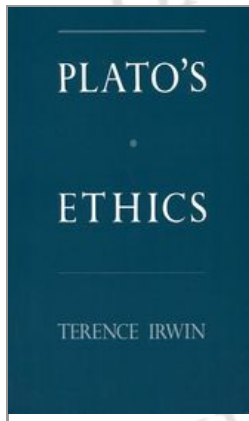


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### Plato's Ethics

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## The Theory of Forms

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### [+] Abstract and Keywords

With chapter 10, the author starts the long study of the *Republic*, which lasts for 9 chapters. This chapter discusses the relevance of the theory of forms for Plato's ethics. Considering the crucial passages of the *Republic* book V but also of the *Phaedo*, it is argued that the distinction between sensibles and forms is significant for ethics. Socrates fails to provide proper definitions in ethics because, lacking the theory of forms, he unsuccessfully tries to make the definitions fit with sensible properties.

**Keywords:** Definition, Phaedo, Republic, Plato, Sensibles, Senses, Theory of forms

### 104. Socratic Method and Platonic Metaphysics

The Theory of Forms 104. Socratic Method and Platonic Metaphysics

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 is the result of recollection. 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).<sup>1</sup> 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.

In Aristotle's view, this belief in the epistemological deficiency of sensible things and in the epistemological necessity of Forms that are 'separated' from these sensibles is a central difference between Socrates and Plato on questions of metaphysics and epistemology (*Met.* 987a32–b10, 1078b12–1079a4, 1086a37–b11). According to Aristotle, Plato developed his theory of nonsensible, 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. Aristotle leads us to expect, then, that when Plato argues that sensibles are deficient or imperfect, he will refer especially to change. To see whether Aristotle is right, we must find out what he means and how far his claim can be defended from Plato's dialogues. It will be easier to approach these questions once we have examined Plato's reasons for regarding sensibles as deficient.

These issues are relevant to the understanding of Plato's moral theory. It is worth examining Plato's theoretical views about Socratic definition, because his practice in the *Republic* is strikingly different from his practice in earlier dialogues. Whereas the early dialogues fail to reach the Socratic definitions they seek, *Republic* IV presents an account of each of the cardinal virtues. Does Plato's reflexion on Socratic definitions affect his views about the prospects of finding them?

### **(p.149)** 105. Definition and Unity

The Theory of Forms 105. Definition and Unity

It is useful to take up some questions that are raised, but not pursued, in the *Meno*. When Socrates suggests to Meno that a definition of virtue is needed, Meno does not immediately agree that such a definition is possible (*M.* 73a4–5). Indeed, Plato recognizes that the demand for a single account of virtue is not as uncontroversial as it is made to appear in the Socratic dialogues. Meno's initial views about the different types of virtue reflect the rather awkward coexistence in common sense of different views about what should count as a virtue. Meno thinks immediately of the Homeric conception, connecting virtue with the agent's own worldly success; Socrates gradually persuades him, returning to the same point more than once, that justice and temperance are necessary for any genuine virtue (73a6–c5, 78c4–79a2). Socrates assumes that genuine virtues must share a tendency to benefit the agent himself and other people. He does not justify this assumption, but in making it clearer that Socrates relies on it, Plato uncovers one of the controversial claims that underlie the arguments of the Socratic dialogues about the virtues.

Meno agrees quite quickly with Socrates' demand for a single definition of virtue (73a6–c5); he does not suggest that Socrates is asking the wrong question. Nor does he challenge Socrates' other criteria for a definition, even when he has doubts about Socratic inquiry. He supposes that his failure to make progress results from Socrates' attempt to inquire without previous knowledge, not from Socrates' conception of the definitions he is looking for. But it is worthwhile to raise some questions about Socrates' conditions for definitions.

When Meno offers a list of types of virtue, Socrates suggests that Meno thinks the items on his list belong on it because of some further feature that they share (besides the mere fact that they are on the list). To recognize this further feature is to recognize the 'one' belonging to all of the many (*dia pantōn*, 74a9; cf. 75a7–8), to recognize that something can be attributed 'universally' to them (*kata holou*, 77a6). This is a familiar Socratic demand, but what does it imply?

Let us suppose that Meno had not accepted Socrates' suggestion that justice and temperance are common features of all the types of virtue that Meno originally mentioned. In that case he might have said that the different types of virtue need not have anything in common except their membership in a disjunctive list. We might say, if we like, that this membership is the single feature that makes all virtue.

