

## II. The Method of Division



# Division and Metaphysics in Plato

*Fernando Muniz and George Rudebusch*  
*Northern Arizona University*

Building upon earlier work that distinguishes kind (*genos*) from form (*eidos*), we present the metaphysics entailed by the method of division, referring to the Stranger's paradigmatic division to the Angler and two antecedent Homeric divisions. We show that the Stranger's simile of a sacrificial animal (*hiereion*) has the virtues of entailing that such a kind is different from its subkinds, that it persists through division, that *to be a kind of* is a transitive relation, that *to be an immediate subkind of* is non-transitive, that *members* are the ultimate results of a process of division, that there are three forms of identification for those ultimate results, that division is appropriate relative to its purposes, that the *hiereion* is apt in relating extension to intension, and that such kinds are unlike natural kinds but like thought experiments. We conclude by considering the metaphysical respectability of such kinds.  
Plato, division, kinds, forms, *hiereion*

## 1. Introduction

Twentieth century philosophical accounts of Plato struggled to give an account of what were seen as his 'later' method and metaphysics. Plato celebrates the method of division in the *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus*. Plato identifies the method with dialectic and presents it as the key not only to his theories of love, sophistry, political expertise, and the good, but also to being itself and the greatest kinds and forms. The puzzle for twentieth century interpreters was to understand why the method is so important for metaphysics. Interpreters were unable to give Plato's method the metaphysical importance that Plato believed it held. Instead of first place in doing metaphysics, the method seemed to have an uncertain place. No doubt, the main reason for the uncertainty was the difficulty in finding a consistent interpretation of the most crucial item for the method: what Plato meant in those dialogues by the word '*genos*', which we translate as 'kind'. A kind is what is divided by the method, and more kinds, that is, subkinds, are also what are produced by the division.

Elsewhere we defend an account of kinds as neither intensional forms nor extensional classes but as like bodies in possessing both an extension and

an intension.<sup>1</sup> Here we present the metaphysics entailed by the method of division. We begin by reviewing the Stranger’s paradigmatic division with its Homeric antecedents.

## 2. The paradigmatic division and its Homeric antecedents

There is an antecedent to the Stranger’s division of kinds in Homer. The Catalog of Ships in book 2 of the *Iliad* was an oral performer’s *tour de force*. ‘Of the Boeotians Peneleos and Leitus were captains, and Arcesilaus and Prothoënor and Clonius. . . . Of these there came fifty ships, and on board of each went young men of the Boeotians an hundred and twenty’ (*Il.* 2.494-510, trans. Murray). The poet goes on to divide the Greek fleet into 29 ethnic contingents from 164 settlements under 46 captains, and then to subdivide the contingents into 1,186 ships of 120 men each. Thanks to the power of division, the poet thus catalogs ‘all them that came beneath Ilios,’ by this reckoning 142,320 men (see Figure 1).

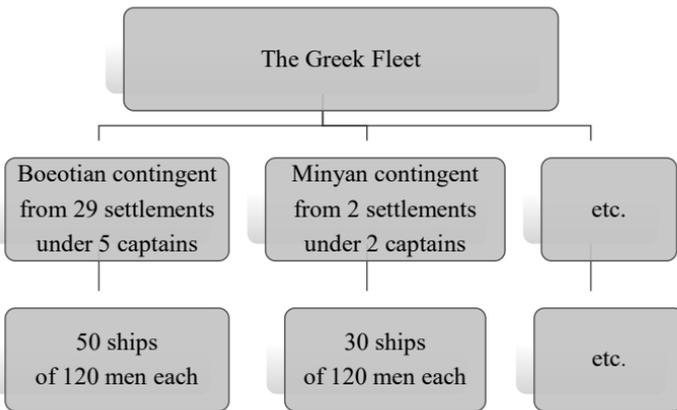


Fig. 1 *Catalog of Ships*

Another division, with a different function, also appears in the same chapter of the *Iliad*. Rather than cataloging, the poet here recounts Nestor’s advice

