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Compresence of Opposites in Nehamas, Irwin, and Fine

Timothy A. Robinson

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Beginning in the 1970's, Alexander Nehamas published a series of articles in which he proposed a radical departure from the then-standard interpretation of the theory of Forms set forth in Plato's middle-period dialogues. Building on his work, Terence Irwin and Gail Fine further elaborated this new interpretation, and it received its most comprehensive exposition in Fine's *On Ideas*.¹ This interpretation has several attractive features. It frees Plato of certain doctrines which we regard as indefensible, but which the traditional interpretation had saddled him with, such as a commitment to extreme Heracliteanism and the view that sensible particulars are self-contradictory. In Fine's version, it even absolves him of belief in the impossibility of knowing sensible objects. It provides his theory with a means of escape from the Third Man Argument. It tells a coherent story about the origins of the theory, and one which can be read as agreeing with Aristotle's reports in the *Metaphysics*. And, as Fine went to great lengths to show, it can be made to mesh with the accounts given in the *Peri Ideon*, and thus leads to an affirmative answer (if a qualified one) to the question whether Aristotle rightly understood the theory he so vehemently criticized.

Whether the new interpretation has a right to these advantages depends of course on whether its central claims can be substantiated by appeal to Plato's texts. At first glance, it appears that they can. Indeed, each of these authors arrives at his/her contribution to this interpretation by close analyses of particular passages and wide-ranging comparisons between dialogues. But there remains room for doubt as to whether they have read these passages correctly or connected them in the right way. The task of assessment is complicated by the fact that the evidential relations among their various assertions are often unclear. What follows is in part an attempt to articulate those relations, a reconstruction of the argument which is only partially explicit in their works. If this interpretation of the interpretation is correct, it turns out to stand on much shakier ground than its proponents would have us believe. My account of their views thus merges into criticism of them.

I

The central notion in the new interpretation is that of the "compresence of opposites." The term itself can be applied to any situation where both members of a pair of opposites are simultaneously present in a single subject. It could also be stretched to cover cases where opposites are *successively* present in a single subject. But in either case, the phenomenon so described will vary depending on what sorts of opposites are in

¹ The key works are Nehamas' "Predication and Forms of Opposites in the Phaedo," *Review of Metaphysics* 26 (1973): 461-491 (cited hereafter as PFOP), and "Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 12 (1975): 105-117 (PISW); Irwin's "Plato's Heracliteanism," *Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1977): 1-13 (PH), and *Plato's Ethics* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995) (PE); and Fine's *On Ideas: Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Theory of Forms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) (OI).

question, what sort of subject they are said to be present in, and what relation is understood under the term ‘presence.’ These variations generate different specific meanings for the formula. Identification of some of these meanings will be helpful in clarifying the issues raised by the new interpretation. In particular, a shift from one of these to another seems to play a crucial role in the arguments of Nehamas, Irwin, and Fine.

In its most straightforward sense, “compresence of opposites” refers to the possession of contrary properties by a particular. I shall use the term ‘particular’ here to refer to two sorts of things:

- A. The things Aristotle would describe as “first substances,” such concrete individuals as Socrates, Seabiscuit, and the table in my dining room. These are such things as could be given proper names, although not everything that bears a proper name is necessarily a particular, nor is everything that could serve as the value of a variable in a formalized system.
- B. Individual actions or events as opposed to types or genera of actions and events—the indictment Euthyphro brought against his father on the day he had that conversation with Socrates, rather than a class of indictments-by-Euthyphro-against-his-father, or any of the more general classes to which this belongs. The point of contrast in either case is with properties understood as universals. This usage does not settle the question whether Platonic Forms are particulars.

It is common among the newer interpreters to represent this sense of compresence by an expression of the form ‘x is both F and not F’. This is somewhat misleading, for it suggests that the opposites in question are contradictories, whereas in fact the opposites that draw Plato’s interest in the middle dialogues are all contraries.² The ‘F and not-F’ formula has the advantage that it makes the opposition between the two predicate expressions explicit, which would not be the case if, in imitation of ordinary language, we named the opposed properties, say, ‘F’ and ‘G’. But it would be much less misleading to find a distinctive way of signalling contrariety. For example, we could symbolize contraries by expressions of the forms ‘F’ and ‘anti-F.’ ‘x is anti-F’ would of course normally imply ‘x is not F.’³ But the expressions are not synonymous. It might be seen as an advantage of the ‘F and not-F’ formula that it suggests a connection between compresence of opposites as it appears in the middle dialogues and Plato’s later concern with the problem of not-being, as expressed in the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist*. But this could with equal if not greater justification be seen as a disadvantage, inasmuch as the formula biases us toward seeing the two sorts of phenomena as identical, or at least as having been confused by Plato. But that’s something we would have to discover, not something we want to point ourselves toward at the outset. As it turns out, I believe that

² That the newer interpreters recognize this is most evident in Fine’s distinction between “broad” and “narrow” compresence. In the following discussion, I use ‘compresence’ only for what she calls “narrow compresence.” (OI, p. 100)

³ This is on the usual reading of contraries. If some so-called “incomplete” predicates are contraries, then the principle holds only for their completed versions. That Socrates is short does not entail that Socrates is not tall; but that Socrates is shorter than Simmias, or shorter than average, does entail that he is not taller than Simmias, or taller than average.

this formula has misled the newer interpreters in yet another way, as well. But that will emerge in the sequel. For the present, I will continue to use this formula simply to streamline my exposition of the new interpretation.

