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Intentionality and Referentiality in Plato's Conceptual Apparatus

Abstract: The notions of intentionality and referentiality are applied to Plato's conceptual apparatus in the conviction that they can profitably shed light on some aspects of Plato's epistemology and ontology and that, conversely, their use as an exegetical tool in Plato's thought can provide some interesting insights into their nature and function. From this perspective, the Platonic notions of *dianoia* and *nous* will be considered in succession: they will be read in the light of the fundamental concept of *syngeneia* and the idea that for Plato the deep structure of reality is configured as a network of elementary ontological units (Forms and *gene*). Consequently, the notions of intentionality and referentiality will also be applied to this structure of reality. In conclusion, a comparison will be proposed between the results of these analyses and Tim Crane's use of the notions in question, and from the outcome of this comparison some implications will be drawn, by way of example, with reference to two themes of contemporary epistemology.

Keywords: Intentionality; referentiality; Plato; *dianoia*; *nous*; *syngeneia*; *logos*; mind-world relation

1. Intent

The belief at the heart of this paper is that the notions of intentionality and referentiality can profitably shed light on some aspects of Plato's epistemology and ontology¹. In order to justify this belief, I will pursue here the intent to highlight if and how these notions are applicable to Plato's conceptual apparatus.

I am also convinced that the notion of intentionality can receive from the comparison with Plato's thought cues for the clarification of its nature and its multiple aspects; but I will only provide some hints on this.

¹ I wish to thank Erminia Di Iulio: some of the considerations presented here, in particular on the contemporary side, are her suggestions. Many thanks also to Nicholas Smith and Lorenzo Giovannetti for their questions during the Seminar 'Ancient Philosophy in Dialogue'.

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This being the intent, my paper will not provide an exegesis of Platonic passages to elaborate a philological analysis; rather, I will refer to the cornerstones of Plato's epistemology and, occasionally, to passages that represent them emblematically.

This naturally implies and presupposes a specific interpretation of Plato's thought, among the many possible and debated ones; but – as is well known – this 'interpretative prejudice' can never be done without, although in this case its weight will be more evident. In other words: my intent here is not to defend my interpretation of Plato's thought over others; it is simply assumed here, with the intention of making it dialogue with contemporary conceptual tools (but, as one might easily expect, my hope is that my interpretation will come out corroborated by the following analyses).

2. A General Definition of Intentionality

The notion of intentionality is one of the thorny issues in contemporary philosophy. It has been so much debated that one could say that 'intentionality *pollachos legetai*'. In an effort to avoid, as far as possible, theoretical presuppositions, my starting point will be a general definition of intentionality. By 'general' I mean a definition so broad as to be valid for all or (more prudently) almost all theoretical perspectives on the subject. A definition, in short, that is not compromised (or not entirely compromised) with any theoretical option on the subject and is therefore merely descriptive in nature.

Hence, I will take 'intentionality', as 'the attitude of mind of being about or directed towards objects'².

² Cf. Searle's 'preliminary formulation' in the incipit of his influential volume on intentionality: 'Intentionality is that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects and states of affairs in the world' (1983: 1). Two clarifications on this 'general definition': 1) obviously, the notion of intentionality played an important role in 19th and 20th century philosophy (particularly in phenomenology), but the intention here is to start with a definition that is as 'innocent' as possible, i.e. one that only indicates an orientation towards something (and, indeed, Searle's formulation is only called into question because of its preliminary nature); 2) since the path that will be followed in applying the notions of intentionality and referentiality to Plato's thought goes from the mental to the ontological, the initial 'general definition' refers to an 'attitude

Indeed, 'intentionality' so broadly understood is involved in, or underlies, any cognitive act.

2.1. Aboutness vs Reference

However, even this definition is not entirely uncontroversial: at least, it requires some clarifications and distinctions. For instance, we could, or we should, distinguish between 'aboutness' and 'reference, that is between 'intentionality' as generally 'possessing a mental content' and 'intentionality' as 'referring to an external object'.

This point was clearly and efficaciously made by Tim Crane:

I take reference to be a real relation, and accordingly I distinguish between aboutness and reference. A thought can be *about* something non-existent, but such thought *fails to refer*. 'Reference' in this sense is a technical term for the relation between a word, or thought, and an existing thing. 'Aboutness' is the mere representation of some thing in words or thought, whether or not it exists. (Crane 2013: 9)³.

In other terms, we could distinguish between 'intentionality' as the aboutness of every mental or linguistic act and another kind of intentionality – referentiality – as the peculiar relation between some mental or linguistic acts and their respective objects. I will come back to this and another related point later.

3. The Hypothesis of Applicability

As anticipated, what I am about to argue is based on a 'hypothesis of applicability', according to which the notion of intentionality is applicable to the way in which Plato describes the cognitive relationship and the structure of language (in a word: *logos*).

of mind', but it will gradually be shown that, in order to remain faithful to the conceptual framework of Plato's thought, it will be necessary to abandon this reference to the mental alone.

³ This distinction is rooted in a semantic conception of intentionality; on this Crane (forthcoming).

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3.1. Plato on *Dynameis*

I believe that many passages from Plato's dialogues offer a solid basis in support of this starting hypothesis. For, in my opinion, the whole Platonic epistemology moves from the idea that knowledge is an intentional relation between the *psyche* and an object⁴.

In this regard, I will limit myself here to two emblematic passages. They are taken from the central books of the *Republic*. In fact, at the end of Book V of the *Republic* Plato outlines the conceptual framework within which the arguments of the next two books are placed: the statements in those pages have the simplicity, clarity and generality of paradigmatic theses.

At stake is the distinction between opinion and science. To address it, Plato chooses an approach that is illuminating for the purposes of this paper. The first step of the Platonic argument – its logical starting point, the one from which one must begin when interacting with an interlocutor unwilling to accept the Platonic point of view – consists in the following question: 'Does he who knows know something or nothing?' (*Resp.* 476e7; here and below, translations from the *Republic* are mine). The objective Plato wants to achieve by moving from this question is clear and widely known: the argument will conclude with the assurance of the necessary connection between *episteme* and *on*, between authentic science and what is. But what is relevant here is that in view of the pursuit of this objective, this question is rhetorical (from Plato's point of view, of course) and is only formulated so that the interlocutor explicitly agrees on a point that is considered uncontroversial. Even before knowing that *episteme* is referred to *ta onta*, indeed in order to reach such an awareness, one must recognise that 'to know' is always 'to know something'.

