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PLATO'S WORLD OF FORMS : AN ANALYTIC, APPRECIATIVE AND APPLICATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This research article aims to analyze Plato's world of Forms. The methodology employed is qualitative, involving the study and compilation of data from the *Phaedo* dialogue, relevant documents, and scholarly works concerning Plato's theory of Forms. The findings reveal that although Plato's theory of the ideal world or the Forms faces objections from differing perspectives, including the Third Man Argument, the problem of participation, and the challenge of explaining change in the physical world, it can nonetheless be strengthened. This can be achieved by reconsidering the distinction between the properties of Forms and those of physical objects, interpreting Forms as sets of similar particulars, and incorporating a Form of Change into the system. Employing a dialectical, reflexive process and hermeneutic method, the study reinterprets Plato's metaphysical dualism in light of contemporary discussions on realism and universals. The research contributes to current metaphysical discourse by clarifying the epistemological status of the Forms and demonstrating their relevance to modern philosophical and interdisciplinary inquiries, such as logic and conceptual ontology.

Keywords: World, Ideal, Forms

Introduction

Plato's original theory of Forms continues to hold significant relevance in the contemporary world for several reasons. In computer science, programming work often draws upon Plato's philosophy of Forms, viewing the world in terms of Forms and particulars, which reduces redundancy and enhances efficiency. Moreover, Plato's ideas have been historically integrated into Christian thought and continue to influence political philosophy, particularly regarding the concept of the ideal state.

The researcher raises the question of whether the objections to Plato's world of Forms can be addressed and strengthened. The purpose of this study is to examine Plato's theory of Forms according to the classical Platonic school, and to explore in depth the contemporary critiques of the world of Forms. The theory of Forms involves multiple aspects, such as the self-predication of Forms. Vlastos argues that one should understand the relationship between a Form and itself, analogous to the relationship between particulars and their Forms. (Vlastos, 1981) Regarding the simplicity of Forms, a Form is a unified whole (Cooper &



Hutchinson, 1997, pp. 68–73), and with respect to the divisibility of Forms, they are considered entirely indivisible (Cooper & Hutchinson, 1997, p. 1103).

The researcher seeks to study three key ontological objections that are central in contemporary discourse, in order to identify potential weaknesses in Plato's theory of Forms and respond to the following three objections: the Third Man Argument, the Problem of Partaking, and the Problem of Change. Additionally, the study aims to propose interpretations and improvements that could strengthen the theory of Forms. The methodology employed is philosophical, emphasizing textual research and critical reflection through the study of classical texts, documents, and scholarly literature.

The *Phaedo* dialogue is the first and only dialogue in which Plato systematically presents his theory of Forms in a metaphysical context. While other dialogues make reference to Forms, none provide a metaphysical framework aligned with the three objections examined in this study.

The Third Man Argument is a significant critique of Plato's theory of Forms, challenging the notion that Forms represent the perfect exemplars of qualities or properties found in the empirical world. It also highlights internal inconsistencies within the theory by questioning the ability of Forms to fully explain their existence in a world independent of matter.

The Problem of Partaking, raised by Aristotle and later philosophers, argues that if Forms are pure and separate from the physical world, it is unclear how they can influence particulars. The nature of the participation of particulars in Forms, as Plato suggests, remains obscure. This problem remains central to contemporary debates regarding universals and particulars, questioning whether abstract entities can indeed exist independently of the physical world.

The Problem of Change is another major critique of Plato's theory of Forms. Critics argue that reality is divided into two dimensions: the unchanging world of Forms and the constantly changing world of experience (the World of Becoming). The World of Forms contains perfect exemplars of all things, while the empirical world consists of imperfect and constantly changing copies.

