

Plato's "Worst Difficulty" Argument In The *Parmenides* (133b-134b)

Allen Coates

For Plato, the objects of true knowledge are Forms, as opposed to objects in the phenomenal world, so that his account of knowledge relies essentially on his dualistic metaphysical system. Yet as typically happens in such systems, troubles arise in explaining the relations between objects of different ontological types. Plato addresses one of these troubles, the relation of knowledge between persons and Forms, in the "worst difficulty" argument in the *Parmenides* (133b-134b). This argument attempts to show that persons may only have knowledge of things in the phenomenal world, and not knowledge of Forms. The ontological gap between Forms and particulars cannot, so to speak, be bridged by knowledge. Here I want to offer an interpretation of that argument that adheres to Plato's claims that it is both difficult and that it is not irrefutable (133b). Further, I hope to show that a related passage in the *Sophist*, 247e-249d, provides the conceptual elements needed for refuting that argument.

However, a few distinctions are worth making at the outset. First, one can distinguish between the attributes a thing has insofar as it belongs to a certain ontological type, and those it has that distinguish it from other members of that type. For example, the Form Beauty is eternal and perfect simply by virtue of being a Form, yet it presumably has attributes that distinguish it from other Forms. I will call the former "formal attributes" and the latter "proper attributes."¹ Second, it is important to distinguish what I will call an "ontological category" from an "ontological status." There are at least three ontological categories in Plato: Forms, particulars, and characteristics (though souls, I think, comprise a fourth). Yet particulars and characteristics could be said to share the same status insofar as they both exist in the phenomenal world. The distinction between things of a

different status seems to be the same as Plato's between "things in our [phenomenal] world" and "things in that world [of Forms]" (P 134a). Relations between things that share a common status, regardless of category, do not seem to cause the same difficulties as those between things of a different status. In other words, even if there is a special problem regarding relations between particulars and Forms, there would not necessarily be a similar problem between particulars and characteristics. These distinctions allow Plato a possible solution to the worst difficulty argument. Namely, they allow souls and Forms to share the same ontological status in spite of having different formal attributes, that is, in spite of the fact that souls are not (of the same ontological category as) Forms. In this way, the ontological gap between knower and known, crucial to the worst difficulty argument, may be overcome.

This argument hinges on a principle designed to rule out absurd relations between Forms and particulars which, in doing so, also rules out the relation between knowledge and Forms. The principle is that "things in that world [of Forms] are what they are [only] with reference to one another ... and so likewise with the things in our world" (134a). Relations that are in some sense essential are restricted by this principle to members of the same ontological status. Yet it is not obvious what relations Plato refers to with the phrase "with reference to one another." He could mean for it to refer only to reciprocal relations, those in which each member is what it is with regard to the other. If so, the principle would read:

P_1 : If x and y each are what they are with reference to the other, then they must share the same ontological status.

This interpretation accurately describes the example Plato first uses to illustrate it, the relation between masters and slaves (133e). If a master exists, so must a slave, and vice-versa. On the other hand, it would not apply to the relation between forests and trees, for ex-

ample, since while forests cannot exist without trees, trees may exist without forests, and hence their relation is not reciprocal.

However, the phrase "with reference to one another" need not be understood as referring only to reciprocal relations. Instead, it may simply refer to cases in which some x is what it is with regard to some y , regardless of whether that y is what it is with regard to that x . The relation, that is, need not be a two-way street, and could then be:

P_2 : If x is what it is with regard to y , then x and y must share the same ontological status.

This interpretation is broader than the former and could apply to the case of forests and trees as well as to reciprocal cases such as masters and slaves.

Since the principle is to support an argument ruling out knowledge of Forms, the better interpretation is clearly that which best applies to the relation between knower and known. Plato describes the things conjoined in this relation as "knowledge" and "reality" (134a), and while knowledge in some sense depends on its object to be what it is, it is doubtful that Plato would claim that reality depends on being known to be what it is. Hence the relation is not reciprocal, and P_2 is the better interpretation. Further, if P_1 is applied and the object of knowledge is what it is insofar as it is known (e.g., a Form of the Known), then the principle would still not apply to Forms such as the Good that are not defined by being known,² since the knowing relation in such cases would not be reciprocal. But an argument that only ruled out knowledge of the Form of the Known and allowed knowledge of other Forms would not seem to pose a serious problem for the theory of Forms. Although Plato does say that the worst difficulty argument is refutable, he surely does not mean that it is inconsequential and hence not a difficulty at all.

It is crucial to note that this principle only insists that members of the relations it specifies need only share the same ontological sta-

tus and not necessarily the same ontological category. Plato's distinction, again, is between "things of that world" and "things of this world," and the latter includes two categories, particulars and characteristics. Further, if the principle were to restrict relations to members of the same category, then particulars would be deprived of essential characteristics, since in some sense they are what they are with reference to their essential characteristics. To borrow an example from the *Phaedo*, fire necessarily has the characteristic of heat, and so could be said to be what it is with reference to heat. If the principle behind the worst difficulty argument is meant to restrict such relations to members of the same category, relations such as that between fire and heat would be ruled out. But the principle does not seem to have such drastic consequences in the *Parmenides*, and so it ought to be understood as applying to relations between members of a different status, not necessarily those of a different category.