Has Socrates any reason to reject this as an account of the 'one' that is common to the 'many'? In demanding the one in the many, Socrates seems to be influenced by the fact that we apply the single name 'virtue' to the many different types of virtue. Does he perhaps assume that whenever we apply a single word 'F' to many cases, it has a single meaning, and that this fact by itself justifies us in demanding a Socratic definition of F that reveals some form that all Fs have in common, something because of which they are all Fs, and something that we can focus on to say whether something is F?

**(p.150)** If this is what Socrates means when he looks for a definition, then it will be relatively easy, but also relatively uninteresting, to find the one common to the many. If, for instance, 'F' is a disjunctively defined predicate, there must (on this view) be something that all Fs have in common; if the definition corresponding to 'F' is 'being G or H', then this will tell us what all Fs have in common. If that is Socrates' view, then it is easy to adapt Meno's first answer to answer Socrates' question; instead of giving a list of types of virtue, Meno should simply say that the form that they all have in common is simply being a member of the list, so that virtue will be an essentially disjunctive characteristic.

Socrates, however, does not suggest that such an answer would satisfy him. In assuming that virtue must be a single form, he seems to assume not merely that 'virtue' is a meaningful predicate but also that it corresponds to one non-disjunctive property underlying the disjunctive list of types of virtue. This single property must explain why the different types of virtue belong to one and the same kind.<sup>2</sup> This assumption is neither challenged nor clarified in the rest of the *Meno*. It commits Socrates to claiming that names (or some names at least) are correlated with some sort of unified explanatory properties that do not correspond directly to linguistic predicates; if, for instance, 'virtue'

corresponded only to a disjunction of characteristics, it would not correspond to a genuine explanatory property. To see what Plato takes to be implied by the belief in properties of this sort, we must look outside the *Meno*. The best place to look is the *Cratylus*.

### 106. Convention and Objectivity

The Theory of Forms 106. Convention and Objectivity

The *Cratylus* is concerned with the 'correctness of names' (383a4–b2) and specifically considers whether their correctness is conventional or natural.<sup>3</sup> 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'?) (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.

Socrates supposes that the conventionalist answer to the second question rests on the Protagorean view that 'what things seem to each person to be like, that is also what they are like' (386c4–5). 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 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' questions in the *Meno* presuppose there is something about virtues themselves that makes it correct to give them the same name. If a conventionalist theory is universally correct, however, there is nothing in the nature of virtues themselves that makes it right for us to classify all these states and characteristics (**p.151**) as virtues. If it is simply a matter of convention that we recognize the kinds we actually recognize, and if nothing about the things classified makes one classification right or wrong, then there is no reason to follow Socrates in assuming that the things referred to by the name must have something in common besides being the things that we have chosen to classify under that name.

Socrates attacks one motive for the conventionalist view by attacking the Protagorean position. 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).<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup>

This argument helps us to see why Socrates believes he is asking Meno the right

questions about virtue. He assumes that an interlocutor will have some views about the correct answer to Socrates' questions. Even more important, he assumes that the interlocutor agrees that correct answers exist and that we can make progress in finding them. This assumption rests on the still more basic assumption that some people are wiser than others about virtue.

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 their own right independently of our beliefs about them (386d8–e5). It follows that we speak correctly or incorrectly insofar 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).<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 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,<sup>8</sup> 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 (p.152) 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 judgment that all the types of virtue are genuine virtues.

This is why Socrates rejects Meno's attempted definition of virtue as 'ruling with justice'.

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Meno's suggestion is faulty not only because there are types of virtue that do not involve ruling (73d2–5) but also because a reference to justice does not properly justify our judgment about virtue. Socrates assumes that some further fact about virtue explains the fact that justice is a virtue, and the explanation provided by this further fact is needed for a proper definition of virtue.

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.

### 107. Epistemological Requirements for a Definition

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This demand on Socratic definitions is metaphysical, since it requires a single objective property that stands in the right explanatory relations to its instances. Once we understand this demand, we must compare it with Socrates' other demands on definitions, to see whether it is reasonable to expect that they can all be satisfied.

In the *Euthyphro* Socrates combines his metaphysical demand with an epistemological demand; the appropriate account of a form must provide a 'pattern' or 'standard' (*paradeigma*) for judging that something is or is not an instance of piety. He seems to assume that such an account must eliminate 'disputed terms' (*Eu.* 7c10–d5).<sup>9</sup> Socrates seems to believe that we cannot use our account of the form of piety as a standard for judgment, if we can describe it only in terms that we cannot apply to particular cases without causing dispute. Since there is dispute about which actions are just, an account of piety that mentions justice will not allow us to decide which actions are pious.

