The philosophers and theologians that investigate things that are beyond nature, or that cannot be seen, say a thousand insanities: because men are in fact in the dark regarding such matters, and this questioning serves more to exercise the intellect than to find truth.

Francesco Guicciardini

1. IS THERE A PLATO’S “THEORY OF IDEAS”? 

In the previous chapter I have sought to demonstrate that the first section of the Parmenides provides a kind of ‘transcendental dialectic’ in the Kantian sense of the term, which is to say: an attempt to illustrate what unsolvable (as well as philosophically rather uninteresting) difficulties emerge if problems are formulated in the wrong way. From this point of view, I perfectly agree with the conclusions reached by Francisco Gonzalez, who rejects the idea that the object of the criticism offered in the Parmenides might be the theory of the ideas found in Plato’s mature dialogues, arguing instead that “the aim of the dialogue is to bring into focus the problems which [...] any attempt to formulate a theory of the ideas is bound to run into”.¹ One of the elements in support of this hypothesis is the fact that Plato’s dialogues not only provide no genuine answer to the many questions raised with regard to the ideas, but do not even betray any inclination on the author’s part to provide such answer.² In point of fact, the only text in which these questions are explicitly formulated is precisely the Parmenides, which is to say the one dialogue that purposefully leaves these questions open, as if to show that they cannot be answered. In the light of these facts, it seems as though it is high time for the critical enquiry on these issues to radically change its focus: instead of wasting so much intellectual energy in an attempt to clarify problems which Plato consciously chose not to solve, we should seriously consider the reasons for his choice.³

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² See ibid., p. 35.
³ See ibid., p. 51.
At this point, however, a significant divergence emerges between my own approach and that of Gonzalez. Gonzalez believes that the impossibility of formulating a doctrine of the ideas in the strong sense depends on the fact that according to Plato the ideas are only known in an intuitive and non-propositional way, in a context in which – as Gail Fine also suggests – one cannot speak of any genuine separation of the ideas from the sensible world.⁴ By contrast, I believe that this impossibility derives precisely from the fact that a theory of the ideas in the strong sense could only be based on the direct intuition of them, something that is unavailable to man in his mortal state, since the ideas are actually separate from sensible reality, which they transcend (and this implies both a realist interpretation of the theory of recollection and an acknowledgement of the fact that only the disembodied soul enjoys direct and full knowledge of the ideas, as evidenced in the Phaedo and Phaedrus). In the previous chapter – and partly in other works as well – I have sought to demonstrate the above hypothesis through an analysis of Platonic texts, and especially the Parmenides, not without considering some evidence from Aristotle. It is on the latter that I here wish to focus, in order to show in greater detail that Aristotle provides ample proof in support of the hypothesis under consideration.

I shall begin my enquiry by making what is certainly a rather banal observation, but one which proves important when – as is sometimes the case – it is not taken into account. Aristotle’s testimony on Plato may be divided into three different sets of passages, albeit not always fitting precisely:

1) passages in which Aristotle explicitly attributes something to Plato and/or the Platonists;
2) passages in which a thesis upheld by Plato and/or the Platonists can be inferred from Aristotle himself, who adds to the information he has something he believes to be logically implied by his interlocutors’ position (in some cases warning his listener/reader that this is what he is doing);
3) passages in which Aristotle only formulates criticisms of theses attributed to Plato and/or the Platonists by adopting the methods listed under 1) and 2).

Now, it is obvious that anyone who wishes to turn to Aristotle’s testimony in order to learn what Plato and/or the Platonists may or may not have said or done can legitimately make use – not without much caution – only of type 1) passages. This, then, is the criterion I shall adopt for my enquiry.

⁴ See Fine (2003).
2. IMITATION AND PARTICIPATION

The first passage I shall examine consists in some famous lines from Ch. 6 of *Metaph.* A (987b9–14):

A1

The plurality of things which bear the same name⁵ as the forms exist by participation in them. And participation he took over with a mere change of name. For the Pythagoreans had said that entities existed by imitation of the numbers, whereas Plato said that it was by participation, changing the name. However, as to what this “participation” or “imitation” may be, they left this an open question (ἀφείσαν ἐν κοινῷ ζητεῖν). (own transl.)

Commentators disagree on how to translate the expression ἀφείσαν ἐν κοινῷ ζητεῖν in line b14. The most common reading – accepted by Ross, Tricot and Viano, among others – is that the sentence means “they left before the world of discussion,” i.e. that the Pythagoreans and Plato left it up to others to investigate the problems they did not personally discuss. The obvious implication of this reading is that both the Pythagoreans and Plato did not undertake any investigation of the relations of participation between the ideas and sensible objects.⁷ In this sense, an even stronger meaning may be assigned to the verb ἀφείσαν, as describing not so much the act of ‘leaving the investigation (up to others)’ as that of simply ‘neglecting, avoiding’ it. Indeed, Aristotle frequently⁸ uses the verb ἀφείναι in the imperative form (ἀφείσθω, or more rarely the plural ἀφείσθωσαν) precisely to signal that he will avoid investigating a given problem (because it is not crucial, because it has already been discussed, because there is no need to discuss it at the moment, etc.). A pertinent example may be found again in book Α of *Metaphysics* (985b20), where Aristotle writes that with regard to motion Democritus – more or less like all other philosophers – ῥαθύμως ἀφείσαν (“has carelessly refrained” – naturally, “from investigating”). It is quite true that when

