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THE DOCTRINE OF RECOLLECTION AT *PHAEDO* 74A-75D: COHERENCE IS NOT ENOUGH

At *Phaedo* 74a-75d, Plato makes a concerted effort to argue for the Doctrine of Recollection. Recent commentators have raised several objections to the doctrine as it is expressed there,¹ but I think it is possible to give the passage an interpretation that surpasses these objections and gives coherence to the Doctrine of Recollection. However, coherence is not enough; in the end I find other difficulties in Plato's argument that make it unconvincing.

The passage begins with mention of the fact that similarity is a possible but not necessary basis for recollection, for sometimes a thing can remind us of something else which is dissimilar. It is the possibility of similarity as a basis for recollection that presently interests Socrates. He raises a phenomenological consideration about similarity: the experience of similarity includes a comparative feature by virtue of which one is aware of the imperfection of the similarity; that is, lack of similarity is part of the experience of similarity, so that we are aware that any instance of similarity points to even greater possible similarity than it exhibits itself.² We may disagree with Plato and think that it is only the similarity that we notice when we appraise the similarity of two things, but it is not necessary for us to agree with his phenomenology in order for us to accept the only point that he really needs to make, that is, that it is possible for us to reflect on any experience of similarity and notice that it allows for an even greater degree of similarity than it itself has. The way is thus prepared for the re-introduction of the Theory of Forms³ (which is assumed rather than argued for):

1. They are adequately summarized, when not originated, by David Gallop in *Plato: Phaedo*, London, Oxford University Press 1975. I shall refer primarily to Gallop's treatment of them, as his book, so far as I am concerned, is "state of the art".

2. Gallop, op. cit., 118-119, agreeing with Gosling, assumes that Plato takes an assessment of the degree of similarity to be a necessary or common *precondition* for being reminded of an object by a similar object. This is not an implausible interpretation, except that it seems unlikely that Plato would commit himself to such a vulnerable point that is not necessary to his argument.

3. The Theory of Forms was discussed briefly at 65c9-e5.



“We say, don’t we, that there is something equal — I don’t mean a log to a log, or a stone to a stone, or anything else of that sort, but some further thing beyond all those, the equal itself: are we to say that there is something or nothing?” (74a9-13)⁴

Simmiias answers Socrates affirmatively, and then Socrates asks: “And do we know what it is?” (74b3). Simmiias gives the correct answer: “Certainly”. As Gallop points out, “we know what the Form Equal is” is equivalent in Greek to “we know the Form Equal”, and the latter assertion seems to be contradicted at 76b4-c3, where it is indicated that not everyone knows the Forms. Gallop offers two ways of avoiding this contradiction, both of which involve rather extreme interpretive measures, and both of which he ultimately acknowledges to be unsatisfactory.⁵ Actually, on the face of it, there is no contradiction at all: “we know the Form Equal” does not contradict “not everyone knows the Forms”, nor even “not everyone knows the Form Equal”.⁶ Presumably, Gallop takes “we” to refer to more than just the participants in the dialogue, which could produce a contradiction, but it seems to me that the context provides no warrant for such an interpretation.

However, this is not to say that there are no problems connected with knowledge of the Forms. One of these problems arises now in the dialogue, as Socrates suggests how knowledge of the Form Equal occurs:

“Where did we get the knowledge of it? Wasn’t it from the things we were just mentioning: on seeing logs or stones or other equal things...?” (74b4-6)

Socrates’ thesis, the Doctrine of Recollection, seems clearly to be in conflict with the view, stated earlier in the *Phaedo*, that the way to gain knowledge of the Forms is to purify the soul by living the philosophical life. The philosopher, it is said there, disregards sense-perception, because it only causes confusion. It would seem that the only way to avoid this difficulty is for Plato to have intended two different senses of knowledge of the Forms in these two passages. Since the contradiction occurs within a fairly short dialogue, it seems this must have been Plato’s intention. In the earlier passage it is clear

4. All of my quotes are from the Gallop translation, op. cit.

5. Gallop, op. cit., 120.

6. It’s true that Simmiias goes further, implying that Socrates may be the only person who can demonstrate a knowledge of the Forms by giving an account of them, but this seems to be intended primarily as an expression of praise for Socrates, rather than as an integral part of the argument.

