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THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN
PLATO'S THEORY
OF
KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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ABSTRACT

There is an apparent conflict in Plato’s epistemology. For Plato, knowledge, philosophy, and even learning have Forms as their objects. Full grasp of Forms is direct, akin to seeing, and we attain it through Recollection, interpreted as an act of intuitive insight. Forms are atomic, and our knowledge of them is correspondingly simple. But philosophical inquiry, or dialectic, is a process in which we reflect on the things we say. The necessary and sufficient condition for completing dialectic, and for knowledge, is the ability to provide a rational account: a complex expression that says, somehow, what a Form is. This suggests that knowledge is discursive, complex, and even holistic. In recent scholarship, interpreters have favored one side or another of this divide, without satisfactorily accounting for both. I provide a new interpretation according to which Plato’s views form a unified theory of knowledge and learning.

I show that the role of a rational account as a condition on knowledge is a result of the role of language in learning. I provide new interpretations of Platonic dialectic, and Plato’s account of learning, the theory of Recollection. These interpretations show that human learning must take place through the development of our facility with language. Learning begins when we begin to think and speak ordinarily, and continues gradually through philosophical inquiry. Dialectic proceeds by reflection on and revision
of the things we say, until we develop a coherent, explanatory theory. Anyone completing dialectic will necessarily develop the ability to provide a rational account.

In dialectic, we study the way a Form appears in the sensible world. In the *Philebus* and *Sophist* Plato introduces a new relation, *association*, according to which Forms are characterized by their appearances together in complex sensible particulars. Our definitions and theories represent the associative relations between one Form and others. But associative relations are not constitutive of the Forms that enter into them. Thus, our definitions and theories do not represent the ontological structure of a Form. Instead, associative relations are the relations we must study in dialectic. Our definitions and theories represent the structure of learning.
For my family,

and especially for my mother.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy has two products. The first is wisdom. The second is a rational account or theory that expresses what we know. This dissertation is about the relationship between knowledge and theory, the products of philosophy.

For Plato, the ability to provide a rational account or logos is a necessary and sufficient condition on knowledge. One cannot be said to know unless one can say and explain what one knows. Yet the objects of knowledge for Plato are not propositions or theories, they are Forms, transcendent essences. Furthermore, the character of our accounts is radically different from that of Forms, or our knowledge of them. Forms are atomic and independent. Our knowledge of Forms is a kind of direct apprehension, likened by Plato to seeing. But our accounts are complex and interrelated; their structure suggests that the being of Forms and our knowledge of them are, perhaps, holistic. Because of this difference it is hard to see why knowledge requires the ability to provide

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1 While I do think that Plato takes a logos to be sufficient for knowledge, it is much more difficult to say how or why this is the case. The sufficiency of a rational account will not be a focus of this dissertation. See the Appendix for a discussion of some of the difficulties concerning the sufficiency of accounts.
an account. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how complex rational accounts succeed in articulating the simple Forms we know. I'll develop this problem in more detail here, and then set out my solution briefly.

I'll begin with the simplicity of Forms. Forms can be seen to have three main roles in Plato's philosophy. They have a metaphysical role as stable principles of Being. They have an epistemological role as stable principles of thought and knowledge. And they have an ethical role as stable moral standards. For our purposes, the simplicity of Forms is based mainly in the first two roles. Forms are causes of Being. Plato notices that sensible particulars are characterized in a large number of ways. Each of us is many things: e.g. human, tall, intelligent, virtuous. A Form represents a single way of being. To be human is to be a single kind of thing, or to be in a single determinate way. The same is true of being virtuous, or just, or tall, or equal, or a triangle. In coming to be any of these things, a particular comes to be characterized in just one way. Put in another way, in coming to be any of these things, a particular comes to be just one kind of thing, and not many. For each property that can characterize a number of particulars, Plato posits a single Form, or essence. The simplicity of Forms reflects the fact that each Form is responsible for just one kind of being. So for instance, Plato thinks of Humanity as a simple Form because he thinks that being Human is a single way of being, distinct from being in any other way.²


³ A question that must be confronted is how the single property of Humanity is related to the other properties which seem to accompany it necessarily. For instance, being human seems to involve, somehow, being an animal. This may indicate that Animality is a constitutive part of the Human essence. In fact, Plato will deny any Form a constitutive role in any other Form. Accordingly, he will say that while
The metaphysical reasons for the simplicity of Forms are closely related to the epistemological ones. Our ability to think and speak about anything, according to Plato, depends on the predication of a determinate property. Thus, Plato thinks we can speak and think of items only by reference to Forms. When we say that something is human, or tall, or a triangle, we do so by predicking the Form for those properties. This brings forward an epistemological reason for the simplicity of Forms. When we predicate humanity, or triangularity, or tallness of an item, Plato thinks that we have predicated just one thing. Our predication may entail or necessitate other predications, e.g. if something is human it must also be animal. Nevertheless, Plato does not think that the entailed predications are included in our predication of the first Form. When we say or think that an individual is human, we have not also said or thought that the person is an animal. One reason for thinking this is that the ability to predicate a property is, in most cases, independent of the ability to predicate any other property in particular. Children are capable of predicking Humanity without being familiar with Animality. Similarly, a person can predicate Triangularity without knowing what an angle is. Having one property in mind does not seem to require that we have any other property in particular in mind. As we shall see, Plato restricts a Form's essence to just what we predicate when we apply the Form's name. Therefore, if Animality is not included in our predication of Humanity, Animality is in no way constitutive of Humanity. In this way, the epistemological independence of Forms gives support to the ontological independence of being an Animal is necessary for being Human, it is not constitutive of being Human. Humans are human strictly by participating in Humanity. I'll discuss the reasons for this in Chapter Five.

4 This is not an uncontroversial position. Considerations of this sort are at work in modern accounts of Conceptual Atomism. See, e.g., J. Fodor, Concepts. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)
and simplicity of Forms. The simplicity of a Form is a result of each Form's being a single essence — a single way to be something, and a single way to be thought of and understood.

Plato describes knowledge of Forms as a kind of direct apprehension. In part this is because of the simplicity of Forms. Were Forms complex, we could grasp them by analysis into their component parts. But a truly simple entity, it seems, can only be grasped whole or not at all. Plato likens our grasp of Forms to the faculty of sight. By this, he indicates that full apprehension of Forms is a direct, unmediated relationship between a soul and a Form. But the ability to provide a rational account is something quite different. It is a discursive ability, a facility with statements, elucidations, and explanation. Given that knowledge and the ability to provide a rational account are distinct, why think that the latter is necessary for the former? In fact, why think that there is any link between them at all?

This problem is made more acute if we consider the character of rational accounts in Plato. The requirement of a logos has its origins in the Socratic elenchus and develops, without fundamental revision, throughout Plato's corpus. In the early Socratic dialogues, Socrates engages his fellow Athenians in conversation about a number of important moral topics. In many cases, Socrates' interlocutor presumes knowledge of the topic at

5 Most famously at Republic 507b ff., but the image is used in the Symposium and Phaedrus as well.

6 In Metaphysics 9.10 Aristotle addresses our apprehension of simples in a similar way, likening it to touching, 1051b 17 ff..

7 I assume a standard dating of Plato's dialogues throughout this dissertation. On such a dating, Plato's dialogues fall roughly into three groups: 1) early or Socratic dialogues such as Apology, Euthyphro, Crito, Laches, Charmides, Lysis, Ion, Gorgias; 2) middle period dialogues such as Phaedo, Republic, Symposium; and 3) late or critical period dialogues such as Parmenides, Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus, and the Laws. The Meno is frequently treated as a transitional dialogue between the early and

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hand. Socrates asks his interlocutor to provide an account or definition of the subject of his knowledge. This request comes in the form of a *ti esti* or "What is F?" question, where F is the name of the moral property at issue. The answer to this question is a definition that says of the property, *what it is*. It must specify the essence of the property, which Socrates calls the *ousia* in the *Euthyphro*. When the interlocutor fails to provide an account at all, or fails to provide one that is consistent with the many other things he says about the property and its bearers, he is said not to have knowledge.

Two features of this practice contribute to the problem. The first is that Socrates expects a person who knows to be able to provide a definition of the essence of the subject at hand. The definition must articulate the feature common to all and only the items we call by the same name, and responsible for their bearing the property. The definition that answers the *ti esti* question is a *logos* in the central sense. But this can't be all there is to providing a *logos*, because anybody can be taught to pronounce the correct definition. Thus, the second part of being able to provide an account is being able to defend one's definition. Defending an account consists in showing that it coheres with the many other things one says about the property and its bearers. So for instance, Euthyphro's view of Piety is convicted on the grounds that it does not cohere with his views about the gods. The defense of an account consists in showing that it coheres with

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middle period. The *Phaedrus* is thought of as a later middle period dialogue, due mostly to its introduction of the method of Collection and Division. On this standard dating, my treatment of the dialogues in this dissertation proceeds chronologically. However, I do not wish to make claims about developments or changes in Plato's doctrines through time. And I do not intend to forward or rely in any essential way on claims about the dating of the dialogues.

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8 *Euthyphro* 11a8.

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a wide range of other claims we make, ranging over a diverse number of subjects. These other statements, and the defense as a whole, constitute a logos in an extended sense.

The two parts of providing a logos persist and develop throughout Plato’s writings. Plato’s dialectical method emphasizes the role of definitions, and explores their relationship to the statements by which we defend it.® As we will see in Chapter Two, the structure of dialectic in the Meno is one in which we develop theories, complex bodies of statements that relate a number of properties in systematic ways. These theories are accounts in the second, extended sense described above. Furthermore, the nature of the coherence between our definition and our theory is deepened as well. The defense of our definition consists not just in showing its consistency with the theory, but in showing its ability to explain the diverse phenomena described in the theory.

Plato’s late period method crystallizes this view further. The method of Collection and Division, the centerpiece of Plato’s later dialectical method provides more specific details about the structure of our theories. In this method, Plato describes how our theories describe hierarchical fields of Forms, like biological taxonomies. In the Philebus, Socrates claims that the construction of such taxonomies is the way humans have gained any expertise they have. The creation of systematic, interrelated theoretical structures is for Plato a necessary feature of human knowledge and learning. At the center of these taxonomic structures are definitions that specify the essences of Forms.

In two ways, the requirement of an account ties our knowledge of one Form to our knowledge of others. The first can be seen in the central logos or definition. In order to

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® See also Republic 534b-c.
say what a Form is, we must give a definition that articulates a Form’s essence in terms of other Forms. Merely to provide another name for the Form would be (pun not intended) uninformative. A definition must provide some kind of analysis, though the exact nature of this analysis is still unclear.\(^{10}\) We cannot say what a Form is without reference to other Forms. Second, the defense of our definition requires that we systematically relate the Form we have defined to a wide range of other properties that constitute a field. The fact that our definition is defended by reference to theory, a logos in the second sense above, requires that we have knowledge of the other Forms in the theory. In fact, Plato seems to say in the Philebus that we cannot know any Form within a field without knowing all the other Forms in that field.\(^{11}\)

The character of a rational account is complex and holistic. Forms are expressed in terms of other Forms, and by reference to a field of related Forms which must be grasped together or not at all. Recall the description of the simplicity of Forms, though. Each Form is what it is independently of any other entity. Forms are non composite; they have no parts, not even other Forms. Furthermore, we grasp each Form directly, such that our knowledge of one Form is a relation between our soul and just that Form. Strictly speaking, knowledge of one Form does not involve knowledge of any other Form. The simple and atomic character of Forms and our knowledge of them appears to

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\(^{10}\) Plato does face the paradox of analysis. On one hand, it is a requirement on a definition that it say of the definiendum what it is, where the satisfaction of this criterion requires that the definiens signify the same thing as the definiendum. At the same time, the definition must be informative, such that the definiens must differ in content, somehow, from the definiendum.

\(^{11}\) Philebus, 17c ff.
be in direct contradiction with the complex and holistic character of our accounts. But these accounts are supposed to express our knowledge of Forms. And they are supposed to do that by saying what the Forms are.

We can now restate the problem in particularly trenchant form: Why would the direct apprehension of a simple, independent essence require the ability to provide a complex definition in which the Form’s essence is articulated by reference to other Forms, and defended by reference to a theory that describes an interrelated field of Forms? A rational account is supposed to say what a Form is. But what a Form is, is its essence, which is simple and independent of other Forms. A definition is a complex expression, composed of the names of other Forms. Thus, a second question emerges: How does a complex expression composed of the names of several Forms signify the simple essence of an entirely distinct and independent Form?

We cannot resolve this dilemma by taking Plato to abandon either of the commitments that generate the problem. Plato is committed to simple, independent essences as the objects of knowledge. And he is committed to the view that knowledge requires the ability to provide a rational account. We cannot, I believe, give up either and remain true to Plato’s philosophical program.12 It is the goal of this dissertation to show that we can retain both the simple, atomic character of Forms and the complex, holistic character of rational accounts by answering the two questions above. To do this, we must give up the notion that our complex accounts represent the ontological structure of a

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Form's essence. Similarly, we must abandon the notion that our accounts represent the structure of knowledge. Instead, I will show that the structure of our rational accounts represents the structure of learning. If we wish to understand why a rational account is necessary for knowledge, and how a rational account signifies the essence of a Form, we must examine how we learn, and the role of language in that process.

For Plato, human rationality has a single goal: knowledge, the direct apprehension of Forms. This is because the direct apprehension of Forms is the best state of the soul. When located in a body, though, the influx of sensation from the changing sensible world impedes the soul's efforts to apprehend Forms. If we are to apprehend Forms in this life, we must do so through the data of the sensible world. Learning consists in any improvement in our grasp of Forms. All learning, for this reason, is described by Plato as the Recollection of Forms.

On my view, Recollection takes place in two primary steps. The first is a step in which we acquire the ability to recognize a Form when it appears before us in the sensible world. This step of learning sustains our ability to predicate properties in ordinary speech and thought. Thus, Recollection reaches back all the way to the very inception of speech and thought. According to Plato, it is only because we Recollect that we can speak and think at all. The second step of Recollection is a process in which we reflect on the appearances of a Form in the sensible world, its participants, and its regular relations to other Forms, in order to grasp its essence fully. This process is dialectic, or philosophy. The phenomena of the sensible world are presented to us in the things we tend to say. For this reason, dialectic is also a process of reflection on and revision of the things we say in our ordinary discourse. In dialectic, we seek a definition that specifies
the essence, and explains the many other things we say about that essence and its bearers. It is by developing a *logos*, that is by developing a definition and a theory, that we gradually improve our grasp of essence. For this reason, anyone who acquires knowledge in this life, will also possess the ability to provide a rational account. Human learning and language are intertwined throughout the learning process, from the inception of speech and thought, through the gradual learning of philosophy, to knowledge. The necessity of a rational account for knowledge is a result of the role of language in human learning, from beginning to end.

In dialectic we study the relations between one Form and other Forms. In our definitions and theories, we articulate one Form's essence by reference to a central set of these relations. But the relations between Forms are not internal to, or constitutive of their essences. Instead, these relations result from the appearance of Forms in the complex sensible world. For this reason, our definitions and theories do not represent the ontological structure of a Form. Nor do they represent the structure of our knowledge of a Form. The complexity of our definitions and theories represents the complexity of the sensible world. It is only by studying a Form's appearance in these complex relations that we come to knowledge. Thus, the structure of our rational accounts represents the structure of learning.
Precis of Chapters:

Chapter 2: Dialectic, Meno's Paradox, and Recollection in the Meno

The Meno introduces dialectic as Plato's philosophical method, and confronts the nature of the learning philosophy brings. Chapter Two is an interpretation of Plato's view of philosophical learning and knowledge based in an account of his philosophical method.

I begin by describing the endpoints of dialectic. The beginning and end of dialectic are described in the Meno in two applications of a restriction on answers given in dialectical exchange. This restriction, which I call the Dialectical Requirement or DR, requires that our accounts employ only terms known to our interlocutors. But the two applications of the DR enforce different standards of knowledge, which correspond to the endpoints of dialectic. The beginning of dialectic requires only that we have linguistic competence with the name of the property we wish to investigate. Linguistic competence demonstrates that we are familiar with the property and its bearers in an ordinary sense. The end of dialectic requires that we are able to provide a rational account, or definition of the property. This definition is uniquely correct for all inquirers and obeys rules of epistemological priority which reflect the arrangement of essences into structured fields. Dialectical progress is made by the process of proposing and testing accounts. We test our accounts against the things we tend to say. In the end, our account must be consistent with and explanatory of the phenomena described in our ordinary statements.

Meno's paradox arises because, on its surface, dialectic is unguided. Because dialectic pursues consistency between our accounts and ordinary statements, and because consistency can be achieved by an indefinite number of theoretical structures, dialectical
procedure could lead us to any one of innumerable theories. We choose the correct theory in virtue of recognizing its genuine explanatory power. But this just raises the question how we are capable of distinguishing a genuinely explanatory definition and theory from other non-explanatory candidates.

Enter the theory of Recollection. We learn in dialectic by recognizing when an essence genuinely explains the phenomena of our ordinary statements. And we can do this only by dint of two rational faculties. One is the ability to apprehend essences, which explain the shared being of many sensible particulars. The second is the ability to perceive relations between essences, which enables us to explain lawlike relations between properties. A new interpretation of Socrates’ argument for recollection – the geometrical inquiry with Meno’s slave – shows that this inquiry represents the structure and learning of dialectic. By reflecting on our statements we improve our grasp on Forms and their relations, we recollect. At the same time, we improve our statements until they form a coherent, explanatory theory.

Chapter 3: Linguistic Competence and Recollection in the Phaedo

Plato argues for Recollection in a second place, the Phaedo. But here the emphasis is on a different stage of human learning. Whereas the argument in the Meno concerns the learning we undergo in philosophy, the Phaedo concerns the learning that enables us to engage in ordinary speech and thought. While the Meno presents recollection as a process that brings us to knowledge, the Phaedo presents recollection as the inception of thought and learning.
This view requires a careful reading of the argument. At the heart of this reading is a distinction between two mental activities at work in the argument. The first mental activity is the act of having a Form in mind in response to perceptual experience. This is Recollection proper. The second mental activity is the act of comparing sensibles to Forms, and seeing that sensibles are deficient compared to Forms. For a number of reasons, this second activity is often thought to be part of or necessarily coincident with the first. And since the comparison of sensibles to Forms is a fairly sophisticated philosophical act, some interpreters have concluded that only philosophers recollect. Such a conclusion would bar Recollection from explaining ordinary human speech and thought. I show that the comparison of sensibles to Forms is not a necessary part of recollecting at all. Instead it is the philosophical reflection that a philosopher must perform in order to understand Recollection. The act of calling a Form to mind from perceptual experience requires explanation. The comparison of sensibles to Forms is the reflection that shows us, as philosophers, the need for further explanation of this act. The explanation, of course, is that we recollect.

The chapter ends by addressing the role of Forms in Plato’s view of ordinary human speech and thought. Forms are the properties by which we think and speak of sensible particulars at all. Coming to have Forms in mind is therefore necessary for coming to speak and think at all. Ultimately, though, Plato thinks of our coming to have Forms in this way as merely the first step of learning, a path that leads finally to knowledge.
The interpretation of Recollection allows us to say why knowledge requires the ability to provide a rational account. The process by which we acquire knowledge is dialectic, and dialectic proceeds by the revision of our ordinary statements and the discovery of definition. We are able to make these statements, and rely on them in dialectic, only because they depend on a previous stage of Recollection. One can’t get through dialectic without developing the ability to provide a rational account, and one can’t get knowledge without going through the two stages of learning, language acquisition, and dialectic. Thus, anyone who has knowledge will also have the ability to provide a rational account.

This explanation of the requirement of a rational account, though accurate, fails to convey the deep reasons why an account is necessary for knowledge. To see these reasons, we need to consider the two stages of recollection, and Plato’s reasons for thinking of them as single learning process. The two stages of Recollection are unified by the fact that they are the two steps by which we improve our grasp of Forms. Direct apprehension of Forms is the best state of the soul, and we are impelled through the two stages of Recollection by our soul’s rational desire to recover its knowledge. Learning language and constructing theories in dialectic are the things a soul must do to acquire knowledge in this life. The course of human learning is one in which learning and language are continually intertwined. This persistent link is necessitated by our soul’s location in the body. The requirement of an account is a result of the way we learn. The way we learn is a result of what we are.
Chapter 5: Dialectic, Plurality, and Association

So far, little has been said about the way a rational account says what we know. This chapter examines the way our definitions and theories express our knowledge, by exploring the nature of the relations we study in dialectic.

In the Philebus, Plato focuses on a kind of plurality that characterizes Forms, and which we must study in order to make dialectical progress. I show that this plurality has its origins in the appearance of Forms together in complex sensible particulars. The plurality comes to our attention through the way we use a Form’s name in a wide variety of statements, which relate it to the many different Forms in whose company it appears.

The Sophist confirms this analysis. There, Plato explores in tandem the variety of ways an entity can be, and the variety of ways we can speak about it. He identifies three different kinds of Being for Forms. The first is a Form’s being its own essence. The second is the Form’s possession of the properties characteristic of Forms: stability, unity, permanence, etc. There are true predications corresponding to each of these manners of Being. But these predications do not capture the majority of things we say about a Form, or using a Form’s name. Moreover, the predications so far described are not useful for learning. A third kind of being, and a third kind of predication, is necessary to account for most of the things we say about Forms, and especially the statements that are central to dialectic. Plato introduces a new relation, which I call association, according to which Forms may be and be called many things. Two Forms associate when they appear together in complex sensible particulars. What makes it true to say, for instance, that Man is an Animal is the association of the Forms of Humanity and Animality in their
participants. The relations we study in dialectic and represent in our definitions and theories are, by and large, associative relations.

Associative relations are not internal to a Form's essence. They are, at best, a result of the Form's essence. Consequently, our definitions and theories do not represent to us the internal structure of a Form's essence. Nor could they; forms are incomposite essences. The complexity of accounts and definitions is a result of the complexity of the sensible world. We improve our grasp of a Form only by reflection on the behavior of Forms in the sensible world. The associative relations and Forms represented in our definitions and theories are the relations and Forms that play a central role in this learning process. Our definitions and theories signify the essences they do by distillation and representation of the learning process.
CHAPTER 2

DIALECTIC, MENO’S PARADOX, AND RECOLLECTION IN THE MENO

"Can Virtue be taught?" So begins the Meno, an investigation into the way human beings become virtuous. Because Plato believes that Virtue is a kind of knowledge, this question also begins an investigation of the way human beings inquire, learn, and know. The result is a network of epistemological developments: Meno’s paradox, the theory of Recollection, a distinction between true belief and knowledge, a method of hypothesis.¹ These developments are most properly viewed in the context of Plato’s philosophical method, dialectic. In the Meno, Plato makes philosophical inquiry the subject of his own philosophical reflection. The result is a view about philosophical inquiry, learning, and knowledge.

I will begin by distinguishing the endpoints of dialectic. The beginning and end of dialectic can be thought of as two sets of conditions. The first are the conditions one must meet to participate in dialectic, the second are the conditions one must meet in order to complete dialectic and gain philosophical understanding. The conditions on starting

¹ While I think that any full account of Plato’s philosophical method must address the role of hypotheses, I will not address the method of hypothesis Socrates introduces at the end of the dialogue. (86e⁴ ff.) I think that hypotheses, as they are used in the Meno, fit fairly neatly into the dialectical structure I present here. A more difficult question is how the hypotheses of the Meno cohere with the hypotheses of the Phaedo (100d 2-3) and Republic. (510b5 ff., 511a3 ff., 533c1 ff.)
dialectic are easily satisfied: in order to participate in dialectic one must be competent
with language generally, and specifically with the term that names the subject of
investigation. These conditions make dialectic a process open to nearly all human
beings. In contrast, the conditions on completion are demanding: one must be able
didonai logon, to give an account that names the nature or essence common to all and
only the items properly called by the term, and responsible for their deserving the term.\textsuperscript{2,3}
The linguistic abilities that characterize the endpoints of dialectic are correlated with
different levels of comprehension of the essence under investigation. The beginning of
dialectic requires only that we have ordinary familiarity, whereas the end of dialectic is
reached only when we acquire full, explanatory understanding. These are the endpoints
of dialectic. In exploring and comparing them we see the kind of change dialectic effects
on our comprehension. We will learn about dialectical learning.

Our resources in inquiry are limited. In order to move from the beginning of
dialectic to the end, we must rely primarily on what is embedded in the prerequisites for
participation. Thus, our linguistic competence and the ordinary familiarity associated
with that competence provide the evidence and tools by which we make philosophical

\textsuperscript{2} I will use the terms “nature,” “essence” and, less frequently, “property” to refer to the object of dialectic,
the item specified by a successful account and called the \textalpha\textalpha by Socrates in the \textit{Euthyphro} (11a8).
Because in the \textit{Meno} Plato has not yet articulated the theory of Forms, as such, I will not call essences
\textit{Forms} in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{3} These are the criteria for adequately answering the \textit{ti esti} question. As we shall see, though, these
conditions give rise to other conditions. For instance, Socrates seems to think that the essence signified by
our account should explain not only the being of any particular bearer of the essence, but also the regular
character of the bearers of the essence. So, if humans are regularly capable of laughter, then we ought to be
able to explain the risibility of human beings by reference to the human essence. See below, pp.32-33.
progress. After distinguishing the starting and ending conditions of dialectic, and characterizing the kinds of understanding these endpoints demand, I will describe how dialectic proceeds from beginning to end.

The second section of the chapter is given to interpreting the better known passages of the *Meno* by reference to the structure of dialectic. Meno’s paradox is explicitly a problem for inquiry. It is a challenge to the possibility of learning through the kind of conversation Socrates and Meno set out to have. Accordingly, I will interpret Meno’s paradox in terms of the problems germane to the dialectical structure I have described. Plato thinks that we do learn from philosophical inquiry. Meno’s paradox reveals that our ability to learn in this way deserves fuller explanation. The doctrine of Recollection resolves Meno’s paradox. It provides an explanation of the learning we accomplish through dialectic. Understanding the doctrine of Recollection depends, therefore, on understanding how dialectic works, and the nature of its intellectual progress. In dialectic, Plato describes a process by which we move from an ordinary ability to think and talk about the items in our experience to an ability to understand and explain those items and the regularities in their behavior. In Meno’s paradox he acknowledges the obstacles faced by such a process. In Recollection, Plato describes the faculties of the human mind that overcome these obstacles, and make knowledge and learning possible for us.
2.1 The Structure of Dialectic

The opening discussion of the *Meno* is essentially a dialectical clinic. The conversation conjures our sustained attention to the rules and requirements of inquiry. Meno initially wants to know whether Virtue can be taught, but Socrates insists that before answering his question, they must first determine what Virtue is. When Meno has difficulty understanding how he should answer the question, “What is Virtue?” Socrates must state the criteria for an adequate answer. When troubles persist, Socrates even presents model accounts of Color and Shape for the purpose or practice. These moments are self-consciously methodological; Plato is trying to show us in detail how philosophy is done.

The surest sign of Plato’s focus on method is the introduction of a dialectical rule, a restriction on the terms that may be employed in an account. The restriction prohibits accounts that employ terms unknown to whomever is supposed to learn from the account. The restriction ensures that accounts given in dialectical exchange will be understandable and informative to the person hearing the account. I’ll call this the

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4 This moment has been taken by some to show Socrates’ adherence to an epistemological principle stating that one must know what X is in order to know anything about X. A great deal has been written about this principle, and it has been dubbed the *Socratic Fallacy* by Peter Geach in “Plato’s *Euthyphro*: An Analysis and Commentary,” *The Monist*, 50 (1966) pp. 369-382. Later I will address briefly the sense in which Socrates and Plato are committed to such a principle. For a more thorough treatment of the evidence in favor of such a reading, and the arguments against it, see Hugh Benson, *Socratic Wisdom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 112-141.

5 See Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pg. 136. I adopt Irwin’s name for the rule, but the agreement between our accounts stops soon thereafter. See also Gail Fine, “Knowledge and *Logos* in the *Theaetetus*”, *Philosophical Review*, 88 (1979), 366-97. Fine relates the DR to an epistemological principle called the ‘Knowledge Based on Knowledge’ principle. Both Fine and Irwin are partially right about the role of the Dialectic Requirement, and what it says about the way we develop knowledge. What both overlook, along with all other interpreters, is the way this requirement functions in the learning process, and adapts to the different stages of dialectic.

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Dialectical Requirement, or DR. The DR is applied twice in the *Meno* and the applications differ in important ways. The first application, or DR1, represents the beginning of dialectic, and demands only the kind of comprehension required to enter into inquiry. The second application, DR2, represents the end of dialectic, and the conditions on philosophical understanding.

2.1.1 *The Endpoints of Dialectic: DR1 Familiarity and DR2 Understanding*

At the beginning of the discussion Meno has trouble understanding what Socrates is asking for, and how he should answer. Eventually, Socrates provides an account of Shape as a model for the way Meno should give an account of Virtue. The account is this: “Let this be Shape for us: the only thing that always follows Color.” (75b 9-10)7 Meno says that this account would be useless if he were ignorant of Color, as he is imagined to be of Shape. (75c 5-7) Although the account is true, says Socrates, it is necessary to answer “more gently and more dialectically” since he and Meno are engaged in friendly and not combative discussion.8 What follows is the introduction of the DR: “It is more dialectical, probably, to respond not just with the truth, but also through those things the questioner grants he knows.” (75d 5-7) In offering the restriction, Socrates distinguishes dialectical from eristic conversation. The difference between the modes of

6 Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

7 When a chapter or section concerns a single dialogue, I will put references to Plato’s text in the body of the chapter. When a section of a chapter concerns several dialogues, references to the text will be in the footnotes.

8 What I have translated as “more dialectically” is the word διαλεκτικώτερον. The word is apparently Plato’s invention.
discourse is a difference in their goals. Eristic is purely competitive; a participant’s success consists in besting her opponent. To discuss something dialectically, on the other hand, interlocutors must converse as partners in the search for something valuable to both. The goal of dialectic is understanding, not victory. In light of this, the DR is a good restriction. A dialectician must work around the things her partner does not know, instead of taking competitive advantage of that ignorance. This ensures that the partner is learning, and enables him to contribute as well. The DR captures the goals and methods that distinguish dialectic from other modes of discourse.

Two puzzles about the DR confront us immediately. The first is to decide what kind of things an account proceeds through. Socrates’ use of “δὲ ἔκεινον” (75d7) does not say what kind of item provides the medium of an account. The second puzzle concerns what it means for someone to grant that she knows these things. Let’s start with the second. After introducing the DR, Socrates adheres conspicuously to the new rule while giving two more practice accounts. Before each account Socrates makes sure that Meno is familiar with the terms he will employ. “You call something a plane, and a different thing a solid...Now then, you call something an eye.” (76a 1, 76d 2-3) In these questions, Socrates is giving Meno the opportunity to grant that he knows the things through which Socrates will give his account. The verb kalein – to call – is prominent here. In nearly every case Socrates asks Meno whether he calls something, τι, by a certain name. Socrates is asking only whether Meno uses certain words to speak of

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9 Socrates does not use kalein in every case. When he checks with Meno to make sure he can use the words effluence (ἀπορροή) and channel (πορός) he asks whether Meno says that there are such things in the world. There may seem to be an important difference in that Meno is asked about the existence of effluences and the channels through which they flow. But the difference is not so great in actuality. For
things in the world. Exactly what Meno speaks of by these words is left undetermined; we know only that he talks about something, $\tau$, by means of the words. Still, once Meno has answered that he uses the words, Socrates employs them in his account with no more trouble from the DR. For Meno to *grant that he knows* the things through which Socrates will give his accounts, all he has to do is claim to use the words in Socrates’ account to speak about something.

Meno’s claim to use certain words suffices as his claim to know the things in Socrates’ account. But the words themselves are not the *things* through which Socrates gives his account. Consider the way Socrates checks to make sure Meno knows the thing corresponding to his use of “$\pi\varepsilon\rho\alpha\zeta$” in the revised account of Shape: “You call something an end? I mean by this such a thing as a limit or extreme. I mean the same thing by all these. Prodicus would probably disagree with us, but I suppose you call something limited, or completed. That’s the sort of thing I mean, nothing complicated.” (75el-4) Socrates thinks his words signify something, and it is their signification that interests him. Here he uses several words to signify “the same thing,” a single item for which “$\pi\varepsilon\rho\alpha\zeta$” will stand in his account. Whatever that item is, it is the thing through

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10 See also Meno 74d7-e2, and e11. Socrates asks Meno to tell him what it is that is called “Shape.” Just as the object of definition is the nature and not its name, the items through which the nature is explicated are other natures, and not their names.
which Socrates gives his account. Moreover, it is the thing Meno grants he knows when he admits that he uses the words Socrates parades before him. Dialectic is object oriented; it seeks an account of the *essence* that is shared by all and only the items bearing the same name. The focus is not on the name or names of this essence, but on the thing itself. Nonetheless, a claim to use an essence's name in speech is sufficient to claim that one knows the essence so named.

In testing for knowledge this way, Socrates is doing nothing out of the ordinary. When someone calls things in the world by a term “X” or says that she has heard of X's, it is common to say that she knows X’s, or what X’s are. But in saying this we do not attribute expert knowledge to the speaker. Nor have we said anything about what the person believes about X’s. We have not implied that the person’s beliefs about X’s are certain, or justified, or even true. So, although we use the term ‘know,’ we are definitely not invoking a robust philosophical notion of knowledge. If anything, we take the person to be able to pick out X’s in the environment, and perhaps to give some general description of X’s. But this general description need not be the same as ours, or even agree with ours.\(^{11}\) All we take to be shown by the person’s use of the term is that he or she is familiar with the subject. This ordinary familiarity is all Socrates is testing for. And this is why Socrates doesn’t make any effort to determine the precise character of Meno’s use. He isn’t trying to find out whether Meno is an accomplished mathematician or doctor. He isn’t testing for justification or certainty in Meno’s views. Although he

\(^{11}\) Imagine someone holds a mistaken theory about the chemical composition of water. We would not say that the person does not know, in an ordinary sense, what water is. So long as the person labels instances of the liquid that comes out of the tap ‘water’ we would continue to say that the person knows what water is. See Tyler Burge, “Individualism and the Mental,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. IV (1979) pp. 72-122.
uses the word ‘know’, he isn’t really testing for knowledge of any kind. He just wants to be sure that Meno is familiar with planes, solids, and eyes so that he’ll comprehend when Socrates refers to these things in his account. When we take someone to know items in this ordinary way, we feel comfortable using the name of the items to say something or make something clear to the person. When Socrates uses Meno’s manner of speaking as evidence of Meno’s familiarity, he is doing nothing more controversial than what we do all the time. As used here, the DR requires the common and easily attained familiarity with things that is demonstrated by our use of the general term for a group of items.

This notion of familiarity helps to illuminate the way Socrates’ accounts go through properties or natures, and not words. Imagine that we know a person uses the term “water” either because we have heard her use it, or because she claims to use it as Meno does. We typically take this to indicate that the speaker is familiar not just with the word “water” and the way it is used by English speakers, but actually with water. We expect that such a person has encountered water, talked about water, and thought about water. That is, we take the person’s use of a word as evidence of a relationship holding between him and the item named by the word. When we give an account of one thing through another, the account uses the hearer’s familiarity with the second to illuminate

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the first. When given an elucidation like the one Socrates gives of Shape through Color, we do not focus on the linguistic sense of the words in the account, or their patterns of use in speech. We attend immediately to their signification. We think about color, and whatever it is that happens always to follow it. We are informed not by reflection on the word, but on the thing named by the word. It is in this sense that Socrates defines through things and not through words. The words are certainly instrumental in our ability to do this, but it is not by reflection on them that we gain whatever information the account contains.

In order to be informed in this way, one needn’t know the item an account goes through very thoroughly. One must only be familiar with the item so named, in the sense that one can pick it out, have thoughts about it, and give some general characterization of it. This is the kind of familiarity shown when a person displays competence with a word, and it is the kind of familiarity Socrates is interested in when he applies the DR for the first time. I will call the first application of that rule DR1, and the kind of comprehension it requires DR1 familiarity. DR1 familiarity and linguistic competence are easily achieved, but very powerful. For if one is DR1 familiar with a nature and competent with its name, one is able to think and speak generally about the nature and its bearers. One can discuss its relations to other natures. One can become familiar with other natures through it. And most important, one can ask meaningfully and productively what the nature is.

Later in the discussion Socrates and Meno are considering an account of Virtue as “whatever is done with Justice.” (78e6-79a1) Socrates rejects the account for violating
the DR in the following way. Meno and Socrates have agreed that Justice is a part of
Virtue. (79a2-5) But a part of Virtue cannot be known unless one already knows what
Virtue itself is. (79c7-9) Consequently, any account of Virtue in terms of Justice will be
an account that goes through something (namely Justice) not yet known by a person
ignorant of Virtue. Anyone who stands to learn from an account of Virtue – because he
is ignorant of it – will also be ignorant of Justice. Thus an account of Virtue in terms of
Justice will be uninformative; it will go through something unknown to the person
receiving the account. (79d 5 ff.) Socrates appeals to the DR to justify his rejection of
the account: “If you remember, when I was answering you before about Shape, we
rejected the sort of answer that proceeds through things still the subject of inquiry and not
yet agreed upon.” (79d1-3)

Although Socrates claims to be using the principle that forced him to revise his
first account of Shape, the standards of the DR have changed. Under DR1, in order for a
property to be mentioned in an account the questioner must only claim to use the name of
that property in speech. This suffices to show that the questioner is familiar with the
property. But Socrates and Meno obviously satisfy this standard with regard to Justice.
If Socrates and Meno needed only to be DR1 familiar with Justice, then there would be
no problem with the account rejected here. Different standards must now be at work.
The more stringent standard of the second application of the DR (DR2) is indicated by
the changed phrasing of the requirement. The interlocutor’s familiarity with the item and
its name is no longer sufficient. Rather, the item must no longer be the subject of
inquiry. Far from being over when one has acquired linguistic competence with the name of a property, inquiry ends only when one can answer the *ti esti* question, the question “What is it?” concerning the object of investigation. One does this by providing an account that states the single nature common to all instances of the property and responsible for their being what they are. (72c ff.) That Socrates is demanding an answer to the *ti esti* question as the standard of knowledge is emphasized by his repeated use of the phrase ὅτι ἐστὶν. (79c 7, d6, 7) “Do you suppose that someone can know a part of Virtue, *what it is*, not knowing it (Virtue) itself?” If inquiry must be complete with regard to a nature before it is used in an account, then one must have an account stating what that nature is. In what follows I will call the knowledge demonstrated by the ability to provide an account *DR2 knowledge*, or *DR2 understanding*.

The difference between DR2 understanding and DR1 familiarity can be seen in the details of the DR’s applications. For instance, DR2’s constraints on the terms in an account are impersonal. Justice cannot be mentioned in any account of Virtue because nobody can grasp the nature of Justice without understanding Virtue. DR2 prohibits certain terms from being used in accounts, no matter who is giving or hearing them. The

This might seem an overly technical reading of ἐπιτουμένων. Perhaps we needn’t take inquiry to end only with the answering of the *ti esti* question. Perhaps there is a kind of inquiry that ends when a term is determined to be part of the competence of both inquirers. Two things suggest, though, that Socrates is using the term in a more stringent sense. First, as noted, is his repeated use of the phrase ὅτι ἐστὶν, a clear allusion to the *ti esti* question. The second is the markedly different standard at work in this application of the DR. I shall note these differences in detail below. I don’t think that the differences between the applications of the DR fracture the rule. The DR states a rule for dialectical inquiry which varies in its standards depending on the place one occupies in dialectic. The spirit of the DR remains the same throughout; learning comes through what one already knows.

Socrates uses the impersonal pronoun τινες to express his doubt that anyone can know Justice without knowing Virtue.
rule seems to cut in the other direction as well. The comment that one cannot understand Justice without already grasping Virtue suggests that Virtue must appear in any account of Justice. Accounts governed by DR2 have unqualified restrictions against the use of certain terms, and they have unqualified requirements that certain terms appear. The sense is that when giving an account under DR2, there is only one correct account, no matter who is giving it or who is listening. This indicates that, in some way yet to be specified, DR2 understanding is the same from person to person.

In contrast, the DR1 allows great flexibility in our accounts. DR1 is introduced on the grounds that Meno doesn't understand one of the terms in Socrates' account of Shape. Socrates maintains that his first account of Shape is true, but is willing to craft a new one in order to accommodate Meno's alleged ignorance. But for someone who knows what Color is, i.e. has DR1 familiarity with Color, the first account is adequate. Under DR1 there is more than one true account of an item. Moreover, accounts are acceptable or unacceptable based on the competence of one's interlocutor. So while there may be many true accounts, the DR1 restricts us to those that accommodate our interlocutor's familiarity. As a result, we may give different accounts of one and the same nature to different interlocutors. This reflects the fact that familiarity with a nature can be developed in a number of different ways, and through a variety of different terms. DR1 familiarity of a nature can vary from person to person. For instance, one person may have different experiences with shapes than another person, or have learned about shapes under a different description than another person, or have different beliefs about shapes. Even though these variations exist, the individuals occupy the same level of comprehension of the same nature.
Under DR1, accounts are shaped to accommodate the competence of one’s interlocutor. Under DR2 the opposite happens; one must shape one’s competence to accommodate the requirements of the account. Let us return to the prohibition on using Justice in a DR2 account of Virtue. This requirement exists because Virtue must be present in the DR2 account of Justice. Justice is a part of Virtue, and so cannot be understood by a person who does not understand Virtue as a whole. Similarly, if Virtue is a part of Knowledge, it cannot be understood unless Knowledge is grasped as a whole. DR2 knowledge of Justice depends on DR2 knowledge of Virtue, which depends on DR2 knowledge of Knowledge. Under DR2 there are rules of epistemological priority. Insofar as there are certain terms that must appear in the DR2 account of a property, there are certain items one must DR2 understand in order to understand the account. The epistemological order is the same for every person with no exceptions. DR1 familiarity, in contrast, has no rules of priority at all, as demonstrated by the acceptability of circular accounts for different interlocutors. One person may become familiar with Shape through her familiarity with Color, while another person becomes familiar with Color through his familiarity with Shape.15

DR1 and DR2 require different kinds of comprehension of the terms used in dialectical accounts. DR1 familiarity is demonstrated by competence with a word, whereas DR2 understanding is demonstrated by the ability to give an account. DR1

15 This is displayed in Socrates’ practice accounts. He begins by accounting for Shape in terms of Color, and ends with an account of Color in terms of Shape. Whereas the first account would be adequate for someone who knows what Color is, the latter is appropriate for Meno. Socrates does express some dissatisfaction with the latter account, but this should not be taken as a sign of the account’s inadequacy. (76e6-9) I take the trouble with Socrates’ Empedoclean account of Color to be that it is theory laden, and thus prejudices the inquiry in way that should be avoided at the start. Irwin’s reading is similar, see Plato’s Moral Theory, pg. 314.
familiarity of the same item can be held in varying ways; the beliefs, characterizations, and experiences associated with DR1 familiarity will vary from person to person. DR2 knowledge on the other hand is the same from person to person as reflected by the fact that the account demonstrating DR2 knowledge is the same from person to person.

