
The Fundamentals Of Plato's Philosophy

This essay will discuss Plato's conception of philosophy; his approach, thoughts, and influences in regards to the discipline of philosophy. Perhaps one of the most influential philosophers of all time, a lot of Plato's work has influenced how we as human civilization think of ethics, epistemology, logic and mathematics. The primary concept that will be examined in this essay is Plato's theory of Forms, which could be argued as his most substantial contributions to philosophy. Plato's influence on western civilization can still be felt in this day as a backbone of Western philosophy. The traditional school of thought being that "essence" or "truth" is hidden behind the many phenomenon of the world that people see. This philosophical concept, credited to Plato, holds the view that the physical world is not as "real" or true as eternal, absolute, steadfast ideas.

The fundamental concept behind Plato's theory of Forms is that the physical world which we see and experience is in fact not the "real" world and that an "ultimate reality" exists beyond the physical world that we live in. This could be understood as two different realms; the physical realm which we as humans experience and interact with on a day to day basis which is constantly changing and imperfect, as well as a spiritual realm which exists beyond the physical. Plato calls this "spiritual realm" the "realm of Forms" and asserts that the physical realm is only a "shadow" or "image" representing the true reality of Forms. The changes of the physical world include nearly every single aspect of it that we experience. From the world we live in; the changes of seasons, terrain and nature over time, to our individual senses; what we see, hear or taste, to the various objects which exist such as tables and chairs. The development of Plato's theory of Forms asserts that our thinking involves a level which does not come from experience since it does not allow us to achieve or see the absolute ideas or truth. He identifies our knowledge of ideas as someone he calls "reminiscence"; according to Plato, our immortal souls lose the clear recollection of ideas when born (or reborn) into human bodies. Thus, the famous quote 'I know that I know nothing' derived from Plato's account of his mentor Socrates is understood by Plato's theory as "I know I have forgotten".

Plato contends that whilst the physical representation of all things exist in a constant state of change, it is their Forms which represent the "essence" of our various experiences and the objects that we are able to discern. Without these Forms or essences, we would be unable to comprehend what an object truly is and this is what Plato means when he refers to in his use of terminology of "Forms" which are his representation of abstract, perfect and unchanging concepts or ideals which transcend time and space. A rather simple illustration of this concept could be taken from the field of geometry. Take any shape, for example a perfect triangle as defined by a mathematician, and attempt to recreate it. Our attempts may fall short; perhaps due to a line that is not perfectly straight, an angle that was not quite right and so on, but the attempt made by people to recreate Form can only be understood by others since they themselves hold the intelligibility of the Form of a triangle which exists as it remains a universal truth over time even if we, the observers, age and pass away. This concept of course, applies not only to geometry, for an object such as a table or a chair it could be said that there are countless different variations in the world and over time, and thus it is their "Form" and "essence" which encompass all of them.

Plato's theory of Forms is extremely difficult to comprehend and perhaps even more so when the issue of hypothetical Forms is brought into question. If, as he claims, there is a Form for everything that could possibly exist which is transcendent of space and time, a universal truth, must there exist a Form for any objects that do not yet exist? If it is true that there is a Form for everything that could ever come into existence then must that mean there is a Form for all things that we as humans will never think of or experience? Indeed, as we are limited in our civilization and existence, it must also be true that, at least for the human race, some Forms may never be realized and thus certain universal truths will continue to elude us. The complications that come with understanding this concept stems from the idea of considering physical objects in an abstract manner. According to this theory, there is no object that is a perfect representation of the idea that it represents and each object in the world is merely a flawed image of the perfect Forms that it attempts to represent. Since the Forms are the perfect versions of the corresponding objects in the physical realm, they are considered by Plato to be the most real things in all of existence.

Plato's theory of forms can be seen as a broad conception of philosophy which conveys his perception of reality and knowledge. It is commonly seen as a possible solution to the problem of universals which questions the existence of properties which two or more entities may hold in common and these assorted properties such as qualities and relations are summed up as universals. For example, three triangles will share certain common qualities of the shape such as internal angles, and a pair of biological siblings will share the common property of being the descendants of the same people. Whilst these properties may be, and are often, discussed, the debate over this problem arises over the question of whether these universals exist in reality, or simply in our thoughts. Taking a Platonic position using the theory of Forms, it is understood that true knowledge is transcendent of time and space and must be unfailing. As such knowledge of Forms would be "true" knowledge whilst it would be impossible to have knowledge of their physical imitations since the representations that we see in the physical world are subject to change. Since knowledge is unchanging, therefore we can at most hold opinions of the physical world and not true knowledge.

A simple example that could be raised is the color blue, and what it truly is. As we understand, it is often used in description of both water, and the sky. However, the color which we believe we often see when looking at either water or the sky is simply a characteristic of our human senses; our visual representation dependent on the wavelength of light that is reflected at the images presented before our eyes. Using Plato's perspective, the world that is sensible or realistic to us is imperfect and only partially real, like a shadow imitating the real world, the realm of spirits. Indeed, in Plato's own work "The Republic" he presents the Allegory of the Cave (514a–520a) which is also known as "Plato's Cave". In this story, the Cave is described as having a line of people chained within a cave for their entire lives facing a blank wall within and shadows are projected upon the wall using objects behind the people but also in front of a fire behind them. The people may look at the shadows of objects projected upon the wall and name them, however, having never truly seen those objects firsthand, they should have no way of knowing what they themselves are talking about. However, since the shadows are the reality for those prisoners, there is nothing more they could understand other than this false projection of reality.

Although the theory of Forms is often considered a possible answer to the problem of universals and provides much subject for reflection, it also holds its own issues or downfalls as attested by the "one over many" argument which remains unsolved and is noted by Plato himself in "Parmenides". This refers to the failure in evaluating the exact relation between the existence

of the true Form suggested by Plato and its many possible representations. The issues raised by the problem of “one over many” is two-fold; first from an ontological one and the second, a linguistic one.

In part of his dialogue of Parmenides, Plato attempts to explain the relationship between the forms and their representations in the physical world through the use of his participation metaphor which states that for example an object is beautiful because it participates in the Form of Beauty. However this raises the question of what is meant by “participation” in this case. This then leads to certain absurdities brought about by the combination of the theory of Forms and what is known as “the Pie Model” which is used to attempt to explain the relationship between a Form and its partaking relation in which the participants of a Form literally get a share of the Forms of which they partake, in a way that is similar to how those who partake in a pie literally get a share of that pie.

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