

the review of
metaphysics

a philosophical quarterly

Plato on Identity, Sameness, and Difference

Author(s): Lloyd P. Gerson

Source: *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Dec., 2004), pp. 305-332

Published by: Philosophy Education Society Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20130453>

Accessed: 04-04-2016 16:53 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Philosophy Education Society Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
The Review of Metaphysics

PLATO ON IDENTITY, SAMENESS, AND DIFFERENCE

LLOYD P. GERSON

AMONG THE CONCEPTS CENTRAL to Plato's metaphysical vision are those of identity, sameness, and difference. For example, it is on the basis of a claim about putative cases of sameness among different things that Plato postulates the existence of separate forms. It is owing to the apparent sameness between instances of forms and the forms themselves that Plato is compelled somehow to take account of potentially destructive, vicious infinite regress arguments. Further, in reflecting on the forms and their relations among themselves, it is their self-identity that seems to be threatened or at least compromised. In providing an account of the possibility of cognition in *Ti-maeus*, Plato evidently sees the need to incorporate principles of identity and difference into the soul's very fabric. In this paper, I propose to explore some of the systematic connections between these concepts. Translators have sometimes obscured the fact that there are such connections. The Greek terms ταὐτόν, ἕτερον, and ὅμοιον (ἀνόμοιον) are variously rendered, often in ways that obscure the metaphysics. For example, ταὐτόν is most commonly rendered in English as "same," which, predictably, leads ὅμοιον to be translated as "like" or "similar." This has suggested to some that if two things are "like" or "similar," then they are not "the same." But "like" and "similar" are not, as I shall show, well-formed or perspicuous metaphysical concepts. There is no justification for foisting them on Plato; rendering the terms thus often leads scholars to miss the force of Plato's arguments. In addition, translating ταὐτόν as "same" threatens to trivialize a fundamental concept in Plato, leading to complaints that to say that something is "the same as itself" is to say nothing at all.

Correspondence to: University of Toronto, St. Michaels College, 81 St. Mary Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 114.

The Review of Metaphysics 58 (December 2004): 305–332. Copyright © 2004 by *The Review of Metaphysics*

Let us begin with the quasi-technical use of ὅμοιον.¹ Consider this passage, part of the second regress argument in *Parmenides*:

Οὐ δ' ἂν τὰ ὅμοια μετέχοντα ὅμοια ᾗ, οὐκ ἐκεῖνο ἔσται αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος;²

Mary Louise Gill, like most other English translators, translates this line: “But if like things are like by partaking of something, won’t that be the form itself?”³ The justification for “like things” is clear enough. When two things are large, to take the previous example in the dialogue, Socrates wants to posit a single form of Largeness.⁴ The implication of the meaning of “like things” is that the things are like, in this case, large, with respect to the property of largeness. One avoids saying that the like things are “the same” because if there are two things, they cannot be, simply, the same. Yet they clearly are like, according to this way of thinking, because they have the identical property. If this were not so, that is, if two things were like because they each had a property that was “like” the other, then we could ask about what it is that makes each property like the other. Presumably, this would be because they are the same in some respect. In short, avoidance of a vicious infinite regress requires that likeness be functionally related to sameness. It requires that there be a fundamental sameness in virtue of which any claim about likeness can be made.

Accordingly, it is sameness not likeness that needs to do all the work in the argument that is supposed to lead to the postulation of separate forms. It is owing to the fact that, say, one “largeness” in one thing is the same as another “largeness” in another that a form of Largeness is posited in the first place.⁵ If it were only likeness and not sameness that is the fundamental datum, then, since anything can be held to be like anything else in some respect, it would be entirely opaque what the forms are that are supposed to explain this likeness.

¹ That there is a nontechnical use of ὅμοιον where a translation of “like” is correct is beyond doubt. The nontechnical use comes to the fore especially with the comparative ὁμοίωτερον and the superlative ὁμοιώτατον.

² *Parmenides* (hereafter, “*Parm*”) 132e3–4.

³ Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan, *Plato. Parmenides* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1996). So, Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides: Parmenides’ Way of Truth and Plato’s Parmenides* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1939); Reginald E. Allen, *Plato’s Parmenides* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Samuel Scolnicov, *Plato’s Parmenides* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), and others.

⁴ *Parm* 132a1–4.

If we insist on the logical priority of the concept of sameness to the concept of likeness in the argument, we can see why Socrates' attempt to avoid the first regress argument in *Parmenides*, the so-called third man argument, by insisting that instances of forms are ὁμοιώματα, is on the face of it feeble.⁶ For sameness, unlike likeness, is clearly a reciprocal relation. If instances of forms are the same as the forms, then the forms are the same as their instances. One well-trodden interpretative path is to say that Socrates is right to insist that instances of forms are images of the forms and that therefore they are mere likenesses of them; so, there are no grounds for saying that form and instance require another form "over and above" to account for their likeness.⁷ Reciprocal relatedness is precluded by imagery.

First, however, claiming that an instance of a form is a ὁμοίωμα of it seems very much like claiming that one instance is ὅμοιον another. Second, the same argument that shows that likeness is posterior to sameness among like things shows that likeness is posterior to sameness in the case of a form and an instance of it, even supposing that we designate this instance an image of a form. If an instance of a form is like a form, it must be so in some respect.⁸ For example, what makes an instance of a form of Largeness like the form of Largeness

⁵ See Alexander of Aphrodisias, *In metaphysica* 84, 1–2: "Further, things that are the same as each other are the same as each other owing to their participation in something self-identical which is, principally, this, and this is the Idea (ἔτι τὰ ὅμοια ἀλλήλοις τοῦ αὐτοῦ τινος μετουσίᾳ ὅμοια ἀλλήλοις εἶναι, ὃ κυρίως ἐστὶ τοῦτο καὶ τοῦτο· εἶναι τὴν ἰδέαν)," quoting from Aristotle's *On the Ideas*. Compare 85, 4–5.

⁶ *Parm* 132d4.

⁷ See, for example, Richard Patterson, *Image and Reality in Plato's Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985), 51, "The regress of similarities of the *Parmenides* has no force against Plato's paradigmaticism but is best viewed, like the other arguments given there, as bringing out the disastrous consequences of one possible (and in this case very tempting) misinterpretation of participation" (my emphasis). See also Reginald E. Allen, *Plato's Parmenides*, 158–68, who argues that imagery precludes the symmetry entailed by sameness.

⁸ *Parm* 132d5–6: "If, then, he said, something is likened to the form, is it possible that that form is not the same as that which is likened to it, insofar as that is made the same as it" (Εἰ οὖν τι, ἔφη, ἔοικεν τῷ εἶδει, οἷόν τε ἐκεῖνο τὸ εἶδος μὴ ὅμοιον εἶναι τῷ εἰκασθέντι, καθ' ὅσον αὐτῷ ἀφομοιώθη;) The word translated as "likened to" is supposed to be the prophylactic against regress. *Parmenides*, however, rightly keeps the focus on sameness, supposing as does Socrates that forms are intended to explain sameness in difference. Compare *Phaedo* 74e3 where equals are said to "resemble" (προσεοικέναι) deficiently the Equal itself.

rather than, say, the form of Thickness? Presumably, the answer is: its largeness. If this largeness is not the same as the largeness whose name is “the form of Largeness,” it is a mystery as to what makes it an instance of this form rather than another.⁹ And then must it not be the case that the largeness of the form is the same as the largeness of the instance, just as the largeness of one instance is the same as the largeness of another?

Let us use as a frame for the sameness of one instance of a form and another: (1) $A_1 = A_2$. This, however, is supposedly not meant by Plato to undermine the truth of (2) $A_1 = A_1$ and (3) $A_2 = A_2$. Indeed, it is because (2) and (3) are held to be indubitable truths that (1) is held by nominalists to be necessarily false: the only thing A_1 and A_2 are the same as are themselves. Attempts to take the sting out of the nominalists’ complaint against Platonism by holding that the fundamental data of a theory of forms are the likenesses of things rather than the sameness of instances of forms are misguided and, in part, inspired by an effort to make a theory of forms a respectable theory of universals, namely, a realistic one.¹⁰ If, however, forms are postulated to explain sameness in difference, then forms are not universals. For universals as such explain nothing.¹¹

⁹ See *Phaedo* 102d6–8 where the self-identity of the instance of the form and the form is stressed. Compare 74c1–2; 103b4–5. The instance of Largeness, and Largeness itself, never admit of smallness. Surely, form and instance are exactly the same in this way. Nothing about imagery is going to change this. If this were not so, then the claim that an instance of Largeness does not admit of smallness would have to be substantiated separately from a claim that the form of Largeness does not admit of smallness. If imagery makes a difference, why should not an image of the form of Largeness admit of smallness?