**(p.153)** This constraint is suggested rather than stated in the *Euthyphro*; although Socrates emphasizes the difficulty that arises from the use of disputed terms in an account, he does not explicitly insist that an acceptable account must eliminate them. Still, he suggests no other way to remove the difficulty that he raises. Moreover, if he believes that disputed terms must be eliminated, it is easier to understand why he never specifically claims to give a satisfactory definition of a virtue. He offers descriptions such as 'bravery is knowledge of what is to be feared and faced with confidence' (*La.* 199d1–2; *Pr.* 360d4–5) and the descriptions in the *Gorgias* of the virtues as types of psychic order (*G.* 506e2–507b8), but he does not represent these descriptions as adequate definitions. His apparent unwillingness to accept definitions of this sort is understandable if he accepts the implicit demand in the *Euthyphro* for a method of measuring and deciding that will eliminate disagreement about moral properties. If Socrates is looking for such a method, then accounts such as 'bravery is knowledge of what is to be feared' will not seem promising.

Socrates would perhaps be able to meet the difficulty raised in the *Euthyphro* if he relied on the epistemological hedonism of the *Protagoras* and so claimed that we can know what maximizes pleasure independently of our beliefs about the good.<sup>10</sup> In the *Protagoras* he

speaks of the 'measuring craft' that settles questions about goodness and badness by estimating present and future pleasures; this seems to solve the difficulty that was raised in the *Euthyphro*. Measurement is precisely the method that the *Euthyphro* suggests for eliminating disputes, and the *Protagoras* suggests that this method is not as alien to moral questions as it might initially have seemed.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Meno* Plato notices the epistemological aspect of Socratic definition and distinguishes it from the metaphysical aspect. Socrates 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' (*M.* 75d6–7).<sup>12</sup> 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 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 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, then apparently our initial disputes about what things are G will return when we consider what things are F.

If we combine the remarks in the *Euthyphro* about disputed terms with the dialectical condition in the *Meno*, we still cannot be sure exactly what Socrates (**p.154**) or Plato means to allow or exclude. But these different remarks suggest that Socrates imposes some epistemological demand on a definition. If he does, we ought to raise a question that the *Meno* does not raise: how does the epistemological demand affect the metaphysical demand for an explanatory property?

Although the dialectical condition may seem reasonable if we are concerned about the resolution of disputes, the restriction it imposes is open to question. How can Socrates be entitled to rule out the possibility that some definitions are interdependent? If he recognizes this possibility, how can it be fair to rule out such definitions as answers to an inquiry? Such a restriction seems especially unwelcome in the light of Socrates' metaphysical constraint on definitions. If they are supposed to identify the genuinely explanatory property, how does he know that it will always be possible to specify this property in the sorts of terms required by the dialectical condition? Socrates does not consider the possibility of divergence between the epistemological demand and the metaphysical demand, and so he does not say which demand is more important.

As long as Socrates accepts both the epistemological and 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 reflexions 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.

### 108. Comprehensiveness of Opposites

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In the *Phaedo* Plato discusses both the metaphysical and the epistemological sides of Socratic definition. He considers the forms (*eidê*; *Eu.* 6d9–e1; *M.* 72c6–d1) and asks how we can know them, in the light of facts about how they are. To make it clear that he is talking about the forms that concern Socrates, Plato 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 makes an epistemological claim: these Forms are inaccessible to the senses (65d4–5). In support of this claim, he makes a metaphysical claim: the Form of F has properties that no sensible F can have. This fact about Forms explains why they cannot be known by the senses (74a9–b7). These claims and their supporting arguments have no parallel in the Socratic dialogues; we must try to understand their significance for Plato's view of Forms.

**(p.155)** To show that the Form cannot be sensible, Plato claims that whereas equal sticks and stones appear both equal and unequal, the form cannot have these contrary properties (*Phd.* 74b7–9).<sup>13</sup> In the post-Socratic dialogues, Plato often contrasts the Form of F with Fs that are both F and not F. He sees a Heracleitean unity of opposites in a beautiful (*kalon*) girl who is also ugly (*aischron*) in comparison with gods (*HMa.* 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 (*R.* 479a5–b10). In contrast to the F things that are both F and not F, the Form of F must be free from this comprehensiveness of opposites (*Symp.* 210e5–211a5; cf. *HMa.* 291d1–3).

