ARCTOS

Acta Philologica Fennica

VOL. XLVIII

HELSINKI 2014

INDEX

Arctos 48 (2014) 25–55

RETHOUGHT FORMS: HOW DO THEY WORK?

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Abstract

This paper is a critical evaluation of Holger Thesleff's thinking on Plato's Forms, especially of his 'rethinking' of the matter, as he puts it in the title of his most recent contribution.[1] It lays out a broadly sympathetic perspective through dialectical engagement with the main lines of his interpretation and reconstruction of Plato's world. The aim is to launch the formal academic reception of that reconstruction (rethinking), which Thesleff cautiously and modestly presents as a 'proposal' — his teaser to elicit a reaction, positive or negative. The exegetical focus is on tracing the inspiration and reasoning behind his 'two-level' model of Plato's ontology, which, in turn, supports his tripartite classification of Forms. The critical focus is on identifying potential areas of misunderstanding and supplying any explanations, analyses, or arguments that may enhance the clarity of the respective positions.

1. Introduction

Thesleff is difficult to ignore and easy to misunderstand. He has something to say about practically everything we are accustomed to discussing in regard to Plato and a few things we are not. He also has a proclivity for going against the grain

[1] The 'rethinking' in question is actually a product of collaboration between Thesleff and myself: Alican and Thesleff 2013. Thesleff's insight, however, predates our formal collaboration, making it both appropriate and convenient to abbreviate repeated references to our article as 'Thesleff 2013'. Thesleff's personal initiative unfolds through several of his earlier works: 1989; 1993; 1999 (= 2009, 383–506). My own efforts intersect with that initiative in two places: Alican 2012 (87–110, 110–29) and Alican 2015.

of mainstream interpretation. This is why I have taken to calling him a maverick, both in person and in print (Alican 2012, 185–88). He has yet to correct me on that. His outlook on the Forms alone reveals why he has not voiced an objection: He *is* a maverick, and he is comfortable with that label. One would have to be to produce and promote the ideas he does.

Thesleff's positions are always fluid, his work, always in progress. What we get in his books and articles are snapshots of an ever developing viewpoint. To some extent, this is true of all academic work. But with Thesleff, it might well be the common denominator of his intellectual output. This makes it all the more difficult, and that much more important, to keep up with his investigation of any given subject. My aim here is to explicate his unorthodox approach to Plato's ontology, with particular emphasis on what he does with the Forms.

2. The General Enterprise

The most striking feature of the general enterprise is its ontological elitism. Thesleff does not recognise every abstraction in Plato as a Form.[2] Nor does he take what we normally regard as Platonic Forms to be, one and all, the same kind of thing: each one simply a Form, just like any other. He sees a fundamental difference between, say, the Form for bed and that for motion, and further, between either one of those and the Form for justice — examples likely to be familiar even without specific references. He proposes rethinking Plato's Forms with a view to preserving the variegation present in the original as opposed to perpetuating the uniformity prevailing in the literature.

His rethinking inspires a tripartite classification consisting of Ideal Forms, Conceptual Forms, and Relational Forms. This arrangement comes with caveats reflecting uncertainties in the dialogues themselves. The following provisions in particular are important for a thorough appreciation:

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[2] The first letter of 'Form' (or 'Idea') is capitalised whenever the reference is to Plato's Forms. Individual Forms take on an initial capital when this would help avoid ambiguity (but not otherwise), as in the case of a direct comparison between a Form and an instantiation bearing the same name, for example, Justice itself and justice in the court (or the Just itself and a just law).

- The classification is a thought experiment, as is Plato's own approach to philosophy.[3] There can be no proof in the standard sense.
- The taxonomy has little to do with chronology: To affirm differences between types of Forms is not to affirm developmentalism.[4]
- The three divisions are decidedly different from one another, so much so as to defy being brought together under the general rubric of Forms, a label retained for convenience and familiarity.
- Despite fundamental differences, one kind of Form can, depending on context, take on the characteristics of another, specifically with certain Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms coming to resemble Ideal Forms.

We may add to these what would be the most important condition of all, though not directly about the Forms: the understanding of Plato's philosophical vision in terms of a sliding scale of reality represented by the metaphor of two levels in one world. This is Thesleff's alternative to the traditional two-world interpretation where Forms reside in one world and particulars in another. The caveat here is that the focal point of Plato's metaphysics is not the relationship between Forms and particulars, nor the diversification experiments with Forms, but the stratification of reality in a hierarchical ontological structure consisting of a higher and lower level and untold layers in between. Forms and particulars, not to mention the different kinds of Forms, are distinguished through this two-level vision — not merely a heuristic tool for understanding Plato but an outlook actually present in Plato.

This means, among other things, that Thesleff's classification of Forms is an initiative to tidy up the most important features of Plato's ontology rather than an attempt to provide an exhaustive catalogue of Forms recognised in the scholarly tradition. But even after we make allowances for any and all caveats, Thesleff's account leaves us with questions that can fruitfully be pursued further and problems that cannot fairly be placed entirely on Plato's doorstep:

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[3] Thesleff uses the model to make better sense of Plato, who was in the habit of using his own models, among them, the Forms, to make better sense of the world.

[4] See Thesleff (2013, 20, cf. 14, 16, 24, 33, including nn. 4, 10). Admittedly, Plato may have come up with the different types of Forms as a result of different thought experiments conducted at different times. But the resulting variety functions as an organic whole rather than a succession of increasingly better models of exactly the same thing. One category of Forms is not an improved version of another. For more on his views on chronology, see Thesleff (1982 [= 2009, 143–382]; 1989, 1–26).

- What is the difference between Forms and concepts?
- What is the difference between Forms and universals?
- What is the ontological status of Forms, or, to elaborate, what is the mode of their existence, or the nature and implications of their reality?
- How does the ontological status of Ideal Forms differ from that of Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms?

The first three questions cannot be answered without expanding on them to distinguish between the kinds of Forms envisaged. And this is what gives rise to the fourth question. To be fair, Thesleff answers all these questions. But his answers can leave the reader wondering, for example, what the difference is between horseness and justice, the former, presumably a Conceptual Form, the latter, definitely an Ideal Form. Horseness lacks the positive intrinsic value characteristic of (common and unique to) Ideal Forms and therefore present in justice. But apart from that, both horseness and justice are universals that exist in reality and outside the mind, thus pointing to a shared ontological platform.

To put it crudely, it would seem that both horseness and justice are the same kind of thing from an ontological standpoint, differing only in their axiological dimensions. We may then press Thesleff more generally on whether Ideal Forms really differ from the other two kinds of Forms in any way other than the presence or absence of positive intrinsic value.[5] This goes to the heart of his classification scheme, and we would, accordingly, do well to examine the main organisational principles behind that arrangement.

Despite the various uncertainties, always embraced unapologetically, Thesleff's perspective comes with several clear and strong commitments:

- All Forms are objectively real: They are ontologically independent both of the mind and of particulars.
- All Forms are at least universals (a provision allowing Forms to function like universals while having a greater claim to reality).[6]

[5] The notion of positive intrinsic value in Forms naturally brings to mind the possibility of negative intrinsic value in Forms. Thesleff devotes considerable attention to the question of negative Forms (the bad itself, the unjust itself, the ugly itself, and so on), primarily with a view to establishing that there are none, or, more specifically, that Plato does not countenance negative (Ideal) Forms. This is a developing theme (1999, 63–67 [= 2009, 447–50]; 2013, 40–42).

[6] See Thesleff (2013, 19–21). Note that "Forms are what universals fail to be" (19, n. 20), a friendly amendment to McCabe's dictum that "Forms are what particulars fail to be" (1994,

- All Forms are causally efficacious, functioning as reasons, explanations, or causes of sorts for the phenomena they represent.
- Ontological Status: Some Forms are more real, so to speak, than others, depending on the relative value and importance Plato attaches to them.
- Ontological Ascent: Forms with a lower ontological standing (Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms) can approximate to those of the highest ontological standing (Ideal Forms).[7]

The commitments enumerated here contain the answers to the questions posed above, especially in consideration of the caveats mentioned in the beginning. It may be helpful, all the same, to retrace such connections to make sure they are intact. This paper is dedicated to doing just that, not necessarily by taking up each of the foregoing questions exactly as expressed above but by trying out the vantage point Thesleff recommends for a clear view of the world as Plato saw it.

