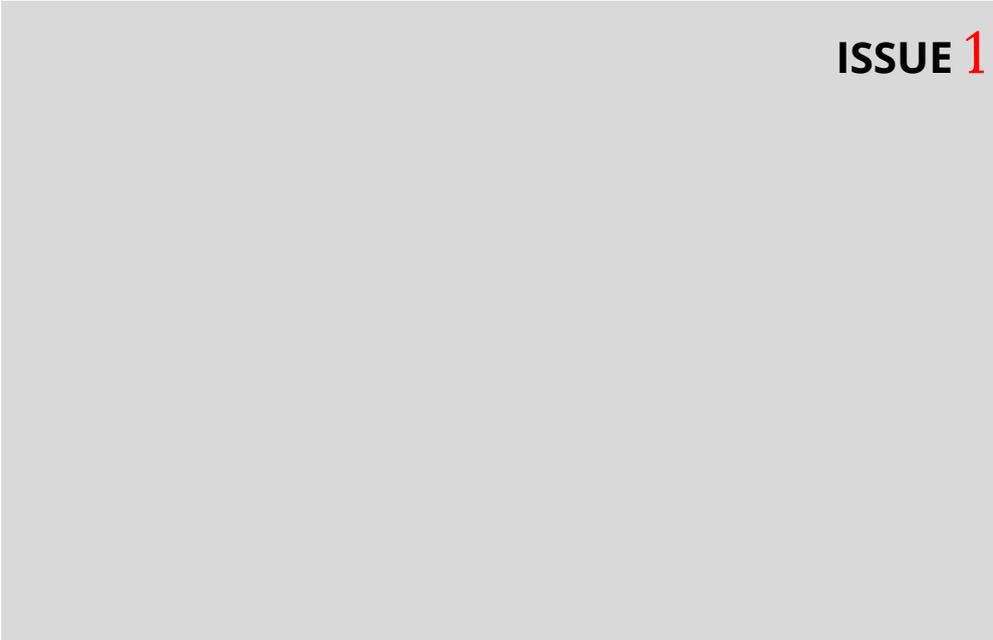
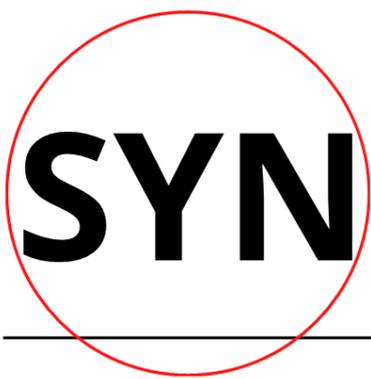




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Non-Existence: Error and Fiction

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Before Any Possible Error: A Platonic Argument in Realism

Abstract: Metaphysical Realism is commonly understood as the view that reality is independent of what one thinks or believes about it. To better understand the notion of independence deployed by metaphysical realists, I consider two very influential critiques from Putnam and Dummett. Thereafter, I show that Plato's view on reality and the mind does not share the assumptions that are considered to be unacceptable by Putnam and Dummett. Thus, I go on to analyse a passage from the *Cratylus* that clearly shows (i) that Plato puts forward a view that we would uncontroversially consider as realist; and (ii) that in this view, the concept of error plays a pivotal role. Finally, I provide the outline of an alternative view on metaphysical realism, inspired by Plato's line of thought, in terms of reality enjoying a priority over representation/belief.

Keywords: *Error, Realism, Plato, Natural Kinds*

1. Introduction: Metaphysical Realism

Metaphysical realism is a polysemic notion that lends itself to a variety of philosophical debates. It can be related to particular sets of objects. For instance, one can be a realist about numbers, classes, first-person conscious experience, and so on. This means that the realist believes that the words “number” and “class”, for example, refer to existing entities. By contrast, the antirealist claims that what we say when we refer to these entities can be fully accounted for without being committed to their existence.¹ The traditionally most famous representative of this position is nominalism with regard to universals or properties, namely the view that only particular objects exist and that speaking of their properties does not require us to include a genuinely existing entity for each of their features we talk about. Commonly, existence is joined with mind-independence by the realist. For instance, one is a realist about numbers,

¹ Cf. Dummett (1978: 358-61), who maintains that antirealism of this sort can best be understood semantically. In other words, statements regarding the class of entities whose existence is disputed are true in virtue of the truth of statements regarding a more fundamental class of entities that the former entities should be reduced to.

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if one thinks that numbers exist independently of whether any cognitive subject knows about, thinks of and speaks of them.

