

## What is the most compelling argument against the theory of Forms presented in the *Parmenides*? Can the theory survive the argument?

### Introduction

I assume that the most compelling argument in the *Parmenides* is whether Forms can be known at all. However, this is only the surface of a possibly deeper assumption, i.e.: whether any strong theory (and one over all: that of Parmenides' monism) can really challenge the Theory of Forms.

This last claim needs however to be taken carefully, for the following reasons:

(A) It is not necessarily true that a survey of Plato's intentions in writing the dialogue, will ultimately lead us into a better understanding of the Theory itself.

(B) Secondly the Theory of Forms, as shown in the dialogue, is not a complete version of it<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore we are left with not enough proof of whether the intention considered above can be taken so seriously.

Nonetheless, without this second assumption, there is not a valid possibility to explore the first argument: if Forms can be known at all is left as an open question but with the positive *stimulus* that they are nevertheless necessary for knowledge (from now: '*Parmenides*' *ultimate conclusion*') and the overwhelming feeling of a 'hopeless scepticism'<sup>2</sup>.

I shall then assume that both accounts need to be considered while analysing the several difficulties over which Socrates is forced, in order to reveal the possibility of a solution in relation to what can be considered the logical representation of the argument: i.e. the 'Third Man Argument'.

### Plato's *Parmenides* at a glance

Parmenides' philosophical position can be summarised as: 'all there is is one'. This can be shown by the following argument (Zeno's Argument):

(1z) If things are many, consequently they are both *like* and *unlike*

(2z) Nothing can be both *like* and *unlike*

(3z) Therefore, the things that are, are not many, otherwise we encounter absurdity.

On the contrary: the Theory of Forms establishes that there is a single, eternal and indivisible Form corresponding to *every* property. This implies that things are many as well as divisible at least in the sensible world, and each of them *participate of* as many Forms as the properties that constitute the sensible thing<sup>3</sup>.

From this we can already reveal an important point in support of '*Parmenides*' *ultimate conclusion*': Parmenides believes only in the reality of the intelligible world; while the Theory of Forms, in order to 'save' the existence of the sensible world, is required to establish the necessity of the multiplicity: i.e. the *one* is 'present' in the *many* by means of being partaken ('The One over Many').

It is indeed possible to see a common view in both doctrines: the 'intolerance' of the sensible world conceived as an instrument for knowledge. The difference however is that:

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<sup>1</sup> Many commentaries have insisted over the importance of Socrates' character in the dialogue, and this is remarked by Plato himself: a young, untrained Socrates not yet able to support his theory strongly enough.

<sup>2</sup> A.E. Taylor, *Plato's Parmenides*, Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> As far as I know, there is no recognition of 'uninstantiated Forms' in the dialogue. But even if there was, this wouldn't attack the point in analysis.

- for Parmenides the sensible world is far from knowledge.
- for Socrates, our understanding of the sensible, by ‘recognition’ of the Forms, *can* lead us to knowledge.

This opposition can be overcome by Socrates only by denying principle (2z): i.e. by formulating an argument by which it is possible that the same thing can be both *like* and *unlike*. This, I assume, is the logical starting point of the Theory of Forms, which is proposed as a solution to Zeno’s argument.

To better understand its validity, we need to analyse some of its principles in depth.

As seen before, the Theory of Forms establishes that:

- (TF1) There is a single, eternal and indivisible Form corresponding to *every* property. This can be called the principle of **Uniqueness**.
- (TF2) The *one* Form is ‘present’ in the *many* by means of being partaken. This is recognised as **The One over Many** principle.
- (TF3) Both principles can be further rendered into the principle of **Causality**: Things that are *F* (other than the *F*) are *F* by virtue of participating of the *F*.
- (TF4) Also: **Uniqueness** ought not to be confused with **One-ness** (each Form is one) for the former establishes the ontological status of Forms, while the latter remarks the possibility of the Forms to be counted: i.e. to be a plurality of entities (yet indivisible and eternal by means of being unique).

Two important points can be noticed: in some respects the Theory can be taken as an extension of Parmenides’ *monism* (by means of the uniqueness and indivisibility of each Form); but it ultimately produces an important departure from it as soon as the sensible realm is involved (as shown in the *One over Many* principle).

### Problems concerning the Theory of Forms

Parmenides’ disagreement at this point is essentially that: the concept of uniqueness will inevitably result invalid in relation to the possibility of *participation* of the sensibles. And this is emblematically shown by two important questions:

- (a) How is the relation between sensibles and Forms possible?
- (b) How can we find the ultimate Form for each property?

