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Resembling Nothing: 
Image and Being in Plato

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A crucial application of Plato’s views on the use of images in philosophy occurs through the use of the image relationship as an image for the relation of forms and particulars. The relation of a picture to the object it depicts, or that between a reflection and what it reflects, can be seen as analogous to the relation of a particular to the form in which it participates. Although the attack on the image model as analogous to the relation of forms and particulars in the Parmenides threatens to undermine any reliance on that model, this essay will present a case for reliance on the image model.

1 Image and regress

The view of forms as models which particulars resemble seems to invite the ‘third man’ argument. Socrates introduces the image analogy in an attempt to defend the claim that separate forms exist and that particulars have the character they have “to the extent that they get a share” in such forms (Parmenides 128e-129a). To avoid the first ‘third man’ regress, Socrates’ theory needs a notion of participation that does not imply a symmetrical relationship which renders form and particular both large, for example, in the same way. Thus, Socrates says that what appears most likely to me is this: these forms are like patterns (paradeigmata) set in nature, and other things resemble (eoikenai) them and are likenesses (einaí homoiômata); and this partaking of the form is, for the other things, simply being modeled on them (eikasthénai autois) (132d1-4).¹

This analogy enables the forms to appear not as things in the same class as particulars, which would make the theory subject to the first version of the ‘third man’ regress. An image possesses its character only because it derives that character from its model—the two have the character for quite different reasons, and do not appear to have the character in the same way: one has it as original, the other as image.²

Plato’s Parmenides, however, constructs a regress argument in terms of the image analogy, apparently dashing Socrates’ hopes.

“If something resembles the form,” he said, “can that form not be like what has been modeled on it, to the extent that the thing has been made like it? Or is there any way for something like to be like what is not like it? (esti tis mêchanê to homoion mê homoioi homoion einai?)”

“There is not.”

“And isn’t there a compelling necessity for that which is like to partake of the same one form as what is like it?”

“There is.”

“But if like things are like by partaking of something, won’t that be the form itself?” (132d5-e4).

Parmenides’ last question involves the form itself; the result should be that “if the form proves to be like what partakes of it, a fresh form will never cease emerging” (133a1-3). If a form explains the resemblance of any two or more things, a further form must be invoked in order to explain the resemblance of the form itself to those particulars.³ The form and the particular are alike, as a model is like its image. If two things are alike because they participate in some one form, though, then the form and the like things must also partake of some additional form. This need for further forms continues into infinity, thus eliminating any chance that looking to forms might explain particulars.

¹ I shall make use of Gill and Ryan’s translation of the Parmenides, noting any changes.
² David Hunt, for example, notes this feature of the image relationship, at Hunt, 16.
³ Numerous fascinating—though usually mutually exclusive—attempts to formalize this argument, along with the first ‘third man’ argument, have been made. I refer readers, in particular, to Vlastos 1954, 241-244; Geach 271-275; Lee 1964, 53-55; Patterson, 52-53; Schofield, 59-61; and Hunt, 3-6.
2 Resistance

2.1 An object does not resemble its reflection

If particulars relate to forms not as all images relate to originals, but as reflections relate to their originals, then one can claim that the particulars obviously depend upon the forms despite the fact that they cannot possibly be grouped with those forms. A reflection is nothing at all in itself—it is a product of the interaction of original, light, and reflective surface; it is, itself, nothing. Particulars, on this model, are simply products of the interaction of the forms and the what Timaeus calls the receptacle (Timaeus, 52c). In the words of R. E. Allen, an early proponent of this interpretation, the “reflection does not resemble the original; rather, it is a resemblance of the original.” The faulty premise of Plato’s Parmenides’ argument, then, is the claim that the particular is some thing that resembles a form, rather than simply a resemblance of a form.