3. The Stratification of Reality

Thesleff's primary mission in Platonica is to replace the traditional two-world interpretation with a two-level alternative.[8] Perhaps his greatest contribution to Plato scholarship has been his campaign to unite the disparate worlds of the noumenal and the phenomenal in a single world with two levels sandwiching an indefinite multitude of subdivisions in a hierarchical stratification of reality.[9] The possibility and sensibility of bringing Forms and particulars together in a single

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[7] The term first appears in Thesleff (2013): 22, n. 21, 43. See 29–33, 42, for discussion, 43–44, for recapitulation.

[8] Other notable reactions to the tradition of two worlds in Plato include: Brentlinger (1972); Broadie (2004); Butler (2007); Ferguson (1921); Nails (2013); Nehamas (1975); Robjant (2012). See also n. 9 below.

[9] A note on ontological versus epistemological frames of reference may be in order: In advocating his two-level model over the two-world model, Thesleff (2013, 15, n. 7) is concerned exclusively with the ontology of the matter. This is not the only possible approach, nor even the only actual one, and he is sensitive to the difference. He finds the epistemological perspective irrelevant to his own project and refers readers primarily to the work of Smith (2000, 2012) but also to contributions by Rowe (2005) and Butler (2007). See further: Fine (1978, 1990) and the reaction to Fine by Gonzalez (1996).

world convinces him to lay to rest the thoroughgoing metaphysical dualism shaping the reception and presentation of Plato through the ages.

Thesleff locates the origins of the two-level model in the work of De Vogel but accepts responsibility for having developed it as an interpretive paradigm.[10] He embraces the two-level model as the root of all Platonic thinking, a philosophical vision more basic than, say, the so-called theory of Forms.[11] It is, in fact, this feature of his discovery, namely, its relevance and reliability as a standard of interpretation, that so excites Thesleff, who declares the two-level perspective a prerequisite to a proper understanding of Plato.

Other basic perspectives, however, could be at play here. Opposition, to name one, is a prime candidate. Thesleff admits this, or, more accurately, he invokes and publicises it, wherever he discusses the two-level model (1993, 21; 1999, 7–10, 11–25 [= 2009, 393–96, 397–410]; 2013, 17–19), which he presents as the natural culmination of a general preoccupation with opposition relations shaping the prevailing sociocultural mindset. It may be useful to probe even deeper into how the Greek conception of opposition may have influenced Plato's thought, particularly in leading him to develop a two-level outlook.

Although pursuing this in detail here might be distracting, a rewarding distraction of this sort is to be found in the early work of G. E. R. Lloyd, a somewhat younger contemporary of Thesleff. During the period that Thesleff was moving from Pythagoras to Plato, Lloyd came out with a series of contributions (1962, 1964, 1966) to our understanding of the role of opposition in ancient Greek philosophy, with especial emphasis on tracing its roots in ancient Greek thought in general and demonstrating its growing hold on Greek philosophy in particular. According to Lloyd (1962), cultural preconceptions regarding opposition were prevalent in ancient Greece, among other places, with a strong impact and traceable influence on early philosophical ruminations ranging from the Presocratics to Aristotle.

Thesleff's work (1993, 21; 1999, 7–10, 11–25 [= 2009, 393–96, 397–410]; 2013, 17–19) is largely in agreement with that of Lloyd in regard to the emergence and development of opposition as a paradigm in Greek philosophy,

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[10] See De Vogel (1986, 50, 62, 145–48, 159–212, especially 159–71); cf. Thesleff (1993, 17–45; 1999, 11–52 [= 2009, 397–436]; 2013, 17, including nn. 14, 15).

[11] The theoreticity of Plato's Forms is a thorny question. Thesleff does not explore the matter personally, instead referring readers to a selection of substantive discussions (2013, 15, n. 6): Annas (1981, 217–41); Gonzalez (2002, 31–83); Hyland (2002, 257–72); Sayre (1994, 167–99; 2002, 169–91); Williams (2006, 148–86).

though Thesleff (after his early work on Pythagoras) has remained more strictly focussed on Plato, with Lloyd concentrating partly on Aristotle and mostly on Greek science. Inspired by what Plato did with the opposition framework he inherited, specifically with the complementary contrasts he evidently preferred to polar opposites, Thesleff urges us to abandon the two worlds of the metaphysical dualism traditionally attributed to Plato in favour of two levels in a single world.

Possibly the strongest objection to the two-level alternative lies in the question of transcendence: What exactly do the transcendent Forms transcend? And where do they do this transcending? Does not the very idea of transcendence require a separate world?

These amount to basically the same question, and it is, in any case, an open question. Today, we face a similar problem in the choice between a universe and a multiverse as the proper interpretation of reality. Science is increasingly favouring a multiverse, at bottom, a plurality of universes. While physicists assure us that this is a possibility — that what we have been exploring as the universe is actually just one of many (possibly infinitely many) universes that are inaccessible to us — the assurance, or even flat out proof, is not convincing, nor even relevant, if what is meant by 'universe' in the first place is the totality of everything that exists, the whole of reality, accessible or not, so that the postulated 'multiverse' adds nothing to the concept of 'universe'. In this sense, the scenario of a multiverse beyond the universe is not meaningful, let alone being tenable. Yet in the sense that the universe is what we have so far been able to make of reality with the science and technology available to us, it is both meaningful and useful to think about what lies beyond. It seems, in the end, to be a matter of perspective, a matter, that is, of what we mean by 'universe' (what we take to be the referent of the term).

Thesleff's levels are like that. While Thesleff himself does not present any of this as a matter of perspective, instead asserting unequivocally that his own view is right (and anything in contradiction wrong), if the analogy could nevertheless be extended to his case, he would come down on the side of the universe as opposed to the multiverse. He assigns a single world to the whole of reality, while handling diversity in levels. What others divide between two different worlds, he distributes throughout a single world with two main levels and multiple sublevels.

But can two levels in one world accommodate the division between material and immaterial reality? This is the question to be asked here. And it is not the same question as whether it makes more sense to speak of a plurality of worlds or

of a plurality of levels within a single world. Those who postulate a second world do so for no other reason than to accommodate Plato's notion of transcendence, which they take to require an existence outside the familiar world of space and time. Thesleff, in contrast, combines everything, including any transcending to be done, in one and the same world. The two-world interpretation is entirely consistent with what we normally understand by transcendence while falling short in explaining how the two separate worlds are supposed to account for the correspondence Plato sees between Forms and particulars. The two-level interpretation supports a curious sense of transcendence, with everything still belonging to the same world, wherein nothing can quite properly be said to have transcended anything, at least not in the ordinary sense of the term (as being or going beyond that which is transcended), but it is, for the very same reason, fully responsive to all manner of connection and correspondence between Forms and particulars.

What, then, is the answer? Can two levels in the same world accommodate the distinction between the physical and the abstract? Probably not if we think of this and similar contrasts in terms of polar opposition. Nothing can reconcile reality with what lies beyond. This is because nothing lies beyond reality. On the other hand, the physical does not necessarily exhaust reality. Perhaps the proper distinction is between reality as we know it and reality as it is. Thesleff's recommendation is always to think of such distinctions (material / immaterial, sensible / intelligible, and so on) in terms of complementary perspectives, as in the contrast between, say, upstairs and downstairs.[12] In this sense, not only are the apparent opposites compatible but they are also complementary, neither one comprehensible without the other.

