

The Greatest Difficulty at *Parmenides* 133c-134e and Plato's relative terms

The first part of Plato's *Parmenides* bombards the theory of Forms with objections. Parmenides singles out one criticism as the 'Greatest Difficulty' (hereafter 'GD') and presents it at *Parmenides* 133c-134e. The argument has received some attention but scholars generally think that it does not pose a threat to the theory of Forms, either because it is not formally valid, or, if it is formally valid, because it begs the question against the Platonist. This paper aims to show that the GD is a serious challenge to the theory of Forms, neither invalid, at least for the reasons usually given, nor question-begging.

To understand how the GD poses a threat, we need to understand how Plato thinks of relative terms, with which the GD is concerned. We discover that the Forms are otiose when saying in virtue of what a relative comes to be the relative that it is.¹ Roughly put: for Plato each relative term, such as master, has a correlative to which it exclusively and exhaustively relates. So when we come to say in virtue of what a relative is the relative it is, we need to mention only its correlative and not a Form. For example, if Achilles is a master, he is a master in virtue of his relationship to Briseis, not to the Form Master. Because of a peculiarity in Plato's view of relatives,

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¹ I use the expression 'in virtue of' to reflect an important distinction here between causal explanations and non-causal explanations. Causal explanations answer a why question by pointing to a world-level causal relationship between items. The window broke *because* a ball hit it. But explanations need not point to a relationship like this. Why are all biologists scientists? It seems that it is *in virtue of* the non-causal relationship between biologists and scientists, not because of any causal relationship between them. This piece is primarily concerned with an explanation of this latter sort. In virtue of what is a relative the relative that it is? Answering this question is independent of explaining how, for example, the Form master may cause a participant master to be a master. It is often thought that the Forms offer causal explanations of the properties of their participants, but I do not rely on that claim and will not argue for it here.

relatives only relate to their correlative; for Plato, relative terms have a special and unique relationship to a correlative term. Thus, Achilles can only be master of things in this realm. With appropriate changes, the same considerations isolate the Form Master as master only of the Form Slave. So the GD rules out the relation of relative terms to correlatives in another realm. The difficulty is serious because it entails that we cannot know the Forms, and that the gods cannot know our affairs or be our masters.

In section 1, I will outline the main approaches to the GD in the literature. The first approach, styled ‘the radical separation reading’, takes it that the GD assumes total separation of the Forms from participants. I reject this reading as begging the question against the Platonist. I reject an older view, that the GD is an argument from analogy, because that reading makes the GD an obvious fallacy. In section II, I will introduce my own reading, which vindicates the argument, but avoids the problems that dog the existing readings. I develop a much richer understanding of Plato’s notion of relative terms and show how that supports my view.

1. Existing Approaches to the GD

If Socrates is correct that there are Forms, then his proposal must account for the relationship between Forms and participants. Two candidates for the relationship, sharing and resembling, are examined at 131a-e and 132d-133b respectively. Both accounts of the relationship fail. Then, at 133c–134e, Parmenides presents the young Socrates’ theory of Forms with the ‘Greatest Difficulty’. This difficulty focuses on the separation of Forms and participants. Parmenides invokes two pairs of relative terms: the master–slave pair (133d7–134a1) and the knowledge–truth pair (134a3–b1). He

concludes, so I will argue, that we cannot be masters of the Form Slave, we cannot know the Form Truth and the gods cannot master us or know our affairs. The text of the argument is as follows:

(P1) Because, Socrates, I think that you, and anyone else who posits that there is some essence of each thing itself by itself (ὅστις αὐτήν τινα καθ' αὐτήν ἐκάστου οὐσίαν τίθεται εἶναι), would agree, first, that none of them is among us (ἐν ἡμῖν) (133c3–5).

(P2) Therefore, all the Ideas which are what they are in relation to each other (ὅσαι τῶν ἰδεῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλας εἰσὶν αἱ εἰσιν) have their essence (οὐσίαν) in relation to themselves (πρὸς αὐτάς), not in relation to the things among us, by partaking in which we are called after each of them, whether one posits these as likenesses or in some other way (133c8–d2).

(P3) But these things among us (τὰ δὲ παρ' ἡμῖν ταῦτα) which have the same names as each of those, are, again, themselves in relation to themselves but not in relation to the Forms (πρὸς αὐτὰ ἐστὶν ἀλλ' οὐ πρὸς τὰ εἶδη), and all the things which are named in this way are of themselves and not of those things (133c8–d5).

The construal of this highly compressed argument is contentious. Indeed, there is no agreement as to what the principal conclusion is supposed to be, let alone whether the GD validly derives its conclusion. One answer is that the GD aims to show that there

is radical separation of Forms from participants: the unknowability of the Forms would follow as a corollary of this radical separation. I reject this ‘radical separation’ reading because if it were correct the GD would become an unexplained *petitio principii*. Another answer I discount is that the GD aims to show that the Forms are unknowable by an argument from analogy. It fails because the GD actually has four significant consequences, not just one. But let us begin with the radical separation reading.

