

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.18524/2410-2601.2025.2\(44\).354273](https://doi.org/10.18524/2410-2601.2025.2(44).354273)

UDC 101+111+141+165

Sergii Shevtsov

ORCID: 0000-0001-6096-4846

ON THE ONTOLOGY OF PLATO'S IDEAS

This article is a shortened and revised presentation of three lectures on the ontology of Platonic Ideas delivered within the Erasmus+ program at the University of Siena. The author proposes a hierarchical model of the ontology of Platonic Ideas, according to which Ideas possess different ontological statuses depending on their position within the hierarchy. This hierarchy is grounded in the “great kinds” of Plato’s philosophy but is generally oriented by the criterion of the one and the many. As the level increases, entities are unified and reduced, ultimately culminating in the One, which may simultaneously be regarded as undivided Being, the Good, Beauty, Truth, and so forth. At the opposite end of this pyramid-like structure lies an infinite (or very large) multiplicity of individual elements (points, lines, sounds, etc.). Ideas appear as principles that organize chaotic multiplicity into ordered unities, and the level of organization determines the ontological level of an Idea. The principles of organization include other elements of Plato’s philosophy, such as eros, dialectics, recollection, and so on. The author also examines the reasons behind Plato’s development of the theory of Ideas and offers a general characterization of this theory.

Keywords: ontology, idea, form, being, Platonic philosophy, model, truth, goodness, beauty, order, hierarchy, eros.

There exists a considerable, although limited, number of interpretations of Plato’s philosophy (or Plato’s texts), and not all of them acknowledge that he had a theory of Ideas (although they all admit that he used the term “idea” in his philosophy). Those scholars who do acknowledge the existence of the theory of Ideas interpret both the theory itself and the ontological status of Ideas in very different ways. Over the last 30–40 years a clear tendency toward a general re-evaluation of Platonic philosophy has taken shape¹.

When we use the word “idea” today, we generally mean some thought or something formed in someone’s consciousness (“an idea came to mind...”, “I have no ideas about this...”). This meaning is relatively recent – it became fixed in Western philosophy only in the seventeenth century – and for now it should be put aside. Plato understands “idea” differently, just as the Greek language understands this term differently. To begin with: this is not at all a philosophical term. The Greek word εἶδος (“eidos”) simply means “form”, “appearance”, “look”, “shape” (a young man is “beautiful in appearance” – Plato’s *Charmides* 154d). Plato also uses the word ἰδέα, which means approximately the same: “appearance”, “look”. For this reason, in the English tradition it eventually became customary to designate Ideas by the term “Form”, largely under the influence of Aristotle’s exposition of Plato’s philosophy.

Let us begin with something relatively simple and familiar. Let us take a most ordinary thing – for example, a piece of chalk. If we try to understand what

this is and how we determine what it is, we will probably say: it is a light, friable stone, limestone, used in construction, used for writing on boards; its chemical formula is CaCO_3 ; it was formed as a result of deposits of calcareous skeletons of ancient microorganisms. Thus, we can define chalk by (1) a set of qualities or properties, (2) by its use (function), (3) by its chemical formula, and (4) by its origin. Unfortunately, this gives us very little. The chemical formula tells us what elements chalk consists of, but not what it is. Its individual properties allow us to recognize chalk (children call “chalk” anything with which one can draw on the pavement), but this is also insufficient. The same applies to its uses.

Suppose that chalk is nothing more than everything mentioned above. Let us consider these points in reverse order, beginning with its origin. It is easy to notice that origin brings no clarity: not many people know about it at all, and almost anyone can recognize chalk. Moreover, in order to identify an object, it is not necessary to know how or whence it originated (consider, for example, the water in a river, the fire in a hearth, the sky above our heads, or the ground beneath our feet).

The possible uses of chalk are so numerous that there is no way to list them briefly; but in any domain chalk may be replaced by another material. In some cases, it may seem the most convenient material, but convenience is a relative feature, and it is difficult to rely on it. It would turn out that for each person “chalk” would be something of his own – that which is most convenient for him.

It seems that the formula can give us knowledge about chalk, but in daily life we do not distinguish substances by chemical formulas. And the formula of chalk will not help us, for we use it only when we already know what chalk is. It is not formulas by which we recognize things.

It seems much simpler to deal with the properties of chalk. Chalk is white, fine-grained, stains the hands and everything it touches, and so on. But there exist colored chalks; and, finally, there is wet chalk, which is no less chalk, but it leaves no bright trace. In other words, any of the properties of chalk may be disputed in this or that concrete case, while nevertheless preserving our object – chalk. If someone were to ask us how we recognize chalk, we would find it difficult to answer, so obvious does it seem. The difficulty lies in the question itself – it is unclear how someone might be unable to recognize chalk, and even more unclear how we might help such a person. There is no single property; we simply see chalk and understand – this is chalk: sometimes by context (near a school board), sometimes by shape, sometimes by color, most often by all signs together.

And despite all this, we easily recognize chalk. And this fact, apparently, astonished Plato. It turns out that we recognize this particular object (this piece of chalk) only when we know any similar object (any chalk, chalk as such). This particular piece of chalk is always only one concrete instance of chalk, just as the word “chalk” is a concrete instance of the word as such. And Plato says: *“For each plurality of things to which we apply a single name, we are accustomed to posit a single definite Form (Idea, eidos)”* (Republic VI 596a). This particular piece of chalk may be destroyed, but chalk will not suffer from this. One might imagine the

entire chalk of the world destroyed, yet “chalk in general”, chalk as a concept – just like its chemical formula – would suffer no harm. And now we have come very close to the Idea of chalk – it is almost at hand. That in chalk which does not change, does not perish, does not vary with time; that which makes chalk *chalk*, rather than something accidental, secondary, non-essential – this is the Idea of chalk. But, we may ask, is not this Idea in our consciousness? Have we not been speaking all this time about understanding?

The Idea is present in our consciousness only because it exists outside it as well. Tradition tells us that Plato explained this by the example of geometry – his favorite science (it is no accident that testimonies report that the entrance to his school bore the inscription “Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here”). In geometry lessons we draw a triangle on the board with this same chalk and prove some theorem. For which triangle did we prove it? For the one drawn on the board? No; for in that case, we would need to prove it anew for each new triangle. The drawing is merely an illustration; the theorem concerns the triangle *as such*, the triangle in general, any and all triangles at once. When we speak of the Idea of chalk, we speak of all pieces of chalk, past and future, and of chalk as a material. The same holds for the triangle – but the triangle does not exist only in our minds, for then there would be no reason to prove theorems at all. You could say: “The triangle in my head has such-and-such properties”, and no teacher could refute you. The sophists defended precisely this view: they held that everything comes only from the human mind, and that “man is the measure of all things”. But Plato sought to oppose them with objective knowledge, knowledge which he considered genuine – knowledge of that which truly is, independently of our consciousness, whims, development, gender, age, mood, culture, or historical epoch. “*Will not that be an Idea which is thought as one, insofar as it remains one and the same for all things?*”, says the very young Socrates in the *Parmenides* (132c).

Thus, Ideas are eternal, unchanging, and therefore perfect; they truly exist, whereas individual things do not – individual things are subject to becoming, that is, they are always in a process of change and thus equally exist and do not exist, like the waves of the sea or the images in a kaleidoscope. Genuine knowledge is knowledge of Ideas; and only when we know Ideas can we know individual things. And these individual things strive to become like the Ideas, but they are not capable of achieving this.

Where and how do these Ideas exist? But where do triangles exist, or straight lines, or points, or even numbers, or decimal fractions? Plato answers evasively, and his answer is usually understood in two ways: either that there exists a special place (for example, “the supercelestial realm”, *Phedr.* 247c) in which the “realm of Ideas” is located, separate from the things of this world; or that they have a special mode of existence, and the question “where” is not quite appropriate – they form with things a very peculiar kind of unity.

Thus, according to Plato, the world is divided in two: we exist in the non-genuine, ever-flowing, changing world of things (and we ourselves change together with them), while somewhere outside us (above us) exists a world of

eternal, unchanging archetypes – the Ideas. Strangely enough, it is precisely this world of Ideas that sets our world in motion, because the motion of our world is conditioned by the striving of each of its parts (each thing, each living being) to become like the eternal Idea, to become perfect (for the perfect cannot change).