¹⁰ See my “Platonism and the Invention of the Problem of Universals,” forthcoming in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*.

¹¹ See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (hereafter, “*Met*”) 3.6.1003a11 where “the universal (τὸ καθόλου)” is defined as “that which is predicated in common (τὸ κοινῇ κατηγορούμενον);” compare *Eudemian Ethics* 1.8.1218a7; *De Interpretatione* 17a39. At *Met.* 5.26.1023b29 and following, Aristotle identifies the universal with “that which is said as a whole” (τὸ ὅλως λεγόμενον). See also *Physics* 1.1.184a24–5: “the universal is a kind of whole” and 1.5.189a5–8. Predicates and wholes are posterior to subjects and parts and so do not explain anything about them. See John Malcolm, *Plato on Self-Predication of Forms: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 54–62; 167. He supposes that the form is intended by Plato to function as a universal. By this Malcolm means that the form is the “ontological basis for the application of the predicate term” (54). I think the latter claim is exactly right. It is a mistake, however, to think that such an “ontological basis” is incompatible with paradeigmatism or that this makes the form into a universal in Aristotle’s sense.

If (1) entails that there be two truths expressed as (2) and (3), then we should clearly distinguish sameness from identity, as in fact Plato most certainly does.¹² Every instance of a form is identical with itself; every form is identical with itself. Is an instance self-identical because the form of which it is an instance is self-identical? So it would seem, judging from the claim made in *Euthyphro*:

Or is the pious itself not identical with itself in every action? And the impious, on the other hand, the opposite of all that is pious, is it not the same as itself, that is, does not everything that is going to be counted as impious have some single character, namely, impiety?¹³

If the piety in a pious action is the same as the piety whose name is “the form of Piety,” then it is the case both that the piety that is in each is self-identical and that the impiety in one action is the same as the impiety in another action (or in the form).

Yet in *Phaedo* we read,

These equals, therefore, and Equality itself are not identical.¹⁴

Supposing, as I think we must, that “these equals” refers to instances of equality and not the things that are equal, we are told that the equality in an instance of Equality is not identical with Equality itself.¹⁵ We have, however, already seen that the instance should be

¹² So, too, Aristotle, *Met* 10.3.1054a20–1055a3, who discusses at length the meanings of identical (different), same (not same). The key general point regarding these concepts is that “identical” comes under “one” and “same” comes under “plurality” (τὸ πλῆθος). See 1054a29–32.

¹³ *Euthyphro* 5d1–5: οὐ ταῦτον ἐστὶν ἐν πάσῃ πράξει τὸ ὄσιον αὐτο αὐτῷ, καὶ τὸ ἀνόσιον αὐτῷ τοῦ μὲν ὀσίου παντὸς ἐναντίον, αὐτὸ δὲ αὐτῷ ὁμοίον καὶ ἔχον μίαν τινὰ ἰδέαν κατὰ τὴν ἀνοσιότητα πᾶν ὅτιπερ ἂν μέλλῃ ἀνόσιον εἶναι;. I take the phrase beginning “καὶ ἔχον” as an exegetical use of καί. To say that “the impious is the same as itself” is, on this reading, equivalent to saying that impious actions, say, are the same because impiety is identical with itself. If the text is not read in this way, it is obscure what “have some single character with respect to impiety” says in addition to “same as itself.” I take the words “is the same as itself” as explicated by what follows.

¹⁴ *Phaedo* 74c4–5: Οὐ ταῦτόν ἄρα ἐστίν, ἧ δ' ὅς, ταῦτά τε τὰ ἴσα καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον. Compare 74c10–d5.

¹⁵ The supposition is clinched by the preceding line: “the equals themselves did not appear unequal nor did Equality to be Inequality.” But of course equal things do appear unequal; “the equals themselves” must refer to the equality of equal things. See above n. 9. See David Gallop, *Plato. Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 121–6, for a good discussion of the problems of understanding how the form and instance can be both the same and not identical. Also, David Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chap. 4.

understood to be the same as the form. So, there is evidently more to identity or self-identity than sameness. Of course. For if (1), (2), and (3) above are to be true, then the nonidentity of A_1 and A_2 follows. Or, to put it more circumspectly, something must follow which can be represented by saying that A_1 and A_2 are nonidentical or different. Hence, we are obliged to say, for example: the equality in A_1 is the same as the equality in A_2 and is the same as the equality in the form, but neither A_1 nor A_2 is identical with that form.¹⁶

If an instance of a form is the same as the form, though it is not identical with it, we might suppose that identity is being construed here as straightforwardly numerical. The claim of nonidentity, however, is the conclusion of a line of reasoning (“therefore” [ἄρα]), contained in 74b7–9, where sensible equals are said to appear unequal in some way.¹⁷ Because they are the sort of things to appear unequal, they are not identical with the form of Equality, even though the equality in them is the same as the equality in the form. If, however, numerical nonidentity were meant in the conclusion, that could have been directly inferred from 74a11, where the form of Equality is said to be different from (ἐτερον = not identical to) its instances.

It is perhaps not too much of a stretch to claim that the cogency of Platonism rests upon the successful distinction of sameness and

¹⁶ *Theaetetus* (hereafter, “*Tht*”) 158e5–10 seems to provide an example where ταυτόν is used synonymously with ὅμοιον, but in this passage Socrates is describing how the proponent of the view that sense perception is knowledge would account for sense perception’s being ἀψευδής or “infallible.” Such a person wants to argue that each case of sense perception is “different (ἐτερον)” from every other because the perceptual event is different each time. Each perceptual event consists of a perceiver and a thing perceived together producing a new perception. Even if one perceptual event were *per impossibile* the “same” (ὅμοιον) as another in some respect, it would still be different (= not ταυτόν) from that. Plato here uses the phrase “identical” (ταυτόν) “in some respect” (τῇ μὲν . . . τῇ δέ) as synonymous with ὅμοιον because the identity of a perceptual event is complex. He is excluding as impossible the case in which, say, the perceived remains the same in two different perceptions.

¹⁷ The word “appear” (φαίνεται) must not be understood in the “adversative” sense, as if it indicated that though things appear unequal, they really are equal. If this were meant, then these things would really be instances of the form of Inequality. The use of “appear” is rather “nonadversative” that is, things appear unequal because they in fact are so. The problem is exactly how the instances of Equality can appear unequal in this sense. Compare *Sophist* (hereafter, “*Soph*”) 236b7 for the adversative sense; 264b1–3 for the nonadversative sense.

identity. The nominalist will insist that such a distinction rests upon a deviant notion of identity. For the individual identity of A_1 or A_2 or the putative form should exhaust all there is to say about them. There could be nothing “left over” for A_1 or A_2 to be the same as. There is not much doubt that Plato wants to reject this concept of identity. He wants to maintain that something can be the same as something else even though it is identical only with itself.¹⁸ Indeed, something can only be the same as something else if it is identical only with itself. Clearly identity is conceptually prior to sameness.¹⁹ What we need to ask is what Plato’s concept of identity is such that he can maintain that identity allows for sameness.

Plato’s most direct and concise answer to this question is in the second part of *Parmenides*. Wishing not to beg any questions about the significance of this part of the dialogue, I point only to an argument whose logic is isolatable, even if its total meaning is inseparable from the meaning of the second part (or, indeed, of the entire dialogue) as a whole. This is the argument that:

If that which is one is (ἔστιν), then is it possible for it to be but not to partake of (μετέχειν) essence (οὐσίας)? – It could not. – Now, that which is one’s essence would be, too, not being identical with that which is one; otherwise, that essence would not be *its* essence, nor would it, that which is one, partake of that essence, but saying that that which is one is would be like saying that that which is one is one.²⁰

Whatever “that which is one” refers to, there is no indication that this argument is anything but an application of a general principle: if A is, then (i) A ’s essence is distinct from it, and (ii) A partakes of that essence. What exactly it means to say that “that which is one is” is not exactly clear, though it must obviously be contrasted with “that which is one is one,” which is excluded in the last line.²¹ It cannot simply

¹⁸ This point is related to that expressed at *Parm* 146a9–d1 where that which is one, the subject of investigation, is said to be “identical with itself” (ταὐτόν ἑαυτῷ) and “different from itself” (ἕτερον ἑαυτοῦ). See below for the conception of the form according to which this is supposed to make sense.

