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Socratic Metaphysics

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SOCRATIC METAPHYSICS*

INTRODUCTION

Did Socrates have a metaphysics? The question is complex. We might begin by asking, what is a metaphysics? We might also ask, who we mean by Socrates? Let me deal with these questions in order. Metaphysics is concerned with what lies at the foundation of things, the principles underlying reality. In this essay, that will mean primarily an ontology, a theory of 'what there is'. Now one point on which the authors discussed in this article agree, a 'point of departure' that anchors their various views about *Socratic* metaphysics, is that *Plato* had a metaphysics: as Gregory Vlastos puts it, 'a grandiose theory of "separately existing" Forms' (Vlastos 1991: 48).¹ This ontology is found in the *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and *Republic*. Our authors agree further that the Platonic Forms are universals, causes, paradigms or standards, and in some sense self-predicational ('the Form of *F* itself is *F*'). Given this level of agreement on *Platonic* metaphysics, we can ask three questions about *Socratic* metaphysics: Did Socrates espouse Platonic metaphysics? Did he espouse some predecessor to Platonic metaphysics? Or was Socrates 'innocent' of metaphysics?

As to the identity of Socrates, there are two possibilities. 'Socrates' may be taken to

refer to the historical figure who is the source for the Platonic portrait in the dialogues, or to the Socrates of the Platonic portrait itself. Of the authors I shall discuss, only Gregory Vlastos insists that he is seeking the historical Socrates. The rest are content to deal with the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues. This is, in my judgement, the only Socrates about whom we have information adequate to provide an answer to the ontological question. When this question is confined to the Socrates of the dialogues, the question then becomes, which dialogues? One possibility is that we should look at the views of the character named 'Socrates' in *all* the dialogues in which he appears. This approach is connected with an interpretive strategy called 'unitarianism'. The unitarian treats the complete set of dialogues as a whole and does not divide them into temporally distinct groups with distinct doctrines. For the unitarian the answer to the question whether the Socrates of the dialogues has an ontology is clear, for there is no doubt that the character named 'Socrates' in the *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and *Republic* espouses an ontology of Forms.

The unitarian approach has not been dominant in the modern era, though it was widely accepted among Plato's readers and interpreters in antiquity. The predominant

approach to the interpretation of the dialogues in the twentieth century, however, is what has been called 'developmentalism'. The developmentalist divides the dialogues into three groups: an early or Socratic group, which represents the thought of Socrates, a middle or Platonic group and a late group. (Only the first two groups will be relevant to this essay.)² The developmentalist rejects the solution to the problem of Socratic metaphysics offered by the unitarian, on the grounds that the ontology of the middle period dialogues is Platonic rather than Socratic. For the developmentalist, the question of Socratic metaphysics is confined to the early dialogues. Only the Socrates of the early dialogues counts as representing the thought of Socrates. So the question of this essay becomes: Does the Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues possess an ontology, a theory of 'what there is'?

Here controversy has swirled around several texts: *Protagoras* (330c–331c), in which Socrates gets Protagoras to admit that justice is something that exists and is just, and likewise for piety; *Meno* (72a–73a), in which Socrates compares the nature of virtue to the nature of a bee, and also to health, strength and size; *Hippias Major* (287b–e), in which justice, wisdom, goodness and beauty (the fine, *to kalon*) are said to be that by which things are just, wise, good and fine, by *being* those respective properties; and, most importantly, *Euthyphro* (5c–d and 6d–e). In these two passages, Socrates, in challenging Euthyphro to define piety and in criticizing his first attempt to define piety, puts forward what has seemed to several scholars to be a theory of forms:

(E1) SOCRATES: . . . So tell me now, by Zeus, what you just now maintained you clearly knew: what kind of thing do you

say that godliness and ungodliness are, both as regards murder and other things; or is the pious not the same and alike in every action, and the impious the opposite of all that is pious and like itself, and everything that is to be impious presents us with one form (*idean*, d4) or appearance in so far as it is impious?

EUTHYPHRO: Most certainly, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Tell me then, what is the pious, and what the impious, do you say? (5c–d, trans. Grube)³

And,

(E2) SOCRATES: Bear in mind then that I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions but that form (*eidōs*, d11) itself that makes all pious actions pious, for you agreed that all impious actions are impious and all pious actions pious through one form (*idea*, e1), or don't you remember?

EUTHYPHRO: I do.

SOCRATES: Tell me then what this form (*idean*, e4) itself is, so that I may look upon it, and using it as a model (*paradeigmati*, e6), say that any action of yours that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not. (6d–e)

These two passages are centrally important, the 'proof texts' for those who would maintain the existence of an ontology, a version of the theory of forms, in the early dialogues. (All of the authors considered in this essay regard the *Euthyphro* as an early dialogue.) For proponents of this view, Plato's use of *eidōs*, *idea* and *paradeigma* to denominate the entities mentioned in these passages prefigures the full-blown theory of Forms in the middle dialogues. The claim that there is one form for all the instances of piety, a 'One over

Many', marks piety as a universal, a common property.⁴ The claim that it is 'through' one form of piety that all pious things are pious marks piety as a 'cause' of pious actions. The statement that forms are *paradeigmata*, paradigms or models, marks piety as a standard for the application of the term 'pious'. Paradeigmatism leads to self-predication, the assertion that the form of *F* is *F*. Socrates' rejection of definition by distinguishing mark (*Euthyphro* 9e–11b) indicates that the definition of piety must describe its nature, or essence. This impressive looking set of claims appears to constitute a metaphysical theory, one that strongly resembles the middle period theory of Forms. How does it differ from that theory? Primarily on the issue of separation. The forms in the early period do not exist in separation from their participants; those in the middle period do.⁵ There is disagreement among proponents of this distinction concerning the nature of separation and the amount of difference it makes to the two theories. For some interpreters (Allen and me, in particular), separation is a serious issue, marking a large-scale difference between the theories and requiring a difference in the kind of entities forms can be said to be (unseparated forms being properties, but separate Forms being substances). For Fine, in contrast, the difference between the unseparated forms of the early dialogues and the separated Forms of the middle dialogues is much more modest, with forms of both kinds being treated as properties. For Francesco Fronterotta, the germ (at least) of separation, and thus of the middle period theory of Forms, is already present in the early theory.

The question of separation is connected with the testimony of Aristotle concerning the metaphysical views of Socrates and Plato. In several places (notably, *Metaphysics* A.6, M.4 and M.9) Aristotle discusses the views of

'Socrates' on matters of definition and their metaphysical implications, and compares them to those of Plato. Numerous questions arise from these passages: Is the 'Socrates' of these texts the character of the dialogues or the historical figure? Does 'Socrates' have a metaphysical view? What does Aristotle mean by 'definitions'? But the key claim of these passages is that 'Socrates' did not separate the forms, whereas Plato did. Aristotle's claims have been subject to scrutiny; it has been questioned whether we ought to rely on them for our interpretation of Socrates. The authors I discuss take a number of different views on this question. Most tend to accept Aristotle's testimony, but Allen is critical of Aristotle as a historian of philosophy.

They also take a variety of positions on the question of Socratic metaphysics. Russell Dancy takes the most extreme, anti-metaphysical view and draws the sharpest distinction between Socrates and Plato. For Dancy the early dialogues contain a theory of definitions but no metaphysics; the metaphysics emerges in the middle dialogues and belongs not to Socrates but to Plato. Dancy relies on Aristotle's testimony to support his view. Gregory Vlastos holds the view closest to Dancy's. Like Dancy, he takes an anti-metaphysical line on the philosophy of Socrates. He makes the important concession that there is an ontology of forms in the *Euthyphro* and other early dialogues, but he denies that it is a theory. For Vlastos, Socrates is 'exclusively a moral philosopher', for he never asks critical questions about the ontology he holds.

R. E. Allen, Gail Fine and I, in contrast, hold that there is a metaphysical theory present in the early dialogues, an early version of the theory of forms. I criticize Vlastos for denying that the metaphysics of the early dialogues is a theory. I argue that it is *a* theory,

and following Allen, that it is similar, but not identical to, *the* theory of the middle dialogues. It is Allen who labels this theory the ‘earlier theory of Forms’. If Gregory Vlastos holds the majority opinion about Socratic metaphysics, Allen is the leader of the minority view. My agreement with Allen is nearly complete; we hold the same view of Socratic metaphysics, but we have slightly different views on separation. We also disagree about the testimony of Aristotle; like Fine, I take Aristotle’s view of Socrates’ ontology to be reliable, whereas Allen is critical of it. Fine takes it that there is a Socratic theory of forms and that it differs from the Platonic theory on the question of separation, but is otherwise the same. Fronterotta, finally, criticizes my view (and that of other scholars mentioned above) that there is development between the ontology of the early and that of the middle dialogues. Fronterotta is a unitarian, or, to use his term, an ‘anti-developmental’.