1 See Muniz and Rudebusch 2018 and 2023.

how to marshal troops: ‘Divide thy men by tribes, by clans, Agamemnon, that clan may bear aid to clan and tribe to tribe’ (see Figure 2).<sup>2</sup>

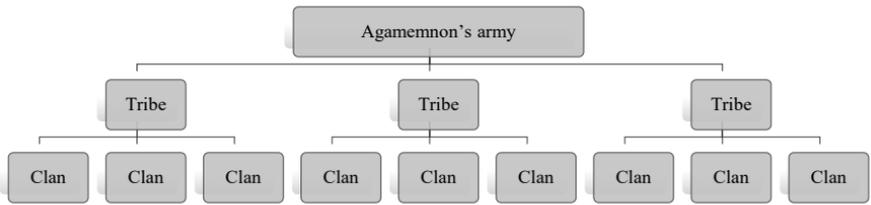


Fig. 2 *Division of troops*

Here Homer uses the same verb of division, *krinein*, that Plato's Stranger will centuries later use with a prefix, *diakrinein*. It is often noticed that Plato's *Sophist* is full of allusions to Homer. The Homeric precedents for the method of division provide one reason for the allusions and set bounds to interpretations of the Stranger's method.

The Stranger's 'paradigm' (*paradeigma*) of his method takes as its target something that is 'easy to know and of small importance but having an account no less than things of great importance'—the angler (*Sph.* 218d8-e4). The first division is of expertise into 'productive' expertise (*poiētikēn*, 219b11) and 'acquisitive' expertise (*ktētikē*, 219c7). The Stranger continues as in Figure 3, in a division that proceeds from left to right according to the spatial metaphor the Stranger uses at 221b.

2 *Il.* 2. 362-3. Unless otherwise noted, translations are ours.

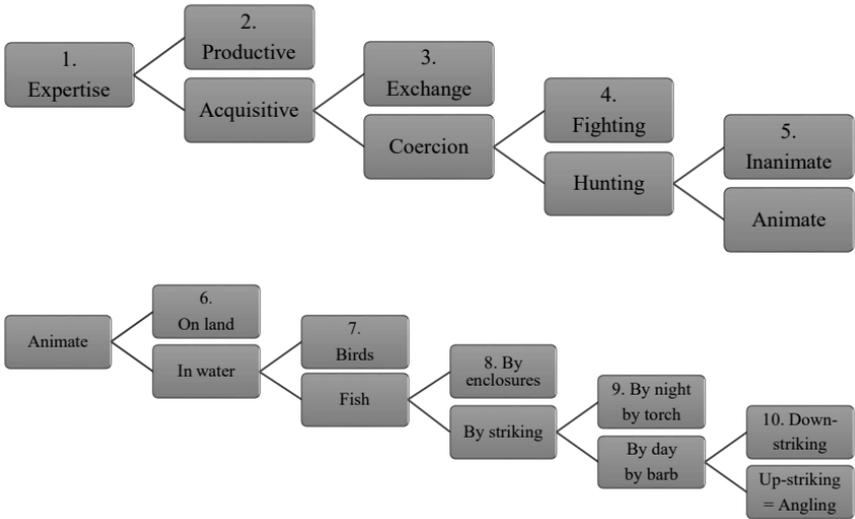


Fig. 3 Paradigmatic Division to Angler

The point of the division is to ‘uncover a path’ (*Plt.* 258c3) from kind to subkind, dividing again and again in order to define a given expertise, here Angling.

### 3. Metaphysics of the simile

Our account of the kinds divided by the method and the kinds produced by the divisions is guided by the Stranger’s simile for a kind as ‘like a *hiereion*’ (*Plt.* 287c3).<sup>3</sup> A *hiereion* was a sacrificial animal offering, and the step-by-step dismemberment was performed upon the dead body after killing it. In this simile what corresponds to a kind is the sacrificial body and what corresponds to the subkinds are its members after the sacred butchering is complete and the various portions have been distributed to gods and mortals. The Stranger’s simile echoes Socrates’ famous butcher metaphor in which he describes the division of a kind as ‘by forms, to cut through by joints which it has by nature, trying not to shatter any part using the method

3 Moore 2015 also uses the simile to interpret the method, although she does not reach our conclusions.

of a bad butcher' (*Phdr.* 265e1-3).<sup>4</sup> The simile is apt in making the Stranger the hierarch whose sacred act of division of the *hiereion* creates a hierarchy. Leaving aside many literary riches suggested by the simile, we aim here to develop aspects of the simile that reveal details of the metaphysics of the division of kinds.

