Why Should We Assume There is Divine Productive Art?

Sebastian Odzuck,
Goethe-Universität Frankfurt

On the final pages of his *Sophist* in 265b6, Plato has the Eleatic stranger divide productive art (*poiētikē technē*) into two parts: divine and human. What are the stranger's reasons for claiming that it is through the craftsmanship of a god and this divine art (*theia technē*) that the things we find in the world—all animals, plants, and inanimate things in nature—come to be? In answer to this question, I will argue for the following three claims: (1) The stranger's reason for making his claim is based on the assumption that processes in nature and actions in the arts (*technai*) are structured analogously (= *analogy thesis*) and (2) on the more fundamental claim that we cannot but presuppose that knowledge of the world is possible (= *knowledge thesis*) once we embark on the project of explaining the world. I will contend that (3) once we see the connection between the analogy thesis and the knowledge thesis, we can recognize the truth of the latter even if the former is rejected. At the same time the analogy thesis allows us to see that processes in nature are structured in such a way that knowledge about them is possible at all.
knowledge, nature, technê/art, cause, divine craftsman

1. Overview

On the final pages of his *Sophist* in 265b6, Plato has the Eleatic stranger divide productive art (*poiētikē technē*) into two parts: divine and human.[1] The stranger does so in the course of his discussion of the art of imitation (*mimētikē technē*) as a certain kind of productive art (*poiētikē technē*), more precisely the art of producing copies (*eidōla*) (see 265a10–b3) which in the end leads to the final definition of the sophist (see 268c5–d4).

In this paper I will deal with the question of what the stranger's reasons are for claiming that there is this divine branch of productive art and that, as he claims, it is through the 'craftsmanship of a god'[2] (*theou dēmiourgontos*) and this divine art (*theia technē*) that the things we find in the world—all animals, plants, and inanimate things in nature—come to be. The stranger does not really present an argument for these claims.

I will argue for the following three claims: (1) The stranger's reason for making his claim is based on the assumption that processes in nature and

1 For the larger context, see *Sph.* 265a4–b6.
2 265c4; for translations from the *Sophist*, I use White, 1996, often with modification.

actions in the arts (*technai*) are structured analogously (= *analogy thesis*) and on the more fundamental claim that (2) we cannot but presuppose that knowledge of the world is possible (= *knowledge thesis*) once we embark on the project of explaining the world. I will contend that (3) once we see the connection between the analogy thesis and the knowledge thesis, we can recognize the truth of the latter even if the former is rejected.

Why should we deal with the stated question? After all, one might think that the assumption of a divine demiurge and his divine *technē* is also found in other works by Plato without any argument.[3]

The text, however, suggests that the assumption about there being a divine productive art that is responsible for the existence of animals, plants, and other things we find in the world needs further discussion; for when the stranger asserts that production should be divided into a divine and a human branch, Theaetetus says that he doesn't 'understand yet.'[4] Theaetetus' lack of understanding induces the stranger to present arguments for this claim. The arguments are evidently inadequate for instead of wholeheartedly agreeing to the claim, Theaetetus points out that he often changes his opinion concerning the stranger's claim[5] and adds, 'looking at you now and supposing that you believe they [i.e. the things in the world] come to be by a god, I also adopt that view.'[6]

For the stranger this response suffices because he knows that Theaetetus tends towards this option anyway and will not change his mind concerning this point, although he is clearly aware that more argument could be presented for his claim.[7] For us, however, it is crucial to know more about the reasoning behind these assumptions because the claim that there must be a divine productive art and some kind of divine craftsman responsible for the things we find in the world is substantial and problematic. Against this background it is surprising that the commentaries and the literature do not really discuss it.[8]

In what follows I will therefore present what I believe to be the argument behind this reasoning and will argue for the three claims stated above.

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3 The obvious case, of course, is the Timaeus (e.g., 28a6), but a divine craftsman is also mentioned elsewhere in Plato, for instance, in the *R.* 430a7 and *Phlb.* 27b1.

4 Οὔπω μεμάθηκα, *Sph.* 265b7.