1.1 Radical separation

The key issue concerning validity is precisely how we take the ‘principle of separation’ which is, arguably, relied upon by the GD.² Those who think that the argument is valid typically think that P1 and P2 amount to the claim that ‘separation is radical’.³

² Even if I am correct and the argument relies on a principle of separation between Forms and participants, there is no agreement on which of several possible principles of separation is relied upon in the argument. To see the diversity of approach, compare F. M. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides: Parmenides’ Way of Truth and Plato’s Parmenides. Translated with Commentary [Plato and Parmenides]*, (London, 1939), 99; H. F. Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato and the Academy [Criticism]* (London, 1962), vol. 1, 284; W. G. Runciman *Plato’s Later Epistemology [Epistemology]* (Cambridge, 1962, 159); W. J. Prior, *Unity and Development in Plato’s Metaphysics [Unity]* (LaSalle, 1985), 75–6; M.M. McCabe *Plato’s Individuals [Individuals]* (Princeton, 1999), 91; M. L. Gill and P. Ryan. *Parmenides [Parmenides]* (Indianapolis, 1996), 46; R.E. Allen, *Plato’s Parmenides [Plato’s Parmenides]* (Newhaven, 1998), 193; S. Peterson, ‘The Greatest Difficulty for Plato’s Theory of Forms: The Unknowability Argument of *Parmenides* 133c–134c’ [‘Greatest’], *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 63 (1981), 1–16 and S. Rickless, *Plato’s Forms in Transition: a Reading of the Parmenides [Transition]* (Cambridge, 2007), 85–93.

³ Allen, *Plato’s Parmenides*, 193. A similar line on separation, if not validity, is taken by Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides*, 99; Cherniss, *Criticism*, 284; Runciman, *Epistemology*, 159; McCabe, *Individuals*, 91; Prior, *Unity*, 75–6 and Gill, *Parmenides*, 46.

(RS) For all X , for all Y , X is a form and X bears a relation to Y iff Y is a form.⁴

This radical separation of Forms from participants is the strongest possible reading of the separation premise. The premise proves the conclusion that we cannot know the Forms, as long as we hold that ‘knows’ is a relation. Such a proof is as follows: (i) the knowledge we have is not a Form, (ii) the knowledge we have knows (or is knowledge of) something, Y . So, by RS, (iii) Y must be a non-Form. Therefore, (iv) anything that we know must be a non-Form. The GD is valid, provided we accept that there is an object to which knowledge relates.⁵

But RS exacts too great a price for a valid construal of the argument. A Platonist would not accept a premise that denies all relations between Forms and participants.⁶ If the argument relies on such a strong premise, then it begs the question. One may wish to retain RS and explain why Parmenides says that an off-target attack is the *greatest* difficulty with the theory of Forms. Perhaps one could appeal to the several passages in the first part of the *Parmenides* where Socrates may accept premises which a more mature theorist would not (for example, at 130b; 130e–131e, esp. 131b; 132a).

Even if we found some way to satisfy ourselves that the GD deliberately begs the question, we ought to reject the radical separation reading on the basis of the text alone. The sentence at 133d1–2 mentions three kinds of relation which may hold between Forms and participants, namely, the relations ‘...participates in...’, ‘...is

⁴ This is a biconditional, which is not explicitly formulated in the text. A closer reflection of what is taken as the source for these remarks, 133c3–5, would be two conditionals: (RS1) For all X , for all Y , if X is a form and X bears a relation to Y then Y is a form, and (RS2) For all X , for all Y , if X is among us and X bears a relation to Y then Y is among us. Assuming that every item is either a Form, or among us, the biconditional (RS) follows from the conjunction of (RS1) and (RS2).

⁵ There is a non-relational sense of ἐπιστήμη in Greek, meaning something like a field of expertise. But this is obviously not the sense at stake in the GD.

⁶ See Prior, *Unity*, 75.

like...’ and ‘...is named after...’.⁷ If, as is implied by that sentence, some relations can obtain across the realms, then separation is not radical. In short, the radical separation reading validates the GD, but also makes it an off-target attack that does not respect the specific details of the argument in the text.

1.2 *The argument-from-analogy reading*

If the radical separation reading is not persuasive, we might have recourse to an older construal of the argument. Many concur with Cornford’s remark that the GD is ‘almost grossly fallacious’.⁸ They usually follow Forrester’s construal of the argument as an argument from analogy:⁹

1. The Form Master is a master, the Form Slave is a slave;
2. Of what is the Form Master a master? There are three possibilities:
 - a. Particular slaves;
 - b. Participants in the Form Master;
 - c. The Form Slave.
3. The Form Master cannot master (a), since (a) are slaves of particular masters;
4. The Form Master cannot master (b), since (b) are masters, not slaves;
5. So, the Form Master must be master of (only) the Form Slave.

