

**Phi 260: History of Philosophy I**  
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**Spring 2007**

### **Plato's *Forms*: A Summary**

We have encountered the Forms in the following readings:

- (1) *Phaedo* (65d-66a, 70a-72a, 72c-77a, 78b-80c, 95b-107a)
- (2) *Symposium* (211a-b)
- (3) *Republic* (475e-480a, 484b ff., 509d ff., 523a-525a, 596a-597d)

The Theory of Forms occupies a crucial place in Plato's philosophy. In *Metaphysics*, the Forms are those things that really exist. Unlike the concrete objects of the sensible world, which come to be and pass away, the Forms are eternal, and therefore truly deserve to be said 'to be.' When Plato claims that "x is," he means the following:

- (i) x is intelligible. (*Phaedo* 65c ff., *Republic* 509d ff.)
- (ii) x is changeless. (*Phaedo* 78d ff., *Republic* 484b ff.)
- (iii) x is not qualified by contrary predicates. (*Phaedo* 74c, *Republic* 479a-c, 523)
- (iv) x is itself the perfect instance of the property or relation which the word 'x' connotes.

One way to think of what's going on is that Plato is here trying to reconcile the claims of Parmenides (there is no change) with Heraclitus (everything is in flux). The Forms are changeless and thus really are; the objects of the sensible world 'participate in' the Forms, but they possess some properties now, others at another time.

The Forms can also be seen to represent abstractions from the properties of things in the sensible world. In other words, if we have several particulars *a*, *b*, and *c*, and each of them is *F*, then *F*-ness is a single common property to all of them. This is sometimes called the issue of "the One and the Many" (or "One over Many"). As Plato puts it in the *Republic*: "As you know, we customarily hypothesize a single form in connection with each collection of many things to which we apply the same name." (596a)

In Plato's Epistemology (theory of knowledge), the Forms play the role of the true objects of knowledge. (For more on this, see the handouts on the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*.)

If all of this seems a little odd, ask yourself this: Is there some *thing* by virtue of which you are all students? Is there a reason for our saying that Lassie, Rin Tin Tin, and Benji are all dogs? If there is a God, what does God understand by 'justice,' 'beauty,' or 'table'? Are there *essential properties* for any of those things?

Critique of the Doctrine of the Forms (*Parmenides*)

The Third-Man Argument (132a-b):

- (A1) If a number of things,  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$  are all  $F$ , there must be a single Form  $F$ -ness, in virtue of which we apprehend  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$  as all  $F$ .
- (A2) If  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$ , and  $F$ -ness are all  $F$ , there must be another Form,  $F$ -ness\*, in virtue of which we apprehend  $a$ ,  $b$ ,  $c$  and  $F$ -ness as all  $F$ .

The argument is meant to show that we will soon have an infinite regress of forms. But does (A2) really follow from (A1)? Probably not as it is given in the *Parmenides*. For the argument to have any force, we need at least two additional (suppressed) premises: self-predication (SP) and non-identity (NI).

- (SP) Any Form can be predicated of itself. Largeness is itself large.  $F$ -ness is itself  $F$ .
- (NI) If anything has a certain character, it cannot be identical with the Form in virtue of which we apprehend that character. If  $x$  is  $F$ ,  $x$  cannot be identical with  $F$ -ness.

But these premises actually seem to be inconsistent. So where are we? Is this perhaps no critique at all?

Unknowability Argument (133b ff.)