

FIDELITY TOWARDS FORMS: AN ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH – PART I

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Abstract: The paper opposes to a common attitude towards forms – as being something non-important, superficial, “formal” – Plato and Aristotle’s philosophy, according to which things exist because of forms. From the inquiry of their logic that mixes the epistemological and the ontological standpoint, the analysis goes on to the problem of the understanding of forms as events: as mirrors of the manner we see the world/as mirrors of the way of thinking. I contrast the *event* to the *situation* – in Alain Badiou’s manner – and I show that there is a logic of continuity between Aristotle’s insistence on the *concrete* face of form (σύνολον) and Badiou’s concept of *fidelity*: because this concept always relates to the concrete which deserves to be faithful towards. The value of things we support gives their “forms”. If so, fidelity towards forms is something more complete and suggestive than to follow essences: forms are as important as essences; this is obvious when the forms change but the essence do not; in fact, it is not a real change. The real change is when the form changes bringing also the change of the essence.

Keywords: form, essence, σύνολον, existence, event, shadow, surprise, fidelity (Plato, Aristotle, Badiou).

WARNING

It seems that the first philosophical attitude towards forms summarises in fact the *common* human behaviours which, all of them, are related to “forms”. I put this last word into inverted commas because of its multiplicity of *common* meanings¹, resulted obviously from lasting traditional experiences: as something superficial, thus not very important and that one may neglect or even ignore (they are “formal”); as the “coloured” appearance of things and thus implacable and mysterious, something which never can be dislocated; just because this something is ever changing; or, as the coloured appearance of things

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¹ This situation is characteristic to many concepts, and this one is – as Lesne has observed (2011, p.1) – “intuitive and ubiquitous, originating from observation and belonging to ordinary language”.

but, just in virtue that things exist colourful and varied, these colour and variety of forms are that which people has to be conforming to. Therefore: a) forms are not important, b) or are the only important thing, c) or are understandable, d) or are not, e) or are changeable, f) or not, g) or may be transformed, h) or not.

History of philosophy – focusing on the significances thinkers arrived at through reasoning, analyses and comparisons which have connected the known and (yet) unknown, the near and far away things in a huge ordered whole (*kosmos*) – reveals us how did man understand existence: or, how did he become familiar with the world, or, how did this familiarity developed.

INTRODUCTION: “THE FORM HAS NO ONTOLOGICAL RELEVANCE”

As the first philosophers said, the world is the coloured and full of differences whole we see, but we, as human beings gifted with reason, ought to understand *why* and *how* this whole was born. And this means to understand the *origin* of things as they present themselves in front of us. This origin is the *essence* or *substrate*, and without it no other logic of things would be meaningful. Accordingly, the search for knowledge is, first of all, the understanding of the *principle* of things (*ἀρχή*, Anaximander) that is nothing but just the *origin*.

Hence, this essence was found as water (Thales), air (Anaximenes, Diogenes of Apollonia, Archelaus), fire (Heraclitus), water, earth, air and fire (Empedocles), fire springing from water (Hippo); fire and earth (Parmenides of Elea); *or even as an unlimited mass*, *ἄπειρον* (Anaximander), or as small seeds of the above-mentioned primary elements (Anaxagoras); or as material substrate “without face/without form”, *ἀπρόθμιστον* (Antiphon), or as “matter (which) is devoid of form and unlimited, and that composite things arise out of it. And that it was once in disorderly motion but, inasmuch as God preferred order to disorder, was by him brought together in one place. This substance, he says, is converted into the four elements, fire, water, air, earth, of which the world itself and all that therein is are formed” (Plato, in Diogenes Laertius III, 69); or as “the passive principle, then, is a substance without quality, *i.e.* matter, whereas the active is the reason inherent in this substance” (Zeno of Citium, *Ibid.*, VII, I, 134). Or: as atoms (as according to a little later Thracian philosopher, Democritus).

More: the origin was thought not only as a *substantial* essence, but also as some founding *relations/forces* constituting the universe.