This is my own reaction to the puzzle of transcendence in a single world. It is thoroughly exploratory. Thesleff's is more elegant: Writing to me in person, he denies the problem altogether, as he takes 'transcendence' in a weaker sense than the standard philosophical/theological notion of a reality outside or beyond the world. Under his interpretation, the relevant sense of 'transcendence' is not (pace my playful label above to mark the difference) a 'curious' one invoking an 'otherworldly' existence without any 'other world' to speak of but a weaker one

[12] Thesleff typically explicates this distinction — or rather relationship, perhaps a communion (*koinōnia*) of sorts — with an abundance of examples, not just his own but also Plato's. Some of his favourites (2013, 19, including n. 19) are the divided line in the *Republic* (6,509d–511e), the ladder of love in the *Symposium* (209e–212a), and the world-soul in the *Timaeus* (35a–36d). See the following discussion through the end of this section (including the corresponding notes) for the use he makes of the divided line.

precluding the implied dissociation with the world (the only one there is).[13]

Thesleff and I are not in disagreement over the nature of the two-level model. Our reactions to the putative puzzle converge toward the same end. Thesleff's response is more solid, leaving no room for a problem to solve. Mine is more adventurous, entertaining the standard (strong) sense of transcendence while seeking a solution within the limitations of a single world. Strictly speaking, no such adventure can succeed in a scenario both requiring and rejecting an 'other world', but the metaphorical analysis above is the best way I know to demonstrate the significance of Thesleff's promotion of complementary over contradictory opposition. It may not show how to remain in the world while leaving it behind, but it does show what goes on in Plato's world.

Thesleff has been in the habit of using a visual aid to probe Plato's world, which he believes to be built on the relevant (complementary) sort of opposition. The design is simple, a line going through a list of ten pairs of contrasts as follows:[14]

one	same	stable	divine	soul	leading	intellect	truth	knowledge	defined
many	different	changing	human	body	being-led	senses	appearance	opinion	undefined

The vertical alignment of the corresponding elements in each pair of contrasts depicts an asymmetrical relationship, basically a sociocultural valuation pattern (of which the list is representative rather than exhaustive) developing into philosophical insight, with the top component considered superior to the bottom but neither contemplated apart from the other. The illustration is not so much about

[13] This is consistent with Thesleff's ever vigilant approach to transcendence in Plato. He has long denied a 'transcendence' beyond the world, as it were, and has for this reason favoured the use of scare quotes for the term itself: "It is natural, also, to infer from the two-level vision that all 'Ideas' (whatever terms used [= 'Ideal Forms' in 2013]), are (in spite of the κοινωνία between the levels) somehow 'transcendent,' i.e. distinct (χωρίς) from and pointedly primary in relation to sensible things (though they are certainly not 'beyond being'): being 'divine,' invisible and attainable by intellect only, they belong entirely to the higher level in Plato's vision" (1999, 58 [= 2009, 442]; cf. 55 [= 2009, 439] n. 97; 62 [= 2009, 446] n. 111). It is important to remember, however, that this distinction is still within the sliding scale of a single reality where neither end is cut off from the other in complete isolation or polar opposition. The *chōrismós* here is not a hard 'separation' (or 'separability') but a softer 'distinction' (or 'distinguishability'). See further n. 31 below.

[14] The visual aid in question can be found in several of Thesleff's works, either in the precise form presented here (1999, 27 [= 2009, 411]; 2013, 17) or in a variation (1993, 21).

the Forms as it is about the more basic opposition paradigm Thesleff believes to have led Plato to develop his two-level outlook, which, in turn, supports and encourages the distinction between Forms and particulars (or which, from our perspective, helps explain that distinction). The distinction between Forms and the things of which they are Forms makes more sense in a single reality divided up in this manner than it does in two separate worlds — where the Forms would be without substance, the things, without Form, and each without a frame of reference to identify it as what it is.

Thesleff's visual aid is, in a sense, a simplified version of the more popular one in Plato, the divided line of the *Republic* (6,509d–511e). Thesleff is, in fact, quite fond of the original simile, embracing it both as evidence of Plato's two-level vision and as a model for his (Thesleff's but also Plato's) classification of Forms. The four segments of Plato's divided line correspond to subdivisions in the two main levels of Thesleff's scheme, placing the Forms on the upper level, the particulars, on the lower.[15] To put it in Plato's terms, Ideal Forms belong at the top (right after *to agathon*), at the level of *noesis*, Conceptual Forms come next, at the level of *dianoia*, and Relational Forms constitute a lateral projection of the general partition scheme. The two lower segments of Plato's line are reserved for physical things, at the level of *pistis*, and for images or shadows, at the level of *eikasia*, together corresponding to the single (but divisible and actually stratified) lower level of Thesleff. Details are best left to the next section, dedicated exclusively to Thesleff's classification of Forms.

4. The Classification of Forms

Thesleff's stratification of reality is the hermeneutic anchor for his classification of Forms. This is not to say that his two-level model automatically suggests the divisions he proposes. It does not. But what he does with the Forms is a natural extension of what he does with Plato's ontology. Having long contemplated distinctions between different kinds of entities collectively regarded simply and without discrimination as Forms (1989; 1993; 1999 [= 2009, 383–506]), Thesleff has settled, in his latest thinking (2013), on a full-blown classification scheme.

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[15] This is another occasion to remember that Thesleff presents the two primary levels as a metaphor for a comprehensive stratification scheme with an indefinitely large number of subdivisions. Wherever he refers to either of the two main levels, or to both at once, he means to include any and all sublayers without specifically mentioning them.

Summarised above (in section 2), this is a grouping with three divisions: Ideal Forms; Conceptual Forms; Relational Forms.

All three are universals with objective reality. As Thesleff puts it, they are 'at least' universals, which leaves open how much more they can be and what exactly each might be. It turns out that they are decidedly different things. They differ not only in the aspects of reality to which they correspond as universals but also in the qualities that make them what they are as Forms.

Regarding their 'phenomenal range', to coin a phrase, (1) Ideal Forms serve as value paradigms, though what they are in and of themselves is noetic realities of superlative intrinsic value; (2) Conceptual Forms cover types, properties, events, actions, and experiences; (3) Relational Forms embody correlative universal concepts taken in pairs of asymmetrical contrasts jointly responsible for the fundamental structure of the cosmos. In a sense, albeit a simplistic sense, Ideal Forms account for values, Relational Forms, for relations, leaving Conceptual Forms to represent all other relevant universals, be they natural kinds, or their properties, or anything else open to phenomenal experience, such as events or actions.[16]

As for what these Forms are qua Forms, Ideal Forms differ from the other two kinds through a host of features, including transcendence, intelligibility, and comparable refinements familiar from the long tradition of Plato scholarship.[17] Ideal Forms are much like the fantabulous entities associated with the gods, and accorded a status bordering on divinity, as in the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*.[18] In comparison, Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms come across as little more than glorified concepts, universals with objective reality. They exist, to be sure, but evidently not as anything nearly so special as Ideal Forms.

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[16] The reason this is a simplistic account is that Ideal Forms are not values, Relational Forms are not relations, and Conceptual Forms are not concepts. Each is the Form for the type of phenomenal manifestation it represents, not that manifestation itself.

[17] The full list includes seven features identifying Ideal Forms as transcendent, intelligible, paradigmatic, perfect, immutable, simple, and unique. Thesleff lists these as commonly recognised features in the literature as opposed to personal discoveries or innovations, and he admits the possibility of additions, deletions, and modifications to the list (2013, 27–28, cf. nn. 33, 34).

[18] *Phaedo* 78b–80b: the analogic argument where the soul is likened to the gods and the Forms, thus implying that the latter two are themselves comparable in some way. *Phaedrus* 246e–249d: the cosmic journey of enlightenment where the soul of the philosopher (248a–249d), together with the gods (246e–247e), eventually beholds the Forms.

