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## Plato Seeking for “One Real Explanation” in *Phaedo*\*

**Mohammad Bagher Qomi\*\***

*PhD Candidate of philosophy, University of Tehran (corresponding author)*

**Mahdi Qavam Safari**

*Associate Professor of philosophy, University of Tehran- Iran*

### **Abstract**

*What this essay is to discuss is Plato's theory of explanation in *Phaedo*. In this dialogue, we observe that Socrates criticizes both the natural scientists' explanations and Anaxagoras' theory of Mind since he thinks they could not explain all things, firstly, in a unitary and, secondary, in a real way. Thence, we are to call what Plato is seeking as his ideal explanation in *Phaedo* “One Real Explanation”. He talks at least about three kinds of explanation, two of which, the confused and foolish way of explanation by Forms and the explanation by Forms appealing to essence, are just “second best” and lower degrees of explanation. His ideal explanation is an explanation that can explain all things by one thing and in a real way. Though he cannot show, at least in *Phaedo*, how this One Real Explanation can work, we can see Plato completing his plan by the Form of the Good in *Republic*.*

**Key words:** Plato; explanation; cause; good; Form

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\*\* E-mail: mbqomi@gmail.com

I

Having discussed the immortality of human soul in *Phaedo*, Socrates asserts that their arguments do not prove the soul to be immortal but only being long-lasting (95c). He pauses 'for a long time, deep in thought'<sup>1</sup> (95e7) to find a way for the soul's immortality. He knows that it is a crucial problem that requires 'a thorough investigation of the cause of generation and destruction' [ὅλως γὰρ δεῖ περὶ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς τὴν αἰτίαν διαπραγματεύσασθαι] (95e9-96a1). Socrates' wonderful keen for the wisdom of natural science, he says, was because he thought it splendid to find out the causes of everything, 'why it comes to be, why it perishes, and why it exists' (96a9-10). Socrates is thus searching for i) the explanation of everything and ii) an explanation that tells him about being, generation, and destruction of things.

Based on what those natural scientists were to present, one simply can expect these from them: explaining all things' being, becoming, generation, and destruction by one or more elements. Their explanations not only were not satisfactory but made him even 'quite blind to those things which he and others thought that [he] clearly knew it before' (96c3-5). But why their explanations made him so? Let have a look at his three kinds of examples of what he had thought he knew before- but became blind to after their explanations:

- i) Men grow with eating and drinking.
- ii) A large man is taller than a small one by a head.
- iii) Ten is more than eight because two is added.

All of these examples attempt to explain things through addition; in the first example, as he says, 'food adds flesh to flesh and bones to bones' (96d 1-2). We can see the same in other examples: the addition of a head in the second and of a number in the third. Actually he argues about addition after these examples:

*I will not even allow myself to say that where one is added to one either the one to which it is added or the one that is added becomes two, or that the one added and the one to which it is added becomes two because of the addition of the one to the other.*(96e7-97a1)

## II

Socrates speaks implicitly about two reasons of rejecting such explanations. Their first problem, from my point of view, is that they are not *Real* explanations. He wonders because it is obvious for him that coming close to each other cannot be the true cause of two ones' becoming two:

*I wonder that when each of them is separated from the other, each of them is one, nor are they then two, but that, when they come near one another, this is the cause of their becoming two, the coming together and being placed closer to one another. (97a2-5)*

The second problem arises when we use the opposite things as the cause of the same thing:

*Nor can I any longer be persuaded that when one thing is divided, this division is the cause of its becoming two, for just now the cause of becoming two was the opposite. At that time it was their coming close together and one was added to the other, but now it is because one is taken and separated from the other. (97a5-b3)*

By relating addition, or growing, to generation, division to destruction and twoness, or oneness, to being, we can find out how these examples can explain what was Socrates' expectation from natural scientists, that is, the explanation of coming to be, destruction, and being. But they not only failed in giving one explanation for everything, but they did vice versa: they used the opposite explanations for the same thing. Two opposite things are at the extreme points of two-ness; in other words, there are not two things that are more than two opposites two. If we sum up these two problems of explanation, namely, problems of being a real explanation and being one explanation, Socrates' main problem with what is called 'physical explanation' will be obvious.

Calling it a “requirement” of explanation, Politis (2010:70) formulates Socrates' problem as such: “if same *explanandum*, then same *explanans*” or conversely: “if same *explanans*, then same *explanandum*”

(Politis, 2010:70). Socrates' reliance on traditional explanation, Politis thinks, was lost because he thought "such explanations do not satisfy certain fundamental requirements of explanation" (ibid: 65). Bostoc's formulation of the case is nearly the same: "Two opposite causes cannot have the same effect" and "the same causes cannot have opposite effects" (Bostoc, 1986: 138). He calls them "two conditions which Socrates thinks any acceptable reasons or causes must satisfy". (ibid) These are obviously some formulas that can be correctly said about Plato's requirements or conditions of explanation but reducing the problem to this is misleading.<sup>2</sup>