5 See *Sph.* 265d1–2.

6 νῦν μὴν βλέπων εἰς σὲ καὶ ὑπολαμβάνων οἴεσθαί σε κατά γε θεὸν αὐτὰ γίγνεσθαι, ταύτῃ καὶ αὐτὸς νενόμικα, *Sph.* 265d2–4.

7 See *Sph.* 266d5–e2.

8 See, for instance, Cornford, 1935, 325–326, Bluck, 1975, chpt. VIII, de Rijk, 1986, 213, Seeck, 2011, 130-131, and Crivelli, 2012, who do not discuss this passage any further.

2. The Analogy Thesis

Why should we assume that there is a divine productive art as the stranger claims? After Theaetetus indicated that he does not see why there must be a divine branch of production, the stranger presents what seems to be part of the reason for this assumption. He does so by asking the following question, clearly presupposing that the suggestion made by it is correct:

> Now take all animals and everything mortal, all plants on the earth that grow from seeds and roots, and also the lifeless bodies, fusible and infusible, made up inside the earth. Shall we say that anything besides the craftsmanship of a god makes them come to be after previously not being?[9] (*Sph.* 265c1–5)

The key phrase here is: 'the craftsmanship of a god" (*theou dēmiourgountos*). This means all these things are products of an art (*technē*), more precisely the divine productive *technē*.[10] Since the only *technē* we know about directly is human *technē*, to speak of divine *technē* is to make a tacit analogy. The stranger's claim that production may be divided into a divine and a human branch follows directly from the analogy.

When the stranger claims that 'all animals and everything mortal, all plants . . . and also the lifeless bodies . . . made up inside the earth' must be products of some divine *technē*, he implicitly presupposes the following claim to which I will refer as the *analogy-thesis*: the processes we find in nature that are responsible for the coming to be of these things are structured like a craftsman's action, like *technē* actions.[11] Both the processes in nature and actions in the arts or crafts (*technai*) in the end lead to a product and

9 Ζῷα δὴ πάντα θνητά, καὶ δὴ καὶ φυτὰ ὅσα τ' ἐπὶ γῆς ἐκ σπερμάτων καὶ ῥιζῶν φύεται, καὶ ὅσα ἄψυχα ἐν γῇ συνίσταται σώματα τηκτὰ καὶ ἄτηκτα, μῶν ἄλλου τινὸς ἢ θεοῦ δημιουργοῦντος φήσομεν ὕστερον γίγνεσθαι πρότερον οὐκ ὄντα;

10 That this must be what the stranger has in mind is also clear from 265e3, where he claims that 'the things said to be by nature' (τὰ μὲν φύσει λεγόμενα) in fact are made by divine art (ποιεῖσθαι θείᾳ τέχνῃ).

11 Note that this claim does not necessarily imply that there must be a creator god that is a craftsman in the literal sense, but may be understood in a metaphorical sense just as in the case of the 'likely story' (εἰκός μῦθος, 29d2) in the *Timaeus*. For a discussion of this point with respect to the *Timaeus* see, for instance, Carone, 2005, 31, who distinguishes between a literalist reading, according to which what is stated in the *Timaeus* has to be understood literally, and a nonliteralist one, which focuses on 'the abstract and more impersonal "demiurgic function" that he seems to represent in the universe, namely that of intelligent causation aiming at an end' and 'not so much on his anthropomorphic appearance'; for proponents of both views see Carone, 2005, 31, n. 19.

have their cause in some kind of craftsman. These processes in nature, thus, are structured like the *technē* actions, that is, like human actions. It is in this respect that the stranger presupposes an analogy between nature and action and the reason why he holds that processes in nature in principle may be explained in the same way as human actions, which means with respect to the ends at which these processes aim.

The claim of divine craftsmanship, and the analogy thesis it presupposes, are bold claims, and it is striking that the stranger barely gives any additional reason for making them, although he seems to be well aware that they are far from self-evident.What may be the reasoning behind this claim, however, becomes clearer when the stranger states what he thinks would be the only alternative to his view, the 'common belief' (*tōn pollōn dogmata*, 265c5) 'that nature (*phusis*) produces' all mortal living beings and the mentioned lifeless things in the world 'by some spontaneous cause (*apo tinos aitia automatēs*) that generates them without any thought (*aneu dianoias*)' (265c7–c8). In other words, there is no other reason one may give for the existence of things beyond their having come to be by chance.

