

## Plato II

PHIL410

### The epistemological value of Forms

- Plato's forms serve a remarkable dual purpose: they are ontologically primary, meaning that all being is or derives from them; and they are both epistemically transparent and epistemically accessible, meaning that their nature is completely and perfectly revealed to us (when, that is, we come to know them).
- That is, Plato's forms – if real – solve the epistemological problems of the moderns by (a) giving reality exactly the same form we represent it, conceptually, to have, and (b) providing us direct intellectual access to that reality. (It isn't clear just how this last works; see below.)
  - o Compare Kant, who maintains that ultimate reality is *not* how we represent the world to be, and to which we can have no direct access, intellectual or otherwise. (Note that Kant reverses Plato's schedule of in/direct access to reality: intuition is direct representation of reality; conception is indirect representation, insofar as it represents intuition.)
  - o Compare Descartes, who maintains that ultimate reality *is* how we represent it to be, but who cannot explain how we can come to know it. (Observe, too, the similarity with his fellow rationalist: it is the rational mind that determines (primary) truth, as in the ball of wax, case. Note, further, Descartes's account of the role of sense: to indicate the health of the body, only.)
  - o Compare Hume, who maintains that ultimate reality *could be* how we represent it to be, if only we could get the (metaphysical) ideas into our heads.

### Plato's account of Empirical Knowledge

- Plato believes that empirical knowledge involves the use of a host of *a priori* concepts.
- In the *Phaedo*, we see developed the view that sense perception involves "recollection" of concepts present since before birth.
  - o 73c: determinate sense perception requires "recollection" of a Form.
  - o 74b: knowledge of the Equal, e.g., is occasioned by seeing the equal.
  - o 74d: the equal are deficient with respect to the Equal.
  - o 74d-e: in order to judge a form deficient with respect to a Form, we must have *a priori* knowledge of that Form.
  - o 74e: we judge the equal inferior to the Equal.
  - o 74e: hence, we have prior knowledge of the Equal.
  - o And similarly for all forms with respect to Forms.
- Big- and little-f forms:
  - o The Forms (big-F) are the single, ultimate reals that are the essence and ground of being.

- The forms (little-f) are the many, derivative reals that exist by participating in the (big-F) Forms. These forms, evidently, are present in the spatiotemporal world in which we live. Indeed, each of us is a form – our souls are identified by Plato as forms (though he doesn't say much about any correlative big-F Form, the Soul) – and our bodies, too, presumably, instantiate the Form of Human Body.
- Note, too, that (little-f) forms are *inferior* to the (big-F) Forms. In what respect, exactly? Possibly, this is a confusion on Plato's part: he confuses forms (little-f) with sense objects, the latter being inferior appearances of forms. Or perhaps he means that the equality, e.g., I judge holding between earthly forms can never be the Perfect Equality of the Equal. If I judge two horses equal in respect of being horses (i.e., in respect of participating in Horse), presumably, since neither is a horse (i.e., Horse), the two are likely to differ, so that they are not, in fact, exactly equal (alike).
- Sense appearances: objects of sense change (79a, 477ab, 534a), and are not to be confused with (little-f) forms. What one *sees*, per se, is not a (little-h) horse; forms, like the Forms, are open only to intellection (65a, 477ab, 534a). Rather, we see an appearance of the form – this is how a (little-h) horse appears to beings with eyes like ours, presumably.
  - Note, too, that appearances admit of opposites (479ab): one and the same horse can appear to one as beautiful and another as unbeautiful. Moreover, these forms admit of relative designations – big, small, light, heavy, relative to different things.
- Plato, then, has *five* terms to organize in his account of empirical knowledge: sensible appearance, form, and Form.
  - In sense perception, a non-discursive (*alogos*) presentation appears to sense; this is judged, intellectually, to be an instance of a (little-f) form. We make this judgment by reference to a (big-F) Form – i.e., we identify the forms by intellectual reference to the Forms. Evidently, it is the latter that we “possess” *a priori*, since it is by reference to it that we identify the deficient form as such.
  - That means that there are big-F Forms both outside this world and in my head (somehow), and little-f forms both in spacetime and in my head; plus the sensible appearance of little-f forms, which (presumably) occurs only in my head.

Evaluating this account: some pointed questions

- If the forms are unchanging, why is there change in the “material” world?
- Why are instances of Forms themselves imperfect?
- Why are instances of Forms material instead of immaterial?
- If the material world is distinct from the Formal, how can it exist at all?

- Like the Moderns, Plato distinguishes sense from intellect, and judges intellect the faculty of true understanding. The role of sense is less clear.
- Like Descartes, Plato believes that sense perception reveals only imperfectly what the mind judges with greater precision. (See *Phaedo* 65c-d, *Republic* 477a-b.) Thus, while sight may reveal to me a horse, it is the intellectual understanding of that thing as a horse that tells me what that thing is. (What my concept of horse entails, which is not itself a product of sense, is a question that Plato does not take up. Perhaps, like Descartes, he would reduce the horse's body to a complex geometrical form, its motion to mechanics. Note, however, that the geometrical per se is not purely intellectual if Kant is right.)
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- For Plato, the Empirical world is something of a perdition.
- For Plato, the Empirical World is the world of *becoming*. This is the world of change, in which things both are and are not.
  - o Empirical objects *are* insofar as they participate in some form. E.g., a horse *is* insofar as it instantiates the form of a horse. (The form *horse* is ALL a horse can be. It is the completion or perfection of horse-hood.)
  - o Empirical objects *are not* in two respects, evidently: insofar as they are *deficient* copies of the forms they instantiate; and insofar as they are subject to change. (These two may or may not amount to the same thing.)
- The empirical world is also defective in this respect: it is the world conveyed to us in sense. Sense information