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SECOND SAILING:
Alternative Perspectives on Plato

Edited by Debra Nails and Harold Tarrant

in Collaboration with

Mika Kajava and Eero Salmenkivi



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A Horse Is a Horse, of Course, of Course, but What about Horseness?

NECİP FİKİRİ ALİCAN

My first encounter with Plato's Forms was a failure. I had not taken any classes in philosophy. Nor had I had any training in classical studies. I had heard of Plato but not of the Forms. Thus equipped with nothing but a blank tablet of a mind, I happened upon the 'invisible things' of the *Phaedo*. I walked away from that experience without a whisper of an awareness regarding a separate world for the Forms. I had failed to notice an entire world.

Once I was told about it, however, I learnt to recognise it when I saw it: first, in the *Phaedrus*; next, in the *Symposium*; later, in the *Republic*; and with a little instruction, wherever else it was supposed to be found. But I secretly suspected that I might be recognising something that was not there, somewhat like agreeing to 'see' the fluffy bunny people were always pointing out to me in the cloud formations above. All I ever saw was the clouds. That is perhaps why, in all the usual places where I was expected to see a division between two worlds, what I saw instead was a gradation of reality in a single world.

Moreover, I found that much of the gradation, that is, most of the degrees of reality, was lost in a two-world interpretation with one world sharply opposed to the other. If one world were one extreme and the other world the opposite extreme, I wondered, would we not need at least one more world for the degrees in between? Not if we put all the interior degrees in one world or the other, or divided them up between the two. But that, it seemed to me, would defeat the purpose of positing two worlds instead of one (where we could likewise place all the interior degrees but with room to spare for both extremes). Where and why did the differences in degree turn into a difference in kind requiring division into two separate worlds?

I did not know. I still do not. What I do know is that such a strong separation is not necessary to make things work. It is, of course, sufficient. It does make things work. Even if it is inelegant, it is not incoherent. Still, one hopes for an interpretive model that offers more than coherence.

I came across such a model in Holger Thesleff's initiative to replace the traditional two worlds with two levels. This is his construal of Plato's ontology as comprising two main levels and a full complement of subdivisions collectively

amounting to a stratification of reality in a single world satisfying all modes of existence and incorporating all grades and shades of reality. This is neither the only nor even the first reaction to a two-world perspective. In fact, it is not so much a reaction as it is a positive viewpoint, a comprehensive platform for interpreting Plato. And that positive dimension is what attracted me to it.

My aim here is not to champion that perspective. For one thing, there is not enough room. For another, Thesleff himself has already done that, later recruiting me to do it together.¹ My aim, rather, is to explore the basic intuition that would inspire any reader of Plato to favour one view over the other. That preference has never struck me as a reasoned conclusion of any sort, say, as the result of intensive study or careful deliberation. It has always impressed me as an intuitive grasp subsequently supported by evidence and argument.

We sift through the available evidence to justify the original intuition, whatever that may be. There is enough evidence either way to keep both sides happy. There is no proof in this. It is the bunny in the clouds, this second world. So, it may be worth our while to figure out why some of us see it and some do not. That stands to be more useful than attempting in vain to demonstrate either that it is there or that it is not. Even if we cannot settle the primary debate, we may be able to develop a better understanding of why we are engaged in it.

My own understanding, well before becoming acquainted with Thesleff's, was that the second world was a heuristic device Plato's readers employed to make sense of the magic.² In speaking of magic, I do not mean to characterise the Forms as sorcery, trickery, or illusion. I mean to identify them as delightfully different. Some, no doubt, find them disturbingly or provocatively different rather than delightfully so. And one reaction to what is disturbing is to keep one's distance. Hence, a second world, one reserved just for the Forms.

Did the Forms not look a bit fanciful to me? They most certainly did. That part, I had not missed. I was enchanted through and through and had no doubt they were sprinkled with pixie dust. As fantabulous as the Forms seemed, however, I always thought that Plato envisaged them as making it easier for us to understand our world, not as requiring us to postulate another, which we would likely understand even less.

¹ See Thesleff (1993, 17–45; 1999 [= 2009, 383–506]) for his work, Alican and Thesleff (2013, 14–7, 17–9) for our collaboration, and Alican (2014, 29–34, 44–51) for my follow-up.

² A glimpse into my impression of the magic may be had through Alican (2012, 87–110).

I was not sure what to call my interpretation as against the two-world rendition, which I also did not know what to call, as it was presented to me as the only interpretation, thus without a name or an alternative. Not having an alternative, it did not need a name, or so it must have seemed. Without naming either one, then, I thought of mine as two aspects of the same reality. I did not think that Plato's Forms existed in one world while sensible particulars existed in another. I thought that the Forms existed in one sense, sensible particulars in another, quite apart from how many worlds there are—regarding which I happened to believe there was just the one.

This is still what I think. And I now believe, in addition, that at least some of the disagreement, probably most of it, is grounded in what we make of existence. There must be something in the way Forms exist, which is to say, in the way they are supposed to exist, that is uncomfortable, maybe even inscrutable, for some but not for others. Some of us, I think, are predisposed to finding plenty of room for the Forms right here, while others see no option but to make room for them elsewhere, all the while all of us being fully aware that they are not actually supposed to be anywhere. If they take up no room, neither here nor there, why bother with a second world? It cannot be just because something Plato once said sounded like a 'Platonic heaven' (*Republic* 6,509d; cf. *Phaedrus* 247c–d). With all the metaphors to choose from, why fasten onto the one that makes him sound like a lunatic? And even then, why take it literally?

