

## THE ACADEMY AT WORK: DIALECTIC IN PLATO'S PARMENIDES

Alexander Nehamas  
Princeton University

In Plato's Earlier Dialectic, written well over fifty years ago, Richard Robinson pointed out an "important difference" between the dialogues of Plato's early middle period (e.g., Laches and Euthyphro) and the works he composed during his middle period (e.g., the Republic): "The early," Robinson wrote

gives prominence to method but not to methodology, while the middle gives prominence to methodology but not to method. In other words, theories of method are more obvious in the middle, but examples of it are more obvious in the early.<sup>1</sup>

When we turn to the dialogues of Plato's late period, though, we seem to have the better of both worlds: both method—in most of the Parmenides (127d-137c), and in parts of the Sophist (235a-264b), the Politicus (283b-285c), and the Philebus (14c-20a)—and methodology—in the opening pages of the Parmenides and other parts of the same three dialogues. But the better of both worlds is hardly good enough: we are still far from understanding either the method or the methodology of Plato's late works. And since our conference aims at a new, concerted approach to the Academy, a reconsideration of Plato's later dialectic is also in order.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Robinson, Plato's Earlier Dialectic, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 63-64.

Such a reconsideration must first establish the philosophical problems that occupied the Academy, the place to look is the Parmenides, where Plato lays out various difficulties facing the theory of Forms as he presents it in his middle works and begins to clear a path that might lead to their solution. That path must have been a central concern of the Academy during this period.

During a fictional meeting between Socrates, Zeno, and Parmenides, Zeno recites a work of his containing, if Proclus is right, forty logoi against the hypothesis that “beings are many.” According to one of them, as Socrates summarizes it, if beings were indeed many they would have to be both like and unlike, and that is impossible; therefore beings are not many. Socrates counters that Zeno has shown merely that if sensible objects are many, they are both like and unlike—which he dismisses as a problem: the real issue is whether intelligible objects—the forms—can be like or unlike, one or many, and so on and charges that they can’t. Parmenides then objects to Socrates’ view, giving him a taste of his own aporetic medicine. He insists, though, that thinking requires stable and unchanging objects like the forms: without them “the power of discourse” would be destroyed. He tells Socrates that he needs much further dialectical training before he can present his view correctly, describes that training in general terms, and illustrates it through a long question-and-answer session with a young member of the group.

### **I. Zeno’s Hypothesis, Socrates’ Response, and the Problem of Many Names**

Nothing about this text is without controversy, not even the hypothesis Zeno disputes,

**Beings are many.**

This is usually interpreted as

**There are many things,**

which contradicts the view the Eleatics are supposed to have held, namely,

**Only one thing exists,**

the variegated world we see around us being a deceptive illusion. I begin by disputing that interpretation.

I leave aside some rather superficial but still telling considerations<sup>2</sup> and turn to the hypothesis itself. We are told that Zeno argues that there can't be many things because they would then be both like and unlike. Imagine, then, three things, Socrates, Simmias, and Phaedo. Socrates, according to this view, is then both like and unlike because, it is said, Socrates may be like Simmias (in being human) and unlike Phaedo (in being short).<sup>3</sup> But is that what Socrates disputes? In response to Zeno, he first distinguishes between the intelligible forms of likeness and unlikeness, which are opposite to each other, and introduces the relation of participation, which sensible objects ("I and you and the other things we call many") can bear to

---

<sup>2</sup> If Zeno, on the basis of the view that reality is one, argued that the many objects of perception don't exist, he should never have felt entitled to mention "Spartan she-hounds" (128c1) or "those who want to ridicule Parmenides" (128c7-d1) in the plural right after giving forty reasons for thinking it impossible. O.K. Bouwsma, in "The Expression Theory of Art," writes hilariously of Parmenides and Zeno at the racetrack, realizing that their horse, which is behind, will never be able to catch up with the leader, and leaving, "a little embarrassed at their non-existence was showing as they walked." Nor should Zeno have conceded to Socrates, even implicitly, that the forms of likeness and unlikeness are two distinct objects (128b6-129a2). Sandra Peterson, who, in her essay on the Parmenides," in Gail Fine, ed. The Oxford Handbook of Plato (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 383-400), accepts this numerical interpretation of Zeno's hypothesis, considers Zeno's concession "devastating" to his view. But no one in the dialogue, especially Parmenides, or, as far as we can tell, Plato himself seems to be disturbed by Zeno's agreement—an agreement that would be impossible to understand if Zeno really had argued against numerical multiplicity. By the same token, neither Zeno nor Parmenides should ever agree with Socrates that there are many large or similar things, or many sticks and stones (129a-e).