Finally, there are no restrictions on the order in which one comes to have DR1 familiarity with natures. A person may become familiar with Justice before Virtue. In fact, her familiarity with Virtue may be acquired through her prior familiarity with Justice. But in order to possess DR2 understanding of a nature, there are certain other natures one must already understand.\(^\text{16}\)

In the applications of the DR, Plato is distinguishing two levels of grasp, both important to dialectic. We must now ask where in the dialectical process these levels of comprehension are important. It is fairly clear that accounts governed by DR2 represent the end of dialectic. These accounts are final answers to the *ti esti* question. They represent the fullest understanding, and accordingly must meet the highest standards. Accounts at this final stage are uniquely correct, and the same for all inquirers. They delineate an objective hierarchy of natures that obey rules of epistemological priority. In order for one nature to be understood, the natures in terms of which it is explicated must also be grasped, with no exceptions.

These standards reflect some fundamental beliefs about philosophical understanding on Plato's part. Foremost of these is that knowledge is of how things are

\(^{16}\) The epistemological priority of one nature to another does not require that the knowledge of one nature be temporally prior to the other. It is possible that one comes to understand Virtue at the same time that one comes to know Justice. The epistemological priority requires just that one cannot know a part or species of a nature before understanding the genus nature.
in themselves, and not in relation to any observer. What is known is the same from person to person. As a result the accounts that demonstrate knowledge must be the same no matter who is putting them forward. The goal of inquiry is to bring one's comprehension of a nature to grasp it as it is, by itself. Since these natures are what they are independently of any individual, the state of mind that constitutes understanding will be the same from person to person. Accordingly, the linguistic account that expresses this knowledge is the same as well.

At times I call the knowledge achieved by dialectic understanding. This is to reflect the fact that Plato emphasizes the ability of one who knows to give explanations. In one use of the word, to understand something is to grasp the reasons why it is the way it is. Thus, to understand something like Virtue is to understand what is responsible for the character and behavior of virtuous things. To grasp what makes things virtuous is to be able to say, of any virtuous particular, why it is virtuous. An answer to the *ti esti* question must specify the item responsible for making many particulars bear a nature because the answer should explain why these items are the way they are.

This is not all that needs explaining, though. Related to the belief that such explanation can be given is the belief that if there are any features characteristic of Virtues or virtuous particulars, aside from being instances or species of Virtue, these

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17 Plato’s emphasis on the ability to give explanation should be contrasted with the more modern emphasis on certainty as a condition of knowledge. This is not to say that certainty is no part of Plato’s conception of knowledge. Rather, it seems that certainty is supposed to follow from grasping the reason why something is the case. What is mysterious about this, and deserves more scholarly attention than it has gotten, is why for Plato grasping the reason why something is the case should give that understanding any greater security in the soul of the knower. See Meno 98a ff.

features must be explicable by the nature of Virtue. For instance, if Virtue is teachable, then we ought to be able to see how this follows from what Virtue is. Plato thinks that the regular behavior of a property is to be understood and explained by the nature of the property. This is why he puts the question of what a property is before the question of what it is like.\footnote{Meno, 70a5-7. Plato is committed to the priority of definition, according to which one must know the nature of a property in order to know anything about it. But see John Beversluis, “Does Socrates Commit the Socratic Fallacy?”, in Benson, Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 1-7-122. I do not take this to be a fallacy precisely because Plato calls knowledge only understanding of the sort that can give explanations, and grasps the reason why. One can be fairly confident that an action or individual is virtuous prior to discovering the final account of Virtue. But one cannot fully understand and explain the virtue of the action or the individual without such an account.} If there are features or characteristics that attend the property in every case, then these features ought to follow from the nature of the property.\footnote{The relations between essences that our explanations describe deserve much fuller investigation. The discussion of association in Chapter Five provides the beginning of such an investigation. See my conjecture on pp.216-218 also.} Therefore, in order to understand what some property X is like one must first know what it is. The DR2 account of a property’s nature must explain not only the being of many particulars, it must explain the other features that attend these particulars in virtue of their having the original property.

The expanded explanatory power of DR2 accounts illuminates the rules of epistemological priority under DR2. The explanations enabled by our grasp of a nature will proceed through the terms mentioned in the account of that nature. For instance, Virtue’s being teachable might follow from its being knowledge, per se, and not knowledge of goods and evils specifically. But in order to employ the parts of the definition in an explanation we must have understanding of the natures corresponding to those parts. To show that Virtue’s being teachable follows from being knowledge, we
must understand why being teachable follows from being an instance or kind of knowledge. Since the fact that knowledge is teachable is a part of what knowledge is like, we cannot understand that fact until we understand what Knowledge is.

The explanatory role of an account also elucidates the uniqueness of the correct account. The correct explanation one gives of some property X being Y is unique; there is no other correct explanation. If understanding what X is enables one to give such an explanation, then understanding X must entail understanding the items through which one will explain X's being Y. Of course, for any nature X, we will have to explain many regular features. There is only one set of terms through which all the requisite explanations can be given. These terms make up the final DR2 account.

So much talk about explanations, unique accounts, and the natures mentioned in accounts risks losing sight of the deep and powerful intuitions behind Plato's epistemological program. Plato's insight is that knowledge is of how things are. To be something is to have a stable and determinate nature. To know something, therefore, is to know this nature. Anything possessing a certain nature will have the same character as anything else possessing that nature. Furthermore, there are consequences of possessing a nature. Natures are related to one another in regular and understandable ways. It is a consequence of what Courage is and what Virtue is that they are related as they are. Since Courage and Virtue are what they are invariably, their relations are stable as well. Finally, the way two natures are related follows from what they are. Thus, if one grasps each of them as they are, one possesses the grounds for understanding how they are related. These inter-relations locate natures in fields, hierarchical structures of natures. The levels of these hierarchical structures correspond to the epistemological priority.
governing our accounts. Plato’s view of philosophical knowledge as stable, explanatory, and discursive reflects his view of natures that are determinate, fixed, and inter-related. The standards of the DR2 reflect these intuitions.

If DR2 governs the end of dialectic, then we can be sure that DR1 concerns a stage earlier in the process of inquiry. The best evidence to guide us on this matter is the first definition Socrates gives of Shape. The account is this: “Let this be Shape for us: the only thing that always follows Color. Is this sufficient for you, or do you pursue it some other way? For I would be satisfied if you spoke about Virtue even in this way.” (75b9-10) Meno will complain, but the fact that Socrates is satisfied with this account suggests that it serves some dialectical purpose. The first thing to note is that this definition does not satisfy the requirements of the ti esti question. For one, it fails to mention something true of all and only shapes. The core of the Earth and a chair in a perfectly dark room are both shaped without having color. The shapes of these things, therefore, do not follow their color. As a result, this description cannot be used to explain Shape in each and every case.²¹ Even if all shaped things did have color, this fact would not be what makes shaped things shaped. The property of following color is at best a παθος, and not the ὀμοιοσ of Shape. For these reasons, the account does not articulate the nature of Shape.

But Socrates says that the account is true. This requires that we take him not to be saying that all instances of shape coincide with instances of color. Instead the claim must be that whenever there is color, it has a determinate shape. Shape follows Color in the

²¹ Irwin takes Socrates’ first account of Shape to be coextensive with Shape, but to fall short of a final answer. See Plato’s Moral Theory, pg. 314. Richard Robinson takes Socrates’ satisfaction to indicate that the account is sufficient, but for Meno’s complaint, Plato’s Earlier Dialectic. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953) pg. 54.
sense that whenever Color is present, Shape is present as well. If it is also true that Shape is the only thing that happens to follow Color in this way, then the account succeeds not in saying what Shape is, i.e. what its essence is, but only in saying something uniquely true of it. But Socrates is satisfied with the account. This indicates that the function of the account is not to articulate the essence of Shape, but to pick it out from all other beings by saying something true of it alone. This function is further suggested by Socrates’ use of the phrase μόνον τῶν δυντῶν. (75b10) Since Socrates would be satisfied with a similar answer from Meno, all he wants Meno to do, in answering about Virtue, is to give a description of Virtue that isolates it from all other things. That Socrates would seek this kind of account is not surprising. After all, he has struggled to get Meno to give an account that treats Virtue as a single thing, rather than distributing it over a plurality of items.

The account works in this way. It points at Shape by saying something sufficient to identify it, without explicating its nature. The account picks out Shape as that thing, whatever it may be, which happens to have the feature of following Color. The account focuses on Shape, isolates it from all other things, and treats it as a single object for

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22 Other features of Socrates’ language indicate that the account is not a final answer to the *ti esti* question but remains useful. The placement of “κάν οὕτως” conveys that Socrates would be satisfied if Meno spoke even in this very way about Virtue. The point is that the sort of account he has given does not accomplish everything an account can, but is still of some dialectical use. R.S. Bluck, in Plato’s *Meno*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961) pg. 243, takes “κάν οὕτως” to express Socrates’ desire that Meno speak in precisely the same way as he has. Given the weakness of the account’s articulation of the nature of Shape, it is more likely that Socrates is here making a concession, lowering the dialectical bar in order to get Meno going instead of setting a final standard.

23 The use of τὰγχόειειον plus a participle adds to the sense that the way Shape is here picked out is by an accidental feature of shapes. Since not all shapes are colored, it is not even a necessary feature of shapes that they follow color.
inquiry. This is useful for inquiry, though, only if one has not already demarcated what it is one seeks to understand. What is satisfactory about this definition is that for someone familiar with its terms, it provides a way of narrowing the dialectical focus on Shape and Shape alone.\(^{24}\) One cannot begin to investigate the nature of something until one has gotten hold of it somehow, presented it as a single object for investigation.\(^{25}\) This account, therefore, provides the demarcation of the dialectical object necessary for dialectic to begin. The location of Socrates’ account, and the sort of account governed by DR1 in general, is at the beginning of dialectic.\(^{26}\)

DR1 familiarity and DR2 understanding are the endpoints of dialectic. Together they show us the origin and aim of philosophy. Philosophy begins in our everyday experience with the world, and our ordinary ability to speak and think about it. When we

\(^{24}\) Irwin treats the account along these lines. See Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, pg. 139. See also G. Fine, “Inquiry in the *Meno*,” in Richard Kraut, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 200-226. Irwin’s position is that the preliminary account fixes the reference of inquiry. At the end of inquiry one may compare the final account with the preliminary account to see that they refer to the same thing. I think the preliminary account loses its importance as dialectic goes on. It may be possible, in fact, for us to enter dialectic by means of an account that is incorrect! Imagine that two people begin inquiry about cats by means of the following account: “Cats are the only domesticated animal that hunts.” If this account succeeds in focusing the interlocutors’ attention on felines, it succeeds. They may later realize that dogs hunt too. No matter. So long as the account focuses our attention on the subject of inquiry, it succeeds. This is related to the way dialectic is object oriented. We are concerned with the nature, not the description that focuses us on the nature. Once we fix our attention on the nature, we may revise or discard the description altogether.

\(^{25}\) I.M. Crombie makes a point similar to this one in “Socratic Definition,” in *Plato's *Meno* in Focus*, Jane M. Day, (ed.) (New York: Routledge, 1994) pg. 188.

\(^{26}\) There are a couple other textual clues to this effect. Consider for instance Socrates’ use of the hortatory subjunctive, ἐστεο in combination with the dative pronoun, ἡμῖν. “Let this be Shape for us...” The sense is that the account is speculative and particularly meant for Socrates and Meno. Socrates is neither committed overly to the account, nor would he find it useful in other circumstances. Each of these facts argues against the location of this account at a more involved stage of dialectic were, presumably, general facts about Shape would be discovered, posited, and explored. Rather, the sense is that he and Meno need some characterization of Shape to get them started, and Socrates presents this one with the attitude “Let’s try this and see how it goes.” Socrates further signals that he is not concerned with the highest level of precision when he dismisses the concerns of Prodicus.
begin to inquire we must begin from what we know and have experienced, even if that perspective is limited and in some ways incorrect. In some sense, philosophy has a different origin for each inquirer. But it has the same end for all. Philosophy aims at knowledge, and knowledge is of things as they are in themselves. The differences between DR1 and DR2 show Plato’s sensitivity to the demands on dialectic as a learning method. As a learning method, dialectic is a process in which we undergo a cognitive transformation. We move from one kind of comprehension to another. DR1 captures the need for a learning method to adapt its starting conditions to the inquirer, since it is from the learner’s original level of grasp that any learning must proceed. But DR2 captures the need for a learning method to end with full grasp of the truth. It is toward such understanding that all learning strives.

The differences between DR1 and DR2 should not lead us to overlook the continuity of dialectic. The DR has different applications, but there is an important truth in Socrates’ claim that he is applying the same principle a second time. Taken neutrally between its application, the DR captures some important facts about our use of language to learn. Plato notices first that when we introduce, or illuminate, or explain something, we do so in terms of other things. Second, he notices that our ability to learn from these accounts is constrained by our understanding of the other things through which an account is given. This is a feature of our ordinary discourse and our expert discourse alike. In dialectic, the ordinary practice of elucidating and explaining one thing in terms of others is pushed to its natural conclusion. The natural conclusion, Plato sees, is the creation of a consistent, organized, explanatory body of knowledge in which a number of
natures are systematically interrelated. The fact that dialectic is, in a way, an extension of our ordinary conversational practice indicates that our ordinary use of language involves the very rationality whose full realization is philosophical knowledge.

2.1.2 Dialectical Progress

The endpoints of dialectic are far apart. Dialectic begins in DR1 familiarity of a property, where this knowledge involves the ability to identify bearers of the property reliably, though not infallibly, and to give some general characterization of them. Dialectic ends when one can provide the single correct articulation of the nature one seeks, where the ability to provide this account depends on DR2 understanding of the items mentioned in the account, and the ability to employ that understanding in giving explanations of the nature’s regular behavior. What is left to describe is how one gets from the beginning of dialectic to the end. This is complicated both by the distance between the endpoints of dialectic, and by the limited resources available to the inquirers. Participants in dialectic rely only on what is contained in, or can be developed from, the comprehension that satisfies DR1. In progressing to DR2 understanding, dialecticians have only the resources of their linguistic competence, and the familiarity displayed by that competence.

I am going to describe dialectical progress by working up from the least prior familiarity on the part of the inquirer. In this way I can cover the most ground. It is of

The method of Collection and Division, developed in the Phaedrus, Sophist, Statesman, and Philebus, is the most developed expression of this insight. But the seeds of Plato’s taxonomic bent are present in the Meno. In addition to what I have pointed out so far, one should note the nascent talk of wholes and parts (78e1 ff.), and the priestly claim that “all things are akin.” (81c9-d1)
course possible for an inquirer to come to dialectic with an intermediate familiarity with
the subject. Such an interlocutor renders some of the steps I will describe unnecessary,
but there are no additional requirements for a case like this. In the case where the
introductory DR1 account is a genuine introduction to the subject of investigation, we
must start from the tools in that account. The account gives the inquirer a manner of
thinking about the subject, and some method of identifying instances of the nature in
question. Even an account like "the only thing that always follows color" gives us a way
of investigating Shape. We have to start looking at colored things in order to focus on
whatever it is that follows color in each case. Such an investigation, at the very least,
gets us started by showing us many instances of shaped things. The process of looking at
particulars bearing the property is primarily useful for acquiring linguistic competence
with the name of the property. In examining many instances of the property the
interlocutor refines his ability to identify new instances in varying conditions.

Acquaintance with a plurality of instances of the property and the ability to
identify new instances are crucial to the dialectical process. The first criterion on an
adequate answer to the *ti esti* question is that it specify the nature common to all and only
those items we call by the name of the property. Our search for this nature is aided by
confronting as many instances as possible. Since linguistic competence with the name of
the property includes the ability to apply the term reliably, it enables the interlocutor to
present and identify instances of the property. That is, it enables her to amass a collection
of items bearing the very item we are trying to identify.

A plurality of particulars is not the only kind of plurality one must investigate.
This is one of the important lessons of the beginning of the *Meno*. Meno’s accounts of
Virtue are unsatisfactory because they name many virtuous things. Importantly, they do not point out particular instances of virtue. They break Virtue down into categories. Meno first tries to account for Virtue by describing the kinds of actions that are considered virtuous in various ages and stations in life. (71el-72a5) Meno does not mention any particular virtuous actions as, for instance, Euthyphro does. Rather, Meno describes a plurality of action types, correlated with different ages and stations in life. Later on he is led by Socrates to list the character traits called virtues. There are then, at least three different kinds of plurality relevant and useful to dialectic. The first may be called the plurality of particulars. The second may be called a plurality of types, as in the action types Meno correlates with ages and stations of life. The third is a plurality of species subsumed under the original property as a genus, as are the virtues under Virtue itself. The final account of Virtue must stand over each of these pluralities in the same way. It must name the one thing common to all and only the items in these pluralities, and responsible for their being called by the same name. It may seem that Socrates is confusing several different kinds of plurality in the beginning of the Meno. Instead, the conversation displays the flexibility the final account must have in standing over several different kinds of plurality, although it names only one thing.

Accordingly, the beginning inquirer shouldn't collect only particulars. He or she should begin to group the particulars into categories within the collection as a whole. He should look for different kinds or types of instances, perhaps correlated with other

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28 See Euthyphro 5d8-9. Strictly speaking, Euthyphro may not be answering just in terms of a particular action, since he follows this with a general description: “prosecuting the wrongdoer, either for murder, or theft from shrines, or some other such thing....” See A. Nehamas, “Confusing Universals and Particulars in Plato’s Early Dialogues,” Review of Metaphysics 29 (1975) 287-306.
properties obtaining in the instances, and he should look for general features accompanying the property in every case. In most cases the inquirer will come to dialectic already familiar with these things. No Greek would be ignorant of the fact that Courage, Temperance, Wisdom, Piety, and Justice are virtues, nor would one forget that the virtue of a man is closely related to his ability to participate in the governance of his city. Being aware of these subdivisions, types, and general features is just part of a developed DR1 familiarity; these subdivisions, types, and general characteristics are frequently discussed in ordinary uses of the name. The more familiar one is with the property, the more acquainted one is with the many things people are accustomed to say using the name of the property. These statements include predications of the property to a particular, general characterizations of the property, descriptions of how the property is manifested by certain kinds of particular (e.g., Virtue for a man), and divisions of the property into smaller classes or species. The full pattern of our speech with a common general term covers a wide diversity of statements. In most cases, an inquirer will come to dialectic familiar with all these kinds of statements. In the case of someone beginning dialectic with a genuine introduction to the subject, the first task is to build his or her familiarity up to the full character displayed by most speakers thoroughly familiar with the property.

The first step of dialectic is to perform a survey of pluralities in order to see the scope the final account must cover. This survey is, in essence, a collection of the actions, people, types, and conditions to which one would apply the name of the property. 29 This

29 I have used the term “collect” to describe the process of surveying the items, types, classes, species, etc. that fall under the subject of inquiry. While this is not intended as an allusion to the method of Collection and Division, it so happens that the process of Collection in that method is much like the survey I am
is one reason why linguistic competence is so important. A person competent in the use of a term is reliable in collecting the pluralities so important to the beginning of dialectic. Those who come to dialectic already possessing DR1 familiarity with the nature, as demonstrated by their competent use of the term, will already have encountered or heard of types, species, and instances of the nature on many occasions. For someone who is hearing of the nature for the first time, the collection of instances serves to develop linguistic competence beyond the initial account.

So far I have described the process required to bring an inquirer completely ignorant of the property to a level of ordinary competence. This is a process nowhere displayed in the dialogues and it is largely taken for granted. This is because the properties Socrates is interested in are so important and so commonly spoken about that any adult speaker of Greek would be thoroughly familiar with them. When one adds that Socrates’ interlocutors are typically members of the intelligentsia, distinguished politicians, educators, artists, or religious leaders, it is evident why there is no need to develop linguistic competence. Thus, what I have described as the first step of dialectic, is a process most interlocutors go through as part of becoming a competent speaker. For this reason, Socrates goes immediately to the stage where accounts are proposed and tested. It is nonetheless useful for us to have gone through the kinds of statements describing here. The fact that this survey is part and parcel of our ordinary competence may help explain why there are so few examples of Collection in the dialogues compared to the ample instances of Division.

30 In referring to Socrates’ practice in dialogues other than the Meno I do not wish to attribute a dialectical model to Plato at the writing those dialogues. The dialectical structure I describe here is related to the Socratic elenchus, and I think may be described as a development of that method. Indeed, most scholars treat the opening of the Meno presents a standard Socratic elenchus. This reading overlooks Plato’s new attention to methodological issues, and the fruits of that attention.
involved in robust DR1 familiarity in order to see the scope a final account must cover. It is also useful because this collected body of statements plays a vital role in the next stage, where accounts are proposed and tested.

Once an inquirer is determined to be competent with the name of the property, and so to have DR1 familiarity with it, the inquiry moves to the testing of accounts. In this stage inquirers attempt to give an account that answers the *ti esti* question. Each account is then tested to see whether it accords with the way we tend to speak about the property and its bearers. In this process, the body of statements associated with our linguistic competence provides the inquirer with a host of claims against which she may test accounts. For instance, if the account names a feature that does not belong to a member of one of the pluralities, this presents a challenge to the correctness of the account. Similarly, if the account specifies a property belonging to an item not included in the plurality, the account comes into question. Accounts that are too narrow or too broad are challenged by counterexamples, accepted instances of the property under investigation that are not covered by the account, or an item covered by the account that we do not take to bear the property. So, although the pluralities themselves are not definitions, they provide evidence against which any candidate definition may be tested. Importantly, the collection of instances is not limited to the beginning of dialectic. At any point during investigation a new instance may be brought to bear on a candidate account. Nothing inspires us to think of a counterexample better than a definition we suspect is off track. The ability to bring new examples and instances to the discussion
depends on a general ability to pick out and describe bearers of the property in question. That is, it depends on DR1 familiarity with the property and the linguistic competence associated with it.

Claims about the individuals, types, and species that bear the property are not the only statements against which an account is tested. There are higher-level considerations that must be satisfied as well. Consider the claim that Virtue and the virtues are always beneficial. This claim is used on several occasions to show that an account of one virtue or another is inadequate.31 Many other sorts of considerations are brought in as well. In the Euthyphro an account of Piety is measured against intuitions about what kind of service it is possible to give to the gods. This discussion depends on Euthyphro's beliefs about the nature of the gods. In the Charmides, an account of Temperance is rejected because it fails to accord with the accepted value of quickness and slowness in everyday endeavors. Another is discarded because it goes against the tenet—central to the notion of Temperance—that one bearing it knows she has it. Some of these claims involve attributing a feature to all instances of the property in question, others involve deeply held notions about the nature of the property. For instance, Temperance has close connections to the notion of self-knowledge. For this reason, an account of Temperance that allows one to be temperate without knowing it is clearly unacceptable.

There is apparently no restriction on the statements, central or peripheral to the nature under consideration, that may be brought into the debate.32 If there is incoherence

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31 See Charmides 161a-b, Laches 163d-e.

32 Restrictions may be developed in the course of inquiry. That is, as we progress in dialectic, we may discover that certain topics do not bear a relevant connection to the subject under investigation.
between the account and something else we tend to say, that conflict presents a challenge to the adequacy of the account. The panoply of statements we make using the name of the term, either about particular items bearing the property, species of the property, or the property itself, acts as a kind of portfolio, an expanded portrait of the property we seek. Each claim in this portfolio is potentially a test the final account must pass. These tests are the tools of dialectic. These statements are potentially inconsistent with our account. Such an inconsistency demands revision. If we are not willing to give up the statement that conflicts with our account, then the account must be changed. So at the very least, these statements act as indicators that our account is incorrect.

In this role as indicators, however, the statements illuminate us as well. Here's how this happens. We present an account in a first groping attempt to articulate the nature of the object of inquiry. When this account fails it does so because it is incompatible with something we tend to say about the property or some of its bearers. The inconsistency between the account and our statement has developed because we overlooked whatever feature of the property is contained in the statement. When our account conflicts with something we are accustomed to say, we are alerted to an aspect of the property that has not yet been, but must be accommodated in our final account. Perhaps this is a set of items that deserve the name of the property, but are not covered by our first account. Perhaps we are reminded of a general feature we take to hold of all items bearing the property, but our account does not accord with that general predication. Perhaps our account is inconsistent with a deeply held but so far unarticulated notion about what the property is like. With each account rejected we learn, or are reminded of,
something concerning the item we seek to understand. In this way, the things we tend to say teach us about the things we seek to know, and lead us to the single correct account.

This is the most important role our linguistic competence plays in dialectic. Dialectic requires a kind of reflection quite foreign to most of Socrates’ interlocutors. Some of the insights presented in these discussions are occurring to the inquirers for the first time. These insights are reached by a new kind of attention to how we speak and what it is we mean in speaking that way. We can all identify with Laches’ frustration when he says “I am unaccustomed to this sort of discussion…and in truth I am irritated that I am not able to say what I know. I seem to myself to know what Courage is, but I don’t know how it has just gotten away from me so that I can’t put it together in an account and say what it is.” There is something determinate meant by our use of a term, and we have a vague intuition of the content. Nevertheless, our competence with the term and our intuition of the nature do not enable us to say what it is immediately. It is by reflecting on precisely what we mean when we use the term, and the conditions we look to in attributing the property that we come to understand what it is we have been predicating all along. But dialectic is difficult because we cannot tap directly into what we mean in predicating a nature. Instead, we must look at all the things we are used to saying with the term, both about its bearers and about the property in general. Each of these statements can reveal some aspect of the property we are predicating. They are

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33 Laches, 194a7- b4.

34 Consider the way Socrates asks Meno to give an account of Shape. First he points out that both the straight and the curved are shapes. He then points out that we say something different when we apply the term “shape” from when we apply either “round” or “straight.” Having made it clear that there is something unique attributed by our use of the term “shape” Socrates asks precisely what nature we do predicate by our use of the term: “What is it then, whose name is ‘Shape’?” (74d3-11)
 especially revealing, though, when they conflict with an account we have given. This kind of conflict reveals something included in what we mean by our use of the term, but not included by the account, or vice versa. For this reason, the rejection of accounts is not a negative moment in dialectic. Instead it presents inquirers with the opportunity to improve their understanding, to be made aware of a feature they associated with the property, and thus a condition their final account must satisfy.

We must be very clear about the dialectical role of the statements brought forward from our linguistic competence. Dialectic depends on an inchoate, intuitive grasp of the property under investigation. At heart, DR1 familiarity just is the intuitive grasp of a property that guides our responses to accounts. When a candidate account is deemed unsatisfactory, it is because it fails to capture our intuition of the property. Most of the time we will sense that an account is inadequate before we can say exactly why. In response, we present a statement that contradicts the account. This statement expresses our intuition of the property, and specifically that part of the intuition that is not captured by the account. There is simultaneous progress on two fronts here. Our intuition of the property indicates that the account is wrong, and guides us in improving it. But in order for this to happen, we must reflect on the intuition and identify precisely how the account fails to capture it. As a result of this reflection, our intuition of the property becomes

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35 In Chapter Three, I will argue that the theory of Recollection in the Phaedo explains our having this intuitive grasp in the first place.
sharper and more explicit. In this way, the process of testing and refuting many accounts gradually refines our latent, intuitive grasp of a property until we have full, patent understanding.\(^{36}\)

The testing stage is exploratory in nature. With each account proposed and rejected the inquirers gather features or instances of the property that must be covered by the final account. At one level this process serves to sharpen the plurality of particulars said to bear the property. It also gives the dialecticians the opportunity to investigate fully the subdivisions and types the property manifests. Finally, it allows them to consider all the characteristics that accompany the property in every case. The testing stage is a dialectical laboratory wherein the object of investigation is looked over, examined, and dissected by means of the things we are used to saying about it and its bearers. The final account is the account that accommodates the many things we tend to say about the property. It covers and explains the items in the many pluralities. It is consistent with the features we generally attribute to particulars bearing the property, and explains these general predications as well. It stands over our many uses of the term in a way that explains them, and organizes them into a systematic whole.

A few additional remarks about dialectic are needed. First, it is important to realize that the claims against which we test an account are not fixed in advance. It is possible that we are wrong to pick out an individual or action as an instance of the property we are considering. In the same way, the general claims and high-level considerations we bring to bear on a definition may be discarded if our reflection

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\(^{36}\) I address this in slightly more detail below, pp. 65-66. In the *Meno*, Plato does not fully explore the complexity of the interaction between accounts, counterexamples, and revisions.
convinces us that they are wrong. The Laches provides two situations where this is apparent. The first is Nicias’ account of Courage as knowledge of some kind. This account has the result, absurd in Laches’ eyes, that animals are incapable of being courageous. Instead of taking this as evidence that his account is wrong, Nicias instead disputes the allegedly universal practice of attributing courage to animals. In doing so, Nicias takes upon himself the burden of explaining why he does not take animals to be courageous. Accordingly, he must demonstrate that there are problems with attributing courage to animals. The dialectical process is not dictated by our pre-philosophical claims. Although we build and test our case on these claims, it is vital in the end that our intuitive understanding of the property directs and revises these statements, rather than the other way around. The other example involves the final refutation of Nicias’ account of Courage as knowledge of goods and evils. Since anyone knowing all goods and evils would necessarily have all other virtues, it seems that the account of Courage has the result that Courage is no longer just a part of Virtue, but is Virtue entire. There is some Platonic sympathy with this account of Courage. But in order for the account to go through, the intuition that there are distinct parts of Virtue must be revised. At the very least, Nicias must show how Courage can be described as a part of Virtue, even though Courage somehow sustains all other virtues as well. This involves careful and abstract theorizing about the nature of Virtue, and what it means to be a part of Virtue. These two examples are illuminating because one concerns the extension of Courage, whereas the

37 Laches 196e-197b.

38 Ibid., 199c-e.
other involves claims about the abstract relationship between Courage and another property, Virtue. The result is not merely that dialectic draws on claims of all sorts and levels, but also that any of these claims is subject to revision.

The fact that the claims and intuitions surrounding the object of inquiry may be revised helps to resolve an apparent problem in dialectical method. Socrates intimates in various places that in order to know anything about X, or whether any particular is X, one must first know what X is. The problem is that Socrates then uses claims about what X is like or what things are X in order to reject accounts of what X is. If he cannot know that these claims are right, then he has no sure basis for using these claims to reject any account. This criticism assumes that in challenging an account Socrates takes himself to have deduced the falsity of the account from its inconsistency with a decidedly true claim. But it is always available to the interlocutor to reject the claim that challenges his account. If he chooses not to take up the challenge in this way, it is because the claim is one he takes to be important enough that any correct account must accord with it. In such a case the interlocutor admits and understands why the account is wrong.

The goal is to come up with an account that best accords with our judgments about what bears the property in question, what features accompany the property, what is involved in having the property, and how the property is related to other properties. In developing such an account we may move back and forth between general speculation and attention to specific cases. We may move, that is, from making changes at the level of the account to making revisions in the phenomena the account is supposed to explain.

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For instance a specific case may force us to revise our account of Virtue. In turn, this leads us to change the way we think about other instances of Virtue, even instances which had previously seemed unproblematic. In this way the dialectical focus can shift quite flexibly until a kind of equilibrium is reached. The equilibrium is the state where the definition is consistent with all the cases one admits to be instances of the property and general features and species of the property. It is the state in which one feels no pressure to make revisions.

This is not to say that dialectic seeks only to find an account consistent with the largest set of statements. Consistency is a necessary feature of any account and its relations to the rest of our judgments. It is for this reason that inconsistency is a sign that one does not know what one is discussing. When dialectic is finished, our judgments and predication should be arranged around the single account stating what the object of inquiry is. This account must not only be consistent with the statements in our revised portfolio of the nature, it must also explain why these statements are right. An account of Virtue must be able to explain why it is virtuous for a man to govern the city, or why Courage deserves to be called a virtue. Similarly, if certain revisions are made in the claims and intuitions we had before engaging in dialectic, those changes should be explained by the account as well. If we choose no longer to call animals courageous, then the account of Courage should give us good reason for doing this. The role of our claims and intuitions regarding the object of dialectic is not just to act as a test of consistency, but to provide phenomena in need of explanation. Since any good explanation will be consistent with what it explains, inconsistency is a sign that the right account has not been found. Nevertheless the fit between the account and the body of
statements arranged around the account is ultimately much tighter than just consistency. The final account states the principle by means of which each of those statements is be explained and understood.

The fact that we are searching for explanations in dialectic has another important consequence. The search for explanations and essences expands our intellectual scope, and allow us to venture beyond the ordinary beliefs we have at the beginning of inquiry. If dialectic were no more than a search for consistency in our beliefs, then dialectic would consist in nothing more than pruning. We would simply remove beliefs until we reached a consistent set. But the beliefs available to an interlocutor at the beginning of inquiry are limited in a way. They are mainly beliefs about sensible particulars, either individual statements or generalities. Dialectical novices do not have beliefs about essences, or properties, or parts of kinds on any theoretical level. If we were looking for consistency only, our beliefs would remain at this level, and dialectic would be a two dimensional process, staying always on a single plane. In searching for explanation, though, the inquirer is forced to go beyond beliefs about sensible items, and begin thinking about a new kind of item, essences. The result is the introduction of a whole new level of postulates, hypotheses, and speculative suggestions about theoretical entities and relationships for the purpose of explaining the phenomena with which we begin.40

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40 The importance of speculation and guessing to dialectic cannot be overstated. It is represented by the boy's answers in his mathematical discussion with Socrates. (Meno, 82b ff.) The slave has never confronted these issues before, and he is just guessing, albeit within certain constraints. When he sees and understands the answer, his set of beliefs has not just been revised, it has been expanded. He leaves the discussion with beliefs and understanding about a subject he has never considered before. Accounts of dialectic as a process of mere inconsistency purging cannot accommodate this central feature of dialectical reflection.
Dialectic is a model of theory construction. As with any theorist, the dialectician approaches the task with phenomena in need of explanation, and a host of pre-theoretical, judgments, intuitions, and distinctions that may or not become a part of the final system. The process of dialectic is the process of reflecting on all of these phenomena, intuitions, and judgments in order to produce a single account that organizes and explains our pre-dialectical judgments in a coherent way. What is distinctive about dialectic is that these phenomena, intuitions, and claims are brought to dialectic through the linguistic competence of the interlocutors. They are presented in the form of things we tend to say. Although logic plays a vital role in this process — since the consistency of our claims is necessary for our account to be correct — dialectic does not reach its goal inferentially. The correct account of the property is not deduced from premises of any kind. When dialectic is complete, the correct account is seen to provide the explanation we seek. It is seen to signify the single essence common to all and only instances of the property, and the essence in virtue of which those items and actions bear the property. Furthermore, the account will signify that essence in terms that illuminate the behavior of the instances. The terms in the definition will be useful in explaining why certain features apply generally to all bearers of the property, or why none of the bearers possess a certain property. Finally, the account will locate the property in relation to more general properties to which the property under investigation is intelligibly related.

Dialectic proceeds by reflection on the things we tend to say with the name of a property. Our ordinary use of the property's name manifests an intuitive grasp of the property, which I have called DR1 familiarity. It is by seeking an account that says what the property is, an account that is consistent with, and explanatory of the many other
things we say about the property and its bearers, that we improve our grasp of the property. By developing an account, and the theory that surrounds it, we move from ordinary familiarity to knowledge. This is the structure of dialectic.

2.2 Meno’s Paradox and the Structure of Dialectic

In spite of Socrates’ carefully crafted practice definitions, Meno is unable to get the discussion off to the right start. Frustrated with his inability to give a satisfactory account, especially given his success in speaking about Virtue in the past, Meno challenges the possibility of inquiring at all. His challenge is phrased in this way: “And how, Socrates, will you search for something you don’t know at all? Which of the things you do not know will you pursue, having set it out before you? Or, most of all, if you should happen upon it, how will you know that this is the thing you didn’t know?” (80d5-8) As Meno has put it, the problem is one of recognition. Specifically, there is a problem with being sure that the thing one has set out to find is the thing one actually finds. Given that you do not know what it is you seek, how will you know when you find it? Or, having found something, how can you know that it is the thing you began looking for in the first place? The core of the paradox is that a poverty of information at the outset of inquiry prohibits one from being able to distinguish the object of one’s search from other
objects one might find in the process. What one knows at the start of inquiry is not sufficient to distinguish from other candidates the single essence, the grasp of which is the successful end of dialectic.\(^{41}\)

In order to fit Meno’s paradox to the structure of dialectic set out in section 1, I need to show that the linguistic competence associated with DR1 is insufficient to distinguish the single item picked out by the uniquely correct definition under DR2. Meno’s paradox arises because what we have at our disposal under DR1 does not equip us to identify the single thing we specify in an account under DR2. Given this, how will we know which item is to be picked out by our DR2 definition? Even if we should come upon that very thing, how will know that it is the item we have been looking for?

The competence associated with DR1 is the understanding possessed by the ordinary, unreflective user of an expression. To be competent with the term “virtue” and

\(^{41}\) Some commentators have seized upon Meno’s use of “τό πάραξιν” in the presentation of the challenge to suggest that the problem is resolved by equipping the dialectician with some information at the start of dialectic. Since it is not the case that we are completely ignorant of the object of our search, we can proceed to identify it. That is, it is possible to know enough about an object to identify it without thereby understanding that thing fully, or knowing what it is in itself. This solution makes an important point. My distinction between the familiarity required by DR1 and the understanding required by DR2 fits into such a model. The familiarity required by DR1 is enough to identify the object of one’s search, but is not equivalent to knowing what it is. It is not, that is, equal to the understanding required by DR2. Although I have some sympathy with this view, it is not enough. For one, if this were all that is required to surmount Meno’s paradox, the theory of Recollection would have an idle role. But it seems that an adequate interpretation of the paradox must find a genuine problem, and not merely hyperbole on Meno’s part. In addition, although Meno may seem to overstate his case by using the words “τό πάραξιν,” he does qualify his comment by including the phrase “ὅτι ἐστιν.” What he and Socrates are ignorant of is what Virtue is. To know what Virtue is is to know the single essence common to all virtuous items, which is responsible for their being virtuous. The ability to identify many instances, types, and species of Virtue is not equivalent, not even in a lesser degree, to knowing this single thing. Either one knows what Virtue is completely, or one is completely ignorant of it. The competence satisfying the DR1 may be comprehension of, or familiarity with Virtue in some sense, but it is not knowledge of what Virtue is. To know what Virtue is at all is to know completely the thing that makes virtuous things virtuous. See J. Moravcsik, “Learning as Recollection in the Meno,” in Plato’s Meno in Focus, pp. 112-128. See also Irwin, Plato’s Moral Theory, pg. 139. See also G. Fine, “Inquiry in the Meno.” Contrast A. Nehamas, “Meno’s Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher,” pg. 9.
its cognates is to be accurate enough in applying the term to people and actions that other
speakers accept your use as conveying the same meaning as their own. That is, they take
the competent user to be speaking of the same property as themselves when she uses
“virtue” to describe something. Not all of these uses will be straightforward
applications to particular instances of Virtue. Some of them will be general
characterizations of virtuous behavior, e.g. “It is virtuous to honor one’s parents.” Others
are statements of the benefits brought by Virtue. The majority of the uses, however, will
be applications of the term to particular actions, people, states of affairs, etc. That this is
the substance of our familiarity with these properties is shown, I think, by the way
Socrates' interlocutors respond to his questions. Most respond either by pointing out
particular actions, reciting platiitudes, or listing some of the characteristic behaviors
associated with the property Socrates' has asked about. The difficulty with Socrates'
method of questioning is not just that he poses difficult questions to answer, but that the
activity in which he engages his interlocutors is unfamiliar to them. They are asked to
reflect on the nature of a property, on its general character, in a way that is hard because
it is foreign. This kind of reflection is difficult precisely because competent speakers,
and even experts such as Euthyphro, are far more practiced at identifying the particular
action or person that is virtuous in a specific instance than in giving a unified, general
characterization.

What the inquirer brings to dialectic is a practiced skill at picking out particular
items and types bearing the property under investigation. This skill provides the

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42 It is very difficult to specify the conditions on linguistic competence with a term. The conditions I've
presented here should not be taken as necessary and sufficient conditions.
investigation with a set of items whose common feature must be identified. This provides the most basic way in which the familiarity associated with DR1 is insufficient to determine what one will find at the end of one’s search. For any collection of items there are an indeterminate number of features common to all and only those items. If one is searching for a feature common to the set of items one calls “virtuous” then in principle there will be a great many for one to choose from. The requirement that the feature belong to all and only those items is of no use in deciding between them. Notice how well this problem fits with Meno’s description of the problem with inquiry. Given that you are looking for the feature common to this set of items, how will you distinguish the right common feature from the wrong common features? And if you should happen to pick out the correct common feature, the nature one seeks, in virtue of what will you identify it as the very nature you were looking for? The evidence of one’s linguistic competence – a set of items from which one must determine the common feature – does not provide reasons for preferring one of these common features over the others.

This description of the problem depends on a scaled down picture of what linguistic competence provides. After all, a competent speaker isn’t able only to pick out items bearing the property with reliability. He or she is also able to describe the various sub-classes these items fall into, give general characterizations of the behavior in question, and say something about what is central to the property. The question one must ask, however, is whether these additional claims remove all indeterminacy about which feature is the single correct feature common to all and only the items bearing the property. When all these additional characterizations are brought to bear, is it the case that there is only one feature that is consistent with these claims, and common to all and
only the items described? The answer is no. The possibility remains that there is more than one feature one could pick out, even on the basis of the additional evidence.

