

On the Several Modes of Being in Plato

A widely accepted view of Plato's metaphysics is that he held what may be characterized as a "degrees of reality" theory and that his metaphysics can be equated with the theory of forms (or ideas).

In this paper, I argue that the "degrees of reality" model is flawed, that the theory of forms is held by Plato throughout the dialogues, and that a "modes of being" model is a better interpretative model because it retains the value of the theory of forms and shows the relation of the theory to his wider observations on being per se.

Caveats

In attempting to understand the work of a philosopher, especially when the writings are as rich and complex as those of Plato, one may find that the interpreter, no less than the translator, is a traitor, albeit a traitor unawares, a risk that applies also to the writer of the present paper. However, there are criteria for assessing the value of an interpretation. A good interpretation must consider various contexts of the writing, the historical period, the problems and audience addressed, the relation of the writing to the other works of the author, the writing style, and the writer's terminology, especially when the central concepts are complex, technical, or newly introduced with highly specialized meanings. But perhaps the most important test for an interpretation is whether it provides a deeper, more coherent, and fruitful understanding of the work. In a certain sense, the interpreter should drop out the "I" in interpretation and attend to the work as the true lover attends to his beloved. In this regard, one might well follow Plato's own directive in the 7th *Letter*, "from constant communion with the subject, the truth springs forth." ¹

Both Plato and Aristotle recognized that truth is the proper object of the human intellect. However, the attempt to understand and to clearly articulate truths in philosophy is well known for its impediments, some of which are identified by Francis Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning*² as the idols of the tribe, the den, the marketplace and the theater. In addition to the errors of the tribe, common to human nature, philosophers seem especially prone to errors of the den and of the theater. An “error of the den” occurs when someone, “refracts and discolors the light of nature, owing either to his own proper and peculiar nature; or to his education and conversation with others; or to the reading of books, and the authority of those whom he esteems and admires....” The “errors of the theater” arise from the various dogmas of philosophies and from faulty laws of demonstrations, of which Bacon says, “all the received systems are but so many stage plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion.” The view presented here may not constitute an actual paradigm shift, but it is to be expected that since it is contrary to much that has been taught and learned about the forms, its acceptance will require some re-thinking.

There are several versions, both ancient and modern, of the degrees of reality view attributed to Plato. Perhaps the best known of the ancient versions is that of Plotinus, who flourished in the mid-third century A.D. Although he is now referred to as a “neo-Platonist,” Plotinus would have considered himself merely a Platonist making his best effort to interpret Plato in light of the various commentaries, including those of Aristotle, that had been written in the six centuries after Plato’s death.

Leaving aside the intricacies of his metaphysics, the important point for the present paper is that Plotinus held as ultimate ontological and explanatory principles the One (or the Good), the

Intellect and the Soul. Here we are especially interested in the principles of the One and the Intellect.

The One is the absolutely first principle that is the cause of all, but is itself simple and uncaused; it is not directly describable and can be grasped only by saying what it is not. According to Gerson,³ Plotinus found the principle of the One in Plato's *Republic* in the "Idea of the Good," and in the *Parmenides* where it is the subject of the deductions in the second part. In the metaphysics of Plotinus, an eternal and immutable intellect is the locus of all the Platonic forms and whatever properties things have, they owe to forms whose instances these properties are. But why would the existence of forms require an eternal and immutable intellect in which they are contained? Gerson suggests that part of the answer is that Plotinus assumed he was following Plato in the *Timaeus* in the claim that the Form of Intelligible Animal was eternally contemplated by an intellect called the "Demiurge." Since Plotinus holds that the Many is in some sense derived from the One, and from the Divine intellect that contains the Platonic forms, his view is clearly a degrees of reality view.

The neo-Platonist interpretation of Plato's views on reality has been remarkably resistant to alteration. Lovejoy, in *The Great Chain of Being*, first published in 1936, attributes to Plato, as understood in this interpretation, "the indigenous strain of otherworldliness in Occidental philosophy and religion, as distinguished from the imported Oriental varieties,"⁴ quoting Dean Inge as saying that it is through Plato "that the conception of an unseen eternal world, of which the visible world is but a pale copy, gains a permanent foothold in the West."⁵ Lovejoy, of course, is not claiming that Plato thought the physical world was a mere illusion or a mere evil, but that his writings, especially on the idea of the Good, mark him as "the father of otherworldliness in the West, though Parmenides, no doubt, was its Urgrossvater."⁶

Macrobius, in the early fifth century, sums up the degrees of reality theory of the Neoplatonic cosmology in a passage using the metaphors of the chain and a series of mirrors,

