

PLATO'S THEORIES OF FORMS IN THE
PHAEDO AND THE *REPUBLIC*

Scott Hendricks

In the middle dialogues, Plato gives a somewhat scattered account of what has been called his theory of forms. The theory itself has generated problems not only for the readers of the dialogues but for Plato as well. The *Parmenides* provides an explicit example of the difficulties produced, but there are other conflicting claims that should be the cause of some discomfort for a careful reader. In order to reconcile these difficulties, most scholars and philosophers have offered possible interpretations of what Plato meant by his claims. Unfortunately, as I shall point out in greater detail, these interpretations fall short as they fail to incorporate all of the assertions made in the dialogues. In this paper, I propose that a very unspectacular interpretation of the theory of forms is the one which we must assume Plato is using. This paper will focus primarily on the relationship of the forms with the sensible world, and will show that Plato understands this relationship in two very distinct ways. These ways correspond to two traditional interpretations of the forms. They are: 1) The forms are universals; and 2) the forms are standards. (I will refer to these theories as UF and SF, respectively.) I will proceed by giving evidence for the respective theories. I will further show that these theories are incommensurable and that interpretations that fail to account for the presence of these theories fail to account for everything that Plato asserts of the forms. Finally, I will give an account of why I think Plato conflates UF and SF.

During his discussions of the forms in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, Plato gives the reader reasonable evidence that he understands the forms as universals and the relationship between the forms and the sensible world as predication. Aristotle interprets the theory of forms accordingly in the *Metaphysics*:

Socrates, however, was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters Plato accepted his teaching but . . . sensible things, he said, were named after these [Ideas], and in virtue of a relation to these; for the many existed by participation in the Ideas that have the same name as they. (987b1-10. Ross translation)

Aristotle's testimony will not suffice to show conclusively that Plato understood the forms as universals, and we are better off using Aristotle

to provide additional support for a view already established textually. Both the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* provide evidence for this theory. The passages, which I will cite, do not give support exclusively for UF; they may be cited in support of SF also, since there is often some cross-over between the two theories (and hence, this fact is a likely possibility for the source of Plato's conflation of the two). Nevertheless, much of what Plato tells us about the forms we can easily identify as what we would include in a clear characterization of universals and predication.

In the *Phaedo*, Plato regards the form as a criterion for recognizing some property in the sensible world (75 B). He says that this form is unchangeable (79 D) and that the knowledge of the form is a different sort of knowledge than knowing the sensible thing (73 C). Alone, the meaning of this last claim is not immediately clear. But given other claims that Plato provides, we can make sense of it in favor of UF. Whereas in the *Phaedo*, Plato does not appear to be using the word 'knowledge' (*epistēmē*) in a scientific way, in the *Republic* Book V 476 D - 480 A, Plato tells us that only knowing (*gignōskontos*) the forms is knowledge (*gnōmēn*) in the strict sense. So, "knowing" the sensible world is not merely a different sort of knowledge but not true knowledge at all. I propose that it is best seen as a kind of sensible acquaintance; in other words, an apprehending of the physical world by means of the senses.¹ This way, we can also make sense of Plato's claim in the *Republic* that the forms are not seen but thought (507 B). In other words, a particular is known by being sensed, while a form is known through the intellect. This would support the view that the forms are some kind of universals, since universals seem to be a different class of entities than their sensible instantiations, and one way of differentiating them is that they are not sensed but thought.

Finally, Plato regards the forms as distinct from the sensible world. Using this fact to demonstrate UF may appear quite novel to the reader since the separation of the forms is often used as an argument *against* UF. I will address this later; but here, Plato seems to be arguing that the forms are distinct and I take this as supporting the claim that universals are a distinct class of entities. Whether or not they are ontologically distinct, as Plato seems to take them, is a different question. The argument is in the *Phaedo* at 74 B-C.² The sensible particulars appear sometimes as having some property (F) and sometimes as not. The corresponding form of that

¹Plato's use of different words in his discussion of these notions should not lead us to believe that he was using either in a strictly technical sense. Any idea about what he intends by the terms should come more from the context than from the terminology itself. Hence, although I am arguing that there is a difference in meaning, his use of *epistēmē* on the one hand and *gnōmēn* on the other does not establish this.