<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, Socrates might be like Phaedo in being human and unlike him in being short. The "problem" arises as soon as we have two objects.

forms. He then says that nothing prevents any sensible object from participating in both, and so being “both like and unlike itself” (ὅμοιά τε και ἀνόμοια αὐτὰ αὐτοῖς, 126α6-9). But being both like and unlike oneself is not at all the same as being like one thing and unlike another. If Socrates takes Zeno to think that plurality somehow makes things both like and unlike themselves, he is crediting him with something that does look like a contradiction and not with the much more innocuous claim that we usually attribute to him. This emerges clearly from when Socrates now says that no paradox is involved in his being both one (of the seven people present) and also many (in that he has many parts)—and note that such a statement could be true even if Socrates, who would still be one person and many parts, were the only thing in the world.

In short, Socrates takes Zeno to charge that plurality makes things both like and unlike themselves, not like some things and unlike others. But why would Zeno say that? Let’s return to the hypothesis that is the target of his forty logoi, “Beings are many” (πολλὰ ἔστι τὰ ὄντα). The Greek sentence can be understood either as “There are many beings” or, in a sense I will explain in a moment, “Beings are many (things),” which as a first approximation we can understand as “Each being is many things.”

I suggest that Zeno is thinking not about the number of things there are but about the number of things that each of the things there are is. He is concerned not with the multiplicity of the sensible world but with its manifoldness—with the idea that every sensible object there is has—as we, but not, as we will see, the Greeks would put it—many features or properties. But before we ask why the Eleatics con-

sidered something that seems so perfectly obvious to us a serious problem, we should note that this interpretation is corroborated by the way Socrates, in his reply to Zeno, draws the contrast between sensible objects on the one hand and the intelligible forms on the other. He asks Zeno whether he thinks that there is such a thing as “the form of unlikeness itself by itself and something else, opposite to it, that which is unlike” in which “I and you and the other things we call many participate” (εγὼ καὶ σὺ καὶ τᾶλλα ἃ δὴ πολλὰ καλοῦμεν, 128e6-129a3).

I believe everyone who has written on this passage understands it as

I and you and the others we call “many.”<sup>4</sup>

According to that interpretation, “many” is a term that Plato and the Academy use to refer collectively to sensible objects, which is in line with taking “Beings are many” to mean that there are many things. We just saw, however, that such an interpretation fails to explain why Socrates takes it to imply that those things are both like and unlike themselves. In fact, though, we can also understand the phrase in a different and philosophically more satisfactory manner. That is, we can take it to mean:

I and you and the other things we call many things.

We can rephrase this as

I and you and the other things that have many properties, the word “many” applying directly not to Socrates, Zeno, and the rest but to their features instead. But neither Zeno nor Socrates can use expressions like “property” or “feature” because the distinction between subject and predicate, substance and

---

<sup>4</sup> One explicit example is provided by Mary Louise Gill’s approach in her introduction to Plato: Parmenides, translated by Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), p. 128.

property or feature, is just what is missing from the logic and metaphysics of early Greek philosophy. And it is my view that, in his late works, Plato is in the process of introducing, for the first time, the notion of predication, the operation that allows us to attribute properties to things and which we now take so completely for granted that it is difficult for us to believe there was a time when it was not available and that a whole lot of philosophical labor was required in order to articulate it. The Parmenides is where that labor truly begins.

