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# Plato's Doctrine Of Forms: Modern Misunderstandings

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MODERN MISUNDERSTANDINGS**

by

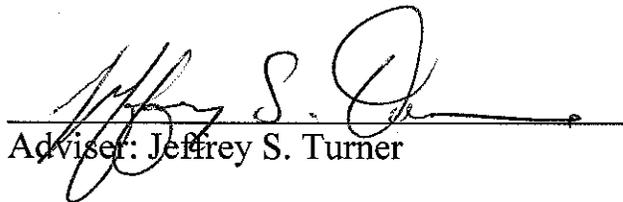
Christopher D. Renaud

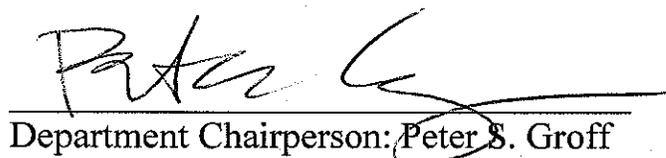
A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in Philosophy

May 9, 2013

Approved By:

  
Adviser: Jeffrey S. Turner

  
Department Chairperson: Peter S. Groff

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## Abstract

Among the philosophical ideas of Plato, perhaps the most famous is his doctrine of forms. This doctrine has faced harsh criticism due, in large part, to the interpretations of this position by modern philosophers such as René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant. For example, Plato has been interpreted as presenting a “two-worlds” approach to form and thing and as advancing a rationalist approach to epistemology. His forms have often been interpreted as ideas and as perfect copies of the things of the visible world. In this thesis, I argue that these, along with other interpretations of Plato presented by the moderns, are based on misunderstandings of Plato’s overall philosophy. In so doing, I attempt to show that the doctrine of forms cannot be directly interpreted into the language of Cartesian, Lockean, and Kantian metaphysics and epistemology, and thus should not be prematurely dismissed because of these modern Platonic interpretations. By analyzing the Platonic dialogues beside the writings of the modern philosophers, I conclude that three of the most prominent modern philosophers, as representatives of their respective philosophical frameworks, have fundamentally misunderstood the nature of Plato’s famous doctrine of forms. This could have significant implications for the future of metaphysics and epistemology by providing an interpretation of Plato which adds to, instead of contradicts, the developments of modern philosophy.

## Introduction

Philosophy is a development. It is a development of ideas, often marked by paradigmatic shifts from earlier philosophical work. This development, which centers on the questions of what exists, how knowledge is possible, how one ought to live, and many others, has seemed to define philosophy for centuries. It is common to hear philosophers refer to, criticize, and restructure the arguments of their predecessors in order both to make clear their own philosophical accounts as well as to illustrate the direction in which they believe philosophy should continue. Therefore, it is often important that philosophy pauses to confirm that we have properly understood the previous assertions on which this development rests. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case, and the result has sometimes been a dismissal of key philosophical positions because of misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

Few, if any, philosophers can be seen to have had more influence on the development of philosophy than Plato (429-347 BCE). Considered by some to be the person to whom many of the most fundamental themes in philosophy can be traced, Plato has been credited with a significant number of ideas that have shaped the direction of philosophy for centuries. As Alfred North Whitehead once remarked, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (1979, 39). Among these fundamental ideas is his famous doctrine of forms. By this doctrine, Plato argues that the essence of material things cannot be found *in* these things themselves, but only in their eternal, constant, and intelligible forms.

Although the forms have significant metaphysical implications, they certainly have epistemological ones as well. Not only are forms the only things that are truly real; they are also the only things that can truly be known.

Imagine that you have just witnessed the general of an army leading his troops into battle, facing heavy artillery across the battlefield. You may come to say that this action is “courageous.” You may also say that it is an “act of courage.” What one would presumably not say, however, is that this action *is itself* courage. The action is only an example of courage, but it is not courage itself. There must be something independent of this action that leads us to call this action courageous: namely, the form of courage. In other words, a courageous action only accidentally participates in the form of courage, while courage itself is essentially what it is to be courage (Nehamas 1999, 144). We are able to call an act courageous because of the form courage. Plato thus seeks, by the forms, not to understand instances of courageous actions *by themselves*, but to make sense of these actions by understanding the nature of the form by virtue of which individual actions may be *called* courageous.

Plato’s philosophy is simultaneously metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, his doctrine of forms includes all three of these philosophical components. However, despite (if not because of) its broad implications, this doctrine, as we will see, has not been without challenge. Some of the most vehement criticisms have come with the rise of modern philosophy, bringing with it an emphasis on the limits of human

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, we will focus primarily on the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of the doctrine of forms since these are the areas of Plato’s philosophy at which the modern philosophers discussed in Chapter Two take direct aim.

knowledge. As we will see, Plato's doctrine of forms has been challenged by modern philosophers such as René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant. However, I will argue that the interpretations of Plato's doctrine of forms by these philosophers, on which many of their criticisms are based, are the results of misunderstandings.

To do this, I will begin by exploring the relevant dialogues of Plato in order of the detail provided by Plato in regard to the doctrine of forms. As we will see, some of the Platonic dialogues mention forms only in passing, while others devote much of their attention to the general question of the nature of forms and their relations to the things which take part in them.

In Chapter Two, I will address the interpretations and criticisms of the doctrine of forms by three modern philosophers: René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant. I choose to look at these three thinkers because they are among the most prominent representatives of their respective philosophical traditions (namely, Descartes' *rationalism*, Locke's *empiricism*, and what is often referred to as Kant's *critical philosophy*). In analyzing the specific remarks made by these philosophers, it will be necessary to ground the remarks within their overall philosophical framework. We will thus seek to understand not only *what* is being said in regard to the Platonic doctrine of forms, but *why* these claims are being made.

In Chapter Three, I will attempt to provide a deeper analysis of five Platonic positions at which the modern philosophers of Chapter Two take most direct aim. In so doing, I will draw on the arguments from Chapter One as well as those of Platonic

scholars such as Gregory Vlastos, Terry Penner, Harold Cherniss, Paul Friedländer, Alexander Nehamas, and Mitchell Miller.

This discussion will give way to an analysis in Chapter Four of this thesis's central hypothesis: that *three of the most influential modern philosophers, René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant, as representatives of their various philosophical projects, have fundamentally misunderstood the Platonic doctrine of forms.* These misunderstandings have profound implications for the future of the doctrine of forms and for modern philosophy.

If indeed this hypothesis proves to be true, then certain areas of modern philosophy would seem to be prematurely dismissing one of the possible solutions to philosophy's biggest metaphysical and epistemological problems. It will be shown that Plato's forms can shed light on these and many other philosophical questions, and should therefore not be overlooked. The objective of this thesis is not only to show that modern philosophers such as René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant misunderstand the doctrine of forms as Plato presents it, but also to show that an elucidation of these misinterpretations may serve as a starting point for a philosophical dialogue that will serve to reorient philosophy's focus on metaphysics and epistemology in a way that may be beneficial to the general development of philosophy mentioned above.

## Chapter 1

### The Metaphysics and Epistemology of the Platonic Doctrine of Forms

We begin our investigation with an analysis of the doctrine of forms as it is presented in Platonic dialogues, especially those generally seen to be from Plato's middle period. I focus on these dialogues because of their relevance to the criticisms that will be presented in the next chapter. It is widely accepted that these dialogues present a much more deeply 'conceptual'<sup>2</sup> analysis of the nature of forms themselves than those written in the early period. I will therefore devote my attention to the Platonic dialogues of the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*.<sup>3</sup> However, because of its importance for understanding several key aspects to Plato's philosophy, we will begin by investigating what has generally been seen as an earlier dialogue: the *Euthyphro*. Throughout this chapter, I will move through these dialogues, uncovering different elements to the philosophy of forms as we go. The chapter will conclude with the significantly related doctrine of recollection whose explication will be crucial to understanding how Plato may respond to the criticisms presented by the modern philosophers in Chapter Two.

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<sup>2</sup> By "conceptual," I mean only the investigation of forms in themselves, without relying unnecessarily on empirical analogies and without focusing solely on the specific definitions of individual forms. It is important to not think of forms as "concepts," for reasons that will become clear throughout this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Though the *Parmenides* is a crucial text for understanding Plato's ultimate presentation of the doctrine of forms, the dialogue will be addressed in Chapter 3, as it is the center of much of the discussion in the secondary literature that will be used to shed light on the criticisms posed by the modern philosophers.

In the *Euthyphro*, we do not find a full account of the nature of forms in general. Instead, Socrates<sup>4</sup> and Euthyphro are engaged in a dialogue with the goal of understanding the definition of “piety.” However, through this conversation, we gain at least some degree of insight into Plato’s notion of forms.

It is in this dialogue that Plato provides a nice introduction to our investigation of the “oneness” of the forms. As opposed to the many “pieties,” the form piety is one. When Euthyphro attempts to define “piety” by way of particular instances of it, Socrates states,

Bear in mind that I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions but that form itself that makes all pious actions pious, for you agreed that all impious actions are impious and all pious actions pious through one form (*Euthyphro*, 6d).<sup>5</sup>

This begins to set up the distinction between the forms as one and their participant things as “many.” There is only one form of piety, whereas there is an indefinite number of “pious actions.” This, however, is not the only insight regarding forms that can be taken from this passage.

Socrates refers to piety as a “form itself.” This is distinguished in this passage from “the many pious actions.” We can already begin to see that Plato is attempting to invite the reader to think of forms as independent and not exhibiting the same structure as

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<sup>4</sup> The distinction between Plato and Socrates is one that is often discussed in relation to the doctrine of forms (see Vlastos 1991). In this thesis, when I speak of Socrates, I will mean *Plato’s* Socrates. In other words, the doctrine of forms as I present it here is, in my opinion, wholly Plato’s. I also do not believe there to be sufficient evidence to support the argument that Socrates and Plato present different conceptions of forms.

<sup>5</sup> All references to Platonic dialogues are taken from Cooper, John M. 1997. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

empirical examples. Piety is not an activity, material object, or empirical event. Instead, it is a “form.” On a common sense level, an object’s form is simply its visible shape or outline. Though we will find that forms are not visible, this definition is not entirely misguided in terms of Plato’s overall account. Forms give objects their structure and thus bring them to be what they are. It also brings them to be what we *say* they are. This brings us to the next piece of information that we may gather from the above passage.

How is it that we are able to call a particular action pious and distinguish it from another action which we call impious? For Plato, the answer to this question is certainly because these actions are made what they are, and are able to be experienced in the way that they are, by the forms that allow them to be so. Forms have defining agency.<sup>6</sup> Socrates states that “all impious actions are impious and all pious actions pious through one form.” Pious actions are seen as such by virtue of the form piety, and impious actions are seen as such by virtue of the form impiety. These actions would not even be what they *are* if it were not for the forms that allow them to be so. As Socrates states earlier in the dialogue, “...everything that is impious presents us with one form or appearance in so far as it is impious” (5d). Again we see that there is one piety among many “pieties.” We would not experience the world in the same way (if we could experience the world at all) without such forms. There is nothing definite without the defining agency of the forms.

This discussion implicates the notion of “independence” in Plato’s doctrine of forms. We will see that Plato suggests that the forms exist independently of having any

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<sup>6</sup> This is not Plato’s language, and it indeed has its limitations. For example, forms should not be thought as conscious actors (a familiar connotation that comes with the word “agent”). However, the forms do give their participant things the structures they have. For this reason, I will say that forms have “defining agency.”

objects or actions participating in them. This is one way in which we must use caution when speaking of the relationship of form and many. Throughout this thesis, I will most often refer to the many as “participants” or “participant things” for reasons that will become clear as we move further into our analysis.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note, however, that Plato does not seem to have a concrete name for these kinds of things (Miller 1986, 197, n. 22). This is perhaps because, as we will see, these are not even “things” or “participants” without the forms. The relationship between the forms and their participants is a crucial part of our story, specifically when we are trying to deal with the interpretations of Plato made by Locke and Kant. My choice to call physical-sensible objects “participant things” is the result of a need for clarity in this thesis, and should not be thought of as explicit Platonic language. However, I believe that we will see that there are compelling reasons for describing these objects as such.

Also relevant to the relationship between form and participant is Socrates’ illustration of the form as a “model.” He states, “Tell me then what this form itself is, so that I may look upon it and, using it as a model, say that any action of yours or another’s that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not” (6e). Again, we are able to experience the world in the way that we do because of the forms that make participant things what they are. It is by way of the forms that we are able to call particular actions pious, simultaneously distinguishing it from an action which we would deem impious. Forms therefore serve an important role as a model for the objects of our experience.

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<sup>7</sup>I should note at the outset that participant things are not “members” of their respective forms, at least to the extent that the forms are *made up of or constituted by* their participant things. This will become clearer when we discuss the unity and independence of the forms.

However, we must be careful to not take this analogy too far. This model is not itself something empirical or particular. As we will see, Socrates often finds it useful, and at some times necessary, to use empirical analogies in order to explain his doctrine of forms to non-philosophers. Are we thus to understand the forms to be perfect versions of the participant things? We will soon come to realize that there may be a problem with reading Socrates' remarks about models literally, understanding them to assert that forms are perfect copies or models of participant things.

Plato sets the stage for an intellectual investigation of the forms when he refutes Euthyphro's attempt to define piety as "what all the gods love" (9e). Socrates states,

I'm afraid, Euthyphro, that when you were asked what piety is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me, but you told me an affect or quality of it, that the pious has the quality of being loved by the gods, but you have not yet told me what the pious is" (11a-b).

For Plato, there is a distinction between what a form *is* and any one or several of the qualities that it possesses. Therefore, Socrates attempts to get Euthyphro to think more deeply about the question 'What is piety?' and the related, if not synonymous, question of 'What does it mean to be pious?' For example, when asked the question 'What is a human being?' one may answer 'A thing that walks on two legs.'" We may safely assume that no one would suggest that a human being *is* walking on two legs. This is simply a quality of human beings, but not the defining agency. Euthyphro, and the reader, is thus being asked not to define forms in terms of any one of their qualities, but by what its nature truly is. 'What is a human being?' Some say it is a *thing* that is rational. 'What is piety?' Though it may have the *quality* of being loved by the gods, we are not able to

think of it as a *thing* that is loved by the gods.<sup>8</sup> How then *are* we to think of it? *This* is the question that Socrates asks of Euthyphro. Thus, when dealing with the true nature of the forms, we will also have to deal with the fact that forms are not *things* in the physical or empirical sense. We have already begun to deal with this issue in regard to the limitations of the analogy of the forms as model. Still, however, in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*, Socrates devotes much of his attention to how the forms differ from their participant things. In the *Parmenides*, we see Plato taking seriously his advice in the *Euthyphro* (See Chapter 3). For now, however, let us continue our investigation of the doctrine of forms in the Platonic dialogues. We now turn to an even more detailed discussion of this philosophy as we investigate Plato's conversation with Meno.