The stranger rejects this option without explaining why. However, he points out that something being brought into existence by divine craftsmanship means that it is produced 'by a cause that works with reason (*meta logou*) and divine knowledge that comes from god' (*epistēmēs theias apo theou gignomenēs*) (265c8–9).

To the stranger it seems obvious that the only way to explain why the things whose existence we mean to explain exist in the way they do and have the specific characteristics they do is to consider them products of some cause operating with reason and knowledge.

The reasoning behind this assumption must be that all the things he ascribes to divine productive art exhibit some kind of order or structure, a degree of rationality that cannot be the outcome of mere coincidence. To give an example: some of these things—living beings—are well functioning organisms all parts of which play a specific role for the working of this organism. This order or structure is intelligible in itself and, therefore, must have its cause in something that itself is rational and may thereby serve as the origin of its rationality. The assumption seems to be that without such a rational cause we cannot explain the rational structure we find exhibited in the world and the things therein. The stranger's point is that without reference to god's craftsmanship and, thus, a divine demiurge we would not be able to explain the world's rational order.

Contrariwise, the proponents of the 'common belief' that things arise from chance are unable to account for the rational structure of the world. In particular, they could not explain the regularity found in the world. Certain events or patterns of events—such as certain cycles in the life of living beings or the seasons—occur again and again, and we are able to predict that things will happen in regular ways.[12] If the coming to be of things in the world were governed by coincidence, there would be no basis for any regularity and no explanation would be possible. It is not clear, however, whether these consequences would really arise for the proponents of the alternative view and many of us today would not accept the stranger's argument. Given, for instance, what modern science tells us about how evolution works it seems reasonable to assume that animals and plants indeed developed by chance without any necessity for divine knowledge being involved, and it seems wrong to draw an analogy between nature and action. Against this background the stranger's claims and argument seem rather problematic, and one may wonder what he would say in response.

3. The Knowledge Thesis

Although it is not stated in the text, the stranger may point out again that the 'common belief' according to which all mortal beings as well as inanimate things come to be 'by some spontaneous cause that generates them without any thought' cannot account for the existence of these things or, more broadly speaking, for the rationality we find in the world. He would hold that referring to coincidence as the cause of all coming to be and assuming that this is all that needs to be said here does not help us make sense of the coming to be of things in the world at all.

12 That the regularity in the world is an expression of its rational character is a thought also found, for instance, in the *Philebus*. There, Socrates and Protarchus agree that it is reason (νοῦς) and wisdom (σοφία) that have to be considered the cause (αἰτία) ordering and coordinating (κοσμοῦσά τε καὶ συντάττουσα) the years, seasons, and months (*Phlb*. 30c4–7), that is also, one could add, what is responsible for the regular changes that take place in the world. As Socrates points out, it is assumptions like these that let us see 'that reason always rules the universe' (ὡς ἀεὶ τοῦ παντὸς νοῦς ἄρχει, *Phlb*. 30d8). We also find a similar thought in Laws X where the Athenian stranger points out that we can only say why we may observe the regular motions of the heavenly bodies in the sky and why there are the 'years, month, and all seasons' (*Lg*. 899b2–3) if we assume that the world is governed by a good and rational world soul and that the processes it causes are accordingly structured (see *Lg*. 899b2–c1).

As I understand it, he would do so because he implicitly assumes a more fundamental claim that I will call the *knowledge thesis*. That is the claim that the world in principle is something we can make sense of, and that for this reason knowledge of the world and the things we find therein is possible. It is on the basis of the knowledge thesis that the stranger asks for the explanation of the coming to be of things in the first place. It is this assumption that leads him to claim that processes in nature and actions in the arts exhibit an analogous structure and that there must be a rational cause responsible for both kinds of processes, since it must be possible to explain them and gain knowledge about them. The knowledge thesis at the same time is what makes him reject coincidence.