Change, thus movement (Heraclitus), generation and decay (Anaximander), attraction and separation /Love and Strife (Empedocles), mixture and separation ordered by a cosmic mind (*vovς* – Anaxagoras), condensation and rarefaction (Diogenes of Apollonia): always generated from themselves/the inner essence. See “The substance of all things came from hot and cold, and dry and moist, which change into one another” (Zeno of Elea, *Ibid.*, IX, V, 5, 29).

This above-mentioned illustration emphasises the difference between essence as *concrete* primordial element (Thales, Empedocles, Parmenides, Heraclitus) and as *abstract concept* (Anaximander, Antiphon, Zeno of Citium, Zeno of Elea, Democritus, Plato).

In all of these, it was important for philosophers to separate the continuous uniqueness from variety, and to make a hierarchy between them by subordinating the second to the first. In this entire philosophical moment, the form has no ontological function.

PLATO (AND THE DIVERSITY OF THINGS)

Plato's theory was, however, more complex than it was pictured above and it represented a bridge between the first tenet of philosophers – that forms are not important from a philosophical standpoint – and Aristotle's new paradigm. As we know, what was challenging for Plato was *not the basic matter but the real things*. How do these things constitute on the same constant and grey background? How could they be so diverse? They do by obviously combining parts and telluric forces but *according to pre-existent patterns*, the Ideas. These patterns are different forms which are ideal/somehow abstract, however substantial, and are as many as things – objects and qualities/features/values – are in the world. In which sense does this occur? Forms are, actually, *what is the most real and knowable thing*, while those things perceived through sensations are only copies and shadows of the forms. Consequently, Forms are patterns of every real thing, but with *n* more or less good or pat copies: they represent *the stable*, irrespective of the changes and of deformations happened in so many copies.

Thus, forms are the *essence* and, since essence means the perfect (thought or real) state, they are that which should be taken into account, and the knowledge of Forms is the real and most fruitful knowledge: the *logos* of the world is grasped by the human mind, and the result is the correspondence between the order of the world

(*kosmos*) and the logical order, only through the understanding of Forms and of the dialectic of gradual nearness of things to Forms.

Actually, Plato has constructed ontology *from an epistemological viewpoint*. Indeed, how can we see and understand the logic of things? We do this by reasoning, i.e. by comparing, thus differentiating/separating different objects and features: *logos* does mean just this ability of distinguishing, perceiving, choosing, thus deciding – understanding that it would be about something requiring judgement, discernment between truth and false – or, in a modern term, criticising, does it? But what can we compare? Has it any sense to compare only changing aspects which do have nothing stable? Of course, it has not. Therefore, Plato has conceived of Forms as the *logically necessary stable, constant, permanent* that would necessarily exist in the world. That's why Forms were at the same time Ideas. Since idea – εἶδος or ἰδέα – came from the Indo-European *to see*², namely meant *what is grasped by the human mind*, then Forms were *not simple appearances*, just because these appearances (φαινόμενα) touch rather the human senses, than mind³.

To make *autonomous* these Forms was, then, an inevitable next step: and to make them (*abstract entities*) autonomous means *autonomous towards the human mind*.

In this step, Forms are ontological concepts – explaining the essential constituency of the world – because they would correspond to *ontos*, to realities from the existence. That's why Forms were conceived of by Plato as being both abstract ideas and substantial⁴. According to our modern technology, we could equate them with *holograms* (minus, obviously, the substantial aspect put by Plato, since holograms are not material, but virtual images resulted from the manipulation of light beams on objects and then recorded by using again light rays). And since commonly holograms are the result of

² Sanskrit: *pazyati*, *vidarzyati*, *vilocayati*.

³ Greek: φαίνω – shine.

Sanskrit: *bhAti* – to shine; *nirbhAti*, *sambhAti* – seem to be.

⁴ The world of forms would lie in the superior circle of αἰθήρ, a rarefied pure air where the humans can not enter or grasp, see Plato, *Phaido*, 109c-e. Indeed, both the ideas of people's mind and the surrounding real things are imperfect copies of the forms even because the air separates our regard from the ethereal forms, so it generates a process of refraction of the forms lain in ether.

light casting (on objects), the light beams being generated from the same side as the viewer – as if the viewer would see directly the objects in their entirety and consistency, and he would not be blinded by the light –, while shadows are the result of light casting (on objects) but lain opposite to the viewer so that he is blinded by the light and does see only the outline of the object, or its shadow, we can better understand that Plato's Forms are not simple outlines, or sketches of the real objects (metaphorically, their shadows) but on the contrary, *virtual objects in their whole complexity and with their all colourful particularities*. Forms are not pictures copying and reconstructing the only real authenticity of the real objects, but on the contrary, these objects are copies and reconstructions in different degrees of Forms.