Plato's theory of Forms has been extensively studied by classical scholars and contemporary interpreters. Early interpretations, such as those by Vlastos (1981) and Cooper and Hutchinson (1997), focus on the ontology and self-predication of Forms, emphasizing their unity, simplicity, and indivisibility. Vlastos, for instance, highlights the relationship between a Form and itself, analogous to the connection between particulars and their Forms. Cooper and Hutchinson discuss the simplicity and indivisibility of Forms, reinforcing the metaphysical dualism between the unchanging world of Forms and the changing world of particulars.

In recent decades, 21st-century analytic philosophers have expanded the discourse on metaphysical realism, providing new perspectives relevant to Platonic Forms. Kit Fine emphasizes the importance of structural relations and essences in understanding reality, arguing that Forms can be interpreted as abstract structures rather than merely self-predicative entities (Fine, 1994, 2000). D. M. Armstrong contributes by examining universals and their instantiation, demonstrating how Forms may relate to the empirical world through law-governed patterns (Armstrong, 1978, 1997). E. J. Lowe introduces a four-category ontology that clarifies the distinctions among substances, kinds, properties, and relations, offering a systematic framework to address issues of participation and change (Lowe, 2006).



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This study builds upon these contemporary perspectives by integrating analytic metaphysical tools into the interpretation of Plato's Forms. Unlike earlier scholars who primarily focus on textual exegesis, the present research adopts a comparative analytic framework to reinterpret Forms as sets of particulars and to propose a Form of Change, thus bridging classical Platonic metaphysics with modern debates on universals, instantiation, and the nature of reality. Furthermore, while classical critiques such as the Third Man Argument, the Problem of Participation, and the Problem of Change have traditionally been seen as insurmountable obstacles, this research demonstrates that the theory of Forms can be refined and strengthened. By adopting the insights of Fine, Armstrong, and Lowe, the study rejects strict self-predication, clarifies participation through logical-relational modeling, and incorporates change as a formal aspect of the system.

The researcher hopes that this study will reveal the weaknesses of Plato's theory of Forms and offer insights useful for scholarly discussions on abstract entities and the empirical world. Moreover, it seeks to provide guidance for practical applications of Plato's theory of Forms.

Therefore, the researcher is committed to studying "Plato's World of Forms: An Analytic, Appreciative, and Applicative Study."

Research Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine Plato's original theory of Forms in order to identify its weaknesses and potential gaps, and to propose improvements that could strengthen the theory. In the field of computer science, before the 1920s, program design was grounded in process philosophy, which viewed reality as a sequence of procedural stages. After the 1920s, however, programming increasingly adopted a Platonic framework, conceiving the world in terms of Forms and objects rather than mere processes. This paradigm shift reduced redundancy and enhanced computational efficiency. If Plato's Theory of Forms were to vanish from intellectual discourse today, computer science which facilitates much of modern life would regress by decades. Moreover, Platonic thought continues to shape religious and political ideas: Christianity inherits Plato's vision of the divine and the human realms, while his concept of the ideal state, grounded in the Theory of Forms, remains influential in contemporary thought. Without the Theory of Forms, the world would undergo profound conceptual change, as the foundations of many modern systems of belief and knowledge would be destabilized.

Scope of the Research

This research was conducted in accordance with the philosophical methodology, emphasizing the study and investigation of texts, books, and documents in conjunction with critical reflection. Accordingly, the scope of data collection was limited to books and documents accessible to the researcher up to September 19, 2025, across various areas.

Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative research project employing documentary analysis. The research began with the construction of a framework, which includes the study of Plato's theory of Forms and the examination of three major opposing critiques. The study of Plato's theory encompasses the ontology of Forms, the participation of particulars in Forms, and the ability of Forms to account for change in the physical world. The examination of the three critiques includes the analysis of the Third Man Argument, the Problem of Partaking, and the Problem



of Change concerning the ability of Forms to explain change in particulars. Subsequently, the gathered materials were analyzed and interpreted to identify weaknesses and gaps in the theory of Forms and to propose potential improvements. The final section of the study provides conclusions and recommendations for interested scholars.

