Forms and Causality in the *Phaedo*

Michael Wiitala

**Abstract:** In Socrates’ account of his “second sailing” in the *Phaedo*, he relates how his search for the causes (αἴτια) of why things come to be, pass away, and are led him to posit the forms as causes. The sense in which the forms are causes, however, is not obvious. Consider some object, \(x\), that has some property, \(F\). Socrates asks, “Why is \(x\) \(F\)?” He claims that the “safe answer” to questions of this sort is that \(x\) is \(F\) because \(x\) participates in the form \(F\). Given Socrates’ claim that \(x\) is \(F\) because it participates in form \(F\), what must a form be on his account and what sort of causal power must it possess? In this paper, I will argue that the forms in the “second sailing” account are best understood as norms. By asking why \(x\) is \(F\), Socrates is searching for the norm to which object \(x\) must conform in order to be an \(F\) object. Object \(x\) is \(F\) insofar as it conforms to that norm. That norm itself is form \(F\).

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates relates his search for the causes (αἴτια) of why things come to be, pass away, and are (96a5 ff.). He explains how this search eventually led him to posit the forms as the causes that answered the sort of why-questions with which he was concerned. The sense in which the forms are causes, however, is not as obvious to us contemporary readers as it apparently was to Phaedo and Echecrities, who claim that Socrates’ account of the way forms are causes was “wonderfully clear to anyone of even small intelligence” (102a4-5).\(^1\) Consider some object, \(x\), that has some characteristic, \(F\). Object \(x\) is \(F\). Socrates wants to know the cause of \(x\)’s being \(F\). So he asks, “Why is \(x\) \(F\)?” Socrates claims that the “safe answer” to questions of this sort is that \(x\) is \(F\) because \(x\) participates in the \(F\) itself—form \(F\). Say \(x\) is something beautiful, for example. Socrates claims that the safe answer to “Why is \(x\) beautiful?” is that \(x\) is beautiful because it participates in the form beautiful (100c3-e3). Given Socrates’ claim that \(x\) is \(F\) because it participates in form \(F\), what must a form be on his account and what sort of causal power must it possess? In this paper, I will argue that the forms in the “second sailing” account

---

are best understood as norms. By asking why $x$ is $F$, Socrates is searching for the norm to which object $x$ must conform in order to be an $F$ object. Object $x$ is $F$ insofar as it conforms to that norm. That norm itself is the form $F$.

I will support this thesis by considering three alternative ways of thinking about the causal power of forms. The first I will call the “Property Reading.” According to the Property Reading, $x$ is $F$ because it has the property $F$. Form $F$, on this reading, is property $F$. The second way of thinking about the causality of the forms is what I will call the “Logical Reading.” This sort of reading is proposed by Gregory Vlastos.\(^2\) According to the Logical Reading, $x$ is $F$ because it satisfies the definition of $F$. A third way of understanding the causality of the forms is what I will call the “Structuring-Causes Reading.” A version of this reading has been proposed by Fiona Leigh and is suggested by some of Gail Fine’s criticisms of Vlastos’ Logical Reading.\(^3\) While each of these readings has merits, I argue that my own “Forms as Norms Reading” better explains Socrates’ claims about causality in *Phaedo* 96a5-102d4.

§1. The Property Reading

One way to understand Socrates’ “safe answer” is to think of forms as properties. This reading does not have much support among scholars of the *Phaedo* because it renders Socrates’ view as fundamentally confused. It is worth briefly thinking through, however, in order to get a sense of what is at stake in Socrates’ claims. Socrates says that beautiful things are beautiful because they participate in the beautiful itself (100c3-e3). The Property Reading glosses “participate in the beautiful itself” as “have the property beautiful.” There is even some textual

---

justification for this gloss: Socrates claims that he does not insist on any specific way of speaking about how the form beautiful makes things beautiful (100d4-7). In fact, he explicitly lists the “presence” (100d5; παρουσία) of the form beautiful in beautiful things as one way of describing how the form beautiful makes things beautiful. Hence, one could argue that perhaps Socrates himself would be comfortable glossing “beautiful things participate in the beautiful” as “the property beautiful is present in beautiful things.” The Property Reading claims that what Socrates is calling the beautiful itself is what we call the property beautiful. If so, then Socrates’ claim is that beautiful things are beautiful because they have the property beautiful. And generally, \( x \) is \( F \) because it has the property \( F \).

