

**Reading 5:****Parmenides and Socrates' Theory of Forms.**

The *Parmenides* is Plato's account of a meeting which he tells us took place between Parmenides and Socrates when Socrates was a young man, presumably about 20, and so fifty years before the final scene described in the *Phaedo*. It was probably written at least 20 years after Socrates' death. In the *Parmenides* Socrates is represented as having begun to develop the theory of Forms but not, as yet, having fully thought it through. Parmenides gives him advice on the proper method in philosophy: proceed by putting forward hypotheses and testing them until you have found those which best explain the facts you are interested in.

**A. Zeno's arguments**

Zeno was a younger follower of Parmenides who produced many arguments to refute those who rejected Parmenides' claim that being is single and undifferentiated. He argued by reduction to impossibility (*reductio ad impossibile*). That is he started from the assumption that there is a plurality of beings in some sense, and showed that an impossibility followed; the original assumption must therefore have been false. He is most famous for his invention of the 'paradoxes of motion'. See the notes at the end of the handout.

In the *Parmenides* Zeno is said to have argued from the existence of a plurality to the 'impossibility' that something will at the same time be both *like* and *unlike*, i.e. 'not-like'. So that there is an *F* such that it will be both *F* and not-*F*. Which is impossible. Socrates, however, claims that this is not an impossibility since we must make a distinction between the Forms of likeness and unlikeness and the things which because they participate in them are like and unlike. He thinks that there is no problem with each of two particular concrete thing being both like and unlike - Socrates, for example, is both like Zeno - if he is the same in height - and unlike Zeno - since he is of a different age. Socrates agrees that the Form of likeness, i.e. *the-likeness-itself*, cannot be unlike but he does not think that Zeno can prove that this follows from the existence of a plurality of beings.

Parmenides does not argue against Socrates that the theory of Forms is false but rather that Socrates has not properly worked it out.

**B. Parmenides' Problems with Socrates' Understanding of the Theory of Forms****1. Socrates has not sufficiently thought through the question of what kinds of things there are Forms of.**

Socrates agrees that there are Forms of likeness and unlikeness, unity and plurality, rightness, beauty and goodness. He has doubts about whether there are Forms of human being, fire, and water. He thinks that it is absurd to suppose that there are Forms of hair, mud, and filth. Parmenides replies by, in effect, pointing out that Socrates has not given any argument for distinguishing these cases. He is still young and untrained in philosophy.

## 2. Socrates has not sufficiently worked out the nature of participation.

### ( $\alpha$ ) The Sail-Cloth Argument.

Assuming that participation is a kind of physical sharing, Parmenides asks whether something which shares in a Form, or Idea, possesses the whole Form or only part of it. Socrates' theory requires it to possess the whole Form. Parmenides argues that if each of many things possesses the whole of largeness, beauty, unity etc., then each of the Forms will be "separated" from itself and so there will not be a single Form for each of the features which Socrates is interested in.

Socrates suggests that the Forms might be like a day which is present all at once to many places. Parmenides, however, insists on the spatial analogy of a sail-cloth spread over many people. Socrates feebly agrees that in this case the sail-cloth would be divided with only a part of it covering a given individual.

Parmenides pursues his spatial analogy. The Form of largeness is according to Socrates itself large and the Form of smallness small. But, following the spatial analogy, the Form of largeness is divided into many small parts and so Socrates seems committed to the claim that something is made large by what is itself small. Worse if equality is divisible in this way things will be made equal by the possession of something less than equality.

### ( $\beta$ ) The "Third Man" Argument.

There is a general problem with the idea that a distinction must be made between the Forms and what participates in them. One motivation for invoking the Forms is the need to locate standards of equality, beauty, justice etc. But if the Forms are standards then they must presumably instantiate to the highest degree the features which they are invoked to explain. So the *the-beautiful-itself*, i.e. the Form of beauty, must be beautiful, the Form of equality must be equal etc.

