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Recommended Citation
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WKU Undergraduate Research Conference

Mentor: Dr. Arvin Voss

An Analysis of the Third Objection to the Forms in Plato's *Parmenides*

In this presentation, I will limit my analysis to the third objection Parmenides presents against Plato's forms in the *Parmenides* and discuss why it is a powerful critique. I will then propose that a possible solution to overcoming Parmenides' third objection can be found in other passages of Plato's dialogues, although this solution entails a radical departure from Plato's theory of the forms. I will end by demonstrating that the solution Plato merely hints at has been systematized by the 20th century philosopher Bernard Lonergan.

The general structure of Parmenides' third objection goes something like this: one looks and discerns in multiple individual things a commonality, or shared character. This shared character is understood to be a single, distinct thing—i.e. what Plato calls a form. Now a shared character exists not only among individual things, but between individual things and the distinct form. This new shared character will itself be understood as a single, distinct thing and, therefore, a new form must exist over and above, not only the individual things, but the prior form as well. This process can be repeated indefinitely and results in an infinite regress. Known as the third man argument since Aristotle reformulated it in his *Metaphysics*, it exploits three main principles implicit in Plato's theory of the forms—1) the principle of One-over-Many, 2) the principle of Non-Identity, and 3) the principle of Self-Predication. As long as Plato holds these three principles simultaneously, they unavoidably implicate his theory of forms in the dilemma of an infinite regression.

Parmenides believes that contained in the theory of the forms is the principle of One-over-Many:

> (One-over-Many) For any plurality of *F* things, there is a form of *F*-ness by virtue of partaking of which each member of the plurality is *F*. (Rickless)

In the theory of the forms, things' derive their existence and essence by partaking in the forms. For example, take the form the Beautiful-itself. Now suppose three bronze statues that are beautiful (never

mind the arbitrariness of the term beautiful). The Beautiful-itself is not consequent to the individual statues, i.e. it is not causally dependent upon anything the sculptor does to the bronze. The theory of forms posits all forms, including the Beautiful-itself in a transcendent *intelligible* world of forms that exists outside time and space. A statue is beautiul when it comes to participate in the Beautiful-itself—beauty is not derived from particulars. Particulars are beautiful through participation in the universal forms. The One-over-Many principle is an attempt to explain how the forms, which are inmaterial, immutable, and incorruptible relate to material, changeable and corruptible things. The form is not the summation of all individual things or divided into each thing—it is over and above the individuals.

Furthermore, Plato would describe the shared character of beauty that exists in the statues as something separate and distinct from the individual statues. The Non-Identity principle states:

(Non-Identity) No form is identical to anything that partakes of it. (Rickless)

Existing outside time and space, the forms must by definition be distinct and differentiated from the indviduals that partake in them. Like the One-over-Many principle, the Non-Identity principle seems to be an attempt to maintain the perfection of the forms while admitting the imperfections of the physical world. Because all material things are imperfect to some extent, if a form was identical to anything that partakes in it, it would be contrary to the definition of a form.

The principle of Self-Predication also appears logically necessary to the theory of the forms:

(Self-Predication) For any property *F*, the *F* is *F*. (Rickless)

Individual things are mere approximations of the perfect forms. The whole conception of individual things as representations or approximations of the forms makes no sense if the forms do not predicate themselves. Taking the example earlier, it makes little sense to say a statue is beautiful through its participation of the Beautiful-itself, if the Beautiful-itself is not itself beautiful.

With these principals now eluciated, the precise structure of Parmenides' argument becomes illumed:

1) a, b, c are large things.

2) a, b, c are large because of the one form in which they participate, the Large-itself, L1. (One-over-Many)
3) L1 is distinct from a, b, c. (Non-Identity)
4) L1 must be large. (Self-Predication)
5) What makes L1 large, along with a, b, c must be a form (One-over-Many)
6) This form is distinct from a, b, c, and L1. This new form will be L2. (Non-Identity)
7) L2 is large, too (Self-Predication) (Rickless)

By repeating the steps, the process will repeat indefinately. As Parmenides notes, "[the] forms will no longer be one, but an indefinate number" (132b). Immediately numerous question arise: why is this infinite regress even a problem at all, what gave rise to the theory of the forms in the first place, and how can the difficulty be avoided?