The 'glorified concepts' analogy, however, runs the risk of understatement. It must be understood to include not just ontological independence but ontological eminence as well. As vague as that may sound, it captures the superiority of the lesser two types of Forms over things that are not Forms at all. The upper level of Plato's world is not just for Ideal Forms but for all Forms. Everything else belongs to the lower level. Furthermore, the eminence in question is not strictly ontological but broadly metaphysical. At the very least, these 'glorified concepts', in addition to their objective reality, boast a causal efficacy of some sort. All Forms, no matter which of the three divisions they may belong to, function in an explanatory capacity on a cosmic scale, though it is not clear whether this is a logical, cosmological, psychological, or yet some other kind of explanation. The lack of specificity in this regard is not a shortcoming of Thesleff's account but a feature of Plato's. Thesleff acknowledges a causal role for the Forms, but he does not pursue it in any detail, partly because has a greater interest in ontology than in cosmology, and partly because he does not think we can get very far with a reconstruction of Platonic causality.[19]

The relevance of ontological/cosmological eminence across the board at the upper level of reality is best reflected in Thesleff's allowance for the possibility of ontological ascent: This is a process (or phenomenon) through which the boundaries break down between Ideal Forms, on the one hand, and Conceptual

[19] Thesleff is not impressed with our prospects for discovering a coherent account of causation, or of causal explanation, in Plato. He does recognise the various attempts in the canonical corpus — where causality is examined in the Forms, in the soul, in the demiurge, and even as a category of its own (e.g., *Philebus* 23d ff.) — but he also notes the absence of a connection toward a unified perspective (1999, 102 [= 2009, 483]). He finds the approach unclear even where the focus seems to be exclusively on the Forms (2013, 28, n. 34), adding, in fact, that there is no such restriction to the Forms. What may appear to be about the Forms is more generally about the levels: "To put it somewhat aristotelically, there is a 'causal' relation between the levels, even more manifestly than between Forms and particulars" (1999, 30 [= 2009, 415]). Yet, even then, observes Thesleff, "one cannot claim that the upper level is always or predominantly 'effecting' the lower level phenomena" (1999, 102 [= 2009, 483]). He is equally cautious about what to make of the foundational principles of the *agrapha dogmata*. Rejecting the Tübingen tendency to take the *archai* as "'causes' in the Presocratic sense, which would mean stressing their 'material' and 'efficient' aspects", he interprets the subordination of the *hen* to the *ahoristos duas* as an indication that the *archai* "combine the 'formal' and 'final' aspects of Aristotelian causes" (1999, 101–02 [= 2009, 483]). He makes no commitments in this regard, offers no assurances. He warns that this is not so much about Plato as it is about Aristotle: "But of course 'aetiology' is an Aristotelian issue" (1999, 102 [= 2009, 483]). Even his call for caution is cautious: "The question of how to apply Aristotelian 'causes' (or rather, aetiology) to this complex, can perhaps not be definitely solved" (1999, 101 [= 2009, 483]).

Forms and Relational Forms, on the other. Any Conceptual Form can, in principle, approximate to Ideal Forms, thereby coming to resemble them in every way except for the possession of intrinsic value. And the same holds for the dominant (more valuable or more important) element in the asymmetrically paired correlative universal concepts constituting Relational Forms. Hence, the string of features normally reserved for Ideal Forms, including the qualities of transcendence and intelligibility, ceases under ontological ascent to be a means for differentiating between Ideal Forms and the other two types.

Ontological ascent opens up interesting possibilities, engendering greater flexibility within the classification scheme, but it also comes with implications that may be interpreted as complications. This is at the centre of the discussion in the next section. At this point, it is better to proceed with a closer look at the system itself, taking stock of the details of all three categories of Forms.

To start with, what makes Ideal Forms so special? It may seem upon initial consideration that they are little more than moral exemplars, paradigms of human excellence. But they are more than that. First, they are more than paradigms: They are real entities albeit ones that transcend sense-experience, therefore being accessible through the mind alone. As mentioned, they also have some sort of causal or explanatory relevance, though we need not dwell on this here, as moral values of the ordinary sort may also be said to have causal or explanatory relevance insofar as they tend to be invoked as reasons for action, that is, cited as justification by moral agents performing moral acts. They are, in short, noetic realities. Second, their connection with the phenomenal level of reality covers more than moral value, extending, for example, to aesthetic and religious value as well, and possibly also to other categories of value. As a matter of fact, the division is not between moral and nonmoral value (nor between aesthetic and nonaesthetic value, nor between religious and nonreligious value) but between intrinsic and instrumental value. Hence, even something that is neither moral (justice) nor aesthetic (beauty) nor religious (piety) may be an Ideal Form. The Form of knowledge comes to mind (*Parmenides* 134a–e; *Phaedrus* 247d–e). And the same may perhaps be said of the Form of life (*Phaedo* 106d).

As for the other two types of Forms, the fact that they are both, in many respects, less valuable (or less important, or less significant, and so on, all with reference to Plato's discernible outlook), and as it seems, equally less valuable, should not be taken as an indication that they are merely variations on a theme. They are different sorts of things and they play different roles in Plato's attempt to make sense of the world around him. More to the point, Relational Forms are not

a subdivision of Conceptual Forms that just happen to be taken in pairs of complementary opposites.[20] Relational Forms have the distinct function, collectively, of illustrating the constitution of the universe.

As with any classification scheme, two questions arise with respect to Thesleff's: (1) Is the taxonomy exhaustive? (2) How does it compare with actual or possible alternatives?

The answer to the first question is that the aim is not so much exhaustive coverage as it is holistic codification. It is more important that each division be a verifiable or defensible reflection of the Platonic corpus than that absolutely nothing be left out. Thesleff has never been after a complete catalogue of everything that may pass for a Form, but he has been interested in making sense of the variety of entities (or constructs, depending on whether one sees Plato as discovering or inventing these things) that may be organised in accordance with Plato's ontology and his general philosophical outlook, preferably in a demonstrable correspondence with both. This being so, his classification of Forms has been inspired and shaped by his two-level interpretation of Plato. Nothing that is not supported by this model makes it into the classification. And the same can be said of anything that happens to be either too vague or too controversial for accurate assignment.[21]

The answer to the second question would have to be on a case-by-case basis. This is a matter of comparing Thesleff's classification with whatever happens to be nominated in its place. While alternatives have not yet appeared in print in the form of a direct challenge, both actual and possible alternatives can be found in much that has been proposed independently. They can sometimes be found in generalist commentaries on Plato (companions, guidebooks, overviews), required by their nature to make the 'theory' of Forms accessible to a wide audience. Mohr (2010, 5), for example, divides Plato's Forms into five groups, which he takes to represent the traditional list of Forms: moral and aesthetic notions (justice itself, goodness itself, beauty itself); mathematical concepts (three, oddness, even, square, sphere); relations (double, half, large, small, octave, speed); notions

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[20] See Thesleff (2013, 35–36, especially n. 54) on this aspect of the difference between Relational Forms and Conceptual Forms.

[21] The prime examples are mathematicals (numbers and shapes) and immanent Forms. Regarding mathematicals, Thesleff notes in passing that they can be classified under Conceptual Forms, though he shows no enthusiasm for further consideration, first, because he is not convinced of the subject's relevance to his primary project, second, because he is not optimistic about a resolution in any event (2013, 21–22, especially n. 21). And he shows no greater interest in the possibility or implications of immanence — the chief implication being 'immanent Forms' — declaring the question "largely *non liquet*" (2013, 33; cf. n. 31 below).

that range widely over other notions (being, sameness, difference, motion, rest); natural kinds (earth, air, fire, water). Mohr is right to offer this as a 'traditional' list. But nothing here contradicts Thesleff's model.