Why is this question important? It might seem at first glance to be a question of a rather technical sort, based on disputed readings of isolated texts. Further reflection reveals, however, that it is an interpretative question of essential importance for our understanding of Socrates. The metaphysical Socrates differs from the anti-metaphysical Socrates in fundamental ways; ways that affect our reading of all the early and middle dialogues, and bring into play the general interpretative strategies of unitarianism and developmentalism. If ‘Socrates_E’, as Gregory Vlastos called the Socrates of the early dialogues, had a theory of forms, then he is much closer to ‘Socrates_M’, the Socrates of the middle dialogues, than anti-metaphysical interpreters such as Dancy and Vlastos can admit (though exactly how close the two Socrateses are to each other is a matter of controversy). But more important, the answer we give to

the question, ‘Did Socrates have a metaphysics?’ decisively shapes our understanding of the nature of Socrates’ philosophical inquiry, which is central to everything we know about him, and thus our portrait of Socrates. Socrates was one of the great philosophers of the ancient world – indeed, of the entire history of Western thought – and the question whether we should see him exclusively as a moral philosopher, as Vlastos claimed, or as a philosopher with a metaphysics is of fundamental importance to our understanding of him. That is the primary reason for us to investigate this question.

THE ANTI-METAPHYSICAL INTERPRETATION

DANCY’S VIEW

The first view that I shall consider is that of Russell Dancy. Dancy presents his interpretation of Socrates’ view on metaphysics in *Plato’s Introduction of Forms* (Dancy 2004) and in ‘Platonic Definitions and Forms’ (Dancy 2006: 70–84). Dancy is a developmentalist. (In this respect his view resembles that of Vlastos, which we shall consider below.) He distinguishes a group of early dialogues, including the *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Protagoras*, and Book I of the *Republic*, from a middle group, including the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*; the *Meno* he takes to be transitional (Dancy 2006: 70). He classifies the early, definitional dialogues as non-doctrinal and the *Meno*, *Phaedo* and *Symposium* as doctrinal (Dancy 2004: 4–6). Dancy’s interpretation assumes a development over time from one group of dialogues to the other. Specifically, the early dialogues are concerned

with a search for definitions, which is not metaphysical in character. The middle dialogues, on the other hand, introduce the theory of Forms; this theory is said to be absent before the *Phaedo*. The *Meno* is transitional in that it introduces a philosophical doctrine, the doctrine of Recollection, which goes beyond anything in the Socratic dialogues. In the *Phaedo* this doctrine is explicitly linked to the theory of Forms (Dancy 2004: 10–11). Dancy writes, ‘Socrates was concerned with definitions in the domain of “ethical matters”’, while ‘Plato’s adoption of Socrates’ quest for definitions took a special turn: Plato made the objects of definition, “forms”, *distinct or separate* from perceptible things. And we shall find this taking place not in the Socratic dialogues, but in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*’ (Dancy 2006: 70). Dancy denies the Allen/Fine/Prior view, discussed below, that the *Euthyphro* contains a ‘Theory of Forms’ (Dancy 2004: 11).

Dancy accepts the testimony of Aristotle that ‘Socrates did not make the universals or the definitions exist apart’ (*Metaphysics* M.4, 1078b30–31), which he reads as supporting his distinction between the early, non-doctrinal dialogues and the middle, doctrinal ones. He is also inclined to accept the view that attributes the philosophical positions of the Socrates of the early dialogues to the historical Socrates and the views of the Socrates of the middle dialogues to Plato, though he concedes that for purposes of discussion ‘occurrences of the name ‘Socrates’ need only be taken as referring to the character in Plato’s dialogues’ (Dancy 2006: 70).

For Dancy, a key to the distinction between the early and middle dialogues lies in the Argument from Relativity:

- There exists a form of *F* (e.g. the Beautiful).

- Ordinary *F* things are also not-*F* (beautiful things are also ugly).
- The form is never not-*F* (the Beautiful is never ugly).
- Therefore, the form of *F* is not the same as any ordinary *F* thing (the Beautiful is not the same as any ordinary beautiful thing).

This argument does not appear in the Socratic dialogues, though it is anticipated in the *Hippias Major*. It does, however, appear in the middle dialogues (Dancy 2006: 71). Dancy believes that this argument is the same as the Argument from Flux, which Aristotle uses to distinguish the views of Socrates from those of Plato (Dancy 2004: 18–19). The Argument from Relativity/Flux marks the onset of Platonic metaphysics, in particular the theory of Forms. What Dancy does is ‘to construct a Theory of Definition for Socrates’ (Dancy 2006: 71). He admits that this theory is not Socrates’ or Plato’s, since there is no explicit theory of definition in either the Socratic or the middle dialogues. It is, rather, elicited from remarks in the Socratic dialogues. This theory contains three ‘conditions of adequacy’ for definitions: the Substitutivity Requirement, the Explanatory Requirement and the Paradigm Requirement. Though the latter two ‘feed into the Theory of Forms’, they do not entail that theory; ‘where Socrates is concerned with definitions, he is not concerned with metaphysics at all’ (Dancy 2006: 71). ‘Socrates wants definitions because he thinks they are essential to figuring out how to live rightly’ (Dancy 2006: 72; cf. 2004: 26–35). Of the three requirements for a satisfactory definition, the Substitutivity Requirement is most straightforward and seemingly free of ontological significance. It simply says that the *definiens* and the *definiendum* must be substitutable *salva*

veritate; in other words, the *definiens* must state a necessary and sufficient condition for satisfying the *definiendum*. This is just a standard feature of definitions and contains nothing controversial. Not so with the other two. The Paradigm Requirement states that the '*definiens* must give a paradigm or standard by comparison with which cases of its *definiendum* may be determined', and the Explanatory Requirement states that the '*definiens* must explain the application of its *definiendum*' (Dancy 2006: 73). The latter two requirements are clearly stated in (E2). The Paradigm Requirement is supported by Plato's common habit of referring to what he wants to define using generically abstract noun phrases such as 'the pious' or 'the beautiful' instead of the abstract nouns 'piety' or 'beauty'. This makes the claim that the beautiful is beautiful sound like a tautology and the claim that the beautiful is ugly a contradiction (Dancy 2006: 77).

Plato accepts the schema, 'The *F* is *F*' (SP, or Self-Predication), and a stronger version, 'The *F* is always *F* and never non-*F*' (SPs, or strengthened Self-Predication). To say that a definition of a term *F* must meet the Paradigm Requirement is to say that it must specify a standard that is in no way qualified by the opposite of *F*; a self-predicating form would meet that requirement.

The Paradigm Requirement is connected to the Explanatory Requirement by means of what Dancy calls a 'Transmission Theory of Causality', according to which the cause transmits to the effect a quality it possesses itself. That is, the beautiful causes beautiful things to be beautiful by transmitting to them a quality, beauty, which it possesses in supreme degree. Thus, the cause of something's being *F* is the perfect paradigm of *F*-ness. Dancy calls the Transmission Theory 'a piece of metaphysics although not yet the

Theory of Forms' (Dancy 2006: 77). (He does not consider, however, whether his whole package – the Explanation and Paradigm Requirements, strengthened Self-Predication and the Transmission Theory of Causation, when connected with the One over Many principle, which he does not include in his theory of definition – do not amount to the theory of Forms such as that presented in the *Phaedo*.)

Dancy concludes his treatment of the theory of definition in the Socratic dialogues with a discussion of an argument in the *Hippias Major* that he admits comes very close to the Argument from Relativity discussed above, an argument that he believes marks the transition to the theory of Forms (Dancy 2006: 79). Hippias defines 'the beautiful' as 'a beautiful girl' (*Hp. Ma.* 287e). Socrates responds:

- Any beautiful girl is also ugly.
- The beautiful itself cannot be ugly.
- Therefore, the beautiful is not the same as any beautiful girl (Dancy 2006: 79).

Why is this not the Argument from Relativity? '[T]hat requires a generalization Socrates does not give us in the *Hippias Major*, to the effect that . . . "any beautiful girl is ugly" is not just true of girls, horses, or lyres, but of any mundane beautiful thing whatever' (Dancy 2006: 79). And why does this argument not establish a theory of Forms? 'Socrates says nothing whatever to indicate that he has an overarching interest in the transcendental existence of the Form of the Beautiful' (Dancy 2006: 79). (This remark indicates clearly that Dancy regards only a theory of transcendental Forms as a metaphysical view.)

A related issue is the question of existential import: to be defined, the subject of

definition must exist, must 'be something'. Socrates inquires about the existence of his subjects in several places. In the *Protagoras* he asks Protagoras whether justice and holiness exist, and whether they are self-predicative (330b–e), and Protagoras affirms that they are. Is this not ontology? Dancy argues that there is no reason to think that Protagoras commits himself to 'an ontology of abstract entities' (Dancy 2004: 70). Protagoras, an intelligent interlocutor, must understand his own view. When he accepts the existence of justice and piety he cannot be accepting a theory of Forms, for he knows nothing of Forms. 'Forms are irrelevant to the argument' (Dancy 2004: 71). When Socrates asks and Protagoras answers questions concerning the existence of holiness and justice, he is merely establishing the existence of topics of discussion, not abstract entities.

Things are different in the *Hippias Major* (287b–d). Here Hippias accepts a number of existence claims, accompanied by causal claims: justice exists, and by justice things are just; wisdom exists and by wisdom things are wise; goodness exists, and by goodness things are good; beauty exists, and by beauty things are beautiful. Now it will not do to claim that Hippias must understand what he is agreeing to because 'for sheer density, there are few interlocutors in the dialogues to rival Hippias' (Dancy 2004: 77). So is it possible that Hippias agrees to a theory of Forms that he does not understand?