¹⁹ So, being “different” (ἕτερον) is prior to “not being the same” (ἀνόμοιον). Compare *Tht* 185c9–10; *Parm* 148a6–7 for the pairs identical/different, same/not same.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 142b5–c2. Compare *Soph* 244b–c where substantially the same argument is made against Eleaticism: to say that the Eleatic One is, is to implicitly distinguish it from its essence.

²¹ This is questioned by Verity Harte, *Plato on Parts and Wholes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 75–6.

mean “that which is one is real.” The principal evidence for this is that in *Republic* the form of the Good is “beyond οὐσία” which certainly does not mean that it is beyond reality.²² On the other hand, Plato seems committed to saying that that which is is, that is, it exists, because it partakes of οὐσία. Let this be an instance of: (iii) if A exists and has essence, it does so because it partakes of essence.

Plato’s argument against the claim that identity excludes sameness must be something like this: for a thing’s individual identity to exhaust all there is to say about it would mean that that something could not exist; therefore, if something does exist, its individual identity cannot exhaust all there is to say about it.²³ For something to have an individual identity such that we can refer to it as something that exists, it must be (i) distinct from the essence of which it partakes and (iii) the essence in virtue of which it exists. The notion of identity that absolutely excludes sameness among self-identical things is the aberrant notion, as the first hypothesis of the second part of *Parmenides* shows. For a one that is nothing but one (that is, absolutely self-identical) cannot exist. Indeed, it cannot even be one.²⁴

What is the justification for claiming that identity requires partaking of essence that is distinct from that which partakes? Let there be two existents, A and B, and let each be self-identical and this self-iden-

²² See *Republic* (hereafter, “*Rep*”) 509b8-9. If the form of the Good is not real, it could not “exceed οὐσία in power;” it could also not be “the brightest thing that is” (τοῦ ὄντος τὸ φανότατον) (518c9), nor could the “greatest study” (μέγιστον μάθημα) “be of it” (504d2). See Matthias Baltes, “Is the Idea of the Good in Plato’s *Republic* Beyond Being?” in *Studies in Plato and the Platonic Tradition*, ed. Mark Joyal (London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 1997), 1–23, for what I take to be a conclusive demonstration of this point. A most useful general study is that of Rafael Ferber, *Platons Idee des Guten* 2d ed. (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 1989). See Ferber’s further elaborations in “L’Idea del bene è o non è trascendente? Ancora su ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας,” in *Platone e la tradizione platonica*, ed. Mauro Bonazzi and Franco Trabattori (Milan: Cisalpino, 2003), 127–49.

²³ Excluding, of course, the form of the Good, which is real or exists in some way but is “beyond being.” See below as to why this is not an arbitrary exclusion. By “individual identity” I mean whatever is included conceptually by reference to it.

²⁴ See *Parm* 137c4–142b5. I am supposing here, without further argument, that if existence flows from partaking of essence, then the form of the Good does not exist, though it is in some sense real. I think it is least misleading to express this by saying that the reality of the form of the Good constitutes a different sort of existence, that is, infinite existence or, if one prefers, nonexistential being.

tity be understood as excluding the possibility that A be the same as B.²⁵ Either A's identity as this existent consists in the fact(s) about what A is, its essence, or it consists in these facts plus an additional fact, namely, that A exists. Even if there are things whose identity does not entail existence, no one, we may presume, wants to argue that identity actually excludes existence, that is, that nothing that is self-identical exists. At least in those cases in which identity entails existence, we have two existents, each with its own identity. Then, a process of identifying A or B could not exhaust all that we can say about either of them. In addition to giving the content of the identity of A or B, we can and must say that A and B exist. So, it is not impossible that something of A's identity escapes being absorbed into A's existence. Plato captures this point by saying that if something exists, it is because it partakes of essence (iii).²⁶

That Plato has something like the above argument in mind is indicated by his explicit linking of an implicit denial of forms in *Parmenides* with the Eleaticism of Zeno,

If things are many, you say, then it is necessary for them to be the same and not the same; but this is impossible. For it is not possible that things that are not the same be the same or that things that are the same be not the same.²⁷

If a plurality of things exists, they must be the same and not the same: the same because each is one and not the same because each is not the other; that is, because each has its own individual identity.²⁸ If

²⁵ I use "self-identical" as synonymous with "is identical with itself" or "has identity with respect to itself."

²⁶ Aristotle takes fundamentally the same approach in designating a basic existent, a "substance" (οὐσία), as a "this something" (τοδε τι). The identity of the substance is cognized through its "whatness" (τι ἦν εἶναι) or "essence" (οὐσία τοῦ). Compare *Met* 1.10.993a18; 8.1.1043a18. A substance or individual exists because it has essence (= (iii) "partakes of essence" in Plato's language).

²⁷ *Parm* 127e1–4: εἰ πολλά ἐσσι τὰ ὄντα, ὡς ἄρα δεῖ αὐτὰ ὁμοῖα τε εἶναι καὶ ἀνόμοια, τοῦτο δὲ δὴ ἀδύνατον· οὔτε γὰρ τὰ ἀνόμοια ὁμοῖα οὔτε τὰ ὁμοῖα ἀνόμοια οἷόν τε εἶναι.

²⁸ I must leave aside the question of whether Plato interprets Zeno correctly as providing a *reductio* proof of the contradictory of Parmenides' central metaphysical claims. See *Soph* 244b–245e for the evidence that Plato took Parmenides as being a "numerical monist" rather than a "predicational monist." For the view that Plato got Parmenides wrong, see Alexander Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) and Patricia Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

part of what something is entails its being the same as something else—in this case, its being one—then its identification as this existent does not exhaust all that it is, where identity is supposed to guarantee unqualified uniqueness. Conversely, if identity does exhaust all that it is, then it cannot be the same as something else. We could not in this case even say that there are two things—two “ones” of whatever sort—meaning that these are the same insofar as each is one so and so. Thus, a rigorous or even a consistent nominalism collapses into Eleaticism.²⁹

Allowing that there can be two things that are the same insofar as each is one entails a distinction between whatever it is that constitutes each thing’s individual identity and the oneness (in this case) of which each thing partakes.³⁰ Generally, anything with an identity must exist and so must be distinct from the οὐσία of which it partakes and in virtue of which it exists as the sort of thing it is.³¹ However, something with an identity can be the same as something else if the οὐσία of which each thing partakes is the sort of thing such that when it is partaken of, it does not get absorbed into that thing’s identity as the existent it is. For example, two things can be large (or, equivalently, largeness can be in two things) so long as largeness is the sort of thing such that when something partakes of largeness, that largeness does not get absorbed into that thing’s individual identity as this existent. If it did get so absorbed, then by definition nothing else could partake of it.

²⁹ See Reginald E. Allen, *Plato’s Parmenides*, 80, “Aristotle’s and Plato’s diagnosis of Eleatic monism is the same: that monism rested on an implicit and unstated nominalism.” I think Platonists assumed that a solution to extreme nominalism that stopped short of positing the separateness of forms (or something doing the job that forms do) was not sustainable. The most extensive treatment of Plato’s arguments for forms as a response to nominalism is Terence Penner, *The Ascent from Nominalism. Some Existence Arguments in Plato’s Middle Dialogues* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1987). On “separation” as indicating independent existence see Daniel Devereaux, “Separation and Immanence in Plato’s Theory of Forms,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 12 (1994): 63–90.

³⁰ It is important for reasons I shall explain below that this is only an argument for the possibility of sameness in difference.

³¹ The oddness, not to say impossibility, of talking about the identity of things that do not exist, is evident if we attempt to reidentify the nonexistent. How would one even begin to answer a question regarding whether a new novel about Sherlock Holmes is about the same character Arthur Conan Doyle wrote about?

We may, however, wish to object at this point that the largeness in one thing, or any other property it may have, is or can be absorbed into that thing's identity by the simple expedient of stipulating it so. Thus, recurring to (2) and (3) above, we say that the large man is self-identical; he cannot be the same as anything else. After specifying his identity, or the identity of his largeness, there is nothing "left over" to constitute his or its sameness to something else.

