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THE THEORY OF FORMS AND PLATO'S ETHICS

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for the award of the degree of Master of Social Science in Philosophy.**

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Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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ABSTRACT

The aims of this dissertation are to uncover and analyse potential links between ethics and metaphysics – specifically, the theory of Forms – in the dialogues of Plato. Drawing on material from a wide range of Plato's works, I investigate possible ways in which his theory of Forms might, at a very general level, converge with his moral theory. To do this, I discuss each of the two theories individually, and then I consider how they might be connected. Therefore, I begin with an overview and critique of both the theory of Forms and Plato's ethics. I argue that the theory of Forms is flawed as a metaphysical doctrine, largely because the postulation of Platonic Forms is insufficiently justified; Plato's moral theory, however, is far less problematic. My analysis of the convergence of these two themes focuses on the following issues: the Form of the Good as it appears in the *Republic*; the Forms as a theory of moral properties; the meta-ethical position implied by the theory of Forms; and some possible epistemological links between the Forms and Plato's ethics. In this analysis, I demonstrate how the weaknesses in the theory of Forms affect the interactions among his metaphysics, ethics and meta-ethics. I argue that, while there are a number of points at which Plato's theory of Forms might converge with his ethics, the latter does not depend on the former in an essential way. In addition, considering the problems with the theory of Forms, Plato's ethical theory seems to be better off remaining independent of his metaphysics.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The overarching goal of this dissertation is to investigate possible interactions between Platonic ethics and metaphysics. In particular, I will focus on the theory of Forms, which is arguably the core of Plato's metaphysics. I intend to consider in what ways, and to what extent, the theory of Forms grounds, influences, or merely converges with Plato's moral philosophy. This requires a detailed study of Plato's general metaphysical and ethical theories, followed by an analysis of the relationships between the two. My analysis of these relationships will examine how Plato connects the Forms to his moral views, as well as an assessment of whether such connections enhance or weaken Plato's moral theory.

Considering the abundance of literature on many different aspects of Plato's works, some defence of my choice of topic is in order. A great deal has been written on both Plato's ethics and his theory of Forms. These discussions range in focus from general studies of Plato's moral and metaphysical theories to analyses of very fine points within these theories. However, comparatively less has been written on the subject of how Plato's ethics and theory of Forms interact with each other. In order to further clarify, and justify, my choice of topic, I shall briefly mention some of the issues which *have* been addressed with respect to the connections between Platonic ethics and metaphysics, and then indicate how my focus is different.

One topic in this area which has been covered extensively is Plato's conception of the good. In particular, much has been written on the Form of the Good in the *Republic*.¹ Some

¹ Some examples: Julia Annas, "What Use Is the Form of the Good? Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato", in *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 96-116; Nicholas Denyer, "Sun and Line: The Role of the Good", in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 284-309; Richard J. Ketchum, "Forms, Paradigms and the Form of the Good", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 11 (1994), 1-21; Gerasimos Santas, "The Form of the Good in Plato's *Republic*", in *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, ed. Gail Fine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 247-274; Samuel C. Wheeler III, "Plato's Enlightenment: The Good as the Sun", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 14 (1997), 171-188.

attention has also been devoted to the more general question of how Plato conceives of goodness.² Discussions of this issue, however, tend to focus more heavily either on metaphysical or ethical aspects of the good rather than the connections between the two. This is not to say that these connections have been neglected altogether; but, as a slightly crude generalisation, discussions of the Form of the Good tend to focus more on metaphysical issues, whereas discussions of Plato's conception of the good tend to focus more on ethical questions about what Plato considers valuable things to pursue.

Arguably, most of the literature on the convergence of Plato's ethics and metaphysics focuses on the Form of the Good. However, other issues relevant to this topic have also been given some attention. A few authors have discussed the relationship between Plato's conception of virtue and knowledge of the Forms.³ Plato's theory of Forms is also sometimes brought up in the context of meta-ethics, but it is often given only a passing mention rather than detailed scrutiny.⁴ In addition, some of the literature on Plato's ethics makes reference to the theory of Forms,⁵ but, again, these discussions are not focused *primarily* on the connections between the two theories.

The principal way in which this study differs from those mentioned above is in the breadth of its focus. What I aim to do is to provide an in-depth analysis of how ethics and metaphysics converge as global themes in Plato's thought. This means that I shall examine his moral and metaphysical theories at a high level of generality and draw out the connections between the two. Although I shall devote some attention to issues which have already been addressed,

² For example, Christopher Rowe, "The Form of the Good and the Good: The *Republic* in Conversation with Other (Pre-*Republic*) Dialogues", in *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 239-254; Nicholas White, "Plato's Concept of Goodness", in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 356-372.

³ For example, Julia Annas, "Moral Knowledge as Practical Knowledge", *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2001), 236-256; David Wolfsdorf, *Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 86-145.

⁴ For example, J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 23-24; Hilary Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 17; Peter Railton, "Moral Realism: Prospects and Problems", in *Moral Knowledge?* Ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 50.

⁵ Such as, Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), who devotes a chapter to the theory of Forms.

such as the Form of the Good, I will focus mainly on the very general connections between Plato's ethics and metaphysics, which have not been covered much (if at all).

The novelty of the focus of this dissertation is one reason why I believe this topic is worth investigating. Through this analysis, I hope to uncover insights about Plato's philosophical theories and how they fit together. In addition, I believe that achieving a better understanding of the connections among Plato's principal doctrines could yield worthwhile points about how ethics and metaphysics might be related more generally.

The scope of the analysis I am undertaking is very broad in terms of the range of material on which I will be drawing. This is because I shall not be focusing on one particular work, or group of works, by Plato, but will instead be considering his philosophy more holistically. In other words, I will be investigating the interactions between Plato's metaphysics and ethics *in general* rather than analysing these themes in any single dialogue or group of dialogues. An analysis of such generality requires studying many of Plato's texts, and, in what follows, I shall make references to a large number of these texts in order to support the conclusions I draw about his overall positions on relevant issues. This does not mean, of course, that all the dialogues will be dealt with equally or similarly – the extent to which any particular dialogue is consulted will depend on which issues it covers and in how much detail it discusses them. To prevent the analysis from becoming too abstract or speculative, I shall, throughout, make reference to specific works which address relevant points; however, my ultimate goal is to generalise about Plato's views from these particular discussions.

The kind of approach I am taking undeniably has certain shortcomings, which cannot be ignored; however, these problems do not have a devastating impact, and this approach also has some advantages. One concern which may arise for any project with a very broad scope is that a higher degree of breadth will come at the expense of depth. That is, there may be a danger that the analysis will be too superficial if its focus is insufficiently narrow. Another

possible disadvantage, which relates specifically to the study of Plato, is that studying his philosophy holistically invites the temptation to impose more unity and consistency on his views than is warranted. Considering the number of works Plato produced and the range of philosophical issues addressed in these works, there is at least some possibility that there are changes or inconsistencies in his views. In analysing Platonic themes at such a general level, there is a risk that inconsistencies will be glossed over or that Plato's claims will be misrepresented in an attempt to make more coherent generalisations about his views.

The first of the above concerns does not seem to pose much of a problem for my task here, as the broad scope of this dissertation is not liable to diminish its depth. This is because the breadth of the focus consists in the number of Plato's works to be consulted rather than the number of issues to be addressed. I shall be concentrating only on two major Platonic themes – morality and the theory of Forms – and *these* can be discussed in depth, even if no particular passages or dialogues are considered in detail. Moreover, in order to provide a coherent and thorough analysis of these themes, it is obviously necessary to examine a number of narrower topics which Plato raises. The generality of the focus does not preclude a nuanced analysis.

The second issue – the danger of trying to impose more consistency on Plato's thought than there actually is – is a somewhat more serious concern. However, the acknowledgement of this risk goes some way towards reducing it: provided one is sufficiently aware of this temptation and strives to represent Plato's views accurately, even if they contain inconsistencies, one should be able to minimise this danger. In conducting my research, I have, therefore, endeavoured to be attentive to points in Plato's moral and metaphysical theories which may be obscure or contradictory. Where appropriate, I acknowledge these points and indicate how they may affect my analysis.

There are also some advantages associated with the broad approach I am taking here. For a writer as prolific as Plato, it seems valuable to study his work from a variety of perspectives, both narrow and broad. Some of the literature on Plato is extremely narrow in its focus in that it discusses, for example, only a short passage within a particular dialogue; other works focus on one entire dialogue or group of dialogues. The study I am undertaking here is a contribution from the broadest end of the spectrum, in that all of Plato's dialogues are potentially up for consideration.

There is, in addition, a further reason why it seems especially appropriate to study Plato's works in this holistic way. Whereas contemporary philosophy is divided into various sub-disciplines (metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy, to name just a few), Plato does not draw or observe such distinctions, but instead weaves all these topics together. From the perspective of modern philosophy, Plato's integration of these issues – which are now largely kept separate – is remarkable. And because these philosophical fields are so closely interconnected in Plato's works, it seems quite appropriate to conduct a close scrutiny of these interconnections. In doing so, we might uncover some valuable insights about the relationships among modern categories of philosophical inquiry.

It must be acknowledged at the outset that studies of Plato's works are inevitably beset by certain obstacles relating to interpretation. First, there is the obvious disadvantage of basing an analysis on translated works, as there may be subtleties in the original language which are lost when these texts are translated into English. Secondly, there is considerable dispute regarding the order in which Plato's works were written. This may hinder the analysis if one is concerned with change or progression in his thought. Thirdly, the use of the dialogue format creates some challenges. Because dialogues are both philosophical and dramatic works, they include certain literary but non-philosophical devices, such as irony, metaphor, hyperbole, and so on. Such devices may, on occasion, make it difficult to discern Plato's genuine views, as readers might be unsure about how seriously to take various claims that are

made in the dialogues. Finally, since Plato only expresses views through characters in dialogues, it is impossible to identify with absolute certainty which of the claims made are views of his own and which are supposed to represent the views of others. This uncertainty is especially acute with respect to Socrates, who is the dominant speaker in the majority of Plato's works.

The first of these obstacles (working with translated works) is really unavoidable; it is something which must always be borne in mind when studying Plato. Should any interpretive problems associated with translation difficulties arise in the course of the forthcoming analysis, these will be acknowledged appropriately.

The controversy over the chronology of Plato's dialogues is not too great a problem for a study with as broad a scope as this one. Since my aim is to examine Plato's philosophy in a holistic way, it is not all that important whether certain works were written before or after others. The only bearing which the chronology of Plato's works may have on the current analysis is that he may have changed his position on certain issues over time, so that the views he expresses in the "earlier" dialogues are different from (or even in conflict with) those of the "later" dialogues. However, I have already indicated how I intend to deal with potential inconsistencies in Plato's thought and the question of whether these inconsistencies have a temporal element is immaterial to my present task.

The last two interpretive issues I mentioned both concern possible difficulties in discerning which views Plato genuinely endorses. It must be acknowledged that it is impossible to know with absolute certainty which of the claims Plato makes across his many dialogues are genuinely endorsed by him and which are introduced for some other purpose. Nonetheless, some issues are discussed in such detail and with such frequency in his works that it is at least reasonable to attribute certain views to him. Where significant doubts remain

concerning Plato's real views on particular issues, I shall indicate this and suggest how these uncertainties may affect analysis of his theories.

In order to analyse the interactions between Plato's ethics and metaphysics, I shall firstly examine each of these themes in isolation and then consider how they are related. Thus, I shall begin in Chapter II with an outline and critique of Plato's theory of Forms, followed in Chapter III by a discussion of his moral theory. The central analysis of the dissertation will be undertaken in Chapter IV where, drawing on the issues covered in Chapters II and III, I shall discuss various connections between the theory of Forms and Plato's ethics. In Chapter V, I shall close with a brief summary of my conclusions and some remarks on the broader significance these conclusions might have.

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II. THE THEORY OF FORMS

Plato's "Forms" are abstract entities which feature in a number of his writings. Because of the frequency with which Forms are the subject of discussion in the dialogues, they are a prominent Platonic theme. Forms are central to Platonic metaphysics: they comprise a metaphysical system which classifies and imposes order on the fundamental structure of reality. However, Forms are also raised in a variety of other contexts, not explicitly related to metaphysics, and, as a result, they appear to fulfil additional functions (beyond the metaphysical) in Plato's philosophy.

I have two main goals in this chapter. The first is to provide an overview of the metaphysical theory constituted by Platonic Forms. This elucidation of the theory of Forms, at a general level, lays necessary groundwork for the analysis which follows in Chapter IV. In my attempt to present a broad and coherent outline of this theory, I have drawn on many disparate discussions of Forms across a range of Plato's dialogues and tried to distill from these the central tenets of Platonic metaphysics. In conformity with my overall approach (outlined in the Introduction), I have not analysed any single dialogue (or particular passages within a dialogue) in detail, but have instead made reference to a number of Plato's works which deal with Forms.

My second aim in this chapter is to give a critique of the Forms as a metaphysical theory. The analysis of the strengths and (especially) the weaknesses of the theory of Forms is crucial to achieving the overarching goal of this dissertation, because when investigating the connections between Plato's ethics and metaphysics, one of the questions I shall need to address is how, whether, or to what extent, the flaws in the theory of Forms affect Plato's ethics and meta-ethics.

Achieving a holistic picture of Plato's theory of Forms is both valuable in itself and an important component of my particular aims here. However, there are certain difficulties which limit the extent to which a coherent exposition of the theory can be produced. This is because Plato never provides a concise or straightforward statement of the metaphysical theory of which Forms are the centrepiece. Instead, Forms are discussed in a variety of contexts, in varying levels of detail, and in a rather piecemeal way, which makes it difficult to present the Forms as a clear, consistent and systematic theory. In fact, it may even be argued that it is too much to describe Forms as constituting a "theory" at all, given that they probably do not meet the criteria of contemporary applications of this term. (Nevertheless, in what follows, I shall continue to refer to the "theory" of Forms, but the sense of this term may be somewhat looser than in its typical modern usage.) Thus, while I have attempted to present as clear and coherent an overview of the Forms as possible, certain gaps and inconsistencies inevitably remain. I have acknowledged these as far as possible and indicated where they constitute weaknesses in the theory of Forms.

The first two sections of this chapter present my attempt to achieve a holistic picture of the theory of Forms. I begin with the fundamental questions of what kinds of entities Forms are and how Plato understands them to be connected to particular objects in the physical world. Then, in the second section, I comment briefly on the metaphysical and other functions that Forms fulfil, or could potentially fulfil, in Plato's philosophy. The final two sections contain my critique of the theory of Forms. First, I consider some possible motivations for postulating Forms; then I outline a number of problems with the theory and draw a conclusion regarding how the Forms fare as a metaphysical doctrine.

A. The Nature of Forms and their Relations to Particulars

To give an exposition of Plato's theory of Forms, it seems appropriate to begin by clarifying, most fundamentally, what a Form is. However, even in this initial phase there is an obstacle

because Plato never provides a clear or direct explanation of what kinds of entities Forms are supposed to be. In those dialogues which include discussions of Forms, they are often introduced as if the characters in the dialogue have an antecedent familiarity with them.⁶ This is not very helpful to the uninitiated, who are required to learn about the nature of Forms by inferring this information from what is said during discussions in which they are more or less presupposed. Based on what can be gleaned from such discussions, there are two broad rival positions which can be adopted with respect to how we ought to understand Platonic Forms: they can be construed either as universals or as paradigms.⁷ Each of these alternatives has different implications for the relations between Forms and particulars. I shall discuss each position in turn.

The first option, then, is that the Forms are to be understood as universals, much like those of contemporary theories of properties. Thus, on this view, properties are universals and each universal is equivalent to a Form. The implication of this interpretation for the relationship between Forms and particulars is as follows: particular objects in the world with a given property are instantiations of the universal of that property, and so they are instantiations of the *Form* of that property. The Form of the property in question would be what all particulars with that property had in common. In addition, according to this view, the Forms are immanent or “present” in all particulars which instantiate them. So, for example, if the Forms are universals, then every particular circle in existence is an instantiation of the Form of Circularity, this Form is what all particular circles have in common, and the Form is immanent in every particular circle.

The alternative position is that Forms are not mere universals, but rather paradigms or perfect exemplars of properties. This would mean, for example, that the Form of Circularity

⁶ For example, *Phaedo*, 65d; *Protagoras*, 332c; *Republic*, 476b. All references to Plato’s dialogues are taken from John M. Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

⁷ Throughout this dissertation I shall make free use of modern terminology such as “universals”, “paradigms”, “properties”, etc. Although such terms do not appear in Plato’s own writings, they are nonetheless helpful in understanding and analysing his philosophical doctrines.

is the most perfect circle possible. If Forms are understood as paradigms rather than as universals, this implies that the relation between Forms and particulars is one of *imitation* as opposed to *instantiation*. In other words, a particular with a given property would be an imitation of the Form exemplifying that property. Moreover, Forms are, according to this interpretation, *separate* from corresponding particulars rather than immanent in them. A Form is, therefore, not simply what all particulars with a certain property have in common; rather, what all particulars with that property have in common is that they all imitate a single Form.