While this reading has some plausibility, the reason most commentators on the Phaedo reject it is that it does not account for the explanatory or causal power Socrates attributes to the forms. Properties have some of the characteristics typically attributed to the forms. For example, one and the same property can be in many different entities. Yet properties do not explain why the entities that have them have them. To “have the property \( F \)” typically just means to “be \( F \).” In other words, “\( x \) is \( F \)” and “\( x \) has the property \( F \)” are typically thought of as two ways of saying the same thing. Hence, if Socrates is claiming that \( x \) is \( F \) because it has the property \( F \), his claim is in no way explanatory, since it amounts to “\( x \) is \( F \) because \( x \) is \( F \).” Having property \( F \) does not explain why \( x \) is \( F \); whereas according to Socrates, sharing in form \( F \) does. The principle of charity, therefore, dictates that we should only accept the Property Reading if it is impossible to offer an interpretation of Socrates’ claims that is equally or more plausible. And there certainly are such interpretations. I now turn to some of those.

---

4 For why Socrates would not be comfortable with this gloss see Fiona Leigh, “Being and Power in Plato’s Sophist,” Apeiron 43, no. 1 (2010): 78n29.
§2. The Logical Reading

Gregory Vlastos proposes what I will call the “Logical Reading.” According to the Logical Reading, \( x \) is \( F \) because it satisfies the definition of \( F \). Beautiful things are beautiful, for example, because they satisfy the definition of beautiful. Likewise, large things are large because they satisfy the definition of large. In the same way, squares are squares because they satisfy the definition of squareness. The sort of causality here is logical, according to Vlastos. Object \( x \) is \( F \) because it meets the logical conditions for being \( F \). As Vlastos points out, however, the \( F \) that explains why \( x \) is \( F \) is not a form. Rather, the \( F \) that explains why \( x \) is \( F \) is a definition. While Vlastos acknowledges that for Plato the forms are that which make definitions true, he argues that the causal power Socrates attributes to the forms in the “second sailing” passage belongs properly to definitions. Definition \( F \) explains why \( x \) is \( F \) regardless of one’s theory about what makes definitions true. Squares are squares because they are plane figures with four equal straight sides and four right angles. Even a nominalist could agree to that. Hence Vlastos concludes that “Plato’s Squareness has no more causal efficacy than has the nominalist’s.”

The Logical Reading certainly has some advantages over the Property Reading. Definitions seem to answer the sort of why-questions Socrates asks in a way that properties do not. Yet the Logical Reading still renders a number of Socrates’ claims confused and misleading. First, on the Logical Reading, definitions, rather than forms, are the true causes. Socrates, however, speaks as if forms are the true causes. Second, while definitions answer certain sorts of why-questions, they do not answer the sorts of why-questions with which Socrates is concerned. Socrates is not asking “Why are the things we call beautiful called

---

5 Vlastos, “Reasons and Causes in the Phaedo.”
6 Ibid., 305ff.
7 Ibid., 307.
beautiful?” Rather, he is asking “Why are beautiful things beautiful?” The thing to be explained is not why we label things the way we do, but rather why things are the way they are. In other words, Socrates’ why-questions are metaphysical questions, not terminological ones. Granted, certain terminological consequences may follow from Socrates’ answers to these metaphysical questions. As Phaedo remarks at 102b1-3, things other than the forms receive their names from the names of the forms. Yet the why-questions Socrates asks are metaphysical. A nominalist or conventional definition explains nothing about why things come to be, why they pass away, and why they are. If the Logical Reading is correct, Socrates’ questions are poorly stated. He should be asking “Why is x called F?” not “Why is x F?” Again, the principle of charity dictates we reject the Logical Reading if another reading with equal or greater plausibility can be found.

§3. The Structuring-Causes Reading

A third way to interpret Socrates’ “safe answer” to the why-questions he asks is to understand the forms as the structures according to which the entities that participate in them are structured. This sort of reading has been suggested in different ways by Fiona Leigh and Gail Fine, although not to my knowledge fully developed by either. Fine suggests that what makes beautiful things beautiful, for Plato, is not something like bright colors or other material constituents. Rather, what makes beautiful things beautiful are “more abstract features, such as structure or arrangement,” to which any material constituents must conform. Leigh goes further and proposes that the forms are “structuring-causes.” Consider the form justice. Leigh argues that the form justice specifies the structure that entities must have if they are to possess the property justice. “The structure that belongs to the Form Justice as its nature,” Leigh writes,
“and specifies what it is to have the property, being just, is a certain harmonious relation between the parts (of soul or city), each performing its own function.”\textsuperscript{11} The forms, according to the Structuring-Causes Reading, are the structures that specify the way that entities that possess the corresponding properties must be structured. Form $F$ is the structure that specifies the way that $x$ must be structured if $x$ is to be $F$.

