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978-0-521-86456-5 - Plato's Forms in Transition: A Reading of the *Parmenides*

Samuel C. Rickless

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PLATO'S FORMS IN TRANSITION

There is a mystery at the heart of Plato's *Parmenides*. In the first part, Parmenides criticizes what is widely regarded as Plato's mature theory of forms, and in the second, he promises to explain how the forms can be saved from these criticisms. Ever since the dialogue was written, scholars have struggled to determine how the two parts of the work fit together. Did Plato mean us to abandon, keep, or modify the theory of forms, on the strength of Parmenides' criticisms? Samuel Rickless offers something that has never been done before: a careful reconstruction of every argument in the dialogue. He concludes that Plato's main aim was to argue that the theory of forms should be modified by allowing that forms can have contrary properties. To grasp this is to solve the mystery of the *Parmenides* and understand its crucial role in Plato's philosophical development.

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This book came into existence by accident. My graduate training (at Oxford and UCLA) was not in ancient philosophy, but primarily in the philosophy of language. My first job out of graduate school was at Florida State University, where I taught courses on descriptivism, direct reference, and propositional attitude reports. For a year or so after I was hired, I searched for a new project, without much success. Then, in January 1997, I decided to attend a graduate seminar on the *Parmenides* taught by my then colleague, Russ Dancy. I remembered that my college mentor, Warren Goldfarb, had once discussed what he called a “third man” argument purporting to show that what accounts for the unity of a proposition cannot, on pain of infinite regress, be part of the proposition. I knew that the name for this argument had come from the *Parmenides*, and this sparked my interest in the seminar. Russ, with his wealth of erudition and sharp intellect, listened patiently and provided encouragement as I struggled to give voice to naïve suggestions that more often than not simply led nowhere. But by the end of the semester, I realized that I was called to the study of Plato and sat down to write “How Parmenides Saved the Theory of Forms.”

The project of writing this book began with the realization that my article had provided a cursory, and in the end inaccurate, interpretation of the second half of the *Parmenides*. The article had also failed to draw Plato's various statements about the forms into a coherent theory, with independent axioms and with theorems following deductively from the result of combining these axioms with auxiliary assumptions. The pages that follow are the result of my attempt to atone for these deficiencies by providing a complete logical reconstruction of all the arguments of the dialogue. As I argue below, such a reconstruction provides the key needed to solve the enduring mystery of the *Parmenides*.

I could not have written this book without the sage advice of my editor at Cambridge University Press, Hilary Gaskin, the wonderful philosophical training I received from my mentors at UCLA, particularly David Kaplan

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(my dissertation advisor), Robert Adams, Rogers Albritton, Joseph Almog, Tyler Burge, John Carriero, Keith Donnellan, Kit Fine, Barbara Herman, Gavin Lawrence, David Pears, and Warren Quinn, or the assistance and encouragement of a significant number of philosophical interlocutors. I would like to single out the following people for their special contributions, in the form of constructive philosophical and/or philological comments and criticism: Rogers Albritton, Russ Dancy, Dan Devereux, Darryl Jung, Gareth Matthews, Pat Matthews, Dana Nelkin, Michael Pakaluk, Richard Patterson, Terry Penner, Sandra Peterson, George Rudebusch, and two extremely helpful and diligent anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press. I have learned an enormous amount from contributors to the secondary literature on Plato's metaphysics, and the *Parmenides* in particular, as I hope will be evident from the pages that follow. I would like to thank the graduate students in my two *Parmenides* seminars at UCSD for their constructive and probing comments, particularly Andy Beck, Matt Brown, Erin Frykholm, Andrew Hamilton, Mitch Herschbach, Charlie Kurth, James Messina, Mark Newman, Aaron Schiller, Sharon Skare, and Nellie Wieland. I am deeply grateful for the editorial and philosophical assistance of two dedicated research assistants, Erin Frykholm (who read the manuscript from cover to cover) and John Vella. I have benefited greatly from the encouragement of colleagues and friends, both at Florida State and then later at UCSD, particularly Georgios Anagnostopoulos, Dick Arneson, Bill Bechtel, David Brink, Craig Callender, Nancy Cartwright, Pat Churchland, Paul Churchland, Jonathan Cohen, Peter Dalton, Margaret Dancy, Russ Dancy, Jerry Doppelt, Rick Grush, Michael Hardimon, Darryl Jung, Wayne Martin, Pat Matthews, Maria Morales, Dana Nelkin, Don Rutherford, Gila Sher, and Eric Watkins. And I am most grateful to my assistant editor, Gillian Dadd, my production editor, Jacqui Burton, and my wonderfully punctilious copy editor, Iveta Adams, for carefully shepherding the manuscript through a complex production process. To those I have forgotten to thank by name for their various contributions, I offer my sincere apologies.