Before we try to address this problem, let us recall that in a crucial and difficult passage in *Timaeus*, Plato recognizes, among other things, the need to distinguish between two types of οὐσία. Here he is giving the "recipe" for the construction of the soul of the universe by the demiurge:

Between indivisible essence that is always self-identical and the divisible essence that comes to be in bodies, he composed out of both a third type of essence. Again, for the nature of identity and difference, he constructed according to the identical principle a type intermediate between the indivisible [types of identity and difference] and the divisible type found in bodies. Then, taking these three, he composed them into one form, forcing the hard to mix nature of difference with identity, mixing them with essence and making one out of three.³²

Leaving aside for the moment the main point of this passage regarding the human soul, which is that it must have certain ingredients if it is to be able to cognize all that is intelligible, let us focus on the distinction between indivisible essence, identity, and difference and their divisible, bodily counterparts.

In the context of the above discussion, divisible essence, identity, and difference must be what are possessed by those things whose sameness and difference constitute the fundamental data of a theory of forms. It is not surprising that Plato here speaks of divisible identity and not divisible sameness since, as we have seen, the latter is

³² *Timaeus* 35a1-b1: τῆς ἀμερίστου καὶ ἀεὶ κατὰ ταῦτὰ ἐχούσης οὐσίας καὶ τῆς αὐτῆς περὶ τὰ σώματα γιγνομένης μεριστῆς τρίτον ἐξ ἀμφοῖν ἐν μέσῳ συνεκεράσατο οὐσίας εἶδος, τῆς τε ταύτου φύσεως αὐτῆς περὶ καὶ τῆς τοῦ ἑτέρου, καὶ κατὰ ταῦτὰ συνέστησεν ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ τε ἀμεροῦς αὐτῶν καὶ τοῦ κατὰ τὰ σώματα μεριστοῦ· καὶ τρία λαβὼν αὐτὰ ὄντα συνεκεράσατο εἰς μίαν πάντα ιδέαν, τὴν θατέρου φύσιν δύσμεικτον οὔσαν εἰς ταῦτὸν συναρμότων βίᾳ. μειγνύς δὲ μετὰ τῆς οὐσίας καὶ ἐκ τριῶν ποιησάμενος ἓν. See on the text and translation Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1937), 59–61, with notes and Luc Brisson, *Le Même et L'Autre dans la Structure Ontologique du "Timee" de Platon* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 1994), 270–5.

functionally dependent upon the former. Divisible identity and divisible essence are possessed by bodily entities capable of manifesting sameness and difference among themselves.³³ The essence of which a self-identical bodily thing partakes is distinct from indivisible essence and identity.

What are divisible and indivisible essence, identity, and difference? Divisible essence, identity, and difference belong to bodies which have parts outside of parts or extension. These include temporal parts. Because their existential identity and essence are extended, the samenesses they have with other bodies are indirectly extended as well. Moreover, insofar as identity and essence are divisible, their differences are divisible as well. For example, being large consists in having a divisible kind of essence, in the sense that we can specify in divisible terms what the largeness consists of. The only way that the identity of that which is bodily can be indicated is by referring to its divisible parts.³⁴ By contrast, indivisible identity and essence do not require parts outside of parts (though as we shall see, this does not exclude complexity).

Divisible identity entails divisible essence; otherwise, the essence of that which is self-identical would be separate from it (or some of its parts) and, among other absurdities, these parts would not partake of essence. Judging from the *Parmenides* argument above, something with divisible identity exists because it partakes of divisible essence. The key to understanding what divisible and indivisible essences are is that they refer to what is cognizable by, or intelligible, to the soul, as opposed to what is sensible.³⁵ If things with divisible identity owe their existence to partaking of divisible essence, then, if they are cognizable (as opposed to sensible) at all, their essence must be distinct from their identity, even if their existence is not.

The answer to the objection that we could specify identity and have nothing left over for sameness is this. The attempt to identify, let alone reidentify, an existent with divisible identity requires the inclusion of its divisible essence, that is, it is by using divisible essence as a criterion that we identify something. For example, we determine that

³³ Numerical difference among things possessing divisible essence is posterior to the difference that obtains among things with indivisible essence. For these latter are only equivocally numerable.

³⁴ Compare *Parm* 157b6–158b4, where the “others,” that is, participants in the “one,” must be said to have “parts” (μέρη), each of which must itself have parts.

³⁵ See *Timaeus* 37a–b.

this man has the same height today that he had yesterday. The divisible essence cannot itself be constitutive of the existential identity. In the above frames (2) and (3), to identify A_1 or A_2 , we have to cognize it as something, as having some structure or other. We have to cognize its divisible essence, regardless of our theory of what essence is exactly or how we cognize it. The only way that the sameness of A_1 and A_2 could be made impossible is by claiming that the identity of each is utterly uncognizable. Since we do cognize divisible essence, the impossibility of sameness among different self-identical things is refuted, which is all Plato really needs to do. For the nominalist objections do not amount to a quibble about this or that case of sameness; they typically rest on the denial of the very possibility of sameness among self-identical things.³⁶

In order to see this point more clearly, let us consider an additional frame: (4) $A = B$. This frame is usually called “material identity” as opposed to “formal identity” in (2) and (3) above. (4) represents the typical structure of scientific and mathematical equations like the definition of force in classical mechanics, $F = ma$, or the mathematical expression of Boyle’s Law, $PV = k$, or $12/4 = 3\sqrt{27}$. It is the frame Plato implicitly employs when he asks the question of whether the virtues are really one.³⁷ It is also, for example, the frame implicitly employed in claiming that, say, “the Morning Star = the Evening Star.” There is, at least superficially, something deeply paradoxical about claiming (1), (2), and (3), and yet insisting on the cogency of (4).³⁸ What we are saying in all these cases is, basically, that two or more things that appear to be different in some way or another really are identical or

³⁶ A root and branch objection would maintain that all our cognition of divisible being is constructive. There is nothing “there” to cognize.

³⁷ See *Protagoras* 329d and following. Note that Plato assumes that Justice is just (330c4–8, $A = A$) and Piety is pious (330d8 and following, $B = B$), though he apparently sees no contradiction in also asking whether Justice and Piety are identical ($A = B$). At *Soph* 217a and following, an analogous question is raised of whether “sophist,” “statesman,” and “philosopher,” do or do not refer to one thing.

³⁸ Compare Wittgenstein in *Tractatus* 5.5303: “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 at all.” This passage from Wittgenstein is quoted in Panayot Butchvarov, *Being Qua Being* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 9. My account of material identity owes much to this book.

one.³⁹ In Platonic terms, we are saying that a diversity of essence rests upon an identity. Note that this is an entirely separate point from that concerning sameness. Frame (4) does not indicate sameness or at least it does not indicate it in the same manner. In the case of the Morning Star and the Evening Star, the diversity is explained by the various conditions under which the single entity is perceived. In the case of the forms, the diversity is owing to cognition. That is, the only way that that which unites the forms can be cognized is as the array of intelligible reality. The array is fixed, like the color spectrum. It is not open to alteration, though simulacra of it, ensconced in language and thought, can represent or misrepresent it.

Material identity as in (4) amounts to a way of expressing (1) as in the case of a “many” which a form is supposed to be “over and above.” For example, when Parmenides offers Socrates a statement of the reason for positing forms, he does so in a manner that is most perspicuously understood as making a claim about material identity:

I think that on this basis you think that each form is one: whenever many things seem to you to be large, it perhaps seems to you that you are looking at some one self-identical Idea over all, whence you think that Largeness is one.⁴⁰

The nominalist wants to say that the very grounds for identifying diverse objects of perception or thought precludes their sameness. As we have seen, Plato replies that identification could not occur apart from the recognition of divisible essence. Even to say, “this color is not, that is, could not be, the same as that color,” is to employ a self-defeating strategy. It is much as if one were to maintain that the star seen at night could not be the same as the star seen in the morning. Yet if the identity of the one permits of reidentification, then the criteria of identity are distinct from that that which is identified. Re-identifying one thing involves the employment of material identity claims that are in principle no different from those used in claiming

³⁹ Plato’s main word for expressing (4) is “one (ἓν).” Note that in Platonic language this is not equivalent to saying that they are the same. The Morning Star and the Evening Star are not instances of Venus. Material identity is broader than the relation that consists of sameness, though it includes it as a special case. Thus, frame (4) is a generalization of frame (1).

⁴⁰ *Parm* 132a1–4: Οἶμαι σε ἐκ τοῦ τοιοῦδε ἐν ἑκαστον εἶδος οἶεσθαι εἶναι· ὅταν πόλλ’ ἄττα μεγάλα σοι δόξη εἶναι, μία τις ἴσως δοκεῖ ἰδέα ἢ αὐτὴ εἶναι ἐπὶ πάντα ἰδόντι, ὅθεν ἐν τὸ μέγα ἡγῆ εἶναι.

that many large things are the same, that Largeness is the one self-identical nature that variously manifests itself. It is the self-identical nature whose presence allows us to say that multiple instances of it are the same.

