

INTRODUCTION

How ought one to live? I take this question to be the starting point for Plato's philosophy, his Platonism. No doubt others before him asked it: Socrates for one. But it is not the mere posing of the question that makes it so special. Rather, it is the manner in which Plato considers it. In his hands it calls for reflection, and reflection of a certain, increasingly systematic variety. Plato thinks that systematic reflection, what he and we call "philosophy," shows that this question can be answered. Indeed, philosophical reflection reveals that philosophy itself, the practice of philosophizing, is the answer to the question.

From this starting point spring his ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics. For Plato, these domains are interdependent. Plato is rightly honored for his synoptic vision, his power to see systematic connections between different parts of life, science, the arts, and philosophy. If the question is, broadly speaking, part of ethical inquiry, his answer requires the development of much of his metaphysics and epistemology.

My aim in this work is to explore Plato's metaphysics. The book has three parts, modeled on what I believe to be the three key elements of his metaphysics: the Theory of Forms; the account of particulars; and the nature of metaphysical theory itself.

At the core of Plato's entire philosophy is the Theory of Forms. For Plato, Forms are both the goal and the grounds of philosophical inquiry. In seeking to answer the question of how ought one to live, Plato thinks that we come

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ineluctably to recognize their presence, in part through the realization that they are needed if one is to engage in any inquiry at all.

Thus while I will try to steer clear of most of his ethics and much of his epistemology, I cannot avoid the epistemology entirely. The fact that reflection is a critical component of the best way to live ensures that epistemology will be in play from the outset. The capacity for reflection is distinctive of humans. Reflection presupposes that we take objects or states of affairs, including our own mental states, e.g., beliefs, perceptions, or feelings, as fixed in some sense, so that we may examine and think about them. The assumption that the world is a certain determinate way, constant and fixed to some degree, was as much a part of the Greek worldview as it is of our own. Plato's philosophy is predicated on the notion that the cosmos of which we are an integral part is rationally ordered and (therefore) in principle intelligible to us.¹

But this is not to say that every Greek thinker accepted that the world was fixed and determinate. Perhaps its most problematic aspects are properties such as good and bad, right and wrong, or justice and injustice. Heraclitus, Gorgias, and Protagoras, thinkers whom Plato regarded as rivals, and no doubt countless tragedians, historians, and politicians challenged assumptions about the universality and sameness of ethical notions. Plato sees that reflection is a source of anxiety for humans. For us alone constancy is an issue, since only humans, it seems, have the ability to raise issues about it in our everyday thought and talk. And yet, aware of the challenges posed by reason, Plato concludes that in order to save the phenomenon of reason there must be stable, determinate Forms.

Part and parcel, then, of the reflective inquiry into the question of how ought one to live is this issue of fixity and stability. Socrates claims, against the sophists and others, that there are objective ethical values. Plato recognizes that Socrates' method of argumentation presupposes determinate concepts and beliefs that can be juxtaposed with other beliefs and concepts and judged to be compatible or incompatible, consistent or inconsistent with one another. Because there are these fixed, determinate contents, it is possible for one to deny the *same* judgment or statement that another asserts. *Plato's Doctrine of Forms is the crystallization of his insight that there must be fixity or constancy, both in the world and in our thoughts.* Indeed, I take this intuition to be at the heart of Realism or Platonism, Platonic or otherwise. Forms are the preconditions of an ordered, intelligible cosmos. They are principles of fixity, stability, and changelessness. Forms have a distinctively philosophical legacy. They are universals. They are objective, mind-independent entities. Among their heirs are Frege's sharp borders² and the rules of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. Let us refer to these fixed entities as "properties." The guiding insight, then, into the Theory of Forms is that properties cannot change their nature or properties. In my view, Plato's *primary* metaphysical goal is to

explore and analyze this bedrock intuition that properties or Forms are the source and principles of stability in nature.

Set against this commitment to stable Forms is the apparent fact that things change. Plato accepts that change is also a phenomenon to be saved and explained. Among the changing things are the ordinary particulars and events of the physical, material, sensible world. Included among the ordinary particulars are the inorganic rocks, metals, and liquids, as well as the various kinds of living things, plants, animals, and humans. For Plato, the domain of nature is a subject of metaphysical inquiry. Therefore, a *second* goal of Plato's metaphysical theory is to explain the nature and characteristics of the particulars of the material world, a critical part of which will be to explain how change is possible.

