
Every reader of Plato will be familiar with the image of Socrates persuading an interlocutor that all instances of some term, whose definition he seeks, are unified by a common form. Most will also be aware of Aristotle’s assessment that according to Plato ‘the forms are the causes of what it is for each of the rest of things, and the one for the forms’ (*Metaph.* A.1, 988a10-12). This claim has historically been influential in the interpretation of Plato’s dialogues, particularly those in which the metaphysical implications of the ‘theory of forms’ are discussed, and also those more ‘technically’ sophisticated (and apparently less dramatic) works in which problems of truth and falsity, language and being, unity and plurality, and similar general principles are explored. More recently, in this century, the hope that Plato’s own intellectual development might be recoverable from the chronological sequence of his writings, identified by stylometric means, has led to the proposal that the technical dialogues are late works in which Plato rejects or modifies the theory of forms.

It is a measure of the boldness of McCabe’s book that she denies the persuasiveness of the results of stylometric research (309-13, cf. 18-21), but nevertheless appeals to a developmental hypothesis in order to tell her story about the role of the technical dialogues in Plato’s corpus. Yet without independent evidence (such as stylometry purports to offer) there is no objective justification for treating this group of dialogues as all dating from the same, late, period, and so as themselves evidence for Plato’s rejection of his earlier metaphysics. (It is in any case, of course, a considerable thorn in the side of the developmental approach that the theory of forms is prominent in the *Timaeus*, arguably
also in the *Philebus*, and clearly appealed to in the *Phaedrus* (250b-d), and *Theaetetus* (173e, 175c, 176b-c), which stylistic criteria imply are late, while the method of collection and division is demonstrated even in the 'early' *Euthyphro*.)

Plato’s *Individuals* focuses on the metaphysical concept of unity and seeks to show that Plato turned away from consideration of the problematic unity both of perceptible particulars and of forms to pursue this topic in purely general terms by asking what it is to be an individual thing. Plato’s metaphysics of unity, then, can be contrasted with Aristotle’s, which McCabe takes as our norm today, where being one depends on being an instance of a natural kind (cf. *Metaph.* G.2, 1003b23-34), since by analysis of the account of the ‘great kinds’ at *Soph.* 254c-258e (224-40) we see that for Plato the unity of an individual (such as one of those five countable kinds, being, motion, rest, sameness and difference) is context relative. McCabe does not pursue the question as to what other things are individuals in this sense, nor the further metaphysical implications of her concept of context relative unity. Perhaps it is then by way of compensation for the unilluminating character of the outcome, and the ‘austere’ unity of such an individual as a countable unit, that in an appended chapter which does not really draw on her main result she treats humans as richly unified individual wholes.

McCabe is at her best in discussing the *Sophist* and in the detailed analysis of other passages germane to the same themes from the *Theaetetus*, *Timaeus* and *Philebus*. But generally it seems as if a good idea has been stretched too far, and in conjunction with the developmental preoccupation has obscured its own value. The argument of the book focuses on passages relevant to the question of unity, and without more general consideration of the dialogues themselves as unified wholes it aims to arrive at definitive conclusions about what is central to Plato’s views.

It is in the way Plato’s question is defined by McCabe in terms of criticism of the unity both of perceptible particulars and also of forms that the book is at once most controversial and least persuasive. One could of course claim that, in principle, an inquiry
into the unity of individuals is not inconsistent with continued adherence to the theory of forms, but the author argues that Plato struggles with a dilemma in conceiving individuality, which is only solved by the account of context relative unity in the *Sophist*. Individuals will be either too 'generous' if they have multiple properties which would compromise their unity, or else too 'austere' without properties even to be identified. The solution is that an individual's relations belong to its context, and are not its properties, while the dilemma arises because any individual, even a form, is involved in relations, and McCabe argues that Plato (until the solution) treats all an individual's relations as its properties.

This is certainly and prominently true of relations for perceptible particulars in the *Phaedo*. Here McCabe makes the provocative claim, central to her subsequent thesis, that the separation of forms from particulars results not from the deficient reality of the latter, but their ambiguous complexity, both containing and not containing in different respects given attributes. (Pp. 39-43 argue that τῷ μὲν ἴσα φαίνεται, τῷ δ' οὐ, *Ph.* 74b8-9, means '...equal to one thing and [at the same time] not equal to some other thing'. This is unlikely in view of the plural ἴσα, which implies a pair of things being compared with each other.) On McCabe's view the complexity, or internal multiplicity, of perceptible particulars would be responsible primarily for a failure of unity, not of being; the being of particulars is only threatened derivatively by their possibility of dispersal into multiple constituents. Apart from this, she asserts, in the *Phaedo* 'the sensible world is real' (51).

