

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DIVISIBILITY OF FORMS IN PLATO'S *PARMENIDES*

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IN THIS PAPER I wish to suggest a new interpretation of *Parm.* 131c12–e2, which is perhaps one of the most puzzling passages in the first part of the dialogue. The passage runs as follows:¹

- Well, now,² if you divide absolute greatness, and each of the many great things is great by a part of greatness smaller than absolute greatness, is not that unreasonable? (131c 12–d2)
- Certainly.
- Or again, will anything by taking away a particular small part of equality possess something by means of which, when it is less than absolute equality, its possessor will be equal to anything else? (131d4–5)
- That is impossible.
- Or let one of us have a part of the small; the small will be greater than this, since this is a part of it, and therefore the absolute small will be greater; but that to which the part of the small is added will be smaller, not greater, than before. (131d7–e1)
- That is impossible.

The above passage occurs in the following context. Earlier on, at 131a4–7, Socrates agrees that there are only two ways in which sensibles may “partake” of the Forms or, what is regarded as the same thing, two ways in which a Form may be “present in” its instances: either the whole or else a part of the Form may be “present in.” Parmenides then argues that these two ways of effecting “participation” are untenable, since they have consequences which conflict with the two aspects of the unity of the Forms, their uniqueness and incompositeness. If the whole form is “present” at once “in” many and distinct sensibles, then the Form is “separate from itself” or numerically many. That is, there must be as

¹The translation below is by H. N. Fowler in the Loeb edition of the dialogue ([Cambridge, Mass. 1963] 215–217). I have changed his rendering of *ὅρα γάρ* at 131c12, for which see n. 2 below.

²The words *ὅρα γάρ* (131c12) are frequently given the sense of “No, for if you . . .” (e.g., G. Burges, *Plato* 3 [London 1850] 000; Fowler, [above, n. 1] 215; F. M. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides* [London 1939] 85; G. Matthews, *Plato's Epistemology* [London 1972] 128). Such a rendering suggests that the examples which follow are somehow meant to illustrate the point already made at 131c9–10. But this does not seem right. The point of 131c9–10 is self-evident and Socrates shows no hesitation in accepting it. Furthermore, *γάρ* need not be “explanatory” but rather “progressive” (see J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*² [Oxford 1954] 81). Hence its sense, along with *ὅρα*, is “Well, look now” etc. It is so understood by B. Jowett (*The Dialogues of Plato*² 4 [Oxford 1875] 165) and J. Warrington ([London 1961] 7). I think, therefore, that the three examples go well beyond the point made at 131c9–10.

many Forms, of the same type, as there are homonymous sensibles (131b1–2). Hence the Form is not unique. On the other hand, the second alternative, that a part of the Form is “present in” each sensible, implies that the Forms are, in themselves, “divisible” (131c5) and, when “present in” their instances, actually “divided” (cf. 131c6–10). Hence the Forms are not incomposite. After remarking to Socrates that one cannot really claim that a Form is both incomposite (one³) and actually divided (131c9–10), Parmenides proceeds to the passage with which I am presently concerned.

Parmenides presents three examples, all of which presumably illustrate the same issue. That is, the conclusion in each one of the examples is evidently an instance of a common problem, which arises when one believes that the Forms are divisible or, more generally, when one believes that “participation” is nothing but the *presence in* sensibles of a part of a Form. It appears, therefore, that we cannot discover the point at issue unless we can discern what, if anything, is common to all three examples. This is in fact the procedure followed by most commentators.

