

Plato Notes
LART602
Prof. Oakes
Winthrop University

Class #5, 2/13/12

Readings:

Plato: *Republic*, Book V.473b-480a, Book VI.504d-VII.535a, Book VIII.545c-547c¹ [*RAGP* 507-514, 534-560, 569-571]

Plato: *Parmenides*, 130a-132b² [*RAGP* 645-647] – *recommended*

Burkert: “Philosophical Religion” pp. 321-329, 332-337

Classical Greek Sculpture³

In General

- The *Republic* is one of Plato’s greatest works and one of the Western world’s great intellectual and artistic achievements.
- The title is a translation of πολιτεία (*politeia*), which means (literally) “political nature” or (more loosely) how to live as persons. Translation to ‘Republic’ is owing to Cicero and regrettable.
- The topics discussed in *Republic* include political theory, ethical theory, metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, and aesthetics.
- The principal topic is *justice*: what is justice, and how might it be possible for humans to be just? Plato’s general answer is twofold: justice involves a certain organization of the “soul”, but complete justice requires living also in a just society, where the just society has a similar organization.
- Plato’s concept of justice (*dikaiosyne*) is a broad one. It is a kind of super-virtue, subsuming the other moral virtues, and may be construed as interchangeable with our concept of moral goodness or rightness (cf. “righteousness”; cf. Socrates’ notion of wisdom).
- Some context: as we have seen, Plato lived in a turbulent time. Athens had endured 30 years of war with its neighbors; Plato’s family was involved in a coup, resulting in rule by “the 30 tyrants,” whose government was brutal if short-lived. Plato’s own forays into politics were themselves short-lived and unfortunate. Treachery and political disorder were all too familiar to him. His interest in the possibility of personal justice and a politically just society was thus personal and acute.

Plato’s metaphysics and epistemology

Overview

- Plato’s overall question is whether it is prudent to be just (367e), and having raised the question of the feasibility of the *kallipolis*, which is essential to its providing an accurate model of justice, he asserts that the just city must be ruled by philosophers (473c-d). He sets out to demonstrate this point by arguing that only philosophers can have the

knowledge necessary to rule properly, because only they can have access to truth (474b-480a). The wisdom of the philosopher must be explicitly connected by Plato with virtue – i.e., knowledge of how to live well – which leads Plato to further discussion of the education of the philosophers, beginning in book VI and continuing through book VII. Completion of the education of the philosophers constitutes the completion of the composition of the *kallipolis*, its “third city”. At this point, finally, Plato can return to address specifically the question whether it is prudent for the individual person to be just (books VIII-IX).

- The account of knowledge and reality advanced in books V-VII can of course be considered in its own right. Its role within the larger argument of the *Republic* is to demonstrate the unique access that philosophers have to truth.

Metaphysics and Epistemology in General

- Plato is impressed with the human capacity for rational understanding, though he believes that many of us settle for what he calls mere opinion.
- Plato believes that the rational intellect is capable of knowledge of reality, while the senses fail to present any coherent or “knowable” representation of reality. In fact, Plato believes that the objects of knowledge – i.e., those things grasped by reason – are distinct from the objects of sense. Plato therefore subscribes to a *dualism* about reality: one “realm” consists in the changing and unknowable physical world; the other consists in unchanging, eternal, insensible, ideal forms. (For a further account of the relationship between the material and ideal worlds, see Plato’s *Timaeus*, 29e and following.)
- Since Plato maintains that the knowable is identical with the real, and since he thinks that only the eternal, unchanging idea (or form) is knowable, reality is thus for Plato also *ideal*. This makes Plato an *idealist*, a philosopher subscribing to *idealism*. Idealism is the doctrine according to which reality consists in non-material, ideal beings. It is difficult to say much about the ideal, beyond the above. It is knowable, graspable by intellect or reason, and eternal. Other characterizations are negative: the ideal is unchanging, insensible. Plato’s idealism also makes use of the second sense of the term ‘ideal’, which means “perfect” or “best”. For him, ultimate reality consists in perfect “Forms” which define all other things. Because Plato is also a dualist, his idealism is limited and perhaps conflicted. If there is a material realm, which he seems to accept, this would seem to suggest that not all real things are ideal. On the other hand, if only the ideal is knowable, then the material is not only unknowable, but there is nothing that we can say about it that is, strictly speaking, true. This connects Plato with Parmenides. Like Parmenides, Plato thinks that the changing, sensible world is in some sense false or misleading, an appearance. This, in turn, raises questions about Plato’s dualist credentials. In any case, idealism and dualism together set the terms for our understanding of, and debate about, Plato’s view of knowledge and reality.