Three philosophical methods are applied in this study:

1. Socrates' Dialectical Method

This method involves a reasoned debate between two or more positions. One party presents the research answer and supporting arguments, referred to as the thesis, while the opposing party presents counterarguments, referred to as the antithesis. The process begins with the opposing party presenting their arguments, followed by the researcher's critique, then the presentation of supporting arguments for the researcher's own position. Finally, a conclusion, called the synthesis, is drawn from the discussion.

2. Reflexive Process

The reflexive process is a form of critical reasoning aligned with critical thinking, comprising three steps. Analysis involves deconstructing the components and structure of the problem. Appreciation entails evaluating the significance and value of the knowledge. Application consists of applying the understanding gained to the research question.

3. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics follows Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, allowing for a deep interpretation and understanding of the research problem, including the meaning of primary texts and classical sources.

These three methods collectively contribute to epistemological consistency, enabling verification of reasoning, consideration of multiple perspectives, and rigorous interpretation of Plato's original texts. Sources were carefully selected based on academic credibility, including primary sources (e.g., Plato's dialogues, Aristotle) and secondary sources (e.g., classical and contemporary scholarship such as Fine, Armstrong, Lowe, and Vlastos). Each source was critically assessed for its relevance and accuracy in relation to the research question, providing a sound foundation for argumentation and refinement of Plato's Theory of Forms.

Research Results

Using philosophical research methods namely the Socratic Dialectic Method, the Hermeneutic Process, and the Reflexive Process to answer the research question "Can Plato's Theory of Forms or the Ideal World Argument be strengthened beyond its original form?", the analysis and newly proposed interpretations revealed the following results:

1. The Opponents' View

Opponents argue that Plato's Theory of Forms or the Ideal World Argument remains incomplete and contains irreparable flaws that cannot be strengthened. Their reasoning centers on three major problems: the Third Man Argument, the Problem of Participation, and the Problem of Change.

The Third Man Argument suggests that Forms are neither as pure nor as perfect as Plato claimed, because the theory itself generates internal contradictions. The Problem of Participation, raised by Aristotle and later philosophers, contends that if Forms are pure and separate from the material world, they cannot exert any causal influence upon it. Lastly, the Problem of Change highlights that immutable Forms cannot explain transformation in the empirical world, since change necessarily belongs to the realm of becoming, not to the unchanging realm of being.



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The Third Man Argument reflects a fundamental incompleteness in Plato's metaphysics, pointing to the infinite regress that arises when Forms are assumed to possess the very properties they exemplify. The Problem of Participation questions how material objects "partake" in Forms when the two belong to distinct ontological domains. This issue remains central to contemporary debates over universals and particulars whether abstract entities can genuinely exist apart from the material world.

As for the Problem of Change, Plato's attempt to link the unchanging world of Forms with the mutable world of experience raises the question of how the two realms could possibly interact. Can immutable Forms truly account for the dynamics of becoming? Subsequent philosophers such as Aristotle, the empiricists, and modern metaphysicians have offered alternative models such as hylomorphism, trope theory, and process metaphysics that aim to resolve these tensions by grounding change within material or relational structures.

2. The Researcher's Counterposition

Although critics maintain that Plato's theory is irreparably flawed, the researcher holds the opposite view: that the Theory of Forms can indeed be refined and strengthened despite these objections. To demonstrate this, the study re-examines the reasoning of the opponents and argues that Plato's metaphysics remains coherent and internally consistent.

The Third Man Argument, the researcher contends, results from a narrow and overly literal interpretation of Plato's thought. It assumes that a Form must possess the very property it represents for example, that the Form of Beauty must itself be beautiful thereby producing an infinite regress. However, as Rickless notes, Plato did not necessarily intend for Forms to be self-predicative in this way: "Plato holds that the infinite regress of Forms of F-ness cannot explain the F-ness of the original group of F things; explanation must come to an end somewhere." (Rickless, 2025)

Regarding the Problem of Participation, Aristotle claimed that Forms are immanent in matter and constitute what makes a thing what it is. Yet this explanation remains inadequate to account for objects that share a common Form but differ in appearance or condition. As Thomas observes: "Aristotle famously proposed that every physical object is a composite of matter and form, a doctrine known as hylomorphism." (Thomas, 2024) Critics argue, however, that hylomorphism fails to explain change sufficiently, since identifying objects as matter-plus-form does not reveal how transformations occur within shared formal identities.