It is precisely the junction of existence and mind-independence that can be generalised so as to provide a general account of metaphysical realism.² In quite intuitive terms, it could be phrased as follows:

The simplest way to put the idea that lies behind our concern with knowledge is that the world around us that we claim to know about exists and is the way it is quite independently of its being known or believed by us to be that way. It is an objective world. [...] In many cases what we believe or think we know about the world does not require anyone's knowing or believing anything in order for it to be true. (Stroud 1984: 77)

A general definition of realism can be found in the *SEP*:

a, b, and c and so on exist, and the fact that they exist and have properties such as F-ness, G-ness, and H-ness is [...] independent of anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on³

The notion of independence can be pushed further so that it constitutes the background assumption that makes any theory whatsoever intelligible. This is, roughly put, Searle's position: «*Realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations. Realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are*» (Searle 1997: 20, emphasis in original).

As often happens in philosophy, the best way to understand and assess a theory is by considering its rival views. In this paper I will consider the most influential critiques put forward by analytic philosophers, namely Michael Dummett and Hilary Putnam. Of course, the complexity and the variety of their views cannot be surveyed here. However, they very generally characterise metaphysical realism as is represented by the definition above. This characterisation is then considered unacceptable by them for different reasons, which prompts them to offer alternative views. My objective in this paper is to show that Plato does not subscribe to the characterisation of realism targeted by Dummett and

² Cf. Devitt (1996: 13-25).

³ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism/#ViewOppoIndeDimeISemaReal>

Putnam, without endorsing any form of conceptual relativism or antirealism. This should be taken to mean that one can find a more essential conception of realism that can only appear by comparing modern criticism and ancient conceptions. In this way it is possible to delineate, as it were, a Platonic core of metaphysical realism that remains unaffected by the two aforementioned challenges.

Challenge to mind-independence. This is formulated by Putnam. He critiques the view that reality is independent of the mind, which ultimately amounts to saying that reality is a totality of objects and properties that are only waiting for some cognitive subject to label them.⁴ The basic argument is that if one is to pick only one correspondence between words and mind-independent things, one should also have referential access to mind-independent things.⁵ In other words, metaphysical realism is the view that every truth is independent of what humans do or can do, that any meaningful statement is determinately true or false and that there is only one correct description of the world.⁶ Denying this view does not mean denying that there are objectively true or false propositions. Putnam's point is that there could not be true and false propositions before applying a specific language, conceptual scheme or, more generally, way of speaking. There is no brute fact before a subject applies a conceptual scheme, i.e. she uses the terms of a given language according to certain rules.⁷

Putnam's ingenious arguments are very complex. However, what should be focused on here is that metaphysical realism is considered to be untenable insofar as it claims that reality is a totality of given objects that are only waiting to be discovered and to instruct the speakers about which words to use and how to use them. The problematic aspect of this conception of metaphysical realism is that one can never escape one's own thought and language so as to grasp the way reality is supposed to inform the speaker about what words she should use independently of the language she is employing at that moment. The inner tension within metaphysical realism thus conceived is that reality dictates essential

⁴ Putnam (1992: 27); Putnam (1994a: 449).

⁵ Putnam (1981: 73).

⁶ Putnam (1991: 107). See also Putnam (1992: 30-1).

⁷ Putnam (1991: 114-5). See also Putnam (1994b: 295-314).

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facts to the mind and at the same time what accounts for this is that reality is absolutely mind-independent. Putnam's worry is ultimately that he cannot see how an absolutely independent reality can determine the terms of the language that we use to speak of it because any matter of existence and truth only makes sense within that language. According to this challenge, what is real needs to be somehow related to some mental activity. Consequently, this challenge makes explicit, by criticising it, what notion of mind-independence is at stake when we talk about metaphysical realism. As I will show in the next section, Putnam's opposition between metaphysical realism qua "totality of objects" view and mind-relatedness⁸ does not hold in the case of Plato. According to Plato, reality consists of a totality of objectively existing entities, but at the same time these entities are naturally related to the mind.

Challenge to recognition-transcendence. This challenge is formulated by Dummett. He claims that realism is the view that all meaningful contingent statements are true or false regardless of any cognitive subject being able to recognise whether they are true or false. This is usually expressed through the opposition between recognition-transcendence and recognition-immanence. Dummett's line of thought is particularly difficult and relies on a variety of arguments. I will focus here on the general outcome of his view.⁹ According to Dummett the fundamental aspect of metaphysical realism is that what is real is independent of our knowledge of it, which translates into reality making each statement true or false independently of whether we know it or are able to discover it, i.e. bivalence. Dummett thinks metaphysical realism is mistaken because it inconsistently relies on a truth-conditional theory of meaning while maintaining that propositional truth-values are recognition-transcendent. In a nutshell, this theory is that the meaning of a sentence coincides with knowing under what conditions that statement would be true. Dummett view is that such truth-conditions can only make sense if a cognitive subject is actually able to rationally assert whether they obtain or not. By contrast, if there is no evidence for thinking that a given statement is true or false, then that statement lacks a truth-

⁸ I choose this term in accordance with Putnam's own regret in speaking of "dependence", cf. Putnam (1994a: 448 n. 8).