There may be the possibility of a kind of “hybrid” interpretation which would combine these two alternatives. That is, one could take the view that Forms are *both* universals *and* paradigms. This would imply, first, that Forms are both separate from and immanent in particulars; secondly, that a Form is both what all particulars with a given property have in common *and* the perfect exemplar of this property; and finally, that particulars both instantiate and imitate Forms.⁸

With these competing conceptions of Forms laid out, it is necessary now to determine which of these views is the most accurate representation of Plato’s own characterisation of Forms. In Plato’s works there is support for both interpretations, which is of course why there is a division between these two views in the first place. I shall now highlight some passages in Plato’s dialogues which support one or the other of these positions, and I will argue that, although the evidence is mixed regarding Plato’s genuine conception of Forms, it may be more plausible to attribute to him the view that Forms are paradigms rather than the view that they are universals.

⁸ The difficulties faced by such a “hybrid” interpretation may seem obvious, but I shall discuss these later in this section when I consider which of the above alternatives is the most accurate interpretation of Plato’s views.

I shall begin by examining some passages in Plato's dialogues which seem to support the first position, that Forms are universals. Plato never describes Forms as "universals" himself, but, in places, there are quite clear suggestions that Forms are thought of as "present" in objects with the relevant properties and that particulars *instantiate* Forms. One general piece of evidence for this conception of Forms comes from some of the terminology which is used in various dialogues to describe the relationship between Forms and particulars. In several of Plato's works, it is said that particular items in the world which have a certain property "participate" or "share" in the Form of that property.⁹ Such terminology appears to support the notion of Forms as universals because it implies that Forms are in some sense a *part* of particulars with the relevant properties, or that Forms are (at least partially) *present in* these particulars. This suggests that Forms are something like universals which are instantiated, rather than paradigms which are imitated.

Further support for this interpretation of Forms can be found in the "Socratic" dialogues. These dialogues are characterised by Socrates' close questioning of his interlocutor(s) regarding the definition of some (usually moral) concept.¹⁰ In these discussions, Socrates is asking for an explanation of what is common to all instances of a certain property, or the common essence which is present in all particulars with this property. For example, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates questions Euthyphro about the nature of piety, asking not merely for examples of pious actions, but for an account of piety itself. If what Socrates is seeking in these dialogues is an explanation of the Forms of each property, then the conception of Forms which he (or Plato) has in mind does seem to be that of universals which are instantiated (and hence present in) those particulars.

There are also, however, several passages across Plato's works which provide support for the contrary view, that he conceives of Forms as paradigms which are distinct from and imitated

⁹ For example, *Parmenides*, 129a, 131e; *Republic*, 476d; *Symposium*, 211b. The Greek verbs used are "μεταλαμβάνω" (in the *Parmenides*) and "μετέχω" (*Republic* and *Symposium*), both meaning to "partake" or "get a share" of something.

¹⁰ Some examples of dialogues which take this form are: *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, and *Lysis*.

by particulars. That Forms exist separately from and independently of their corresponding particulars is suggested by the claim, which appears in a few dialogues, that a Form exists “itself by itself”.¹¹ This phrasing is a little cryptic, but it does hint at the idea of Forms’ being independent entities which exist in their own right, rather than merely what is common to all instances of a given property. However, clearer expressions of the separateness of Forms occur in dialogues where it is explicitly said that the Form of a property is distinct from individual items in the world which possess that property.¹² There are also some passages which suggest that Plato thinks of the relationship between Forms and particulars as one of resemblance or imitation. For example, in the *Phaedo*, it is said that the many equal objects in the sensible world are like the Equal itself, though deficient in comparison to it,¹³ and, in the *Republic*, the just person is described as being like “the just itself”.¹⁴

The passages cited above clearly indicate that the evidence is mixed with respect to whether Plato conceives of Forms as immanent universals or separate paradigms. There is perhaps more support for the latter interpretation, considering the greater number of references in the dialogues to Forms’ being separate from and imitated by particulars; however, the evidence for the alternative view cannot be disregarded. Thus, in order to come to a general conclusion about Plato’s theory of Forms, it is necessary to determine what can be inferred from these conflicting pieces of evidence. I shall consider four conclusions which might be drawn.

The first possibility, to which I have already alluded, is that Plato’s theory of Forms is a hybrid of these two views, and this hybrid is consistent. That is, it might be argued that Plato understands Forms as *both* universals *and* paradigms and that, contrary to appearances,

¹¹ For example, *Phaedo*, 78d; *Symposium*, 211b. The Greek phrase used in both these passages is “αὐτοῦ καθ’ αὐτό”; “itself by itself” is the literal translation of this phrase.

¹² For example, *Phaedo*, 74a-c (the Form of the Equal); *Republic*, 479a (the Form of the Beautiful).

¹³ *Phaedo*, 74d.

¹⁴ *Republic*, 472b-c.

these positions are not in tension with one another.¹⁵ The obvious, and substantial, challenge faced by such an interpretation is how these two conceptions of Forms are to be reconciled with one another. It is not clear how Forms could be both *immanent* in and *separate* from particulars, as these two qualities seem to be fundamentally opposed to one another. To make such an interpretation credible, considerable argument would need to be given to show how these two alternatives could be coherently combined.

The second possibility is that Plato endorses both positions, but that he simply fails to recognise the incompatibility of the two views. This is an unappealing conclusion for those who are loath to attribute such blatant confusion to Plato. In any case, it is unlikely that Plato would be blind to such an obvious inconsistency since he is so careful and rigorous in other areas. Moreover, the extended assessment of the Forms in the *Parmenides* suggests that Plato is aware of at least some of the difficulties in his metaphysics and that he is not above self-criticism.¹⁶

The third conclusion which might be drawn from the mixed evidence on the nature of Forms is that Plato changes his mind on this issue; he progresses from conceiving of Forms as universals to thinking of them as paradigms. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the passages supporting the idea of Forms as universals are more prominent in the “Socratic” dialogues, which are standardly classified as “early” works in Plato’s career, whereas the depictions of Forms as paradigms appear more frequently in what are considered the “middle” period dialogues. There is thus some plausibility to this view, but it still requires an explanation of why Forms are sometimes spoken of as if they are universals *and* as if they are paradigms *within a single dialogue*.¹⁷

¹⁵ This sort of interpretation is defended in Eric D. Perl, “The Presence of the Paradigm: Immanence and Transcendence in Plato’s Theory of Forms”, *The Review of Metaphysics* 53 (1999), 339-362. Perl argues that there is no tension between the claim that Forms are separate from particulars and the claim that Forms are immanent in particulars.

¹⁶ I shall discuss some of the *Parmenides*’s criticisms of Forms in the final section of this chapter.

¹⁷ For example: *Parmenides*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Cratylus*.

The final possibility is that Plato only ever endorses one of these conceptions of Forms and the alternative is not his genuine position: specifically, Plato himself views Forms only as separate paradigms and the idea of Forms as universals is Socrates' position, not Plato's. This conclusion is supported, first, by the aforementioned fact that the evidence for Forms' being immanent in particulars is heavier in the "early" or "Socratic" dialogues, and, secondly, by Aristotle's remark that *Socrates* conceived of Forms as universals and that it was *Plato* who considered them as separate entities.¹⁸ To interpret Plato's conception of Forms in this way is also, like the previous interpretation, to assume a degree of change or transition in Plato's thought, except that in this case the change is not a modification of Plato's own views but rather a transition from reporting Socrates' ideas to developing his own.

Of the possible conclusions outlined above, the last is probably the most plausible. First, as I have already mentioned, when considering Plato's works all together there are, on balance, more clues that Forms are to be understood as paradigms rather than universals. Secondly, there is a fairly clear difference between the sense in which "Form" is used in the "Socratic" dialogues and the sense in which it is used in the "later" dialogues. Forms in the "Socratic" dialogues are depicted as something fairly metaphysically unambitious (like universals) in comparison to how they are presented in other dialogues dealing with Forms. Finally, what gives the last of the four interpretations an advantage over the rest is that it is the only one for which there is external evidence that this is indeed Plato's own position.

Consequently, for the purposes of the forthcoming analyses (later in this chapter and in Chapter IV), I shall assume that Plato conceives of Forms as distinct, independent entities, and that they are paradigms of properties which particulars in the sensible world imitate. However, it must not be forgotten that there *is* evidence for another conception of Forms in Plato's works and that this creates a tension in his metaphysics. Even if, as I have suggested, this tension could be explained, the explanation is not foolproof. It is especially problematic

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Arthur Madigan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 13. 1078b.

that both conceptions of Forms sometimes seem to appear within a single dialogue. Therefore, my acceptance of the interpretation of Forms as paradigms is tentative. The uncertainty about the exact nature of Forms and their relations to particulars produces a gap which undermines the theory of Forms as a metaphysical system.

B. The Roles of the Forms

I shall, therefore, proceed with my analysis of the theory of Forms on the assumption that Forms are the kinds of entities which exist separately from objects in the perceptible world and which provide paradigms for these objects. But, regardless of whether Forms are best understood as universals or as paradigms, it is undeniable that they occupy crucial roles in Plato's philosophy as a whole. In this section, I shall briefly highlight some of the functions that Forms fulfil in various contexts, including metaphysics, epistemology, political philosophy, and ethics.

As the preceding discussion should clearly illustrate, the most obvious and fundamental roles of Forms are metaphysical ones. Forms both impose a two-tiered structure on reality and provide a theory of properties. With the postulation of Forms, reality is divided into two distinct realms: the realm of concrete, perceptible objects, and the realm of abstract Forms. And the theory of Forms can provide an account of properties because it implies that what all particular objects with a given property have in common is their relation (presumed to be some kind of resemblance or imitation) to a relevant Form. Plato sometimes describes the relationship between Forms and corresponding particulars even more strongly by suggesting that it is Forms which *cause* these particulars to have those properties.¹⁹

¹⁹ For example, *Phaedo*, 96-106. What this "causation" might involve is an interesting question, but, unfortunately, it lies beyond the scope of this discussion.

Because the different regions of Plato's philosophy are so interconnected, the (primarily metaphysical) theory of Forms also arises in discussions which are not explicitly concerned with metaphysical issues. For instance, Forms come up in contexts which would be more accurately considered epistemological than metaphysical – that is, when the discussion is about some aspect of the nature of knowledge or what can be known – and they are sometimes presented as the objects of knowledge. In the “Socratic” dialogues, where the elucidation of a certain (usually moral) quality is sought, it is suggested that knowing the quality in question involves knowing the Form of that quality. Although I indicated earlier that the conception of Forms in these dialogues is different, in certain respects, from the conception in “later” dialogues, the connection between Forms and knowledge is a continuous theme in Plato's thought, even if the nature of Forms is not consistent across all of his works. In the “middle” dialogues, most notably the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*,²⁰ Forms are described as being accessible only through reason or intellect, in contrast to the perceptible world which is discernible through the senses. There may also be some reason to think that Plato believes that *only* Forms can be true objects of knowledge.²¹

Forms also feature, to some extent, in Plato's treatment of political and moral issues. They are most directly linked to his political philosophy in the *Republic's* discussion of the ideally just state. This state is to be governed by philosophers, who alone are acquainted with Forms, especially the Form of the Good.²² The purported superiority of the knowers of Forms hints at the moral significance Plato attaches to knowledge in general, and to knowledge of the Forms in particular. Forms feature in various ways in Plato's ethics, and, since the ultimate goal of this dissertation is to uncover these connections, I will delay discussion of them until my analysis in Chapter IV. For now it is important only to note that Forms feature significantly in other areas of Plato's philosophy besides metaphysics.

²⁰ *Phaedo*, 65a-d; *Republic*, 507b-511e.

²¹ This is an important point which will recur in my later discussions of the Forms and of the connections between the Forms and Plato's ethics.

²² *Republic*, 500b-c, 501b, 504d, 506b.

C. Arguments for Forms

In the preceding two sections I attempted to provide as coherent an account as possible of the nature of Plato's Forms and the various purposes they fulfil in his philosophy. I shall now move on to my assessment of the theory of Forms, beginning, in this section, with the positive half of the evaluation.

Plato's theory of Forms undeniably has certain attractive features, such as its elegance as a metaphysical system and its potential explanatory power, not only in metaphysics but in other areas too. However, if the Forms are to constitute a plausible metaphysical theory, there must be compelling arguments to demonstrate their existence. Plato himself does not provide very much by way of explicit argument for Forms, and in some dialogues their existence seems to be simply assumed. In places, Plato does gesture at motivations for positing Forms, but these tend to fall short of substantive arguments. Nevertheless, even if Plato does not develop these lines of argument himself, they can be developed on his behalf; indeed, they *have* been developed on his behalf, most notably by Aristotle. Aristotle provides some helpful information regarding what might have motivated Plato (and others) to postulate Forms. Therefore, in what follows I shall consider what arguments may be given in favour of Forms, based not only on Plato's own writings but also on Aristotle's.

The first argument for Forms which I shall consider is the well-known "One over Many" argument, which Aristotle discusses and which has been preserved in contemporary metaphysics' theories of properties. A version of this sort of argument can be found in the last book of the *Republic*.²³ The argument begins with the simple observation that certain properties are predicated of multiple particulars in the world. For example, there are multiple objects in the world which are round, which have the property roundness, or to which the predicate "round" can be applied. The next premise in the argument is that the

²³ *Republic*, 596a-b.

property predicated of these particulars is not identical to any of these objects: in speaking of the property “roundness” we do not refer to any particular round object, but to something which transcends all the particular instances of roundness. Therefore, the argument concludes, a property cannot be a particular but must rather be something which exists *in addition to* particulars with that property. Clearly, when this argument is applied to Plato’s theory of Forms, the conclusion is that what exists in addition to particulars with a given property is the *Form* of that property.²⁴

The “One over Many” argument is appealing in its simplicity which borders on intuitive obviousness – it is virtually impossible to deny that there is something which all particulars with a shared property have in common and which is (in some sense) distinct from any single instance of that property. However, there are (at least) two reasons why this argument does not provide a good enough motivation for accepting that there are Platonic Forms. The first is a general problem with the argument which arises whether it is invoked to establish the existence of Forms or some other conception of properties (e.g. universals). The problem is that accepting the reasoning of the “One over Many” argument commits us to recognising Forms (or universals, or whatever the argument is being used to establish) of far too many properties.²⁵ This is because the argument would imply that there must be a Form corresponding to *every conceivable* property, and this includes, for instance, disjunctive properties (e.g. round-or-square), negative properties (e.g. not-round) and indefinitely many other arbitrary absurdities. Although I shall argue in the next section that it is not clear precisely which Forms Plato does and does not acknowledge, it is certainly safe to say that he does not postulate a Form corresponding to every property that could ever be imagined.

The second problem with the “One over Many” argument relates specifically to Platonic Forms. While the argument *may* be able to show that there is something which is common to all particulars with a certain property, it does not go far enough to show that this

²⁴ Aristotle deals with the “One over Many” argument in *Metaphysics*, 1. 987a-b.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1. 990b.

commonality involves a *Form*. What is common to all particulars with certain properties may be something far less metaphysically ambitious (such as mere universals) than Forms as Plato conceives them (that is, as paradigms which exist separately from, and independently of, items in the sensible world). Therefore, the “One over Many” argument, when applied to Plato’s Forms, proves both too much and too little: too much, because it would imply that there is an over-abundance of Forms, and too little, because it cannot establish that what is common to all particulars with a given property is a Platonic Form of that property. Consequently, the argument cannot provide any real support for the theory of Forms.

Another prominent motivation for positing Forms, which can potentially provide the foundation for more than one argument to establish their existence, is the view that the sensible world is not a stable reality because perceptible objects are in a constant state of flux. This doctrine is thought to originate from Heraclitus; Aristotle reports that Plato was sympathetic to it and that it was one of his motivations for developing the theory of Forms.²⁶ There are certain passages in Plato’s dialogues which do appear to refer to, or at least gesture at, the principle of constant flux. One of the clearest expressions of this idea in Plato’s works can be found in the *Phaedo*, where it is said that “the many beautifuls” (i.e. the many beautiful particulars), “the many equals”, and so on, are never the same but always changing; what the senses perceive as beautiful, equal, etc., are not constant but rather in a state of flux.²⁷

Despite Aristotle’s claim, and the evidence in Plato’s own works, there is some controversy regarding whether Plato genuinely or consistently accepts the doctrine of constant flux. Nevertheless, the doctrine is worth considering here because it can potentially provide the foundation of important arguments for the existence of Forms. Therefore, I shall proceed on the assumption that Plato *does* endorse the principle of constant flux, and investigate how this principle might motivate the postulation of Forms.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 1. 987a-b.

²⁷ *Phaedo*, 78d-79b.

