



The Third Man Argument in the Parmenides

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THE THIRD MAN ARGUMENT IN THE *PARMENIDES*

HARDLY a text in Plato has been discussed as much in the last forty years¹ as the two passages in the *Parmenides* purporting to prove that the Theory of Forms involves an infinite regress, which came to be dubbed within Plato's lifetime the "Third Man" Argument. A flood of light has been thrown both on the meaning of the text and on its philosophical implications. Yet in spite of this, disagreement continues. Is the Third Man Argument a valid objection to the Theory of Forms? Did Plato believe that it was valid? One can find acute and learned critics on both sides of both of these basic questions. I write as the beneficiary of their controversies, but not in a controversial spirit. If any progress in agreement is to be made at this juncture it must come from some advance in understanding of the logical structure of the Argument. To this end I shall pursue its analysis further than I think anyone has yet found it profitable to push it. This will be the task of Section I. I shall then consider in Section II what this may teach us about the Theory of Forms and also about the state of mind in which Plato held this theory when he

¹ I list the major contributions:

A. E. Taylor, "Parmenides, Zeno, and Socrates," in *Philosophical Studies* (London, 1934); reprinted from *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XVI (1915-1916).

F. Goblott, "Le Troisième Homme chez Platon," *Revue d'Histoire de la Philosophie*, III (1929), 473 ff.

W. F. R. Hardie, *A Study in Plato* (Oxford, 1936), pp. 88 ff.

F. M. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides* (London, 1939), pp. 87-95.

G. Ryle, "Plato's Parmenides," *Mind*, n.s., XLVIII (1939), 129 ff. (especially pp. 136-140).

R. Robinson, "Plato's Parmenides," *Classical Philology*, XXXVII (1942), 51 ff.

H. Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato and the Academy*, I (Baltimore, 1944), *passim*, but especially pp. 231 ff., 284 ff., 375, and 500 ff.

D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 86 ff.

G. E. L. Owen, "The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's Dialogues," *Classical Quarterly*, n.s., III (1953), 79 ff. at 83.

To works in this list I shall refer hereafter merely by the author's name.

turned against it that battery of objections of which the Third Man Argument is the most interesting and the most instructive.

I. ANALYSIS OF THE ARGUMENT

A. *The First Version, Parmenides* 132a1-b2

"I suppose this is what leads you to suppose that there is in every case a single Form: When several things seem large to you, it seems perhaps that there is a single Form which is the same in your view of all of them. Hence you believe that Largeness is a single thing."²

This is the first step of the Argument, and may be generalized as follows:

(A1) If a number of things, *a*, *b*, *c*, are³ all *F*, there must be a single Form, *F*-ness, in virtue of which we apprehend *a*, *b*, *c*, as all *F*.⁴

Here '*F*' stands for any discernible character or property. The use of the same symbol, '*F*,' in '*F*-ness,' the symbolic representation of the "single Form,"⁵ records the identity of the character discerned in the particular ("large") and conceived in the Form ("Largeness") through which we see that this, or any other, particular has this character. On the substantive meaning of the various terms in Plato's statement and in my transcript of it, I have nothing to say just now. Plato's argument professes to be a deductive argument and I propose to treat it as a formal structure of inference from premises, stated or implied. For this reason, I raise no questions about the Theory of Forms and presume no more information about it than I can extract from the text

² For this and subsequent translations I have consulted Cornford, *op. cit.*, and A. E. Taylor, *Plato's Parmenides* (Oxford, 1934), and mainly followed Cornford. My main concern has been to translate as literally as possible.

³ I say "are," where Plato's text above says only "seem." But the difference is immaterial to the argument. A few lines later Plato speaks of the large things as "participating" in Largeness (132a11), which is his way of saying that they are large (so far as particulars *are* anything at all) and do not merely appear such. Cf. also *Parm.* 130e5-131a2.

⁴ In the last clause I merely make explicit an assumption which is implicit throughout the argument and is stated in the second step, 132a7-8.

⁵ That *F* and *F*-ness are logically and ontologically distinct is crucial to the argument. Cf. below, n. 39.

before me. And what is supplied in its first step is, I trust, fully contained in (A₁).

“What then if you similarly view mentally Largeness itself and the other large things? Will not a single Largeness appear once again, in virtue of which all these (*sc.* Largeness and the other large things) appear large?—It seems so.—Consequently another Form of Largeness will appear, over and above Largeness itself and the things which participate in it.”

This is the second step:

(A₂) If *a*, *b*, *c*, and *F*-ness are all *F*, there must be another Form, *F*₁-ness, in virtue of which we apprehend *a*, *b*, *c*, and *F*-ness as all *F*.

Now merely to compare (A₂) with (A₁) above is to see a discrepancy in the reasoning which, so far as I know, has never been noticed before, though it leaps to the eye the moment one takes the trouble to transcribe the full content of the two steps in symbolic form. In (A₁) we are told that if several things are all *F*, they are all seen as such in virtue of *F*-ness. But (A₂) tells us that if several things are all *F*, they are all seen as such not because of *F*-ness, but because of a Form other than *F*-ness, namely, *F*₁-ness. To be sure, there is a difference in the protasis of (A₁) and (A₂), and this is doubtless what has misled patrons or critics of the Argument: (A₂) includes, while (A₁) does not, *F*-ness, among the things which have the property, *F*. The significance of the assumption which prompts this inclusion will be discussed directly, and will indeed remain the most important single issue throughout the whole of this paper. But if we simply stick to the logical form of the two statements, the disparity of reasoning ⁶ as between (A₁) and (A₂) remains glaringly abrupt and unwarranted.

⁶ A fastidious reader may be displeased at the vagueness of this expression. I could speak more definitely of a *non sequitur* (and, to simplify matters, will do so hereafter). But this is to understate the faultiness of the reasoning, which can only be fully stated in a proposition whose assertion is not necessary to my argument in the text and whose proof would have exceeded Plato's technical resources: *The joint assertion of (A₁) and (A₂) implies that the protaseis of (A₁) and (A₂) are mutually inconsistent*; and since the Argument assumes that both of the latter *can* be asserted (i.e., that it is true that there are large particulars, and that Largeness and the large particulars are all large), the joint

Is there then no way to get around the difficulty? There certainly would be, if (A2) could be changed to read:

(A2a) If a , b , c , and F -ness are all F_1 , there must be another Form, F_1 -ness, etc.

Is there any chance that this is what Plato did say, and that I missed it in my transcript of his argument at (A2) above? I think, none. We need only refer back to the text to verify the fact that (A2), not (A2a), is the information it supplies. All it asks of us is to "view mentally" Largeness and "the other large things" and find the Form in virtue of which *all* of these "appear large." It does *not* invite us to discern a *new* character, not large, but large₁ (whatever this may mean), and having satisfied ourselves that a , b , c , and Largeness are all large₁ to infer, *pari passu* with (A1), the existence of Largeness₁.

Now it might be claimed that though (A2a) is not what Plato said, it is nonetheless what he meant. This proposal should be advanced, and entertained, with the gravest misgivings, since Plato is anything but a careless writer, and his vocabulary suffers from no limitation which would have kept him from saying (A2a), if he had meant (A2a). Still, the issue being crucial to the whole course of the argument, let us give the proposal its day in court. Would this improvement of the text be an improvement of the argument? The answer is, surely, that it would not. For the purpose of the second step in the Argument is to con-

assertion of (A1) and (A2) is absolutely precluded. The proof of the italicized proposition is as follows:

$p = a, b, c$ are F .

$q = a, b, c$ are seen as F in virtue of F -ness.

$\sim q = a, b, c$ are seen as F in virtue of F_1 -ness, where F_1 -ness $\neq F$ -ness.

$r = F$ -ness is F .

$s = F$ -ness is seen as F in virtue of F_1 -ness, where F_1 -ness $\neq F$ -ness.

(It will be noticed that, to reduce the length of the ensuing proof, I have put as $\sim q$ a proposition that is not strictly the negate of q but whose truth-value is equivalent to that of the latter, since we may take it for granted that it can not be true that x, y, z are seen as F in virtue of F -ness and also in virtue of a Form other than F -ness.)

Then, (A1) = $p \supset q$.

(A2) = $(p.r) \supset (\sim q.s)$.

But $(\sim q.s) \supset \sim q$; therefore, $(p.r) \supset \sim q$; hence, $q \supset \sim (p.r)$.

