

What the Forms are Not: Plato on Conceptualism in *Parmenides* 132b-c

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How comes [the mind] to be furnished? Whence comes
it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy
of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety?
Locke (*Essay* II.1. ii)

Conceptualism—the view that universals are mental entities without an external, independent, or substantial reality—has enjoyed popularity at various points throughout the history of philosophy. While Plato’s Theory of Forms is not a conceptualist theory of universals, we find at *Parmenides* 132b-c the surprising conceptualist suggestion from a young Socrates that each Form might be a νόημα, or a mental entity.¹ This suggestion and Parmenides’ cryptic objections to it have been overshadowed by their placement directly after the notoriously difficult Third Man Argument (132a-b), and before the Likeness Regress (132c-133a). However, in the background of 132b-c, we find illuminating assumptions behind Parmenides’ arguments against the Theory of Forms in the first half of the dialogue. We also find in this text a set of implied criteria for concepthood.² My focus in this paper is to take a closer look at Socrates’ conceptualist suggestion and Parmenides’ pair of truncated objections to it.

First, I briefly explain the dialectical context of Socrates’ suggestion—namely, Parmenides’ Large-Equality-Small Argument (LESA) at 131d-e and the Third Man Argument (TMA) at 132a-b. I argue that these arguments are meant to attack the Theory of Forms by exposing how the notion of participation leads to unacceptable consequences that threaten the numerical and predicational unity of the Forms. Forms, recall, are numerical unities, because for every F, there can only be one Form of F-ness. They are also predicational unities in the sense that every Form can only bear one predicate in a particularly strong way.³ The suggestion at 132b-c that Forms are mental entities is Socrates’ attempt to save the Forms from numerical and predicational plurality by means of a rejection of participation.

Next, in my reading of 132b-c, I argue that Parmenides presents two objections to the conceptualist suggestion. The first objection shows that a Form cannot be a νόημα in the passive

¹ For why the Theory of Forms is not a conceptualist theory of universals see for instance Cherniss (1944) pp. 214-216. That Socrates’ suggestion in this part of the text amounts to conceptualism is defended, for example, by Allen (1983) and Helmig (2007), among many others, and seems to be the dominant view. One exception is the view defended in Bossi (2005), which I discuss in §2.

² The *Parmenides* is an immensely rich dialogue, and all of its difficulties cannot be addressed in one paper. I set aside speculation about the target of Plato’s anti-conceptualism, as well as questions about the dramatic and philosophical allusions or qualifications Plato might intend in making Parmenides the main interlocutor in this dialogue. I also set aside the question of whether the Parmenides of this dialogue is deploying a sincere criticism of the Theory of Forms.

³ The language of numerical and predicational unity belongs to Curd (1986). I will use ‘unity’ and ‘oneness’ interchangeably. The language of ‘bearing’ and ‘acquiring’ a Form, or ‘bearing’, ‘holding’, and ‘expressing’ a predicate is also deliberately ambiguous so as to not beg questions.

sense of a content, and the second shows that a Form cannot be a νόημα in the active sense of the activity of thinking. Finally, I discuss the account of concepts lurking in the background of this section of the text. While in the Platonic dialogues, Forms are explanantia for many of the phenomena concepts purportedly explain in contemporary philosophy, concepts do seem to have an important epistemic role in the corpus, for example, as part of the theory of recollection. I then test the coherence of these criteria for concepthood by applying this picture to what is often referred to as the ‘conceptual analysis’ involved in the method of collection and division demonstrated in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*.

1 The Large-Equality-Small Argument, The Third Man, and Socrates’ Conceptualism

The possibility that Forms are mental entities is raised by Socrates in response to the difficulties presented by the LESA and TMA:

- (a) “But Parmenides,” Socrates said, “maybe each of these Forms is a thought (*noēma*)⁴ and properly occurs nowhere other than the soul. For each [Form] would be one and would not suffer the things which you just now mentioned.”

“Ἀλλά,” φάναι, “ὦ Παρμενίδη,” τὸν Σωκράτη, “μὴ τῶν εἰδῶν ἕκαστον ἢ τούτων νόημα, καὶ οὐδαμοῦ αὐτῷ προσήκη ἐγγίγνεσθαι ἄλλοθι ἢ ἐν ψυχαῖς· οὕτω γὰρ ἂν ἐν γε ἕκαστον εἶη καὶ οὐκ ἂν ἔτι πάσχοι ἃ νῦν δὴ ἐλέγετο.” (132b3-5)

The problem that immediately confronts us is how we should think of the νόημα in Socrates’ suggestion, for νόημα can have an active sense and a passive sense, and it is not obvious which of these Socrates intends. In the active sense, it refers to an act of thought. In the passive sense, it refers to the content of an act of thinking. In (a), I translate νόημα as ‘thought’ because at this point in the discussion, whether the term is to have an active or passive sense is ambiguous. After confronting Parmenides’ preceding arguments against the Forms, Socrates is grasping for a solution that would save the Forms. Minimally, Socrates’ proposal is that Forms might be mental entities of a sort. What problem in particular is this suggestion meant to resolve, and what is it about mental entities that might avoid this problem?

