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RETHINKING PLATO'S FORMS

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Abstract

This is a proposal for rethinking the main lines of Plato's philosophy, including some of the conceptual tools he uses for building and maintaining it. Drawing on a new interpretive paradigm for Plato's overall vision, the central focus is on the so-called Forms. Regarding the guiding paradigm, we propose replacing the dualism of a world of Forms separated from a world of particulars, with the monistic model of a hierarchically structured universe comprising interdependent levels of reality. Regarding the tools of the trade, we distinguish between three constructs that have come, one and all, and largely indiscriminately, to be regarded as Forms: Ideal Forms, Conceptual Forms, and Relational Forms. This recalibration of what we know of Plato's outlook, tools, and methods, together with a realignment of these with his general aims, will also help restore the philosopher's emphasis on that which is good, a perspective often blurred in the structure of two worlds.

1. Introduction

A common denominator in the history of Plato interpretation is the metaphysical dualism of Forms versus particulars.[1] To be sure, other issues have also been in the forefront. But the point is that, for better or worse, Forms have been the centre of attention, and Plato has often been defined by them. Unfortunately, the converse does not hold: Plato has not, to put it crudely, defined the Forms. Thus, getting it right is both important and difficult.[2]

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[1] We are indebted to Debra Nails, Gerald A. Press, Pauliina Remes, and Christopher J. Rowe for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[2] The literature on the Forms is vast. The following is a sampling: Alican (2012, 87–110);

We are convinced that the textbook interpretation of the Forms as uniform entities occupying a world outside our own is wrong in two respects, first, in positing an extra world to make things work, second, in compressing all abstractions, or, at any rate, too many of them, into the concept of Form. The first problem is ontological extravagance, the second, the exact opposite.

While we realise that the tradition we are opposing is not a united front dominating the field in unanimous agreement, we are also certain that we are not chasing phantoms. There is surely a familiar enough ring to the two-world dichotomy between Forms and particulars to justify our taking this to be the traditional account. And we feel safe in including under this rubric the fungibility of Forms as a group of heterogeneous abstractions, which should also have a familiar ring, though, this one, perhaps not so loud, because it is usually a silent assumption as opposed to a declaration or argument. We trust that our meaning is clear enough in both cases without having to compile a list of textbooks that corroborate our impression of what counts as traditional in Plato scholarship. The designation 'textbook interpretation', then, is a figure of speech that does not really call for documentation unless the account attached to it is alarmingly at odds with what one might expect to find in an actual textbook.[3]

Allen (1970); Blackson (1995); Dancy (2004); Fine (1993, 2003); Gerson (2004); McCabe (1994, 53–94); Patterson (1985); Ross (1951); Silverman (2002); Thesleff (1999, 50–107 [= 2009, 434–88]). Studies focusing on problem areas might best be kept separate: Malcolm (1991); Meinwald (1991, 1992); Nails (2013); Pelletier (1990); Rickless (2007); Rowe (2005); Sayre (1983, 1996); Scolnicov (2003); Teloh (1981); Vlastos (1954). Both lists may be rounded off by the collection of essays edited by Welton (2002). A good conspectus of the global state of scholarship regarding the Forms can be found in Erler (2007, 390–406, 699–703).

[3] As for actual textbooks, the famous one by Bertrand Russell, though perhaps not intended as a textbook in the standard sense, teaches us that "Plato is led to a supra-sensible world, more real than the common world of sense, the unchangeable world of ideas, which alone gives to the world of sense whatever pale reflection of reality may belong to it" (1912, 144). A hundred years later, a *Companion to Plato* can still be found unable to introduce the Forms without reference, at least in scare quotes, to "what is often described as a 'two world ontology'" (Press 2012, 174). In between, something of the tradition we are challenging has evidently survived. What it is that has survived is captured rather well in an anthology exclusively on Plato's Forms, in fact, titled *Plato's Forms*, where the editor's dispassionate overview presents tradition as firmly embracing a two-world interpretation: "The most famous view associated with one of the greatest thinkers of all time is a view that seems to defy our common sense, to challenge our deepest beliefs about the very nature of reality; for it seems to tell us that the flesh-and-blood world of which we are a part, the world of change and time in which we pass our lives, is somehow 'less real' than a world we can only see in our minds" (Welton 2002, 1).

Against the tradition thus defined, the purpose of this paper is to recommend and pursue a course correction in Plato studies, specifically in connection with the two problems identified above. The first correction is that Plato works with a single world that is stratified into ontological layers with a sliding scale of reality where there is enough room both for Forms and for particulars as well as for their separation. We call this scenario the 'two-level' model (in contrast to the two worlds typically assumed instead), not because there are only two levels, but because Forms occupy one level, particulars, another, in a hierarchical ontological configuration comprising layer upon layer, complete with sublayers, collectively representing and facilitating a gradation of reality, both within and between the two levels in question. Otherwise, this is not a binary or bipolar model of reality, nor an attempt to trade one sort of dualism for another, merely substituting the notion of level for that of world.

The second correction is that Plato's experimentation with abstraction can be better understood in terms of three different categories of Forms instead of a single homogeneous breed answering for every possibility (where candidates for Forms can be as diverse as justice, horse, and motion). Taken up in detail later, the three categories are Ideal Forms, Conceptual Forms, and Relational Forms.

These two course corrections are best pursued as a single revisionist project bringing the main strands of Plato's thought into better alignment. This is because they do not solve mutually independent problems in separate areas of Plato studies but explicate Plato's philosophical (rather intuitive) vision in the broadest terms, where they are jointly necessary for a comprehensive sketch.

The reliability of the big picture is important not just for its own sake but also for avoiding infelicities at the level of details. The potential for misdirection is significant, for example, in precluding proper insight into Plato's thinking in other areas and on other problems. One such case is the inadequacy of prevailing patterns of interpretation to account for the general axiological orientation of Plato's thought, or, perhaps more perspicuously, for the primacy of intrinsic value in his philosophical projects. Everything aims at the Good, but there can be no enlightenment, moral or otherwise, so long as the Good resides in an entirely different world, along with all else that is fine and decent and noble. We aim to show that the big picture, revised as promised, naturally emphasises the Platonic devotion to value.

This is a bold undertaking that goes against the grain of current scholarship. While we intend to supply all the evidence pertinent to our proposals for revision, there can be no proof in the strict sense of the term. The leading alternative, after all, is not itself based on proof but on a tradition of interpretation dat-

ing back to antiquity. This is not to say that we can whimsically replace that with our own interpretation while dispensing with the need to provide reasons and reasoning. Nevertheless, in the end, the acid test will be whether we end up with a reconstruction that makes better sense of Plato than one that places the Forms in one world, the particulars, in another, and leaves no room for an experience of value, which rests with all the good stuff in the world of Forms, not where we dwell, in the world of particulars. Likewise, with regard to the classification of Forms into three categories, another acid test will be whether the variegation, which constitutes a natural fit with an already stratified reality, is truer to Plato than is undifferentiated abstraction confined to an alternate reality. In the final analysis, then, the reason that there can be no proof in the strict sense is that this is not so much a disquisition as it is a thought experiment, much in the way that Plato propounds his own philosophy.

That said, our understanding of the way Plato propounds his own philosophy does not presuppose any particular pattern in his development as a philosopher or as a writer. Nor is our general initiative helped or hindered by any given order in which the dialogues may have been written. This is not the place to argue against developmental accounts or chronological approaches, but ignoring them should give no pause, as we can hardly be obligated to adopt them.[4]

2. Stratification of Reality

Plato's philosophy has an unmistakable axiological orientation. His dialogues constitute a procession of thought experiments aiming at that which is desirable for its own sake, or, what is the same, that which is good in itself (*agathon*, *kalon*, and the like). This emphasis on value is difficult to reconcile with the attribution of metaphysically transcendent Forms to what is not explicitly good.

This problem has a considerable bearing on the general interpretation of Plato. Several scholars have, over the years, taken Plato's commitment to value-neutral Forms and to trivial Forms as a given, or at least as a possibility, some

[4] Platonic chronology is a field of its own. For an overview of problems and solutions, see Alican (2012, 148–88); for substantive contributions, see Thesleff (1982 [= 2009, 143–382]; 1989, 1–26; 1999, 108–16 [= 2009, 489–97]). For a brief account of Thesleff on Platonic chronology, see Alican (2012, 185–88) and Nails (1995, 59, 134). For sweeping documentation of the main schools, major trends, and best achievements in Platonic chronology, with the convenience of tabular presentations, see Nails (1995, 58, 59, 60, 61, 64, 76, 111, 112, 131, 134, 203). Cf. also the chronological reference in the latter part of n. 10 below.

even embracing not merely neutral and trivial Forms but also negative Forms, while others have expressed reservations on all three fronts.[5] Disagreement among scholars often depends on what is meant by the terms used. Reconsidering Plato's so-called theory of Forms,[6] primarily through a close look at the dialogues, may help resolve superficial disagreements and expose genuine differences. Chief among them will be the stratification intended in place of the duplication assumed.

A popular makeshift is the assumption of a unique, separate, and complete world of Forms that corresponds to our own world, somehow accounting for many of its features, or, by some counts, for all of them, including plurality and change, but sharing none of its deficiencies.[7] On close inspection, the difficulties of such an assumption are legion, foremost of which is that Plato himself provides little ground for it in the dialogues.[8]

We normally expect the metaphor of 'world' to include plurality, variety, and change, as well as some indication of what is good and bad for the things within. Perhaps this, the plurality, the variety, the change, together with a sense of good and bad, is what we expect because of the way our own world looks to

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[5] See, for example, the references in Erler (2007, 397) and in Guthrie (1978, 97–100).

[6] Attributing to Plato a 'theory of Forms' is becoming an increasingly delicate matter, with many scholars contending that he never actually held any such theory, and some holding that he never held any theory at all: Annas (1981, 217–41); Gonzales (2002, 31–83); Hyland (2002, 257–72); Sayre (1994, 167–99; 2002, 169–91); Williams (2006, 148–86, especially 154). A review of the literature, together with a discussion of the possibilities, can be found in Alican (2012, 110–29).