Such is the old traditional picture of Plato's world of Ideas. Is this picture clearly and explicitly expressed in any one of Plato's dialogues? No – we will not find it in Plato, only separate elements of this picture appear in his works. Moreover, the same aspects are sometimes depicted very differently in different dialogues.

The sketch of Platonic philosophy presented here is very primitive and schematic. Modern scholars treat such an interpretation of Plato with disdain – they consider him far deeper, subtler, and more complex.

Moreover, if Ideas are understood merely as universals, then this is a property of Greek philosophy as a whole, its “basic stance” (as Olaf Gigon put it [Gigon 1959: 123–124]). The polarity of the universal and the particular also signified the division of the world into the divine and the human. And Plato in some respects opposed this polarity, just as modern philosophy does not accept the radicality of this division.

If we turn to the passage from Plato's *Cratylus* (44a), it seems quite logical and clear that knowledge can relate only to things that are unchanging; if all things are constantly changing, then knowledge of them is impossible. In our everyday world of sensible objects there are no unchanging things (recall that Heraclitus said even the Sun is new every day), therefore knowledge can relate only to objects “on the other side” of our sensory experience. These objects, if imagined spatially, may be above or below our world, hidden behind it or located somewhere within it. Thus, we isolate a special sphere of unchanging objects; and because they are unchanging, they cannot strive for anything, which means they are self-sufficient and in this sense perfect (or, which in this case is the same, divine). And by virtue of their unchanging character – which appears as perfection – they become archetypes for the things of our experiential world.

In principle, one could, logically, construct an opposite model, in which unchanging things remain always the same, while changing things “outgrow” them, discovering within themselves a capacity for change. In such a model, the things of our world, capable of change, appear as more perfect; their variability allows them to reach a higher level than that embedded in the original archetype. If change is arbitrary, variable things may become either better or worse. But then a problem arises – the problem of a coordinate system by which one can determine the directions “better” and “worse”. And then we would still need a new archetype of perfection or worthlessness; one archetype would suffice to define one direction, the other direction being simply its opposite. Without such an archetype, unchanging and constant change would be understood as chaos or as infinite cyclical movement, like the shifting shapes of a kaleidoscope. This model is well known in philosophy; it, too, ultimately goes back to Plato – we know it as the problem of “free will”: it posits a unique object capable of change – the human

being. In a certain sense a similar model was employed by Charles Darwin to describe evolution as a chaotic and arbitrary proliferation of endless mutations. But he had to introduce the concept of natural selection in order to designate a direction of improvement. I do not know of any cases where such a model has been applied to changing inorganic objects. Modern science is skeptical about concepts like “perfection” or “better” (when applied to external objects, not theories) and explains motion on the basis of laws of nature (which, incidentally, are understood as unchanging).

But in a world-picture that includes a divine sphere (whether one god or many), this sphere will always be regarded as more perfect in relation to the world of our sensory experience. And with regard to ancient Greece of the early or classical period (before Plato and Aristotle and during their lifetimes), we know of no cases of a non-religious worldview. The gods could be various, but they always were; and they were inevitably regarded as the element or “pole” that sets the direction of perfection. “To become better” meant to change in the direction of likeness to the gods. The question of whether the gods were considered changeable or unchanging is extremely complex. Traditional cosmogonies, such as Hesiod’s *Theogony*, described the becoming of the world of gods, but these accounts became the subject of criticism by emerging philosophy. By the time of Plato, one may assume, conceptions of the gods formed a complex conglomerate of different and often contradictory ideas. Plato, though not a theologian, had to introduce order into the conception of the gods for the sake of the unity of philosophical worldview. Apart from being a very difficult task, it was also a dangerous one: the charge of impiety retained its force; Protagoras, Anaxagoras, and most importantly Socrates had already been accused of impiety. In any case, the recognition of the gods set a certain direction for any movement or change in Plato’s philosophical picture of the world. And there is no doubt that however one understands Plato’s Ideas, they are closer to the gods than to human beings.

If we take into account the testimony of Aristotle in *Metaphysics* (*Met.* I 6, 987a–b), then we may distinguish the following possible ways in which Plato may have arrived at the theory of Ideas.

First, Plato’s reception of the Heraclitean doctrine of the impossibility of knowing that which is constantly changing (this reception may have been critical or not).

Second, his reflection on Socrates’ constant striving to elicit from his interlocutor (or find himself) the definition of the object of discussion; and here Socrates was close to Heraclitus, since he too, judging by the majority of testimonies known to us, excluded the possibility of defining that which is constantly changing (things and their characteristics).

Third, Plato, as is known, studied texts of the Pythagoreans; thanks to them, it seems, he developed a high appreciation of mathematics, and he may have regarded geometric figures or numbers as higher entities.

Fourth, Plato was acquainted with the doctrines of the Eleatic school, at least Parmenides, Zeno, and Melissus, and could have borrowed from them both the

general logic of reasoning and the doctrine of the immobility and unchangeability of being.

Fifth, Plato may have arrived at the doctrine of Ideas on the basis of reflection on and experience of mystical religious cults, such as the Eleusinian mysteries; modern reconstructions of this festival show a striking closeness to Plato's fullest description of contemplation of Ideas – the account of Diotima in the *Symposium* (210a–212a).

Sixth, Plato could have independently arrived at the doctrine of Ideas as the ontological foundation of all the philosophical doctrines mentioned above (Heraclitus, the Pythagoreans, the Eleatics, Socrates); this must have seemed attractive to him, for despite their essential differences these doctrines possessed a single ontology – namely, certain unchanging entities accessible to intellectual cognition.

Seventh, Plato could have arrived at the assertion of the existence of Ideas through careful and detailed study of the human cognitive process; Plato repeatedly demonstrates in his dialogues great attention to the process of cognition (the *Meno* may serve as an example), and thus it is entirely possible that he ultimately conferred ontological status on the result of logically correct and consistent cognition (the ascent or “hunt”, to use Plato's metaphors).

Finally, eighth, there may have been some other unknown source that prompted Plato to acknowledge the existence of Ideas. This also cannot be excluded.

In order to prefer one of these options over the others, we must reconstruct the sequence in which the theory of Ideas is presented in Plato's texts. Presumably, Plato should first present separate features of the Ideas, his terminology should be inconsistent, and only gradually would he arrive at a coherent and consistent exposition with a fixed terminology. This was the main content criterion according to which, from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth, the chronology of Plato's works was constructed. Although stylometry (the study of the language and style of Platonic texts) began to be actively used from the mid-nineteenth century onward², it nonetheless relied on the completeness of Plato's philosophical doctrine. This tradition still persists in most editions of Plato: the so-called “early dialogues”, “middle dialogues”, and “late dialogues”. But, as has already been noted, consistent and complete exposition of the theory of Ideas is found in none of the dialogues. Beginning roughly in the mid-1950s, an active re-evaluation of methods of reconstructing Platonic philosophy – and of Platonic philosophy itself – began. Very roughly, the beginning of this may be associated with the emergence of the so-called Tübingen School, when two German scholars, Hans Joachim Krämer and Konrad Gaiser³, along with a group gradually forming around them, proposed a completely different approach to Platonic texts. They advanced the so-called concept of Plato's “unwritten doctrine”, whose central core was the notion of Ideas-Numbers. Around the same time, the German-American philosopher Leo Strauss, then working at the University of Chicago, proposed his own completely different reading of Plato's dialogues as multi-layered literary

texts.⁴ Slightly later, the Finnish classicist and philologist Holger Thesleff began publishing a series of studies on the chronology of Plato's texts based on entirely different principles of stylometry [Thesleff 2009]. As a result, today we have a far more complex and multi-faceted picture of the understanding of Platonic philosophy. Many philosophers and philologists have contributed to its creation; they studied aspects of Platonic texts previously ignored or regarded as insignificant and attempted to propose a completely different understanding of Plato and his philosophy.

To some, this might have seemed fairly simple: Ideas are just general concepts, which the ancient philosopher for some reason decided to treat as if they had a kind of body – turning them into substances (although *substance* is a Latin term and not quite appropriate here). But Plato's dialogues do not allow us to draw such a straightforward conclusion. And once we begin to think about or look closely at the Platonic Ideas, everything becomes much more complicated.