Whatever other inconsistencies these arguments raise about the Forms, the LESA and the TMA seem to expose and attack weaknesses that arise from the notion of the participation of instances in Forms. At 131a4-7, the interlocutors agree that the only way an instance can participate in a Form is by having the whole, undivided Form or part of the divided Form. Despite Socrates’ attempt to defend the claim at 131b3-c7, Parmenides ultimately denies that in participation, instances acquire the whole Form, because it would mean that the Form is undivided and yet divided among its participants, which is absurd. The only other option is that participants acquire a part of

⁴ The text also lends itself to “maybe each of the Forms is a thought of these things” when τούτων is taken as an objective genitive with νόημα. For this reading, see Allen (1983). The placement of τούτων makes this rendering more plausible, though it raises the question of what the referent of τούτων is. So understood, one candidate for the referent would be the participants, so that the Form of Largeness, for example, is a thought of individual large things. But it’s unclear how Forms would do what they are supposed to do (e.g. account for sameness in difference) if they are merely thoughts of individual things. Additionally, if τούτων is meant to refer to something other than the Forms, Socrates would seem to be anticipating Parmenides’ objection to his suggestion, that thoughts are of something.

the divided Form. The LESA and the TMA are deployed by Parmenides to reveal how the division of the Form among its participants entails the numerical and predicational plurality of the Forms. Each Form is numerically one in the sense that for everything of which there is a Form, there is exactly one Form. For instance, there is only a single Form of Beauty. Each Form is also a predicational unity in the sense that a Form holds only one predicate, and holds it in a particularly strong way. While each particular can hold a plurality of predicates, each Form can only have one predicate attached to it. For example, as a particular, Socrates is both wise and just, but the Form of Beauty can only be beautiful—it cannot also be blue, or large.⁵ Let's take each argument in turn.

First, according to the LESA, when the Form of Largeness is divided among the participants, each participant receives a small part of the whole Form of Largeness, so that the participant is called large because it has something we can call small. The same argument applies to the Form of Equality and the Form of Smallness—equal things are called equal by having something smaller than and therefore unequal to the Equal itself, and small things are called small by having a small part of something larger (i.e. the Small itself). As Curd summarizes, “A participant is made to be *f* by having as its share of the *F*-itself a portion that is not *f*, and indeed, is the opposite of *f*.”⁶ The predicational unity of the Form is threatened by participation, for it follows from this argument that each of these Forms would hold some predicate and its opposite.

The TMA begins with the assumption that there is a plurality of large things, which we will call P1. Each member of P1 is large by virtue of participating in the Form of Largeness. We know that Plato endorses self-predication, so every Form is, in some way, a Form of itself, but since it is a Form, it will not be an instance of itself. So, according to the TMA, the Form of Largeness must itself be large without at the same time being an instance of the Form of Largeness. The Form of Largeness, since it is large, would be a member of P1, forming a new plurality which we can call P2. It seems, then, that a new Form of Largeness that is not identical to the one that was added to P2 is needed in order to explain how each member of P2 is large. However, this means that there are two Forms of Largeness, and we know that for anything of which there is a Form, there is exactly one Form. The second Form of Largeness can then be added to P2 as a member, creating a new plurality, P3, and prompting the introduction of a third Form of Largeness. This reasoning can be repeated infinitely. Here, since there is more than one Form of Largeness, there is no numerical unity. There is, in fact, an infinite plurality of Forms of Largeness.

The TMA also threatens the predicational unity of the Forms. Assume, as the TMA concludes, that there are two non-equivalent Forms of Largeness—FL1 and FL2. If FL1 is what it is to be large, then FL2 must also be what it is to be large. By substitution, since they are not equivalent, it follows that what it is to be large is not what it is to be large. Predicational plurality, then, also follows from the numerical plurality of Forms of Largeness in the TMA.

Given that participation leads to problems with numerical and predicational unity in the LESA and the TMA, Socrates must be suggesting conceptualism as a means of avoiding the problem of participation altogether. Mental entities are not the kinds of things that participate in themselves. There is nothing in the mind (or the soul) that can be large in the way that the Form of Largeness is—i.e. as a superlatively large thing that is divided amongst its participants. Socrates attempts to avoid the problems raised by the LESA and the TMA by reducing Forms to mental entities that cannot partake in themselves in this way, and indeed, in which other things can participate. As mental entities, Socrates says in (a), “each Form would be one and would not suffer

⁵ The following discussion of how the LESA and TMA threaten numerical and predicational unity is heavily indebted to the argument in Curd (1986).

⁶ Curd (1986) p. 130.

the things which you just now mentioned.”—i.e. numerical and predicational plurality. How would this work?

If the Form of Largeness is a mental entity that does not self-participate (i.e. is not a large thing), then it is not the kind of thing that can be divided into parts among its participants. If it doesn't participate in itself, then the Form of Largeness, as a mental entity, also would not be a member of the plurality of large things, which is what motivates positing an infinity of Forms of Largeness. This takes care of the numerical oneness worries from both the LESA and the TMA. If there is only one Form of Largeness, the problem of predicational oneness in the TMA no longer applies, for there is no longer an infinite number of Forms of Largeness. In addition, if the Form of Largeness is not itself a large thing that is divided among its participants, then the participants are not made large by something that can be called small, and the problem of the Form holding opposite predicates is avoided. So, if the Form of Largeness is a mental entity, it can still be a predicational and numerical unity.⁷

2 Parmenides' First Objection

Parmenides provides a two-part objection to Socrates' conceptualism, beginning with the following:

- (b) “Well?” he said, “Is each of the thoughts one, but a thought of nothing?”
 “That's impossible,” he responded.
 “But of something?”
 “Yes.”
 “Of something that is or of something that is not?”
 “Of something that is.”
 “Isn't it of some one thing, which that thought thinks as over all the instances, being some one character?”
 “Yes.”
 “Then, wouldn't the one thing that's thought, being always the same over all the instances, be a Form?”
 “That, too, appears necessary.”

