

Can Plato's Forms escape the Third Man argument?

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PHIL2005W - Greek Philosophy from Plato to Aristotle

Plato's Forms are some of the most discussed of his philosophical creations, and much has been written in the past two millennia about them. It is a testament to their enduring character that there is still a lively literature on the topic, and no piece of Plato's work is more analyzed than the impact of the Third Man argument on his overall theory. I think that with a careful reading of the theory, and in light of the developments of Meinwald, Zalta, and Pelletier, Plato's theory is not undermined and remains sound.

It is useful, before dealing with the Third Man argument itself, to clarify what Plato means when he talks about Forms and why he deals with them in the first place. He posits two distinct types of objects, namely particulars and Forms. Particulars are what he calls the everyday objects that we interact with, objects of our visual experience that we talk about. A particular is no more and no less than what it appears, it has certain properties, and stands in relation to other objects in a certain way.

Forms exist in complete opposition to particulars, because where particulars are variable and ever-changing, Forms are constant and one. There is only one Form for each type, and this Form is unmovable, unchanging, and not part of our sensory perception. Essentially, a Form is what *explains* particulars, or certain properties of a particular. When looking at an array of red objects before us, the Form of the Red, or Red-ness, is what gives the objects the property of red that they have. Plato's terminology, and the one that we will use, is that particulars *participate* in Forms. So this red apple that is before me is participating in the Form of the Red, and that is why it is red.

A fundamental difference between particulars and Forms is that particulars suffer from the problem of the *compresence of opposites*—for example, should I be holding two sticks of the same length in front of me, they may also be different colors, or different shapes. If I am to see a man taller than myself, I might attribute the property “tall” to him. But a giant might see this same man and attribute the property “not-tall” to him. The Form of the Large, however, is Large-ness itself—it is no way not-large and cannot be.

It is interesting to note that Plato does not explicitly introduce the idea of Forms anywhere in the dialogues, but rather assumes their existence. (Harte, “Plato's Metaphysics”) Even in the *Parmenides*, where Zeno is very critical of Socrates' theory, he claims “Don't you acknowledge that there is a form, itself by itself, of likeness, and another form, opposite to this, which is what unlike is?” (*Parmenides* 129a) So as we talk about a Theory of Forms, we are following the attempts of later philosophers to reconstruct a coherent single theory from the fragmented discussions on Forms that are to be found in the dialogues.

The most interesting discussions of Platonic Forms happens in the *Parmenides*, where a very young Socrates is in conversation with a mature Parmenides. After criticizing Zeno's book that he reads out, Socrates introduces the Forms as a response and uses them to point out flaws in Zeno's argument. However, it is here that Parmenides begins to question Socrates about his theory and, quite surprisingly, Socrates is unable to properly respond. In fact there are multiple lines of attack that Parmenides takes against Socrates, and he is unable to defend his theory against any of them. At the end of this section of the dialogue, it seems that the Theory of Forms that Socrates attempted to produce is not able to withstand Parmenides' criticisms, and we are left to wonder what this means for the theory in general. Two of the strongest arguments levied against Socrates are the Greatest Difficulty argument and the Third Man argument.

The Greatest Difficulty argument is named so for it is the last argument which Parmenides employs

and he thinks it guts Socrates' theory effectively. It begins with him claiming that Forms cannot be directly involved with the world of particulars. Were they able to, they would no longer be separate. So Forms are posited in relation to other Forms, but not in relation to the world of particulars, and vice versa—so we cannot know the Forms. However, as the Forms are knowledge in its most precise and perfect form, god, having knowledge, knows these Forms. But then god cannot know anything about us, nor we of the gods, as we cannot have knowledge of the Forms. This unsettling conclusion proved too much for Socrates, and he acquiesced with Parmenides' rejection of Forms. (McCabe, *Plato's Individuals*)

Lastly, Parmenides brings up what is now called the Third Man argument (TMA). It is, at heart, very simple. Although there has been considerable debate on the exact wording of the TMA, as well as what exactly Parmenides meant, we will eschew the contradictions shown by Vlastos (1954) in favor of the following argument, taken from McCabe (1991). Parmenides starts with the premise that each form is just one. Furthermore, according to Socrates' theory, given particulars that participate in the form F, F-ness itself is not a member of the set of particulars that it explains. This is evident from the fact that the Form F must be distinct from *f*-bearing particulars. Third, F is itself *f*. That is, F-ness is itself what it is to be *f*. The problem lies in the fact that we now have the set of *f* things, and F-ness itself, which are not the same, but all exhibit a certain property. So there must be a form, call it F', that explains this. This argument then provides for an infinite regress in the number of Forms. Forms cannot be one among many, however—they are meant to be simply and completely one. It is not that there are an infinite number of Forms that is the problem, but rather, the fact that there cannot be just one Form for each property. This contradicts Socrates' theory, and is damaging to the Theory of Forms.

The Third Man argument has been discussed extensively over the last half-century, and a variety of interpretations exist. One major line of reasoning holds that Plato is unable to escape the conclusions of Parmenides' argument against him, and we need to adapt parts of the Theory of the Forms to allow it to survive. However, there have been more recent attempts to show that Plato's theory was never flawed in the first place, but it is our reading of the text of *Parmenides* which is lacking. This approach, introduced by Meinwald (1991), hinges on the fact that so far we have only discussed the first half of the dialogue. Once Parmenides is done pointing out the flaws in Socrates' theory, he commends him on his thinking and cautions that he is as of yet too young, and must become more practiced in the art of philosophy. He then goes on to lead Socrates through a series of deductions that at times seem trivial and wrongheaded. However, Meinwald maintains that it is precisely here that Plato explains how to properly interpret his Theory of Forms in order to avoid the catastrophic consequences of the previous arguments.