Allen uses the example of a reflection of a red scarf: one cannot call the reflection a scarf (it cannot, of course, keep one’s neck warm in the winter). Further, Allen claims, one cannot call the reflection red either—to do so would be “to say that we can predicate of reflections, which are essentially adjectival, in just the way we predicate of their originals, things which exist in their own right.” The reflection of the scarf is essentially adjectival, it exists as a quality or characteristic of the scarf, and is nothing in its own right. The reflection of the scarf is properly ‘the scarf reflected.’ Speaking of the reflection as though it were independent of the actual scarf involves making a mistake, taking the reflection to be what it is not, an actual thing which exists in its own right. One can, of course, speak the words ‘the reflection is red’; but “you cannot mean the same thing you mean when you call its original red.” The reflection cannot resemble the scarf with respect to being red, for the reflection is called red in a way quite different from the way in which the scarf is called red. One cannot say, then, that reflections and their originals meaningfully resemble each other. If particulars are like reflections, one cannot say they resemble forms, and the ‘third man’ regress cannot occur.

Is it reasonable to treat particulars as like reflections rather than like any sort of image? The Timaeus offers the clearest evidence that reflections provide the best analogue for particulars. In particular, the passage in the Timaeus that presents the receptacle suggests this reading. The fact that images in mirrors are wholly dependent upon the mirror and their originals combined with the complete insubstantiality of mirror images parallels the description of the things that appear in the receptacle.

Timaeus describes the receptacle as “that in which [the elements] appear to keep coming to be and from which they subsequently perish” (49e7-50a1—translator’s italics). Cornford explains that these lines make clear the fact that the receptacle ought to be seen on the model of a mirror: “The Receptacle is not that ‘out of which’ (ex hou) things are made; it is that ‘in which’ (en hôi) qualities appear, as fleeting images are seen in a mirror.” The language that Timaeus uses in speaking both of the receptacle and of the phenomena that appear in it suggests that things in the physical world are analogous to reflections in a mirror.

The caution about speaking of each of the four ‘elements’ lends support to this reading. Timaeus tells his listeners that they are safest to characterize it, that is, fire, not as ‘this,’ but always as ‘what is such’ . . . And never to speak of anything else as ‘this,’ as though it has some stability, of all the things at which we point and use the expressions ‘that’ and ‘this’ and so think we are designating something (49d5-e2).
Calling a bit of phenomenal fire ‘this’ would imply that it had some substantial being to it; instead, only the receptacle—“that in which [things] appear to keep coming to be and from which they subsequently perish, that’s the only thing to refer to by means of the expressions ‘that’ and ‘this’” (49e7-50a2—translator’s italics). Timaeus portrays physical objects as lacking any inherent, substantial character—they cannot even be pointed to as things in their own right. Such phenomena closely resemble a reflection in a mirror, which is actually nothing at all except a trick of light and surface.

Timaeus’ gold example furthers this notion of particulars as insubstantial. Of gold molded into various shapes, the safest answer to the question ‘what is it?’ ‘would be to say, ‘gold,’ but never ‘triangle’ or any of the other shapes that come to be in the gold” (50b1-3). Likewise with particulars, if asked ‘what is it?’ one ought to say it is the receptacle, nothing more. Although the comparison of the receptacle to gold seems to suggest that phenomena might have more substance that reflections, the fact that one cannot say that some phenomena are anything but the receptacle strengthens the claim that such things, like reflections, lack any subsistent, independent nature. At the close of the section on the receptacle Timaeus again portrays the physical universe as insubstantial and dependent:

Since an image does not have as its own that which it has come to signify (an image is invariably borne along to depict something else), it stands to reason that the image should therefore come to be in something else, somehow clinging to being, or else be nothing at all (52c2-5—translator’s italics).

These images’ ‘clinging to being’ in the receptacle suggests the dependent status of something like a reflection. Unlike images such as statues or paintings, reflections cannot survive the departure of either their model or their medium. The receptacle seems to resemble a mirror.

