Self-Participation of Forms in Plato? An Analysis of *Sophist* 255e3-6

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In this paper, I will examine a short passage in the main part of the *Sophist* – lines 255e3-6 – to see whether it can be interpreted as evidence for the view that Plato considered – and maybe even assumed – the self-participation of Forms. I will discuss different grounds on which the passage has been taken as evidence for self-participation and evaluate objections raised against interpretations along these lines. I will then show that the assumption of self-participation of Forms would provide an elegant response to the Third Man Arguments in the first part of the *Parmenides*. I will discuss why a modification of the so-called Non-Identity Assumption (NI) may be a way out of the regress. Yet, this solution is in need of another explanation of why the Form F-ness is F if not by virtue of partaking of a different Form F-ness. One alternative explanation for its being F consists in the possibility of self-participation of the Form F-ness. Hence the importance of the passage from the *Sophist* for the consistency of Plato's Theory of Forms.
Self-participation, Third Man Arguments, Non-Identity Assumption, megista genê, Theory of Forms.

This paper has two aims. The first is to examine a short passage in the main part of the *Sophist* – lines 255e3-6 – to see whether it can be interpreted as evidence for the view that Plato considered – and maybe even assumed – the self-participation of Forms. The other aim is to examine whether – and if so, how – the self-participation of Forms offers a way out to rebut the Third Man Arguments (TMAs) in the first part of the *Parmenides*.

First, I will briefly introduce the passage from the *Sophist* in its context and examine whether it gives us reason to assume the self-participation of Forms in Plato. I will discuss different grounds on which the passage has been taken as evidence for self-participation ((Nehamas (1982) Kostman (1989)) and evaluate objections raised against interpretations along these lines (Vlastos (1969)). My provisional conclusion will be that although lines 255e3-6 can be understood as possible evidence for self-participation, this passage is not unambiguous. Notwithstanding, in the second part, I will show that the assumption of self-participation of Forms would provide an elegant response to the regress arguments in the *Parmenides*, the so-called Third Man Arguments. I will explain why a modification of the so-called

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Non-Identity Assumption (NI) may be a way out of the regress. The idea is that a restriction of NI to participation relations between particulars and Forms provides a solution to the TMA, but only if it is accompanied by an alternative explanation of why the Form F-ness is F if not by virtue of partaking of a different Form F-ness. One alternative explanation for its being F consists in F-ness's partaking *of itself*, i.e. the self-participation of the Form F-ness. Hence the importance of the passage from the *Sophist* for the consistency of Plato's Theory of Forms.

Self-Participation in Plato?

Authors who argue that Plato accepted the assumption of the self-participation of Forms primarily refer to lines 255e3-6 in the main part of the *Sophist* (250-259) to support their view. Reference to the *Sophist* is obvious because the dialogue explicitly extends the relation of participation to the relationships between Forms. Forms can participate in each other, and it is because of this participation that they have their attributes. The Form Identity, for instance, is resting because of its participation in the Form Rest. If participation among Forms is allowed, it does not seem farfetched to suppose that the Form Identity is identical with itself in virtue of participating in itself.

Lines 255e3-6 and their context in the Sophist

The relevant passage of the *Sophist*, lines 255e3-6, occurs at the end of the section in which the five *megista genê*, highest kinds or Forms, are distinguished. As the fifth and last of the *megista genê*, the Form Difference is separated from the four others. After lines 255e3-6 follows a section in which the relations between the five *megista genê* are examined in more detail. The purpose of the discussion in this section is to suggest that some apparently contradictory statements about Forms are, in fact, compatible once we realize that different things can be attributed to Forms with sentences of the same syntactic form. The problem for which a solution is sought can be illustrated by the example of the Form Change. On the one hand, we know from the middle dialogues that every Form is necessarily at rest or unchanged. Therefore, every reader of the middle dialogues will believe the sentence "The Form Change is at rest" to be true. On the other hand, the Eleatic visitor vehemently rejects this sentence and asks the following

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leading question, which Theaetetus affirms unhesitatingly: "But this is most necessarily impossible, that change come to be at rest and rest change?" (*Sph.* 252d9-11).