²See Appendix A for an outline of the argument.

property is never the opposite of that property. In other words, F-ness is always F and never -F. By assuming a standard condition for identity, he deduces that the form of the property is not the same as the sensible particulars. This does not, of course, prove that the universals are distinct from the instances of the property, but it does prove that they are different from the sensible world.

Next, we move to the *Republic* for more evidence of UF. As already mentioned above, the forms are thought (*noeisthai*) and not seen (*hōrasthai*) (507 B). Furthermore, they are eternal and unchanging (484 B; 500 C; 527 B). But the strongest case for UF comes at 476 A where Socrates says that "concerning justice and injustice, good and bad, and concerning all of the forms there is the same account, each is itself one, and thus everywhere, through an association with actions and with bodies and with each other, each appears as many visible things."³ This is an apt description of universals and predication. Socrates also says in Book X that "we are accustomed to assume a single form, each for every group of things to which we confer the same name" (596 A). The preceding gives us good reason to take Aristotle at his word, and to suppose that Plato, at least at some point, did understand the forms as universals and participation as predication in the middle dialogues.

The view that Plato conceived of the forms as standards is generally thought to be the competing interpretation. In the following paragraphs, I will examine the textual evidence for this view. Afterwards, I will begin my assessment of what I take to be Plato's theory of the forms. Beginning with the *Phaedo*, Plato gives some very explicit reasons for taking the forms to be unambiguous standards which the particulars only approximate. The standard would be, just as a universal, a criterion by which a sensible particular is recognized (75c). Further, Socrates says: "This which I now see aims to be some other sort of reality [the form], but it is lacking and is not able to be that sort of thing, but is more paltry" (74d-e). Later in the same passage, he states that the sensible thing resembles the form and does so inadequately (74e). Finally, Plato claims that the form is self-predicable (75c). Without saying too much about what Plato means by this last assertion, we can at least suppose that in order for a form of red to be red, it must be some kind of standard and not a universal, a concept or a set. In the *Republic*, Plato does not add significantly to this list. He asserts that a form is a model (*paradeigma*) which is imitated or approximated (472b-c; 484c-d; 500c-e). He also repeats the point that the sensible particular resembles the form (476c). This kind of language does not suggest a theory such as UF. It is much less difficult to make a case for SF given that Plato so explicitly outlines such a theory himself. We need not explicate any further for solid evidence that Plato understands the forms as a standard

³All translations are mine, from the Oxford Classical Texts.

from which the sensible particulars fall short.

Assuming now that the preceding explication is fairly representative of the account of the forms that Plato gives in the middle dialogues (and I think it is), we must suppose one of two things. Either Plato is conflating two incommensurable theories of the forms, or the distinction is a false one, and UF and SF can be combined into a single theory. I argue that the former possibility is the one we must take to be the case. We need only show that UF and SF are incommensurable theories, and we can do this in two ways. First, there are statements that can be ascribed to SF which cannot be ascribed to UF, and vice versa. Plato claims in a number of places that the forms are self-predicable. A great deal of material has been generated over exactly what Plato meant when he made this claim, so I will try to assume the most general account of its content. For now, self-predication will only apply to those entities which we can substitute for 'F-ness' in the phrase 'F-ness is F' and have the phrase make sense. Given this, we cannot say that the universal 'redness' is itself red, while a standard, paradigm, pattern, type, or "standard meter" (in Geach's sense) can all be intelligibly substituted in the phrase 'F-ness is F.' There are certain things we can predicate of universals such as intelligible, abstract or simple, but very few of the predicates discussed by Plato fall into this category (white, beautiful, equal, tall, shuttle, brave, etc.).