If this reading of the receptacle as a mirror is correct, Plato is saved from the ‘third man’ regress. Reflections cannot be said to resemble their originals, because reflections are, in essence, nothing. If particulars are

words, the characteristics shared by many instances of fire) should be called ‘fire,’ while some particular instantiation of those characteristics should not be so called. Although the dispute ranges over much of 49d-e, the different treatments of the two lines above (49d5-6) capture the larger differences: thus, I restrict my remarks to them. Both translations seem well-recommended (see, e.g., Cherniss 1954; M. L. Gill; Lee 1964 and 1967; Sallis 1999); Lee, though, makes the intriguing point that Cornford, after offering the traditional translation, explicates the passage in a way more fitted to the alternate translation (which Cornford’s book antedates): Cornford writes that “Plato is now asserting that ‘fire’ is properly only a name for a certain combination of qualities or ‘powers,’ which appear and disappear and are always varying” (Cornford 1937, 179-181; cf. Lee 1964, 117-118)—the name ‘fire,’ then seems, as the alternate translation suggests, best applied to the qualities, rather than to some particular instantiation of those qualities.

The controversies that surround the translation of this passage, however, do not call into question the fact that Timaeus here treats phenomena as fundamentally insubstantial, dependent on the form they imitate and on the receptacle in which they appear. Due to this fundamental insubstantiality of phenomena, one cannot coherently speak in ways that treat phenomena as substantial. Sallis writes that “[w]hichever interpretation is followed, the decisive point in the entire passage is clearly the flight of fire and the others from discourse” (Sallis 1999, 102-103).

13 As would calling some single instantiation of fiery qualities ‘fire.’

14 Allen describes a reflection as a thing that “does not resemble the original; rather it is a resemblance of this original. . . . ‘Resemblances of’ are quasi-substantial; relational entities, not relations. They stand to their originals as the dependent to the independent, as the less real to the more real” (Allen 1960, 50-51). Particulars, Allen claims, should be seen on the model of reflections, since their being is dependent and less real. Lee also argues that the model of a reflection, an ‘insubstantial image’ best displays the character of phenomena as described in the Timaeus, since such phenomena lack any stable nature of their own, being rather a product of the interaction of the forms and the receptacle just as a reflection is the product of the interaction of an original and a mirror (Lee 1966, 352-360). Thus, when Timaeus introduces the receptacle, “what Plato does there is to disclose the presence of the mirror” (Lee 1966, 357).

15 Lee culls the same lesson from the gold example, writing that the “only genuine, autonomous reality to which we can physically point, the only one with an enduring and securely stable [sic] nature of its own, is the Receptacle: the permanent medium, not the transient phenomenon” (Lee 1966, 359). Although the language of ‘molding’ (metaplattôn), as well as that of ‘impressing’ (apomattein) at 50e8-9, might suggest a malleable matter rather than a mirror, Lee points out that the language of ‘impressions,’ at least, sometimes shows up in talk of mirrors, and so “does not disqualify our mirror analogy” (Lee 1966, 357n.32).

like reflections, they do not resemble the forms in which they participate, thus eliminating the need for an additional form, a ‘third man.’

One obvious problem, however, for proponents of the reflection view of particulars comes from the lack of direct textual evidence for their view: Timaeus never compares the receptacle to a mirror; in fact, he compares particulars to a variety of images, and the comparison of the receptacle to gold suggests that the receptacle is more than just a mirror. Thus, though the mirror analogy is not ‘disqualified,’ it is not beyond criticism.

More substantially, the mirror analogy fails to account for the ability of phenomena to move and suffer change independent of their models. Just as Timaeus introduces the receptacle, he discusses the changes that phenomena undergo. The phenomenal elements change into one another, suffering dissolution, combustion, and condensation. The forms, however, do not change (see, e.g., 28e-29a): the motions of phenomena suggest that these things possess greater independence than mere reflections, which cannot move independently of each other if their models do not. Although the suggestion that sensible phenomena might survive the destruction or departure of the forms in which they participate confronts readers who refuse to see the receptacle as a mirror, the reflection model must be rejected, or only accepted with caution.