Examples can be multiplied indefinitely, I suspect, with much the same result. Alternatives are unlikely to be opposed diametrically to Thesleff's classification, instead presenting different ways of arranging roughly the same items, perhaps coming up with a division or two which Thesleff handles at the level of subdivisions. A broader survey may prove more informative. A combination of both questions could, for example, be taken up in an alternative classification grounded in the distinction between transcendence and immanence. Thus, instead of Thesleff's three divisions, we would have transcendent Forms versus immanent Forms.[22]

Actually, the matter of transcendence versus immanence is not so much a distinction between types of Forms as it is a debate on the nature of Forms, specifically on the possible phenomenal manifestation of Forms. Employing it as a means of differentiating between Forms (just because some dialogues speak of the 'F' in us and so on) seems to beg the question. That, of course, may not be altogether fair from the perspective of anyone collating apparently endless examples of transcendent Forms and immanent Forms throughout the Platonic corpus, wondering why they are both in abundance if they may not be taken as two different types of Forms.

A case in point is a discussion note by Demos (1948, 456–60), reportedly drawing and expanding on earlier work both by himself (1939, 179) and by Cornford (1939, 78). Demos objects to interpreting the interplay between Forms and particulars as a correspondence between *what* and *that*, in other words, as a juxtaposition of essence and instance, thus equating whatness (structure) with universals while leaving nothing but brute fact for particulars (1948, 456). He envisages Plato's Forms as combining elements both of universals and of particulars. Although he does not claim to be advancing a classification scheme, his discussion is dedicated to elucidating the distinction between what he calls 'Ideal Forms' (or 'Abstract Forms') and 'Empirical Forms' (or 'Phenomenal Forms'). The difference is that the former are grasped by *nous* whereas the latter are found in

[22] This is not necessarily incompatible with Thesleff's scheme, as both transcendent Forms and immanent Forms can arguably be divided further into Ideal Forms, Conceptual Forms, and Relational Forms. Or perhaps the three divisions can be assumed to be under transcendent Forms, and their manifestations, under immanent Forms. Either way, the result is an alternative to Thesleff's model, not necessarily a contradiction of it.

sense-experience. Ideal Forms are transcendent, invisible, and abstract. Empirical Forms are immanent, visible, and concrete.

The question, then, is whether this distinction deserves the recognition denied it by those who reject immanent Forms as a type of Form (not to mention those who contest the very possibility of immanence for Forms). It does not. While the question of immanence certainly requires our full attention, it provides no grounds for a classification of Forms. This is because transcendence is a defining characteristic of Forms (routinely so with the undifferentiated Forms of the Platonic tradition), which precludes immanence as an alternative (for anything that is supposed to remain a Form). When we begin talking about the difference between transcendent Forms and immanent Forms (or between Ideal Forms and Empirical Forms in the terminology of Demos), we are no longer talking about two different types of Forms but focussing on two different kinds of things. We are, in effect, talking about Forms versus things that would be Forms if they were transcendent instead of immanent.

This leaves open the broader question of immanence, that is, the question whether the immanence of Forms is possible at all. Does rejecting immanence as the basis for a proper classification of Forms require rejecting immanence altogether? It may not be a requirement, but it is a good idea. A Form is not the kind of thing that can be immanent, whether or not this is used as a basis for classification.[23] This position may seem to be undermined by the countless examples typically adduced in favour of immanence, starting with the parade example of the tallness, or largeness, in Simmias (*Phaedo* 102b–d), but all such talk is metaphor for whatever correspondence there may be between Forms and particulars, not evidence of Forms that are incarnate in the physical realm, which would be tantamount to evidence of Forms that are not Forms. A so-called immanent Form is no more a Form than the tallness in Simmias is Tallness itself (*auto kath' hauto*).

[23] Note, however, that denying this claim does not require holding that Forms are immanent instead of transcendent, just that they are immanent. Perl (1999, 339–62, see especially 339, n. 1, 361–62), for one, argues that transcendence and immanence are not contradictory positions, crediting Fine for having already established this with her two articles, one each, on transcendence (1984, 31–87) and immanence (1986, 71–97). On this view, it would not be wrong to claim that Forms are transcendent, and it would not be wrong to claim that they are immanent, but it would be wrong to claim, as I do, that they are transcendent and not immanent.

What, then, is the tallness in Simmias, if not a Form?[24] It is nothing more than the instantiation of Tallness — an indication[25] that the thing is in conformity with the Form, that it is displaying the essential quality, or the defining characteristic, of the Form, that, in this case, Simmias is tall.[26] The proper explanation is not that Tallness itself (*auto kath' hauto*) is in Simmias but that the physical rela-

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[24] My dialectical excursion below is not a substitute for Thesleff's own answer. See his assessment of the opposition between tallness and smallness, presented in the broader context of his explication of the (limited) relationship between Forms and opposites (1999, 50–52 [= 2009, 434–36]). Both tallness and smallness are at best Conceptual Forms in his terminology. While it would be difficult (in the relevant context) to mistake them for Ideal Forms, note well that they are also not Relational Forms (a mistake less difficult to make). The opposition between tallness and smallness does not make them a pair of Relational Forms, which, as noted above (n. 20 and the text to which it refers), are not simply opposite Conceptual Forms but correlative universal categories of metaphysical significance.

[25] This is a special kind of indication, bringing together the phenomenal and the noumenal, and combining empirical evidence with rational reflection, in what can best be described as a 'bridge' between the upper and lower levels of Plato's universe. See Thesleff (1999, 33 [= 2009, 417–18]) for the notion of bridges in Plato's stratification of reality. It is particularly noteworthy that he identifies Plato's Forms as the philosopher's "most explicit, ambitious and famous" attempt to bridge the levels.

[26] It may be objected that this is just what is meant by the immanence of Forms, or that it falls under what is involved in the immanence of Forms, in short, that it counts as immanence. (See Fine 1986, 71–97, especially 71–73, for the relevant sense of being 'in' something, and 74, for the tallness in Simmias. See Perl 1999, 339–62, especially 345–47, for the tallness in Simmias.) The objection, in other words, would be that I have misunderstood immanence in general, whether or not I have understood Plato. Either way, I do not see how we can all agree that it is not Tallness itself (but the quality of being tall) that is in Simmias and still disagree whether the Form is in the thing. Or perhaps we do not all agree on the first part of the apparent puzzle, as Fine (1986, 73), for example, speaks of the Form's being in the thing as a property ('being in the thing as a property' as an acceptable sense of 'being in the thing', and accordingly, 'the Form's being in the thing as a property' as the relevant sense of 'the Form's being in the thing'), which, I agree, does not mean that the Form is nothing more than a property of the thing. This may be a matter of drawing more or less the same conclusion but expressing it differently. My interpretation seems to be closer to that of Devereux, who submits that what is in Simmias is the "immanent character of largeness" (1994, 88, cf. 66, 73–74), not largeness itself. See Allen (1997, 116–19) for general agreement, Gonzalez (2002, 39–40) for opposition. Devereux's (1994, 70–71, including especially n. 15) rejection of immanence for Forms turns on a distinction (in the relevant part of the *Phaedo*) between Plato's usage of *eidos*, reserved for nonimmanent Forms, and *idea*, reserved for the 'character' that comes to characterise or to be 'in' the sensible thing. (I am reporting the justification, not confirming the observation.) My own impression was shaped independently of the Greek, relying solely on my (mis)understanding of immanence.

tion of Simmias to Socrates, presumably coupled with other relations of the same sort (as in Phaedo in relation to Simmias), helps understand (recollect) Tallness itself, which is not itself in anything. If the Form were in something, it would not require recollection, just observation, thus making *anamnēsis* redundant.[27]

Some manner of experimentation may be helpful here. What if the problem were a matter of conflating physical and abstract instantiations while trying to distinguish between transcendent and immanent Forms? I am not suggesting that there is a meaningful difference between physical and abstract instantiations. I am speculating that we do perhaps proceed as if there were. What seems (to some) to be a legitimate distinction between transcendent and immanent Forms may instead be a confusion between physical and abstract instantiations. We usually have no problem (or at least not the same problem) with, say, the bed or the shuttle as instantiations, but we tend to complicate matters with tallness as an instantiation, wondering whether something abstract, such as tallness (as a quality), can be the instantiation of something else that is abstract, such as the Form of Tallness. We may thereby be making more of the tallness in something or of someone than is required to make sense of the instantiation of Forms. The tallness in Simmias is the tallness of Simmias.[28]