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⁵ I read here, with Schwegler and Bonitz contra Ross, τῶν συνωνύμων instead of ὅμώνυμα.
⁶ Ross (1924) p. 166.
⁷ Cherniss notes: “The present sentence, as it stands, means that neither Pythagoreans nor Plato gave any explanation of μίμησις or μέθεξις from which one could determine what the nature of the relationship between ideas and phenomena might be” (Cherniss 1962, p. 180, n. 103). Here we also find a convincing explanation for the reason why extending the genitive τῶν εἰδῶν to include the Pythagoreans as well is not a problem.
⁸ See EE 1219b31; EN 1096a10, 1106b20, 1155b8, 1159b23, 1166a34, 1171a34, 1175a19; De gen. et corr. 325b36, 327b31; De int. 17a5; Parv. nat. 467b18; Metaph. 985b20, 990a33, 1027b17, 1028a3, 1034b34, 1046a7; Phys. 223b27; Pol. 1286a5, 1289b12, 1300b36, 1331b22.
the verb is followed by the infinitive it usually acquires the meaning of “allow” or “let”. One example of this use is in *Metaph. A*, 107a17, where Aristotle writes with reference to the need for the heavenly spheres to amount to a specific number: “we leave to more rigorous thinkers that ourselves the proof of all this (ἀφεῖσθω τοῖς ἰσχθροτέροις λέγειν)”. In this passage, however, we find a dative referring to the people to whom the task is left; it is a matter, then, of seeing whether this dative might be replaced by the expression ἐν κοινῷ from 987b14 without affecting the meaning of the verb.

Be that as it may, we are only dealing with nuances here, since in both cases (whether we take ἀφεῖσαν ἐν κοινῷ ζητεῖν to mean ‘neglect to investigate’ or ‘leave the investigation up to others’), what the sentence means is that neither the Pythagoreans nor Plato have investigated the issues of imitation and participation. We get a very different picture if we follow the suggestion made by D.J. Allan several years ago, according to which the sentence means that the question “was set aside for joint study”. In other words, Aristotle seems to have in mind not a mere abandonment of the question, but some definite action or pronouncement, such as an authoritative publication in which the issue was stated and the discussion declared open.

According to Allan, the publication in question would be the *Parmenides*. Aristotle’s account, therefore, would show that Plato conceived the *Parmenides* “as a statement of difficulties concerning the participation of things in the Ideas, which readers of the dialogue were invited to discuss among themselves.” These readers, in turn, would be precisely the Pythagoreans and the members of the Academy, whom Plato would have encouraged to conduct shared research. In this respect, Allan endeavours to show that in the case under consideration the term κοινός does not refer to the public at large, as is often the case with Aristotle.

The interpretation I have just outlined, however, strikes me as being rather implausible. Let us leave aside the impression that in this way one is attributing to Plato and Aristotle a work method closely reminiscent of the sort of seminars commonly held in our universities or colleges (whereas we know very little of the kind of work actually conducted within the Academy). What is more problematic is the fact that according to Allan the Pythagoreans that Aristotle would be referring to here would be fellow students and colleagues of Plato and his disciples,

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., p. 135.
engaged in common research with them. If the Pythagoreans and Plato are often discussed together (and not only in A), this is because according to Aristotle they state similar things, as may also be inferred from the passage in question: the Pythagoreans (who evidently must have identified principles comparable to the Platonic ones) describe the relation between principle and principled as mimesis, whereas Plato uses the term participation to describe the same thing. There is nothing to suggest that Aristotle here wishes to refer to the Pythagoreans, Plato and the Academics as a genuine community of researchers interested in coming up with solutions to shared problems. Besides, the grouping of different opinions according to their similarities is typical of the whole ‘historiographical’ excursus of A (we thus read, for instance, that a certain number of pre-Socratic philosophers – who obviously were not working together – had already discovered two of the causes Aristotle identifies in his Physics).¹³ Aristotle, in other words, is here providing an abstract evaluation of various views, resorting to all the ‘unhistorical’ parallels which this operation calls for. Among these we also find an assimilation of the Pythagoreans’ theses to those of Plato, which in Aristotle’s opinion corresponds to a common failure to adequately address what he regards as the crucial questions implied by these views.

As Allan explains from the very opening of his article, his suggestion is prompted by the wish to solve the difficult problem of why Aristotle never mentions the Parmenides when presenting and criticising the doctrine of the ideas. This difficulty would be further aggravated by the very passage we are now examining, if the latter really meant that Plato never investigated the issue of participation: “What about the Parmenides?”, one might object. But in fact, Aristotle might have reasonably maintained that the Parmenides does not constitute a genuine research (ζήτεσις) on the problem of participation, since a ζήτεσις of this sort implies a conscious intention to regard the questions it addresses as being relevant, and hence a commitment to pin down an acceptable answer to them. But as Gonzalez has rightly noted, no traces of this are to be found in the Parmenides.¹⁴ Aristotle, therefore, can quite legitimately complain – at least,

¹³ 985a10–14.

¹⁴ A reference to the Parmenides is also to be found in Alexander: ταύτην δὲ τὴν μέθεξιν τε καὶ μίμησιν τί ἐστι καὶ πῶς γίνεται, οὔτε τῶν Πυθαγορικῶν τις οὔτε Πλάτων ἀπέδοσαν, ἀλλ’ εἶσαν ἐν κοινῷ ζητεῖσθαι πῶς γίνεται καὶ τίνα τρόπον. οὕτε δὲ τούτῳ καὶ ὑπὸ Πλάτωνος ἐν τῷ Παρμενίδῃ δελούσαι (52.3–6). Still, it is not clear how the last sentence is to be understood. Dooley (1979, p. 79) translates “although this point does seem to be clarified by Plato in the Parmenides”, pointing to Parm. 130efff. as a possible reference. In such a way, Dooley stresses the initial δὲ (‘although’), but does not translate the καὶ which follows shortly afterwards. Besides, while it cannot be denied of course that Plato discusses participation in the Parmenides, it cannot be argued that he has ‘clarified’ πῶς γίνεται
according to his own perspective – about a lack of research, even given that Plato wrote the Parmenides: for in Aristotle’s eyes this dialogue does not carry enough weight to show that Plato truly addressed the issues of participation and imitation (just as Democritus cannot be said to have truly explored the nature of motion).\footnote{Allan’s idea, according to which – in the case of the testimony on Democritus – the negative meaning of the verb ἀφίημι depends entirely on the adverb ῥαθύμως (op. cit., p. 134) is too ambitious: as we have seen above, this verb means “to neglect” in many passages of Aristotle’s work, even when taken alone.}