As for the Problem of Change, Jonathan Barnes notes that to deny permanence altogether leads to self-contradiction: if everything changes including truth itself then no stable principle remains by which to understand reality. He points out that Heraclitus' doctrine of universal flux risks self-refutation: "Heraclitus runs the risk of refuting himself; for if everything is in constant change, then his own doctrine must be changing as well, and therefore cannot be eternally true." (Kirk et al., 1983, p. 69) If nothing remains constant, truth itself cannot be defined and without truth, there can be neither proof nor refutation.

3. Proposed Refinements

Having established that Plato's Theory of Forms can indeed be reinforced, the researcher proposes three major improvements: Rejecting the strict principle of perfect similarity between Forms and particulars; Clarifying the mechanism of participation through a logical-relational framework; and Introducing a Form of Change into the system.

To resolve the issue raised by the Third Man Argument, rejecting the demand for perfect resemblance makes the theory stronger. Forms need not exemplify the very property they instantiate for instance, the Form of Humanity need not itself be human, nor must the

Form of Justice be just in the same sense as just actions are. Philosophers such as Gail Fine and Gregory Vlastos have noted that abandoning self-predication halts the infinite regress in TMA.

To strengthen the explanation of participation, the study proposes a reinterpretation: instead of viewing participation as a vague metaphysical interaction, it can be understood as a logical or set-theoretical relation a membership or instantiation relation within an abstract structure. This approach resembles the modern set-theoretical view of Frege and Russell, where objects are members of sets that represent Forms. The advantage of this model is that it eliminates the need for mysterious metaphysical forces linking Forms to particulars.

Finally, to improve the explanatory power of the theory regarding change, the study proposes adding a Form of Change to the Platonic hierarchy. If Forms represent the universal aspects of all things, there should also exist a universal Form corresponding to change, motion, or process. For example, human growth could be seen as participation in the Form of Change from childhood to adulthood, or from green to yellow. Plato himself hinted at such an idea in the *Timaeus*, where he introduced the notion of a receptacle or space that allows Forms to appear in variable ways. This addition preserves the immutability of the Forms while enabling the world of becoming to transform through the mediation of the Form of Change.

To present the comparative reasoning more systematically, the objections to Plato's Theory of Forms (the Third Man Argument, the Problem of Participation, and the Problem of Change) are structured as follows: for each critique, the opposing view is summarized, followed by the researcher's counterargument and the resulting resolution or refinement. Short quotations from classical and contemporary sources are integrated to support interpretive claims, ensuring both fidelity to the texts and analytical clarity. This approach clarifies how the proposed refinements rejecting strict self-predication, modeling participation logically, and introducing a Form of Change directly respond to the critiques while situating the discussion within ongoing metaphysical debates.

Critique	Counterargument	Resolution/ Refinement	Citation
Third Man Argument (TMA): Forms cannot fully exemplify the properties they represent, leading to infinite regress.	Rejecting strict self-predication: Forms need not possess the very property they instantiate. Plato did not necessarily intend Forms to be self-predicative in the literal sense.	Halts the infinite regress by treating Forms as abstract structures rather than self-predicative entities.	Rickless (2025); Fine (1994, 2000); Vlastos (1981)
Problem of Participation: If Forms are separate from the material world, it is unclear how particulars partake in them.	Logical-relational framework: Participation can be understood as set-theoretical or membership relations rather than mysterious metaphysical interaction.	Clarifies the mechanism of participation, aligning Forms with structured sets of particulars.	Fine (1994, 2000); Armstrong (1978, 1997); Cooper & Hutchinson (1997)
Problem of Change:	Introduce a Form of Change: Recognize a	Bridges the unchanging and	Lowe (2006); Fine