The larger problem with this response is that when the extra claims are added, the full set of claims is typically inconsistent. As a result, the dialectician is confronted with a set of claims that requires revision. One must eliminate certain claims in order to make the full set consistent. But given a set of inconsistent statements, there is always more than one option for how to make revisions. In the simplest case, when two claims are inconsistent, one can choose to dispatch one or the other of the claims. When the set includes a great number of claims, occupying different levels of generality, the number of options for revision explodes. Even if a revised and consistent set of beliefs were sufficient to determine the single correct essence, there is a problem in deciding which consistent set of claims ought to be the basis for that determination. Since our expanded set of claims is inconsistent, there are many consistent sets we can make from that original set by revision.

We have reached a problem I call the problem of *multiple equilibria*. I said in section 1 that dialectic ends when we reach a state of equilibrium between our account and the statements associated with our linguistic competence. With respect to the first criterion for our account, we have discovered an indeterminacy in the evidence of our linguistic competence. The requirement that our account of X pick out a feature common to all and only X things fails to determine a single nature from the many natures that meet this demand. Similarly, the demand for consistency in our expanded set of beliefs fails to

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43 See pg. 51.
determine just one consistent set that contains the right account. Given the evidence of our linguistic competence, we could develop a number of different accounts, each accompanied by a different, but consistent set of statements. On these criteria, each of these end states is as adequate as the others. How do we tell which end state is the right one?

In this discussion I have not made use of the second criterion on answers to the *ti esti* question. The item specified by the definition must also be the single essence in virtue of which the many instances have the property in question. The essence we are seeking must *explain* the fact that the many instances are X. This explanatory role is also expanded when we expand the set of claims that are the evidence of dialectic. For if it is generally a feature of Virtue that it is beneficial this too ought to be explicable in terms of the single thing which is Virtue itself. Now, in one sense, this is the solution to our problems. Although there may be many features common to all and only the objects bearing the property we investigate, there is only one that genuinely explains their possession of the property. We are able to overcome the indeterminacy of the first criterion by means of satisfying the second. Similarly, we make choices in the process of rendering our belief set consistent by choosing the revision that will lead our system closer to the explanatory structure we seek.

This solution only serves to focus the problem. This can be seen in two ways. Take the first part of the solution, according to which we choose from among the many features common to all and only the instances of the property by picking the one that genuinely explains their being what they are. How do we do that? How do we decide which nature explains the property we are investigating? In virtue of what do we have a
sense for the genuinely explanatory? Perhaps we accomplish this by creating a larger explanatory theoretical structure. When we have done this, we can see which essence stands at the center of the structure, and which sustains explanations. But this is to beg the crucial question in another way: How do we decide between competing explanatory theoretical structures? From our initial set of beliefs many different consistent explanatory structures might be formed, but only one will genuinely explain what needs explaining. Given this, how will we know when we have found the right one? If we should chance upon the right one, on what basis do we distinguish it from the other possibilities?

In showing how Meno’s paradox fits with the structure of dialectic, I have gone beyond anything Plato says explicitly in the *Meno*. But Meno’s paradox is explicitly a problem for inquiry. And, as I have shown, inquiry for Plato is a method, a process with rules and regular routines. It is important to see how the paradox applies to the details of the method. Ultimately, though, Meno’s paradox is a challenge to the possibility of a certain kind of learning. The importance of explanation to dialectic reveals the deep problem Plato is addressing. Human beings are capable of developing a remarkable kind of understanding. It is an understanding in which we grasp the causes of things, the underlying reasons that shape our world and ourselves. Plato thinks that learning and knowledge are real. He thinks that our philosophical and scientific inquiries genuinely bring us closer to understanding the causes of nature. In coming to have this

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44 Plato repeats forms of the verb ζητεῖν no fewer than five times in a few lines (80d5-e5). See Moravcsik, “Learning as Recollection,” pp. 112-113. In “Meno’s Paradox,” Nehamas makes helpful remarks on how we are to construe the fact that Meno’s paradox is limited to inquiry. Rather than excluding other forms of learning from the problems of the paradox, he points out rightly that “Plato seems to hold the view that any learning and epistêmê worth the name must be achieved through inquiry,” pg.9.
understanding our minds undergo a radical transformation. We move from being able to say only what is taking place, to saying why it takes place. We move from being able to describe the superficial phenomena, to articulating the underlying causes. But from our superficial account of what occurs, we might arrive at any number of explanations, only one of which accurately presents the causes in nature. The fact that we can approach and eventually reach the right explanation itself demands explanation. The explanation must describe the powers of the human intellect that enable us to enact this transformation, and to learn.

2.3 The Theory of Recollection

Socrates shows Meno that learning is possible by engaging a slave of Meno’s in a discussion of geometry. A great deal has been written about this passage, how it supports the theory of Recollection, and what the theory must be, given the evidence of the discussion. I want to give an account of the theory of Recollection first, and then to show how the passage conveys the theory. My account of Recollection depends heavily on the structure of dialectic and the obstacles the process faces. In this dialogue,

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45 It is in precisely this sense that true beliefs become knowledge according to Plato. It is for this reason that I think we must understand true belief in the Meno along the lines of DRT familiarity, and not as the true belief of a single proposition or a set of propositions. It may be more accurate to translate (ῥητὴ ὁδόξα) as true seeming, to capture that (ῥητὴ ὁδόξα) is a cognitive relation between a mind and a property, not between mind and proposition. One who has (ῥητὴ ὁδόξα) with respect to a property is one whose judgment about when the property appears is reliable.

Recollection is presented to explain our ability to learn through dialectic. The structure of dialectic provides a framework for the theory; it helps us focus on the kind of intellectual progress at stake, and the rational faculties that sustain such progress. The interrogation of the slave boy embodies the structure of dialectic. As an instance of successful dialectic, therefore, it demonstrates that we are able to overcome the obstacles I have described as part of Meno's paradox. Specifically, the interrogation of the slave boy displays the rational faculties attributed by the Theory of Recollection.

2.3.1 Recollection and Rational Faculties

The problem represented by Meno's paradox is that linguistic competence does not provide sufficient evidence for us to identify the single essence our final dialectical account must pick out. In the end, the inadequacy of our evidence came down to the problem of identifying the genuinely explanatory. This was presented in two ways. There is, first of all, a problem with identifying a single essence out of many as the one that genuinely explains the being of many particulars. Beyond that there is a problem with identifying a connected body of statements as the single genuinely explanatory theoretical system among many candidates. In fact these two ways of looking at the problem are related. They are related because the explanatory system of the second perspective is anchored by the definition specifying the single explanatory essence of the first. The success of the explanatory system depends on the success of the essence's explanation of many particulars, types, and species of the property, as well as the other
general phenomena attending its presence. Our ability to overcome Meno’s paradox and make dialectical progress comes down to our ability to tell when an essence provides the explanations we seek.

Two kinds of explanation must be distinguished. These kinds will correspond to two rational abilities attributed by the theory of Recollection. Let us start with our ability to pick out the single essence in virtue of which many particulars are alike. While there may be many essences common to those items, the assumption is that only one of them explains the property we are interested in. In order to discover exactly what the essence is, we need to do some careful thinking about what we predicate of an item when we use the name of the property. We need to think about which features of the item have led us to call it by the name of the property. In asking the *ti esti* question, Socrates says that it will be useful for Meno to focus on (\(\alpha\pi\rho\theta\lambda\varepsilon\varphi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\) \(\varepsilon\iota\varsigma\) 72c8) the one thing common to all virtuous items in giving an answer. Similarly, in the *Euthyphro* Socrates suggests that it is by focusing on the item specified in the definition of the Pious that he will be able to tell whether any item is Pious or not. (*Euthyphro*, 6e5) But Socrates also suggests that even in our ordinary predications, we are focusing on the nature we hope to pick out with our account. This is indicated, though not with same vocabulary, in the *Meno*.

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47 This assumption is best displayed in the *Euthyphro*, where Socrates rejects the account of Piety as the god-beloved. (11a5 ff.) While it may be the case that the god-beloved is coextensive with the Pious, Euthyphro has described an affection, \(\pi\alpha\theta\omicron\varsigma\ \tau\iota\) instead of the essence, \(\omicron\sigma\omicron\sigma\iota\alpha\). The implication here is that there may be many \(\pi\alpha\theta\omicron\varsigma\), but only one \(\omicron\sigma\omicron\sigma\iota\alpha\).

48 Plato uses “\(\alpha\pi\rho\theta\lambda\varepsilon\varphi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\)” in several ways. At times it is used to describe the item or person an individual is looking at. But there is a clear pattern of uses in which the verb takes as its object what a person has in mind in saying what he or she does. Within this broad use, two narrower uses develop in Plato’s writing. The first is exemplified at *Euthyphro* 6e5. A person who knows an essence fully focuses on the essence in identifying its bearers. Similarly, craftsman focus on the \(\epsilon\iota\dot{\delta}\omicron\varsigma\) of their product in their work (*Cratylus* 390e2-3, *Gorgias* 503e1) and the philosopher-rulers of the *Republic* focus on the Form of
when Socrates enjoins Meno to give an account of Shape: “What is it that belongs no less to the round than to the straight, which you call shape.” (Meno, 74d7-9) Meno is not able, presumably, to provide a final account of Shape. Nonetheless, when he uses the term ‘shape’ he succeeds in identifying and naming the essence of Shape. Embedded in our ordinary use of a term there is a cognition, perhaps inarticulate, of the very item we seek to specify in a definition. We are able to recognize and identify the nature when it is present, but are not able to explicate just what the nature is. Dialectic is the process by which we make the inchoate cognition of our ordinary competence articulate.

This inchoate cognition is not idle in dialectic. Consider, for instance, what happens when someone gives an account that we think fails to pick out the right essence. Often, before we can say exactly why, we have a vague sense that the account is wrong. We have an intuition of the essence we seek, and it is by reference to that intuition that we are comfortable or uncomfortable with an account. If we are uncomfortable, we strive to provide a counterexample. But what allows us to think of a counterexample? That is, what sustains our confidence that the counterexample we present is a legitimate instance of the property? It is our intuition of the essence of the property. In this process we both rely on our intuition of the essence, and refine it. The intuition tells us that an account is wrong, and aids us in developing a counterexample to show this conclusively. Then, by comparison of the counterexample to the essence described in the account, we can focus on the difference between them. We can focus on the precise feature demanded by our intuition of the nature, but absent in the account we challenge. This is but one example

Justice in governing. The second use is one in which an ordinary person, lacking expertise, focuses on some feature or features of an object in calling it by a certain term. See Protagoras 354b,e, Hippias Major, 299e, and Republic 429b.
of the way our progress in dialectic is made possible by the intuition associated with our ordinary linguistic competence. Over the course of dialectic this intuition leads us gradually to revise our accounts, until we see that our account signifies the essence we have been intuiting all along. In this process, our ability to recognize the property is refined and made articulate. But we could not make progress in dialectic, and recognize the item we are looking for, without this prior ability to detect it.

The second kind of discerning power is our ability to see that the essence picked out by our account explains the general phenomena we are trying to explain. For instance, certain less general properties and characteristics seem to fall under the property we are investigating, or the property’s bearers are characterized in a number of regular ways, or certain features coincide with the property in every instance. Each of these represents a case where there is a relationship between two properties. For instance, when we call Courage a virtue we say something about Courage itself and its relationship to Virtue. To understand why Courage is a virtue is to see why Virtue’s nature and that of Courage are such that it is appropriate to subsume Courage beneath Virtue. Similarly, if it is true to say that Virtue is good, or that all virtuous things are beneficial, our understanding of this fact depends on our ability to grasp the relationship between the essence of Virtue and the essence of the Good that makes these statements true.

Relations hold between properties because of their essences. If we grasp the nature of Virtue we have taken a crucial step to understanding its relations to other properties. But our ability to do this depends on an additional ability to perceive the relations holding

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49 Compare this account to Irwin’s: “To inquire into x we need only enough true beliefs about x to fix the reference of the term ‘x’, so that when the inquiry is over, we can see we still refer to the same thing,” Plato’s Moral Theory, pg. 139.
between essences and following from what they are. Because of this ability we are able to distinguish the genuinely explanatory structure from those competing theories that do not provide real explanations.

The theory of Recollection explains our ability to learn by attributing two rational abilities to humans. The first is the ability to grasp determinate essences. This grasp is manifested first in our ability to apply words reliably to things, to recognize the same character in many guises. It is realized fully when we answer the *ti esti* question and articulate the essence we have intuited all along. The second ability is our grasp of the relations between essences. It is this ability that allows us to understand why everything virtuous is good, or why everything odd is numbered. This ability is also manifested in our ordinary use of language. It is at work in our comprehension and use of logical inference. We understand when one proposition follows from another in virtue of understanding the relations between the predicates in the propositions. This is not to say that our ability to deduce a conclusion from premises demonstrates understanding of the fullest kind. Rather, our sense of relations between properties and predicates is

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50 In Chapter Five, I'll examine the metaphysical conditions underlying these relations between properties. I'll argue that Plato assigns the origin of these relations to the sensible world, and not strictly to the essences of the Forms involved. This does not entail that grasping the essence of a property is not necessary to grasp its relations. Nor does it mean that the essences contribute nothing to determine these relations. See pg. 215 ff.

51 Vlastos's account of Recollection is this: “any advance in understanding which results from the perception of logical relationships.” See “Anamnesis in the Meno,” pg. 97. Logical relationships hold between terms or propositions, whereas on my view what we understand are essences, and the relationships between them. Our perception of logical relationships is based in our perception of relationships between natures, and what those relationships reveal about the natures themselves.
undeveloped just as our grasp of the natures themselves. Dialectic takes these basic rational capacities embodied in our ability to use language and transforms them into full articulate understanding.

In describing the nature of dialectical progress, I emphasized its flexibility, such that a dialectical investigation may move back and forth between discussion of particulars, general characteristics, types, and species. We can now see that this flexible process is one in which the two rational faculties I have just described interact with and refine one another. At times in dialectic, we will deny that a particular bears a property because it fails to have a feature we associate with the property. Thus, our sense of the relationship between one nature and another revises the pool of particulars whose common feature we look for. Conversely, as the plurality of particulars is revised, we may notice other regularities, or natural divisions in the plurality. Thus, as we refine our grasp of the nature itself, we are better able to grasp the relationship between that nature and other natures. At times we improve our grasp of an essence by reflection on the relationships it bears to other natures. And at times we grasp those relations better because we have improved our grasp of the essence itself.

It will be useful to describe these rational abilities more precisely, using the terminology developed in my account of dialectic. There are, I argued, two levels of comprehension that constitute the endpoints of dialectic. DR1 familiarity stands at the beginning of dialectic, and DR2 understanding at the end. Each of the rational abilities posited by the theory of Recollection is manifested at each of these levels (and in between). Thus, there is a DR1 manifestation of our ability to grasp a nature, and a DR2 manifestation. Similarly there is a DR1 expression of our ability to discern the relations
between natures, and a DR2 expression of the same ability. The DR1 grasp of a nature involves the reliable ability to recognize particulars bearing the property in question, to comprehend others when they use the name of the property in speech, and probably the ability to give some general characterization of those particulars and the property they share. None of these abilities is infallible, nor are there requirements that a competent speaker be able to pick out specific paradigm cases, or provide a standard lexical account of the term. These requirements are flexible. In contrast a DR2 grasp of a nature is insight into the very essence of the property, the single thing responsible for any particular's possession of that feature. It is characterized by the ability to provide the single correct articulation of that essence, and to employ this account in analyzing or explaining why any particular has the property in question.

DR1 grasp of the relations between natures includes the following: the speaker's sense of the types and species into which the property is divided, familiarity with some of the general features of the nature's bearers, and some comprehension of inferences involving the nature's name. For example, the adult Greek knew that Courage, Wisdom, and Justice were virtues. She also knew that Virtue is beneficial, and that a man's virtue entailed his participation in the governance of his city. DR2 grasp of the relations holding between natures is displayed by the ability to give systematic explanations of these relations by reference to the essences of the properties. Such an account will, therefore, rely only on the content of a definition of the natures involved.

With these distinctions made, we are prepared to see how the structure of dialectic figures in the slave boy interrogation. The slave boy interrogation proceeds in three
parts. The first part runs from 82b8-e2, the second from 82e14-84a2, and the third from 84d4-85b6. I call these three sections the preliminary section, the exploratory section, and the discovery section respectively. These three sections together embody the structure of dialectic. The preliminary section introduces the topic of discussion and confirms that the slave meets the prerequisites for investigation. In this section Socrates carefully tests to see that the slave has certain dialectical tools. These tools are nothing more than what is comprised in the slave’s ordinary comprehension of the word ‘square,’ and they are all that Socrates calls on in the investigation. That is, Socrates takes stock of the slave’s DR1 comprehension of the nature of square and the relations holding between the nature of squares and other properties. Once he is comfortable that the slave has the required familiarity with squares, the investigation can continue. The exploratory section begins when the slave proposes an answer to the problem Socrates has set him. In this section Socrates uses the slave’s competence to show him that his answers are not correct. It is important to see, however, that this is not all that happens in this stage of the discussion. In addition, the slave’s errors focus his inquiry, and give some guidance as to where the correct answer lies. This section represents the role of testing accounts in

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52 For a different reading of this passage, see Irwin, Plato’s Moral Theory, pg. 139 where it is claimed that the discussion is a scale model Socratic elenchus. Fine echoes this view in “Inquiry in the Meno.” n. 27. In general the interrogation of the slave is taken to show how Socratic elenchus can result in learning. I think these readings fail to notice two important features of the discussion that make it unlike elenchus as it is commonly described. The first is the way the slave’s grasp of matters gradually improves (see below pp. 74-78), and the way this improvement plays a central role in his ability to grasp the final answer. I have not encountered an account of the elenchus or dialectic that describes the rejections of accounts as a moment of progress for the inquirers. This facet of dialectic is crucial to my view. The second feature concerns the way the solution is reached. The correct solution is not discovered merely by eliminating contradictions from the boy’s set of beliefs. The boy has never heard of the diagonal of a square. Socrates needs to introduce the diagonal, at which point the boy can see that it is the line he is looking for. On the standard account of elenchus progress is made by eliminating false beliefs. But this is clearly not what happens to the slave boy in the discovery section.

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dialectic. The accounts may be false, but they reveal to us important features of the property, and so guide our search from then on. In the discovery section, finally, the tools of the preliminary stage and the guidance of the exploratory stage enable the slave to see the solution to the problem. Although the discovery stage does not present us with the acquisition of DR2 knowledge, it displays the very faculties that allow inquiry to be productive. We are shown an advance in the slave’s understanding, an advance akin to the advances that complete dialectic.

2.3.2 Preliminaries: 82b8-e2

Before asking the slave any questions, Socrates asks Meno just one question about the slave’s knowledge. He asks him whether the slave speaks Greek. (82b3) If the slave does not speak Greek, he and Socrates will have a hard time inquiring together. Speaking Greek is therefore a necessary condition on the slave’s participation. But the fact that this is the only question Socrates asks indicates that the slave’s knowledge of Greek is also sufficient for participation. Socrates will go on to ask the slave several more questions to see what he knows, in the ordinary sense of the word. But these questions are asked after Socrates has accepted the challenge of inquiring with the slave. Socrates is confident that he can inquire with the slave just because the slave speaks Greek. The further implication is that the familiarity specifically pertinent to the investigation can be thought of as part of the slave’s fluency in Greek. Thus, when the

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53 There is a similar moment at Charmides 159a6-7.
slave demonstrates some familiarity with squares, we should see it as nothing more than a specific part of his general competence with the Greek language.

There are four preliminary questions concerning the nature and character of squares, followed by four calculating the area of a square whose sides are two units long. After these questions, Socrates presents the problem of the double square. The first question basically tests to see whether the slave can identify a square. (82b9-10) He is presented with a drawn square and asked whether a square is such (τοιούτου) as the drawn figure. The slave's ability to answer the question depends only on his ability to look at the figure and identify it as a square. It is only in the next question that the τοιούτου is explicated: "So then a square is a figure having all these lines equal, being four in number?" (82b10-c2) Socrates next asks whether the lines running from the midpoints of opposing sides are also equal, and finally whether there can be bigger and smaller squares. (82c2-4) In answering each of these questions affirmatively the slave shows a reasonable grasp of what a square is. He is able not only to identify a square when one is displayed. He is also familiar with some of the general features of squares, such as that their sides are equal, and that the lines connecting the midpoints of opposing sides are equal. In recognizing the square Socrates has put before him, and agreeing that

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54 In saying that the slave must just look at the square and identify it as such, I don't mean to suggest that the discovery to follow is a purely empirical one. See Vlastos, "Anamnesis in the Meno," for a refutation of David Ross's claim to this effect in Plato's Theory of Ideas, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), pg. 18.

55 The description Socrates gives of squares fails to mention the fact that squares have equal angles as well as sides. The investigation to come will make inferences or claims that depend on this feature of squares. Although the slave is not yet able to articulate all the features of squares, he can already grasp some of the consequences of those features. That is, he can grasp that the transversals of a square are equal, even though this depends on the equality of the angles in the square, and not just on the equality of the sides.
squares can be bigger or smaller, the slave demonstrates DR1 grasp of the nature of a square. In agreeing that squares have equal sides, and that the lines intersecting opposite sides are equal, he demonstrates DR1 grasp of some of the relations holding between the nature of a square and other properties. The fact that the slave has learned no geometry means that his familiarity with these features of squares has no origin in formal education. It has developed from his everyday experience with squares.

The same can be said about the competence displayed in the discussion of the area of the square with sides of length 2. Socrates builds the square up from two rectangles which measure two by one. Given that the area of such a rectangle is two, and that there are two such rectangles in the two by two square, the area of the square must be twice that of the rectangle. The slave’s arithmetical ability allows him to calculate that the area of the two by two square is four. In these answers the slave demonstrates rudimentary arithmetical skill. Notably, he does not demonstrate the ability to calculate the area of the square by multiplying the length of the side by itself. Socrates must lead him through the calculation step by step.

Whether or not these tools are in fact sufficient for the demonstration to come is still in question. What is nevertheless interesting about the first interchange between the slave and Socrates is that it takes place before Socrates has set the problem before the slave. The problem is not presented until 82d8-e2. Prior to an investigation into squares and their relative areas, Socrates has taken steps to make sure that the slave is capable of talking about squares and thinking about the relationship between the areas of two squares. One might diminish the importance of this point by saying that the problem can’t be described unless one has said something about squares and their areas. But this
reflects the fact that one can’t understand the problem without a certain familiarity with squares and their areas. In asking these preliminary questions Socrates is assessing the slave’s ability to engage the question at hand. He is making sure the slave has the requisite conceptual tools to think about the problem. The function of the preliminary section is analogous to the role of accounts we give under DR1. Those accounts are given to provide one’s interlocutor with the minimum level of competence to begin thinking about the essence of a property. Thus, the preliminary stage of the slave interrogation has the same goals as the requirements associated with DR1. Both are aimed at insuring that inquirers have the requisite tools to engage in dialectic, and in each case these tools are associated with the linguistic competence of the inquirers.

2.3.3 Exploratory: 82e14-84a2

The exploratory stage of the slave boy interrogation represents the testing of accounts. The process of testing and revising accounts brings about learning and moves us from DR1 to DR2. These accounts are tested against the way we tend to speak about the property and its bearers. In rejecting these accounts we discover certain conditions of the property we are investigating, conditions that must be accommodated by our final account. Similarly, in the exploratory phase of the interrogation two lengths for the side of the double sized square are proposed and rejected. What is crucial to see about these rejections is, first, that they employ the tools introduced in the preliminary stage, and second that they redirect and focus the slave boy’s search. Incorrect answers are not just discarded; rather they are used to guide the search from that point on.
The first answer the slave gives is that to draw a square double the original square’s area one should double the length of its sides. (82e2-3) Socrates shows the slave that this answer is wrong by doubling each of the sides, and showing the slave that the resulting square contains four squares equal to the original square. Instead of being twice the area of the two by two square, the resulting square is four times the size of the two by two square. Socrates shows this by drawing the transversals that connect the midpoints of the opposing sides. Since the slave is familiar with these lines, and can see that they divide the original square into four squares equal to the original, he can see that the four by four square is four times, not twice the area of the two by two square. (82e15-83c4) In this way, the rejection of the slave’s answer uses one of the features of squares the slave was shown to comprehend in the preliminary section. Furthermore, Socrates uses the incorrect answer to focus the search: “Isn’t the eight foot square double this one (the two by two square), and half this one (the four by four square)? Won’t it then be based on a line greater than this length (two feet) but smaller than this length (four feet)?” (83c6-d1) Socrates derives two constraints on the correct square from the slave’s mistake. First, in addition to being twice the size of the two by two square, it will also be half the size of the four by four square. Second, since its area is intermediate between these two squares, the length of its side must also be intermediate between the length of their sides.

The slave listens more to the latter point, unfortunately; the former is much more precise. He next guesses that the length must be three feet, since it is the most obvious quantity between two and four feet.\(^\text{56}\) (83e2) Socrates performs the same maneuver as

\(^{56}\) The slave is just guessing here. This hints at a problem with taking the interrogation as a standard elenchus. In an elenchus, false beliefs are purged from an interlocutor when they conflict with his other beliefs. But the slave is just guessing when he says that the square with sides of length three has an area of
before, calculating the area of the three by three square and showing that it is not equal to eight. The rejection of this proposal is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. The first is the way Socrates calculates the area of the square. In the case of the two by two and four by four squares, Socrates calculated the area by building the square up from components whose areas were known. But in this case, he immediately asks whether the area “comes to be three times three feet.” Socrates takes the boy to be learning, to have become more familiar with the way a square's area is calculated, and no longer to need a step by step calculation. The second result is that the slave is shown that it will be more difficult than he thought to state the length of the line that is the base of the eight foot square. Since the three by three square has been shown to be larger than the eight foot square, the slave can infer that the length he seeks is less than three feet. But in choosing a value between two and three, the slave has no idea where to begin. We have no reason

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eight. He isn’t expressing a view to which he is committed at all. The fact is that the problem Socrates presents to him is a new problem, something the boy has never considered before. It doesn’t make sense, for this reason, to describe the slave’s second answer as a belief he has prior to the investigation. The same is true often in dialectic. The kind of question Socrates asks is new to most of his interlocutors. The answers they give him range between platitudes, familiar examples, and guesses of various levels of reflection. Some of the answers will be claims the interlocutor has never considered before meeting Socrates. It seems inappropriate to describe these claims as statements the interlocutor believes prior to investigation. Socrates is asking his interlocutors to do something they have never tried to do, to say what a property is, i.e. state its essence. This request forces them into a realm of reflection they have never entered before. The main development when these initial forays fail is not, I think, the revision of beliefs they had before investigation, though this often occurs, but their growing understanding of what is required in an explanation, and their improved ability to provide one. One result of this new understanding is the development of entirely new beliefs about matters we have never considered before. See Nehamas, “Meno’s Paradox” pg. 14.

57 In Plato’s *Meno*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961) pg. 302, R.S. Bluck has a nice note on this difference, and the manner of finding the areas in the first cases. He also writes: “Socrates’ purpose in introducing the transversals in 82c was no doubt partly, as we have seen, to help the slave to see how [the two by two square] could be divided up into two one-one-foot wide strips, or four square units, and perhaps also to help in determining the area of a square on a base of four feet.”
to think that he can handle fractions, much less irrational numbers. Socrates acknowledges this point by affordings the slave another way of answering the question: “If you don’t wish to count, then point out the line.” (84a1) The rejection of the second proposal guides the slave’s search in a different way from the first rejection. The first rejection narrowed the numerical range in which the answer might be found. The rejection of the three by three square alters the manner in which the slave will search for the answer. Instead of trying to discern the length of the side of the eight foot square, the slave is now trying to find an eight foot square so that he might merely point to its side as the answer. If the slave continues to search for the answer by proposing numerical lengths he will never succeed, because it is not in his power to express the irrational value $\sqrt{8}$. The new manner of search will ultimately be very useful. In addition, the new constraint pushes the slave back to the first piece of guidance derived from the rejection of the four by four square: find a square that has half the area of the four by four square.

If the slave can find that square, he will be able to point to its side as the line he is looking for.

Each correction focuses and directs the slave’s search. It is for this reason that it is appropriate to call what he is doing Recollection. Socrates instructs Meno before the exploratory phase to “watch the slave recollect in succession, as it is necessary to recollect.” (82b5-6) This has puzzled many interpreters, since what follows in the

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58 This quandary is surely one of the reasons the slave professes ignorance here, and not before. Granted, Socrates has mislead the boy previously, strongly hinting after the first failed account that he should guess at a length of three feet (83d4-5). See Vlastos, “Anamnesis in the Meno,” pg. 98.
interrogation are two incorrect answers. Are we to take the slave to have recollected these proposals? If so, it seems that Recollection is no guarantee of learning since what one recollects might be false as well true. This analysis assumes that Recollection is the cognitive process underlying the slave’s answer in each case. But this needn’t be where Recollection lies. Recollection occurs when the slave’s grasp of the problem improves. Thus, at this stage, Recollection takes place not when the slave speaks, but when he digests the corrections Socrates gives him. He does not learn merely that his answers are wrong. He also learns, at first, to restrict the range in which he searches, and later to alter the manner of his searching. By making these mistakes, the slave is brought closer to knowledge; his thinking about the problem is improved. The end result of Recollection is not the possession of a true proposition, but understanding. Accordingly, any steps that advance the understanding, even if they involve the proposal and rejection of incorrect accounts, are steps of Recollection.®

Socrates says that inquiry and learning are entirely Recollection. (81d4-5) The breadth of this claim makes sense if we remember two things. The first is that Plato privileges a certain kind of understanding, and thinks that it alone deserves the name of epistêmê. Accordingly, he calls learning only those moments of intellectual progress that promote epistêmê. Plato is not interested in explaining our ability to master routines by

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59 See Dominic Scott, Recollection and Experience. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) pp. 37-8, and Nehamas, “Meno’s Paradox,” pp. 14-19. Nehamas restricts Recollection to the moment, or period, when knowledge is attained. But this is because he fails to recognize that learning, beyond the recognition that the slave’s answers are wrong, is taking place in the exploratory section.

60 The reading closest to mine on this matter is Vlastos’s in “Anamnesis in the Meno.” I have already addressed the way I differ from Vlastos, who takes Recollection to be improvement of the understanding from the perception of logical relationships. See note 51.

61 See Nehamas, “Meno’s Paradox,” pg. 9
rote, or to be informed about particular people and events. He is concerned with the rational faculties that enable us to understand and explain the facts and regularities of our world. The second point is illustrated by the exploratory section of the slave boy interrogation. Dialectic and learning are gradual. While there are moments where our progress is more marked than others, we typically proceed incrementally to knowledge. Recollection describes the nature of our intellectual progress at all steps along the way. This is why Socrates says that the boy has recollected even though he has not acquired *epistēmē*. As long as the boy makes progress toward knowledge, he has recollected.

2.3.4 Discovery: 84d4-85b6

The discovery section represents the way dialectical tools advance the understanding. Socrates and the slave use the tools developed in the preliminary section and the guidance acquired from the exploratory section to discover the answer. Socrates begins this section by building a single four by four square out of four two by two squares. (84d3-e2) The result is a four by four square with its transversals drawn in. In this, Socrates is reminding the slave of the rejection of his first proposal. That rejection depended on the slave’s acquaintance with the transversals of a square. Socrates now asks the slave how much greater the four by four square is than the two by two, and the slave, remembering the earlier argument, responds correctly "four times greater." (84e1) Socrates then reminds the slave that we aren’t looking for the square which is four times greater, but the one twice the size. The slave has shown that he remembers the results of his first proposal. Socrates’ comment serves to remind him that the desired square must
also have half the area of the four by four square. When, therefore, Socrates draws the
diagonals of the two by two squares, the slave is prepared to tell whether it forms the
desired square.

Now, imagine that Socrates does not draw the diagonals, but stops after building
the four by four square with its transversals. Imagine that he reminds the slave that the
eight foot square is twice the size of each of the two by two squares, and half the size of
the four by four square. Finally, imagine that Socrates simply asked the slave if he could
see a way of forming a square inside the four by four square that met these criteria. It is
not farfetched to imagine the slave seeing that the diagonals of the two by two square,
when properly drawn, form a square that meets these conditions. That is, we can easily
imagine someone in the slave’s position getting the answer right without first being
shown it. This is not what happens, of course, but the imagined circumstance is
illuminating. It shows us that the progress of the discussion has given the slave a basis
for understanding the solution when Socrates presents it. In the context of the slave’s
familiarity with the transversals of the four by four square, as well as the information that
the desired square must be half the size of that square, the slave’s grasp of the solution
makes sense. When Socrates shows the slave the answer we can see that the slave does
not merely assent to Socrates’ assertions, but he sees for himself that the solution has
been found.

This provides a way of understanding Socrates’ strong statement that each of the
slave’s answers is his own opinion.62 (87b8-9) It appears that Socrates’ has spoon fed the

demonstration to the slave. There is a sense in which this is true and a sense in which it is false. It is not true to say that Socrates has simply told the slave the correct answer and that this is the basis on which the slave asserts it to be true. Socrates has carefully used what the slave knows to display the answer in a manner comprehensible to the slave. The solution is spoon fed to the slave in the sense that it is put in a form that accommodates what he knows. The other side of this, of course, is that the slave’s competence has developed in the course of the discussion. In order to understand the solution to the problem, there are demands that any inquirer must meet. Socrates brings the boy along until he meets those demands. The interrogation of the slave is an extended display of adherence to the DR, both at the initial stages of inquiry and beyond. Whereas the boy may not have been prepared to grasp the solution at the start of the interrogation, the progress of the exploratory stage develops the familiarity he starts with until he can see the solution.

The slave does not blindly assent when Socrates points out the diagonal as the base of the double sized square. The slave’s acquisition of this information is not just rote learning. Plato’s choice of a mathematical example is revealing in this respect. There is a sense of ‘know’ according to which it is possible to know a mathematical theorem by rote, or on the authority of a mathematician. What one lacks when one knows a theorem in this way is a grasp of the mathematical relationships that make the theorem true. In contrast, there is a kind of understanding in mathematics that one has only when one has grasped the necessity of the theorem, and grasps the reasoning behind

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63 I am here discussing a sense of the English word ‘know,’ and not a sense of the word epistêmê for Plato.
the theorem. In order for this grasp to develop, a student of mathematics must not only behold a demonstration, but must also engage the demonstration in a certain way, become aware of the reasons the demonstration demonstrates, and see for him or herself that these reasons are compelling. Those who have had difficulty understanding or getting another to understand a geometrical proof know that repetition of diagrams and examples just won't do it. In order to grasp the rational force of a proof the learner must reach out with his or her own mind and grasp what is there. Understanding of the kind Plato is concerned with cannot be planted or poured into a person's mind; each learner must develop it from his or her own resources. This, in part, is what Plato is trying to capture in calling learning Recollection. Our grasp of rational connections, essences, and relations between essences, cannot be provided for us by anyone else. Learning is an activity the learner must perform for him or herself. An instructor can find ways to present material so as to enable a learner's grasp, by accommodating what the learner does and does not know. But the act of learning, of grasping essences and rational relations, is something each learner must accomplish alone.

In the end, the slave recognizes that four squares of equal size can be arranged in a square four times their area, such that the diagonals of the four smaller squares form a square twice their size and half that of the larger square. The slave sees that this is a necessary consequence of the nature of the squares. That is, he grasps the necessary relation between the original square, and the square formed on its diagonal. He has advanced from a DR1 familiarity of the relations between the square and its transversals to a deeper understanding of the relation between the square and its diagonal.
Although the slave’s grasp of this relation is beyond DR1 familiarity, it is not yet complete understanding. He has, after all, only been shown a diagram, and not a formal proof of the theorem. In all likelihood, tomorrow he will be unable to reproduce a demonstration of the theorem. It is for this reason that Socrates describes the true beliefs in the slave as having been stirred up as in a dream. (85c9-d1) In order to achieve knowledge of the fullest kind, the slave must be asked “the very same things many times and in many ways.” Complete understanding of the theorem will be attained when the slave can demonstrate it and defend it in varying circumstances and against varying objections. We are to imagine the slave achieving the same result for squares of different sizes, and in light of various other considerations. He will be forced to prove the things taken for granted in Socrates’ demonstration, e.g. that the transversals of the square are equal, or that the diagonals in the final diagram meet in right angles. He will be able to withstand these challenges when he grasps as fully as possible the way the theorem follows directly from the essence of squares. For if he can grasp the way the theorem follows strictly from the nature of squares, he will be able to demonstrate it with regard to any square, no matter what considerations are brought to bear on the case. And this will happen only when the slave has answered the *ti esti* question about squares.

A problem emerges from the slave’s lack of complete understanding. On one hand, I have shown how the interrogation embodies the structure of dialectic. But if the slave does not attain complete understanding, then the result of the discovery stage of the discussion is decidedly different from the final stages of dialectic. How can the slave’s progress demonstrate the theory of Recollection if he has not attained full DR2 understanding of the theorem and the nature of squares? I hinted at the answer at the end
of my discussion of the exploratory section. The demonstration is successful because the intellectual progress the slave displays in the discussion is the kind that leads to the fullest understanding. Recollection is *learning*, the improvement of our understanding. The demonstration works because the slave recollects. And in recollecting, the slave demonstrates that he has the rational faculties necessary to achieve full understanding. The slave has taken a single, small recollective step. But this step is continuous with the learning process as a whole, all the way up to knowledge, because the rational faculties required to make progress of any kind are those required to follow learning to its natural end, *epistêmê*.

The theory of Recollection overcomes the difficulties in dialectic by positing two related rational abilities. The first is the ability to grasp the determinate natures instantiated by particulars in the world. The second is the ability to understand the relations that hold between these natures, just because of what they are. Each of these abilities allows us to overcome the indeterminacy that threatens the possibility of dialectic. The first grounds our ability to decide which of many features common to a set of individuals is the one responsible for their bearing a given property. We are able to do this because the grasp of the property lies inchoate in our ordinary use of the name of the property. It is inarticulate, but present in our meaning something definite when we predicate the name of an item. We are able to make dialectical progress, and ultimately specify the correct item in an account, because we recognize that it is the item we have been predicating all along. The second ability allows us to see how an essence is related to a host of other properties, and to understand how these relations follow from the essence. This allows us to identify the essence as the essence that explains the many
phomena associated with the property. Although these abilities are at work in our ability to use language, our linguistic behavior alone does not determine the item a final definition specifies. Instead we must be guided by a prior acquaintance with the essence we seek, and an ability to understand the features that follow from that nature.

The Meno displays the beginnings of a theory of knowledge and learning. The theory has as its foundation a notion of epistêmê or understanding as the end of human rationality. With this special notion of knowledge comes a special notion of learning. Learning is the development of the familiarity and rational faculties already in the learner, Recollection. In inquiry, nothing can be provided to the learner. Everything must develop from what is already in him or her. In saying that all learning and inquiry is Recollection Plato is not saying that we can learn in this way. He is saying that we must learn in this way, that genuine intellectual progress is developed from what is already in the inquirer. This constraint on learning provides the best explanation for the starting point of this chapter, the Dialectical Requirement. The DR requires that dialectical accounts make use only of terms known or familiar to our interlocutor. More than a useful guide for inquiry, the DR expresses the condition dialectic must meet in order to be a method for learning. That is, the DR expresses the condition dialectic must meet in order to engender Recollection.
CHAPTER 3

RECOLLECTION AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE IN THE PHAEDO

Dialectic begins in our ordinary familiarity with a property. This ordinary grasp, which I called DR1 familiarity in the last chapter, enables us to bring forward a number of statements about a property and its bearers. This ordinary grasp also guides us in responding to and revising candidate answers to the *ti esti* question. In fact, it is precisely because dialectic develops our ordinary familiarity with a property into knowledge that dialectical learning is called Recollection. The importance of this cannot be overstated. We are capable of learning in dialectic, according to Plato, only because when we enter inquiry we already have some grasp of the very essence we wish to know. But dialectic develops out of our ordinary thinking and speaking about the world. This means that our ordinary speech and thought about the world contains some grasp of the very essences we come to know through philosophy. But how could our ordinary thinking about the world involve contact with the most real entities, the essences that are the objects of knowledge?

The *Phaedo* provides an answer to this question. Plato is concerned here with explaining ordinary human speech and thought. Plato believes that the only way for human beings to speak or think about sensible particulars is under the rubric of a
determinate property. The determinacy and stability of our thoughts and statements depend on reference to stable and determinate objects. The objects in virtue of which our thoughts and statements have this character for Plato are Forms. Thus, the human ability to think and speak about the sensible world depends on the presence, somehow, of Forms in our thoughts. Forms here play a role akin to that of concepts; they provide determinate and stable content by which we can think about the world, and communicate with others.

The presence of Forms in our ordinary speech and thought is not so simple as it might seem. Specifically, it is not explicable solely by reference to our empirical experience of sensible particulars; sensory experience is insufficient to bring us to grasp the properties we do grasp. Plato believes that Forms and sensibles are of radically different metaphysical status and character. One consequence is that the experience of sensibles is incapable of bringing us to have Forms in mind. For this reason, Plato rejects any empiricist account of (what we would call) concept formation.¹ And yet, Plato acknowledges that it is in response to sensory experience that we come to have determinate concepts. Plato's solution is to say that in response to sensory experience, we recollect Forms from our soul's prenatal experience of them. If this is right, then Recollection explains human speech and thought from its very inception. The purpose of this chapter is to show that in the Phaedo Plato appeals to Recollection to explain ordinary speech and thought.

¹ Throughout this chapter I will liken Recollection to concept formation. By this I do not intend to say that Forms are concepts, pace Bostock, in Plato's Phaedo, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). One role that Forms play is akin to that of concepts. Forms have additional roles beyond this conceptual role.
On my interpretation, Plato appeals to Recollection twice in his account of human learning, and in significantly different ways. In the order of learning, the Recollection of the *Phaedo* first provides us with the intuitive grasp of properties by which we think and speak ordinarily. Then, when we have begun dialectic, it is by philosophical reflection on the things we tend to say that we refine and develop the intuitive grasp embedded in our ordinary linguistic competence. The learning we undergo in this reflection is a second stage of Recollection, the stage described in the *Meno*. It is this stage that results, ultimately, in knowledge. In the next chapter, I will survey the full course of human learning on Plato’s account, and explain why these two stages of Recollection deserve to be part of a single theory of learning. Once we have seen how the two stages of Recollection are unified as single course of learning, we will be in position to say why human knowledge requires the ability to give an account of what one knows.

