

Two Problems about Forms



Can Forms do their job?

Two Problems

- ❖ One posed by Plato himself:
 - ❖ Forms are implicated in an explanatory regress.
- ❖ One posed by Aristotle:
 - ❖ Forms oversimplify by ignoring real distinctions.
 - ❖ They are thus explanatorily impoverished.

Problem One: A Regress of Explanation

- ❖ Some features of Forms:
 - ❖ The Form F-ness explains F things.
 - ❖ E.g. The Form of Justice explains just things.
 - ❖ Forms are models or exemplars; particulars copy or mirror them.
 - ❖ If the Form F-ness is a model copied by F things, then F-ness is itself F
 - ❖ Forms are thus self-predicative (SP).

The Regress

1. Suppose there is a Form F-ness.
2. By (SP), F-ness is F.
3. If F-ness is F, then it has something in common with F things.
4. Whenever there is a group of F things, their F-ness is explained by their copying some Form F-ness.
5. So, there must be another Form, F-ness₁, in addition to F-ness.
6. F-ness₁, by (SP), is itself F.
7. So, by (4), there must be another Form F₂, which, by (SP), is itself F.
8. So, there appears to be an infinite number of Forms of F-ness.

The Problem

- ❖ If we are to explain the F-ness in F things by appeal to the Form F-ness, our appeals will go on forever.
- ❖ Yet, explanation cannot go on forever.
- ❖ So, Forms seem ill-suited to perform the very task for which Plato introduced them.

Problem Two: Explanatory Poverty

- ❖ Consider the following two sentences:
 - ❖ Socrates is pale.
 - ❖ Socrates is human.
- ❖ For Plato, the surface grammar captures the depth grammar.
 - ❖ Each sentence is analyzed in the same way:
 - ❖ Socrates participates in the Form of Pallor.
 - ❖ Socrates participates in the Form of Humanity.

Ignoring a Real Distinction

- ❖ ‘Socrates is pale.’ is an instance of *accidental predication*.
- ❖ F-ness is accidentally predicated of x just in case x is F but can exist without being F.
- ❖ ‘Socrates is human.’ is an instance of *essential predication*.
- ❖ F-ness is essentially predicated of x just in case x is F and cannot exist without being F.

The Problem

- ❖ If a theory cannot capture this real distinction, then that theory is explanatorily inadequate.
- ❖ Plato's Theory cannot capture this real distinction.
- ❖ So, Plato's Theory of Forms is explanatorily inadequate.