I have no objection to a second world itself. I just do not think we need it for the Forms. To be perfectly honest, I should confess that I also object to the idea of a second world in general, or a third, and so on, which, to me, are all the same world, because the world is what there is. We only ever have what there is, not something else besides. Before we can get to something else, it has to become part of what there is. There is never anything else. This naïve worldview is not the point I am pressing here, even if, as admitted, I cannot truthfully deny being moved by it. My only concern here is about whether we need a second world to accommodate the Forms, not whether we can ever have a second world (which, I am sure, we cannot).

Despite this confession, I will try to be as receptive as possible to the general plausibility of a second world, responding instead to the specific requirement of one for the Forms. If I am shown a passage where the souls of the dead go to Hades, and Hades is purported to be (in) another world, I shall embrace that world of souls. If I am shown a passage where the gods dwell in the heavens, and that is said to be (in) another world, I shall revere that world of gods. I am not sure, though, whether the whereabouts of souls and gods would make for one more

world or two more, thus possibly three in all, going up to four if we add one for the Forms. I am being deliberately difficult, of course, to make anything beyond one world sound sillier than it actually is. No, there would be just one extra world. All the souls and gods and Forms, anything unfamiliar, would go there.

Yet even if I am being difficult, how is it that none of these things can be accommodated in the world we already have but they can all be tucked away neatly in one alternate reality? Why not an extra world for each kind of thing that does not seem to go with what we have here? Or are souls and gods and Forms the same kind of thing? Strictly speaking, they are not. But there seems to be a looser sense in which they might reasonably, or not unreasonably, be thought of as the same kind of thing. If there is such a sense at all, it might well be in the way in which they are conceived to exist.

Must we do this the hard way, speculating about what might be the case? Does Plato never say anything outright that could possibly be pointing to another world? No, indeed, he says plenty of things that *can* be read that way and one or two that *must* be read that way. But he swings the other way as well. This is what the debate has always been about. It cannot hurt to go beyond that to see if there is anything else there. Variations in our approach to existence may well be the key to the disagreement.

With a focus on existence, it might seem like a systematic study of Plato's ontology is in order, or perhaps a close reading of his conception of 'being'. Fortunately, there are such studies. This one is not about what Plato thinks of existence. It is about what I think we think of existence. That, too, can be relevant. It could help those who do not think like me to track down the source of my disagreement, and that of others who may be in agreement with me, so that those who think differently can develop a better strategy to convince us otherwise. The reason this is fundamentally about existence, then, is that it is presumably the pressure Plato's Forms put on the notion of existence that forces us, evidently only some of us, to imagine a second world. We need to understand, better than we already do, why only some of us are thus affected.

Whenever we deny that Plato's Forms exist, we deny of them exactly what we affirm of sensible particulars. We thereby deny something that nobody holds: 'I can see the horse, Plato, but not horseness'.³ Indeed, none of us can. Yet Plato

³ This would be Antisthenes addressing Plato. The inverted commas are not for quotation but for (imagined) direct speech inspired by the story of an exchange between Plato and Antisthenes as reported by Simp. (*Comm. Arist. Cat.* 208.28–32 = Giannantoni 1990, 2.193 = V A 149). The same basic plot, with Diogenes of Sinope replacing Antisthenes, and cups and tables replacing horses, can be found in D. L. (6.53 = Giannantoni 1990, 2.255 = V B 62).

is not troubled by the fact that horseness is nowhere to be seen. To trouble Plato, one would have to show that there is no such thing as horseness, not that horseness is not the same kind of thing as horses. One could also trouble Plato by showing that there is such a thing as horseness but that it exists only by convention and not by nature. That, however, is a roundabout way of saying that there is no such thing as horseness, the demonstration of which, I have already conceded, would be decisive. Plato would be the first to admit that horseness does not exist in the same way horses do and the last to accept that either one does not exist at all. The task is to understand existence in context, not in space and time. This is what Plato's fabled response amounts to.⁴

But is that response entirely fair to Antisthenes? What if Antisthenes had made a rejoinder we never heard about? What if he had said: 'Yes, yes, we know to call a horse a horse when we see it, but that still does not mean there is anything other than this horse and that horse and that one over there and the one over yonder'. What if he had added: 'The only reason it occurs to you to speak of a horseness at all is these horses right here. If Poseidon were to take back the horses, there would be no horseness'. This is not in character for someone reportedly complaining about not being able to see the horseness. But it does take us beyond that first step, and that is where the debate gets interesting.

Given that we are still debating whether horseness and such really exist, even without anyone demanding to see the horseness, we obviously disagree about what it is to exist. Plato does not have to answer alone for that disagreement. He still has to give us more than horses, but we need to give him something in return. His responsibility to explain how horseness exists (if not as horses) does not absolve us of ours to explain why horses exist (if not because of horseness). With Poseidon steadily losing credibility, the Forms must be looking increasingly more tenable as an explanation.

