Essay 4

Tenth Grade Honors

Philosophy Class

Plato, Aristotle and the Third Man Argument

Many scholars believe that the Third Man Argument (TMA) is one of the most powerful arguments against the existence of Plato’s Forms, with many going so far as to say that it is successful. It exists in two versions. The first is offered — to his great credit — by Plato himself, while the second comes from Aristotle, though only preserved for us in a commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* by the later philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. 200 AD).[[1]](#footnote-0) Plato’s argument uses the Form of ‘Largeness,’ while that of Aristotle uses the form of ‘Man’ as an example. The difference between the versions is noteworthy in that the first uses the Form of an attribute, or property, as an example, while the second uses the Form of an entity itself.

Both versions of the argument use just three major premises so as to generate a regress that is untenable. These three major premises are: 1) For any group of things to which the same name may be properly applied, there exists a Form having the same name, by virtue of which that name may be applied to them, e.g. large things share in the quality of Largeness. 2) This Form is not a member of the group of things of which it is the Form. (This is usually called the “Non-Identity Assumption.”) 3) Finally, this Form may be predicated of itself. (This is usually called the “Self-Predication Assumption.”)[[2]](#footnote-1) Since an infinite regress is impossible, one or more of the three major premises must be false. The problem is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to see how Plato could give up any of those premises and be left with anything that resembles his philosophy.

The following are the two primary sources for the TMA, beginning with Plato in the *Parmenides* dialogue. Parmenides questions Socrates (*Parmenides* 132a1-b2):[[3]](#footnote-2)

*“I fancy your reason for believing that each idea is one is something like this; when there is a number of things which seem to you to be great, you may think, as you look at them all, that there is one and the same idea in them, and hence you think the great is one.” “That is true,” he said. “But if with your mind's eye you regard the absolute great and these many great things in the same way, will not another great appear beyond, by which all these must appear to be great?” “So it seems.” “That is, another idea of greatness will appear, in addition to absolute greatness and the objects which partake of it; and another again in addition to these, by reason of which they are all great; and each of your ideas will no longer be one, but their number will be infinite.”*

Next is Aristotle’s version of the TMA, as found in the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisias:[[4]](#footnote-3)

*The Third Man is proven also in the following way. If the thing predicated of some group of things is also another thing in addition to the things of which it is predicated, having been separated from them (for this is what those who believe in the Forms think they prove; this is why, according to them, a certain “man-itself” exists — because the man being truly predicated of the many individual men also is other than the individual men) — if this is so, there will be a third man. For if the thing predicated is other than the things of which it is predicated, and exists on its own, and man is predicated both of the individual men and of the Form, there will be a third man in addition to both the individuals and the Form. In the same way, there will also be a fourth man, predicated both to this third man, the Form, and the individual men. Then in the same way also a fifth, and so on to infinity.*

Controversy surrounds these arguments, with some scholars finding them to be successful in disproving the existence of the Forms, while others denying this. Carefully read the following four sources, including the material that introduces each source. Then, in an essay that synthesizes at least three of the sources, take a position on the claim that the TMA constitutes a valid objection to Plato’s Theory of Forms.

Do not simply summarize the sources. Instead, weigh evidence from the sources to support and illustrate your position on the issue. You may paraphrase, review, and quote relevant material directly and indirectly from the sources. Be sure to indicate in your essay which sources you use. Refer to them as Source A, Source B, and so on, or by the key words in the parentheses below. In making your argument, you may, of course, also include any ideas of your own.

Source A (Vlastos)

Source B (Bailey)

Source C (Ryle)

Source D (Taylor)

Source A

Vlastos, G. (1954) “The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*,” *The Philosophical Review* 63: 319-49.

*The passage below is minimally adapted from a scholarly article written by one of the greatest Platonic scholars of the twentieth century, and published in a journal specializing in philosophy, both ancient and modern.*

The TMA in Plato’s *Parmenides* fails to prove that the theory is logically bankrupt because it involves an endless regress.[[5]](#footnote-4) It could only have succeeded in this if it had it been shown to be a valid argument. But Plato had at his disposal a perfectly good way of refuting the TMA as stated by his Parmenides. All his Parmenides had to offer in place of the tacit assumptions about Non-Identity and Self-Predication is the Separation Assumption, or the premise which states that the Form has a separate existence from any particular.

That is, if the Separation Assumption is to be the reason for acknowledging the “separate existence” of the Form “Largeness” from the particulars of which it is predicated, Plato could argue that the same Assumption could not require, but must forbid, the separation of the next predicative Form, “Largeness 1,” from the original Form, “Largeness,” of which “Largeness 1” is predicated; and if this separation were to fail, the infinite regress would fail.

Source B

Bailey, D.T.J. (2009) “The Third Man Argument,” *Philosophy Compass* 4: 666-81.