What then of indivisible essence, identity, and difference? One important clue as to their meaning is that, though Plato wants to affirm a “communion of kinds” (κοινωνία τῶν γενῶν) and an “interweaving of forms” (συμπλοκή τῶν εἰδῶν),⁴¹ he never says that forms can be said to be the same as each other. Even if it is true that in some way some nature pervades many or all forms, this does not make it true that forms are the same in this respect. For example, though every form partakes of Difference and so is different from every other form, it does not follow that all the forms are the same in virtue of partaking of Difference.⁴² The reason for this is that for two things to be the same, they must have an individual identity specifiable or referable to independently of their essence. Two instances of a form can be identified by their spatial separation or otherwise by that which accounts for their divisible identity. Thus, in the above passage “many larges” are presumably so identified. Yet, the two putative instances of a form located in two other forms cannot be so specified. The “instance” of Difference in the form of Identity is not as such distinguishable from the “instance” of Difference in the form of Existence. The only way the indivisible identity of a form can be specified is, it seems, through its own indivisible essence.

Nevertheless, the indivisible identity of a form and its indivisible essence have to be distinguishable in some manner. This is evident if we consider “the greatest kinds”: the form of Identity (τὸ ταῦτόν), the form of Difference (τὸ θάτερον), the form of Existence (τὸ ὄν), the form of Motion (ἡ κίνησις) and the form of Rest (ἡ στάσις).⁴³ The reason why the form of Identity must be different from the form of Existence is that if it is not, then if we say that the form of Rest has existence and the form of Motion has existence, we shall be affirming,

⁴¹ See *Soph* 257a9; 259e5–6. Compare *Rep* 476a6–7 where it is a κοινωνία τῶν εἰδῶν. So, I do not take the use of γενῶν here as significant. In fact, throughout the *Sophist* passage εἶδος and γένος seem to be used interchangeably. Compare 254c2, d4.

⁴² See *Soph* 255e3–6.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 254b and following. It is evident from 254c2 that “kind” (γένος) is being used synonymously with “form” (εἶδος). Compare 253d1; 258c3.

counterfactually, the identity of these forms.⁴⁴ So, each form has identity and existence. This general principle must cover the forms of Identity and Existence themselves. Similarly, each form is different from the others because it partakes of the form of Difference, not because of its own nature.⁴⁵

This initially seems surprising. One might have supposed that in fact one form is different from another precisely because of its own nature. Thus, it would seem that, say, the form of Rest is different from the form of Motion precisely because of its having a contrary nature. Since, though, the point about difference is unrestricted, too, the form of Difference is different from other forms owing to its partaking of Difference not owing to its own nature. And the form of Identity is self-identical owing to its partaking of Identity, not owing to its own nature. Whatever the words “its own nature” can mean, they must refer to something other than that of which the form of Difference partakes.⁴⁶

That which a form partakes of is what the form’s name names or its essence, “itself according to itself” (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό).⁴⁷ So, “its own nature” cannot be that. One might conjecture that the phrase refers to “bare particularity” or something like *haecceitas*, analogous to the spatially unique divisible identity of a sensible instance of a form.⁴⁸ The problem with this is, however, that a multitude of distinct “thises” leaves unexplained and perhaps inexplicable what the

⁴⁴ *Soph* 255b11–c1: “But if Existence and Identity did not have different meanings, once more, when we say that Motion and Rest both have existence, we would be saying that they are identical” (εἰ τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸ ταῦτὸν μηδὲν διάφορον σημαίνεται, κίνησιν αὖ πάλιν καὶ στάσιν ἀμφοτέρω εἶναι λέγοντες ἀμφοτέρω οὕτως αὐτὰ ταῦτὸν ὡς ὄντα προσεροῦμεν).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 255e4–6: “For each one is different from the others, not owing to its own nature but owing to the fact that it partakes of the Idea of Difference” (ἐν ἑκάστῳ γὰρ ἕτερον εἶναι τῶν ἄλλων οὐ διὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ μετέχειν τῆς ἰδέας τῆς θατέρου).

⁴⁶ I suggest that the words “not owing to its own nature” (οὐ διὰ τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν) need not imply that that a form has a nature apart from the essence that it is.

⁴⁷ See *Phaedo* 66a2; 78d5, where the phrase is associated with ὁ ἔστι; 100b6 and so forth. At 100d7 it is by the “presence” of the form of Beauty or by “communion” with it that beautiful things are beautiful.

⁴⁸ This seems to be the view of Mary McCabe, *Plato’s Individuals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 224–37, who argues that in *Sophist* the individuality of a form is constructed out of its identity and difference, the latter providing the “context” for individuation.

communion, participating, or interweaving of forms is supposed to be. I would suggest another way of looking at the matter.

Begin with the following question. How does diversity of essence square with the claim that a form is “uniform” (μονοειδές)?⁴⁹ As in the frame (4), uniformity of essence is relativized. That is, the one entity that variously appears as A or B is uniform relative to these. The relativization of uniformity is accounted for by the relativization of essence or οὐσία in *Republic*.⁵⁰ That is why the form of the Good is beyond οὐσία. That is also why such a superordinate form is needed to make forms knowable.⁵¹ Thus, to know that which has relativized essence is to know it as relative to its ultimate explanation.⁵²

The relativization of essence amounts to each form’s not having an independent identity or existence. Another way of stating the same point is that relativized essence negates the substantiality of each form in the Aristotelian sense of that word. That is why, strictly speaking, a form, insofar as it is an essence, does not partake; it is only partaken of.⁵³ A form is not an individual or a τὸδε τί in the

⁴⁹ See *Phaedo* 78d5; 80b2; 83e2; *Symposium* 211b1, e4.

⁵⁰ *Rep* 509b7–8 tells us that “the form of the Good provides existence and essence to forms (ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ὑπ’ ἐκείνου αὐτοῖς προσεῖναι).” The eternal dependence of essences upon that which is “beyond essence (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας)” seems to me to be the proof text for the claim that forms are not to be taken to be independent entities.

⁵¹ *Rep* 509b6–7: “And, so, for things knowable, you should say not only that the Good provides them with their knowability” (Καὶ τοῖς γινώσκομένοις τοίνυν μὴ μόνον τὸ γινώσκεισθαι φάναι ὑπ’ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρεῖναι). Compare 517c4.

⁵² Aristotle makes the same basic point in reference to sensible substances and their attributes at *Met* 7.5. The dependent essence of an attribute is not “capable of being clarified apart from” its subject. Compare 7.5.1030b24–5. Just as no attribute is knowable apart from that of which it is an attribute, so no form is knowable apart from that first principle of all of which it is an expression. One expression is materially identical with another expression which is its definition.

⁵³ It is true that the term μετέχειν is used frequently in reference to the relations among the greatest kinds. See *Soph* 255b3, e5; 256a1, 7, d9, e3; 260d7. However, these relations are not among existents that have any essence apart from that of which they “partake.” Consider the contrast between Helen’s partaking of beauty and the Difference of which the form of Identity partakes. In the first case, Helen has properties specifiable independently of her beauty; in the second case, the form of Identity has no properties independently of the essence it is. The form of Identity “partakes” both of Identity and Difference. This does not mean that “it” has an identity in addition to the essence that it is.

Aristotelian sense. Aristotle was right to argue that a universal could not be a substance and a substance could not be a universal.⁵⁴ Just as Plato did not maintain that a form was an (Aristotelian) universal, so he did not maintain that a form was an (Aristotelian) substance.⁵⁵ Returning to frame (4) above and the example of the Morning Star and the Evening Star, neither of these has an existence independent of Venus such that something we could say truly about it would not also be said truly about Venus.

We can, with (4) and its justification rooted in the relation of the form of the Good to the other forms, explain what it means to say that a form has parts. We read in *Timaeus* that the Demiurge created the world according to a divine model:

[T]he world is the same as, above all things, that Living Being of which all other living beings, individually and according to their kinds, are parts. For that contains and encompasses all the intelligible living beings.⁵⁶

Without the frame (4), the notion of a part of a form is incoherent.⁵⁷ Many scholars have sought to defend Plato from the charge that the form of Living Being is not a *summum genus* with all the absurdities this supposedly implies. Cornford, for example, argues that this form “must be conceived, not as a bare abstraction obtained by leav-

⁵⁴ See *Met* 7.13.1038b35–1039a3; 7.16.1040b25–30; 14.9.1086a32–5. See Francisco Gonzalez, “Plato’s Dialectic of Forms,” *Plato’s Forms*, ed. William Welton (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002), 31–83, esp. 46–7, for a perspicuous expression of the view that Aristotle has constructed a theory of forms according to which forms are both universals and substances. Mary McCabe, *Plato’s Individuals*, 255, believes that Plato is vulnerable to Aristotle’s objection because he does in fact make forms into substantial individuals.

