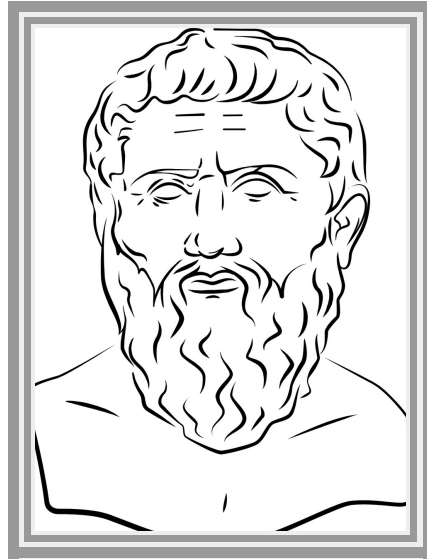


*Accensa domo proximi, tua quoque periclitatur.*<sup>1</sup>

## Classical Thought<sup>2</sup> Plato (428BC – 347BC) 2



### Plato's Philosophy: The “Forms”

#### **Nature of Plato's Ideas**

Plato's ideas are very abstract and can be difficult to understand. He was trying to make sense of the world without God's revelation in the Bible and therefore, despite his brilliant mind, he came to conclusions which do not make a coherent philosophy. However, he was hugely influential both in the non Christian world and also on the church. One twentieth century philosopher described all of Western Philosophy as “footnotes on Plato.”<sup>3</sup> For this reason it is good to make the effort to understand Plato's ideas.

#### **Plato's Motivation**

We have seen that Plato wanted to reform politics<sup>4</sup>. He thought this could not happen without a corresponding reform in metaphysics. He is the first in a long line of philosophers in western history who tied political change to metaphysical teaching. He wanted to defend the existence of moral absolutes against the Sophists<sup>5</sup> and to defend the possibility that human reason could have secure and certain knowledge.

Plato therefore set out to demonstrate:

that human reason is an adequate tool for understanding objective reality  
that there is a objectivity to moral laws  
that the state could have a stable foundation

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<sup>1</sup> When the house of your neighbour is in flames, your own is in danger. Anon.

<sup>2</sup> These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

<sup>3</sup> A N Whitehead.

<sup>4</sup> Term 2 Week 4 Day 4

<sup>5</sup> Term 2 Week 1 Day 4

## Plato's Dualism

Plato learnt from Parmenides<sup>6</sup> that knowledge requires a permanent, unchanging, stable object since you cannot know something if it is in constant flux or alteration. This poses a problem because in experience everything we know is changing. The Atomists<sup>7</sup> stressed this and so did Heraclitus.<sup>8</sup>

We see that things change in this world of time and space. An apple rots, a person grows old. They are still apples and people. Knowledge must be of an object that is unchanging but every object in the natural world is changing. Where is the object that we *know*, then? If it is in this world everything is changing. Plato came to the conclusion that the object we know must be in *another* world. Harking back to the epistemological dualism of Democritus<sup>9</sup> he said that our senses tell us about one kind of thing but reason tells us about another thing: objective reality.

Democritus thought of the objective reality as part of this natural world. He was thinking of the objective atoms falling through space. Plato's idea was different. He also said our sense tell us about one realm. Reason tells us about another realm and it is not in the changing world of our senses. The object of knowledge that reason grasps is something that must be *outside* of the perceptible, natural world of time and space.

Plato is therefore a metaphysical and epistemological dualist. He believes in two realms: the natural realm of human experience which is known by our senses and is always changing *and* a realm that is apart from the physical world. By this he does not mean another kind of physical world with one world outside the other. Plato was not so naïve as to think you had two worlds one on top of the other. He thought there was a different kind of world apart from or different from the world of matter. This is where the objects of knowledge exist. Plato called the objects of knowledge “forms” or “ideas.”

## The Doctrine of the Forms

Plato thought that everything<sup>10</sup> we see or perceive with our senses has a corresponding “form.” Other words for this “form” that can help us better understand what he meant are “ideal,” “formula” or idea.”

So we have, for instance, actual ducks, cows, horses, triangles or people but also a “form” of duck, horse, triangle or person by which we can recognise the individual ducks, horses, triangles and people that we see. We see three ducks on the pond and we recognise them all as ducks. But the object of our knowledge is not the thing swimming on the pond. That is changing and unreliable. What I actually know is the form, ideal, idea, or formula for a duck. That is what my mind perceives and I think of them as three instances of the form of duck. It is as though the mind has a pastry cutter “form” of a duck into which it can fit the ducks on the pond. This is not an actual physical outline. Or would could think of it as like the formula for some chemical which is not the chemical itself.

Triangles give us a better notion of how this works. Plato would say that there is a “form” of a perfect triangle. We do not have any perfect triangles in our experience because however well they are drawn there is a very slight inexactness. Nevertheless we recognise these imperfect shapes as triangles because they fit the ideal or form of a triangle we know in our mind. In this way, he said, the objects of knowledge exist apart from the physical world.

