

THE PLATONIC RECEPTACLE: BETWEEN PURE MEDIALITY AND DETERMINING CAUSE

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Abstract: In this paper I will try to answer two different questions that stem from Plato's characterization of the Receptacle in the *Timaeus*. The first originates from the description of the Receptacle as a "characterless sort of thing" (50e5-6, 51a5) that "receives all things" (51b) without "showing its own face" (50e4). This lets one assume that whatever character the Receptacle will receive from the Forms, the resulting image will have that exact character and will in turn be an accurate depiction of its Form. Yet, this conflicts with the fact that Plato describes Forms and particulars in strikingly contrasting manners. Thus, the first question will be: What accounts for the differences in character between Form and particular in light of the Receptacles' pure receptivity? The second question asks as to the nature of the common character that binds the image to its Form: If the image and its model are differentiated by opposing characteristics, what is the common aspect in which an image resembles its model, making it of one particular model rather than of another? Before tackling these questions, I will first review three of the more influential interpretations of the nature of Forms and particulars in the following order: The Approximation View, the Unqualified Exemplar interpretation, and the Model-Image view. I will side with the latter, arguing that it provides the most satisfactory account of Plato's thought. Placing my approach in the theoretical framework of the Model-Image view I will argue that the first question can be solved in the following way. First, I will maintain that the Receptacle need not be characterless in all respects, but only in those in which it is to receive the characters of the Forms. Secondly, I propose that the image has two inherent types of determining sources, a) the formal determination that comes from its model, and b) the medial determination that stems from the medium to which it belongs. I will argue that it is due to the medial determination of the Receptacle that the image has all the contrary properties that oppose it to the Form. Regarding the second question, I will maintain that as it stands at a moment, the Model-Image theory cannot provide a satisfactory account.

Keywords: image-model, particular-form, receptacle, participation, approximation, unqualified, medial aspect, formal aspect.

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1. Introduction

The Platonic Receptacle has received two main interpretations throughout the secondary literature. The first, following Aristotle, has construed it as a badly thought of account of matter. Diverging from this reading, later interpreters² following Cornford (1997) took Plato to have in mind a type of medium in which the Forms are received as images, a function that is best exemplified by analogy with a mirror³. In this article I will follow the latter interpretation.

The Receptacle acts as a medium at least in so much as it counts as the necessary counterpart alongside the Form to the genesis of the image. It is that in which the images of the Forms, Plato's metaphor for the phenomenal world, come to be. Timaeus describes it as a "characterless sort of thing" (*Timaeus* 50e5-6, 51a5) that "receives all things" (51b) as copies or images (50e2), without "showing its own face" (50e4) in the process.

This would suggest that the Receptacle provides no resistance of its own when being informed by the Forms, indicating that whatever character it was to receive it would receive it in a pure and accurate manner. By analogy, a straight mirror can be called characterless because it will represent its model accurately, i.e. without importing any of its characteristics to the way it depicts it. In other words, the proportion and shape that a reflection of a triangle would have will be due solely to the proportion and shape of the model reflected. By contrast, a crooked mirror will "show its own face" by contributing as a cause alongside the model to the proportion and shape of the reflection, giving rise to an inaccurate depiction.

The Receptacle's lack of characteristics of its own ensures not only that it can receive "all things", but that it does so by letting them appear as they are. This would imply that whatever character a particular might possess, it would do so solely because of their model, i.e. the Form. This conclusion though runs contrary to Plato's emphatic distinction between the Forms and particulars. Forms are described in stark contrast to the

² Lee (1964), Mohr (1985).

³ Against this view see Kung (1988).

particulars as being completely insensible and accessible to reason alone (*Phaedo* 65d-66a7, *Phaedrus*, 247c6-9, *Timaeus* 27d-28a), not extended in space and incorporeal (*Phaedo*, 66a, 74b-c, *Symposium* 211a), not in any place at all, and not divisible into parts (*Timaeus* 52a-b, *Phaedo* 78c, 80b-c), and lacking even the conditions for either change and decay (*Phaedo*, 78d-79a, *Symposium* 211a, *Timaeus* 27d-28a).

How are we then to understand the Receptacle's pure mediality, i.e. its undistorting reception of the character of the Forms, in light of the fact that the images are described as contrary to their models? This is the main question that this article proposes to address.

A second, related question, regards the nature of the aspect that binds an image to its model, since they are described by opposite properties.

These two questions can be summarized as follows:

1) If the Receptacle receives without distortion the character of the Forms, what accounts for the fact that the resulting images are characterized by contrary properties to their models?

2) How are we to understand the positive link, or the common character, that makes something be an image of its model, and what exactly accounts for the fact that an image is of one particular model rather than another?

In order to provide an answer to these questions, I will first place my investigation within the framework of some general interpretation of the nature of Forms and particulars and of the nature of participation. For this purpose, I will analyze three of the more popular interpretations belonging to the secondary literature. I will examine in turn the Approximation view of participation, the Unqualified Exemplar interpretation, and the Model-Image view. I will argue in favor of the latter as being the most feasible approach.

Following this, I will use the theoretical framework of the Model-Image view in order to tackle the questions this article has set out to answer. To this purpose I will argue that the Receptacle is not characterless in all respects, but rather only in those respects in which it is to receive a determination from the Forms. Then, I will claim that intrinsic to the concept of image lie two different determinations. The first is the formal aspect, the determination that the image receives from its model. The second is what I have called the medial aspect, and

concerns the characteristics that the medium in which the image comes to be effects on the image. My main argument will be that we can account for the differences that distinguish the image from the Form by way of the medial aspect of the image. I will argue that such properties that belong to the particulars such as extendedness, visibility, composability, and being in flux are due to characteristics intrinsic to the Receptacle, the medium in which they come to be.

Regarding the second question, I will contend that the Model-Image view cannot offer a satisfying account in its present state. I suggest that an analysis of the “being of” relation that binds an image to its model might provide the necessary tools in order to provide an answer to this question.

