

Separation Anxieties. *Parmenides* 133a-135c

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The greatest difficulty for the defender of Forms, says Parmenides, is laying to rest the objection that Forms of the kind posited would be unknowable. The objection seems to turn on the supposition that if Forms are separate from sensibles, then sensibles must be likewise separate from Forms—and therefore likewise *independent of* Forms. But since independence might imply separateness without separateness implying independence, it looks as if the objector commits an obvious fallacy, and so Parmenides' anxiety far outstrips the actual difficulty. Examining the relation between separateness (a symmetrical relation) and independence (a non-symmetrical relation), this paper argues that the task of surmounting the objection is indeed formidable—with respect to sensible objects and forms, and more especially with respect to the relationship between intelligence and intelligibles. To overcome the objection that distinct and independent forms are unknowable, one must give an account of asymmetrical relations which imply symmetrical relations on which each of the relata (of the symmetrical relation) may be differently affected by this relation; and one must give an account of metaphysical dependence and independence which allows that which is depended upon to retain its independence of that which depends on it. One must in particular offer such an account of the relation between intelligence and the intelligible. For if the intelligible depends for its being intelligible on the nature of intelligence—*our* intelligence—then realism is threatened in a serious way, and the hypothesis of an intelligible reality can no longer do the work of operating as a shared and objective standard by which to resolve disputes by reason rather than by force.

Separation argument, non-symmetrical, independence, separateness, dependent

Manifold issues arise from delimiting [διορίζεται] εἶδη ὄντα αὐτὰ καθ' αὐτά (*Prm.* 133a8-9), says Parmenides; but the greatest (μέγιστον, 133b4) and hardest to answer is the worry that such beings will be unknowable.¹ Only astounding acuity could lay this worry to rest (135b1-2). Why is *this* the real worry? What is there to be so anxious about?

At first it seems that Parmenides' worry outstrips the difficulty of the puzzle. The elaboration of this greatest difficulty comprises the assertion of basic principles; a 'test case' ('master' and 'slave'); and an application to the case of real interest ('knowledge' and 'knowables'). But the crucial flaw is already conspicuous in the initial principles set out, and the application to the test case does nothing to ameliorate it. If we can identify this misstep, we should be able to dispel the larger problem about knowledge.

Forms, Socrates agrees are not 'in us' (ἐν ἡμῖν, 133c5), for being in us would violate their being *auta kath' auta* (133c6). From this, Parmenides concludes that "all τῶν ἰδεῶν are what they are in relation to one another (πρὸς ἀλλήλας εἰσὶν αἱ εἰσιν), and have their being in relation to themselves, not in relation to things that are around us (παρ' ἡμῖν)" (133c8-d1). So

¹ The 'many' of which this is the greatest is not specified; the previous lines concern the extent of the *aporia* (ὄση ἢ ἀπορία) in the singular, twice (133a8, 133b1). Harte 2018 discusses the precise meaning of *aporia* here, and emphasises that the challenge is to persuade otherwise someone who objects that demarcated, *auto kath' auto* forms are unknowable.

far, so familiar: forms do not depend upon sensible particulars for their being—neither for their existence, nor for being *what* and as they are. However, Parmenides then goes on to apply the same stricture to sensible particulars: “These things that belong in us...are in their turn what they are in relation to themselves but not in relation to the forms (τὰ εἶδη)” (133d3-4). But whatever ‘have being with respect to’ means, the very notion that forms and sensibles are on a par in this respect *has* to be mistaken. Particular sensibles were meant to be *unlike* forms in exactly this respect: they are not self-sufficient (*auta kath’auta*), and therefore require and depend upon things which are (*viz.*, forms).

Indeed, the only reason Socrates was not astonished by Zeno’s paradoxes was that he could explain them away concerning *sensibilia* by reference to *intelligibilia*; and this is also why he would be ‘amazed’ (three times, 129b1, c1, e3) should these *intelligibilia* themselves turn out to share the same fate. The whole motivation for positing some such *auta kath’auta* is that more familiar bits of reality do *not* enjoy this status. A line of reasoning implying on which sensible particulars are *also* ‘themselves by themselves’ has gone badly wrong. Plato even draws our attention to this by having Parmenides plant a reminder of the essential *relatedness* of forms and sensibles in the midst of the assertions of their mutual separateness. “And whether one posits these [things among us] as likenesses (ὁμοιώματα) or in some other way, it is by partaking of them that we receive their various names” (133d1-2).

So this seems to be the crucial misstep, and it highlights specifically the characteristic of *eidē* as *auta kath’auta*. But what exactly has gone wrong, and how is it to be set right? If this is the greatest difficulty, we must identify why this misstep seems so plausible—unavoidable, even. What should be so difficult in persuading someone that sensibles are necessarily dependent on forms for their being, and so do not suffer the fatal separateness from forms the objection implies?