In this first sense of “compresence of opposites”, the phrase denotes the phenomenon which the traditional interpretation sees Socrates as describing when, in the *Phaedo*, he says of “equal sticks and stones” that they appear “equal to one, unequal to another” (74b-c); or again, when he speaks of Simmias as having both shortness and tallness in him (102b); or when, in the *Republic*, he secures Glaucon’s agreement that none of the “many bigs and smalls and lights and heavies” is “any more the thing one says it is than its opposite” (479); or when, in the *Symposium*, he reports Diotima’s words contrasting the Beautiful itself with other beautiful things, saying that it alone “is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others.” (211a-c) As these examples illustrate, the thesis is sometimes stated in such a way as to suggest that particulars are self-contradictory, but at other times it suggests that the opposed properties belong to a thing in different respects or in different relations or in different comparisons or from different viewpoints. As we see in Diotima’s words, possessing opposite properties at different times is sometimes placed alongside other, non-temporal variations. Terence Irwin argued in “Plato’s Heracliteanism” that Plato did not explicitly differentiate temporal from non-temporal variations. Since he resists the conclusion that Plato actually confused the two, I take him to mean that for Plato’s purposes, the difference between them was not important. Irwin accordingly claims that when Plato refers to or asserts a Heraclitean doctrine of flux, and when Aristotle attributes such a doctrine to Plato, “flux” should be read as including non-temporal variations as well. And conversely, when Plato attributes simultaneous compresence of opposites to sensible objects, this, no less than attributions of constant change, represents Plato’s Heracliteanism. Together with Nehamas and Fine, Irwin sees Plato’s arguments for the existence of Forms as resting on the more general notion of compresence of opposites rather than on the narrower flux doctrine in particular. The claim that Plato regarded the two phenomena as more or less equivalent has the advantage, from Irwin’s point of view, of vindicating Aristotle’s assertion that the Heraclitean doctrine was one of the main inspirations for the development of the theory of Forms.

I am going to assume here that Irwin is correct in asserting that Plato treated flux and compresence as, for most purposes, equivalent. This thesis by itself does not require drastic revision of the traditional interpretation. The way that interpretation reads Aristotle’s report, Plato is supposed to have followed something like this course of reasoning: Because the sensibles are in constant flux, they are unknowable. (Plato is taken to assume that the objects of knowledge must be constant.) So, if knowledge is to be possible at all, there must be other things to serve as its objects. But knowledge is possible (another assumption). Therefore, there are such other things, and these are the Forms.

A modest alteration in this account can accommodate the alleged equation of temporal change with compresence of opposites. One need only suppose that either of these suffices to render sensibles unknowable. Aristotle can then be read as referring to

both of them under the heading of “flux,” and we can regard his report as based on the arguments in the dialogues which, to all appearances, appeal to compresence instead.

But Irwin carries his revision even further, and this is where the decisive departure occurs. Irwin claims that the compresence of opposites appealed to in the arguments for the Forms is not compresence in particulars; it is compresence in sensible properties. This is the second of the senses of “compresence” I mentioned above. The best general description of this is Fine’s:

Something suffers narrow compresence with respect to being F if it is F and not F in virtue of some one and the same aspect of itself. For example, the action-type of standing firm in battle, under the description ‘standing firm in battle’, is both courageous (in so far as it has some courageous tokens) and not courageous (in so far as it has some tokens that are not courageous). Similarly, the character-trait of endurance is both courageous (in so far as it is sometimes courageous to endure) and not courageous (in so far as it is sometimes not courageous to endure).⁴

To get clear about the implications of this, let’s focus on the first example:

- A. The action-type *standing firm in battle* has some tokens which are courageous, and other tokens which are not courageous.

In everyday English it would be more natural to express this by saying:

- B. Standing firm in battle is sometimes courageous and sometimes not.

We might even express the point by saying:

- C. Standing firm in battle is both courageous and not-courageous.

When we use the third sort of expression, we are normally not taken to be asserting a contradiction. Our speakers assume we are deliberately leaving out the qualifications that would eliminate the apparent contradiction, and they would be entitled to ask us to supply those qualifications to make ourselves clear.

