

Separation and its language in Plato

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I present an original interpretation of the concept of separation in Plato. First, I argue that despite the fact that the ancient Greek word for “separation” almost never appears in the metaphysical discussions of Plato’s dialogues, the key role of the concept of separation in Plato’s metaphysics can be attested by the importance the platonic tradition gives to it. Therefore, understanding separation in Plato seems to be a problem we must face, but we do not have a clear strategy to solve it. My strategy will be to tackle this problem by looking at a specific passage (*Phd.* 74 b7-c5) in which Plato distinguishes the ontological status of Forms and sensible things. Through the analysis of this passage and its relations to another metaphysical argument in Plato (*Smp.* 211a2-5), I hope to show that Plato’s careful choice of words and syntactical structure of sentences aims to distinguish two ontologically different types of entities: the unrelational, separate Forms, and the relational sensible things.

Keywords: Plato, separation, ontology.

Introduction

The concept of separation plays a major role in Plato scholarship since the very beginning of this tradition, when Aristotle decided to comment on his master’s work. Aristotle takes separation as a central feature of Plato’s ontology and spends most of his time dedicated to Plato in the *Metaphysics* criticizing this single attribute of the Forms. Surprisingly, Plato himself almost never uses the term to describe the Forms or the relationship between Forms and particulars, the only exception being the opening moments of Socrates’ discussion with Parmenides in the dialogue named after the great Eleatic philosopher (*Prm.* 130b2-5; 130c1-d2).

As we could expect, Plato’s failure to refer to “separation” made some scholars believe that this was not an important feature of his ontology after all, or even that it was not one of his metaphysical claims (see Fine, 1984, 1986; also Dancy, 1991). However, since Aristotle, for many different reasons, is in a very privileged position on the issue of how to understand Plato’s Philosophy, I take it for granted that the concept of separation has a central function in Plato’s theory of reality. What I do not take for granted is that we should understand Plato’s concept of “separation” based on Aristotle’s criticism of it. So, in this paper, I will look for ways to understand “separation” in Plato regardless of what Aristotle says of it, especially regardless of the technicalities Aristotle brings to the discussion.

At this point, I am sure the reader expects me to start a discussion about *Phaedo’s* Affinity Argument (*Phd.* 7bb-84b) in order to establish analogies between the separated souls and

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Forms, on the one hand, and things and bodies, on the other. But that is not what I am going to do. What I am going to do is to analyze a single sentence of the *Phaedo* in which Socrates explicitly talks about the differences between Forms and sensible things. My hope is that a correct appreciation of this single sentence will help to clarify the concept of separation in Plato's metaphysics.

Analysis of 74b7-9

The sentence to be considered in this paper (*Phd.* 74b7-9) has for a long time been a source of controversy both among translators and philosophers. The main reason for that is the fact that its interpretation depends on a series of judgments about Greek syntax. In this section, I will present the different syntactical readings for the sentence and discuss some of the philosophical consequences related to them.

The context is of great importance since the sentence happens to be located in the context of one of the most famous statements of Socrates's theory of recollection (*Phd.* 72e-78b). In this part of his argument, Socrates makes the very straightforward claim that equal sticks or stones are inevitably also unequal. Since, on the other hand, the Equal itself cannot betray any measure of inequality, the particular sticks and stones and the Equal itself are not the same. Equal sticks and stones can, however, remind the soul of the Equal itself, which the soul must have contemplated before incarnation. Therefore, the argument seems to go, the human soul is immortal.

For the sake of my present argumentation the passage is especially important because it represents one out of a very small number of explicit arguments that Plato gives for the claim that Forms are distinct from sensible objects. Therefore, I wish to focus on the step in which Plato states the differences between these two kinds of entities: the Equal itself and equal sticks and stones. For the time being, let's assume the following translation for the passage:

Consider thus. Don't equal sticks and stones sometimes, being the same, seem equal to one but not to another?

Certainly.

Well, then, have the equals themselves ever seemed to you unequal or equality inequality? Never yet, Socrates.

So, these equals and the Equal itself are not the same (Phd.74 b7-c5).

σκόπει δὲ καὶ τῆδε. ἄρ' οὐ λίθοι μὲν ἴσοι καὶ ξύλα ἐνίστε ταῦτά ὄντα τῶ μὲν ἴσα φαίνεται, τῶ δ' οὐ;

Πάνυ μὲν οὖν.