As we shall now see, the explanation I have suggested finds further confirmation in other passages by Aristotle. However, I should note right from the start that the fact that Aristotle exposes Plato’s silence on certain matters as a failure on his part cannot be taken as counter-evidence. Aristotle has all the right to regard Plato’s choice not to address certain problems as something quite unjustifiable from a philosophical perspective; but, from a historiographical perspective, we cannot simply consider a weakness of Plato’s philosophy anything which Aristotle seems to view as such. If Aristotle informs us, as a matter of fact, that Plato did not investigate participation and imitation, in order to understand Plato’s thought we must search for the reasons 
Plato might have had to behave in such a way, rather than passively accept those provided by Aristotle. Not to do so is to go against the methodological suggestions presented at the beginning of this article: it means using Aristotle’s criticism of Plato as a useful source for reconstructing the latter’s thought.

3. POETIC METAPHORS

As it has just been anticipated, the ‘factual’ information which may be gleaned from A1 finds confirmation in other sections of Aristotle’s Metaphysics. Let us consider the two following passages, for instance:

καὶ τίνα τρόπον (“how and in what way it happens”). Finally, this claim seems to contrast with the way in which the translator understands the immediately preceding sentence in Alexander’s commentary, namely as expressing Plato’s intention to make the study of this matter a topic of shared research. It therefore seems more reasonable to me to take the verb δελοῦσαι to mean ‘be made known’. Hence, I would suggest the following translation: “It seems to me that this [i.e. Plato’s choice not to provide any solutions concerning the πῶς γίνεται καὶ τίνα τρόπον of participation] is also made known by Plato in the Parmenides”. This too would only suggest that according to Alexander Plato refrained from personally discussing certain matters – not, as Allan would have it, that he positively sought to entrust Pythagoreans and Academics with the task of doing so. It is further worth noting that Alexander here clearly distinguishes between Plato and the Pythagoreans, treating them separately.
And to say that they [sc. the forms] are paradigms and that other things participate in them is to say nothing (κενολογεῖν) and to give poetic metaphors. (A, 991a20–22 = M, 1079b24–26) (transl. Lawson-Tancred)

For participation, as we said before, is nothing ... (we are speaking nonsense = διὰ κενῆς λέγομεν). (A, 992a28–29) (transl. Lawson-Tancred)

I believe the meaning of the expression κενολογεῖν (and of other variants which likewise refer to emptiness, such as διὰ κενῆς λέγομεν or even just the adverb κενῶς) has been convincingly clarified by Mario Vegetti.¹⁶ The meaning of the expression includes two distinct sub-meanings, which correspond to logical-dialectical argumentation on the one hand and to reasoning based on metaphors on the other. Now, since both these methods are less rigorous than the scientific one, according to Aristotle, it is clear that in many cases the philosopher is using the verb κενολογεῖν to dismiss arguments that are based on a method of explanation unsuited to the phenomenon to be explained (as is frequently the case with Platonist arguments, in his view). Still, this does not imply that κενολογεῖν merely coincides with an incorrect reasoning method that must always be avoided. As again noted by Vegetti, Aristotle himself makes use of this method, when he deems it necessary to adopt more general (and hence broadly acceptable) arguments in order to defend scientific theories apparently marked “by analytical or observational deficiencies”¹⁷ (p. 45). In other words, the truthfulness of a theory here proves to be inversely proportional to its degree of preciseness: the more rigorous a theory, and the more specifically pertinent to the object one wishes to explain, the more likely it is for its truthfulness to be challenged by counterfactual experiences; the more generic a theory, and the more removed from the facts to be explained, the less likely it is for its truthfulness to be challenged. This explains why, in the first instance of the use of κενολογεῖν identified by Vegetti, Aristotle provides an apparently perplexing juxtaposition between the two adverbs λογικῶς and κενῶς (Eth. Eud. 1217b22–23).¹⁸

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¹⁷ “Da insufficienze analitiche o osservative”, p. 45.
¹⁸ As M. Burnyeat has observed with reference to the use of λογικῶς in Metaph. z, 1029b13, in such cases the adverb λογικῶς must be explained on the basis of the third among the various meanings of the term presented by Simplicius in his commentary on Physics (440.19–441.12), namely as describing a method that “proceeds from generalities rather than from principles peculiar and appropriate to the subject” (Burnyeat 2011, pp. 19–20).
totle employs the adverb \textit{λογικῶς} in his polemic against the Platonists, what he is doing is attributing the ineffectiveness (and oddness) of their doctrines to the fact that they are based on an exclusively ‘logical-generical’ approach to problems.

What has been argued so far enables us to elucidate the real meaning of Aristotle’s polemic against Plato and the Platonists in A2 and A3. The Platonists’ thesis that ideas are the ‘causes’ of sensible things operates on the level of \textit{κενολογεῖν}: in itself it might even be true (for it is too general to be refuted), but ultimately it is nothing but empty speech, ineffective from an explanatory point of view. As Aristotle notes in a passage of \textit{De generatione animalium} quoted by Vegetti,\footnote{\textit{Op. cit.}, p. 38.} in order to be more than just empty speech, arguments must set out from principles that are peculiar and appropriate to the object to be explained. Anyone wishing to elucidate the problem which Socrates tackles in the last section of the \textit{Phaedo}, for instance, namely that of finding the causes of generation and corruption, should – according to Aristotle – consider related phenomena such as the specific privation present in given matter, the individual form it will take, the specific substrate in which the process occurs, the particular efficient cause that triggers the movement, etc. By contrast, an explanation seeking to solve the problem by invoking the forms alone will not be an effective one: for while Aristotle too may agree that the universal notion plays a role in generative processes, identifying causes at this level alone means merely indulging in empty speech, without truly explaining the nature of phenomena.\footnote{See \textit{De gen. et corr.} 335b7–24. On the problems in the causes in the \textit{Phaedo} see Trabattoni (2011), \textit{ad loc.} and Trabattoni (2012).}

