Identity and Predication in Plato

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Among the Platonic statements that have most agitated his commentators, from Aristotle's time down to the present, are those in which he seems to be saying (and with great confidence, too, as though there were no question about it) that beauty itself is beautiful, justice itself is just, largeness is large, piety is pious, and the like. On the one hand, these statements are considered by many to involve some sort of category-mistake or serious ambiguity: beauty itself, they say, is not the sort of thing that can be beautiful, at least not in the same sense in which people, statues, paintings, or pieces of music are beautiful. And likewise with justice itself, largeness itself, and the other Ideas. On the other hand, though, there is the awkward fact that these so-called "self-predications" cannot be lightly dismissed as mere lapsus linguæ on the part of our author, for they seem essentially related to his doctrine that each Idea is a paradigm or perfect exemplar for the particulars that fall under it; beauty itself is said not only to be beautiful, but to be the most beautiful thing of all.

In recent times this situation has been analyzed on the basis of the assumption that the verb "to be" has at least two senses, viz., the predicative sense, as in "Socrates is human", and the identity sense, as in "Socrates is the husband of Xanthippe". Plato's critics castigate him for being unaware of the distinction, while his defenders believe that he was perfectly well aware of it and that the allegedly self-predicative statements are to be understood as assertions of identity. In this paper I wish to investigate the possibility that the assumption is false, and that consequently neither the attacks nor the defenses that are based upon it are well-founded.¹

1. The Third Man Argument

A convenient point of entry to the matter is the notorious Third Man argument, which, though it has been discussed in the literature over and over again, still has a few things to teach us. One version of this argument occurs at Parmenides 132A1-B2, and it is upon this that I wish to focus attention.² Parmenides addresses young Socrates:

"This, I suppose, is why you consider that each form is one: whenever a number of things seem to you to be large, some one idea no doubt seems to you, as you view them, to be the same in all of them; whence you think that the large (τὸ μέγα) is one".

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"What you say is true", he replied.

"But what about the large itself and the other large things; if in the same way you mentally view all of them, will not some one large (ἐν πᾶ μέγα) again appear, by which (ὅ) all these appear large?"

"Evidently".

"Therefore another form of largeness (μεγάλοις) will show up besides that largeness that was already there and the things participating in it; and on top of these yet another one, by which (ὅ) all these will be large. And no longer will each of the forms be one for you, but infinite in number".

Now the first thing to observe here is that the point of Parmenides' argument is not, as has often been erroneously said, that certain assumptions lead to an 'infinite regress' (for there is nothing per se wrong with an infinite regress, anyway), but simply that Socrates' admissions are inconsistent with the principle:

(1) Each of the forms is one.

(Let us postpone for a moment the question of what this principle means).

Indeed, Parmenides attacks (1) throughout this portion of the dialogue. Thus in the section immediately following the quoted passage Socrates seeks to escape the net by raising the possibility that each of the forms may be a thought, existing only in a mind, and in this way "each would be one and would no longer be subject to the consequences just now mentioned" (emphasis supplied by Plato with the particle γε). And in the section immediately preceding our passage it is likewise clear that denials of statements like (1) are what Parmenides is endeavoring to prove and Socrates cannot accept:

"Do you think that the whole form, being one, is in each of the many, or what?"

"Why not, Parmenides?" said Socrates.

"Well, being one and the same it will be separate from itself".

"Not if," he said, "just as day, which is one and the same, is simultaneously in many places and is nevertheless not separate from itself, so each of the forms were one and the same in all at once."

"You are quite ready, O Socrates," he replied, "to make what is one and the same to be in many places at once, as if spreading a sail over a number of people you should say that one thing as a whole was over many. Is not that the sort of thing you intend?"

"Perhaps”, he said.

"But would the whole sail be over each person, or only a part over one, another part over another?"

"Only a part."

"Then the forms themselves would consist of parts, O Socrates, and the things participating in them would participate in parts, and in each of them there would no longer be the whole but only a part of each form."

"So it seems."