A horse is a horse, of course, of course, but what about horseness? We should know by now not to ask Antisthenes. We know full well that he missed the point. Yet we keep echoing the same criticism. We remain just one step from Antisthenes when we ask, 'Okay, but do the Forms really exist?'

Almost anyone who is not a professional philosopher, and perhaps also a few professional philosophers, would rest easier with horseness existing the way horses do, not necessarily with a flowing mane of its own but certainly with an existence on its own. They may not have to see the horseness to believe it, but

⁴ This is not Plato's actual reply, but it is close enough. His reply is reported to be that Antisthenes has the eye to see the horse but not the eye (mind) to see the horseness.

they might still appreciate being assured that horseness exists no less than horses do when they fade out of sight on the other side of a hill.

We do not like things fading out of sight. We so fear the natural end to our own existence that we seek solace in a promised existence in some other realm after we cease to exist in this one. No wonder we do not want the Forms to exist in a funny way. We do not even want our souls or our gods to exist in that way. That is why we have our souls dwelling with our gods—when they are no longer dwelling in our bodies—and our gods sending us books and messengers and offspring as we wait for the reunion. If the gods can put in a personal appearance, even better. We need all the assurance we can get.

And we get plenty. We at least get what we need to keep talking to our gods, even when it is a monologue. Happily, though, it is often enough more than a monologue. We want to hear something back. So, we do. We do not hear our gods the way we hear each other. But the connection, however it works, lets us know they are there. We know they ‘really’ exist.

We normally would not bother to strengthen ‘existence’ with ‘reality’. We sometimes do it to seek confirmation: ‘Does Santa Claus really exist?’ We also do it to deny existence: ‘Santa Claus does not really exist’. And we do it with the Forms. My answer to ‘Do the Forms really exist?’ would be the same as my answer to ‘Do the Forms really, really exist?’ and the same again as my answer to ‘Do the Forms exist?’ It does not matter what that answer is. The point is that it would be, and, in fact, should be, the same in every case. It should be the same because each ‘really’ is nothing more than a hidden demand for confession that the whole thing is a sham. That demand, in turn, is anchored to a shared understanding of the difference between reality and fantasy: ‘Wink wink, nudge nudge, we can talk about leprechauns all you want, so long as you admit there aren’t any’.

Scholars contemplating the nature of Plato’s Forms and those talking about the existence of universals rarely seem to be doing the same thing. There is something in the exchange on universals in the broad sense that sets it apart from the typical engagement with Plato. There is, to be specific, a mutual toleration plain to see on either side of the debate on universals. There are signs of a ‘wink wink, nudge nudge, say no more, say no more’ kind of framework agreement—also imposed on, but seldom observed by, the Plato scholar. This silent protocol breaks down when the existence of Forms comes up. The Plato scholar refuses to wink back. Instead, brushing off the nudges, the Plato scholar insists that the Forms really do exist, or, what is more likely, that this was Plato’s position.

I am not denying that the Forms can be, and sometimes are, discussed in the same way as universals. I am reporting that I personally sense an expectation to be surprised whenever I read a general overview presenting Plato (quite rightly) as having assigned to the Forms an objective reality outside the mind. It is almost as if each presentation came with a rhetorical question: ‘Can you believe what he is saying?’ I, for one, can believe it. That is why I never know whether I am supposed to praise Plato for anticipating and inspiring the subtleties of the modern debate or to condemn him for making too much of what is, at bottom, little more than the natural capacity for abstraction, a capacity Plato famously taps through a kind of thought experiment to explain identity in difference.

I am expected to confront Alexius Meinong or Bertrand Russell without batting an eye. But I had better have an incredulous stare ready for Plato. Welton (2002, 1), among others, seems well-acquainted with that kind of reception: “The ‘theory of Forms’ is one of the most famous, most influential, and most controversial of all philosophical theories. It is also one of the weirdest, or at least so it seems to countless undergraduates forced to learn about it in introductory philosophy courses’. Undergraduates, of course, are not the only ones taken aback by an encounter with the Forms. Aristotle was evidently uncomfortable with them even after he graduated, and, no doubt, before:

Aristotle certainly thinks that Socrates and Plato share this view of the objects of the sciences, though Aristotle also thinks that these new objects of the sciences that Plato believed in were wrongly identified by Plato with certain extraordinary, even preposterous, entities, the Forms; while if we avoid such an overreaction, Aristotle continues, what we get are simply those (abstract) objects, universals, which are precisely what the objects of the sciences should be. (Penner 2006, 167)

In both of the passages just quoted, and in countless others like them, we get a hint of a metaphysical monstrosity that goes beyond the existence of the abstract. Sometimes, we get more than a hint:

[T]he conception of forms as universals or as the meanings of general terms produces a baffled incredulity when we consider some of the things that Plato has to say about them. It would be outlandish enough anyway to be told that a universal is an object; it becomes positively outrageous when we are informed furthermore that the object which is the universal being a so-and-so is itself a very superior so-and-so, existing separate from and independent of

the particulars it characterizes and causing them to have the nature that they do. Could Plato have seriously thought and meant things so foolish? (Denyer 1983, 315)

As a matter of fact, we almost always get more than a hint. The first two passages seem like hints only because I left out the greater context. Hardly anyone I have read merely mentions an abomination and leaves it at that. And misgivings run deeper than the sheer existence of Forms. What is shocking, or presented as shocking, is usually not simply that the Forms exist, nor just that they exist outside the mind, but more so that they exist as perfect paradigms after which sensible phenomena are patterned, the Forms themselves remaining forever changeless. And there is so little agreement about what to make of the Forms that even this makeshift description will be found by some to be an understatement of the metaphysical extravagance they represent and by others to be an overstatement.