⁹ See Dummett (1978: 358-74) and Dummett (1996: 230-76).

value. This view deserves the name of antirealism because if a statement lacks a truth-value, this ultimately comes down to reality itself being indeterminate. This also implies that if evidence changes, reality itself changes: what is real is essentially related to the epistemic means of a given subject at a given time.

This challenge reveals much about the nature of metaphysical realism because it essentially recognises its being independent of knowledge. Knowledge here is thought of in terms of recognition of a truth value, i.e. one's actual capacity to recognise whether something is the case. As I will show in the next section, this opposition between a robust notion of realism and its possibly being related to our knowledge of reality does not hold in Plato's view.

2. Does Plato's realism expose itself to the two challenges?

In this section I will briefly show that Plato's view meets the two challenges presented above without abdicating to some sort of realism. Due to space limitations, I cannot explain on what historical grounds he can do it, and I will only focus on the theoretical outcome. However, it should always be kept in mind that the comparison I am proposing between modern analytic philosophers and Plato is fertile because they *move from very different philosophical assumptions*. It should also be noted that I say that Plato *meets* the challenges, in other words he maintains a sort of realism that does not present the two aspects criticised by Putnam and Dummett. This by no means suggest that Plato strictly speaking provides *counter-arguments* to their critiques as if he were embedded in the current debate.

Furthermore, Plato's two philosophical tenets, which I am about to introduce and that here are meant to meet the two challenges of the previous section, are well known in the literature. This means, among other things, that the debate around them is enormous. However, discussing them in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, and therefore I will only make explicit the interpretation I am embracing.

2.1. *The kinship between mind and being*

One crucial tenet of Plato's theory of mind is that minds are naturally related to the object of knowledge. As is well known, and as I will discuss in the next subsection, the object of knowledge is being, i.e. forms or ideas. Thus, Plato's view seems to be that being a cognitive subject means, among other things, being naturally related to a fundamental class of entities, which in turn constitutes the object of knowledge. It is not possible here to discuss what knowledge is for Plato. However, on a quite general level, one is allowed to say that for Plato knowledge is a cognitive capacity through which one is able to grasp or understand and possibly describe a certain portion of reality with absolute certainty, which means that what one knows is so stable that it will not be subject to further correction.¹⁰

Consider the following passage from the *Phaedo*:

But when the soul investigates by itself [*scil.* without bodily sense-organs] it passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing (ἀεὶ ὄν), immortal and unchanging, and being akin to this (ὡς συγγενῆς οὐσα), it always stays with it whenever it is by itself and can do so; it ceases to stray and remains in the same state as it is in touch with things of the same kind (τοιούτων ἐφαπτομένη), and its experience then is what is called wisdom (φρόνησις)? 79d1-5 (transl. G. M. A. Grube)

This text epitomises what could be called the doctrine of *syngeneia*, i.e. the kinship, between the soul or mind and what is real.¹¹ To put it roughly, Plato's view is this. There are two sorts of items, namely becoming things and truly existing forms. The former can be perceived by means of the bodily senses, the latter can be grasped by thought. What is relevant here is that the mind, namely that by which thought and linguistically informed enquiry are carried out, is considered to be of the same nature as the objects one can know. Part of Plato's

¹⁰ Cf. for instance *Resp.* 477e.

¹¹ This is not its only appearance in the corpus, cf. *Resp.* 490 a-b; 518b-c; 611e. An essential analysis of the doctrine of *syngeneia* is found in Aronadio (2002: 221-44). This argument is also known under the name of the Affinity Argument. It has been discussed with regard to whether Plato entertains a representationalist view of knowledge, cf. Gerson (2003: 79-88) and Butler (2006). I will not engage in the discussion of what concept of knowledge Plato has in mind, I only take into account Plato's view that sees the soul's kinship with the forms as a condition to get in contact with them, as is recognised also by Gerson (2003: 81).

argument here is to show that the soul is immortal and to say that the soul is of the same kind as the eternal objects of its activity goes in this direction.¹² However, this is not what I am interested in here. The text seems to suggest a different point as well. We are told (i) that the soul or mind is able to grasp items that are always-existing and unchanging and (ii) that this can happen *because* the mind and these beings are akin.