But since $p \supset q$, (A1), it follows that $p \supset \sim (p.r)$, i.e., that the protaseis of (A1) and (A2) are mutually inconsistent.

vince us of the existence of a new Form of Largeness, "over and above Largeness itself." This purpose would be defeated if the protasis of the second step were as questionable as its apodosis. And is not this precisely what would happen, if the proposal were adopted? The second step would then begin: 'If there are large₁ things . . .'; and how could we then help retorting, "If, indeed," and ask for reasons why there must? In the case of (A₁), the protasis offers no trouble at all; for who would gainsay that there are (or appear to be) a number of large things? But here the matter is absolutely different. Everyone has seen large things; but who has ever seen a large₁ thing or set of things? If Plato had meant to offer such an assertion as the *if*-clause of an *if-then* statement, he would surely have seen that it cries aloud for justification, and would never have moved on to the *then*-clause, without stopping to interpolate reasons for the *if*-clause itself. And to do this he would have had to change the whole form of his argument. The burden of the second step would have then become to establish the existence of things that have the remarkable property, large₁. I am not saying that such an argument could not be made.⁷ All I am saying is that, had it been made,

⁷ It could not be made at all without anticipating the results of Sec. II. If the anticipation be permitted, the argument can be reconstructed as follows: Largeness is large in a different (superlative) sense (which follows from the Degrees-of-Reality Theory in Sec. II) from that in which particulars are large. So,

(i) Largeness is large₁.

But the large particulars and the large₁ Form have something in common; call this—the determinable, of which large and large₁ are determinates—large₂. It then follows that

(ii) Largeness and the large particulars
are all large₂.

Having completed this detour we would now have warrant for asserting a suitable variant of (A_{2a}), which would now read

(A_{2a}₁) If *a*, *b*, *c*, and *F*-ness are all *F*₂,
there must be a Form other than *F*-ness,
namely, *F*₂-ness.

It will be noticed that (A_{2a}₁) would no longer be the *second* step of the Argument but, at the very least, the third; the existence of the predicate *F*₁ would have to be proved not as the common predicate of *F*-ness and the *F* particulars, but as the distinctive property of *F*-ness; and the common predicate of *F*-ness and the *F* particulars would not be *F*₁, but *F*₂—all of which is a far cry from Plato's argument in the text before us, and, I trust, will convince the

the second step of the Third Man Argument would have been entirely different from what it is. And since my purpose is to analyze the argument Plato gives us, instead of one he might have given, I have no choice but to consign to the waste basket the suggestion that (A2a) is what Plato meant. We are then left, where we started, with (A2) staring us in the face.

Now if this is all we had to go by, (A1) in the first step, and (A2) in the second, could anyone say that the Third Man Argument was logically valid? Clearly there must have been something more in Plato's mind than the information supplied at (A1), which made the transition to (A2) appear to him not only permissible, but plausible. What could this be? A full answer to this question would send us rummaging into other texts to discover what further assumptions Plato made about his Theory of Forms. But this would have to anticipate Section II. Let us content ourselves now with a more modest question: What are the simplest premises, not given in the present Argument, which would have to be added to its first step, to make (A2) a legitimate conclusion?

We need, first of all, what I propose to call the Self-Predication Assumption:

(A3) Any Form can be predicated of itself. Largeness is itself large. *F*-ness is itself *F*.

I have alluded to this already. Clearly it is necessary, for were it not true, the protasis of (A2) would be certainly false; if *F*-ness were not *F*, it would be false to say that *a*, *b*, *c*, and *F*-ness are all *F*. The credit for recognizing that this is an indispensable, though suppressed, premise of the Third Man Argument goes to A. E. Taylor.⁸ He thereby opened the way to a correct understanding of the Argument and not only of this but of the whole Theory of Forms, though Taylor, ironically, never realized the implications of his own discovery, for he refused to admit that

skeptic why it should not be taken as "the meaning" of the second step as it appears in the text.

⁸ Pp. 46 ff. of his 1916 paper. Most of the later mentions of this vital point acknowledge indebtedness to Taylor, and it is probable that even those which do not are similarly indebted to him directly or indirectly since this insight is missing in any of the earlier discussions.

Plato himself made so absurd an assumption. Of this more later. Here we may remark not only that this premise is necessary to the argument, but that Plato's actual wording of the second step comes as close to asserting it as one could without actually stating the Self-Predication Assumption: "Will not a single Largeness appear once again, in virtue of which *all these* (*sc.* 'Largeness and the other large things') appear large?" The second clause clearly implies that Largeness, no less than each of the particulars, "appear(s) large."

But we need also a further premise, which I shall call the Nonidentity Assumption:

- (A₄) 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.

This too, though not stated in the Argument, is certainly implied. For think of what would happen if it were not assumed to be true. The transition from the protasis of (A₂), "If a , b , c , and F -ness are all F ," to its apodosis, "then there must be another Form, F_1 -ness," would then not be a logical sequence, but the wild and whimsical jump we have seen it to be above. The minimum warrant for passing from 'the large things and Largeness are large' to 'the Form in virtue of which we apprehend the common character of large things and Largeness cannot be Largeness,' could be no less than this: If anything is large, its Largeness cannot be identical with that thing. From this it *would* follow that if Largeness is large, then *its* Largeness cannot be identical with itself and must, therefore, be a second Form of Largeness, Largeness_1 .

In the many modern discussions of the Argument I can find no explicit statement that this Nonidentity Assumption, or an equivalent one, is strictly required in just this way. This may be because the role of such an assumption at this point strikes critics more nimble-witted than myself as so obvious that they feel it an insult to their reader's intelligence to put it into words or symbols. However, there are times when the drudgery of saying the obvious is rewarded, and this is one of them. For if one compares (A₄) with (A₃) above, one will then see that these two premises, jointly necessary to the second, and every subse-

quent, step of the Argument, are mutually inconsistent, and that their inconsistency does not need to be exposed through the indirect and elaborate machinery of the infinite regress, but can be shown much more simply and directly. (A₃) reads: *F*-ness is *F*. (A₄) reads: if *x* is *F*, *x* cannot be identical with *F*-ness. Substituting *F*-ness for *x* in (A₄), we get

(A₅) If *F*-ness is *F*, *F*-ness cannot be identical with *F*-ness.

And since the consequent of (A₅) is plainly false, because self-contradictory, at least one of the premises from which it follows —(A₃), (A₄)—must be false.⁹

Now there is one way of avoiding this particular impasse, and that is to modify (A₄), restating it as follows:

(A_{4a}) If any *particular* has a certain character, then 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 when, and only when, the values for *x* are particulars, *a*, *b*, *c* . . .¹⁰

If (A_{4a}) replaces (A₄) above, then the inconsistency with (A₃) will not arise. For (A_{4a}) does not warrant the substitution of *F*-ness for *x*, and this in spite of the fact that *F*-ness is *F* (A₃). What we are now told is that the Nonidentity Assumption holds in the case of particulars; we are not told that it holds in the case of Forms, and have no ground for asserting that if a *Form* have a certain character it cannot be identical with the Form in virtue of which it has (and is apprehended as having) that character. But what happens now to the second step of the Argument?—It is no longer a valid inference from our premises, (A₁), (A₃), and (A_{4a}). We have now no ground for saying that if *a*, *b*, *c* and *F*-ness are all *F*, there must be a Form other than *F*-ness, in virtue of which we apprehend that *a*, *b*, *c* and *F*-ness are all *F*; there is now nothing to keep us from saying that they are all apprehended as *F* in virtue of *F*-ness itself. The existence of *F*₁-ness would thus remain unproved in the second step, and, by the same token the existence of all subsequent Forms, *F*₂-ness,

⁹ I am using "false" here and occasionally hereafter in the broader sense which includes "insignificant."

¹⁰ It will be convenient to distinguish hereafter (A_{4a}) from (A₄) above, by referring to (A₄) as the "full-strength" Nonidentity Assumption.

F_3 -ness, etc., would remain unproved. The infinite regress would not materialize.

Let us now see where this analysis of the Third Man Argument has taken us: If we took the second (and crucial) step of the Third Man Argument as a mere inference from what is stated in the first step, it would be a horrible *non sequitur*. To avoid this, further premises must be supplied, and we could not determine whether the Argument is valid until they were supplied; for to say of any argument that it is valid is simply to say that its conclusions follow correctly from its premises. And we have now seen what premises would be necessary for the assertion of (A2):

the first step of the Argument, (A1);

the Self-Predication Assumption, (A3);

the full-strength Nonidentity Assumption, (A4).

