AN INTERPRETATION OF PLATO'S THEORY OF FORMS

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to offer an interpretation of Plato's theory of forms, which clarifies the nature of the forms and determine the limits of the theory. In light of the philosophical background that influenced Plato's thinking, I argue that the theory of forms emerges as a reaction to sophism and skepticism, which were the prevailing philosophical positions by the time Plato wrote his dialogues. More specifically, I argue that Plato responds to the moral skeptics and the relativistic tendencies of the sophists by developing an alternative theory, namely the theory of forms, which is designed to justify the existence of universally valid moral values. Although Plato's initial motivation was to justify the existence of universally valid ethical truths, his ambition to refute sophists' relativist arguments led him to undertake a more ambitious project through which he could demonstrate the possibility of attaining knowledge of eternal truths in general. Having determined Plato's main motivation for and the scope of the theory of forms, this paper will also illuminate the nature of the forms and demonstrate the intransitive relationship between the forms and the particular objects.

Keywords: Theory of Forms, Sophism, Skepticism, Eternal Truths, Morality

PLATON'UN İDEALAR ÖĞRETİSİ ÜZERİNE BİR YORUM

ÖZET

Bu makale Platon'un formlar teorisinin bir yorumunu sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu yorumla hem formların doğası açıklanacak hem de bu teorinin sınırları gösterilecektir. Platon'un fikirlerine etki eden felsefi düşüncelerin ışığında, Platon'un formlar teorisinin, diyaloglarını yazdığı zamanın hakim felsefi görüşleri olan sofizm ve şüpheciliğe karşı bir tepki olarak ortaya çıktığını savunuyorum. Daha spesifik olarak, Platon'un, formlar öğretisini, ahlaki şüpheciliğe ve sofistlerin rölativist eğilimlerine karşı geliştirdiğini ve bu alternatif teoriyi evrensel olarak geçerli ahlaki değerlerin varlığını gerekçelendirmek için tasarladığını ileri sürüyorum. Platon'un ilk motivasyonu evrensel etik hakikatlerin varlığını haklı çıkarmak olsa da, sofistlerin rölativist argümanlarını çürütme isteği, genel olarak ebedi hakikatlere dair bilgi edinme olasılığını gösterebileceği daha iddialı bir projeyi üstlenmesini sağlamıştır. Platon'un formlar teorisinin başlıca motivasyonunu ve kapsamını belirledikten sonra, bu çalışmada ayrıca formların doğası aydınlatılacak ve de formlar ile tikel nesneler arasındaki ilişkinin geçişsizliği gösterilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Formlar Teorisi, Sofizm, Şüphecilik, Ebedi Hakikatler, Ahlak

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INTRODUCTION

A detailed examination of Plato's works reveals that Plato's philosophy was strongly inspired by his teacher Socrates, who seeks the universal definitions of the main ethical terms, such as virtue, piety, justice, etc. Thus, it is no surprise that following his teacher, Plato's main philosophical objective is to come up with a comprehensive moral theory, which will both (i) provide an answer to Socrates' search for moral norms and (ii) stand as an alternative theory to the sophistic and skeptical views regarding the possibility of knowing objective moral facts.

By the time Plato wrote his dialogues, sophists were powerful and skeptical thoughts about universally valid truths were prevailing among the thinkers. I will emphasize the differences between these positions and focus my attention to the way each of these viewpoints influenced Plato's thinking. Then, I will argue that having been influenced by these views, Plato's philosophy emerges as a reaction to sophism and skepticism, which Plato aims to eliminate with his alternative theory, namely the theory of forms. The structure of this paper will be as follows: First, I will demonstrate how Plato's philosophy responds to sophism and skepticism. Having determined Plato's main motivation, I will then argue that although his initial concern was ethical, his worries about the possibility of ethical knowledge led him to undertake a more ambitious project, which requires him to demonstrate the possibility of attaining knowledge of eternal truths. Thus, it would be false to infer from his starting point that Plato's philosophy is limited to ethics. In light of this historical and philosophical background to Plato's theory of forms, this paper will illuminate the nature of the forms and the intransitive relationship between the forms and the particular physical objects.

Historical and Philosophical Background

We know that sophism was flourishing in the second half of the fifth century, when Socrates was active in Athens. Sophists, in other words, the traveling teachers were the representatives of relativism by the time of Socrates. One common feature of the sophists was their denial of the knowledge of universally valid truths (Grube, 1958, p. 3). The underlying assumption of the sophists like Protagoras was that knowledge is identical to perception or sensation. Since, everything we perceive in the physical world is subject to change, knowledge of the unchanging reality, it is argued, is impossible. Hence, according to the sophists, everything was relative to man and their motto was 'man is the measure of all things'. In brief, the sophists were convinced that there is no ultimate unchanging reality, and based on the denial of such reality, they also denied the possibility of knowing eternal truths.