In the passage before lines 255e3-6, the visitor explains the sense in which the sentence "The Form Change is at rest" can express a falsehood (251a-255d): the sentence expresses **something false** if we use it to assert the identity of the Forms Change and Rest. This reasoning helps to distinguish the five *megista genê* from each other. In lines 255e3-6, however, an important shift takes place, for now the analysis follows how the sentence "The Form Change is at rest" can also be used to say **something true** (255e8-256d11). The explanation here is, I take it, exactly the same as the explanation of why particular things are correctly said to be at rest, for the Form Change is said to be at rest just like the changeable particular things because of its participation in the Form Rest. Therefore, according to the visitor, the sentence "The Form Change is at rest" can be used to express different things, namely a truth and a falsehood, depending on how we understand its meaning.

I called lines 255e3-6 a shifting point in the discussion because from here on the relation of participation among Forms is examined and used to explain why Forms are such and such. For this purpose, the passage refers for the first time to participation among the *megista genê* in order to explain why we can correctly say of them that they are different.

> [Eleatic visitor] "Therefore the nature of the Different must be said to be fifth among the Forms we are selecting." – [Theaetetus] "Yes." – [Eleactic visitor] "And we shall say that it runs through all of them: for each one is different from the others not by virtue of its own nature, but by virtue of participating in the Form of the different." – [Theaetetus] "By all means." (*Sph*. 255d9-e6]

Here, the visitor states that the Form Difference runs through all other *megista genê,* which means that all *megista genê* are different from at least one other thing. Furthermore, he adds the appropriate explanation to the statement that the *megista genê* are different: They are different because they participate in the Form Difference. So far, the meaning of the passage seems fairly clear. The interpretation becomes less clear when we turn to the question whether the visitor intends to explain the Form Difference's being different in the same way, namely through participation in itself. Let us look at different views that have been put forward in the literature.

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Alexander Nehamas

Nehamas defends the view that the Form Difference's being different is to be explained by self-participation:

> Now this statement [sc. *Sph*. 255e3-6] suggests that in "going through" all the Forms, the Different goes through itself as well. As since to be "going through" by a Form seems to be identical with participation in it, the statement suggests that the Different participates in itself (Nehamas (1982) 353).

Nehamas takes these lines to mean that the being different of *all* five *megista genê* should be explained by the fact that they participate in the Form Difference. Yet he is well aware that the lines can also be understood entirely differently and translated accordingly:

> And we shall say that it [sc. "the Nature" (or Idea, Form, Kind) of the Different, D9] goes through all them [*i.e. through Rest, Motion, Being, Identity*]; for each of these is different from [each of] the others not in virtue of its own nature but in virtue of participating in the Idea of the Different (Vlastos (1969) 340; my emphasis).

Vlastos emphasizes in the explicative parenthesis that he believes that only the being different of the **four** other *megista genê* (except the Form Difference) is to be explained by participation in the Form Difference. Although I believe that Nehamas draws attention to an important and possible reading of this crucial passage, his arguments in support for this view do not convince me. I will therefore discuss the view of another proponent of the assumption of self-participation in Plato, namely James Kostman.

James Kostman

Kostman's approach is of special interest because he links his stance on self-participation to his discussion of the TMA in the *Parmenides*. Before examining his interpretation in more detail, it is required to recall briefly the core idea of the TMA. Here is a semi-formal reconstruction of the first TMA:

> (OM): For all x: If x is F, then there is a Form, F-ness, in virtue of which (i.e. by partaking of which) x is F.
> (SP): The Form F-ness is F.
> (NI): If anything has a given character by participating in a Form, it is not identical with that Form

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From 1 and 2 one can deduce (4):

(4) If F-ness is F, then there is a Form, in virtue of which (i.e. by partaking of which) F-ness is F.

And from 4 and (NI) follows:

(5) F-ness is not identical with the Form in virtue of which F-ness is F.

Therefore, we need to assume another Form F-ness, F-ness2, because (NI) excludes the possibility of F-ness's being F in virtue of itself. We can repeat the same procedure, starting now from a group of different F-particulars and the Form F-ness and deducing – with (SP) and (NI) – another Form F-ness, F-ness3, *ad infinitum.* The derivation of a second Form of F-ness – and *a fortiori* the infinite regress – contradicts the uniqueness assumption which underlies Plato's Theory of Forms.