Most basically, the third man argument is a powerful critique of Plato's theory of the forms because it undercuts his entire theory of knowledge. In Plato's epistemology, true knowledge is ascertained when the reason comes to grasp and understand the forms themselves. But if the forms can never be grasped because there are always greater forms above and beyond whatever the reason grasps, it follows that there can never be true knowledge. This inevitability leads Plato directly to the conclusion he sought to avoid in formulating his theory of the form—epistemic uncertainty. Plato believed by positing the forms in an intelligible, transcendent world and assuming their ontology, that he could overcome epistemic relativity. Agreement of what is true is possible when everyone "sees" the forms properly. However, the endeavour is doomed to failure from the very beginning because it is founded upon a poorly conceieved metaphor.

Constantly in his dialogues, Plato invokes the metaphor of grasping truth as a sort of "sight." The forms exists somwhere outside of the mind and for an individual to come to have true knowledge of them, they must come to turn their minds-eye towards them. No where is this conception of "knowledge as sight" more clearly demonstrated than in Plato's analogy of the sun in the *Republic*. Seeking to show how the Good is somehow beyond being and also the cause of the forms being known, Plato invokes

the"knowledge as sight" metaphor at great length. Writes Plato, "think about the soul in the same way [that is, like eyes seeing an object illuminated by the sun]. When it focuses on something that is illuminated both by truth and what is, it understands, knows, and manifestly possesses understanding" (Republic 508d). Epistemic relativity is avoided so long as people "look" at the forms the proper way.

But although this metaphor is apt for achieving Plato's ends, numerous problems arise. If the forms exist outside of time and space, how is it that we come to know them? How do we even know what we are looking for, and if we do find it, how will we know to stop? According to Plato, it cannot be through the senses because they only perceieve likeness and shadows of true reality. In the *Meno*, Plato proposes that all learning is nothing more than recollection of priorly learned knowledge:

> As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both in virtue and other things. (81b)

Here, Plato overcomes his difficulty only by introducing an explanation that results in more difficulties than it overcomes. How did the soul come to know the forms in the first place? How does this knowledge of the immarterial perfections help us come to know the material imperfections of common experience? Plato's conception of knowing as recollection is ineffectual in answering these questions, and worse, glaringly oblivious to basic processes occuring in all acts of learning.

Interestingly, however, although his theory of recollection dismisses the psychology of learning, Plato does recognizing what is occuring in learning. In the analogy of the divided line in the *Republic*, Plato seems more open to acknowledging knowledge as a process. Although he is still unwilling to divorce himself from belief in the forms and the metaphor of knowledge-as-seeing, Plato does recognize that learning seems to consistenly follow an underlying structure. There is no need to depend upon a theory of recollection to explain knowledge of things in the intelligible world, so long as there exists a method for dealing with abstractions. Mathematical and geometrical truths can be ascertained by beginning with an image, formulating and supposing hypothesis, and drawing them out to a conclusion (Republic 510b). So long the hypothesis are accepted, relativity is avoided because an underlying structure guides them to a conclusion. As Plato writes, "going from these first principles through the

remaining steps, they arrive in full agreement at the point they set out to reach in their investigation (Republic 510c). Here knowledge is presented not as a seeing of forms, but as a process.

Another example of knowledge-as-process can be seen in story of the slave boy in the *Meno*. In the passage, Socrates asks an uneducated slave boy, who possess no knowledge of geometry, to double the area of a 2 x 2 feet square. It is crucial to note the exact processes that occur in the passage. First, it begins with a question. Socrates inquires of the boy to double the area of a square. If the boy had not been questioned it is unlikely he would ever ascertain this knowledge. Next, he accepts numerous geometical suppositions such as a square is an enclosed figure with four equal sides and four interior right angles. With this knowledge, Socrates draws an approximation of a square upon the ground. The boy then hypothesizes that to double the area of the square the length of the sides must be doubled. When he realizes that his hypothesis is in error he continues reformulate it until he comes to the conclusion that the interior square of a squre with sides double the length of the original square is exactly double the area of a 2x2 square. Note that when the boys hypothesis proved insufficient he could check and with an understanding of the properties of a square determine where he went wrong. When he came to the correct answer he knew to end his inquiry because there was nothing more to determine—the concept of a square and the accidental information of the particular occaison completely matched. Interestingly, Plato uses this passage as a demonstration of recollection, although there is no logical demand to do so. It would seem Plato maintains his theory of recollection simply because to admit the knowledge-as-process that the boy demonstrates would void the theory of the forms.

Yet, if Plato is to overcome the third-man argument of Parmenides, this is exactly solution he must take. By understanding knowledge as a process, there is no fear of an infinite regression of forms or a total epistemic uncertainty. In fact, by understaning knowledge as a process and allowing the individual to fix the terms and conditions of things' relations, Plato could not only overcome the third-man argument but all of Parmenides objections.