Being addressed or directed towards some object is, therefore, for Plato an inherent characteristic of knowing as such: every cognitive act, whatever its

⁴ I have argued in this sense, more extensively than possible here, in Aronadio (2002: 172–221).

nature and object, is understood as an intentional relation, which is ineffective unless it is completed in something, to which it is structurally oriented⁵.

Having gained consensus on this point (a consensus he took for granted), Plato takes his argument to a more general level with the introduction of the notion of *dynamis*, starting from the claim that knowledge, opinion, and perception are all *dynameis*⁶. As is well known, *dynameis* are characterized this way: 'In the case of a *dynamis*, I only look at one thing, namely what it is directed at and what it produces, and in this way I call each one a *dynamis*' (Resp. 477d1-2). Plato does not use the term 'intentionality', but it seems clear to me that the processes thus described and labelled by him under the name of *dynameis* fall perfectly within the notion of intentionality, at least in the general version assumed here. Plato's aim was to distinguish knowledge from opinion: they are different *dynameis* because they are directed at different objects and achieve different results; they are different *dynameis* because the one who knows deploys a different *dynamis* from the one deployed by the one who is opining, but this does not detract from the fact that in both cases intentional states are at stake.

3.1.1. Knowledge and Reality: 'Platonic' Intentionality

Of course, Plato considers various types of mental acts: their intentional objects can be sensible things, but mental acts that provide knowledge are understood by Plato as acts whose intentional objects are not things of such a nature. As is well known, for Plato the true object of knowledge is not the empirical world, but the deep structure of reality, which takes the shape of a

⁵ Cf. Resp. 477B7-8: 'Then opinion is directed at one thing and science at another, each according to its own distinctive *dynamis*'. *Doxa*, which is a cognitive act inferior to *episteme*, shares with it the trait of intentionality, although the term of the intentional movement is different; from an epistemological point of view, *doxa* cannot be effective because its intentional object is not an *ontos on*, i.e. a real entity, whereas *episteme* can be effective because its intentional objects are the Forms, i.e. real entities (and is effective insofar as it refers to them).

⁶ *Dynamis* can be translated into different English words (e.g. power, faculty, capacity, action): transliteration is adopted here in order to preserve the broad semantics of the term.

‘network’ of interconnected Forms (hereafter, the domain of reality) ⁷. Only Forms are intelligible (in the sense of being ‘knowable’), whereas sensible objects are not really knowable, as they are unstable aggregates.

This concept presupposes that, on Plato’s view, there is no gap between knowledge and reality (or between mind and world). On the one hand, the knowing subject is ontologically familiar with the domain of reality: the human mind (the *psyche*) is ontologically *syngenes* (i.e. of the same family, cognate, akin) to the components of reality, although it does not have knowledge at birth (Aronadio 2002 and 2005). On the other hand, only reality is capable of being known since its components are knowable in their essence⁸. In short, Plato establishes a priority of ontology over epistemology and includes cognitive relationships in the domain of reality. This implies that 1) cognitive relationships can be explained and must be justified on the basis of ontological relationships and 2) that a certain kind of intentionality must be found, first of all, in the domain of reality, as we shall see.

But let us start from the epistemological side. Recalling that in the *Line of the Republic* the segment of *episteme* is divided into two segments, representing *dianoia* and *noesis*, I will only focus on these two forms of cognitive attitude, or rather on the respective mental acts they entail. I will call the one who is capable of *noesis* ‘dialectician’. The distinctive character of the dialectician is the fact that she has full access to the object of her intentional state.

4. *Dianoia*

4.0. *Mediation as a Distinctive Character of Dianoia*

Unlike *noesis*, *dianoia* does not allow direct access to reality: some form of mediation between the knowing subject and the object must play a role in the dianoetic acts. Indeed, it can be said, with a tolerable degree of approximation,

⁷ Platonic Forms are not universals, nor hypostatized properties, although some scholars maintain that they are (for example, Ryle 1939). However, Plato is very clear about that: a Form is a *ἓν* (one) and an *ὄν* (existing entity), i.e. a singular object, provided with its own *dynamis*, as we shall see later. On this, see Giovannetti (2022: 93–112).

⁸ Cf. Plato, *Cratylus* 439–440.

that the Platonic concept of *dianoia* corresponds to the notion of ‘inferential thought’. Therefore, dianoetic acts are characterised by a lower degree of clearness (*sapheneia*) than noetic acts⁹. In a word, *dianoia* can establish an indirect relationship with the object, which involves that intentionality and referentiality assume specific features, as we are going to see.

Moreover, a distinction can be made between two kinds of dianoetic acts according to whether the intentional object is real or fictitious. They will be labelled here as ‘Dianoetic, experience-related act’ and ‘Dianoetic, imagination-related act’, respectively, and will be treated separately.

4.1. *Dianoetic, Experience-Related Act*

In a famous passage of the *Republic* we read that *dianoia* is the cognitive state that requires *hypotheseis* in order to address its intentional object: Socrates is describing the segments of the Line and is saying that in the upper segment, that of *episteme*, there are two subdivisions. Then he continues, speaking about the first subdivision:

[...] the soul, using things previously [*scil.*: in the lower segment] imitated as images, is forced to investigate from *hypotheseis*. (*Resp.* 510b4-5)

And a few lines later, about ‘those involved in geometry’:

They make use of the visible forms and conduct their arguments on them, but they do not think (*dianooumenoi*) not of these, but of the things they resemble; not of the figures which they draw, but of the square itself and the diameter itself, and so on; as for the figures that they model or draw, and that project shadows and images of themselves in the water, they use them as images, in their attempt to see the things themselves which cannot be seen otherwise than by means of *dianoia*. (*Resp.* 510d5-511a1)

⁹ The adjective *saphes* and the noun *sapheneia* recur several times in the pages of the *Republic* devoted to the Line and the Cave and express the degree of fullness and effectiveness of the cognitive act. Cf. Smith (1996); Aronadio (2006).