that “knowledge” refers to direct and immediate acquaintance by means of intellectual vision. At 66e1, Socrates says we must “view” the Forms “with the soul by itself”, and, at 67c2-3, he indicates that it is the “intellect” which is prepared through purification for knowledge of the Forms. It is not clear in this passage to what extent we can gain this intellectual vision before death (which is a sort of ultimate purification for the philosopher), but it is clear that purified intellectual vision is given exclusive rights to direct and immediate acquaintance with the Forms: “Never will it be permissible for impure to touch pure” (67b2). Now Plato must be talking about something different at 74b4-6. Gallop proposes that Socrates may be asking here for the source of our concept of equality, i.e., “how we learnt, for ordinary purposes, to recognize things as equal, and to describe them as such?”⁷ But, aside from the difficulties with this view that Gallop himself mentions, this seems completely alien to the context, which clearly indicates that the “it” in Socrates’ question (“Where did we get the knowledge of it?”) refers to the Form Equal, not to a mundane psychological consideration. The only alternative interpretation, in Gallop’s view, requires us to have the contradiction.

It is easy here to overlook the obvious, which is that Plato, in the later passage, is telling us how we are reminded of the Forms, whereas in the earlier passage he is telling us how we gain direct and immediate acquaintance with them. Perhaps we are not satisfied with his superficial explanation of recollection, and are tempted to inquire after a more detailed explanation of the mechanics of this process, but then we diverge from Plato’s own concern in making this point, which is to use the Doctrine of Recollection as a proof for the immortality of the soul. It may be that being reminded of the Forms does have a practical function somewhat similar to what Gallop suggests. In fact, the discussion of the Doctrine of Recollection in the *Meno* makes it clear that recollection makes it possible for one to use the Forms (but not some separate concepts) in a practical way. But here Plato saw no need to bring out the practical value involved in being reminded of the Forms.

The next few lines establish that the Form Equal and equal things are “not the same” (74b8-c6). The first step of the argument consists of a suggestion by Socrates: “Don’t equal stones and logs, the very same ones, sometimes seem equal to one, but not to another?” (74b8-9) Gallop offers four possible interpretations of this line:

“...(a) that equal stones and logs, while remaining the same, seem equal to one observer but not to another; or

7. Ibid., 120.

(b) that they seem equal to one thing but not to another; or (c) that they seem equal in one respect (e.g. length) but not in another (e.g. weight); or (d) that sometimes, while remaining the same, they seem equal at one time, but not at another.”⁸

Gallop correctly rejects (c) as an inadequate translation of the Greek. His objection to (b) requires that we anticipate the next step of the argument, which is that the characteristic we are presently attributing to equal things is not a characteristic of the Form Equal. (Note that the exact meaning of the characteristic depends on which of the four interpretations we adopt.) Now if we were to adopt (b) as the correct interpretation, then the next step in the argument would have to be understood as saying that the Form Equal is not unequal to anything, which would seem to imply that it is equal to everything, which is obviously not the case in its relation either to other Forms or to sensible things. However, perhaps that implication is only apparent, for it might be said that the Form Equal is not unequal to anything simply on the basis that it does not enter into relationships of equality and inequality at all. (This suggests the problem of self-predication, which will be considered below.)

I must say that (d) strikes me as a bit strained, considering the context, but there seems to be no really good reason for rejecting it in favor of either (a) or (b). Actually any one of these three versions will allow Plato to make the point that he needs to make, which is that sensible instances of the Form Equal sometimes appear to be unequal, whereas this is never the case with the Form Equal, so they “are not the same”.⁹

Now Socrates says that even though they are different from each other, it is the equal things that remind us of the Form Equal, regardless of their similarity or dissimilarity. But, he insists, the equal things are not equal “in the same way” as the Form Equal. They “fall short... in being like” the Form Equal. Further on, at 75a1-2, he describes the equal things as “striving to be like” the Form Equal. Taking all of these expressions together, we get the implication that a Form can serve as some sort of standard for its sensible instances. We also get the implication that a Form can be self-predicating, i.e., that X can be predicated of the Form X.

8. Ibid., 122.

9. I have assumed that the phrase “the equals themselves” at 74c1 refers to the Form Equal. Gallop’s argument for this interpretation (op. cit., 123-125) seems to me quite sufficient, but, in any case, I think that this is the only interpretation the context will allow.

Let us examine some of the 'acute difficulties' that have been thought to be associated with the role of the Forms as standards and with self-predication of the Forms, as they are admirably summarized by Gallop.¹⁰

(1) We do not in practice use the Form Equal (for example) as a standard; instead, we measure things against each other or with a measuring device. I donot think that Plato claims that this is what we do. The Form Equal is not a standard in the ordinary sense; it is what makes it possible for us to know what it means to appraise the equality of things, no matter what technique we use in doing it.

