

Introduction

The topic of the present study is Plato's theory of Forms, as it used to be called. The thesis of the study is that Plato's Forms simply are essences and that Plato's theory of Forms is a theory of essence – essences, in the sense of what we are committed to by the supposition that the *ti esti* ('What is it?') question can be posed and, all going well, answered. This thesis says that the characteristics that, as is generally recognised, Plato attributes to Forms, he attributes to them because he thinks that it can be shown that essences, on the original and minimal sense of essence, must be so characterised. The characteristics that Plato attributes to Forms include the following: Forms are changeless, uniform, not perceptible by the senses, knowable only by reasoning, the basis of causation and explanation, distinct from sense-perceptible things, necessary for thought and speech, separate from physical things. According to the thesis of this study, each and all of these characteristics of Forms can be derived, Plato thinks, from the supposition that we can ask and, all going well, answer the *ti esti* question adequately and truly, and the supposition that, whatever else Forms are and is characteristic of them, they are essences, essences in the sense of that which is designated by an adequate and true answer to the *ti esti* question.

For Plato, the question 'What is . . . ?' is not, originally and according to its original meaning and use – the meaning and use shared by Socrates' understanding of it and the understanding of it by his interlocutors – a philosophical, much less technical question, the posing of which commits one to the existence of essences in a disputable or controversial sense. In several dialogues, Plato presents Socrates' interlocutors, those who are without philosophical background or training, as taking themselves to be immediately capable of understanding this question, and indeed of answering it, and presents Socrates as having to do much work to persuade them, and Plato the reader, that things are not so simple. That which the *ti esti* question asks for, in its original meaning and use, is a standard

(*paradeigma*) for a thing's being of a certain quality and a way of determining whether a thing is such as to be of a certain quality.

If there is one thing that Socrates, as Plato represents him, is convinced of, it is that the *ti esti* question, especially when asked of certain things or qualities, such as *beauty, equality, unity, justice*, is a most important and profoundly difficult one, the answering of which is a major undertaking and requires demanding enquiry. At the same time, there is a dialogue, the *Hippias Major*, in which, as we shall see, Plato has a character, Hippias, present Socrates and his distinctive convictions about the *ti esti* question with a monumental challenge. For, Hippias insists, the question, 'What is beauty?', is 'trivial and worth practically nothing' (286e5–6). He does this because he argues that the *ti esti* question can be answered, with ease and without any enquiry to speak of, by pointing to an example of a particular thing of exemplary beauty, such as a girl, or a horse or a lyre; a thing, therefore, capable of serving as an adequate standard for a thing's being beautiful and for determining of a thing whether or not it is such as to be beautiful.

At the same time, there can be no doubt that Plato thinks that the *ti esti* question, when properly considered and especially when asked of certain things or qualities, is a philosophical one, whose answer, to be adequate, must conform to certain requirements that are substantive and potentially subject to controversy and dispute. The most important of these requirements says that, when asked of certain things or qualities, the *ti esti* question cannot be adequately answered by example and exemplar, that is, in the way Hippias insists and argues it can. It does not follow from this that the appeal to an example and exemplar of a thing that is F cannot contribute to the search for an answer to the question 'What is F?'; what it means, rather, is that this appeal is not, by itself, adequate for answering the question. The reason why this is the most important requirement that Plato associates with the *ti esti* question, when asked of certain things or qualities, is that, if the *ti esti* question can be answered by example and exemplar, it is, as Hippias points out, so easy to answer as to be trivial and worth practically nothing.

Plato associates further substantive requirements with the *ti esti* question; in particular, the answer to the question must be unitary, and it must be explanatory. I shall not spell out these requirements here; I have done so elsewhere (Politis 2012; 2015, ch. 2), and we will have the opportunity to consider them, and their consequences and relevance for the theory of Forms, at the proper junctures of the study. What is important to observe is that, by adding these requirements – generality (i.e., not by example and

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exemplar), unity, explanatoriness – to the original and basic meaning and use of the *ti esti* question, that is, the meaning and use that leaves open what is, or provides, an adequate standard (*paradeigma*) for a thing or quality, Plato is, in effect, introducing a philosophical, and potentially controversial and disputable, notion of essence: the essence of a thing or quality, F, is that which is designated by a true answer to the question ‘What is F?’, and this answer has to conform to certain substantive requirements.

