

# THE RECEPTION OF ARISTOTLE'S INTERPRETATION OF PLATO'S FORMS IN PLOTINUS AND AL-FĀRĀBĪ

EMILE ALEXANDROV  
University of Notre Dame, Australia  
emile931@gmail.com

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper makes four arguments to challenge attributing to Plato a theory of Forms. I begin by closely studying Aristotle's critique of the Forms to show that Aristotle was more focused on the epistemological implications of the Forms as opposed to their existence. Additionally, it remains unclear as to whether Aristotle was targeting Plato or the Platonists in his critiques. I then turn to the inconsistencies inherent in Plato's discussion of the Forms. Essentially, this is incumbent upon Plato's commitment to the belief that writing and language fail to capture the Forms holistically. As such, Plato's variegated discussions of the Forms in the dialogues reflect his commitment to the mutability of the world concurrently with language. This carries over to the reception of Plato and Aristotle in Antiquity and beyond. I show that starting from Antiochus of Ascalon onwards, Plato and Aristotle were accepted to be representatives of a consistent philosophy. This historical 'harmonization' of Plato and Aristotle shows that opposition between both thinkers concerning the Forms was not a commonly held view. I then turn to Plotinus who syncretised Plato's Forms with Aristotelian Intellect which was appropriated by al-Fārābī who rejected the idea that there had been any distinction in the first place. Al-Fārābī composed a treatise on the harmony of Plato and Aristotle, whereas Plotinus based his entire philosophical enterprise on the synthesis of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy that proved historically influential. The resulting thesis of this paper is that any close historical study of Aristotle's interpretation of Plato's Forms would show that one cannot attribute to Plato a theory of Forms without facing serious contradictions.

**KEYWORDS:** Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, theory of forms, intellect, soul.

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## Introduction

The subject matter of Plato's Forms has undoubtedly been a matter of dispute throughout the history of philosophy. Thus, it would certainly be farfetched to

claim that Plato's Forms have received historically consistent interpretations. This paper makes four arguments against a Theory of Forms, each aimed at presenting a distinct vantage point. While this paper synthesises the four theses, each of the arguments is intended to be a standalone argument that can be expanded in greater detail in support of the overall thesis. In so doing, the goal is to rethink how Plato is taught today, especially the variety to which most modern students are introduced. This is a Plato read through the Forms; the Greek philosopher who is purported to have postulated separate and intangible Forms that inhabit an eternal suprasensible world. This has largely been based on the contemporaneous acceptance of Aristotle's so-called rejection of the Forms. However, from Middle-Platonism onwards Aristotle's philosophy was not understood to be opposed to Plato's Forms, nor was the refutation seen to be aimed directly at Plato. This paper shows that this can be supported by a closer reading of Aristotle's writings, a conclusion that some modern scholars have reached.

The first part deals specifically with two factors involved in Aristotle's criticism of the Forms. Firstly, it remains unclear whether Aristotle is specifically targeting Plato's 'Theory of Forms' or even whether Aristotle thought that Plato held such a theory. Aristotle instead made frequent references to the Platonists and Pythagoreans among others that warrant reconsidering the target of Aristotle's criticism. The second feature of Aristotle's criticisms relates to the refutation itself which I argue is more oriented towards the epistemological consequence of positing separate Forms as opposed to the existence of Forms themselves. For Aristotle, the greater concern is the epistemological relation to the Forms, regardless of whether they exist or not. While Aristotle essentially saw that the existence of Forms cannot be affirmed or denied, attributing to the Forms the primary causal origin of nature amounts to a presupposition that impedes scientific investigations. I then show Aristotle's first principles were consistent with Plato, namely, the prime mover and the self-thinking Intellect. Despite these consistencies, Aristotle remained committed to the idea that postulating separate Forms is epistemologically unsustainable, a matter that is the source of the controversy between Plato and Aristotle.

The second part deals with the highly ambivalent nature of Plato's writings. I begin by arguing that the discussion of the Forms in the dialogues varies to such a degree that hinders any attribution to Plato a consistent theory. We can say, however, that Plato ruminated over the Forms, albeit without incurring a conclusive theory. This involved frequent references to the ideas of others such as Anaxagoras, Parmenides and Heraclitus which indicates that Plato was advancing discourse with major thinkers of the time and testing different contemplative vantage points. This further reinforces the core thesis that Plato was more involved in a dialectical deliberation of the Forms as opposed to postulating a theory of Forms. Moreover,

attention needs to be given to Aristotle's references to Plato's so-called 'unwritten teaching' and the *On the Good* lecture, both of which had been historically considered to be the latter's true philosophy and distinct from the dialogues.

This leads to the third part, where I argue that the main problem associated with Plato's Theory of Forms is based on his consistent portrayal of the weakness of writing to capture knowledge with any certainty. As such, dialogues with considerable topological depth were a mitigative strategy that Plato employed. Discussions of the Forms thusly differ depending on the setting, narrative and contemplative angle of approach. That Plato wrote dialogues not philosophical treatises seems to have little impact on contemporary interpretations of Plato. Essentially, Plato believed in the superiority of dialogue, particularly, the dialectical method which included myth and allegory. This does not mean, however, that Plato endorsed a sporting argumentation of affirmation and refutation, instead, the dialectical method is described as a collective pursuit of truth where the interlocutors share a fundamental agreement at the start. So given that Plato was predisposed to accepting the weakness of writing and each time presenting a different account of the Forms depending on the dialogue in question, it proves difficult to attribute a Theory of Forms to Plato without contradiction.

The last section revisits Plato's reception in Plotinus and al-Fārābī to reveal the underlying consistency between Plato and Aristotle. This section shows that there are good grounds for harmonizing Plato and Aristotle as scholars such as Gadamer, Gerson, Hadot and Karamanolis have noted. While this is not intended to be an exhaustive historical excavation, I nonetheless show how Plotinus and al-Fārābī appropriated Plato and Aristotle commensurately. In Plotinus, Aristotle's self-thinking Intellect is synthesised with the Platonic Forms, whereas in al-Fārābī, Plato's first principles were holistically appropriated into Aristotelian logic. Furthermore, al-Fārābī composed a treatise dedicated to the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle to show that there was no divergence to begin with. Any apparent discordance amounts to a difference in exposition, and to add to this, al-Fārābī accepted that the Forms are not describable in language. I close by turning to Plato's reception in the Medieval era where Aristotelianism became the dominant philosophy. I point out that Plato's philosophy was mostly engaged indirectly through secondary sources until the fifteenth-century translation project of Ficino in the Renaissance, an important historical precedent that needs to be considered when observing the contemporary interpretation of the Forms. Thus, Plato's reception in Antiquity needs to be distinguished from the High Middle Ages and beyond if we are to seek another interpretation of the Forms.

### The Aim of Aristotle's Criticisms of the Forms

Aristotle's discussion of the Forms is widely dispersed throughout his writings, although the most comprehensive treatments are found in *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, and the short essay *On Ideas*. The latter having survived in fragments, is preserved by Alexander of Aphrodisias' commentary on the *Metaphysics* and presents Aristotle's key exposition of the Third Man argument.<sup>1</sup> Before we proceed to unpack Aristotle's view, it is important to consider Aristotle's preambulatory statement to justify his critique of the Forms in *Nicomachean Ethics*:

"We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant by it, although such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by friends of our own [φίλους ἀνδρας εἰσαγαγεῖν τὰ εἶδη]. Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers; for, while both are dear, piety requires us to honour truth above our friends" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, [6]. 1096.a11-16).

Now two points of contention are visible here. Firstly, Aristotle appears committed to the idea that one must honour truth over friends. The friends in question are the Pythagoreans (including Speusippus who in his view adopted the Pythagorean view) and the Platonists (*Nicomachean Ethics*, [6]. 1096.b4-10). As Gerson argued, Aristotle may be targeting the interpretation of those who have inherited Plato's philosophy as opposed to Plato directly, "references to what can be loosely described as Academic positions, such as a belief in separate Forms, that might well include Plato but then again might not" (Gerson 2005, 11). This leads to the second important detail; Aristotle is effectively affirming that the Pythagoreans held an account of the good and its relation to the Idea well before Plato (*Nicomachean Ethics*, [6]. 1096.b19-20). It follows that for Aristotle, Plato promulgated views he had adopted from the Pythagoreans in the dialogues (*Metaphysics* [6]. 987a25-30). Plato is not the original progenitor of the Forms or the Good, with Aristotle elsewhere distinguishing between the 'Platonists' and Plato, who "on the other hand, holds that there is no body outside (the Forms are not outside, because they are nowhere) [Πλάτων δὲ ἔξω μὲν οὐδὲν εἶναι σῶμα, οὐδὲ τὰς ιδέας, διὰ τὸ μηδὲ πού εἶναι αὐτάς]" (*Physics*, [4]. 203a6-8). That Plato was the target of Aristotle's criticism, therefore, remains undeterminable, what "is not always so clear is when Aristotle is discussing Plato's theory of Forms as opposed to that of someone else" (Gerson 2005, 220).

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<sup>1</sup> For translation and recent scholarship on the *On Ideas*, see Irwin and Fine, 1995, and Fine, 2004.