“Since, from the Supreme God Mind arises, and from Mind, Soul, and since this in turn creates all subsequent things and fills them all with life, and since this single radiance illumines all and is reflected in each, as a single face might be reflected in many mirrors placed in a series; and since all things follow in continuous succession, degenerating in sequence to the very bottom of the series, the attentive observer will discover a connection of parts, from the Supreme God down to the last dregs of things, mutually linked together and without a break.”⁷

The remainder of Lovejoy’s book treats how this “scale of being” or, as we may call it, the “ neo-Platonic degrees of reality,” schema plays out in various disciplines and ages, until in the 18th century it is rejected by the memorable words of Dr. Johnson: “this Scale of Being I have demonstrated to be raised by presumptuous Imagination, to rest on Nothing at the Bottom, to lean on Nothing at the Top, and to have Vacuities from step to step though which any Order of Being may sink into Nihilicity without any Inconvenience, so far as we can Judge, to the next Rank above or below it.”⁸

While Dr. Johnson, with his 18th century tools, chopped down the luxuriant growth of the great scale of being, its Plotinian roots are still alive, the main root being that Plotinus took Plato’s One, equated with the idea of the Good, to be God. In the early 20th century, even so judicious a scholar as Frederick Copleston, in Vol. 1 of *A History of Philosophy*, writes of the idea of the good, “It is, therefore, real in itself and subsistent...Plato is clearly working towards the conception of the Absolute, the absolutely Perfect and Exemplary Pattern of all things, the ultimate ontological Principle.”⁹

Copleston’s statement contains some truth but it also strongly suggests the Neo-Platonist interpretation of the idea of the Good as God. There is no evidence in the dialogues to support this interpretation; moreover, the ontological value of the idea of the Good and the One is supportable without reference to God. Clearly, there *is* evidence that Plato, as Socrates before

him, believed that God is responsible for the order in the universe, but this lends no support to the claim that the idea of the Good should be interpreted to be God.

The idea of the Good, a member of the class of ideas, shares the essential class features of a-temporality, unchangeableness, and intelligibility. However, an idea does not think; it neither has nor is an intellect and therefore cannot be God. The idea of the Good is *different* from every other idea, a difference Plato marks by saying that it exceeds all other ideas in beauty and power. This phrase has often been interpreted to mean that the idea of Good is “beyond being,” which seems to mean that it cannot be defined by genus and species. In Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysical frameworks, it is also said to be one of the “transcendentals.” What Plato actually says of the idea of the Good (*Republic* 508e-509a) is:

This, then, which gives to the objects of knowledge their truth and to him who knows them his power of knowing, is the idea or essential nature of Goodness. It is the cause of knowledge and truth; and so, while you may think of it as an object of knowledge, you will do well to regard it as something beyond truth and knowledge and, precious as these both are, of still higher worth.

In the metaphysics of Plato, the idea of the Good is best understood as a first-order ontological and epistemological principle. That the Good can be called the One, and the One the Good, does not conflict with anything in the dialogues. Gadamer suggests that the One, aka the Good, in the dialogues, be understood *not* as “Plotinus’s “One,” the sole existent and “trans-existent” entity,” but rather as “that which on any given occasion provides what is multiple with the unity of whatever consists in itself. As the unity of what is unitary, the idea of the Good would seem to be presupposed by anything ordered, enduring and consistent.”¹⁰

Regarding the Good as an epistemological principle, one can hardly do better than endorse the view of Nettleship:

If you take any complex object (and all objects are complex), that is any object which is a whole of parts, the only way to explain it or understand it is to see how the various parts are related to the whole; that is, what function each of them performs in the whole, how each of them serves the good or end (telos) of the whole. The good or end of the thing is the immanent principle which we have to suppose in it in order to explain it, and which is involved in calling it a whole at all. The progress of knowledge is to Plato and Aristotle the increased realization of the fact that each thing has thus its function, and the world is, in Plato's phraseology, luminous just so far as it reveals this fact.¹¹

The twentieth century analytic approach to the interpretation of Plato has some limitations, but the seminal paper of Gregory Vlastos, "Degrees of Reality,"¹² while it does not address all the questions that may be raised about the various meanings of "real" and "reality," does establish two crucial points. First, when Plato speaks of a form as "completely" real, or "purely" or "perfectly" real, or "really" real, or more real than its sensible instances, the term 'real' is being used to indicate that the form is cognitively dependable or undeceiving, in contrast to the sensible instances of the form that are constantly changing, confused, unclear and mixed with their opposites. Second, when Plato speaks of some things as more or less real than others, there is absolutely no evidence that he meant one thing exists more or less than another, in the sense in which we commonly use the word, 'exists.'