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6 Term 1 Week 5 Day 4

7 Term 1 Week 8 Day 4

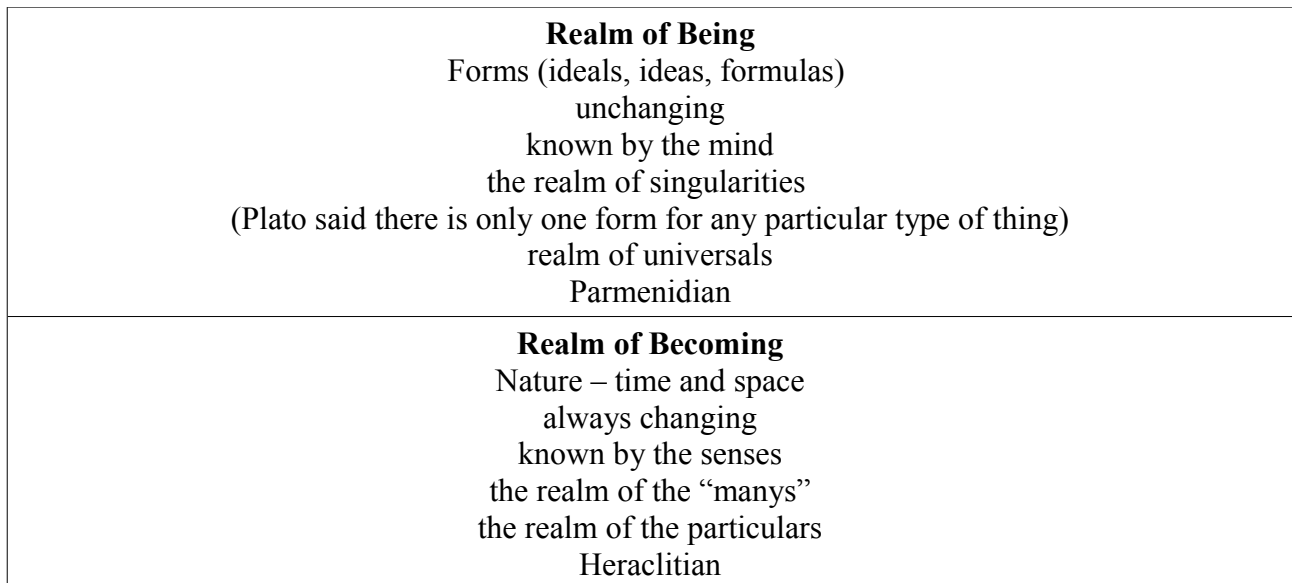
8 Term 1 Week 4 Day 4

9 Term 1 Week 8 Day 4

10 Plato made exceptions to this rule. He thought nasty things like dirt or dung (and oddly hair) had no form or ideal.

In his *Phaedo* and *Meno* dialogues Plato discusses the two realms and in his *Republic* he incorporates these views into a political treatise.

We can represent Plato's teaching in the form of a diagram:



Plato regarded the upper realm as the realm of “being” and “goodness.” He said that being is good and the realm of forms is the realm of the good. He taught that there was a hierarchy of forms since it is not just ducks, horses, people and triangles that have forms but also ethical ideas. In this world every instance of goodness that we experience is somewhat imperfect just as every triangle we see falls short of ideal triangularity. The essence of goodness that every particular good action we see is found outside the realm of time and space in the realm of the forms. Goodness is the highest form.

Does it follow then that, the upper realm being good, the lower domain is bad or evil?

Plato taught that the *complete* opposite of good would not be the realm of Becoming in which we live but rather a realm of *pure* matter. This would be matter which has no form, order or rationality to it. This pure matter would be evil. Matter is evil according to Plato. Forms known by reason he thought were good. In the realm in which we live we have “formed” or “informed” matter. The matter and the form come together and the form “informs” the matter like the pastry cutter impressing the dough. That which is “informed” is reasonable and knowable to the mind. Plato taught that the lower realm is not pure evil but it is not as good as the upper realm. It has a material part that drags on the realm of Becoming and stops it being pure good.

From all this Plato concluded that the good life is therefore the life of philosophical contemplation. The good man uses his mind and does not indulge the flesh since mind is good and matter is evil.

**Plato's view of the Soul**

The questions arise: How do these realms relate to each other, and what is man?

Man has a soul and a body. Plato thought that the body, made up of matter, is the tomb or prison of the soul. He said the soul is eternal and has existed previously. It is sent into a human body and because the body has the drag of matter on it, it becomes the prison house of the soul. The eternal soul is now entombed in a body. How can man know anything about the realm of the forms? Plato gave an analogy. If some men live in a cave and cannot go outside they see shadows passing on the cave walls. If someone goes outside they see the true bodies that throw the shadows. In the same

way our senses perceive shadows. Shadows have a form in common with their subject. We do not see the object but we know the form. When a man with his senses sees the shadow of reality which he recollects from a *previous life* the idea of which that is the shadow.