The *Meno* depicts a conversation between Socrates and Meno concerning whether or not virtue can be taught. As we will see throughout the rest of this chapter, the relationship between form(s) and virtue(s) is an issue of great significance. In this dialogue, before discussing whether or not virtue can be taught, Socrates presses Meno to first define "what virtue itself is" (*Meno*, 71a). This conversation provides some significant insight into the nature of forms themselves.

First, forms have a kind of unifying aspect in regard to their respective participants. Socrates states that, by way of the forms, participant things, in at least one respect, "are all the same and do not differ from one another" (*Meno*, 72c). When searching for the forms, Socrates is attempting to find "this very thing" in which these

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<sup>8</sup> Note that this does not mean that "being loved by the gods" is a *physical* quality. My point is that it is not correct to think that a form can be defined as a thing at all, no matter whether the qualities it possesses are physical or not.

participants are the same. Though individual ‘beautifuls’ may be very different in appearance, Socrates looks to the form which makes them all the same. Therefore, because of this active unifying process of the forms, we are able to recognize the similarity of different participant things because of the forms which make them what they are.

This discussion of unity becomes interesting in the case of virtues. In this case, Socrates states, “Even if [virtues] are many and various, all of them have one and the same form which makes them virtues, and it is right to look to this when one is asked to make clear what virtue is” (*Meno*, 72c-d). Thus, according to Socrates, there is only one form of virtue. But what does this mean for justice, temperance, piety, and the like? Are we justified in speaking of these as *forms* of virtue? Just as a form is one behind many particular things, can virtue be a form behind many forms? For Plato, it seems that the answer is no. Virtue does not exist in a type of hierarchical structure in which the form of virtue is higher than, say, justice, courage, and piety. Instead, these “forms” are one in a much deeper sense than we may have thought previously. In fact, there are not many forms of virtue in Plato, but only one.<sup>9</sup> If virtue is to be one and not many, then having many forms of virtue would be contradictory. Thus, the conclusion that we seem forced to draw goes something like this: virtue, justice, piety, and the like, are one with virtue. They are not distinct, but simply different names that we use to discuss the same form (Nehamas 1999, 194, n. 45). Indeed, Plato explicitly makes this argument in the *Republic* when discussing the need for human beings to turn away from material pleasures and

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<sup>9</sup> See Turner, Jeffrey S. “The Unity of Virtue Argument in *Meno*, 71e-79e.” Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA. Lecture, n.d.

seek instead to live a life of virtue. At the end of this discussion, he concludes that “there is one form of virtue” (445c). As we will soon see, he goes on to suggest that there is, by comparison, “an unlimited number of forms of vice” (*Republic*, 445c).<sup>10</sup>

In the beginning of the *Meno*, Socrates and Meno discuss the relationship between virtue and the good. In the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates, in attempting to define what virtue is, states, “So both the man and the woman, if they are to be good, need the same things, justice and moderation” (*Meno*, 73b). Preceding this remark, Socrates asks, “What about a child and an old man? Can they possibly be good if they are intemperate and unjust” (*Meno*, 72b)? Indeed, this does not prove that virtue is simply equivalent to or synonymous with the good. It does however seem to suggest that virtue is at least a form intimately related to what it means to be good (i.e. the form of the good, of at least the *human* good). At this point, however, all we are able to say is that a child and old man cannot be “good” (i.e. participate in the good) if they are intemperate and unjust.<sup>11</sup>

It is in the *Phaedo* that we begin to see Plato’s fullest account of the doctrine of forms that we have thus far seen in this thesis, especially as forms are related to, and must be contrasted with, their participants. In this dialogue, Socrates is attempting to turn *Phaedo* toward the forms themselves by using an illustrative distinction between soul and body. Socrates goes on to suggest that the forms are most like the soul, whereas the many are most like the body. He states,

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<sup>10</sup> For detailed discussion, see: Turner, Jeffrey S. “The Unity of Virtue in Plato’s *Republic*.” Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA, n.d.

<sup>11</sup> This remark may also suggest that when Plato speaks of “virtue” or the “good,” he is speaking primarily of *human* virtue, or the *human* good. Though this is an interesting aspect of Plato’s forms, the question is left open in this thesis since it is not directly related to the criticisms posed by the modern philosophers discussed.

The soul is most like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble, and never consistently the same (*Phaedo*, 80a-b).

Plato's Socrates suggests that the distinction between soul and body may provide an illustration that helps us to understand the distinction between forms and participant things. Though he does not explicitly speak of forms in connection with the soul, the implications are clear. Socrates suggests that the soul is like that which is unchangeable, "always the same as itself." He then goes on to suggest that "...those that always remain the same can be grasped only by the reasoning power of the mind" (*Phaedo*, 79a). He also states that "the philosopher achieves a calm from such emotions [pleasures and pains]; it follows reason and ever stays with it contemplating the true, the divine, which is not the object of opinion" (*Phaedo*, 84a). He also argues that, after death, the soul "makes its way to a region of the same kind" (*Phaedo*, 80d). Thus, though Socrates does not directly argue that the soul and the forms have the same features, he does seem to use the soul-body distinction to parallel the knowledge-opinion and form-thing distinctions. Socrates states that the soul of the philosopher is most interested in the objects of knowledge, the divine (i.e. the forms). He also states that these forms can only be grasped through the reasoning power of the mind. This will be a significant point of contention throughout this thesis, and I would therefore like to provide a brief explanation of this remark now. The word "grasped" is vital for understanding the true meaning of this remark. As will soon become clear, Plato never suggests that we *come to know* the forms wholly through the reason. He does, however, suggest that forms can only be *grasped*

through the reasoning power of the mind. This distinction between *coming to know* and *knowing* the forms is crucial. It is sufficient, at this point, to recognize this distinction, which will be critical when moving into the epistemological arguments related to forms. We will discuss *how* the forms come to be known in much more detail later.

There is also a suggestion by Socrates in this dialogue that the forms are in some way superior to their participant things. He states, “Equal objects...strive to be like the Equal but are deficient in this” (*Phaedo*, 74e-75a). As we have already noted, the forms are not simply perfect versions of their respective examples. They are, however, models or ideals which particular things strive to be like. For example, beautiful things participate in the form of the beautiful; however, they fail in some way to *be* the ultimate form of the beautiful. Even after participating in the beautiful, they are still beautiful *things* as opposed to *the beautiful*. In order to fully understand how this relationship should be interpreted in Plato, we will need to understand the notion of “self-predication” (for detailed discussion, see Nehamas 1999, 196-218). We will address this issue in Chapter Three.

An additional feature of the forms which is related to our discussion of virtue is added in this dialogue when Socrates suggests that forms are not composite. Though we have already established that each of the forms is numerically one, it is also one in the sense that it does not have any parts (Miller 1986, 35-36). “Are not the things that always remain the same and in the same state most likely not to be composite, whereas those that vary from one time to another and are never the same are composite” (*Phaedo*, 78c)?

Therefore, we come to realize that examples of courage, for instance, are not *parts* of courage, but simply individual manifestations, albeit imperfect ones, of it.

We have been discussing the notion that forms are not physical things, but instead unite these physical participant things in being what they are. From this follows the claim that forms are invisible. Socrates asks, “These [participant things] you could touch and perceive with the other senses, but those that always remain the same can be grasped only by the reasoning power of the mind? They are not seen but are invisible?” (79a). At this point, I should clarify that the metaphysical and epistemological claims of Plato in regard to forms are not distinct, but intimately related. In reasserting that the forms are not like bodies which can be seen and perceived by the senses, Plato’s Socrates is also telling us that we grasp the forms by reason as opposed to experience.

As a clear example of this metaphysical-epistemological relationship, Socrates, in the *Phaedo*, foreshadows a distinction between true knowledge and opinion. He seems to be suggesting that one cannot possess true knowledge about participant things, but only of forms, because of the very nature of participants and forms. As we just saw, he states, “The soul of the philosopher achieves a calm from such emotions [pleasures and pains]; it follows reason and ever stays with it contemplating the true, the divine, which is not the object of opinion” (*Phaedo*, 84a). Thus Socrates asserts that the soul (of the philosopher) is most focused on true objects of knowledge (to which the soul is most similar). Socrates is thus making an epistemological claim that only forms are the objects of true knowledge. We will continue to expand our understanding of this claim in investigating more fully Plato’s argument regarding how the forms come to be known.

To the reader who does not yet embrace the distinction between *grasping* the forms and *coming to know* them, Socrates' conversation with Diotima in the *Symposium* will seem to be in direct contradiction to Plato's overall doctrine of forms. In discussing the process by which one comes to know the beautiful, Diotima first argues that beauty "neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes... [and] is always one in form" (*Symposium*, 211a-b). She then uses this metaphysical position to inform her epistemological argument. She states:

...one goes always upwards for the same of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful (211c-d).

At first glance, this would seem to contradict Socrates' continual assertion that forms are grasped only through the "reasoning power of the mind." Forms cannot be grasped through the senses, as we saw was the case in the *Phaedo*. Yet Diotima is suggesting that, in our search for the beautiful, we may indeed begin with beautiful *things*. The confusion with this passage only arises if one assumes that "grasping" the forms is the same as coming to know them. Coming to know the forms is a process, a turning away from the senses. However, this process, at least as is suggested by Diotima in the *Symposium*, *begins* with the senses. This reading of Plato's position is further evidenced by his discussion of the divided line in the *Republic*.

After discussing his famous allegory of the cave (which we will soon investigate in detail) in which he argues that the good illuminates our experience in order that we may gain knowledge, Socrates divides a line between the visible and the intelligible (509d). He then uses this line to illustrate how we can come to gain knowledge. Again in the *Republic* Socrates distinguishes between the knowable and the opinable and argues that knowledge is only possible in regard to the forms which are not “mixed with obscurity” (508d). He states that “As the opinable is to the knowable, so the likeness is to the thing that it is like” (510a).

Socrates suggests that the process of gaining knowledge occurs by working up this “line.” In the visible realm we begin, Socrates says, with images of the imagination (*eikasia*). Images in a literal sense, he states that they are “first, shadows, then reflections in water and in all close-packed, smooth, and shiny materials, and everything of that sort” (*Republic*, 509e-510a). We then move up the line to use belief (*pistis*) to arrive at the originals of the images we see below, “namely, the animals around us, all the plants, and the whole class of manufactured things” (*Republic*, 510a). He then moves on to the realm of the intelligible, dividing this section into thought (*dianoia*), regarding mathematical objects, and finally understanding (*noēsis*) of the forms. However, the sections of the visible and the intelligible, in their epistemological processes, are parallel. In both the visible and the intelligible sections, there is a distinction between images and originals. Socrates states that in the realm of the intelligible, “In one subsection, the soul, using as images the things that were imitated before, is forced to investigate from hypotheses, proceeding not to a first principle but to a conclusion” (*Republic*, 510b). In other words,

the soul now takes over, using as images those originals which were revealed through belief in the previous section. These images allow us to arrive at conclusions (i.e. mathematical objects); however, we have not yet reached a “first principle.” Therefore, Socrates goes on to describe the final section of the intelligible in this way:

In the other subsection, however, [the soul] makes its way to a first principle which is *not* a hypothesis, proceeding from a hypothesis but without the images used in the previous subsection, using forms themselves and making its investigation through them (*Republic*, 510b).

We have finally freed ourselves from images, relying solely on the “reasoning power of the mind” to grasp the “first principles.” The section of the intelligible parallels the realm of the visible. Just as belief allowed us to discover the original of the images revealed through imagination, so too understanding allows the soul to arrive at the first principles of the hypotheses used by thought to embrace mathematical objects. Therefore, in our search for understanding (i.e. knowledge of the forms), we begin not from some completely rational foundation; instead, our search begins with images, working up to the originals of those images, and then to the mathematical objects of which the previous originals are also images, and finally to the first principles which make the previous hypotheses possible.

Just as we saw in the *Symposium*, Plato’s doctrine of forms does not advance a purely rationalist argument by which the forms could only come to be understood by means of thought or reason alone. Instead, Plato begins from images,<sup>12</sup> things which are

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<sup>12</sup> This leads to a seemingly strange conclusion that knowledge must always begin with images such as reflections in water. In the everyday world, it seems that there is no confusion between these images and

able to be grasped by the senses. “The figures that [students of geometry, calculation, and the like] make and draw, of which shadows and reflections in water are images, they now in turn use as images, in seeking those others themselves that one cannot see except by means of thought” (510d-e). It is indeed true that forms cannot be seen “except by means of thought.” However, our distinction between *grasping* the forms and *coming to an understanding* of them now allows us to see that the latter is not a purely rational project.

Socrates provides an even clearer explication of this argument when he states, “...although [students of geometry, calculation, and the like] use visible figures and make claims about [the first principles], their thought isn’t directed to them but to those other things that they are like” (510d). He continues,

[A first principle], then, is the kind of thing that, on the one hand, I said is intelligible, and, on the other, is such that the soul is forced to use hypotheses in the investigation of it, not travelling up to a first principle, since it cannot reach beyond its hypotheses, but using as images those very things of which images were made in the section below, and which, by comparison to their images, were thought to be clear and to be valued as such” (511a).

For Socrates in the *Republic*, it is not only *possible* that we use sensory experience in our search for the forms; it is *necessary*. Our experience with sensible objects is the very beginning of our process of coming to know the forms. Without this experience, we would have nothing whose originals we must seek to discover. As we will soon see in regard to the modern interpretations of the Platonic doctrine of forms, this is perhaps the most misunderstood implication of all. Many, like Locke and Kant, will want to interpret

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their originals. However, we will come to see that, on the best interpretation, Plato’s divided line does not require us to begin with reflections or pictures, but instead with the visible world in general.

Plato as totally denying the use of experience in our search for knowledge. Of course, we will need to work out much more fully what is at stake for these thinkers.

