A Necessary Falsehood in the
Third Man Argument

Dedicated to the Memory of Gregory Vlastos

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Last week I painted the garden gate, and the front door of the house, brown. But then I paused and pondered: What more could I do to make them the same colour? At first I despaired . . . but gradually my mind drifted to the Third Man Argument for help . . . My aim in this paper is to show that the premises of the Third Man Argument (TMA) are committed to a distinction that falsifies them in every possible world. The distinction is between what makes a thing \( f \), and what makes it qualitatively identical to another \( f \) thing. I will argue that according to the TMA, what makes something \( f \) is not sufficient for making it qualitatively identical to another \( f \) thing. But this is the denial of a necessary truth, namely, ‘being \( f \) is sufficient for being \( f \)-identical to another \( f \) thing’;\(^1\) hence, the premises of the TMA cannot be true in any possible world.

Apart from the logical analysis of the TMA, I also develop an interpretation of the Theory of Forms, regarding the nature of the Forms and of the relation of participation. My aim in proposing this interpretation is to show the plausibility of Plato’s commitment to each of the premises of the TMA, which, on alternative interpretations, become implausible, if not bizarre, beliefs to attribute to Plato. The interpretation will also help us gain an intuitive understanding of where and why the explanation offered by the Theory of Forms breaks down.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) I use ‘\( f \)-identical’ to mean identical with respect to being \( f \).

\(^2\) Space does not allow me to present and discuss the following two interpretations of the Third Man Argument, which are based on altogether different analyses. I shall briefly list

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1. The Premisses and the Regress

Within the context of the Theory of Forms, Plato explains that things are \( f \) by participation in Form F.\(^4\) Thus in the first part of the Parmenides he says:

the difficulties I find with these interpretations. Teloh and Louzecky (1972), and Teloh (1981, pp. 158-167), argue that an infinite regress follows from a single premise that does not require the notion of Self-Predication. All that is needed is (T): 'If a number of things are F, there is a single Form in virtue of which we apprehend these things as F, and these things . . . are not identical with this Form', which requires only the notions of predication and non-identity (Teloh and Louzecky 1972, p. 87)). My objection to this analysis is that it will not generate a regress. To generate it a further premise must be added, namely a *uniqueness premise* that secures that for each set of things, the Form in virtue of which we apprehend them as F is unique to *that* set of things. Otherwise, a single Form would be sufficient for all sets. Teloh and Louzecky do tacitly introduce a uniqueness assumption: 'This Form [by which the \( f \) things in a set are apprehended to be \( f \)] is one in respect to the many things in the set of \( f \) things, and being required for that set is unique to it' (ibid., p. 85). But they offer no textual justification for such an assumption, which, further, is implausible for anyone to hold.

William Prior (1979) argues that when the logic of the theory of paradigms is understood, it becomes evident that Form F, *qua* paradigm, has \( f \)-ness on entirely different grounds than do \( f \) things. Prior's example is the King's foot, which is set as a standard of measure for 'one foot', and which, therefore, is one foot on *a priori* grounds, as opposed to all other things that are \( n \) feet long by comparison to the King's foot. Similarly, for Prior, Form F is \( f \), not by sharing in some Form F (which would give rise to the regress, p. 232), but on *a priori* grounds *qua* paradigm (p. 236-237). My objection to Prior's analysis is that the theory of paradigms he expounds cannot be applied to the Forms. Prior's theory can explain the attribution of properties by convention to entities that have an existence independently of that convention, e.g. setting the rod to be one meter long. But what can a Form be such that it can acquire the property of being \( f \), in the way that the rod acquires the property of being one meter long? Yet Prior claims that 'the paradigm *does* possess the property of being \( f \)', but . . . the grounds for the attribution of the property are quite different in the case of the paradigm' (p. 237). To what is the property of being \( f \) attributed? There is nothing to which the property \( f \) can be attributed, so that the result of the attribution will be Form F. Contrary to Prior's claim, Form F cannot be \( f \) in the way the King's foot is one meter long.

\(^3\) E.g. see Phaedo 100c-d. In the above formulation, \( f \) is a placeholder for general terms of opposites, like 'large', 'just', 'hot', etc., and arguably, from the Parmenides, substantial terms like 'man', 'tree' etc.

\(^4\) In the Phaedo Plato introduces the Forms as *causes* of things becoming \( f \). He explains why a thing is beautiful as follows:

I no longer understand nor can recognize those other wise reasons . . . but in a plain, artless, and possibly simple-minded way, I hold this close to myself: nothing else makes *poieton* it beautiful except that beautiful itself, whether by its presence or communion or whatever the manner and nature of the relation may be; . . . it is by the beautiful that all things are beautiful. (*Phaedo* 100c-9-d8, translation from Gallop (1975)).