

IS PLATO A DUALIST?

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Abstract: Generally, Plato is seen as a monist philosopher. But this fact is true only if we take in account his written works. Since the Tübingen School reveals the importance of Plato's inner-Academic teachings, the Plato monism is questionable. In this paper we try to find out if Plato is a dualist. We will see that, according to his successors, Plato spoke about two first supreme principles: the One and the indefinite Dyad. Moreover, some Modern scholars have proved that those teachings aren't contradictory to Plato's dialogues. In that case, the answer to our question will be positive.

Keywords: Plato, dualism, unwritten teachings, Dyad, first principles

PLATO'S UNWRITTEN TEACHINGS AND THE TÜBINGEN SCHOOL

There are different interpretations of Plato's philosophy, but since the 50's of the last century Tübingen School of interpretation began to impose¹. This kind of interpretation starts with the works of Hans Joachim Krämer and Konrad Gaiser, along with the researches of scholars like Heinz Happ, Thomas A. Szlezák, Vittorio Hösle, Jürgen Wippern, and Jens Halfwassen, or Giovanni Reale. Another kind of scholars who are affiliated to the Tübingen School of interpretation, but a little bit different then it is that represented by W. K. C. Guthrie, J. N. Findlay, Julia Annas or John Dillon.

The most famous adversary of the idea that Plato had unwritten teachings is Harold Fredrik Cherniss. His opinion is that Aristotle had merely misunderstood the Platonic dialogues. The main arguments in favor of Plato's oral teachings are: the criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus*, indirect tradition that speaks about theories that cannot be found in Plato's dialogues, the dialogues make reference beyond text, the *Seventh Letter* attests Plato's esoteric doctrine, also Aristotle attests Plato's Unwritten doctrines (agrapha dogmata).

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¹ About how Plato should be read in the light of his unwritten teachings, see Thomas A. Szlezák (1999). *Reading Plato*. Translated by Graham Zanker, London/New York: Routledge.

In his oral teachings, Plato develops a theory of first principles, which are the One and the indefinite Dyad. We have a testimony about this teaching from Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics* A. 6: “Since the Forms are the causes of all other things, he thought their elements were the elements of all things. As matter, the great and the small were principles; as essential reality, the One; for from the great and the small, by participation in the One, come the Forms.”² These two first principles are not subordinated to one another; they coexist, and play a different role in the constitution of the realm.

According to Tübingen School, the main beliefs of Plato’s oral teachings are the following³:

1. There are two primary ontological principles that are the causes of all things.
2. From these two first principles comes a hierarchy of being: Ideas and ideal numbers.
3. From the ideal numbers come geometrical entities.
4. After the intermediates come physical appearances.

It appears to be clearly that Plato in his later years had become more attracted by the philosophical teachings of Pythagoreanism, which postulate a mathematical paradigm for the universe. Plato developed a philosophical system which implicated a pair of two opposed first principles, and division of being on three levels.⁴ The first principles seem contrary one another, even if the One is unique and pure simplicity, it is still opposed to the Dyad. All other things can be deduced from the principles as their causes, but the principles themselves are not derived from each other.

DIVISION OF BEING IN PLATO’S PHILOSOPHY

About the division of being in Plato’s philosophy, we can find a useful discussion in the study of Giovanni Reale dedicated to Plato’s thought. The Italian scholar highlights the role of the hierarchical structure of realm; for Plato, the supreme principles of the One and the Dyad are followed by the level of Forms or Ideas, then they are followed by mathematical entities and in the end, by the level of sensible world.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987b.

³ Dmitri Nikulin, “Plato: Testimonia et Fragmenta”, in Dmitri Nikulin (ed.) (2012). *The Other Plato: The Tübingen Interpretation of Plato's Inner-Academic Teachings*, New York: State University of New York Press, pp.15-17.

⁴ John Dillon (2003). *The Heirs of Plato: A Study of the Old Academy (347–274 B.C.)*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp.17-18.