If we apply this way of understanding the causal power of the forms to the sort of why-questions Socrates asks as he relates his “second-sailing,” we get the following. Socrates’ claim that $x$ is $F$ because it participates in form $F$ can be glossed as $x$ is $F$ because it is structured according to structure $F$. Consider the form justice again. The structure that simply is the form justice explains why just things are just. Just things are just because they are structured according to the structure that simply is the form justice. We can, of course, articulate that structure in language by means of a definition. In contrast to the Logical Reading, however, the definition is not what explains why just things are just. Rather the structure that just things instantiate explains why they are just. That structure, considered without reference to any specific instance of it, is the form justice. On the Structuring-Causes Reading, therefore, both the causal and the ontological asymmetry between form and participant is maintained.\textsuperscript{12} The structure that is the form justice is intelligible regardless of whether there are any instances of that structure; whereas an instance of the structure that is the form justice is unintelligible without that structure. Why is $x$ $F$? The “safe answer,” according to the Structuring-Causes Reading, is that $x$ is $F$ because it is an instance of the structure that form $F$ simply is.

How the Structuring-Causes Reading works in the case of the form justice, understood along the lines of Socrates’ account in the Republic, is relatively intuitive, since justice specifies

\textsuperscript{11} Leigh, “Restless Forms and Changeless Causes,” 257.
\textsuperscript{12} Cf. ibid., 255n25.
the way that parts of a structured whole (a city or soul) are to interact. Yet what about the sorts of forms Socrates uses as examples in the “second sailing” passage? As Fine’s comments above suggest, it is not implausible to think of the form beautiful as a certain structure or arrangement. In the case of forms like large and small, they can be characterized as relational structures. Large, for instance, is the structure according to which one thing is in the relationship of exceeding another in size. Simmias instantiates the structure large, for example, insofar as he is taller than Socrates, that is, insofar as his height exceeds the height of Socrates. The structure here is relational. Simmias is not “larger than Socrates because he is Simmias” (102c1-2).

Nothing about the structure of Simmias himself, including his specific height, causes him to be larger than Socrates. Simmias’ specific height cannot be the cause of his being large because it no more explains his tallness in relation to Socrates than his shortness in relation to Phaedo. Rather the structure of the relationship between Simmias’ and Socrates’ respective heights—a structure in which Simmias’ height exceeds and Socrates’ height is exceeded—is what explains why Simmias is large when compared to Socrates. In other words, the largeness Simmias has when compared to Socrates is a result of Simmias’ participation in the form large in relation to Socrates (100e5-101b2, 102b3-d4). The Structuring-Causes Reading can make sense not only of forms that structure individual entities, like justice or beauty, but also forms like large and small that structure relations between entities.

With the Structuring-Causes Reading, therefore, we have a reading that accounts for all of Socrates’ claims about the causality of the forms in the “second sailing” passage. The structure that simply is form $F$ explains why entities that are $F$ are $F$. Since structure $F$ explains why entities insofar as they are structured according to it are structured in an $F$ way, while entities insofar as they are structured in an $F$ way do not explain why structure $F$ itself is the way

---

13 Cf. Plato, *Hippias Major*, 294b2-4; *Parmenides* 150c7-d2.
it is, the Structuring-Causes Reading, unlike the Property Reading, maintains the causal priority of the form over participant. Likewise, in contrast to the Logical Reading, the Structuring-Causes Reading explains why \(x\) is \(F\) ontologically, instead of merely explaining why we call \(x\) “\(F\)” Furthermore, since there could be no entities structured in an \(F\) way without structure \(F\), whereas structure \(F\) is intelligible whether or not any spatio-temporal entities instantiate it, the Structuring-Causes Reading maintains the ontological priority of form over participant. Granting that the Structuring-Causes Reading has these strengths, in what follows I will argue that the Forms as Norms Reading is nevertheless superior in that it more clearly articulates both what a structuring-cause is and what a form is (§4); and in that it more closely ties Socrates’ discussion of the causality of the forms to his claims about causality in the account of his “first sailing” (97b8-99c8) (§5).

