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V. POLITIS, *The Structure of Enquiry in Plato's Early Dialogues*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). ISBN 978-1-107-68996-1. £22.99 (Pb).

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This book has been ably reviewed by others. I am taking a second look at it now on the occasion of the publication of its sequel, a review of which I also provide in this volume. I have had the distinct pleasure of being a student and colleague of Vasilis Politis (VP) since the initiation of the project that led to these monographs, and the great privilege of witnessing the development of the project for more than a decade. VP's Plato is in a way the only one I have known. When I hear the terms '*aporia*', '*whether-or-not*', and '*ti esti*', they ring in my ears like bells. In this double review, I hope to impress upon the reader the unique importance of this interpretation of Plato, both for the history of philosophy and philosophy more broadly, and thereby to give a sense of its melody and resonance. [302]

This book is highly recommended for scholars, students, and anyone wishing to understand the motivation and structure of Plato's enquiries. It has  $x + 256$  pages and, following its Introduction, is divided into two main parts. The first comprises three chapters and the second comprises five chapters: Part 1 – The Issue of the Justification of Plato's Essentialism: 1 The Raising of the *ti esti* question; 2 How to answer the *ti esti* question; 3 The thesis of the priority of definition; Part 2 – The Role of *Aporia* and the Root of Plato's Essentialism: 4 What are Plato's early dialogues about?; 5 Whether-or-not questions and agonistic argument; 6 Whether-or-not questions and the articulation of *aporiai*; 7 *Aporia*-based enquiry aiming at knowledge; 8 What is behind the *ti esti* question? There is a general index and an index of cited passages.

VP considers the dialogues *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Meno*, *Hippias Major*, *Euthydemus*, *Republic I*, and *Phaedo*. In these dialogues, Plato was searching for *definitions*, but was not in the business of writing dictionaries; rather, he was in search of an account of the *ti esti* of things, the *what it is to be* or *essence* of such and such a quality, for example, what it is to be just or what it is to be beautiful, etc.

Why does Plato search for definitions? What motivates and justifies Socrates' asking of the *ti esti* question (of the form 'What is *it*?') in each case? It is a request for a definition, a standard by which to judge whether or not something is of such and such a kind or quality (e.g. whether or not the garden is beautiful), or whether or not a kind or quality itself partakes in another kind or quality (e.g. whether or not virtue can be taught). Peter Geach (1966) called this demand for definitions the 'Socratic fallacy', and argued that where answers to such questions can be achieved, they could instead be achieved through mere comparison with a set of particular examples (Politis 2015, p. 48).

VP's response is basically to show that Plato himself had considered similar objections, and to argue that some *whether-or-not* questions are more difficult to answer than others. Some express

what is called an *aporia*, a dilemma with equally strong reasons pulling the judgement of a single person in opposed directions, leading to a peculiar state of perplexity (also called *aporia*). VP argues that Plato's demand for definitions is motivated by cases in which one cannot find an appropriate exemplar by which to judge and escape such impasses. VP calls these *radical aporiai* because they do not merely call into question this or that example, rather, they undercut even the [303] root of the usual strategy of comparison with exemplars, and so call into question our everyday understanding of *what it is to be* the quality in question (pp. 216 ff.). If we no longer have even this compass to guide us, we cannot point in a non-question-begging way to any example that will suffice; no mere lodestone will do.

An adequate answer to the *ti esti* question in such cases must present an account of a standard that is *general, unitary, and explanatory*. *General*, because reference to particular exemplars has been undermined. This is especially apparent in *Hippias Major* where the need arises for cross-comparison between differing kinds of exemplars, so no further exemplar can play the role of a standard. *Unitary*, because as Plato points out in *Meno*, merely gathering the multifarious definitions of sub-kinds (e.g. virtue of a man, virtue of a woman, worker bees, queen bees) together does not produce a definition of a quality or kind (e.g. virtue, or bee-ness, respectively). *Explanatory*, because although we might discover a set of conditions that lines up exactly with the quality in question, such that examples of each are examples of the other, and they occur in all and only the same cases, it would still be necessary [to] say which is *because* of, and which is *explanatory* for which. This is the substance of the famous dilemma that was posed to Euthyphro by Socrates while discussing the question 'What is piety?': 'Is what is pious loved by the gods because it is pious or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?' (*Euthyphro* 10a2–3; Politis 2015, pp. 48–52).

The great virtue of VP's reading of Plato is that one is not left wondering why, in Plato, the *ti esti* question is so central and so demanding. Plato did not demand definitions for all qualities, rather, only for those about which we are in radical *aporia*. VP is at pains to point out that the raising of a *ti esti* question is ineliminably interwoven with the enquiry and radical *aporia* that prompts it. The demand for definitions is not an *epistemological* principle (a principle of all knowledge) articulated independently of any particular enquiry and applicable to all, rather, it is a thesis that is rooted in each enquiry in which it arises (pp. 98–99). This observation is of profound importance for philosophy more generally, especially as it has become common practice for some contemporary analytical philosophers to apply principles and methodologies across the board without due consideration, if any, given to the content of particular enquiries to which they are applied. [304]

V. POLITIS, *Plato's Essentialism: Reinterpreting the Theory of Forms*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). ISBN 978-1-108-83366-0. £75.00 (Hb).

In this book, VP builds upon his previous study by shifting focus from the motivation for the *ti esti* question, to the motivation for the commitment to what is designated by an adequate and true answer to such questions. VP's aim in this study is to show that what are usually called 'Forms' (*eidē*), rather than being things that *have* essences, simply *are* those essences designated by adequate and true answers to *ti esti* questions. This book is highly recommended for scholars, students, and anyone wishing to understand the core of Plato's philosophy and its motivations from the ground upwards.