Some Key Passages

- 476a: Many things are beautiful, but none of them is beauty per se. Similarly for justice, the good, and “all the forms.” Each “appears to be many” but is “one”.
- 476b: Strictly speaking, beauty is not open to sense. The “beautiful itself” is something found in material things, but not to be mistaken for the sensible per se: various sounds, colors, etc., are beautiful, but none of them is beauty per se.
- 476b-c: Most people (the “lovers of sights and sounds”) fail to recognize the distinction between the sensible and these forms, thinking that beauty and the sensible are the same

thing, and are thus unable to formulate an understanding of beauty itself. (See also, in this connection, the accounts of love offered in Plato's *Symposium*.)

- 478c-479c: Ignorance is “set over” what is not; knowledge is set over “what is” and opinion is set over something intermediary – that which both is and is not – which turns out to be the sensible.
- 505a-506a: The form of the good is the most valuable possible object of knowledge; knowledge of it is essential for the guardians to rule properly.
- 507b: The forms are not sensible, but rather are intelligible; while the sensible per se is not intelligible. The forms are “the being” of those things instantiating them: beauty itself is the essence of beautiful things.
- 508a-509b: The sun analogy: Plato likens the form of the Good to sunlight: just as the sun produces the light making the visible seen by the eye, the Good produces an intellectual “light” making known the knowable to the mind.
- 509d-511e: The Line: Here, Plato distinguishes two general “realms” along with four mental states and their epistemic content. In the visible realm, visible objects produce in us either images or beliefs about those visible things. In the intelligible, we may have thoughts about the formal qualities of the visible, or understanding of the ultimate principles defining those formal qualities. The latter is the object of “dialectics”, the former, mere (“so-called”) “science”.
- 514a-519a: The Cave allegory: ordinary sense perception occurs at two removes from true understanding, and is possible in virtue only of a “light” itself at a remove from “true light”. (See table, below.)
- 523bc, 524d: “Summoners”: These are experiences enabling the mind to move beyond appearance to the formal reality behind it. For example, numbers call attention to themselves as “one” giving form to many. Compare “finger”, which does not (Plato says).
- 529d: Geometrical figures are grasped by reason, not sense.
- 532a: It is through reason, by means of dialectical argument, that we approach and grasp truth. The end of all intellection is The Good.
- 534a: Being is to becoming as intellect is to opinion, and knowledge is to belief as thought is to imaging.

In other words:

- When we perceive a triangle, the intellect (reason) judges certain objects presented in sense as being arranged in a triangular fashion. This “triangularity” is not, strictly speaking, open to sense. Rather, by reference to an ideal triangle, the mind determines that certain shapes and colors closely resemble that Form.
- Let us distinguish, then, between “big-F” Forms and “little-f” forms: the Form of *triangle* defines the nature and essence of triangularity. This Form is open to the intellect. Instances of triangles found in the world “participate” (476c) in the Form of *triangle*, so that we have triangular (small-f) forms found in the arrangements of the material world.
- Thus, material objects have (small-b) beauty insofar as they participate in the (big-F) Form of (big-B) Beauty. Or, alternatively, various (small-f) forms of beauty exist; we recognize these by comparing them, mentally, with the (big-F) Form of Beauty.
- Sense presents us with sights, sounds, tastes, etc. It is the rational mind that understands these things in abstract, non-sensible terms. We don't literally *see* a triangle when we see clay arranged into a triangle. Rather, we see something that the mind judges to be a (small-t) triangle.

- Note that what a triangle is (i.e., an instance of Triangle) never changes: (small-t) triangles are and must be (big-T) Triangular.
- What *does* change is the material stuff of the world, which is now triangular and then circular, depending on the course of events.

The Material World

- The material world has an ambiguous status, as described by Plato. On the one hand, it is unstable, continually changing, presenting itself in images which are not strictly knowable. On the other hand, it “participates” in Forms, and to that extent is knowable by the intellect.
- Plato, evidently, believes that the material world approximates the world of Forms by arranging itself, occasionally, into (little-f) forms: triangles, beautiful things, acts of justice, etc. Such “participation” in the forms tends to be imperfect, however – never an exact triangle or perfectly beautiful object.
- Knowledge of the material world is vexed because the material is not, strictly speaking, open to intellect. It is sensible, and the images etc. presented in sense are then judged to instantiate forms. But, as above, this is not to know the material per se, but to know the formal that it resembles.

