

# Plato's *Parmenides*: Interpretations and Solutions to the Third Man

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Plato's *Parmenides* fulfills a special role in understanding Plato's theory of Forms. Throughout his dialogues, Plato is pleased to invoke the theory intermittently, often as ancillary support for related pieces of his philosophy. But the theory itself remains concealed, even mysterious, never giving up a broad exposure for the reader's immediate analysis. Hence, what we know of Plato's Forms comes from piecemeal assembly.<sup>1</sup> Given this situation, the attacks levied against the Forms in the *Parmenides* may reveal vital aspects of the theory and perhaps even betray Plato's own misgivings about the Forms. In this paper I will not consider whether Plato maintained his theory in the face of these critiques. Rather, I will present the famous Third-Man Argument from the *Parmenides*, review some competing perspectives on the argument among Plato's interpreters, and defend Gregory Vlastos' interpretation due to its historical plausibility.

## I. The Third-Man Argument

The Third-Man Argument (hereafter TMA) appears early in the *Parmenides* (132A1–B2). It is given in two varieties in the dialogue, but

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive listing of Plato's comments regarding the Forms, see "Chapter 28: Form" of *The Great Ideas: A Synopticon of Great Books of the Western World* (Vol. II). Encyclopaedia Britannica (1952), 536–41.

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there is rarely any instructive difference between the first and the second formulation. In this section I will formalize Parmenides' argument so it can be analyzed apart from the redundancy of the text. My formalization is not groundbreaking, and it inherits much of the work from previous formulations.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the initial premises of the TMA we need only consult Plato's arguments for the Forms. First, Parmenides begins with the principle of Uniqueness. The principle appears in Plato's One-Over-Many argument. The basic idea is that when a number of things share a common property, they do so by virtue of a single Form of that commonality. However, my wording here may betray certain modern nuances of the universal-particular relationship, so I will quote from the *Parmenides* to establish exactly what Plato has agreed to, which is commonly understood as Uniqueness:

I suppose you think each form is one on the following ground: whenever some number of things seem to you to be large, perhaps there seems to be some one character, the same as you look at them all, and from that you conclude that the large is one. (132A)<sup>3</sup>

This passage is the final summary of the Forms from the dialogue, and it appears immediately before Parmenides presents the TMA. We will soon examine other references to the Forms found earlier in the *Parmenides*, but this passage illustrates the Uniqueness premise nicely. I will formalize this premise in the following way:

- (U) If multiple things (*a*, *b*, and *c*) are all *F*, then there must be a single Form, *F*-ness, by which they exhibit the same quality.

Thus, where multiple things are large, there must be a unified Form of "Largeness" to account for their commonality. This is intended to hold for any quality shared among things: where things are *F*, there is *F*-ness.

Second, Parmenides establishes the principle of Participation. The principle has roots in Plato's *Phaedo* where he proposes that "each of

<sup>2</sup> My rendering of these premises is modeled after Vlastos' original formulation of the TMA, with the added benefit of being informed by subsequent articles responding to his, with only a few of my own stylistic differences.

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that Plato has allowed such a contextual relation as "large" to represent his Forms in the above passage, but this is no new development since we read about tall and tallness in the *Phaedo*. In fact, it is readily agreed upon that "the theory that Socrates presented at the beginning of the [Parmenides] is plainly the one developed in *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*" (Cooper 359). For this reason I feel no need to inspect these accounts of the Forms to look for developments in Plato's thought in the *Parmenides*: let us proceed by treating the theory as a mostly stable target to this point.

the Forms existed, and that other things acquired their name by having a share in them" (102B). We find similar summaries of Participation from the *Parmenides* in 128E6–129A6, 130B, and 130E5–131A2.<sup>4</sup> This establishes the link between Forms and particulars. Thus, let us formulate the Participation premise in the following way:

- (P) If multiple things (*a*, *b*, and *c*) exhibit *F*, then  
they exhibit that quality through participation  
in the Form of *F-ness*.

