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The Divine Plato

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Summary of John McDowell, ‘Identity Mistakes: Plato and the Logical Atomists’

I. Introduction

* McDowell begins by noting that the concept of identity has been central to philosophical debates since ancient times, and that it continues to be a contested issue in contemporary philosophy.
* McDowell argues that the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and the logical atomists offer two fundamentally different accounts of identity, and that understanding these accounts can shed light on contemporary debates about the nature of identity.

II. The Logical Atomists' View of Identity

* The logical atomists, such as Democritus and Leucippus, held that objects are identical if and only if they share all of the same properties.
* McDowell notes that this view of identity implies that "two things which are not indistinguishable in every respect cannot be identical" (p. 184).
* This leads to absurd conclusions, such as the idea that two objects can only be identical if they are indistinguishable in every respect, including their spatial location.
* The logical atomists' view of identity also implies a kind of metaphysical atomism, where objects are "loose aggregates of properties."
* McDowell notes that this view of identity is based on a kind of "extensionalism," where objects are identified solely on the basis of their properties, rather than any underlying essence or form.

III. Plato's Theory of Forms

* Plato believed that objects have a "form" or "essence" that defines their identity, and that "identity is conferred by participation in a form" (p. 186).
* McDowell notes that Plato's theory of Forms provides a way of conceiving of objects as having an underlying unity or coherence.
* For example, Plato believed that the concept of "justice" is not just a label we apply to certain actions or situations, but rather has an objective reality in the realm of Forms.
* McDowell notes that Plato's theory of Forms allows for a kind of "intensionalism," where objects are identified on the basis of their underlying essence or form, rather than just their properties.

IV. Comparing the Two Views of Identity

* McDowell argues that the logical atomists' view of identity is overly restrictive, since it only allows for objects to be identical if they share all of the same properties.
* In contrast, Plato's theory of Forms allows for a way of distinguishing between things that share some properties but not all.
* For example, two paintings may have some similar features, but still be identified as distinct works of art because they have different underlying forms or essences.
* McDowell also notes that the logical atomists' view of identity is rooted in a kind of "nominalism," where objects are identified solely on the basis of their names or labels, while Plato's theory of Forms allows for a kind of "realism," where objects have an objective underlying nature that determines their identity.

V. Implications for the Problem of Universals

* The problem of universals concerns the question of whether abstract concepts, such as "justice" or "beauty," have an objective reality or are just labels we apply to certain things.
* The logical atomists' view of identity implies a kind of "particularism," where abstract concepts do not have an objective reality, since they cannot be reduced to any particular set of properties.
* In contrast, Plato's theory of Forms implies a kind of "universalism," where abstract concepts have an objective reality in the realm of Forms.
* McDowell notes that the Forms are the principles by which we can understand the universal properties that are shared by many things.

VI. Conclusion

McDowell concludes by arguing that Plato's theory of Forms provides a more robust and coherent account of identity than the logical atomists' view.

* He notes that Plato's theory of Forms allows for a way of conceiving of objects as having an underlying unity or coherence, which is missing from the logical atomists' view.
* McDowell also suggests that Plato's theory of Forms has important implications for contemporary debates about the nature of identity and the problem of universals.
* By highlighting the importance of underlying forms or essences in determining identity, Plato's theory of Forms provides a way of reconciling the seemingly opposed positions of nominalism and realism.
* McDowell argues that this makes Plato's theory of Forms a valuable resource for contemporary philosophers seeking to understand the nature of identity and universals.