Before leaving our analysis of forms in the *Republic*, it is crucial that we also investigate the relationship that exists among the forms that ultimately leads to their intelligibility. At the end of his discussion of the divided line, Socrates states,

Then also understand that, by the other subsection of the intelligible, I mean that which reason itself grasps by the power of dialectic. It does not consider these hypotheses as first principles, but truly as hypotheses—but as stepping stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the *unhypothetical first principle of everything*. Having grasped this principle, it reverses itself and, keeping hold of what follows from it, comes down to a conclusion without making use of anything visible at all, but only of forms themselves, moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms (emphasis added) (511b-c).

What exactly is *the* “unhypothetical first principle of everything?” To answer this question, it may be helpful to understand the role of the good in our grasp of the forms.

Socrates asserts,

What gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. And though it is the cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful than they (*Republic*, 508d-e).

The form of the good is the highest object of knowledge. We must strive above all to gain an understanding of the form of the good. “...if we don’t know [the form of the good], even the fullest possible knowledge of other things is of no benefit to us, any more than if we acquire any possession without the good of it” (*Republic*, 505a). Plato seems to be

suggesting that knowledge of virtue, for example, without knowledge of the good is of no use to us since it is not virtue at all without the good. Virtue, beauty, and even perhaps vice, are illuminated by the form of the good. There is thus a type of hierarchy in regard to the forms at least insofar as the good is concerned. The good lies beyond the rest of the forms and allows us to know the forms by its illumination. What this means is that form ultimately has within it the possibility of being known because of the form of the good. We need go no further than form in seeking knowledge. Ultimately, it is form itself which is the “unhypothetical first principle of everything.” Its existence does not depend on the existence of anything else. It is neither relative nor partial. It is not a hypothesis which refers to anything outside of itself. Perhaps we may gain further insight into this notion by investigating Plato’s famous “allegory of the cave.”

In Book VII of the *Republic*, Plato likens the form of the good to the sun, illuminating truth and reality so that it can be known (515c-d). In fact, “true philosophers” are defined earlier in the dialogue as “those who love the sight of truth” (*Republic*, 475e). The form of the good would seem to illuminate the forms so that they can be known to us when our souls turn around to face them (*Republic*, 518d). Socrates states of the good,

Once one has seen it, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides the truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it (*Republic*, 517b-c).

Socrates thus asserts that the form of the good illuminates both the forms and the visible world, allowing us to experience the visible world in the way that we do and allows us to know the forms through the reasoning power of the mind. It is because of the forms' communing or blending with the good that allows the forms to have the structure that is intelligible, and thus able to be the unhypothetical first principle of everything.

As I mentioned earlier, participant things are defined by the forms. We could not experience things in the way we do without what I have called the "defining agency" of the forms. It would now seem that the form of the good also allows us to experience various manifestations of the good, such as beauty and justice. We could not come to an understanding of the form of beauty, for instance, without the form of the good which gives beauty a structure which is able to be known. Just as the sun illuminates the originals of the images whose shadows are cast on the wall of a cave, the form of the good allows the shadows of beauty and justice to be cast in the visible world. We begin with shadows, moving upward to their originals, then to that unhypothetical first principle which makes knowledge possible.

Of course, this all leaves open the issue of forms such as the ugly, unjust, and impious. In the *Republic*, Socrates states that "there is one form of virtue and an unlimited number of forms of vice" (*Republic*, 445c). As I argued earlier, for Plato, there is only one form of virtue. However, Socrates asserts in the *Republic* that this is not the case for the "vicious" forms. They do not participate in the unity of the form of virtue. However, it is important to understand that there *are* forms of vice. An important question is raised here: if the form of the good lies beyond or above all of the other

forms, it follows that the forms of vice communes with the good, but how can this be? Should we instead read Plato to be suggesting that there is a form of the good which lies above the good forms, but a form of the bad which lies above the bad forms? If this were true, then the form of the good would not seem to be the highest object of knowledge. Instead, it seems plausible to think that forms of vice participate in the good by being *attempts*, to reach the good. Imagine an individual who kills his father's murderer out of revenge. Although we may say that revenge and murder are not good, the actions that participate in them seem to be directed in some way toward the good. Certainly, the vengeful son most likely considered his action to be justified based on the fact of his father's murder. It most likely seemed to him to be an act of justice. Thus, it seems that actions which are directed at the form of the good, but which are ultimately the result of a failure to understand true nature of the good, can be seen as actions of vice. The form of the good is the highest of all the forms, and all other forms participate in it. However, this does not mean that the forms of vice are ultimately what it is to be good. In fact, they are by their very definition, failures in striving to reach the good. Perhaps this is another way to understand our argument that there is only one form of virtue while there is an unlimited number of forms of vice. Although there is only one way to reach the form of the good (namely, through virtue), there is an unlimited number of ways to fail to do so.

Throughout this chapter, we have been able to see clearly the connections between Plato's metaphysics and his epistemology. Continuing to develop this connection, Socrates states in the *Phaedrus* that we would not be human beings without the forms. "A soul that never saw the truth can never take a human shape, since a human

being must understand speech in terms of general forms, proceeding to bring many perceptions together into a reasoned unity” (*Phaedrus*, 249b). From what has already been said throughout this chapter, one should immediately understand that Socrates will claim that a human being would not be what it is if it was not for the form of human being. However, Socrates provides a further explanation in regard to the role forms play. Here, he argues that forms are necessary for the very talk that has occurred throughout all of the Platonic dialogues we have discussed. We would not be able to recognize the similarities and differences in participant things and thus we would not be able to talk about things in the way we do (or at all, for that matter) were it not for forms. Interestingly, if it was not for this relationship between form and thing that provides the possibility of language, we would not be able to talk at all, and we would certainly be unable to come to know the forms through dialectic. This is related to a passage in the *Parmenides* in which Parmenides urges a young Socrates to not give up on his doctrine of forms, since such a move would “destroy the power of dialectic (*dialegesthai*) entirely” (135c). For Plato, discourse is only made possible by the forms which give particular things their structure, thus making them what they are. Since, for Plato, this discourse is vital to our human shape, we could not even be human without the forms. Without the forms themselves, we would not be able to talk about our experience, and then about the originals of that experience. Thus, we would never be able to come to any type of knowledge whatsoever without the form that makes us human.

Finally, in regard to our coming to know the forms, we must address another Platonic notion: the doctrine of recollection. This doctrine is fundamentally related to our

discussion of the process by which the forms come to be understood. As we saw in our analysis of the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, this process necessarily begins with images, derived from our sense perceptions. There is, however, a final piece missing from the puzzle. How do we search for that of which we have no knowledge? For what are we looking?

In the *Meno* and *Phaedo*, Socrates argues that the soul, being deathless (*Phaedo*, 80a-b), has seen everything that one will come to know when it becomes incarnated. Thus, according to Socrates, “Learning is no other than recollection. According to this, we must at some previous time have learned what we now recollect” (*Phaedo*, 72e-73a). Though the doctrine of recollection is not the focus of this thesis, it certainly has important implications for our investigation at present. The question we must now ask is, ‘How is that we come to recollect the forms?’ In the *Phaedo*, Socrates explains recollection in the following way:

When a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only knows that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different...he recollects the second thing that comes into his mind (73c).

Therefore, it seems, once again, that we begin with *perceptions* in our search for understanding of the forms. Indeed, Socrates continues, “Our sense perceptions must surely make us realize that all that we perceive through them is striving to reach [the forms] but falls short of [them]” (*Phaedo*, 75b). In this way, we come to recollect the forms through the particular things which strive to be like their “models.” Thus, once again, Plato’s doctrine of forms, in its epistemic features, does not present a purely

rationalist argument. Instead, although the forms can never appear to us wholly and completely in their participants, these individual examples are the very beginnings of our coming to know the forms. The doctrine of recollection thus provides further evidence that Plato's philosophy is not a purely rationalist one. We will see that the doctrine of recollection plays a critical role in allowing us to recognize that the visible somehow falls short of the intelligible, and is thus similar to Socrates' discussion in the divided line.

However, some have argued that it is not clear that Plato fully endorses the doctrine of recollection (Weiss 2001, 63-76). In fact, Plato may simply be using this argument as a further example of his divided line formulation. Roslyn Weiss, for instance, argues that Socrates' doctrine of recollection is only a myth that forces Meno to continue with their inquiry into virtue (2001, 63-64). She presents four pieces of evidence in support of her claim:

First, there is the sheer fact that he presents a myth, as opposed to a reasoned *logos*, in response to Meno's paradox...; Second, by presenting the myth as something he has heard, Socrates packages it to appeal to Meno, who regularly quotes approvingly the word of others...; Third, Socrates hints at the self-serving motive of those from whom he has heard it; Fourth, it is unlikely that Socrates thinks he has solid grounds for accepting the myth as true (Weiss 2001, 64-66).

It is true that Socrates presents this doctrine as an argument he has heard from others, namely, priests and priestesses (*Meno*, 81a). It is also true that these priests and priestesses may have had a stake in this type of argument. However, Weiss' assertion that the doctrine of recollection is nothing more than a myth seems to be unfounded. On Weiss' own admission, Socrates states that he believes this doctrine to be true; in fact, he

does so on more than one occasion. He states that he found what these men and women said to be “both true and beautiful” (*Meno*, 81a) and, in reflecting on this claim, he states that “I trust that this is true” (*Meno*, 81e). There seems to be no sufficient evidence to support the claim that Socrates was *merely* presenting a myth; nor does there seem to be sufficient evidence to support the claim that Socrates did not think that he had solid grounds for accepting this myth as true. In fact, in the *Phaedo*, we saw that Socrates believed in the immortality of the soul, and he seems to maintain the dichotomy between the soul and the body throughout his writings. This is consistent with the arguments he asserts in the doctrine of recollection. Thus, I do not find any reason to hold, with Weiss, that Plato’s doctrine of recollection is nothing other than a myth. Even though Socrates may not have fully endorsed a literal process of recollection (i.e., remembering), it seems clear that he was honest in his assertion that a recognition of the relationship between the visible and intelligible worlds is a crucial step in our search for knowledge.

We have thus investigated, in a preliminary fashion, Plato’s metaphysical and epistemic philosophy in regard to the doctrine of forms in the Platonic dialogues. I have attempted to show that metaphysics and epistemology in Plato are fundamentally connected, and I have attempted to make clear Plato’s arguments regarding the nature of forms and the nature of the relationship between forms and constituent things. Finally, I have argued that Plato’s epistemic philosophy is not a purely rationalist one. With all of this constantly in mind, we are now ready to turn to the criticisms of three influential modern philosophers.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Plato: As Interpreted By the Moderns**

Now that we have a basic overview of the doctrine of forms, I will turn to the interpretations and criticisms of this doctrine posed by three modern philosophers: René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant. In so doing, it will be necessary to examine not only their direct references to Plato's forms, but also their general philosophical positions (both metaphysically and epistemologically) that are the foundations of such criticisms and interpretations. My goal in this chapter is to provide both the interpretations of Plato made by these three philosophers and to ground these interpretations within their respective philosophical projects. This will lead me at certain times, at least here, to provide a very generous and uncritical account of these philosophies and criticisms. I will save the analysis of their arguments for Chapter Four. For each of the modern philosophers with whom we concern ourselves in this chapter, I will first present their direct references to Plato. I will then frame these criticisms within their overall philosophical positions and will finally return to the criticism or reference by pointing out key passages in the Platonic dialogues from which these modern remarks stem. With all of this in mind, we now begin with Descartes.

Throughout his philosophical writings, Descartes rarely mentions Plato, and never mentions the doctrine of forms directly. However, the connections are clear, and Descartes alludes to these connections on at least one occasion. In responding to the argument that Descartes' philosophy implies that our knowledge of God is innate, and thus expressly known to us, states that,

according to Plato, Socrates asks a slave boy about the elements of geometry and thereby makes the boy able to dig out certain truths from his own mind which he had not previously recognized were there, thus attempting to establish the doctrine of reminiscence. Our knowledge of God is of this sort...(Descartes 1991, 222-223).

Just because certain truths are innate does not mean that they are expressly known. On the other hand, just as Plato believed that knowledge of the forms must be recollected, we “come to know [God] by the power of our own native intelligence, without any sensory experience” (Descartes 1991, 222). Descartes is therefore noting that our knowledge of God comes to us without making use of any sense experience. Putting these two passages together, we come to see that Descartes interprets Plato’s doctrine of reminiscence (i.e., recollection) as a process occurring solely in the mind, *a priori*, without reference to the unreliable world of sense data.

In order to understand these remarks, it will be necessary to understand a few key concepts in Descartes’ overall philosophy. Epistemologically speaking, Descartes is a rationalist. In other words, he believes that reason is the source of knowledge. Therefore, Descartes will argue that *a priori* knowledge is indeed possible. *Metaphysically* speaking, Descartes is a realist. In other words, he believes that the world exists as it does independently of its being perceived by the senses. Putting these two philosophical positions together, we begin to get a sense of why Descartes takes a skeptical approach in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Though Descartes may not himself be a skeptic, he employs a kind of hyperbolic doubt or methodological solipsism in order to show that the external world does indeed exist independently. This knowledge, however, cannot

come from the senses. "...From time to time I have discovered that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once"

(Descartes 1984, 18). He asserts that "Once the foundations of the building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested" (Descartes 1984, 18).

Therefore, in order to prove the independent existence of the external world, he must turn not to sensible perceptions, but to mental scrutiny. He therefore commits himself to meditation on these subjects. He begins his project with what *cannot* be doubted. In many instances, Descartes will refer to these basic principles as "first causes" or "first principles." He states,

These principles must satisfy two conditions. First, they must be so clear and so evident that the human mind cannot doubt their truth when it attentively concentrates on them; and secondly, the knowledge of other things must depend on them, in the sense that the principles must be capable of being known without knowledge of these other matters, but not *vice versa* (Descartes 1985, 179-180).

He will thus use these principles which he cannot come to doubt, which are clear and evident, in his argument for the independent existence of the material world since our knowledge of other things, according to Descartes, depends on these principles.

Examples of such principles seem to include the *cogito* (the meditator as a thinking thing).

Crucial for understanding Descartes' notion of how we arrive at the first principles through mental scrutiny is the distinction between a substance's outer clothing and its nature. Descartes seems to recognize two categories of perception: 1) sensation

(which often deceives us) along with imagination which allows us to take the images of substance's outer clothing received from sensation and cut and paste them together into new things (1984, 19); and 2) mental scrutiny. It is the latter which gives us the most reliable knowledge of first principles and allows us to arrive at a substance's nature. Indeed, Descartes' meditations were not marked by active sensation, but by mental scrutiny about the first principles such as the *cogito*. According to Descartes, no matter how much sensory data we may receive about an object, we are still only receiving its outer clothing. In order to get to the inner nature of the thing, we need human, rational, and pure mental scrutiny. Descartes' example of the wax provides a helpful illustration.