2. The relation of particular to Form

A good way of demarcating between the ways that the relation between particular and Form has been interpreted throughout the secondary literature is by an author’s choice of word when translating εἶδωλον, μίμησις or εἰκόν. These terms are all used by Plato as metaphorical stand-ins for the worldly particulars⁴, and have been usually translated either as copy or as image. The two words carry with them substantially different implications, though. While the copy suggests that the particular is in some way dependent on the Form, it also implies that 1) it is the same type of thing as the Form and 2) it leaves open the possibility-if not explicitly denied- that it can equal the Form in perfection. A copy key owes its existence in part to a model and can be evaluated by reference to the model, yet it is still as much a key as the model is. When applied to the Forms such a view implies self-predication and thus opens the Theory of Forms to the Third Man Argument of *Parmenides*. As the argument goes, the same way that both model key and copy key, while different in some respects, nonetheless

⁴ Plato uses a variety of terms to describe the particulars. Usually usage will vary according to whether Plato wants to underline the common ground between image and original (εἰκόν/ὁμοίωμα/μίμησις) or the difference (φάντασμα/εἶδωλον).

have the same property of being a key, so would the Form of Circle and the particular circle both be circles⁵.

The alternative view would account for the particular-Form relation through the lenses of the image. While maintaining a relation of dependence to the model, the image does not imply that it is the same way *F* as the model is. As Allen puts it:

The theory of Forms involves two fundamental doctrines: (a) that the relation between particulars and Forms is that of imitation, of copy to original, and (b) that Forms and particulars differ in degree of reality. The proponents of self-predication maintain that it implies still more: that if *F* particulars and the *F* Itself resemble each other; they must do so in virtue of being *F*. This conclusion is one of almost breath-taking eccentricity. My hands resemble each other in being hands. Do they also resemble the Hand Itself in this respect? Clearly not. For the relation of hands to the Hand is analogous, on Plato's account, to the relation between pictures or reflections of hands and hands. Therefore, if 'the logic of Plato's metaphor' implies that the Hand is a hand, it also implies that the picture of a hand is a hand; which is absurd (1960, 152).

According to this approach we should view the relation of Form to particular along the lines of relations such as those between Socrates and a painting of Socrates, a vase and its shadow, or an event and the retelling of the event through words. Accordingly, an image *F* is not similar to its model in respect to *being F*, the same way that a picture of a cat is not similar to a real cat in being a cat. One of the merits of this position is that it can make sense of participation while avoiding self-

⁵ As Patterson (1985, 14-15) puts it: "It is a sufficient condition for a thing's being a *standard* for the type or property *F* that instances of the type are classified on the basis of similarity to that particular *F* in respect *F* [...]. Paradigm cases, standard instances, or perfect particulars are still cases, instances, or exemplars of a given kind of thing, right along their non-paradigmatic brethren. The Standard Yard will itself be one yard long. The standard *F* may be *F* by 'definition;' [...]. It may on these grounds be considered ontologically and epistemologically a different kind of *F* from non-standard *F*. Still it is similar to other *F*s, and comparable to them in respect *F*."

predication and thus availing the Forms from the Third Man regress, and in consequence offering a more charitable reading of Plato.

3. The particular as copy

Let's look first at the interpretations that view the relation of Form to particular by way of the relation between copy and original.

The Approximation View (A.E. Taylor 1922, W.D. Ross 1951, P. Shorey 1933) argues that Forms are perfect particulars. They have F ⁶ perfectly, while particulars can only approximate, but never equal the perfection of the Forms. According to this view what is essential to the gap that separates Form from particulars is the quality of the properties they possess. The Form of Circle is nothing else then the absolutely perfect circle, and what separates it from all the worldly circles that merely approximate it, is just this perfection. Yet both the Form of Circle and the sensible circles share the property of being circles.

Following Nehamas (1975) in his review and critique of the Approximation View, this type of interpretations relies on the assumption that Plato's main reason for developing the Theory of Forms can be understood on the basis of his background in mathematics and geometry. Because geometry operates with perfect figures that are nowhere to be found in nature⁷, where instead we only encounter the merely approximate, Plato had to conceive of a world where they could exist perfectly. More so, Nehamas suggests that this type of interpretation generally assumes that

⁶ "F" is used here as a general stand-in for any property a thing might poses and for which there is a Form, e.g. cold, beautiful, just, horse, etc.

⁷ This passage from Shorey (1933, 172-3), captures the spirit of this interpretative direction well: "Experience can never give us the pure mathematical ideas which sensation and perception awaken in our minds. There are no perfect circles or equalities in nature. Yet we do conceive them, and we feel how far concrete circles and equalities fall short of the ideal toward which they strive [...]. We are reminded by the imperfect copies in the world of sense of something that we have seen or known in another state of existence."

Plato, either consciously or unconsciously, applied this sense of imperfection to objects belonging to ethical and aesthetic contexts. Just as geometrical illustrations are always only approximately and never exactly equal, circular, or square, so beautiful people, just actions, and healthy animals are only approximately and never exactly beautiful, just, or healthy. That is, they could always be more beautiful, more just, or healthier. It is in this sense that the Form of, say, beauty, which is perfectly (namely, exactly) beautiful is like the limit of an infinite series. (Nehamas 1975, 107).

Seeming is also construed along similar lines. For although two sticks might appear to be equal in some respect, on closer inspection, or with the right instruments, it would become manifest that they are actually unequal. Thus, what at first glance appeared as being a perfect instance of equality, proved to be just an appearance of equality, and actually an instance of inequality.

A variant of this interpretation⁸ argues that particulars can in fact equal the perfection of the Form, but reserves to the latter the status of unique condition for the hierarchization of the former. According to this view, the uniqueness of the Form is preserved by the fact that it is both an epistemological and an ontological condition for particulars of its type.

One way of seeing the differences between these two versions of the Approximation View is the following. The first ascribes a superior role to the Forms by way of the degree in which they possess properties (perfectly), and thus feels the need to deny perfection to the particulars, so as not to compromise the superiority of the Forms. The latter, on the other hand, identifies the Forms' superiority to their role as epistemological and ontological standards, and thus does not need to restrict particulars from achieving perfection.

