

Plato and the Forms

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Socrates' method of doing philosophy was to debate **the meaning of words** (e.g. What is 'beauty', or 'truth' or 'justice'?).

- We may call various things 'beautiful', but what is 'beauty' in itself?
- Why do we call these different things 'beautiful' unless we have some prior understanding of 'beauty'?
- Where did that prior understanding come from?

Plato's dialogues develop the 'Socratic method.' He works on the assumption that the meaning of a word corresponds to some **permanent external reality**. (e.g. 'Justice' is not just a word used to bracket certain events and situations together. Justice actually exists **in itself, it is a reality over and above any of the individual things that are said to be just**. Indeed, individual things can be said to be 'just' only because we already have an idea of 'justice' itself.

These general, abstract realities he calls 'forms'.

If we had no knowledge of such 'forms', we would not be able to categorise things. All meanings would be conventional only – what one person thought of as 'just' another might call 'unjust' and there would be no way to decide between the two.

The 'form' of something is its **essential feature**; it is what makes that thing what it is, and not something else.

Plato also divided the world into '**reality**' and '**appearance**' and our understanding of it is divided into 'knowledge' and 'opinion'.

What we know of particular things is only 'opinion'; knowledge is reserved for our understanding of the eternal realities. Philosophy tries to gain true 'knowledge', to understand the essence of beauty, justice, goodness etc. It seeks to get beyond mere opinion about the bits and pieces of our experienced world.

For Plato there are two worlds (or, better, two very different ways of encountering the world):

- The changeable world that we encounter through the senses.
- The world beyond the things we experience through the senses: a world of 'forms' of which we can have true knowledge, and which is eternal.

He held that '**The Form of the Good**' was the highest of these forms, and that knowledge of the 'good' was the highest knowledge of which human we are capable.

Plato's allegory of the Cave:

In *The Republic*, Plato uses an analogy to illustrate the progress towards knowledge of the good. He sees ordinary experience as being like that of prisoners, chained so that they can see only the back wall of a cave. Behind them is a fire, and in front of it people carry objects to and fro, throwing shadows upon the wall. Since it is all they know, the prisoners assume that the shadows are reality.

The philosopher, escaping his chains, turns and sees first the fire and the objects being carried. He then moves up to the mouth of the cave and is dazzled by the light of the sun – the Form of the Good.

On returning, he tries to explain to the other prisoners that their everyday experience is that of shadows.

Plato contrasts the philosopher, who, seeing objects illuminated by the sun, understands and knows them as they really are, whereas the prisoners, still stuck in their twilight world of change and decay, can do no more than form opinions about the shifting play of shadows.

How do we come to know the forms?

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates challenges someone to explain the meaning of a concept and then tests it by introducing particular examples. This implies that knowledge is **prior to** experience, rather than the other way round. If experience came first, you would need to do no more than add up the sum total of experiences to gain true knowledge.

Plato believed that, prior to our birth, our soul had direct knowledge of the forms, and that our understanding of them now is really a matter of **remembering**. It is because we have this prior knowledge of 'beauty', 'justice' etc that we are able to use these words to describe our experiences as beautiful or just.

He believed that we all have knowledge of reality, but it is lost, cluttered by the changing experiences of the everyday world.

Plato uses this idea as a proof of immortality, arguing that the soul must have been in the eternal realm of the forms before its birth into this world.

Implications of this for religion

Consider the following features of Plato's view of reality:

- The 'real' world is not the one we see with our eyes, but an eternal world beyond the ever-changing world of our experience.
- Particular things have meaning and value only because they participate in the value of an eternal 'Form'.
- Reason takes priority over sense experience.
- The natural condition in which people find themselves is one of ignorance; they wait to be enlightened.

Clearly, if 'God' is identified with the Form of the Good, then he is not seen directly in the world of experienced things.

It suggests that science, and the whole process of gaining 'empirical' knowledge through the senses, is destined to fail in its quest to reveal the truth about the world. Since it is merely showing patterns on the wall of the cave, it is inherently incapable of seeing things as they really are.

Indirectly, it may lead to a 'compensatory' view of religion e.g. Augustine (influenced by Plato's philosophy) looked for an eternal and perfect 'City of God' to compensate for the fall of Rome. This approach becomes possible if reality is eternal, known by reason to the enlightened few, and is not seen in the objects of experience.

It also suggests that reason should dictate how we interpret experience. This had profound implications for the religion and science debates of later centuries. It may also encourage a tendency to put the absolute ideals and demands of an eternal deity before human reality and suffering – with terrible consequences.