Whether through understatement or overstatement, or through avoiding both, it is hard to deny the extravagance. The Forms are splendid. So much so that the gods are in awe. The gods of the central myth of the *Phaedrus* (246e–249d) would certainly not be trekking out to the edge of the heavens to gaze upon things just because they are there. No pilgrimage is ever made to behold the mundane. Things that exist, even things that really, really exist, will not, unless they provide some attraction other than their own existence, get Zeus and company out of Olympus to come take a look.⁵

I readily admit as much. But I also find that the shock value is not buried too deeply in the metaphysical splendour. To be surprised, we need not go into the glorious features that make the Forms worthy of the admiration of the gods. No, we are supposed to be surprised with far less. We are supposed to be surprised starting with their existence outside the mind: ‘The problem [of universals] only persists if we acknowledge that sameness in difference requires an explanation and if we suppose that a Platonic solution to this problem is going to involve doing something weird with universals, e.g., positing them as existing on their own’ (Gerson 2004, 239).

The shock value in the contention that the Forms really do exist is for the distinction that they would exist even if nothing else did. The sense of ‘real’ existence here is existence with full ontological independence. Plato, it seems, has exaggerated the existence of Forms, whatever else about them he may have exaggerated on top of that.

⁵ All the Olympians make the journey except Hestia, who, rather appropriately, stays at home (*Phdr.* 247a).

How does one exaggerate existence? What does that even mean? Plato often handles such questions with allegories and analogies. This works well because an indirect treatment of this sort turns out to be a strategically advantageous way of taking a stand on the existence of abstract objects, especially for someone prepared to assign a greater reality to them than to concrete objects, and even more so for anyone doing that at a time when the leading candidates for abstract objects would have been gods.⁶ And abstraction itself seems to have been such a novelty, at least as a philosophical tool or topic, that Plato not only worked with it but also developed it.⁷ Hence, the metaphorical approach likely made it easier for him to get away with passing over all the patently real things around him to embrace those with a curious yet stronger claim to existence. This is not to suggest that the things around him, ordinary things, as they say, did not exist for Plato. They did. But the Forms ranked higher in his ontology.

We see this in the divided line dividing the *Republic* in two (6,509d–511e). We hear it from Diotima as she educates Socrates on love in the speech dividing the *Symposium* in two (209e–212a). We follow it in the cosmic journey of the soul in the great myth dividing the *Phaedrus* in two (246e–249d).⁸ In each case, the division is not necessarily between two equal lengths of text but between appearance and reality, and accordingly, between ignorance and enlightenment. And even though there may be a world of difference between appearance and reality, and between ignorance and enlightenment, these are opposite ends of the same world, with many levels in between. Why else would Plato divide the same line again and again? Why else would Diotima lead Socrates up the ladder of love one step at a time? Why else would the ascent of the soul be such a struggle, and, even then, possible only for the philosopher?

What we learn through the most memorable of Plato's allegories and analogies is that his reality comes in degrees. Thesleff, as mentioned above, is confident about where to go with this: Plato's ontology is built on two main levels and an indefinite multitude of subdivisions, all in the same world. This is Thesleff's alternative to the two-world interpretation where the Forms reside in one world, sensible phenomena in another.

⁶ I do not mean to prejudge the question whether Plato's gods are material or immaterial, or both, or neither. Such a discussion cannot profitably be restricted to the traditional anthropomorphic gods. Nor should we focus exclusively on the demiurge. My own concern, at any rate, is with the gods in the analogic argument of *Phd.* (78b–84b), discussed further in what follows.

⁷ See Alican (2014, 44–51) for my thoughts, partly speculative, on Plato's contribution to the development of abstraction as a philosophical process and vision.

⁸ Even the myth itself is divided in two: 246e–247e for gods, 248a–249d for mortals.

A gradation of reality can, of course, become more and more uncomfortable, abhorrent even, the further it takes us away from the reality we find familiar. But two separate worlds is no better, as the division merely shifts the uncertainty to the 'other' world. If the funny kind of existence is not exactly what we want for ourselves or for our gods, then perhaps it is also not the kind of existence Plato's audience wanted, though Plato himself was evidently comfortable with it. What we want is not very important, as we have to make do with what we get. This typically requires analysing the kind of reality that is relevant in terms of the kind of reality that is familiar. Where the two differ, we try to find common features, and whether we find any or not, we try to express the difference as a similarity, at least in metaphorical terms. The unfamiliar thus becomes more familiar as it is placed in another 'world', in a different 'realm', and so on, thereby drawing on concepts we readily understand to create a context for those we do not. This is why we put up with a funny and fuzzy dialectic for souls and gods and such.