First, let us note an important point: the Ideas appear with entirely different characteristics depending on whether we arrive at them through the cognition of the objects of this world, or through a logical consideration of the Ideas themselves. I will refer to the first approach, roughly, as a “bottom-up” perspective. If in the process of knowing we move from simple sensory perception of worldly things and events toward an understanding of these objects in their full completeness (let us designate this completeness using the terms *essence*, *nature*, or *cause*, which for now we will treat as synonyms), then the Ideas – whether we think of them as general concepts or as special entities – turn out to be our final goal, that which we seek.

But everything changes once we start examining the Ideas themselves. In this case, many problems arise – not so much problems that are difficult to solve, but problems for which it is extremely hard even to imagine what a solution could look like. Let us take an example: the Idea of Courage. When we look at a variety of actions that at first glance seem entirely different (the courageous behavior of a soldier may involve advancing, retreating, standing still, running, etc., as is well illustrated in the *Laches*), we may indeed identify a common feature that makes these actions courageous – for example (and here I am not following the dialogue literally), fulfilling one's task in battle. In that case, it may seem quite clear why the Idea of Courage turns out to be knowledge. But at the same time many questions arise, such as: knowledge *of what* – of the Idea of Courage itself, or of the task at hand, or of something else? How exactly can the Idea of Courage influence anything – behavior? events or states of affairs? the soul of a person? – and impart courage to an action?

Let us recall that the Idea is unchanging. So, we might suppose that the soul of a particular warrior contemplates this Idea with the eyes of the mind and is itself filled with courage, passing this courage on to the body's actions. That is, the Idea of Courage can bestow courage upon the one who knows it, while itself remaining unchanged. This seems quite strange. Moreover, the Idea of Courage itself must stand in a similar relation to a more general Idea, for example the Idea of Virtue,

since courage is a virtue. Then either this Idea of Courage also “knows” virtue, or is itself a manifestation of virtue under certain circumstances (today we might say “in a certain dimension”). If so, is the Idea of Courage simply a certain dimension or projection in which a more general Idea exists? But then we get a chain of Ideas of different levels: the lower the level, the more concrete; the higher, the more general – yet all of them must have some sort of content. At this point it is entirely unclear how something unchanging can be actualized in the changing, and also be itself an actualization of something else unchanging at a higher level.

If, for example, courage and virtue are connected as part and whole, or as particular manifestation and general form, then in turn they must be subordinate to the Idea of Manifestation or the Idea of Representation or the Idea of Identity. And that Idea (or several of them) must also be present there, just as the Idea of Measurability must be present in the Idea of Equality.

And this is not even an attempt to solve the problem – we are merely outlining it. As soon as we attempt to make any of these issues the focus of serious scholarly attention, each one splits into a dozen more: we suddenly need Ideas of attention, Ideas of objecthood, Ideas of seriousness, Ideas of scientificity, and so on.

Perhaps this is nothing more than a verbal game? After all, Ludwig Wittgenstein believed that most philosophical problems arise simply from the peculiarities of language use⁵. We might also recall Michel Foucault, who examined the relation between word and thing and concluded that the nature of this relation has changed over time: in earlier periods, the word was identified with the thing, whereas today we regard their connection as conventional [Foucault 1966]. Unfortunately, attempts to resolve the problem of the ontological status of the Ideas by reducing it to Plato’s alleged misunderstanding of the relation between word and thing do not succeed. Moreover, even today we cannot hope to use a language entirely free of additional meanings. This applies even to the language of mathematics, as demonstrated by Gödel’s famous incompleteness theorem.

Let us now summarize our situation and try to formulate our task. Some of Plato’s philosophical claims are now considered fundamental and widely accepted in epistemology (let us call this as *Block 1*); some claims appear clearly mistaken (*Block 2*); and some give rise to ongoing debate, because they are present in contemporary thought but their status remains unclear (*Block 3*). To the first block belong, for example, the distinction between knowledge and opinion, and the assertion that the former is preferable to the latter and must be something stably true. To the second block belongs the claim about the immortality of the soul and its reincarnation (metempsychosis). But the theory of Ideas belongs to Block 3. We cannot reject this theory, yet we find it difficult to accept it, even if we divide it – as is sometimes done in the Anglophone world – into a theory of more primitive Forms and a theory of more complex Ideas [See e. g.: Thesleff 2009: 437–441]. A theory of Forms, or something like it, must be true, because without it we cannot think or speak at all; yet it remains entirely unclear how exactly this theory works

and to what extent it is self-sufficient, because upon closer examination it seems to require a theory of Ideas – whose ontological status is itself wholly unclear.

In other words, the ontological status of Plato's Ideas is a cornerstone of all contemporary philosophical thought. Modern philosophy is not prepared to accept the old forms of solution (for example, medieval realism), but it is equally unwilling to abandon the solution altogether. We may try to ignore or bypass this problem, but then it continues to follow contemporary philosophy like a stone chained to its feet.

My answer is this: to clarify the ontological character of Plato's theory of Ideas we must first consider Plato's philosophy as a whole and determine the function of the theory of Ideas within it. However, this is easier said than done.

Today we have three main models for reconstructing Plato's philosophy as a whole:

1. *The analytical model.* Extracting from Plato's texts what today counts as philosophy and synthesizing this "philosophical content" in terms of contemporary logic, ontology, and epistemology. The chronology of Plato's texts matters only to clarify specific points.

2. *The dynamic model.* Viewing Plato as a living thinker who developed over time, changing his views – sometimes refining them, sometimes simplifying them. This approach depends entirely on the chronology of Plato's works, which determines the direction and character of the development of Plato's thought and personality.

3. *The multidimensional model.* Reading Plato's dialogues contextually and as an organic whole, seeing Plato more as a guide than a teacher, and regarding the philosophy they present as something prophetic, concerned more with principles than with dogmas. In this case, artistic devices and tropes (allegory, allusion, style, idiom, irony, juxtaposition, metaphor, paradox, personification, comparison, tone, deliberate incompleteness, etc.) are seen not as ornament or as means of entertainment, but as an organic part of the author's worldview. On this reading, one of Plato's central aims is the dismantling of the primitive dualisms long attributed to him: philosophy versus literature, argument versus myth, playfulness versus seriousness, dogmatism versus skepticism, the true versus the false, the real versus the unreal [Press 2015: 190].

In each of these models, the ontological status of the Ideas appears in a significantly different light, because it serves a different function. Moreover, revealing the very essence of the Ideas proves to be problematic. For example, the well-known claim that "virtue is knowledge", which Socrates reaches in the *Phaedo*, is thoroughly refuted in the *Meno* (89c–96d); the thesis defended in the *Republic* that the essence of justice is "minding one's own business" is refuted twice in the *Charmides* (161b–163b). The theory of Forms becomes the object of criticism in the *Parmenides* (130b–135b), and this criticism is far more severe than that found, for instance, in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In other words, as soon as we draw conclusions about the ontological status of the Ideas based on two or three

dialogues, reading the next dialogue immediately presents equally weighty counterarguments. The different models propose different attitudes toward these counterarguments: for the first and second models, the response is essentially to ignore them by eliminating one of the options (though on different grounds), while for the third model the response is to accept complexity and paradox – perhaps as a kind of play, or the contradiction itself as a hint at something third, something not explicitly stated.

This difference in attitudes is tied to the fact that the first two models attempt to reconstruct Plato's philosophy as a unified system (a task that proves difficult), whereas the third model is fundamentally skeptical toward system and systematization in philosophy. According to the third approach, the dialogical form of Plato's writings is seen as an organic part of Plato's philosophy itself, not merely as a literary form of presentation.