Socrates' disappointment with natural philosophers, I think, is due to the fact that they could not understand the necessity of *One Real Explanation* for all things. *One Real Explanation* is an explanation that can explain all the related matters in a unified and real way. Only in such a way we can understand the explanation and follow the argument. This may be understood better by what Plato has in mind when, in *Sophist*, gets the visitor to say that those philosophers 'have simply been talking their way through their explanations without paying any attention to whether we were following them or we were left behind' (243a7-b1). What is Socrates' final decision about their explanation? Does he reject them completely? Does he think that they cannot be explanations at all or he accepts them as a low-level kind of explanation that, however, has some problems? Politis believes that physical explanations 'cannot themselves be explanations' in Plato's view (Politis, 2010:112) but they can only be 'an element' in the explanation and 'can thus be accommodated within explanations' (ibid: 111). He thinks Socrates' disillusionment with them must be understood as resulting not in his throwing them out, but in his settling them to one side, for the sake of first examining what an explanation really is (ibid:112). David Hillel Ruben, on the contrary, believes Plato could not think about those explanations even as an element. '[He] did not find them less than fully adequate, and in need of supplementation', he says, 'but rather entirely unacceptable' and Socrates knows that he does not want to follow this alleged method of explanation at all (Ruben, 2004:47). For this last comment he refers to 97b3-7 where we have Socrates saying:

*I do not any longer persuade myself that I know why a unit  
or anything else comes to be, or perishes or exits by the old*

*method of investigation, and I do not accept it, but I have a confused method of my own.*

We have already noted that Plato’s objection to natural scientists’ explanation was that they failed to suggest *One Real Explanation*. Having been disappointed with all those different incomprehensible explanations, the only thing that could make him hopeful again was *One Real Explanation* which he heard had been suggested by Anaxagoras’ theory of Mind (νοῦς). It was One explanation because it was saying that “it is Mind that directs and is the cause of everything” (ὡς ἄρα νοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ δια κοσμῶν τε καὶ πάντων αἴτιος) (97c1-2; cf. Diels-Kranz, Fr.15.8-9, 11-12, 12-14). That Socrates was searching for one explanation for all things can be proved even from what he has been expecting from natural philosophers. The case is, nonetheless, more clearly asserted when he speaks about Anaxagoras’ theory. In addition to δια κοσμῶν τε καὶ πάντων αἴτιος of 97c2 mentioned above, we have τὸ τὸν νοῦν εἶναι πάντων αἴτιον (c3-4) and τὸν γε νοῦν κοσμοῦν τὰ πάντα κοσμεῖν (c4-5), all emphasizing the cause of all things (πάντα). This may indicate that one of the reasons that caused Socrates to embrace Anaxagoras’ theory delightfully was its claim to provide the cause of *all* things by *one* thing.

But it was also a *Real* explanation because it was something specific: Mind. The cause of his dissatisfaction with the explanation of becoming two out of coming together, as we pointed out, was that it could not be a *Real* cause. Why Mind, in difference with those unreal causes, can be a *Real* cause? Maybe because there is not, it seems at least at first, anything in the world more suitable than Mind to be the basis of explanation. The essential relation of knowledge and virtue or good and knowledge might help us understand the specific character of Mind. Trying to solve the problem of teachability of virtue, Socrates says that it can be teachable only if it is a kind of knowledge because nothing can be taught to human beings but knowledge (ἐπιστήμην) (*Meno* 87c2). The dilemma will be, then, whether virtue is knowledge or not (c11-12) and since virtue is good, we can change the question to: whether is there anything good separate from knowledge (εἰ μὲν τί ἐστὶν ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἄλλο χωριζόμενον

ἐπιστήμης) (d4-5). Therefore, the conclusion will be that if there is nothing good which knowledge does not encompass, virtue can be nothing but knowledge (d6-8).

Anaxagoras' Mind, at least in Socrates' view, was attempting to explain everything by the concept of the Good. This connection between Mind and the Good belongs more to the essential relation they have in Socrates' thinking than Anaxagoras' own theory because there are almost nothing about such a relation in the remained fragments of Anaxagoras. The reason for Socrates' reading can be that Mind is substantially compatible with Socrates' idea of the relation between good and knowledge. Both the thesis 'no one does wrong willingly' and the theory of virtue as knowledge are evidences of this essential relation. Nobody who knows that something is bad can choose or do it as bad. The reason, so far as it is reason, works only based on good-choosing. In this context, when Socrates hears that Mind is considered as the cause of everything, it sounds to him like this: Good should be regarded as the basis of the explanation of all things. We see him, thus, passing from the former to the latter without any proof. This is done in the second sentence after introducing Mind:

*I thought that if this were so, the arranging Mind would arrange all things and put each thing in the way that was Best (ὅπῃ ἂν βέλτιστα ἔχῃ). If one then wished to find the cause of each thing by which it either perishes or exists, one needs to find what is the best way (βέλτιστον ἀντὶ ἑστίν) for it to be, or to be acted upon, or to act. On these premises then it befitted a man to investigate only, about this and other things, what is the most excellent (ἄριστον) and best (βέλτιστον). The same man must inevitably also know what is worse (χειρῶν), for that is part of the same knowledge. (97c4-d5)*

This passage is a good evidence of Socrates' leap from Anaxagoras' Mind to his own concept of the Good that can explain why Socrates found Anaxagoras theory after his own heart (97d7). Mind is welcomed because of its capability for explanation on the basis of good to 'explain why it is

so of necessity, saying which is better (ἄμεινον), and that it was better (ἄμεινον) to be so' (97e1-3).