⁷ One problem involves the coherence of considering the Forms to be predicational unities at all. While the Form of Largeness indeed cannot be small or blue, it should be a magnitude. Or while the Form of Greenness cannot be wise or triangular, it is surely a colour, and Justice, in addition to being just, surely is a virtue. It appears in these cases that each Form holds more than one predicate. For a discussion of predicational unity in Plato, see Curd (2004) pp. 228-240. This issue is difficult to adjudicate, but we might still consider the Form of Justice, for example, to be a kind of predicational unity by thinking of it as somehow encoding the properties that are implied by or contained in the property of being just, such as the property of being virtuous. Because one implies the other, we might wonder if it is a true threat to unity. Here, we might also consider Meinwald's (1991) characterization of *pros heauto* predication, which she describes as a kind of genus-species tree: “In such a tree, a kind A appears either directly below or far below another kind B if what it is to be an A is to be a B with certain differentia (or series of differentia) added. That is, the natures of A's and B's are so related that being a B is part of what it is to be an A.” (p. 68) That justice is a virtue, or that Largeness is a magnitude would be a kind of *pros heauto* predication. Since these distinctions in modes of predication are primarily introduced in the second half of the *Parmenides* (starting at 137e4, after the TMA) it is plausible that it signals a revision or refinement of the theory, motivated by the problems raised with respect to predicational and numerical unity in the first half of the dialogue.

“Τί οὖν;” φάσαι, “Ἐν ἕκαστόν ἐστι τῶν νοημάτων, νόημα δὲ οὐδενός;”

“Ἄλλ’ ἀδύνατον,” εἰπεῖν.

“Ἄλλὰ τινός;”

“Ναί.”

“Ὀντος ἢ οὐκ ὄντος;”

“Ὀντος.”

“Οὐχ ἑνός τινος, ὃ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἐκεῖνο τὸ νόημα ἐπὶ νοεῖ, μίαν τινὰ οὐσαν ἰδέαν;”

“Ναί.”

“Εἶτα οὐκ εἶδος ἔσται τοῦτο τὸ νοούμενον ἐν εἶναι, ἀεὶ ὄν τὸ αὐτὸ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν;”

“Ἀνάγκη αὐτὸ φαίνεται.” (132b6-c8)

As I discussed in §1, νόημα can have an active sense and a passive sense.⁸ I explained that in (a), the suggestion that each Form is a νόημα is presented as ambiguous between the active and passive sense. Another ambiguity in this section of the text is that the τὸ νοούμενον of Parmenides’ final question can refer to the inner-mental content of the thought, or to the extra-mental object in the world. Note that the inner-mental reading of τὸ νοούμενον is the same as the passive reading of νόημα, insofar as both refer to the content of a thought. So, if one adopts a passive reading of νόημα, one cannot also adopt the inner-mental reading of τὸ νοούμενον, for in such a case, Parmenides would not be making any distinction in his objection, rendering his reply incoherent.

Most commenters, such as Cornford (1939), Allen (1983), Caston (1999), and Helmig (2007) take the active reading of νόημα in this part of the text, so that Parmenides’ first objection to Socrates’ conceptualism is based on an act-object distinction. According to the active reading, the activity of thinking requires the existence of an object to which the thinking is directed. So, all acts of thinking about a given kind have a single object, and this object must be a Form.

If this is the extent of Parmenides’ reply to Socrates, then we must work backwards to understand Socrates’ conceptualism with an active νόημα, and see whether Parmenides’ reply makes sense. Understood on the active reading, we would expect Socrates’ conceptualism to amount to the thesis that thinking unifies the common elements into one object of thought, which the language here suggests is one Form. This entails that the sameness of a Form over its participants is a feature of the mind, instead of an inherent feature of some external Form which the mind detects; what accounts for sameness in difference according to the active version of Socrates’ conceptualism is nothing more than a mental act that unifies particulars. If, indeed, Parmenides’ reply is aimed at the active version of Socrates’ conceptualism, we might expect his objection to turn on how unattractive this consequence of the view is—nothing guarantees that one person’s mental act will unify particulars the same way that someone else’s will. In other words, if Socrates is suggesting that a mental act is what accounts for the sameness of a certain set of particulars that share some feature, it is puzzling that Parmenides’ reply wouldn’t focus on the objectivity that Forms provide, which is a central explanatory feature of the Forms.⁹

⁸ Cornford (1939) and Helmig (2007) take the active reading, citing the “νόημα...νοεῖ” locution and the Neoplatonic interpretation of the νόημα in this text as active at Proclus *in Parm.* IV 891.22-899.2. See below for a discussion of this. Allen (1983) pp.147-157 assumes that it has an active sense in [B], also citing the “νόημα...νοεῖ” locution” and a passive sense in [C], though he never argues for this reading, and takes [B] and [C] to constitute one continuous argument.

