



Plato and a friend discuss philosophy

1. The Two Worlds Theory: preliminary remarks

The 'Two Worlds Theory' constitutes a specific interpretation of Plato's conclusion of Book V of the *Republic*, and the question of whether it is a correct reading or the only reading of this inquiry remains open. The Theory argues that being and becoming are separated from one another to such an extent that they constitute two absolutely *distinct* realms, which seems to contradict the assumption that the

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things that become bear a likeness to what is, i.e. the Forms. The potential validity of this claim bears significant consequences pertaining to the nature of being and not being, as well as that of the many sensible particulars that bear resemblance to the higher Forms that *are* and in which these particulars participate. This alleged division of being and becoming as constituting two distinct realms connotes that these two phenomena are *entirely* really and conceptually distinct, and this connotation must be carefully explored in order to illuminate its implications should the theory prove to be the case.

This interpretation is so common that, with few exceptions, it has become a synonym for "Platonism," but it is usually considered unsatisfactory because few any longer believe in it and therefore, if Platonism is taken as being such, do not believe in Plato's relevance. Moreover—in spite of efforts of decades before and after David Ross' *Plato's Theory of ideas*—no consistent interpretation of the Two Worlds Theory through different dialogues has been proposed, even if some allowance is made for Plato's "evolution", or for discarding all dialogues that disturb any such interpretation.

For this exploration, I propose a close reading of the text, which though many would consider a naïve reading, is not altogether inappropriate in the interpretation of a book that defends several times the need for a clean slate. Moreover, if our initial assumption is that Plato grasps an important truth or at least that there is a possibility of this being the case, such a reading would have merit. Let us proceed with this criterion, then.

2. The Formulation: conclusion of Book V of the *Republic* and further notes on the Two Worlds Theory

At the end of Book V of the *Republic* (473–480a) Plato's Socrates explores the possibility of a capacity (or power) lying in between knowledge and ignorance, and of an object pertaining to this capacity and lying in between the respective objects of knowledge and ignorance, these objects being "what purely is and what in no way is", respectively (477a6-8). It is on the basis of "what it deals with and what it does", Socrates argues, that one

distinguishes each capacity; Socrates suggests that "...those [the powers or capacities] assigned to deal with the same things and do the same... call the same; those that deal with different things and do different things... call different" (477c9-d5).

Socrates argues that knowledge is a power, the most effective one, and then inquires into the nature of true opinion or belief. He includes belief as a capacity, namely the capacity that enables one to believe (477c6-d5). Given their shared nature as capacities, they must be set over a particular object. Knowledge is set over what purely is (478a6-7). Moreover, if belief is the capacity to believe, the question arises of whether belief believes the same thing that knowledge knows, i. e. whether the respective objects of belief and knowledge are the same (478a8-9). If they are to be called different capacities, however, then they must by nature be set over different things; it therefore follows that the object of knowledge and that of belief is by no means the same object (478a10-b2). On that same note, Socrates continues, if knowledge is set over *what is*, then belief must be set over something else (478b3-5). He argues, however, that it is impossible for belief to be set over what is not, on the grounds that a believer believes in *something* and that it is impossible to believe in *no* thing (478b10-11). Therefore, since what is not is the object of ignorance, and what is is the object of knowledge, then "belief neither believes what is nor what is not" (478c6-7) — i. e. as a capacity it is concerned with neither. From this it follows that belief is neither ignorance nor knowledge, but—that said—it surely is not the case that belief lies *beyond* these two: rather, it "lies within the boundaries determined by them", being "more opaque than knowledge but clearer than ignorance" (478c8-d). This therefore establishes that belief lies between the two capacities of knowledge and ignorance.

Having successfully inquired into the nature of opinion or belief, the in-between capacity, Socrates proceeds to explore the possibility of the in-between object corresponding to such a capacity. He argues that such an object "would lie in between what purely is and what in every way is not" (478d5-9), the respective objects of knowledge and ignorance.

Neither knowledge nor ignorance would deal with such an object, but, rather, whatever turned out to lie in between these two capacities would; but that in-between capacity has

already been called belief (478d11-12). Such an object, then —that participates in both being and not being "and cannot correctly be called purely one or the other"—would be the appropriate object of belief, the in-between capacity, "thereby assigning extremes to extremes and in-betweens to in-betweens" (478e1-4).

