A major problem in the interpretation of Plato's metaphysics is the question of whether he abandoned self-predication as a result of the Third Man Argument in the Parmenides. In this paper I will argue that the answer to this question must be 'no' because the self-predication assumption is still present in the Sophist.¹

I

Plato's commitment to self-predication in the Sophist emerges in his argument against the view that all Forms combine (252d2-11): if all Forms combined, then Motion would combine with Rest, and as a result Motion itself would rest, and Rest itself would move. And it is impossible that the Form Rest should move or that the Form Motion should rest.

The argument has caused bewilderment. Plato says that it is impossible that the Form of Motion should rest. And how can that be? The Form of Motion is a Form, after all, and Forms are supposed to be changeless. So why doesn't Plato say that it is obvious that the Form of Motion is at rest rather than impossible?

It might be urged that Plato denies that Motion rests because he has just argued (248c-e) that Forms are changed by being known. But this cannot be correct. For if that were his reason for believing that Motion moves, it would equally be a reason for believing that Rest moves. But 252d rejects the statement that Rest moves as vehemently as it rejects the statement that Motion rests.

My own view is that 252d is to be explained by Plato's retention of self-predication. Hence the Form of Motion moves; that is its nature. The Form of Motion cannot have the contrary attribute of resting since for Motion to exist is just for it to move.²

So I am claiming that Plato is committed to the truth of

(1) Motion is moving

where (1) means that the Form of Motion is (predicatively) moving.³ And because he holds (1), he rejects

(A) Motion is resting.

This interpretation can be avoided in two ways. (i) We could try to show
that in (1) 'Motion' refers to moving individuals. (ii) We could try to show that, although (1) is about the Form of Motion, it does not mean that the Form of Motion is (predicatively) moving.

The next section argues against (i), the following section against (ii).

II

One way of trying to avoid my interpretation of 252d is to take Plato’s assertion that it is impossible that “Motion itself” should rest to be a statement whose subject is not the Form of Motion but rather the class of moving things. Therefore, since (A) is rejected because of the truth of (1), (1) must mean merely that every moving thing is moving, not that the Form of Motion is moving.

As representative of this sort of interpretation I will consider Professor Gregory Vlastos’ explanation of our argument. His case is based on a distinction between what he calls ordinary predications and Pauline predications. A statement of the form

F-ness is G

is ambiguous. It can be understood as an ordinary predication, in which case it says that the entity F-ness is itself a G. Or it can be understood as a Pauline predication, in which case it is making an assertion, not about the entity F-ness, but rather about particular F’s, viz.: necessarily every F is a G.

In our argument at 252d Plato says that the statement

(A) Motion is resting

is impossible. Now, (A) can be understood in two ways:

(I) M isOP R = Df. M ∈ R
(II) M isPP R = Df. □ [(x) (x ∈ M) → (x ∈ R)]

(where the domain of the variable is the class of sensible individuals).

What does Plato understand by (A) when he rejects it as impossible? Well, Vlastos says, he cannot wish to declare (I) impossible because (I) “has to be true in Plato’s system.” On the other hand Plato would wish to reject (II), for “Motion and Rest are contraries . . . ; and to say of two concepts, B and C, that they are contraries is to say that whatever instantiates either of them does not instantiate the other.”

I do not understand why Vlastos says that, for Plato, “to say of two concepts that they are contraries is to say that whatever instantiates either of them does not instantiate the other.” For Plato makes it quite clear in several places that he considers it an important feature of sensible objects, as opposed to Forms, that they do instantiate contrary qualities (cf. Symp.