

Parmenides 132c-133a and the Development of Plato's Thought

WILLIAM J. PRIOR

The crucial question in the issue of Plato's philosophical development is whether he ever abandoned or significantly modified the theory of forms. Most pertinent to this question is the nature of Plato's response to his own critique of the theory in the *Parmenides*. Scholarly opinion on this issue is so divided that it may safely be called the most vexed problem in the interpretation of Plato.

In this paper I shall consider only one view of the force of the *Parmenides* arguments on Plato's development: that of G. E. L. Owen. According to Owen, one of the arguments of the *Parmenides*, the so-called second version of the Third Man Argument, conclusively refutes the view of the middle dialogues that the forms are paradigms. After the *Parmenides*, Owen holds, Plato either adopted the view that the forms are immanent universals or gave no interpretation of their nature.¹ Owen uses this conclusion to support his claim that the *Timaeus*, in which the forms are construed as paradigms, antedates the *Parmenides*.

I shall attempt to show that the argument of the *Parmenides* on which Owen relies does not refute the claim that the forms can be understood as paradigms, even though the argument may be formulated so as to be formally valid. In the absence of other textual evidence that Plato modified the theory of forms, then, it cannot be proved that the paradigm version of the theory is the exclusive property of Plato's middle period, or that the *Timaeus* is therefore a dialogue of that period.²

I

Here is Owen's argument:

At one stage of the earlier argument in the *Parmenides* (132c 12-133a 7) Socrates defines μέβεβς in terms of ὁμοιωμενα and παρᾶδειγμενα. Parmenides has no trouble in proving that, if participation in some character A is to be construed as resemblance to some παρᾶδειγμα in respect of A, then, since resemblance is symmetrical, both παρᾶδειγμα and ὁμοιωμενα must exhibit A and hence *ex hypothesi* resemble a further παρᾶδειγμα in that respect. And so on, in regress. Now the suggestion refuted by Parmenides is precisely the account of the relation between Forms and particulars given in the *Timaeus* (e.g. 29b, 48c-49a, 50d 1, 52a, 53c). So commentators, hoping to reconcile a late *Timaeus* with a Plato who saw the point of

his own arguments, have laboured to show that the *Timaeus* theory was immune (or at worst thought to be immune) to the objections raised in the supposedly earlier work. But their attempts have failed. (318-319)

Owen later concludes:

The reasonable solution of the puzzle is to regard the *Timaeus* as preceding the *Parmenides* and as inheriting from the middle-period dialogues a fallacy which Plato subsequently exposed. (321-322)

The structure of the argument, then, is as follows:

- 1) In the middle dialogues and the *Timaeus* Plato construed the forms as paradigms;
- 2) An argument in the *Parmenides* shows this to be an impossible interpretation of the forms;
- 3) Plato recognized this as the point of the argument.

From this, Owen concludes:

- 4) Plato ceased to think of the forms as paradigms after the *Parmenides*; and,
- 5) The *Timaeus* must therefore antedate the *Parmenides*.

As Owen's reasoning is cogent, scholars who dispute his conclusions must deny one of his premisses. Few Plato scholars have been willing to deny that Plato correctly perceived the force of his own argument;³ charity and vested interest argue against that option. Vlastos believes that the *Parmenides* argument is inconsistent, but that Plato was unable to find the flaw in it. According to Vlastos, Plato did not give up the theory of forms, which puts Plato in the awkward position of continuing to hold a position to which he thought he possessed a conclusive refutation.⁴

By far the most common response to Owen's argument has been to deny premise (1). The dominant view of scholars has been that the forms are not paradigms, but abstract universals; therefore, the arguments of the *Parmenides* do not refute the theory Plato actually held.⁵ The two versions of the Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides* depend on the acceptance of self-predication (the claim that the form possesses the property for which it is named) and of a relation of resemblance between forms and the phenomena that participate in them. If the forms are universals, Plato need accept neither of these claims; so the arguments would fail.