Plato's mentor Socrates was also influenced by the sophists. Like the sophists, Socrates would question the traditionally unchallenged subjects. Yet, Socrates should be viewed as a skeptic rather than a sophist. Skeptics were less certain about the possibility of knowing objective and universally valid eternal truths. Although skeptics were in agreement with the sophists with regard to their absence of knowledge of eternal truths, in contrast with the sophists, who would be satisfied with the negative answer, skeptics would merely suspend judgment on the question of the possibility of objective and universally valid eternal truths. In this regard, contra the sophists, who deny the possibility of knowledge of the unchanging reality behind the perceived world, skeptics -like Socrates- were simply skeptical about this issue.

In order to determine the extent to which such skeptical position influenced Plato, let us first examine Socrates' account of the possibility of knowledge, as an exemplar of the skeptic thought. Since Socrates himself did not leave any written material regarding his philosophical pursuit, we should see what others who wrote about him like Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon have to say about Socrates and his philosophical commitments. In order to learn about the views that Socrates genuinely maintained, however, we must be able to distinguish the dialogues in which Plato represents the historical Socrates accurately from the dialogues where Plato slightly diverges from Socrates' views and instead undertakes his own philosophical project. That is, we first need to demarcate the Socratic dialogues from the Platonic dialogues, which is a quite difficult task.

Scholars divide the Platonic dialogues into three chronological groups namely, early, middle and late dialogues. Close examination of this division reveals that in the early dialogues the character Socrates appears to represent the historical Socrates. That is why the early dialogues of Plato are called Socratic dialogues.[1] The method and the subject matter of the early dialogues differ significantly from Plato's so-called middle and late dialogues. In the early dialogues, i.e. Socratic dialogues, Socrates interrogates his interlocutors, who defend certain positive ethical beliefs. He asks questions about their beliefs, especially the way they would define ethical concepts like, "bravery" in *Laches*, or "piety" in the *Euthyphro* and shows them that the beliefs they hold about these concepts are inconsistent and ultimately lead to some contradiction (*Laches*, 190d-e; *Euthyphro*, 5d). In other words at the end of the interrogation, Socrates' interlocutor usually finds out that her believes about various ethical concepts, which were

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[1] According to T. Penner, some of the dialogues that should be regarded as Socratic are the followings: *Hippias*, *Minos*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Euthyphro* and *Apology* (Penner, 1992, p. 124).

initially thought to be firm, are in fact inconsistent. Two of the common characteristics of these Socratic dialogues are as follows: First, the goal of the characters in the dialogues is to attain knowledge of universally valid ethical truths. Second, despite their efforts to discover the definitions of the commonly used ethical terms, the characters ultimately fail to come up with satisfying definitions for the ethical terms.

The first feature of the early dialogues, namely that they are all about Socratic definitions of ethical terms supports the claim that Plato's early writings were influenced by Socrates' own philosophical ambitions to find universal definitions for ethical terms. Thus, by looking at the early dialogues one might infer that Plato's objective was to adopt his teacher's strategy and come up with a comprehensive ethical theory. In the very first works Plato might be regarded as a mere biographer, who records some facts about his much-admired mentor Socrates, as he appears to be concerned merely with conveying the views of the historical Socrates. Nonetheless, Plato gradually comes up with his own theories in relation to the problems Socrates was bothered. As will be clear, in the late dialogues Plato is concerned with a broader conception of knowledge about eternal truths in general, which exceeds the limited scope of Socrates' search for knowledge of ethical truths.

Another feature of the early dialogues is that they demonstrate the ignorance of people concerning commonly used and fundamental ethical terms. That is, Socrates -as portrayed by Plato- makes it clear that contrary to the common assumption, we do not have substantial ethical knowledge. The failure of the interlocutors to present a consistent definition of familiar ethical terms, such as 'bravery' demonstrates this point most clearly. Nonetheless, the interlocutors are not the only ones who do not know the answers to the questions. Socrates himself concedes that he is as ignorant as his interlocutors. What distinguishes Socrates from the other characters is that Socrates is aware of his own ignorance and famously asserts that the only thing he knows is that he does not know anything. As we see in the *Apology*, Socrates claims "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know [...]" (Plato 1997, Apology, 21d).

So far, we saw that in the early dialogues the historical Socrates is represented as a philosopher who aims to show that there is no consensus among people about the meanings of even the most fundamental and familiar ethical notions like courage or piety. Thus, we are shown that people who claim to know various ethical concepts are in fact ignorant of the most basic moral forms. Moreover, Socrates himself admits his ignorance and lack of knowledge regarding those moral terms. One might, therefore, conclude that

Socrates was a sophist and did not believe in the possibility of ethical knowledge. In other words, the reason why Socrates demonstrates that the interlocutor lacks knowledge might be because he did not believe that ethical knowledge was possible.