(2) "In judging that two logs are not exactly equal, we do not take ourselves to be comparing them with a non-sensible Form". This objection is also beside the point. Plato's theory does not require that we "take ourselves" to be making a comparison with a Form. Rather, it takes the Form (as a standard) to be a pre-condition for our being able to judge that the two logs are not equal. It seems reasonable to suppose that our use of the Form in appraising equality is generally tacit.

(3) "It is not clear that judgments to the effect that 'x is not exactly F' require prior acquaintance with an x that is exactly F." This is correct, but we must have some kind of previous acquaintance with F in order to appraise the degree of its presence in any x, and Plato can plausibly maintain that we cannot be confident that our appraisal is full and complete unless we have some previous acquaintance with a standard for F.

(4) The Forms are also said by Plato to function as universals, which role would seem to conflict with their self-predication and their function as standards. "Forms, as universals, cannot, in general, have the characters that they are." As examples, Gallop suggests that smallness cannot be small, or largeness large. But the crux of the matter is somewhat different: can the Form Small function as a universal, smallness, and yet be said to be perfectly small itself? On the face of it, Plato is certainly involved in an absurdity here, for the very idea of perfectly small is nonsensical. The only way out seems to be for us to understand that predication of a Form is something different from ordinary predication. As Plato says at 74d6, the equal things are not equal "in the same way as" the Form Equal. The Form Small is small, not because of its size, but simply because it is the Form Small: that is just the way Forms are. Just so, the Form Equal is equal not because it is equal to anything, but because it is the Form Equal; neither is it unequal to anything, so its equality is perfect. If someone protests that he doesn't understand this

10. Ibid., 127-128.

other kind of predication, or that it doesn't seem that this is really predication, we can only reply that he just doesn't understand the nature of Forms, and how they differ from sensible things. At the very least, this approach frees Plato from the logical difficulties that seemed to exist.

(5) The predication of "equal" to the Form Equal raises the problem that the Form Equal cannot be equal to everything, but if it is equal to only some things, then it is defectively equal, just like its sensible instances. If it is equal to nothing, or to nothing but itself, then it could not function as a standard. Gallop proposes that we avoid the difficulty by interpreting "the Form Equal is equal" as an identity statement: "the Form Equal is (identical with) Equal". But I see no warrant for converting what is clearly some kind of predication to an identity statement. As with (4), the only solution that I can see is to understand that because of the peculiar nature of Forms, predication in their case is different than it is in the case of sensible things. One consideration that may make this suggestion more plausible is that Forms are, after all, fundamentally different from sensible things in that they are not sensible; so, for example, it would be inappropriate to think that the self-predication of the Form Small has something to do with size. Perhaps it would even be defensible to suppose that the self-predication of the Forms is at most analogous to the predication of the sensible things, and then we could make the further point that analogies should not be pressed too hard. By saying this, I don't mean to imply that the self-predication of the Forms is merely analogous, in the sense of not really predication after all, but rather that it is predication different from, but analogous to, ordinary predication. Then how does a Form serve as a standard? First of all, the phrases that prompted us to suppose that the Forms function as some sort of standards are vague: equal things "fall short... in being like" the Form Equal, equal things are "striving to be like" the Form Equal. There is no suggestion of a direct comparison, which would be impossible, for, again, equal things are not equal "in the same way as" the Form Equal. Forms must serve as standards in a transcendental sense, such that prior acquaintance with them is necessary in order to recognize their instantiations in experience. It should be obvious that Forms are not examined and compared with their instantiations in the context of experience.

Socrates' next point is that in order for one to realize that X "falls short of" Y, he must have had prior acquaintance with Y. If this is the case, he proceeds, then we must have had acquaintance with the Form Equal prior to the first time that we thought of equal things as "striving to be like" it, and prior to their reminding us of it. Therefore, our initial acquaintance with the Form Equal must have occurred prior to any sensory experience. Plato's



conclusion goes beyond his argument in two respects.¹¹ (1) If his argument is otherwise sound, he can legitimately conclude only that the initial acquaintance with the Form Equal must have occurred prior to any experience of sensible equals, not prior to any sensible experience at all. Of course, presumably he could proceed to cite other cases, arguing inductively for the conclusion that he is really after, viz., that knowledge of the Forms, as a group, is a prerequisite for having sensory experience. (2) But further, he is not entitled to say that the initial acquaintance with the Form Equal must have occurred prior to any experience of sensible equals, but only that it must have occurred prior to any experience of referring the sensible equals to the Form Equal. For the former to be proved, he must argue that every experience of a sensible equal includes a reference to the Form Equal, which he does not attempt to do.

