In contrast to the close attention paid to the 'third man' argument, its neighbour, Parmenides' argument that the Forms, if there are such, are unknowable by us, has received very little. The reason is that it has been generally assumed that the argument raises no important issues over and above those already raised by the third man. Thus, of the third man, Vlastos holds that (a) the theory of Forms is committed to the assumption that the Forms are (perfect) instances of the attributes of which they are the Forms ('self-predication'); (b) that Plato did not explicitly realise this; (c) that escape from the third man objection requires rejection of the self-predication assumption, and concludes that (d), in virtue of (a), the third man is a sound objection to the theory of Forms, but that (e), in virtue of (b), Plato was in a state of 'honest perplexity' concerning the soundness of the objection. All these observations, he believes, apply, mutatis mutandis, to the unknowability of the Forms argument: Plato provides no answer to the objection because, he believes, he could not have done so 'without, once again, spotting the Self-Predication assumption' (op. cit., p.258). Cornford agrees that, like the 'third man', the unknowability of the Forms argument turns on self-predication. But he believes that the identification of Forms with perfect instances of themselves that generates the self-predication assumption is one Plato knew to be 'grossly fallacious' (op. cit., p.98), and did not make. Hence, he concludes, like the third man, the unknowability of the Forms argument is unsound and Plato knew it to be so.

As against both Vlastos and Cornford, I shall argue that the soundness or otherwise of the unknowability argument has nothing to do with self-predication. The argument, I shall suggest, raises issues that are logically quite independent of those raised by the third man. Vlastos calls the argument 'loose and longwinded' (op. cit., p.259). I agree, and will try to render precise the way in which it is longwinded. Nonetheless, I shall suggest, the argument manages to raise a formidable difficulty for the theory of Forms that remains even if Plato has a convincing reply to the third man.

* * * * *

2. Plato and Parmenides (London, 1939). All quotations from the text are from this translation.
Here is the relevant portion of the text:
Suppose . . . one of us is master or slave of another; he is not, of course, the slave of Master itself, the essential Master, nor, if he is a master, is he master of Slave itself, the essential Slave, but, being a man, is master or slave of another man; whereas Mastership itself is what it is (mastership) of Slavery itself, and Slavery itself is slavery to Mastership itself. The significance of things in our world is not with reference to things in that other world, nor have these their significance with reference to us . . . similarly Knowledge itself, the essence of Knowledge will be knowledge of that Reality itself, the essentially real . . . . And . . . any branch of Knowledge in itself will be knowledge of some department of real things as it is in itself. . . . Whereas the knowledge in our world will be knowledge of the reality in our world. . . . Then, none of the Forms is known by us, since we have no part in Knowledge itself. (133D-134B).

And here is a rather literal paraphrase of the argument which, for reasons that will become apparent, I leave vague at certain points on the question of what is inferred from what:

1. A particular sensible master is master, not of Slavery itself, but of a particular sensible slave.

While

2. Mastership itself is mastership, not of any particular sensible slave, but of Slavery itself.

So

3. Particular sensible things signify (‘have significance with reference to’) particular sensible things and not Forms (generalisation from (1)).

And

4. Forms signify Forms and not particular sensible things (generalisation from (2)).

Hence

5. Our knowledge is knowledge of particular sensible things and not of Forms (instantiation of (3)).

While

6. Knowledge itself is knowledge of Forms and not of particular sensible things (instantiation of (4)).

Hence

7. Our knowledge is different from Knowledge itself (‘we have no part in knowledge itself’) (?).

Therefore

8. None of the Forms is known by us (?).

The most problematic premiss here is clearly (2) for it is not at all clear that it is even intelligible. Let us consider what might be said about it. As I have mentioned, both Vlastos and Cornford think that the argument turns on self-predication, and it is here, if anywhere, that self-predication makes its appearance. Very well then, let us suppose for the moment that Plato does think of the Forms as perfect instances of themselves, that, at least implicitly, he thinks that only The F itself is fully, perfectly, or completely F, sensible things being only imperfectly or deficiently F. In that case the Form Mastership is perfectly a master and hence is a master. But you cannot be a
master without being master of a slave, and if your slave was only defi-
ciently a slave, you could, surely, only be deficiently a master. So the
perfect master is master of the perfect slave, Mastership is mastership of
(and only of) Slavery. It is presumably by some such process of reasoning
that (2) is seen as a consequence of the self-predication assumption.

