

## HOW TO READ PLATO'S PARMENIDES

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Plato had a simple and straightforward defense of the doctrine of participation to offer in response to the "third man argument" of the Parmenides. Forms are self-sustaining and self-evident in character and so neither their existence nor our knowledge of them need to be explained by appeal to higher order forms. They are not, in any significant sense, self-predicting and no regress of forms can or need be generated. Plato's reasons for not defending the theory of forms in the Parmenides were pedagogical. The dialogue was designed to initiate the transition in students' knowledge from the mode of dianoia to that of episteme. The Republic's account of the education of philosophers can be used to specify the pedagogical intentions which motivate the Parmenides and determine its structure and content

Plato's Parmenides partakes of peculiarity. It is not an early dialogue, but it takes the form of elenctic Socratic dialogue so characteristic of the early period. What is more surprising is that the Socratic method is employed not by Socrates but on him. What is perhaps most surprising of all is that it contains an argument (the "Third Man Argument," or TMA) which purports to provide a devastating criticism of Plato's own theory of forms -- one that Socrates seems unable to adequately respond to.

It has been suggested by Gregory Vlastos and others that Plato's presentation of the TMA marks some kind of discontinuity in his thought, that it was a forthright and exceptionally honest expression of a growing perplexity he felt concerning the doctrine of participation and the theory of forms.

("The TMA in the Parmenides," Gregory Vlastos, to be found in Studies in Plato's Metaphysics, ed. R. E. Allen; Humanities Press, New York, 1969)

I shall argue that Plato was not perplexed by the TMA and that it does not mark any discontinuity in his thought. I shall do so by first analysing the TMA in order to show that it depends on what is generally known as the "Self Predication Assumption" (or "SPA"). I shall then argue that Plato did not believe forms were self-predicating. In further defense of this claim I shall argue that there are crucial flaws in

the textual arguments offered by Vlastos and others to show that he did. If Plato did not adopt the SPA, then he should not have been deeply troubled by the TMA and we may hold that it does not mark any discontinuity in his thought.

On any interpretation one is bound to be left wondering why Plato left his theory of forms undefended in the Parmenides. In Section IV I shall attempt to account for this via a discussion of the intended audience of the Parmenides and the aims Plato had in mind when writing the dialogue.

## I

There are two versions of the TMA and they have been reformulated in a variety of ways. However, regardless of how one formulates them, it is clear that they involve some version of what Gregory Vlastos has called the "SPA." That is, "Any form can be predicative of itself. Largeness is itself large, F-ness is itself F." (Vlastos 236) In the first version, this is introduced (at 132a) when Parmenides says: "now take largeness itself and other things which are large." In the second version it occurs (at 132e) when Parmenides, after arguing that a Form is like that which is made in the image of it, assumes that the Form which is like the thing must "share with the thing that is like it in one and the same thing (character). Without these SPA's, neither version of the TMA goes through for the argument's thrust is to show

that an indefinite number of forms are required since each must "self-predicate" by a higher order form by virtue of which it is what it is and is like phenomena it is like. In the next section I am going to argue that, in spite of the fact that the youthful Socrates provisionally accepts the SPA here, Plato himself did not. Thus, if the following argument is sound, then one may conclude that the TMA marks no hiatus in Plato's thought.

## II

To explain why Plato did not hold the forms were Self-Predicating, let me sketch his ontological views and make some remarks on his account of knowledge. The Timeaus gives the clearest account of his views. I shall focus largely on it, but would contend that these views are to be found intimated or implied in earlier dialogues.

To explain the phenomena of the world of becoming Plato introduced three kinds of cause. The first is the barely intelligible "receptacle" of "chaos" -- the "material cause" as it were. The forms provide the second sort of cause. They are simply given in organic relations to one another in the one "eternal living creature." In contrast, the relation of a form to a phenomena is that of original to copy or of exemplar to exemplification. The chaos is molded or made into

the image of the forms. This latter process is effected by a third kind of cause -- an efficient causality. In the Timaeus he calls it "the demiurge."

I have some reservations in labelling this mode of causality "efficient." The term is not Plato's, and what I mean by it is not quite what Aristotle had in mind, much less what the term means in modern parlance. What I have in mind is a notion of causality as a kind of power -- not an antecedent causal event, nor a causal law -- but a force or power. It is what Plato calls Eros in the Symposium, and calls the Good in the Republic. (I shall suggest that in the Parmenides he calls it the "One".)