The important distinction that is brought up in the second half of the *Parmenides* is a distinction between two types of predication. The young Socrates in the first part of the dialogue, she explains, is mistaken about the type of predication in the sentence "The Large is Large," and so is susceptible to falling into Parmenides' trap. The two types of predication that are distinguished here are predication "in relation to itself" (*pros heauto*), and "in relation to others" (*pros ta alla*). When we make a statement such as "the x is F", a *pros ta alla* predication is understood as the common interpretation of the sentence—the object x has a certain property such that is it F. However, "the x is F" when seen as a *pros heauto*, has a very specific meaning—it means that x is F because F is a part of what we take x to be. That is, the nature of F is included in what it is to be x, and so "The idea here is that this kind of predication is grounded in the structure of the nature in question [x]." (Meinwald, "Good-bye to the Third Man" p. 379) Why is this distinction between forms of predication important? A sentence such

as “The Large is Large,” when understood *pros heauto*, is true, because it is part of the nature of the Form of the Large to have Large-ness. But this sentence *pros ta alla* is false—in this example, there is no object which in relation to others is large.

With these two types of predications in hand, Meinwald shows how the Third Man argument does not stand. Restating the fundamental premises of the argument, we have the Self-Predication premise (SP): “F-ness is itself F”, the Non-Identity premise (NI): “The set of things which are F do not participate in F-ness,” the One-over-Many premise (OM): “If there are n things with property F, there is one form of F that expresses it,” and the Uniqueness premise (U): “Each form is just one. The important premise for Meinwald’s consideration is SP, because her approach stems from a different interpretation of it. If we take SP to be a *pros heauto* predication, as she takes Socrates to be doing, all it is saying is that, for example, the Large is large in virtue of Large-ness being a feature of itself. It does not establish the Form of the Large as having a “new” property requiring explanation. This invalidates the conclusion, as it requires F-ness together with the particulars that participate in F to all share a new property. If Plato’s claims about Forms do not require them to also exhibit features, as *pros ta alla* predication does, then he is not forced to invent an infinite number of Forms.

Meinwald dispatches the Third Man argument, as well as the Greatest Difficulty argument, not discussed here, with ease. It follows logically from her application of the two different types of predication. However, others have criticized her theory because it has other implications that she fails to consider, and we will take a look at another attempt to finally and ultimately complete the Theory of Forms and render it immune to criticism.

This theory, developed by Zalta and Pelletier (2000), attempts to rigorously ground the Theory of Forms in modern terms and, using the distinction between *pros ta alla* and *pros heauto*, finally lay all attacks to rest. Their expansion of Meinwald’s theory applies the different predicate meanings to other parts of the Theory of Forms. They split up NI into two parts, NIa and NIb. The first variant of the principle is NI *pros ta alla*, and the second is *pros heauto*. So NIa is the same as it was before, while NIb now means that all particulars that participate *pros heauto* in F-ness are separate from it. The invalidity of the TMA given NIa is what Meinwald has already shown. However, she does not take into account the possibility of NIb spawning another Third Man argument. Given two Forms F and G, which are both H *pros heauto*—meaning H is a part of their nature—it follows that there is a Form of H. However, by the *pros heauto* understanding of self-predication, this Form of H is H *pros heauto*. Now, since the Forms F, G, and H are all H, there must be a second Form of H in which they participate. So in order to dismantle this second TMA that they bring up, Zalta and Pelletier show how NIb must always be false. That is, Forms are always equivalent to the properties that they express insofar as those properties are part of what it is to be that Form. (Zalta, “How to Say Goodbye to the Third Man”) This closes a loophole that later commentators attributed to Meinwald’s theory, and also addresses the fact that she failed to fully apply her *pros heauto* and *pros ta alla* distinction to the other premises of the TMA.

The logical foundation for the Theory of Forms that Zalta and Pelletier establish in their paper is immune to the TMA attacks. However, the question at this point becomes whether or not the theory which they construct is similar enough to what Plato himself meant by his Theory of Forms. While it is hard to find a complete exposition of Plato’s belief of what a Theory of Forms should be, Zalta and Pelletier’s theory does align with the crucial points. They maintain the existence of separate, unique, austere Forms, which in their terms “encode” certain properties of objects that participate in them. This is certainly in agreement with what Socrates was trying to defend against Parmenides, and it is possible that Plato meant the second half of the dialogue to show how Socrates could learn to

improve and strengthen his understanding of Forms. We are left then with Zalta and Pelletier's codified system that expresses what Socrates was unable to in his discussion with Parmenides. The Third Man argument, while at first appearance is devastating to the Forms that Socrates is trying to defend, is not dangerous. We are left to wonder if a more experienced defender of the Forms, in the place of a young Socrates, would have expressed a much more resilient theory. We can at least realize that the seeds of this more robust theory are to be found later on in the dialogue, and see that Plato may have had it in mind all along.

Works Cited

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