Almost but not quite, and here close doesn't count. So far we have only conceded the existence of the beautiful, and no one can suppose that this concession lets in the super-beautiful described in the *Symposium*. All that Socrates needs is that there is something to be defined, as subject for his 'what is it?' question. (Dancy 2004: 78)

Dancy concludes, 'it is best to leave metaphysics until it actually happens' (Dancy 2004: 78). On the other hand, the *Hippias Major* adds something important to the discussion: the claim that it is 'by' justice, wisdom and the like that things are made just, wise and so forth. This connects the question of existential import with the Explanatory Requirement of the Theory of Definition. It connects the existence of the entities being defined with their role as causes.

'In the *Meno*', Dancy writes, 'there is a massive shifting of gears' (Dancy 2006: 79). The novelty begins with Meno's Paradox: how can one search for a definition of something if one knows nothing about it? Socrates' response is the Doctrine of Recollection, which states that all knowledge is latent in the immortal soul. The Doctrine of Recollection is associated with the theory of Forms in the *Phaedo* (it is hinted at in 72a–b), where Socrates uses the word 'form' to indicate the object of his investigation. '[T]his is a far cry from an explicit Theory of Forms', Dancy writes (Dancy 2006: 80). But the *Meno* contains other novelties. It abandons the Intellectualist Assumption (86c–e), often called the Priority of Definition Principle or the Socratic Fallacy, which had been a staple of the early dialogues' search for definitions (Dancy 2004: 35–64, 210, 236–7; cf. 2006: 72). This leads to the introduction of the Method of Hypothesis, which allows him to reach the conclusion that virtue is knowledge. This conclusion is undermined by the view that true belief is as good as knowledge for directing conduct. The dialogue ends 'in Socratic fashion, inconclusively. The Doctrine of Recollection, the retraction of the Intellectualist Assumption, and the Method of Hypothesis are hardly Socratic. . . . [I]t looks very much as if, in the

Meno, we have Plato striking out on his own' (Dancy 2006: 81).

The theory of Forms, at last, comes on stage in the *Phaedo*, a stage that has been long prepared for it. The initial appearance of Forms (at 65a–66a) is augmented by the Argument from Relativity, which is connected with the Doctrine of Recollection (at 72e–78a). The Argument from Relativity (at 74a–c) is presented using the Equal as an example:

- There is such a thing as the Equal.
- Any ordinary thing is also unequal.
- The Equal is never unequal.
- Therefore, the Equal is not the same as any ordinary equal thing.

This argument establishes the existence of a Form of Equality. The argument is further generalized in the *Symposium* (210e–211b) with respect to the Beautiful. As Dancy notes, the account of the Beautiful in this passage 'fits with' two requirements of Socratic definition: it covers all the cases, so satisfies the Substitutivity Requirement, and it is a paradigmatically beautiful thing, satisfying the Paradigm Requirement. The third requirement, the Explanatory Requirement, is found in the *Phaedo* (at 100c–d) where Socrates insists:

[I]f there is anything else beautiful beside the beautiful itself it is not beautiful because of any other [thing] than because it partakes of that beautiful . . . nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence or communion or however and in whatever way it comes on that beautiful . . . [it is] by the beautiful that all beautiful [things are] beautiful. (100c–d; Dancy 2006: 83)

Dancy concludes that 'This is the Theory of Forms, and its heritage is pretty clearly Socrates' quest for definitions' (Dancy 2006: 83).

CRITIQUE OF DANCY

Dancy provides an excellent account of the theory of definition in the Socratic dialogues, and of the development or unfolding of the theory of Forms in the *Phaedo* and *Symposium*. A proponent of the Allen/Fine/Prior account of the development of Plato's metaphysics (described below) can accept much of what he says. What Dancy does not succeed in showing, however, is that the account of definitions in the Socratic dialogues is not metaphysical. Of the views I shall discuss in this article, Dancy holds the purest version of the anti-metaphysical position. He shows that the theory of definition is not equivalent to the theory of 'separately existing' Forms of the middle dialogues, but he does not show that it is not a precursor to that theory. Indeed, he insists that it is a precursor to it. He claims that it is a metaphysically innocent precursor, but he does not show that it is, for he does not offer an account of what makes a theory metaphysically innocent. Dancy (like Vlastos) identifies 'having a metaphysical view' with having, in Vlastos's words, 'a grandiose theory of separately existing Forms'. Neither Dancy nor Vlastos considers the more modest theory of unseparated forms in the Socratic dialogues to be a metaphysical theory, even though it seems to me to be the forerunner of Aristotle's ontology.

But Dancy does not explain the basis for his distinction between metaphysical and non-metaphysical views. As Donald Zeyl puts it:

I worry about the lack of attention given to the question as to what counts as a metaphysical theory, and what distinguishes such a theory from one that isn't metaphysical. That distinction is crucial

to Dancy's overall argument, yet it seems assumed without much support. (Zeyl 2006)

Zeyl states that Dancy 'does not . . . explicitly identify and defend criteria that distinguish non-metaphysical talk from metaphysics; he appears to think that if a claim is intelligible to philosophically naïve interlocutors and accepted by them as obviously true it is not metaphysical' (Zeyl 2006). However, as he later adds, 'Why, one might wonder, should a philosophically naïve interlocutor be incapable of understanding a metaphysical proposition?' (Zeyl 2006).

If one rejects Dancy's claim that the early theory of definition is not metaphysical, as I believe one should, one can then see the beginning of Platonic metaphysics in what Dancy calls the Paradigm Requirement and the Explanation Requirement. These requirements have counterparts in Allen's account of Socratic definition, and Allen finds in them the basis of his theory of real definition and the early theory of Forms. It would seem that Dancy does not believe that the Socratic definitions he describes are real definitions. (A real definition is one that primarily defines a thing, not a term; for more on real definitions, see the section on Allen.) If he held that they were, he would have to consider the claim that there was a metaphysical view in the Socratic dialogues.

I agree with Dancy on his analysis of the definitions of the Socratic dialogues and on his analysis of the Argument from Relativity. I agree also with his claim that the metaphysics of the middle dialogues 'emerges' from the theory of definitions in the Socratic dialogues. As I hold that the theory of definitions is a metaphysical one, however, I do not regard this 'emergence' as the abrupt matter that Dancy does. I think there are

many anticipations of the middle period theory in the Socratic dialogues. I would mention in particular the anticipation of the Argument from Relativity in *Hippias Major* (287e–289d) discussed above. For Dancy this argument is one large step removed from the Argument from Relativity, in that its scope is limited to the beauty of a maiden, and not generalized to all beautiful things. For me the step is a small one, and is almost inevitable when one realizes that there is nothing special about the example of a maiden, that she simply typifies the entities in the phenomenal world. In general, I think the Socratic dialogues anticipate the Platonic theory of Forms in many ways such as this.

VLASTOS'S VIEW

The most influential view on the topic of Socratic metaphysics is that of Gregory Vlastos, which he set forth in a variety of works, but primarily in a book, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Vlastos 1991), and a lecture, 'Socrates', which was presented to the British Academy (Vlastos 1988).⁶ Vlastos set out to find the historical Socrates. Like most scholars, he attempted to find him primarily in the Platonic dialogues. He divided the dialogues into three groups, the first two of which are of interest to us.

1. The first group consisted of the *early* dialogues, which he subdivided as follows:
 - the elenctic dialogues, consisting of the *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras* and *Republic I*;
 - the transitional dialogues, consisting of the *Euthydemus*, *Hippias Major*, *Lysis*, *Menexenus* and *Meno*.
2. The second group consisted of the *middle* dialogues: the *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*,

Symposium, *Republic* II-X, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides* and *Theaetetus*.

3. The third, or late group, cited here for the sake of completeness, including the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Critias* and *Laws*. (Vlastos 1991: 46–7)

Vlastos thought that the middle group followed the early group in date of composition, but moreover he thought that the transitional dialogues of the early group all post-dated the elenctic group. Thus he thought that there were four temporally distinct groups of dialogues: elenctic, transitional, middle and late.⁷

Next, Vlastos distinguished the Socrates of the early dialogues, whom he called ‘Socrates_E’, from the Socrates of the middle dialogues, whom he labelled ‘Socrates_M’. He identified Socrates_E with the historical Socrates, and Socrates_M with Plato. He made a list of ten differences between the two Socrateses, the most important of which is item II:

IIB. Socrates_M had a grandiose metaphysical theory of ‘separately existing’ Forms [. . .]

IIA. Socrates_E has no such theory.

Vlastos thought that, because Socrates_E lacks the metaphysical theory of Socrates_M, he is no metaphysician. Rather, Socrates_E is ‘exclusively a moral philosopher’ (Vlastos 1991: 47). He describes thesis II as ‘the most powerful of the ten’, and he states that ‘*the irreconcilable difference between Socrates_E and Socrates_M could have been established by this criterion even if it had stood alone*’ (Vlastos 1991: 53).