[7] While scholars tend to distinguish between ontological and epistemological versions of the two-world model, our own project leaves no room for this, neither physically nor logically. This is because denying a two-world ontology makes it superfluous to deny a two-world epistemology. Since the opposite does not hold, however, the epistemological version can fruitfully be explored by those who countenance a two-world ontology, or by those who do not take any sort of stand on the ontology. A sweeping acquaintance with the current state of scholarship on the epistemological issue can be had through two complementary pieces by Smith (2000, 2012), where one will also find a substantive contribution toward a solution. Nails (2013, 78, n. 3), for one, considers Smith (2000) to have settled the epistemological issue, having demonstrated that the two-world model fails to account for Plato's epistemology. Yet, as she admits, not everyone considers the matter closed. For other recent discussions with Plato's epistemology in the forefront, see, for example, Rowe (2005) and Butler (2007).

[8] The ideal model of a good state in the *Republic* (9,592a–b), and of the cosmos in the *Timaeus* (28a–30d, see also 51d–52d), have been adduced. But thoroughgoing metaphysical dualism is not the only possible reading, and Plato himself hardly indicates internal conflicts of opposites in either model.

us. Perhaps, then, we do not have the right to expect it of all possible worlds. But, either way, we can rest assured that we can neither expect it nor extract it from any world of Forms as such.

Even if some, or most, of the Forms are understood to be immanent, as some scholars and schools have been inclined to maintain, this does not typically come with a reduction in the number of worlds.[9] However that may be, our human world is not simply a replica of a world of Forms.

Earlier fascination with recovering Platonic chronology, thereby giving rise to the legend of Plato's development from immanentism to transcendentism, can also be set aside safely, now that Plato scholarship has established itself as moving away, especially rapidly in recent years, from certain patterns of interpretation dominating the field through most of the twentieth century. Much of the dogma handed down uncritically from generation to generation is either gone or on its way out.[10]

One that has proven persistent, however, is the dogma of the 'two worlds', which continues to distort the intellectual legacy of Plato.[11] The separation (*chōrismos*) of Forms from particulars was already being discussed in Plato's time, both by him and by those around him, as a logical problem.[12] But what if it was not a real problem for Plato (as some have argued on various grounds)? What if his universe was a single one (as intimated in the *Timaeus*), a continuum of levels, somewhat as Plotinus saw it? These are not intended as purely rhetori-

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[9] Standing out among the numerous treatments of this issue are Fine's articles on separation (1984) and immanence (1986), one each, and Devereux's single article (1994) on separation and immanence.

[10] A progressive mindset was already in place twenty years before the composition of the present article, as evidenced, for example, in an anthology editor's open praise for the devotion of contributors to the interpretive principle that "the thought rightly attributable to the dialogues is likely to be something other than the traditional set of dogmas or doctrines, whether unitary or developing, that are found both in textbooks and scholarly writing, the philosophical system called Platonism" (Press 1993, 5). The backlash against developmentalism has been particularly harsh, as can be readily verified in the front matter of the Hackett edition of Plato's *Complete Works*, whose editor demonstrates a pedagogical vigilance so strong as to "urge readers not to undertake the study of Plato's works holding in mind the customary chronological groupings of 'early', 'middle', and 'late' dialogues" (Cooper 1997, xiv). For related issues in chronology, see n. 4 above.

[11] Our characterisation of the two-world model as a 'dogma' coincides with terminology ('dogma') also favoured by Nails (2013).

[12] See especially Plato's *Parmenides* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (987a29–b35, 1078b7–1079a4, 1086a30–b12); cf. Fine (1984, 1986), Devereux (1994), and Nails (2013).

cal questions but as a springboard to opening up interpretive possibilities, starting with direct answers in the next section.

3. A Two-Level Model

The alternative we propose in place of a two-world model of interpretation is a two-level model. Readers may follow our reasoning as a thought experiment, which, we believe, provides a grounding for a proper explication of the notion and theory of Forms, starting with their purported transcendence.

The metaphor of levels, contrary to that of worlds, exposes a value differential between a higher and a lower order of entities or phenomena. The comparatives are important. The underlying ontology is that of two basic levels understood as belonging together (in Platonic *koinōnia*) like, say, sky and earth in the worldview of Plato's contemporaries — or like gods and humans, masters and slaves, truths and beliefs, abstractions and their instantiations. It was natural for Plato to have held this two-level vision of a single world, an intuitive outlook always present in his thought but only indirectly reflected in what he said and wrote.[13] This vision is in all respects primary to any theory of Forms. Plato is likely to have developed it early on, drawing on a combination of general Greek views and more explicit Presocratic thought.

The idea of a two-level vision in Plato was first brought up and articulated in some detail by de Vogel in 1986.[14] It was later adopted as an interpretive paradigm and developed further by Thesleff.[15] The model can be illustrated particularly well through contrasts typical of Plato's view of reality. For this purpose, a representative set of ten pairs of complementary concepts can be taken either in a regular list or distributed alongside a horizontal separator as follows:[16]

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

[13] See, for example, Thesleff (1999, 11–12, 28–29 [= 2009, 397–98, 413–14]).

[14] See de Vogel (1986, 50, 62, and *passim*).

[15] See Thesleff (1993, 17–45; 1999, 11–52 [= 2009, 397–436]). Cf. Press (2007, 159–71). See further the first of the two dogmas in Nails (2013, 78–87).

[16] The example is from Thesleff (1999, 27 [= 2009, 411]).

The concepts in question are not true opposites (as some similar ideas are in Oriental and Pythagorean thought).

In the same contexts, it has been argued, and it can easily be argued further and in greater detail, that Plato applies his two-level vision to a wide variety of aspects of method and thought. Take, for instance, his typical 'dialectic' where the philosophical leader of the discussion naturally 'knows' more than he says, yet profits from his lower-level partners. Or take his typical irony, especially through Socrates, or his word-play, where truth is covertly balanced against appearance. Or take the multilevel structure of his utopian State. The levels operate together. Here, we will focus just on the level of the Forms.

If transcendent Forms do not constitute a world separate from the one we occupy, they can be assigned, at any rate, to a different level within the same world. The level of the Forms need not correspond to that of the physical in details, but it is not divorced from it either. They are two aspects of the same reality. One world, two levels — this may be as close as we get to Plato's vision of the abstract, where different terms and concepts will, inevitably, not be as clearly differentiated as we might wish.[17]

A two-level interpretation recommends itself for two reasons in particular. First, the imagery of two levels comes with a complementary hierarchical structure within a single reality, which then stands as a cohesive whole where points, or regions, or just ways, of contact are easier to grasp and to defend, as opposed to the juxtaposition of disjointed and polarised worlds where any connection would be tenuous at best. Second, the two-level model readily accommodates the Platonic orientation toward the Good, owing, again, to its unitary hierarchical structure, whereas the two-world interpretation falls short in this respect because it places the Good in some other, wholly separate world, thereby undermining the possibility of orientation toward it. Moreover, the differentiation and order that can be had simultaneously in a single world with two levels is uniquely hospitable to a proper classification of Forms, paving the way out of the present cacophony in the variety of constructs passing for Forms.[18]

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[17] Plato sometimes refers to a noetic *topos* outside the cosmos: *Republic* 6,509d, 7,517b; *Phaedrus* 247c–d, 248b; it is 'over' us, as the sky is over the earth. See also *Timaeus* 50a–52e (where the 'receptacle' is added as a third level).

[18] Plato's notion of the Good was the cause of much perplexity in the fourth century. This was evidently due not merely to what he made available through the dialogues but also to a notorious public lecture on the subject. See, for example, Alican (2012, 84–87) and Thesleff (1999, 104–05, 164–65 [= 2009, 485–86, 531]). See also Ferber (1989).

In short, keeping things in the same world has its advantages. Fashioned after a *koinōnia* of sorts, as between upstairs and downstairs, the model finds ample support in the canonical corpus: Consider for a start, the divided line in the *Republic* (6,509d–511e), the ladder of love in the *Symposium* (209e–212a), with Eros and Socrates as a mediating power, and the world-soul in the *Timaeus* (35a–36d).[19]

4. Classification of Forms

Another fundamental question for the present is: What do we mean by the term 'Form' as identified with what was traditionally called an 'Idea'? Both terms, 'Form' and 'Idea', have some misleading connotations in modern languages, and 'Form' is easily confused with the Aristotelian *eidos*. Worse, Plato's own terminology is hopelessly inconsistent. And he never did put forth a clear and complete account of the Forms. What we have instead are tentative visions (sometimes literally Socratic dreams) or suggestions proposed in different situations and at different times – all extremely difficult to sort out, as contemporary scholarship is beginning to see.

Since Plato did not impose terminological preferences, or issue philosophical instructions, it is incumbent upon the community of Plato scholars to figure out the central characteristics (and the details, if possible) of what has been handed down as Forms (or Ideas). We suggest, following many interpreters since ancient times, that a Platonic Form must be at least a universal, though always a unique one, and preferably a positive one, functioning as a typical characteristic (or as a standard or model) of phenomena or occurrences on the sensible level of our world.

We will be expanding on this characterisation throughout the paper, but a few points of clarification might be useful immediately: First, we say 'at least' because not all universals are Forms. The aphorism that "Forms are what particulars fail to be" can be extended further, though with caution, to assert that Forms are what universals fail to be.[20] This is not to say that they are not universals, but that

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[19] See also *Republic* 5,477a–478c. For the notion of universal *koinōnia*, cf. *Republic* 5,462a–464d, 7,537c, 9,585b–c; *Phaedo* 100d; *Theaetetus* 147d–e; *Sophist* 248a–e; *Laws* 12,967d–e.

[20] The elegantly abbreviated account that "Forms are what particulars fail to be" belongs specifically to McCabe (1994, 60), though the opinion expressed therein is common in the literature.

they are indeed that and always something more. Second, though still in the same vein, this is partly the sense in claiming that they are unique, each one being just what it is, and not simply an example of the kind of thing we call 'Form'. The 'just itself', in Plato's thought, is not identical with what we now call 'justice', though we will, for convenience, use the latter term as shorthand. Third, and finally, by 'positive', we mean something worth seeking or imitating, of course, from Plato's point of view.

