For most modern readers of Plato the very idea of Forms of individuals would appear as being contradictory and incomprehensible. A Platonic Form is normally thought of as something represented by a term such as “Largeness” or “Justice” or, perhaps, “Fire” or “Tree”, and supposed to be in some way responsible for the presence of the corresponding general properties of being “large” or “just”, “a fire” or “a tree” in individual objects. It is considered as a basic aspect of both its ontological and its epistemological function that it provides a unitary and stable point of reference for all the various uses of these general terms and, therefore, a guarantee for their unambiguousness. Plato himself stresses this connection between Forms and generality while formulating his famous “rule” for introducing them:

We have been in the habit, if you remember, of positing a Form whenever we use the same name in many instances, one Form for each “many”.

*(Rep. 596a, tr. A.D. Lindsay)*

Aristotle, when reviewing this “rule” in his *Metaphysics*, explicitly connects the Platonic Forms with his own universals (*καθόλοι*), obviously regarding generality as their most prominent characteristic:

Socrates did not make the universals or definitions exist apart; his successors, however (sc. Plato), gave them separate existence, and this was the kind of thing they called Ideas. Therefore it followed for them, almost by the same argument, that there must be Ideas of all things that are spoken of *universally*.

*(M 4, 1078b30-4, Rev. Oxford transl.)*

Moreover, Aristotle more than once refers to an argument, intended as a criticism against Plato’s theory of Forms, according to which if we posit a Form for whatever can be thought about (*κατὰ τὸ νοεῖν τι*), we shall have to accept Forms even for perishable particulars, since we can still have a
thought (ἐννοία) of them after they no longer exist. The implication is considered to be unacceptable, perhaps even fatal, for the Platonic view.²

Later Platonists generally display the same attitude towards the notion of Forms of individuals. Albinus (or, if you prefer, Alcinoos) in his handbook reports that

most Platonists do not accept that there are Forms . . . of individuals, like Socrates and Plato.

(Didask. IX 2, 163.24-8 Whittaker, tr. J. Dillon)³

When we turn to Aristotle’s own philosophy though, his exact position concerning the existence of forms of individuals becomes much more difficult to ascertain. According to the standard view, for him a form is what brings together individuals under a single species, while matter is what makes them different instances of this species, acting as a principle of individuation.⁴ However, the truth is that in certain passages he seems to envisage, at least in some cases, forms of individual substances,⁵ while in others he is thought to imply their existence,⁶ and in recent years a whole school of interpretation has developed, according to which forms of individuals or particulars constitute the basis for the ontology lurking between the lines of Metaphysics Z.⁷ I do not think that this is the right place to examine this vexed question in detail. All I need to establish is that a plausible case can be made for maintaining that Aristotle had seriously considered forms of individuals as a possible solution for the central problem of his metaphysics: Which is the primary essence that underlies the various properties and the alterations of an object, and makes

² Aristotle, De ideis fr. 3 Ross = Alex. Aphrod., In Met. 81.25-82.7 Hayduck. Cf. Arist., Met. A 9, 990b14-5. For a more positive presentation of the argument see Diog. L. III 15.

³ Cf. Syrianus, In Met. 39.4 Kroll, Proclus, In Parm. 824.12-825.11 Cousin. Although Wallis [1992: 465 with n. 44] has adduced some interesting but inconclusive parallels from Gnosticism, we have no idea who were the members of the minority group.

⁴ See, e.g., Met. Z 8, 1034a7-8, A 8, 1074a31-5.

⁵ The best known is the one in Met. A 5, 1071a28, where it is said that one person differs from another in respect of their matter, their form and their moving cause. Cf. De an. I 3, 408a23-4 and Cherniss [1944: 506-8].


⁷ Some of the most eminent representatives of this school are W. Sellars [1957: 688-99], M. Frede [1987: 63-80] and T. Irwin [1988: 250-9].