Τί δέ; αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα ἔστιν ὅτε ἄνισά σοι ἐφάνη, ἢ ἡ ἰσότης ἀνισότης;
Οὐδεπώποτε γε, ὦ Σώκратες.
Οὐ ταῦτὸν ἄρα ἔστιν, ἢ δ' ὅς, ταῦτά τε τὰ ἴσα καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον (*Phd.* 74 b7-c5).

The argument rests on the claim that Forms and sensible objects have distinct features. While sensible equals also appear/are unequal, the Form of Equal does not appear/is unequal. The difficulties begin when we try to understand in what sense the equal sticks and stones can also be unequal, and, on the other hand, in what sense the Equal itself cannot be unequal. There seem to be several options of reading each one with its pros and cons.

The Greek text for the specific lines I want to consider is the following:

ἄρ' οὐ λίθοι μὲν ἴσοι καὶ ξύλα ἐνίστε ταῦτά ὄντα τῶ μὲν ἴσα φαίνεται, τῶ δ' οὐ (*Phd.* 74b7-9).

In order to understand the correct meaning of this sentence, we must first deal with the fact that the verb φαίνομαι has two distinct uses. If it is followed by an infinitive, its meaning is "appears to be" or "seems to be" with the possible addition "but is not". On the other hand, if it is followed by a participle, it means "seems to be" or "is observed to be" with the possible addition "and really is". Since the text does not provide either one of the complements, the interpreter must decide for himself which sense Plato intended to convey. And, of course, there are philosophical consequences attached to that choice.

For some interpreters the mere fact that sensible particulars can generate contrary perceptions is sufficient to differentiate them from the Forms, even if they are not in themselves contradictory entities. This line of interpretation reads φαίνεται as followed by an elided infinitive and was advocated, for instance, by Archer-Hind, for whom "the existence of a conflict of opinion is sufficient to establish the differences between the particulars and the Idea: in the case of the latter no such conflict does or can exist" (1883, p. 37).²

Others, however, maintain that Socrates would need more in order to distinguish Forms from particulars, especially in view of Socrates' further claim that equal sticks and stones are in themselves somehow deficient when compared with the Equal itself. For those interpreters, Socrates would need to talk about the *actual* properties of Forms and things, and not about how these things *appear* to be. But for that claim to be made, Plato would need an elided participle after φαίνεται (see, for example, Hackforth, 1955, p. 75; Bluck, 1955, p. 76).

Another point of dispute is the correct understanding of the pronouns τῶ μὲν ... τῶ δ' οὐ. These words offer an even wider range of possible readings. First of all, there is a family of

² See White (1987, p. 211): "Equal sensibles are capable of presenting misleading appearances in a way in which equality and inequality are not. Unlike sensibles, Forms are cognitively reliable". See also Dorter (1980, p. 54-57).

manuscripts in which these words are replaced by *τότε μὲν ... τότε δ' οὐ*, which would be translated “sometimes sticks and stones, while being the same, at one time appear equal, at another time not.”³ On this reading, Socrates’ point is that a pair of equal sticks, while remaining the same pair of sticks, is at one time equal and at another time unequal, because they have changed. Or, if we assume an elided infinitive after *φαίνεται*, his point would rather be that a pair of equal sticks or stones, while remaining exactly the same, *seems* now equal and now unequal not because of their changing, but due to a change in the perspective of the observer. And this contrasts with the Form of Equality, which never changes nor even *seems* to be unequal.

Although there is a respectable manuscript tradition for this reading of the Greek text, it must be noted that this replacement would make the use of *ἐνίοτε* in the sentence a little awkward: “sometimes... at one time... at another time” (*ἐνίοτε... τότε... τότε*). Besides, stones are certainly not the best sensible entities to illustrate changes over time. No doubt stones actually change over time, but they certainly are not the most natural example to make the point that sensible things change while Forms do not.⁴

On the other hand, if we choose to adopt the manuscript tradition that reads *τῶ μὲν ... τῶ δ' οὐ* instead of *τότε μὲν ... τότε δ' οὐ*, things are not really better. For we can attribute three very different meanings to the sentence according to the gender we assign to the pronouns.