⁷ εἴτε ὁμοιώματα εἴτε ὅπῃ δὴ τις αὐτὰ τίθεται, ὧν ἡμεῖς μετέχοντες εἶναι ἕκαστα ἐπονομαζόμεθα. *Parmenides*, 133d1-2

⁸ Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides*, 98. See also J.W. Forrester 'Arguments and (sic) Able Man Colud (sic) Refute: *Parmenides* 133b-134e' ['Arguments'], *Phronesis* (1974), 233–237; F.A. Lewis 'Parmenides on Separation and the Knowability of the Forms: Plato *Parmenides* 133a ff' ['Separation'], *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979), 105–127; I. Mueller, 'Parmenides 133a-134e: Some Suggestions', *Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1983), 3–7.

⁹ Forrester, 'Arguments', 234.

6. Just as the Form Master must be Master of the Form Slave, so too the Form Knowledge must know only the Form Truth.¹⁰
7. From (5), humans cannot master the Form Slavery.
8. From (6) and (7), humans cannot know the Form Truth.
9. Therefore, humans cannot know the Forms.

For this argument from analogy to hold, the master-slave case needs to be relevantly similar to the knowledge-truth case in such a way as to show that, just as a human master cannot master the Form Slave, so human knowledge cannot know the Form Truth. But, according to those who follow this reading, the analogy between the master-slave case and the knowledge-truth case breaks down.¹¹ It is clear *a priori* that a master must be master of a slave, who has certain characteristics that the Form Slave cannot have, e.g. being mortal. A human master must be master of something mortal. But the categorical properties of the Forms include being non-mortal. So the categorical properties of the Form Slave prevent it from being mastered by a human master.¹² However, the term 'knowledge' does not have such restrictions: there is no reason that knowledge cannot hold between a human and a Form, since being knowable is a categorical property of the Forms. The argument invalidly moves from a case where the categorical properties prevent a cross-realm relation to a case where the categorical properties do not do so. Therefore, the GD is invalid.

¹⁰ Truth is the Form which Parmenides specifies as the correlative of the Form Knowledge. Forrester, 'Arguments', 235 glosses this as the Form Object-of-Knowledge.

¹¹ Forrester, 'Arguments', 236–7, Lewis 'Separation', 112.

¹² Categorical properties of Forms are those which a Form has simply in virtue of being a Form, rather than being the Form it happens to be. See Owen, G. E. L. *Dialectic and Eristic in the Treatment of the Forms*, (Oxford, 1968).

This cannot be the correct way to read the argument, since, as I will now argue, there are four philosophical conclusions to the argument, each derived in the same way, not one conclusion concerning masters and slaves which provides the model for the conclusion concerning knowledge. Overwhelmingly, scholars have thought that the main conclusion is an epistemic difficulty: that the Forms cannot be known (133b4-6, 134b11-c2).¹³ Some have also emphasised that there is a second epistemic conclusion, which may be problematic for a Platonist, namely, that the divine, or the gods, would not be able to know human matters (134e5-6).¹⁴ Parmenides calls this conclusion ‘astonishing’ (θαυμαστός) (134e7). I argue that these epistemic conclusions do not exhaust the problems generated by the GD and that a Platonist would find the conclusion concerning vassalage, that the divine cannot be our master, equally problematic. We will read the argument differently, if we recognise that it has four consequences: (i) that the divine cannot master the human, (ii) that the human cannot master the divine, (iii) that the divine cannot know the human (iv) that the human cannot know the divine.¹⁵ If the argument were an argument from analogy, then only the epistemic conclusions would be philosophically interesting. But, it cannot be an argument from analogy if both sorts of conclusion are important.

While it is agreed on all sides that conclusion (iv) would be unacceptable to Plato, (i) would also be problematic for him.¹⁶ At *Phaedo* 62d2–3 a conception of the divine is found such that we are its possessions (κτήματα) and it is our manager (τὸ

¹³ Forrester 'Arguments', 233, Peterson 'Greatest', 1, Rickless 'Transition', 90.

¹⁴ Lewis 'Separation', 120–123, M.L. McPherran, 'An Argument 'Too Strange': *Parmenides* 134c4-e8', *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 32 (1999), 55–71; Rickless 'Transition', 90–93.

¹⁵ Plato would surely hold that (ii) is an obvious truth and so, although the GD entails (ii), we should perhaps avoid calling it a conclusion: Plato would see no need to argue for (ii).

¹⁶ I owe to David Sedley the parallel with *Phaedo* 62d. Although it seems obvious, no literature I am aware of says that (i) would be problematic for the Platonist.

θεόν τε εἶναι τὸν ἐπιμελούμενον ἡμῶν). Platonic piety, it seems, would be outraged by the conclusion (i). Since the conclusions (i), (iii) and (iv) are all philosophically threatening, the master-slave example is not introduced simply on the way to the damaging conclusions (iii) and (iv).

Textual evidence from the *Parmenides* supports this. 134d9-e6 summarises the overall conclusions of the GD. The sentence begins with οὐχοῦν, Plato's usual term for drawing a conclusion, and proceeds to give the conditional 'if this most accurate mastery and this most accurate knowledge are in the divine realm, then their mastery could not master us, nor their knowledge know us nor anything else among us' (134d9-e1). Nothing grammatical indicates that an analogy is being drawn between the example of mastery and the example of knowledge: in fact, the conjunction καί at 134d10 is most naturally taken as balancing the two examples, not subordinating one to the other.