§4. The Forms as Norms Reading

Building on the Structuring-Causes Reading, the Forms as Norms Reading characterizes the forms as norms and claims that their causal power is their normativity. Structures, considered apart from the entities structured according to them, are norms. The structure that is the form justice, for example, is a norm that specifies that the parts of any entity that is to be just must each do their own proper work (ἔργον) (Republic, 433b2-4). Similarly, the structure that is the form squareness is a norm dictating that any entity that is to be a square must be a plane figure that has four equal straight sides and four right angles. Likewise, the structure that is the form large is a norm specifying that whatever is large must exceed something else in size. Simmias is large when compared to Socrates because, when compared to Socrates, Simmias conforms to the norm that the form large simply is. In this way, the norm that the form large
simply is makes Simmias a large thing in comparison to Socrates. Why is $x$ $F$? According to the Forms as Norms Reading, $x$ is $F$ because it conforms to norm $F$. To participate in form $F$ is to conform to norm $F$.

The Forms as Norms Reading, therefore, is fully compatible with the Structuring-Causes Reading. All structuring-causes are norms and all forms are both structuring-causes and norms. The Forms as Norms Reading, however, has the advantage of identifying what precisely a structuring-cause is in a way that makes the distinction between form and participant more clear. Forms are norms that exact a structure in their participants;\(^\text{14}\) while participants are objects structured according to those norms. Since norms are neither causally nor ontologically dependent on the objects that conform to them, forms are neither causally nor ontologically dependent on their participants. Norms explain why the entities that conform to them are the way they are and norms are intelligible whether or not there are any spatio-temporal entities that conform to them. The Forms as Norms Reading, therefore, offers all the benefits of the Structuring-Causes Reading but does so with more clarity.

§5. *Causes as Norms in the “First Sailing”*

A further benefit of the Forms as Norms Reading is that it better connects the “second sailing” account of the forms to Socrates’ discussion of his “first sailing” that immediately precedes it. Of the various things he discusses while narrating his search for the causes of why things come to be, pass away, and are, the only things Socrates identifies as exhibiting genuine causality are intelligence (νοῦς), opinion (δόξα), and the forms. That the forms are causes is of course the central claim of the “second sailing” account (99d1 ff.). Yet immediately preceding his retelling of the “second sailing,” he also identifies intelligence as the cause of his decision to

\(^{14}\) Mitchell Miller suggested this way of wording things after hearing me present an earlier version of this essay.
sit in prison talking to his friends (98c-99b, esp. 99a8). Likewise, he claims that if he had held the opinion that escaping from prison was best, that opinion could have been the cause of his fleeing to Megara or Boeotia (99a1-2). Similarly, he discusses Anaxagoras’ cosmic Intelligence (νοῦς) as a candidate for genuine causality (97b8-99c8). Having already argued that the forms in the “second sailing” account are best understood as norms, I will now provide further support for the Forms as Norms Reading by showing that intelligence and opinion as Socrates presents them in his discussion of Anaxagoras are best understood as norms.

While introducing the sort of causality he goes on to attribute to the forms, Socrates asks his interlocutors to consider the cause of his sitting in prison and talking to them. One sort of explanation for why he is sitting in prison is that he has bones and sinews that are arranged in a sitting position (98c2-d6). Socrates claims that this sort of explanation is absurd (99a4-5). He argues that bones and sinews are not the cause of his sitting in prison, but rather “that without which the cause would not be able to act as a cause” (99b3-4). He explains that the true cause of his sitting in prison is that he thought it was better, given his circumstances, to remain in prison and obey the laws of Athens, than to attempt an escape to another city (98d6-99b4). Crito had offered Socrates a chance to flee Athens. Socrates, however, decided to remain in prison, and, on the day of his execution, to sit and talk with his friends. He claims that his decision to remain was the best because it was made on the basis of intelligence (99a8; ταῦτα νῷ πράττων). Intelligence, he believes, was the cause of his remaining in prison and is now the cause of his sitting and talking to his friends. In other words, intelligence—or we could say reason itself—is the norm that he believes is guiding his action. Since intelligence is the norm, the course of action he has chosen is the best (99a8-b1). Of course, intelligence is not the only possible cause

