

# Relating Platonic Forms and Sensible Particulars in the *Phaedo* and the *Parmenides*

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What precisely is the relationship between Platonic forms and sensible particulars? We read that snow "partakes" in coldness, that Socrates "participates" in tallness and that unity "is present" in one. "Partakes", "participates" and "is present in" are the most specific terms Plato employs to articulate the kind of relationship that subsists between the forms and sensible particulars. At best, these terms show that in some sense, the properties, qualities and attributes of sensible particulars are instantiations of the Forms "Coldness", "Tallness" and "Unity". But what does it mean to be an instantiation of a form? How do sensible particulars "get" the properties, qualities and attributes they have from the forms? And how can an immaterial entity be the source of material qualities?

In the *Phaedo* and the *Parmenides* we find out what the participation relation is not. These two dialogues reveal the inadequacy of any kind of physical model. The physical make-up of sensible particulars cannot include tangible, material parts of a form in virtue of which sensible particulars can be said to be instantiations of forms. This effectively rules out the possibility that the participation relation is causal in the narrowest conception of causality. Plato's critique of the physical model proposed by Anaxagoras leaves open the possibility for alternative participation models, but Plato does not explicitly argue for any one specific alternative as the most plausible or appropriate. However, an examination of Plato's response to the physical model certainly reveals what the participation relation cannot be. Are we left then with only a negative definition of the participation relation?

The most plausible alternative is that the participation relation is explanatory. This is suggested in the *Phaedo* where it is characterized as: the logical definition of a form is such that if it is present in a sensible particular, specific properties and attributes manifest themselves in that sensible particular. I will first discuss Plato's critique of the physical model in the *Phaedo* and the *Parmenides* and then turn to an evaluation of the explanatory account of participation.

We first encounter the physical model in the *Phaedo* where it is introduced as a theory of causal explanation. The physical model asserts that sensible particulars have the properties, quali-

ties and attributes that they do because their material constitution contains a part of the form that is the universal of the specific attribute or property sensible particulars display (*Phaedo* 100a). For example, a ball is red because it contains a piece of redness. On this theory then, the ball participates in redness in virtue of having a piece of redness in it as a material constituent. This explains why the ball is red and makes the further claim that the piece of red in the ball is what causes the ball to be red. This physical model relies on two key presuppositions, both of which Plato will agree with even though he rejects the participation relation that comes out of the physical model. The first is that forms do indeed exist separately and independently from sensible particulars and that some kind of relationship between the forms and sensible particulars exists that grounds any explanation for why sensible particulars have the properties they do. The physical model certainly maintains the existence of such forms. Pure redness must exist in order to ground the claim that the ball is red because it contains a part of pure redness. If pure redness did not exist then such a claim would not hold any explanatory or causal power because without pure redness a sensible particular could not contain a part of pure redness. Although this does not discount the possibility for an entirely different theory of why the ball is red, in the context of the physical model pure redness must exist. Evidently, Plato agrees: pure redness is precisely the Form Redness. As shall we, Plato objects to the claim that a part of pure redness is in the ball and thus causes the ball to be red.

The second presupposition that the physical model relies on is the truth of self-predication. For the physical model to stand, the form must have the same property or quality that it instantiates in the sensible particular as its own predicable property or quality. In other words, redness itself must be red or *F*, where *F* is a form, must have *f*-ness, and where *f*-ness is a property or quality. Self-predication is required so that the piece of redness in the ball can be said to be itself red. If the Form of Redness was not truly red, then having a piece of redness in the ball would not explain why the ball was red nor could it cause the redness of the ball. Because *F* has *f*-ness, any part of *F* in a sensible particular has *f*-ness as well. This allows the physical model to explain why the sensible particular has *f*-ness and it grounds the claim that having a part of *F* that has *f*-ness is what causes the sensible particular to have *f*-ness. In the *Parmenides*, Plato develops a theory of predication that retains the truth of self-predication but does not necessarily ground the physical model.

Initially, the physical model makes some sense in view of articulating what kind of relationship might subsist between the forms and sensible particulars. It provides a plausible account of why sensible particulars have the properties they do by relying on a causal explanation. In short, it claims that the forms play a direct, efficient causal role - the piece of the form that is in the particular is what causes the particular to have *f*-ness because the piece itself has *f*-ness. The form (via the "piece" of the form) causes the effect of "having *f*-ness". But this account gives rise to a variety of problems which Plato explores predominantly in the *Parmenides*. First, the forms, according to Plato's explicit account in the *Phaedo*, are by definition immaterial. As such, any talk of parts or pieces of forms that constitute material components of a sensible particular is rendered incoherent. The immaterial cannot be divided into parts and exist as physical components of physical entities (*Parmenides* 131c). Immateriality implies indivisibility except perhaps in the realm of concepts. A complex idea, for example, can be broken down into the simple ideas that compose it or a multiple

clause sentence can be divided into clauses. But transforming the divided parts of the immaterial, like simple ideas or clauses, into physical parts of a material thing is a transformation that belongs to the supernatural, not the natural. Although all Platonic forms are immaterial it might be possible to contend that forms for physical properties could be divided into physical parts when they are instantiated by sensible particulars. Redness is a physical property when it is displayed in a sensible particular even if the Form "Redness" is immaterial. However, if self-predication holds and forms are universally immaterial, how can something immaterial be red or tall, properties which are displayed only by material entities? Plato admits that natural forms are problematic with respect to self-predication not only in the physical model but also in general (*Parmenides* 130c). The Form of Redness cannot be strictly immaterial if redness itself is a physical quality that redness must display.