Each of these levels is further subdivided into: ideal Numbers and Figures which are followed by general Forms and then by more specific and particular Ideas. After this level is the level of geometrical entities, sphere and solid, objects of pure astronomy and objects of musicology. The last level includes all sensible realities.⁵ Between the levels exists a unilateral non-symmetrical ontological dependence, in other words the lower levels are dependent of higher levels, but those higher levels can be without the lower.⁶

Other scholar tells us that for Plato reality is set along two axes, one horizontal and one vertical. The horizontal axis is formed by the One and the Dyad. This vertical axis refers to the hierarchy of ontological levels, in such a way that the two principles interact on each level to produce the various levels of reality.⁷

The dyadic principle is responsible for the development of the levels of reality by being a source of tension and differentiation on the lower levels. The One is the principle of sameness, whereas the indefinite Dyad is the principle of difference. Each successive level of reality generated by the One and the Dyad is characterized by a further distancing from the supreme principles and a continuous increase of dyadic qualities. Turner stresses that the Dyad ends up at the bottom of these levels of reality as the ultimate receptacle and substrate of all particulars.⁸

On the other hand, the physical world is intermediate between an eternal and perfect being, which is unchangeable, and not-being. This fact is found in *Republic* where the physical world is intermediate between pure being and pure non-being. Here are two passages from the dialogue: “Hence, as it seems, it would remain for us to find what participates in both-in *to be* and *not to be*-and could not correctly be addressed as either purely and simply, so that, if it comes to light, we can justly address it as the opinable, thus assigning the extremes to the extremes and that which is in between to that which is in between”⁹; “Then we have found, as it seems, that the many beliefs of the many

⁵ Giovanni Reale (1988). *Storia della filosofia antica: II. Platone e Aristotele*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, pp.152-153.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.153.

⁷ John D. Turner, “Introduction”, in Wolf-Peter Funk, Paul-Hubert Poirier, John D. Turner (2000), *Marsanès: NH X*, Peeters/Louvain/Paris: Les Presses De L’Université Laval, p.178.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 478 e.

about what's fair and about the other things roll around somewhere between not-being and being purely and simply."¹⁰

Reale considers that the passages above speak about the dyadic principle. Non-being from this passages seems to be nothing, but the text enable us, declares Reale, to believe that "Plato meant rather, the opposite material principle (the sensible Dyad), that, as we know, become assimilated to non-being, since, for our philosopher, being is a "mixture," which depends on the determination and delimitation of the indeterminate and unlimited (and such is instead the Dyad of the great-and-small that is exactly the unlimited)".¹¹ Reale concludes that it is clear that the participation in non-being is possible, only if non-being is something. So, it clear that the physical world is situated between two entities, pure being and non-being, but the latter must be something else than nothing. I think that Reale's conclusion must be connected with the affirmation made by Burnet in the first part of his book about Greek philosophy. The Scottish classicist believes that if someone reads the *Sophist* rightly, along the testimony of Hermodoros, he will come up with the conclusion that "it is not meant that the indefinite continuum of the more and less is nothing, but rather it is not anything"¹².

IDEAS AND THE PHYSICAL WORLD

For Plato, physical world, as we saw, is a mix between being and non-being, whereas the Ideas are being in the pure sense; our world is corporeal, whereas the Ideas are incorporeal. In the same time the physical world is sensible, whereas the Forms are intelligible things; the Ideas are stable and eternal realities, they are absolute, whereas sensible realities are corruptible and relative. Because of this, many scholars saw in Plato's philosophy a kind of dualism between physical world and Ideas. Anyway, Plato doesn't talk about a world of Ideas, for the first time in history, Philo from Alexandria is the one who talked about *kosmos noētós*, which means the world of Ideas.

Giovanni Reale reacts against the opinion that postulates a dualism between physical world and the eternal with its incorruptible Ideas, as A. H. Armstrong did. Here are the words of Reale about this topic: "if the Ideas are opposed to experiential things as the intelligible

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 479 d.

¹¹ Giovanni Reale, *op. cit.*, p.159, n.6.