Aristotle's criticism is also commonly framed in syllogisms and deductive inferences that are intended for clarifying the epistemological consequences of the Forms. In other words, while Aristotle was concerned with the empirical value of postulating external Forms, he did not reject their 'existence' outright. Aristotle indicated in crucial passages that despite being epistemically problematic, the Forms may nonetheless persist:

a) If they exist, they are more suited "to the higher realms of reality [ἐπὶ τὰ ἀνωτέρω τῶν ὄντων], and are more suited to these than to theories about nature [φύσεως λόγοις]" (Metaphysics, [8]. 990a5-10). They cannot help with describing the process of change and destruction. Again, here the reference is to the Pythagoreans, as opposed to Plato himself.

b) The Forms, if "they are something apart from the individuals [εἰ ἔστιν ἄττα παρὰ τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα]," are useless with regards to the generation and decay of things (Metaphysics, [8]. 1033b26-29). Whether the Forms *are* or not, they do not determine anything substantive for empirical science.

c) If we are going to accept the Forms as the eternal foundation for all causal relations, that things come to be and inevitably perish, one cannot determine this by a sum of all causes. However, if there is such an eternal "first mover [κινεῖν ἔσται πρῶτον]," then there is one, not many. For should one postulate a plurality for every motion, then there will be a plurality of such eternal movers (Metaphysics, [6]. 259a1-10). Rather than reject the Forms, Aristotle preferred the one and simple unmoved mover as the simple and unvarying cause of all motion (Metaphysics, [6]. 259a15-19).

d) It is important to question what the Forms or eternal things contribute εἶδη ἢ τοῖς ἀϊδίοις to sensible things. For they do not demonstrably influence change, and so do not help us gain "knowledge [ἐπιστήμην] of other things" given that they are not, as some would have it, in particulars which share in the Forms (Metaphysics, [9]. 991a10-15). Aristotle here directed his criticism towards Anaxagoras and Eudoxus who attribute causal relations to the Forms.

e) While philosophy pursues the cause of perceptible things ἐπιστήμῃς ὁρῶμεν, the Forms have no such relation (Metaphysics, [9]. 991a25-30). Essentially, they subsist beyond the causal plane, a feature that Aristotle does not deny. In Aristotle's view, "all other things cannot come from the Forms in any of the usual sense of 'from' [μὴν οὐδ' ἐκ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐστὶ τὰλλα κατ' οὐθέννα τρόπον τῶν εἰωθότων λέγεσθαι]" for to state otherwise would be to use "empty words and poetical metaphors [μεταφορὰς λέγειν ποιητικὰς]" (Metaphysics, [9]. 991a20-25).

f) Even if there is some "one good which is universally predicable [κοινῇ κατηγορούμενον ἀγαθὸν ἢ χωριστόν]," it is not attainable by man, whereas in the sphere of ethics, one must seek the attainable. In other words, the investigation of

Forms is better put aside in favour of more fruitful investigations (Nicomachean Ethics, [6]. 1096b30-34).

g) While Plato subscribed to the Heraclitean doctrine of flux, Plato implemented the use of 'participating' in the Ideas. However, Plato left open this participatory nature or imitation *μίμησιν* of the Forms (Metaphysics, [6]. 987a7-12). This is again according to Aristotle the view of the Pythagoreans and the Platonist interpretation of Plato.

h) If there are Forms at all, then Plato was "not far wrong when he said that there are as many Forms as there are natural things [*διὸ δὴ οὐ κακῶς Πλάτων ἔφη ὅτι εἶδη ἔστιν ὅποσα φύσει, εἴπερ ἔστιν εἶδη ἄλλα τούτων οἷον πῦρ σὰρξ κεφαλή*]" (Metaphysics, [3]. 1070a16-20). For Aristotle, if there are Forms at all then Plato held a congenial understanding of them; the variety which is instantiated and inseparable from natural things.

i) Aristotle agrees with Plato's criticism of the sophist "who spends his time on non-being [*περὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν*]" (Metaphysics, [8]. 1064b25-30). For Aristotle, scientific investigation deals with causes and principles which are not accidental and cannot be related to non-being. Plato in Aristotle's view did not present the Forms as that which are accidental or characterised as non-being, for if there is "another entity and substance, separable and unmovable [*χωριστὴ καὶ ἀκίνητος*], the science of it must be different and prior to natural science [*καθόλου τῷ προτέρων*], and universal because it is prior" (Metaphysics, [7]. 1064b10-14).

From this overview we see that Aristotle is mostly concerned with the relatability of the Forms to the world generation and degeneration. Of higher priority is the epistemological role the Forms play as opposed to their existence, which he nowhere denies. When it comes to the transcendent nature of the Forms, Aristotle's view is consistent with Plato as Ross explained; Aristotle's eternal principle is "an ever-living being whose influence radiates through the universe... He moves by inspiring love and desire" (Ross 1995, 187). Aristotle's preference, as observed above, is to assume a prime mover – the one eternal cause of all subsequent causes. Part and parcel of this postulation is the rejection of a plurality of eternal movers, for there can be only one. This, however, is not inconsistent with Plato and especially the Neoplatonic view of the simple unity of the One, which more on later.

The central concern for Aristotle is the scientific implications of the Forms which he thought "are nonny-noes, and if there are any they are nothing to the argument [*τερετίσματά τε γὰρ ἔστι, καὶ εἰ ἔστιν, οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν λόγον ἔστιν*]" (Posterior Analytics, [22]. 83a32-35). Again, whether the Forms exist or not has little to do with scientific investigation, for they are not attainable through normal states of awareness; "clearly it could not be achieved or attained by man [*δῆλον ὡς οὐκ ἂν εἴη πρακτὸν οὐδὲ κτητὸν ἀνθρώπῳ*]; but we are now seeking something attainable

[τοιούτων τι ζητεῖται] (Nicomachean Ethics, [6]. 1096.b31-35).” In playing the role of the scientist, Aristotle is in the business of investigating that which yields tangible results. Aristotle’s criticisms are directed towards those who attempt to relay the causal chain of being to the supra-sensible Forms that are not epistemically representational. To do so would mean to make a series of inconsistent arguments and deductive fallacies that inevitably impede scientific investigations. That said, this does not lead to Aristotle rejecting the idea of the One Good itself, he instead preferred to leave such discussions outside of the realm of deductive inference.

This is especially evident in Aristotle’s principal fragmentary essay *On Ideas*. The criticism is again, as Alexander of Aphrodisias recorded in his *Commentarius in Metaphysica*, directed towards the applicability of the Ideas within the sphere of the sciences, not an outright rejection of that which is beyond perception:

“Now such arguments do not prove the thesis at issue [πρῶτοι οὐ δεικνύουσιν], which was that there are Ideas [ἔτι εἰσὶν ἰδέαι]; but they do prove that there are certain things apart from particulars and perceptibles. But it does not follow that if there are certain things which are apart from particulars, these are Ideas [ταῦτα ἰδέας εἶναι]” (On Ideas, 79.16-19).

While Aristotle is not denying the existence of that which is apart ἕκαστά of the particulars and perceptibles, he accepts that we are in no way capable of ascertaining if these are, in fact, ideas. So proceeding with the scientific investigation based on the undeterminable ideas (as transcending the perceptibles) would prompt unjustifiable presuppositions.

Further, Aristotle’s major rebuttal of the commitment to the causal relation between an ostensibly separate non-perceptible Form and the perceptibles is observed in the Third Man argument. The argument gets extensive treatment in Alexander’s *Commentarius in Metaphysica* alongside Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* ([9]. 990b15-991a25) and *Sophistical Refutations* ([22]. 178b35-b40). In his commentary, Alexander also insinuated that Aristotle’s *On Ideas* had been composed before his *Metaphysics*, an important detail when compared with the dating of the *Parmenides* since Plato also covered the Third Man argument in the *Parmenides* (132a-132b). This caused Fine to deliberate whether it may have influenced Aristotle’s personal formulations (Fine 2004, 39-43).<sup>2</sup> Leaving speculation behind, the Third Man argument is concisely laid out in *On Ideas* as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Miller argued that Aristotle’s reference to Plato’s ‘unwritten teachings’ can be found in the *Parmenides* dialogue, and much of Aristotle’s writings in the *Metaphysics* can be seen as a response to the arguments laid out in the *Parmenides* (Miller 1995, 594-606).

“If what is predicated truly of several items is also something other apart from the things of which it is predicated, separated [κεχωρισμένον] from them (for it is this that those who posit the Ideas think to prove; for in their opinion man-himself is something because man is predicated truly of particular men, who are more than one in number, and is different from these particular men)—but if this is so, there will be some third man. For if the man that is predicated is different from those of whom he is predicated, and exists on his own, and man is predicated both of the particular men and of the Idea [κατὰ τῆς ἰδέας ὁ ἄνθρωπος], then there will be some third man apart both from the particular and from the Idea. On this basis there will be also a fourth man, predicated of the third man, of the Idea, and of the particulars; and similarly also a fifth, and so on *ad infinitum* [επ' ἀπειρον]” (On Ideas, 84.22-85.4).

The argument is again related to the deductive method and the ensuing logical fallacy *επ' ἀπειρον* incurred upon positing the Forms like in *Parmenides*. Essentially for Aristotle, the fallacy is the direct consequence of assuming a separate non-perceptible entity for every perceptible entity or group of entities, the same principle he applied to his eternal prime movers mentioned earlier. Philosophy, as far as Aristotle is concerned, cannot proceed based on a logical fallacy, for “though philosophy seeks the cause of perceptible things,” to assert a “second class of substances” is “empty talk [κενῆς λέγομεν]; for sharing, as we said before, means nothing” (Metaphysics, [9]. 991a25-29). The Third Man argument, therefore, shows that the Forms inhibit scientific investigations by instituting a fallacious presupposition as the ground for knowledge. So, two prominent issues emerge in accepting separate Forms; the incapacity for one's discernment of its supra-sensible nature, followed by the Third Man argument. Both explain why for Aristotle, commitment to non-perceptible entities – regardless of whether they exist – should not be considered in light of epistemological investigation.

Aristotle nevertheless presented two theories concerning a divine first principle. The first is in the unmoved mover *κινούμενον κινεῖ*: “Since there must always be motion without intermission [μὴ διαλείπειν], there must necessarily be something eternal [ἄϊδιον ὁ πρῶτον κινεῖ], whether one or many, that first imparts motion, and this first mover must be unmoved [πρῶτον κινῶν ἀκίνητον]” (Physics, [6]. 258b10-12). The second is the “thinking is a thinking on thinking [νόησις νοήσεως νόησις],” since thinking itself is the most excellent *κράτιστον* of all things (Metaphysics, [9].1074b30-34). These ‘first principles’ of Aristotle incur comprehensive development throughout Antiquity and beyond, particularly in Plotinus and later in al-Fārābī. Aristotle's referral to first principles implies that they act as the ultimate starting point for philosophy. However, the fundamental tenet of Aristotle's ‘theology’ here is the impossibility of determining an epistemology based on it. As mentioned earlier, they would require a different science that is before regular sciences

προτέραν τῆς φυσικῆς since it is prior and universal (Metaphysics, [7]. 1064b10-14). The divine principles, therefore, are to be unconditionally accepted; they are “naturally appropriate for being known” through “non-linguistic, non-psychological, non-propositional entities – as first principles” (Irwin 1988, 3-4). As Aristotle stated in his *On the Heavens*:

“It is clear then that there is neither place, nor void, nor time, outside the heaven [Ἄμα δὲ δῆλον ὅτι οὐδὲ τόπος οὐδὲ κενὸν οὐδὲ χρόνος ἐστὶν ἔξω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ]. Hence whatever is there, is of such a nature as not to occupy any place, nor does time age it; nor is there any change in any of the things which lie beyond the outermost motion [κενὸν δ’ εἶναι φασιν ἐν ᾧ μὴ ἐνυπάρχει σῶμα, δυνατὸν δ’ ἐστὶ γενέσθαι· χρόνος δὲ ἀριθμὸς κινήσεως]; they continue through their entire duration unalterable and unmodified, living the best and most self-sufficient of lives” (On the Heavens, 279a15-22).