On this basis, Anaxagoras could explain everything- that earth is flat or round, in the up or down or middle and if any of them, he would go on to show that it was *better* for it to be so. On the basis of his need for *One Real Explanation*, I think, we can elaborate why Anaxagoras' Mind was so attractive for young Socrates. He emphasizes precisely on this point saying (98a1-b3):

*If he showed me those things I should be prepared never to desire any other kind of cause. I was ready to find out in the same way (οὕτω ... ὡσαύτως) about the sun and the moon and ..., how it is best (πῆποτεταῦτ' ἄμεινόν ἐστιν) that each should act or be acted upon. I never thought that Anaxagoras, who said that those things were directed by Mind, would bring any other cause for them than that it was best for them as they are (βέλτιστον αὐτὰ οὕτως ἔχειν ἐστὶν ὥσπερ ἔχει). Once he had given the best for each (ἐκάστω βέλτιστον) as the cause for each and the general cause of all, I thought he would go on to explain the common good for all (τὸ κοινὸν πᾶσιν ἐπεκδιηγήσεσθαι ἀγαθόν).*

What Socrates thought he had found in Anaxagoras can indicate what he had been expecting from natural scientists before. Socrates could not be satisfied with their explanations because they were unable to explain how it is the best for everything to be as it is. It can probably be said, then, that it was the lack of the unifying Good in their explanation that had disappointed Socrates. Politis, conversely, does not accept that Socrates introduced this new method of explanation because of the fact that they were not good-based. 'Socrates' complaint against traditional explanation', he says, 'is independent of and prior to his becoming hopeful about good-based ones.' (Politis, 2010, 99) If we have to accept that what he means by 'good-based' explanation is the same with what Socrates had in mind about Anaxagoras' theory, Politis is misleading here. It is obvious that Socrates' hope for Anaxagoras' theory must be essentially related to the

fact that he is already disappointed with natural philosophers' explanations. This justifies the suggestion to take that which is included in this new theory as the same with what was absent before. It is also misleading, I think, to call Socrates' theory teleological if we mean by this some kind of explanation that must be considered besides other kinds of explanation as, for example, Taylor thinks (Taylor, 1998, 11). If we behold the essential relation between the Good and the knowledge and observe the fact that the good is here considered as the basis of explanation, we cannot be satisfied with putting it as one kind besides other kinds of explanations.

It must be insisted that we are discussing what Socrates *thought* Anaxagoras' theory of Mind should have been, not about Anaxagoras' actual way of using Mind. *Phaedo* 97c-98b, is not about what Socrates *found* in Anaxagoras but what he thought he *could find* in it. On the contrary, it should also be noted that it was not this that was dashed at 98b, but Anaxagoras' actual way of using Mind.<sup>3</sup> It was Anaxagoras' fault not to find out how to use such an excellent thesis (98b8-c2, cf. 98e-99b). He 'made no use of Mind nor gave it any responsibility for the management of the things, but mentioned as causes air and ether and water and many other strange things'. (98b8-c2) Socrates' complaint against Anaxagoras, as it is obvious in the text above, is not against Anaxagoras as the creator of Mind, but is against Anaxagoras as a natural scientist who turned back to his predecessors' method of explanation. Socrates' example of the explanation of his staying at prison, 98e-99b, confirms this.<sup>4</sup> He asserts that when we make a mistake like what Anaxagoras made trying to explain by many causes, it is the ignorance of 'true causes' (ἀληθῶς αἰτίας)(98e1). Socrates thinks 'to call those things causes is too absurd' (99a4-5), meaning by 'those things' all the things that, though are necessary for something as it is, they are not the causes of its being as it is. Though they are necessary, but are not the *Real* causes. We can clearly see his main concern about a cause in 99b2-4:

*Imagine not being able to distinguish the real cause (αἴτιον τῷ ὄντι) (99b2) from that without which the cause cannot be able to act as a cause (ἐκεῖνο ἄνευ οὗ τὸ αἴτιον οὐκ ἂν ποτ' εἶη αἴτιον). (99b3-4)*

We cannot call them causes and this name does not belong to them. They cannot be causes and explanations since they cannot explain the Good in what they want to explain. Socrates gives an example to show how not believing in 'good' as the basis of explanation makes people be wanderers between different unreal explanations of a thing. His words δέον συνδεῖν (binding that binds together) as a description for the Good shows that he want it to have a unifying role:

*They do not believe that the truly good and binding binds and holds them together (ὡς ἀληθῶς τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ δέον συνδεῖν καὶ συνέχειν οὐδὲν οἴονται). (99c5-6)*

At the end of discussing what he would like to be the explanation but became disappointed with, he is still hopeful to find someone to teach him the workings of that kind of cause (99c6-8), probably showing that he was not thoroughly disappointed of finding the way of using good in explanation. It is on this basis that we say *One Real Explanation* is the highest degree of explanation for Plato. What he suggests later on as the explanation by Forms is only a 'second voyage' (δεύτερον πλοῦν) (99c9-d1). Whatever this 'second' might mean, as Hackforth notes, it must include some kind of 'inferiority to πρώτος πλοῦς.' (Hackforth, 1955, 137).

