

Motivating Forms



Plato's Gambit

Something or Nothing?

- ❖ ‘Tell us: does the person who knows know something or nothing?’
- ❖ ‘He knows something.’
- ❖ ‘Something that is, or something that is not?’
- ❖ ‘Something that is. For how could something that is not be known?’ (*Rep.* 476e10; cf. *Rep.* 478b6-c1, *Symp.* 199d1-2, e6-7, *Prt.* 330c1, *Lys.* 218d7-8, *Euth.* 291d7-e1, *Chrm.* 161d1-4, *Parm.* 132b3-c7.
- ❖ First contention: this is a perfectly sensible question.
 - ❖ If so, our only remaining question is this: what is the character of the thing known?

Two Argument Strategies

- ❖ One Epistemological
- ❖ One Metaphysical

Forms: an Epistemological Argument

- ❖ Some Background Assumptions

- ❖ Knowledge is not the same as opinion.
- ❖ We have some knowledge.
- ❖ Knowledge is secure, in the sense of unchanging.

- ❖ The Argument

1. If we have knowledge, the objects of knowledge are abstract entities.
2. We have some knowledge.
3. Hence, there are some abstract entities, the Forms.

On Behalf of (1)

1. Knowledge is of what is precise and invariable.
2. Every object of sense is imprecise and variable.
3. Hence, objects of sense are not objects of knowledge.
4. Hence, objects of knowledge are abstract entities.
5. Hence, if we have knowledge, the objects of knowledge are abstract entities.

Forms: a Metaphysical Argument

❖ Some Background Assumptions

- ❖ No physical object can be altogether in more than one place at one time.
- ❖ It is possible for two physical objects to be exactly alike in some regard.

❖ The Argument

1. If x is F and y is F, then there is something, F-ness, which is the same in x and y.
2. If x and y are in different places, then they share something, F-ness, which is altogether present in different places.
3. No physical object can be altogether present in different places at one time.
4. Hence, F-ness is not a physical object.
5. Hence, F-ness is an abstract object, a universal or Form.

Aristotle's Plato's Motivation

- ❖ After the systems we have named came the philosophy of Plato, which in most respects followed these thinkers, but had peculiarities that distinguished it from the philosophy of the Italians. For, having in his youth first become familiar with Cratylus and with the Heraclitean doctrines (that all sensible things are ever in a state of flux and there is no knowledge about them), these views he held even in later years. Socrates, however, was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions; Plato accepted his teaching, but held that the problem applied not to any sensible thing but to entities of another kind—for this reason, that the common definition could not be a definition of any sensible thing, as they were always changing. Things of this other sort, then, he called Ideas, and sensible things, he said, were apart from these, and were all called after these; for the multitude of things which have the same name as the Form exist by participation in it. Only the name 'participation' was new. . . . But what the participation or the imitation of the Forms could be they left an open question (*Met.* 987a29-13).

Plato's Heracliteanism

- ❖ Aristotle's Analysis of Plato's Motivation for Forms (*Met.* 987a32-b7; cf. 1078b12-17, 1086a32-b32)
 1. Sensibles are in flux.
 2. Whatever is in flux is unknowable.
 3. Therefore, sensibles are unknowable.
 4. There is some K.
 5. Therefore, there are nonsensible objects of K, viz. Forms.
- ❖ What does (1) mean?
 - ❖ succession of opposites: at t_1 x is F, but at t_2 x is not-F.
 - ❖ radical
 - ❖ mild
 - ❖ 2. compresence of opposites: at t_1 x is both F and not-F.

An Argument from the *Phaedo*

❖ *Phaedo* 74a9-c5

"Then consider whether this is so. We say, don't we, that there is something equal—I don't mean a log to a log, or a stone to a stone, or anything else of that sort, but something else beyond all these, the equal itself: are we to say that there is something or nothing?"

"We most certainly are to say that there is," said Simmias, "most emphatically!"

"And do we know what it is?"

"Indeed."

"Where did we get our knowledge of it? Wasn't it from the things we were just mentioning: on seeing logs or stones or other equal things, wasn't it from these that we thought of that object, it being different from them? Or doesn't it seem different to you? Consider it this way: don't equal stones and logs, the very same ones, sometimes seem equal to one, but not to another?"

"Yes, indeed."

"But now, did the equals themselves ever seem to you unequal, or equality inequality?"

"Never yet, Socrates."

"Then those equals, and the equal itself, are not the same."

Some Formulations of *Phaedo* 74b-d

- ❖ Evidently relies upon Leibniz's Law:
 - ❖ If $x = y$, then ϕx iff ϕy
 - ❖ Informally: if x and y are identical, then whatever features x has, y has too; and whatever features y has, x has too.
- ❖ But Plato is relying on which feature?
 - ❖ Phenomenal Variation
 - ❖ Compresence of Opposites

Phenomenal Variation

1. Equal sticks and stones sometimes, staying the same, appear equal to one person and unequal to another.
2. The equals themselves have never appeared unequal to anyone.
3. Therefore, the equal itself and equal things are not the same.

Compresence of Opposites

1. Equal sticks and stones sometimes, staying the same, appear equal in one respect and unequal in another (viz. they suffer the compresence of opposites).
2. The equals themselves are never unequal (and so never suffer the compresence of opposites).
3. Therefore, the equal itself and equal things are not the same.

Backing Away

- ❖ Plato's something-or-nothing hinge forces a pair of choice rather than establishes an *ab initio* existence argument for Forms:
 - ❖ first choice: nihilism or existence
 - ❖ second choice: endless, infinite non-univocity or univocity.
 - ❖ Plato's choice: 'Beauty itself, taken by itself, within itself, one in Form, and existing always' (*Symp.* 211a-b)
 - ❖ Same again, then, for Justice, Courage, the Good. . .