

Plato's Theory of Ideas

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My subject for tonight is, as announced, "Plato's Theory of Ideas". Whether that subject actually interests you, or you think that it ought to interest you-- you will, I imagine, regard it as a respectable lecture topic. And yet I have to tell you that every term in the project is wrong-headed. Let me, therefore begin by explaining why that is.

First, Plato's Theory of Ideas is not a subject at all. I mean that it is not a compact mental material to be presented on an intellectual platter. Plato himself refrained from making it the direct theme of any of the twenty-five or more dialogues which he wrote. Instead, the ideas appear in the context of conversation, incidentally and in scattered places. He gives the reason directly in a letter:

There is no treatise of mine about these things, nor ever will be. For it cannot be talked about like other subjects of learning, but out of much communion which has taken place around this business, and from living together, suddenly, like a light kindled from a leaping fire, it gets into the soul, and from there on nourishes itself. (Seventh Letter 341c).

It follows that my lecture, like all the similar scholars' efforts, is an outsider's attempt to short-circuit a required initiation, an attempt which betrays my lack of genuine participation in the truth I am conveying as a molded matter. On the other hand, there is also much in Plato's works which invites such an exposition of his doctrine: much explicit and provocative argumentation and many promises of an externally communicable way to insight.

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I have another reason for thus boldly ploughing in. Last summer there died that man, that teacher in this school, who, as it seemed to many of us, best knew the way into the Platonic dialogues. His name is Jacob Klein. While he was alive, I, for one, resting secure in the fact of his existence, postponed a bald confrontation of my own with this ultimate philosophical matter. But now, I thought, the time had come to be bold in acting on the advice Socrates gives to his friends in the course of the last conversation of his life. When he is asked where they will find someone to charm away their fears that philosophy is impossible once he is dead, he tells them that not only among the Greeks, but also among the barbarians-- that, of course, includes us -- there are many good people who can do this for them. But then he adds:

And also you must search for them among yourselves, for probably you will not easily find people more ~~capable~~ than you are to do this. (Phaedo 78 a).

We speak of "Plato's Theory", and let me now say something about that. Its chief source are, to be sure, the works of Plato, and he is its ultimate master.¹⁾ Yet within his works, the Dialogues, it is not Plato but his teacher Socrates who originates and maintains the theory. Plato presents Socrates as having a life-long hold on it, though he speaks of it under continuously changing aspects. There is a so-called "late" dialogue, the Parmenides, in which the elderly author imagines a boyish Socrates-- a wonderful turnabout-- and in which Socrates' originating claim is elicited by the father of philosophy, Parmenides, himself. (130 b).
↓ There is another dialogue, also written late in Plato's life, the Sophist, in which an old Socrates, just a few weeks away from death, listens silently while a stranger brings the theory to its height

with the solution of its deepest difficulty. And finally there is a "middle" dialogue, the Phaedo, in which Socrates, in the last conversation of his life, addresses the theory more directly than anywhere else. Plato, at least, wished the world to think of "Socrates' Theory of Ideas".

But then, more accurately, he would not have had us think of a "theory" at all. By a theory we usually mean a conceptual construction designed in principle to yield satisfying explanations for every problem brought to it.²⁾ A theory ought to be falsifiable, which means it should be capable of being made to reveal its incompleteness or inconsistency by strenuous formal reasoning, so that it may be discredited and discarded. Therefore it is its author's responsibility to present it in the most impregnable form possible. Scholars do find such difficulties aplenty in the Theory of Ideas. But here is a curious circumstance: they are all anticipated in their boldest form in that very dialogue, the Parmenides, which represents a boyish Socrates as first proposing the Ideas.³⁾ Can you think of another philosophical theory which is presented at the very beginning in terms of a series of devastating difficulties, never to be explicitly resolved?

The point is, the Ideas are not a theory. Socrates calls his bringing in of the Ideas a "supposing" (Phaedo 100 b); the Greek word for a supposition is a hypothesis. A hypothesis is, literally, an underpinning, a prop.⁴⁾ It comes to him and he comes on it at every departure and at every turning. It is a basis he acknowledges so that he can carry on as he must; not a conclusion presented for verification but a beginning which then becomes the end of inquiry. It is first the condition that gives him heart for a search, by making it possible for him to frame a question that has in it the arrow to an answer. One might say that it

allows him to make a suspect of the unknown. (Meno 86 b). Thereafter, however, the Idea-hypotheses--for the hypothesis is not the proposition that there are Ideas but each Idea itself--are to be used as stepping stones to their own conversion into something not merely supposed but truly beheld, "seen". (Republic 511 b.). Such suppositions are surely not fruitfully accosted by formal hammer-and-tongs argument, though they are, of course, amenable to careful and critical inspection.

I keep calling these Socratic suppositions Ideas. The word "idea" is a transcription of a term Socrates himself uses, idea. Nonetheless it is an infelicitous term. For ask yourselves what we usually mean by an idea, for instance when we say: "That's her idea of a good lecture". Clearly we mean an opinion or a mental image or a concept, often in opposition to "the real thing". This modern notion of an idea, the result of an earth-shaking intellectual upset, is that of a mental representation, something before or in the organ of ideas, the mind. The use of the term would cast my exposition into a false, albeit familiar, frame, and I would only make things worse were I to insist that Socrates' Ideas are "real", and worse yet, "really exist".

