Abstract of ‘Platonic Participation’

The Republic presents us with a standard account of the Theory of Forms, especially in the discussion of the difference between knowledge and opinion. But we also get in the Republic the only passage in the Platonic corpus that gives some sort of reasoned account of what is meant by participation, I mean the analogy of the Sun. A feature of this analogy is that, properly taken, it answers one of the criticisms of participation that Parmenides levels against Socrates in the Parmenides. The Republic also gives, in other places, an account of how forms and particulars can be said to be like each other that answers Parmenides’ criticism based on the likeness regress. For this reason, as well as for several others, the chronological division of the Platonic dialogues into early and middle and late should be rejected, and the Parmenides should not be read, as scholars do now read it, as posing problems for the Theory of Forms given in the Republic, but the Republic should be read as giving answers to the problems posed in the Parmenides.

But while the Republic successfully answers criticisms from Parmenides in the Parmenides, it does not answer, and cannot answer, criticisms from Aristotle in the Metaphysics. This is because the Republic is distinctive among Platonic dialogues in talking, and talking at length, about particulars as participating in being and not just as participating in the beautiful or the just or the like. For while some sense can be made of speaking of participation in the just or the beautiful, no sense at all can be made of speaking of participation in being. Such talk is simply incoherent, as Aristotle points out, and if being cannot therefore be a Platonic form, then nothing at all can be a Platonic form, and the Theory of Forms must be rejected.
Platonic Participation.

(by Peter L P Simpson)

The Idea of Participation in the Republic

The term or idea of participation occurs often enough in the Republic but not always in a way that seems relevant to a theory of ideas. For instance, it appears in the case of children participating in education, of citizens participating in political office, of people participating in material goods, of the city participating in happiness or knowledge, or workmen participating in each other’s tools, or children not participating in reasoning (424, 600, 525, 529, 369, 421, 429, 434, 441). These uses we may describe as non-technical ones, as ordinary uses that any speaker of ancient Greek might adopt without any implication of following some theory of forms.

Socrates does, of course, use participation in the Platonic dialogues to articulate a theory of forms, but one may wonder how far either he or Plato intended to make it into a technical term of art. Indeed, in the Phaedo Socrates seems to repudiate any such suggestion, saying that he does not worry about the term, whether participation or something else, as long as one accepts the thing, namely of particulars somehow all participating a common form, as beautiful things participate the form of beauty (100d4-e3). But this passage, while it does not insist on the word, very much insists on the thing. There is some special theory which Socrates adopts, his second sailing as he calls it (99c9-d1), and in this theory there is some special relationship that exists between particulars and forms. We might appeal to the Parmenides for the same point since there Socrates is clearly speaking of some special relationship of participation, and it is because
he is so that Parmenides is able to catch him in confusion and inconsistency (130e5-131e7). For Socrates is unable to explain precisely what he has in mind even though he is able to understand and to reject as inadequate several more ordinary ways of using the term.

Returning to the *Republic*, the obvious passage for the role of participation in some theory of forms occurs where Socrates distinguishes between lovers of wisdom and lovers of opinion (475d1-480a13). The lover of opinions, or of sights (as Socrates also calls him) does not love realities but rather things that roll about between reality and unreality, or between being and not-being. The lover of wisdom, by contrast, loves that which is simply being and is not a mixture, however temporary, of being and not-being. Actually at one point Socrates speaks, not of particulars participating in forms, but of forms communing (*koinonia*) with particulars and thus, though single, of appearing as many (476a7). He goes on to speak of those who can recognize and love the particulars but not the idea itself as living a sort of waking dream (476c4), while those who recognize both the particulars and the idea and distinguish each from each are fully awake. For being, he says, is what is simply knowable and not-being what is simply unknowable, but what is opinable participates (*metecho*) in both being and not-being (478e2). Such are the particulars which appear both to be and not to be what they are said to be, for beautiful and just and holy things also appear to be ugly and unjust and unholy, and doubles appear to be halves, and big and small things and heavy and light things can no more be said to be one of these than the opposite (479a5-b10).

