Aristotle’s Criticisms of Platonic Forms

The foal who kicked its mother?
Some Attitudes Towards Aristotle’s Attitude

‘He had accepted Plato’s doctrines with his whole soul, and the effort to discover his own relation to them occupied all his life, and is the clue to his development. It is possible to discern a gradual progress, in the various stages of which we can clearly recognize the unfolding of his own essential nature. . . Just as tragedy attains its own special nature. . . ‘out of the dithyramb’ by leading the latter through various forms, so Aristotle made himself out of the Platonic philosophy.’ —Jaeger, W., Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of his Development (Oxford University Press: 1934), 15.
More Attitudes Towards Aristotle’s Attitude

* Aristotle was ‘the foal who kicked its mother.’ —DL, v 2


* ‘In the first place, it is certain that he [Aristotle] never understood the teaching of the head of the Academy.’—Burnet, Platonism (Berkeley: 1928), 56

* Yet. . .he says Plato was ‘a man whom the wicked have no place to praise: he alone, unsurpassed among mortals, has shown clearly by his own life and by the pursuits of his writings that a man becomes happy and good simultaneously’ — Aristotle, Frag. 673 R³, Olympiodorus, Commentarius in Gorgiam 41.9.
Aristotle’s Criticisms: an Overview

* Aristotle has no shortage of complaints about Plato’s Forms:

  * They are causally inert and so cannot explain change or generation (*Met.* 991a8, 1033b26-28).

  * Postulating Forms offends theoretical economy (*Phys.* 259a8).

  * Forms, if ever they existed, would be epistemologically otiose (*Met.* 991a12-14).

  * Introducing Forms as paradigms is empty metaphor (*Met.* 991a20-23).

  * Forms cannot be essences if they are separated, since essences are intrinsic features of things (*Met.* 991b1).

  * Forms are irrelevant to human conduct, and so must be set aside from inquiries into ethical virtue (*EN* 1096b32-4).

  * Above all one might ask what in the world the Forms contribute to our understanding of perceptible things (*Met.* 991a8-10).
Good-bye, then. . .

* At his most caustic, Aristotle recommends a ‘good-bye to the Forms,’ since ‘they are jibber-jabber and even if they do exist they are wholly irrelevant’ (APo. 83a32-4).
Socrates was right to attend to the universal.

For, ‘without the universal, it is not possible to attain knowledge’ (Met. 1086b5-6).

‘Nevertheless, Socrates surely never separated them from particulars; and in not separating them, he thought rightly’ (Met. 1086b3-5).

That he thought rightly, Aristotle insists, can be appreciated by observing how those who do separate universals from particulars, the Platonists, go awry (Met. 1086b5).
By separating universals, the Platonists end up swallowing the view that ‘universals and particulars are practically (or, very roughly, σχεδόν) the same natures’ (Met. 1086b10-11),

Or, more weakly, they ‘at the same time make the Ideas, as substances, universal, and then again make them, as separate, belong to the class of particulars’ (Met. 1086a32-4).
How so?

* . . . They at the same time make the Ideas, as substances, universals, and again, as separate, also as belonging to the class of particulars. Separation is the cause of the difficulties which result regarding Ideas. These things were shown to be problematic earlier, because this cannot be. The reason why those who say that substances are universal conjoin these things into the same, is that they made substances not the same as perceptibles. They thought that in the case of sensibles, particulars are in flux and that none of them remains, whereas they thought of universals as beyond these and as being something else. Just as we said earlier, this is something Socrates set in motion, because of his definitions, but even so he at any rate did not separate out them from particulars. And he thought rightly in not separating them. This is clear from the results (ἔργα): for while without the universal, it is not possible to attain knowledge, separation is the cause of the difficulties which accrue concerning the Ideas. They [Socrates’ successors] regarded it as necessary, if there are going to be substances beyond (παρά) the sensible and flowing substances, that they be separate; but they did not have others and instead selected the things predicated universally, with the result that universals and particulars were practically the same sorts of natures (Met. 1086b7-11).
Aristotle’s Argument