The difficulty is great not only dialectically but also, I think, practically. ~~—because t~~ There is the most at stake (Meinwald 1991, 17), as intimated in Parmenides’ concluding warning that ~~without someone denying~~ demarcated, self-sufficient forms, one “won’t have anywhere to turn his thought” (135b8). Parmenides’ pressing This practical concern is not, as Socrates’ reaction implies, that “god would be deprived of knowing” (134e7), but rather that *we* cannot fruitfully discuss justice itself; ~~and consider~~ Recognising this can help ~~to~~ illuminate the difficulty of answering the Separation objection. Practices of inquiry, and of resolving practical disputes by appeal to reason, depend upon there being something to be known that is not identical with whatever may appear to us or however it may appear. ~~But t~~ They also depend ~~also~~ upon the possibility of our *having access to* this reality—or at least upon our being able to make our appearances conform more to reality, and be clear when they do so. But the accessibility of reality to us is something that depends in turn upon our cognitive activity; ~~;~~ whether reality is intelligible *to us* depends in part upon our forms of cognition. But if reality as we can know it

is dependent in that way on us, how could it after all serve as an objective standard for arbitrating disputes?²

This is indeed a most difficult challenge to surmount, and is not easily dissolved by pointing to fallacies in Parmenides' argument, or even by introducing important distinctions—although there may be important distinctions to be made, and there are certainly problems with Parmenides' argument. The core of the difficulty can be seen in its set-up, quoted above. What we see there, put most abstractly, is the simple observation that any asymmetrically related things must be equally related to each other, yet one relatum must be affected by the relation in a way that the other is not.

The specific tension at issue here is between the non-symmetrical relation of independence, and the symmetrical relation of distinctness or “separateness”. Forms must be independent of sensible particulars—they must “have their being”, or be what they are, quite regardless of anything at all about particulars, including their existence or otherwise. This might be glossed as separateness, and seems to imply it—witness the immediate association of *ἀντὰ καθ' ἀντὰ* with verbs of demarcation or separation (*διορίζεται*, 133a9, *ἀφορίζόμενος*, 133b2) in setting out the difficulty.³ But separateness is symmetrical, so if forms are separate from sensible particulars, then sensible particulars are separate from forms. But to be separate from something is to be independent of it, so that if sensibles are separate from forms, they must likewise be what they are by reference *only* to each other, independently of forms. By glossing a non-symmetrical relation with a symmetrical one, and then applying the mutual implication of separateness and independence in the other direction, sensibles achieve precisely the independence of forms they were supposed to lack, and forms become inaccessible to us, and also irrelevant.

This issue is acute in an epistemological context, since explanation—the core of Plato's conception of knowledge—is essentially *asymmetrical*, while forms, in order to do the very explanatory work for which they were posited, must *apparently* be quite separate from the changing vicissitudes of sensible particulars, so as to remain supremely unaffected by these changes. Yet if sensibles are similarly separate from forms, the explanatory project fails.

The preceding likeness regress has set us up to anticipate this tension. For ‘being a likeness’, as Socrates initially describes the relation between sensibles and particulars (*ὁμοιώματα*, 132d3; *εἰκασθῆναι*, 132d4), is essentially *asymmetrical*; but ‘being alike’ is essentially symmetrical.⁴ If P is like (resembles) R, then R is like (resembles) P. But if P *is a likeness of* R, this positively precludes R being a likeness of P. And yet, as Parmenides asks (132d5-8),

² This is familiar as a Kantian puzzle, but it may be formulated in a way that is reminiscent of the question, at *Sophist* 248a ff, of whether the known is affected by being known. The treatment of the ontological question by Brown 1998 seems to me right—we can preserve unchanging forms *and* the ‘affect or be affected’ criterion of being by allowing that reality is the agent that affects minds; but this does not touch on the deeper metaphysico-epistemological worry, concerning the dependency of intelligibles on intelligence. [Fine's \(2020\) acute analysis of the passage thus highlights as a part of the solution what I take to be the crux of the difficulty, namely the apparently trivial and unproblematic observation that “9Se. Knowledge among us is of truths that we grasp or understand”. In this matter, distinguishing ontological from epistemological readings cannot dissolve the difficulty.](#)

³ This is what has become of Parmenides' original, less subtle, formulation of Socrates' view as dividing (*διήρησαι*) ‘separately forms themselves on the one hand, and on the other separately those which partake of them’ (*χωρίς μὲν εἶδη ἀντὰ ἄττα, χωρίς δὲ τὰ τούτων αὖ μετέχοντα*, 130b2-3).

how could P be a *likeness of* R without being *like* R? And if P is like R, then R must be like P. Here an asymmetrical relation (being a likeness of) seems to imply and even dissolve into a symmetrical one (being alike)—and paradox ensues, for the priority implied in the asymmetry of the likeness relation is compromised. To dismiss this as equivocating on ‘likeness’ incurs the onus of articulating how a likeness is a likeness of something, without these two things being alike in that respect. But doing so will not resolve the Separation worry, which brings to the surface the latent concerns with symmetrical and non-symmetrical relations in the more abstract and acute form of distinctness and independence.