Vlastos devotes his argument to showing that Socrates_E did not have the metaphysical theory of Socrates_M. He begins to make

his case for this stark difference by stating that *eidos* and *idea* in the early dialogues do ‘strictly definitional work’ (Vlastos 1991: 53). He cites two principles for definitions, exemplified in the *Euthyphro*:

[1] The definiens must be true of all cases falling under the definiendum (cf. Dancy’s Substitutivity Requirement), and

[2] the definiens must disclose the reason why anything is an instance of the definiendum (cf. Dancy’s Explanatory Requirement). (Vlastos 1991: 56–7)⁸

There follows an extraordinary admission:

(V1) In assuming that these two conditions can be met S_E is making a substantial ontological commitment. He is implying that what there is contains not only spatio-temporal items, like individuals and events, but also entities of another sort whose identity conditions are strikingly different since they are ‘the same’ in persons and in actions which are not the same: justice here and justice there and again elsewhere, the same in different individuals and occurrences, real in each of them, but real in a way that is different from that in which they are real, its own reality evidenced just in the fact that it can be instantiated self-identically in happenings scattered widely over space and time, so that if justice has been correctly defined for even a single instance, the definiens will be true of every instance of justice that ever was or ever will be anywhere. [. . .] That there are things which meet this strong condition is a piece of ontology firmly fixed in Socrates_E’s speech and thought. He *has* this ontology. (Vlastos 1991: 57–8)

Though Vlastos does not use the term, his description of these items in Socrates’

ontology is virtually a textbook account of what is called a *universal*: an entity that can remain one and the same while being instantiated in multiple items. By describing these universals as scattered throughout space and time, rather than as existing in the mind, Vlastos commits Socrates to the ‘One over Many’ Principle (OM) and the doctrine of *metaphysical realism*. To accept the existence of forms is to accept the existence of universals, and that is to be a metaphysical realist. What more is required for Socrates to be a metaphysician?

Though Vlastos does not shy away from attributing this metaphysical view to Socrates, he does not think that this invalidates his claim that Socrates_E is ‘a moralist and nothing more – no metaphysician, no ontologist’ (Vlastos 1991: 58). He compares Socrates’ acceptance of this ontology with the average New Yorker’s acceptance of an ontology of a world of material objects, independent of the mind. He asks: ‘Can’t one have a language without being a linguist?’ What makes one a linguist, and by parity of reasoning, what makes one an ontologist, is making their respective subjects object of ‘reflective investigation’. But this is what S_E never does. ‘He never asks what sort of things forms must be . . . The search for those general properties of forms which distinguish them systematically from non-forms is never on his elenctic agenda. He asks, what is the form piety? What is the form beauty? And so forth. What is form? He never asks’ (Vlastos 1991: 58).

‘That is why it is gratuitous to credit him, as so often has been done in the scholarly literature, with a theory of forms. . . . A belief is not a theory if everyone’s agreement with it can be presumed as a matter of course’ (Vlastos 1991: 59). This is the spirit in which Socrates and his interlocutors – Euthyphro, Laches, Hippias – accept the existence of

forms. It is also the spirit in which Protagoras accepts them in *Protagoras* (330c): ‘there is a sense of “thing” so innocuous that everyone who is willing to discuss justice, piety, and the rest can be expected to agree that they are “things”’ (Vlastos 1991: 62). The sense is not ontological, but linguistic, semantical – and, Vlastos adds, ethical. ‘Brought up face to face with the premier relativist of the day, the chance to debate ontology virtually thrust on him, Socrates_E turns it down’ (Vlastos 1991: 63). (There are really two distinct questions here: whether the talk of ‘forms’ in the early dialogues constitutes a theory and whether Socrates is a theorist for talking that way.)

Consider now Socrates_M. The existence of ‘the *F*’, which had been conceded as a matter of course by his interlocutors, now becomes a matter of serious debate, ‘highly contestable’, a ‘posit’, a ‘hypothesis’, assent to which ‘cannot be expected from everyone’ (Vlastos 1991: 63–4). In both the early and the middle dialogues Socrates is presented ‘*contra mundum*’. But in the early dialogues the opposition is exclusively ethical; his ontology is the same as that of the many (Vlastos 1991: 65). In the middle dialogues that is all changed. Now Socrates insists on asking his ‘What is it?’ question of the Forms. He posits four ‘categorical’ features of the Forms: they are inaccessible to the senses, absolutely changeless, incorporeal and they exist ‘themselves by themselves’, independent of their participants (Vlastos 1991: 66–73). Socrates_E, on the other hand, if asked where the forms existed, would have said, ‘in bodies’ (Vlastos 1991: 74). Aristotle referred to the ontological independence of the Forms as ‘separation’ (*chorismos*) (Vlastos 1991: 75–6). Vlastos summarizes:

This is the heart of Plato’s metaphysics: the postulation of an eternal self-existent

world, transcending everything in ours, exempt from the vagaries and vicissitudes which afflict all creatures in the world of time, containing the Form of everything valuable or knowable, purged of all sensory content. (Vlastos 1991: 76)

The metaphysics of two worlds is completed by the theory of the immortal, transmigrating soul and the doctrine of Recollection mentioned above. The result is a mystical vision of reality: 'Plato's Form-mysticism is profoundly other-worldly. The ontology of non-sensible, eternal, incorporeal, self-existent, contemplable Forms [. . .] has far-reaching implications' (Vlastos 1991: 79).

Vlastos concludes:

One could hardly imagine a world-outlook more foreign to that of Socrates. He is unworldly: he cares little for money, reputation, security, life itself, in fact for anything except virtue and moral knowledge. But he is not otherworldly: the eternal world with which Plato seeks mystical union is unknown to him. For Socrates reality – real knowledge, real virtue, real happiness – is in the world in which he lives. The hereafter is for him a bonus and anyhow only a matter of faith and hope. The passionate certainties of his life are in the here and now. (Vlastos 1991: 79–80)

CRITIQUE OF VLASTOS

In 2004 I published 'Socrates Metaphysician', a critique of Vlastos's claim that Socrates was 'purely a moral philosopher'. As we have seen, Vlastos had argued that there are in the Platonic dialogues two Socrateses: Socrates_E, the Socrates of the early dialogues, who was exclusively a moral philosopher, and Socrates_M, who was, among other things, a

metaphysician, with a 'grandiose' theory of 'separately existing Forms'. These two Socrateses were so different that they could not have inhabited the same brain unless it had been that of a schizophrenic (Vlastos 1991: 46). I argued against this view that there was a metaphysical theory in the Socratic dialogues, and that Vlastos's dichotomy between the Socrates_M who accepts the theory of separately existing Forms and the Socrates_E who is purely a moral philosopher is a false one. The question should not be, does Socrates_E accept the 'grandiose' theory of 'separately existing Forms', but 'is there a metaphysical theory in the Socratic dialogues?'

My own view is that there is, and that Plato was not a schizophrenic for holding it. Vlastos's dichotomy led him to devote himself to arguing that the Socrates of the early dialogues did not hold the ontology of Socrates_M. I concede at the outset that Socrates_E did not accept the theory of separate Forms. Nevertheless, I argue that there is a theory of forms in the early dialogues, and that it is basically the theory presented by R. E. Allen in 1970. This version of the theory of forms does not contain the great contrasts of the middle period theory: Being and Becoming, Appearance and Reality and the like. It is thus not a theory of 'separately existing' Forms (Prior 2004: 3–4).⁹ What remains when 'separation' is removed? A theory of universals, of the sort Aristotle accepted. When Aristotle says that Socrates was seeking the universal or the essence of things but 'did not make the universals or definitions exist apart', I interpret him to mean that Socrates had a theory of universals, but not the Platonic theory of separately existing ones (Prior 2004: 4).

What textual evidence exists for the existence of a theory of 'unseparated' forms in the

Socratic dialogues? Like Allen, I find this evidence primarily in E1 and E2 above, where Socrates describes holiness as an *eidos*, an *idea* and a *paradeigma*, all terms that prefigure the middle period theory of Forms. I also find support in the *Protagoras* and *Meno*. In the *Protagoras*, as part of his argument with Protagoras as to whether virtue is a single thing, Socrates asks Protagoras whether he takes piety and justice to be something (*pragma ti*), and Protagoras readily agrees. Next he asks whether Protagoras thinks that justice is just and piety pious, and again Protagoras agrees. He finally attempts to get Protagoras to agree that justice is pious and piety just, but Protagoras balks and the argument fails. This exchange is ontologically significant. The claims that justice and piety are *pragmata*, things, form the basis of an ontology. The claims that piety is pious and justice is just are instances of *self-predication*, a prominent feature of the middle-period theory of Forms. There is no agreement on the correct interpretation of sentences of this formula, but both existence and self-predication claims are features of the theory of ‘separately existing Forms’ in the middle dialogues. This passage anticipates that theory, and, I would argue, what anticipates an ontological theory must have ontological significance (Prior 2004: 4–6).

It could be argued that though the *Euthyphro* and *Protagoras* passages contain at least the makings of an ontology, they are limited to moral philosophy; thus, Socrates_E can still be understood as ‘exclusively a moral philosopher’. My response is two-fold: first, an ontology limited to ethics is still an ontology; what Kant called a ‘metaphysics of morals’ is still a metaphysics. Second, the *Meno* indicates that the ontology is not limited to moral matters. In explaining

to *Meno* what he wants by way of a definition, Socrates makes reference to the case of bees: even if bees come in various kinds, still there is a common form that they all possess, in virtue of which they are all bees. He goes on to make the same point with health, size and strength, making it clear that he thinks of his ontology as extending beyond moral matters to common terms generally (Prior 2004: 6–7).