Plato and the Platonists are therefore confronted with a stringent dilemma: either they confine themselves to stating that the forms are the causes of things, in which case they remain on the level of empty and vague – albeit probably true – explanations; or they investigate this causal connection and seek to identify an intermediate set of peculiar principles between sensible things and forms, in such a way as to actually elucidate the nature and functioning of the causal connection between the two. But what do Plato and the Platonists add to the simple, empty claim that forms and principles are the causes of things? According to Aristotle, practically nothing at all. For they argue that the causal connection between ideas and sensibles takes the form either of participation or imitation. Yet they do not explain what the two terms concretely mean (cf. A1). Hence, their addition, which apparently moves beyond \textit{κενολογεῖν} along the path leading to peculiar principles, actually fails to meet this aim: as Platonists offer no further explanation, their argument always remains on the level of \textit{κενολογεῖν}. The only
difference is that a transition has been made – to again use Vegetti’s useful classification – from logical-dialectical κενολογεῖν to the kind of κενολογεῖν that expresses itself through metaphors: in their attempt to add an explanation, Plato and the Platonists find no better solution than to employ poetical metaphors, which according to Aristotle are as generic as the statements of principle they are meant to define.²¹

Once again, my interest lies not in evaluating how pertinent this criticism may be, but in examining Aristotle’s account in search of informations as factual as possible (that is, informations which can reveal what Plato and the Platonists were actually doing). If taken as it stands, Aristotle’s account informs us that in order to clarify the relation between the forms and sensible objects, Plato has spoken of paradigms and participation, but has done so by making only metaphorical use of these terms. Unlike in the case of certain pre-Socratic doctrines – such as those of Empedocles and Anaxagoras – which are criticised in the first two books of Physics, Aristotle here does not suggest that he is discussing a well-defined doctrine based of specific principles, albeit a fallacious one. Rather, he suggests that the view held by Plato and the Platonists cannot even be considered an explanatory theory providing specific explanations whose truthfulness is worthy of evaluation, since this view is drastically limited to the logical-dialectical, or at most metaphorical, level of κενολογεῖν – as is shown by the fact that the charge of engaging in ‘empty speech’ is chiefly directed precisely against these philosophers. All Aristotle can argue, then, is that they have explained nothing at all.

4. ACCORDING TO ARISTOTLE, PLATO HAS NO “THEORY” OF IDEAS

That said, if our intention now is to turn to Aristotle in order to understand what Plato may have done or said, we must put the criticism of the former aside and enquire what interpretation of the ‘Platonic doctrine of the ideas’ may be compatible with the ‘facts’ we come to know through Aristotle’s account. We are thus faced with two opposite hypotheses: 1) the theory of the ideas is inevitably faulty, for it has no means of elucidating the causal relation between forms and sensible objects, even though this clarification is implied as an integral and crucial aspect of the theory; 2) because of the way in which it is formulate, the theory

²¹ See Top. 139b34–35: πᾶν γάρ ἰσαφές τὸ κατὰ μεταφορὰν λεγόμενον (“all we say through metaphors is inaccurate”). Note that terms such as σαφές, σαφώς, σαφένεια – represent precisely the explanatory quality which reasoning conducted λογικῶς κενῶς lacks. See F. Trabattoni (2003), esp. pp. 279–289.
of forms does not go so far as to provide a detailed explanation of the causal relation between forms and sensible objects; this does not make the doctrine faulty, however, since the clarification of this relation is not an integral and crucial aspect of the theory.

If we adopt Aristotle’s perspective, we will be inclined to opt for the first hypothesis. Let us consider, for instance, what the philosopher writes in a passage of Ch. 6 of Book η of *Metaphysics* (1054a36 ff.). Things of the genus of categories, Aristotle explains, derive their unity from themselves, and not from the fact of falling within the genus of being and the one (which – as is widely known – are not genera at all, in Aristotle’s view). Some philosophers (and it is difficult not to think of Plato and the Platonists here) try to solve this difficulty – i.e. that of knowing how categories, or the supreme genera, ‘are’ in being and the one as within genera – as follows:

A4

And it is because of this problem that some philosophers have espoused participation, though this plunges them into difficulties (ἀποροῦσιν) about what the cause of participation is or indeed what participation is anyway. (H, 1045b7–9) (transl. Lawson-Tancred)

The issue investigated by Aristotle is precisely the causal nature of Plato’s forms – what we have been discussing so far. Platonists evidently believe that a thing such as quality (or quantity) is a determined unity on account of the one. They then seek to clarify the nature of this causal relation by invoking the concept of participation. However, they fail to take the next step, which is to explain what ensures the emergence of this relation of participation, and more generally what this relation consists in. Platonists, therefore, according to Aristotle, have a problem (ἀποροῦσιν). So are we to conclude that this is a difficulty which Plato and the Platonists felt they needed to solve, but failed to solve? Or is it a difficulty that they only ought to have solved according to Aristotle?

If we approach the Aristotelian text simply as a piece of historical evidence, the latter prospect seems far more likely. First of all – as previously noted – Aristotle shows that what he is addressing are not false solutions, but rather the lack of any solution; secondly, the very charge of only employing metaphors suggests that the Platonists themselves were aware that it was neither possible nor necessary to say more. Aristotle may not like this – indeed, he certainly does not, since it is precisely for this reason that he regards Plato and the Platonists’ stance as destined to failure. But we are here delving into the field of Aristotle’s motives and moving away from that of the facts he bears witness to. And the facts – as we shall now see by quoting other passages – all point in the same direction.
Let us carry on our enquiry with a rather interesting passage from *Metaph. B* (997b5–12):

A5
While presenting difficulties of various kinds, the most paradoxical thing of all is the statement that there are certain things besides those in this world, and that these are identical to sensible things except that they are eternal, while the latter are perishable. For they say that there is man himself and the horse itself and health itself, but state no more than this (ἄλλο δ’ οὐδέν) – much like those who say that there are gods, but in human form. For these posit nothing but eternal men, whereas they posit the ideas as eternal sensibles. (own transl.)