So far, we may say, we have a fairly standard account of the status of particulars in relation to forms, and the idea of participation is introduced without further
explanation to name that relation. But of course we do get later an analogy that does seem to say something more specific about the nature of participation, I mean the analogy of the sun to the idea of the good. The idea of the good is said to do in the intelligible world what the sun does in the visible world, and as the latter makes things both to be seeable and the eye to see, so the former makes things to be knowable and the mind to know. Further, just as the sun also causes seeable things to come to be and to grow and be nourished without itself coming to be, so the idea of the good causes knowable things to exist and to have being without itself existing as a being but rather as beyond being (509b2-10).

The Maturity of the Idea of Participation in the Republic

However incomplete, and therefore puzzling, this analogy with the sun may be (an incompleteness Socrates himself concedes, 509c5-10), one should not overlook its peculiar relation to one of the criticisms of the theory of forms given by Parmenides in the dialogue of that name. But perhaps I should say first of all, lest I appear to be begging too many questions, that, in trying to understand the Platonic dialogues, I do not adopt, indeed I altogether reject, the scholarly consensus about their chronological division into early, middle, and late.¹ I do not think we have any evidence, and certainly no convincing evidence, to draw such chronological divisions, and further, even if we did, I do not think the divisions would help us to make sense of the dialogues. All that we need to understand the dialogues is what the dialogues themselves contain. In fact, the dialogues, or some of them, do contain information about chronology, save that the chronology is

not about when Plato wrote them but about when he set them. The *Phaedo*, for instance, is set on the last day of Socrates’ life. It is preceded in this setting, as we all know, by the *Crito* and the *Apology*. What we also know, though we seldom pay this fact any attention, is that the *Apology* is preceded, in its setting, by the *Statesman*, which is preceded by the *Sophist*, which is preceded by the *Euthyphro*, which is preceded by the *Theaetetus* (to judge by the last words of the *Theaetetus*, 210d1-4). Accordingly, if we want to understand these dialogues, or at least to understand what Plato intended, we should understand them according to this setting, that is, according to their dramatic chronology and not according to some supposed chronology of when Plato wrote them.

For the same reason, if we want to understand the *Parmenides* we should read it according to its dramatic chronology, which, since the dialogue is set when Socrates is a young man, makes it the earliest of all the dialogues of Plato in which Socrates appears. The *Parmenides*, of course, is notorious for containing some pretty severe criticisms of the theory of forms. One of these criticisms turns on the problem of participation, namely how a single form can be participated in by many particulars without itself becoming many. Since the *Republic* is dramatically later than the *Parmenides*, I think it is evident, if we are to take seriously what Plato actually wrote, that whatever Socrates says in the *Republic* about participation must be understood as cognizant of, and therefore as in some way avoiding, or even answering, the criticisms of the *Parmenides*. That this is easier to do than scholars are wont to think is something that can be shown with respect to the *Republic’s* analogy of the sun, to which, therefore, I now return.

Parmenides’ question to Socrates of how it is that many particulars participate in a single form while the form remains one and single is answered by Socrates through an
analogy with a single day which is in many places at once and yet remains one and the same day. To this Parmenides responds that that is like saying a single sheet cast over many men would be one over many (131b1-9) – when, of course, clearly only a part of the whole sheet would be over each man, and thus the whole sheet, and by analogy the whole form, would have to be divisible into many parts. Socrates is clearly puzzled by this reply and does not pursue his analogy further. The reason can only be what Parmenides himself says is the reason, namely Socrates’ youth and inexperience (130e1-3, 135c8-d6), for otherwise Socrates would not have let Parmenides bamboozle him into equating his day analogy with Parmenides’ sheet analogy. In the Republic, of course, Socrates is no longer young and inexperienced and the sun analogy has taken the place of the day analogy. The sun analogy is clearly better because while the light that makes up a given day is clearly divisible like a sheet (one part of the light is here and another part there), the source of that light, namely the sun, is not. So if the relationship of form to particular is like the relationship of the sun to the places it lights up then one form can be present in many particulars at once without itself being divisible.

