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DISCUSSIONS

IS THERE ONE OR ARE THERE MANY ONE AND
MANY PROBLEMS IN PLATO ?

BY M. J. CRESSWELL

How can one thing be many and many things one? This perennial in Greek philosophy gets a new twist in three of Plato's later dialogues (*Parmenides*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus*) where we discover not one problem but apparently two. More interestingly, although one of them is a serious and perplexing problem demanding the full insight of the rigorously disciplined philosopher, the other problem is described in the *Philebus* (14d, e) as commonplace and one such that "almost everyone agrees nowadays that there is no need to concern oneself with things like that, feeling that they are childish, obvious and a great nuisance to argument". And in the *Sophist* (251b) it is relegated to providing a banquet for the young and for "late learners of old men" who are "poorly endowed with intelligence and marvel at such things, thinking themselves to have come upon all wisdom".

What is the difference between this trivial form and the serious form of the problem of how one thing can be many? In the *Philebus* (15a) Socrates says that the trivial problem occurs when the one in question is the sort of thing which can come into being and pass away, i.e., is something which belongs to the physical world. The serious problem is when the one is an eternal existent.

Now for Plato things in the changing physical world were certainly of a very different category from things which did not change—indeed, his whole philosophy might be claimed to be founded on this—but this difference, however great, does not by itself explain why the problem of how one eternally existing thing could be many is a serious one, while the problem of how one physical changing thing could be many is not. In other words (if we for the moment suppose that the eternally existing things are the Forms) why it should be no problem that one man may be many, but a very serious problem that, say, goodness should be many.

Taking our cue from the *Sophist* we find that the one and many problem for particulars is simply the problem of how the same thing can have many characteristics. Given

(1) x is ϕ_1 , x is ϕ_2 , . . . , x is ϕ_n , . . . ,

the problem is: how can all these be true? That is, how do we allow there to be a set of ' x is ϕ ' statements with different ϕ 's? Now the formal structure of this problem does not require that the x be a particular. Exactly

the same problem would arise if we want to claim that a given Form is, say, ungenerated, indestructible, perfect, etc. And in such a case one could say that we had a one and many problem about the Forms. However, when Plato actually sets out the one and many problem about the Forms it doesn't have the structure of (1) at all. The one and many problem about the Forms is: how that which is "most assuredly this single unity yet subsequently comes to be in an infinite number of things that come into being" (*Philebus* 15b 4-6). In other words, how can we say that many things have the same characteristic, i.e., how can we say,

(2) x_1 is ϕ , x_2 is ϕ , . . . , x_n is ϕ ,

As in (1) the x 's here may be either particulars or Forms. But in (2) it is not the x 's that are both one and many; it is the ϕ . That is, assuming that the Forms are some sort of universals, (2) as a one and many problem has to be about Forms, whereas (1) may be about particulars also. What Plato seems to have been clear about is that (2) was a more difficult problem than (1), and that (2) was a problem about Forms. What he does not seem to have been clear about is that the difference between (1) and (2) is *not* that (2) is (1) with the things in question being Forms.

Actually the trivial problem is not quite as simple in structure as (1) makes out. Certainly in the *Sophist* passage the example of (1) is the case of a man with many names (e.g., man and good), but in the *Parmenides* passage (129) the ϕ 's are not merely different but contrary. In other words the trivial problem is not just that the same thing should be, e.g., both tall and red, it is that the same thing should be both tall and short. The *Philebus* passage also seems concerned with contrary characteristics, for the problem Protarchus raises is how the same man can be both tall and short, heavy and light, and so on. Plato clearly thinks of these as no more than word puzzles. Obviously Protarchus is taller than some men and shorter than others, etc. What is surprising is that he should have thought them serious problems in the case of the Forms. The clue to Plato's attitude here is found back in the *Phaedo* (at 102).

Plato complains at 102b7-c4 that it is not strictly true to say that Simmias is taller than Socrates, and gives as a reason that he is taller, not by being Simmias, but by the tallness which he happens to have. Part at least of what he means is that Simmias is only contingently tall and not logically tall; for he distinguishes the way in which Simmias can be said to be tall from the way in which his tallness can be said to be tall, by saying that neither tallness itself nor the tallness in us will endure shortness (102d6-7), i.e., it is logically impossible for the tallness in Simmias to be anything but tall.¹

¹Cf. G. Vlastos, "Degrees of Reality in Plato", in *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, ed. R. Bambrough (London, 1965), pp. 1-19, especially pp. 10-17, though Vlastos gives the impression that he thinks the distinction Plato was after was no more than that between necessary and contingent truth, and that Plato was just confused about the nature of relative terms.