The analytic approach often assumes that Plato's views "developed" from the "early" to the "late" dialogues. In another paper, "The Third Man Argument in the Parmenides,"¹³ Vlastos attempts to find suppressed premises, which, if they were added to the arguments, would show the arguments against the theory of forms to be valid, and, therefore would show that Plato had, or ought to have, abandoned an "earlier" theory he held in the middle dialogues. This assumption of a genetic development surfaces even in the work of contemporary, well-respected interpreters of Plato, as when one speaks of the 'late' ontology of Plato, implying that there was an 'earlier' and different ontology.¹⁴ However, as Jacob Howland convincingly argues in a recent paper,¹⁵ there is no justifiable basis on which to establish any chronology of the dialogues, claiming that

“we can no longer afford to regard the “results” of chronological investigations as key to the understanding of Plato.”¹⁶

It must be admitted that the metaphors in the *Republic* can lead to a misleading use of language found even in the work of a scholar of the rank of Cornford, who spoke of the ‘world’ of intelligibles as distinguished from the ‘world’ of appearances.¹⁷ So, the question naturally arises “Why would Plato use this sort of language?”

One answer is that Plato is not so closely tied to the use of technical terms as we ordinarily think Aristotle is, and that he adjusts his way of speaking to the audience. As Miller has perceptively pointed out, the audience within the *Republic* is primarily Glaucon and Adimantus, who, although they are more tenacious in inquiry and have more intellectual prowess than others in the dialogue, are yet uneducated in philosophy and this “forces Socrates, in his effort to be intelligible to them, to set aside conceptual discourse for imagery and simile at a number of key points, especially in presenting his theory of forms.”¹⁸

Foundational Questions

“What is there?” and “What human knowledge is possible?” are foundational questions in philosophy. A person encounters things and has knowledge long before the metaphysical and epistemological question is explicitly raised. Though interrelated, in order of time, the epistemological question may be raised before the metaphysical question, but the metaphysical question is more fundamental. Plato raises both questions in various ways in different dialogues. What is reality and how is it known?

In this last section, I suggest that Plato’s treatment of these questions is best understood on a “modes of being” model, and that since the essential features of the theory of ideas (or forms) are found throughout the dialogues, the modes of being model does not *replace* the theory

of forms, but incorporates it into a wider metaphysics. This, of course, does not imply that the theory is *discussed*, or even *mentioned*, in each and every dialogue; rather that it is presupposed in the discussion of other matters. In the *Euthyphro*, a central task is to attempt a definition of piety. Forms *per se* are not mentioned, but Socrates keeps pressing Euthyphro to give an account of piety itself, not of instances of piety, nor of types of piety. In the *Theaetetus*, the attempt is to find some account that, if added to sense perception, would enable one to speak of knowledge in relation to sense perception. No such account is forthcoming, but the dialogue cries out for the one type of account that could accomplish this: an account using forms. Plato always and everywhere assumes that the idea (idea) or form (eidos) is to be sought to bring order to, or make intelligible, the other elements of human experience, and that the human intellect, if competent and adequately educated, can discover (and be helped to discover) the inherent eidos—not always and not by one means only, since various methods and techniques are needed depending upon the situation and the individuality of persons. Sometimes irony is used, sometimes hypothesis, or collection or division, or straightforward argument, or a *reductio ad absurdum* argument.

To illustrate, in the first part of the *Parmenides*, young Socrates is being instructed by being led to reflect on and to think through the difference between forms and physical things. The *reductio ad absurdum* is used here. Parmenides and Zeno are dialecticians who have experience in arguing; moreover, they realize that without clarity about the nature of forms, philosophy would be impossible. For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to enter into the minute details of each argument or the extensive literature on “the third man argument,” but merely to point out, in a general way, what is being rejected, or “reduced to absurdity.”

Using the *reductio*, Parmenides establishes three main points: forms are not physical or sensible; forms are not merely thoughts; and, there is no drastic, unbridgeable, radical separation between forms and their instances. The first argument (*Parmenides*, 131a-132b) shows the absurdity of treating a form as something physical: “if this is assumed, would its instances get a part or the whole of the form?” It is within the context of this first extended argument that one version of the infinite regress argument occurs:¹⁹ “take largeness itself and the other things which are large. Suppose you look at these in the same way in your mind’s eye, will not yet another unity make its appearance—a largeness by virtue of which they all appear large?” The key, often overlooked, suggestion is that the form and its instance be seen “in the same way in your mind’s eye.” The infinite regress argument could only get off the ground if the form and its instance were seen *in the same way*, i.e., as something *physical*, but, as is evident in dialogue after dialogue, this is precisely how a form must *not* be understood. To so understand it, would be, in contemporary terminology, to make a *category mistake* of the deepest dye.