Are they then also sufficient? Certainly, though in a very odd way, for we are working with inconsistent premises which, as we have seen, have already produced the self-contradictory conclusion at (A5), ' F -ness cannot be identical with F -ness,' and we should not be surprised to see them justify all kinds of contradictory conclusions. Since these premises warrant the proposition that F -ness is *not* identical with F -ness, they will warrant the proposition that F -ness *is* identical with F_1 -ness, which *is* a Form not identical with F -ness, and (A2) will then follow from (A1).¹¹ And having thus got the existence of F_1 -ness at (A2), we can proceed, by the same 'reasoning,' to show in the next step the existence of F_2 -ness, then again, F_3 -ness, and so on without end. We would thus get a *bona fide* infinite regress, logically vicious, since it is assumed that we discern F particulars in virtue of F -ness (A1), F -ness in virtue of F_1 -ness (A2), and so on *ad infinitum*, the discernment of each successive Form being required

¹¹ For we know from (A1) that if a number of things are F there must be a Form, F -ness, through which they are apprehended as F . Whence it follows that (A2b) If a , b , c , and F -ness are all F , there

must be a Form, F -ness, through which they are apprehended as F .

But if F -ness is identical with F_1 -ness, we may substitute F_1 -ness for F -ness in the second clause of (A2b), which will produce (A2).

for the discernment of its immediate predecessor, a requirement which can never be fulfilled, since the series is infinite.¹²

And what would we learn from this consequence?—Only that one or more of our premises is false or void of sense, on the assumption that some vice in one or more of the premises is the source of the vicious consequence. We could have got the same information by a much more economical procedure: by simply noting the contradiction which follows from the joint assertion of (A₃) and (A₄), as explained above. And if Plato had even got as far as the explicit assertion of (A₃) itself, he would have found good reason for rejecting it,¹³ and would thus have been

¹² There is a tolerably good explanation of the fact that the Argument does not result in an (unobjectionable) infinite series, but in a (vicious) regress, in Taylor, pp. 47 ff., though I should take exception to the form of his application of the regress to Platonic "participation" at p. 49. The gist of the matter may be restated as follows: If the Argument simply established an indefinite series of Forms corresponding to each discernible character, no logical disaster would ensue, so long as one (or, at most, a finite number) of these Forms sufficed to do what Forms are supposed to do, i.e., enable us to discern the relevant characters in the particulars and then in the first of the corresponding Forms. All other members of the series could then be ignored as a harmless surplus, though every adept in the use of Occam's razor would itch to lop them off. But what the Argument proves is much worse than this. At (A₁) we are told that we apprehend particulars as *F* through *F*-ness. Now if *F*-ness itself must be apprehended as *F*, then it follows from (A₂) that we must apprehend *F*-ness through *F*₁-ness, and so on. Whence it follows that, since we cannot complete the series, *F*-ness, *F*₁-ness, etc., we shall never be able to apprehend *F*-ness in the first place, and thus never apprehend the *F*-particulars; and this *is* disastrous. It may be objected that Plato does not *say* that *F*-ness must itself be apprehended as *F*. Of course, he does not. But what he does say implies it in conjunction with Self-Predication. For if it were true that *F*-ness *is* *F*, how could it be apprehended except *as F*? However, it is not necessary (and is unwarranted by the evidence) to assume that this distinction between a harmless series and a vicious regress was apparent to Plato himself. He was himself convinced that there was just one Form for each discernible character or kind, and argued (*Rep.* 597c-d, *Tim.* 31a-b) that if, *per impossible*, there were two Forms of anything, there would have to be a third which would be *the* Form of that thing. He would, therefore, have regarded even the existence of an infinite series of Forms of any one kind as disastrous for his Theory.

¹³ To avoid misunderstanding, I should underline the fact that the Self-Predication Assumption to which I refer throughout this paper is the assertion in (A₃) above that *any* Form may be predicated of itself. Absurdity or contradiction inevitably results from this assertion which implies that Forms predicable of particulars are predicable of themselves, as I shall show in Sec.

able to nail down the exact source of the trouble that is attested, but not identified, by the infinite regress. But even if Plato had asserted (A₃), he could still have saved himself from the disaster of the regress by simply denying (A₄) and saying that he had no reason for holding anything more than (A_{4a}).

This result may be summarized, in anticipation of Section II below, as follows: If Plato had identified all of the premises which are necessary (and sufficient) to warrant the second step of the Third Man Argument, he would not have produced the Third Man Argument at all, unless he were simply pursuing a logical game for its own sake, which is not what he is doing in the first part of the *Parmenides*.¹⁴ In stating the Third Man Argument, and in leaving it unrefuted, he is revealing (a) that he did not know all of its necessary premises, whence it would follow that (b) he had no way of determining whether or not it was a valid argument. (a) can be independently verified, and it will be in Section II.

B. *The Second Version: Parmenides 132d1–133a6*

This is at least as interesting on its own account; and no less so is a third version, supplied by Aristotle.¹⁵ Lack of space forbids altogether a treatment of the third in this paper, and compels me to deal more briefly and more roughly with the second than it deserves. All I shall attempt here is to show that Plato's

II-B below. Had Plato merely said or implied that some Forms are self-predicational—those predicable only of Forms, like Logical Self-Identity, Intelligibility, Changelessness, etc.—no obvious absurdity or contradiction would have arisen. On Russell's well-known theory *any* assertion of the form "F(F)" is logically illicit: but see, *contra*, A. Koyré, *Épiménide Le menteur* (Paris, 1947), pp. 36–42.

¹⁴ For the best demonstration of this see Robinson, pp. 58 ff.

¹⁵ In his essay *On the Forms*, *ap.* Alexander, in *Met.* (Hayduck), 84.21–85.11; English translation by W. D. Ross, *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. XII, *Select Fragments* (Oxford, 1952), 129; cf. Cherniss, pp. 233–234, and 500 ff. I can only observe here that an analysis of Aristotle's version will show that it too involves, without appearing to notice, the same discrepancy between the first and the second steps of the Argument. While at the first step Aristotle infers the existence of *F*-ness from the fact that *F*-ness is predicated of certain things (in this case, particulars), in the second step he very surprisingly infers the existence of a Form other than *F*-ness from the fact that *F*-ness is predicated of certain things (in this case, the particulars and *F*-ness).

second version of the Argument is similar in logical structure to his first and presupposes both of the inconsistent premises presupposed by the first.

The first step in the second version:

- (B1) The Copy-Theory: If *a* and *b* are similar (in respect of being *F*), there must be a Form, *F*-ness, in which they both participate by way of resemblance: *a* and *b* must resemble *F*-ness, as copies resemble their model.

Moreover:

- (B1.1) If *a* resembles *F*-ness (in respect of being *F*), *F*-ness must resemble *a* (in the same respect).¹⁶

The second and crucial step, whose reasoning is repeated in all subsequent steps:

- (B2) If *a* and *F*-ness are similar (in respect of being *F*), there must be another Form, *F*₁-ness, in which they both participate by way of resemblance: *a* and *F*-ness must resemble *F*₁-ness, as copies resemble their model.

A comparison of the above with Plato's text will show that the symbolic transcript omits nothing vital to the reasoning, and adds nothing except the parenthetical statements; and these only make explicit the sense of the argument. Clearly, if *a* and *b* are similar, they must be similar in at least one respect; and my parentheses have simply specified the respect with a symbol which is the same as that used for the Form in which they participate. Thus, if *a* and *b* are both white, they resemble each other in respect of being white, the same property which is expressed by the Form, Whiteness, in which they are said to participate by way of resemblance. Again, in the corollary, if Whiteness resembles the white particular, it can only resemble it in the same respect in which the white thing is said to resemble Whiteness, namely, 'white.'

