PLATO’S ARGUMENTS FOR THE FORMS IV: THE ARGUMENT FROM RELATIVES II
(FROM REPUBLIC VI 523A-525A)

I will try, I said, to show you at least my opinion. Do you keep watch and observe the things I
distinguish in my mind as being or not being conducive to our purpose, and either concur or dissent, in order
that here too we may see more clearly whether my surmise is right.

Point them out, he said.

I do point them out, I said, if you can discern that some reports of our perceptions do not provoke
thought to reconsideration because the judgment of them by sensation seems adequate, while others always
invite the intellect to reflection because the sensation yields nothing that can be trusted.

You obviously mean distant appearances, he said, and shadow painting.

You have quite missed my meaning, said I.

What do you mean? he said.

The experiences that do not provoke thought are those that do not at the same time issue in a
contradictory perception. Those that do have that effect I set down as provocatives, when the perception no
more manifests one thing than its contrary, alike whether its impact comes from nearby or afar. An illustration
will make my meaning plain. Here, we say, are three fingers, the little finger, the second, and the middle.

Quite so, he said.

Assume that I speak of them as seen near at hand. But this is the point that you are to consider.

What?

Each one of them appears to be equally a finger, and in this respect it makes no difference whether it is
observed as intermediate or at either extreme, whether it is white or black, thick or thin, or of any other quality
of this kind. For in none of these cases is the soul of most men impelled to question the reason and to ask what
in the world is a finger, since the faculty of sight never signifies to it at the same time that the finger is the
opposite of a finger.

Why, no, it does not, he said.

Then, said I, it is to be expected that such a perception will not provoke or awaken reflection and
thought.

It is.

But now, what about the bigness and the smallness of these objects? Is our vision’s view of them
adequate, and does it make no difference to it whether one of them is situated outside or in the middle, and
similarly of the relation of touch, to thickness and thinness, softness and hardness? And are not the other senses
also defective in their reports of such things? Or is the operation of each of them as follows? In the first place,
the sensation that is set over the hard is of necessity related also to the soft, and it reports to the soul that the
same thing is both hard and soft to its perception.

It is so, he said.

Then, said I, it is not this again a case where the soul must be at a loss as to what significance for it the
sensation of hardness has, if the sense reports the same thing as also soft? And, similarly, as to what the
sensation of light and heavy means by light and heavy, if it reports the heavy as light, and the light as
heavy?

Yes, indeed, he said, these communications to the soul are strange and invite reconsideration.

Naturally, then, said I, it is in such cases as these that the soul first summons to its aid the calculating
reason and tries to consider whether each of the things reported to it is one or two.

Of course.

And if it appears to be two, each of the two is a distinct unit.

Yes.

If, then, each is one and both two, the very meaning of ‘two’ is that the soul will conceive them as
distinct. For if they were not separable, it would not have been thinking of two, but of one.

Right.

Sight too saw the great and the small, we say, not separated but confounded. Is not that so?

Yes.

And for the clarification of this, the intelligence is compelled to contemplate the great and small, not thus
confounded but as distinct entities, in the opposite way from sensation.
True.
And is it not in some such experience as this that the question first occurs to us, What in the world, then, is the great and the small?
By all means.
And this is the origin of the designation intelligible for the one, and visible for the other.
Just so, he said.
This, then, is just what I was trying to explain a little while ago when I said that some things are provocative of thought and some are not, defining as provocative things that impinge upon the senses together with their opposites, while those that do not I said do not tend to awaken reflection.
Well, now I understand, he said, and agree.
To which class, then, do you think number and the one belong?
I cannot conceive, he said.
Well, reason it out from what has already been said. For, if unity is adequately seen by itself or apprehended by some other sensation, it would not tend to draw the mind to the apprehension of essence, as we were explaining in the case of the finger. But if some contradiction is always seen coincidently with it, so that it no more appears to be one than the opposite, there would forthwith be need of something to judge between them, and it would compel the soul to be at a loss and to inquire, by arousing thought in itself, and to ask, whatever then is the one as such, and thus the study of unity will be one of the studies that guide and convert the soul to the contemplation of true being.
But surely, he said, the visual perception of it does especially involve this. For we see the same thing at once as one and as an indefinite plurality.
Then if this is true of the one, I said, the same holds of all number, does it not?
Of course.