Having laid the possibility of the in-between object out, the text proceeds to address the "fellow who believes there is no beautiful itself... but who does believe that there are many beautiful things" (476a1-2). In other words, the person who believes in the many particulars—that participate in both being and not being—but who does not believe in the Forms themselves that *are* (478e6-8, 479a). He inquires whether it is inevitable that the many just, beautiful, pious, and other such things will "be any more what we say they are than they will be the opposite" (479a5-7, b6-7). Socrates concludes from this that each of the many sensible particulars is no more "what one says it is than it is not what one says it is" (479b10). These particulars must necessarily be placed, therefore, between being and not being, as "one cannot understand them as fixedly being or fixedly not being, or as both, or as neither" (479c). Socrates reiterates that "if anything turned out to be of that sort, it would... be an object of belief, not an object of knowledge—a wandering, in-between object grasped by the in-between power" (479d7-9).

This constitutes the 'knowledge/belief' argument in the conclusion of Book V of the *Republic* and the material on which the Two Worlds Theory is allegedly based and of which it is an allegedly correct interpretation. The Two Worlds Theory claims that there are two distinct realms, the first being the world of being and occupied by the Forms; the second being the world of becoming and occupied by the many particulars. The adequacy of the relationship between the conclusion of Book V and the Two Worlds Theory must be explored.

One recalls the phrase "we agree that belief is different from knowledge" (476d), though it is suggested to bear a likeness to knowledge in that belief believes in *something* and not in *no* thing, in something that in some way bears some existence. The Two Worlds Theory, however, presents an interpretation of the text in such a way that the demarcation between being (the object of knowledge) and the many particulars (the object of belief) is definitive,

i.e. that the two constitute *entirely* distinct realms and thus that the difference between these two is absolute. Since a capacity is determined by its object moreover a complete demarcation between being and becoming would entail a same demarcation between knowledge and belief. This controversial claim, implied by the theory, must be explored, as a close and faithful reading of the text's own formulation will prove to contradict such a suggestion.

3. The in between and the particulars, introduction of the Blend and Gradation Theory

If the object of belief participates in what is (i.e., in the object of knowledge) and appears to be a lesser version of it, insofar as it participates *in* it but is *not it* (i.e., is something *different from* it but bears, through its participation in it, a likeness to it), then it appears to be not only in between what is and what is not, but the nature of its being 'in between' them suggests that this object is something in the order of a *blend*, as it were, of being and not being, a blend of 'what purely is' and of 'what in no way is' together in what—in appearance, at least—is one thing, i. e. one particular. In other words, if the object of belief is held to participate in both what is and in what is not, it must necessarily be composed of both being and not being in a blended sort of state, and since the degree to which it is closer to one or the other would seem impossible to determine, the Blend hypothesis is satisfactory as an articulation of the nature of the in-between object.

Bearing a likeness, though deficiently so, to what is but falling short inasmuch as it is not what is necessarily suggests that it - i. e. the particulars as object - also bears a likeness, in some respect, to what is not. For, as its seemingly blended nature already implies, if a particular is like the Form that is - and therefore like being - but deficient in that likeness, then it must also bear a likeness to something other than what is, namely, to *no* thing, to what is not - notwithstanding to what extent. Moreover, there being a definitive relationship between the object and the capacity that deals with it, the inference of particulars as blends of being and not being must necessarily extrapolate to the nature of belief. Therefore belief -

like the particulars (its object) that are in between what is and what is not, the objects of knowledge and ignorance, respectively - occupies a space in between the capacities corresponding to these objects, knowledge and ignorance. Belief would therefore seem to be a blend of knowledge and ignorance: the object being a blend of the objects, the capacity of the capacities.

4. Man as a particular and the possibility of attempting knowledge under the Blend and Gradation Theory. Impossibility under the Two Worlds Theory

Moreover, the seeming nature of particulars as blends of being and not being has serious implications for man and is in fact interrelated to man's relationship to the particulars. Any attempt he makes to come to know the Forms that really are is only possible through his experience with the particulars. Man conceives of the Forms through inferences from the particulars that point *beyond* them, and due to the illuminating fact that man bears similarities to the particulars and is subject to some of the same reality insofar as he too, at least temporally, exists in the physical perceptible world, i. e. the world of the sensible particulars. Sharing in the nature of the particulars in this way, man therefore both is and is not as well. Like the particulars, he is but not fully, and participates in both being and not being. Moreover, the natural conclusion of this is that this shared participation does not simply establish a relationship between man and the particulars; it makes man *himself* a particular. .

