

Plato I

PHIL410

Context

- Plato is interested in the same epistemological and metaphysical questions as are we. What is knowledge? What is reality? What can we know? How do we explain what we do know? Etc.
- Plato is influenced by Socrates, Parmenides, and Heraclitus, among others. We see this influence in (a) his conviction that morality lies at the center of reality; (b) his representation of ultimate reality as perfect, complete, eternal, unchanging, (perhaps, ultimately, via the Good) single, and thus the (only) proper object of knowledge; and (c) his representation of empirical reality as continually changing (and, thus, not a proper object of knowledge).
- Like the Moderns, Plato is impressed by the fact of *a priori* knowledge and seeks an account of its relation to empirical reality. His theory of Forms is intended to explain *a priori* knowledge and to establish its relation to the empirical.

Theory of Forms

- Properties of Forms (see e.g. *Phaedo* 80b)
 - o Eternal (79d), Immutable (78c10-d9), Divine (80a3, b1), Immaterial (i.e., abstract, non-physical, not present in “this world”), Perfect (i.e., complete, i.e., unqualifiedly what their instances are only imperfectly – 75b)
 - o Intelligible, Imperceptible, Mind-Independent (79a)
 - o The Source and Essence of Being (reality) (65d, 100c)
 - o Good: The Form of the Good determines the forms of all other Forms. See *Republic* 508a-509b.
 - ♣ Thus: what makes a horse a horse? A good horse will exemplify the Form of horse. To the extent that a horse is a poor horse, it falls away from that Form.
- One and Many
 - o It is in virtue of “participating in” or “sharing” a form that any given thing has any given property (but see below). The beautiful is beautiful only insofar as it participates in the form, *beauty*. (*Republic* 476b, e.g.)
 - o Thus, the forms explain *likeness* or *similarity*: two things are alike insofar as they both instantiate (share) the same form.
- Which forms are there? (see e.g. *Parmenides* 130a-e)
 - o This is a controversial matter, about which Plato seems to have himself puzzled.
 - o Forms *par excellence* include axiological properties such as *Justice*, *Piety*, and *Beauty*.
 - o Also commonly admitted are natural kinds such as *humans* and *horses*; natural stuffs such as *fire* and the *cold*.
 - o Logical and mathematical Forms are sometimes mentioned: the *equal*, the *one*, the *two*, the *large*, the *small*, the *triangular*.

- “Undignified” things such as *mud*, *dirt*, and *hair* Socrates (in *Parmenides*) wishes to resist.
- Possibly, Plato’s original adherence to a limited number of (especially axiological) forms gave way to broader acceptance of all properties and kinds being expressions of forms. This would amount to a strong form of Rationalism:
 - ♣ All properties are, in fact, instances of some form.
 - ♣ Forms are intelligible only, not sensible.
 - ♣ Thus, a thing’s appearing red will be the illusory appearance of something that is, after all, an intellectually-accessible reality, only.
- For some confirmation, see *Phaedo*, 101c.
- Argument from Deficiency (*Phaedo* 74-76)
 1. In judging whether two things are alike (equal) in some respect, we employ the concept of *equal*.
 2. No two things are in fact perfectly alike (cf. 74b); the equality of two like things is not *equality* per se; instances of equality are “deficient” with respect to equality per se.
 3. Consequently, the concept *equal* cannot be derived from experience (i.e., by abstraction).
 - Plato goes on to suggest that such concepts must be *recollected* by us and present in us from before birth. We needn’t follow Plato here, since it is equally possible that such concepts are part of our mental make-up.
 - However, Plato explains our knowledge of such concepts by reference to Forms. We have intellectual access to Forms, whether from before birth or in the present. It is by intellectual reference to the form of the *equal* that we judge the in/equality of things. (Cf. 65e-66a)
 - The details of this account may prove problematic for Plato. We shall return to this point.

Dual Realms

- Plato postulates the existence of two realms, the realm of Forms, the realm of bodies.
- The realm of Forms is stable, unchanging, etc. as are the Forms themselves. This is the realm open to intellection. This is also known as the realm of *being* per se. (See *Republic* 510-535.)
- The realm of bodies is in perpetual change – aka, *becoming*. This is the realm of sense perception.
- We might wonder why the world of sense is imperfect and changing if its contents exist only insofar as they instantiate Forms.
- Note, however, that the realm of bodies is midway between the realm of pure being and its opposite, nothingness. The material world is unstable, ontologically, inasmuch as it participates in both being and non-being. This account, however, is not incoherent, in Plato’s view.

- Simmias is taller than Socrates but shorter than Phaedo. (102b-3) That is, Simmias is both tall and short. This is not logically impossible, since his tallness is relative to Socrates and his shortness is relative to Phaedo.
- Note that Simmias is distinct from these properties, themselves. From Plato's point of view, this makes him, like all bodies, something of a mess. He instantiates innumerable properties, making him "be" tall, short, pale, etc., as well as making him not-short, not-tall, not-dark, etc. These properties, furthermore, change continually. Now he is pale; now he is dark.
- In sense perception, we see the world only unclearly. (65a-c) Plato is not precise on this matter, but presumably he means something like the following:

The Forms and Knowledge

- As above, access to the forms is via intellect (reason), only. (See 65a-d)
 - E.g., beauty, per se, is not visible. Only the colors, shapes, etc. making up a scene are visible. (476b)
 - As in Descartes, Plato maintains that the intellect judges the presence of something not present to sense.
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- Soul = Intellect; only the soul/intellect can know Truth. (65a-c)
- Forms are Pure; Particular instances of them, impure or deficient. (65d)
- Certain forms (concepts? e.g., the Equal) precede experience. (76a)
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