

# Criticisms of Plato's Theory of Forms: Third Man Argument:

- I. In Plato's later dialogues we observe that they offer critical self-evaluations of the Theory of Forms: For example, in the *Theaetetus* Plato attempts to answer the question "What is knowledge" in a way that seems to ignore the critical role of Forms in Platonic epistemology. In *Parmenides*, Plato offers a series of arguments which seem to refute the theory of Forms. Perhaps the most telling is the "Third Man Argument":
- II. Third Man Argument depends on three theses:
  - A. **One-over-many Thesis:** there exists a Form, F-ness, for every set of F-things that make those things F. For example, the Form of Beauty (F-ness) which makes beautiful people (F-things) beautiful (F).
  - B. **Distinctness Thesis:** The form that makes the F-things F is distinct from the F-things themselves. For example, in the *Phaedo*, Plato argues that the Form of Equality (F-ness), which the sensible equals (F-things) strived to be like was distinct from the sensible equals themselves.
  - C. **Self-Predication:** The Form which makes the F-things F is itself F. For example, the Form of Equality is a perfect instance of Equality. Equality (F-ness) is (perfectly) equal (F) and Justice (F-ness) is (perfectly) just (F).

Given these three theses, Plato argues that an infinite regress of Forms can be generated.

For example, let's assume that there exists a set of girls (F-things). It follows from the one-over-many thesis that there exists the Form of girls (F-ness), which makes those girls, girls.

From the distinctness thesis it follows that girl-ness is distinct from those girls, that is, Girl-ness is not itself a member of that set of girls, and yet from the self-predication thesis it follows that Girl-ness is itself a girl. Therefore, we have a new set of girls, the original set plus Girl-ness, which in turn requires the existence of the Form Girl-ness that makes these girls, girls. But Girl-ness is distinct from the girls it explains and is itself a girl. Thus, we have a new set of girls and a new Form, Girl-ness, and so on, ad infinitum.

David Banach uses this illustration:

A red book and a red flower, for example, resemble each other in virtue of being copies of the form of redness. Because they are copies of this form, they also resemble the form. But this resemblance between the red object and the form of redness must also be explained in terms of another form. What form does a red object and the form of redness both copy to account for their similarity? One can see that this will lead to an infinite regress. Whenever someone proposes another form that two similar things copy, you can always ask them to explain the similarity between the form and the objects. This will always require another form. The notion of imitation or copying used in the theory of forms, then, runs into logical difficulties. The theory of forms really explains nothing about the similarity of objects; another form is always needed beyond the one proposed. Thus to explain the similarity between a man and the form of man, one needs a third form of man, and this always requires another form. The explanation of the original similarity is never given; it is only put off to the next level.