2.2 A horse does not resemble a painting of itself

In fact, the regress can be prevented without resorting to such “radical” claims as 1) that particulars are as insubstantial as reflections and 2) that by ‘image’ Plato really means only ‘reflection.’ Because the image must not be of the same kind as the original, no relevant resemblance between image and original can exist: a painted horse cannot resemble a horse with respect to being an actual horse. Image and original do not—must not—

17 Although Lee distinguishes himself from Allen on the basis of his reliance—in contrast to Allen—on “a specific and explicit Platonic text” (Lee 1966, 365), nothing in the Timaeus is ‘specific and explicit’ enough to unequivocally confirm the aptness of the mirror analogy.

18 Such as a ‘wetnurse’ of becoming, a golden triangle, a mother, an embossed shape, space, and a winnowing sieve. See Patterson, p. 46.

19 Lee 1966, 357n.32.

20 Patterson, 48.

21 As Patterson points out, the “point is perhaps sharper in the case of self-initiated motions of living things” (Patterson, 48).

22 Only accepted with caution since, as the attractiveness of the model cannot be denied—though Patterson is right that all images always ‘participate’ in their models, even ones that survive their models (Patterson, 46-47), the suggestion that phenomena might ‘survive’ their forms is unsavory. Further, it’s not clear how treating the phenomenal world as like any image can explain the independent motion of phenomena, since most statues move even less than reflections.

When one attempts to replace the reflection model with other language, it grows difficult to avoid either the language of space or that of matter (see, for example, Kung 174-178, which includes a reading of Aristotle’s treatment of the receptacle). The receptacle, though, seems to possess characteristics that prevent one from reducing it simply to matter or space—in particular, the fact that is has a permanent sort of being and can be called ‘this’ (49e-50a) suggests something with more of a nature than simple matter or empty space. Timaeus does call it ‘space’ (chôra), though he also compares it to the gold in a golden triangle: neither matter nor space alone seem adequate, since the receptacle has features of both. A mirror does handily perform tasks analogous to providing both space and matter for reflections, which occur on its surface and due to the relation of the mirror’s reflective qualities with objects and light; the mirror analogy, however—as discussed above—also seems insufficient. Sallis attempts to characterize the receptacle in a way that avoids all of the language mentioned here, though it’s not an entirely straightforward description:

Because it nurtures and shelters the image, the chôra is anything but a mere mirror in which perpetual being would be reflected and the cosmos thus fabricated in the same way that all things could be made by the clever and wonderful man who took a mirror and carried it around everywhere (Rep. 596c-d). One could call it, rather, a ghost scene that, enshrouding precisely in letting appear, endows the fleeting specters with whatever trace of being they might enjoy (Sallis 1999, 122).

23 This section offers an adaptation of Patterson’s view—he himself rejects a view of forms as patterns (Patterson, 16-19).

24 Lee’s view is called ‘radical’ at Patterson 175ff. The argument that Patterson’s model of imaging resists the regress comes at Patterson, 51-62: my account here will, I hope, represent the whole of Patterson’s arguments. For discussion of and objections to the mirror analogy, see above, section 3.1.

25 Patterson, 59-60.

26 See Cratylus 432a-b.
resemble each other in the way in which the particular resembles another particular, and, therefore, the form cannot be grouped together with the particulars in that respect. Without such a resemblance, the regress cannot occur.

The relation of ‘being an image of’ justifies the naming of the image after its model in a way that refers not to a resemblance, but to a causal relation.

The positive link that removes image and model $F$ from the realm of bare homonyms is the image’s being an image of its model. . . . We label the drawing ‘horse’ rather than ‘cabbage’ because it is a drawing of a horse. $^{27}$

This relation between image and original justifies the naming of the image after the original, since it defines the image precisely as of the original.

