

Study Guide: Aristotle's Metaphysics

Aristotle's Criticisms of Plato's Theory of the Forms:

The Form of the Good Argument: This argument attacks Plato's claim that there is a single form of Goodness. Aristotle points out that there are so many different senses in which something can be good, and there could not be a single sense or form of goodness to account for them all.

The next two arguments presented here depend upon Plato's claim that each form has the associated characteristic (e.g., the form of doghood is itself a dog, and the form of greenness is itself green).

The Form of Perishability Argument: This argument attacks Plato's claim that his theory of the forms can explain why objects have their characteristics.

1. There is a form for each characteristic an object can have.
2. Some objects are perishable, so there must be a form of perishability.
3. Each form has its associated characteristic, so the form of perishability must be perishable.
4. Each form is eternal and unchanging, so the form of perishability must be eternal and unchanging.
5. Therefore, the form of perishability is both perishable and not perishable. This is a contradiction.
6. Any theory that generates a contradiction must be false, so Plato's theory of forms must be false.

The Third Person Argument: This argument attacks Plato's claim that his theory of the Forms can explain how objects should be classified. Remember, Plato says that objects belong in the same category when they participate in the same form.

1. Two people are in the same category because they both participate in the form of personhood.
2. The form of personhood is also a person, so there are three people (the two we began with plus the form of personhood).
3. These three people are in the same category (that is, they are all people) because they all participate in an additional thing: another form of personhood.
4. This new form of personhood is a person, so we now have four people (the two we began with, plus the first form of personhood and now this new form of personhood).
5. These four people are in the same category (that is, they are all people) because they all participate in an additional thing, yet another form of personhood.
6. This process continues indefinitely: Each time we bring in a form to explain why other objects are in the same category, we are also introducing a new object that presents a new question about classification. To explain why this new, larger set of objects is all in the same category, we have to introduce another form, and this starts the process all over again.

7. Instead of providing an acceptable explanation of classification, the theory of forms generates an endless sequence of questions. Any theory that does this is unsatisfactory.