Zeno, then, doesn't deny the existence of the objects of everyday experience, each one of which is indeed many things, but their reality. The Eleatic view is that sensible things certainly exist—even a philosopher who delights in paradox, like Zeno, would find it difficult to make such a claim—but what they are like bears no connection to the nature of reality, which is fundamentally distinct from what appears to us. Parmenides, along with Heraclitus, is the first philosopher to distinguish sharply between appearance and reality, and insists that appearance reflects nothing of the nature of reality itself. In that respect, though with an important difference, ancient Eleaticism is not unlike contemporary views according to which only elementary particle physics and not everyday perception is an accurate description of the world. The difference, of course, is that for Parmenides, physics—the physiologia of Ionian philosophy—is merely the study of appearance and only philosophy reveals what the world is really like. To think that the manifold, changing world of experience is all there is is to commit a very grave error.

That is exactly the error for which Plato himself, in the Republic, criticizes the people he calls “sight-lovers” (φιλοθεάμονες). These people believe that there are

“many beautifuls” (πολλὰ καλά) but refuse to acknowledge that there is, beyond them, a single thing that beauty is, something beautiful in itself that is and always remains the same (479a1-5). Once again, we are faced with the same ambiguity we have been discussing in the Parmenides. Are the πολλὰ καλά the many beautiful things of our experience or, rather, the many ways in which beauty appears, the many things that account for the beauty of the things of our experience? My own view is that they are what we would call the various features that beautiful things possess—beautiful colors and such. It is only on that interpretation that we can explain why Plato thinks that there is not one of those many beautifuls that will not also appear ugly (479a5-7). True, in the Hippias Major, Plato argues that the most beautiful woman is ugly when compared to a goddess. But the reason is that being a beautiful woman is only one way of being beautiful, a way that pales when it is compared to the beauty of the gods. Being a beautiful woman accounts, say, for Helen’s beauty in comparison to other women but that very same feature is responsible for her being ugly when compared to the gods.<sup>5</sup> Being a beautiful woman is therefore, for Plato, both beautiful and ugly—and, to connect this discussion with the Parmenides, being beautiful makes it like and being ugly, unlike itself. And that disqualifies it from being what beauty, which must according to Plato be beautiful without any qualification, really is.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> See J.C.B. Gosling and my “Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World” . Meno, too, is a “sight-lover” when it comes to virtue since he can’t countenance the one single thing that all the many ways of being virtuous—a man’s, a woman’s, a slave’s, knowing what you want and being able to get it—have in common: something that explains the virtue not only of some particular virtuous group or activity but of every single virtuous thing in the world.

<sup>6</sup> Meno is another “sight-lover”—in connection with virtue in this case: in response to Socrates’ questioning, he cites again and again different ways of beings virtuous—e.g., courage, temperance, wis-

Plato's approach confirms Parmenides' immense influence on classical Greek philosophy. He concedes that whatever is real must meet Parmenides' "signposts": like Parmenides' Being, the forms are ungenerable, imperishable, integral, immobile, continuous, and perfectly and completely whatever they are at all times. They are, however, many. Is that a genuine disagreement with Parmenides? The Eleatic certainly wrote that Being is one, but that, in fact, can mean either that there is only one real thing in the world or that every one of the however many real things there are is, in a sense we must explain, one.

That Parmenides wrote ambiguously on that issue is suggested, perhaps paradoxically, by the battery of arguments his other great student, Melissus, produced in order to show that there is in fact only one real thing. Why would he bother if that had been sufficiently clear in the first place? Of course, what Parmenides himself thought is a further question without a clear answer. What is clear, though, is that most of his successors<sup>7</sup> took him to have shown that many things are real, though each of them is one. How else can we explain that although they all accept every single one of Parmenides' conditions on reality, including its unity, they also assume without ever arguing, that there are many real things? Empedocles' four elements, Democritus' atoms, Anaxagoras' homoiomere, and for that matter the forms themselves, testify that the reality Parmenides bequeathed to his successors was, in numerical terms, irreducibly plural.<sup>8</sup>

---

dom, magnificence, and "many, many others" (ἄλλαι πάμπολλαι, 74a4-6)—but confesses he is unable to think of a single way of being virtuous that accounts for the virtuousness of all the rest (74a7-b1).

<sup>7</sup> The one notable exception is Diogenes of Apollonia, who returned to Anaximenes and took air to be the sensible world's underlying reality.