According to Cornford, Parmenides’ examples “bring out the absurdity of supposing that ‘Largeness itself’ or ‘the Large itself’ is a *large* thing, which could be divided into parts.”⁴ I am not concerned with the conclusion Cornford draws from the examples, but rather with what he thinks enters into all three of them. This is what Vlastos has called the “Self-Predication Assumption,” i.e., that the Form possesses itself the characteristic it denotes.⁵ H. Teloh, however, points out that self-predication is “neither the tacit nor explicit point of the three conclusions.” For, while the first example (131c12–d2) implies that Largeness is “larger” (than any of its parts), the second example (131d4–5) implies that Equality is not “equal” (to any of its parts), and the third (131d7–e1) states clearly that Smallness is “larger” (than any of its parts). The last two examples imply or state the contrary of self-predication. Teloh concludes, rightly I believe, that self-predication cannot be what is common—and what Parmenides thinks crucial—to all three examples.⁶

In the place of self-predication, Teloh finds what he calls the “Causal Principle,” namely “a cause must have the quality which it produces in something else.” Parmenides’ point is that all three examples violate the “Causal Principle,” and in the following way: “In the first, large phenomena are made large *by* a part of Largeness which [part] is small; in the

³It is absolutely clear that *ἐν* bears two distinct senses in this whole argument: (a) “unique,” “one of its kind” and (b) “incomposite,” “simple.”

⁴Cornford (above, n. 2). 87.

⁵See G. Vlastos, “The Third Man Argument in the ‘Parmenides,’ ” in R. E. Allen (ed.), *Studies in Plato’s Metaphysics* (London 1965) 256; also R. H. Weingartner, *The Unity of the Platonic Dialogues* (Indianapolis 1973) 152.

⁶H. Teloh, “Self-Predication or Anaxagorean Causation in Plato,” *Apeiron* 9 (1975) 15.

second, equal things are made equal *by* a part of Equality which is unequal; and in the last, small things are made small *by* Smallness which is large." The upshot is that "particulars do not participate in the parts of a Form" since "the parts of a Form do not stand in the proper sort of causal relation—one which does not violate the [causal principle]—to the particulars."

This is an interesting theory, but I doubt that Teloh has found in his causal principle the common element of all three examples, since Parmenides' third example does *not* violate the principle in the required sense. In this example, particulars will be "smaller," since they have in them a part of Smallness which is "smaller" (than Smallness itself). The parts of the Form satisfy in this case the requirements of his causal principle.⁷ Teloh might rejoin that it is the Form Smallness, and not its parts, which violates the principle in this case. But, if this is so, the third example cannot then be part of the reductive argument against the presence in things of part(s) of a Form: such an argument presumably relies on showing that it is the *parts* of the Form, not the Form itself, which violate the causal principle. It appears that Teloh's theory breaks down in the third example.

Now it is obvious that all three examples assume that a Form is the kind of thing which can be significantly said to have (or not to have) such quantitative properties as "largeness," "smallness" and so on. It would thus seem to be a logical assumption of all three examples that the Forms are "particular things" (thus the usual charge by commentators that Parmenides reifies the Forms). In fact, self-predication or the causal principle may be regarded simply as symptoms of such a reification. So, although it is doubtful whether either self-predication or the causal principle is at issue here, it may well be that the issue is precisely the general assumption that Forms are (or behave like) "particulars."⁸

It is true that all three examples proceed on the assumption that Forms are "particulars." It does not follow, however, that it is precisely this assumption which is attracting Plato's attention at this juncture.

⁷In an attempt to forestall this objection Teloh (22 n. 10) argues that "although the parts of Smallness are small (being smaller than Smallness), each *larger* part of Smallness would, presumably, make a particular *smaller* than a smaller part would, and herein lies the absurdity." There are two objections to his argument. (i) On the causal principle, the more we have of a quantitative "cause," the greater the effect. Thus, the more Heat, the hotter the object, the more Largeness, the larger the object, and, presumably, the more Smallness, the smaller the object. I cannot therefore see the absurdity here. Indeed, if Teloh's causal principle, as he understands it in the third example, were applied to the first example, the first example would no longer violate it. (ii) The text of the third example does not seem to allow Teloh's reading of it. The puzzle at 131d9-e1 is over how a particular thing, to which a part of Smallness is added, becomes "smaller" (than it was before), when Smallness itself is said to be "greater."

⁸Such a view might be advanced, for example, by G. Ryle. See his "Plato's 'Parmenides,'" in Allen (above, n. 5) 97 ff.

