

GREEK PHILOSOPHY
Lecture 1, Term 1, 2001/2
SOME THOUGHTS ON PLATONIC FORMS
Anthony Price

Plato's point of departure was Socratic discussions of definitions (cf. Aristotle *Meta-physics* A 6, 987b1 ff.) Socrates needs real, not nominal, definitions if, e.g., the answer to the question 'What is justice?' is to have implications for how one should live. Purely verbal definitions are practically idle (unless accidentally). But then what non-verbal entities are the target of definition?

E.g., what is equality? It is not to be identified with equal sticks and stones (*Phaedo* 74b8-c5). What is beauty? It is not to be identified with a beautiful girl (*Hippias Major* 287e, 289a-c). Nor is justice the same as 'truth-telling and paying back what one has re-ceived from anyone' (*Republic* 1.331c-d).

Such things are to be identified neither with perceptible objects, nor with perceptible properties. For these fill the bill only relatively, or in context, not in themselves. Socra-tes and Plato ask, 'What is — in itself?'

Rather, there is, e.g., an Equality which exists separately from things we perceive. It is 'divine, immortal, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, unvarying, and constant in relation to itself' (*Phaedo* 80b). As such, it is an object of definition (which remains constant to keep the definition true); and of knowledge (whose contents are in no way false, never true in one way but false in another).

How do we know Forms? Not in, but from, perceptions (*Phaedo* 75a); these remind us of what we knew directly, disembodied, before birth (75-76). Thus to the Forms/perceptibles contrast corresponds a soul/body contrast (80b). Beauty is excep-tional, however: we see young faces as beautiful, for Beauty itself becomes quasi-visible through its images (*Phaedrus* 250b, d). Whence the special role of love in recovering our grasp of the Forms (cf. the ladder of love, *Symposium* 210).

So far we have Forms of some properties (e.g., Beauty, Equality) – especially geometri-cal, moral, aesthetic – to which perceptible particulars (e.g., sticks, stones, beautiful peo-ple) stand in relation. There are not the same grounds for supposing a Form of Stick, or Boy (cf. *Parmenides* 130b-d, *Republic* 7.523b-524c). So far the logical form is this (cf. *Phaedo* 100c):

For some F, a is F = a partakes of the F.

Here partaking of (or participating in) is a metaphor that needs unpacking, cf. the mud-dles in *Parmenides* 130d ff. *Phaedo* 100d is prudently vague about how the relation between Form and particular is best understood. Notice how implicit in Plato's para-phrase is a distinction between Forms and properties: it is the whole predicate ('is F' or 'partakes of the F') that indicates a property (that of being F, i.e. partaking of the F), while only one element of it ('the F') indicates a Form. [Cf. Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic* §

57.]

Yet Plato can be tempted (cf. Republic 10.596a) to extend the picture to cover all proper-ties (though not mere negations). If so, particulars depend upon Forms for their whole character and existence. So Allen remarks (Vlastos ed, Plato I p. 81): ‘Particulars have no independent ontological status; they are purely relational entities, entities which de-rive their whole character and existence from Forms.’

If so, perceptible particulars become like derivative reflections of what exists in its own right. There can be nothing true of them in themselves – and so so no knowledge at all of the sensible world. The logical form would be:

For all F, This is F = The F is reflected here.

Thus it is significant that in the Timaeus we meet both Forms of natural kinds, and talk of reflections (50c-51b). However, there is nowhere any suggestion of Forms, say, of col-ours; so restrictions remain, and Republic 10.596a should not be taken as Plato’s final word.

