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Gilbert Ryle and Plato's theory of forms

ABSTRACT: *This essay is dedicated to the interpretation that Gilbert Ryle gave to Plato's theory of forms. Despite having distinguished himself as an exponent of Analytic Philosophy and Ordinary Language Philosophy in the context of the University of Oxford, Ryle qualified as a philologist by reading the vast production of Plato's dialogues. Among Ryle's most significant essays are those referring to the dialogues of Plato's maturity (Theaetetus, Sophist, Parmenides), where the ancient Athenian philosopher expounded his conception of the art of dialectics. Then Ryle highlighted the relationship between the theory of forms and the theory of being, on the basis of an original rereading of the concept of idea, i.e. of form, separated from the traditional ontologism attributed to both Parmenides and Plato.*

KEYWORDS: *Analytic Philosophy; Theory of Forms; Art of Dialectics; Rational Animal; Philosophy and Philology.*

Premise

During the contemporary age, Cambridge and Oxford have made notable contributions to the history of philosophy, compared with the theoretical and practical themes developed during the classical age. In this sense, we must remember the context of neo-positivism and mathematical logic, on the one hand (at Trinity College, Cambridge), and of Analytic Philosophy and Ordinary Language Philosophy, on the other hand (at the University of Oxford). George Edward Moore, Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead worked in Cambridge, with the aim of opposing the principles of the neo-idealism that had established itself in Great Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century; in this case one thinks of the work (*The Secret of Hegel*) by James Hutchison Stirling, published in 1865. For the development of neo-positivism, Moore's essay "The Refutation of Idealism", which appeared in the journal *Mind* in 1903, and Russell's book on *The Principles of Mathematics*, published in the same year, are very significant works. So 1903 can be taken as a year of the break between idealism and anti-idealism, with different characteristics from those determined in 1831 immediately after Hegel's death in the 19th century; to some extent, even as regards the history of philosophy, we must believe in the recurrent historical cycles harking back to Vico.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in addition to Moore's essay and Russell's work, mention should be made of the substantial text of *Principia mathematica* published by Russell and Whitehead in three volumes in the years 1910, 1912 and 1913. Whitehead also distinguished himself with the drafting of *Process and Reality*, which saw the light in 1929, the same year in which the Vienna Circle and the Berlin Circle gave substance to the project of scientific philosophy with the manifesto on *Die wissenschaftliche Konzeption der Welt*.

With Whitehead's production we are in the first decades of the twentieth century, that is, in the years in which, on the European continent, logical empiricism was consolidating, thanks to the Vienna Circle (led by Moritz Schlick), the Berlin Circle (headed by Hans Reichenbach) and the Lov-Warsaw School (headed by Kazimierz Twardowski). Instead, the current of analytic philosophy was generated in Oxford, with a series of authors who contributed to enriching the context of European culture in the 20th century; the reference names are above all those of Gilbert Ryle, Alfred Jules Ayer and John Langshaw Austin. Furthermore, the representatives of the University of Oxford distinguished themselves together with those of the University of Cambridge, promoting so-called "Oxford-Cambridge Philosophy", destined to constitute a rich and complex piece of the precious mosaic of twentieth-century philosophy. In this context, Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, published in 1921, played a decisive role in the development of analytic philosophy, not only in Europe, but also in the United States of America, with Charles William Morris, Willard Van Orman Quine and Noam Chomsky. If we look from this angle of analytic philosophy, it should be noted that Gilbert Ryle was strongly influenced by both Wittgenstein's work and Russell's production; as a young man he was also fascinated by Husserl, a theorist of transcendental phenomenology. As part of this current of thought, Ryle also had an opportunity to interact with Alexius Meinong, Franz Brentano, Bernhard Bolzano and Gottlob Frege. Therefore it is necessary to underline the relevance, in addition to Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, of Heidegger's fundamental ontology and of analytic philosophy, recognized in Wittgenstein as the author of both the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* and the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* and *The Big Typescript*, works in which we can find the peculiar logic of the Austrian philosopher, related to the philosophy of language.

During the first decades of the 20th century, Great Britain played a non-marginal role in the development of new currents of thought, which even today at the beginning of the 21st century we cannot ignore. A leading author appears to be Gilbert Ryle, whose training in classical philology must be recognized; this allowed him to compare contemporary thought with Hellenic thought, led by Plato and Aristotle. In the case of Aristotle, Ryle's attention was dedicated to works of a logical nature (including above all *Categories*, *Topics* and *On Interpretation*); in the case of Plato, to the dialectical dialogues, including above all *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. As can be seen from the pages of his *Autobiographical*,¹ Gilbert Ryle

1 Cf. Ryle 1970, 1-15.

was lucky enough to be born and grow up in a cultured family, if only we refer to the interests of his father, a general practitioner, but a lover of philosophy and astronomy. His father Reginald John (married to Catherine Scott) bequeathed a vast library to his ten children, which contributed above all to the education of Gilbert, who was born in Brighton on 19 August 1900 and died in Whitby on 6 October 1976. Gilbert first studied at Brighton College School, and then enrolled in 1919 at Queen's College, Oxford with the aim of studying classical languages and literatures. He graduated in 1924, and soon after was appointed reader of philosophy at Christ Church College, Oxford; the following year he was appointed a tutor. He remained in Oxford until 1968, the year of his retirement. After the interlude of the Second World War, during which he was recruited by military intelligence for his knowledge of languages, he was appointed Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy and fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford. It was in Oxford that he wrote and published his main work in 1949, *The Concept of Mind*, with which the author highlighted his theory relating to the philosophy of mind.

We know that Wittgenstein, having studied at Cambridge, above all with Russell, developed the salient themes of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* during the years around 1910; at the end of the First World War he completed his text in the German version (*Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*), published in 1921 in *Annalen der Naturphilosophie* edited by Friedrich Wilhelm Ostwald and then, the following year, with the title *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. The translation was done by Cecyl Kay Ogden with the collaboration of Frank Plumpton Ramsey; Russell's introduction is proof of the impact that the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* had both in Great Britain and in Europe (especially within the Vienna Circle). This explains Ryle's interest in Wittgenstein, as he was no stranger to analytic philosophy, which was developing on a European and international level. Among other things, Ryle had the objective of overcoming so-called Cartesian dualism, centred on the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*; hence in his main work (*The Concept of Mind*) he coined the expression "the Ghost in the Machine"², to indicate what he defines in negative terms as "official theory", meaning the "ghost" of the mind giving life to the "machine" of the body: "I hope to prove that it is entirely false, and false not in detail but in principle. It is not merely an assemblage of particular mistakes. It is one big mistake and a mistake of a special kind. It is, namely, a category-mistake"³. In this sense, he underlined the need to recover the value of introspection, so dear to the philosophy of mind, closely related to psychology. In this regard, we should not forget that, in 1649, René Descartes had published *Les passions de l'âme* implying and suggesting a more correct interpretation of his psychology.