Plato states clearly and precisely that when investigating any situation, event, or thing, in order to determine its causes or simply to give a full and comprehensive account of the object of inquiry, a researcher must ascend to a higher level of consideration than the level on which the object itself is found. We all know this well, because the main type of definition still used today is that of genus (*genus proximum*) and specific difference (*differentia specifica*), following the model: "a noun is a part of speech that indicates a thing..." In our tradition, such definitions are associated with Aristotle, since in his commentary on the *Categories*, the Neoplatonist Porphyry (third century CE) constructs a hierarchy of genera and species – the so-called "Porphyrian tree"⁶. Aristotle can be credited with first fixing this structure, but it is Plato who discovers and establishes it (leaving aside Socrates' demand for definitions, about which we know relatively little). It is important to note that Plato applies this not only to definitions but to the entire structure of knowledge. In other words, Plato was the first to establish that any model of truth presupposes at least two levels, and that the second level is always less determinate than the first. And it must be acknowledged that we still use this model today. For example, it appears indirectly in Alfred Tarski's semantic theory of truth, according to which the statement "snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white; here, "snow is white" in the first case is an expression in one language, and in the second case an expression in another⁷.

However, when the objects of the second level themselves become the subject of inquiry, the need arises to identify a third level, and so on. Potentially, this movement from level to level becomes infinite unless, at some point, one introduces an object with special characteristics – an object that, in principle, cannot be known, but by virtue of its uniqueness terminates the series. As is well known, for Plato this object is the Good, and by introducing it Plato essentially introduces God as the limit of the cognitive process. Beyond it there can be nothing further, and this object itself remains unknowable.

Thus, from the standpoint of knowledge, the Ideas are the highest generalizations for the lower level, yet they are not mere abstractions; they contain

within themselves the capacity, while remaining unchanged, to endow the lower-level objects connected to them with their essential qualities.

Ideas, then, are something general and unchanging, by means of which the knowledge of individual, concrete things become possible. Both terms Plato uses – εἶδος and ἰδέα – are originally associated with “seeing” or “beholding”, and therefore Plato likely introduces them precisely to describe the process of cognition. Socrates, initiating one of his discussions, says: “In the case of each multiplicity to which we give the same name, we are in the habit of positing a single Form (εἶδος)” (*Republic* X, 596a, trans. Paul Shorey). And in the *Parmenides* he puts it as follows: “Will not this single element, which is thought of as one and always the same in all, be an Idea?” (*Parmenides* 132c, trans. Harold N. Fowler).

If we proceed from the model of knowledge, then undoubtedly the existence of the Ideas is of a higher order than that of things, because things can be known only through the Ideas. Moreover, the sensible things around us are products of our senses; they themselves are changeable and unstable, like the water in a river or a wave in the sea. Only the Idea – the concept of a wave – remains unchanged, and it is this that must exist in the true sense. The passage from the *Phaedrus* describes the supposed existence of this “world of Ideas” (*Phaedr.* 247c), but the description remains external: it is a description of the knower, not of the Ideas “themselves”.

In 1826, in *On the Comparative Physiology of the Sense of Vision* [Müller 1826], the German natural scientist Johannes Peter Müller formulated the so-called “law of specific energy of the sense organs”. According to this law, a wide variety of stimuli always produce only the sensation characteristic of the organ being stimulated, and conversely, one and the same stimulus, when applied to different sense organs, produces entirely different sensations corresponding to each organ. Müller argued that the nature of the reaction depends not on the stimulus but on the nervous apparatus that receives it. A ray of sunlight striking the retina produces the sensation of light, while the same ray striking the skin’s receptors produces the sensation of warmth, although the sunlight is not necessarily either light or warmth “in itself”. From this Müller concluded that we are not entitled to regard our sensations as images of the external world. “Light, darkness, color, tone, heat, cold, various smells and tastes... – in short, everything that the senses give us in the form of general impressions, are not truths of external things but qualities of our senses... The essences of external things and of what we call the external world we do not know; we know only the essences of our senses” [Müller 1826: 50].

Of course, Plato neither knew nor could have known Müller’s “law of specific energy”, but he knew Heraclitus’ conclusion about the impossibility of knowing the world through the senses, and he repeatedly tested his own sensory experience. You all know that we perceive objects as shrinking when we move farther from them (and vice versa), while their size remains unchanged. Nothing of this sort can occur with the Ideas of things – so it is hardly surprising that Plato attributed greater reality to the Ideas than to what we perceive through the senses.

Nevertheless, we should not imagine that this “super-celestial realm” actually exists as a place somewhere in the heavens or anywhere else in physical space where the whole kingdom of Ideas is located. Many of his students understood it in this way, and by tradition it is thought that Aristotle criticized Plato precisely for separating the world of Ideas from the world of things. But similar criticism – indeed, in some respects even more substantial – can already be found in Plato himself, clearly directed against those who understood his (or Socrates’) doctrine too naively and simplistically. Thus, the realm of Ideas – some gray mist visible only to the eyes of the mind, and only to the noblest souls – exists in an unclear manner and in an unclear place.

For now, let us simply note that the Ideas themselves cannot be a mist or a kind of heap – this is merely how they appear to our mind. In reality, judging from the context, Plato is not attempting to describe the Ideas as they are, but rather to emphasize their special status in relation to the objects of the sensible world.

Even this does not exhaust the consideration of the Ideas from the standpoint of knowledge. In this respect Plato served for many centuries as a model, although cognition itself was hardly the central object of his interest. Like many others, I believe that Plato’s primary concern was politics, and everything else was merely an extension of it. The life and thought of this remarkable man were inseparable, and the core of all his inquiries – of his entire spiritual biography – was politics simply because it is the most important human problem. Yet by “politics” we must understand least of all the art of governing or manipulating others, or the opportunities for pleasure or self-aggrandizement provided by power [Jaeger [1933–1947] 1973: 787]. Human beings live together, not alone; therefore, the most important art is the art of living together – the art of educating a person for communal life and building relationships that allow each individual to manifest fully their nature and the capacities inherent in them. This is what politics is: the art of living together, in family and in the polis. Politics was the sphere in which all questions converged – human nature, justice, beauty, education, the state... “The most important and most beautiful thing”, says the priestess Diotima to Socrates in the *Symposium*, whose words he reverently repeats to his companions, “is understanding how to govern the city and the household; and this ability is called prudence and justice” (*Symposium* 209a).

But Plato, as a researcher, never left anything without careful attention. And if one needs to investigate what the best form of political organization is and how to achieve it, then one must first make cognition itself the object of inquiry, so as not to err. To find the truth, one must first make the search for it true; otherwise, the result will depend on chance and rely not on the state of affairs, but on something else. (Such is opinion – *doxa* – whereas Plato seeks only knowledge – *epistēmē*.)

At first glance, it is difficult even to imagine anything more absurd than Plato’s doctrine of knowledge. One can hardly invent something so implausible. The doctrine is usually summed up as follows: all knowledge already exists in our mind, and we do not truly learn things but merely remember what was stored deep

in our memory. Hence cognition is recollection – *anamnēsis*. Knowledge is stored in memory because the soul is immortal and, before entering our body, dwelled in another world, where it could directly contemplate the essence of things – that is, the world of Ideas. After embodiment, the soul forgets its former life; yet when we reflect on something, we compel it to remember and thus “activate” hidden, forgotten knowledge.

Of course, this theory sounds absurd. It seems archaic, naïve, ancient, even mythical. But let us look at it more carefully, as well as at our own process of cognition (which is what we are dealing with anyway). So, what do we see? Plato finds himself puzzled by a rather strange issue. He cannot understand how cognition is possible – that is, how it can be that knowledge was absent and then suddenly appears. And, honestly, it *is* strange. Can I think about something I know absolutely nothing about? And if I can, then *what* and *how* do I think about it? It would seem that I must think about something that is not yet in my mind at all. But if the opposite is true, then I always think only about what I already know – and what is the point of thinking about that? So, what exactly am I thinking about? This is the first question.

The second question. We enter a furniture shop looking for a bed, and immediately we see: “the beds are over there”. How do we determine that, Plato asks. We have seen many beds – but not these specific ones, others. Suppose they were of a different color, slightly different shape, even made of different material – would that prevent us from *recognizing* a bed? Of course not. But how? If the notion of “bed” is not bound to color, shape, or material, then what is it bound to? To its function – the fact that one can lie on it? But no one defines a bed that way; if we look around right now, we will not find a single bed here, yet we will find many things one can lie or sleep on. So, it is not the function. Especially since in a furniture store no one typically lies on the beds. The fact that a craftsman made it does not help either – we do not know the craftsman, we did not see how he made it or what he intended. We simply see: “this is a bed”, and we cannot mistake it for anything else.