The unmoved mover in this case exists outside the domain of causality, they cannot impact the world of generation and decay *as commonly understood*. Given its self-thinking nature per the *Metaphysics*, it cannot be dependent on sensory perception either, hence Aristotle’s rejection of attributing causality to the divine Forms. It is for this reason that Aristotle’s position on divine causality influenced great controversy throughout the ages; for “Aristotle has no theory either of divine creation or of divine providence” (Ross 1995, 189-190).

This non-discursive knowledge is also where Aristotle aligns most with Plato. In asking what the One is, Aristotle described it as in some way radiating love and desire:

“whether we must take the one itself as being a substance [πότερον ὡς οὐσίας τινὸς οὐσης αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἐνός] (as both the Pythagoreans say in earlier and Plato in later times), or there is, rather, an underlying nature and it is to be explained more intelligibly and more in the manner of the natural philosophers, of whom one says the one is love, another says it is air, and another the indefinite [ὁ μὲν τις φιλίαν εἶναι φησι τὸ ἐν ὁ δ’ ἀέρα ὁ δὲ τὸ ἄπειρον]” (Metaphysics, [2]. 1053b11-16).

Here Bodéüs explained that Aristotle endorsed a ‘sort of theology’ by defending a superior form of knowledge to which science is subordinate; a “science possessed by the god” (Bodéüs 2000, 39). Essentially, for Aristotle, a divine science is one that “deals with divine objects,” one that is based on God being “among the causes of all things and to be a first principle, and such a science either God alone can have, or God above all others. All the sciences, indeed, are more necessary than this, but none is better [ὅ τε γὰρ θεὸς δοκεῖ τῶν αἰτίων πᾶσιν εἶναι καὶ ἀρχὴ τις, καὶ τὴν τοιαύτην ἢ μόνος ἢ μάλιστα ἂν ἔχοι ὁ θεός. ἀναγκαιότεραι μὲν οὖν πᾶσαι ταύτης, ἀμείνων δ’

οὐδεμία]” (Metaphysics, [2]. 983a4-10). While Aristotle makes concessions for such a divine science, he does not expand beyond these peripheral remarks, hence the controversy regarding any ostensible Aristotelian theology. This is also why Aristotle sees it more reasonable to pursue the regular sciences and to refute those who attempt to make epistemological correlations to said divine sciences. In this sense, Aristotle is not incongruent with Plato, particularly concerning the divine being a fundamental unity and being that contains no substance (Metaphysics, [4]. 1001a9-14 and [7]. 1064b10-14). This can be summarized by his crucial statement in *Metaphysics* where Aristotle advanced Plato's fundamental question: “are we on the way from or to the first principles? [πότερον ἀπὸ τῶν ἀρχῶν ἢ ἐπὶ τὰς ἀρχάς ἐστιν ἡ ὁδός]” (Metaphysics, [4]. 1095a30-34). Given this admission, it is not surprising that later thinkers attribute a harmonious fundamental ontology to both Plato and Aristotle.

### Plato's Writing

Scholars who distinguish between the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato usually proceed by contrasting Aristotelian philosophy with the writing of the dialogues and secondly, by relating Aristotle's references to the Platonists and Pythagoreans in his refutation of Forms to Plato himself.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, that Plato did not present a systematic and theoretical theory of the Forms throughout his expansive corpus can also be overlooked (Fine 2004, 20) and (Hyland 2008, 104). Aristotle's criticism of a consistent Form-based epistemology is also consistent with the Neoplatonists who accepted as Aristotle did – a rejection of entities as “separate in senses” (Gerson 2005, 21). The Neoplatonists took the decisive self-criticism of the Forms in the *Parmenides* as self-evident that Plato had been keenly aware of the problems (Third Man argument) associated with accepting separate intangible Forms. This included the unlikelihood of reconciling Forms of *Parmenides* with the other dialogues (Peterson 2019, 255).<sup>4</sup> As seen in Proclus' *Timaeus* commentary, for Plato the Forms do not exist on their own in separation from Intellect [οὔτε γὰρ αἱ ιδέαι κεχωρισμέναι τοῦ νοῦ καθ' αὐτάς ὑφ' ἑστέχασιν],” but the Intellect sees all the Forms when it turns into itself, as a “sphere turned on the lathe [σφαίρας ἐντόρνου περιφορᾶ]” (*Timaeus* Commentary Book II: 394. [1-5]). While further inconsistencies emerge upon attributing to Plato a concise and systematic theory of the Forms,

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the historical account of Aristotle's secession from Plato has been challenged by scholarship. Hermippus of Smyrna of the third century BC was likely the first to promote Aristotle's Peripatetic School as a response to Plato's Academy. This however, appears to be a fabrication with no basis in fact (Chroust 1964, 53-4).

<sup>4</sup> Peterson like Fine considers it possible for the Plato to avoid the Third Man argument in the *Parmenides* (Peterson 2019, 243).

it is important to note that Plato deliberately avoided presenting his philosophy in writing. In other words, a fundamental feature of Plato's thought is that philosophy or wisdom as such cannot be adequately captured in writing (Krämer 2012, 66).

Aristotle was well aware of this, having referred to Plato's so-called 'unwritten teachings' (Physics, [2]. 209b11-15). Furthermore, Aristotle among others also referred to Plato's *On the Good* lecture which demonstrated his true teachings – of which ample evidence suggests that it almost certainly did take place (On the Soul, [2].404b10 – b20).<sup>5</sup> From what we can gather about the lecture *On the Good*, as Gaiser explained, "Plato did not treat mathematics and the Good in the same way in his lecture as in dialogues like the Republic," but instead gave an implicit demonstration of the first principles throughout the dialogues (Gaiser 1980, 5). This is not uncommon in scholarship, as some have argued that the Good serves as the underlying structure of Plato's topology, acting as a guide for his "settings, themes, and the various narrative uses of space-time in the dialogues" (Corocan 2016, 1) and (Kahn 2015, xiv). While this relates to what some scholars call Plato's 'Unwritten Doctrines,' this also points to Plato not exhibiting his true philosophy in the dialogues, a philosophy that Findlay suggested Aristotle may have misunderstood (Findlay 1974, xi, 186).

There is also the subject matter of Plato's letters, especially the *Seventh Letter*, of which the genuineness "has become almost an axiom of Platonic scholarship" (Edelstein 1966, 1). Whereas others have doubted the authenticity of the letter (Burnyeat and Frede, 2015), the circumstances and details of the events recounted in the letter show that whoever wrote the letter "was so intimately acquainted with Plato and so thoroughly versed in the historical situation, that the *content* may be taken broadly speaking as authentic" (Gaiser 1980, 15). Moreover, there are significant philosophical consistencies between the Platonic corpus, the *Seventh Letter* and *Second Letter*. As mentioned earlier, Plato regularly referred to the incapacity of writing to capture philosophical insights, a theme that is implicit throughout the dialogues. In the *Seventh Letter*, however, Plato appears to explicitly state that philosophy cannot be projected in writing like the other sciences but can only be attained after "joint pursuit of the subject [πολλῆς συνουσίας γιγνομένης], suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul [ψυχῇ γενόμενον] and straightway nourishes itself" (Letter VII, 341c-d). It is important to state the

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<sup>5</sup> For references to Plato's lecture and Aristotle's non-extant writings discussing this, see Simplicius, *Commentarius in de Anima* [28.7–9], [151.6–11]: F 28 R3, [453.25–30]: F 28 R3, Aristoxenus, *Elementa harmonica II* [30–31], Philoponus, *Commentarius in de Anima* [75.34–76.1], *Vita Aristotelis Latina* 33: F 27 R3 and Alexander, *Commentarius in Metaphysica*, [250.17–20]: F 31 R3, [85.15–19], [777.16–21], [55.20–56.35]: F 28 R3, [59.28–60.2]: F 30 R3.

obvious at this point, that the dialogues are demonstrative of πολλῆς συνουσίας γιγνομένης, with Socrates most frequently serving as the primary interlocutor of the dialogues. To be clear, Plato is effectively aiming to simulate such discourse *in writing*. Putting aside the spuriousness of the *Second* and *Seventh* letters momentarily, further consistencies with the dialogues emerge.