This defense only works, of course, against the Third Man Argument; the scholar who takes this line must meet other objections raised in the *Parmenides*, and cannot assume that all is well with the theory of forms, if only the Third Man be evaded. Such a line of defense concedes too much, moreover; for it tacitly accepts Owen's view that the argument is conclusive

against a paradigm version of the theory. I wish to show that it is not.⁶ Here is Plato's argument, as translated by Fowler in the *Loeb* text:

"But Parmenides, I think the most likely view is, that these ideas exist in nature as patterns, and the other things resemble them and are imitations of them; their participation in ideas is assimilation to them, that and nothing else."

"Then if anything," he said, "resembles the idea, can that idea avoid being like the thing which resembles it, in so far as the thing has been made to resemble it, or is there any possibility that the like be unlike its like?"

"No, there is none."

"And must not necessarily the like partake of the same idea as its like?"

"It must."

"That by participation in which like things are made like, will be the absolute idea, will it not?"

"Certainly."

"Then it is impossible that anything be like the idea, or the idea like anything; for if they are alike, some further idea, in addition to the first, will always appear, and if that is like anything, still another, and a new idea will always be arising, if the idea is like that which partakes of it."

"Very true."

"Then it is not by likeness that other things partake of ideas; we must seek some other method of participation."

"So it seems." (*Parmenides* 132e-133a)

The analysis of this argument and the first version of the Third Man (132a-b) has been a source of constant controversy in recent years.⁷ Agreement on the correct analysis of the argument will probably never be reached, but the analysis I offer below has the virtues of simplicity (it is formalizable in first-order quantification theory) and closeness to the text. First, I shall paraphrase the argument into quasi-ordinary English, and then into canonical notation.

- 1) There exists at least one form in which objects participate.
- 2) If any object participates in a form, it is not identical to the form ("the other things . . . are imitations").
- 3) Any object that participates in a form imitates that form and resembles it.
- 4) If any object resembles another, that other resembles it.
- 5) If any object resembles another, there exists a form in which both objects participate.
- 6) Therefore, if the form and the object that participates in it resemble each other, there is another form, not identical to the first, in which both the first form and its participant participate (and so on).

Symbolically:

Let I = imitates, R = resembles, F = is a form, and P = participates in. Then,

- 1) $(\exists x)(\exists y)(Fy \cdot Pxy)$
- 2) $(x)(y)(Fy \cdot Pxy \rightarrow x \neq y)$

- 3) $(x)(y)(Fy \cdot Pxy \rightarrow Ixy \cdot Rxy)$
- 4) $(x)(y)(Rxy \rightarrow Ryx)$
- 5) $(x)(y)(Rxy \rightarrow (\exists z)(Fz \cdot Pxz \cdot Pzy))$
- 6) $(x)(y)(Fy \cdot Pxy \cdot Rxy \cdot Ryx \rightarrow (\exists z)(Fz \cdot y \neq z \cdot Pxz \cdot Pzy))$

(6) is deducible from (2) and (5); the premisses jointly generate the regress. Owen is clearly correct in assuming that the argument is valid. Equally clearly, the argument is directed against the kind of account of participation given in the *Timaeus*. The question that remains is: Is Plato committed to all the premisses?

The only premise that is utterly unsuspect is (4), which states that resemblance is a symmetrical relation. Surprisingly, this is just the premise some defenders of Plato have chosen to question; but Owen has closed off that route (319-320). Premises (2) and (3) are suspect for the following reason: they make participation a relation no object can have to itself. Premise (2) states that if x participates in y, then x is not identical to y. Premise (3) states that participation involves imitation; but no object is an imitation of itself.