Only an account that can conceive how Forms and particulars relate to each other, and is able to show how a departure from sensibles to Forms is possible, would preserve the validity of the Theory.

However, in the dialogue things seem to go out of expectations: not only the arguments against the Theory seem to be *prima facie* valid, but they gradually bring Socrates towards a confused reinterpretation of his theory.

Many attempts have tried to show the invalidity of the arguments themselves, but as shown by A.E. Taylor, only a binary interpretation that includes its logical structure as well as its dramaturgic one can give justice to the work as possibly conceived by Plato.

Before attempting such interpretation, it will be useful to briefly see some of the central arguments.

A first issue is given by the impossibility of offering a valid logical argument of how Forms relate to particulars: if (TF2) is taken in combination with (TF1) we can simply imagine the ‘complete’ presence of the Form into the particular: the indivisible Form is present in the

many particulars. However, two further principles can be considered in order to explain the Theory:

**(TF5)** The principle of *Separation*: any  $F$  is *itself by itself*, in the sense of being separated from the things that partake of it.

This principle is further accomplished by:

**(TF6)** The principle of *Non-Identity*: if  $x$  is  $F \rightarrow \square x \neq F$ -ness (no Form is identical with any sensible thing).

These two claims show the logical impossibility of the particular to instantiate a complete Form: **(TF6)** imposes Form and Particular to be necessarily distinct; while **(TF5)** shows the impossibility of a *real* integration between the two.

Socrates is then forced to assume the possibility of a ‘piece-of-pie model’: the Form is shared by the members of the set represented by that specific Form: i.e. all the  $F$  things participate of a *part* of  $F$ -ness. But this is absurd: it clearly goes against **(TF1)**: Forms are indivisible.

If no other possibilities are found, then we are to conclude that no instantiation can be logically inferred from the Theory of Forms.

I assume that the argument itself does not hold: we are invited to follow a conclusion which refuses the different *ontological status* to which Forms and particulars belong to<sup>4</sup>. And while it is true that Plato does not establish any remark over his personal theory, this can be easily found over many of his previous works<sup>5</sup>.

### The Third Man Argument

We can now move to the main argument in the dialogue: The Third Man Argument, the aim of which is to attack the possibility of Forms as *medium* for the apprehension of the sensible world.

The main concept of the Theory *in nuce* is that:

**t1** if  $a$  and  $b$  are  $F$ , then there is a single Form  $F$ -ness so to apprehend  $a$  and  $b$  as  $F$ .

This implies the fact that the *many* are recognisable under a *common character*, which in turn gives us the ‘apprehension’ of what the *many* are.

However, it is assumed by Parmenides that the logical consequence of it will inevitably lead us to the further assumption that:

**t2** if  $a$  and  $b$  and  $F$ -ness are  $F$ , then there must be another Form  $F$ -ness so to apprehend  $a$ ,  $b$  and  $F$ -ness as  $F$ .

This is the source of a supposedly *infinite regress*, whose importance and validity will be now taken under analysis.

First of all: the possibility that **t2** can be formulated is given by:

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<sup>4</sup> A problem that is overcome by Cohen’s **OX-Axiom** (see below).

<sup>5</sup> This can be taken as the first example of the importance of our previous considerations (A) and, in particular, (B) above and the necessity of the binary interpretation (see also A.E. Taylor on *Parmenides*).

(TF7): The principle of *Self-Predication*: *F*-ness is itself *F*-ness.

This principle can be better understood in conjunction with Socrates' commitment to the *purity* of Forms (from which Forms cannot have contrary properties) so to produce the claim that *F*-ness cannot possess the property that is contrary to *F*-ness.

In relation to Parmenides' assumption, Vlastos recognises that for *t2* to follow from *t1* Self-Predication and Non-Identity must be included<sup>6</sup>, so that: *t1* tells us that there is a Form; (TF7) that this Form is *another F*-thing; (TF6) that the *F*-thing cannot be *F*-ness; and finally that another Form is required, i.e. *F*-ness<sup>1</sup> (as stated in *t2*). However, Geach remarks that (TF6) and (TF7) are inconsistent<sup>7</sup>: together they entail that *F*-ness is not identical with *F*-ness (for (TF7) would then establish that '*F*-ness is an *F*-thing'; while (TF6) that '*F*-ness is not an *F*-thing').