Plato in the *Republic* discusses the superiority of the dialectical method for philosophy with particular reference to educating future rulers from a young age (*Republic*, 537d-e). Dialectics, of course, entails face-to-face conversation, and nowhere in the dialogues is the training of the future rulers via writing comparably promoted. This relates to the *Parmenides*, where the younger Socrates is advised by the older Parmenides to keep up the practice of dialectic since it requires lengthy training and benefits the cultivation of good memory (*Parmenides*, 135b-136a). A good memory comes with not relying on writing, a dependency that Socrates – by way of the Egyptian God King Theuth – warns against in the *Phaedrus*; it will “introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it [λήθην μὲν ἐν ψυχῆς παρέξει μνήμης ἀμελετησίᾳ]” (*Phaedrus*, 275a). Socrates relates this to the other negative consequence of writing; it portends to the “appearance of wisdom, not with its reality [σοφίας δὲ τοῖς μαθηταῖς δόξαν, οὐκ ἀλήθειαν πορίζεις]” (*Phaedrus*, 275a). The Ancients as Socrates recounts were accustomed to the words of an oak or stone “so long as it was telling the truth [ἀληθῆ λέγοιεν]” (*Phaedrus*, 275b). This relates to Plato's comment in the *Parmenides*, that a young Antiphon had practised to perfection the discussion held between Socrates, Zeno and Parmenides upon hearing it recounted from Pythodorus countless times (*Parmenides* 126b-c). Having recited it from memory, Antiphon represents the Platonic figure who had understood the true meaning behind the discourse. This crucial passage when read in close consideration of the aforementioned *Phaedrus* passage shows that Antiphon had accrued real wisdom. Additionally, the passage in the *Parmenides* corresponds directly to the *Second Letter* where Plato described those with a “tenacious memory [δυνατοὶ δὲ μνημονεῦσαι]” who after having heard these doctrines for thirty years learn the truth of them hence, Plato's insistence to avoid recording the doctrines in writing (*Letter II*, 314b-d).

The subject matter of lengthy discourse, recital, memory and dialectics are taken up again in the *Laws* where Plato described the process of training the future guardians involving “plenty of intimate discussions [διδαχὴ μετὰ συνουσίας πολλῆς]” (*Laws*, 968c). This is because the soul is “far older than any created thing [ψυχὴ τε ὡς ἔστιν πρεσβύτατον ἀπάντων]” and is guided by reason. However, while the soul controls matter, reason controls all the heavenly bodies (*Laws* 967d-968a). Plato related this ontology to the application of the laws themselves, which he doubted

writing could adequately capture. Plato suggested that the legislator should instead blend what he deemed respectable with the written laws (Laws, 822e-823a). The legislator, presumably, would have had lengthy training in dialectics and so can overcome the limitations of writing. Plato's denigration of writing extends over to his understanding of language more generally. In the *Philebus*, Plato makes it clear that one cannot express through the various vocals sounds of language the entirety of the unity of human speech, and that there is some underlying unity to language that he equated with the art of literacy γραμματικὴν (*Philebus*, 18b-d). However, one cannot resolve this weakness by calculation, for one will remain in a "boundless ignorance [ἄπειρόν σε ἐκάστων]" should one try to calculate the entirety of language through a series of numbers (*Philebus*, 17e).<sup>6</sup> Precise language does not necessitate wisdom, only lengthy dialectical discourse can grant wisdom as a sudden event like a "light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself [οἶον ἀπὸ πυρός πηδῆσαντος ἐξαφθὲν φῶς, ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ γενόμενον αὐτὸ ἑαυτὸ ἤδη τρέφει]" (*Letter VII*, 341c-d). It is important to keep in mind that Plato's dialectics is not an oppositional "game of contradiction [ἀντιλογίαν χρώμενοι]," but rather a collective pursuit for the truth that brings about honour to the philosophical way of life (*Republic*, (539b). As Gadamer explained, regarding the "Model of Platonic Dialectics," the first thing we must ensure is that the other person goes with us (*Mitgehens des Partners zu versichern*) (Gadamer 1999, 373).

To turn our focus back to the *Second Letter*, Plato here - in Pythagorean fashion (Rist 1965, 78-81) - appears to not only denounce philosophical doctrines in writing but to also advise against allowing for their possession by the unworthy (*Letter II*, 314b-c).<sup>7</sup> For Plato, ideas must be pondered and recited over an extended period through dialectical discourse otherwise they can lead to a distorted meaning. Hence Plato's allusion to speaking in the matter of enigmas to avoid the unworthy from possessing them should they be found in "the recesses of the sea or land [ἴν' ἄν τι ἢ δέλτος ἢ πόντου ἢ γῆς ἐν πτυχαίς πάθῃ]" (*Letter II*, 312d). Furthermore, the desire to write in riddles per the *Second Letter* to avoid speaking directly of the "first [πρώτου φύσεως]" corresponds directly to the *Laws* where Plato described Ancient theogonic accounts of the "first substance of Heaven [πρώτη φύσις οὐρανοῦ]," which

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<sup>6</sup> This is likely a reference to Plato's student Xenocrates who was said to have calculated the total possible number syllables via the characters of language to an astronomically large number (McKeown 2013, 171).

<sup>7</sup> There is also the contentious issue regarding the authenticity of the *Second Letter*, although both the *Second* and *Seventh Letter* have had their authenticity defended. Amongst the defenders, see Caskey 1974, 220-227, Morrow 1962, 3-16, Gadamer 1968, 255 and Rosen 1987, xiii-xviii.

some had been expressed “in a kind of meter, others without meter [τισι μέτροις, οἱ δὲ καὶ ἄνευ μέτρων λέγοντες περὶ θεῶν]” (*Laws*, 886c). This is also consistent with some scholars who pointed out that Plato's writing in the *Laws* contains an underlying Hesiodic expression, an important detail given Plato's intent is to theoretically construct an ideal city with laws (Katz 2018, 63-4) and (Folch 2018, 312-14). This suggests that Plato had not only deliberately obfuscated his writings but also poetized them. Moreover, Plato's concealment of his doctrines was common to the Pythagoreans and Neoplatonists. For example, Porphyry in his biography of Plotinus records that Plotinus, Errenius and Origen had all broken their initial vow of silence to their master Ammonius of Saccas (who is documented to have not written anything) by placing their doctrines in writing (*Life of Plotinus*, §3: [20-45]).

Then there is the contentious description of “youthful and idealized” Socrates who is the originator of the philosophies portrayed in the dialogues: “There is no writing of Plato's, nor will there ever be; those that are now called so come from an idealized and youthful Socrates [Σωκράτους ἐστὶν καλοῦ καὶ νέου γεγονότος]” (*Letter II*, 314c). This passage has generated considerable scholarly confusion. As Bury explained in his translation (he preferred “become fair and young”), it is likely related to Plato's claim that there is no extant writing of his *Seventh Letter* (341c) and the description of a young Socrates in the *Parmenides* (127c) (Bury 1952, 416). Hyland makes another important observation, that καλοῦ καὶ νέου can also be translated as Socrates “become new,” where Socrates' “newness” is a “self consciously constructed one, a matter of art, not the unconscious and inevitable workings of memory” (Hyland 2008, 99). This is consistent with Gadamer's view, who saw this peculiar description of Socrates as revealing Plato's simulation of apolitical education both through live discussion and writing (Gadamer 1968, 209). As Hyland further relates, it is not just that Plato did not present his ‘true teachings’ in the dialogues, but Plato believed that “no writing can adequately express the deepest truths of philosophy” (Hyland 2008, 94-5). When the letters are cross-referenced with key dialogues, one can see that regardless of the authenticity question, Plato's views are consistent regarding the weakness of the written word.

The results of this investigation lead us to question where a so-called Theory of Forms would stand. For to attribute a theory of Forms to Plato, one would need to accept two propositions; a non-contradictory and consistent system from within the dialogues, and secondly, that Plato believed a philosophical theory can be adequately presented in writing. Regarding the previous, the dialogues repeatedly demonstrate the contrary and that Plato aimed to circumnavigate the limitations of writing. To do so, Plato attempted to do what he saw as second best, simulate the superiority of the dialectical method between the interlocutors. This includes the artistic sensibilities of Plato's style, with the backdrops, narrative and settings

of the dialogues meaningfully intertwined into the larger aim of the dialogue. Hence, Gadamer explained that Plato tried to overcome the weakness of the written *logoi* through the dialogues (Gadamer 1999, 374). This is a feature that was universally accepted amongst thinkers of late Antiquity such as Proclus who explained that as a prerequisite for reading the dialogues, one must take into consideration a variety of factors such as the characters, places and times (Republic Commentary VI: [5].25 - [7].5). Proclus is commensurate here with Gadamer's concept of "Fusion of Horizons [*Horizontverschmelzung*]" where the text must speak the language of the reader only if the interpretation can find the right language (Gadamer 1999, 401). Regarding the second proposition, Plato's desire to avoid placing doctrines in writing is not unfounded in the tradition and as observed thus far, sufficient evidence suggests that this was indeed the case. Be that as it may, written works of Plato do survive, and we must make do with what we have. And so, to orient our focus specifically towards Plato's discussion of the Forms, we will observe formative changes that the Forms incur depending on the dialogue.

### Which Theory of Forms?

While awaiting his inevitable execution, Socrates of the *Phaedo* discussed the Forms in the context of the soul's immortality. The dialogue being held in prison accentuates an investigation into the Forms that corresponds to Socrates' impending death. As such, the melancholic conversation takes place while Socrates assures Phaedo of the soul's immortality: "the Form of life itself [*ζωῆς εἶδος*], and anything that is deathless [*ἀθάνατόν*], are never destroyed," and so given that deathless is indestructible, it follows that the soul - which is concomitant with deathlessness - is necessarily indestructible (Phaedo, 106d). This 'Final Proof' of the soul's immortality is based on the soul's participation in the 'Form of life' that signifies its indestructibility (Frede 1978, 27-41). In other words, Plato is already predisposed to the Form of life being indestructible *ἀθάνατόν*. It follows then that the argument only holds if we accept (along with Plato) the characterisation of the human being as the composition of body and soul (Frede 1978, 33). However, if we compare this with the *Cratylus*, a different set of suppositions ensures a different outcome.