The suggestion that a form is merely a thought (*Parmenides*, 132b-c) is rapidly reduced to absurdity showing that, if this were true, each sensible thing would consist of thoughts, or that there are thoughts which nevertheless do not think.

The final position reduced to absurdity is that there is a radical separation between the “world of forms” and the ordinary things experienced in everyday life such that there is no relation between the two. If this were true, forms would be related solely to each other; only the form of knowledge, or perhaps God (being perfect like the forms) would be able to know the forms, and God would not be able to know anything about this other ordinary world, or us. This would also have the consequence that the human intellect could not know the forms, a position obviously absurd and meant to be rejected, since in all the dialogues, without exception, the

underlying assumption is that forms *are* knowable by the human intellect. Parmenides notes this as the greatest challenge to acceptance of the theory of forms. A person who objects that forms cannot be known could not be convinced that he is wrong, “unless he chanced to be a man of wide experience and natural ability, and were willing to follow one through a long and remote train of argument. Otherwise there would be no way of convincing a man who maintained that the forms were unknowable.”²⁰

The basic tenets of the theory of forms, assumed in all the dialogues, and through various techniques, often explicitly delineated, point to some fundamental truths about reality and the possibility of human knowledge. However, as we have seen, misinterpretations of the theory may arise from the difficulty of the subject matter, the inherent limitations of the individual intellect, faulty education or false assumptions, or some combination of these. The only remedy is eternal vigilance and daily discourse of a certain kind.²¹

Although the theory of forms is *central* to Plato’s account of reality and human knowledge, it is not *exhaustive*, which is to say there are other aspects of being that must be considered. In metaphysics, a fundamental problem arises when one type of being is privileged over other types solely on the basis that one is more “real” than another. In the *Sophist*, Plato referred to this problem as a battle between the gods and the giants; post-Kantian articulations often describe it as a conflict between transcendental idealism and a physical reductionism. Embracing either extreme—that only ideas are real or that only physical things are real—obscures or diminishes important features of experiential reality. This occurs in the metaphysics of Plotinus when the “simple” One is privileged over the many “non-simple” ones and provokes the question of how the One gives rise to the many. In the 16th century, Descartes gave such primacy to the *cogito* that the existence of the external world came to be questioned, and in the

18th century, Kant offered an idealism that gave rise to a host of problems still current in philosophical discourse.

Plato's solution is to accept that ideas and physical things, both together, are real. But these do not exhaust "real" things. The human intellect must also be real, if knowledge is to be possible, and, falsehoods must be real, else the Sophist who deals in falsehoods cannot be defined. In these passages, Plato is endorsing a view of reality that distinguishes certain ways or modes of being.

How is this "modes of being" talk related to the theory of forms? Is Plato altering or replacing the theory? To one who has accepted a certain "degrees of reality" interpretation of the theory of forms, or who is committed to a chronological placement of the dialogues in a certain order, this might seem to be the case. However, there is the strongest possible evidence *within* the *Sophist* itself that Plato is neither altering nor abandoning the theory of forms. One explicit purpose of the dialogue is to "capture" the sophist, and from the context of the dialogue, this "capturing" is clearly intended to mean being able to give an adequate account of the nature of the sophist; they are, in fact, searching for the "cognitively dependable or undeceiving"²² *form* of the sophist. Moreover, concerning the battle between the gods and the giants, the stranger notes that "only one course is open to the philosopher who values knowledge and the rest above all else. He must refuse to accept from the champions either of the one or of the many forms the doctrine that all reality is changeless, and he must turn a deaf ear to the other party who represent reality as everywhere changing. Like a child begging for 'both,' he must declare that reality or the sum of things is both at once—all that is unchangeable and all that is in change."²³ Clearly, this passage is endorsing the view that both forms and their instances exist, in the ordinary sense of 'exist.'²⁴

The *Sophist* is an extraordinarily rich dialogue, containing many suggestions for a metaphysics that is yet to be worked out, perhaps along Aristotelian lines, perhaps not entirely so. A careful reading of Brentano's²⁵ treatment of Aristotelian metaphysics will reveal several parallels between the views of Plato and Aristotle, including that Aristotle also distinguishes different modes of being, "Being is said in various ways..."²⁶

In contemporary philosophy, various attempts are made to work out a metaphysics that will accommodate the important contributions made by the phenomenological movement, as for example, the work done by Roman Ingarden.²⁷ It may turn out that the "modes of being" model that began with Plato will be fruitful here, as well as in discussions in contemporary metaphysics of "possible worlds," for example, in clarifying certain issues relating to "negative being."

