

## As Exam Coursework

### A. Explain what Plato meant by 'Forms'.

Plato had many philosophies but the main one was his theory of forms, which we sometimes refer to as the theory of ideas. Plato's Forms are not mental entities, nor even mind-dependent. They are independently existing entities whose existence and nature are graspable only by the mind, even though they do not depend on being so grasped in order to exist. He believed that as well as the world that we live in and experience, which is a material world, there is another eternal world of concepts or forms. This eternal world is more real than the world, which we experience through the senses and it the object of knowledge not opinion. The world of sense experience has constant change, and this was a popular topic in philosophy as there is no truth or evidence that the world never stays the same from one moment to the next. Plato believed that the answer was that there is certain truth, but this material world cannot reveal it. It can only present appearances, which lead us to form opinions, rather than knowledge. Plato believed that if something was real, it had to be permanent and unchanging. When the Socrates asked him complex questions such as 'what is beauty?' or 'what is justice?' he was not trying to find a good definition of the words but was asking about the nature or essence of these qualities, which he believed had a kind of universal existence or a reality of their own. When we call something beautiful, it is because we have an innate knowledge of beauty or the form of beauty, but we don't actually know what it is and therefore can't judge. When we see examples of justice, we recognise them because we recognise them as we see that they reflect the nature of True Justice or the form of Justice. The beauty or justice that we see in society around us is always imperfect, as even though we have never seen perfect justice or beauty we know what they are according to Plato, because we have knowledge, which is kind of a recollection.

We have some kind of understanding of the Forms as for example we know that a chair should have four legs but it might be different from another chair which also has the same form but is better as it might be more comfortable. According to Plato's thinking, because we have concepts of the ideal forms and are told, without having experienced them, our souls must have known the forms before we were born. This then leads him to the idea that people must have immortal souls.

The theory of the Forms can be quite complicated to comprehend. Forms have a greater reality than objects in the physical both because of their perfection and unchanging ness, and because they are models. As ideals, they give ordinary physical objects whatever reality they have, because of the ways in which the physical objects resemble the Forms, just like the shadows in the Allegory of the cave, in the way that they only had any kind of existence because of their resemblance to their corresponding physical objects. He believed that the forms were interconnected and arranged in a hierarchy. He believed that the most important Form is the Form of the Good, which is the principle. The Good illuminates the other Forms like the sun in the Allegory of the Cave. The sun also represents knowledge and energy, which the world needs to live on in order to complete the seven life processes. We can see that justice for example is an aspect of Goodness and we know that we have never seen with our senses any examples of perfect goodness, but we have plenty of particular examples which approximate goodness and we know that they are 'good' when we see them because of the way in which they correspond to our innate notion of the Form of the Good. Using Plato's logic, real knowledge becomes knowledge of goodness in the end and this is why philosophers are in the best position to rule.

Plato splits up existence into two realms: the material realm and the transcendent realm of forms. The world of changing, material objects (the visible world) is merely a fleeting image of the intelligible world--what Plato calls the realm of the Forms. Physical objects are real only insofar as they are intelligible, but they can be intelligible only in terms of that which does not change. What makes a thing intelligible as a certain kind of thing cannot be constantly changing: otherwise, it could not be identified as that kind of thing, nor would it be that kind of thing. So a thing is what it is in virtue of something that is not changing. But since the visible world is constantly changing, it cannot be used as the basis for identifying what things are. There must be an intelligible (non-sensual) realm in terms of which physical things are said to exist intelligibly. That is the realm of the Forms.

Plato realises that the general run of humankind can think, and speak, etc., without any awareness of his realm of Forms. In the allegory, Plato likens people untutored in the Theory of Forms to

prisoners chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects, that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects that they do not see. Such prisoners would mistake appearance for reality. They would think the things they see on the wall (the shadows) were real; they would know nothing of the real causes of the shadows. If a prisoner says "That's a book" he thinks that the word "book" refers to the very thing he is looking at. But he would be wrong. He's only looking at a shadow. The real referent of the word "book" he cannot see. To see it, he would have to turn his head around. Plato's point: the general terms of our language are not "names" of the physical objects that we can see. They are actually names of things that we cannot see, things that we can only grasp with the mind. The prisoners may learn what a book is by their experience with shadows of books. But they would be mistaken if they thought that the word "book" refers to something that any of them has ever seen. Likewise, we may acquire concepts by our perceptual experience of physical objects. But we would be mistaken if we thought that the concepts that we grasp were on the same level as the things we perceive.