In each of A-C, the referent of the grammatical subject is an action-type. I shall use the term ‘property’ in its generic sense for an attribute corresponding to any predicate. Hence I will say that the referent of the grammatical subject in A-C is a property. Of course, on the standard way of analyzing such assertions, it turns out that the *logical* subject of the sentence is not a property at all. ‘Standing firm in battle is courageous’, when asserted with a tacit implication that this is true only of some instances, would ordinarily be turned into logicese as, ‘There is at least one x such that x is an instance of standing firm in battle and x is courageous.’⁵ On this analysis, the assertion is taken to be

⁴ OI, p. 47.

⁵ That is, we take such sentences as what Sandra Peterson has dubbed “Pauline predications.” See her “A Reasonable Self-Predication Premise for the Third Man Argument,” *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973): 451-470, esp. pp. 457-459.

one about instances rather than about properties.⁶ The analysis makes this clear, where B and C do not. Of course, we can still make the relationship clear in ordinary English, and if we like, we can even do it in a sentence whose grammatical subject names a property. This is what A does. To say that the action-type *standing firm in battle* has some tokens which are courageous seems to express the same idea as saying that some particular actions are both cases of standing firm in battle and cases of courage.⁷ We could also make this point by using the language of compresence: We could say that *standing firm in battle* and *courage* are compresent in some instances. ‘Compresence’ here is used in the same sense as in ‘compresence of opposites’ as outlined above, but here the compresent properties are not opposites. If we incorporate the second conjunct of A-C into this format, we will say, “Standing firm in battle and courage are compresent in some instances, but standing firm in battle and not-being-courageous are compresent in others.” This says something about the opposites, but it does not make them compresent with each other.

But Irwin and Fine propose a different way of describing this situation. They want to say that if some instances of standing firm in battle are courageous and some are not, then we are entitled to say that the properties *being courageous* and *not being courageous* are compresent in the property *standing firm in battle*. The opposites are compresent with each other in this third property.

Although the newer interpreters gloss over the point, it is important to recognize that this is a different sense of ‘compresence’ than that used in attributing compresence to particulars. If the opposed properties said to be compresent were second-order properties, then one might plausibly deny the difference. Second-order properties are thought to be present in first-order properties in much the same way that first-order properties are present in particulars. But being courageous is a first-order property. Although ordinary language permits us to predicate one first-order property of another, as in sentences B and C above, we normally regard ordinary language as misleading in this respect. We normally suppose that the fact expressed by such sentences actually consists in the compresence of the subject property and the predicate property in some particulars. It seems at best to invite confusion to describe this instead as the presence of the predicate property in the subject property. Again, such an expression might be innocent enough where the predicate property is a genus of the subject property. To say that the property of *being colored* is present in the property of *being red* doesn’t sound so odd. It seems equally natural to say that *being colored* is “part of” *being red*. These expressions try to capture the intensional aspect of the genus-species relation, which is left out when we interpret it solely in terms of class-inclusion, and hence purely extensively. But the relation between courage and standing firm in battle is not that of genus to species.

One might reply that that relationship is similar to the genus-species relation in one respect. When standing firm in battle is courageous, it’s not just a coincidence. The fact that it is an act of standing firm in battle is, in those circumstances, what makes it an act of courage. The act is courageous *because* it’s an instance of standing firm. That is what courage requires on those occasions. In another formulation, standing firm in battle

⁶ Of course, ‘instance’ here means a particular which bears the property, not the property-instances which are often distinguished in general discussions of universals.

⁷ The type-token relation is not always taken to be the same as the universal-instance relation, but for present purposes no such distinction need be made.

is *the way to be courageous* in those circumstances. The relationship that exists on these occasions is something over and above the fact that both these predicates are present in the same act. One might try to get at that by saying that, on these occasions, *being courageous* is “present in” *standing firm in battle*. But to say this without a qualifier like “sometimes” or “in certain circumstances” is just to invite confusion. And it only makes matters worse to say that *being courageous* and *not being courageous* are both present in *standing firm in battle*.

That way of putting it becomes even odder when we consider the use to which the newer interpreters would put the notion of compresence. Recall that on the traditional interpretation, it was the compresence of opposites in particulars that constituted their imperfection, the imperfection that made them unknowable and called for the postulation of Forms. The newer interpreters would substitute for this the compresence of opposites in properties. *This* is the imperfection that leads to the postulation of Forms. Indeed, the newer interpreters go so far as to deny that particulars suffer compresence at all. A particular act, they claim, can be simply courageous without being in any way cowardly. It is only properties that truly suffer compresence. This is not to say that every property is subject to compresence. The new interpreters claim that the properties to which Forms correspond escape compresence. The property of being courageous is never under any circumstances cowardly. Only such properties as *standing one’s ground* suffer the compresence of opposites. And there is no Form of standing one’s ground.