But then there is a problem:

The theory of Forms requires

(a) if  $X$ ,  $Y$ , and  $Z$  are each  $F$ , then there is a single form *the-F-itself* distinct from each of them which makes them each  $F$

[**Assumption 1: Non-identity Assumption:** if  $X$  is  $F$ , then  $X$  is not identical to *the-F-itself* - e.g. if Plato is beautiful, then Plato is not the-beautiful-itself, since if he were and Socrates is also beautiful, it would follow that Plato is Socrates.]

and

(b) *The-F-itself* is  $F$

[**Assumption 2: The self-Predication Assumption:** The  $F$  itself, is  $F$  - e.g. the-beautiful-itself is beautiful.]

so

(c)  $X, Y, Z$ , and *the-F-itself* are all  $F$

(d) so there must be something, *the-F-itself*\* which makes each of them  $F$ .

(e) so if  $X, Y$ , and  $Z$  are individual human beings and  $F$  the Form of human being (*the-human-itself*) there must be a 'Third Man', that is a Form, or Idea, which the individual humans and the Form of human being each participate in.

[Note the example of human being is traditional but not very plausible, beauty is a much better example]

(f) but then, by exactly parallel reasoning, there must be a fourth Form and a fifth Form and so on *ad infinitum*.

The ancient Greeks regarded an infinite regress as impossible, and so there is proof here that the theory of participation as defined by Assumptions 1 and 2 is false.

**(γ) The Forms cannot be ideas in our minds:**

Socrates retreats and suggests that the Forms might be concepts which exists only in the minds of human beings.

Parmenides argues first that for the theory to work the concepts must be concepts of something and whatever they are concepts of must exist outside of the mind and the problems just raised have not been avoided. Furthermore if the Forms are just thoughts, then the things which participate in them will be composed of thoughts, and so themselves have mental being.

Socrates tries another approach and suggests that rather than literally composing the things which participate in them, the Forms, or Ideas, are related to their instances by the relation of resemblance. Against this Parmenides argues that there must be some objective basis for the resemblance between a Form and its instance. Something, that is, in which the both share, which is distinct from them - a "Third Idea" - and so the "Third Man" argument may be invoked again.

**(δ) The greatest problem:**

Parmenides argues that relations between things are explained in Socrates' theory by relations between Forms. Thus the relationship between a master and his slave is explained by their participation in *mastery-itself* and *slavery-itself* which themselves stand in different relationship - a relationship between Forms. The same argument applies to knowledge and the object of knowledge. *Knowledge-itself* is of the *Forms-themselves*. Human knowledge is of concrete things in space and time.

Therefore humans can have no knowledge of the Forms and since the object of divine knowledge is the Forms, the gods have no knowledge of us.

**Aristotle's Analysis of Plato's Mistake**

(A) A central principle of Aristotle's philosophical method is that it is necessary to distinguish the different senses which a word may have. In particular he thinks that Plato has

failed to see that the word 'good' has many different senses. Here he sketches out Plato's theory forms and locates the central claim that the Forms, or Ideas, are ontologically prior to everything else. *If they did not exist, then nothing else would.*

(B) Aristotle's gives an account of the origins of Plato's theory. It is the result of the need to reconcile Heraclitus' realisation that the world in which we live is in constant change and Parmenides' requirement that what is truly real is entirely undifferentiated. Plato distinguishes Forms from changing things and holds that the relation between them is that of *participation*. Aristotle also notes that Plato held that mathematical entities such as numbers are a third kind of entity located 'between' Forms and changing things.

(C) Aristotle surveys the development of the theory of Forms and notes that it was Plato not Socrates who introduced the idea that the Forms are separate from the things which participate in them.

Aristotle mentions various arguments against the theory of Forms in addition to the *Third Man*. These arguments are set out in more detail in a work called *On Ideas*<sup>1</sup> of which only fragments survive. They can be summarised as follows:

### **(1) *The Argument from the Sciences***

Each science has its own proper object of study. The proper objects of a science are not particular individuals. Therefore: for each science there must exist something other than sensible particulars. Therefore there must be everlasting patterns of things, i.e. ideas.

#### **General form of the argument:**

The science of X's has for its object the X-itself. Therefore the X-itself exists.

**Aristotle's Objection:** The argument proves only that there is something apart from particulars but not that it is an idea.

