The Platonic ideas: a new interpretation

Dimitris Papadis
Department of Philosophy, Neapolis University, Cyprus

ABSTRACT

The word “form” as a philosophical term is connected par excellence with Plato, according to whom the world consists of phenomena we perceive through sensation and of all the atemporal archetypes of the beings, which Plato calls Forms or Ideas. On the one hand we have all the beautiful things and on the other hand we have the Form of Beauty, the Beauty itself. The measure for and the cause of for example the equality of equal things is the Form of Equality itself. All things perceived through sensation are in a way reflections or shadows of the Forms, they have a specific beginning for their existence, they evolve, and destruct; in contrast to these, the Forms, the archetypes of the world known to us through sensation, are atemporal, unchanging, and perfect beings of the intelligible world and only perceived with the mind. This article argues that the Platonic Forms are neither simple general notions, as Aristotle claims, nor are they truly transcendent/metaphysical beings/entities, which supposedly existed before humans, but substantiated general notions, which Socrates reached by inductive reasoning, and which gained in a way a poetic-mythical existence, independent from man who created them in a subtractive way. Plato used this approach as juxtaposition to the Sophistic Relativism and as a means to exalt and emphasise mainly the importance of moral values.

Existing beings are divided, according to Plato, into visible-perceptible on the one hand and invisible-comprehensible on the other. The former are changeable – the latter are unchangeable; they are eternal and absolute substances, the so-called Forms or Ideas. But what are the Platonic Ideas? Should they be understood as autonomous and real substances that belong to an ideal-metaphysical world, beyond of and independent from the physical world, or should they be understood as realities of the natural world? If the former hypothesis is valid, then they are the eternal archetypes and causes of the things of the physical world, namely of the perceptible things, which owe their existence to a kind of participation in the Ideas. Beautiful things, for example, exist and are beautiful, because they participate in the Idea of the Beautiful. In all the beautiful things we have the presence of the Idea of the Beautiful.
of the Idea of the Beautiful. Precisely this presence establishes their substance as beautiful things. But if the latter hypothesis is valid, then the case is just the opposite, it is not the Ideas that are the causes of the existence of perceptible things. Consequently, in our example it is the perceptible things that are the causes of the existence of Ideas, namely the beautiful things, and, in keeping with our example, the cause of the existence of the Idea of the Beautiful. In other words, in this case, man goes back to the Ideas, taking as a starting point and as a cause the perceptible things.

Based on similar beings of a particular ontological category (e.g. category: man) that man perceives through his senses, man is able to go back to the notion-idea of the kind of those similar things. That is, all men embody and represent the one and only notion-idea of the human species. So from the different white objects which we perceive through vision, we can then reach the general notion-idea of whiteness and, accordingly, from the different fair deeds we can reach the general notion-idea of justice. At any rate, when talking about the Platonic Ideas, we usually refer to the eternal and unchangeable, comprehensible substances that are connected on the one hand with Plato's theory about the pre-existence of the soul and on the other hand with his theory about the a priori knowledge of the aforesaid Ideas on behalf of the soul when the latter was still in the stage of pre-existence. Thus we are referring to the eternal archetypes of perceptible beings and things which presumably exist in a purely metaphysical world.

The concept of Platonic Ideas is a much debated topic among Platonic scholars. Kant, for example, considers the Ideas as exemplary models that do not correspond to anything real, i.e. they are logical structures, simple creations of the mind that serve as methodological models, as intellectual tools and tools for interpreting the world. They are intellectual beings without ontological value. Eduard Zeller, too, considers the Ideas autonomous concepts. They are the abstract concepts which Socrates inferred by deduction and which Plato regarded as truly subordinate beings. Thus he gave a real substance to reasonable creations (fictions). Paul Natorp (1961) considers the Ideas as "methodical matters", by which man captures reality with his intellect.