Explicating Plato's Forms in terms of universals, even if it is only to say that they are much more than this, is open to misunderstanding. Universals no longer stand for the same thing they did with Aristotle, and the contemporary discussion is far from a consensus. Nor does the conceptual development between then and now add up or average out to a uniform understanding.

The commonplace that Plato reified universals does not go far toward capturing what Plato thought to be a Form. And the question lurking at the end of that statement ('what Plato thought to be a Form') is not the right question to ask, at least not for us, but also not of us. We cannot say what a Form is, as if it were just one thing, or one type of thing, because we do not think that the Form for justice and the Form for bed, to take just a couple of examples, are really the same kind of thing, a Form. We believe Plato to have experimented with abstraction in several different ways, ending up with different results, which are best classified in different categories or divisions. We are not prepared to draw any developmental conclusions from this, instead remaining content to let the dialogues fall where they may in terms of chronological order. But we can, after all, say quite a bit about the different types of entities tradition has handed down as Forms (or Ideas).

We have to keep in mind, first, that universals were yet to be discovered, or invented, depending on one's perspective, when Plato seems to have reified them, second, that he did not merely reify them but almost deified them (in the loose sense of giving them godlike 'upper level' qualities, not, of course, to worship them), and, third, that justice and horseness and everything in between are not reified or deified into the same kind of thing, or to the same extent, thus leaving a broad spectrum of ontological profiles as the constituents of reality and our experience of it.

Yet we find the analogy with universals helpful as a starting point, which doubles as a point of departure. We are aware of scholarly opposition to identifying Plato's Forms with universals (which is not what we are doing). Some protest because they, like us, find that universals fall short of Forms, others, because they deny that universals exist while recognising that Plato considered the Forms real,

yet others, because universals are not individuals whereas Plato's Forms are, and the list goes on.

But we have to start somewhere. So, we may as well start with the praise Socrates receives from Parmenides for separating properties from the things of which they are properties (*Parmenides* 130b). And this cannot be too far to reach from universals, anyone's universals. The point of departure that drives our own understanding is the importance Plato attaches to intrinsic value, not to be found in mere universals, nor in reified ones, which makes it a feature lost in the typically monochrome Forms taken up in much of the literature.

We may profitably recognise three distinct divisions among the referents of what are usually taken collectively as Forms:

- Ideal Forms: These are metaphysically transcendent entities that embody, on the upper level of reality, the perfection of qualities (justice, temperance, knowledge, etc., as in *Phaedrus* 247d–e) we aspire to on the lower level. They have an axiological orientation culminating in the Good. Put simply, they are charged with positive intrinsic value.
- Conceptual Forms: These are universals corresponding, on the upper level of reality, to such particulars as are manifested, on the lower level, with mutual similarity but varying degrees of reality and importance (to Plato), including concrete things (horse, ship, water) and their properties, qualities, or attributes (speed, size, colour), as well as various phenomena, broadly taken to comprise events, actions, and experiences, but excluding (again from Plato's point of view) things that are either imaginary or intrinsically bad, not because Conceptual Forms are intrinsically good, but because they have no value of their own, only by association (with Ideal Forms, as explained later), which does not make it intrinsic value.
- Relational Forms: These are relational universal concepts, that is, correlative abstractions taken in contrasting pairs of apparent opposites jointly covering both levels of reality and collectively exhausting the entire two-level ontology. They, too, are value-neutral in and of themselves. A good example is the pairing of rest / motion and of same / other among the *megista genē* in the *Sophist* (254d–e).

Retaining the term 'Form' as part of the name for each division is a reminder that the classification[21] pertains to what has long been discussed under this single

[21] The classification we propose is silent on mathematicals (numbers and shapes) largely be-

name (and, before that, and still in non-anglophone contexts, under another single name, 'Idea').

That said, pressed for a choice, we might have to admit that Forms proper are the constructs we have called 'Ideal Forms', and that these may just as well be called 'Ideas' instead of 'Forms'. Conceptual Forms, then, would stand out as the main cause of the difficulty in deciding whether there is a Form for everything or only for some things. And any difficulty in this is liable to be exacerbated by the additional division of Relational Forms, which are, in essence, universal categories, that is, basic concepts for understanding the cosmos, not in its minutiae, nor from a moral perspective, but as a structured whole.

A visual aid often makes complex thought more accessible. Fortunately, Plato provides one of the most memorable visual aids in the history of philosophy — the divided line.[22] His simile in the centre of the *Republic* (6,509d–511e) is in many ways illustrative of his two-level vision, here subdivided into four segments. It can be taken as a cross section of Plato's universe, with the philosopher's ontology and epistemology in the foreground. And it represents the hierarchy of what, to him, is valuable. Let us mark the four segments from top to bottom as (a), (b), (c), and (d). If the noetic segment (a) is understood to cover the Ideal Forms culminating in *to agathon*, it is sensible to assign the *dianoia* segment (b) to Conceptual Forms. Since Plato must have known that segments (b) and (c) are by geometrical necessity equal in length, whichever proportion is chosen for the first cut, it is reasonable to assume a close correspondence between (b) and (c), the latter of which represents visible things (on the higher, more important, and more valuable of the bottom two levels): *zōa*, all that is *phuteuton*, even *skeuaston* of some value (6,510a), and geometrical figures (6,510c, 6,510e). They all have corresponding Conceptual Forms on level (b).[23] Relational Forms, rather

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cause Plato himself is not clear on what these are. On the testimony of Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 987b14–17, 1059b5–14; cf. 'eidetic numbers' at 1080a23, 1081a23–25), a common interpretation has been that Plato took mathematicals to be a separate category between Forms and particulars. This assignment of an intermediate position may have been inspired by a pythagorising interpretation of segment (b) of the divided line (discussed at the end of the present section). We also find Plato's interest in 'eidetic numbers' to be a late pythagorising experiment. (See section 9 below, especially n. 61.) Nevertheless, mathematicals can be accommodated in our classification scheme as a special type of Conceptual Form, associated with Ideal Forms, and approximating to them through a process of ontological ascent (taken up in section 7.1 below).

[22] For this much-discussed metaphor, we refer only to Thesleff (1999, 31–32, 70–72 [= 2009, 416, 453–55]).

[23] For the distinction between Conceptual Forms and 'concepts', see section 7.1. As for the

than claiming a place on one level or other, collectively constitute a lateral projection of the structural representation.

Even with the appeal to the divided line, however, much of the foregoing discussion has proceeded with a predominance of hypotheses over documentation. The remainder of the paper is devoted to fleshing out the proposed classification, bringing out some of the more important details, and, in the process, showing how the proposal fits in with what Plato said, and, to some extent, with how that has been interpreted.

5. Terminological Clues and Other Observations

Scholars traditionally look for linguistic clues to sort out the details of Plato's conceptual apparatus. First on their list is to check the occurrence of the terms *eidos* or *idea*, designations giving the Ideas, and, later, the Forms, their modern name.

Although the typical search for Forms, with *eidos* (or *idea*) as the descriptor, is a generic one, undifferentiated as to this or that division in the classification we are advocating, the result is far more likely to identify a Conceptual Form than an Ideal Form, and oftentimes even to pick out nothing more than a concept. Indeed, both terms are also applied to universals, with no metaphysical overtones.

Generally speaking, in Plato's dialogues, *eidos* (and *idea*) often approaches our notion of concept. But a concept is not a Form.

Some developmentalists have assumed that *eidos* and *idea* became markers of transcendence when Plato began to use them for abstract concepts. This often includes the assumption that *eidos* and *idea* point to Ideal Forms. And sometimes they do. But what are we to do when they point elsewhere?

The etymology of the words *eidos* and *idea* is of little help here. They seem to be practically synonymous; hence, we can focus on the more common *eidos*. Originally, it just meant 'shape' in the sense of 'outward appearance', but also (and still before Plato) signified a mental vision of the characteristic shape of something, thereby pointing to types, or kinds. To Plato, it may sometimes denote an ideal shape, a model of sorts, and thus, implicitly, a concept of positive

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metaphor on hand, we may imagine the line as drawn in the sand, or on a slate, before the dramatic audience, but, unfortunately, we do not know exactly by what construction Plato wanted the second cut to be made 'in the same ratio' (*Republic* 6,509d), or whether the topmost segment (a) was meant to be the longest or the shortest one. The interpretation has varied since ancient times.

value. It remains unclear, however, to what extent this nuance was influenced by an emerging theory of Ideal Forms.

Plato may well have adopted the term *eidos* (*idea*) both for Ideal Forms and for Conceptual Forms in oral discussions of ontology and epistemology. The fact that the terms are hardly ever present in the so-called early dialogues may be because these texts are probably, by and large, addressed to larger audiences. At any rate, *eidos* and *idea* are neither systematic designations of Ideal Forms nor reliable indicators of value. The standard reference is to typical shapes, typical forms, but in a more abstract way than, say, *morphē* or *schēma*.[24] After e*idos* and *idea* began to be employed for Ideal Forms as well, they took on a metaphysical connotation in addition to their original meaning. This assessment is consistent with traditional interpretations,[25] though its relevance to the chronology of the dialogues is doubtful.

To go somewhat further into this complex of problems, we may infer that, in Plato's thought, pointedly abstract concepts automatically tend to be associated with the upper level of his universe, given its abstract nature. Insofar as concepts are understood to be common denominations of a group of phenomena (i.e., universals), and, further, taken to be accessible through the mind rather than the senses, they are already acquiring greater distinction, whereupon, if they are conceived to be somehow real and important and not imagined, they merit a higher ontological ranking than their concrete manifestations. We deal with this inference in section 7.

