

Chiastic modelling and the Dialectician Passage at Sophist 253b-e

Draft excerpt from:

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Chapter 4: Plato, Cross-Division and the Genesis of Modelling Theory

§4.3 Chiastic modelling and the “dialectician passage” at Sophist 253b-e.

The first example of Plato’s promotion of both *linear hierarchal* (taxonomic) classification and *co-ordinate* or *chiastic* (typological) cross-classification is taken from the dialogue *Sophist*. This dialogue is a pivotal work in ancient philosophy of science and in the history of (“western”) scientific methodology in general.¹ It includes some of the most inspiring – and enigmatic – passages in the Platonic dialogues and has captivated classical scholars and philosophers for centuries. One of the most famous of these is the so-called “dialectician passage” (*Soph.* 253b-e)². This passage seems to describe – in terms of Platonic forms – four different ways that “ideas” (or concepts) can and cannot combine. Now, modern scholars have pointed out that this text obviously concerns more than *merely* describing “four different kinds of relations between Ideas”.³ It is seen as being part of a much more complex and sophisticated account of ontological relationships taken up later in the dialogue involving the so-called “five great kinds”.⁴

I totally agree with this and fully appreciate the fact that Plato had bigger fish to fry than simply describing “four different kinds of relations between Ideas”. However, to state that the dialectician passage does not “merely” concern itself with describing such relationships does not preclude the prospect that it nonetheless *does – also –* describe them. For, regardless of what fish you are frying, you will be in need of certain basic utensils for the job and, in the case of the “communion of kinds”, these utensils include the use of certain basic “logical (relational) operators” (Fig. 4.1). And such operators are clearly present in the Platonic dialogues in general, as well as in the conceptual structures described in the “dialectician passage”, whatever its wider purpose.

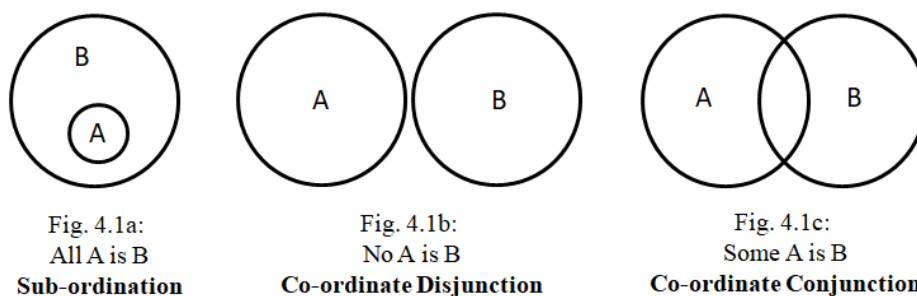


Figure 4.1: Three basic logical operators

The dialectician passage starts off at 253b-c by stating that, if we agree that “kinds” (forms, classes or concepts) can “join together” or “co-mingle” (συμμίγνυσθαι), then the dialectician has to have the expertise to discern between such “kinds”, and how they can and cannot combine.⁵ Then comes the famous sub-passage at 253d5-e2:

“*Visitor*: Then he who is able to do this has a clear perception

(R1) of **one** form extending entirely through many individuals each of which lies apart, and

(R2) of **many** forms differing from one another but included in one greater form, and again [αὖ]

(R3) of **one** form evolved by the union of many wholes, and

(R4) of **many** forms entirely apart and separate.

This is the knowledge and ability to distinguish by classes how individual things can or cannot be associated with one another.”⁶

This passage has been examined, interpreted and bandied about in scores of studies during the past century. It has been subject to many various translations and, at the same time, to different interpretations, even within one and the same translation. My aim here is neither to evaluate translations nor their interpretations – which I am definitely not competent to do – but to look at the possible classificatory relationships being treated in these statements from a purely modelling theoretic perspective.

