

V—

The Theory of Forms

T.H. Irwin

(1.)—

Socratic Method and Platonic Metaphysics

Throughout the Platonic dialogues the character Socrates assumes the existence of 'forms' (eide * *Euthphr.* 6d9-e1; *Men.* 72c6-d1), but most students of Plato believe that the Theory of Forms¹ is a distinctively Platonic theory, not accepted by the historical Socrates. Students who recognize a group of early 'Socrates' dialogues and a later group of 'middle' dialogues take the Theory of Forms to be introduced in the middle dialogues.

Those who accept this division between Socratic forms and Platonic Forms appeal to Aristotle's comments (*Metaph.* 987^a32-^b10, 1078^b12-1079^a4, 1086^a37-^b11). According to Aristotle, Plato developed his theory of non-sensible, separated Forms in response to Socrates' search for definitions in ethics, because he believed that Socratic definitions could not apply to sensible things, since sensible things are subject to change. Plato's views about change resulted (Aristotle tells us) from his early association with Cratylus the Heracleitean.

Aristotle leads us to expect, then, that when Plato argues that sensibles are deficient or imperfect, he will refer especially to change. We ought not to assume that Aristotle must be right, but it is only reasonable to examine the dialogues to see whether his claims are true, or plausible, or illuminating. To see whether he is right, we must find out what he means and how far his claim can be defended from Plato's dialogues.

The most relevant passages in the dialogues are those—if there are any—in which Plato argues for non-sensible Forms. What he says about non-sensible Forms in contexts where he assumes that they exist, or where

¹ This essay is derived, with some modifications, from *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 10. I ought to emphasize that it was written as part of an account of Plato's moral philosophy, and therefore does not cover every aspect of the Theory of Forms. I use an initial capital in 'Forms' and in the names of Forms ('Just' etc.) to indicate 'Platonic' in contrast 'Socratic' forms.

EBSCOhost®

he wants to raise puzzles about them, is relevant to understanding the Theory of Forms, but it is not necessarily relevant to understanding his arguments for the theory. For this reason, we may reasonably set aside the *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*; these are later dialogues that discuss Forms at length, but seem to presuppose the conception that Aristotle describes. To see how Plato forms this conception, we must look at the middle dialogues, and especially at the *Phaedo* and *Republic*.²

2.—

Recollection and Forms

We can see that some aspects of Aristotle's story are plausible if we turn to a development in Plato's thought that he does not mention in this context. In the *Meno* Plato examines some of the presuppositions of Socratic inquiry. He considers the conditions for an adequate Socratic definition, and he explores the distinction between knowledge and belief. He implies that knowledge of Socratic definitions must be the result not of observation, but of recollection of prenatal knowledge. In the *Phaedo* he reasserts the Theory of recollection, but now he claims that the truths we recollect are truths about non-sensible Forms, recollected from imperfect sensible instances (*Phd.* 74e8-75a3). Since recollection is complete—according to the *Meno*—when we have a Socratic definition, Plato claims that Socratic definitions must primarily apply to non-sensible Forms. The *Republic* asserts the same epistemological and metaphysical claims; Plato argues that knowledge cannot be primarily about anything sensible, but must be about non-sensible Forms.

Plato makes it clear that he is talking about the forms that concern Socrates. He introduces the 'just itself' and all the other things that are properly called 'the *F* itself' in dialectical discussions (*Phd.* 65d4-5, 74a11, 75c10-d3, 76d7-9); these are precisely the 'beings' or 'essences' (cf. *ousias*; 65d13) that Socrates sought to define. Once he has made it clear that he is talking about the same forms that Socrates talked about, Plato claims that these forms are inaccessible to the senses (65d4-5).

What is it about Socratic forms that, in Plato's view, makes them inaccessible to the senses? We may find it easier to answer this question if we consider what Socratic forms must be like if they are to answer the questions that Socrates wants answered.

² I have discussed the order of the Platonic dialogues in *Plato's Ethics*, ch. 1.

EBSCOhost®

3.—

Socratic—

Definition in the Euthyphro

In the *Euthyphro* Socrates gradually introduces different features of forms, by telling Euthyphro what sort of answer is needed to the question 'What is the pious?' He attributes four features to forms:

1. There must be just one form of piety for all pious things (actions, people, and so on) (5d1-5).
2. It must be usable as a paradigm that we can consult to say whether something is pious or not (6e3-6).
3. It must be describable without explicit reference to properties—just and unjust, fine and shameful, good and bad—that introduce disputes (7c10-d7).
4. The single 'form' (*eidos*) or 'character' (*idea*) of piety is that 'by which all pious things are pious' (6d9). A correct description of it must describe the feature of pious things that explains why they are pious. Socrates is willing to grant that what the gods love is coextensive with piety (since he treats it as a *pathos* of piety; 11a7), but he does not agree that this description of piety answers the question he asked.

Does Socrates regard these as four distinct claims about forms? Or does he take the last three to be clarifications of the first, so that they explain what he means by speaking of one form? In saying that the form is that by which pious things are pious, he assumes that Euthyphro has already agreed with this in agreeing that there is one form *ephestha* * *gar pou*; 6d11); but his original question to Euthyphro did not make this clear.³

In any case, two of these claims, the second and the third, seem to be primarily epistemological, and two others, the first and the fourth, seem to be primarily metaphysical. When Socrates speaks of using the form as a pattern to tell whether something is pious, and of removing terms that arouse disputes, he speaks of our cognitive relation to the form. When he speaks of explanation, he speaks of the actual relation of the form to its instances.

Why should an account of a form meet both the epistemological and the metaphysical demands? It does not seem obvious that a correct description of the relevant explanatory feature will also remove terms that arouse disputes and allow the cognitive access that Socrates demands of a paradigm.

³ Perhaps 6d4-5 is meant to imply the explanatory requirement *inkata ten* anhosioteta**.

EBSCOhost®

4.—

Socratic Definition in the Meno

Does this question about the metaphysical and the epistemological aspects of forms occur to Plato? The *Euthyphro* suggests some degree of self-consciousness, especially about the difference between identification of the explanatory feature of piety and identification of something that pious things merely have in common. But we need not confine ourselves to the *Euthyphro*; for the *Meno* makes it clearer that Plato sees the difference between Socrates' demands and the different questions that they raise.

In contrast to the *Euthyphro*, the *Meno* recognizes that the demand for a single form to cover all the things that bear a given predicate is controversial. Meno supposes it is easy to say what virtue is, because he thinks he can answer the question by giving a list of different types of virtue (*Men.* 71e1-72a5). Socrates, however, suggests that there is one form because of which all virtues are virtues, and which one ought to focus on in making it clear what virtue is (72c6-d3).

Here Plato introduces the unity of the form in its many instances, and its paradigmatic and explanatory character. He may suggest that its paradigmatic and explanatory character justifies the assertion of its unity. If Meno's first suggestion were right, virtues would simply constitute a list with nothing more in common besides membership on the list. Plato answers that there is more to being a virtue than simply belonging to a heterogeneous list; virtues share some property that explains why all genuine virtues deserve to count as virtues. To recognize this property is to recognize the 'one' belonging to all of the many (*dia*

panton * 74a9;cf. 75a7-8), something that can be attributed 'universally' to them (*kata holou*; 77a6).

These remarks present a metaphysical demand. Socrates adds an epistemological demand. He persuades Meno that the correct answer to a search for a definition must not only answer true things, but also through those things that the questioner additionally agrees that he knows' (75d6-7).⁴ This condition—said to be characteristic of dialectic as opposed to eristic—is applied to Meno's next attempt at definition. He eventually agrees that 'whatever comes about with justice is virtue and whatever comes about without all such things is vice' (78e8-79a1). Socrates objects that if we do not know what virtue is, we will not know what any part of

⁴ The reading *dihon* proshomologe(i) eidenai ho eromenos* is defended by R. W. Sharpies, *Plato: Meno* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1985), ad loc. Some favour emending to *prohomologe(i)* 'agrees in advance'*. The MSS read *erotomenos** 'the one questioned'; *eromenos* is an emendation.

virtue is; hence we will not know what justice is, and so it is illegitimate (by the standards of the dialectical condition) to mention justice in the definition of virtue (79d1-e4).