Descartes asks that we imagine a piece of wax. He states, "I must admit that the nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone" (Descartes 1985, 31).<sup>13</sup> He continues, "I would not be making a correct judgment about the nature of the wax unless I believed it capable of being extended in many more different ways than I will ever encompass in my imagination" (Descartes 1985, 31). Therefore, Descartes will conclude that the perception (via mental scrutiny) that the wax is "extended, flexible, and changeable" is "clear and distinct" (Descartes 1985, 20-21). As he states in the *Third Meditation*, "I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true" (Descartes 1985, 31). However, the apodictic certainty of the first principles does not stand on its

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<sup>13</sup> I should note that the mental scrutiny that allows us to arrive at the nature of objects is still a "perception" in Cartesian language, but a different *type* of perception. This fact will be crucial when attempting to deal with the Cartesian remarks on the Platonic doctrine of forms.

own, for Descartes still leaves open the possibility that he may be being deceived by God.

We thus turn to Descartes' notion of the primary idea.

All of ideas, according to Descartes, must have a cause.

And although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally <and in fact> all the reality <or perfection> which is present only objectively <or representatively> in the idea. So it is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like <pictures, or> images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect (Descartes 1985, 42).

Perhaps the easiest way to make sense of this claim is in relation to Descartes' second proof of God's existence. This proof goes something like this: I have a clear and distinct idea that I, as a thinking thing, exists. However, this idea, and therefore my existence, would not be possible without a cause, and this cause must have at least as much reality as the previous idea. Because there cannot be an infinite regress, there must be an archetype, a primary cause, a *causa sui* (cause of itself) which has at least as much reality as my ideas of myself; Descartes called this primary idea "God" (1985, 92). For Descartes, God is the archetype which is the primary cause of our ideas and, at the same time, *is* an idea, in fact the *primary* idea. He is both a substance and the cause of our ideas of God. Will this primary idea be like Plato's form for Descartes? We will attempt to answer this question as we return to Descartes' remarks on Plato.

We saw that Descartes seems to suggest that, for Plato, we come to know the forms in the same way that we come to know the first principles, including the primary idea: *a priori*, without reliance on sensory data which is unreliable. Indeed, Plato

suggests in the *Phaedo* that the forms are most like the soul, which is invisible and can only be grasped by the “reasoning power of the mind” (79a). Therefore, at first glance, it seems that Descartes’ perceived connection between the forms and the primary idea, epistemologically speaking, is perfectly correct. Certainly, Plato believes that we grasp the forms solely by the reasoning power of the mind, and he certainly believes, as we saw in the divided line, that we strive to reach form which is perhaps, for Descartes, the primary idea. However, whether or not this is an adequate interpretation of Plato’s philosophy will be discussed in great detail in Chapter Four. We turn now to John Locke.

In Book III of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke seems to describe Plato’s forms as “ideas.” He states:

For else, why might not *Plato* as properly make the Word...*Man* in this case stand for his complex *Idea*, made up of the *Ideas* of a Body, distinguished from others by a certain shape and other outward appearances, as *Aristotle*, make the complex *Idea*, to which he gave the name...*Man*, of Body, and the Faculty of reasoning join’d together... (Locke 1975, 500).

Locke builds on this further when he states,

And therefore why Plato’s *Animal implume Bipes latis unguibus*, should not be as good a Definition of the Name *Man*, standing for that sort of Creatures, will not be easy to shew: for ‘tis the Shape, as the leading Quality, that seems more to determine that Species, than a Faculty of Reasoning, which appears not at first, and in some never (1975, 519).

Both of these passages are related to Locke’s distinction between real and nominal essences, which we will discuss soon. For now, it is sufficient to understand that Locke

sees a distinction between ideas and outward appearances, and believes that Plato's forms are most like the former.

Locke makes one final substantive reference to Plato in Book IV. He states,

*Nothing can be so dangerous, as Principles thus taken up without questioning or examination...; he, who with Plato, shall place Beatitude in the Knowledge of GOD, will have his Thoughts raised to other Contemplations, than those who look not beyond this spot of Earth, and those perishing Things which are to be had in it (Locke 1975, 642).*

Locke therefore seems to suggest that Plato, in arguing that we must search for knowledge of the form of the good, is focusing his thoughts on a principle which lies outside the realm of experience. Plato seems to assert the possibility of knowledge of the forms without seriously questioning, by our experience, whether such knowledge is actually possible. According to Locke, he is building upon precarious ideas or principles in positing the possibility of knowledge of the forms. He argues that Plato looks beyond the world of experience to one in which true knowledge is not possible. For Locke, as we will see, knowledge comes only from experience. It is with this that we begin to frame Locke's criticisms within his overall philosophical project.

Locke is considered to be among the most influential philosophers to take an empiricist approach to epistemology. When I say empiricism, I mean nothing other than the epistemological position which holds that knowledge comes only from sensory experience. In other words, empiricists reject the possibility of *a priori* knowledge. However, there is much more that needs to be said regarding Locke's own philosophy specifically. There are several key concepts and distinctions in Lockean philosophy

which will be vital for our understanding of Locke's remarks on Plato's doctrine of forms. We begin with a discussion of "ideas."

Locke begins his famous *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* with a discussion of "ideas," which he defined in Book I as "whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks" (Locke 1975, 47). In this way, the term "idea" for Locke is a broad one. However, he does bring some clarity to this term throughout the *Essay*. In Book II, Locke holds that the mind is, at the beginning, blank and void of all ideas. He states, "Let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any Ideas" (Locke 1975, 104). We must then ask ourselves 'from where do our ideas and knowledge come?' As we have already seen, Locke, as an empiricist, asserts that all knowledge comes from experience. As he puts it, "in [experience], all our knowledge is founded" (Locke 1975, 104).

Locke continues his discussion of ideas in Book II when he draws a distinction between simple and complex ideas. He states that simple ideas are:

the *Impressions* that are made on our *Senses* by outward Objects, that are extrinsical to the Mind; and *its own Operations*, proceeding from Powers intrinsical and proper to it self, which when reflected on by it self, become also Objects of its contemplation, are, as I have said, *the Original of all Knowledge* (Locke 1975, 118).

As we can see from this description, the mind cannot create simple ideas *a priori*.

Instead, we must get them from experience. It is thus not surprising that Locke will go on to say that "in this Part, the *Understanding* is merely *passive*; and whether or no, it will have these Beginnings, and as it were materials of Knowledge, not in its own Power"

(1975, 118). All of our knowledge must begin from experience. Now Locke tells us that this experience, which is the beginning of all knowledge, is given to the Mind in terms of simple ideas. This experience is of two kinds: sensation, which tells us about the external world, and reflection, which tells us about our own minds (Locke 1975, 118). “These simple *Ideas*, the Materials of all of our Knowledge, are suggested and furnished to the Mind, only by those two ways above mentioned, *viz. Sensation and Reflection*” (Locke 1975, 119). It is perhaps helpful to think of simple ideas as atoms, simple elements of larger compounds. This brings us to complex ideas.

“The Acts of the Mind wherein it exerts its Power over its simple *Ideas* [includes] combining several simple *Ideas* into one compound one, and thus all Complex *Ideas* are made” (Locke 1975, 163). If simple ideas can be thought of as atoms, then complex ideas may be thought of as the compounds created by the combination of those atoms. In gathering simple ideas from experience, the mind is passive; in bringing together simple ideas into complex ones, the mind is active.

It is helpful here to remember that, because Locke believes that all knowledge comes from experience, there can be, at least for Locke, no innate knowledge. This is in clear opposition to Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas that are the product solely of reflection, at least according to Descartes who strives to turn away from the unreliable and deceitful world of the senses. As we saw earlier, Locke often uses metaphors such as

“white paper” or “tabula rasa” (blank slate)<sup>14</sup> to refer to the mind. Locke goes so far as to say that it is a

contradiction, to say, that there are Truths imprinted on the Soul, which it perceives or understands not; imprinting, if it signify any thing, being nothing else, but the making certain Truths to be perceived. For to imprint any thing on the Mind without the Mind’s perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible (1975, 50).

This passage’s relevance to Plato’s doctrine of recollection will be crucial as we begin to assess Plato’s responses to Locke’s criticisms. However, my goal in this chapter is to simply provide an overview of Locke’s general philosophical position and to introduce his references to Plato in their own right.

I also find it necessary to present a final Lockean term that will be important for our analysis of Locke’s interpretations of Plato: “abstract ideas.” For Locke, after the mind passively receives simple ideas, it can, as we have seen, actively bring these ideas together in order to form complex ideas. It can also take either simple or complex ideas and, removing them for their particular spaces and times, thus generalizing them, forming abstract or general ideas. In doing this, the mind “is separating them from all other *Ideas* that accompany them in their real existence; this is called *Abstraction*: And thus all its General *Ideas* are made” (Locke 1975, 163).

Finally, I would like to consider Locke’s discussion of substance, and particularly his distinction between real and nominal essences. Locke defines a “real essence” as “the real internal, but generally in Substances, unknown Constitution of Things, whereon their

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<sup>14</sup> Such metaphors originate from Plato’s discussion of the waxen tablet and the aviary of the mind (Theatetus, 193c-197e)

discoverable Qualities depend” (1975, 417). Thus, a substance’s real essence can simply be seen as its scientific formula (of course, we cannot push this analogy too far since, for Locke, this “chemical makeup” cannot be known). Questions regarding real essences concern what an object *really* is. Also note that Locke holds that real essences are ultimately unknowable. Because a substance’s simplest makeup cannot be observed through experience, we can have no simple ideas of it, and thus no knowledge of it. By comparison, “nominal essences” are really nothing more than a substance or object’s name. “*Between the Nominal Essence, and the Name, there is so near a Connexion, that the Name of any sort of Things cannot be attributed to any particular Being, but what has this Essence, whereby it answers that abstract Idea, whereof that Name is the Sign*” (417). Take gold as an example: if one were to ask Locke what this substance’s real essence is, he would turn him or her to a kind of natural composition of gold which cannot be experienced, and thus cannot be known. However, if asked about the gold’s *nominal* essence, he would simply respond “this is gold.” With all of this in mind, let us return to Locke’s direct criticisms of and remarks on Plato and his doctrine of forms.

Locke, in referring to Plato’s forms as “ideas,” sees Plato’s “forms” as being examples of his “complex ideas,” and perhaps his “abstract ideas.” We have already seen that Plato distinguishes forms from material things and argues that we do not know the forms through the senses, but only by the reasoning power of the mind. This may suggest that forms *are* examples of ideas. Further, it is precisely because Locke recognizes that Plato will not allow for knowledge of the forms to be of the sensory kind that he sees them as *complex* as opposed to simple ideas. In fact, as we will see in Chapters Three and

Four, Socrates himself suggests that forms may be ideas, or “thoughts,” in the *Parmenides*. He states, “But, Parmenides, maybe each of these forms is a thought...and properly occurs only in minds” (132b). It is thus not totally surprising that Locke would see Plato’s forms as ideas.<sup>15</sup>

Locke also argues that Plato, in using the word “Man” as a form, to signify an object’s (in this case, human being’s) real essence, is abusing this term. The word “Man” can only, for Locke, signify *nominal* essences. Real essences cannot be known, as they do not come from experience and we therefore have no simple ideas of them. He suggests that Plato is attempting to define man’s *real* essence when such essence lies beyond the limits of our knowledge. Complex ideas are formed from the simple ideas which we receive through experience. Locke asserts that Plato is attempting to posit the real essence of substance by the forms, which are complex ideas, directly resulting from an active capacity of the mind. We saw in Chapter One that forms have what I called “defining agency.” Things are what they are only because of their participation in their respective forms. “All impious actions are impious and all pious actions pious through one form” (*Euthyphro*, 6d). I held in the previous chapter that, for Plato, there would be nothing definite which we could experience without the defining agency of the forms. We come to call a particular action pious because of its participation in the form of piety. Locke therefore does not seem to be unjustified in seeing the forms as the real essence of substance. Yet, we must ask the question of how a substance’s essence is related to its

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<sup>15</sup> Plato uses the term ἰδέα in several instances when speaking of forms. However, for Plato, ἰδέα is ultimately synonymous with εἶδος, meaning “form” instead of idea.

name for Plato. Is Locke's nominal essence synonymous with Plato's real essence (in Lockean language)? This will be a question for the chapters that follow. Let us turn finally to Immanuel Kant.

The following passage provides a useful overview for Kant's more specific claims regarding Plato's forms made in the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space. It was thus that Plato left the world of the senses, as setting too narrow limits to the understanding, and ventured out beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of the pure understanding. He did not observe that with all his efforts he made no advance—meeting no resistance that might, as it were, serve as a support upon which he could take a stand, to which he could apply his powers, and so set his understanding in motion (1965, B9).

Put more simply, Plato attempts to arrive at the world of forms by moving beyond the realm of experience, thus ignoring the very thing which makes knowledge possible in the first place.

Kant will further argue that Plato's "forms" are examples of his own "things-in-themselves," or those things which lie behind the veil of experience, the originals of the sensory data we receive in the realm of experience:

For Plato ideas are archetypes of the things themselves, and not, in the manner of the categories, merely keys to possible experiences. In his view they have issued from the highest reason, and from that source have come to be shared in by human reason, which, however, is now no longer in its original state, but is constrained laboriously to recall, by a process of reminiscence (which is named philosophy), the old ideas, now very much obscured (1965, B370).

Kant then goes on to suggest that this a way in which “we understand [Plato] better than he has understood himself” (1965, B370). He holds that Plato’s mistake was in

[exalting the reason] to modes of knowledge which so far transcend the bounds of experience that no given empirical object can ever coincide with them, but which must none the less be recognised as having their own reality, and which are by no means mere fictions of the brain (Kant 1965, B371).

Thus, Kant argues that forms are examples of things in themselves, lying outside of the realm of all possible experience. Note that Kant actually admits that things in themselves must exist. He simply asserts that we cannot presume to be able to have knowledge of these things.

I also find it necessary to mention Kant’s assumption that forms are ideals or archetypes for their material “copies” in the realm of experience. In discussing the idea of a perfect human being, Kant states,

What to us is an ideal was in Plato’s view an *idea of the divine understanding*, an individual object of its pure intuition, the most perfect of every kind of possible being, and the archetype of all copies in the [field of] appearance (1965, B596).