Just as we seek a familiar and reassuring interpretation of the kind of existence relevant to our souls and to our gods, Plato seems to have tried to provide one for his audience, not just in regard to souls or gods but in regard to everything that matters, most notably, the Forms. One especially rich stretch of dialogue that goes through everything that matters, including souls, gods, and Forms, is the *Phaedo's* analogic argument for the immortality of the soul (78b–80b for the logical core, 80c–84b for the supporting imagery). There are many other places throughout the corpus where the discussion turns to souls, to gods, or to Forms, and quite a few places accommodating two out of three, but this is a rare occasion where all three of the fuzzy concepts intersect in a formal proof.

Given the prominence of Forms in Plato's thought, his philosophical output may reasonably have been expected to come with a clear explanation of what the Forms are and how they work. It does not. And this is a common complaint. It is a common complaint that divides us as we go looking in various different places for the best account. Even when we look in the same dialogue, we tend to focus on different parts or aspects of it. We need a good place to look, one that will not divide us, at least not as much as the alternatives. The analogic argument of the *Phaedo* is such a place. The typical concern with the argument is understandably its success or failure as a proof for the immortality of the soul. I believe, in contrast, that it has more to offer as an account of the nature of Plato's Forms.

In all likelihood, the analogic argument was intended specifically as a dramatic vehicle to discuss the Forms, if only to say something about them by way of introduction and orientation. The possibility of a dramatic role is suggested by the absence or weakness of a logical one. The reason it does not have an ef-

fective logical role is not just that it is a bad argument (which it is) but also that the main characters collaborate to expose it as a bad argument. The first thing Socrates says about the argument after he is done with the delivery amounts to a confession that he himself does not think very highly of it (84c). This turns out to be just what his interlocutors were waiting for, with Simmias (85b–86d) and Cebes (86e–88b) taking turns undermining the inherent reasoning as soon as it is laid out. Hence, it is a bad argument acknowledged to be a bad argument. It is so bad that it serves as a segue into objections instigating the misology episode at the pedimental centre of the dialogue (88c–89b for the actual misology, 89b–91c for the warning against it).

This is what makes me suspect a dramatic motivation for the analogic argument. I take it I do not need to demonstrate that it is a bad argument, not just because it is an obviously bad argument, and widely acknowledged to be so, both within the drama and outside it, but also because it is a bad argument for the immortality of the soul, whereas my interest is only in the insight it offers into what Plato may have thought about the Forms.⁹ I take the argument to be something of an orientation session on the Forms. The session, such as it is, does not lay out a proper theory, which is nowhere to be found anyway, but it does allow the interjection of a thing or two about the Forms without disrupting the dramatic flow. The dramatic audience apparently does not need a formal lesson, as the interlocutors seem to be familiar with the Forms. The ensuing presentation, then, could have been intended for the audience of the dialogue itself.

Although the dramatic audience is familiar with the Forms, in fact, precisely because the dramatic audience is familiar with the Forms, Plato needs a way to reach the general audience, a need he fills through the semblance of an argument for the immortality of the soul. The parallel treatment between Forms (78b–79c) and gods (79e–80a) as analogues of the soul is an opportunity to make the Forms as familiar as possible to anyone who may otherwise be alienated. The soul, we are told, is (somewhat) similar not just to the Forms but also to the gods. Everyone, both then and now, has some idea what a god must be like, given that we ourselves come up with the notion in the first place. And the gods need not be invoked with the irreverence I have shown here. The faithful have an even greater awareness of what a god must be like. No god goes unworshipped.

The parallel treatment in the logical core (78b–80b) of the argument is complemented by subsequent references to souls existing in Hades, to Forms implied

⁹ See Alican (2012) for an analysis of the analogic argument (418–24) and of the *Phd.* in general (391–491).

(explicit elsewhere) to be accessible there, and to gods able and willing to hang out with both (80d–81a, 82b–c, 83a–b). This may seem to lend credence to the postulation of a separate world for the Forms (where souls and gods also dwell). But any talk of a different world as such is metaphor for a different mode of existence in one and the same world. Note, again, the gradation of reality in the divided line, in Diotima's speech, and in the ascent of the philosopher's soul.

This is admittedly not the only conceivable explanation, nor even the only plausible one, for the motivation behind the analogic argument. Another is that Plato needs a dramatic foil for the misology episode, which means that he needs a minor win for the antagonists, which, in turn, requires a disposable argument for the protagonist, who thus serves up the analogic argument. Another is that Plato proceeds with several bad arguments leading up to one good argument (at least from his perspective), specifically, that the analogic argument is one of three bad arguments setting up the fourth and final argument (96a–107a, or 105b–107a, depending on the focus), which does seem to enjoy greater support among the main characters. Another is that the *Phaedo* contains nothing but bad arguments, which would mean that the analogic argument is not special in that regard, and hence, not in need of explanation in the present context. But none of this means that an opportunity to say something about the Forms never crossed Plato's mind as he conjured up this argument. Each of the three scenarios considered as an alternative explanation is compatible with the partial elucidation of Forms as a possible motivation. All I am claiming, at any rate, is that this is a sensible interpretation.