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2 Cf. Zeller (1844-1852).
Now let us turn to what the Ideas are according to the Platonic text. According to \textit{Phaedo}\textsuperscript{3} there are many Ideas, such as the idea of Equality, Justice, Beauty. Each idea is something separate and different from all the things of the natural world and it exists by itself as something unique and absolute. It would be wrong, says Plato, to identify two equal sticks with the idea of Equality itself, or beautiful bodies with the Idea of the Beautiful itself. Moreover, it is also possible that two sticks that appear to us equal are actually unequal. In any case, that which establishes the two sticks as equal is the Idea of Equality which is Equality \textit{per se}, the proper equality, and equality by itself. Without the Idea of Equality we would not be able to talk about equal nor about unequal sticks. It is the Idea of Equality that constitutes the essential criterion for equality. The same, of course, goes for the relation between the beautiful things and the Idea of the Beautiful (and for all other similar relations). The Idea of the Beautiful is not identified either with a beautiful thing or with the nice things all together. The Idea of the Beautiful is Beauty itself, proper Beauty as such, the Beautiful by itself. This is the cause and the criterion for the Beauty of all beautiful things, which are beautiful, because they are examples of the Idea of the Beautiful in the sense that they participate in the essence of Beauty. All the above, as far as the relation between the Idea and the perceptible things is concerned, are valid either when the Idea is an autonomous metaphysical substance or when the Idea is what we call a general notion, because in either case both the Idea and the general notion function as cause and criterion in relation to the identity of the perceptible things of each ontological category. The particular characteristics of each Idea are the uniqueness and the otherness, i.e. the Idea is something different and separate from all the perceptible homonymous things which belong to the same category and bear the same name as the Idea.\textsuperscript{4} Furthermore, the Ideas are, according to what we read in \textit{Phaedo}, eternal, unchanging, perfect, and simple, i.e. of a single kind and not composite\textsuperscript{5}.

In \textit{Phaedrus}, too, the Ideas are presented as unique intelligible realities, and as causes of existence and of unity of the homonymous perceptible beings and things. Without the intellectual conception of the Idea we cannot understand the perceptible things which participate in the Idea. For example, without the conception of the Beautiful we cannot

\textsuperscript{3} See \textit{Phaedo} 74-78.
\textsuperscript{4} Cf. 74a-d.
\textsuperscript{5} Cf. 74de, 78cd-79d, 80b, 103e.
understand why many beautiful things are beautiful, namely what is that which makes them beautiful. In order to highlight how the Ideas differ from the world of perceptible things, Plato places them into a metaphysical space, in a place above the sky, as he calls it. They also appear as unfamiliar to every materiality and physicality and are connected with the truth, which distinguishes the eternal, unchanging and absolute world of the mind and of the Ideas in contrast to the changing, relative/subjective and perishable world of perceptible things which is connected with the subjective view (δόξα), i.e. the opinion, the uncertain and relative/subjective knowledge⁶.

In the Republic, too⁷, does Plato repeat his position about the existence of two worlds, of the absolute world of the Ideas on the one hand and of the relative and ephemeral world of perceptible beings and things on the other hand. The Ideas, according to the Republic, are, from a cognitive view, more real than the perceptible and ephemeral things. This happens because the absolute reality, as that of the Ideas, is steady, unchanging, and of a single dimensional and meaning. That is why it is also connected with the truth, with the steady, precise and absolute knowledge. On the contrary, the perceptible things are multidimensional and changing. Consequently the knowledge of them follows their ontological variability. Depending on the point of view, the perceptible things can exist and at the same time not exist. This is precisely what is implied by the paradoxical view – at least at first sight – that the perceptible things are less real than the Ideas. Yet the concept/notion of reality is not taken here in its strictly ontological sense. In this case the concept/notion of reality is related to the concept of ontological perfection. Thus a tree, for example, may well be beautiful from one point of view, and ugly from another point of view; or it may sometimes be beautiful and at other times ugly; or it may be beautiful in relation to some things and ugly in relation to other things; or it may be beautiful in position A and ugly in position B; or it may be beautiful for some people and ugly for other people⁸. In another example the Idea of the Circle is always and absolutely circular from every point of view and independently from the circumstances, but this does not apply to any perceived circle.

Each Idea is the best object that exists or may exist. For each category of beings and things of the same kind there exists only one Idea which corresponds to the substance,