This is a misinterpretation of Socrates' philosophy. Socrates does not hold that knowledge of ethical definitions is impossible. In this respect, he differs from the sophists. For one thing, unlike the sophists Socrates keeps seeking knowledge of universally valid ethical truths. Contrary to the sophists, who think that knowledge of eternal ethical truths is impossible, Socrates seems to believe that he might eventually attain those truths. In most of the early and middle (or transitional) dialogues, Socrates asks for adequate definitions of ethical notions, like bravery (in *Laches*), piety (in *Euthyphro*), temperance (in *Charmides*), virtue, justice (in *Republic*) etc. For instance, in *Euthyphro*, Socrates searches for an account of piety and argues that the pious should have the same character in every instance of it. He says, "[...] is the pious not the same an alike in every action, and the impious the opposite of all that is pious and like itself, and everything that is to be impious presents us with one form or appearance in so far as it is impious?" (Plato, 1997, Euthyphro, 5d). As is clear in this passage, Socrates demands a definition of piety that will be applicable to each and every instance of pious act, and can also be captured with one and the same form.

Similarly in *Meno*, Socrates asks "What is virtue?" and as a response he writes, "What else but also to be able to rule over people, if you are seeking one description to fit them all" (Plato, 1997, Meno, 73d). Thus, we have good reasons to think that Socrates himself was one of the skeptics, who was continuously in search of knowledge even though he was well aware that there is no guarantee that he will attain such knowledge. That is why even though he admits that he knows nothing and aims to demonstrate that people who think they know something are misguided, he does not give up searching for knowledge, which suggests that he does not deny the possibility of such knowledge, rather he is simply skeptical about it.

While Plato might be read as attempting to refute the proponents of the prevailing ethical theories of his time, one might also argue that Plato's main target was not the moral skeptics, relativists, and sophists, but rather the average people, who are indifferent to the ethical problems, and therefore fail to grasp the truths about the forms. Similarly, Plato's main target might be the common people who do not care about attaining knowledge about ethics due to their preoccupation with the daily endeavors in their self-centered worlds.[2]

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[2] Julia Annas argues for the latter line of thought (Annas, 1958, p. 239).

Although plausible, this line of thought does not reflect Plato's philosophy accurately either. It is quite true that Plato had concerns about the beliefs of common people. Yet, he could be considered as an elitist when it comes to philosophical avocation. In the *Republic*, for instance, it is asked "Can the majority in any way tolerate or accept the reality of the beautiful itself, as opposed to the many beautiful things, or the reality of each thing itself, as opposed to the corresponding many" and the response is negative: "Not in any way. Then the majority cannot be philosophic" (Plato, 1997, Republic, 493e-494a). In other words, for Plato, only the educated people with necessary intellectual capacities, namely the philosophers can be philosophic. In that sense, philosophers are responsible to seek the truth and grasp the reality.

In order to emphasize the responsibility of philosophers for the salvation of the common people we are told that, "[...] no city, constitution, or individual man will ever become perfect until either some chance event compels those few philosophers who aren't vicious to take charge of a city" (Plato, 1997, Republic, 499b-c). To put it in other words, Plato does not aim to educate or change the beliefs of the average people by revealing his philosophy, instead he wants a group of intellectuals to take control of the city so that the common people can be ruled properly and ultimately be happy. In this regard, in Plato's ideal state *Callipolis*, the welfare of the majority depends on the minority's success to attain the necessary knowledge of the forms that will reveal the correct way to live.

Having consulted with Plato's writings, we can now confirm that Plato's priority was to enable those who possess philosophic nature to acquire the knowledge of unchanging reality of the forms, so that they can rule the common people accordingly. Hence, Plato seems to be aware that he first has to persuade the philosophers of his day by coming up with an alternative to the prevailing philosophical positions, such as sophism and skepticism.

Plato's Search for Eternal Truths

Let us, now, focus on the consequences of this interpretation. From what has been argued we can infer that both sophists and skeptics point out the lack of substantial evidence for believing in the existence of unchanging and objective moral facts. Having been surrounded by sophists who completely deny the existence of immutable and eternal truths about moral conduct and the moral skeptics, who are skeptical of unchanging moral facts, it is natural for Plato to be concerned with questions regarding ethical knowledge. Thus in order to respond to the arguments of sophists and moral skeptics, Plato had to show that ethical knowledge is attainable. So, he had to prove a) contra sophists, there are universal realities that are not

subject to change and b) contra skeptics, we can attain the knowledge of these realities through reason. In fact, the philosophers who follow his footsteps will be the privileged ones.

Knowing that the primary purpose of Plato is to show that there are immutable things whose knowledge is attainable by the philosophically minded gives us some insight into the nature of the forms and the limits of the theory of forms. One consequence of this thesis is that if the theory of forms is introduced as a response to sophists' relativism and skeptics' worries regarding the possibility of moral knowledge, then it is reasonable to conclude that there is a strong relation between the forms and morality. In other words, it might be thought that the theory of forms is an ethical theory that is specifically designed to demonstrate the possibility of universal and objective moral knowledge. There is some textual evidence to support this claim. For example, recognizing the forms of moral properties prior to amoral forms can be considered as a good support for this line of thought. The discussion of moral qualities and the corresponding forms appear before the discussion of any other kinds of forms in Plato's dialogues. One might also point out that the form of the Good, which is the highest form in the hierarchy of forms, has ethical connotations.