The claim that the inspiration for the theory of Forms lay in the compresence of opposites in properties thus dovetails with this other claim of the newer interpreters, that the domain of Forms is narrowly restricted. Their way of drawing the restriction goes back to G.E.L. Owen’s article, “A Proof in the ‘Peri Ideon’,”⁸ and it may be helpful to briefly examine the idea at its source. Many of the terms that Socrates frets over, such as ‘long’, ‘strong’, and ‘swift’, are relative in the sense that predicating them of a subject implies some comparison with another thing. Owen dubbed these “incomplete predicates” because in saying, for example, ‘Phaedo is tall,’ we omit the object of comparison, and the truth of the proposition cannot be determined until the predicate has been completed by supplying that object. But he did not limit the class to such tacit comparatives. He also described ‘one’ as incomplete, because whether it is true to say of something that it is one depends on what we’re saying it is *one of*. One animal is many organs, one machine many parts, one rock many atoms, and one particular many properties. Now Owen claims that all the predicates that supply Plato with his “stock examples of Ideas” in the early dialogues (and invoked by Socrates in the *Parmenides*) are incomplete in this sense. “In this world what is large or equal, beautiful or good, right or pious, is so in some respect or relation and will always show a contradictory face in some other.” The class of incomplete predicates is thus extended to cover every property whose possession by a subject is in any sense relative to or contingent on any other circumstance. Owen goes on to say that Plato eventually came to regard all predicates as incomplete “in their earthly applications,” but sees this as involving a broader sense of incompleteness than that required by the earlier dialogues.

Nehamas retains Owen’s terminology, but for him what is definitive of the incomplete properties that lead to postulation of Forms is the compresence of opposites.⁹

⁸ *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77 (1957): 103-111. See esp. pp. 107-108.

⁹ PFOP, esp. p. 470; PISW, p. 108.

Irwin follows Nehamas in his definition of the class of sensibles that call for Forms, but drops the language of Owen.¹⁰ Whereas Nehamas defines incompleteness in terms of compresence, Fine is at pains to distinguish them but follows Nehamas in resting her account of the theory of Forms on the latter notion. For all of these interpreters, the claim that Plato postulated Forms only for a narrow class of properties is supposed to be based to some extent on independent textual evidence. But it is equally clear, at least among the newer interpreters, that much of the support for it derives from the way it meshes with their thesis that compresence of opposites provided the inspiration for the theory. Precisely how this works will become evident in the following sections.

The ramifications of the newer interpretation become clearer by contrast to the older one. On the traditional interpretation, the flux or compresence that characterizes particulars renders them unknowable, so the Forms are postulated to serve as alternative objects of knowledge. In the new interpretation, the compresence that characterizes properties is not said to render *those properties* unknowable. It is supposed rather to justify a different conclusion: that the properties for which Forms are to be postulated cannot be defined in terms of the properties that suffer compresence, or, if you like, the Forms cannot be known through such properties. Thus, neither *courage* nor *standing firm in battle* is unknowable. The thesis important to Plato is that the former cannot be known via the latter.

Now the properties that suffer compresence are identified by the newer interpreters with sensible or observable properties. So the conclusion they would have us draw from compresence is equivalent to saying that the properties for which Forms are to be postulated cannot be defined in terms of sensible properties. And this is supposed to lead not just to the proposition that the target properties are non-sensible, but to the further conclusion that there must be other entities, separate from all sensible objects, to serve as the metaphysical correlates of the names of these properties.

The newer interpreters don't claim that the last step is explicit in any of the dialogues' arguments for the Forms. For that matter, the preliminary conclusion that the Forms cannot be defined in terms of sensible properties is never stated exactly in such terms, either. But both conclusions can, so the newer interpreters claim, be justly inferred by the discerning reader.

In sum, the new interpretation puts forward three claims that make it radically different from the traditional one: first, that Plato's Heracliteanism includes the doctrine of compresence and not just the doctrine of flux; second, that the compresence which motivates the postulation of Forms is compresence in properties rather than in particulars; and third, that the intermediate step that connects the recognition of compresence in properties with the postulation of Forms is the inference that the properties for which Forms are to be postulated cannot be defined in terms of sensible properties. I have already said that I will not here contest the first claim. But I do want to look closely at the grounds for the other two.

II

How do the newer interpreters purport to establish their claim that it was the problem of compresence in properties rather than in particulars that led Plato to postulate

¹⁰ See PH, esp. p. 7, where Irwin takes note of Owen's usage in footnote 10, and PE, pp. 155-159.