There are three obvious strategies for interrupting the logic which has landed us with unknowable intelligibles: 1) deny that the independence of forms implies their separateness of sensibles; 2) deny the symmetry of separateness; 3) deny that the separateness that sensibles *do* enjoy implies their independence of forms. Each of these moves involves maintaining a claim that is *prima facie* difficult to swallow. No wonder it would be very hard to persuade someone who objected that *auta kath’auta* forms were as nothing to us.

We might to this end put these three together by diagnosing an equivocation on ‘separate’. The only ‘separateness’ implied by forms being themselves-by-themselves, and marked off from sensibles and independent of determination by them, is one that is identical to that very fact—simply another word for the same thing (strategy 1). There is no separateness or distinctness implied which is symmetrical (strategy 2). Conversely, if there is any sense in which sensibles *are* ‘separate from’ intelligibles, it is not one that implies their independence (strategy 3).

Sensibles, then, are *not* ‘separate from’ intelligibles in just the same sense of ‘separate’ in which intelligibles *are* separate from sensibles—namely, sensibles *do* ‘become what they are’ in virtue of forms.⁵ It is because equality is what it is, forever and always, that these two sticks are ‘equal in length’. So long as we avoid equivocation, ‘separateness’ in any symmetrical sense does not follow from being *auto kath’auto*. None of these claims is easy to spell out and defend; yet to dispel the anxieties of Separation, we must go one step further, and maintain that independence *precludes* separateness (in the ordinary, symmetrical sense) from that which depends upon it. If something which is independent is depended upon by another, it *cannot* be separate from that other from which it is nevertheless independent.

There is no escaping the threat of Separation without this last move. And yet it is just this move which may seem to make that which is independent something which ‘is what it is in relation to’ that on which it depends, after all. This is the worry. Let us consider this more closely. If sensibles depend on forms, then forms are *depended upon*. This asymmetrical reciprocity is what Parmenides’ ‘master-slave’ example is meant to capture: a relation in which one party has definite authority over the other, while the other is wholly dependent upon the first—yet as relata, each equally depends upon the other playing its role in the relation. Intelligibles similarly have authority over sensibles; they are responsible for

⁴ Scolnicov 2003, 64-68, diagnoses the crux of the Likeness Regress to lie in a confusion of symmetrical and antisymmetrical relations, created in his view by Parmenides’ refusal to acknowledge an ambiguity in εἶναι. If that regress could indeed be resolved by disambiguating senses of εἶναι, it foreshadows concerns with independence and distinctness which could not be so resolved.

⁵ Perhaps also, as Socrates says, in virtue of other sensibles, too – whether other responsible factors come into it is not to the point.

sensibles in a way that sensibles are *not* responsible for them. This, in fact, ~~this~~ is the very thing that links them. As forms with respect to sensibles, the master is the authoritative one, the independent and free one. And yet his being a master *does* depend on someone else's being a slave—and so the master (as Hegel observed) depends up his slave. This is only paradoxical if the original relation we are trying to capture was one in which one party was authoritative over another, and yet ~~is~~ dependent upon that other.⁶ The master-slave relation is not just any old relation chosen at random: it is an excellent analogue for the sort of relationship that is meant to hold between forms and sensibles generally—and it thereby at the same time serves well to anticipate the anxiety that the dependence of sensibles on intelligibles engenders. The master is free and independent of his slave; yet his being a master depends upon there being a slave who is dependent upon him. So his being and nature *as a master* depends upon the being and nature of his slave in a way that compromises the self-sufficiency or independence of that nature, after all. If we give up separateness, the spectre of mutual determination looms.

