J. Gosling on τὰ πολλὰ καλά

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J. Gosling's paper on τὰ πολλὰ of Republic 479 (Phronesis, 5 (1960) ) has received little comment beyond an approving footnote by I. M. Crombie (An Examination of Plato's Doctrines, vol. i, 1963, p. 102). This is surprising, for the passage that Gosling seeks so radically to re-interpret is important; if he is wrong, therefore, — as I believe he is, — his arguments need to be met, however briefly.

His first set of arguments (pp. 118-120) aim at showing that it is difficult to find any interpretation of 479 a-b if we assume that particulars, and not types, are under discussion. His method is to suggest possible interpretations and then to show why he thinks they will not do.

1. The first possible interpretation is that there is no beautiful object such that you cannot conceive of a more beautiful one, in comparison with which it will seem ugly.

Against this, Gosling raises two objections —

a. It is not plausible, he argues, in the case of "the many doubles" (τὰ πολλὰ διπλάσια) of which Plato says "do they seem any less halves than doubles?" (479 b 3-4). For, if a particular is not perfectly double the size of another, this surely does not lead us to think that it is for that reason only (and precisely) half of that other.

One can scarcely disagree with Gosling on this, at the same time rather wondering why he should have suggested the interpretation in the first place. However, he recognizes himself that it is thoroughly implausible and passes on to an alternative interpretation of the same kind.¹ This is as follows. There is no particular of size A which is double a particular of size B which will not also seem half a particular of size C.

To this new interpretation he objects on the grounds that it would only show that particulars could possess (apparently) opposite properties imperfectly, not at all that they must. Unfortunately he does not explain very precisely why he says this, but, if I understand his footnote (p. 118) correctly, he means something as follows. Any given item which exists and is double a second, must itself be half a third. This third existing item must in turn be half a fourth. And so on. The interpretation finally commits us, he says, to the existence of objects which are infinitely large.

¹ This is as follows.
Whatever the precise bearing of this objection, it has a number of drawbacks.

(i) The interpretation does not have the consequences Gosling seems to suggest. An infinite regress of doubles no more reaches infinitely large objects than an infinite regress of causes reaches a first cause. One simply has an infinite number of objects of finite size, each double its predecessor. (It may be thought that this is a serious enough objection in its own right. That may be so, but it is not Gosling's objection.)

(ii) If what Gosling is ultimately objecting to is that the proposed interpretation should in any way entail existences, then his objection surely recoils on his own interpretation. For that itself carries an existential entailment. For the following reason. If "the many beautifuls" refers to types, then Plato's argument is that any given type which is said to be beautiful must also be said to be ugly. What does this mean? In the way that Gosling would interpret it, it means that if some instances of a certain type of thing are beautiful there must exist also some instances which are ugly.

(iii) In his footnote (p. 118), which is not easy to follow (for it opens with a curious repetition of the main text), Gosling says: "What is true is that any size of group or measurement which is double some other must be half a further one,—but now we are talking of types, no longer of particulars." This seems to imply that while Gosling would scruple at accepting "vast a priori claims about the necessary existence of infinitely large objects", he feels no such worry about types. But no one, surely, can assume that there is no problem attached to claims about the necessary existence of types, without telling us something about his views on their ontology; or, more to the point, what he thinks Plato's views were.

(iv) If types are at issue, then undeniably Gosling's understanding of the sense in which types may be said to be bearers of opposite properties is perfectly plausible in some of the cases raised by Plato. Repayment of debts, for example, may be said to be just and unjust in the sense that some particular instances of it are just, some not. But no such sense can be lent to the case of doubles. To make sense of the latter we would have to have something like the following: "The type called . . . is both double and half in that some of its tokens are double, some half." I have not been able to think of a single plausible example that would make sense here, nor does Gosling tell us how he might fill in the blank. When he does come to say something about the case of doubles (p. 123), he gives the impression of confusing the case of types' having other types as their halves and doubles, with the quite different case of types having some of their tokens as halves, some as doubles.