Now a mere glance at my transcript of the argument will

¹⁶ *Not* in respect of being a copy of *a* or *b*—an absurd suggestion, which, of course, is not in the text, though Taylor (p. 87) inexplicably read it into the argument and, therefore, thought he could explode the argument by retorting that the model-copy relation is not symmetrical. The argument only assumes that the relation of similarity is symmetrical which, of course, it *is* (Hardie, p. 96; Ryle, p. 137; Ross, p. 89; Owen, p. 83, n. 3).

show the same discrepancy between the first and the second step that we encountered in the first version. From the premise that two things are similar in respect of being *F*, (B₁) infers the existence of *F*-ness, while (B₂) that of a Form other than *F*-ness, *F*₁-ness. To be sure, the things which are said to be similar in the protasis of (B₁) are once again not the same things which are said to be similar at (B₂): *a* and *b*, in (B₁), *a* and *F*-ness in (B₂). And this protasis in (B₂) implies the Self-Predication Assumption:

(B₃) *F*-ness is *F*;

for if *F*-ness were not *F*, it would not resemble *a* in respect of being *F*. But why should the similarity of *a* and *F*-ness in respect of *F* require the resemblance of *a* and *F*-ness to a Form other than *F*-ness? A necessary reason for this is the Nonidentity Assumption:

(B₄) If *x* is *F*, it cannot be identical with the Form, *F*-ness;

for if this were not true, there would be no reason at all why *a* and *F*-ness could not both be *F* in virtue of *F*-ness. But (B₃) and (B₄) are obviously inconsistent, and their joint assertion leads to a contradiction:

(B₅) If *F*-ness is *F* (B₃), then *F*-ness cannot be identical with *F*-ness;

for if anything is *F* it cannot be identical with *F*-ness (B₄).

It is worth noting that the two Assumptions of Self-Predication and (full-strength) Nonidentity which are still necessary, as they were in the first version, are still tacit, for neither of them is stated as such; but they are now much closer to the verbal surface of the Argument, for they are both logically implied and even intuitively suggested by the key-concept of the second version, the Copy-Theory of participation. For if an *F* thing participates in *F*-ness, by way of resembling *F*-ness as a copy resembles its model, then (a) *F*-ness *must* be *F*, else it would not be resembled by, and resemble, the *F* thing in respect of *F*, and (b) the *F* thing cannot be identical with *F*-ness, since a copy cannot be identical with its model. The contradiction at (B₅) exposes both the inconsistency of the two tacit Assumptions and the logical vice of the Copy-Theory, for it shows that it implies both (B₃) and (B₄) which are mutually inconsistent. Another

way of stating the contradiction that follows from the Copy-Theory is

(B5a) If F -ness is F , then it cannot be F ;

for the Copy-Theory which, as we have seen, requires that F -ness be F , also requires that it cannot be F , for, if it were F , it would have to be, on this theory, a copy of F -ness, and nothing can be a copy of itself. And it is further worth noting that the Argument could be collapsed in the second version, exactly as in the first, by rejecting (B4) in favor of

(B4a) If any *particular* is F , it cannot be identical with the Form, F -ness.

This would avoid the absurd consequences of (B4), (B5) and (B5a), and would ruin the regress by invalidating its second step.

Having learned all this, what is there more to learn about the infinite regress that must start at (B2)? That it does start there, if (B3) and (B4) are supplied, can be easily shown, for (B2) is justified by these premises in the same queer way in which (A2) was justified above.¹⁷ We have thus got our precious regress once again. But what good is it? As in the first version, its diagnostic value for the logical vices of the Theory of Forms is no better than, is indeed not as good as, the simple statement of the tacit premises, (B3) and (B4), followed by the simple deduction of the self-contradictory conclusions, (B5) and (B5a) above. If Plato knew that his theory commits him to *these* premises, he would not need the regress to tell him that his theory is logically moribund and must submit to drastic surgery to survive.

II. THE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE ARGUMENT AND OF THE THEORY OF FORMS

A. *Plato's Ontology*

The question whether or not the Third Man Argument is a

¹⁷ (B5) has given us the same remarkable information that we got at (A5) above: F -ness is not identical with F -ness. Let it then be, once again, identical with F_1 -ness, which empowers us to substitute " F_1 -ness" for " F -ness" wherever we please. But from (B1) we deduce

(B2a) If a and F -ness are similar (in respect of

being F), there must be a Form, F -ness, etc.

Substituting " F_1 -ness" for " F -ness" in the second clause of (B2a), we get (B2).

valid objection to Plato's Theory of Forms can now be resolved into the far more precise one: Did Plato's Theory of Forms make the two tacit assumptions which are needed to produce the infinite regress? This is what we must now determine. When we have done this, it will appear, I think, that the more complex question, whether Plato himself did or did not believe the Argument to be a valid objection to his Theory, will pretty well answer itself.

The place to begin is with what Plato himself tells about the Theory of Forms, in this very dialogue, before presenting either the Third Man Argument or any of the other objections. "Tell me, Socrates," asks Parmenides at 130b, "have you yourself drawn this division you speak of: on one hand, certain Forms *separately* by themselves and, on the other, *separately*, the things which partake of them? And do you believe that Similarity itself is something *separately* from the Similarity which we possess?" Plato could hardly have been more emphatic in identifying that feature of the Theory which will be the special butt of the attacks that are to follow; and when Aristotle, in his version of the Third Man Argument, as indeed in most of his other polemic, makes the "separation" (χωρισμός) of the Forms the most objectionable aspect of the Platonic theory, he does so with good warrant from at least this Platonic text.¹⁸ But what exactly is Plato saying when he asserts that Forms exist "separately" from particulars?—Only what he had said many times before without using the word "separately" at all. The solemn announcements of the Theory in the middle dialogues—the *Cratylus*, the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*¹⁹—are generally put in this form: Beauty (or Justice, or Goodness, etc.) "is something" (τὶ ἔστί) or "is one thing" (ὓν ἔστί). But these expressions are themselves uninformative, nor is there gain in information in doubling the emphasis on "is," by compounding the verb with its adverbial or substantival

¹⁸ And from many others. See Cherniss, pp. 208 ff., whose thorough refutation of the contrary view makes further argument unnecessary.

¹⁹ *Crat.* 439c, 440a; *Phaedo* 65d, 74a; *Rep.* 475e, 596a. I am well aware that some scholars believe that the *Cratylus* is one of the later dialogues, but this is no place to argue the point, and nothing of any consequence turns on it for my present purpose.

derivatives, "is really" (ὄντως ἔστι), "is a real (thing)" (ὄν ἔστι), "is a reality" (οὐσία ἔστι), or even resorting to other adjectives or adverbs, "is a true (ἀληθής) being," or "is truly" (ἀληθῶς), "is a pure (εἰλικρινής) being" or "purely (εἰλικρινῶς) is."²⁰ What Plato means by saying, with or without the use of any other substantive, adjective, or adverb, that "*x is*," in the strict sense of "is," becomes clear only when we see that he understands this to entail:

- (i) *x* is intelligible;²¹
- (ii) *x* is changeless;²²
- (iii) *x* is not qualified by contrary predicates;²³
- (iv) *x* is itself the perfect instance of the property or relation which the word for '*x*' connotes.²⁴

Obviously this is not the place to expound the content of these assertions which epitomize one of the richest and boldest metaphysical theories ever invented in Western thought. Just one or two remarks are called for here.

Perhaps more important than any one or all four of the specific statements which convey the content of the Platonic meaning of the word "is" is the tacit assumption which underlies them all. Logically, this is the costliest of all the assumptions that Plato made: that the verb "is" and all its substantival, adjectival, or adverbial variants have a *single* meaning, the one which is jointly specified by the four propositions I have just enumerated. We must not judge him harshly on this account. The Aristo-

²⁰ Detailed documentation is superfluous; these expressions turn up in every context in which the Theory of Forms is asserted, including the passages listed in the preceding note. Those who, like Owen, believe that the Theory of Forms was drastically revised in the later dialogues and who deny the lateness of the *Timaeus*, might be referred especially to *Phil.* 58a-59d; there the object of dialectic, which consists of the Forms (cf. the "divine circle and sphere" in contrast to the "human circle," the "false circle and rule," at *Phil.* 62ab), is that which "really is" (58a2-3, 59d4), in explicit contrast to "this world" of becoming (59a).

²¹ In emphatic opposition to "sensible." So, e.g., at *Phaedo* 65c ff., *Rep.* 5.509d ff., *Tim.* 51b-e.

²² E.g., *Crat.* 439d ff.; *Phaedo* 78d ff.; *Rep.* 6.484b; *Phil.* 59a-c.

²³ E.g., *Phaedo* 74c; *Rep.* 5.479a-c, 7.523b ff.; *Ep.* 7.343ab.