Opinion, Knowledge, and Ignorance

- Knowledge is of forms and of Forms. Since the forms and Forms are unchanging, knowledge is of “what is”.
- Opinion (or “belief”) is a mental state produced by experience of sights, sounds, etc., without benefit of knowledge of the forms. As such, it tends to be superficial and unstable. Note again that the sensible is not strictly knowable by intellect. The intellect can grasp the forms, but not items of sense per se. Thus, while we may recognize sights and sounds, resulting “opinion” doesn’t constitute knowledge in any robust sense.
- Ignorance is a degenerate state, as represented by Plato – set over “that which is not” as perhaps befits the opposite of knowledge. (It sounds rather more like error, however, strictly speaking, since to believe falsely is to have a belief about a state that fails to obtain.)

Levels of Knowing and Truth in Plato’s Cave

- I. Mere appearance: no representation/reality distinction drawn; unquestioning, unexamined thought; characteristic of the uneducated masses; “seeing is believing”, “you are as you appear to me”
- II. Appearance/Reality distinction drawn. This is the beginning of ascent from ignorance to knowledge.
- III. Contemplation of reality, truth, by class or kind
- IV. Possible unity within kinds or classes of truth, reality. (What is the Real, such that all real things share in it?)

Level	Allegory Element	Epistemological Status	Ontological Status	I.e.
0.	prisoner understanding	at best, “mere opinion”	(a mental state)	common belief
I.	shadows on the cave wall	mere appearance of reality	third-order: presentations in	images; sights, sounds, tastes,

			sense to us of second-order reality	etc., e.g., colors of a sunset
II.	the puppets	immediate source of mere appearance of reality	second-order: artificial (material) models of reality	physical objects and processes, e.g., an instance of beauty
	firelight	artificial vehicle of knowledge	(source of artificial reality)	mathematics, science
III.	extra-cave objects	proper objects of knowledge	first-order: actual reality	Ideal, immaterial, eternal, immutable; Plato's "Forms", e.g., the Form of Beauty per se
IV.	sunlight	<i>logos?</i> (that which makes reality open to intellectual grasp)	?	?
V.	the sun	<i>logos?</i> (the source of that which makes reality intelligible)	being per se; alternatively, the good*	(whatever defines the forms?)

The Good

- Plato believes that an ur-Form gives reality to all others.
- Perhaps he has in mind something like the following: when we identify the nature of a horse, for example, we refer not to any particular horse, but to an ideal horse – horses “as they should be” or as they ideally would be or, in other words, to a “good” horse. A good horse will be able to do what horses are supposed to do. Similarly for geometrical shapes – we define instances by reference to a perfected ideal.
- Thus, the Good gives definition to the other Forms. In this sense, perhaps, it constitutes an intellectual “light” which reveals true nature to us. This is the substance of the Sun Analogy.

Some Political Philosophy

Constitutions and Persons

* In the Cave allegory, the sun seems to represent the source or essence of being. In the Sun analogy, the sun is said to represent the Good, which is “other and more beautiful than” knowledge and truth. Part of the problem, here, is the ambiguity of ‘truth’, which can mean both the quality of a true proposition, or the reality itself referred to by such a proposition. Similarly, Plato in the Sun analogy asserts that the Good is “not being” and “superior to it in rank and power”. See 508e-509b and 516a-c.

- At 368d-e, Socrates asserts that justice is the same thing in both city and man. This claim is established at 441d, when we find that justice is the same structural feature in both. Similarly for the other chief virtues, courage, wisdom, and moderation.
- The *Kallipolis* is established as the best possible city at 427d-e: it is “completely good” (despite any theoretical flaws in its description – 472b), and its goodness is a function of its justice – 433b-c.
- Similarly, the just person is the best possible human – justice is “a kind of health, fine condition, and well-being of the soul” (444d), though such persons are rare (503b) and indeed likely possible only given the ideal conditions of a *Kallipolis* (497b-c).
- At 445c-d, we see Plato identify five kinds of soul and five corresponding kinds of political constitution. The best of these is the just person or just city. The just city will be a “kingship” if ruled by a single wise person, and an “aristocracy” if ruled by several. The wise, of course, will attend to truth (475b-476a), disdaining pleasure and honor (485d-e), and valuing the well-being of the city above all things (540d-e; cf. 412d, 414e). Having shown (as above) the merit of the best type, Plato proceeds to consider the lesser four.

