

AO1 Explain Plato's Theory of Forms

Plato was born, the son of Ariston and Perictione, in about 428 BC. His family, on both sides, was among the most distinguished in Athens. He was born in Athens into a very wealthy family and as a young man was a student of Socrates.

Plato is probably one of the best-known philosophers.

Plato embarked on a period of extensive travel, returning to Athens some years later. In 387 BCE he established the Academy, a school devoted to philosophical debate and learning. Aristotle was a student at the Academy for about the last twenty years of Plato's life.

At the heart of all Plato's philosophy is his Theory of Forms, sometimes called the Theory of Ideas. Plato believed that there exists an immaterial Universe of 'forms', perfect aspects of everyday things such as a table, bird, and ideas/emotions, joy, action, etc. The objects and ideas in our material world are 'shadows' of the forms

In the Theory of eternal forms Plato makes a distinction between objects that are real and concepts that exist in our minds. He believed that, as well as the material world in which we live and which we experience, there is also another, eternal world of concepts or forms. This eternal world is more the real than the world we experience through the senses, and is the object of knowledge, not opinion.

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato portrays education as the process of leaving the cave into the sunlight. In the back of the cave, facing the back wall, are the masses—the population of the city. They are tied down so that they may not move or look backwards. All they see is the back wall of the cave. Behind them is a fire with figures going back and forth before it, forming shadows on the wall. The result of this is that the entire reality of the people facing the back of the cave consists of these shadows. They know of nothing else and assume that there can never be anything beyond the shadows.

The world of sense is at a constant change, so how can the truth be known if the world never stays the same from one moment to the next. Plato believed there was a certain truth, but this material world cannot answer it. The material world only presents appearances, which lead us to make opinions, not knowledge. Plato believes there is truth on a different plane, on the non-material world of forms. He alleged that in order for something to be real, it had to be permanent and unchanging.

In order to see exactly what a form is and how it differs from a material object, we need to look at the first two of the properties that characterize the forms. The forms are transcendent. This means that they do not exist in space and time. A material object, a basketball, exists at a particular place at a particular time. A form, roundness, does not exist at any place or time. The forms exist, or subsist, in a different way. This is especially important because it explains why the forms are unchanging. A form such as roundness will never change; it does not even exist in time. It is the same at all times or places in which it might be instantiated. A form does not exist in space in that it can be instantiated in many places at once and need not be instantiated anywhere in order for the form to exist. The form of roundness can be found in many particular spatial locations, and even if all round objects were destroyed, the property of roundness would still exist.

Plato believed that the qualities, like ‘what is justice?’ and ‘what is beauty?’ had a sort of universal existence, a reality of their own. When we call something beautiful, we do this because we have an innate knowledge of True Beauty, or the Form of Beauty. These things we see in the world around us, beauty and justice, is always imperfect.

We have instinctive understanding of the Forms. Plato also says because we have concepts of the Ideal Forms, without having experienced them, our souls must have known the Forms before we were born.

The forms are also pure. This means that they are pure properties separated from all other properties. A material object, such as a basketball, has many properties: roundness, ballness, orangeness, elasticity, etc. These are all put together to make up this individual basketball. A form is just one of these properties, existing by itself apart from space and time. Roundness is just pure roundness, without any other properties mixed in. The forms differ from material objects, then, in that they are transcendent and pure, while material objects are complex conglomerations of properties located in space and time.

Plato believed there is basically an ‘Ideal’ everything. He claimed that in the Ideal world there is an Ideal ‘cat’ created by God. The cats we see in our daily life are inferior instances of the Ideal cat. The cats in our lives are constantly changing but the Ideal cat is eternal, depending on nothing for its existence and is the object of knowledge, not opinion. Plato gives many examples in understanding the Forms, examples of ‘cats’ and the mathematics way of ‘circles’. He believes the form of a circle exists but not in the physical world of space and time. It exists as a changeless object in the world of forms or Ideas, which can be known only by reason. Forms have a greater reality than objects in the physical world both because of their perfection and unchangingness, and because they are models.

Plato thought that the Forms were interconnected, and arranged in a hierarchy. The most important is good, the ultimate principle. Good illuminates the other forms. The forms flow down from the Good going from most general, abstract, and objective (the Good) to most particular and subjective. All particular forms are subsumed under more general forms, and all forms are finally subsumed under the form of the Good. By Plato’s logic, real knowledge becomes knowledge of goodness. The lowest of forms are images.

Plato developed his Theory of Forms by dividing existence into two realms. The world of sense experience, where nothing stays the same and is always changing. There is a world which is outside space and time, which is not perceived through the senses, and in which everything is permanent and perfect, Ideal – the realm of Forms. The empirical world shows only shadows and poor copies of the Forms, and is so less real than the world of the Forms themselves, because the Forms are eternal and immutable, the proper objects of knowledge.

