

# Knower and Known: The Making of a *Sophistes*

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The Eleatic Stranger's question about the aetiological relationship between knower and known – does only one affect the other, or both, or neither? – is not clearly answered in the *Sophist*. One can arrive at a Platonic answer by attending to basic aspects of Plato's own thought that are not included in the Stranger's characterization of the "Friends of the Forms", above all the fundamental role of the Good as source of the intelligibility, being, and nature of the Forms. This basis underlies two related facts: first, Forms affect knowers as objects of desire (*eros*) for truth; second, participation in Forms is a value-bestowing Formal cause (NB: not an Aristotelian formal cause) of worldly participants being what they are, namely, things instantiating, enacting, or personifying a type of *dyunamis* essential to the good ordering of the realm of becoming. This twofold answer to the Stranger's question has in turn implications for how we assess the alleged status of sophistry as a *technē*.  
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## Introduction

I begin by bringing the Good of the *Republic* into discussion of the *Sophist* and highlighting some of the Eleatic Stranger's remarks reflecting a more full-blooded, Good-based version of Platonism than that which he attributes to the Friends of the Forms. Drawing on the role of the Good as the source of the being, essence and intelligibility of Forms in general, I will describe briefly how the participation of worldly things in Forms works and how Forms are an *aitia* of worldly participants being what they are. On that basis I propose answers to two related questions: What aetiological relationship obtains between knower and known? Is sophistry a *technē*, as assumed throughout the *Sophist*'s multiple processes of Division? The answer to the first question suggests an answer to the second.

## The Friends of the Forms and Plato's Own Platonism

Whether or not power (*dyunamis*) to affect or be affected is a mark (*horos*) of being, as suggested by the Eleatic Stranger at *Sophist* 248C, the suggestion raises the question of whether Forms as objects of knowledge affect the

knower, or are affected by the knower, or neither, or both (248D). I agree with those who think that knowers do not affect Forms, at least insofar as the Forms' own intelligible natures are concerned, and also with those who believe that Forms do somehow affect knowers. I suggest two ways the latter is so, one obvious and non-controversial, the other quite innocent-looking but highly controversial. To appreciate either of these, however, it is necessary to restore some basic aspects of Plato's own thought.

First, Forms affect potential knowers as objects of desire or aspiration. The role of *eros* in motivating and sustaining the search for expertise or knowledge is well-attested in the *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and elsewhere. This would be an important part of any answer to the Stranger's question. Although the matter is more complicated than first appears, we focus here on a second part of the answer.

A second way that Forms affect knowers depends again on a fundamental aspect of Plato's Platonism that the Stranger does not mention, the fact that the Good is the source of the intelligibility, being, and nature of the Forms (*to gignosesthai...kai to einai te kai ten ousian*, R. 509B). Among other things, this means that the Good determines which groupings of things correspond to Forms (Ox, Guardian, Number, Triangle, Greater, Different, Shuttle, et al.) and which do not (cosmetician, marketplace haggler, confectioner). This foundational role of the Good also explains why all Forms are separate from worldly participants—i.e., not just not spatially where they are (nor in any place else at all, *Timaeus* 52A-B), but entirely independent of them (e.g., *Symposium* 211A-B): intelligible, non-spatial Forms depend for their being on the eternal Good alone.

To elaborate a bit, the intelligible realm encompasses all the types or kinds—animal, vegetable, mineral, political, psychological, mathematical, relational, or artefactual—whose coordinated instantiation is essential to the optimal ordering of the realm of becoming, along with the natural subtypes thereof. By contrast, there are no Forms for things not directly or indirectly essential to that ordering. Note that by this criterion there are Forms even for such “lowly” or “undignified” types of things as hair, dirt, or clay (*πηλός*), for which the young, not-yet-philosophically mature, Socrates of the *Parmenides* denies separate Forms (such things “are just what we see”, 130C-D). To his credit, however, he then wonders aloud whether there might not be such Forms after all. Plato indicates elsewhere the nature and positive value of these “lowly” sorts of thing (hair, *Timaeus* 64c; clay, *Theaetetus* 147a).