The analogy of the sun is, then, I say a solution to the puzzle of participation raised, and not solved, in the Parmenides. Of course the analogy of the sun is to the form of the good only and not to any form, but an extension of the analogy to cover the other forms is not hard to construct and is suggested by Socrates anyway. For the good is the cause of being and intelligibility to all the forms, and not just to the many particulars, and how it could be so can readily be understood if one adds to the sun analogy the further picture of different colored filters placed between the sun and the things that the sun illuminates. For a green or red filter, say, would, like the sun, be single and yet would,
without losing its singularity, shed its special hue on the many particulars, lighting them up with the color of green or red. So we could imagine the forms of justice and beauty and largeness and twoness being so many intelligible filters through which the single intelligibility of the good was mediated and which thereby made the many particulars to be just or beautiful or large or two while themselves each remaining a single form. That Socrates does not develop his sun analogy like this is hardly a problem, for the development seems obvious enough and we are invited to develop it in this sort of way, or at least to develop it in a way that would allow for there being many forms dependent for their intelligibility on the form of the good (509c5-d4). I consider the sun analogy, therefore, to be a complete and satisfactory solution to Parmenides’ puzzle about the singleness of forms.

There is something else in the *Republic* that serves, in like manner, as a complete and satisfactory solution to another one of Parmenides’ puzzles. The puzzle I have in mind is the so-called likeness regress, which is directed at Socrates’ suggestion that particulars participate in forms by being made like them as copies are made like their models. For, says Parmenides, the particulars cannot be like the form if the form is not also, in its turn, like the particulars; and if the form is like the particulars there must be some further form that the form and the particulars participate in so that they can be like – and so on ad infinitum (132c12-133a3). But there is a passage in the *Republic* where Socrates describes those who believe in the many beautiful things but not in beauty itself as living a dream, and he says of dreaming: “is not dreaming this, that a person, whether he is in a dream or awake, thinks that the like is the same as, and not just like, that which it is like?” (476c5-7). The importance of this passage is that Socrates distinguishes being
like something from being the same as something and, by declaring that the fault of
dreamers is to think, say, that the particular beautifuls are the same as the beautiful
instead of merely being like the beautiful, clearly implies that only the beautiful itself, or
only the form of beauty, is the same as the beautiful, while the particular beautifuls are
like the beautiful but not the same as it. The same distinction between sameness and
likeness is found in the passage about God being the maker of the bed as it is in nature
(the form of the bed) and about his making only one such bed and not more (597b5-c5).

The context here is a discussion of imitation (mimesis) and not of likeness (homoiotes),
but there is no difference in the thought: an imitation is, after all, a likeness. At any rate
the reason that Socrates gives for God not making more than one bed in nature is the
following: “If he made two beds only, another bed would appear whose form the first two
would both possess, and it would be what that bed is and not these two” (597c7-9). In
other words, again there is a single form that is the same as itself, while multiple
instances are not the same as it but are only like it or only partake of it (the genitive here
with the Greek verb echoien, or ‘possess’, is clearly partitive).

At any rate, armed with a distinction between sameness on the one hand and
likeness or participation on the other, the Socrates of the Republic would have an easy
reply to Parmenides’ likeness regress, for he could say that the way the form is like the
particulars is very different from the way the particulars are like the form. The form is
like the particulars, not because there is some further form that it and the particulars all
participate in, but because it is the same as, and not merely like, what the particulars are
like, namely itself. Accordingly there is no need to bring in some further form of likeness
to explain the likeness of the form to the particulars. The self-identity of the form with itself (that the beautiful is identical with the beautiful) is sufficient for that.²

So I regard the distinction between sameness and likeness that Socrates uses in the Republic passage as a complete and satisfactory solution to Parmenides’ likeness regress, just as I regard the sun analogy as a complete and satisfactory solution to Parmenides’ puzzle about how forms can be single while being participated in by many particulars. Further I regard the fact that the Republic provides solutions to problems from the Parmenides as confirmation³ that the Republic is not just dramatically later than the Parmenides but logically later too, and that Plato intended the Republic to be read, at least in part, as providing responses to the Parmenides and not the Parmenides as providing puzzles for the Republic.