Socrates' own chief word is eidos. Like the word idea it is built on the simple past stem of the word to see, which signifies the act of seeing once done and completed. Scholars have collected the many meanings of eidos which flow continuously from the broadly ordinary to the narrowly technical: shape, figure, face, form, characteristic, quality, class, kind. But, of course, when we dwell on the multiplicity of Greek usages, we are standing the matter on its head, for they are all revealing differentiations from the dead-center meaning. Eidos means sight, aspect, looks, in that eerily active sense in which a thing that has looks or is a sight presents itself to our sight and our looking.

"Looks", then, and, not idea or form, is the most faithful rendering of eidos.⁵⁾ But it sounds too curious, and so I shall tonight speak simply of eidos. The plural is eide. Eidos, then is the word Socrates chooses for his hypothesis. For that choice he might, for this once, be called a "Greek thinker", one who cherishes and yet overturns the wisdom of his language, which associates seeing and knowing: "I know" in Greek is built on the stem of "I saw". Eidos is a choice full of witty depth, for the first of all those notorious Socratic paradoxes is surely that the eidos is invisible.

So let me convert the falsely familiar title "Plato's Theory of Ideas" to "Socrates' hypothesis of the eide". I shall pursue the eidos under seven headings, for it shows as many aspects as there are beginnings to Socrates' inquiry. Indeed, that is what makes his hypothesis compelling: that so many roads lead to the eidos.⁶⁾

- I. Excellence and Commonness
- II. Speech and Dialectic
- III. Answers and Questions
- IV. Opinion and Knowledge
- V. Being and Appearance
- VI. Same and Other
- VII. Original and Image

I. Excellence and Commonness

"Philosophy" means literally the love of wisdom. Therefore it begins in desire (Republic 475 b, Symposium 204 a), in desirous love, in erotic passion, the most acute of all passions. That is what we might call the young beginning of philosophy.⁷⁾ It is that love which arises when another human being appears "all-beautiful in aspect", in eidos, as the

Greek phrase goes. (Charmides 154 d). We might simply say that it arises when someone suddenly becomes visible for us. For beauty, Socrates says, has the part of shining out eminently and being most lovable, and of coming to us through sense, through the most acute of senses, the sense of sight. Beauty is brilliance, attractive visibility. Beauty is sight par excellence, and a sight is that which, without going out of itself, draws us from a distance. But such a sensual sight, such a bodily "idea" (Phaedrus 251 a), which draws us from afar, affects us with an exciting and utterly confounding sense of its being a mere penetrable veil, a mere representation of some divinity beyond. That is why we speak of such love as adoration. It draws us not to itself but through itself-- the enchantedly attentive fascination with sensual looks goes over into something on the other side of that surface. Desire through distance is called love, and if what beckons is on the further side of surface sight, it is called philosophy. For, Socrates says, there is a road, whose first station is the beckoning irritation aroused by one beautiful body and which leads us to have an eye, first for all kinds of beauty and finally to sight its self-sameness everywhere in the world and in the soul. (Symposium 210 a). And that sight, the very source of visibility, is beyond sense, and is the eidos itself.

There is another beginning in what is extraordinary and captivating, but its visible aspect is a little duller, though its luster is life-long. (Phaedrus 250 d). It has to do with what is outstanding, excellent. Some time or other all of us are overcome by admiration for the fullness of being of certain people and their deeds, or even by an animal or a tool. (Republic 353 b, 601 d). Such potency of being, such proper goodness, is called in Greek areté, which means effective excellence, potent capability. (Laches 192 b). It is more than ordinary usefulness or

humanity or sincerity. It is rather a kind of superlativeness--its name is related to áristos, the best. It is competitive, "agonistic", as the Greeks say, and uncommon, although we speak rightly and yet paradoxically of a "standard" of excellence. Excellence and how to engender it is a topic of pervasive fascination. It interests the good, the crafty, the curious, parents, citizens, the corrupt--perhaps them most peculiarly (Meno), them and the young.

But again, as in the case of beauty incarnate, every outstanding human being, every fine deed, appears as a mere instance, a mere exemplification of excellence. It is spurious for being only an instance and not the thing itself, deficient in being abstracted from the complete complex of virtues, deformed by being bound to a particular setting. We all know that even the best-founded hero-worship eventually loses its edge and luster as the admirer gains perspective, whereas the longing to see excellence and be excellent is for an ever-bright, undeformable shape, looming behind the tainted earthly example.

The beautiful and the best, the fine and the good-- through these is the enthusiastic first access to the eidos.

