Introduction

> The theory of forms was set up on the basis of a contrast that employed provocative predicates: forms were free of identity crises by virtue of their indefeasible possession of identifying predicates, whereas transient individuals were unstable because they always show both the predicate and its contrary. That contrast, after the *Parmenides* and *Sophist*, is no more.
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> (Dancy [1984, 183])

THE SETTING

Among scholars of ancient philosophy, there is disagreement over whether the Platonic corpus exhibits thematic unity or thematic development. According to "unitarians," Plato's dialogues present a single, consistent, synoptic philosophical system of which each dialogue gives us a partial or proleptic glimpse.[1] According to "developmentalists," the same dialogues can be arranged in thematic order that likely corresponds with the order in which they were written.[2]

The main lines of argument that favor developmentalism are these. The "early" dialogues (*Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Charmides*, *Ion*, *Hippias Minor*, *Menexenus*, *Protagoras*, *Euthydemus*, *Lysis*, *Laches*, and *Republic* I) hew (more or less) to the following paradigm: Socrates (always the protagonist) extracts from his interlocutor a definition or characterization of a morally significant topic (typically, one of the canonical parts of human virtue), proceeds to criticize this definition or characterization "elenctically" by pointing out that the interlocutor's beliefs on the relevant subject are logically inconsistent, and wraps up the discussion by getting the interlocutor to admit to utter confusion (*aporia*) and ignorance. At no point in these

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[1] For a defense of unitarianism, see Shorey (1903; 1933), Cherniss (1945), and, more recently, Kahn (1996).

[2] For interestingly different defenses of developmentalism, see Teloh (1981), Prior (1985), Silverman (2002), and Dancy (2004).

dialogues does Socrates propose or defend his own definition of the parts of human virtue. Nor does he discuss the abstract ontological and epistemological features of the objects of definition, which he calls "forms" [*eidē* or *ideai*].[3]

These activities, so out of keeping with the elenctic method of the early dialogues, do appear in the dialogues of the middle period, notably the *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and *Republic* II–X. In these works Socrates, who appears to have abandoned the elenctic method in favor of the method of hypothesis (according to which hypotheses are either confirmed or disconfirmed by the propositions that entail them and by the consequences that may be derived from them), provides and defends his own definitions of the human virtues and argues, for the first time, that forms are invisible, eternal, perfect, unchanging, uniform, and knowable. Middle-period Socrates resembles in great measure the Plato described by Aristotle,[4] and it makes sense to suppose that middle-period Plato puts his own views in the mouth of a character named "Socrates" as a gesture of respect and admiration of a pupil for his mentor.[5]

Finally, in the late-period dialogues (*Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, and *Laws*), Plato's protagonist (who, more often than not, is no longer called "Socrates") embraces a new definitional method of division and collection, and appears to have abandoned (or, at least, ignores) some of the theses characteristic of the middle period.

With the aid of these three major chronological divisions, developmentalist scholars have proposed two further groups of transitional dialogues: an early-middle group (*Gorgias*, *Meno*, and *Hippias Major*), in which the opinions of early-period Socrates are undermined and views of middle-period Socrates begin to appear, and a middle-late group (*Parmenides* and *Theaetetus*), in which the opinions of middle-period Socrates are undermined and views of late-period Socrates begin to appear.[6]

In the sequel, I assume the standard developmentalist ordering of the dialogues, in part because I find the evidence favoring developmentalism compelling, but also because it gives me a convenient frame of reference for my results.

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[3] For an analysis of the different ways in which the early dialogues differ from the rest, see Vlastos (1991). For discussion, see Nails (1993) and Beversluis (1993). For close analysis of the function of the Socratic *elenchus*, see Benson (2000).

[4] See, e.g., *Metaphysics*, 987a29–b8, 1078b12–32, and 1086a32–b13.

[5] For criticism of the "mouthpiece" view, see Nails (2000) and Press (2000). For defense of the view, see Gerson (2000).