Now Vlastos’s response to the claim that there is an ontology in the Socratic dialogues is remarkable: as we saw above, he admits that Socrates_E has this ontology (V1).¹⁰ He goes on to argue that though he has an ontology, Socrates_E is nonetheless still exclusively a moral philosopher. Before I go further, let me note that from my perspective this concession puts Vlastos in the camp of those who, like Allen, Fine and myself, attribute to the Socrates of the early dialogues a metaphysical view. Vlastos denies that it is a *theory*, on the grounds that it is readily accepted by Socrates’ interlocutors,¹¹ and he denies that Socrates is a metaphysician, on the grounds that he never asks the ‘what is *F*?’ question about Form.

My response to the first point is the fact that, whether or not it counts as a theory, Socrates is ontologically committed to forms. According to Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment, Socrates is committed to the existence of justice, piety and the like: he treats them as values of bound variables (Prior 2004: 7–8). My response to the second point is that it is too restrictive. True, Socrates does not ask ‘What is Form?’ in the early or Socratic dialogues, but neither does he ask it in later dialogues, such as the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, which Vlastos admits are metaphysical. Not until the *Parmenides* does Socrates ask, ‘What is Form’ (Prior

2004: 8)? In fact, however, it is not necessary for someone to ask a second-order question about the nature of Form for the existence of forms to be maintained in a serious, philosophical manner. Not all philosophical questions are questions of definition, and Socrates never says that only when he is engaging in definition is he engaging in serious philosophical thought.

Suppose, however, that Socrates held Vlastos's view that only if Socrates asks the 'What is *F*?' question is he engaged in serious philosophical inquiry. Should we then deny that Socrates investigates forms seriously in the Socratic dialogues? I do not think so. For Socrates asks the 'What is *F*?' question about virtue and the individual virtues in these dialogues, and at least on occasion states that he is looking for a form (e.g. E1 and E2). Now the definitional statements Socrates is seeking are identity statements, and it does not matter which side of the identity sign the definiendum is on. So when Socrates says he is seeking the definition of piety, and piety is a particular form, when he is engaged in serious investigation into the nature of piety he is at the same time engaged in serious investigation into the nature of a form. On the assumption that the quest for the definition of a moral virtue is a quest for the nature of a particular form, moral inquiry and metaphysical are inseparable (Prior 2004: 9). As Allen puts the point, the definition sought in the elenctic dialogues is *real* definition, a definition of things, not terms.

If Socrates_E is a moral philosopher of the sort described in the elenctic dialogues, then, he cannot be *exclusively* a moral philosopher, for his moral philosophy presupposes a metaphysical theory, a theory of common properties. Without

this metaphysical underpinning, Socratic moral enquiry cannot take place. (Prior 2004: 10)

Perhaps the most serious objection Vlastos made against the claim that Socrates was an ontologist was the assertion that the propositions in question were too commonly held to be considered an ontological theory. 'A belief is not a theory if everyone's agreement with it can be presumed as a matter of course – if it is unproblematic for everyone, in need of explanation and justification for no one. This is the vein in which S_E believes in the reality of forms' (Vlastos 1991: 59). I find this claim to be seriously misleading, in three respects. First, it is not clear to me that widespread or even universal acceptance disqualifies something from being a theory. The heliocentric theory of the solar system is a theory that is accepted by everyone in the civilized world.

Second, whether something is a theory may depend not on the content of the view so much as the person who holds it. An ontology of physical objects existing in space may not be a theory to the unreflective 'man in the street', but it may be a theory nonetheless to a philosopher. (One way of understanding the Socratic elenchus, a way that I think is congenial to Vlastos's 'The Socratic Elenchus' [Vlastos 1983a: 27–58], is 'an attempt to make the interlocutors aware of the theoretical, that is, philosophical, depth and significance of the apparently ordinary, non-theoretical, non-philosophical statements they are inclined, unreflectively, to make about moral matters' [Prior 2014: 11].) Even if we concede, however, that the ordinary 'man in the street' does not have a theory of moral ontology or, for that matter, of the ontology of physical objects, to what is this due? I argued that it was due to the fact

that he is not a philosopher. When a philosopher such as Socrates makes an ontological claim, however, it may be part of an ontological theory. Whether or not a statement is part of an ontological theory, then, is not a matter of the statement itself but the way in which it is held and by whom it is held.

Third and most important, I believe that Vlastos seriously misrepresented the uncontroversial nature of Socrates' ontological theory. I note three features of Socratic dialectic. First, Socrates is careful to get the explicit assent from his interlocutors about his existence claims: he gets Protagoras' assent that justice is something, and similarly with Hippias and Euthyphro. Second, his interlocutors often show that they do not really understand such claims even when they have assented to them. Hippias and Euthyphro find the idea of a common character 'intellectually daunting', and it takes much subsequent discussion to sort matters out. Third and most important, not every character in the dialogues takes the existence and definition of a common character to be unproblematic. To be specific, Meno does not. He explicitly rejects Socrates' comparison between the definition of virtue and the definition of a bee or health or strength. Subsequent discussion not only fails to define virtue but also leads to Meno's famous sceptical question, how is inquiry possible? The idea that virtue is a common character is anything but unproblematic for Meno (Prior 2004: 12–13).

It might be objected that the *Meno* is not an early but a transitional dialogue. It is, however, in its first third, an elenctic dialogue, as Vlastos notes (Vlastos 1988: 144). The discussion of the ontology of definition in the *Meno* is germane to the ontology of the elenctic dialogues. It cannot be said, based on the explicitness of that discussion, that the acceptance of the existence of common characters

by Socrates' interlocutors is unproblematic. It might also be objected that, as the *Meno* contains the doctrine of Recollection and as the doctrine of Recollection is linked in the *Phaedo* to the theory of separate Forms, the common characters of the *Meno* must also be so linked. My response is that the common characters of the *Meno* are not separately existing Forms, but 'forms'; there is no trace of separation in the *Meno*.

My conclusions are two:

1. The Socrates of the elenctic dialogues is a moral philosopher. The form his moral philosophy took was that of enquiry into the nature of the moral virtues. The assumption underlying this enquiry is that the virtues are characteristics, properties, common to many individual persons and actions. Without this assumption it is hard to see how moral enquiry could go forward. The assumption is ontological, metaphysical in character. The fact that it is held not casually, but in the face of philosophical objections, marks it as a philosophical view. (Prior 2004: 13–14)
2. Vlastos was incorrect in his claim that the Socrates of the early dialogues was exclusively a moral philosopher. I have argued, following Allen, that the Socrates of these dialogues is a metaphysician, an ontologist, as well as a moral philosopher. The ontology of the elenctic dialogues differs from that of the middle dialogues only in a single respect: separation. This is a huge difference and it is, strictly, an incompatibility. Thus, the ontology of the elenctic dialogues is in this one respect incompatible with that of the middle dialogues. In other respects, however, it is compatible with that ontology and should be seen as the precursor or first stage of that theory. In this regard, as I believe in others, Socrates_E was much more closely connected to Socrates_M than Vlastos's portrait allows. (Prior 2004: 14)

THE METAPHYSICAL INTERPRETATION

ALLEN'S VIEW

As I stated in the introduction, one of the main positions on the question of Socratic metaphysics is that of R. E. Allen. Allen's view is described in two works: *Plato's 'Euthyphro' and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (Allen 1970) and 'Plato's Earlier Theory of Forms' (Allen 1971). Allen is the leading proponent of the view that the early Platonic dialogues contain a theory of forms. His works remain, after four decades, the classic statement of that view. Allen finds textual support for his claims primarily in two texts: E1 and E2. As I noted in the introduction, for Allen, the forms described in these passages are universals, causes, self-predicating paradigms and essences. The theory has both a logical and a metaphysical role to play in dialectic, and the two roles are related. Logically, the forms play a regulative role in dialectic: 'they define the conditions for deciding when dialectic has succeeded, and when it has failed. Metaphysically, Forms affect the career of the world: they are the real natures of things, and the world is what it is because they are what they are' (Allen 1970: 68). The logical and the metaphysical aspects of the theory come together in the concept of real definition: 'To say that Forms exist is to say that real definition should be pursued; to say that real definition should be pursued is to say that Forms exist' (Allen 1970: 68; cf. 1971: 334).

Real definition 'is analysis of essence, rather than stipulation as to how words are used or a report as to how they are in fact used' (Allen 1971: 327). Real definition is not simply nominal definition plus an existence claim; the existential import is taken for granted in the early dialogues. Real

definitions concern essence, and the essence of a thing is 'the nature of something which is' (Allen 1971: 328). These essences, forms, 'do not just sit there. They do honest work. They affect the career of the world, being that by which things are what they are. [. . .] Beauty is not a word, not a thought, not a concept. It is an existing thing' (Allen 1971: 329). The fact that the forms Socrates seeks in the *Euthyphro* are universals, standards and essences implies that the kind of definition he seeks is real definition; this in turn entails that the search is a metaphysical one. These facts imply 'something that is properly called a theory of Forms' (Allen 1971: 328). Allen rejects the view that 'there is no commitment to the existence of Forms in the early dialogues, and that talk of them is "merely a matter of language"' (Allen 1971: 329). Though the Socratic theory of forms is metaphysical, it is 'continuous with common sense' (Allen 1971: 330). That is the reason why people like Euthyphro can accept it without question. What distinguishes Socrates' inquiry from common sense is its precision:

His question is hardly one which common sense, left to its own devices, will ask. But is a question to which common sense may certainly be led. . . . The progress of dialectic involves passage from the naïve existence claim that 'there is such a thing as holiness' to the highly sophisticated existence claim that there is an essence of holiness, and that it can be defined. . . . [T]he commitment to essence is then latent in the common sense use of words. The essence of holiness is what we mean by the word 'holiness' – when we fully understand our meaning. (Allen 1971: 331)

It is in this sense that the theory of forms is a theory of meaning. Allen admits that the

theory of meaning is controversial and would be rejected by anti-essentialist philosophers, such as Wittgenstein (Allen 1971: 331–2). The theory of meaning is a referential one: the meaning of a term is the characteristic to which it refers, which is a Form (Allen 1970: 125). Forms are causes: ‘Forms . . . are causes in the sense that they are that by which things are what they are. They therefore affect the career of the world, in that if they did not exist, the world would not be what it is’ (Allen 1970: 125).

