

## Lecture 5.1: Plato's Theory of Forms

Rorty UCSC 2008

In my various mythical accounts of what Plato was doing in his travel from the agora to the academy, I suggested that not only was he haunted by the fate of a just man in an unjust society—he was also intrigued by Socrates' quest, and convinced that we did know some things, could know more, better.

If you believe that, you need to inquire into

The nature of the knower

The nature of the known

And the nature of the relation between the two: In short, psychology, ontology or metaphysics, and epistemology.

We talked about the myth/model he presented in response to the fate of just man in unjust society—his utopian society, which we sketched in our survey of Books I-V of the Republic last Thursday. Today we will look at a continuation of his depiction in the early dialogues of Socrates' search for definitions.

Thursday I listed for you the passages in the dialogues we have already read that are invoked in an attempt to understand Plato's epistemology and metaphysics:

Euthyphro 5d

X is the same whenever it occurs

has the same character

retains its identity

6e

X is characteristics of all x actions

can be used as a standard to judge whether actions are x

11e

asks what the 'essential character' of x is

Meno

72c

What is the character in respect of which all x don't differ,  
but are all the same?—

one quality to cover all instances?

a reason why we call these many particulars by one and the same  
name?

examples: bees (all members of same species)

color

shape

Phaedo

65d

There is such a thing as absolute x

It is the essence or real being of everything

It is apprehended by the intellect (not the senses)

74b

we believe in the existence of equality—not the equality of pieces  
of wood or stone, but equality in the abstract

which we learn of by seeing x phenomena

we form from them the idea of abstract x, which is different from  
them

75d

this applies as well to good, beauty, justice, piety—everything  
which we mark with the name of the real

100b

the assumption that there exists 'absolute x'

100d

particular phenomenal x are made x by partaking of absolute x  
presence of X in x

communication of x with X

101c

nothing can be generated except by participation in its own proper  
essence  
102b  
each idea exists  
phenomena take their names from the ideas in which they  
participate

To them we might as well add the passages in last week's reading that contribute to the story we will tell today:

- Symposium      210 a-d  
Young men move from love of individual to love of physical  
beauty to love of beautiful customs and institutions to knowledge  
to 'what is beautiful in general.'  
211a  
this leads to beauty 'eternal, neither coming to be nor passing away,  
neither increasing nor decreasing, ...not beautiful in some respects but not in  
others, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as if beautiful in some people's eyes  
and not in others...it exists for all time, by itself and with itself, unique.  
211c  
he 'uses [individual beautiful things] like a ladder, climbing from the love of one  
person to love of two; from two to love of all physical beauty; from physical  
beauty to beauty in human behavior; thence to beauty in subjects of study; from  
them he arrives finally at that branch of knowledge which studies nothing but  
ultimate beauty. Then at last he understands what true beauty is.'
- Republic      476a  
Each [of the essential forms] manifests itself in a great variety of  
combinations, with actions, with material things, and with one another, and each  
seems to be many  
476d  
...a man who holds that there is such a thing as beauty itself, and  
can discern that essence as well as the things that partake of its character,  
without ever confusing the one with the other...  
when a man knows, there must be something that he knows.  
the perfectly real is perfectly knowable and the utterly unreal is  
entirely unknowable  
477d  
belief is a different state of mind than knowledge (or ignorance) and has a  
different field of objects  
478e  
what remains to be discovered is that object which can be said both to be and not  
to be and cannot properly be called either purely real or purely unreal...we may  
justly call it the object of belief  
479d  
the many conventional notions of the mass of mankind about what is beautiful  
or honorable or just and so on are adrift in a sort of twilight between pure reality  
and pure unreality

Although I did discuss some parts of Book V Thursday, and did call your attention to the faculty-psychology there, I'd like to re-direct your attention to those passages again today, because of their importance for the epistemology and ontology, as well as the psychology, of Plato's theory of forms. The distinction he draws there between knowledge and opinion turns out to be very important in the passages we are discussing today.

