

TWO MEN AND THE THIRD MAN

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FORTY YEARS AGO Gregory Vlastos wrote, “Hardly a text in Plato has been discussed as much in the last forty years as the two passages in the *Parmenides* ... which came to be dubbed within Plato’s lifetime as the ‘Third Man’ Argument” (“The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*” 319; henceforth cited as “Third Man”). Forty years later, the same statement is still true. Of course this is hardly surprising; the Third Man Argument attacks the heart of Plato’s philosophy, the theory of forms. Plato’s ethics, epistemology, and psychology all rest on his belief in transcendent forms. Critics such as Vlastos seem to think the Third Man Argument reveals the hopelessly paradoxical nature of Plato’s unmodern, and hence, naïve ontology. Nevertheless, proponents and critics alike have tried to interpret Plato as charitably as possible, finding at least the seeds of modern logical distinctions which, if developed, might have enabled Plato to avoid such problems as the Third Man. The problem with this kind of “charity,” though, is that the modern distinctions which we “charitably” impute to Plato can lead to contradictions which would not arise in an unmolested Platonic system. As I shall argue, Plato’s system is not only internally consistent, but it also avoids several problems inherent in modern predicative logic.

I. THE PROBLEM

Roughly put, the alleged problem on which the Third Man Argument capitalizes is Plato’s attempt to hypostatize predicates. The problem is that if any predicate is thought of as some sort of substantive entity for which that predicate is true (for example, the predicate “large” is considered “largeness,” which is itself large), then each substantive entity relies on another one by virtue of which it has the property which it in turn bestows onto others. Here is the argument as it appears in the *Parmenides* 132ab:

How do you feel about this? I imagine your ground for believing in a single form in each case is this. When it seems to you that a number of things are large, there seems, I suppose, to be a certain single character which is the same when you look at them all; hence you think that largeness is a single thing....But now take largeness itself and the other things which are large. Suppose you look at all these in the same way in your mind’s eye, will not yet another unity make its appearance of largeness by virtue of which they all appear large? ... If so, a second form of largeness will present itself, over and above largeness

itself and the things that share in it, and again, covering all these, yet another, which will make all of them large. So each of your forms will no longer be one, but an indefinite number.

Vlastos admirably explicates this argument, showing it to rest on three main assumptions:

1. [(OM)]¹ If a number of things, *a*, *b*, *c*, are all *F*, there must be a single Form, *F*-ness, in virtue of which we apprehend *a*, *b*, *c*, as all *F*. (“Third Man” 320)
2. [(SP)] Any Form can be predicated of itself. Largeness is itself large. *F*-ness is itself *F*. (324)
3. [(N)] If anything has a certain character, it cannot be identical with the Form in virtue of which we apprehend that character. If *x* is *F*, *x* cannot be identical with *F*-ness. (325)

The same assumptions are necessary for the later version of the argument which treats sensible particulars as copies of forms (“Third Man” 331). But as Vlastos points out, (SP) and (N) blatantly contradict one another (“Third Man” 329). One of them, it seems, will have to go. However, Vlastos insists that Plato is committed to both (SP) and (N). The question, then, becomes, “Which one?”

A. Self-Predication

It is not difficult to convict Plato of holding (SP). In the *Protagoras*, Socrates explicitly asks whether justice itself is just or unjust, and concludes that “justice is of such a nature as to be just” (330c; cf. “Third Man” 337). Plato’s talk of sensible particulars “resembling” the Forms further indicates that the Forms have the attributes which particulars have derivatively (“Third Man” 337). Indeed, if there were no such resemblance, then we could not know the forms at all. As Parmenides argues,² since human knowledge is a copy of the form of knowledge, it can only know the copies of the forms. Real knowledge belongs to the form of knowledge alone. (*Parmenides* 134b). Similarly, Plato’s “Degrees of Reality” theory, according to which only largeness itself is absolutely large and sensible things are only “deficiently large,” implies self-predication (“Third Man” 337). If forms and particulars differ in degree rather than in kind of reality, then they ought to have the same kinds of qualities, although perhaps in varying degrees.