Humans are a special part of nature. So too are the capacities of humans, especially language and thought. When we understand what it is to be human, we appreciate the need for an account of what the world must be like if there are to be thought and language. Thus in the pursuit of our metaphysical inquiry we have to examine the nature of the cognitive states and the nature of their objects. It turns out that the objects of knowledge, our highest rational capacity and the foundation of all our rational capacities, are the Forms. Thus the culmination of metaphysical and epistemological inquiry returns us once again to Forms. (And since, for Plato, knowledge turns out to be the crucial component in the good life for a human, the inquiry into the question of how ought one to live also culminates in Forms.)

According to Plato, at the end of the day the only way for metaphysical inquiry to proceed is by looking at the cognitive and linguistic capacities of humans, for there is no route of inquiry independent of language and thought. Hence, in developing a metaphysical theory, Plato attempts to give an account of metaphysical theorizing. This surfaces most visibly in the *Parmenides*, which is only fitting, given that this most august predecessor had, it seems, identified what is with what is thought.³ After his *Parmenides* declares that Forms are necessary if there is to be dialectical inquiry (*Parm.* 135b–c), issues pertaining to the nature of metaphysical inquiry itself become part of metaphysics in the second part of the dialogue. Given various assumptions about what the objects of inquiry are, Plato undertakes to show that there are general principles that hold true about whatever may be, in part by showing that certain forms of inquiry are possible and others impossible.

Thus, Plato investigates what we might call “general” or “analytic ontology,” the aim of which is to set out general principles governing any specific or special ontology which might be proposed. Here we find, though worked out in a less detailed fashion, the family of notions subsequently to be familiar from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: subject and predicate, universal and particular, part and whole, one and many, same and different, inherence, separation

and others. In so far as a philosopher is studying and proving things about metaphysical inquiry, one is engaged in what is today perhaps considered part of epistemology. In the pursuit of a wholly general ontological account, however, the boundary between metaphysics and epistemology is blurred.

But for Plato, there is a second, more specific arena in which the boundary is blurred. In accounting for the nature and behavior of ordinary particulars, Plato develops a pattern of inference or argument that we, following his successors, call the “One-Over-Many.” We recognize that many items are the same in kind or type: Secretariat and Seattle Slew are both horses; Aristides and Socrates are both just. From such facts Plato infers that there are Forms, e.g., Justice, Beauty, Squareness, Equality. In so far as thought and speech are part of the study of nature, they too should be subject to a One-Over-Many argument. Accordingly, Plato asserts that Knowledge is a Form, and apparently commits himself to Forms of Belief, Perception, Name, and Statement. Moreover, items that his inquiry shows to be necessary not only for thought and speech in general, but for metaphysical or philosophical inquiry in particular, seem worthy of being regarded as Forms. Plato, especially in the *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, attributes a special status to a host of Forms or Kinds whose *raison d’être* is arguably to make possible thought, language, and metaphysical inquiry. Yet, one desideratum we try to satisfy in considering whether the Horse itself or Squareness be Forms is that they be objective and mind-independent entities, items which would “exist” were there no thinkers at all. One is hesitant to say the same about what is required by thought and speech, for in some sense they are not independent, or at least not in the same intuitive fashion. Indeed, Gilbert Ryle, in his epoch-making study of the *Parmenides*,⁴ argued that Plato’s recognition of the “syncategorematic” nature of these properties prompted revolutionary changes in his Theory of Forms. Making sense of Forms such as Unity, Sameness, Difference, and other Forms introduced in the later works, must then be an integral part of the reconstruction of Plato’s metaphysics. This requires one to examine the boundary between epistemology and metaphysics, and to be alert to the difficulties of distinguishing conceptual/epistemological⁵ from metaphysical realism. Tracking Plato’s development of a general metaphysics is the *third* major goal of this work.

The Dialectic of Essence

There are many ways into the labyrinth of Plato’s metaphysics. And while I would like to think that there is only one way out, i.e., the path I will travel, I am pretty sure that there are many. (My fear is that there is none! Perhaps Wittgenstein is right and the only way to deal with the labyrinth of Platonism is to refuse to enter it.) The path I will follow tracks the thread of

ousia, which I shall translate “essence.” There is no hoarier notion in ancient metaphysics.

While Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is the *locus classicus* among the ancient investigations into *ousia*, almost all of his philosophical ancestors were concerned with the notion in one guise or another. Canonically, Greek philosophy begins with the Ionian inquiries into nature, *phusis*, which yielded different speculative accounts of how the present cosmos, marked by change and multiplicity, came to be “out of” some single and undifferentiated principle, e.g., air or the *apeiron*. Ionian methodology, we might say, was empirical and democratic. Their conclusions were based on observations of the phenomena of the physical world (*istoria*). The phenomena, though not the processes which produced them nor the principle(s) from which they were produced, were widely accepted by their fellow citizens and inquirers. Xenophanes seems to have been the first to question the extent to which humans could in fact have knowledge, or perfect knowledge, of the physical world. Whatever we are to make of his obscure remarks about the limitations of human knowledge, to him we can credit the distinction between perfected knowledge of the true state of affairs and our usual epistemic condition, *dokos*, in which, unawares, we are concerned with mere appearances (B36, B35, B2).

Parmenides and Heraclitus change everything. Both distinguish mere appearances, what the ordinary individual or (half-baked) philosopher mistakenly thinks is fact, from the true, hidden nature of reality. But despite their shared rejection of the Ionian account of nature, Heraclitus and Parmenides espouse vastly different ontologies. Heraclitus is the apostle of change, Parmenides the evangelist of a static reality.

For Heraclitus, the ordinary objects of the physical world seem to be continually changing. The only constant, the underlying commonality, is the pattern of change itself. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato ascribes to him a doctrine of flux in all dimensions: at every moment any particular is both changing location and (ex)changing all of its properties. Plato’s material particulars are distant heirs of Heraclitus’s. Plato’s particulars are subject to change in every respect, although not necessarily in every respect at each moment. Platonic particulars are nothing essentially: there is no property that a particular cannot lose.⁶

Particulars, because they change, can be neither metaphysically nor epistemologically basic for Plato. Nor can change itself be the fundamental principle, since Plato finds change intelligible only if there are stable points or states from which it begins and at which it ends. But Plato does think that change must be possible, and he seeks a metaphysical account that secures its possibility. The key to this account are his Forms, entities which are unchanging and essentially and completely the very entities they are. In conceiving of Forms in this way, Plato owes a profound debt to Parmenides.

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Unfortunately, Parmenides' poem is too enigmatic to permit a confident assessment of his account of Being. There are, for us and I think for Plato, two fundamental and related issues of interpretation: the nature of Parmenides' monism and the nature of the Parmenidean "is," the verb which figures in the critical premises of the argument in *The Way of Truth*. According to a tradition that begins no later than Plato's *Sophist*, Parmenides is a numerical monist: there is exactly one item in Parmenides' metaphysical cosmos. What that item is is unclear. It seems to be Mind, Being, or the One. Plato devotes much effort in the *Sophist* and *Parmenides* to separating Being, as the object of thought or language, from one's language and thought about it. As he reads the poem, the Parmenidean One/Being/Mind is incapable of being the object of thought or language.

Others argue that Parmenides is a "kind" monist. They find him committed to exactly one kind of entity, Being, but they allow that there may be many entities of that one kind. Support for this interpretation can be found in the fact that some of his successors, Plato perhaps included, do not think it necessary to defend their assumption of a pluralistic metaphysics. Anaximander, Empedocles, and the Atomists all start their accounts with many different items, each of which is something that is. At issue are the possibilities of change, or generation and destruction.

In large measure, the question of Parmenides' monism turns on the way he conceives of Being. Our best guide to understanding his conception is the way the notion is deployed in the arguments of his poem.⁷ Two broad lines of interpretation distinguish an existential "is" from a predicational "is." The existential reading typically treats Parmenides as a numerical monist. What might be called a "pure existentialist reading" maintains that the "is" of *The Way of Truth* stands simply for existence.⁸ All that can be said of any subject is that it is. For admitting any other "property," even (self-)identity, seems to require that the subject be a plurality of some sort, e.g., that it be *both* an existent *and* self-identical. Once pluralism is accepted, difference and not-being seem to follow. At least the last notion is anathema to Parmenides.

The predicationalists⁹ are in general inclined towards kind monism. A plurality of beings is possible because, according to the predicationalist, what is required in order for something to be is that it satisfy certain standards, namely that it be a "predicational unity." To be a predicational unity is for the candidate being, F, to be "of a single kind," *mounogenes* (B8.4): it must be completely and solely F, and admit of a single account specifying its unique nature as F. But nothing about Being, or the arguments of the poem, restricts the number of items that can be predicational unities.¹⁰