Socrates implies that we cannot know what *G* is if *F* is mentioned in the definition of *G* and we do not know what *F* is; and so, since knowledge requires definition, we cannot know what *G* is unless we can define *F* independently of *G*. This is not quite the same as the demand, presented in the *Euthyphro*, for the elimination of disputed terms, but it might be explained by that demand. For Socrates might argue that if *G* is defined by reference to *F*, but *F* cannot be defined independently of *G*, our initial disputes about what things are *G* will return when we consider what things are *F*.

The dialectical condition is open to question. It seems to reject interdependent definitions; but why should we reject such definitions as answers to a Socratic question? A Socratic definition identifies the genuinely explanatory property; why should it always be possible to specify this property in the terms required by the dialectical condition?

As long as Socrates accepts both the epistemological and the metaphysical demands, without saying which is more important, or how we are to decide conflicts between them, he makes the task of finding a Socratic definition significantly more difficult. Meno is as unsuccessful as both Socrates and his interlocutors have been in the early dialogues. Meno does not challenge Socrates' requirements; he believes that the difficulties he faces arise from Socrates' claims about knowledge and definition. He is mistaken in this belief; when we see that he is mistaken, we may wonder whether Socrates' other demands would make it difficult for anyone to find a satisfactory definition. In studying Plato's further reflections on the nature of forms and our knowledge of them, we might reasonably hope to find out whether Plato accepts both the metaphysical and the explanatory demands imposed by Socrates, and how he believes they can be satisfied.

5.—

Convention And Objectivity

The *Cratylus* clarifies some of the assumptions in the *Meno* about the unity of a form and about its explanatory character. The dialogue considers whether the 'correctness of names' (383a4-b2) is conventional or natural.⁵

⁵ The *Cratylus* is a dialogue of uncertain date. See J. V. Luce, 'The Date of the *Cratylus*' *American Journal of Philology*, 90 (1954), 136–54; M. M. Mackenzie, 'Putting the *Cratylus* in its Place', *Classical Quarterly*, 36 (1986), 124–50.

EBSCOhost®

This question divides into two further questions: (1) Is the internal character and structure of names purely conventional? (Is 'horse' a more correct name for horses than '*hippos*' is?) (2) Is it a matter of nature or convention that a particular name is the correct name for a particular sort of thing? Socrates allows that an appeal to convention may give the right answer to the first question (435a5-d3), but he rejects convention as an answer to the second question.

In Socrates' view, the conventionalist means that there is nothing about, say, horses themselves that makes it correct to give a single name to all horses rather than one name to horses and dogs encountered on odd days of the week and another name to horses and cats encountered on even days. On this view, there is nothing about external reality itself that makes it right to classify things in one way rather than another.

Socrates attacks one motive for the conventionalist view by attacking the Protagorean position that 'what things seem to each person to be like, that is also what they are like' (386c4-5). He asks Hermogenes whether 'the being (*ousia*) of things is private to each person' (385e5), or, on the contrary, things have some stability in their own right (386a3-4), so that they do not vary in accordance with variations in our views about them (386d8-e4). Socrates defends his belief in objective things and properties by arguing from the fact that we distinguish better and worse people, and in doing so distinguish wise from ignorant people (386b10-12). If Protagoras were right, we would not be entitled to draw these distinctions; for since everyone would have equally true beliefs, everyone would be equally wise, and so no one would be wiser than anyone else (386c2-d1).

Once Socrates has secured Hermogenes' agreement about different degrees of wisdom, he infers that there must be something for us to be right or wrong about, and that this must be the nature that things have in themselves, independently of our beliefs about them (386d8-e5). It follows that we speak correctly or incorrectly in so far as we do or do not speak of things as they objectively are (387b11-c5). Since naming is an action that is a part of speaking, naming can be done rightly or wrongly too (387c9-d8). The proper function of a name is to teach and distinguish the being of things (388b6-c1), and a correct name will carry out this function. Socrates suggests that a name is correct to the extent that it conveys an 'outline' (*tupos*) of its referent. The better the outline of *F*, the more correct the name of *F*; but as long as some outline of *F* is conveyed, the name still names *F* (431c4-433a2).

The assumption that some predicates are names preserving outlines

EBSCOhost®

underlies the discussion with Meno. For Socrates assumes that when Meno uses the word 'virtue', he preserves the outline of a genuine nature, as Socrates conceives it. Why does Socrates assume this? Presumably it is possible that some names (or putative names) are so badly correlated with reality that they preserve the outline of no genuine nature, or they combine elements of two natures so confusedly that we cannot say determinately which nature is named. Meno might argue that there is nothing that the items on his list of virtues have in common, or that all they have in common is the fact that they are conventionally recognized as virtues because they correspond to conventionally recognized roles. Alternatively, he might suggest that if some quality of a person comes to be widely admired, or admired by certain people, it is a virtue, and that this is what being a virtue consists in. This answer does not divide virtue up into many, and it does not provide a mere list. But it is not the sort of answer that satisfies Socrates. In the *Euthyphro* he considers and rejects an answer of this sort, arguing against the suggestion that piety should be defined as what the gods love.

Socrates rejects this sort of answer because he believes there is something about the virtues themselves that makes it appropriate to put them on the list of virtues. He assumes that there is some question about the objective character of the virtues that we can answer correctly or incorrectly. The *Cratylus* presents the metaphysical view of language and its underlying reality that is presupposed by Socrates' demands in the *Meno* and in the early dialogues. Socrates commits himself to the existence of real kinds and genuine objective similarities that justify our classifying things as we do. He assumes, with Meno's agreement, that there is some single standard, derived from the nature of the actions and characteristics themselves, that justifies our judgement that all the types of virtue are genuine virtues.

The demand for an objective explanatory property makes the demand for a single definition more difficult to satisfy. If Socrates were satisfied with a single description corresponding to 'F' that applies to all Fs, it would be easier for Meno to satisfy him. Since, however, he demands an objective explanatory property, he is dissatisfied with answers that do not provide the right sort of explanation.

At the end of the *Cratylus* Plato considers the implications of his conception of forms for a Heraclitean doctrine of flux. Socrates and Cratylus agree that there is such a thing as 'beautiful itself, and good [itself], and each one of the beings in this way' (439c7-d1). Then Socrates asks about the possibility of change in the forms: 'Then let's consider this very question, not whether a face, or anything of that sort, is beautiful, and all

EBSCOhost®

such things seem to flow. Are we not to say that the beautiful itself is always such as it is?' (439d3-6). They agree that the form itself cannot change without ceasing to be the form it is (439d8-10). They must have in mind change in respect of the property that makes the form the form it is. If triangularity were to cease to imply trilaterality, that would not be a change from one state of triangularity to another; it would be the nonexistence of triangularity. Hence, if the form of beauty were to lose its essential property, such an alleged change would imply that there is no form of beauty.

We might object that this argument overlooks the possibility of saying that beauty was one thing in the Parthenon, but became something different in Chartres Cathedral, since the beauty of the Parthenon is quite dissimilar to that of Chartres Cathedral. Why should we not call this a change in beauty? Plato's answer depends on the conception of forms that Socrates defends against Hermogenes' conventionalism. The one form of beauty is the one that makes it true that both the Parthenon and Chartres Cathedral are beautiful; it has neither the specific features of a Greek temple nor the specific features of a Gothic cathedral, and hence the alleged change in beauty is not really a change in beauty itself, if there is a single form of the sort that Socrates has in mind.