Plato does move on to draw an analogy, using the term ὁμοίως, at 134e1. But the analogy drawn is not between the examples of mastery and knowledge, but rather between the divine and the human: 'just as we do not command them (sc. the gods) with our leadership, nor know the divine with our knowledge, so they, in turn, according to the argument, are not masters of us, nor do they know human affairs, because they are gods' (134e2-6). The language Plato uses suggests that the analogy holds between the abilities of the human and divine, not between the examples of mastery and knowledge. Therefore, the conclusions (i), (iii) and (iv) each seem philosophically important and ought to be read as deriving from isomorphic

reasoning.¹⁷ The GD is not an argument from analogy, so is not invalid, at least for the reasons Forrester gives.

The two dominant readings both have serious drawbacks. If we take separation as a premise in the GD, as we must, separation cannot be *radical*. Moreover, the GD should be valid, contrary to the argument from analogy reading, with four philosophically significant consequences. In section 2, I show that such a reading is not only possible, but also highly plausible.

2. Relative terms and the GD

We saw above that the existing readings of the GD are unsatisfactory and we might wish to remind ourselves of the criteria for a successful reading of the GD. My discussion of the radical separation reading showed that separation must be strong enough to motivate the conclusion that the Form Master can relate only to the Form Slave, not to some participant slave, and vice versa. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis* for Knowledge and Truth. But the premise must also not be so strong as to rule out *a priori* all relations between Forms and participants, as this would beg the question against the Platonist. The failure of the argument-from-analogy reading taught us to understand the argument as a valid derivation of all four consequences, not just the epistemic consequences.

¹⁷ If conclusions (i), (iii) and (iv) are philosophically important, Plato is not picking his examples of relatives at random, or deriving them from another source. This is significant because if Plato's examples are deliberate, Aristotle's use of 'master' and 'slave' as examples of relatives in *Cat. 7* indicates that he was influenced directly by this passage in his thinking about relatives. If, contrary to fact, Plato had picked the example of 'master' and 'slave' without a philosophical point, it might have suggested that Plato and Aristotle were both following an existing (perhaps shared) tradition.

A proper understanding of P2, and the notion of relative terms contained within it, allows us to navigate the waters between these requirements. I take the GD as a *reductio* of a separation assumption that P1 and P2 express: such a separation assumption leads to consequences, three of which are unacceptable, when combined with various assumptions about relatives. P1 asserts that (a) each thing has an essence that is ‘itself by itself’ and (b) none of those essences are among us. P2 applies this thinking to a class of Forms: those that ‘are what they are in relation to each other’. It asserts that (c) members of this class have their essence in relation to themselves and not in relation to things among us. Parmenides then repeats, in P3, the complementary point for the things among us. Formally, I claim that texts P1-P3 reflect the following principles, and that the GD targets them for *reductio*:

(A) For all X , for all Y , (if (X is a Form and X has Y as its reciprocating correlative) then Y is a Form).

As suggested by P3, there is an equivalent principle governing participants:

(B) For all X , for all Y , (if (X is among us and X has Y as a reciprocating correlative) then Y is among us).

Given the assumption that Forms and things among us exhaust the ontology, these two principles yield the following biconditional:

(AB) For all X , for all Y , ((X is a Form and X has Y as its reciprocating correlative) iff Y is a Form).

Note that AB does not bar all relations between Forms and participants: specifically, it does not rule out every version of the participation relation. The only thing that it blocks is having a reciprocating correlation between Forms and participants. We will see below what a reciprocating correlative is, for Plato. But, taken with certain assumptions about relative terms, AB yields the four consequences, three of which are unacceptable to the Platonist: one concerning vassalage and two concerning epistemology. Roughly this is because Plato's conception of relative terms entails that a given relative is that relative in virtue of its correlative. It is only in virtue of the relationship a master has to a correlative slave that a master is a master. By AB, the relative-correlative relationship cannot hold across realms, which, as we will see below, leads to the four conclusions.

For my reading to succeed, I must first establish that A and B best reflect the text of P1-P3. A close reading of P2 helps to do this. P2 tells us what characteristics those Forms that are to be isolated from participants should have. These characteristics are precisely the ones required for (A) and (B). P2 specifies a restricted class of Forms and asserts things about those Forms. The class picked out is 'all the Ideas which are what they are in relation to each other' (ὅσα τῶν ἰδεῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλας εἶσιν αἱ εἶσιν). Contrary to the radical separation reading, which takes this as a delineation of all the Forms, my reading recognises that only some Forms can be picked out this way: Forms for relative terms. This is what the ὅσα indicates.¹⁸ But what are the characteristics of the Forms for relatives that are thus identified?