The interest in the philosophy of mind and in analytic philosophy denotes the particular attention paid by Ryle to the current of empiricism, which arose in Great Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries with the non-marginal contributions of John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume. This explains Ryle's exploration not

² Ryle 2000, 17.

³ Ryle 2000, 17.

only of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, but also of the epistemology of Karl Popper and Rudolf Carnap, on the basis of his peculiar conception of analytic philosophy. However, as well as being an eminent representative of contemporary philosophy, Ryle distinguished himself as a scholar of ancient philosophy, with particular attention paid to Plato's theory of ideas, which he defined as the theory of forms. The interest in Plato drove Ryle to retrace the entire chronological and thematic segment of the theory of forms, which leads from the youthful dialogues to the mature ones. Ryle's monograph on the Athenian philosopher dates back to the years of his full maturity: the book *Plato's Progress*⁴ was published in 1966, preceded, however, by a series of essays published starting from 1939. In this connection, the following should be remembered: the one which appeared in 1939 in the journal *Mind* on *Parmenides*⁵ and the review⁶ of the monograph by Francis Macdonald Cornford dedicated to Plato and Parmenides. Furthermore, other essays on the ancient Athenian philosopher are worth mentioning: in 1960 one on the theory of knowledge and meaning⁷ expounded in *Theaetetus*; in 1965 those on the astronomer Timaeus of Locri⁸ and on dialectics⁹ cultivated within the Academy; and in 1967 the item "Plato" inserted in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*¹⁰. In 1968 Ryle participated in the third Symposium Aristotelicum held in Oxford with a paper on the concept of dialectics¹¹ in Plato's Academy. The publication in 1971 of the two volumes of *Collected Papers*¹² denotes that the author represented a sure reference point for contemporary culture, also because his essays highlight a marked interest in classical culture. In the context of his research activity, the presidency of the Aristotelian Society (from 1945 to 1946) and the editing of the journal *Mind* (from 1947 to 1971) should not be overlooked. Therefore, the rich and complex training of an author who, during the 20th century, was able to combine philosophy with philology should be underlined. The attention paid by Ryle to Plato's production must be considered adequately, if the comparison with the ancient Greek thinkers is considered more than appropriate; specifically for the contents of the art of dialectics and the theory of forms, for which we are indebted to Plato and therefore to Ryle.

1. Philosophy and art of dialectics

Taking into consideration Ryle's best-known work (*The Concept of Mind*), it is necessary to focus on the concepts of I and myself, placed at the basis of the intellectual activity carried out by man; therefore the theory of knowledge must

4 Cf. Ryle 1966b.

5 Cf. Ryle 1939a.

6 Cf. Ryle 1939b.

7 Cf. Ryle 1960.

8 Cf. Ryle 1965c.

9 Cf. Ryle 1965a.

10 Cf. Ryle 1967.

11 Cf. Ryle 1968.

12 Cf. Ryle 1971a; 1971b.

be correlated not only with the humanistic disciplines but also with the natural disciplines. Ryle believes that specific “behavioural” theories, focused on the mind-body relationship, can help explain the nature of the human person; in this case, however, we must distance ourselves from the “methodological behaviourism” promoted by both Burrhus Frederic Skinner and John Watson. Therefore Ryle proposes to consider the human subject as a “rational animal”. If for Aristotle, as we read in *Politics* (I, 2, 1253 a 8), man is essentially a “sociable animal” (ζῷον πολιτικόν), for Ryle man must also be considered as a “rational animal”, interpreting the term “logos” (λόγος), not only as “word” but also as “thought”. In this regard he underlines that it is appropriate to note that, again in *Politics* (I, 2, 1253 a 10), Aristotle also defines man as an “animal endowed with speech” (ζῷον λόγον ἔχον). The literal translation “animal endowed with speech” must be extended, meaning that man is an “animal endowed with reason”, that is, “man is a rational being”, as Ryle asserts in his essay *A Rational Animal*, published in 1962, referring to the teaching carried out by Plato within the Academy. “The human nature – Ryle maintains – that we have so far demarcated from sub-human nature seems to be a one-sidedly Academic human nature”¹³. Logos is the pure faculty through which men think (produce thoughts) and communicate with each other in a more evolved rational dimension than that of animals. Therefore, according to Ryle, man must be defined, not only as ζῷον πολιτικόν, but also as ζῷον λογικόν, keeping in mind that the final goal of history must be considered “as an advancer of knowledge, no matter whether this be knowledge of nature, mathematical knowledge or knowledge of human ways and human callings”¹⁴.

If we scroll through the index of the history of philosophy of the classical age, we can note that the term “logos” turns out to be a decidedly problematic and complex keyword; the human being, as a “rational animal”, is equipped not only with “sensation” (αἴσθησις), but also with “logos” (λόγος). It is no coincidence that, in the context of Stoicism and therefore of Zeno of Citium, “logos” is defined “hegemonic” (ἡγεμονικόν). According to Heraclitus, the noun “logos” (λόγος) is related to the verb “collect” (λέγειν), to be interpreted as “to speak”, or “to express one’s thoughts”. The fragments of Heraclitus lead to Parmenides’ poem and therefore to the distinction between “opinion” (δόξα) and “truth” (ἀλήθεια), which we find is central to Plato’s doctrine. In this regard, it should not be overlooked that, at the opening of *Metaphysics* (I, 1, 980 a 20), Aristotle writes: “All men by nature desire to know”¹⁵. This sentence (from the first book of *Metaphysics*) implies reference to another work by Aristotle; specifically *On the Soul* (I, 1, 402 a 1), which opens with a statement very similar to that of *Metaphysics*: “We regard all knowledge as beautiful and valuable, but one kind more so than another, either in virtue of its accuracy, or because it relates to higher and more wonderful things”¹⁶. At the beginning of *On the Soul*, Aristotle uses the term εἶδησις as a synonym of γνῶσις, to be translated