A more reliable way of tracing the appearance of Ideal Forms in the dialogues is to search for qualifications of universals by the term *auto* (*auto to*, *hauto*, *kath' hauto*, etc.), often rendered into English as 'as such' or as '(in) itself'. Similarly suggestive are words for that which 'really and always is' or that which is 'true' (*ho estin*, *aei*, *alēthēs*, etc.) or 'pure' (*eilikrinēs*). Even a preliminary effort to enumerate such instances can quickly grow to cover a dozen dialogues. Consider, for instance, the contexts of *Cratylus* 439c–d (*kalon*, *agathon*, in Socrates' dream); *Euthydemus* 292d (*epistēmē*, but in ironical context); *Hippias Major* 286d (*kalon*, 289d with *eidos*); *Laches* 194a (*aretē*, playfully personified); *Meno* 100b (*aretē*, cf. 72c); *Parmenides* 130b (*homoiotēs*, see section 8, below), 134b (*to kalon*, *to agathon*); *Phaedo* 65d–66a (*dikaion*, *kalon*, *agathon ... megethos*, *hugieia*, *ischus*), 106d (*zōē*, with *eidos*); *Phaedrus* 247d (*epistēmē*, seen by gods on their

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[24] Note that *schēma* can be used for 'concept', as in *Meno* 74b, *Sophist* 267c–d, and *Statesman* 277a.

[25] See, for example, Ross (1951, *passim*).

winged journey); *Philebus* 59b–c (the problem of *to alēthestaton*, being close to *ta aei kata ta auta hōsautōs ameiktota echonta*); *Republic* 4,435b (*dikaiosunē*, with *eidos*, cf. 4,435e, 7,517e), 5,479e (*to kalon*, *to dikaion*, cf. 6,505a, *hē tou agathou idea*, not sufficiently well known); *Sophist* 248a–b (assumptions of the *eidōn philoi*); and, of course, Diotima's memorable portrayal of *to kalon* at *Symposium* 211b (*to kalon ... auto kath' hauto meth' hautou monoeides aei on*).[26] Terminological clues of the *auto* type (or 'truly' or 'purely') almost always indicate an Ideal Form.

A somewhat less reliable mark of Ideal Forms is the characteristic reference to the relation between Forms and particulars as a presence or a partaking. It is less reliable because it is also, at least occasionally, extended to Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms. Considering the use of terms such as *parousia*, *metechein*, *koinōnia* (*Phaedo* 100d), it seems that the discussion of 'participation' was not limited to Ideal Forms. See, for example: *Gorgias* 467e–468a, 498d; *Euthydemus* 301a; *Hippias Major* 289c–d, 294a; *Lysis* 217b–e; *Sophist* 247a. Possibly, though, there was a religious background giving a specific connotation to Plato's employment of the words. The question of particulars 'reflecting' or 'imitating' Forms (à la *Parmenides*) may be of a different origin.

Ideal Forms are, in the first place, ideal qualities (or capacities) of gods and of humans at their best (i.e., philosophers). This is a remarkable fact. It points to the divine upper-level as a model for ideal human behaviour.[27] At the same time, it reflects the Socratic search for universals in human *sophia*.[28] The latter has traditionally been regarded as a feature of the 'early dialogues', though the prospects of dating them with any precision remain dubious and controversial.[29]

We also find as possible candidates for Ideal Forms, entities representing physical things (e.g., man, fire), and universal concepts characterising our perception of such things (e.g., similarity, hotness).[30] This comes out clearly in the

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[26] Note the context: The 'upper level' eventually reached by the philosopher is like an open sea, *pelagos* (*Symposium* 210d). See also *Phaedo* 109c–d and *Republic* 10,611b–d. Perhaps we may imagine *to kalon* shining like a sun over it (as in the *Republic*). For the notion of 'same' (*auto*), cf. the discussion on Relational Forms (section 8 below).

[27] But Plato's point of view is not primarily religious; see Thesleff (1999, 12–15 [= 2009, 397–401]).

[28] Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 987b1–10) seeks the roots of Plato's theory in Socratic definitions. Dancy (2004, 23–208, 209–44), for one, explores this in great depth.

[29] See the references to Platonic chronology in n. 4 above.

[30] The case of fire (*pur*) is more complicated. Its significance for humans, from the earliest cosmologies onward, was beyond doubt. The *Phaedo* (103b–e) likewise assigns it a respect-

order of presentation of the Forms in the *Phaedo*, and also in Socrates' aporia in the *Parmenides* (130c), both dialogues being explored further in the section on Relational Forms (section 8). The perceptually descriptive sort is probably the older of the two, as it is natural in Greek to operate with abstractions grounded in properties or attributes before doing so with the substances to which those properties or attributes belong. Separating the equality from the sticks, or, say, the largeness from the man, surely counts as a milestone in the history of our ongoing efforts to understand and describe the world around us, but working with the remainder, that is, with the substances themselves, requires an altogether different operation of abstraction, marking the advent of kinds, types, and classes.

The roots of Ideal Forms are not in the *eidē* of physical things. A potter's or an artist's vision of a Grecian urn, or a carpenter's of a bed, is not, to Plato, metaphysically special. Even the external appearance of a demigod would not be very impressive in this regard.[31] All these, and much more, are eclipsed by Ideal Forms.

Regarding a possible approximation of universals for physical things to Ideal Forms, see below, section 7. For similar approximations of the first member of Relational Forms to Ideal Forms, see below, section 8.

6. Ideal Forms

Commentators often complain of ambiguities, inconsistencies, and undeveloped lines of thought in Plato. This is especially true of the Forms, regarding which Plato is allegedly vague, laconic, and mercurial. A partial explanation of this fact is that Plato meant his Forms to be subject to philosophical, not public, discussion; and discussion was best conducted orally. The *Symposium*, and perhaps also the *Phaedrus*, were exceptions, where the central issue concerns, however playfully, the heart of all theories of Forms, namely Ideal Forms.[32]

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able position in contrasting it with snow (unpleasant and undesirable), but seems to treat only its property hotness (*thermon*), and not fire itself, as an Ideal Form (see further: section 8). Yet the rather sweeping presentation of Ideal Forms in the *Timaeus* (50c–52d) includes all four of the traditional elements, among them, fire (51b).

[31] A satyr, for instance, or Eros in the *Symposium*. The playfully introduced *phutourgos* in the *Republic* (10,597d) is no cosmic Creator; cf. further n. 45 below. Broadie (2007, 232–53) rightly doubts (Ideal) Forms for artefacts in the early 'Platonistic tradition', but she does not consider *Republic* 6,510a–b, nor the floating category of Conceptual Forms.

[32] See Thesleff (2002, 289–301 [= 2009, 541–50]) on publicity in Plato.

Ideal Forms also fit clearly and directly into Plato's two-level vision as sketched above. And they have always been regarded (even by Plato himself, e.g., in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*) as the most representative examples of Forms. For some explicit markers, see the preceding section. In the dialogues, the most detailed discussion of Ideal Forms as the philosopher's specialty can be found in the central books of the *Republic*, beginning with the contrast between 'philosophers' and 'others' (5,475e ff.).

Like many other readers of Plato, and writers too, we, the present authors, are prepared to qualify Forms proper as transcendent, intelligible, paradigmatic, perfect, immutable, simple, and unique.[33] We apply this list as a whole to Ideal Forms alone. And we add, as a note to be remembered throughout our argument, that these criteria explicate what is intrinsically good about the Forms from Plato's point of view.

The list is fairly representative of the characteristics of Ideal Forms as they occur in the dialogues. But we do not pretend that it is final. Some of the descriptors may be redundant, and others yet may need to be added. For example, we can immediately add that Ideal Forms are eternal and incorporeal, though these two features may arguably be said to be redundant with those on the original list. Both eternality and incorporeality (sometimes just 'invisibility') can probably be inferred directly from the original list, but Plato does make a point of mentioning them separately, for example, in the *Phaedo* (78c–80b).

Another important feature of Ideal Forms is an exalted ontological status representing ultimate reality, the cosmic embodiment of true being, in contrast to the contingent mode of existence at the lower, phenomenal level. The importance of this two-level feature is not just metaphysical but epistemological as well, since the ultimate reality in question, with the stability it embodies, constitutes our only hope of attaining knowledge, the kind grounded in universal truth, as opposed to settling for mere opinion or belief (*pistis* on the divided line),

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[33] Such features as we list here are likely to be found mentioned or discussed not only in scholarly articles or monographs but also in the expository sections of the growing stock of 'companions' or 'guides' to Plato. *The Continuum Companion to Plato* (Press 2012), for example, covers most of these features, if not more, in two short entries, one on the Forms (173–75, contributed by Kenneth Sayre) and one on ontology (218–20, contributed by Allan Silverman). Another example is Grube's monograph, *Plato's Thought*, where the first sentence alone goes through several of the features on our list (1935, 1). As for philosophy textbooks, a popular one currently in its eighth edition, describes the Forms as "independently existing, nonspatial, nontemporal 'somethings' ('kinds', 'types', or 'sorts') that cannot be known through the senses" (Soccio 2013, 131).

affording no greater reliability than the illusory objects of perception at our own level of existence.[34]

A detailed analysis of clear or potentially clear cases of Ideal Forms in the dialogues would reveal a concentration on entities of moral value, which usually goes hand-in-hand with aesthetic value.[35] They are, from a human perspective, good in an exemplary sense. They do not, as Ideal Forms, come with opposites that are also Ideal Forms. To elaborate, beautiful and ugly are opposite existential states, or aesthetic judgments, just as beauty and ugliness are opposite attributes or properties, but at that level, neither one is an Ideal Form, though both do well as concepts. We will return below (section 7) to Conceptual Forms. However, on the level of Ideal Forms, we are sure to find the beautiful right where Plato placed it, but we will find no sign of the ideally ugly throughout the canonical corpus.[36]

Our account builds on the cumulative evidence of passages in many dialogues, as illustrated in the preceding section, since none of them alone offers a clear and complete record.[37]

As Plato himself points out, this is a much-discussed matter (*poluthrulēta*, *Phaedo* 100b).[38] And the abundance of discussion, of course, is not an indication that the matter, having been thoroughly examined, may now safely be put to rest, but that it is to be investigated further still. Plato often emphasises its difficulties, even for philosophers. Although the original reference of this discussion is, dramatically, to Socrates and his associates, and, by extension, to Plato and his associates, it holds up rather well in transference to modern scholars and their as-

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[34] Causality might be added as yet another feature, as Forms are often taken to be causal agents of some sort. Platonic causality, to wit, the causality in and of the Forms, is a controversial topic. Nobody is sure how it works. What is going on is purportedly a kind of communion, inherence, partaking, or participation. But these concepts are not themselves all that clear; nor do they all conjure up the same image. The Aristotelian 'final cause' is not relevant either. A seminal attempt at clarification, to cite just one example, is the Vlastosian 'one-over-many' principle, but that just presents the Form as a unifying principle for a multitude of things of the same kind (Vlastos 1954, 320).

