DISCUSSION NOTES

Semantics and Self-Predication in Plato

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It is crucial to the notorious Third Man argument (Parmenides 132a1-b2, 132d1-133a6), where an infinite regress is alleged to ensue from the adoption of Plato's Theory of Forms, that the Form and its instances be grouped together in the same class and this by virtue of the so-called Self-Predication of the Forms. In other words, a given Form, e.g., Beauty, or the Beautiful, is itself beautiful and this fact allows this Form to be included along with the beautiful particulars in the class of beautiful things. In general, not only is a certain predicate "F" true of a group of particulars, but the Form, F-ness, in virtue of which this is so, is F as well — assuring the truth of the formulation "F-ness is F."

Some scholars have convinced themselves that an examination of Plato's concepts of eponymy and homonymy is sufficient to disallow self-predication and so free Plato from the questionable clutches of the Third Man. I propose to challenge this contention and shall maintain that Plato's use of eponymy and homonymy is inconclusive as regards self-predication and hence the evidence for or against the latter must be sought elsewhere. I hope, in passing, to cast new light on an interesting passage in Plato (Parmenides 133d) and, finally, to offer some considerations on the relation between predicate adjectives and Platonic Forms.

Let me begin with eponymy. Plato's account of the eponymous relation between particulars and Forms, whereby the particulars get their name from the Form, is given at Parmenides 130e-131a. The passage reads: "There seem to you, as you say, to be certain Forms from which the other things that partake of them get their names (τὰς ἐπωνύμιας ... ἑνώσεως). For example, those partaking of Likeness become like (διόμω), of Greatness great, of Beauty and Justice beautiful and just." (One may compare Phaedo 102b and 102c.) Eponymy, here, is the relation of a particular to a Form. Socrates, for example, gets the derivative designation "just" by partaking of the Form named "Justice."

But these passages have been taken to give us much more. Bestor (PS, pp. 38-40; CPE, p. 190) assumes that, by virtue of the eponymous relation as it is presented by Plato, the same general word "F" has a primary referent, or Form, of which it is the proper name and also secondary referents, the many particulars, which are named after the Form. Since the application of the term "F" to the Form is not of the secondary or "named after" variety, we do not require another Form for a corresponding primary referent and hence the infinite regress proposed by the Third Man does not obtain. Allen, PP, p. 170, distinguishes "F" as a common name, when applied to particulars, from "F" as a proper name when applied to the Form. With respect to the use of "F" as the proper name of a Form, he maintains, p. 170, "When 'F' is used in primary designation it is a synonym of 'the F itself' and 'F-ness,' therefore to say that F-ness is F is to state an identity. It follows that it is invalid to infer self-predication from Plato's apparently self-predicative language." For both thinkers self-predication is blocked because "F" when applied to a Form is a proper name (= "the F") and so "F-ness is F" is really equivalent to "F-ness is the F" or, indeed, "The F is the F" (cf. Bestor, PS, p. 58) and this gives us no license to
classify the Form along with the particulars as entities univocally possessing the common
name, or description, “F.”

There can be no doubt that what the particulars get from their eponymous relation to
the Form is a common name — “F” — e.g., “just”, “beautiful” or whatever. But, with
respect to the corresponding name of the Form, the Bestor/Allen position goes beyond
the evidence on two counts.

Firstly, it is certainly the case that the name of the Form, given in the paradigm
formulation of eponymy, is a proper name, but this has no logical connection whatever to
self-predication, for the proper name of the Form from which the particulars get their
name is the abstract form of the name, i.e., “F-ness” (e.g., “Justice”), conceivably also the
substantivized adjectival, “the F” (e.g., “the Just”), but not “F” (e.g., “just”). We have in
effect the equivalence of Aristotelian paronymys where what we get is “F-ness” naming
the Form and “F” naming the particulars. There is no basis here for a statement such as
“F-ness is F.”

In the second place, even if Bestor and Allen were right and the eponymous relation
gave us “F” as the proper name of the Form, this would only show that eponymy could not
be used as grounds for self-predication, for there “F-ness is F” would be an identity
statement. But the evidence for self-predication has not generally been held to derive
from semantic considerations such as Plato’s theory of predication, as illustrated by
eponymy and homonymy, but from ontological concerns, such as Degrees of Reality and
Model/Copy, and from contexts such as Phaedo 100c and Symposium 210e-211b where
the Form is perfectly F and the particulars imperfectly F. The fact that the Forms do not
obtain “F” as a common name from the eponymous relation does not preclude that they
may receive it from other sources.

So far I have dealt only with eponymy. I now turn to consider homonymy. Things are
homonymous when they, literally, “have the same name.” Bestor, PS, p. 46. CPE, pp.
199-200, does not distinguish homonymy and eponymy. Allen, PP, p. 169, takes eponymy
as a more precise rendition of homonymy, but I do not think this is so. In the standard
formulation of eponymy the Form is named “F-ness” and the particular “F.” Now this, I
submit, is not a case of homonymy, for “Justice” and “just,” to take a particular instance,
cannot by any stretch of the imagination be looked upon as being the same name.
Eponymy, therefore, is to be distinguished from homonymy in that Justice and Socrates
are related eponymously, but not homonymously, when Justice is called “Justice” and
Socrates is called “just.” To continue with the same specific example, cases of homonymy,
in contrast, are to be found (1) where each homonym is called “justice” or (2) when one is
called “the Just” and the other(s) “just.”

The first sort of homonymy is found at Parmenides 133d which gives us both homo-
ynymy and eponymy. It reads: “Those Forms, then, which are what they are with respect
to one another, have their being in relation to themselves and not in relation to the
likenesses in us (πορεύομαι ήμιν)... by participating in which we receive each of the names
(έκαστα επονομαζόμεθα). These things in us, having the same name (ὑμώνωμα) as those
[i.e., the Forms], are relative to themselves and not to the Forms.”

We can distinguish two relations here: (1) that of eponymy between individuals and
the characteristics in our world. For example, Aesop is a slave and gets this designation
from the slavery “among us”; (2) that of homonymy between the characteristics of
terrestrial slavery or masterhood and the Forms of the same. In this passage immanent
characteristics are homonymous with Forms, e.g., slavery in us with Slavery as such.
Particulars are eponymous with (from) these immanent characteristics, as is also the case