

The Dominance of "Coming to Be" in the Sensible Realm: Elaborating Theaetetus 157a-b

The Core Argument in Context

The passage from Theaetetus 157a-b represents a pivotal moment in Plato's exploration of the flux doctrine, where Socrates articulates a fundamental principle that "nothing exists as invariably one, itself by itself, but everything is always becoming in relation to something" ^[1] ^[2] ^[3]. This statement emerges within the broader context of examining whether knowledge can be equated with perception, and it reveals the profound ontological implications of accepting a Heraclitean view of reality ^[4] ^[5].

The Greek text at 157a contains the crucial phrase "οὐδέν εἶναι ἑν αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτό" (nothing exists as one, itself by itself), followed by the assertion that everything comes to be through relational interactions ^[6]. This linguistic formulation establishes a sharp contrast between two fundamental modes of existence: autonomous being versus relational becoming ^[7] ^[3].

The Polar Structure: Coming to Be versus Just by Itself

The Sensible Realm and the Dominance of Becoming

In the sensible realm, the "coming to be" pole dominates because all perceptible objects exist within networks of relationships that constantly alter their properties ^[1] ^[5]. The flux theory presented in the Theaetetus argues that sensible things possess no stable, intrinsic qualities but instead manifest different characteristics depending on their interactions with perceivers and other objects ^[4] ^[2].

This dominance manifests in several key ways:

Temporal Dependency: Sensible objects exist only within temporal processes of change, where their properties emerge and dissolve through ongoing interactions ^[5] ^[8]. The Heraclitean influence is evident here, as the doctrine maintains that "everything is movement" with different types of kinetic processes—fast and slow, active and passive—generating the apparent stability of perceptual experience ^[2] ^[3].

Relational Emergence: Properties like largeness and smallness, which were central to our previous discussion, exemplify how qualities emerge relationally rather than existing intrinsically ^[1] ^[7]. The dice puzzle demonstrates this principle: six dice become "large" or "small" not through any inherent property but through comparative relationships with different sets of objects ^[2].

Perceptual Relativism: The sensible realm operates according to Protagorean principles where appearances are true for each perceiver, but this truth depends entirely on the relational context

of perception ^[1] ^[7]. Nothing possesses properties "just by itself" that could ground objective knowledge claims ^[2].

The Intelligible Dimension and Self-Subsistent Being

The contrasting pole of "just by itself" represents what Plato elsewhere develops as the formal or intelligible dimension, though the Theaetetus does not explicitly invoke the Theory of Forms ^[9] ^[3]. This dimension would be characterized by entities that possess:

Self-Subsistent Nature: Objects in the intelligible realm would exist "just by themselves" (καθ' αὐτό), possessing stable properties independent of relational contexts ^[10] ^[11]. These entities would not require external relationships to ground their essential characteristics ^[12].

Temporal Independence: Unlike sensible objects caught in processes of becoming, intelligible entities would exist outside temporal flux, maintaining invariant characteristics ^[10] ^[13]. This represents the "being" pole of the being/becoming distinction that runs throughout Platonic metaphysics ^[11].

Objective Determinacy: The intelligible dimension would provide the stable foundation necessary for genuine knowledge, offering objects that maintain consistent properties regardless of perspectival differences ^[9] ^[11].

The Philosophical Implications

The Epistemological Consequences

The dominance of "coming to be" in the sensible realm creates profound epistemological problems ^[14] ^[2]. If all perceptible objects exist only through relational becoming, then sense perception cannot provide the stable foundation required for knowledge ^[3]. This generates what scholars call the "flux argument" against the equation of knowledge with perception ^[4] ^[15].

The argument proceeds through several stages:

1. **Linguistic Instability:** If everything is in constant flux, then our language becomes unstable because the objects it refers to are constantly changing ^[5] ^[2]. The very attempt to predicate properties of things becomes problematic when those properties exist only relationally ^[3].
2. **Cognitive Dissolution:** The flux doctrine threatens to dissolve the distinction between true and false beliefs, since the objects of belief are constantly altering ^[1] ^[2]. This leads to the broader problem of whether meaningful discourse about reality is possible under flux conditions ^[4].
3. **Perceptual Relativism:** The dominance of relational becoming supports Protagorean relativism, where each person's perceptions are true for them, but this prevents the establishment of objective knowledge claims ^[1] ^[7].

The Metaphysical Framework

The contrast between coming to be and being just by itself reflects a fundamental metaphysical distinction that pervades Platonic philosophy ^[10] ^[11]. This distinction operates across multiple dimensions:

Ontological Priority: The question becomes whether relational processes or self-subsistent entities have ontological priority ^[12] ^[8]. The Theaetetus explores what happens when relational becoming is given priority, revealing the philosophical costs of this position ^[5] ^[16].

Causal Structure: In a realm dominated by coming to be, causal relationships become circular, with active and passive elements constantly exchanging roles ^[3]. This contrasts with a formal dimension where stable causal principles could ground consistent explanations ^[15].

Explanatory Adequacy: The flux doctrine's emphasis on becoming challenges traditional notions of explanation, since explanations typically require stable entities that can serve as explanatory anchors ^[5] ^[15].

The Broader Philosophical Context

Connection to Later Dialogues

While the Theaetetus does not explicitly develop the Theory of Forms, the distinction between coming to be and being just by itself anticipates the metaphysical framework of later dialogues ^[9] ^[3]. The Republic's distinction between the world of becoming and the world of being directly corresponds to this polar structure ^[11].

The Timaeus provides another perspective on this relationship, presenting a cosmology where eternal Forms serve as models for a world of becoming ^[17] ^[13]. This suggests that Plato's solution to the problems raised in the Theaetetus involves positing a realm of stable, self-subsistent entities that can ground knowledge and explanation ^[10].

Contemporary Relevance

The issues raised by the dominance of coming to be in the sensible realm remain relevant to contemporary debates in metaphysics and epistemology ^[8]. Questions about whether properties exist intrinsically or only relationally, whether temporal processes or timeless entities have ontological priority, and whether objective knowledge is possible in a world of constant change continue to engage philosophers ^[12].

The flux doctrine's emphasis on process over substance also resonates with contemporary process philosophy, which similarly prioritizes becoming over being ^[8]. However, the epistemological problems that Plato identifies remain challenging for any philosophy that makes process fundamental ^[5].

Conclusion

The argument that "coming to be" dominates in the sensible realm while "just by itself" represents the formal or intelligible dimension reveals the deep structure of Platonic metaphysics [3] [11]. By showing that relational becoming cannot provide the stability required for knowledge, the Theaetetus prepares the ground for recognizing the need for a different kind of ontological foundation [2] [9].

This analysis demonstrates why Plato ultimately cannot rest content with a purely empirical approach to knowledge and why the philosophical journey leads toward the recognition of intelligible objects that exist "just by themselves" [10] [11]. The polar structure thus serves not merely as a descriptive framework but as a philosophical argument for the necessity of transcending the sensible realm in the search for genuine knowledge [14] [12].

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