Universals: how Plato started the whole thing off

This paper is, of course, about the Theory of Forms. Which sounds straightforward, except for various drawbacks: 1) like any other philosopher, Plato developed his ideas as he went along, 2) nowhere in his work is there a definitive account of exactly what the theory is, 3) there is no consensus among modern writers as to what even those pieces of the jigsaw which are relatively clear actually mean. What I'll do here is, first, to give an account of Plato's views as they develop through the dialogues, and, second, to discuss four questions that arise, both about what he means and about whether he is right.

Warning: as Plato wrote in dialogue form, all the views proposed are put into the mouths of named characters. When you hear me say "Socrates says . . ." or "Plato believes . . .", I use the expressions interchangeably. The distinction is of no account.

A. The 'Theory' of Forms

In the early dialogues Socrates challenges people to produce a definition of a common term that they frequently use in argument. In the *Euthyphro*, for example, when the expert on piety says that he is doing the pious thing in prosecuting his own father, Socrates asks him to define the word 'pious'. What he actually asks is for Euthyphro to tell him "what sort of thing the pious is", something that is the same in every case, the same as itself; and he assumes that the same is the case for the opposite, the 'impious': it has one 'form' (*idea*), according to which everything that is impious is impious, just as the 'pious' has one form (*eidos* – a different word, just to underline the non-technicality of any theory) by which all things are pious. Socrates thinks that, if he knows what this 'form' is, then he can 'look at it', use it as a 'paradigm', and then be able to label as 'pious' all those actions that are 'of that sort'.

So far, this seems common sense. In other early dialogues, where the same notion appears, the words to be defined include health, size, strength, figure, colour, courage and pleasure. When people are having discussions about such things, it is obviously a good idea if they can at least agree on exactly what they are discussing, i.e. the meanings of the key words. What is special about the early dialogues, as opposed to the later ones, is the way the attempt at definition goes. In the *Euthyphro*, and again in the *Laches*, where the target is a definition of 'courage', the method is for Socrates to invite people to offer a definition and then to shoot it down by citing counter-examples – either instances of courage which are not covered by the definition or instances of non-courage that the definition would allow. The interlocutors accept these counter-examples and proceed to think up a more convincing definition. Now that procedure can work only if everyone in the room already knows what 'courage' means, at least intuitively; otherwise the counter-examples would not be accepted as counter-examples. They appeal to people's intuitive knowledge of how the word is used. When a definition of courage is offered as 'standing firm in one's position in battle', it is objected that the Spartans sometimes beat a tactical retreat for reasons that have nothing to do with lack of courage. The others cannot help agreeing that the definition has to be changed because it excludes something that is perfectly courageous. So at this stage Socrates is looking for definitions on which we can all agree of common terms in the language; if we hold the definition in our minds, we can check to see if a particular object or action is like it, and therefore an example; but equally, we can check a suggested definition against agreed examples.

Things start to develop away from common sense when mathematics rears its head, in particular geometry, which was taking off in Greece at the time. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates is discussing the concept of equality. It is agreed that sticks and stones that appear roughly

equal in size are never precisely equal, and yet we seem to have a concept of what it would mean for them to be precisely equal; he goes on to conclude that we must have learnt this concept in a former life before we were born. The point here is that the idea/form of equality is a kind of standard of perfection to which ordinary objects may approximate. That might seem quite a reasonable idea to a student of geometry; after all, when we say that the angles of a triangle add up to 180º, we know that that is true of no triangle on earth, least of all the triangles we use to illustrate it, but it is true of an imagined ideal triangle. Socrates then extends this notion to other adjectives, such as 'beautiful', 'good', 'pious'. There is a superficial similarity here: we can have a concept of 'good' or 'beautiful', but doubt that anyone or anything is ever absolutely one or the other. It would be interesting, however, to see how Socrates would have replied to an interlocutor who took an instance from arithmetic. If, for example, there are 25 people in this room and 25 people in the room next door, is there any reason not to suppose that the number of people in the two rooms is absolutely and precisely equal? Alas, I wasn't there to pose the question! At any event, this gap between the concept and its instantiation is taken to greater lengths in the *Symposium*, where Socrates claims that the point of appreciating beautiful things and people is to move beyond that to appreciating, indeed loving, the 'form' of the beautiful itself, uncontaminated by human flesh; it is the only thing that is beautiful in every respect, everywhere, all the time. Those beautiful things we meet all along the way have a share of the absolutely beautiful but are not fully it. In fact, as Socrates claims in the *Republic*, someone who recognises beautiful things, but does not and cannot recognise beauty itself, lives in a dream.