It is then possible\(^1\) to see (2) as derived from the self-predication assump-
tion. Having thus seen it, and wishing to decide whether the argument con-
stitutes a sound objection to the theory of Forms one would then be inclined
to enter the Vlastos-Cornford (Sellers, Geach, etc., etc.) debate over
whether the theory of Forms is committed to self-predication. But it is not
in fact necessary to enter that debate. The reason is that (2) is redundant in
the argument. It is patently clear—and, while a modest point, this is what
seems not to have been noticed—that the conclusion (8) is already contained
in (5) which is inferred from (3) which is inferred from (1). (2), (4), (6) and
(7) are thus quite redundant in the argument. Vlastos is quite right to
describe the argument as ‘longwinded’.

* * * * *

What point is being made in the inference from (1) through (3) to (5)? (1)
tells us that particular masters have as objects of their mastery not the Form
Slavery but particular slaves. (3) tries to generalise this point and it is, I
think, worth trying to render precise the generalisation gestured at by the
phrase ‘have significance with reference to’. We might proceed as follows.
Certain nouns, in both Greek and English, are formed from verbs with the
same stem. Some of those verbs take grammatical objects. In these cases let
us call the nouns ‘activity terms’ and say of the verb that it designates ‘the
corresponding activity’. Finally let us say that the ‘objects of’ a correspond-
ing activity are just those items whose designations can sensibly, and non-
metaphorically\(^4\), complete the sense of the verb. With this machinery we can
now express (3) as:

Whenever an activity term is true of a particular, the objects of the cor-
responding activity are always particulars, never Forms.

And (5), the instantiation of (3), will tell us that whenever the activity term
‘is a knower’ is true of a particular, the object of its knowing is always a

3. But not necessary. (2) could be intended simply to point out that mastership and slavery are
correlative terms, that if anything instances the first something instances the second (and vice
versa). In this case there would be an equivocation between (1) and (2) because (1) cannot,
surely, be intended to say that if a particular master is instanced, so is some particular slave. It
will become apparent that whether there is this equivocation is as irrelevant to the soundness of
Parmenides’ objection as is the question of whether Plato is committed to self-predication.
4. The point of this proscription of metaphor will become apparent in my penultimate
paragraph.
particular, never a Form. The aim of the first part of the Parmenides is to put pressure on the metaphors by which Plato describes the relations between sensibles and the Forms. It is argued that physical sharing fails to provide a literal account of participation, and the ‘third man’ argument, in its second appearance, suggests that so does the model-copy relation. One would expect, then, that the aim of the present argument is to put pressure on the metaphors by which Plato describes our cognitive relations to the Forms. And he does use metaphors. Sometimes, as in the present argument, Plato uses the term ‘knowledge’ objectually rather than propositionally: in such a use knowledge is a kind of acquaintance, the objects of which are the Forms (cf. Republic VI 508, VII 519). And the characteristic metaphor used to describe this acquaintance is that of vision: knowing the Forms is a matter of seeing them with the mind’s eye. Even when his use of ‘knowledge’ is not overtly objectual, knowledge is still the product of visually conceived acquaintance with the Forms (Meno 81, Republic VI 504) and can be obtained in no other way. Well then, if this is so, is it not reasonable to suggest that just as you cannot be master of Slavery but only of slaves, so you cannot know, be acquainted with, or see, Beauty, but only beautiful things? It is no good pointing out that we sometimes use locutions like ‘vision of loveliness’, ‘being acquainted with goodness itself’, just as it was no good Socrates objecting to Parmenides’ claim that if the Forms are shared they must be divided into proper parts, that two places can share the (whole of) the same day at the same time (131B). These locutions are all metaphorical, of no help in providing a literal cashing of participation or, in the present case, acquaintance with non-particulars. Parmenides’ argument thus, it seems to me, succeeds in its task of casting serious doubt on the possibility of a literal account of our cognitive relations with the Forms, a success that in no way depends on the assumption that Plato is committed to self-predication. As to what Plato was up to in providing him with four redundant steps in the argument, whether the argument fulfils its purpose by judgement or luck, I have no idea.

5. Although my rendition of the sense of (3) makes Parmenides’ argument valid, it suffers from the following difficulty. ‘Instance’ and ‘participant’ satisfy the definition of ‘activity term’ and so, on my rendition, (3) tells us, among other things, that particulars participate in, or instance, not Forms, but other particulars. To meet this difficulty, and capture more precisely the Parmenidean objection to the Theory of Forms we should, I think, restrict the class of activity terms to those that imply (efficient) causal interaction between subject and object. But will this not now exclude ‘knower’ from the class of activity terms? In one—the propositional—sense it will, but in the other—the acquaintance—sense it will not. As the next paragraph makes clear it is the latter sense that is relevant to the argument.