Self-Predication in Plato’s Middle Dialogues

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In this paper I will argue that Plato is committed to self-predication in dialogues generally agreed to be earlier than the Parmenides. By this I mean not merely that Plato is committed to statements of the form

(1) \( F\text{-ness is } F \) ("S-statements")

where F-ness is a Form. That Plato was committed to such statements is beyond dispute. Rather I am claiming that (1) must be interpreted to mean

(2) \( F\text{-ness is characterized by } F, \) or possesses \( F \).

While my thesis may well be accepted by a majority of scholars, there are a number of holdouts who have proposed alternative interpretations of (1). The main contenders are the following:

(3) \( F\text{-ness is identical with } F^2 \)

(4) \( F\text{-ness makes whatever participates in it } F^3 \)

(5) \( N \subseteq (x)(Fx \rightarrow Fx) \)

(6) \( F\text{-ness is what it is to be } F^3 \)

(7) \( F\text{-ness is what is } F \) (or \( F \) itself or the nature of \( F \)).

I believe there is clear evidence in the dialogues which supports (2) as the correct interpretation of (1), but the present paper will be limited to trying

1 Prot. 330d-e, Phaedo 100c. Also see Hip. Maj. 289c, 292d-e; Lysis 217d; Cratylus 439d; Phaedo 74b-e, 102d-e, 106d; Symp. 211a-b; Parm. 150a-b.


to establish the unacceptability of (3)-(7). I will first explain and justify four criteria of adequacy which any interpretation of S-statements must satisfy. Then (3)-(7) will be examined in turn and shown to fail some or all of these requirements. Special problems for the different proposals will also be spelled out.

I

For the time being I am going to assume that "'F' applies to x and y in the same way," "'F' has the same sense in 'Fx' and 'Fy' " and "the same feature is ascribed to x and y in 'Fx' and 'Fy' " are true and false together. Later in section V the possibility that the last two statements can diverge in truth value will be considered.

Assistance in the interpretation of (1) is provided by the fact that Plato makes other types of statement in which the predicate 'is F' must be understood to apply to the subject in the same way that it applies to F-ness in (1). First, in the Protagoras Socrates asserts "Holiness is just" and "Justice is holy" as well as "Holiness is holy" and "Justice is just" (331a-b). It is clear that, e.g., "is holy" is applied to Justice in the same way it is applied to Holiness. For Socrates is arguing that Holiness and Justice are like one another because both are just and holy. When Plato explains in the Parmenides (139e, 148a), what it is for two items to be like one another, he says that they are like when they share the same attribute. So if Justice and Holiness are alike in being both holy and just, they share the same attributes in virtue of being both holy and just.

Hence, in

(A) G-ness is F,

'is F' must be true of G-ness in the same way as it is true of F-ness in (1). I'll call this the "A-requirement".

It might be objected that we do not know that the Protagoras was committed to the theory of Forms, and so we do not know whether Plato would be willing to assert A-statements about Forms. But there are strong grounds for believing that Plato would assert such statements about Forms.

(i) Socrates in the Protagoras has a realist conception of moral attributes (330cl, 4, d4, 5, 349b3, cl) and uses the Form-referring expression 'the F itself' to refer to them (330d5, 8-el).

Note that this account of likeness is used as an assumption to prove both a proposition and its negation (139e7-8, 147c1-2), so it is unlikely that Plato did not believe it.