

## Plato III

PHIL301

Knowledge and Reality

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### 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*, whose nature is essential to the model of justice, he asserts that the just city must be ruled by philosophers (473c-d; 484b-e). 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 *Republic*

- 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 appears therefore to subscribe 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 this. 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 a 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, as above, we also find dualist tendencies in Plato's thought, 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

- 474b-480a: Plato's argument that only philosophers can know truth
  - o 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".
  - o 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.
  - o 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*.)
  - o 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.
  - o See also 519b: the uneducated are unfit to rule.
- 505a-509c: Plato's discussion of the Good
  - o 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.
  - o 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.
  - o 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.
  - o See also 517b for a compact account of the form of the Good.
- 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.)
- 521c-534e: The education of the philosopher-kings: this discussion brings together the theory of forms with Plato's assertion that only the philosopher-kings will be fit to rule.
  - o 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).
  - o 529d: Geometrical figures are grasped by reason, not sense.
  - o 532a: It is through reason, by means of dialectical argument, that we approach and grasp truth. The end of all intellection is The Good.
  - o 534a: Being is to becoming as intellect is to opinion, and knowledge is to belief as thought is to imaging.

### The Theory of Forms

- We may state the theory by reference to *being* and *becoming*:
  - o *Being* consists in ideal "forms" which are (a) abstract, eternal, unchanging and (b) grasped by the intellect (reason) alone. Being can be *known* since it is *true*.
  - o *Becoming* is an intermediate condition between being (what is) and nothingness (what is not). It is (a) open to sensation; opinable, and (b) it "participates" in the forms.

- Illustration:
  - o 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.
  - o 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.
  - o 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.
  - o 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.
  - o Note that what a triangle is (i.e., an instance of Triangle) never changes: (small-t) triangles are and must be (big-T) Triangular.
  - o 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 sense to us of second-order reality	images; sights, sounds, tastes, 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 <sup>1</sup>	(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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.