The metamorphosis of change: a study of Plato's theory of change

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Introduction

In Homer's epic, the *Odyssey*, during Odysseus' confinement on the island Pharos, the hero encountered Eidothea the goddess who informed him that the immortal Proteus of Egypt who was adept in metamorphosis would be able to tell him the way to leave and return home. She said,

> "When the sun hath reached mid-heaven, the unerring old man of the sea is wont to come forth from the brine at the breath of the West Wind, hidden by the dark ripple. And when he is come forth, he lies down to sleep in the hollow caves; and around him the seals, the brood of the fair daughter of the sea, sleep in a herd, coming forth from the gray water, and bitter is the smell they breathe of the depths of the sea…Now so soon as you see him laid to rest, thereafter let your hearts be filled with strength and courage, and do you hold him there despite his striving and struggling to escape. For try he will, and will assume all manner of shapes of all things that move upon the earth, and of water, and of wondrous blazing fire. Yet do ye hold him unflinchingly and grip him yet the more. But when at length of his own will he speaks and questions thee in that shape in which you saw him laid to rest, then, hero, stay thy might, and set the old man free, and ask him who of the gods is wroth with thee, and of thy return, how thou mayest go over the teeming deep."
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> (Hom. *Od*. IV. 400-424)

Odysseus heeded her counsel and seized hold of the old god, compelling him to divulge the truth:

> "Thereat we rushed upon him with a shout, and threw our arms about him, nor did that old man forget his crafty wiles. Nay, at the first he turned into a bearded lion, and then into a serpent, and a leopard, and a huge boar; then he turned into flowing water, and into a tree, high and leafy; but we held on unflinchingly with steadfast heart. But when at last that old man, skilled in wizard arts, grew weary, then he questioned me, and spoke, and said…"
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> (Hom. *Od*. IV. 454-461)

According to Homer's verse, despite the old sea god Proteus's attempts to elude capture by altering his appearance and assuming various forms, Odysseus ultimately apprehended him, preventing his escape. The motif of divine metamorphosis holds enduring significance in Greek mythos and literature, particularly during the classical period, a theme that notably provoked Plato's critique. In the *Republic*, Socrates vehemently denounces the metamorphosis narratives of the poets, explicitly stating, "Let no poet tell us about Proteus or Thetis" (*Rep*. 381d4). Socrates contends that such stories portray the gods as sorcerers, appearing in different forms at different times and changing themselves from their own forms into many shapes, an implausible notion (380c-d). Because it seems that a god and what belongs to it, being in the best and most unchanging state possible, cannot undergo metamorphosis into something inferior (381b-c). Thus, Socrates asserts that "they are the most beautiful

and best possible…each always and unconditionally retains his own shape." (381c7-8)

Why is Plato so discontent with the poet's metamorphosis story of Proteus and other gods? The direct reason, explicitly, should be the role of mythos in shaping the education and moral development of the citizenry. As Socrates contends, poetry plays a crucial role in shaping the souls of children, and false narratives, such as those depicting divine metamorphosis, can have detrimental effects on the moral fabric of the guardians of the city-state (376e-377c). This concern, along with Socrates' philosophical arguments against the metamorphosis of gods, relies on an ontological insight that will be further explored in this work. From Socrates' perspective, the idea of divine metamorphosis undermines the perfect nature of the gods, suggesting a fundamental logical incompatibility between change and identity.

This assumption, while not necessarily Plato's final conclusion, reveals the primary ontological challenge he grapples with in his examination of change and motion. Plato, through Socrates, divides previous philosophers into two opposing camps. In the *Theaetetus*, it is asserted that Homer and all other wise men with the exception of Parmenides advocate that everything is coming to be and nothing ever is (*Theaet*. 152d-e). And in the *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger further claims that those people drag "everything down to earth from the heavenly region of the invisible, actually clutching rocks and trees with their hand. When they take hold of all these things they insist that only what offers tangible contact is, since they define being as the same as body." (*Soph*. 246a8-b1) On the contrary, Parmenides and his followers, as the second group

philosophers under Plato's narrative, claim that all things are One that stands still and avoids any movement (*Theaet*. 180e). And furthermore, in the *Sophist*, the alleged Friends of Form insist that the authentic Being must be nonbodily Forms as the objects of thought, and they take the other group's notion of being as merely a process of becoming (*Soph*. 246b-c).