For brevity, I shall simply say that the essence of a thing or quality, F, is that which is designated by an adequate and true answer to the question ‘What is F?’ If this should make a reader object that, on this account of essence, even Hippias is committed to essences, I think the following answer will do: On a strictly minimal notion of essence, so be it; on a strictly maximal notion of essence, only a true answer to the *ti esti* question that satisfies *all* the requirements that a philosopher may associate with the question – generality, unity, explanatoriness, as well as any further requirements that, for particular reasons, she may associate with it – designates an essence; and, obviously, there are notions of essence in between these two extremes.

Let me, without further delay, return to the point of the present project. I argue that, for Plato and in regard to certain things or qualities, the answer to the *ti esti* question commits us to entities whose existence is controversial and disputed by people in general, namely, what Plato calls Forms (*eidē*).¹ An important reason why the existence of such entities is not evident, but disputable, is that, in such dialogues as *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Parmenides* and likewise *Timaeus* and *Philebus*,² Forms are characterised as having a number of unfamiliar and remarkable characteristics: Forms are

¹ Plato sometimes uses *eidōs* and *idea* interchangeably, when talking about Forms or about essences (such as *Republic* V. 479a1; and, perhaps, *Euthyphro* 6d–e); but not always. He sometimes uses *idea* when he says that an *eidōs* is, precisely, an *idea* (Greek term) *that is always the same*. (See, e.g., *Parmenides* 132a2–3 and 135b8–c1. In passages such as *Republic* VI. 507b6–7, and perhaps even V. 479a1, it is not clear whether he uses *idea* for *eidōs* or, rather, in this other way.) When he uses *idea* in this way, it would not be right to translate ‘Form’ for *idea*; we may translate, rather, ‘character’ or ‘quality’. Plato’s point will then be that a Form is, precisely, a character or quality *that is always the same*. Remarkably, this shows that Plato does not simply assume that a quality must be always the same in every one of its instantiations or occurrences.

² The inclusion of the *Timaeus* and *Philebus*, in addition to *Phaedo-Republic-Parmenides*, may raise some eyebrows, since it is generally thought that they are much later. My reason for including them is that, as I will argue, they are, in regard to the theory of Forms, continuous with the *Republic*, and appear to be intended by Plato as so being. Of course, once we include the *Timaeus* and *Philebus*, we ought, ideally, to consider, in regard to Forms, also dialogues generally thought to be later than the *Parmenides* but earlier than them; such as, especially, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, as well as *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* wherever we place them in the relative chronology overall and indeed in

changeless, uniform, not perceptible by the senses, knowable only by reasoning, the basis of causation and explanation, distinct from sense-perceptible things, necessary for thought and speech, separate from physical things. I cannot seriously entertain the idea that Plato intends the existence of such entities to be taken on trust. In particular, we must wonder why he thinks that these characteristics are all true of the same entities (that they are co-referring and co-extensive) and, most important, why he thinks that they are true of, precisely, those entities to which we come to be committed through the posing of the *ti esti* question.

Unless and until we take up and properly consider these critical questions – by what process of reasoning, in Plato, does the posing of the *ti esti* question turn into the commitment to Forms? What justifies the supposition that the several characteristics of Forms are all true of the same things, and of the very things we are committed to by the posing of the *ti esti* question? – we are not in a position to suppose that Plato has, or intends to have, a theory of essence, or a theory of Forms: a theory, in the sense of a single account that he intends to be coherent and unitary, such that accepting one element in it commits one to accepting all the elements in it.³ These critical questions are at the core of the present study.

