

PLATO'S ESSENTIALISM

In this book, Vasilis Politis argues that Plato's Forms are essences, not merely things that *have* an essence. Politis shows that understanding Plato's theory of Forms as a theory of essence presents a serious challenge to contemporary philosophers who regard essentialism as little more than an optional item on the philosophical menu. This approach, he suggests, also constitutes a sharp critique of those who view Aristotelian essentialism as the only sensible position: Plato's essentialism, Politis demonstrates, is a well-argued, rigorous, and coherent theory, and a viable competitor to that of Aristotle. This book will appeal to students and scholars with an interest in the intersection between philosophy and the history of philosophy.

VASILIS POLITIS is Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College Dublin. He is author of numerous books, including *The Structure of Enquiry in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) and *The Aporetic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy* (with George Karamanolis, Cambridge University Press, 2018).

PLATO'S ESSENTIALISM

Reinterpreting the Theory of Forms

VASILIS POLITIS

Trinity College Dublin



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108986557

DOI: 10.1017/9781108986243

© Vasilis Politis 2021

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2021
First paperback edition 2023

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-108-83366-0 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-108-98655-7 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

*For Lesley Brown, John Dillon, David Berman
mentors, friends, interlocutors*

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> ix
Introduction	I
1 Why cannot the <i>ti esti</i> question be answered by example and exemplar? <i>Hippias Major</i>	17
2 Why cannot essences, or Forms, be perceived by the senses? <i>Hippias Major. Phaedo. Republic</i>	23
3 Why are essences, or Forms, unitary, uniform and non-composite? Why are they changeless? Eternal? Are they logically independent of each other? <i>Phaedo</i> and <i>Republic</i>	49
4 The relation between knowledge and enquiry in the <i>Phaedo</i>	69
5 Why are essences, or Forms, distinct from sense-perceptible things? <i>Phaedo</i> 74 and <i>Republic</i> V. 478–479	90
6 Why are essences, or Forms, the basis of all causation and explanation? <i>Phaedo</i> 95–105	110
7 What is the role of essences, or Forms, in judgements about sense-perceptible and physical things? <i>Republic</i> VII. 523–525	147

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
8	Why does thinking of things require essences, or Forms? <i>Parmenides</i>	179
9	Why are essences, or Forms, separate from physical things? Also <i>Timaeus</i> and <i>Philebus</i>	202
10	What yokes together mind and world? <i>Phaedo</i> 99–100 and <i>Republic</i> VI. 505–509	224
	Conclusion: Forms simply are essences, not things that have essences	230
	<i>Bibliography</i>	235
	<i>General Index</i>	243
	<i>Index Locorum</i>	246

Acknowledgements

My gratitude extends, above all, to John Dillon, The Trinity Plato Centre (which, as it happens, is located in Trinity College Dublin) and all those who work there and have every day been providing me with a lived space that we have been shaping jointly. I had the pleasure and privilege to experience a similar environment during the winter of 2018 in The Durham Institute of Advanced Study, and to it and its excellent directors, and Nicholas Saul not least, I am grateful. At the outset of this project I had two wonderful stays, first at Wuhan University in the summer and autumn of 2016, made even better by my host there, Hao Chanchi, and his hospitality, and then at Uppsala University in the spring of 2017, made just as enjoyable by my host and friend there, Pauliina Remes, and her hospitality. In both places, I enjoyed many seminars with excellent graduate students. I had the opportunity to present individual talks on one or the other item in this book in several places in China, Europe and at São Paulo University and Campinas University in Brazil. I thank my friend, George Karamanolis, my host at Vienna University, and my friend, Klaus Corcilius, my host at Tübingen University. I am also grateful to my friend and host Richard King during my time at Bern University. Several universities in China provided more extended points of refuge during the past four years and the writing of this book, most especially Wuhan University, Renmin University and China University of Political Science and Law. I am grateful to you all. Many people have contributed generously to this book, and I fear I will forget some, but I will not forget Matthew Adams, Keith Begley, Nicolò Benzi, David Berman, Lesley Brown, Friedemann Buddensiek, Damian Caluori, Laura Candiotta, Luca Castagnoli, Nick Clairmont, Niall Connolly, Klaus Corcilius, Giulio Di Basilio, Filomena Di Paola, John Dillon, Nathalie Ek, Paolo Fait, Ge Tianqin, Zuzanna Gnatek, Margaret Hampson, Vivil Valvik Haraldsen, Verity Harte, Blake Hestir, Thomas Hodgson, David Horan, Martin Jacobson, Jiao Liming, George Karamanolis, Kate Kiernan, Richard King, Hermann Körner, Inna

Acknowledgements

Kupreeva, Jens Kristian Larsen, Peter Larsen, Jim Levine, Ruairi Maguire, Mary Margaret McCabe, David Meissner, James Miller, Nie Minli, John Nugent, Kenneth Pearce, Sverre Raffnsøe, Nigel Rapport, Pauliina Remes, Samuel Rickless, Evan Rodriguez, Henrik Rojahn, Pauline Sabrier, Kara Schechtman, Colm Shanahan, Philipp Steinkrüger, Damien Storey, Su Jun, Jan Szaif, Oda Tvedt, Daniel Vazquez, Tom Vogt, Wang Wei, Daniel Watts, Wei Liu, Manfred Weltecke, Benjamin White, Xin Liu and Zhang Jiayu. I thank you all.