According to contemporary modern biases, (SP) appears to be the assumption to reject. Vlastos, for instance, assumes that Plato would have abandoned (SP), were he aware of it. It is hard to maintain this position; it requires the assertion that Plato would say, “‘Justice is just,’ yet not realize that this is as good as saying that a Form which *is* a character *has* that character” (“Third Man” 338). Here another, more obvious

option is rejected without consideration. Perhaps Plato *does* realize what he is saying and simply does not find it objectionable. But this is too absurd for Vlastos, not to mention the numerous other commentators he cites.³ They are thus left with two options: they must either accept that Plato's theory was internally inconsistent, or they must show that Plato does not *really* mean to say that forms are predicated of themselves.

To avoid attributing this fallacy to Plato, R. E. Allen argues that statements of the form, "... is *F*" are "systematically ambiguous" (Allen 170). When Plato says that "the *F* itself is *F*," we are to understand him as making an identity statement, while when he says that "some particular *x* is *F*," he is saying that *x* is related to *F* in the particularly intimate way which Plato calls participation (170). He argues for this systematic ambiguity by noting that particulars are called *F* because they are named after the corresponding form. *F* things are *F*, by association with the *F* itself, which gives them their essential character. *F* thus names both the form itself and the particulars which stand in a participation relation to it (169). Thus, when a particular is *F*, it is *F* in the sense of "something participating in the *F* itself," whereas the *F* itself is *F* because it is self-identical, and thus can be called by its own name.

Allen bolsters this interpretation by focusing on the analogies of reflection and imitation which Plato gives to explain how particulars could resemble forms but still be less real. A picture of a hand resembles a real hand, but is not itself a hand. The sky's reflection in a pond looks like the sky, but is of a wholly different, and lesser, type of reality. Birds do not fly in the sky's reflection; only their reflections do. On this model the forms are paradigms rather than universals. If they are considered to be both, then we are back in the throes of self-predication (Allen 177). To say that a form is "in" the particulars which partake of it, in the way that a universal attribute is attributed of each of its instances, would be like saying that the real gull were somehow "in" the gull reflected on a pond surface. And if this were the case, then the form would occur both as a reflection and a thing. But once the form is a reflection of itself, then we have the Third Man regress, since additional levels can be generated by taking the original bird as a reflection of some even more original bird. As a result, Allen commits himself to denying that the forms are "in" particulars.

This separation must be complete; if the forms were to have any attribute whatsoever in common with particulars, then that common attribute would require some third term which both the form and the particular could reflect. This leads Allen to make the counter-intuitive claim that "though you may call the reflection of a red scarf red if you so please, you cannot mean the *same* thing you mean when you call its original red. The function '... is red' is, in this case, systematically

ambiguous” (Allen 174). Only objects *really are* red; redness can inhere in them. Their reflections, however, are not substantive, and do not have redness as an attribute. Rather, they are red only in the sense that they *reflect* true redness.

This has serious consequences for the way in which particulars can be said to fall short of forms. On Allen’s view, particulars are not-*F* simply because they are reflections rather than the real *F* itself (Allen 176). They exist in a different mode than the *F* does; for example, particulars are changing and unknowable (176). However, Allen denies that particulars possess “in merely approximate or comparative degree a character that the Form, which *is* the character, *has* fully” (175). That is, there can be no sense in which, for instance, the red scarf reflected in the mirror is less red than the actual scarf. For if two things can be compared, they must have some common ground. If the term “red” is really “systematically ambiguous,” then any attempt to compare one kind of red with the other trades on an equivocation.⁴ Conversely, if an object can be more red than its reflection (or a form than its particular), then there is also the possibility that it could be *as* red as the other, and this would constitute an unacceptable sharing of attributes on Allen’s view. Hence, Allen is forced to deny that particulars fall short of their forms in any way besides their ontological status.