There is clearly a stark contrast between this doctrine's depiction of the sensible world and Plato's depiction of Forms: whereas perceptible objects change, disintegrate and assume different properties, Forms are eternal and unchanging. What needs to be established now is how accepting the principle of constant flux might motivate the postulation of Forms, to which this principle does not apply. Aristotle suggests two arguments which can be constructed on the basis of the principle, one concerning definitions and one concerning knowledge.²⁸

The first argument, then, is the "argument from definitions". Aristotle reports that Plato inherited from Socrates the interest in seeking definitions of important philosophical (and typically moral) concepts,²⁹ and this is, of course, also evident from the style of many of Plato's own works. These searches for definitions are attempts to determine the common essence of all particulars which have the quality in question. The "argument from definitions" combines the belief that there are such common essences with the principle of constant flux in order to establish that there are Platonic Forms. The argument can be expressed as follows: since sensible particulars with a given property are in constant flux, the definition of this property cannot be a definition of a sensible particular, because anything whose nature is unstable and variable cannot be defined. However, it is possible to give definitions of the properties of sensible particulars. Therefore, these definitions must be of something fixed and unchanging. It is *Forms* which fit into this role in Plato's philosophy; hence, the argument concludes, there must be Forms to feature as the objects of definitions.³⁰

The second argument based on the doctrine of constant flux is the "knowledge argument". It takes much the same form as the "argument from definitions", but it concludes that Forms are required to serve as the objects of *knowledge* rather than *definitions*. Thus, the argument

²⁸ These arguments are also discussed in Gail Fine, *On Ideas: Aristotle's Criticisms of Plato's Theory of Forms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 45-46; see also R. M. Dancy, *Plato's Introduction of Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11-19.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1. 987b.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 1. 987a-b.

begins, as before, with the premise that objects in the sensible world are in constant flux. The next premise is that it is not possible to know something which is in such flux. Since perceptible objects *are* in flux, it follows that they cannot be the objects of knowledge. However, because knowledge is possible (this is assumed), this knowledge must be about *something*; and if it cannot be about sensible particulars, it must be about something which transcends these particulars and which is not in a state of flux as they are. Therefore, the objects of knowledge are Forms, which are fixed and unchanging, unlike the sensible world.³¹

The success of the “knowledge argument” and the “argument from definitions” depends, crucially, on the plausibility of the doctrine that the sensible world is in constant flux. It is difficult to determine just how plausible this doctrine is, because it is not altogether clear exactly in what sense perceptible objects are always “in flux”. When Plato makes reference to this idea he seems to assume that its meaning is obvious, but this seems unlikely to be as obvious to Plato’s readers as he takes it to be. Without a clear and determinate sense of the principle of constant flux, it is not possible to evaluate it meaningfully. However, it would take me too far afield to consider here all the possibilities of what this doctrine might mean. Instead, I shall simply assume (charitably) that the idea that the sensible world is in constant flux is both easily understandable and sufficiently plausible, and I will evaluate the above arguments for Forms having granted this premise. In other words, I wish to consider whether the conclusion of the above arguments (i.e. that Forms exist) follows from the premise that the sensible world is in constant flux. I will argue that it does not follow.

In addition to the principle of constant flux, the arguments from definitions and knowledge assume that the objects of knowledge or definitions cannot be entities which are in flux. It is certainly not implausible to maintain that something which is in a state of flux can be neither defined nor known, for surely if knowledge and definitions are to be *about* anything then they cannot be about things whose inherent natures are unstable. Thus, so far, it has been granted

³¹ *Ibid*, 13. 1078b.

that: (i) the sensible world is in constant flux; (ii) things in constant flux can be neither known nor defined; and (iii) therefore, the objects of knowledge and definitions are not sensible particulars. However, this does not go far enough to establish that knowledge and definitions are about *Platonic Forms*. The reason for this is that the arguments based on the principle of constant flux are essentially *negative* arguments, in the sense that they can only show what the objects of knowledge and definitions are *not*. That is, these arguments, if they succeed, only establish that definitions and knowledge are *not* about sensible particulars, which does not entail any conclusions regarding what knowledge and definitions *are* about. In order to demonstrate that Forms are the objects of knowledge and definitions, further (positive) argument to this effect is necessary. The arguments based on the doctrine of constant flux, however, fail to create a bridge between the negative conclusion, that the objects of knowledge/definitions are not sensible particulars, and the positive conclusion, that the objects of knowledge/definitions are Forms. Therefore, even if the principle of constant flux can provide *some* motivation for postulating Forms, it cannot plausibly establish that Forms exist.

The final argument for Plato's Forms which I shall consider is commonly referred to as the "compresence of opposites" argument.³² It is given this name because the argument makes reference to the phenomenon of a single object's possessing two opposing properties at the same time. For example, a cat will have the property of largeness when compared to a mouse, but will have the opposite property – smallness – when compared to an elephant. This phenomenon of the "compresence of opposites" is invoked to demonstrate that properties cannot be particulars; they must, therefore, be Forms. The argument is as follows. Sensible particulars are not "pure" instances of properties, because they can simultaneously instantiate two conflicting properties. (So, for example, a cat is not a pure instance of the property of largeness, as it instantiates the opposite property – smallness – at the same

³² This argument has been discussed extensively. See, for example: Fine, *On Ideas*, 54-61; Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 154-156; Nicholas P. White, "Plato's Metaphysical Epistemology", in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 280-283.

time.) Therefore, a property P must be something which transcends all particular instances of P. The property is itself *purely* P, because what serves as the common essence of all instances of P cannot, in any way, be not-P. This motivates the postulation of Forms because they have precisely the qualities necessary to fulfil this role: the Form of P, in contrast to any particular object with the property P, is constantly and eternally P. It is not the case that it has the property P in comparison to some things and the property not-P in comparison to others. It is, instead, purely, absolutely, and unqualifiedly P.

The “compresence of opposites” argument has clear affinities with the arguments based on the doctrine of constant flux. The two lines of argument may even be combined: perceptible objects are subject to the compresence of opposites *because* they are in constant flux.³³ However, the “compresence of opposites” argument does not *require* the doctrine of constant flux and can be advanced as an independent argument for Forms.

It is virtually undeniable that sensible particulars are indeed susceptible to the phenomenon of “compresence of opposites” in the sense outlined above. This argument, however, has at least two shortcomings which cast doubt on its ability to establish the existence of Forms. First, the argument can only apply to properties which are characterised in pairs of opposites – large and small, beautiful and ugly, just and unjust, and so on. The “compresence of opposites” argument could not show that there are Forms of properties which do not admit of such pairings. There are only some properties which can simultaneously co-occur in a single object. For example, a cat can at the same time be both large (in comparison to the mouse) and small (in comparison to the elephant); but it could not be, for example, both a cat and not a cat, or both four-legged and not four-legged, at the same time. The argument can, therefore, not have any force with respect to the latter kinds of properties.

³³ Fine, *On Ideas*, 55.

Whether this is a problem or not depends on which Forms are to be included in Plato's ontology. If he intends to recognise only those Forms which occur in pairs in the way described above, then this limitation of the "compresence of opposites" argument is unproblematic. But if there are to be Forms of properties which are not characterised in pairs of opposites, then the argument cannot explain why we should accept that *those* Forms exist. As I shall argue in the final section of this chapter, Plato does not clearly specify which properties have corresponding Forms and which do not. This makes it impossible to assess whether the restricted scope of the "compresence of opposites" is a real problem or not.

A second, and more damaging, criticism of the "compresence of opposites" argument is that it does not go far enough to establish that there are Forms. Like the arguments based on the doctrine of constant flux, the "compresence of opposites" argument cannot prove that Platonic Forms exist because it reaches a negative conclusion, which does not entail this further positive one. The argument can only demonstrate, at most, that what is common to all particulars with a given property is not identical to any particular instance of that property, because the particular instances of the property co-occur with instances of the opposite property. But, again, this does not entail the (positive) conclusion that the common essence of these instances of the property is a *Form*.

This concludes my survey of the arguments for the existence of Forms. The arguments I have discussed may provide some insight into Plato's motivations for postulating Forms. However, they all share a common weakness: none of them is able to establish the existence of Forms as entities which exist separately from sensible particulars. The failures of such arguments create a substantial problem for the theory of Forms. Any metaphysical system which postulates entities beyond those of ordinary experience will only be plausible if considerable justifications for such entities are given. Plato has not provided adequately compelling justifications for Forms, and the fact that their very existence is dubious

constitutes a significant weakness in his metaphysical theory. I shall return to this point in Chapter IV when I analyse the connections between the theory of Forms and Plato's ethics.

D. Criticisms of the Theory of Forms

In this final section of the chapter on the theory of Forms, I shall consider some of the most significant criticisms of the theory. The conclusion of the previous section is itself an objection to the theory of Forms: that Plato has not given adequate arguments for the existence of Forms is reason to object to the metaphysical system founded upon them. In this section I shall raise three more problems with the theory of Forms. The first is Plato's failure to specify the range of Forms – that is, which Forms exist and which do not. The second is the puzzle concerning how Forms are related to particulars with the corresponding properties. Finally, I shall address an objection to the theory of Forms which deals with the phenomenon of self-predication and leads to the so-called "Third Man" argument.

There is a significant deficiency in Plato's theory of Forms because the scope of Forms is left entirely undetermined. Plato does not clearly specify which Forms exist, nor does he provide an account of why there are Forms of certain properties but not others. From discussions of Forms in various dialogues, it is evident that he almost certainly does recognise some Forms and that he almost certainly does not recognise some others; however, in between these two extremes is a wide range of properties which may or may not have corresponding Forms, and there is no explanation as to how we can distinguish systematically between those properties of which there are Forms and those of which there are not.

The Forms which definitely *do* seem to exist in Plato's ontology include those of value-laden properties, particularly goodness, justice and beauty. That Plato recognises these Forms is evidenced by the fact that they feature prominently in multiple discussions of the Forms in

various dialogues.³⁴ The properties which almost certainly do *not* have corresponding Forms include the very lowly and mundane – well-known examples given in the *Parmenides* are mud, dirt and hair.³⁵ And then there are those properties for which there may or may not be corresponding Forms in Plato's ontology. There are Forms which are mentioned occasionally in Plato's works but whose status remains obscure. These can be divided into three categories. First, there are properties which are not as mundane as the objects listed in the *Parmenides* but which are (unlike goodness, justice or beauty) value-neutral; for example, properties such as largeness and smallness.³⁶ Secondly, Plato mentions Forms of some mathematical properties, such as the Odd and the Even, and the Equal and the Unequal.³⁷ Finally, there are allusions in a few dialogues to Forms of artefacts, like tables.³⁸

Although these last three kinds of properties are explicitly referred to in Plato's works, it would be too hasty to assume that he must believe that there are Forms corresponding to such properties. This is because such Forms (more accurately, potential Forms) are never discussed with the detail and frequency of Forms of moral and aesthetic values. The amount of attention Plato devotes to value-laden Forms at least suggests that these feature consistently in his ontology, whereas the comparatively scant attention paid to value-neutral Forms makes their status uncertain. Interpreters of Plato are divided over the exact range of Forms and there is particular controversy regarding whether there are Platonic Forms of artefacts or not.³⁹

Plato's failure to specify clearly which Forms exist, and which do not, creates problems for his metaphysical system. It constitutes a gap in his metaphysics which makes the theory deficient. More importantly, the absence of an explanation of *why* some Forms exist, while

³⁴ For example, the *Republic* and the *Symposium*.

³⁵ *Parmenides*, 130b-e.

³⁶ *Phaedo*, 102b-105b.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 74a-c.

³⁸ For example, *Cratylus* 389a-c; *Gorgias* 503e; *Republic* 596b.

³⁹ See, for example, Mary Louise Gill, "Problems for Forms", in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 184-198; Verity Harte, "Plato's Metaphysics", in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 191-216.

others do not, means that Plato has not provided a principled reason to accept that there are those Forms to which he devotes the most attention – the Forms of the Just, the Beautiful, and the Good. In other words, it is not clear why we should accept that these Forms exist when Plato has not explained why there are Forms of *these* properties but not of others.

In response to this objection, it could be argued that the “compresence of opposites” argument, discussed in the previous section, could be used to provide an account of which Forms exist and which do not. Thus, one could claim that there are only Forms of those properties which can simultaneously co-occur in a single particular (for example, largeness and smallness). This would provide a systematic means of distinguishing between the properties which have corresponding Forms and which do not. It is important to note that the use of the “compresence of opposites” argument in such an account is different from that discussed in the previous section. When I dealt with this argument earlier, I was considering it as an argument for the *existence* of Forms; in this context, however, it would be used as a justification for restricting the scope of Forms in a certain way.

Although this sort of appeal to the “compresence of opposites” argument *would* supply a principled reason to recognise only certain Forms, there are some problems with this account. First, it requires the prior presupposition that at least some Forms exist, because, as I argued earlier, the “compresence of opposites” cannot, by itself, establish this. Secondly, restricting the range of Forms in the way implied by this account overlooks explicit references in Plato’s works to Forms of properties which are not susceptible to the “compresence of opposites”. These include, for example, references to Forms of artefacts and Forms of mathematical properties such as the Odd and the Even. I did say earlier that it is not entirely clear whether Plato really does acknowledge these Forms or not; however, if the “compresence of opposites” argument is to be used as a means of determining the range of Forms, then these references to other Forms would need to be plausibly accounted for.

The final problem with this account is that it is too speculative. Plato does make reference to the phenomenon of the “compresence of opposites” in motivating the *postulation* of Forms, but he does not connect this idea to the question of which properties have corresponding Forms and which do not. Therefore, the use of this argument as a means of determining the range of Platonic Forms is unpromising and does not seem to fit well with Plato’s own views.

The second of the three objections to the Forms which I shall consider is that Plato does not adequately explain the nature of the relationship between Forms and particulars. Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that it seems more appropriate to assume that Plato conceives of Forms as paradigms rather than as universals, but I also drew attention to the tentativeness of this assumption because Plato’s various discussions of Forms leave their precise nature and their relations to particulars inadequately determined. The fact that Form-particular relations remain obscure is a considerable deficiency in Plato’s metaphysical theory. If the theory of Forms is to fulfil its various roles (some of which I outlined earlier), the account of such relations is crucial, yet the sketchy explanations which emerge from Plato’s works are not adequate.

In Plato’s defence, it should perhaps be noted that he does give at least some indication that he is aware of this shortcoming (and others) of the theory of Forms. This is illustrated in the *Parmenides*, which is of particular interest in the present context because it is devoted entirely to Platonic metaphysics and because it raises questions which suggest a critical self-assessment of Forms on Plato’s part. One of the issues raised in this dialogue is the question about how Forms and particulars are related. Parmenides, questioning a young Socrates, asks in what sense things in the perceptible world “share in” Forms: “So does each thing that gets a share get as its share the Form as a whole or a part of it?”⁴⁰ In other words, does a Form occur in corresponding particulars *in its entirety*, or only *partially*? This question places Socrates in a dilemma because both options are problematic. If Forms are wholly

⁴⁰ *Parmenides*, 131a.

present in particulars, this implies that “it [a Form] will be at the same time, as a whole, in things that are many and separate; and thus it would be separate from itself”.⁴¹ However, if a Form is only *partially* present in each corresponding particular, this would imply that Forms are divisible.⁴²

Parmenides’ question here does not exhaust all the possibilities of how particulars might “share in” Forms. In posing the above dilemma regarding this relationship of “sharing”, he presupposes a spatial analogue which may not be appropriate, given that Forms are not spatial entities. There may be a sense of “sharing” which avoids Parmenides’ dilemma.⁴³ However, in this discussion Plato leaves this issue unresolved and, consequently, no definitive conclusion about Form-particular relations is reached. The inconclusive nature of the *Parmenides* may well be the result of Plato’s own uncertainty about how to resolve the puzzle of how Forms are connected to their corresponding particulars.

Of course, this discussion of particulars’ “sharing in” Forms leaves out the interpretation I provisionally endorsed earlier, namely, that the relationship between Forms and particulars is one of *imitation* or *resemblance*. If particulars “imitate” Forms rather than “sharing in” them, then there is no puzzle about whether Forms are wholly or partially present in particulars, because this view explicitly denies that Forms are present in particulars *at all* (wholly or partially). This conception of Forms avoids Parmenides’ dilemma altogether, but two problems still remain. First, as I have already stressed, although it does seem that Plato endorses this alternative, he does not do so consistently, and his commitment to this conception of Forms is thus uncertain. Secondly, even if Form-particular relations are understood in terms of imitation rather than instantiation, the theory is still vulnerable to the problem of self-predication and the resulting “Third Man” argument. This is the final criticism of the theory of Forms which I shall consider in this chapter.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 131b.

⁴² *Ibid*, 131c.

⁴³ See, for example, Sandra Peterson, “The *Parmenides*”, *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 383-410.

“Self-predication” refers to the phenomenon of Forms themselves having the properties which they confer on sensible particulars. Thus, for example, the Form of the Large is itself large, the Form of the Beautiful is itself beautiful, and so on. That Forms be self-predicative in this way seems necessary for them to fulfil their roles as paradigms which are imitated by particulars – for how could something serve as the paradigm of a property if it did not itself have that property? The self-predicative nature of Forms is also asserted explicitly in the *Parmenides*.⁴⁴

The self-predication of Forms creates two problems for the theory. The first is that the idea of self-predication, when applied to Forms, is undesirably obscure. In what sense, for example, is the Form of the Beautiful itself beautiful? Given the fundamental difference between concrete particulars and abstract Forms, it seems odd to think that both could be beautiful in exactly the same sense. Self-predication may be interpreted in such a way that the terms designating properties are not applicable to Forms and particulars in the same way, but it is not clear how this could be formulated plausibly. For instance, to say that the Form of the Beautiful is self-predicative in the sense that it is the property of being beautiful would yield an unilluminating tautology. Alternatively, to claim that the Form of the Beautiful is beautiful in some sense which is entirely distinct from the sense in which particulars are beautiful would create too great a difference between Forms and particulars for the former to serve as paradigms of the latter. It could also be argued that Forms are self-predicative in the sense that they “participate in” themselves, just as sensible particulars “participate in” Forms. But the notion of a Form’s participating in itself seems even more mysterious than the notion of a particular’s participating in a Form.

