

# Modes of Power and Different Beings in *Sophist* 246a-249d

Yan Lu

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

This paper re-examines Plato's *dynamis* proposal in *Sophist* 246a-249d and argues that power is an intrinsic relational property with distinct modes for bodies, forms, and souls—namely, interactional, constitutional, and directional powers. This conclusion challenges the restriction of power to specific beings and shows the need to differentiate between power bearers. The interpretation rejects the notion of power as a definition or type of being, proposing instead that it serves as a criterion for comparing different beings. Plato's exploration of power does not establish a 'power ontology' but facilitates 'ontological comparison' by highlighting interrelationships among beings with varying modes of power.

power, beings, modes of power, ontological comparison

In his exploration of non-being and falsehood, the Eleatic Stranger digresses to address a puzzle about being. The puzzle is *what sort of* beings there are, and he identifies two opposing views—corporealism and idealism. In examining and reforming corporealism, the Stranger introduces the *dynamis* proposal (DP): to be is to be capable of acting on or being affected by something else. This paper explores the controversy surrounding DP's interpretation. There are two prevailing interpretations: a *generally all-inclusive* reading<sup>1</sup> where power characterizes all kinds of beings, and a *restricted* reading<sup>2</sup> that limits power to either bodies or forms.

This paper argues that Plato views power as an intrinsically relational property. On one hand, power describes the all-inclusive action-passion relation between different beings including bodies, forms, and souls. On the other hand, each being's power has distinct modes. Inasmuch as power pertains to relations between beings, it is itself neither the essence nor a type of being. It follows that the Stranger is not committed to the notion that

---

1 For the generally all-inclusive interpretation of DP, see, e.g., Moravcsik 1962, Owen 1971, Brown 1998.

2 For the interpretation of DP restricted to bodies, see, e.g., von Staden 1998, McCabe 2000, Politis 2006b; for the interpretation of DP focused on the forms, see, e.g., Leigh 2010, Marmodoro 2021. ?If it is extended to the forms, isn't it all inclusive? Say why not. (Reply: It is more accurate to replace 'extended to' with 'focused on'. They use DP to understand the communion of forms but say nothing about the power of bodies and souls.)

being is defined by having power or that being is power. Additionally, my argument clarifies the specific modes of power in different beings (bodies, forms, and souls). Notably, my interpretation underscores the centrality of the soul in the Stranger's argument.

The procedure involves revisiting relevant passages in the debate. Section 1 argues that power, as formulated in DP, is a *relational property* with nine possible cases. Sections 2, 3, and 4 delve into the modes of power in bodies, forms, and souls, arguing that they have interactional, constitutional, and directional powers respectively. Section 5 concludes with remarks and clarifications on the proposed interpretation.

### 1. Dynamis Proposal and the Modes of Power

The Stranger offers two versions of the formulation of DP:

(α) I say that a thing really is if it has any acquired power by nature, either (εἶτ) to act on something else (ἐτερον) or (εἶτ) to be affected, even by the most trivial thing and in the smallest way and even if it only happens once. (β) For I set down as a mark (ὄρον) to mark off beings that they are nothing other than power. (*Sph.* 247d9-e5)

There are two points to clarify in the formulation of DP, pertaining to the terms 'ἐτερον' and 'εἶτ' ... εἶτ'....'

The term 'ἐτερον' (something else) implies that the power is a relational property which involves two correlates, an 'agent' and a 'patient.' The Stranger suggests that an entity *a* has power only if it is related to an entity other than itself, say entity *b*, emphasizing that power must involve relationships between different beings. The fact that power essentially refers to something else makes it impossible to be a definition of being.<sup>3</sup> The reason is that the Stranger proposes the principle at 255c12-d7 that things are said to be something either in their own right (αὐτὰ καθ' αὐτά) or with relation to something else (πρὸς ἕτερον). He uses this principle to distinguish between Being and the Different: Being is said both by themselves and in relation to something else, while the Different is said only in relation to something else. Since power, like the Different, is said in relation to something else, power is distinguished from being and cannot be the definition of being. It also justifies the interpretation of ὄρον in version (β) of DP as 'mark' rather than 'definition.'