²⁴ For this *no* documentation (in the strict sense) can be offered—a point of great importance, to be discussed shortly.

telian axiom that “things can be said to be in many different senses” was not a commonplace in its own day, but a revolutionary discovery.²⁵ Before Aristotle and after Parmenides all the great system-builders—Empedocles, Anaxagoras, the atomists, and Plato himself—had taken it for granted that being had one, and just one sense, whose cardinal feature was changelessness.²⁶ What Plato did was to draw up a far more systematic, more thoughtful and thought-provoking list of conditions which anything must satisfy if it can be said to be in the strict sense of the word, a list which was purely conservative in making changelessness definitive of being, but which broke with Ionian and Italian *physiologia* by rehabilitating the Eleatic inference²⁷ that only the “bodiless” (ἀσώματον)²⁸ is wholly real. Plato did not thereby revert to the Eleatic view that the sensible world is wholly unreal. His view was a Degrees-of-Reality theory which permitted him, in compliance with his native tongue, to say that sensible things are,²⁹ as logical subjects of assertions of ex-

²⁵ One which, among other things, offers a direct way of tracking down the source of the Third Man Argument, as Aristotle himself clearly saw. In his own language, the confusion of the sense which “is” has in the first category with its sense in one of the other categories is what “creates the ‘third man,’” *Soph. El.* 178b37 ff.; cf. *Met.* 1038b34 ff.

²⁶ Empedocles B 8: there is no “generation” (φύσις) or “destruction”; “generation” is only a “name”; B 17.35: the only things that strictly *are*, are the “roots,” and they are “everlastingly in the same state” (literally, “ever continuously alike” (ἡνεκὲς αἰὲν ὁμοῖα). Anaxagoras B 17: “the Greeks,” who think there is such a thing as generation and destruction, are wrong; there *is* no such thing; generation and destruction should be “correctly called” mixture and separation; hence (by implication) “things that are” (ἐόντων χρημάτων) are changeless. In the atomists the only things which “really” (ἔτεῳ, Democritus B 7–10) exist are (the absolutely changeless) atoms and the void.

²⁷ I should warn the reader that my view that Eleatic Being was incorporeal runs against the general opinion. But it is explicit in Melissus B 9; see *Gnomon*, XXV (1953), 34–35. I believe that it is implicit in Parmenides.

²⁸ An assumption so basic that Plato does not trouble to spell it out in the earlier statements of the theory, where he only finds it necessary to insist upon the “invisibility” of the Forms (*Phaedo* 65dg, 79a6 ff.), and it is only in the later dialogues that he supplies the further premise (*sc.*, that the invisible, or not sensible, is the bodiless, *Tim.* 28b) for the conclusion, ‘Forms are bodiless,’ or just states the conclusion by itself (*Soph.* 246b, the “Friends of Forms” in opposition to the materialists who “define reality as identical with body”; cf. *Polit.* 286a).

²⁹ And this in the middle, no less than the later, dialogues. Thus the use of

istence and ascriptions of properties and relations. They were halfway real, "between the purely real and the totally unreal" (*Rep.* 478d). The Imitation or Copy Theory incorporates this assumption that the sensible particulars are 'less real' than the Form they resemble. If the bed produced by the carpenter is not "the real" (τὸ ὄν) Bed, "but only something which is like it," then "it would not be right to say that the work of the carpenter or of any other handicraftsman is a perfectly real thing (τελέως εἶναι), would it? We must not be surprised then if this too [*sc.* the physical bed] is a somewhat shadowy thing as compared with reality" (πρὸς ἀλήθειαν) (*Rep.* 597a).

B. Separation and Self-Predication

We can now ask whether this ontology does or does not include the two tacit premises of the Third Man Argument. That Plato assumes Self-Predication I already implied in the fourth of the conditions of Platonic being I have listed above. I gave no textual evidence that this was recognized by Plato himself on a level with the other three, for the simple reason that there is none to give. While Plato states and defends conditions (i) and (ii), and (iii), he leaves (iv) not only undefended, but unstated. But if he never stated it, what reason can be given for saying that he did make it after all?—The reason is that it is certainly implied by various things he said and believed. It is implied, first of all, both by his Degrees-of-Reality Theory and by his

"beings" (ὄντα) to include the world of becoming in the *Philebus* (23c) can be matched perfectly in the *Phaedo* (79a, "Shall we then assume two kinds of beings (ὄντων), one visible, the other invisible?"). This point spoils one of the major arguments that have been offered by Owen (pp. 85–86) in support of his thesis that the *Timaeus* was written in Plato's middle period: he assumes that a strict dichotomy of being-becoming, which implies a systematic refusal to ascribe being to the world of becoming, is characteristic of the middle dialogues, has been abandoned in the later dialogues, and therefore makes a sure criterion from the earlier date of the *Timaeus*. He ignores the fact that in spite of the harsh being-becoming dichotomy of *Tim.* 27d–28a, Plato continues in the same dialogue to stretch being to include the world of becoming; so, e.g., in the psychogony at 35a, which speaks of the "divisible being (οὐσία) which becomes in bodies," and in the cosmological trichotomy at 52d, where "being, place, becoming" are said to "be" (εἶναι). He also ignores the fact that the being-becoming dichotomy is plainly asserted in an indisputably late dialogue like the *Philebus* (59a).

Copy-Theory of the relation of things to Forms. For if an *F* particular is only “deficiently”³⁰ *F*, and only the corresponding Form is perfectly *F*, then *F*-ness is *F*. Or if the *F* particular is a copy of *F*-ness and resembles *F*-ness in respect of being *F*, then, once again, *F*-ness is *F*. Moreover, Self-Predication is also implied by quite a different set of statements which are not elucidations of the Theory of Forms, but direct and, at times, casual assertions about this or that Form. Examples turn up in the earliest dialogues, long before the Theory of Forms had taken shape in Plato’s mind.³¹ When a man’s hairs have turned white, says Socrates in the *Lysis* (217d), “they have become such as that which is present in them, white through Whiteness”: the white hairs are “such as” or “of the same quality as” (οἷόνπερ) Whiteness; they have the same quality that Whiteness has.³² Somewhat later, in the *Protagoras* (330cd) we get an even more striking text which, since first noticed by Goblot in 1929,³³ has

³⁰ ἐνδεεστέρως, *Phaedo* 74c, 75a; ἐνδεέστερα, *φαιλότερα*, 75b. Cf. *Rep.* 529d: the celestial bodies “fall far short of” (πολὺ ἐνδεῖν) the intelligible Forms whose visible likeness they are.

³¹ The contrary view (cf. H. Cherniss, *Riddle of the Early Academy* [Berkeley, 1945], pp. 4–5) that the Theory of Forms is already present in the early dialogues would simplify my argument. But I do not agree with it, and I cannot argue the point here beyond stating that I cannot consider the employment of certain linguistic expressions as *sufficient* evidence of the concurrent assertion of the metaphysical theory.

³² Self-Predication is also suggested by Plato’s use of the expression “the *x* itself” for ‘the Form of *x*’ which, as Ross remarks (88), “treats the Idea of *x* as one *x* among others, and implies an *x*-ness common to it with others.” This expression occurs repeatedly in the *Hippias Major* (Ross, p. 17, n. 1) as well as in the middle dialogues.

³³ P. 473, n. 3. Soon after it was noticed (perhaps independently of Goblot’s paper) by Theodore de Laguna, “Notes on the Theory of Ideas,” *Philosophical Review*, XLIII (1934), 450–452. De Laguna saw exactly what such a statement implies (and generalized the implication, “The Platonic idea is a universal, supposed precisely and unqualifiedly to characterize itself”) and what is wrong with the implication: “Justice and holiness are not moral agents; they cannot have virtues or vices.” The next important use of the passage is by Robinson (pp. 62–63) in 1942. Cornford (pp. 87 ff.) in 1939 had seen that Self-Predication is implied right and left in the objections against the Forms in the *Parmenides*, but still followed Taylor’s lead in refusing to credit Plato himself with the Assumption; so too Cherniss. So far as I can recall, Taylor, Cornford, and Cherniss do not notice the *Protagoras* passage, and fail to see that the Assumption is implied by the Copy-Theory and the Degrees-of-Reality Theory.

become the star instance of Self-Predication in Plato. Here Socrates roundly declares that justice is just and holiness holy. What other thing *could* be holy, if holiness isn't holy," he asks, indignant at the idea that anyone could gainsay that holiness is holy. These two examples would be quite enough to refute Taylor and others who, in the goodness of their hearts, press upon Plato charitable donations gathered from modern analysis. But there are others. In the *Phaedo* (100c) Socrates gives away the same presumption when he indulges in the expression, "If anything else is beautiful, besides Beauty itself." And in the *Symposium*, while there is no one sentence that says quite baldly that Beauty is beautiful, the whole point of Diotima's speech is that the Form of Beauty is superlatively fair, incomparably more so than fair bodies, minds, or institutions: the universal enters into competition with its instances, and has no trouble at all winning the beauty contest.