¹² John Burnet (1928), *Greek Philosophy. Part I, Thales to Plato*, London: MacMillan and Co., p.330.

to the sensible, being to becoming, incorporeal to corporeal, immobile to mobile, absolute to relative, unity to multiplicity, then it is obvious that they represent a different measure of reality, a new and higher realm of being itself¹³. The Ideas transcend the sensible things, and this aspect allows them to be the cause of physical world. Against those who claim a dualism between two opposed worlds, Reale says that the dualism of Plato is nothing else than the dualism who admits the existence of a supreme cause as a reason of being of the physical world. We have to underline that the sensible, by its reason of self-contradictory nature, cannot be its own reason of being.¹⁴

THE ONE AND THE INDEFINITE DYAD

Nikulin says that the opposition between the two principles of the One and the Dyad is contradictory, because they do not allow for mediation or anything to mediate between these principles. This is another reason why first principles in Plato cannot be considered as embedded in, or embraced by, one single principle.¹⁵ On the other hand, Giovanni Reale writes that it is more exact to say that the One and the indefinite Dyad have a bipolar structure, since the principles require each other structurally or necessarily.¹⁶

The Dyad is regarded, according to Plato's inner-Academic teachings, as a sort of duality, as being infinitely extendible or divisible, being in the same time indefinitely large or indefinitely small. The influence of the Dyad can be observed all through the physical world, where the imposition of correct measure can limit the excess and defect. So, the Dyad has an ethical aspect, since the virtues must be seen as measures between excess and limit.¹⁷ About the One as principle of Good and the Dyad as principle of evil we can find something in the testimony of Aristotle¹⁸. At this point we reach another issue. Plato writes in his *Republic* that the One is the Good, and it is the principle of everything. More than that "the Good isn't being but is still beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power"¹⁹.

¹³ Giovanni Reale, *op.cit.*, pp.93-94.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p.95.

¹⁵ Dmitri Nikulin, *op. cit.*, p.21.

¹⁶ Giovanni Reale, *op. cit.*, p.107.

¹⁷ John Dillon, *op. cit.*, p.18.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 988 a.

¹⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 509 b.

Is this affirmation in contradiction with Plato's unwritten teachings? Apparently not because the Good "is the cause of the things that are in a good way"²⁰, and we must find some other cause for the bad things. Thomas A. Szlezák believes that here we can find an allusion to the dyadic principle.²¹ In the same study, the German scholar considers that at a closer examination, there is not a real contradiction between the written theory from *Republic* and the unwritten teachings.

THE INDEFINITE DYAD AS MATTER

Another question resides in the cosmologic myth of dialogue *Timaeus*. Here we find a term, the receptacle (hypodochē), which is also called "Nurse of all creation"²². Also, Plato uses the term chora, which means place, space, in his discussion of the Receptacle in the *Timaeus*. However, Plato never used the term "matter" in the *Timaeus*. He, as Lesley Dean-Jones points out, speaks about the "particulars as coming to be *in* the particulars, not as being made *out of* it"²³, and maybe he used that terminology to avoid any similarity with the physical philosophers, who considered the elements as the source of physical world.²⁴

The one who equals the receptacle with matter was his disciple, Aristotle. Plato says, we find this in Aristotle's testimony, that matter and space are the same thing. Also, Aristotle informs us that for Plato place and space were the same thing²⁵. Claghorn observes that the Plato's receptacle seems to be very close to Aristotle's prime matter²⁶, on the other hand, Cherniss believes that Aristotle misinterprets Plato's vision about receptacle²⁷.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 379 b.

²¹ Thomas Alexander Szlezák, "The Idea of the Good as *Archē* in Plato's *Republic*", in Dmitri Nikulin (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.131.

²² Plato, *Timaeus*, 49 a, 52 e.

²³ Lesley Dean-Jones, "Aristotle's understanding of Plato's Receptacle and Its Significance for Aristotle's Theory of Familial Resemblance", in M.R. Wright (ed.) (2000). *Essays on Plato's Timaeus*, London: Duckworth, p.111, n. 9.

²⁴ George S. Claghorn (1954). *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Timaeus*, Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, p.19.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, 209b.

²⁶ George S. Claghorn, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

²⁷ Harold Cherniss (1962). *The Riddle of the Early Academy*, New York: Russel & Russel, pp.16-17.