The properties of the forms are split into six sections.

Transcendent, the forms are not located in space and time. For example, there is no particular place or time at which redness exists.

Pure, the forms only exemplify one property. Material objects are impure; they combine a number of properties such as blackness, circularity, and hardness into one object. A form, such as circularity, only exemplifies one property.

Archetypes, the forms are archetypes; that is, they are perfect examples of the property that they exemplify. The forms are the perfect models upon which all material objects are based. The form of redness, for example, is red, and all red objects are simply imperfect, impure copies of this perfect form of redness.

Ultimately Real, The forms are the ultimately real entities, not material objects. All material objects are copies or images of some collection of forms; their reality comes only from the forms.

Causes, the forms are the causes of all things. (1) They provide the explanation of why any thing is the way it is, and (2) they are the source or origin of the being of all things.

Systematically interconnected, the forms comprise a system leading down from the form of the good moving from more general to more particular, from more objective to more subjective. This systematic structure is reflected in the structure of the dialectic process by which we come to knowledge of the forms

Overall Plato's theory of Forms suggests that there exists an abstract and eternal notion of concepts such as 'goodness'. Within this theory it is assumed that particular examples of, e.g. good behaviour, are simply individual instances of the form of good.

AO2 How convincing is his Theory's?

Plato's Theory of Forms has had many criticisms; one being that it is not really a theory. It relies on the 'Analogy of the Cave' to support and explain its' details. This suggests that Plato is unsure of Forms himself, or at least how to explain them.

It is suggested that the Theory is unsure of the extent of the Forms, for example, is there a Form for humanity or each individual? This is important as the answer could change the concept of Form, and alter how the concept is used to understand the world.

Another criticism is that Plato states that each Form is unique, but does not explain why this is. Plato also tells us about the Forms but does not say what they actually are.

The existence of forms is not necessarily the obvious conclusion of logical reasoning. Plato does not provide any convincing argument in favour of the belief that there is a realm of ideas, more real than the world of appearances. Plato believes this higher level of reality in the realm of Forms to be 'self-evident'. We can say it isn't self-evident to us. How do the forms relate to the physical world? Is there a form for everything; form for disease, form for train tickets? Plato is vague in this section when explaining what has forms. He is ambiguous as to whether or not there is a Form for literally everything.

Plato's ideas of immortality of the soul are dependent on our acceptance of his other ideas about the existence of Forms and about knowledge being recollection or recognition of things we already know. Plato's view that knowledge gained through

sense experience is not valuable is hard to accept, even if we agree that knowledge is temporary.

There are problems with object morality; the form of good. Plato believes that the highest of all forms of knowledge is an understanding of the form of the Good. But this causes a problem when questions arise like; 'what is good?' An example of the confusion to decide what is good and what isn't, Plato believed that slavery was good at time, but in this time we believe slavery is bad and the people didn't like and broke free from this. Between philosophers there has been a disagreement on the meaning of goodness; therefore only a few know 'the form of good' and so they can be moral. Plato's idea of human nature "to know the right is to do the right" this naïve. Plato appears to hold that the Form of Good keeps in existence the whole world of Forms, and appearances too, just as the sun gives light and casts shadow. We cannot all agree about what is true goodness is and how it should be shown to other people.

Plato believes at the highest degree of knowledge is the ideal Form of the Good governed by God. But everyone has a differing perception of goodness and this will inevitably cause confusion. The concept of the Form of the Good helps shape the way Christians make moral decisions and understand (this perfect being we have come to name) 'God' whom is eternal and beyond all space and time. This creates a palpable problem, for it would appear Plato's concept only concerns Christians; and this therefore disregards the preponderance of the world.

Plato also says there is a forms of morality; how is it possible to separate morals from everyday actions? Is it possible for there to be ultimate moral standards? Aristotle believed morality could not be eternal and unchanging simply because moral issues have to respond to such changing situations in both time and place. Aristotle believed that the 'form' for things exists within the things themselves. This comes from experience.

Another problem was the uncertainty of what the relation is between the Forms and the objects of everyday experience. Plato equates the Form with knowledge and the 'particulars' with opinion. Opinion can be wrong, but knowledge is infallible. Knowledge exists in the realm of the Forms and is independent of the objects of everyday experience. Plato does not argue that we must dismiss the objects of our senses as completely false because they act as a basis on the long journey towards knowledge. This therefore means Forms would not be completely separate from the particulars.

On the whole I believe that Plato's theory is a speculation not to dismiss and there are points, which are very valid and questions our reality and existence. But there criticisms which affect the way we see things; 'what is goodness', this is a changing answer and I believe cannot be answered. Plato does not really present the Forms as a theory; what is the nature of forms? He talks about forms as distinct and separate things that are unchangeable, perfect, eternal and invisible, but what does it reveal about nature? He insists that forms exist independently of the mind but they are invisible to sense.