Back to the *Phaedo* again, where Socrates intensifies this separatist tendency by talking about the relationship between the body and the psyche (translated as 'mind' or 'soul', there being no difference in Greek). There are two distinct worlds: first is the familiar one we experience through our five (fallible) senses, and second is the world of such things as absolute equality and absolute justice. It is the body which apprehends the physical world, but the psyche that apprehends the world of universals. This distinction is more or less formalised in the *Republic*, where it is made clear that all the particular features of the physical world derive their character from the absolute qualities that populate the intellectual world. At first all we are aware of is the physical world, but from instances of, say, courage we come to a vague idea of what absolute 'courage' is. We might agree with him here: as children, we get a fairly reliable idea of what a dog is from seeing various dogs, and thereafter we can identify a dog we haven't seen before by applying the concept we have learnt. But the person who is going to become a ruler of the ideally just state must do more than that. He (or she – Plato is several centuries ahead of his time in allowing *any* super-clever person into his ruling class) – he or she must forget about the physical world in his or her thinking and concentrate on the world of universals as a separate world. The analogy with geometry, or even arithmetic, is clear. The mathematician may once have learnt the meaning of the word 'triangle' from being given one to play in the school band, but he must forget about such trivia and calculate what happens with perfect triangles, for example their relation to perfect squares. Similarly, the would-be ruler has his attention drawn to various instances of justice, but as an intellectual he forgets about those and thinks about the relation of justice to other absolute qualities. Thus he learns how to derive justice from a higher quality, ultimately the Form of the Good. The world of ethics is treated like that of mathematics: you start with axioms, or hypotheses, which you just assume, and derive conclusions from them – working, as it were, downwards; then you work out how to derive each of those axioms from a higher hypothesis of which it is itself a conclusion. That is working upwards. Eventually you reach the ultimate hypothesis, which somehow you know is the highest; in the *Republic* it is the Form of the Good. It is not an unfamiliar idea. Some philosophers today postulate an ultimate moral principle – e.g. the greatest happiness, or 'do as you would be done by' – and then

derive secondary moral principles from that, e.g. justice, equality, compassion etc. Each of those generates subsidiary moral principles, such as ensuring that poor people get as fair a trial as rich people. And eventually you get down to the exercise of a moral concept in a particular instance in the real world. So there is a hierarchy of universals, and the education of the would-be ruler involves learning how they are related to each other.

In some later dialogues, there is less emphasis on the moral hierarchy, greater emphasis on more general classification. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates calls this 'collection and division', and it is much the same thing as our taxonomy of the animal kingdom. We may collect all humans and some other animals under the general label of 'mammals', then divide the category up into genera, then each genus into species . . . and so on until we have a definition of human. In the *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger gives Theaetetus a lesson in the method, working out a semi-serious definition of the word 'angler'. He starts with the category of 'expert', divides this into the two sub-categories of acquisitive and non-acquisitive experts, and, after seven further divisions into two, arrives at the definition of angler as 'expert who is acquisitive, possession-taking, hunting, animal-hunting, aquatic hunting, fishing, hooking, drawing upward from underneath'. No mention of the Form of the Good, just a method of sorting out the logical relation between different universals. In fact the word for species, or category, is *eidos*, the same word as is usually translated 'Form'. This is really a more sophisticated, methodical version of what we started with: Socrates seeking to define terms in order to discuss an issue more intelligently.

That is a summary of the main features of the so-called Theory of Forms, Plato's idea of universals. Now to the four questions that it raises.