This dreaded spectre is not in *relationalism*. 'Whatever ἰδεῶν are what they are in relation to each other' (ὄσαι τῶν ἰδεῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλας εἰσὶν αἱ εἰσιν, 133c9) is the *topic of discussion*, not the danger to be guarded against. That forms may depend on one another in various ways for their natures may require careful articulation; but it does not render them epistemically useless, for such relations would themselves be stable, consistent, and utterly independent of accident, contingency and whatever changes. Relationalism does not prevent forms acting as regulative ideals in inquiry and reasoning. But the nature of a form depending upon that which depends on it, in the way that the nature of master depends upon the utterly dependent nature of the slave—this is a problem. This would render forms no longer *auto kath'auto* in the way reality needs to be if seeking truth through inquiry is to make sense at all, and if a reason or explanation is to be anything other than the power to create the appearance of 'betterness' in another. Can we give up separateness, yet still keep forms independent of that which partakes of them, is made intelligible and identifiable by this partaking?

Can *anything* be what it is independently, while being depended upon? Or must even God be compromised by his Creation? Let us focus just on our particular case, because even if God survives, this would not necessarily save the forms. Does being depended upon belong to the nature of forms? The answer at first seems obviously to be 'no'. Justice is what it is, regardless of any just acts, institutions or persons; equality is what it is, regardless of whether anything is ever exactly equal to another in any respect. Intelligibles do not depend on there even *being* sensibles that 'partake of' them, or depend upon them for their natures, still less on what or how those sensibles happen to be.

And yet it does seem to belong to their nature—to the nature of each form—that it be intelligible.— As the source of being of sensibles, they are also the source of their

⁶ To replace this with the sibling relation, as Meinwald does, is no doubt 'more congenial to our sensibilities', but fails to carry over the necessary asymmetry and authority of master-slave which is crucial here. If we want something more congenial to our tastes, we may take the parent-child relation (understanding 'child' relationally—'being the child of...', not 'a young human'). Lewis 1979 takes the difficulty to be one that is easily resolved, because he takes the example offered (the master-slave relation) not to be relevantly similar to the target knowledge-object relation to demonstrate the separateness necessary to get the worry going. Since I think the relevant separateness is tied closely to the independence of forms, I do not think the example is even meant to do what Lewis claims it fails to do.

intelligibility; but they cannot bestow an intelligibility which it is not in their nature to give. Perhaps we might draw here on *heauto v. pros ta alla* predication,⁷ and say that only *as* ‘causes of intelligibility’ (that is only *pros ta alla*), are forms what they are in relation to sensibles, and not independently of them—so their independence is only semi-compromised, and not importantly so.

But while forms might depend trivially on sensibles for their nature as ‘sources of intelligibility’, their dependence on intelligence does not seem so trivial. Forms are not incidentally intelligible under the right conditions—in ~~they~~ way they are incidentally sources of being for sensibles only when there are sensibles depending upon them. Forms are essentially intelligible, frequently defined in terms of our mode of access to them: Socrates would be shocked if Zeno’s paradoxes held of “things grasped by reasoning”, (ἐν τοῖς λογισμῶ λαμβανομένοις, 130a2). But intelligibility is a feature of forms that is explicitly relational—intelligibility is what it is in relation to *intelligence*. This relationship seems to be mutual: intelligibles are by definition that which intelligence grasps, while intelligence is by definition that which grasps the intelligible. This symmetry is not one which sensibles and forms ~~do not share;~~ but ~~to which~~ our attention is drawn to the symmetry itself by the suggestion that they might, together with the specific anxiety about Separation articulated in terms of knowability. This suggestion of mutual determination between intelligibles and intelligence, however, cannot stand; for intelligence *must not*, after all, determine the nature of the known, and especially not its nature as intelligible. If the known (the form of justice, say, as intelligible) depends on the knowing, a much more worrying sort of relativism seems to be lurking around the corner. But if, in order to head this off, we make the known utterly independent of the knowing, then we see from our exploration of **the** case of the form-sensible relation, that the results are just as bad.

Parmenides promises Socrates that in order to deal satisfactorily with this greatest difficulty, one would have to address ‘many distant considerations’ (133b8-9). If the foregoing diagnosis is correct, this is no exaggeration. To overcome the objection that distinct and independent forms are unknowable, one must give an account of asymmetrical relations which look to imply symmetrical relations in which each of the relata (of the symmetrical relation) is differently affected by this relation—or else one must show that these symmetrical relations that appear to be implied are not in fact implied; one must give an account of metaphysical dependence and independence which allows that which is depended upon to retain its independence; and finally, one must do this most especially for the case of intelligence and the intelligible.

If realism is to be maintained, intelligibility must be that which is intelligible to intelligence (our intelligence—nothing else matters here), without becoming thereby ‘whatever happens to appeal to the mentality we happen to have’. It is a labour worthy of Kant’s First Critique, and indeed no small one.

⁷ The crucial distinction Meinwald argues is missing, and must be discerned and rehearsed, if we are to avoid Parmenides’ paradoxes.

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