The pronouns can be masculine and, in this case, the sentence would be translated as: “sometimes, sticks and stones, while being the same, seem equal to one person but not to another person.” A pair of sticks one meter long, for instance, seems equal to one observer and unequal to another.⁵ On initial consideration, this interpretation appears to be satisfactory, mostly because it offers a natural translation of the Greek. However, on conceptual grounds it seems problematic. Could it not be the case that the judgment of one of the two people is just wrong? Besides, why would Socrates explain the ontological differences between Forms and sensible particulars solely on the ground that one is capable of misapprehending sensible objects, but not Forms? Again, many critics emphasize that Socrates would rather make a point about these things in themselves, and not about the human apprehension of them.

Another option is to consider the pronouns as neutral and to render the sentence as “sometimes, sticks and stones,

while being the same, appear equal to one thing but not to another thing.”⁶ In this case, we would not be talking about a pair of sticks or stones. Socrates’ point would rather be that a given stick one meter long is equal to another one of the same size but unequal to a third stick half-meter long. This reading has the advantage of resulting in an obviously true statement. Since “to be equal” is a relation between two things, to change the second member of the relation would eventually lead to the case where the two things are not equal. The problem of this reading is that it would make no sense of *ἐνίοτε* again. A stick or stone will *always* be equal to something and unequal to another. So, why would Socrates say that this scenario happens only “sometimes” (*ἐνίοτε*)?

A third possibility is to read the pronouns again as neutral, but this time conferring to them an adverbial force. In this case, we should translate the sentence as: “sometimes, sticks and stones, while being the same, seem equal in one respect but not in another respect” (see Haynes, 1964, p. 19-21). The point would be that a given pair of sticks can be equal in size while being unequal in, say, thickness. This adverbial reading has the advantage of leaving unspecified the aspect in which the sticks and stones are equal or unequal. As a result, it implicitly includes all the other possibilities mentioned before. Its downside, however, is that it is not usual at all to have a neutral pronoun acting as an adverb. As remarked by Bostock (1986, p. 74), one would certainly expect the feminine pronoun in an adverbial construction like this.

Although commentators have a long debate about which one of the above mentioned options is the one that better conveys Plato’s intentions, I think that we should consider the possibility that Plato is actually leaving the text open for these different readings. According to this interpretation, Plato would have chosen a deliberately vague form of writing in order to state the fact that sensible objects are contradictory in many different ways, all of them expressed by the opposition of relative pronouns.⁷

This possibility becomes more likely when we compare these lines of the *Phaedo* with a passage of the *Symposium* (211a2-5). In this *Symposium*’s passage, Diotima tries to explain to Socrates the differences between Beauty itself and other beautiful things:

First, then, it is always, neither coming to be nor passing away, neither increasing nor

³ Several nineteenth century editions of Plato’s *Phaedo* adopt the text *τότε μὲν ... τότε δ' οὐ*, including Grosse (1828), and Wytttenbach (1825). The reading is also favored by the French editions of Vicaire (1983) and Dixsaut (1991). For a defense of this reading on conceptual grounds see Sedley (2007).

⁴ Of course, the second criticism is valid only if we accept a veridical reading of *φαίνεται*.

⁵ This reading is associated with the assumption that the verb *φαίνεται* is followed by an elided infinitive. See White (1987) and Wagner (1885, p. 124): “Equality in as far as it is perceived by the senses is not certain and unchangeable, as men are apt to disagree about it; but abstract equality (*αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον*) always remains one and the same”.

⁶ This interpretation is naturally related to a veridical reading of *φαίνεται*, and was proposed by Murphy (1951, p. 111), Bostock (1986, p. 75) and Rowe (1993, p. 169). For a similar view, see Nehamas (1975).

⁷ The possibility that Plato intended to use a syntactically ambiguous construction was first considered by Gallop (1975, p. 122), and Rochnick (2002, p. 140).

diminishing. Next, it is not beautiful in one respect and ugly in another respect (τῆ μὲν καλόν, τῆ δ' αἰσχρόν), nor [beautiful] at one time and not at another (τοτὲ μὲν, τοτὲ δὲ οὐ), nor beautiful compared with one thing and ugly compared with another (πρὸς μὲν τὸ καλόν, πρὸς δὲ τὸ αἰσχρόν), nor beautiful in one place and ugly in another, so as to be beautiful to some and ugly to others (ἔνθα μὲν καλόν, ἔνθα δὲ αἰσχρόν, ὡς πισὶ μὲν ὄν καλόν, πισὶ δὲ αἰσχρόν).