⁹ We might consider unity to be a feature that Forms must have owing to the objectivity they provide as explanations, but this would be a strained reading of this section of text.

The “νόημα...νοεῖ” locution in Parmenides’ reply is standardly taken as evidence for the active reading.¹⁰ Literally, this line reads “that which the thought thinks is over all the instances” and since the thought in this line seems to be thinking, commenters take νόημα as active—the act of thinking rather than the content of an act of thinking. However, nothing should compel us to take this phrase literally. This phrase needn’t imply that νόημα is active any more than the phrase “what the concept conceptualizes” implies that the concept itself is an activity. As a non-literal phrase that points to what a concept does, the fact that it does something is not by itself sufficient to show that νόημα is an act. It can be used to simply signal that νόημα has an object, and that it has an object doesn’t by itself imply that it is an act.¹¹

So far, I hope to have given some reasons to at least doubt that the active reading of νόημα is the only choice we have for interpreting this text. In particular, if we take the active reading, we would expect Parmenides’ first objection, which deals explicitly with the unity of the Forms, to instead focus on the objectivity of the Forms. However, this is not what we find in Parmenides’ reply. Second, the evidence for the active reading rests on taking the “νόημα...νοεῖ” locution literally, which we can just as plausibly interpret non-literally. My aim now is to provide an interpretation of the text on a passive reading, which takes Socrates to suggest that Forms are the contents of acts of thinking. I take the following to be the general argument in (b), which I will call argument [B]:

- B1. Thought contents are of something—i.e. contents have (non-mental) objects. (132b6)
- B2. What a thought content is of is something that is. (132c1)
- B3. This ‘something that is’, which is what the content is of, is the same over all the instances and is of some one character. (132c3-4)
- B4. Since this thing is the same over all the instances, and is of some one character, what contents are of are numerical and predicational unities.
- B5. Only Forms are true numerical and predicational unities.
- B6. Contents are of Forms. (132c6-8)
- BC. Therefore, Forms are not thought contents, but what the contents are of.

The notion of a thought content here cannot be just any thought content. To be sure, on an ordinary, broad construal of ‘thought content’ any passive mental entity, be it a belief, a desire, a hope, or even a passing thought about the chair one is sitting on can be thought contents. The notion of a content at play in this section of the text must be something narrower. Specifically, it must be the kind of content that does what Forms are supposed to do—namely, to account for identity in difference. It’s unclear how mental contents construed broadly would satisfy this explanatory requirement, and so, it’s also unclear why Socrates would propose that Forms are mental entities if they didn’t do at least some of the things Forms should do. So, our reading of a content here is constrained—it must be a mental entity that is close enough to a universal.

In B1, then, Parmenides introduces not an act-object distinction, but a content-object distinction by prompting Socrates to agree that contents are of something, and what they are of is informed by some extra-mental entity. It follows from this that contents and objects are distinct, and

¹⁰ A second piece of evidence that is used in favour of the active reading is the Neoplatonic interpretation of the νόημα in this text as active at Proclus *in Parm.* IV 891.22-899.2. I will not discuss the Proclus argument in my paper, because it is equally plausible that the Neoplatonists imported their own interpretive idiosyncrasies, and there is little reason to take their word on Plato to be decisive or authoritative.

¹¹ Gerson (1999) writes, “The locution τὸ νόημα νοεῖ understandably compels some translators to render νόημα ‘thought’. Nevertheless, thoughts do not think any more than do concepts. Minimally, the locution may be understood as indicating merely that there must be some object of thought or something that a concept must be of.” (p. 66)

that the extra-mental objects of contents are things that are—a locution that is often a reference to the Forms.¹² B1-B2 distinguish between the content and what it is of. On an extra-mental reading of τὸ νοούμενον, we learn that the object is not some inner-mental entity, but something outside in the world.¹³ B3 specifies that this object which informs the content is a common entity.¹⁴ That it is “the same over all the instances” points to its numerical unity, and that it is “of some one character” points to its predicational unity.¹⁵ If the object is a numerical and predicational unity, then the content, which is informed by the object, should also be a numerical and predicational unity, but the argument suggests that this unity will be weaker, because it is derivative from the unity of the Form which is its object. The reason why contents should have some kind of numerical and predicational unity is that they are introduced by Socrates as a way to preserve these kinds of unity in the face of the threats posed by LESA and TMA. B4 to B6 then establish that since the objects of contents are predicational and numerical unities, the objects of contents must be Forms, which yields the conclusion that Forms are not contents, but the extra-mental objects of contents.

The passive reading and the emphasis on unity also help us understand the “ἓν ἕκαστόν ἐστι τῶν νοημάτων” of the beginning of Parmenides’ reply. If we take νόημα as the activity of thinking, it is unclear what it could possibly mean for each of the activities of thinking to be one. Note that the phrasing here mirrors Socrates’ conceptualist suggestion in (a): “οὕτω γὰρ ἂν ἓν γε ἕκαστον εἴη...” I argued in §1 that the oneness in (a) is an important clue as to what is at stake in the preceding arguments. Recall that the locution, as it appears in Socrates’ conceptualist suggestion, is a reference to the unity of the Form, which Socrates believes is saved by conceptualism. The phrase appears again at the beginning of (b), and as far as I can tell, goes unaddressed by commenters who take the active reading of νόημα. However, what it means for a νόημα, on the passive reading, to be ἓν seems clear enough: each concept has a kind of unity.