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⁶ Cf. 247c.
⁷ Cf. 476d and 507b.
⁸ Cf. Symposium 211 and Republic 479ab.
to the common denominator of those beings. Whoever does not distinguish, says Plato, the Ideas from the perceptible things does not live in the real world, but instead is dreaming, whereas he who clearly distinguishes the Ideas from their images, i.e. from the perceptibles, possesses accurate knowledge of the reality, possesses knowledge of both visible and invisible things with their true identity, i.e. [possesses knowledge] of the Ideas as Ideas, as absolute beings, and of the perceptibles as perceptible relative beings. This is the man who knows the truth as opposed to the one who does not reach the knowledge of the absolute beings, i.e. the Ideas, and regards the things that are not the same, but only similar, to be the same. This man does not have accurate knowledge about the things, but simply thinks that he knows their true nature. He simply has different opinions about things that do not reflect the truth. These opinions refer to the perceptible things that have no fixed identity. The latter sometimes appear to us as being this way and at other times they appear differently; they continuously exist in different ways because they can always be amenable to their opposite: large-small, heavy-light, asleep-awake, old-new, healthy-sick, etc. This is precisely why we say that truth refers to the absolute and unchanging Ideas, since the truth, by its nature, is connected with fixed identities and relationships, whereas opinions change, they come and go, precisely like the perceptibles themselves. But they exist as much as the Ideas, because as far as the very substantiveness is concerned, there are no gradations. Something either exists or does not exist. An intermediate state is excluded. The difference lies in the duration. The perceptible things are transient, while the Ideas are eternal. The perceptible things are interrelated with the opinions and the Becoming, while the Ideas are interrelated with the truth and the unchanging Being. Ignorance is connected with the non-Being. Only those who do not possess the truth identify the Ideas with the perceptible things and Being with Appearing. Thus Plato often refers to the Forms as paradigms or patterns and to perceptibles as imperfect instances, shadows or copies or reflections, of such paradigms.

A reasonable question which arises here is the following: How did Plato arrive at the famous theory of the Ideas? It was perhaps due to the fascination which the transcendental world exerts on man, because he is not subject to the confinements of the natural world which can therefore be formed completely freely according to the requirements of human

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9 Cf. Republic 479c.
10 Cf. Republic 479a-480a.
imagination. Besides we may remove every imperfection from the transcendental world; and then its supposed perfection may, perhaps unconsciously, function as a proof for its existence. This is the case for example with Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (1033-1109), who thought that the existence of God is necessary because of his supposed perfection. He claimed that God as an absolutely perfect being cannot but exist. This is obviously what we call “the logical error of taking for granted what we are searching for”. This is also perhaps where Plato’s theory of Ideas came from, describing the Ideas as autonomous, absolute and metaphysical substances. Namely wishing to underline the unchanging and absolute nature of the general notions (which are purely imaginary realities as separate and somewhat independent from the individual beings and things, but also from the man himself, as much as they are nothing but created by use of the deductive method), Plato overstated their perfect and absolute character, so as they would be considered as independent, eternal, absolute and unchanging substances, isolated from the individual things of the natural world. So the idea for example of man is not necessarily a metaphysical entity, but expresses the common element of all men, i.e. man’s logical power that gives him his unique ontological identity. But from the moment the general notion of man emerges, it becomes autonomous and exists independently from the individual human beings, from which it emerged by the deductive method. And not only does the general notion of man become autonomous, but it also constitutes the measure and the criterion for defining some beings as human beings. This is exactly what we mean when we say that all men, according to Plato, participate in the Idea of man. That means that only those beings are human beings, which meet the specifications of the notion and of the Idea of man. The same goes without saying for all other Ideas (Equality, Justice, Bravery, Circle). He who first argued that the Platonic Ideas are not autonomous metaphysical substances, but instead are ultimately and simply general concepts, is Aristotle. For Aristotle the matters concerning the Platonic Ideas as models of beings and of things of the natural world, which supposedly exist because of their ultimately unexplained participation in Ideas similar to them, are poetic images and metaphors without a realistic content. Plato was probably misled by the idea that the concept of perfection presupposes in some way the surpassing/transcending of the empirical world (Ross 1924)\textsuperscript{11}.

With his theory of the Ideas Plato attempts to give a lead in the world of the intellect and of intelligible things to the world of matter, as opposed to the world of material, the world of visible and perceptible things, believing that somehow he expands Heraclitus’ theory about reason and Parmenides’ theory about the Being, although there is no considerable connection between these two models of thought, the Pre-Socratic and the Platonic.

To conclude, I believe that the Platonic Ideas are something between autonomous metaphysical substances on the one hand and other general notions on the other hand. Therefore they cannot be determined in a clear and specific way. It seems that to these ideas Plato places more emphasis than to the general notions, because the former, or at least some of them, are identical with the great ideals which he considers of utmost importance for human life. Such are for example the ethical and political Ideas of Equality, Justice and the Good. The Platonic Ideas seem to have been ontologically nuanced, i.e. to have an ontological, as it were, character, which is certainly not the case with the general notions; because with the Ideas Plato wanted to establish strong and consistent evaluation criteria. For Plato if something is right and good, it is so, because it agrees with the eternal and unchanging Idea of the Just and of the Good. In this way he wanted to emphasise the moral values which the Sophists questioned with their subjectivism and relativism.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