[35] Such an analysis, that is, with the focus specified and the depth and breadth required, has never been conducted, not even by Ross (1951).

[36] To be perfectly clear, we will not find the ugly as an Ideal Form: Otherwise, mention of the ugly (*Euthydemus* 301b, *Hippias Major* 289c–d, *Republic* 5,475e–476a, *Theaetetus* 186a), often in contrast to the beautiful, is common enough, but it remains at the conceptual level.

[37] See the conspectus in Erler (2007, 390–406).

[38] See Tarrant (2000, 43). Attaining certainty about *to agathon* is almost hopeless, as evidenced, for example, in *Republic* 6,496a–497d, 505a, *Parmenides* 134b–c, *Timaeus* 29d, and *Philebus* 64a–c. See further: n. 18 above.

sociates. Two areas where our view differs from those of our associates are, first, that we find Ideal Forms to be charged with positive intrinsic value, a feature implicit in the foregoing discussion and exemplified further below, and, second, that we consider these criteria to be features of Ideal Forms, not of just any Forms, and certainly not of things that are not Forms.

7. Conceptual Forms

7.1. Conceptualisation and Formalisation

Very few of the innumerable abstractions with which the human mind operates deserve to be labelled 'Ideal Form'. This is clear enough from the criteria laid out in the preceding section. Yet many kinds of universals outside the core of Ideal Forms are traditionally (and apparently also by Plato) classified as Forms, whatever term may be used. What kinds? This has been one of the biggest stumbling blocks in Platonic theory since antiquity.

Classical Greek was eminently suitable for abstractions, both for using the ones in hand and for creating new ones, often as derivatives, or easily generated with the aid of the article *to*. For the most part, such abstractions have nothing to do with Forms. Adopting the somewhat anachronistic term 'concept' for all abstractions representing a universal, or for any type of phenomenon, including imaginary ones, we find no clear distinction in Plato between concepts and the words (names, *onomata*) that represent them.[39] The linguistic expression is essential, however, not only for Plato but also for enabling a discussion of concepts.

The linguistic expression is not just 'the thing' as Antisthenes and others had asserted.[40] Spoken or written names of things, including what we would call 'concepts' as a general term for all abstractions, can always be expressed by words. If such concepts turn out to be 'real' or 'important' universals from Plato's perspective, we can expect him to place them on the upper level of his universe,

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[39] Examples abound in the *Cratylus* and the *Sophist*. The *Timaeus* (52a) makes it clear that Ideal Forms are *homōnuma* with particular things. But, taken as words, concepts are naturally nouns, or substantivised infinitives, as in *to eidenai* (*Phaedo* 75d), rather than finite verbs. Though words and denominations vary, it is through them that the dihaeretic process may reach the Forms. See, for example, *Statesman* 261e–262b, 285a–287d; cf. also n. 49 below.

[40] Diogenes Laërtius (*Lives* 6,3) reports that Antisthenes "was the first to define statement (or assertion) by saying that a statement is that which sets forth what a thing was or is" (Loeb translation).

analogously with Ideal Forms. Examples follow below, but the claim itself cannot be proven, nor its details fully worked out, in the space available for ancillary support for the main theses of a journal article.

On the other hand, both Conceptual Forms and the positive element in Relational Forms can, depending on the context, approximate to Ideal Forms, in which case they each tend to take on some of the associated features. However, there is no specific subset of features identified with Ideal Forms that tends to be taken on by the other two kinds when they approximate to Ideal Forms. This is an arbitrary tendency, not a systematic process. The question of which features, or that of how many, does not have a set answer, and must be decided on a case-by-case basis. Plato is seldom exact on the sliding scale of his two-level vision.

A telling example of Plato's treatment of concepts is the 'dihaeretic method', with which he and his younger friends experimented. An experiment along these lines may perchance end up at the level of Ideal Forms.[41] Normally, however, it would remain on a more linguistic level through 'division and collection', the so-called dialectical process of separating and grouping concepts. The concept of angler, for example, can be derived, divided, reconstructed, and combined with other concepts, but it never becomes anything like an Ideal Form. The method is likely to have been originally designed for definitional purposes, not as speculative or theoretical exercises supporting an ontological system.[42]

From another perspective, even Ideal Forms are concepts (in addition to whatever else Plato would have them be), both in their Socratic origins, and from our own vantage point. The converse, of course, does not hold: Not all concepts are Forms, let alone being Ideal Forms. Nor are they all suitable for formalisation as such.

Nevertheless, it is evidently a short step from concept to Conceptual Form. To be more precise, the step, short or long, is from our conception of concept to our understanding of what Plato might likely have considered a Conceptual Form. Otherwise, projecting all this back into Plato is mostly a heuristic device for sorting out what he was doing. The simple explanation, given the premise that there is a Conceptual Form for just about everything, or, more accurately, for

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[41] See n. 39 above. Clearly expressed in the *Phaedrus* (249b–c, 265d–266c); cf. also the *Sophist* (253c–e), *Statesman* (287c), *Philebus* (16c–17a), and *Hippias Major* (301b ff.). The dialectician knows how to proceed.

[42] The *Gorgias* (462e–466e) provides some corroboration. See also Prodicus on semantic distinctions in the *Protagoras* (e.g., 340a–341e, 358a–e), and the eristic games in the *Euthydemus*.

everything Plato found somehow real or important, is that anything Plato could and wanted to conceptualise ended up as a Conceptual Form.[43]

However, we should not make the distinction between concept and Form as fluent as that. Not everything has a Form, not even potentially. Plato makes this clear in all the dialogues where Forms (denoted as *eidē* or otherwise) are discussed as something specific, especially in the *Parmenides*. Forms belong to the upper level(s) of Plato's universe. And the lower level(s) are not set aside for replicas of them. But the continuity of and between levels must be kept in mind, as must the analogy between Ideal Forms and possible Forms of a lower status.

As we saw above (section 4), the divided line suggests a direct correspondence between levels (b) and (c). The latter consists of physical, sensibly manifest things, a neutral category, neither good nor bad as such. In other words, these are things that are neither good nor bad in themselves, only instrumentally so, if at all, though the text itself is silent about their possible misuse or ugliness (*Republic* 6,510a). It is easy to infer, as we are prepared to do, that segment (b) of the line represents, though broadly and vaguely, what we call 'Conceptual Forms'. And it is reasonable to claim (as will be fleshed out in section 10) that no Platonic Form stands for the 'bad', and none, again, for the 'trivial'.

Relative importance, or value, is key here: Not all concepts are interesting to Plato. Not even all Conceptual Forms are of equal relevance in Plato's universe. Some are more important than others. This is largely a reflection of the differential importance already existing at the phenomenal level. But Conceptual Forms stand for relatively 'reliable' things; they are not objects for conjecture or fantasy (as level (d) is on the line).

Plato seems to regard what we have called 'Conceptual Forms' as objects for opinion (albeit rational thought), not for noetic knowledge (*Timaeus* 51d–e; cf. *Republic* 5,475e–480a and the divided line).

Here, it is worth reiterating that the two-level vision, with its sliding scales, does allow concepts a partial approximation to Ideal Forms, denied by the customary (Parmenidean) 'either/or' logic. Concepts may, as it happens, be used in contexts where they resemble Ideal Forms, even taking on some of the features enumerated in the preceding section. They then acquire a higher dignity, so to speak, than ordinary concepts. They become Conceptual Forms. The acquired

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[43] See the discussion of the divided line above (section 4). Conceptual Forms, given their plenitude and their possibly exhaustive coverage of phenomenal experience, just may be Plato's answer to Parmenides' emphasis on the importance of not underrating apparently trivial candidates for abstraction (*Parmenides* 130e). Trivialities (see the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*), however, probably interested the Academy more than they did Plato.

dignity that marks this transformation also confirms their ontological status as suprasensible abstractions, perhaps with a few other impressive attributes, and thus secures for them a ranking higher up on Plato's stratification of reality.

Working with a two-level vision of reality, Plato is likely to have intuitively designed Conceptual Forms close to Ideal Forms, whether or not the term *eidos* (*idea*) is explicitly used. Here are some samples (from a vast assortment)[44] of *eidos* referring to a Conceptual Form, easily mistaken for an Ideal Form, if the criteria for the latter are not taken strictly into account: *Gorgias* 503e (*dēmiourgoi blepontes pros ... eidos ti*); *Cratylus* 389a–b, 390b (on the *eidos* of the carpenter's shuttle); cf. the apparent revelation at *Republic* 10,596a ("we are in the habit of positing a single *eidos* for the various *polla* to which we give the same name"), followed by the rather playful example at 10,596b–608b (on the *eidos* and *idea* of 'bed', made by the *phutourgos*[45] and imitated by the carpenter, and, the result, in turn, by the artist, etc.); cf. also *Timaeus* 51c (on the possibility of an *eidos* for every object); *Theaetetus* 148d (*dunamis*); *Sophist* 248a (*hoi tōn eidōn philoi*, referring to Academic radicals), 253d (on the dialectician distinguishing *eidē* in dihaeretics); *Statesman* 258e (on the statesman, king, master, and so on, as one); *Epistle* 6,322d (*hē eidōn sophia*, probably including both Ideal Forms and Conceptual Forms, as well as dihaeretics).

