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Plato's Bed: essence and archetype in the Theory of Forms

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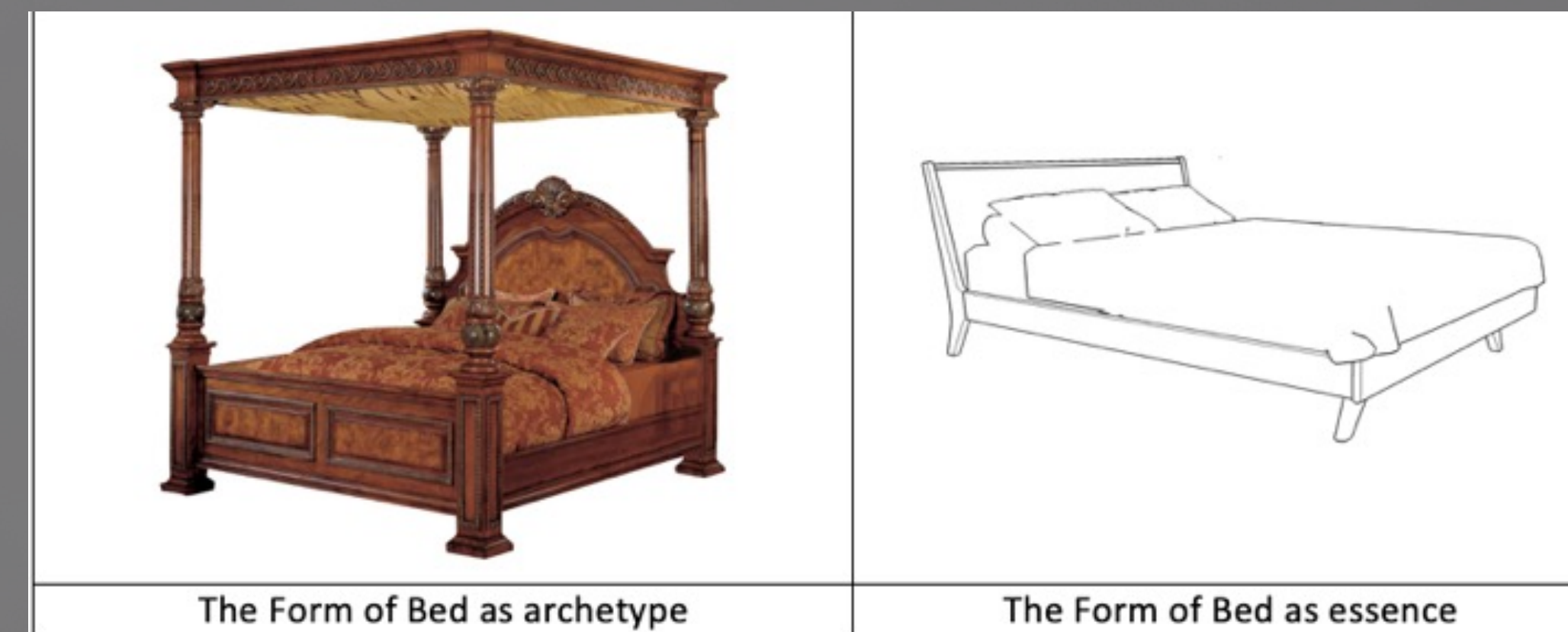
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Plato's Bed

Essence and Archetype in the Theory of Forms

What are Plato's Forms?

Everyone knows the answer to that. The Forms are marvellous entities, existing in the intelligible—not the perceptible—realm; they are single and eternal; they are models or paradigms for ordinary perceptible things; they are more real than the ordinary things that instantiate them; they underlie the existence of everything else; by their relationships with one another they make thought and discourse possible. This theory, tweaked and adjusted here and there, is a thread that runs through Plato's whole intellectual career. And, of course, reactions to it, pro and con, have animated much subsequent philosophical thought.



An Immediate Problem

There is, however, an immediate problem, which Plato himself seems not to have noticed. Are these Forms to be understood as *archetypes*, or as *essences*? Is the Form of Bed the idea of an incomparably perfect, supremely excellent, bed—an archetypal bed? Or is Form of Bed the essence of bed: just the bare, stripped-down, necessary and sufficient conditions for being a bed, that which all and only beds have in common? Just a piece of furniture for lying on? Each of these options—archetype or essence—presents serious troubles for the theory, though they do so in quite different ways. (Plato is interested in the Form of bed in *Republic X*.)

Troubles for Archetypes

If Forms are archetypes they won't be very good at doing most of the metaphysical work that Plato wants them to do. If the archetype is, say, a four-poster like the one in the above picture, Plato won't be able to claim that the whole Form is present in every instance of bed: a Murphy bed has no posts! Nor will the archetype be the definition of bed, and Forms are thought to be the result of the search for definitions. Nor will they be very good at explaining discourse: a sentence like "the bed is blue" cannot be grounded in the Form of bed, if the Form of bed is like the one in the diagram. Forms as archetypes would be awe-inspiring, no doubt, but metaphysically useless.



Trouble for Essences

The trouble for Forms as essences is even worse. The above drawing of the essence of bed is pretty sketchy, but in fact it isn't nearly sketchy enough. The *essence* of bed, while coloured, must be of *no definite colour*—not even white. A bed must have height, but the *essence* of bed must be of *no definite height*. A bed must have width, but the *essence* of bed must be of *no definite width*. And so forth. The essence of bed will largely be a collection of blanks, an assemblage of gaps. It would be like a piece of badly proofed bread: more air than dough, more void than matter, more nothing than anything. But is it even possible for something to be coloured without being of any definite colour? Could essences even exist?

The short lesson is this. Throughout his works Plato seems to vacillate between understanding his Forms as archetypes and as essences; in fact he does not appear to have seen the difference between the two. But either choice will lead to major troubles for his theory.

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