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So, these *hypotheses* are ‘visible images’, ‘which cast shadows and images of themselves’; therefore, they are objects of experience, adopted as mediation to represent the real objects, the Forms. In this sense, and only in this sense, I will call the cognitive acts of *dianoia* ‘experience-related dianoetic acts’.

4.1.1. *Incomplete, Completable Intentionality*

Experience-related dianoetic acts are the ordinary cognitive and linguistic acts performed by a non-dialectician who relies on data of experience.

Because of the lack of direct access to real entities, a non-dialectician is unable to acquire full knowledge, and she can only work on conjectures. The intentionality of her acts is aimed at Forms but only by means of images (i.e., empirical things) of the fundamental real objects (i.e., the Forms)¹⁰. Since they are based on these images, the experience-related dianoetic acts are oriented towards their intentional object, but do not reach completion in grasping it. Although the non-dialectician strives to relate to a component of the domain of reality, she cannot know it in all its determinateness, because she is forced to turn her gaze to the images. Therefore, the intentional object of an experience-related dianoetic act remains ultimately undetermined or not fully determined: it is an undetermined or not fully determined *ti* (a ‘something’) rather than an *ontos os* (a real entity, a Form). In this sense the intentionality of the experience-related dianoetic acts can be labelled as ‘incomplete intentionality’¹¹.

Nonetheless, it is not impossible that experience-related dianoetic acts are a good starting point for the subject to come to full knowledge. Nor is it impossible for the dianoetic image of the object to bear an overall similarity to

¹⁰ Emblematic are, for example, the passages of Plato’s *Meno*, 98b1-5, where dianoetic thinking is described as an *eikazein*, which means at the same time ‘portray’, ‘represent by an image or a likeness’, and ‘form a conjecture’. On this verb, see Picciafuochi (2022).

¹¹ Some scholars (recently Thomas 2008) interpret Plato’s claim that ‘*logos* necessarily [...] is *logos* of something (*tinis*)’ (*Soph.* 262e6-7; cf. also *Resp.* 476d-477b and *Parm.* 132b-c) in a strongly referential way. I argue, instead, that in order to justify the epistemological difference between representation (*dianoia*) and presentational thought (*noesis*) from a Platonic point of view, it is necessary to interpret the indefinite pronoun *ti* as referring to an undetermined or not fully determined ‘something’ and differentiate intentionality from referentiality (on this cf. Aronadio, 2018 and 2021).

the real object, so that it can work as the right path to the acquisition of the noetic ‘contact’ with the object. In this sense, the incomplete intentionality of the experience-related dianoetic acts is capable of being completed.

4.1.2. Opaque Referentiality

However, since the *dianoia* has no direct access to the object towards which it is intended, the experience-related dianoetic acts lack the transparent referentiality which is proper to *noesis*. Their actualisation is rather (and at best) the indication of certain qualities of the Forms or the formulation of descriptions of them, or, in summary and with a modern word, representations. Their actualisation can be labelled as ‘opaque referentiality’, as it lacks full knowledge of the intended object and is based on an indirect and tentative representation of it¹². To the one who represents it appears as a plausible referentiality because the data of experience are not considered in their empirical character, but are used as mediating elements for the understanding of the real intentional object (i.e. the Form); and yet, precisely because of the use of mediating elements, the one who represents cannot have any certainty about the effectiveness of his act in grasping the object. Only the dialectician can assess this, as we shall see.

¹² A use of the opposition ‘transparent/opaque’ can be found in Le Morvan (2005). The use of this pair of terms, here and hereafter, presents similarities and differences to that of Le Morvan: the similarity consists in the fact that transparency and opacity concern, respectively, the occurrence and non-occurrence of an actual relation of the knowing subject to the intended object; the dissimilarity rests on the fact that for Le Morvan the distinction between transparent and opaque descends from the difference between ‘objectual knowledge’ and ‘factive knowledge’, whereas in Plato’s perspective there can be no such difference; in fact, given the aforementioned priority of ontology over epistemology, from Plato’s perspective authentic knowledge has Forms as its object and knowing Forms implies knowing the relations they have with something other than themselves (in Le Morvan’s terms, objectual knowledge implies factive knowledge, and knowledge that is not objectual is not authentic knowledge). This in turn implies that it cannot be the case that intentionality is both existentially transparent and referentially opaque: this is, moreover, why in the context of Platonic thought it does not make sense to include the third element of Le Morvan’s triad, namely ‘translucent intentionality’. More pertinent is the use of the ‘transparent/opaque’ pair in Ray’s article (1980), on which, *infra*, footnote 25.

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4.2. *Dianoetic, Imagination-Related Act*

Although Plato did not thematise the issue of fictitious entities, it is legitimate to ask how a mental act directed towards a fictitious object fits into the conceptual framework outlined so far (all the more so since Plato frequently adopts fictitious characters or mythological figures in his dialogues)¹³.

Dianoetic acts oriented towards this type of objects are labelled here as ‘imagination-related acts’, to emphasize the pivotal role played by mental images in this case, and without any reference to something like a ‘faculty of imagination’.

Dianoia works here as in the case of the experience-related acts, the only difference being that imagination-related acts are not directed towards any empirical thing. The intended object does not exist (or is supposed to not exist)¹⁴.

4.2.1. *Incomplete, Incompletable Intentionality*

Therefore, besides being incomplete, as in the case of experience-related acts, the intentionality of imagination-related dianoetic acts is incapable of being completed: their indirect relation to their object is accompanied by the absence of any presumption of the possibility of a direct relation to this object, since the latter is not experience-related and/or is considered implausible.

¹³ Many scholars hinted at this issue, although it was not an explicit Platonic concern: cf. Thomas (2008), Centrone (2008: lx–lxviii). Prudently, Crivelli (2012: 8) states that it is unclear what position Plato would have taken on the issue of fictitious entities since he never takes an explicit position on the matter; but this prudent consideration is already indicative of the fact that it is not illegitimate to pose the question addressed here, if not from a historical perspective, at least from a theoretical one.

¹⁴ This clarification is not superfluous: for example, the mental act of an inhabitant of the northern hemisphere in the 15th century representing a black swan was an imagination-related act even though black swans already existed in the southern hemisphere.