Perhaps the greatest clue for the dramatic motivation behind the analogic argument is the pervasive theme of fear, namely, the fear of death. This is the same fear we display today in connection with our personal existence. In the dialogue, this existential angst comes out through repeated references to the fear of death, a fear identified as common yet groundless. A telling reference is where Socrates affirms that the philosopher is not afraid of death (63e–64a). He goes on to elaborate on the reason, which, we soon find out, is that the philosopher's entire life is a preparation for death (63e–69a). A defining moment in the course of elaboration is where Socrates equates the resentment of death with the resentment of wisdom and declares the fear of death the height of folly (67d–68c). These references take death as the separation of the soul from the body, thus romanticising death as the liberation of the true self, set free to work toward the purification of reason.¹⁰ On

¹⁰ Other references to the fear of death include: *Phd.* 58c–59a, 70a–b, 77a–78e, 84a–b, 85a, 88a–b, 91c–d, 95c–d; *Ap.* 29a–b, 39e–41c; *Grg.* 522d–e; *R.* 3,386a–b.

the other hand, what the main interlocutors want to know, as many of us also do, is what happens to the soul after its separation from the body: Is its liberation also its termination?

Cebes voices this concern as he presents the fear of death not as a fear of separation from the body but as a fear of ceasing to exist altogether upon separation, much like a dissipating puff of smoke (70a–b). Simmias repeats the same concern a little later (77b), indicating the failure of two prior arguments (the first two proofs) advanced in response to Cebes. There is meaningful emphasis on the fact that they are both talking about a common fear, hence, not a personal feeling or outlook, nor a philosophical perspective, but an attitude in ordinary people. The opinion of the many is hardly ever to be trusted in Plato. Sure enough, Socrates identifies this common fear as a childish and irrational one (77d). But Cebes insists on proceeding as if they themselves were afraid, or as if the fear belonged to the child within each of them (77e). And this brings us to the analogic argument.

The argument is designed to show that the soul is decidedly different from things that are susceptible to destruction in the manner of the dispersal of a cloud of smoke, and that it is reassuringly similar to things that are not susceptible to that sort of destruction, dissolution, or disintegration. But the comparison does more toward communicating the nature of the Forms, especially in regard to the mode of their existence, than it does toward establishing the immortality of the soul. The confirmation for this is not just the logic of the argument but also the nature of the conclusion. Even if successful, the argument would establish only the likelihood of the immortality of the soul, which has nothing to recommend it beyond the analogy. One thing's being like another in some respects does not entail its being like the other in any other respect.

Apart from that, however, the conclusion would not be entirely satisfactory even if the argument were perfectly reliable. It may be good news indeed that the soul is like the Forms in some of their most impressive features. But what if the soul were like the Forms in all the relevant ways? What if the soul were like the Forms in every way? The Forms are absolutely amazing. But nobody wants to be one. The Forms are not, after all, life forms (except perhaps the Form of life, which, however, is probably not a form of life but a force of life). That much, we know. The Forms are not alive. Hence, the last thing we want the soul to be is a Form.

We want the soul to continue to exist, but we want it to do so as a living thing, in fact, as a rational being, preferably as the being it was prior to its separation from the body, minus the body. Much of this is stipulated from the outset as a formal requirement of the proof to be pursued: The soul must be shown to go

on existing with certain powers or abilities, most of all, with a capacity for reasoning (70b). The soul must possess intelligence. This is reiterated two proofs down the line, at the end of the recollection argument (72e–77a), where Socrates claims to have demonstrated not merely that the soul exists prior to birth but that it so exists with a prenatal power of thought (76c). But it is easy to lose sight of the importance of reason, which should then be regarded as implicit, when the focus turns to existence and its various modes.

The way of existence is the leitmotif not just of the analogic argument but also of the *Phaedo* in its entirety. The dialogue even opens with a reference to existence, or to presence, which is existence at a certain place at a certain time: ‘Were you there yourself, Phaedo?’ (57a). The scope of the question is later expanded: ‘Who exactly was there, Phaedo?’ (59b). The dialogue also closes with talk of existence, this time, that of Socrates (118a). He is no longer with us. Or is he? This is just the sort of thing we want to know. This is language we understand. In the beginning, we get the assurance that the narrator was there at the scene he will be narrating. In the end, we get the confirmation that the protagonist has left the scene, never to return. In between, we get the message that the Forms ‘really’ exist. And if we ‘really’ get the message, we get that what is most real about the protagonist is not what is left behind in the end.

There is a part of Socrates that abides. But we do not know whether the part that abides remains the same without the part left behind. Perhaps all that remains is, much like a Form, real but lifeless.

Socrates never says that the soul is a Form. Could anything he does say be taken that way? That debate is still alive. But it is possible to have too much of a good thing without being identical with it. And the analogic argument works in that direction. The portion of it where the soul is likened to gods (79e–80a), and not then to Forms (78b–79c), provides some relief (from the prospect of being just like a Form, or too much like one). That secondary analogy is more appealing for anyone concerned with life after death. But since both analogies are there, we cannot be sure whether we will end up like a Form or like a god (or more like one than like the other).

Either way, though, the uncertainty is about the soul, not the Forms. There is no question that the Forms get the royal treatment as they rival the gods as metaphysical benchmarks. Not only do they ‘really’ exist but they do so at the highest level of reality. Is this, then, how Plato exaggerates the existence, or reality, of the Forms?