The same applies to the less common *idea* (e.g., *Phaedo* 104d, *Phaedrus* 246a), but, here, the connotation of Ideal Form is perhaps more prominent.[46]

Plato was comfortable with ambiguity, as, for example, his use of irony and play suggests. No wonder *eidos* can be found, in the same context, standing for an Ideal Form as well as a Conceptual Form.[47]

To place the terminology in the context of the divided line, we may note that the term *eidos* is used in a broad sense for invisible objects (*Republic* 6,510c) and for classes of visible ones (6,510d), all the while pointing to abstract conceptuality (6,511c).

Sometimes we find markers other than *eidos* indicating the approximation of a concept to a Form. See, for instance, *Phaedrus* 260a (and 261c–d, *ta*

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[44] See the lists in des Places (1964, 159–61).

[45] This rare term seems to stand for the demiurge of the entities of segment (b) on the divided line. See section 4 above; cf. also n. 31 above.

[46] For this controversial issue, see Ross (1951, *passim*), Guthrie (1975, 114–21; 1978, 19–29, and *passim*), and the list in des Places (1964, 260–61). Cf. the possibly playful point at *Theaetetus* 203e, which is not directly concerned with Forms.

[47] The parade example is *Republic* 4,445c. See section 7.2 below.

ontōs agatha, etc., *to dikaion*); *Republic* 3,401c (some craftsmen attempt to reach the *phusis* of *to kalon*, etc., cf. 402c), 4,438c–439b (*epistēmē autē*, compared to thirst); *Parmenides* 133d–e (*autos doulos*, *ho esti doulos*); *Sophist* 235e (*alēthēs summetria*, cf. *Statesman* 284d, *auto t'akribes*); *Timaeus* 30c (*ta noēta zōia*, cf. 37c); *Philebus* 59c (the pure, true, etc., and their cognates); *Epistle* 7,342a–344d (the 'philosophical digression', with the circle as an example of a Conceptual Form, cf. 342c).

It is often impossible for us, and probably was for Plato as well, to say precisely when a concept receives the connotation of a Form. Take, for instance, *to dikaion*. In Greek, it is sometimes synonymous with *dikaiosunē* (righteousness as an ideal human virtue), but it also implies what is right, whether in general or in a given situation or simply in theory (cf. the German *das Rechte*). Or consider *to kalon*, or any of the many nuances of *epistēmē*. Such value concepts become easily identified with Ideal Forms, if their reference is not clearly specified. The question of immanence or transcendence is largely *non liquet*.

We also leave another much-debated question open: Were Platonic theories of Forms more Socratic early on and less so later? That is to say, were they, in their beginnings, more dependent on the Socratic search for moral truth, or, as is alleged just as often, on craftsmen's and artists' search for models? To put it differently, are they better captured by the *eidos* approach, perhaps as with Conceptual Forms, or by the *auto* approach, as with Ideal Forms? Since chronology is not our concern here, we prefer a Platonic open-ended 'both/and'.

7.2. Opposition and Polarisation

Contrary or contradictory concepts of positive and negative value are often contrasted in Plato's works, but, normally, only as concepts, not as Forms. To some extent, this is a rhetorical device for intensifying their sense. The tendency is to put the positive term first. There are many examples of this, including the following: *Charmides* 169b (*epistēmē* of *epistēmē* and *anepistēmosunē*), 174c (*epistēmē* of *to kakon te kai agathon*);[48] *Meno* 72a (manifestations of *aretē* and *kakia*); *Phaedo* 60b, 71a, 103b, and *passim* (opposites arise from one another, as *hēdu* from *lupē*, *dikaioteron* from *adikōteron*, etc.); *Republic* 3,402c (guardians must

[48] See the *Lysis* (216d–218c), where the somewhat ironical discussion of opposites, including *to kalon* and *to kakon*, brings with it the term *parousia* (217b), yet without a clear reference to Ideal Forms. Cf. n. 47 above. See further *Euthydemus* 301a–b.

be able to recognise *ta tēs sōphrosunēs eidē kai andreias ... kai ta toutōn enantia*, certainly not implying Ideal Forms); *Sophist* 247a–e (some are said to have a presence of *dikaiosunē* in their soul, others, the opposite); *Symposium* 209b (bringing forth with *to kalon*, never with *to aischron*).

Such cases usually have nothing to do with Ideal Forms. We are, however, on occasion, tempted to regard the first member of a pair of opposites as representing an Ideal Form. This applies particularly to Relational Forms (see section 8). But there are other occurrences of the same nature.

For example, in the 'existential digression' of the *Theaetetus* (172c–179b), the two *paradeigmata* of life (176e) primarily concern the general orientation toward models of behaviour, not Ideal Forms. Still, at some point (175c), *autē dikaiosunē* slips in, together with its opposite, *adikia*.

A good example is *Republic* 5,475e–476e. Opening the discussion on true philosophers, Socrates contrasts the opposites *kalon* and *aischron*. Similarly, he says that each of the *eidos* (5,476a3) of *dikaion*, *adikon*, *agathon*, *kakon*, etc., is one, but that (in *koinōnia*) their manifestations are many. He then centres on the philosopher's orientation toward *to kalon* (5,476b), explicitly taken as an Ideal Form. A reasonable interpretation is to take *eidos* at 5,476a only in the sense of a concept, which can naturally have opposites. This passage seems to illustrate the famous *apo skopias* reflection of Socrates, looking back, as if 'from a lookout', over the dialogic ground covered, and declaring that there is one *eidos* of *aretē*, and an infinite number (of *eidē*) of *kakia* (4,445c).[49] Here, the term *eidos* is used with a rather typical Platonic ambiguity: Uniqueness refers to an Ideal Form, plurality, to various concepts (types, kinds).

Again, in the *Republic*, specifically in the final book, where we encounter one of Plato's proofs for the immortality of the soul (10,608d–611e), Socrates contends that everything susceptible of and to destruction has an inherent *to kakon* (*xumphuton*, 10,609a) that brings about its destruction. But the inherent evil of the soul, namely, *adikia*, turns out to be incapable of destroying it. Plato never refers to an Ideal Form of the soul, though its contacts with the higher level are obvious. At any rate, this curious piece of argument suggests that negative Forms do not reach the uppermost level of Plato's universe.

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[49] See, for example, the *Philebus* (12c): many *morphai* of *hēdonē*, but one term for it. See also the *Sophist* (256e): many *eidē* of being, innumerable ones of non-being. The language used in the Cave does not reach the Forms; see Harte (2007, 195–215).

8. Relational Forms

Relational Forms can, in principle, be spotted, in the dialogues where they occur, as contrasting pairs of relational universal concepts.[50] The fact that they may appear on first impression to be little more than opposite terms can frustrate a search in any dialogue. One pitfall is the ever-present possibility of false positives grounded in the abundance of dialectical occasions for contrasting terms, or concepts, which usually turn out to be just that and nothing more.

But the search can be tricky even upon correctly diagnosing dialogues where Relational Forms would be sure to be present. Two such dialogues take us on a terminological merry-go-round between the *auto* (or 'true being', etc.) expressions, relational universal concepts, and the *eidos* label: *Phaedo* and *Parmenides*.

In the *Phaedo*, the first of the sections concerned with Ideal Forms (65d–66a) operates only with the *auto* type, and the examples are limited to concepts of positive value. But Relational Forms are ushered in with talk of similarity and dissimilarity (74a ff.). As noted above (section 4), these are not charged with intrinsic value. Returning to Ideal Forms, in the second, longer section (100b ff.), the term *megethos* (100e) is taken as a relational concept, and contrasted with *smikrotēs*.[51] The extended search for a proof of the immortality of the soul embraces the terms *eidos* and *idea* for apparently the same entities, but the focus is on etiological and relational correlatives, notably: large and small; hot and cold; odd and even. The logic of the argument is controversial,[52] but what is important for our purposes is that Plato is concerned with the universal dynamics of Forms, and that the first member of the relational pairs (large, hot, odd) dominates when contrasted with its counterpart (small, cold, even).[53] Both are concepts, or possibly Conceptual Forms (either as *eidos* or as *idea*).[54] However, when contrasted

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[50] See the discussion, with references, in Thesleff (1999, 74–90 [= 2009, 457–72]), where they are called 'categories', following Plotinus.

[51] The *deuteros plous* (*Phaedo* 99c) probably signifies Plato's own autobiographical shift from Presocratic mechanistic explanations to general theories of Forms, and not specifically a new approach to the latter. For problems in taking *auto to ison* as just an Ideal Form, see Sedley (2007, 82). Relational Forms are manifested with sliding scales; see further below in this section.

[52] See Alican (2012, 435–50); Denyer (2007, 87–96); Erler (2007, 608–11).

[53] See Thesleff (1999, 7–10, 11–25, 74–90, 120–21 [= 2009, 393–96, 397–410, 457–72, 501–02]).

[54] Identifying the correlative components in each of certain pairs of Relational Forms (large

in a pair, though each one lacks intrinsic value, the first member easily presents itself, at least to the Greek mind in antiquity, and not just to Plato, as stronger and better, and hence, closer to Ideal Forms.