It is reasonable to deduct that, within this framework of the intellectual battle between these two groups, Homer may be deemed by Parmenides or Socrates in the *Republic*, as a crappy philosopher, blurring the distinction between becoming and being, and compelling Odysseus to grasp the altering god by his own hands. Indeed, according to their view, if the beings were truly in such a perpetual and extreme flux, they would not be able to be grasped at all. Because having obeyed this flux doctrine strictly, the changing thing would always slip away and cannot be applied (*Theaet*. 182d). Thus, in the case of Odysseus, he would not have been able to grasp the metamorphosizing Proteus, as within the flux doctrine the object of his grasp would continuously slip away.

Plato's engagement in this debate is motivated not solely by metaphysical and theoretical curiosity, but also by practical and urgent concerns arising from the tumultuous political climate of his era. The precarious political circumstances necessitate a serious examination of this issue. As Socrates notes in the *Theaetetus*, the doctrine of flux propagated by Homer, Heraclitus, and other philosophers serves as the foundation for Sophists' conventionalism, particularly exemplified by Protagoras. And their theory, in turn, undermines the foundation of justice, piety and other political virtues (172a-b). The proliferation of flux doctrine and its attendant

conventionalism poses a significant threat to individual character and the hierarchical structure of Greek city-states. Plato consistently emphasizes, as evident in works such as the *Republic* and many other dialogues, that a robust political framework should be grounded in the pursuit of eternal truths and Being.

However, Plato does not unilaterally align himself with Parmenides and his adherents. While he acknowledges that true Being undergoes no generative changes leading to non-Being, he diverges from Parmenides by asserting that Being is not entirely devoid of motion. On the one hand, Plato acknowledges the inherent variability of sensible things, which are situated between true Being and non-Being, and can undergo diverse forms of change. He does not wholly dismiss the empirical observations of pre-Socratic natural philosophers regarding the flux nature of visible and material entities in the world. Yet, Plato critiques their lack of a coherent explanatory mechanism governed by nous and a comprehensive understanding of change and motion, as depicted in the *Phaedo* (*Phaed*. 95e-99d). Plato warns against the potential consequences of such a worldview, as seen in the *Laws* X, where all political and ethical constructs risk being reduced to mere products of human conventions, devoid of any natural standards. This seriously threatens the establishment of prudent legislation and political order (*Laws* 888e-891a). Therefore, a key objective of Plato's theory of motion and change is to offer a systematic and rational interpretation of the phenomena within this flux-laden world.

And further, on the other hand, diverging from Parmenides and the Eleatic philosophers, Plato suggests that even true Being, including

Forms and souls, may undergo certain changes and motions (*Soph*. 248e-249b). This leads to a logical conundrum, as Plato concurrently advocates two propositions at the same time:

I. Being always is, retaining its identity and sameness without undergoing any generative change.
II. Being possesses some certain motions.

Both propositions can trace their origins to pre-Socratic thought and potentially contradict each other within this intellectual context. As explored further in subsequent chapters, the first proposition likely stems from the legacy of Parmenides and the Eleatic tradition, asserting that What-is, the real Being, cannot be What-is-not, and even the tiniest change or motion would compel it to become What-it-not. In short, change and motion are incompatible with Being's sameness and identity. By suffering a change or motion, it must completely lose its identity and thoroughly come to be something it was not—that is, a process of generation. Apparently, this is the fundamental reason for Socrates of the *Republic* rejecting Proteus' metamorphosis story, for such alterations would force the old sea god to lose his identity, no longer being the same perfect god as he was. Conversely, the second proposition, influenced by various pre-Socratic philosophers, posits that certain entities, such as the soul and Forms, can experience motion. This raises a fundamental question: how can Being maintain its sameness and identity if it is subject to motion?

This question, as elucidated in subsequent chapters, is the core of Plato's investigation into change and motion, serving as the impetus for his

integration of the ideas of his predecessors and the formulation of diverse theories aimed at resolving this quandary. This challenge is not unique to Plato; it constitutes a fundamental issue for Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and numerous other pre-Socratic philosophers. Moreover, it remains a Gordian Knot for most theories concerning change and motion in the history of philosophy after Plato.