The second, and probably more serious problem, associated with the self-predication of Forms is the so-called “Third Man” argument. This argument is made by Plato’s critics,

⁴⁴ *Parmenides*, 132a.

including Aristotle, but Plato himself also raises it in the *Parmenides*.⁴⁵ The argument proceeds from the claim that Forms are self-predicative. In Plato's metaphysical system, sensible particulars have their properties in virtue of their relations to the Forms of those properties. But if Forms themselves have their own properties (which is what self-predication means), then, by analogous reasoning, there must be something in virtue of which *they* possess these properties. For example, since the Form of Largeness itself has the property of being large, this must be because it is related to some additional entity which confers the property largeness on the Form. The problem is that this generates an infinite regress of Forms: particulars are large because of their relation to the Form Largeness, the Form of Largeness is itself large because of its relation to a further Form of Largeness, and so on. This regress could be avoided if the Form of Largeness were large in virtue of its relation to itself – rather than its relation to a further Form – but this would be a problematic move. As I have already suggested, the notion of a Form's "participating in" itself is obscure. Alternatively, if the relationship between Forms and particulars is understood in terms of imitation, then it does not seem to make sense to say that the Form of Largeness is large in virtue of its relation to itself. This would involve saying that the Form of Largeness is large because it imitates itself, which is not very intelligible.

The "Third Man" appears to present a substantial challenge to Plato's theory of Forms. If this argument is sound, Plato's characterisation of Forms seems to compel him to admit an infinite number of Forms into his ontology, and this is surely undesirable. As I mentioned at the end of the previous section, postulating mysterious entities like Forms is problematic – how much worse it would then be to postulate an *infinity* of such entities. The regress of Forms implied by the "Third Man" argument also strips the theory of Forms of the explanatory force it could have. On the assumption that there is a single Form corresponding to every property, the theory of Forms provides an elegant account of properties; but to

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 132b. Aristotle raises this objection in *Metaphysics*, 990b 17-1079a 13. Some contemporary discussions of this argument include: Constance C. Meinwald, "Good-bye to the Third Man", in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 365-393; Peterson, "The *Parmenides*", 383-410.

explain the properties of particulars in terms of their relations to an infinite series of Forms is not very plausible.

Plato's theory of Forms could be rescued from the "Third Man" argument if the notion of self-predication could be defined in a suitable way. Such a definition would somehow need to preserve the parity between the properties of particulars and those of Forms so that Forms could still serve as paradigms of these properties. At the same time, it would need to be shown how this parity does not cause the self-predicative nature of Forms to lead to an infinite regress of Forms. As I have already pointed out, the prospects for formulating such a definition of "self-predication" are less than hopeful.

E. Conclusion

I shall conclude this chapter with a brief recapitulation of what I have covered. First, I considered what kinds of entities Forms are and how they are related to particulars. I argued that the evidence in Plato's works suggests that he generally considers Forms to be paradigms of which sensible particulars are imitations, but that there are also suggestions in his texts that Forms are to be understood as "immanent" in their corresponding particulars. Secondly, I briefly sketched some of the roles that Forms play in Plato's philosophy, not only in metaphysics but also in epistemology, ethics and political philosophy. Thirdly, I discussed some possible motivations for postulating Forms, and I argued that none of these succeeds in establishing that Platonic Forms exist. Finally, I raised some criticisms of the theory of Forms, including some gaps and inconsistencies which remain in the theory as well as the problem of self-predication and the resulting "Third Man" argument.

The expository portion of this chapter provides the background for the discussion of Chapter IV, in which I shall analyse the connections between Plato's ethics and metaphysics. The

critical portion of the chapter highlights evaluative points which will have a crucial influence on that analysis. The inadequacy of the arguments for Forms, and the force of the objections to the theory, will undoubtedly affect the assessment of the convergence between Plato's ethics and metaphysics.

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III. ETHICS

In this chapter I discuss the second central theme of this dissertation – Plato’s moral theory. Ethics is very prominent in Plato’s writings, as moral issues arise with great frequency and some dialogues are devoted entirely to particular moral concepts or questions. In comparison to his metaphysical theory, which I outlined in the previous chapter, Plato’s ethics is, in some respects, more accessible and comprehensible because the central themes recur more explicitly and there is a higher degree of consistency among Plato’s various comments on moral questions. However, his ethical position is nonetheless complex and contains important subtleties which need to be elucidated. Consequently, it is not possible to provide a concise summary statement of Plato’s moral theory; understanding his ethics requires an investigation of several issues which, in combination, make up a nuanced position.

In contrast to most contemporary moral theories, which typically attempt to provide universally applicable principles dictating how people ought to *act*, Plato’s ethics is concerned primarily with the sort of *character* one ought to have and the sort of life one ought to live. Thus, rather than focusing on how we should judge the rightness or wrongness of individual actions, the questions addressed in Plato’s dialogues revolve around the qualities of a good character and the features of a worthwhile human life.

My goals in this chapter are to elucidate and evaluate Plato’s moral theory by investigating how he answers these two questions. I shall, therefore, consider his views on good character, his views on the good life, and the connections between the two. First, I will outline Plato’s idea of good character and his conception of virtue. I shall then examine how he understands the connection between virtue and happiness. Finally, I will comment on his conception of

happiness and the good life. This will complete the foundations required for the analysis in Chapter IV.

A. Traits of Good Character

Perhaps the simplest question to clarify concerning Plato's ethics is which character traits he considers to be good ones – or, in other words, what qualities he thinks are virtues. As will be evident in the forthcoming discussion of Plato's ethics, the notion of virtue occupies a central role in his moral theory. There are four character traits which Plato clearly and undeniably takes to be virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. A fifth virtue, piety, is the subject of discussion in the *Euthyphro*, but, considering the relative scarcity of references to this virtue in other dialogues, it does not seem that Plato attaches too much significance to this quality as a virtue. Hence, it can be assumed that it is the other four virtues which Plato considers to be the central components of moral character.

That Plato considers wisdom to be a virtue is incontestable given the emphasis he consistently places on this characteristic in his dialogues. It is evident that he believes that the person whose life is directed by wisdom (or knowledge, or understanding) is a virtuous person. The other three virtues – justice, courage, and temperance – are brought up in various places in Plato's texts, but they have whole dialogues devoted to them as well. Courage is discussed in the *Laches*, temperance in the *Charmides*, and justice in the *Republic* and the *Gorgias*.

Plato's vision of what constitutes good character is summarised in his depiction of the "just individual" in the *Republic*. This individual exemplifies the four virtues listed above and, although Plato describes him specifically as the ideally *just* person, his portrayal of this character strongly suggests a view of good character generally. The just individual in the

Republic possesses the first virtue, wisdom, because it is the rational part of his soul which governs his life. He is courageous because the “spirited” component of his soul functions appropriately and is controlled by reason, so that he is neither cowardly nor brash or obsessed with honour. The just person is also temperate because his appetites are constrained by reason. Finally, he is just because his soul is appropriately ordered so that each component performs its proper function in harmony with the rest – this is Plato’s account, in the *Republic*, of what it is for an individual to be just.⁴⁶

It is clear, then, that the character traits Plato counts as virtues include wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. The next issue which needs to be addressed is the deeper and more interesting question: what is it that makes traits like these virtues? Or, in other words, what is the definition of virtue generally? Plato addresses this question in his dialogues, in addition to discussing particular virtues. From these various discussions two important aspects of the general nature of virtue emerge. I shall discuss these in the next section.

B. The Nature of Virtue

The first component of Plato’s conception of virtue is the view that there is a relationship between virtue and knowledge. The notion that there is a connection between virtue and knowledge (or wisdom) recurs in several of Plato’s dialogues. It might be too strong to claim that Plato *identifies* virtue with knowledge, but I would argue that, at the very least, he does perceive a link between the two. The idea that virtue is a kind of knowledge is discussed at some length in the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*.⁴⁷ Both dialogues end somewhat inconclusively, but the fact that this idea is given significant attention suggests that Plato considers it to be worth taking seriously. In addition, that Plato believes there is a connection between knowledge and virtue is suggested by his claim that those things which are

⁴⁶ *Republic*, 441c-443e.

⁴⁷ *Meno*, 87c-89a; *Protagoras*, 357b-e, 361a-c.

conventionally thought to be good (health, strength, wealth, beauty, and so on) are only good if they are used well – that is, with knowledge and wisdom. It is *virtue* which facilitates the wise use of these things and thus makes them good; therefore, virtue must itself be a kind of knowledge or wisdom.⁴⁸

The second key element of Plato's general conception of virtue is that it is related to personal benefit. This means that a virtue is a character trait which it is beneficial for a person to have, so a virtuous person will be better off than a non-virtuous person. Plato asserts the relationship between virtue and personal benefit in several places. For example, in the *Laws*, the anonymous Athenian claims that the good person "enjoys good fortune and is happy";⁴⁹ and in the *Meno*, Socrates and Meno agree that "virtue is something beneficial".⁵⁰ The connection between virtue and benefit is also assumed in the *Republic*, where Socrates argues that justice is a virtue because the just person is better off than the unjust person.⁵¹

From this, Plato's conception of virtue can be summarised as follows: virtues are character traits which manifest knowledge or wisdom and which are beneficial for a person to have. These two aspects of virtue are not only readily compatible, but one can support the other – it could be argued that virtue is beneficial *because* someone whose actions are guided by knowledge is better off than someone who acts from ignorance. The relationships between virtue and knowledge, and between virtue and benefit, as Plato construes them, are worth analysing in further depth. I shall discuss the first of these relationships in connection with the subject of the next section, which is the Unity of Virtue. Then, in the section after that, I shall consider the link between virtue and benefit in more detail by examining how Plato connects virtue and happiness.

⁴⁸ For example, *Apology*, 30a-b; *Euthydemus*, 278e-282d.

⁴⁹ *Laws*, 660e.

⁵⁰ *Meno*, 87e.

⁵¹ This defence of justice is developed throughout the *Republic*. I shall discuss some of the points raised in this defence later on in this chapter.

C. The Unity of Virtue

Another important aspect of Plato's view of good character is the way he relates individual virtues to one another. Plato is commonly thought to endorse, or at least to be sympathetic to, the doctrine referred to as the "Unity of Virtue".⁵² In the most general terms, the Unity of Virtue is the idea that virtue is a whole, of which the parts are *particular* virtues (courage, temperance, etc.). There are different senses in which individual virtues might be said to constitute a "unity", and so the Unity of Virtue doctrine can take various forms. Here I shall discuss four versions of the Unity of Virtue principle which might be reflections of Plato's views on the relationships among virtues.

The first version involves interpreting the Unity of Virtue quite literally as the idea that virtue is a whole of which particular virtues are its parts. This is suggested by some of Plato's phrasing in discussions of virtue.⁵³ However, even if he does sometimes appear to express the Unity of Virtue doctrine in these terms, it is very difficult to make sense of what this idea might mean. It surely cannot be the case that, for example, courage is a component of virtue in the same sense in which a brick is a component of a wall. The part-whole terminology might be intended to be taken less literally, as merely an analogy for the idea that the general term "virtue" covers the individual traits which are considered virtues, but this turns out to be entirely uninformative. Consequently, a meaningful version of the Unity of Virtue doctrine requires a more substantial account of how individual virtues are connected. The other three interpretations of the Unity of Virtue which I will discuss constitute such accounts.

⁵² The Unity of Virtue doctrine has been discussed quite widely, both in general and in relation to Plato in particular. See, for example, Daniel Devereux, "The Unity of the Virtues", in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh H. Benson (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 325-340; Raymond J. Devettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks* (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002); Terry Penner, "The Unity of Virtue", *The Philosophical Review* 82 (1973), 35-68; C. C. W. Taylor, "Platonic Ethics", in *Companions to Ancient Thought 4: Ethics*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 58-59.

⁵³ For example, *Laches*, 190c-d.

The Unity of Virtue might be interpreted as the view that the individual virtues imply one another, such that a person cannot possess one of them without possessing them all. This interpretation can itself be expressed as one of two distinct claims, one stronger than the other. The stronger version is the claim that having one particular virtue necessarily implies that one has others. Plato alludes to this idea in the *Gorgias* when Socrates says that the self-controlled person will necessarily also be just, pious, and brave.⁵⁴ The weaker version of this view is that, as a contingent matter of fact, individuals who have one virtue will have all of them. Both of these forms of the Unity of Virtue principle would require considerable argument to make them plausible. The stronger version would require an analysis of the nature of each virtue in question and some proof of their mutual entailment. The weaker version would require an explanation of why people tend to have all the virtues together rather than in isolation.

On the face of it, the prospects for adequately justifying the claim that the virtues imply one another does not look promising, even if this claim is taken in its weaker form. However, the last version of the Unity of Virtue which I shall consider might be able to provide some account of why the virtues occur all together.

The third possible interpretation of the Unity of Virtue doctrine in Plato's moral theory is that justice is a "global" virtue which unifies the other virtues (courage, wisdom, and temperance).⁵⁵ This view is clearly based on the depiction of the "just individual" in the *Republic*. As Plato describes him, this person is wise, courageous and temperate because each of the relevant parts of his soul performs its function well; justice is this overall order and harmony in the soul, and this is the sense in which it "unifies" the virtues.

Although this version of the Unity of Virtue principle fits very well with the account of justice Plato gives in the *Republic*, it seems not to adequately capture Plato's general conception of

⁵⁴ *Gorgias*, 507a-c.

⁵⁵ DeVettere, *Introduction to Virtue Ethics: Insights of the Ancient Greeks*, 81.

virtue and is also a little dubious in itself. This view of justice as the “unifying” virtue is not raised outside the *Republic*. Although this dialogue is one of Plato’s longest and most famous works, that he does not discuss this idea elsewhere makes it seem inappropriate to assume that he consistently endorses the Unity of Virtue principle in this form. In addition, the definition of “justice” in the individual which Plato gives in the *Republic* is unique to that dialogue and is quite different from commonsense understandings of justice. Moreover, it is rather unilluminating to claim that justice creates a unity among the virtues if justice itself is *defined* as a certain arrangement of the soul which already involves the possession of other virtues.

The final version of the Unity of Virtue principle which I shall consider seems to be the most plausible, both in itself and in relation to the rest of Plato’s moral theory. It is the view that what unifies the individual virtues is knowledge or wisdom.⁵⁶ This interpretation is somewhat similar to the previous one, in the sense that it also singles out one quality as the “global” virtue which unifies the others, but, in this case, the “global” virtue is wisdom rather than justice. Thus, according to this view, the virtues form a unity because they all originate from, or are manifestations of, this global wisdom.

There are several reasons why I consider this interpretation of the Unity of Virtue to be more plausible than the others. First, as I argued in the previous section, one feature of Plato’s general conception of virtue is that there is a relationship between virtue and knowledge. There is an obvious parallel between this idea and the view that the virtues form a unity because they stem from, or are connected to, a global wisdom. Secondly, this version of the Unity of Virtue doctrine is richer and more informative than the others. Thirdly, this view is not only compatible with the first two interpretations of the Unity of Virtue but can also be used as a means of filling them out. The first interpretation I mentioned was simply the idea that individual virtues are components of virtue as a whole. If the unity of the virtues

⁵⁶ Annas, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*, 122-123.

consists in their relation to a global wisdom, it is possible to make some sense of the notion of the virtues being parts of a greater whole by understanding each individual virtue as a particular instance of this wisdom which is the “whole” of virtue. The second interpretation of the Unity of Virtue doctrine I discussed was the view that virtues imply one another. Again, the view that knowledge is what creates unity among the virtues can explain why virtues would imply one another: if each virtue stems from a global wisdom, then one cannot have one virtue without having them all. A person who has this wisdom will necessarily have the virtues which it entails, while a person who lacks this wisdom will not have these virtues.

Even though I have been arguing that the idea that the virtues are unified by wisdom is the most plausible of the four interpretations of the Unity of Virtue I have considered, there may well be grounds on which to object to this view. For example, it could be objected that this version of the Unity of Virtue principle appears to assume that wisdom, and thus virtue, is an all-or-nothing matter, but, intuitively at least, it seems that there could be different kinds and degrees of both wisdom and virtue. It certainly appears plausible that a person could be, say, both courageous and immoderate, or wise in certain areas of life but not others. To deal with such questions it would be necessary to analyse in further depth how exactly Plato construes “knowledge” or “wisdom” in the relevant contexts, but such an analysis is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

What matters more for my present purposes is the conclusion which can be drawn from this examination of the Unity of Virtue doctrine and how it relates to Plato’s ethics. In the light of what I have discussed in this section and the previous one, it can be concluded that in Plato’s moral theory, there is clearly a connection between virtue and knowledge. I suggested in the previous section that there are several ways in which Plato draws such a connection in his dialogues, and in this section I have argued that, if he does endorse the Unity of Virtue principle, it is most likely that he views wisdom (or knowledge) as the factor which brings about this unity. From this, it emerges that knowledge is a significant part of Plato’s

conception of virtue and hence his ethics. This point will be of importance in the analysis I shall conduct in Chapter IV, when I consider how the theory of Forms might feature in the knowledge which Plato connects to virtue.⁵⁷

D. Virtue and Happiness

I shall now turn to the other key feature of Plato's conception of virtue mentioned earlier, namely, that virtue is beneficial. As I have already indicated, Plato's view is that a virtuous person is better off than a person who lacks virtue. In this section, I shall examine this issue in further depth by considering how Plato might construe the connection between virtue and happiness.⁵⁸ This is an important component of my analysis partly because it helps to shed further light on Plato's notion of virtue, but also because it brings out the relationship between the good character and the worthwhile life. At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that Plato's ethics is concerned with two general questions: what sort of person one ought to be and what sort of life one ought to live. So far I have been dealing with the first question; in this section, I shall examine the connection between the two; and, in the next section, I shall discuss the second question.