I also consider myself very fortunate to have received precious assistance from institutional sources. I am deeply grateful to the UCSD Hellman Faculty Fellows program for providing me with a summer grant, and to the UCSD Center for the Humanities for providing me with one quarter's research leave to work on the manuscript. The generosity of these organizations helped spur my research and allowed me to complete the book in a fraction of the time it would otherwise have taken.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my immediate family and close friends: my mother, Regina Sarfaty Rickless, and (late) father, Elwood Rickless, for their undying confidence in me and for making it possible for me to achieve my intellectual dreams without worrying about where my next meal was coming from; my sister, Sarah Baker, for her love and support (and consummate spelling and grammar); my (late) father-in-law, Norton Nelkin, whose devotion to family and to philosophy as a calling I have constantly striven to emulate; my stepmother-in-law, Sue Metzner, for her courage and strength (and German pancakes); my mother-in-law, Nancy Morais, and stepfather-in-law, Lee Morais, for helping me to see beauty in unfamiliar places; my sister-in-law, Karen Nelkin, for her genius and wit; my gorgeous children, Sophie and Alice, for their endless patience and understanding (and peals of wild laughter); my cousin, Miriam Rykles, for encouraging me (when in college) to follow my intellectual nose wherever it might lead, and for delicious holiday meals I will never forget; Michael Wolf and Susan Wolf, for helping me find my feet in graduate school and enjoy the wonders of Southern California; Nancy, David, and Leona Foldi, for cheering me up; and my wife, colleague, and soulmate, Dana Nelkin, to whom this book is dedicated, for her love and companionship, for believing in me even when the chips were down, and for her magical smile and sharp intellect: from her I have learned everything I know about anything worth knowing about (except maybe Fourth Amendment law, Verdi operas, and the Chicago Cubs).

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THE HIGH THEORY OF FORMS

AXIOMS

OM (One-over-Many) 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.

II (Itself-by-Itself) Every form is itself by itself.

AUXILIARIES

CON (Contraries) The following pairs of properties (among others) are pairs of contraries: beautiful/ugly, just/unjust, good/bad, wise/foolish, strong/weak, quick/slow, poor/rich, dry/wet, cold/hot, bitter/sweet, sharp/blunt, empty/full, friend/enemy, temperate/licentious, healthy/diseased, big/small (or tall/short), odd/even, alive/dead, pious/impious, light/heavy, double/half, hard/soft, dark/pale, thick/thin, and one/many.

PC (Principle of Contraries) Forms corresponding to contrary properties are themselves contraries. [If X is a form of F-ness and Y is a form of G-ness and the property of being F is opposite to the property of being G, then X and Y are opposite forms.]

NCC (No Causation by Contraries) For any property F that admits a contrary (con-F), whatever makes something be (or become) F cannot itself be con-F.

TT (Transmission Theory) Whatever makes something be (or become) F must itself be F.

IS (Impurity of the Sensibles) For any property F that admits a contrary (con-F), all sensible F things are con-F.

SOK (Stability of the Objects of Knowledge) All objects of knowledge are stable.

PHK (Possibility of Human Knowledge) Humans are capable of having knowledge.

FUNDAMENTAL THEOREMS

E (Existence) For any property F, there is a form of F-ness.

NMTO (No More Than One) For any property F, there is no more than one form of F-ness.

U (Uniqueness) For any property F, there is exactly one form of F-ness.

C (Causality) For any property F, all F things (other than the F) are F by virtue of partaking of the F.

BP (Being as Partaking) For any property F and for anything other than the F, partaking of the F is both necessary and sufficient for being F.

SP (Self-Predication) For any property F, the F is F.

P (Purity) For any property F that admits a contrary (con-F), the F is not con-F.

P* (Purity*) For any property F that admits a contrary (con-F), the F is not both F and con-F.

O (Oneness) Every form is one.

NI₁ (Non-Identity₁) For any property F that admits a contrary, the F is not identical to any sensible F thing.

KF (Knowledge of Forms) Humans can know at least some forms.

S (Separation) Every form is separate from the things that partake of it.

NSP (Non-Self-Partaking) No form partakes of itself.

NSE (Non-Self-Explanation) For any property F, it is not by virtue of partaking of itself that the F is F.

THE HIGHER THEORY OF FORMS

The higher theory results from adding the following proposition as an axiom to the high theory:

RP (Radical Purity) No form can have contrary properties.

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ADDITIONAL PRINCIPLES

SBP (Strong Being as Partaking) To say that *X* partakes of the *F* is to say that *X* is *F*.

PE (Principles of Elision)

PE₁: To say that *X is F in some way* is to say that *X is F*.

PE₂: To say that *X is in some way* is to say that *X is*.

PE₃: To say that *X comes to be F in some way* is to say that *X comes to be F*.

PE₄: To say that *X ceases to be F in some way* is to say that *X ceases to be F*.

PE₅: To say that *X appears to be F in some way* is to say that *X appears to be F*.

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