What is wrong with the comprehensiveness of opposites, and why is Plato entitled to assert that the Form must be free of it? It would be a mistake to argue that if something is both F and not F, it is not genuinely F after all, or that it is a self-contradictory entity; Plato never relies on this mistaken argument.<sup>14</sup> In *Republic IV* 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).<sup>15</sup> While Plato never actually remarks that the many Fs are not self-contradictory, everything he says suggests that he believes their opposite properties are perfectly compatible. When he talks about the comprehensiveness of opposites in the many



Fs, he makes it clear that this compresence involves different respects or different relations, and he never relies on any argument that requires him to neglect this fact about the relevant sort of compresence. Why, then, does the compresence of F and not-F in a given F imply that this F cannot be the Form of F?

### 109. Compresence and Explanation

The Theory of Forms 109. Compresence and Explanation

To answer this question, Plato refers to the explanatory role of Forms. Like Socrates, he wants to find the Form of F because he wants to find 'that because of which' (*di'ho*) all F things are F (*M.* 72c6–d1, *Eu.* 6d9–e1). To clarify this explanatory requirement, he 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 the combination of two things is what makes things two, since it is equally true that the division of one thing makes it two (96e5–97b3).<sup>16</sup>

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. He suggests that as explanations they suffer from disabling faults; 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 have some connexion with x's being F (as 'by a head' plainly does if we say that Theaetetus is taller than **(p.156)** Socrates by a head), but if either (1) or (2) is true, then G lacks the explanatory connexion to F that G would have to have if G were what makes x F. To put it in Aristotle's terms, we cannot say that x is F insofar as x is G (that x is F qua G) if either (1) or (2) is true (cf. *Phys.* 196b24–29; *Met.* 1026b37–1027a5). In asserting his constraints on explanation, Plato assumes that an explanation involves a contrast.<sup>17</sup> If being F and being G are two possible conditions for x and we want to explain why x is F as opposed to G, we have not explained this if we refer to some further state H that no more explains x's being F than it explains x's being G. And so 'by a head' does not explain x's being taller rather than shorter than y, since it no more explains this than it explains x's being shorter than z. If, then, F and G are contrasted in our demands for explanation, so that we want to know why x is F rather than G or G rather than F, we must appeal to different explanatory properties of x.<sup>18</sup>

These general claims about explanation show us why Plato focusses on the compresence of opposites. If we want to know what makes something just, and the alleged explanatory property no more makes something just than it makes something unjust, then 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 direction that has no Socratic parallel. 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' (*Ch.* 161a2–b2). He could also have pointed out to Laches, although 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. *M.* 73d6–8), but that is not how they are stated. None of these passages 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 (*HMa.* 291d1–3), but it is expressed most clearly in the dialogues that contrast the non-sensible Form of F with the many sensible Fs.<sup>19</sup>

### 110. The Form and the 'Many'

The Theory of Forms 110. The Form and the 'Many'

Once we see why Plato contrasts the Form of F with the many Fs, we can also see what the many Fs are supposed to be and what an acceptable description of the Form would have to be like.<sup>20</sup> 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 (p.157) 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.<sup>21</sup>

The discussion of explanation in the *Phaedo* refers primarily to properties: having a head, being taller by a head, and so on. When he contrasts the 'safe' explanation referring to Forms with the defective explanations he has illustrated, Plato insists that we should say 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). He seems to mean the same by saying (1) that bright-coloured things, say, are both beautiful and ugly, (2) that bright colour is both beautiful and ugly, or (3) that bright colour makes things beautiful and ugly. The third formula conveys his main point most accurately.

It would be going too far to claim that when Plato speaks of 'the many Fs', he always and unambiguously has in mind alleged F-making properties, as opposed to F particulars. In some cases it is easy not to see the distinction. For in the case of equality, largeness, and smallness, particulars as well as properties seem to suffer the relevant sort of compresence. The comparative character of largeness and equality implies that whatever

is large or equal in one comparison will also be small or unequal in another. But no sound parallel argument can be given to show that the same is true for the moral properties (goodness, bravery, justice, and so on) that are Socrates' main concern.<sup>22</sup> Plato never implies that every single token brave action (for instance) is also cowardly, and such claims play no role in his arguments about the many Fs and Forms.<sup>23</sup>

### 111. The Role of the Senses

The Theory of Forms 111. The Role of the Senses

Now that we have seen what Plato means by his claim that the many Fs 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 Fs 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 Fs that suffer the compresence of opposites, and so we must grasp it by something other than the senses.