## Implications for the Sophist

The Eleatic Stranger sometimes appears quite unconcerned with any limitations, good-based or otherwise, on the population of Forms. But he himself expressly, if discreetly, adopts a more familiar Platonic view both in the *Sophist* itself and in its sequel, the *Statesman*. In the latter he emphasizes that division according to kinds must distinguish *gene* or *eide* from mere parts (*mere*, see esp. 262A, 263A). Socrates had put the point more colorfully in the *Phaedrus*: the dialectician's divisions of reality must not “hack off parts like a careless butcher” but rather “carve at the natural joints” (265E). And in the *Sophist* itself the Stranger suggests a robust Platonic outlook when he refers to the divine creator (*demiourgos*) of natural kinds such as plants, animals, and inanimate bodies formed in the earth, whether fusible or non-fusible (265C), and again when he maintains that “we ourselves, the other creatures, and the constituents of things—fire, water, and their kin—are produced by god” (266B). These passages not only harmonize well with the *Phaedrus*, but bring the *Sophist* squarely in line with the *Timaeus*, where the Demiurge creates animals of all the kinds found in his eternal *paradeigma*, along with fusible and non-fusible so-called “elements”. At the same time, the Stranger is clear that such types as “marketplace haggler” and “number other than 10,000” do not enjoy the status of natural groupings. As he would put it in the *Statesman*, they are mere parts (*mere*), not genuine *genē* or *eidē*.

Pluralities or types of things that do not as such correspond to Forms do of course exist and bear common labels, and are in some cases highly valued by humans —e.g., the *Gorgias*'s cosmetician, whose alleged art and its products only appear to be valuable. Human beings have the general capacity, sketched in largely mathematical form in the *Timaeus*' account of the soul, to formulate all sorts of concepts and to devise all sorts of gadgets, good, bad and ugly.

If many of these sorts of thing do not as such correspond to Forms, it remains true also that all worldly things, including cosmetic powders and pink flamingo lawn ornaments, do nonetheless participate in *some* Forms, if only under such descriptions as *water*, *earth*, *three*, or *different*. In short, the basic metaphysical framework set forth in the *Republic*—a select, exclusionary population of separate, eternal, Good-dependent Forms that *are* the intelligible natures possessed, embodied, or enacted by non-Form particulars—is still very much with us in the *Sophist*, even if it is invoked only in passing by the Stranger, and is largely set aside for his purposes.

## How Participation in Forms Makes Participants What They Are

On this basis one can also see what participation of worldly things in Forms amounts to. In short, all natural kinds of living things and their vital parts (ox, heart, lung, vine, root, leaf), along with any sort of expertise or mastery (*technē*, *epistēmē*) needed for the survival and flourishing of living things, are not “just what we see”, but sorts of things possessing some specific *objective value*, sorts of things well-suited to fulfill some role necessary for the optimal ordering of becoming. The key point is that possession of one or another objective, eternally determined sort of value is part of what it is to be a participant in a natural kind or a genuine *technē*. There is no across-the-board fact/value distinction in Plato, because genuine values are facts; indeed, they are essential facts about participants in Forms. Thus, supposing that Ox is one of the animal types found in the Demiurge’s *paradeigma*, being a flesh-and-blood ox is not a value-neutral matter of having a size, shape and musculature sufficient for drawing a plow, nor is it a matter of that plus the fact that the ox is well-suited for doing things humans need done in order to survive. Beyond that, it is an animal capable of performing a type of function that is, eternally and objectively speaking, essential to an optimal sublunar realm.<sup>1</sup>

If there is an objectively determined optimal design for a cosmos, city, or soul, independent both of human opinion and of whatever may currently happen to be the case among sensibles, then it follows that Forms, as the intelligible kinds directly or indirectly essentially involved in that design, are *aitiai* of participants being what they are. They constitute a value-laden Formal cause, or a value-bestowing *aitia*. If one is tempted to speak of Forms as “formal causes” as counterparts to one of Aristotle’s celebrated four causes, scare quotes are necessary because separate Forms are not and cannot be Aristotelian formal causes, since the latter are of necessity immanent in things—like the sphericity in a particular bronze sphere. If this bronze sphere’s sphericity were not present in it, the bronze would not be spherical. To separate that sphericity in thought is one thing, but to separate it metaphysically and still claim that it is what “makes” the bronze sphere spherical would be, in Aristotle’s view, patent nonsense. And if one were to