There is another, weaker difference between UF and SF where Plato says of the forms that "each is itself one, and thus everywhere, through an association with actions and with bodies and with each other, each appears as many visible things" (476a). It is much easier to construe this passage as giving an account of universals and predication than of standards and imperfect particulars. This is primarily so for the following reason: If we are going to discuss the relationship between standards and particulars, it would seem to us, as it clearly did to Plato, that 'imitation' is a more accurate way of characterizing the relationship. The exact relationship between a universal and its particular is much more difficult to characterize. But even the most general description would have to account for 1) the immanence of qualities in the sensible world and 2) an atomic intelligible thing which we consider the property apart from its instances (the universal). Regardless of whether universals are actually real entities or artifacts of our language, Plato still holds closely to a loose description of universals in the quotation above. In any case, Plato apparently recognized that there are words in the language that do not correspond to any single particular in the sensible world but are used to identify these particulars. It seems reasonable that the word correspond to some entity and, as it happens, Plato thought that it did, namely, to the form. But we must point out that it is not impossible to develop an SF theory that also accounts for the passage quoted above. The difficulty is that Plato does not explicitly make sense of this claim with regard to the forms as

standards. If the form is a standard, the particular *imitates* the form, and Plato does not describe it accordingly here. Proponents of SF can only account for such a view by overemphasizing and elaborating Socrates's examples in the dialogues which we can also take as an attempt to elucidate the notion of predication. As interesting as such a supplementary account may be, it seems to suppose that there is more in the text than we may want to assume initially.

The second way of demonstrating incommensurability is related to the directly preceding discussion. The relationship between the forms and the sensible world differs dramatically in each theory. In UF the sensible world participates in the forms through predication. In this case we have the 'one over many' idea and can make sense of the assertion Plato makes that the one form exhibits itself as a multiplicity in the sensible world. On the other hand, in the SF account the sensible particular imitates and/or approximates the form. In the latter account we can analogize in the same way Plato does, by giving the example of how a painting or a sculpture would approximate or imitate its subject (*Phaedo* 73e; *Rep.* 595a-603b). The separation between the sensible particular and the standard in SF is proximally distinct. The imperfect particular is physically separate from the standard. But in the case of universals, the distinction differs. While this distinction is ontological for Plato, we can consider it merely as a logical or linguistic one. While we experience a great many individual F things in the sensible world, we recognize that there is one word 'F,' or some entity 'F-ness,' which is not itself a sensible thing. Whether it is a word or a real universal, it is distinct from the sensible thing in a way that a standard or ideal does not achieve. Given this, in the *Republic*, we can see that a general description of what predication may be is, as Plato describes, participation, namely, as a single (transcendental) thing which, when instantiated in the sensible world, appears in many circumstances in different ways (476 A). In any case, Plato provides explicit statements supporting both these views of the distinction between sensibles and forms, yet they do not outline the same theory. Again, we have evidence here both that Plato was using two versions of the theory of forms and that these theories are incommensurable.

Still, a number of recent interpretations of the theory of forms have made attempts to dismiss either UF or SF, and account for Plato's claims in some original fashion. If Plato is, as I have argued, conflating UF and SF in his theory, then any interpretation or argument that dismisses one theory in favor of the other will give an insufficient portrayal of Plato's thought in the middle dialogues. I intend to show that this is the case. R. S. Bluck and Alexander Nehamas seem to represent most clearly the respective sides. Bluck argues against Ross who writes that Plato supposed the forms to be universals. Bluck's arguments do not succeed. Nehamas gives arguments against what he calls "the approximation view," which is

essentially SF, and then he goes on to provide an interpretation of the participation of the sensible world which we can minimally represent as UF. These first arguments are effective against SF, but do not show that Plato actually did not hold SF. One can criticize his interpretation on the same grounds. I will begin with Bluck's arguments.

