The Function of the formae nativae in the Refinement Process of Matter: A Study of Bernard of Chartres’s Concept of Matter

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1. Introduction

Tullio Gregory demonstrated convincingly in his early publications on medieval Platonism, an argument recently confirmed by Paul Dutton, that Bernard of Chartres’ conception of the formae nativae emerged from a close reading of both Calcidius’ commentary on Plato’s Timaeus and Boethius’ treatise De Trinitate. The sureness with which these two scholars have laid bare the genetic roots of Bernard’s philosophy should not, however, blind us to the fact that it was precisely from the glossed text, the Timaeus, that Bernard derived his knowledge of Plato’s philosophy. Dutton’s word of caution is indeed in order here: “glossators were engaged in explaining a text and would only occasionally stand self-consciously aside from the task,” he writes in his introduction, and continues: “Bernard’s role, therefore, was to interpret Plato’s philosophy as he had received it, and not to put forward his own, though the two seem to have coincided.”

In a recent contribution to a history of twelfth-century philosophy, Professor Gregory drew Plato himself into the sources of Bernard’s formae nativae. It is clear that the occasion of the reference, a survey of twelfth-century Platonism, was not the forum for a detailed discussion.


2 Dutton, Introduction, p. 71. The formulation “as he had received it” is, of course, a telling one; on the one hand it refers to the Middle Platonist tradition Bernard had been exposed when reading Calcidius, and on the other hand to the Aristotelian influences he had received from both Calcidius and Boethius.

3 I mean the article The Platonic inheritance in P. Dronke’s History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy, Cambridge 1988, p. 74 where Gregory, referring to the notion of formae nativae, writes as follows: “a doctrine which not only drew on a reference to Boethius, but was derived directly from the Timaeus and Calcidius’ commentary (....)” When considering the exact meaning of John of Salisbury’s famous sentence about Bernard (“perfectissimus inter

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The reference does raise the questions, however. To what degree can we read Bernard’s Glosae as a literal commentary on Plato’s Timaeus? And to what extent does the concept of the formae nativae emerge directly from Bernard’s efforts to understand Plato? This paper attempts an answer these questions. The eighth part of the commentary constitutes the material basis for our study. For it is precisely in the tractatus de primordiali materia that Bernard begins calling on the explicatory services of his formae nativae.

2. Hyle sive necessitas

In addition to the efficient cause (deus) and the formal cause (ideae), Bernard proposes hyle as the third metaphysical principle. At the very beginning of the treatise, he observes that Plato calls it necessity, for no corporeal being can exist without it: “Et uocat hic hylen necessitatem, quia impossible est aliquod corporeum sine ea esse” (8: 4-6). Primordial matter must thus be both substratum out of which (ex qua) corporeal things draw their material phenotype and substantia in which (in qua) bodies come into existence.

When Plato considers the nature of the third principle for the first time in his dialogue, he offers the following notion: “Opinor, omnium quae gignuntur receptaculum est, quasi quaedam nutricula.” Many of the commentators before Bernard had based their understanding of hyle on this

Platonicos seculi nostri”), Dutton surmises that “perhaps the perfectissimus of the title was merely an acknowledgement of Bernard’s orthodoxy and integrity in sticking to the doctrine of the text.” Dutton, Introduction, p. 91.

4 Besides this one, there are three other passages in the Glosae, where Bernard writes explicitly on the three metaphysical principles of Plato’s philosophy: these are 4: 234-7, 8: 194-7, and 8: 401-2. The metaphysics of the three principles took its classical shape in the era of Middle Platonism; see e.g. John Dillon, The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism 80 B.C. to A.D. 220, London 1977, 45-9; Stephen Gersh, Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism: The Latin Tradition, Notre Dame 1986 (Vol. I), 241-50, and David Runia, Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato, Leiden 1986, 52-5.

5 The argumentation in Timaeus 47e-48a does not go like this, for Plato himself uses the term necessity to designate the domain beyond the reach of reason. Thus everything that happens outside the control of reason is for him accidental, and so for him the concepts of necessity and chance are synonymous. By this kind of concept of necessity Plato wants also to avoid the determinism defended by such atomists as Demokritus.

6 The Aristotelian term substratum is not found in Bernard’s Glosae, but it is implied in the conception of hyle.

7 Timaeus a Calcidoio translatus 49a, ed. J. Waszink, p. 46, 19-20. Because we are dealing here with the history of the Latin Timaeus, all quotations henceforth are from Calcidius’ translation.