Allen insists that the theory of forms in the early dialogues is *a* theory of Forms, not *the* theory of Forms:

[T]hat theory of the choir of heaven and the furniture of earth found in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and other middle dialogues. . . . The philosophy of the middle dialogues is a nest of contrasts: Being and Becoming, Appearance and Reality, Permanence and Flux, Reason and Sense, Body and Soul, Flesh and the Spirit. Those contrasts are rooted in an ontology of two Worlds, separated by a gulf of deficiency. (Allen 1971: 332)

The key questions are what ‘separation’ means, and how the early dialogues are related to the middle dialogues on this question. Allen rejects several answers to these questions before stating his own. First, he rejects the view that the alleged presence of the theory of forms in the early dialogues is merely linguistic. This is incompatible with Socrates’ search for real definitions. Second, he rejects the view of Aristotle that Socrates ‘did not separate the forms’ in the early dialogues. On Aristotle’s own understanding of ‘separation’, which requires that ‘the Ideas are numerically distinct from their instances, exist independently of their instances, and are

ontologically prior to their instances’ (Allen 1970: 133), Allen insists that the forms of the early theory are just as ‘separate’ as those of the later theory’ (Allen 1970: 136; cf. 147).

Third, Allen rejects the view that the metaphysics of the early dialogues is the same as that of the middle dialogues, the view that Plato’s thought is a unity in a very strong sense. In both the early theory and the middle theory of Forms, the Forms are separate, in the sense that the Forms are not identical with and are ontologically prior to their instances,

But the middle dialogues expand this separation into a new view of the universe, involving a doctrine of Two Worlds, separated by a gulf of deficiency and unreality. Associated with this is a religious attitude unlike anything the early dialogues can show (Allen 1970: 154).

The difference between the theory of Forms in the early dialogues and those which followed does not consist in the fact of separation, but the way in which separation is conceived. The middle dialogues present a revised scheme of ontological status, an estimate which turns on a theory of the way in which Forms are (Allen 1970: 147).

The Forms of the middle dialogues are ‘separate’ in a way that the forms of the early dialogues are not. In the middle dialogues sensible instances of Forms are deficient resemblances of Forms, and they are less real than Forms. There is no trace of either of these claims in the *Euthyphro* (Allen 1971: 332).

What motivated Plato to change his theory of *forms* into a theory of *Forms*? Why did he adopt an ontology of two worlds, ‘separated by a gulf of deficiency’? Why did he, in the middle dialogues, construe the claim that forms are standards as the claim that they are perfect, fully real, exemplars of

qualities that their instances imperfectly imitate? According to Allen:

Plato's account in the middle dialogues is conditioned by problems in epistemology which the early dialogues had not faced. Those problems arose over scepticism and *a priori* knowledge. They arose not *in* Socratic dialectic, but *about* it; specifically, they arose when Plato turned to deal with the question of how Socratic dialectic, as a search for Forms or essences, is possible. (Allen 1970: 157)

These problems arise in the *Meno*, which Allen describes as an 'early middle' or 'boundary' dialogue, connecting the early dialogues with the middle, in particular the *Phaedo*. The scepticism of Meno's paradox is answered by the doctrine of Recollection. In the *Phaedo*, this doctrine is connected to the theory of Forms. Sceptical doubts about the possibility of Socratic inquiry thus led to a doctrine of the deficiency of sensibles to Forms, developed into a full-blown doctrine of 'Two Worlds', and a new conception of separation. This conception is not found in the early dialogues because scepticism about Socratic inquiry is not present there. What does this say about the relation between the ontology of the early dialogues and that of the middle dialogues? Allen concludes his article with an answer to this question:

The middle dialogues do not abandon the 'What is it?' question. They pursue it in the light of a new ontology. The theory of Forms in the middle dialogues, then, is neither the same theory as that of the early dialogues, nor a different one. Not different because it contains the earlier theory as a part. Not the same because it is directed towards issues which the early

dialogues do not raise. (Allen 1971: 334; cf. 1970: 163–4)

ARISTOTLES TESTIMONY: FINE'S VIEW

I now turn to the view of Gail Fine, as expressed in her 1993 book *On Ideas*.¹² This view differs from others in this essay in that, though it discusses passages from the Platonic dialogues, it focuses on Aristotle's treatment of Plato's ontology, including its Socratic version. Though Fine's focus is on Aristotle's lost *Peri Ideôn*, for which we have fragmentary textual evidence, she also deals with Aristotle's discussion of Socrates' and Plato's ontology in three passages, all from the *Metaphysics*: A.6, 987a29–b8; M.4, 1078b12–32; M.9, 1086a32–b13 (Fine 1993: 44–6; the following are all Fine's translations).¹³

(F1) But Socrates was concerned with moral questions, and not at all with the whole of nature; he was seeking the universal (*katholou*) and was the first to turn his thought to definitions. Plato agreed with him; but because of this (Heraclitean view) he supposed that this (defining) applied to different things (*heterôn*) and not to sensibles – for, he thought, it is impossible for the common definition to be any of the sensibles, since they are always changing (*Metaphysics* A.6, 987b1–b7)

(F2) Now Socrates was concerned with the moral virtues, and he was the first to seek universal definitions in connection with them. [. . .] It was reasonable for Socrates to try to find out what a thing is, because he was trying to argue deductively, and the starting point of deductions is what a thing is. . . . For there are just two things one might fairly ascribe to Socrates – inductive arguments and

universal definitions, both of which are concerned with the starting point of knowledge. But Socrates did not make universals or definitions (*horismous*) separate (*chorista*), but they (the Platonists) separated them. (*Metaphysics* M.4, 1078b17–19, 23–5, 27–31)

(F3) Socrates motivated this (view), as we were saying before, through definitions; but he did not separate (universals) from particulars. And he was right not to separate them. This is clear from the results. For it is not possible to acquire knowledge without the universal; but separating it is the cause of the difficulties arising about the ideas. (*Metaphysics* M.9, 1086b2–7)

It is with her interpretation of these passages that I shall be concerned here. I shall deal with two questions:

1. What does Aristotle's testimony tell us about Socrates' metaphysics?
2. What does it tell us about the relation between that metaphysics and that of Plato?

Fine's answer to my first question is clear:

Socrates believes that correct answers to 'What is *F*?' questions specify forms; forms are the objects of definition where, as we have seen, definitions are real definitions. The ontological correlates of real definitions are real essences, non-linguistic universals that explain why things are as they are. (Fine 1993: 49)¹⁴

These forms are universals: 'Aristotle takes Socratic forms to be universals not just in the sense that they are or can be in more than one thing at a time but also in the sense that they are real essences, explanatory properties'

(Fine 1993: 50). Socrates has a realist conception of universals: Socratic forms are properties, not meanings.

Fine discusses three more features of Socratic forms: their lack of separation from phenomena, their self-predication and the claim that they are paradigms. With regard to separation, she notes that Socrates never states that the forms are 'separate', and that other evidence pro or con is indeterminate. On the question of self-predication, she begins by claiming that the form of *F* cannot be both *F* and not *F*. It might be so either by being neither, or by being simply *F*. The evidence indicates that Socrates took the latter option, and accepted the self-predication of forms. It may be, however, that the form is not *F* in the same way as its participants; it 'may be *F* in a *sui generis* way, simply in virtue of its explanatory role' (Fine 1993: 52–3). Self-predication is connected with paradeigmatism.

When Socrates says that forms are paradigms he seems to mean only that they are standards, in the sense that in order to know whether *x* is *F*, one must know, and refer to, the form of *F*. . . . (So paradeigmatism and self-predication are closely linked. The form of *F* is *F* because it explains the *F*-ness of things: forms are also paradigms in virtue of their explanatory role.) (Fine 1993: 53)

Socratic forms are thus real essences, universals, explanatory properties rather than meanings, self-predicative paradigms. They are not separate from their participants.

I turn now to my question 2: what does Aristotle's testimony tell us about the relationship between the Socratic and the Platonic theory of forms? Here the answer is not so clear. Fine connects the Platonic theory of forms with Plato's Heracliteanism. As

traditionally interpreted, this is the view that there is no knowledge of sensibles, as they are always changing. Fine distinguishes two versions of Heracliteanism: a radical version, according to which objects change in every respect at every time, and a moderate version, according to which objects change in some respect at every time. Change is defined as the succession of opposites. To these two she adds a third kind of change: substantial change, the generation and corruption of things (Fine 1993: 54). Fine asserts, and I agree, that Plato never accepted extreme Heracliteanism (Fine 1993: 56). But what kind of Heracliteanism did he accept? Here matters become complex. In addition to the succession of opposites, Fine adds to the discussion the compresence of opposites. It is well known that Plato denied that phenomena could be objects of knowledge because they were at one and the same time both *F* and not-*F*. This is the compresence of opposites, and it is a reason for Plato's acceptance of forms (*Phd.* 74b–c, *Republic* 479a–d, 523–5). Fine treats the compresence of opposites as a form of Heracliteanism (Fine 1993: 56–7).