The four relational structures are usually partitioned into two groups R1+R2 & R3+R4, separated by the seemingly significant “αὖ” (“and again”):

- **R1+R2: Subordinate relationships**

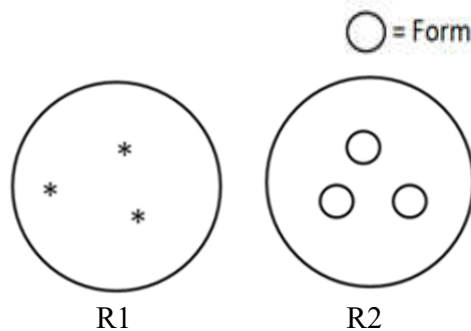


Figure 4.2: Particulars vs. forms

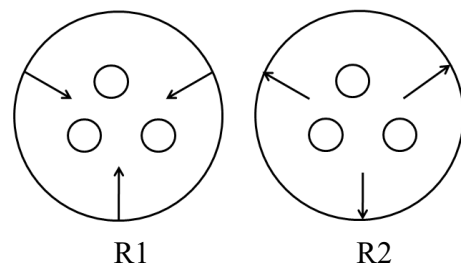


Figure 4.3: Divisions vs. Collections

R1 and R2 have been interpreted in two different ways (Figs. 4.2 and 4.3 respectively) as describing subordinate-superordinate relationships:

- I. (**Figure 4.2: Particulars vs. Forms**): The subordinate entities contained in R1 are *particular instances* of the superior form; whereas in R2 the subordinate entities are themselves (sub-) *forms*. This is justified on grammatical grounds, i.e. that the gender of the terms used to denote the subordinated entities in R1 points to them being particular “things”.

II. (Figure 4.3: Forms only): Both R1 and R2 concern *forms*. R1 proceeds from a superior form to the subordinate forms, indicating (compositional-analytic) “division”; whereas R2 proceeds from subordinate forms to a superordinate form, indicating (compositional-synthetic) “collection”. This is justified on the grounds that it is generally accepted, that Plato is only concerned with “forms” in this account in the Sophist, not “particulars”.

I prefer the second alternative but, for our present purposes, either interpretation will suffice.

- **R3+R4: Co-ordinate relationships**

We take R4 first, which seems to be relatively straight forward, before tackling the truly enigmatic R3. R4 seems to represent a group/set of free-range *disjunct concepts* (or genera) within a particular *universe of discourse* [U] (Fig 4.4). If this set is exhaustive, it can be rendered as a *partition* of that universe (Fig. 4.5). In any event, it corresponds to Fig. 4.1b (supra), i.e. *disjunct coordinate concepts*. There is no sub-ordination or hierarchy involved here.

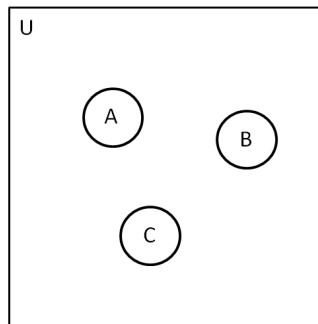


Figure 4.4 Disjunct generic concepts in U

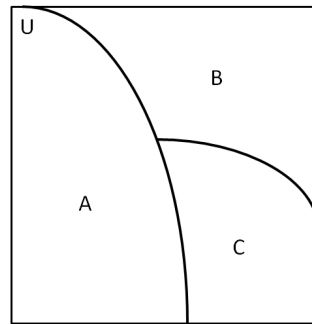


Figure 4.5: 3-Partitioned U.

Finally, the case of R3. Let us cite it again in Fowler’s translation.

(R3) ...one form evolved by the union of many wholes... (Fowler (1921))

The Greek text is: *καὶ μίαν αὖ δι’ ὅλων πολλῶν ἐν ἐνὶ συνημμένῃν*. The word *συνημμένῃν* (*sunemmenen*) is generally translated as “join together” or “combine”. To get a better perspective on this we can look a number of other translations:

- (R3) “... a Form passing through several ‘wholes’... combined to form a ‘unity’”. (Gomez-Lobo (1977))
- (R3) “ one unified [form] composed of many wholes (Smith (2019))
- (R3) “ a single form that’s connected as a unit throughout many wholes. (White (1997))
- (R3) “ one [form] through many wholes gathered into a one (Smith (2020))
- (R3) “ a single [form] [running] through many wholes that is gathered into a one (Miller (2016))
- (R3) “ one form knit together into a single whole and *pervading* many such wholes ... (Jowett (1892))

All of these, taken together, reek of “conjunction”. Indeed, many classical scholars – especially in connection with the Sophist and Statesman – frequently refer to cross-division and “overlapping” concepts (or forms), although usually they do not go into much further detail (see §4.4, *infra*).