Forms, as paradigms, are self-predicative. Now if (and it's a big "if") Plato takes participation to be the relation that grounds *all* predication, he must reject (2) and (3) on the grounds that self-predication is based on self-participation. Unfortunately, there is no clear evidence of where Plato stood on this matter. He may have taken it that participation only grounds predication in the case of non-paradigms, leaving self-predication to be otherwise grounded.⁸

Let us assume for the purpose of argument that Plato would accept (2) and (3), and that he would therefore reject participation as the ground of self-predication. In this case, since Plato would certainly accept (1), and since (6) is a consequence of (2) and (5), he could only avoid the regress by denying (5). It can be shown, I believe, that (5) conflicts with the paradigm theory of forms, and would have been unacceptable to Plato, had he seen the conflict.

III

Premise (5) states that if any object resembles another, there is a common form in which they both participate. Plato unquestionably accepted this statement, as it pertained to phenomenal objects. The paradigm forms of the middle dialogues were introduced, among other reasons, to make it clear in just what way two or more phenomenal objects resembled each other. If one wished to know why both x and y were both called "good," or

"just," or "beautiful," he could turn to the paradigm of justice, goodness, or beauty, and note the resemblance between it and x and y.

Take as an example John and Mary. There are many ways in which John and Mary resemble each other, at least some of which are not marked by the general terms of a given language. For the sake of simplicity, let us assume that the resemblance relations Plato is concerned with are just those designated by the common terms of his language. (If this is not so, there will be resemblance relations without general terms, and, hence, forms to designate them, and premise (5) will be false, anyway.) We can say then that John and Mary resemble each other in being human, or animals, or whatever; and in each case there will be a form, not identical with John or Mary, in which both participate.

The second case that should be mentioned involves the comparison of a phenomenal particular, for instance John, with a form, say the form of Man. On the assumption that the form of Man is a paradigmatic man, there will again be many forms in which they both participate, such as the form of Animal, or the form of Being. These forms will be distinct from the two objects that resemble each other, and thus (5) will be true in this case, too.

The third case is the problematic one. Again, let us compare John and the form of Man, in that very respect in which both are men. John and the form of Man do resemble each other on the paradigm theory, and they do share a common term. Is there, then, a third item, a form distinct from Man itself, in which they both participate, and in virtue of which they are both called men? The paradigm theorist must answer no. If anything is responsible for the resemblance between the form of Man and John, it is the form of Man itself (and whatever agent made John in the image of the form). To declare that the paradigm itself requires another paradigm in order to perform its function is to misunderstand the role of the paradigm in the theory. To apply premise (5) to this case is to make a demand of Plato that is ill-conceived, for reasons I shall try to make clear below. Premise (5), though perfectly unobjectionable in the first two cases, is inapplicable here. Since (5) as stated is universal in scope, rejection of it in this case constitutes complete rejection of it. Without (5), the regress cannot be generated. Thus Plato, if he wished to keep (2) and (3) and still avoid the regress, must reject (5).

It remains to show why this rejection of (5) is not *ad hoc*, and why the paradigm theorist is not merely free, but is actually compelled, to reject it. I shall attempt to show this by talking about paradigms in general, without regard to the particular nature and genesis of the paradigm theory of forms in the Platonic dialogues.

Consider the following case. Imagine a kingdom in which people have and employ the concept of length but have no system of measurement. In this kingdom people make judgments of resemblance between objects in respect of length: that is, they say such things as, "This broom is almost as long as that mop," and "These bricks are the same length," and so forth. Thus, the concept of resemblance or similarity, at least as it applies to length, is already a part of the conceptual framework of these people.

Since such a concept of length can be employed only when the objects being compared are physically close to each other and are of a manageable size, and since judgments of this kind are bound to be somewhat vague (e.g., what counts as "the same length," or "almost the same length"?), the desirability of a system of measurement independent of the objects becomes clear. Let us suppose that such a system is introduced, by the decree that the unit of measure shall be "the length of the King's foot," and that anything shall be called "a foot long" that is equal in length to the King's foot.