13 Ryle 1962, 5.

14 Ryle 1962, 24.

15 Aristotle 1924, 14.

16 Aristotle 1957, 9.

as “knowledge” or “to know”; instead, at the beginning of *Metaphysics*, he uses the verb εἰδέναι (infinitive of εἶδον, aorist of the verb ὁράω); the fact of “having seen” allows the human being to acquire knowledge based not only on logos but also on sensation, and specifically on sight, so in Greek we translate with the present indicative “I know” the logical perfect οἶδα which descends from the root (F)ἰδ, and from which the Latin verb “videre” is formed. Therefore Ryle would not be wrong in finding a linguistic dimension in Plato’s theory of forms, which can be traced back to the theory of meaning, at the basis of analytic philosophy. Ryle himself recognizes Aristotle to be the first to develop formal and propositional logic, which we find in the context of Stoicism and early twentieth-century philosophy. Comparing logic and philosophy, Ryle writes: “How then, it remains to be asked, is the philosopher a client of the Formal Logician?”¹⁷ He answers this question in the following terms: “it is rather like what geometry is to the cartographer”¹⁸. That is, logic turns out to be the instrument for representing reality, which philosophy cannot do without.

According to this interpretation, the close relationship between logic and philosophy allows us to examine the theory of forms, interpreted with the tools of language analysis. In this way, we can reread both Plato’s *Cratylus* and his *Theaetetus*. In the dialogue entitled to the pupil of Heraclitus, Plato not only shows interest in the theory of becoming, but also and above all in the origin and function of language. This interest is not strange, since Plato himself, after the death of Socrates, followed the teachings of Cratylus. Therefore, precisely in *Cratylus*, the interlocutors of the character Socrates are Cratylus himself and Hermogenes (a Greek philosopher who lived during the 5th-4th century BC). According to Cratylus, language, with the names that constitute it, derives from the intimate nature of human beings; instead, according to Hermogenes, language is a convention, as maintained by Democritus. In *Cratylus*, Plato reiterates the function of “dialoguing” (διαλέγεσθαι), with the aim of supporting the legitimacy of dialectics in relation to rhetoric. Through the character Socrates, Plato emphasizes that the problem of language is not constituted by the specification of its origin; names have a specific meaning not so much “by nature” (φύσει) or “by convention” (νόμω), but for the linguistic and semantic, and therefore social, use that men make of them in the system of relationships they have with their peers. Language must therefore be seen as a tool of communication between human beings, who use true or false “discourses” (λόγοι), which in turn consist of true or false “names” (ὀνόματα). This means that every single man can perceive good or beautiful things, but not the good in itself or the beautiful in itself; every single man grasps the phenomena (to put it according to Kantian criticism), since he can only think of ideas (the forms of things).

In this regard, the central problem of Plato’s theory of forms emerges, headed by the “chorismos” (χωρισμός) between forms and sensible things. The dialectical dialogues would deny that Plato believed and supported the existence of abstract forms distinct and separate from sensible things. Therefore, wanting to highlight

17 Ryle 1966a, 123.

18 Ryle 1966a, 123.

the illegitimacy of the ontologism of ideas, Ryle believes that a certain chronological and thematic continuity could be established between *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* but also between *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*; he hypothesizes that the dialogue entitled to the Athenian mathematician (*Theaetetus*), who lived during the 5th-4th century BC, was probably conceived and written with the aim of supporting the content of the dialogue entitled to the pupil of Heraclitus (*Cratylus*), who, in turn, was Plato's teacher. Therefore, the attention paid to the function of language implies an inevitable comparison between the aforementioned dialogues by Plato and some of Aristotle's early works (*Categories*, *Topics* and *On Interpretation*). In this regard, Ryle writes: "There are signs that both Plato and Aristotle are here drawing on, and also contributing to an Academic pool of methodological ideas and idioms; a pool to which, among others, Speusippus is also contributing, for example the notions of *genus*, *species* and *differentia*"¹⁹. On the basis of this statement by Ryle, we are led to reflect on the logical themes posed by Aristotle in *Categories* and *Topics* – firstly on the concept of universal, which the Stagirite would have developed in contrast to the concept of idea. In Part 9 of the first book of *Topics*, Aristotle focuses on the ten categories (Essence, Quantity, Quality, Relation, Place, Time, Position, State, Activity, Passivity), which can be predicated of any given and specific universal. It is no coincidence that in the ninth chapter of the fifth book of *Metaphysics*, in the tenth chapter of *Categories* and in the seventh book of *Topics*, Aristotle takes up the principle of identity, which is the basis of all logic. The principle of identity on the level of logic is related to the concept of universal, which in turn leads to the concepts of genus and species; but on the level of metaphysics the concept of universal, in turn, implies the concept of essence, which allows us to glimpse the problem of definition in an ontological dimension. Therefore we could deduce that Aristotle did not solve the problem posed by Plato with the development of the theory of ideas, which can be found in all of his production.

In a youthful dialogue, *Meno* (77 a), by Plato, through the character Socrates who dialogues with the character Meno, the keyword "universal" (κατὰ ὅλου) is presented, not yet conceived in the contracted form of καθόλου, which we find in Aristotle. In his youthful dialogues, Plato would not have conceived ideas in a transcendent dimension but in an immanent dimension. Ideas or, if we prefer, forms are words whose semantic value serves to indicate individual sensible things. By carefully reading *Meno*, we could infer an original form of nominalism, whereby the term "form" indicates the multiplicity of sensible things, without the form existing in itself as an immaterial entity. The term "form" (εἶδος) is therefore used as a synonym for "idea" (ιδέα), "genre" (γένος) and "essence" (οὐσία) in an immanentist dimension, recognized by Ryle himself. Following the interpretation suggested by the Oxonian scholar, instead of using the keyword "nominalism", we could resort to the keyword "semantics". This keyword comes from the Greek term σῆμα, according to the lesson that comes from the logic developed by the Stoics. The term σῆμα stands for "sign", or is a term that includes and relates to

19 Ryle 1966b, 277.

the multiplicity of things. The problem was proposed again during the Middle Ages, starting from Porphyry's *Isagoge*, down to the contemporary age, headed by the theory of denoting²⁰ found in the logical atomism of Bertrand Russell.