**(p.158)** The connexion between the senses and the compresence of opposites is most strongly asserted in *Republic* VII. When Plato describes the growth of reasoning and reflexion, 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' (*R.* 523a10–b4). The cases that do not provoke thought include our perception of fingers; those that do 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 normally attributes to the many Fs, and we have seen that 'the many Fs' may refer to particulars or to properties and types; which does he have in mind here?

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 judgment but does not itself include any concepts or judgments. 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 judgments, 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.<sup>24</sup> 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' (523d5–6). The judgment that this thing is a finger and that thing is not a finger is attributed to sense; it is only when sense gives conflicting judgments of this sort that thought is provoked to ask questions. Plato does not say that perceptual judgments do not involve thought, but he suggests that in some cases sense 'discriminates adequately' (523b1–2) without provoking thought to examination. The point, then, seems to be that in some cases the degree of thought needed for the perceptual judgment 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. The most important point for interpretation is Plato's claim that perceptual judgments about large and small, heavy and light, in contrast to perceptual judgments about fingers, provoke the soul to ask what heavy and light are. The soul is puzzled because sense indicates (**p. 159**) 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 sort of question is raised by cases where we cannot adequately grasp something 'itself by itself' (524d10)<sup>25</sup> by sense, but can grasp it only 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 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, should not lead us to say 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 by itself seem to confuse largeness and smallness. Nor is it clear why these perceptual judgments should 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 the 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. The senses are open to the objection that was raised in the discussion of explanations in the *Phaedo*. 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.<sup>26</sup>

In Plato's view, Forms such as the Large, the Equal, and the Just cannot be properties that are grasped by the senses. Whatever the senses offer us to answer our question about largeness, this property turns out to be both largeness (in some things) and smallness (in other things); and so a six-inch length is one of 'the many Fs' that turn out to be both F and not-F, and cannot be the F Itself. When we are confused by this reflexion on the reports by the senses, we begin to ask what largeness and smallness are; we come to recognize that they cannot be properties that we grasp through the senses.

### **(p.160) 112. Sensible Properties**

The Theory of Forms 112. Sensible Properties

What entitles Plato to say 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?<sup>27</sup>

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 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 other 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 three hundred 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 new titles we have published, 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 **(p.161)** 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 it embodies is not determined by the length itself, but by the context in which it is placed (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).

### 113. Objections to the Senses: Types of Flux

The Theory of Forms 113. Objections to the Senses: Types of 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 he believes 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 mistaken?<sup>28</sup>

We have good reason to believe that Aristotle is not mistaken, 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. In the *Cratylus* he suggests that

knowledge requires the existence of unchanging forms as objects of knowledge; even if sensibles are all in flux, forms must be exempt from flux (*Cra.* 439c6–440d2). In this passage Plato does not actually affirm that sensibles are in flux,<sup>29</sup> but in other dialogues he seems to affirm precisely that; after he has argued that the Forms are different from sensibles, he claims that sensibles undergo constant change, whereas Forms are completely unchanging (*Phd.* 78c10–e4; *R.* 495a10–b3, 508d4–9, 518e8–9, 525b5–6, 534a2–3). If Plato believes that flux in sensibles implies that there can be no knowledge of them, why does he believe this?

According to Aristotle, Plato became familiar in his youth with Cratylus and with a Heracleitean belief that sensibles are in flux and cannot be known; he held this same belief later (*Met.* 987a32–b1). Apparently, then, Plato looked at Socrates' search for definitions in the light of Heracleitean beliefs about flux.<sup>30</sup> What might he have taken these beliefs to imply?

In Plato's report, 'Heracleitus says somewhere that everything passes away and nothing remains, and in likening beings to the flow of a river he says that you could not step into the same river twice' (*Cra.* 402a8–10). This claim is about the succession of properties in the same subject over time. But Plato ascribes **(p.162)** a second view to Heracleitus, that everything 'is always being drawn together in being drawn apart' (*Sph.* 242e2–3). This claim is about the compresence of opposite properties in the same subject at the same time.

Plato takes this second Heracleitean thesis to express a belief in flux. He 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 (*Tht.* 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 compresence 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.<sup>31</sup>

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.