3 See, e.g., Marmodoro 2021 endorses the view that being is power.

The formulation ‘either to act on or to be affected by something else’ is a disjunction. In ordinary language, the connective ‘either...or...’ (εἴτ’... εἴτ’....) can have two senses: *inclusive*, where the statement is true if at least one of the options is true, and *exclusive*, where only one can be true, not both. Given that when the Stranger examines the idealists, he asks whether coming to know and being known are an action, an affection, or both (ποίημα ἢ πάθος ἢ ἀμφοτέρον, 248d4–5), it becomes evident that the connective εἴτ’... εἴτ’.... in DP is an *inclusive* disjunction. Consequently, there are three modes in which an entity can satisfy DP:

DP-mode I: both to act on and to be affected by something else.

DP-mode II: only to be affected by something else.

DP-mode III: only to act on something else.

Our next step is to systematically assess each entity involved in Gigan-tomachia to determine whether they all adhere to DP and to identify the specific mode in which they satisfy DP.

## 2. Bodies and Interactional Power

Since the Stranger offers DP as an improvement over materialism, and he imagines that the materialist accepts this proposal, it is clear that the body satisfies DP, but in what mode?

Some commentators wrongly limit DP to depicting the body, arguing that subsequent developments in the dialogue dismiss its application to forms and souls.<sup>4</sup> This error stems from assimilating the Stranger’s general portrayal of power in DP with its application to bodies. However, a crucial distinction exists: the general portrayal? uses ‘either-or,’ while the application uses ‘both-and.’ Thus at 248c5, when referencing DP, the Stranger uses the connective ‘or’ whereas immediately after, 248c7 uses ‘and’ to describe the corporealists’ view of ‘becoming’. As it says: “We took it as a sufficient mark of *beings* that power is present in a thing to do something *or* (ἢ...ἢ...) have something done to it... In reply, they say that becoming has the power to do something *and* (καὶ) have something done to it...” (*Sph.* 248c4–7).

This difference indicates that the body satisfies DP in terms of a special mode of power rather than in terms of power in general, namely DP-mode

4 See, e.g., von Staden 1998, 270–1 argues that in the Sophist, Plato hints that *dynamis* is more suitable for describing material things rather than forms, and in the Theaetetus, Plato associates *dynamis* with the bodies rather than the souls.

I: the body has the power both to act upon and to be affected, which I call *interactional* power. For example, when someone uses their hand to push something else, say entity *a*, *a* will push the hand as resistance or push entity *b*. In this regard, the hand and the entity *a* are in an interactional chain, they both act on and are affected.

This power mode aligns with original corporealism, particularly explaining its key feature. In *Sph.* 246a7-b1, the Stranger summarizes the corporealists' central claim by saying that only entities experiencing impingement and touch, that is, bodies, are beings. The Greek terms used are προσβολή (attack) and ἐπαφή (touch) illustrating the body's active and passive involvement in its power. This is parallel to Plato's use of τὸ προσβάλλον and τὸ προσβαλλόμενον to explain how a particular color comes into being in *Theaetetus* 154a1-2.

The Stranger criticizes corporealists for limiting their understanding of power to interactions among bodies alone. The Stranger may accept interactional power for describing body but acknowledges its limitations when exploring the powers of form and soul.

### 3. Forms and Constitutional Power

Commentators differ on whether the Friends of the forms ultimately accept DP, and, if so, in what sense. In the Stranger's examination of the Friends in *Gigantomachia*, he focuses on the relationship between form and soul in knowledge. The puzzles are whether DP can be applied to characterize the soul's knowing of form and, if so, what DP-mode applies to forms in this process.

Let's first present the basic claims of the Friends, followed by discussion of the three-phase examination of these claims by the Stranger. Friends' basic claims (F) include:

(F1) Perhaps by distinguishing between becoming and being you say they are separate.

(F2) And you declare that by the body and through perception, we commune (κοινωνεῖν) with becoming, but through reasoning and by soul we commune with real being,

(F3) which (being) is the same always in the same way, but becoming is different at different times. (*Sph.* 248a7-13)

(F1) and (F3) are metaphysical claims, while (F2) is epistemological. (F3) delineates distinct features of real being linked to rest and becoming linked to

change. (F1) posits the separation of these 'beings' into distinct worlds, and (F2) asserts that humans use body through perception and soul through reasoning to commune with these two different entities. The Stranger questions the Friends' epistemological claim, and then challenges their metaphysical claims, compelling the Friends to partially revise their claims.