In such a scheme the King's foot functions as a paradigm or standard. In any judgment of length, whether of a single object or a comparative judgment between two or more objects, the King's foot, or its surrogate, the foot-rule,⁹ now can enter the situation and serve as a basis of comparison. Judgments of length need not be made only relatively, in terms of one of two ordinary objects being longer than the other, but absolutely, in terms of multiples or divisions of the length of the King's foot. Yet the distinction between relative and absolute measurement conceals the fact that absolute measurement is itself a matter of relating, directly or indirectly, two objects: the standard and the object measured.

Of course, for reasons Plato well appreciated, it would be desirable to find a standard that did not change at various times of the day, depending on how far the King had walked, or bring consternation to the Bureau of Weights and Measures every time a new monarch was crowned. Still, the example of the King's foot is adequate to make several points clear.

First, it is not merely true, but necessarily true, in this system, that the King's foot is a foot long. For anything is a foot long which is equal in length to the King's foot, and the King's foot is always the same length as itself. In general, classic statements of Platonic self-predication will always be true in a system of paradigms.

Second, the statement "The King's foot is a foot long" is distinguished in several ways from all other statements of the form "_____ is a foot long." These statements are at best contingently true, for they depend for their verification on comparison of the object in question with the King's

foot, or its surrogate. Thus, we discover that other objects are a foot long, but we know *a priori*, by definition, that the King's foot is a foot long. In other words, in the case of every object but the paradigm, the question "How do you know it's a foot long?" may be answered, "I have measured it against the King's foot." In the case of the King's foot, however, the only reply possible to the question is that the meaning of the expression "a foot long" makes the truth of the claim self-evident.

One who attempted to make an empirical determination of the length of the King's foot, in this system, would be guilty of a confusion concerning its role as a paradigm. There is no further standard to which the King's foot could be referred for measurement. If such a standard were adopted, this would be equivalent to adopting a *new* system of measurement, in which the King's foot no longer served as a paradigm. In other words, there can be at most one paradigm of a given length in a consistent system of measurement.

Third, the fact that the statement about the King's foot differs from others of the same grammatical form in method of verification, in scope, and in linguistic role should not make us forget that the relation between the King's foot and all other objects of the same length is one of *resemblance* in this respect. We may safely say that the King's foot and the other objects *share a property*, so long as we keep in mind that resemblance is the criterion whereby sameness of property is established, and not the other way around. In other words, there is nothing mystical about the length of the King's foot: it is the same length as the other objects, in spite of the fact that the validation of the statement to that effect is different in this case.

Fourth and finally, the introduction of the King's foot as paradigm depends on the pre-existence in the culture of the notions of resemblance and comparison. The paradigm gives precision to the notion of resemblance in the particular cases for which it is introduced, and it is for this reason that we turn to the paradigm to determine whether two ordinary objects resemble each other. The paradigm is not introduced to *explain* or *define* the notion of resemblance, however; rather, the very notion of a paradigm trades on the fact that we already understand what it is for two objects to resemble each other.

With these features of our example in mind, we can easily see what is wrong with the Third Man Argument. First, the argument as a whole demands an account of the relation between paradigm and ordinary object in the same terms as the account of the relation between two ordinary objects; it demands, in other words, that we account for the paradigm's

possession of a property in the same way that we account for any other object's possession of the property. We have seen from the third point above that the paradigm *does* possess the property, but from the first two points that the grounds for the attribution of the property are quite different in the case of the paradigm. Thus, while it is not illegitimate to demand an account of the attribution of the property to the paradigm, it displays a misunderstanding concerning the nature of a paradigm theory to demand the *same kind* of account given for other objects.

Second, premise (5) must be specifically rejected. There are two ways of reading (5). On the surface, it is a simple statement about the relation between resemblance, forms, and participation. The examination of cases carried out on pp. 234-235 above shows that this generalization is false and must be rejected.

If a feeling persists that premise (5) ought not to be rejected, it is likely due to the belief that the paradigm theorist ought to give an account of resemblance, and that (5) presents what must be his account. The fact that the account is in terms of participation makes the paradigm theory blatantly circular; for in premise (3) participation is explained in part in terms of resemblance.