What these views hold in common is the fact that they implicitly or explicitly hold that Form *F* and the particular *F* are similar in being *F*, marking the differences between the two in the manner of perfect model to imperfect copy, or standard instance or paradigm and its copy, be it

⁸ I will not be referring to this particular view when talking about the Approximation interpretation. For a more detailed account of this account of the Forms, see Patterson (1985, 13-16).

perfect or imperfect. Such a position ascribes self-predication to the Forms and thus open the Theory of Forms to the Third Man Regress⁹.

*The Unqualified Exemplar*¹⁰ interpretation or the *F* and non-*F* view (Nehamas 1975) while resembling those presented above in that it accepts or involves self-predication, gives a wholly different account of how we are to understand the particular's inferiority to the Form. First off, this interpretation finds the main thesis of the Approximation View untenable. The reason for this is that if particulars only have in an approximate way the property they participate in, then it follows that they also have the opposite property with regards to the same respect and at the same time¹¹.

If two sticks appear equal, but only approximatively so, on what grounds, Nehamas asks, are we to say that they strive for perfect equality rather than perfect inequality¹²? One of the main characteristics of the *F* and non-*F* view is that it accepts Forms only for incomplete predicates such as large-small, just-unjust, beautiful-ugly, equal-unequal, etc., which are to be distinguished from complete or simple predicates such as man, horse, house, etc. While the former are always said of a thing in relation to something else, the latter don't need any such qualification in order to be predicated of a subject. As such, the possession of incomplete predicates by a particular is wholly dependent both on the object with which it is put in relation, as it is on the context.

⁹ For some this is not a problem at all. Owen (1953) for example takes the criticism of the *Parmenides* as proof of a departure from the classic Theory of Forms of the *Republic* and *Phaedo*, and as such places the time of composition for *Timaeus*, on account of the fact that it uses the now defunct terminology of *eidolon* and *paradeigma*, to the middle period.

¹⁰ While it is not clear if this view follows either a copy based or image-based interpretation of particulars, I will place it in this category because it allows for self-predication.

¹¹ *Republic* (436b-c) is clear evidence of the fact that Plato did not think this was possible.

¹² Nehamas quotes Allen (1960, 178): "A crooked line is not an imperfect instantiation of straight linearity; on the contrary, it is a full and complete instantiation of the kind of crooked line that it is, and the kind is repeatable, though the line itself is not [...] to say that something is deficient with respect to one character is merely an awkward way of saying that it quite fully has another."

Nehamas' reason for restricting Forms to incomplete predicates is quite straightforward. Because contrary predicates such as light or heavy, tall or short, just or unjust, could be said of the same particulars, Plato was said to have

postulated the Forms in order to show that despite their compresence these properties did correspond to distinct entities, and that the terms associated with them did have distinct, and univocal, meanings. But for this problem to even arise, the same sensible particulars would have to be qualified by contrary properties. And for these particulars to remain the same, there would have to be some properties which those particulars possessed in themselves, independently of their relations to other objects, properties which would allow their reidentification over time¹³. (Nehamas 1975, 166).

If the Approximation view holds that the basis of the inferiority and separation between Form *F* and the particular *F* lies in the imperfection of the property *F* that the particulars possess, the *F* and non-*F* view locates this imperfection not in the incomplete way that a sensible *F* is *F*, but rather in the way that individuals possess *F*.

Particulars can have perfect equality, for example, yet what separates them from the Form of Equality is the fact that their equality is a relative, incomplete and accidental property: relative, because it needs something else to be equal to, incomplete, because equality does not hold in all aspects and in all contexts¹⁴, and accidental, due to the fact that the object can subsist without being equal to anything else. If two sticks appear equal in length, their equality in the respect in which it holds is in no way inferior to Equality itself. The difference between the equality of the sticks and that of Equality itself is that the former are equal only with regards to length, for a determinate period of time, they need each other in order to have the property "equal" and can subsist

¹³ Nehamas is referring here to complete predicates, or substance sortals. These are predicates that apply in an unqualified manner, such as tree, human, chair, etc.

¹⁴ Two sticks might be equal in size yet not also in width. Also, they may cease to be equal if one of the sticks has a part of it cut off.

even if they somehow lose this property. By contrast, the Form of Equality is equal in all possible respects, for eternity, needs no other thing to be equal to in order to have the property “equal”, and because “equality” is its essential property it cannot subsist without it. Accordingly, Nehamas argues that when we find Plato saying that

sensible objects are only imperfectly beautiful or just, he does not mean that they are approximately beautiful or just. Rather, he means that they are only accidentally beautiful or just, while the Form and its characters possess the relevant property in an essential manner. Notice also that on this approach, not only the Form but also the properties of particulars (the characters) exhibit this perfection. Thus, the properties that particulars possess are perfect copies of the Forms in which these particulars participate. (Nehamas 1975, 109)

For instance, Helen can be both beautiful (in comparison to a monkey) and ugly (in comparison to Aphrodite). According to Nehamas then, it is not that Helen possess beauty approximately—more so than the monkey and yet less than Aphrodite¹⁵—but because Helen possesses beauty in an accidental manner, its possession is always dependent on the relatum with which she is put in relation¹⁶.

One consequence of this view that Nehamas endorses is that Forms of incomplete predicates are what they are in an unqualified manner, and which allows for self-predication. That means that something like Equality, for example, would not only be an equal thing that is equal in all possible respects (completeness), but it would also be equal without anything else to be equal to (non-relative).

In summary, the difference between the Approximation View and the *F* and non-*F* view can be articulated as follows: while in the first case the individuals have imperfect and only approximate properties, in the other case the individuals have perfect properties, while their

¹⁵ For arguments against construing participation as a matter of degree see Nehamas (1975, 110).

¹⁶ One can ask as to what accounts for Helen’s possessing beauty in relation to the monkey and losing that property in relation to Aphrodite.

imperfection lies in the way the particulars *possess* their properties and not with their properties as such.

The criticism that both these views will receive from the image theorists is that they provide a rather uncharitable reading of Plato. Both positions imply self-predication and the regress of the Third Man, consequences that the image theorist argues that it could easily be avoided if the difference that separates particulars from Forms were to be thought of in terms of an ontological difference and not merely in terms of the properties they possess or of how they possess them.