First, a kind is **different from its subkinds**. For example, the one kind Acquisitive Expertise is different from its two subkinds, Expertise at Acquisition by Exchange and Expertise at Acquisition by Coercion, even though the one kind and the two subkinds comprise the same members, such as Angling, Spear Fishing, etc. Likewise, the *hiereion*, being one, is distinct from the two parts it is divided into after the liver has been detached from the rest of the body, even though both the one body and the many parts comprise the same members.

Second, a kind **persists through division**. As Homer continued to speak of the very same Greek fleet throughout his divisions of it into contingents and ships, and as Agamemnon's army remained the same army even as he marshaled it according to Nestor's advice by tribe and clan, so also the kind Expertise remained the same kind even as the Stranger divided it again and again into subkinds. We take it that in the Stranger's simile the *hiereion* persists in the same way as and after it is divided 'member by member' (*kata melē*). For purposes of identification, ordinary English does not have a precise vocabulary for the words 'infant', 'child', and 'adult', but it is roughly accurate to say that the *infant* is in existence or persists only for the first year or so of life, that the *child* persists from about the second year to the eighteenth or so, while the *adult* persists for the remaining span of life. If we identify them in terms of persistence conditions, each of these objects is distinct, even though all three—infant, child, and adult—are made of the same flesh and bone and are divisible into the same head, torso, and limbs. And the *human being*, persisting for the full span of seventy or so years, is distinct in its identity from each of its stages of life, although it too is made of the same stuff and comprises the same parts. In the same

---

4 Butchery in ancient Greece was predominantly religious and therefore of a *hiereion* (see Berthiaume 1982, 62-70 and 79-93, and Eckroth 2007). Accordingly, Socrates' metaphor, like the Stranger's simile, is of a *hiereion*. In addition to the *Phaedrus*, Socrates also in the *Philebus* gives an implicit reference to a *hiereion* as a conception of division when he speaks of 'dividing members (*melē*) and parts (*merē*)' at 14e1. Such members and parts would belong to a *hiereion*. In the remainder of the paper, when we speak of kind membership, following the Stranger we refer to a relation like body membership, not the relation set membership.

way, although ancient Greek did not have a precise technical vocabulary for naming the stages of a *hierieion*, it is roughly accurate to distinguish *hierieion* from *victim*, *carcass*, and *body parts*. For the Stranger's simile to be most apt, the *hierieion* would come into existence at the initial designation of a living animal as victim and persist through its slaughter and division into the final assignment of portions to gods and mortals, as Agamemnon's army existed before and after being marshaled according to Nestor's advice.<sup>5</sup> The victim, in contrast, persists only from designation to slaughter, for after slaughter there exist only the remains of the victim, that is, the carcass. And the carcass persists only from slaughter to dismemberment. After dismemberment, there exist only the remains of the carcass, apportioned for sacrifice, in Greek the *tomion*. A kind, then, for the Stranger's purposes, is like a *hierieion*—and unlike a victim, carcass, or *tomion*—in persisting from its moment of designation (at the fourth step of the process of collection) throughout its subsequent division into subkinds.

A third feature is that **to be a kind of is a transitive relation** in a hierarchy. According to Figure 3 above, the following argument is valid: Angling is kind of barb fishing; barb fishing is kind of strike fishing; thus, angling is kind of strike fishing. In like manner the following argument about the parts produced by butchery is valid: A loin chop is a cut of loin; the loin is a cut of the lower torso; thus, a loin chop is a cut of the lower torso.