On the widest view of Forms (as stated there), would Plato’s universe become totally elusive, a world (or two worlds) of abstractions on the one hand, reflections on the other? Hopefully not. The Forms are abstract in that, e.g., the Form of Beauty is purely beauti-ful, with a beauty that is not a property of anything else (viz. something that is beautiful), and does not supervene upon any subjacent properties (like a colour or shape). Forms are paradigms or exemplars; i.e., they are paradigmatic, perfect, realizations of the property of which they are the Form. This feature of Forms is commonly labelled ‘self-predication’: as we might put it, being beautiful is what at once constitutes and charac-terizes Beauty. In relation to Forms, Plato rejects any distinction like that of Frege be-tween a property (Eigenschaft) and a component (Merkmal) of a concept: ‘Right-angled is a component of the concept right-angled triangle, but it is not a property of that con-cept; it is a property of the triangles that fall under it’ (Kenny, Frege, p. 75). In Plato, being beautiful, which characterizes everything that partakes of the Form of Beauty, also characterizes the Form itself (pace Allen). This accords with what Jonathan Barnes has called ‘the Synonymy Principle of causation’ (cf. the fire that warms by itself being hot). Otherwise, perhaps, we could no more explain a person’s beauty by saying that it reflects Beauty itself, than we would explain the colour of a reflection by relating it to a colour-less scarf. And the Platonic lover, who has advanced from the beauty of boys to that of Beauty itself, will be cheated if Beauty itself isn’t beautiful at all (cf. Symposium 211d-e).

Gail Fine distinguishes two varieties of self-predication, ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ (On Ideas, p. 62): According to narrow self-predication (NSP), ‘The Form of F is F in roughly the way in which sensible particulars are F; so, for example, the Form of Dog, if there is one, can wag its tail; the Form of White, if there is one, is coloured white’ (On Ideas, p. 62).

According to broad self-predication (BSP), ‘The form of equal is equal, not because it is equal to something, but because , being the non-sensible, determinable property of equality, it explains why all equal things are equal and it never explains why anything is unequal’ (ibid., pp. 189-90).

Fine evidently prefers BSP to NSP as a reading of Plato. But BSP leaves it opaque how the Form of F explains things' being F (as would explaining the power of opium to cause sleep by calling it 'soporific'). Taking it as a brute or ultimate fact that the Form of F explains things' being F, and nothing's being not F, is like ascribing to a thing a power or disposition that rests upon no categorical base (like a drug's being soporific not in virtue of its chemical composition). I think that we should rather try to make non-parodic sense of NSP, partly by pressing Plato to restrict the range of Forms, to this effect: strictly, we want no Forms for properties that are not possible properties of Forms. (Pace Republic 10.596a, there is certainly no form of white; and Socrates is right to be 'puzzled' about whether there is a form even of man, cf. Parmenides 130c).

We might distinguish the ideal properties of (e.g.) Beauty itself, i.e. the properties that make it a Form (being divine, immortal, etc.) from its special quality (being purely and unqualifiedly beautiful). However, the special quality entails the ideal ones in that nothing could be purely and unqualifiedly F without being a Form. Then a boy or girl who partakes of Beauty takes on its special property (he or she is beautiful) in an imperfect mode that fails to import its ideal properties (he or she doesn't thereby become divine or immortal). This goes with the metaphor of 'reflecting': a reflection of a red scarf is likely to be red and scarf-like in shape, but it will remain a reflection and not a material object.

All Forms are fully beautiful, without qualification, and yet the Form of the Beauty is the paradigm of beauty, in that its beauty is original and non-derivative. Helen is beautiful derivatively and qualifiedly; Equality is beautiful derivatively (through participating in Beauty) though unqualifiedly; Beauty is beautiful both non-derivatively and unqualifiedly (here the former entails the latter). The Form of Beauty is not beautiful derivatively (not even from partaking of Beauty, which only other things can do, cf. Phaedo 100c4-6). And no Form is beautiful superveniently (Forms are not beautiful in virtue of subjacent features such as colour or shape). However, it remains open that beauty might be analysable geometrically or numerically – beauty might be nothing but a certain proportion.

All Forms are subject to some aspect change: Beauty partakes of the Same in relation to itself, but of the Different in relation to Equality. But maybe all that is excluded is that a Form should suffer aspect change in respect of the very property of which it is the Form. This would suit numbers: 2 is twice 1 and yet half 4; but it is unqualifiedly 2 (the only thing that can be called 2 not in respect of one concept but not another, like 2 shoes that are also 1 pair of shoes).

Note on Parmenides 130b-d: Fire and water are dubious candidates for Formhood, in that they might be taken to consist in what we see. Yet as elements they are less phenomenal. Timaeus 56ab identifies the particles of fire with the pyramid (because that figure is most mobile, smallest, and lightest, and has the most acute angles so that its sharpness and cutting power are the greatest), while the particles of water are shaped like the icosahedron (as being least mobile, largest, heaviest, and most blunt because of its obtuse angles).