4.2.2. Transparent Non-Referentiality

Accordingly, the actualisation of these acts differs from that of the experience-related acts. Although incomplete, the intentionality of the experience-related acts is such that it can be completed once a noetic vision gains direct relation to the previously only represented object. In this sense these mental acts are characterised by a possible, albeit opaque, referentiality. On the contrary, as imagination-related acts by definition have no referent, their referentiality must be qualified as ‘impossible’.

However, precisely because of this impossibility, the lack of any possible referentiality is transparent for the subject performing these acts: she is aware of the fictitious character of the object.

5. Noesis

As well known, in the aforementioned page of the *Republic* the *nous* is described as capable of going beyond the *hypotheseis* and grasping Forms directly. Whatever ‘grasping’ exactly means in this context, it is clear that only *nous* guarantees that a cognitive act gives rise to a true and full *episteme* (cf. *Resp.* VI 510b–511d). This is characterized by an apprehension of the object to be known that takes place without any filter¹⁵.

¹⁵ The epistemological characteristics of *nous* are highly debated. One thing, however, is indisputable: that in the image of the Line and in the allegory of the Cave Plato is very clear in positing a discontinuity between *dianoia* and *nous* and in making the noetic activity the culmination of the cognitive ascent that allows the intelligible entities to be directly grasped. As is well known, in Plato’s view one of the most qualifying features of *episteme* is infallibility: this characterisation finds its justification precisely in the absence of any mediation between the knowing subject and the known object.

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5.1. *Complete Intentionality*

It is worth recalling a couple of passages (among others) where Plato clarifies that the condition of knowledge is the ‘natural familiarity’ (the *syngeneia*) of human mind with the deep structure of reality.

For since all nature is of the same kin (*syngenes*) and the soul has learned everything, there is no reason why someone who has recollected only one thing – which is what people call ‘learning’ – should not discover everything else, as long as one is brave and does not give up on the search. (*Men.* 81c9-d4)

[...] it is the nature of the true lover of knowledge to strive for being; he does not dwell on the multiplicity of particulars, which are only opined as real, but he goes on his way, and he does become discouraged or give up his love until he grasps the true nature of each thing through that part of his soul to whom it suits to attain such a reality, namely the part cognate (*syngenes*) to it. (*Resp.* 490a8-b4)

The knowing subject is cognate, *syngenes*, to the domain of reality: although the human mind (the *psyche*) does not have knowledge at birth, nevertheless – Plato claims – it is *syngenes* to the components of reality.

The noetic act is the full expression of this condition of human *psyche*. Thanks to the *syngeneia*, the intentionality of the noetic acts can be labelled as ‘complete’, in the sense that it reaches completion in grasping its objects (Smith 1996; Fronterotta 2006).

5.2. *Necessary and Transparent Referentiality*

Therefore, the noetic act has full effectiveness. Its intentionality gives rise to referentiality: the noetically knowing subject refers directly to a component of the domain of reality. But for a full understanding of the noetic referentiality we must turn towards the ontological side of Plato’s perspective.

5.3. *Syngeneia as the ontological condition of the possibility of the noetic act by the human psyche*

Let me go back to the notion of *syngeneia*. If we do not want to transform Plato in Kant, if we do not want to pass off Plato's notion of *syngeneia* as something like a transcendental structure, we must admit that *syngeneia* is not only an epistemological condition of knowledge, but also an ontological one. In other terms, the image of family connection, on which the notion of *syngeneia* relies, means that in Plato's perspective mind and world are intimately connected: the quoted passages from the *Meno* as well as from the *Republic* show that in Plato's perspective all things are connected and the human *psyche* is – in some, admittedly not very clear way – part of this connection (at the end, this is the meaning of the myths that tell of the prenatal vision of the Forms by the soul).

6. *The Domain of Reality*

The notion of *syngeneia* makes it necessary to broaden the horizon of the present considerations to include the domain of the real. The 'kinship' between *psyche* and Forms finds, after all, a correspondence (or should it be better said: its foundation) in the relationality that characterises the elementary units of the real. This is the theme that must now be addressed.

6.1. *Being as Dynamis, i.e. Relationality as a Characteristic of the Domain of Reality*

In *Sophist* 251d-253a Plato describes the domain of reality in terms of *dynamis koinonias*, that is, mutual combination capacity.

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The reason why Plato attributes this capacity to the elementary units of the domain of reality (i.e., the Forms or the *gene*)¹⁶ lies in his conception of the *genos* of Being:

[...] a thing genuinely is if it has some capacity (*dynamis*), of whatever sort, either to act on another thing, of whatever nature, or to be acted on [...]. That is, what marks off the things that are as beings, I propose, is nothing other than *capacity* (*dynamis*) (*Soph.* 247d8–e4, transl. Rowe).

Being is *dynamis*, which implies that if something exists, it has the capacity to combine with something else. Consequently, the whole domain of reality is conceived of as a network, a huge system of selective relations: relationality is its hallmark. The nodes of this network are the Forms.

6.2. Intentionality and Effectiveness of Forms

The network metaphor helps to highlight two fundamental aspects of Platonic ontology¹⁷: first, each node of the network, i.e. each component of the domain of reality, *inasmuch as it exists as an individual entity*, has, besides its own nature (goodness, motion, rest, etc.), its own *dynamis*, which is a propensity to selectively combine with something else (a few of these nodes combine with all others). In this sense it is legitimate to consider the *dynamis* as a sort of ‘intentionality’. This intentionality is precisely the relationality that characterises the domain of reality: in other words, it is the *capacity* (*dynamis*) of each *ontos on* to be in at least some relationships with other *onta*.

Second, each component of the domain of reality, *inasmuch as it is part of the network of relationships* is *actually* connected to other Forms: and this is the

¹⁶ This is not the place to discuss the possible difference between Forms and *gene*. I personally believe that what Plato states in the *Sophist* about the five *megista gene* should be extended to all Forms, i.e. to all the elementary units that make up the domain of reality in its authentic and deep structure (where ‘deep’ means the opposite of ‘empirical’).