It is clear that Plato assumes that happiness is intrinsically valuable and thus something for which any rational person would aim. Two examples of where he makes this assumption explicit are in the *Euthydemus* and the *Symposium*. In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates asks, "Do all men wish to do well?" but declares, without waiting for an answer, that the question is a stupid one because the answer is so obvious.⁵⁹ Similarly, in the *Symposium*, it is suggested

⁵⁷ The views I have discussed in this section do not by any means exhaust the possibilities of how the Unity of Virtue doctrine might be interpreted, but they do present some of the principal options.

⁵⁸ "Happiness" is the most convenient term to use here, but it is perhaps not the most precise. It must be borne in mind that "happiness" in Plato's ethics is used in a very broad sense, in that it is not limited to subjective pleasant feelings but incorporates more general notions of well-being and flourishing. "Happiness" in this context refers to a state of a person's life as a whole, not merely her particular mental states at any given time.

⁵⁹ *Euthydemus*, 278e.

that it is not necessary to ask why anyone would desire happiness,⁶⁰ which indicates that the intrinsic value of happiness is taken for granted. In the light of such claims about the value of happiness, it is evident that this is an important component of Plato's moral philosophy.

The claim that virtue is beneficial warrants further analysis because the (purported) connection between virtue and happiness is not immediately obvious. Moreover, it is possible to conceive of situations in which it seems that being virtuous would *not* lead to happiness but rather the opposite. For example, someone who behaves justly in a highly corrupt society is not likely to be happy or flourish; in such a situation, virtue would seem to be detrimental to one's happiness rather than conducive to it.

There are two ways of responding to such (apparent) counter-examples to the claim that virtue is beneficial. The first is to hold that *any* character trait which causes a person to do well is, by definition, a virtue, even if the trait in question is not ordinarily considered a virtue. Thus, to return to the example above, if a person would flourish in a corrupt society by behaving unjustly, then injustice would be a virtue. Plato considers this way of preserving the link between virtue and benefit in the *Republic* when Thrasymachus challenges Socrates with the argument that injustice is a virtue and justice is a vice, because the unjust person fares better than the just person.⁶¹ However, this is not Plato's own view – he certainly does not claim that injustice, cowardice, intemperance, and so on, are virtues in certain circumstances. Instead, he takes the second and more challenging route, by maintaining that the qualities ordinarily considered virtues really are beneficial to the person who has them.

Although it is quite clear that this is Plato's position, the details of how he construes the relationship between virtue and happiness are somewhat less clear. One important issue which is difficult to resolve is whether Plato considers virtue to be only *necessary* for

⁶⁰ *Symposium*, 205a.

⁶¹ *Republic* 348b-e.

happiness, or whether he thinks that virtue is both necessary and *sufficient* for happiness.⁶² If virtue is necessary but not sufficient for happiness, this means that one must be virtuous in order to do well in life, but other factors may also be required for one to be happy (such as favourable circumstances). In contrast, the view that virtue is also sufficient for happiness means that a virtuous person will be happy *regardless* of the kinds of circumstances in which she lives.

It is not clear which of these is the more accurate reflection of Plato's position, because in his writings he makes remarks which allude to both alternatives. The view that virtue is necessary for happiness is justified by the claim, to which I referred earlier in this chapter, that "conventional" goods such as health, wealth, strength, beauty, and so on, are only made good when they are used properly – that is, with virtue. Therefore, virtue is necessary for happiness because such things cannot make a person's life better unless she uses them virtuously.

However, some of the comments Plato makes in his dialogues suggest that he believes that virtue is not only necessary but also sufficient for happiness. One example of this can be found in the *Laws*, when the Athenian says that a virtuous person will be happy irrespective of whether he is weak or powerful, or rich or poor.⁶³ Thus, even if a person lacks "conventional" goods like health, power, wealth, and so on, he will be happy if he is virtuous. A further suggestion of the view that virtue is sufficient for happiness can be found in the *Gorgias*, where it is said that the good man "does well and admirably *whatever he does*, while the corrupt man, the one who does badly, is miserable".⁶⁴

The view that virtue is not only necessary but also sufficient for happiness is too strong a claim to have any immediate plausibility. One can easily imagine a virtuous person who lives

⁶² Julia Annas, "Plato's Ethics", in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 270-271.

⁶³ *Laws*, 660e-661a.

⁶⁴ *Gorgias*, 507c (my emphasis).

in wretched circumstances and question how his virtue alone suffices to make him happy. It could be shown that such a person is happy if “happiness” were given some “moralised” definition, such that it is restricted to being *morally* well-off; in this sense, the virtuous person in terrible circumstances is “happy” because he has a moral character. However, this creates a circularity because virtue is being understood in terms of personal benefit, but this benefit is itself being defined in terms of virtue. As I argued earlier in this chapter, Plato conceives of virtues as character traits which are beneficial to have and which promote the individual’s happiness. If “benefit” and “happiness” are to be understood in a “moralised” way, this would mean that what constitutes a benefit, or happiness, is having a certain moral character. This makes the definitions of virtue and benefit circular: a virtue is a trait which benefits its possessor, but to be benefited is to be virtuous. As a result, the accounts of “virtue” and “benefit” become unilluminating. However, if one adopts a commonsense (non-moralised) understanding of happiness or benefit, it seems patently false that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness.

The idea that virtue is merely necessary for happiness is the weaker and therefore more plausible claim. Plato’s argument that things like health, power, wealth, and so on, are good only when used wisely and virtuously, is not objectionable. However, this justification for the claim that virtue is necessary for happiness has a consequence which *could* be objectionable. The consequence is that “goods” like health, power and wealth become harmful if they are used with vice rather than virtue.⁶⁵ This is because the argument is based on the idea that such things are neutral – neither good nor bad – in themselves but only become good or bad depending on the character employing them. Therefore, if they are used by a virtuous person they will benefit her, whereas if they are used by a vicious person they will harm her. Plato embraces this implication quite happily,⁶⁶ but for many it would surely be very counter-intuitive. For example, it is difficult to understand in what sense health is “harmful” to a tyrant. Of course, health may be *morally* harmful to him because it enables him to commit

⁶⁵ Julia Annas, “Plato’s Ethics”, 270.

⁶⁶ *Euthydemus*, 281b-d; *Laws*, 661d.

more tyranny than if he were unhealthy; but again, if harm and benefit are being understood in a “moralised” way then there is a circularity between virtue and benefit. Thus, the argument that virtue is necessary for happiness, because it enables conventional goods to benefit the virtuous person, is not wholly plausible, since it either leads to a very counter-intuitive implication or requires a moralised definition of “benefit” which yields a circularity.

Although it is not altogether clear whether Plato considers virtue to be (merely) necessary or (also) sufficient for happiness, what is clear is that he does perceive some relationship between virtue and happiness, and that virtue is an important component of his vision of the ideal human life. This issue is given sustained attention in the *Republic* when Socrates provides a defence of justice to refute Thrasymachus’ objection that injustice is more beneficial than justice. In this defence, Plato does not clearly commit himself to the view that virtue is *sufficient* (rather than merely necessary) for happiness, but seems here to be more concerned to show only that the virtuous person is better off *in comparison to* the unvirtuous person. Because this is one of the most detailed of Plato’s arguments dealing with the connection between virtue and happiness, it is worth considering in the present context. Even though the argument focuses only on justice and not on the virtues more generally, it is still very relevant to a broader examination of the connections between virtue and happiness. Justice is a virtue to which Plato attaches great importance, and if the defence of justice in the *Republic* is sound then he will have succeeded in demonstrating that one of the traits he considers to be a virtue really does benefit the person who possesses it. Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, Plato’s depiction of the “just individual” in the *Republic* is a depiction of someone who is not merely “just” in the ordinary sense of the word but who exemplifies good character generally.

The arguments for the connection between justice and happiness which Plato gives in the *Republic* are complex and the conclusion is reached circuitously because of numerous digressions into issues which do not bear directly on the main question. In order to avoid departing too far from my present topic, I shall not discuss the defence of justice in the

Republic in detail, but instead I will extract a few of the central points which may help to shed further light on how Plato construes the relationship between virtue and happiness, and his conception of happiness.⁶⁷

One important justification Plato gives for the view that the just person is better off than the unjust person makes reference to the states of their respective souls. As Plato describes him, the just person's soul is in a state of harmony, because each of its components (reason, spirit, and appetite) performs only its own function and does not interfere with the others. Reason is the dominant element in the just soul and this is what maintains the harmony and ensures the proper functioning of the components of the soul. In contrast, the soul of the unjust person fails to exhibit this kind of order and is in disarray. Plato describes the soul of the just individual as "healthy" and that of the unjust individual as "unhealthy".⁶⁸ Given this portrayal of the contrast between the just and the unjust soul, it is obvious why the just person would be happier – someone whose body is diseased will be unhappy in comparison to someone whose body is healthy, so if the just individual is the paradigm of the "healthy" soul, he will clearly be happier than someone with an "unhealthy" soul.

That the just person is ruled by the rational part of his soul also gives him an advantage in terms of happiness. Because his life is governed by reason, he is better able to recognise and pursue what is truly valuable and rationally best for himself. Plato brings out this point further by contrasting the life of the just person with those of the "unjust" individuals who correspond to the political regimes he considers to fall short of the ideally just state. He discusses the timocratic, oligarchic, democratic and tyrannical individuals and claims that

⁶⁷ The defence of justice in the *Republic* has been discussed extensively. See, for example, Norman O. Dahl, "Plato's Defence of Justice", in *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion and the Soul*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 207-234; T. H. Irwin, "Republic 2: Questions about Justice", in *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion and the Soul*, ed. Gail Fine, 164-185; Richard Kraut, "The Defense of Justice in Plato's *Republic*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 311-337.

⁶⁸ *Republic*, 444c-445c.

they are all unhappy because, unlike the just individual, reason is not the governing element in their souls.⁶⁹

Another relevant aspect of Plato's argument that the life of the just person is better than the life of the unjust person can be drawn from his depiction of the philosophers who are to rule the hypothetical state described in the *Republic*. The philosophers are to rule because they are the wisest people in the state, and they have souls which exhibit the order and harmony of Plato's ideally just individual; thus, they not only rule the city using their faculties of reason, but they also rule *themselves* according to reason because of the dominance of the rational element in their souls. Plato also claims that these philosophers, in virtue of their superior rationality, are capable of enjoying pursuits not accessible to the masses. The philosophers take pleasure in intellectual pursuits, in particular, the contemplation of Platonic Forms, and these pleasures are described as superior and "more real" than the mundane pleasures of the unenlightened majority.⁷⁰ The implication of this is that the just person, whose soul is like those of Plato's philosophers, has a better life than an unjust person because he has access to pleasures and pursuits which are most valuable.

The arguments I have discussed in this section may not appear adequately compelling to demonstrate that virtue is beneficial. I have argued that the claim that virtue is sufficient for happiness is too strong to be plausible, whereas the idea that virtue is merely necessary for happiness is more credible but has a counter-intuitive implication. The defence of justice in the *Republic*, which I have just discussed, is persuasive to the extent that one accepts Plato's account of the contrasting states of just and unjust souls. However, it might well be objected that the arguments Plato gives in the *Republic* to support the benefits of justice still do not show that one will generally, or always, be better off behaving virtuously instead of viciously. To return to my earlier example, the arguments of the *Republic* do not seem to prove that a

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 580a-c.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 583b-588a.

person who lives in an extremely corrupt and unjust society will be better off behaving justly than unjustly.

In response to such objections it should perhaps be pointed out that Plato's understanding of virtue is primarily concerned with *character* rather than with *behaviour*. As his arguments for justice in the *Republic* indicate, he views virtue (in this case, justice) as an *internal* state rather than in terms of an agent's interactions with the external world.⁷¹ With this in mind, the objection that Plato has failed to show that a person will always be better off by *acting* virtuously seems misguided. Plato's point is, rather, that virtue is beneficial in the sense that the virtuous person's soul is in a better state than the unvirtuous person's soul. This does not entail that virtue is *sufficient* for happiness, but it does go some way towards explaining why Plato believes that virtue is a means to happiness.

E. Plato's Conception of Happiness

The discussion of the connections between virtue and happiness which I gave in the previous section gives some indication of Plato's conception of the good life. However, in this section, I shall briefly summarise the key points in order to provide a clearer and more explicit explanation of this conception.

Plato evidently recognises the value of "conventional" goods like health, strength, wealth, and so on, but he also recognises their limitations as constituents of human happiness. In other words, he acknowledges that such things have the potential to make a person's life better; however, he argues that they are not intrinsically good but only become good when they are used well. These goods are therefore not essential for happiness, but may enhance it.

⁷¹ Terry Penner, "Plato's Ethics: Early and Middle Dialogues", in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Mary Louise Gill and Pierre Pellegrin (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 160-164.

It is also clear that a crucial component of Plato's view of happiness and the good life is the exercise of reason, as he emphasises its importance in a variety of contexts. This is indicated by the recurring theme that it is knowledge or wisdom which facilitates the proper use of "conventional" goods and makes them beneficial. It is also expressed in the idea, which emerges from Plato's works quite generally, that the rational person is able to identify and pursue what is truly valuable. Moreover, what Plato considers to be "truly valuable" are precisely those pursuits which involve the use of reason. This is why, in the *Republic*, he claims that the lives of just individuals, exemplified by the philosophers, are the best sorts of lives – not only are their lives *directed* by reason, but they are also *devoted* to rational pursuits.

Finally, Plato acknowledges the value of pleasure and its influence on happiness, but he does not consider pleasure to be the ultimate value or the sole determinant of the good life. This is shown by the way he carefully distinguishes between the "better" and "worse" pleasures.⁷² Unsurprisingly, the pleasures he ranks most highly are those associated with intellectual activities, which further emphasises the value he attaches to the use of reason.

F. Conclusion

Plato's moral theory consists of two main elements: the notion of virtue and the value of happiness. As I have demonstrated, these two issues are deeply connected in Plato's ethics. I have argued that the principal features of Plato's conception of virtue are, first, that virtue is connected to some kind of wisdom or knowledge, and, secondly, that virtue is beneficial to the person who possesses it. The latter of these two features is the point at which Plato's view of moral character converges with his conception of happiness. Plato's understanding of happiness – or what constitutes a good life – strongly emphasises the role of reason, both as

⁷² For example, *Phaedo* 69a-d; *Philebus* 13b; *Republic* 505c.

a means of choosing which ends to pursue and as something which confers value on certain ends.

Throughout my examination of Plato's ethics, I have pointed out aspects of his moral theory which are potentially problematic or which require further development or clarification. For instance, as I discussed in the section on the Unity of Virtue, it is not clear how Plato conceives of the relationships among the qualities that he classifies as virtues. In addition, some of the details of how virtue and happiness are connected in Plato's ethics could be clarified and justified further. Despite these deficiencies, Plato's many discussions of ethical issues provide, on the whole, a fairly unproblematic moral theory. Certainly, his ethics seems less problematic than the metaphysical theory of Forms. Having laid the necessary groundwork in this chapter and the previous one, in the next chapter I shall turn to an examination of how Plato's moral and metaphysical theories interact.

IV. THE CONVERGENCE OF ETHICS AND METAPHYSICS

In this chapter, I shall pursue the primary aim of this dissertation. Drawing on what was covered in the previous two chapters, I shall analyse in what ways Plato's theory of Forms connects to his ethics. Some of the links between the two themes are established quite explicitly in Plato's works, but others are suggested only implicitly and require more interpretation and analysis to draw them out. Consequently, in my analysis I shall consider some fairly direct references in Plato's dialogues to the Forms' place in his ethics, but I shall also discuss some of the less explicit ways in which his ethics and metaphysics may be connected. Where necessary, I shall indicate the degree to which the various connections I discuss are drawn explicitly or only implicitly by Plato.

One of the most direct links between ethics and metaphysics which Plato establishes is in his discussion of the Form of the Good in the *Republic*. The Form of the Good is clearly relevant to an analysis of the convergence between Plato's ethics and the theory of Forms, because this is one connection which Plato makes most clearly and explicitly. For this reason, I devote some attention to this topic in the first section of this chapter. However, my treatment of the Form of the Good is relatively brief. Rather than embarking on a detailed discussion of the *Republic's* characterisation of the Form of the Good, I have focused on connections between Plato's moral and metaphysical theories which can be drawn from a greater range of his dialogues besides the *Republic*. Thus, the bulk of my analysis is in the second and third sections of this chapter.