In the *Parmenides*, the presentation follows a different pattern. The discussion of Forms opens (128e) with ostensible Ideal Forms characterised by *auto* (and *ho estin*) and combined with the *eidos* label (*idea* also occurs, but *eidos* quickly and decisively rises above all other designations). Already impressed with the insightfulness of the young Socrates in distinguishing Forms from particulars, Parmenides quickly comes to the point: What kinds of things have separate (i.e., upper-level) *eidē*? Socrates first mentions Forms that we have here called 'Relational Forms', namely, relational universal concepts, such as one and many, similarity and difference, rest and motion (129d–e, cf. 130b). A start with such concepts anticipates, dramatically, the Eleatic problem of the one versus the many, which turns out to be the underlying theme of the dialogue. To the relational universal concepts brought up by Socrates, Parmenides adds concepts familiar to us as Ideal Forms, namely, the just, the beautiful, and the good (130b), all readily accepted by Socrates as having separate *eidē*. The problem comes with the uncertainty of Socrates regarding the status of physical objects, such as man, fire, and water (130c) — we may call them 'Conceptual Forms' — but he insists that trivial things, such as hair, mud, and dirt (130c), cannot have *eidē* of their own. Something of an aporia sets in as Socrates admits unease at the inconsistency of admitting Forms for some things but not for others. This prompts the prophetic remark of Parmenides that Socrates will eventually, through philosophy, learn to appreciate the entire spectrum of things considered, never treating any of them as unworthy of attention (130e). The semblance of suggestion masks clever avoidance of either confirming or denying that they all have Forms. There is no commitment, just encouragement. The invitation of the passage to embrace the full range of phenomena, despite having already repudiated Forms for certain types of things, and having done so with conviction, points to the intricacies of a

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vs. small, hot vs. cold, odd vs. even) as Conceptual Forms points to at least some overlap, possibly even suggesting that Relational Forms in general are not so much a discrete division of Forms as they are a subdivision of Conceptual Forms. They would, on this interpretation, be Conceptual Forms that happen to be paired up as universal relational categories. However, we do not believe that this requires, or even warrants, compressing our classification from three to two divisions. The lateral perspective of Plato's two levels, as reflected in Relational Forms, opens up a new dimension for understanding the universe (as discussed further below in the present section). This function of Relational Forms is not just important (for Plato) but unique as well. We therefore believe that Plato himself embraced all three divisions in the course of a lifelong preoccupation with abstraction.

proper understanding and classification of Forms. However, we may still doubt Plato's own interest in trivialities.[55]

Parmenides' subsequent elenchus operates chiefly with transcendent *eidē*, as does the logical (philosophical) exercise that occupies the second part of the dialogue. The elenchus involves Relational Forms treated as Ideal Forms (though, here, without neglecting the second, inferior member in the relevant pairs, thus bringing in smallness, plurality, and otherness), in addition to Ideal Forms proper, such as knowledge, beauty, and the good (134a–b). Conceptual Forms also seem to enter into the picture (133c–d), but there are no clear examples of negative Forms.[56] As most interpreters agree, the elenchus can reasonably be taken as a preparation for the discussion in the *Sophist* of the *sumplokē* of *eidē*. We see here the involvement of both Relational Forms and some Conceptual Forms in the complex of Ideal Forms.

As already noted above (section 4), Relational Forms also come into play in the *Sophist* (254d–e), where the categories covered are introduced as *megista genē* (soon also termed *eidē* and *ideai*). In the *Timaeus* (35a–36d), they become elements of the world-soul, thereby giving it a mediatory but good-oriented function in the universe.

Drawing on these two dialogues, the list of examples from the *Phaedo* and the *Parmenides* can be expanded as follows: being (*ousia*) / being something (*einai ti*); one (*hen*, *monon*) / many, number (*polla*, *plēthos*, *arithmos*); sameness (*tauton*) / difference / (*thateron*, *heteron*, *allon*); stability, rest (*stasis*,[57] *hestanai*, *hēsuchazein*, etc.) / change, motion (*kinēsis*, *gignesthai*, etc.); bigger (*meizon*, *mallon*) / smaller (*elatton*, *hētton*); whole (*holon*) / parts, divisibility (*meros*, *meriston*).

The examples can easily be multiplied further, bearing in mind that the entities are not intrinsically value-laden as in Ideal Forms, and that they must always be taken in pairs as done above. They concern most concepts and all phenomena. They are not true opposites, but they reflect the intertwinings of Plato's asymmetrical, two-level universe — seen laterally, as it were.

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[55] See n. 43 above.

[56] The curious pair of 'being a master' and 'being a slave' (*Parmenides* 133e) is suggestive of Relational Forms. Yet the context is logical rather than axiological; i.e., the emphasis is on conceptual contrast rather than relative value.

[57] The ambivalence of the opposite meanings of this term may be part of Platonic play.

This lateral aspect allows us to term both members of the pairs 'Forms'. They are both abstractions, but the lower member is far from Ideal Forms.

We may also turn to the *Theaetetus* (185c–186c), where we find the suggestion, set forth by Socrates' young partner, with encouragement from Socrates, that what we have called 'Relational Forms' constitute a prerequisite for abstract thinking about the All.[58] The examples that follow are not Ideal Forms. They occur as contrasted pairs (with the first member pointing to a higher level), and they lack important characteristics of Ideal Forms (see section 6).

Reflections on Relational Forms, especially on the first member of each pair, may occasionally bring to mind Ideal Forms, as in young Socrates' opening ponderings in the *Parmenides* (cf. similarity in the *Phaedo*, above). Yet this would take us down the wrong track. They are, more than anything, 'categories' or 'kinds of aspect' (*genē* is a more appropriate term than *eidē*) covering the two levels.[59] The second member (many, movement, difference, etc.) can potentially be associated with bad things or evil qualities (see section 10), though it does not represent anything bad in itself. In the *Sophist*, such concepts are employed to explain the *sumplokē* of *eidē*, considered, in the first place, to be abstract concepts in the employment of language, and in particular (i.e., otherness) to make room for negation. The latter approach also concerns ostensible Ideal Forms (notably, *Sophist* 257d–258a).

Unfortunately, the use of the term *eidos* (and *idea*) in the context of Relational Forms, and the occasional explicit allusion to Ideal Forms, especially in Socrates' opening remarks in the *Parmenides*, have had a snowball effect in conceptual confusion, as the clutter became perpetuated through contradictory interpretations throughout the course of Plato scholarship. A far less confusing alternative has been to label pretty much any abstraction a 'Form', which can look surprisingly credible with all the capitalisation and scare quotes.

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[58] After abruptly displacing the Good where one might naturally expect to find it at the top of the divided line (*Republic* 6,509d–511e), the unhypothetical first principle of the All remains confined to the famous metaphor, never to be heard of again, at least not outside that context. Much of the modern literature is thus understandably focused on whether the Good and the All are somehow the same: either two aspects of the same thing, or two ways of thinking about the same thing, or outright identical. The scholarly debate to date seems to be leaning toward the identity interpretation. See Nails (2013, 88–101) both for a succinct survey of the literature and for a substantive contribution challenging the mainstream interpretation.

[59] Thesleff (1999, 74–90 [= 2009, 457–72]).

9. First Principles

A further source of confusion is the problem of the two foundational principles (*archai*, *prōta*) Plato is said to have communicated orally: the one (*hen*) and the indefinite dyad (*ahoristos duas*). The indefinite dyad is also known as the 'great-and-small', not to mention comparable expressions capturing its mathematical essence as being open (infinite) in both directions, toward greatness as well as toward smallness, toward more as well as toward less.[60]

The relation of these first principles to the theory of Forms became a major concern among Plato scholars as the Tübingen school made inroads in the 1960s into documenting the plausibility and importance of the so-called unwritten teaching (*agrapha dogmata*), the purported outlet for the exposition and discussion of these matters, which are not to be found in the canonical corpus, except in a rudimentary fashion that requires interpretation, if not also interpolation and extrapolation.

Recently, it has been argued that the two principles, together with a theory of ideal numbers (a Pythagorean mystical *tetraktus*, i.e., 1+2+3+4=10, constituting the basis of arithmology and geometry), were a rather late pythagorising thought experiment by Plato, in fact, an application of the two-level model.[61] Yet, late or otherwise, this complex of principles and theories should be neither confused with Relational Forms nor wholly divorced from them. On the other hand, apart from the move toward ideal numbers — which Speusippus may have abandoned (Aristotle: *Metaphysics* 1086a3–6) — these developments are not relevant to Ideal Forms.

However, we know that some early commentators (probably members of Plato's Academy) came to take the indefinite dyad as somehow symbolising matter and evil.[62] This trend corresponds to speculations about a metaphysically active negative (bad, evil) psychic force, an outlook on the rise in the Academy toward the end of Plato's life. The influence of Persian thought is likely to have been in operation here. Reverberations of such speculations can be seen in new interpretations of the indefinite dyad, especially on the strength of textual support

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[60] See Reale (1990, 67–68), among others, for terminological alternatives for the indefinite dyad.

[61] Thesleff (1999, 91–107 [= 2009, 473–88]).

[62] See, for example, Aristotle (*Physics* 203a4–16, 209b; *Metaphysics* 988a14–16, 1091b31–35).

from the introduction of a secondary (bad) world-soul in the *Laws* (10,896e–897d) and *Epinomis* (988c–e).[63]

10. Negative Forms?

Any attempt to classify the Forms, or, more accurately, any attempt to sort through the variety of constructs that are brought under the rubric of Forms, must deal with the possibility of negative Forms. The problem, of course, is not with the possibility of negative concepts, for these are admittedly legion, but they are not Forms. Nor do we need to worry about the possibility of negative Relational Forms, because these come in pairs of intrinsically value-neutral correlative elements standing in a complementary relationship that exhausts, and thereby represents, basic, or universal, categories. Despite the hierarchical nature of the correlation, the lower, or subordinate, element is not negative, especially not in the sense of evil. It is merely at a preferential disadvantage that may be psychological or cultural, whereby positive thoughts about the element typically listed first (because it is preferred) relegate the one listed second to a subordinate complementary status. All this is consistent with Plato's two-level vision of the universe. This just leaves Ideal Forms and (secondarily) the Conceptual Forms associated with them, and this is precisely where the problem would be if any negative Forms were to be discovered in their midst. Ideal Forms are, by our definition, oriented toward that which is good and desirable, and anything to diminish their goodness and desirability would overturn our classification.

Indeed, a few menacing examples of apparently negative Ideal Forms stand out. The critical reader may benefit from contemplating the most salient passages.