Fourth, the Stranger's *hierieion* simile fits the **non-transitivity of immediate subkinds** in a hierarchy. For example, at the third level in Figure 3 the Stranger divides the kind Expertise at Acquisition into the kinds Expertise at Acquisition by Coercion and Exchange. These two kinds are immediate

---

5 According to LSJ, the meaning of *hierieion* is victim, animal for sacrifice. An anonymous referee once stated that the word has a clearly restricted meaning: 'a ἱερείον is the animal victim of a sacrifice and does not persist through the division "limb by limb" [*kata melē*]. But the Stranger appears to use the word *hierieion* in a less restricted sense, as suggested by his using the word to refer to the body of the dead animal victim as it undergoes the cutting. Detienne and Vernant (1989: 27) seem to recognize this less restricted sense of the word when they speak of 'the distribution of parts of the sacrificial victim', i.e., the *hierieion*. Xenophon seems to use the word in this less restricted sense when he refers to the carcass after it is cut open for inspection, such that 'favorable omens appear upon the *hierieion*' (*An.* 6. 5. 2 lines 2-3). Likewise, Xenophon refers to the butchered remains of a sacrifice of many *hierieia*, sent about and feasted upon: 'Cyxares had *hierieia* sent in to each company, and as they were passed around each one of us got three pieces (*krea tria*) or even more' (*Cyr.* 2. 2. 2 lines 5-7: here *krea* is used as a count noun with *hierieia* [LSJ κρέας A]). Again, pseudo-Xenophon describes how after a sacrifice of many *hierieia* 'the feasting citizenry (*ho demos ho euōchoumenos*) distributes by lot the *hierieia*' (*Ath.* 2. 9. 5-2. 10. 1). We have not found evidence to establish the assertion that the word has only a restricted meaning.

subkinds only of the second level kind Acquisitive Expertise, not of the first level kind Expertise. Likewise in the case of Agamemnon's army, each clan is an immediate division of a tribe, not of the army as a whole. Just so in the simile, the order of division followed by the priestly butcher produces division parts, level by level. For example, one level of division might produce a leg from the torso, while at the next level the upper leg is produced. In this example, the upper leg is an immediate division part of the leg only and not of the whole carcass.

Fifth, the Stranger's *hiereion* simile fits the features of **membership**. In the marshaling of Agamemnon's troops, Nestor ceases to divide when he reaches individual clans, while Homer ceases his catalog of the fleet when he reaches enumerable ships. Again, the Stranger ceases to divide in his paradigm when he reaches Angling. In general, hierarchies cease to divide at certain points—at clans, at numbers of ships, at Angling—and the points at which it ceases to divide are the members of the kind. Moreover, an individual clan is a member both of its tribe and of its army, and a ship is a member both of its contingent and its fleet, and the expertise Angling at level ten in Figure 3 is a member not only of the kind Expertise but of every kind on the path leading from Expertise to Angling: Acquisitive Expertise, Expertise at Acquisition by Coercion, etc. A *hiereion* is like a kind in having such members. For a given form of butchering at certain points ceases its divisions, and the points at which it ceases to divide provide its members: the individual chops, shoulders, shanks, etc.

As a sixth shared feature, it follows that there are **three forms of identification for the results** of the final division alike of the clan, the numbers of ships, the kind Angling, and the shoulder chop. Each of these is an *immediate division part* respectively of tribe, contingent, Barb Fishing, and shoulder. Each is also a *division part* of the first-level whole—respectively, the army, fleet, expertise, and *hiereion*—as well as of every whole on the path leading from it to the first-level whole. And each is also a *member* of the same wholes or kinds.

A seventh shared feature of the division of kinds into a hierarchy is that it is **appropriate relative to the purposes** of the division. The division of a kind may be to catalog for purposes of exposition (as in Homer's catalog of ships), or to marshal troops for battle (as in Nestor's advice to Agamemnon), or to define Angling (as in the Stranger's paradigm of division). Just so, a priest's divisions of a *hiereion* will be appropriate relative to the kind of religious rite. The poet and seer divide aiming to produce a complete set of members, respectively, of the fleet and army. The Stranger, by contrast, is intent only upon one member, namely the individual expertise Angling, as

