

Indiscernibles and Plato's Forms vs. Parmenides

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Abstract: In *Parmenides*, the young Socrates defends several candidate forms against Parmenides, who makes five objections: the objection of forms of common things, the question of the part vs. the whole, the third man argument, infinite regress, and the greatest difficulty problem. I define forms in terms of Leibniz's Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles (PII) in an attempt to overcome Parmenides' opposition. I show that the main force in Parmenides' objections consists of absurdities that emerge in relations between forms and particulars: absurdities that are avoided if the form and its instantiation in the particular are identical.

Indiscernibles and Plato's Forms

Plato's *Parmenides* provides an informative account of forms as well as a rigorous series of arguments against them. Socrates is a young man in this dialogue and has no well-articulated account of the forms, so there is an aporetic element to the dialogue concerning the answers to Parmenides' objections that persists with special regards to the third man and the greatest difficulty objections. I suggest the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles (PII) as an additional criterion for the general account of forms, which helps overcome Parmenides' objections while remaining consistent to Plato's theory of forms in the dialogue. When applied to aspects of the inchoate theory, the PII resolves Parmenides' five objections to Socrates' account by defining the way particulars instantiate forms as an identity between the form and its instantiation in the particular.

The format of the paper is as follows: I first explain how and why the PII should be applied to the theory of forms, and entertain four objections to the explanation. I then go on to explain and respond to each of Parmenides' five objections in the following order: forms of common things, the part vs. the whole, the third man, infinite regress, and the greatest difficulty problem.

The PII is Leibniz's claim that if x and y have indiscernible sets of properties¹, then x and y are identical.² The reason for applying it to the theory of forms in the *Parmenides* is because of the following account of forms that Socrates initially gives to Parmenides:

But tell me this: don't you acknowledge that there is a form, itself by itself, of likeness, and another form, opposite to

¹ The use of the word "properties" here is not meant to be an ontological claim, but as a neutral way to describe instantiations of forms in particulars.

² G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), 41-2.



this, which is what unlike is? Don't you and I and the other things we call 'many' get a share of those two entities? And don't things that get a share of likeness come to be like in that way and to the extent that they get a share, whereas things that get a share of unlikeness come to be unlike, and things that get a share of both come to be both?³

If the ability of particulars to instantiate forms in degrees is taken to imply that an aspect of the particular has qualities that are indiscernible from the quality of the form, Parmenides' criticisms of forms can be avoided. With this interpretation, the degree to which a particular thing instantiates the form is the degree to which the particular shares identity with the form. For example, if a set of three objects was partaking in the form of oddness, then what can be said of the set regarding oddness is indiscernible from the form of odd. If the set instantiates something that is discernible from oddness (in this case, evenness is the only alternative), then there is no reason to say that it instantiates that form, if, as Socrates claims, it comes to be such a way because of the form. If it were taking part in the form, there would be something about it that can be said of the form. Since a form is one trait,⁴ or "itself by itself,"⁵ if the form is said of something, the thing must have the one trait. Otherwise, the form is not present.

One may object that no particular physical set of objects can be considered a paradigm case of something like oddness, since many sets of many different numbers equally qualify, and therefore, is discernible from the form of oddness. But this can instead be interpreted as the form of oddness being instantiated amongst instantiations of a variety of other forms. If they are said to be odd at all, something about them must be consistent with the pure notion of oddness, otherwise describing them as such is just false. If a thing were to get a share of a form as Socrates claims, it would be strange if the share were missing the essential trait of the form. It seems impossible to find an example of a numerical set that is partially odd—and if one could do it, such a set would not instantiate the form of oddness.

Further, one may be reluctant to accept the explanation because it is an uncomfortable notion that a specific instantiation with regard to a particular object is identical with a form, since not every instance of oddness looks like this one. But, as previously stated, the other traits of the set, outside of this particular form, detract from the trait that is the form of oddness. Other things can be said about the set, such as it being a set of tables, whereas nothing can

³ Plato, "Parmenides," in *Complete Works*, trans. Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 129a.