<sup>8</sup> On this approach to Eleaticism, see my "On Parmenides' Three Ways of Inquiry" (in Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. ) and



Plural, yes, but in every other respect unlike the deceptive sensible world, which for Parmenides bears no connection to reality. Plato, though, believes that it bears a particular relation—participation—that grounds it in the forms, gives it a measure of reality, and explains why its manifoldness is not a problem. It isn't a problem because the very fact that we can call Socrates many things, like and unlike, one and many, snub-nosed and virtuous, shows that, strictly speaking, Socrates is not either like or unlike, either one or many, snub-nosed or virtuous. Only likeness, the one, and virtue are themselves like, one, or virtuous and never their opposite. That Simmias is taller than Socrates, we read in the Phaedo, "is not in fact as we say in words because it is not in Simmias' nature to be taller in virtue of that, that is, of being Simmias, but only in virtue of the tallness he happens to have" (102b8-c4). Simmias merely participates in tallness, and nothing prevents an object from participating in various forms even if these are incompatible with one another.

Why does Socrates insist that it is impossible for the like to be unlike, for the one to be many, or more generally for the forms to mix among themselves, which suggests that the one can't be anything other than one? Part of the answer, which I have tried to give in detail elsewhere, is this.

Early and classical Greek thought operated with an extraordinarily restrictive notion of what it is to be something. Lacking, as I have said, the notion of predication, it had serious trouble understanding a sentence like "Charmides is beautiful" because it took it to assert not that Charmides is characterized by beauty (that

---

"Parmenidean Being/Heraclitean Fire," in Victor Caston and Daniel Graham (eds.), The Way of Persuasion (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), pp. . See also Patricia Kenig Curd, The Legacy of Parmenides: Eleatic Monism and Later Presocratic Thought (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2004) and Nestor-Luis Cordero,

would be its predicative understanding) but rather that Charmides is what it is to be beautiful—that Charmides is the very nature of beauty. But that, of course, is impossible, especially since, as Plato would say, Charmides, who is a beautiful man, is also ugly when compared with a god. But, given this understanding of “is,” Charmides is both what it is to be beautiful and what it is to be ugly. But how can what it is beautiful be what it is to be ugly; how can what is be what is not? That is a genuine contradiction and a special case of Parmenides’ fundamental principle, from which all his strictures on being follow: “Never shall this be proved, that what is not is” (B7.1).

The only thing that is strictly speaking beautiful is nothing other than beauty itself. “Beauty is beautiful,” “Justice is just,” “Tallness is tall”—“self-predications”—in which Plato delights, are puzzling, but only superficially so. Of course justice can’t be just in the sense that people and perhaps actions are but there is nothing wrong with saying that doing your own—Plato’s account of justice in the Republic—is what it is to be just. And not only is doing your own not unjust, it isn’t anything else either. For if it were anything else, even if it were only stable and unmoving as all the forms are supposed to be, we would have a similar contradiction. For suppose that justice, that is, doing your own, one. In our context, being one means being one is what it is to be one, and therefore justice turns out to be what it is to be one. But what it is to be stable is not what it is to be just. Therefore, justice, what it is to be just is not what it is to be just, and we have another contradiction that contravenes Parmenides’ principle.

## **II. Participation and Unity**

Participation, in Plato's middle period, is an alternative to or an imperfect, second-best way of being: to participate in the one, to be what we would call one thing, is not to be strictly speaking or perfectly one, though it makes a claim to being called one and so to a second-rate reality. The middle theory of forms, then, is perhaps paradoxically the last great Presocratic theory: it works within the Parmenidean framework and attempts to explain how calling one thing by many names doesn't consign it to total unreality. Socrates uses the theory to argue that Zeno's contradictions apply only to sensible objects, participants in the forms, and are harmless. But he insists that Zeno can't possibly show that his contradictions apply to the forms.

Perhaps Zeno can't. But Parmenides certainly can. Taking over the discussion, he establishes that Socrates isn't even sure of what things there are forms. He then takes four different ways of understanding the relation between sensibles and forms and shows that they all fail. However participation is understood, it turns out to be incompatible with the forms' unity—the basic feature that Socrates believes distinguishes them from sensibles: it results in the forms, each of which needs to be one, being also many, and contradicts Socrates' confident claim that he would be amazed if that could ever be shown (129c2-3). And he concludes by arguing that no connection between forms and sensible is in principle possible, rendering them unknowable.