But there is also a more sober beginning, one whose implications Socrates himself was a little put off by in his first youth, feeling its meanness. (Parmenides 130 c). For besides the high and shining eidos of what is beautiful and excellent, there is also a common eidos, or better, everything, from a small bee to a grand virtue, displays or "has" an eidos. (Meno 72). Everything we see, everything that appears in any way at all, looks (or sounds or smells) like something_λ excellences, elements, animals, tools. Everything wears the aspect of being of a sort. Unless it has the looks of something, we cannot see it, for it has no

coherent shape to draw us; we cannot point to it or name it. To see is always to re-cognize; just imagine trying to focus on something --I shouldn't even say "something"--which is truly unique and looks like nothing. Whatever wears a look at all wears that look in common with other things. One look presides over numerous things and that is why we can "identify", that is to say, make out the sameness, of things, of people, elements, animals, tools. It is not in their multifarious^{ness} and difference that we lay hold of things but "by their being bees" or beds or excellences, (Meno 72 b). Socrates is far more interested in this common look than in what we call individuality, that inarticulable deviation from the common which he never thinks of as a source of particular fineness. He pursues the common eidos because it is more revealing than the world's idiosyncracies.

For we do not learn of this eidos by looking at individual things; on the contrary, we can look at them only because they display this eidos, this look. For example, Socrates would agree that equal objects--scratched lines, say--are needed to call up in us the thought of equality. (Phaedo 75 a). But they do that only because they take part in that eidos which makes them look equal to us, even though they are but uncertainly, passingly, approximately equal, and from them we could never gather the sharply precise idea of equality anymore than we can identify goodness by watching human actions from now till doomsday. That look of things which not one of them has fully or purely but which is common to all, that is a wonder to Socrates.

And so both outstanding and common sights point to an invisible eidos beyond.

II. Speech and Dialectic

We have a surpassing strange power of reaching the things that share a look, all of them, at once. We can say the word, their name. When the

eye sees a sight the tongue can utter a sound which is the sensual appearance of a word, of speech. (Third Letter 342 b). One word reaches, picks out, intends what is the same in many things. One word presides over many things. (Republic 596 a). A word is not a symbol for Socrates, for it does not stand for something by reason of some sort of fit between it and the thing; rather it reaches toward something utterly other than itself: it has meaning. Socrates thinks that what words mean is precisely that common eidos. In fixing on speech he discovers what the panoramic familiarity of daily seeing leaves obscure: that the visible world, particularly the natural world, comes compounded of more and more encompassing visible sorts, rising finally into totally invisible kindred groups. The Greek word for a visible sort is, of course, eidos and for a kindred group, genos. The Latin word for eidos is species. Socrates discovers the organization of the world into species and genus,⁸⁾ and that things can be placed, defined, by thinking about the meaning of names and connecting them properly in speech. All the world seems to be at the roots akin (Meno 81 d), and that kinship is articulable in complexes of words.

Such connected speech is what the Greeks call logos. It is, first of all, inner effort, movement, attention, intention; indeed, it is the same as thinking. (Sophist 263 e). It is always an activity of discerning and picking out on the one hand, and comprehending and collecting on the other; in fact that is what the verb legein means: to select and collect. Socrates thinks that such speech can reveal the interconnections of the world, but only if it "looks to" (e.g., Republic 472 b, 532 a) the interweaving of the invisible eide. Meaningful and true speech is speech in accordance with the eidos (Phaedrus 249 b);

names reach for the eide singly and sentences for their interconnections. Socrates calls such reaching speech dialectic, "sorting through". (266 c).

But he gives that word another sense also, a wider one. Dialectic is serious, and, if necessary, uncompromising conversation with oneself or with another, argument. (I might say that if the enthusiasm of love is young philosophy, argumentative dialectic might be called the youngest philosophy because bright children make lively dialecticians.) Now dialectic does not only reveal the articulated unity of the world. It can also shake our easy acceptance of its oneness. Speech can rake up the obtuse self-contradictoriness of things. Such self-opposition comes out when speech is used in a very original way, in "telling" as the old term goes, in counting. Take this index finger. It is larger than the thumb but smaller than the middle finger. It is both small and large. It has both looks at once. They coincide in the thing and yet we can tell them apart and count them as each one, and two together in the thing. Whoever takes the deliverance of words seriously will find this provoking -- provoking of thought. (Republic 523). Socrates can account for this revelation only by supposing that the eidos greatness and the eidos smallness, which are each one and forever separate beyond the finger, can be fused in the finger. Even if the finger is confounding, the eide are pure and intelligible. This eidos saves the telling power of speech.

III. Answers and Questions

Socrates asks questions, of himself and of others, and he urges them continually: try to say the answer. His questions are not quite the usual kind, namely requests for information or provocations of acknowledgement. Nonetheless people see a charm or a dignity enough in them to try to respond. Socrates' kind of question is preeminently framed to elicit

speech. He asks after that in things which can respond, which is answerable, responsible. The Greek term for what is answerable in that way is aitia, the responsible reason. Socrates thinks that such a responsible reason -- we sometimes say "cause" -- cannot be some external linkage of events. It is an trivializing answer to the question "Why is Socrates sitting in prison?" to say that he is flexing his joints in a certain way. Although he is too modest to say so, he knows he is there because of his peculiar kind of courage. Similarly, if the question is "What makes this face beautiful?" the answer he insists on is that it is beautiful not by a certain incidental shape or color, but "by beauty". He calls such answers unsophisticated but safe. (Phaedo 100 d).