⁴ I will use the neutral term 'trait' to describe the form's relation to the particular. Plato's Socrates acknowledges a similar terminological problem (Phaedo 100d): "[N]othing makes a thing beautiful but the presence of, or the sharing in, or however you may describe its relation to that beauty we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship except that all beautiful things are beautiful by beauty." The difference is that I insist that the precise nature of the relationship is identity.

⁵ Plato, 129a.

be said of the form of oddness except that it is odd. Given that the qualities in the instantiation of the form are indiscernible from the quality of the form itself, then by the PII, the form and the instantiation of it must be identical. This does not mean that the entire particular is identical with the form; it only means that if an object instantiates a form, then there is a trait within the total set of the object's traits that is identical with the form.

Here, it may be argued that Plato would never accept this way of defining forms in consideration of Gregory Vlastos' nonidentity assumption, by which a particular object, *x*, cannot be identical to the *F*-ness by which it instantiates the form *F*.⁶ It may be objected further that, in 130b, Socrates agrees with Parmenides' statement that forms are distinguished as separate from the traits that instantiate them, specifically stating that "likeness itself is something, separate from the likeness we have."⁷ One may also say that he blatantly rejects the PII as applied to forms: "On the other hand, if it were the same as another, it would be that thing, and not itself. So in this way, too, it would not be just what it is—one—but would be different from one. Therefore, it won't be the same as another or different from itself."⁸

In response to Vlastos's objection and to the objection concerning the first passage, it can still be true that likeness itself is separate from something partaking of it if the form is only identical with its instantiation in the object. The form is distinguished from the particular with regard to the PII because they do not have identical sets of properties.⁹ Consider again the set of three tables. The tables are brown, hard, and odd. The odd itself is only odd. Therefore, although the odd is identical with the trait of oddness that the tables have, it is not identical with the set of tables. The only identity is between the trait that is the form in the object, and the form itself. This is not sufficient for making the object and the form identical.

As for the objection concerning the second passage, when Parmenides states that the form of the one is not the same as another thing, Parmenides can be interpreted as speaking of the other thing in terms of other forms—not of other objects. If there were two identical forms of the one, there must be something to distinguish them, so one of them would not be identical with the one. Thus, he reaches the conclusion that there is only one form of each trait for which there is a form. Further, this passage is fully consistent with the PII in regard to forms, because if anything is exactly the same as something else, it follows that there is an identity relation. Plato rejects that two identical yet numerically distinct things can exist, so if there is identity, there must be

⁶ Gregory Vlastos, "The Third Man Argument in the Parmenides," *Philosophical Review* 63 (1954): 325.

⁷ Plato, 131a-e.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ I do not claim here that forms have sets of properties; instead the form itself is a property. So if something has a property other than the instantiation of the specific form, the conditions for identity laid out by the PII are not met.



numerical sameness, as is the case with the form and its particulars. This hinges on the concept of multilocation that is implicit with the PII.¹⁰

Forms of Common Things

The first of Parmenides' objections is the question of whether there are forms of common things, e.g., "hair, mud, and dirt," which puts Socrates in a quandary, having no way of deciding what sorts of things exist as forms. But this difficulty no longer stands with the PII explanation, unless the common objects themselves were forms. The possibility for the form to be instantiated in a particular is necessary, otherwise there would be no reason for postulating it as a form. So under this explanation, the form must be able to exist multilocally and retain its identity, because it is assumed that many objects are partaking of it, and that each object is in a different location. The reason that things like mud and hair are unable to fit this definition is that the identity amongst things partaking of muddiness, and muddiness itself, exists only linguistically (or perhaps as an Aristotelian form). It is true that two samples of mud both have traits of muddiness (e.g., wetness, graininess), but there is nothing about the notion of muddiness that shares identity with the particulars. For example, if there were two molecularly indiscernible samples of mud, it would be incredibly anomalous, and an unnecessary qualification for both to be considered mud. The term muddiness would accurately describe both samples, but the recognition that connects the two would be based on traits that are not necessarily indiscernible. Further, the indiscernibility of mud samples and muddiness, if it were possible, would depend on a molecular structure, which poses a problem: namely, the only thing that would be able to instantiate such a form would be something with exactly the same molecular structure. This would limit the sharing in the form to things with identical structures, and they would no longer be differentiable from the form itself, due to the PII. Furthermore, as Samuel Rickless points out, mud is limited to a spatiotemporal definition, meaning that it can only be explained in physical terms.¹¹ Rickless has different reasons for rejecting such a form on these grounds, but another consequence of this theory is that a spatiotemporal object would have to be multilocated to fit the PII explanation, and this would certainly be a problem.¹² With the PII explanation in addition to Rickless' notion, it is clear that a form must have the ability to exist multilocally, and that Parmenides' common objects do not have this trait.