¹⁷ These are, in my opinion, two aspects that can be found in the background of any formulation of the notion of Form found in Plato’s dialogues, regardless of the date of their composition; however, they become clearest and most explicit precisely in the *Sophist*.

effectiveness of the *dynamis* of the components. The intentionality of the components of the deep structure of reality (i.e., the *dynamis* of Forms) is always effective, because the network of Forms as well as every Form is *aei on*, always existing, to use an expression typical of Plato. Therefore, in this case effectiveness can be labelled as ‘actuality’, to indicate that the relationships between the Forms necessarily obtain.

7. The Genos Logos

Among the entities characterised by *dynamis koinonias* Plato counts the *genos logos*: ‘*logos* is one of the *gene* among the things that are (*ta onta*)’ (*Sophist* 260a5–6). Here ‘*genos logos*’ is not just the name of human language and thought; primarily, it is one among the components of the domain of reality. The *genos logos* (hereafter *Logos*) is the deep structure that functions as the *paradeigma* that defines the nature of every human linguistic and cognitive act (hereafter *logos*).

7.1. Intentionality and Effectiveness of Logos

A few lines before the passage just quoted Plato states: ‘*logos* is born for us from the interweaving of Forms’ (*Soph.* 259e5–6). Indeed, qua *genos*, *Logos* possesses its own capacity for connection, but in this case *dynamis* is not a selective capacity: since the relationality of *Logos* is rooted in the interweaving of Forms, it extends to all components of the domain of reality. And this in turn implies that everything is speakable and/or thinkable¹⁸.

¹⁸ Plato’s thought (or, at least, the interpretation of it proposed here) differs significantly from contemporary forms of (so-called) Platonism. The Fregean conception of a Third Realm (Frege 1918) and the successive forms that the Fregean suggestion assumes (for example: Katz 1981) presuppose an ontological difference between language/thought and reality (conceived of as the physical domain). On the contrary, in the *Sophist* Plato clearly and explicitly presents an ontology based on the *koinonia* between all the components of the deep structure of reality, including *Logos* (to be understood as the paradigmatic Form of every linguistic and cognitive act).

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What has been said about each node of the network can be obviously applied to *Logos*. Inasmuch as it exists as an individual entity, *Logos* has, besides its own nature (language/thought), its own *dynamis*, which is its *capacity* (*dynamis*) be in relation with other *onta*. This propensity can be labelled as the ‘intentionality’ of *Logos*. Inasmuch as it is part of the network of relationships, *Logos* is actually connected to the other Forms. This is its effectiveness, that can be labelled as ‘actuality’, in accordance with what was said earlier about each component of the deep structure of reality. Since the own nature of *Logos* is language/thought, its being in actual relation with the *onta* is nothing other than referring to them. Therefore, the actuality of *Logos* is referentiality, a sort of ‘ontological referentiality’.

7.2. Digression: The ‘*tinós/peri tinós*’ Structure and its Instantiations ¹⁹

As with every other component of the deep structure of reality, all instantiations of *Logos* are copies of it; these instantiations are the *logoi* (discourses, or more generally mental acts, which have a linguistic form)²⁰. Therefore, the formal structure of *Logos* will be replicated, albeit with different levels of imprecision, in all *logoi*.

It is clear from pages 261c6–262e10 of the *Sophist* that every *logos* possesses three essential characteristics: a) it is related to something/someone (it is *tinós*, i.e. about something/someone, *Soph.* 262e6–7); b) it is an intertwining (*symploke*, *Soph.* 262c6) of at least one noun and one verb (*onoma* and *rhema*) which are ‘signs that show’ (*deloma*) a subject and an action or fact, respectively (*Soph.* 262a1–7); c) it possesses a quality (*poion*, *Soph.* 262e9), which is nothing other than its truth-value (as explicitly stated in *Soph.* 263b2–3). Since *logoi* are

¹⁹ The topic addressed in this section of the paper is among the most studied and debated in studies on Plato’s *Sophist*. Since its discussion here has the sole aim of showing how the use of the notions of intentionality and referentiality as interpretative tools has positive effects on Plato’s reading of linguistic phenomena, I will limit myself to describing them, without any references to the extensive critical literature, which would require much more space.

²⁰ As is well known, for Plato, thought is nothing other than internalised language: *Theaet.* 189e6–190a6, *Soph.* 263e3–9.

instantiations of *Logos*, the combination of these three essential characteristics has its foundation in the formal structure of *Logos*.

To illustrate how the aforementioned three essential characteristics are to be understood, Plato gives the example of two *logoi*: these are the famous sentences ‘Theaetetus sits’ and ‘Theaetetus flies’. With regard to them, Plato distinguishes a side of *tinós* (i.e. about something/someone) from a side of *peri tinós* (i.e. concerning something/someone): I think that in order to grasp the reason and function of this distinction, it is fruitful to interpret the side of *tinós* in terms of intentionality and the side of *peri tinós* in terms of referentiality.

In 262e6–7 it is clearly stated that if *logos* were not *tinós* it would not be at all²¹: being *tinós* is a necessary and essential characteristic of every *logos*. On the basis of what has been stated in § 7.1, such an essential characteristic is to be interpreted as the intentionality of every *logos*: actually, it is in the very being of *Logos*, i.e. in its *dynamis*, the propensity to be directed towards an object. In light of this, the indefinite pronoun *tinós* indicates the intentional object towards which the *logos* is directed: in both examples, Theaetetus²².

On the side of *peri tinós*, passage 263d1–4 clarifies what was already implicit in 262e9–263b3:

When things are said about you (*Peri de sou legomena*), then, but different things as if the same, and things that are not as if they are – that definitely seems to be the sort of combination of verbs and names (*synthesis ek rhematon gignomene kai onomaton*) that turns out really and truly to be false speech. (transl. Rowe)

Leaving aside for the moment the specific nature of falsehood, what is now relevant is that it is the *synthesis ek rhematon gignomene kai onomaton* that is called into account this time: thus, the side of *peri tinós* concerns the relation between a noun and a verb, which, as seen, are *deloma* of a subject and of an

²¹ *Soph.* 262e6–7: *logon anankaion, hotanper e, tinós einai logon, me de tinós adynaton* (‘Speech, when there is speech, must necessarily say something of something; it’s impossible for it to say something of nothing’, transl. Rowe).