Thus, we always deal with particular, changing objects, yet we do not know *them* as such, but rather their essence – that which remains common, unchanging, and that without which the object would no longer be what it is. But how do we perceive the unchanging and universal through the changing and particular?

If we answer: “through abstraction” or something similar, Plato would rightly object that we do not know what exactly these words mean, and he would reject such a reply. It is equivalent to saying “just because”. Such an answer is inadequate.

Plato identifies two important features of cognition: first, we know only what is unchanging; second, at first we do not know, and then suddenly we do – “all at once”, so to speak – and the object of knowledge appears not gradually, from parts, but immediately and as a whole. These two features must help us understand Plato, despite the strangeness of his doctrine.

Plato distinguishes knowledge of essence (true knowledge) from mere opinion. Opinion results from a kind of “appearance”, a surface-level grasp – essentially, a sensory image or impression (even taken dynamically). Such opinion does not yield truth and is not genuine knowledge. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato makes Socrates and his interlocutors examine in detail what knowledge is, and compels them to reject sensory perception, correct opinion, and even correct opinion with explanation as things that, though they may contain truth, still do not qualify as true knowledge. (Of course, at this point, one would expect us to finally declare what true knowledge is... But we have no such formula yet.)

In another dialogue – *Meno* – Plato also investigates closely how knowledge arises. Here Socrates asks a young slave boy, about fifteen years old and without any education, to solve a problem: to draw a square twice the size of the one already drawn. (For brevity, I simplify the reasoning somewhat.) The boy first doubles one side, but the square becomes four times larger, not two; then, with Socrates’ guidance, he understands that the desired square is equal to four times the area of one half of the original. He draws a square whose side is the diagonal of the initial one and gets the correct solution. The problem arises: how could a boy who has never studied geometry solve the problem correctly? At first he did not understand; then suddenly he understood – as if the solution had been hidden within him, only blurred with time, like a forgotten memory. Sometimes we suddenly remember something long forgotten, and we remember it instantly, all at once, not piece by piece – how is that possible?

Someone once compared the soul’s recollecting of ideas to the activation of archived files or programs in a computer. They were stored there, unused, inactive, and the computer “knew” nothing about them. But once the program is activated, it immediately unfolds itself, without anything new being added – only a code that, taken by itself, contains no information.

Plato found himself facing a difficult task: a person deals with concrete, changeable things, yet knows what is general and unchanging; moreover, one knows it as if through an effort, but suddenly and whole, like a recollection, not gradually. Plato saw only one possible solution: knowledge is always already within us. Our soul could not have drawn it from life in this world, because in this world nothing unchanging exists; therefore, the soul must have learned it before beginning life in the body – in some other world. That is why recollecting is always difficult. Thus, the soul must be immortal, it must have lived before our bodily life – how else? And it must be akin to the Ideas, since the two seem so perfectly suited to each other.

The theory of recollection (reminiscence) can, strangely enough, give a quite precise answer to the question of what caused Plato to introduce the notion of ideas for Plato himself. Admittedly, we will hardly be able to share this conviction with him, but that is another matter. If we take Plato’s texts seriously, there is every reason to suppose that Plato was convinced that he... remembered the ideas, strange as that sounds. More precisely: his soul remembered its previous existence in a world in which the contemplation of ideas was available – not, of course, with

the ordinary eyes of the body, but with the eyes of the soul, or the eyes of the intellect.

If this is so, Plato did not have to, and did not aim to, provide an exhaustive and fully articulated proof of the existence of ideas. What he needed was only to structure instruction so that his pupils (or the listeners of his lectures) would themselves activate their souls' capacity to recollect their former existence, in which immediate contemplation of ideas was available to them. No logically rigorous and consecutively argued justification could even remotely equal what today is usually called insight, an illumination. The task of the teacher, in this case, is merely to create the conditions and to activate in the pupil the capacity to discover the knowledge already lodged in his soul.

Judging by what we know about the Platonic Academy, Plato succeeded in this only partially. Plato's dialogues and other testimonies from his students contain a great many data showing that the problems of ideas were actively discussed in the Academy, arguments pro and contra were compared, and individual aspects of the theory were examined and contrasted. Today most scholars agree that almost every Platonic dialogue was written for a specific audience and on a specific occasion and is devoted to the discussion of a particular problem. It is equally true that there was no text that could be regarded as a systematic exposition of a Theory of Ideas for Plato.

Accordingly, this explains the fact that the process of cognizing ideas (what I have called the "upward gaze") is presented in Plato's legacy far more fully than the discussion of the ideas themselves (let us denote this other approach as the "horizontal view", though it would be more accurate to call it an "intrinsic perspective"). By the way, both approaches later find unexpected applications: the "upward gaze" will be actively employed by Western theologians, the Church Fathers – above all Augustine – while for Eastern Fathers of the Church, such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, the pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus, the approach of the "horizontal view" will be more characteristic. This may be connected with the fact that it is more widely represented in the direction known as Neoplatonism, although I cannot assert this with certainty, since such a conclusion would require a special investigation and a specific count.

For our purposes it is important to note that this intrinsic or "horizontal" perspective appears only in the later dialogues of Plato, apparently beginning with the *Parmenides* – and then *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*. Holger Thesleff even suggests that Plato may have had only indirect involvement in the writing of these dialogues [Thesleff 2009: 492 ff.]. Their characteristic feature is a monologic tone, in which the participation of an interlocutor is either conditional or formal. Some material supporting this view is provided by Plato's *Seventh Letter*, which is now almost universally accepted as genuine.

Moreover, we have external testimonies, primarily Aristotle's, but our attitude to them must remain cautious, because, first, it is not always clear what exactly Aristotle is talking about – Plato's own teaching or the interpretation of

that teaching by successors in the school such as Speusippus and Xenocrates; second, Aristotle's testimonies are not free of contradictions; and third, they are in a sense oriented, and quite possibly biased. Nevertheless, these testimonies form the basis of the so-called "unwritten" or "oral" doctrine of Plato. This is important for us here because a central part of that complex teaching is the concept of ideas-numbers. I will return to this briefly later, but without this teaching the picture cannot be complete.

It can be supposed that Plato himself was less inclined to investigate the internal relations of ideas than to consider their necessity for the cognition of things and the state of affairs in the "earthly" world. The theory of ideas became regarded as Plato's principal philosophical doctrine largely under the influence of Aristotle's criticism. It is Aristotle who presented it in that light. For Plato himself it was apparently only one aspect of his philosophical teaching. Thesleff – whom I partly follow here – also notes this and advances a very interesting hypothesis. According to him, Plato's theory of ideas arose from the very beginning of his activity, from the time of the early dialogues (the *Apology* of Socrates), but related only to the sphere of ethical norms: justice, courage, piety, and so on. At that time Plato did not yet have a fixed terminology to denote these entities, and he referred to them as "the something itself" (the very justice, the very piety, etc.). Later Plato was compelled to extend the realm of higher entities to what we today call genera and species of things; then he began to employ as special terms εἶδος and ἰδέα – *eidōs* (εἶδος) and *idea* (ἰδέα) – but not systematically. This is what English-language literature commonly denotes as the "theory of Forms", rather than of Ideas. Even here Plato did not immediately conclude the existence of "forms" for all phenomena; initially he posited them only for the exalted (traces of this are to be found in the *Parmenides*). In time, under the influence of his Academy students, Plato again began to revise his theory, acknowledging the presence of forms for practically all elements of the human world, while reserving "ideas" for positive moral qualities. As a result of this revision, he was also compelled to single out several "great kinds" (or genera), relatively universal and neutral, such as being, the one/many, the same/other, the moved/moving, as instruments for grouping and categorizing conceptual Forms. Thesleff observes that "The 'greatest kinds', ... are certainly no 'Ideas', and they are 'Forms' only in a very loose sense. In fact, they are often classed as 'Ideas' or 'Forms' merely because their character of belonging to a different system is not recognized" [Thesleff 2009: 462]. The application of the terms εἶδος and ἰδέα for their designation only confuses matters. Thesleff concludes: "Thus, whether or not Plato ever had a consistent theory of Forms of physical things and artifacts, it should be kept somewhat apart from his theory of Ideas" [Thesleff 2009: 462].