In summary, by examining the part relating to the art of dialectics, we understand why *Theaetetus* should be placed in close relation with *Sophist*, and these two dialogues with *Parmenides*; this leads to the fact that Ryle points out that “the nature of knowledge”, expounded in *Theaetetus*, is to be related to “the theory of the Greatest Kinds”, expounded in *Sophist*. The suggested succession is that *Parmenides* precedes *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. As regards the content of *Theaetetus*, it must be highlighted that the discussion between Socrates, Theaetetus and Theodore does not end with the recognition of rationalism which also relies on sensation. In the initial part of *Sophist*, Socrates, Theodore and Theaetetus meet again to continue the discussion on the problem of knowledge; Theodore and Theaetetus are mathematicians, but with the two of them there appears the “stranger of Elea”, qualified as a philosopher who is part of the School represented by Parmenides and Zeno. The stranger of Elea anticipates the character Parmenides, to whom Plato titles the dialogue in which the founder of the Eleatic school acts as the main character and young Socrates as a secondary character. Therefore some interpreters of Plato believe that *Parmenides* was probably written after *Sophist*, although Parmenides is referenced at the beginning of *Sophist* itself with the presence of the stranger of Elea. Among other things, in *Theaetetus* (183 e) it is underlined that Socrates declares to Theodore that he met Parmenides when he was very young and the founder of the Eleatic school was elderly and philosophically profound. On the basis of this testimony, *Parmenides* should be placed before *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. However, whatever chronological succession one wishes to attribute to *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, on the thematic level the three dialogues must be read together, starting from the problem of being, placed among the Greatest Kinds of *Sophist* and taken up by the founder of the Eleatic school in the second part of *Parmenides*. Therefore *Theaetetus* is significant for the problem of knowledge, and *Sophist* and *Parmenides* for the art of dialectics, centred on the keyword “being”.

Against any form of ontologism of ideas, *Parmenides* (but also *Sophist*) highlights Plato's intention to elaborate and expound epistemological relativism based on the concept of being. In this sense, we are especially helped by *Parmenides* (130 e – 132 b) where the “third man argument” (τρίτος ἄνθρωπος) is stated to deny the fact that Plato supported the existence of ideas as separate and distinct forms from sensitive things. Therefore there would be no justification for resorting to the third man argument in Aristotle (in *Metaphysics* and in *Sophistical Refutations*), as an implicit criticism of Plato's theory of ideas. Plato himself expounds the third man argument, not only in *Parmenides* but also in *Timaeus* (31 a) and in the tenth book of *Republic* (597 c). The paradox of the *regressus in infinitum*, or *ad libitum*, derives from the false relationship of things with ideas centred on the principles of

20 Cf. Russell 1905.

“metexis” (μέθεξις) and “mimesis” (μίμησις), which Plato criticizes in the first part of *Parmenides* through the figure of the founder of the Eleatic school, who addresses a young Socrates, inexperienced in philosophy and the art of dialectics. On this point, we should not overlook the complexity of the third man argument²¹, dating back to the Megarian School, taken up, according to Alexander from Aphrodisias, by the Sophist Polixenus²². In *Parmenides* (132 a – 133 a) the argument is used by the founder of the Eleatic school against young Socrates, who had expressed his belief in the ontologism of ideas. Indeed, in banal terms, young Socrates had come to the conclusion that ideas are “thoughts of nothing” (νόημα δὲ οὐδενός), moving from the hypothesis of ontologism to that of nominalism. At the end of the first part of the dialogue, Parmenides objects to young Socrates that on the level of philosophy we cannot forego ideas; the problem, posed and developed in the second part of the dialogue, consists in assuming the basic thesis of Eleaticism. Therefore Parmenides himself works out his arguments to his new interlocutor (young Aristotle), chosen in the second part of the dialogue, in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of the dialectical art. However, while keeping in mind the centrality of *Parmenides*, especially for the arguments developed by the founder of the Eleatic school in the second part of the dialogue, it is necessary to reiterate the thematic segment that leads from *Theaetetus* to *Sophist* and from the latter to *Parmenides*. Indeed, whatever the chronological order of composition of the three dialogues, we believe we can share the thesis of those who claim to read and analyze the three dialectical dialogues in the following succession: *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Parmenides*. Therefore, wanting to proceed with a specific interpretation of the theory of forms, the year of composition of each of the three dialogues matters little. Therefore, the sequence that we feel we respect in interpreting the aforementioned three dialogues in terms of the art of dialectics is fundamental. In this way, *Parmenides* would not represent a crisis of Platonism, but rather a confirmation of a theory of ideas, or a theory of forms, never considered in the youthful dialogues themselves as immaterial entities separate from sensible things. There is thus recognized the legitimacy of the individual icons (copies) that differ from each other, but within a whole that unites them through the concept of class, Bertrand Russell was to say in *The Principles of Mathematics* in the wake of the transfinite number theory of Georg Cantor²³.

Bearing in mind the thematic segment constituted by *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Parmenides*, it should be underlined that, in the first of these three dialectical dialogues, the character Socrates is compared with Theodore (a follower of Socrates of the Elis School) and with Theaetetus (a mathematician and a student of Plato's), with the aim of contesting the epistemological relativism of Protagoras. Socrates objects to Theaetetus (a supporter of Protagoras' epistemological relativism) that knowledge cannot be understood as a peculiar form of “sensation” (αἴσθησις); the principles of “science” (ἐπιστήμη) possess a universal dimension, which contrasts with the criteria of “opinion” (δόξα). So that “science” must be seen not only as