Having in mind Plato's well-known analogy of the sun and the Good at *Republic* 508-509, we can dare to say that his warning of the danger of seeing the truth directly like one watching an eclipse of the sun in *Phaedo* (99d-e) is more about the difficulty of so-called good-based explanation than its insufficiency, a difficulty precisely confirmed in *Republic* (504e-505a, 506d-e). What is said in *Republic* can be regarded as compatible with *Phaedo* 99d-e and the metaphor of watching an eclipse of the sun. In spite of the fact that we do not have adequate knowledge of the Idea of the Good, it is necessary for every kind of knowledge: 'If we do not know it, even if we know all other things, it is of no benefit to us without it.' (505a6-7) The problem that we do not have sufficient knowledge of the Idea of Good is tried to be solved by the same method of *Phaedo* 99d-e, that is to say, by looking at what is like instead of looking at thing itself (506d8-e4). It is this solution that leads to the comparison of the Good

with sun in the allegory of Sun (508b12-13). What the Good is in the intelligible realm corresponds to what the sun is in the visible realm; as sun is not sight, but is its cause and is seen by it (b9-10), the Good is so regarding knowledge. It has, then, the same role for knowledge that the sun has for sight. Socrates draws our attention to the function of sun in our act of seeing. Being able to see everything in the light of the day, the eyes are unable to see the same things in the gloom of night (508c4-6). Without the sun, our eyes are dimmed and blind as if they do not have clear vision any longer (c6-7). That the Good must have the same role about knowledge based on the analogy means that it must be considered as a required condition of any kind of knowledge:

*The soul, then, thinks (νόει) in the same way: whenever it focuses on what is shined upon by truth and being, understands (ἐνόησέν), knows (ἔγνω) and apparently possesses understanding (νοῦν ἔχειν). (508d4-6)<sup>5</sup>*

Socrates does not use *agathon* in this paragraph and substitutes it with both *aletheia* and *to on*.<sup>6</sup> He links them with the Idea of the Good when he is to assert the conclusion of the analogy:

*That which gives truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say, is the Idea of the Good: being the cause of knowledge and truth (αἰτίαν δ' ἐπιστήμης οὖσαν καὶ ἀληθείας)<sup>7</sup> so far as it is known (ὡς γιγνωσκομένης μὲν διανοοῦ). (508e1-4)*

Knowledge and truth are called goodlike (ἀγαθοειδῆ) since they are not the same as the Good but more honoured (508e6-509a5). What had been implicitly contemplated and searched in *Phaedo*, is now explicitly being asserted in *Republic*. The Form of the Good in *Republic*, of which Santas speaks as 'the centerpiece of the canonical Platonism of the middle dialogues, the centerpiece of Plato's metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and ...' (1983, 256) much more can be said.

Plato's Cave allegory in *Book VIII* dedicates a similar role to the Idea of the Good. The Idea of the Good is there as the last thing to be seen in the knowable realm, something so important that its seeing equals to

understanding the fact that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful. (517b) Producing both light and its source in visible realm, it controls and provides truth and understanding in the intelligible realm. (517c)

The same point is asserted in a more explicit way in the *Republic*, where the Good is considered not only as a condition for the knowledge of X, but also as what binds all the objects of knowledge and also the soul in its knowing them. At *Republic VI*, 508e1-3, where Socrates says that the Form of the Good 'gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower'<sup>8</sup>, he wants to set the Good at the highest point of his epistemological structure by which all the elements of this structure are bound. This point is emphasized at 509b6-7: 'the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good' (τοῖς γινωσκομένοις ... τὸ γινώσκεσθαι ... ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρεῖναι). Good, which is the cause of knowledge (αἴτιαν δ' ἐπιστήμης) (508e3) and the Form of the good, as is said in book VII, is the basis of knowing and its meaning because you cannot know anything without finding it:

*Unless someone can distinguish in an account the form of the good from everything else, cannot survive all refutation (ὅς ἂν μὴ ἔχη διορίσασθαι τῷ λόγῳ ἀποτῶν ἄλλων πάντων ἀφελώντην τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέαν). (534b8-c1)*

This binding aspect of the Good is by no means a simple binding of all knowledge or all the objects of knowledge, but the most complicated kind of binding as it is expected from the author of the *Republic*. The kind of unity the Good gives to the different knowledge of different things is comparable with the unity which each Form gives to its participants in *Republic*: as all the participants of a Form are united *by referring to the ideas*, all different kinds of knowledge are united *by referring to the Good*. If we regard Aristotle's assertions that for Plato and the believers of Forms, the causative relation of the One with the Forms is the same as that of the Forms with particulars (e.g. *Metaphysics* 988a10-11, 988b4), that is to say, the One is the essence (e.g., *ibid*, 988a10-11: τοῦτίεστιν, 988b4-6: τὸτίηνεῖναι) of the Forms, besides his statement that for them One is

the Good (e.g. *ibid*, 988b11-13), the relation between the Good and unity may become more apparent.