In other words, if there are Forms of practically everything, the range of Ideas is necessarily reduced to a comparatively limited group of entities characterized by the predominance of the "One" and the "Good". Thesleff justifies this with his theory of a two-level Plato. With all due respect to the Finnish scholar and to the depth of his textual analysis and other merits, I do not share his theory in its

entirety. It seems strange to me that a philosopher such as Plato, with his propensity to distinguish the subtlest nuances of reasoning and the cognitive process, could fail to note a fundamental division of all that exists into two levels in his own outlook. Even though Plato did not possess stable terminology (which, in fact, might have hindered his task of guiding students toward the discernment of the higher, toward the insight), Plato could hardly have neglected to mark in some way the presence in his philosophy of this defining feature: the coexistence of two levels.

In my view, a more important factor is the task Plato set for his philosophy. Like Socrates, he did not aim to create a universal philosophical picture of the world (as did Anaximander, Anaximenes, Anaxagoras, or even Empedocles). He strove to direct his fellow citizens toward a conscious path of moral renewal. As Werner Jaeger rightly says, the main orientation of Plato's teaching was politics, though not in the modern sense of the word [Jaeger [1933–1947] 1973: 787]. Thus, the *Republic* is the central work in which ideas reflected in his other dialogues find expression. But Plato's *Republic* is not a teaching about constitutional law or forms of government; governmental structures are considered by Plato as expressions of different dispositions of the soul – or, as came to be said after Aristotle, of the “parts of the soul.” Therefore, Plato's attention was primarily directed toward what contributed to the formation of the soul in an ethically proper direction.

If we accept this position, we are forced to understand Plato's ontology differently. Certainly, each thing, good and bad, has its “classes”, “sets”, or general concepts; in that sense Forms exist for practically everything. But in general, our world may be represented as something like a pyramid where levels are not sharply separated from one another: goodness and being stand at the top and converge there into the unified totality of the One, while multiplicity and diversity increase as we move downward. Only this explains Socrates' statement at the end of Book IV of the *Republic*: “Now it seems to me”, he says, “that there is only one *eidos* (εἶδος) of virtue (ἀρετή), but an infinite number (ἄπειρα) of vice (κακία)” (445c). And this finds its precise counterpart in cognition, where there is one truth but an innumerable multitude of errors.

Now we can attempt to look at the ideas themselves “from the inside”, with the horizontal or intrinsic perspective, as if we were among them. We must immediately note, however, that this will not be a frozen world of some special kind of entities as once imagined. Nor will it be the three-level hierarchy of the One, Intellect, and World-Soul as pictured by the Neoplatonists. It is a living pyramid of constant upward and downward movement, where levels are indicated conditionally in relation to one another, because there is no “sea level” serving as a fixed point of reference. This movement up and down is best represented as cognition, an ascent toward the unity of truth. (Hence Plato's great role in subsequent theology: the limit of that ascent will essentially be God as the indivisible union of truth, good and being.)

And this movement is affected by the soul; more than that – the soul, in a certain sense, is the embodiment of this movement. Thus it “falls down” into the multiplicity of the body and perceives cognition as a return home to its true nature.

Plato performed a kind of revolution: he was the first to create a doctrine of the soul. Whether we agree or disagree with it today, whether we seek facts to confirm or to refute it, we must also acknowledge as a historical fact that Plato’s teaching proved, first, immortal, and second, incredibly fruitful. Plato’s doctrine became the basis of Christian teaching about the soul, and in that sense we may speak of the immortality of Platonic thought itself.

Plato creates the doctrine of the soul as simultaneously an artistic teaching and, at the same time, philosophically rich. Above all, Plato sees in the soul a rational and moving principle – indeed, one and the same principle – and it moves not arbitrarily but toward the summit; therein lies its rationality.

It can be supposed that Plato did not strive to base his psychology on a single terminology or conceptual system. He oddly combines fantastic images with the most serious and profound reflections. In different dialogues Plato depicts the soul variously: as a team of horses (*Phaedrus* 246a), as a wax tablet (*Theaetetus* 191c–195b), as a dovecote (*Theaetetus* 197d–e), as a picture-book (*Philebus* 38e–40c). All these, of course, are metaphors, but they are something more as well, since each of them reveals one projection or one dimension of the soul. To represent all of this as a whole Plato does not wish – and it is not necessary, for everyone already has an idea of what the soul is in itself. The soul can move from level to level not like from floor to floor but like along a ramp; the one who learns something finds himself on “another level”. The higher the level, the more general and global the knowledge and principles become.

We can analogically compare this to a somewhat modified modern picture of the world. Suppose we need to represent the order of the world according to science today. Its basis consists of the totality of natural laws (both those already known and those not yet discovered). These laws do not exist in isolation; they form a kind of hierarchy in which there are more general laws and necessarily consequent particular laws (the classical example in physics is the relation of Kepler’s laws to Isaac Newton’s law of gravitation). These laws are immutable; they do not deform over time, do not increase or diminish; one cannot say that they are material, yet they exist. The material world at any point in space and time moves and changes only according to these laws. These laws pervade one another, and the discovery of a fundamental law leads to the discovery of many other laws that are in fact particular manifestations of that fundamental law. Thus, one can say that some laws govern others. The number of fundamental laws – whatever their true number may be, and we know rather few – will always be fewer than the number of particular laws. The levels of these laws can only be determined by their relation to one another. For example, the law of conservation of energy, as known, may have its own formulation for each kind of energy, differing from the universal statement (in classical mechanics there is the conservation of mechanical energy, in thermodynamics the first law, in electrodynamics the Poynting theorem). The

implementation of the motion of matter according to such natural laws is something very close to what Plato calls the soul.

It follows that the soul is the tendency of the whole physical world to actualize itself according to the eternal immutable order or Reason; one may say this both of the world as a whole and of an individual person, though not to the same extent. Consequently, the world is an endless striving to actualize itself as a rational principle. Here again we find the unity of immutability and reason. We are used to understanding reason as that which moves us; Plato in the *Republic*, however, distinguishes four cognitive capacities: intellect (nous (νοῦς)), discursive reason (dianoia (διάνοια)), belief (pistis (πίστις)), and image-thinking (eikasia (εἰκασία)) (511e). Remarkably, he relates these to four spheres of reality: first he opposes the visible and the intelligible, and then divides each of these spheres into two. Plato – or rather his character Socrates – illustrates this by the division of the line. Much has been written on this passage (509d–511e) of Book VI of the *Republic*, and many variants and interpretations have been proposed. I will not delve into them now; for us it is important only to note two aspects not always taken into account: first, Plato does not take four separate segments but divides a single line; and second, even then he does not attach a special technical term to each segment. He distinguishes them by the character of cognition (perception) and by the cognitive faculty that corresponds to each sphere. In other words, for Plato normal motion of the soul is movement from eikasia toward nous. And nous, in this respect, is the point of immobility, the limit of motion. Plants, animals, humans grow in order to more fully become what they are. Plants and animals have no possibility of achieving such a limit; man can become something greater through cognition. “Become such as you are”, as the Greek poet Pindar put it (*Pyth.* II 72); the same can be said of everything else. All things strive to bring themselves into full conformity with Reason, except for those which, according to Plato, are already in full harmony with it – for example, celestial bodies, the cosmos. The theory of motion properly appears with Aristotle, but Aristotle bases his understanding of motion on Plato’s picture.

Just as among natural laws, so among ideas there is a hierarchy. But it hardly lends itself to facile description, as Plato himself noted. Apparently more general ideas contain particular ideas and perhaps even consist of them, yet still do not reduce to them. Today it is unclear how Plato pictured this astonishing world of ideas in detail, but since multiplicity increases with descending levels, ideas must necessarily have a numerical dimension. The highest point, above all ideas and forms, is the One. As at the apex of a pyramid, it could be nothing else. Plato calls it the idea of the Good; it is immutable and immobile; it is above all, and all exists only thanks to it and only through participation in it.