21 Cf. Lugarini 1954.

22 Cf. Baeumker 1879.

23 Cf. Cantor 1895; 1897.

ἐπιστήμη, but also as ἀλήθεια, and consequently Theaetetus, at the end of the dialogue, can assert that knowledge cannot be understood only on the basis of δόξα but also of λόγος, since only in this way can it be reiterated that knowledge coincides with the “right opinion combined with rational explanation” (δόξα ἀληθῆς μετὰ λόγου, *Theaetetus* 208 c). The art of dialectics suggests rethinking the content of *Phaedrus* and *Republic*; it is no coincidence that Ryle underlines that the art of dialectics, conceived in its highest expression as true philosophy, is expounded in the dialogues that Plato wrote at the height of his maturity, probably when he was seventy years old. Indeed, *Theaetetus* looks forward to the happy season of dialectical dialogues, as we read not only in *Sophist*, but also and above all in *Parmenides*. It is no coincidence that the first volume of the *Collected Papers* (which Ryle had published in 1971) has the subtitle *Critical Essays* and opens with an essay on Plato’s *Parmenides*, published in 1939 in the journal *Mind*. As regards Plato’s theory of forms, Ryle notes the complexity of Plato’s dialogue entitled to the founder of the school of Elea. “For the construction of the required logical apparatus could not be taken in hand until after the inevitability of the sorts of antinomies which the dialogue exhibits had been realised”²⁴. On the basis of this assertion, it should be underlined that Ryle paid attention to Plato’s *Parmenides*, not only in the 1939 essay, but also in the volume *Plato’s Progress* published in 1966. In this volume, Ryle observes that the second part of the dialogue goes beyond the theory of forms and represents a dialectical exercise: “The issues discussed in Part II are good or at least ingenious teasers for any philosopher, whether he accepts or, like Aristotle, rejects the Theory of Forms”²⁵. Analyzing *Parmenides*, it should not be overlooked that Ryle’s essay (*Plato’s Parmenides*), originally published in 1939 in the journal *Mind*, before being republished in 1971 in the first volume (*Critical Essays*) of *Collected Papers*, was included in 1965 in the collective volume²⁶ of *Studies in Plato’s Metaphysics* edited by Reginald Edward Allen. In this volume we find, in addition to the 1939 essay on *Parmenides*, a short but significant *Afterword* dated 1963, with which Ryle denotes a certain detachment from the content of the second part of the dialogue. In this *Afterword* he remarks: “We can conjecture that the second part of the dialogue does contain (between the lines) the answer to the problem of the first part; but we cannot say that Plato was aware of it”²⁷.

2. The role of the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy

Rereading *Parmenides*, Ryle does not accept, but rather rejects, the metaphysical interpretation of the theory of forms, centred on *Republic*. He suggests that the art of dialectics should be placed in relation to the analysis of language, which can be deduced from the content of *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*. However, before

24 Ryle 1971a, p. 1.

25 Ryle 1966b, 288.

26 Cf. Allen 1965, 104-140.

27 Allen 1965, 140.

reaching *Parmenides* and the other dialogues of his full maturity (*Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*), according to Ryle it is necessary to focus on the eristic character that marks Plato's youthful dialogues, where Socrates plays the role of the main character. "Plato's eristic dialogues are: the *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, [*Alcibiades I* and *II*], *Protagoras*, *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias* and *Meno*"²⁸. To these dialogues Ryle adds the first book of *Republic* (*Thrasymachus*), to reiterate that all the youthful dialogues, called Socratic or aporetic, are characterized by the method of "refutation" (ἐλεγχος). It is no coincidence that one of the works, constituting the whole of Aristotle's *Organon*, bears the title *Sophistical Refutations*. In this text Aristotle exposes the concept of "refutation" (ἐλεγχος), the meaning of which is linked to identification of fallacious arguments, i.e. paradoxes or sophisms, which we find at the basis of the work of Zeno of Elea. However, according to Aristotle, refutation turns out to be the dialectical contradiction founded with true propositions, reiterated with dialectical syllogisms. So dialectics, as can already be found in Plato's dialogues, for Aristotle is to be contrasted with the eristic of the Sophists. Dialectics is therefore based on the method of dialogue, with the aim of comparing the different opinions expressed by the individual interlocutors; dialectics must be correlated to science, that is, to analytics, which for Aristotle is logic par excellence. In this way we understand why the text *Sophistical Refutations* is placed in the appendix to *Topics*, where Aristotle, in addition to recognizing the positive function of dialectics, objects that "sophistical refutations" are to be compared with paralogisms, i.e. with false reasoning, both from the point of view of form and from the point of view of content.

Returning to Plato's production, according to Ryle it must be stressed that the transition from eristic to philosophy is witnessed by the writing of the dialogues of his full maturity, as well as by *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and *Cratylus*, and by the dialectical dialogues (*Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*). Coming to the writing of the last dialogues (*Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Laws*), we inevitably see that Plato concluded his long existence "qui uno et octogesimo anno scribens est mortuus", as Cicero observes (in *De senectute*, 5). In summary, as regards *Republic*, Ryle objects that this dialogue cannot be placed in a central position within Platonic doctrine. Ethics and politics are not the fundamental components of Plato's philosophy, which must be reread in the light of the working out of the art of dialectics, expounded in the dialogues of his maturity, above all *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. Among these three dialectical dialogues, Ryle pays most attention to *Parmenides*, not only for the content, but also for the form. First, he argues that the two parts of the dialogue, named after the founder of the Eleatic school, were most likely composed at different times. He underlines that the first part of *Parmenides* constitutes an unpublished fragment written in 362-361 BC in the form of *oratio obliqua*, while the second part was probably written in 350 BC in the form of *oratio recta*. Rereading the dialogue, as it was handed down to us, the first part appears to be an account of the meeting that took place between

Parmenides, Zeno and young Socrates in Athens, on the occasion of the Great Panathenaea organized in June 450 BC. The hypothetical meeting between the two representatives of the school of Elea and young Socrates is narrated by Cephalus, who asks Glaucon and Adeimantus to be taken to Antiphon, so that he can tell him about this meeting. Antiphon learned of this meeting from Pitodorus, who had hosted the two philosophers from distant Elea in his house, in the presence of young Socrates and young Aristotle (one of the Thirty tyrants). Cephalus is not a famous person, and of him we only know that he comes from Clazomene; Adeimantus and Glaucon are Plato's brothers, while Antiphon is his half-brother (being the son of Perictione, whose second husband was Pyrilampus, Plato's father); furthermore Pitodorus is presented as a student of Zeno. The names of these characters appear only in the *oratio obliqua*, that is, only at the beginning of the first part of the dialogue. In fact, the second part of the dialogue (i.e. the *oratio recta*) consists of a real monologue by Parmenides, before which young Aristotle remains silent. The second part of the dialogue turns out to be a test of high-profile and problematic dialectics, which throughout the history of thought has been the subject of different and sometimes conflicting interpretations.