My comparison with holograms is not gratuitous. In his *allegory of the cave* (*The Republic*, Book VII, 514a-517c), Plato has described an extremely interesting scientific and philosophical (i.e. ideal/mental) experience: he “put” some prisoners into a cave, unable to turn their heads and seeing only the white wall in front of them. At the same time, behind them was a fire, casting light on them, and between the fire and them was a parapet on which puppeteers held up puppets, thus casting shadows on the white wall. But since prisoners could see only these shadows, they confounded them with the real world: only these shadows composed reality.

But why should these shadows being taken as real? Because: they were felt by the senses of people. Consequently, for Plato not that which we see and hear, taste, smell and touch is the true real, but that which we *disclose from the existence with our reason*⁵. Actually, he

⁵ As we know, Heidegger has assumed the old pre-Socratic meaning of truth as pulling-out-from-the-state-of-concealment (*ἀλήθεια*). It is not the place to discuss the entire Heideggerian reading of “unconcealedness”. Related to our problem of forms, it is interesting to note that (Heidegger 1998a, pp. 58-59, 70, 71, 137) the modern culture would begin when the result of disclosure – the Greek concept as *ἀλήθεια* – or the Latin *veritas* (that has prefigured the modern correspondence between the object and its image in mind) has transformed in *certitudo*, the certitude opposed to the false from the modern positive knowledge. Accordingly, the modern culture is less the offspring of the ancient Greek mentality, but more of the Roman tradition, reductionist and “imperial”.

What does this mean for the sensitivity towards forms? That, on the one hand, *ἀλήθεια* and *veritas* means just that man can understand, and aims at understanding neither only some abstract essences, by neglecting the richness of the concrete whole, thus of forms, nor only some shining appearances strolling in front of his eyes, but just the concrete whole, thus the meanings of this. At their level, Plato's Forms could

was not quite wrong: since what we feel with our senses is so different, constituting a changing and coloured puzzle that does not serve too much in order to orientate ourselves in the world. What we need for this is just something stable, some *landmarks*: not abstractions far away from the real world, but coloured and concrete models of things.

Shadows could never be landmarks: but Forms are. And just because they are landmarks, they are the essence of things/what we understand and disclose from *to Ōn*. We never could think, understand, develop reasoning if we would face only changing some-things. More: if hypothetically, we could have given names – as expressed landmarks – to the parts of the changing puzzle, we could not have understood the essence, the stable, the constant of things, because we would give names only to the casual appearances we feel (*The Republic*, Book VII, 515b). On the contrary, the names are the result of many historical experiences of naming, i.e. of reasoning, deducing, comparing, reviewing and grasping the essence of things (*Cratylus*): and *this essence is never an abstract intellectually codified law, but the beautiful and constant concreteness, the Forms*. As later on Hegel said that the truth is the whole in its concreteness, as Plato has preceded the entire following quest for concreteness by insisting on the truth/reality of Forms towards the mimicking world of appearances in front of the humans. And this is a valuable idea with deep significance nowadays.

ARISTOTLE AND THE GENERATIVE CAPACITY OF FORMS

Therefore, one of the most challenging assumptions of Plato was that, because the human reason cannot understand the world without the immutable and invariable which *would necessarily exist*, this immutable and invariable is the core of the existence, manifested obviously through *n* appearances which are copies. Accordingly, on the one hand, the *change* has not an important (ontological) place, since it implies only the appearances. The role of movement or dialectic lies in the relationships between Forms and in the transitions between different copies of the same Form (εἶδος, μορφή). This means

keep us outside any kind of reduction and simplification. On the other hand, that certitude –which is the modern/positivist following of the concept of truth –is related only to a correspondence between ideas and the real world that is certified through measurement and quantification. But measurement and quantification refer only to particular and isolated features of things, whether they lie at their surface or in their profoundness. Thus, certitude could never be but a moment in the way of knowledge and disclosure.

that, on the other hand, there is a contradiction concerning the goal of change. This goal is *perfection* but, on the one hand again, it is related only to the unchangeable patterns (*Timaeus*, 28), while on the other hand, man can learn, control himself and become as near to the Forms of justice, good, beauty and truth as he can.