3.1 The Argument for Recollection

The argument from recollection presents a difficult interpretive challenge.² Socrates purports to show that our souls pre-existed our births by showing that we engage in recollection of Forms. Socrates shows that we recollect Forms from a pre-natal experience of them by presenting a mental act that we could not perform unless we were

² Two arguments must be distinguished. The argument from Recollection is one in which Socrates argues from the fact that we recollect to the conclusion that our souls pre-existed our births. This argument begins at 73c1 and ends at 76e7. The argument for Recollection, as I will call it, is the argument by which Socrates establishes that we recollect. This argument begins at 73c1 and ends at 75b8. Thus, the argument for Recollection is a central part of the argument from Recollection. I will focus here on the argument for Recollection. All citations are from the critical edition of C.J. Rowe, *Phaedo*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
recollecting Forms. That is, he proves we recollect by specifying a mental activity that cannot be explained just by reference to the cognitive resources available to us after we were born. The argument concerns a rather complicated subject, and a subject for which Plato has no technical terms of expression. Consequently, the description of the mental activity called Recollection is sometimes vague, and often controversial. The first difficulty confronting an interpreter is to determine, from Socrates’ ambiguous description, which mental act Recollection covers. Given that some kind of grasp of Forms is achieved by Recollection, the key question we must answer is, what level of sophistication is achieved by the Recollection of the Phaedo?³

The presentation of Recollection in the Phaedo, is complicated, however, by the intrusion of a bit of metaphysics. Just after Socrates introduces Recollection, he turns to a discussion of the Form of Equality, and its relation to particular equal things. This discussion clouds matters in the following way. In the discussion of the Equal itself and equal particulars, Socrates and Simmias display a rather sophisticated grasp of the Form of Equality and its relations to particulars. This is not surprising. Simmias and Cebes are not only familiar with Socratic philosophy, they are also learned Pythagorean mathematicians.⁴ Since Socrates appeals to Recollection to explain the grasp

³ Dominic Scott, in Recollection and Experience, deserves the credit for framing the debate in these terms. Nonetheless, merely identifying the level of sophistication achieved by Recollection is insufficient. There are a number of ways an ordinary, non philosopher might grasp Forms, and an even greater number of ways a philosopher might grasp Forms. Scott’s arguments that Recollection is an act of philosophical sophistication are forceful and difficult to overcome. Still, he nowhere describes the precise way a philosopher who recollects comes to grasp the Forms he or she recollects.

⁴ That Simmias and Cebes are familiar with Socrates’ philosophical habits is brought home on a number of occasions in the Phaedo. Socrates presents the Forms on several occasions in a way that makes them seem to be familiar entities: 65d4 ff., 74a9 ff., 75c7 ff., and 100b1. Moreover, Simmias and Cebes are alleged to have spent some time with Philolaus, a Pythagorean mathematician. (61d6-7)
Simmias have of Equality, the sophistication he and Simmias display has led some to argue that Recollection explains only philosophical understanding. Others like myself are convinced that Socrates’ frequent mention of perception is meant to describe a more rudimentary cognitive grasp, of the kind required to discern and predicate properties of sensible particulars in ordinary speech and thought. If the discussion of the Equal itself and sensible equals is not meant to display the level of grasp achieved by Recollection, though, it’s place in the argument for Recollection is a mystery. For this reason, the second task confronting an interpreter is to describe the role in the argument of the metaphysical discussion of the Equal itself and equal particulars, and to relate the sophisticated mental activity displayed in that discussion to the mental activity explained by Recollection. This demand is especially acute for me, since I want to say that Recollection produces an ordinary grasp of Forms, much more common than the sophisticated grasp displayed by Socrates and Simmias.

I cannot address every issue and controversy in the argument from Recollection. What I will do instead is this. I will first present my reading of the text in moderate detail, moving through the argument in order to articulate the overall argumentative strategy and structure. I will argue that Recollection explains the ordinary human ability to predicate properties in speech and thought. The discussion has four sections. The importance of perception in the introduction of Recollection shows that Recollection concerns the predications we make in ordinary speech and thought. I will discuss this

5 This is part of Scott’s strategy; see Recollection and Experience pp.53–73. J.L. Ackrill is also puzzled by the rather esoteric character of the discussion between 74a9–d8, although he is not persuaded to the view that Recollection here concerns the acquisition of philosophical understanding. See J.L. Ackrill, “Anamnesis in the Phaedo,” in E.N. Lee et.al. (edd.), Exegesis and Argument, (Assen: Phronesis Supplement, 1973).
introduction and its implications in the first section. Although this ordinary mental act is the one explained by Recollection, there is another, more sophisticated mental act at work in the argument: the comparison of sensibles to Forms. This second mental activity is on display in the metaphysical discussion from 74a9-d8. The way Socrates introduces this second mental act strongly suggests that it is a necessary condition on Recollection. In the second section, I will argue that the comparison of sensibles to Forms is not a necessary condition on Recollection. Instead, this discussion contains the philosophical investigation by which we see why Recollection is necessary to explain the ordinary mental act. In the third section, I will examine the metaphysical discussion, and what it indicates about Recollection. In this discussion, Socrates describes the deficiency of sensible particulars in virtue of which the perception of sensibles alone is insufficient to ground the acquisition of determinate concepts. That is, this discussion presents the metaphysical difference between sensibles and Forms that makes it impossible for us to come to have Forms in mind from sensory experience alone. The metaphysical discussion is neither an intrusion, nor a display of the mental activity explained by Recollection. Instead, the discussion presents the philosophical reasons for the Theory of Recollection. As such, it is a discussion Socrates and Simmias must have if they are to understand the theory. Finally, in the fourth section, I will show how these metaphysical considerations are employed in an argument for the claim that we recollect.

3.1.1 The Introduction of Recollection: 73c1 – 74a3

Socrates’ main concern in the Phaedo is to convince Simmias and Cebes that the soul is immortal. Immediately prior to the argument from Recollection, he presents an
argument for this claim on the grounds that all things come to be from their opposites and pass away into their opposites. (70c4-72e1) The soul, he argues, persists through the change from life to death, and thus pre exists its incarnation in the body and survives the body’s death. Cebes offers support to Socrates by reminding him that the familiar theory of Recollection requires the pre-existence of the soul as well. Simmias, however, does not remember the proofs (αποδείξεις) of this theory and asks to be reminded of them. Cebes says that if one interrogates an individual on some problem in the right way, one can draw out the correct answer from him or her. He adds that this would not be possible if men did not already possess knowledge and a correct account in them. (72d6-73b2) Socrates then offers another proof in case the argument Cebes’ describes is unpersuasive. Cebes’ description of a proof of Recollection is almost certainly an allusion to the Meno and the interrogation of the slave boy in that dialogue. But Socrates gives a new argument in case the Meno’s argument is unpersuasive. This suggests that, although he is working with the same theory, Socrates will focus on different acts of learning than those explored in the Meno.

Socrates introduces the scope of Recollection in this discussion by making some general remarks in the form of conditions on Recollection and by providing some examples. In this introduction Socrates appeals to the familiar experience of remembering to introduce a very specific kind of mental activity. The conditions and examples reflect this strategy. Socrates’ first condition is this: “If someone recollects something, it is necessary for him to have known it before.” (73c1-2) We do not say that something has been remembered unless what has been called to mind is something the person has experienced before. This condition comes naturally out of the way we
experience and think about remembering. Another condition is stated in Socrates’
general formulation of Recollection. It is a requirement that the knowledge of the
recollected item be different from the knowledge of the item that inspires Recollection.
This requirement ensures, I think, that our grasp of the item that inspires Recollection
does not itself include grasp of the item we are to recollect. For if we are already
thinking of an item in our general grasp of something else, our being led to think of the
first from the second does not constitute Recollection. For instance, since I must be
thinking of Simmias in order to identify a photograph as a picture of him, my being led to
think of Simmias from that identification does not constitute Recollection of Simmias.
I was already thinking of him when I identified the picture. In order to be reminded of
something, we must not already be thinking of that item when we are reminded. So the
second condition on Recollection is also derived from ordinary notions of what it is to be
reminded of something. Finally, Socrates illustrates Recollection with examples of the
way lovers pass from the perception of a cloak or lyre used by their lover directly to the
thought of the lover. (73d5-10) Recollection, or remembering, is a familiar and broad set
of experiences. Socrates’ strategy in this stage is to introduce the notion by appealing to
our ordinary experience of it.

*The Greek word I have translated as knowledge is epistêmê. This may suggest that we have
understanding of the items inspiring Recollection of the same kind as that we have of the items recollected.
But I don’t think this is the case. Two items can be different with respect to epistêmê if one is not properly
the object of epistêmê whereas the other is. Or they can be different in this respect if the manners in which
they are grasped are different in kind from one another. It is not necessary, therefore, for the two items to
be objects of epistêmê and merely different. Alexander Nehamas takes this condition similarly in “Plato on
the Imperfection of the Sensible World,” in Virtues of Authenticity. (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
1999) pg. 148. Since Nehamas is concerned with the metaphysical distinction between Forms and
sensibles, he does not clarify the mental activity covered by Recollection. Nonetheless, he takes this
condition to state that the grasp of the object inspiring Recollection cannot be sufficient for one to grasp the
item we recollect, i.e. the grasp of the former cannot include that of the latter.
At the same time, Socrates is interested in a very specific kind of Recollection, and he uses very specific language to describe it. For instance, Socrates consistently uses perceptual terms to describe the way we grasp the items that inspire Recollection: “If someone seeing, or hearing, or having some other perception is not only aware (γινώσκειν) of that thing....” (73c6-7, see also 73d5, e5, 7, 9, 74b5, d13-e1) Not all remembering is inspired by the perception of something. But Socrates’ language indicates that the Recollection that concerns him has just such a source. Twice, Socrates uses the verb γινώσκειν to describe the grasp we have of items inspiring Recollection (73c7, d7) We could translate this word as “recognizing” to suggest that our grasp of the items that inspire Recollection is not merely perceptual. Taken this way, Socrates seems to require that the recollector have some grasp of the item inspiring Recollection as an item of a particular kind. For instance, we recognize the lyre as a lyre before thinking of the boy to whom it belongs. But we do not need to take γινώσκειν to have this cognitive force. γινώσκειν can mean perceive or be aware of, and I think Socrates’ use of it here should be taken along these lines. Socrates’ use of perceptual terms throughout the introduction of Recollection is quite consistent. Unless we are given reason to think that cognitive grasp is included in our grasp of the items inspiring reflection, we should describe that grasp as being strictly perceptual.

In contrast to the perceptual language describing our grasp of the items that inspire Recollection, Socrates uses cognitive language consistently to describe our grasp of the items recollected. The most common term for our mental activity with regard to

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these items is ennoein, to have in mind, to think of, or consider. In giving examples of this, Socrates says that the lover “takes up in thought (ἐν τῇ διάνοια) the image (ἐἴδος) of the boy....” (73d 7-8) Eidos is a word with important connotations for Plato. It is, first of all, one word for the Forms (102b1). Socrates' use here hints that he is interested in Recollection of the Forms, a point that will become explicit soon. Of equal importance, however, is that Socrates uses eidos to stand for the object a dialectical account should pick out. We call many items by the same name in virtue of focussing on some one form, or eidos. The goal of dialectic is to specify what it is we are focussing on in our ordinary application of the term to many different items. Plato thinks that our ordinary ability to predicate a property in speech or thought requires that we have the property, or eidos, before our minds. In this argument he is trying to say just how such determinate properties enter our minds.

In the wider context of the Phaedo the distinction between perceptible items and intelligible items is prominent. In the next argument (78b-80c), Socrates will describe two discreet realms. One is the sensible world, which is composed of sensible, changing, and unintelligible objects accessible to us only through the body. The other is the intelligible realm of the Forms, which are unchanging, imperceptible realities, grasped only by our souls. (80b1-6) We can use this division, without going too much into its details, to illuminate the process of Recollection. On Plato’s view, perceptible items and intelligible items are mutually exclusive; no perceptible is intelligible and no intelligible

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8 When I refer to the verb ennoein alone, I will put in italicized English lettering. When it appears in a larger phrase, I will use the Greek.

9 See pg. 64, note 48.
is perceptible. The object that inspires Recollection is a perceptible item, and our grasp of the item is perceptual, for that is the only way we can grasp such an item.\textsuperscript{10} Our grasp of the item recollected, in contrast, is intellectual. The objects we recollect, in fact, cannot be perceived at all. As we shall learn soon, this is because what we recollect are Forms, and the only kind of grasp we can have of Forms is through the intellect, i.e. the soul. The difference between the items that inspire Recollection and the items we recollect explains the condition on Recollection that the former must be items of a different knowledge than the latter.\textsuperscript{11} On one hand, perceptuals obviously satisfy the condition as I have described it, because our perceptual experience of an item cannot, according to Plato, be intellectual grasp. The senses and the intellect are different faculties with different objects. Since it is perception that inspires Recollection, it is guaranteed that this perception does not contain the intellectual grasp that is the result of Recollection. But there is a deeper sense in which the items inspiring Recollection are objects of a different knowledge than the items we recollect. Since sensibles are not properly the objects of knowledge, whereas the intelligible Forms are, the two are objects of different knowledge in a very strong sense. Sensibles are not objects of knowledge at all, whereas Forms are.

\textsuperscript{10} There may be an extent to which our perceptual grasp of an item includes attributions of some kind. We may, strictly as a part of our perceiving an item, be able to say that it is red, or warm, or a stick. This would be the case for Plato if he thought some concepts were developed empirically, or some properties were accessible through the senses alone. I wish to leave aside the issue of which properties are perceptual. For even if there are properties we may perceive and predicate strictly on the basis of perception, Plato thinks there are other, more important properties which can be grasped only in thought, and not by the senses.

\textsuperscript{11} See pg. 93
Recollection is inspired by perception, and results in our having an intelligible object in mind. Furthermore, the object that inspires Recollection is, strictly speaking unintelligible, or more literally, unthinkable – ἄνοητος. (80b4) Together these facts indicate that in describing Recollection, Socrates is interested in our ability to think about, or in response to, sensible items. That is, Plato is interested in our ability to move from the reception of raw sense data to the predication of a property. This happens when, perceiving a particular, we become aware of the kind of thing it is. We manifest our classification most readily in speech, by calling the sensible item by a general term, the term that names the property we predicate of the particular. In doing this, according to Plato, we have before our mind the determinate property we predicate of the item. For we could not perform the predication of a property to a sensible item if we did not, in some way, have the property in mind.

A few caveats are in order. First, there is no guarantee that when we recollect a Form in this way, we will be correct in having done so. There will surely be times when we predicate a property incorrectly. It is to accommodate this occurrence, in part, that Socrates will admit that we sometimes recollect from items dissimilar to the Form we recollect. (74a2-3) Another way we may recollect from dissimilars is by calling a Form to mind in order to deny that it is predicated of some particular. If we wish to say that two sticks are not Equal, we must have the Equal in mind no less than were we to predicate it of the sticks. Most importantly, though, when Plato says that we have the

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12 Socrates and Simmias are about to discuss the deficiency of sensibles compared to Forms. This deficiency indicates a third way that Recollection of Forms is in every case Recollection from dissimilars. Because sensibles are what they are in a manner different from that of Forms, whenever we call a Form to mind from our experience of a sensible, we have recollected the Form from an item dissimilar to it.
Form in mind, he is not saying that the Forms are the subjects of our thinking. The subject of our thinking is the item that inspires Recollection, for it is of that item that we predicate the property. Nor must we be aware that we have a Form in mind. In the same way that children and non philosophers can be said to employ concepts without knowing it, Plato thinks that one can have a Form in mind without knowing that one has a Form in mind, or that there are Forms at all. Nonetheless, that we succeed in predicing a determinate property requires for Plato that the property enter our thinking as much as the subject to which we attribute it. Socrates’ use of ennoein in the introduction of Recollection stands for the presence of determinate properties in our thoughts, when we predicate them of sensible items.

Because our perceptual experience provides no grounds for grasping Forms, our passage from perception to thought must be explained by reference to something other than sensory stimulation alone. Socrates will explain this movement by saying that we recollect the Forms, entities we have come in contact with in a prenatal state. This is the general strategy of the argument. The opening section lays the foundation for this strategy by distinguishing clearly between the perceptual grasp we have of the items inspiring Recollection and the intellectual grasp we have of the items we recollect.

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13 It may seem odd that the subject of our thinking can be an item that is, strictly speaking, unthinkable. The claim that sensibles are unthinkable should be taken to say that, by themselves, sensible items cannot be thought about, understood, or known. It is only by reference to, or under the rubric of Forms that we can think about them at all. The only way a sensible item can become the subject of our thinking, then, is by our conceiving it as an item of a certain kind, i.e. as an item bearing a certain property. It is for precisely this reason that Recollection explains our ability to think and speak at all.
3.1.2  *A Necessary Consideration: 74a5-7*

After Socrates has introduced Recollection to Simmias, and Simmias seems comfortable with the activity at stake, (73d11, e4) Socrates presents a few more examples and uses them to make a distinction between Recollection from items similar to the item recollected, and items dissimilar to it. (74a2-3) He then states what appears to be a very puzzling condition on Recollection: “But whenever someone recollects something from similar items, isn’t it necessary for him to experience this in addition: to consider whether it falls short in any way of that which he recollects with respect to their likeness?” (74a5-7) This statement seems to put forward a necessary condition on Recollection. As such it seems to describe an act that we must perform before, at the same time as, or immediately after recollecting. But if we take Recollection to concern the mental acts I have described, then this is an implausible condition. In predicking a property of a sensible item, we rarely if ever consider whether the particular falls short of the property we predicate of it. Most people are unaware there are two items in their mind – particular and property – when they make predications in speech or thought. At the very least, in order to make a comparison of this kind, a person must become aware of Forms, or properties, as the sort of thing to which one could compare sensibles.¹⁴ But there is no reason to think that when people predicate properties in ordinary speech and thought they

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¹⁴ What is involved in comparing a sensible to a Form will depend on how one thinks of the difference between sensibles and Forms. For instance, if one thinks that Forms are perfect instances of properties that sensibles merely approximate, then one might compare a sensible to a Form whenever one predicates a property to a sensible with awareness of the sensible’s failure to instantiate the property fully. So, for instance, if one says that two sticks are equal, while aware that they are really almost but not quite exactly equal, it may be said that one has implicitly compared the equal sticks to Equality itself. Even if this is one’s view though, it seems unlikely that such implicit comparisons are necessary conditions on Recollection. There are cases where we predicate equality without considering the fact that the objects are merely approximately equal.
are aware that there is some item or object they are predicating. As a result, some
interpreters have taken this condition to show that Recollection cannot cover our ordinary
attributions in speech and thought. Those who recollect, Socrates seems to tell us, must
compare sensibles to Forms. But only someone who has a sophisticated grasp of the
Form could make such a comparison. As a result, Recollection must produce a rather
sophisticated grasp of a form, such that only philosophers can undergo Recollection. 15

I agree that if Socrates’ statement at 74a 5-7 puts forward a necessary condition
on Recollection, it would be strange to take Recollection to occur in our ordinary
predicative speech and thought. But I do not take Socrates here to be stating a necessary
condition on the act of Recollection. The purpose of Socrates’ statement is not to
characterize Recollection, but to steer the conversation in a new direction. He is drawing
Simmias’ attention to an issue that must be confronted for the argument to move ahead:
whether and how sensible particulars fall short of the forms. It is by confronting the
deficiency of sensibles compared to Forms that Simmias will understand why having
Forms in mind requires Recollection.

To see that this is Socrates’ intent, consider that immediately after Simmias
agrees to Socrates’ statement, Socrates shifts the conversation: “Look then (σκότει δή)
if these things hold in this way (σιώτως). We say, I suppose, that the Equal is

15 Scott leads the way in drawing this conclusion, Recollection and Experience, pp. 59-61. Ackrill is more
concerned to discuss the role of similarity as an associative mechanism in Recollection, and the difference
between the relation holding between similar items and that holding between an original and its likeness.
He does not suggest a reading according to which it makes sense to say that this is a necessary condition on
Socrates’ use of σύνως here looks backward. Socrates is instructing Simmias to examine the very matter he has just described – whether or not the items that inspire Recollection are deficient in their similarity to the item we recollect from them. The use of δὴ supports this by framing Socrates’ instruction as a natural result of Simmias’ agreement that the consideration is necessary. Socrates gives this instruction as if to say “Well, since you agree that it is necessary for someone in this position to consider the question, you had better look at it yourself.” Instead of describing an act that necessarily accompanies the act of Recollection, Socrates is presenting a matter that he and Simmias must look into.

There is more evidence for this reading. The discussion of the Equal itself and sensible equals runs from 74a9 to 74d8. Socrates’ last remark is telling: “Well then, do we experience (πῶσχομεν) something of this sort concerning the sticks and the equals we were just now discussing? Do they appear to us to be equal in this way just as the Equal itself, or do they, with respect to being such as the Equal, fall short of it somehow, or in no way?” Socrates’ language indicates that the position he and Simmias occupy at the end of the discussion is an instance of the very consideration he described at 74a 5-7. There he said that one must experience in addition (προσχαχειν) the consideration whether the similar items are deficient with respect to the item we recollect from them.

At the end of the discussion of equal particulars and the Equal itself, Socrates and

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17 I take the δὴ here to be of the sort Smyth called consecutive or resumptive, see Smyth, Greek Grammar, §2846, pg. 646.
Simmias are shown to be experiencing (πάσχειν) that very thing. At 74a5-7 Socrates states the direction the conversation must take. He and Simmias must consider whether the items inspiring Recollection (sensibles) are deficient in any way compared to the items we recollect (Forms). Between 74a9 and 74d8 he and Simmias consider that question with respect to the Equal itself and the sensible equals that inspire us to call the Equal to mind. When the discussion is over Socrates pointedly notes that he and Simmias have completed the consideration described in 74a5-7 and have reached the conclusion that sensible equals are deficient. If this is the right way of reading the passage, then the necessity described by Socrates in 74a5-7 is not the necessity of a necessary condition on recollecting. Socrates has not described an act of consideration necessarily part of or subsequent to the act of Recollection. Instead the necessity

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18 There is some strangeness to the πάσχειν is used here. The verb typically suggests that we are experiencing or suffering something that happens to us passively, and not doing something actively. So it is odd that here πάσχειν describes our actively taking up a philosophical consideration. There is a precedent for using πάσχειν to describe the experience of reaching a philosophical result, however, and that is in Simmias’ stated desire to experience Recollection, in apprehending Socrates’ reasons for the theory of Recollection. For him to experience this is to behold the proof of the theory of Recollection, i.e. to reach a philosophical conclusion. On my reading, in comparing sensibles to Forms, Simmias will come to grasp the reasons for the claim that we recollect. Thus these three uses of πάσχειν all stand for the same act of reflection, which is performed in the discussion about the Equal itself and sensible equals.

19 I realize that my reading strains against the most natural reading of 74a5-7. In addition to the textual clues to the effect that Socrates is initiating a conversational turn, there are a few other reasons not to take Socrates here to be presenting a necessary condition on the act of Recollection. I have already discussed the difficulty in taking this to be a necessary condition on Recollection if Recollection is the ordinary act of identifying and predicating a property in speech or thought. This leads some, Scott most prominently, to suppose that Recollection must involve a more philosophical grasp of the Forms. It is more plausible, he argues, that one acquiring philosophical understanding would perform such a comparison between Forms and particulars, Recollection and Experience, pp. 59-61, 63. I agree that only a philosopher could perform a comparison of this sort. But it is still not very plausible to say that the philosopher necessarily performs this comparison on coming to understand the Forms. Isn’t it possible that, on attaining understanding, the philosopher abandons the consideration of sensibles for a while and contemplates the Form itself, or its relations to other Forms, without making comparisons? At the very least, more needs to be said by Scott about the nature of philosophical understanding such that acquiring it necessarily involves comparison of this kind. As it is, there is not much hope of making this a necessary condition of Recollection, no matter
Socrates describes is one that applies to a matter one must consider in order to reach understanding about some topic. In order to understand Recollection, Socrates and Simmias must compare sensibles to Forms.

The discussion from 74a9-74d8 is Socrates’ and Simmias’ examination of the question whether items inspiring Recollection are deficient with respect to the recollected item. This passage shows them considering whether (εννοεῖν εἰτε) sensible equals are deficient compared to the Equal itself. Given this, it is important to note that within this very discussion Socrates and Simmias discuss the way sensible equals have inspired them to call the Equal itself to mind. At 74b 4 Socrates asks, “From where did we take up the knowledge of [the Equal itself]? Was it not from the things we were just discussing, by seeing either sticks or rocks or some other equals, from these things we called that one to mind (ἐκ τούτων ἔκεινὸν ἐννοησώμεν), although it is different from them?” Similarly at 74c7 Socrates asks “Nevertheless, isn’t it from these very equals, although they are different from the Equal, that we have thought of and taken up the knowledge of it?” These questions employ aorist and perfect tenses, tenses of completed aspect. The calling to mind of the Equal itself from equal things has already occurred by the time how we construe Recollection. Additionally, the condition plays no further role in the argument as a necessary condition. Socrates may be invoking the condition in 74d9-ε4 (σύκοιν ὁμολογοῦμεν...). But in that passage he says that anybody experiencing the thought that sensibles are inferior to the Forms must have known the Form prior to this consideration. If this passage recalls the condition at 74a5-7, then the condition has changed into a sufficient condition on Recollection, and not a necessary one. For here Socrates is deducing from the fact that one thinks that sensibles are deficient compared to a Form that one has previously known the Form. Finally, the alleged condition in 74a5-7 is a condition on Recollection from similars. It is difficult to think that this condition plays any important role in the argument when Socrates explicitly and emphatically reminds Simmias that Recollection can come from the perception of similars and dissimilars. (74c13-d2) Bostock makes this very point in discarding the condition altogether, Plato’s Phaedo, pg. 65. In light of these considerations, the textual clues I cite in the main body of my argument have, I think, more force in indicating the role of Socrates’ comment at 74a5-7.
Socrates and Simmias begin this discussion. Simmias and Socrates have already recollected the Equal itself from equal particulars. If they are attending to the deficiency of sensibles for the first time here, as I think they are, then the past Recollection of the Equal itself does not include as a necessary component the consideration of this very question. Recollection has already taken place, and long ago, whereas Simmias is only now considering whether the equals are deficient compared to the Equal itself.

It is difficult to distinguish Recollection from the consideration of the deficiency of the items that inspire Recollection because Socrates uses the same verb for the two activities, *ennoein*. Nevertheless, the act of recollecting a Form from sensibles is distinct from the act of considering whether the particular instantiations of that Form are deficient compared to the Form. The first is consistently described as having an object in mind, *ἐννοεῖν τι* (73c8, 74b6, c8). But the second use of *ennoein* has as its object a proposition or a question, *ἐννοεῖν ὅτι* or *ἴσιν*. (74a5-7, d9) These different formulations will be used throughout the rest of the argument to signify distinct mental acts. Not only are they different mental acts, there is no necessity that the one entail the other. They occur at different times, and are inspired by quite different circumstances. This distinction will become crucially important in the latter part of the argument where the former is the mental activity in need of explanation, and the latter is the philosophical activity that illuminates the need for explanation. That is, Recollection proper is the ordinary act of having a form in mind — *ἐννοεῖν τι* — from the perception of its sensible instantiations. But it is only by considering the deficiency of the sensible particulars —
that we as philosophers recognize that the ordinary activity needs explanation. This will become clearer in the next section.

3.1.3 The Deficiency of Sensibles: 74a9-d8

So far I have described the general argumentative strategy of the argument from Recollection, and I have said something about the role in that argument of the discussion of equal sticks and stones in comparison to the Equal itself. Recollection is posited to explain our ability to move from perception to thought. An explanation is needed for this because sensory experience is not sufficient to ground our grasp of the concepts, or properties, by which we engage in thought about particulars. Some account is needed for the fact that we have properties in mind, and that we do so in response to sensory experience. The discussion of the Equal itself and equal sticks and stones aids this argumentative strategy by articulating the deficiency of sensible particulars. Specifically, the discussion describes a deficiency of sensible particulars that prohibits them from being the source of the concepts required for us to have thoughts. Here’s how this takes place.

Socrates begins by asking Simmias whether he admits the existence of the Equal, not some particular things equal to one another, but above and beyond these things, “the Equal itself.” Next he asks whether they have acquired their knowledge of the Equal from sensible equals, whether “from these things (sensible equals) we have called it (the Equal Itself) to mind.” (74b4-6) Before hearing Simmias’ answer, however, Socrates backtracks to re-examine the question whether the Equal itself is genuinely distinct from sensible equals. The argument here is dense and complicated. The main thrust is that
there is a characteristic possessed by sensible equals that is not possessed by the Equal itself. Sensible equals "appear to be equal at one time and unequal at another." The Equal itself, in contrast, never appears to be Inequality. Socrates then infers that the sensible equals are not the same as the Equal itself.\(^\text{20}\)

There are many different ways Socrates could have demonstrated that the Equal itself and sensible equals are not identical. It is significant that he chose to discuss the way each appears. The central claim is that coming to behold the Equal itself guarantees that one will come to have the idea of Equality, because it appears Equal or manifests Equality on its own, at all times, and in every way. In contrast the sensible equals manifest equality in an inconsistent and unreliable way, and thus with no assurance that

\(^{20}\)There are several difficult ambiguities in the lines I have just cited. The first of these is how to interpret the appearances of the dative article in the μεν-δε clause in lines 74b 8-9. I have translated them as "at one time...at another time." But they could mean just as plausibly "to one person...to another person," "to one thing...to another thing," and somewhat less plausibly "in one respect...in another respect." Any of these translations would suffice for distinguishing the Equal itself from sensible equals, and in such a way as to support the rest of the argument. It does not matter, for my purposes, which of these Socrates means. The important point is that the Equal itself appears at all times and in all ways to be Equal, whereas sensible equals appear to be equal inconsistently, and only in certain circumstances, e.g. in relation to one thing but not another, to one viewer and not another. The next issue is how we are to take the use of φαίνεσθαι. Socrates combines the verb in his first uses with a participle of εἶναι. This combination expresses that things both appear, and truly are in some way, rather than merely appearing to be a certain way. But in his description of the way the Equal itself appears, Socrates uses only a form of φαίνεσθαι. The argument requires that he uses the verb in the same way. Nonetheless, the emphasis on the appearance of the Form and its particulars is relevant, and I will address this below. The next issue is Socrates' puzzling pluralization of the term αὐτὸ τὸ ἔσον, to αὐτὰ τὰ ἔσον, the Equals themselves. Some have taken this use to refer to the Forms-in-us that will appear in the last argument of the dialogue, others have explained the plurals by reference to the fact that equal things always come in pairs, still others take Socrates to be referring to mathematical entities which are perfectly equal by being theoretical postulations. Finally, Socrates uses the nominalization ἡ ἴσοτης for the Equal itself in saying that it never appears to be the Unequal ἡ ἴσοποτης. But this is not strictly parallel to the case of the equal particulars, which were said to appear to be unequal, not to be inequality. These details are puzzling and difficult, and important. They are important, however, mostly for an account of the metaphysical nature of forms, which is undoubtedly being presented here. Answering these questions is not necessary for an account of this discussion's contribution to the epistemological thesis at stake.
one will come to have the idea of Equality from them. This difference is manifested in two ways, primarily. The first has to do with the fact that sensible equals appear equal only in certain circumstances. They appear equal at one time and not another, in relation to one thing and not another, and from one perspective but not another. Consequently, the equality of any particular is enmeshed in a web of relations that are, in fact, external to Equality. For instance, in order for one stick to be equal to another in length, it may need to be 16 inches long. Being 16 inches long is not constitutive of the stick’s equality, although it is necessary for it to be equal to the other stick. Since the equality of a particular can be grasped only in connection with these other necessary features, it is possible that in beholding a sensible particular that is equal, we will fail to grasp Equality alone.

Another way sensible particulars fail to appear equal is that they display characteristics other than equality. Sensible particulars are, we are told later, polueidēs, multiform, or complex. When we perceive a sensible particular, we are beset by a complicated impression that displays an indefinite number of properties. There is always a chance that, in perceiving such a thing, we will be led to think of some other feature and

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21 It is consistent with the difference I am describing here that the Equal itself and sensible equals appear in different manners entirely. At root, the difference in the way sensibles and Forms appear is due to a difference in the manners of their being. Sensible equals are equal only by dependence on the Equal Itself, which depends on nothing else to be Equal. Similarly, sensible equals appear equal only by reference to the Equal itself.

22 “Imagine not being able to distinguish the essence and cause of being from that without which the cause would not be a cause!” Socrates explicitly distinguishes between “the cause of being” and “that without which the cause could not be a cause” in 99b2-4. The mistake he wishes to warn us from is thinking that the conditions necessary to a sensible particular having some property are constitutive of the particular’s possession of the property. So, while being brightly colored may be necessary for a statue to be beautiful, the beauty of the statue does not consist in its being brightly colored. Similarly, while it may be necessary for a stick to be equal that it be equal in length specifically, it is not length that constitutes the stick’s equality. It is for precisely these reasons that Socrates goes on to introduce Forms as causes of being.
not the equality of the particular. Forms, on the other hand, are μονοειδῆς, simple in
form. (80b2) Every Form is a single determinate property, such that one beholding a
Form, or having it in mind, must grasp just the property that the Form is.

Let us locate the deficiency of sensibles in the context of Recollection.
Recollection occurs when the perception of a particular inspires us to have a determinate
property in mind and to predicate that property of the particular. The deficiency of
sensibles consists in the fact that they do not manifest determinate characteristics in our
sensations. In perceiving a sensible we are confronted with a complex datum of which
we may predicate any one of an indefinite number of determinate properties. No amount
of indeterminate sensory input amounts to the communication of a determinate concept.
Or as Plato would put it, no amount of indeterminate sensory input could, by itself, bring
us to have a Form in mind. Consequently, if we are able to discern and predicate a
determinate property of a sensible item, it is because we already had that property at our
disposal. So our ordinary predicative speech and thought involves the application of
concepts, or properties, which were present in our minds prior to the perceptions that
inspire our predications.

In most cases, the fact that we do this is not so mysterious. This is because in
most cases we are applying a concept with which we are quite familiar. When I
recognize a dog on the street and describe it as such, I have not reached back to a pre-
natal acquaintance with the Form Dog. Rather, I have invoked a concept that I have used
often and easily for some time. If anything, I recollect it from the last time I encountered
a dog, and not from before birth. But Plato is interested in the origin of our conceptual
grasp. He is interested not just in the application of concepts in ordinary speech and

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thought, but in the original acquisition or development of concepts. Two things are obvious to Plato. The first is that we are able to think and express determinate thoughts. These thoughts involve what we may call the application of concepts to sensible items. The second obvious fact is that we are not born with this ability, but acquire it at some point in our childhood. This leads to a puzzle. On the one hand, what we employ in our thoughts are determinate, intelligible concepts. On the other hand, since our births, the only cognitive input we have is perceptual. Given a difference in kind between the objects of the senses and the objects of the intellect, such that the former cannot bestow or communicate the latter, the question naturally arises, how do we acquire the concepts we do acquire?

Of course, Plato does not mention concepts anywhere. He mentions Forms. The acts that we would describe as the application of a concept to an item in speech or thought, Plato describes as acts in which we refer particulars to the Forms. (75b7, 76d10-e1) We make determinate attributions in speech or thought by making reference to a property that we predicate of the particular. While we might ask how we came to have concepts by which we classify and describe particulars, Plato will ask the question how we first came to have a Form to mind, such that we could classify and describe particulars by reference to the Form. We tend to think that our grasp of concepts develops by the experience of many sensible particulars exemplifying those concepts. Plato agrees. He agrees that our ability to refer to Forms, as manifested by our linguistic
abilities, develops out of our sensory experience of particulars. The puzzle presented above about concept acquisition is presented by Plato as a puzzle about how we first come to have a Form in mind.

The puzzle is generated not just because sensible particulars appear in the way they do. It is the fact that, despite this deficiency, we come to have the concepts we do from our perceptions of particulars. This is the very point Socrates makes once Simmias has agreed that the equal sensibles are different from the Equal. He says this: “Nevertheless, isn’t it from these very equals, although they are different from the Equal, that we have thought of and taken up the knowledge of it?” Socrates’ question is made strongly adversative by the use of ἀλλὰ μὴν ... γε. This phrase is used to emphasize a point that is contrary to what has just come before.23 Socrates is here emphasizing the peculiarity in the fact that we come to have Forms in mind from our sensory experience even though sensibles do not manifest properties in a way that could sustain such grasp. The question pinpoints the puzzle Recollection must solve: even though sensible equals are different from the Equal itself, and deficient compared to it in the way they manifest equality, it is nevertheless from these very things that we come to have Equality in mind. That is, even though sensible particulars do not manifest their properties in a way sufficient for us to have those properties in mind, it is in response to the perception of these items and nothing else that we come to have the concepts that we do. But by comparing sensibles to Forms, Socrates and Simmias have come to see that sensory experience alone cannot lead us to have Forms in mind. Thus, by comparing sensibles to

23 Smyth, Greek Grammar, §2921, pg. 658.

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Forms, Socrates and Simmias come to see that something like Recollection must be taking place. The deficiency of sensibles shows that the mind must rely on resources contained within it when it calls Forms to mind in response to sensory experience. In the argument to follow, the conclusion of the metaphysical discussion plays precisely this role. It provides the philosophical reasons for concluding that we recollect when we come to have a Form in mind in response to sensory experience.

3.1.4 The Argument for Recollection: 74d9 — 75b8

The next stretch of argument is difficult. It will be useful to state the results of the discussion so far. The mental activity Socrates is primarily interested in takes place when, upon perceiving one or more sensible items, we are led to have a property, or Form, in mind. This occurs when our perception of a particular inspires us to predicate a property of that item, or to deny such a predication. This Recollection is described as having an object in mind — ἐννοεῖν τι — in response to sensory experience. This mental activity is not easily explained because sensible particulars fail to manifest their properties in a consistent, unambiguous, or uncomplicated enough way for us to derive our conceptions from them alone. This is revealed by philosophical reflection on the difference between sensible particulars and forms. This philosophical reflection is described as thinking that the sensible particulars fall short of the form — ἐννοεῖν ὅτι τὰ αἷσθητα ένδει τι. In seeing that sensible particulars are deficient compared to the Forms, and in precisely what way they are deficient, the philosopher examining this question is in position to see that the perception of sensibles alone cannot explain our
coming to have Forms in mind. The fact that these perceptions do inspire us to have such concepts must be explained. There are, then, two distinct mental activities at issue. The first is the Recollection Socrates is primarily interested in, the second is the philosophical reflection that illuminates the need for Recollection. Let's see how this comes out in the next section of argument.

Socrates and Simmias agree that they are experiencing the consideration that sensible particulars are deficient compared to Forms. (74d4-7) Socrates then asks whether he and Simmias agree that someone entertaining such a line of thought must have known the Form prior to thinking that the particulars are deficient compared to it. Simmias agrees that this is the case. If this is right, then it is necessary for Socrates and Simmias “to have known the Equal prior to that time when we first, seeing equal things, thought that all these desire to be such as the Equal, but are deficient.” (74e9-75a2) Socrates here asserts that prior to the time he and Simmias first came to the philosophical realization that sensible equals are deficient compared to the Equal itself, they must have known the Equal itself. Socrates goes on to add “But we also agree to this, that we have not called it to mind (αυτό εννοεωντευξα) from any other place, nor is it possible to call it to mind except from the seeing or touching or from some other perception. I mean the same thing by all these.” (75a5-8) It is very easy to suppose that Socrates is talking about the same mental activity, or at least two closely related mental activities, in these

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24 This question may refer back to Socrates’ statement at 74a5-7. That is he may be asking whether they agree to this, because it has already been discussed. If this is right, then it further undermines the need to take that earlier statement as a necessary condition on the act of Recollection, since what is described here is at best a sufficient condition on Recollection. See note 19.

25 But see Scott, Recollection and Experience, pg. 61 ff.
two passages. That is, it easy to think that the first instance of our thinking that sensible equals are deficient compared to the Form of Equality is identical to, or necessarily correlated with the moment when we first came to think of the Equal itself from our perception of sensible equals. Indeed, the use of *ennoein*, and the similar references to perceiving in both passages strongly suggest such an interpretation. On the other hand, the first passage has a proposition as the object of consideration (*εννοεῖν ὅτι*), namely the claim that sensible equals are deficient, whereas in the second passage a Form is the object (*εννοεῖν τι*). These are different mental activities, and have been distinguished, both in time and character, in the discussion up to this point. Thus, two very different points are being made here. The first is that we came to know the Equal itself prior to our comparing it to sensible equals, i.e. prior to engaging in philosophical reflection on the character of Forms in comparison to that of particulars. This naturally raises the question of how we came to have the Equal in mind in the first place. This is answered in the second passage, which reiterates the point that our *initial* conception of the Equal came from our perception of sensible equals. In fact, Socrates here makes the much stronger claim that this is the only possible source (*μὴ ἄλλοθεν...μηδὲ δυνατὸν εἶναι...*, 75a5-6) for our grasp of the Equal.

Socrates is working backwards from the philosophical place he and Simmias now occupy. They have just realized that sensible equals are deficient compared to the form. In order to make such a discovery, they must have had some grasp of the Equal prior to their investigation. But they have also agreed that their original grasp of the Equal came from nowhere other than perceptions of equal things. Having located the original grasp
in this earlier mental act, Socrates can employ the content of the metaphysical discussion to analyze the original grasp of the Equal. His next assertion is this: “But certainly from perceptions (ἐκ γε τῶν αἰτοθησεων) it is necessary to think that (ἐννοεῖν ὅτι) all these items in the perceptions desire that which is what is Equal but fall short of it.”

(75a11-b2) Once again, the reference to perceptions and the use of ennoein might lead us to take Socrates here to be describing the act of Recollection. But the object of ennoein here is again a proposition, namely the claim that sensibles are deficient with respect to forms. Socrates’ statement reiterates the conclusion of the discussion about sensible equals and their difference from the Equal itself. Sensible equals were shown to be deficient compared to the Equal because of the way each appeared. It is because of the way sensible equals are perceived that we know them to be different from and deficient in comparison to the Equal itself. We come to the philosophical conclusion by evaluating the phenomenal character of sensibles. It is in this sense that the thought comes from the senses (ἐκ γε τῶν αἰτοθησεων). Socrates is not describing Recollection, but reminding Simmias of the deficient appearance of sensibles.