We ought not to assume, then, that when Plato speaks of flux he must have succession in mind; and so we ought not to be surprised when he begins by speaking of compresence and continues by speaking of change. We need not infer that Plato really intends some argument about succession or that he illegitimately infers succession from compresence; we should simply suppose that he assumes a broad interpretation of flux. The fact that he speaks of flux does not by itself tell us whether he has in mind change over time, compresence of opposites, or both at once. If we see that 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 explaining why they are unknowable 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.<sup>32</sup>

### **(p.163)** 114. The Senses and the Compresence of Opposites

The Theory of Forms 114. 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. No doubt the questions are difficult, but it may well seem surprising that Socrates tries so hard to answer them, but apparently always fails. Does he impose inappropriately stringent demands on definitions?

If we are asked to say what bravery is, we quite rightly 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 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.<sup>33</sup>

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?

### 115. Difficulties About Moral Properties

The Theory of Forms 115. Difficulties About Moral Properties

Sometimes Plato suggests that moral properties are especially likely to cause disagreement and dispute. In the *Euthyphro* Socrates contrasts moral properties **(p.164)** 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, but that we have different thoughts about justice; by this he may mean simply that we have different beliefs about justice or conceptions of justice.<sup>34</sup>

The division between disputed and non-disputed properties seems to be connected with that between sensible and non-sensible. The properties examined in the Socratic elenchos are clearly disputed properties; they are mentioned in the *Phaedo* as non-sensible properties, and properties that involve the compresence of opposites in their sensible embodiments include moral properties. It is reasonable to assume, then, that disputed properties are a proper subset of non-sensible properties. What is the difference between these and other non-sensible properties that explains why moral properties are disputed, whereas numerical properties, for instance, are not?

No one would argue that numerical or comparative properties should be identified with sensible properties. In fact 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.

Moral properties, however, are less clear. Indeed, it is easy to draw a Heracleitean conclusion that Plato wants to reject. 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 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 **(p.165)** 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, this 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, we might argue, 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.

Plato has good reasons for believing that moral properties are essentially contextual. 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 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, then observation of the action itself will not tell us whether it is fine and beneficial, and so 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, non-contextual 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 non-sensible, 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 context-free observable properties.

If this is Plato's point, and if we have correctly understood Socrates' demands on a definition, then Plato argues that Socrates' metaphysical demand for a single explanatory property conflicts with his epistemological demand that could be satisfied only by a sensible property. According to Plato, we cannot find a single explanatory property if we insist that it must be a sensible property, and therefore the different requirements for a definition that are imposed in the *Meno* cannot all be satisfied.

This argument to show that Plato intends a direct refutation of Socrates' criteria for definitions has been rather speculative at some crucial points. It must **(p.166)** be admitted both that Plato does not affirm the essential interconnexion of definitions of moral properties and that the Socratic dialogues do not explicitly deny it. In order to show that Plato disagrees with Socrates, we have to interpret some of Socrates' demands in more precise terms than he actually uses. It is quite possible that Plato does not believe he is rejecting anything that Socrates would have said if he had been aware of its full implications.

Still, even if we do not agree that Plato deliberately rejects Socrates' explicit or implicit views about inquiry and definition, we ought to admit that he makes definite claims that Socrates does not make and rules out some approaches to definition that Socrates does not rule out. Socrates talks in general terms about finding the one in the many, a paradigm, and an explanation. If he does not see what is wrong with attempts to find definitions of moral properties that reduce them to sensible properties, then he does not see what demands on Socratic definitions are reasonable. Even if Socrates is merely silent or indeterminate on points that Plato emphasizes, Plato's arguments ought to make some difference to the search for Socratic definitions.

### 116. Definitions and Hypotheses

#### The Theory of Forms 116. 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, symmetrical shape, or some other sensible property, he prefers to say that 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.<sup>35</sup>

Plato adds something, however, to suggest how one might approach the right sort of account. He suggests that 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 also 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.<sup>36</sup>

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 this **(p.167)** process 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 (*archê*) with discussion of its consequences (101e1–3). Plato suggests that not every 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 think it worth insisting 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 (*G.* 451d5–e1, 489e6–8); and we have seen how the *Euthyphro* and the *Meno* might support this protest. Thrasymachus makes the same protest especially forcefully in *Republic* I, arguing that any account of the just as the expedient, 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 (*R.* 336c6–d4).<sup>37</sup> If Forms are non-sensible, however, Plato cannot guarantee that circular accounts of them can be avoided.

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 connexions 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, 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 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. 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.

