

Plato's Parmenides

An Analysis and Response to Objections Raised

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The *Parmenides* is composed of two parts: the first section is a self-criticism of Plato's theory of Forms, while the second part consists of a series of hypotheses concerning the one, and what results if the one is or if the one is not. The first part of Plato's *Parmenides* contains four objections or problems concerning the Theory of Forms, which apparently result from the very nature of the forms. The problems break down into two main categories: metaphysical and epistemological. There are three metaphysical problems: (1.) What things count as having a Form? (2.) How is it that instances participate in their Form? (3.) What is a Form and how is it different from a particular? Finally, there is one epistemological problem: if the forms are separate existences or are in another realm, how is it that human beings can come to know them in this realm? All of the objections or problems fail to invalidate Plato's Theory of Forms because they misrepresent the Theory of Forms and/or involve an unwarranted assumption.

The first problem that is raised in the *Parmenides* centers around a perplexity on Socrates' part as to whether things like mud, men, and fire have forms; however, the perplexity seems to arise from Socrates' disdain for material things. Socrates readily agrees that there is a character of the Just itself, the Good itself, and Beauty itself, but refuses to believe in the existence of a character for physical things: "Surely those things actually are just what we see them to be, and it would be absurd to suppose that something is a character of them" (Annas 248). Unlike justice, beauty, and goodness, physical things are bound to this temporal world, and since they are so, there is no reason to suppose an eternal character of them. Francis Cornford observes that Plato initially approached the Forms of moral qualities: "...Plato must have started by recognizing the Forms of moral qualities, because these had been the main object of Socrates' inquiries" (Cornford 82). Given the fact that Plato initially began his study of the Forms through moral qualities, it is not surprising that he

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should disregard the existence of Forms of physical things. Physical things are, for Socrates, insignificant, and therefore do not have forms.

Socrates' perplexity with regard to the existence of Forms for physical things could also be attributed to the fact that one of his proofs for the existence of Forms relies on Forms being the perfect exemplars of their instances. Justice, Beauty, and Good all allow gradation: one can say something is more or less beautiful, but we do not say that that anything that is beautiful in this world is perfectly beautiful—Beauty itself. Physical things do not allow gradation as does Beauty: one cannot say that one wood is more or less wood than another with respect to the wooden thing; and one cannot say that there is any perfect wood because one wood is just as much wood as another. One of the attributes that Plato's Argument from Recollection establishes is that Forms are perfect exemplars for their instances. The argument, which relies on a relative property, i.e. equality, would break down if one were to substitute "wood" for "equality". If Socrates regards solely the Argument from Recollection as being the basis for establishing the existence of Forms, then it is no wonder that he regards physical things as being "just what they appear to be".

It seems, however, that Plato is misrepresenting his own theory and being inconsistent in his reason to posit the existence of forms. The original intent of Forms is to explain why things are and/or can be like one another. Parmenides alludes to this original intent: "Now tell me: do you yourself thus distinguish as you say, certain characters themselves separately, and separately in turn the things that have a share of them? And do you think that likeness itself is something separate from the likeness we have..." (Annas 247). If something is similar to another thing, then there is a Form that is posited over the two like things in order to explain why those two similar things are similar. If Socrates kept this principle in mind, he probably would have agreed that physical things do have forms: one wood is similar to another wood, so there must be "Woodness" to explain why those two things are wood.

Parmenides' criticism of participation revolves around two spatial concepts: whole and part. Parmenides initially influences Socrates to agree that

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instances share in their Form only either by having the whole Form in them or part of the Form in them. If it is not the case that instances share in their Form either by whole or by part, then the idea of participation is problematic. Parmenides begins with participation by whole and shows it to be absurd: “Therefore, being one and the same, it will be present at once and as a whole in things that are many and separate, and thus it would be separate from itself” (Annas 248). What makes participation by whole absurd is the assumption that Forms, like their instances, are bound to the same space. If there are many instances, and there is the Form that is bound to each of the separate instances, which are in turn bound to a certain, separate space, then it is clear that the same Form would be separate from itself because it is “in” separate instances. Kenneth Sayre illustrates this point: “By way of analogy, think of a collection of compact discs that is contained in several drawers. If the entire collection, per impossible, were present in each drawer, then the collection as a whole would exist apart from itself—being wholly contained as it were, in several separate drawers” (Sayre 76). It is therefore problematic for a Form which is a single thing, to be wholly in its instances.

Participation by part is also problematic because a Form, which is one, indivisible thing, would be divided amongst its instances. Parmenides uses the spatial example of a sail (a Form) covering a group of men (instances) resulting in the division of a Form: “...the characters themselves are divisible, and things that have a share of them have a share of parts of them; whole would no longer be in each, but part of each in each” (Annas 248). Socrates finds this division of a form unacceptable because the division of an entity that is supposed to be one and without parts is now many and with parts.