Is it possible that a man should say, and with the greatest emphasis, "Justice is just," yet not realize that this is as good as saying that a Form which *is* a character *has* that character?—It is perfectly possible. That it is possible to say *p*, which implies *q*, and not think of the implication or even of *q*, is a first principle of inquiry in the history of philosophy.³⁴ In this case there is a further factor, and a very prosaic one, which may blinker the logical vision of a clearheaded man. It is the fact that "Justice is just," which can also be said in Greek as, "the just is just," can be so easily mistaken for a tautology, and its denial for a self-contradiction.³⁵ I am not suggesting that the Assumption of Self-Predication is just a symptom of the tyranny of language over ontology. The suggestion would not even be plausible, for other philosophers, using the same language, made no such assumption. The assumption has far deeper roots, notably religious ones, which I cannot explore in this paper. What can be debited to language is simply the fact that an assertion which looks like an identity-statement may be taken as having the certainty of a tautology; and the illusion of its self-evidence

³⁴ No one has stated this so clearly and followed it so rigorously as R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1941), pp. 2-3 *et passim*.

³⁵ Cornford, p. 87.

could very well block that further scrutiny which would reveal that it implies a proposition which so far from being self-evident leads to self-contradiction. Anyhow, whether it be for this or for some other reason, there can be no doubt about the fact that Plato never asserted Self-Predication in any of his writings, and not much doubt that neither did he assert it in oral discussion in the many debates that raged over the Forms in the Academy; for if he had, Aristotle would have known it, and he was not the man to pass over the wonderful polemical possibilities it opens up.³⁶ Shall we then assume that Plato did know it but kept the thought locked up in the secrecy of his own mind? This melodramatic possibility can be disposed of fairly simply. Had Plato recognized that all of his Forms are self-predicational, what would he have done with Forms like Change, Becoming and Perishing, which he did recognize as *bona fide* Forms? ³⁷ Clearly none of these could be self-predicational, for if they were, they would not be changeless, and would thus forfeit *being*. The same could be said of other Forms, not mentioned as such by Plato, but which his Theory would require him to recognize—Forms of the Sensible, Corporeal, Imperfect, indeed of all characters contrary to those which define the conditions of Platonic being. That Plato is never aware of any such difficulty shows that he was not aware of any Assumption which would have made the difficulty as obvious to him as it is to us.³⁸

³⁶ In Aristotle's version of the Third Man Argument we see Self-Predication not only at his finger tips but almost in the hollow of his hand: "and 'man' is predicated both of particular men *and of the Form . . .*," ap. Alex., in *Met.* 84.29. That he did not *see* what was thus within his grasp is clear from the fact that elsewhere he makes much of the point that characters predicable of Forms cannot be predicated of their particular instances; e.g., Changelessness, predicable of (the Form) Man, but impredicable of any man (*Top.* 137b3 ff., 148a15 ff.; and cf. 113a24 ff. See Cherniss, pp. 1 ff., for a discussion of these passages); and at *Met.* 1059a10 ff. he turns this point into an argument against the Theory of Forms. Had he clearly seen that Plato's Forms are self-predicational he would have argued to even better effect that, on this hypothesis, the Forms which *are* predicable of the particulars *qua* particulars (e.g., perishableness, change, mortality) have predicates incompatible with their predicates *qua* Forms (e.g., imperishableness, changelessness, immortality).

³⁷ *Parm.* 136b.

³⁸ The only Form in whose case one might think that Plato did feel such a difficulty is that of Not-Being. But a careful study of his discussion of Not-

C. *Separation and Nonidentity*

What of the other assumption which I have called Nonidentity in Section I?—If the question concerned only the nonidentity of particulars with their homonymous Forms—(A4a), (B4a) above—the answer would seem so obvious as to be trivial. If the Form is what we have seen it to be, how could it help being other than the particulars whose characters it enables us to discern? Indeed, it might be said that Plato is the first Western thinker to make the distinction between a character and the things that have that character a matter of philosophical reflection. For did not his Theory of Forms call attention, and for the first time, to the ‘reality’ of universals as distinct from that of material existents? This is, of course, perfectly true. But what is no less true is that the Platonic ontology inadvertently blurs the very distinction it was devised to express. It compels Plato to think of the difference between empirical existents and their intelligible properties as a difference between “deficiently” real and perfectly real things, i.e., as a difference in degree between beings of the same kind, instead of a difference in kind between different kinds of being. To say that the difference between a white thing, like wool or snow, and the universal, Whiteness, is a difference in degree of reality, is to put Whiteness in the same class with white things, albeit as a pre-eminent member of that class, endowed in pre-eminent degree with the character which its fellow members possess in variously deficient degrees; it is to think of Whiteness as a (superlatively) white thing, and thus to assimilate it categorically to white things, instead of so distinguishing it from them. For a good example of this I can refer to the closing sentence of the statement of the Separation Assumption I have cited above from *Parmenides* 130b: “And do you believe that Similarity itself is something separately from the Similarity which we possess?” Instead of asking the simple question, ‘Is the property,

Being in the *Sophist* will, I think, show that the real difficulty Plato felt about Not-Being was not *caused* by reasoning that, since all Forms are self-predicational, this Form must also be such, and hence have the character of not being. The difficulty he states at 240d–241b is simply that of thinking what is not, without, by this very fact, being involved in the contradictory assumption that what is not is. His discussion of Not-Being cannot, therefore, be cited as evidence that he understood Self-Predication.

Similarity, distinct from any of the things that have that property?' Plato is misled by his Separation Assumption to ask the entirely different question, 'Is the property, Similarity, distinct from the property of Similarity which is exemplified in particular instances of Similarity?'³⁹ 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, peculiar to Plato's ontology, between two grades of reality in things and properties: perfectly real things and properties in the Forms, imperfectly real things and properties in the sensible world.

Among the unintended and unexpected consequences of this distinction is the Nonidentity Assumption in its full-strength Form, (A₄) and (B₄) above, i.e., that the nonidentity of a Form with any of its homonymous instances holds not only when the instance is a particular but also when the instance is the Form itself. Certainly Plato never said any such thing; indeed this is the last thing he would have wished to say. The Separation Theory is clearly meant to separate Forms from particulars, Largeness from large things, not to reintroduce the separation within the formal pole of the Form-particular relation, to split

³⁹ This is why a symbolic transcript of Plato's statements must distinguish systematically between the substantival form, *F*-ness, and the adjectival or predicative function of the same Form, *F*. Thus, in transcribing the First Man Argument it was necessary to distinguish between Largeness, as *F*-ness, and the Largeness of large things, as *F*. Similarly the Nonidentity Assumption must be rendered as, "If *a* is *F*, *a* cannot be identical with *F*-ness," (A_{4a}), (B_{4a}) above. Were it not for the systematic dualism of *F* and *F*-ness, it could be stated more simply as, "If *a* is *F*, *a* cannot be identical with *F*," which I take to be the correct statement of this fundamental principle. In the absence of the Separation Assumption we would not need the two symbols, *F* and *F*-ness; the latter would be redundant. To recognize this is perhaps the simplest way of collapsing the Third Man Argument (and, unfortunately for Plato, thereby also collapsing the Separation Assumption). I may add that, though it is language which suggests the distinction between *F*-ness and *F* (by its double furniture of substantives and adjectives or predicative terms), yet neither can this distinction be observed without occasional violence to the linguistic distinction (for we are still forced to transcribe as '*F*' any term which refers to the property of a particular: the Largeness of large things or "the Similarity which we possess" must be taken, on Plato's own theory, as adjectival in sense though they are substantival in linguistic form). A simple linguistic explanation of Plato's theory would be only simple-minded.

off Largeness from Largeness₁. Yet just this is the nemesis of the Degrees-of-Reality Theory which is part and parcel of the Separation Assumption. For if the Form, Largeness, is superlatively large, while large mountains, oaks, etc. are only deficiently large, it must follow that the single word, *large*, stands for two distinct predicates: (a) the predicate which attaches to the large particulars; (b) the predicate which attaches to Largeness.⁴⁰ Call (a), "large" and (b), "large₁." Now since Largeness is, by hypothesis, the Form of the predicate "large," it cannot be the Form of the different predicate "large₁." There must then be two Forms, Largeness and Largeness₁ and the full-strength form of the Nonidentity Assumption becomes unavoidable: not only can no large particular be identical with the Form, Largeness, in virtue of which it is seen as large, but Largeness itself cannot be identical with the Form, Largeness₁, in virtue of which we see that it is large₁. The same reasoning which compelled the "separation" of any *F* particular from its corresponding Form, *F*-ness, also compels the "separation" of any Form from itself, and splits off *F*-ness from *F*₁-ness.

