



Universiteit  
Leiden

The Netherlands

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

Yue, S.

### **Citation**

Yue, S. (2025, March 12). *The metamorphosis of change: a study of Plato's theory of change*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4197357>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4197357>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Conclusion

We have now reached the culmination of Plato's philosophical journey, affording us an overview of his dialectical comprehension of change and motion within its philosophical milieu.

As previously argued, it is imperative to situate Plato's inquiry within the philosophical landscape of his era. The pre-Socratic philosophers presented diverse and competitive theories and perspectives on change and motion, which likely exerted a profound influence on Plato and his contemporaries. Three particular aspects merit our attention in this study. Firstly, the early Ionian philosophers, Anaximander and Anaximenes, introduced the pattern of change between opposites. Heraclitus subsequently generalized this notion as a universal principle governing all phenomena. From his viewpoint, everything in the world undergoes perpetual flux, constantly oscillating between opposites. Secondly, there exists a prominent tradition in ancient Greek philosophy advocating the perpetual motion of the immortal soul, as well as the gods, and their ability to initiate others' motions. Thirdly, in contrast to these perspectives, Parmenides and his Eleatic followers asserted that What-is always is, undergoing no change, because any alteration or motion of it would be generative. Consequently, they advocated the immutability of What-is. All of these three viewpoints find echoes in some of Plato's works. He unequivocally acknowledges the fundamental pattern of change between opposites and agrees that the soul is the prime mover that initiates motion in others. Additionally, Parmenides' principle of What-is serves as the foundation for Plato's examination of the unchangeable

Form and generative change. However, it becomes apparent that these three insights are not entirely compatible with each other. Following Parmenides' viewpoint would render it challenging to reconcile the phenomena of change in the world. The Pluralists, such as Anaxagoras and Empedocles, formulated their own narratives to address this challenge. Plato, similarly, required a systematic and coherent theory to integrate these insights, thereby avoiding potential conflicts between them.

Plato's first theory of change and motion, constituting his primary attempt to address this objective, gradually emerges in his middle dialogues such as the *Cratylus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. In these dialogues, he aligns with the Ionian philosophers and Heraclitus, considering change between opposites as the fundamental pattern of alteration for sensible entities. Moreover, he embraces the Eleatic perspective that such changes are inherently generative. Plato introduces the Form to elucidate both the mechanism of change between opposites and its generative nature. Namely, according to this model, a sensible entity comes to be *F* if and only if it participates in a corresponding Form *F*-ness. Thus, the Form functions as the cause of the sensible entities' change between opposites. Further, since such a process of participation is the essential premise for an entity to undergo a generative change, it indicates that certain motions, such as spatial motion and the motion of the soul, can be non-generative as they are irrelevant to a Form. Consequently, this model allows spatial motion and the motion of the soul to be non-generative, ensuring the perpetual motion of the immortal soul and its ability to initiate motion in others.

The first model, while innovative and imaginative, proves flawed, as evidenced in Plato's *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides* and *Sophist*. As we have contended, two pillars of this model are severely weakened in these dialogues. Firstly, doubts arise regarding the role of the Form in the mechanism of change. Plato intimates within these dialogues that the conception of the Form presented in his middle dialogues may fail to encompass all varieties of change between opposites. Because upon closer scrutiny, Plato argues that negative Forms and sensible Forms should not exist. Moreover, Plato demonstrates that participation in a Form does not inevitably lead to generation. For example, a Kind can combine with other Kinds and undergo some form of motion without undergoing generation. Additionally, Plato compellingly argues that all types of change and motion are generative if Parmenides' principle is strictly adhered to. Consequently, explaining the motion of entities such as the soul, life, and even the Form becomes challenging. Secondly, the Parmenidean principle, which elucidates the generative nature of change, is deemed untenable, as the Form is argued to be both *F* and not-*F*. Therefore, Plato's theory of change and motion can no longer be founded on the Parmenidean principle, and its mechanism should not rely on the participation of the Form.

Thus, in the *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, and the *Laws X*, Plato advocates his second model of change and motion. Under this framework, he emphasizes that sensible entities possess an inherent capacity to move and change. This motion, including oscillation between opposites and irregular spatial motion, is intrinsic rather than caused by external forces, as posited by the initial model. Consequently, these changes are not considered generative processes of motion. Instead, according to Plato's

new narrative, generation occurs only when an order or mathematical proportion is introduced into the disorganized sensible object. This process ends the inherent disordered motion of the object, transforming it into something ordered and good. Furthermore, the ultimate cause of generation is attributed to the soul. Accordingly, Plato provides a comprehensive depiction of change and motion in the universe. The world is in a perpetual state of flux, with all sensible and visible phenomena constantly changing and moving, influenced by both inherent and external forces. It is the soul, including the gods, that introduces order and facilitates generation in the sensible world. Thus, Plato concludes his exploration of change and motion by asserting that the universe, though characterized by flux, is not random or disordered. Rather, it is carefully guided by nous or intellectual power, as elucidated in the *Phaedo*.