But it is difficult to imagine how the forms could be paradigms if there were no basis for comparison between them and the particulars which reflect them. The passage which fits most closely to such a view is, unfortunately for Allen, the *reductio ad absurdum* at *Parmenides* 133-134, in which the strict separation of the forms from this world ultimately results in the unsavory conclusion that since our knowledge is only a reflection of the form of knowledge, then it can only know other reflections (134b). In such a system, the forms could be the one over many, thereby explaining the similarities we see in the world,⁵ but they could not provide the epistemic certainty Plato needs from them in Book V of the *Republic*. While Allen seems to be on solid ground when he insists on an ontological difference between forms and particulars, the further claim that forms and particulars have no common attributes leads to considerable difficulties.

Such a claim would also depart from Plato’s views. It would take a strained reading to find Allen’s “systematic ambiguity” when Socrates says, “Nothing else could well be holy if we won’t allow holiness itself to be so” (*Protagoras* 330d6). Here it is suggested that the other things and holiness itself are both holy in the same way. It hardly seems likely that Plato means that nothing else can reflect holiness if holiness itself is not self-identical. And in *Republic* V, the distinguishing mark of the many (sensible) things is that they partake of contrary forms:

My good fellow, is there any one of these many fair and honorable things that will not sometimes appear ugly and base? And of the just things, that will not seem unjust? And of the pious things, that will not seem impious?

No, it is inevitable, he said, that they would appear to be both beautiful in a way and ugly... each of them will always hold of, and partake of, both. (479a7b2, 6)

Here, sensible particulars are distinguished from the forms not merely because they are of a different ontological kind, but because they partake of opposite forms, “*F* and not-*F*” (“Degrees of Reality” 67). Likewise, in the *Phaedo*, equal stones and sticks are distinguished from absolute equality because “without changing in themselves, [they] appear equal to one person and unequal to another,” whereas no one ever “thought things which were absolutely equal were unequal, or that equality was inequality” (74b7c2). This is the only characteristic of particular equality given that could justify the claim at 74d6 that equal things “fall short of [absolute equality] in so far as they only approximate to equality” (Nehamas 114). Sensible particulars are “deficiently *F*” not merely because they exist in a different mode than the *F* itself, but because they have different attributes from it. The *F* itself is only *F*; the many *F*s are both *F* and not-*F*.⁶ But this distinction, which is clearly Plato’s, can only work if it is possible to compare “predicates.” Thus, we are stuck with the same *F* being applied to both the form and the particulars.

A further problem with Allen’s “systematic ambiguity” is that not all relations of the forms are relations of identity. One must bear in mind that on Allen’s view, the difference between the copula and the identity sign resides in the equivocality of names. Any name applied to a particular will put it *in relation to* the form it names, thus (roughly speaking) predicating the form of the particular. The same name applied to a form set is *identical with* the form named. The “is” by itself is always the “is” of identity. Thus, in the realm of forms, only identity can exist. Of course, for any form *F*, one can say that “*F*-ness is *F*.” If this were all that Socrates ever said, perhaps Allen could persuade us that this is a simple identity. However, Plato obviously believes that predication relations obtain among the forms. Most of the *Sophist* investigates such relations among the forms. For example, “motion is [identity] not the same... but on the other hand, motion...is the same as itself” (256a35). Clearly, both predicative and identity statements play a role here.

While one might object that the *Sophist* is a late dialogue, the same sort of thing can be found in the *Phaedo*. After Socrates determines that forms never admit of opposites (for example, evenness never partakes of oddness), he goes on to assert that this relationship obtains among other things besides opposites. For instance, “two and four and all the

rest of the other series are not identical with the even but each one of them always *is* even” (*Phaedo* 104b1). As Vlastos argues, this is the kind of *a priori* truth which could only exist within the realm of the forms (“Degrees of Reality” 69). Three does not ever admit of evenness (*Phaedo* 104c). It is thus different from all the sensible particulars, which partake of both *F* and not-*F* for any given predicate. Of course, Plato does not explicitly say that he is referring to the *form* of threeness, but this lack of ambivalence marks the threeness of this particular three as a form. The particular itself may become even instead of odd, but only if its threeness departs. This puts threeness on exactly the same footing as tallness, which must depart from Simmias if he is to be shorter than Phaedo (*Phaedo* 102c). Since tallness is clearly a form, in the example of threeness and oddness we must conclude that two forms are being invoked, one of which is predicated of the other. But if threeness actually partakes of oddness, then the distinction between “being” and “having” a certain character loses its validity, and the door is opened for self-predication again.