Man, therefore, belongs to the world of the sensible particulars. This is why, following Socrates' confession of not having knowledge of the Forms (506c) - and therefore having only *beliefs* of these - human beings are not able to have full knowledge of the things that are. This is to the extent that human beings, as one of the particulars, both are and are not, participating in both, and thus are subject to the same blended nature of being and not being. Restrained by this blended nature, and only partially being, it follows that man could not have full access to what is, the object of knowledge. Not having full access to its object, therefore, man cannot have full access to knowledge either.

Given this shared constraint with the sensible particulars, man also belongs - the extent notwithstanding - to the realm of becoming, an entirely distinct realm (separated from that of being by an unbridgeable chasm) according to the Two Worlds Theory. It follows from this that the scope of human access to knowledge must necessarily be restrained. This restraint does not, however, imply an impossibility, insofar as man, as a particular, does participate in being to a certain extent. This mix of restraint and possibility of the scope of human access to knowledge seems to suggest an *intermingling*, a *blend*, a *gradation* from *being* to *becoming* to *not being*. Otherwise, human beings would not be able to think or conceive of *what is* at all (i.e. there would be *no* knowledge/there could not exist even an attempt at knowledge), which is what the Two Worlds Theory implies. This impossibility of even an attempt at knowledge would be in place if there were not a *gradation* being manifested, a blend of being and not being—since the nature of *what is* and what is *in between* what is and what is not would be *entirely* distinct, i. e. comprising two different realms in an absolute sense.

This would entail that the objects of becoming bear no likeness to what is, and this in turn would entail their not participating in being at all—which would seem to be contradicted by Socrates' formulations in the text itself. Moreover, this alleged total separation of natures would not seem to be the case simply from the fact that the particulars are defined as lying *in between* what is and what is not, and as bearing a likeness—notwithstanding deficiently so—to what *is*. And if the particulars participate in what is, and from there bear a likeness to it, they must necessarily participate in none other than the same *nature* as that of what truly is. This said, however, through our alternative, "non-chasmic" reading of gradation and blend in the relationship between being and becoming, man still encounters a restraint at full knowledge (for the reasons highlighted above). That said, the Blend and Gradation reading nonetheless dodges the impossibility entailed by the Two Worlds Theory's total separation of what is and what both is and is not.

5. Recapitulation, the inadequacy of the Two Worlds

It will be helpful in our discussion to recapitulate and further articulate what we

have presented so far.

Sharing in the nature of what is, the particulars cannot be entirely distinct, and thus entirely separated, from the Forms (that *are*) and vice versa, and the Two Worlds Theory as a potential reading of the conclusion of Book V must be false. At the least, it is significantly unequipped to interpret the material presented in the conclusion of Book V of the *Republic* as a whole. Such a claim, rather, does seem to pertain to the nature of being and not being as constituting two different, *entirely distinct* realms. As mentioned, however, regarding the nature of the object of knowledge and the object of belief—i.e. what is and what is between being and not being, respectively—such a theory, attempting to establish a sharp and complete distinction between these two objects and thus conceptually imposing an erroneous chasm or void where in reality there appears to be a *gradation of being* must miss the mark. Again, in the face of this depth of exploration, such a claim as the one the Two Worlds Theory suggests would seem, rather, to pertain to the nature of being and not being, insofar as these two *are* absolutely distinct. Pertaining to the relationship between what is and what is in between being and not being, however, it seems very significantly inadequate.