The fourth point above (p. 236) makes it clear that it would be improper for the paradigm theorist to attempt to explain resemblance, at least in terms of participation. In a theory of paradigms, resemblance functions as a primitive notion, at least with respect to participation. If the demand for an explanation of resemblance in terms of participation is rejected, the circularity vanishes and premise (5) is exposed for what it is: an attempt to make the paradigm theorist treat as *explanandum* a concept he need only use as *explanans*.

The Third Man Argument may seem effective against a paradigm theory of forms for one more reason. Although it may be admitted that the proponent of such a theory is entitled to take *some* term as primitive, it could be argued that the notion of resemblance is ill-chosen for the task. It may be felt that *any* theory that serves the purposes of the theory of forms ought to explain resemblance, perhaps in terms of sharing a (universal) property. To answer this objection would require a detailed comparison of the competing theories, which would go considerably beyond the scope of this paper. Yet it must be noted that Owen presented the Third Man Argument as proof, not of the implausibility of the paradigm theory of forms, but of its logical incoherence. That such a theory as Plato defends in his middle dialogues and the *Timaeus* can be held without inconsistency by

the justified rejection of premise (5) of the argument has, I take it, been now established.

IV

Analysis of the argument can show us only what Plato ought to believe, or what he is entitled to believe, about the paradigm theory of forms. Only examination of the text can show us what he actually did believe. Unfortunately, unless we beg the question against Owen and place the *Timaeus* late, the textual evidence is inconclusive. No passage of the *Sophist* or *Philebus* requires that we take the forms in general as paradigms, though equally no passage rules out such an interpretation.

There is a striking remark at *Theaetetus* 176e that some have taken as conclusive proof that Plato continued to treat forms as paradigms: "Two patterns, my friend, are set up in the world, the divine, which is most blessed, and the godless, which is most wretched." (Fowler, trans.) Owen claims that the passage is metaphorical, and that the postulation of a form of evil is not in keeping with the canonical doctrine of forms (321, n. 2). The passage itself is a digression from the general discussion of the dialogue; and, even if Owen's objections could be met and we could take it as an indication that the theory of paradigms still lives in the *Theaetetus*, there is no proof that the *Theaetetus* is later than the *Parmenides*.¹⁰

It is the inconclusiveness of the textual evidence that forces the interpreter of Plato to speculate on the basis of the argument concerning the course of Plato's development. The text is similarly inconclusive when consulted concerning Plato's reaction to the argument itself. The late dialogues afford no evidence that Plato had found the flaw in the argument; yet it seems likely that if he had he would have let his readers know about it.

Plato did produce a counter-argument designed to show that there can be only one paradigm of a given concept. The argument, presented at *Republic* X, 597c and repeated at *Timaeus* 31a, is quite similar to the second point of part III (p. 235, above). A counter-argument is not a refutation, however, and we may not infer from the existence of the argument that Plato had rejected the Third Man. Indeed, the fact that the argument appears first in the *Republic*, which is almost certainly earlier than the *Parmenides*, and is repeated in the *Timaeus*, which Owen wishes to prove is earlier, gives Owen the opportunity to claim that the Third Man enabled Plato to see the error implicit in thinking that a paradigm form could be unique.

Owen's case rests on the claims that the Third Man is a conclusive refutation of the paradigm theory of forms, and that Plato saw that point. We have seen that the argument is not conclusive, but can be evaded by rejection of one of its premisses. Yet we must be more cautious than Owen, and not insist that Plato must have seen that point. All we can confidently assert is that the *Parmenides* argument need not have prevented Plato from continuing to hold that forms are paradigms. The analysis of the argument is problematic even today, with the availability of logical apparatus. The premisses individually would have looked acceptable to Plato, and none more so than (5), which we have shown is true in two of three cases, according to the paradigm theory.