[6] For an excellent summary of the case for developmentalism, see Kraut (1992b).

THE PROBLEM

Let us assume, then, that the *Parmenides* is a way station from the dialogues of the middle period to the dialogues of the late period. This much is clear (at least to developmentalists): but little else is. The *Parmenides* is simply the most puzzling and notorious of Plato's dialogues. Although the work is of seminal importance for understanding the development of Plato's metaphysical doctrines, it has been the source of nothing but disagreement and controversy. Generations of scholars have cut their teeth on this work, attempting to capture its structure and content, as well as its relative significance in the overall Platonic corpus.[7] But, despite their efforts, there is still nothing approaching consensus on the answer to the most pressing interpretive question: What, in Plato's opinion, is the ultimate lesson of the dialogue?

The *Parmenides* focuses on the philosophical interaction between two main characters: an impatient, youthful, and bold Socrates, and a patient, venerable, and exceedingly deliberate Parmenides. There are two main parts to the work, with a short transitional section in between. In the first part (126a1–134e8), after a brief introduction (126a1–128e4), young Socrates (in a speech at 128e5–130a2) proposes what is widely recognized to be an outline of the theory of forms defended by a considerably older Socrates in the works of Plato's middle period. (I will call this theory the "high theory of forms.") Parmenides then (at 130a3–134e8) affectionately puts Socrates in his place with a series of arguments that drive him to ever greater perplexity. In the transitional section (134e9–137c3), Parmenides sketches the general lines of a method of "training" that promises to rescue (or to begin the task of rescuing) at least some aspects of the high theory. And finally, in the second part (137c4–166c5), Parmenides instantiates this method by way of roughly 180 tightly interconnected arguments arranged in eight (or nine) sections.

The structure of the *Parmenides*, as described, raises a number of questions that, to my mind, have never before been answered in a way that is completely satisfactory.

First, what exactly is Plato's "high" theory of forms, as put forward and defended by middle-period Socrates? Is this theory identical to,

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[7] These scholars include, among many others, Cornford (1939), Ryle (1939; 1966), Vlastos (1954; 1969), Runciman (1959), Brumbaugh (1961), Owen (1970), Peterson (1973; 1981; 1996; 2000; 2003), Teloh (1981), Allen (1983; 1997), Sayre (1983; 1996), Prior (1985), Miller (1986), Meinwald (1991; 1992), Moravcsik (1992), Dorter (1994), McCabe (1994), Rickless (1998a), Turnbull (1998), Silverman (2002), and Scolnicov (2003).

similar to, or different from, the "theory" of forms that appears in Socrates' speech in the *Parmenides*? If there are similarities or differences, what are they? If there are differences, do they show that the high theory has undergone significant, or only minor, transformation by the time of the *Parmenides*?

Second, how exactly does the theory that appears in Socrates' speech (however similar or different it may be from the high theory of forms) come under attack in the first part of the dialogue? How many arguments does Parmenides unleash against this theory, and what exactly are these arguments intended to establish? Do they allow for the possibility of rescuing the theory? If so, is it by leaving room to question their soundness, or, with their soundness having been accepted, is it by abandoning some axiom or axioms of the theory? If the latter, is the chunk of theory to be abandoned significant enough to constitute wholesale transformation, or does Plato envisage that the theoretical changes required by Parmenides' criticisms are relatively minor?

Third, how are we to understand the second part of the dialogue and its relation to the first? More particularly, what exactly are the 180 (or so) arguments in this part of the dialogue, and exactly how (if at all) are these arguments interrelated? If the arguments are indeed interrelated, what does Plato intend them (and the manner of their interconnection) to establish? Does he present them to the reader as sound, or does he mean to "train" the reader to ferret out fallacies or false premises within them? If the former, does he mean for these arguments to reveal that some or all of Parmenides' criticisms in the first part were invalid or otherwise unsound? Does he intend these arguments to provide reasons to abandon a chunk of the theory outlined in Socrates' speech? Or is there some other, less obviously scrutable, purpose behind the dizzying display of argumentation in the second part of the dialogue?