the Forms? Alexander Nehamas does not make this claim, but he prepares the groundwork which enables Irwin to take that step. In “Predication and Forms of Opposites in the *Phaedo*,” Nehamas sets out to show that the middle-period theory of Forms asserted the existence of Forms corresponding only to “incomplete predicates.” The crucial passage for our purposes begins with an examination of Socrates’ “second sailing” in search of the causes of coming to be and passing away. Socrates begins with the hypothesis that Forms exist, and that other things have the corresponding properties by participation in the Forms. He then contrasts this sort of explanation with such things as saying that “a thing is beautiful because it has a bright color or shape or any such thing,” or that “one man is taller than another by a head, and the shorter man shorter by the same.” Nehamas extracts from these examples two conditions of adequacy on any theory of *aitiai*, and he is puzzled as to why Socrates endorses them. Nehamas takes Cebes “offhand” acceptance of these conditions as suggesting that they reflect “an habitual Socratic approach,” and then he goes looking for evidence of such an approach. He looks specifically at the unsuccessful attempts to define moral terms in the early dialogues. His explanation of their failure is that the terms Socrates sought to define “are constantly instantiated along with their opposites.” That is, “every particular which bears either opposite bears both.” From this compresence of opposites in particulars, Nehamas infers that “none of these properties can be defined, it seems, in terms of particulars; any such definition will no more pick out things that possess a given property than it will pick out things that possess its opposite: the two classes are the same.” Apparently, each of the definitions offered by Socrates’ interlocutors picked out “things that were both F and not F.” Reflecting on this, Plato supposedly concluded that the possibility of successful definition requires that there be other things besides sensible particulars, things which do not suffer compresence, to serve as objects of these definitions.¹¹

There is some confusion here. The proposed definitions fail because they attempt to define the target property “in terms of particulars.” What does that mean? If we take the subsequent clause as clarifying the expression, to define a property in terms of particulars would be to offer a definition which “picks out” particulars. The only sense I can make of that is that the members of the extension of the definiens are particulars. Obviously a definition is faulty if definiens and definiendum are not co-extensive. This can occur in two ways. In the more usual case, both of the terms apply to particulars, and the definiendum “picks out” the wrong particulars. More rarely, we get a failure of co-extensiveness when one term refers to particulars and the other does not. This is the error that would be committed by someone who tried to define ‘beauty’ by offering a list of beautiful particulars. Some interpreters have thought that Socrates’ interlocutors do exactly that. But they are mistaken, as Nehamas himself showed in “Confusing Universals and Particulars in Plato’s Early Dialogues.”¹² If the proposed definitions do not err in that they define a universal by naming a particular, do they err in that they define a particular by naming a universal? That might seem a possibility in so far as the definienda are properties which will eventually be exalted to the status of Platonic Forms,

¹¹ The material in this paragraph is taken from pp. 466-467.

¹² *Review of Metaphysics* 29 (1975): 287-306. The closest thing to it is Hippias’ offering ‘a beautiful girl’ as his definition of ‘beauty’. Hippias is certainly confused, but he is not offering a particular as a definiens for a universal. To do that he would have to name a particular girl. ‘A beautiful girl’ is an indefinite description, and as such is a universal.

and Aristotle says that Plato regarded the Forms as particulars. But that is clearly not what Nehamas has in mind. He speaks of the target properties as being instantiated in particulars, and thus regards them as universals. And the definiens, similarly, is said to “pick out” a class of things. But in that case, it is completely misleading to fault the proposed definitions for defining the target property “in terms of particulars.” If what this means is that the extension of the definiens consists of particulars, this cannot be a flaw, since that is equally true of the definiendum. If it means that the definiens is a particular, that is simply false. What is left for it to mean? I can’t think of anything.

Irwin and Fine introduce changes into Nehamas’ approach which enable them to avoid this particular difficulty. But two features of Nehamas’ version persist alongside the later modifications. Nehamas takes the failure of the proposed definitions in the Socratic dialogues as the key to understanding the origins of the theory of Forms. In particular, (a) he assumes that the shortcoming exhibited by these definitions will be the same as the deficiency of the unacceptable causal explanations in *Phd.* 100e-101b, and (b) by identifying that shortcoming as the compresence of opposites in particulars, he has made it identical with the deficiency of sensibles which has traditionally been thought to render them unknowable.

III

The shift of attention from compresence of opposites in particulars to compresence of opposites in properties is first made explicitly in Irwin’s “Plato’s Heracliteanism.”¹³ Irwin argues that Plato could have inferred the existence of Forms from compresence in particulars only if he were confused. To absolve Plato of this confusion, he searches for an alternative interpretation and hits upon the suggestion that it is compresence in properties that Plato is really interested in.

Here’s how he argues that an inference to Forms from compresence in particulars would evince confusion. Compresence in particulars, by itself, does not justify belief in separated Forms, because “if the properties F and not-F are both present in something, we may still know what F is and what not-F is if we can distinguish the ways the thing is F from the ways it is not-F.” But, he suggests, perhaps Plato adds to the assertion of compresence the premise that “we can learn what it is to be F only from confrontation with a sample of F which is not also not-F; since the sensible world provides no such sample of some problematic properties, separated Forms will be needed.” But if this is Plato’s argument, Irwin says, then Plato needs also to defend that last move, that is, to show that “for every property which concerns him, every sensible particular which has the property also has the opposite property.” But he cannot show this, because it is not true. In particular, it is not true of the moral properties Plato is concerned with. “A particular just or brave action is (or may be) entirely just or brave, and not equally unjust or cowardly.” Hence, there are perfect samples of these properties among sensible particulars, samples which do not suffer compresence, and consequently, the supposed argument from compresence to these Forms can never get started.¹⁴

Notice that the first step in this reconstructed argument for the Forms is to say that the compresence of opposites in particulars makes it impossible to know the property

¹³ But it seems implicit in Nehamas’ PISW; see especially p. 115.