While there is much evidence that Plato held Self-Predication regarding the Forms (i.e. the belief that the Form of a quality is itself that quality [e.g. Largeness is large]), there is no evidence whatsoever that he held Non-Identification in its full strength (i.e. that anything which is of a certain quality, is so by virtue of something else). There is evidence that he held a version of Non-Identification where the domain of the quantifier with widest scope includes only sensible particulars. But such a version of Non-Identification is not strong enough for the infinite regress. Only a premise as strong as the assertion that anything F is so by virtue of something other than F will guarantee, when conjoined with Self-Predication, that a new form pops up each time we have accounted, with the previous form, for the property shared by the members of a lower level plurality. But why should the Theory of Forms suppose anything as strong as Non-Identification in its full strength? The Forms are supposed to explain property sharing among sensibles, and, as everybody knows, explanations come to an end?

Source C

Ryle, G. (1939) “Plato’s Parmenides,” *Mind* 48: 129-51.

Socrates is now bankrupt of any answer to the question, What sort of a relation exists when something is an instance of something else? But the debate is so far inconclusive that the fact that Socrates cannot answer the question does not imply that there is no answer. I propose here to go beyond my text and argue that there can be no answer to the question, since the question itself is illegitimate.

Let us call the relation of one thing being an instance of a certain quality ‘exemplification.’ On this view a thing stands in some relation of exemplifying a certain quality; and a relational proposition will assert that the two or more terms jointly exemplify the relation.

Now what of the alleged relation itself, which we are calling 'exemplification'? Is this a Form or an instance of a Form? Take the two propositions ‘this is square' and ' that is circular.' We have here two different cases of something exemplifying something else. We have two different instances of the relation of being-an-instance-of. What is the relation between them and that of which they are instances? It will have to be exemplification Number2. The exemplification of P by S will be an instance of exemplification, and its being in that relation to exemplification will be an instance of a second-order exemplification, and that of a third, and so on *ad infinitum*.

This conclusion is impossible. So there is no such relation as being-an-instance-of. This is green 'is not a relational proposition, and 'this is bigger than that' only mentionsone relation, that of being-bigger-than. There are no genuine simple relational propositions having for their terms what is denoted by abstract nouns. Forms are not terms in relational propositions with their instances acting as the other terms. And if (what is a further point whichis not here being argued) Forms are also incapable of having qualities or dimensions or states or places or dates, etc., it follows that Forms cannot be the subjects of any simple propositions affirmative or negative, attributive or relational.

What is meant is that abstract nouns are not proper names, so that to ask what is the relation between the nominee of such a noun and something else is an illegitimate question. The semantic function of abstract nouns is something other than that of denoting subjects of qualities, states, dimensions or relations. To enquire after the qualities, states, positions, sizes or relations of circularity or unity or civility is to ask a nonsensical question. So when we say that there is no relation between a universal and its instances we are only saying the same sort of thing as when we say that yellowness has no color or circularity has no shape since such abstract nouns are not the names of things possessing qualities.

Source D

Taylor, A.E. (1934) *The Parmenides of Plato*. Oxford. Pg. 13.

*A.E. Taylor was an eminent scholar of Plato, and classical philosophy in general, from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The following is a quote from a book of his devoted entirely to the* Parmenides *dialogue of Plato.*

In the Platonic dialogue named after him, Parmenides does not, for a moment, quarrel with the young Socrates for believing in the "separate and intelligible Forms." On the contrary, he expressly declares that without such objects there can be no philosophy and no science, for there is nothing else that can be really known (135BC). What he does criticize is that Socrates is trying to ascribe at least a "phenomenal" reality to the sensible world and its contents by maintaining that they somehow "participate" in the reality of the intelligible Forms. All his criticisms, including the TMA, aim at showing that Socrates can give no coherent explanation of this relation of the sensible to the intelligible, because all possible explanations are inconsistent with the strict unity of the "Form." It is the ascription of any reality whatsoever to the sensible which he feels to be inconsistent with any kind of monism [the philosophical belief that all reality is essentially one]; for Parmenides, the error of Socrates is precisely that he is determined to ascribe at least a derivative and secondary reality to the things of sense, which he ought to regard as a mere illusion.

1. There are only scattered references in the text to an argument that Aristotle calls the "Third Man" (*Metaphysics* 84.23-85.3, 93.1-7, 990b 17=1079a 13, 1039a 2, 1059b 8; *Sophistic Refutations* 178b 36), and these are commonly considered to be essentially the same argument as Plato’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. It should be pointed out, however, that both the formulation of this premise, and its name, are misleading since it is not the very same Form that is predicated of itself, but rather another Form having the same name as the first, with the same point applying as the regress proceeds. That is, *predication* is a linguistic category, yet what Vlastos (who invented this term) really meant was “Self-Instantiation.” The same goes for “Non-Identity” which may be better rendered “Asymmetrical Causality.” (Bailey, D.T.J [2009] “The Third Man Argument,” *Philosophy Compass* 4: 666-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. 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[↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. *On Ideas* 84.21-85.6 in *Aristotelis Fragmenta Selecta*, W.D. Ross ed. (1963) Oxford. For a use of the τρίτος ἄνθροπος that does not even employ the infinite regress, see Alex. *in Met*. 84.7-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Cf. *Rep*. 597c, and *Tim*. 31a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)