

Magic or Magia?

This paper contains a facsimile of a piece of text written in October 1994, while I was living and working in Oxford. It was written on a Macintosh, and the original file appears to have been lost. As a consequence, there are two or three minor typos in the text which I have been unable to correct, but these do not obscure the sense of the argument.

It is in three parts: the first is a general discussion of the kind of arguments about the nature of reality which formed the core of argument on the subject in ancient Greece; the second part is an analysis of the structure of Plato's dialogue *The Sophist* (Sophistes), where the various arguments appear, using the translation by Francis Cornford; the third part restates the structure, but adds some significant quotations from the text.

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate how the Greeks argued about the nature of reality, and that there were four principal categories of argument. These arguments stand in relation to each other, and it is useful to explore their relationship with each other. Listing them a) to d), arguments a), c) and d) turn out to represent an inability to accept the necessity of b), or are contrary positions. Position a) is the extreme view of Parmenides that reality is one and one only, and that therefore all multiplicity, change and participation is impossible. Position b) suggests that both change and the participation of the Forms or Ideas in the world must be accepted, though we cannot easily explain this.

Position b) is the only one which allows the participants in the discussion to accept both what they consider to be theoretically true (that reality itself is one and does not change), and aspects of experience (change and participation). This is to accept that the worlds of experience and of knowledge enshrine paradoxicality at the core. The other two provide modes of argument (by themselves) which offer less useful theoretical bases for insight into the nature of reality and the world.

Given the nature of the way the dialogue is constructed and the way the arguments are laid out, it seems clear that Plato is making the case for position b). Plato's philosophical outlook therefore is paradoxical in nature. This should not be a surprise, since he describes a transcendental reality standing behind appearance in the course of several of his dialogues. The paradoxicality of the nature of reality itself is the source of Plato's transcendentalism.

The paper begins, perhaps unexpectedly, with a discussion of J.G. Frazer's view of ancient thought, and ancient understandings of magic. Frazer's position is essentially position d), meaning that he regarded physical reality as the only reality. Modern science is the only proper mode of knowledge, and any universality in the world is the universality of a public neutral reality, which obeys physical laws which we can observe in nature.

Frazer was (as I've written elsewhere) a disciple of John Locke, who held that all thought was based on the 'association of ideas'. He was dismissive of the idea of Being altogether, as something about which nothing could be said, and therefore had no sense of, or notion of, a transcendental reality (he seems to have read most or all of the Platonic dialogues by the age of 24, without agreeing in any way with Plato on the question of a reality behind the world of appearance).

So for Frazer, all ideas of a transcendental reality were simply false, which he explained (in connection with Plato in particular) was the consequence of turning an epistemology into an ontology. That was an error by Plato. Ideas of magic and magical practice were similarly based on a

fundamental error, and such errors were explained in terms of the association of ideas (the confusion of similarity with identity, and former contact with current connection). In the *Golden Bough* he said quite explicitly that the ancient magician did not supplicate a higher power.

Of course it is certainly the case that such erroneous ideas of what magic and magical practice entailed in the past were widespread, and were likely to be nearly universal outside priestly establishments and the royal courts. But that is no way for a scholar to frame a study of human thought in antiquity, or in later times. What stratification of phenomena there is in his work is based on the difference between thought and practice founded on error (ideas of Being, of sympathy and contagion), and modern knowledge based on scientific investigation and the experimental method.

Plato himself identified the distinction between ideas of magic and sorcery as error in his *Laws*, and contrasts this with prophecy and divining, which, is *according to knowledge*. The entire basis of the idea of the ascent via the Forms to the Good in Plato is that the Good is the place where all knowledge can be had, and is defined as such. The philosopher may then descend again by the Forms, returning with 'beneficial knowledge'. He says explicitly that the magician or sorcerer does not know what he is doing (i.e., what he is doing is 'not according to knowledge'). 'Unless of course he is a prophet or a diviner'. [*Laws* XI, 933.]