In the Republic, for example, Socrates says "not only being known is present in the things known as a consequence of the good, but also existence and being are in them as a result of it." (509b) Here the Good is clearly functioning as an efficient cause that is proffered as a solution to Plato's version of the one over many problems. While he has earlier spoken of the Good as a Form or Idea (508c) he here goes on to explicitly distinguish it from Forms by saying, "the good isn't being but is beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power." (509b)

He does not further specify its nature, for he holds in the context of the dialogue this would be impossible. One can only come to know the Good through a careful and prolonged

practice of dialectic. Indeed, it may be that Plato himself did not believe that the Good could be written of at all.

(See the Second Epistle 314c) I shall have more to say of this in Section IV.

In Plato's ontology, the operative metaphor is that of the craftsman. The demiurge is explicitly likened to a craftsman. (This metaphor can be found to run through the entire Platonic corpus. cf. Republic 595-598) A craftsman molds his material in the image of some model. He is an efficient cause which serves to force matter to exemplify the qualities of some original being. Similarly, in Plato's ontology, efficient causality makes the chaos (or material cause) in the image of forms -- which serve as exemplary causes.

The next four points need emphasis. First, note that the forms are not commutative universals or "formal causes" of the Aristotelian variety. They are exemplary beings. As a result, it is a category mistake to call them self-predicating. Strictly speaking they can not be self-predicating simply because they are not predicates at all. Only predicates can be genuinely self-predicating.

Second, the existence of the forms requires no explanation. Only that which is generated or destroyed need have its existence explained. But the forms exist eternally, unchangingly.

They are simply given and no explanation of their being is possible or required. In so far as the regress of the TMA is generated in order to account for the being of forms, it is superfluous.

Third, the forms are self-evidently what they are. To know Beauty I need only turn the gaze of my mind's eye toward it (As the Demiurge does in the Timaeus). Its character and nature is immediately evident. In so far as the regress of the TMA is generated in order to account for our knowing of the forms, it is a superfluous regress.

Fourth, let me deal with a further subtlety arising from Plato's epistemology. I only know what the predicate "is beautiful" means in so far as I am directly acquainted with the form of Beauty itself. There is a sense in which the form Beauty is beautiful. Indeed, it is perfectly beautiful -- were it not, it could not fulfill its key role in Plato's epistemology. And the process of recollecting it (described in the Symposium) would be impossible. However, since the meaning of the predicate "is beautiful" is wholly derivative from acquaintance with the form Beauty itself, to tell me that "Beauty is beautiful" is to tell me nothing at all. The sentence is not false (and it is not an identity claim as Allen has suggested). Rather, it is, strictly speaking, nonsense.

It can be a pedagogically useful piece of nonsense. Suppose someone is getting introduced to the theory of the forms (As in the Symposium). It will be helpful to tell them that Beauty is a certain marvelous beautiful nature. Indeed, if they were told that this claim is nonsense, they would be extremely puzzled. Such puzzlement would linger on until a rather technical account of Plato's epistemology had been given. More of this in Section III.

For now let me recapitulate this section. Plato's theory of forms is not susceptible to the TMA. No regress of forms is required to explain their being or make possible our cognizance of them because their being is self-explanatory and their nature is self-evident. Their likeness to phenomena is explained by efficient causality and not by formal causality, and so, again, no regress is required to explain that. Further, to speak of them as self-predicating is to either make a category mistake -- because they are not predicates -- or it is to utter superfluous nonsense -- because the predicate's meaning is wholly derivative from acquaintance with the forms themselves.

### III

Contrary to the foregoing argument, it has been held by Vlastos and others that Plato did adopt the SPA and that there are various texts in which he explicitly does so.



There are two sets of passages which have been held to commit Plato to the SPA. The first and largest consists of passages that all occur in dialogues from the early period. (Lysis, 217d; Hippias Major 289c; 291e, 292e, 294a-b). It is such a passage from the Protagoras (330c-d) that Vlastos has held is "the star instance" of Self-predication in Plato. "Here Socrates roundly declares that justice is just and holiness is holy. 'What other thing could be holy, if holiness isn't holy,' he asks, indignant at the idea that anyone could gainsay that holiness is holy." (Allen, 249)

The main difficulty with Vlastos' "star instance," and all of the others to be found in the early dialogues, is this. The theory of forms does not appear in any of these dialogues. In them, it is motive forces on states of soul which are being investigated, not metaphysical entities. Plato is not concerned with ontological questions about forms, but is asking substantial psychological questions about moral virtues. (cf. T. Penner, "The Unity of Virtue," Philosophical Review, 82 (1973), 35-68). Since Socrates is not talking about forms when he speaks of holiness and the like, he can not be thought to be claiming forms are self-predicating.