While more would need to be said in a full discussion of this passage, these remarks will show how it is connected with the beginning of the *Cratylus*, and hence with questions about Socratic definition. This passage also brings us back to Aristotle's comments. For it is in a dialogue named after Cratylus; it introduces a doctrine of flux; and it insists that forms must be free of flux. Does it confirm Aristotle's comments on the origin of the Theory of Forms?

The similarities between this passage and Aristotle's comments are close enough to persuade some critics that it is Aristotle's only basis for his claim about Plato and Cratylus. Before we agree, however, we must notice some differences between our passage and Aristotle: (1) The passage does not assert that anything is in flux. The clause that refers to flux is 'and all such things seem to flow' (439d4), but this clause is part of the question that Socrates says they will not consider. (2) It does not say that being in flux has anything to do with being a sensible object. (3) It does not say that what is in flux cannot be known; it says only that if a form were in flux, it could not be known.

Despite first appearances, then, the passage does not support Aristotle; if it is his only basis for his claims, he was a remarkably careless reader. Some critics would rather embrace this consequence than allow that

EBSCOhost®

Aristotle might have had some different basis for his claims.⁶ But before we decide one way or the other, we should consider other evidence that might be relevant to a judgement about Aristotle.

6.—

Arguments in the *Phaedo*

The *Phaedo* first reminds us that forms are the things Socrates tried to describe in his inquiries, and then claims that these forms have features that are not familiar to us from earlier dialogues. Plato introduces four unfamiliar claims about Forms: (1) They cannot be grasped by the senses, but must be grasped by intellect alone (*phd.* 65D4-66a10). (2) The Form of *F* is different from sensible *F*s because it has properties that no sensible *F* can have, and hence cannot be known by the senses (74a9-b7). (3) Sensible things undergo constant change, whereas Forms are completely unchanging (78c10-e4).⁷ (4) Since the Form of beauty is what makes things beautiful, it cannot be identified with bright colour, or symmetrical shape, or anything else of that sort (100c9-d1).

The first task of the interpreter is to understand each of these claims about Forms. The second task is to understand whether and how they fit together; do they constitute a consistent or reasonable conception of Forms? Plato seems to intend us to understand the first claim through the second. At first he simply asserts, as though it were obvious, that we cannot grasp Socratic forms through the senses. He seems to be relying on the apparent oddity of saying that we see or hear bravery or justice. But it is not enough to agree that such claims seem odd; we want to understand why they are odd, and what it is about the senses and about Forms that makes Forms inaccessible to the senses. Plato's second claim seems to answer this question.

The third claim brings us back to Aristotle's comments on Plato's thought about Forms. In contrast to the *Cratylus*, it asserts that sensible things are in constant change, and so it tends to confirm Aristotle's comments. It falls short of Aristotle's claims, however, since it does not seem to offer flux in sensibles as the reason for believing in non-sensible Forms. Plato presents the third claim as a consequence of recognizing the Forms

⁶ For an extreme example of refusal to credit Aristotle, see C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 81-7. See e.g. p. 82: 'This attribution to Cratylus looks like an Aristotelian inference from an over-hasty reading of the dialogue that bears that name. A more perceptive reading of this same dialogue indicates that Cratylus was not someone from whom Plato thought he had anything to learn.' Compare 81 n. 20, 87 n. 30.

⁷ Cf. *Rep.* 495a10-b3, 508d4-9, 518e8-9, 525b5-6, 534a2-3.

that have already been secured by the second claim. As Plato presents them, the second claim appears more basic than the third; he seems to disagree with Aristotle's account on this point.

The fourth claim is clearly relevant in the light of the explanatory role of forms. We have seen Socrates insist on this explanatory role in the *Euthyphro* and *Meno*. But its place in the *Phaedo* is puzzling. Plato gives examples (colour and shape as accounts of beauty) of unacceptable accounts of Forms, but he does not say how we are to generalize from these examples, or how this fourth claim about the forms is to be connected with any of the first three.

If we can answer some of these questions, we will have a clearer idea of the conception of the Forms that Plato develops in the *Phaedo*.

7.—

Sensible Equals and the Form of Equal

To show that the form cannot be sensible, Plato claims that equal sticks and stones appear equal to one, and not to another, but the form cannot have these properties; the 'equals themselves' never appeared unequal, nor equality inequality (*Phd.* 74b7-9).⁸

Plato's claim about the equals raises several questions: (1) He says equal sticks and stones 'appear equal to one, not to another'.⁹ Is the reference to appearing crucial to the argument? Does Plato mean that whereas sticks may appear to be equal and may appear to be unequal, the form cannot appear in these different ways? Or does he simply mean that the sticks are both equal and unequal, but the form cannot be both?¹⁰ (2) In 'appear to

⁸ Discussions of *Phd.* 74b6-9 include: N. R. Murphy, *The Interpretation of Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 111 n. 1; G. E. L. Owen, 'A Proof in the *Peri ideon* *', in M. C. Nussbaum (ed.), *Logic, Science, and Dialectic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), ch. 9; 1st pub. *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 77 (1957), 103-11; K. W. Mills, 'Phaedo 74bc', *Phronesis*, 2 (1957), 128-47, and 3 (1958), 40-58; C. A. Kirwan, 'Plato and Relativity', *Phronesis*, 19 (1974), 112-29; 116-17; D. Gallop, *Plato: Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 121-2; D. Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 73-7; T. Penner, *The Ascent from Nominalism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987), 20-2, 33-40, 48-52, 352; N. P. White, 'Forms and Sensibles', *Philosophical Topics*, 15 (1987), 197-214, and 'Plato's Metaphysical Epistemology', in R. Kraut (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), ch. 9, 280-3; G. Fine, *On Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 331-2.

⁹ The datives in *toi* men...toi\$pe d'ou* might perhaps be translated 'in one respect... in another respect'. A variant text (*tote men...tote d'ou*) reads: 'sometimes appear equal, sometimes not'.

¹⁰ See Penner, *The Ascent from Nominalism*, and White, 'Forms and Sensibles' and 'Plato's Metaphysical Epistemology'. The Greek verb translated 'appear' (*phainesthai*) may have a veridical sense ('evidently is', used with a participle) and a non-veridical sense ('appears to be', used with an infinitive). Since Plato uses neither participle nor infinitive with *phainesthai* here, we lack any grammatical clue to the sense of the verb.

one, not to another', 'one' and 'another' might mean either 'one (another) person' (Greek masculine pronoun) or 'one (another) thing' (Greek neuter). In the first case, Plato refers to different appearances to different people; in the second case he refers to relativity to different things. (3) What is the force of the plural in 'equal sticks and stones'? Does Plato refer to a particular pair of sticks, and mean that it appears both equal and unequal? Or does he refer to the class of sticks, and mean that it includes both equal and unequal instances?

These different questions suggest quite a few possible interpretations. Rather than examine them all, it may be useful to indicate the philosophical point that would emerge from some of those that have been favoured.

If we take 'appear' non-veridically (so that it does not imply real equality and inequality), the contrast between the equal sticks and the form lies in how they can appear. The form of equal lacks the property of possibly appearing unequal that the equal sticks have; hence (Plato argues, on this view) the form is not identical to the equal sticks. A possible objection to this argument may be seen from considering an apparently parallel argument: The number of the planets may appear to someone to be greater than nine; the number of the planets cannot appear to be greater than the number of the planets; therefore the number of the planets is not identical to nine. This apparently parallel argument is invalid; hence, if it is really parallel to the argument attributed to Plato, the latter argument is also invalid.

