A Sense of Eidos

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By eidos I mean the essence of each thing and its primary substance.

Legitimate puzzlement might arise in the mind of a person who catches sight of the title of this journal, “EIDOS” on a library shelf. After all, is not “Eidos” the name of the entertainment software company that has produced smash hit interactive games, including the very popular “Laura Croft, Tomb Raider?” What could possibly be the rationale for entitling a serious philosophy journal with such a name as Eidos?

Of course, for anyone familiar with the history of philosophy, the term “eidos” is one of great significance. Along with its associated linguistic derivatives, the term “eidos” contains a nexus of concepts that are probably the most important to philosophizing as such. This is a bold claim and might seem, prima facie, to be an exaggerated one. In order to justify it I would like to present here, very briefly, a twofold justification for the claim. A few remarks on the etymology of the term will then be followed by a quick survey of some of the roles performed by the term in the history of philosophy.

The term “eidos” (plural: “eide”) is of Greek origin, “eidos” and it basically means “something that is seen.” The term is a noun that is derived from the verb “eido” which means “to see.” The root of this verb is quite interesting because it originally contained a letter that in later Greek became obsolete, namely, the digamma which had the sound of a “w” or a “v.” Thus, we can see this root at work in the Latin verb “video” which also means “to see” and which, as most will recognize, has become a very important term in modern media entertainment and communication. A further interesting linguistic connection presumably exists with the Sanskrit term “veda” which also designates a cognitive activity such as “knowing” or “wisdom.” There is even a link with Old English in a term like “wit”, i.e., “to know.”

1 Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1032b1-2
However, if the examination is restricted to the Greek term itself, we find a number of important meanings assigned to it. Since that which is seen is often the form or shape, early in Homer it is applied to the *human form* or *figure*. Thus, Paris, the man who is said to be “mad about women” and to be at the root of the Trojan War for his abduction of Helen, is said to be “best in shape,” i.e., of a handsome figure. Elsewhere, references are made to the Argives who are handsome in figure. Hence, the notion of appearance can be linked to it, as well as positive *appearance* in the sense of *beauty*. One further finds that it even becomes a term to mean *human being*.

A different sense of the term occurs in the medical tradition. In the Hippocratic literature, it seems to refer to the physical health of the constitution of the body and thus the term comes to be applied to the *physique* of a person, some having “flabby physiques (*eide*)” as well as to the quality and *complexion* of the skin. The term also comes to stand for *types of illness*, e.g., different sorts of fever. It can also, in the medical literature, be used for a *symptom*.

There is also the occurrence of the term “eidos” in the mathematical tradition in which it means figure or schema. Some have argued that there might be a connection between the mathematical use and the philosophical use that follows later – that the Pythagorean philosophers who employed the term for their basic mathematical patterns were an influence in the development of the more technical use of the term.

One of the most dominant senses of the term “eidos,” both in number of its occurrences and also in terms of its influence, is that which derives from the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle as well as their successors. As A.E. Taylor notes, the term is almost completely absent from the non-philosophical prose of the Attic Period, whether it be works of forensic or political oratory, the comedies of Aristophanes, and the work of Xenophon. It is used in the works of Thucydides to stand for a *phase or fashion* pertaining to a thing or *mode of behaviour*, or to the *policy or plan* of, say, some political group. In the rhetorical tradition it seems to have meant the *style of words* or the *figure of diction*. For Plato the term “eidos” takes on a significant philosophical meaning and it is from his writings onwards that the term seems to develop an elaborate life of its own. For Plato himself it serves to designate any of those primary realities which have come to be known as the *Forms*. Although Plato also uses the term (*iđēa*) “idea” to denote these same realities, and while some might detect a slight difference in the meaning and use of these two words in Plato, the two terms seem
interchangeable. However, the term “eidos,” which shares the same root as “idea,” is the more frequently employed.

For Plato the term “eidos” can be found already in what can even be called the later Socratic dialogues, as already in his Euthyphro where both it and “idea” appear as a persistent reference point in terms of which particulars can be assigned the predicate ‘holy’ or ‘pious.’ Plato is seen to have transformed Socrates’ quest for the definition of universal moral terms into a philosophy in which transcendental references were posited not only for moral abstract terms but also for mathematical terms and even concrete general terms, including thereby even artificial things, relations, and even negations. These transcendental references were posited as not only existing apart from the sensible world of human experience but also as having the qualities of being eternal, unchanging, absolute, immaterial, and perfect. They functioned as standards and paradigms of particulars which, by a relation of participation, possessed a characteristic which the standard itself was manifested in an unrestricted way. These references and standards were Plato’s ultimate realities (ousiai) and were generally referred to as “eide,” i.e., the Forms.