If I dedicate a book-length study to this task, it is not because I want to take issue with one or another interpretation of Plato's theory of Forms – as it used to be called, before such systematic interpretations were practically displaced by a single-minded preoccupation, by critics setting the tone, with the dialogical drama displayed by a Platonic dialogue, based on one or another single dialogue, warning against dialogue-crossing, and predisposed against the search for systematicity, or theory, in Plato.⁴ My motives derive, in part, from a basic concern I have about the current state of the art regarding Plato's Forms and their relation to his essences, that is, essences, in the sense of those entities, whatever they may be, and however disputable or not they may be, to which one is committed by the

relation to each other. It is simply that doing this would take us too far . . . and we would need many more words than Cambridge University Press admits.

³ Thus Annas (1986, 242): 'It is often said that Plato has a "Theory" of Forms and even that it dominates his entire work. In fact Forms appear rarely and are always discussed non-technically; they answer to a variety of needs which are never systematically brought together . . . If we ask "What are Forms?" we find a variety of answers.' If the argument of the present study is on the right lines, this statement is the opposite of the truth.

⁴ I recommend Christopher Rowe's salutary opposition to this tendency: 'Talk of "versatility" is in danger of suggesting that we can retreat into interpreting each dialogue on its own (as some scholars in the last two centuries have attempted to do), and there are too many connections between them, too many constants, to make that a viable proposition' (2007, 3). Rowe goes on to spell out the need to read the dialogues together.

supposition that the *ti esti* question can be posed and, all going well, answered. My impression is that those critics who are still occupied with Plato's Forms, including the best and most perceptive of them such as Verity Harte,⁵ consider it adequate to characterise Plato's Forms as being those entities that satisfy a set of characteristics such as those listed above, to which is commonly added (though sometimes this seems to be forgotten!) that Forms are essences, in the sense of that which is designated by a true answer to a *ti esti* question. This is to characterise Plato's Forms through a list of characteristics; and this, I believe, is not at all to understand what Plato's Forms are or why one would believe in such things.

I know of a single exception, of some time ago, to this tendency among critics, by a critic who very much marks the alternative approach I want to take up and defend. This is Alan Code, when he says: 'Plato's realm of separable being is not the realm of existence, though of course its inhabitants are supposed to exist. Rather, it is the domain of definable entities – the objects about which one asks the Socratic "What is F?" question' (1986, 426). However, Code did not defend this statement; or, if he did, no one appears to have taken notice, perhaps because of the exceedingly compressed way in which he did defend it.⁶ In his 1951 classic, *Plato's Theory of Ideas*, David Ross, for one, asked whether Plato's theory of Forms contains 'an essential core' (90) – this being the question of the present study.

By itself, the proposition that there are entities that satisfy this, or some suitably similar, list of characteristics, must remain a philosophical curiosity, no doubt fascinating and worthy of a visionary mind, but otherwise something it is hard to know what to do with except admire it and wonder at how strange and incredible it is. If this is what Plato's Forms are and what the theory of Forms is, the recommendation would not be unreasonable that said that, having duly noted Plato's commitment to such

⁵ Harte (2008) begins (193–194) by stating, as basic characteristics of Forms, the following four, in which the notion of essence does not figure: 1. Forms are primary beings; 2. they have causal responsibility; 3. they are privileged bearers of certain terms and 4. they are objects of a knowledge of a privileged sort. Later Harte characterises Forms as being essences, when she says (in regard of *Phaedo* 75c–d): 'Socratic questions ask "What is F?" for some range of properties. The Form is identified as "What is [F]" – that is, as the referent of the answer to this Socratic inquiry' (197). See Rowe (2007, 40) for a similar characterisation. Rowe is especially clear and explicit that the whole idea of Forms goes back to the Socratic *ti esti* question. See Chapter 2.