If we take the equality and inequality of sticks to result from relativity (so that a yardstick is equal to another yardstick but not to a foot rule), Plato is claiming that the form is non-relatively equal, so that it is equal without being equal to anything. This might well appear a nonsensical conception of an equal thing. Perhaps, however, Plato accepts such a conception because he believes we cannot understand any relative predicate without referring to, and being acquainted with, some object that bears the predicate in a non-relative sense.¹¹

8.—

The Form and the 'Many'

It is difficult to choose between different interpretations if we look at the passage in the *Phaedo* in isolation. But if we consider it together with other

¹¹ Owen, 'A Proof in the *Peri Ideon*', C. Strang, 'Plato and the Third Man', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 37 (1963), 147–64, and Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 77, 79–80, maintain that Plato's belief in Forms is a response to some sort of relativity in certain predicates. This view is criticized by N. P. White, 'Perceptual and Objective Properties in Plato', *Apeiron*, 89/4 (1989), 45–65: 45–57; Fine, *On Ideas*, 161–8.

apparently relevant passages in the *Phaedo* and elsewhere, we may find reasons for preferring one interpretation over another.

Other places in which Plato uses 'to one' and 'to another' in contrasting the form and the many suggest that he means 'to one person' and 'to another person' (*Hp.Ma.* 291d1-3; *Smp.* 211a2-5). Probably, then, he is not concerned with relativity to different things.

Nor does he seem to be concerned primarily with the possibility of appearing, as opposed to being, equal and unequal. For in apparently similar contexts he normally speaks of 'the many *F*s' appearing *F* and not *F* in a veridical sense (*Hp.Ma.* 289b5-7; *Rep.* 479b6-7), so that different people's appearances seem to be the means of discovering a fact about the many *F*s themselves.

Plato attributes 'compresence of opposites' (as some modern writers call it), not merely compresence of opposite appearances, to the many *F*s. He contrasts the form of *F*, which cannot be both *F* and not-*F*, with 'the many *F*s' that are both *F* and not-*F*, or both *F* and the opposite of *F*. A beautiful (*kalon*) girl is also ugly (*aischron*) in comparison with gods (*Hp.Ma.* 289a2-c6). Burying our parents and being buried by our children are fine (*kalon*) in some circumstances and shameful (*aischron*) in others (293b5-e5). The many beautifuls (justs, equals, and so on) are both beautiful and ugly (*Rep.* 479a5-b10). In contrast to the *F* things that are both *F* and not-*F*, the form of *F* must be free from this compresence of opposites (*Smp.* 210e5-211a5; cf. *Hp.Ma.* 291d1-3). In the *Phaedo* itself Plato takes the argument about the equals to show that the many *F*s undergo constant change (78d10-e4), not simply that they appear to undergo change.

If equal sticks and stones are meant as examples of the many *F*s that are both *F* and not-*F*, are they particular instances or types? In one place Plato mentions the beautiful girl who is also ugly (*Hp.Ma.* 289a2-c6). In another place he mentions burying our parents and being buried by our children, a type that has different particular instances, some fine and some shameful (*Hp.Ma.* 293b5-e5). He does not mean that a particular instance of this type of action is both fine and shameful. In this case, compresence of opposites is attributed to types, not to tokens of the types.¹²

Other passages, then, do not unambiguously suggest that the argument about equal sticks must be concerned with tokens, or that it must be concerned with types. This question is important, however. For Plato does not take his argument to be confined to equals; he thinks it also applies to fine, good, just, and the other things that concerned Socrates in his inquiries. If he is concerned with tokens, and his argument is to be generalized to these

¹² On the nature of the 'many *F*s', see Murphy, *The Interpretation of Plato's Republic*, 110; Owen, 'A Proof in the *Peri ideon* *', 174 n. 32; J. C. B. Gosling, '*Republic V: Ta Polla Kala*', *Phronesis*, 5 (1960), 116-28.

EBSCOhost®

other properties, he must claim that every particular brave action is both brave and cowardly, every particular just action is both just and unjust, and so on. If, however, he is concerned with types, he is not committed to any such claim about particular actions.

To see what Plato is committed to, we may raise further questions about compresence of opposites: what is wrong with it, and why should the form be free of it? According to one view, anything that is both *F* and not *F* is not genuinely *F* after all; it is a self-contradictory entity.¹³ If Plato holds this view, he turns away from sensible equals because they fail minimal logical conditions for being genuine entities at all.

It is difficult to find any basis for such an argument in Plato. He makes it clear that the compresence of opposites in the many *F*s involves different respects or different relations; being buried by our children is fine in one situation and shameful in another, but it is not both fine and shameful without qualification. In *Republic* 4 Plato formulates a principle somewhat similar to the Principle of Non-Contradiction; he insists that it is impossible 'for the same thing' to do or undergo contrary things in the same respect or in relation to the same thing' (436b8-9). He does not suggest that if something is *F* in one respect and not-*F* in a different respect, it is self-contradictory. All his remarks suggest that he takes the opposite properties of sensible equals, and so on, to be perfectly compatible.

Other interpreters take Plato to mean that the many *F*s cannot be suitable for learning the meaning of *F* or acquiring the concept of *F*, if they are both *F* and not-*F*. If learning a concept requires acquaintance with an unambiguous instance, and *F*-and-not-*F* things are not unambiguous instances of *F*, we cannot acquire the concept of *F* from the many *F*s.¹⁴

This interpretation rests on two assumptions about Plato: (1) The many *F*s that suffer compresence of opposites are particulars. If they were types, Plato would not be saying that particular just actions, say, are also unjust; hence they might still (for all he says) provide unambiguous instances of justice.¹⁵ (2) He must assume that acquisition of a concept requires acquaintance with unambiguous instances.

¹³ See W. D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 38; Mills, 'Phaedo 74', Pt. 2.

¹⁴ Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 97-8, presents this argument (derived from Owen, 'A Proof in the *Peri ideon* *') very clearly.

¹⁵ When Bostock offers to show that, in Plato's view, we cannot find an 'unambiguous instance of courage, or beauty, or justice', he argues that paying one's debts is not an unambiguous instance, because there are circumstances in which one ought not to return what one has borrowed (*Plato's Phaedo*, 97). But this example shows only that paying one's debts—the type—has both just and unjust tokens. Nothing that Plato or Bostock says suggests that we should infer that each token of the type is both just and unjust. Hence some tokens of the type may (for all this example shows) be unambiguous instances of justice.

EBSCOhost®

If we could understand the argument about equals only by relying on these assumptions, they would be reasonable. But if the argument about equals can fairly be interpreted differently, we must look at other contexts to see both whether they support these two assumptions, and whether they favour one or another interpretation of the argument about equals.

The first assumption can be dealt with briefly. Plato never asserts and never assumes (in any context apart from *Phaedo* 74, where the dispute arises) that we can infer compresence in tokens from compresence in types. Such an inference is so clearly illegitimate that we need some good reason for attributing it to Plato. We have found no good reason.

The second assumption, about Plato's views on the acquisition of concepts, needs fuller discussion. He never explicitly asserts the claim that we need unambiguous instances of *F* to acquire the concept of *F*. But we must consider alleged evidence of his relying on such a claim.

9.—

Why are the Senses Unreliable?

Interpreters who take Forms to provide unambiguous instances (or 'perfect samples') for the acquisition of some concepts often appeal to a passage in *Republic* 7 that discusses the connection between the senses and the compresence of opposites. When Plato describes the growth of reasoning and reflection, he especially mentions mathematical properties. These are the ones for which the senses give us unsatisfactory answers: 'In some cases the things the senses give us do not provoke thought to examination, on the assumption that they are adequately discriminated by the senses; but in other cases they urge thought in every way to examine, on the assumption that sense produces nothing sound' (*Rep.* 523a10-b4). The cases that do not provoke thought include our perception of fingers. Those that provoke thought include our perception of their largeness and smallness.

Plato explains what it means to say that the senses sometimes do not provoke thought. He makes it clear that he is not thinking of perceptual error or illusion (resulting, for instance, from seeing fingers at a distance; 523b5-e2). He is concerned only with cases in which the senses report that the same thing is large and small, or hard and soft (523e2-524a5).

