THE PLATONIC FORMS AS GESETZE:
COULD PAUL NATORP HAVE BEEN RIGHT?

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It may seem a thoroughly safe assertion to declare that the philosopher Plato was not an idealist, at least according to the strict meaning of the term.1 If there is one thing that Plato is known for, after all, it is the postulation of a realm of “real being,” comprising a system of so-called “Forms” (ideaí, eídê), which possess existence quite independently of our minds; our minds are capable of cognizing them, but perfect knowledge of them is not strictly possible for the human mind while still immersed in a body. There is thus for Plato a realm of reality which is both logically prior and ontologically superior to any individual subjectivity, especially an embodied one.2

So much would seem to be clear. But is it after all that clear? I would like in this paper to attempt to reopen the possibility, largely dismissed by Plato scholars since the demise of Neo-Kantianism in the 1920s, that the Platonic Forms need not after all be regarded as ‘things’—purely

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1 That I take to be, to quote John Henry Muirhead, in the 14th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the doctrine that “apart from the activity of the self or subject in sensory reaction, memory and association, imagination, judgement and inference, there can be no world of objects. A thing-in-itself which is not a thing to some consciousness is an entirely unrealizable, because self-contradictory, conception.” But he also recognizes, immediately below, that “it is equally true that a subject apart from an object is unintelligible. As an object exists for knowledge through the constructive activity of the subject, so the subject lives in the construction of the object. To seek for the true self in any region into which its opposite in the form of a not-self does not enter is to grasp a shadow. It is in seeking to realize its own ideas in the world of knowledge, feeling and action that the mind comes into possession of itself; it is in becoming permeated and transformed by the mind’s ideas that the world develops for us the fullness of its reality as object.” It is in virtue of this latter side of the story that Plato, at least on one interpretation of him, may get a look-in after all.

2 The classic statements of this doctrine occur in the Phaedo, and to a lesser extent in the Meno, while the doctrine is presented with various kinds of mythological elaboration (the Cave, the Heavenly Ride) in the Republic and the Phaedrus. And then of course there is the Paradigm of the Timaeus, contemplated by the Demiurge.
independent, immutable and eternal objects of knowledge, and may be seen rather as something more like ‘laws,’ structuring principles of knowledge, still immutable and eternal, and possessing objective reality, but nonetheless only acquiring their full realization through the activity of the human mind.

Let me make it clear that I am not myself unequivocally committed to such a view. I merely feel that it contains enough plausibility to be still worth entertaining. As a means of exploring this line of interpretation of Plato, I want to make use of the work of the Neo-Kantian Paul Natorp (1854–1924), and in particular his great study of Plato, Platons Ideenlehre. Natorp, admittedly, had a definite agenda of his own, most authoritatively presented in his main systematic work, Logik der reinen Erkenntnis (1902), but that does not automatically disqualify him from achieving insights into Plato. He remains, at the very least, someone who is, in contemporary parlance, “good to think with.”

In Platons Ideenlehre—now at last given an excellent English translation by Vasilis Politis and John Connolly—Natorp undertakes a comprehensive survey of the dialogues (ending with the “Unwritten Doctrines,” as reported by Aristotle), in order to show that, despite much vivid imagery pointing to a conception of the Forms as a set of objective entities with which the intellect can have direct acquaintance, which can be contemplated as models against which physical objects and states of affairs can be judged, in fact what Plato is wishing to assert is that the Forms are systems for ordering knowledge, that they are nothing other than “laws of thought.” This is not to say that they are pure constructions of the intellect, that they have no objective validity. They are indeed stable features of the nature of things, but they are brought to realization by the intellect that cognizes them.

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3 First published in 1903, but republished, with an important “metakritische Anhang,” in 1921.

4 The doctrine of this may be summarized as follows: “the object of knowledge is not given as a ready-made thing, but ‘becomes’ only in the eternal process of of knowing, in a constantly-renewed production of objects. This process never lies completed before us, as a firm and final result, an ‘Absolute,’ in the dogmatic-metaphysical meaning of the term; it is, however, possible to recognize the direction in which it moves, the general form of the production of the object.” (Ernst Cassirer, in Enzyk. Brit. 14th ed., s.v. ‘Neo-Kantianism.’)

5 Soon to be published by Akademia-Verlag, of Sankt-Augustin, under the auspices of the International Plato Society. I am indebted to Dr. Politis for providing me with the typescript.