They are indeed so simple-minded as to seem at first futile. They are answers for those whose ambition is not to go onward but inward. For their safety is in keeping us to the question, in directing us through its words to a word. To accept that things are beautiful by beauty means that the cause is not to be reduced or evaporated in inquiry but kept in sight and pursued; that granted, the answer can then be safely elaborated. (Phaedo 105 b). For it poses a new and deeper question: What is beauty -- or excellence ~~or~~ or knowledge? I should say here that Socrates does not go about idly asking what scholars like to call the "What is X? question". His questions are not one function with variable objects, but each is asked differently in each conversation, for each is set differently into Socrates' life and each reaches toward a unique being. We all know that the answer to the question what something is can take many forms. Socrates sometimes begins by showing people that they quite literally don't know what they are talking about and can't mean what they are saying -- a charming but dangerous business for the

young. (Apology 33 c), Republic 539 b, Philebus 15 a). Sometimes he proposes a startlingly revealing, seemingly paradoxical, and dubiously convertible identification, for instance that excellence is knowledge. And once in a while he does what, persuaded by Aristotle (Metaphysics 987 b) people think of Socrates as doing first and preeminently: he looks for a definition by genus and species and differentiae. So, as Mr. Klein used to say: There is no one method for interpreting all the dialogues.⁹⁾ And yet it is equally the case that Socrates is always after the same end, on a trail of speech on which the one-word answer is a trail blaze. The trail, however, runs asymptotically to its goal; it approaches it without meeting it. This goal is the eidos named in the simple-minded but safe answer to a Socratic question. Ultimately the eidos toward which the word points cannot be attained through speech but only by itself and through itself. (Cratylus 439 b), for it is not speech which determines the eidos but the eidos which founds speech. (Parmenides 135 c). Logos is utterly diverse from eidos since its very nature is to be merely about being; it might be said to climb along the eidetic structure, articulating, so to speak, the lattice of an impenetrably crystalline complex.

Yet in the meantime the question which is steadfastly answered as it itself directs, focusses the soul on the eidos as responsible cause.

IV. Opinion and Knowledge

Socrates comes to grips with the strangest of human scandals: that we are able to talk without speaking and to believe without acting. Human life is peculiarly capable of heights and excruciating falls, and it is these heights and depths we most avidly chatter about and have powerfully ineffective beliefs about. Indeed, public talk about them is obligatory.-- It is an incantation to keep spirit of excellence from fading. It

consists of certain partial lopsided truths whose deficiency is obscured by their familiarity. Socrates calls such speechless talk, such logos-like utterance without present thought, opinion. (Our favorite phrase signal that an opinion is coming is: "I feel that...".) He thinks further that it is because we do not know what we mean when we talk of excellence, that we fail to be excellent. By "knowing" he does not mean being familiar with certain arguments and definitions or having a some sort of competence or canniness in getting what one wants. (Hippias Minor 365 d). He means that our souls are alight with, are filled with, what truly is. He means a knowledge so live and rich that it goes immediately over into action without leaving room for the mediation of a wavering or perverse will. So Socrates' first interest in knowledge is practical, but I should say here that that knowledge vivid enough to pass immediately into deed will also be an end in itself, a realm in which to dwell beyond all action, and that this is yet another one of the great Socratic paradoxes. (Phaedo 66 b, Phaedrus 247, Republic 517 b).

To be cured of being caught in mere opinion we must know how this state is possible. Socrates finds only one explanation plausible. What we have opinions about cannot be the same as what we think seriously about. (Republic 477). The name may be the same, but we cannot have the same thing in mind when we talk and when we speak. We are using our powers so differently that they amount to different powers and must have different objects. That is not really so odd an idea: We seem to switch gears when we pass from pontificating to thinking, and the matter we have gone into deeply is no longer what it was when we "knew" it superficially, just as the friend well known is a different

person from the friend of first acquaintance. The superficial glance is reflected by a surface that masks the depth in which thinking becomes absorbed.

That first aspect of the world which is the object of opinion, whose whole character it is to seem and then to vanish before closer inspection, Socrates calls becoming, because it is always coming to be and never quite what it is. It is what is before our eyes. Our first fascination is with the shifting, inexact, contradictory things before our eyes, or with the obtrusive opinions of our fellows, and these are our unavoidable beginning. (Phaedo 74 a). But as the visible surface is penetrated and those opinions are searched into, a new world appears, now to the eye of the thought, steadfast in being such as it is, of a powerful "suchness," shapely, unique. Socrates calls this world being. He understands it to be all that knowledge demands. For in knowing we have a sense of being anchored, rooted in something stable and lucid for the eye of the soul, (Phaedo 99 d). It is the world of the eidos as that which is to be known, the knowable eidos. (Republic 511 a).

And however I have made it sound, Socrates does not regard the knowable eidos as his contrivance to grant himself knowledge. Rather he thinks that we are, all of us, capable of the experience of going into ourselves in thought, led on by the beckoning eidos, a process so vividly like the raising of a memory that he calls it, making a myth of it, recollection, the calling-up of a ^{primordial} memory. (Meno 81, Phaedo 73). The way to the eidos is by passage through our souls, not by penetration of outer things-- or rather, these two ways are one.

I should add that the eidos is knowable but it is not knowledge. It confronts the soul and is not of it. To put it in modern terms: It

is a presence to the soul, but not a representation within it. We might say that Being is for us irreducibly aspectual: We look at it and move among its articulations for it has a power of affecting the soul and being known. (Republic 511, Sophist 248 e). We may even, speaking figuratively, comprehend it, but we cannot pass into it. For Socrates philosophy, the desire for being, remains forever philosophy, an unfulfilled longing.

