

9. The Forms

Matter constitutes one principle, but Plato postulates others also, to wit, the paradigmatic, that is the forms, and that constituted by God the father and cause of all things. Form is considered in relation to God, his thinking; in relation to us, the primary object of thought; in relation to Matter, measure; in relation to the sensible world, its paradigm; and in relation to itself, essence. For in general everything that we can conceptualize must come to be in reference to something, of which the paradigm must pre-exist, just as if one thing were to be derived from another, in the way that my image derives from me; and even if the paradigm does not always subsist externally, in any event every artist, having the paradigm in himself, applies the structure of it to matter.

Form is defined as an eternal model of things that are in accordance with nature. For most Platonists do not accept that there are forms of artificial objects, such as a shield or a lyre, nor of things that are contrary to nature, like fever or cholera, nor of individuals, like Socrates and Plato, not yet of any trivial thing, such as dirt or chaff, nor of relations, such as the greater or the superior. For the forms are eternal and perfect thoughts of God.

They justify the existence of forms in the following way also. Whether God is an intellect or is possessed of intellect, he has thoughts, and these are eternal and unchanging; and if this is the case, forms exist. For if matter is unmeasured in its own right, it needs to receive measures from something else superior to it and immaterial. But the former is true; therefore so is the latter; and if this is the case, then forms exist as a type of immaterial measure.

Further, if the world is not such as it is by accident, it has not only been generated *from* something, but also *by* something (or someone); and not only this, but also *with reference to* something. But what could that with reference to which it is generated be other than form? So forms exist.

But further, if intellect differs from true opinion, then also the objects of intellection differ from the objects of opinion. But if this is the case, then there are objects of intellection distinct from objects of opinion. So there will also be primary objects of intellection, just as there are primary objects of sense-perception. But if this is so, then forms exist. But in fact intellect does differ from true opinion; so that forms exist.

10. God

We must next discuss the third principle, which Plato declares to be more or less beyond description. However, we might arrive by induction at some notion of it in the following fashion. If there exist objects of intellection, and these are neither sense-perceptible nor participate in what is sense-perceptible, but rather in certain primary objects of intellection, then there exist primary objects of intellection in an absolute sense, just as there exist primary objects of sense perception. But the former is true; therefore so is the latter. Since human beings are filled with sense-impressions, with the result that even when they set out to direct their minds to the intelligible, they still retain in their imaginations sensible images, to the extent of conceiving along with it often a notion of size, or shape, or colour, it is impossible for them to acquire any pure conception of the intelligibles, but the gods are free from sense-perception, and therefore apprehend them in a pure and uncontaminated mode.

Since intellect is superior to soul, and superior to potential intellect there is actualized intellect, which cognizes everything simultaneously and eternally, and finer than this again is the cause of this and whatever it is that has an existence still prior to these, this it is that would be the primal God, being the cause of the eternal activity of the intellect of the whole heaven. It acts on this while remaining itself unmoved, as does the sun on vision, when this is directed towards it, and as the object of desire moves desire, while remaining motionless itself. In just this way will this intellect move the intellect of the whole heaven.

Since the primary intellect is the finest of things, it follows that the object of its intelligizing must also be supremely fine. But there is nothing finer than this intellect. Therefore it must be everlastingly engaged in thinking of itself and its own thoughts, and this activity of it is Form.

The primary god, then, is eternal, ineffable, "self-perfect" (that is, deficient in no respect), "ever-perfect" (that is, always perfect), and "all-perfect" (that is, perfect in all respects); divinity, essentiality, truth, commensurability, beauty, good. I am not listing these terms as being distinct from one another, but on the assumption that one single thing is being denoted by all of them. He is the Good, because he benefits all things according to their capacities, being the cause of all good. He is the Beautiful, because he himself by his own nature is perfect and commensurable; Truth, because he is the origin of all truth, as the sun is of all light; he is Father through being the cause of all things and bestowing

order on the heavenly Intellect and the soul of the world in accordance with himself and his own thoughts. By his own will he has filled all things with himself, rousing up the soul of the world and turning it towards himself, as being the cause of its intellect. It is this latter that, set in order by the Father, itself imposes order on all of nature in this world.

God is ineffable and graspable only by the intellect, as we have said, since he is neither genus, nor species, nor differentia, nor does he possess any attributes, neither bad (for it is improper to utter such a thought), nor good (for he would be thus by participation in something, to wit, goodness), nor indifferent (for neither is this in accordance with the concept we have of him), nor yet qualified (for he is not endowed with quality, nor is his peculiar perfection due to qualification) nor unqualified (for he is not deprived of any quality which might accrue to him). Further, he is not a part of anything, nor is he in the position of being a whole which has parts, nor is he the same as anything or different from anything; for no attribute is proper to him, in virtue of which he could be distinguished from other things. Also, he neither moves anything, nor is he himself moved.

Transl. By John Dillon (*Alcinous: The Handbook of Platonism*; Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993)