⁵⁵ At the beginning of *Met* 7.6 (1031a15–18) Aristotle says: “[W]e should examine whether each thing is identical with or different from its essence. This is of some use for the investigation of substance; for each thing does not seem to be other than its own substance and the essence is said to be the substance of each thing” (Πότερον δὲ ταῦτόν ἐστιν ἢ ἕτερον τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι καὶ ἕκαστον, σκεπτέον. ἔστι γὰρ τι πρὸ ἔργου πρὸς τὴν περὶ τῆς οὐσίας σκέψιν· ἕκαστόν τε γὰρ οὐκ ἄλλο δοκεῖ εἶναι τῆς ἑαυτοῦ οὐσίας, καὶ τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι λέγεται εἶναι ἢ ἕκαστου οὐσία). A form, in contrast to a “this something,” is not a thing of which it would even make sense to ask whether it is identical with its οὐσία. This is what Aristotle himself goes on to argue in this chapter.

⁵⁶ *Timaeus* 30c5–8: οὗ δ’ ἔστιν ἄλλα ζῶα καθ’ ἓν καὶ κατὰ γένη μόρια, τούτῳ πάντων ομοιώτατον αὐτὸν εἶναι τιθῶμεν. τὰ γὰρ δὴ νοητὰ ζῶα πάντα ἐκεῖνο ἐν ἑαυτῷ περιλαβὸν ἔχει.

ing out all the specific differences determining the subordinate species, but as a whole, richer in content than any of the parts it contains and embraces.⁵⁸ Cornford, though, cannot explain how a “rich content” can be “uniform in essence” or, indeed, how an intelligible entity can have parts.

Similarly, the very idea of the method of collection and division, so prominent in the later dialogues, assumes a partitioning of forms that scarcely seems to make sense.⁵⁹ After all, what is it exactly to “divide” an immaterial entity? If it is divisible, is it not already “divided”? In that case, what does it mean to say that it is “one”? Whatever the division might be supposed to accomplish, it cannot leave us with extensive parts outside of parts, as in “part of my belongings are in Los Angeles and part of them are in London.” On the other hand, the “division” of number into odd and even can be understood according to (4): odd and even are virtually identical or materially identical.⁶⁰ That is, odd and even are the two expression of that which is one, namely, number or integer. In general, any definition, including those per genus and differentia, can be understood in the same way, according to (4): $x =_{df} yz$.⁶¹

⁵⁷ For example, the recourse in the literature to Venn diagrams to explain this obviously will not do. Sometimes, the absurdities adduced at *Parm* 130e–131e if forms have parts is cited as evidence that forms do not have parts. It is clear enough that forms do not have extensive parts. But partitioning of forms in some sense is evident in the *Timaeus* passage as well as in the *Parmenides* passage cited above and in the method of collection and division.

⁵⁸ See Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, 40. See also Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 182–204, especially 185–9, for a criticism of Cornford's interpretation. Also, see Richard Parry, “The Intelligible World-Animal in Plato's *Timaeus*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29 (1991): 13–32, and Mitchell Miller, “The *Timaeus* and the ‘Longer Way’: ‘God-Given’ Method and the Constitution of Elements and Animals,” *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*, ed. Gretchen Reydams-Schils (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 17–59, esp. 41 for other criticisms of the genus/species model.

⁵⁹ See *Phaedrus* 264e–266d; *Soph* 221b–c; 253c–254b; *Statesmen* 262b–d; 287c; *Philebus* 16c–19a.

⁶⁰ Compare *Phaedrus* 244b and following on “the four kinds of madness.”

⁶¹ See Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method*, 216–31, for a good discussion of definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions and for the differences between the method of definition employed in *Phaedo* and *Sophist*. Sayre operates entirely within the formal or logical mode, abstracting from questions about what makes possible defining a form in terms of other forms. See also Alan Silverman, *The Dialectic of Essence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), chap. 6, especially 207–17, though Silverman does not see the need for virtuality, that is, ultimate ontological identity.

The truth of a material identity statement may be completely in doubt, or it may be accepted for no good reason, or it may be grasped as self-evident. In the latter case, it borders on a formal identity statement, as in “ $2 + 2 = 4$.” Presumably, an omniscient mind would be the locus of formal identity where all true material identity claims converge. The philosophical passage from doubt and lack of clarity to self-evidence is what the science of dialectic is supposed by Plato to be. At the end of book 6 of *Republic*, Plato distinguishes the mathematicians who take as hypotheses their definitions and axioms.⁶² They are contrasted with true dialecticians who are able to ascend to a first unhypothetical principle and then able to grasp the array of forms in their complexity. The former engage in “discursive thinking” (διάνοια) while the latter have “understanding” (νόησις) or “knowledge” (ἐπιστήμη).⁶³

There is little doubt that this first unhypothetical principle is the form of the Good described just one Stephanus page earlier as being “beyond οὐσία” and the explanation for the essence, existence, and knowability of forms. Leaving aside for the moment why the superordinate form is called “Good” and even whether Aristotle accurately represents Plato as holding that “the form of the Good” and “the One” refer to the same thing, we can give a reasonably precise meaning to the claim that this form accounts for the essence and knowability of the other forms. For one thing, to know a form would seem to entail being able to give a λόγος of it. Further, insofar as we may assume that the science of dialectic at least includes the practice of collection and division, knowing a form will amount to grasping its “location” in the entire array of intelligible entities. Therefore, the knowability of a form depends upon there being a self-identical entity expressed or represented in the material identity statement that is the definition. One could not know what F is unless one knows why $F =_{df} GH$. This could not be true unless there were one self-identical entity underlying the material identity statement. In similar fashion, to see the “one form extended everywhere through many forms lying apart” requires that there be a virtual identity of these many forms.⁶⁴

⁶² See *Rep* 510b and following.

⁶³ For the implicit identification of the two see 533d4–7.

⁶⁴ *Soph* 253d5–6. Compare *Philebus* 16d1–7.

It is not difficult to make the conceptual connection between the two points. Since knowability and essence of forms depend on the Good unrestrictedly, they apply to the forms that are divided, the putative generic forms, too. Either we must suppose that these forms are not knowable or, if they are, then their knowability and essence rest on their being expressions of the self-identical form of the Good. In this light, the identification of the form of the Good as “that which is one” makes excellent sense.⁶⁵ Virtual identity and difference in essence amount to the relativization of the essence of the forms, that is, to their ontological dependence, like the ontological dependence of the Morning Star and Evening Star on the planet named “Venus” or red and blue light on “white” light. Plato tells us that this ontological dependence is on the first principle of all, “that which is one.”⁶⁶

An obvious objection to this interpretation is that identity flows from essence. Therefore, diversity of essence requires diversity of identity and hence multiple existents. Indeed, if each of the “greatest kinds” is different owing to partaking of the form of Difference, must it not also be the case that each of them is self-identical owing to

⁶⁵ Aristotle explicitly identifies the One with the Good at *Met* 15.4.1091b13-14, though he does not here refer specifically to Plato. Compare *Eudemean Ethics* 1.8.1218a24-8; *Met* 1.6.987b18-22. The term τὸ ἓν can, of course, be used as a name or a definite description. Since the first principle is “beyond οὐσία,” however, a “definite description” of it is not, strictly speaking, available. Still, “that which is one” would be the best way to refer to that which is the identifying unity beneath the multiplicity of forms.