⁶ Silverman's *The Dialectic of Essence* (2002) promises to bring Forms closer to essences, but in fact Silverman argues against the view that a Form is identical with its essence, or that Forms *are* essences, and he considers Forms to be, rather, the 'bearers' of essences. I come back to this issue in the Conclusion of the present study – which the reader is welcome to read in advance.

entities, we had better limit ourselves to the examination of the dialogical, dramatical and argumentative ins and outs of each of Plato's dialogues and leave it at that.

If I may be allowed some pathos and a little exaggeration, this is to miss the point not only of Plato's Forms but of his philosophy. For I submit that, for Plato, Forms simply are essences. Essences, Plato thinks, simply are that which we are committed to, in one way or another, directly or indirectly, by the pursuit of *ti esti* questions and this pursuit's logical ramifications; and *ti esti* questions are thoroughly caught up in the dialogical, dramatical and argumentative enquiries, and the *aporiai* that all this is ultimately rooted in, that make up the dialogues.

Plato has the reader work hard to identify the basic elements in his philosophy, whatever they are, especially by placing in particular dramatic settings, and by practising philosophy as drama, the ways in which they are worked out, and situating this drama in historically inspired contexts engaging with intellectual figures alive and dead (e.g., lesser and greater sophists, generals, poets, dramatists, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Homer ...) as well as with other forces and presences such as the war and Athens and the fatal mix-up of the two. In looking for these elements, I try to be sensitive to the dialogical character of Plato's arguments; such as the distinction between arguments addressed to those who have not yet accepted this, that or the other feature of essences and Forms and arguments addressed to those who have already accepted this. I shall, I recognise, be less occupied with the historical dimension, both in and out of the dialogues – much as I'd have liked to have integrated this more into the study.

The defence of the thesis that Plato's Forms simply are essences and that Plato's theory of Forms is a theory of essence must, of necessity, take a certain general form and proceed by a certain series of logical steps. It must start with the recognition, not only that the *ti esti* question is at the root of numerous enquiries in the dialogues – so much is commonly recognised – but that Plato is acutely aware of a debunking and, as we would say, deflationary response to this question, which says that the question is 'trivial and worth practically nothing', because it can be answered, with ease and without any enquiry to speak of, by pointing to an example and exemplar, and therefore an adequate standard, of what it asks for. For, if the *ti esti* question can be answered by example and exemplar, and if a standard of a thing or quality can be provided in this way, there is no reason to think that more is needed to answer it and afford the desired standard; and so the great substance that Plato affords this question, and

the difficult and weighty enquiries he associates with it, is vain. Plato did not have to wait for Wittgenstein or Geach to be presented with this radical challenge, he has Hippias present it in the *Hippias Major*. This is a dialogue the question of whose authenticity is rebutted once and for all by the recognition of the function the dialogue serves, through the radical dispute it contains regarding the *ti esti* question and whether it can be answered by example and exemplar: Hippias argues (he does not simply assume) that it can, Socrates that it cannot. This dialogue points to a basic element in Plato's approach to philosophy, philosophical questions and philosophical enquiry, namely, the *ti esti* question associated with certain substantial and demanding requirements for its answer; it acknowledges that this element is disputable; and it provides a dialectical defence of it, that is, an argument against the debunking and deflationary alternative. This is the point at which I begin, in Chapter 1.⁷

Having taken this first, basic, step, of determining why Plato thinks that there is no easy or readily available way of answering the *ti esti* question and of providing a standard for certain things or qualities, it is of the essence that we proceed with particular caution and care, in order to determine what is the next move that Plato makes, and makes on just this basis: the supposition, itself properly defended (in the *Hippias Major*), that the *ti esti* question, at least when asked of certain things or qualities, cannot be answered by example and exemplar. It will not do to proceed by supposing that, at a certain point in his development, such as when he wrote the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, Plato came to think that that which is designated by a true answer to a *ti esti* question is a Platonic Form, that is, an entity that satisfies some or all of a set of the mentioned characteristics. This will not do, not because of any general misgivings one may have about developmentalism, the view that Plato's philosophy develops through certain relatively distinct stages, but because it is not at all evident, but, on the contrary, perfectly obscure, why the alternative to the quick and easy way (as recommended by Hippias) of providing a standard of what something is, that is, by example and exemplar, implies the commitment to entities that have a single, much less some or all, of these characteristics.⁸

⁷ Chapter 1 is a revised version of Politis (2018a).

