

UNITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN PLATO'S METAPHYSICS

William J. Prior

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DEVELOPMENT
IN PLATO'S
METAPHYSICS

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This book is dedicated to my parents

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Boulder, Colorado

In Plato's work there is both unity and development — unity, because he has a sharply defined manner of viewing things and securing an intellectual grasp of them, and this manner *is* the Platonic Idea or 'vision'; and development, because there is a change in the kind of objects on which his main interest rests at different times.

Julius Stenzel, *Plato's Method of Dialectic*, p. 23.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF PLATO'S DEVELOPMENT

This book contains an account of the development of Plato's metaphysics. I focus on two metaphysical doctrines of central importance in Plato's thought: the Theory of Forms and the doctrine of Being and Becoming. I discuss Plato's epistemology, psychology, theology and other topics only when they are relevant to the metaphysical doctrines just mentioned. My approach is therefore selective. It is selective also in that I deal primarily with only six dialogues: the *Euthyphro*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Parmenides* (part I), *Timaeus* and *Sophist*. I discuss other dialogues only when their contents illuminate or augment the metaphysics of these six.

This selectivity is not required by my topic, which certainly admits of more comprehensive treatment. It is well suited to my general thesis concerning Plato's development, however, which may be stated as follows. Plato develops in his early and middle dialogues a metaphysical view which has at its centre the Theory of Forms and the related doctrine of Being and Becoming. According to the Theory of Forms, there exist certain abstract objects of knowledge, called Forms. By virtue of a relation of participation which holds between these Forms and the phenomenal objects with which we are familiar, these phenomena acquire their names and characteristics. According to the doctrine of Being and Becoming, the Forms are eternal, intelligible and utterly insusceptible to change, whereas their phenomenal participants are generated and destroyed, sensible and in constant change. Plato not only makes this categorical distinction between Forms and phenomena, he portrays them as inhabiting separate worlds.

The Theory of Forms receives its first real treatment in the *Euthyphro*, an early dialogue. The theory is developed and the Being-Becoming distinction introduced in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, dialogues of Plato's middle period. In the first part of the *Parmenides*, these doctrines are subjected to criticism. This criticism does not constitute a refutation of either doctrine, but it does raise serious questions about both, questions to which the middle dialogues do not contain definitive answers. In the post-*Parmenides* dialogues, and in particular, in the *Timaeus* and

Sophist, Plato does deal with the questions raised in the *Parmenides*. Without altering either the Theory of Forms or the doctrine of Being and Becoming in their essential natures, he augments and clarifies his metaphysics in such a way that the objections of the *Parmenides* are met. Thus, the dialogues I shall deal with exhibit a genuine development in Plato's metaphysics, a movement from an initial statement of his views through a critique of them to a refined final position.

This thesis is far from uncontroversial. It must be contrasted with two other views of Plato's thought which have been defended in the scholarly literature. I shall label the first of these views 'radical revisionism', both because it posits a change in Plato's position more radical than the one I propose and because the view itself constituted a radical departure from the orthodox conception of Plato's thought when it was first put forth. The second view is generally labelled 'unitarianism', because it emphasises the unity of Plato's thought throughout the dialogues. Whereas radical revisionism insists on a greater change in Plato's metaphysics than I allow, unitarianism insists on less. I shall discuss both views briefly below.

The question of Plato's development has concerned Plato scholars at least since the early nineteenth century. Any view that proposes some development or change in Plato's thought must deal with the question of the relative chronological order of the dialogues. Unless it can be determined which dialogues were written at what period in Plato's career, there is no objective basis for any claims about how his thought developed. Such a chronology of the dialogues was absent in the first two thirds of the nineteenth century, and the proliferation of rival hypotheses concerning Plato's thought demonstrated more clearly than could any abstract discussion of methodology the need for one.¹

Such a chronology was provided as the result of numerous studies of Plato's style, undertaken in the later part of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth by Campbell, Lutoslawski, von Arnim, Ritter and others.² These investigations, for which the term 'stylometry' was coined, showed that five dialogues — the *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus* — were remarkably similar in style to the *Laws*, which was known to be one of Plato's latest works. These six dialogues constituted a 'late group'. Prior to them stood one or more 'middle' or 'Platonic' groups of dialogues, including at least the

Phaedo, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Theaetetus*, and *Parmenides*; and still earlier still was a group of 'early' or 'Socratic' dialogues, such as the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Lysis*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Protagoras*, *Euthydemus*, and *Gorgias*.

The results of stylometry put an end for a time to wild speculation about Plato's development. They greatly reduced the number of accounts of Plato's thought that were historically possible; and, though rival accounts persisted, there was general agreement among scholars in the early part of this century that any development of Plato's metaphysics took the form of a gradual unfolding and refinement of that metaphysics.

