

24.200: Ancient Philosophy  
October 27, 2004

### Platonic Forms and the "Third Man"

It is important to look carefully at some of the basic theses of Plato's Theory of Forms, for we will find that some of Aristotle's most significant views arise out of a rejection of Plato's "two worlds" ontology.

At *Republic* 596a, we find the following comment about Forms:

We are accustomed to assuming one Form in each case for the many particulars to which we give the same name.

This claim has come to be called the One Over Many Principle, or OM for short. The thought behind OM is this. We sometimes attempt to describe the world by applying predicates such as '...is wise', '...is large', '...is beautiful' to sensible objects. For instance we call Socrates wise, and we call Aristotle wise. If we reflect on this it seems we are saying that Socrates and Aristotle have something in common, viz., wisdom (or the wise itself). This wisdom which they have in common is not identical to either of them, or to any other sensible particular. (Recall Socrates' complaint against Euthyphro. Instead of giving a definition of the form of piety common to all cases Euthyphro began by offering examples of pious actions. But no example of a pious action can be what all pious actions have in common.)

Thus we might be tempted to say that whenever a group of sensible things have something in common, e.g., when it is correct to say of them that they are F (for any predicate F), there is a single Form, the F itself, which they have in common. Plato calls the relation which holds between each sensible F-thing and the Form F, *participation*. (Note that there are some indications in Plato's writings that he did not think that OM is as fully general as *Republic* 596 suggests. E.g., in the dialogue the *Parmenides*, the character Socrates expresses some doubt as to whether there are Forms of certain kinds, e.g., Forms for mud, hair, and dirt. However, this need not concern us here.)

In a number of passages in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, Socrates contrasts what we say of sensible things, with what we say of the Forms. For example, if we say that the chalk is white, and if we say that white is white, we are not really saying the same thing. To say that the chalk is white is to say that the chalk HAS whiteness, or participates in whiteness. To say that white is white, however, is to say that white is just what white IS. (Remember another example: the sponge is wet in a different way than the wet itself is wet.) Sensible particulars are called what they are (e.g., hot, white, large, wise) in virtue of their participation in Forms. In contrast, a Form is called what it is in virtue of itself, i.e., in virtue of what it IS. So we see that a word may apply to something either (a) in virtue of what it HAS, or (b) in virtue of what it IS.

Plato thinks that this tells us something important about the difference between the realm of Forms and the realm of sensible particulars. The Forms are what they are in virtue of themselves; this is the realm of BEING. Sensible things are what they are only in virtue of participating in the Forms; this is the realm of HAVING, or Plato puts it, BECOMING. (To see the relevance of the notion of "becoming" we may note that although the white itself is always

white and can never become not white, white chalk might become not-white, e.g., if I dye it or paint it. Anything which merely HAS whiteness may cease to be white, or might have been not-white, or might appear white to some and not to others.)

Plato uses the idea that the Forms constitute the realm of BEING in his account of knowledge. (See e.g., *Republic* 477-480) He believes that knowledge must have as its object things which ARE, i.e., Forms, for knowledge must be stable, certain, infallible. Our opinions concerning sensible things, in contrast, are unstable, uncertain, and fallible. A flower may appear beautiful to one person and not another, it may be beautiful at one time and not at another. In contrast, Beauty itself "remains eternally the same in all respects" (479a), and it will not appear beautiful to some and not to others. (See also the discussion of "the Equals" at *Phaedo* 74a-c.)

These reflections on the Forms and sensible things suggest that we can formulate three important principles guiding Plato's theory:

- OM) There is one Form for each plurality of things to which we apply the same name.
- NI) The Form whose name is applied to a plurality of things is something distinct from each member of the plurality.
- SP) The name of a Form is applicable to the Form itself, e.g., The white itself is white, Beauty itself is beautiful.

However, given these assumptions we generate an infinite regress. For example, consider a plurality of beautiful particulars. By OM we must introduce a Form of Beauty which they have in common. Call this Form Beauty-1. By NI, Beauty-1 is distinct from each member of the plurality of beautiful particulars which participate in it. However, by SP we must say that Beauty-1 is also beautiful. Thus we have a new plurality of beautiful things, the original plurality of beautiful particulars *plus* Beauty-1. This means that we must apply OM again to the new plurality since it also is a plurality of things rightly called 'beautiful'. From this second application of OM, we must conclude that there is a new Form, call it Beauty-2 in addition to Beauty-1. (Due to NI, Beauty-2 cannot be identical to Beauty-1, since Beauty-1 is part of the plurality Beauty-2 applies to.) Repeating this series of steps we must introduce an infinite number of Forms of Beauty, and the same regress can be constructed for any Form whatsoever. So if Plato is committed to the three principles listed, his theory leads to undesirable consequences.

What could Plato say in response? It is reasonable to think he would question our move of constructing the second, i.e., "new", plurality which consists of the original beautiful particulars plus Beauty-1. But on what basis could he reject this new plurality? Note that Plato's distinction between two different ways that names apply things might help him. After all, Beauty itself IS beautiful, whereas a beautiful flower only HAS beauty. To combine Beauty itself and the beautiful flower in a plurality of things called 'beautiful' is mixing apples and oranges; the "new" plurality is not a genuine plurality of things which have something in common because the members are not beautiful in the same way. In effect, Plato could complain that in the principles listed above we speak too vaguely of a name "applying to" a plurality of things. Because we haven't distinguished the different ways that names "apply" to things, we rely on a false plurality, and the argument fails.

Although this response may help Plato in the case of Forms such as Beauty, Largeness, etc., there are cases which pose a more serious problem. The standard problem example (which goes back to Plato's Academy) is called the "Third Man". Let us suppose that there is a Form of Man (and let us suppose that this is the Form of Human Being). The Form Man is what particular human beings have in common. On Plato's view, it seems we should say that individuals such as Socrates and Aristotle are men by HAVING, or participating in, the Form Man. But note that no individual man could fail to be a man; no individual man could cease to be a man without ceasing to exist. Socrates could not become a horse or a table; he could only be a man. We might say that Man is just what Socrates IS. But we also know that on Plato's view we must also say that the Form Man IS Man. This suggests that in contrast to the example of Beauty we used above, we can form a genuine plurality which consists of individual men and the Form Man. There is something that individual men and the Form Man have in common, viz., they both ARE Man; Man is what each IS. In other words, both the individual man and the Form Man are essentially man.

If these considerations are correct, then there are plausible principles applying to the case of 'man', which avoid the problem of relying on a "false plurality":

- OM<sub>m</sub>) There is one Form for each plurality of things to which we apply (in the same way) the name 'man'.
- NI) The Form whose name is applied to a plurality of things is something distinct from each member of the plurality.
- SP<sub>m</sub>) The name 'man' is applicable to the Form itself, e.g., Man itself is man, and to particular men, in the same way.

Using the same steps as in the example of Beauty discussed above, we can use these modified premises to generate an infinite regress. Although the "Third Man" argument does not have the consequence that Plato is committed to principles which generate a regress for every Form, it does show that there is an important range of predicates, e.g., those which name species, which cannot be accommodated by his principles. To avoid the regress we must reject at least one of the principles. Plato would probably reject (SP<sub>m</sub>), Aristotle will reject (NI). In doing so, Aristotle will reject Plato's "two worlds" doctrine. Although Aristotle will allow that there are forms, his are not Platonic Forms which exist in a transcendent realm over and above the sensible world. Moreover, he will allow that we can have knowledge of what IS through an investigation of the natural world and its sensible objects.