In the first examination phase (248b11-c9), the Stranger questions whether 'commune' in (F2) aligns with 'the power to be affected *or* to do' (248c5) in DP. The Friends respond that 'becoming has the power to be affected *and* to act,' but 'this power does not fit with being' (248c7-9). While they aim to reject applying DP to what they term real being, the use of 'and' signals a rejection of applying body's power mode (DP-mode I) to real being specifically. Their stance leaves room for consideration of other modes of power.

In the second examination phase (248c10-e5), the Stranger assesses whether using power to explain coming to know and being known in (F2) aligns with the Friends' other claims (F1) and (F3):

- (EF1) Real being is the same always in the same way. (from F3)
- (EF2) The soul comes to know and *being* is known. (from F2)
- (EF3) To come to know is to do something. (introduction of DP)
- (EF4) If to come to know is to do something, then to be known is to be affected.
- (EF5) To be known is to be affected. (EF3, EF4, *MP*)
- (EF6) To be affected is to be changed.
- (EF7) To be known is to be changed. (EF5, EF6, *HS*)
- (EF8) *being* is changed. (EF2, EF7, *HS*)

The introduction of DP to explain (F2) leads to a result (EF8) that contradicts the Friends' claim F3. There are two possible interpretations: either the Friends accept the result (EF8) and revise their original claim regarding the nature of real being (form), which leads to the view that forms undergo mere Cambridge change, or they find the result (EF8) unacceptable, prompting a search for the problematic premise. (EF6) and (EF3) are suspect. Given that (EF4) is a naïve characterization of the *converse* in the relation, commentators do not consider it problematic.

Due to space constraints, a detailed discussion of these views is not possible. In short, the 'mere Cambridge changes' perspective lacks support in other dialogues and may not align with the dialogue's overarching project. Additionally, there is no strong textual basis for refuting the idea that being affected implies being changed. Therefore, the interpretation that (EF3) is

problematic seems more plausible, since it is the introduction of DP to explain (F2) that leads to (EF3).

Some commentators may think that the interpretation that (EF3) is problematic implies that the argument rejects the use of DP to understand the soul's knowing of forms at all. However, this inference does not hold. Rather, it only challenges a specific mode of power, namely, that forms are affected in the process of being known (DP-mode II), while leaving open the possibility that forms act on in this process (DP-mode III).

The third examination phase (248e6-249d4) could be reconstructed as follows:

(EF9) It (i.e., τῷ παντελῶς ὄντι) has *nous*. (From F2)

(EF10) If it has *nous*, then it has life.

(EF11) It has life. (EF9, EF10, *HS*)

(EF12) If it has *nous* and life, then it has them in a soul.

(EF13) It has a soul. (EF11, EF12, *HS*)

(EF14) If it has a *nous*, life, and soul, then it's not at rest and not completely changeless.

(EF15) It changes. (EF9, EF11, EF13, *HS*)

This argument starts from an examination of the Friends' claim (F2) and infers a result (EF15) that contradicts claim (F3). But unlike the second phase, the Stranger and Friends seem to find this result difficult to refute. This argument, thus, would force Friends to revise their claims. The suggestion given in the dialogue is to revise (F3), which concludes in the assertion that 'being and totality of things (τὸ ὄν τε καὶ τὸ πᾶν) are both the unchanging and that which changes'. (249d3-4)

It is widely recognized that the introduction of soul (and *nous*, life) leads to the revision of Friends' claims. Commentators vary in their interpretations of the entities recognized as real being by the Stranger and Friends, depending on their understanding of the relationship between the soul and τῷ παντελῶς ὄντι and τὸ ὄν τε καὶ τὸ πᾶν. One interpretation posits that the Friends recognize that Forms have *nous* and life.<sup>5</sup> Another interpretation suggests that the soul here is an embodied soul, necessitating the inclusion of the body in τῷ παντελῶς ὄντι.<sup>6</sup> A third interpretation introduces the soul as a distinct kind of being outside of the forms and bodies.<sup>7</sup>

5 It goes back to the Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus, *Enneads* iii 8.9. Also see, e.g., Gerson 2006.