Plato is here ostensibly concerned with the divisibility, not the reification, of Forms. Of course, the reification is in a sense the track on which proceed not just the three examples but the entire argument from 131a to 131e. Although it is Plato's ultimate purpose to explode this track, he can do so only by showing up the particular difficulties it leads to. Our present task is therefore to find out what particular difficulties regarding the divisibility of Forms are rehearsed in the three examples.

Despite the fact that the language of the exchange is cast in the ontological mode, I would suggest that Plato is concerned not so much with the "ontological" as with the "epistemological" or "explanatory" divisibility of Forms. There are two reasons for thinking that the divisibility is not really ontological. First, the point has already been made at 131c9–10 that the (ontological) divisibility of Forms is in conflict with their "incompositeness" (oneness). This point is as fatal to the hypothesis of "presence in" and as self-evident as the point about the "multiplication" of Forms (cf. 131b1–2); like the latter point, it needs only be stated for its force to become obvious and hence there is no need for Plato to repeat it. Second, if the language of the exchange is taken at its face value (i.e., in the ontological mode), then the three examples can be shown to be fallacious or irrelevant. I shall return to this point shortly.

The following are considerations which incline me to believe that the divisibility is one of "function" and not of "being." Unlike the first part of the exchange (i.e., 131a4–c11), where the points made concern exclusively the Forms, the three examples describe what happens to sensible particulars when someone divides the Forms. Now, whether or not the Forms are divisible (or divided) is irrelevant to what actually happens to sensible particulars, whereas the divisibility or division of Forms is absolutely crucial to the account or explanation one might give of sensibles. I think there is a strong hint of this concern with function in the first example. The consequence of the division of Largeness is here described as *ἄλογον* (131d2). It seems to me that *ἄλογον* cannot describe the improper "being," as it were, of large particulars. Ontological facts are facts and cannot be "reasonable" or "unreasonable." What *ἄλογον* must be describing is the circumstances one gets into when one attempts to *account* for the "largeness" of sensibles by using a "divided" Form as a principle of explanation. Finally, one should generally be wary of separating too sharply Plato's epistemology from his ontology. It should thus be no surprise to find epistemological issues lurking behind the ontological language.⁹

⁹As Vlastos has pointed out ([above, n. 5] 262; and *Philosophical Review* 64 [1955] 442–443), the "Third Man" Argument, which follows the one under discussion, provides us with materials for both an ontological and an epistemological version.

I return now to the point that, if it is assumed that Plato intended the language to be taken literally, the three examples can then be shown to be deliberately not to the point or downright fallacious. If this is so it cannot then be maintained, as is generally done, that the present exchange is meant as a serious *reductio ad absurdum* of the divisibility of the Forms. Instead, one might have to allow a foothold to the (now discredited) view that the dialogue is a parody¹⁰ or to admit Bluck's suggestion that this section is "purely frivolous."¹¹ It seems to me, however, that we should strive to find, if we can, the same seriousness of purpose in the three examples here as is exhibited in the rest of this exchange.

If we take the language literally, then the argument of the first example (131c12-d2) is, as far as it goes here, irrelevant. For one might rejoin that as long as Largeness is divided into unequal parts (and Parmenides says nothing on the relative size of the parts), there will presumably always be some things which are large or larger than other things. Their being large or larger than other things will be accounted for by their possession of relatively larger bits of Largeness than other things.¹² It is quite beside the point that individual parts of the Form are smaller than the Form itself. That a given part is smaller than the whole (of which it is a part) is a logical truth Parmenides himself recognizes and uses in the third example (131d8).¹³ What is crucial to the argument, one might insist, is not the size of the parts in comparison to the Form, but rather the size of the parts in comparison to one another. There is another, *ad hominem* objection to the first example, but it cannot be properly developed until we examine the third example. In any case, the same kind of objection raised against the first example can be made against the argument of the second example (131d4-5). Provided that sensible

¹⁰For the parody-view and objections to it, see R. Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*² (Oxford 1953) 230-237.

¹¹R. S. Bluck, "The *Parmenides* and the 'Third Man,'" *CR* n.s. 6 (1956) 31.

