Parmenides' Puzzle
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When asked to give an example of Ancient Greek philosophy, most beneficiaries of a liberal education are bound to mention Plato's concept of "forms." If pressed, they will likely recall the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*, one of the more famous metaphors in Ancient Greek philosophy, if not all Western philosophy. In this paper, I will give a short overview of the theory of forms, and then take a more critical analysis that will surface a number of deep questions which after more than two millennia remain unanswered.

In Book VII of his *Republic*, Plato serves up his famous cave allegory. What we see as the world, Socrates argues, are simply shadows on the wall of a cave which we all sit facing. Were we to turn around and gaze up at the entrance of the cave, we would see the "real" world, a purity of essence which the shadows of the cave wall at best emulate. To translate metaphor into example: an individual horse is a particular instance of the ideal form of "horseness." Likewise, a table is an instance of the ideal form of "tableness" and so on with all other things we might encounter, such as chairs and windows. This short summary might suffice for an introductory classroom, but on examination it falls apart quickly.

Let us begin with a few clarifying questions. First, how do we *know* that the horse we see embodies "horseness?" Second, assuming this form of "horseness" exists, where is it? One might say that we know this animal is called a "horse," a name which signifies a definition of horseness. But if that's the case, shouldn't an infant who does not yet have language be unable to distinguish between a horse and a cat or dog? Yet they can, so there is clearly something which precedes language. Are forms a means by which we can recognize something without words or language to describe it?

Next, if we can discern that this animal is a horse, what is it we are discerning? Does the horse itself have some sort of essential form of "horseness," or do we in our minds have a filtering perception which performs a sort of matching? The form cannot be present in the horse itself, because otherwise we would not be able to look at a rough sketch from a child and recognize it to be a horse. So perhaps it is something inherent in our minds. But then we must ask, how is it that everyone is able to see the form of horseness? Do we observe the forms through our senses, or is there some kind of higher filtering layer?

To these latter questions, Plato provides something of an answer in his *Meno* and *Phaedo*, and hints at it in other dialogues like the *Phaedrus*. In the *Meno*, he uses a geometry lesson with a slave to argue that when we learn something, we are actually remembering it. But how can this be, if this concept is new to us? It is because of the nature of the soul. Socrates claims that when we die, our physical body separates from our soul, and, while the body dissolves to ash, the soul returns to some spiritual realm where it waits to be reborn into a new body. Therefore, the act of learning is simply our soul reaching into some higher logos to "retrieve" a memory from a past life. This would support his reasoning in the *Phaedo* where Socrates has no fear of bodily death, and it resonates with a lengthy exposition in his second speech of the *Phaedrus*, where he recounts a bizarre palinode that includes the number of lives a soul must pass through before reaching some greater state. At points his ideas sound more Eastern than Western.

Taking in these details, we can arrive at a potential beginning to a more solid theory. Recalling from *Timeus* that Plato distinguishes between the static world of being and the changing world of becoming, we could argue that the soul itself serves as a kind of link between the two worlds, a sort of gateway which allows us to look at a horse, and have it "remind" us of the perfect form of "horseness" which exists in the static world. Further, it resolves the question of why everyone can comprehend these forms, without needing language or lessons: if everyone has a soul, which is a

connection to the perfect world of spirit, then lessons and language are only used to fine-tune our perceptions of the forms within objects in the world, a bit like tuning an instrument or adjusting the lens of a camera or a telescope. It also answers the question of needing to learn itself. If the soul is a sort of gateway to this spirit world, it must go through the body, which is imperfect. Over time, the soul is able to "remember" things, like an astronomer tracking the stars.

As far-fetched as this theory sounds, it does resolve some of the questions we initially posed. However, it does not satisfy them all, and in his later dialogues, especially the *Parmenides*, Plato takes a wrecking ball to the theory and leaves the reader wondering if the forms was an early idea which an older Plato came to reject. Rather than continue his practice of platforming Socrates as the new Achilles, in his *Parmenides* Plato presents an aged Parmenides scolding a very youthful 18 year old Socrates for the faults in his nascent theory. For example, he asks:

> "So does each thing that gets a share get as its share the form as a whole or a part of it? Or could there be some other means of getting a share apart from these two?[1]"

Let's step back, give some context, and break down the argument to show how powerful it is. Parmenides is grilling Socrates on how exactly the forms work. How is it that the horse we see which contains horseness, *has* horseness? Is this form of horseness something that can be quantified? The answer must be yes, because we'd say that a living horse has horseness, while a drawing of a horse at best resembles a horse. But if this is true, that means the drawing only has part of the form, not the full form. However, if we accept that, then a slew of contradictions follow.

