Assumptions involved in the Third man Argument

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This article takes its start from G. Vlastos’s excellent discussion in *Philosophical Review* lxiii (1954) pp. 319 ff. I am in general agreement with Vlastos, but I think that his ideas need further development before they can be fully accepted. It is hardly necessary for me to comment on the criticisms advanced by Geach and Sellars; Vlastos has already defended himself in *Philosophical Review* Vol. lxiv (1955) and Vol. lxv (1956). Possibly, however, there is need to refer to R. S. Bluck’s work in *Classical Quarterly* N.S. vi (1956) and in *Phronesis* Vol. 2 no. 2 (1957).

I. The Self-Predication Assumption

Vlastos suggests that the Third Man argument, as presented in Plato’s *Parmenides*, may be analysed into two main stages:

1. If a number of things, a, b, c are all F, there must be a single form, F-ness, in virtue of which we apprehend a, b, c as F.
2. If a, b, c, and F-ness are all F, there must be another form, F-ness, in virtue of which we apprehend a, b, c, and F-ness as F.

Now, says Vlastos: if this is a correct statement of the argument, two assumptions are involved, both of which are essential to the final reductio ad absurdum. These are the Self-Predication Assumption and the Non-Identity Assumption. By the Self-Predication Assumption, Vlastos means the assumption that F-ness is itself F, Justice is itself just etc.: by the Non-Identity Assumption, Vlastos means that Plato assumes, without proof, that F-ness cannot be F in virtue of itself, but must be so in virtue of a different F-ness.

Now it seems undeniable that Plato’s Third Man argument involves self-predication. ταύτα πάντα μεγάλα φαίνεσθαι, he says at *Parmenides* 132a8, referring to αὐτὸ τὸ μέγα καὶ τάλλα τὰ μεγάλα all lumped together; and at the end of 132a the expression changes to the even more definite ταύτα πάντα μεγάλα ἔσται. It seems, therefore, quite certain that one essential requirement of Plato argument was that αὐτὸ τὸ μέγα should be considered to be μέγα. I see no need for further proof. What could be added, perhaps, is a discussion of why Plato makes the transition from φαίνεσθαι to ἔσται – is there not a very great assumption involved in this transition? I shall return to this point in a later section, for it certainly seems to be a loose end left by Vlastos.
II. The Non-Identity Assumption

In Plato’s *Parmenides* the character “Parmenides” argues that, because “the great itself” and all other great things are all great, therefore there must be some other “greatness” in virtue of which they are all great; and this plainly implies the view that “the great itself” cannot be great in virtue of itself.

But is this the fundamental assumption, or does it follow from some other underlying assumption, from which it follows as a conclusion? We must ask, why does Plato refuse to envisage the idea that “the great itself” cannot be great in virtue of itself? If Vlastos has asked himself this question, he has not made his answer sufficiently explicit; I propose to give my own answer in the next section.

III. The Substrate Assumption

By this I mean the assumption that no quality can exist on its own without a substrate.

We saw before that the Idea of Greatness (*αὐτὸ τὸ μέγα*) was itself considered to be great. But if so, it must be Great-Something; or at least, this seems to be Plato’s assumption, for he adds the substrate *αὐτὸ τό*. Thus the Idea of Greatness becomes something which partakes of Greatness, or *in* which Greatness is. But if it is something which partakes of Greatness, it is not simple pure unadulterated Greatness – which is the same as to say that it is not identical with Greatness. Another Greatness will have to be sought; and this in its turn will have to be supplied with a substrate too, so that it too will be non-identical with Greatness. And so on ad infinitum.

It may perhaps be legitimate to assume that quality must be a quality of something; it is perhaps implicit in the definition of the word “quality”. But if so, then Plato had no right to “separate” his Ideas from all particulars; for the Ideas are (inter alia) qualities and ought not to have independent existence. It is curious, then, that Plato seems to have persisted in this error. But it is perfectly possible that he managed to conceal the error from himself. It was very difficult for any one, at this early stage, to think of an abstract as anything other than Great-Something, Just-Something, and the like; and it is making a very great assumption, quite unwarranted by Plato’s text, to suppose that Plato had seen through the difficulty. In point of fact, the error was reinforced by Plato’s own theory of *αὐτὸ τὸ μέγα* as a perfect exemplar.

The only reasonable answer, given Plato’s basic assumption about substrate and quality, is to do what Aristotle did, i.e. deny the separate