⁶⁶ The form of the Good is virtually all the forms roughly in the sense in which white light is virtually all the colors of the spectrum or a working calculator contains virtually all the answers to the questions that can be legitimately asked of it. Compare *Philebus* 65a1-5 where the Good is said to be “one” and a “mixture” (συνμειξίει) of “beauty,” “measure,” and “truth.” I am not here claiming that the account of the “contents” of the Good is the same in *Republic* and *Philebus*. I am claiming only that material identity is the concept relevant to understanding the complexity of the unity or “mixture.” See Mitchell Miller, “Figure, Ratio, form: Plato’s Five Mathematical Studies,” *Recognition, Remembrance, and Reality*, ed. Mark McPherran (Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1999), 86, who speaks of the forms as “cases of the [form of the] Good.” I take it that his formulation is equivalent to mine. Gerasimos Santas, *Goodness and Justice. Plato, Aristotle, and the Modern* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell’s Publishing Ltd., 2001), 186, has, I think, the same basic intuition when he claims that “the ideal attributes of all the other Forms are the proper attributes of the Form of the Good.” Ideal attributes are those that belong to forms qua forms; proper attributes are those that belong to forms qua their natures or their being. See Aristotle, *Topics* 5.7.137b3-13 on roughly the same distinction.

participating in the form of Identity? There must be something to this objection for the intelligibility of (4) rests on it. It is answered only in part by pointing out that virtual identity is not formal identity, what is expressed in (2) and (3). Plato must show that the formally self-identical A and B can be virtually identical and that it is virtual identity, not formal identity, that undergirds the diversity of essence discovered in dialectic.

Understanding formal identity is parasitic on understanding material identity, at least for all existing things. For the way we understand that something is formally identical or identical with itself is by a series of material identity claims, converging on a formal identity claim.⁶⁷ These material identity claims often originate in claims that two things are the same and so the respect in which they are the same constitutes a material identity indicating a formal identity. Thus, for example, for cases of spatiotemporal formal identity, we say that the A here and now is (materially) identical with the A there and then. Stated otherwise, we say that the formally identical thing appears in the same way or as having the same attributes in a succession of spatiotemporal “cuts.” In the latter case, we mean that formal identity is constituted out of the actual or supposed potential material identity of all the “cuts.”

As for how this applies to the intelligible world, let us return for a moment to the implication of the deductions for the “greatest kinds.” The form of Difference is different from other forms because it partakes of the form of Difference, not because of its own nature, that is, not because its own nature is just different from every other form. Analogously, the form of Identity is self-identical owing to its partaking of the form of Identity, not because of its own nature, that is, not because its own nature is just self-identical. Presumably, what is true

⁶⁷ See *Parm.* 139e8: “That which is self-identical is, I suppose, the same” (τὸ ταῦτόν που πεπονθὸς ὁμοίον). Also, 148a3, d1–4. We judge something as self-identical by judging the material identity or sameness of its appearances. Aristotle repeats the definition at *Met.* 5.9.1018a15–16 in a manner that is at once more perspicuous and also somewhat more puzzling, assuming the text is correct: “Things are said to be the same that are in every way affected by what is self-identical” (ὅμοια λέγεται τὰ τε πάντα ταῦτο πεπονθότα). Some manuscripts eliminate the πάντα, which seems right given what is said at 11.3.1054b9–10. Things do not have to be the same in every way to be the same. Assuming that πάντα stays, we may suppose that Aristotle is taking the maximal case of sameness, which evidently collapses into formal identity.

for a form and its partaking of the nature that its own name names is also true for every other form of which it partakes. Each form has an identity, to be sure, but that identity is entirely expressed in the essence or nature of which it partakes. In other words, the determination of the formal identity of the form is just what results from the analysis in dialectic of the essence of which it partakes.

The formal identity of the relativized essence of forms underlies the description of forms in the later dialogues as “ones.” In *Philebus*, the question is raised whether such “ones” (μονάδα) should be hypothesized at all.

First, should we hypothesize the real existence of such monads; second, how should we hypothesize the essence of each, since each is always self-identical and accepts neither generation nor destruction, but is nevertheless most assuredly the one thing it is though it is then found in an unlimited number of generable things. Should it in this case be hypothesized as dispersed and having become many or as a whole that has become separate from itself, being simultaneously self-identical and one though it comes to be in one and many things (which would seem to be the most impossible alternative).⁶⁸

The unity at issue here is the “weak” or relative unity that is entailed by relativized essence. This is the essence or nature that is variously present in the intelligible and the sensible world. To take the immediate *Philebus* example, “sound” (φωνή) is or has a sort of unity, which means its nature is distinct from other natures. Similarly, kinds of sound are each one in the same way. Sound, however, or its “species,” are not in themselves one or many.⁶⁹ To take a different example, “the whale” is a distinct nature, though it is itself neither one nor many. Therefore, neither sound nor the whale exists independently as such. Dependent existence entails weak unity. A genuine intelligible nature does, however, have “strong” existence in the form of

⁶⁸ *Philebus* 15b1–8: πρῶτον μὲν εἴ τινας δεῖ τοιαύτας εἶναι μονάδας ὑπολαμβάνειν ἀληθῶς οὐσας· εἶτα πῶς αὖ ταύτας μίαν ἐκάστην οὐσαν αἰτὴν αὐτὴν καὶ μήτε γένεσιν μήτε ὄλεθρον προσδεχομένην, ὅμως εἶναι βεβαιώτατα μίαν ταύτην; μετὰ δὲ τοῦτ' ἐν τοῖς γιγνομένοις αὐ καὶ ἀπειροῖς εἴτε διεσπασμένην καὶ πολλὰ γεγονυῖαν θετέον, εἴθ' ὅλην αὐτὴν αὐτῆς χωρὶς, ὃ δὴ πάντων ἀδθηνατώτατον φαίνοιτ' ἄν, ταῦτόν καὶ ἓν ἄμα ἓν ἐνὶ τε καὶ πολλοῖς γίγνεσθαι.

⁶⁹ I take it that this analysis complements the insightful account of Mitchell Miller, “Unwritten Teachings’ in the *Parmenides*,” *Review of Metaphysics* 48 (1995): 591–633.

the Good and as instantiated in its images. In the *Philebus* example, Socrates says that

We should hypothesize a single form with respect to everything and then search for it – for we will find it – and if we then attain it, we should look for two, if there are two, or else for three or whatever the number is; each should be dealt with in the same way until one can see of the original one not only that it is one, a plurality, and an indefinite number, but also its precise quantity.⁷⁰

The “one” that is a “plurality” (= many ones) and an “indefinite number” is one precisely in the above weak sense. The one nature that sound is, is present in its multiple species and in the indefinite number of sensible instances of it. The definition of sound—or of any other nature—is materially identical with it. The entity underlying this material identity is the first principle of all, the form of the Good or “that which is one,” which is virtually all the intelligible natures there are.

Understanding the forms in this way, we can see the point Plato is making in claiming that

[T]hat which is one is self-identical and different from itself, and, in the same way, identical with and different from the others.⁷¹

The self-identical intelligible nature can be present in an instance of the form, which is at the same time different from it.⁷² This is what we saw Plato wanted to indicate at *Phaedo* 74c4–5 by saying that form and instance were the same but not identical. The identical nature is (a) present in form and instance (hence their sameness), but (b) the instance is different from the paradigm. How can this be? The first point is glossed by saying that, for example, neither the form of Largeness nor the largeness in us admit of smallness.⁷³ The second point is

⁷⁰ *Philebus*, 16c10–d7: δεῖν οὖν ἡμᾶς τούτων οὕτω διακεκοσμημένων ἀεὶ μίαν ἰδέαν περὶ παντὸς ἐκάστοτε θεμένουθς ζητεῖν - εὐρήσειν γὰρ ἐνοῦσαν - ἐὰν οὖν μεταλάβωμεν, μετὰ μίαν δύο, εἴ πως εἰσί, σκοπεῖν, εἴ δὲ μή, τρεῖς ἢ τινα ἄλλον ἀριθμόν, καὶ τῶν ἐν ἐκείνων ἕκαστον πάλιν ὡσαύτως, μέγιστον ἂν τὸ κατ' ἀρχὰς ἐν μὴ ὅτι ἐν καὶ πολλὰ καὶ ἄπειρά ἐστι μόνον ἴδη τις, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὀπίσα.

⁷¹ *Parm* 146a9–b1: Καὶ μὴν ταυτόν δεῖ εἶναι αὐτὸ ἑαυτῷ καὶ ἕτερον ἑαυτοῦ, καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὡσαύτως ταυτόν τε καὶ ἕτερον εἶναι. “The others” here, I take it, refers to instances of “that which is one.” Since each of these is one, the point made at 142b5–c2 applies generally to them. That is, each one of “the others” partakes of essence; if it did not, it would not exist.