Arguably so. But the exaggeration, if there is any, is not as great as one would think. And it is this aspect of Plato’s world that Thesleff captures best. His Plato

does not work with uniformly reified universals corresponding, as a homogeneous collection, to what we now call Forms (or Ideas), all residing in a separate world from the one we experience. He distinguishes between various different kinds of Forms and keeps them all in our own world. What we have heretofore recognised simply and without discrimination as Forms, says Thesleff, is instead a diverse assortment of ontological entities (or constructs) discovered (or invented) by Plato during his lifelong experimentation with abstraction.¹¹ The best fit he finds with the evidence of the corpus is a tripartite classification of Forms as such. Each representing a different thought experiment with abstraction, or, more properly, a distinct episode of inspiration in a steady process of experimentation, there are Ideal Forms, Conceptual Forms, and Relational Forms.

Ideal Forms are the reified analogues of value paradigms we commonly acknowledge in our experience in and of the world. The emphasis is on the nature rather than type of value: Whatever is intrinsically valuable has an Ideal Form corresponding to it. Whatever is not, does not. Hence, while the category is nearly exhausted by moral, aesthetic, and religious value, as exemplified, respectively, by the Forms of justice, beauty, and piety (among others), it also includes Forms such as knowledge and life, which are valuable in themselves albeit not in a properly moral, aesthetic, or religious sense.

Conceptual Forms account for the majority of Plato's other abstraction experiments, primarily including types and properties (outside anything done with intrinsic value in this regard), but also covering events, actions, experiences, and various other phenomena to be evaluated individually (some or all of these evincing redundancy with types and properties). Examples are inexhaustible, ranging from the horseness denied by Antisthenes to the colour of the horse he spotted while denying the horseness, and the speed at which the horse was travelling during the denial. The general idea, though this should not be taken out of context, is that 'anything Plato could and wanted to conceptualise ended up as a Conceptual Form' (Alican and Thesleff 2013, 31).¹²

¹¹ What counts as a discovery from Plato's perspective (and from that of anyone in agreement) could reasonably be considered an invention from a critical perspective. The Forms would be entities in the first case, constructs in the second.

¹² This does not mean that anything goes. It is merely a reminder that reification is a reflection of value assignments by Plato, thus, a matter of what Plato himself found valuable. The mechanics of Plato's reification tendencies are discussed as 'conceptualisation and formalisation' in Alican and Thesleff (2013, 29–33, cf. 44) and as a 'continuum of abstraction' in Alican (2014, 44–51, cf. 51–2).

Relational Forms are the ontological building blocks of Plato's world. They constitute a lateral projection of the basic two-level scheme. What this means is that they come in correlative pairs of contrasting universal categories collectively responsible for the fundamental ontological structure shaping our phenomenal experience. Examples include pairs familiar from the *megista genē* of the *Sophist* (254d–e): rest / motion, same / other. These are complementary contrasts, as Thesleff always pauses to emphasise, not polar opposites. The contrast is asymmetrical, or hierarchical, with one element dominating the other (the dominant one listed first, for convenience), but there is no real opposition, only joint coverage of reality.

This is a fair summary of the classification.¹³ All three kinds of Forms occupy the upper level of reality, but Ideal Forms enjoy a higher ontological status than Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms. This is because features responsible for the shock value regularly invoked in the secondary literature—as in Welton (2002, 1), Penner (2006, 167), and Denyer (1983, 315)—are had first and foremost by Ideal Forms, only contingently by the other two kinds.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Conceptual Forms and Relational Forms can approximate to Ideal Forms through a process of 'ontological ascent' whereby they come to resemble them in every way except in the possession of intrinsic value.¹⁵ Although several qualifications concerning the relevant similarities and differences are missing from this overview, as are various other details of the classification, the skeletal core here is still sufficient, and certainly necessary, for a rudimentary understanding of what Thesleff does with the Forms in the two-level ontology he attributes to Plato.¹⁶

¹³ The distinct categories begin to take shape as soon as Thesleff lays out his two-level model (1993, 17–45; 1999 [= 2009, 383–506]), but they first appear in their present form in Alican and Thesleff (2013, 19–23, 26–38, 43–5). See Alican (2014, 26–9, 34–44) for further exposition and exploration, including some critical reflection, though not with a revisionary agenda.

¹⁴ The provisional list of features in Alican and Thesleff (2013, 27–8, cf. also nn. 33, 34) includes transcendence, intelligibility, paradigmaticity, perfection, immutability, simplicity, and uniqueness, with ancillary allusions to eternity, incorporeality, and causal efficacy. These are elucidated in Alican (2014, 35–8, 45–6) as signifying a distinctive 'ontological [or metaphysical] eminence', some loosely unifying portion of which is broadly predicable of all Forms as a common denominator.

¹⁵ Thesleff's allowance for ontological ascent can be traced back to his earlier work (e.g., 1999, 69–73, 119 [= 2009, 452–5, 501]), but it is both named and refined later: Alican and Thesleff (2013, 29–33, 42, 43–4; cf. 22 [n. 21], 43, for the actual term). See Alican (2014, 29, 36–7, 45–6, 50–1) for further elaboration and analysis.