Now, there is an obvious way to stop the regress at the outset by restricting the Non-Identity Assumption in a way that only names for particulars are possible substitutes for "x". This means we are no longer allowed to insert "F-ness" (as a name for a non-particular, i.e. a Form) for "x" in (NI). Therefore, it is not the case that a Form F-ness cannot be identical with the Form in virtue of which (i.e. by partaking of which) it is F. Now, the regress does not ensue because the premises no longer exclude other grounds for the Form F-ness's being F (i.e. reasons other than F-ness's partaking of a different Form F-ness, with which it is not identical). It would be a very elegant way to reject the regress arguments by restricting NI. But so far, the restriction of NI remains a mere contention that requires further justification.

Constance Meinwald (Meinwald 1991 and 1992) famously suggested that it is necessary to distinguish between two kinds of predication which allows to avoid the regress; however her solution seems to provide only a partial solution because there are still two types of counterexamples that are not captured by her proposal. Counterexamples of the first type arise for all Forms that allow for true PTA-predications. Counterexamples of the second type arise when the argument contains as premises exclusively true PH-predications.

Brian Frances believes that Plato has an answer to the counterexamples, namely the restriction of NI and the assumption of a different explanation for F-ness's being F than by partaking of a different Form F-ness (Frances 1996). But this answer remains incomplete as long as no alternative explana-

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tion of F-ness's being F is provided. Obviously, self-participation of Forms would provide the wanted alternative explanation.

Let us now come back to Kostman. The merit of his interpretation shows that the responses to the TMA vary depending on the mode of predication that is applied in the premises. Kostman seems to agree with Meinwald's distinction between two possible readings of predications, PTA-predications ("ordinary predications") and PH-predications (predications that express something about the nature of the Form designated by the subject term). Kostman and Meinwald also agree that self-predications should in general be interpreted as PH-predications.

But Kostman seems to go beyond Meinwald's interpretation because he also deals with the two sorts of counterexamples that cause problems for her approach. To see why, lines 255e3-6 are crucial, for his discussion of the passage shows that it reveals not only one possible answer to the TMA but two, which correspond to the two kinds of counterexamples. The two different answers rely on two different explanations of why an object is F mentioned in this passage. With respect to one specific class of F-things, the nature of those things is the adequate explanation for their being F, while for another class of F-things participation is the correct explanation for their being F. I will discuss this second response to the TMA which is the relevant case for the issue of self-participation of Forms.

Counterexamples of the first type result from a set of premises that exclusively includes PTA-predications. This applies to all Forms for which it is true that a property corresponds to Forms that equally belongs to *every* object – including all Forms. These Forms include the Form Identity, the Form Being, the Form One, and perhaps the Form Difference (if there exists more than one object) and the Form Rest (the corresponding property, resting, applies to all Forms but not to every object whatsoever because there are, of course, moving particulars).[1]

1 Here is an instance of a counterexample of the first type:

(OM)For all x: If x is *pros ta alla* at rest, then there exists only one Form, the Form Rest, in virtue of which x is *pros ta alla* at rest.
(A)The number 7 is *pros ta alla* at rest.
(SP) The Form Rest is *pros ta alla* at rest.
(SP*)The Form Rest is *pros heauto* at rest.
(NI)If the Form Rest is *pros ta alla* at rest, then the Form Rest is not identical with the Form Rest.

In this reconstruction, both formulations of SP (SP and SP*) turn out true, which means that the equivocation in the premises is removed and the vicious regress results again.

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In this case, Kostman argues that the regress argument is unsound because it falsely involves the unrestricted version of NI, he gives another justification for this claim:

> […] there is a class of true statements about Forms, including "The One is one", "The Same is same (as itself)", "Rest is at rest", etc., which are clearly ordinary predications […]. […] their truth is not to be explained (nor does Plato intend to explain it) in terms of the nature (in the sense of 255e3-6) of the Forms they are about. Their truth is rather to be *explained in terms of the relevant Form's partaking of itself,* and this is precisely the account to which Plato is committed by 255e3-6. (Kostman (1989) 355-356; my emphasis)

Kostman tries to avoid this kind of counterexamples by applying the second mentioned explanation in 255e3-6: he explains Form F-ness's being F by saying that it participates in itself. Thus, the possibility of self-participation also requires a restriction of NI because this is the extraordinary case in which the relata are identical.