An even better distinction (or perhaps a better naming convention for the same distinction) may be between simple and complex instantiations — or between full and partial instantiations, or direct and indirect instantiations, or defining and refining ones. The simple kind is when the Form is instantiated precisely as what it is, the Form of Bed, as a bed, the Form of Justice, as justice, and so on. The complex kind is when the Form is instantiated, again, as what it is, but in something that is more than just the instantiation of the Form in question, as is the case with the instantiation of the Form of Tallness in Simmias. There is noth-

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[27] The reference to *anamnēsis* is merely a reminder of the underlying epistemology, which, of course, does not constitute a demonstration of anything regarding the metaphysics. Thesleff himself is not very interested in the matter, regarding it as a mythic thought experiment with little if any relevance to anything outside the eschatological epistemology of the philosopher following the gods toward a rather mystical enlightenment (*Phaedrus* 246e–249d). Noting that it never took on a more important function, he deems it "unfortunate" that the experiment "became a standard requisite of Platonism" (1999, 86 [= 2009, 468]).

[28] I am not alone in this reading. Kahn, for one, finds it plausible: "The reference to 'the tallness in us' at *Phaedo* 102d7 was probably intended only as a linguistic variant for *our being tall*" (1996, 357, Stephanus notation modified). Allen makes a similar point about the instantiation of justice: "to say, for example, that there is justice in an action is merely another way, and an ordinary way, of saying that an action is just" (1970, 146).

ing wrong with one kind that would not also be wrong with the other. Yet while we normally do not think to bring up the bedness of the bed as a complication, a puzzling category between the Form of Bed and the physical bed, we do this regularly with the tallness of Simmias, as if the latter represented an entirely different sort of instantiation.

There is actually just one sort of instantiation.[29] We are not clear on how it works. Nor are we in agreement. But many of us would probably be willing to grant that, however it works, it works the same way in all cases. It may or may not be a tenable phenomenon or process, but the instantiation of Forms should pose no special problems, only a general one, if any at all.

Greater clarity may be had through a reconsideration of the proper correspondence between the elements compared in the foregoing examples. Some of the comparisons seem to have been cast at the wrong level, resulting in the juxtaposition of disparate elements. The analogic counterpart of the bedness of the bed is not the tallness in or of Simmias but tallness as a quality.[30] It may help to think metaphorically of the Form of Tallness as somehow coming to be present in Simmias, but this is not the same as identifying a new (immanent) Form of Tallness to be distinguished from the standard (transcendent) Form of Tallness. There is just the one Form (for Tallness as for anything else) and it is transcendent. Its instantiation is not the same as the Form itself.

This is not intended as a definitive answer, not, to be more specific, as a conclusive general account of instantiation, but as a possible explanation on be-

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[29] That said, the instantiation of Forms, and thereby the relationship between Forms and particulars, is explicated in various different ways, ranging from the 'participation' of the thing in the Form, to the opposite perspective in the 'inherence' of the Form in the thing, to an even vaguer 'communion' between the two. This is often associated with the question of causation or causal explanation in Plato, especially in its bearing on the Forms. See, e.g., Alican (2012, 95–97); cf. Thesleff (2013, 28, n. 34). It is also the focal point of Thesleff's notion of 'bridges' between ontological levels. See the preceding notes on causation (n. 19) and bridges (n. 25). At any rate, the point of claiming that there is only one kind of instantiation is not to deny the variety of attempts to account for instantiation but to suggest that any model proposed to explain instantiation (whether or not that model works differently from any other) must work the same way when applied to the Form of Bed as it does when applied to the Form of Tallness (or to the Form of anything else).

[30] The tallness of Tallness the Form is an altogether different problem, one receiving plenty of attention in the literature as the Third Man Argument. The question on hand is not whether the Form of Bed is a bed but whether the bedness of the bed constitutes a puzzle, a separate and unfathomable ontological category, in the relationship between the Form of Bed and the physical bed.

half of Thesleff regarding his refusal to recognise immanent Forms.[31] Whether or not the skeletal response sketched here is on the right track, it gives rise to an even more important question. In other words, even if the response contemplated above is correct in itself, and further, even if it captures Thesleff's actual thoughts on the matter, it brings us to a related but more fundamental matter requiring clarification, again, concerning transcendence. In fact, this prior issue is not about transcendence alone but about the entire collection of features Thesleff attributes to Ideal Forms.[32] The potential problem is that transcendence (and any other ontologically special feature) is accorded to Ideal Forms but not to the other two types except under special circumstances (through which the others come to resemble Ideal Forms). The next section explains why this may be a problem and examines whether it really is.

5. The Continuum of Abstraction

Thesleff's classification of Forms holds a certain potential for confusion in the details of the ontological stratification proposed. More accurately, the potential rests on just one detail that ties everything together: the provision for a gradation of reality not only between Forms and particulars but also between different kinds of Forms and further between Forms and mere abstractions. The difference be-

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[31] Thesleff does not take an active part in the debate on transcendence versus immanence. Neither his 'transcendence' nor his 'immanence' is much like what one might expect to find in the literature: "It is a specific characteristic of the entities of Plato's first ('higher') level to be, somehow, inherent (rather than 'immanent') in the corresponding entities of the second ('lower') level" (1999, 30 [= 2009, 414]). The key to understanding his noncommittal perspective is in his emphatic warning against making too much of the distinction: "It is again worth noting that there is no distinct gap of difference between the two levels in Plato's vision, no pointed χωρίς, no deep separation of the 'immanent' from the 'transcendent'" (1999, 63 [= 2009, 446]). His *koinōnia*, on the other hand, is no more demanding than his *chōrismós*. The balance, therefore, is steadier than would be required for a contradiction. This leaves Thesleff without much of an internal conflict, the absence of which also deprives him of a serious incentive to debate the matter. His tendency to remain outside the dialogue in the secondary literature can be confirmed in his latest work (2013, 16, cf. nn. 9, 12), where he is content to refer readers to the contributions of others (Fine 1984, 1986; Devereux 1994; Nails 2013), though he does show a personal interest in the relevant passages in the primary sources, for example, the complications in Plato (*Parmenides*) and the critique in Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 1,987a29–b35, 13,1078b7–1079a4, 13,1086a30–b12).

[32] See Thesleff (2013, 27); cf. n. 17 above.

tween Forms and particulars is par for the course, a common feature, if there ever was one, in the literature on Plato. The difference(s) between types of Forms is Thesleff's own contribution, and everything there is clear enough (which, at this point, is to endorse just the clarity and not necessarily the veracity or validity). The potential for confusion rests in the difference between a Form and a mere abstraction.

A concept, for example, is different from a Conceptual Form, the concept being less real, the Form, more so, but we also find that a Conceptual Form differs from an Ideal Form in a comparable fashion and degree. We find, in other words, that a Conceptual Form is not transcendent or intelligible, and so on, except when it approximates to Ideal Forms. But in what way, then, is a Conceptual Form superior to a mere concept? The answer, not just for Conceptual Forms but for all Forms, is that the Form has a metaphysical eminence manifested at least as objective reality and causal efficacy (features common to all Forms), whereas what it represents, be it a value, a concept, or a relation, does not.

The answer itself is not problematic, but the assignment of objective reality and some sort of causal efficacy to all Forms, while reserving transcendence and intelligibility and other metaphysically privileged qualities for Ideal Forms, raises the further question of what kind of reality it is that is assigned to the other two types of Forms if not a reality that is transcendent and intelligible. What does it mean to say that Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms are objectively real? Just how real are they? We seem to be looking for a mode of existence corresponding neither to the physical reality of ordinary things nor to the conventional reality of abstractions nor to the perfect reality of Ideal Forms. It is difficult to imagine any type of Platonic Form with an existence that does not come with transcendence and intelligibility and the host of other features associated with Ideal Forms.

