Does the Third Man Argument refute the theory of forms?

Fine [1993] recognises four versions of the Third Man Argument (TMA). However, she argues persuasively that these are similar arguments with similar tacit premises, though with different emphases. Consequently, we will consider only that in Parmenides 132a1-b2. Fine’s translation runs as follows, with Parmenides speaking to Socrates:

I suppose it is because of the following sort of thing that you think that (1) each form is one: (2) Whenever many things seem large to you, there perhaps seems to you to be, when you have looked at them all, some one and the same idea. Hence you think (3) the large is one.

…. (4) What, then, if in the same way you look in your soul at all these – at the large itself and the other large things? (5) Will not some one large appear again, by which all these will appear large?

…. So another form of largeness will appear besides the large itself and its participants. (6) And in addition to these, yet another, by which all these will be large. (7) And so each of the forms will no longer be one for you, but infinitely many.

There are two things we need to address in this essay. Firstly, we need to understand the TMA itself, determining its premises, logical structure and validity. Secondly, we need to determine what Plato wants us to learn from it, and what its consequences are for his theory of Forms.

The Argument

Vlastos [1954] generalises Fine’s steps (2) and (5) as:

(V2) 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.

(V5) If a, b, c, and F-ness are all F, there must be another Form F-ness1, in virtue of which we apprehend a, b, c and F-ness as all F.

Since (V5) evidently does not follow from (V2), Vlastos provides two premises that he considers the simplest to legitimate the conclusion:

(SPV) Self-predication: Any Form can be predicated of itself. Largeness is itself large. F-ness is itself F.

(NIV) Non-Identity: If anything has a certain character, it cannot be identical with the Form that explains its having that character. If x is F, x cannot be identical with F-ness.

In addition, Fine reformulates step (1) as the uniqueness assumption (U):
There is exactly one form corresponding to every predicate that has a form.

The regress

Vlastos’s premises successfully maintain the regress:

1. Take a, b, c, … particular F things.
2. There is a single form F-ness, in virtue of which they are F …. (from 1 & (V2))
3. F-ness is F …. (from (SPV)).
4. So, a, b, c, … & F-ness are all F (from 1 & 3).
5. So, there is a single form F-ness₁, in virtue of which they are F …. (from 4 & (V2)).
6. F-ness₁ is F …. (from (SPV)).
7. F-ness₁ cannot be F-ness, because F-ness cannot be F in virtue of F-ness …. (from 4 & (NIV))
8. a, b, c, … , F-ness & F-ness₁ are all F (from 4 & 6).
9. So, there is a single form F-ness₂, in virtue of which they are F …. (from 8 & (V2)).
10. F-ness₂ is F …. (from (SPV)).
11. F-ness₂ cannot be F-ness₁, because F-ness₁ cannot be F in virtue of F-ness₁ …. (from 8 & (NIV))
12. Similarly, F-ness₂ cannot be F-ness, because F-ness cannot be F in virtue of F-ness …. (from 8 & (NIV))
13. a, b, c, … , F-ness, F-ness₁ & F-ness₂ are all F (from 8 & 10).
14. … and so on …

The regress in the TMA is vicious. The Forms are supposed to explain how we know things. We know something is F by acquaintance with the Form of F. But if this Form requires a further Form to explain it, and so on ad infinitum, we’ll never know anything.

Refining the premises

Vlastos’s premises are inconsistent. According to (SPV), F-ness is F. Consequently, (NIV) says that F-ness is not identical with F-ness, a contradiction since anything is identical with itself. While (SPV) and (NIV) take us from (V2) to (V5), their inconsistency will take us anywhere. Additionally, if (SPV) and (NIV) are essential to the theory of Forms, then it is inconsistent also. Our question would be quickly answered and the TMA would refute the theory of Forms.

However, Self-Predication and Non-Identity assumptions are required, since:

- Step (4) refers to other large things, in addition to “the Large”, showing that the Form of Large is itself large.
- Step (5) refers to another form of largeness, indicating non-identity.

Fine suggests the following, which are intentionally less explicit to make them consistent:
(SP) Any form of F is itself F.
(NI) Nothing is F in virtue of itself.