There is no need to be suspicious of conflating the appearance of *F* and the name of *F* in (U) and (P) respectively: both regard our account of things in the world. But it appears that (P) is an extension of (U), then. Notice that (U) proposes the singleness of *F-ness*, while (P) supplies the means by which things exhibit the characteristic *F*. Plato has distinguished these premises in his dialogue, but for simplicity's sake let us collapse (U) and (P) into a single premise:

- (UP) If multiple things (*a*, *b*, and *c*) are all *F*, then  
there must be a single Form, *F-ness*, by which  
they exhibit the same quality through partici-  
pation.

However, the above premises are alone insufficient to effect Parmenides' conclusion that any given Form is not one, but infinitely many. The TMA itself requires additional, tacit premises in order to address the theory of Forms. This is where the TMA becomes especially informative about Plato's theory. Because it appears that Plato thought the argument was a valid one, we are justified in searching out whatever assumptions are necessary to justify the TMA and how they impact the Forms. The greatest potential for understanding the dialogue rests somewhere between (UP) and the conclusion of the TMA. Before we posit any additional premises, let us first look at the conclusion that Parmenides draws:

What about the large itself and the other large things? If you look at them all in the same way with the mind's eye, again won't some one thing appear large, by which all these appear large? . . .

So another form of largeness will make its appearance, which has emerged alongside largeness itself and the things that partake of it, and in turn another over all

<sup>4</sup> For those interested in the translations of these passages, Gregory Vlastos treats them in his article, "Plato's Third Man Argument" where they appear "annotated copiously, chiefly on matters dealing with textual points which [he] had failed to cover in previous papers" (290–97).

these, by which all of them will be large. Each of your forms will no longer be one, but unlimited in multitude.  
(132A-B)

Here Parmenides appears to have cornered the young Socrates, who had intended that a unique Form account for a single quality via participation. If Parmenides' conclusion follows, we can formalize it thus:

(UP2) If multiple things ( $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ , and  $F$ ) are all  $F$ ,  
then there must be a single Form,  $F$ -ness  
II, by which they exhibit the same quality  
through participation.

Notice that  $F$  is now included in the list of multiple things. In this case, Socrates' demand has failed that  $F$ -ness be the unique cause for multiple things exhibiting  $F$ -ness. Parmenides has shown us  $F$ -ness II, which has appeared to explain the new relation, and  $F$ -ness III and  $F$ -ness IV are not far off. But Parmenides has been too hasty: (UP2) does not follow directly from (UP). What is necessary to establish the logical jump from (UP) to (UP2)? Parmenides never named the tacit premises, so we must explore the problem for him.

First there is the premise of Self-Predication (hereafter SP). This is simply the idea that Forms exhibit the very characteristic that they bestow on the things that participate in them. Thus, largeness is large, tallness is tall, and any other  $F$ -ness is  $F$ . And this premise coheres with Plato's other writings. His dialogues offer many phrases to support (SP), but their significance and meaning is hotly contested.

Second there is the unstated premise of Non-Identity (hereafter NI). (NI) suggests that if things exhibit a certain quality through participating in a Form, then these things are not identical to the Form itself. That is, when Simmias is tall, the Parthenon is tall, and Mount Olympus is tall, none of these things is identical to Tallness itself.

With these two unstated premises, we can now give a completed formulation of the TMA where Parmenides' conclusion will follow. Here it is in short form:

(UP) If  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  are  $F$ , then they participate in  
the single form  $F$ -ness.

(SP)  $F$ -ness is  $F$ .

(NI)  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  are not  $F$ -ness.

(UP2) If  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ , and  $F$ -ness are  $F$ , then they partici-  
pate in  $F$ -ness II . . .

Where the oneness of  $F$ -ness in (UP) is contradicted by  $F$ -ness II of (UP2).

Thus we have a working, formalized TMA. But to fairly assess the argument we should also note its peculiar context. In the *Parmenides*, Plato's Socrates is a young and budding metaphysician instead of a wise and seasoned ethical inquirer. Also unlike typical dialogues, Socrates is not the central spokesman. Rather, the venerable Parmenides and his student Zeno develop the body of the dialogue as they question the young Socrates on points of his metaphysics. After a critique of the young Socrates' Forms, Parmenides presents an exhausting philosophical method which Socrates "must do . . . to achieve a full view of the truth" (136C). These all seem to indicate that the theory of Forms being attacked by the TMA may be juvenile at this point, so it is reasonable to ask whether Plato understood a solution to the criticism he put into Parmenides' mouth.