The reference to Plato and Platonists is obvious in the light of the content of the passage, but it is also further confirmed by what Aristotle writes in the immediately preceding lines. Here Aristotle refers to what he has previously argued (probably in Book Α, chs. 6 and 9) with regard to the way in which ‘we’ say that the forms (τὰ εἴδη) are causes and substances (οὐσίαι). The use of the first person plural, which is also common in Α, leaves no doubts with regard to the identity of the philosophers alluded to here.

In the passage just quoted, Aristotle is clearly indicating what he regards – at least, as far as may be inferred here – as the most serious difficulty faced by the Platonic doctrine of forms. This difficulty springs directly from the procedure which leads Plato and the Platonists to posit the existence of the forms, and from the way in which they consequently describe them. The philosophers in question, Aristotle argues, simply posit the ideas by taking sensible things as their starting point and adding the attribute of eternity as the only feature distinguishing the former from the latter. For these philosophers claim that there exists a man *himself*, a horse *itself* and health *itself*, simply by applying an αὐτό to the sensible objects, without adding anything else (ἄλλο δ’ οὐδέν). This attribute of eternity which Plato and the Platonists add to sensible things in order to produce the ideas is given by the very αὐτό (“itself”) they juxtapose to the terms describing the things in question. The fact that this is indeed what Aristotle believes may be inferred from two other passages from texts in which he criticises Platonic-Academic stances:

A6
There is, they say, something which is good ‘itself’. He thus adds ‘itself’ to the universal [i.e. common] expression. But what could this be, if not eternal and separate? (*Eth. Eud.* 1218A10–12) (own transl.)

The second passage comes from Ch. 16 of *Metaphysics* Book Ζ (1040b 30ff.). Aristotle here reproaches Plato and the Platonists for their failure to identify
the exact nature of the imperishable (ἄφθαρτοι) substances which exist beyond individual and sensible things (παρὰ τὰς καθ’ ἐκαστὰ καὶ αἰσθητάς) The context is thus identical to that of A5. Aristotle does not deny the fact that there exist eternal substances, distinct from sensible ones, but rejects the idea that they may coincide with those identified by Plato and the Platonists. Why? The answer is one we have already heard:

A7

They thus posit them [sc. the ideas] as identical to sensible things in terms of species (for these we know) – man himself and the horse itself – by adding the expression ‘itself’ to the sensible things. (1040b32–34) (own transl.)

According to Aristotle, therefore, Plato and the Platonists believe that they can define the nature of eternal and imperishable things, and the difference between these and sensible things, simply by adding the word αὐτό to the sensible things. Most importantly, as may be inferred from A5, Aristotle claims that this is all they do. What this means is that in Aristotle’s view Plato’s theory of forms amounts to nothing more than an affirmation of the existence of things formally analogous to sensible things, and having the fact of being in themselves (and hence eternal) as their only additional attribute. Therefore, if we stick to Aristotle’s account, we are forced to admit that the theory of forms he attributes to the Platonists is exceedingly poor:

1) with regard to the nature of the ideas, all we can say is that the latter are analogous to sensible things, only with the added attributes of ‘inseity’ and eternity;
2) with regard to the relation between the ideas and sensible things, all we know is that the forms are the cause of things, based on a relation of imitation and participation. In other words, we have nothing more precise than a generic affirmation of the causality of the forms and the poetic-metaphorical expressions which describe this causality in terms of imitation and participation.

We may conclude this analysis, then, by stating that the thesis initially proposed, following Gonzalez’s investigations – and according to which no genuine Platonic theory of the ideas exists – finds ample support in the picture of this ‘doctrine’ as it emerges in Aristotle’s writing.
I now wish to extend my enquiry a little further, since Aristotle’s testimony also provides valuable evidence concerning the reason why no genuine theory of the ideas is to be found in Plato’s writing.

As previously noted, Aristotle accuses Plato and the Platonists of adopting a fallacious procedure for identifying eternal and imperishable substances. This procedure takes sensible reality as its starting point, marks out general characters within it, and then turns these into individual substances separate from sensible things. In Aristotle’s view, this leads to a monstrous and contradictory outcome: for the imperishable substances admitted by Platonists, namely the ideas, are simultaneously endowed with the incompatible characters of universality and individuality/sepærability.²² Now, according to Aristotle it is possible to define, and hence scientifically know, only universal characters, but these are not separate substances.²³ Hence, we are faced with the two following alternatives: 1) if definition and knowledge are possible, this means that their object is a universal notion; 2) if, on the contrary, the object has an individual character, knowledge must be acquired in a different way. In the case of compounds of matter and form, knowledge will be acquired through sense-perception (aisthesis) if the matter is sensible, and through intuition (noesis) if the matter is intelligible (paradigmatic examples of these two cases are the circle of bronze and the mathematical circle). If a compound is neither perceivable by sense-perception nor by intuition, there is no way of knowing whether it exists or not, even though it is possible to know it to some extent by means of the corresponding universal notion (for instance, if I cannot currently perceive a bronze circle, I cannot know whether it exists; yet what I do know is that, if it exists, its shape corresponds to the universal notion of circle).²⁴

This distinction partly also applies to imperishable substances, insofar as some of them are compounds. For there are some imperishable substances, such as the stars, that are comprised of matter and form, and which may be grasped by means of sense-perception. Through sense-perception we can get to know some of their distinguishing features (the fact that they only change in terms of location, move according to a uniform circular motion, etc.). Yet these substances would be what they are – which is to say eternal and imperishable substances endowed

²² Metaph. M, 1086a32–34.
with the aforementioned features – even if they were not perceived, \(^{25}\) since their features are necessarily inherent to their nature and may be inferred through reasoning. This is an important point, since it enables Aristotle to argue that it is possible to know imperishable substances which are not compounds of matter and form, and which therefore escape both sense-perception and intuition: as it is necessary to posit the existence of these substances in order to explain sensible reality, it is possible to get to know them by tracing the reasoning that illustrates this necessity (as Aristotle does in *Phys.* 8 and *Metaph.* A). \(^{26}\)