1 Note that participation is not, as is commonly thought, a matter of approximately duplicating a non-spatial Form (a clear impossibility), or of being exactly like the Form in one respect but not others, nor is it something to be asserted but whose explanation remains a mystery. Also, for those worried — needlessly if understandably — about how the metaphor of “imaging” supports the picture of participation given here, see the extensive discussion in Patterson 1985 or the very short treatment in Patterson 2022.

take Plato's *eidē* to be just Aristotelian universals (inherent common natures shared by any and all groups of similar items) Aristotle would be quite right about that. But rather than trying to read Aristotle back into Plato, one would do better to see Aristotle's immanent formal causes as an attempt to preserve one sort of aetiological function Plato claimed for his Forms while avoiding what he, Aristotle, honestly but mistakenly took to be the disastrous consequences of Plato's making his Forms separate substances (*ousiai*).

To address a further matter that may be troubling some readers, it is trivially true that a sensible could not embody some genuine or objective value if there were not such a value to be embodied, and another truism that possessing a given value is what makes a particular thing valuable. Socrates says in the *Phaedo* that participation in Forms is a "simple but safe" *aitia* of sensibles being what they are (101B). But has safety been bought at the cost of triviality? Certainly not. The Platonic position is coherent and "safe" only given the non-trivial and much-contested assumption of the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, *et al.*, that there is an eternal, objective, rational basis of value articulable in the structure of a good soul, city, or cosmos—a basis that would abide eternally and immutably even if nothing in the world embodied it or even conceived of it. This contention Plato had to fight for tooth and nail against the relativists (e.g., Protagoras as represented in the *Theaetetus*), the self-styled "naturalists" of the *Philebus* who neglect the most important facts about what they consider "nature" (59A), the allegedly wise scientific types of *Laws* X (888E), the atomists (whom Plato never deigns to mention by name), and other assorted "wise guys". Establishing that basic truth and working out in some degree of detail how it applies to the good design of cosmos, city, or soul, is a fundamental challenge for the full-blooded Platonist.

### *Return to Knower and Known*

One can now readily see how the general notion of a Platonic Formal cause applies to our initial question about knower and known. In a nutshell, the weaver, doctor, housebuilder, statesman, guardian/auxiliary *et al.*, possess types of power or capacity whose proper exercise is essential for bringing rational order into the realm of becoming. I believe it is fair to say that genuine *technē*, divine or human, is the medium by which rational order enters into the created world. Possession of some specific sort of *genuinely valuable* expertise is what *makes* someone a doctor, statesman, or weaver: the positive value of the expertise is part of its very being. In this respect, the

types of genuine *technē* are just special cases of Platonic Formal causality as described above with regard to natural kinds.

Admittedly, without platonic Forms people could still heal disease, prune grape vines, or weave cloaks, still be labeled ‘doctor’, ‘vintner’ or ‘weaver’, still embody immanent universals, and still be thought valuable by humans. But none of that would yet imply that it is objectively and eternally a good thing that humans exist at all, or that they should enjoy what we call “health”, or that there should be houses or clothing or agriculture in the sublunar realm. Perhaps humans are simply creatures that have emerged, along with our cosmos as a whole, through the chance collocation of atoms in the void, or the blind interactions of primal elements such as fire and air. Perhaps all artefacts and all types of human *technē* are just things these chance creatures have devised for their own survival or pleasure, so that ultimately there is no objective basis for considering the abilities of doctors more valuable than those of hairdressers or pastry cooks, or philosophy any better than sophistry (if one could even distinguish between them), much less for considering Socrates truly the best, wisest and most just person of his time (*Phaedo* 118A). These things would not be possessors of a value determined objectively and eternally by the nature of goodness, as opposed to characteristics or skills that are useful to and valued by certain creatures (human beings) that have emerged from primeval disorder through processes unguided by eternal principles of rationality or goodness.