²² *Soph.* 263c5–8: [‘Theaetetus flies is a *logos*’] *tinós*. [...] *Ei de ne estin sos, ouk allo ge oudenós*. (‘It [scil. the sentence ‘Theaetetus flies’] is necessarily of something. [...] But if it is not of you, it is certainly not of anybody or anything else’, transl. Rowe).

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action or fact. On the basis of what has been stated in § 7.1, such a relation can be interpreted as the (potential)²³ referentiality of every *logos*: actually, it is in the very being of *Logos*, as part of the network of reality, its being in relation with other *onta*. In light of this, the construct '*peri tinos*' concerns both the intended object and its relation to something else; more precisely, the side of *peri tinos* expresses the relationship as a whole²⁴: in the examples, the relationship between Theaetetus and sitting and the relationship between Theaetetus and flying.

Returning to the question of falsehood and, more generally, to the *poion* of *logoi*, i.e. their being true or false, consider the definition of true speech given in 263b4-5: 'And the true one [scil. the true *logos* 'Theaetetus sits'] says the things that are (*onta*), as they are, concerning you (*peri sou*)' (transl. Rowe, slightly modified). Two aspects deserve attention in this definition: on the one hand, the plural *onta* appears and, on the other hand, reference is made to the side of *peri tinos*, while that of *tinis* is not taken into account. This is explained by what has just been seen: the side of *peri tinos* involves the relationship as a whole. Moreover, it is to this complex that the compound names *symploke* and *synthesis* employed by Plato in this page of the *Sophist* refer: the real object (the referent) of the *logos* is the relation that its *symploke* of *onoma* and *rhema* is intended to describe.

The relation delineated in a *logos* has a *poion*, in the sense that it can be true when, about someone/something (*tinis*, e.g. Theaetetus), the *logos* refers to an existing relation concerning him/her/it (*peri tinos*, e.g. Theaetetus sits) or it can be false when, about someone/something (*tinis*, e.g. Theaetetus), the *logos* says things concerning him/her/it (*peri tinos*, e.g. Theaetetus flies) other than how they are.

Indirect proof of the usefulness of the notions of intentionality and referentiality as an exegetical tool for understanding the formal structure of

²³ This specification is necessary: whereas in the case of *Logos* referentiality is always actual, in the case of *logos* there may be a lack of an effective referentiality, as will be seen shortly.

²⁴ The *tinis/peri tinos* structure is often interpreted in terms of subject/predicate; here, as is easy to see, a different reading of it is proposed.

discourse/thought comes from the fact that these notions make it possible to justify two linguistic phenomena proper to the ordinary use of language, to which Plato paid attention, albeit occasionally and marginally. The first phenomenon consists in the formulation of sentences concerning fictitious entities. A situation analogous to the one considered in §§ 4.2, 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 arises here: these sentences are *logoi* with an intentionality that is, however, incomplete and incompletionable: in fact, because of the deliberately fictitious character of their object, they lack a referent and are, therefore, characterised by transparent non-referentiality; nevertheless, they are *logoi* that are perfectly intelligible to speakers. Without the distinction of intentionality from referentiality, this dual aspect of this type of *logoi* – namely their being without a referent and their communicative practicability – would not be explicable. An example of this type of sentences can be found in the *Sophist*: on pages 237b7–239a11 Plato examines sentences concerning the *medamos on*, emphasising precisely that twofold aspect, namely the fact that the *medamos on*, being something absurd, cannot be a referent and the fact that, nevertheless, sentences concerning it are formulated and comprehensible to speakers.

The other typical phenomenon of ordinary language is misunderstanding. Speaker A utters the sentence P referring to x, but receiver B hears P and understands it as if it refers to y. In this case too, it seems to me that the key of interpretation proposed here comes to the rescue: if every *logos* had not only intentionality but also referentiality, then misunderstanding would not be possible (because B, hearing P, could not fail to understand it as referring to x); on the other hand, the sentence P is not mere noise, but is a well-formed *logos* (as such it is received by B, even if he misunderstands its meaning). One way to make these two data compatibles is to differentiate the capacity of a *logos* to address something (its intentionality, which both A and B recognise as characteristic of P) from its actual referentiality (which, since the *logos* in question is evidently the result of a dianoetic act – at least for B –, takes the form of an opaque referentiality)²⁵. Analogous to the case of misunderstanding is the

²⁵ More generally, the interpretation proposed here of the *tinós/peri tinós* structure is also in line with the distinction between transparent and opaque referentiality. As anticipated (*supra*, footnote

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case of a misuse of a part of a sentence, which, however, does not endanger the communication: the misunderstanding case concerns an erroneous perception of the speaker's intentions by the receiver; the misuse case, on the contrary, concerns a correct understanding of the speaker's intentions by the receiver despite the error contained in the speaker's message. An example of the latter type of sentences can be found in the *Cratylus*: in 434e6-8 the character Socrates envisages a situation in which one person greets another using an incorrect name, but it is clear that the receiver understands that he/she has been greeted by the speaker despite the misuse his/her name.

Up to this point, following Plato's examples, we have considered language as practised by humans or, so to say, the empirical use of language. But, of course, such use finds its possibility and justification on the ontological level of Forms: as mentioned, *logoi* are instantiations of *Logos*. Consider now how the formal structure of language/thought is configured at the level of *Logos*. As has already been argued, *Logos* has overall relationality, since it is related to all the nodes in the network (including Not-Being), and overall referentiality, since, as *genos*, it has actuality. This corresponds to a fundamental theoretical

12), this pair of adjectives is used here in a manner similar to that of Ray (1980), who, roughly speaking, reformulates Donnellan's (1966) distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions in terms of transparent and opaque reference; thus, unlike Donnellan, Ray argues that reference occurs even in the cases of attributive uses of definite descriptions. He argues that one refers to something transparently if one's sentence respects two rules: the identifiability of the subject it refers to within the context in which it is formulated and the fact that the connection between that subject and what the sentence attributes to it occurs. If either of these two conditions is not met, the sentence has opaque referentiality. This distinction between opaque and transparent referentiality applies well to Platonic thought, as we have seen, and – it is now possible to add – is well suited to the *tinós/peri tinós* structure of *logos*. Let us consider the assertion 'The square is divisible into two isosceles triangles': this is clearly a case of *logos tinós* (about the square, or, more Platonically, about the Form of the square) *peri tinós* (the relationship between the square and the isosceles triangle). If it is formulated by an expert in geometry (*dianoetic act*) it is referentially opaque, since, according to Ray's perspective, the expert cannot be certain either that the copies of the square he uses are actually congruent with the square itself or that the square itself is divisible into two isosceles triangles. If, on the other hand, the assertion is made by a dialectician, then the referentiality is transparent, because both requirements are fulfilled, since the dialectician has direct insight into the square itself and its relations to something else.

