

# The One, The Many, and Plato

## A Critical Analysis of Plato's Theory of Forms

Emann Allebban

Plato's theory of forms conveys his theories of both reality and knowledge, attracting the attention of philosophers of his time all the way to the present. The theory, however, is not without its problems. As will be demonstrated in the following, Plato's theory of forms fails in resolving the One/Many problem and does not overcome the objection raised by Plato in *Parmenides* – the failure to figure out the exact relation between the form and the particular.

Before that, a brief review of relevant aspects of the theory is necessary. Plato postulates the existence of what he calls eternal Forms, which particular objects in the sensory world imitate and from which they derive their existence and nature. Thus a desk participates in the Form of "Hardness" and is an imitation and reflection of that Form. Objects can, of course, participate in more than one Form at once. So a monkey may participate in the Form of "Monkeyness" and the Form of "Maleness", among others. These Forms are eternal and unchanging, while the sensory world is not.

The theory of forms is most clearly revealed through his Cave Allegory and Divided Line Image, which divides our knowledge into four levels: conjecture/imagining, belief, thinking/understanding, and reason/intelligence.<sup>1</sup> The first level, also the bottom level of knowledge, is the level of conjecture and imagination. It coincides with the prisoners sitting in front of the cave wall, watching the shadows of the props being cast on the wall. These images are distortions of real objects and do not rep-

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Emann currently attends the University of Michigan, where he majors in Philosophy and Liberal Studies with concentrations in Anthropology, History, and Communications. He plans on attending a graduate program in philosophy and religion. His primary interests in Philosophy are philosophy of religion, Islamic philosophy, metaphysics, and logic. He was born and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee and now resides in Dearborn, Michigan

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resent the truth of an object but allow for conjecture and guesswork. In this level, one takes a reflection (shadows) of a reflection (props) to be reality. In the world as we know it today, taking second hand information from politicians, the media, religion, parents, or peers as reality would fall under this category of knowledge.

One level up is the level of belief and is represented by the fire level in the cave, where the prisoner is released from his chains only to find the fire and the shadows of the props it casts. The prisoner then takes the fire to be real, instead of the shadows. The source of knowledge is the objects themselves, thus this level is characterized by taking the sensory world to be the real world. While in reality, according to Plato this world of particulars (particular objects, ideas, etc) is nothing but a reflection of the real world – the world of Forms. Plato argues that the objects in the sensory world are always changing, and thus cannot be truly real. Thus for anything to be real and fully exist, it must be constant and have a fixed and definite character. A circular object is not perfectly circular, just as a tall person is not perfectly tall. It is only in the world of Forms that you will find the perfection of circularity, tallness, and so on.

The third level is the level of thinking/understanding, and it involves mathematics and the study of the essence of the mathematical Forms, such as square, triangle, point, etc. Although these Forms are reflected in the material world, their true nature can only be grasped via the use of reason and not sensory experience. Plato, however, identifies two problems with mathematics: it relies on assumptions that are never proven and it relies on the senses, as sensory experience, for Plato, will not reveal reality. Thus mathematics, due to these two problems, is not the highest level of knowledge.

The last and highest level of knowledge is that of reason and intelligence. In this level, the Forms are directly studied, the highest Form being the Form of the Good. Through understanding the Form of the Good, one understands the purpose and meaning of existence and all that is within it, including all the other Forms, such as truth, justice, beauty, etc. This world of

Forms can only be acquired via the use of reason, not sensory experience, which only yields understanding of imitations of reality and particulars, which again are not perfect beauty. So understanding beauty entails going beyond the study of beautiful objects to the study of beauty itself, which is the common element that is found in all of these different objects that partake in beauty. This can only occur with the use of reason. Thus the Forms are more real, unchanging, and eternal, and are the source of existence for all the particulars in the sensory world.