However, it is not clear that the distinction among ways of being tall is simply the distinction between necessary and contingent truth. It is rather the distinction between the tallness of a tallness, and the tallness of a tall thing. To understand why Plato says that a tallness can be tall we must remember that he thinks of the particulars as being "named after" the Forms (102b2)², i.e., he is identifying 'being tall' with 'being worthy of the name "tallness"', and the things which are always worthy of the name are tallnesses. In the strict sense the things which are tall are never people or objects but only tallnesses. If then we go on to divide tallnesses into kinds, then one kind of tallness will be tallness relative to Socrates. Plato uses this fact to give an analysis of what it is to say of a sensible particular that it is (relatively) tall. For when we say (102b3-6) that Simmias is taller than Socrates and shorter than Phaedo we mean that there is in Simmias both a tallness and a shortness. That is, for Plato the primary way of being tall was to be a tallness, while the secondary way was to have a tallness in one. The secondary way is inferior because the same person can have in him both a shortness and a tallness, and the bringing out of this depends essentially on the fact that 'tall' when applied to people is a relative term. It does not depend on the fact that Simmias' tallness is merely contingent. It is simply that Simmias is not a tallness and can therefore have in him not only something which is absolutely tall (namely, his tallness relative to Socrates) but also something which is absolutely short (namely, his shortness relative to Phaedo). In so far as he can be said to be tall it is only in a relative sense, for he can also be said to be short. The primary way of being tall is, on the other hand, an absolute way. For a tallness cannot be a shortness. Plato is very careful not to say that one tallness can be taller than another. What he does say (102c10-d4) is that a tallness can overtop a shortness.³ The point seems to be that describing something as a tallness restricts us to putting it in the first argument place of any "— is taller than —" proposition. For Plato the foolishness of God is not wiser than men. This is why the analysis of Simmias' relative tallness requires there to be two things in Simmias. For if we were allowed to say that a tallness relative to Socrates can in some circumstances be the same thing as a shortness relative to Phaedo, then the tallness in Simmias could not be said to be absolutely tall and the problem would arise all over again. By requiring that tallness relative to Socrates and shortness relative to Phaedo are distinct things and merely co-habit in Simmias, we can without any contradiction describe the one as absolutely tall and the other as absolutely short, while Simmias is neither. For Simmias to be tall we have

²For a fuller discussion of this point see R. E. Allen, "Participation and Predication in Plato's Middle Dialogues", *The Philosophical Review* (1960) (reprinted in *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*, ed. R. E. Allen (London, 1965), pp. 43-60) and K. W. Mills, "Some Aspects of Plato's Theory of Forms, *Timaeus* 49c ff.", *Phronesis*, vol. xiii (1968), pp. 145-170.

³R. S. Bluck, "Forms as Standards", *Phronesis*, vol. ii (1957), p. 123.

to posit a tallness *in* Simmias. Perhaps at one time Plato had thought of all Forms as in the particulars; but what is significant here is that even in a dialogue in which the separateness of the Forms is explicitly affirmed (e.g., at 74a 11-12) the analysis of relative terms seems to require immanent Forms of some kind, and thus the 'is' in (1) asserts, when the ϕ 's are not only different but contrary, their immanence in the x 's.

Regarding characteristics as *in* something perhaps explains why Plato, both in the *Philebus* passage and in the *Parmenides* passage, makes the problem of how one thing can have many characteristics of a piece with the problem of how one thing can have many parts. If a Form is regarded as immanent in the particular rather as being a part (perhaps a logical part) of it, then it becomes quite clear that (1) is not only of a different logical kind from (2) but may be thought of as having such a straightforward solution that it's only the "late learners" who see it as difficult. For on an immanence view of the having of characteristics there is no reason at all why these ϕ 's (being different) should not all be in x as logical parts, just as his limbs, head, trunk, etc., are all in him as bodily parts. But turning to (2) we would find that an immanence view of the having of characteristics requires us to say that ϕ is in x_1 , in x_2 , . . . , in x_n , . . . ; and involves us in the absurdities demonstrated by Parmenides in the *Parmenides*, and again referred to in the *Philebus*, of how this can be so without the Form dividing and there being only parts of it in each. And how the Form can be eternal if it is in things which come into being and pass away.

If the Forms are "in" the particulars then they cannot solve (2), for clearly the same thing cannot be "in" many different particulars unless the relation of in-ness is rather different from any ordinary relation of in-ness. And this is Plato's dilemma, for he sees that his Forms must be separate, and wants them to be separate, and yet is perplexed because the natural way of explaining the relation between Form and particular, namely, the immanence of the Form in the particular, will not do. The two forms of the one and many problem bring out the distinction between those cases in which the inadequacy of the immanence view is not exposed and those in which it is.