Three questions about those passages:  
What is the difference between knowledge and opinion?

What exactly IS Plato's argument for the claim that the 'sight lovers' have only opinion, and not knowledge?

In what sense can it be said that the object of the 'sight-lover's attention both is and is not at the same time? (478d)

A: The texts

In the texts we are considering today, we are presented with three separate but correlated accounts of the nature of the known and its relation to the knower. From these accounts, various interpretations have been drawn of Plato's epistemology and metaphysics.

Our text begins on p. 272 of my text, 506 b: "But Socrates, what is your own account of the Good? Is it knowledge, or pleasure, or something else?"

I: The Sun [506b-509d]

The faculty of sight is accommodated to its proper object, the visible

Light is the condition which makes the exercise of vision possible

The sun is the source of light. It is thus the visible offspring of the Good, which serves an analogous role to intelligibility: namely,

The relation of the sun to vision and visible things is the same as the relation of the good to intelligence and intelligible objects. It gives to the objects of knowledge their truth, and to him who knows them, his power of knowing.

In the final passage of the analogy, Plato ascribes not only their visibility or knowability, but also their "very being and reality" to the sun/FofGood. (509c) The FofG is described as 'even beyond Being.'

In this section Plato has started from the known—the visible world, the sunlit world of growth and life and interaction between the soul and its sensible objects—the phenomenal world—and has used analogy to construct a parallel—the intelligible world.

As the sun is to the visible, the FoG is to the intelligible; as the seen is to the senses, so the objects of thought are to the power of thought.

Next, he stacks the two on top of each other—and that which we know, live in, perceive, move and grow in—that which is more real to us—is described as less ultimately real, because less knowable, thus, less weighty, less valuable. Hierarchy.

II: The Divided Line [509d-513e]

This is a little bit confusing—and is so whether you emphasize the ontological or the epistemological dimension.

The soul is the tacit observer here; and evidently is so by virtue of its various faculties—sense, for the things below the middle divider, and reason for above the division. Some puzzles:

Are mathematical objects forms? A different kind of forms, or just a different way of dealing with forms? What way? Induction v deduction? Are diagrams mathematical objects? Doesn't he deal with mathematical objects in the *Meno* as somehow more capable of certainty than most physical things?

What kind of a faculty is imagination? Why should it be relegated to dealing with images, rather than dealing with all the objects in a particular way? Why are images—especially things like reflections, not viewed as 'visible things,' albeit of an odd sort, rather than a separate category of things? And—where do paintings of things fit in?

There's a dichotomy between Being and Non-being earlier in the dialogue that is not mapped on this. Underneath the Line as we have it sketched, we need to insert (on the object side) Non-being, pure unreality; and on the State of Mind side, ignorance. It's important to know, in respect to that dichotomy, that the Form of the Good (=FoG) is 'beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power;' so Being starts with the other forms. (It's one of the first dichotomy of forms, followed by one and many and motion and rest and same and different.) The Sun is analogously the highest item below the horizontal line, and is described (509b) as also 'not the same as existence,' although that apparently doesn't mean, in its case, that it doesn't exist.

The various divisions are in terms of 'reality and truth.' (510a) This is either clarifying, or confusing. If we take 'truth' as the dominant idea here, we can interpret what he is doing epistemologically,

underplaying the ontological part. That has some advantages for mapping what he is doing on contemporary problems.

### III: The Cave

This is described as ‘a parable’ in our text.

The diagram that is reproduced (on p. 278 of my text) has many advantages over the one that I usually draw on the board, especially in the placement of the fire and the little puppets that are paraded in front of it; I always get that wrong. It still has some mysteries, though...what does the guy who gets away and leaves the cave see between the shadows on the wall and the fire?