Plato thought that the mind of man dwelt in the realm of the forms.<sup>11</sup> When the soul leaves the realm of ideas it brings the knowledge of the forms with it. Thus we know things as they are, said Plato. In Plato's scheme then, the learning process amounts to recollection of ideas familiar in a previous life.

The philosopher, said Plato, studies the forms and gives his life over to contemplating the higher good. He should therefore rule over other men.

### **Philosophy and Death, Platonism in the Church**

Plato also considered philosophy as preparation for death. Plato taught that when a man dies, the soul is set free and returns to the realm of ideas. Philosophers study the realm of the ideals before their bodies die and so prepare us for death.

We can see the religious significance of these ideas and, sad to say, they influenced the church which became contaminated by Platonism. The idea that disembodied reality is better than physical reality led to asceticism – the denial of the body because the body is seen as somehow a drag on spirituality. The idea that good is outside the world and the closer you get to matter the more evil things are is still very pervasive even today.

### **Problems with Plato's Ideas**

Where does the soul fit into all this? It is not a physical object. It inhabits a physical object, the body. It is not an idea or form, it knows the ideas or forms. Do we know the soul? If so it has to have a form. There has to be an idea of the soul in order for Plato to speak rationally about it. This means that when the soul is in the realm of the forms there is not only a soul there but an idea of a soul. This does not make good sense. How does the soul know the form of the soul? Plato never really solved the metaphysical and epistemological problem: he just re-introduced it at a higher level. What is self-knowledge for the soul? Where does the soul come from?

### **The Demiurge**

How did the forms get impressed into the physical world of matter? Why is this world “informed?” Here Plato resorted to a myth because he had no adequate answer.

There is an eternal realm of matter<sup>12</sup> and eternity of the forms. These were united by the *Demiurge*, a supernatural force, not like the Christian view of the creator the source of all things, but limited. This *Demiurge* took pre-existing matter and eternal ideas and compressing them together to give ducks, horses human beings, good acts etc. Although it is more sophisticated than that of the old gods, this is not a good philosophical answer. The philosopher is ultimately appealing to myth which is not philosophy.

### **Criticism of the Theory of Forms**

Plato not only proposed the theory, he was also its best critic. In his dialogue *Parmenides* Plato levels devastating criticism at his own ideas. This is complicated and turns on the idea of participation. We can imagine seeing two ducks on a pond. We recognise them both as ducks because they both have the duck Form or Formula in common in the upper realm, the realm of Being. How do we organise the many into the one? We say the ducks resemble each other and thus participate in the form of duck. What is this participation? Plato explained it in terms of actors and their rôles. Many different actors, for instance, have played Hamlet. The rôle of Hamlet

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<sup>11</sup> There is a problem here: Plato is now treating the realm of the forms like another physical realm.

<sup>12</sup> Here Plato was recalling Democritus' eternal atoms see Term 1 Week 8 Day 4.

corresponds to the Form or Ideal, the actors correspond to the physical objects that participate in the form. Why do we say that this duck participates in the form or idea of “duck?” There must be a resemblance, something in common, between the duck and the form or idea. If this is so, however, there must be a higher “form” as it were above the duck and its form by which we recognise that they both correspond. This leads goes on for ever and leads to an infinite series of forms. This means that to understand any particular thing, you have to know an infinite series of things. This leads to the conclusion that there is no certainty of knowledge. But why did Plato come up with the theory of the forms in the first place? He wanted certainty of knowledge. This theory does not give it.

### **Other problems with Plato's Ideas**

Plato's ideas suffer from arbitrariness; why do things like dirt and hair have no form? There is a problem too with Plato's teaching about the soul. If the mediation between the realm of Being and the realm of Becoming is done by the soul, where does the soul come from? Is it a form?

We have seen that Plato has to invoke a *Demiurge* to unite form and matter in the realm of Becoming and that you have to know an infinite series of forms to be able to say you know a physical object. But, even if Plato's Forms *had* given some hope for certainty and a way for epistemology and metaphysics to work together, there were still problems. The possibility of motion was left out: there was no explanation of how things change.

### **The Problem of Motion**

This was one of the things Plato was trying to address in the first place. His failure to do so lost him the support of his best student – Aristotle.<sup>13</sup>

Exercises:

Don't worry if just by reading this through you can't grasp the ideas. Re read and make notes (diagrams help if you can manage it) and understand as much as you can. If you can get even a hazy idea of the “Forms” you will be doing well. It is easy to see that Plato's ideas about the soul are not in line with anything taught in the Bible. You can also bear in mind wrong ideas such as matter being evil and that matter is eternal. When you come across these ideas elsewhere you will be able to remember that these were the ideas of Plato. When you read of the aesthetic practices of Christians in the Middle Ages, for instance, you will understand where their unbiblical ideas originated. They were trying to mix Platonic ideas into Christianity.

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13 See subsequent lessons Term 2 Weeks 8, 9 and 10 Day 4.