That statement should give us pause. It is one of a number of statements throughout Plato's work which make it clear that what he is discussing actually refers to the gods, and that he is talking about the proper theoretical context of religion and religious practice. That context is not about a set of beliefs, but rather about knowledge of what is divine (gained by the ascent from assumptions made as starting points, and which are reviewed on the return). And the divine is reality itself.

Is Plato a priest? He often writes like one. The later philosophers who wrote on the basis of his work largely interpreted it in terms of a form of theology. Modern philosophers and classicists distinguish the work of Plato and the later Platonists on a number of grounds, the two most important of which is that there was a large period of time after the physical destruction of the Academy in Athens before their writings started to appear; and the second is that, since they were writing about Plato's work as theology, they were introducing ideas from other cultures around the Mediterranean and the near East into their discussions, and not really developing thought about Plato. Hence these later philosophers are classed as Neoplatonists rather than Platonists, despite the fact that they understood themselves to be Platonists.

That is a discussion for another time. The modern classifications of 'Platonist' and 'Neoplatonist' serve the useful function of allowing modern philosophers to discuss a construction of Plato's life and work which isn't about theology at all. This is a construction which arose around the time of the European Enlightenment, and not before. I think that is unwise to divide the history of philosophy in this way, since it discourages the modern academic philosopher from asking certain questions about Plato's intentions, some of which otherwise can be answered by close attention to his text, and to the texts of the Neoplatonists.

If Plato is writing from a priestly perspective (and I think that he is), then he is exposing an alternative and philosophical basis for religious thought. A basis which is rooted in a dialectical discussion of the nature of reality. If that is indeed the case, then philosophical thought, far from being a step forward from religious thought, represents the *core* of ancient religious speculation about the nature of the divine. Plato argued explicitly in both the *Protagoras* and the *Philebus* that the discipline was of immense age.

If Plato embraced position b), which understands the nature of reality to be paradoxical, what does this mean? It means (apart from many other things) that there is a philosophical basis for the idea that the gods can exist on earth in the form of images which are not capable of movement. This is because motion and change are in a sense necessarily co-terminous with the changeless reality of the One. Meaning that life, change and thought in the physical world, simply represents the *possibility* which is contained in the unchanging One.

Thomas Yaeger, May 31, 2019.

October 10, 1994

1. Magic or Magia?

J. G. Frazer distinguished between Religion and Magic, seeing in the former the expression of elevated human feeling (understood as literature and poetry); and in the latter the expression of an intellectual error.

The error involved in magic he divided into two categories: Sympathetic and Contagious. In the former category, what is like something is connected with that which it resembles, and in the latter category, what has been in contact with something is assumed to be still subject to that connection.

The origins of human thought, therefore, can be traced to a pattern of systematic error, which can be reduced to the analytic description given by Frazer.

While this analysis has been seriously challenged, it remains the only one which binds together the phenomenal history of magic: the other approaches not only not producing a synthetic understanding, but avoiding it either as something undesirable or as something which cannot underpin the evidence.

This analysis proceeds on the basis that the presumption that the Frazerian analysis is false as a general description of the origin and nature of magic in antiquity (i.e., that the core of magical patterns of thought is the product of a clearly identifiable intellectual error and does not depend on a theory of reality which is woven out of a theory (or theories) of Being. The latter might still be understood to be a foundation upon error, but a quite different kind of error. The reader is directed to my paper on *Sir James Frazer and the Platonic Theory of Being* (1994) which subjects Frazer's initial work on Plato's development to critical analysis, and which analyses his subsequent work as the outcome of his initial position *vis a vis* the existence of theories of Being before the Presocratic philosophers.

The nature and significance of reality exercised ancient minds as much as it exercises our own. However we can trace the history of this problem back only so far as an explicit issue; beyond that, through inference. If we infer that it was considered to be a crucial issue, even perhaps the prime religious mystery, as far as the first written records, then this notion ought to inform the shape of the intellectual remains in way which makes sense of the evidence, even if this religious mystery does not appear in explicit form (it is unreasonable to expect religious mysteries to manifest themselves explicitly in a religious context).