Now the fact that the *Parmenides* is succeeded by the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus* raises another set of (to my mind heretofore unanswered) questions. In particular, what happens to the high theory of forms (and, if it is different, to the theory articulated in Socrates' speech) in the "late" dialogues that postdate the *Parmenides*? Does the theory change, or does it disappear entirely? If the former, are the changes slight or more significant? Is there evidence in these dialogues to confirm or disconfirm any particular interpretive hypothesis about the structure and content of the *Parmenides* itself? And can the proper interpretation of the *Parmenides* explain the methodological or theoretical differences between the dialogues of the middle period and the dialogues of the late period?

The main purpose of this book is to show, by careful attention to the logical structure of the high theory of forms and to the arguments in both parts of the *Parmenides*, that the answer to all these questions is, at bottom, remarkably simple.

THE SOLUTION

As I argue below, the heart of the high theory of forms consists of two axioms, **One-over-Many** (**OM**) and **Itself-by-Itself** (**II**). According to **OM**, for any property F and any plurality of F things, there is a form of F-ness by virtue of partaking of which each member of the plurality is F. Thus, for example, for any plurality of large things, there is a form of largeness by virtue of partaking of which each member of the plurality is large. According to **II**, every form is itself by itself (*auto kath' auto*), a claim that entails that every form is numerically distinct from, and not present in, the things that partake of it. (What these axioms mean will become clearer in the sequel.) When combined with auxiliary assumptions about such things as opposites, sensibles, causation, and knowledge, these two axioms yield virtually all of the philosophically significant theorems about the ontological and epistemological status of the forms postulated by the high theory.

Among the more important of the high theory's auxiliary assumptions is "**No Causation by Contraries**" (**NCC**), the assumption that nothing that makes something possess a certain property can possess the opposite (or contrary) of that property.[8] **NCC** precludes the possibility of large things making small things small, of unlike things making like things like, and so on. Among the more important theorems is what we might call "**Purity**" (**P**), the claim that, for any property F that admits an opposite (call it "con-F"), the F cannot be con-F, which itself entails what we might call "**Purity***" (**P***), the claim that, for such a property, the F cannot be both F and con-F.[9] According to **P**, the tall cannot be short, the like cannot be unlike, and so on; and, according to **P***, the tall cannot be both tall and short, the like cannot be both like and unlike, and so on. Another important theorem is "**Uniqueness**" (**U**), the claim that there is exactly one form per property.

In the *Parmenides*, Socrates extends the high theory by making a single important change (call this extension the "higher theory"). The change

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[8] Henceforth, I use the words "opposite" and "contrary" interchangeably.
[9] To say that a property F "admits" an opposite is just to say that there is another property (con-F) that is opposite to F. For example, for Plato, the property of being one admits an opposite (namely, the property of being many), but the property of being human does not.

comes about through the introduction of an axiom I call "**Radical Purity**" (**RP**), the assumption that no form can have contrary properties. **RP**, which is a generalization of **P*** (hence its name), *not only* makes it impossible for the F to be both F and con-F (as is already required by **P***) *but also* makes it impossible for the F to be both G and con-G (for any property G distinct from F). Thus, for example, **P*** does, but **RP** does not, allow the equal to be both one and many, like and unlike, large and small, and so on.

Once the logical structure of Parmenides' criticisms of the higher theory has been clarified, it becomes clear that every one but the very last of his criticisms can be avoided by abandoning **RP**, **NCC**, **P**, and **U**. And once the logical structure of the arguments of the second part of the dialogue has been clarified, it becomes clear that Plato intended these arguments to establish the being of forms and, by proving that all forms possess both oneness and multitude, as well as a host of contrary properties of various kinds, the falsity of both **RP** and **P**. There is also a stretch of argument in the second part that is sufficient to establish the falsity of **U**. It then remains for the late-period dialogues to confirm these results and establish the falsity of **NCC** by showing, in the *Sophist*, that the same, by which same things are same, is also different, and that the different, by which different things are different, is also same.

