Socrates, he said, your eagerness for discussion is admirable. And now tell me. Have you yourself drawn this distinction you speak of and separated apart on the one side forms themselves and on the other the things that share in them? Do you believe that there is such a thing as likeness itself apart from the likeness that we possess, and so on with unity and plurality and all the terms in Zeno's argument that you have just been listening to?

Certainly I do, said Socrates.

And also in cases like these, asked Parmenides, is there, for example, a form of rightness or of beauty or of goodness, and of all such things?

Yes.

And again, a form of man, apart from ourselves and all other men like us--a form of man as something by itself? Or a form of fire or of water?

I have often been puzzled about those things, Parmenides, whether one should say that the same thing is true in their case or not.

Are you also puzzled, Socrates, about cases that might be thought absurd, such as hair or mud or dirt or any other trivial and undignified objects? Are you doubtful whether or not to assert that each of these has a separate form distinct from things like those we handle?

Not at all, said Socrates. In these cases, the things are just the things we see; it would surely be too absurd to suppose that they have a form. All the same, I have sometimes been troubled by a doubt whether what is true in one case may not be true in all. Then, when I have reached that point, I am driven to retreat, for fear of tumbling into a bottomless pit of nonsense. Anyhow, I get back to the things which we were just now speaking of as having forms, and occupy my time with thinking about them.

That, replied Parmenides, is because you are still young, Socrates, and philosophy has not yet taken hold of you so firmly as I believe it will someday. You will not despise any of these objects then, but at present your youth makes you still pay attention to what the world will think. However that may be, tell me this. You say you hold that there exist certain forms, of which these other things come to partake and so to be called after their names; by coming to partake of likeness or largeness or beauty or justice, they become like or large or beautiful or just?

Certainly, said Socrates.

Then each thing that partakes receives as its share either the form as a whole or a part of it? Or can there be any other way of partaking besides this?

No, how could there be?

Do you hold, then, that the form as a whole, a single thing, is in each of the many, or how?

Why should it not be in each, Parmenides?

If so, a form which is one and the same will be at the same time, as a whole, in a number of things which are separate, and consequently will be separate from itself.

No, it would not, replied Socrates, if it were like one and the same day, which is in many places at the same time and nevertheless is not separate from itself. Suppose any given form is in them all at the same time as one and the same thing in that way.

I like the way you make out that one and the same thing is in many places at once, Socrates. You might as well spread a sail over a number of people and then say that the one sail as a whole was over them all. Don't you think that is a fair analogy?
Perhaps it is.
Then would the sail as a whole be over each man, or only a part over one, another part over another?
Only a part.
In that case, Socrates, the forms themselves must be divisible into parts, and the things which have a share in them will have a part for their share. Only a part of any given form, and no longer the whole of it, will be in each thing.
Evidently, on that showing.
Are you, then, prepared to assert that we shall find the single form actually being divided? Will it still be one?
Certainly not.
No, for consider this. Suppose it is largeness itself that you are going to divide into parts, and that each of the many large things is to be large by virtue of a part of largeness which is smaller than largeness itself. Will not that seem unreasonable?
It will indeed.
And again, if it is equality that a thing receives some small part of, will that part, which is less than equality itself, make its possessor equal to something else?
No, that is impossible.
Well, take smallness. Is one of us to have a portion of smallness, and is smallness to be larger than that portion, which is a part of it? On this supposition again smallness itself will be larger, and anything to which the portion taken is added will be smaller, and not larger, than it was before.
That cannot be so.
Well then, Socrates, how are the other things going to partake of your forms, if they can partake of them neither in part nor as wholes?
Really, said Socrates, it seems no easy matter to determine in any way.
Again, there is another question.
What is that?
How do you feel about this? I imagine your ground for believing in a single form in each case is this. When it seems to you that a number of things are large, there seems, I suppose, to be a certain single character which is the same when you look at them all; hence you think that largeness is a single thing.
True, he replied.
But now take largeness itself and the other things which are large. Suppose you look at all these in the same way in your mind's eye, will not yet another unity make its appearance—a largeness by virtue of which they all appear large?
So it would seem.
If so, a second form of largeness will present itself, over and above largeness itself and the things that share in it, and again, covering all these, yet another, which will make all of them large. So each of your forms will no longer be one, but an indefinite number.
But, Parmenides, said Socrates, may it not be that each of these forms is a thought, which cannot properly exist anywhere but in a mind. In that way each of them can be one and the statements that have just been made would no longer be true of it.
Then, is each form one of these thoughts and yet a thought of nothing?
No, that is impossible.
So it is a thought of something?
Yes.
Of something that is, or of something that is not?
Of something that is.
In fact, of some one thing which that thought observes to cover all the cases, as being a certain single character?
Yes.
Then will not this thing that is thought of as being one and always the same in all cases be a form?
That again seems to follow.
And besides, said Parmenides, according to the way in which you assert that the other things have a share in the forms, must you not hold either that each of those things consists of thoughts, so that all things think, or else that they are thoughts which nevertheless do not think?
That too is unreasonable, replied Socrates. But, Parmenides, the best I can make of the matter is this--that these forms are as it were patterns fixed in the nature of things. The other things are made in their image and are likenesses, and this participation they come to have in the forms is nothing but their being made in their image.
Well, if a thing is made in the image of the form, can that form fail to be like the image of it, in so far as the image was made in its likeness? If a thing is like, must it not be like something that is like it?
It must.
And must not the thing which is like share with the thing that is like it in one and the same thing [character]?
Yes.
And will not that in which the like things share, so as to be alike, be just the form itself that you spoke of?
Certainly.
If so, nothing can be like the form, nor can the form be like anything. Otherwise a second form will always make its appearance over and above the first form, and if that second form is like anything, yet a third. And there will be no end to this emergence of fresh forms, if the form is to be like the thing that partakes of it.
Quite true.
It follows that the other things do not partake of forms by being like them; we must look for some other means by which they partake.
So it seems.
You see then, Socrates, said Parmenides, what great difficulties there are in asserting their existence as forms just by themselves?
I do indeed.
I assure you, then, you have as yet hardly a notion of how great they will be, if you are going to set up a single form for every distinction you make among things.
How so?
The worst difficulty will be this, though there are plenty more. Suppose someone should say that the forms, if they are such as we are saying they must be, cannot even be known. One could not convince him that he was mistaken in that objection, unless he chanced to be a man of wide experience and natural ability, and were willing to follow one through a long and remote train of argument. Otherwise there would be no way of convincing a man who maintained that the forms were unknowable.
Why so, Parmenides?

