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PROJEKTBERICHT | RESEARCH REPORT

RESEARCH GROUP (D-II-2) PLACE, SPACE AND MOTION

PLACE, SPACE AND MOTION IN PLATO AND MIDDLE PLATONISM

Research results of the period from
01.04.2008 – 01.04.2012

Members of the research project

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Description of research question, approach and results

Research question

How does Plato use spatial concepts in his natural philosophy (to the extent that he has one)? How did Middle Platonist thinkers, especially Plutarch and the author of the *Didaskalikos* (= Alcinous?), take up and revise Plato's views? To what extent were they also influenced by other thinkers, e.g. Aristotle?

Research methodology and approach

We approached the research questions through *close reading* of relevant texts, reconsideration of their *philological basis* in the manuscript tradition (when called for), *systematic reconstruction and assessment* of the arguments guided always by sensitivity to their place in the ancient *history of science*.

The work on this project was firmly anchored in the Junior Research Group, "Place, Space and Motion." We especially benefited from the late antique commentaries on Aristotle that we read together with the other members of the group, especially Simplicius and Philoponus on Aristotle's treatments of place and void in the *Physics* (not all of which has been translated into a modern language). We also benefited greatly from the later (= post-Plotinus) Platonist perspective that other group members provided. There was also extensive, fruitful interaction with D-II-1 "The Metaphysics of Space."

Beere and Mouroutsou have both intensively worked on certain passages from Plato's *Timaeus* that deal (depending on your interpretation) with space or matter or both or neither. Beere and Mouroutsou have developed competing interpretations. Methodologically, their agreements and disagreements have been provocative and fruitful both for them and for the other group members. Mouroutsou has also worked on two Middle Platonist texts, the *Didaskalikos* and Plutarch's *On the Creation of the Soul in Plato's Timaeus*, both of which deal with the same passage from Plato's *Timaeus*. This intensive focus on a limited, difficult, much-discussed text has been fruitful.

Results

Timaeus 1, Beere (unpublished).

Beere has focused on the relationship between the so-called Receptacle and the bodies that are “in” the receptacle. He argues that the Receptacle is the bearer of certain fundamental perceptible properties (viz., the properties of the traditional elements), but that it is nevertheless not a part of any perceptible body. Because it is not part of any perceptible body, it is not matter. To the extent that perceptible bodies are *in* it, it is like space. But to the extent that it is a subject of properties (both the properties that constitutes perceptible bodies and other properties, e.g. motion), it is not space. Thus, in the *Timaeus*, being a part and being a subject of a property do not come together in the way that we would normally expect. This is a philosophically challenging and interesting position, and a new way of interpreting the text. It makes the Receptacle neither space nor matter but in a way both and in a way neither.

Timaeus 2, Mouroutsou.

Two most decisive dilemmas about Plato’s Receptacle tantalized ancient and modern interpreters: the first concerns its nature (matter or space) while the second addresses the context into which it is integrated and in which it is required to play its role: ontology (a metaphysics of particulars in general) or physics (a physical theory for the four elements). In the essay under review there are two distinctive contributions to this perennial debate. First I lay bare the structure of 48e-52d: Since the Receptacle is called space (*chora*) at the very culmination, namely in 52a, all that matters to Plato is the concept of space rather than the one of matter. However, since the passage is not a separate investigation into the *concept* of space (as Algra thinks), we need to ask what question this Platonic stretch *does* offer an answer to. Mouroutsou understands the starting problem as follows: Plato does not ask about the possibility of change, and thus the nature of matter, but seeks a language that appropriately addresses the Sensible. In accordance with other spatial and ontological interpretations (E. Lee, Broadie, Harte, Silverman), she claims to show a “language without particulars” (Strawson’s terminology) does justice to the Platonic agenda.

A separate undertaking, which grew out of this paper on the Receptacle, concerns the kind of ontology that is relevant to the Platonic physics: After distinguishing different notions of ontology (in a modest sense and in a stronger sense), she formulates the Platonic ontological endeavor in the *Timaeus* on the basis of the problem of possibility. While traditionally the question whether the world was created in time or not has been considered to be *the* problem of *Timaeus* exegesis, I show how we can formulate the fundamental philosophical question of the first part as follows: How is world possible? The second part of the Timaeian monologue addresses the question of the possibility of the Sensible. In both cases, the notion of possibility at stake is not related to time. As far as the content is concerned, the two parts of the dialogue prove to be intimately connected and, with regard to form, the role of the myth is philosophically re-evaluated.

Middle Platonism, Mouroutsou.

In “Alcinous’ *Didaskalikos*: Aristotelian Traces in Alcinoic Physics”, Mouroutsou demonstrates that the physics of Alcinous’ Handbook is far from being a mere summary of the Platonic *Timaeus* (*pace* the tenor in Middle Platonism research, e.g. Moraux and Dillon). It is a Middle Platonic trend to interpret the Receptacle of the *Timaeus* as matter and certain Middle Platonic tendencies suggest that they draw upon Aristotle’s *On Generation and Corruption* to explicate matter’s nature. She shows how Alcinous makes use of this understanding of matter in his subsequent *Timaeus* narrative.

The question that she asks about Plutarch is the following: How does Plutarch interpret the Platonic receptacle in his work and why? My thesis is that, in comparison to Alcinous, whose “Platonic” physics is Aristotelian regarding the concept of matter, Plutarch’s interpretation of the Receptacle as corporeal reveals a distinctively Stoic strain. Plutarch attributes the Stoic characteristics of matter to the Platonic receptacle, which he characterizes as “matter/body without quality”.

Discussion of the results in the light of current research

Beere’s work on the *Timaeus* differs from recent work in its way of using contemporary concepts (matter, space) to interpret the text. He argues that recent interpretive disputes have derived from the way interpreters have failed to be sufficiently explicit about the assumptions implicit in their concepts, especially the Aristotelian assumption that a subject of properties is a part of a composite whose form is the relevant property. Once certain assumptions are made explicit, we can see our way to a precisely formulated theory, which is both more philosophically interesting and more interpretatively plausible than other interpretations.

Mouroutsou’s work has brought the *Timaeus* into dialogue with certain strains of analytic metaphysics, going back to Strawson’s *Individuals*, in a way that has never been done before. She suggests that Plato quite seriously intends us to describe the sensible world using a language without persisting individuals, something Strawson envisaged only to dismiss. This is a striking and innovative interpretive move.