If the image theorists can accept Nehamas' critique of the Approximation view, and also that at times being *F* and un-*F* is indeed a characteristic mark of the sensibles, they will not concede either that 1) there are Forms only for incomplete predicates, 2) that Plato thought of Forms as unqualified exemplars of qualified particulars¹⁷, or 3) that being *F* and non-*F* is the sole mark of the particulars' inferiority to the Form.

Let us now turn to the image theorists' conception of the relation of Form to particular, and to their conception of the characteristic marks that differentiate the two.

4. The particular as image

The Image-model interpretation (A.I. Allen 1960, E.N. Lee 1964, R. Patterson 1985) assumes an ontological distinction between particular and Form. What separates them is not a matter of the degree in which they are *F*, nor of the way in which they possess *F*, but rather, first and foremost, the fact that they are not *F* in the same way. Patterson writes:

Indeed, Plato's stock examples of images-paintings, statues, drawings, reflections in mirror or water, dream images, songs, images in poetry or prose- are in no way related to their models as copies to standards or as qualified to unqualified exemplars. In

¹⁷ This would have the consequence of suggesting that a thinker the caliber of Plato could have blundered his way into thinking that essentially relational Forms such as Equality or Large could have the property "equal" or "large" irrespective of anything else.

this case the image *F* is not 'another real *F* such as its model' (the phrase is from *Sophist* 240a9), nor does it resemble its model with respect to being *F*: the reflection of Cratylus in the mirror or on water is not another Cratylus; the black-figure warrior on a vase is not another, only qualified or imperfect, warrior; [...] the mirror reflection of a bed is no more a 'real' bed, a worldly participant in the Form of Bed itself, than is the mirror reflection of a horse, since neither fulfills the function or does the characteristic work of a carpenter's bed. (1985, 20)

Starting from this interpretation of the relationship between the Form and the particular, two different positions with regard to the status of the relation that binds particulars to Forms can be distinguished. The first view (Allen 1960, Lee 1964) proposes to give up on any such relationship. Both propose a desubstantializing interpretation of particulars, thought on the model of the relationship between the reflection and the reflected thing. For both Allen and Lee, the power and essential meaning of the metaphor of the image comes to light only when we consider the shadows and reflections and the type of dependence specific to them. They argue that just as a reflection in a mirror is not really something, in any case, not something independent, but rather the effect of the interaction between a thing and a medium, in the same way we do not need a relationship to bind the model reflected to its reflection. In Lee's words:

I maintain that the very being of a reflection is relational, wholly dependent upon what is other than itself; the original, and the reflecting medium. The gist of my hypothesis, as of his [Allen's], is that because their being is relational, adjectival, dependent, relations to bind them to Forms are neither possible nor required. The 'insubstantial image' is not an entity related to a Form; it is the product of a relation-perhaps just the holding of a relation-between something else [the Receptacle] and the Form (1964, 365).

On the other hand, Patterson (1985) argues against reducing all types of images to the completely dependent nature of reflections and shadows,

arguing instead that the substantial images such as paintings, sculptures, or written accounts that Plato mentions, need to be taken at face value. This position will make him plead for maintaining a quasi-substantial character of the sensible world and, therefore, for the need for a relationship that links it to the intelligible one. This relation is described in terms of the images' being *of* its model:

The positive link that removes image *F* and model *F* from the realm of bare equivocation is the image's being an image of its model [...]. There is thus an extended family of *F*s held together, despite differences of type, by the relation of imaging. I suggest this is an adequate explanation of Plato's speaking of "likeness" with respect to being *F* between two things that are in another sense definitely not alike in that respect. (Patterson 1985, 42)

It is no problem for the image theorist to accept that particulars can achieve perfection, for any type of perfection that an image might achieve would still not make it less of an image. Thus, Patterson argues regarding the perfectly spherical shape in which the Universe was made into by the Demiurge (33b2-7, 34b) that even though "it takes the power of a god to produce a perfect circle in the sensible realm it is beyond the power even of a god to produce a duplicate of the Form within the sensible realm" (94). More so, in the *Republic* (529c-530c), Socrates states that the heavens "must be used as an embroidered model in the study of those realities," and that it would at the same time be "ludicrous to labor over them as if he would grasp the truth of equals or doubles or any other ratio." Patterson suggests that even though the movement and constitution of the heavens were to be perfect as it is the case in the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, they would still only be "visible models of true realities." The mark of their inferiority thus resides not in the sensible circles' imperfection as such, but in their visible character. In other words, the main reason that the visible world is not an object of ἐπιστήμη is not that it provides imperfect or approximate instantiations of otherwise perfect figures, but that it provides visible instantiations as such. The visible circle belongs to the generated phenomena, and because of that all that it tells the understanding is that it is what it is, i.e.

a circle, and not why it is so, or what it means to be so¹⁸. For the latter accounts one needs to ascend from the generated to the generative source, a task that can be accomplished by reason alone.

So, at least in Patterson's case, we find that the model-image interpretation construes the Forms as abstract essences that act as principles for the generation of the world of becoming, and of the particulars as the concrete, generated instantiations of these essences¹⁹. More so, there seems to be no obvious point of identity between the Form and its image, given that even if the sensible sphere were perfectly spherical it would still not be "similar to the Form with respect to shape" (ibid.). Patterson makes this point on the basis of a line in *Phaedrus* (247c) where Socrates states that the Forms have neither color nor shape. Another more forceful argument for understanding Forms as abstract essences emerges when one thinks of the relation between the Form of Shuttle (*Cratylus*, 388a-b) and the many different types or species of shuttle that the Form must provide an essence for. If it were that the Form of Shuttle was either a perfect shuttle or a pattern or blueprint for some kind of shuttle, it would not be able to provide the essence for the many different species of shuttle that there are.

From the perspective of the image theorist both the Approximation as well as the Unqualified Exemplar views provide merely accidental criteria for differentiating between Form and particular. As we have seen, some particulars can attain perfection and still not equal the Form in any way. Regarding the Unqualified Exemplar view, Patterson (100) points out that in the *Phaedo* (106d5-6) Socrates talks about the Form of Life, which even though it has a contrary, i.e. Death, is still a complete predicate. This amounts to a critical objection to this view²⁰.

¹⁸ See Cornford (1997, 24).