he makes divisions of the kind Expertise. He divides like a butcher aiming to produce but a single shoulder chop, say, from the carcass. Nevertheless, as we interpret him, the Stranger refers to the members of a kind in the first step collecting it. For example, we take the members of Productive Expertise to be the items he lists in the first step of his collection of that kind: whatever is an attendance for any living, composite, or molded body and whatever is an imitative expertise (219a10-b1). Again, we take the items he lists in the first step of his collection of Acquisitive Expertise to be the members of that kind: whatever is learning, recognition, moneymaking expertise, combat, or hunting (219c2-4). As it happens, the Stranger's form of division in his paradigm is dichotomous, so that each subkind will in turn have exactly two subkinds, until the target, Angling, is reached as in Figure 3 above. Such a form of division we take to be appropriate relative to his purpose, which is to give a paradigm of how he plans to divide in order to answer Socrates' question—*Are Sophist, Statesman, and Philosopher one, two, or three kinds?*—but we leave aside here the question why that purpose is best served by the use of dichotomy in the paradigm of the Angler.

Eighth, the *hiereion* is apt in **relating extension to intension**. The Stranger's third step of collecting a kind brings the items in the extension (namely, the members indicated in the first step) together under a head with their shared intension (as identified in the second step). A *hiereion* is an extension of flesh and bone identified as one according to the intension of the word *hiereion*. That intension distinguishes the *hiereion* from other bodies that happen to be made of the same flesh and bone and even from other bodies that necessarily are made of the same flesh and bone, such as the victim, the carcass, and the *tomion*. A kind, like a *hiereion*, possesses both an extension and an intension. Just as the extension of the Greek fleet was a mass of soldiery that divided into contingents and ships, and just as the extension of Agamemnon's army was a mass of troops that divided by tribe and by clan, so also a kind divides into its subkinds in respect of its extension. As shown above, for example, the extension of the kind Acquisitive Expertise is a mass of expertise—whatever is learning, recognition, money-making expertise, combat, or hunting, including in particular Angling—and it is in respect of that extension that Acquisitive Expertise divides into subkinds, as in Figure 3. And as the intension of a *hiereion* gives it an identity distinct from other bodies, even from some that necessarily have the same extension of flesh and bone, so the intension of a kind gives it an identity distinct from other kinds, even if some necessarily share the same extension. For example, the Stranger's kinds Same, Other, and Being are numerically different, even though they share the same extension.

Finally, a *kind as a body* is different from what philosophers today call a *natural kind*. A *hierieion* has different identity conditions from the animal that becomes a *hierieion*. Unlike the animal, a *hierieion* only comes into being when it is designated as part of a ritual. In this respect, the Stranger's kinds are unlike what philosophers today call *natural kinds*. The Stranger's kinds are more like *thought experiments* and *illustrative examples*.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Conclusion: too dirty?

Moravcsik (1973, 167) and Cohen (1973, 182) playfully spoke of different extensional models as 'clean' and 'superclean,' with intensional models implied in contrast to be *dirty* or even *superdirty*. Their use of the metaphorical hygienic contrast is based upon their Quinean assumption that sets are relatively perspicuous metaphysical objects while intensions, such as Plato's Forms, are relatively obscure. It is possible that they might also consider the body simile a dirty model, since it incorporates intensions in a way that remains unclear. But the hygienic contrast is inapt. Of course, there remain metaphysical mysteries about bodies as well as intensions, but there are also mysteries about extensions like sets.<sup>7</sup> In particular, sets require an explanation of how they manage to be one while containing many members. Ultimately, it may turn out that hylomorphism will provide the best account of that feature of sets, as Johnston proposes (2006, 652), and sets as much as kinds would then be like, and as dirty as, bodies. Without a cleaner account of what makes a set one, then, for a set theorist to call the Stranger's body simile dirty would be like the pot calling the kettle black.

---

6 See Bird and Tobin 2016 for an overview of current philosophical thought about the identity of natural kinds.

7 And, likewise, there are mysteries about how each 'fusion' of classical mereology manages to be a one while its parts are many. See Harte 2002, 23 for discussion.