V. Appearance and Being

The eidōs is steadfast and lucid. Not so the world which envelops us. It is shifting and opaque. Yet the Greeks call what appears before our eyes the phenomena, which means "what shines out", "what shows itself", for the things that appear glow and ensnare us in their kaleidoscopic spectacle; that is why we are all lovers of sights and sounds (Republic 475 d). I should note here that although I cannot help talking of "things", the appearances are not things in any strict sense since they have no "reality" (which is but Latin for "thinghood"), no compacted, concrete character. Socrates sometimes uses the word "business", "affairs" (pragmata) for our world. The "phenomena" sparkle busily, but it is all surface.

Now the systematic illusions and the serried variety of appearance can be mastered by various sciences, for example, sciences of perspective and classification, but there is still a recalcitrant residue. That incorrigible phenomenality show itself as a two-fold multiplicity. First there are always many of a kind, many beautiful things, many just acts. And second, no beautiful thing and no just act is that way perfectly. unbudgeably, purely, but each changes as our perspective on it changes in time or place. Appearance as appearance is scattered and shimmering,

fragmented and irredescent.

But most of all it is not what it shows, or to put it plainer:
Appearance is appearance of something, it points beyond itself. What is it whose refracted form is shown to us in appearance? What appears must be for that very reason in itself invisible. This invisible eidos is what Socrates thinks of as the being behind appearance, and appearance is becoming regarded as a manifestation. This eidos which is a being, is all that appearance and becoming are not: not scattered but one, not multiform but of a single look (Phaedo 78 d); not mixed but pure (66 a); not passive but potent (Sophist 247 e); not elusive and illusory but steadfast and true; not for busy show but the thing in its verity, the very thing (to auto pragma); not self-contradictory but self-same (Phaedo 78 d, Cratylus 386 e); not dependent and of something, but itself by itself, absolved from subservience, or "absolute", as later commentators render Socrates deliberately naive term "by itself"; unique, immortal, indestructible (Phaedo 78 d), outside time and beyond place (Phaedrus 247 b). Most simply, Socrates calls the eidos, the just, the beautiful.

Whatever has this characteristic of potent, shapely, and, one might almost say "specific", self-sameness is called a being. It provides such "beingness" (ousía, Cratylus 386 e, Meno 72 b) as appearances have, and it does this by somehow "being by", having presence (parousia, Phaedo 100 d) in them. The eidetic beings are responsible for the fact that the question "What is it?" asks not only what the thing is but also what it is, that being accompanies every "whatness", all quality.

I should observe again that beings are not "real", for they are not things and do not move in the categories true of things, nor do they

"exist", for to exist means to be here and now.¹⁰⁾ But they are not unreal or non-existent either. They are, in the way described, and as they appear they give things their looks, their visible form. (Phaedo 104 d).

VI. Same and Other

The being I have named so often is not Socrates' discovery. It comes to him from those so prejudicially called Presocratics, in particular from Parmenides who entered ~~the~~ sanctuary of being in a blazing chariot. Thus it comes to Socrates already fraught with established controversy and difficulties. Even he has an inherited legacy of "problems", that is to say, of questions posed in terms of his predecessors' inescapable doctrines. Questions posed in this way, as problems, notoriously have resolutions which pose more and tighter problems, and so the tradition of professional philosophy is set. Socrates does not escape this unfresh beginning.

This is the problem Socrates takes up when still almost a boy: The being Father Parmenides discovered is and nothing else. It is, one and only, without distinction or difference, for we cannot think or speak what is ~~utterly~~ not. There is no sentence which does not contain, audibly or latently, an "is", an assertion of the truth of being. Such austere attention to what speech always says is not primitive. Listen to a contemporary poet, W.H. Auden:

Words have no words for words that are not true. ("Words").
What Parmenides says -- that what is, is and in merely being is all one, ~~("Words")~~ is compelling ^{since} we have no immediate speech with which to say it nay. But it is equally monstrous, for it negates both our multifarious world, the one in which we are at home; ^{along with} ~~and~~ the very possibility of articulate speech itself. Because Parmenides' grand

insight brings all articulating speech to a halt, his zealous follower Zeno has taken the clever way of attacking the opposition who continue to talk and say that being is not one but many. He understands this to have to mean that being is at once like and unlike itself, self-contradictory, unthinkable. Socrates knows that the visible world, at least, is like that and that yet thoughtful speech cannot bear such self-contradictions. So he offers a supposition which saves both at once: the integrity of that which speech is always about, this "is" which is the bond of every logos, and also the manifest multiplicity and inconsistency of appearance and its gathering in speech. He saves Parmenides from sinking into the white silence of being.

Socrates' supposition is the eidos, which is not being itself but a being. His resolution is that being is many, but not confused. The eide are each self-same, as being should be, but they are also diverse from each other. The appearances somehow "participate" in these beings in such a way that the diverse beings intersect in them and are superimposed. Thus the appearances become self-opposed; they eide save at once the purity of being and the alloy of becoming. "What wonder?", says young Socrates to the Parmenidean problem with multiplicity (Parmenides 129 b), the universal paean of those who have resolved another's perplexity.--An older Socrates will say that philosophy is wonder.