⁸ It is a consequence of the thesis defended in the present study that developmentalism, in regard to Forms and the theory of Forms, is mistaken; and it is mistaken irrespective of whether by developmentalism we mean the view that Plato's claims about Forms in such dialogues as *Phaedo* and *Republic* are inconsistent with his claims in dialogues we consider to be earlier, or, on the contrary, we mean the view that Plato's claims about Forms in such dialogues as *Phaedo* and *Republic*, though consistent with his earlier claims, introduce new claims that are not continuous

Nor will it help to add, as critics commonly have done, and still do even while having, on the whole, turned against developmentalism, that this step in Plato's development, when he came to think of essences as Platonic Forms, marks the philosopher's recognisable and archetypical turn to metaphysics and the questions of what there is and what are the most basic and primary entities there are. It is not only that this narrative does not begin to indicate why Plato thinks that all the mentioned characteristics are true of the same entities (are co-referring and co-extensive) and of those entities that are designated by a true answer to the *ti esti* question – these being absolutely critical questions without a sense of the answer to which we are entirely in the dark about Plato's Forms. The narrative begs a monumental question, namely, that Plato's theory of Forms is, basically, a theory about what there is and what are the most basic and primary entities there are: a metaphysical theory in this sense. To beg this question is no mean sin, for it is to ignore the possibility that what Plato's theory of Forms basically is, is a theory of essence, in the sense of a theory of what we are committed to in thinking that the *ti esti* question can be posed and, all going well, answered: a metaphysical theory, if you like, but in this quite different sense.⁹ It is to confuse things to suppose, from the start, that a theory of essence is a theory of what there is and what are the most basic and primary entities there are; a supposition that, to be worthy of consideration, requires a major and ambitious argument, such as we find in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and is anything but straightforward.

What we must do, rather, is identify a characteristic that Plato thinks essences, or Forms, must satisfy, and of which it can be shown that he thinks that this characteristic follows from the supposition, itself properly defended (in the *Hippias Major*), that the *ti esti* question, at least when asked of certain qualities, such as *beauty*, *equality*, *unity*, *justice*, cannot be answered by example and exemplar. I argue, in Chapter 2, that there is such a characteristic: it is that essences, or Forms, cannot be perceived by the senses, which Plato, famously, asserts in *Phaedo* and *Republic*. I argue that the reason why Plato thinks that certain essences, or Forms, cannot be perceived by the senses is, precisely, that he thinks that what certain things or qualities are cannot be specified (determined, defined, known) by example and exemplar. If this is correct, there is absolutely no need to

with, or based on, or justifiable on the basis of earlier claims. (For a recent defence of developmentalism in regard to Forms, see Dancy (2004). For critical assessments of developmentalism in general in regard to Plato, see Annas and Rowe (2003), also Kahn (1992).)

⁹ For the conception of metaphysics that is associated with questions about essences and what things are like essentially, see the classic paper by Kit Fine (1994).

suppose that Plato's commitment to Forms marks a turn to metaphysics, or any turn at all; all it marks is another step in Plato's process of determining, by logic and the art of reasoning when in the hands of a master craftsman, what we are committed to in thinking that the *ti esti* question can be posed and, all going well, answered.

My intention is to proceed in this way from the beginning to the end, practically, of the present study. By relying on *Hippias Major*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Parmenides* (also, more briefly, *Timaeus* and *Philebus*, and the occasional mention of other dialogues, too), I want to demonstrate that Plato defends each of the characteristics of his essences, or Forms, on the basis of the supposition alone that the *ti esti* question can be posed and, all going well, answered, and everything that follows from that. If this effort can be successfully sustained, we will have shown that Plato defends a comprehensive, coherent and well-argued theory of essence, based ultimately on a single question, and one that is not philosophically controversial or predisposed towards one substantial theory or prejudiced against another.