This deficiency is the fact that makes us, as philosophers, aware that although it is from perceptions that we come to grasp the Equal itself, our perceptions are not sufficient for that grasp to come about. It is this fact that requires that something more than perception is taking place when we perform ordinary predications in speech and thought. This is exactly the conclusion Socrates draws: “Then it is necessary that, before we began to see and to hear and to have the other perceptions, somehow we took up the knowledge of it, the Equal, what it is, if we were going to refer the equals from perception to it, since
all such things desire to be such as it, but are deficient compared to it.” (75b4-8) The crucial inference is made explicitly here. It is a consequence of the deficiency of sensible particulars that we must have known the Forms prior to our perceiving particulars and referring them to the forms, i.e. predicking properties of them. That is, since sensibles manifest properties in the inconsistent, ambiguous, and indeterminate way they do, our ability to think of and apply the Forms to sensibles requires that we had acquaintance with them prior to our perception of sensibles.

This passage also illustrates the different roles of the two mental acts I have been distinguishing. The first mental act, our coming to have the Forms in mind, requires Recollection to be explained. The second mental act, our thinking of the deficiency of particulars provides the philosophical reason that this explanation is necessary. This role is expressed by the fact that the conclusion of the philosophical act is the content of the ὅτι clause. In the passage previous to this, ὅτι has always been accompanied by ennoein, indicating that the ὅτι introduced the content of a thought. The use here lacks a verb of saying or thinking, and lends itself to a reading on which the ὅτι introduces a causal clause. It introduces the clause stating the reasons for the claim in the main clause.

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26 What I have here translated as “since” is the word ὅτι, which can also introduce the propositional content of thinking or saying verbs. There are, however, no verbs appropriate to this reading in the passage, the closest being ἴδωμεν. Because of this, most interpreters supply a verb of thinking such as εἴσηκα in order to make this ὅτι parallel to those found in 75a1, and 11. Of interpretations I have seen, only Bluck takes this ὅτι to have causal force, although it is not clear that he reads the passage as I do. See R.S. Bluck, Plato's Phaedo. (London: 1955) Grube translates “and realized that all of them...” in Plato: Five Dialogues, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981) pg. 113. Rowe suggests “and come to have in mind that...,” Phaedo, pg. 173. Hackforth makes similar conjectures about the absence of ennoein, Phaedo, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955) pg. 70. Although my reading denies the tempting parallel between this ὅτι and earlier ones, in its favor is that it requires no textual emendation, or supplying of verbs. The passage can be translated just as it is written if we take the ὅτι to have causal force.
of the sentence, i.e. the thesis of Recollection. So, although what is stated in the ὅτι
clause is in fact the content of the philosophical conclusion described earlier, its role here
is to provide the philosophical reasons behind the theory of Recollection.

The key to my reading is the distinction between Recollection proper, an ordinary
act, and the philosophical reflection that leads us to understand Recollection. For reasons
I will discuss briefly below, it is difficult to see how this distinction is made, and how it
functions in the argument. Nevertheless, in the Phaedo, recollection is not a
philosophical act. We call Forms to mind when we predicate determinate properties of
the objects of our everyday experience. Insofar as this is something we all do, and have
done from a very young age, it is not necessary that we be aware that we are calling
Forms to mind. It is only philosophers, after all, who realize the need for entities like
Forms. And it is only philosophers who realize that we have Forms in mind in our
ordinary acts of speech and thought. Finally, it is only philosophers who realize, by
making the philosophical comparison of sensibles to Forms, that our ability to call Forms
to mind cannot be explained solely in terms of sensory experience. Everyone recollects,
but very few understand that they are doing so.

3.2 The Argument for Recollection in Context

In the last part of this chapter, I want to step back a bit to consider the argument
for Recollection in the Phaedo in a larger context. In part, I hope this will illuminate
some of the puzzling details of the argument. More importantly, it will clarify the
relation of Recollection to linguistic competence and to knowledge – the levels of
comprehension I identified as DR1 familiarity and DR2 understanding in Chapter One. First, because no explicit mention is made of ordinary speech and thought, or linguistic competence within the argument, I will explore the role of Forms in Plato’s developing epistemology. This will provide broader support for thinking that when Socrates talks about having a Form in mind, he means to talk about the predications of ordinary speech and thought. Then I will consider the relation between the two mental activities presented in the argument. Although my interpretation depends on distinguishing them and their roles in the argument, Plato seems intentionally to relate them. This is because ultimately, we must see ordinary learning and recollection as a step on the way to philosophical reflection and learning. Plato thinks of Recollection as a continuous process that starts in the learning that enables ordinary speech and thought and develops into philosophical reflection of the kind performed by Socrates and Simmias in this passage. I will explore this continuity much more fully in Chapter Four.

3.2.1 Recollection of Forms and Linguistic Competence

Nowhere in the argument I have described does Socrates say anything about the act of predicating a property in speech, or mention linguistic competence. Recollection is said to concern our ability to have a form in mind in response to the perception of a sensible particular, usually one of the Form’s participants. Socrates’ description of this process represents Recollection as a movement from perception to thought. Still, there is nothing in what he says to suggest that this process underlies our use of language. In order for us to see that Recollection does concern linguistic predications, we need to examine Plato’s thoughts about Forms more broadly.
In the *Phaedo*, Forms emerge as the centerpiece of Plato's developing metaphysics and epistemology. Forms are the determinate, eternal, intelligible entities in virtue of which unstable, perishable, unintelligible sensible particulars are what they are. Sensible entities have determinate properties in virtue of participating in the Forms. (100c ff.) In articulating this metaphysical role, Socrates says that participants in Forms are named after the Forms, or have the *eponyms* of the forms, in virtue of their participation. As Phaedo says, “It was agreed that each of the Forms (ἐκκοστον των εἰδων) was something, and that the participants of them were named after them (αύτων τούτων την ἐπωνυμίαν ἵσχειν).” (102b1-3) Socrates repeats this formulation shortly after: “Thus, Simmias has the eponyms small and large...” 27 In one sense, this formulation is another way of stating the metaphysical thesis. Something is appropriately called *large* just in case it is large. So the fact that Simmias deserves the eponym “large” consists in nothing more than his being large, i.e. his participating in the Large itself. To say that sensibles have their names, or eponyms, in virtue of participating in the Forms is one way of saying that they are what they are, i.e. have the properties they have, in virtue of participating in the Forms.

At the same time, Socrates' use of the word ἐπωνυμία to describe the terms we apply to sensible particulars indicates that strictly speaking, our words are names for the Forms. This suggests that in any correct application, the term will be applied directly to

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27 At 78e2 Socrates refers to sensible particulars as items *homonymous* to the Forms. Although I take Socrates to mean basically the same thing in saying that particulars are homonymous with Forms as he does in saying that they are eponymous, the latter use has an important difference. The use of the term ἐπωνυμία suggests that the terms we apply to particulars are strictly speaking, the names of the forms, and only derivatively applied to particulars.
the property, and derivatively to the particular bearing the property. Thus, even when we say that two sticks are equal to each other, what we are doing is identifying the equality that happens to be in the sticks.  

Plato does not make a distinction between general terms and proper names. In the same way that a proper name is properly applied to the single individual whose name it is, and derivatively to images of that person, the name of a Form is appropriately applied to the Form itself, and derivatively to the images or participants of the Form. Our ability to recognize a picture of Simmias as a picture of Simmias depends on our being acquainted with Simmias and having him in mind.

Similarly, Plato thinks that our ability to identify a sensible particular as an image of a Form depends on our being acquainted with the Form, and having it in mind.

We must be careful not to confuse two points of emphasis in this analogy. One concern we might have is with the ability to identify a picture as a picture, or an image. Another concern is with the ability to identify pictures of a certain individual, as that individual, perhaps without the ability to say that it is merely an image of him. The first ability requires that we be aware of a general distinction between real items and pictures such that we can, typically, identify an item as one or the other. The second requires only that we be acquainted with the individual whose picture we identify. Plato's account of ordinary speech and thought focuses on the second of these abilities. Most people have no idea that the items of the sensible world are mere images of Forms. To understand this point would require much philosophy. Nevertheless, what all people can do is

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28 This locution, "the equality in the sticks" takes its lead from Socrates' own description of the Largeness-in-us, in 102d7-8, ff. It is unclear whether we are to take this phrase to introduce a new entity to Plato's metaphysics.
identify the images of Forms by the Forms' names. Our ability to do this, thinks Plato, requires that we be acquainted with the Form itself, and that we have it in mind whenever we make such identifications.

This role for Forms develops out of their place as the objects of the *ti esti* question. In the elenchus, Socrates starts from the fact that we call many things by the same name, and seeks to identify what is common to or present in each of them. In entering elenchus, Socrates' interlocutors agree that the items to which they apply the term in question all have something in common. And they agree that their application of the name in many instances is inspired by the presence of some one feature, to which they apply the name. Consider, for instance, what Socrates says to Meno as he tries to explain the *ti esti* question with regard to Shape. He asks, "What is this which applies (ἐπιγείσεπεῖν) no less to the Round than to the Straight, and which you call Shape?" (Meno 74e7-8, my emphasis) There is some one thing named by the term "shape," which is common to roundness and straightness, and also to individual shapes. The task of answering the question "What is Shape?" is to say what one is discerning and naming in predicing Shape of the many different shaped things. Plato thinks we succeed in discerning and naming a property when we use its name in ordinary speech, even before we have begun inquiry with regard to that property. Similarly, in the inquiry into Virtue, the presumption is that Meno has discerned and named Virtue many times in using the

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29 The role of Forms as the objects of elenchus and dialectic is underscored at 75c10 ff. Socrates asserts that the argument for Recollection concerns the Equal itself no more than the Good itself, the Just itself, or any of those other things described in "asking our questions and in giving our answers."
term “virtue” or its cognates to speak of particular actions or people, or the virtues themselves. The objects of inquiry, Forms, are the very objects we have discerned and named, and had before our minds in our ordinary discourse.

It is natural to wish for more detail about the way a Form occupies our thinking in ordinary predications. Unfortunately, Plato says nothing about the precise way we have Forms in mind in these acts.\(^\text{30}\) Still, the terms of the elenchus, and Socrates’ remark that particulars have the eponyms of the Forms demonstrate that the Forms play a central role in our calling particulars what we call them. Forms are central to the predicative statements and thoughts we perform in making ordinary judgments about the world. In the argument from Recollection, Socrates describes Recollection as an act of referring particulars to Forms. (ἐκείσε ἄνοιγεν, 75b7, ἐπι...ἀναφέρομεν 76d9) This description is intended to describe the way we have Forms in mind in the predications of ordinary speech and thought.

3.2.2 Recollection and Knowledge

Plato’s focus on the inception of speech and thought in the Phaedo must not be seen to limit Recollection to a single moment in the course of human learning. To do so would be to sever Recollection in the Phaedo from that in the Meno.\(^\text{31}\) In the Meno, Recollection explains our ability to make progress in philosophical inquiry, and

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30 There is a good reason for this. It is an extraordinarily difficult question to answer. This question continues to vex philosophers who try to say what concepts are, how to individuate concepts, and just what constitutes concept possession.

31 This concern, in part, motivates Scott’s reading of the argument in the Phaedo. In order for Recollection to be a single theory, though, we do not need to restrict it to a single moment or stage of learning. See Chapter Four.
eventually reach knowledge. In the next chapter I will address the unity of the two stages of Recollection. The result of this account will be that Recollection is a continuous and gradual process that begins when we begin to speak and think, and ends only when we have reached knowledge. There are indications in the *Phaedo* that Plato conceives of Recollection in this way. The first is in the way Recollection is introduced. Cebes makes reference to proofs of Recollection which are unmistakably allusions to the argument in the *Meno*. Socrates then offers the new argument in case the *Meno* style argument fails to convince Simmias. Thus, although the argument is new, it is a new argument for the same theory. We will understand that theory fully, then, only when have seen how the two arguments truly describe a single learning process.

The continuity of Recollection is suggested also by Socrates' frequent use of the word *epistêmê*. *Epistêmê* signifies the fullest understanding and expertise. Although the term is used in the early parts of the argument – to establish the condition that the knowledge of the items inspiring Recollection must be distinct from that of the item recollected – the use of *epistêmê* is most prominent in the latter parts of the argument. For instance, Socrates asks Simmias whether we know what the Equal itself is "ἐπιστῶμεθα αὐτὸ ὅ ἐστιν?" He then goes on to ask from where we have acquired this knowledge, *epistêmê*. Socrates proceeds to ask if it is not from the perception of sticks and stones, and other such things. Given that the introduction of Recollection strongly suggests that Socrates is concerned with the conceptual grasp that sustains predications in ordinary speech and thought, it would seem that he is now asking how he and Simmias came to have an ordinary grasp of Equality. But the use of *epistêmê* connotes a rather extraordinary grasp of things. This is made all the more likely by the
fact that Simmias and Cebes are experienced philosophers and mathematicians; their grasp of Equality is deeper than the ordinary person's. Still, we need not conclude that Socrates is interested just in the development of philosophical understanding. Socrates is asking about the beginning of thought, and its development out of our perceptions. But at the same time, he is reminding us that this act is the first act on the road to full knowledge. That is, what we are doing when we recollect in the process of making ordinary predications is an incomplete Recollection, a first step towards the recovery of full understanding.

This provides a way of understanding some of the confusing features of the argument. Socrates uses very similar language to describe the two mental acts I worked so hard to distinguish. Furthermore he uses a variety of terms for knowledge, including the use of *epistêmê* when he seems to be talking about ordinary grasp. These apparent conflations make some sense if we see that Plato does not want to sever ordinary Recollection from philosophical reflection and knowledge. That is, Plato does not want us to think that the Recollection that sustains our ordinary speech and thought has nothing to do with the learning and reflection we do in philosophy. Rather, the ordinary Recollection explained here is properly seen as a step towards philosophical learning and knowledge.

I'll explore this point in much greater detail in the next chapter. For now it is enough to consider the ramifications of the role of Recollection in the *Phaedo*. Plato's view is that the ordinary human ability to think and speak depends on reference to stable, determinate entities. The entities that fill this role, however, are not merely mental entities. Forms are not merely concepts, though one of their roles is akin to that of
concepts. In addition, Forms are the principles of Being in virtue of which anything is what it is. The ordinary human ability to speak and think depends on contact with, or reference to the most real entities there are. According to Plato, the ordinary human ability to speak and think involves contact with the very entities that are the objects of the highest knowledge, epistêmê. Herein lies the unity of Plato’s epistemology.
In this chapter I will explain why the ability to provide a rational account is a necessary condition on knowledge for Plato. I will argue that the necessity of a rational account is a result of the role played by language in the learning process. I must first point out, though, that the progress of the last two chapters, far from making the answer to this question easily apparent, has instead raised a second pressing question. In the last two chapters I have described the structure of Plato’s philosophical method, and given interpretations of the two main arguments for the theory of Recollection. On my account, Recollection is used in different ways in the Meno and the Phaedo. In the Meno, recollection explains our ability to make progress in philosophical investigation, and eventually to reach knowledge. I’ll call this *philosophical learning*. But in the Phaedo, Recollection explains a far more ordinary moment of learning, the inception of ordinary speech and thought, or *ordinary learning*. Recollection covers two distinct stages of learning. Other than the fact that one must begin to speak and think before entering into philosophical inquiry, though, it isn’t clear how these two stages are related. Specifically, it isn’t clear why ordinary learning and philosophical learning deserve to be
covered by the same theory of learning. "All learning is Recollection," Socrates says. I take this claim to mean that for human beings there is a single kind of intellectual progress, called Recollection by Plato. If so, then we need to identify the single kind of intellectual progress that occurs in the stages of learning described in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*.

In answering this second question, we shall prepare the way for an answer to one of the guiding questions of this dissertation. This is because an account of the unity of Recollection will recast the nature of learning for Plato, and especially the role of language in learning. All learning is one for Plato because all learning aims at, and makes progress towards, a single goal: full apprehension of Forms. Human learning pursues this goal because we have rational souls. Full apprehension of Forms is the best state of a rational soul. It is in light of the single *telos* of human rationality that we must understand all learning to be Recollection. When placed in a body, the rational soul can no longer apprehend Forms directly. It must pursue knowledge through the data of the sensible world. The two stages of recollection represent the two stages a soul in this circumstance must go through in order to attain knowledge. In this way, the two stages of Recollection are unified because they are directed at the same goal, and because they each represent progress towards that goal.

This perspective sheds light on the role of language in learning for Plato. Our coming to use language is not distinct from the philosophical pursuit of knowledge. Language is not something we develop independently of our search for knowledge, and

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1 *Meno*, 81d4-5.
which just happens to be useful for that search. Rather, properly understood, our learning language is an expression of our rational desire to apprehend the Forms. Moreover, in coming to learn language, we make progress in that pursuit. When we learn language, we come to grasp Forms to some degree. The same is true of dialectic, and the revision of our statements involved in dialectic. There is not an alternate route to knowledge for human beings. For this reason, the completion of the learning process – the attainment of knowledge – necessarily brings the ability to provide a rational account. Human learning is a continuous and gradual process that begins when we begin to speak and think, and continues through dialectic to knowledge. It is a process that takes place through language. Language is not merely a tool for learning. It is the necessary expression and realization of our learning throughout the learning process. The connection between the ability to provide a logos and knowledge is the endpoint of the long and continuous union of language and learning.

4.1 The Unity of Recollection

The main arguments for the Theory of Recollection are located in the Meno and the Phaedo. The difference between these two arguments is that in them Plato seeks to explain distinct activities by appeal to Recollection. In the Meno, he is trying to explain our ability to engage in successful dialectical inquiry into an essence we do not know. In the Phaedo, he explains our ability to discern and predicate properties of sensible items.
This difference creates a tension in the doctrine of Recollection. On one hand, Plato obviously thinks that the two presentations of Recollection are related. The argument in the *Phaedo* is avowedly an argument for the same claim as that argued for in the *Meno*. There is but one theory of Recollection. On the other hand, the distinct activities explained by Recollection suggest that there are discreet kinds, or stages of Recollection. An adequate account must resolve this tension. It must show not only how Recollection, i.e. learning, is one throughout, but also why it is important to distinguish two stages of learning, despite the deep unity of these stages.

The unity of Recollection consists in a single rational impulse that drives ordinary learning as much as it does dialectic. This rational impulse is the soul’s desire to apprehend Forms directly. But this rational impulse manifests itself differently at different times. The most significant change comes when we begin philosophy; the beginning of philosophy radically alters the way we investigate the world. In what follows, I will first discuss the way philosophy changes the way we investigate the world, and the resulting need for an articulation of two stages of learning. After that, I will show how these two stages of learning are nevertheless driven on by a single, fundamental rational impulse.

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2 This tension is part of the motivation for Dominic Scott’s interpretation of Recollection in *Recollection and Experience*. Scott thinks that the unity of Recollection demands that the theory address the same type of learning in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*. Since the *Meno* is pretty obviously concerned with dialectic and philosophical learning, Scott labors to interpret the *Phaedo* as a discussion of the acquisition of philosophical understanding as well. The text strains under this interpretation. But there is no reason to think that Recollection must be homogeneous in its outward character. In fact, if we take seriously the claim that all learning is Recollection, we should find this rather unlikely.

3 See *Phaedo* 72e1-73b5.
4.1.1 Two Stages of Recollection

If ordinary learning and philosophical learning are akin, then there is a sense in which they have the same objects. Whatever we come to grasp fully in philosophical learning is the same as what we come to understand better in ordinary learning. The object of learning is a Form, a property or essence. In ordinary learning we come to have familiarity with an essence and its bearers, whereas dialectic leads us to apprehend the essence itself, what it is. In these two kinds of learning, however, there is an important difference between the stances we take toward the essence even as we learn with respect to it. The difference in stance derives from a difference in the kind of objects ordinary learners and philosophers focus on as they are learning. Although ordinary learners invoke the Form in thinking about and predicting the behavior of sensible particulars, they do not bring the Form before their mind consciously as a subject of investigation itself. This begins only with our initiation to philosophy. In fact, the turn towards the essence itself is a crucial part of the reflection that enacts the turn to philosophy.

Let's begin with the *ti esti* question, the question that begins and guides dialectic. In most cases, this question is inspired by the casual use of a property's name to describe an act or person, or in the statement of a moral platitude. Often the question is understood poorly by Socrates' interlocutor, and for good reason. In the ordinary speaker's parlance the property's name is used in one way, whereas Socrates' question uses the term in another, less familiar way. In ordinary speech, the name of a property is used to speak of and characterize items in the world. The most common use is one in which the name of the property occupies the predicate position in a statement whose subject is a sensible particular. In such a use the property itself is not presented as an
item worthy of analysis, description, and distinction from other objects. In the predicate position of the sentence, the property is invoked for the purpose of talking and thinking about the sensible items before us. The property typically goes unnoticed in this role; most speakers remain unaware that there is an object corresponding to the predicate term in their statement. This is why the typical response to the *ti esti* question is for the interlocutor to point to an action or person who bears the property, rather than the property itself. Socrates' interlocutors are accustomed to using the property's name to speak of and describe individuals and types in their experience, but they are not used to thinking of the property itself as a subject. The *ti esti* question breaks from this use by making the property itself — aside from its instances — the subject of discussion, analysis, and distinction. This change of focus is represented by the promotion of the property's name into the subject position of the *ti esti* question, and in the answers to that question.

The grammatical distinction between the predicate position and subject position of a sentence is merely the symptom of a deeper distinction between the stances an ordinary person and a philosopher take toward the property. Admittedly, the grammatical distinction is not perfectly correlated with the differences in the stance towards essence of the ordinary person and the philosopher. Unreflective users of a property's name will use it in the subject position of many statements. One needn't be a philosopher to utter

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4 The best example of this is Euthyphro, who uses his own current action to specify what Piety is for Socrates. But see Nehamas, "Confusing Universals and Particulars in Plato's Early Dialogues." Still, in the *Meno*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, and *Hippias Major*, an interlocutor's first response to the *ti esti* question is to point to some action or kind of person who is characterized by the property in question. In some of these cases the items specified in the answer are, strictly speaking, types and not individuals. Nonetheless, these answers all show the tendency of Socrates' interlocutors to focus on the items and types that are spoken of by reference to the property under discussion. These answers show that they are not accustomed to focus on the property as a thing itself, but think immediately of the subjects to which they customarily attribute the property.
sentences like "Virtue is beneficial," or "Honesty is the best policy," and do so meaningfully. Making and understanding statements of this kind is not a sign that one conceives of the property signified by the name as an item worthy of investigation, distinction, and analysis. The ordinary person who speaks and understands these sentences usually has no analysis to give of the subject terms in these statements. To most, the idea that there is a distinct entity corresponding to the property's name is quite alien. If pressed into an analysis of such a statement, the ordinary person will most likely interpret herself to have said something about the actions or people that manifest the property, rather than the essence itself. When the ordinary speaker says, "Man is an animal," this is most reasonably taken as equivalent to saying "Men are animals." At the very least, it is not reasonable to take the ordinary speaker to intend for her statement to say anything about two essences, Man and Animal, and the relation holding between them.

The ordinary unreflective speaker is focussed on speaking about the items of her everyday experience, and in cataloguing and predicting their behavior. The name of the property serves as a shorthand way of speaking about these phenomena, either specifically or generally. For this reason, the fact that some of Socrates' interlocutors specify types in their first answers to the *ti esti* question does not show them to have pried their focus away from sensible particulars. These speakers aren't aware that they have specified a type, or that perhaps a type is an object of differing metaphysical status from

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5 The extent to which people use the names of properties in the subject positions of sentences unreflectively may be seen in the fact that there is no guarantee that such general statements are intended to apply to all the bearers of the property named in the subject position. The layman who says "The Lion is a ferocious beast," may nonetheless believe that there are tame lions. We make these statements as general summaries of our experience, and exceptions to our statements do not daunt us from making such summaries.
sensible particulars. They're just trying make clear, in the best way they know how, what
the property in question is. To do this, they choose to point out one of the individuals or
types they have observed to be characterized by the property.

The grammatical distinction represents two ways of invoking the property in
discourse. The first is the ordinary use of the property’s name in which sensible
particulars, and collections or classes of particulars are spoken of by means of an oblique
reference to the property. The second is the philosophical use in which the user of the
name has a much narrower focus. For in this use the speaker means to talk about just the
essence, the possession of which makes an item bear the property. He means to speak
directly about the essence that is common to and explanatory of the many items, types,
and species described by the ordinary use of the term. And by speaking of it directly, the
philosopher hopes to analyze it, distinguish it from other essences, and say what it is.

The ordinary person is concerned with the objects apparent to him in everyday life, the
phenomena whose behavior he must describe and predict accurately in order to get along.
He has given little thought to the existence of essences he does not perceive. More to the
point, although he is proficient in identifying objects as belonging to a kind or type, and
in predicting the regular behavior of these objects on the basis of his classifications, he
has given little thought to what might explain such regularity in the world. The ordinary
person expects and depends on the regularity of the world in nearly every activity. But in
most cases a person’s thought about this regularity extends no further than what is
required to predict or describe the behavior of particulars. What the ordinary person does
rarely is wonder what explains the fact that items of kind X are regularly items of kind Y,
or why doing W regularly brings about Z. Philosophy begins when the individual reflects

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on the regularity manifested in the phenomena of the world, and wonders what could be
behind it. This reflection draws the philosopher to consider essences as distinct entities.

The turn to philosophy deserves more attention. On one hand, the initiation into
philosophical inquiry is inspired by reflection on the behavior of particulars, specifically
the regularity evident in the behavior of many like particulars. But it is not clear why this
sort of investigation should turn the budding philosopher’s attention to the essence itself
and away from the phenomena that bear it. That is, it is not clear why philosophy
requires that we move away from the particular and toward the universal. But there is no
question that, in Plato’s mind, the beginning of philosophy requires exactly this kind of
turn.6

In sketching an answer to this question, we must note in more detail the kind of
concern that typically leads to a philosophical examination in Plato. In the Socratic
dialogues, there are two issues generally that inspire Socrates to ask the ti esti question.
The first is an authoritative statement that some object bears a property, or a confident
statement about the character of some property. (Euthyphro, Crito, Republic, et. al.)
Socrates usually responds by asking for some explanation or justification of the claim.
The second issue is a concern with how a moral property is brought about in an
individual. (Laches, Meno, Protagoras, et. al.) These two projects converge, for in each

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6 Phaedo 65b-67a, and perhaps 99d-100a. See also Republic 500b-d, 509d-511c, 523a-d.
we are seeking a kind of cause. In the first case, the property has been attributed to an individual, or perhaps to the bearers of another property generally. Or, perhaps, something has been said generally about the bearers of the property itself. In all of these cases, the burden on the person making the statement is to say what about the subject of these predications makes it deserve the predication. What is sought is an elucidation of the conditions inhering in the subject that cause it to bear the property named by the predicate. Similarly, when we are seeking a description of the methods and processes that bring a property about, we are asking what causes the property to belong to an individual.

When seeking a cause in this way our satisfaction with the response depends on the character of the relationship holding between the cause described and the effect we are concerned with. This is not to say that in ordinary discourse we have an explicit set of criteria for the adequacy of a causal account. Rather, we intuitively feel that the cause that has been cited is genuinely and manifestly the cause of the effect for which it is cited, or that it is not. What we are looking for is a kind of transparency in the relationship between cause and effect. By this I mean that we desire a cause whose role as a cause is manifest in its nature and the nature of the effect it is said to cause. When such transparency is lacking, it is not apparent why the cause is responsible for the effect; we do not know what about the cause brings the effect about. In this circumstance there is what we may call an explanatory gap. Until we discover a cause whose nature is evidently of the sort to be responsible for the effect, we may continue to ask why the cause is a cause of the effect. Our search ends when the explanatory gap is closed and we have grasped precisely why the cause brings the effect about.
The drive to close the explanatory gap pushes our investigations naturally from
the particular to the general, and from ordinary to philosophical discourse. Imagine a
discussion that starts with an individual asking how he can make his son courageous. He
is asking about a particular effect: courage in his son. Imagine that he is told to send his
son to the Culver Academy for military training. In this recommendation Culver’s course
of education is put forward as a cause of courage in the son. Imagine that the father is not
satisfied with this, and wants to know precisely what about or in Culver’s course of
education makes it the best place for his son to acquire courage. His demand for more
develops out of the presence of an explanatory gap. It is not clear to the father why
Culver’s course of education will bestow courage to his son. In order to satisfy the
father, we need to specify the features of the school’s program that inculcate courage in a
student. This is an important step, for in isolating certain aspects or features of the
school’s course, we have begun to move away from the particular and towards the
general. The structure of our further explanation is as follows: Culver has discipline and
intellectual challenge in its courses, and these features cause courage. Therefore,
Culver’s courses promote courage in anyone who attends the school.\(^7\) In specifying the
features that make the school’s education productive of courage, we are not basing our
explanation on the particularity of the Culver Academy; it isn’t because it’s Culver that
the school imbues its students with courage. Instead our explanation is based on

\(^7\) Perhaps we don’t imagine the school to produce courage in everybody, but think that it will be good for
the son in particular. Then, the explanation says that the presence of discipline and intellectual challenge in
the school’s courses is productive of courage in any student who is like the son in relevant ways. Thus,
there is generality in both the features of the school that produce courage, and the features of the son that
make the school apt to produce courage in him.
discipline and intellectual challenge, features that might obtain in any number of schools. These features are not particulars, but universals, and it is these features, strictly speaking, that are productive of courage.

So far, the search for an explanation has led the father to explain a feature of a particular by reference to certain universal features of that particular. The Culver Academy’s success in producing courageous students is due to the presence of discipline and intellectual challenge in its courses. If an explanatory gap persists, the father may go on to ask what it is about discipline and intellectual challenge that make them productive of courage. Note, though, that in asking this question he is seeking an explanation for a relationship holding between universals. The more we press for an explanation of the usefulness of the school’s course of education, the further we move from the particularity of the school to the general. Eventually, to close the explanatory gap, the father will have to discover what Courage is, and show that discipline and intellectual challenge are themselves of a nature to produce that condition in an individual. The end of the father’s investigation into a particular school is a general account of the educational processes and methods that confer courage on students. But such an account is grounded in an account of what Courage is, that is, an answer to the *ti esti* question.

In trying to explain something about a particular, it gets us nowhere to appeal to the individuality of the item. It is no explanation of Simmias’ size to say that he is large

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8 In the *Gorgias* the difference between a *techne*, or craft, and an *empeiria*, or knack, is related directly to practitioner’s ability to provide precisely this kind of explanation. A *techne* is said to have an account of its product, and the product’s causes, whereas an *empeiria* does not. This difference is captured in a *techne*’s possession of *logos*, and an *empeiria*’s lack of same. See *Gorgias*, 465a, 501a.
because he is Simmias. Rather, our explanations must isolate some feature or property of the particular. But in doing this, we implicitly assert that the cause of the characteristic we are trying to explain is the property we have isolated, and not the individuality of the particular. The further implication is that anything sharing the property we have isolated as the cause will share the effect we are trying to explain. The next natural question is to ask why there is a general relation of cause and effect holding between these two properties. But when we reach the point of asking this question, of asking about a relation of cause and effect holding between two properties, we have reached another level of discourse. For we have ceased to ask questions about particulars, and begun, perhaps unwittingly, to ask questions about another kind of object altogether. In asking questions directly about the property, we have begun to do philosophy.

Plato observes that our general direction in seeking explanations is from the particular to the general. This direction is driven by a rational desire to close the explanatory gap, to find causes whose relation to their effects is transparent in what they are and the effects are. Plato’s philosophical justification of this tendency is to say that universals, and not particulars, are capable of standing in the proper causal relations to

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9 See Phaedo 102b8-c4. Simmias is large, not by being Simmias, but by participating in the Large itself. This example is given in a discussion of Forms, and their role as causes. Although Forms may be simple-minded and naïve causes, they exemplify the kind of transparency at which our explanations aim. Simmias is large just because he has, or participates in, largeness.

10 The reflective turn to philosophy does not require that one have opinions about the nature of the objects one is inquiring about. Socrates’ interlocutors make progress in their answers to the ti esti question, but they are not yet at the point of wondering about the status of objects like properties. Nonetheless, Plato also seems to think that somewhere along the way a dialectician must become aware that the objects he is inquiring after do have a special metaphysical status, different from that of particulars, if he is going to acquire knowledge of those objects. This suggests that there is a kind of philosophical reflection that is important for dialectical progress, but is of a general metaphysical character, and not limited to the field of any specific essence or nature.
their effects. Essences, and not particulars, are the sorts of things that can be related transparently, because of what they are, as cause and effect. Even if we are trying to understand the behavior of particulars, we must turn our attention to the properties they possess rather than their individuality. A search for explanations, therefore, must move into the realm of essences and away from the sensible realm. For it is only by reference to essences that we can satisfy the rational urge that leads us to seek explanations at all.

The drive to close the explanatory gap is closely related to an investigation of regularity. When we begin to ask why properties are regularly related in the sensible phenomena of the world, we are, in effect, seeking to close the explanatory gap between them. Imagine that the father has observed that every school with courses in philosophy succeeds in producing courageous students. If the father begins to wonder why courses in philosophy are regularly correlated with courage in students, he would be asking for an explanation of what about studying philosophy leads to courage. More often than not, we start by observing a regularity, using it, and depending on it in our everyday affairs. When we attend to the regularity itself, however, and seek to understand it, we begin to investigate the essences that are related in the regularity, and we begin, perhaps without noticing it, to do philosophy.

In the Republic, the transition from an ordinary perspective to a philosophical perspective will be elevated to a position of great importance. This is partly due to Plato’s heightened critical attention in that work to the ordinary stance towards essence. The unreflective person’s focus on sensible objects is likened to a state of dreaming, in that he or she takes sensible objects as the items of the fullest reality, ignorant of the
Forms whose copies they are.\textsuperscript{11} The turn to philosophy is represented as an act of turning away from sensible objects and towards the objects of true being, the Forms.\textsuperscript{12} In turning one's soul in this way, one does not automatically acquire understanding. But one does enact a crucial change in the stance one takes towards the regularity of the world. Before turning the soul towards the Forms, one is engaged primarily in asking what circumstance obtains in the sensible world, and what will take place in the future.\textsuperscript{13} In these acts of description and prediction, we rely on the properties that are common to sensible particulars, and the regular associations between them. But these common properties and regularities remain implicit in our thought. The fact that we are invoking universals, and relying on inductive generalizations is hidden to us. The question that effects the turning of the soul is the philosophical question. It is the search for reasons and explanation, the question of why there are regularities.\textsuperscript{14} We are forced to consider exactly what it is that is common to the sensible items that are alike. Similarly, we must examine why two such features are regularly related, perhaps as cause and effect. The beginning of philosophy

\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{11} Republic, 476c ff.
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\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 518c-d
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\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 516c; “prizes for the man who saw most clearly the shadows that passed before them, and who could best remember which usually came earlier and which later, and which came together and thus could most ably prophesy the future...” (Grube translation)
\end{quotation}

\begin{quotation}
\textsuperscript{14} Wonder about regularity can occur on at least two levels. The first level is to wonder why some specific condition or property is regularly correlated with or caused by some other specific property. This kind of wonder inspires one to investigate the properties involved in the regularity. At another level one may begin to wonder what must be the case in order for regularity, per se, to exist in the world. It is this kind of wondering, presumably, that leads Plato to arrive at the Theory of Forms. An important question to consider is this: what is the relation between these two kinds of wondering and their methods of investigation? For instance, it might be the case that dialectic is a method for only the first kind of investigation, for looking into specific essences, while a less formal kind of reflection is necessary for the second kind of inquiry. Or, one might say that in order to complete an investigation of the first kind one must, at some point, engage in investigation of the second. At what point, and how the first kind of reflection leads to the second is another matter altogether. See my remarks on pg. 227.
\end{quotation}
marks a change in the way one investigates and thinks about the world; one begins to confront and focus on an entirely different kind of entity, essences. Consequently, there is a discontinuity between the kind of learning one engages in before and after initiation into philosophy. In the Meno and Phaedo, Plato marks this discontinuity by distinguishing two kinds of learning. One produces the ability to track and describe the regularity in the sensible world, and the other produces the ability to pursue explanations for those regularities to the very end. These two kinds of learning require that we describe two distinct stages of Recollection.

4.1.2 A Single Kind of Intellectual Progress

In the Republic, Socrates says that the role of a teacher is not to give sight to blind eyes, but to turn the soul from darkness to light. This image describes the change we undergo when we begin philosophy, and conveys the discontinuity of ordinary learning and philosophical learning. When we begin to do philosophy, we direct our rational attention in an entirely different direction, away from sensibles and toward Forms. But this image also captures the continuity of ordinary and philosophical learning. For in turning her soul around, the learner does not begin to use a different faculty to grasp the new objects of her attention. The faculty of sight, which represents the intellect (νοûς), is active no matter which direction the individual faces. This suggests that the faculty of understanding that directs our ordinary learning is the same as that involved in our

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15 See pp. 52-53

16 Republic 517b-d
philosophical learning. This is significant on two levels. First, it explains the usefulness of our ordinary speech and thought to dialectic. The reason we can make philosophical progress by reflection on our ordinary beliefs and statements is that the formation of those beliefs and statements has been guided by the same rational goals that guide dialectic. Second, the fact that ordinary learning and philosophical learning are directed by the same rational faculty indicates that the two stages of learning are part of the same rational project: the pursuit of full apprehension of the Forms. The unity of this rational project grounds the unity of Recollection. I shall explore both of these points here.

The usefulness of ordinary learning to dialectic was described in Chapter Two. Our ordinary use of language has embedded in it a wealth of experience with the objects of the sensible world. The statements we tend to make with the name of a property, both specific and general, provide us a means of surveying the manifest behavior of the property. The things we are accustomed to say with the name of the property are an encapsulation and summary of our experience with the bearers of that property. By surveying these statements, we are able to conduct a wide-ranging survey of the manifest behavior of the property. This survey enables our dialectical search because we are searching for the essence common to the instances of the property, and explanatory of the being and regular behavior of those instances.

Our ordinary language is useful not just as a vehicle for the presentation of our ordinary experience, but also for the manner in which it is able to present that experience. A wealth of experience with the objects of the sensible world is obviously useful for dialectic. But it is not enough. A biologist with a large collection of animal specimens is not thereby prepared to perform a study of mammals. Similarly, a wealth of encounters
with sensible objects does not by itself prepare us to investigate a single kind of those objects. If the biologist's collection of animals is not organized, he will not be able to present to himself just the specimens germane to a study of mammals. Obviously, his collection must be organized such that he can focus on the specimens that are relevant to a study of mammals. In the same way, the starting dialectician must have a collection of phenomena that is organized so that she can survey just those items, types, and species useful to her investigation. Our ordinary learning performs the organization of our experience necessary for that experience to be dialectically useful. Our ordinary use of language is the expression of this organization.

Organization is a rational act. The fact that we have an impulse to organize our ordinary experience indicates that our ordinary experience of the world is guided by our rationality. Thus, the usefulness of our ordinary experience to dialectic reveals that our ordinary experience is itself a realization of the rational capacities and impulses that guide dialectic. Two facets of our ordinary experience show this to be the case. The first is our sensitivity to likeness, manifested in our ordinary use of general terms. The second is our search for causal relationships and explanations. I'll consider each in turn.

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17 There is a paradox here. In order to conduct a useful investigation of mammals, the biologist must have an organized collection of animal specimens. Specifically, he must have a collection organized in such a way that the mammals are set off as a discreet category. But he cannot grasp the nature of mammals, and thus the criteria for assigning a specimen to the category of mammals until he has performed an investigation of mammals. In order to study mammals, it seems, the biologist must already know what a mammal is. Conversely, not knowing what a mammal is, it seems that the biologist will have no guidance in his study. This is basically the paradox Meno puts forward. The organization our ordinary language performs on our sensory experience requires our grasping the property we want to investigate to some degree, but not in the full way at which dialectic aims.

18 This is not to say that the pre-dialectical organization must be perfect. Just as the biologist's collection of mammals might exclude whales and include caterpillars, our pre-dialectical manner of speaking may make mistakes.
4.1.2a Sensitivity to Likeness

The use of a single term to describe a plurality of phenomena constitutes the collection of those phenomena into a single class. Our calling many things by the same name indicates that we take those things to be akin in some important way. The most evident sign that we take treat these items in this way is our comfort in thinking and speaking of them as one. This occurs when we use the term commonly applied to them in the subject position of a sentence. In ordinary discourse, this is a way of saying something generally about the items called by the name. The point here is not that we consciously choose to think of the items called by the same name as akin, or that we have an analysis of the kinship we sense among those items. Rather, without thinking about what we are doing, we quite naturally think of these items as one, make general statements about them as a group, and make claims about the character of future items to which the name will be applied. We have a predilection for grouping items together, and treating them as alike in some way. The means for these groupings are words.

Our use of language generally manifests an impulse to organize the items in the world into classes according to likeness. Our use of a specific word represents our detection of a specific similarity holding across a plurality of particulars. This is not to say that we get it right every time we make a classification. It is far-fetched to say that every general term designates a natural kind, a group of items made genuinely alike by the common possession of a single essence. Sometimes our words group together items

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19 See Meno 74d4 ff. Here Socrates imagines someone imploring Meno to tell him what Shape is, “since you call all these many by the same name, and you say of none of them that it is not a shape....” The fact that many things are called by the same name is at least prima facie evidence that they are alike in some way and deserve a single account. But see 73a 4-5.
that are not genuinely alike. Nonetheless, when we group items together in this way, the tacit conjecture is that they are alike. Whether we succeed or not, what we are trying to do is delineate a genuine kind in the world. Moreover, although we are fallible in our groupings, we do have an intuitive sense for when objects are grouped together well and when they are grouped together poorly. Generally speaking, our terms are used to speak of items that are alike at least superficially, and quite often deeply. More importantly, we almost never group together items that are significantly and obviously different from one another. When we go wrong, it is easy to see why we went wrong. So, for instance, it is easy to see why for so long people grouped Jadeite and Nephrite together as Jade, or why the Greeks lumped all foreigners together as Barbarians. The character of our mistakes in linguistic classification confirms, rather than undermines, the following point about our ordinary use of language. We use words in an attempt to demarcate the items of the world into classes according to likeness. And our classifications are guided by an intuitive, though not infallible, sense for when things are genuinely alike and when they are different.