Bluck has two primary arguments against those who take the forms to be universals. First, he argues that universals are not distinct from the sensible world (*Plato's Phaedo* 174-177). Because they are not distinct, Plato could not possibly have thought of the pure, eternal, unchangeable, and separate realities as universals. There are a number of difficulties in this criticism. One, while it may be that universals are not ontologically distinct from the sensible world, they are certainly logically distinct. Nevertheless, given that figures in recent philosophy, such as Bertrand Russell have still argued that universals have some further ontological status, it does not seem clear that Plato should have so readily avoided separating them. Further, there does not appear to be any evidence that Plato conceived of anything like universals as being exclusively immanent except in the early dialogues.⁴ Second, if this criticism were, in fact, compelling against UF, then it would, in some sense, be more compelling against SF. If the form is a standard, which is the view defended by Bluck, then it lends itself to being distinct from sensible things only insofar as it can be regarded as a sensible thing itself. There is no more reason to suppose that it is separate from the sensible world than there is to say that a universal is. In fact, insofar as a universal is inherently an intelligible thing, we may be able to make quite the opposite case. Any metaphysic which assumes that the distinction between the mind and the sensible world is an ontological one should be more skeptical of mental abstractions that derive from sensible properties (SF) than those that are invisible to the senses (UF). It could be objected, rightly, that Plato did not understand the standards as having derived their properties from the sensible world. Instead, he saw it the other way around. Nevertheless, there is no compelling reason to suppose that Plato thought that separating universals would be more problematic than separating standards.

Bluck's second criticism is that we cannot make good sense of Plato's claim that the sensibles "fall short" of the forms if they are universals (174-181). If we regard the sensible property in isolation, it cannot be anything short of a perfect instantiation of the universal. Bluck is simply showing that a good account of universals and predication conflicts with Plato's claims. On the other hand, some scholars, such as J. Malcolm, have no difficulty asserting that an instantiation of a universal can fall short of the universal itself (59). There is, apparently, a missing link here which I think Nehamas fills in. While it is true that any property is, in itself, a perfect

⁴See Ross 225-233.

example of the universal, Nehamas points out that every property will be instantiated imperfectly, and will consequently appear as falling short of the ideal ("Plato on the Imperfection" 108-109 and 116). Further, we could propose (with Malcolm) that the 'ideal' not be understood as the form but as a perfect instantiation of the form, which is a universal in this case. The difficulty here is that Plato never seems to defend a view such as the one Nehamas provides and we are left to grapple with a legitimate criticism from Bluck. But given the preceding, we are not compelled to give up UF entirely. Bluck's claim that UF cannot make sense of participation as "falling short" does not necessarily entail that Plato did not in some way regard the forms as universals. Instead, there is now a concrete example of the problems that arise from the conflation of UF and SF.

On the other hand, Nehamas provides some arguments against SF, which he believes show that Plato did not subscribe to the general description of SF. The main difficulty which he points out is an epistemic one, namely: if the sensible attribute only imperfectly exemplifies the form, then there is no reason to take the sensible as falling short of form X rather than of some other form Y (109-110). Again, if the circularity in a sensible instance of a circle only approximates the form, then we would never know whether the instance of the figure was desiring the form of circularity or the form of squareness. (For future reference, I will call this the Indeterminacy of Approximate Particulars Objection or IA.) If this criticism holds, then a standard cannot serve as a criterion for judging that when Plato says that the sensible falls short of the form, Plato means the sensible to be taken as the attribute belonging to the object. Instead, Nehamas explains, Plato is asserting that it is the object itself which exhibits the attribute imperfectly. The attribute, in so far as it belongs to a sensible thing, is a *character* of the form and is, in itself, perfect ("Predication and Forms" 475; "Plato on the Imperfection" 108-109).