Two alternative interpretations of (b) can be found in Bossi (2005) and Rickless (2007). Bossi (2005) argues that Socrates’ suggestion in (a) is not conceptualist, on the grounds that conceptualism would require that Socrates affirm that each Form is only a thought. However, according to Bossi, Socrates actually suggests that as a thought, a Form comes to be (ἐγγίγνεσθαι) in the soul, while we know that Forms themselves never come to be, but are. So, Socrates’ suggestion does not rule out the existence of independent Forms, and therefore, on this interpretation, the

¹² See for example *Rep.* 476e

¹³ The issue that confronts us in the text behind B3 is that the invalidity of inferring extra-mental objects from thoughts was well-attested before Plato in the texts of Gorgias of Leontini, who asserts that we cannot infer from the mere thought of a chariot being driven over the sea that there is actually such a chariot (DK 82B3). See the discussion in Caston (2002). We can avoid attributing an invalid inference to Parmenides by reading νόημα as a content and taking ‘something that is’ not as a straightforward existential claim, but as a reference to the Forms. It can be taken to assert that there are no empty concepts; for everything of which there is a genuine concept, there is a corresponding Form. The trouble, which is alluded to by Parmenides at 130a-e, is that the extent of the Forms is unclear. Socrates denies that there can be Forms of natural kinds, mixtures, and things like mud or hair. Nevertheless, we do seem to have thoughts of human, and of water, for example. If there are no Forms of these things, how, then, can we have the thoughts? The answer will require an account of concept-formation in Plato, which is beyond the scope of my paper. However, we might simply consider our concepts of things that lack Forms as lacking the important kind of unity that they should have in order to be useful by any measure (i.e. the unity that makes them objective and shareable). I discuss this further in §4.

¹⁴ Another way of putting this is, per Cherniss (1944) pp. 216-6 n. 128 “[Forms are] the objective correlates of the mental concepts...”

¹⁵ Helmig (2007) p. 324 claims that “This object of thought, which is identified with the Form, is a unity because it is unified by thought.” This strikes me as an implausible reading of Parmenides’ final question in (b). The oneness clearly belongs to the extra-mental object of the thought. Helmig’s reading treats the oneness of the Form as a feature of the mind rather than as an inherent feature of the Form, which I disagree with. Forms have an inherent unity independent of thought.

suggestion in (a) should not be read as conceptualist. She then reads Parmenides' first objection not as turning on a thought-object distinction of any kind, but as raising participation as a problem for the notion of thoughts themselves as also being one over many. Bossi is right to point out the significance of ἐγγίγνεσθαι in (a), but her interpretation of Socrates' suggestion as already acknowledging the independent existence of Forms results in a strained reading of (b), particularly because it is not said at any point that thoughts themselves are one over many, but that the objects of the thoughts are one over many. The relative pronoun and description of its referent as 'one over many' in (b)'s “ὁ ἐπὶ πᾶσιν ἐκεῖνο τὸ νόημα ἐπὸν νοεῖ” is meant to identify the objects of these thoughts as the Forms. The problem in (b) is not that thoughts, too, are one over many; the problem of participation, and indeed mention of μέθεξις does not in fact show up in this section of text until later, in (c), or Parmenides' second objection. The ἐγγίγνεσθαι of (a) is still significant, however, because what Parmenides is picking up in his first objection is that Socrates does not explain how a thought comes to be in the soul—i.e. what its object is. I take this to be the main point of Parmenides' objection in (b). Rickless (2007) pp. 75-80 proposes a different reading, namely that this argument results in every Form being a thought of a Form, which generates an infinite regress of Forms. I agree with Helmig (2007) p. 323 n. 58 that this is an unlikely interpretation of the text because first, the regress is not clearly marked as other regresses in the text are, and second, it is never said that a Form is actually a thought of a Form.

It is plausible, then, to read Parmenides' first objection to Socrates' conceptualism as an argument that employs the passive sense of thought to draw a content-object distinction, showing that Forms are not contents in the mind, but objects.

3 Parmenides' Second Objection

After showing that Forms are not thought contents, but rather, the extra-mental objects that contents are of, Parmenides provides a second objection to Socrates' suggestion that Forms are νοήματα.

- (c) “And what about this?” said Parmenides. “Given your claim that other things partake of Forms, won't you necessarily think either that each thing is composed of thinking and all things think, or that, although they are thinking, they are unthinking?”

“That isn't reasonable either, Parmenides,” he said...