requirement of Plato's thought: the distinguishability of truth from falsehood (i.e., of the dialectician's *logoi* from those of the sophist) requires an ontological justification of falsehood, which presupposes that a false sentence has referentiality. Indeed in the *Sophist*, Plato argues that both true and false *logoi* are referential: the former refers to a relation that is among those included in the *dynamis* of the *tinis* (the relation between Theaetetus and sitting [let us disregard the contingency of this *logos* here]); the latter refers to a relation that is not among them, and thus to a 'triangulation' that passes through the *genos* of *heteron* or Not-Being (the 'triangular' relation Theaetetus – *heteron* – flying)²⁶.

To sum up, since *Logos* is the *genos* that serves as a paradigm for all linguistic and thought acts, it is: a) *tinis*, in the sense that it has as its peculiar *dynamis* the propensity to refer to the other nodes of the network of reality; b) a *symploke* or a *synthesis ek rhematon kai onomaton*, in the sense that it refers to the relations between the other nodes of the network of reality (the relations called into question by the side of *peri tinis*); c) such that it has two opposite qualities (true/false, i.e. the aspect of the *poion*), in the sense that it refers both to relations included in the *dynamis* of the *tinis* and to relations not included, which call into question the *heteron*. This formal ontological structure of *Logos* is what, from Plato's perspective, makes it possible to explain how and why 'Theaetetus flies' is a false sentence: at the ontological level of *Logos*, the necessary completion of intentionality in referentiality guarantees the possibility of falsehood; at the ontological level of the *logoi*, the difference between intentionality and referentiality guarantees the distinguishability of true from false judgements.

7.3. *Logos as Paradeigma of Acts of Knowledge*

Let me go back to *noesis*. We have just seen that each component of the deep structure of reality is characterised by its own intentionality and by the

²⁶ Cf. *Soph.* 263b7: 'The false [*logos* says] things different from things that are (*hetera ton onton*)': as is well known, the entire Platonic justification of false speech hinges on the rejection of the *medamos on* and the conception of the Not-Being as different.

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effectiveness of this intentionality, that is the actualisation of the relations in which each of them is involved. But, as said, the noetic act is the expression of the ‘natural familiarity’ (*syngeneia*) of human mind with the deep structure of reality. Therefore, we can now understand why it is not by chance that noetic intentionality is a complete intentionality and resembles the intentionality of the nodes of the mentioned network: when performing a noetic act, the human *psyche* is, in a way, part of that network. Thanks to this, the noetic act has full effectiveness, precisely because its intentionality reaches completion in grasping its object (Smith 1996; Fronterotta 2006), as already said. This is the reason why the dialectician acquires not only full knowledge of the intentional object, but also the certainty about the effectiveness of her cognitive act: the noetically knowing subject²⁷ refers directly and infallibly to a component of the domain of reality, which in turn implies that noetic referentiality is not opaque, like that of *dianoia*, but is necessary and transparent.

The model and the ontological basis of the relationality of knowledge is the relationality of the domain of reality. It is possible to invert perspective and say that knowable entities are necessarily related to the *psyche*: Forms are intelligible in their essence.

To sum up, referentiality is a necessary feature of the noetic act. Moreover, transparency is a further essential quality of any noetic act in so far as it is characterized by *sapheneia*²⁸ (i.e. the absolute clearness with which the object manifests) because of the ‘anhypothetic’ character of *noesis* (Resp. 511b3–c2) or, in other terms, because of the directness of noetic acts.

²⁷ For the purposes of this theoretical reformulation of certain aspects of Platonic epistemology and its ontological background, it is not relevant to settle the question of whether the noetically knowing subject is only the disembodied *psyche* or can also be the embodied *psyche* of a human being. The aim here is merely to provide, on the basis of the ‘hypothesis of applicability’, an account of the nature of cognitive processes and their finding justification in the ontological articulation of the domain of reality.

²⁸ Cf. *supra*, footnote 9.

8. *Plato in Dialogue*

8.1. *Plato's Epistemology and Ontology through the Lens of Intentionality and Referentiality*

The following table summarises what has been said so far:

	Intentionality	Effectiveness
The network of Forms	(Selective) Relationality	Actual relations between Forms
Logos	Overall relationality	Overall referentiality
Noesis	Complete intentionality	Necessary and transparent referentiality
Experience-related dianoetic act	Incomplete, completable intentionality	Opaque referentiality
Imagination-related dianoetic act	Incomplete, incompletable intentionality	Impossible and transparent referentiality

The order of exposition followed so far has been reversed in this table: the ontological aspect, which has founding value, has been given priority over the epistemological aspect, which, Platonically, ranks lower.

This different order makes it clearer the reason why, in my opinion, looking at Plato's conceptual framework through the lens of intentionality helps to clarify the peculiar interrelationship between ontology and epistemology in Plato's thought. The notions of intentionality and effectiveness (or referentiality) are a successful way-in to understand Plato's view of the structure of both reality and knowledge, and, consequently, to understand a thought that is an onto-epistemology. In particular, the difference between intentionality and referentiality allows the primacy of ontology to be illuminated, insofar as it is

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the relationality of Forms that makes knowledge possible and, by virtue of this, that justifies noetic knowledge as well as all other kinds of cognitive acts²⁹.

Moreover, making use of the notions of intentionality and referentiality, focusing on their difference, opens a perspective to understand the role Plato assigns to *logos*, both in its ontological nature (that is the *Logos*) and in its instantiation in human thought and language. As already noted, the adoption of this perspective is essential in order to understand how a speech or a mental act can make sense despite being deficient in terms of reference; it is essential to understand how it is possible to speak about a non-existent thing like the *medamos on*, the absolute, 'Parmenidean' not-Being (an allusion is made here to the famous and crucial passage on the *medamos on* in the *Sophist*, on which something more in Aronadio 2018 and 2021, where it is argued that the difference between intentionality and referentiality allows to account for the possibility of falsehood in Plato's onto-epistemological thought).