⁷² *Ibid.* 146c8–d1: ἕτερον ἄρα, ὡς ἔοικεν, εἴη ταύτη ἂν ἑαυτοῦ τὸ ἐν.

glossed by saying that an account or λόγος of the instance would necessarily be different from an account of the form. Thus, to give an account of Largeness would not be equivalent to giving an account of, say, Simmias' largeness. The latter account would have to include his particular "amount" of largeness—his divided essence. That this account is not equivalent to the account of Largeness follows immediately from the fact that it would also be an account of Simmias' smallness, whereas the account of Largeness is not an account of Smallness.⁷⁴

Understanding forms in this way, that is, as natures rather than as really distinct entities or substances, is also the only way, I believe, that enables us to take seriously talk about "interweaving" or "communing" of forms and of the very process of dialectical investigation. For in dialectic we do not "connect" entities; rather, we conceptualize the diverse natures belonging to the intelligible realm.⁷⁵ The collecting and dividing of forms is neither the conceptualizing itself nor, absurdly, the collecting and dividing of entities, like heaps of mined gold portioned into pieces of jewelry. It is the mental operations performed on the natures which, since their essences are relativized and relativizable, can be worked on in thought. Yet as *Republic* makes clear, the dialectical operation is only available for someone who recognized the first principle, first in the sense of being the cause of

⁷³ See *Phaedo* 102d6–8. Compare 103b5.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 102c10–d2, which literally says that Simmias "takes the name of small and large." The account of Simmias' smallness and largeness is the same account because smallness and largeness are not understood by Plato as relations between entities but properties that, in this case, one entity has.

⁷⁵ Compare *Parm* 135b5–c2 where Parmenides makes the remarkable claim that if "one will not grant that there are forms of things" (μη εἰσεί εἶδη τῶν ὄντων), "the power of conversation" (τὴν τοῦ διαλέγεσθαι δύναμιν) will be destroyed. This claim makes little sense if it takes forms to be entities rather than natures, whose existence is a condition for the intelligibility of the identities and differences constituting conceptualization. See Gregor Damschen, "Grenzen des Gesprächs über Ideen. Die Formen des Wissens und die Notwendigkeit der Ideen in Platons *Parmenides*," *Platon und Aristoteles – sub ratione veritatis*, ed. Gregor Damschen, Rainer Enskat, and Alejandro G. Vigo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 31–75, esp. 59–64, for a good discussion of this passage and the claim that the forms are the condition for the possibility of discourse.

existence, essence, and knowability for the forms.⁷⁶ In addition, we can in the above way understand the communing of forms with actions and bodies as well as with one another, as *Republic* states.⁷⁷ That communing is the divisible presence of the nature or essence in something said to partake of it, like a just action or a beautiful body. Finally, understanding that the relativization of the essence of the form means that the form has become just what the form's name names allows us to give a non-arbitrary account of why the regress arguments in *Parmenides* do not get off the ground. Partaking of the nature of, say, largeness does not require that there be an intelligible entity that is also large. The only entity with which the form is associated is the first principle, and that entity is only virtually large. Consequently, there are no grounds for saying that the large man and that putative entity are the same because they are both large, even though we can say that the nature which is present both in the intelligible world and in the sensible world is self-identical.⁷⁸

Supposing that the relations among forms can be understood according to the unity underlying the various cases of material identity, we still need to ask about the cogency of the distinction between iden-

⁷⁶ *Rep* 511c8–d2: διὰ δὲ τὸ μὴ ἐπ' ἀπλήν ἀνελθόντες σκοπεῖν ἀλλ' ἐξ ὑποθέσεων, νοῦν οὐκ ἴσχειν περὶ αὐτὰ δοκοῦσι σοι, καίτοι νοητῶν ὄντων μετὰ ἀρχῆς. Most English translators miss the force of the last phrase, “although the things themselves are intelligible with a first principle.” The implication is that without such a first principle, the objects of mathematical science are not intelligible. They are intelligible only with this. See James Adam, *Plato's Republic. Edited with Critical Notes, Commentary, and Appendices* 2d ed., vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), appendix, pp. 86–7, who argued that the puzzle in this passage is that Plato seems to imply that the objects of mathematics are intelligible (compare 510b2; 511a3, b3) independently of the first principle. Returning to 509b6, however, it is the first principle that makes all intelligibles knowable. Mathematicians do not use the first principle, that is, they do not affirm the virtual identity of their objects.

⁷⁷ See *Rep* 476a4–7.

⁷⁸ This is the only way to exclude the self-predication of forms nonarbitrarily. See Gail Fine, *On Ideas: Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Theory of Forms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 61–4, who thinks that Plato is committed to “broad” self-predication. It is not clear to me whether broad self-predication is different from the form's identity being just what its name names. Fine, 230–1, takes one implication of broad self-predication to be that the form and instance are “synonymous,” although this synonymy is not sufficient to generate the third man argument. Malcolm believes that Plato failed to distinguish the form as paradigm from the form as universal (*Plato on Self-Predication*, 159–66).

tity and sameness. It is important to see that here the “strong” identity of the first principle of all entails its uniqueness. It is only the “weak” identity of the forms that guarantees the uniqueness of each of these.⁷⁹ The form of the Good or “that which is one” is unique in exactly the way that the nominalist claims that identity entails uniqueness. The form of the Good could not be the same as anything else. Necessarily, it is uniquely not a composite of “that which exists” and “the essence of which it partakes.” The identity that the subordinate forms possess does guarantee their own sort of uniqueness, too. It is, however, the identity of that which is composite, that which is distinct from the essence of which it partakes. This identity also entails that no form could be the same as any other. If this were not so, then no form could be uniform. The identity that a form as nature has, though, is not strong enough to entail the impossibility that its essence should be multiply partaken of, as the nominalist claims. It is not impossible that the identical nature should be multiply present such that we can say that several things are the same with respect to that nature. This is because the nature in itself is neither one nor many; it does not have the oneness of an entity or substance, and it does not have the many-ness of a universal.

The uniqueness of that which is “beyond essence” entails its simplicity. For being composite entails having essence. Partaking of essence is the only way that something gets to be composite. Therefore, anything that is not beyond essence, that is, everything else, must be “composite” in the relevant sense. That is, it must be a composite of that which identifies it as this existent and the essence of which it partakes. To claim that identity precludes sameness, from a Platonic perspective, amounts to claiming that each identical thing is utterly unique in the way that only the form of the Good can be utterly unique. Four-dimensional uniqueness—presumably, the sort of uniqueness that the nominalist wants to argue precludes sameness among non-identical things—does not get the job done, or rather it gets the job done too well. For what is four-dimensionally unique cannot even be reidentified. And without the ability to reidentify, it is not even clear what it would mean to claim that such things exist. If, however, the

⁷⁹ See *Rep* 597c1–9 where an argument for the uniqueness of the form of the Bed is provided. No such argument is necessary for the uniqueness of the form of the Good, understood as virtually all the other forms.

identity is construed such that reidentification is possible, then that is because the thing has an identity distinct from the essence of which it partakes.⁸⁰ For the only way to identify things that are unique in this way is to reidentify them on the basis of the essence of which they partake. The relativization of the essence of forms belongs in the account of why partaking of essence does not just re-establish a unique identity for each putative participant. I mean that on the basis of the weak identity of forms as natures, we do not have to suppose that frame (1) represents an impossible state of affairs. The identity of the form as nature or essence is not strong enough to entail that one instance of that form cannot be the same as another. The essence does not overwhelm the identity of the instance. Indeed, on this line of reasoning, nothing that partakes of essence has an identity that is overwhelmed by that essence. The fact that the identity and essence must be really distinct precludes this.

I have tried to show in this paper that comprehending Plato's metaphysics requires serious attention to his use of the concepts of identity, sameness, and difference. That is perhaps a not surprising claim. I have also tried to show, admittedly in a sketchy and indecently peremptory fashion, that inattention to these concepts leads to some exegetically and philosophically unsatisfactory results. To say, for example, as some do, that Plato does not really take the form of the Good seriously or that the "interweaving" of forms is just a metaphor or that the regress arguments in *Parmenides* are not meant seriously and in need of a serious solution is simply to sell Plato short. To do this is not only to betray the text again and again; it amounts to making the success of anti-Platonic arguments all but inevitable.⁸¹

University of Toronto

⁸⁰ This would result from relaxing the criteria for identity such that we could say that something was self-identical if either the spatial coordinates or the temporal coordinate varied while the other remained the same.

⁸¹ I am especially grateful to Prof. Mitchell Miller for reading an earlier draft of this paper. Miller saved me from a number of errors and encouraged me to clarify numerous points. I have also been immensely stimulated by his own writings on Plato's metaphysics, more so than the citations in this paper indicate.