What therefore might we assume to be the prime religious mystery? In ancient records we find two explicit ways of modelling the world, which resemble modern analytical divisions, but which are not precisely the same. These are, expressed as extreme positions, as follows:

1. That the essence of reality is one, indivisible, and cannot move.
2. That reality is multifold, divisible and moves.

These extremes are not the axioms from which all subsequent propositions are built (we shall examine these axiomatic positions later), but rather concise statements of what we might term the primary conclusions of the two main and opposing analyses of the nature of the Real.

In the Greek tradition, which is the main source of information about the discursive side of ancient thought - i.e., we have written (and composed) versions of the kind of debate of the questions we are here considering, whereas we do not have these for other cultures around the Mediterranean and for the Mesopotamian complex of civilizations - the practice of dialectic (collection and division) was used in an attempt to establish whether or not reality could be spoken of as one, or as many.

The principal exemplar of this kind of discussion is of course Plato. Some of the dialogues tend to give weight to the view that the nature of ultimate reality is One; others, though clearly not intended to inculcate the opposite point of view, tend to conclusions which might be held by those who cannot accept such a doctrine.

Plato spoke of these different schools of thought (schools in the loosest sense) as being part of an eternal struggle, and named them as being either on the side of the Gods (the One), or on the side of the Giants (the Many), and thus appears to confirm that he held to the belief that the former argument is (in its essence) the correct one, despite the fact that this view does not clearly emerge from the written corpus of dialogues.

These schools of thought can be broken down into the following broad categories, as they are schematized in Plato's *The Sophist*:

a) Those who argue that the only the One is truly real (as did Parmenides), and thus that everything which constitutes the many is unreal and consequently an untrustworthy guide to the nature of the One.

b) Those who argue that, while Reality itself is One, it embraces all the categories which we find necessary to postulate as belonging to its nature, but which we cannot reconcile in a single image. That is, the Real embraces both change and remaining the same in a way which transcends our capacity to understand. The implication of view a) is that any supposed realm of exemplars is either fictitious or unknowable (the latter not only because the changeless and the changing have apparently no means of commerce, but because a reality embracing both the changeless and the changing breaches the fundamental character of our way of thinking about these things). Whereas view b) essentially accepts the implicitly paradoxical nature of the Real, and consequently the viability of concepts which can actually be shown to be impossible from our point of view (the corollary of this is that if the Real is in a sense impossible, what is impossible is true: hence the impossibility of a realm of exemplars can in fact be taken as the fundamental ground of their existence)

c) Those who hold to the view that reality is constantly changing (in flux). This was the stated doctrine of Heraclitus ("one cannot step into the same river twice", etc). This view identifies a particular aspect and characteristic of reality as it appears to us and ascribes it to the actual nature of reality (a quite unjustified projection); essentially on the basis that the Real is spoken of as One by those in the camp of the Gods: change is the one thing which, in the part of the universe we can apprehend, *does not change*. The many are accepted in this view of reality as the corollary of change and motion.

d) Those who say that only the many can be counted real, and who argue that only visible reality (and its causal and material components) is actually real. The abstract One is rejected in favour of material causes and material substances. In fact substance is redefined in concrete terms (water, fire, etc.) However (and it is important to note this), in antiquity we have no example of a philosopher who argued that a unifying principle did not underlie the variety of appearances and forms - simply that it could be understood to be an abstraction of something which already understood.

These then are the basic positions outlined in Plato's Sophist.

It should be observed that position b) actually embraces a) and also c); and that position d) can be understood as a systematic type of error, in which either certain implications of a) are misunderstood, or are misapplied (for whatever reason) to inappropriate categories.