But what of separation? 'The argument from compresence shows that forms are *different* from both sensible particulars and sensible properties. But it does not show that forms are *separate*: that is, that they can exist whether or not the corresponding sensible particulars exist' (Fine 1993: 60). Fine remarks:

Nothing said in the middle dialogues seems to me to involve clear commitment to separation. None the less, separation fits well with the tenor of the middle dialogues, and the casual way in which separation emerges in the *Timaeus* perhaps suggests that Plato takes it for granted. So I shall assume that Aristotle is right to

say that Plato separated forms, though it is important to be clear that Plato never argues, or even says, that forms are separate. (Fine 1993: 61)

On the related questions of self-predication and paradeigmatism, Fine holds that the forms of the middle dialogues are the same as forms of the early dialogues: self-predicative paradigms. She distinguishes two forms of self-predication: *narrow self-predication* (NSP), according to which forms are *F* in the same way that their participants are, and *broad self-predication* (BSP), according to which forms are *F* in a different way than their participants. Forms are *F* because they explain the way in which *F* things are *F*. Socrates' version of SP is BSP and, she claims, so is Plato's. It is often thought that forms in the middle dialogues are self-predicative in a different sense than this is because they are not properties, which Fine thinks they are, but perfect particulars. But it is sometimes thought that forms are particulars because they are self-predicative, and an account of SP in terms of BSP removes one main reason for thinking of forms as particulars (Fine 1993: 62–3).

On the question of paradeigmatism, Fine thinks Plato goes beyond Socrates' view while being basically consistent with it. Both agree that forms are paradigms in that they are standards. 'The form of *F* is the property of *F*, and is therefore the ultimate explanation of why *F*s are *F*. . . forms are self-predicative paradigms in virtue of their explanatory role' (Fine 1993: 63). Plato, unlike Socrates, holds that forms are perfect, and their participants are imperfectly *F* and derivatively *F* (derivatively from the form). Thus, 'whereas Socrates accepts only weak paradigmaticism, Plato accepts *perfect paradigmaticism*' (Fine 1993: 63). Neither the fact that forms are

self-predicative nor the fact that they are paradigms jeopardizes their status as universals. ‘On the contrary, the fact that forms are universals – and so are explanatory – explains the sense in which they are self-predicative, perfect paradigms’ (Fine 1993: 64).

Fine’s conclusion is that Socratic and Platonic forms are more similar than has often been believed. Both are ‘universals or properties, introduced for metaphysical and epistemological reasons; they are not perfect particulars or meanings. Both Socrates and Plato accept SP, but their version of it is best construed as BSP’ (Fine 1993: 64). They disagree in that Plato says that forms are non-sensible, perfect and separate. But Plato is not trying to offer a theory of forms that is radically different from that of Socrates;

Rather, he is offering what he takes to be the most plausible defence of Socrates, or developing Socrates’ views in what he takes to be the most plausible way. In particular, Platonic forms are not different entities from Socratic forms. Rather, Plato is attempting to offer what he views as a better account of the same entities (Fine 1993: 64)

THE UNITARIAN INTERPRETATION:
FRONTEROTTA’S VIEW

The final view I shall discuss is that of Francesco Fronterotta, whose ‘The Development of Plato’s Theory of Ideas and the “Socratic Question”’ (Fronterotta 2007) was written in response to my 2004 article. Fronterotta agrees with Allen, Fine and me that there exists a theory of forms in the early dialogues (Fronterotta 2007: 38), but he argues that these forms are separate from their participants, as are the Forms of the middle dialogues. (In other words, the ‘forms’ of the early dialogues are ‘Forms’.) He finds

the developmentalist interpretation of Plato’s thought in this respect incorrect. His aim is to show that ‘an anti-developmental thesis (like Allen’s or more radical) is wholly plausible’ (Fronterotta 2007: 40; cf. 37 n. 1; 38).

Fronterotta focuses on four ‘definitional’ dialogues: the *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Hippias Major* and *Euthyphro*. While all four of these dialogues fail to define the terms they seek, there is a progression from the first two to the second two. In the *Charmides* and *Laches* the definitions fail because they are not appropriately universal: they give examples rather than universal formulae.¹⁵ In the *Hippias Major*, however, the failure is of a different order. Socrates makes it clear that he is interested in ‘what the beautiful’ or ‘the beautiful itself’ is, not with what is beautiful. The correct definition

must refer back to the proper nature of the relevant object, that is, to that Form or Idea that, ‘when added’ . . . to anything, ‘makes it beautiful’: this ‘Form’ or ‘Idea’ (*eidos*) is the ‘beautiful itself’ (*auto to kalon*), and it is the cause (1) that produces the beauty of/in all the beautiful things or (2) by which all other beautiful things become beautiful. (Fronterotta 2007: 42)

Whereas in the *Charmides* and *Laches* the requirement for a correct definition can be stated in terms of extensional equivalence between *definiens* and *definiendum*, now it must be stated in the form of a ‘causal-ontological’ universality.

An answer to the Socratic question ‘what is X?’ can now be given solely by indicating a unique and universal object – qualified by Plato as an ‘Idea’ or ‘Form’ itself – that is always unchangeable and identical to itself and yet ‘present’ in a multiplicity of particular things, to

which, by virtue of its ‘presence’, it confers that same property whose true nature it embodies. (Fronterotta 2007: 44)¹⁶

The *Euthyphro* accords with the causal-ontological turn of the *Hippias Major*, adding to it the idea of the form as *paradeigma*, or model (Fronterotta 2007: 45). Clearly, Fronterotta finds in these two dialogues the introduction of an ontology of Forms.

Fronterotta reaches the same conclusion when viewing the subjects from the standpoint of agreement between *definiens* and *definiendum*. At the first level, the *Charmides* and *Laches* seek only a ‘logico-semantic’ agreement. At a second level, epistemological agreement is sought, based on knowledge of the *definiendum*. At the third level, agreement depends on the ontological status of the *definiendum*:

The only true universal knowledge is that which is directed to certain objects marked by a peculiar ontological status, the unchangeable and ever identical Ideas or Forms. Thus the possibility of knowledge and definition depends on the ontological status of the objects to be known and defined, and Socrates’ interlocutors’ blatant inability to grasp this fundamental ontological dimension is the ultimate reason why the enquiry carried out in the definitional dialogues fails. (Fronterotta 2007: 48)

Thus:

The question raised in the definitional dialogues, emphasizing the need for a definition, leads to positing Ideas as the real beings one has to know beforehand . . . in order to put forward an appropriate definition: on these terms, it seems to me beyond doubt that one can legitimately speak of a ‘theory of Ideas’

in Plato’s early dialogues. (Fronterotta 2007: 49)

What Socrates is seeking is what Allen called ‘real definition, that is, one that shows the very nature of the object to be defined’, and not nominal definition (Fronterotta 2007: 52). This sort of definition is prior to the logico-semantic and epistemological sorts of definition, and the Ideas, the objects so defined, are ‘distinct, autonomous and prior to the multiplicity of particular things of which they represent the proper being’ (Fronterotta 2007: 54).

Having defended the existence of Ideas in the early dialogues, Fronterotta turns to the development of Plato’s thought concerning them. Up to this point what he has argued for has been compatible with the conception of forms described by Allen, Fine and myself. From this point on, however, Fronterotta offers a critique of the developmentalist hypothesis shared by all three of us. According to this hypothesis the theory of forms in the early dialogues is different from that in the middle dialogues in that Plato describes the relation of participation in the early dialogues in terms of immanence, while he describes it in the middle dialogues in terms of transcendence. Fronterotta objects that the forms are described in both ways in each set of dialogues (Fronterotta 2007: 54).

Fronterotta distinguishes two versions of developmentalism. According to the first, there is no theory of Ideas in the early dialogues. As we have seen, he rejects this view.¹⁷ He then turns to the second version, which he notes is defended by Allen, ‘one of the rare scholars who has . . . recognized a true philosophical meaning in the theory of Ideas in the definitional dialogues’ (Fronterotta 2007: 57). In opposition to Allen’s view, which denies separation between forms and their

participants in the early dialogues, only to posit 'a wide gap . . . between two absolutely different and rigorously separated worlds' in the middle dialogues, Fronterotta argues 'that the difference between Ideas and sensible things, in the early dialogues, *already* consists in a real and concrete separation between two kinds of beings' (Fronterotta 2007: 57). He admits that this separation 'never takes on the 'mythical' form of the juxtaposition between two separated worlds', but he claims that 'this represents a narrative change at most', an 'enlargement' of Plato's epistemological and ontological hierarchy 'from a "geographical" point of view' (Fronterotta 2007: 57). In other words, from Fronterotta's perspective, the doctrine of 'two worlds' is merely a metaphorical expression of a pre-existing metaphysical doctrine of separation. 'For, if the object to be defined and known must be universal, unchangeable, and stable, it obviously cannot belong to the physical world' (Fronterotta 2007: 57). He concludes, 'I tend to believe that this onto-epistemological principle, which plausibly explains the introduction of Ideas, forcing their status to be separated from the physical world and justifying their set of functions, is on no account subject to development in Plato's thought' (Fronterotta 2007: 57).