B. Nonidentity and Separation

It seems, then, that we are stuck with (SP). Therefore, if we are to avoid Vlastos’s contradiction, we had better modify (N). Vlastos himself suggests how to do this. He recognizes that Plato never affirmed anything like (N), and even states that “this is the last thing he would have wished to say” (“Third Man” 341). For if the Nonidentity Assumption could be qualified so as to assert only that for any *sensible particular* with a certain character, it is not identical to the form which gives rise to that character then no contradiction or infinite regress would follow (326). Vlastos admits that this is the intent of Plato’s theory: “The Separation Theory is clearly meant to separate Forms from particulars ... not to reintroduce the separation within the formal pole of the Form-particular relation” (341).

Vlastos is on thin ice here: he has suggested a solution to the problem of the Third Man which he must close off if he is to maintain the thesis that Plato’s assumptions do lead both to contradictions and to an infinite regress. The core of Vlastos’s argument for the full-strength (and thus unworkable) Nonidentity Assumption is a passage from *Parmenides* 130b, which affirms that “Similarity itself is something separately from the Similarity which we possess” (“Third Man” 340).⁷ According to Vlastos, this implies that there are two predicates corresponding to each form the superlative, which applies to the form itself, and the “deficient,” which applies to its instances (342). Once these two predicates become incommensurable, (N) follows. For if forms correspond to predicates, then the forms that the individuals participate in

will be incommensurable with the form of the *F* itself (342).

This argument rests on the same assumption as did Allen's: that the difference between the forms and their particulars is so great as to preclude anything from bridging the gap. The problems with thinking of the forms and particulars as so radically separate should be apparent from the last section. These difficulties aside, it is not clear that Plato affirms an *ontological* separation in the first place. All he says is that apart from all the particular instances of a form, that form exists by itself. This *could* mean that the *F* itself is not the same as what gives particulars their *F*-ness, but it more likely means only that there is more to *F*-ness than the particular *F*s we usually see. The point is not that there are two kinds of *F*-ness, but rather that *F*-ness exists both alone and in particular things.

Nevertheless, it is true that Plato seems to see some difference in kind between forms and sensible particulars. How can we maintain this distinction without affirming (N), so as to defuse Vlastos's argument? Ironically, the solution comes from Vlastos himself (albeit in another article): "a statement of the form '*F* is *H*' would have to be about the Forms, *F* and *H*, and be true because these characters are logically or essentially connected" ("Degrees of Reality" 69). After all, the main distinction between the forms and particulars in Book V of the *Republic* is their epistemic reliability. On this view, relations among the forms would be more knowable than those involving empirical objects, since they are analytic truths. This seems to match Plato's intent, since an analytic truth is something which "always is and never is not." A bachelor always is an unmarried man. It is not strictly (*a priori*) true that Simmias is taller than Socrates; the dependable truth is that tallness is taller than shortness ("Degrees of Reality" 68).

Thus the division between the world of the forms and the world of sensible particulars appears to consist in the distinction between analytic and empirical truth. And since "real" in Greek has connotations which include "true" and "reliable" ("Degrees of Reality" 5960), it is hardly a leap to imagine that Plato should distinguish this kind of necessary truth by granting ontological priority to its object. The distinction between necessary and contingent (empirical) truth allows us to provide a difference in types between attributes of forms and attributes of particulars. The attributes themselves need not be different; they only need be predicated in different modalities. Thus, (N) can be qualified to read as follows:

- (N) If anything has a certain character *contingently*, it cannot be identical with the Form in virtue of which we apprehend that character (*which is F necessarily*). If *x* is *F* (*but is also sometimes or in some respects not-F*), *x* cannot be

identical with *F*-ness.