6 See, e.g., Owen 1971.

7 See, e.g., Cornford 1935.

Limited by space, I cannot examine these views in detail. I support the third interpretation. The main reason is that the context in which the Stranger introduces (EF9) is a discussion of whether the soul's coming to know forms is an instance of DP. Commentators take for granted that souls, or entities with souls, change, but this requires explanation. This explanation depends on what the stranger sees as a sufficient condition for change. While the Stranger does not provide a sufficient condition for change in this argument, he mentions a presupposition in (EF6) of the previous argument: 'to be affected is to be changed'. Thus, asserting that the soul or something with a soul is changed implies that it is being affected. Since the soul is being affected, it follows that the forms are acting on it. Therefore, in the process of forms being known by the soul, contrary to the apparent grammatical form, it is forms acting on the soul, and forms satisfy DP in terms of DP-mode III: having the power only to act on while remaining immune from being affected, which I call *constitutional power*.

Let's review the examination of the Friends. Instead of seeing the argument in the third phase as overturning that in the first two phases, the arguments in the three phases complement each other. The first phase rejects DP-mode I, the second phase rejects DP-mode II, while the third phase affirms the use of DP-mode III to characterize forms' power in relation to the soul.

#### 4. Active Soul and Directional Power

In examining the soul's power, the last section highlighted its *passive* role in knowing forms. However, we hesitate to characterize it solely as passive. This section aims to demonstrate that the soul, in some sense, plays an active role in its relationship with forms. The Stranger's inquiry into the soul's relationship with forms extends beyond the *Gigantomachia* passage to include dialectics and production, where the active role is termed dialectical power and productive power.

In *Sophist* 253c-e, Plato describes a form of dialectical knowledge wherein a dialectician possesses the power 'to know how to discriminate by kinds, how things can associate and how they can not' (253e1-2). This dialectical power is contrasted with the incapacity of most human souls to see what is divine. Plato uses the term dialectical power (ἡ τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δύναμις) to denote dialectics in both *Republic* (511b4) and *Philebus* (57e6-7). Plato's characterization of dialectical power varies across dialogues. In *Sophist*, it involves the power to determine which forms commune. When the soul

comes to know forms, it does not act on them; instead, it collects and separates the relationships between forms. Conversely, the outcome of this knowledge is that forms are structurally present in the soul, acting on it and causing a transformative turnabout (περιαγωγῆς, R. 518d4).

Furthermore, the soul's power extends to production. Plato defines production as a type of power in *Sophist*, where it is described as 'the power to cause (αἰτία, or ἄγῃ in *Sph.* 219b4-5) things to come into being that previously were not' (*Sph.* 265b9-10). The term ἄγειν (to bring or to direct) is used by the Stranger to specify the soul's ποιεῖν as bringing something into being or causing a change.

The soul's power is capable of acting on itself as well as on external entities. When it acts upon itself, it causes the soul to turn around, whereas when it acts upon external entities, it produces change on them. The soul's power, in turn, is grounded on the its being affected by forms. The soul changes (turns around) itself by directing its different parts toward different objects, and it changes something else by directing them toward specific goals. Therefore, I refer to this power mode of the soul as *directional* power.

We can summarize the different modes of power in three different beings as follows:

Form's *Constitutional* Power: Form has the power to act on something else while remaining immune from being affected by it.

Body's *Interactional* Power: Body has the power both to act on something else and to be affected by something else.

Soul's *Directional* Power: Soul has the power to direct itself by being affected by something else and direct something else by acting on itself.

These three modes of power in the three different beings align with the three distinct 'motions': form is unmoved, the body engages in interactional motion, and the soul is self-moved. Indeed, the specified modes of power in different beings illuminate the specific content of these three modes of motion and underscore the differences between them.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, my interpretation of Platonic *dynamis* highlights power as an intrinsic relational property, and different beings possess different modes of power. According to Plato, power is not a definition of being or a fundamental type of being but rather serves as a criterion for comparing different beings. Therefore, Plato's exploration of power does not establish



a 'power ontology' but facilitates the discussion of 'ontological comparison.' The various modes of power across different beings forms a chain of power, enabling the examination of interrelationships between them. In this chain, the soul serves as an intermediary, being directed by forms to subsequently direct the realm of becoming or bodies. The soul's mediating role is effective when it actively exercises its power with its dialectical power and production.