πρῶτον μὲν αἰεὶ ὄν καὶ οὔτε γιγνόμενον οὔτε ἀπολλύμενον, οὔτε αὐξανόμενον οὔτε φθίνον, ἔπειτα οὐ τῆ μὲν καλόν, τῆ δ' αἰσχρόν, οὐδὲ τοτὲ μὲν, τοτὲ δὲ οὐ, οὐδὲ πρὸς μὲν τὸ καλόν, πρὸς δὲ τὸ αἰσχρόν, οὐδ' ἔνθα μὲν καλόν, ἔνθα δὲ αἰσχρόν, ὡς πισὶ μὲν ὄν καλόν, πισὶ δὲ αἰσχρόν (*Smp.* 211a2-5).

As we can see, the three possible readings for the ambiguous pronouns of the sentence in the *Phaedo* plus the version with the adverb of time *τοτὲ*, which we dismissed on textual grounds, are here laid out by Diotima as different ways in which a beautiful thing can be ugly. Well, the same goes for equal sticks and stones. There are various ways in which sensible equals are (and seem to be) also unequal; each one of these ways represents a possible reading for the indefinite pronouns we find at the line *Phd.* 74b7. In the *Phaedo*, Plato's use of the pronouns is intentionally indeterminate (as indeed is his use of the verb *φαίνομαι*) in order to express in just one sentence the many different ways in which the sensible objects can display their indeterminacy.

Separation

Plato's use of the indefinite pronouns in the oppositional construction *τῶ μὲν ... τῶ δ' οὐ* represents an ingenious device to express the various relations that every sensible object holds with other things. These relations are constitutive of the sensible objects and they determine what properties these objects actually have. In fact, the sensible objects are involved in so many relations that for each property they have there will be another relation in which they display the exact contrary property. That is why Plato uses the pronouns together with the particles *μὲν* and *δὲ* in an oppositional construction.

The Forms, on the other hand, do not hold any kind of relation to other things, and that is why they are not described by relative pronouns in oppositional construction but by the intensive pronoun *αὐτός*. The contrast between the expression *τῶ μὲν ... τῶ δ' οὐ* used to describe the sensible things and the expression *αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ* used to describe the Forms represents, therefore, a syntactical device designed to express the distinction between a relational kind of object and a non-relational, isolated kind of entity. Sensible objects have their properties in relation to other things, and that feature makes them subject to opposite predications and, since

their relations are always changing, also unstable entities. Forms, on the other hand, have their properties by themselves in the sense that their lack of relation with other things makes them perfect, stable and independent unities, described only by their self-predication.

Now, if we assume Vlastos' thesis according to which the expressions *εἶναι χωρίς* and *εἶναι αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ* "are meant to enunciate the same metaphysical claim" (1987, p. 190), we come to the conclusion that to be *χωρίς* (separate) means nothing more than to be "isolate", which is actually the ordinary meaning of this word! In contrast to sensible relational things that are what they are only because of their relations to other things, a Form is separate (*χωρίς*) in the sense that it is what it is itself by itself (*αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ*).

Of course, I am not willing to say that Forms are not ontologically independent, prior or transcendent entities. In fact, these ontological features are intrinsically connected to the fact that Forms are un-relational, isolated entities. However, it seems to me that to understand the expressions *εἶναι χωρίς* and *εἶναι αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ* as equivalent to these sophisticated metaphysical theses is misleading in the sense that it undermines the descriptive value of these expressions and, as a consequence, the most fundamental metaphysical claim attached to them.

To make it clear, my point is that we do not need to understand separation as a technical term formulated to express complex philosophical claims such as ontological priority, ontological independence or even transcendence. The distinction between non-relational and relational entities is at the core of Plato's metaphysics, and to say that the Forms are separate is equivalent to stating this very distinction. To be separate is to be set apart, disconnected from everything else, isolated, but nothing more than that.

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