**The Incoherence of the Idea of Participation in the Republic**

At this point, however, I need to enter two caveats. First, there are other puzzles against the theory of forms raised in the Parmenides that I have not dealt with thus far and the question naturally arises about how I would deal with them. The short answer is that I would do so in a similar way, namely by showing that there are solutions, if not in the Republic, then in other dialogues – for I do not wish to claim that the Republic by itself contains express solutions to all Parmenides’ puzzles.⁴ Second, even if it is the case, as I contend, that these puzzles are answered in other Platonic dialogues, it still need not follow that the theory of forms, and in particular the theory of participation, is altogether

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³ I say confirmation rather than proof because perhaps an author might revive problems to which he had elsewhere given solutions without at once answering or suspending those solutions. But I see no reason to think that of the Republic’s solutions to the arguments found in the Parmenides.

⁴ More of the details of the view I express here are found in the article mentioned in note 1 above.
free of problems or is otherwise acceptable. In fact, I think there are other such problems. Further, I think that the Platonic theory of participation, or the idea of participation as this appears in Plato’s dialogues and especially in the *Republic*, is ultimately incoherent. Let me explain.

In a striking image, Socrates speaks of the many beliefs of the many about beauty and the like as “rolling about” between being and not-being (479d3-5). The same thought is echoed later when Socrates speaks of what always is as not being made to wander about by becoming and destruction (485b3), and also when he speaks of the soul looking at coming to be and destruction and “changing its opinions up and down” (508d8-9). Socrates speaks ambiguously leaving it unclear whether the things that participate in being and not-being are particulars or the beliefs and judgments of the many, or whether, that is, what rolls about is things or opinions about things. Probably Socrates means both, because he seems to speak in both ways, both about the many beautifuls and also about the opinions of the many about the beautiful.

But if we know what is participated in, namely the forms, what is it that participates? Is it the particular things? Then how can these particular things participate in being without already being something (for what is altogether nothing cannot participate in anything)? Does that mean that the particulars that participate have some being of their own and because of which they are able to participate in whatever they do participate in? What could such being be? Moreover, if the particulars have enough being that they can participate, or fail to participate, in some form, why do they need to participate in being – for they already are beings? We should be reminded now of the *Timaeus* and the strange “wandering cause” or the “receptacle” and “mother” where the
particulars, that neither fully are nor fully are not, come to be through the coming together of forms and which itself has no character at all but is just an availability for the imprinting or receiving of all characters (Timaeus 47e3-51b6). The problems Timaeus has in describing this receptacle and in both giving it being, so that it can receive, and denying it being, so that it imposes nothing of itself on what it receives, are indicative of the intractability of the problem of how there can be participation in being.

This problem is the one that especially afflicts the doctrines put forward in the Republic. For, although the Republic speaks, as do other dialogues, about the just and the beautiful and about participation in these, it also speaks about being and not-being and about participation in being and not-being. To speak of an action participating in justice in one case and failing to do so in another raises no immediate puzzles, because there is no difficulty in thinking of an action of, say, giving back a borrowed item as being just in this situation but not in that. The action after all is something already by itself, a giving back, so that it can participate in something else, as justice or beauty, and so be just or beautiful, or fail to participate in this something else, and so be unjust or base. But how can an action, or anything, participate in being or not-being? For it cannot participate unless it already is in some way, and if it participates in not-being it must both be, so that it can participate, and not be, for to participate in not-being is not to be. There is no problem, that is to say, in thinking of a being as participating in something else, like justice or beauty, but there is considerable problem in thinking of a being as participating in being. A sheer nothing cannot participate; and what is not a sheer nothing is already something before it participates. Participation makes some sense when what is participated in is justice or beauty; it makes no sense when what is participated in is being.
This problem is not made any better but exacerbated by what is said of participation in the *Sophist*. There the Eleatic Stranger introduces the five great genera of motion, rest, sameness, difference, and being, and speaks of how these genera participate, or do not participate, in each other. The purpose of the Stranger’s discussion in the context is to explain the Parmenidean problem of not-being, or of how it can be possible, given Parmenides’ claim that not-being cannot be said or thought, that something can be said not to be. The answer is that a thing is never said simply not to be; rather what is said when something is said not to be is that that something is different from being, or participates in difference with respect to being (*Sophist* 254b7-259e6). But this, though clever, is a mere subterfuge. How can something that is not already something be said to participate in difference, and so how can saying what is not be explained as saying that something is different from being or participates in difference with respect to being? The answer is that it cannot. The *Sophist*’s account of not-being is simply incoherent.