If we restrict ourselves to the *Phaedo*, Nehamas's interpretation at first glance appears to be compelling. But as one examines the assertions regarding the forms made in the *Republic*, this interpretation loses much of its credibility. Nehamas's reading is attractive because it appeals to our philosophical instinct to get to the truth of the matter. That Plato could have regarded sensible objects as bad imitations of perfect transcendental patterns is somewhat disappointing. It is especially so in light of his introduction of a philosophically inspiring treatment of universals. Ridding Plato of SF solves IA and allows us to interpret Plato's treatment of the imperfection of the sensible world in a sound way. But Plato's talk of "imitation" in the *Republic* does not support Nehamas's interpretation. The examples given by Socrates such as the craftsman's table and the artist's rendition explain imitation in such a way that is not friendly towards

Nehamas' account.⁵ Plato's account of imitation and Nehamas's account of predication are incompatible in exactly the same way UF and SF are.⁶ So instead of accepting Nehamas's interpretation, one is forced back into supposing that Plato did, in fact, intend SF, if we are to take him at his word. So much for a position that is unsympathetic to SF.

In the final portion of this paper I will give some reasons for why Plato may have conflated UF and SF. In order to prove that Plato conflated the two theories one must show that the forms function both as standards and as universals, that the respective functions are incommensurable and that an interpretation of the forms which does not account for this conflation is inadequate. I have already addressed the preceding and intend to support it further by speculating on Plato's motivation for conflating the two theories. It appears that there is more than one contributing factor towards this mistake. In the first place, Plato seems to have improperly interpreted the imperfection of the sensible world. He clearly recognized this imperfection and viewed it as a problem. Plato saw that the many properties in the sensible world which fall under a single name exhibit degrees of difference. In the attempt to explain these differences, Plato failed to grasp the possibility that Nehamas points out, namely, that a complete and perfect instance (of a universal) is always imperfectly instantiated. Instead of analyzing and asking questions about the sensible world, Plato altered his characterization of the forms to meet the needs of the problem.

Secondly, Plato conflated UF and SF as a result of supposing that the criterion by which we judge a property and the abstraction of all existing properties was the same. In other words, Plato believes that the forms are what allow the possibility of making the sensible world intelligible. But he recognizes that predicates are general terms, abstract, and also intelligible. Put in this way, it is clear that they are not necessarily the same thing; but it is easy to see how this was not evident to Plato. He was confronted with a certain epistemic problem. The sensible world exhibits constant change. While we may not be able to ascribe to Plato a Heraclitean concern, we can supply some evidence that Plato was addressing certain kinds of change. For example, Socrates is tall standing near Alcibiades yet short next to Xenophon. The table is reddish-brown in the morning, but has a bluish tint at dusk. Another kind of change that may have concerned Plato is as follows: If I am able to identify a chair at any given time, then what I call a chair at one time is in some sense different than what I call a chair at another time. Yet, I am able to recognize both as chairs, and more notably, recognize something which I

⁵See *Rep.* Book X

⁶See 3-4 above.

have never seen before as a chair.⁷ Plato assumes that some kind of *a priori* faculty is necessary in order to recognize some property or predicate in the sensible world. This faculty develops into the Theory of Recollection, and the Theory of Recollection depends upon the forms.

Now, there is an ambiguity in cases of simple properties that seems to have led Plato to introduce universals into his solution to the Epistemic Problem. One's ability to recognize red is easily explained given the (mental) presence of redness. That there exists a thing 'redness' seems intuitively necessary to presuppose in order for there to be red things. If this is so, then some kind of appeal to redness would be necessary for one to identify a red thing. It is not clear in this case that the universal, an abstract and intelligible entity, may not be the criterion for judging a particular thing. On the other hand, complex predicates do not appeal to universals for knowability.⁸ The form of a shuttle must be a standard. The universal of shuttle is only something we abstract from existing cases. We must have already been able to understand what a shuttle is before we abstract from existing cases. Consequently, a universal will not serve as a criterion for judgment in cases such as this one since it is not logically presupposed. Apparently, Plato has lumped any and all kinds of predicates under one theory. His original insight with regard to simple predicates is extended over a larger body of predicates that cannot accommodate it. But before accepting these conclusions, we can still supply further evidence for the fact that Plato did generate forms from the universals of simple predicates.