¹²This rejoinder proceeds on the assumption, made tacitly in Parmenides' example, that "largeness" is a property. A similar rejoinder could be made even if "largeness" were assumed to be a relation and regardless of the relative sizes of its parts. That is, one might argue that sensible x is large or larger than y so long as x possessed some part of largeness while y did not possess any part of it.

¹³My point here is that the first example need not give rise to a paradox, so long as the divisibility of the Form is conceived ontologically. The fact that Parmenides recognizes and uses in the third example the logical truth that the part is less than the whole, and given that he is being consistent, would indicate that what he finds puzzling and nonsensical in the first example is *not* that parts of Largeness are less than Largeness itself. Hence, my suggestion will be that the puzzle Parmenides tries to express operates at the "explanatory" level, i.e., how can one account for the "largeness" of sensibles by using, as a principle of explanation, only part of the concept of largeness (Form of Largeness)?

particulars possess equal parts of Equality itself, they will be equal to one another. Again, it is beside the point that the parts are less than Equality itself.

Similarly, if we take its language literally, the third example is open to the same objection. Indeed, one can argue that Parmenides must be aware of this objection since he now shifts his ground to avoid it. The third example is less straightforward than the first two, and requires discussion in some detail.

In this example, Plato has Parmenides treat "greater than" first as a relation, then as a property and then again as a relation. At 131d8 the word *μείζον* describes the relation between Smallness (*τὸ σμικρόν*) and that part of it which is present in a given particular. From this Parmenides concludes (*καὶ οὕτω* 131d8) that Smallness is "greater" *simpliciter* (*τὸ σμικρόν μείζον ἔσται*, d9). Here *μείζον* is treated not as a relation but as a property. Having done so, Parmenides proceeds to offer what he takes to be the damaging point (climax) in the sense that it presents us with a proposition contrary to what we should expect. The particular thing,¹⁴ he says, *σμικρότερον ἔσται ἀλλ' οὐ μείζον ἢ πρὶν* (131e1).¹⁵

It will be noticed that *μείζον* is once again treated as a relation but it is now supposed to describe the relation obtaining (or, rather, not obtaining) between a particular at one time and the *same* particular at a different time. *Μείζον* has its proper status as a relation reinstated, but it is now supposed to obtain between entirely different relata. The force of the argument derives from the contrast between *σμικρότερον* and *μείζον* at 131e1, but *μείζον* has attained the required force by the shift from *μείζον*, as obtaining between the Form and its part at 131d8, to *μείζον* as obtaining between a particular and itself at different times in 131e1. By saying "greater" *simpliciter*, as opposed to "greater than" in the intervening line (131d9), Parmenides is able to endow the bare *μείζον* with new relata at 131e1. The omission of relata at 131d9 is strategic and sophistic, as it facilitates and covers up the illegitimacy of the jump from *μείζον* in d8 to that of e1. The fallacies committed here (*secundum quid*) are similar to those committed, on Plato's instructions, by the sophists

¹⁴Clearly both *ᾧ* (131d9) and *τοῦτο* (131e1) refer to a sensible and not to the Form.

¹⁵It has been suggested to me that parallelism in the three examples would point to 131d8–9, and not to 131e1, as the climax of the reasoning, i.e., the damaging point involves the relation between the Form and its parts. One would then read 131e1 as adding another puzzle about the relation between the Form and the sensibles sharing in the parts of the Form. This view does not seem plausible. For one thing, there is no parallel in the first two examples to the point made at 131d8–9. In fact, this was Teloh's reason for rejecting Vlastos's interpretation. For another, 131d8–9 reads just like an intermediate step. If one were to stop here, the argument would be clearly incomplete. At the same time, 131d9–e1, which deals with sensibles, completes the circle which started at 131d1 with "one of us" (a sensible particular) having "a part of Smallness."

Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in the *Euthydemus*.¹⁶ It would follow from this that Plato is in all probability aware of the fallaciousness of the argument.