This doesn’t lead to an immediate contradiction, because it’s not claimed that a form of F is F in virtue of itself. However, Vlastos’s (V2) still causes problems for, if we formulate (2) as (V2) and assume (SP) and (NI), we have an inconsistent triad. This is because (SP) and (V2) imply that the unique form of Large must be large in virtue of itself, which (NI) denies.

Refining the One-Over-Many assumption

Strictly, step (2) is not an instance of (U), but of a more general one-over-many assumption, and hence need not be read as (V2). The literature provides a sequence of attempts to improve on (V2), which space prohibits our discussing here. All but Cohen’s [1971] fail either to generate a regress or to suggest (U).

For Cohen’s proposal, we need the concept of a maximal set of level n. The set of all sensible Fs is the maximal set of Fs of level 0. The maximal set of Level 1 consists of the members of this set, together with the unique Form at level 1 in virtue of which they are F. In general, the maximal set of level n contains all the Fs at that level, together with all those of lower levels. With this in place, we have:

(OM-TMA) For any maximal set of Fs at level n, there is exactly one Form of F at level n+1 over1 it.

Fine concludes that (SP), (NI) and (OM-TMA) are the premises of the TMA. They are mutually consistent and generate a regress. (OM-TMA) assigns a unique form to explain the F-ness of any set of Fs. It does not imply (U), but its use of “exactly one” makes it look as though it might. The point is that the TMA argues that (U) is false, so the premises need to make the thought that (U) tempting, without strictly implying it.

We might have reservations that (OM-TMA) is more in the spirit of Russell than Plato. However, while it is far from the surface of Plato’s writings, it might just be the sort of thing he had in mind and could have explicated if pressed.

Is Plato vulnerable to the TMA?

Having now got a version of the TMA with consistent premises that validly generates a regress, we have to ask ourselves what it proves. There seem to be three main alternatives:

1. The premises of the TMA are central to Plato’s theory of Forms, which he was forced to abandon.

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1 “Participated in by all and only the members of”.

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2. The TMA shows how it’s possible to misconstrue the theory of Forms so that it’s subject to the regress, but Plato himself never held this view.

3. The TMA showed Plato that he needed to tighten up what he meant by his premises, after which the theory is sound or at least not refuted.

We should reject (1) for three reasons. Firstly, there’s no evidence that Plato abandoned the theory of Forms in his later writings\(^2\), and Aristotle treated it as a live doctrine of the Academy after Plato’s death\(^3\). Secondly, as both Meinwald [1992] and Cohen point out, the TMA cannot be a reductio ad absurdum of Plato’s theory of Forms because, if it were, the premises and logic would be clear so that we could tell what conclusions to draw. Since, the argument is notoriously obscure, it fails to fit the paradigm of a reductio. Finally, (1) doesn’t seem to be the lesson Plato draws; the abandonment of the theory would destroy dialectic; rather, Socrates needs more training in philosophy\(^4\).

To determine whether Plato ought to have abandoned the theory\(^5\), or alternatively to choose between (2) and (3), we need to examine the premises and Plato’s commitment to them. According to Fine’s analysis, Plato has to accept all of (SP), (NI) and (OM-TMA) to be vulnerable to the TMA, so rejecting or seriously modifying one of these would liberate Plato. We treat them in turn.

**Self-Predication**

Meinwald argues that the second part of the *Parmenides* demonstrates an innovation on Plato’s part – a distinction between two kinds of predication:

- *Predication in relation to itself* reveals something of the structure of a thing’s nature, explaining what makes a property what it is.
- *Predication in relation to the others* concerns the subject’s display of some feature, predicating a property of a particular.

Predication in relation to self shows that the As and Bs are so related that being B is part of what it is to be A. Eg. “The Just is virtuous” because being virtuous is part of what it means to be just. “The Just is just” is the limiting case; uninformative but safe.

Meinwald thinks that “Platonism” has been taken to involve the ridiculous mistake of supposing that properties do their job by possessing the very properties they are. Beauty is taken to be the most beautiful thing, Largeness the largest, and so on. What Meinwald calls super-exemplification assimilates self-predication sentences to true ordinary predications in relation to the others. Saying “Bravery is brave” is false or nonsense, taken in relation to the others, as Bravery isn’t the sort of thing that can stand firm in fearsome circumstances. However, self-predication sentences are always true when taken

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\(^2\) See, eg. *Sophist* 254c “Let’s not talk about every form … let’s choose some of the most important ones”. Also *Philebus* 15a, where problems are raised, but the theory isn’t rejected.