I said that Parmenides rejects four different models of the participation relation. Not everyone would agree. At least some commentators think that the second and third, especially the second, to which I now turn, are not directed at participa-

tion but at the unity of the forms directly.<sup>9</sup> In this argument, Parmenides argues that if there is a form of largeness that is common to many large things then, necessarily, a second will emerge and then a third and so on, so that, as he says in conclusion, “Each of your forms will no longer be one but indefinitely many” (132b1-2). I suspect that the reason is that ever since Gregory Vlastos’s historic article brought this passage—misleadingly named “The Third Man Argument” (131e8-b2)—to the attention of contemporary philosophers, we have failed to see that it too refers to a particular version of participation. Professor Meinwald, for example, finds that the argument begins from the fact that

Large things must have something in common (largeness)

and, presupposing that the large itself is large, goes on to claim that

Large things and the large, being all large, must have something in common,

which results in a second form and, by repetition, generates its infinite regress.

Clearly, no reference to participation is obvious here.<sup>10</sup> In fact, however, this is not how the text reads:

---

<sup>9</sup> Among others, M.L. Gill: In this argument, “Parmenides shifts the focus from the problem of participation, with its unwelcome result that each form is many, to Socrates’ ground for thinking that a form is one” (p. 29).

<sup>10</sup> See also, among others, Sandra Lynne Peterson, who, in “The Parmenides,” in Gail Fine, ed., The Oxford Handbook of Plato (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 383-410 also finds that the argument begins with “the one-over-many premise . . . : Whenever it seems that several things are large, there is one form, the large (that is of them all),” p. 396. A notable exception is M.L. Gill, who acknowledges it and identifies that idea with the feature—the “immanent character”—that she claims Socrates introduces in contrast to the things that have that feature on the one hand and the form that explains its nature on the other. As we have seen, however, she considers that the argument is directed not directly at participation but at the forms’ unity (pp. 29-32). In On Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Gail Fine, too, takes the argument to begin with a major premise to the effect that for any collection of things with a certain property there is a form that accounts for that property (p. 210; the complications of Fine’s version of that assumption—her “OM-TMA,” for example—don’t concern us here.

Οἷμαί σε ἐκ τοιοῦδε ἐν ἑκάστον εἶδος οἴεσθαι εἶναι· ὅταν πόλλ' ἄττα μεγάλα σοι δόξη εἶναι, μία τις ἴσως δοκεῖ ιδέα ἢ αὐτὴ εἶναι ἐπὶ πάντα ἰδόντι, ὅθεν ἐν τὸ μέγα ἡγή εἶναι. (132a1-4)

I suppose you think that each form is one from a consideration of such sort: when it seems to you that many things are large, it may be that there seems to be one idea, the same upon them all as you look at them, whence you take it that the large is one.

The extra step, “it may be that there seems to be one idea, the same upon them all as you look at them,” is consistently ignored, although it makes a serious difference to the argument. It is from this idea, not simply from the presence of several large things, that Parmenides infers that the form is itself one and to which, in my opinion, he returns when he generates the next form in his regress:

Τί δ' αὐτὸ τὸ μέγα καὶ ἄλλα τὰ μεγάλα, ἐὰν ὡσαύτως τῇ ψυχῇ ἐπὶ πάντα ἴδης, οὐχὶ ἐν τι αὖ μέγα φανεῖται, ὃ ταῦτα πάντα μεγάλα φαίνεσθαι; (132a6-8)

Note that although Plato here seems to refer to the idea by the same term he has used for the form (τὸ μέγα), he also applies, with one exception, the vocabulary of appearance to it. I believe his point is that the idea is what allows things to appear large while the form makes them such:

Ἄλλο ἄρα εἶδος μεγέθους ἀναφανήσεται, παρ' αὐτό τε τὸ μέγεθος γεγονὸς καὶ τὰ μετέχοντα αὐτοῦ· καὶ ἐπὶ τούτοις αὖ πάσιν ἕτερον, ὃ ταῦτα πάντα μεγάλα ἔσται· καὶ οὐκέτι δὴ ἐν ἑκάστον σοι τῶν εἰδῶν ἔσται, ἀλλὰ ἄπειρα τὸ πλῆθος. (132<sup>a</sup>10-b2)