In the light of this doctrine of Aristotle, it is possible to clearly identify both the shortcomings which he detects in the rival Platonic doctrine and – on the basis of these shortcomings – the features he attributes to it. If the Platonic ideas were universals, it ought to be possible to provide a definition of them. Yet this is not the case. In Ch. 15 of *Metaph.* Z, Aristotle writes: “Nor, then, is it possible to define any form. For the idea, as they say is counted among individual things, and is separable” (1040a8–9, (own transl.). This is confirmed by what Plato and the Platonists do: for none of them ever attempts to define any idea; and if they did, Aristotle’s objections would strike them as being clearly valid. \(^{27}\) 

Aristotle thus maintains that the Platonic ideas cannot be known by means of definition, both as a matter of fact (based on what the Platonists do) and as a matter of principle (for defining the ideas would in any case be impossible). The reason for this is that the Platonists describe the ideas as individual and separate things.

If the forms are such, one might be inclined to believe that they may be known through intuition (*noesis*). Aristotle’s account, however, clearly indicates that the Platonists do not even reach this conclusion. For Plato and the Platonists do not ultimately affirm the existence of the ideas as separate and individual objects by means of intellection – so that the existence of the object is proven by the fact that (and as long as) the ideas are perceived in such a way. On the contrary, Plato and the Platonists posit the existence of the ideas not by perceiving them (either through their senses or the intellect), but simply by combining the characters of sensible reality with the attributes of ‘inseity’ and eternity. The nature of this procedure may successfully be elucidated precisely by considering Aristotle’s account. Plato and the Platonists take sensible reality as their starting point and mark out its universal characters. But since these universal characters are raised to the status of individual and separate substances, the logical invariance typical of universals – for the definition of ‘man’ will not change, for instance,

\(^{25}\) *Metaph.* Z 16, 1040b34–a1.


\(^{27}\) *Metaph.* Z 15, 1040b2–4.
as the time, place and subjects it is applied to change – becomes an ontological feature of the ideas (which thus are made into imperishable and eternal things).

The procedure just illustrated accounts for most of the oddities Aristotle detects in the Platonic doctrine of forms. If the ideas are neither known by means of definition nor grasped through intuition, there would still be the third way of knowing individual substances granted by Aristotle himself, the one pertaining to imperishable things which are not compounds of form and matter (namely the method which infers the existence of given objects and some of their features from something else). Indeed, a degree of similarity is to be found between the two ways of reasoning. Just as Aristotle establishes the existence of the unmoved mover(s), and defines its/their features, through an inferential procedure which sets out from the need to explain some aspects of sensible reality (the eternity of motion and time), in the same way Plato infers the existence of the ideas, and the features they must have, by speculating on some empirical data, which could not be explained without invoking causes of that sort.²⁸ In both cases, moreover, the features of the object inferred that may actually be known are strictly dependent upon the features of the facts on which the inference is based: for if I infer the need for to find a sufficient cause to explain , I will be able to say about anything which is necessary in order for to be the sufficient cause of – and nothing more than that.

It is easy to see, however, that this method (which we may describe as “metaphysical inference”) leads Aristotle and Plato to attain two very different results. While the unmoved mover, just like the forms, is not directly intuited, but is rather inferred through reasoning which sets out from the sensible, according to Aristotle the phenomenon to be explained can qualify the unmoved mover by assigning it a number of features: for it must be a mover, it must be unmoved (in order to account for eternal motion), it must be an act, and it must consist in thought (since thought is the only activity accomplished without matter). On the contrary, since Plato’s ideas are only inferred from the fact that not all reality can be partial and transitory, they only differ from sensible things insofar as they possess the predicates of ‘inseity’ and eternity (whereas beautiful things are always only temporarily and partially beautiful, the idea of beauty must always be beautiful and cannot be anything other than beautiful). Hence, the only way to set down a theory of forms connected to a specific field of enquiry is to draw something specific and positive from the above predicates.

²⁸ See ch. 11. It is interesting to note that in his Commentary on the Parmenides, Proclus explicitly draws this analogy, which he resorts to in order to accuse Aristotle himself of duplicating the reality he wishes to explain (In Parm. 929.18–28).
But as Aristotle scathingly remarks further on in A6, “something which is white for many days is in no respects whiter than a thing which is only white for a day (1218a12–13).” Hence, a person studying the idea of whiteness (= eternal whiteness) is studying exactly the same object as the person who is studying the perceptible colour white (= transitory whiteness). The fact that the ideas are in themselves and eternal, then, does not open up any specifically metaphysical field of investigation as an alternative to research focusing on the physical world: in Aristotelian terms, the metaphysical entities which Plato speaks of do are not enough to identify a ‘first philosophy’ different from and superior to ‘second philosophy’.

It is precisely for the above reasons that, according to Aristotle himself, the Platonic ‘doctrine’ of the ideas is exceedingly poor. For what field of enquiry is open to the particular kind of knowledge which has the forms as its object? Nothing may be achieved through definition, since the ideas are individual and separate, nor through intuition, since the ideas are not intuited, but rather inferred. As for inference, its outcome is limited to the mere affirmation of the existence of entities which serve as a perfect and eternal embodiment of the very same characters that are to be found in an imperfect and intermittent form within sensible reality. Not without reason, then, Aristotle can argue that the procedure adopted by the Platonists resembles that of people who affirm the existence of the gods but believe they have human forms (see A 5). Clearly, these people have no real knowledge of what the gods are, but merely infer their nature by changing the quantity of the human characteristics known to them (as suggested by the expression for “these we know” in A 7). Likewise, Plato and the Platonists infer the nature of the ideas by changing the quantity of sensible determinations. So just as the former individuals, for instance, set out from the fact that men are wise in order to then claim that the gods are omniscient, the latter set out from the fact that in the sensible world there are temporarily beautiful things in order to then claim that the idea of beauty is eternal and imperishable beauty. And just as anthropomorphism cannot provide adequate ground for the acquisition of theological knowledge, likewise the Platonic notion of the ideas fails to establish itself as a genuine doctrine.