However, before starting to examine the second part of *Parmenides*, as it is right to do, it is necessary to focus on the first part of the dialogue, at least to have an overall vision of the entire text. In the *oratio obliqua*, as observed above, the character Socrates is presented in the guise of a young man with little experience in the art of dialectics and therefore in philosophy. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates talks with Zeno about the positive value of the dialectical method; so that the pupil of the founder of the Eleatic school, who in *Phaedrus* (261 d) is remembered as the "Eleatic Palamedes", in *Parmenides* (126 d) is recognized to be a philosopher worthy of all attention. Zeno's "text" (τὸ σύγγραμμα) is mentioned, divided into various "discourses" (λόγοι), designed to codify the dialectical method so much appreciated by Plato. In this initial glimpse of the first part of the dialogue, the role of the main character seems to be attributed to Zeno, who converses with young Socrates, while Parmenides is inside the house of Pitodorus to be welcomed with all the honours befitting a prominent character. In this regard, it should be underlined that, according to the testimony of Diogenes Laërtius (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* VIII, 57) and Sextus Empiricus (*Against the Mathematicians* VII, 7), Zeno is credited with being the inventor of the dialectical method, taken up and developed by Plato. Continuing to read the first part of *Parmenides*, we find that young Socrates, after having spoken with Zeno, dialogues with Parmenides on the way to interpret the theory of forms. This leads to Parmenides' objections to young Socrates on the ontologism of the theory of forms, erroneously based on the principles of mimesis and methexis. At the end of the confrontation between Parmenides (an expert philosopher) and Socrates (both young and inexperienced), it becomes clear that Plato is represented by Parmenides. Therefore, in the second part of the dialogue, Parmenides no longer dialogues with Socrates, but with another interlocutor (young Aristotle), who allows him to work out his arguments without meaningless interruptions; at this point the dialogue can be seen as a real monologue.

The starting point of the second part of the dialogue is the basic thesis of the founder of the Eleatic school: “τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι” (because the same thing is there for thinking and for being); indeed, according to the testimony of Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* VI, 2, 23), Parmenides²⁹ wanted to argue that the act of thinking is relative only to being, or to what is; the act of thinking cannot consist in thinking nothingness, but only in what is. This hypothesis is assumed by Plato by introducing the concept of “non-being” (μὴ ὄν), considered not as the negation of the one, that is, of “what is” (τὸ ὄν), but rather as the opposite of what is. In this sense, *Parmenides* should be read before *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. In *Sophist* the five Greatest Kinds are expounded, starting from the concept of being. Overall, the five “Greatest Kinds” (μέγιστα γένη) imply, in addition to “that which is” (τὸ ὄν), the “identical” (τὸ αὐτόν), the “other” (τὸ ἕτερον), “quiet” (ἡ στάσις) and “movement” (ἡ κίνησις). The listing of the five Greatest Kinds in *Sophist* leads to the exposition of the second part of *Parmenides*, carried out on the basis of the dialectical method. The themes treated in *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and *Parmenides* suggest reading these three dialogues in close connection, keeping in mind with adequate attention the content of the second part of the dialogue entitled to the head of the school of Elea.

The second part of *Parmenides* appears to have been written as a manual for the students of the Academy oriented towards the art of dialectics, as is mentioned by the head of the school of Elea towards young Socrates, inexperienced in the art of dialectics (*Parmenides*, 137a). Indeed, in this second part of the dialogue, Parmenides points out that the arguments he would have developed on the problem of being and the one are not addressed to the many (οἱ πολλοί). Therefore the dialogue, entitled to the founder of the Eleatic school, would be the testimony of the fact that Plato was never a prisoner of himself, having developed a theory of forms continuously subjected to revisions, also following his travels in Magna Graecia, and his having assimilated both the Eleatic doctrine and the Pythagorean doctrine. Unlike what Aristotle argued with logic, seen as analytics, and with philosophy, seen as metaphysics, Plato developed a model of philosophy as the art of dialectics identified with the theory of forms. The presence of a young Socrates facing up to the head of the school of Elea would denote Plato's intention to criticise his students for failing to understand the logical value of his doctrine. Hence *Parmenides* would not represent a crisis of Platonism, but rather would express the desire on the part of the Athenian philosopher to reiterate a correct interpretation of the theory of forms already conceived starting from his youthful dialogues. If we read *Hippias Major*, we find the central theme of “what is it” (τί ἐστὶ), that is, of the entire Platonic production; therefore we must deal with the keywords “idea” (ἰδέα), “form” (εἶδος), “essence” (οὐσία), and “genre” (γένος). The concept, developed by Plato through the character Socrates, involves the problem of definition; therefore, every time we ask ourselves or say that something is beautiful, good, true, we problematize the central theme of definition, as it was

29 Parmenides of Elea 1984, 56-57.

formulated by Russell at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is no coincidence that Russell, two years after the publication of *The Principles of Mathematics*, wrote the essay with the emblematic title (*On Denoting*), with which he meant to stress that the theme of denotation has a value on the level of logic and of mathematics, but also in the theory of knowledge.

Focusing on the second part of *Parmenides*, Ryle asserts that the discussion between the founder of the school of Elea and young Aristotle represents an “exercise” (γυμνασία), carried out according to the principles of the Eleatic school. Therefore Parmenides’ “monologue” begins by assuming the thesis “If the One is”, from which eight hypotheses derive. Parmenides’ arguments are taken up and divided into four main theses, with the aim of specifying the character of the art of dialectics through the relationship of two theses, one opposed to the other. The scheme proposed by Ryle is the following:

A1 (M1)	137c	N1 (M1)	160b
A1 (M2)	142b	N1 (M2)	163b
A2 (M1)	157b	N2 (M1)	164b
A2 (M2)	159b	N2 (M2)	165e

This arrangement of the eight hypotheses, expounded in the second part of *Parmenides*, allows us to deduce that from the first pair of opposites, indicated by Ryle with the symbolism A1 (M1) and A1 (M2), it is assumed that “If the One is”, nothing can be said about it (137 c – 142 b), or that, “If the One is not”, all can be said about it (142 b – 157 b).

The second pair of opposites, indicated with the symbols A2 (M1) and A2 (M2), also originates from the thesis on the “Unity of being”, but in relation to the many; for which it is objected that, “If the One is”, everything can be said of the many (157 b – 159 b), or that, “If the One is”, nothing can be said of the many (159 b – 160 b).

The third pair of opposites, indicated with the symbols N1 (M1) and N1 (M2), originates from the thesis “If the One is not”. Therefore the argument is as follows: “If the One is not”, everything can be said of it (160 b – 163 b), or that, “If the One is not”, nothing can be said of it (163 b – 164 b).

The fourth pair of opposites, indicated with the symbols N2 (M1) and N2 (M2), originates again from the thesis “If the One is not”. Therefore the argument is the following: “If the One is not”, everything can be said of what is different from the one (164 b – 165 e), or that, “If the One is not”, nothing can be said about what is different from the one (165 e – 166 c).