With this qualification made, Plato can hold both (SP) and (N) without generating the Third Man regress. Particulars require a single form in virtue of which they have a given character, but that form itself requires no further form above it.

II. TWO ALTERNATIVES

In the first part of this paper I argue that (SP) and (N), properly understood, do not generate the problems for which Vlastos blames them. This is not because (SP) can be abandoned, but rather because (N) can be qualified. However, most commentators seem to prefer a resolution which does not affirm (SP). Even if it does not conflict with (N), to the modern understanding (SP) appears hopelessly confused. Vlastos complains:

Instead of asking the simple question, "Is the property, Similarity, distinct from any of the things that have that property?" Plato is misled ... to ask the entirely different question, "Is the property, Similarity, distinct from the property of Similarity which is exemplified in particular instances of Similarity."⁸ To say, "Yes," to *this question*, is to pass from the distinction between thing and property which every philosophy must acknowledge to the vastly different distinction ... between two grades of reality. ("Third Man" 341)

The problem, then, seems to be that Plato does not respect the Aristotelian distinction between substance and attribute. Worse, on my interpretation, it would seem that he confuses the two, attributing attributes which rightfully only apply to substances to attributes themselves. Thus, oddness becomes odd, justice just, etc. Allen puts the obvious objection rather well:

Proper universals are not instantiations of themselves, perfect or otherwise. Oddness is not odd; Justice is not just; Equality is equal to nothing at all. No one can curl up for a nap in the Divine Bedsteadiness; not even God can scratch Doghood behind the ears. (Allen 167)

However, this objection has force only once universals are conceived on the model of predication. "The Form is a universal which has itself as an attribute and is thus a member of its own class," Allen gripes (167). This reference to classes is revealing. In modern logic, a predicate is thought to define a class or set of objects for which that predicate is true. Thus, the predicate *Ox* (standing for "x is odd") defines the set, {1, 3, 5, ... }, as does the universal, "the odd." Indeed, predicates are often defined extensionally, that is, by a function which specifies exactly which objects they are true of (Boolos 99). Allen must be using this model to think of the forms as universals.

But on this model, all the absurdities of the Third Man Argument

are unavoidable. For let **O** be the universal form, “the odd,” extensionally conceived as the set of odd individuals. If **O** itself is odd, then we have:

$$\begin{array}{ll} & \mathbf{O} = \{ \mathbf{O}, 1, 3, 5, \dots \} \\ \text{which expands to} & \mathbf{O} = \{ \{ \mathbf{O}, 1, 3, 5, \dots \}, 1, 3, 5, \dots \} \\ \text{and in turn to} & \mathbf{O} = \{ \{ \{ \mathbf{O}, 1, 3, 5, \dots \}, 1, 3, 5, \dots \}, \\ & 1, 3, 5, \dots \} \end{array}$$

This obviously constitutes an infinite regress. However, it should be noted that this understanding of forms is almost paradigmatically *not* Plato’s own. To answer the question, “What is virtue?” by giving a list, even a complete one, of virtuous particulars would, no doubt, bring the response of the *Meno*: “I seem to be in luck. I wanted one virtue and I find that you have a whole swarm of virtues to offer” (72a56). If forms were universal classes, then they could not fulfill their role in explaining *why* a given set of objects all fit under the same heading. But this is one of the forms’ chief purposes. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates asserts that “the one thing that makes [an] object beautiful is the presence in it or association with it, in whatever way the relation comes about, of absolute beauty” (100d45). Forms are the causal entities by which objects come to belong to various classes; they are not classes themselves.

Nor are they attributes. To suppose that they are is, again, to impose onto Plato problems that are not of his own making. For if we think that Plato is talking about attributes, then we can fault him on two grounds: first, for not having realized (as Aristotle did) that attributes are dependent entities; and second, for thinking that attributes have themselves. In the system we have inherited from Aristotle, individuals are considered to be something like containers in which attributes can inhere. Again, the ideal model is a set. A modern particular is nothing more than a set of predicates true of it. That this is so follows readily from Leibniz’s law of the Identity of Indiscernibles:

$$x = y \quad (P)(Px \supset Py)$$

Two objects are equal if and only if they have all the same predicates true of them. Thus, an object is defined completely by the set of all its true predicates. Of course, this is an infinite set, which contains either P or $\neg P$ (but not both) for any predicate P .⁹ But if objects can be defined as sets of predicates true of them, then the statement Px reduces to saying that P is a member of x , while $\neg P$ is not. This again makes (SP) look absurd, because it amounts to saying that F is a member of F , and thus starts an infinite regress.