Critique	Counterargument	Resolution/ Refinement	Citation
Immutable Forms cannot account for transformations in the empirical world.	universal Form corresponding to change or process, allowing particulars to participate in change without violating the immutability of Forms.	changing realms systematically, preserving Platonic dualism while accommodating process metaphysics.	(2000); Rickless (2025)

Conclusion and Discussion

The refinements proposed in this study such as rejecting strict self-predication, clarifying participation through a logical-relational framework, and introducing a Form of Change do not merely address classical critiques of Plato’s theory of Forms. They also resonate with contemporary debates in metaphysics, particularly concerning universals, instantiation, and the relation between abstract entities and particulars. By interpreting Forms as structured sets of particulars rather than purely self-predicative entities, the study aligns with Kit Fine’s emphasis on essences and structural relations (Fine, 1994, 2000), and with D. M. Armstrong’s account of universals as law-governed patterns (Armstrong, 1978, 1997). Moreover, the incorporation of a Form of Change engages with modern discussions on process metaphysics and hylomorphism (Lowe, 2006), offering a systematic way to account for change without undermining the stability of the Forms.

Despite the theoretical refinements proposed in this study, certain epistemological limitations remain. The tension between the ideal realm of Forms and the empirical world of particulars persists, as Forms are apprehensible only through intellectual reasoning, while particulars are known through sensory experience. Interpreting Forms as structured sets of particulars and introducing a Form of Change alleviates some classical objections, yet it also entails that the purity and independence of the Forms are partially dependent on empirical instances. Consequently, the model cannot fully capture the variability and unpredictability of the empirical world, nor can it account for phenomena that resist systematic laws or regularities. This reflection underscores that, although the proposed refinements strengthen Plato’s theory of Forms and align it with contemporary metaphysical debates, the epistemological gap between the ideal and the empirical remains an inherent limitation, inviting further philosophical inquiry.

Recommendations

From the research titled “Plato’s Ideal World: An Analytical, Critical, and Methodological Study,” it was found that applying the principles of Plato’s Ideal World to processes of analysis, differentiation, evaluation, and application reveals that, although certain criticisms exist, the theory can be refined and strengthened. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be conducted to expand and deepen the body of knowledge derived from this study, with the ultimate goal of enhancing human quality of life and providing a solid conceptual foundation for future applications.



Recommendations for Application of the Research Findings

1 Curriculum Development

It is possible to design a curriculum aimed at developing knowledge and understanding of classical theories such as Plato's original Theory of Forms, recognizing it as a foundational philosophical model that has influenced various academic disciplines—such as religion, political science, and computer science. Such a curriculum would help clarify conceptual communication across fields, as there are currently significant misinterpretations when pure philosophical theories like Plato's classical idealism are adapted or reinterpreted within other domains.

2 Creative Media and Technological Application

The findings of this research can be used to design creative media for promoting positive and philosophical approaches to computer programming and software development. Project proposals could be submitted for funding to agencies that support creative and technological innovation in Thailand, such as: the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), the Innovation and Technology Assistance Program (ITAP), the Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA), and the Software Industry Promotion Agency (SIPA). These creative outputs could take various forms E-books, interviews, documentaries, or online interactive activities all of which aim to integrate philosophical depth with creative and technological advancement.

Recommendations for Future Research

To extend the current study, the researcher proposes the following topics for future research:

1 A Study of Plato's Theory of Forms in Relation to the Philosophy of Language exploring how Plato's ideas about universals and meaning relate to linguistic expression and conceptual reference.

2 A Deeper Study of Plato's Theory of Forms in the Context of Ethical Implications examining how the metaphysical structure of Forms influences moral reasoning, virtue, and the pursuit of the good life.

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