The 'Third Man' Argument and Plato's Theory of Forms

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The 'Third Man'-argument (Parmenides 132a1-b2) is one of the most controversial passages in Plato's dialogues. In recent years a number of new interpretations of this argument have appeared. These interpretations were designed to bring to bear upon the Platonic text the logical rigour and analytic acumen which are characteristic of contemporary philosophy. Allegedly implicit premisses have been brought to light with the help of symbolic logic, and attempts have been made to relate the argument to the problem of change vs. constancy in Plato's metaphysical position. Though these interpretations contain much that is stimulating, each of them seems to have the shortcoming of representing Plato as fairly simple-minded philosophically, and of locating the complexity of thought in logical structure. Such accounts ascribe to Plato the kind of argument which is not typical of what we encounter in the dialogues. For in most of his writings Plato emphasizes philosophical depth, rather than formal complexity. Thus it is more plausible to suppose that the passage under consideration is fairly simple in its deductive form, and that it poses problems with serious metaphysical implications. Such, at any rate, is the contention of the interpretation presented here.

If correct, this interpretation indicates a need to reexamine the dialogues in ways rarely – if ever – attempted before. For according to the account presented here, in the middle period dialogues we find not one but five different conceptions of what are known as Plato's Forms, and part of the difficulty of the 'Third Man'-argument is that it does

1 I am greatly indebted to Prof. G. Vlastos, Prof. H. Hochberg, and to my colleagues at the University of Michigan for criticism and advice.
3 E.g. Vlastos ascribes to Plato two tacit premisses which are patently inconsistent with each other (see op. cit. pp. 314-325).
4 Sellars ascribes to Plato the distinction between predicates and predicate-variables (op. cit. pp. 416-417), while Geach locates the trouble in a complex and inconsistent set of propositions with involved quantificational form (op. cit. pp. 77-78).
5 I am including among these the Timaeus. See G. E. L. Owen, "The Place of the Timaeus in Plato's Dialogues" Classical Quarterly v. 47. pp. 79-95.
not affect all of these conceptions in the same way. These different conceptions have been overlooked because of the traditional emphasis on the similarities among the various descriptions of the Forms which Plato provides for us. In order to see Plato’s thought in better light, it is time to concentrate on the differences.

Another distinguishing feature of this interpretation is that it shows how the notion of self-predication (i.e. the notion that a predicate should apply with descriptive force to the Form it stands for) which at first blush appears absurd, can be made intelligible within the context of Plato’s ontology. This should give second thoughts to those who are all too prone to detect linguistic and logical confusions in the writings of traditional philosophers. Finally, this interpretation should engender new interest in the ‘Third Man’-argument among philosophers, for it locates at the heart of the argument metaphysical problems which are as much alive today as they were 2300 years ago.

As our point of departure let us take the claim made by Vlastos and Geach that the “Third Man”-argument remained a source of puzzlement to Plato; on the one hand he did not accept it as fatal, on the other hand he could not refute it. Since the Theory of Forms is upheld in such later dialogues as the Philebus, and at the same time no refutation of the “Third Man” is ever given, this claim seems eminently acceptable. Thus the real issue is to locate the causes of this puzzlement. According to Vlastos the difficulty is that Plato held two principles the inconsistency of which he failed to recognize.1 These principles, the principles of self-predication and of non-identity, are explained as stating that each Form has the character it stands for, and none of the Forms can be identified with any of its attributes. A flaw in this interpretation is the vagueness and ambiguity of these statements. Our first step toward an adequate interpretation is to distinguish various possible interpretations of the principles in question. With regard to self-predication, we must distinguish between the following two statements.

S1. A Form $F$ has ‘$F$’ predicated of it in a sense different from and prior to the sense(s) in which ‘$F$’ is predicated of all the entities partaking of this Form.

S2. A Form $F$ has ‘$F$’ predicated of it in the same sense in which ‘$F$’ is predicated of particulars$^2$.

1 See note 3. Geach reproduces the principles as 1) F-ness is an F, and 2) No F is identical with F-ness. Geach himself does not accept these as adequate renderings of what Plato wished to express.

2 F. M. Cornford also fails to make this distinction, and thus misses completely the element which leads to the infinite regress in the argument, as well as its philosophical implications (see *Plato and Parmenides* p. 88).