Socrates makes it clear that despite both his and Cratylus' commitment to the Form of beauty, all beautiful things are always "passing away [*ὑπεξέρχεται*]" and so "it can't even be known by anyone [*οὐδ' ἂν γνωσθείη γε ὑπ' οὐδενός*]" (Cratylus, 439d-e). Socrates even takes this further to suggest that based on this Heraclitean insight, "it isn't even reasonable to say that there is such a thing as knowledge [*οὐδὲ γινώσκον εἶναι φάναι εἰκότως*]" (Cratylus, 440a). This illustrates the difficulty of knowing

the Forms, and Socrates in this dialogue appears more of a student who is deliberating Heraclitus' teachings (*Cratylus*, 440b-c). Whereas the Form of life is a certainty in the *Phaedo*, in the *Cratylus*, one cannot even ascertain whether the Forms or any knowledge is attainable. Socrates in *Cratylus* is not as confident of the Forms as he is in the *Phaedo* since the Heraclitean insight impedes his judgement in the *Cratylus*.<sup>8</sup> This resembles *Parmenides* where Socrates is schooled by Parmenides' Third Man argument and is left doubting the Forms (*Parmenides* 132a-c). This is despite reconciling Anaxagoras' 'scientific explanation' of the soul that defines the body as "ordered and sustained by mind or soul [πιστεύεις Ἀναξαγόρα νοῦν καὶ ψυχὴν εἶναι τὴν διακοσμοῦσαν καὶ ἔχουσαν]" which produces the same body-soul composition of the *Phaedo* (*Cratylus*, 400a). So Plato here dialectically contemplates the Forms concurrently with Pre-Socratic ideas, narrative, setting etc which often leads to a different characterisation of the Forms. Whereas the *Cratylus* (400c) and the *Phaedo* (66a-67a) affirm the body as an entrapment for the soul, the Form of life is only seen in the *Phaedo* dialogue with no questioning of its indestructibility (Frede 1978, 41).

Further discrepancies are present in Plato's conception of the Forms that are not as pronounced. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates explained that beautiful things are contingent upon their share in Beauty itself, "and I say so with everything [καὶ πάντα δὴ οὕτως λέγω]." Socrates, however, remains ignorant of the nature of this relationship: "I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship" (*Phaedo*, 100c-d). Similarly, in the *Cratylus*, Plato insists that since all things are always flowing - a particular beauty cannot be something at all. For every time one approaches the beautiful thing it seemingly changes and so "no kind of knowledge is knowledge of what isn't in any way" [ὁ γινώσκει μηδαμῶς ἔχον] (*Cratylus*, 439e-440a). While this is indicative of the immutability of the Forms, this also means that the Forms cannot be determined conceptually. The mutability of experience inhibits one's knowledge, thus concepts or models of Forms are impossible - for there is no immutable ground from which to begin investigating. This is reiterated in *Euthyphro* where Socrates sought the form of piety: "Tell me then what this form itself is, so that I may look upon it and, using it as a model [παράδειγματι]" (*Euthyphro*, 6e). Plato's deliberate use of the word παράδειγμα and the dialogue's aporia shows that

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle affirmed this Heraclitean influence on Plato in the *Metaphysics*, having claimed that Plato had subscribed to the Heraclitean doctrine, unlike Socrates, who "was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole" (*Metaphysics*, [6].987a31-987b10). Kirk, however, challenged Aristotle's view that Plato adopted the Heraclitean doctrine (Kirk 1951, 237-41).

Plato - affirming Aristotle's concerns - was predisposed to rejecting the conceptualisation of the Forms (*Euthyphro*, 15c-d). For this is beyond reasoning and like Aristotle's view of divine knowledge: "Do you then not realize now that you are saying that what is dear to the gods is pious [θεοῖς φίλον φῆς ὅσιον εἶναι]? Is this not the same as the god-loved [θεοφιλές]?" (*Euthyphro*, 15c).

The Forms are evidently beyond reason and cannot be grasped in theory or concept. This is clear in the *Symposium*, where the beautiful particular serves as the ascent towards the beauty itself; "starting out from beautiful things [καλῶν ἐκείνου] and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two [ἀπὸ ἑνὸς ἐπὶ δύο καὶ ἀπὸ δύο ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ καλὰ σώματα] ... in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful [γνώ αὐτὸ τελευτῶν ὃ ἔστι καλόν]." (*Symposium*, 211c-d). Plato's focus on καλῶν ἐκείνου and καλὰ σώματα shows that beautiful objects exist, albeit based on varying gradations on Diotima's 'Ladder of Love' that one must use to ascend. This is repeated by another *anagogic* metaphor in the *Phaedrus*, where one's seeing a particular beauty reminds one of true (ἀναμιμνησκόμενος ἀληθοῦς) beauty so that "he takes wing and flutters in his eagerness to rise up [πτερῶται τε καὶ ἀναπτερούμενος προθυμούμενος ἀναπτέσθαι]," (*Phaedrus*, 249d). Plato's widespread use of metaphor, allegory and myth is indicative of the mysterious nature of the Forms and how they relate to the world, a feature that Aristotle later clarified. As Gerson showed, the multitude of characters in the dialogues reflects ongoing discussions in the Academy which Aristotle most likely was a part of (Gerson 2017, 79). Aristotle's criticism being oriented toward those members of the Academy and their ongoing discussions would seem likely given his two-decade-long membership. Be that as it may, the Forms are not theories but ideas that arise depending on the contextual circumstance. Hence why for Proclus, one must first determine the aim σκοπός according to the rules κανῶν of the dialogue (*Republic Commentary* VI: [6].1-5).

When read in this way, the aim of the *Phaedo* (called *On the Soul* by the Ancients) is to prove the indestructibility of the soul, and so the dialogue's characters, places and times must correspond to this aim. Alternatively, the aim of the *Cratylus* apropos Gadamer is to identify the relationship between word and thing (Gadamer 1999, 414). The *Cratylus*, therefore, incurs a different narrational setting and outcome, likewise with the *Symposium*, given the aim is to determine the best speech on love. In *Symposium*, beauty can be seen depending on its ranking on Diotima's ladder, whereas in the *Cratylus* that is not the case, hence Plato's lesser emphasis on the mutability of the particulars in the *Symposium*. Again, the discussion of love and beauty in *Phaedrus* takes place in Plato's most idyllic setting which is intended to elevate beauty and love beyond the particulars. In *Euthyphro*, Socrates' discussion with Euthyphro near the Athenian court results in the failure to find a model

παράδειγμα of the Form of piety itself. The dialogue's setting foreshadows the absurdity of the charge bestowed upon Socrates whilst simultaneously restating Plato's lack of commitment to any concept of Forms (*Euthyphro*, 6d-e). This shows that the setting corresponds directly to the variegated descriptions of the Forms, hence the widespread inconsistency across the dialogues. So when Hippias states "I can't agree with you in that, Socrates," it is no wonder that Socrates responds "Nor I with myself, Hippias" (*Lesser Hippias*, 376c). Plato is anything but certain of a theory of the Forms.

### The Harmonization: From Plotinus to al-Fārābī

Aristotle's awareness of Plato's inconsistent portrayal of the Forms likely influenced his decision to focus on those who promoted causal theories of the Forms. As Alexander explained, Aristotle in the first book of *On Ideas* claimed that it was the Platonists who had established the Ideas for furthering the sciences (*Commentarius in Metaphysica*, 79.3-5).<sup>9</sup> While it is common for the contemporary scholarship to distinguish between Aristotelian and Platonist philosophy, this was much less prevalent from the Middle-Platonism of Antiochus of Ascalon to late Antiquity onward to the early Medieval Islamic Neoplatonists.<sup>10</sup> This is an important historical development that sheds light on how contemporary interpretations differ from Antiquity and beyond. This early harmonization of Plato and Aristotle also shows how common ground on the Forms was sought. As Banner had explained, the idea of an esoteric Aristotle was one of the ways that harmonization was achieved, given that it was "the most outstanding issue in need of harmonisation for the Platonists" (Banner 2018, 77). Others traced the philosophical lineage of Plato and Aristotle back to Pythagoras, such as Numenius of Apamea (Édouard 1973, 62-5) and Hierocles (Boys-Stones 2018, 40). Antiochus was nonetheless the first to systematically advance the idea that Plato and Aristotle were in agreement *συμφωνία* concerning the revelations of Pythagoras which would later be adopted by the Middle-

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<sup>9</sup> Πλεοναχῶς μὲν ταῖς ἐπιστήμας πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἰδεῶν κατασκευὴν προσεχρήσαντο, ὡς ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ Περὶ ἰδεῶν λέγει.

<sup>10</sup> Gerson holds that Antiochus of Ascalon was likely the first to reject the skepticism of Philo of Larissa and attempted to return back to the teachings of the Old Academy. Antiochus also "upheld the essential harmony of Stoicism both with the Academy and with Peripatetic philosophy, based on Zeno's connection with Plato's successor Polemo" (Gerson 2005, 293). Gersh would add that Antiochus maintained that despite the differences in exposition – Plato and Aristotle among other philosophical schools were teaching the same doctrine (Gersh 1986, 63-7).

Platonists and Neoplatonists (Hadot 2015, 44-9).<sup>11</sup> While the limited written works in the Middle-Platonists up to Ammonius of Saccas make it difficult to fully expand on the details of said harmonisation, from Plotinus onwards this is no longer the case.<sup>12</sup> It is however, due to the preceding Middle-Platonism and others that harmonization had become entrenched in the philosophies of the various Neoplatonists to such an extent that “Aristotle is seen by Plotinus as a somewhat backward member of the hæresis of the ancients, but a member all the same” (Banner 2018, 260).<sup>13</sup>

Plotinus’ Forms are based on a Plato-Aristotle syncretism that remained the dominant interpretation throughout late Antiquity.<sup>14</sup> As the editor of the *Enneads*, Porphyry wrote that Plotinus’ writings contain the concentrated essence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Life of Plotinus, §14: 1-10). This influenced Plotinus’ determination of νοῦς that “famously combines the Platonic idea of a world of Forms with Aristotle’s conception of the supreme god as self-contemplating intellect. The result is an intellect whose ‘thoughts’, νοήματα or νοητά, are the Forms” (Banner 2018, 183). Plotinus effectively assimilated Aristotle’s potentiality and actuality in its temporally horizontal dimension into the Neoplatonic vertical atemporal ontological posteriority (Perl 2022, 20). In the sixth *Ennead*, Plotinus began by questioning how the Forms are to be found bound up within the Intellect (Ennead 6 (38) §6.7.17: [1-3]). By drawing upon Aristotle’s analogy of the soul to the hand, Plotinus

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth keeping in mind that Antiochus did not just see the agreement between Plato and Aristotle, but insisted that the founders of the Stoic and Peripatetic schools all belonged to Plato’s Academy. The three schools were basically propounding the same philosophy in different terminology (Hadot 2015, 49).