It is not my purpose to analyze this extraordinary argument here. I only want to point out that, if I am right, it too examines a particular interpretation of participation. Things that participate in a form share a single common look or character, the uniqueness of which gives rise to the idea that it corresponds to a single form. The argument, therefore, concerns both the unity of the forms and the problems that participation generates for it, and confirms my claim that the Parmenides raises, quite consciously, problems about both in tandem. It also suggests that the way to meet the argument, assuming that that it is a good one, is to deny that to participate in a form is to have a certain look or character in common with everything else that also participates in it.

But is the argument a good one? It might seem that, on my own account, it can't be. For I have said that only the form of largeness is strictly speaking large, that is, what it is to be large, and not a large thing, while large things are simply called "large." Forms and their participants, therefore, are what we say they are in very different ways. And if they are not large in the same way, it seems illegitimate to put them into one group and claim that they are all made large by participating in another form.<sup>11</sup>

It is true that with a categorical distinction between being on the one hand and participation on the other, one could stop the regress that turns the one form

---

<sup>11</sup> Constance Meinwald, in *Plato's "Parmenides"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 155-157, and "Good-Bye to the Third Man," in Richard Kraut, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 365-396, argues that the argument is unsound for a similar reason. Unlike me, though, she believes that Plato is perfectly aware of its inefficacy. My own view is that not only this but all of Parmenides' object are part of what Gregory Vlastos, in connection with it, called Plato's "record of honest perplexity" (see his "The 'Third Man' Argument in the *Parmenides*," in R.E. Allen, ed., *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 231-261, on p. 254.

into many. But this categorical distinction, the idea that participation is simply a different but perfectly legitimate way of being large, is just what Plato lacks at this time in his development: instead, as I have said, he considers participation in the large, to be as a second-best way of being large. In Plato's middle works, the only way of being large is to be what it is to be large. The many things we call "large" are only imperfectly (what it is to be) large, large in an inferior way: the imperfection of the sensible world is a central feature of this stage of Plato's development.<sup>12</sup> But as long as Plato thinks the difference between forms and the participants is a matter of degree rather than of kind, it is legitimate to group forms and their participants together, as we might, for example, place both great and lesser paintings in a single class. His theory is therefore vulnerable to this sort of argument and to the internal contradiction the argument reveals.

### III. Glimmers of a Solution

What Plato needs, then, is to show that participation, the relation that allows us to call each thing by many names, is not an inferior but a different way of being that doesn't interfere with being strictly speaking: that if participation is not imperfection, nothing in principle prevents it from applying not only to sensibles but also—as it does not, at least by implication, in the first part of the Parmenides—to the forms themselves. One thing we learn from the dialectic of the dialogue's second part is that if each form can be called nothing but that which it really is (one/one, like/like, etc), nothing—not even that—can be truly said of it: if the one is only one,

---

<sup>12</sup> See, among other passages, Phd. 74a12-e5, especially 74e6-8: ἄρα φαίνεται ἡμῖν οὕτως ἴσα εἶναι ὥσπερ αὐτὸ τὸ ὅ ἔστιν, ἢ ἐνδεῖ τι ἐκείνου τῷ τοιούτον εἶναι οἷον τὸ ἴσον, ἢ οὐδέν; Καὶ πολὺ γε, ἔφη, ἐνδεῖ. For more on the issue, see my "Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World," American Philosophical Quarterly, 12 (1975): 105-118.

Parmenides shows that it can't even be one. That is the lesson of four of the eight hypotheses he examines. The other four, by contrast, allow participation to apply to forms and demonstrate that if two things can be said of a form, so can absolutely everything else. What Plato seems to need, then, is an understanding of both being and participation that allows the forms to bear more than one name in addition to what constitutes their nature and prevents them from bearing every possible feature as a result. That, along with the fact that Parmenides seems to think that it is impossible for any form to be nothing at all (142a6-7), suggests that contrary to Constance Meinwald's influential interpretation (accepted and expanded by Sandra Peterson) Plato doesn't accept the conclusions reached in the dialectical exercise.