For Kant, forms are not only things in themselves, but are ideal or perfect models of their respective copies in the “field of appearance.” Though perhaps rightly asserting the forms’ metaphysical reality, Plato goes further, to illicitly posit apodictic certainty in regard to knowledge of the forms. This claim, along with those of Descartes and Locke, will be examined in great detail in Chapter Four. There are still many questions that remain in regard to what can be considered an accurate interpretation of Plato’s forms.

For this reason, we will devote a great deal of time in the next chapter to working out the answers to these questions. For now, however, framing the criticisms of Kant within his overall philosophical framework will help to set the stage for the critical discussion which follows. I will attempt to first provide a brief overview both of Kant's epistemic and metaphysical positions.

Interestingly, Kant attempts to synthesize the rationalism of Descartes (and perhaps of Plato) with the empiricism of Locke. Therefore, though he will argue that *a priori* knowledge is indeed possible, he will also assert that all knowledge begins with experience.

There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. For how should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action did not objects affecting our senses partly of themselves produce representations, partly arouse the activity of our understanding to compare these representations, and, by combining or separating them, work up the raw material of the sensible impressions into that knowledge of objects which is entitled experience? In the order of time, therefore, we have no knowledge antecedent to experience, and with experience all our knowledge begins (Kant 1965, B1).

Similarly to Locke, Kant argues that the understanding can compare and combine representations (or perhaps ideas) which result from experience. Though all of this sounds contradictory at first glance to the belief in the possibility of *a priori* knowledge, a deeper understanding of Kant's epistemology and metaphysics will help to rectify this misunderstanding. Indeed, Kant argues that even "though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that is all arises out of experience" (1965, B1). Our knowledge of the conditions of our experience is *a priori*. However, it is still knowledge

about experience, and thus begins here. Thus, Kant does not see himself as a true empiricist, for he will argue that *a priori* knowledge of space and time, for example, is necessary for making sense of our own experience. One can already begin to see how Kant's metaphysical and epistemological impulses are clearly interconnected. In order to better understand this, it may be useful to turn to Kant's distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge.

Though we are already familiar with these terms, Kant's framing of this distinction will be helpful for our understanding of his "transcendental idealism." Kant defines *a priori* knowledge as that knowledge which is completely and absolutely independent of experience (1965, B3). This is to be compared with *a posteriori* or "empirical" knowledge which is knowledge possible only "through experience" (Kant 1965, B3). The former is a judgment of necessity, "not derived from any proposition except one which also has the validity of a necessary judgment" (Kant 1965, B3). The latter, however, is only descriptive and includes no necessity. Put another way, *a priori* knowledge is of strict universal principles in which no exceptions are possible; a *a posteriori* knowledge, on the other hand, achieves universality only through assumption and induction (Kant 1965, B4). Kant will indeed go on to argue that there are *a priori* judgments. For example, mathematics, and space, provide *a priori* principles which are necessary for the possibility of experience (Kant 1965, B5). However, all *a priori* knowledge must have its *beginnings* in what is reliable: experience (Kant 1965, B9).

Let us now attempt to put these puzzle pieces together to form a coherent picture. Kant believes that all knowledge begins with experience, and that we have *a priori*

knowledge of the conditions of that experience. Metaphysically speaking, he will not completely submit to the idealist's argument that only what is perceived exists (i.e., *esse est percipi*: to be is to be perceived). Space and time, for example, are metaphysically real, and are the conditions of our making sense of experience. In other words, we project space and time onto nature. Perhaps an illustration will be helpful: imagine that you are in a small room with no windows or doors. In the walls of the room are tiny slots through which you cannot see. All information that you receive comes through these slots which may be thought of as space and time. The room can be thought of as the sphere of all possible experience. For Kant, although space and time are empirically real, for I walk around in it and live through it every day, it is transcendently ideal. In other words, it is simply a function of our construction of nature. Space and time, along with the *a priori* knowledge of these functions, does not lie or occur within the room. Kant puts it this way:

Our exposition therefore establishes the *reality*, that is, the objective validity, of space in respect of whatever can be presented to us outwardly as object, but also at the same time the *ideality* of space in respect of things when they are considered in themselves through reason, that is, without regard to the constitution of our sensibility. We assert then, the *empirical reality* of space, as regards all possible outer experience; and yet at the same time we assert its *transcendental ideality*—in other words, that it is nothing at all, immediately we withdraw the above condition, namely, its limitation to possible experience, and so look upon it as something that underlies things-in-themselves (1965, B44).

Kant thus argues that space and time are empirically real, for our experience is shaped by these very structures that we experience every day. However, we do not *directly* experience space and time in the realm of all possible experience. Instead, we arrive at

these functions only through our experience with the construction of nature. Therefore, space and time are “transcendentally ideal.”

We finally come to Kant’s infamous “things-in-themselves.” Returning to our metaphor, things-in-themselves lie *outside* of the room, and thus outside of the realm of all possible experience. Because we cannot experience these things, we cannot argue that we have knowledge of them. Kant states,

The transcendental concept of appearances in space...is a critical reminder that nothing intuited in space is a thing in itself... space is not a form inhering in things in themselves as their intrinsic property, that objects in themselves are quite unknown to us, and that what we call outer objects are nothing but mere representations of our sensibility, the form of which is space (1965, B45).

It is critical that we do not confuse Kant’s notion of space with his notion of things-in-themselves. Space is an *a priori* condition of experience, a function of nature. In other words, it provides the structure of nature that allows it to be experienced in the way that it is. However, it does not lie *within* the sphere of all possible experience. It does, however, as we just saw, “underlie things-in-themselves.” Thus, when Kant speaks of “things in themselves,” he refers to those things which are totally unknowable because they lie *outside* of this sphere and which are not functions of our construction of nature. We are thus ready to return to Kant’s criticisms of Plato.

As we saw, Kant argues that Plato leaves the world of sensibility (the sphere of all possible experience) to enter the realm of things in themselves. In fact, he holds that Plato’s forms are “archetypes of the things themselves.” Certainly, Plato’s forms are not

able to be experienced through the senses. We have seen this throughout the Platonic dialogues (see *Phaedo*, 79a) and throughout the first two chapters of this thesis.

Kant also argued that Plato's forms are "archetypes of all copies in the field of experience" (1965, B596). This certainly seems logical when considering Plato's discussion of the forms as models. "Tell me then what this form itself is, so that I may look upon it and, using it as a model, say that any action of yours or another's that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not" (*Euthyphro*, 6e). Again in the *Phaedo*, he states, "Equal objects...strive to be like the Equal but are deficient in this" (74e-75a). For Kant, these passages indeed seem to suggest that a form is a perfect version of their deficient empirical copies in the world of sensible experience. Whether or not "model" is synonymous with "perfect version" will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

In this chapter, we have explored the criticisms and interpretations of Plato's doctrine of forms made by three modern philosophers: Descartes, Locke, and Kant. I have attempted to frame these remarks within these philosophers' overall projects so as to provide justifications for their opinions. I have also attempted to present some of the crucial aspects of Plato's philosophy at which these philosophers take their most direct aim. In this light, I now move to a deeper understanding of these Platonic positions, taking advantage of the immense amount of secondary literature that has been written on Plato's dialogues since the time of Descartes, Locke, and Kant.

### **Chapter 3**

## **A Closer Look at Forms and Recollection**

In Chapter One, we investigated Plato's doctrine of forms in its own right, as it is presented in the Platonic dialogues. In Chapter Two, we addressed the criticisms and interpretations of this doctrine posed by Descartes, Locke, and Kant. I shall now attempt to more deeply understand five aspects of the Platonic doctrine of forms at which these criticisms seem to take direct aim, and will do so with the help of secondary literature on the subject. First, I will address the "two-worlds" perspective of the doctrine of forms as it relates to the unreliability of knowledge of the sensible world and to the distinctions drawn between wisdom and ignorance along with knowledge and opinion. Second, we will look at the ways in which Plato suggests that we come to know the forms (e.g., through recollection) and what this means for his overall epistemological account and for how we come to "look upon" the forms. Third, I will address the notion that forms are ideas existing solely in the mind. Fourth, we will investigate broadly but deeply the issue of naming and essences in regard to the relationship of forms and the things that participate in them. Finally, I will attempt to provide a deeper account of how the forms are related to their participant things by dealing with the notion that forms are simply ideal copies of participant things. By investigating more deeply these five issues, we will be ready to engage in a conversation between Plato and the modern philosophers, and ultimately to determine whether or not these philosophers truly understand the nature of the doctrine of forms. This will be our goal in the next chapter. For now, however, I turn to the idea that Plato's doctrine relies on a "two-worlds" perspective.

It is true that there is an overwhelming tendency to see Plato's doctrine of forms as presenting a two-worlds approach to metaphysics and epistemology. As we have seen, Plato draws a definite line between the realms of the visible and the intelligible (*Republic*, 509d). He also suggests that we may only have *opinions* of the visible world, whereas we may have *knowledge* of the forms. "As the opinable is to the knowable, so the likeness is to the thing that it is like" (*Republic*, 510a). There seems to be a world of images and another of originals. As we saw with the allegory of the cave, Plato suggests that we are trapped in the cave, viewing the shadows of puppets, cast by the fire behind us. It is only when we turn around that we are able to see these originals. Then, when we emerge from the cave and enter the realm of the intelligible, we see that the originals inside the cave are simply images cast by the sun (the form of the good). Some may read this passage as providing evidence that Plato is endorsing the existence of two separate worlds: one of visibility (inside the cave) and one of intelligibility (outside of the cave when we look upon the sun).

This idea is widely accepted. Gregory Vlastos, for instance, argues that Socrates in the early dialogues was satisfied with the world in which he lived, and that the other world was unknown to him. On the other hand, the later Socrates (representing Plato) embraced the otherworld: the world of forms. He states of early Socrates:

he is not otherworldly: the external world with which Plato seeks mystical union is unknown to him. For Socrates reality—real knowledge, real virtue, real happiness—is in the world in which he lives. The hereafter is for him a bonus and anyhow only a matter of faith and hope. The passionate certainties of his life are in the here and now (Vlastos 1991, 79-80).

Vlastos thus argues that Plato, in many of the dialogues we have discussed, is otherworldly. He seeks to come to a kind of union with an external world of forms, a world of immortality, divinity, and true knowledge, unpolluted by the sensible world, and indeed Vlastos has good reasons to argue exactly this. However, there seems to be a bit of a problem with this type of interpretation. If the forms exist in a world separate from the world of visibility, then how do things participate in the forms? How do forms unify and define things in the way we suggested in Chapter One? Such a distinction between form and visibility does not seem to fit with Plato's overall discussion of the relationship between forms and things. Of course, Vlastos may like to argue that forms must exist in an external world if they are to remain independent of being known or being participated. However, an intimate metaphysical and epistemological relationship between form and thing does not endanger this asymmetrical relationship. Form and thing do not have to exist in distinct worlds in order for the forms to be independent. In fact, as we will soon see, it is the understanding of form and thing as existing in two separate epistemological and metaphysical worlds that is dangerous when we are trying to understand our coming to know the forms in Plato.

Mitchell Miller recognizes this problem in his book *Plato's Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul*. He states in his discussion of being and nonbeing that "'Being' in this new context refers not to temporal existence but, rather, to the having or partaking of certain forms and to these forms as such, as making up or characterizing the true nature of the participant" (Miller 1986, 148). Thus, participant things get their being (i.e., their nature) from the forms in which they participate. On the other hand, the forms also seem

to spill forth their being into their participants by giving them the structure that they have. It would seem that, based on this, the forms cannot be completely separate, for, if they were, nothing would have any structure or being since they would fail to participate in the forms at all. Indeed, in the *Parmenides*, Parmenides explicitly denies that forms and things can exist in different worlds. He argues that if we accept this model, then we would run into the very problems we are addressing in this thesis. When Socrates himself poses the two-worlds hypothesis, Parmenides warns,

Suppose someone were to say that if forms as such as we claim they must be, [themselves by themselves], they cannot even be known. If anyone should raise that objection, you wouldn't be able to show him that he is wrong..." (*Parmenides*, 133b).

This conclusion is based on the fact that if the things are what they are only in relation to the things of this world, then only knowledge of things in this world would be possible (*Parmenides*, 134a-134e). Thus, Plato seems to assert that the moderns would be correct in concluding that forms could not be known if they begin with the assumption that the forms exist in a world in which they exist themselves by themselves. Such an assumption, says Parmenides, leads to serious danger. Form and thing do not exist in distinct worlds and are thus not known only in relation to themselves. Whereas participant things derive their being from the forms, the forms spill forth their being into participant things. Thus, an intimate relationship exists between forms and things that is not conducive to a two-worlds model.

That being said, it is important to understand that there is still an asymmetrical relationship of the forms and things in regard to being. Whereas things depend for their

being on the forms, the forms are independent of being participated. Also, things are like the forms (i.e., they strive to be like the forms); on the other hand, forms can never be thought of as being like things. Therefore, even though Miller recognizes this asymmetric relationship, he agrees with our concern above that Plato does not seem to put forth the existence of two independent metaphysical or epistemological worlds.

It is true that Paul Friedländer recognizes two distinct worlds in Plato; however, for Friedländer, these are not the worlds of the forms and things, but the worlds of the soul and of the body. According to him, Plato distinguishes between the “eye of the body and the vision of the mind,” and then goes on to make a parallel distinction between the “world of the soul and the world of the body” (Friedländer 1958, 13). He continues by arguing that “...whenever man’s mind grasps the one form in the midst of many appearances, this is due to remembering what the soul beheld while following the god. Here one could often substitute the phrase ‘eye of the soul’” (Friedländer 1958, 14). Thus, though Plato may endorse a *type* of “two-worlds perspective,” the two worlds are not the one and the many, but rather the worlds of the soul, where the vision of the mind grasps the forms in relation to their participant things, and the body, where we remain inside the cave to see only shadows. This seems to avoid the problems we encountered in Vlastos’ account of the worlds of form and sensibility.

The distinction between the world of the soul and the world of the body is closely tied to the question of how we come to know forms in Plato’s account. I shall begin generally, looking at the possibility of knowledge of what the forms are in the first place. We thus turn again to Mitchell Miller. He writes, “To assert that the One [form] is

unknowable presupposes the contrary; the speaker must *know* the One in its *difference-in-kind* from the ‘others’ [participant things] in order to make it the referent of this very discourse” (Miller 1986, 158). Thus, knowledge of what the forms are follows from the distinction we make between the forms and their participant things. By understanding what the forms are not (e.g., things, mortal, changing, fleeting, etc.), we come to understand what the forms *are*.