\(^3\) Eg. In *Peri Ideon*, from whence (84.21-85.3) comes one of the four versions of the TMA noted by Fine.

\(^4\) *Parmenides* 135c-135d.

\(^5\) Noting, with Annas [1981], that Plato never presents a “theory” as such.
as predications in relation to self. Failing to make this distinction is what made the immature Socrates (and hence the early Plato) misinterpret his own theory.

With (SP) understood in this way, the TMA fails. It crucially depends on the claim “The Large is large” being taken in the same way as “Mont Blanc is large”. However, taken as predication in relation to self, (SP) doesn’t claim that The Large is large in this way, and so we don’t end up with a new set of large things that require a new Form.

In response, if Forms don’t display super-exemplification, we might ask what it is about them that allows them to do their job. We’ve noticed that self-predication is uninformative, so what is it about the Form of Large that explains why large things are large? If the Form is itself large, we have an informative explanation, but otherwise we have only a pseudo-explanation. While it may appear that the Form explains the property, it does so no more than the appeal to the “dormitive faculty” of opium explains its soporific properties. We need a mechanism.

Additionally, there are passages outside the Parmenides that show that Plato, at least initially, accepted (SP). For instance Phaedo 100c5 “If anything else is beautiful besides the beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no other reason at all than that it participates in that beautiful”.

Cases where (SP) is problematic will result in a reduction in the number of Forms. We see that Plato was concerned about this from Parmenides 130e.

**Non-Identity**

We must distinguish weak- from strong-NI. Weak-NI only claims that non-Forms are not F in virtue of themselves – because they are F in virtue of the Form F. Strong-NI claims that the Form F is also not F in virtue of itself. We saw at Phaedo 100c5 that Plato accepted weak-NI. However, strong-NI is essential to the TMA.

Plato must reject strong-NI on theoretical grounds. If each Form required a Form at a higher level to explain it, knowledge would be impossible, because we would have an explanatory regress, which is what makes the TMA-regress vicious. Since knowledge is possible, there must be Forms accessible to us that are F in virtue of themselves. Forms have to explain something other than themselves, so this rules out further Forms above the one Form which explains the sensibles, which is F in virtue of itself. This gives Plato (U).

Passages such as Symposium 211b, where the Form of the Beautiful is “itself by itself with itself” and which is independent of things that participate in it, and suffers no augmentation, diminution or change when they come to be or perish, gives no indication that Forms depend on other things, as of course does the uniqueness requirement (Republic 507b – “a single form … of each”).

**One-Over-Many**
Nor is Plato committed to (OM-TMA), because Forms only arise for imperfectly-F things⁶, and a group containing a Form hasn’t all its members imperfectly F, so requires no further Form over it. Not every group of F-things is F in virtue of some thing external to the group, for it may contain the paradigm Form, which is intrinsically F.

**Conclusion**

We should reject (2). Socrates is usually Plato’s mouthpiece, but in this dialogue it is Parmenides who speaks for Plato. This indicates that Plato has been challenged to modify his views so that we have Plato correcting his former self. To re-read the earlier dialogues as though Socrates were speaking only for himself, with Plato secretly holding more developed views all along, undermines the literary skill with which Plato presents his thoughts.

Hence, we should accept (3). The TMA does not refute the theory of Forms. Plato rejects both (NI) and (OM-TMA), two of the premises of the TMA, to which he is consequently not vulnerable. Alternatively, he might modify the meaning of (SP). The TMA is neither a record of honest perplexity nor a reductio of his theory, though the theory has many other problems to contend with⁷. Instead, it’s an invitation for us to clarify what we mean by self-predication, non-identity and the one-over-many principle⁸.

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⁶ See, eg., *Phaedo* 74⁴-74⁵, where equal things strive to be like, but fall short of, and are inferior to, the Equal, whereas the Equal is perfectly equal.

⁷ As *Parmenides* 130⁶-134⁷ points out. Eg. What the Forms are (paradigms, thoughts, …), how particulars partake of the Form, how Forms are known.

⁸ Word count: 2,620 including 124 for the question (10), bibliography (99) & this footnote (15).
### Bibliography

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