Among all these theories, from our perspective, the majority seem to follow one approach, which involves dissecting Being into various facets or stages to adhere to Parmenides' insight. At the outset of *On Generation and Corruption*, Aristotle announces that he is going to distinguish between generation (γένεσις) and alteration (ἀλλοίωσις).[1] He argues that Parmenides and his followers fail to differentiate between these two concepts, positing that anything undergoing alteration must also undergo generation (*GC*. 314a1-13). One of Aristotle's primary objectives in this work is to establish this distinction, as without it, entities cannot undergo change while retaining their identity. He proposes dividing Being into substratum (ὑποκείμενον) and the properties (πάθος) predicated of it. According to him, in an alteration, the substratum of the entity remains to be the same but some certain property passes away and comes to be, while within a generation, the substratum itself does not persist and the entity changes as a whole (*GC.* 319b8-18). Further, in Aristotelian terms, non-generative changes occur in the categories of quantity, quality, and space, while generative change occurs in the category of substance (*GC.* 319b31-320a2; *Phys.* 224a21-225b5). Thus, during the non-generative changes and motions, the substratum of the entity remains being the same,

[1] A detailed discussion of the distinction at this beginning, cf. Brunschwig, 2004: 31 ff.

aligning with the first proposition and reconciling with the second.

Even in contemporary philosophy, concerning this issue, Aristotle's route is still popular when addressing the persistence of entities through temporal changes. Consider this case: An entity *x* possesses a property *F* at t_1, and loses it at t_2, being not-*F*. According to everyday intuition, this entity, though undergoing a change, fully and completely exists both at t_1 and t_2. Thus, *x* endures through this period of time and the corresponding process of change. This opinion, in David Lewis' term, is called "endurantism".[2] However, some assert that this view necessarily leads to an unacceptable deduction. Namely, since based on the endurantism, the same entity *x* fully and completely exists at t_1 and t_2, it must both be *F* and not-*F*, ridiculously violating the non-contradiction law. Thus, contemporary scholars confront the same difficulty that Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient philosophers meet: The self-identity of an entity seems to be incompatible with its change. Some scholars turn to advocate an opposite standpoint, named "perdurantism". They argue that the temporal part is also the essential element of an entity's existence. Then, in the case discussed above, the entity *x* at t_1 is not numerically identical to the *x* at t_1. Hence, the *x*, strictly speaking, does not persist during this period of time and the corresponding process of change. Instead, it is an aggregation containing a series of stages that exist at different times. Therefore, each stage of *x* at every moment is able to retain its identity since it does not suffer any change, and the *x* as a whole or diachronic aggregation undergoes generations whenever it changes. Those who advocate endurantism provide a further defence of their standpoint by re-interpreting the essence of the property. From their perspective, the

[2] Lewis, 1986: 202-205.

entity x does not possess a property F, but a time-related property F-at-t. Thus, x is F-at-t_1 at t_1 and then it is not F-at-t_2 at t_2. Therefore, x can persist and retain its identity during this change, without being divided into temporal stages, for it is not self-contradicted for x to be both F-at- t_1 and not F-at- t_2.[3]

Despite their divergent approaches, both endurantism and perdurantism share a common foundational premise: the decomposition of Being to conform to Parmenides' notion that true Being must retain its identity by eschewing change and motion. Endurantism aligns with Aristotle's framework by attributing change to properties while maintaining the unchanging nature of the essential part of Being. Perdurantism, on the other hand, decomposes Being into temporal stages to ensure its self-identity and immutability at each moment. Both approaches, alongside Aristotle's pioneering work, strive to adhere to Parmenidean insights by positing that change is incompatible with the identity of Being.

Plato chooses another route. Faced with the apparent contradiction between change and the identity of an entity, he eventually gives up this Parmenidean view, allowing the Being or other entities to be both F and not-F, and to change without losing their self-identities. And his final thinking of motion and change is founded on this ontological premise. Therefore, an investigation into Plato's corresponding theory today holds significant value, not only for clarifying Plato's own perspective but also for enriching contemporary discussions on this issue.

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[3] Loux, 1998: chp. 7.

