

Title: Evidencing Ideas in Plato's Republic VII (524c-525a)

Category: longer

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Abstract: From time to time, one recurrent question presents itself to Plato scholars: how can the existence of ideas be demonstrated in Plato's ontology?

We dare suggest that the answer is, quite simply, that ideas are not to be demonstrated - they are self-evident.

Though simple in itself, that answer requires some additional observations.

To begin with, we know of such demonstrations in Plato's thought. According to Alexander, Aristotle classified them into seven major groups. However, it will be in well-acknowledged passages in Republic, Parmenides or Timaeus, as well as in other dialogues, that we will find its typification within the corpus.

Interestingly, though, those proofs only rarely intend to be taken as such in the context where they occur. Moreover, even when they are introduced as such, it is never in full and conclusive manner, for as soon as they are put forward, Plato expressly reduces them to mere provisional remarks, aimed at bringing down the discussion to a sufficiently consensual probability, rather than at providing any effective demonstration.

Furthermore, much of what is extrinsically taken as proof of ideas in Plato's texts is, in fact, in those very loci, an expression of its exact contrary, i.e., the postulation of ideas as such, or their postulation according to a specific point of view, or according to one of their properties in particular.

In this sense, one could say that the attribution of a demonstrative functionality to typical places in the Platonic corpus is not itself Platonic. Rather, it belongs to other theoretical structures where such functionality would have some meaning, viz. Aristotle's thought. However, when assuming, as we do, that, for Plato, ideas do not require proof because they are in themselves self-evident, that does not imply in any way that they are evident for everyone, or that they are immediately evident.

There is a relative obscurity in every process of understanding, an obscurity that follows from diversity of interests, degrees of attention, types of intelligence, etc., that justifies that, sometimes, even that which is more evident remains almost universally unnoticed.

That is why that which is self-evident also requires (perhaps, principally requires) clarification, or, better yet, evidencing.

But, precisely in that evidencing is what is here required, it will not be necessary to look for it in those places where Plato allegedly puts forward the groundings for ideas, i.e., there will be no need to examine "proofs" of ideas.

One is only required to look into how ideas appear in Plato's texts, examining not the groundings of ideas themselves, but the groundings for that which requires ideas as their grounds, viz. the sensible world.

Now, within the Platonic corpus, this process is best developed in a passage apparently secondary in this regard, wherein Socrates sets himself to the task of justifying the importance of arithmetic in the philosopher's training: Republic, VII, 524c-525a. The purpose of our communication is to attempt to show it, through a careful review of Plato's text.

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