¹⁹ "[...] what Plato requires as standard is an abstract intelligible nature or essence which can be exemplified in various ways while providing a criterion of excellence for any and all of its sensible namesakes. Thus, the Form of Equal itself has no shape, weight, size, speed or age, but is participated in by various sorts of equals;" (Patterson 1985, 109).

²⁰ This, Patterson writes "provides one more reason for not supposing Plato's Forms were, to begin with, unqualified exemplars of incomplete predicates, differing from sensibles by performing the impossible- by providing examples of largeness, equality and so on without being large or equal in relation to any relatum" (100).

Our next step is to see how the Image Theory construes the differences that mark the distinction of image to Form.

5. Differentiating between Form and image

Let's begin by looking at some of the passages that Patterson provides in order to argue for the inferiority of the sensibles.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates fends off Cebes' concern that a man's soul might disperse at the moment of his death, by asking what kind of thing is likely to be dispersed, i.e. what nature a thing must have in order to be able to succumb to destruction. The argument goes that if the soul is more like those realities that themselves do not run the risk of decomposition, then the soul is safe. What follows is an enumeration of the characteristic marks that separate the corporeal from the Forms: at (78c) the property of compositeness is attributed to the corporeal, which in turn leads to the possibility of decomposing or destruction, while the Forms are described as non-composite and thus indestructible. The two are further equated with being in flux and being perfectly stable, respectively. At (79a) the corporeal is said to be visible and perceptible while the Forms invisible and accessible only to reason. At (79d) the Forms are contrasted to the corporeal realities and described as "pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging." Lastly, (80b) recapitulates what has been said so far:

Consider then, Cebes, whether it follows from all that has been said that the soul is most like the divine, deathless, intelligible²¹, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same.

²¹ One interesting aspect of this enumeration is that while at (79a) the corporeal was said to be visible and was contrasted to the Forms' invisible and intelligible character, at (80b) intelligibility is contrasted directly with unintelligibility, omitting the visible-invisible pair. This suggests to me that for Plato visibility is not an accidental trait of the unintelligible, and neither invisibility for the intelligible, but rather that they are essentially connected.

Turning to Diotima's account of the nature of Beauty itself, we find that:

Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself. (*Symposium* 211a-c)

The fact that the Forms are not in something else should be put in relation with *Phaedo* (66a) which states that knowledge can be achieved only by reason alone which, by "using pure thought alone, tries to track down each reality pure and by itself." We can suppose that the alternative to "pure thought alone" tracking down "reality pure and by itself," i.e. the study of the nature of things through the senses and by way of the objects of the sense, can be called impure for no other reason than by the admixture of the perceptual or corporeal element alongside the Form in the constitution of the particular²². The introduction of the Receptacle in the *Timaeus* as the corporeal counterpart to the Forms in generating the particulars sheds a revealing retrospective light on these passages.

Timaeus echoes both Diotima's description from *Symposium* and Socrates' from *Phaedo* when he states that:

Since these things are so, we must agree that that which keeps its own form unchangingly, which has not been brought into being and is not destroyed, which neither receives into itself anything else from anywhere else, nor itself enters into anything else anywhere, is one thing. It is invisible—it cannot be perceived by the senses at all—and it is the role of understanding to study it. The second thing is that which shares the other's name and resembles it. This thing can be perceived by the senses, and it has been begotten. It is constantly borne along, now coming to be in a

²² We find a similar vein of thought in *Republic* when Socrates describes dialectic as "whenever someone tries through argument and apart from all sense perceptions to find the being itself of each thing and doesn't give up until he grasps the good itself with understanding itself" (*Republic* 532a-b).

certain place and then perishing out of it. It is apprehended by opinion, which involves sense perception. (*Timaeus* 52a-b)

Moreover, with regards to the image Timaeus states that:

Since that for which an image has come to be is not at all intrinsic to the image, which is invariably borne along to picture something else, it stands to reason that the image should therefore come to be *in* something else, somehow clinging to being, or else be nothing at all. (52c-b)

In the *Republic* (479a-d) Socrates describes the condition that befalls all particulars that participate in opposites. “So, with the many bigs and smalls and lights and heavies, is any one of them any more what we say it is than its opposite? No, each of them always participates in both opposites. Is any one of the manys what we say it is, then, any more than it is not what he says it is?” This, in turn is to be compared to the Forms’ being what they are without any admixture from its contrary.

Besides these characteristic differences that distinguish Form and particular, there is still the matter of the image being *of* its model. This fact is expressed by Patterson as a kind of double dependence of the particular to the Form “as model for making and as formal *aitia*” (92). Trying to capture the same point, Allen writes:

Particulars are named after Forms because Forms are their causes. To say of anything that it is *F* is to say that it depends for its existence upon the *F*, that in virtue of which *F*-things are *F*. But the *F* is not merely a cause; it is an exemplary cause. Particulars not only depend upon it; they are resemblances of it, as reflections are resemblances of their originals. Like reflections, they differ in type from their originals; they share no common attribute; and yet they exhibit a fundamental community of character. (1960, 160)

Neither account explains too much when it comes to how we should understand the nature of the relation that binds model and image²³. I

²³ I shall, for the present purpose name it the “being of” relation.

believe we can at least say the following things about it. First of all, the mode of being of the image is that of being *of* something else. This *of* which references an *other* affords the image three main aspects. a) Its identity; by being named after that which serves as its model. b) Part of its character; the model also is responsible for part of the characteristics of the image, e.g. part of the aspect of a painting of a cube will be due to the cube itself. c) Its evaluative model; the model acts as an evaluative standard from which the accuracy of the image's depiction is judged²⁴.

To sum up, the image theorist draws on the following passages in his account for the difference of particular to Form: 1) The particular is corporeal and visible, the Form is incorporeal, invisible and shapeless. 2) The particular is open only to perception and opinion while the Form is invisible, intelligible, and the sole object of knowledge. 3) The particular is spatial extended while the Form is not in space. 4) The particular is compounded, the form is simple and uncompounded. 5) The particular is liable to decomposition and change²⁵, the Form does not have the necessary properties for neither change nor decomposition. 6) The particular is in²⁶ something else, the Form is in and of itself.

