

## Plato: themes

Scholarly attempts to provide relative chronological orderings of the early transitional and middle dialogues are problematical because all agree that the main dialogue of the middle period, the *Republic*, has several features that make dating it precisely especially difficult. As we have already said, many scholars count the first book of the *Republic* as among the early group of dialogues. But those who read the entire *Republic* will also see that the first book also provides a natural and effective introduction to the remaining books of the work. A recent study by Debra Nails (“The Dramatic Date of Plato’s *Republic*,” *The Classical Journal* 93.4, 1998, 383-396) notes several anachronisms that suggest that the process of writing (and perhaps re-editing) the work may have continued over a very long period. If this central work of the period is difficult to place into a specific context, there can be no great assurance in positioning any other works relative to this one.

Nonetheless, it does not take especially careful study of the transitional and middle period dialogues to notice clear differences in style and philosophical content from the early dialogues. The most obvious change is the way in which Plato seems to characterize Socrates: In the early dialogues, we find Socrates simply asking questions, exposing his interlocutors’ confusions, all the while professing his own inability to shed any positive light on the subject, whereas in the middle period dialogues, Socrates suddenly emerges as a kind of positive expert, willing to affirm and defend his own theories about many important subjects. In the early dialogues, moreover, Socrates discusses mainly ethical subjects with his interlocutors—with some related religious, methodological, and epistemological views scattered within the primarily ethical discussions. In the middle period, Plato’s Socrates’ interests expand outward into nearly every area of inquiry known to humankind. The philosophical positions Socrates advances in these dialogues are vastly more systematical, including broad theoretical inquiries into the connections between language and reality (in the *Cratylus*), knowledge and explanation (in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, Books V-VII). Unlike the Socrates of the early period, who

was the “wisest of men” only because he recognized the full extent of his own ignorance, the Socrates of the middle period acknowledges the possibility of infallible human knowledge (especially in the famous similes of light, the simile of the sun and good and the simile of the divided line in Book VI and the parable of the cave in Book VII of the *Republic*), and this becomes possible in virtue of a special sort of cognitive contact with the Forms or Ideas (*eidê*), which exist in a supra-sensible realm available only to thought. This theory of Forms, introduced and explained in various contexts in each of the middle period dialogues, is perhaps the single best-known and most definitive aspect of what has come to be known as Platonism.

### **The Theory of Forms**

In many of his dialogues, Plato mentions supra-sensible entities he calls “Forms” (or “Ideas”). So, for example, in the *Phaedo*, we are told that particular sensible equal things—for example, equal sticks or stones (see *Phaedo* 74a-75d)—are equal because of their “participation” or “sharing” in the character of the Form of Equality, which is absolutely, changelessly, perfectly, and essentially equal. Plato sometimes characterizes this participation in the Form as a kind of imaging, or approximation of the Form. The same may be said of the many things that are greater or smaller and the Forms of Great and Small (*Phaedo* 75c-d), or the many tall things and the Form of Tall (*Phaedo* 100e), or the many beautiful things and the Form of Beauty (*Phaedo* 75c-d, *Symposium* 211e, *Republic* V.476c). When Plato writes about instances of Forms “approximating” Forms, it is easy to infer that, for Plato, Forms are exemplars. If so, Plato believes that The Form of Beauty is perfect beauty, the Form of Justice is perfect justice, and so forth. Conceiving of Forms in this way was important to Plato because it enabled the philosopher who grasps the entities to be best able to judge to what extent sensible instances of the Forms are good examples of the Forms they approximate.

Scholars disagree about the scope of what is often called “the theory of Forms,” and question whether Plato began holding that there are only Forms for a small range of properties, such as tallness, equality, justice, beauty, and so on, and then widened the

scope to include Forms corresponding to every term that can be applied to a multiplicity of instances. In the *Republic*, he writes as if there may be a great multiplicity of Forms—for example, in Book X of that work, we find him writing about the Form of Bed (see *Republic* X.596b). He may have come to believe that for any set of things that shares some property, there is a Form that gives unity to the set of things (and univocity to the term by which we refer to members of that set of things). Knowledge involves the recognition of the Forms (*Republic* V.475e-480a), and any reliable application of this knowledge will involve the ability to compare the particular sensible instantiations of a property to the Form.