¹⁰ The term multilocation does not assume spatiotemporal traits here. A wall, instantiating the form of blueness, for example, gives us two locations of the form of blueness: the form of blueness within the wall, and the form of blueness itself. The wall gives us an instance of the form pertaining to a spatiotemporal object, and the object's spatiotemporal traits are not a result of the form. Given that the form cannot be spatiotemporal, this would not be possible. Cf. Dean W. Zimmerman, "Distinct Indiscernibles and the Bundle Theory," *Mind* 106, no. 422, (1997) 305-9.

¹¹ Samuel Rickless, *Plato's Forms in Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹² Max Black, "The Identity of Indiscernibles," *Mind* 61, no. 242 (1952): 153-64.

Part vs. Whole

Parmenides' next objection is the difficulty of the part versus the whole.¹³ The force of this objection comes from the absurdity of a thing instantiating a part of the form, and thus having traits from the form that are opposite of the form itself; in other words, a part of the large that is smaller than the large itself. Socrates is also hesitant to admit that an entire form is instantiated in a particular, but it is clear how the PII explanation of forms and particulars counters this objection, since it becomes essential that each particular that instantiates the form instantiates the entire form. If the form itself is identical with its instantiation, then the instantiation cannot be a part of the form, for then the two would not be identical. Take, for example, whiteness. When two pieces of paper are white, assuming the shades are indiscernible, the whiteness of each paper is identical to the form of white. It is not said that the whiteness of one paper is identical with one part of whiteness and the other paper identical with another part. Instead, each paper is simply said to be white; its whiteness is the form of whiteness being instantiated in the particular object, i.e., the pieces of paper. The form and its instantiation are indiscernible, thus identical. If they are identical, it is impossible that one be a part and the other a whole, so the instantiation is necessarily one with the form itself.

The Third Man

The third man problem is a rather challenging problem for Socrates on which at least two other problems rest. The third man problem is the regress that comes about when a form, having all the properties of which it is a form, is compared to its occurrence in a particular, thus generating a comparison which relies on another form, which is again compared to the first form by another, and so on ad infinitum.¹⁴ Rickless outlines the problem nicely: if there is a set of large things, {a, b, c}, each taking part in the form of the large, and the large itself is large (thus taking part of itself), the set, P1, will look like this: {a, b, c, L1}, for which L1 is the form. But if each thing in the set is in the set because of instantiating the form of large, then there must be another form, L2, by which the members of the set are able to instantiate the form of large. This is because, according to Rickless, a form cannot instantiate itself.¹⁵ If this is true, it follows that the L2 is necessary for L1 to be large. It is apparent, then, how the number of forms of the same thing go on to infinity, for L3, L4, L5, and so on, can be added to the set creating a demand for another form infinitely many times.¹⁶

So, applying the PII to the forms and their instantiations rejects Vlastos' self-predication assumption and Rickless' non-self-partaking auxiliary. If a form has the trait of which it is a form, it is impossible with the PII for it

¹³ Plato, 131a-e.

¹⁴ Ibid., 132a-133e.

¹⁵ Rickless, 71.