¹⁴ PH, p. 7.

which is thus compresent. On the traditional reading of the argument from flux, the first step was to say that flux in particulars rendered *the particulars* unknowable. If we accept Irwin's argument that compresence played a much larger role in Plato's thinking than flux, it still remains to be seen why it should lead to a denial, not of the possibility of knowing particulars, but of the possibility of knowing certain properties by means of sense-experience of their instances. The issue here is not whether Plato believed that some properties cannot be known via sensation. The traditional interpretation would have him reject sensation as a source of any sort of knowledge. The question, rather, is whether this impossibility was inferred from compresence of opposites in properties. Irwin does not explicitly defend this claim. But he prefaces it with an allusion to the distinction drawn between sensible equals and the equal itself in the Recollection argument of the *Phaedo*, and in his subsequent search for an alternative Platonic argument for Forms, he offers an account of that argument. From this we can uncover his reasoning.

Here is his discussion of that argument:

Plato might be taken to argue only that since any particular equal things are both equal and unequal, and the equal itself is only equal, the equal itself must be separate from the particulars. This argument would suggest the demand for perfect samples. But if the role of the senses is stressed, the argument rests on different grounds. If someone relies on the observable properties of equal sticks and stones as a good guide to what equality is, he will find, as in *Republic VII*, that the senses confuse equality and inequality; for the same dimensions will make the sticks both equal and unequal, making their equality (in some comparisons) into inequality (in others). Plato need not mean that a perfect sample is needed, and unavailable in the sensible world; he may mean that the right account of equality or 'the equal' cannot be found by reference to sensible properties.¹⁵

This reading of the *Phaedo* is apparently suggested by Irwin's reading of *Republic VII*. Here is how he represents the relevant passage:

The finger passage in *Republic VII* explains why some properties do not provoke thought, because they are adequately judged by the senses, and others do provoke thought, because the senses reveal nothing sound. (523a10-b4) We are not compelled to ask what a finger is; but the senses' confusion of hardness and softness compels us to ask what these properties are. The senses do not simply ascribe opposite properties to the same particular object. We can say without trouble that a centaur is a man and not a man; but the senses tell us that the same thing is hardness and softness, and make us look for an account of these properties, to show that they are different. (524b3-c11) If we expect largeness, say, to be some observable property—a definite size, such as being three inches long—we will find that this property is 'the large' or 'largeness' in some things, since it makes them large, but is 'the small' or 'smallness' in other things, or in

¹⁵ PH, pp. 8-9.

the same thing in different comparisons. Those properties accessible to the senses confuse largeness and smallness for us, as Plato says.¹⁶

On the traditional interpretation, this passage claims that the senses report to us that the same particular is both large and small, and the apparent contradiction forces us to reflect on what these properties are. On Irwin's reading, we apparently begin with some particular said to be large and then suppose that the *size* of this particular is identical with largeness; subsequently we realize that the same particular, and hence the same size, is also (in a different comparison) small. What confuses us is not that the particular is both large and small, but that the size (in his example, "three inches long") is both largeness and smallness. It is compresence in the property, not compresence in the particular, that prompts thought. What Irwin introduces into the passage that is not explicitly there is precisely this definite property—a length of three inches—which is to be the bearer of compresent opposites. This becomes the basis of his interpretation of the *Phaedo* passage. But why does he introduce this third property (in addition to largeness and smallness)? Again, Irwin does not address this question directly. But immediately after this account of the *Republic* passage, Irwin turns to the explanations of change which Socrates rejects in the *Phaedo*, and claims that in those, too, we see attempts to explain a problematic term by appeal to "an observable property". The problematic term once again is 'larger', and one appeals to a sensible property in explaining that one thing is larger than another when one says that the first exceeds the second "by a head." In the case under discussion, the things being compared are Socrates and Simmias, so presumably the sensible property in question is not that of *having a head*. One might suppose that it is the property of *being larger by a head*, but that would make nonsense of Socrates' saying that 'a head' is here being characterized as the cause of Simmias' being taller. So the observable property must be the tallness represented by the expression "by a head", which is to say, the specific height either of Socrates', of Simmias', or of an average head.

My suggestion is that Irwin reads the Recollection argument as he does because that reading agrees with his interpretation of *Republic* VII. And he reads *Republic* VII as he does because of his interpretation of the rejected explanations at *Phaedo* 96d, 97e, and 100c. But why does he read those rejected explanations as he does? After reviewing the arguments for the Forms, he summarizes thus: "These arguments all rely on the failure of sensible properties to answer the Socratic 'What is it?' question for certain difficult properties." Like Nehamas, Irwin assumes that the shortcoming that explains the failure of candidate definitions in the early dialogues, the shortcoming of the kinds of causal explanations Socrates rejects, and the shortcoming of the sensibles which leads Plato to postulate Forms are all the same shortcoming, viz., compresence of opposites in sensibles. But whereas Nehamas continued to think of the deficiency of sensibles as pertaining to sensible particulars and thus ran into confusion, Irwin avoids the difficulties I imputed to Nehamas by reading 'sensibles' across the board as 'sensible properties.'