While Plato’s theory, in the eyes of most scholars, seems to have undergone some changes throughout his life, and while there are indications that behind this theory of Forms there lay, in his theorizing, yet another level of explanatory Principles at the base of reality, the use and mention of these eide in Plato’s dialogues becomes the center of what has come to be known as his Theory of Forms. While Whitehead thought that the wide range of notions in Plato’s thinking made European philosophy a series of footnotes to Plato, one can make an even bolder claim that the very Theory of Ideas or Forms (“eide”) exerted enormous influence over all sorts of areas of Western thinking. His own student and early critic Aristotle devoted enormous energy to refute the Theory and transformed the Platonic “eide” into principles that were made to exist and function in a radically different way in metaphysics, physics, biology, ethics, and other areas of thinking as well.

The theorizing of Aristotle will bring a dual meaning to the word “eidos.” While commentators find Aristotle’s own theory very difficult to present clearly and in the course of its development to later become more Platonic, Aristotle moves away from the transcendent modality of the Form’s existence to the eidos as being indwelling or immanent in a thing. There seem to be two senses of “eidos” operative in his work, namely, that of form and species. For Aristotle the eidos as form
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is determinative of a substance; it is the key aspect expressed in the thing’s definition as the essence or whatness of the thing. The eidos as species or kind is that which has the universality to serve as the object of scientific investigation, since mere individuals, on account of their contingency, are not able to be carriers of the universality and necessity needed for the scope and permanency of scientific truths. As such a basic element of Aristotle’s philosophy, the “eidos” functioned not only in his abstract metaphysical speculation, but also in his elaboration of causal types in his physics (“formal cause”), as objects of both sensible and intellective knowing (intelligible and sensitive forms) in his psychology, as ultimate kinds (taxonomic groups) in his biology, and as the basic types captured by definitions in every other discipline (the species as the integration of genus and difference).

The term “species” opens up other avenues of philosophical application. Species is affiliated to the Latin term “specio” which means to look or to behold, and thus has a parallel relation to its Latin verb as “eidos” does to its Greek verb. It carries the meanings of a seeing, a sight, shape, appearance, beautiful form, show, dream or phantom, representation, pretext, notion, idea, and — of course kind or species. In the course of Latin philosophizing, the use of the frequency of the term’s use for kind was probably matched by that of its use as notion or idea. The reason for this is that the term “eidos” which, in Aristotle’s psychology, was applied to the object in the process of knowing, was translated as a “species” or a “species intelligibilis” Hence there came to be talk of “sensible or intelligible species” not only in the medieval tradition but also in the course of early modern philosophy (although sometimes occurring in this later period in a disparaging way). The term also came to be applied, in theology, to the appearances of bread and wine in connection with the consecration of these in the Roman Catholic Mass, since it was maintained in that tradition that neither the substance of the bread and wine remained but only their species, i.e., appearances.

Finally, the Greek term in the Septuagint and the New Testament is also used to indicate a face, manner, or even the mint (in/of which coins are made).

The term “eidos,” which has a long and prosperous life in the tradition of Greek and Latin philosophy under the translated terms of “species” and “forma,” is quite robust throughout the Medieval period. Only in the Modern period with the rise of a new physics does the term begin to lose its hold on philosophers. Yet, in its Greek form
“eidos” reemerges in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl who used it to mean the subject of the set of predicates which could not be removed from a thing after having submitted it to a process of imaginative variation— in short, the essence of a thing. In this connection one finds in his philosophy the use of the adjective “eidetic” to designate the process mentioned as well as to qualify formal and material divisions of philosophical investigation into essences.

Derivative of the term is the expression “eidolon” which in the Homeric period would be a phantom or an unreal image; it would also apply to the shades of the dead who were only images or copies of their living selves. It could also apply to votive images of the dead. In the Atomist tradition in Greece, the “eidola” (plural of “eidolon”) would be the images that would come off objects and affect the perceiver; hence, it has the sense of a copy. Generally it can be used for the representations of men and gods. One also finds the term in Biblical Greek in a more pejorative sense to denote an idol, an understandable enough mutation of meaning, given the previous sense of copy.

As mentioned above, there is another term that shares the same root as that of eidos, namely idea, and its history is so extensive that only another article would do it justice. Just recently a book was published in Europe entitled, Eidos, idea, morphe dans la philosophie grecque des origines à Aristote (Eidos, idea, morphe in Greek philosophy from its origins to Aristotle), which was the product of a symposium held in Liège in 2001. The editors of this journal have agreed to allow me to review this for a future issue of Eidos. Any oversights or misconceptions contained in the above remarks are likely to be rectified through a review of this book.

So, in conclusion, rather than thinking that this journal inappropriately shares a designation that is the corporate last name of a type like Laura Croft, one should conclude that if Laura Croft were really in the know, she would humbly acknowledge that her own character does not quite match up to the philosophical pedigree of a such a central and complex concept as EIDOS.
Sources

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