1. If knowledge is to be possible, there must be stable objects of knowledge, immune to the flux suffered by sensibles.

2. Knowledge is possible.

3. So, there must be super-sensible stable objects of knowledge, immune to the flux suffered by sensibles.

4. As super-sensible and stable, such objects might be: (i) in rebus, or (ii) ante rem.

5. If they are ante rem, the result will be that Forms will be both universals and particulars.

6. The Platonists, not recognizing (4.i) as an option, endorse ante rem objects of knowledge.

7. If (6), then Platonic Forms will be both universals and particulars.

8. Hence, Platonic Forms will be both universals and particulars.
* Metaphysics iii 6 sheds some light. In the fifteenth aporia, Aristotle argues dilemmically first that no universal is an archê (Met. 1003a7-9) and, second, that every archê must be a universal (Met. 1003a13-17).

* The argument for the first horn has it that:

1. Universals are common (1003a8-9).
2. Nothing common signifies a tode ti (1003a8-9).
3. So, no universal signifies a tode ti.
4. Ousia signifies a tode ti (1003a9).
5. So, no universal is an ousia.
6. The archai are ousiai (assumption).
7. So, no archê is universal.
* The argument for the second horn has it:

1. Knowledge (in the sense of *epistêmê*) is in all cases of universals (1003a14-15; cf. *Met.* 998a24-26, 998b4-6, 1013a14-17; *APo.* 87b28-88a17; *Phys.* 194b16-20);

2. We do have knowledge of *archai* (or at least such knowledge is possible).

3. So, *archai* are universal.

* Since both horns cannot be correct, something must give way.
Metaphysics vii 13–15: They say. . .

* ‘Form belongs to the class of particulars, as they say (ὡς φασί), and is separate (Met. 1040a8–9).

* Where?

* Plato sometimes refers to Form by using a singular terms (e.g. ἕκαστος): (Phaedo 78d3; cf. Crat. 389d6; Parm. 133d8; Phd. 75b1, 75d2; Rep. 507b7, 597c9; Theaet. 146e9; Phil. 62a2)

* It matters, because:

  * Forms must be universals, since ‘every Idea is such as to be participated in (μεθεκτή’) (Met. 1040a26–27; cf. Met. 990b28, 1079a25).
Robust and Deflationary Particulars

* A robust particular is an *impredicable*; a deflationary particular is any logical subject.

* Robust particulars in Aristotle: ‘By universal I mean what is naturally predicated over (epi) more than one thing, and by particular what is not’ (*DI* 17a38–40; cf. *Met.* 1039a1).

* Must Forms be robust?
Ross and Runcimann: Plato’s paradeigmatism commits him to the particularity of Forms.

‘If whiteness is white (which must follow if white objects are white by resembling it) then whiteness is one of the class of white objects.’ —Runcimann (1965, 158)

Plato subscribes to mimeticism, the view that a particular x is eponymously F only by imitating the Form F-ness.

So, for example, we call Helen good because she somehow imitates the Form of Goodness.

In general, since nothing could be F, except by copying something which is itself F, the Form F-ness must itself be F.

So, Forms must be SP.
Not So

* Paradeigmatism does not require that paradigms be paradigms by exemplifying the properties for which they serve as paradigms.

* It follows, then, that nothing in Plato’s mimeticism requires that he treat Forms as robust particulars.

* Therefore, if he thinks that Forms are particulars, Plato does not indicate that this simply by embracing paradeigmatism.

* Hence, the Form of the Good might or might not be a robust particular.

* So far, then, nothing categorically untowards results from Plato’s treatment of Forms as archai.
Further, among the more accurate arguments, some produce Ideas of relatives, whereas we deny that these are among those things that exist in their own right; others introduce the Third Man. \((\text{Met. 990b14-17})\)
More accurate?

* In Met. i 9, ‘less accurate arguments’ are evidently invalid arguments, conceived as arguments for Forms (ex eniôn men gar ouk anagkê gignesthai sullogismon); perhaps, then, ‘more accurate arguments’ are at least valid arguments for Forms.