Careful attention also must be paid to the phrase "is what it is," for although it is concerned with a thing's essence, it does not imply that one member of the relation is the essence of the other. For if this were the case, the principle would say that the essence of particulars and characters would depend solely on things that share their status. But then their essence could not depend on Forms and, in short, things in the phenomenal world could not participate in the very Forms that define their essence. Since the worst difficulty argument is apparently a reduction to absurdity of the theory of Forms, its prominent principle ought to be one that is sanctioned by that theory. But any principle that rules out the possibility of participation would certainly not be sanctioned by it, and could thus be rejected for this reason.³ Since the argument is apparently not meant to be so easily refuted, the phrase "is what it is" could be better interpreted as implying the following: if x is what it is with regard to y , then the existence of x implies the existence of y . This interpretation seems perfectly in line with the examples Plato gives in the course of the argument. The existence of a particular master implies the existence of a particular

slave, while the essence of the master would presumably depend on the Form Master, and not on the slave. Similarly, the essence of the Form master is found within that Form itself (i.e., it simply is the essence of mastership), but its existence implies the existence of the Form Slave.

Bearing all these considerations in mind, the main principle at work in the argument would then be:

P_3 : If an x is a member of a relation such that its existence implies the existence of y , then x and y must share the same ontological status.

This interpretation avoids leaving the principle so narrow that it only prohibits knowledge of a Form of the Known, or so broad that it prohibits relations such as participation in Forms or the possession of necessary characteristics. At the same time, it presents a strong argument against the knowledge of Forms. If the existence of any sort of knowledge implies the existence of its object, then the object known must share the same ontological status as the knowledge. Since forms do not share the same status as things in the phenomenal world, we, who live in the phenomenal world, cannot have knowledge of Forms.

The force of the argument lies in the degree to which p_3 is sanctioned or required by the theory of Forms. The need for the principle seems to be its ability to avoid absurd relations between Forms and particulars such as particular masters ruling over the Form Slavery, or particular forests composed of the Form Tree. With P_3 , Plato can say not merely that such relations do not in fact obtain, but that they could not in principle obtain. It seems that Plato has three possible routes for refuting this argument. First, he could simply allow that seemingly absurd relations could in principle obtain, though in fact they do not. This would be a weak response, however, since it is not clear how such relations could obtain; Plato would merely be trading

one absurdity for another. Second, he could try to find some other principle that would rule out the absurd cases and yet not rule out the knowing relation. But Plato does not seem to offer this solution anywhere in his writings (so far as I know), and such a principle would be very difficult to come by. Finally, he could look for some peculiarity regarding the relation between knower and known that would exempt it from P_3 . In particular, he could claim that souls, the bearers of knowledge, share the same ontological status as Forms, though not the same category. This would exempt the knowing relation between souls and Forms from P_3 , and Plato seems to hint at such a claim in the *Sophist* (247e-249d).

This passage is ultimately concerned with what things may be classified as having "real being" (247e), which is a good description of the ontological status of Forms. More specifically, it is concerned with whether change may be an attribute of things with real being. In other words, the issue is whether having the proper attribute of change disqualifies a thing from having the same ontological status as Forms. At 249a, Plato argues that intelligence (hence knowledge) implies life, life implies a soul, and a soul implies motion or change. Thus Plato claims that knowledge requires a knower, or soul, and for this reason any knowledge that has real being requires a soul that, in spite of its change, must also have real being. Assuming that knowledge that has real being must include knowledge of Forms, the question whether there is any knowledge of Forms amounts to the question whether change, hence souls, can have real being, and thus share the same ontological status as Forms. Although Plato does not specifically discuss the worst difficulty argument here, he is apparently dealing with the same general problem.

Plato then resolves the question whether change may be a proper attribute of things with real being by first presenting a dilemma: on the one hand, there could not be real knowledge without some real beings capable of change, for then there could not be any knowers (249b); on the other hand, there could be no objects of knowledge if

all reality is capable of change (249c). He therefore concludes that "reality or the sum of all things is both at once - all that is unchangeable and all that is in change" (249d). The quantifier "all" is disputable,⁴ and does not seem to be warranted by the argument given, since all that has been shown is that some changeable things, such as life and soul and all that is necessary for there to be a knower, must have real being. The argument does not show that other changeable things must also have real being. The formal attribute of change, while neither necessary nor sufficient for real being, it is not contrary to real being either. If Plato's distinction here between "real being" and "becoming" (248a) is the same as the distinction in the worst difficulty argument between "things in this world" and "things in that world," the conclusion here may be understood as saying that souls share the same ontological status as Forms, though of course this does not imply that they belong to the same category.

If this interpretation is correct, Plato has the necessary tools in hand for refuting the worst difficulty argument. The refutation amounts to claiming that such phrases as "knowledge in our world" and "knowers in our world" are misleading, for they imply that such knowledge and knowers share the same ontological status as particulars and characteristics. If, on the other hand, knowledge and knowers have the same status as Forms, then the restriction on possible relations given by P_3 does not apply to knowledge, since that principle only ruled out relations between things of a different status, not of different categories. Thus the worst difficulty argument, though not easily refutable in the terms in which it is given, can nevertheless be refuted within the framework of Plato's theory of Forms.

Notes

1. See David Keyt, "Plato's Paradox That the Immutable Is Unknowable," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 1969, p. 13.
2. See James Forrester, "Arguments an Able Man Could Refute," *Phronesis*, 1974, p. 236.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
4. See Keyt, p. 6.