The argument I am about to explore is as the following:

It is possible to imagine that these different views arise out of the difficulty in the use of dialectical procedure, employed to gain an insight into the fundamental nature of reality. In other words, since all of them (a, c-d) can be understood as metamorphoses or subpositions of b), these can be ranged as a subordinate set of views to b).

This does not mean that the order of precedence so illustrated represents anything other than a hypothetical arrangement - position b) is most unlikely to be arrived at before position a), and therefore the order of precedence is not likely to reflect a real chronology of philosophical development. However, if we define alternative possible schools of thought which *cannot* be fitted into this arrangement, and do not find such schools of thought represented in the record (which for Greece appears to be fairly comprehensive concerning the range of views held during the classical and Hellenistic periods), then it may be that this hypothetical arrangement reveals an authentic pattern of development (if not expressed in time, a simultaneous range of schools).

What are the various implications of these possible points of view? We shall consider them in order. First a), the extreme Parmenidean position. Which is that: those who argue that the only the One is truly real, and that everything which constitutes the many is unreal and consequently an untrustworthy guide to the nature of the One.

Does this mean that images (eidola, which is what statues are) are a phenomenon which can have no function? Essentially Parmenides postulates an ultimate reality with which we have no possibility of commerce. It simply is what it is. Further we have grave difficulty in defining what it is. As was highlighted in the Sophist, as soon as one attempts to speak of it at all, we become enmeshed in difficulties. We cannot say what its defining characteristic is because the characteristics we might bring to bear on its description are drawn from our own experience, and we have already decided that these can have no relevance for the nature of the one.

The world of eidola remains for us what it was, but its connection with the One are obscure, and, by the logic of the Parmenidean argument, declared to be impossible. According to this argument therefore, the world of eidola must be that of meaningless phantoms. Whatever consistency and structure appears to be resident in the world of images is therefore illusory and misleading and owes nothing to the nature of the One, since the One is beyond all transaction with the world of eidola.

Clearly therefore, position a) could not easily give rise to a transactive cult of divine statues as we find in the literary and archaeological record, since it denies the possibility of transaction with the divine, defined as Being. It is difficult to imagine how a world of Forms would fare in such a picture of reality, since it would seem that they too could have no commerce with the One, and thus are shorn of reality also. Further there is nothing about this descriptive model of the world which suggests a pattern of dialogue between the human and the divine, and thus we are unlikely to find that cult practice owes its origin to a Parmenidean type of argument. For the moment therefore, we may leave this argument to one side, in order to assess the value of arguments b) to d)

We turn now to argument b), which argues that, while Reality itself is One, it embraces all the categories which we find necessary to postulate as belonging to its nature, but which cannot be reconciled in a single image. That is, the Real embraces both change and remaining the same in a way which transcends our capacity to understand. Whereas the implication of view a) is that any supposed realm of exemplars is either fictitious or unknowable (the latter not only because the changeless and the changing have apparently no means of commerce, but because a reality embracing both the changeless and the changing breaches the fundamental

character of our way of thinking about these things), view b) essentially accepts the implicitly paradoxical nature of the Real, and consequently the viability of concepts which can actually be shown to be impossible from our point of view.

The great merit of this argument is that it does not depend on categories of understanding which we may bring to bear on the concept of the Real. It does not specify what the Real is, simply postulating that, beneath the world of appearance, there is a reality which binds all aspects of phenomenal and noumenal experience together. It is therefore independent of specific concepts which derive from those categories of experience and understanding which a human perspective gives us.

Argument b), at first sight does not give us an easy explanation of why it is and how it is that the divine and the human can have some form of commerce, but at least does not rule out the possibility. We may therefore return to this line of argument once we have considered the value of those which remain, and explore it in some detail.