“Τί δὲ δῆ;” εἰπεῖν τὸν Παρμενίδην, “οὐκ ἀνάγκη ἢ τὰλλα φῆς τῶν εἰδῶν μετέχειν, ἢ δοκεῖ σοι ἐκ νοημάτων ἕκαστον εἶναι καὶ πάντα νοεῖν, ἢ νοήματα ὄντα ἀνόητα εἶναι;”
 “Ἄλλ' οὐδὲ τοῦτο,” φάναι, “ἔχει λόγον, ἀλλ', ὦ Παρμενίδη... (132c9-12)

Some commenters argue that (b) and (c) comprise a single objection in response to Socrates, and that Parmenides has one objection to the suggestion that Forms are νοήματα.¹⁶ However, per Cornford (1939), τί δὲ δῆ usually signals the start of a new idea or argument in Plato.¹⁷ In addition, each of (b) and (c) can be read as having a different aim. In [B], Parmenides focuses on showing that thoughts are of Forms, and because contents are informed by Forms, they have the predicative and

¹⁶ See, for instance, Allen (1983).

¹⁷ Cornford (1939) pp. 90-2. See also Gill-Ryan (1996) p.39, Miller (1986) pp. 54-5, and Rickless (2007) p. 75.

numerical unity Socrates is interested in only derivatively. However, in [B], there is no mention of the notion of participation, which, while a central explanatory feature of the Forms, is what Socrates is forced to give up in his conceptualism. So, in the second objection, which I will call [C], participation is what Parmenides is interested in. Importantly, while we understand νόημα in the passive, as a content, in [B], [C] is more symmetrical if we understand its νόημα as active, or as the activity of thinking. In addition to nothing being assumed in (c) from (b), the shift from the passive to the active sense of νόημα is more evidence that there are two objections here. The upshot for Parmenides is that he can now deal not only with the questions about unity and participation, but also show that Forms are not νοήματα, whether construed as active or as passive.

C1. Forms are acts of thinking.

C2. Other things partake of Forms, and in partaking of them, they become like them and constituted by them.

C3. If other things partake of acts of thinking, then (i) everything is constituted by acts of thinking and everything thinks, or (ii) despite partaking of acts of thinking, they are unconscious.

C4. (i) and (ii) are both absurd.

CC. Forms are not acts of thinking.

First, why think that νόημα shifts meaning from passive to active? We have observed that the passive νόημα, rendered as concept, yields a straightforward content-object distinction that makes sense of [B]. In (c), however, Parmenides presents two possibilities for participation that are distinctly active. This is brought out in particular by consideration of (i), where we find the active infinitive, and (ii), where the act of thinking is contrasted with a lack of consciousness.¹⁸

What underlies this second objection is the notion that participation is a central explanatory feature of the Forms. So, if Forms should be reduced to mental entities of any kind, they must be such that instances still partake in them. In C3, we are given two possibilities, assuming instances participate in Forms, and Forms are acts of thinking. One possibility is to concede that since everything participates in a Form (here construed as an act of thinking), then everything is constituted by thinking and everything thinks. This is obviously absurd, since not everything thinks, and it's unclear what, exactly, it could mean for everything to be constituted by thinking. Perhaps it points to a kind of mind-dependent world, which would be unexpected, since we find a mind-independent reality across the Platonic corpus. The other possibility is to concede that everything does in fact participate in some Form (here construed as an act of thinking), but doesn't think. And if the point of participation is to explain how instances, by participating in certain Forms, have certain features, then it would turn out that Forms cannot, in the end, do this explanatory work. The conclusion that Forms cannot be acts of thinking follows from the absurdity of each of these possibilities.

So, [B] and [C] are exhaustive against taking Forms to be mental entities of any kind. [B] shows that Forms are not passive mental entities, or concepts, because concepts are derivative and depend on Forms. Forms are not only the extra-mental objects of concepts, but they also account for

¹⁸ As other commenters have remarked, ἀνόητα is ambiguous and can mean 'non-thinking things', 'unintelligent' or 'silly'. Since here, it is in opposition to νοεῖν, with Cornford (1939) and Helmig (2007) I take it to have the sense of 'non-thinking'. Allen (1983) p. 156-7 claims that ἀνόητα can be understood as passive: "thoughts in things that do not think are unthought or unthinkable." And later claims that the two possibilities in C3 should read: "if Ideas are thoughts, other things that partake of characters either all think, or do not think and are unthought or unthinkable" Allen does not explicitly state this, but I am assuming that the reasoning here is that if something has a thought (in the passive sense) in it, then it is a thinking thing. But this seems to me to be asymmetric—if the Form is a thought in the passive sense, then the thing participating in it should also be a thought in the passive sense. Otherwise, it sinks back into an active reading.

the unity of their corresponding concepts. [C] shows that Forms are also not mental acts, or acts of thinking, because of the absurd conclusions that result from participation.

4 Concepts in the *Parmenides* and “Conceptual Analysis” in the Method of Collection and Division in the *Sophist*

Concepts have a well-attested importance in theories of the mind and in cognitive processes such as learning, memory, and inference. However, the nature and structure of concepts, as well as their relationship to language and philosophical tools such as conceptual analysis have been the subject of continued debate among philosophers. The Platonic tradition, as Gerson (1999) points out, has not generally been recognized as a useful source for understanding concepts.¹⁹ After all, in the Platonic tradition, Forms are explanantia for many of the above phenomena, and concepts are not explicitly described anywhere in the Platonic corpus. Additionally, talk of concepts in antiquity is fraught with terminological confusion, for several terms and phrases can signify a concept, such as εἶδος, γένος, ἔννοια, νόημα, ἐννόημα, λόγος, καθόλου, and κοινόν.²⁰ Worse, these terms are not synonymous with one another, and some of them can signify both inner-mental contents as well as the mental states that are vehicles for those contents.