In learning to use a general term in ordinary discourse, we are trying to demarcate a set of items that are genuinely alike in the world. The impulse to classify items

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20 It is not clear whether Plato, at the writing of the *Meno* and *Phaedo*, thought that every general term corresponds to a natural kind. By the time of the *Statesman*, though, he did make a distinction between terms that map onto natural kinds and terms that do not. See *Statesman* 262a ff.

21 My use of the word “trying” must not be taken to mean that our classification of items according to likeness is a conscious attempt to do so. Very young children are not consciously trying to divide the world up according to likeness when they delight in identifying new dogs. They are just doing what comes naturally. That this categorization comes so naturally, Plato thinks, is the result of a certain striving on the part of the rational soul, a striving to discover and apprehend Forms in the data of the sensible world. More on this below, pg. 151 ff.
according to likeness organizes our use of language. And the organization that results is, by and large, an apt preparation for dialectic. This is because the rational impulse that guides our use of a general term is the same as the one that directs our search for an essence in dialectic. The goal of dialectic is to apprehend the real essences common to many sensible particulars. These real essences are the items responsible for the similarity among a plurality of sensible items. It is by reference to these essences that we explain the being of particulars individually, and their regular behavior generally. A specific dialectical investigation begins from the fact that we call many particulars by the same name and sets out in search of the essence common to those items, and corresponding to the name. The fact that our use of language is guided by a sense for likeness makes the set of items we survey dialectically a good place for us to start, since those items will generally be like one another. At times some of the items we call by a name will be alike and others will not share that likeness. For instance, some of the individuals and actions we call courageous may genuinely be courageous, while some of them merely appear to be so. In dialectic, our sense for genuine likeness allows us to distinguish between the real bearers of a property, and those that merely appear to bear the property. In a more extreme case, the term we are investigating may turn out not to signify a class of genuinely similar items at all. In this case, our sense for when things are truly alike – when there is a genuine essence common to many items – enables us to discover that there is no essence where our language suggested there was. In general, though, there

22 Our sense for genuine likeness itself may need to be refined through dialectic. That is, just as our grasp of a certain essence is developed in the course of a dialectical investigation, our grasp on what it means for two particulars to be genuinely alike, to possess the same property, may itself be improved at the same time. Ultimately, I think, the refinement of our sense of genuine likeness results in our philosophical grasp of Being. For two particulars to be genuinely alike is for them to have or be characterized by the same
will be some similarity, superficial or deep, inhering in the items we call by some one name, and dialectic is a process of examining those items in order to grasp the essence they have in common.

In dialectic we are seeking an essence, in order to explain the likeness and regular behavior of sensibles. According to Plato, in learning to use a general term we are also trying to find real essences by delineating the natural divisions in the sensible world. In the Cratylus, Socrates says that names are tools for teaching and for “separating being.” This indicates that, for Plato, when we learn language we are striving to discern and distinguish essences, separating one essence from another. When we have learned to use a word, optimally, we have learned to recognize the essence named by that term. It is in virtue of that discernment that we are able to recognize instances of the property and identify them by use of the name. In language learning, the soul manifests its impulse to discern essences through its predisposition to group sensible items according to likeness. The goal of language learning is the same as the soul has in inquiry.

4.1.2b The Search for Causes

In describing the turn to philosophy, I referred to our ordinary tendency to look for causes and explanations. This tendency leads us naturally to philosophical reflection. Moreover, this predilection is closely related to another tendency I have mentioned, the tendency to speak of the bearers of a property as one, especially when

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essence. Thus, to understand the likeness of two particulars fully, we need to grasp what it is to be a single, stable essence. That a philosopher must grasp Being in order to succeed fully at any specific dialectical investigation is one of the results of Sophist. (253b9-254b1)

23 Cratylus 388b13-c1.
predicating some other property to them generally. These two tendencies are related in
the following way. When one property is regularly accompanied by another we are often
led to predicate one of the other. So, we say that fire is hot. But in many cases, we are
often not satisfied merely to note the regular conjunction of the two. We are not satisfied
just to say that "X is Z," but go on to assert a causal relationship between the two. So the
fact that fire is always hot leads us to think of fire as a cause of heat, not just in itself, but
in things that come into contact with fire. Of course, our causal claims are not limited
to general statements relating properties. In fact, the majority of our causal claims have
to do with particulars: the kettle is hot because it has been standing over the fire for
fifteen minutes. Our focus, ordinarily, is on explaining why the particular items around
us behave in the way they do, why individuals make the choices they do, why specific
events unfolded as they did. In stating the causes for these varieties of phenomena, we
often appeal to other specific features of the phenomena, or conditions related to the
phenomena. This kettle is hot because of that fire. We can explain this kettle's being hot
by mentioning its position over that fire only because we have seen nearness to fire bring
heat into many objects before. Our tendency to make causal attributions, either specific
or general, is supported by our observations of regular correlations between features,
conditions, actions, and properties in the world. The same
observations of regularity that lead us to use the name of a property in a general
attributive statement inspire us also to posit causal relationships between properties and
particulars alike, and sustain our explanations of how things are around us.

24 See Phaedo 103 ff.
Dialectically, the presence of causal attributions in the set of statements we make using the name of a property is very useful. When we search for an essence in inquiry, we look for the one that sustains the causal relations we have attributed to the property in our ordinary discourse. The statement that Virtue is beneficial, for instance, is the claim that Virtue brings good effects to those that have it, and to those who deal with the virtuous. Whatever Virtue is, it cannot be something with the capacity for ill effects. Arguing in this way, Socrates reaches the conclusion that Virtue is Knowledge in the Meno. Similarly, if we think that Virtue is caused by education, then we can limit our search to those things brought about by education, as opposed to natural talent. The best example, however, is in the Euthyphro, where the account of Piety as what the gods love is rejected on the grounds that the gods love the Pious because it is Pious. That is, the condition put forward to cause Piety is in fact caused by Piety, and so cannot be the very essence of the Pious. Our causal claims, as much as our particular attributions, guide our search for the essence by showing us what sort of thing the essence must be. It must be the sort of thing to cause X, Y, and Z, and to be caused by F, G, and H. These causal claims are useful to dialectic, though, only because the goal of dialectic is to discover the essence that is responsible for a variety of phenomena, all sharing some property in common, and the regular behavior of those phenomena. An unconsidered tendency in our ordinary discourse becomes an explicit goal of dialectic.

25 Consider Socrates' instruction to Charmides at Charmides 160d5-e1: "...think about what kind of person your indwelling Temperance causes you to be, and consider what sort of Being might accomplish this."

26 Meno 87d2-89a7.

27 Euthyphro 10d1-11b5.
Our tendency to make causal attributions has important implications. Implicit in the attribution of a causal relation, whether particular or general, is a claim about the natures of the things cited as cause and effect. The implicit claim is that the nature or character of the cause is such as to bring the effect into being. The claim that the fire below the kettle caused it to be hot implies that there is something about what the fire is that enables it to bring about heat, whatever it is, in the kettle. Our causal attributions state that the nature or character of the cause is sufficient to bring about the nature or character of the effect. For this reason, the fact that our ordinary discourse is full of causal claims indicates that our ordinary stance to the world is guided by an important assumption. The assumption is that the items in the world have natures, determinate characters, and that these characters are related to one another in such a way as to bring one another about just because of what they are. This assumption remains hidden to us, because we are not easily spurred to consider what it means to say that one thing is the cause of another. But the fact that we are driven to seek and find causes indicates that our ordinary stance to the world is guided by a deep awareness of the explicable relations between things, and the determinate natures behind these relations. Although we are not infallible at detecting causal relations in the world, we are very good at it. As was the case with our sensitivity to likeness, we make mistakes. But our causal mistakes show that our intuitions about causes are more right than they are wrong, and go wrong for understandable reasons when they do.

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28 This is a matter that is properly taken up in a philosophical discussion, e.g. the discussion at 96 ff. of the Phaedo.
The result of this discussion is much the same as the discussion of our sensitivity to likeness. Concealed in our ordinary discourse is a strong rational impulse, the impulse to discover and grasp the causes of things, the reasons for the regular behavior of items which stem from what those items are. This strong rational impulse organizes and shapes our ordinary discourse and makes it useful for dialectic. But the reason it is useful for dialectic is that the concealed rational impulse is at root the same as one of the explicit goals of dialectic. Dialectic seeks to find the single essence in virtue of which items of a single kind are what they are, and behave as they do.

Ordinary learning is continuous with philosophical learning. This is so in two ways. The first aspect of this continuity is the usefulness of our ordinary statements for a dialectical examination. These statements are the means by which we present our organized ordinary experience in a dialectical examination. The character of this organization, however, and the fact that we perform it so easily and unconsciously indicates a deeper continuity between ordinary and philosophical learning. For upon inspection of our ordinary learning it becomes apparent that we are guided in it by strong impulses to delineate the similarities in the world, and to discover the causal relations between these and other stable characters. These deep impulses, which act silently in our ordinary learning, become explicit goals of dialectic. The rational impulses that guide ordinary and philosophical learning are the same.

4.1.2c The Rational Impulse

I have concentrated on two ways our ordinary learning, and thus our language, is organized: sensitivity to likeness, and a disposition to seek and find causes in the world.
It is time to bring these tendencies together, and articulate the single rational impulse they both express. The soul seeks to apprehend essences, or Forms, directly.\(^\text{29}\) According to Plato Forms are stable, determinate, eternal entities that are what they are in a way different from and superior to the way sensibles are what they are.\(^\text{30}\) Furthermore, the being of Forms is causally prior to the being of sensibles.\(^\text{31}\) For the soul that is seeking essences, then, it is a good strategy to look for the hallmarks of the kind of Being essences enjoy. Two hallmarks of this Being are stability, insofar as Forms are what they are without change, and causal efficacy, insofar as Forms are responsible for the being of sensible particulars. The two rational impulses described above are properly understood as sensitivities to the hallmarks of the kind of Being Forms enjoy. In searching for likeness in the world, we are looking for stable Forms in the ceaseless flux of the sensible world. That which is common to many sensible items displays this stability, since it appears the same in many instances. We seek to group items according to likeness, therefore, in order to grasp what they have in common. That common item, whatever it is, manifests the stability characteristic of essence. In searching for causes, we are looking for the items responsible for the behavior of sensible particulars. Here too, our search is ultimately directed towards essences; we are looking for items with the Being required to stand in this causal role.

Remember that our search for causes is impelled by a desire to close an explanatory gap. This gap is closed only when we apprehend a cause whose nature is

\(^{29}\) See Phaedo 66b ff., 79d.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 74d, 78c-d.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 100c.
transparency of the sort to bring about the effect. Forms are the only items in the world that possess the natures or Being capable of standing in this role. Forms can stand in this position of causal priority precisely because of the kind of Being they possess. We search for causes and explanations in our ordinary discourse precisely because they will lead us to the Forms. That is, we search for causes because it is a hallmark of being an essence that the essence can stand in a causal and explanatory role. Thus, our search for likeness and our search for causes are both expressions of a more fundamental search for essences, for Forms. The rational tendencies that organize our ordinary learning, and our use of language are expressions of the single overarching rational goal of the soul: to apprehend the Forms.

The identification of the single rational impulse that guides ordinary and philosophical learning alike illuminates the unity of these two stages of learning. In the Phaedo, Plato describes the soul as an entity inherently directed towards knowledge. When the soul is purified of its association with the body and alone by itself, it can apprehend the Forms directly. This direct apprehension constitutes the best state of the soul. The rationality of the human soul consists in its intrinsic impulse toward and capacity for direct apprehension of the Forms. When a soul of this kind is placed in a

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32 This comes out in the Phaedo's formulation of the theory of Forms: If anything is beautiful, it is so by the Beautiful itself, Phaedo 100c3 ff.

33 Although Socrates never explicitly says that the soul seeks knowledge of the Forms, in virtue of being a soul, it is strongly implied in several places. Socrates' description of how philosophers prepare for death by doing philosophy makes a strong connection between doing philosophy, and approaching knowledge of the Forms and separating the soul from the body, 61d-67b. The more one does philosophy, the more one purifies one's soul of the body and allows the soul to exist itself by itself (66e6-67a1). What the soul is, in and of itself, is an agent or organ directed towards knowledge. It is only by the purification of something foreign, the body, that the soul achieves its true purpose.
human body, its nature and goals are unchanged. It still strives for the fullest
apprehension of the Forms. But this rational pursuit is hindered by our soul’s location in
a sensing body in the sensible world of complex, equivocal, changing particulars. The
soul has one rational purpose, but it must proceed incrementally due to its incarnation.
The two stages of learning are the two stages a soul of this kind must proceed through in
order to reach knowledge.

By considering the constraints of the soul’s location in a body, we can see
precisely how language acquisition represents an improvement in our grasp of Forms.
When the soul is placed in the body, according to Plato, it forgets the Forms it knew.
Nevertheless, the soul’s impulse to apprehend stable essences remains. Unfortunately,
the overwhelming influx of the senses constrains the soul’s rational activity. Because of
these constraints, the soul must first grasp Forms in the rudimentary manner manifested
in ordinary linguistic competence. The soul must first come to ordinary familiarity with a
property, and linguistic competence with its name, before it can recover knowledge.
Here’s how this happens.

From the moment we are born we are inundated with sensory experiences of
complex, unstable sensible particulars. Nevertheless, the soul continues to reach for
essences any way it can. Having forgotten essences, however, it cannot reach out for any
essence specifically. That is, the soul cannot hunt through its sensory experience
specifically for Justice, or Virtue. It has forgotten what these Forms are. Rather, the soul
can only look for the hallmarks of essence: stability, determinacy, causal efficacy.
Within the soul’s experience of sensible particulars, there are some things that do not
change and are of determinate character. These are the features, or properties manifested
by sensible particulars. These properties are stable from item to item, and cause different particulars to be genuinely alike. In an attempt to grasp these stable properties, the soul’s first rational response to the experience of being trapped in a body is to mark off the brute similarities it detects in the world.

When the soul groups items according to similarity, it identifies a stable property in virtue of which those items are similar without yet grasping the essence of the property. And it must do this first, because before one can grasp the essence of a property, one must first demarcate and locate the property. The tools by which we perform this rudimentary demarcation, i.e. the tools by which we separate Being, are names. Similarly, before the soul can begin to reflect on the regular relations between one property and another, it must observe and describe these regular relations in sensible instantiations. Learning a language is, largely, a process of becoming familiar with a large number of properties in this way, and becoming proficient in using the names for those properties in speech. In marking off similarities in this way, the soul is reaching in the only way it can for the grasp of stable essences.

A passage from the Cratylus is relevant here. After a long series of etymologies, Socrates at last gives an etymology of the word ὄνομα, the term Plato applies to proper names and general terms alike. Socrates posits that the word is a compression of the sentence “ὅν οὗ ᾗ ἥθημα” or “ὅν οὗ μάσμα” both of which translate to “being for which there is an inquiry.” In becoming competent with a general term we detect and learn to recognize a property we think is deserving of inquiry, i.e. a character for which

34 Cratylus 421a7-b1.
we think there is an essence. Our ordinary use of a general term contains a tacit conjecture. The conjecture is that *there is a genuine essence* that is responsible for the regular character we track with the name. Socrates' analysis of the term ὅνωμα indicates that we use names for the purpose of locating and rudimentarily grasping the essences which we will come to understand fully by inquiry.

Both ordinary and philosophical learning aim at the full discernment and grasp of essences, and rely on an innate human capacity for grasping the genuine regularities in the world. Language learning is limited by the fact that it is the *first* step the soul takes in apprehending natures through the data of sensation. This step having been made, dialectic profits from the incipient grasp in our use of language. But both endeavors are driven by the soul's rational desire to grasp natures fully and directly. And both endeavors produce grasp of natures, albeit of differing degrees. It is in this sense that when the soul learns a language it is making the same kind of rational progress as is made in philosophical inquiry. In ordinary learning, as in philosophical learning, the soul is striving for full grasp of essences, and succeeds in improving its grasp, though perhaps not fully. For this reason, the recollection involved in language learning is the same as the recollection involved in dialectic.

In order to grasp the unity of recollection, we need to see ordinary learning and philosophical learning through the lens of knowledge. We need to see these stages of learning as steps the soul takes, and must take, if it is to reach knowledge while trapped

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35 This is not to say that every general term names a real essence, but that every general term represents an attempt to name a real essence, a conjecture that there is a real essence causing the regularity we have named. See above pg. 143.
in a body. It is perhaps easy to see that this is the case for dialectic. It is harder, though, to see that ordinary linguistic competence expresses our rational desire for knowledge, and represents progress towards that goal. But this, ultimately, is the way Plato thinks of ordinary human discourse. The features of our ordinary use of language—our sensitivity to likeness, and the use of general terms; our detection of regularities and their description in general statements; our pursuit of causes and explanations—are ways for us to get at essences. For this reason, ordinary learning and philosophical learning are deeply continuous. They are constituted by a single kind of intellectual progress, improvement in our grasp of Forms. And together they form the single course that human learning must take. The Theory of Recollection is a theory about the way a soul inherently directed towards the apprehension of stable, determinate essences will proceed towards that goal when it is placed in a body and a world where essences cannot be directly apprehended, but only through their many sensible bearers. The path the learning soul will take is a long one, and the manifestations of our learning will vary depending on where we stand along the way to knowledge. Nevertheless, the rational activity of learning is one throughout the learning process.

4.2 Language and Learning

Let us now turn to the question that inspired our investigation of dialectic, linguistic competence, and the Theory of Recollection: why must anyone who knows something be able to give an account of what he or she knows? With much work behind us, the answer can be given in two fairly short steps. The first step is to show that anyone
completing dialectic will necessarily be able to give an account of the kind Plato
demands. The second is to show that, according to Plato, language acquisition and
dialectic constitute the only path to human knowledge. Of this latter task, part has been
accomplished in the account of language learning I've just given. It will help,
nonetheless, to give an account of dialectic, and the role of language in the learning
process as a whole.

4.2.1 Dialectic and the Ability to Provide an Account

Let's begin by saying briefly what is involved in giving a rational account. The
ability to provide an account should not be taken in a narrow sense. The phrase *didonai logon*, to give an account, does not stand merely for the pronunciation of the definition of
a Form. This can be accomplished by the most unreflective of people and young
children. Instead the ability *didonai logon* involves a more substantial commitment to a
statement of the essence of a Form. To be able to provide an account is to be able to
enunciate a definition of an essence, and to defend it in the face of any sort of
questioning. If the account is difficult for an individual to understand, the knower should
be able to make it clearer for that person, and explain its content and consequences to
some degree. Plato thinks that knowing something entails the ability to teach what one
knows. In part, this must include some capacity for explaining, or rephrasing, or
clarifying one's account. Similarly, if the account comes under attack, the person

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36 See Meno 93c ff. where Themistocles and Pericles are said not to have known Virtue because of their
inability to teach it to their children. This is not to say that the knower must be able to teach just anyone
what he or she knows.
providing the account must be able to defend it. This is not to say that the provider of an account must be able to teach anybody, or convince any challenger of its correctness. Still, the person who knows must be able to state and explain what he knows, and respond to challenges consistently, coherently, and in a way that makes the account coherent and plausible to competent and reasonable listeners.

The skills required to provide an account are the very skills that dialectic promotes in the inquirer. In the process of reaching a final account, three important things happen. First of all, the inquirer completes a critical survey of the instantiations, types, and species of the nature under investigation. This survey is critical in the sense that the inquirer makes revisions in the range of items to which he attributes the property, and improves his skill, generally, at telling whether something genuinely bears the property or not. He purges errors from the cases with which he is familiar, and hones his ability to decide whether new cases bear the nature or not. Second of all, this critical survey is guided by the demand for consistency. As a result, the inquirer’s beliefs about items bearing the property will be a consistent set at the end of inquiry. This consistency will obtain across the many levels of statements the inquirer makes, from particular predications, to the articulation of types and species, to general descriptions. In general,

[37] An inability to teach infants what one knows is not to be held against the provider of an account. Similarly, an inability to convince interlocutors like Thrasymachus and Philebus is not to be taken as a sign that the account is wrong, or the provider ignorant.

[38] One reason it would be misguided to think that the possessor of an account should be able to convince anyone of the account’s correctness, is that in at least some (and perhaps all) cases, coming to understand an account and see that it is correct requires that one go through a dialectical investigation of one’s own. Consider the difference between being able to pronounce the centerpiece of Relativity, $E=MC^2$, and being able to explain it. Even if my physicist brother gives me a proof of the theory, so as to convince me of its truth, I will need to take many physics classes before I genuinely understand the theory fully.
the inquirer will learn what is and is not entailed by the possession of the nature at hand. He will learn which properties are compatible, and which incompatible, which follow from, and which entail the property's presence. Finally, the testing stage proceeds by examining the explanatory power of the account. The final account is supposed to explain particular predications, why species fall under the nature as a genus, and also the general characterizations. This process brings the inquirer to understand each of the facts the account explains, and a general grasp of what is caused by the property, and what can be explained by the account. These three developments put the inquirer who completes inquiry in a position to explain the account, and the rulings it makes in particular cases consistently, and, importantly, to do the same with new cases.

The process of proposing and testing accounts is a kind of practice for the act of providing an account. After all, dialectical progress is made by a process of proposing, challenging, sometimes defending, and sometimes revising accounts. In this process, the inquirer refines and develops the skills necessary for providing an account, and gains experience in the range of phenomena the defense and elucidation of an account must cover. The inquirer becomes expert in talking about the nature under investigation and using its name to talk about other items. But, importantly, in addition to this expertise, the inquirer who completes dialectic is armed with the correct account. Consequently, the decisions and explanations that follow from it are correct. Inquirers who have participated in dialectic but arrived at the wrong account will be very good at defending their accounts against some challenges, just by their experience in philosophical debate. But their account will fail to meet all the dialectical criteria. Either there will be some recalcitrant phenomena that fail to agree with the account, or the account will not meet
the explanatory demand.\textsuperscript{39} Similarly a person who parrots the correct account without having gone through dialectic will easily falter in her defense of it. The expert's ability to provide an account depends on a general ability to relate the account to the many statements that employ the name of the property accounted for. If someone has not revised her body of statements, or refined her skill at applying an account to the dialectical data, she will be unable to defend the account. One needs to go through dialectic fully, and one needs to have reached the correct account in order to be able to defend it in all cases.\textsuperscript{40} But anyone who has successfully completed dialectic in this way will, because of the dialectical process and the role of language in it, be able to provide and defend an account.

\section*{4.2.2 The Necessity of Dialectic and the Course of Learning}

The fact that completing dialectic bestows the ability to provide an account is important only if dialectic is the only path to knowledge according to Plato. Obviously, I think that this is the case. The general reasons for this have already been discussed.

\textsuperscript{39} I don't mean to say that one in possession of an incorrect account will always fail to stand up under questioning. Surely there will be times when we take someone successfully to defend an account that is, in fact, incorrect. How then can we be sure that we have got the right account? Or, put another way, if it is possible to give and defend an incorrect account, can the ability to give an account truly be sufficient for knowledge? I'll take these difficult questions up in the Appendix.

\textsuperscript{40} The person in possession of an account need not be able to defend it immediately. There will certainly be times when a potential counterexample requires long investigation before the expert can say why it fails to overturn the account. Imagine, for instance, some who is an expert on dogs, who's account of the Canine essence is inconsistent with the discovery of a new breed of wild dogs in some newly explored wilderness. The expert need not be able to say, at first glance, why the purported new breed is not in fact a breed of dog. He needs to know, however, what it would take to decide the question. And in the event that the new breed are shown not to be dogs, he needs to be able to make that decision satisfying. We need to see, eventually, that there are good reasons for denying that the animals are dogs. Of course, this may depend on an appeal to a larger theory of biological species.
When the soul is trapped in a human body, it forgets what it knows. The full and direct apprehension of the Forms, possible when the soul is apart from the body, is lost because the soul is overwhelmed by the influx of perceptions. Once trapped in the body, the soul cannot simply turn away from the data provided by the senses. If it is going to apprehend Forms again, it must do so through the senses. Given these constraints, language learning and dialectic are the soul’s only path back to knowledge. I have already described specifically how language learning is a response to this circumstance. Here I want to explore in more detail the way dialectic promotes knowledge. For this purpose, it will help to return briefly to the earlier account, and distinguish two levels of linguistic competence.

Starting from a position of ignorance with respect to essences, the soul can begin to learn about them only by first locating them. That is, it must first identify the regularities that are, or manifest natures, before it can apprehend precisely what essence is responsible for those regularities. This is what we do when we become able to identify a regular character in different particulars and different circumstances. This grasp is manifested in our ability to apply the name of a property reliably to its sensible instantiations. But this introductory grasp does not contain the full apprehension of the essence of the nature. And, as a result of the soul’s location in the body, it cannot at this point apprehend the essence fully but must continue to proceed through the appearances of the sensible world. The only resources at the soul’s disposal are its ability to identify a property whenever it appears, and the continued perceptual experience of the sensible world. If the soul is going to learn about a property with which it has become familiar, it must attend to the way the property behaves in its sensible instantiations. Each of these

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instantiations is complex, characterized by a number of properties. Investigation of just one of these instantiations will yield few results. The properties that are compresent in a single individual are, by and large, compresent by accident. For this reason, we can't learn anything about a property by looking at just one of its instantiations. But we are capable of noticing patterns in the set of complex particulars that instantiate the property. We are sensitive to the way certain other properties always accompany the nature at hand, or that there are certain other properties that it always accompanies. This is the process by which we come to be aware, gradually, of the types, species, and general characteristics associated with an essence. Furthermore, it is by such a process that we become aware that one property prohibits the presence of another property, or is causally related to the presence or absence of another property.

The soul learns about a property by encountering it in many different circumstances. There are regularities to be found running through those varying circumstances, and the soul learns more about a particular essence by being sensitive to regularities within the set of its instantiations. From the observation of such regularities, the soul can become aware of the relationships that hold between properties. Importantly, this is the only way the soul can make progress in its understanding of an essence. So long as the soul is in the body, it will be hindered from apprehending the Forms directly. In this condition, the soul is limited to the appearance of the Forms in the sensible world. The first step in apprehending the Forms through this sensible experience is to learn to recognize a stable character in many different particulars. The second step is beginning to recognize the patterns within these instantiations. These patterns reveal the relations holding between essences because of what they are.
We can think of ordinary learning as a two step process. The first is the introductory apprehension of an essence that consists in grasping the regular, distinctive character that appears in the particulars characterized by the essence. This level of grasp corresponds to the most rudimentary level of competence with the name of the essence: the ability to apply the name reliably to the essence’s particular bearers. The second level consists in a more developed sense of the essence’s character through an awareness of the general features that attend the essence, the relations that hold between the essence and other essences, and the divisions in the set of the essence’s bearers. This level of grasp corresponds to a level of linguistic competence in which one is able not only to apply the property’s name to particulars, but also to make general statements about the property, and relate the property to others in speech. These stages represent our rudimentary and our developed linguistic competence respectively.

I have distinguished these stages in order to emphasize three things. The first is that a soul’s grasp of a property develops by means of its rational attention to the information of its senses. Having isolated a stable property amid the sensibles, we are able to search for regularities in the group of items bearing that stable nature. The soul has access to sensible items only. If it is going to apprehend the stable essences in the world, it must do so through a deepening awareness of the regularity and order in the sensible world. This is precisely what we do when we grasp an essence initially, and then gather experience with the regular ways that essence behaves and is related to other natures. The second purpose is to point out that our linguistic abilities improve in connection with the improvement of our grasp of a property. In improving our grasp of essences, and their regular behavior, we necessarily improve our ability to use their
names, and speak about them. The goal of this discussion is to explain why giving an account is a necessary result of acquiring knowledge. It is important to see, however, that this correlation is the result of an enduring correspondence between our grasp of essence and our linguistic abilities from the inception of speech and thought. The third reason for this discussion is to provide a new description of the resources of our developed linguistic competence. The two stages of linguistic competence are the first two steps our souls must take to reach knowledge, when placed in the sensible world. The results of these two steps represent the response of our rational souls to the data of the sensible world. The full pattern of our ordinary use of a property’s name in speech represents the patterns we have observed in the property’s appearances in the sensible world.

This description of the resources of our linguistic competence enables us to see precisely why dialectic is necessary for knowledge. Dialectic is essentially a process of reflection on an essence’s appearance in the sensible world, not only on its particular instantiations, but also on the patterns that obtain in the range of that instantiation. Our statements present us with phenomena to be explained in the most literal sense. They present to us the specific and general features of an essence’s appearance in the sensible world. We are guided in dialectic by asking the question “What essence is common to and explanatory of all these appearances?” At each stage of learning, the soul must make use of what is available to it in the sensible world. The possession of ordinary linguistic competence enables the soul to present the patterns and details of an essence’s appearance in the sensible world. If it is to apprehend the essence on the basis of that competence, it is only by means of a careful examination of the phenomena with which it is familiar. The examination of these phenomena is dialectic.
The soul's confinement to the body restricts the soul's access to essences. Specifically, the soul can access essences only through their appearances in the sensible world. The way this must happen, according to Plato, can be described in three steps. Each of these steps has a cognitive and a linguistic component; as our understanding improves, so does our linguistic ability. The steps are:

1) Grasp of a regular character. This step produces the awareness of an essence through the soul's discernment of a distinctive character causing similarity between particulars. Corresponding to this grasp is the ability to apply the name of the essence reliably, though not infallibly, to particulars bearing the essence.

2) Experience with the behavior of the property. In this step the soul becomes aware of patterns and distinctions within the range of an essence's appearances, and begins to grasp the relations holding between the essence and other essences just because of what they are. Corresponding to this awareness is the ability to make general attributions about the bearer's of the property, describe the species falling under the nature as a genus, explicate the types in which the bearers of the property may fall, and refer to the property in causal accounts, both particular and general.

3) Dialectical investigation of the essence's behavior. In this stage the soul asks what essence is responsible for the manifest behavior of the property. A crucial part of this stage is beginning to think of the essence as an entity distinct from its bearers, and thus a proper subject for investigation and analysis. At the end of this investigation, the soul apprehends the essence,
grasps its causal role, and its relations to other essences. Corresponding to this complete understanding is the ability to give an account, where this ability consists in an ability to give a definition that signifies the essence, and to use that statement in providing explanations and clarifications of other statements employing the essence’s name.

This is the course of human learning according to Plato, and it is a necessary result of the soul’s incarnation. We must come to apprehend Forms by reflection on their role as the stable essences responsible for the being of sensible items and their behavior. But in order to do this, we must first come to be aware of the regular characters in our world, and develop experience with the patterns associated with those characters. The three steps described above present the stages an embodied soul must go through in order to achieve knowledge of essences. Each step has two kinds of progress. The first is the intellectual progress that involves our improved grasp of a nature. We begin by grasping a regular, stable character, proceed to become aware of its relations to other essences, and finally grasp the very essence that explains the property’s behavior and relations. The second is the progress in our linguistic or discursive abilities. On this track, we start by becoming able to apply a name to particular items reliably and accurately. We proceed from there to be able to say things about the items to which we apply the name generally, and make distinctions among them by means of other terms. Finally, we become able to give an account, and in so doing, make the set of statements we make using the name consistent, and coherent. The parallel between these tracks has the consequence that anyone who reaches knowledge will be able to provide an account. The connection
between knowledge and the ability to provide an account is the terminus of a learning process in which our understanding and our facility with language are tightly intertwined. They are intertwined in this way because acquiring language and engaging in dialectic just are the way human beings learn. These steps of learning are the way a rational soul overcomes the sensible world to apprehend Forms.
CHAPTER 5
DIALECTIC, PLURALITY AND ASSOCIATION

In the previous three chapters, I have shown that the role of a *logos* as a condition on knowledge has its foundation in the role of language in the learning process for Plato. To this point, however, I have said little about the way a *logos* expresses what we know. A *logos* is an answer to the *ti esti* question, and is supposed to say, of the defined Form, what it is. The definition is supposed to specify the very essence of the Form. But while a Form is supposed to be a simple essence, a definition is a complex linguistic entity. For this reason, an explanation is needed of the way a complex linguistic expression can signify a simple essence. One strategy for answering this question is to deny that Forms remain simple essences in Plato's late ontology. Such a revision allows us to say that the structure of a definition represents the structure of the defined essence. I wish to give a different solution. In this chapter I shall argue that the complexity of a definition is due to the requirement that human learning proceed through the complexity and plurality of the sensible world. Forms remain simple essences. The complex structure of a definition does not represent the structure of the defined Form. It represents the structure of learning.
For this investigation I will turn first to the Philebus. It is instructive to compare this dialogue’s treatment of dialectic with that of our starting point, the Meno. Plato’s concerns in these works are akin. In both dialogues Plato investigates the good life for human beings, and specifically the role of knowledge in it. The discussion in both dialogues addresses how people learn, and raises methodological issues surrounding the acquisition of expertise and understanding. But there is a crucial difference between the methodological investigations of the Meno and the Philebus. The center of the methodological focus in the Meno is the Socratic *ti esti* question, and the criteria for an adequate answer. Specifically, Socrates is at pains to explain to Meno the need for an answer that specifies the single essence common to and responsible for a wide body of phenomena exhibiting the nature. This reflects Plato’s foremost methodological concern: the central role of knowable essences in our knowledge, and the corresponding role of a *logos* that expresses what we know, providing the foundation for prediction, elucidation, and explanation.

In the Philebus, the focus has shifted away from the singular role played by essences, and toward the varied dialectical phenomena that exhibit the essence. This shift is seen in the opening disagreement between Socrates and Protarchus. Socrates labors to convince Protarchus that Pleasure is complex, that individual pleasures differ from one another, and that an investigation into Pleasure’s nature must recognize this complexity and diversity. Plato’s new concern is with a kind of plurality that characterizes Forms, and plays an important dialectical role. Whatever this plurality is, Socrates insists that

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1 The Philebus is also concerned with pleasure and its place in human happiness. This makes the dialogue a companion to the Gorgias as well. Compare especially Gorgias 501a ff., 503e with Philebus 55e.
dialectic must proceed through it. The method of Collection and Division, introduced here as a divine gift to human beings, exemplifies this new concern. The gift is a method for discovering, and representing in an organized way the plurality that falls under a given Form. This chapter will not provide a detailed account of the way Collection and Division achieves its dialectical goal. I shall refer to the method only to explicate Plato’s more general dialectical commitment to proceed through the plurality of Forms. My goal here is to say in what way Plato thinks Forms are plural, and why we must proceed through their plurality in dialectic. Ultimately, we shall see that Plato is introducing a new way for Forms to be characterized, a way that depends on their appearances together in the sensible world. We shall also see that this new kind of characterization is the result of Plato’s deepening attention to the character of human speech and thought, and the nature of knowable essences.

The methodological shift between the Meno and the Philebus is a shift of emphasis, and not a change in Plato’s core methodological commitments. Forms remain the primary objects of knowledge, and continue to stand at the center of human thought and knowledge. Dialectic still aims at the discovery of a single account that signifies the essence of a Form, and occupies a central explanatory role in our body of knowledge. Finally, Plato still believes that dialectical progress is made through sustained exploration of the things we tend to say, the statements associated with our ordinary linguistic competence. That these commitments remain for Plato will emerge in my treatment of these issues. What is new is Plato’s focus on the plurality of things we say, and his interest in discovering how these many statements improve our understanding of Forms. In the Meno it became clear that dialectic proceeds through the things we tend to say.
But no account was given there of how these statements improve our understanding, and
what they tell us about Forms. In the Philebus, Plato is interested in the facts about
Forms that our ordinary statements represent, and how the investigation of those facts
moves us closer to grasp of a Form’s essence.

The investigation of the relations and facts described by our ordinary statements
leads us to the Sophist. There, Plato introduces a new relation according to which Forms
are characterized by their appearances together in the sensible world. I call this relation
association. Association is important for two reasons. First, it is because of association
that Forms are plural in the way described in the Philebus; dialectic proceeds through
examination of a Form’s associative relations. As a result, our definitions and theories
represent to us the central associative relations between Forms. Second, associative
relations are not internal to, or constitutive of the essences that enter into them.
Consequently our definitions and theories do not represent the ontological structure of the
Forms we study. By representing associative relations, our definitions represent the
relations in the sensible world that we must study in order to improve our understanding
of the Forms we investigate. Our definitions and theories represent the course of
learning.
5.1 Plurality, Forms, and Inquiry

5.1.1 A Methodological Principle

In the beginning of the Philebus Plato presents a new dialectical principle: proceed to knowledge of a Kind through the plurality of that Kind. Socrates and Protarchus set out to discuss the good for human beings. Socrates advocates Knowledge as what is good for humans, while Protarchus advances the cause of Pleasure. But before Socrates and Protarchus begin to discuss in earnest what Pleasure and Knowledge are, and how each relates to the Good, they disagree about the sorts of consideration that may be brought into the discussion. Socrates wants to consider the complexity of Pleasure, and the various forms Pleasure may take, whereas Protarchus wants to bar these variations from the discussion, and to focus on Pleasure alone. For instance, when Socrates describes the different pleasures experienced by men of opposing temperaments, Protarchus responds that these differences are not proper to the pleasure the men enjoy, but reside instead in the sources of their pleasure. The implication is that we can ignore the differences since they are external to Pleasure itself. Similarly, after Socrates

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2 The term Kind translates γένος, which gains prominence in Plato's later dialogues. While this new term, along with other developments, suggests to some interpreters that the basic entities of Plato's metaphysics have undergone revision, I take Kinds to be equivalent to Forms, and will use the terms interchangeably.

3 Gosling suggests that this tension concerns the spurious unity of the life of Pleasure, and is a critique directed specifically at the hedonist enterprise. See J.C.B. Gosling, Plato, Philebus, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) pg. 73. I think that Socrates' desire to consider the diversity of types and instances of a Kind would obtain no matter what Kind he investigated. This is suggested by his concession that Knowledge suffers the same diversity as Pleasure, and most strongly by the character of C&D.

4 See D. Frede, Plato Philebus, (Indianapolis, 1993) pg. xviii-xix. Frede notes that Socrates' inclusive treatment of Pleasure is integral to his ability to distinguish between good and bad pleasures. Thus, by admitting that Pleasures are different from one another, Protarchus gives Socrates a wedge by which he will later pry apart Pleasure and the Good. It should come as no surprise that Plato would advance his ethical project by the same devices that he advances his epistemological inquiries. C. Hampton, in Pleasure, Knowledge, and Being, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) pg. 14, points out rightly that
suggests that Protarchus must defend his main claim — that Pleasure is the human Good — by reference to many and different kinds of pleasures, Protarchus refuses. Socrates then asks Protarchus whether he accepts the claim that pleasures differ from one another, and Protarchus responds, “Not insofar as they are pleasures.”

Protarchus’ point is not just that we must distinguish between what pleasures are insofar as they are pleasures, and what they are over and above this. In addition, Protarchus wants to bar from consideration those facts about pleasures that do not fall in the range of what pleasures are insofar as they are pleasures. Protarchus thinks that an investigation of Pleasure must focus from the outset on what is common to all and only pleasures, and exclude everything else on the grounds that these matters are external to what Pleasure and pleasures are. In contrast to this exclusive and narrow treatment of Pleasure, Socrates takes a highly inclusive and broad approach. Whatever might distinguish two pleasures from one another is a difference that is properly attributed to those pleasures, and is thus worth investigating in the search for what Pleasure is.

Socrates complains that Protarchus’ strategy is naïve and endangers the conversation. In order for the discussion to proceed, according to Socrates, he

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Plato’s focus at this point in the dialogue is less ethical and more metaphysical and, I would add, methodological.

5 Admittedly, Protarchus’ objection is inspired by Socrates’ mention of good and bad pleasures. Since Protarchus is advocating the position that pleasure is the good for human beings, he is averse to the suggestion that there are bad pleasures at all. Frede, for instance, thinks that Socrates’ maneuver is sophist, and that Protarchus spots his ploy, Philebus, pg. 4. Instead, I think that Socrates takes the goodness of Pleasure to be compatible with specific types and instances of Pleasure being bad. These types and instances may be good insofar as they are pleasure, but bad for other reasons, such as their sources, the bad temperaments they please, and their bad consequences. Whereas Socrates thinks these additional aspects of a pleasure are legitimately brought into the consideration of pleasure, Protarchus does not.

6 Socrates has already admitted such a distinction in describing colors as one in Kind. The implication is that colors are the same insofar as they are colors and differ in respects external to their being colors.
and Protarchus must consider the many differences holding between pleasures. They must be allowed to investigate pleasures beyond what they are just insofar as they are pleasures. Socrates’ rebuke indicates the methodological import of his push towards complexity and plurality. The success of the discussion hinges on Protarchus’ willingness to consider the differences between pleasures. Nor is it hard to see why.

Socrates and Protarchus are initiating a search for the essence of Pleasure. As such, they do not yet know precisely what Pleasure is, i.e. what essence is common to all pleasures and responsible for their being pleasures. Lacking such knowledge, they simply cannot focus on pleasures just insofar as they are pleasures. Since they do not know the essence of Pleasure, they do not know which one, of the many features displayed by the various types, instances, and species of Pleasure, causes them to be pleasures. Moreover, not knowing what Pleasure is, they cannot call that essence to mind to consider whether it is good for human beings or not. When one lacks knowledge of the essence common to a set of like items, one cannot restrict one’s attention to that essence alone.

In order to grasp an essence, Socrates thinks one must investigate the many differences and variations observed in the class of items thought to bear it. Thus, one must consider the many and different types and instances of Pleasure. It is only by a careful survey of these differences that one will be able to discern the feature common to all and only pleasures, and responsible for the like behavior of pleasures in a variety of circumstances. When Socrates says “I know that Pleasure is complex and...it is

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7 12c4-6

8 This is not to say that calling the essence to mind is sufficient for determining whether Pleasure is the good for humans. It is, it seems, a necessary condition on knowing as fully as one can, whether Pleasure is the good for humans.
necessary for us, starting from it, to consider and investigate what sort of nature it has,"
(12c4-6) this is not an idle introduction to conversation. It is the articulation of a
methodological principle governing our investigations into the essence of a Kind.

Two comments are in order. First, the methodological principle announced by
Socrates is very general. This generality holds in two ways. First, Socrates seems to
think the principle applies to any Kind whatsoever. Pleasure, Knowledge, Color and
Shape are all mentioned in this section, and treated equally with respect to the need to
consider their plurality. Yet these Kinds, and their plurality, might differ from each other
in important ways. Socrates' failure to distinguish between them suggests that the
methodological principle applies to all dialectical investigations quite generally. Second,
the factors that contribute to the plurality of a Kind are also quite general. Any
difference between the instantiations of a Kind contributes to the plurality we must
investigate. This is not to say that we can never make distinctions between these
differences. It is to say, rather, that at the beginning of dialectic we must be open to
consider any of the variations that occur in a Kind's instantiations. Moreover, as we shall
see below (pg. 184 ff.) it suggests that the conditions that give rise to the plurality of
Kinds are themselves quite general.