Besides, in *Parmenides,* which is considered to be one of the middle (or transitional) dialogues, while there is no hesitation to assert the existence of moral forms, such as the forms of Justice, Beauty and Goodness, the character Socrates admits that he is puzzled by the forms of other things like human beings; water and fire; and of undignified and worthless things as hair, mud, and dirt (Plato, Parmenides, 130b-d). Thus, there are good reasons to think that the character Socrates in that dialogue represents the historical Socrates as his main interest lies in the ethical problems and more particularly in attaining the universal definitions of moral notions.

Even when Socrates seeks knowledge of the forms, he seems to be searching for definitions of the general ethical terms. For instance, when the character Socrates asks for the form of Pious through which all the pious actions are pious, the answer he receives is also definitional (Plato, Euthyphro, 6d-7a). That is, *Euthyphro* gives a definitional account when he asserts that "what is dear to Gods is pious and what is not is impious" (Plato, 1997, Euthyphro, 7a). Yet, since *Euthyphro* is generally accepted to be one of the transitional dialogues, we cannot attribute this interest in universal moral definitions alone to Plato's late dialogues and generalize that Plato's whole philosophy is limited to ethics.

In the dialogues where the character Socrates examines amoral entities or issues, we can see that Plato presents his own views, rather than the views of the historical Socrates. The historical Socrates was not

interested in the theory of forms and how they are related to particulars and to each other.[3] Nonetheless, the character Socrates in *Parmenides* seems to have no interest in coming up with the definitions of moral concepts. Instead, he is interested in understanding the nature of forms and how they are different from particulars. Therefore, in *Parmenides* it is Plato who is talking under the name of Socrates.

One reason for the confusion between Socratic enterprise for universal definitions of ethical terms and the Platonic project of demonstrating the existence of unchanging reality is due to the similarity of the structure of the problem each tries to solve, namely the One-Over-Many Problem. While in the context of Socratic enterprise the One-Over-Many Problem emerges from the assumption that many different instances of a moral quality, such as piety can be accounted by appealing to a single term, i.e., piety, in the Platonic framework the problem appears when we attempt to explain how many different particulars, such as human beings can be instantiations of a single form, namely the form of Man.

Plato's reluctance to present a comprehensive theory of forms, as opposed to a theory that is merely concerned with ethical terms especially in his early dialogues suggests that he has focused on a project limited to ethics alone, and he is not interested in answering more general and fundamental metaphysical or epistemological questions. In most of his early dialogues we find references to ethical questions both in the level of individual and society. In the late dialogues, on the other hand, the significance of Socratic definitions of moral notions decreases, while the role of forms in his philosophy dominates Plato's writings. For example, in the late dialogues such as *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*, Plato focuses on the distinction between the forms and the particulars rather than the Socratic definitions of ethical terms (Plato, Parmenides, 129a-c, Plato, Timeaus, 27d-28b).

Although we cannot deny the similarities between definitions and the forms, it should be noted that the theory of forms applies to a wider range of objects, while Socratic definitions are limited merely to ethical qualities. As the late dialogues reveal, Plato's theory of forms is not only about morality, but also about the possibility of knowledge acquisition in general.

Despite the fact that Plato's preliminary project was on ethics, it would be a mistake to think that Plato's theory of forms is a moral theory. As we saw above, in the early dialogues Plato adopts a Socratic mission to

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[3] According to some scholars, such as John Burnet and Alfred A. Taylor Socrates himself developed a theory of forms. For more information on their view.

search for universal definitions for ethical qualities. Thus, Plato's lack of confidence in asserting the existence of morally neutral forms in *Parmenides* can only imply that the theory of forms -as represented there- is not a complete theory yet.

The main focus of the dialogue *Parmenides* is the relation between forms and the particulars, not the limits of the theory of forms. In other words, there is very few and quite weak textual evidence in Plato's writings supporting the view that the theory of forms is an account of objective knowledge of morality alone. On the other hand, the difference between Plato's early dialogues, in which Plato appears to be interested in questions of practical philosophy, and his middle and late dialogues where he is more concerned with theoretical philosophy suggests that Plato's thought has developed and expanded significantly throughout the course of his writings. While in the Socratic dialogues Plato is interested in searching for universal definitions for ethical terms, in his later works he undertakes a much more comprehensive project of proving the possibility of knowledge of eternal truths about the forms that are instantiated in various ways in this world. In this regard, the limit of knowledge he is concerned with in his later works extends far beyond the ethical realm for he is also concerned with mathematical, scientific, aesthetic, and political knowledge.