The nexus of notions introduced by Parmenides, and especially by the predicationalist reading of him, e.g., being, existence, essence or nature, sameness, difference, not-being, clearly demands to be untangled. While his immediate successors tackle problems relating to change and generation by

appealing to a plurality of entities and processes that allegedly satisfy Parmenidean strictures, Plato is the first to critique Parmenides' assumptions about Being and how one can theorize about what is. In his dialogues, Plato treats Parmenides as a numerical monist and, on balance, conceives of his "is" along existentialist lines. Of course Plato's purpose is dialectical and thus we should not base our understanding of Parmenides solely or even principally on Plato's use of the fragments. Indeed, the predicational reading is very similar to the notion of Being Plato develops for his Forms. There would, then, be good reason for Plato to suppress this reading of Parmenides in order to highlight his own originality. But regardless of which sense of "is" is at work in Parmenides' poem, the effort to identify the different ways in which essence or properties or predicates can belong to a being (an *on*), whether that *on* be a Form, or a particular, or a linguistic subject, would be continuous with the metaphysical tradition of Parmenides.

Plato's Theory of Forms is his revolutionary contribution to the tradition. For Plato, Forms are the primary bearers of essence.¹¹ Their possession of *ousia* guarantees their stability and allows them to be the source of constancy in nature. They *may* be the only bearers of *ousia*. If other items bear essences, their possession of an essence will depend in some fashion on the Form's possession of that same essence.

In this respect, essence is the thread that leads us through the maze of Plato's dialogues as well as his metaphysics. To select essence over other properties or items, e.g., unity, or sameness, or soul, is to imply (conversationally at least) that it deserves to be privileged.¹² Not only do I believe it to be at the core of his metaphysical theory, I contend that the study of essence is the most useful heuristic for the reconstruction of that metaphysical theory.

In trying to understand the role essence plays in Plato, one begins from its earliest manifestations in the so-called Socratic dialogues. Socrates' distinctive mode of inquiry is the elenchus, at whose heart is what we refer to as a Socratic question. It takes the form of a "What is it?" question (*Ti esti . . . ?*) where in place of the "it" typically is found the name of some ethical property, e.g., What is Justice? or What is Piety? A Socratic question is answered by a definition or *logos*, an account that says what Piety or Justice, or for any property X, what X is. Today we typically regard definitions as (of) linguistic items. While it is appropriate at times to treat definitions as linguistic items, they are, for Plato, primarily ontological items; that is, definitions are of things, not words or concepts. If we are careful, we can toggle easily between the linguistic and ontological senses of "definition." It is critical, however, to recognize that *what the linguistic definition picks out or refers to is the essence or ousia of X*.

My inquiry into Plato's metaphysics is guided by three related questions about essence. The first question is:

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What items have essences?

The obvious candidates are Forms or particulars.¹³

The second question concerns the ontological relation between the essence and what has an essence:

Can essence be predicated of anything with which it is not identical?

Is an essence (always) identical with whatever possesses it? The answer to this question is terribly complex. Aristotle, in *Metaphysics Zeta* 6, asserts that primary substance is, strictly speaking, identical with its essence.¹⁴ While this suggests that Aristotle's answer to the second question is no, the adjective, "primary," and the phrase, "strictly speaking," leave (vast) room for qualifications. Perhaps essence is predicable of, but not identical with, substances that are not primary; or perhaps when one is not speaking strictly, we can predicate essence of a subject with which it is not identical.

The third question is:

What is the relation between the ontological nature of an essence and the way we learn about and, at the ideal limit, define it?

Can one distinguish the way in which we know and define a Form from the way the Form is? A vivid way to pose this third question is to contrast the syntactic complexity of the linguistic definition of, e.g., Human, say "rational, two-footed animal," with the apparent simplicity or unity of the essence. A Platonic Form is supposed to be simple or unique, a *one* over many. The tension between the unitary nature of the Platonic Form and our understanding of that nature becomes pronounced when Plato develops the Method of Collection and Division in the late dialogues. The weblike or "holistic" structure of the collections and divisions suggests that Plato has either abandoned the unitary nature of the Forms or revised his conception of essence such that Forms are now complex unities.

These three questions shape my account of Plato's metaphysics and my selection of texts and topics. I will ignore many dialogues and even some metaphysical aspects of those dialogues to which my chapters are devoted. For instance, I will not discuss Plato's teleology, the interaction of soul and body, or other aspects of his philosophy of science, including what might be described as his account of efficient causation. Also I will deal only cursorily with the Theory of Recollection in the *Phaedo* and the epistemology of the *Republic*.