Since the quiddity of the Good (τί ποτ' ἐστὶ τἀγαθόν) is more than discussion (506d8-e2), we cannot await Socrates to tell us how this binding role is played. All we can expect is to hear from him an analogy by which this unifying role is envisaged, the sun. The kind of unity that the Good gives to the knowledge and its objects in the intelligible realm is comparable to the unity that the sun gives to the sight and its objects in the visible realm (508b-c).

The allegory of Line<sup>9</sup> (*Republic VI*, 509d-511), like that of the Sun, tries to bind all various kinds of knowledge. The hierarchical model of the Line which encompasses all kinds of knowledge from imagination to understanding can clearly be considered as Plato's effort to bind all kinds of knowledge by a certain unhypothetical principle. The method of hypothesis starts, in the first subsection of the intelligible realm, with a hypothesis that is not directed firstly to a principle but a conclusion (510b4-6). It proceeds, in the other subsection, to a 'principle which is not a hypothesis' (b7) and is called the 'unhypothetical principle of all things' (ἀνυποθέτου ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ παντός ἀρχήν) (511b6-7). This παντός must refer not only to the objects of the intelligible realm but to the sensible objects as well. Plato does posit, therefore, an epistemological principle for all things, a principle that all things are, epistemologically, bound and, thus, unified by.

### III

To pass over that theory of explanation by the Good to attach a new theory in *Phaedo*, Socrates needs a new method, the method of hypothesis. This method is used to represent an image of what the real explanation is, enabling us to look at the real one. He describes this method as such:

*However, I started in this manner: taking as my hypothesis in each case the theory that seemed to me the most compelling. I would consider as true, about cause and everything else, whatever agreed with this, and as untrue whatever did not so agree. (100a3-7)*

It is through this method that he comes to the kind of cause he has always been concerned about (100b2-3). Though his new kind of explanation is emphasized to be what he has never stopped talking about, I am not to agree with Bluck that in this coming to the theory of explanation by Forms, there is a transition from ‘purely Socratic thought to Plato’s own development of it’ because the theory of good-based explanation neither is less Platonic than the theory of Forms nor is in a lower rank. (Bluck, 2014, 14) However, Socrates knows that this theory can be used only when the existence of Forms has been accepted (100b7-9). If we believe in the existence of Forms, there will be no better way to explain a thing unless by its Form:

I think that, if there is anything beautiful besides the Beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no other reason that it shares in that Beautiful, and I say so with everything. (100c4-6)

He calls this theory simple, naïve, and foolish and emphasizes that it is not the way of the relation between things and their Form that is important for this kind of explanation but this very theory of Form as explanation (100d). He also calls this answer to the question of explanation the safest answer and impossible to fall into error. It is not an answer which makes us surprised, but the most predictable one.<sup>10</sup>He mentions the problem of the same explanations for the opposites again adding another problem which is the problem of explanation by the opposites:

*Bigger is bigger by a head which is small and this would be strange, namely, that someone is made bigger by something small. (101b1-2)*

Bostock interprets this as the third condition of explanation and formulates it as such: “A cause cannot be the opposite of the effect it has”. (Bostock, 1986: 137) We can also see this theory, for instance, in *Timaeus* 29b5-9. The theory of explanation by Forms is the most possible consistent theory with this kind of thinking. The Forms are the only things that can be the *aitia* of things:

*You would loudly exclaim that you do not know how else each thing can come to be except by sharing in the particular reality in which it shares, and in these cases you do not know of any other cause of becoming two except by sharing in Two-ness, and that the things that are to be two must share in this... (101c2-6)*

Let us return to the method of hypothesis on which he based his theory of explanation by Forms. He told us that in this method we should take the most compelling theory as our hypothesis and then analyze everything on its basis: Whatever agrees with it will be considered as true and whatever not, as false. The theory of Form as explanation is his first hypothesis here and it is obvious that the theory was the most compelling theory for him. Now he says that before examining the consequence of this theory, you should not examine the hypothesis itself; and continues: 'When you must give an account of your hypothesis itself, you will proceed in the same way: you will assume another hypothesis, the one which seems to you the best of the higher ones until you come to something acceptable.' (101d5-e1)

Now we know that we should examine the consequences of our theory and be careful not to jumble the consequences and the hypothesis at once. What is the consequence of the theory of Form as explanation? It might have happened that one thing has two opposite Forms. Let's see his example:

*If you say these things are so, when you then say that Simmias is taller than Socrates but shorter than Phaedo, do not you mean that there is in Simmias both tallness and shortness? (102b3-6)*