So far, I have anticipated two elements in this, Plato's theory of essence, which, as I shall demonstrate, Plato defends on the basis of the supposition that the *ti esti* question can be posed and, all going well, answered: that, when asked of certain things or qualities, the *ti esti* question cannot be adequately answered by example and exemplar (Chapter 1) and that, when asked of such things or qualities, that which is designated by an adequate and true answer to the *ti esti* question cannot be perceived by the senses (Chapter 2). A further element in Plato's theory of essence is his claim that essences, or Forms, are changeless and that they are uniform and non-composite; which, famously, he makes in the *Phaedo*. In Chapter 3, I argue that the claim that Forms are uniform and non-composite is derived from the claim that the *ti esti* question must be answered with an account that is unitary; and I argue that the claim that Forms are changeless is derived from the fact that the *ti esti* question is a request for a standard of what a thing is and from the requirement that this standard must be unitary. It follows, I conclude contra a prominent line of critics, that we have no reason to think that Plato's Forms, in the *Phaedo* or *Republic*, are supposed to be logically independent of each other.

A yet further element in Plato's theory of essence is his claim (in *Phaedo*) that essences, or Forms, are distinct from and not identical with sense-perceptible things. In Chapter 5, I argue that this claim is derived from the claims that the *ti esti* question, when asked of certain things or qualities, cannot be answered by example and exemplar, and that that which it

designates, if it is answered adequately and truly, cannot be perceived by the senses.

Let me not anticipate further how I intend to show that Plato defends, in this thoroughly essence-based way, each of the elements in his theory of essence – which is indeed what the theory of Forms is, if the argument of the present study is on the right lines. I do, though, need to call attention to a particular feature of this, the thoroughly essence-based way in which, as I argue, Plato defends the elements in his theory of Forms. So far, the elements whose distinctively essence-based defence I have anticipated are derived, by Plato, in a direct way from the supposition that the *ti esti* question can be posed and, all going well, answered. However, not all of Plato's essence-based arguments for an element in his theory of Forms are as direct. Let me explain with what is a particularly important, and clear, case.

One of the elements in Plato's theory of Forms is the claim that essences, or Forms, are necessary for, and provide the basis of, all causation and explanation; a claim that, famously, he makes and defends towards the end of *Phaedo* (95e ff.). I argue (in Chapter 6)¹⁰ that this claim, too, is defended by Plato in a thoroughly essence-based way. However, in this case, he does not rely only on the suppositions that there are essences and that essences cannot be specified by example and exemplar or perceived by the senses. For he also relies on the supposition, itself defended in the *Phaedo*, that causation and explanation is uniform: same cause and explanans if, and only if, same effect and explanandum.

This, I argue, is all that Plato relies on in defence of the claim that essences, or Forms, are necessary for, and provide the basis of, all causation and explanation. In particular, he does not rely on a claim that says that the cause transmits its quality to the effect and hence must be like the effect¹¹ – a claim from which it follows that Forms, at any rate in so far as they are causes, are self-predicative: the Form of F is itself F. Critics have commonly attributed to Plato these suppositions – the transmission theory of causation and self-predication – to make sense of his argument for the claim that causation requires Forms and is based on Forms. Neither of these suppositions, I argue, are needed to make sense of Plato's argument,

¹⁰ Chapter 6 is a revised version of Politis (2010).

¹¹ That Plato is *not* committed to this principle of causation (i.e., that causation works by causes transmitting their character to their effect) was argued, in regard to dialogues before *Phaedo*, by Malcolm (1991, 12–16, 20–24). However, the principle is now commonly (e.g., by Sedley [1998]) invoked in the account of Plato's argument in *Phaedo* 95e ff.