**Aristotle's *reductio ad absurdum*:** The arguments would prove the existence of ideas of things that are dealt with by crafts and there must be ideas of things that we do not want to have Ideas of. Eg. the Idea of a bed without qualification.

### **(2) *The One Over Many argument***

Each man is a man. No thing is predicated of itself. Therefore what is predicated of each is not the same as any of them. Therefore there is something everlasting, distinct from the particulars which is predicated of each of them.

It is everlasting because always predicated.

What is one over many and everlasting is an idea.

**Aristotle's *reductio ad absurdum*:** This argument establishes that there are ideas of negations etc. For example non-human predicated of horse and dog etc. But it is absurd that

<sup>1</sup> Gail Fine, *On ideas: Aristotle's criticism of Plato's theory of forms*, Clarendon Press : Oxford, 1993.

there should be idea of non-being. These negative ideas would collect entirely dissimilar items, stones, fish and trees, are all, for example non-human.

Again, what the argument seeks to show is that what is predicated in common is not one of the sensible particulars of which it is predicated.

### **(3) *Object of Thought Argument***

Whenever we think of human being we are not thinking of a particular human being. Therefore there is something of which we are thinking which is not particular.

What we are thinking of is a Form, or Idea.

**Aristotle's *reductio ad absurdum*:** This shows that there are Ideas of perishable things and of things which have perished such as of Socrates and Plato. Something which the Platonist's would presumably reject.

### **(4) *The argument from Relations***

When we call sensible things equal we are referring them to a standard of equality. None of the sensible things itself is the standard of equality. Therefore there must exist apart from sensible things a standard of equality, the Equal-itself, and so on for other relations.

**Aristotle's *reductio ad absurdum*:** the Platonists hold that the Ideas are entirely independent of one another but all relations involve dependence.

**(D) Aristotle's general objection to Plato's theory** is that it requires that the Ideas themselves are both individual and common, or universal. They are individuals distinct from sensible individuals but common by the participation in them of sensible individuals. Aristotle will argue against this that what is common is not something distinct from sensible individuals.

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**NOTE: Zeno's Paradoxes of Motion** (reported by Aristotle, *Physics*, VI.9 here quoted in the paraphrase given by John Burnett, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 1892, pp.322 ff.)

If the arguments had the general form which we are told was employed by Zeno he will have begun by assuming that reality is a plurality and then arguing that if space and time must then be either (a) infinitely divisible or (b) divisible only into a finite number of indivisible units. The paradoxes show that absurdities follow from either assumption.

### **(A) Assume (a) plurality in the form of infinite divisibility:**

**1. THE DICHOTOMY:** You cannot traverse an infinite number of points in a finite time. You must traverse the half of any given distance before you traverse the whole, and the half of that again before you can traverse the whole, and the half of that again before you can traverse it. This goes on ad infinitum, so that (if space is made up of points) there are an infinite number in any given space, and it cannot be traversed in a finite time.

**2. THE ACHILLES:** The second argument is the famous puzzle of Achilles and the tortoise. Achilles must first reach the place from which the tortoise started. By that time the tortoise will have got on a little way. Achilles must then traverse that, and still the tortoise will be ahead. He is always nearer, but he never makes up to it.

**(B) Assume (b) plurality in the form of finite divisibility:**

**3. THE ARROW:** The third argument against the possibility of motion through a space made up of points is that, on this hypothesis, an arrow in any given moment of its flight must be at rest in some particular point.

**4. THE STADIUM:** Suppose three parallel rows of points in juxtaposition, as in Fig. 1.

FIG. 1.

*A* . . . . .  
*B* . . . . .  
*C* . . . . .

FIG. 2.

← *A* . . . . .  
*B* . . . . .  
*C* . . . . . →

One of these (*B*) is immovable, while *A* and *C* move in opposite directions with, equal velocity so as to come into the position represented in Fig. 2. The movement of *C* relative to *A* will be double its movement relatively to *B*, or, in other words, any given point in time *C* has passed twice as many points in *A* as it has in *B*. It cannot, therefore, be the case that an instant of time corresponds to the passage from one point to another.

From both (a) and (b) absurdities follow. Therefore reality is not a plurality.