Plato seems to have been aware, certainly in his later dialogues, that (2) could be solved if he could give an adequate account of the relation between Forms and particulars which permitted the latter to be separate entities, that is, he seemed to realize that there must be a relation R such that for any particular x and Form F -ness

(3) x is F iff x R F -ness.⁴

⁴I am trusting that my using ' x ' to designate a particular individual, and my making relational statements about it, need not imply that it has an independent ontological status. Allen (*op. cit.*, pp. 56-9) argues that for Plato it is misleading to suppose that a particular could stand in a relation to anything, since particulars have no independent existence. While agreeing with Allen's view of Plato's ontology, I see no reason for being unable to refer to particulars and make relational statements about them. If I see two reflections in two mirrors of the same toothbrush, there is nothing

This is made clear in the *Parmenides* passage where particulars are spoken of as “sharing” or “participating” in the Forms. In the *Sophist* Forms as well as particulars are allowed to share in other Forms, and in the section immediately succeeding our passage (namely 251-9) Plato uses participation to distinguish the various senses of ‘is’ and solve many logical problems about non-being.⁵

In both these dialogues, however, there is no attempt to explain what participation itself is, except for a half-hearted attempt in terms of imitation at *Parmenides* 132c12-133a6. Taken literally, μετέχειν (‘have a share in’ followed by the genitive) suggests the old immanence idea where each particular has its share of the Form, that share being a part (since it obviously couldn’t be the whole) of the Form; a point *Parmenides* makes great play of. Aristotle’s complaint at *Metaphysics* A 6 987b13-14 that the relation of participation is never made clear is indeed justified if what we expect is an explicit analysis.

But although Plato could never say exactly what participation was, and so could never say exactly how the one and many problem could be solved, yet he knew (or if you like felt he knew) that there was a solution because he “knew” that the Forms existed. A man could know that the Forms existed because (either as a result of ἀνάμνησις or of the practice of dialectic) his soul could come to have some sort of non-sensory “vision” of the Forms. This is roughly the doctrine of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* with the “vision of the Forms” part being more dramatically described in the *Symposium* (210-212) and the *Phaedrus* (246-250).⁶ If one accepts Plato’s belief that the vision of the Forms is attainable then one can, to that extent, say that the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* show the path that must be travelled in order to solve the one and many problem.

What then about the *Philebus*? Here too Plato does not explicitly solve the problem. The passage immediately succeeding the statement of the problem (namely 16b6-17a5) is a description of the method of obtaining knowledge by the process of logical division. At first sight this does not look like an answer to the one and many problem. Is it though possible to

to prevent me from calling one reflection x and one reflection y and discussing how x and y are alike and how they differ without implying that there “really exists” any more than the one toothbrush reflected in the two mirrors. (See also W. G. Runciman, *Plato’s Later Epistemology* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 21-4.)

⁵See J. L. Ackrill, “Plato and the Copula, *Sophist* 251-259”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* (1957) (reprinted in *Studies in Plato’s Metaphysics*, pp. 207-218). The argument of the *Sophist* does not require an analysis of μετέχειν. Indeed, at 251e8-d3 the stranger makes it clear that what he is going to say applies equally to the late learners’ problem and to the serious problem. It is not even necessary to assume that the εἶδη and γένη are Forms. (See Ackrill, *op. cit.*, p. 207.)

⁶Cf. Runciman, *op. cit.*, p. 129. Plato’s discussion of knowledge is always bedevilled by the fact that he speaks of it as if it were a kind of perception, whilst vehemently denying that it is like perception, and always contrasting it with perception. Perhaps ‘acquaintance’ is a better term than ‘vision’, which suggests an almost mystical experience. If Plato did think of knowledge as a mystical experience it was certainly one acquired only after rigorous intellectual effort.

say something about the method of division analogous to the things we have said about participation? The first appearance of the method of division is in the *Phaedrus*, and it is perhaps no accident that in this dialogue we also find, admittedly in a mythical form but nevertheless described with genuine feeling, the fullest description of the soul's acquaintance with the Forms. Now one of the most significant features of the method of division in the *Phaedrus* is that whenever we divide we must do so in accordance with the thing's nature (265e). For this to be possible the method of division as practised by the philosopher with his "soul's eye" on the Forms, entailing as it does knowledge (by acquaintance) of the Forms, must also entail knowledge of the relation between Forms and particulars.

With this knowledge we can use the equivalence of (3) to solve the non-trivial version (2) of the one and many problem. The fact that Plato cannot give an analysis of the relation between Forms and particulars (or between Forms and Forms in those cases in which he wants to say that one Form participates in another) means that he must fall back on saying that knowledge of it comes only to the properly trained soul and that the cultivation of the philosophic life is therefore the only way in which the one and many problem can be solved. Since most men lack either the ability or the willingness to pursue this lofty but arduous calling it is little wonder that this problem is one that will ever be with us and ever cause serious perplexity.

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