There is something satisfying in the context of this greater dialogue, in the terms in which we have been talking about it—in this last parable, Plato has not only got Socrates out of prison—he’s forced him to get on the boat—and has done so in terms that Socrates would probably approve of: it is for the good of the state. He cannot abandon the *polis* to its own devices, to sink or swim by its own justice or injustice. Instead he’s obliged to stick around and save it—to drag other people out of the cave, to raise a generation of successor philosopher-kings. Lots of rhetoric of compulsion here.

B: The ToF as “the great hypothesis:” Saving the phenomena

The texts I listed for you last week represent the ‘arguments’ for the ToF.

Plato had, let us say, several problems inherited from his present context and his cultural situation: an ethical problem, an epistemological problem, and an ontological problem. In the ToF he was able to suggest a single hypothesis that gave AN answer to all three.

*Ethical:* Throughout the dialogues we see Plato searching for, determined to establish, an absolute ethical standard. He was not satisfied with ethical relativism. Conventional moral standards were too contradictory, too adventitious, too arbitrary. Needed a standard by which to determine what was fair and what was foul. The possibility of ethical distinctions (good, bad, right, wrong) implies objective differences. We DO make ethical judgments; but that we do presupposes that there are real differences which make those judgments possible. *Let us then hypothesize the existence of something which is that which all acts properly called virtuous have in common, that which is the essence of what it is to be eg. just or pious...Call it the ‘form’ of justice.*

*Epistemological:* Until one can base his reasoning upon the knowledge of absolute virtue, there is no adequate solution to the problems of ethics. Right opinion alone is unstable, being unconnected by any chains of reasoning. Knowledge is only possible if there are proper objects for it; those objects cannot be sensible particulars, which are subject to change, and to predication of opposites. The possibility of abstraction requires the independent reality of the object apprehended by the intellect. The forms ‘save the phenomena of mental activity,’ by hypothesizing the existence, reality, objectivity, of the objects of thought. In particular, they are an attempt to account for the existence of *a priori* propositions—necessary truths, that no empirical evidence could disconfirm. The possibility of knowledge requires the existence of the knowable. *Let us then hypothesize the existence of a proper object of the knowing mind: call it the realm of the intelligible objects, the realm of Forms.*

*Ontological:* a hypothesis to explain the data of physical phenomena as such.

The world we experience is made up of things that resemble each other in some respects, can be grouped together on the basis of some similarities, but are different, discrete, separate from one another. Everything is what it is, and not another thing. At the same time, even statically conceived, things can be understood to have something in common with some other things: in space, in time, material, sharing some properties. And—when we try to take into consideration change, the ontology is even more perplexing.

--the phenomenal, physical world IS in constant flux. (P’s heraclitean’m)

--but: change is possible only if there is something which underlies change, by reference to which, or in terms of which, we can say ‘this changes from p to q’; that moves from s1 to s2 at time t1; this was determinately p at one time, and is now determinately not-p, but q instead; this is clearly and certainly not that, at least for now.

Cherniss puts it like this: “a logical account of physical nature requires some hypothesis of qualitative existence underived from quantitative distinctions.” If you are going to talk about, explain, change—you need to have something which is the ‘this’ which changes. *So: hypothesize that underlying the plurality of phenomena, enduring under change, there are unchanging and unitary principles that constitute the identity of individual things. Call them Forms.*

A great philologist and philosopher of the last century, Harold Cherniss, spoke of this in terms of the “philosophical economy” of the ToF: one hypothesis that could give the same answer to a number of different questions. [Woozley says that’s the problem: it tries to answer too many questions, and thus begins upon closer examination to seem to contradict itself. Much of the scholarship on Plato is thus devoted to trying to reconcile those apparent self-contradictions.]