Despite this, we do find assumptions about concepts and concept-formation that seem to lurk in the background of the Platonic corpus. For instance, we find various accounts of learning as recollection throughout the dialogues, and we would expect concepts to have some role in this process of recollecting innate knowledge. Another example is the method of collection and division, which is sometimes called ‘conceptual analysis’, described in the *Phaedrus*, and demonstrated in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*.

Given how central concepts seem to be for some of the epistemic theories described in the Platonic corpus, there has been relatively little work dedicated to the question of what a concept can possibly be within the constraints of Platonism.²¹ *Parmenides* 132b-c provides some clues as to a background picture of concepthood that can prevent us from anachronistically imposing contemporary criteria for concepts onto ancient texts.

It should be clear by this point that the passive νόημα in (b) is a mental entity akin to a concept. This is because it would be unclear how, exactly, other kinds of mental contents can come close to doing what Forms are supposed to do (i.e. explain identity in difference), such that Socrates would propose that Forms are that kind of mental content. For example, beliefs, desires, and hopes all have contents, but it’s not obvious how, for example, the content of a belief, considered holistically, can be a Form. Concepts, rather, seem like the right kind of mental content for (b), in virtue of some basic

¹⁹ Gerson (1999) p. 65

²⁰ See Helmig (2012) p. 14 for discussion and a more complete list.

²¹ One recent attempt can be found in Helmig (2012). Helmig’s core project is, rather than to carve out a Platonic account of concepthood, to argue that for Plato, concepts are formed by knowledge of the Forms, so that concepts are always understood in relation to Forms, as the contents of Forms. At pp. 16-23, Helmig prefaces his project by setting some criteria for concepthood, but his approach to building this list of criteria is imported from contemporary assumptions about concepts. This approach is understandable, because in the absence of any explicit evidence in Plato for what concepts are, such a study is doomed to failure from the start. However, my view is that we can aim to be more optimistic about the possibility of discovering a Platonic account of concepthood.

understanding of what concepts are—mental particulars that are to some degree objective and shareable.²² What, then, can *Parmenides* 132 b-c tell us about concepts?

In (a), we learned that νοήματα occur properly in the mind. This gives us our first criterion for concepthood: (1) concepts are mental entities. Socrates' suggestion comes in response to the problems for the predicational and numerical unity of the Forms presented by the LESA and the TMA. If Socrates believes that reducing Forms to mental entities will help dissolve these worries while retaining all of the explanatory functions of Forms, he must think that if Forms are mental entities, they do not enjoy the same kind of participation as the Forms of Parmenides' arguments. If other things participate in them at all, or if they participate in themselves, they will not do so in a manner that allows them to be divided. This, as I discussed in §1, is supposed to allow them to retain their predicational and numerical unity. But [B]'s content-object distinction shows that Forms cannot be concepts, for they are what concepts are of. Concepts are derivative mental entities, whose predicational and numerical unity is grounded in the predicational and numerical unity of their corresponding Forms. This yields at least three other criteria. We can add that (2) concepts are shareable, common entities. Otherwise, it would be difficult to see why Socrates thinks they are suitable candidates for explaining identity in difference. We can also add that (3) concepts are (weak) predicational and numerical unities—weak, because their unity is derivative. To explain this, (4) concepts link up to reality because they derive from, and depend on Forms. Otherwise, they are, according to (b), “of nothing.” Finally, it follows that (5) concepts are differentiated according to what Form they correspond to.²³

To test this list of criteria, I turn now to a part of the Platonic corpus that seems to assume some account of concepthood: the method of collection and division in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*. In these dialogues, the strategy for arriving at a definition of the sophist and the statesman is described in a famous passage in the *Phaedrus*.²⁴ The procedure starts from broad linguistic intuitions. Through a series of bifurcations, where each ‘lower’ division narrows the broader concept that immediately precedes it, what results is purportedly a new, epistemically adequate definition, or articulation of an essence. In the *Sophist*, for example, arts are divided into acquisitive and productive (265b). Since it's agreed that sophistry is a productive art, productive arts are then divided into divine and human productions (265e-266a). Since sophistry turns out to be a human production, human production is divided into entities and images (266d-e). After a series of other divisions, at 268c-d, the method in this section of the text yields the following definition of sophistry: “imitation of the contrary-speech-producing, the appearance-making kind of copy-making, the word-juggling part of production that is marked off as human and not divine.”²⁵

Evaluating the method of collection and division as it's practiced in these two dialogues is difficult, particularly in the case of the *Sophist*, since it seems to offer seven definitions of sophistry in total.²⁶ This raises a question about whether the method is in fact intended to produce a definition of what sophistry is. Some commenters, such as Moravcsik (1973) believe that many definitions are found. Some, such as Cornford (1935) and Notomi (1999) believe that only one definition is given. And others, such as Ryle (1966), Cherniss (1944), and Brown (2010), don't believe that any correct definition of sophistry is produced. While Ryle and Cherniss locate the

²² I do not think that there is motivation to take the νοήματα in 132b-c as abilities or as Fregean senses. In our contemporary vocabulary, the view here looks like it amounts to the notion of a concept as a mental representation of some kind, as described above.