A reflection on these eight hypotheses implies that, starting from the thesis “If the One is” and following the dialectical method, everything can be affirmed or denied of both the one and the many, just as everything can be affirmed or denied of both the one and of the many, starting from the thesis “If the One is not”. In summary, the scheme, which is obtained in more explicit terms from reading the second part of *Parmenides*, is the following:

1. If the One is, nothing can be said about it (137 c – 142 b);
2. If the One is, all can be said about it (142 b – 157 b);
3. If the One is, everything can be said about others (i.e. the many) (157 b – 159 b);
4. If the One is, nothing can be said about the others (i.e. the many) (159 b – 160 b);
5. If the One is not, everything can be said about it (160 b – 163 b);
6. If the One is not, nothing can be said of it (163 b – 164 b);
7. If the One is not, everything can be said about what is different from the one (164 b – 165 e);
8. If the One is not, nothing can be said of what is different from the one (165 e – 166 c).

Ryle must be given credit for having highlighted the positive value of “dialoguing” (διαλέγεσθαι), already present in Book VII of *Republic*; therefore the dialectical procedure, expounded in *Parmenides*, represents the most mature phase of the theory of forms, also related to *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. On the basis of this consideration, Ryle compares Plato, as well as with Aristotle, with Kant, Russell, Wittgenstein and Carnap. “But his questions and his arguments in this dialogue should be classified by us as belonging to the same sphere to which belong, for example, Aristotle’s theory of Categories, Kant’s separation of formal from non-formal concepts, Russell’s theory of types, and Wittgenstein’s and Carnap’s theories of logical syntax”³⁰. Specifically, the theory of forms is correlated with the theory of categories of the Stagirite philosopher and with the transcendental logic of the philosopher of Königsberg. By following the key to reading Plato’s dialogues, and in particular the dialectical dialogues, suggested by Ryle, the presumed and age-old problem of chorismos between ideas and things disappears. Ideas, which not by chance Ryle prefers to define forms, are not immaterial entities separated from material things; it can be asserted that to every multiplicity of material things there corresponds a word, defined as form, without thereby inferring that the form exists in itself. The forms would therefore be words that we use to indicate this or that kind of thing; only things exist, each of which does not appear to be an icon of the corresponding form. Otherwise we should accept the theory of the innatism of ideas, which the soul transfers into the body when it is “condemned” to be incarnated by the hyperuranion in a specific body to atone for the punishment committed during its existence. In this way we should recognize a certain relationship between the art of dialectics and the theory of metempsychosis, that is, between logic and rational psychology.

Reading *Parmenides*, as a premise to *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, we must note the value and legitimacy of dialectics, imparted by Plato to the students of the Academy to guarantee the highest possible training process. The foundation of the Academy took place in 387 BC a year after the journey made by Plato to Magna Graecia, with the aim of meeting the Pythagorean Archytas in Tarentum, and Dionysius the Elder, tyrant of Syracuse. Immediately after returning to Athens, Plato purchased

30 Ryle 1971a, 37.

land in the area dedicated to Academus. Precisely in 387 BC, having reached the age of forty, Plato decided to dedicate himself to open teaching to students, overcoming the scheme of the ancient schools of the Pre-Socratics, in particular of the Pythagoreans and the Eleatics. The turning point in Plato's life, which occurred with the foundation of the Academy, coincided with the process of maturation of his thought centred on Zeno's dialectical method and Parmenides' theory. The subjects taught within the Academy were aimed at the study of the humanistic and scientific fields; in addition to philosophy, mathematics and astronomy were taught. "Paideia" (παιδεία) was supported on the basis of dialectics, compared with rhetoric, cultivated by Isocrates, who in 390 BC had founded another political training school.

Plato's goal was different from that of the Sophists and Isocrates himself; high culture did not presuppose the strength of the word, but the strength of reason, based on the art of dialectics. Therefore *Parmenides* must be considered as evidence of Plato's desire to offer a logical demonstration on the specific level of dialectics. The head of the school of Elea suggested to Plato that he assume, as a basic thesis, the concept of the one, to be examined with the dialectical method developed by his student Zeno. It is no coincidence that, at the end of the first part of *Parmenides* (137 b), Plato presents the founder of the school of Elea willing, after some reluctance, to demonstrate the art of dialectics. Parmenides and Zeno are therefore the referents of the mature Plato, who addresses the "students" of the Academy inviting them not to neglect philosophy and with it dialectics. The warning addressed by the main character of the dialogue (who precisely represents Plato's position) to young Socrates, who represents those who had failed and were unable to understand the complex articulation of dialectics, is therefore significant. Therefore Parmenides decides to neglect young Socrates, who had demonstrated that he did not understand "the power of reasoning" (135 c); he chooses young Aristotle, who appears, so to speak, less presumptuous than young Socrates. Young Aristotle will allow Parmenides to carry out his dialectical arguments without hindrance; it is an expedient to reiterate, on the part of the author of the dialogue, that his students had not understood in breadth and in depth what dialectics is.

At this point we can ask ourselves whether the arguments presented in the second part of *Parmenides* lead to definitive conclusions. From a careful reading of the texts dedicated by Ryle to Plato, it can be deduced that the Oxonian philosopher intended to examine the Athenian philosopher's theory of forms, assuming that he did not accept the ontologism of ideas.

Final thoughts

The attention paid by Ryle to Plato and his peculiar way of interpreting the theory of forms suggests underlining that the production of the ancient Athenian philosopher over time has constituted a solid doctrine, which the history of Western thought has faced up to, while generating different interpretations that sometimes contradict each other. Therefore, the way of reading the doctrine