These points, plus the absence of a refutation, give us reason to think that Plato could not find specifically what was wrong with the argument; he may well have found it flawless and telling. Does that mean, then, that he must have abandoned the view that the forms are paradigms, as Owen asserts, and that the *Timaeus* must therefore be a middle dialogue? Certainly it does not. The apparent conclusiveness of the argument would have to be weighed in Plato's mind against the conclusiveness of the counter-argument, the intuition that the paradigm theory is coherent, and the importance of the theory of forms to the philosophical enterprise (cf. *Parm.* 135b-c). The conviction that the paradigm theory was, after all, sound could have led Plato to the view that *something* was wrong with the Third Man Argument, even if he could not put his finger on what it was.

Modern work in the philosophy of science (e.g., that of Putnam and Kuhn) indicates that theories are not abandoned even if they are thought to be defective. They are held, as working hypotheses, until a better theory can be developed. It would have been hard to improve on the paradigm theory to meet Plato's particular needs. It is not unreasonable to think that he continued to hold it after the *Parmenides*.

The Third Man may well have remained a problem for him throughout the rest of his career. He may well have held the theory undogmatically after the *Parmenides*; yet it is possible to read the *Timaeus* not as a work of religious revelation or *a priori* science, but as an attempt to explore the implications of a hypothesis in a new area: that of natural science. The fact that the paradigm theory tells us that the philosopher is acquainted with the forms need not make us assume that Plato believed that he had made their acquaintance. A theory about certain knowledge may be held uncertainly.

We cannot categorically state that Plato did continue to hold the paradigm theory, unless we take the *Timaeus* to be late. I have shown,

though, that he need not have abandoned this view. If he did continue to hold the paradigm theory, not uncritically but with reasoned conviction in its soundness, even in the face of the argument, he would at least have made an intelligent choice.

University of Colorado at Boulder

¹ G. E. L. Owen, "The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's Dialogues," in R. E. Allen, ed., *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics* (London, 1965), 321 and 321-2, n. 3. Hereafter all references to this article appear in parentheses in the body of the text.

² More can be proved about the position of the *Timaeus* than this negative conclusion suggests. Styliometric evidence places the dialogue late, at least post-*Parmenides*, and Owen's arguments against this evidence are not sufficient to shake one's confidence in it. But that cannot be proved in this paper.

³ One who does deny this is W. G. Runciman, in "Plato's *Parmenides*," in Allen, 152. I agree with Runciman to the extent that I see no evidence that Plato ever saw *exactly* what was wrong with the argument; cf. *infra*, part IV, 238-240.

⁴ Gregory Vlastos, "The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*," in Allen, 254-255. The position I attribute to Plato in part IV, below, is perhaps only slightly less awkward.

⁵ Among those who hold that forms are universals are: Kyle, Russell, Ross, Crombie, Wedberg, Straug, Vlastos, perhaps Cherniss, and Aristotle.

⁶ It can be established by textual evidence that Plato does treat the forms as paradigms, and that this argument is therefore of more than academic interest; but again, proof of that point is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷ Vlastos provides a bibliography of the major contributions to the debate in "The Third Man," in Allen, 231, n. 2, and in "Plato's 'Third Man' Argument (*Parm.* 132A1-B2): Text and Logic," in Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, 1973), Appendix I, 361-362.

⁸ This is stated explicitly at *Rep.* V, 476c-d.

⁹ The foot-rule, of course, is in this system only an approximation of the King's foot, to be used for practical purposes; it in no way serves as a standard in its own right.

¹⁰ *Statesman* 285d-286a shows that Plato retained the language of original and image for description of the relation of *some* forms to phenomena; but it also explicitly states that other forms do *not* have images (at least sensible ones). The *Seventh Letter* would show conclusively that Plato retained in his last years the language of original and image for describing the relation of forms to phenomena (cf. 343c), were its authenticity not somewhat in doubt.