These claims about the *Phaedo* and about the implications of the non-sensible character of Forms more generally are bound to seem rather speculative until we connect them with Plato's actual search for Socratic definitions. Fortunately, the *Republic* offers us an extended search for definitions; in fact, it presents definitions of the virtues that Socrates in the early dialogues tries and fails to define. What explains this difference between the *Republic* and the earlier dialogues? (p.168) We might say that Socrates' failure was merely a pretence, that Plato is more dogmatic than Socrates, or that Plato is wrongly satisfied with accounts that Socrates would rightly have challenged. We might, however, find that in the middle dialogues Plato has formulated his task more clearly and that in the *Republic* he carries it out with more success. Our discussion of the middle dialogues should make it worthwhile to explore this question about the *Republic*.

### Notes:

(1.) I use an initial capital in 'Form' and in the names of Forms ('Just', etc.) to refer to the non-sensible entity that, in Plato's view, is the only thing that meets Socrates' conditions for being a form (i.e., what is defined in a Socratic definition).

(2.) On Socrates' demand for a single property, see §§13, 14.

(3.) The *Cra.* is a dialogue of uncertain date; see Luce [1964]; Mackenzie [1986]. The fact that it takes up some questions that are treated at greater length in the *Tht.* might be thought to suggest that, like the *Tht.*, it was written after the *R.* This is not a good reason, however, for thinking it must be a late dialogue; it is equally possible that in the later dialogues Plato returns to some questions that he had discussed earlier and examines them again because he thinks they need a more thorough treatment. If we take the *Euthd.* to be an early dialogue (see chap. 4, note 1), we will make the same point about its relation to the *Sph.* and the *St.*

(4.) On the reference to change and stability here, see §113.

(5.) This issue is also discussed in *Pr.* 327e–328c; *Tht.* 178a5–179b5.

(6.) Plato needs the assumption that naming is an action, if he is to avoid committing a

fallacy of division (which Robinson [1956], 123, alleges). The correctness of names is discussed by Kretzmann [1971].

(7.) The next part of the dialogue considers one way in which a name might be correct; for it considers whether the etymology of names conveys the truth about the objects they name. In the end Socrates recognizes that etymology is not the right place to look for correctness (435a5–d3). Even a name whose etymology conveys false information about the object named can serve as a name for that object in the right context, just as ‘Hermogenes’ can be used to name Hermogenes even though he is not a descendant of Hermes (429b11–c5). In place of the etymological theory of correctness, Socrates appeals to the preservation of ‘outlines’ (on which see Fine [1977]).

(8.) ‘*Barbaros*’, discussed in *St.* 262c10–263a1, is an example of an apparent name that fails to preserve the outline of a genuine kind. Plato does not discuss such cases in the *Cra*.

(9.) On disputed terms, see §§14, 26; Kraut [1984], 281 and note.

(10.) On epistemological hedonism, see §57.

(11.) On measurement, see §64.

(12.) I follow Thompson in reading *ho erōtōn*. In 79c2 *gnōsomenou emou* suggests that the questioner's agreement is the relevant one. The emendation *prohomologē(i)* (defended by Thompson and Bluck) is attractive, but unnecessary.

(13.) At *Phd.* 74b6–9 I take *tō(i) men . . . tō(i) d'ou* to be masculine (as in *HMa.* 291d1–3, *Symp.* 211a2–5) and *phainetai* to have its veridical sense (as in *HMa.* 289b5–7; *R.* 479b6–7). On this view, one person correctly judges that two sticks are equal and another that they are unequal; presumably they focus on different features of the sticks (perhaps their equal length versus their unequal width, or their being equal to each other versus their being unequal to something else with a different length). For discussion see Murphy [1951], 111 and note 1; Owen [1957], 175 and note 35 (agreeing with Murphy, but with an important reservation based on 74c1); Mills [1957]; Kirwan [1974], 116f.; Gallop [1975], 121f.; Bostock [1986], 73–77; Penner [1987b], 20–22, 33–40, 48–52, 352; White [1987]; [1992], 280–83; Fine [1993], 331f.

(14.) Contrast Ross [1951], 38; Mills [1958].

(15.) It is relevant to appeal to this passage in *R.* IV even though it does not specifically state the Principle of Non-Contradiction. See chap. 13, note 4.

(16.) Different views about the fault in the rejected explanations are presented by Vlastos [1969b], 95–102; Gallop [1975], 172–74; Bostock [1986], 136–42.

(17.) Explanations are connected with contrasts by Dretske [1988], 42f., relying on Dretske [1972]; Van Fraassen [1980], 127f.