<sup>12</sup> Karamanolis traces the evidence for the historical development of harmonization in the figures starting from Antiochus to Plutarch, Numenius, Atticus, Ammonius and finally in the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Porphyry (Karamanolis 2006, 44-330). Perhaps Augustine of Hippo can be included here, for he maintained that most historians were wrong in supposing that Plato and Aristotle were in fundamental disagreement when they agreed with each other more than originally anticipated (Against the Academicians, (3).19.42). Augustine had also confronted the concept of Plato’s *Ideas*, however, he was uncertain of the origin of the concept, having considered the likelihood being outside of Greece, perhaps in Egypt (Cavadini and Fitzgerald 1999, 652) and (City of God, (8).4: 8-11).

<sup>13</sup> Porphyry has also authored a now lost treatise on the harmonization of Plato and Aristotle entitled ‘On the One Doctrine of Plato and Aristotle’ Περὶ τοῦ μίαν εἶναι τὴν Πλάτωνος καὶ Ἀριστοτέλους ἀΐρεσιν (Hadot 2015, 41).

<sup>14</sup> Plotinus accepted the harmonized Aristotelian-Platonic position where all embodied cognition required images as a precondition for accessing the Intellect. Based on this synthesis, the Forms being coterminous with the Intellect are, therefore, accessed via a higher state of cognition (Gerson 2014, 271).

explained that “thought is the form of forms [νοῦς εἶδος εἰδῶν]” and the multiplicity of Forms acts as the thoughtform of the Intellect (On the Soul, [8].431a1-3). Paradoxically however, the Intellect is not to be understood here as fragmented into multiplicity; “it possessed a difference by becoming entirely one [εἷς ὅλως γενέσθαι εἶχε τὴν διαφορᾶν] (Ennead 6 (38) §6.7.17: [31-33]). The difficulty of understanding the simultaneous unity in multiplicity or the ‘difference in becoming one’ is incumbent upon the degeneration of the Forms into the material world, or specifically the apprehension of them by the soul’s lower part as opposed to the Intellect. The soul’s inhabitation in the material world means that the Forms can only be discursively deliberated in a fragmented state. This relates directly to the variegated description of the Forms in Plato’s dialogues.

This thusly carries over directly to Plotinus’ non-discursive thinking where the subject-object dichotomy is dissolved in the apprehension of the Forms on the level of the Intellect.<sup>15</sup> For Plotinus, the best result the soul can attain whilst in the body is a reflection of the Form (Ennead 1 (53) §1.1.7: 13-5). This is superseded by the Intellect which “comes to be in relation to Soul as light for it [νοῦς δὲ γίνεται πρὸς ψυχὴν οὕτως φῶς εἰς αὐτήν]” (Ennead 6 (38) §6.7.17: [37-38]). Moreover, the soul’s governance of the body is complimented by the “Forms, from which soul alone has already received its leadership over the living being, come thoughts, beliefs, and acts of intellection [διάνοιαι δὴ καὶ δόξαι καὶ Νοήσεις]” (Ennead 1 (53) §1.1.7: [15-17]). As Gerson explains regarding this cogent passage, “Plotinus is taking the Aristotelian doctrine of cognition of Forms without matter and combining it with the Platonic doctrine of Forms, the true paradigms of the forms in and apart from matter” (Gerson 2018, 48). This shows that Aristotle’s Intellect is indispensable for Plotinus’ project. Moreover, coupled with Plato’s inconclusive explications of the Forms, the *Enneads* exhibit the most comprehensive exposition of the Forms in the Ancient world. As Proclus added, Plotinus is the great interpreter to have revealed all the sacred narrations of Plato’s “revelation [ἐποπτεία]” which his successors Amelius, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Theodorus would inevitably receive (Theology of Plato, [B1C1, 51-2]). In other words, Plotinus’ syncretism represented the foundational approach to the Forms of Neoplatonism.

So rather than refute the Forms with Aristotle’s Third Man argument, the prevailing Neoplatonist view was to harmonize the Forms with the Intellect. This inevitably influenced the development of early Islamic philosophy, especially Plotinian cosmology which was one of the most crucial resources for harmonization. Plotinus was

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<sup>15</sup> Despite Plotinus being commonly understood to be the father of mysticism, Plotinus used the word *μυστικῶς* to describe the “mystic rites” and the allegorical speech of the ‘wise men of long ago’ (Ennead 3 (26) §3.6.19: [26-29]).

propagated during the ninth century under the title of *The Theology of Aristotle* which was a translation and creative paraphrasing of books IV, V and VI of the *Enneads*. While the authorship is not certain, it was most likely composed within the circle of al-Kindi during the ninth century. Its early entry into the Islamic world enabled the Neoplatonic synergy of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy to become central to thinkers like al-Fārābī and ibn-Sīnā. As Fakhry explained, “the introduction of the pseudo *Theologia Aristotelis* enables al-Fārābī to reconcile Plato and Aristotle on one of the most crucial issues dividing them; namely, the status of the Ideas or Forms, as well as the pre-existence of the soul” (Fakhry 2002, 37).

The other treatise attributed to Aristotle was *The Book of Causes* (*Liber de Causis*) which was also circulated during the ninth century. This contained thirty-two of the two hundred and eleven propositions of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* which further entrenched the Neoplatonic worldview (Brand 1984, 4-7).<sup>16</sup> As King had explained in the case of the *Liber de Causis*, “Al-Fārābī and Proclus are brought together within the paradigm of the *sapiens*, astrologer or prophet who, by intellectual union with the primordial causes or gods, participates in their operative power” (King 2019, 413). Despite Aristotelian philosophy being dominant during the Medieval era, Corbin explained that what “should be stressed is the considerable influence exerted by certain pseudepigraphic works” on the early development of Islamic philosophy (Corbin 1993, 17-8). In particular, the two pseudo-Aristotelian treatises allowed significant elements of Neoplatonism to percolate throughout the Islamic world. This is especially the case with al-Fārābī, the first to develop an Islamic Neoplatonic scheme in his philosophy whilst also composing a treatise entitled *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle* [كتاب الجمع بين رأيي الحكيمين: افلاطون الالهي وأرسطوطاليس] (Fakhry 2002, 3-4).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Some attribute the Arabic translation from Greek to Al-Fārābī and from Arabic into Latin by Gerard of Cremona which ultimately led to its Latin title *Liber de Causis*, see (Rosan 1949, 223).

<sup>17</sup> The term “الجمع” a cognate of “جمع” - is commonly understood as a “collection,” “gathering” or “joint.” This implies that al-Fārābī saw a unified message in Plato and Aristotle. In other words, al-Fārābī thought he was gathering one philosophy *not* forcefully harmonizing two distinct philosophies. There has been some scholarly contention regarding the authorship of the text and whether al-Fārābī was the true author of the treatise. Those who argue against al-Fārābī’s authorship point to al-Fārābī’s student Yahyā Ibn’Adī as the likely author, see (Rashed 2009, 44-66) and (Lameer 1994, 30-9). However, given that Yahyā Ibn’Adī was a student of al-Fārābī, and the latter reiterated elsewhere that Plato and Aristotle held a consonant philosophy, this does not detract from al-Fārābī’s views on the harmony of Plato and Aristotle: “So let it be clear to you that, in what they presented, their

In this work, al-Fārābī set out to dispel any apparent discordance between the two “sages [الحكيم],” whilst also describing Plato and Aristotle as the “fountain-heads of philosophy, the originators of its beginnings and fundamentals, the fulfillers of its ends and branches [هذان الحكمان هما مبدعان للفلسفة، ومنشئان لأوائها واصولها،]” (Two Sages, (2).[1b], 125-26). As far as al-Fārābī was concerned, Plato had been the originator of divine philosophy and Aristotle as a follower, helper, and advisor “toiled mightily and struggled greatly to originate the method of the syllogism and embarked upon explaining and refining it so as to use it in each and every part [ارسطاطاليس باحتمال الكد واعمال الجهد في انشاء طريق القياس؛ وشرع في بيانه وتهذيبه، ليستعمل القياس والبرهان في جزء جزء مما توجهه القسمة، ليكون كالتابع والمتمم]” (Two Sages, (3).[2a], 126-27). The first principles that were developed by Plato's divine philosophy were appropriated by Aristotle into the syllogistic method, furthering the study of the divine first principles. Any ostensible distinction in composition between Plato and Aristotle had been a deliberate plot on the part of Plato since he had chosen to resort to allegories and riddles to allow for them to be “known only to the deserving [فاختار الرموز والالغاز، قصد امنه، لتدوين علومه]” (Two Sages, (12).[4b], 131).

This is reiterated at length in his study of Plato's *Laws*, where al-Fārābī wrote:

“the wise Plato did not feel free to reveal and uncover the sciences [تسمح نفسه بإظهار العلوم] for all men. Therefore, he followed the practice of using symbols, riddles, obscurity, and difficulty [طريق الرمز والالغاز والتعمية والتصعيب] so that science would not fall into the hands of those who do not deserve it and be deformed, or into the hands of one who does not know its worth or who uses it improperly [يقع العلم إلى غير أهله فيتبدل]... This notion is one of the secrets of his books [أسرار كتبه]. Moreover, no one is able to understand that which he states openly and that which he states symbolically unless he is trained in that art itself [وما قد صرح به وما قد رمزه وألغزه إلا من تدرب في الصناعة نفسها] and no one is able to distinguish between the two unless he is skilled in the science that is being discussed. This is how his discussion proceeds in the *Laws*” (Plato's *Laws*, [3/2], 85/125).<sup>18</sup>

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purpose is the same, and that they intended to offer one and the same philosophy [فنيين]” (Book of Happiness, (63-64): [1-10], 49-50/47).

<sup>18</sup> Al-Fārābī's passage echoes Plato's *Second Letter* where he advised the reader to burn the letter after reading it so as to avoid risking its falling into the hands of the uninitiated (Letter II, 314c).

This harks back to Proclus who argued that Plato often used names and allegories ἀνιγμᾶσιν in his exposition (Republic Commentary VI: 118.[17-20]). Furthermore, al-Fārābī's reference to Plato's writings as intended for those trained in the art itself is endorsed by Gadamer who saw the dialogues as playful allusions (*leichte Anspielungen*) that speak to those who find meanings beyond the explicit writings (Gadamer 1968, 203).