6. FROM PLATO’S POINT OF VIEW: PLATO’S CRITICISM OF ARISTOTLE

Switching now from Aristotle’s side to that of Plato, we may note that the Aristotelian representation of the ‘facts’ pertaining to the Platonic ‘doctrine’ of the ideas is essentially faithful and correct. First of all, the use of the pronoun αὐτό and of related expressions as a way of qualifying the ideas is well attested in Plato’s writing. Even the connection which Aristotle draws between
this pronoun and the attributes of imperishability and eternity (which in A 6 is explicitly presented as Aristotle’s own inference) fully corresponds to the usual way in which Plato speaks of the ideas. According to Plato, the ideas are indeed things which “are ever the same and in the same state” (ὡσαύτως ἀεὶ ἔχει κατὰ ταυτά).

Moreover, it is also true that Plato adds nothing more to this, and in particular that he does not attempt to clearly elucidate the nature of the causal relation between the ideas and things. Finally, Aristotle also correctly identifies the reason why Plato cannot add anything more to the few things he states with regard to the forms and the way they operate, namely: the fact that according to Plato the ideas can be known neither by means of definition nor by means of intuition, but only by means of an inference which is too simple and generic to open up any proper field of enquiry.

If this is the case, Platonists will thus be forced to claim λογικῶς καὶ κενῶς that in order to explain sensible reality it is necessary to posit the existence of causes such as the ideas (i.e. things that are absolutely x, y, z, etc.), since a more detailed description of this causal relation would require direct and independent knowledge both of the effect (which we have: cf. again “for these we know” in A7) and of the cause (which instead is not available). With regard to the poetic metaphors as participation and imitation, here too it is easy to understand not only why Plato believes it is necessary to resort to concepts of this sort, but also why he believes that any further specification is impossible. The claim that things participate in the ideas is a metaphor for the fact that the causal relation between the ideas and things is of a genuinely ontological nature; and the claim that they are imitations of the ideas is a poetic image expressing the fact that this causal connection depends on the analogy of attribution which exists between cause

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²⁹ Phaed. 78d2–3. Similar expressions frequently occur in Phaed. 78c–80b. Phrases of this kind, however, are often used – positively to describe intelligible reality and negatively to describe sensible reality – in other dialogues as well. See Crat. 439e, Soph. 248a, 252a, Polit. 269d, Phil. 59c, Resp. 479a, 484b, Tim. 29a.

³⁰ Actually, this might be the only essential element of Plato’s perspective which Aristotle overlooks. For Plato’s dialogues might be taken to suggest that according to the philosopher genuine knowledge of the forms takes precisely the form of intellectual intuition, although Plato usually confines the intuitive vision of the ideas to the place beyond heaven and the time in which the soul is disembodied (Phaedo and Phaedrus), or envisages this vision as the high point in a process of initiation from which Socrates himself is significantly excluded (Symp. 210a). Clearly, Aristotle believed that this metaphysical realism was not to be taken seriously, or at any rate that it was marred by the substantial unreliability of mythical-metaphorical procedures.

³¹ The hypothesis according to which the ideas only exist in thought is explicitly ruled out by Parmenides in the dialogue named after him (132b–133a).
and caused: if it is necessary to argue that sensible beauty is caused by something else, then the latter must possess the attribute of which it is the cause to a perfect degree (self-predication).

According to both Aristotle and Plato, then, the ‘doctrine’ of the ideas ultimately boils down to a few generic claims, which are only corrected by obscure poetic metaphors. Still, this should not be taken to suggest that Plato’s philosophical project is a failure (or that Aristotle’s criticism of Plato is to be regarded as pertinent from Plato’s own point of view). Nor should we believe, by contrast, that Plato’s philosophy may only be defended by proving that Aristotle’s criticism is unjustified, and by showing in what way – and in what texts – Plato addresses problems that according to Aristotle he has left unsolved. For to do so means defending Plato’s position by setting it squarely within the framework of Aristotle’s philosophical paradigm, of the specific questions he raised, and of the kind of solutions he deemed satisfactory. According to Bonitz, for instance, Aristotle’s observation in Metaph. 987b14 that Plato never elucidated the link of participation is unfair, as Plato discusses participation in the Parmenides and causality in the Timaeus. Bonitz then concludes that Aristotle has all the right to regard Plato’s treatment of these issues as inadequate, but cannot claim that Plato simply neglected them. Similar remarks are formulated by Giovanni Reale, who indeed entitles the paragraph with his commentary on 987b9–14 “An unwarranted stance of Aristotle’s vis-à-vis Plato”: Reale notes that Plato discusses not just participation, but also presence and commonality (in the Phaedo), and that he adopts the notion of idea as a paradigm possessing an ontological normativeness which escapes Aristotle. Finally, like Bonitz, Reale points out that Aristotle completely overlooks the “mediating function of the demiurge.”

Actually, the reference to the Parmenides does not seem a pertinent one, since while it is clear that in this dialogue problems connected to participation and the relation between sensibles and ideas are addressed, it is just as clear that these problems are not solved. As already stated, I agree with Gonzalez that this is an intentional omission; but even if it were not, Aristotle would de facto be right in arguing that the discussion provided in the Parmenides does not elucidate any of the difficulties raised by him. As concerns the notions of presence and commonality, moreover, and even more so the paradigmatic function of the forms, the points made by Reale merely confirm Aristotle’s argument: from Aristotle’s perspective, what we have here are only empty (and/or metaphorical) words, at least if they are not accompanied by σαφέστεραι explanations, which

32 Bonitz (1848), p. 91.
is to say explanations directly pertaining to the phenomena to be explained and capable of elucidating the concrete functioning of the causal connection investigated.