This is as far as the list goes when it comes to strictly textual references. From these passages the image theorists conclude that: 1) The particular is concrete, the Form is abstract. 2) The particular has or images some nature, while the Form is the nature imaged, in the sense that it is what it means to be *F*, and not another an instantiation of *F*. 3) The particular images or instantiates something else, the Form is the abstract nature that is imaged or instantiated. 4) The particular has either

²⁴ As Cratylus (432a-d) shows the image must always depict its model in a restricted manner. This implies that an image's accuracy will always be judged in the relevant respects in which it purports to depict its model. For example, one should not say of a picture of an apple that it is inaccurate because it is a two-dimensional depiction, while the apple is three dimensional.

²⁵ This is true even of immortal beings such as the gods that populate the cosmos and the cosmos itself. At *Timaeus* (41a-c) it is said that the Demiurge's good will accounts for their everlastingness. Thus, the everlasting object, because it is sensible and compounded, has in itself all the conditions necessary for change and destruction.

²⁶ Recall that particulars reside in the Receptacle, while the Forms "neither receives into itself anything else from anywhere else, nor itself enters into anything else anywhere" (52b-c).

quasi-substantial being (Patterson) or is an insubstantial being (Allen, Lee), while the Form fully is.

Coming back to the positions we have discussed so far, we can resume them the following way:

- 1) The Approximation view holds that the particular equal and the Form of Equality are both equal things. What differentiates them is that the latter is perfectly equal while the former only has equality in an approximative manner. Furthermore, it is because of this status as a perfect particular that the Form takes the role of ontological and epistemological condition of the other.
- 2) The Unqualified Exemplar view also holds that both the particular equal and the Form of Equality are equal things. What differentiates them is the fact that the Form of Equality is equal in an essential manner while the particular is equal only in an accidental and thus relative and incomplete way. Contrary to the Approximation view, the equality that the particular possesses is in no way inferior to that of the Equal itself. Its mark of inferiority comes solely from how it possesses it. What makes the Form of Equality an epistemological and ontological standard is that by being equal in a complete and eternal way it provides a) the criterion by which to judge particulars as equal in some respect, and unequal in another respect, and also b) an eternal and unchanging Equal model that can be copied, i.e. participated in, by the particulars which thus become equal in the way open to them.
- 3) The Model-Image view holds that the equal *qua* particular thing and the Form of Equality are not both equal things. Rather, one is the abstract nature of equality and the latter is its sensible and corporeal instantiation. What differentiates the two is the manner in which they are F, one being an abstract essence, the other its sensible image. According to this view we do not need any common property that both model and image must have in order for the image to be of its model. The argument goes that since the model is an abstract essence that the particular images 1) they do not share, or need not share any common properties and 2) their connection is guaranteed by the images' being of that model. The model provides

the ontological condition for the image by informing the Receptacle, thus generating the image. It also provides an epistemological condition by being the formal cause for the image.

I believe that the Image Model theory provides the best account of Plato's Theory of Forms. The other two views proved not only to be untenable when confronted with the material that Plato furnishes in his writing, but they also provided a rather uncharitable interpretation, given the fact that both, implicitly or explicitly, imply self-predication. The Image Model theory instead was able not only to make sense in a coherent way of a larger amount of material, but also provided a way for avoiding self-predication. This is not to say that it would not benefit from a clearer analysis of the *being of* relation, and also from a more convincing account of the relation that binds the image to its model. As we shall see in the next part of this article, these shortcomings will become obvious when trying to give a clear articulation of the communality between the particular and its Form, a communality that is essential in accounting for the reason that an image is of some model rather than another.

In my upcoming exposition of the problem that *Timaeus* rises I will place my interpretation in the general framework of the Image Model theory.

6. The Receptacle, Images and Forms

We can now go back to our original question. At the beginning we asked how we should understand the fact that if the Receptacle is a pure medium in which the Forms leave their respective marks as images, these images nonetheless possess completely different characteristics from their models.

To begin let's first take a look at how the Receptacle is described by *Timaeus*:

We also must understand that if the imprints are to be varied, with all the varieties there to see, this thing upon which the imprints are

to be formed could not be well prepared for that role if it were not itself devoid of any of those characters that it is to receive from elsewhere. For if it resembled any of the things that enter it, it could not successfully copy their opposites or things of a totally different nature whenever it was to receive them. It would be showing its own face as well. This is why the thing that is to receive in itself all the elemental kinds must be totally devoid of any characteristics. (50e)

Timaeus insists that if the Receptacle “is to receive repeatedly throughout its whole self the likenesses of the intelligible objects, the things which always are—if it is to do so successfully, then it ought to be devoid of any inherent characteristics of its own.” The “mother or receptacle of what has come to be” and of what is visible should be thought of as an “invisible and characterless sort of thing, one that receives all things” (51a).

We can divide Timaeus’ description in two parts. The first concerns the role of the Receptacle: to receive all things, and to receive them successfully, i.e. without showing its own face. The second provides a description of the character the Receptacle must have in order to achieve its role: it must be “devoid of the characters that it is to receive from elsewhere,” it should not resemble any of them, and also it must be an “invisible and characterless sort of thing.”

If someone were to use a perfume base²⁷ that had its own specific smell, say “x,” and wanted to imbue it with the perfume essence “y,” the resulting effect would not be “y,” but some sort of combination between “x” and “y.” The perfume base would thus “show its own face” in the end result. Because the perfume base had a prior determination as to smell the procedure failed, it has produced something different than

²⁷ This is one of the comparisons used to describe the Receptacle. Throughout (49-52) the Receptacle is compared to a receptacle (49a6), to a wet nurse for becoming (49a6), to gold in relation to the multitude of shapes that the gold can take (50a-6), to a mother in relation to the Forms taken as the father, and to the images as their child (50d3-4), to a neutral base for perfumes (50e8), and to a shapeless and soft material to be imprinted upon (50e11). Also, at (52b1) it is described a “fixed state for all things that come to be,” and at (52e6) it is compared to a winnowing-basket.

what was intended. As a consequence of this, if someone were to use the resulting perfume as an indication of the smell of the perfume essence “y,” he would be misled.