Thus, it is obvious that it cannot be an explanation of something just by referring to its Form because it can share many Forms and it cannot be meaningful to say something is so and so because it shares a Form and it is such and such because it shares another Form, the opposite to the first one. It is noteworthy that this is not the same with what we have discussed as a problem in physical explanation (the opposite things as the cause of the same things) but something different: the opposite things as the cause of opposite characters of the same thing. In the former case, for example,

addition and division were the causes of the same thing, two-ness, while here tallness and shortness are the causes of two opposite characters, being taller than Socrates and being shorter than Phaedo, in the same person, Simmias. While the first problem forced Socrates to look for one explanation for all things, this problem will make him distinguish between what is the thing itself and what it happened to have:

*It is not, surely, the nature of Simmias to be taller than Socrates because he is Simmias but because of the tallness he happened to have (τῷ μεγέθει ὃ τυγχάνει ἔχων). Nor is he taller than Socrates because Socrates is Socrates, but because Socrates has smallness compared with the tallness of the other? (102c1-4)*

These are what happened for them to have and they do not have them because they are themselves as if these characters make their nature. This is only tallness that has tallness as its nature and only shortness that has shortness as its nature. Thus:

*Not only tallness itself is never willing to be tall and short at the same time, but also that the tallness in us will never admit the shortness or be overcome. (102d6-8)*

He concludes that the opposites themselves (not what have them by accident) cannot accept each other while they are themselves. This leads us to a crucial point: only what that shares in a Form by its nature refuses its opposite, that is, cannot have it while it is itself. It means we can explain a thing by a Form it shares in only when it shares in it essentially. He says:

*It is true then about some of these things that not only the Form itself deserves its own name for all time, but there is something else- that is not the Form but has its character whenever it exists. (103e2-5)*

Every tall thing shares in the Form of tallness because it is tall, but only what has tallness in its nature can deserve the name of the Form essentially. What we have used as our example here, tallness, is his previous example and is not suitable to show what he wants to show us

because there is not or at least we are not aware of a special thing which has tallness by its nature except the Form of tallness itself. Socrates' own examples are 'fire' and 'snow' which have hotness and coldness by their nature and cannot accept the opposite. We have, thereupon, three classes of things: Forms (hot itself); what shares in or has the Form by its nature (fire); and what shares in Form by accident (every hot thing). It is only the second or what shares in Form by nature that refuses its opposite. It is in this way that Socrates solves the problem of explanation by Form, the explanation of two opposite characters of a thing by two opposite Forms. Everything that shares in a Form by nature is always called with that Form and can never be called by the opposite: It cannot 'admit that Form which is opposite to that which it is' (104b9-10). He uses the examples of odd and even:

*Consider three: do you not think that it must always be called both by its own name and by that of the Odd, which is not the same as three? That is the nature of three, and of five, and of half of all the numbers; each of them is odd, but it is not the Odd. (104a5-b1)*

By this method, he reaches to a necessary opposition between things which are not the opposites:

*Five does not admit the Form of the Even, nor will ten, its double, admit the Form of the Odd. The double itself is an opposite of something else, yet it will not admit the Form of the Odd. (105a6-b1)*

Now he can extend his previous safe and foolish theory of explanation by Forms (by resolving that problem of the explanation of opposite Forms in the same thing) and pass to another not foolish but still safe theory of explanation. (105b6-c6)

Let us review what we have discussed above and summarize them:

1. Plato cannot be satisfied with the natural scientists' explanations since they have ignored to introduce *One Real Explanation*.
2. That *One Real Explanation*, for Plato, is a theory that i) can explain all things by a unitary way of explanation, and ii) can do this with showing how it is good or best for them to be as they are. Plato was disappointed with Anaxagoras' Mind because he did not show how Mind could satisfy

the conditions mentioned above (Anaxagoras used many other causes and did not use Mind to show how it was best for everything to be as it was). In spite of the fact that Anaxagoras made him disappointed, Plato did not leave the above conditions as the necessary conditions for an explanation. He had to come to other theories of explanation as 'second best' ones because neither he himself nor anyone else could show "the workings" of such an explanation.

3. He represents the theory of explanation by Form as his own confused theory of explanation as the safest, but foolish. Having encountered with the problem of the two opposite Forms as explanations of two opposites in one thing, he used the leading point of the method of hypothesis that when you reach to a problem and want to examine the hypothesis itself, you should assume another hypothesis; and he came to distinguish between what a thing is by its nature and what it is by accident. The result was a new theory of explanation based on the previous theory through making limitations on it: the theory of explanation only by those Forms to which a thing shares by its nature. He still preserves this crucial point that explanation should refer to the Forms. What is added to this point here is that he restricts and limits that theory to the Forms which refers to the nature of what is going to be explained.