The junction of (i) and (ii) is theoretically remarkable and may sound odd to the metaphysical realist described above. Given the features of the objects in question, i.e. changelessness, purity, eternity, one is clearly faced with items that are at the farthest end of what, in some sense, depends on the conceptual schemes of a community of speakers at a given time. On the other hand, the relation between the mind and these objects is accounted for by a primitive feature of mind itself, namely its being naturally able to grasp them. This natural capacity is phrased in terms of reality and the mind being “of the same kind”. The term *syngenes*, outside the philosophical jargon, mainly means that two or more people are relatives, belong to the same family and thus, in a sense, belong to each other. So the point is not just the assumption that the mind can know an independent world. Any realist who is not a sceptic would accept this. The next step is that the mind can know what is real *because* they are of the same kind, i.e. they are naturally *related*.¹³ Accordingly, the philosophical outcome of the *syngeneia* is that being and mind are naturally fit for each other (when the mind is not distracted by irrationality, which mainly means bodily sensations and appetites). However, this implies that what is real is somehow related to the mind. This aspect of Plato’s thought seems to join a series of features usually associated with the absolute objectivity and independence of reality belonging to metaphysical realism with an essential aspect of mind-relatedness. However weird this might sound, the doctrine of *syngeneia* seems to meet the challenge to mind-independence, while remaining within a strongly realist conception.

¹² On which cf. Apolloni (1996).

¹³ Curiously enough, in English the term “relative” means both “related” and “family member” just as the term *syngenes* is being used by Plato.

2.2. Onto-epistemic correlation

Plato's conception of what is real is connected to the cognitive ability of human mind in one further respect. In this subsection, I will very briefly introduce one of the most debated texts in the Platonic corpus, namely *Resp.* 476e-480a. I will not try to give my own specific interpretation, nor will I present its many steps. I wish only to focus on one single theoretical outcome that is immediately relevant to the present discourse. Roughly put, Plato's line of thought seems to be the following. Different sorts of objects admit of different sorts of cognition. Knowledge in its strict sense, i.e. a mental capacity that requires the exercise of thought and that is unerring, is directed at what fully is (forms). Belief in its strict sense, i.e. a mental capacity that is between knowledge and ignorance and whose results are not unerring, is directed at what at the same time is and is not.¹⁴ It is not easy to understand what Plato means by "being" and "not-being" in this context. There are two points that are relevant for us here:

- Different cognitive activities are directed at different sorts of items;
- The fundamental trait by which to distinguish different sorts of items is the way they can be cognised.

One more fact seems to emerge from Plato's account:

- The epistemic features of the mental capacity are determined by the ontological features of the cognised object. For instance, knowledge is unerring *because* its object (i) reveals itself in an undeceiving manner and (ii) is unchanging. Accordingly, a mental grasp and proper descriptions of such an object are unerring and indefeasible.

¹⁴ This is commonly regarded as the traditional reading. Some classical proponents of this reading are Cross & Woosley (1964: 134-195) and Vlastos (1973). More recent versions are Fronterotta (2001: 62-79), White (2006), and Moss (2021). A fierce adversary of the traditional reading is Fine (1981; 1990). However, Fine's view cannot withstand criticism, cf. Gonzalez (1996), Gerson (2003) and Fronterotta (2007). The main problem of the traditional reading is that it seems to exclude that one can have knowledge of particulars and opinion of forms, given that this would relate sorts of cognition with the "wrong" sorts of objects. A very well-argued defense of the traditional reading is Schwab (2016). The most recent attempt to solve the issue is to be found in Smith (2019), who claims that the capacities or powers of the soul/mind and the mental acts produced by those powers should be kept distinct.

What is immediately relevant for my argument is the continuity between forms of cognitions and items in the world. To begin with, Plato seems to be claiming that fundamental ontological distinctions essentially appear at the level of cognition: sensible particulars both are and are not and therefore give rise to beliefs, whereas forms completely are and therefore give rise to knowledge. Moreover, knowledge is (i) related to being and more importantly (ii) it is knowledge *because* it is knowledge of *being*.