Note that all images,—painting and sculptures as well as reflections—on this reading, are adjectival in the same way that Allen’s reflected scarf is adjectival—the painting of Simmias is properly called, as in the Phaedo, ‘Simmias depicted’ (Simmias gegenammenos) (73e6-7). The painting of Simmias is essentially adjectival as a painting of Simmias—it is no more a thing in its own right than the reflected scarf. The painting, inasmuch as it is a painting of Simmias, exists only in its reference to Simmias. In its own right, the painting does exist as pigment on canvas; but it is no image at all without reference to Simmias, upon whom it depends. Thus, the ‘third man’ should be prevented just as easily on this model as on the reflection model, since the images, as images, cannot be said to have properties in the same way as their models.

Sensible resemblance plays no part in this account. $^{28}$ A perfect reproduction of Cratylus, for example, is not an image of him, but rather another Cratylus:

Suppose some god didn’t just represent your color and shape the way painters do, but made all the inner parts like yours . . . in a word, suppose he made a duplicate of everything you have and put it beside you. Would there then be two Cratyluses or Cratylus and an image of Cratylus? (Cratylus, 432b2-c5). $^{29}$

Patterson points out that images not only cannot perfectly capture their models—in fact, an image of a given object must not resemble the model insofar as the model is a particular sort of object. $^{30}$ No image of a horse can actually be a horse—if it were, it is no longer an image, but another horse. $^{31}$ Drawings of horses, therefore, are not called ‘horse’ because they resemble horses—if they did actually resemble horses with respect to being horses, they would be horses, not drawings.

The only apparent similarity between the painted horse and the actual horse is their sharing the designation ‘horse.’ On the model found in the Timaeus, particulars’ only apparent similarity to forms is likewise their sharing a designation, like ‘fire.’ The particular bit of flame cannot truly resemble the fire itself: it cannot be, among other things, eternal and unchanging; and the fire itself, being non-physical, cannot possess properties essential to phenomenal fire like temperature or color.

One might wonder, though, whether—in the absence of a common characteristic—the two deserve to share a name. The form can be seen as an ‘abstract nature or essence’; $^{32}$ forms might be understood as abstract models

$^{27}$ patterson, 42—italics original.
$^{28}$ patterson says that “it is very doubtful that Plato believed imaging as such requires resemblance” (Patterson, 61).
$^{29}$ I shall make use of Reeve’s translation of the Cratylus, noting any changes
$^{30}$ patterson offers a more formalized version of his position: “it is essential to something’s being an image $F$ or an imitation of $F$ that it not be a real $F$, that it not share the property of being $F$ with the model or real thing itself” (Patterson, 21). Barney argues that Socrates’ argument does not show that “correctness cannot simply track resemblance” (Barney, 121). For Barney, the argument does not do away with the notion of correctness in images, but rather simply calls a standard of ‘mimetic correctness’ into question. Barney objects to the claim (which she credits to Patterson) that Socrates here shows a distinction between images and copies or duplicates (Barney, 121n.13). Barney goes on to suggest that it does not follow “from the fact that what is perfectly $f$ cannot be a $g$ that $f$-ness is not the appropriate norm by which to judge $g$’s” (Barney, 121.n14). She offers the example of a ‘perfectly quick’ runner, who covers a distance in 0 seconds, and who “cannot be sprinting; but a sprinter sprints well by sprinting quickly” (Barney, 121n.14). I am, however, not at all convinced that moving in no time is a case of perfect quickness, rather than a simple defiance of physical laws.
$^{31}$ “[T]he reflection of Cratylus in the mirror or on water is not another Cratylus; the black-figure warrior on a vase is not another, only qualified or imperfect, warrior; the marble Hermes is not itself a god” (Patterson, 20).
$^{32}$ Patterson, 67-68, 73.
that dictate what it is to be a given thing. The characters agree that “even if a name doesn’t include all the appropriate letters, it will still describe the thing (lexetai ge to pragma) if it includes its pattern (typos)” (Cratylus, 433a4-6). This statement about names—which the characters in the Cratylus treat as like images (e.g., 432b-d)—shows that an image and its original ought to share a name whenever the image captures the pattern of the original. This statement suggests a reason for a form and a particular sharing a name: if the particular appears to fit the ‘pattern’ dictated by the form, it deserves to be called after that form. The form of fire dictates, in some manner, the characteristics necessarily present in any fiery thing. Although the form of fire does not possess these characteristics, its nature, if understood, enables one to see the necessity of these characteristics. The ‘pattern’ is attributed to the form inasmuch as the form dictates that pattern; and it is attributed to any particular thing that fits the pattern. A thing’s embodying the characteristics dictated by some form justifies calling the thing after the form, just as a thing’s being an image of an object justified calling the image after the object. As an image is a depiction of a model, a particular is an instantiation or embodiment of a pattern.