Because, Socrates, I imagine that you or anyone else who asserts that each of them has a real being 'just by itself,' would admit, to begin with, that no such real being exists in our world.

True, for how could it then be just by itself?

Very good, said Parmenides. And further, those forms which are what they are with reference to one another have their being in such references among themselves, not with reference to those likenesses, or whatever we are to call them, in our world, which we possess and so come to be called by their several names. And, on the other hand, these things in our world which bear the same names as the forms are related among themselves, not to the forms, and all the names of that sort that they bear have reference to one another, not to the forms.

How do you mean? asked Socrates.

Suppose, for instance, 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, but, as I say, the things in that world are what they are with reference to one another and toward one another, and so likewise are the things in our world. You see what I mean?

Certainly I do.

And similarly knowledge itself, the essence of knowledge, will be knowledge of that reality itself, the essentially real.

Certainly.

And again, any given branch of knowledge in itself will be knowledge of some department of real things as it is in itself, will it not?

Yes.

Whereas the knowledge in our world will be knowledge of the reality in our world, and it will follow again that each branch of knowledge in our world must be knowledge of some department of things that exist in our world.

Necessarily.

But, as you admit, we do not possess the forms themselves, nor can they exist in our world.

No.

And presumably the forms, just as they are in themselves, are known by the form of knowledge itself?

Yes.

The form which we do not possess.

True.

Then, none of the forms is known by us, since we have no part in knowledge itself.

Apparently not.

So beauty itself or goodness itself and all the things we take as forms in themselves are unknowable to us.

I am afraid that is so.

Then here is a still more formidable consequence for you to consider.

What is that?
You will grant, I suppose, that if there is such a thing as a form, knowledge itself, it is much more perfect than the knowledge in our world, and so with beauty and all the rest.

Yes.

And if anything has part in this knowledge itself, you would agree that a god has a better title than anyone else to possess the most perfect knowledge?

Undoubtedly.

Then will the god, who possesses knowledge itself, be able to know the things in our world?

Why not?

Because we have agreed that those forms have no significance with reference to things in our world, nor have things in our world any significance with reference to them. Each set has it only among themselves.

Yes, we did.

Then if this most perfect mastership and most perfect knowledge are in the god's world, the gods' mastership can never be exercised over us, nor their knowledge know us or anything in our world. Just as we do not rule over them by virtue of rule as it exists in our world and we know nothing that is divine by our knowledge, so they, on the same principle, being gods, are not our masters nor do they know anything of human concerns.

But surely, said Socrates, an argument which would deprive the gods of knowledge would be too strange.

And yet, Socrates, Parmenides went on, these difficulties and many more besides are inevitably involved in the forms, if these characters of things really exist and one is going to distinguish each form as a thing just by itself. The result is that the hearer is perplexed and inclined either to question their existence, or to contend that, if they do exist, they must certainly be unknowable by our human nature. Moreover, there seems to be some weight in these objections, and, as we were saying, it is extraordinarily difficult to convert the objector. Only a man of exceptional gifts will be able to see that a form, or essence just by itself, does exist in each case, and it will require someone still more remarkable to discover it and to instruct another who has thoroughly examined all these difficulties.

I admit that, Parmenides. I quite agree with what you are saying.

But on the other hand, Parmenides continued, if, in view of all these difficulties and others like them, a man refuses to admit that forms of things exist or to distinguish a definite form in every case, he will have nothing on which to fix his thought, so long as he will not allow that each thing has a character which is always the same, and in so doing he will completely destroy the significance of all discourse. But of that consequence I think you are only too well aware.

True. (Parmenides 130b-c)

NOTES: (1) The argument about Large has been discussed the most out of every one of these criticisms – it's known as the “Third Man” argument, probably because Aristotle referred to this problem in that way. To be more accurate here, it should be called the Third Largeness argument.

(2) Even after Plato makes all of the criticisms he makes here, he says what I have highlighted in yellow at the end, which at least to me indicates that though he believes he’s presented some plausible objections to his theory of Forms, that he does believe that the difficulties are answerable.
(3) The paragraph I’ve highlighted in blue at the end can actually be construed as another argument for the Forms – if we do not admit that SOMETHING remains stable through change, such as the Forms, then our words really do not refer to any one thing at any time. If everything is changing all the time in every respect, and nothing remains the same, then we cannot refer to anything.