The first thing that is clear is that relatives are not singletons. No one could be a slave if they were the only item in the universe. Obviously, it is necessary but not

¹⁸ Lewis, 'Separation', 107 also holds that a restricted class of Forms are picked out here.

sufficient for being a slave that there are other items in the universe. Someone is not a slave if the other item that exists is merely a man, for example. A special relationship to another item is necessary. To be a slave is to bear a special relationship to a master. If a master exists, then there must be a slave and vice versa. This does not hold with other terms, such as ‘man’: if a man exists, it does not follow that there must be a slave, or anything else. One might think that relative terms come in pairs. This fits with the examples cited in the GD: Master/Slave and Knowledge/Truth. We have already seen that the first term in this pair is usually called a relative term, the other its correlative.

Not only do relatives and their correlatives come in pairs, but also the pair is of a special sort. This is a further indication that A and B are the correct reading of P2. Parmenides tells us, at 133c8, that the terms in the pair are in relation to each other (πρὸς ἀλλήλας). We might call the pair ‘reciprocal’. Just as a master is master of a slave, so a slave is slave of a master.¹⁹ We could put the point, somewhat anachronistically, by using the notion of a relation and its converse in modern logic.²⁰ The domain of a relation, *R*, is the set of all of the items that bear *R* to something. We can say that the co-domain of *R* is the set of all items which have *R* borne to them.

¹⁹ cf. Aristotle *Cat.* 7 6b28-7a21. Aristotle is very clear that relatives reciprocate (6b28–35) and even uses as examples master and slave (6b29–30) and knowledge (6b34–5), which I mentioned above, are taken directly from this passage. Here, and in what follows, I draw illustrative comparisons with Aristotle’s discussion of relatives in *Categories* 7. Although none of my arguments rely on Aristotle’s texts as evidence, such comparisons are pertinent because Plato and Aristotle seem to handle relatives in much the same way. Both conceive of relatives as having a correlative which it is exclusively relative to. Both think of relatives reciprocating with their correlative. Both pick many of the same examples. Compare *Charmides* 167c–168c, *Republic* 438b–e and *Theaetetus* 152a–c with *Categories* 6a36–8b24 to see double and half, larger and smaller, knowledge and perception used by both philosophers as examples of relatives, in addition to master and slave, which we have been discussing. While there are some differences (e.g. for Aristotle relatives admit of contraries, *Cat.* 7 6b15–18, a point not discussed by Plato), the similarities are strong enough to make the comparisons illuminating.

²⁰ Although the analogy is useful, there are, I believe very important differences in the way Plato and Aristotle conceive of relative terms and the way modern logic does. Principally, Plato and Aristotle lack the idea of a dyadic relation.

These notions also allow us to define the converse of a relation, R . The converse of R is R^{-1} , defined as the relation which takes the co-domain of R as its domain and which has the domain of R as its co-domain. This allows us to describe in more detailed language what Parmenides is saying here: the co-domain of the ‘is a master’ relation consists exclusively of slaves.²¹ So the terms ‘master’ and ‘slave’ reciprocate because the domain of the ‘is a master of’ relation is the co-domain of the ‘is a slave of’ relation and vice versa.²²

Plato holds, right across his corpus, that each relative term has a reciprocating correlative to which it is related. *Republic* IV gives us a rich selection of examples in the context of a discussion of relative terms:

Don’t you understand that the greater is the sort of thing to be of or than something? Of course. Surely, greater than the smaller? Yes. And, perhaps, the much greater than the much smaller: isn’t that right? Yes. So is the at-a-time (πῶτε) greater than the at-a-time smaller and the going-to-be (ἔσόμενον) greater to than the going-to-be smaller? Certainly, said he. And similarly the more in relation to the fewer, and the double in relation to the half and all like cases; again, the heavier in relation to the lighter, the faster in relation to the slower and moreover, perhaps, the hot in relation to the cold: surely it is also like that for all similar cases? But what about knowledges? Isn’t it the same way?

²¹ Lewis, ‘Separation’, 110 also invokes these modern notions, but in an analysis quite different to mine.

²² Note the difference between ‘symmetrical’ relations and reciprocal relations. ‘Symmetry’ is a property of first-order relations, while reciprocity is a relation between first-order relations. It is easy to see the difference when we look at cases such as ‘larger’. ‘Larger’ is not symmetrical, because if x is larger than y , it is not the case that y is larger than x . But ‘larger’ does have a reciprocal, i.e. ‘smaller’.

Knowledge itself is knowledge of learning (μαθήματος) itself – or of whatever we ought to posit that knowledge is of...(438b4-c9)

In each case, Socrates gives the relative term as relative to its reciprocating partner: just as the relative relates to its correlative, so the correlative relates to the relative. Nor is this way of presenting relatives and correlatives confined to the *Republic*: greater and smaller are given in this way in the *Charmides* (168b5–8) and *Categories* 7 (6a36–b10). Double and half are so given in the *Charmides* (168c4–5) and *Categories* 7 (7a15–17). Heavier and lighter feature thus in the *Charmides* (168c9–10). Desire is a relative in *Symposium* (200a5) as well as the *Charmides* (167e1–2). Finally, knowledge is mentioned as a relative with a correlative in *Charmides* (168b2–3), *Categories* 7 (6a36–b10; 6b28–35; 7b15ff) and *Parmenides* (134a–b), although in each case, ‘knowledge’ has a different reciprocating correlative. So each relative term has a reciprocating correlative. This is reflected by A and B, showing them to be a good reading of P2 and P3.