Roles played in P’s phil by the ToF:

- i— Forms are the object of an epistemological faculty that is different than belief, opinion: they are the objects of the faculty of knowing. Knowledge, unlike belief, is unerring, infallible; and so it must have objects equally so.  
Consider how we use the two: I believe that P. But: my belief that p can be either true or false. But if I say I know that P—either it is true, or I don’t really know it.
- ii— Forms are what is real. They are contrasted with appearances. They are more permanent, perhaps; or better; a contrast similar to that by which we call the chair I’m sitting in more ‘real’ than a hallucination or dream or fiction. They are what they are, independently of what we may think or say.
- iii— Forms are standards, against which we measure any particular (ie just acts) in order to determine whether they are ‘really’ just or not. They are perfectly that to which imperfect particulars only approximate.
- iv— Forms are universals. Two examples: Rep 596a: ...assume the existence of a single essential nature for every set of things which we call by the same name..  
Or: Meno, 72a: ...a quality in which [particular things that are called by the same name] do not differ, but are all alike...a common nature which makes them [virtues], on which one would be well to have the eye fixed...  
It is because of this common form that we are able to use general terms.  
“In philosophy, the term ‘universal’ has been used of that which is common to a group of particulars, or again from the side of language, as that of which a general term is the name.”  
(Woozley, KB & F, in Vlastos)
- v-- Forms are causes, reasons why something is what it is: ‘the only thing that makes x beautiful is the presence of, or its participation in, or whatever the relationship may be—of beauty.’ a necessary condition for the something to be what it is, and not another thing. The sun is the cause of visibility and vision; the FoG is the cause of the being and reality of the other forms.

Does he try to do too much with the Forms?

Consider the form as (iii) the ideal standards: no individual act is perfectly just; only Justice itself is perfectly just. But: that opens the possibility—describes the necessity—of self-predication: justice can be predicated of itself. When we consider (iv) forms as universals, we think of them as general terms, that refer to a property or attribute that is common to all particulars. But a general term is not itself a particular, but belongs to a different logical category. So: can the same thing do both jobs?

Or: consider the form as (v) making particulars what they are: that suggests that they are somehow present in particulars, not separate from them. But their function as (iii) ideal standards to which we compare particular instances, requires separation from the particulars which are to be measured against them. [the paint-pot vs. the Standard Meter]  
So: can the same thing do both jobs?

Some questions about these texts:

What are the forms? [universals, or ideal objects?]

Are the forms self-predicating?

How do the forms differ from perceivable particular things?

Some questions about what lies behind these texts:

What IS it about the world that allows us to understand it?

What IS it that we understand when we understand things about the world?

**Housekeeping:**

Thursday we will look at an important passage in the *Parmenides* in which Plato calls into question some of the ways in which he has formulated his theory of forms. For that purpose, the texts I cited at the beginning will continue to be important. But I'd like to close with a quote from my favorite Zen butcher, Tony Wozzley, who suggests one answer to why Plato formulated his ToF:

“Generality is an essential feature of objects of experience. Recognition of generality is an essential feature of experience itself. Reflection of this generality is shown in the vocabulary of every language—all the words of which are general.”

Perhaps the way we will best understand Plato's ToF is through a Linguistic Turn: looking not for what the nature of reality is, but for what makes us able to know it, and what allows us to think—and thus talk—about it. [But: if all the words of all languages are general—and all the things we use them to talk about are specific—what does that say about the adequacy of language to the world?]

Please read as well: the selection from the *Timaeus* that is in our text; the selection from the *Timaeus* that I posted on the website; and, as a final addition to our textual collection of 'arguments for the forms,' the passage from *Republic X* that is also posted on the website.

In the supplementary readings section there are a number of secondary sources, most typically articles from learned journals, that will expose the curious to the combination of sumo wrestling and nit-picking that characterizes the encounters of various interpreters of these central texts. The predominant rhetorical move is “Jones has said P. But I respond...” If I have done my job of transparency, listing for you my major sources, some of the names may be familiar. If you are thinking of writing your paper on a Platonic dialogue or topic, you might want to cruise those articles or some of the articles in the collections on reserve in the library for topics or issues worth your time.