The second class of passages which are thought to commit Plato to the SPA are found in the middle dialogues. There are three: Two in the Phaedo and one in the Symposium. Contra

Vlastos, I believe a careful examination of Socrates' discourse in the Phaedo shows that he does not imply that the forms are self-predicating (I show this in detail in the appendix).

Under some readings one may hold that Diotima's speech (as recounted by Socrates) has passages which explicitly affirm that the Beauty is beautiful. Does such a statement by Diotima commit Plato to the SPA? I think not -- for three reasons:

First, the speech is not an espousal by Socrates but a report he makes of Diotima's speech. Second, it is not a well-concluded philosophical investigation that is reported but an oracular statement of a priestess, expressing inspired insight, not rigorous philosophical conclusions. These two considerations strongly suggest that one should not expect to find any rigorous technical points in the speech, and that this is why there is no explicit denial of Self-Predication. A third point provides further explanation. Since Socrates' audience (as well as Plato's) is just being introduced to the theory of forms, they would be astonished at a denial of Self-Predication as Socrates would have been himself in the early dialogues such as the Protagoras where Self-Predication could be legitimately employed since it involved no ontological claims. For Socrates to make a technical point of denying Self-Predication while reporting the climax of Diotima's sublime eulogy of Beauty would have been rhetorically

and pedagogically foolish. On the contrary, from a pedagogical point of view, the wisest thing is to tell the audience Beauty is "a certain marvelous beautiful nature," for this will help them orient their minds' eyes in the appropriate direction.

#### IV

I have argued that Plato had a simple and straightforward defense of the doctrine of participation to offer in response to the TMA which he could easily have presented in the Parmenides. Forms are not self-predicative and are what they are in and of themselves and not by virtue of higher order forms. Hence, no regress of forms can be or need be generated. Still, this leaves us wondering why he did not come out and offer this argument in the Parmenides instead of leaving his theory of forms so seemingly vulnerable. In this section, I am going to argue that his reasons were primarily pedagogical.

I believe the Parmenides was written for the purpose of educating students who had already been given some introduction to dialectic and who were familiar, in a general way, with the theory of forms. Its pedagogical purpose was to initiate them to the long and difficult process of dialectic by which they might come to know the "good" or "One." In terms of Plato's cave allegory, the function of the Parmenides was to "turn the

eyes" of students already outside in the daylight up towards the "sun." It's purpose was to stimulate active thought, so no solutions are given in it. In short, Plato wrote the Parmenides for an audience of young philosophers not unlike the Socrates that appears in the dialogues.

Socrates is depicted as being a young man who has studied philosophy for a time and is not unfamiliar with the basic method of dialectic. He has adopted a theory of forms, but as an hypothesis, in the manner of a geometer, with dianoia and not episteme. He is, for example, not yet sure what a form is. He suggests that it may be a psychic entity or perhaps an independent ontological one. (Compare 132b with 133d)

Parmenides critiques both sorts of accounts of the forms. But his aim is not to get Socrates to reject the theory and adopt some other. As Parmenides himself points out, if one denies the existence of the forms this will "destroy the significance of all discourse." (135c) Parmenides' aim is rather to make Socrates think more deeply about the Theory of Forms. The remark with which Parmenides concludes the second version of the TMA is an explicit encouragement to further investigation. "It follows that other things do not partake of forms by being like them, we must look for some

other means by which they partake." (133a) As I argued in Section II, the means by which they partake is the efficient causality which makes them in the image of the forms themselves. The task Parmenides is setting before Socrates is the investigation of this ultimate principle.

Socrates clearly needs to be motivated in this way to further investigation. He himself admits that he has not yet fully thought through the theory of forms. When asked, for instance, if he believes there are forms for trivial and undignified objects, he replies that he finds the view absurd, but has doubts about the issue. He says he retreats from investigating the matter and occupies his time thinking about the forms of more dignified things. (138d) Parmenides comments "That is because you are still young, Socrates, and philosophy has not yet taken hold of you so firmly as I believe it will some day." (130e) As the dialogue proceeds, it becomes clear that Parmenides is attempting to make philosophy take a firmer hold of Socrates. After giving Socrates the philosophical shock treatment that makes up the early part of the dialogue he pointedly tells Socrates that his difficulties in answering the questions put to him arise,

...because you are undertaking to define  
'beautiful,' 'just,' 'good,' and other particular  
forms, too soon, before you have had a preliminary

training... you must make an effort and submit yourself, while you are still young, to a severer training in what the world calls idle talk and considers as useless. Otherwise, the truth will escape you. (135b)

In other words, Socrates is being told that to deal with his difficulties he must carefully and strenuously exercise himself in dialectic. At Socrates' request, Parmenides then goes on to briefly explain the full nature of such an exercise and to provide him with a long and brilliant example of it.