(18.) I have spoken generally of 'explanation' in order to avoid the suggestion that Plato is concerned exclusively with causal explanation, and the suggestion that he has only non-causal explanation in mind. This issue is discussed by Taylor [1969]; Vlastos [1969b]; Annas [1982]; Fine [1987].

(19.) On the compresence of opposites, in *R. I*, see §120.

(20.) On the nature of the 'many Fs' see Murphy [1951], 110; Owen [1957], 174 and note 32; Crombie [1962], II 79, 293–95; Gosling [1960] (criticized by White [1977]; White [1979], with a reply by Gosling [1977]); Nehamas [1975a], 116 (treating the many Fs as particulars; contrast his view in [1975b]). If we believe that the many Fs are types or properties, we will not suppose that Plato is arguing primarily against nominalism (as suggested by Penner [1987b], 22, 53–55, 236f.). On Socrates, see §14.

(21.) Plato does not argue, then, that because (for instance) standing firm is 'no more' (*ou mallon*) fine than shameful, no particular instance of standing firm is definitely fine. On *ou mallon* see Woodruff [1988], 146–50; Annas [1992], 66–68.

(22.) Owen [1957], Strang [1963], and Bostock [1986], 77, 79f., maintain that Plato's belief in Forms is a response to some sort of relativity in certain predicates. This view is criticized by White [1989a], 45–57; Fine [1993], 161–68.

(23.) Contrast Ross [1951], 38.

(24.) This point is made clearly by Adam [1902], ad loc.

(25.) In this passage '*auto kath'hauto*' clearly does not refer to existential independence (which is irrelevant to the contrast). Cf. chap. 10, note 32.

(26.) This view of the passage is defended by Irwin [1977a], 318; Penner [1987b], 114f., 142. A different view is taken by Adam [1902], ad loc.; Kirwan [1974], 121–23; White [1992], 286f.

(27.) The inadequacy of the senses is discussed by Gosling [1973], 165–68; Penner [1987b], 114–16.

(28.) Plato's views on flux are discussed by Weerts [1931], 6–29 (discussed by Cherniss [1944], 218f.); Cornford [1935], 99; Ross [1951], 20; Bolton [1975]; Irwin [1977b]; Penner [1987b], 216–21; White [1989a], 58; Vlastos [1991], 69–71; Fine [1993], 54–57.

(29.) In 439d3–4, *kai dokei tauta panta rhein* is part of the clause beginning *mē ei*. Socrates, then, does not assert *kai dokei*. . . . This passage is discussed by Weerts [1931], 24; Calvert [1970], 36.

(30.) The relation of Plato's views on flux to the early dialogues is discussed by Graham [1992].



(31.) Plato's view of Heracleitus is discussed further in Irwin [1992b], 55f.

(32.) None of the passages we have discussed offers any explicit basis for Aristotle's claim that Plato 'separated' Forms from sensibles. (Vlastos [1991], 259 and note, 261, claims that Plato's use of *auto kath' hauto* for Forms implies separation, but see chap. 10, note 25, and Fine [1993], 165f., 274f.) It is not clear, however, that Aristotle takes the belief in separation to be explicit. At *Met.* 1086b7–10 he suggests that Plato took it for granted that if he had proved the existence of Forms 'apart from' (*para*) sensibles (cf. *Phd.* 74a11, 74b6–7), that would be enough to prove that the Forms must be separated. For fuller discussion, see Fine [1993], 60.

(33.) On the *Eu.* and the *M.*, see §§14, 107.

(34.) *I Alc.* 111a11–112a9 draws a similar distinction. The importance of these passages on disputed properties is rightly emphasized by Strang [1963], 195–98 (who, however, connects them too closely with Owen's views on relatives; see chapter 10, note 22). Cf. Irwin [1977a], 320f.

(35.) Vlastos [1969b], 91f., argues that Plato's formula in *Phd.* 100c–e is meant to allude to the demand for definitions. Strang [1963], 196; and Bostock [1986], 150f., deny this, but they take insufficient account of 78c10–d7, which makes it clear that the Forms are the objects of Socratic definitions. The same Forms are introduced again at 100c–e; it is reasonable to suppose that Plato still intends them to be definable. The 'clever' accounts of various causes (105b6–c7) offer different suggestions about how a more informative account could be given; see Taylor [1969], 48–54.

(36.) The sense of 'accord' and 'discord' is discussed by Robinson [1953], 126–36; Bostock [1986], 166–70; Gentzler [1991b].

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



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