To understand this passage, we need to answer two questions: (1) What contrast does Plato intend to draw between sense and thought? (2) What does it mean to say that 'the same thing' is large and small? Plato attributes to 'the same thing' the compresence of opposites that he

EBSCOhost®

normally attributes to the many *F*s; if we can discover what 'the same thing' is, we will have some basis for understanding claims about the many *F*s.

The first question does not allow a very detailed answer, since Plato does not say much here about the contrast between sense and thought. We might be inclined to draw the contrast so that sense by itself includes no thought; in that case the contribution of sense is the basis for a perceptual judgement, but does not itself include any concepts or judgements. This is the conception of sense that Plato accepts in the *Theaetetus*, in order to show that sense does not yield knowledge; knowledge requires the application of concepts and judgements, and the application of these is not a task for the senses (*Tht.* 184b4-186e12).

In the present passage, however, Plato does not seem to intend such a minimal conception of sense.¹⁶ For he says that in perceiving a finger, 'sight in no case indicated to it [sc. the soul] at the same time that the finger is the contrary of a finger' (*Rep.* 523d5-6). The judgement that this thing is a finger and that thing is not a finger is attributed to sense; it is only when sense makes conflicting judgements of this sort that thought is provoked to ask questions. Plato does not say that perceptual judgements do not involve thought, but he suggests that in some cases sense 'discriminates adequately' (523b1-2) without provoking thought to examination. In some cases, the degree of thought needed for the perceptual judgement that this is a finger does not lead us into further questions about what a finger is.

If sense is not meant to exclude all thought, it may be easier to answer the second question about the passage. Plato claims that perceptual judgements about large and small, heavy and light, in contrast to perceptual judgements about fingers, provoke the soul to ask what heavy and light are. The soul is puzzled because sense indicates that the same thing is light and heavy, or (equivalently, according to Plato) that the heavy is light and the light is heavy (524a9-10). Sight shows light and heavy confused (524c3-4), so that the soul is provoked to ask whether light and heavy are one or two (524b3-5). This question arises if we cannot adequately grasp something 'itself by itself' (524d10) by sense, but can only grasp it confused with its contrary (524e2-4).

The difficulty that Plato mentions seems spurious if 'the same thing', 'the light', and so on refer to particular objects, such as this finger that we take to be both heavy and light. For the mere fact that the senses attribute

¹⁶ This point is made clearly by J. Adam, *The Republic of Plato*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), ad loc.

EBSCOhost®

contrary properties to one and the same object does not seem to create any special difficulty; we do not, for instance, accuse sight of confusing squareness and whiteness if it reports that a sugar cube is both square and white. Even mutually exclusive properties need not raise any difficulty. Nothing can be both red and green all over, but if sight reports that the Italian flag is red and green in different parts, it is not confusing red and green.

Equally, then, the mere fact that sight reports that something is equal and unequal, or large and small, does not imply that sight confuses these two properties. If it reports that a mouse is big next to a small mouse, but small next to an elephant, that report does not seem to confuse largeness and smallness. Nor do these perceptual judgements raise a question about whether large and small are one or two.

Plato's claim is much more plausible if we take 'the same thing', and so on to refer to properties (largeness, etc.) rather than to the particular objects (this large finger, etc.) that have the properties. This is what he means by saying that sight does not adequately see the 'largeness and smallness' of things (523e3-7). He claims that the senses confuse opposite properties, not merely that they take the same thing to have opposite properties. In saying that, according to the senses, 'the hard' is also soft (524a1-10), Plato uses 'the hard' to refer to the property that the senses identify with hardness.

Plato suggests, then, that sight counts the same things as evidence for calling something a finger in all cases, whereas it counts the same thing as evidence for attributing contrary properties in the case of large and small. If we consider what aspect of this mouse makes it big, we may mention its length—say, six inches. But if we are asked what makes it small (in comparison to an elephant that is twelve feet long), we may mention its six-inch length again. And so we are saying that the same property is both largeness and smallness.¹⁷

If Plato has in mind this point about properties, his position is more reasonable than if he has in mind the assumption about particulars that would lead to a demand for perfect samples. It does not follow that he must intend the more reasonable point. But at least it follows that the passage provides no evidence for the view that he demands perfect particulars. It can be explained perfectly well without assuming that he demands anything of the kind.

¹⁷ This view of the passage is defended by Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 318; Penner, *The Ascent from Nominalism*, 114–15, 142. A different view is taken by Adam, *The Republic of Plato*, ad loc.; Kirwan, 'Plato and Relativity', 121–3; White, 'Plato's Metaphysical Epistemology', 286–7.

EBSCOhost®

10.—

Comprensence and Explanation

If the second interpretation of this passage (referring to a property that is both largeness and smallness) is at least as plausible as the first interpretation (referring to a particular that is both large and small), we may ask whether Plato says anything else to suggest that one or the other interpretation captures his main reason for believing in non-sensible Forms.

We must now consider the passage in the *Phaedo* (96d8 ff.) that refers to the explanatory role of Forms. In attributing this role to Forms, Plato shows that he is concerned with their role in Socratic inquiries; for, as we have seen, Socrates wants to find the form of *F* because he wants to find 'that because of which' (*di'ho*) all *F* things are *F* (*Men.* 72c6-d1; *Euthphr.* 6d9-e1.). Plato now asks what sorts of properties we must attribute to a form if it is to explain what it is meant to explain.

To clarify the explanatory requirement, Plato cites purported explanations that would be blatantly unsatisfactory. If, for instance, we tried to explain *x*'s being larger than *y* by mentioning what makes *x* larger than *y*, and we said that *x* is larger than *y* 'by a head' (*Phd.* 96d7-e1), we would have given a bad explanation, since 'by a head' explains *x*'s being larger than *y* no more than it explains *y*'s being smaller than *x*. Similarly, we cannot say that combination is what makes things two, since it is equally true that the division of one thing makes it two (96e5-97b3).¹⁸

These are strange examples of attempted explanations. No doubt Plato means them to be strange, so that they illustrate an extreme version of the error that he means to avoid. A property *G* cannot be the explanation of *x*'s being *F* if either (1) *G* is present in *y*, but *y* is not-*F* or (2) *G* is not present in *z*, but *z* is *F* (97a5-b3, 100e8-101b2). *G* may well be present in *x* and may be connected with *x*'s being *F* (as 'by a head' plainly is, if we say that Theaetetus is taller than Socrates by a head); but if either (1) or (2) is true, *G* and *F* are not connected as they would be if *G* were what makes *x* *F*. To put it in Aristotle's terms, we cannot say that *x* is *F* in so far as *x* is *G* (that *x* is *F* *qua* *G*) if either (1) or (2) is true (cf. *Phys.* 196^b24-9; *Metaph.* 1026^b37-1027^a5).

These general claims about explanation show us why Plato focuses on the comprehensiveness of opposites. If we want to know what makes something just, and the alleged explanatory property no more makes something just

¹⁸ Different views about the fault in the rejected explanations are presented by G. Vlastos, 'Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*', in *Platonic Studies*, 2nd edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 95-102; 1st pub. *Philosophical Review*, 78 (1969), 291-325; Gallop, *Plato: Phaedo*, 172-4; Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 136-42.

than it makes something unjust, we have not found the explanatory property we wanted. Plato argues that, for instance, it cannot be the fact that the children bury their parents that makes this particular action of these children burying their parents fine; for that fact might equally be found in a shameful action (if, for instance, the children had murdered their parents first).