---

15 The νῷ at 99a8 is a causal dative. The way “these things” are done “by intelligence” parallels the way that “all things are beautiful by the beautiful [itself]” (τῷ καλῷ πάντα τὰ καλὰ καλά) at 100d7-8. For the use of causal datives in the “second sailing” passage see David Sedley, “Platonic Causes,” Phronesis 43, no. 2 (1998): 114–132.
of action. Mere opinion can be a cause as well. Socrates acknowledges he could “long ago have been in Megara or among the Boeotians, carried there by the opinion that it was best (ὑπὸ δόξης φερόμενα τοῦ βελτίστου)” (99e8-99a2). In that case, Socrates’ opinion that it was best to flee Athens would have been the norm guiding his action. Socrates’ account of his sitting in prison, therefore, represents the cause of deliberate action as the norm that guides it. In some cases that norm may be intelligence, while in other cases that norm may be a mere opinion. Material conditions, such as bones and sinews, however, can never be the cause of deliberate actions. Rather they are only the conditions without which the norms dictating certain actions—for example, sitting—could not operate as norms.

The way Socrates characterizes his response to hearing about Anaxagoras’ cosmic Intelligence further confirms that the sort of causes that interest him are norms. After recalling his dissatisfaction with various materialist accounts of causality, he tells how he was initially enthused when he heard someone reading a passage from Anaxagoras “saying that it is Intelligence (νοῦς) that directs and is the cause of all things” (97b8-c2). As we have seen in Socrates’ account of his sitting in prison, he characterizes intelligence as a norm that specifies what is best. When applied to the various courses of action one could take in a given situation, intelligence will specify which course of action is the best. On Socrates’ interpretation, Anaxagoras’ claim that Intelligence is the cause of all things amounts to the claim that all things conform to the norm that specifies what is best. Thus, from the claim that Intelligence is the cause of all things, Socrates infers that “if one wished to know the cause of each thing . . . one had to find what was the best way for it to be” (97c6-d1). If we understand intelligence as a norm that specifies what is best, the hypothesis that intelligence is the cause of all things is the

---

16 I am grateful to Paul DiRado for pointing out to me the distinction between the causality of intelligence and that of opinion in this passage.
hypothesis that all things conform to the norm that specifies what is best. Hence, if one, granting that hypothesis, wanted to show that a claim such as “the earth is in the middle of the universe” were true, one would show why it was best for the earth to be in the middle of the universe (97e3-98a1). From all this I think we should conclude that Socrates was originally excited about Anaxagoras because Socrates initially thought that by identifying Intelligence as the cause of all, Anaxagoras had, in contrast to the materialist philosophers, identified a norm as the cause of all.

Anaxagoras’ cosmic Intelligence, the intelligence that guided Socrates’ decision to remain in prison, and the opinion that could have led him to attempt an escape are all best understood as norms. The Forms as Norms Reading, therefore, not only best explains the sort of causality attributed to the forms in the “second sailing” account, but also enables us to see Socrates employing a continuous notion of causality as he recounts his search for true causes, in both the “first” and “second sailings” of that search.

§6. Conclusion

The Forms as Norms Reading explains what is compelling in each of the other readings I discussed in this paper. Structures, considered apart from the entities that instantiate them, are norms. Since all structures are norms, the Forms as Norms Reading is fully compatible with and does all the work of the Structuring-Causes Reading. The Forms as Norms Reading, however, has the further benefit of highlighting that a structure apart from the entities that instantiate it is a norm. Moreover, it better connects the causes in the “second sailing” with those in the “first.” Similarly, the Forms as Norms Reading can explain what appeared plausible in the Logical Reading. According to the Logical Reading, \( x \) is \( F \) because it satisfies the definition of \( F \). A definition of the sort Plato has in mind—a real definition as opposed to a nominal one—
identifies the norm that is the form being defined. Finally, the Forms as Norms Reading explains what seems at first blush plausible in the Property Reading. To have a property $F$ is to conform to the norm that is the form $F$. Property $F$ is conformity to norm $F$, and is unintelligible apart from norm $F$. The fact that a property is unintelligible apart from the norm to which it conforms is what sometimes leads people to want to reduce form to property, as is done in the Property Reading. Property $F$ is different from form $F$, however, because form $F$ is a norm, while property $F$ is the conformity of an entity other than that norm to that norm.