216a-218d	Introductory Conversation
218d-221c	Illustrative Division defining the Angler The seven Divisions defining the Sophist
221c-223b	Division I. The Sophist as Hunter
223c-224e	Divisions II-IV. The Sophist as salesman
224e-226a	Division V. Eristic
226a-231b	Division VI. Cathartic method of Socrates The Methods of Collection and Division
231b-235a	Survey yielding the genus 'Image-making'
235a-236c	Division of Image-making into two species
236c-237b	Statement of the problems of unreal appearances and of falsity in speech and thought
237b-239c	(a) The totally unreal
239c-242b	(b) Definition of eidolon and the problem of false statement and belief
242b-244b	(c) The perfectly real. What does 'real' mean?
244b-245e	Criticism of Parmenides' One Real Being
245e-246e	The Battle of Gods and Giants. Idealists and Materialists
246e-248a	A mark of the real is offered for the Materialists' acceptance
248a-249d	The Idealists must concede that reality includes some changing things
249d-251a	Transition. What does the Idealist mean by 'real'?
251a-c	Exclusion of the trivial question, how one individual thing can have many names
251c-252e	Proof that some Forms will combine, others will not
252e-253c	The texture of philosophic discourse
253c-254b	Description of the science of Dialectic The structure of the world of Forms
254b-d	Three of the most important Forms selected for purposes of illustration: Existence, Motion, Rest
254d-255e	Two further forms, Sameness and Difference, distinct from these three and all pervading
255e-257a	A review of true statements involving the five Forms shows that there are any number of true statements asserting that 'what is' in a sense 'is not'
257b-258c	There are also any number of true statements asserting that 'what is not' in a sense 'is'
258c-259d	Conclusion: We have refuted Parmenides' dogma that 'what is' cannot in any sense 'not be', and that 'what is not' cannot in any sense 'be'
259d-261c	Introductory statement of the problem of false speaking and thinking
261c-262e	Every statement is a complex of heterogenous elements (name and verb)
262e	Every statement is about something and is either true or false
262e-263b	The definition of true statement
263b-d	The definition of false statement
263d-264b	Judgment being simply unspoken statement, false judgment and false 'appearing' are possible
264b-d	Transition, connecting these results with the interrupted Division of Image-making
264d-268d	Division VII. The Sophist as a species of Image-maker

Drawn from Cornfords' *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*

216a-218d	Introductory Conversation
218d-221c	Illustrative Division defining the Angler
	The seven Divisions defining the Sophist
221c-223b	Division I. The Sophist as Hunter
223c-224e	Divisions II-IV. The Sophist as salesman
224e-226a	Division V. Eristic
226a-231b	Division VI. Cathartic method of Socrates
	The Methods of Collection and Division
231b-235a	Survey yielding the genus 'Image-making'
235a-236c	Division of Image-making into two species
236c-237b	Statement of the problems of unreal appearances and of falsity in speech and thought
237b-239c	(a) The totally unreal
239c-242b	(b) Definition of eidolon and the problem of false statement and belief
242b-244b	(c) The perfectly real. What does 'real' mean?
244b-245e	Criticism of Parmenides' One Real Being

At 244c the Eleatic stranger asks whether the Real is "the same thing as that to which you give the name one? Are you applying two names to the same thing...?" And continues: "it is surely absurd for him [Parmenides] to admit the existence of two names, when he has laid down that there is no more than one thing..." Thus in attempting to define the One Parmenides cannot state it at all "without recognising three real things"*1

At 244d the Stranger questions the notion of the reality as wholeness: is "whole" other than the one real thing or identical with it? For

"... if it is a whole — as indeed Parmenides says*2

"Every way like the mass of a well—rounded sphere, evenly balanced from the midst in every direction; for there must not be something more nor something less here than there" —

If the Real is like that, it has a middle and extremities, and consequently it must have parts, must it not?"* 3

The Stranger observes that if a thing is divided into parts it may have the property of unity in terms of an aggregate of its parts, "being a sum or whole". However, "the thing which has these properties cannot be just Unity itself... Unity in the true sense

¹ F.M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, p221.