Socrates' solution, that there are several and diverse beings, of course poses new problems. The most telling of these is that each being is also a non-being--at least it is a not-being; it is not what the other beings are, so that Zeno's problem with the self-opposition of the world of appearance has been but raised into the realm of being. A few

weeks before the end of his life Socrates is present at a great moment in the course of philosophy when a visitor from Parmenides' country presents, by way of resolving this higher problem, a momentous elaboration of his supposition which, while turning it almost irrevocably into a theory, advances it greatly. For if Socrates had shown how we can come to terms with the self-opposition of the world of appearance, the visitor will show how we can account for false and fraudulent speech, and even for spurious being.

The stranger's bold solution to Socrates' problem is this. All the eide are beings, and that is taken to mean that they all take part in being itself; they belong to a highest eidos, the eidos Being. The stranger boldly claims that there is also another, unheard of, eidos which ranges in a peculiar way through all the eide. It is indeed not-being, but not-being rightly understood, understood as a being. (Sophist 258 c). He calls it the Other. The eidos of the Other runs through all beings and makes them other than each other--not what the other is. By being scattered through all being it is the cause of its pervasive distinction and difference. It is a peculiar principle which relates by opposition and unifies by diversity, ^{for} since all have otherness in common, their very community makes them different. It makes all beings confront each other. It is the very eidos of relativity. It is not a new name for non-being that the stranger contributes but a new view of the world as articulated and bonded through difference. It is a world in which the fact that we take one thing for another and speak falsely, as we surely do, is accounted for.

The stranger mentions in passing also another principle, evidently not itself an eidos among eide, but comprehending, surpassing and beyond all being. He calls it the Same (254 e), in antithesis to the Other.

It is that which gives the eidos of Being, and through it all the beings, their very own nature, their steadfast abiding by themselves, their being what they are through and through; the Same gives the eide their self-sameness. It is the culminating principle. Depending on how it is approached, it is also called the Good, because it gives beings their vividness ^{and Fittingness} (Republic 509a), and in Plato's "Unwritten Teachings"--recall that he declined to write down ^{the most} central things-- it seems to have been called the One, because it is the first and final totality. Socrates speaks of it explicitly, though in metaphor, but once, likening it to the sun because it gives the eide their luminous sightlikeness. (509b).

Aristotle told a story of Plato's famous lecture on the Good, which he held at his school, the Academy. People came in droves, expecting to hear something fascinating to themselves, about health or wealth or power. But it was all about arithmetic and how the eide are a certain kind of number, ending up with the just-mentioned revelation that the Good is the One. So they got disgusted and drifted off. (Aristoxenus, Elements of Harmony II, 30). Mr. Klein used to add--as if he had been there--that only one person stayed, comprehending and critical. That was Aristotle himself.

What Plato spoke about then was what is called dialectic in the last and strongest sense, thinking by and through the eide (Republic 511 C, 532), attending to their grouping, mingling, hierarchy, "intertwining". (Symploke, Sophist 240 c). Such dialectic, the ultimate use of the logos and the philosophical activity proper, appears in the dialogues but once, namely in the Sophist, and scholars have not often succeeded in recovering it. I should say that there is a chapter in Mr. Klein's book on Greek mathematics which engages in true dialectic and tells how the eidos Being

can be understood as the number 'Two.¹¹⁾

VII. Original and Image

There is one greatest, almost overwhelming perplexity about the eide which Socrates knows about from the very beginning. (Parmenides 131 c). How can an eidos do the very business for which it is submitted to us? Is not the eidos-unit,

being each one and ever the same and receptive of neither becoming nor destruction, still steadfastly the same? And thereafter, must it not be posited ^{either} as scattered and having become many in the things that are becoming, ~~or as~~ yet whole but separate from itself, which would seem to be the most impossible of all--that one and the same thing should be in one and many? (Philebus 15 b).

Then ^{how} can the eidos be the source of the appearances around us, how can it have truck with what is always changing and multiple? This question can be called the "lower participation problem" since it deals not with the community the eide have with each other but with that which is below them. It is the question closest to us: How do we understand the working relations which the eide--once we suppose them to be-- have to the variety, the passages and the contradictions of our world of appearance.

Socrates uses a number of terms to name this relation. He speaks of the "part-hold", the "participation" (methexis, Phaedo 100-102) of the appearances in the eidos, but, of course, he does not mean a part-taking, as when people take up a part of an awning they sit under. (Parmenides 131 b). He speaks of a community of the eidos and appearances, of their being named after it, of the presence of the eidos in them. (e.g. Phaedo 100 c,d, 103 b). These terms signify that the two realms are strongly related, but they do not reveal what the appearances can have in common with beings, or why they merit being named after them, or how the beings can be with them.

But Socrates does use one group of words which tell more. He speaks of participation through similarity, likeness, imaging, imitation.

(Phaedrus 250 a, Phaedo 74 e, Timaeus 39 e and, above all Republic 510 b).