Fronterotta turns finally to the Socratic question, and specifically to the attempt to find the historical Socrates in Plato's early dialogues. This attempt, which 'falls apart' due to the argument that there is a theory of separate forms in the early dialogues, is based on 'an implicit exegetical prejudice . . . consisting in the dogmatic assumption that Plato's early dialogues represent a faithful portrayal of Socrates' philosophical activity' (Fronterotta 2007: 58). This prejudice requires the elimination of all reference to the theory of forms from the early dialogues and

the drawing of a sharp distinction between the early and middle groups. Without this prejudice, we could see that 'Plato already inaugurates an original philosophical trend from the early dialogues, especially regarding the onto-epistemological framework of the theory of Ideas' (Fronterotta 2007: 59).

CRITIQUE OF FRONTEROTTA: THE PROBLEM OF SEPARATION

Fronterotta describes his position as 'anti-developmental' (2007: 40, 60). He does not use the term 'unitarian' for his position, but that is what a scholar who denied development in Plato's thought, especially his ontology, would be called. If he sees development in Plato's thought, it occurs within the definitional dialogues, between the *Laches* and *Charmides*, on the one hand, and the *Hippias Major* and *Euthyphro*, on the other. That is where the theory of Ideas is introduced. Like Allen, Fine and myself, Fronterotta posits the existence of a theory of Forms or Ideas in these early, definitional dialogues. Once the Ideas are introduced, they remain a constant feature of Plato's thought. Naturally, I have no criticism of Fronterotta's introduction of forms in the early dialogues, but are these forms 'Forms'? Are they the metaphysical entities of the middle dialogues? The question turns on the meaning of 'separation', and this is not as clear as it might be. In his book Allen defined 'separation' in two ways: first, in terms of the independent existence of the forms, and second, in terms of the 'gulf of deficiency' between Forms and their phenomenal participants, and I focused on the second sort of separation in my article. Let us call the second sort of separation 'Two Worlds separation'; Fronterotta tends to downplay the significance of this kind of separation, referring to it as a 'mythological' expression,

a 'geographical' formulation of an ontological point of view – in short, a metaphor. I question this downplaying of the doctrine.

As Allen argued, the separation of the Forms in the 'middle' dialogues is a response to questions about Socratic dialectic that the Socratic dialogues do not raise. These questions are epistemological in nature. They are raised for the first time in the *Meno*, in Meno's paradox. The *Meno* offers a solution to the problem of Socratic dialectic in the doctrine of Recollection; the *Phaedo* connects this doctrine with the theory of Forms. It is in the *Phaedo* that Socratic 'forms' become 'Forms', and the change is due to Plato's consideration of these new questions about the possibility of inquiry. It is also due to Platonic meditation on the imperfection of sensible objects, the fact that for every example of *F*-ness one finds, there is some respect in which it is not-*F*. The paradigm requirement of Socratic definition, enunciated by Dancy and accepted by Allen, among others, requires as a definition an object that is *F* in all respects. Believing that such objects could not be found in the phenomenal world, Plato posited a separate world in which they existed. This was a consequence of Dancy's 'Argument from Relativity', introduced for the first time in the *Phaedo*, but adumbrated in the *Hippias Major*. Fronterotta could argue that this hint indicates that Platonic separation is present already in the Socratic dialogues, but the same cannot be said for the epistemological considerations mentioned above. In brief, it seems to me that Two Worlds separation is not found in the Socratic dialogues, but marks a new development in the so-called middle dialogues. With this development comes another, a change in ontological status of the Forms. Socratic forms are properties of phenomenal objects, however independent of those objects they may be; Platonic Forms are

self-subsistent substances, though they generate properties of objects through participation. One may argue that Platonic Forms are properties, as does Fine, but I think one cannot eliminate the change in ontological status between forms and Forms.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding sections of this chapter, I have tried to present the positions of the various commentators on Socratic metaphysics as accurately and objectively as possible. In the course of doing so I have presented my own view in the form of a critique of Vlastos's position. In this concluding section I would like to present my view in a more systematic way than I have done so far and indicate my agreement and disagreement with the views of others. I am well aware that those holding other views may find my position unpersuasive. I hope, however, that some readers may be convinced.

I have so far identified seven features, found at various places in the Socratic dialogues, that argue for the attribution to the Socrates of these dialogues of a metaphysical theory. These features include:

- (1) use of the language of the middle period (classic) theory of Forms: *eidōs*, *idea* and *paradeigma*;

and the following claims:

- (2) that things corresponding to abstract terms such as 'justice' exist (as in *Prt.* 330c–d and *Hp. Ma.* 287b–d);
- (3) that these things are the objects of real definition, that they are things in the world, not linguistic terms;
- (4) that these abstract entities are 'ones over many', universals;

- (5) that they are causes of some sort;
- (6) that they are standards;
- (7) that they are self-predicational.

It is true that all of these claims are not found in a single text, but E1 and E2 come close to a complete statement of the theory. Together these seven features constitute a theory of forms, as Allen states. They constitute the basis of the theory of separately existing Forms in the ‘middle’ Platonic dialogues. Only the separate existence of the Forms, the ‘gulf of deficiency’ between Forms and phenomena, is not maintained. I do not find it plausible to argue that this premise alone is sufficient to turn a metaphysically innocent set of claims into a metaphysical theory.

I have a further argument in favour of the ‘metaphysical’ interpretation of the Socratic dialogues. It ties together at least some of these dialogues into a neat whole. The dialogues I have in mind are the dialogues of definition: the *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Hippias Major*, *Republic I*, *Lysis*, *Meno* and (perhaps) *Protagoras*. These dialogues search for a definition of a key term, but what is the nature of that search? According to the account I adopt, it is a search for real beings, beings that possess certain characteristics, enumerated above. If one rejects this account, it seems to me that one must say either that the search is purely linguistic in character, or refuse to provide an answer at all. The attempt to ‘read out’ the ontological theory from the dialogues one by one runs afoul of E1 and E2; why not assume, therefore, that when Socrates is seeking definitions he is seeking forms? This metaphysical theory is, moreover, highly coherent. It posits the existence of the objects it seeks to define, assigns a causal role to them and assigns a role as standards as well. The latter claim gives rise to a version of self-predication, but it does

not appear to be a version that gives rise (if any in fact does) to an infinite regress.

Why, then, do opponents of this view (Dancy and Vlastos) refuse to accept it? Perhaps because they hold the view I rejected above, that only the inclusion of separate existence among the premises of the theory of forms renders it metaphysically significant. What Vlastos called Plato’s ‘grandiose theory of “separately existing” Forms’ would be a metaphysical theory; anything less ‘grandiose’ would not be. Perhaps the question is seen as a ‘threshold problem’: what does it take to make a theory cross the threshold from metaphysical innocence to metaphysical significance; their answer being, ‘the doctrine of separate existence’. As noted above, I find this implausible. I do not think this is a reasonable place to put the threshold. Exactly where the threshold of metaphysical significance lies is uncertain; if I had to select a single principle that gave this theory metaphysical significance, it would be the ‘one over many’ principle (4 above), which introduces the idea of forms as universals. In fact, however, I think the seven principles I outlined above constitute a single theory that crosses the threshold of metaphysical significance, wherever it lies, as a body.

I suspect that the real reason for rejecting the metaphysical interpretation of the Socratic dialogues is antecedent commitment to the radical developmentalist framework of interpretation, what Fronterotta calls an ‘exegetical prejudice’. The evidence in favour of an early theory of forms cannot be decisive because we ‘know’, prior to inquiring, that the Socrates of the early dialogues was ‘exclusively a moral philosopher’. This radical account of Platonic development may be attractive for reasons I have not explored here. Vlastos thought it enabled him to solve the Socratic problem. I do not imagine that

I, in this essay, have removed all the reasons for regarding radical developmentalism as attractive. If the account I have defended of an ‘unseparated’ theory of forms in the Socratic dialogues is correct, however, radical developmentalism must be false and the relation between Vlastos’s Socrates_E and Socrates_M must be closer than Vlastos thought. Though I do not think the relation is as close as Fronterotta claims, I think that the development of Socrates_M from Socrates_E is a smooth movement in a single direction, rather than a radical shift of view.

I conclude with a remark about Aristotle’s testimony, as contained in F1–F3 above. The interpretation of these passages is controversial. I am in complete agreement with Fine’s postulation of an early theory of forms, and especially with her treatment of early Platonic

forms as properties. I think that this is what Aristotle meant when he said that Socrates ‘did not make the universals or definitions exist apart’: that he accepted universals, but not separately existing ones. I do not think, however, that Fine is right to claim that the separated Forms of the middle dialogues continue to be properties. I think that separation transforms forms into Forms, properties into substances. This leads to a new concept of self-predication, according to which Forms become perfect instances of their relevant properties, and participation becomes resemblance to that instance. Aristotle’s interpretation of the Platonic version of Forms, with all its complexities, is, however, beyond the scope of this chapter.

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