In articulating this demand on explanations, Plato exploits some standard Socratic objections, but he develops them in a new direction. When Charmides suggests that temperance is shame, Socrates convinces him that this is a faulty definition because shame is good (in some situations) and bad (in other situations), or 'no more good than bad' (*Chrm.* 161a2-b2). He could also have pointed out to Laches, though he does not say so in precisely these terms, that endurance is both fine and shameful (cf. *La.* 192d7-8). He does not say that shame is both temperate and not temperate or that endurance is both brave and not brave. Some of the objections raised in the *Meno* against Meno's proposed definitions could be stated in terms referring to the compresence of opposites (cf. *Men.* 73d6-8), but that is not how they are stated.

None of these passages, then, states the general principle that the *F* cannot be both *F* and not-*F*, whereas various candidates for being the *F* are in fact both *F* and not-*F*, and therefore cannot be the *F*. The *Hippias Major* comes closer to stating this general principle (291d1-3). It is expressed most clearly in the dialogues that contrast the non-sensible Form of *F* with the many sensible *F*s.

Once we see why Plato contrasts the Form of *F* with the many *F*s, we can also see what the many *F*s are supposed to be, and what an acceptable description of the Form would have to be like. To see what he might mean, we ought to recall what Socrates means when he implies (in the *Laches*) that endurance is both fine and shameful, or asserts (in the *Charmides*) that shame is both good and bad. He does not suggest that every particular case of endurance (Leonidas' last stand, for instance) or of feeling shame (for instance, the shame felt by a Spartan who ran away when Leonidas stood firm) is both good and bad (or fine and shameful). He means that some tokens of the relevant action type are good and others are bad, or, equivalently, that the property in question (being a case of endurance or shame) makes some token actions good and makes other token actions bad. Equally clearly, the remark in the *Hippias Major* about burying one's parents means not that every such action token is both fine and shameful, but that some of them are fine and others are shameful.

The discussion of explanation in the *Phaedo* refers primarily to proper-

EBSCOhost®

ties—having a head, being taller by a head, and so on. Plato introduces a 'safe' explanation, which is safe because it does not allow compresence of opposites, and therefore is not disqualified from being an explanation. He contrasts the safe explanation referring to Forms with the defective explanations he has illustrated. The safe explanation says that beautiful things are beautiful because of the Beautiful Itself, not 'by having a bright colour or a shape or anything else of that kind' (*Phd.* 100c9-d2). Plato seems to mean the same by saying that (1) brightly coloured things, say, are both beautiful and ugly, or that (2) bright colour is both beautiful and ugly, or that (3) bright colour makes things beautiful and ugly. The third formula conveys his main point most accurately.

If this is the right way to understand the *Phaedo* on explanation, it confirms our preferred interpretation of the passage on the senses in *Republic* 7. It also suggests that we should take *Phaedo* 74 to express the same contrast between sensibles and Forms. The argument about equals, taken by itself, allows several interpretations; but the fact that Plato takes it to justify conclusions about the many *F*s in general (78d10-e5) tends to favour some interpretations over others. If he were generalizing an argument about compresence in particulars to other properties besides equality, he would be unjustified (in the light of what he says elsewhere). If he is generalizing about compresence in types, he is justified. Hence, it is reasonable (in the absence of clear contrary evidence) to suppose that he is generalizing about compresence in types.

11.—

The Role of the Senses

Now that we have seen what Plato means by his claim that the many *F*s are *F* and not-*F*, whereas the Form cannot suffer from this compresence of opposites, we ought to return to his claim that the many *F*s are sensible, but the Form is non-sensible. This emphasis on the senses is one aspect of the middle dialogues that has no parallel in any earlier dialogues. In the *Meno* Plato introduces knowledge gained by recollection, but he does not explicitly contrast it with sense-perception, and he does not discuss the role of sense-perception in the process of recollection. In the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, by contrast, the contrast between sense-perception and thought is closely connected with the contrast between the many and the one. Plato believes that in order to recollect the form of *F* that Socrates was looking for, we must distinguish it from all the sensible *F*s that suffer the compresence of opposites, and so we must grasp it by something other than the senses.

EBSCOhost®

In the discussion of the senses in *Republic* 7 Plato claims that the properties making something a finger are accessible to the senses, and that the senses never take different views about what these properties are, whereas the property making something equal or large is inaccessible to the senses. How does he decide what is and is not accessible to the senses?¹⁹

In order to avoid judging that the same thing is both largeness and smallness, we must avoid identifying these properties with determinate lengths (or other quantities), and we must realize that whether x is large or not depends both on a comparison with other things and on reference to an appropriate standard of comparison. Why is it not within the competence of sight to take account of these features of largeness in informing the soul about what largeness is? Conversely, sense is supposed to be competent to find the features that make something a finger, and it never informs us that the same property makes one thing a finger and something else not a finger. Why is this?

Plato might argue that we can remove doubts about whether something is a finger if we observe the finger more carefully, whereas we do not remove the appearance that the same thing is largeness and smallness by further observation of the thing that has these opposite properties. If we are to understand that six inches is both largeness (in a mouse) and smallness (in an elephant), we must attend not only to this length, but also to the relevant standard of comparison and the relevant context, and these are not features that we can observe in a particular situation. If we are thinking of mice, the mouse is large; if we are thinking of inhabitants of the zoo, the comparison with mice is irrelevant and the comparison with the elephant is relevant, so that the mouse is small. Nothing in our observation of the mouse and its environment tells us that one or the other standard of comparison is the right one to apply. We would be misunderstanding the source of our mistake if we were to say that we ought to have observed the large mouse more carefully in order to recognize that it is small; we were not mistaken (we might want to say) in any of our observations of the mice, and we need to get the relevant information from some source outside our observation of this situation.

The same point comes out more clearly, as Plato intends it to, in the case of arithmetical properties. We can observe that there are three copies of a book on the table, that each has 300 pages, and that each has a binding and a dust jacket. But is there one thing, are there three things, or are there at least 906 things on the table? If we are publishers considering how many

¹⁹ The inadequacy of the senses is discussed by J. C. B. Gosling, *Plato* (London: Routledge, 1973), 165–8; Penner, *The Ascent from Nominalism*, 114–16.

EBSCOhost®

new titles we have published, or booksellers considering our profits, or book manufacturers considering the materials we need, a different answer is appropriate; but we do not find which answer is appropriate simply by observing these books in their present environment. The same questions arise about deciding whether something is or is not the same book or the same page as the one we were reading before; the answer seems to depend on the question we have in mind, not on something we can settle by observing the books or the pages themselves. In the cases that interest Plato, the role of contextual facts external to the observable situation implies that observation cannot provide an account of the relevant properties. What makes one situation sufficiently similar to another is an external, contextual fact that is not a matter of observation.

The relevance of context explains why compresence of opposites should be a mark of the observable instances of some properties. Being six inches long is not itself being large; it counts as being large in one context, and as being small in another. The same length may embody both properties, but which one it embodies is not determined by the length itself, but by the context (comparison with mice or comparison with animals). Plato suggests, then, that if contextual facts are essential to the nature of a property, that property is not an observable property, and observation confronts us with the compresence of opposites. This is why the senses cannot be sources of knowledge about the properties that are the normal focus of Socratic inquiry (*Phd.* 65d4-66a8, 75c7-d5).

12.—

The Senses and the Compresence of Opposites

Plato's claim that sensibles do not yield knowledge of forms helps to explain why Socrates did not find definitions. Socrates in the early dialogues does not speak as though his requests for definitions are unanswerable; on the contrary, he stresses the importance of answering them, and works hard to find answers. But neither he nor others are said to find answers of the sort he wants. Does he impose inappropriately stringent demands on definitions?

If we are asked to say what bravery is, we begin with our beliefs about particular brave actions and people, and we think about how we recognize them in particular situations. We observe that in particular situations brave people stand firm, temperate people are quiet, just people pay back what they have borrowed, and so on. These observations of particular situations are quite accurate, as far as they go; but Socrates points out that these observable properties (standing firm, quietness, etc.) are not the ones we

EBSCOhost®

are looking for, since in other particular situations we can observe the opposite properties, even though people display the same virtues, or we can observe the same properties, even though people fail to display the same virtues.