Irwin shows us that the dialogues' arguments for Forms can be read as appealing to compresence in sensible properties. Those arguments certainly do not demand such a reading, and I rather doubt that such a reading would ever occur to anyone who examined those arguments alone. But the rejected explanations do seem to be rejected because they appeal to the wrong sort of cause—to universals, but the wrong universals. And certainly

¹⁶ PH, pp. 7-8.

the definitions rejected in the early dialogues are universals, so whatever is wrong with them has to be something that can be wrong with universals. Since it is the definitional passages that most unambiguously deal with universals, it seems likely that Irwin, like Nehamas, takes the definitional passages as the key to interpreting the others. If so, then the foundation of the new interpretation seems to be these two assumptions: first, that the three kinds of deficiencies all reduce to a single kind, and second, that the key to interpreting all of them is the deficiency in proposed definitions. The next question is, are these assumptions justified?

IV

I have extracted these questionable assumptions from the interpretive strategy of the newer interpreters. They do not advance either as an explicit thesis. The closest Nehamas comes to it is when he says: “Plato, I believe, was to a great extent led to formulate the theory of Forms in the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, and the *Republic* out of a concern with definition springing from Socrates’ unsuccessful attempts to define a number of a family of terms, attempts which Plato himself made in the early or Socratic dialogues.”¹⁷ A corresponding but more specific statement occurs in Irwin’s *Plato’s Ethics*: “Plato’s claim that sensibles do not yield knowledge of Forms helps to explain why Socrates did not find final definitions.” That Socrates’ search for definitions was one of the inspirations for the theory of Forms is generally accepted, as is the doctrine that the Forms cannot be known via sensation. But the dialogues never explicitly claim that the deficiency of sensibles is responsible for the failure of Socratic attempts at definition. Indeed, no general explanation of the failure is offered in the dialogues. That of course does not preclude the possibility that such an explanation is there implicitly. That we ought to search for such an explanation was perhaps suggested to the newer interpreters by Aristotle’s discussion of the origins of the theory, in the passages mentioned previously. Certainly Irwin’s article on “Plato’s Heracliteanism” takes these remarks of Aristotle’s as its starting point and sets out to show that Aristotle’s report is correct. Here is a representative passage from the *Metaphysics*:

Having become familiar first in his youth with Cratylus and the Heraclitean doctrines that all sensibles are always flowing and there is no knowledge of them, [Plato] thought these things were so later, as well. While Socrates occupied himself with ethics and not at all with the whole of nature, but in ethics sought the universal and first turned his thought to definitions, Plato, following him in that, thought for the kinds of reasons I have mentioned that this [the definition] was of other things, not of the sensibles; for it was impossible for the common mark to be of any of the sensibles which were always changing. So he called these [other] sorts of beings ‘Ideas,’ and the sensibles are beside these and are all named after them. II, 6, 987a lines

The passage attributes two consequences to the doctrine that sensibles are in flux: (a) that the sensibles are unknowable, and (b) that definition cannot be “of” the sensibles. Thus the reasoning Aristotle attributes to Plato clearly implies that the flux in sensibles accounts for the inadequacy of *some ways* of defining. The precise nature of the

¹⁷ PISW, p. 108.

inadequacy is not clear. Neither is the inference from flux in sensibles to that inadequacy. If Aristotle is to be trusted, Plato must have made some such inference. But from Aristotle alone, we cannot tell what it was. Any more specific claims about it will have to be justified from the evidence of the dialogues. Aristotle's remarks may well have inspired the new interpreters. And it is certainly possible to supply an interpretation of Aristotle's remarks which is compatible with the new interpretation. But those remarks are too vague to furnish independent evidence in favor of the newer interpreters' very specific account of Plato's reasoning.