It is significant that the example chosen concerns the nature of the One. I think Aristotle is to be believed when he tells us that Plato held that the One was identical with the Good. Both expressions are ones Plato used to refer to the ultimate principle. In the Republic Socrates tells us that the purpose of training in dialectic is to enable a philosopher to apprehend the Good, the first principle of all, "beginning of the whole" (Republic 511b) Clearly, this is the same principle as the One, for, "If there is no One, there is nothing at all." (Parmenides 166c)

By focusing on the one in his example of dialectic, Parmenides manages to not only generally motivate and guide Socrates' training by example, but to also begin turning his gaze towards the "sun."

I think we should assume Plato's pedagogical intentions in writing this dialogue were not unlike those of the Parmenides

who speaks in it. Plato must have had a number of students at the Academy (and perhaps elsewhere) who had reached a development parallel to that of the young Socrates interrogated in the dialogue. The theory of education presented in the Republic gives us good grounds for believing that Plato thought such students needed to have their eyes turned toward the sun just as Socrates' eyes are turned by Parmenides.

To conclude my essay, let me reaffirm my central claims. The TMA did not mark any hiatus in Plato's thought. His theory of forms is not vulnerable to it because it does not involve a "self-predication" of any form by a higher order form in virtue of which that lower order form is what it is. Plato's reasons for not defending the Theory of Forms in the Parmenides were pedagogical. The TMA was not a source of any discontinuity in Plato's thought. Rather it is best understood in its functioning to initiate students to the process of dialectic. The only discontinuity marked by the TMA is that between the periods of dianoia and episteme in the educational careers of the young "Socrates" who were Plato's disciples and whom Plato sought to make in the image of the original.



## APPENDIX

There are two passages in the Phaedo sometimes thought to commit Plato to the SPA. A close examination of these texts shows that they do not commit Plato to the SPA. One of these passages in the Phaedo is at 100c. Vlastos suggests that Socrates there presumes "Self-Predication" when he indulges in the expression, 'if anything else is beautiful, besides Beauty itself.'" (Allen 249-250) I submit that this expression is merely a convenient one Socrates makes use of to explain to Cebes the doctrine of causality provided by the theory of forms. One should think of it as a "pre-theoretical" or "introductory" expression, so to speak. The full text (in Tredennick's translation) is:

Then consider the next step, and see whether you share my opinion. It seems to me that whatever else is beautiful apart from absolute beauty is beautiful because it partakes of that absolute beauty, and for no other reason. Do you accept this kind of causality? (100c)

Here Socrates is not implying that absolute beauty is beautiful. Strictly speaking, he is simply referring to that which is apart from absolute beauty (in the world of sense) and is beautiful.

The reason Socrates does not make a point of saying that, strictly speaking, we cannot say absolute beauty is beautiful and uses a locution that might be construed to the contrary is that the speech context is not one in which strict speaking is



yet possible. The audience is just being introduced to the theory of forms. Both Socrates' imaginary audience and Plato's actual audience were familiar with the psychic notions of the early dialogues in which "Self-Predication" was legitimately employed and would have been needlessly troubled by an introduction of a more technical point concerning the Self-Predication of forms.

The same general analysis can be applied with equal force to the other case of alleged Self-Predication in the Phaedo noted by Allen. In speaking of sticks, Socrates asks, "Do they seem to us to be equal in the sense of absolute equality, or do they fall short of it in so far as they only approximate to equality?" (74d)

Moreover, this passage is preceded by one in which Socrates is meticulous in not predicating equality of itself. He asks, "have you ever thought that things that were absolutely equal were unequal, or that equality was inequality?" If Socrates was comfortable with the assumption of Self-Predication then he would not have hesitated to ask if equality was ever unequal. That he is careful in not phrasing his question in this way counts as good evidence that he did not assume Self-Predication -- much better than any counter-evidence that the loose pre-theoretic locutions alluded to by Vlastos and Allen supply.

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