The potential of this approach is exemplified in the philosophy of Bernard Lonergan. In his book *Insight*, Lonergan examines the process that results in coming to understand something, or as he prefers,

grasping insights. The process is remarkably similar to the account of learning Plato gives in the *Meno*. The five key characterisitics he attributes to the process of insight can be readily seen in the slave-boy passage. The first characteristic is that insight "comes as a relesase to the tension of inquiry" (Lonergan 28). The slave boy would never have learned to double the area of a square if he had not first been questioned—he would have no impetus to begin the process of learning. Next, "insight comes suddenly and unexpectedly" (29). When the slave boy came to grasp the correct answer to the question it was a sudden event when he realized how all the parts of the square and interior square related. The process was not sudden, but his understanding was. Thirdly, "insight is a function, not of outer circumstances, but of inner conditions" (29). Had the boy been distracted by other mental activities it is perhaps likely that he never would grasp the insight. Fourthly, "insight pivots between the concrete and the abstract" (30). Once the boy had grasped the relation between the parts of the square he can repeat the process of doubling a squares area indefinately. All the inessential, accidental qualities of the exact problem he attended to do not prevent him from realizing the universality of the insight he grasped. He could now double a square's area no matter its size. Finally, Lonergan notes that "insight passes into the haibitual texture of one's mind" (30). What seemed difficult to the boy moments earlier now seems fairly obvious. After grasping the insight it does not cease to be known, but is held and used as the foundation of future insights.

At no point in his description of learning does Lonergan ever feel obligated to posit perfect forms in a transcendent, intelligible realm. Instead, the mere process of defining terms suffices. Let us again return a final time to the story of the slave boy in the *Meno*.

Lonergan draws a distinction between concepts and images to highlight what is occuring in the process of learning. Concepts extend beyond Plato's visible and are the perfections that are approximated in images. For example, in the *Meno* passage Socrates draws an image of square on the ground. This image is not truly a square because it exists in three-dimensions, has imperfect angles, unequal sides, etc. However, both recognize it as a square because they have already grasped what an ideal square is in their minds. It is sensless to appeal to a form of a square to account for their grasping of something that exists

outside time and space. What they grasp is the *definition* of a square—Socrates the explanatory and the boy the nominal definition. There is no neeed to give the form the Square-itself an ontological status greater than ourselves, merely supposing the definition of a square its properties can be worked out and ascertaned. True squares exist no where other than in concepts in our minds. Plato's inability to recognize that there is no logical necessity for concepts in the mind to directly relate to exterior forms with proper ontological status is one of the prime reasons for his unwillingness to abandon the theory of the forms. Afterall, Plato has Socrates concede to Parmenides, thoughts must be thoughts of *something (Parmenides* 132c).

But the new question asked is, "how do ideal definitions come into being?" And also, "if definitions are produced by individuals doesn't that lead to the epistemic relativity Plato sought to avoid?" Lonergan's account of learning answers these objections simply enough. Definitions arise out of the process of inquiry and learning themselves. Lonergan points out "definitions do not occur in a private vacuum of their own. They emerge in solidarity with experiences, images, questions, and insights" (36). As we inquire into the nature of things, we grasp the interrelation of the various parts of things. Understanding this interrelation allows us to prescribe a definition of an ideal something. Take one thousand distinct squares. The shared character that is common to all of them would be used to formulate a definition of a square. At no point is a form necessary—the concept of a square resides in our minds. Definition matches the approximations in experience.

To the second objection, that individuals producing definitions will result in an epistemic relativity, Lonergan stresses that definitions arise out of things relationships to one another. For example take the color red. Experienced subjectively, I can never know if the color red I see is exactly the color red that you see. But that does not mean that you and I may never come to agreement that we are experiencing the same thing. If we understand the color red as the wavelength of visible light that is reflect off an object, we can come to an objective agreement of what "red" is. Red is so-and-so wavelength of light that is reflected off objects that absorb all other wavelengths of light. Relativity is

avoided because we have framed the objects in relation to one another, not ourselves. Understanding is thus grasping the structure and interrelation of reality, not "seeing" an intelligible world of forms.

In this presentation, I have hoped to demonstrate why Parmenides third objection in *Parmenides* is a powerful critique of the forms, why the theory of forms is doomed to this problem from its very outset, and finally to provide a solution to it, although this entails abandoning the theory of the forms.

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