AB is a good reading of the premise targeted for *reductio* by the GD. But to prove my reading of the GD, I need to show that relative terms, for Plato, do not just have a reciprocating correlative, but also that the reciprocating correlative is the *object* of the relative. Plato asserts this in the case of ‘knowledge’ at *Republic* 438c9. The ‘knowledge’ relation takes an item in the domain, a knower, and links it to an item in the co-domain of the relation. Each item in the ‘co-domain’ is an object of knowledge: each is something known. The special object is what can be applied to the whole co-domain of a given relative: where the relative is ‘knowledge’ the object is all the known things. Plato changes the expression he uses for ‘object of knowledge’, but the notion is stable enough: not only is the known the correlative of knowledge,

but it is also its object. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to other relative-correlative pairs.

In the *Parmenides*, Socrates' interrogator has more to say about the Forms that come in reciprocating relative and correlative pairs. As well as coming in such a pair, they 'are what they are' (εἰσὶν αἷ εἰσιν) in relation to each other. For some scholars this indicates that Forms of relative terms feature other Forms in their definition.²³ However, I think that the expression εἰσὶν αἷ εἰσιν means something rather specific in the context of relative terms. εἰσὶν αἷ εἰσιν serves as the feminine plural form of a neuter singular expression often found in Plato's discussions of relative terms: ὅπερ ἔστιν. The expression occurs at *Parmenides* 133c8 in the feminine plural, rather than the usual neuter singular, because it agrees with the feminine plural τῶν ἰδεῶν in the same line. Looking at some comparable uses of this expression in Plato will reveal that it is used to specify that a relative reciprocates with its correlative when the relative is properly specified and that the correlative is the object of the relative.

The *Symposium* contains an apparently technical use of ὅπερ ἔστιν in the context of relative terms. The elenchus of Agathon includes a discussion where Socrates argues, on the basis of the relativity of 'desire', that love is not beautiful: love is the desire for beauty; we only desire what we lack; so, love must lack beauty and, therefore, is not beautiful. In the course of that argument, Socrates discusses the defining characteristics of relative terms and some examples. He puts a formula for whether something is a relative as a question: 'Is Eros of such a kind as to be of something or of nothing?' (199d1–2).²⁴ He continues with an analogical case: 'is the father father of something or not?' (199d5).²⁵ Socrates supplies the answer that the

²³ See Peterson, 'Greatest' and Rickless, *Transition*, 85–93.

²⁴ ἔστι τοιοῦτος οἷος εἶναί τινος ὁ Ἔρως ἔρως, ἢ οὐδενός;

²⁵ ἄρα ὁ πατήρ ἔστι πατήρ τινος ἢ οὐ;

father is father of a son or daughter.²⁶ In this way, he puts the term ‘father’ into the same class as the term ‘Eros’.

Socrates continues with the case of ‘brother’, another relative term, and specifies it in the following manner: ‘ἀδελφός, αὐτὸ τοῦθ' ὅπερ ἔστιν’ (199e3–4). Literally, the expression means ‘brother, the actual thing that it is’ and is glossed as ‘brother *qua* brother’ by Dover.²⁷ The gloss can be used, but with care: *qua* is a term of art in modern philosophy of language and epistemology, which specifies the aspect under which something is considered.²⁸ One might say that Hume’s dialogues *qua* philosophy are lucid, but *qua* literature are obscure. The *qua* qualifier allows us to specify how we are thinking of an object and different ways of thinking of an object may result in incompatible descriptions being true of an item.²⁹ In none of the uses I can find in Plato does he use the qualifier in this ‘multiple aspect’ way, so, we must handle Dover’s gloss carefully. Whereas in modern philosophy, *qua* is used to introduce and to exclude aspects under which something may be considered, Plato, as we will see, uses the expression only to exclude aspects from consideration, never to introduce them. The only use Plato would allow is: ‘Hume’s dialogues *qua* dialogues are thus–and–so’. This statement warns us not to think of Hume’s dialogues as literature, nor as philosophy, but only as dialogues.

To prove the point about ὅπερ ἔστιν let us look at its occurrence at *Theaetetus* 204e11. Socrates is trying, in the face of determined resistance, to force Theaetetus to

²⁶ ὁ πατήρ, the Greek formula with a definite article, is a way of speaking generally about fathers. I have retained the definite article in English for the sake of literalism, even though it sounds archaic.

²⁷ K.J. Dover, *et al. Symposium*. (Cambridge, 1980), 134.

²⁸ Aristotle is often thought to be the originator of this use of ἦ, from which we derive the *qua* qualifier, but see Empedocles B17, line 9 in DK. This line is also line 8 of Empedocles 26 in DK.