And of course, since the One stands at the apex of this pyramid and multiplicity and concreteness increase as one descends, the world of ideas also has a numerical dimension. In the *Philebus* (16c) Plato refers to the “divine gift”, brought to mankind by Prometheus, namely the teaching of the One and the Many (or the limit and the infinite) as principles and elements of what eternally exists.

Yet it should be observed that this is not merely a principle but also the opposite poles of the pyramid of being: at one end is the summit – the One – while at the other is the manifold, which one might call matter, though that is not quite precise. It seems that what we call matter is already the result of a certain union. Below that, one cannot properly name anything: there are merely separate elements – letters, sounds, points, units. I must confess this is a reconstruction; Plato himself says almost nothing directly about this.

Now we turn to the final aspect: numbers, mathematics, and eros. Aristotle speaks about numbers, or rather about mathematical entities (τὰ μαθηματικά), which in Plato occupy an intermediate domain between ideas and sensibly perceived things. Moreover, he asserts in the *Metaphysics* I.6 (987b–988a16) that the ideas themselves have principles or elements: “the one” (τὸ ἓν) and “the great and the small” (τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ μικρόν), the first functioning as the essence and form of ideas, the second as their matter. Like the Pythagoreans, Aristotle says, “the one” is connected with the Good, and the many with “evil”. These mathematical entities differ from sensible things in that they are eternal and immobile, and they differ from eidos (εἶδος) in that there are many identical ones. The Pythagoreans, according to Aristotle, considered the sensible things themselves to be numbers, while Plato separated numbers both from things and from ideas. Thus, according to Aristotle, Plato doubles or even triples the world – a position Aristotle did not accept.

Much here is difficult and many things unclear. The problem is compounded by Aristotle’s report in Book 13 of the *Metaphysics* (1080b14) that Plato recognized two kinds of numbers: ideal and mathematical. The distinction between them is substantial: mathematical numbers resemble ours – they are identical units that can be connected and combined to obtain other numbers. Ideal numbers are something else entirely: they are not so much numbers as beginnings, each unique. The unit, for example, is not an element of counting but a differentiation of an object from its surroundings – it is closer to the demonstrative “this”. In this sense the unit is the beginning of any knowledge, because the condition of cognition is the isolation of its object as something one. The two, however, is not two units but an opposite beginning to the unit – change taken in itself, for example, love, enmity, battle – considered independently of the particular objects between which they occur. Thus, the two is the origin of any multiplicity. The three is their conjunction, but it is a conjunction of what is incompatible or opposite; it creates volume and, in essence, is a kind of model of our material world. Each number up to ten has its peculiarities, because there are only ten ideal numbers. Hence scholars ask what numbers Aristotle means by “mathematical objects” – ideal or mathematical? Julius Stenzel, David Ross, and many others thought Plato meant ideal numbers; Conrad Geiser and other representatives of the Tübingen school argued for mathematical numbers. Both readings find support but also encounter difficulties.

I will confine myself to this much; for us it is important to note again that in the movement toward the Good multiplicity must decrease, while in the reverse

movement it increases. Thus, Plato describes the arising of matter in the late dialogues as a process of the numerical multiplication of entities: points begin to form lines, lines – planes, planes – solid bodies. It cannot be said that all this is expressed in a clear and consistent sequence, and this drives many scholars to puzzle over the matter. In general, it is unclear how mathematical bodies such as the triangles in his *Timaeus* generate the matter of our world. Plato himself hardly had a fully transparent picture of this. But the tendency remains: the further from the One toward matter and multiplicity, the further from Being; the movement to the One is movement to truth, Being, and the Good.

Approaching the Good is knowledge. Many authors who write about Plato lament that he does not give a description of the structure of the world in itself but offers only the structure of our knowledge of the world, as for example in the *Philebus*. In my view this is a misunderstanding and anachronism. For Plato there is no such separation. Knowledge as approximation to the Good is the attainment of one's own authentic being. That is why the Good appears as the object of ultimate desire, which only increases as one approaches it. Accordingly, the movement toward it, the ascent to the One, Plato calls love (ἔρως).

The theory of the *eros* is developed by Plato primarily in his dialogues *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. The Greek word ἔρως meant “sexual desire”, as K. Dover has shown beautifully in his edition of the *Symposium* [Plato 1980: 1–2]⁸. But in fact, it's all a bit more complicated than that: originally, in Homer, for example, ἔρως (with a short “o”) referred equally to sexual desire (XIV 315) and the desire for food and drink (I 469), as well as other things; he even has the phrase “eros of sorrow” (γῶου ἐξ ἔρως, XXIV 227). “Throughout the classical and Hellenistic periods, the connotation of this group of words is so regularly sexual that other uses of it can fairly be regarded as sexual metaphor” [Dover 1978: 43], but this is contradicted by the evidence they themselves provide. Let us limit ourselves to just one example: “Lawful eros is a noble pursuit of beauty,” says Democritus (DK B 73). And, of course, he is not talking about sexual desire. Plato was very sensitive to the nuances of meaning in words and skillfully played with them. In *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, it was important for him to lead the reader or listener away from the usual meaning of eros to a deeper one, as if revealing the true meaning of the word (concept, phenomenon, state of affairs).

Plato's *eros* is not our modern notion of love, first and foremost an emotion or sentiment. That aspect of love became predominant only after the eighteenth century with its sentimentalism and cult of sensuality, although precursors can be found already in the late Middle Ages – in chivalric romances, troubadour poetry, and the cult of courtly love. Still, our modern sense of “love” preserves its ancient meaning, though it tends to conceal it. We love what allows us to be more fully ourselves. We “love” our work, if it makes us better; we love our life if it makes it fuller and more meaningful. In the same way we may “love” art, literature, sport, cars, many things. We can also “love” a society, a walk, or ice cream – strangely enough – and the structure remains the same: our life becomes fuller, and we ourselves become more ourselves when this “love” is fulfilled. There is also love

for relatives and the proper idea of “love” in the highest sense. In all these cases the emotions do not arise spontaneously but because through this love we become fully who we are; without it, we do not.

In other words, love is the human being in his authentic activity; love is the very core of human existence and its truth. He who loves science wholly alone can be called a scientist; he whose life’s meaning is love of another is a lover (Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde); he who “loves” money is a miser (Molière’s Harpagon); he who “loves” the bottle is a drunkard.

It should be noted that Plato – and rightly so – is credited with distinguishing between bodily love and spiritual love. But this distinction in Plato, as in other spheres of that unified world, is not absolute: spiritual love, he says, should begin from bodily love, and it must contain passion as a component – the concrete within the general, the mobile within the immobile.

Thus, love is a way of actualizing oneself in the world and is therefore connected with truth, because the most important thing is to actualize oneself correctly – not to err, not to fall into secondary matters, not to waste one’s life on trivialities. Hence the importance of finding truth – the kernel, the essence – and the striving toward it is love. That is why love may be genuine or illusory, a quickly burning infatuation or a stable and deeply rooted knowledge. The truth of love is at once the full essence of the lover. Since Truth is the Good, and the Good is Being, and all this is One, it follows that Plato regarded the object of true love as the Good itself. Plato’s ontology is, one might say, a unified process in which love, knowledge, and self-actualization are joined. Love proves to be an overcoming of the temporal world and an aspiration toward the world of eternity, perfection, the world of ideas and the Good. Sensual love leads to the lowest form of cognitive capacity, *eikasia*, that is, to procreation. The highest form of love is the contemplation with the intellect (*nous* (νοῦς)) of the One. Everything else occupies intermediate degrees and determines the order of the world and the rest, the whole world. All is ordered by love. “L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle.” – Dante characterizes it in a thoroughly Platonic manner (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, 145).

Notes

¹See [Press 1996; Press 2015].

²Stylometry is the quantitative analysis of text style using statistical methods to establish authorship, authenticity of documents, or text analysis. The first to apply stylometry to Plato’s works was Lewis Campbell [Campbell 1867]; later, Wincenty Lutosławski’s stylometric analysis gained significant popularity [Lutosławski 1897]; new principles of style research were used by Holger Thesleff [Thesleff 2009].

³Hans Joachim Krämer (1929–2015) [Krämer 1959] and Konrad Gaiser (1929–1988) [Konrad 1963].

