On Republic 596a

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Republic 596a6-7 offers an important, if compressed, statement concerning the theory of Forms: εἰδὸς γὰρ ποῦ τι ἐν ἑκατόν εἰσόθαι τίθεσθαι περὶ ἕκαστα τὰ πολλὰ, οἷς ταῦτα ὄνομα ἔπιφέρομεν.

In his 1902 commentary on the dialogue, Adam proposed the following translation: 'for we are, as you know, in the habit of assuming a certain idea — always one idea — in connexion with each group of particulars to which we apply the same name.'¹ That translation has not stood unchallenged: it was attacked long ago by J.A. Smith on grounds both philosophical and grammatical, and there are signs in the recent literature that a number of scholars have come to regard Smith’s counterproposal as quite credible, even compelling.² However, none of Smith’s

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criticisms strike me as sound; and since the issue is of some moment for
the understanding of Plato’s ontology, it merits brief consideration.

I want to treat the grammatical objection first, but let me mention the
philosophical one by way of background. According to Smith, Adam’s
interpretation commits Plato to a manifest absurdity — namely that
there is an Idea (to use the label that Smith and Adam prefer) for every
general term of the language, including ‘artefacta, negatives and rela-
tives’ as well as ‘groups or aggregates which [are] only ὑπὸ τῆς ὀμό-
νωμα. Smith shrinks from burdening Plato with such a ‘wild Nominal-
ism’, and so he insists that Plato’s Socrates is in fact saying something
quite different from what Adam and others have presumed.

Smith bolsters that judgment with his grammatical objection. Suppos-
edly, Adam believes that the relative clause ‘is general, and characterises
or determines a fixed collection of groups as its antecedent.’ Yet, the
simple relative ὅς cannot be used with the indicative to express that sort
of generality: one would need either ὣν with the subjunctive or another
form of the relative (ὅστις, ὅσος). There, therefore, Smith insists, the relative
clause must be considered ‘a mere addition or appentage to the main
clause, almost as if ὅς were equivalent to καὶ τοῦτος.’ He translates
accordingly: ‘for we are, as you know, in the habit of assuming [as a rule
of procedure] that the Idea which corresponds to a group of particulars,
each to each, is always one, in which case [or, and in that case] we call
the group of particulars by a common name.’

That translation yields an interpretation quite different from Adam’s.
For Adam, Socrates’ statement is a concise expression of one motivation
for the theory of Ideas. For Smith, however, the statement tells nothing

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Philosophical Society 1989], 94-104, at 102n4); M.I. Gill, *Plato. Parmenides* (Indian-
376e-398b; Republic 595-608b (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996),
190-1. See also the recent translation of the Republic by T. Griffith (ed. G.R.F. Ferrari,
[New York: Cambridge University Press 2000]), where Smith’s interpretation is
offered as an alternative in a footnote ad loc.

3 Smith’s remarks leave it unclear whether he thinks the indicative and simple relative
can never be used to express generality, or whether instead he finds a problem in
the idea of generalizing over a ‘fixed collection of groups’. I presume he means the
latter, since the former would be quite mistaken. See for instance R 352c1-2: ὅς ὑπὸ
φωμεν ἔρρομομοι καὶ πάντες τι μετ’ ἄλλοις καὶ πρᾶξαι αὐτίκοις ὄντες. For further
brief discussion, see E.A. Sonnenschein, ‘The Indicative in Relative Clauses’, *Classi-
about the motivations for the theory. Instead, the main clause merely stresses that each Idea is ‘always one Idea’, while the relative clause presumably reinforces that by noting that the particulars corresponding to the Idea are called by a single name.

Smith neglects to explain how precisely he understands the claim that each Idea is ‘always one’ or why he deems it significant. Whatever the case, his interpretation seems implausible given the immediate context. Socrates introduces his remark about the Ideas by noting that he will begin his discussion ἐκ τῆς εἰωθώνας μεθόδου, but it is unclear how an emphasis on the mere uniqueness (or unity?) of an Idea may be said to express a μεθόδος, a procedure or method. Fortunately, one need not dwell on the interpretive possibilities. For, Smith’s translation is by no means requisite. It is not even plausible. The grammatical objection underlying it is misguided; and once the support of the objection is removed, the translation comes to seem forced, depending as it does on the claim that the relative clause is completely incidental to the rest of the sentence.

As mentioned above, Smith maintains that for Adam the relative clause ‘characterises ... a fixed collection of groups as its antecedent’ or, alternatively, ‘specifies a group of groups’. Yet there is no ‘group of groups’ at issue: the phrase ἐκαστα τὰ πολλά means ‘each group of many’ and indicates that the groups are to be taken severally, not collectively. The antecedent of the plural ὁς is correspondingly the many members of each group, not the many groups; and the relative clause is therefore to be understood as explaining how any one group of τὰ πολλά is demarcated — namely, by the application of a certain ὁνόμα to each of its members. The construction is thus a straightforward example of the defining use of the relative pronoun. For that, the simple ὁς is perfectly appropriate. Indeed, the indefinite ὅστις would have little point, since Socrates would be generalizing only over the members of a given group and not, as Smith suggests, over the totality of groups designated by common names. Finally, the indicative ἐπιφέρομεν is not only unproblematic but is in fact the natural choice here. Socrates considers the application of one name to many objects as a datum, something actually

4 The fact that a uniqueness-claim is made subsequently, at 597c-d, does not by itself suffice to explain what is said here.
reflected in the linguistic practices of his fellows, and the indicative conveys that point quite clearly.