On my account, Plato's metaphysics emerges in response to his attempts to answer these three questions. In the *Phaedo*, which I take to be the beginning of his metaphysics, his goals are to develop a special ontology of Forms as the stable bearers of essence, and to distinguish Forms from particulars, items that lack essence. In the next phase, his concern is to investigate what it is for a Form to possess an essence. In the *Parmenides*, this endeavor

prompts his initial efforts to advance a general ontology, a crucial aspect of which is his isolation of Being, Identity, Unity, Sameness, Difference, and other properties that characterize any Form simply in virtue of the fact that it is a Form. In the late dialogues, his continuing investigation into general ontology and the relations between Forms leads to new insights into the difference between the metaphysical and conceptual realms. Here he develops the Method of Collection and Division and the notion of the interweaving of Forms. These allow him to give an account of false statement and to differentiate terms which make distinctions that don't correspond to the way things are in nature from those that do signify real kinds, two clear instances where what we say and what there is come apart. Finally, the account of the interweaving of Forms and the Method of Collection and Division allows him to address the third question about definition and knowledge. According to the general ontology, there can be no *ontological* relation between a Form and a *part* of its essence.¹⁵ Statements such as “Man is animal” are “conceptual truths”; the relations between the Forms are those of compatibility or implication. The only beings of whom Man and Animal are (ontologically) predicated are the individual humans. The relations between Forms are discovered and displayed in the collections and divisions of particulars and the Forms “over” them. Armed with these new weapons, Plato is at last prepared to give an account in the *Timaeus* and *Philebus* of the nature of the particular and the relations between particulars and Forms.

Précis of the Chapters

This book is addressed to the expert who is familiar with the primary metaphysical passages in the dialogues, as well as the secondary literature. But I have tried to make the book accessible to the relative newcomer who might be reading for the first time a book devoted to Plato's metaphysics. The somewhat expansive discussions of the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Parmenides* provide the texts from which I'd like to think my interpretation of Plato's metaphysics falls out rather naturally. Together with more detailed discussions of the late dialogues, the book provides a general introduction to Plato's metaphysics.

Chapter 1 examines in greater detail some of the philosophical issues involved in Plato's account of Forms, particulars, and general metaphysics.

The succeeding six chapters track Plato's metaphysics from its origin in the Socratic dialogues to its conclusion in the *Timaeus*.

Chapter 2 provides the backdrop to the Platonic metaphysics of the *Phaedo*. I look at properties in the so-called Socratic dialogues and how essence emerges in response to Socrates' “What is X?” questions. The metaphysics of these dialogues is adumbrative and problematic. It is unclear whether Socra-

tic properties are simple or related to other properties. Of special interest is the role of a Socratic property as the primary bearer of (its) essence, in virtue of which it “explains” all instances of itself. Socratic properties “self-predicate,” i.e., each seems to be qualified by the very property it is: Piety is pious. In a coda I turn to the *Meno*, a transitional dialogue, to consider its new demands on definitions and the new kinds of properties mentioned there.

In the third chapter, I present my interpretation of Plato’s initial metaphysics of Forms and particulars lacking essence. I begin with the arguments of the *Phaedo*, especially the Hypothesis of Forms commencing at 100 and culminating with the final argument for the immortality of the soul. In the second part of the chapter I turn briefly to the central books of the *Republic*. Mine is, I would like to believe, a fairly orthodox reading of these dialogues. In the final part of the chapter I offer my rational reconstruction of Plato’s account of Forms and particulars in the middle period, to include a defense of the controversial forms-in-us,¹⁶ and my interpretation of the relations of Participation and Being in the middle period. (In an appendix to chapter 2, there is a discussion of Irwin’s and Fine’s alternative account of Plato’s initial metaphysics.)

In the fourth chapter, I examine the *Parmenides*, tracking the argument through the beginning stages of the Second Hypothesis (126–143b8). Here Plato begins the examination of the nature of metaphysics. The critical features of the first two hypotheses concern what must be true of any beings that are to serve as subjects of metaphysical inquiry, beginning from the consideration of how many *archai*, beings or principles, must be posited in order to account for what there is. Special attention is given to the nature of Forms as bearers of essence; what follows from the postulation of two primitives, a one-component and a being-component; and what relations Forms bear to one another. Forms are shown to be both Beings, as they were introduced to be, and partakers, a role that was uncertain in the initial exposition of the theory. In the second part of the chapter I take up the question of separation, the critical feature of the theory according to Aristotle. I argue that (for Plato) Forms are definitionally separate from particulars; that is, since Forms, and not particulars, are bearers of essence, definitions are predicable of Forms and not of particulars. Here I also consider an important rival account, the view that Forms are existentially separate from particulars.

