A Proof from the Peri Ideon revisited

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In Book A of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle asserts that none of the ways in which “we prove” the existence of Forms is really convincing, for some of them are simply invalid and others prove the existence of Forms “for things of which we do not think that there are Forms” (990 b 8-11). As an example of failure in the latter case, Aristotle cites the argument which produces Ideas of relatives. This argument fails, says Aristotle, because “we don’t want to say that relatives are a class of things existing by themselves” (990 b 15-17), i.e. we ought not to assert that there are Ideas of relatives. In the *Metaphysics* we have only the mention of an argument concerning relatives and its rather curt dismissal by Aristotle.

It has been clear to scholars for a long time, however, that in chapter 9 of Book A, Aristotle is simply passing in review the statement and criticism of a number of Academic arguments for the existence of Forms which he had treated at length and refuted in a lost essay entitled *Peri Ideon*. And fortunately fragments of this essay have been preserved in Alexander’s commentary on the *Metaphysics*, where we find a statement of the argument concerning relatives and Aristotle’s refutation of it.¹

In this paper I would like to approach this argument from three points of view: 1) what I believe is the correct analysis and interpretation of the argument; 2) a comparison of my view with those of G. E. L. Owen and H. Cherniss;² and 3) a brief discussion of one of Aristotle’s criticisms of the argument. An extended treatment of this argument is called for, since it raises important questions on the nature


of predication in Plato, the nature of relations, the nature of the paradigm, and the character of Aristotle’s criticisms of Plato. Both Owen and Cherniss have shed a great deal of light on the argument; nevertheless, I hope to show that their exposition misses the mark at certain crucial points in either the analysis or the interpretation of the proof. And the proof is a difficult one. In 1908 Léon Robin wrote: “L’exposition que nous donne Alexander de cet argument est souvent, il faut le reconnaître avec Bonitz..., fort obscure…”

With regard to the analysis and interpretation of the proof, the text of Alexander, the MS. A of Bonitz printed by Hayduck with slight emendation, reads as follows: (We shall call this after Owen the argument P)

A. The argument which produces Ideas even of relations is this. Whenever the same thing is predicated of several individuals non-homonymously (μὴ διμονόμοις), but so as to indicate a single nature, it is true of them, either

1. because they are strictly (κυρίως) what is indicated by the predicate, as when we call both Socrates and Plato a ‘man’; or
2. because they are images of the real objects, as when we predicate ‘man’ of pictures (for we are pointing to the images of men in these pictures, indicating the same nature in all of them); or
3. when one of them is a paradigm and the others are images, as if we were to say that Socrates and his images are ‘men’.

B. We predicate ‘equal’ in the strict sense (τὸ ἴσον κύριῳ) of things in this world, being predicated of them homonymously (διμονόμοις). For

1. the same definition does not fit all of them,
2. nor are we indicating things that are really equal, since the sizes of sensibles are continually changing, and they are not determinate, and
3. neither is there anything in this world which answers without qualification (ἀκριβῶς) to the definition of the equal. But
4. not even [do we call them equal non-homonymously] on the grounds that one of them is the paradigm and the other an image, for the one is no more paradigm or image than the other. And
5. even if someone were to claim that the image is not homonymous (μὴ διμονόμοις) with the paradigm, it always follows that these equal things are equal as images of what is truly and strictly equal.

C. And if this is so, then there is something that is strictly the equal itself, in relation to which the things in this world as images come to be and are called equal, and this is the Idea, the paradigm [excising καὶ εἰκόνα] for those things which come to be in relation to it.