In order to avoid it, W. Sellar proposes to render the two principles within quantifier explanation<sup>8</sup>. This however requires the necessity of interpreting the *uniqueness* of *F*-ness as 'at least one' and not as 'just one' (which is what is intended by Plato himself) in order to show the argument to be valid. But what is required is that a valid principle can be found in order to show that 'there is more than one Form corresponding to the character *F* (as claimed by *t2*)'<sup>9</sup>: i.e. 'if a number of entities are all *F*, there must be exactly one Form by virtue of which they are all *F*'. However, further conditions are required in order to define the 'quantifiers over the set' (where sensibles are the members of such a set) and the possibility of *F*-ness to be described *over* it.

This ultimately shows the inconsistency between *uniqueness* and the *One over Many* principle; briefly: we end up with the claim that 'for any set  $\alpha$  there is exactly one Form *participated in* by all and only members of the *lowest level maximal set* which contains every member of  $\alpha$ '<sup>10</sup>. In other words: we have a set of *F*-things where no Form is included in it; this is a *maximal set* that, conjoined with the **OM-Axiom**: 'for any maximal set there is exactly one Form in which all and only members of that set participate', it produces the existence of a Form over that set. However, this last step inevitably creates a new *maximal set*, yet restricted under the same **OM-Axiom** condition, so to produce a further Form over that set: the beginning of the regress is obtained.

Two important points need now to be noted:

- Every maximal set has a definite position in the hierarchy.
- Fine claimed that the nature of the problem itself is purely epistemic: the primary function of the Form *F*-ness is to *explain* the *F*-ness of *F*-things (as revealed by *t1*)<sup>11</sup>, and therefore 'explanation must come to an end somewhere'.

This together with Cohen's claim would define the validity of Parmenides' argument. One more analysis needs to be considered before summing up the final conclusion.

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<sup>6</sup> G. Vlastos, *The Third Man Argument in the Parmenides*, *Philosophical Review*, 63.

<sup>7</sup> P. Geach, *The Third Man Argument Again*, *Philosophical Review*, 65.

<sup>8</sup> W. Sellar, *Vlastos and The Third Man*, *Philosophical Review*, 64. This point will not be taken under deep analysis for it would bring us far from the purpose of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> S. Marc Cohen, *The Logic of The Third Man*, *Philosophical Review*, 65.

<sup>10</sup> S. Marc Cohen, *The Logic of The Third Man*, *Philosophical Review*, 65, p.289

<sup>11</sup> G. Fine, *On Ideas: Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Theory of Forms*, 1993.

## Can Forms be known at all?

A.E. Taylor, in *Parmenides, Zeno and Socrates*, exposes a defense of Socrates' theory by appealing to a reevaluation of the meaning of the *regress* generated by the Third Man Argument. This is shown by referring to the conception of 'common *character*' between sensibles which, taken from a sense-perception analysis would avoid the regress (which is Socrates' main aim: a distinction of the sensible and the intelligible world, which, I assume, remarks the importance of a differentiation in the ontological status of Forms and particulars determined above regarding the relation of the two), but seems to fail to be so only from a realistic analysis (that of Parmenides).

Nevertheless, by supposing that the regress yet holds, we are invited to reason over the *kind* of regress we are dealing with: it is not a *logically vicious* one, but a *harmless* one. The latter kind implies that 'for every proposition *p* an infinite series of true propositions must be generated' (Russell).

Now, considering the main problem: by admitting the regress we never end up knowing which predicate asserts the character under which *a, b, c, etc.* can be apprehended. But this is only obtained by false interpretation of the principle of *Self-Predication*; we ought to distinguish between:

- the *is* of predication.
- the *is* of identity.

(in other words: we can say that 'White' is a color' but not that 'White' has a color'<sup>12</sup>). Such a distinction should be able to offer a new interpretation of whether the Form *F*-ness need to be considered within the set of *F*-things (and consequently under *F*-ness<sup>1</sup> or not); in other words: whether or not we can accept the regress produced by the Third Man Argument.

Whether this interpretation holds or not, I nevertheless assume that it is able to show the conditions under which we can recognise Forms as 'devices' for the apprehension of the sensible realm. The mere fact that an *ultimate* Form may not be obtained doesn't imply the sceptical conclusion that Forms cannot be known at all. This, I believe, relates coherently with Socrates' *safest answer* (*Phaedo*, 100a ff.) as well as with Cohen's hierarchy conclusion and Fine's epistemic interpretation (see above), which from this perspective simply remarks that there is nevertheless an apprehension, even though not an ultimate one, in knowing about the sensible realm, and well deserves its indirect support in *Parmenides*' *ultimate conclusion*: Forms are nevertheless necessary for knowledge (*Parmenides*, 136).

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<sup>12</sup> A.E. Taylor, *Parmenides, Zeno and Socrates*, p.255.