Consider Figure 4.6 – a rather mundane but nonetheless functional example of “overlapping concepts” or “co-ordinate conjunction”. The three properties (A: mammal; B: hunts fish; C: can fly) are fully co-ordinate, i.e. they generate a full 3-dimensional combinatorial lattice or “blend”. This is a simple three-(binary)-variable cross-classification creating $2^3 = 8$ species.

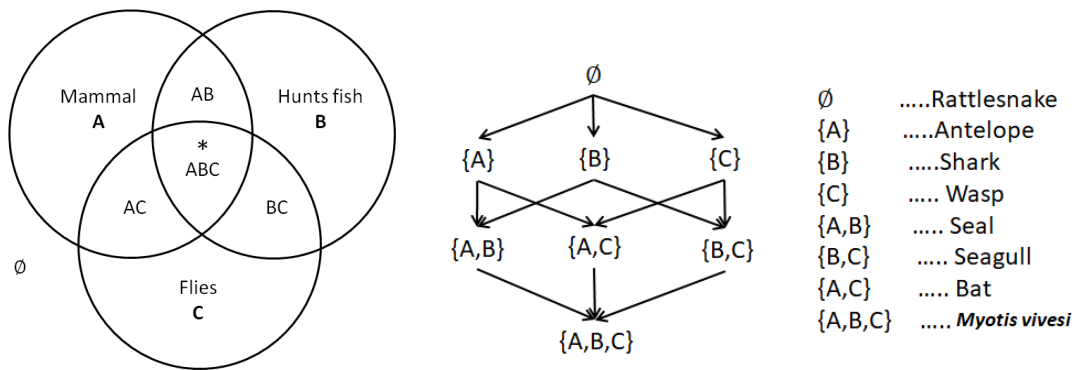


Figure 4.6: Three-property conjunction with its lattice diagram and example list.

If the four relationships in the *Sophist* (R1-R4) can be interpreted as being based on the three logical operations in Fig. 4.1 (R1 & R2 being two ways to approach *subordination*), then we can present the “dialectician passage” as in Figure 4.7.