True, the right distinction between being and participation makes it possible to see why, if the one is only one, it neither rests or moves. For since what it is be one is not either what it is to move or what it is to rest, the one is strictly speaking neither (138b7-139b3). Still, it can't be true that if the one participates in other forms—if, e.g., it participates in being and is therefore a thing that is without being that which it is to be, it both rests and moves (145e6-146a6). What must be shown is that something that really is can also participate in other things but that this isn't to say that it can therefore participate in everything.

In what exactly a form does and to what it doesn't participate, that is, what features a form has in addition to its own nature, is not something that can be established in general: it requires a detailed examination of each form. The Parmenides, in my opinion, demonstrates the kind of training (γυμνάσια, 135b-136a) the Academy is likely to have offered its members but, contrary to Meinwald, contains both



true and false statements about the forms. How, then, could this sort of training help? This question, which has not been asked nearly often enough, is not easy to answer but I will venture a guess.

To begin with, we mustn't assume that the exercise will proceed exactly as it does in the dialogue, whose respondent, the very young and inexperienced Aristotle (not the philosopher) is chosen precisely for that reason, takes everything Parmenides says at face value. Aristotle is even less active a respondent than Meno's slave, who at least offers some of his own suggestions when Socrates presents him with a geometrical problem. On the contrary, the respondent must decide how to answer each question, sometimes positively sometimes not, and so how the different forms the different exercises address are related both to themselves and to all the others; for example, a sophisticated student would say that being is in the sense that it is what it is to be; also in the sense that it is a thing that is, which means that it participates in itself; and it is a thing that moves, since no form is a moving thing, and therefore doesn't participate in motion, as motion itself doesn't, since it too doesn't move although it does move in the sense of being what it is to move.

it is by going through these various relations of connection and exclusion that the Academy's students would gradually acquire the knowledge of which forms do and which don't communicate with each—the knowledge, as the Sophist claims, that belongs to dialectic, which, in turn, constitutes philosophy itself (253b-e6). It is in this dialogue too that we find a summary discussion of the precise interrelations of five of "greatest kinds" (254c3-4). And it is dialogue that, having shown that "in its nature, being neither rests nor moves" (250c6-7) proceeds to dispel that seeming

paradox by explaining, precisely, “in what way we call, in each case, the same thing by many names” (251a6-7; text 10, cf. Phil. 14c1-15c6)—a problem Plato now thinks would disturb only “children and those among the old who came late to learning” (251b5-6).

The Parmenides shows that everything, sensible and intelligible, must be called by many names and that we need an understanding of both being and participation that doesn’t destroy the unity of the forms, by implying either that the form can be nothing at all or that it has to be everything. It doesn’t show what particular names each form can bear but sets out the kind of questioning that, with a proper interlocutor, can lead to that knowledge. Only the Sophist, in my opinion, offers us a glimpse of the kind of knowledge, both its theory and its practical application, that the Academy, through the training outlined in the Parmenides, promised to impart to its students.

Almost sixty years ago now, Gregory Vlastos and Gwilym Owen made Plato accessible to contemporary philosophers by arguing that his problems were the same as ours. Vlastos, in particular, thought that, although Plato had a clear conception of predication,<sup>13</sup> he wrongly believed that in order for a sentence like “Socrates is tall” to be true the predicate “tall” had to refer not only to tall things but to tallness as well. In other words, he credited Plato with the right question but found his answer wrong, even perhaps simple-minded. I prefer to reverse that image. I think that in his middle works Plato, lacking the concept of predication, had great trouble with the fact that things other than forms also “deserved” the forms’ names and that

---

<sup>13</sup> See “A Note on a Proposed Redefinition of Self-Predication”

he left those troubles behind when he no longer took participation, his candidate for the concept of predication, to be a second-best way of being. In short, I think that Plato asked questions that are other than ours, perhaps even more naïve, even primitive, but that the answers he gave them were nothing but absolutely brilliant—so brilliant, in fact, that we have taken them so much for granted that we think of them as part and parcel of our common sense and not as philosophical discoveries of the first rank that required the extraordinary efforts of an extraordinary mind and the extraordinary institution our conference is devoted to.