For sake of argument, let's assume we have two drawings of horses, one by a child and one by a professional artist. The artist's rendering will probably more closely resemble the actual living horse, and therefore contain more horseness than the child's. If we consider relations such as "more" and "less" to be forms themselves, then the child's drawing, having less horseness, would contain more "lessness" than the professional's. But then we would have a larger quantity of "lessness," containing "moreness," at which point the logic becomes self-contradictory.

We could then push back and say that concepts like "more" and "less" are not forms, which solves the first dilemma and leads to a second: what gets a form? Obviously things like chairs and tables have the forms of tableness and chairness, but someone who is brave would also have the non-material form of braveness. By setting the bounds of what gets a form and what does not, are we actually trying to understand how this works, or are we simply redefining forms in such a way to fit Plato's theory, rather than reality?

And Parmenides is just getting started. There is an additional question of what it means to *partake* in a form. Take a teacher, who would embody the form of "teachingness." It is clear that at some point in time we have an individual who is not a teacher, and then at another point in time, they have transformed into being a teacher. How did this happen? Is the simple act of teaching someone sufficient to partake in this form, or must they be employed as a teacher, or further, must they be in the actual act of teaching a class or seminar to partake in "teachingness?" If the same person writes a book on a topic, when someone reads the book and learns, is the person who wrote it still partaking in teachingness? In other words, while we would agree that the concept of teaching (or teachingness) exists, it is much harder, if not impossible to pinpoint when an individual who does not originally partake in "teachingness" *becomes* a teacher, and likewise, when their role as a teacher ceases to exist, when they stop partaking in the form.

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[1] Plato's Parmenides, 131a, tr. by Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan.

And the challenges keep coming. Parmenides' lines of attack, ironically skewering Socrates in the way Socrates himself targets opponents in other dialogues, seem fatal, but they are not conclusive: if there are no such things as forms, then how is it that we see and recognise patterns? How do we know that a horse or a chair is in fact a horse or a chair, if not through forms? After more than two millennia, we still do not have a satisfying answer to this question.

But wait: if the theory of forms is the foundation of Plato's philosophy, then why does he attack it so profusely? In modern practice, we are used to one philosopher proposing an idea or set of ideas, and another opposing them. This is so common that all we need to do is utter someone's name– Wittgenstein, Hegel, Marx– and a whole series of ideas will follow, and most seeming contradictions between a philosopher's early and later work can be explained by experience or maturity. But Plato poses a problem for us, because it is unusual for a single individual to put so much effort into a theory and then ruthlessly attack it. We tend to regard the *Republic* as Plato's masterpiece, and the forms as a crown jewel. This is not a straw man argument he has constructed only to destroy it later with something better, but a deep and profound insight about how the world might work.

There are a few possible explanations for this. First, we know that Plato is the author of, but never the speaker in any of the dialogues. The earlier period dialogues feature Socrates heavily, culminating in the *Republic*, and then he slowly fades away until the *Laws*, where he is not present at all. It could be that Plato is giving Socrates a platform early on, and then later, hands the stage to the Eliatic philosophers like Parmenides, and then at the end, an Athenian "stranger." So perhaps Plato is acting like a news reporter and simply reporting the perspective from different sides of the arguments. But if that were the case, it seems odd that the early and mid dialogues would focus so much on Socrates to the exclusion of all others.

Another argument is that Plato began as a strict adherent to Socrates, chronicling his ideas as faithfully as possible, and as time passed, the philosophical bond between Plato and Socrates weakened. The once loyal student ceased to be a parrot for his teacher's ideas, matured into his own, and by the time he was writing the *Parmenides*, long estranged from his master's charismatic wings, turned against them. It was yet another case of a teacher/student rivalry: the balance of the earlier dialogues tilt to Socrates, the later to Plato, the *Republic* showing a harmonious compromise between. However, this does not explain other changes in the dialogues, such as their length and interaction of participants.

Finally, a theory proposed by Gilbert Ryle in his 1966 *Plato's Progress* is more promising. Ryle argues in Chapter 2 that Plato wrote his dialogues to be performed at the Panathenaic Games, with Plato himself acting as Socrates. This matches the early and some mid period dialogues, which have quite a lot of back and forth between characters, and are also of a suitable length to engage a crowd but not tire them out. When things shift in the later dialogues, Ryle suggests that Plato suffered a health condition that prevented him from being on stage, and so swapped out Socrates with other philosophers. The timing also coincided with the founding of the Socratic School, where Plato taught and Aristotle eventually became student then teacher. This could explain why the later "dialogues" are really monologues: they were serving as lectures to students, rather than theatrical devices used to engage the public. After completion, Plato slightly modified them to be passed off as dialogues for the public.

In the end, this is all speculation. We can attempt to use historical context and external sources to explain away the inconsistencies, but despite thousands of years of efforts, the best philosophers have been unable to completely dismiss the theory of forms. Perhaps, like metaphor, it is a literary device to comprehend something otherwise beyond us.