What sort of evidence for the newer interpretation can we find in the dialogues themselves? To begin with, it seems quite implausible to suggest that the candidate definitions in the early dialogues were unsatisfactory because they attempted to define the target properties in sensible terms. Certainly this is never offered in those dialogues as a criticism of any definition¹⁸. But reasons are given for rejecting those definitions, different reasons for different definitions. Moreover, the reasons given are good ones. If standing your ground is sometimes courageous, sometimes not, then obviously those two properties are not identical. If you say that piety is rendering assistance to the gods, but you cannot say what the gods do that we assist them in, then your definition is unsatisfactory because it is incomplete. One might try to find some deeper, more general reason why all of the candidate definitions fail. What the newer interpreters seem to claim, after all, is that it was precisely in looking for such a larger reason behind the scenes that Plato was led to the Forms. But if there is such a reason, it is unlikely that it consists in the attempt to define the target properties in sensible terms, because it is unreasonable to assert that all of the candidate definitions do this. If we accept Irwin and Fine's substitution of 'observable' for 'sensible,' it becomes slightly more plausible, but it still won't do.¹⁹ When I return what is owed, the actual transfer is observable, but the fact that it is in fulfillment of a debt or the return of a loan is hardly an observable property. A pious act is observable, but that an act "renders assistance to the gods" could hardly be so. Neither is it observable whether an act is or is not pleasing to some or all of the gods. There may well be some connection between the imperfection of sensibles and the inadequacy of certain definitions, but it is likely to be more complicated than the newer interpreters suggest.

For clarity's sake, let me emphasize that I am not trying to cast doubt on the proposition, "Forms cannot be defined in sensible terms," although I'm not sure quite what that is supposed to mean. Rather, the claim I wish to place in doubt is, "The impossibility of defining Forms in sensible terms was Plato's explanation for the failure of Socratic attempts at definition." I have just argued that the passages in which candidate definitions come to nought do not, on a reasonable interpretation, support that claim.

There is, however, one bit of evidence in those passages that tells in favor of the new interpretation. The language which Socrates uses on some occasions to announce that a definition has been found wanting is similar to the language he sometimes uses for describing the imperfection of sensibles.

In the *Hippias Major*, Socrates objects to defining beauty as "a beautiful girl" on the ground that even a beautiful girl is ugly in comparison to the gods, and he says to

¹⁸ As Fine acknowledges, *OI*, p. 51.

¹⁹ Irwin, *PH*, p. 8; Fine, *OI*, pp. 51, 99.

Hippias, “When you were asked for the beautiful, do you answer with something that turns out to be no more beautiful than ugly?” In the *Euthyphro*, the definition of piety as “what is loved by the gods” is rejected because the same thing can be loved by some gods and hated by others, so that on this definition the same thing would be both pious and impious. Clearly, the failures of some definitions can be described by expressions of the form “no more F than not-F” or “both F and not-F.” Such formulae are taken by the newer interpreters to indicate the compresence of opposites. Similar expressions are used where Socrates argues for the unknowability of sensibles. In the *Republic*, for example, Socrates says to Glaucon: “So, with the many bigs and smalls and lights and heavies, is any one of them any more the thing one says it is than its opposite?” And Glaucon replies, “No, each of them always participates in both opposites.” (479) Are the newer interpreters then entitled to conclude that the compresence of opposites is to blame for failed attempts at definition? Not at all. We will allow the claim that an improper definition leads to contradiction. The way to show that any thesis, definitional or otherwise, is faulty is to show that it leads to contradiction, whether it is self-contradictory or just contradicts other, better-grounded propositions. If that’s all that ‘compresence of opposites’ meant, we could regard all false theories as resting on this phenomenon. But the newer interpreters do not want to use ‘compresence of opposites’ in such a trivial sense. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are willing to vacillate between a wider and a narrower sense of the phrase. In the wider sense, there can be no objection to using it wherever an expression of the form “both F and not-F” occurs. But if we take compresence in the narrower sense in which, according to the newer interpreters, it leads to the postulation of Forms, then we are only entitled to use that phrase in connection with the two definitional passages just cited if we are justified in saying that the definition in each case is rejected because the property being defined and its opposite are both present in the definiendum-property in the very way in which opposites are elsewhere said to be present in sensibles and thereby to render the forms indefinable in sensible terms. And nothing in those passages suggests such a reading. It is much more natural to take Socrates’ objections as merely pointing to a failure of co-extensiveness between definiens and definiendum. This is especially so in the light of two facts: Socrates does not use the kinds of expressions in question in every case where a definition is rejected, he does recognize other reasons for rejecting a definition besides a failure of co-extensiveness (as in the third definition of the *Euthyphro*, as Fine notes), and he does not use this sort of language where a definition is guilty of this other sort of shortcoming. We must conclude that the similarity of language between some definitional passages and those passages pointing up the imperfection of the sensibles is far from proving that these two sets of passages are concerned with the same problem, at least at a non-trivial level of description. Neither set of passages by itself demands the particular interpretation of compresence of opposites that the newer interpreters defend. And the fact that their interpretation allows us to view both sets as concerned with the same problem is no argument in its favor unless we are predisposed to believe that the problem in both cases must be the same.

V

If the foregoing analysis is correct, we are entitled to conclude that the interpretation successively developed by Nehamas, Irwin, and Fine is based on contentious readings of the Platonic texts and fueled by questionable assumptions. That interpretation was meant to supplant the traditional account of the theory of Forms. I will not try here to offer a full assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two interpretations. But I think it safe to say that the new interpretation is not nearly so serious a competitor to the traditional account as its adherents claim, and we should certainly not declare the contest decided in their favor.