In order to persuade the sophists on the possibility of knowledge Plato had to argue that there are realities, which are not subject to change. These realities, namely forms were the only objects of knowledge because unlike the particular objects in the world, forms are unchanging. In this regard, he clearly distinguishes the forms from the particulars. In the dialogue *Sophist*, Plato writes, "by our bodies and through perception we have dealings with coming-to-be, but we deal with real being by our souls and through reasoning. You say that being always stays at the same and in the same state, but coming-to-be varies from one time to another" (Plato, 1997, Sophist, 248a). By the terms 'coming-to-be' and 'being' Plato refers to particulars that we perceive in the world and the forms respectively. These phrases emphasize the opposition between the changing nature of particulars and the stable and unchanging nature of the forms. With this characterization Plato could very well respond to the sophists' arguments against the possibility of knowledge of the unchanging realities because one of the underlying assumption of the sophists was that everything is subject to change.

The Nature of the Forms

Having argued that Plato responds to the moral skeptics and the sophists in the beginning of his philosophical journey, we can now determine the nature of the forms. However, since it is difficult to give a

positive characterization of the forms, let us first try to determine what forms are not. This exercise will hopefully lead us to a positive account of forms. Are forms physical entities? One might appeal to the analogy between the objects and their pictures in order to be able to visualize the relation between the forms and particular objects. Nevertheless, this illustration can tell very little -if anything at all- about this mysterious relation between forms and particulars. For one thing it makes reference to a relation between two physical objects namely physical object and their pictures. In other words, this relation implies that forms are physical objects.

However, it has been emphasized several times in Platonic dialogues, forms are not physical. Forms, which are objects of knowledge, cannot be grasped through senses. In *Pheado*, we have been told that "Purest knowledge comes with thought alone not with eyes and ears" (Plato, 1997, Pheado, 65e). In other words, forms are described as intelligible objects not as sensible things. Unlike sensible objects, the intelligible forms are immutable. As it is described in *Republic*, the form of Beauty is always beautiful and never the opposite of beautiful (Plato, Republic, 479e). The reason why the forms cannot have opposite properties is because unlike particulars forms do not change. It is stated explicitly in *Symposium*, "[...] when those others come to be or pass away, this (the beautiful itself) does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change" (Plato, 1997, Symposium, 211a-b).

Besides, if forms were physical, then Plato would fail to solve the problem of one-over-many, which was one of the initial problems he supposedly wanted to solve regarding moral issues. The one-over-many problem is examined in *Parmenides*. There, the character Socrates fails to respond to Parmenides' questions regarding this specific problem of how one form can be instantiated in different particulars at the same time (Plato, Parmenides, 131a-d). While one might conclude from Parmenides' questioning that it is not possible at all, this conclusion would be far from justified. As demonstrated in *Parmenides*, representation of forms with physical objects, such as a sail leads to contradictions for such representation implies either division of forms into parts or their being present in each particular as a whole. Either of these options leads to absurdities concerning the relation between forms and particular physical objects. Thus, the question of how particulars and especially how different particulars can partake in the same form remains to be answered. In brief, contrary textual evidence suggests that forms are not physical entities. The next question, therefore, is whether forms are mere ethical abstractions.

If we admit forms to be mere ethical abstractions, we would also have to admit that Plato's theory of forms is a theory of morality *simpliciter*. This would make sense if we read Plato's own philosophical project to be

identical with Socrates' philosophical aspirations that are limited to ethical questions. My only -and I believe it will be a determining argument- against this interpretation of the forms is that in his various texts Plato mentions the possibility of morally neutral forms such as, the form of one, large and small, etc. Similarly, mathematical terms, like 'equality' and 'one' might be good examples of morally neutral forms in Plato's theory (Plato, Pheado, 74a-b; Plato, Symposium, 187a). If forms were only of ethical qualities, then why would Plato regard some clearly amoral terms as some of the examples of the forms?

In addition to mathematical terms, Plato also argues that there are forms of aesthetic qualities, such as beautiful and ugly. He speaks of all things, such as "Bigness, Health, Strength and in a world a reality of all other things, that which each of them essentially is" (Plato, 1997, Pheado, 65d). In addition to all these qualities, Plato also talks about the forms or "reality of all other things." Thus, he implies that there are forms of everything we encounter, such as physical objects and artifacts. In the *Republic*, we see that there are forms of furniture: "For example, there are many beds and tables. But there are only two forms of such furniture, one of bed and one of the table" (Plato, 1997, Republic, 596a-b). In brief, it is apparent that Plato is concerned with much wider range of qualities rather than mere ethical ones. There seems to be a form of every kind of things or for every general predicate such as the form of good, the form of man, even the form of cat.

