

THREE PROBLEMS FOR THE THEORY OF FORMS

The Whole-Part Dilemma

Here are two ways to understand what “partaking” amounts to. The Whole-Part Dilemma shows that, on either way of understanding partaking, the theory of forms results in absurdity.

Whole-Pie (WP) Model: X partakes of Y = the whole of Y is in X
Piece-of-Pie (PP) Model: X partakes of Y = a part of Y is in X

Assume the existence of some sensible spatially separated F things, (a, b, c). By (C), a, b, and c are F by virtue of partaking of the F. So, a, b, and c partake of the F. According to the WP Model, the whole of the F is in each of a, b, and c. Since a, b, and c are spatially separated, it follows that the whole of the F is in many separate things at the same time. But if the whole of X is in many separate things at the same time, then X is separate from itself. So, the F is separate from itself. But nothing is separate from itself. Hence the F is not separate from itself. Contradiction. So the WP Model is inconsistent with (C), and hence is inconsistent with the theory of forms.

According to the PP Model, a part of the F is in each of a, b, and c. (Since it is possible for a, b, and c to end up with different parts of the F, the PP Model doesn't result in the same absurdity that results from the WP Model.) But if a part of the F is in each of a, b, and c, then the F is divisible. Hence, the F is divisible. But, in general, if X is divisible, then X has many parts. And if X has many parts, then X is many (things). Hence, the F is many. Since one and many are contrary properties, it follows from (RP) that the F can't be both one and many. Hence the F is not one. But, by (O), the F is one. Contradiction. So the PP Model is inconsistent with (C), (O), and (RP), and hence is inconsistent with the theory of forms.

The Third Man

Assume the existence of some sensible F things, (a, b, c). By (OM), there is a form of F-ness (call it “F1”) by virtue of partaking of which a, b, and c are all F. So, a, b, and c all partake of F1. By (SP), F1 is F. By (OM), there is a form of F-ness (call it “F2”) by virtue of partaking of which a, b, c, and F1 are all F. So, a, b, c, and F1 all partake of F2. By (NSP), no form partakes of itself, and hence F1 is not identical to F2. Thus, there are two forms of F-ness, F1 and F2, such that F1 partakes of F2.

Now, by (SP), F2 is F. So, by (OM), there is a form of F-ness (call it “F3”) by virtue of partaking of which a, b, c, F1, and F2 are all F. So a, b, c, F1, and F2 all partake of F3. By (NSP), neither F1 nor F2 is identical to F3. Thus, there are three forms of F-ness, F1-F3, such that F1 partakes of F2-F3, and F2 partakes of F3.

Now, by (SP), F3 is F. So, by (OM), there is a form of F-ness (call it “F4”) by virtue of partaking of which a, b, c, F1, F2, and F3 are all F. So a, b, c, F1, F2, and F3 all partake of F4. By (NSP), none of F1, F2, F3 is identical to F4. Thus, there are four forms of F-ness, F1-F4, such that F1 partakes of F2-F4, F2 partakes of F3-F4, and F3 partakes of F4.

Repeating this reasoning *ad infinitum* gives us the following result: there is an infinite sequence of forms of F-ness such that each form in the sequence partakes of each form that comes later in the sequence. Hence, there is an infinite sequence of forms of F-ness, each one of which partakes of infinitely many forms.

Now, in general, if X partakes of infinitely many forms, then X is (infinitely) many. Thus, there is an infinite sequence of forms of F-ness, each of which is (infinitely) many. Since one and many are contrary properties, it follows by (RP) that each form of F-ness in the infinite sequence is not one. But, by (O)—which follows from (OM), each form is one. Contradiction. So the following assumptions of the theory of forms are mutually inconsistent: (OM), (SP), (NSP), and (RP).

The Likeness Regress

Here is another way to understand partaking:

(S) X partakes of Y = X is like (i.e., resembles) Y

Assume the existence of some sensible F thing, say A. By (OM), A is F by virtue of partaking of a form of F-ness (call it “F1”). So A partakes of F1. By (S), A is like F1. But the relation of being like is symmetrical (call this “symmetry”): if X is like Y, then Y is like X. Hence, F1 is like A. But, in general, if X is like something, then X is like. So F1 is like. Thus, by (OM), F1 is like by virtue of partaking of a form of likeness (call it “L1”). So F1 partakes of L1. And by (NSP), F1 is not identical to L1.

Suppose now (for *reductio*) that something (say, B) is like L1 or that L1 is like something (say, C). If B is like L1, then, by symmetry, L1 is like B. Hence, on either supposition L1 is like something, and hence L1 is like. Now, by (OM), L1 is like by virtue of partaking of a form of likeness (call it “L2”). So L1 partakes of L2. By (NSP), L1 is not identical to L2. So there are two forms of likeness, L1 and L2, such that L1 partakes of L2.

Since L1 partakes of L2, it follows from (S) that L1 is like L2. By symmetry, L2 is like L1, and hence L2 is like. Thus, by (OM), L1 and L2 are both like by virtue of partaking of a form of likeness (call it “L3”). So L1 and L2 both partake of L3. By (NSP), neither L1 nor L2 is identical to L3. So there are three forms of likeness, L1-L3, such that L1 partakes of L2-L3, and L2 partakes of L3.

Since L2 partakes of L3, it follows from (S) that L2 is like L3. By symmetry, L3 is like L2, and hence L3 is like L2. Thus, by (OM), L1, L2, and L3 are all like by virtue of partaking of a form of likeness (call it “L4”). So L1-L3 all partake of L4. By (NSP), none of L1-L3 is identical to L4. So there are four forms of likeness, L1-L4, such that L1 partakes of L2-L4, L2 partakes of L3-L4, and L3 partakes of L4.

Repeating this reasoning *ad infinitum* gives us the following result: there is an infinite sequence of forms of likeness such that each form in the sequence partakes of each form that comes later in the sequence. Hence, there is an infinite sequence of forms of likeness each one of which partakes of infinitely many forms.

Now, in general, if X partakes of infinitely many forms, then X is (infinitely) many. Thus, there is an infinite sequence of forms of likeness, each of which is (infinitely) many. Since one and many are contrary properties, it follows by (RP) that each form of likeness in the infinite sequence is not one. But, by (O)—which follows from (OM), each form is one. Contradiction.

It follows that the assumption for *reductio* is false, i.e., it follows that *nothing* is like L1 (and L1 is like nothing). But we showed above that A is like L1, and hence that *something* is like L1. Contradiction.

It follows that the understanding of partaking as resemblance, namely (S), is inconsistent with (OM), (NSP), and (RP), and hence that (S) is inconsistent with the theory of forms.