That our world should stand to the realm of eide as copy to exemplar (Parmenides 132 d, Timaeus 48 e) has a certain high plausibility. It conveys a falling off from the fullness of being, an imitative, derivative mode. It suggests that one original eidōs will have many image-appearances, and that each appearance ought not to stand free, but be, like any image, in some stuff. (Timaeus 52 c). It indicates how every appearance could be doubly dependent, on the eidōs for being visible, and on our sight for being seen. If the appearances somehow image the eide, their inferiority, multiplicity, materiality and sensuality becomes comprehensible--and so does the fact of their inescapably beguiling looks.

Yet there are apparently devastating difficulties with this primordial imitation, of which the one most open to formal attack is this: If the eidōs is what is originally beautiful, and beautiful things are copies, and if the likeness of copies to their originals comes from their sharing the same quality, then both have the quality of being beautiful. Then the eidōs of beauty is beautiful, as the eidōs of justice is just, and Socrates does not scruple to say just that. (Protagoras 330 c, Symposium 210 c). But that way of speaking, that beauty is beautiful, is an insupportable redundancy, called by scholars "self-predication". Furthermore, if the function of the eidōs was to account for the fact that anything is beautiful, then another eidōs beyond will have to be posited to account for the fact that the eidōs itself has been said to be beautiful. Aristotle calls this dilemma the "Third Man", because behind the man and the man-like eidōs of mankind there must appear a third man-eidōs. (Metaphysics 990 b).

But in truth, these terrible perplexities, whose various versions and issues Socrates knows about (Parmenides 132 d, Republic 597 c), miss the point. When Socrates so often chooses to employ ^{the phrase} "the beautiful" rather than the noun of quality "beauty", he is not simply misled by the fact that in Greek, as in English, the former phrase sounds as if it meant a beautiful thing, being an adjective turned into a substantive. When he speaks that way he means to make us face the self-same "suchness" of the eidos, to divert our desire from appearing beautiful things to a better but invisible beauty, to convey its greater desirability, to persuade us to "look to" it. The turns of speech that call the eidos verily beautiful, through and through beautiful, the beautiful itself, are philosophical rhetoric. They try to lever us into new way of being enchanted, namely not by that which appears as beautiful but by the very condition of our seeing and saying that it is beautiful. The eidos beauty is certainly not ugly, but no more is it adjectivally beautiful; it is rather such as to be itself the sole source of the attribute in others. The word "beautiful" does not describe this suchness, but it reaches for it.

How then can beautiful things be images of beauty if it is not, as seems indeed to be impossible, by likeness in the sense of sameness of quality? It is because imaging is the deepest capability of being, the accompaniment of the pervasive otherness which haunts it, of the non-being which dogs every being. Each being confronts another as its other, and its own otherness is mirrored in the others.

For the image nature of an image is not really caught when we point out similarities, say of conformation and color, between it and its original. The closest we can come to telling it is to say that an image is, in truth, not what it images, and then again it somehow is.

For example, we are apt to say of a little statue of Socrates looking like a pot-bellied satyr: "That's Socrates", while we know that it is not. We mean that he is in some sense present in the clay--"represented", but not in truth. For an image is that which in its very nature is not what it is; it is an interweaving of being and non-being. (Sophist 240 c).

Now among the beings, the eide, each is self-same and truly what it is, and also other than and not what the others are; its not-being is with respect to the other beings; the interweaving is not a mingling. But becoming, Socrates explains, is an amalgam of being and non-being. (Republic 477a). The appearances mingle within themselves non-being and being; they have neither steady self-sameness nor fixed difference, and yet they are somehow enduring and distinct. They are in their very nature not what they are. In that sense they might well be called images of being. So here is a formal way of conceiving the claim that appearance images the eidos. But it must be said that it in no wise solves our greatest problem: how the eidos drops down from the context of being to become entangled with non-being in a new and world-making way -- how there can be an eidos incarnate. (Phaedrus 251a).

Socrates ascribes to us an initial power -- most startling to see in children -- of image recognition (eikasía, Republic 511e), by which we recognize at once the fact of a counterfeit and the original lurking in the imitation (510b). In its developed form it is a sense for what Mr. Klein once called "the duplicity of being", and it is the very urge of philosophy itself.

I have said what I think Plato's Socrates thought, but I do not want this lecture to be what is, wonderfully, called an "academic" exercise, so I must now say what I think. But before I do that, let me make mention one last time of the name of Jacob Klein to whom this lecture is most certainly dedicated in loving memory and who -- so good a teacher was he -- taught me nothing but what I could straightway recognize as my own.

Socrates himself says of the eide that they have become buzz-words (Phaedo 100b); there are even those known, a little absurdly, as "the friends of the eide" (Sophist 248a). That kind of thing comes from being drawn and fascinated by Socrates' sights without having ourselves seen them. What is more, Plato does not reveal, indeed conceals, in the dialogues the answer to the question: did Socrates himself view the eide? did anyone ever?; in short: are there accessible eide?

Therefore our attention is naturally turned to the Socrates through whom we hear of these matters and to his trustworthiness. And I find the man who is commemorated in the Dialogues trustworthy beyond all others. I trust his slowness and his simplicity, his sobriety and his enthusiasm, his playfulness and his steadfastness, his eros and his dignity. Yet it is not mainly his character that I trust, but his presuppositions, and I think that they must have formed him more than he did them.