Chapter 5, the longest discussion of a single dialogue, is devoted to the *Sophist* and the interweaving of Forms. I try to show how Forms and metaphysical inquiry emerge into new light *prior* to *Sophist* 254. I then offer my own account of the interweaving of Forms, addressing the questions why there is no Form of Participation and what we are to make of the nature of Being, as well as the nature of statements involving the copula. While the vast literature on the dialogue operates in the background, at the outset of

the chapter I briefly consider Ryle's account of Plato's development, and at the end the culmination of the linguistic turn initiated by Ryle and others, namely Frede's interpretation of *Sophist* 255c12–13.¹⁷

The sixth chapter then takes up the status of “not-beings” in Plato. In general, the goal of the chapter is to consider whether there is an ontological correlate to every linguistic and conceptual notion. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to the treatment of not-beings in the *Sophist*: for instance, the question whether there is a Form of the Not-Beautiful correlated with the predicate “not-beautiful.” Since this question arises in the course of Plato's treatment of false statement, I try to reconstruct Plato's account of this phenomenon. Of all the passages considered in this book, I am least confident about my grip on Plato's argument here (and not confident that Plato himself has a good grip on the problem.) The second part of the chapter addresses the question whether Forms are ontologically related in a manner corresponding to the patterns displayed in the Method of Collection and Division.

In the seventh and longest chapter, I present a detailed account of the nature of particulars. The first part of the chapter looks at the metaphysics of the *Philebus*. In the second part I take up the *Timaeus*.¹⁸ The key question is why Plato offers in each dialogue two accounts of particulars: the “Gift of Prometheus” (14c–19) and the fourfold ontology (23bff.) in the *Philebus*; the initial creation of the cosmos (27dff.) and the restart (47eff.) in the *Timaeus*. The earlier accounts, I will claim, are wedded to the traditional Theory of Forms, even as they push the envelope of that theory. The nature of the Gift of Prometheus and the World Animal itself is fully revealed in their respective dialogues only when the novel and far more detailed second accounts are developed. I consider the metaphysical program of the *Philebus* to be a preliminary take on the nature of particulars. I thus try to show how the fourfold ontology can be assimilated especially to the *Timaeus*'s second account involving the receptacle, geometrical and traditional Forms, and two kinds of causes. According to my reconstruction of the theory of particulars in the *Timaeus*, matter is not a primitive. Platonic particulars, I contend, are composed of matter or body, but matter itself is a construct. Particulars remain dependent beings; they (still) lack *ousia*. They are beholden for their nature both to the natureless medium in which they come to be, the receptacle, and to the form-copies of the geometrical and traditional Forms, which bequeath to them whatever properties they have.

Given the progress of my chapters, perhaps a few remarks about chronology are in order. In all likelihood, Plato wrote the dialogues at different times. I believe, however, that nothing in what I take to be a later dialogue requires that an earlier doctrine be rejected. But chronology does have some implications for me, insofar as I believe that there are developments in Plato's metaphysics. On my account, issues addressed in the later dialogues rely on notions discussed elsewhere, e.g., the so-called first part of the *Par-*

menides looks back to the *Phaedo*. Plato's metaphysics becomes increasingly more sophisticated. I accept the traditional chronology because I think it allows for the most illuminating reconstruction of his metaphysics. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to read the dialogues in a variety of orders, say in the order of the Tetralogies of Thrasyllus, or according to the age of Socrates.¹⁹

Leaving aside the lateness of the *Timaeus*, I adopt a fairly orthodox view about which dialogues belong to the various periods.²⁰ In the early "Socratic" period I include *Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Ion*, *Lysis*, *Laches*, *Hippias Minor*, *Menexenus*, *Euthydemus*(?) and the *Protagoras*. The *Hippias Major*, *Gorgias*, and perhaps the *Meno* belong to the end of this period, maybe with the *Gorgias* and more likely the *Meno* verging into the middle period. The middle period works include the *Cratylus*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and perhaps the *Phaedrus*. In the post-*Republic* phase we then find the *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Politicus*, *Timaeus*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*, along with the *Critias*.²¹ I omit the dubiously Platonic dialogues as well as the *Letters*. The former have no bearing on my account. As for the *Seventh Letter*, I believe that it is either by Plato or by one sufficiently in tune with his thinking that we should consider most of the doctrinal elements, especially those concerning writing, knowledge, and definition (341–44c), to reflect accurately his late thought.²²