Plato also developed his Theory of Forms to the point where he divided existence into two realms. There is the world of sense experience, where nothing ever stays the same and beings are mortal, it is always in the process of change. It is the world, which we live in. There is also a world, which is outside space, and time, which is not perceived through the senses and everything is permanent and perfect or ideal, this is known as the 'realm of the forms' and this is supposedly where our souls go after our body dies. The empirical world shows only shadows and poor copies of these forms, and is therefore less real than the world of the form themselves, because the Forms are eternal and immutable, the proper objects of knowledge.

#### B. 'Plato's theory of the Forms is of little use.' Discuss.

Forms and their perceptions seem accessible and understandable and of little use to many, as they exist beyond the physical world, so cannot be empirically proven to exist or not exist. The understanding and believing of the theory relies heavily on human mental ability to escape the shadows. Yet to many people and philosophers Plato's theory is very much of use as we do have some understanding of the Forms and there are different ways to understand the theory.

Firstly, I will consider how Plato's theory is of little use. Forms do not say much about the world we live in, they point beyond it, and they do not explain the movement of things. Plato focuses mainly on the 'real' world, not the physical world, which is unimportant as it is the world we live in that is more relevant and central to us. The Form is involved in matter and expresses itself through matter, which has a purpose. It has an objective sense through the substance it exists in, for example, there is an idea of 'horse', which expresses itself through horses and gains some degree of objectivity through that expression. Yet this theory is very hard to comprehend and so many people just discard the theory and think of the ideas as stupid or irrelevant.

The Forms in the end are only a theory. It was argued by Aristotle and other empiricists that the Forms cannot be verified by the senses. Aristotle felt there was no proof Forms existed beyond this world even though he believed the Forms were the object of rational thought. He believed that Forms could not exist as things in themselves beyond this world but only as part of the things in the world as they are not objective universals. This means Plato needs to prove that the Forms are more than just ideas in his head, that they actually exist independently from his mind; he needs to provide some logical proof. Creating a concept and showing that there really is something to which the concept refers are two different processes. Plato's theory only tells us what the Forms would be like if they existed. He could not establish whether the Forms do in fact exist. Plato's conclusion depends on whether we accept his concepts and arguments as analytically true or correct. Plato seems to take the existence of the Forms for granted, more as a matter of faith rather than reason and logical argument. The Forms are not as self-evident as Plato presumes.

However, the theory of forms is of use to some people as some people can understand the logic of Plato's theory and relate it to their lives. We have some kind of understanding of the Forms as for example we know that a chair should have four legs but it might be different from another chair which

also has the same form but is better as it might be more comfortable. We are all moulds of the same form. We can say to each other 'her nose is too big' and know that this means that she falls short of true beauty, which we understand as a concept even though we have never seen a perfect example of it, as no one is perfect. So therefore we have concepts of the ideal forms and are told, without having experienced them and so Plato's theory is of use. People also use and think relevant Plato's argument that when we use words and apply them to particular objects, we make reference to the world of Forms. Plato believed that when we use words such as 'dog' to describe the particular animal we see, we are not just classifying it. We are referring to a particular essence or quality that it shares with animals that are also described as 'dog'; they all share something of the Form of the Cat and many people without even realising do this and understand and agree with it.

Some people, especially highly educated philosophers, can make use of Plato's theory of Forms by understanding and considering them mathematically. For example a circle is a round two-dimensional figure made up of an infinite series of points, all the same distance from a given centre and all the angles usually add up to 360°. This is not a matter of opinion, but something that we know, and have been told. No one has ever actually seen a perfect circle, they have just seen imperfect copies and reasonable approximations of a perfect circle. A perfect circle, as well as any other shape has not been seen; the infinite points which make up its circumference do not take up any space, they just exist in logic rather than in a physical form. Even if someone tries to draw it with the most sophisticated computerised equipment, it becomes imperfect. People do know what a circle is though, even though the Ideal Form of a circle has never been seen and never could be seen. They can define it and understand that it can't be translated into the material world without losing its perfection. For lots of people, the form of a Circle exists, but not in the physical world of space and time, and thus they believe Plato's theory correct. It exists as a changeless object in the world of Forms or Ideas, which can only be known by reason, and in order to find out the reason you need to question.

So in conclusion, many people believe Plato's theory of Forms to be of great use and use the theory to shape their everyday lives, yet others believe it of little use and do not see how it is relevant as Plato's emphasis is not on the physical world they live in, but the 'real' world, and so therefore is not relevant or important.