

*tertium quid*<sup>1</sup>  
Classical Thought<sup>2</sup>  
Plato (428BC – 347BC) 3



## Plato's Philosophy: Ethics and Politics

### **The three divisions of the soul**

Although Plato's ideas can be hard to grasp it is well worth understanding them. They are a model used over and over again in the history of philosophy. Many of the wrong ideas that have plagued the world right up to the present time can be traced back to Plato's approach to ethics and politics.

Plato believed that man's soul had three divisions or functions

1. his reasoning ability
2. his appetites or desires
3. temperament or will

A good man, according to Plato, has reason (1) governing his appetites (2) and will (3). He pictured reason as a charioteer and the two horses pulling the chariot as the appetites and temperament. If reason is in control the chariot goes well. If either of the two horses is in charge the chariot is out of control. People who live by emotion and are not wise and impulsive people are not good. According to Plato, reason must dominate because reason is closer to the *Forms*.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Form of the Good**

Plato's aim was to refute the traditionalism of Athens that held that “what we always did is the good way of going on.” He also wanted to refute the sophists who said you cannot know what good is because everything is relative.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, he wanted to have an unchanging ethic which was knowable by reason.

In his doctrine of the Forms Plato taught that the Forms exist in a realm separate from the natural world and separate from the mind of the individual person. He said there was a a Form of goodness

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- 1 A third thing – literally a third “what.” An expression used in Greek by Plato (τρίτον τι) and later in Latin by Tertullian. It can mean another option beside the two proposed as either/or in an argument. Look out for it in today's lesson.
  - 2 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.cmfnw.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.
  - 3 See last week's lesson.
  - 4 See Term 2 Week 1 Day 4

and a Form of love just as there was a Form of cow or person. These Forms are disembodied, apart from the natural world, unchanging and eternal. Every time we experience love or justice in this world it is imperfect. The perfect Form of goodness, justice, love and so on is the idea or ideal of it which is beyond this world of nature. The unchanging standard of goodness is not to be found through our sensations but by recollecting<sup>5</sup> a life among the forms – in other words by using our intuition. We do not learn goodness through experience we recollect it from a previous life and this is intuition.

### **The dilemma**

This Form of goodness, said Plato, is even beyond the gods. In connection with this, Plato points out a dilemma which you will still hear today used as an argument for the non existence of God. It goes like this:

Moral goodness must either be:

Something separate from the gods or (God) that they recognise and commend and is therefore higher than them,

or

it depends upon the whim or will of the gods. Whatever the gods decide at the moment is right (this is called Voluntarism).

An example will make it clearer:

Is murder wrong because the gods say so or because of some moral code that is above the gods? If it just depends on the whim of the gods this could change from day to day. Sometimes the gods might say murder is good. On the other hand, if they can't just say anything they like, then the Form of goodness must be outside the gods and their will. In that case, you do not need the gods in order to know what is moral.

Plato wanted an ethic that was not dependent upon the gods, that was autonomous.<sup>6</sup> He therefore invented his eternal unchanging Form of The Good. This makes the gods irrelevant.

### **The Christian *Tertium Quid***

What is the answer to the dilemma that Plato posed? Christians say there is another option, a *tertium quid*. It is not the case that *either* God has to answer to the form of the good *or* that good is whatever God says. Good is God's own unchanging character it is not something apart from God. God declares what is good or bad by (as it were) looking at himself, not at something outside himself. The Christian is not stuck with the voluntarism that Plato ridiculed on the one hand or Platonic autonomy on the other hand. Goodness is the character of God and when he says what is good he is declaring his own character.

### **Problems with Plato's Ethic**

Plato was at least correct in saying that standard of goodness is absolute. It is not determined by human needs (what is good is what gives benefit to humanity) or beneficial consequences (what is good will bring benefit) or by traditional opinions (what is good is what we have always done). Goodness *does* have an unchanging absolute character. He was wrong, however, to say that goodness is something apart from the divine.

Plato's ethic can be criticised on a number of other grounds. He said that the Form of the Good is known by intuition and that the highest good for man is to be philosophical. He never explained *how he knew* this. Also, although Plato had an absolute authoritative ethic, it has no relevance for human life because who can say that they know they have intuited properly the Form of the Good? We could all have different intuitions. Who is to say what is correct?

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<sup>5</sup> Remember that Plato taught that the soul existed before birth in the realm of the Forms. See last week's lesson.

<sup>6</sup> That is, standing on its own and independent of the gods or other forces.

Plato had the intellectualist view that wrong doing arises from ignorance. He thought that if people would make reason dominant in their personality and come to know the truth they would do the truth. He had a low opinion of the masses but thought that if we educate them they will do what is right. This is a naïve view of human nature. We know from experience that teaching people what is right and wrong is not sufficient to make them do what is good. For example, was every individual who has a life that is given over to drugs ignorant of the consequences before embarking on this course of action? People sometimes know the consequences and risks of what they do and do evil anyway. People sometimes even do what is wrong exactly because it is wrong. Augustine tells us, for instance, in his *City of God* that he stole some pears as a youngster not because he liked them but *because it was wrong*. Plato does not understand human nature. He does not understand the inner depravity that sometimes does something wrong just for its wrongness. Education is not the answer to man's problems either although it can help in many ways. However, it cannot change people. The rebellion and depravity of the human heart remains. The Platonic idea that people will be good if taught what is good is seen over and over again in human culture and has done much damage.

Another criticism is that if human nature is not basically morally good then how can anyone rely on his intuition to understand the Form of the good? Would Plato say that man is morally good at base? Yes, because he thought that education was all that was needed to get them to do what is right. We have seen that this is naïve and we can ask why, then, do they need to be educated if human nature is basically good? If goodness comes through education you must surely begin with people who are not basically good. If they can only be relied upon to intuit the Form of the Good after they have been educated then morality depends on *who is doing the educating*.

This last point leads on to Plato's view of politics which we will consider in the next lesson.

Exercise:

(The answers to these questions will give you a useful summary of Plato's ethic.)

1. What were Plato's three divisions of the soul?
2. How did Plato say we could know what is good?
3. Explain the dilemma Plato set up to prove that the gods were irrelevant to morality.
4. What is the Christian *Tertium Quid* that solves this dilemma?
5. What was correct about Plato's ethic?
6. Give four criticisms of Plato's ethic.

Answers on the next page.

1. Plato's three divisions of the soul were: *i.* reason, *ii.* appetites or desires and *iii.* temperament or will.
2. Plato said we could know what is good by recollecting our past existence in the realm of the Forms. This is intuition.
3. The dilemma Plato set up was: Is morality something higher than the gods (in which case they are irrelevant to moral issues) or is it dependant on the will of the gods (in which case they can change it at will).
4. Christian *Tertium Quid* is that goodness is intrinsic to the character of God and that when He gives moral rules he is describing himself.
5. Plato's ethic was correct in that the standard of goodness is absolute and unchanging.
6. Four criticisms of Plato's ethic: *i.* He does not explain how he knows that the Form of the Good can be intuited, *ii.* Who can say that they know they have intuited the Form of the Good correctly? *iii.* We can see from experience that wrong doing is not always the result of ignorance. *iv.* If human nature is basically good why does it need education to do right? If it is not basically good how can we rely on intuition to determine the Form of the Good?