²⁹ Alternatively, it may be that the descriptions are true of the ordered pair of the item and way of thinking, i.e. the properties being lucid and being obscure apply respectively to the ordered pairs <Hume’s dialogues, philosophy> and <Hume’s dialogues, literature>. In this case the descriptions would be true or false of different ordered pairs and so not incompatible.

accept that the ‘whole’ (τὸ ὅλον) and the ‘sum’ (πᾶν) mean the same. Socrates says that if a whole consisted of parts, it would be all the parts. Something that is all the parts is a sum. So the ‘whole’ and ‘sum’ mean the same. ‘Or is a part what it is of anything other than the whole?’³⁰ Socrates here moves to exclude the possibility that the part should be considered under another aspect, say, the aspect of being a functional part of a structured whole, such as a hand of somebody. Under that aspect, the ‘part’ might be relative to a body, as well as relative to a whole. But Socrates’ point is to exclude the other possible aspects of the item, and consider it just *qua* part. Note also that the ὅπερ ἐστίν is again used in the context of relative terms: the part is part of the whole.

This suggests that, for Plato, a relative is always relative to some correlative. The part is always relative to the whole, properly construed, and, to return to the *Republic* IV examples, the larger is always larger than the smaller. But is the relationship between relative and correlative exclusive? That is, is the relative *only* relative to the reciprocating correlative, or could it be relative to something else as well? This is not obvious: it seems that a larger thing is not only larger than a smaller thing, but also larger than a middle-sized thing. The ὅπερ ἐστίν move can help us here as well. Plato is concerned with the proper correlative of the larger. Whatever the larger is larger than will be smaller than the larger. In other words, if we properly specify the larger *qua* larger, not larger *qua* a larger *thing*, we see that it is relative only to the smaller. Indeed, this *qua* indicates that the necessary and sufficient condition on being larger is being larger than the smaller. Any relationships in addition to the relationship to the smaller, such as to a middle-sized thing, are redundant when explaining why the larger is larger.

³⁰ μέρος δ' ἔσθ' ὅτου ἄλλου ἐστίν ὅπερ ἐστίν ἢ τοῦ ὅλου; *Theaetetus*, 204e11.

We can see from looking at other passages where Plato uses this terminology that it regularly specifies that something should be viewed *qua* itself; it is used to exclude other incidental ways of looking at the relative, for example, under a non-relative description. In the context of the *Parmenides*, we should be alive to the sense in which Parmenides uses it. In so far as someone is a slave, he must be slave of something. The point is to differentiate a relative description such as ‘slave’ from another, non-relative, description which will apply to all slaves, for example, ‘being human’ or ‘being an offspring’. If this is the thought, it prefigures Aristotle’s discussion at *Cat.* 7 7a31–b9. There Aristotle remarks that when all the possible ‘accidental’ (συμβεβηκότα) descriptions are excluded, or ‘stripped away’ from a master, such as ‘being a biped’, ‘being capable of reason’, we will say that a slave is a slave of a master. His point is that it is, if not exactly false, not ideal to say that ‘a slave is slave of a biped’; he would prefer a more perspicuous designation of the correlative.³¹ The *Parmenides*’ use of εἶσιν αἷ εἶσιν could be understood to make the same point: a master *qua* master, is master of a slave and a slave, *qua* slave, is slave of a master. When properly specified, master and slave are reciprocal correlatives, which means that a master is always and only of a slave and the relative-correlative relationship is necessary and sufficient for being a master.

So my broader view highlights two elements of Plato’s account of relatives. First, when properly specified, a relative will relate to a correlative. A master, when

³¹ συμβεβηκός has a range of uses in Aristotle but *Physics* II.3 195a33–b6 may be the closest parallel. There Aristotle is discussing, not kinds of cause, but the ways in which a cause may be given: ‘...some [are causes] as accident (ὡς τὸ συμβεβηκός) and some the genera of these’ (195a31–33). He then gives the example of a sculptor causing a sculpture. The cause of a sculpture can be given as ‘a sculptor’, ‘Polyclitus’ or even ‘a man’ or ‘an animal’. The cause can be picked out in various ‘accidental’ ways. This closely reflects the thought in *Categories* 7a31–b9 that a relative can be specified in various ways. Moreover, the *Physics* tells us that there is a hierarchy of ways of specifying the cause with respect to the caused (195b1–2). Similarly, the *Categories* says that there is a privileged description of the relative with respect to the correlative.

specified as such, will relate to a slave. The relationship between a relative and correlative is exclusive and exhaustive. Second, the correlative will be the object of the relative term. In the example from *Republic IV*, the relative term, knowledge, is relative to the object of knowledge, the knowable.

Understanding P2 with the help of a richer grasp of relativity in Plato allows us to properly understand the principles that I labelled above as (A) and (B). (A) asserts that, for any pair of reciprocal correlatives, if one is a Form, both are Forms and (B) asserts that, for any pair of reciprocal correlatives, if one is a participant, both are participants. If this is the correct way to construe the principles of separation as they appear in the GD, the argument of the GD works in the following manner.