The proof that the receptacle is matter is in the gold analogy from fragment 50 a, where it is written that shapes are formed out of receptacle. The receptacle is also called in *Timaeus*: soft material, mother and nurse. We must note also that Aristotle says in his *Physics* that the platonic matter is non-being. But, we know that for Plato non-being doesn't mean that it is without existence and somehow that matter is. Findlay, despite his attraction to Plato's unwritten teachings sees in him a monist.²⁸ But receptacle of the *Timaeus* is the Dyad; it is the "feminine principle" which acts as a principle of multiplicity, otherness and limitedness.²⁹

CONSENSUS IN DEFINING DUALISM

Dualism has received some univocally definitions from scholars. Generally there is a consensus about what it means. In the *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, the dualism is defined as follows: "Any metaphysical theory which, in contrast to monism, holds that reality is composed of two kinds of fundamental entities, neither of which can be reduced to the other."³⁰ And in the same place we read: "In its wider sense, dualism refers to philosophical systems that are established on some sharp fundamental distinction, such as Plato's distinction between the sensible world and ideal world or Kant's distinction between the phenomenal world and the noumenal world". *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* defines dualism as: "the view that reality consists of two disparate parts. The crux of dualism is an apparently unbridgeable gap between two incommensurable orders of being that must be reconciled if our assumption that there is a comprehensible universe is to be justified. Dualism is exhibited in the pre-Socratic division between appearance and reality; Plato's realm of being containing eternal Ideas and realm of becoming containing changing things (...)"³¹ Arthur H. Armstrong proposes a typology of dualism which distinct between cosmic dualism and two-world dualism. The first one consider the whole existence as constituted by the interaction of two opposite principles, and the latter postulate a

²⁸ John Niemeyer Findlay (2011). *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines*, New York: Routledge, p.324.

²⁹ John D. Turner, *op. cit.*, p.181.

³⁰ Nicholas Bunnin, Jiyuan Yu (2004). *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p.193.

³¹ Robert Audi (ed.) (1999), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, p.244.

division between two levels of reality, the physical and the higher one.³²

One of the most influential definitions is that given by the Italian scholar Ugo Bianchi. In his academic career, the problem of dualism occupies a special place.³³ As an overview of Bianchi's conception about dualism we will use his article from *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Here dualism is seen "as a category within the history and phenomenology of religion, dualism may be defined as a doctrine that posits the existence of two fundamental causal principles underlying the existence"³⁴. In that article the authors propose a typology of dualism: radical versus moderate, dialectical versus eschatological, cosmic or procosmic versus antic cosmic.

Radical dualism admits two coequal and coeternal principles, in the sense that both of them exist and act from the very beginning; In dialectical dualism the two principles are often conceived of as good and evil, respectively, both in the ethical and metaphysical sense.³⁵ I disagree with some aspects of the typology proposed by Bianchi. For example, he says that there are two kind of dualism: radical and moderate. For him, Pythagoreans and Platonic traditions, which postulate the existence of one Supreme Being from whom a second principle somehow is derived, are dualistic systems, and I believe that this fact is not true. Moreover, Plotinus is a pure example of monism, or to use Gatti's words he is an extreme radical monist³⁶.

CONCLUSION

Anyway, in respect to our paper, we must conclude from the definitions above that the dualism declares two first principles that are at the origin of the physical world. Here comes the question: is Plato a dualist? As we saw, the great philosopher can be seen sometimes as a

³² A.H. Armstrong (1992). "Dualism: Platonic, Gnostic and Christian", in Richard T. Wallis (ed.). *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, New York: State University of New York Press, pp.33-54.

³³ The problem of dualism is widely debated in Ugo Bianchi (1978). *Selected Essays on Gnosticism, Dualism and Mysteriography*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, pp.3-62.

³⁴ Ugo Bianchi, Yuri Stoyanov (2005). "Dualism", in Lindsay Jones (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd Edition, Vol. 4, Detroit/New York: Thomson Gale, p.2504.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 2507-2508.

³⁶ Maria Luisa Gatti (1999). "Plotinus: The Platonic tradition and the Foundation of Neoplatonism", in Lloyd P. Gerson, *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, p.24.

dualist, at least in his unwritten doctrines. Plato will be considered a monist if we pay attention only to his written works. But, as Tübingen School has proved there is no contradiction between his inner-Academic teachings and his dialogues.

Moreover, as Dillon points out, the echo of these unwritten doctrines can be found in dialogues as the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*, dialogues of the middle and later periods, but these doctrines could not be detected in the dialogues alone.³⁷ But this fact doesn't the validity of the testimonies of Plato's successors, but it indeed confirms the existence of such a doctrine. So, now we can say that Plato is a dualist, and his first two principles are the One and the indefinite dyad, or matter. These two principles are contradictory and they are generating both superior beings and the physical world.

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³⁷ John Dillon, *op. cit.*, p.18.

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