That al-Fārābī recognised Plato's intention to keep his core ideas outside of writing through riddles is consistent with the broader Platonist tradition. Al-Fārābī, however, had also attributed this to Aristotle by relying on the *Theology of Aristotle* in its riddled description of the soul and the intellect (Two Sages, [75].21b.164).<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding this misattribution, Plato and Aristotle nonetheless shared the more crucial fundamental ontology for al-Fārābī, the nature of the oneness of the creator who is present in every multiplicity (ان الواحد موجود في كل - كثرة) - which is equally demonstratable in both Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (Two Sages, (57).[17a], 156). This exposition is directly related to the issue of the Forms, where al-Fārābī had rejected the idea that Plato "affirms them and to Aristotle that he is of a different opinion [ومن ذلك، الصور والمثل التي تنسب الى افلاطون] (Two Sages, (63).[19a], 160).<sup>20</sup> While al-Fārābī admitted to Plato's talk of "divine models [المثل الالهية]" that do not undergo "corruption, but perdure [لا تدثر ولا تفسد، ولكنها باقية]" he saw that the Aristotle of the *Theology* had also affirmed these "spiritual forms [الصور الروحانية]" (Two Sages, (64-66).[19a-20a], 160-61).

That al-Fārābī had attributed to Aristotle the so-called *Theology* may lead to some suggesting that his harmonization project would not hold water.<sup>21</sup> That, however, is not the only resource material that al-Fārābī had incorporated. As Porphyry pointed out, the *Enneads* appropriated significant elements of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* along with other Platonist sources. Stamatellos further added that Plotinus accepted various fundamental Aristotelian ideas, such as the "Intellect and Intelligible Matter," which includes Aristotle's various psychological vocabulary and the

<sup>19</sup> Adamson notes that al-Fārābī was not referring to the *Theology of Aristotle* we currently possess (Adamson 2021, 183).

<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that al-Fārābī uses the word "الصور" for the Forms, which is the common term for pictures, paintings, images and so on. This is because al-Fārābī wants to illustrate that imagination is always close to picturing how the Form of sensible things come to be in a particular way, never the Form itself, which is beyond imagination (Netton 1999, 47-8).

<sup>21</sup> Davidson argued that despite having accepted Aristotle as the author of the *Theology of Aristotle*, al-Fārābī "could hardly have mistaken it for Aristotle's *De anima*" (Davidson 1992, 55).

dynamic philosophical antitheses of “matter-form,” “potentiality-actuality,” and “prior-posterior” (Stamatellos 2007, 14). These Aristotelian ideas are precisely what al-Fārābī capitalised on, although al-Fārābī goes further towards affirming this commensurate ontology by explaining that the Forms (صور الالهية) do not subsist “in other places outside this world [كأنها اشباح قائمة في اماكن اخر خارجة عن هذا العالم]” for both Plato and Aristotle (Two Sages, (69).[20a-20b], 161-62). Essentially, it only appears as such for al-Fārābī because “necessity stands as an obstacle and intervenes between us and that [كانت الضرورة تمنع وتحول بيننا وبين ذلك],” for we must accept that the “divine meanings [المعاني الالهية]” are of a “more venerable species and are other than we imagine and conceptualise [هي بنوع اشرف وعلى غير ما نتخيله]” (Two Sages, (70).[20b], 162-63). Should we accept the previous proposition of a separable world of Forms, we fall into the problem of “innumerable worlds [عواالم غير متناهيه]” which Aristotle revealed as untenable in the *Physics* - al-Fārābī’s reference to the Third Man argument (Two Sages, (69).[20a-b], 162). Both Aristotle and Plato must contend with the limitations of language in addressing the issue of the divine Forms, which only *prima facie* incur a difference of opinion.

Al-Fārābī’s understanding of the Forms that he saw consistent in Plato and Aristotle is, therefore, Neoplatonic owing to its Plotinian foundation. The Forms do not just cohere with the Intellect; they are essentially identical to the Intellect. As the Neoplatonist Asclepius of Tralles had argued in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Aristotle placed the Forms in the Intellect, and therefore, Aristotle’s arguments are not with Plato, but with those who separated the Forms from the Intellect (Commentaria In Aristotelem Graeca, 69: 17–27).<sup>22</sup> In al-Fārābī’s adoption of this view, the Forms are more descriptive of higher intellection, that which is not accessible from within the natural world and the soul. However, this does not entail separation, as al-Fārābī wrote:

“that by the “world of the intellect [بعوالم العقل]” he intends only its sphere and likewise by the “world of the soul [بعوالم النفس],” not that the intellect has a location, the soul a location, and the Creator may He be exalted-a location, some higher and some lower, as is the case with bodies [لا ان العقل مكانا وللنفس مكانا وللباري تعالى مكانا، بعضها اعلى]

<sup>22</sup> Ἐντεῦθεν δοκεῖ πρὸς τὸν Πλάτωνα ἀποτείνεσθαι περὶ τῶν ιδεῶν. εἰρή-καμεν δὲ τὸν σκοπὸν τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους περὶ τούτου. αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ λέγων ἐν τῇ Περὶ ψυχῆς πραγματείᾳ ‘καὶ εὖ γε οἱ τὴν ψυχὴν εἰρηκότες τόπον εἰδῶν’, καὶ ὅτι ὁ ἐνεργείᾳ νοῦς ἐστὶ τὰ πράγματα, καὶ πάλιν ὅτι ὁ μὲν δυνάμει νοῦς ἐνεργεῖ, ὁ δὲ ἐνεργείᾳ νοῦς ποιεῖ. ὥστε ἀντικρυς καὶ αὐτὸς ἐναποτίθεται ιδέας τῷ νῷ. πῶς οὖν, εἴποι ἄν τις, καὶ αὐτὸς πρεσ-βεύων ιδέας δοκεῖ τῷ Πλάτῳ μάχεσθαι; καὶ λέγομεν ὅτι κατ’ ἀλήθειαν οὐ τῷ Πλάτῳ μάχεται, ἀλλὰ τῷ ἐν ἄλλῳ καὶ ἄλλῳ ὄντι Πλάτῳ μάχε-ται, τοῖς ὑποτιθεμένοις τὰς ιδέας ταύτας αὐτάς καθ’ ἑαυτάς ὑπαρχούσας καὶ οὔσας κεχωρισμένας τοῦ νοῦ. ὥστε φανερὰ ἡμῖν γέγονεν ἡ ὅλη ἔννοια τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους ἢ περὶ τῶν ιδεῶν.

[ويعضحا اسفل، كما يكون للجسام]. That is something even beginners in philosophizing would find reprehensible, so how would those trained and schooled in it [assert it]? Indeed, by "higher [بالأعلى]" and "lower [والأسفل]," he means the venerable and superior [الفضيلة والشرف], not spatial location [لا المكان السطحي]. And his statement "the world of the intellect" is only the way one says the "world of ignorance [عالم الجهل]," the "world of knowledge [وعالم العلم]," or the "world of the invisible [عالم الغيب]," meaning by that the sphere of each of them [ويراد بذلك حيز كل واحد منها] (Two Sages, (71).[21a], 163).<sup>23</sup>

Al-Fārābī effectively resolved any discrepancies between Aristotle and Plato regarding the Forms by integrating the Intellect, soul and Forms into a whole that is not representative of 'separate' worlds, but of superior Intellection. Al-Fārābī saw that the soul remains bound to the senses and so acts as an "intermediary between the intellect and nature [كالمتموسطة بين العقل والطبيعة]" (Two Sages, (74).[21b], 164). This is also the reasoning behind Plato's riddled speech, for they are beyond the senses and so naturally beyond language and discursive thinking; the Forms are inextricably bound to the whole of soul-Intellect. For al-Fārābī, the divine Forms are to be understood as separate only metaphorically. Despite the literal reference "to a spatial location," this also applies to the "world of intellect," and "world of soul" (Druart 1992, 133). Hence, al-Fārābī saw that the Forms can also be accessed by dreaming and prophesying, all part of the imaginative faculty which can act as the intermediary between the soul and the Intellect (Fakhry 2002, 89). This is drawn directly from the *Republic* where Plato explained that one can best grasp truth when reason remained dormant allowing for visions to appear in dreams (*Republic*, 572a-b). Plato's and Aristotle's depiction of the Forms is thusly consistent based on their being beyond one's faculties of perceptive reasoning. Al-Fārābī alluded to this in his view that Plato and Aristotle both agreed that the superior nature of the human being, the kind suited for the ultimate happiness is the self-sufficient kind that puts into practice the virtues which help us attain "ultimate happiness [نفعه في بلوغ السعادة]" which is "the good without qualification [وكل شيء]" (Aphorisms, [28].25-6/45-7).

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<sup>23</sup> While Butterworth translates as "حيز" as "sphere," the word is also translatable as space, or a spatial location of sorts. This shows that al-Fārābī saw the sages referring to these "worlds [بعوالم]" as *not* inhabiting separates spatial locations, only metaphorically appearing as such. Additionally, Adamson notes that this passage argues that both Plato and the Aristotle accept Forms because God's willing creation of universe entails God having a divine knowledge which are the Forms, that which must be paradigmatic to serve as fit objects for that knowledge, see Adamson 2021, 194.