On this interpretation of the image model, the ‘third man’ regress cannot occur—the image and the model must not resemble each other in any relevant way, though the image is a resemblance of the model. Likewise, a particular cannot resemble the form in which it participates, despite the fact that the particular instantiates the pattern which the form dictates. If actual resemblance between form and particular is impossible, the ‘third man’ regress must also be impossible.

At least one question remains: how does this model answer the question of the motion of particulars? Statues and paintings cannot move independently any more than reflections can—this objection against the mirror analogy resurfaces on this broader conception of image. Perhaps one might defend this model with the claim that the activity of sensible things is a part of their instantiation of the pattern. Instantiating or embodying a form such as animal itself in the unstable, temporal universe might require motion of the particulars. Indeed, Timaeus says that the heavens exist as a moving image of eternity precisely because “it isn’t possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten” (37d). Since particular things must exist in time, their motion might help them instantiate the eternal pattern dictated by forms.

Thus, one might view particulars and forms as like images and models in the sense that a causal connection exists between the two despite the fact that the forms and models cannot resemble the particulars and images. The interpretation offered here possesses many virtues. First, this account accords well with the descriptions of the relation of form and particular in the dialogues. Second, the account highlights the dependent, adjectival nature of particulars. Perhaps most importantly, this account allows Plato to avoid the third man regress, which cannot occur if the forms do not resemble the particulars. Finally, the account favored here—in contrast to the reflection model, which also brings those first three advantages—does not restrict Plato’s conception of images to reflections alone. No platonic text makes such a restriction, and an exclusive focus on reflections as the proper analogue for particulars renders the motion of particular things incomprehensible. Thus, the image analogy successfully conveys the nature of particulars’ relation to forms, and successfully avoids the third man regress.

33 Dorter writes that forms are in a sense “possibilities of reality, possibilities of the kinds of things and qualities that can exist in accordance with the nature of reality” (Dorter 1994, 21—original italics). The forms offer indications of the sort of thing or quality that might occur at any given moment, and justify one’s calling the appearance after the possibility.

34 This mention of Cratylus 433a has benefited from a reading of Lee’s dissertation (Lee 1964, 15-16); though I cannot agree with Lee that typos here refers to an ‘essential feature’ shared by form and particular (Lee 1964, 16), I do agree that some notion of typos explains the similarity of particular and form. I also agree with Lee that the LSJ translation of typos at Cratylus 432e-433a as ‘general impression, vague indication’ or ‘approximate indication’ misses the mark, though I accept Reeve’s translation, ‘pattern,’ which I believe Lee would not. Sedley offers ‘outline’ as his preferred translation (Sedley 2003, 138). The term itself should be general enough to fit with a sense such as ‘pattern’; Sedley’s own explanation, however, agrees with Lee that the relation involves something like resemblance, and so I must reject Sedley’s view. For more on typos, see the extensive entry in LSJ.

35 Patterson, 73.

36 A suggestion from Thomas M. Tuozzo.
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