Ross gives a coherent account of the development of the theory of forms in his *Plato's Theory of Ideas*. He sees the move from UF to SF as a development corresponding with the shift from the early Socratic dialogues to the middle dialogues. While I do not agree that Plato abandoned the notion that the forms act as universals, the shift certainly supports my theory that simple universals acted as forms. First, I have already shown that Plato assumes that the forms in the middle dialogues act in some respects as universals. Next, in the early dialogues, Plato writes of the forms as immanent, and he has Socrates ask for general accounts of the qualities in question. Giving an account of universals will serve Socrates's purposes much more readily in these contexts.⁹ But as Plato begins to move away from general accounts and into epistemological and

⁷The preceding account of the epistemic difficulty I will refer to simply as the Epistemic Problem.

⁸By 'complex,' I mean here that the predicate can be analyzed into simple predicates.

⁹Still, it is important to note that Plato does have Socrates speak of standards as early as the *Euthyphro* (6 D-E). I take this, though, as further evidence that Plato was prone to the confusion of standards and universals.

metaphysical problems, two things seem to occur. One, the forms are construed as having properties not predicable of universals; and two, the functions of the forms that fall into UF get separated from the sensible world along with the form as a standard.

UF cannot provide a solution for the Epistemic Problem. On the other hand, universals neatly fit the description Plato wants to give to the forms. They are abstract, applying to any given sensible case; and they are intelligible, invisible, etc. The root of the problem appears to be that Plato took it for granted that the forms, as originally formulated, would solve any existing epistemological, metaphysical, or ethical question. In fact, different solutions may be required for the different problems. Ross makes an important observation in noting that SF allows Plato a more general theory of forms (231). In other words the standards can be coherently applied to more epistemic problems than the universals can. But in any case, it is clear that a single *a priori* faculty, or criterion for judgment, cannot be either abstract predicates or ideal standards of properties if Plato wants to generate scientific knowledge.¹⁰

While it may seem *ad hoc* to suppose that somehow all of the confusions outlined above contributed towards Plato's conflating UF and SF, it is important to note that we may underestimate the complexity of the problem if we ignore most of these obscurities. If one is forced to focus on one of the possible reasons given above for Plato's mistake, then one is left with a weak account for Plato's motivation. Of course, the important move in establishing that Plato conflated the two theories is merely showing that the forms function both as standards and as universals. Proving that this is the correct interpretation entails showing that the respective functions are incommensurable and that an interpretation of the forms that refuses to incorporate this cannot account for all the information Plato gives us. Finally, speculating as to why Plato conflated UF and SF completes this account, and allows us to understand more fully Plato's conception of the theory of forms.

¹⁰A rigorous scientific theory would have to give a more complete account of relationships than universals could possibly attain to using the paradigms that would be amiable to UF such as the genus/species method. For example, a form of a shuttle may allow us to recognize the shuttle, but it does not clearly explain how a shuttle works. Plato could say that this knowledge is contained in the form, but this is still not the explanation itself. The theory of forms (either UF or SF) seems unable to provide minds with the kinds of conceptual schemes that provide minds with the simplest knowledge about math. Plato is unclear about such things as logical connectors and exactly how they would be accommodated in a theory of forms. Plato's emphasis on mathematics in the later dialogues focuses unfruitfully on accidental properties. In the case of SF, we would universalize the account, which would merely bring us back to dealing with universals. In any case, Plato failed to generate a compelling scientific ontology and his inability to make a number of important distinctions is at least in part to blame.

Appendix

Appendix A: Argument from the *Phaedo* that the Forms are distinct.

1. The sensible particular appears sometimes as F and sometimes -F. (74b)
2. The form of F (F-ness) is never -F. (74c; Definition)
3. X is identical to Y iff everything that can be predicated of X can be predicated of Y and the converse. (Assumed Condition for Identity)
4. The form of F is not the same as the sensible particular. (74c; by 1, 2, and 3)

Note: There are three terms in the above argument: the sensible particular, F, and the form of F.

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