#### IV

Finally, we turn back to our basic question: what is Plato's theory of explanation? Does he have one unitary theory of explanation? Taylor holds that we cannot find a 'single principle' of explanation in *Phaedo*<sup>10</sup> Annas thinks that Plato's argument in *Phaedo* is a mixed one because he could not distinguish between different meanings of the explanation which Aristotle did. She says that *Phaedo* is 'a classic case of what Aristotle regards as confusion arising from failure to note that a philosophically important term is being used as though it had a single sense, whereas in fact it is crucially ambiguous'. (Annas, 1995, 25) She asserts that Plato is 'confusedly treating together different kinds of explanation' and continues:

*A grasp of Aristotle's point in physics II3 would have enabled Plato to transform his confused discussion into an*

*unconfused discussion of three distinct kinds of explanation;  
but Plato shows no sign of any such grasp. (ibid)*

Vlastos, on the contrary, recognizes three kinds of explanation in Plato to show how he anticipates Aristotle's doctrine:

*Plato has not only distinguished here mechanical from  
teleological causes.... but has also come within sight of the  
still more radical distinction between both of these and the  
logical aitia of classification and entailment. (1971: 166)*

He thinks that Plato's use of that 'safe' explanation was in order to 'explode pseudo-problems which arise when the categorical difference between logical and physical *aitia* is ignored' (ibid). Politis, on the other side, thinks that Plato defends a 'unitary account of explanation, i.e. an account that is supposed to be true of each and every explanation without distinction' (Politis, 2010: 98). For Politis, this unitary account is nothing but essence.<sup>11</sup> He says that Plato cannot distinguish between the teleological and formal explanations because 'he thinks that all explanations are formal and essence-based' (ibid: 99). Politis holds that Plato distinguishes between those essence-based explanations appealing to the essence of the good and those that do not appeal to it and adds that 'good-based explanations depend on essence-based ones' (ibid: 101) because it is necessary for good-based explanations, if they are to satisfy what he calls the requirements of explanation, to depend on essence-based explanations (ibid: 101-102). He even says that 'good-based explanations are a kind of essence-based explanations' (ibid: 102).

### **Conclusion**

What this article has been so far trying to show is that we have a unitary theory of explanation, *One Real Explanation*, which is good-based. Based on this ground, even if explanation by Forms appealing to essence may be a second ranked explanation, it must be regarded on the same principle (good-based explanation) and under his unitary theory of *One Real Explanation*. As White points out, 'the second voyage will be directed toward' the Good because otherwise Socrates' appeal to what is "best" would be misleading. (White, 1989, 166) This becomes more apparent if we pay attention to the relation of Good and Forms as is construed in

*Republic* or reported by Aristotle. Consequently, if we have *Republic* in mind, where the Good plays the causal role it were to play in *Phaedo* and is explicitly taken as *aitia* (cf. Herrmann 2007), the good-based unitary theory comes more apparent. If not, maybe we will not have such a single principle between *One Real Explanation* and explanation by Form and essence. In spite of the fact that we agree with Politis that Plato defends a unitary account of explanation, we have to disagree with his reduction of Plato's theory to the theory of explanation to essence since we must consider the theory of explanation by essence either as a theory that is a second theory lower than *One Real Explanation* or as a theory that will finally come along with it based on the relation between Forms and the Form of the Good in *Republic*.<sup>13</sup>

In this way, we accept that *One Real Explanation* is an explanation which seems inaccessible in *Phaedo* while achieved in *Republic*. If so, his overall theory of explanation is that there should be one explanation for all things and this explanation explains the presence of good in them. In this interpretation, we must consider the theories of 'explanation by Form' and 'explanation by Form appealing to essence' as the steps that cannot reach the *One Real Explanation*. Neither is the theory of explanation by Forms nor the theory of explanation by Forms appealing to essence are thus sufficient. They are some deficient stepstoward that *One Real Explanation* that cannot reach it by themselves, at least in *Phaedo*.<sup>14</sup> If we add the Form of the Good as the highest Form which all other Forms share in, as it is said in *Republic*, and continue the method of hypothesis as it is drawn out in *Phaedo*, we will have, then, a complete theory of explanation by the Form of the Good and need only one more step: taking good as the essence of all the Forms or what all of them share in. Such being the case, our theories of explanation by Form and explanation by Form that appeals to the essence will be completed with the theory of good as the essence of all explanations<sup>15</sup> and thus can be included in *One Real Explanation*. If this can be done, we may, however, be able to conclude that we have a unitary theory of explanation in Plato's philosophy.

### Notes

1. All the translations of Plato's texts are from: Cooper 1997
2. Politis says: 'It is of course true that, in this argument and its context (i.e. 98b7 – 99c6), Socrates objects to physicalist explanations. But his grounds for

objecting are precisely that physicalist explanations do not satisfy those requirements of explanation....' (Politis, 2010: 73)

3. Thinking that Socrates' disappointment with Anaxagoras' Theory of Mind was because of his disappointment with what is called good-based explanation is misleading. Politis, for instance, says: 'It is equally true that his hope to the extent that they were founded in good-based explanation traditionally available, were dashed (98b7), and as a result, "he turned to essence-based or form-based explanations.' (Politis, 2010: 75)

4. His analogy of mind as a Real and necessary explanation of his staying in prison with Anaxagoras' explanation of everything by Mind is so noticeable.