Note that we cannot evade the difficulty by backtracking and admitting that Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms are, after all, transcendent and intelligible and so on, for to do so would be to deny ontological ascent. Either they attain those qualities through ontological ascent, or if they have them in the first place, then there is no room for ontological ascent. And if they attain those qualities through ontological ascent, then they are not so special beforehand, not, in other words, far superior to concepts.

A tempting response is that ontological ascent is precisely what accounts for the difference between concepts and Conceptual Forms (or between relations and Relational Forms, or between ideas or ideals and Ideal Forms), such that

without it there is no difference between a concept and a Conceptual Form (or a relation and a Relational Form, or an idea or ideal and an Ideal Form). But Thesleff clearly assigns ontological ascent to Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms that approximate somehow to Ideal Forms, thereby specifying when and explaining how these other two types of Forms come to possess features normally reserved for Ideal Forms (2013, 29–33, 42, 43–44). The same process cannot then be invoked to show that these other two types of Forms always possess those features (transcendence and intelligibility and so on).

This line of criticism may be a bit pedantic. Thesleff is not very demanding here. If we agree that Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms have legitimate claims to objective reality, which we might then flesh out as ontological independence (at least of the mind and of particulars), and if we recognise in addition that these two types of Forms have cosmologically significant causal roles, the cumulative evidence, that is, the base of agreement, could arguably be sufficient, as suggested in section 4, to distinguish them from mere concepts and relations (and abstractions in general). Whether it is or not is indeed the central question — and the prime reason for the potential confusion regarding ontological ascent. As far as Thesleff is concerned, we do not even have to bother with the matter of causality, since we do not quite know what we would be getting into there. He is perfectly comfortable with objective reality (especially with full ontological independence) as representing a minimally acceptable sense of metaphysical eminence clearly not shared by mere abstractions. But as long as we are revisiting the response to the 'glorified concepts' analogy entertained in section 4, a dispassionate assessment requires acknowledging that the metaphysical eminence claimed there for Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms, while establishing their superiority to concepts and such, leaves open the question whether they are nevertheless 'glorified concepts' — difficult to rule out, because the term does not really mean anything, and difficult to ignore, because we understand exactly what it means anyway.

The difficulties may stand exacerbated by complications associated with using a metalanguage (relative to Plato in translation) that is an integral part of our natural language but probably was not a part of Plato's — nor, evidently, of his audience. The difference, to fill in the details, is between talking about Forms with a shared understanding of concepts and talking about them without one.[33]

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[33] This is intended not as a judgement from a position of expertise but as a naïve exploration of the possibilities. If the statement is vulnerably bald, safeguards are certainly welcome as amendments. Perhaps, for example, the difference invoked here is better explicated as one

This is a controversial assumption, but it is not entirely untenable, despite recent studies suggesting that the actual gap was not as great as one may think and implying therefore that this way of putting it may be an exaggeration of the facts.[34] It is not, at any rate, an easy matter. The fact, for example, that Plato had a word (or two or three) for 'concept' does not settle the issue one way or the other.[35] We know all too well how hard the Socrates of the so-called early dialogues has to work to get his interlocutors to understand the question whenever he inquires into the nature of what would now strike us as an ordinary concept.[36] If everyone in Socratic Athens, or even just the philosophical community there, had been comfortable with abstraction, we would not have had Socratic interlocutors giving an example of virtue as an answer to what virtue is (*Meno*), pointing to an instance of piety in response to what piety is (*Euthyphro*), and so on with other familiar

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between talking about Forms while drawing on a shared understanding of concepts (or of the process of abstraction) and talking about Forms with no recourse to a fully established and sufficiently common background understanding of concepts (or of the process of abstraction).

[34] The recent studies in question are those on Plato's understanding of concepts and on his notion of abstraction. Helmig (2004, 2007, 2012) is in the vanguard of ongoing research in this area. Schumacher (2010) is a good example of work drawing on Helmig. Warner (1965) and Gerson (1999a, 1999b) are forerunners worth consulting on the same topic. If it would not be too presumptuous to speak of a trend here, one of the safest generalisations that can be made is that there is a growing consensus that we have to make a greater effort to understand Plato's approach to abstraction, using all the resources available to us instead of confining the investigation to the letter of the text. Accordingly, the focus is oftentimes more on Platonism and the Platonic tradition than on Plato. We are encouraged to consult, say, the Middle Platonists or the Neoplatonists for clues on how to handle the gaps in Plato himself. The general lesson to be learnt there seems to be that a discussion of abstraction in Plato need not be restricted to the realm of Forms, which leaves room for an independent albeit related discussion of concepts.

[35] Noting that ancient Greek had several words that can now be translated as 'concept' (though never claiming that any one of these refers precisely to what we typically take today to be concepts), Helmig (2012, 14–15) lists thirteen individual words and one pair of words, each and every one of them liable to be qualified by adjectives (also listed in full), which, in turn, can themselves be used as nouns. Among these, only *ennoia* is identified as already occurring in Plato, specifically at *Phaedo* 73c and *Philebus* 59d (Helmig 2012, 14, n. 6). This does not bring us, with reference to Plato, anywhere near a philosophy of concepts, or of abstraction, that can be distinguished from any philosophy of Forms (nor does Helmig claim that it does).

[36] Even if this were nothing more than a dramatic ploy to create an occasion for demonstrating how abstraction works, and not otherwise an indication that characters who do not understand abstraction are representative of actual people who did not understand abstraction, we would still be left with the fact that there was some use, in fact, a philosophical need, for a dramatic ploy to create an occasion for demonstrating how abstraction works.

examples in other memorable encounters. The existence of a word for something is not the same as a clear or common understanding of that thing — nor, therefore, indicative of the presence of intelligent dialogue on it — as confirmed by Plato's Socrates in reporting that he has yet to meet anyone who knows what virtue is (*Meno* 71c).

And the problem is not restricted to moral concepts. Any scenario where it is necessary, or even merely useful, to explain that 'Roundness' is not an adequate response to 'What is shape?' (*Meno* 73e, 74b), or that 'Whiteness' is not an adequate response to 'What is colour?' (*Meno* 74c), suggests that something is missing in the prevailing conception of abstraction. This is precisely what we have in the character of Meno, who, even after this very explanation, is still reluctant to demonstrate that he has understood what is being asked, as he declines to say what it is that is common to roundness and straightness and other things we call 'shape' (*Meno* 75a–b). The various clarifications and instructions do not prove to be enough; Socrates has to go on to supply the answer as well. This is evidence both that Plato understood abstraction and that not everyone did.

To elaborate, then, on the question of possible conceptual or linguistic differences between Plato's circumstances and our own, the problem is not that Plato was not able to work with abstraction, or that he was ill-equipped to do so (which he probably was in terms of the philosophical parlance he inherited), but that he did not say enough about it to help us see exactly how he distinguished between concepts and Forms. We naturally use our own understanding of concepts to figure out what it is that Plato took to be Forms, as we are not able to use Plato's understanding of concepts toward that same end. We use terms like 'concept' or 'universal' or 'abstraction' in our efforts to explore all possible shades of meaning between a Form and the thing of which it is a Form, but this may be a luxury or privilege, perhaps even an extravagance, that was not fully available to Plato. In the final analysis, Plato seems to have been at the forefront of a breakthrough in the conceptual, linguistic, and philosophical development of abstraction — thus engaged not in applying a familiar process but in inventing, exploring, or refining it — and we cannot sensibly expect from him the same discussion at the same level we are engaged in today.