If there are forms of every general predicate, then forms might be mere linguistic entities. The third option we will examine now is whether forms are simply universal definitions? Having argued that Plato was influenced by his teacher Socrates, whose main goal was to discover universal definitions of moral concepts, we can see how Plato's project also involves discovering true and universally valid definitions of concepts. And unlike his teacher, we can say that Plato had a broader interest and wanted to acquire the knowledge of universally valid definitions of all concepts, including both moral and amoral ones.

Despite its initial appeal, this interpretation regarding the nature of forms is also problematic as there are passages where Plato undermines the possibility of identifying form as mere verbal or linguistic representations. For instance, in *Sophist*, any rhetorical or verbal representation of things is dismissed:

> Well, then won't we expect that there's another kind of expertise– this time having to do with words– and that someone can use it to trick young people when they stand even farther away from the truth about things? Wouldn't he do it by putting words in their ears, and by showing them spoken copies of

> everything, so as to make them believe that the words are true and that the person who is speaking to them is the wisest person there is? (Plato, 1997, Sophist, 234c).

Plato implies that any verbal representation will fail to capture the nature of things and therefore will not be more than a mere imitation. Besides, we are told that definitions are not immutable as more experience one acquires the more likely that the definitions or verbal expressions will be changed by the new experience (Plato, Sophist, 234e-235a). In this respect, despite the fact that Plato was quite sympathetic to Socratic mission for discovering universal definitions, his mature theory of forms diverges significantly from his teacher's project. Definitions, for Plato, cannot be good candidates for eternal entities because they are mere verbal imitations that are subject to change.

Could forms be universals in Aristotelian sense? According to Aristotle, the solution of the one-over-many problem is possible if we appeal to universals. As we know Plato was also bothered with the one-over-many problem. Hence, one might infer that he thought of the forms as universals in the Aristotelian sense. According to Aristotle, universals are sheer abstractions from or generalizations of things. They persist only in particulars and have no independent or objective reality apart from particulars.

Contra Aristotelian universals, however, Platonic forms exist independently of particulars in the physical world. Although, we recollect the knowledge of the forms we are not justified to think that we form this knowledge. Also, unlike the Aristotelian universals that are learned by the human minds' active effort, in Plato's theory of forms, we are quite passive, in the sense that we only recollect the knowledge passively that we already possessed (Plato, Meno, 82b-85b). In this regard, Platonic forms should be distinguished from the Aristotelian universals.

Having argued that forms cannot be merely physical entities, definitions, Aristotelian universals or merely mathematical and ethical entities, one might think that they are mere ideas or conceptual mind-dependent entities. Yet, it cannot be concepts or ideas of human beings for our ideas are subject to change and they might vary from person to person. Nevertheless, as described by Plato in *Symposium*, forms are pure, unmixed and not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other non-sense of mortality (Plato, Symposium, 211e). Besides, if forms were human concepts, then they would not be eternal. Our concepts exist only as long as minds exist, while according to Plato's theory of forms, forms exist independently of our knowing them. In other words, unlike concepts, Platonic forms

possess mind independent objective reality. Therefore, forms cannot be concepts.

In his late dialogue *Timaeus*, Plato appears to be saying that forms are ideas in the mind of the designer of the universe: "Well, if this world of ours is beautiful and its craftsman good, then clearly he looked at the eternal model." And it continues, "Now surely it's clear to all that it was the eternal model he looked at, as all the things that have come to be, our universe is the most beautiful, and of causes the craftsman is the most excellent" (Plato, 1997, Timaeus, 29a). It seems that in this passage Plato is making a reference to an intelligent designer of the world, which can be interpreted as a reference to God. While this is a highly controversial inference that needs to be backed up with substantial textual evidence, for the purposes of the present paper, it suffices to grant that this is a better reading than the alternative readings that had been discussed above. If forms are the ideas in God's mind constituting a model for the design of the universe, then we can infer that there are forms corresponding to everything in the universe, including all physical and non-physical objects, such as organisms, our thoughts, principles, artifacts, qualities etc. The claim that forms are models by which God designed the world is also compatible with our thesis that ethical objects are not the only objects of the theory of forms.

In fact, in his earlier dialogue *Parmenides*, the character Socrates says: "But, Parmenides maybe each of these forms is a thought, and properly occurs only in minds" and then argues for the possibility that forms might be patterns in nature and the similarity between the particulars and the forms originates from particulars' being modeled on forms (Plato, 1997, Parmenides, 132b-e). These responses i.e., forms as thoughts and forms as models might appear to be two mutually exclusive possibilities because Parmenides gives separate responses to each possibility. Nevertheless, a closer inspection reveals that the character Socrates examined the possibility that 'forms are thoughts/models by which all the particulars in the universe are designed'. Parmenides' response to this proposal goes as follows; "If something resembles the form, can that form not be like what has been modeled on it, to the extent that the thing has been made like it? Or is there any way for something like to be like what is not like it?" (Plato, 1997, Parmenides, 132d).