The main message of the *Parmenides*, then, is that the higher theory of forms can and must be altered in order to avoid inconsistency, and that this is to be accomplished by abandoning **P**, **RP**, **U**, and (as Plato later argues) **NCC**. As it happens, the rejection of these principles leaves a good chunk of the higher theory (including **OM** and **II**) untouched, but not without bringing a series of important theoretical and methodological changes in its train, among the most important of which is the introduction of a new method of defining the forms (the so-called "method of division and collection"). If the story I am about to tell is even roughly right, not only will we have a better understanding of the *Parmenides* itself, but we will also acquire a deeper appreciation of the dialogue's pivotal place in the development of Plato's metaphysics and epistemology.

THE METHOD

Before entering into the details of the reconstruction itself, I would like to describe the methodology that animates my interpretation of the dialogue and its place in the larger Platonic corpus. Like the work of analytic philosophers today, most of Plato's writings are awash with deductive arguments. It is impossible to read Plato's work without being struck by his

love of reason and his delight in what the use of reason is (or might be) able to accomplish. And this love does not merely reveal itself through the discussions Plato sets up among his various fictional interlocutors; it is also, at least in some dialogues (most notably, the *Republic*), explicitly defended as a matter of philosophical *doctrine*.

Given these facts, it is frankly inconceivable to me that Plato's philosophical intentions may be gleaned in any other way than through careful logical analysis. Attention to dramatic clues and stage directions, though not to be dismissed as an exegetical tool, must play a role secondary to the role of logical reconstruction. The meaning of a character's smile or frown, resistance or amenability, intelligence or stupidity cannot be understood in abstraction from the relevant argumentative context and the overall logic of the dialectical enterprise. The interpretation of literary tropes is the servant, not the master, of logical analysis.

And yet it is a widespread view among scholars of ancient philosophy that logical analysis fails to do justice to the many facets of Plato's work. Typical of this view is the following passage from a recent book review in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*:

One might ask whether the techniques of analytical philosophy can elucidate the views of so allusive, visionary and poetic a philosopher as Plato . . . [Logical] analysis yields rival accounts that cannot be confirmed or rejected on the basis of the text alone . . . I wonder whether the analytical approach does not require a greater precision from Plato's dialogues than can be found there. I also wonder whether the pursuit of precision does not inevitably lead the interpreter to underplay the more mystical and religious aspects of Plato's thought.[10]

What this passage reveals is understandable frustration in the face of continuing controversy among analytically inclined Plato scholars. As an impartial observer, one might be forgiven for concluding that the method of logical analysis is an inappropriate tool for understanding the ultimately imprecise and poetic musings of a philosophical visionary. This book is written in the firm belief that this attitude is the product of unjustified defeatism in the face of a seemingly recalcitrant text. The proper cure for disagreement among analytically inclined commentators is not retreat into perplexity in the face of apparent imprecision, but simply more careful and more detailed logical scrutiny.

However, there is growing recognition among analytically minded commentators that the arguments of the *Parmenides* cannot be interpreted in

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[10] See Prior (2004, 98).

isolation. With this approach I am in complete agreement. The vast lit-
erature on the Third Man argument (see below) testifies to the fact that
we are unlikely to find the key to the *Parmenides* by unearthing the logical
structure of a single argument, no matter how central to the dialogue it
may be. Accordingly, the interpretation defended in this book aims to place
each reconstructed argument in its proper context. Each argument is to be
understood in the light of the arguments that precede it and the arguments
that follow it. Even the dialogue itself cannot be fully understood without
being related to its immediate predecessors and successors.

I am not saying that every text must be approached as an exercise in
logical reconstruction. Some philosophical texts are indeed written in a
visionary, and sometimes even anti-logical, spirit. Some contain musings
on different matters that the author may never have intended to form a
logically harmonious whole. But one of the messages of this book is that,
insofar as Plato was a visionary, he was of the logophilic persuasion.