Fortunately, I think there is a feature in Parmenides' procedure which allows us to go beyond mere probability on this point. Whereas in the first and second examples he compares the part to the Form and concludes that the part is smaller or less than the Form, in the third example Parmenides compares the Form to the part and concludes that the Form is larger than the part. There is a good reason for the change. Without it, Parmenides would have been forced to conclude that the part is *smaller than* the Form Smallness, and this would not have given him the required contrast between "smaller" and "larger" at 131e1. Instead, it would have given him the exact opposite of what he requires for his purposes. Changing the direction of comparison allows Parmenides to make all three examples conform to the same pattern.

What can one infer from all this? Perhaps Parmenides is determined to generate contradictions at any cost. By the same token, however, it can be supposed that Plato is fully aware that his own arguments are plastic, and can be manipulated to yield conclusions which either agree or disagree with those drawn by Parmenides. He must realize, for instance, that by simply reversing the direction of comparison, one may reconstruct the first example along the lines adopted in the third so that it yields a conclusion acceptable to Parmenides.¹⁷ That is, the first example can be made impotent on its own grounds.

Now, it seems to me that the difficulties I have been attempting to raise against the three examples need not arise. We inherit them, I believe, along with the tendency to take the language of the exchange literally. On the other hand, these difficulties disappear once we divorce ourselves from this tendency. That is, provided one does not tie oneself too closely to the language of the three examples, one may offer an interpretation which makes sense of the present exchange while avoiding the problems of interpretations which turn on either self-predication or the causal principle.

The arguments of the three examples are concerned with the fate of the epistemological function of the Forms, if they are said to be divisible or divided. If "participation" is assumed to be effected by a part of the Form's being present in particular sensibles, then, *ex hypothesi*, the explanatory function of the Form is delegated to its part(s). In that case,

¹⁶See R. K. Sprague, *Plato's Use of Fallacy* (London 1963) 3-6, 24-25, 26.

¹⁷We might reconstruct it as follows: "Let a sensible have a part (p) of Largeness (L). L will be larger than p, since p is only a part of L. Thus, L will be larger, and the things to which p is added will itself be larger than it was before." One may reconstruct the third example after the first, again with a conclusion acceptable to Parmenides.

however, the explanation cannot explain anything.¹⁸ One cannot explain why, say, particular *x* is *F* by giving only "part" of the explanation. One requires the entire explanation and not fragments of it. Nor can anything be defined in this manner, since the definition will be hopelessly broad.

Apart from inherent probability, this interpretation has other features to recommend it. First, it fits in well with what we should expect from a serious and thorough argument. Parmenides wishes to show that the divisibility of Forms raises a two-fold problem: it is in conflict with their ontological status as indivisible objects and it destroys their epistemological function. Secondly, it allows one to find in the three examples the same seriousness of purpose that is evident in the rest of the section.

This interpretation is simply the result of reading the examples in the "explanatory" mode, as it were, though they are given in the "material" mode of speech. If one thinks in terms of "functions" or "accounts," instead of "things," the argument of the examples becomes, as far as it goes here, cogent. On the "explanatory" mode, our earlier rejoinders to the first and second examples¹⁹ miss the mark. For what we would be in effect arguing now is that there is no problem so long as we give, in the case of the first example, *more comprehensive* or, in the case of the second example, *identical* accounts of things. But such replies are of no use. The more comprehensive or identical accounts are still *partial* accounts and, to that extent, they are unsatisfactory. Indeed, the third example may be interpreted as suggesting that a partial explanation may well turn out to be in direct conflict with the complete explanation.

As is obvious the third example is much more difficult to fit into the "explanatory" mode, largely because of the change in the direction of comparison. It would be a strong argument in its favour if my interpretation could account for the manipulation, but I cannot see how it might do so. Plato is bent on emphasizing the contrast between "part" and "whole" and, in order to do so, he must manipulate the third example no matter whether he is thinking of "things" or of "accounts."²⁰

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¹⁸J. Burnet (*Greek Philosophy* [London 1914] 258) suggests in passing that if only a part of the Form is present, then "the forms will not serve to explain anything." My interpretation is largely an attempt to develop Burnet's hint.

¹⁹See pages 49–50 above.

²⁰I am grateful to an anonymous reader who made a number of valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.