I make Socrates' presuppositions out to be these: That there is that in human life which stands out, that there are heights and there is a way to them, an ascent. That what is desirable is at a distance, by itself and in itself and therefore sight-like and yet invisible, and that there must be a means for reaching it. That this mediating power is speech, which

~~not only raises us but first~~ ^{articulate} arouses that irritably wonder at common things which ~~when articulated~~ is called a question. And first and last, that where there is a question, an answer has already been at work, and it is our human task to recollect it.

These presuppositions are not at all necessary. Our specific human work does not have to be thought of as arising from enthusiasm about the extraordinary or marvelling at the common, as Socrates says philosophy does. (Theaetetus 155d). It can come from a cool, sober sense that the ways of the world should be exposed and explained, ^{its} myths dismantled and ^{its} depths made plane; that not what is best but what is individual, not what is common but what is ordinary, should preoccupy our efforts; that we should not view but master, not play but work, not suppose but certify, not ask but determine, not long but draw limits. I am describing that self-controlled maturing of philosophy which is responsible for all that we call modernity. I do not think for a moment that we should play truant from this severe and powerful school. But I do think that Socrates' suppositions are that beginning which can be forgotten but never superseded.

N O T E S

1. Let me add here that the next most important source of the Theory of Ideas, very difficult to use, is Aristotle, who reports its technical elaborations and problems and looks at it, as it were, askance.

2. The meaning of theoria in Greek is, however, that of a viewing, a sight seen, contemplation, and in that sense the Ideas are very much a "theory".

3. I am thinking of the so-called problems of participation and separation, of self-predication, of the Third Man, and of eidetic structure. Incidentally in the Parmenides Socrates is portrayed as the supporter of that very version of the theory -- that the ideas are "separate" from things -- which Aristotle explicitly denies he held. Aristotle makes this claim in a puzzling passage which is the prime source for all denials of Socrates' authorship of the theory. (Metaphysics 987b).

4. A Socratic hypotheses is unlike a post-Baconian hypotheses in not being a conjecture to be verified by observational experience. It is a little closer to an astronomical hypotheses such as Plato is said by Simplicius to have first demanded, namely an intellectual construction, a mathematical theory, devised to "save the phenomena", that is, to display the anomalous appearances as grounded in regularities acceptable to reason. Only a Socratic hypotheses is in no way a postulated construction.

5. Nor is the translation "form" quite good, because it is too reminiscent of the Aristotelian distinction between form and matter. The eidōs may "work" a form in a thing (Phaedo 104d) but it is not its form.

6. I have given this presentation a questionable coherence by ranging through the dialogues as if Plato's works constituted a planned-out whole. But then I believe that they do, and that what scholars consider the "development" of Plato's thought from early to late dialogues is largely the advancing of one or

the other of these different beginnings and aspects.

7. Accordingly the Phaedrus, in which this beginning of philosophy is prominently set out, was once, probably wrongly, thought to be Plato's earliest dialogue.

8. Of course, the visible things do not constitute the eidos, nor is the eidos their concept, that is, the definition which selects the members.

I want to mention also that, although it is not his fixed usage, Plato does refer to the greatest eide as gene, genera, kindred groups (Sophist 254d), thereby indicating that in the highest reaches eidetic shapeliness yields to associative characteristics.

9. For Socrates methodos means a path of inquiry to be followed (Republic 533b), not a pre-set investigatory procedure.

10. (a) The word ousia did play a role analogous to modern "reality" in common language. As we speak of "real" estate, Greeks used ousia to mean one's property, substance.

(b) Scholars attribute to Socrates the distinction between two uses of the verb "to be", the predicative and the existential. In its predicative use "is" acts as a copula, a coupling between the subject of discourse and what is said of it, as in "This face is beautiful". The existential "is" occurs in the chopped-off sentence "Justice is", meaning is to be found sometimes, somewhere in the world: "Justice exists". But distinctions in verbal usage are not Socrates' aim. When we say that "the face is beautiful" it is for him the occasion for asking what beauty is, and when we assert that "justics exists" he wants to know in what world -- and it will not be one which has time and place.

11. Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra (The M.I.T. Press, 1968) 7c, pp. 79 ff.

In brief, it goes like this: according to the stranger the eidōs of Being is composed of two eide, change and stillness (Sophist 254^d), since first of all everything that is, is either in motion or at rest, though never both at once; these eide never mingle. Being is not either of these alone, or their mixture, but precisely both together. That, however, is just how number assemblages behave; Socrates himself draws attention to this in that favorite formula: each one, both too. (Hippias Major 301^a, Phaedo 97^a, Republic 476^a, Theaetetus 146^e). Each unit in a number remains what it was, one, but both together have a new name and nature, two; they are together what neither is by itself. Being, the highest eidōs, would then be the eidetic Two -- not anything above or beyond the two eidetic units, change and stillness, which constitute it, but simply their being together. Aristotle reports the Academy's interest in the arithmetic organization of the eide. (Metaphysics 987b). He also points out that the eidetic units are not, like arithmetic units, indifferent, and so capable of being added and "thrown together" any which way (1081a). They can only associate into eidetic numbers uniquely, according to their nature; such eidetic counting, which drives speech to and then beyond its limits, is dialectic proper.