The problem antirealism such as Dummett's has with metaphysical realism is that the latter ascribes truth-values to even in principle unverifiable statements. This constitutes a problem because it defies the cognitive means one employs in order to ascertain the truth of those statements. This is in turn problematic because the meaning of the statements is thought of as knowing under what conditions these statements are true. In Plato's line of thought in the *Republic*, there is no mention of a sophisticated theory of meaning. However, one point stands out. That which completely is, to use Plato's phrasing, which, ontologically speaking, corresponds to what the modern metaphysical realist would consider as knowledge- and recognition-transcendent, is in fact presented as (a) what knowledge is meant to grasp, (b) what can best be understood as the proper object of knowledge and (c) what, thanks to its features,¹⁵ determines the nature of knowledge. As a consequence, Plato's view meets the challenge posed by Dummett's antirealism: it somehow assumes a realist stance insofar as Plato never says that reality is mind-dependent, but, at the same time, it seems not to be committed to any form of recognition-transcendence (which in this context should not be taken strictly as is formulated by truth-conditional semantics, but rather as the fact that reality is such as to possibly reside outside one's capacity to know it). On the contrary, the mark of reality is precisely its being that which can be known. Of course, Plato is well aware that one could never attain truth about the objects of possible knowledge, but this happens on account of a deficient nature and/or education.

¹⁵ Keeping with the example given above: knowledge is unerring because its object is undecieving and unchanging; it must be said that only the second is a non-epistemic feature of the object in question. However, this should not worry us: that being is presented as something intrinsically clear to the mind only reinforces the point I want to make.

Interestingly, an appealing aspect of antirealism is that it bridges the gap between the subject's cognitive capacities and what there is to know since the latter is directly derived from the former.¹⁶ However, although Plato's view does not insert any such gap between reality and the mind, at the same time it does not embrace any sort of antirealism.¹⁷ In this sense, Plato meets the challenge of antirealism.

As just shown, Plato's realism does not fall prey to the two main challenges posed against metaphysical realism discussed in this paper. This does not mean that Plato actually refutes the main point of both critiques of metaphysical realism from the point of view of their authors. On the contrary, Plato conceives of reality as being related to both mind and knowledge. At the same time, he does this within a strongly realist view. I will now turn to an argument from the *Cratylus*, which helps disclose an essential aspect of Plato's realism and where the notion of error plays a pivotal role.

3. *The core of Plato's realism*

As is well known, in the *Cratylus* two views regarding the correctness of names and naming are contrasted, which are traditionally labelled conventionalism and naturalism and are maintained by Hermogenes and Cratylus, respectively. In associating conventionalism – the view according to which names are given purely by a conventional stipulation that is reversible at will – with Protagoras' view,¹⁸ Plato is exploiting the present context to reject relativism or subjectivism about reality. I will focus specifically on this only apparently collateral question. Protagoras view is presented in this context as follows: «that man is the measure of all things, and that things are to me as they appear to me, and

¹⁶ This is diagnosed in different terms by Searle (1997: 29).

¹⁷ This holds in the case of what Plato considers to be fully real, i.e. forms. When it comes to sensible particulars being caused by forms, the matter is much more difficult. Cf. Davidson (1997: 109) who, *en passant*, recognises the strict relation between forms and knowledge in Plato and suggests an antirealist reading of material items in Plato.

¹⁸ As Sedley (2003: 54-5) points out, Conventionalism does not imply Relativism. However, rejecting Relativism entails that things and actions have their own stable nature, including naming (which will prove against Conventionalism). In any case, my concern in this paper is the metaphysical framework that Plato introduces as an alternative to Protagoras' view.

are to you as they appear to you». I will not discuss the vexed question of what Protagoras' doctrine means or whether Plato's Protagoras is the historical Protagoras. My point is that Plato's realism can be broached by considering the strict denial of the view that how things are is determined by one's belief about them.

Then it is clear that things have some fixed being or essence of their own (δήλον δὴ ὅτι αὐτὰ αὐτῶν οὐσίαν ἔχοντά τινα βέβαιόν ἐστι τὰ πράγματα). They are not in relation to us and are not made to fluctuate by how they appear to us (τῷ ἡμετέρῳ φαντάσματι). They are by themselves (καθ' αὐτὰ), in relation to their own being or essence, which is theirs by nature (πέφυκεν). (*Crat.* 386d9–e4, transl. C. D. C. Reeve)

Plato's point is that things possess some sort of fixed being. Something is stable or fixed, *bebaios*,¹⁹ if it is not in relation to us, i.e. the cognitive subject who mentally represents the world and entertains beliefs. "To be in relation to" should be taken to mean something like "being determined by". Thus, Plato is claiming here that whatever constitutes the being of things must be fixed, which is the same as saying that it is not determined by how it appears to a given subject at a given moment. Interestingly, the appearance to a subject is phrased in terms of movement: if what people think about something is what constitutes the being of that something, and what people think changes, then the being of that something changes.