Unfortunately, inexperienced 'Socrates' fails to respond to this challenge and answers negatively to the question, which enables Parmenides to come up with the famous 'third man' counter argument. Parmenides says that if a particular is like a form to the extent that it has been modeled on it, then we can also say that the form is like the particular. Thus, if the form and the particular are like each other, then there should be a third form that both the original form and the particular partakes in, so that

the similarity between them can be explained (Plato, Parmenides, 132d-133a). It is obvious that this kind of relation between the forms and particulars leads to infinite regress of forms hence lacks any explanatory power.

Should we give up this suggestion then? Fortunately, unlike the inexperienced Socrates in the dialogue we can think of a way out of Parmenides' criticisms. However, first we need to identify the part that causes the problem. Parmenides assumes that if a particular is like a form to the extent that it has been modeled on it, then the form should be like the particular as well. Nevertheless, it is not clear why we should accept this assumption. There might be an intransitive similarity relation between the form and the particular. An example will help us clarify this point. Let us imagine that Plato had a little daughter, named Platonia who resembled his father a lot form the physical point of view i.e., the same eyes, the same nose and the same physical constitution. In brief, she is exactly like his father on which she is being modeled. Would we also say that Plato is like his daughter Platonia? The intuitive answer to this is, "no." We usually do not say that parents are like their infants, even though we can admit the opposite easily. Similarly, as an amateur sculpture I can make a sculpture of my sister. Though not a perfect copy, my sculpture might resemble my sister in various ways. In other words, I can say that it is like my sister for it has the same height, similar face etc. Having said that, would I also say that my sister is like this sculpture? I would not say this because the sculpture is a bad imitation and it lacks many qualities my sister has.

Similarly, Parmenides' criticism of Socrates' suggestion that forms could be models for particulars is not legitimate because similarity is not always a transitive relation. Just because 'a' resembles 'b' we cannot infer that 'b' resembles 'a' as well. We might say that the copies are like their models, yet we would not always want to admit that the models are like the copies. Hence, if this kind of intransitive similarity relation between the forms and particulars is specified, there might be a way of handling Parmenides' criticisms regarding the possibility that forms are ideas in God's mind on which the particulars modeled in the design of the universe.

One other passage that supports the suggestion - that forms are God's ideas that constitutes the ideal universe for the design of existing universe- comes form *Republic* X. There, Plato distinguishes three different kinds of things, namely the form, the imitation of form, and the imitation of the imitation of form. He says, "We get, then, these three kinds of beds. The first is in nature a bed, and I suppose we'd say that a god makes it, or does someone else make it? No one else, I suppose. The second is the work of a carpenter. Yes. And the third is the one the painter makes. Isn't that so? It is" (Plato, 1997, Republic X, 597b). As described above, we can still argue that

both the imitation and the imitation of the imitation are 'like' the form they are modeled on respectively; The carpenter's handwork will be more similar to the form of the bed then the painter's depiction of the artifact bed because the carpenter uses the form itself for his design, while the painter uses the imitation of the same form. Although we can argue that both the carpenter's and the painter's bed are like the form of the bed, we cannot infer the opposite for the aforementioned reasons, i.e., the intransitive relation between the forms and their imitations.

One other important thing to note from this passage from *Republic* is that, although God is the only one who creates forms, He is not the only one who can attain the knowledge of the forms. As indicated in the previous passage, carpenter has access to the form of the bed and, in fact, his designs are modeled on this form of the bed, which is bed in nature. On the other hand, the painter has access to only the imitation of the imitation of the form of the bed. Thus, according to Plato, unlike the carpenter, the painter -or the artist in general- fails to attain the knowledge of the bed.

Having specified the nature of the forms, Plato could respond to the sophists' claims that there are no universal unchanging realities. Next, we need to examine how it is possible for us to acquire the knowledge of the forms that reside in God's mind? Unless, Plato has an argument showing that knowledge of these realities is possible and identify a way of grasping the forms, his project cannot be completed for he has to persuade the skeptics as well. Let us now see whether Plato presents a coherent picture of how we acquire knowledge of the forms.

Understanding the distinction between knowledge and opinion plays a significant role in understanding how we can acquire knowledge of the forms. According to Plato, the sight lovers are concerned with particulars i.e., many beautiful things therefore they can only have opinions. He argues that these people who are only concerned with appearances and particulars are living in a dream as they fail to grasp the realities beneath appearances (Plato, Republic, 476c-d). People who are deceived by their sensual experience and believe in the apparent multiplicity of single forms can only have opinions (Plato, Republic, 476a). Besides, the instances or particulars that partake in the forms can have opposite qualities at the same time. That is why it is not possible to have definite knowledge of particular things. The reason why particulars can have opposite features is due to their changing natures. Particulars are subject to change and can have opposite properties at different times. Their features might also change in relation to different perspectives and contexts (Plato, Symposium, 212a). Therefore, anything we say about the particulars is fallible and cannot be considered as knowledge. In brief, particulars can be both F and not F at the same time or through time where F denotes any property.

