Perceptual Judgments and Particulars in Plato's Later Philosophy

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Throughout the centuries since Plato wrote, interpretations of his theory of forms, from Aristotle's criticisms to the exhaustive commentaries of modern times, have varied with the philosophies on which they have been based. These divergent interpretations may be divided into two groups. One group holds that Plato maintained his doctrine of forms as contained in his earlier and middle dialogues throughout his writings, only clarifying it and developing its consequences in his later dialogues. To this group belong Ritter and probably Cornford, notwithstanding the latter's insistence that the later dialogues consider (but do not solve) the problems of the concrete, particular thing, and of the "separate reality of the forms", which the earlier dialogues left unsolved. The other group, represented in their various ways by Burnet, Robin, Stenzel, agree in holding that the earlier theory of forms was fundamentally altered in the later dialogues from the Theaetetus on. They base their theories not only on the internal evidence of the dialogues, but on some references by Aristotle to the forms as "numbers", which are distinguished from "mathematicals", and are generated from "the One and the dyad of the Great-and-Small". Members of this group, however they diverge on the significance of Aristotle's references, yet agree that Plato's original problem of the participation of sensible, particular things in forms is superseded by the problem of the method of dialectical investigation or, in Burnet's words, of giving an "intelligible account" of appearances.

This paper holds, following the views of the latter group, that there is a marked difference between the earlier and later doctrines of forms. The difference does not consist in Plato's abandoning his earlier theory for one of form-numbers. For, however form-numbers be construed, their nature and knowability and relation to each other and to particulars must be explained. They should at least solve the difficulties of the earlier

theory they supplant. And this, it seems to me, the theories of form-numbers which have been developed do not do. In this paper, I should like to show that Plato in no sense abandoned the fundamental doctrines of the theory of forms. Rather, he elaborated the doctrine, defining (what was left a question before) the nature of the sensible particulars which the forms were said to describe, and the relation of the forms to them and to each other. He was thus able to bring out his basic doctrines more consistently and comprehensively, without the difficulties involved in the participation of sensible, particular things in the universal forms.

I

The interrelated forms

In the later dialogues from the Theaetetus on, as in the earlier dialogues, the forms are the unsensed, definable and intelligible, and hence permanent objects of knowledge. Forms are still what, in contrast to evanescent sensations, are lasting enough to formulate. They are not sensed, nor can any sensory image of them be had. Forms are not pictured or imagined. They are the conceivable or understandable objects of knowledge. They are what are named, described, or stated in any reasoned examination or account (λόγος) of things. They are the objects of reasoning (διαλέγομαι), and necessary for it.  

It follows that forms, being the conceivable characteristics which may apply to any number of sensed particulars, are, so far forth, universal. Aristotle and subsequent philosophy called them so, though Plato never used the term, nor explicitly brought out the problem of universals. However, they are contrasted with the sensed particulars which they describe. They are the unitary classes, defining characteristics, or relations which any experienced particulars conceivable in the same way may exemplify. In the Theaetetus, Plato speaks of them as “the common terms which apply to everything”, such as “existence, and non-existence, likeness and unlikeness, sameness and difference, and also unity and numbers in general as applied to them (perceptions)”. Later, the value-characteristics of “honourable and dishonourable, good and bad” are added. Thus, Plato has a clear-cut distinction between the universals in terms of which we formulate and understand our experience and the fluctuating, non-recurring sensed particulars which they describe and relate.

1 Parmenides 135 b-c.
2 Theaet. 185, 186c. All translations are by Cornford unless otherwise indicated.