However, given that the being of things is not determined by how they appear to a given person, it is thought of as remaining fixed while representations and beliefs change. This last remark is crucial to my argument, as will appear in what follows: the mark of what is real is depicted as what remains stable as representations/beliefs change. Moreover, this stability is presented in terms of self-determination and autonomy. If the being of things is to remain stable, things must have a being of their own and be determined by themselves (whatever it means). What I am interested in here is that one is faced with one of the first instances of the principle that reality must be in some relevant way independent of the mind. However, not to fall into ambiguous formulations, I will call

¹⁹ Cf. also *Crat.* 386a4 on which Aronadio (2008: XXXIV). Cf. also Ademollo (2011: 87), who reads "stability" to be a metaphor for "subject-independent, objective".

this the priority of reality with respect to the mind (PR). This because reality can be prior to the mind, for a sense of “prior” which is still to be defined, even though reality and mind are essentially akin.

However, how should one interpret PR? The basic idea is that reality remains stable as our *phantasmata* change. Also, in the last line there is a reference to nature, which is specifically employed to designate the fact that things have being of their own. The word in question is *pephyken*.²⁰ It is the perfect form of the verb *phyo*. Most notably, among the many differences entertained by the ancient Greek language and modern European languages is the fact that ancient Greek prioritises the grammatical aspect. The aspect is a grammatical category expressing how an action or an event, denoted by a verb, extends over time: «aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation» (Comrie 1976: 3). The perfect form of the verb is the kind of temporal constituency in which the action is already completed but whose effect still has an influence on the present situation. The common meaning of *pephykenai* in the *LSJ* is “to be formed or disposed by nature”, but it is also employed impersonally to mean “it happens naturally” or “as is natural”. My view is that this particular form of the verb is used by Plato to express what is at stake in the quotation above, namely that what is real is thought of as something naturally determined in advance with respect to minds having a representation of them. Thus, this notion of natural determination or disposition is a first way to express in what sense reality is prior to the mind.

Going back to the *Cratylus*, Socrates draws a further inference: for anything that has its own being naturally determined, then any action dealing with it, has in turn its own nature.²¹ Let us consider one more passage:

So an action’s performance accords with the action’s own nature, and not with what we believe (οὐ κατὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν δόξαν). Suppose, for example, that we undertake to cut something. If we make the cut in whatever way we choose (ἤμεις βουλόμεθα) and with whatever tool we choose, we will not succeed in cutting.

²⁰ As far as I know, the subject has been given little relevance in the literature except for Aronadio (2002: 141-49), and a hint in Ademollo (2011: 99, n. 10), where the author compares the value of “ἐπεφύκει” to “a sort of timeless present” and Frede (2012: 376, n. 18); the subject has also been treated tangentially in the first part of Calvert (1970: 26-34) and Heitsch (1985: 44-62); for a brilliant comparison with Aristotle cf. Isnardi Parente (1966: 118-121).

²¹ Sedley (2002: 57); Goldschmidt (1982: 55-6).

But if in each case we choose to cut in accord with the nature (*κατὰ τὴν φύσιν*) of cutting and being cut and with the natural tool for cutting, we'll succeed and cut correctly. If we try to cut contrary to nature, however, we'll be in error and accomplish nothing. (*Crat.* 387a1-8)

The association of representation with belief I made is now textually expressed, as shown by the occurrence of the term *doxa*. The initial contrast of nature with representation/belief is now developed with regard to actions, including a further specification: if one is to perform some action, what needs to be done in order to perform that action is not up to that person. In other words, the stability of being emerges when one is to interact with it and not as something in principle unattainable, as recognition-transcendence would have it, for example. For now, my objective is starting to highlight that for Plato PR is something that is defined in relation to mental and practical activities. The crucial fact of this second excerpt is the reference to errors. This is the crucial point in Plato's critique of Protagoras. The reference to Protagoras is also what allows one to see that PR holds in the case of beliefs and not just for practical and technical know-how. The idea that a mistake emerges when one cuts or burns "contrary to nature" makes Plato's point immediately recognisable, as the result is unsatisfying. But it is not meant to restrict to such cases what Plato is saying about the stability of being. For Plato's own objective in criticising Protagoras' view is to show that according to Protagoras, errors are not allowed for and as a consequence there is no difference between wise and mean individuals, which Plato finds unacceptable. What is relevant here is that Plato's realism of fixed being is essentially related to the notion of error. One can get or make things wrong only insofar as what things are is not determined by what one believes or makes. To confront this view, Plato expresses PR in terms of natural predisposition.