How ought we to react to this discovery? We might suppose that we have not yet found the right observable property. Socrates' interlocutors, at any rate, suppose that an account of *F* should mention one and the same observable feature present in every situation where something *F* can be observed; when they find none, Socrates points out that they have given an inadequate account of *F*, but he does not tell them where they have gone wrong. Does he assume that if we look hard enough, we ought to be able to find the single observable property that the interlocutors have not found?

The Socratic dialogues and the *Meno* do not actually say that Socrates assumes that observable properties are needed for a definition. But at least Socrates does not discourage the interlocutors from looking in this direction; and we have suggested, by appealing to the *Euthyphro* on disputes and measurement and to the *Meno* on the dialectical condition, that he actually requires definitions to refer only to observable properties.

Plato suggests, on the contrary, that this way of looking for a definition is sometimes misguided in principle. It is easy to see why he thinks it would be a mistake to identify largeness or smallness with observable properties; but why does he believe that moral properties are among those that cannot be identified with observable properties?

Sometimes Plato suggests that moral properties are especially likely to cause disagreement and dispute. In the *Euthyphro* Socrates contrasts moral properties with those that raise disputes that can be settled by measurement. In the *Phaedrus* he distinguishes 'gold' and 'silver' from 'just' and 'good' (*Phdr.* 263a2-b2). In cases of the first type we all 'think the same' when someone uses the name, but in cases of the second type 'we disagree with one another and with ourselves', and we are 'confused' (263a6-b5). Plato does not say that we disagree about whether this or that action is just or unjust. He says we have different thoughts about justice; he may mean simply that we have different beliefs about justice or different conceptions of justice.²⁰

The division between disputed and non-disputed properties seems to be connected with that between sensible and non-sensible. The properties

²⁰ *Alc.* 1, 111a11-112a9 draws a similar distinction. The importance of these passages on disputed properties is rightly emphasized by Strang, 'Plato and the Third Man', 195-8.

EBSCOhost®

examined by Socrates are clearly disputed properties. The *Phaedo* makes it clear that properties that involve the compresence of opposites in their sensible embodiments include moral properties.

No one would argue that numerical or comparative properties are sensible properties. When Plato mentions accounts such as 'by a head' as explanations of largeness, his point is to show how evidently ridiculous they are. In these cases there is no serious difficulty in finding an account that is not confined to sensible properties. Numerical and comparative properties are contextual, because the features that determine whether one of these properties is embodied in a particular case are features external to particular observable situations.

Something similar seems to be true of moral properties as well. Socrates often insists that each of the virtues is essentially fine and beneficial; and so facts about what is fine and beneficial must affect questions about whether this or that sort of action is brave or just. Whether an action is fine and beneficial or not may depend on (among other things) the agent's reason for doing it, the actual or expected effects of the action, and the social institutions and practices within which the agent acts. If this is so, observation of the action itself will not tell us whether it is fine and beneficial, and therefore will not tell us whether an action is brave. Bravery and justice must be essentially contextual properties.

This argument could be answered if we could show, for instance, that one moral property is sensible, so that it can be defined in sensible, noncontextual terms, and that all other moral properties can be defined by reference to this one. If we could show this, we would vindicate Socrates' suggestion that disputed terms ought to be eliminated from definitions of moral properties, and we would satisfy the dialectical condition imposed in the *Meno*. Plato's reasons for believing that moral properties are nonsensible, however, apply equally to whatever property might be chosen as the basic one—just, fine, or good. If all of these are non-sensible, we have no reason to assume that one of them must be more basic than the others. If we can define the good, the fine, and the just only by reference to each other, then we cannot hope to find an account that relies only on contextfree observable properties.

If this is Plato's point, and if we have correctly understood Socrates' demands on a definition, Plato argues that Socrates' metaphysical demand for a single explanatory property conflicts with his epistemological demand. Only a sensible property would clearly satisfy Socrates' epistemological demand; but, according to Plato, no sensible property can satisfy the metaphysical demand, since no sensible property can be the appropriate single explanatory property.

EBSCOhost®

13.—

Definitions and Hypotheses

If Plato rejects an account of moral properties that reduces them to sensible properties, has he anything to say about what an illuminating account ought to be like? He comes closest to answering this question in the *Phaedo*. After rejecting the explanations that appeal to sensible properties, he offers his own preferred type of explanation. Instead of saying that things are beautiful by the presence of bright colour, or symmetrical shape, or some other sensible property, he prefers the safe explanation: whatever is beautiful is so by the presence of the nonsensible Form of the beautiful (*Phd.* 100c3-e3). This remark does not tell us what an explanation referring to the non-sensible Form will be like, or how the Form is to be described. To say that x is F because the Form of F is present to it is a schema for an explanatory account, not itself a satisfactory account.²¹

Plato adds something, however, to suggest how one might approach the right sort of account: we should put forward a 'hypothesis' or assumption (100a3-7, 101c9-102a1). This hypothesis is the account that we judge strongest (100a4), and we judge how strong it is by seeing whether the consequences are in accord or discord with it. The consequences of accepting the hypothesis are not merely the logical consequences of the hypothesis alone, but the total consequences of accepting this hypothesis together with the other beliefs that we accept; and so we test the hypothesis against the whole set of these beliefs. The hypothesis is to be accepted if it explains our other relevant beliefs—this is part of its function as an explanation—and if it does not conflict with them.²²

Plato recognizes that this sort of hypothesis may not by itself provide an adequate explanation. We may have to give an account of the hypothesis. To do this, we must find a higher hypothesis, and ask the same questions about the concord or discord of other beliefs with this hypothesis. We must continue until we 'come to something adequate' (101e1). Plato does not say what counts as something adequate, but he emphasizes the importance of resorting to a higher hypothesis. It would be a sign of confusion if we mixed up discussion of a principle or starting-point (*arche* *) with discussion of its consequences (101e1-3). Plato suggests that not every

²¹ Vlastos, 'Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*', 91–2, argues that Plato's formula in *Phd.* 100c-e is meant to allude to the demand for definitions. Strang, 'Plato and the Third Man', 196, and Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 150–1, deny this, but they take insufficient account of 78c10-d7, which makes it clear that the Forms are the objects of Socratic definitions.

²² The sense of 'accord' and 'discord' is discussed by R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 126–36; Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo*, 166–70; J. K. Gentzler, 'sumphonein* in Plato's *Phaedo*', *Phronesis*, 36 (1991), 265–76.

sort of objection to a hypothesis should persuade us to abandon the hypothesis. In some cases we ought to retain the hypothesis and defend it, not by examining the consequences, but by deriving it from a higher hypothesis. Why does Plato insist on this point, and how is it relevant to Socratic definition?

We can see the point of appealing to a higher hypothesis if we consider a possible consequence of believing that Forms are non-sensible. In earlier dialogues Socrates sometimes seems to protest that if we must keep mentioning moral properties in our accounts of moral properties, our accounts will be uninformative and unacceptable (*Grg.* 451d5-e1, 489e6-8). We have seen how the *Euthyphro* and the *Meno* might support this protest. Thrasymachus makes the same protest especially forcefully in *Republic* 1, arguing that any account of the just as the expedient, or the beneficial, or the advantageous is unacceptable, and that the only acceptable definition must say what the just is 'clearly and exactly' in terms that escape from this circle of accounts of moral properties (*Rep.* 336c6-d4).²³ If Forms are nonsensible, however, circular accounts of them may be unavoidable.

To show that circular accounts are sometimes acceptable, Plato needs to distinguish different types of circular accounts. Circularity is open to objection if the circle of terms and definitions is too small. But the same objections do not necessarily apply if the circle is wider; for even if we cannot eliminate a circle of definitions, we may be able to make them more intelligible by displaying the right sorts of connections between our account of moral properties and other sorts of explanations. Plato might reasonably have this point in mind when he asks for a higher hypothesis. Circular accounts of moral properties are not necessarily to be rejected simply because each of them is uninformative by itself. We should not try to replace them with a different sort of account; instead we should place them in a theoretical context that will make them intelligible and explanatory by reference to higher and more general hypotheses.