Furthermore, another problem arises with the Forms of relations if the instances participate in the Form by part: the instances of the Form of a relation participate in another contrary Form of relation. Parmenides uses the example of the Form of largeness: “...if you divide largeness itself, and each of the many large things is to be large by a part of largeness smaller than largeness itself, won't that appear unreasonable?” (Annas 248). By way of analogy, take a finite

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straight line, and call it “largeness itself”. Now divide the straight line into many parts and call these parts “large things” since these parts are from the straight line “largeness itself”. Since any finite part is smaller than the finite whole, the “large things” which are parts of the whole “largeness itself” participate in both “largeness itself” and “smallness itself” simultaneously—which is contradictory since what is large is not what is small. If participation by part, as Parmenides conceives it to be, is true, then, similarly, the equal things share in both smallness itself and unequal itself, and small things also share in largeness itself—all of which are contradictory. Given the fact that participation by whole or by part is problematic, participation itself, a central idea to Plato's Theory of Forms, is also problematic.

The notion that participation occurs only through whole or part in a spatial sense is an assumption that cannot be granted in Plato's Theory of Forms. Earlier, Socrates suggests a different way of conceiving participation by whole using the following analogy: “...at least if it were like one and the same day which is in many different places at once and nonetheless not separate from itself. If it were in fact that way, each of the characters could be in everything at once as one and the same” (Annas 248). Sayre suggests that Plato is hinting at a temporal model for participation, and that such a model would avoid the problem of participation by a spatial whole: “The fact that the same day is present in Athens and Corinth simultaneously, for instance, carries no implication that the day is ‘apart from itself’ in any way” (Sayre 76). Although it is true that any finite time is divisible into measures of time, and poses a problem with the view that Forms are one and without parts, the “day” analogy extends only to how the Form exists in comparison to the instance—how the instance participates in the Form. Since it is true that the day, or even the night, can be in multiple places at once wholly, and lack division even though they are in many places, it is possible for something to be, as Socrates states, “one and the same”, despite participation by whole.

If it is true that participation works according to a temporal model, and not a spatial model, then Parmenides' criticism of participation by part collapses

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since the criticism relies on a spatial model. When one divides “largeness itself” into “large things”, one must employ the spatial concept of the relation between part and whole in order to perceive the absurdity involved with this division. If it is the case that the temporal concept of participation by whole is the manner in which instances participate in their Forms, then this criticism is irrelevant since not only does participation by a temporal whole work, but a criticism of a spatial model is not a criticism of a temporal model. Consequently, Parmenides’ criticisms of participation fail since he assumes that participation can work only through a spatial model.

Parmenides’ underlying assumption for his criticism of how the Form is different from the particular is that the Form itself has the same definite attribute that its instances have. The criticism arises from the reason one posits a Form over its instances: “I suppose you think that each character is one for some such reason as this: when some plurality of things seem to you to be large, there perhaps seems to be some characteristic that is the same when you look over them all, whence you believe that the large is one” (Annas 249). Based on this phrasing of this principle, it is clear that the “large itself” or the “large is one” has the same characteristic that the many “large things” or “plurality of things seem to you to be large” have—namely, that the “large itself” and “large things” are all “large”. If it is true that a Form is posited over all things that have the same characteristic, and that the “large itself” and the “large things” are all “large”, then another “large itself” is posited over the other “large itself” and the “large things”. One can see how an infinite regress of “large itself” results. Parmenides highlights the problem that arises from an infinite regress of Forms for Plato’s theory: “And each of the characters will no longer be one for you, but unlimited in multitude” (Annas 249). The problem is that the infinite regress generated by the Theory of Forms shows that, instead of simplifying the account of the similarity of things, it makes the account more complex. The criticism, which is also called the Third Man argument, therefore, does not show that Forms cannot exist, but that the Theory of Forms does not simplify the account of the similarity of things.

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If the assumption that Forms have the same definite property as their instances is not granted, then the Third Man argument cannot hold against Plato's Theory of Forms. Part of the reason the infinite regress is generated is because the same term, which represents a property, is found in both the name of the Form and the name of the instance. For example, the term "large" is present in the Form "largeness" as well as the instance "large thing". Underlying this use of the same term is the conception that the Form "largeness" and the instances "large things" are both large—one cannot seem to conceive how the Form of an instance is different from the instance. Consequently, it appears that both the Form "largeness" and the "large thing" are both "large", and an infinite regress results. If that which is the genus is distinguished from that which is the species, each representing a distinct property, an infinite regress does not arise. For example, take the Form or genus "animality" for the species "dogness". One can see that it cannot be said that "animality" is itself "dogness" or a "dog", or else all animals are dogs, which is false. Similarly, if "largeness" is the genus of "large things", it does not necessarily follow that "largeness" is a "large thing". The Form "largeness" is the cause of "large things" being "large", but the cause is not the same as its effect. Similarly, "animality" is the cause of "dog" being an animal, but "animality" is not itself a "dog". Thinking of the Form and instance in this manner avoids the infinite regress, and shows that Parmenides' assumption that the Form has the same definite property as its instance is not warranted.