Decline of the *Kallipolis*

- The four types of lesser city are the timocracy, the oligarchy, the democracy, and the tyranny. The four types of lesser person are the timocrat, the oligarch, the democrat, and the tyrant. Structurally, person and city will be similar. Further, the nature of the city will be a reflection of its rulers – e.g., the qualities of a timocracy will be a function of its timocratic rulers. Note the close relationship, for Plato, between the nature of the citizen and the state in which s/he lives.
- The timocrat is ruled by his/her spirited part. The oligarch is a person ruled by his/her *necessary appetites*. Democratic persons are ruled by the *unnecessary appetites*. And a tyrannical person is one ruled by *lawless and unnecessary appetites*.
 - o The necessary appetites are for the primary requirements of life: food, shelter, and material wealth generally. Souls thus ruled (oligarchs) tend to be miserly (554a), philistine, and callous (554c). The suppression of unnecessary appetites entails a latent propensity for licentiousness, which occasions internal conflict (554d). (Note that the necessary appetites do include the desires for “delicacies”, to the extent that these are beneficial. 559b)
 - o The unnecessary appetites are those whose satisfaction is either unbeneficial or harmful to continued life (559b). Presumably, these include luxuries, intoxicants, sexual excess, etc. Souls thus ruled (democrats) are ignorant (560b), incorrigible (560c), immoderate (560d), shameless (560d-e), and inconstant (561c-d). They experience inner conflict with the necessary desires which they tend to neglect (550e). Such persons chafe at rule and order (563d).
 - o The lawless unnecessary appetites are those ordinarily repressed in civilized society, visiting us only in dreams (571c). These include savagery, incest, bestiality, murder, and other unnatural acts (571c-d). Plato suggests that “a powerful erotic love”, unchecked, is responsible for these desires (572e).
- The several kinds of city (“constitutions”) devolve by means of political change owing to the characters of their leaders. The characters of the leaders are themselves influenced by political change, by having been raised in the households of imperfect leaders, and originally by the imperfect mixture of their souls.
 - o The first motion away from the *Kallipolis* is occasioned by “mixing” of the soul types, which results from imperfect eugenics (546c-e). This imperfection itself

results from the inability of even Philosopher-Kings to recognize the (small-f) form of human perfection: they may recognize its (big-F) Form; but there is an inevitable disparity between that and its material instantiation (546a-b). That is, it is only by sense perception that the Philosopher-Kings can implement their knowledge of the ideal human Form. But because the senses present an inevitably imperfect representation of reality, this effort is bound to go wrong.

- Civil conflict will result from an ill-bred ruling class (547a), which will lead to private property held by rulers (547b), which will lead to timocracy, to oligarchy, democracy, and finally to tyranny.
- The key point in the subsequent changes appears to be the “mixture” of desires found in the various character types. E.g., the timocrat tends to become a money-lover because s/he “isn’t pure in his [/her] attitude to virtue” (549b). I.e., the timocrat isn’t simply one whose soul is governed by the spirited part, but one whose soul is governed by a mixture of spirit and appetite (i.e., necessary appetite, in this case). See also the psychology of the children of each type, below.
- Plato seems to see a linear regression, with the given individual a result of “pulls” from above and below on the scale of quality desires. Thus, the son of the deteriorating aristocrat is swayed by what is left of his father’s rational part, on the one hand, and by spirited and appetitive forces around him (e.g., his mother who wishes revenge for the father’s political failure). See 549c-550b. The son “settles in the middle and surrenders the rule over himself to the middle part – the victory-loving and spirited part – and becomes a proud and honor-loving man” (550b).
- In other words, the mixture in one’s soul makes one vulnerable to vices born of one’s lowest desire. The timocratic are vulnerable to necessary appetite; the oligarchic, who are defined by necessary desire, are vulnerable to unnecessary desire (licentiousness); and those governed by unnecessary desire – the democratic – are vulnerable to becoming lawless – i.e., tyrannical. It appears that the trend is downwards since the external conditions in which the individual finds him/herself are not ideal.

¹ Plato’s *Republic* may be found here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0168>

² Plato’s *Parmenides* may be found here:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0174%3Atext%3DParm.%3Apage%3D130>

³ For some representative images, see here:

http://faculty.winthrop.edu/oakesm/LART602/Classical_Sculpture.html