As I am about to show, Plato's concept of PR may be properly understood through the concept of error. This may sound paradoxical in that the very concept of error implies that the person who, for instance, entertains a mistaken belief should not be aware of it. However, the point I want to make is that PR, as is suggested by the dense though brief text from the *Cratylus*, stands out when rectifying a mistaken belief. When Plato speaks of the fact that our representations or beliefs change when the reality they are about remains fixed is best un-

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derstood as the fundamental realist view that, if things at some point turn out to be different, one's previous beliefs were wrong instead of claiming that things have really changed. Before discussing this, I must say a few words on Plato's peculiar way to frame this point. Through the concept of natural predisposition, Plato seems to suggest that reality is determined, as it were, in advance of beliefs and representations. What is philosophically remarkable in this is that this "coming before" of the fixed being of things should not be intended chronologically. This, I think, is the philosophical import of the term *pephykenai*. The fundamental idea behind the perfect form of the verb is that what is real is, as it were, fully determined by what it by itself is before one interacts doxastically or technically with it. Precisely on this account the being of things can be said to be stable and by no means determined in relation to our (changing) representations.

4. *The Platonic core of realism*

Now, Plato's argument as is very briefly presented in this paper would deserve a much more detailed treatment. This because the concept of natural predisposition is strictly related to Plato's metaphysics of forms. Exploring this aspect would clearly be beyond the scope of this paper. What I want to investigate now is whether there is room for a fundamental concept of realism directly inspired by Plato's argument in the *Cratylus*. This concept of realism on the basis of PR would frame mind-independence in a new way, given that in Plato's view the mind has a kinship with being and being is essentially related to knowledge. My attempt to capture this basic realist intuition is the following principle, immediately deriving from PR, which could be labelled the Priority of Reality Assumption (PRA):

PRA: If one entertains a belief or a representation about how things are/stand, and later she finds out that she was mistaken and that they actually stand in some other way, the basic realist intuition consists in the fact that the second way things stand has always been truly the case, even if she did not believe so, and that therefore reality has not changed.

In other words, being does not change because one changes her mind about it. If one considers statements about numbers, laws of nature, or in general abstract entities, one sees that the described reality does not change when she sees that her theory or description is wrong. This is particularly clear on account of the fact that such abstract entities are commonly regarded as admitting of no change. However, PRA also holds in the case of descriptions of facts or states of affairs that occur in time, i.e. are possibly changing. For, if one believes something about concrete particulars, keeping to a general realist conception of the world, things do not change because her belief about them changes. For instance, if I see a person approaching and I think he is Theodorus, and then I find out that he is Theaetetus, PRA is meant to explain why Theodorus has not *actually* turned into someone else.

PRA specifies what I think Plato is aiming at when he says that the *ousia* of things is not drawn up and down by our *phantasma* or *doxa* of it. This because being or reality is by itself and is *already* complete by nature. This last, apparently mysterious, point means only that the object of cognition does not require that one represents it in order for it to be. This, however, does not commit Plato to either of the following:

- Mind-independence in Putnam's sense because there is no mention of referential access to things independently of the mind, but only that the being of things is not determined by one believing it to be thus and so;
- Recognition-transcendence in Dummett's sense because it is precisely in recognising that what one believes to be the case (or has been done in a technical endeavour) is wrong that what is really the case can emerge.

The overall philosophical significance of this is that there is a sense of "realism" that remains untouched by Putnam's and Dummett's criticism, whose core is to be found in Plato. One more relevant aspect is that PRA could also shed light on the difference between Putnam's internal realism and Dummett's antirealism. Putnam seems to be clearly committed to PRA:

To reject the idea that there is a coherent 'external' perspective, a theory which is simply true 'in itself, apart from all possible observers, is not to identify truth with

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rational acceptability. Truth cannot simply be rational acceptability for one fundamental reason; truth is supposed to be a property of a statement that cannot be lost, whereas justification can be lost. The statement 'The earth is flat' was, very likely, rationally acceptable 3,000 years ago; but it is not rationally acceptable today. Yet it would be wrong to say that 'the earth is flat' was true 3,000 years ago; for that would mean that the earth has changed its shape. (Putnam 1981: 55)

I am not going to comment on the topic of rational acceptability versus truth, nor will I elaborate upon the even more complex question of why Plato speaks of being while Putnam speaks of truth. I only wish to point out that in this quotation Putnam, at least at this stage of his critique to metaphysical realism, clearly embraces PRA. Those who believed that the earth is flat, when it appeared for whatever reason that the earth is not flat, must be considered to have been wrong all along. The other way would be to say that they were right both now and then and that *consequently* reality has changed. It must be said that Putnam would not subscribe to PRA in some cases, namely where it comes to the change in truth-values determined by adopting a different conceptual scheme. In fact, he wants to make precisely this point when he resorts to conceptual schemes: there is no fact of the matter as to how to use words because reality does not come up ready to be labelled by our language. The above quotation is a clear instance of PRA. In other words, Putnam's view retains a realistic core, represented by PRA, which is consistent with Putnam's own phrasing his view as "internal realism".