The second comment concerns Plato's stance towards Socrates' principle. Plato's
goal in introducing the methodological principle is not to provide a justification of it, or
convince us that it is the way we should do philosophy. Plato's view is that the principle
governs our learning and philosophy. The principle describes the way we learn, and
always have learned. Plato's goal in focusing on this principle is to explore and explain our practice. In order to learn about a Kind, we must proceed through the plurality of that Kind. In order to understand this requirement, though, we need to understand what it means to say that a Kind is plural or complex, and why that plurality is so central a source of learning for us.

5.1.2 The One/Many Problem

The methodological disagreement between Socrates and Protarchus is resolved when Socrates concedes that Knowledge suffers the same complexity and diversity as Pleasure. At this suggestion, Protarchus relents and agrees that there are many different pleasures and knowledges. According to Socrates, this agreement confirms the cryptic claim that "the one is many, and the many are one," and introduces a problem of One and Many. (14c 8-9) Socrates' remark explicitly links the One/Many problem that follows to the methodological difficulties of the opening discussion. If we wish to know why we must proceed through the plurality of a Kind in dialectic, we must discover what Socrates means in saying that Kinds are complex, or diverse, or pluralized. The One/Many problem concerns just this matter.

Protarchus expects Socrates to present a problem concerning the complexity of sensible particulars. But Socrates dismisses this problem as pretty much solved, and not worth troubling over. The more difficult One/Many problem concerns "monads" that are not among the things that come to be and pass away. When one talks about the single

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9 For instance, notice that the Heavenly Gift is introduced by Socrates as the source of any learning that has ever come to human beings, in any field whatsoever, 16c.
Man itself, or Ox itself, or Good itself "the great zeal for division generates controversy." (15a 1-7) It is clear that Socrates is talking about Forms. First of all, the One/Many problem Protarchus expects is familiar from the introduction of Forms.\(^\text{10}\) Socrates’ dismissal of this problem as easily solved suggests that the theory of Forms, insofar as it is the solution to the problem, is well established and lies in the background of the discussion.\(^\text{11}\) In addition, the description of monads that are not among the things that come to be and pass away invokes two of the central features of Forms: unity and immutability. Of course, the fact that these very same monads are in some respect pluralities suggests that Forms may have undergone some changes, or that Plato is introducing new entities to stand in the place of Forms. I won’t take up any of the views about how Plato is modifying or replacing Forms in this and other late dialogues.\(^\text{12}\) I think he is doing neither. Instead, Plato is focusing his attention on the way Forms are manifested in the sensible world, and the way this manifestation is represented in human speech and thought. He is not changing his view on what essences are, or how they are related to one another apart from the world of becoming. Instead, he is applying greater scrutiny to the appearance of essences in the world of becoming, and examining the

\(^{10}\) See Phaedo 101ff., Republic, 475 ff.


consequences of such appearance on our ordinary thought and our philosophical progress.

That this is Plato’s project is revealed by the details of the One/Many problem.

Unfortunately, Socrates’ clarification of the One/Many problem is notoriously opaque. Here is what he says:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Πρώτου μὲν εἰ τινας δὲ τοιαύτας εἶναι μονάδας ὑπολαμβάνειν ἀληθῶς σῶσαι· εἶτα πῶς αὕται, μίαν ἐκάστην σῶσαι ἀδική

\text{τὴν αὐτὴν καὶ μήτε γένεσιν μήτε ἀλλήθρον προσδεχόμενην, ὅμως εἶναι βεβαιώτατα μίαν τάσην; μετὰ δὲ τούτῳ ἐν τοῖς γνωσμένοις αὕτη ἀπείροις εἰτε διεσπασμένην καὶ πολλὰ γεγονότα πεπέσων, εἰδὶ δὴν αὐτὴν αὐτής χωρίς, δὲ πάντων ἄδυνατωτατον φανοιν' ἀν, ταυτὸν καὶ ἐν ὧμι ἐν ἔνι τε καὶ πολλοίς γίγνεσθαι. Ταύτην εστὶ τὰ περὶ τὰ τοιαύτα ἐν καὶ πολλά...}
\end{align*}\]

The difficulties here are mostly textual; parts of the passage are quite difficult to read without editing of some kind. I will not attempt to solve the textual difficulties. There are already a number of interpretations available, each persuasive in many respects, but none of them wholly satisfying. More work on this passage is unlikely to yield a

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13 This is Burnet’s punctuation. In his 1941 edition, A. Dies removes the semicolon between \(\text{μίαν τάσην} \) and \(\text{μετὰ δὲ τούτῳ} \).

14 Here is a translation that aspires to be literal. “First we must consider whether there must be such monads truly being, and then we must consider how they are, each one being always the same and admitting neither generation or destruction, nevertheless (or: wholly) being most assuredly the same one thing. And after this, we must consider whether, in the things that come to be and are unlimited, it is necessary to say that each is dispersed and has come to be many, or whether each is entirely separate from itself, which would seem to be the most impossible of all, one and the same thing coming to be in one and many at the same time. These are the problems concerning such ones and manies…”

conclusive solution to its problems. But this does not mean that the passage is of no use to us. Without resolving the textual difficulties, we can see that the passage assigns the unity and plurality of Forms to different origins.

The central difficulty of the passage is in determining the number of questions asked. Interpretations divide, by and large, into those that find two questions in the passage, and those that find three. Common to most interpretations, no matter how many questions they translate, is to take the passage to present a tension between the way the Forms are unities in their proper realm, and the way they are pluralized, where this occurs through some connection with the world of becoming. Depending on the interpretation, this contrast is expressed either by διως or by μετα δε τοῦτο in lines 15b4-5. I think this trend is generally on the right track. In order to discover how we are to approach this tension, though, we must look more carefully at the passage.

Here is how the contrast is presented. In the first part of the passage, (up to ρεταιονα μίαν ταύτην in 15b2) Socrates raises issues concerning the being and character of the Forms in their own realm. First we must ask whether there must be

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16 Within each of these groups there is significant variation, of course. Two question interpretations: Cherniss, Hackforth, Gosling. Three question interpretations: Frede, Benitez, Dancy, Hampton, Anscombe.

17 The general picture is this. Two question interpretations feel the need, because of διως in 15b4, to provide a suitable contrast for the unity and immutability of Forms described in 15b2-4. The obvious contrast is what is described in 15b4-8, the plurality of Forms in the sensible world. Thus, they emend the punctuation after ταύτην in 15b4, and read 15b2 through 15b8 as one question, often taking ειθ ... φαίνοντα σαν as a parenthetical comment. Three question interpretations accept the punctuation, and take μετα δε τοῦτο to introduce a third question in the series, thus continuing πρώτον μεν...ειτα... They struggle to interpret the διως in 15b2, some emending it to δελως (Badham, Benitez).

18 I say the first part of the passage in order to remain neutral on the question of the number of questions here. If three questions, then I am discussing the first two questions. If two questions, then I am discussing the first question and the first part of the second question.
monads that are not among the things that come to be and pass away. Then we are asked to consider how (ποῖς) each is, so as to be always the same, not admitting generation and destruction, but to be most assuredly just one thing. Let's focus on the view of Forms up to this point. Three things stand out. First, the nature of Forms in their proper realm is at stake. Having introduced the monads as items not belonging to the world of coming to be and passing way (15a1-7), Socrates asks whether monads of this kind must be said to exist. He then raises the matter of how they are, including their insusceptibility to generation and destruction. Forms enjoy a manner of being quite different from that of sensibles. This passage (15a8-b2) directs us to investigate the being of Forms, and the characteristics of that manner of being. These matters include what it is to be a Form, what characteristics Forms have qua Forms, and what kinds of relations exist between Forms just because of what they are.

Second, this passage places emphasis on the unity of Forms, and strongly associates that unity with the Forms' separation from sensibles. This is conveyed not only by the use of μονάδας but also by the conspicuous repetition of μίαν in b2 and b4, the latter with the intensifying superlative βεβαιοτατότατο. Whatever Forms are, the unity at issue stems from their manner of being apart from generation and destruction.

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19 I do not mean to invoke any specific reading of the separation of Forms here. Socrates says that the monads at issue here are not among the things that come to be and pass away. In talking about the separation of Forms, I refer only to this claim. For more on the separation of Forms from particulars, see G. Fine “Separation,” in Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 2 (1984), 31-87.

20 This is not to say that Forms are only unities in their manner of being apart from generation and destruction. There may still be a way in which Forms are pluralities in their proper domain. Still, there is a central way in which Forms are unities, and this unity has its origins in the Forms' existence apart from the sensible world.
Third, the passage indicates that we are supposed to reach an affirmative conclusion about the Forms, not just about their existence, but also about their unity and insusceptibility to generation and destruction. There would be no need to ask about the character of Forms unless one had concluded that they must exist. Furthermore, the questions that follow do not challenge the claim that the Forms are unities as here described. This is shown by the term ἐβεβαιώτετα - most assuredly or firmly - which indicates that the unity and immutability of the Forms receive the strongest confirmation. Socrates does not argue for the being, unity and immutability of the Forms. The existence and character of the Forms seems, rather, to be a presupposition of his comments. So, the contrast Socrates develops here is not between illusory unity and genuine plurality. Forms really are unities apart from the world of becoming. Our solution to the One/Many problem must elucidate and accommodate this unity rather than explain it away.

Socrates then turns to the character of Forms among the things that come to be (ἐν τοῖς γνωμένοις). I'll make three points about this transition corresponding to the three points above. First, given Socrates' prior emphasis on the Forms' status outside of the world of becoming, the turn to the world of becoming represents a significant shift. Socrates' use of ἐν τοῖς γνωμένοις is reinforced by uses of two other forms of

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21 As noted above on pg. 177, this is suggested by the ease with which Socrates dismisses the easy One/Many problem of sensible particulars. Since this problem is solved by the claim that there are Forms, Socrates treatment indicates that Forms are a well established background claim to the discussion at hand.

22 This shift is represented by the use of μετὰ δὲ τούτῳ.
The emphasis is now on considering Forms in the sensible world, a realm to which Forms do not properly belong.

Second, the plurality of the Forms – at least the plurality relevant here – is associated with their presence in the sensible world. Two options are considered for our analysis of the Forms' presence among sensibles. The first is that each Form is dispersed so as to become many. The second option is that each Form comes to be separate from itself, in that it is in many things at the same time. In either case, the question that is being asked is how a Form, a single essence, comes to be distributed and so pluralized among many sensibles.

Third and finally, we are not supposed to doubt that the Forms come to be many in the sensible world. Socrates does not offer the option of denying that Forms are pluralized in the sensible world. He merely gives two candidate accounts of that plurality. Thus, the problem presented in this passage as a whole is a tension between the unity Forms genuinely enjoy in their proper realm, and the plurality they genuinely suffer among sensibles.

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23 There may be a way in which Forms are many things in the world of Forms. But the plurality at issue here originates in the sensible world. The One/Many problem is intended to elucidate the plurality of Forms that our dialectic must investigate. Consequently, Socrates is primarily concerned with the way our dialectical investigations must proceed through the behavior of Forms in the sensible world.

24 The similarity between these options, and the option surveyed by Parmenides in the eponymous dialogue cannot be overlooked. Parmenides presents those options in order to explore the relation of participation. What that discussion and this one have in common, I think, is a concern with the way Forms are modified, or characterized by their appearance in the sensible world.

25 The use of γίγνεσθαι in connection with the pluralization of Forms occurs repeatedly in this part of the dialogue. For instance, when Socrates attributes the problem to our use of language, he says that “the same thing comes to be one and many...” (15d4) See also 14a1, 3, 8.
The passage does not give any precise indication of how the tension will be resolved. But the contrast between the origin of a Form's unity in its proper realm, and the origin of a Form's plurality in the world of becoming suggests where the solution does and does not lie. The clear distinction between the source of a Form's unity and plurality makes it difficult to argue that the plurality at issue here characterizes the very essence of a Form. What a Form is, is part of its eternal, immutable being. A Form's essence is not determined by the sensible world. Since the plurality at issue here has its origins in the world of becoming, and since Socrates has emphasized the separation of the Forms from the sensible world, it is hard to see how this plurality could be ascribed to a Form's essence. Perhaps there is a kind of plurality that deserves to be so ascribed, but it is not at issue here. 

For this reason, it is unlikely that the solution to the problem lies in a description of how the essences of Forms are complex, or many parted, or plural in some way, while at the same time unified.

The plurality of the Forms is introduced as something that each Form comes to be. But the introduction of the monads in this passage describes them as items that are not among the things that come to be and pass away. If we are considering how Forms come to be many, we are not considering what Forms are in their own right, or in their proper manner of being. The plurality of the Forms here is a qualified plurality. Socrates is describing a plurality that is not proper to what Forms are in themselves, but arises from their relation to, or appearance in, the sensible world. The solution to the

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26 *Pace* Anscombe, "The New Theory of Forms," who reads three questions here, and takes the second question to point out a tension between the unity of a Form's essence, and the plurality of features that attend that essence eternally, e.g. beauty, goodness, sameness, difference, being, etc.

27 See note 25.
One/Many problem lies, then, in an account of the qualified plurality Forms become in the sensible world, and a demonstration that this plurality does not threaten the proper unity Forms enjoy in the world of Forms.

Let us take stock. The Philebus begins with the announcement of a general methodological principle. The principle is that our dialectical investigations must proceed through the complexity or plurality of the Form we are investigating. The One/Many problem is related to this methodological principle because the plurality we must investigate dialectically is the many that characterizes Forms and seems to be inconsistent with their unity. The plurality we must explore in dialectic has its origins in the appearance of the Forms in the sensible world.

The requirement that humans proceed to knowledge through the data of the sensible world has been confronted before. Because human beings are located in the sensible world, our access to Forms is mediated by their appearances in that realm. Since Forms are pluralized in their sensible appearances, our inquiry into Forms must proceed through this plurality. But it is one thing to say that our investigations must proceed through the data of the sensible world, and quite another to say that Forms themselves are characterized by the behavior of the sensible world. In saying that Forms become pluralities, Plato seems to be saying that the character of Forms is in some way affected by their entrance to the sensible world. To understand why this might be, we should look more carefully at the conditions that lead to the pluralization of Forms.

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24 See pg. 151 ff.
5.1.3 One/Many, Language, and the Sensible World

The preceding discussion directs us to the appearance of Forms in the sensible world in order to understand their plurality. But Socrates begins to address the One/Many problem by making a different point: “the same thing runs about with each of the things we always say, both long ago and now, coming to be one and many things on account of statements.” (15d 4-6) The One/Many problem has two aspects. The first involves the claim that Forms are pluralized because of their appearance in the sensible world. One task before us, then, is to state the conditions on a Form’s appearance in the sensible world that cause it to be pluralized. The second component is linguistic, according to which Forms are pluralized because of things we say. The second task before us is to describe the contribution of language to the pluralization of Forms.

Plato has provided a guide for understanding the One/Many problem of Forms. The guide is the simpler One/Many problem, concerning the complexity of sensible particulars. The simpler problem fulfills this role with respect to each of the two aspects described above. The simple One/Many problem has a linguistic component that is, on the surface, the same as the contribution of language to the One/Many problem of Forms. Furthermore, the One/Many problem of sensible particulars highlights a basic feature of the sensible world, the complexity of sensible particulars. The One/Many

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29 I am taking γιγνόμενον to be attracted into the plural by the preceding πολλά.

30 C. Meinwald also takes the simple One/Many problem as a guide to understanding the more difficult problem, “One/Many Problems in Philebus 14c1-15c3,” Phronesis 41(1996), pp. 95-103. She takes the simpler problem to be structurally the same as the later, where the structural similarity consists in the fact that both problems stem from the difficulty of explaining how entities with many parts can be unified wholes, rather than mere heaps. In the same way that there is a problem in explaining how a human being is one thing rather than a loose collection of body parts, there is a difficulty in explaining how a Form is one thing, rather than a loose collection of species.
problem of Forms, it turns out, develops out of the complexity of sensible particulars. Thus, the simpler One/Many problem describes the metaphysical conditions that give rise to the harder One/Many problem. I'll explore each of these two aspects in greater detail.

The linguistic character of the One/Many problem of particulars is as follows. For any sensible particular there are many things we say to describe that particular. As Protarchus points out, he may be called “tall and short, heavy and light, and endless other such things.” (14d2-3) Our statements suggest to us that sensible particulars are in some sense many things, and that each of them is at the same time just one thing. We apply a single name in many different statements because there is one thing we mean to talk about in all of them. Our attribution of many features to that item indicates, however, that it is many things. We needn't think of this problem as stemming only from statements in which we predicate something directly of an individual. All the statements we make using an individual’s names, insofar as they describe facts involving the individual, contribute to the impression that the referent of the name is complex, or plural. Thus, statements such as “Socrates is wiser than Protarchus,” contribute to the impression that Protarchus is complex just as much as statements like “Protarchus is tall.” The linguistic component of the One/Many problem of particulars consists in our use of a single name in a number of statements about the individual so named.

The same is true for Forms. The name of a Form appears in a vast number of statements. Some of these statements attribute something to the property directly “Patience is a virtue.” Others attribute features to the instances of the property, whether they are types or instances, e.g. “Patient men are rewarded in the end.” Still others predicate the Form of something else, a particular, a type, or another kind: “Well-raised
children are patient." The fact that a single name appears in each of the statements contributes to the impression that there is some one thing involved in all the facts described by the statements. But the variety of statements we make involving that single thing represents a large number of features or facts involving the property. So, in both the One/Many problem of particulars, and the One/Many problem of Forms, the linguistic origin is the same. Because we use a single name, the referent of that name appears to us as a single thing. Because we say so many different things about or involving the referent of that name, it appears to us as complex, or plural.

Let us turn now to the claim that the problem of One and Many develops from the presence of eternal monads in the sensible world. Since the monads at issue here are Forms, we must begin an investigation of their presence in the sensible world with the participation of sensible particulars in the Forms. For it is strictly in virtue of participation that a Form is manifested in the sensible world. As the One/Many problem of particulars indicates, however, sensible particulars are complex. Every particular is characterized by a large number of properties because it participates in a large number of Forms. This has consequences for Forms. Because of the complexity of sensible particulars, every appearance of one Form in the sensible world will be accompanied by the appearances of many other Forms. The accompanying Forms will vary from particular to particular. Over the full range of a Form’s presence in the sensible world, the Form will be found in a wide diversity of circumstances, even circumstances that are opposite in some respect. For instance, the pleasure a temperate man takes in his restraint is accompanied by goodness, whereas that of the lecherous man is accompanied by
badness. We say, however, that the pleasure of the temperate man is good, and that of the lecherous man bad. In this way, a single Form comes to be many different things because it is accompanied by different properties in different situations. The metaphysical condition underlying the One/Many problem of particulars, the complexity of sensible particulars, also underlies the One/Many problem of Forms.

This account of the contribution of the sensible world is very general. Forms are pluralized in the sensible world whenever they appear, because they always appear in the company of other Forms in complex sensible particulars. This is the case for all Forms. The account is general in another way. Given a certain Form, the account does not distinguish between the other Forms in whose company it appears. A given Form will appear with certain Forms in regular correlations, sometimes without exception. But the Form will also appear only occasionally or just once with others. As far as the account here is concerned, the Form is pluralized by all of these instances of compresence, the regular, the occasional, and the rare.

The linguistic contribution to the One/Many problem and the contribution of the sensible world are related. Our ordinary statements describe what we observe in the sensible world. Some of the statements describe unique occasions and circumstances. Others describe regular relations, or patterns of events, or causal relations in the sensible world. Here are two statements that illustrate the wide range our speech may cover: “Man is a social animal,” and “That brave man is tall.” Both statements describe the compresence of two properties. The first describes a regular, perhaps necessary,

31 See pg. 164 ff.
compresence between Man and Sociality. The latter describes the occasional and perhaps inexplicable compresence of Courage and Height in a single individual. Dialectic ranges over both statements, and the compresence relations they describe. Just as the statements we may consider in dialectic are unrestricted in scope, at least at the beginning, the interactions between Forms that may be investigated dialectically are also unrestricted.

These are not separate endeavors. We investigate the compresence relations between Forms by presenting the ordinary statements that describe those relations. In the dialectical survey of our ordinary statements we are surveying the behavior of the Form we investigate. Specifically, we are investigating the relations of compresence between that Form and other Forms. In culling from our ordinary speech a set of central statements, we are discerning the relations of compresence that are central to our understanding of the Form.

This is a familiar dialectical model. The things we tend to say with the name of an essence reveal its behavior to us. What is new is that Plato has begun to explore exactly what about the essence those statements reveal. Our statements reveal essences to us by cataloguing the other essences in whose company they appear. It is because a single essence will appear in the company of a large and varied number of other essences over the range of its appearances in the sensible world that the essence is pluralized. When we proceed dialectically through the plurality of an essence, we are surveying the essences with which it appears. Thus, we will learn about Pleasure if we consider the way it appears in temperate men, in contrast to the way the intemperate are pleased. Similarly, we will learn about Courage by considering the way it is displayed in military circumstances, in juxtaposition with its manifestation in politics. Our survey of these
variations informs us by showing us how the essence we are investigating interacts with other essences. By investigating these interactions, we improve our grasp of the very essence of a Form.

In discussing Socrates’ methodological principle, I have emphasized the generality of the plurality that is so important to dialectic. This generality is reflected in the conditions that makes Forms pluralities. The plurality at stake here is something that all Forms undergo, just by appearing in the sensible world. Moreover, for any given Form, there seem to be no restrictions on which other Forms may contribute to its pluralization by virtue of compresence. This is also seen in the general way language and the sensible world contribute to the One/Many problem. The upshot is that our dialectical investigations are not restricted – at their outset – to a subset of a Form’s appearances. We must consider all of a Form’s appearances, and all of the things we say about it in connection with other Forms.

At the same time, the goal of dialectic is to describe the central relations between the Form we investigate and other Forms. This is so in two ways. First, we are seeking a definition that signifies the Form’s essence in terms of a small number of other Forms, e.g. Man is a Rational Bipedal Animal. Second, we seek to locate the defined Form in a field of related Forms. The difference between the plurality with which we begin dialectic, and the restricted field that ends dialectic is key to our understanding of dialectic. We begin dialectic with a large and undifferentiated set of relations between one Form and many others. Our ordinary statements describe these relations. A crucial dialectical task is to distinguish the necessary, intelligible, and perhaps essential relations
within this set from those that are merely contingent, random, or accidental. For it is the relations of the former kind that we represent in our definitions and theories. I'll call the relations we describe in our final account natural relations. Since we cannot know which relations are natural relations at the beginning of inquiry, our dialectical investigations must remain open to considering them all.  

This leads to a problem. Plato's account of the plurality of Forms makes no distinctions in the relations that pluralize a Form, and must be studied in dialectic. All such relations, natural and otherwise, have their origin in the sensible world, and in our manner of speaking about the sensible world. At the same time, what a Form is, its essence, is separate from the sensible world. This suggests that none of the relations we study in dialectic and describe in our definitions and theories, constitute or contribute to the Form's essence. So, for example, we say that Man is an Animal. This seems to be something necessarily true, perhaps even essentially true of Man; it seems that part of what it is to be Human is to be an Animal. If this is right, then the relation between Humanity and Animality described here cannot have its origin in the sensible world; essential facts about Humanity must be grounded in the world of Forms. Conversely, if the relations that make it true to say that Man is an Animal are grounded in the sensible world, then it seems that they cannot properly be thought to be essential relations. It will not be true to say that Animality is constitutive of the Human essence.

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32 For this reason, we must not confuse the taxonomies produced by Collection and Division with the way that method works in the process of discovery. We do not start with a firmly established taxonomy. Collection and Division is a flexible method for producing taxonomic theoretical structures. The structures are neat because they represent a small number of Forms in a structured field way. But the learning method is messy, because it must consider a large and unorganized number of Forms, in order to discover the fields our final theory represents.
At stake is how we shall describe the facts and relations described by our best philosophical and scientific theories. Intuitively, we wish for these relations and facts to have the firmest and most intelligible basis. This tempts us to think that natural relations, or at least some of them, are essential relations or facts. But Plato's description of the plurality we study and describe in dialectic assigns these facts and relations to the sensible world. This seems to prohibit natural relations from being essential relations. It might also seem to prohibit natural relations from being intelligible in the way we wish our scientific and philosophical theorems to be intelligible.

Plato approaches this problem by clarifying what may be said truly of Forms, and the facts and relations that make those statements true. On one hand, Plato will greatly restrict what can be said in signification or articulation of a Form's essence. We will see that the name of one Form, by itself, cannot be predicated to the essence of another Form. Corresponding to this linguistic restriction is the ontological claim that a Form is its essence just by itself, without relation to, or dependence on any other Form. At the same time, Plato greatly expands what can be said about Forms by applying the names of other Forms to them, and introduces two relations that Forms can stand in that allow us to talk, think, and learn about them. In the next section, I will explore these relations, and the consequences of their introduction for dialectical learning, and the nature of dialectical accounts. The result will be that even natural relations have their origin in the sensible world. At the end of the next section, I'll make a conjecture about how this is consistent with the intelligibility of natural relations, and their central role in philosophy and science.
5.2 Essences and Association in the Sophist

For the final stage of this investigation I turn to the Sophist. The central discussion of this dialogue investigates a nest of issues relevant here. Plato explores in tandem what essences are, and what may be said of them. The connection for Plato is that what is truly predicable of an item, including a Form, is something that item is. But Plato is taking a very broad approach to Being in this discussion. Rather than restrict his scope to the special manner of Being that distinguishes Forms, he is interested in several different kinds of Being, and the statements that describe these different kinds of being. In this way, Plato's exploration of the uses of the copula is also an exploration of the various metaphysical conditions and relations that underlie our predications and make them true.

The relevance of such matters to our current topic should be obvious. In the Philebus, Plato tells us that our dialectical investigations must proceed through the plurality of a Form, where this plurality is associated with a broad set of statements involving the Form's name. We want to discover the circumstances or relations that underlie those statements and make them true, for it is by exploring those circumstances and relations that we proceed to grasp essences themselves. By articulating the conditions and relations that make our statements true, we will get clear on the nature of the facts about Forms that lead us to knowledge.

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33 In truth, the investigation concerns speech about all things, and the being that corresponds to that speech. Forms are central to this investigation, of course; it is because there are Forms that we can say anything about anything. And it is because there are Forms that anything can be anything.
Let me set out Plato’s view.\textsuperscript{34} A Form is a single, non-composite essence. To be an essence is to be a determinate property, by which other entities may be characterized. It is only because a Form is the property it is that anything can have that property and be characterized by it. Anything that has F-ness is dependent for its being F on the Form of that property. But the Form is dependent on nothing for its essence. Each Form is the essence it is by itself, and by relation to no other item. Plato describes this ontological independence as \textit{kath auto} Being.\textsuperscript{35} What a Form is by itself, \textit{kath auto}, is its essence and nothing else. Accordingly, if we say what a Form is \textit{kath auto}, we predicate its essence of it and nothing else.

In our speech and thought about Forms we do more than predicate a Form’s essence of itself. We also apply the names of other Forms. But since each Form is different from every other, when we predicate the name of one Form to another, we are not speaking of the subject Form \textit{kath auto}.\textsuperscript{36} Rather we are predicating a different essence of the first. Such predications do not describe what a Form is in its essence, but describe features and characteristics it has because of its relations to other Forms. Thus the Form’s possession of these features and characteristics is not independent; it depends,

\textsuperscript{34} The view I present here and in the rest of the chapter is the result, in no small part, of readings and discussions related to Allan Silverman’s seminar on Plato’s metaphysics in the winter of 1998. While I take responsibility for its failings, any success is due in large part to his instruction.

\textsuperscript{35} The description of Forms as \textit{kath auto onta} begins in the \textit{Phaedo} (66a2), where the phrase is applied also to the soul as well (see also Chapter 4, note 33), and is applied in many places where the distinctive being of Forms is at issue. See also \textit{Parmenides}, 133a9.

\textsuperscript{36} I’ll address this in more detail later. The complication comes when we wish to give a definition of a Form. The definition of a Form will be composed of the names of several other Forms. There is a difference, I contend, between applying the name of a single other Form to a Form, and applying several names as a definition. How a definition signifies an essence is not easy to say.

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instead, on the Forms whose names we apply. The features and characteristics a Form has because of these relations fall under the category of \textit{pros allo} Being – what a Form is by relation to other Forms.\textsuperscript{37}

Our ability to talk about Forms depends on the fact that they enter into relations with each other. In fact, Plato wants to make the more general point that our ability to speak and think discursively about anything at all depends on the fact that Forms enter into relations with one another. The relationships between Forms that sustain speech and thought are brought together under the rubric of \textit{blending}. Two blending relations are important here. The first is a blending relation that is basically participation. Participation enables discourse in two ways. First, what we can say truthfully of a sensible particular is a result of the Forms it participates in. Second, when we speak about sensibles in this way, we are predicating Forms. The fact that Forms can be predicated of other items is a result of the kind of thing they are. Forms are predicatable essences, and this role is defined by a set of properties each Form has in virtue of being a Form. These properties are not the essences of the Forms that bear them, but the characteristics of predicatable essences in general. The way Forms have these properties is by \textit{participation} in a special set of Forms, called the Greatest Kinds. The greatest kinds are the following Forms: Being, Sameness, Difference, Motion and Rest.\textsuperscript{38} It is in virtue of participation in the Greatest Kinds that Forms are predicatable. It is because there are

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Pros allo} being is not restricted to Forms. In fact, sensible particulars are what they are only \textit{pros allo}. Thus, the difference between sensibles and Forms is precisely that each Form is something \textit{kath auto}, whereas no particular is anything in this way.

\textsuperscript{38} These are the Forms called the Greatest Kinds in the \textit{Sophist}, (254d4). There are probably other Forms not included in this list that have similarly important places in Plato’s ontology. The Good, the Beautiful, and the One are the strongest candidates for inclusion.
predicable essences that we are able to speak or think about anything at all. So, some of a Form’s being – though not its *kath auto* Being – is due to its participation in other Forms. Accordingly, some of the things we can truly say about a Form are due to its participation in the Greatest Kinds.

The second important kind of blending comprises the compresence relations Forms have with each other in their sensible participants. I’ll call this kind of blending *association*. We shall say that two Forms associate when they appear together in a participant. Since most Forms have only sensibles as participants, most Forms associate with other Forms only by their appearance in complex sensible particulars. In introducing association, Plato is introducing a relationship according to which Forms are characterized by their appearance in the sensible world. Association is the relation responsible for the plurality that Forms come to be in the sensible world. Thus, association is responsible for the plurality we must investigate in dialectic.

The importance of association, and its dialectical usefulness, springs from two sources. The first is the strict limitation Plato puts on *kath auto* being and *kath auto* predication. According to Plato, what one can say of a Form in expression of its essence is severely restricted. Since the predications that contribute to dialectic fall outside these restrictions, I shall argue that they cannot be described as descriptions or articulations of a Form’s essence. Second, we shall see that most of the statements that forward our dialectical search cannot be construed as descriptions of the features of Form; they do not plausibly express the features or characteristics of an essence. Consequently, they are not made true by participation. Nonetheless, Plato realizes, the statements that play a central
role in dialectic are true and informative about a Form and its essence. The relationship of association is introduced to represent the relations that make these statements true and informative.

This view will emerge as we survey the discussion of Being and Blending in the Sophist. (251a5-254d2) The introduction of association sheds light on the role of a *logos* as an expression of knowledge. The *logos* of a Form articulates its essence in terms of other Forms. Yet, as we shall see, none of the Forms mentioned in the *logos* is related to the defined Form essentially. Instead, the Forms in a *logos* are related to the defined Form by association. For most Forms relations of association obtain only in the sensible world. The result is that a *logos* does not represent the ontological structure of the defined Form. It does not provide an analysis of the defined Form’s essence. There is good reason for this: Forms are simple essences that cannot be analyzed into component parts. Instead, the *logos* represents a central set of Forms with which the defined Form is associated. These central Forms are the Forms we must study in dialectic in order to come to grasp the essence of the Form. Thus, a *logos* represents the structure of learning.

5.2.1 Being and Blending

The discussion of the Sophist is directed towards a definition of the Sophist. In this search the Eleatic Stranger, who leads the discussion, presents a number of puzzles concerning both Not-Being and Being. The Stranger suggests that perhaps by clarifying Being we will come to understand Not-Being. He then turns the discussion to what seems like a new topic: how we call one thing by many names. As an example he points out the way we call a single individual a man, and good, and a number of other names.
While this practice is common, it is disputed by the late-learners who insist that each thing deserves only a single name. The introduction of this problem is abrupt; our application of many names to a single item has no obvious connection to the difficulties surrounding Being and Not-Being. The relevance of the Stranger’s change of subject can be seen if we take his question to concern not just our application of many names to a single subject, but the correct or true application of many names to a single subject. The Stranger is asking what makes a single item deserve many different names. The Stranger assumes a correlation between what may be truly said about an item, and what it is. So, in investigating how we can call a single thing by many names, the Stranger is investigating how a single item can be many things. It is this fact that makes the investigation of predication relevant to the investigation of Being.

For this reason, there is also a strong connection between the discussion of blending and the One/Many problems of the Philebus. In the latter discussion Plato examines the plurality of Forms, where this plurality is based in the way we use a Form’s name in speech. But we are not interested merely in the linguistic explanation of our speech patterns. Rather, we want to know what it is about Forms that makes it true to speak of them in many different ways. We want to know what about Forms makes them be genuinely plural.

In order to explain our ability to speak of things by many names, the Stranger introduces the notion of blending. But it is not clear at the outset what kind of blending he has in mind. This is because it is not clear what kind of entities are at issue. In

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39 Sophist, 250d5-251c6.
introducing the problem, the Stranger seems to be talking about the way we call sensible particulars by many names. But as the discussion about blending proceeds, he turns his attention more towards the way *Forms* blend with one another, and so may be called by many names. When the Stranger turns to investigate the extent of blending, he asks whether we shall “refuse to apply *Being* to *Change* or to *Rest* or anything to anything else?” The Stranger has moved away from asking how a single man comes to be and be called many things, to asking how an entity like Motion comes to be, and so be called by the name of Being.

This move is not accidental. Plato is interested in the conditions that allow for speech in general. In discussing blending he is trying to identify a complexity that inheres in the structure of everything we say and think discursively. Speech and discursive thought require that one thing be predicated of another. Linguistically, we are calling our subject by a name that is not, strictly speaking, its own. In order for us to be able to speak and think truly, there must be metaphysical relationships between the items that correspond to our subject and predicate terms. It is in virtue of such relationships that our predicative thoughts and statements are true. Blending stands generically over the class of relations that can link a subject and predicate, and enable us to speak and

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40 The man to whom we apply many names seems to be an individual from the Stranger’s use of *ἀνόμο* in 251b1 and the terms he discusses applying to the man. See M. Frede Pradikation und Existenzaussage, *Hypomnemata* 18, (Göttingen, 1967)

41 *Sophist*, 251d5 ff. The Stranger is picking up the last puzzle concerning *Being*, where he wonders how and whether *Being* is applied to Motion and Rest.

42 See 262c and 263e. The Stranger describes *dianoia*, which I will call discursive thought, as speech that occurs without the voice.
think of anything. Whether we are speaking about Forms or particulars, we do so in virtue of some blending relation involving the subject and predicate of our speech.

5.2.2 Participation and Essence

Although the Stranger moves quickly away from particulars to Forms, it is appropriate for him to start with particulars; it is with particulars that the need for blending is first apparent. We must answer the question how a single individual can have many properties. Accordingly, the first kind of blending is one according to which an item comes to have a property by blending with the Form of that property. Thus, a man comes to be good by blending with the Form of the Good. Similarly, he comes to be a man by blending with the Form of Man. But this kind of blending is not restricted to particulars. For instance, one Form is different from any other Form by blending in the Form of the Different with respect to the Forms from which it is different. Generally, by means of blending in this way with the Form F, an item comes to be an F thing, or characterized by F-ness. Clearly, the blending I am describing here is very much like, if not identical to the participation relation that is introduced hesitantly in the Phaedo. For this reason, I will call this kind of blending participation.

In one sense, it is easy to see why participation is relevant to our ability to speak and think. Most of our speaking and thinking is about sensible particulars. Sensibles are nothing on their own, but owe all their being to Forms. A sensible item comes to be what

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43 Phaedo 100d 4-6. Socrates' hesitance derives from his inability to give an analysis of the relation. I do not take Plato to provide an analysis of participation in the Sophist either. Rather, the work of the Sophist is to isolate two different predication relations that are needed to explain the phenomena of our speech and thought. If an analysis of participation is to be found, it is most likely located account of the receptacle and copies or images of Forms in the Timaeus.
it is by participating in the Forms of the properties it bears. When we predicate a Form of a sensible in speech and thought, that predication is made true by the participation of the sensible in the Form of whatever property we have predicated.\footnote{I specify the predication of \textit{Forms} for the following reason. In the \textit{Statesman}, (262e3 ff.) the Stranger alludes to dialectical cuts, or divisions, that do not correspond to Kinds. Cuts that are not Kinds are general terms in our language that do not designate a real essence. For instance, the term 'barbarian' does not designate a single essence; there is no class of items made genuinely alike by possession of the \textit{barbarian} essence. But one can speak truly and falsely, it seems, in calling someone a barbarian. If this is right, then not all of our statements about sensibles are made true or false by participation relations.} We speak falsely when we predicate a property other than one of the Forms that the sensible subject participates in.\footnote{This is far too brief a treatment of Plato’s hard won solution to the problem of false speech. See M. Frede, “Plato’s \textit{Sophist} on False Speech,” \textit{Cambridge Companion to Plato}, ed. R. Kraut, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).}

There is, however, a deeper way in which participation sustains our speech and thought. In the \textit{Sophist}, Plato begins to explore the ways that \textit{Forms} can be the bearers of many properties, and the relations that sustain such complexity. Forms, Plato realizes, deserve to be called by many names.\footnote{It is not that Plato begins calling Forms by many names in the \textit{Sophist}. Since their introduction in the \textit{Phaedo}, Plato has attributed many important features to Forms as a group. (\textit{Phaedo} 80a10-b3, \textit{Symposium} 211) In the \textit{Sophist}, though, he begins to explore the relations that make it true to speak of Forms in this way.} Specifically, Forms deserve a number of attributions that describe the manner of being special to them. Each Form is eternal, stable, the same as itself for all time, different from all other Forms, Beautiful, etc..

These are the predications that tell us what kind of thing a Form is. That these statements
are true, however, requires that Forms participate in other Forms. Thus, Forms deserve some predications for the same reason that sensibles deserve attributions, by participating in Forms.\(^47\)

Here is where the deeper relevance of participation to speech and thought comes in. Forms are predicatable essences. Forms are the kind of thing, the participation in which causes an item to have a determinate feature. Moreover, Forms are the kind of thing, the predication of which in speech or thought results in meaningful, determinate statements about the subjects of our predication. Forms can play these roles precisely because they have certain characteristics. Foremost among these features is that Forms are what they are in a special way. Each form is a single essence, i.e. a determinate property. When we apply the name of a Form to a subject, we have predicated of that subject the single determinate property that the Form is. In addition, Forms are stable; they are at rest, and remain the same at all times. This allows repeated use of the Form’s name to have the same content from use to use, and person to person. Finally, Forms are different from all other Forms, such that the predication of a Form is a unique attribution. Forms have these special features by participation. By participating in the Forms of Being, Unity, Sameness, Difference, and Rest, Forms are the kind of thing that can stand in this role. Our ability to speak and think depends on the participation of Forms in

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\(^47\) Plato explores the way we may predicate certain terms of Forms in *Sophist* 254d4-257b1. The passage is the subject of much critical attention. At the same time that Plato is concerned to distinguish the Greatest Kinds — Being, Motion, Rest, Sameness, Difference — from one another, he is also interested in the way these Kinds may be predicated of one another. My view is that he there shows how Being, Sameness, and Difference are predicatable of all Forms, insofar as they are Forms. See 255d4-6, 256a7-8, a10-b4, d12-e4, etc. See also M. Frede, *Pradikation und Existenzaussage*, G.E.L. Owen, “Plato on Not-Being,” in *Logic, Science, and Dialectic*, M. Nussbaum, ed., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), F.M. Cornford, *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge*, for much fuller discussion of this difficult passage.

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Forms; it is only because of this participation that Forms can cause being in other items, and be predicatable in speech and thought to other items.

The fact that Forms enjoy a manner of being in common with particulars does not collapse the distinction between them and sensible particulars. Sensibles owe all their being to Forms; they are nothing except by participation in Forms. But while Forms do depend on other Forms for their characteristics, each Form is something by itself, and independently of any other Form. Each Form is its essence, just by itself. A Form's relationship to its essence involves a relation to no other item. It is for this reason that the relationship between a Form and its essence is described by Plato as kath auto being. Forms are archai, principles of being for Plato. Whatever is anything, in the sense of having a certain property or characteristic, is what it is because of Forms. But Forms do not depend on anything for their being; each Form is an essence just by itself, and by relation to no other thing. Accordingly, kath auto being is not a kind of being that comes from blending. The distinction between Forms and particulars is due to the fact that Forms are something by themselves, without blending, whereas particulars are what they only through blending.

We began this investigation by noting the importance of the plurality of Forms, and by setting out to find the nature of this plurality. But in the Philebus the plurality of Forms is contrasted to their unity. In the process of discovering how each Form is many things, we have also discovered the unity of Forms. Each Form is a single determinate essence. And it is in virtue of having that single determinate essence in common that all

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48 This term is introduced explicitly in 255c12-13, but hinted at much earlier in 250c6-7.
the instances, types, and species of a Form are one in kind.49 The One/Many problem derives from a tension between the unity Forms enjoy in their proper realm, and a plurality they take on in the sensible world. The unity of a Form's essence is the special unity that a Form enjoys in its proper realm. This unity, the Form's essence, is what we seek to grasp dialectically.