But unfortunately, unlike Aristotle, whose theory of motion has been extensively explored, there have been few studies and fewer tenable interpretations of Plato's thought of change and motion.[4] Hence, this study aims to provide an overview of Plato's theory of change and motion, encompassing his significant discussions on this topic in the middle and later dialogues. Furthermore, this study intends to cover the following topics:

1. The prevailing pre-Socratic opinions regarding change and motion before Plato might have influenced him.
2. Plato's understanding of the essence and classification of change and motion.
3. What is subject to move and change in Plato's theory, and what sorts of motion or change do they undergo?
4. What is the mechanism underlying these changes and motions?
5. What causes these changes and motions?

Obviously, Plato's narrative should be contextualized within his comprehensive exploration of change and motion. He presents his theory not as a single exposition but disperses his ideas and arguments across a series of dialogues, facilitating a dialectical progression for his audience. Regarding the debate between Unitarianism and Developmentalism interpretations of Plato, we align with the standpoint akin to Charles Kahn's. Although we acknowledge that the views presented in Platonic

[4] To date, the only comprehensive work focusing on Plato's theory of change and motion is Skemp (1942) which merely analyzes Plato's later dialogues. Additionally, Mason (2016) offers insightful discussions but focuses solely on the concepts of flux and flow in Platonic works.

works are not entirely consistent with each other, we do not posit substantial changes in Plato's theory throughout his corpus. Rather, these perspectives serve as a dialectical guide for readers to gradually apprehend the truth. As Kahn contends, Plato's primary aim "is not to assert true propositions but to alter the minds and hearts of his readers. Plato's conception of philosophical education is not to replace false doctrines with true ones but to change radically the moral and intellectual orientation of the learner, who, like prisoners in the cave, must be converted-turned around-in order to see the light."[5]

This study will outline Plato's comprehensive exploration of the theory of change and motion and delve into his efforts in subsequent chapters. As previously mentioned, pre-Socratic philosophers left a significant legacy for Plato concerning the theory of change and motion. The first chapter will examine their influence on Plato. Plato's contemplation of change and motion begins with his comprehension of the world's phenomena, deeply influenced by his predecessors. On one hand, Plato appears to agree with many pre-Socratic philosophers regarding the flux and perpetual movement of the world. The early Ionian philosophers introduced the concept of change between opposites, which Heraclitus further generalized to argue that everything is in constant flux. Additionally, there is a longstanding tradition asserting that the immortal soul is perpetually in motion. On the other hand, Parmenides and his followers' understanding of the generative nature of change also greatly inspired Plato. However, these perspectives are not naturally coherent with each other. Plato must integrate these insights into his comprehensive theory. In the second chapter, through an analysis of the

[5] Kahn, 1996: xiv-xv.

Cratylus, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*, we seek to elucidate Plato's first model of change and motion. He initially adopts the Parmenidean principle, positing that Forms, as the true Being, undergo no change, while sensible things, in perpetual flux, lack a consistent and real identity, constantly changing generatively between opposites. Building on this premise, Plato introduces Forms to explain the mechanism of change in the sensible realm, which not only elucidates the generative nature of changes but also accounts for spatial motion and the motion of the soul as non-generative. Subsequently, in the third chapter, focusing on the *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, Plato offers several pointed criticisms of his initial model. In these dialogues, Plato does not deny the phenomena of flux in the world but rather questions the Parmenidean principle that serves as the foundation of his initial model, as well as the role of Forms as the cause of all changes between opposites. Consequently, the Two-World theory, mechanism of change, classification of motion, the scope of Forms, and various essential aspects of the initial model are challenged. Plato introduces a new ontological principle, asserting that a Kind is able to be both *F* and not-*F*, as well as to combine with Motion—that is, to move. His subsequent theory must align with this new insight. And Plato's second model of change and motion is soon revealed in the fourth chapter, which discusses the *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Laws* X. According to Plato's second model, represented in these dialogues, Forms are no longer considered the sole cause of change; instead, Plato emphasizes that sensible entities can move and change by their own nature. However, a sensible entity only undergoes generative change when it acquires a certain order or mathematical proportion and thus becomes good. This type of change is not caused by the inherent nature of the entity but rather by the soul or

god, serving as the ultimate and primary reason for all generations in the world. Consequently, although the universe experiences various types of motion and change at every moment, it is not disorganized, arbitrary, or random but rather orderly and rational as a whole.