## II. Solutions to the TMA

Early solutions to the TMA addressed the (SP) premise. Scholars like Russell,<sup>5</sup> Wittgenstein, and Cherniss adopted two senses of predication in order to weaken (SP) enough to avoid the TMA's conclusion. This is done by explaining "is" in two ways: predication and identity. The predicative sense of "is" regards properties of an object. To say, "Socrates is snub-nosed," is to describe one of his characteristics: "snub-nosed" is a property predicate of Socrates. Alternatively, to say "Socrates is the teacher of Plato" is to assert something about his identity. By parsing "is" in this way, one can avoid the entanglements of the TMA by holding that UP utilizes the predicative sense of "is" whereas (SP) uses the identity sense of "is." This prevents the shift from (UP) to (UP2) because *a*, *b*, and *c* are *F* in a different sense than *F-ness* is *F*, which shouldn't be conflated to produce the contradiction of the TMA.

More recently, Gregory Vlastos ignited a new interest in the TMA with his article "The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*." He proposed that taking (NI) as an assumption is something of an illegal maneuver on the part of Parmenides because it is immediately at odds with (SP). The TMA is supposed to show inconsistency in (UP) and (UP2), but the true contradiction arrives by importing (NI) together with (SP). Given (SP) (*F-ness* is *F*) and (NI) (If *x* is *F*, then *x* is not identical with *F-ness*), a simple substitution for *x* generates a contradiction: if *F-ness* is *F*, then *F-ness* is not identical with *F-ness*. Therefore, Vlastos believes that "one will then see that these two premises, jointly necessary to the second . . . step of the

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Russell credits Plato for the greater part of his theory of universals, saying "Plato's 'theory of ideas' . . . is one of the most successful attempts [at understanding universals] hitherto made" (90).

Argument [(UP2)], are mutually inconsistent” (“Third Man” 325–6). In this case, the TMA imports its own contradiction to damage (UP), and does so without needing an infinite regress—all it needs is *F-ness* II.

In this interpretation, it is vital to consider whether Plato actually admitted to (SP) and (NI). Although Vlastos believes Plato failed to recognize the two necessary premises, he believes Plato is still committed to them. He argues that Plato’s ontology commits him to (SP), “both by his Degrees-of-Reality Theory and by his Copy-Theory of the relation of things to Forms” (“Third Man” 336–7). He also notes various appearances of self-predicative statements throughout Platonic dialogues. But he believes Plato never understood his own commitments to (SP). Vlastos’ most convincing point comes from the Form of Change (“Third Man” 339). How could Change itself change? Wouldn’t that disqualify it from being a Form at all? The Forms plainly self-predicate, but Plato seems to have missed the upshot of self-predication for Change.

Vlastos also argues that Plato was ignorantly committed to (NI) due to his Degrees-of-Reality Theory. The Forms were introduced to explain the separation between particular things and universals, but the Degrees-of-Reality Theory frustrates the very distinction it was intended to make: particulars and universals appear as the same kind, with particulars being “deficient” in degree of reality. It was a fundamental point for Plato that the Forms are the *most real* of anything. This tension appears to be a defect inherent in the theory of Forms that was unknown to Plato. Since (SP) and (NI) were inadvertently implied by Plato’s theory of Forms, Vlastos concludes that the TMA represents a “record of honest perplexity” on Plato’s part (“Third Man” 343).

However, Sellars and Strang responded to Vlastos’ formulation with a streamlined and more powerful formulation of the TMA. Their reform occurs in (UP), where they exchange “a single Form” for “at least one Form” to account for things being *F*. Thus:

(UP\*) If multiple things (*a*, *b*, and *c*) are all *F*, then  
 there must be *at least one* Form, by which  
 they exhibit the same quality through parti-  
 cipation.

In this case, the infinite regress of the TMA is no longer derived using an illegal maneuver (previously done by importing already contradictory premises). (UP\*), (SP), and (NI) directly allow for a genuine regress (rather than the previous contradictory statement *F-ness* is not *F-ness*) and reinstate the argumentative legitimacy of the TMA.