5.2.3 The Need for Association

So far we have explored two kinds of Being for Forms. Each kind of Being allows us to predicate something of a Form truly. According to the kath auto being of a Form, we can predicate of a Form the essence that it is. According to the participation relations a Form enters, we can predicate of it the properties that characterize all Forms as predicatable essences. Nevertheless, neither of these two kinds of predications includes the vast majority of things we say about Forms. More importantly, neither kind of predication includes the statements central to dialectic and definition. This is because these two kinds of predications allow us to say very little about Forms, and very little that is useful for the purpose of learning. A third relation, association, is necessary to accommodate much of what we say about Forms, and especially those statements that are crucial to the improvement of our understanding.

Consider the plurality of Forms discussed in the Philebus. That plurality has its origin in the appearance of Forms in the sensible world, and in the way we talk about those appearances. Forms are pluralized quite generally by their appearances together in

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49 See Philebus 12e7.
complex sensible participants. This pluralization is described by any statement in which
two or more properties are related. Although dialectic must proceed by examining the
way we speak generally, in the course of our investigations, we will discover that certain
relations between Forms, and the statements that describe those relations, are more
important than others. The process of dialectic is, in part, the process of distinguishing
the necessary and intelligible relations, i.e. natural relations between Forms, from the
accidental and unintelligible relations. The location of a Form in a field of Forms is the
identification of a set of Forms with which it is regularly and intelligibly related. So, by
locating the Form of Humanity in its proper field, we are able to say that the Human is a
mammal, a social creature, capable of learning grammar, capable of laughter, and so on.
Within this field, however, there is a small set of Forms that appear in the definition of
the Form. Each of these Forms is predicable of the defined Form separately. So, if the
definition of Human is Rational Bipedal Animal, then it will also be true to say that the
Human is Rational. Our theory of a property is comprised of our definition and the
statements that locate the Form in its proper field. These statements correspond to
natural relations between the Form we study and other Forms.

None of these statements is true of the Form either kath auto or because of
participation. This is easiest to see in the case of participation. Participation causes the
participant to be characterized by the property of the Form in which it participates. By
participating in the Form of F-ness, the participant comes to be an F-thing. But the Form
of Man is neither an animate thing, nor a bipedal thing, and not even a rational thing.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Forms do not think, learn, and know. For this reason, the Form is not rational, at least not in the way a
soul is rational.
These statements do not describe features or properties that characterize the essence of Humanity. This is no less true of the statements in our wider theory. Although we say that the Human is Social and Risible this does not mean that the essence of humanity lives in groups, or laughs at jokes. The only statements that are true of Forms because of participation are statements that describe the features essences have in virtue of being essences. Neither the Forms in our definition or our wider field are true of the Form because of participation.

More controversially, none of these statements is true of the Form kath auto either. To see why this is controversial, consider the Forms mentioned in the definition of the Form of Humanity. The statement that Man is an Animal seems to describe not just a necessary feature of Humanity, but a part of the Human essence. It seems that being an animal is just part of what it is to be human. Furthermore, the role of a logos seems to require that these statements be kath auto predications. After all, in dialectic we are trying to arrive at a definition of a Form that specifies just what it is, i.e. its essence. Nevertheless, the definition must be a complex linguistic expression. It must articulate the essence of the Form by reference to other Forms.\footnote{See especially Statesman, 262a9 ff.} It seems that a definition as a whole cannot serve this purpose unless the terms that stand in the definiens are predicables of the definiendum kath auto.\footnote{M. Frede makes this point in Prädikation und Existenzaussage.} That is, the definition “Rational Bipedal Animal” cannot say what Humanity is unless each of its terms is predicable of Humanity essentially, or kath auto.

\footnote{See especially Statesman, 262a9 ff.}
\footnote{M. Frede makes this point in Prädikation und Existenzaussage.}
Exactly how a definition signifies the essence it defines is complicated. I don’t think we must conclude that each term of a definition is predicatable of the essence in the same way the definition as a whole is. There is no denying that the definition as a whole is predicatable of the essence \textit{kath auto}. But the \textit{Sophist} also provides evidence that the terms of a definition, \textit{taken individually}, are not predicatable \textit{kath auto} of the defined Form. Just before introducing the discussion of Blending, the Stranger and Theaetetus reach the conclusion that both Motion and Rest must \textit{be} if philosophy is possible. In saying, however, that both Motion and Rest \textit{are}, Theaetetus and the Stranger are invoking a third entity, Being.\footnote{\textit{Sophist} 249c10-250c2.} The Stranger sets out to distinguish Being from Motion and Rest. He does this by examining what is said, or predicated, when one applies the name of Being to an item. He argues in the following way. If it is the case that the application of the name of Being says something different from the application of the name of Motion or Rest, then Being is different from either Motion or Rest.\footnote{This manner of distinguishing Forms confirms the importance of thinking of Forms as predicatable essences. What a Form is, is what is predicated when we apply its name in speech or thought} But the Stranger puts the conclusion in much stronger terms than this. Since Being is different from either Motion or Rest, it follows (\textit{diρα}) that \textit{by its own nature} (κατὰ τὴν αὐτὸν φύσιν) Being neither rests nor moves.\footnote{\textit{Sophist} 250c6-7} I take this expression – κατὰ τὴν αὐτὸν φύσιν – to indicate that \textit{kath auto} being is at stake. If this is right, then the distinction between
Being, Rest, and Motion means that neither of the latter may be predicated of the former kath auto. Nor, by parity of reasoning, may Being be predicated kath auto of either Motion or Rest.  

What a Form is by itself, kath auto, is limited strictly to what is predicated when the name of the Form is applied in speech or thought. All that can be said truly of a Form kath auto is whatever is predicated by the use of that Form’s name. If the use of one Form’s name predicates something different from that of another Form, then neither Form is predicable of the other kath auto. The two Forms are strictly different from one another, and not predicable essentially of each other.

This test for the kath auto being of a Form has severe consequences. It means, quite generally, that we can predicate of a Form kath auto only those expressions that say exactly the same thing as the Form’s name. A trivial case is the Form’s name itself. This is how we should understand the self-predications of the middle dialogues. In saying that Beauty is Beautiful and nothing else, Justice is Just and nothing else, Plato is trying to display the special relationship a Form has to its essence, such that the essence, and nothing else, is predicable of it kath auto. The converse is that any expression that fails

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56 Similar reasoning is on display at Parmenides 143a, where Parmenides argues that if we consider the One alone, by itself – kath auto – in thought, apart from what it participates in, it will appear to be only one. See below, pg. 209.

57 Self-predications are not limited to the middle dialogues. There is a good example of the practice in the Sophist as well, 258e3.
to predicate exactly what the name of the Form does fails to be predicable of the Form
*kath auto*. So, the Form of Man is not Animal, or Rational, or Bipedal *kath auto*.\(^5\) Man
is just Man *kath auto*.

What we can say of a Form truly corresponds to what that Form is. What we can
say of a form *kath auto* corresponds to what the Form is essentially. The fact that we can
say just one thing of a Form *kath auto* means that each Form just *is* one thing essentially,
by itself. Forms are not composed of, or made what they are essentially by their relations
to any other thing. *Forms are atoms of being.* Everything that is something depends on
them, but they depend on nothing else, not even each other, for their essences. Plato’s
commitment to the unity and independence of Forms can be seen in two passages from
other dialogues. The first is the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates recounts a dream about
simple elements and the complexes composed of them. Because they are simple
elements, when spoken of themselves by themselves (αὐτὸ...καθ’ αὐτό, 201e3) they
can only be named. For if we apply the name of anything else to an element, we are
speaking of it beyond what it is alone. In such a case, we go beyond the proper account
(ὁικέων αὐτοῦ λόγου, 2026-7) of the element.\(^6\) Similarly, at *Parmenides* 143a,
Parmenides argues that if we focus on the One alone, itself by itself (αὐτό καθ’ αὐτό,

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\(^5\) I must reiterate that I am concerned here with our predication of these terms individually to the Form,
and *not* collectively. Collectively the terms compose a definition, which must, by Plato’s lights, succeed in
saying what a Form is *kath auto*. How the terms succeed in doing this collectively, while not individually,
deserves much more attention than it is given here. A brief remark in that direction is this: essences are not
composite entities. Signification of essences cannot depend on listing, or articulating the parts of the
essence. If an expression, simple or complex, succeeds in signifying an essence, it does so in a direct,
unstructured way. The term “Man” and the definition “Rational Bipedal Animal” are two names for the
same essence, and they signify that essence in the same direct way.

\(^6\) But see Fine, “Knowledge and Logos in the *Theaetetus*.”

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143a7), in thought, we will say only that it is One. The One stands here not just for the Form of Unity, but for all Forms generally and specifically for the unity of the essence of each Form. Each Form is a single, non-composite, independent essence. To speak of a Form by itself, is to specify only the single non-composite essence that it is. Consequently, if we apply the name of one Form to another, we are not speaking of it *kath auto*. Only the name of a Form can be applied to it *kath auto*.

Here is how things stand. In dialectic we discover and describe a central set of relations between the Form we investigate and a number of other Forms. Some of these Forms are mentioned in the definition of the Form, as perhaps Rationality, Animality, and Bipedality are in the definition of Humanity. The relations between these Forms can, in many cases, be represented by statements in which one Form is predicated of another: Man is an Animal. Similarly, our full theory locates a Form in a field of Forms, each of which may be related to the central form by a predicative statement: Man is a social animal. Yet the preceding discussion has shown that these predications cannot be understood to be true in virtue of the participation of one Form in another. Nor are they true because one Form belongs to the essence of the other in some way. Two points need to be made here. The first is that there is no room for question, in Plato's mind, that the statements I'm describing here are true and informative. As noted, statements of this kind have a central place in dialectic. In the method of Collection and Division, our divisions under a Form map onto statements of this kind. For each of the proper parts of a Kind, there is a statement predicing the higher Form of its proper part, e.g. Justice is a Virtue. In order for these divisions to play such a role in our science, the statements
corresponding to the divisions must be true. More importantly, Plato takes statements of this kind to be true of the Form. When we say that Man is an Animal, Plato takes it that we have said something about the essence of Humanity. After all, statements of this kind, by describing necessary and intelligible relations between Forms are the most valuable statements in our dialectical inquiry. It is statements of this kind that help us to distinguish one Form from other Forms, and to understand its regular, explicable behavior.  

The fact that these statements play such a central dialectical role raises the crucial question: how do we improve our grasp of an essence? Two kinds of being for Forms have been introduced – kath auto being, and being by participation – corresponding to two kinds of statements. But neither of these kinds of being is useful for learning. We cannot avail ourselves of kath auto being in dialectic. We participate in dialectic precisely because we do not know what a Form is kath auto. We cannot improve our grasp on what a Form is kath auto by surveying its kath auto being. Nor can we rely to any great extent on what a Form is by participation, for two reasons. First, our grasp of these facts depends on a fairly sophisticated grasp of the metaphysics of Forms. To know what a Form is by participation is to understand the special manner of being Forms enjoy. While this grasp may, or even must, develop in the course of a dialectical investigation, it seems not to be required at the start of an investigation. More importantly, participation

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60 See Sophist 253d 1-3, where the Philosopher's expertise is described as distinguishing one Form from others, and not mistaking them for each other, and ff. See also Statesman 258c3-8.

61 This is the problem with restricting discussion as Protarchus wants at the beginning of the Philebus. If we are allowed to consider only what pleasures are insofar as they are pleasures we need to know, in advance, precisely what it is to be an instance or kind of pleasure. But this is precisely what we hope to discover by means of dialectical inquiry.
does not distinguish one Form from others. This is because the features that a Form has by participation are the features that *all* Forms have by participation. To say that Humanity is the same as itself, different from all other Forms, at rest, etc. is to say nothing about the distinctive nature of Humanity. We make little or no progress towards grasping what Man is *kath auto* by surveying these statements.\(^{62}\)

Plato’s answer is that we track a Form’s behavior in the sensible world, with special sensitivity to the way it appears in the company of other essences. We focus on the way an essence is accompanied by other essences regularly, or always, or never. These sorts of relationships serve to isolate and distinguish one essence from all others. More importantly, we can learn about a nature by investigating the other natures that must accompany it, can never accompany it, bring it about in regular circumstances, are caused by it in other circumstances, and so on. These are the kinds of relationship that tell us what an essence is. Generally speaking, we learn about a Form by investigating the way it interacts with other Forms.

If this is right, it means that when we pursue knowledge of a Form’s essence in dialectic, we study the relations of compresence between that Form and others. We improve our understanding of the Form’s essence by surveying the way it interacts with other Forms. In the *Sophist*, Plato captures the importance of these interactions by introducing a kind of blending that occurs when two Forms appear in the same participant. In order to illustrate this kind of blending, the Stranger uses two models.

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\(^{62}\) This may be an overstatement. It may be the case that we make progress towards grasping what a Form is when we understand better what *kind of thing* a Form is. I think Plato does think this is a kind of dialectical progress. But if there is progress in such a realization, it is indirect. By learning what kind of thing we are looking for, we may be able to refine the way we look for it. But we do not, I think, improve our grasp of a Form’s essence in learning this. If anything, we improve our ability to go on searching for it.
The first is the model of letters and the way they combine to form words. The second is the model of musical tones, and their compatibility in harmonies. In each case, what it means for one item (letter, note, or Form) to blend with another is for the two to appear in a composite together. Unlike participation, this kind of blending is a symmetrical relationship. If A blends with B by appearing with it in a composite, then B blends with A. The plurality of Forms introduced in the Philebus is due to a very general feature of the sensible world, according to which Forms appear together in complex sensible particulars. In the models of letters and notes in the Sophist, Plato isolates the relationship that holds between Forms as a result of the complexity of sensible particulars.

I’ll call this kind of blending association. When two Forms appear together in a single item, they associate with one another. As with participation, there are two ways that association contributes to our ability to speak and think. The first concerns the problem that introduced the discussion of blending: How do we call one and the same thing by many names? The focus was originally on our ability to call particulars by many names. The relationship of association helps us to answer this question, by highlighting

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63 Sophist 252e9-253b4. While the model of letters and musical tones is used the same way here as in the Philebus, the example of letters and syllables in the Theaetetus has a different goal, pace Fine in "Knowledge and Logos in the Theaetetus."

64 The kind of blending at issue here is not symmetrical in every way, as shown by the model of letters. ‘B’ may appear before ‘R’ at the beginning of a word, but not the reverse. In the same way, the blending of kinds may not be symmetrical in every way. For instance, Animality accompanies Humanity in each of its appearances, but Humanity does not accompany Animality in the same way.

65 Association can take place in Forms too. For instance, the Greatest Kinds associate with one another in every Form, since every Form participates in the Greatest Kinds. But the Greatest Kinds are, on my view, the only Forms that have Forms as participants. For all other Forms, association takes place exclusively in the sensible world.
the fact that Forms can appear together in the same particular. We are able to call a single item by the names of the Forms that associate in it. If Forms could not associate, the world would not have complex items. In this case, the late-learners, who argue that each item deserves only one name, would have the right theory. The second contribution of association is in the statements I have been focusing on in this discussion, statements where a Form itself is the subject, and we predicate another Form of it, e.g. “Man is an Animal.” As we saw before, these statements are not made true by the participation of one Form in another, nor do they express the kath auto being of the Form that is the subject. What makes these statements true, according to Plato, is that the Forms in them stand in a relation of association.

The importance of association relations to dialectic is made explicit in the Sophist. The models of letters and musical tones provide an introduction to the expertise of the philosopher. The Stranger’s description indicates that the philosopher’s expertise consists largely in an ability to explore relations of association. These relations enable the philosopher to distinguish kinds from one another, discern relations of entailment, incompatibility, and subsumption of one Kind under another, and ultimately to reach apprehension of a Form’s essence. The description of the philosopher’s expertise in the Sophist coheres with Socrates’ methodological principle in the Philebus: dialectic proceeds through the plurality of a Form, a plurality that has its sources in the association

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66 Sophist 253b9-c2, and d5-e2 especially. The Stranger here describes the various relationships that result from the association of Forms with one exception. The Stranger also refers to vowel-like Forms which enable Forms to associate (253c2 ff.). This refers, in my opinion, to the Greatest Kinds by participation in which Forms become predicable essences. Were Forms not predicable essences, they could not associate in sensibles at all. Insofar as the Greatest Kinds bestow on Forms the features that make this role possible, they make Forms capable of associating, as vowels make words possible.
of Forms in the sensible world. Our definitions and theories represent a central set of the relations that compose this plurality. Thus, our definitions and theories represent the central associative relations between one Form and others.

I want to make two points about association before moving on to the conclusion of this chapter. The first concerns the scope of association. I have emphasized the role of association as a relationship that obtains, quite generally, between Forms in the sensible world. Because sensible particulars are complex, two Forms may appear in the same particular. When they do, the Forms associate. But, this discussion has also shown that Forms can participate in other Forms. Consequently, it is possible for Forms to associate in Forms as well. This is true, but possible for only a select number of Forms. Specifically, only the Greatest Kinds can associate in Forms, because only the Greatest kinds have Forms as participants. For the majority of Forms, association takes place only in the sensible world. If we wish to learn about these Forms, we must survey their behavior in complex sensible particulars.

Second, the claim that Forms associate only in sensible particular raises a problem. It suggests that the origin for the natural relations we study in science and philosophy is just the compresence of Forms in sensible particulars. Presumably, we would like for our scientific laws and explanations to have a firmer basis. This is because we wish for our scientific laws to be intelligible and explicable, to provide illuminating explanations, and to submit to some explanation themselves. Underlying this wish is the intuition that lawlike natural relations are the result, somehow, of the essences involved in them. It is not mere accident that humans are necessarily animals. There is something
about what it is to be human that involves or necessitates being an animal. The claim that our definitions and theorems are based merely in the association of essences in the sensible world seems to deflate our natural laws. This is made more acute by the claim that the Forms in our definitions and theorems are not predicable of the essences of the Forms they are supposed to articulate. The hint is that these relations have nothing to do with the essences involved.

We do not need to reach this conclusion. First, association comes in degrees. While some Forms associate with each other merely randomly, others associate regularly, and some in every instance of one or both of the Forms involved. Natural relations will manifest themselves in necessary, or at least, very regular associations between the essences involved. Still, the limitation on what may be said kath auto of a Form has the result that natural relations are not internal to, or constitutive of, any of the essences they involve. But this does not mean that natural relations have no basis in the essences of Forms. That is, although Animality is not constitutive in any way of Humanity, it may nonetheless follow necessarily and intelligibly from what these Forms are that anything that is human is also an animal. Obviously, the success of this suggestion depends on an explication of the necessity and intelligibility binding the Forms in a natural relation.

I’ll end this discussion with a brief conjecture about natural relations. If I am right that natural relations are a subset of associative relations, then even natural relations will have their origin in the appearance of Form in the sensible world. For this reason, the principles that explain the natural relations will be the principles that govern the combination of Forms in the sensible world. If this is right, then our account of natural relations in Plato must turn to the principles governing Plato’s cosmology. Two
principles from Plato’s cosmology are most relevant. The first is the nature of the sensible world as a realm that, on its own, shapes the way Forms appear in it. Plato identifies the need for such a principle in the introduction of the *apeiron* or the limitless in the *Philebus.* He addresses the same issue by introducing the receptacle and the “wandering cause” of necessity in the *Timaeus.* Some facts about the way Forms associate have their explanation in the limitations and requirements of appearing in the sensible world. To the extent that we can understand the constraints of the sensible world, we will find these natural relations intelligible.

The second principle governing Plato’s cosmology is the Good. With respect to the combination of Forms in the sensible world, the Good acts as a principle of structure and harmony. The sensible world is created to be as good as possible. This dictates that certain Forms always or regularly associate. If this is right, many or most natural relations will have their foundation in the direction of the sensible world towards harmony and the Good. Natural relations – the principles by which we explain the world’s regularities – will themselves be explained teleologically. Moreover, if this is right, then the human ability to detect natural relations, in both ordinary discourse and

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67 *Philebus* 16c10. This hint is explicated in the introduction of the Fourfold ontology at 23c ff..

68 *Timaeus* 47e ff.

69 Ibid., 29d ff.
philosophical investigation, is an expression of the human intuition of the Good. The innate human desire for knowledge and explanation is an expression of our desire to behold the Good.

My conjecture indicates, at least, that the introduction of association is just the beginning of an account of natural relations in Plato. But we began this investigation to discover the source of the plurality of Forms. The general phenomenon of plurality in Forms is based in the appearance of Forms together in the sensible world. Because Forms associate in sensible particulars, they come to appear in diverse ways in diverse circumstances. Put in another way, because Forms associate in complex particulars, Forms come to be many different things in difference circumstances. And, because our dialectical investigations must be based in the phenomena of the sensible world, dialectic primarily studies the associative relations between Forms. These are the relations that ground our theorems and our definitions. And it is by studying associations that we come to grasp essences.

5.3 Association, Learning, and Rational Accounts

How does a definition work? What is the articulation of a theory supposed to do? For some the answers to these questions are straightforward: they articulate what we know. But for Plato, this answer is not available. The objects of knowledge for Plato are

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70 In Chapter Two I suggested that the Theory of Recollection attributes two rational faculties to human beings: the ability to apprehend essence, and the ability to discern relations between essences. See pg. 67. If my conjecture here is correct, then the second of these abilities may be re-described as the ability to apprehend the Good specifically. If this is right, then for Plato, human rationality consists only in the ability to apprehend essences, where specific essences have special roles in our progress to knowledge.
Forms, simple essences. But definitions and theories are complex linguistic expressions whose structure cannot correspond to the atomic essence of a Form. What a Form is cannot be articulated in the literal sense; it can only be named. And yet, the complexity of a definition and a theory is crucial to what it does. It is precisely by articulating a Form that our definitions and theories have their expressive power. It is by complex articulation that definitions and theories inform us as they do. We can now see that the complexity of our definitions and theories represents not the complexity of a Form’s essence, but the complexity of a Form’s appearance in the sensible world.

Philosophical inquiry must take place through the plurality of a Form. Forms are pluralized by their associations with one another in complex sensible particulars. Our theories and definitions represent the natural relations between one Form and others; they represent the central, intelligible, associative relations obtaining between Forms. In this way, the complex theory we produce in dialectic represents, in distilled form, the phenomena by which we learn. It is in this sense that definitions and theories say what we know. They cannot directly articulate what a Form is; essences are unanalyzable. But definitions and theories can point towards the Form. They do this by distilling and representing the course of study by which a soul comes to knowledge. Our definitions and theories act as a heuristic; they represent the process of discovery.\footnote{See H. Cherniss, \textit{Plato's Criticism of Plato and the Academy}, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1944) pp.46-47.}

Consider the way a definition or theorem promotes understanding when presented to a student. The mere pronouncement of a definition or theorem accomplishes virtually nothing. Being told that the Human is a Rational Bipedal Animal will not bring one...
immediately to grasp the very essence of Humanity. Similarly, being told that $E=MC^2$
does not bring one immediately to grasp the theory of Relativity. In both cases, our
understanding develops only by investigating the way these claims are embedded in a
broader theoretical context. We must investigate the biological field in which Humanity
is situated, and explore each of the Kinds in its definition. Similarly, for the theory of
Relativity, we must consider the arguments and experiments by which the theory was
derived and confirmed. It is only by investigation of this broader context that we can
understand what these statements signify. And it is only in this broader context that the
definition or theory expresses what it does. A definition or theory signifies the essence it
does by pointing us to the theoretical reflection we must perform to gain understanding.

There is an example of this in Plato, in the interrogation of the Slave in the *Meno.*
Socrates and the boy are trying to specify the length of the line that forms the base of a
square whose area is eight. The answer, $\sqrt{8}$, is irrational; like a Form’s essence, it cannot
be expressed. Socrates brings the slave to signify the length by drawing a diagram that
includes a square of area eight. The slave signifies the length $\sqrt{8}$ by pointing to the right
line in the diagram. But outside of the diagram, the line signifies no length in particular.
It is the correct line, and its length is the correct length, only in the context of Socrates’
diagram and the mathematical discussion that is taking place. What’s more, an
individual’s ability to understand that the line is the correct one depends on his grasp of
the significance of the diagram as a whole. The slave points to the line as the base of the
square whose area is eight. Does the line signify the length $\sqrt{8}$? Yes it does, but only
through the discussion and the diagram that has led the slave to point it out. The line signifies the length it does only through its relation to the diagram by which the Slave learns.

All rational activity aims toward knowledge. For the human soul, the pursuit of knowledge must proceed by reflection on a Form's appearance in the complex sensible world. This means that we must consider the relations between one Form and others in its appearance in complex sensible particulars. It is by this reflection that we construct definitions and theories. But these definitions and theories do not represent the internal ontological structure of the Form we come to know. Rather they point back to the process of reflection that has created them. Definitions and theories point back to the process of reflection and learning by which they and epistêmê have come about. Our complex definitions and theories represent the structure of learning.
Plato’s epistemology is framed by two abiding commitments. The first is a commitment to Forms as the objects of knowledge. Forms are simple, transcendent, eternal essences. We know Forms by direct apprehension, unmediated by the knowledge of any other entity, Form, particular, or proposition. The second commitment is the belief that knowledge is articulate. Those with knowledge can say what they know, by providing a logos, which specifies the essence of the Form they know. Furthermore, they can defend this logos by reference to a coherent, explanatory theory, in which the defined Form is systematically linked to a field of related Forms. In this dissertation, I have shown that Plato can maintain these commitments consistently. I have done this by showing that the role and character of a rational account in Plato’s epistemology is a result of the nature of learning. The fact that knowledge is articulate, and the precise way we express what we know, is a result of the way language functions in ordinary and philosophical learning.

Central to my interpretation is the role of knowledge as the telos of human rationality. Full and direct apprehension of Forms is the best state of the soul, and it is towards such apprehension that all souls strive. All human rational activity, and
especially all human discursive activity, is properly viewed as part of the soul's striving for knowledge. Because the soul is trapped in a body, it is limited in its study to the resources available in the sensible world. As a result, the soul's learning takes place in two stages. Together, these two stages constitute the continuous, gradual learning process called *Recollection* by Plato. In the first stage of Recollection we become able to think and speak ordinarily, by becoming able to recognize and identify properties when they appear in the sensible world. The second stage of Recollection is philosophy, or dialectic. In dialectic we reflect on the way a Form appears in the sensible world. In particular, we reflect on the *associative* relations one Form has with other Forms in the sensible world. In order to grasp an essence fully, we must consider its relations to a wide number of other properties. But we represent these relations to ourselves through the many things we tend to say about the Form and its bearers. As we reflect on these statements, we make them consistent with each other, and develop explanations. For this reason, the process by which we improve our grasp of a Form is necessarily a process in which we develop a coherent, explanatory account and theory.

Language learning and philosophical theorizing are the path to knowledge for human beings. The fact that human learning must take place through these activities determines the outward character of knowledge. It is because we must learn through philosophy — sustained reflection on and revision of the things we say — that all knowledge is accompanied by an account. Furthermore, we must understand philosophy to be a process of reflection on a Form's behavior in the sensible world, where it comes to be related in diverse ways to many other Forms. As a result, the complexity of the sensible world infuses the way we express our knowledge. The complex, interrelated...
character of a *logos* reflects the complex, interrelated appearance of Forms in the sensible world. It is this appearance that we study in dialectic. The way we express knowledge is a result of the way we pursue knowledge. Rational accounts represent the structure of learning.

Plato’s theory of knowledge and learning contains (at least) three claims that deserve the reflection and examination of any philosopher. The first is that there is a deep continuity between ordinary human speech and thought and philosophical reflection. Philosophy develops out of nothing more than our ordinary stance towards the world. All philosophical arguments, distinctions, and theories have their origin, ultimately, in common wonder. While recognizing that there are important ways in which philosophical and ordinary discourse are *discontinuous*, Plato concludes that ordinary human speech and thought manifest the rational resources required to develop philosophical understanding. In his view, this is because ordinary human speech and thought is directed towards knowledge and understanding no less than philosophy. The continuity of ordinary thought and philosophical reflection is captured in the dual role of the single theory of Recollection.

The second claim concerns the nature of philosophical progress. Plato recognizes that philosophical (and scientific) learning takes place through flexible reflection on diverse phenomena, general claims, and intuitions. Specifically, we learn by seeking an explanation of these diverse data. If such a process is to produce real learning and progress, Plato realizes that it must be guided somehow. Guidance comes in the form of Recollection. This solution amounts to saying that our ability to learn depends on our possessing an intuition of the goal of learning. We can learn because we know already

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what knowledge, or explanation, or an adequate theory is like. This sense is inchoate at the beginning of inquiry, to be sure. Still, Plato thinks that it is only by possessing such an intuition that we can make genuine progress, and identify it when it occurs. Put another way, learning, if it is real, aims at a single telos, and depends on a learner’s prior grasp of the telos of learning. Otherwise we fall prey to Meno’s paradox, the suggestion that philosophical and scientific developments represent no real progress.

The third claim concerns the relation of theoretical expression to the nature of philosophical and scientific learning. In the method of Collection and Division, Plato recognizes that human science (broadly construed) aims at the creation of formal theoretical systems, where knowledge is represented in an organized way. Plato believes that these formal systems do not directly represent the content of our knowledge. For a number of reasons, we may wish to disagree with Plato here. What is not so easily debated, I think, is the claim that theoretical systems do not communicate knowledge in a direct way. We do not come to understand a scientific or philosophical theory simply by reading its final theoretical expression. We come to understand a theory only by exploring the reflections, observations, experiments, and arguments that lead to the theory. This is to say that the significance of a theory, as an expression of knowledge, depends on its relation to a process of learning. This is a central claim of the theory of Recollection, which tells us that knowledge cannot be acquired by rote. Philosophical and scientific understanding, sophia, is not equivalent to mastery of a set of propositions, however complex. Genuine understanding can develop only as through a learner’s active engagement with the underlying causes of the phenomena at stake. There is no shortcut around dialectic. A theory expresses what it does by its connection to a process of
reflective learning. If our theories teach us, it is only by bringing us to engage in reflective learning. The formal expression of knowledge cannot be severed from the learning process that produced that knowledge.

I regard this dissertation as, at best, a skeleton of Plato's theory of knowledge and learning. It provides a framework within which Plato's epistemology can be viewed, and within which further results should be situated. I'll conclude by describing some of the important results that would help complete the account.

In addition to the structure of dialectic presented in Chapter Two, Plato also introduces a method of *hypothesis* in the *Meno*. Two questions must be asked about this method. The first concerns the relation of hypotheses to dialectic. Plato's use of hypotheses can be integrated into my dialectical structure to provide a fuller account of Plato's philosophical method. Hypotheses, I think, play a role akin to that played by candidate definitions. We learn, and revise our hypotheses, by testing them and their consequences against other claims we wish to make. The second question concerns the relation of hypotheses in the *Meno* to the hypotheses that appear in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. These three presentations of hypotheses are coherent with each other, and the structure of dialectic, if we understand dialectic and philosophy to occupy many levels of reasoning. A hypothesis like the theory of Forms (*Phaedo*) exists on a rather high level of our philosophical reasoning, whereas the hypothesis that Courage is Knowledge occupies a lower level. The coherence of different kinds of hypothesis depends on the coherence and interdependence of different levels of dialectical reasoning.
The relation between different levels of dialectic in Plato deserves much greater attention. We must distinguish between dialectical investigation into ordinary Forms, such as Human or Ox, which occupy a place in a field of Forms, and Forms such as the Greatest Kinds, which have a privileged place in our philosophical systems as a whole. Call investigations of the first kind special dialectic, and investigations of the latter general dialectic. A number of questions are pressing. First, we might wonder whether it is possible to complete a special dialectical investigation without engaging in general dialectic at all. If special dialectic requires some level of general dialectical investigation, as I think it does, does Plato also require that we must complete our general dialectic in order to complete any special dialectical investigation? Must we grasp the Good itself in order to understand anything? More generally, we must ask what constraints there are on special understanding, i.e., knowledge of ordinary Forms, and how our understanding of Forms like the Greatest Kinds enables or informs our special dialectical investigations. Plato begins to address these issues in later dialogues such as the Sophist, Theaetetus, and Parmenides.

The conjecture at the end of Chapter Five indicates two important areas to be developed. The introduction of association indicates that the relations we study in dialectic, and which are described in our definitions and theories, are not internal to essences. These relations obtain in the sensible world. Yet these relations represent our natural laws, the relations we take to be most intelligible, and to sustain our explanations of the regular behavior of the world. This means that the best explanation we can give of natural laws is based in an account of the way Forms associate in the sensible world.
Thus, an account of Plato's theory of explanation must be based in his cosmology. Since Plato's cosmology is guided by the Good, we can describe the role of the Good in our explanations in two precise ways. First, the ultimate explanation for some of the lawlike associations between Forms will refer to the fact that it is good that they so associate. Plato's view of explanations is ultimately teleological. Second, the human ability to detect natural relations, and distinguish them from merely accidental regularities, depends on the human intuition of the Good. It is by seeking explanations, and by seeking to understand what it means to give an explanation, that we come to grasp the Good.

Still, it may be the case that not all regularities in the sensible world are dictated by the Good. Specifically, there may be inherent constraints on the behavior of Forms which are based in the deficient nature of the sensible world. If this is right, then our ability to perform a dialectical investigation may require that we come to understand the conditions of the sensible world that govern the appearance of Forms. That is, in order to be dialecticians, we might also need to be empirical cosmologists. My conjecture at the end of Chapter Five should indicate that I think this is the case, to some extent, for Plato. In order to explicate how, and to what extent this is the case, we must look into Plato's thoughts on the sensible world in the *Philebus* and *Timaeus*.

Finally, one must examine the way Plato's views of learning and rationality develop as his dialectical model becomes more complex. In the middle period, these views are conveyed by the theory of Recollection. But in later dialogues, specifically the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*, this theory comes to be replaced by the description of the soul as a self-moving entity. I do not think that this change reflects a fundamental revision in
Plato’s account of human rationality and learning. I do think, however, that Plato introduces self-motion to accommodate two developments of his later period metaphysics and epistemology. The first is the emergence of the Greatest Kinds, and Plato’s new emphasis on general metaphysical reflection. The second is the recognition that not all general terms correspond to genuine essences, or Forms. As a result of these developments, Plato realizes that not all intellectual progress can be represented merely as an improvement in our grasp of the properties named by our general terms. At least some intellectual progress must be described as an improvement in the fit between our concepts, say, and genuine properties. With the recognition that not all general terms stand for genuine properties, and assuming that there is a concept corresponding to each general term, Plato recognizes that not all of our concepts correspond to natural kinds. One task of philosophy and science, then, is to bring our concepts more in line with the real divisions in nature. But we can do this only by an innate sensitivity to Being, the property all essences have in virtue of being essences. It is because of our sensitivity to Being that we can distinguish concepts that do not correspond to essences from those that do. The model of the self-moving soul is introduced to accommodate the new requirements on learning and dialectic for Plato.
APPENDIX
THE SUFFICIENCY OF A RATIONAL ACCOUNT

I claim in the introduction that the ability to provide a rational account is both necessary and sufficient for knowledge. But most of this dissertation is guided by the attempt to explain just the necessity of a rational account for knowledge. The sufficiency of a rational account is very perplexing, such that it is hard to say for certain whether and how a rational account is sufficient for knowledge. Because this issue continues to perplex me, what I present here are ruminations, followed by a very speculative solution.

Treating a rational account as a necessary condition on knowledge enables the following kind of test, frequently on display in the Socratic dialogues: If someone fails to provide a rational account, then we have good reason to say that he or she lacks knowledge. So long as there are clear conditions under which someone fails to provide a rational account, this test is effective. And of course there are such clear conditions. When the account or definition one provides entails a contradiction with something else one agrees to, then one has failed to provide a rational account. Treating a rational account as a sufficient condition on knowledge suggests a different kind of test: If someone succeeds in providing a rational account, then we have good reason to say that he or she has knowledge. But there are not clear conditions under which one has
succeeded in providing a rational account as there are for failure. In fact, it is extremely
difficult to say what counts as providing a rational account. This difference is at the heart
of the problem with the sufficiency of a rational account.

To provide a rational account of a Form one must provide a definition that says
what the Form is, and defend that definition by reference to an explanatory theory, a
systematic set of statements which locate the defined Form in a field of related Forms.
Many different verbal performances might be said to satisfy this description. For
instance, we can imagine someone providing and defending an incorrect account to an
audience which, because of its ignorance or inexperience, fails to uncover the genuine
weaknesses of the account. An especially accomplished and persuasive orator might
succeed in defending a false account even before an educated, insightful audience. But
surely, such defenses are insufficient for knowledge. For this reason it seems that only
the ability to defend a true account can suffice for knowledge.

Unfortunately, we cannot directly consult the truth or falsity of an account in
order to decide whether a speaker has knowledge. We need to think about the details of
the verbal performance, and the challenges confronted, when considering whether
someone has succeeded in providing a rational account. Clearly, providing and
defending an account before a passive or ignorant audience isn’t enough. Unfortunately,
as we increase the sophistication of the audience, and the demands placed on the provider
of the account, this worry does not go away. In fact, we cannot take the satisfaction of
any particular audience to be enough. Very learned audiences (e.g., entire scientific and
philosophical communities) have been satisfied by accounts that have turned out to be
wrong. For this reason, no specific presentation and defense of an account will
demonstrate beyond all doubt that the provider has knowledge. This is because we cannot remove the doubt that the account is false. Surely if the account is false, the provider of the account does not have knowledge.

Our construal of the ability to provide a rational account must be strengthened. Perhaps the ability to provide a rational account is the ability to provide and defend one’s account before any possible audience, and in the face of any possible challenge. On one hand, describing the ability in this way will entail that one’s account is correct. For any incorrect account there is at least one possible challenge it cannot overcome. On the other hand, I fear that describing the ability to provide a rational account in this way raises the standard on knowledge too high. Can such an ability plausibly be thought to be necessary for knowledge?

I want to point out that there are two problems here. First, in order to say whether or why an account is sufficient for knowledge we need to get clear on what counts as providing a rational account. Clearly not all verbal performances, no matter how persuasive, coherent, and illuminating they are, give good reason to say that someone has knowledge. In particular, so long as there is the possibility that the account is false, then it seems that the act of providing such an account cannot suffice for knowledge. In this way, saying whether and how an account is sufficient for knowledge is tied to our ability to reach the conclusion that an account is the right account.

Now, let’s imagine that we describe the ability to provide a rational account in the way described above. The ability to provide a rational account is the ability to provide a definition and defend it against any possible challenge, before any possible audience. Let’s imagine someone who possesses this ability. Is it possible to imagine of even this
person that she lacks knowledge? That is, is it possible to imagine someone who can provide the correct theory, explain, clarify, and defend it in all circumstances, and yet who fails to apprehend the Form defined by the account? I think it is. I'll address this in more detail below. For now, it is enough to say that if this is imaginable, it seems to undermine the claim that the ability to provide a rational account, no matter how stringently we take this, is sufficient for knowledge.

For reasons I cannot fully articulate, I think these two problems stand or fall together. Skepticism about our ability to identify a true account is related to skepticism about an account's sufficiency for knowledge. What's more, the first problem seems to be a version of Meno's paradox. Meno's paradox poses a problem for our ability to identify the single true theory, given the fact that inquiry can result in any one of innumerable consistent theories. If we are capable of making real progress in inquiry, then we must be able to identify the right theory, or say when one theory is better than another. Plato answers Meno's paradox with the theory of Recollection. As I've said, I think the two problems I have developed here are related to each other. And, since one of them is closely related to if not identical to Meno's paradox, I think Plato's solution to these problems – if he has one – comes out of the theory of Recollection.

In order to solve Meno's paradox, Plato attributes to human rationality two faculties that enable us to identify correct accounts and theories. These are the ability to apprehend essences, and the ability to grasp relations between essences. From Plato's point of view, our definitions and theories do two things. They specify essences that are common to and responsible for the being of many particulars. And they describe the relations between essences that explain the regular behavior of those particulars. Our
ability to discern that an account is the right one depends on our ability to see that the essence specified genuinely is the one responsible for the common being of the particulars we are working with, and our ability to see that the essences in the account are related as the account says they are. More generally, the theory of Recollection attributes to human beings the ability to detect and grasp rational relations. It is these relations that ground the necessity and truth of our correct theories. And, most importantly, it is by grasping these rational relations that we judge any account to be correct. It is because we can see that a proof's premises necessitate its conclusion that we judge it to be a good proof. Similarly, it is because we see that a theory genuinely explains the phenomena it purports to explain that we see that it is the right theory. Theories represent rational relations. It is by grasping those relations that we judge a theory to be true. For this reason, we can judge an account to be true not because it has survived a number of challenges, and remained consistent. We judge it to be true because we grasp the rational relations described in the theory to be real rational relations in nature. For this reason, we can judge an account true without seeing that it exhausts all possible challenges.

Ultimately, the theory of Recollection goes beyond saying that the human mind has certain rational capacities. Plato does not say just that we can apprehend essences and can perceive relations between essences. He says that, because we are rational, we strive to do these things. It is in this feature of Recollection that we may be able to solve the second problem. This problem concerned the fact that it is imaginable that someone might be in possession of a true and complete account, and yet fail to have knowledge. This is imaginable because we sense a gap between possessing an account and apprehending a Form. This sense is right. What our definitions and theories do, I have
argued, is represent to us the necessary and intelligible relations obtaining between one Form and many others in the sensible world. Our definitions and theories do not represent a Form's essence. For this reason, there is a difference between what our theories represent, and what we grasp when we have knowledge. And, because there is this difference, we can imagine someone getting the theory without getting knowledge. But according to Plato, it is by considering the behavior of a Form in the sensible world, and by reflecting on the Form's relations to other Forms that we improve our grasp of the Form's essence. Here is where the difference between saying that we can grasp essences and that we strive to grasp essences becomes important. If Plato says merely that we can apprehend essences, then it is imaginable that some souls, for whatever reason, will simply fail to do what they are able to do. That is, even in the best of circumstances, with the best theoretical base for grasping essences, it is still possible that a soul will fail to grasp an essence. But since Plato says also that the human soul strives, above all things, for grasp of essence, this is harder to imagine. Because the soul strives for knowledge, it makes whatever progress it can. That is, it grasps essences as fully as its circumstances allow. The possession of a rational account represents the best circumstances for a soul to grasp essence. This is because the possession of a rational account represents the perfect representation of a Form's relations to other Form's in the sensible world. If it is possible to grasp an essence fully in this circumstance – and Plato thinks it is – then any soul will grasp an essence fully in this circumstance. It is not just the human capacity for knowledge, but also the human desire for knowledge, that makes a rational account sufficient for knowledge.


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