* Even so, even the less accurate arguments are valid arguments for common things (koina).

* Presumably, then, the more accurate OM argument is thus a valid but unsound argument for Forms, and so also a valid argument for common things (koina).

* If this is right, then we face a (welcome) interpretative constraint concerning the more accurate TMA.
‘I suppose that it is on this sort of basis that you think that each form is one: whenever it seems to you that there are many large things, there presumably seems to be some one and the same idea over them all—whence you think the large is one.’

‘That’s right,’ said Socrates.

‘And what of the large itself and all these other large things: if you should similarly see with your soul something alongside all these, will not something large, something one, appear again, in terms of which all these large things appear large?’

‘So it seems.’

‘Then another idea of largeness will appear in its turn, beyond both the large itself which has already come to be and those things which partake of it—and again beyond all these another in its turn, in terms of which all these large things will be large. Thus each of your forms will no longer be one, but will be unlimited in number.’ (Parm. 132a1-b2)
Some Background Assumptions

• SP: The form F is itself F.

• OM: For any set of F things, there is a form F over that set of F things.

• NI: The form over any set is not a member of that set.

• U: There is just one form corresponding to F things.
The TMA: Vlastos

* $\text{SP}_v$: any form can be predicated of itself. (F-ness is F.)

* $\text{NI}_v$: If anything has a certain character, it cannot be identical with the Form in virtue of which we apprehend that character. (If $x$ is $F$, $x$ cannot be identical with $F$-ness.)

1. If a number of things, $a$, $b$, and $c$, are all $F$, there must be a single form $F$-ness, in virtue of which we apprehend $a$, $b$, and $c$ as all $F$.

2. $\text{SP}_v$

3. $\text{NI}_v$

4. Hence, if a number of things, $a$, $b$, $c$, and $F$-ness are all $F$, there must be another form $F$-ness, in virtue of which we apprehend $a$, $b$, $c$, and $F$-ness as all $F$. 
The TMA: Sellars

* **SP}_s: All F-nesses are F.

* **NI}_s: If x is F, then x is not identical with the F-ness in virtue of which it is F.

1. If a number of entities are all F, then there must be an F-ness by virtue of which they are all F.

2. Some particulars a, b, c, and so forth are F.

3. **SP}_s

4. **NI}_s

5. Hence, there are an infinite number of Forms.
A Preferred Formulation

* SP: The form F is itself F.
* OM: For any set of F things, there is a form F over that set of F things.
* NI: The form over any set is not a member of that set.
* U: There is just one form corresponding to F things.

1. There are some large sensible particulars \{L_1, L_2, L_3, \ldots\}
2. OM
3. Hence, there is a Form, L-ness, over that set of L things.
4. SP
5. Hence, L-ness is itself large.
6. NI
7. Hence, L-ness is not a member of \{L_1, L_2, L_3, \ldots\}
8. But there is a set \{L_1, L_2, L_3, \ldots\}
9. Hence, there is also a Form, L-ness1, over that set of L things.
10. Hence, not U: it is not the case that there is just one Form corresponding to F things—since they are infinite in number.
1. There are some good sensible particulars \( \{ G_1, G_2, G_3 \ldots \} \)

2. OM

3. Hence, there is a Form, Goodness, over that set of good things.

4. SP

5. Hence, Goodness is itself good.

6. NI

7. Hence, Goodness is not a member of \( \{ G_1, G_2, G_3 \ldots \} \).

8. But there is a set \( \{ G_1, G_2, G_3, G_4 \ldots \} \).

9. Hence, there is also a Form, Goodness\(_1\), over that set of good things.

10. Hence, not U: it is not the case that there is just one Form corresponding to good things—since they are infinite in number.
‘It is not possible for something to be white [such as White Itself] which is not something else being white. For we can say goodbye to the Forms; ‘they are jibber-jabber and even if they do exist they are wholly irrelevant’ (83a32-34).

So, no good-byes just yet. . .