So, with Nehamas and Kostman, we have two ways of supporting the view that lines 255e3-6 give us grounds to ascribe the assumption of self-participation to Plato. But, so far lines 255e3-6 are, I take it, not sufficient evidence for self-participation. Furthermore, there are other objections, primarily raised by Vlastos, against this interpretation which I will discuss next.

Objections to the assumption of self-participation

First, Vlastos argues that the metaphor of partaking is not compatible with the assumption of self-participation because partaking is an irreflexive relation and verbs of partaking in Greek are exclusively used to designate a relation between distinct objects: Second, he argues that in Plato's dialogues we do not find any further – let alone clear – evidence for self-participation. This omission is all the more significant because self-participation would have been an important additional assumption for the Theory of Forms. Therefore, one might expect that greater consideration would have been given to this assumption.

Leaving aside the first worry, we must, in order to assess Vlastos's second concern, examine whether other evidence for self-participation can be found in the dialogues. To be brief, I will summarize my standing to this point: although there are some passages in the *Sophist* and the *Parmenides* which one could refer to as evidence, these instances are, unfortunately, not only

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ambiguous and controversial but can also be met by counterexamples. The first passage I have in mind are lines 256a7-8 in the *Sophist* ("But it [i.e. the Form Difference] was identical to itself because everything participates in the identical.") But what applies to lines 255e3-6 also applies to this passage: it is not unambiguous insofar as "πᾶν" could refer either to all five *megista genê* or only to the four highest Forms other than the Form Identity.

In the *Parmenides*, by contrast, there seems to be a passage that does not contain this ambiguity, namely lines 162a6-b3. According to this passage, the Form Being participates, 'by what is', in being, and since being belongs to the Form Being, it must be assumed that the Form Being participates in itself. If this is the meaning of this passage and if it is meant seriously, one might consider this passage as evidence of self-participation. But it would be another single piece of evidence which occurs in the extremely complex and controversial second part of the *Parmenides*. Furthermore, the second part of the *Parmenides* features a passage which seems to speak clearly against the assumption of self-participation, namely 157e4-158a6. According to this passage, the Form Unity does not have unity in virtue of participating in the Form Unity. But this does not mean, I take it, that the Form Unity, in contrast to all other things, does not have unity – this conclusion seems absurd. What it could mean, however, is that only the Form Unity has unity for a reason other than its participation in the Form Unity. In other words: this passage excludes the self-participation of the Forms.

The second passage from the *Parmenides* suggests that the Form F-ness's being F requires another explanation than its participation in the Form F-ness. But the passage gives no further hint of what the alternative explanation for the being F of the Form F-ness could be. We might believe that such an alternative can be found in lines 255e3-6 in the *Sophist*, namely in virtue of the nature of the Form F-ness. After all, what could the nature of the Form F-ness be an adequate explanation for if not F-ness's being F? This seems reasonable, but unfortunately the explanation is neither unpacked nor clarified by Plato in any of his dialogues.

Concluding remarks

The problem I have dealt with is the question whether it is possible to find sufficient evidence for the assumption of self-participation in Plato's dialogues. We have seen that the assumption of self-participation would have a great impact on crucial challenges to the Theory of Forms, such as the TMA. I tried to show that there are some passages in the *Sophist* and

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the *Parmenides* which one could refer to as evidence for self-participation. Unfortunately, these instances are not only ambiguous and controversial but can be met by counterexamples. Not only that, they are remarkably small in number given that they involve an important modification of the Theory of Forms. Therefore, I believe we are entitled to concede, on the one hand, that Plato did indeed recognize that there was a problem with the Theory of Forms, which becomes especially manifest in the TMA, and that he even might have seen a possible way out in modifying one of its implicit premises. On the other hand, Plato *defends* neither a restricted version of NI nor the assumption of self-participation. Thus, I doubt that he wholeheartedly endorsed self-participation or the corresponding restriction of NI, which is all the more notable because doing so would have been an elegant solution to major problems immanent to his theory.

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