### *Why Sophistry Is Not a Technē*

Each of the *Sophist*’s series of divisions starts from the general assumption that sophistry is some sort of *technē*. But if sophistry is in Plato’s view a genuine *technē*, the discussion above implies that there should be a Form of Sophistry and that sophistry is essential to the right ordering of the realm of becoming. If one (rightly) rejects that conclusion, then sophistry is not a genuine Platonic *technē*, despite what the divisions of the *Sophist* assume. In everyday usage the term ‘sophist’/‘sophistes’ would by definition be someone who is master of some skill or craft (*technē*), or wise in some way.<sup>2</sup> Thus the pastry chef, hairdresser, and the popular sophist, along with the doctor, architect, and Philosopher-King, would each be a *technites* and a

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2 For a deep dive into these waters, see Parry 2020 on the concepts of *technē* and *epistēmē* in a range of ancient philosophical authors, and Parry 1996 on Platonic Justice as a *technē*.

*sophistes*. Plato is of course willing in appropriate contexts to have a literary protagonist use ‘*technē*’ and ‘*sophistes*’ in such a broad sense. But as argued above, he himself holds to a normative, hence exclusionary conception of *technē*. This is abundantly clear in the *Gorgias*. Socrates and Gorgias, like Theaetetus and the Eleatic Stranger, define sophistry through a series of divisions, assuming from the start that it is a *technē*. But in the immediately following exchange with Polus, Socrates flatly and provocatively denies that either sophistry or rhetoric is a *technē*, in part because these do not by nature aim at any genuine good. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates implicitly reaffirms that position: without knowledge of truth, one has not a *technē*, but a routine devoid of art (ἄτεχνος τριβή, 260E). But he then takes a more conciliatory approach, granting that rhetoricians do have skills, including mastery of certain forms of argument and means of manipulating emotions. They even teach, lecture on, and write treatises about these skills. But he goes on to say that these skills are only the preliminaries (τὰ πρὸ 269A) of an art of “speaking well”, listing several necessary features that popular rhetoric lacks, and concluding with the normative requirement that a speaker effect persuasion in a manner “pleasing to the Gods”.

So it is difficult to believe that Plato has by the time of the *Sophist* abandoned the distinction between a broad, popular use of *technē* and a distinctively Platonic normative conception—especially since he there introduces, among a series of profit-seeking versions of sophistry, one definition that stands out for its obvious and distinctively Platonic brand of normativity, the “Sophist of noble lineage”, who winnows out falsehoods in a manner highly reminiscent of Socrates.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the conscientious (or even merely conscious) reader of Plato will notice the “red flag” planted at the very moment the general assumption of sophistry as a *technē* is introduced and endorsed. When the Stranger asks whether the *sophistes* possesses a *technē*, Theaetetus gives the ingenuously question-begging reply, “Of course he does: he’s a *sophistes* after all!” It is on this unshakable foundation that the divisions proceed.

### *The technitai Must Do Their Part*

It is a further question as to how someone *comes to be* and *continues to be* a participant in a genuine *technē* and more specifically in a Form of Wisdom.

3 <sup>3</sup> For an original, philosophically probing investigation of the role of the Good in Platonic dialectic and the development of the philosopher-ruler, see Broadie 2022.

Let it suffice to say here that in Plato's view this involves an appropriate inborn character or aptitude which must then undergo lengthy and arduous development through practice, reflection, and "real world" experience, all under expert guidance and supervision. With appropriate variations these are in general the means by which any genuine *technē* is acquired. If someone has become a good builder of houses, maker of shoes, warrior, ruler, etc., and if in addition the mastery thus acquired through blood, sweat and tears is of a type that has a place in the eternal, objectively determined good ordering of some aspect of our world of becoming, then that person is a participant in the corresponding intelligible Form. There is nothing particularly mysterious about this, and nothing more is needed. That is, however, a great deal to ask, especially in the supremely important case of becoming a philosophical ruler.

### Conclusion

As good Platonists seeking *sophia*, then, let this be our mnemonic and our mantra: aspiration, perspiration, personification of the eternal Form.