5. In the allegory of Sun, there are two paragraphs that evidently and deliberately extend the binding role of the Good to the ontological scene:

You will say that the sun not only makes the visible things have the ability of being seen but also coming to be, growth and nourishment. (509b2-4)

This clearly intends to remind the ontological role the sun plays in bringing to being all the sensible things in order to display how its counterpart has the same role in the intelligible realm (b6-10):

Not only the objects of knowledge (γινωσκόμενοις) owe their being known (γινώσκεσθαι) to the Good, but also their existence (τὸ εἶναί) and their being (οὐσίαν) are due to it, though the Good is not being but superior to it in rank and power.

6. The relation of the Good, on the one hand, and being and truth, on the other hand, remains ambiguous at least in *Republic*. All that we hear from Plato here is that the Good is beyond them. I cannot understand what kind of evidence Cynthia Hampton had to conclude that truth in *Republic* is 'likewise a Form and a part of the Good' and also an 'ontological notion' (Hampton, 1998, 239).

7. One might agree with Politis that by the things that are capable of being known, Plato has in mind, 'at least primarily', the other ideas (2010, 102). Cooper's translation (ed.) of ὡς γινωσκομένης μὲν διανοοῦ ('it is an object of knowledge') cannot be satisfactory.

8. I agree with Politis that 'It is natural to suppose that by the things that are capable of being known, he has in mind (at least primarily) the other ideas or forms' (Politis, 2010: 102). But it does not matter for us to make the good or the form of the good as the *aitia* of either a thing or a form. What is crucial here is that good is the meaning of knowledge whether in things or in Forms. He refuses these two objection, 1) '*Phaedo*'s account is about the αἴτια of changeable things' (ibid: 103) and 2) 'It is about formal αἴτια, not the teleological ones' (ibid).

9. The allegory of Cave at the very beginning of the seventh Book (514aff.) can be taken as evidence.

10. Cf. for example: *Euthyphro* 10b, *Hippias Major* 287c, 294 b

11. He says: 'Since we have been unable to find any single principle of explanation in the *Phaedo*, it is natural to inquire just what the similarities are between the kinds of explanation found there and Aristotle's explanation by means of formal cause.' (Taylor 1998:11) He finds Plato's theory of explanation in *Republic* in this way: 'On the whole I am inclined to guess that he thought that

in that area two explanations must ultimately refer to the Forms, but the only support for that opinion which occurs to me is the reference at *Republic* 511b 6-7 to the ‘un-hypothetical first principle of everything’ which implies that there is a single pattern of explanation for all phenomena, depending on a single principle which seems either to be identical with or to be some proposition concerning the Form of the Good.’ (ibid: 5)

12. Politis thinks that Socrates’ account of explanation ‘is not that explanata which are simply essences, but that explanata, whatever else they may involve, are primarily essences’. (Politis, 2010: 64) He says that Plato generates the theory of essence by his theory of explanation and also points out that ‘the account of explanation is sufficient to generate a particular account of essence’. (ibid: 66) He argues that the existence of essence is necessary for the possibility of explanation: ‘only if there are essences, can there be an explanation (αἴτια) of why a thing is as it is.’ (ibid: 90) and: ‘the account of explanation serves to develop an account of essence’. (ibid) It is more pleasant for him to prefer what he calls a stronger reading of the relation of the theory of essence and the theory of explanation, that is: “Part of what it is to be an essence is that essence plays this role in explanation, i.e. the role of being the primary explanata”. (ibid: 91) Although he hesitates that his interpretation of the case in *Phaedo* can provide this stronger reading, he continues: ‘What it may or may not allow us to conclude is that Plato thinks essences are, essentially, explanations – that it is part of what it is to be an essence that essences are explanations.’ (ibid) He also tries to interpret Form and essence through each other: ‘Forms in the *Phaedo*, whatever else they also are, are essences as well. And the theory of Forms, whatever else it also is, is also a theory of essence.’ (ibid: 92)

13. That what this relation may be is a matter of confusion. The most remarkable and even strange suggestion is that of Fine. She thinks that the Form of the Good is not a distinct Form but ‘the teleological structure of things; individual Forms are its parts, and particular sensible objects instantiate it’ (Fine, 1999, 228). This makes the problem of the causal relation between the Form of the Good and other Forms even more problematic. To say, like Seel, that the Form of the Good is ‘the cause of the existence of the essences’ (Seel, 2007, 185) does not explain their epistemological relation.

14. Plato’s εἰκός λόγος on which he emphasizes severally in *Timaeus*, can be regarded as an approval of degrees of explanation. Though Ashbaugh’s statement about likely account is not proving degrees of explanation but is notable: ‘To be an *eikōs logos* is already to have as much closeness to truth as images can have. Such explanations completely fulfill the criterion of being true to something and in addition, they have the power to bring to mind the truth they mirror’. (Ashbaugh, 1988: 33)

15 Politis says: ‘There appears to be no problem with thinking that the claim that the idea of the good is the αἴτια of the other ideas [in *Republic*] can be directly accommodated within the account of explanation of *Phaedo*.’ (ibid)

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