Another reason modern commentators find (SP) unacceptable is

because it implies that motion is in motion, perishing is perishing, etc. (“Third Man” 339). If this were the case, then they would not seem to possess the changeless, fixed status common to all forms. Thus, Vlastos writes, “Had Plato recognized that all of his Forms are self-predicational, what would he have done with Forms like Change, Becoming, and Perishing?” (“Third Man” 339). Fortunately, this is a question we can answer. In the *Sophist*, Theaetetus argues that not all forms can mix with each other “because then movement itself would come to a complete standstill” (252d2). The clear implication is that movement *is* moving. Plato is far from unaware of this “problem,” and does not seem overly concerned about it. Again, the problem arises because of our own notions of predication. The form of motion is always and in every respect in motion; in this way it is paradoxically at rest. But the paradox arises only by confusing levels of discourse. If a form is considered as a substantive entity and therefore (to return to our modern model) a *set* (that is, an object) rather than a *set member* (an attribute), then when we say that it is “in motion” we are describing its members, and when we say it is at rest, we are speaking of the set itself. In a predicative theory, this distinction cannot be made, because a predicate is *only* a set member. We cannot talk about it and its contents separately. Thus, to predicate something of a predicate is to posit a set within a set. To avoid contradictions in this system, something like Russell’s theory of types is needed to ensure that no predicate can be said of itself, since this would involve the same kind of infinite regress attributed to Plato. But in Plato’s system, talk of forms and talk of particulars are very much on the same level. Discourse about forms, while having a necessary character, is still talk about things, not attributes. Although this distinction is not Plato’s, forms are not attributes but rather have them. Things have attributes by “partaking of” forms which have attributes.

If we are to believe the *Parmenides*, the forms were posited to explain how one predicate could be applied to such a wide variety of things. If the form itself has attributes, then it can explain the similarities between all the individual things: they are similar because they all partake of a particular form. But if the forms do not have the attributes, but rather *are* the attributes they are meant to explain, then the explanation becomes vacuous. It no longer explains *why* we can apply one predicate to disparate kinds of things, but only affirms *that* we can. Indeed, the form itself then becomes nothing but an empty predicate, and participation in a form becomes nothing but an awkward metaphysical equivalent to modern predication. And *Self-Predication* (as opposed to *Self-Participation*) is indeed unworkable. It is this recasting of participation in modern terms which makes self-predication seem absurd.

III. A PARTICIPATORY SOLUTION

If modern conceptions of predication are not adequate to explain the relationship between forms and particulars, what kind of model would be? The forgoing discussion has brought out several criteria which such a model would have to satisfy:

1. There must be one form, F , underlying, as a cause, the many F s.
2. That form must be separate from and ontologically superior to its instances.
3. The many F s must nevertheless participate in the F itself and have some kind of resemblance to it.¹⁰
4. The many F s must also participate in not- F in some way.
5. F must be more knowable than the many F s.
6. F must participate in itself.
7. F must not be both an attribute and a substance, or both a set and a member of a set.

One more aspect of participation needs development. Socrates often says that particulars “partake of” their forms (*Rep.* V.479b6). In the *Phaedo* he remains noncommittal, but at least suggests that the forms are in some sense “in” their corresponding particulars (100d4). The many F s are both F and not- F , then, because as sensible particulars they participate in many forms. This interpretation fits with the *Parmenides*, where the forms are said to be beyond this world because in this world a form can never be “just by itself” (133c3). This also explains why the form itself is called “pure and unadulterated” at *Phaedo* 66a3; it is not mixed with any other forms.