This consensus was challenged in 1939 by one of the major exponents of radical revisionism, Gilbert Ryle.³ Ryle argued that the critique of the *Parmenides* was fatal to any version of the Theory of Forms and that Plato in fact abandoned the theory following that critique. Ryle's argument succeeded in convincing many Plato scholars that the *Parmenides* presented a strong, perhaps unanswerable challenge to the Theory of Forms; but the later dialogues employed the theory so freely that it seemed impossible that Plato had abandoned it.

Ryle's account of Plato's development appeared historically impossible. There was more hope for a less extreme version of the radical thesis, which was propounded and defended by G. E. L. Owen in 1953.⁴ Owen said that the *Parmenides* refuted not the Theory of Forms, but the interpretation of the Forms as *paradeigmata*, 'paradigms', and the doctrine of Being and Becoming. This version of the theory and the Being-Becoming dichotomy are propounded in the late dialogues chiefly by the *Timaeus*; thus, Owen sought to make his view plausible by proposing to remove the *Timaeus* from the late group and place it among the middle dialogues, after the *Republic* but before the *Parmenides*.

Owen launched a many-pronged attack on the traditional late dating of the *Timaeus*. He said that the political philosophy of the dialogue differed from that of the *Statesman* and *Laws* but was the same as that of the *Republic*, and that its astronomy also differed from that of the *Laws* and resembled that of the *Republic*. He argued that both the view that the Forms are paradigms and the sharp dichotomy between Being and Becoming were abandoned in the later dialogues as the result of criticism in the *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, and *Parmenides*. He attempted to undermine the credibility of the stylometric evidence for the late date of the

Timaeus, and he attempted to refute a claim of Cornford's that a particular passage of the *Timaeus* presupposes the previous composition of the *Sophist*. The crux of Owen's argument, however, was the same as Ryle's: that Plato could not have continued to hold his middle period Theory of Forms after the *Parmenides*.

A response to Owen's radical proposal came in 1957 from the leading champion of the unitarian camp of Plato scholars, H. F. Cherniss.⁵ Cherniss conceded many of the points Owen made in criticism of stylometry (not surprisingly, as unitarians from Shorey on had been themselves critical of stylometry on the grounds that it imports into Plato scholarship a concern for development, whereas in reality Plato's thought was fixed from the start of his career). He did argue, however, that there was sufficient sound evidence of this nature to show that the *Timaeus* is late, and he criticised Owen's evidence to the contrary. Cherniss also argued, as one would expect unitarians to do, that Plato's later metaphysics did not differ in any important way from the metaphysics of the early and middle dialogues. The arguments of the *Parmenides*, and in particular the Third Man Argument, which Owen had used to show the need for Plato to abandon paradeigmatism, were in Cherniss' view not serious objections to the Theory of Forms, but had already been refuted in the *Republic* and other middle dialogues.

The exchange between Cherniss and Owen initiated a debate which has continued to this day. Both positions have won some support, but neither has emerged victorious from the fray.⁶ The work of Ryle and Owen has effectively destroyed the consensus of scholars on the development of Plato's metaphysics and the date of the *Timaeus*, but it has not produced a new consensus. Nor has Cherniss' contrary position won the support of a majority of scholars.

It is against the background of this dispute between two views which are polar opposites that I have developed the position I propound in this book. I am of course not alone in holding a moderate position between these two extremes. The majority of Plato scholars in this century have held some version of the view I put forth; my differences from them are largely matters of detail. None the less, it seemed important to me to propound and defend this alternative to radical revisionism on the one hand and unitarianism on the other, in part because the debate on Plato's development has been largely carried out, in recent years at least, by members of one camp or the other. Yet it seems clear to me

that neither extreme view can succeed in presenting a historically accurate picture of Plato's philosophy; both the radical view, which shows Plato giving up metaphysics in his later years for a prototype of philosophical analysis, and the unitarian position, which finds the later Plato fully present in the early, are serious distortions of the facts.

I do not think it necessary to subject either of these extreme views to criticism.⁷ The members of one camp have in general done a more than adequate job of showing up the weaknesses of the other. My book is therefore not a commentary on the dispute between the two camps, but an attempt to lay out a plausible alternative to either. The only satisfactory way of doing this seems to me to be to ground my interpretation in the Platonic text. Thus, I have undertaken an exposition of the metaphysical sections of the six dialogues I mentioned above, an exposition which I hope brings out the essential nature of Plato's metaphysics.