Thus, we have found that it is incorrect to think of the forms as existing in a separate metaphysical world completely separate from the one of sensibility. However, I also mentioned that it is important to note that the forms do exist independently, in a very important way. For example, the forms exist independently of being participated in or, most importantly for our task at hand, of being known. Miller puts it like this:

The form is prior to, not dependent on, being known and being participated. To the pre-Kantian perspective, at any rate, this priority is a guarantee against, not the source of, epistemological and ontological problems. Precisely because the object is independent of being known and the knowing process itself, true knowledge is possible; and because the transient particulars in time derive from causes quite indifferent to them, existence is securely founded (1986, 155).

In other words, for Plato, the independent existence of forms is necessary for the possibility of true knowledge. If the forms were changed in some way by being participated or being known, then we would run into the same epistemological problems with forms that we do with the visible world (e.g. things being fleeting, changing, unreliable objects of knowledge). The forms are left both unchanged and untouched by our process of coming to know them, which Miller speaks of as a type of “bifurcatory

diaeresis” (1986, 153), and of our ultimately knowing or grasping them. Kant and the philosophers that follow will see this as not solving our epistemological problems, but creating them. However, we will see that this concern is unjustified, for it is based on an incorrect assumption that the independent existence of the forms entails the existence of two metaphysical or epistemological worlds in Plato.

Miller describes the process of discursive knowledge of the forms as a kind of movement back and forth between eidetic being and not being. The overall argument begins with the “communing” or “blending” of the forms. He argues that Plato “suggests a relation entirely between forms, a ‘partaking’ quite apart from physical-sensible existence in which forms participate in forms. This is the so-called “‘communion’ or ‘blending’ of forms with one another” (Miller 1986, 145). This relates to our past discussion of forms participating in forms. This type of relationship among the forms is what ultimately gives participant things their character, participating in different forms, or a communion of forms. Miller gives an example of what he means by this when he states that “for either the great and the small or the defining form to exercise its constitutive function for the same thing, each must combine with the other” (1986, 145). Thus, in communing, the forms give the spatio-temporal things their defining characteristics. In communing or blending, they give these things the very structure which allows them to be experienced.<sup>16</sup> Further, “To know the One (any one form) is to distinguish it, within the encompassing forms with which it communes, from those others

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to remember here that the forms do not commune *in order* to give participant things their structure. The communion or blending of the forms occurs independently of being known or being instantiated in any participant thing.

from which it differs (Miller 1986, 154). This is related to the process of bifurcatory diaeresis in which we come to know a form by understanding both what a form is and what it is not. In other words, we determine the forms in which the form in question does or does not participate. Likewise, to know a particular thing, we must understand the forms in which it participates, which commune to make the thing what it is, capable of being experienced in the way that it is.

To know the being of a subject, we saw, is to know *what* it 'is'; that is, it is to grasp the defining forms in which the subject partakes. And since the subject is itself a form, this will be the knowledge of the other forms in which it 'partakes' in the special sense...of 'communing' or 'blending' (Miller 1986, 152-153).

Thus, our coming to know the forms through bifurcatory diaeresis will require a kind of motion among the forms, a movement back and forth between what a form is and what it is not, in relation to the other forms. But what exactly does this motion look like? Miller explains it like this:

The mind progressively narrows what the subject 'is,' until finally it arrives at a grasp that includes nothing the subject 'is not' (i.e. the other forms, specifically different from the subject, that also partake of the encompassing form); and conversely, recognizing what the subject 'is not' sets into relief, with new specificity, just what it 'is.' Thus the One (the form) *as the object of knowing* undergoes precisely the motion Parmenides has described, a transiting back and forth between its being and its not being (or difference); in the course of each such transiting, it alters in character in the sense that its being—that is, 'what' it is known to 'be'—becomes ever more specific (1986, 153).

This may (justifiably) seem to be logically fallacious. In Miller's account, Parmenides is suggesting that a form can both be and not be, and alter its character without changing.

However, we should note two things in regard to this criticism. First, there is significant evidence in Plato's *Parmenides* to support such an interpretation:

This is how what is would most of all be and what is not would not be: on the one hand, by what is, if it is completely to be, partaking of being in regard to being a being and of not-being in regard to being a not-being; and, on the other hand, by what is not, if in its turn what is not is completely not to be, partaking of not-being in regard to not-being a not-being and of being in regard to being a not-being (162a-b).

As we have seen, our process of discursive knowledge of the forms involves a process of “bifurcatory diairesis” by which we come to discover what the forms are in part by what they are not. This requires, first and foremost, that the forms partake both of being and of not being. This also leads to the discussion of the motion of the forms in their communal relationships with other forms. However, it does not directly respond to the criticism that a thing cannot both be and not be. Yet, the answer to this criticism lies within the criticism itself. Forms are not *things* in a spatio-temporal way (Miller 1986, 152). This also addresses our original concern that forms can commune in different ways and yet remain the same. There is a blending of the forms which gives participant things their structures. In order to understand what a form is, we must understand both its being in regard to the forms with which it communes and its not-being in regard to the forms with which it does not. In so doing, we move back and forth among the forms in coming to know the nature of any particular form.

We can already begin to see how a purely rationalist understanding of the doctrine of forms is overly simplified. The communing of the forms is often instantiated in the material objects of our everyday world. Thus, our knowledge of the communing and

blending of the forms may begin with experience. Of course, the process of bifurcatory diaeresis, in ultimately looking upon the forms, occurs independently of experience. However, if we actively possessed true knowledge of the forms from birth, there would indeed be no reason to turn to the material world as a starting point for knowledge; we would simply be able to “see” the communing of the forms by the reasoning power of the mind. Yet, we do not seem to possess this type of knowledge innately (at least, we do not *know* that we know it). Thus enters the divided line of the *Republic* and Plato’s doctrine of recollection.

In the *Phaedo*, we are asked to examine the following question:

When a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only knows that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different, are we not right to say that he recollects the second thing that comes into his mind (73c)?

This fairly simple explanation of recollection is vital for understanding how we come to know the forms. Alexander Nehamas, in his essay entitled “Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World,” describes what can be learned from this passage in the following way:

First, the perception of one thing must give rise to knowledge of the other. All cases of recollection involve (at least) three terms: the subject who remembers, the object that reminds him of what he remembers, and the object he remembers. Secondly, the knowledge of what is remembered must be distinct from the knowledge of the reminding object (1999, 148).

Notice that Nehamas uses the term “perception” to describe our experience with the reminding object. For anyone who has encountered Plato’s discussion of our grasping of

the forms solely by the reasoning power of the mind, this may seem to be immediately contradictory. However, I argue that Plato himself makes a distinction between *grasping* the forms and *coming to know* the forms, similar to Kant's claim that knowledge begins with experience, but does not arise out of it that we discussed in the previous chapter. I contend that Plato did not believe that our coming to know the forms occurs through reason alone, independently of experience in the visible world. Plato never argues that we come to know the forms *a priori*. As we have seen, this process occurs through recollection, and I will argue that this recollection begins with the realm of the visible.

In the *Phaedo*, Plato makes another comment that supports this conclusion. He states that "Our sense perceptions surely make us realize that all we perceive through them is striving to reach [the forms] but falls short of them" (*Phaedo*, 75b). We will have more to say about just how the reminding object falls short of the forms later, but for now our concern is with Plato's view that our recollection begins with the recognition that what we *perceive* is in some way deficient in regard to the forms. In experiencing the visible world, we realize, for example, that acts of bravery are not *totally* and *essentially* what it is to be brave. We realize that appearances are not seen as beautiful by everyone, and are seen as totally and essentially beautiful by no one. This recognition of inferiority or lacking is the beginning of our recollection of the forms, and although it is the reason which allows us to come to such recognition, this process can only occur after we have gathered the "data" from the visible world.

We have already seen that this point is further developed in the *Symposium* when Socrates tells of a conversation he had with a woman named Diotima who spoke of the form of the beautiful. The passage is worth restating here:

...one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, that in the end he comes to know just what is to be beautiful (211c-d).

It would seem, then, that our search for the Forms is not totally rational, but begins instead with experience. The point is further expanded in the divided line of the *Republic*. As we saw in Chapter One, Socrates asserts that our process of coming to know the forms is working up a divided line, moving from the visible to the intelligible.

Mitchell Miller summarizes what we have been discussing quite well when he states that “were it not for [the physical-sensible things of ordinary experience]... there would be no discussion of forms—indeed, no discussion at all!—in the first place” (1986, 138). This conclusion is closely tied to our earlier argument that Plato does not posit two independently existing material “worlds” for the forms and the sensible things. Just as we could not talk about the sensible world were it not for the forms, we would be unable to talk about the forms were it not for the everyday objects that we perceive. We will soon come to see that participant things are named after the forms. This seems to provide an entrance to our discussion of forms. Without this language, made possible by this

naming, we would not be able to work out, through dialectic as is Plato's project, what the forms are. I turn next to the notion that forms are ideas, existing solely in the mind.

This understanding made its way into the philosophies of both Descartes (the primary idea) and Locke (complex and abstract ideas). Surprisingly, this argument may have its roots in the *Parmenides*. As we saw in the previous chapter, Socrates himself suggests that the forms may be "thoughts." He states, "But, Parmenides, maybe each of these forms is a thought...and properly occurs only in minds" (132b). However, we must also remember that Parmenides explicitly rejects such an approach. As Miller states,

[Socrates] makes the forms depend for their very being on the particular souls, or minds, that think them. This devastates the theory of forms in two obvious ways...First, if the form is taken in this way as a 'thought,' then the theory will be reduced from the status of an ontological account of the genuine and universal intelligibility of the world to a psychologistic account of how each mind generates meaning for itself...Second—and this is the thrust of Parmenides' closing objection at 132c9-11—if the form were only a 'thought,' its constitutive relation to its participants would be, if not absurd, quite mysterious (1986, 55).

In other words, this type of assertion would first reduce the universality of the forms to relativity. The forms would no longer be universal structures on which our experience is modeled. Instead, they would be relative understandings of our experience on individual psychological levels. The second point of Parmenides' objection is a fascinating one: if the form is an idea or thought, then participant things would also be thoughts, since the forms in which they participate and from which they derive their structure are merely thoughts. "Given your claim that other things partake of forms, won't you necessarily think either that each thing is composed of thoughts and all things think, or that, although

they are thoughts, they are unthinking” (*Parmenides*, 132c)? Of course, both Parmenides and Socrates will come to agree that this would be absurd. Parmenides argues against Socrates, saying, Agreeing that this is would be “unreasonable,” and thus Socrates rejects his own argument that the forms are thoughts (or ideas). Thus, seeing forms as dependent on the mind or soul is not compatible Plato’s account. I now turn to the relationship of forms and their participant things in regard to naming and essences.

My goal in this discussion is to determine what Plato would mean if he said that a participant thing was, for instance, beautiful. Is the thing beautiful in name only, or is it, at its very essence, beautiful? In other words, does an object’s participation in beauty only give the object the right to be called beautiful (perhaps to assume this as one of its characteristics), or does it mean that the object is now *defined in essence* as beautiful? It is with this question that Nehamas grapples in his essays “Self-Predication and Plato’s Theory of Forms” and “Participation and Predication in Plato’s Later Thought.” He begins by stating that Plato is constantly committed to the notion of “self-predication.” For example, “Beauty is beautiful, that is, what it is to be beautiful” (Nehamas 1999, 214). This is based on Diotima’s remarks regarding the beautiful that we discussed earlier. According to Nehamas, Plato never “gives up” this view (1999, 214). Further, Plato holds that to participate in the beautiful is to participate in it completely. To participate in what it is to be beautiful is to participate in *all* of what it is to be beautiful. Indeed, Plato seems to suggest precisely this in the *Parmenides* when Parmenides points out a form cannot be like a sail, with separate parts covering each person. He and Socrates both reject this metaphor since the forms cannot be divisible (*Parmenides*, 131b-

c). Thus, to participate in a form is to participate *completely* in that form. Each participant in the beautiful participates completely in what it is to be beautiful. Note that this does not mean that a beautiful thing is what it is to be beautiful. In fact, as we will see further in Nehamas, this is reserved only for the beautiful itself. Yet, this is only the first step in answering our original question about naming and essences. We next must determine whether beauty is, from the perspective of its participants and those who perceive them, just a characteristic.

Nehamas can also help us on this point. He states:

Just as, on the ontological level, only the beautiful itself is beautiful, so, on the semantical, the word ‘beautiful’ is strictly speaking only the name (*onoma*) of the beautiful itself and of nothing else. The word, we may say, is only ‘derivatively’ the name of beautiful things (Nehamas 1999, 184).

In other words, beautiful things are only “*named after*” the beautiful (Nehamas 1999, 185). Indeed, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates discusses how tall things derive their names from their participation in the tall (102-104). Thus, for a thing to participate in the form of the tall is to derive its name, tall, from the form. To do this, it partakes completely in the tall, and thus in what it is to be tall. However, as we will come to see, it fails to be essentially such. In other words, though it *participates* in what it is to be tall, it does so only accidentally (i.e. it is not what it is to be tall) (Nehamas 1999, 154).

It is important to understand what Nehamas means when he speaks of name (*onoma*) and naming (*onomazein*). “Plato seems to think that ‘beautiful’ names only the beautiful because he thinks of an *onoma* as revealing the nature of what it names, and that it is only if this very strong semantical relation obtains that a word can pick out an item in

reality” (Nehamas 1999, 184). Thus, putting all of these pieces together, Nehamas suggests (and it seems that he is correct in doing so) that the *onoma* is reserved solely for the forms, whereas participant things are only “named after” their respective forms, in ways that do not reveal their nature. Further,

the Forms’ participants are things that can be denoted by more than one name (the possibility being grounded in their participation in many Forms, after each of which they are named); by contrast, the Forms...can be called only by one name” (Nehamas 1999, 186).

This is closely related to our discussion of the communion or blending of the forms. We come to know the forms through bifurcatory diaeresis, by understanding both what the forms are and what they are not. However, the forms are not changed and do not lose their being by taking part in both being and non-being. Things, however, since they exist spatio-temporally, cannot both be and not be. What we have suggested is that the individual names given to participant things cannot reveal their true nature in reality, for such things are not purely real. However, in some way, they resemble the forms in which they participate, and are thus named after them. This is directly related to the final issue that I would like to address in this chapter: how exactly participant things are less perfect than their forms, or in some way deficient in regard to the forms.