All this clearly presupposes a purely Aristotelian notion of philosophy, envisaged primarily as the science of causality, as well as an equally Aristotelian representation of causes and causal explanations. In the light of these, it is not enough to state that the forms are present in things, for instance: for one must also explain just in what way they can be present in them. It is not enough to argue that the forms are paradigms: one must also clarify what the model-copy relation between ideal reality and sensible reality consists in exactly. In other words, Aristotle is quite right to argue that the notions Plato resorts to are confined to a general and metaphorical level, and not further explicated in a way more closely pertaining to phenomena – and hence σαφέστερον – which he deemed essential in order to develop a genuine theory of causes. Much the same can be said about the demiurge. I believe that Cherniss offers a correct reading when he suggests that Aristotle did not regard this notion as a serious one from a philosophical perspective (as is shown by the fact that even in Λ, which contains references to the Timaeus, Aristotle regards as still open the question of what the cause of participation may be): not without good reason, Aristotle must have thought that the action of the demiurge represents an explanation as unscientific and unphilosophical, as the one offered by individuals who believe that the first pages of Genesis provide a proper scientific or philosophical explanation for the constitution of the universe.

I wish to stress once more that these observations should not be seen as detrimental to Plato's philosophy, since there is no reason to believe that Plato harboured a conception of philosophy identical to that of Aristotle. On the contrary, it would be far more correct to maintain that Plato made a conscious choice to embrace metaphysics not as a rigorous science of causes or a broad explanation of their functioning, but rather as a discipline consisting in the formulation of general, metaphorical (or even mythical) statements (see for instance, on support of this hypothesis, Phaedo 100d5–8, where Socrates clearly shows no interest for a detailed explanations of the relationship between ideas and sensible things). This choice on Plato's part would certainly agree with his idea of the nature and purpose of philosophy: for if the aim of philosophy

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35 “Nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of (κοινωνία), or the sharing in (παρουσία), or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful".
is chiefly the Socratic one of increasingly elucidating what goodness, justice and beauty in general consist in, then it is essential to argue that in principle (and hence generally) the absolute and general characters of goodness, justice and beauty truly exist and determine the nature of reality (in a way that is best described through metaphorical expressions). For if these characters did not exist, the minimum prerequisites for investigation would be lacking (and thus we would have to adhere to Protagorean relativism).

Once it has been established that the forms exist, Platonic philosophy – just as Aristotle argues – will no longer have as its object things marked by determinations that differ from those of sensible things; rather, it will investigate justice, beauty and goodness as we experience them. The ‘theory’ of the ideas, however, has the decisive effect of making the philosophical investigation of experience completely different from the investigation undertaken by people who merely seek to identify the different, partial and transient aspects of empirical reality.\footnote{Such are the ‘philodoxes’ whom Socrates talks about in the final section of Book 5 of the \textit{Republic}. See Ch. 8.} For Plato’s investigation has the aim of attaining an increasing degree of generality, based on confidence of the fact that this endeavour is possible precisely because metaphysical inference ensures that absolute determinations (the forms) truly exist and are the causes of relative determinations.

Were we to accept this ‘Platonic’ conception of philosophy, we might even argue that in an ideal eternal present the two philosophers switch roles. Platonic thought may be seen as \textit{ante-litteram} criticism of the Aristotelian project – which can hardly be regarded as having been accomplished, either by Aristotle or by later philosophers – of shifting metaphysics from the field of generic statements, metaphorical explanations and plausible myths to that of genuine science (to the point of turning this project into the chief aim of philosophy). What proves most revealing here is the history of ancient Platonism from Antiochus to Plotinus and the late Neoplatonists, who often pursued the aim of developing a non-metaphorical Platonic metaphysics, either by attempting to elucidate the relation of participation between the ideas and things or by providing a realist interpretation of the myth of the \textit{Timaeus}. Plato, of course, did not regard the \textit{Timaeus} as a myth in the disparaging sense of the term: a metaphorical interpretation of the narrative of the \textit{Timaeus} does not imply (for instance) that the demiurge does not exist; rather, it implies that this figure serves as a metaphorical and generic representation of the divine and providential rule which ensures the order of the cosmos. By contrast, it would be utterly un-Platonic to claim that this principle functions as a cause which meets Aristotle’s ‘scientific’ requirements. With only a few exceptions (e.g. Atticus), the Platonist tradition has largely pursued the above
task, which may be interesting perhaps from a general theoretical perspective, but is ineffective and useless from the point of view of Platonic exegesis (which is ultimately what the Platonists were concerned with).

The greatest efforts in this direction were made by Plotinus, who adopted a whole array of different strategies in the attempt to solve the metaphysical problems which Plato had left \( \varepsilon \nu \kappa \alpha \eta \nu \phi \zeta \nu \tau \varepsilon \iota \nu \) – such as the issue of participation and the presence of the ideas within sensible reality (e.g. VI, 4–5) – with the aim of making up for the omissions we find in the Parmenides and countering Aristotelian objections. Thus in the attempt to defend Plato against Aristotle’s attacks, many ancient Platonists ultimately provided a picture of Plato’s philosophy which is utterly twisted by Aristotle’s theoretical and methodological assumptions and the kind of questions he regarded as crucial.³⁷

The above endeavour led both Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists to develop philosophies that are essentially different from that of Plato. But, of course, the issue of the faithfulness of these philosophers to their master proves largely irrelevant to an evaluation of their doctrines. By contrast, faithfulness to Plato ought to be seen as an essential prerequisite for contemporary historians, whose only aim is to understand Plato’s philosophy. Consequently, historians ought to do away with the kind of Aristotelian assumptions that are so often systematically adopted, and stop regarding the questions which Aristotle considered crucial as being self-evidently relevant according to a Platonic perspective as well.

³⁷ I have briefly outlined the “Aristotelian” drift of Plotinus’ “Platonic” metaphysics in Trabattoni (2013 bis).