¹⁶ Ibid., 67-8.



not to instantiate itself; for a thing to be able to instantiate the form, the form must not only be, but also have a trait with which a trait of a particular can be identical. If so, it becomes almost meaningless to compare the form to the particular in the first place, since the only comparison between the two is the identity between them. Thus, if a building is large by instantiating the form of largeness, and the form of largeness is large in virtue of itself, it seems that the form itself must be more large than the building, since it would be absurd for something to be more like the form than the form to be like itself. But with the PII, it cannot be supposed that the form of large is larger than the largeness of the building, since the building, insofar as it is large, is identical with the form, and the form cannot be larger than itself.

Infinite Regress

There is a similar answer to the objection of the infinite regress problem.¹⁷ This is the problem that there can be nothing like a form, nor can there be a form like anything else, since things have likeness due to instantiating the same form, and so if a form and a thing have likeness, another form must supply it. This objection is answered in the same way as the third man argument. The similarity between two particulars, insofar as it is indiscernible, is identical, and if this similarity is a form, there is no need for another form to exist in order to contain the identity.

The Greatest Difficulty

Parmenides' final objection is the greatest difficulty objection,¹⁸ or the Access Problem¹⁹—namely, the question of how humans are able to know forms when our knowledge is restricted to “things that belong to us” while a form, by being “itself by itself,”²⁰ necessarily does not belong to us, and that proving the existence of forms is nearly impossible for anyone who is not “widely experienced and not ungifted.”²¹ Thus, if forms are non-spatiotemporal, and everything of which we have knowledge is known through the senses (thus belonging to us), then a theory of forms seems to be speculative, without empirical evidence in regards to mathematical platonism. Benacerraf points out that there must be access to non-spatiotemporal entities, given that we have knowledge of mathematics, which is non-spatiotemporal.²² To preserve the plausibility of forms, there must be some relation between these non-spatiotemporal objects and our spatiotemporal world that we can recognize. Thus, forms must be understood similarly to the way mathematics

¹⁷ Plato, 132e-133a.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133b-135c.

¹⁹ This term is introduced in Paul Benacerraf, “Mathematical Truth,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973), 666-8: the idea that humans must have access to some mathematical truths (though not necessarily all), since we are able to posit true ideas about them.

²⁰ Plato, 133c-d.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 133b.

²² Benacerraf, 666-8.

is understood if, like mathematics, they are to have any reality that is not contingent on human thought.

The PII relates forms to spatiotemporal objects by means of identity. The form of a non-spatiotemporal trait is identical to the same non-spatiotemporal trait of the spatiotemporal particular that instantiates it. Parmenides notes that when we encounter a form, the encounter is not with the form alone, but instead with its instantiation in some particular thing.²³ If there is an identity in such a circumstance, then Parmenides must admit that we know the form this way. An object instantiating some form has a trait that is indiscernible from the form, and if we accept the PII and posit an identity, then by claiming that we can know the forms as they pertain to particulars, we can know the forms. With a mathematical theorem for example, it would be incorrect to say that the knowledge necessary for writing and understanding a theorem is only partial, and limited by our ability to sense only spatiotemporal objects. Instead, if the theorem is consistent with mathematics in general, the working of the theorem and the mathematical truth are indiscernible.

For the PII explanation of the relation between forms and particulars to be correct, it must be possible for spatiotemporal objects to have non-spatiotemporal traits. If they do not, then it is impossible for particulars to instantiate forms. Under such a view, the theory of forms is both ontologically and epistemologically useless; it makes no difference whether or not we can know forms if it is impossible that they are instantiated in the world of sensibles.

The PII may seem to make forms of things that are almost unanimously rejected from formhood, e.g., colors, largeness, justice, and so on. But this does not imply that all sets of indiscernible things are candidates for formhood. This series of arguments is not sufficient for applying the PII to all Plato's mentions of forms, limited as it is to the Parmenides. It fails to take into account other factors that both include and rule out other candidate forms. So, although it can be contested whether the PII provides a plausible explanation of forms, its application with regard to Parmenides' objections is a good predictor of how consistent it might be with candidate forms from other dialogues.²⁴ ❖

²³ Plato, 134a.

²⁴ I am grateful to Debra Nails and Erik Jensen for helpful comments, and to Dustin Brown for a thorough proofreading.