The stranger does not explicitly state the knowledge thesis in the text but presupposes it as a given. Again, one may wonder why we should accept this claim and what would be stranger's reply if we point out that the world just is the way it is and assume the sceptical view that knowledge about the world is impossible and that the knowledge thesis is false or, at least, that it is unclear whether it holds.

We can only speculate, but it is hard to imagine the stranger's rejecting the knowledge thesis. He might say that the very fact that we reject the knowledge thesis shows that we already presuppose the knowledge thesis as a given. The reason is that by rejecting these claims we implicitly assume that they are inappropriate ways of making sense of the world, which would be impossible if we would not also assume that we can make sense of the world and, thus, that knowledge of some kind is possible. But this is just what the knowledge thesis claims. It is, thus, in a certain sense indubitable.

Once we seriously embark on the project of explaining the coming to be of things in the world and look for appropriate ways to do so, the stranger could argue, we already have accepted the knowledge thesis as given, even if we are not aware of this. The assumption that knowledge of the world *in principle* is possible for us (independent from the question of how to gain that knowledge) is a necessary condition for judging some answer to the question of how things came to be as correct or incorrect, which is why the stranger rightly presupposes the knowledge thesis.

This conclusion does not imply that the stranger is also right about the analogy thesis. Nor does it even imply that 'common belief' need be rejected. The knowledge thesis holds independently of these other claims and is more fundamental than they are. The stranger's discussion of divine art, however, helps us see the more formal point that not only does his analogy answer to the question about the cause (*aitia*) of the coming to be of things in the world implicitly presuppose the knowledge thesis, but 'common belief'

as well as modern answers to the question also presuppose the knowledge thesis. It is in this sense that Plato has us see what we always presuppose when we ask how it is that things 'come to be after previously not being' (265c4–5).

Of course, Plato's works are committed to the analogy as well as to teleological accounts of nature, as we can see from the *Phaedo*.[13] For Plato and the stranger, it is only by way of reference to human action and its teleological structure that we can make sense of the processes and things we find in the world. However, by presupposing the knowledge thesis and then drawing analogies between processes in nature and human action, Plato makes it possible to see that not only human actions but also processes in nature are structured in specific ways that permit knowledge about them, independent of whether the *analogy thesis* holds. Thus, Plato and his stranger develop a crucial insight fundamental to the notion that knowledge of the world, its scientific explanation, is possible and that holds independently from whether we accept the assumptions of the analogy thesis and divine craftsmanship.

4. Conclusion

What, then, are we to make of the stranger's claim that it is through the craftsmanship of a god that all animals, plants, and other things come to be? First, I have shown that the stranger's argument for the stated claim involves the *analogy thesis*, that is, the assumption that divine *technē* paralells human *technē*. The basis for this assumption must be that cosmos, collectively and individually, exhibits something of the sort of order we find in the products of human *technē*.

What is ordered is rational and must have its cause in something that itself is rational. The only possible answer, the stranger holds, is that this rational structure we find exhibited in the world and the beings that live therein must result from god's craftmanship. However, the analogy thesis is itself based on the *knowledge thesis*, that is, the claim that the world in principle is explainable and that knowledge of it is possible. The knowledge thesis, I have argued, is more fundamental than the analogy thesis and does not imply the analogy thesis or the claim about there being a divine art.

13 See *Phd*. 98b–99b, where Socrates, as scholars widely agree, discusses the explanation of human action to introduce teleological explanation as the only kind of appropriate explanation in nature and the cosmos. See, for instance: Gallop, 1975, 174–175; Ebert, 2004, 344; Frede, 2005, 106.

It is on the basis of the knowledge thesis that Plato has the stranger ask for the explanation of the coming to be of things, look for explanations that go beyond the assumption that the coming to be of things is the outcome of mere coincidence, and draw analogies between things occurring in nature and in the arts. Drawing this analogy, however, allows us to recognize that processes in nature exhibit structures that make them intelligible and, so, subject to knowledge. This crucial insight is fundamental for the possibility of scientific understanding of nature and holds even if we reject the analogy thesis and the claim about divine craftsmanship.