

Plato's Theory of Forms

The Theory of Forms, also known as the Theory of Ideas, is perhaps the most well known aspect of Plato's philosophy. I am not terribly well versed on the writings of Plato, but I know just enough to get by. For example, I know that there are all kinds of breeds of dogs in the world, each of varying size and have drastically different sounding barks – but the concept of dog will always remain constant and that when I think of the idea of dog, the tangible item that comes to mind is never a cat. Plato was an advocate of open discussion of ideas rather than the commitment of any one given idea as truth. It was such open mindedness that kept him away from that dangerous spiral of silence that so many slip down for fear of being ridiculed. . . But, then again, what do I know? I learned much more about Plato's Theory of Forms while on my quest for knowledge so now I am much more enlightened; I hope.

Plato expounded his Theory of Forms over a writing career of some forty years. The theories were being refined over this period and were never fully explained in any one dialogue. A form is an abstract property or quality. Take any property of an object, separate it from that object and consider it by itself, and you are pondering a form. For example, if you separate the bark of a dog and consider its bark all by itself, you are thinking of the form of a bark. Plato held that this property existed apart from the dog, in a different mode of existence than the dog. The form is not just the idea of the bark you have in your mind. It exists independently of the dog and independently of what someone

thinks of it. All barks of a dog, not just this dog, participate or copy this same form of the bark. Capece?

Plato's theory of forms combines his account of knowledge and of the nature of reality (i.e., his epistemology and metaphysics). According to Plato there are two orders of reality: the visible and the intelligible. Things in the visible realm (things we see around us every day) are born, die, decay, and generally change. We know them through our five senses. Things in the intelligible realm (forms) are constant, unchanging, permanence. We know them through our minds, specifically, through the correct use of reason. Knowledge is defined by its object: true knowledge is knowledge of the forms, we can only have changing beliefs and opinions about things in the visible realm. However, the two realms are intimately connected. Things in the visible realm are what they are because they reflect/imitate certain forms. For example what all chairs have in common and reflect is the essence of being a chair, and is the form: chair. The highest form is the form of the good, so the highest form of knowledge is knowledge of the good.

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. They do not exist in space and time. A material object, a basketball, for example, exists at a particular place at a particular time. A form on the other hand, such as roundness, does not exist at any place or time. The forms exist, 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. The form of roundness can be found in many

particular locations, and even if all round objects were destroyed, the property of roundness would still exist.

Another characterization of the forms is that they are pure. This means that they have pure properties separated from all other properties. A material object, such as a basketball, has many properties: roundness and elasticity, etc. These properties 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, in that they are transcendent and pure, while material objects are collections of properties located in space and time.

In believing that all objects in this world are copies of the forms, the forms are the causes of all that exists in this world. In general, whenever you want to explain why something is the way that it is, you point to some properties that the object has. Which means you explain what form the object is a copy of. The forms are causes in two closely related ways: The forms are the causes of all our knowledge of all objects. The forms contribute all order and intelligibility to objects. Since we can only know something as it has some order or form, the forms are the source of all material objects.

The forms are also systematically interconnected. They are connected to each other and to material objects in an intricate system. The forms fit with each other and material objects in a hierarchical system, whose structure is reflected in the process one goes through to gain knowledge of the forms. It involves putting together two subjective

points of view to form a more objective concept. All particular forms are included under more general forms, and all forms are finally counted under the form of the Good.

The notion of "the reason" is crucial in understanding Plato. Plato makes it clear that the reason is a higher faculty than intellect. Certainly he maintains the training of the intellect is an essential pursuit if an individual is to gain access to his reason, but so too is gymnastics and music. The fact that so much of Plato's writing is concerned with imagery points to creative imagination as also being a pathway to the higher reason.

It is important to realize that the Theory of Forms is a hypothesis that is proven by the process of inference to best explain it. It is a grand image that identifies levels of reality, and metaphysical functionalities that Plato reasoned must exist, to make any sense of the world. The actual mechanical processes involved are only defined in a very abstract manner, but even here, the theory has a counter, in that man cannot presume to understand the physiology of the Gods. The facts that the theory is expounded over such a vast expanse in the text of the thirty-two dialogues, and that Plato often allows himself to develop an image or allegory to a point of apparent contradiction, have made it easy for later thinkers to construct criticisms based on a few words taken in isolation.