Edited by Michael Bruce and Steven Barbone

JUST THE ARGUMENTS

100 of the Most Important Arguments in Western Philosophy

WILEY-BLACKWELL
The Existence of Forms: Plato’s Argument from the Possibility of Knowledge

Jurgis (George) Brakas

The existence of Forms is at the heart of Plato’s philosophy. Take them away, and no philosophy that could reasonably be called Plato’s would remain. To the layman (not to mention many philosophers), they are strange creatures indeed. This demands that any discussion of them attempt not only to make clear what these Forms are supposed to be like but also why we should believe they exist at all. Plato gives us several arguments for their existence, but the most important one is arguably what may be called his “argument from the possibility of knowledge.” Its premises can be found in several of his dialogues. The argument, naturally enough, is the product of his own passionate convictions and the influence of his predecessors upon his thinking.

Deeply influenced by Socrates, he took from him the love of wisdom, the love of genuine knowledge, with its corresponding withering contempt for pretension and the contempt of the logos to gri. Parmenides (#14) claim certain One is constant remaining thing, to know it, it has alr.

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for pretensions to it — including the relativism and subjectivism of many of his contemporary thinkers, the Sophists. He also realized that he had to come to grips with the views of two other major thinkers, Heraclitus and Parmenides — Heraclitus claiming that nothing is, only becoming, Parmenides (#14) claiming that change does not exist, only what does not change (a certain One). If — as Plato believed with Heraclitus — everything in this world is constantly changing in every way, constantly "morphing," never, ever remaining what it is, how could it ever be possible for us to "grasp" anything, to know what any thing is? By the time you think you have grasped it, it has already slipped out of your hands.

To know something must therefore be to know something that does not change, something that always remains what it is (something Parmenidean). Only such a thing can be known, and only such a thing — Plato agrees with Parmenides — is really real. Since such things do not exist in this world, they must exist in, and constitute, a nonspatial, nontemporal dimension. These are what Plato calls "Forms." (Note that the structure of Plato's argument is not that Forms exist because knowledge exists; it is, rather, that knowledge exists because Forms exist. Knowledge is not the source of the existence of Forms; the reverse is true: the existence of Forms makes the existence of knowledge possible. Plato's argument, therefore, is not epistemic; it is ontological.) They are also perfect, eternal, the source of the existence of this world, and many other things as well, but Plato gives other reasons for their possession of these attributes.

[Socrates asks Cratylus] Tell me whether there is or is not any absolute beauty or good, or any other absolute existence? Certainly, Socrates, I think there is. Then let us seek the true beauty, not asking whether a face is fair, or anything of that sort, for all such things appear to be in flux, but let us ask whether the true beauty is not always beautiful. Certainly [. . .]. Then how can that be a real thing which is never in the same state? [. . .]. They cannot. Nor yet, can they be known by anyone; for at the moment that the observer approaches, then they become other and of another nature, so that you can no longer know their nature or state. [. . .]. Nor can we reasonably say [. . .] that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding. For knowledge too cannot continue to be knowledge unless continuing always to abide and to exist. But if the very nature of knowledge changes, at the time when the change occurs there will be no knowledge, and if the transition is always going on, there will always be no knowledge. (Cratylus, qtd. in Ross, 439C-440C; Ross's trans., slightly modified using Jowett's in The Collected Dialogues)

In the Republic, Plato gives us the same argument in more explicit form – or, if you like, a different version of the same argument in more explicit form.
Socrates then goes on to identify that object as the world in which we live, a world which he earlier implicitly referred to as a world of appearances. Although one of the basic operating premises here is not that all things in this world are in constant flux, but rather that they are neither fully real nor fully unreal, it is not a far stretch to argue that they are neither fully real nor fully unreal because they are in constant flux. If so, then the argument is fundamentally the same as the one given in the Cratylus; if not, then it is another version of it. In the latter case, premise 4 would have to be modified accordingly as well as the wording in all the lines relying on it.

P1. Knowledge is possible.
P2. Knowledge is knowledge of some object. That is, if a (putative) piece of knowledge does not have an object, then that (putative) piece of knowledge does not exist.
P3. All knowledge (unlike opinion) is stable. That is, all pieces of knowledge are stable: they do not change, being one thing at one time, another at another.
P4. If the object of knowledge could change (for example, if beauty, the object I know, could become something other than beauty), then the knowledge of that object would not be stable (my knowledge of beauty would not be stable).
P5. All things in this world, as Heraclitus says, are in constant flux. That is, all things in this world are things that are always changing in every way, or, all things in this world are not things that are stable.
The existence of a Beauty in a dream? If a man partake of its pleasure, then he is not dreaming at all. If he does not partake of its pleasure, then he is not dreaming at all. Therefore, the object of the dream is not real. Or is it? Perhaps it is unreal. True or false? (putative) piece of knowledge.

World in which we think the world of appearance is not that all things are neither real nor unreal, if so, then the object of belief is one that is not real. But if not, then we would have the lines relying on the indirect proof that objects of knowledge do not exist in another world (reductio, P6–C8).

P6. Some objects of knowledge exist among things in this world (assumption for reductio).
C1. Some objects of knowledge change; they are not stable (syllogism, P5, P6).
C2. Some pieces of knowledge are not stable (modus ponens, P4, C1).
C3. All knowledge (unlike opinion) is stable and some pieces of knowledge are not stable (conjunction, P3, C2).
C4. No objects of knowledge exist among things in this world (reductio, P6–C3).

P7. If objects of knowledge do not exist in this world and do not exist in another, then objects of knowledge do not exist.
C5. Objects of knowledge do not exist in this world, and objects of knowledge do not exist in another (conjunction, C4, P8).
C6. Objects of knowledge do not exist (modus ponens, P7, C5).
C7. Knowledge is not possible (modus ponens, P2, C6).
C8. Knowledge is possible, and knowledge is not possible (conjunction, P1, C7).

C9. Objects of knowledge — called “Forms” — do exist in another world (reductio, P6–C8).