In setting out his own interpretation, Smith does not explain whether he takes the relative clause to apply to the many groups or to the many members of a given group. In his translation, he simply avoids the issue by treating the relative pronoun as if it were singular, or at least as if it applied to the groups taken serially: 'in which case ... we call the group of particulars by a common name' (emphasis added). Whatever precisely may be his view, it cannot but cause problems when it comes to explaining the phrase ταύτων ὄνομα, 'the same name'. For if Smith were to understand the relative pronoun to refer to the many groups, taken either serially or collectively, then ταύτων ὄνομα would make no sense. After all, there is nothing for a single group to share its name with, and the various groups taken together cannot be said to have a name in common. However, if Smith were instead to interpret the pronoun as designating the many members of a given group, there would still be a difficulty. The whole thrust of his translation is to avoid the suggestion that Socrates is talking about a name common to various particulars, where that way of speaking might be understood to sketch a motivation for the Theory of Ideas. According to Smith, as I have explained, the sentence serves merely to emphasize the oneness of a Form, and the fact that various particulars are all called by the same name is of dubious relevance to that point.

Sensing the difficulty, Smith avers that his initial translation needs to be emended. In an exercise of διάφορας ὄνομάτων, he maintains that had Socrates really wanted to convey the idea of a name common to many things, he would have used the phrase κοινόν ὄνομα. Instead, Socrates chooses ταύτων ὄνομα, which 'would most naturally mean ... “the name as before”, i.e. the name of the εἴδος.' Thus, Smith is able to interpret the statement so that it avoids any direct reference to what might be common to several particulars, group-members: 'I ... emend my translation to “in which case we call the group, or its particulars, by the same name as the εἴδος”.' (Note the continuing ambiguity concerning the referent of the relative pronoun.)

Enough is enough. The phrase ταύτων ὄνομα is perfectly good Greek for 'the same name', the name applied to many particulars. In fact, it is Smith's alternative that must be considered unduly awkward, since the name of the εἴδος is nowhere mentioned in the main clause.

What, then, of Smith's philosophical objection? Must one consider Socrates to be committing himself to a 'wild Nominalism'?
I think not. At 596a6-7, Socrates is calling attention to a pattern of reasoning that leads him to the Ideas. What precisely he has in mind is a question I shall put off for another occasion, since the issue underlying Smith’s objection is an independent concern, one about which Socrates is not attempting to express any convictions.

Like any ontologist, Plato’s Socrates initially conceives of ontological explanation generally, in terms of formulae for analyzing a range of cases. As he effectively proposes here, the true application of a general term to several things is to be explained by supposing that each of those things participates in an Idea — the same Idea in each case. In order subsequently to apply that formula, Socrates must determine the vocabulary appropriate for describing the world. That will partly be a matter of fixing the true statements, but it will also involve deciding which of the terms used in those statements are basic, in the sense that they cannot be ‘defined’ or ‘analyzed’ using other pieces of language. The definition or analysis in question here need not be thought of solely as the outcome of a close study of ordinary usage; in all likelihood, it will also involve an appeal to a certain set of theoretical principles — be they scientific or epistemic or whatnot.

At Republic 596a, I submit, Socrates is not attempting to take a stand as to what general terms are suitably basic. Indeed, I suspect he has scarcely thought about the issue. If one looks elsewhere in the dialogues, there is no sign that Socrates has any developed views. At points, he does wonder whether the use of certain terms entails an ontological commitment (as at Prm 130c-d), but I imagine that he does not have at his disposal a set of clearly-articulated principles that would demand he conclude one way rather than another.

To be sure, Socrates allows himself a great deal of freedom in Republic X. As soon as he has set out his ἐυθυνία μέθοδος, he famously goes on to speak as if there are Ideas of couches and tables (596b1-2). For anyone with an impulse to theoretical parsimony, such extravagance is undoubtedly distasteful. But I do not think one should make too much of it. As Adam and others have observed, Socrates’ present purposes are neatly served by speaking of such Ideas: in what follows in Book X, he will establish a three-fold scale — θεός, καλοποιός, γράφως — which he will then use as a basis for discussing generally the work of the imitator, who produces τὸ τρίτον γέννημα ἀπὸ τῆς φύσεως. Notwithstanding what he says here, Socrates might elsewhere neglect to concern himself with Ideas of couches and tables without thereby deserving to be branded indecisive or capricious.
In saying as much, I hasten to add that I have no desire to dismiss what Socrates says as lacking in sincerity. He may well take seriously the possibility that there are Ideas corresponding to artifact-terms. In fact, the opening of Republic X strikes me as being rather exploratory in character. As I imagine, Socrates is well aware that as yet he has nothing definite to say concerning what terms designate Ideas, and so he unconsciously allows himself a great deal of breadth.

Commentators have been eager to save Socrates from what they deem an embarrassing view. I prefer to regard him as acting in a spirit of openness, and as doing so without any feeling of discomfort. Indeed, I would like to imagine that the mature Socrates of the Republic has finally come to appreciate the remark made to him long ago by Parmenides, who speaks thus of the young Socrates' hesitation at allowing a broad range of ontological commitments (Prm 130e): Νέος γὰρ εἰ ἔτι, ὁ Σώκρατες, καὶ οὖσα σοῦ ἀντείληται φιλοσοφία ὡς ἔτι ἀντιλήμεται κατ’ ἐμὴν δόξαν, ὦτε οὐδὲν αὐτῶν ἀτιμάσεις· νῦν δὲ-ἔτι πρὸς ἄνθρωπον ἀποβλέπεις δόξας διὰ τὴν ἡλικίαν.

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