In a later article, Vlastos concedes “that this would be an incomparably better argument than the one . . . laid out in [his first article]”

(“Plato’s” 293). Indeed, Sellars and Strang’s interpretation looks very promising since the infinite regress is more than a simple “logical bonus.” Accordingly, Vlastos modifies his formulation of the TMA to reflect certain aspects of Sellars and Strang’s responses, such as conceding that the TMA involves an inconsistent triad rather than what he originally thought was an inconsistent dyad between (SP) and (NI) (“Plato’s,” fn. 300). However, Vlastos counters Sellars and Strang’s version of (UP\*) using a persuasive textual defense: “our question then is what we are expected to understand by ‘one’ in this text” (293). He argues that the *Parmenides* does not allow for “one” to be rendered as “at least one,” even in ambiguous or inclusive senses of the phrase. Given this textual constraint, Sellars and Strang have interesting solutions to the TMA, but they are not available to Plato.

However, K. W. Rankin is not convinced by Vlastos’ textual defense, and he challenges Vlastos’ defense of (UP) (a single Form) and rejection of the substitution for (UP)\* (at least one Form). Rankin explains, “Vlastos points out that there is no warrant for any such substitution [of “at least one”] to be found in any Platonic text. But a modification of the same complaint might be made about his own formulation of [(UP)]” (379). That is, Rankin believes that Vlastos has no more justification in assuming (UP) (a single Form) than Sellars and Strang have in assuming (UP\*) (at least one Form). This is because he believes that Vlastos has divined this assumption where it must be explicitly stated in the *Parmenides* itself. His position is something like a loose constructionist’s; when the text gives an argument with internal tensions like the TMA, readers are justified in accepting interpretations such as (UP\*) as long as they are not forbidden by the text. Thus, “SP and NI require, while the text permits, Vlastos to drop his assumption that it is the function of just one Form to correspond to a given character” (380).

### III. My Rejoinder in favor of Vlastos: “One” in the *Parmenides*, contra Rankin

In this section, I will argue that Vlastos’ interpretation is preferable to any other I have treated in this paper because it maintains the most responsible procedures for historical philosophy. In regard to Russell, Wittgenstein, and Cherniss, I cannot agree to their set-theoretically informed solution. However useful it may be to parse “is” into predicate and identity to avoid the TMA, it is too difficult historically speaking to attribute it to Plato. It is more likely the result of modern set-theory, which clearly lays out the differences between identity and predication thanks to logical notation. I have heard an interesting comparison in the history of long division.

Apparently the ancients toiled and repeatedly failed in their attempts to formalize the process of long division using their complicated numbering systems. However, after the introduction of an alternative notation (Arabic numerals), long division soon became an elementary school regularity. Even if Plato had some grasp of the basic difference employed by these philosophers, I find it historically irresponsible to believe Plato had a sufficiently explicit demarcation to solve his TMA.

Moreover, ancient considerations also point away from the predication-identity solution. It does violence to Plato's text to read certain passages where "is" requires a continuous meaning. Benson Mates has pointed out a poignant example in the *Symposium* (225). Here Plato describes various beautiful things. His discussion builds to a climax with Beauty itself, which is to be the most beautiful thing one can witness:

This is what it is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, . . . to beautiful customs, . . . to learning, . . . and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful. (211C-D)

Cases like these dot the dialogues and support Vlastos' understanding of the Degrees-of-Reality Argument, which only bolsters his reading of the TMA.

Furthermore, let us assume that Plato did have a fairly evolved concept of predication and identity, one sufficient to avoid the TMA but not yet approaching the rigor of set-theory. In this case, if Plato did manage to account for these difficult passages together with his primitive predicate-identity solution, he would remain strangely silent about it in his reactions to the TMA in the dialogues. I can't see anywhere in Plato's dialogues where it might be referenced. Plato conscientiously explores possible escapes from the TMA in the *Parmenides*, including considering the Forms to be "like one and the same day . . . that is in many places at the same time and is none the less not separate from itself" (131B), or perhaps "each of these forms is a thought" (132B). These routes are far less potent than the predication-identity solution. Should we propose that Plato straw-manned his own theory? The burden of proof appears to fall on explaining why Plato held back his supposed predication-identity solution in favor of these weaker attempted solutions. Considering Aristotle's later persistence in advancing the argument, such a conclusion seems historically unlikely.