The most conspicuous case is the beginning of Socrates' elenchus in the *Euthyphro* (5c–6e), where he tries to elicit from Euthyphron a definition of piety. In contrast to other definitional dialogues, we find here a logically superfluous yet dramatically essential emphasis on the opposite of the concept sought, namely, the unholy (*to asebes*, *to anhosion*), which is provided with markers suggesting an Ideal Form (pointed *auto*, *idea*, *eidos*, cf. 15d). Plato must have been teasing his audience. Even ancient critics may have noticed the terminological slide: The otherwise reliable ms. B reads *hosiotēta* at *Euthyphro* 5d4, perhaps as a reflection

[63] For a more genuinely Platonic background, see the *Timaeus* (48a) and the *Sophist* (268c–275c). For why the *Laws* might not be so genuinely Platonic, see Nails and Thesleff (2003, 14–29).

of an attempt to refer the entire sentence to *to hosion*, not to *to anhosion*. But note the play with refined terminology (for instance, 7c, 9d, 11a, 12c, 13e, 14c). The dialogue is certainly not 'very early', as many modern critics have assumed.[64] It is unthinkable that Plato would have believed in an Ideal Form for *to anhosion*. He seems even to have been in some doubt about *to hosion*, traditionally included among the cardinal virtues, as in *Protagoras* 329c and *Phaedo* 75d (with *auto*). In the *Republic*, it is not a central virtue but part of *dikaiosunē* (e.g., 4,443a).

Another passage for contemplation comes in the *Republic*, where Socrates asserts that guardians-in-training must learn to recognise the *eidē* of *sōphrosunē*, *andreia*, etc., and of their opposites (3,402b–403b, 3,409b, cf. 5,476a). What is meant here must be the manifestations of such qualities, not the qualities existing in and of themselves as Ideal Forms. The *eidē* and the opposites in question are just concepts, dispositions, or behaviour patterns. The *megista mathēmata*, which include Ideal Forms, come later (6,503e, 6,504a).

The *Phaedo*, to expand on what has already been said about it above (section 8), is one of the most tempting places to look for a negative Ideal Form. The dialogue appears to bring together everything we have here distinguished as this or that type of abstraction, which, upon close inspection, may or may not call for designation as a Form of any kind. And the temptation to look there is intensified by its preoccupation with opposition, repeatedly contrasting one concept with another.

For all that, negative Ideal Forms are nowhere to be found in the dialogue. An introductory section on Forms mentions only Ideal Forms (65d–68d). The first argument on immortality (70c–72e) is concerned with opposition on the level of physical reactions and particulars rather than Forms. The second argument (72e–77a), from recollection, does not operate primarily with opposition. The third argument (78b–80b), commonly known as the analogic argument, proceeds with pairs of relational universal concepts: noncomposite and composite; constant and changing; invisible and visible; soul and body; and so on. This leaves the final ar-

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64 Critics assigning such an early date to the *Euthyphro* are too numerous to acknowledge with full publication details. To cite just one example, Ledger (1989) places the dialogue in second place overall, preceded only by the *Lysis* (comprehensive list in 224–25, cf. 229). For further examples, see Thesleff (1982, 8–17 [= 2009, 154–63]), who provides a conspectus of chronologies cataloguing 132 attempts at establishing the production sequence of the Platonic corpus. One of those attempts (1982, 16 [= 2009, 162]) belongs to Thesleff himself, reflecting his earlier work (1967), but see Thesleff (1982, 204–05, 223–26 [= 2009, 351–52, 369–71]) for his later views specifically on dating the *Euthyphro*. For related issues in chronology, see n. 4 above. Cf. also the latter part of n. 10 above.

gument (105b–107a), where the prime candidate for a negative Ideal Form would seem to be death. The well-known conclusion of the argument is that the soul, as the bringer of life, does not admit death, as the opposite of life, because, so we are told beforehand, the soul's connection with life is an interminable one: Life is not simply a phase the soul goes through but an essential property of the soul.[65]

This is a controversial argument. But what is important for our immediate purposes is the nature of an asymmetrical contrast between life and death. The text bears out the interpretation of a Form of life (106d), but this does not mean that death is to be treated in the same way. Even life is not quite like the typical Ideal Form (the just, the beautiful, and so on), and this leaves little room for its opposite to ascend to that status.

In the main, the *Phaedo* tends to approach all Forms from the perspective of relational universal concepts. This makes them Relational Forms in the classification proposed and defended here. The first member of each pair (similarity, largeness, hotness, oddness, life) may approximate to Ideal Forms, but the opposite characteristics do not elevate the correlative elements at the lower end to the status of Ideal Forms.

The *Phaedrus* (250a) mentions *to adikon*, but this cannot be an Ideal Form, as it is simply a reference to an unfortunate turn toward unrighteousness in a soul that has already failed in its cosmic journey toward the upper regions, where it would otherwise aspire to dwell with the gods in the presence of Ideal Forms. *To adikon* is simply a negative concept. The later mention of a single *eidos* of *to aphron* must likewise be dismissed, coming as it does in the course of a brief commentary (265d–266c) on the method of dihaeresis, where the focus is on concepts or Conceptual Forms. This may be confirmed by the extensive dihaereses in the *Sophist*.

The *Sophist* (246a–247e) presents a parallel case in point, as the Eleatic Visitor argues for the noetic and incorporeal *eidē* constituting true *ousia*, and offers as examples (247a–b) the presence of *dikaiosunē*, *phronēsis*, etc., and of their opposites, in the soul to which they (as primary entities) give their character. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on the abstract quality of concepts, not specifically on Ideal Forms, though the latter serve as models.

The search for the elusive evil twin of Ideal Forms can go on forever, or at least as far as one can continue to identify potential candidates in the text, though exhaustive treatment here cannot be a practical goal.[66]

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[65] The soul is associated with the upper level, but there is no Ideal Form for it.

[66] A set of observations cutting across multiple dialogues may provide additional insight into

11. Conclusion

We have been concerned with Platonic Forms. The importance of this issue for Plato's own thinking has perhaps been overrated for centuries. But it is part of his ontology and epistemology, where intuitive visions and strict reasoning come into play with equal vigour, and, often, with equal subtlety.

We submit that the constructs commonly known as Plato's Forms do not all belong together. They originate in three separate attempts to explore abstraction from a philosophical perspective. These are distinct but overlapping efforts, all part of a continuous thought experiment geared toward understanding a single universe with basically two ontological levels, and modified as needed, either to pursue new insights or to rethink old ones. The building blocks of reality emerging from the separate attempts have come down to us as a massive collection of undifferentiated units. And scholars have been content to continue to treat this as a homogeneous collection with each element essentially the same as any other. Getting out of that habit promises to enrich our understanding of the main lines of Plato's thought.

The revision required is to identify the proper divisions in the heretofore fungible Forms. Our classification recognises three such divisions:

- Ideal Forms: noetic realities with superlative intrinsic value, especially moral value, but also aesthetic and religious value.
- Conceptual Forms: universals to which Plato assigns objective reality, but not intrinsic value, though positive and negative connotations occur, and ontological ascent is possible through approximation to Ideal Forms.
- Relational Forms: correlative pairs of relational universal concepts employed in the pursuit of a structural understanding of the cosmos, the first element of each pair being capable of ontological ascent, much like the case of Conceptual Forms.

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the question of negative Forms. One such wide-ranging theme is the contrast between pleasure and pain. Pleasure is not, on the whole, regarded very highly by Plato. The most graphic reminder of this is the legendary chariot's unruly horse (*Phaedrus* 253c–254e), chastised repeatedly for seeking pleasure (cf. *Phaedo* 69b, 83b, and *passim*; *Timaeus* 69c–d). Occasionally, however, we find hints of the possibility of an Ideal Form for pleasure. In the *Protagoras* (351d–357e), Socrates argues that the art of *metrētikē* is a condition for reaching the good in pleasure (*hēdonē autē* 351d; cf. *Statesman* 283d; *Philebus* 55e). In the *Republic* (9,586b), true and pure pleasure is placed within reach of the wise. In the *Philebus*, true pleasure is ranked high throughout the dialogue, though the discussion only peripherally touches on Forms. Even if there is an Ideal Form for pleasure, a negative Ideal Form for pain, or for any other evil, is not to be found anywhere in the corpus.

Although these are not actually three different kinds of Forms, retaining that designation is convenient for the continuity of discussion. Otherwise, Ideal Forms are the real thing, the other two being glorified concepts far short of the perfection associated with noetic reality. They can indeed take on some of the features of Ideal Forms, but not as a rule, and never the attribute of positive intrinsic value.

Hence, while the difference between a concept and a Conceptual Form is significant, at least in terms of the second-order language we use in trying to figure out what Plato is doing, the same thing can sometimes be treated as a concept and sometimes as a Conceptual Form. Plato can move in a flash from hot thing to hotness to the hot itself, and it is not always easy to see which sense is in the forefront, but it is easy to see that there are differences. The same holds for Relational Forms, particularly for the dominant element in each pairing.

We believe we have made a reasonable appeal for this classification. Naturally, there will be reservations and objections, especially since our proposal, in essence, limits Forms proper to Ideal Forms. Their cognates among Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms reflect only some of their characteristics. The strength of our thesis is best reflected in a famous vision: the imagery of what awaits the soul of the philosopher upon the completion of its cosmic ascent (*Phaedrus* 248a–249d). When the enlightened soul joins the gods in admiration of the Forms, it will behold justice, temperance, knowledge, and such (247d), not horseness or wetness or muckness. Plato's poetry is all about the Ideal Forms, transcendent and intelligible and immutable and altogether precious, all culminating in the Good. Among mortals, philosophers alone are able to attain them.

This is not to deny a place to Plato's first principles, the one and the indefinite dyad, but these seem to have been a late pythagorising experiment built on the two-level model, and we do not know enough about them to incorporate them as essential ingredients in a working model of Plato's overall vision. As for negative Ideal Forms, Plato makes no room for them, denying negative concepts the possibility of ascent to the noetic level, which is inherently opposed to negativity.

We further contend that our reconstruction of the conceptual apparatus Plato uses to make sense of the world has a distinct advantage in bringing out the axiological orientation of his worldview. This is an area where the simple contrast between Forms and particulars falls short. That black-and-white contrast, in turn, is a legacy and shortcoming of the traditional interpretation of Plato as a thoroughgoing metaphysical dualist. The ultimate solution, therefore, is to abandon the dualism of two worlds in favour of the asymmetrical and complementary hierarchy of two levels, providing all the room necessary for the stratification

of reality in correspondence with what we get from the text, without the typical problems we run into with the traditional interpretation.

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