A NOTE ON THE *TIMAEUS*

I said above that developmentalists are largely agreed on the thematic order-
ing of Plato's dialogues. But there is one point of disagreement among them
that has significant bearing on the main thesis of this book, namely, the
thematic position of the *Timaeus* relative to the *Parmenides*. According to
Owen (1953), the *Timaeus* belongs with the middle-period dialogues, and
therefore *precedes* the *Parmenides*. Owen's arguments have been challenged,
most notably by Cherniss (1957), who adopts the (still orthodox) position
that the *Timaeus* is a late-period dialogue that *postdates* the *Parmenides*.

My own view, for reasons similar to Owen's, is that the theory of forms
described in the *Timaeus* closely resembles the theory of forms described in
the middle dialogues, and is not consistent with the revised version of the
theory that issues from the *Parmenides*. This claim requires defense, and I
do not take it for granted. But any adequate defense of it must issue from,
and hence cannot precede, an adequate interpretation of the *Parmenides*
itself. It is only once we understand the *Parmenides* and its role in the
development of Plato's metaphysics that we will be in a better position
to judge whether the doctrines of the *Timaeus* more closely resemble the
doctrines of the middle period than they do the doctrines of the late period.

Having said that, I will henceforth *provisionally* assume that the *Timaeus*
is a middle-period dialogue. I invite those who think that it is best read as
a late work to consider whether the evidence marshaled below confirms,
rather than disconfirms, this assumption. I would argue that it does.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

For ease of reference, I have borrowed all translations of the original Greek text from Cooper (1997), unless otherwise noted. With respect to the *Parmenides* in particular, I rely (again, unless otherwise noted) on the excellent and easy-to-follow translation of Gill and Ryan (1996), which is reprinted, without Gill's very useful introduction, in Cooper (1997).

CHAPTER 1

The theory of forms

The Socrates of the early dialogues devotes his attention to the search for definitions of morally significant forms, but never asks after the fundamental ontological and epistemological status of these entities. For example, Socrates asks Euthyphro to provide him with a definition of piety (*Euthyphro* 5d), Charmides to provide him with a definition of temperance (*Charmides* 159a), and both Nicias and Laches to provide him with a definition of courage (*Laches* 190d–e). In all these cases, what Socrates asks his interlocutors to define is something he calls a "form," namely whatever it is by virtue of which persons and actions are pious, temperate, or courageous.[1] Although Socrates reveals that he has opinions about what some of these forms are like[2] and about what all forms must be like,[3] he never suggests that these opinions rise to the level of knowledge. More importantly, he never so much as speculates about whether forms are or are not the sorts of things that can be perceived by means of the senses, whether they have parts or are indivisible wholes, whether they are eternal and indestructible or whether they come to be or perish, whether they can undergo any sort of change (whether in the form of translation, rotation, or alteration), whether they are perfect or in some way deficient, or whether they are such as to be humanly knowable.

It is in the dialogues of the middle period, principally the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, that Plato begins to ask and answer these questions. As I argue in section 1.1, the answers to Plato's questions take the form of a theory, insofar

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[1] For example, at *Euthyphro* 6d10–11, Socrates asks Euthyphro to define "that form itself by which all pious things are pious."

[2] At *Protagoras* 361b, Socrates concludes that every virtue (notably justice, temperance, and courage) is [a kind of] knowledge. Socrates also claims that temperance is admirable (*Charmides* 159c), that virtue is admirable (*Protagoras* 349e), that courage is admirable (*Laches* 193d), that the good is admirable (*Lysis* 216d), that justice is admirable (*Gorgias* 478b), and that temperance, justice, and courage (and, by implication, all the virtues) are good (*Euthydemus* 279b).

[3] For example, at *Protagoras* 332c8–9, Socrates claims that "for each thing that can have an opposite, there is only one opposite."