To describe this passage as Plato's account of 'the hypothetical method' is a bit exaggerated. His remarks are too brief and too imprecise to give us a very clear impression of any specific method that he might have in mind. Still, it is useful to see how they might reasonably be connected with questions that we have seen arise in Plato's arguments for non-sensible Forms. For the more we can connect Plato's remarks about Forms and explanations with our account of his arguments, the better reason we have for confidence in our account.

²³ Perhaps Plato suggests that someone who raises Thrasymachus' sort of objection is a 'contradictor', *antilogikos* (101e2), who urges against a hypothesis an objection that really needs to be evaluated by reference to some higher principle.

EBSCOhost®

14.—

Objections to the Senses: Heraclitus and Flux

So far the dialogues confirm Aristotle's claim that Plato connects his arguments for Forms with objections to the senses. It is not so clear, however, that they confirm his claim that Plato believes in non-sensible Forms because sensibles are all subject to change and flux; for the arguments we have considered so far do not mention change, but refer to compresence of opposites. Have we, then, missed some important aspect of Plato's objections to sensible things? Or is Aristotle wrong?²⁴

We have good reason to believe that Aristotle is right, once we notice that Plato himself speaks of change in sensibles and seems to regard this as a reason for denying that they can be objects of knowledge and definition.²⁵ These remarks tend to confirm Aristotle's claim that Plato looked at Socrates' search for definitions in the light of Heraclitean beliefs about flux. What might he have taken these beliefs to imply?

According to Plato (*Cra.* 402a), Heraclitus argues that there is more change over time than we suppose there is. The river has been replaced by a different one when we step into 'it' for the second time, because it is composed of different waters. Similarly, trees, rocks, and other apparently stable things go out of existence whenever any of their matter is replaced.

Elsewhere Plato ascribes to Heraclitus the view that everything 'is always being drawn together in being drawn apart' (*Sph.* 242e2-3). One and the same letter at the same time is both straight (if it has a straight stroke) and crooked (if it has a crooked stroke), sea water is good (for fish) and bad (for human beings), and striking a blow is just (if done by an official exacting a punishment) and unjust (if done by an individual in a private feud).

This second Heraclitean doctrine—often called 'the unity of opposites'—is evidently similar to Plato's doctrine of the compresence of opposites; some of the same examples would illustrate both doctrines. It is reasonable, then, for Aristotle to say that Plato's inspiration in formulating his claims about Forms is partly Heraclitean. But Aristotle says more than this: he says the inspiration is a Heraclitean doctrine of flux. Do Plato's claims support Aristotle on this point?

²⁴ For discussions of Plato's views on flux, see: F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1935), 99; Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas*, 20; R. H. Bolton, 'Plato's Distinction between Being and Becoming', *Review of Metaphysics*, 29 (1975), 66–95; Penner, *The Ascent from Nominalism*, 216–21; White, 'Perceptual and Objective Properties in Plato', 58; Vlastos, *Socrates* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 69–71; Fine, *On Ideas*, 54–7.

²⁵ See Sect. 6 above.

In the *Theaetetus* Socrates explains how Protagoras' belief in the truth of appearances leads to the doctrine that 'nothing is any one thing itself by itself', because, for instance, you cannot call anything large without its appearing small, or heavy without its appearing light (152d2-6). These appearances of compresence are the result of motion, change, and mingling, so that everything merely comes to be (hard, soft, light, heavy, and so on) and nothing stably is what we take it to be (152d2-e1).

According to Plato, this is a doctrine of 'flux and change' (152e8). In speaking of heavy, light, and so on, Plato clearly refers to the Heracleitean doctrine of the unity of opposites; he thinks no further explanation is needed to justify him in describing such a doctrine as a doctrine of flux. He therefore assumes that it is appropriate to speak of 'flux', 'change', and 'becoming' in describing the instability that is manifested in the compresence of opposites.

The *Cratylus* speaks in similar terms of the Protagorean doctrine. Plato claims that according to this doctrine things would be 'relative to us, and dragged by us up and down by our appearance' (*Cra.* 386e1-2). Things are 'dragged by our appearance' if we have conflicting (as a non-Protagorean would suppose) beliefs about them, so that (according to a Protagorean) contrary properties belong to them; but conflicting beliefs (of wise and foolish people) may be held at the same time. Plato does not assume that the instability Protagoras attributes to things is simply change over time; he uses terms that are appropriate for change in order to describe the instability involved in the compresence of opposites.

When Plato speaks of flux, therefore, he need not have succession in mind. If his arguments appeal only to compresence, not to change over time, we are justified in concluding that the type of flux he attributes to sensibles in arguing for non-sensible Forms is compresence.

If Aristotle sees that this is Plato's conception of flux, he does not mean to say that Plato thinks sensible objects undergo continual change over time, or that change over time is what makes them unsuitable as objects of knowledge. He may simply recognize that, given Plato's broad interpretation of flux, compresence of opposites counts as a kind of flux. We ought not to conclude, then, that Plato's argument from flux in sensibles relies on anything more than the compresence of opposites.

Once we see the Heracleitean inspiration of some of Plato's claims, we can also see where Plato disagrees with Heracleitus. In the *Cratylus* the discussion turns to the 'fine names' of 'wisdom', 'understanding', 'justice', and so on. Socrates suggests that the etymology of these names shows that the inventors of the names supposed that the underlying realities were in flux; but, in his view, they thought this simply because of their own

EBSCOhost®

waverings and confusions about the nature of these things, and they transferred the instability in their own convictions to the things themselves (*Cra.* 411a1-c5).

This remark describes a Heraclitean reaction to the compresence of opposites. Heracliteans may argue that (for instance) justice is returning and not returning what you have borrowed, keeping and not keeping your promises, and so on. In saying this they suppose that the different sensible properties that are the focus of dispute about justice must themselves be the only defining properties of justice.

These arguments suggest that Socrates' search for a definition of moral properties combines incompatible demands. If we suppose that moral properties must be identified with some sort of sensible properties, then the assumption that there must be one form of justice, piety, and so on is open to doubt; it seems more reasonable to identify each moral property with a list of sensible properties. Socrates' metaphysical demand on adequate definitions is incompatible with this Heraclitean view; but if he assumes that a definition should treat moral properties as sensible properties, he is open to the Heraclitean objection.

Against this objection Plato argues that the Heraclitean confuses different embodiments of justice in different circumstances with the property that is embodied in these different ways, so that the Heraclitean thinks the variation in these embodying properties is a variation in justice itself. In Plato's view, the Heraclitean makes the sort of mistake that we would make if we were to identify a river with the particular quantity of water that happens to fill its banks at a particular time; on this view there cannot be any continuing river. We might answer this Heraclitean view by pointing out that while the particular quantity of water constituting the river changes, the river itself remains the same. Similarly, Plato argues, the compresence of opposites is confined to the sensible properties that embody justice; since each of these is just only in its specific context, it is not surprising that in a different context it ceases to be just. Since justice itself cannot also be unjust in a different context, it cannot be identical to these sensible properties that embody it.

Aristotle's remarks about Socrates, Heracliteanism, and the Theory of Forms turn out, therefore, to be helpful, but not in the way we might at first expect. We ought not to suppose that they refer to Plato's supposed preoccupation with change and succession in particular sensible objects. They refer to his reflections on Socratic definition and on the sorts of properties that might satisfy Socrates' main demands. Here, as elsewhere, Plato's implicit criticisms of Socrates are intended to vindicate the central and crucial Socratic doctrines.

EBSCOhost®