B. Questions

1. Relation between universals and particulars

My first point is about the relation between universals and particulars. When he specifies it at all, Plato talks of particulars being what they are, i.e. having the name they have, *either* by participating in, i.e. having a share of, the relevant Form, *or* by resembling it. There is a remarkable section in the *Parmenides* where the philosopher Parmenides quizzes the young Socrates about this relation. Does the 'having a share' relation mean that the Form is split up into lots of little bits, one for each particular, or does it mean that the whole of each Form is in each particular? As for the resemblance option, if this particular resembles that particular because both resemble the relevant Form, must there not be some further object, a sort of super-Form, which both the particulars and the Form resemble? And, if so, there must be some even more ultimate super-super-Form that all four resemble . . . *ad infinitum*. This is known as the Third Man argument, and Socrates has no answer to it, or indeed to the previous questions about partaking of the Form. It is not clear what we are meant to make of this puzzlement, or what the rest of the dialogue, where Parmenides gives Socrates some training in philosophical argument, is all about; but, if there is a problem about the relationship between universal and particular, Plato nowhere cracks it.

2. What types of Universal are there?

Plato tends to be most interested in two distinct kinds of concept. One is the precise mathematical definition, such as equality of size, or triangle, where we can conceive of a perfect example of such a thing but are unlikely to find one; when we do geometric reasoning, we may use imperfect examples as guides, or apply our reasoning to imperfect examples, but the calculations are based on imagined perfect triangles or perfectly equal lengths. The other concept is of qualities on a value spectrum, such as beautiful and good. Here we describe some objects or actions as better or more beautiful than others, and by a

logical extension we can imagine the spectrum having a top end, where there may be something perfectly beautiful or perfectly good – though we need have no idea in most instances what that might be, and there is no particular reason why there should be such a thing. These two types of concept, which are basically geometrical and value concepts, are just two of the various types of universal that could be mentioned. Another type might be numbers, a sort capable of precise definition, but in this case having precise instances: the phrase 'precise instances', for example, is precisely two words, nothing approximate about it. Yet another type – a very common one – is of ordinary objects such as 'bed'. It would be hard to give a precise definition of 'bed', and there probably are, or at least could be, objects where there is some dispute over whether they are beds or, say, couches or divans. But, despite the concept's fuzzy edges, there is no question about the bedness, or unbedness, of the vast majority of objects in the world, and there is no feeling that some beds are more bedlike than others. And there are no doubt various other categories of concept, too. Plato is most interested in the value categories, such as good and beautiful, most knowledgeable about the geometrical ones, and is prone to treat the former – and indeed all other universals – as of the same type as the latter, the geometrical. So his general view of universals is rather different from ours, namely as perfect examples to which things in the everyday world approximate or aspire. One might say his whole idea of universals is skewed by his love of geometry and his preoccupation with ethics, with questionable results for his general theory of how universals work.

3. Do the Forms exist?

The question arises for many modern commentators, as it did for Aristotle: what is the ontological status of these universals, or Forms? Do they actually exist? Or are they merely logical constructs of ours? The same question arises even today in the case of number; I have heard some philosophers and mathematicians claim that the number 4 is an entity which exists as much as any string quartet. Imagine that God, being sole owner of the universe, put it up for sale to a rival god. If he was required to write out an inventory of everything in the universe, would he include – in addition to string quartets and beautiful sonatas – the number 4 and the universal concept 'beauty'? Well the first thing to say is that the Greeks did not have a word that means 'exist'. So it is not really clear if Plato would understand the question; I even have a sneaking suspicion that the question doesn't mean much in English either! But let us try to work Plato out. When he starts off a discussion of the Forms, he sometimes checks that his interlocutor understands by asking him to agree that "the just is something rather than nothing". The interlocutor agrees immediately, as if the answer is obvious. In a sense it is, if all that is meant is that the word 'just' means something and there are at least some things in the world to which it applies. Had he asked if "the splidgific, or the number zap, is something rather than nothing", his interlocutor would probably have replied "Nothing". *We* might say that individual just people exist, and individual just acts occur, perhaps exist; but we might say that justice itself – the concept removed from its instances – does not really exist as a separate entity. Aristotle says clearly, in *Metaphysics* Z, that Plato *does* treat the Forms as something 'separate' (*choriston*). And in the *Parmenides*, when the young Socrates suggests that perhaps the Forms are merely thoughts in our minds, Parmenides ridicules such a silly idea. So they probably would feature on God's inventory, in Plato's view. Some modern scholars believe that Plato is confusing objectivity with object; since the Forms are objective (as I talk about in the next section), they must be objects; but I'm not sure how much rides on this. What Plato himself says, when he talks about 'being', is that Helen of Troy, renowned for her beauty, is not wholly beautiful: there are some respects in which she is not beautiful, some times at which she is not, some angles from which she is not. So she both is and is not beautiful. The only thing that is absolutely

beautiful is the beautiful itself, by definition; the only thing that is absolutely just is the just itself. Everything in the physical world is and is not, in the sense that it both is and is not whatever it is said to be: it is not a perfect example of whatever it is an instance of. So in this sense, where 'to be' means not 'to exist' but – as often in Greek philosophy – 'to be whatever it is', the constituents of the world of Forms fully are, while the constituents of the physical world hover between being and not-being.