Because of the nature of the dialogue form which Plato uses, as well as the variety of contexts in which he mentions Forms, the material on which I must base this analysis is fragmented and scattered. As a result, the issues are difficult to untangle. In the hope of imposing a clearer structure upon my discussion of these issues, I have divided my analysis of the roles

of Forms in Plato's ethics into two broad categories, which I refer to as "metaphysical" and "epistemological" respectively. The first of these focuses on how Forms can serve as a theory of moral properties, and the meta-ethical position to which Plato's characterisation of Forms commits him. The second relates to the ways in which Forms feature, or might feature, in Plato's moral theory with respect to matters pertaining to knowledge. As I made clear in Chapter III, knowledge and wisdom are significant themes in Plato's ethics, so it is appropriate to consider what place Forms might have in the relevant sort of knowledge. After dealing with the Form of the Good in the first section of this chapter, I will discuss the metaphysical roles of the Forms in the second section and the epistemological roles in the third.

A. The Form of the Good

In most of Plato's dialogues which mention Forms, the Form of the Good is not given special attention, but is simply listed along with other Forms. It is only in the *Republic* that this Form is examined in detail and presented as having a special status relative to the rest of the Forms. In this section I shall provide a brief discussion of the Form of the Good as it is characterised in the *Republic*. This includes an overview of what Plato says in this dialogue about the Form of the Good, as well as a summary of some of the main objections to his conception of this Form.

The Form of the Good is introduced in the *Republic* at the point when Socrates and his interlocutors are considering the education of the Guardians who are to govern the ideal state they are describing. Socrates claims that the Guardians must be educated in the "most important subjects", by which he means the virtues which were discussed earlier in the

dialogue.⁷³ He then adds that there is an even more important subject than this, which turns out to be the Form of the Good.⁷⁴

In the discussion which follows, Plato gives the Form of the Good a kind of superiority over the rest of the Forms, presenting it as a “first principle” of sorts. The Form of the Good, as it is described in the *Republic*, has a special priority – metaphysically, epistemically, and even morally. It is a “first principle” in that it is the end-point of explanation in these areas. In metaphysics, the Form of the Good is said to be the cause of the existence of the rest of the Forms;⁷⁵ it is thus, in modern terminology, ontologically prior to other Forms. Epistemologically, the Form of the Good is also given particular significance. Socrates claims that knowledge of the Form of the Good is necessary for knowledge of the other Forms,⁷⁶ as well as for an understanding of why anything else is good.⁷⁷ He also says that no knowledge of any subject will be beneficial unless one has prior knowledge of the Form of the Good.⁷⁸ In ethics, the Form of the Good is important because it is the ultimate source of moral value. Socrates also claims that it is what makes the virtues “useful and beneficial”.⁷⁹

This depiction of the Form of the Good in the *Republic* is intriguing, because it has a certain appeal but also leaves questions unanswered. As I mentioned in Chapter I, Plato’s Form of the Good has been the subject of much discussion among his commentators. I shall now briefly list a few of the main problems with the Form of the Good which have been identified.

First, Plato never gives a definition or account of what exactly the Form of the Good is. In the *Republic*, when Socrates is pressed to give his opinion of what “the Good” is, he refuses to do so, and instead goes on to illustrate the metaphysical and epistemological roles of the Form of

⁷³ *Republic*, 503e-504a.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 504e-505a.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 509b.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 508c-e.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 506a.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 505a.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*.

the Good using the analogy of the Sun.⁸⁰ Given that the Form of the Good is such a highly abstract principle, it is understandable that Plato is hesitant to give a definition of it. His failure to do so may not necessarily be objectionable, but if the Form of the Good is to serve as a “first principle”, which accounts for all knowledge and explanation, then it seems undesirable for it to remain so mysterious.

Secondly, it is not clear how one is to *know* the Form of the Good, or even whether such knowledge is possible. At one point in the *Republic*, Socrates uses the analogy of the Divided Line to represent different levels of cognition, and seems to suggest that, to attain knowledge of the Good, one must progress through these levels “by hypotheses” until one reaches the “unhypothetical first principle of everything”.⁸¹ Although this gives *some* indication of how one might come to know the Form of the Good, the explanation is rather obscure and leaves the details of this process undetermined. The difficulty of how we are to know the Form of the Good is problematic because of the epistemological priority it is given in the *Republic*. As I explained earlier, knowledge of the Form of the Good is said to be necessary for knowledge of the other Forms, for knowledge of why anything is good, and for any other knowledge to be beneficial. Thus, if it is not clear how (or whether) one is able to achieve knowledge of the Form of the Good, this makes it a problematic principle for epistemology.

The final two objections I shall discuss are both raised by Aristotle. The first is that the Form of the Good does not seem to have a place in ethics. This is because, Aristotle argues, the Form of the Good is “not the sort of good a human being can pursue in action or possess”.⁸² In other words, the Form of the Good is so abstract and distant from practical values that it is not the sort of thing for which people can actually aim. The second of Aristotle’s objections is that it is not appropriate to postulate just one “Form of the Good”, because there are in fact many different ways in which we speak of what is good. Aristotle claims that there are

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 506d-e.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 511b.

⁸² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1096b.

different versions of “the good” for different “categories”⁸³ of things. For example, some things are morally good (such as justice), while others are aesthetically good (i.e. beautiful), and some things are good because they perform their functions well (such as human artefacts). Given these different senses of “good”, it is not clear why there should only be one Form of the Good.

This survey of the Form of the Good is brief, but I hope that it has highlighted the main features of and problems with this Form. The Form of the Good is an important and interesting topic in Plato’s philosophy, and it does represent one point at which his ethics and metaphysics converge quite explicitly. This is why I have covered it in this chapter. However, I have refrained from discussing it in more depth because doing so would cause me to stray too far from the main focus of this dissertation, which is the analysis of ethics and the theory of Forms as global themes in Plato’s philosophy. The conception of the Form of the Good, which I have discussed here, is unique to the *Republic* and thus does not seem to be representative of the most general convergence of Platonic ethics and metaphysics. I have, therefore, given greater priority to other, broader, interactions between these themes. These interactions are the subjects of the next two sections of this chapter.

B. The Metaphysical Roles of the Forms

The Forms to which Plato devotes the most attention in his dialogues are the Forms of value-laden properties, particularly the Form of the Good, the Form of the Just, and the Form of the Beautiful. As I demonstrated in Chapter II, these are the only Forms which can almost certainly be said to be admitted into Plato’s ontology, since the status of other potential Forms is less apparent. In this section, I intend to consider what Plato’s recognition of these Forms might imply about the place of Forms in his ethics.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1096a.

I shall begin by showing how the Forms can be interpreted as a theory of moral properties and how the deficiencies in the theory of Forms discussed in Chapter II undermine this theory of moral properties. Thereafter, I will discuss the meta-ethical position which emerges from Plato's theory of Forms when interpreted as a theory of moral properties. To do this, I shall situate Plato's position in the landscape of contemporary meta-ethics by demonstrating how it can be classified as a variety of moral realism. I will then assess Plato's version of moral realism, both on its own and in comparison to other varieties of realism. I shall conclude that the weaknesses in the theory of Forms diminish its plausibility as a theory of moral properties and create problems for Platonic moral realism.

Interpreting the Forms as a theory of moral properties involves applying the Forms as a general theory of properties to a particular subset of properties. If Forms are construed as a theory of properties, this means that, according to this theory, particular items in the world have the properties they do in virtue of their relations to Forms of those properties. When this is restricted to *moral* properties, the theory of Forms implies that particulars have moral properties because they are connected (in the relevant way) to Forms of those moral properties. Thus, for example, a particular person or institution would be just (or would have the property "justice") through having the required relation to the Form of the Just.

The strengths and weaknesses of this theory of moral properties are much the same as those of the Forms as a general metaphysical system. I discussed some objections to the theory of Forms in Chapter II and I now shall briefly recapitulate the main issues in order to highlight the principal challenges faced by the Forms as a theory of moral properties.

The first problem is that Plato has not provided sufficient justifications for postulating Forms. In Chapter II, I considered several arguments which have been given, or which could be given, to demonstrate that Platonic Forms exist, and I showed that none of these succeeds. This is a significant weakness in the Forms as a theory of moral properties. Forms are

supposed to explain how things in the world have moral qualities (such as moral goodness), but if the existence of the Forms of these qualities has not been satisfactorily established, then the theory cannot fulfil this function.

The second problem is that Plato does not specify precisely which Forms exist and, more importantly, he does not give an account of how we are to distinguish between properties which have corresponding Forms and those which do not. I have emphasised that Plato certainly *does* seem to believe that there are Forms of moral properties, and so it might be thought that his failure to explain whether other kinds of Forms exist is irrelevant to an assessment of the theory of Forms interpreted narrowly as a theory of *moral* properties. However, that Plato does not give a systematic account of which kinds of properties have corresponding Forms, and which do not, is problematic even when one focuses only on moral properties. Such an account would provide a principled reason for postulating the Forms of the Good, the Beautiful, and the Just; but without such an account, there is no reason to accept that *these* Forms exist when we have not been told *why* there are these Forms but not others.

These two objections both point to a broader problem with the Forms as a theory of moral properties, which is that the existence of Forms is doubtful. As I argued in Chapter II, a metaphysical system which postulates entities as abstract and mysterious as Platonic Forms requires very compelling arguments to justify this postulation, but I have shown that such arguments are lacking in Plato's works. Therefore, because it appeals to entities whose existence is dubious, the theory of Forms is not a strong account of moral properties.

The third problem with Forms, which is relevant to the assessment of Plato's theory of moral properties, is that the nature of the relationship between Forms and particulars remains obscure. Plato does not reach a clear enough conclusion regarding whether particulars "share in" Forms or "imitate" Forms. The potential for Forms to be able to explain how

things have moral properties is substantially diminished by the absence of a clear account of how something with a given moral property is related to the Form of that property.

The final two weaknesses in the theory of Forms are the problems of self-predication and the “Third Man”. That Forms are self-predicative is puzzling enough in general, but the obscurity seems especially acute in the case of moral properties. We can make sense of the idea, for example, that a person, action or institution could be just, but in what sense could a purely abstract entity like a Platonic Form be “just”? The “Third Man” argument, which demonstrates a potential infinite regress of Forms, similarly creates a problem for the theory of Forms as a theory of moral properties. Without a plausible account of self-predication which enables the theory of Forms to escape the problem of the “Third Man” argument, these remain significant weaknesses in Plato’s theory of moral properties.

These objections to the theory of Forms, both individually and in combination, clearly show that Forms do not provide a promising foundation for a theory of moral properties. However, I shall, for the moment, set these difficulties aside, because there are connections between Plato’s ethics and metaphysics which are worth examining despite the weaknesses in the theory of Forms. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss the metaphysical roles of Forms in Plato’s ethics further by considering the meta-ethical position to which Plato’s characterisation of Forms commits him. Because I will analyse this position as a variety of moral realism, I shall begin with an overview of this meta-ethical theory. I will explain the most general features of moral realism and provide a short taxonomy of the relevant sub-types of realism. Against this background, I will demonstrate how Plato’s position satisfies the general description of moral realism and how it compares to the other varieties of moral realism. Lastly, I will evaluate Plato’s particular version of moral realism.

Moral realism is a tradition in meta-ethics which represents a broad view of the status of moral propositions. At the most general level, the standard definition of moral realism

comprises the following three claims.⁸⁴ First, moral statements are the sorts of propositions which are capable of being true or false. Moral claims are like ordinary declarative statements in the sense that they purport to be factual (they have the form of reporting facts), and they are true or false depending on whether they report the facts accurately or not. Secondly, moral realism asserts that there are such things as moral facts. The consequence of this is that some moral statements are actually true because they accurately report moral facts. Finally, the truth of moral statements (or the nature of moral facts) is “objective” in the sense that their nature is independent of anyone’s beliefs or opinions about them.⁸⁵

This description captures the essence of moral realism by characterising it broadly as a view which endorses the notion of moral *truth* and which considers this truth to be objective. However, this very general explanation clearly leaves out important details – most obviously, the concept of a “moral fact” requires illumination. Ordinary facts expressed by declarative statements can be grasped easily enough, but the notion of a *moral* fact is far less clear. A moral realist theory must, therefore, explain what constitutes the moral facts in virtue of which moral statements are true. It would be too much of a digression for me to discuss all the possible varieties and sub-varieties of moral realism here; instead, I shall only focus on three main versions of moral realism which seem the most relevant to the study of Plato’s meta-ethics.

Within moral realism there is a broad division between two positions known as “naturalistic” and “non-naturalistic” moral realism respectively. There is, in addition, “supernaturalistic”

⁸⁴ The literature on moral realism is vast. Some helpful introductions include: David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Peter Railton, “Moral Realism: Prospects and Problems”; Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Moral Realism”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 39-62; Michael Smith, “Moral Realism”, in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 15-37.

⁸⁵ The final feature of moral realism which I have listed here is controversial. See, for example, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “The Many Moral Realisms”, in *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1-23, who argues that this kind of objectivity is not essential to moral realism. However, I include it in my definition because, as I shall demonstrate, Plato’s meta-ethical position clearly *does* incorporate this notion of objectivity.

moral realism, but this position is less widely discussed because of contemporary philosophy's general aversion to supernatural elements. These different versions of moral realism provide competing accounts of what moral facts and moral properties are. Supernaturalistic moral realism identifies moral properties with supernatural properties. So, for example, a supernaturalistic moral realist might hold that the property of being morally good is equivalent to the property of being willed by a divine being. Naturalistic moral realism endorses the general principle of naturalism, which is the view that the only facts which exist are natural facts. Therefore, naturalistic moral realism identifies moral properties with natural properties. An example of a naturalistic moral realist theory is one which equates what is morally good with what is pleasant, so that the (moral) property "goodness" is identified with the (natural) property "pleasantness". Finally, non-naturalistic moral realism does not identify moral properties with any other kinds of properties. Instead, it characterises moral properties as a class of their own, distinct from natural (or supernatural) properties.⁸⁶

Having thus clarified moral realism and some of its varieties, I shall now move on to discussing Plato's meta-ethical position. That Plato is a moral realist may seem immediately obvious to some; however, instead of merely assuming this, I shall briefly demonstrate explicitly why his meta-ethics is consistent with the core principles of moral realism. In addition, I shall explain the roles that Forms play in Plato's moral realism.

In my initial exposition of moral realism, I suggested that it can be summarised in the following three claims: (i) that moral statements are capable of being true or false; (ii) that some moral statements are actually true; and (iii) that the truth of moral statements is objective (in the sense of "independent"). Plato does not make any of these claims explicitly, since his theory of Forms pre-dates the classifications of modern meta-ethics. However, it is

⁸⁶ This brief taxonomy draws on discussions of moral realism in Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, 22-23; Sayre-McCord, "Moral Realism", 40-41; Smith, "Moral Realism", 23-26.

clear from the way in which he characterises Forms in his dialogues that he does endorse these broad principles of moral realism. Consequently, as I shall now show, Plato's meta-ethics satisfies the general criteria for moral realism.

I shall begin with the second of the three claims: that some moral statements are actually true, because there are such things as moral facts and some moral statements accurately represent these facts. That Plato's views are consistent with this principle of moral realism can be inferred from his belief that Forms exist and are the source of moral properties. As should be evident from my discussions in Chapter II and the beginning of this section, it is reasonable to suppose that Plato believes that Forms exist and that there are Forms of moral properties (such as goodness and justice). If there are such things as moral properties (Forms), and some items in the world actually have these properties (because they are related to the relevant Forms), then it follows that some statements about moral value – which ascribe moral properties to particular things – will be true. Plato's meta-ethics therefore satisfies the second of the three principles of moral realism. This also commits Plato to the first principle of moral realism, that moral statements are capable of being true, because it would be inconsistent to hold that some moral statements are *actually* true while denying that moral statements are *capable* of being true.

It is also quite uncontroversial to say that Plato's theory of moral properties is consistent with the last claim of moral realism, which is that moral truths are objective in the sense explained earlier. This is because of the way in which Plato characterises Forms. In Plato's dialogues, Forms are consistently depicted as constituting a reality which is permanent and unchanging. That is to say, they exist eternally, or timelessly, and no Form's nature ever changes in any way.⁸⁷ In addition, Forms are portrayed as potential objects of knowledge, as things which are to be *discovered* by humans rather than "created" by them.⁸⁸ These features of Forms clearly show that Plato considers Forms to be objective in that their existence and nature are

⁸⁷ For example, *Phaedo*, 78d-79b; *Republic*, 479a; *Symposium*, 211a-c.

⁸⁸ This is perhaps most clearly expressed in the *Republic*, 509d-511e.

entirely independent of human agency. Therefore, moral properties and hence moral facts must be similarly objective in Plato's system.

From what I have said in the last few paragraphs, it should be clear how Forms feature in Plato's particular version of moral realism. As a theory of moral properties, the Forms constitute Plato's account of moral facts. What makes a moral statement true is the state of affairs it describes actually obtaining, which means that a particular which is said to have a certain moral property actually does have that property. In Plato's metaphysical system, having a moral property involves participating in the Form of that property. Therefore, what constitutes a moral fact is the state of affairs in which a particular participates in the Form of a moral property.

So far, I have shown how Plato's meta-ethics fits into the broad category of moral realism; now I shall explore how his position compares to the other varieties of moral realism I outlined earlier (naturalistic, non-naturalistic and supernaturalistic). To do this, I will consider what Plato's meta-ethical position has in common with each of these theories and how it differs from them. The purposes of this comparison are, first, to provide a fuller and clearer picture of Plato's moral realism and, secondly, to lay the groundwork for the evaluation of his position, which I shall undertake later in this section. I shall argue that Plato's version of moral realism does not fit comfortably into any of the three subtypes of moral realism I have identified and that it should rather be considered a unique variety of realism. However, Plato's position does have certain affinities with other forms of moral realism and this affects its plausibility as a meta-ethical theory.