Another assumption involved in the Third Man argument is that the Form must be like the particulars, generating another infinite regress. If a Form must be posited to explain the resemblance of two or more things, and the Form is similar to those two or more similar things, then another Form must be posited to explain the resemblance the one Form has with its similar instances. This process repeats ad infinitum if the Form is like, or similar to, its instances/lesser Forms. To resolve this problem, Cornford suggests that, for instance, two or more men, who are similar to one another, partake of the Form Man, which is in turn the Form of which the copies are copies (Cornford 94).

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The basis for things' similarity is not "likeness itself" but the Form (i.e. Man). Cornford states: " 'This man is like that man' is not equivalent to 'These men both partake of the same Form, Man' " (Cornford 94). The reason those two statements are not the same is because the former merely states that there exists a likeness between the two men, but the likeness is not specified, while the latter states why both things are said to be "men". In this case, the Form "Man" partakes of the Form "Likeness" and the men partake of the Form "Man". Thus, there are two different relations: "Likeness to Man", and "Man to men". Each relation is different because "Man to men" signifies "what the things are", while "Likeness to Man" signifies the basis for similarity as mediated through the Form Man. Since the relations are different one cannot generate a third man because the Form of "Man" participates in the Form "Likeness".

The final objection, which is epistemological in nature, is the Master-Slave argument, which states that if the Forms are really separate from the instances of this world, bearing a relation only to themselves, then knowledge of the Forms is impossible. Parmenides begins with the master-slave analogy: "If one of us is master or slave of someone, he is surely not a slave of master itself, what it is to be master, nor is a master the master of slave itself, what it is to be a slave... but mastership itself is what it is of slavery itself, and slavery in like manner slavery of mastership" (Annas 251). What Parmenides is saying here is that, when there is a master in this world, the master is a master because of a relation to another slave, and vice-versa. The master in this world does not exist or have bearing on the Form "Slavery", as the slave in this world does not exist or have bearing on the Form "Mastership". But the Form "Mastership" and the Form "Slavery" exist and have bearing on each other. The Forms have bearing only on themselves and not on the things of this world. Parmenides takes this analogy further by distinguishing Knowledge itself, and knowledge of the truth and reality of things among us: "...knowledge itself, what it is to be knowledge would be knowledge of what is there, namely, what it is to be real and true? But knowledge among us would be knowledge of the truth and reality among us? Moreover, as you agree, we surely do not have the characters themselves nor

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can they be among us. But the kinds themselves, what it is to be each thing, are known, I take it, by the character of knowledge?" (Annas 251). Since Knowledge itself of the truth and reality of things is not the same as the knowledge of the truth and reality of things around us, and since we do not possess the character of knowledge (Knowledge itself) we cannot know Forms. Without Knowledge itself being present, or relative to this world, any Form is unknowable.

There are two underlying assumptions that are worth challenging: (1) the confusion of the perfect instance of knowing with the Form Knowledge, and (2) the human being is tied to this world alone. Cornford points out that Parmenides is being inconsistent in identifying the Form with the act of knowing, when Parmenides had previously shown Socrates that a Form cannot be an act of knowing (Cornford 98). The confusion arises especially when Parmenides states that only a god can possess the most perfect knowledge (98); according to Cornford: "...it is in fact the god, not the Form, Knowledge, that knows the Forms" (98). Since the act of knowing is distinct from the Form, Knowledge, it does not follow that if one does not possess Knowledge itself, that one cannot know the Forms.

It is clear from the *Phaedo* that our souls are not confined to this world. Cornford states: "Our bodies certainly are; but as the *Phaedo* argued, our souls are more akin to the unseen and intelligible" (99). Given the fact that our souls are more like the unseen and intelligible, our souls are more capable of coming to know the form. The reason for this is that the Forms, which are unseen and intelligible, are similar to the soul. Given this similarity, it does not follow that our souls are necessarily excluded from knowing the Forms, unlike our bodies which are purely sensible.

If it is true that all of the objections or problems raised against Plato's Theory of Forms either misrepresent the Theory or involve an unwarranted assumption, and Plato is aware of the misrepresentations, then one can raise the question: what is the point of this dialogue? Perhaps Plato is hoping that the attentive reader would detect the flaws in the objections, and answer those

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objections on his own. It could also be true that the misrepresentations indicate Plato's struggle to explain precisely the principles of the Forms (i.e. how participation occurs). Even with the responses to the objections, the metaphysical principles that are essential to the Theory of Forms are unclear. Perhaps Plato leaves the elucidation of the principles to the inquiry of the reader. Whatever is the case, the assumptions on which the objections rest are unwarranted or misrepresent Plato's Theory of Forms.

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