of the founder of the Academy starting from Middle Platonism represented by Eudorus of Alexandria (who lived during the second half of the 1st century BC) and by Apuleius of Madauros (who lived during the 2nd century AD) does not appear strange. In succession we should remember the historical and theoretical value of Neo-Platonism represented by the following: the School of Alexandria from Ammonius Saccas to Hypatia and Stephanus; the School of Rome from Plotinus to Porphyry; the Syrian School from Iamblichus to Dessippos; the School of Pergamum from Aedesius to Julian the Apostate; the School of Athens from Plutarch to Proclus; and again, in the Christian age, the School of Rome from Cornelius Labeo to Severinus Boethius. As part of this return to Platonic doctrine, particular attention was paid to Parmenides³¹, no longer read in a logical and dialectical key, but rather in an ontological and theological key. In this sense, it is interesting to read the first hypothesis, "If the One is" (ἔν ἐὶ ἕστιν), developed by Plutarch of the School of Athens who lived in the 4th and 5th centuries; evidently we are in the second part of *Parmenides* and in the first hypothesis, expounded by the founder of the Eleatic school to his silent interlocutor (young Aristotle). Damascius, another representative of the School of Athens who lived during the fifth century, in the wake of Proclus' teaching, underlined that the One can be neither known nor defined; the One, in itself "ineffable" (ἀπόρητον), is taken from the assertion of the first hypothesis "If one is, nothing can be said about it" expounded by the head of Elea in the *Parmenides* (137c-142a). In this regard, historical memory leads us to recall the arguments of Basil of Caesarea (the Cappadocian Father, who lived during the 4th century), who, in addition to Parmenides' concept of the unity of being, takes up the concept of "thinking on thinking" (νόησις νοήσεως) expounded by Aristotle in the twelfth book of *Metaphysics* (XII, 9, 1074 30).

By assuming the Platonic doctrine, centred on the theory of forms, we could rewrite a peculiar and original history of Western thought, down to the contemporary age. The return to Kant's critical philosophy, and with it Plato's theory of ideas at the Baden School and the Marburg School, dates back to the second half of the 19th century. At the University of Heidelberg, above all, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert carried out their rereading of Kant's criticism on the basis of the concept of "value", according to which Plato's ideas, correlated with Kant's moral principles, would also have an ethical value. By contrast, within the Marburg School, Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp interpreted Kantian categories and Platonic ideas as logical functions of thought. Natorp's monograph (*Platos Ideenlehre*), which appeared in 1903, suggests reading *Parmenides* as confirmation of the logical-methodological interpretation of ideas, which Plato seems already to have worked out in his youthful dialogues. The interpretation offered by Natorp suggests remembering the third hypothesis which, in the second part of *Parmenides*, is focused on the correlation between the first and second hypotheses. In this part of the dialogue it is seen that, if the One is, everything about it can be affirmed and denied simultaneously (155 e-157 b); this hypothesis

31 Cf. Barbanti and Romano 2002.

is made possible on the basis of the dialectical method, which Plato matures by developing the concept of “Instant” (ἐξάιφνης), taken up by Hegel himself. Indeed, as can be read both in *Science of Logic* and in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, for the German idealist the concept of “Instant” is to be compared with the concept of “Werden”, in which there are two opposing theses, relating to the concepts of “being” and “non-being”. Therefore Plato, taking up Zeno’s third aporia on movement, underlines through the mouth of the character Parmenides that “this curious nature which we call the moment lying between rest and motion, not being in any time; and into this and out of this what is in motion changes into rest, and what is at rest into motion” (*Parmenides*, 156 d – e).

In Ryle’s arguments we do not find adequate attention paid to the so-called third hypothesis of *Parmenides*, which among other things is to be correlated with the five “Greatest Kinds” (μέγιστα γένη): “Being” (ὄν), “Sameness” (αὐτόν), “Otherness” (ἕτερον), “Rest” (στάσις) and “Motion” (κίνησις). The duality of “Sameness” and “Otherness” represents the theory of the opposites of dialectics, which from Plato goes down to Hegel in all the problematic nature that derives from Zeno’s aporias on movement. Evidently this type of interpretation, which rests on the centrality of *Parmenides* within Plato’s production, is not the only one that we can find on a historiographical level. For example, Paul Natorp’s logical-methodological interpretation³², which we find very convincing, must be compared with that of Auguste Diès, for whom the dialogues of Plato’s maturity (*Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*) denote the metaphysical dimension³³ of the theory of ideas, as found in the subtitle of *Parmenides*³⁴ (περὶ ἰδεῶν, *On Ideas*). We therefore understand that Francis Macdonald Cornford examined *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* in relation to the problem of knowledge³⁵ and *Parmenides* in relation to the complex theory of ideas³⁶ related to the doctrine of the founder of the school of Elea. As regards *Parmenides* (with particular reference to the second part of the dialogue), the concept of unity remains central, taken in its dimension, not only theoretical and logical, but also practical and ethical, as can be found in *Philebus*, placed in relation to *Republic*. Specifically, *Philebus* completes the happy season of dialectical dialogues on the level of ethics and the concept of one defined between the limit and the illimitable, given that the concept of unity becomes the foundation of ideas-numbers in relation to what is *bonum, ens, verum* and *unum*, as is emphasised by David Ross³⁷ in his monograph dedicated to Plato’s theory of ideas. Therefore we should not stop at reading *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, but continue the analysis of Platonic doctrine with the last dialogues, from *Philebus* down to *Critias*, *Timaeus* and *Laws*. Specifically, we should keep in

32 Cf. Natorp 1903.

33 Cf. Diès 1972.

34 Cf. Apelt 1879, 51-54.

35 Cf. Cornford 1935.

36 Cf. Cornford 1939.

37 Cf. Ross 1951.

mind the author's biography alongside his production, especially when we are in the presence of a philosopher with a problematic level like Plato³⁸.

By examining Plato's theory of forms, as suggested by Gilbert Ryle, we find confirmation of the foundation of the Athenian philosopher's production, such as to represent a wide-ranging current of thought within European and international culture. Whichever interpretation one wishes to adhere to, certainly Platonic doctrine over time has taken on the character of a current of thought, to the point of recognizing that it is a precious piece of the rich mosaic of humanistic culture. The charm of the theory of ideas (i.e. of forms) derives from the fact that Plato did not dedicate a specific work to this central part of his thought; however, he dealt with it throughout his entire production. From the youthful dialogues to those of his maturity and old age, the theory of ideas is the backdrop to the theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy of his speculative model. Within Plato's production, the dialogue dedicated to the founder of the school of Elea stands out and looms up; of all the dialogues, *Parmenides* remains the most problematic and the most original. Therefore we can recognize our debt to Gilbert Ryle, a careful reader of Plato's doctrine of forms, headed by the dialectical dialogues (*Parmenides*, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*), above all *Parmenides*. In this way the keyword "ontology" takes on a new guise, if it is correlated with a philosophy seen as the art of dialectics in all the problematic nature of the act of thinking.

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38 Cf. Taylor 1949.

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