On the other hand, unlike beliefs, knowledge is defined as infallible (Plato, Republic, 477e). In *Republic*, it was argued that only the forms are objects of knowledge because they are the only candidates for being truly F, for any property F they bear (Plato, Republic, 470a-480a). For example, the form of beauty is 'the beautiful itself' and it excludes its opposite, namely ugliness. The reason for this exclusion lies in the nature of the object of knowledge, namely the nature of forms. Philosophers, who are distinguished from the sight lovers, can acquire the infallible knowledge of forms because they are interested in the forms, such as the beauty, the just and the good itself rather than their apparent multiplicity (Plato, Republic, 475d).

Plato argues that knowledge of forms is attainable, in fact he argues for a stronger thesis and claims that only forms can be objects of our knowledge. He says it is possible to know forms through reasoning. In *Pheado*, we are told that forms are attainable through reasoning. That is, purest knowledge comes with thought, not with sensation (Plato, Pheado, 65e). In fact, it has been stated in various passages in Plato's dialogues that forms which are defined as unchanging entities can only be grasped through reasoning and the knowledge of them can only be possible through recollection (Plato, Sophist, 248a; Plato, Meno, 81c-d). In other words, Plato implies that we already possess the knowledge of the forms for they are innate in us.

However, one reason why it is not so easy to recollect them and have the conscious knowledge of them seems to be due to the negative influence of our sensible experiences. In *Pheado*, for instance, Socrates is convinced that there are certain never changing things, i.e. forms and his bodily death will enable him to acquire the knowledge of those forms. The reason why Socrates believes that his bodily death will enable him to attain the knowledge of forms can be that after his body dies, he will be free from the inhibitive effects of his senses. There, Socrates says, "It seems likely that we shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom, as our argument shows not while we live" (Plato, 1997, Pheado, 66e). In this respect, in order to attain the knowledge of the forms we should not only develop our reasoning capacities, but also try to avoid the bad influences of our senses.

In brief, Plato distinguishes knowledge from opinions by their objects. While the objects of opinions are sensible things that are subject to change in relation to different contexts, the objects of knowledge are unchanging intelligible realities that can be accessed through reason alone.

It should be clear by now that Plato's theory of knowledge is quite different from modern understanding of knowledge because it does not make any explicit reference to psychological certainty. In other words, for Plato,

being certain of our beliefs does not ensure us that we possess knowledge of things. One reason why Plato does not consider certainty as a criterion of knowledge might be due to the fact that as we see in the Socratic dialogues, people fail to have knowledge even when they are quite certain about their beliefs. Another reason might be that since Plato aims to respond to the worries of the sophists and skeptics, he has to provide a better criterion than sheer certainty and self-confidence. It is obvious that moral skeptics would search for more concrete and compelling theory than claims about psychological certainty and convictions about moral truths.

Having explained the objects of knowledge and the way we can attain knowledge, we can now conclude that Plato manages to respond to both sophists and skeptics' worries regarding the possibility of universal realities and explaining how we can attain knowledge of these realities. That is why it is reasonable to think that the properties that have been attributed to the forms in the early dialogues reflect the ethical concerns of responding the sophists and moral skeptics. The main features of forms are that they are eternal, independent of the physical world and are not contradictory fits perfectly to the moral project of Plato and explains how the theory of forms can be a response to the Socratic search for the universal definitions and Sophists unwillingness to accept that knowledge is possible.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I argued that understanding Plato's initial ethical concerns and his interest in practical philosophy allows us to grasp the development of Plato's views in the course of his dialogues and provides us with the much needed conceptual tools required to grasp his theoretical philosophy. Plato's theory of forms emerges from a search for answers to the ethical questions. Having determined that Plato's initial objective was to introduce an alternative theory to the prevailing philosophies of his time enabled us to see his overall project more accurately and completely. Since, Plato wanted to provide a satisfying answer to the arguments of sophists and moral skeptics, his philosophical thought developed in a way that satisfies this goal.

Plato's primary aim was to determine the objects of knowledge so that sophists' teachings which attack the belief that there are unchanging universal entities could be shown to be wrong. He argued that there are forms, which are the true bearers of properties and therefore unchanging realities. These forms are not in the sensible world, but in the intelligible world, which as suggested in the paper coincide with the mind of God. The function of these forms is to provide God, as the creator of the universe, with an ideal model for his design of the universe. In this regard, Plato's theory of forms differs significantly from the Socratic mission whose objective is

limited to the acquisition of universal moral definitions. In other words, the scope of the theory of forms is much wider and more ambitious than Socratic enterprise. Since the description of the nature and the function of the forms is not sufficient to respond to the skeptics' worries, Plato also tries to show that it is possible for humans to attain knowledge of these unchanging realities. More specifically, he argues that we -as human beings- can have access to these realities through reasoning and by eliminating the negative effects of our senses.

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