We have seen throughout this thesis that participant things are in some way lacking in reality and reliability for knowledge in regard to the forms. I would now like to close this chapter by taking a deeper look at this issue from the metaphysical standpoint. We will see that forms are often seen as simply perfect copies of their respective participant things. This argument is not unjustified, as we just saw that the forms are the

only metaphysical features which have the ultimate claim to reality and to the reliability of knowledge. We have also seen that things participate in forms completely, and are thus “named after” the forms. Thus, it is not totally unwarranted to suggest that forms and participant things are copies at different metaphysical levels. Unfortunately, this view does not fit with Plato’s overall metaphysical account because of a very subtle but vital distinction raised again by Alexander Nehamas.

Nehamas argues that the “approximation view” of the sensible world which holds that “sensible objects only approximate the intelligible objects which they represent in geometrical context...” (Nehamas 1999, 140) is a mistaken understanding of the relationship between sensible objects and forms. This view leads to the conclusion that sensible objects are imperfect copies of the forms because of their failure to perfectly mimic all of the properties which make the forms what they are. Nehamas argues, however, that “the copies’ imperfection does not reside in the properties that make them copies, but in the way these perfect properties are possessed” (1999, 144). In other words, participants do not fail to reach the forms because of their failure to possess all or certain properties of the forms. Instead, the *way* in which these properties are possessed is different in the case of form and thing. But how is it different? To answer this question, we turn to Nehamas’ discussion of the doctrine of recollection.

Nehamas argues that our ability to know sensible objects through the forms is not due to a relationship of association, but of similarity, but what is it that this distinction tells us exactly? Nehamas holds that a “portrait’s ‘imperfection’ does not exist in its deficiency in resembling Simmias in a given respect, but in its incapacity to capture some

characteristic of Simmias in all its dimensions” (1999, 49). By comparison, “Plato believes that if one thing is a copy of another then it must lack some characteristic of its model, and that one must realize this if one is to realize that he is confronted with a copy in the first place” (Nehamas 1999, 150). This is related to Nehamas’ overall argument that the sensible objects are imperfect “not because they cannot *exactly* reproduce *any* of its properties, but because they cannot *at all* reproduce *some* property (or properties) of their model” (Nehamas 1999, 150). The crux of this argument is found in the following remark: “But their imperfection does not consist of being approximately what the Forms are exactly; it consists in their being accidentally what the Forms are essentially” (Nehamas 1999, 154). For example, whereas beauty is essentially *what it is to be beautiful*, beautiful things only *participate* in beauty, and are thus only accidentally beautiful. Self-predication is reserved for the forms, since the forms are what they are only in relation to themselves, whereas participant things derive their being from the forms in which they participate. This directly relates to our recent discussion of naming and essences of the forms and things. As we saw, Plato did not attribute *onoma* to things because they are only accidentally what the forms are essentially. It is in this respect that things are imperfect in regard to the forms. This has profound implications for seeing forms as “copies” of their participant things. It is in a very specific aspect in which participant things fail to partake that make these things imperfect. This will play a significant role in the chapter that follows.

In this chapter, I have attempted to deepen our understanding of Plato’s doctrine of forms in five specific areas. First, we saw that form and thing do not exist in distinct

epistemological and metaphysical worlds for the participant things derive their structure from the forms in which they participate and forms spill forth their being into participant things. Next, I argued that our coming to know the forms begins in the realm of the visible, as is evidenced by the divided line and the doctrine of recollection. I also argued that, for Plato, forms are not thoughts, for they cannot depend on the mind for their existence and are universal as opposed to psychologically relative. Next we saw that, for Plato, names reveal essences, and are thus reserved only for forms, whereas participant things are only *named after* the forms. This finally led to the conclusion that participant things are only accidentally what the forms are essentially, especially in relation to self-predication. Though I have left much unsaid in regard to this philosophical position, our current knowledge will be sufficient for engaging in a dialogue between Plato and the modern philosophers who we discussed in Chapter Two. We will now turn to precisely such a dialogue, with all of what has been said thus far in mind.

## Chapter 4

### Exposing the Misunderstandings of the Moderns

We have come a long way in our conceptualization of Plato's doctrine of forms and of the modern interpretations of this doctrine. It is now time that we apply the knowledge that we have gained in such a way so as to analyze the relationships between Plato and each of the modern philosophers that we have discussed throughout this thesis. This is not a simple task for several reasons. First, it is often difficult to distinguish the epistemological and metaphysical claims in Plato (perhaps because they are so intertwined). However, keeping track of these claims is crucial for our understanding of how the remarks of Plato and the moderns line up. Secondly, the language on each side of this debate is extremely different, resulting from differences in the philosophical contexts from which these thinkers are writing (the background of which I hope to have provided in Chapters One and Two). Therefore, it will often be necessary for me to explicate deeply what particular remarks mean both from the philosopher's perspective and also the implications they have, if any, for the Platonic doctrine of forms. I also find it necessary, at times, to develop my own language in order to place these perspectives on a level at which both can be analyzed and placed into a direct debate. After considering these challenges, I believe that the best way to approach this task is to reformulate the modern remarks on forms, in turn, and then pose a Platonic response to this understanding (or *mis*understanding). The conversation will continue until we have exhausted all of the resources currently at our disposal. With this in mind, let the battle begin.

Throughout this thesis, we have been faced with the claim that Plato presents an epistemological argument which holds that knowledge of the forms can come only through the process of reason, without making use of any sensible experience. From now on, I shall refer to this argument as the *Rationalist Understanding*. In this argument, we see the moderns assert that Plato believed the forms to be knowable only through the reasoning power of the mind, completely independent of all sensible experience. I am aware of the limitations of my labeling of this position, since not all rationalists claim that no knowledge can be gained from experience; however, it is useful for analyzing how the modern philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant understand Plato's doctrine of forms specifically.

For example, Descartes held in his correspondence that

according to Plato, Socrates asks a slave boy about the elements of geometry and thereby makes the boy able to dig out certain truths from his own mind which he had not previously recognized were there, thus attempting to establish the doctrine of reminiscence. Our knowledge of God is of this sort...(Descartes 1991, 222-223).

Of course, as we have seen, it is important to understand how Descartes believes that we come to possess knowledge of God if we are to comprehend how he believes that Plato's doctrine of recollection really operates. As we saw in Chapter Two, Descartes holds that we "come to know [God] by the power of our own native intelligence, without any sensory experience" (Descartes 1991, 222). Descartes committed himself to pure mental scrutiny and a methodological solipsism in order to argue for the reality of the existence of the external world. In this process, he used as stepping stones what he calls "first

principles,” principles that cannot be doubted and which come to us through mental scrutiny alone, in order to reach the idea of God, the primary idea. Our knowledge of other things depends on our knowledge of the first principles and of the primary idea for Descartes. He works backward through the first principles, again through mental scrutiny alone, until he reaches a primary cause, a *causa sui*, an archetype: in Descartes’ understanding, God. We rationally move from first principles to first principles, until we reach the primary idea: God. At first, this may seem to look a lot like Plato’s remarks in the *Republic*:

Then also understand that, by the other subsection of the intelligible, I mean that which reason itself grasps by the power of dialectic. It does not consider these hypotheses as first principles, but truly as hypotheses—but as stepping stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the *unhypothetical first principle of everything*. Having grasped this principle, it reverses itself and, keeping hold of what follows from it, comes down to a conclusion without making use of anything visible at all, but only of forms themselves, moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms (emphasis added)” (511b-c).

We may thus see a direct connection between the Cartesian God and the Platonic forms. Where Descartes works rationally through first principles to reach a primary idea, Plato, through bifurcatory diaeresis, attempts to define particular forms by moving among the forms themselves. However, whether it is correct to think of the forms as ideas and whether it is correct to assert that Plato’s search for the form is totally rational will need to be addressed more fully.

At this point, my reader would not be unjustified in rejecting my original warning that the language between Plato and the moderns would be difficult to reconcile. After

all, Plato himself uses the term “first principle” to describe form.<sup>17</sup> One could not imagine a more direct connection than this. Of course, the word Socrates uses also describes that process by which we arrive at this principle: by not “making use of anything visible at all,” but by using “only...forms themselves.” Further in the *Republic*, Socrates presents the parable of the cave in which he seems to recognize the form of the good as illuminating all of the other forms, for the sun seems to serve a similar function outside the cave as the fire does inside of the cave. One can imagine Descartes saying, “It looks a lot like a primary cause to me!” Thus, on the face, Descartes seems to be right on track in his analysis of Plato’s epistemological account.

Unfortunately, as we have already begun to see, things are not this simple when it comes to the Platonic notion of our knowledge of the forms. Since Descartes discusses the doctrine of recollection, it may be helpful to begin here. As we saw in Chapter One, Plato’s doctrine of recollection is laid out most explicitly in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*. In the *Phaedo*, Plato’s Socrates remarks,

When a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only knows that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different...he recollects the second thing that comes into his mind (73c).

As we have seen, Plato sees the soul as eternal, acquiring all of the knowledge of the forms before it inhabits the body. Thus, something reminds us of these forms and, allowing our work of moving up the divided line to begin. But what is this “something” which sparks our recollection? Plato gives us this answer in the *Phaedo* as well: Our

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<sup>17</sup>Plato uses the term ἀρχή, which is perhaps better translated as “origin” or “starting point.”

sense perceptions must surely make us realize that all that we perceive through them is striving to reach [the forms] but falls short of [them]” (*Phaedo*, 75b). In other words, the doctrine of recollection begins with our sense perceptions, and allows us to recognize that participant things fall short of the forms. From this perspective, though Descartes is correct to suggest that the sensible world by itself is an unreliable source of knowledge, he misunderstands the nature of the Platonic doctrine of recollection, which begins with experience. Further evidence for this reading of Plato can be found in the *Symposium* when Diotima discusses the notion that our knowledge of the beautiful begins with beautiful *things* (211c-d). We have also discussed the nature of Plato’s divided line, beginning with images from experience. As you will remember, the divided line represents our pursuit of knowledge of the forms, and this pursuit begins with the realm of the visible (*Republic*, 509e-510a). Thus, Plato’s response to Descartes’ formulation of the doctrine of recollection would seem to go something like this: you have misunderstood the distinction between *coming to know* the forms and ultimately *grasping* the forms. Though it is true that the forms can only be grasped through the reasoning power of the mind, it is not the case that our pursuit of knowledge of the forms occurs independently of existence. Descartes, however, seems to argue that, since our knowledge of the forms is of the sort of our knowledge of God, we “*come to know* [the forms] by the power of our own native intelligence, without any sensory experience” (emphasis added).

Plato may even want to push further, arguing that Descartes could not have even begun to take part in his activity of pure mental scrutiny without the training that he has

received in the world. Though the sensible world is not the *object* of our knowledge, and perhaps not even the *source* of our knowledge, it is the case that all knowledge *begins* with experience. This argument is supported by Mitchell Miller's interpretation of the *Parmenides* regarding experience presented in the previous chapter: "were it not for [the physical-sensible things of ordinary experience]...there would be no discussion of forms—indeed, no discussion at all!—in the first place" (1986, 138). Though we referenced this remark in passing previously, we should take a moment to understand what Miller is really trying to say. Were it not for the physical-sensible things of ordinary experience, Miller claims that discussion would be impossible, including any type of dialectic which allows us to engage in bifurcatory diaeresis in examine the nature of forms, but why is this so? Why does our language depend for Miller, and perhaps for Plato, on the sensible world? Though Miller does not address this question directly, we may be able to fill in the gaps. Were it not for physical objects, there would be nothing named after the forms. Without the physical world, we would not have language, for language is made possible by the forms which provide names to their participant things. It would therefore seem impossible for our knowledge to exist completely outside of the world, and Plato's argument may be in serious danger if this is his claim. However, as we have seen, no evidence exists for this reading of Plato's doctrine of recollection, and in fact there exists much evidence that suggests exactly the opposite. Plato himself understands the process of questioning to be vital for coming to know the forms. The majority of Plato's writings exist as dialogues, specifically for this reason. The forms

shape the conversations just as they give the sensible world a structure that we are able to experience and about which we are able to talk.

However, Descartes may certainly wish to say that if the forms are truly to be “first principles” or a “primary idea,” they must exist prior to language and prior to the physical-sensible world. If Plato is honest about his assertion that we can have no knowledge of the sensible world, then it would be contradictory to assert that our knowledge of the first principles, the true referents of our knowledge, begins on such an unreliable level. Certainly, this is why Descartes began his meditations in the first place. Also, if Plato is honest about his claim that all of our knowledge is imprinted on the soul, and our goal is to simply recollect this, then the origin of our knowledge of the forms is the soul, with which we have a *rational* relationship. Thus, knowledge does not begin with experience, but with the reasoning power of the mind.

However, we must remember that, for Plato, no true knowledge *comes from* experience. Instead, the experience merely allows us to recollect what we already know. Knowledge of the forms is already imprinted on our immortal souls, which have “faced” or “gazed upon” the forms (*Republic*, 518d). Thus, there seems to be no problem in asserting that our recollection of the forms *begins* with experience, but is not a direct *result* of experience. For instance, Nehamas states, “If *A* reminds me of *B*, then my coming to know *A* is not (not: need not) on that occasion sufficient for my coming to know *B*” (1999, 148). In other words, our knowledge of the forms is not an immediate or direct result of our coming to realize that participant things fail in some way to perfectly mimic the forms. Of course, we should be cautious about speaking of our relationship

with *A* as being one of “knowledge” at all if we are to define *A* as the visible world in itself. At best, we may have *opinions* about the sensible world. However, *A* does not seem to be the visible world, but the fact that the visible world fails to be ultimately like the forms. Remember that in the *Phaedo*, Socrates argues that

When a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only *knows* that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different, are we not right to say that he recollects the second thing that comes into his mind (emphasis added) (73c)?

Thus, Plato holds that our knowledge of the visible world is different from our knowledge of the forms. Primarily, it seems that we do not have knowledge of the visible world *in itself*, but only in relation to the forms. Our knowledge of the forms, however, is of the forms themselves, without any dependence on the visible world. Ultimately, we can only have *opinions* of the sensible world.