We can now see why Plato could neither convince himself that the Third Man Argument was valid, nor refute it convincingly. He could do neither without stating explicitly its two implicit assumptions. This he never did; he never looked at either of them in the clear light of explicit assertion, for, had he done so, he would have had compelling reason to repudiate both, since their logical consequences are intolerable to a rational mind. But their repudiation would have been fatal to the Separation

⁴⁰ If these two predicates were identical, the Form would be indistinguishable from the predicate which attaches to particulars, and the "Separation" would collapse: *F*-ness would then be the *F* of *F* particulars, and the distinction between, e.g., "Similarity itself" and "the Similarity which we possess" at 130b would vanish. Had Plato "believed that . . . the idea *is* that which the particular *has* as an attribute" (Cherniss, p. 298)—a beautiful statement of what Plato's theory *should have been*—the "Separation" would have never arisen. This is my main objection to Cherniss' interpretation of the Third Man Argument (pp. 293–300): he does not see that the "perfect reality" of the Forms is incompatible with their *being* the (imperfect) predicates of particulars. If the Forms *were* attributes of particulars, "Separation" would make no sense, and the Third Man Argument would be not only pure sophistry but so easily refutable sophistry that it would be impossible to understand why Plato takes it as seriously as he does yet leaves it unrefuted.

Theory and the Degrees-of-Reality Theory, which are central to his explicit metaphysics. He was thus holding consciously a metaphysical Theory whose disastrous implications were hidden from his conscious mind. He was saying and believing things which in self-consistency he would have had to take back, had he clearly understood their true logical outcome.

C. *The Record of Honest Perplexity*

Now it is perfectly possible to be in this state of mind and have no inkling of its insecurity. The run-of-the-mill dogmatist lives in it all his life and never feels any the worse for it. The victims of the Socratic elenchus were cheerfully confident that they knew what they were talking about, and they would have ever remained so had they recited their ignorant certainties to anyone but Socrates. But a great philosopher is not likely to be so thick-skinned and so blind. Perfect catharsis from self-deception is given to him no more than to his fellows. But he is far more likely to become aware sooner or later of the difference between those areas of his thought where he has achieved true lucidity and those where he has not. When he first projects a new theory that succeeds in solving to his immediate satisfaction hitherto unsolved problems and satisfies deep longings of his heart, delight in his creation may produce a kind of rapture that leaves little room for self-questioning. This is Plato's mood in the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, and the *Republic*. The Theory of Forms is then the greatest of certainties, a place of unshakable security to which he may retreat when doubtful or perplexed about anything else.⁴¹ But as he lives with his new theory and puts it to work, its limitations begin to close in upon him. He begins to feel that something is wrong, or at least not quite right, about his theory, and he is puzzled and anxious. If he has courage enough, he will not try to get rid of his anxiety by suppressing it. He may then make repeated attempts to get at the source of

⁴¹ Transparently so at *Phaedo* 99c ff.; the 'refuge' metaphor is Plato's own, 99e5. Another characteristic of this mood is the grandiose schemes which it projects, such as the hope for a complete deduction of all the Forms from the Form of the Good in the closing paragraphs of Bk. VI of the *Republic*, a scheme which is never worked out in the dialogues, doubtless for the reason that it is unworkable.

the trouble, and if he cannot get at it directly he may fall back on the device of putting the troublesome symptoms into the form of objections. He can hardly make these objections perfectly precise and consistent counterarguments to his theory unless he discovers the exact source of its difficulties and can embody the discovery in the formal premises of the objections. If he fails to make this discovery, the objections are likely to be as inadequate in their own way as is their target. They will be the expression of his acknowledged but unresolved puzzlement, brave efforts to impersonate and cope with an antagonist who can neither be justly represented nor decisively defeated because he remains unidentified and unseen. This, I believe, is an exact diagnosis of Plato's mind at the time he wrote the *Parmenides*.

1. *The First Objection, Parmenides 130e–131e*

Of the three formal objections to the Theory of Forms, the first has struck every reader by its patent crudity of expression: if a single Form has many instances, either the whole of the Form must be "in" each of them, or only a part of the Form; if the first, the Form will be "in" ⁴² each instance "in separation" from itself;⁴³ if the second, only a fraction of the Form will be in each instance, so that the latter will not be an instance of this Form, *F*-ness, but of another Form, *Fr*-ness, which will be a fraction of *F*-ness.⁴⁴ The words of the argument force the conception of Forms into the flagrantly inappropriate terms of quasi-physical location, separation and division. Hence many commentators have drawn the inference that the difficulty they

⁴² *Parm.* 131a8, ἐν... εἶναι, b 2, ἔνεσται. Plato indulged in this way of talking about instantiation in the middle dialogues, as, e.g., at *Phaedo* 103b8. The word ἐνεῖναι had a bewildering variety of uses in common speech (see Liddell & Scott, *s.v.*). But in cosmological and medical usage it had reached a single, definite meaning: 'x is in y' had come to mean, 'x is a physical ingredient in physical compound y,' as I have remarked in *Classical Philology*, XLII (1947), 171 and n. 139.

⁴³ Here is the immediate nemesis of the *chorismos*, announced at 130b-d, but an intolerably crude one, since it talks of the (physical) "separation" of particulars from one another and of the (metaphysical) "separation" of Form from particulars in the same sentence (131b1–2) as though the word had the same sense in the two cases.

⁴⁴ The analogy of the sail dots the i's of the transposition of a metaphysical statement into a physical one.

portray is wholly fictitious and that Plato knew that it was such. But this inference is certainly wrong, since, as their critics have remarked,⁴⁵ Plato reasserts the difficulty in almost identical terms in the *Philebus* (15b-c), though this time not as an objection to his Theory, but as a problem which continues to cause him extreme perplexity and to which he has still to find an answer. Certainly Plato knew that the relation of Form to instance, whatever else it might be, is not that of physical coalescence of either the whole Form or else a part of the Form with any one of its instances. And he could easily demolish Parmenides' objection by replying that its very language misdirects it against a man of straw. He did not waste a word to win this cheap dialectical victory because he knew that the difficulty lay at a much deeper level, which he eagerly sought to reach, but which he failed to reach, as the phrasing of the objection shows.

What remained hidden to him becomes clear to us when we note, with Cornford (p. 87), that in illustrating the argument with the Form, Largeness, Parmenides at one point obviously assumes that Largeness is self-predicational: "Suppose you divide Largeness itself, and each of the many large things is then large by *virtue of a portion of Largeness which is smaller than Largeness itself . . .*" (131cd). To say that a "part" of the Form, Largeness, is *smaller* than Largeness is most certainly to imply that Largeness is large. Less obviously, but no less certainly, the same assumption and the Separation Assumption of which it is a part are involved in, and are the source of, the whole difficulty which the objection seeks to express, and if we put these Assumptions into our question we can state the difficulty without indulging in the irrelevant language of the text: If *F*-ness is *F*, and is such in virtue of satisfying requirements which no empirical particular can satisfy, how can any empirical particular be *F*? If it were genuinely or perfectly *F*, it would have to be identical with *F*-ness, which is contrary to the hypothesis that it is not the Form, but a particular. If it were not, it could not be said to be fully *F*, but only "deficiently" *F*, or *F* in lesser degree; it would then be not *F*, but *F*_I, where *F*_I is the lesser degree of *F* instantiated in the particular. This alternative obviously leads to an in-

⁴⁵ E.g., Robinson, pp. 59-60.

finite regress, symmetrical with that of the Third Man Argument.⁴⁶ For, by the same reasoning, if *FI* be a character, it can only be perfectly exemplified by the Form, *FI*-ness, and the particular could not then be *FI*, but only *F2*, and so on *ad infinitum*. So stated, the objection exposes the self-contradiction of the Separation Assumption when fully explicated to involve both Self-Predication and the Degrees-of-Reality Theory. Plato could not have stated it in this way without stating one of the components of this complex premise, Self-Predication.