On this view, forms become the building blocks of sensible objects. This paper is composed of various forms,¹¹ such as whiteness, bendability, thickness, lateness, etc. To see the forms as constituting some sort of primordial reality from which the world is made fits the way in which they are discussed. At *Phaedo* 100ff, the forms are described as causal entities. And this passage immediately follows Socrates’ discussion of other Presocratic cosmologies which attempt to explain the world in terms of elements and efficient causation. It would be foolish to suppose that in picking up the theory of the forms Plato loses the cosmological context of the discussion.

To constitute the forms as the element out of which sensible particulars are composed would not conflict with the historical context of Plato’s writings. Greek medical science had a well-developed theory of powers (Moline 8488). On this theory an object derives its nature from the presence or absence of various powers. So, for example, if I have a fever, there is some power such as fire or heat which is acting in me. Here already particular attributes had substantive powers posited as their

cause. Plato's theory of forms, then, is a neat extension of this principle.

Considering forms to be the constituents of the world goes a long way to explaining their ontological priority. Indeed, this matches the discussion in the *Sophist* of Parmenides and the others who have "set out to determine how many real things there are" (242c5). The kinds of things that are listed as real are, for instance "hot being mixed with cold" (243b6) or "three real things, some of which now carry on a sort of warfare with one another, and then make friends and set about marrying and begetting and bringing up their children" (242c911). But these "real" things are precisely the various things posited by the various Presocratics to be the ultimate building blocks of the world. The forms, then, are not simply more real because of their immutability; they are also the constituents upon which the sensible world depends.

Once the forms are conceived of as powers, it is less tempting to see them as adjectival predicates. Rather, they are the paradigmatic possessors of predicates. They are paradigmatic because a form has only those predicates which inhere essentially in it.

Of course, this talk of inherence is not true to Plato, who does not need to separate predicates from the forms in which they inhere. Instead of positing forms like "whiteness," which is dependent on a substance, Plato is speaking of substantially self-sufficient forms perhaps better thought of as "white-thinghood," or some such construction which points to the independent nature of the form. It is the substantive nature of forms which makes self-participation thinkable. Participation is a relation between substances in which one substance manifests what we now call the attributes of the other. Thus, Plato's insistence on the separate existence of the forms and on self-predication are not two blunders, but rather two axioms which, while inconsistent with our notion of an attribute, mutually validate each other.

To put the point in modern set theory, for Plato there are no predicates outside of sets. To say that Simmias participates in tallness, then, is not to make tallness one of the predicates in the set of predicates true of Simmias, but to say that the set of predicates true of tallness is included in the set of predicates true of Simmias. That is, x participates in F is not $F \subset x$ but $F \subseteq x$. Thus, since no set is included in another, no infinite regress arises. In fact, the problematic $F \subseteq F$ becomes $F \subseteq F$, a tautology. If F participates in another form, $G \subseteq F$, then it follows by simple transitivity that $(x)(F \subseteq x) \supset (G \subseteq x)$, or, in normal notation, $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$. Simply because the forms are "unadulterated," predication relations among them automatically have universal, unconditional validity. And because Plato never talks about predicates unattached to a substance, no Third Man Argument can work.

This conception of the forms, then, satisfies our criteria:

1. A single form F , as a causal power, is present in each of the many F s
2. F is ontologically superior to the many F s, both because it constitutes them and because it is pure and changeless whereas they are changing mixtures of forms.
3. The many F s do resemble F , since it (or its reflection) is present (with other forms) in them.
4. Since other forms also exist in sensible particulars, each of the many F s can be also not- F .
5. The F itself is more knowable because it, being without admixture, is always the same; its relations are thus knowable *a priori*.¹²
6. That F -ness is F is a tautology because the form is not an attribute but an exemplar.
7. This also solves the problem of the Third Man.