4. Are they objective?

Whatever we think about Plato's tendency to objectify universals, what is quite incontrovertible is their objectivity, and this is probably the most important and controversial thing about them. *We* might suppose that universal terms are invented by us humans to make conversation easier. If every object in the universe had its own unique name, we should (a) find it very difficult to remember all the names, and (b) have no means of indicating that this object was in the same category as that object; so we categorize the world's objects in a way that is convenient for us, and by convention universal terms are the names we use for the objects in each category. Very roughly! Thus the universal names we use are a matter of public convention, and to that extent objective (or more accurately intersubjective); but, had no humans ever existed, there would be no such categories and no such names.

That is, not, however, the view of Plato, for a number of reasons. First of all there is the notion that we learn the universal terms in a previous existence, and in our present lives, which we begin in a state of forgetfulness, we are reminded of that pre-existing knowledge by seeing examples of each universal in the world around us. The purpose of life, at least for the philosopher, is to come to know the world of Forms as thoroughly as possible and in a way that is as divorced as possible from any contact with the physical world. Eventually, when our psyche escapes from the body, those which have been best trained will apprehend the universals in all their purity in that non-physical world in which the psyche is most at home.

Second, Plato occasionally – and at enormous length in the *Timaeus* – touches on the way the world began. He, or at least the Pythagorean thinker Timaeus, imagines that, before the craftsman-god, the demiurge, got to work, there were two categories of stuff around. There was matter, and there were the unchanging Forms. The demiurge and his helpers, taking the Forms as paradigms, moulded matter into the shape of each Form to create the world as we know it, i.e. a mass of imperfect instances of the perfect Forms. The reason they are imperfect is the fault of matter, which is sometimes called 'necessity' (*ananke*), implying it is beyond the demiurge's control. This idea might work tolerably well for animals, plants, shapes; but what about objects invented by human beings? In the *Parmenides* the youthful Socrates is asked by the philosopher Parmenides whether he thinks there are Forms of all things that have a common name, such as fire, water, hair and mud. Socrates is unsure about fire and water – even though those are specifically mentioned in the *Timaeus* account of creation as having Forms – and very dubious indeed about something as paltry as mud. In a sense, there must be something that all mud has in common that makes it mud, however trivial the concept of 'mud' may be; there cannot *not* be a universal form of 'mud'. But the high-minded young Socrates probably had difficulty imagining that mudness is a Form belonging to that ethereal world where things like absolute equality and absolute justice live. So there may be a doubt here about the objectivity, even the existence, of universals that Plato finds less interesting.

But the *Republic* gives a different slant. Towards the end, in the section on Art, Socrates uses 'bed' as an example of an artefact. There is only one Form of bed; the craftsman ('demiurge' again, only this time a human one) makes various physical beds, but not the actual form of what bed is; that was presumably made by God, he says, while the craftsman looks towards

the ideal bed and copies it, producing something resembling it. So even the universal 'bed' is, as one scholar puts it, not so much a *de*scription as a *pre*scription. Bed-making is in fact very similar to the job of the philosopher-ruler as described in the central part of the *Republic*: he must look at the objectively fixed Form of justice and construct his just state by copying it. These passages are a clear indication not only that a huge range of objects, even human artefacts, have universal Forms which we can apprehend, but also that all of these owe their objectivity to something other than our minds.