But other philosophers contemporary to Plato have shown that the change of the appearance – or of the *form* (*ρῶθος*, as Antiphon called it⁶) – is that which generates the entire change of things: no essence alone would be the cause of this change. Consequently, an answer regarding both ontology and epistemology had again to be given.

This answer has pertained to Aristotle. According to him, the Being/the essence/ *to Ōn* belongs to the concrete things which exists (*Metaphysics*, Z, 5, p. 2349) and is constituted by – but do not forget, they are abstract concepts that *must* reflect reality⁷ – the unity of matter (*ὑλη*)⁸ and form (*εἶδος, μορφή*). Nor for him was the essence related to the substrate matter, but to concrete things/substances (Z, 3, p. 2342). “The ‘form’ means the ‘such’, and is not a ‘this’ – a definite thing” (*Ibid.*, 8, p. 2355). But, and here is the revolutionary modification of the ontological standpoint, the form is not related to the original matter that is the substrate⁹ and, obviously, lacks form, but to the *concrete manifestation* of the matter. This concrete manifestation is the *substance*: but its *essence* is just that it exists, in fact that things exist (the essence, *οὐσία*¹⁰, is just the existence of

⁶ It derives from *ρῆω*, to flow. Therefore, what derives from movement is the concrete face/form.

⁷ It is very important to understand the viewpoint of Aristotle, surpassing the naïve first philosophers (but these ones had to be naïve, since they wanted to inquire scientifically the world, beyond the mythological precedent) and integrating the Socratic turn which starts from man, knowledge, language.

⁸ *Metaphysics*, Z, 10, p. 2361: “But matter is unknowable in itself”. And Book H, 1, p. 2380: “by matter I mean that which, not being a ‘this’ actually, is potentially a ‘this’”.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 10, p. 2359: „the material element by itself must never be said to be so” (a thing).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, Λ, 3 (p. 2465) gives three meanings to this term: 1) matter, i.e. the substrate of every becoming; 2) nature – the form or essence of thing, toward which the becoming directs; 3) the individual thing constituted from matter and form. I develop my thesis here according to this third meaning.

things, the stable beyond any becoming¹¹), or that the existence as such means all kinds of individual appearances (substances).

Thus, if substance is that unity of the substrate matter and the form, what does form mean? It is just that which differentiates a thing from another: the *scheme*, the *model*, existing in principle, whether the model is actualised, i.e. united with matter.

But what happens when actualisation does not take place (i.e. is not setting within reality)? Indeed, that thing would exist only as potentiality. When a certain thing is *actualised*, we can understand it as being composed of matter (for example the wood from which is made a chair) and form (the form of *any kind* of chair is its *quality* to serve to people to sit on – it has three or four legs and a small surface). But there are different kinds of chairs. Here, Aristotle has introduced a new special concept – *σύνολον* – the *archetype* of *that* thing/a *specific* chair, i.e. the *concrete model* that remains unchangeable (as a kind of substantial Form of Plato), irrespective of the possibility that the unity of matter and form could occur in other different ways. While *σύνολον* is the concept of *that* special chair (a certain unity between a certain matter and a certain form): it is the *concrete* model of the *concrete* thing, as the form is the *abstract* model of the same thing. Thus, a certain *σύνολον* is the result of a *certain* unity between matter and form. It is the name of a style¹²; if, for example, the form/model/plan of an armchair is the *quality* that consists in a better comfort for a man sitting on a chair which has arms for resting on and chair backrest, the *σύνολον* of an armchair is the model of a concrete style of armchair.

But there are different styles of armchairs; could these different styles/the difference (for example, the colour or state, as old or new etc.) in the frame of the unity between matter and form be a basic ontological term? Or, differently put, could this difference explain the essence of things?