While this view shares with Allen an understanding of forms as paradigms (Allen 177), it has several important advantages over it. It does not require an equivocation in the way things and forms are F . For both forms and particulars, participation in F both involves taking on the attributes of F , but for the forms (which Allen cannot account for except in the case of self-predication), this participation is essential and *a priori*. This difference follows from the “pure” nature of the forms rather than from any difference in the sense or kind of participation. And because my view accepts self-predication, it does not have to contort itself around the text to deny that possibility. In particular, particulars can be more or less similar to the forms they reflect. On this view, then, the forms maintain their distinctive status while no longer being so different from this world as to preclude any relationship between the two.

Plato’s metaphysics is certainly not faultless. I have not even begun to address here the serious problems which come up in the *Sophist*. However, Plato’s system of participation is surprisingly elegant when understood on its own terms. Who would think that positing a single set of constant entities would be sufficient to establish the distinctions between necessary and contingent truth, between universal and particular, and between fundamental and derivative levels of reality? Of course, there may be other reasons for rejecting Plato’s theory. But before we accuse Plato of inconsistency with Vlastos, or try to save him from it with Allen, we should make sure that the problems we address are really his, and not our own.

NOTES

1. Vlastos's names for these assumptions (A1, A3, etc.) are less helpful than the descriptive. I call them "OM," "SP," and "N," standing for "One over Many," "Self-Predication," and "Nonidentity," respectively.
2. Vlastos mentions that the arguments against the forms in the *Parmenides* imply (SP), but does not elaborate.
3. Theodore de Laguna says that "Justice and holiness are not moral agents; they cannot have virtues or vices" ("Third Man" 337n). Cherniss tries to absolve Plato of holding (SP) by glossing his position as follows: "the idea *is* that which the particular *has* as an attribute" (342n). Cornford and Taylor see that several arguments in the *Parmenides* imply (SP), but attribute these "errors" to Parmenides and the young Socrates, not to Plato himself (337n).
4. Such a comparison would be the equivalent of: "Which is more exhausted, a doctor on call for forty-eight hours, or the national coal deposits?"
5. Allen cites the explanation of such similarities as the main motivation for the theory of forms (Allen 180).
6. While the example of equality seems to depend on things appearing different to different observers, Alexander Nehamas argues that this holds for all relations between particular things, regardless of the predicate involved. That is, "no earthly equal, beautiful, large, good, pious, or just object can appear equal, beautiful, large, good, pious, or just in every relation" (Nehamas 116).
7. While it is not everywhere maintained, this distinction is not unique to this passage. For instance, in the crucial passage about tallness and smallness in the *Phaedo*, Socrates emphasize the difference between what we may call the immanent and self-existent forms: "It seems to me not only that the form of tallness itself absolutely declines to be short as well as tall, but also that the tallness which is us never admits smallness and declines to be surpassed" (102d68).
8. As I argue above, Plato is best read as asking "Is the property, Similarity, distinct from its particular instances?"
9. The assumption that such an infinite set exists and is well-defined is anything but trivial. It is implied, because the statement $(P)(x)(Px \rightarrow \neg Px)$ is a tautology. However, this is only the case because we assume that if a predicate is not true of an object, its contradictory will be. This is true as long as the universe of discourse is sufficiently limited. However, suppose Ox is the proposition, "x is odd," and s is a squirrel. Which is true, Ox or $\neg Ox$? Modern logic needs some provision for category mistakes.
10. Plato keeps the participation relation vague, but most of his analogies involve some sort of copying or reflection. See the above discussion of Allen's interpretation.
11. Or reflections of forms. We need not be more specific than Plato himself is about the details of participation. The key, though, is that sensible particu-

lars are changeable and unknowable because the forms (or their reflections) are *mixed together* in them. And while it violates our notion of Plato's system to think that the forms could actually compose something in this world (thus putting sensible things and forms on the same ontological level), I have already argued that the ontological distinction between form and particular had best be taken as an epistemic one if we are to avoid the problems in Allen's account. The sensible world on my account *is* made of the same stuff as the world of the forms; it is just that the forms exist only in a confused state in the sensible world.

12. The fact that the fundamental entities on which the sensible world is based are themselves knowable *a priori* resonates with Plato's belief that mind made the world according to the (rationally known) good.

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