²³ I intend for (1)-(5) to constitute necessary and jointly sufficient criteria for concepthood.

²⁴ *Phaedr.* 265e and 266b.

²⁵ Trans. White (2007).

²⁶ Six of them are found at 231c9-e6. The seventh is stated at the end of the dialogue at 268c-d.

failure within the method itself, Brown argues that the failure of the method to produce a definition of sophistry lies primarily in the fact that the chosen definiendum is not an appropriate candidate for definition, since sophistry is not a genuine kind; based on what we find in other dialogues, it is not an entity that Plato would recognize as possessing a discernible essence.

Of these proposals, Brown's interpretation appears to be most consistent with other Platonic dialogues. First, the idea that there may be several definitions of the same thing seems like a distinctly anti-Platonic view of definition, for if all seven definitions of sophistry that are purportedly given in the *Sophist* are adequate, then there is no longer an interest in giving an account of a single essence, but in giving different characterizations of an object. Even if this were true, as Brown shows, the various definitions that are given of sophistry are inconsistent.²⁷ Against the view that the dialogue culminates in a single definition of sophistry, Brown convincingly points out that the series of divisions that lead to this final definition fail to distinguish between the sophist and the philosopher as we find in other dialogues.²⁸

For Brown, a clue in this direction is that the starting assumption that sophistry is a τέχνη is unquestioned by the interlocutors. Socrates famously denies that sophistry is a τέχνη at *Gorgias* 462-3. There, we learn that what distinguishes a τέχνη from ἐμπειρία is, among other criteria, that it has a goal and that there are procedures and techniques that are peculiar to it. The seven definitions offered in the *Sophist* not only fail to suggest a consistent goal for sophistry, but they also suggest that there is no set of procedures peculiar to sophistry.²⁹ In addition, if the divisions are meant to discern pre-existing distinctions in reality, we would expect the divisions of a τέχνη across the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* to match. Instead, we find that in the *Sophist*, τέχνη is divided into acquisitive or productive, while in the *Statesman*, it is divided into practical or theoretical.

If Brown is right, in these dialogues, the method of division does not succeed in producing a definition, because the selected definienda are not suitable candidates for definition in that they do not have essences.³⁰ In order to make this claim more definitive, we should consider whether there is anything for which the method of division could produce a definition. The evidence in the corpus does not support giving an affirmative answer to this, because we don't see instances of it, even if it might have been Plato's ultimate aspiration.

What, then, does the method of collection and division, as demonstrated in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* show? One answer is that it demonstrates how the unity of the concept depends on there being a corresponding Form. Since there is no essence for sophistry, for example, the concept does not have unity, and its lack of unity is evidenced by the inability of the interlocutors to come up with a single consistent definition of the sophist; there is simply no unified definition to give, since there is no essence to inform the concept.

5 Final Comments

²⁷ Brown (2010) pp. 158-160.

²⁸ Brown (2010) pp. 160-163. Taylor (2006) argues that this represents a shift in Plato's thought, from the view of philosophy as the Socratic practice represented in the earlier dialogues to a view of philosophy as a comprehensive knowledge of reality. The failure to distinguish between sophistry and philosophy in this dialogue is a deliberate way of describing Socrates' approach to doing philosophy as sophistry. Brown's response is that this reading too readily accepts the starting assumption that sophistry is a τέχνη.

²⁹ Brown (2010) pp. 167-168.

³⁰ This is not to claim that it is explicitly denied anywhere in the corpus that sophistry has a Form, but I do believe that it is implied in the *Gorgias*, as cited above.

At *Parmenides* 132b-c, Socrates suggests that Forms are mental entities. The suggestion comes as an attempt to save the numerical and predicational unity of the Forms, which had proven vulnerable to Parmenides' arguments against the Forms in the *LESA* and the *TMA*. I have argued that in his first objection, Parmenides draws a content-object distinction to show that Forms cannot be mental entities in the passive sense of νόημα—more specifically, as the contents of acts of thoughts, best understood as something close to a concept. Instead, Parmenides argues, concepts depend on Forms both for what they are, and for their unity. He then moves to a second argument to show, by a reductio, that Forms cannot be mental entities in the sense of the activity of thinking. The sense of νόημα shifts between the two arguments, and Parmenides' objections are therefore meant to be exhaustive and complete against taking Forms to be mental entities of any kind.

I have also argued that we find, in the background of this text, an implicit account of concepthood. Here, concepts are: (1) mental entities (2) common entities (3) weak predicational and numerical unities (4) linked to reality because they derive from and depend on Forms, and (5) differentiated according to the Form to which they correspond. This account gives us a way to understand parts of the Platonic corpus that seem to assume some notion of concepthood, such as the method of collection and division in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*.

Of course, various loose threads remain, and they are questions for Plato and the interlocutors in his dialogues as much as they are for me. For example, what can mental entities possibly be for Plato? If there is no essence of sophistry, and concepts require Forms, what am I thinking about when I think about a sophist? Answering these questions, as well as tracing the rich history of concepts after Plato and into the later Platonic tradition would be a much larger undertaking. But at least we have evidence for a start at *Parmenides* 132b-c.

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