Numerous issues of greatest metaphysical importance are treated in the *Sophist*, but they are beyond the scope of the present paper. What I have tried to show here is that Plato has been misinterpreted as postulating a "degrees of reality" view and that his metaphysics is better understood in terms of "modes" rather than "degrees." Correcting these misinterpretations is the first step to a more adequate appreciation of Plato's metaphysics.

ENDNOTES

¹ Plato. Seventh Letter 341d.

² Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, Bk. xli – xliv.

³ Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1994) p. 19.

⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1960) p. p. 35. Hereinafter cited as GCB.

⁵ Dean Inge, *The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought* (1926)p. 9, quoted in GCB, p.35

⁶ GCB, p.39.

⁷ GCB, p. 63.

⁸ GCB, p.254.

⁹ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy. Vol.1: Greece and Rome* (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1946) p.176. The context of the remark is "...as Plato clearly asserts that the Good gives being to the objects of knowledge and so is, as it were, the unifying and all-comprehensive Principle of the essential order, while itself excelling even essential being in dignity and power, it is impossible to conclude that the Good is a mere concept or even that it is a non-existent end, a teleological principle, as yet unreal, towards which all things are working: it is not only an epistemological principle, but also—in some, as yet, ill-defined sense—an ontological [sic] principle, a principle of being. It is, therefore, real in itself and subsistent...Plato is clearly working towards the conception of the Absolute, the absolutely Perfect and Exemplary Pattern of all things, the ultimate ontological Principle. This Absolute is immanent, for phenomena embody it, "copy" it, partake in it, manifest it, in their varying degrees; but it is also transcendent, for it is said to transcend even being itself, while the metaphors of participation (methexis) and imitation (mimesis) imply a distinction between the participation and the partaken of, between the imitation and the Imitated or Exemplar. Any attempt to reduce the Platonic Good to a mere logical principle and to disregard the indications that it is an ontological principle, necessarily leads to a denial of the sublimity of the Platonic metaphysic—as also, of course, to the conclusion that the Middle Platonist and Neo-Platonist philosophers entirely misunderstood the essential meaning of the Master."

¹⁰ Hans Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) p. 31.

¹¹ Richard Lewis Nettleship, *Lectures on the Republic of Plato* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1961) p. 223.

¹² Gregory Vlastos, "Degrees of Reality in Plato," *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, ed. Renford Bambrough (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul and New York: The Humanities Press, 1965) p.1.

¹³ Gregory Vlastos, “The Third Man Argument in the Parmenides” *Philosophical Review*, 1954. Reprinted in *Studies in Plato’s Metaphysics*, ed., R.E. Allen (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965)

¹⁴ the reference is to Kenneth Sayre’s *Plato’s Late Ontology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press) 1983.

¹⁵ Jacob Howland, “Re-reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology” *Phoenix*, Vol. 45. No. 3 (Autumn, 1991) pp. 189-214.

¹⁶ Howland, p. 190.

¹⁷ Plato *The Republic*, tr. With commentary by F. M. Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) diagram on p.222.

¹⁸ Mitchell H. Miller, Jr. *Plato’s Parmenides* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1986) p. 19.

¹⁹ Another version occurs at 132d- 133 a, where it is argued that if an instance is “like” the form, the form must also be “like” the instance; the, somewhat less obvious, flaw still results from treating a form as if it were sensible.

²⁰ *Parmenides*, 132b-d.

²¹ Plato *Apology* 38a-b “if I tell you that daily to discourse about virtue is the greatest good of man, you are not likely to believe me...yet, nonetheless, it is true.

²² See the point made by Vlastos, p. 6 above, and note 13.

²³ *Sophist* 247c-d.

²⁴ Vlastos’ second point mentioned above, p. 6.

²⁵ Franz Brentano, *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1975).

²⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* bk. 4.

²⁷ Roman Ingarden’s major work in ontology, *Spór o istnienie świata* (“The Controversy Over The Existence of the World”) was written in Polish during the war and was not translated into German until 1964. Except for a small part, printed under the title, *Time and Modes of Being*, (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1964) the work is not available in English. A central issue that dominated Ingarden’s work in epistemology, ontology, metaphysics and value theory, and which makes his position pertinent to the present paper, is the realism/idealism problem.

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