Certainly, it cannot. The essence of armchairs is not their specific appearance, manifested in their styles and states, but only the *quality* of comfortably “sittingness”. *Not the appearance of a form is the form itself, but only the model of a quality/the model grasping and transposing a quality.*

¹¹ See Plato, *Cratylus*, 401c and d: *οὐσία* is the “intimate nature” of things, and this could be but their participation to the existence, in contradistinction to movement and becoming.

¹² A style is defined by the presence of recurrent characteristics of things (being these ones natural or human: behaviours, manners of thinking, ideologies).

And just this model gives the essence of a thing, not the abstract matter it is based on. More: the essence of reality/existence/ to *Ōn* should be explained, and this explanation should answer to the question “*what does it exist?*” *The essence consists in the existence of things*. But the essence of things is more than the existence as such: the “thing-hood” is the form the existence manifests through. *Oúσία* is the essence, and this essence consists just in the “thing-hood”. This is the reason *oúσία* is both *substance* – as manifestation of the existence, but also as manifestation of the basic matter – and *form*, as the quality of the existence which gives the “thing-hood”, thus things.

Therefore, the form is not (only) a logical attribute of things, but a real compound of the existence and one of the ontological bricks of this existence; just because the essence of the existence is the “thing-hood”, *oúσία*: substances/things as a manifestation of the existence. Once more, substance is the concrete matter, actually the only that exists in reality – concrete in that it is the unity between the background/the *ontological* basis, *ὅλη*, and form, the other *ontological* basis –, because otherwise we could not separate matter from things, i.e. understand the existence of matter itself. And *this possibility of separation is very important, since without it we cannot explain movement and transformation*. Movement and change themselves are related to forms, i.e. move and change toward forms/from a form to another. We cannot explain movement and change only with the concept of matter. This concept is the most *indeterminate* thing from the universe, because it is only a premise for the existence of things. While form is the most *determinate*, since it is related to substances which are the *cause*, the *nature* and the *principle* of Being.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FORMS

There is an order, a reason of things. This reason ought to be explained, and not ignored when we are pleased with the simple existence certified by sensations, said Aristotle. Consequently, the concepts deduced by philosophers and put in a logical inference seem to be so truthful, as explaining reality so marvellously, that they/the entire corpus of *θεωρία* is thought as if it would only reflect what is/should be the causes and principles in the real world: *as if* in fact there would be forms, names (as individual, genus, universal, general, etc.), essences. Or: *as if* the concrete world would be only the result of an intentional programme (as that of Matrix) programmed by names.

Therefore, just because it is *determinate* does the form explain the *changes* (and that these changes do not touch only the appearances but the essence of things) and thus it (the form) is an *ontological* concept, alongside the *change* transposed as movement between *possibility* and *actuality*.

Starting from the same epistemological need to explain the existence beyond its appearances, Aristotle has developed a finer ontological theory about forms than Plato. In both of them the form is an explaining brick of the existence, and both of them have had to overcome the contradiction between the need to attain the concreteness of things (hence the role of forms) and, on the other hand, the absurdity of the epistemological role of the appearances.

In both of them, it is about abstract concepts explaining the fundamentals of the existence and both of them have made philosophical/mental experiences concerning the real possibility that their representations and concepts to function in the *ontos*.

But while Plato has solved the problem by putting in a celestial space the world of perfect Forms which would be copied by individual beings more or less successfully, Aristotle has considered that in every individual being (be it perceptible thing or an idea) is a mixture of the substrate matter and the form, the latter manifesting as both *general quality* of that individual being and *concrete model* (*σύνολον*) of that thing: and this concrete model is a mixture of the *form* and the *incidental appearances* generated by the concrete conditions the individual thing was constituted within. That's why only *σύνολον* is a "mixture", the individual being is *ab initio* a performed matter: for this reason the essence of things, i.e. their existence as such and the reason of this existence, is both individual "thing-hood" (substance) and form, or for this reason the essence of the individual being is form.

Farther, it is not the place to discuss either the interference between the logical and the ontological, as well as the precedence of one or another, or the next development of the concept of form in the history of philosophy. What was emphasized until now was the *importance* of forms in the constitution and understanding of the world.

This aspect of the importance of forms is what will be developed further on.

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