This is supported by the *Timaeus* where Plato explained that one's craft can only be a "likely tale [εἰκότα μῦθον]" due to its reflection of this world as "an image of something [κόσμον εἰκόνα τινός εἶναι]" (*Timaeus*, 29b-d). The Forms being identical to the Intellect cannot be apprehended fully by the soul given it is directed towards discursive reasoning by nature. This is consistent with Aristotle's description of the soul, which is somewhat distinct from the Intellect and thinking, for the Intellect remains unaffected even when the affections of the soul (thinking and speculating) deteriorate with the body. Discursive thought [διανοεῖσθαι] and affections are not affections of the Intellect but of the soul-body complex, hence "when this vehicle decays, memory and love cease; they were activities not of thought, but of the composite which has perished; thought is, no doubt, something more divine and impassible [διὸ καὶ τούτου φθειρομένου οὔτε μνημονεύει οὔτε φιλεῖ· οὐ γὰρ ἐκείνου ἦν, ἀλλὰ τοῦ κοινοῦ, ὃ ἀπόλωλεν· ὁ δὲ νοῦς ἴσως θειότερόν τι καὶ ἀπαθές ἐστίν]" (*On the Soul*, [4].408b16-29). Now, given that the soul's thinking is not like the 'divine and impassible' Intellect (not prone to the irregularities of the affections), it follows that Aristotle also saw the sciences as somewhat inexact. Gerson explained that this was advanced by the Neoplatonists: "Far more important to the Neoplatonists was Aristotle's evident commitment to a science of the intelligible world distinct from a science of sensibles or physical entities" (Gerson 2017, 69). This is precisely the position that al-Fārābī adopted from the Neoplatonists, for "both Plato and Aristotle concur in the view that a medium serving as a link between sight and its object is essential. However, it is owing to the subtlety of the process in question and the inadequacies of language that the two sages have been led to use the analogy of effluence and affection, which fail nevertheless to describe the process adequately" (Fakhry 1965, 475).

To conclude then, we see that the historical apex of the harmonisation project that began somewhere around the Middle-Platonists had inevitably reached Neoplatonism starting with Plotinus. This culminates in the development of the philosophical enterprise of al-Fārābī, with some carryover to ibn-Sīnā who furthered the Neoplatonic foundation instigated by his predecessor (Fakhry 2004, 133-66).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In the Islamic world, there is also the highly obscure tenth to eleventh century secret society Brethren of Purity إخوان الصفا - who as contemporaries of al-Fārābī and ibn-Sīnā were also heavily influenced by Neoplatonic cosmology. The group, among other distinguishing tendencies, had synthesised Plotinian philosophy with the Aristotelian categories to effectively affirm the "intermediary roles which the Intellect and the Soul played in the creation of the material world" (Netton 1991, 33-52). A potential member of the Brethren of Purity was the little known ibn-Miskawayh who had also synthesised a Platonic moral framework with Aristotelian and Stoic ideals into a "kind of Neoplatonic geometry of morality" (Radez 2019, xi-xii, 78-80).

In the later Medieval Islamic philosophy starting with al-Ghazālī during the mid-eleventh century, a systematic refutation of all Neoplatonic elements of Islamic philosophy had begun (Fakhry 1983, 223-40). This, as is well known, carried over to the Latin philosophers such as Aquinas, where this brand of Aristotelianism predominates. This was mostly based on Arabic translatory imports from the Islamic world that “points to the transmission of Plato’s philosophical doctrines in the works of Averroes and its consequences for the slow turning of Western intellectual interests from Plato to Aristotle” (Hasse 2002, 31). The overwhelming focus on Aristotelian philosophy included the subscription to Aristotle’s ostensible characterisation of Plato’s Forms in a separate and eternal world.<sup>25</sup> Thus, any previously appreciated commonality between Aristotle and Plato is greatly diminished notwithstanding few exceptions - the landmark event taking place in Ficino’s fifteenth-century translation of Plato’s dialogue which allowed for a direct engagement with Plato in the Renaissance (Celenza 2007, 72-96).<sup>26</sup> Prior to Ficino’s efforts, Medieval philosophers had limited engagement with Plato and mostly relied on the suffused Neoplatonic elements in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the Islamic philosophers, as well as the Pseudo-Aristotelian works mentioned earlier. Aside from the brief respite from what Renaissance philosopher Tommaso Campanella deemed an Aristotelian hegemony of the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Aristotelian Medieval Scholasticism view of Plato’s theory of the

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<sup>25</sup> In his essay that covers the Plato’s limited Medieval legacy, Gersh traced the Medieval adoption of the Aristotelian criticism of the Forms back to its earliest Latin sources beginning with Cicero (Gersh 2002, 13-5). Gadamer, however, saw that while the tendency to harmonize Plato and Aristotle was overwhelmingly influential during Ancient times, it can also be seen in the Middle Ages despite the widespread conflict between the schools of the time. This is also related to Augustine who was accepted in the Middle Ages which preserved what Gadamer described as an Augustinian-Platonism with a healthy dose of Aristotelianism (Gadamer 1968, 251-52). Gadamer elsewhere confirmed that the scholarship in his time was heading in the direction of seeing Aristotle as more and more of a Platonist (Gadamer 1985, 242-44).

<sup>26</sup> As Celenza further explained: “The Plato–Aristotle controversy, especially as it manifested itself among Byzantine emigre’s, represented as much a struggle among personalities for patronage and prestige as it did a philosophical conflict... the Plato–Aristotle controversy was in play in and around the environment of the papal court, in Florence, the most important Renaissance Platonist, Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), accomplished the most for the Renaissance study of Platonism, for the most part steering clear of controversy. He provided authoritative Latin translations and commentaries on Plato’s dialogues, wrote a major synthetic work with Platonism as its centerpiece, and through a Europe-wide correspondence network created enthusiasm for his style of Platonism” (Celenza 2007, 81).

Forms became incipient, a view we have aimed to address in this paper as historically unprecedented (Headley 1997, 166). The Forms heretofore remain subjected to characterisations that allowed for the Third Man argument to become axiomatic. It is not until we revisit the historicity of Platonism that this problematic view becomes evident, as recent scholarship has shown.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, with regards to the Third Man argument specifically, Fine had concluded in her masterful analytic study of Aristotle's criticism of the Forms that even when focusing only on the middle dialogues of Plato, it is "not easy to decide how successful Aristotle's criticism is" (Fine 2004, 241). Despite this, Plato's Forms remain read through the Aristotelian lens, a view we have shown to be worthy of reconsideration.

### Conclusion

The Forms is the one major aspect of Plato's writings that have incurred widely varying interpretations with little scholarly consensus. Given that we cannot attribute to Plato a theory of Forms without risking contradiction, we thusly need to determine why a theory of the Forms is commonly associated with Plato. This paper argued that it is dependent on a particular interpretation of Aristotle's critique of the Forms. However, it is not clear that Aristotle was deliberately targeting Plato in his critique, so it is a precarious position to hold. It is clear, however, that Aristotle's major concern was the epistemological application of the Forms which he thought hindered the development of science. Moreover, Aristotle's unmoved mover and the self-thinking Intellect were effectively synthesised with Plato's Forms beginning with Plotinus. This shows that there was significant compatibility to start with. Plato's inconsistent discussion of Forms throughout the dialogues is interdependent with his view of the limitations inherent to writing and language more generally. These aspects of Plato's thought are imperative for understanding the Forms. Further insight is gained by observing the historical interpretations more generally; especially beginning with Aristotle and the Old Academy and onwards to the early Islamic Golden Age. In other words, it is crucial to follow a reductivist approach. This will show that the harmonization of Plato and Aristotle garnered significant support beginning somewhere around the Middle-Platonists

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<sup>27</sup> The subject matter of a Platonic 'revival' in the Renaissance is not without scholarly controversy. Despite the limited access to Plato's dialogues in Latin before Ficino's translations, Plato's ideas nonetheless percolated through secondary sources such as Aristotle, Cicero, Macrobius and Cicero. Due to this peripheral influence, some have argued against a Renaissance revival of Platonism as such (Klibansky 1981, 21-37). However, it is not an unwarranted characterisation given that before Ficino's translations only the *Timaeus* dialogue counts for a direct continuity of the Platonic tradition from late Antiquity to the Renaissance (Corrisas and Del Soldato 2022, 2-4).

in Antiochus and onwards towards the early Islamic Golden Age. While the idea of ‘harmonization’ itself can allude to the notion that there had been a distinction to begin with; this would be lost on Plotinus and al-Fārābī. On the contrary, the more commonly held view for most of the first millennium was that Plato and Aristotle were representatives of a commensurate philosophy.

Thus, an important question surfaces: if Plato did not present a theory of Forms, what was Plato’s goal in discussing the Forms? As we have seen, Aristotle claimed Plato had inherited much from the Pythagoreans and Heraclitus among others. The supposed influence the Pythagorean tradition had on Plato is discussed prominently by thinkers such as Numenius, Iamblichus and Augustine among others, perhaps indicative of Plato’s membership (or at least close ties) with the Pythagorean order. In Aristotle’s view, the Pythagoreans held an account of the Good well before Plato and so Plato’s lecture *On the Good* owed some insight to the Pythagoreans. To further delineate its relation to the Forms and the role that Pythagoreanism played in Plato’s thought would be the subject matter of another paper, but it does need to be considered however briefly. This includes the Egyptian influence on Plato’s thought, particularly observable in the Egyptian myths interspersed throughout the dialogues. As some have pointed out, all “ancient authorities agree that Plato visited Egypt where his chief residence was at Heliopolis” (Hanrahan 1961, 38). Again, this would suggest that Plato was likely artistically propagating the Forms through dialogues using the knowledge he encountered throughout his life by discussing.

On a final note, it is important to recognise the effects that the Neoplatonic treatises had on the early Islamic philosophers and their acceptance of the harmony between Plato and Aristotle. While it is true that Islamic philosophers were under the impression that the so-called *Theology of Aristotle* and *Book of Causes* were Aristotelian treatises, Neoplatonic works generally contained significant elements of Aristotelian thought. One would also have to consider why the treatises were circulated under the guise of Aristotle. Any distinction between the two philosophers was commonly accepted to have been nothing more than superficial even before the Islamic philosophers, a difference in exposition at most. Furthermore, a close reader of Plotinus’ *Enneads* and Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* would find it difficult to ignore its Aristotelian elements. This is not without scholarly support, as we see in Gerson who more recently challenged the pejorative label ‘Neoplatonism’ in his *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, choosing to abolish the label altogether. Gerson sought to challenge the supposed Platonic dogmatism associated with Neoplatonism, a position that contemporary scholarship is progressively showing to be untenable. The Neoplatonists viewed Aristotle as a crucial member of their σχολή and numerous commentaries on Aristotle were

conducted as part of the teaching curriculum starting with Porphyry. Thus, any diligent study of the historical reception of Aristotle's interpretation of the Forms will challenge the idea that Plato's Forms can be encapsulated in theory or concept.

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