This is not to say that Plato does not distinguish between Forms and concepts. He clearly does (though he does not do so clearly). Otherwise, he would have had no occasion to convey a sense of hesitation regarding the assignment of Forms to man, fire, and water, while enthusiastically embracing Forms for justice, beauty, and goodness, and unequivocally rejecting them for hair, mud, and

dirt (*Parmenides* 130b–d). He has a tendency to draw or imply distinctions, these and yet others, which we can appreciate from our own perspective as a distinction between Forms and concepts.[37] In fact, recent studies on the subject both deliver and recommend an examination of Plato's approach to abstraction in greater depth than the customary focus on Forms with little or no emphasis on concepts or concept formation.[38] What we keep debating is not whether there is a difference between Forms and concepts but what that difference is. And the difference is at once so obvious and so nuanced that we have to be guarded in what we say, which means that we usually do not end up saying anything very interesting.[39]

Efforts to lay out Plato's understanding of abstraction, beyond, as intimated, what we have long been discussing in regard to the Forms, centre on *anamnēsis*.[40] No doubt, just the mention of *anamnēsis* brings to mind the age-old preoccupation with Forms. Yet the suggestion is not that we should focus our attention elsewhere but that we should dig deeper here. Possibly the most exciting development in the relevant literature, for example, in Schumacher (2010) expanding on Helmig (2004), is the thesis that Platonic *anamnēsis* is not a matter of recollecting this or that Form (or concept) but of recovering the intellectual capacity for abstraction. Another way of thinking about this would be as the activation of an innate faculty. Recollection, so the argument runs, *is* abstraction, particularly

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[37] This brings up the question whether we might be reading our own perspective back into Plato, but this cannot be all that is going on, as it does not explain why not every concept or abstraction from our perspective is a Form from Plato's perspective. The selectivity in Plato is hard to miss, especially with Thesleff's approach, where there is a difference not just between Forms and concepts but also between different kinds of Forms.

[38] The recent studies mentioned here are, again, those concerning Plato's understanding of concepts and abstraction, as documented in part in n. 34 above.

[39] This is still better than not saying anything that is true. The truth is not too far to reach. It is just difficult to articulate. And this may be why we rarely end up saying anything more interesting than that Forms are not concepts. Here is one example: "Forms are rather the *objective correlates of thought*; they are not concepts or mental entities that are confined to human souls" (Helmig 2012, 50; cf. Helmig 2007, 306, for the same statement in almost exactly the same words). As unadventurous as this view may seem, its latest expression (Helmig 2012, 50, n. 43) is anchored, for good measure, to references to Cherniss (1944, 214–16, n. 128) and Lafrance (1984) in support of the hardly controversial claim that Forms are not concepts.

[40] This is the 'doctrine' ('metaphor'?) of recollection introduced in the *Meno* (81a–86c), developed in the *Phaedo* (72e–77a), and invoked in the *Phaedrus* (249b–c). The separate occasions (*Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*) to utilise the 'doctrine' (or merely to mention it, as the case may be) present mutual inconsistencies, at least in appearance, often inspiring efforts toward reconciliation, as in Allen (1959) and Helmig (2004).

in the sense that it taps into the hardwired ability to make generalisations. On this interpretation, *anamnēsis* is not so much a matter of recollecting specific Forms as it is of recollecting what to do with them, of how to use them to understand the world around us.[41] This is not the empirical abstraction espoused by Aristotle[42] as an alternative to recollection but a rational abstraction through the recovery and projection of innate knowledge as a cognitive process as opposed to mental content.[43]

To return to the question of ontological ascent, any confusion regarding precisely where it belongs (and how it works) in Plato's metaphysics is a reflection or extension of uncertainties in the ongoing efforts of the scholarly community to work out the details of Plato's understanding of abstraction. We are all still participants in a collective work in progress. It is, therefore, not easy to ascertain whether Plato envisaged two different types of transformation, one from concepts

[41] There is still something to be said for the recollection of individual Forms, an established reading which cannot profitably be dismissed offhand, even if the alternative broadens the interpretive possibilities. The evidence is mixed. The *Meno* (81a–86c) can be read as alluding to the recovery of the intellectual capacity for abstraction, or perhaps, more generally, to the activation of innate cognitive functions: Note the reference to discovering everything upon recalling one thing (81d). But the *Phaedo* (72e–77a) is replete with examples of specific Forms identified as objects of recollection: the equal (74a–75c); the greater and the smaller (75c); the beautiful, the good, the just, the pious, with a loose and generously inclusive reference to what seems like all other Forms (75d, cf. 76d, 77a). The *Phaedrus* can go either way: It points to abstraction where it presents recollection as a process whereby the soul (of the philosopher) in its cosmic journey (248a–249d) forges a reasoned unity out of its various perceptions (249b–c). But it quickly degenerates into the recollection of specific items as it brings up the 'sacred objects' seen before (250a). In this regard, the emphasis on beauty is both unmistakeable and unforgettable, especially as it is juxtaposed with justice and temperance, both of which are said to be more difficult to recognise in their earthly manifestations whereas beauty shines brightly (250b).

[42] For Aristotle's reaction (and alternative) to Platonic *anamnēsis*, see *Posterior Analytics* 2,99b15–100b17.

[43] What is new or exciting here is not necessarily the interpretation of the object of recollection as a cognitive process as opposed to mental content. The novelty, rather, is in identifying that process specifically as abstraction. Otherwise, the process interpretation can be, and has been, cast in different terms. A good example, an alternative to the one on hand, is the approach of Allen (1959), who proposes that what is recollected is the power of inference, though he also retains the notion of the recollection of Forms: "The theory of Anamnesis is a theory of inference, and it rests on the intensional relations which the Forms bear to one another" (1959, 167). Allen even anticipates, and rejects, the abstraction account, maintaining instead that knowledge of the Forms is epistemically (and, for Plato, also temporally) prior to knowledge of particulars (1959, 169).

into Conceptual Forms (or from relations into Relational Forms, or from ideas or ideals into Ideal Forms), the other, from Conceptual Forms (or Relational Forms) into Ideal Forms.[44] He indeed may have. Or he may not have. The details of Plato's ontology are not cut and dried. Nor are they amenable to direct inference from assumptions or conclusions about his epistemology. As Thesleff claims, for the basic difference between mere abstractions from our perspective and Forms from Plato's perspective, we do not have much to go by except the demonstrable importance, significance, or value Plato attached to any given abstraction.[45] A value, concept, or relation has a Form corresponding to it if and only if it strikes Plato as being somehow important, significant, or special enough to have a Form corresponding to it. If we were to attempt to list all Platonic Forms, we would be safest in sticking close to the text of the dialogues. We could, of course, extrapolate from explicit examples that obviously recall others, but the further we get from the actual examples, the more likely we are to be expanding the platform rather than exploring it.

6. Conclusion

What did in fact impress Plato as important, significant, or special enough to have a Form corresponding to it is not as hazy a matter as this rather loose characterisation may seem to suggest. On any sensible interpretation, the relative value in question would have to be anchored to explanatory power. Plato, like any other philosopher, was looking to understand the world in which he found himself. But unlike most philosophers, he seems to have had to create or develop the conceptual apparatus required to carry out what might otherwise have been a standard philosophical project.[46] And his principal creation to facilitate his own effort is the interpretive paradigm of Forms. If that is true, then what impressed Plato as important turns out to be whatever helped explain the world. We already have some idea regarding the specifics, as we turn time and again to examples such

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[44] This is a different question from whether or not Thesleff would be justified (in terms of the internal consistency of his own position) in attributing to Plato both types of ontological ascent.

[45] See Thesleff (2013, 29–33, 44). Note especially the correlation between Conceptual Forms and "everything Plato found somehow real or important"; cf. also the assessment that "anything Plato could and wanted to conceptualise ended up as a Conceptual Form" (31).

[46] There is some truth, after all, to Whitehead's long overworked estimation of Plato's position in the European intellectual tradition.

as justice and beauty. But if any generalisation were possible, this would be it — that the Forms help do philosophy (or that they helped Plato do it). It is this simple principle that is at the heart of Thesleff's approach, guiding him both in differentiating between Forms and concepts and in formulating a classification of Forms.

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