Platonic Forms or Ideas

"For every real being, there are three things that are necessary if knowledge of it is to be acquired: first, the name; second, the definition; third, the image; knowledge comes fourth, and in the fifth place we must put the object itself, the knowable and truly real being. To understand what this means, take a particular example, and think of all other objects as analogous to it. There is something called a circle, and its name is this very word we have just used. Second, there is its definition, composed of verbs and nouns. 'The figure whose limit is everywhere equally distant from its centre' is the definition of whatever is 'round', 'circular' or 'a circle'. Third is what we draw or rub out, what is turned or destroyed; but the circle itself to which they all refer remains unaffected, because it is different from them. In the fourth place we have knowledge, reason, and right opinion [true belief] (which are in our minds, not in words or bodily shapes, and therefore must be taken together as something distinct both from the circle itself and from the three things previously mentioned); of these, reason is nearest the fifth in kinship and likeness, while the others are further away. What is true of round is also true of straight; of colour, of the good, the beautiful, the just; of body in general, whether artificial or natural; of fire, water, and all the elements; of all living beings and qualities of souls; of all actions and affections [passions]. For in each case, whoever does not somehow grasp the four things mentioned will never fully attain knowledge of the fifth." (*Letter VII*, 342a–e)[1]

(1) *Ideas.* Roughly, the eternal and unchanging objects of understanding that exist over and above the quotidian objects that we perceive by the senses. The form or idea of something x is 'x-ness', or 'x itself', or 'x as such', or 'what x is'. Forms are general properties, structures, or patterns, which particular objects 'embody' or realise: A piece of wood suitably arranged is a *table* or a *bed* only if it partakes if the Form of Table or Bed (cf. 596ff.).

(2) *One Over Many*. Plato's Forms are supposed to explain qualitative identity. How could (numerically) many things be (qualitatively) one? Three red objects are 'one' in regard to being red. Being red is what they share; the same between them. (a) *Qualitative Identity*: if x and y are *qualitatively* identical, then we are dealing with two things that have similar properties (e.g., two tables). (b) *Numerical Identity*: if x and y are *numerically* identical, then x and y are one and the same thing, i.e. x and y are the same *in number*. If $x = y$, then x and y are *one* thing, not two things (e.g., Mary Ann Evans = George Eliot). Hence Wittgenstein: 'Roughly speaking: to say of two things that they are identical is nonsense, and to say of one thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing' (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §5.5303).

(3) *Leibniz' Law(s): Connecting Numerical and Qualitative Identity*. (a) *Indiscernibility of identicals*: if $x = y$, then whatever is true of x is true of y. (This holds only for numerical identity.) (b) *Identity of indiscernibles*: if x and y have all their properties in common, then $x = y$. Leibniz: 'no two substances are entirely alike, and only differ in number' (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, §9). Any 'two' things that share all their properties, are in fact one thing. In other words: qualitative sameness excludes numerical difference (a difference in number); or, which says the same, qualitative sameness entails numerical sameness.[2]

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1   Adapted from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997 (pp. 1659–60).
2   For more information, visit http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-indiscernible/.

(4) *Universals and Particulars*. Plato's Forms or Ideas are universals. He is a realist about Forms: they exist independently of the human mind in the 'intelligible realm' (νοητὸν τόπον, *noeton topon*, e.g., 517b; cf. *Parmenides* 132b). This realism is also *ante rem*: universals exist 'before' things. (Aristotle's forms are *in rebus*: in things.)

(5) *Two Accounts of the Difference*. (a) *Spatio-temporal account*. Particulars are *concrete* objects, such that no *two* of them can exist in *one* (the same) place at *one* (the same) time. In contrast, universals are *abstract* objects, which can be wholly present at multiple locations at the same time, and many of them can be present in one place at one time. (b) *Iinstantiation account*. Particulars are objects that are *not repeatable* and cannot have *instances*; they *are* instances. In contrast, universals are objects which are repeatable and can *have* instances. Plato's 'partaking' (μετέχειν, *metechein*) is the instantiation-relation, which is primitive.

(6) *Key Features of Platonic Forms*.[3]

(a) *Commonality*. Wherever several things are *F*, this is because they 'partake' in, or imitate a single form of *F*; *F* is the thing that they *share* (cf. 476a, 597c).[4]

(b) *Separation*. The form of *F* is distinct from all the things that are *F*. Tablehood (the 'table-in-itself') is different from any *particular* table (476b, 480a; cf. *Phaedo* 75).

(c) *Self-Predication*. The form of *F* is itself *F*. Rationale: only what is *itself F* can make something *F*: particular tables could not receive their beingor reality from something which is not a table itself. *F* also *explains* what it is to be an *F* only if the form is itself *F* (cf. *Parmenides* 132, *Euthydemus* 301b, *Cratylus* 439d, *Hippias Major* 292e, *Protagoras* 230).[5]

(d) *Purity*. The form of *F* is nothing but *F*. The idea of Table is maximally perfect: it is the 'ideal' table—a blueprint. Perfection is reality, so Platonic forms are most real; and the world that we inhabit is the world of appearances or copies only; recall the cave analogy (cf. *Phaedo* 74c, *Symposium* 211e).

(e) *Uniqueness*. Nothing but the form of *F* is really, truly, and altogether *F*. There is but one form of *F*. The form of Table is the only thing which really is a table (479, 597c–d; *Phaedo* 74d).

(f) *Sublimity*. Forms are eternal, partless and unchangeable, and they are not perceivable by the senses. Forms belong to the world of 'being' or reality (τὸ ὄν, *to on*, e.g., 508d) which is accessible by the intellect only. But Forms are not thoughts or concepts (see *Parmenides* 132b). In contrast, since particulars have certain properties at some times, but not others, they belong to the (inferior) world of 'becoming' and 'ceasing to be' (485b; *Phaedo* 78d, *Symposium* 211b).

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3   After Kenny, A. (2004). *A New History of Western Philosophy*. *Vol. 1, Ancient Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 49–56.

4   The problem of participation or 'getting a share': do *F*-instances have only a *part* of *F*, or the *whole* of *F*? If all large things have only a part of Largeness, then each large particular has a *different* form of largeness: they do not 'share' anything. But if Largeness is wholly present in all large particulars, then *one* thing is in many places at the same time (cf. sail analogy in *Parmenides* 131c).

5   It is debatable whether Plato held this view. The problem of infinite regress (aka 'Third Man Argument'): There are three large things. By *commonality*, there is a form of Large that they share. By *self-predication*, this form is itself large. But now, Largeness and the large particulars make up a new collection of similar 'large-things', which derive their largeness from some other entity (*commonality*). By *separation*, this entity cannot be the original form of Large. Hence, there is a *further* Largeness ('Super-Largeness') in which they participate. But then, there will also be 'Superduper-Largeness' (see *Parmenides* (132a).