The third point to make about objectivity is this. The idea of mind-independent Forms is crucially important in the context of debates about ethics and politics going on in Greece at the time Socrates and Plato were doing philosophy. This is often characterized as the great Nomos-Physis argument. In this context, 'Physis' means nature, what is natural and relatively permanent, while 'Nomos' is convention or law laid down by us humans. Whereas the traditional view was that all the established rules of morality were laid down by the gods at the beginning of history, or at least are somehow natural to us, the dangerous new thinkers – usually sophists – argued that our natural tendency is to be entirely selfish and that the established moral rules are made up by us, designed either to protect the weak against the strong, who would otherwise have unlimited power, or laid down by the strong to safeguard their power. Whether this or that thinker took a more cynical or a more sympathetic view of contemporary customs and laws, they would be agreed on the general principle that concepts such as 'good' were made up by us, and do not lurk on the horizon waiting for us to spot them. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates attributes just such a view to Protagoras and his supporters. Protagoras was a hugely influential thinker, of whose work almost none survives: if the fairy godmother gave me a wish, it would be that his work entitled *Truth* would be found in one of the charred but now decipherable papyri being discovered in the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum. It starts with the words, "Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are and of the things that are not that they are not" . . . and that's all we've got! The view Socrates cites is that, in the case of words such as 'just, unjust, pious, impious', there is no absolute truth about them – "there is nothing in their nature possessing its own being" – but that "what becomes true is what seems to most people right at the time it seems right and for as long as it seems right". So, if a city decides that a certain policy is morally good, there is no independent standard of goodness by which anyone can say the city is wrong. Controversy rages still about how far Protagoras took this so-called relativism. [Some, including Aristotle, regarded it as fairly universal – any statement which I believe is true for me – which leads easily to the sort of refutation Plato gives in this passage.] But all that matters here is that some believed that the whole edifice of moral rules is a human invention, and that there is no absolute, mind-independent truth about what is right or wrong. I assume Protagoras would apply the same reasoning to aesthetic topics, and reject any notion that an absolute beauty exists.

Why is Plato, almost certainly like Socrates before him, so insistent on the absolute truth of universals? Partly, as the argument against Protagoras implies, it makes moral thinking much more straightforward if there are right answers waiting to be found. But there is an epistemological motive, too. One of the features of the intellectual world that contains the universal Forms and the truths of mathematics is the fact that it never changes. Another great thinker, somewhat earlier than Protagoras, was Parmenides, whose poem *The Way of Truth* had an extraordinary influence on later thinkers that we might think went well beyond its obvious appeal. He distinguished between the world of truth, or being, and the world of seeming. The latter, on which he wrote a much longer poem, is the world about us, which is full of variety, change, coming-to-be and perishing; the world of being is totally changeless. That seems to be the result of some rather specious logic, but for what it's worth Parmenides

claims that he has proved logically that any true statement must be necessarily, and therefore always, true, and any appearance to the contrary – e.g. that trees change colour in the autumn, or that children are born who didn't exist before – must be illusory. So the only things we can really know are the permanent truths that never change.

Even those who did not go along with the whole package were seduced by the two-world view: a world of provable truths, e.g. the unchanging facts of mathematics and logic, and the much inferior physical world we live in where facts are transient. In the *Republic*, Plato follows the idea very closely. The intellectual world of Forms is the world of knowledge, that of their particular instances is the world of opinion; just as opinion is between knowledge and ignorance, so the physical world is between being and non-being, and so a world of being and not being. As I mentioned earlier, the latter is probably not a world that half-exists, but one in which everything only partly instantiates the equivalent universal in the world of Forms: it partly is and partly is not (whatever it is). So the world of Forms is the only area in which we can have certain knowledge, or indeed knowledge worth the name, or knowledge of things worth knowing about; any so-called knowledge we may have about the physical world is mere opinion, and derives from our knowledge of the intellectual world. Whatever we may think of all this, it does seem to be a strong epistemological motive for the absoluteness and objectivity of the Forms.

C. Conclusion

To pull all these threads together, Plato's use of universals can be summarised as follows. He calls them by two different words that can be translated as 'form' or 'idea', or 'species', 'class', 'category'.

1. They almost certainly have a separate existence of their own
2. They are the only things that are truly what they are
3. They are eternal and unchanging
4. They are graspable only by the mind
5. They are quite certainly the only true objects of knowledge
6. They are the source of any knowledge we have of the world
7. They are the perfect paradigms of which objects in this world are imperfect copies
8. They are, through the medium of the divine demiurge, the models from which this world is created
9. Things in the everyday world are what they imperfectly are by resembling or partaking of the relevant universal Form
10. They are ideals to which we ought to aspire.

That's a lot of work for them to do!