I will begin by considering whether Plato's version of moral realism has anything in common with supernaturalistic moral realism. For Plato's meta-ethics to be classifiable as a kind of supernaturalistic moral realism it would have to be the case that he believes that moral properties are supernatural, which would presumably mean that the Forms of moral

properties would have to be supernatural in some way, or at least to have some supernatural origin. There are certainly allusions to the supernatural – or more accurately, to the divine – scattered throughout Plato’s works. One theme which recurs, and which hints at some connection between morality and the divine, is the idea that to become morally good (or virtuous) is to become like God.⁸⁹ This may seem to suggest that there is a supernatural element in Plato’s ethics, and possibly even his meta-ethics.

However, overall, there are (at most) very meagre motivations for classifying Plato’s meta-ethics as a kind of supernaturalistic moral realism. There is no real evidence in Plato’s dialogues to suggest that he considers Forms to have a divine nature or origin. He never connects Forms explicitly to anything supernatural or divine, and his discussions of Forms do not typically include references to gods or any other supernatural entities. In addition, even if Plato does say that to be morally good is to be like God, this by no means commits him to viewing moral value as having a divine origin. First, when this claim is made in his dialogues, it appears in discussions of virtue and good character, not in discussions of Forms of moral properties. Therefore, this claim could establish – at most – an indirect and rather tenuous link between moral properties and the divine. Secondly, the view that to be morally good is to be like God is entirely consistent with the view that moral goodness is nonetheless independent of God – gods may well *exemplify* moral properties without *creating* them.⁹⁰ It seems far more likely that *this* is Plato’s position, considering the general absence of references to the supernatural in his discussions of Forms. Consequently, it can be concluded that it would not be accurate to classify Plato’s meta-ethics as a variety of supernaturalistic moral realism.

⁸⁹ For example, *Laws*, 716c-d; *Republic*, 613a-b; *Theaetetus*, 176a-c. This idea is discussed at some length in Daniel C. Russell, “Virtue as ‘Likeness to God’ in Plato and Seneca”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42 (2004), 241-260

⁹⁰ This distinction evidently has some resemblance to Socrates’ famous dilemma in the *Euthyphro*, (10a): “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?”

The next view to which I shall compare Plato's moral realism is naturalistic moral realism. One feature of his meta-ethical position, which appears to have some affinity with this version of moral realism, is the fact that he treats moral and non-moral properties as the same kinds of things. Forms of value-neutral properties⁹¹ are related to particulars in the world in the same way as Forms of moral properties are related to particulars. In Plato's system, being morally good, for example, is metaphysically similar to having any other property, such as being tall. Plato also views value (not only moral but also aesthetic) as existing inherently and objectively in particulars in the world, just like other (non-moral) properties.

Although this might seem to suggest that Plato views moral properties as being "natural" in *some* sense, it is clear that this sense of "natural" falls far short of the sense in which naturalistic moral realism views moral properties as "natural". The defining feature of naturalistic moral realism is the identification of moral and natural properties – it does not merely claim that moral and natural properties are metaphysically alike, but makes the stronger claim that moral properties are *equivalent* to natural properties. Plato, however, never makes such an identification. In fact, there are some passages in his dialogues in which he explicitly denies that moral goodness is equivalent to some other property such as pleasantness.⁹² It could be that Plato is actually a naturalistic moral realist but simply fails to identify which moral property ought to be equated with moral goodness, but this seems very unlikely. The discussions of moral value in Plato's dialogues which fail to identify moral goodness with some other quality give the impression that goodness is something which transcends these other properties – *not* that it is merely some other, as yet undiscovered, natural property. This is especially the case in the portion of the *Republic* which deals with the Form of the Good. Socrates emphasises that the Form of the Good is more important

⁹¹ Assuming that there *are* Forms of value-neutral properties which, as I have indicated, is not altogether clear.

⁹² For example, *Republic*, 505c; the view that goodness is equivalent to pleasure is discussed at some length – and rejected – in the *Philebus*.

than all else (including the other Forms), but he never gives an account of what “the good” is because he refuses to identify it with some other property.

If it is correct to say that it is not accurate to categorise Plato’s meta-ethics as a form of naturalistic moral realism, it may appear more appropriate to classify him as a non-naturalistic moral realist. Plato’s position does seem to have more in common with non-naturalistic moral realism than with naturalistic moral realism because he denies that moral properties are to be identified with natural (non-moral) properties.

However, I would argue that Plato’s meta-ethics nonetheless does not fit altogether comfortably into the category of non-naturalistic moral realism. The reason for this is that it seems anachronistic to impose the distinction between natural and non-natural properties upon Plato’s metaphysical system. Clearly I do believe that there are some aspects of Plato’s thought which can be suitably analysed through the lens of later philosophical doctrines (this is what I have been doing all along), but this is one respect in which I think it is not appropriate to do so. The distinction between natural and non-natural properties is one which Plato neither draws explicitly nor observes implicitly. He does seem to recognise that there is *some* difference between value-laden properties and value-neutral properties, such as when he claims that there is far more disagreement about the former than about the latter, and that these disagreements are much more difficult to resolve.⁹³ However, this is not sufficient to show that Plato views moral properties as being in a class of their own in the way in which non-naturalistic moral realism does. Therefore, rather than trying to force Plato’s moral realism into the mould of non-naturalism, it would be better to treat it as a unique form of moral realism and to remain attentive to its particular features, even if it does have a closer affinity with non-naturalistic moral realism than with either of the other two kinds of realism.

⁹³ For example, *Phaedrus*, 263a-b; *Euthyphro*, 7b-d.

Now that I have illustrated how Plato's meta-ethical position fits into the broader tradition of moral realism, I shall evaluate Plato's particular version of moral realism by considering its main strengths and weaknesses. First, I will give an overview of the principal advantages and disadvantages of moral realism, both generally and in the three subtypes I have identified. Then I shall consider whether, and to what extent, analogous arguments can be applied to Plato's moral realism in particular, as well as whether his version has any unique strengths and weaknesses of its own.

The most appealing feature of moral realism, in its most general formulation, is that it resonates well with some common-sense beliefs about ethics and moral reasoning. Moral realism is compatible, for example, with the following sorts of claims which many would ordinarily endorse: that moral statements can be true or false; that some moral statements are actually true; that there is something substantive at stake in moral disagreements; that one's moral beliefs can be correct or incorrect; and so on. However, realism does have some general disadvantages. As I have already indicated, moral realism bears the burden of giving an account of what constitutes a "moral fact" – without a satisfactory explanation of this, moral realism cannot survive. In addition, a feature of realism which some might find objectionable is the claim that moral value is absolutely objective. That is to say, some people may not share the intuition that there is always a "moral truth" which is entirely independent of anyone's thoughts or beliefs.

The arguments for and against each of the more specific varieties of moral realism can be analysed most easily by considering how each of them fares in relation to the other two, for the advantages of each form of moral realism lie mainly in their abilities to avoid the objections to the others.

The difficulties with supernaturalistic moral realism are obvious and thus warrant only a brief mention. This version of moral realism faces two potentially insurmountable obstacles:

the existence of the supernatural entity which is to be the source of moral properties must be established; and, it must be demonstrated that this entity is in fact the source of moral properties.

Clearly both naturalistic and non-naturalistic moral realism have an immediate advantage over the supernaturalistic version because they do not rely on dubious supernatural elements. Naturalistic moral realism has a further appeal because it typically involves identifying moral value with something conventionally considered to be good, such as pleasure. However, this identification of natural and moral properties also presents a challenge to the theory, because the naturalistic moral realist must identify which natural properties will be plausible candidates for moral properties. This may well prove difficult.

Arguably, the most substantial objection to naturalistic moral realism is what is referred to as the “Open Question” argument.⁹⁴ This argument attacks the very heart of naturalistic moral realism by challenging the principle that moral properties are identical with natural properties. To express this argument most accessibly, I shall use the example of a version of naturalistic moral realism which identifies goodness (a moral property) with pleasantness (a natural property). Thus, on this view, whatever is pleasant is morally good. The “Open Question” argument makes the claim that, if these properties were really equivalent, then anyone who understood the terms “good” and “pleasant” would know immediately, without any further information, that whatever was pleasant was also morally good. But this is not the case, because it always makes sense to ask, of anything which is pleasant, whether that thing is *also* morally good. Therefore, this argument concludes, moral properties cannot be identified with natural properties because it will always be an “open question” whether

⁹⁴ The original formulation of this argument is attributed to G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 15-16.

something with the relevant natural property (in this case pleasantness) also has the *further* property of being morally good.⁹⁵

The greatest advantage of non-naturalistic moral realism is that it is immune to the objections levelled against naturalistic (and supernaturalistic) moral realism. Because it does not claim that moral properties are natural properties, this version of moral realism does not face the challenge of identifying which natural properties are moral properties. Non-naturalistic moral realism is also in complete agreement with the “Open Question” argument’s conclusion that moral properties are distinct from natural ones.

This strand of moral realism, however, encounters a substantial difficulty, which is probably as serious as the problems with naturalistic moral realism. The problem is that, in its basic form, non-naturalistic moral realism leaves the notion of “non-natural” properties entirely unexplained.⁹⁶ Natural properties are not too difficult to grasp, but the idea of non-natural properties seems extremely obscure. Despite its difficulties, naturalistic moral realism at least analyses moral properties in terms of other properties which are readily intelligible. In contrast, non-naturalistic moral realism merely asserts that moral properties are an additional class of properties over and above natural ones, and the nature of the properties in this class remains entirely mysterious.

I shall now consider how the above arguments might apply to Plato’s meta-ethical position. Since this position is a variety of moral realism, it is reasonable to expect that it would have the same sort of strengths and weaknesses as moral realism in general. To the extent that Plato endorses the broad claims of moral realism – for instance, that moral statements are capable of being true or false and that some are actually true – his meta-ethics has the

⁹⁵ Naturalistic moral realists may well have plausible responses to the “Open Question” argument, but it is beyond the scope of the present discussion to enter into this debate.

⁹⁶ I say “in its basic form” to indicate the possibility that some forms of non-naturalistic moral realism could, in principle, provide plausible accounts of non-natural properties. Again, there is inadequate space for me to consider these possibilities here.

intuitive appeal of moral realism generally. However, this appeal is limited in Plato's case because his specific version of realism is not very intuitive, considering that common-sense judgements about the status of moral propositions do not involve reference to Platonic Forms.

Plato's meta-ethical position also encounters the same challenges as moral realism generally. The two broad difficulties with moral realism which I identified earlier were: that it needs to provide an account of "moral facts", and that there may be reason to object to the absolute objectivity of moral value. Plato is able to meet the first of these challenges because, as I have demonstrated, the theory of Forms can provide the necessary account of what constitutes a "moral fact". The second problem seems to pose a more severe objection to Plato's moral realism. Other moral realists, like Plato, also view moral value as entirely objective, but at least some versions of moral realism will connect moral goodness to some human value. For instance, some versions of naturalistic moral realism could equate moral goodness with some property which humans generally prize (such as pleasantness). In contrast, Plato's view of the objectivity of moral value is more austere, as he conceives of moral properties in terms of abstract Forms rather than in terms of anything people actually value. This is counter-intuitive, and it might even be argued that it does not adequately capture the notion of what it means for something to be good. Plato's meta-ethics is therefore *especially* vulnerable to the objection that moral realism is mistaken in considering moral value to be a purely objective matter.

Some of the arguments for and against the three subtypes of moral realism do not affect Plato's version of moral realism, but others do have some relevance to his position. Because Plato does not identify moral properties with either natural or supernatural properties, his view is not vulnerable to the objections against naturalistic or supernaturalistic moral realism. Thus, his moral realism does not rely on controversial claims about supernatural entities, nor is it affected by the challenge of the "Open Question" argument. In these

respects, Plato's position has an advantage over both supernaturalistic and naturalistic moral realism.

The principal objection to non-naturalistic moral realism does, however, have some force against Plato's moral realism. I argued earlier that it would not be wholly appropriate to classify Plato's meta-ethics as a kind of non-naturalistic moral realism, but I also pointed out that it does have some affinity with this strand of realism. It is in virtue of this affinity that Plato's view is susceptible to the objection to non-naturalistic moral realism.

To repeat, the main weakness I identified in non-naturalistic moral realism was that the notion of a "non-natural" property was undesirably obscure. Plato's moral realism can meet this challenge to some degree because he *does* provide some explanation of moral properties by reference to Forms, in contrast to basic forms of non-naturalistic moral realism which merely postulate non-natural (moral) properties without further explanation of such properties. However, whatever explanatory advantage the Forms may give to Plato's account of moral properties is outweighed by the costs of invoking them in such an account. Plato's account of moral properties requires the substantial ontological expansion of recognising an entire class of abstract entities. Non-naturalistic moral realism could, at least, be less metaphysically ambitious in its view of moral properties. As I argued earlier, postulating entities like Forms requires considerable justification and Plato has not provided adequate justification. Therefore, although his position, unlike non-naturalistic moral realism, does provide some explanation of the nature of moral properties, this benefit is offset by the cost of appealing to Forms whose existence is dubious.

In addition, Plato's moral realism cannot fully escape the charge of mysteriousness levelled against non-naturalistic moral realism. Even though there is an account of moral properties in Plato's system, aspects of the theory of Forms remain inadequately clarified. These include, for example, questions about exactly what Forms are and how they are related to

particulars. As a result, mysteriousness simply arises at a different level in Plato's theory – that is, at the level of explaining moral properties – than it does in non-naturalistic moral realism.

This concludes my discussion of the metaphysical roles of the Forms in Plato's ethics. In this section, I have demonstrated how the Forms can be interpreted as a theory of moral properties and I have analysed the meta-ethical position which is entailed by Plato's characterisation of Forms. I have shown how the weaknesses in the metaphysical theory of Forms diminish its value as an account of moral properties, and I have argued that Plato's version of moral realism is problematic for three main reasons: first, because it involves the postulation of entities without adequate justification; secondly, because the Forms' account of moral facts is too obscure; and finally, because Plato's view on the absolute objectivity of moral value is not altogether plausible.

What I have discussed in this section reveals one major facet of the convergence between Plato's ethics and metaphysics, namely, his metaphysics of moral value. However, the issues covered here may not seem to have a very direct bearing on the details of Plato's moral theory outlined in Chapter III. Plato's views on the moral character and the good life do not depend on the Forms as a theory of moral properties in any essential way, though it is not difficult to see how his metaphysical assumptions might *influence* his moral views. Here are three examples. First, the combination of Plato's moral and metaphysical theories would imply that an individual who has a certain moral quality (say, justice) would be related (in the appropriate way) to the Form of that quality (the Form of the Just).⁹⁷ Secondly, that Plato conceives of moral goodness as something which transcends other properties, rather than as something which can be identified with a non-moral property (such as pleasantness), implies that there are certain moral principles he is unlikely to endorse (such as hedonism). Thirdly,

⁹⁷ This example is given explicitly in the *Republic*, 472b-c.

Plato's view that moral properties, as Forms, are single, static unities would lead one to expect that these qualities are the same whenever they occur.

Although such connections between Plato's metaphysics, meta-ethics, and ethics, *can* be drawn, it certainly does not seem that Plato's moral theory crucially depends, metaphysically, on Forms. In other words, the main tenets of his ethical theory do not *require* these connections to the theory of Forms. For example, one could maintain that justice is a virtue and that certain individuals are just without making any reference to a Form of the Just; one can reject principles like hedonism without believing that moral properties are Forms; and one can hold that a moral property is the same in all its instances without postulating a Form which unites these instances. In summary, Plato's theory of Forms commits him to a realist meta-ethical position, but the Forms do not provide an essential metaphysical grounding for his moral theory.

C. The Epistemological Roles of the Forms

In this section, I shall consider possible epistemological connections between Plato's Forms and his moral theory. To clarify, what I mean by "epistemological connections" are the ways in which Forms may feature in Plato's ethics in matters concerning knowledge. The difference between the metaphysical connections I discussed in the previous section and the epistemological connections I shall discuss in this section is that the former concerns how Forms feature in Plato's views on moral *properties*, whereas the latter concerns how *knowledge* of Forms features in his moral views. The epistemological links I shall now address are, in a sense, more directly related to the details of Plato's moral theory (outlined in Chapter III) than the metaphysical links, because they are concerned with Forms' roles in Plato's conceptions of good character and the ideal life. However, most of these epistemological connections are only drawn implicitly in Plato's works, and some of those I will consider are not even implicit but merely possible. This, again, is quite different from the

metaphysical connections I discussed in the previous section, because those were quite clearly views to which Plato's theory of Forms commits him.

I shall structure my analysis in this section around three main themes. First, I will deal with roles that Forms might play in Plato's ethics with respect to moral knowledge. Secondly, I will examine how Plato connects knowledge of Forms to his conception of good character. Thirdly, I will consider the place of knowledge of Forms in Plato's view of the ideal human life. As will become evident in my discussion, these three themes are related and overlap to some extent. I shall also pose three general objections to the epistemological connections between Forms and morality, and I will conclude that attempting to relate Forms (epistemologically) to ethics is generally problematic.

