CHAPTER ONE

PLATO’S DUALISM: THE COSMOS AS ACTIVE AND PASSIVE POWER

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Introduction

In this chapter, I propose a thoroughly dynamistic interpretation of Plato’s explanation of the sensible world. It can be briefly summarized as follows.

Plato (427–347 BC) developed, most notably in the *Timaeus*, a picture of the world which may be called *power dualism*. According to this kind of dualism, the basic constituents of reality are active and passive powers. For Plato, infinite divine reason (*nous*) represents a purely active power; this kind of power is wholly independent from but still able to affect things outside its realm. In virtue of this power, reason is a self-sufficient existent, capable of being entirely ‘in itself’ or ‘by itself’. It is this active rational power that makes the Platonic cosmos essentially teleological: the *telos* of reason is the absolutely beautiful order, perfect harmony. The Platonic forms can be understood as perfect realizations of this active power, and to the extent there is order in our sensible world it is due to this power.

In contrast to reason’s active power, Plato introduces the idea of irrational and passive powers—irrational in the sense of being devoid of all *telos* of their own, and passive in the sense of being subject to external influence. On their own, these powers produce merely chaotic disorder. Plato’s notion of space (*chôra*) should be understood as consisting of such irrational powers. Passive irrational powers form the material nature of the four kinds of simple bodies (air, fire, water, and earth) of which the bodily world is composed.

Plato’s important idea is that the generation of the orderly universe, the cosmos, is a result of a continual contest of the two kinds of powers, the active power of divine reason and the passive powers of the space. Through their combination, the cosmos receives its basic nature as a living being by which Plato understands a union of soul and body. By its
active power, the divine reason endeavours to reproduce in the cosmos, as completely as possible, the same pattern of perfect living being it has produced in the realm of ideal forms. The perfect living being may be understood as a complex formal structure involving the structures of all different kinds of living beings conceivable by the infinite power of the divine reason. The actual cosmos should then be considered as the best possible ‘imitation’ of the perfect living being; it comprehends the actual realizations of all the different kinds of ideal living beings. Accordingly, both the soul and the body of each actual living being have a formal structure similar to their ideal models.

The body of an actual living being is compounded of simple bodies in accordance with rational teleological principles; the power of reason gives them a certain formal structure and strives to maintain it against the irrational powers inherent in their basic constituents, simple bodies. However, due to these irrational powers, bodies are by nature incapable of any purposive behaviour; therefore living beings are equipped with souls. To follow Plato’s general idea, also the souls of actual living beings should be thought of as combinations of reason and necessity, that is, of active power of reason and receptive irrational powers. In virtue of the former, each individual soul is self-subsisting, self-moving, and self-controlling, and in virtue of the latter, each soul is capable of interacting with the material world. This seems to be Plato’s account of the possibility of mind-body interaction.

Being as power

In Plato’s Sophist, the Eleatic Stranger (Plato’s spokesman) proposes tentatively the following distinctive feature for being, for what truly is:

I suggest that everything which has power [dunamin] of any kind, either to affect anything else or to be affected even in the least degree by a slightest thing, and even if it only happens once, truly is [ontós einai]. For I set up nothing else than power as the mark of things that are [ta onta].1

The proposal claims that being amounts to having power to act on something (to poiein) or, equally well, to be acted upon by something (to pathein). It is meant as a general answer to the question about the

1 Sophist 247d–e.