² Frag. 8.43

³ 244d—e.

and rightly defined must be altogether without parts"⁴. Thus, how are we to define the Real — is it one and whole? The property of unity is not unity itself, and alternatively,

if the Real is not a whole by virtue of having this property of unity, while at the same time Wholeness itself is real, it follows that the Real falls short of itself... and further... all things will be more than one since Reality on the one side and Wholeness on the other have now each a distinct nature⁵.

The Real cannot come to be if wholeness does not exist, for "whenever a thing comes into being, at that moment it has come to be as a whole; accordingly, if you do not reckon unity or wholeness amongst real things, you have no right to speak of either Being or coming into being as having any existence"⁶. The Eleatic stranger (probably representing Plato himself) concludes by observing that "countless other difficulties, each involved in measureless perplexity, will arise, if you say that the Real is either two things or only one"⁷.

245e-246e **The Battle of Gods and Giants. Idealists and Materialists**
246e-248a **A mark of the real is offered for the Materialists' acceptance**
248a-249d **The Idealists must concede that reality includes some changing things**

We know from the dialogues that the theory of the Forms was presented by Plato himself as having collapsed, in that the Forms, apparently so clearly distinguished as having no participation in each other, are shown to participate⁸. And, in any case, if they do not participate because of their absolute nature, it would be impossible for us to have any knowledge of them. Thus again, if they participate, it would appear that they are not absolute.

1.5. This might be taken to indicate the integrity of Plato, in that he faithfully recorded the demolition of everything he stood for⁹.

⁴ 245a

⁵ 245c

⁶ 245d

⁷ 245e

⁸ *Sophist* 256e for example, in connection with motion; *Soph.* 249b—d; see also the *Parmenides* 133b—134c

⁹ Jowett, in his introduction to the *Parmenides* argues

249d-251a	Transition. What does the Idealist mean by 'real'?
251a-c	Exclusion of the trivial question, how one individual thing can have many names
251c-252e	Proof that some Forms will combine, others will not
252e-253c	The texture of philosophic discourse
253c-254b	Description of the science of Dialectic
	The structure of the world of Forms
254b-d	Three of the most important Forms selected for purposes of illustration: Existence, Motion, Rest
254d-255e	Two further forms, Sameness and Difference, distinct from these three and all pervading
255e-257a	A review of true statements involving the five Forms shows that there are any number of true statements asserting that 'what is' in a sense 'is not'
257b-258c	There are also any number of true statements asserting that 'what is not' in a sense 'is'
258c-259d	Conclusion: We have refuted Parmenides' dogma that 'what is' cannot in any sense 'not be', and that 'what is not' cannot in any sense 'be'
259d-261c	Introductory statement of the problem of false speaking and thinking
261c-262e	Every statement is a complex of heterogenous elements (name and verb)
262e	Every statement is about something and is either true or false
262e-263b	The definition of true statement
263b-d	The definition of false statement
263d-264b	Judgment being simply unspoken statement, false judgment and false 'appearing' are possible
264b-d	Transition, connecting these results with the interrupted Division of Image-making
264d-268d	Division VII. The Sophist as a species of Image-maker

Drawn from Cornfords' *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*

that the Platonic Ideas were in constant process of growth and transmutation; sometimes veiled in poetry and mythology, then again emerging as fixed Ideas, in some passages regarded as absolute and eternal, and in others as relative to the human mind, existing in and derived from external objects as well as transcending them... Their transcendental existence is not asserted, and is therefore implicitly denied in the *Philebus*: different forms are ascribed to them in the *Republic*, and they are mentioned in the *Theaetetus*, the *Sophist*, the *Politicus*, and the *Laws*, much as universals would be spoken of in modern books... the perplexities which surround the one and many in the sphere of the Ideas are... attended to in the *Philebus*, and no answer is given to them... To suppose that Plato, at a later period of his life, reached a point of view from which he was able to answer them, is a groundless assumption.

-Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. IV, p6-7