Nehamas’ claim entails that our experience with the sensible world does not necessarily lead to knowledge of the forms. This helps us understand why the unreliability of the sensible world does not necessarily disclose the possibility of knowledge beginning with experience. We do not have “knowledge” of the sensible world at all. Instead, we simply use our experience with it as an entryway into our purely rational *view* of the forms. Thus, in general, Plato’s epistemological argument is both rational and empirical. Though the origin of our knowledge is the soul’s looking upon the forms in a previous “life,” experience is not excluded from our coming to know the forms. In fact, it is required. We will now turn to the Locke’s notion that forms are ideas.

I will refer to this conception simple as the *Forms as Ideas* (FAI) response to Plato. We have already seen that Descartes argues that our knowledge of God, a primary idea, is of the type of knowledge that Plato posits in regard to the forms. Thus, there is a tendency to think of Descartes' understanding as a metaphysical one, by which he argues that the forms are primary ideas; however, this is not the case. Descartes' claim was purely epistemological, that our *knowledge* of a certain primary idea, God, is like our knowledge of the forms; yet there is no evidence in Descartes to suggest that he metaphysically believes the forms to be ideas. However, this is not the case in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In this text, as we have seen, Locke seems to hold that Plato's forms are examples of his "complex ideas," formed by the mind's combination of simple ideas (all of which must be found in experience). At first, this seems to be convincing. We just discussed Plato's argument that we recollect the forms, moving up through the divided line, which begins with the physical-sensible world.

However, in the last chapter, we also discussed the direct refutation of the FAI approach in the *Parmenides* by Parmenides himself. The existence of forms does not depend on the forms' being known or being participated, and it certainly does not depend on the mind. In fact, individual "minds" are dependent on the forms. Thus, I have argued, and will continue to assert, that Plato never posits the forms as "ideas," and thus should not be understood as such.

On the other hand, Locke may say that even if forms are not ideas, Plato believes that they at least *resemble* abstract or general ideas. In fact, I believe that the argument Locke attempts to make against Plato is that Plato sees his forms as abstract ideas where

they are instead nothing more than complex ideas. Instead of acknowledging that forms are nothing more than the combination of our simple ideas, coming from experience, Plato attempts to remove the forms from the realm of space and time, thus abstracting or generalizing his own experience in order to posit knowledge of a realm which is more constant, less fleeting, and a much more reliable sense of knowledge. In fact, J.L.

Mackie, a renowned Lockean scholar, sums up what we have been discussing quite well.

He states,

Plato's Theory of Forms (or of 'Ideas,' but this name is now misleading, since they are not ideas in any mind) may be interpreted as the thesis that there are self-subsistent universals, separate from and independent of the concrete particular things in space and time which copy them or approximate to them or strive after them or participate in them. The Forms exist in a super-sensible realm, and are known directly by minds without the aid or intervention of the senses (1976, 126).

Thus, even Mackie, a scholar of Locke, admits that the FAI approach is a misunderstood conception of Plato. However, he does contend that the forms exist in a world independent of this one and that forms are generalized abstract universals. We will set this question aside for now, for it is an example of the understanding of Plato which we will consider later in regard to Kant: the *Otherworld* perspective. For now, I would like to consider Locke's remarks on real and nominal essences in regard to the doctrine of forms. As we saw in Chapter Two, Locke argues that Plato is attempting to understand the *real* essences of objects by way of their *nominal* essences. For example, Plato would say that gold, at its very essence, is gold (by participating completely in what it is to be gold). Plato is attempting to define what cannot be known to the senses (something like

the gold's real essence or chemical makeup) by simply ascribing a name to it. The word "gold," according to Locke, can only be used to signify nominal essences, not real essences. I call this criticism the *Name as Essence* (NAE) Refutation. It can be formulated in the following way:

It is...characteristic of Locke's approach to emphasize that the division into inner constitutions in the world and abstract ideas in us contributes to the way in which our knowledge of the world is limited. Because the real essence is unknown, we have no grounds for speaking of sorted or bounded real essences..." (Newman 2007, 262).

In other words, we cannot bind an object's real essence by a name, which can only signify nominal essences. According to Locke, this is exactly what Plato attempts to do when discussing the relationship between forms and their participant things.

However, this is a misunderstanding of Plato's discussion of essence. As we saw in the last chapter, what Plato ultimately means by saying "X is gold," is "X participates fully in what it is to be gold." Plato does not, therefore, simply attempt to bind an object's essential structure by giving it a name (e.g., gold). Instead, he is referring to all of the features that make gold what it is (by its participation in the communion of different forms). In this way, "gold" is much more like a real essence than a nominal one. Locke argues that "*Between the Nominal Essence, and the Name, there is so near a Connexion, that the Name of any sort of Things cannot be attributed to any particular Being, but what has this Essence, whereby it answers that abstract Idea, whereof that Name is the Sign*" (1975, 417). Plato, on the other hand, never sees a form as simply a name. Where Locke sees a connection between the nominal essence and the name, Plato sees a connection

between the real essence and the form, which just so happens to give its participant object its name. As we saw in the last chapter, Nehamas holds that only the form is worthy of the *onoma* (related to the notion of self-predication), but participant things are named *after* the forms (1999, 185). Therefore, it seems that Locke's understanding of real essences and Plato's perspective on the relationship of participant things and their forms are not as different as one might first suspect. In fact, Locke himself seems to make this claim when he defines a real essence as "the real internal, but generally in Substances, unknown Constitution of Things, whereon their discoverable Qualities depend" (1975, 417). Plato's forms seem to do much the same thing: they provide a formal structure which allows us to experience them in the way that we do. Of course, Locke will want to emphasize the point that these essences are fundamentally unknowable because they are abstract ideas, existing in a different world, not in space and time. We thus turn to the *Otherworld* Understanding of Plato's metaphysical account.

As we have seen, Kant argues in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that Plato, in his search for the forms, moves beyond the physical-sensible world, beyond the realm of all possible experience, and pushes forward into the realm of the forms, a realm of pure rationality, a realm in which experience is not the basis of knowledge. In this world, experience plays no role at all in the formation of knowledge. I remind you of Kant's remarks:

The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space. It was thus that Plato left the world of the senses, as setting too narrow limits to the understanding, and ventured out beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of the pure understanding. He did not observe that with

all his efforts he made no advance—meeting no resistance that might, as it were, serve as a support upon which he could take a stand, to which he could apply his powers, and so set his understanding in motion (1965, B9).

There are two claims presented in this remark that will need to be addressed: first, that Plato's thought in regard to the forms "meets no resistance," and secondly, that Plato moves into another metaphysical and epistemological world. In regard to the former claim, Kant seems to be suggesting that, for Plato, thought in regard to the forms is allowed to run freely with no resistance. However, we have already seen how this cannot be the case. Plato argues that we come to know the forms through bifurcatory diaeresis. Through this process, there *is* a right and wrong answer. The beautiful is 'x,' but not 'y.' This is directly related to Kant's second criticism: that Plato attempts to break free of this world of sensibility and to arrive at a world outside of this one.

Certainly, Plato denies the sensible world's reliability for knowledge, pushes us not to think of forms as things, and states that the sensible world is constituted merely of shadows cast by their originals, illuminated by the forms. Socrates therefore pushes his interlocutors to break free of these unreliable sense perceptions and to focus on what truly makes them what they are. Thus, it would seem perfectly justified to suggest that Plato's search for forms occurs not in this world, but in another one. For this reason, I have called this understanding the *Otherworld* perspective.

Kant goes on to suggest that the forms are "archetypes of things-in-themselves," thus existing outside of the realm of all possible experience, and thus not knowable at all. Remember that the experiential knowledge of space and time still begins with but does not arise out of experience, and we are thus able to, and in fact must, possess *a priori*

knowledge about the structures of these functions. You will recognize that this is similar to Locke's claim that the Platonic forms being abstract or complex ideas, existing as universals or generalized concepts.

However, as I argued in Chapter Three, Plato *never* asserts that the forms exist in some other world or realm. In fact, to do so would be to contradict his overall philosophy. First, to argue that the forms and their participant things were completely distinct would undermine the claims that our experience is shaped by the forms, that sensible things get their structure from the forms in which they participate, and that the divided line begins with the visible, as I have argued throughout this thesis. The divided line involves recognition of the lacking or inferiority of the visible realm in relation to the forms, thus requiring experience to play a role in the process, and the relationship between forms and their participants is an intimate one. We saw Miller and Friedländer both reject this Kantian and Lockean otherworld approach. Again, the forms spill forth their being into participant things, and things could not exist at all if in a world completely independent of the forms.

Of course, Kant may want to argue that even if forms do not exist in another "world," they are still so far removed from the realm of experience that knowledge of them can never be posited. Because all of our knowledge begins with experience (though it does not *arise out of* experience), and because forms cannot be experienced, according to Kant, Plato cannot posit any knowledge of the forms. However, Kant would say that Plato not only ignores this fact, but he actually argues that forms are the only *true* objects

of knowledge. Such a claim, Kant would say, wholly misunderstands the character and limits of our knowledge.

However, as we have seen, Kant himself asserts a type of *a priori* knowledge about the structures of space and time. Were it not for such knowledge, we could not experience the world in the way that we do. I remind you of the metaphor I presented in Chapter Two, where we thought of the realm of possible experience as an enclosed room, of space and time as the slots through which our experience is given to us, and of things-in-themselves as all that which lies outside of the room. In keeping with this model, *a priori* knowledge of space and time is knowledge of the structure of these slots, thus allowing us to experience the world in the way that we do. I argue that Platonic forms are more like space and time than they are like the Kantian things-in-themselves. As we have seen, forms structure the sensible world in such a way that we are able to experience it, just like space and time. I have argued that forms do not exist in another world, but share an intimate relationship with the physical world, just like space and time. Plato's forms are not otherworldly; neither does our knowledge of them arise independently of experience.

Does this then mean that forms are metaphysically real, but transcendentally ideal? In a way, at least half of this is true. Forms are indeed metaphysically real. In fact, they are the more real than anything we experience spatio-temporally. Further, our knowledge of the forms *ultimately* rests in reason alone; therefore, it is correct to think of forms as epistemologically transcendental, as long as we do not think of them as being metaphysically otherworldly. However, they are not transcendentally ideal, at least to the

extent that they are not solely functions of our constructions of nature. This is based in the argument of the ultimate reality of the forms as the ultimate *objects* of knowledge. The forms have within themselves the instructions for their own manifestations. In other words, the forms are simultaneously originals *and* functions of our constructions of nature. Forms both are essentially what their participants are accidentally, thus providing a structure for the participants, and the very structure in which those things participate. Forms structure the physical world in a way that we can experience it. Thus, we can know the forms through the constructions of nature in which we live every day. This is closely connected with our refutation of the rationalist argument against Plato.

Nor are the forms “copies” of things that exist within the realm of experience. As I held in Chapter Three, Nehamas’ response to the approximation view provides a useful way of understanding this point. Because “the copies’ imperfection does not reside in the properties that make them copies, but in the way these perfect properties are possessed” (1999, 144), we cannot understand the forms to be a perfect or ideal reproduction of a physical thing. The forms are not physical at all; nor are they things. Instead, forms are the very structures in which physical things participate and that allow us to experience and talk about the world.

Therefore, I argue that the metaphysical and epistemological claims made by Kant are actually more closely related to the Platonic doctrine of forms than many realize. Certainly, Kant comes closer to reproducing the argument for forms than either of the other modern thinkers that we have discussed. However, he fails to correctly apply his own terminology to Plato’s philosophical position.

Thus, we have come to an understanding of Plato which allows us to posit the following statement: forms do not exist in another metaphysical or epistemological world, yet they do exist independently of being known, being participated, or being thought, and provide the very structures and essences of nature that allows us to experience the world in the way we do. If we keep this interpretation of Plato's doctrine of forms constantly in mind, we will never again be tricked by the misunderstandings of the philosophical positions of Descartes, Locke, and Kant.

## Conclusion

We have moved through a significant number of philosophical texts and arguments in order to test our original hypothesis: that *three of the most influential modern philosophers, René Descartes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant, as representatives of their various philosophical projects, have fundamentally misunderstood the Platonic doctrine of forms*. We tested this hypothesis in the last chapter of this thesis, and I believe that we found that there is significant evidence to support this conclusion. The moderns, in their understandings of the doctrine of forms in regard to ideas, rationalism, copies, and the two-worlds perspective have failed to correctly represent Plato in his philosophical position.

This thesis has not attempted to prove or disprove the existence of forms. Nor has it tried to support or contest the overall philosophical traditions of the three modern philosophers we discussed. Instead, it has been an attempt to interpret accurately Plato's doctrine of forms and the relevant remarks by Descartes, Locke, and Kant. After we did this, we pinned these sides against each other, utilizing all of the resources at our disposal in order to test our original hypothesis. Now that we have seen that this conclusion indeed has strong textual and philosophical support, we are left with one remaining question: what implications does this thesis have for the trajectory of philosophy?

In the introduction of this thesis, I spoke of philosophy as a development of ideas, often marked by paradigmatic shifts, but everywhere seen as a manipulation or reworking of what has previously been said. Therefore, if philosophy misunderstands an argument

that is as far-reaching as the metaphysics and epistemology of Plato's doctrine of forms, it falls in danger of prematurely dismissing positions which could have remarkable implications for our current philosophical projects.

It has often been the case in modern philosophy that philosophers have been given two choices: forms or knowledge from experience. With society's strong belief in the scientific method, involving empirical testing and experimentation, the latter choice has seemed to be preferred. However, as I have attempted to argue throughout this thesis, this is not a true ultimatum (a fact which Kant seems to understand). Philosophy may still retain the doctrine of forms while understanding the beginnings of knowledge to lie in experience. It is for this reason that I chose to end Chapter Four with an analysis of Kant's remarks on the doctrine of forms, for I believe that Kant best understands the distinction between knowledge coming from and arising out of experience (even though he fails to apply this distinction to Plato's doctrine of forms). If we can come to embrace this distinction, along with that of coming to know and knowing the forms, we are well suited to moving forward with our metaphysical and epistemological philosophical positions. However, if we fail to take this point seriously, I fear that we will continue to be forced to make the false choice I presented above.

Plato's doctrine of forms is not a purely rationalist one; it does not argue for the existence of two independently existing metaphysical worlds; does not hold that forms are dependent on the minds that think them, and does not posit the existence of perfect empirical copies of the objects of experience. Instead, forms exist *in this world* independently of being known, being participated, or being thought, and provides the

very structures and essences of nature that allows us to experience the world in the way we do.

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