Moreover, forms like Beauty, Justice, and Knowledge, even when they are qualities displayed by sensible particulars, can hardly be construed as physical parts of sensible particulars. Like ideas and sentences, the Form of Justice could be divisible but it cannot be transformed into a physical entity. Individuals and laws that are *prima facie* "just" are in reality not "just" because they contain within them a particular material entity that is just. The Form of Justice itself could never be described as consisting of or containing a physical entity. Furthermore, if Plato admitted that the forms could be divided at all he would have to admit that a divided form is no longer one that is consistent with the claim that the forms are always one (*Parmenides* 131c-131d). So, the basic Platonic claim that forms are immaterial, whether or not a specific form displays a physical property when it is present in a sensible particular, provides the grounds to reject the physical model of the participation relation.

Another problem which arises from the physical model is the following: if the physical model is true, then each time a sensible particular receives a part of a form the form must separate off a piece of itself that finds its way into a sensible particular. The form must get smaller and smaller, eventually disappearing entirely (*Parmenides* 131d-131e). Other problems appear if a form "runs out": Is it replaced? If so, what replaces it? How can a form be replaced if forms belong to an ideal world that is infinite, non-temporal, and changeless? And what happens to relational forms, for example "Largeness", which would presumably become smaller and smaller as each "large" portion is instantiated in an object's sensible particular? Eventually the Form of Largeness will no longer have largeness and self-predication could not hold (*Parmenides* 131e). The physical model also encounters difficulties in explaining forms of relation generally. If Socrates is taller than Plato is but smaller than Aristotle what happens to Socrates' portion of the Form Tallness? Has it shrunk or been in any way diminished? Or are portions of Tallness given to sensible particulars in different quantities so that tall, taller and tallest exist? Socrates could have a portion of Tallness while Aristotle has a larger portion of Tallness, but what could possibly be present in Tallness that would decide which sensible particular received which portion? And again, we return to the enigma of just what occurs when every portion of Tallness has been distributed.

The physical model is entirely problematic. Any similar account of the participation relation will likely fall into similar difficulties. A narrow conception of causality, namely "efficient" causali-

ty, will also be problematic. Efficient causality is inappropriately mechanistic and material in this context, a context which makes no differentiation between the supersensible world of the forms and the physical, sensible world. A broader sense of causality such as the Aristotelian formal cause or the medieval theories of emanation for example, could be more plausible and appropriate. However, Plato himself never explicitly discusses a broader conception of causality as a plausible explanation of the participation relation. In the *Phaedo* the discussion of causality is limited to efficient causality and, as we have seen, it is rejected. If causal explanation is not a viable model, what does Plato propose in its place? As I have suggested, Plato is uncharacteristically silent on this point. After the lengthy critique of the physical model in the *Parmenides*, Plato turns to a discussion on theories of predication in order to maintain the truth of self-predication. But Plato does not explicitly propose an alternative model for participation nor does he explain whether or not theories of predication have any bearing on his critique. Theories of predication, which focus on the ways we predicate qualities, properties and attributes of objects and their possible truth values, do not strictly explain how or why the object (sensible particular) has the properties that it does. Predication theories are concerned not with the origin of properties in objects but about the veracity of true and false statements about those properties.

The initial critique of the physical model we find in the *Phaedo* suggests that the participation model is purely explanatory. In other words, what makes a painting beautiful is that it participates in or partakes in the Form of Beauty (*Phaedo* 100d). This statement does not claim anything further than 1) there are forms; 2) sensible particulars stand in some kind of relation to the forms and 3) that relation reveals that sensible particulars have the qualities they do with respect to the forms. Evidently, this does not explain what the relation actually consists of and how that relation could be explanatory. Furthermore, if this were the basis of the Platonic account of the participation relation it would be empty and devoid of content (*Phaedo* 100d-100e). We have already accepted Plato's preliminary claim that X is f in virtue of f-ness (the painting is beautiful in virtue of partaking in the Form of Beauty, *Phaedo* 100d). Moreover, if these kinds of explanatory statements were sufficient to ground a participation model, Plato would be forced to acknowledge the following difficulty: What if we do not know that X is f so that we cannot make any claim about X having f in virtue of f-ness? In this case nothing is explained and we are still left with the problem of an unclear conception of the participation relation. That the painting is beautiful because it participates in the Form of Beauty does not explain what kind of interaction occurs between the Form of Beauty and the painting such that the statement "the painting is beautiful" is true (that the painting is in fact beautiful) and that the statement is true because of some kind of participation.