⁴Leo Strauss (1899–1973). Strauss was not a classical scholar in the strict sense of the word, but he constantly referred to ancient philosophy in his lectures and written texts. Some of his books, however, are devoted to problems of ancient

philosophy. See, e. g., [Strauss 1959; Strauss 1970; Strauss 1972; Strauss 1975; Strauss 1983].

⁵The most consistent expression of this thought is: Wittgenstein 1978, §§ 109–133.

⁶Porphyry sets this forth in his Introduction (Εἰσαγωγή) to Aristotle's Categories. See [Porphyry's Introduction. 2003]. For the history of the concept, see, for example: [Franklin 1986].

⁷See [Tarski [1956] 1983]. First published in Polish in 1933: [Tarski 1933].

⁸See also Dover 1978, especially pp. 42–54. I will simplify my presentation somewhat, because in Plato, as the same K. Dover and other researchers show, ἔρωc is simply the initial stage of love.

References

- Campbell, L. (1867) *The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato*, Oxford, Clarendon Press. xc + 192 + lix + 191 p.
- Dover, K. J. (1978) *Greek Homosexuality*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 246 p.
- Foucault, M. (1966) *Les Mots et les Choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris, Gallimard, 405 p.
- Franklin, J. (1986) *Aristotle on Species Variation*, in: *Philosophy*, 61 (236), pp. 245–252.
- Gaiser, K. (1963) *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre; Studien zur systematischen und geschichtlichen Begründung der Wissenschaften in der Platonischen Schule*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 573 S.
- Gigon, O. (1959) *Grundprobleme der Antiken Philosophie*, Bern und München, A. Francke AG Verlag, 336 S.
- Jaeger, W. ([1933–1947] 1973) *Paideia. Die Formung des Griechischen Menschen*, Bd. I–III. *Ungekürzter Photomechanischer Nachdruck in Einem Band*, Berlin, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1398 S.
- Krämer, H. J. (1959) *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles*, Heidelberg, Winter, 600 S.
- Lutosławski, W. (1897) *The Origin and Growth of Plato's Logic. With an Account of Plato's Style and of the Chronology of His Writings*, London, New York [etc.], Longmans, Green and co, 547 p.
- Müller, J. (1826) *Zur vergleichenden Physiologie des Gesichtssinnes des Menschen und der Thiere nebst einem Versuch über die Bewegungen der Augen und über den menschlichen Blick*, Leipzig, 462 S.
- Porphyry's Introduction* (2003), transl. and comment. by Jonathan Barnes, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 415 p.
- Plato (1980) *Symposium*, ed. by K. J. Dover, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 185 p.
- Press, G. A. (1996) *The State of the Question in the Study of Plato*, in: *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 34, pp. 507–532.
- Press, G. A. (2015) *Changing Course in Plato Studies, Second Sailing: Alternative Perspectives on Plato*, edited by D. Nails and H. Tarrant, in: *Societas Scientiarum Fennica*, pp. 187–196.

- Strauss, L. (1959) *On Plato's Symposium*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 294 p.
- Strauss, L. (1970) *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the Oeconomicus*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 211 p.
- Strauss, L. (1972) *Xenophon's Socrates*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 182 p.
- Strauss, L. (1975) *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 186 p.
- Strauss, L. (1983) *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, introd. by Thomas L. Pangle, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 260 p.
- Tarski, A. ([1956] 1983) *The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages*, in: Tarski, A. *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics. Papers from 1923 to 1938*, transl. by J. H. Woodger, Indianapolis, Indiana, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., pp. 152–278.
- Tarski, A. (1933) *Pojęcie prawdy w językach nauk dedukcyjnych*, Warszawa, Towarzystwo Naukowe Warszawskie, 116 c.
- Thesleff, H. (2009) *Platonic Patterns: collection of studies by Holger Thesleff*, Las Vegas, Zurich, Athens, Parmenides Publishing.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1978) *Philosophical Investigations*. tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell.

Сергій Шевцов

ПРО ОНТОЛОГІЮ ІДЕЙ ПЛАТОНА

Стаття є скороченим та переробленим викладом трьох лекцій з онтології Платонових ідей, прочитаних у рамках програми Еразмус+ в університеті Сієни. Автор пропонує ієрархічну модель онтології платонівських ідей, згідно з якою ідеї мають різний онтологічний статус залежно від своєї позиції. Ієрархія заснована на «великих родах» філософії Платона, але в цілому орієнтована за єдиним критерієм єдине–множинне. При підвищенні рівня відбувається поєднання та зменшення сутностей аж до Єдиного, яке одночасно може розглядатися як нероздільні Буття, Благо, Краса, Істина тощо; на протилежному кінці цього свого роду піраміди знаходиться нескінченна (або дуже велика) безліч окремих елементів (крапок, ліній, звуків тощо). Ідеї постають як принципи організації хаотичної множини в упорядковані єдності та рівень організації визначає онтологічний рівень ідеї. Принципами організації є інші елементи філософії Платона — ерос, діалектика, пригадування тощо. Автор розглядає також причини створення Платоном теорії ідей та її загальну характеристику.

Ключові слова: онтологія, ідея, форма, буття, платонівська філософія, модель, істина, благо, краса, порядок, ієрархія, ерос.

Список використаної літератури

- Campbell, L. (1867) *The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato*, Oxford, Clarendon Press. xc + 192 + lix + 191 p.

- Dover, K. J. (1978) *Greek Homosexuality*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 246 p.
- Foucault, M. (1966) *Les Mots et les Choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris, Gallimard, 405 p.
- Franklin, J. (1986) *Aristotle on Species Variation*, in: *Philosophy*, 61 (236), pp. 245–252.
- Gaiser, K. (1963) *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre; Studien zur systematischen und geschichtlichen Begründung der Wissenschaften in der Platonischen Schule*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 573 S.
- Gigon, O. (1959) *Grundprobleme der Antiken Philosophie*, Bern und München, A. Francke AG Verlag, 336 S.
- Jaeger, W. ([1933–1947] 1973) *Paideia. Die Formung des Griechischen Menschen*, Bd. I–III. *Ungekürzter Photomechanischer Nachdruck in Einem Band*, Berlin, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1398 S.
- Krämer, H. J. (1959) *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles*, Heidelberg, Winter, 600 S.
- Lutosławski, W. (1897) *The Origin and Growth of Plato's Logic. With an Account of Plato's Style and of the Chronology of His Writings*, London, New York [etc.], Longmans, Green and co, 547 p.
- Müller, J. (1826) *Zur vergleichenden Physiologie des Gesichtssinnes des Menschen und der Thiere nebst einem Versuch über die Bewegungen der Augen und über den menschlichen Blick*, Leipzig, 462 S.
- Porphyry's Introduction* (2003), transl. and comment. by Jonathan Barnes, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 415 p.
- Plato (1980) *Symposium*, ed. by K. J. Dover, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 185 p.
- Press, G. A. (1996) *The State of the Question in the Study of Plato*, in: *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 34, pp. 507–532.
- Press, G. A. (2015) *Changing Course in Plato Studies, Second Sailing: Alternative Perspectives on Plato*, edited by D. Nails and H. Tarrant, in: *Societas Scientiarum Fennica*, pp. 187–196.
- Strauss, L. (1959) *On Plato's Symposium*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 294 p.
- Strauss, L. (1970) *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the Oeconomicus*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 211 p.
- Strauss, L. (1972) *Xenophon's Socrates*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 182 p.
- Strauss, L. (1975) *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 186 p.
- Strauss, L. (1983) *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, introd. by Thomas L. Pangle, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 260 p.
- Tarski, A. ([1956] 1983) *The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages*, in: *Tarski, A. Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics. Papers from 1923 to 1938*, transl. by J. H. Woodger, Indianapolis, Indiana, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., pp. 152–278.

- Tarski, A. (1933) *Pojęcie prawdy w językach nauk dedukcyjnych*, Warszawa, Towarzystwo Naukowe Warszawskie, 116 с.
- Thesleff, H. (2009) *Platonic Patterns: collection of studies by Holger Thesleff*, Las Vegas, Zurich, Athens, Parmenides Publishing.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1978) *Philosophical Investigations*. tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford, Blackwell.

Стаття надійшла до редакції 24.05.2025

Стаття прийнята 11.06.2025