¹⁶ A footnote will not make up for all the missing details, but had Thesleff seen this paper prior to publication, he would have, no doubt, wanted me to state explicitly that imaginary things and negative values are categorically excluded from the classification. There are no Forms for fictional

The key to understanding Thesleff, as he reminds us repeatedly, is his two-level model, not his tripartition of Forms.¹⁷ Yet this would be little more than shorthand for the traditional two-world interpretation if it were just another version of metaphysical dualism with indiscriminately reified universals at an upper level, wholly separated from any and all instantiations at the corresponding lower level. One of the most forceful ways in which Thesleff breaks that mould is his classification of Forms, not because this is obviously and indubitably how Plato does things, but because, without giving up any plausibility on the basis of the available evidence, it affords greater explanatory power than the traditional alternative of a stark dualism with fungible Forms and matching particulars. It is not just that Thesleff recognises variety and variegation. While that alone makes for a richer ontology, it is also representative of Thesleff's willingness to embrace a fallible and flexible Plato experimenting with abstraction. That is to say, Thesleff's classification of Forms leaves room for at least the possibility of additional abstractions, or of other attempts at concept formation, that do not quite make it to the level of a Form, remaining instead at the level of a mere concept.¹⁸ Hence, his recognition of indefinitely many subdivisions between the two main levels of reality is not just a formal gesture. The subdivisions themselves are real and operational. This is a fluid and exciting world, liable even to hold a few surprises, not a regimented one polarised by Forms and particulars.

Also instrumental in breaking the mould of the thoroughgoing metaphysical dualism of the two-world model is the role Thesleff assigns to the Forms as 'bridges' between the upper and lower levels of reality.¹⁹ Themselves existing at

entities, none again for anything bad or evil (Alican and Thesleff 2013, 21, 29, 33–4, 40–2).

¹⁷ Thesleff is immovable on the primacy of the two-level vision in Plato: 'The central position of the "theory of Forms" in Plato's thought is easily exaggerated; indeed, Aristotle's criticism has made it appear as Plato's main doctrine. However, it constitutes only one aspect of his philosophic moves. The two levels as such, and the problems of their internal relations, always remained as foundations and frames in his thinking. The various themes and methods of the dialogues show plainly that many other aspects of his two-level vision kept in the foreground, indeed more prominently than any theory of Forms' (1999, 53 [= 2009, 437]).

¹⁸ Plato, of course, is not equipped to make, or maybe just not articulate, that distinction between concepts and Forms. Any attempt to do so would have to be from our own perspective. See Alican and Thesleff (2013, 29–33) and Alican (2014, 28, 35–6, 44–51) for some of the relevant possibilities and difficulties. The main takeaway is Thesleff's warning against saddling Plato with 'anachronistic categories such as "abstraction" or "concept"' (1999, 54 [= 2009, 438]), a temptation he condemns as hampering and confusing modern insight into Plato's Forms.

¹⁹ The notion of ontological bridges dates back to Thesleff's original vision for the two-level interpretation: Thesleff (1999, 33 [= 2009, 417–8]); cf. Alican (2014, 41 n. 25, 43 n. 29).

the upper level of reality, the Forms fulfil this role through the familiar if controversial process of instantiation.²⁰ Their place in the upper level presents only a soft *chōrismos* balanced by a *koinōnia* of sorts as reflected, for example, in the divided line (*Republic* 6,509d–511e) and in the ladder of love (*Symposium* 209e–212a). Other bridges include ‘philosophy at large and dialectic in particular’ with the ‘Philosopher’ serving, more or less playfully, as a “daimonic” intermediate’ between the two levels (1999, 33 [= 2009, 417]). Yet Thesleff nominates the Forms as the ‘most explicit, ambitious and famous’ of Plato’s ‘attempts to bridge the levels and explicate their internal relations’ (1999, 33 [= 2009, 418]).

In the final analysis, no matter what Thesleff says, there will still be room for disagreement on both the existence and the nature of Forms, not to mention the meaning of existence, that is, its proper definition and explication. Thesleff has not, to my knowledge, deciphered the meaning of existence in any sense, unless he has been keeping it to himself. But he has clarified the nature of Plato’s Forms at least to my satisfaction. And this helps decide what to say about the existence of Forms.

Ultimately, maybe secretly, we all mean the same thing when we assert or deny the existence of something even if we disagree when we take up existence as a philosophical topic of its own.

What is most exciting about Thesleff’s approach is that it expands our understanding of the existence of Forms, telling us how they exist if they exist. He is generously forthcoming about what this includes, what it does not, and what difference it makes.

Do the Forms really exist? We are still allowed to disagree about that. But not so much about why they exist, how they exist, and where they exist. Perhaps most important, we now know what to make of a world—indeed, only one—in which they do exist.

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²⁰ Note that Thesleff does not make too much of the traditional debate over ‘transcendence’ versus ‘immanence’ (both habitually kept at a distance with scare quotes), preferring instead to balance the separation of Forms (1999, 62–3 [= 2009, 446]) with their inherence in particulars (1999, 30–1 [= 2009, 414–5]). He has been coaching me privately not to be more excitable about instantiation, especially in regard to working out the mechanics and sorting out the details, than would be absolutely necessary to understand Plato (cf. Alican 2014, 39–44).

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