By contrast, Dummett's antirealism ultimately rejects PRA. This is clear from his antirealism about the past. The details of the theory are particularly complex, but the basic idea is this. Reality being determinate, i.e. reality being able to provide statements with truth-values, comes from the subject relying on evidence at the present time. Thus, for instance, we now have evidence for *s*, where *s* is a statement about the past; accordingly, *s* now has a truth value. Let us assume that the following day evidence for *s* is destroyed. This entails in Dummett's account that what happens the day after actually determines the state of affairs in the past *s* is about. This counts also with respect to the future. If I now have evidence for *s*, this seems to imply that tomorrow *s* will still be true because it is true now, which in the antirealist assumption means that the nature of the evidence I have now suggests that I will have it tomorrow as well. However, when tomorrow arrives, what I thought yesterday my evidence was going

to be and the evidence I have at the moment may well be different. In other words, I might lose my evidence overnight and reality might become indeterminate on account of my new epistemic means.

The intricacies of this view must be left aside here, but I think the sketch I proposed is very useful to highlight a basic contrast between PRA and Dummett's antirealism. Dummett ascribes to the present the crucial role when it comes to ascertaining what is real and what remains indeterminate. PRA instead thinks of reality as determinate and essentially related to the past: what turns out to be true needs to have been true all along. However, the notion of past at stake here is rather peculiar insofar as it should not be conceived as a chronological past. A chronological conception of the past would entail an objective conception of change, as the examples of mistaking Theaetetus or earth changing its shape make clear:

- Chronological past: x is F at t and is G at t_1 ; x has really changed from being F to being G and, consequently, there was a time at which x was really F .

When it comes to rectifying beliefs as described by PRA, matters are quite different:

- Timeless past: x appears to be F at t and turns out to be G at t_1 ; x has not really changed from being F to being G because x has been G all along,

This concept of timeless past requires another concept of change, which could be labelled "epistemic change". The change from what is believed in the first belief to what is believed in the second belief is not an objective or real event.²² Rather, one is faced with a mind-dependent shift from one belief or re-

²² This type of change bears some resemblance to the Irwin (1977) concept of aspect-change (x is big in comparison with y , and big in comparison with z) when contrasted with self-change (x is hot at t_1 and becomes non-hot at t_2 by becoming colder). Self-change implies the comparison of a particular with itself and its conditions at different times thereby giving the idea of an objective becoming from a state F at t_1 to a state non- F at t_2 (in this respect it is connected with chronological past). The notion of change at stake here is similar to aspect-change insofar as it is no objective becoming such as a change of state, and yet it retains some essential reference to time, which resembles self-

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presentation to another. In this respect, PRA entails that x was already G when it appeared to be F regardless of any cognitive subject being aware of it. At the same time, this independence of what the subject believes only appears *within* the process of recognition of one's errors. If the chronological past characterises processes of change, the timeless past applies to the relation between the mind and the world. The oxymoronic phrase "timeless past" is meant to convey the idea that, for any representation or belief, reality was already there, *before* the formation of belief, but this "before" has not actually taken place in time. On these grounds, I speak of a *priority* of reality over minds. According to Plato, such a priority takes the form of a stability of what is real: when a cognitive subject rectifies her belief, reality has not changed. With PRA one sees that there is room for metaphysical realism in terms of the priority of reality over minds along with the notion of timeless past. The Platonic inspiration of PRA is particularly interesting because, as we have seen, Plato's view is not committed to mind-independence and recognition-transcendence, which have been thought of as consubstantial with metaphysical realism, and yet the priority of reality over mind remains.

To conclude, I wish to consider whether Plato would embrace PRA as we could interpret it today. I think that the very concept of *pephykenai* is somehow related to PRA. The idea that what is real is already perfected, as it were, before being grasped, represented or described by minds is, I think, the best way to understand what Plato is trying to express with his notion of being naturally predisposed. To remain with the *Cratylus*, what is "already there" when one deals with shuttles is their nature, in Plato's own phrasing, what the shuttle itself is. The same happens with names, as Plato speaks of what the name itself is. At the same time, I submit, Plato would relate the ontological before of this timeless past to very special items whose existence is extra-temporal, i.e. forms, on account of his overall metaphysical view, which cannot be expanded upon here. The intuitive side of it would be that eternal beings such as forms, if sought after from within time, will be grasped as something that is already fully determined and changeless.

change. This reference to time, however, is to be related to the believer entertaining two different beliefs at two different times.

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