Yet, it was not the fact that the perfume base had a prior determination that compromised the procedure, but that it had the relevant kind of determination. A perfume base can be determined as to both shape and color and in no way affect the odor it receives. The same way, the material for imprinting that Timaeus brings up as an analogy for the Receptacle (50e11) can be determined as to odor and color and not affect in anyway the imprinting process. A thing can thus be called characterless in some specific aspects while at the same time be determined in others.

Returning to (50e) where Timaeus states that if the Receptacle resembled “any of the things that enter it, it could not successfully copy their opposites or things of a totally different nature whenever it was to receive them,” I believe this passage should be read the following way. The Receptacle cannot be determined in itself²⁸ with regards to one of a pair of contraries. If it were cold for example, even though it could receive hotness, it would do it by changing its own coldness, i.e. as a thing heating up, and would modify the character of what it received, thus “showing its own face” in the process. With regards to “things of a totally different nature” I take this to refer to things that don’t have any contraries, e.g. circles, triangles, trees, houses, etc. If the Receptacle resembles a circle it would not be able to receive the nature of a triangle. In the case of geometrical shapes, the Receptacle would have to be more like a plane. Yet, and this is a further consequence, it still could not resemble a plane for then it could not receive three dimensional things, or if it were only a plain it could not receive movement²⁹. However, I suggest that the same way the plane is the condition of possibility for the manifestation of all two-dimensional geometrical shapes, without being their formal cause, the Receptacle can be understood by analogy as a plane that is general enough in order to receive “all things” (51b1).

It follows that if the Receptacle receives all things, and is indeed characterless in the relevant aspects so as not to “show its own face” at

²⁸ Rather, as Timaeus show at (50b7-c1), all the determinations the Receptacle takes never affect it as such, for “it does not depart from its own character in any way.”

²⁹ For movement is not implied by the concept of plane alone.

any time, then whatever may appear in the Receptacle 1) does not originate from the Receptacle, the same way the smell that a pure perfume base receives does not originate from the perfume base, and 2) whatever character we may encounter imprinted in the Receptacle is exactly the same in some relevant respects to the character of the Form³⁰, the same way that the sigil in wax is identical with respect to form to that of the stamp.

Yet such conclusions can hardly be accepted at face value. It would mean that whatever is accessible to us in the domain of the sensible world, i.e. whatever is accessible by way of perception and also the perceptible as such—recall that the Receptacle was called the mother of the visible, yet itself invisible (51a)—would be a reduplication of the character of the Forms. By analogy, if whatever smell may appear in an odorless perfume base should be taken as the exact same odor of some perfume essence, so it should be that whatever character may appear in the Receptacle should be taken as the exact character of the Form.

If indeed the Receptacle is a pure medium that receives without any interference of its own the character of the Forms in the shape of images, it follows that by studying these images one could get an accurate account of the Forms, in the same manner in which one would use a mirror reflection to study the thing itself. But this runs against the fact that the particulars were described as scattered or extended, visible, in flux, corporeal and decomposable, as opposed to the Forms' lack of any spatial characteristics, invisible, always the same, intelligible and indecomposable. How are we to make sense of the Receptacle's pure mediality if the images it carries seem to misrepresent their model in almost all conceivable ways?

I will try and answer this question first by stating that images can misrepresent their model only in one way, i.e. in the respect in which they aim to represent it. If someone were to say that a picture of Athens misrepresents Athens because it is two dimensional, only a few centimeters across, and so on, we could rightly say that he does not understand what a picture is. In using images, we usually eliminate the

³⁰ I follow here Lee (1964) and Mohr (1985) against Cherniss in taking the images as a byproduct of the Forms and the Receptacle and not as a fourth kind of independent thing besides the Forms, the Receptacle and the phenomena from within the Receptacle.

idiosyncrasies of the image as such from the representational content of the image. We do so by taking into account what type of image we are dealing with, a painting, a shadow, a spoken account, a statue, etc., and we exclude those characteristics that are specific to the medium of representation in judging whether it distorts its model or not. Besides, even though these types of images have more or less in common with their model, for example a painted statue of Socrates would be three dimensional just as Socrates is, while the painting would not share this property, we would not judge their accuracy³¹ on the basis of this general property sharing. Rather, we would reserve accuracy for the measure in which each image achieved sameness in the respect it set out to do so: the sculpture with regards to proportion, color, and shape in a three dimensional medium, the painting with regards to proportion, color and shape in two dimensions, while the shadow only with regards to proportion and shape.

I believe the same to be the case with the Receptacle. Spatiality, scatteredness, visibility³², compositeness, flux, all this constitute essential determinations of the Receptacle that it passes on to the image, and that should be excluded from evaluating its truthfulness, the same way we exclude a photo's two-dimensional mode of representation when judging whether or not it accurately represents its model. As we have seen, there is no problem in ascribing certain determinations to the Receptacle³³, as long as these determinations do not interfere with the way it receives and properly represents the characters of the Forms.

³¹ In this case we would probably say that the medium of sculpture is potentially a more informative medium when it comes to fully depicting people than that of painting or of shadows.

³² I believe that the Receptacles' invisibility (51a) is different from that of the Forms. I take it that we can conceive of invisibility in two way: a) as the un-visible, the way numbers, sounds, or abstract Forms are not visible, and b) as the undetermined with regards to color, and thus conductive of color, the way Aristotle's diaphanous medium is invisible. I suggest the latter is the case for the Receptacles' invisibility. This reading follows the spirit of the analogies with the material for imprinting and the perfume base. Both can be called unshaped or odorless in the sense of not yet having any determination with regards to shape or odor, and not in the sense in which they could not be determined in principle in these respects.

³³ This is not to say that the fact that the Receptacle can have determinations without participating into any forms is not puzzling.