The book has  $x + 251$  pages and comprises an Introduction followed by ten chapters and a Conclusion: 1 Why cannot the *ti esti* question be answered by example and exemplar?; 2 Why

cannot essences, or Forms, be perceived by the senses?; 3 Why are essences, or Forms, unitary, uniform and non-composite? Why are they changeless? Eternal? Are they logically independent of each other?; 4 The relation between knowledge and enquiry in the *Phaedo*; 5 Why are essences, or Forms, distinct from sense-perceptible things?; 6 Why are essences, or Forms, the basis of all causation and explanation?; 7 What is the role of essences, or Forms, in judgements about sense-perceptible and physical things?; 8 Why does thinking of things require essences, or Forms?; 9 Why are essences, or Forms, separate from physical things?; 10 What yokes together mind and world?; Conclusion: Forms simply are essences, not things that have essences. The book has a General Index and an Index Locorum.

The prevailing scholarship tends merely to assume a theory of Forms that holds that they have certain characteristics: 'Forms are changeless, uniform, not perceptible by the senses, knowable only by reasoning, the basis of causation and explanation, distinct from sense-perceptible things, necessary for thought and speech, separate from physical things, and more' (p. 25). VP instead seeks to understand why Plato thinks one should believe that there are such entities and that they have those characteristics.

VP discusses especially the dialogues *Hippias Major*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Parmenides*, *Timaeus*, and *Philebus*. Throughout the study, he shows how Plato's commitment to Forms and their characteristics, rather than marking a sudden 'turn to Metaphysics', is better understood as [305] being a commitment to essences that is based upon nothing other than the supposition that 'the *ti esti* question can be posed and, all going well, answered, and everything follows from that' (p. 9). VP shows how Plato's essentialism is built up merely by logic from a philosophically uncontroversial starting point, that of common or garden *whether-or-not* questions (e.g. Isn't the garden beautiful? Is it more or less beautiful than the horse grazing in it?), some of which result in the asking of *ti esti* questions (e.g. What is Beauty?). That is, we are pre-philosophically committed to the possibility of sensibly posing such questions and expecting sufficient and determinate means of answering them.

It will not be possible to outline the logic behind the commitment to every characteristic here, but it will be instructive to consider the first that VP addresses, namely, that Forms cannot be perceived by the senses. The standard *just so story* of how the Forms got their imperceptibility has it that it is due to their being non-physical, because only physical things can be perceived by the senses. This is wholly unsatisfying, not least because it gets the order of explanation the wrong way round. VP finds the reason to be instead that for certain qualities *radical aporiai* undermine any possibility of answering the *ti esti* question by example and exemplar. He argues that for Plato, being able to perceive what a certain quality is stands and falls together with the possibility of specifying what that quality is by example and exemplar. It follows from these two findings that, in such cases, what the quality is cannot be perceived by the senses (Chapter 2).

VP shows that the other characteristics of Forms proceed similarly from the requirements for definition (i.e. general, unitary, and explanatory), comprising a systematic understanding of Plato's motivations and reasoning unparalleled in the literature. VP also derives some novel claims and provides answers to certain vexed issues. For example, the view that Forms are simply essences has ramifications for the interpretation of Plato's account of causation. VP shows that the commonly ascribed 'transmission theory' of causation, which entails that Forms are self-predicative (that they themselves *have* the quality of which they are the Form) and transmit their character to their effects, is incorrect and should be jettisoned in favour of a principle of uniformity of causation (Chapter 6).

Forms are objects of the intellect (*noēta*), but the prevailing modern assumption that they are known only *a priori* (radically independent of experience) is but a confused anachronism (Chapter [306] 2 (section 7) and Chapter 4). For example, conflicting contents of sensory perceptions such as a finger's appearing both hard and soft to one, can summon one's intellect to make sense of them (*Republic* VII 523a ff.; Chapters 4 and 7). These observations, I believe, hold a deep lesson for views that are commonly called 'Platonist' in contemporary philosophy, as they often make such erroneous claims to *a priori* knowledge, both for Plato and for their own positions, and are often subject to objections on this basis.

We are accustomed to vain caricatures of Plato's philosophy, for example, that he searched neurotically for definitions, that he thought that there were ideal counterparts of all everyday qualities and kinds, which are somehow 'separate' from the physical world, inhabitants of the sublime zoological gardens that is 'Platonic heaven'. VP's reading shows instead that it was no neurosis or vanity project, rather an entirely motivated and focused search concentrated upon the essences of a limited number of primary and central qualities such as: *one, like, equal, good, beautiful, and just*, which extended to natural kinds like *fire, water, human*, and other qualities, only insofar as their essences involve those primary essences. This makes good sense of passages bearing upon the scope of Forms, such as *Parmenides* 130 where Socrates is hesitant to answer in the same way whether there are separate Forms of such natural kinds. This reading also has a profound impact upon the way we should view 'separation' and the difference between Plato's and Aristotle's essentialism. For Plato, true accounts of primary essences such as *oneness* do not contain reference to physical things, but for Aristotle they do. Hence, 'separation' is to be read primarily as being about separation of *essences* (Chapter 9).

In the final chapter, perhaps so as not to blind us, VP offers but a tantalising glimpse of Plato's account of ultimate reality as portrayed in The Sun Analogy. He argues that Plato thinks that the Good is a 'third kind' (*triton genos*) that yokes together mind and world. Interpretations that prioritise either mind or world over one another, are shown to be crude, because both are subject to the Good (Chapter 10). VP's no-priority reading is a radical departure from the standard realist one (in which world has priority), but without resorting to idealism (in which mind has priority). On this topic there is more that is yet to be said and seen.