I discuss these dialogues in what I take to be their actual chronological order. In Chapter 1 I deal with the central features of the Theory of Forms and the doctrine of Being and Becoming as they appear in the early *Euthyphro* and the middle period dialogues *Phaedo* and *Republic*. Throughout these dialogues Plato assumes that the Forms exist, and he assigns to them a causal role in the phenomenal world. He also treats them as paradigms, and at least suggests by his use of certain expressions that they are self-predicative (that they have the characteristics of which they are the Forms). In the middle dialogues he emphasises the role of the Forms as objects of knowledge, a role which requires their separation from the phenomenal world and which is the basis of the Being-Becoming distinction. The separate existence of the Forms appears to conflict with their function as causes in the phenomenal world; this in turn leads to some of the problems raised in the *Parmenides*. Plato uses two models for the relation of participation in these dialogues: the sharing model (which suits the conception of Forms as causes) and the resemblance model (which suits their role as objects of knowledge); his failure to decide on one model again leads to trouble in the *Parmenides*.

In Chapter 2 I consider the criticism of these metaphysical views presented in the *Parmenides*. I deal in succession with Socrates' statement of the Theory of Forms in that dialogue, the questions *Parmenides* raises about the extent of the world of the Forms, the arguments against the view that the Forms are immanent in things,

the two versions of the Third Man Argument, and the final argument against the separate existence of the Forms. I argue that the objections Parmenides makes against the Theory of Forms can only be made valid if premisses are assumed which differ subtly from those Plato actually accepted in the middle dialogues. Thus, they do not constitute a refutation of the Theory of Forms in those dialogues; but they do raise some serious questions about the correct interpretation of Plato's metaphysics. These questions lead directly to the later dialogues.

In Chapter 3 I deal with the response of the *Timaeus* to the critique of the *Parmenides*. Plato presents the Theory of Forms and the doctrine of Being and Becoming in much the same way here that he had done in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*; this shows that he has not abandoned these doctrines in the face of the criticism they have received. Rather, he adds some new doctrines which enable him to escape from the problems the *Parmenides* had presented. He introduces a new theory of causation, in which the causal function of the Forms is restricted and a new causal principle, Divine Reason in the person of the Demiurge, is introduced. The introduction of the Demiurge enables Plato to show what is wrong with the critique of the separation of the Forms in the *Parmenides*. Plato also introduces into his ontology a new entity, the Receptacle. With the aid of the Receptacle, he is able to exhibit more clearly than before the relation between Forms and phenomena, and this new statement of the Theory of Forms can be seen to be immune to the Third Man Argument in either version.

In the last chapter, I discuss the metaphysics of the *Sophist*. I argue that the *Sophist* does not, as some scholars think, give evidence of a change in Plato's mind concerning the viability of metaphysics in general or the Theory of Forms in particular. There are genuine advances in the *Sophist* from the metaphysics of the middle dialogues, and perhaps even from the position of the *Timaeus*; but these advances are made within the same basic metaphysical framework that characterised those dialogues. Plato argues for the inclusion of changing things in the realm of Being; but this modification of the Being-Becoming dichotomy is verbal rather than substantive. He still employs the pattern-copy relation to illuminate the nature of an image, though he does not apply this relation in discussing the Forms (a fact that is explained by the context in which Forms are discussed). He makes a real conceptual breakthrough in his analysis of negation, but the breakthrough is

made with a metaphysical apparatus of Forms which is little changed from the middle dialogues. He introduces a new relation among Forms but interprets it as the familiar relation of participation. I discuss the consequences of these changes for the Platonic metaphysics and conclude with a comparison of the *Timaeus* and *Sophist*.

The order of my discussion is based on the assumption that the *Timaeus* is one of Plato's latest dialogues; my aim is to show that the dialogue makes good sense when placed after the *Parmenides*. As the reader will already have noted, however, the controversy over Plato's development has produced controversy over the chronological position of the *Timaeus* among the dialogues. In the Appendix, therefore, I address the chronological issue, and give some of my reasons for believing that the traditional late date for this dialogue is correct.

The subject of this book, Plato's metaphysical development, has been of great interest to Plato scholars, particularly in recent years. Accordingly, I have at times found it necessary to discuss the secondary literature on the subject. I have done so sparingly, however. I have tried to avoid mentioning works which bear on the particular issues I discuss unless they have influenced my own view or they make a point which is indispensable to the advancement of the discussion. Whenever possible I have confined even these references to notes. I have followed this policy because I believe that, although Plato scholars may benefit from lengthy discussions of the scholarly literature, other readers generally find such displays of erudition distracting or (what is worse) intimidating. Though my theme is one that has preoccupied Plato scholars, I do not believe that it is of interest only to them; I have tried to write, therefore, for a wider audience. I hope, in fact, that anyone familiar with the dialogues I discuss and interested in the metaphysical themes contained therein may be able to read this book with understanding and with profit.

Notes

The following notes contain only brief references, listing the author's last name and page number; when more than one article or book by a given author is cited in the notes, the year of publication is added to disambiguate the reference. A complete reference to each work cited is to be found in the Bibliography.

1. See Lutoslawski, pp. 35–63, for a discussion of these hypotheses.