Perhaps the most direct way of attempting to establish an epistemological connection between the Forms and morality would be to construe Forms as the objects of moral knowledge. This might involve making a claim such as the following: since particulars in the world have moral properties in virtue of their relations to certain Forms, knowing the relevant Forms would entail having moral knowledge. For example, if one knew the Form of the Just, this would seem to imply that one has moral knowledge, in that one would be able to distinguish which things were just and which were not.

The possibility of such a connection between moral knowledge and knowledge of Forms warrants closer analysis. It must be determined whether Plato makes this connection and, if he does, whether he is justified in doing so. I shall consider two possible motivations for the claim that moral knowledge involves knowledge of Forms.

The first motivation for attributing such a view to Plato is drawn from the "Socratic" dialogues in which the definition of some moral concept – usually a virtue – is sought. In these dialogues, Socrates asks his interlocutors to explain what the essence of the relevant

virtue is by showing what is common to all instances of that virtue. It is possible that, in these cases, the aim of the dialogue is to characterise the *Form* of the quality in question. For example, in the *Euthyphro* Socrates asks Euthyphro to tell him about “the form itself” by which all pious things are pious.⁹⁸ This may appear to lend some support to the notion that moral knowledge involves knowledge of Forms, because it would imply that knowing a particular virtue requires knowing the Form of that virtue.

This kind of argument, however, does not convincingly demonstrate that moral knowledge involves knowledge of Forms. One problem is that, in the “Socratic” dialogues, Plato’s theory of Forms is underdeveloped in comparison to his other works. As a result, it is at least a little doubtful that these dialogues are aimed at discovering what the Forms of the relevant moral qualities are. Another problem is that, even if knowing the nature of a certain virtue involves knowing the Form of that virtue, this does not imply that moral knowledge, in general, must involve knowledge of Forms. Hence the ethical discussions of the “Socratic” dialogues do not provide a good reason to think that moral knowledge must be related to knowledge of Platonic Forms.

The second possible motivation for thinking of Forms as the objects of moral knowledge can be derived from the view, expressed in some of Plato’s works, that Forms are, in general, the only entities which can truly be the objects of knowledge. This claim, if true, would seem to entail quite clearly that moral knowledge involves knowledge of Forms: if *all* knowledge is knowledge of Forms, it follows that moral knowledge must be knowledge of Forms.

There are references in more than one of Plato’s dialogues to the idea that *only* Forms can be the objects of knowledge, but one of the most direct discussions of this view takes place in the *Republic* when Socrates uses the image of a “divided line” to represent various levels of

⁹⁸ *Euthyphro*, 6d.

cognition.⁹⁹ In this passage Socrates claims that Forms are the objects of knowledge and are grasped by the intellect, in contrast to sensible particulars, which are perceived through the senses and are the objects only of *opinion*.

A less direct, but still pertinent, source of support for the view that only Forms can be the objects of knowledge comes from the “knowledge argument”, based on the “constant flux” doctrine, which I covered in Chapter II. To repeat, the principle of constant flux is the idea that objects in the sensible world are subject to continual change. The “knowledge argument” adds to this the premises that: (i) what is in constant flux cannot be known; and (ii) knowledge is possible; it concludes that there must be Forms to serve as the objects of knowledge.

The view that only Forms can be the objects of knowledge does not have much immediate plausibility, but it is understandable why Plato might be drawn to it, especially assuming he is sympathetic to the doctrine of constant flux. However, there is insufficient reason either to accept the view that only Forms can be the objects of knowledge or to assume that Plato consistently endorses it. Outside the *Republic* there is not a great deal of discussion of this idea in Plato’s works. More importantly, that only Forms can be the objects of knowledge is not an independently credible view. As I demonstrated in Chapter II, the “knowledge argument” does not succeed in establishing that Platonic Forms exist, so it cannot show that only Forms can be the objects of knowledge. The principle of constant flux requires further justification and does not clearly entail that sensible particulars cannot be the objects of knowledge. Therefore, the view that only Forms can be the objects of knowledge is inadequately supported, which means that it cannot justify the view that moral knowledge must involve knowledge of Forms. This attempt to establish an epistemological connection between Plato’s ethics and metaphysics is unsuccessful.

⁹⁹ *Republic*, 509d-511e.

The second general point at which Plato's ethics and his theory of Forms could interact (epistemologically) is in relation to his conception of moral character. I shall explore two possible connections here. The first relates to Plato's view that intellectual inquiry improves individual character, and the second is the suggestion that those who have knowledge of Forms have superior characters to those who lack this knowledge.

That Plato considers intellectual inquiry to be beneficial to a person's character is not a controversial claim. He sometimes states it quite explicitly in his writings,¹⁰⁰ but it can also be inferred from the general mood of many of the discussions in his dialogues. Whatever question the participants in Plato's dialogues are addressing, there is typically the sense that the process of reasoning through the issues is of great value in itself and beneficial to those taking part.

Assuming, then, that Plato does believe that inquiry improves a person's character, what remains to be established is how this could create a connection between the theory of Forms and Plato's ethics. Such a connection would be implied if it were the case that Forms are the objects of inquiry – or, in other words, if the purpose of inquiry were to achieve knowledge of Forms. There would then be a clear relationship between morality and the theory of Forms: if intellectual inquiry leads to moral improvement and inquiry is aimed at knowledge of Forms, then pursuing knowledge of Forms leads to moral improvement.

The claim that intellectual inquiry improves a person's character does not seem problematic, provided that one accepts a certain conception of good character. Presumably such a conception would include traits like the capacity to think critically, the desire for one's decisions to be directed by knowledge, and so on. This is not an objectionable view of good character, but what *is* potentially objectionable is the further claim that it is specifically inquiry into *Forms* which improves character. To justify connecting Forms and ethics in this

¹⁰⁰ For example, *Meno*, 81d-e, 86b-c.

way, it is necessary to show both that Plato endorses this claim and that the claim is itself plausible.

There may be some reason to think that Plato believes that Forms are the objects of inquiry. For instance, in those dialogues where the discussants are attempting to clarify some important concept, it may be the case that these are attempts to grasp the Form of that concept. However, this is an inadequate basis for believing either that Plato thinks *all* inquiry is aimed at knowledge of Forms, or that it is only inquiry into Forms which improves a person's character. Some of Plato's dialogues certainly do not seem to be attempts to characterise a particular Form but rather involve inquiries into a variety of other important philosophical issues. In addition, there is no good reason to believe that inquiry which is not concerned with Forms does not improve a person's character.

The view that all inquiry is aimed at knowledge of Forms would follow from the claim, discussed earlier, that only Forms can be the objects of knowledge. Clearly, if all knowledge is knowledge of Forms, and the purpose of intellectual inquiry is to achieve knowledge, then this inquiry must have knowledge of Forms as its goal. But, as I argued earlier, the view that only Forms can be the objects of knowledge is highly dubious; thus, it does not seem plausible to say that Plato's ethics and metaphysics are connected because inquiry into Forms improves character.

Another, somewhat related, point at which Plato's ethics seems to converge with his theory of Forms is in the view that individuals who have knowledge of Forms have superior characters to those who lack this knowledge. Plato himself makes this connection quite explicitly in the *Republic* where he describes the philosophers who are to govern his ideal state. These philosophers are portrayed as being morally superior to the unenlightened masses because of

their access to the realm of the Forms. This seems to indicate quite clearly that Plato does perceive at least some relationship between good character and knowledge of Forms.¹⁰¹

The final epistemological connection between Plato's ethics and the theory of Forms which I shall consider is similarly based on the depiction of the philosophers in the *Republic*, but it also emerges implicitly elsewhere. This relationship concerns not Plato's conception of good character, but rather his vision of the good life – it is the idea that knowledge of Forms, or the pursuit of such knowledge, is a component of a worthwhile life. In the *Republic*, this is expressed in the suggestion that the best sort of life is the life of the philosopher who contemplates the Forms.¹⁰² However, this view is also suggested by Plato's consistent emphasis on the importance of intellectual pursuits and the value of Forms. He depicts the Forms as a "superior" reality to the sensible world, and surely a life spent contemplating this superior reality is more worthwhile than one spent dealing with the mundane affairs of the material world.

In addition to the arguments I have already discussed, I shall close this section by presenting three general objections to connecting Forms, epistemologically, to ethics. The first deals with the Forms' place in Plato's vision of the good life, the second with the relationship between knowledge of Forms and moral character, and the third raises a general concern about Forms as objects of knowledge.

I demonstrated in Chapter III that reason and intellectual inquiry are important components of Plato's conception of the ideal human life, and, in this chapter, I have indicated how Forms may feature in this conception because of Plato's emphasis on their value as objects of study. The view that knowledge is part of a worthwhile life is not really objectionable, but taking the further step of including Forms in this leads to a rather restricted view of the good life which

¹⁰¹ The view that those who have knowledge of the Forms are morally superior to those who do not grasp the Forms may well seem objectionable, but I shall delay criticising it because this view is susceptible to some of the general arguments I shall consider towards the end of this section.

¹⁰² For example, *Republic* 583a.

has little intuitive appeal. It is perhaps understandable that Plato should consider the study of Forms to be the most worthwhile activity given his view that Forms are “more real” and hence more valuable than the sensible world. However, it is difficult to see why a life spent contemplating Platonic Forms is the best kind of life. Humans undoubtedly do place a great value on knowledge, but this vision of the good life is too austere to have much appeal.

The second general objection I wish to raise relates to the relationship between knowledge of Forms and moral character. As I have shown, Plato considers reason, knowledge and wisdom to be linked to virtue and good character. This does not seem problematic, but again, when Forms are incorporated into this view it becomes implausible. I have gestured at some of the ways in which Plato might connect knowledge of Forms to moral character, and I have suggested that, at the very least, he does seem to perceive some relationship between virtue and knowledge of Forms. What is implausible about this view is that it is not clear how having knowledge of Forms translates into having a virtuous character. This is because the kind of knowledge achieved by studying Forms is very abstract and theoretical. In contrast, it would be reasonable to expect that if virtue involves knowledge, this knowledge would be of a very practical kind. Plato has not adequately demonstrated how the very abstract knowledge of Forms relates to having a good character. It could quite reasonably be argued that virtue involves not the abstract understanding of theoretical entities, but rather sensitivity to the concrete details of particular situations.

The final objection I shall propose is the most general of all. Throughout this section I have been referring to how knowledge of Forms might relate to morality. Plato, as well as many of his interpreters, speaks of “knowing” Forms as if the meaning of this notion is obvious or unproblematic. However, it is far from obvious to me what is involved in “knowing” a Form. It is still unclear what exactly a Form *is*, how one comes to know a Form, or what is involved in “contemplating” Forms. What would it mean to say, for example, that a person *knows* the

Form of the Just? It surely cannot mean simply that she understands the concept of justice because Plato's characterisation of Forms presents them as *entities*, not merely as concepts.

One possible explanation of what it might mean to know a Platonic Form is that it involves having a certain state of character. This idea could perhaps be illustrated most clearly by applying it to the example of the Form of the Just and the character of the just individual presented in the *Republic*. Thus, the suggestion would be that to know the Form of the Just is to have the character exhibited by the just individual in the *Republic*. As I explained in Chapter III, this conception of the just character involves a particular arrangement of the individual's soul, with the rational element (reason) ruling the other parts of the soul. Therefore, a person whose soul was ordered in this way could be said to know the Form of the Just.

This account of what it means to know a Form is especially attractive in the case of justice, because of the vivid description of the just individual which Plato gives in the *Republic*. At a more general level, this explanation of knowledge of Forms also has some appeal. It can, to some extent, clear up the mystery of what is involved in knowing a Platonic Form. In addition, this account would create a very direct epistemological connection between the Forms and ethics, as well as a very close connection between knowledge and virtue. As I argued in Chapter III, that virtue involves knowledge (or wisdom) is a significant theme in Plato's ethics. Therefore, to define knowing the Form of a virtue as *having* that virtue would preserve the relationship between knowledge and virtue, while incorporating Forms in this relationship.

However, this account of what it means to know a Form is not wholly satisfactory. The first problem is that the account employs a rather strained conception of "knowledge"; the second problem is that it seems to *undermine* the epistemological component of virtue rather than enhancing it. The conception of knowledge appears strained because defining knowledge of a

Form in terms of having a particular state of character involves a significant departure from the ordinary understanding of what it is to know something. The reason is that this view conflates *knowing* and *being* in a way which is, at best, unintuitive or, at worst, unintelligible. The second problem is that the equating of *knowing* the Form of a virtue with *having* that virtue seems to undermine the epistemological component of virtue. If one wishes to understand virtue as involving knowledge, as Plato (arguably) does, then defining the relevant sort of “knowledge” in this way yields an unilluminating conception of virtue. Saying that virtue involves knowledge of Forms, and then defining “knowledge of a Form” as having the virtue corresponding to that Form, is not very informative. Therefore, trying to establish an epistemological connection between Plato’s ethics and the theory of Forms by defining knowledge of Forms in this way is unlikely to yield a plausible view. If “knowledge” is understood in its ordinary sense, then the puzzle about what it means to “know” a Platonic Form remains, and this seems objectionable.

I have sought to demonstrate in this section that there are some epistemological connections between Plato’s ethics and the theory of Forms which he makes quite explicitly, as well as others which are more tenuous. What emerges from this discussion is that the attempts to make such connections are generally problematic. The value Plato attaches to knowledge in his ethics, both in his conception of virtue and in his view of the ideal life, is not problematic in itself but becomes so when Forms are taken to be the objects of this knowledge. As a result, Plato’s moral theory is stronger without epistemological connections to Forms.

V. CONCLUSION

I shall close with a brief summary of the conclusions I have reached in previous chapters, as well as some comments on what these conclusions might suggest about the interrelationships between different branches of philosophy, both in Plato's thought and in general.

I began, in Chapter II, with a discussion of Plato's metaphysics by providing an exposition and assessment of his theory of Forms. I highlighted the deficiencies in the theory of Forms and argued that it is, on the whole, a problematic metaphysical doctrine. The main reasons for this are that Plato does not provide sufficient justification for the existence of Forms, nor does he adequately clarify the nature of these entities. In addition, the theory of Forms is vulnerable to some powerful criticisms, most notably the problems of self-predication and the "Third Man" argument.

In Chapter III, I provided an overview of Plato's moral theory, focusing on his conceptions of virtue and happiness as well as the relationship between the two. I concluded that, although Plato's ethics is deficient in certain respects, the deficiencies in his moral theory are far less problematic than those in the theory of Forms.

In Chapter IV, I analysed the connections between these two themes and I drew the following conclusions. First, the Forms are problematic as a theory of moral properties because of the weaknesses in the theory of Forms identified in Chapter II. Secondly, the variety of moral realism to which Plato is committed is an implausible meta-ethical position. This is because the postulation of Forms is insufficiently justified, because the invocation of Forms makes the position mysterious, and because Plato's extreme view on the objectivity of moral value is very unintuitive. Thirdly, I concluded that Plato's metaphysical views on moral value may have some influence on his moral theory, but that they do not seem to be essential to it.

Lastly, I argued that drawing epistemological connections between morality and the Forms is problematic.

These conclusions should shed some light on how the different regions of Plato's thought fit together. Given the tendency of 21st-century analytic philosophy to sharply compartmentalise the different areas of inquiry, it is illuminating to investigate the ways in which ancient philosophers like Plato weave these various issues together. The connections between Platonic ethics and metaphysics which I have analysed here may be able to point to some more general insights about how different philosophical disciplines can interact, as well as whether such interactions are beneficial or harmful. I shall close by considering a few such insights which emerge from my analyses.

In Chapter IV, I gestured at some of the ways in which the Forms' implications for moral properties might (perhaps only indirectly) influence Plato's moral theory. Although metaphysics and ethics are concerned with rather different sorts of questions, at least at a theoretical level it seems quite possible that metaphysical assumptions could influence moral principles. Since metaphysics deals with the fundamental nature of reality, it would be reasonable to expect that someone's metaphysical beliefs could have some effect on his moral theory. A metaphysical position like Plato's, which construes values as abstract and independently existing entities, may have very different results for an ethical theory from those of a metaphysical system which views values as something much more concrete or subjective.

Having said that, however, I have also argued that Plato's ethics does not seem to depend on his metaphysics in any essential way. This does not contradict the point made in the previous paragraph, but it does suggest that there may be limits on the extent to which metaphysics influences ethics. Thus, although there are certain ways in which moral theory may be

affected by metaphysical assumptions, it may be the case that ethical theorising does not necessarily depend on or presuppose any particular metaphysical worldview.

My analysis of the interconnections within Plato's philosophy also shows how it can, in fact, be detrimental for an ethical theory to be based on, or to appeal to, a particular metaphysical doctrine. In Plato's case, the connections between his ethics and metaphysics are more harmful than beneficial because of the problems faced by the theory of Forms. There is undoubtedly something very appealing about a holistic philosophical system like Plato's, but as I tried to show, constructing such a system which is comprehensive, consistent, and thoroughly plausible, is extremely difficult. Nevertheless, there is good reason to admire the manner in which Plato attempts to integrate a range of diverse elements into a single grand structure, and in this dissertation I have sought to demonstrate some of the things which can be learned from this.

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