As is evident from Plato's four levels of knowledge, claims made about the physical or visible world are mere opinion, some founded while others are not – but neither are considered knowledge. The last two levels are of the world of things thought, and of the world of reason. Reason, instead of sensory experience, results in knowledge, knowledge and understanding namely of the "Forms" or "Ideas" such as beauty and justice. These Forms can only be understood via reason, and they represent Justice itself, Beauty itself, etc instead of individuals' ideas of justice and beauty.

It is through Plato's theory of forms that he attempts to solve the One/Many problem. The One/Many problem was formulated by the Pre-Socratics as an ontological one, and was characterized by asking such questions as: "*What is the ultimate nature of what is?*" and "*Is everything that exists ultimately "one" thing or "many" different things?*" Plato's theory of forms, however, fails in solving the One/Many problem due to the many problems that have been voiced with his theory – from both critics of his time, like Aristotle, critics of later generations, and even a critic closer to home – Plato himself. The problem to be focused on in this paper is the failure of the theory to provide an explanation of the relationship between the forms and particular things, since Plato asserts that the forms are separate from matter.<sup>2</sup> This problem was voiced by both Aristotle and Plato, in his dialogue *Parmenides*, where he entertains and rejects four metaphysical hypotheses: the One is not many, the One exists, that it is not one, and that it does not exist.<sup>3</sup> In the dialogue, Plato attempts to explain the relationship between the forms and the particulars via

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the use of his participation metaphor: an object is beautiful, for example, because it participates in the Form of Beauty. But what exactly does “participates” mean?<sup>4</sup>

There are two possible ways of participation: whole participation in the Form or partial participation in the Form, and unfortunately both result in logical absurdities.<sup>5</sup> If it is asserted that the particular participates wholly in the Form, then the Form is many and thus separate from itself, as it is in a number of particulars. In this case, the Form will be multiplied. If, however, it is asserted that the particular participates partly in the Form, then the Form is divisible into many parts. This then means, for example, that we are all humans because we share in part in the form of Humanness. I am then in part human. Thus, in the second case, the Form is divisible. In both cases, the Form loses its unity and results in such absurdities.<sup>6</sup>

Plato then attempts to explain the participation metaphor in terms of resemblance, which is also rejected by way of what has come to be known as the Third Man Argument – if large things are large in virtue of something distinct from them (the Form of Large), then the Large itself and the other large things will be large in virtue of another Form of Large, *ad infinitum*.<sup>7</sup> The argument continues to be developed by scholars such as Gregory Vlastos and Wilfrid Sellars.<sup>8</sup> This argument, however, will not be developed here for brevity’s sake.

So it seems as though the participation metaphor has received a fatal blow, and thus fails to explicate the relationship between the Form and the particulars. It is possible, however, to entertain a possible objection, an objection that Plato raises: the stated problems with the metaphor only arise if the Forms are to be taken as material, physical “objects.” However, the forms are immaterial and thus would not be subject to division and multiplication.<sup>9</sup>

Although a seemingly strong objection, asserting the immaterialness of the Forms only raises another objection to the theory: if the Forms are immaterial and the particulars that derive their existence from these Forms are material, then how can materialness be derived from immaterialness? Where does the

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materialness of the particulars come from, if the Forms they imitate are immaterial? This response serves to further amplify the failure of Plato in identifying the exact relationship between the Forms and the particulars- a problem so strong that it hinders the theory of forms from solving the One/Many problem.

Thus, as has been seen through examination of only one of the many problems with the theory of forms, the theory does not resolve the One/Many problem and does not overcome the objection raised by Plato – the failure to figure out the exact relation between the form and the particular.

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### Notes

1. Details of the theory will be drawn from Jordan, pp. 84-96 and Plato's *Republic*, Books 6 - 7 in Rouse, pp. 281-341.
2. Cresswell, p. 153
3. Gross, p. 276
4. Jordan p. 141
5. Peck, p. 178
6. Whitaker, *Parmenides* 131a-e; Scoon, p. 118
7. Pickering, p. 263-264
8. Vlastos, pp. 319-349; Sellars, pp. 405-437
9. Peck, pp. 174 - 177

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