Some aspects of Plato's theory of Forms: Timaeus 49c ff.

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(1) Predicates as proper names of Forms

The dialogue Cratylus is concerned to discover what makes a name a right name for that which it names; but although Plato's discussion, in this context, of the etymologies of particular names begins with personal proper names like 'Hector' and 'Astyanax',¹ the names (διδυματα) he turns to later on include many common nouns and adjectives.² From passages elsewhere in Plato's writings, it seems that the Forms of whose existence he felt most sure were those which corresponded to, and supposedly gave meaning to, various common nouns and adjectives (e.g., 'fire', 'earth', 'table', 'beautiful', 'equal', 'just'). Moreover, when, in Book 10 of the Republic, Plato attempts a formulation of his procedure for postulating Forms, he says that his custom is to postulate a Form wherever the same name (διδυμα) is applied to each of a plurality of things.³ Again, one's describing a thing as having a given Form is equated, in the Phaedo, with one's naming it after that Form (δεκτονομαζειν)⁴ — language which seems to imply in the plainest way possible that to affirm a predicate of something is to give that thing a name.

Now it appears to me that the evidence just summarised readily suggests, and comports very well with, a theory of the following sort. Predicates — or at any rate, common nouns and adjectives — are to be thought of as names in a sense closely similar to that in which 'Hector' and 'Socrates' and 'Plato' are names. What makes a name a name is its serving to pick out a particular thing — that of which it is a name — for special attention. But whereas the personal names, such as 'Hector' and the rest, pick out particular human beings, the predicate-names pick out things of quite another sort. To be more accurate, these predicate-names pick out the sorts themselves — the common types or

¹ 392c ff.
² E.g., 'fire', 'water', 'air', 'ether', 'earth' (409c-410c); 'ugly' and 'beautiful' (416a-d), 'gainful' (417a), 'useful' (417c).
³ 596a.
⁴ 103b, cf. 78e.
characteristics which things may have or of which they may be instances. The predicate 'just' is a name – a proper name, no less – of justice, the characteristic of being just, in very much the way in which ‘Plato’ is the proper name of Plato; and the common nouns ‘earth’ and ‘water’ should be treated as proper names of two distinct types of corporeal matter. It is true, of course, that in our everyday speech we apply these predicates to many things other than general characteristics or types – we apply the term ‘just’, for example, to men and acts, and the term ‘earth’ to clods. Yet these applications too should be construed as namings no less than the applications to characteristics or types. For a name which belongs as a proper name only to A may also reasonably be used as a name for some other thing B provided B is appropriately related to A. The theory holds that a thing’s exemplifying a certain characteristic or type constitutes just such an appropriate relationship between that thing and the type so exemplified; and so it comes about that the exemplifiers or instances are named after the type.5

There may well be those who feel inclined to suggest that to interpret Plato’s theory in this kind of way is to attach a significance to his talk of names and naming which in fact cannot justifiably be read into it. It may well be urged that to render Plato’s term ὄνομα by the English term ‘name’ is often wrong. “Ὅνομα, we may be told, is the only term Plato had available to him when he wanted a Greek equivalent to the English term ‘word’. Consequently, when he calls a predicate an ὄνομα, he may simply – and harmlessly – be calling it a word. When he says that to affirm a predicate of something is to name it after the Form which this affirmative predication represents it as sharing or displaying, this is merely a way of saying that the predicate which, when affirmed of things, presents them as partaking of Form F is precisely the one that belongs to F itself in the sense of having it as its intensional or connotative meaning. To enforce upon certain aspects of Plato’s terminology a literal interpretation which drives us to the conclusion that he treated predicates as a class of proper names may thus be seen as needless and perverse.

5 The view that Plato treats predicates as a class of names is one to which I have already given my support in a two-part article on Phaedo 74b7-c6 in Phronesis, vols. 2 and 3 (1957-8). See in particular pp. 145-7 of part 1. This present paper is to some extent an elaboration of certain things that I wrote in that article; but I would not like it to be thought that my opinions are exactly what they were then, either on this or any other of the topics with which that article dealt.