McCabe focuses in the *Phaedo* on 74a-c and ignores the evidence of passages such as 74d5-e4 and 75a10-b2 (cf. a1-3, b6-9). Read in conjunction with Socrates' subsequent 'safe answer' (100b1-e2), that the cause of an attribute is the form in which it participates, these passages can be seen to refer to final-formal causation (cf. 61 and 68). But in that case the failure and inferiority of the participant is a failure in causal effect (measured against the limit of complete assimilation to the form), and so a failure in the being of the effect, *qua* degree of assimilation to the character of
the cause. It is an image, not an original, and an appearance rather than reality.

McCabe needs to say that Plato rejects the integrity of the perceptible particular solely as a consequence of the multiplicity of its attributes in order to argue subsequently that in the *Parmenides* just such multiplicity of relational attributes is shown to compromise the unity of forms. Readers might well otherwise think that Parmenides’ arguments against the forms either exploit purely logical muddles, or, more generously, are designed rather to indicate, firstly, the inadequacy of the young Socrates’ conception of forms and particulars as equally real things, secondly the peculiar properties of likeness (a completely general term later associated with the ‘great kinds’, but here proposed by Socrates as a form), or, thirdly, even the inappropriateness of treating the relations of forms as their attributes.

McCabe treats the discussion of Protagoras’ purported Heracliteanism in the *Theaetetus* as an exploitation of one arm of her dilemma: the apparent irremediable multiplicity of perceptible phenomena implies that perceivers *(i.e.* knowers) also lack unity; since that is unacceptable, perceptibles cannot be a mere flux of change, yet their relativity undermines their unity. The solution would then be to deny that their relations are properties, but (somehow) form the context of their individuality. The latter is neither in fact in the text nor, I think, implied. Rather Socrates appeals to the principle that the knower judges things by applying the common terms such as being, identity and number (185a-d). This suggests that perceptibles may only appear as individuals as a result of the judgmental activity of souls, which would explain the assimilation of perceptibles to the status of *doxa*, e.g., in *Republic* V, and accordingly deny them any real being or individuality. Since they are only composed of perceptible qualities, and the latter are all relative, the relations of such beings must be constituted as their attributes by *doxa*, since otherwise there would be no terms for such relations to relate. But no such conditions apply to forms, and if their unity is not in fact compromised by the relations in which they are enmeshed, then the paradigmatic individuals to which McCabe’s excellent
analysis of the context dependency of individuality in the *Sophist* applies (in addition to the common terms there counted, and perhaps soul), should be the forms.

Ultimately Plato’s *Individuals* lets the most important questions go begging: what is the ontological status of the common terms (including the ‘great kinds’), and how are they related to unity and the forms? (To put it another way, how is the inherent diversity of linguistic terms related to unity and being, in the cases both of the great kinds, and of the forms?—And why do counting and numbers come up so regularly in the context of the great kinds and more generally the common terms? Cf. *Parm.* 143b-144a, *Theaet.* 185a-d, *Soph.* 254d-255e). What is the relation of intellect to its object: unity, or duality? And of intellect to bodily life? McCabe only contemplates a doctrine of essentially distinct personal souls, relying on her estimation of the rhetorical point of the *Phaedo* (29-30 and 264-67); some might think that this undermines the achievement of her interesting chapter on ‘The Unity of Persons’. Certainly a full account of the individuality of soul should consider, as McCabe does not, the relation of human to cosmic and divine soul, as these are portrayed in the *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws* X (particularly in a book on the ‘later’ dialogues, so-called).

Aristotle (*loc. cit.*) tells us that for Plato unity is the cause of what it is for each of the forms. Forms then would be exemplary individuals. While bearing witness to the growing importance of numbers in Plato’s metaphysics, Aristotle, who was close to him for his final twenty years, provides no evidence that the theory of forms was ever abandoned, or that Plato thought the unity of forms was somehow compromised.

McCabe’s very useful discussion of context relativity might best have been turned to explaining the role of numbers in the theory of forms: the form-numbers, those by which we count, must after all be essentially ordinals, defined each by position in a sequence (rather than as multiplicities of units, which are derivative of the former). Here more study than McCabe allows of the role of the great kinds, particularly of difference, in counting is required.
Difference (which has some special connection with the unlimited dyad, cf. *Soph.* 256e5-6, and Ar. *Metaph.* A.6, 987b25-26, b33-35, 988a11-14) is unique among the kinds, insofar as they are all distinct and so countable in virtue of difference, while difference is itself distinct from the rest and countable in virtue of itself (*Parm.* 143b-c, *Soph.* 255e, 256e, 257b). It is thus at the basis of the multiplicity of number, and as a relation itself constitutes the context relativity of what McCabe calls the individuality of the countable kinds. Yet each of the kinds participates also in the unity of its own identity, which is internal to each, and does not itself enmesh it in the multiplicative relations of countability (cf. *Parm.* 143b3-5, *Soph.* 255d). Unity thus represents a principle in these kinds prior to their countable multiplicity. Thus their individuality in each case, properly understood, is not exhausted by their context relativity, but includes also a prior cause, in itself independent of all relations. But without an account of this principle of unity even McCabe’s interesting treatment of the great kinds in the *Sophist* remains incomplete.

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