One may wonder, of course, if Plato realized this and meant us to realize that the answer of the *Sophist* will not do, at any rate where participation in being is concerned. The evidence of Aristotle is that he did not. Aristotle presents an argument, essentially consisting of two parts: the first that participating in being is nonsense; the second that, if being is not a form nor, accordingly, something that can be participated in, then there are no forms, and, a fortiori, no participating in forms either. The first part of the argument is as follows:

Plato and the Pythagoreans thought being and unity were nothing else, but this was their nature, their substance being just unity and being… But if there is to be
a being-itself and a unity-itself, there is much difficulty in seeing how there will
be anything else besides these – I mean, how things will be more than one in
number. For what is different from being does not exist, so that it necessarily
follows, according to the argument of Parmenides, that all things that are are one
and this is being. (Metaphysics 3.4.1001a9-12, 29-b1; trans. Ross.)

The argument here is, I take it, straightforward enough. If being is one form and if
other things can only be by participating in this one form, then, as Parmenides argued in
his poem, there are no other things besides this form and being is simply and altogether
one. For only what is different from being could participate in being (that which already
is in some way is not different from being, nor does it not need to participate in being,
because it already is); but what is different from being altogether is not; therefore there is
nothing different from being or being is simply and altogether one.

The second part of the argument is as follows:

If we do not suppose being and unity to be substances, it follows that none of the
other universals is a substance; for these are most universal of all. If there is no
unity-itself or being-itself, there will scarcely be in any other case anything apart
from what are called the individuals (particulars). Further, if unity is not a
substance, evidently number also will not exist as an entity separate from the
individual things; for number is units, and the unit is something whose essence it
is to be one. (ib. 1001a19-27.)
Again, I take it, the argument is straightforward: if there are forms by participating in which the individuals or particulars are whatever they are, then being and unity must be forms; but unity and being are not forms (this was the argument of the previous quote); therefore there are no forms at all and, a fortiori, no participating in them.

I conclude from this then that, however much the theory of forms can survive, and was intended to survive, the challenge to the idea of participation posed by Plato himself in the *Parmenides*, it cannot survive the challenge to the idea of participation posed by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*. For as soon as Platonic participation is extended from ideas like justice or beauty or largeness or twoness to the idea of being, as it is so extended above all and primarily in the *Republic*, it becomes radically incoherent. Further, as soon as participation is seen to be incoherent with respect to being, participation in any idea, whether of justice or beauty or what not, becomes a pointless and arbitrary posit. For since participation cannot explain how the many beings are all beings, and since, therefore, some other account of being has to be found that posits neither a single idea or form of being nor participation in it, what possible reason could there be to cling onto participation and ideas in the case of anything else? For if being is not an idea and if things have being without participating in the idea of being, then even less can justice or beauty be ideas and even less can things be just or beautiful by participating in the ideas of justice and beauty.

In short, while the idea of ideas and of participation has a certain immediate plausibility and attractiveness when it comes to explaining the phenomenon of justice or twoness (as in Socrates’ autobiographical excursus in the *Phaedo* 99d4-102a2), it altogether loses both when it comes to the phenomenon of being. Plato, we may say, or at
any rate what is said in the Platonic dialogues, is guilty of wrenching a term out of its ordinary context (for participation is uncontroversial as long as it is meant in some common sense way and not inflated into a piece of technical metaphysics), and putting it into an extraordinary one where, while it may appear to have sense because it has sense in the ordinary context, it can have no sense at all. This is, of course, the sort of accusation leveled at philosophers and philosophies by the later Wittgenstein, and a tool he often had recourse to for solving philosophical puzzles. But Aristotle was effectively there before him and, as far as Platonic forms and participation are concerned, devastatingly so.