2. *The Third Objection, Parmenides 133b-134e*

Plato faces this one in a more hopeful mood. It could be answered, he says, but only to (and, presumably, by) an extremely competent and persistent thinker.⁴⁷ Why then doesn't he answer it? Not because he is pressed for time; the second part of the *Parmenides* shows that he has plenty of time. He doesn't, because the answer he would have given to this objection, as to the first, would not have solved the problem which is infinitely more important to him than the defeat of the objector. Nor could he have solved this without, once again, spotting the Self-Predication Assumption which, enmeshed in the Degrees-of-Reality Theory, greets us here at every turn.⁴⁸ The argument implies that only the Form, Mastership, can possess "exactly"⁴⁹ the

⁴⁶ Each of the two regresses exposes symmetrical contradictions in the Theory which may be stated as follows:

- (a) If the Form be *F*, then it cannot be *F*, but *F*₁
(as we have seen at (B5a) in Sec. I, above);
- (b) if the particular be *F*, then it cannot be *F*, but *FI*.

⁴⁷ *Parm.* 133b.

⁴⁸ So Cornford, p. 98. But he naïvely infers that, because Self-Predication is "grossly fallacious," Plato saw that it was. Had Plato seen this, he would have said so; and for this he would not have needed "a long and remote train of argument" which Plato tells us (133b) would be required to defeat the objection; the Greek equivalent of Cornford's single sentence ("It confuses the Form . . . with perfect instances of the Form") would have been enough. And had he done so, Plato would have seen what Cornford fails to see: that this demolition of the objection to the Theory would have demolished the Theory.

⁴⁹ He introduces this term only toward the end (134c-d), but the whole argument would have gained precision had he done so from the start. The argument turns on the difference in degree between the exemplification of the Form in the Form and in the particulars: "exact" Mastership, Knowledge,

property of mastership and (since the property is a relational one) only in relation to the Form, Slavery, which alone possesses "exactly" the converse property of slavishness; and that only the Form, Knowledge, can be "exactly" knowledge.⁵⁰ Hence, it infers, you and I cannot *be* Masters or Slaves, since we are men, not Forms, and cannot have the properties of Forms but only less "exact," or "human," properties of mastership or slavishness or anything else; nor can we have Knowledge (for this is the prerogative of the Form, Knowledge, and we are not the Form), but only something else which is less "exact" than Knowledge. Anyone familiar with Plato's Theory of the Soul, which includes his Theory of Recollection, would have known how to talk back to Parmenides at this point. One could discredit Parmenides by telling him that he grossly ignored a part, and a most important and relevant part, of the philosophy he is criticizing. But if this had silenced Parmenides, it would have left untouched the logical difficulty, which is precisely the same as in the first objection and raises the same unanswerable question: If only *F*-ness can be *F*, how can anything else be *F*?

3. *The Third Man Argument Once Again*

Seen side by side with its mates it appears to great advantage. Its language is logically refined in contrast to the crudity of the first, terse and precise where that of the third is loose and long-winded. The device it exploits, the infinite regress, was the prize product of Greek logical virtuosity, and Plato must have found a bitter delight in turning it against his own Theory. Yet for all its showy elegance it fails as a diagnostic device to locate the exact source of the logical difficulties of the Theory of Forms, for the reasons which I set forth in Section I. And it fails also in its formal purpose, which is to prove that the Theory is logically bankrupt because it involves an endless regress. It could only have succeeded in this, had it been known to be a valid argument; but it could not be known to be this, unless the tacit premises which alone can warrant the inference from its first to

etc., refers to the former against the latter, to render the sense of "perfect," "complete."

⁵⁰ Cf. *Phaedr.* 247d-e.

its second step were supplied. I trust it has now become clear that Plato could not supply these and so could not know whether or not it was a valid objection to his theory. This being the case, I can now show that Plato had a perfectly good way of refuting the Third Man Argument as stated by his Parmenides.⁵¹ All his Parmenides has to offer in place of the two tacit premises is the Separation Assumption in its explicit form, i.e., not understood to imply both Self-Predication and full-strength Nonidentity. But if these implications are not understood, the conclusion of Parmenides' argument is grossly fallacious, and Plato could easily have shown it to be such:

If the Separation Assumption is to be the reason for acknowledging the "separate existence" of the predicative Form, *F*-ness, from the particulars of which it is predicated, Plato could argue that the same Assumption could not require, but must forbid, the separation of the next predicative Form, *F*₁-ness, from the original Form, *F*-ness, of which *F*₁-ness is predicated; and if *this* separation were to fail, the infinite regress would fail. Plato could argue that his metaphysical theory is only intended to separate Forms from particulars, since the ground of the separation is that only the Forms could satisfy the stipulated conditions of being. "If that is so," he could ask, "what warrant is there for saying that *F*₁-ness is separate from *F*-ness? Both, as Forms, fully satisfy the conditions of being, both have exactly the same degree of reality, and the ontological separation premised on a difference of such degree fails completely. Thus Beauty is separate from any beautiful thing of our common experience because its beauty is so different from theirs—an intelligible, changeless, unblemished beauty such as, alas, we have never seen in the

⁵¹ Other ways of reconstructing Plato's refutation of the Argument abound in the literature (e.g., Taylor, *Plato's Parmenides*, pp. 20 ff.; Goblott, pp. 447 ff.; Cornford, pp. 90 ff.; Cherniss, pp. 292 ff.), but I believe that none of them is free from one or more of the following errors: misunderstanding of the Argument; the view that Plato did not in fact assume Self-Predication; the misapprehension that an argument, somewhat similar in form to the Third Man Argument, employed elsewhere (see above, n. 12 *sub fin.*) by Plato to establish the unity of each Form, somehow explodes the Third Man Argument. Ross (p. 87) has an admirably terse refutation of this last misapprehension: "To show that if there were two Ideas of bed, there would have to be a third does nothing to disprove the contention that if there is one Idea of bed, related to particulars as Plato supposes, there must be a second."

world about us, and never will. In what respect then could Beauty₁ differ from Beauty? How could the two fail to coincide, if they both designate the highest degree of beauty?" By such a reply Plato could have stopped the regress dead in its tracks, easily in the first version of the Argument, and also in the second by merely pointing out that the model-copy relation of predicate to instance is meant to hold only when the instance is an empirical particular and not when both predicate and instance are Forms. He could thus defeat the Argument by retreating in effect to the weaker form of the Nonidentity Assumption (A_{4a}), (B_{4a}) above. His objection would stand unless Parmenides could then go on to show why, in spite of it, the Degrees-of-Reality Theory did imply full-strength Nonidentity, (A₄), (B₄) above.

It is rare enough to find a philosopher employing his best resources to construct an argument which, were it valid, would have destroyed the logical foundations of his life's work.⁵² What is rarer still and, to my knowledge, absolutely without parallel in the pages of Western philosophy, is to find a man who faces such an emergency as Plato did. He had every reason to seek to demolish it, for it was believed to be valid, as e.g., by Aristotle, and so long as he left it standing it remained an ugly threat to his most original philosophical contribution. And he had a way and, by every rule of disputation, a perfectly fair way, of demolishing the argument, by taking it at face-value and replying not to what it implies but to what it says. His reticence at this point is a remarkable tribute to his perspicacity as a thinker and to his honesty as a man. To study the Third Man Argument in this way is to see the stature of the philosopher rising far above the limitations of his philosophy.⁵³

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⁵² I believe it is a mistake to think (e.g., with Ross, pp. 87 ff.) that the Argument is fatal not to Plato's Theory, but to the language in which he expressed it. It should now be apparent that the butt of the Argument is no incidental expression whose excision from Plato's text would leave his Theory intact, but the literal, rock-bottom doctrine of his ontology: the Degrees-of-Reality Theory and the Separation Assumption.

⁵³ Max Black has given me generous help with this paper. Though he cannot be held responsible for any statement in it, his advice and criticism have saved me from many mistakes.