8.2. *The Notions of Intentionality and Referentiality through the Lens of Plato's Epistemology and Ontology*

I believe that the dialogue between Plato and issues in contemporary philosophy may have also been fruitful in the other direction: the distinctions made to account for Plato's conceptual framework could shed light on elements of the contemporary debate. I will try to justify this statement with a couple of examples.

²⁹ An anonymous reviewer points out to me that reading the article one might get the impression that there is a homonymy in the way the notion of intentionality is used, since in the general definition, from which I start, it concerns the mind while, when Plato's ontology comes into play, it concerns the Forms. I am grateful for this observation because it helps me to clarify that one of the purposes of the paper is precisely to highlight how from Plato's point of view intentionality understood as 'attitude of mind' has its *ratio essendi* in the relationality intrinsic to the elementary units of the domain of reality. Rather than being homonymous, the notion of intentionality is here progressively subjected to a necessary enlargement to the ontological dimension; or, if one prefers, to a rooting in an ontological 'intentionality', understood as an intrinsic disposition of the elementary units to enter into a relationship with something other than itself.

8.2.1. Aboutness and Reference

As already seen, from Crane's point of view, 'aboutness' is a notion that exclusively concerns the mental domain, whereas 'reference' concerns the relation between mind and world. Along with this, we can say that, from Crane's point of view, intentionality, as the mind's attitude of being about something, belongs to the mental domain, while referentiality is a notion that concerns the connection between a mental act and its object.

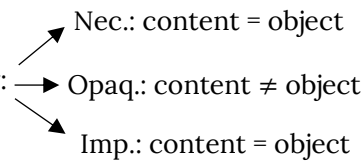
This distinction already supposes a great difference with respect to Plato's philosophical approach: because of the onto-epistemic character of Plato's thought, and because of his notion of *syngeneia*, the intentionality of any mental act with cognitive claims³⁰ is always oriented towards an existing object, whether successful or not. Therefore, within Plato's conceptual framework, intentionality and referentiality must be thought of as being in continuity, the latter being the completion of the former, as seen. The consequence of this conceptual premise was the need to distinguish between an opaque referentiality and a necessary and transparent referentiality.

If now, in addition, imagination-related dianoetic acts are also taken into account, then Platonic intentionality can be rephrased in this way: 'the intentionality of a mental act is always directed towards the presence or absence of an existing object, successful or not, or towards a non-existent object'.

Based on this premise, let me try to compare. In Crane's view, 'aboutness is the mere representation of something in words or thought, whether it exists or not', while 'reference is a technical term for the relationship between a word, or a thought, and an existing thing'. This distinction implies a distinction between 'content', or, better, 'mental content' and 'object' of a mental act. If we apply this pair of notions to Plato's view, the result is the following list:

³⁰ The restriction to mental acts with cognitive claims is necessary for the purposes of the present argument, on the one hand, to include mental acts resulting from *doxa* (since these also have cognitive, albeit unfounded, claims) and, on the other hand, to exclude imagination-related dianoetic acts, which, being oriented towards objects known as non-existent, are consciously performed without any claim to provide knowledge.

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	CRANE	PLATO
CONTENT	Aboutness: representation	Intentionality: mind oriented towards an object
OBJECT	Reference: mind- object relationship	Referentiality: <div style="display: inline-block; vertical-align: middle; margin-left: 10px;">  </div>

In the case of necessary referentiality, the mental content is identical to the object, for noetic acts are at stake here, and these have real entities as their object and are always successful. In the case of impossible referentiality the mental content is, again, identical to the object, for this time imagination-related dianoetic acts are at stake, and these deliberately have fictitious entities as their object and, consequently, are always successful³¹. Only opaque referentiality implies a gap between the mental content and the object, but we have seen that it is not impossible for this gap to be bridged: in the case of dianoetic mental acts (in the sense and role Plato attributes to the *dianoia* in the image of the Line) their intentionality is indeed incomplete, but completable.

What does this comparison imply? In Plato's conceptual framework the possibility of referentiality is presupposed because it is ontologically grounded: it is based on the primacy of ontological relationality and on the *syngeneia*. Consequently, Plato's problem is how to restore the natural identity of object and content. On the contrary, in Crane's conceptual framework it is precisely the possibility of referentiality that is the problem, since object and content are different aspects of the mental act. In other words, for Crane aboutness is unproblematic, whereas reference is; for Plato reference is unproblematic,

³¹ It is not possible to open up here the question of the truth value of mental acts having as their object a fictitious entity: it is clear that 'Pegasus is winged' and 'Pegasus is not winged' are sentences that must be treated differently, but it is beyond the scope of the present considerations to examine this aspect.

whereas the aboutness of human acts may not be successful and this raises problems.

8.2.2. *Singularism and Descriptivism: Possible Compatibility?*

Just a few words on the second example. Another important distinction is often addressed in contemporary debate: the opposition between singularism and descriptivism. Roughly speaking, singularists maintain that we refer to an object directly, by entertaining singular thoughts. What is established by singular thoughts is a direct relationship between the object of thought and the thinking mind, which rests on relations of 'acquaintance'. Differently, descriptivists claim that we refer to objects only indirectly, by means of a description: the object is taken as a properties-bearer.

Perhaps what has been said about necessary referentiality in Plato's conception allows a glimpse of a terrain on which these two opposing theses can be shown to be compatible. Noesis is surely acquaintance, but it makes also possible to have knowledge of both its objects and the relations with other objects, by virtue of the fact that, as already mentioned, the very identity of the object incorporates its own *dynamis*, in the sense that it is already determined with which other entities that object enters into relation and with which it does not. From a contemporary point of view this implies that acquaintance can be descriptive while being a singular thought. In other terms, Plato's perspective can suggest a way to consider singularism and descriptivism as compatible, by conceiving of presentations which both *pick out* the object and *describe* it (or at least some features of it).

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