

Plato III
PHIL410

From last time (with some modifications)

- 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.
 - o Note, too, that appearances admit of opposites (479ab): one and the same horse can appear to one as beautiful and to another as unbeautiful. Moreover, these forms admit of relative designations – big, small, light, heavy, relative to different things.
- It will be useful to distinguish, as does Plato, “particulars” from (small-f) forms. (78d-79a)
 - o The beautiful particulars are not the same things as the instances of Beauty (i.e., beauty in various places) that they instantiate. (Compare the distinction drawn between Simias and his qualities at 102bc.)
 - o It is these things that Plato calls the objects of sense (visible, touchable, etc.); and these things that continually change.
 - o And so Plato allows that the particulars and the forms (and Forms) constitute “two kinds of existences”: the sensible, changeable particulars and the insensible, immutable, intellectable forms (and Forms). (One wonders whether Plato regards the sensible, changeable particulars as intellectable, themselves. Presumably not, since that would make them forms. More on this, below.)
- Plato, then, has *six* terms to organize in his account of empirical knowledge: sensible appearance, sensed particular, form, Form, and knowledge of forms and Forms. (Please note corrections, here, to my previous account.)
 - o In sense perception, a non-discursive (*alogos*) appearance is presented by some changing, sensible particular; this is judged, intellectually, to be some (little-f) form (or forms, if complex). We make this judgment by reference to a (big-F) Form – i.e., we identify the forms by intellectual reference to the Forms. Evidently, we possess knowledge of the latter *a priori*, since it is by reference to this knowledge that we identify the deficient form as such.
 - o That means that there are big-F Forms outside this world known to me *a priori*, and that little-f forms occur in spacetime which I come to know via sense perception; plus the sensible appearance of little-f forms, which (presumably) occurs only in my head; plus the sensible particular, found outside my head.

Problems for this account

- A number of difficulties beset Plato’s account of empirical knowledge.

- First, there is this metaphysical concern: the representation of the Forms as primary and ultimate realities appears incompatible with Plato's dualism.
 - o Plato maintains that only the intellect grasps truth, and that this truth consists in the reality of the Forms. The Forms are "what is", etc. By contrast, the senses are "deceptive" (*Phaedo* 65c) and give rise to "opinion" which is "set over" that which is and is not (*Republic* 479a-c).
 - o And he distinguishes "particulars" from the forms they bear, saying that these are two, different kinds of "existences". (See *Phaedo* 78d-79a, *Republic* 476ab.)
 - o Clearly, where there is only one true reality, A, there cannot be two kinds of thing, A and B, if A and B are wholly unlike each other. But this seems to be Plato's position with respect to Forms and sensible particulars.
- Second, we have this epistemological concern: if there are forms for all intelligible things, then it would seem that a good many of them will have only "sensible content", which is a-rational (*alogos*). But an a-rational form is a contradiction in terms.
 - o E.g., consider the color white. Whiteness is a sensible quality. In order to understand that I see white, I must employ the form of White, by comparison with which, this particular instance of the form white is known by me. Arguably, the "form" of white has no more content, intellectually, than a "mark" for the sensible quality of white. That is, the content of the form of white is intellectualization (conceptualization) of a purely phenomenal (sensible) quality. But this phenomenal quality is positively a-rational: it has no intellectual significance. Consequently, it cannot be intellectualized or conceptualized. Consequently, there can be no Form of white.
- Third, there is the problem of intellectual access to the Forms. This must go unexplained, since Plato cannot hope to detail access to something unavailable in sense.

Potential Responses

- Dualism problem
 - o The *Timaeus* account: the universe consists in two realms, the Forms and a spatiotemporal region. The spatiotemporal region has been brought into closest possible conformity with the Forms by a rational, benevolent deity. (*Timaeus* 29e-30c)
 - o Problems with this view: it's *ad hoc*, arbitrary, and gives up ontological priority of the Forms. On the other hand, it isn't clear that Plato intends the *Timeaus* as literal truth (*logos*) or rather as myth.
 - o The Sensible as Illusion response: Sensible particulars are illusions, not "really real".
 - o Problems with this view: requires giving up (well, perhaps simply re-interpreting) 79a; creates a new problem: how can an illusion exist if all that is is real?
 - o In Plato's defense, we should say that the rationalist account of perception is attractive, and that he cannot be faulted for the nature of sensation. On the other hand, if his account of perception entails that the sensory is unreal, it is incumbent upon him to explain what that might mean.

- Forms of sensibles problem
 - Perhaps the best move for Plato to make is to restrict the class of Forms to include only those “noble” ones such as Beauty, Justice, the Equal, etc., which do not have any particular sensible content. This, after all, is the likely inspiration for the theory, deriving from Socrates.
 - It is not clear, however, that Plato can keep to this view, as he seems to employ the logic of universals and particulars to explain the nature of Forms and their relationship to empirical reality. That is, if, in order to explain the Forms, Plato must acknowledge the general logic of *a* is *P* in virtue of *P*'s being a form, then if it is true that snow is white (or cold?), e.g., it is difficult to see how he can avoid the problem.
 - It must be admitted that Plato's account of which things are forms is unclear and may have no uniform answer.
- Access problem
 - As an idealist, we may grant Plato the mind's access to the Forms. That is, if ultimate reality is ideal, and if the mind is in some sense itself ideal or an instrument of the ideal, then it should not be surprising if the mind has “access” to ideal objects.
 - As above, there seems to me a tension between Plato's idealism, however, and his account of material reality. If the material world has the “confusing” power over the soul described in *Phaedo*, it is hard to see how reality can be wholly ideal.

Timaeus 29d-30c:

... Now why did he who framed this whole universe of becoming frame it? Let us state the reason why: He was good, and one who is good can never become envious of anything. And so, being free of envy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible. In fact, men of wisdom will tell you (and you couldn't do better than to accept their claim) that this, more than anything else, was the most preeminent reason for the origin of the world's coming into being. The god wanted everything to be good and nothing to be bad so far as that was possible, and so he took over all that was visible – not at rest but in discordant and disorderly motion – and brought it from a state of disorder to one of order, because he believed that order was in every way a better than disorder. Now it wasn't permitted (nor it is now) that one who is supremely good should do anything but what is best. Accordingly, the god reasoned and concluded that in the realm of things naturally visible no unintelligent thing could as a whole be better than anything which does possess intelligence as a whole, and he further concluded that it is impossible for anything to come to possess intelligence apart from soul. Guided by this reasoning, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, and so he constructed the universe. He wanted to produce a piece of work that would be as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow. This, then, in keeping with our likely account, is how we must say divine providence brought our world into being as a truly living being, endowed with soul and intelligence.