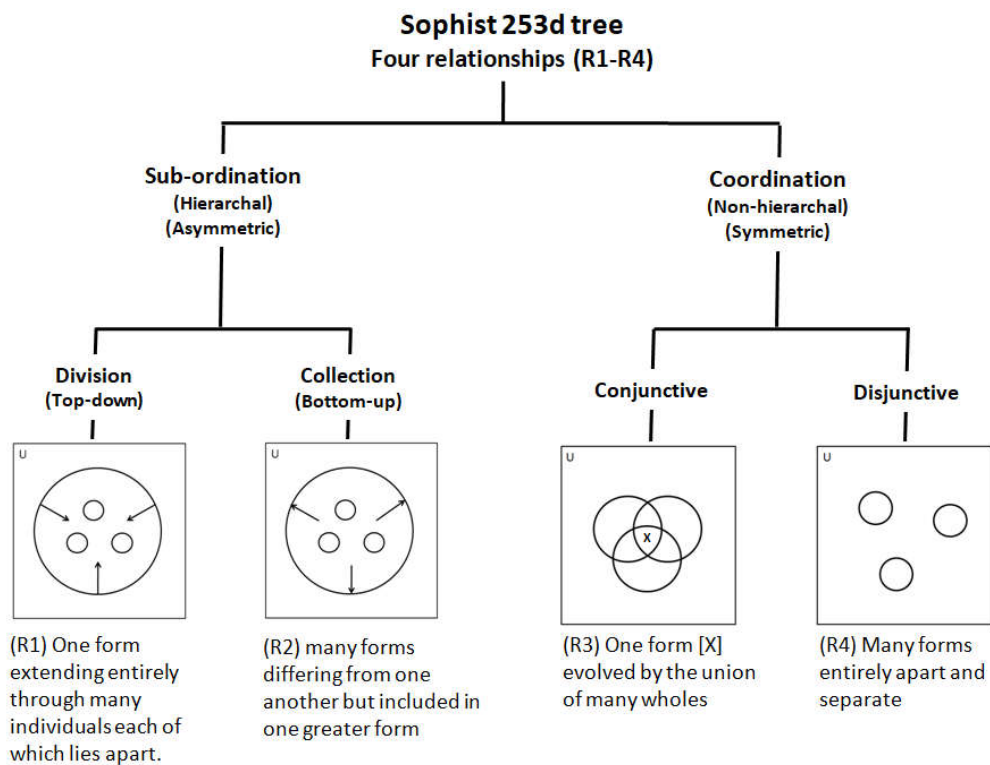


Fig. 4.7: Dialectician-Passage Taxonomy

Summa Summarum: The four relationships in the “dialectician passage” have been classified here according to a taxonomy split along two main branches: (1) asymmetric linear hierarchal *subordination* vs. (2) symmetric non-hierarchal *co-ordination*. (1) is further divided into top-down *division* (R1) vs. bottom-up *collection* (R2); and (2) is further divided into *conjunctive* (R3) vs. *disjunctive* (R4) *co-ordination*. To what extent this is a possible (alt. plausible) interpretation of the “dialectician passage”, I respectfully leave to the classical scholars.

However, I do not believe that this interpretation of the dialectician passage actually represents anything essentially new – not even in the case of R3 as representing (intentional) conjunction. Indeed, this seems to be alluded to by several classical scholars, even if they do not express it outright. Furthermore, since Plato explicitly – and in a clearly pedagogic manner – constructs cross-classificatory (co-ordinate conjunctive) “typologies” elsewhere, in at least four of the later dialogues (*Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman* and *Philebus*, see §4.4, *infra*)⁷, we know that he was already familiar with this type of chiasmic modelling – to which we now turn.

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Notes for this excerpt

¹ Benjamin Jowett (Plato, 1892) states in the introduction to his translation of *Sophist* that it contains the seeds of just about everything that scientific methodology requires:

“The summa genera of thought, the nature of the proposition, of definition, of generalization, of synthesis and analysis, of *division and cross-division*, are clearly described ...and constantly employed in the dialogues of Plato.” (Jowett, 1892 – Introduction. Emphasis added.)

² As far as I can ascertain, the term “dialectician passage” was first used by Colin Smith (2020, *passim*).

³ Lloyd (1952) p. 110, referring to Stenzel (1931).

⁴ “Being”, “motion”, “rest”, “sameness” and “difference”. The discussion of how these “great kinds” relate to one another is a fascinating – if not to say mindboggling – experience in itself, but is not necessary for the present discussion.

⁵ Plato is famously adverse – for the most part – to using fixed technical terms, and in the *Sophist* we see him using several terms – variously translated as kinds, forms, classes, genera, ideas, wholes – more or less synonymously. This, of course, has added to the enigmatic nature of this passage.

⁶ Translation by H. N. Fowler in Plato (1921).

⁷ For an excellent recent example, see Liu (2021; 2024). Also, I am encouraged by Colin Smith’s (2020) study of the “dialectician passage”, when he notes:

“Here I interpret a central passage in Plato’s *Sophist* by focusing on understudied elements that provide insight into the fit of the dialogue’s parts and of the *Sophist*-*Statesman* diptych as a whole. I argue that the Eleatic Stranger’s account of what the dialectician “adequately views” at *Sophist* 253d1-e3 involves both division and the communion of ontological kinds – and not just one or the other as has usually been argued.” (p. 1 – Abstract.)