This can be seen more clearly if we think of the image as having two faces. One is the face it purports to show, the face of its model, in the way that it is able to show it. We can call this the formal aspect of the image. The formal aspect amounts to the formal cause of the image. On the other hand, an image also has the face of the medium to which it belongs. We can talk about images in sculpture, painting, reflections or words. Each image will bear the specific determinations of the medium in which it arises: an image of Socrates in the medium of painting will be different from one in the medium of words not because of the model they represent, but because of the type of representation they are. Let's call this *the mediatic aspect of the image*. Thus, the mediatic aspect determines the way in which the formal aspect can manifest in an image. To illustrate, think of the different ways in which a red apple is imaged in a drawing, a painting, in its shadow, in a sculpture, as a mathematical description, in logos, or in memory. Each mediatic aspect opens up certain possibilities of imaging while at the same time closing up others. As we can see, in this case the images differ not because of the model they represent, but because of the specific medium in which they image their model. More so, because one has had contact with the apple itself, he can 1) call the rest mere images of the apple and 2) identify them as images of the apple.

Furthermore, in none of the cases mentioned above does the model determine in any way the structure of the medium of representation. The model and the medium are thus independent of each other, while the image is in different ways dependent on both. I suggest that the Receptacle should be interpreted as constituting the mediatic aspect of the particulars taken as images, while the Forms constitute their formal aspect. It should come then as no surprise that the image of the Form also bares distinctly different properties than the Form itself. These are due to what I have called the mediatic aspect of the image.

Now that the images' difference from the Forms has been accounted for, we must also try and give an explanation of the relation that connects them. First, it should be recalled that the Forms have no shape, are not spatial and are invisible. Thus, spatial or in any way visible triangles—even if only to the mind's eye—will not resemble the Form with respect to their spatiality or visibility. A particular triangle's

or circle's character of visibility and extendedness is due to what I have called the mediatic aspect, for it is the Receptacle that offers images their spatial and visible character. Yet what accounts for the way in which they are extended in space, and thus for us calling them triangle rather than circle, is the formal aspect, in this case the abstract Form of Circle and Triangle, respectively³⁴.

Yet, from this point on, I believe that the Image Theory runs into some trouble. It becomes quite difficult to understand just how we could read the relation of imaging into that of abstract essence and concrete instantiation. For Allen, the particulars "like reflections, differ in type from their originals; they share no common attribute; and yet they exhibit a fundamental community of character" (1960, 160). This is followed by Patterson considering that "the positive link that removes image *F* and model *F* from the realm of bare equivocation is the image's being an image of its model." (1985, 42).

If all these accounts are illuminating for the way Plato conceives of the relation between Form and particular, they do nothing to explain how this relation works. Patterson insists that the image in no way resembles the Form with respect to *being F*, but that it resembles it with respect *F*, as a different sort of *F* (an image *F* than a real *F*). All that these passages say is that the very essence of an image is to be *of* something else, but they do not reveal on account of what an image is *of* that model. In other words, it is a description of the relation of imaging without an account of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the relation to take place.

The image metaphor would suggest that an image, while of some model, is so by way of representing some aspect of the model. In other words, the image always takes on some aspect of the model and wears it, as it were. Yet, if an abstract essence does not itself possess the properties that are to be instantiated by the particular, it is not at all clear

³⁴ Mohr (1985, 88) makes a similar distinction with regards to the particulars of *Timaeus*, albeit for a different point: "On the one hand, they are in flux; on the other hand, they are images of Ideas. Insofar as the phenomena are in flux, nothing whatsoever may be said of them. But insofar as they are images of Ideas, they may be identified according to kind." On my interpretation the particulars' "being in flux" is just another characteristic that is due to the mediatic aspect, i.e. the character of the Receptacle.

how the relation of imaging should apply in the case of abstract to concrete instantiations. If a painting images its model by way of reproducing its aspect in color and shape, what is there to reproduce in the case of an abstract essence? The essence surely does not itself have the properties of the things it is an essence of according to the image theorist. The Form of Triangle is not itself a three-sided thing, but it is the essence of all three-sided figures. In the words of Patterson “it just is what it means to be *F*.” He suggests that in order to accommodate *logos* in the order of images we need to understand the semblance that connects image to model in terms of correctness. If we can say that a painted tree shares with the real one the same color, shape and proportionality, and in this context interpret semblance between two objects in terms of sharing some identical properties, we cannot give the same explanation in the case of a spoken account of the tree and the tree itself. What do the word “red” and the color red have in common? It is for this reason that Patterson calls for the semblance that Plato so often speaks as connecting model and image to be interpreted as correctness. Yet his analysis³⁵ neither shows how this could be done or even if it is possible.

As the interpretation stands at the moment, I believe that it can offer no clear answer as to what determines, for example, whether a particular circle is an image of the Form of Circle rather than of the Form of Triangle. All it can do is say that the image circle is indebted to the Form of Circle for being what it is, but not also what this debt amounts to, i.e. what is it exactly that it receives.

7. Conclusion

To summarize, the Image Theory interpretation of Forms took us halfway in answering how it is that the images the Receptacle holds are at the same time radically different from their models and also pure expressions of their character. First, I have argued that the Receptacle need not be absolutely characterless—if such a thing is even possible—in order to receive all things, and receive them as they are, but that it only

³⁵ For the relevant passages see Patterson (1985, 110-113).

needs to be characterless in the domain to which the things it receives belong. Then I have argued that all images have a double determination, a) their formal determination, i.e. the way they are determined by the model they are of and b) their medial determination that comes about from the specific medium in which they image their model. Following this, I have ascribed all the characteristics that differentiate the particular from the Form to the medial determination of the Receptacle. Finally, I have pointed out the difficulties that an abstract account of Forms runs into when trying to make sense of the positive relation between Forms and particulars.

Even though I don't believe that in its present state the Image Theory can give a satisfactory answer as to how we are to understand the positive relation between particular and Form, this does not spell the end for such an approach. It could be that an analysis of the *being of* relation that binds image to model may reveal a feasible way of accounting for what it is that the model invests the image with. First off, the image is not connected to its model by an act of conventional reference. Nor is the image connected to the model the way some effect is connected to its cause, both completely distinct things, yet connected by the causal relation. The image makes us think of the model because it has something that belongs to the model and reminds us of it. Their connection lies in the fact that the model invests the image with one of its distinguishing characteristics. What is the nature of the thing invested, and how are we to understand it in the context of Forms and particulars, where Forms are taken to be abstract essences? I believe that the Image Theory has yet to provide an answer to this vital question.

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