In the early transitional dialogue, the *Meno*, Plato has Socrates introduce the Orphic and Pythagorean idea that souls are immortal and existed before our births. All knowledge, he explains, is actually recollected from this prior existence. In perhaps the most famous passage in this dialogue, Socrates elicits recollection about geometry from one of Meno's slaves (*Meno* 81a-86b). Socrates' apparent interest in, and fairly sophisticated knowledge of, mathematics appears wholly new in this dialogue. It is an interest, however, that shows up plainly in the middle period dialogues, especially in the middle books of the *Republic*.

Several arguments for the immortality of the soul, and the idea that souls are reincarnated into different life forms, are also featured in Plato's *Phaedo* (which also includes the famous scene in which Socrates drinks the hemlock and utters his last words). Stylometry has tended to count the *Phaedo* among the early dialogues, whereas analysis of philosophical content has tended to place it at the beginning of the middle period. Similar accounts of the transmigration of souls may be found, with somewhat different details, in Book X of the *Republic* and in the *Phaedrus*, as well as in several dialogues of the late period, including the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*. No traces of the doctrine of recollection, or the theory of reincarnation or transmigration of souls, are to be found in the dialogues we listed above as those of the early period.

One of the most puzzling features of the late dialogues is the strong suggestion in them that Plato has reconsidered his theory of Forms in some way. Although there seems still in the late dialogues to be a theory of Forms (although the theory is, quite

strikingly, wholly unmentioned in the *Theaetetus*, a later dialogue on the nature of knowledge), where it does appear in the later dialogues, it seems in several ways to have been modified from its conception in the middle period works. Perhaps the most dramatic signal of such a change in the theory appears first in the *Parmenides*, which appears to subject the middle period version of the theory to a kind of “Socratic” refutation, only this time, the main refuter is the older Eleatic philosopher Parmenides, and the hapless victim of the refutation is a youthful Socrates. The most famous (and apparently fatal) of the arguments provided by Parmenides in this dialogue has come to be known as the “Third Man Argument,” which suggests that the conception of participation (by which individual objects take on the characters of the Forms) falls prey to an infinite regress: If individual male things are male in virtue of participation in the Form of Man, and the Form of Man is itself male, then what is common to both The Form of Man and the particular male things must be that they all participate in some (other) Form, say, Man 2. But then, if Man 2 is male, then what it has in common with the other male things is participation in some further Form, Man 3, and so on. That Plato’s theory is open to this problem gains support from the notion, mentioned above, that Forms are exemplars. If the Form of Man is itself a (perfect) male, then the Form shares a property in common with the males that participate in it. But since the Theory requires that for any group of entities with a common property, there is a Form to explain the commonality, it appears that the theory does indeed give rise to the vicious regress.

There has been considerable controversy for many years over whether Plato believed that the Theory of Forms was vulnerable to the “Third Man” argument, as Aristotle believed it was, and so uses the *Parmenides* to announce his rejection of the Theory of Forms, or instead believed that the Third Man argument can be avoided by making adjustments to the Theory of Forms. Of relevance to this discussion is the relative dating of the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*, since the Theory of Forms very much as it appears in the middle period works plays a prominent role in the *Timaeus*. Thus, the assignment of a later date to the *Timaeus* shows that Plato did not regard the objection

to the Theory of Forms raised in the *Parmenides* as in any way decisive. In any event, it is agreed on all sides that Plato's interest in the Theory shifted in the *Sophist* and *Stateman* to the exploration of the logical relations that hold between abstract entities. In the *Laws*, Plato's last (and unfinished) work, the Theory of Forms appears to have dropped out altogether. Whatever value Plato believed that knowledge of abstract entities has for the proper conduct of philosophy, he no longer seems to have believed that such knowledge is necessary for the proper running of a political community.