First, P1 makes the general point that the Forms are separate, in some sense, from participants. This claim has been in play from as far back as 128e5 when Socrates posited Forms that, unlike participants, are not themselves subject to being alike and not alike or one and many. Second, P2 picks out a restricted class of the Forms, namely the Forms of relative terms. Each of such terms has a reciprocal correlative: relative terms and their correlatives come in pairs. Third, as I have argued above, P2 is best characterised as asserting that separation amounts to AB, i.e. that both items in a relative-correlative pair are isolated together in either the Form realm or in our realm.

With these three premises in place, Parmenides can derive the four consequences when he turns to his example relative-correlative pairs: master/slave and knowledge/truth. Parmenides says:

If one of us is somebody's master or somebody's slave, surely he is not
[a slave] of Master itself, of what a master is, nor is the master a master

of Slave itself, of what a slave is. On the contrary, because he is a human being he is it [viz. a master or a slave] of a human being; Mastery itself is what it is of Slavery itself (αὐτὴ δὲ δεσποτεία αὐτῆς δουλείας ἐστὶν ὅ ἐστι), and similarly Slavery itself [is what it is] of Mastery itself (133d7–e4).

Parmenides tells Socrates that a human master can only be master of a human slave, and the equivalent is true for the corresponding Forms. It is irrelevant, for example, to Achilles' property of being a master that he bears any other relationships: these can be 'stripped away' to use Aristotle's metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient for being a master that Achilles bears the appropriate relationship to some slave.

But, according to Plato's conception of relatives, the correlative is not just that in virtue of which something is a master; the correlative is also the object of the relation. And by AB any correlation holds only between items in the same realm. So the correlative object of any relative term cannot be in a different realm to the subject of the relative. From here, the four consequences follow directly: a divine master cannot be master of a human slave; the Form Slave cannot be the object of human mastery. The same is true for knowledge: for a state of mind to be knowledge, it is necessary and sufficient that it bear a relationship to the correlative of knowledge. But, because the correlative of a relative and the object of a relative are identical for Plato, and AB, knowledge in the Form realm can only be knowledge of things in that realm; similarly, we cannot know the Form Truth.³²

The above construal of the argument shows that separation, construed as AB, along with Plato's usual notion of relative terms, jeopardise three key Platonic

³² This way of reading the argument owes a great deal to conversations with James Warren. However, he cannot be held responsible for the results!

propositions. This invites us to read Parmenides' attack as a *reductio ad absurdum* of AB, combined with certain assumptions about relatives, which Parmenides is sure the young Socrates will accept.³³ This account does not make GD beg the question, unlike the radical separation reading. My reading does not assume that no relations are possible across realms, but rather shows why relative and correlative pairs cannot relate across the realms. If Plato thinks of relative terms in the GD as he usually thinks of relatives, then there cannot be cross-realm correlations. If there cannot be cross-realm correlations, the four consequences listed above follow. At least three of these consequences threaten fundamental Platonic tenets: that the Forms are knowable, that the divine can master us, and that the divine can know our affairs.³⁴

The aim of this paper was to show, contrary to the view of many, that the GD is correctly targeted and is not formally invalid, at least for the reasons usually given. I argued in section 1.1 that the radical separation reading should be rejected as it makes the GD a *petitio principii* and fails to explain why Parmenides would beg the question. Section 1.2 showed that the argument is not formally invalid, because it is best read as having four consequences, two concerning vassalage and two epistemological. It is not the case that the epistemological conclusions are arrived at

³³ If we read the argument this way, there is still a question over which claim or claims Socrates might reject: would he reject AB, or his (assumed) views of relatives? A full answer to that question is beyond the scope of this paper, but it seems that Plato has the *Parmenides* conception of relatives in the (probably) later work, the *Sophist*, at 255c14. This may suggest that he would retain his conception of relative terms. See my M. Duncombe, 'Plato's Absolute and Relative Categories at *Sophist* 255c14', ['Categories'] *Ancient Philosophy* 32 (2012), 77–86.

³⁴ There is one possible objection to my reading of the GD. On the face of it, 'knowledge' and 'truth' are not related as 'master' is to 'slave': although it is impossible to know without knowing truths, it is perfectly possible for there to be a truth that is not known. Put another way, to be a reciprocal pair, these should be 'knowledge' (ἡ ἐπιστήμη) and the 'knowable' (τὸ ἐπιστητόν), which are the terms Aristotle uses (*Cat.* 6b34). Briefly, I think that 'truth' should be understood here as 'object of knowledge' or 'the knowable', which would be a proper correlative for 'knowledge'. *Theaetetus* 201d2–3, *Republic* 438c6–9 and 438e5 all show that Plato is developing a vocabulary for 'object of knowledge' while avoiding τὸ ἐπιστητόν. For further argument on this point, see my Duncombe, 'Categories', 84–5.

by analogy with the arguments concerning vassalage. So it is not an argument from analogy and does not fall to the objections levelled at it when understood that way. Finally, in section 2 I used an understanding of Plato's wider view of relatives to argue that the GD is a legitimate *reductio*, showing that certain assumptions lead to Platonically unacceptable consequences concerning the relationship of us to the divine and of the divine to us.

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