Since Plato's argument breaks down at this point, we cannot take his further conclusions to be established. They are (1) that sensory experience begins at birth, so we must have got our knowledge of the Form Equal before birth, and (2) that we must have had knowledge of all the other Forms as well before birth. (Even though (2) is presented as a conclusion, it is not argued for; rather Socrates simply states that the argument also applies to the other Forms.) Apart from these less profound, and arguably unnecessary, aspects of the theory, we must acknowledge that the Doctrine of Recollection itself is at least a coherent theory. But Plato has failed to establish it, he has failed to convince us that it must be so; thus, it remains a mere possibility, at best.

ΤΟ ΔΟΓΜΑ ΤΗΣ ΑΝΑΜΝΗΣΗΣ ΣΤΟΝ ΦΑΙΔΩΝΑ

Περίληψη.

Ἀντίθετα πρὸς τὶς ἀπόψεις μερικῶν νεώτερων σχολιαστῶν στὸ ἄρθρο αὐτὸ ὑποστηρίζεται ἡ θέση, ὅτι τὸ δόγμα τῆς ἀνάμνησης, ὅπως προτείνεται ἀπὸ τὸν Πλάτωνα στὸν *Φαίδωνα* 74a-75d, εἶναι συνεπὲς καὶ καθεαυτὸ καὶ μὲ τὸ ὑπόλοιπο μέρος τοῦ διαλόγου. Ἡ μέθοδος εἶναι βασικὰ ἐξηγητική καὶ προσπαθεῖ νὰ δώσει στὸ ὑπὸ θεώρηση χωρίο τὴν καλύτερη καὶ ἰσχυρότερη δυνατὴ ἐξήγηση, δείχνοντας πῶς ξεπερνᾷ ὁ Πλάτων τὶς ἀντιρρήσεις τῶν νεώτερων κριτικῶν του.

11. It is not clear whether Gallop explicitly realizes these. He does quote an objection from Ackrill which would not be relevant if these mistakes were not made (ibid., 129).

Μία από τις αντιρρήσεις αυτές είναι ότι το δόγμα της ανάμνησης συγκρούεται με την άποψη, που αναπτύσσεται προηγουμένως στον *Φαίδωνα*, ότι ο τρόπος για να αποκτήσει κανείς γνώση των Ἰδεῶν είναι να εξαγνίσει την ψυχή του, ζώντας το φιλοσοφικό βίο. Δεν υπάρχει ωστόσο σύγκρουση, όταν γίνει κατανοητό ότι το προηγούμενο χωρίο έχει να κάνει με την άμεση και κατευθείαν γνωριμία με τις Ἰδέες, ενώ το χωρίο που ακολουθεί λέει πως ξαναθυμόμαστε τις Ἰδέες.

Ἀναπτύσσοντας τη θεωρία των ἰδεῶν στο χωρίο αυτό ο Πλάτων εξυπονοεί ότι οι Ἰδέες χρησιμεύουν ως αὐτο-κατηγορικά ὑποδείγματα (self-predicating standards). Οἱ κριτικοὶ βρήκαν δυσκολίες και με τὸ ρόλο των Ἰδεῶν ὡς ὑποδειγμάτων (κανόνων) και με τὴν αὐτο-κατηγορία των Ἰδεῶν. Προσεκτικότερη ἀνάλυση δείχνει ὅτι οἱ ὑποτιθέμενες αυτές δυσκολίες στηρίζονται: α) σὲ παρανοήσεις των λεπτῶν διακρίσεων τῆς πλατωνικῆς θεωρίας, β) σὲ σύγχυση σχετικά με καθημερινές συνήθειες των ἀνθρώπων κρίσεων, και γ) στὴν ἄτοπη τάση νὰ μεταχειριζόμαστε τις Ἰδέες σὰν νὰ ἦταν αἰσθητὰ ἀντικείμενα.

Δυστυχῶς, ἂν και τὸ δόγμα τῆς ἀνάμνησης ἀποδεικνύεται τελικὰ συνεπές, τὰ ἐπιχειρήματα τοῦ Πλάτωνος γιὰ τὴν ὑποστήριξή του, ποὺ ἀναλύονται ἐδῶ, εἶναι ἀνεπαρκῆ γιὰ νὰ μᾶς ὑποχρεώσουν νὰ τὴν ἀποδεχθοῦμε. Ἰδιαίτερα ἀνεπαρκῆ ἀποδεικνύονται τὰ ἐπιχειρήματά του γιὰ τὴν οἰκείωση με τις Ἰδέες πρὶν ἀπὸ τὴ γέννησή μας.

(Μετάφραση Μ. Δραγώνα-Μονάχου)