6. Acknowledgement of limits of both models, conclusions: limits to the Blend and Gradation Theory due to the nature of *being*

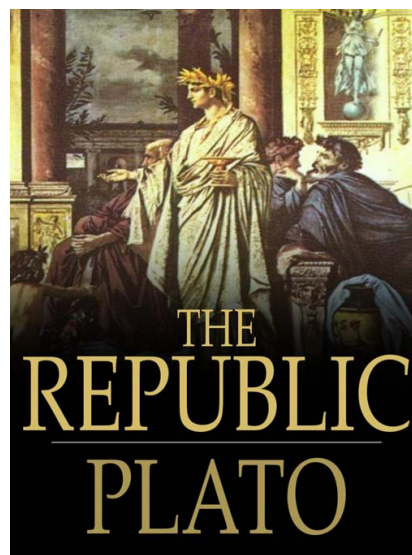
Having put this view forth, we nonetheless ought to highlight the benefits and limitations of the proposed Blend and Gradation Theory. Opposing the Two Worlds Theory, the Blend and Gradation Theory argues that, as the text itself suggests, the fact that the particulars (that become) participate in both what is and what is not necessarily entails that they are a mix or blend of being and not being. We can also witness a gradation in the sense that something may be closer or further from what is. In another sense, if the particulars are a blend of what is and of what is not and are not completely isolated from either of these, this would seem to entail some sort of gradient from *what is* all the way to *what is not*. But this also seems to present a serious problem, in that what is and what is not are *de facto* completely distinct. Therefore, if the things that become are blends of being and not being by participating in both—but being and not being *are* completely distinct—at what point does

this absolute demarcation take place? In other words, following our logic of particulars as blends, and of being and not being as completely different things, at what point do the particulars fully lose their participation in being and thus cease to be? This constitutes a profound conceptual and metaphysical problem.

This essay has primarily been dedicated to exposing the shortcomings of the Two Worlds Theory. However, we have also just outlined how our proposed Blend and Gradation Theory also faces serious limitations. The Two Worlds Theory makes even an attempt at knowledge an impossibility, since according to the theory, being (the object of knowledge) is completely separated from becoming, the realm of the particulars and therefore of man. If, under this model, man as a particular is completely estranged from what is, he necessarily cannot attempt to come to any sort of understanding of it, as this would entail some sort of contact or relationship with the nature of what is. This stands before us as a serious obstacle. Extrapolating a sentiment expressed in the *Meno*, holding this impossibility to be the case would entail surrendering prematurely as there would be no incentive at all to attempt knowledge. On the other hand, the Blend and Gradation Theory, while it allows for the possibility of attempting knowledge, nonetheless presents the problem that, if becoming is to participate in being but also in not being, and if the gradient previously outlined is at work, at what point does the complete estrangement between being and not being take place? In other words: at what point does becoming lose all its participation in being, all its limited being, and thus cease to be? At what point does becoming become not being, if this is in any way possible? The Blend and Gradation Theory leaves the loose end that, if there is a participation in being and not being on the part of becoming, and a gradation from one to the other, the absolute distinction between being and not being seems to be in conflict with the participation of becoming in both of these and the gradation this would seem to allow for.

This in mind, it becomes clear that both theories are deficient in some way. It is not unwise to conclude that this is simply due to the nature of what the two theories are trying to account for. It is not clear whether it is possible to understand the true relationship between

being, becoming, and not being; and therefore the relationship between knowledge, belief, and ignorance. The Two World's Theory, however, suggests to us the impossibility of even attempting this question, as, under it, man's nature as a particular dooms him to face a chasm between his realm and the nature of being. In this sense, the proposed, alternate Blend and Gradation Theory is significantly fitter to articulate the problem of the relationship between being, becoming, and not being. Under this model - one more faithful to the text itself - becoming participates in being and is not subject to a complete estrangement from it. Under the Blend and Gradation Theory, man is allowed to relish in his participation of what is, and through this likeness to attempt at least some form of understanding of being. Akin to the formulation presented in the conclusion of Book V of the *Republic*, the Blend and Gradation Theory allows us to escape the fate of the pitiful fellow "who believes there is no beautiful itself (...) but who does believe that there are many beautiful things." Precisely for the allowance of an attempt at knowledge and an access, albeit to a limited degree, to being, the Blend and Gradation Theory better captures the whole scope of the formulations presented in the conclusion of Book V of Plato's *Republic*. For those who take Plato to possibly offer a valuable theory of being, one that may actually touch on the reality of things, the alternate Blend and Gradation Theory allows the hopeful prospect of coming to a preliminary understanding of "what in every way is."



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