Vlastos' treatment also remains superior to that of Sellars and Strang on historical grounds, despite Rankin's response. I find Rankin's accusation that the text admits to (UP\*) to be puzzling, especially in light of the arguments Vlastos himself offers in favor of his use of 'oneness'. Consider Vlastos' translation of the relevant passage of the *Parmenides* (132A1–4, emphasis added):

This, I take it, is what leads you to hold that each Form is *one*:

Whenever you think that a number of things are large, you perhaps think there exists a certain *one* Form the same in your view of all of them;

Hence you believe that Largeness is *one*. (290)

Vlastos points out that the TMA uses the same word in its final sentence:

And so each Form will no longer be *one* Form for you, but infinitely many.

Whichever translation we prefer, it must consistently replace "one" in each of these instances. Thus, if we take Sellars and Strang's version of (UP\*) seriously, we must also agree that there exists some sort of logical trouble in Parmenides' conclusion: "each Form will no longer be *at least one* for you, but infinitely many." But what distress would there be in that conclusion? There is nothing disconcerting or contradictory about "at least one" in competition with "infinitely many." Surely, this would be to misunderstand the TMA. It appears that even if we grant Sellars and Strang their proposed translation, the TMA would produce a rather anticlimactic conclusion.<sup>6</sup>

Due to these textual facts, I prefer Vlastos' treatment of the TMA over that of Sellars, Strang, and Rankin. As long as we are engaged in historical philosophy, it is only prudent to demand historically plausible explanations. If we admit to non-historical explorations of the theory, such as predication and identity or (UP\*), we have abandoned the original project. Worse, we must propose that the *Parmenides* either straw-mans the theory of Forms or reaches a harmless conclusion. As historical problems go, the TMA calls for additional caution because it asks the reader to identify assumptions to generate its conclusion, which affords all sorts of opportunity to unnecessarily depart from the real problem. If we are to solve the *general* problem of third-men, we ought to consult reason itself without reference texts whatsoever.

<sup>6</sup> Vlastos' interpretation of *one* also benefits from passages beyond the *Parmenides*. See R. 276A, 507B, and 596A. See also *Parm.* 131A8–9, 132B5, and 132C3–4.

I prefer to think of the TMA as a great moment of humility from one of history's greatest philosophers. Instead of a mysterious dialogue that holds secrets to Plato's genius, it is more likely a mysterious dialogue that expresses his willingness to admit to his limits. Such commitments to truth and exploration have been shared by great philosophers throughout the great conversation. When Russell pointed out the flaw in Frege's rule V, Frege responded as gracefully as Plato's self-criticism from the *Parmenides*. When Russell reflected on Frege's response to his critique, he has this to say:

As I think about acts of integrity and grace, I realise that there is nothing in my knowledge to compare with Frege's dedication to truth. His entire life's work was on the verge of completion, much of his work had been ignored to the benefit of men infinitely less capable, his second volume was about to be published, and upon finding that his fundamental assumption was in error, he responded with intellectual pleasure clearly submerging any feelings of personal disappointment. It was almost superhuman and a telling indication of that of which men are capable if their dedication is to creative work and knowledge instead of cruder efforts to dominate and be known. (Heijenoort 127)

Similarly, Plato managed to object to his own central theory of Forms using the most potent methods available in his day. Though he failed to see his own commitments, I suspect he sensed a problem and graciously explored it in the *Parmenides* at his own expense.

In conclusion, I have shown how Parmenides' TMA relies on (UP), (SP), and (NI) to attack Plato's theory of Forms. I have then summarized various treatments of the TMA, including predication and identity, Vlastos' position that (SP) and (NI) immediately contradict each other due to Plato's inadvertent ontology, Sellars and Strang's modification of (UP\*) to revive the TMA, Vlastos' textual refutation of that modification, and Rankin's rejoinder. I have concluded that Vlastos' interpretation is superior to all others presented here because it remains the most historically responsible and appropriately pays the honor of humility to Plato.

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