Plato suggests a new, more sophisticated theory of explanation that is grounded in some kind of logical definition. The logical definition or structure of the form reveals a specific mode of participation (*Phaedo* 105b-105c). The answer to the question "why does X display f-ness?" or "How is X predicable by f?" is: X is f because X is y and y entails f-ness (the Form F) (*Phaedo* 105c). For example, X is cold because X is snow (y) and the logical definition of snow entails Coldness (f-ness). So, the kind of sensible particular that X is denotes what kind of qualities X can display given that specific qualities are entailed in the logical definition of the form that X instantiates. In this case,

there is a close relationship between the form and the sensible particular. The definition or structure of forms entail certain and discrete sets of predicates. Sensible particulars that are predicable by specific set of predicates do so because they participate in that specific form. If a sensible particular satisfies the conditions, or is predicable by one entire set of predicates, then it can be said that it partakes in that form. This account certainly explains why sensible particulars have the qualities they do by appeal to a more sophisticated notion of explanation. It establishes the conditions a sensible particular must meet in order to participate in a form and it reveals that any precise account of the participation relation will have something to do with logical definition and structure of forms. However, there is still a sense in which the participation relation is left unexplained—we are left with persistent question of how and why sensible particulars stand in relation to forms such that they possess the qualities they do. Or, how does the logical definition of a form and the kinds of predicates that definition entails come to be manifested in a sensible particular?

Although Plato's theory of explanation leaves much unclear, it avoids the difficulties that arise from the physicalist model or the causal theory. And it does explain the nature of sensible particulars by appealing to the ideal world of forms. Socrates is human because he satisfies all the conditions of the definition of "human". If we understand the forms as simply objective, *a priori* logical definitions that are immaterial, non-temporal and changeless and not quasi-mystical entities that float about and that do not play any direct, efficient causal role in the instances of sensible particulars, then there is a sense in which the explanatory theory does reveal the participation relation. The mistake is to conceive of the forms as having some kind of agency in arranging sensible particulars so that they display in materiality the kinds of predicates the forms themselves have. We must not underestimate Plato's rejection of the efficient causal explanation.

If we characterize the forms as *a priori* logical definitions which entail specific sets of predicates then sensible particulars that are predicable by certain predicates can be said to participate in a specific form simply in virtue of being predicable by those predicates. The semantics of the word "in" as employed during Plato's account of the physical model are entirely false and misleading. The terms "participate", "partakes" and "present in" are all semantically ambiguous as well, because they imply a kind of activity that requires agency on the part of the forms and the sensible particulars. To claim that Socrates participates in Tallness or Humanness implies an active interaction between Socrates the sensible particular and Tallness or Humanness as forms. Under the explanatory model, this active interaction is irrelevant. A more accurate statement would be: Socrates is human because he is predicable by "ensouled body" which is the predicate entailed in the logical definition "human".

The tendency to understand Platonic forms as having agency, as having the causal power to determine the kinds of qualities and attributes and properties in sensible particulars is persistent. The causal explanation is tempting in part because Plato's two-world hypothesis appears to fit into the later philosophical notions of natural law, the principle of sufficient reason and the entire basis of Christian philosophy. The forms mistakenly supply the immaterial causes for why the material world exists as it does. Like natural law and that of the divine, the forms occupy the supersensible

world that is necessarily *a priori*, absolute and unchanging. The belief in the *a posteriori* nature of the material world in contradistinction to the forms gives rise to an understanding of the forms in the same way that divine or natural law is understood—as causal—so that the material world is rendered intelligible by appeal to a transcendental power. The forms understood as primary causes, a position later occupied by God, provides sufficient and necessary reason for the state of the material world. However, I have tried to show that any understanding of the forms which is grounded in an efficient causation model is inappropriate and misleading and is susceptible to the difficulties encountered by the physical model.

The participation relation is nothing more than an explanatory relation that involves the logical definition and structure of forms. Sensible particulars can only be said to "participate" in a logical definition insofar as a sensible particular happens to be predicable by a set of predicates that are entailed in a specific logical definition. Presumably, the forms and their specific sets of predicates can account for every kind of sensible particular and each instance of a predicable quality that we find in the material world. As such, the forms could be construed as *a priori*, non-temporal and objective kinds that sensible particulars belong to depending on which sets of predicates they are predicable by. The forms then still provide a supersensible system of categorization that permits the intelligibility of the material world without being themselves causes of objects in that world. They exist as a system of logical definitions which are distinguished by the predicates they entail and encompass all possible types of sensible particulars, while also explaining why a sensible particular has the qualities it does insofar as those qualities belong to a particular logical definition.

## Works Cited

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