

Plato Questions

a) Explain Plato's concept of the soul and its relationship to the body.

Plato was a dualist. He believed that we are dual creatures, the soul is distinct from the body and vice versa. The body has extension (it takes up space) and is impermanent: it has a beginning and will have an end. The soul takes up no space and is immortal: it pre-existed our body and will live forever.

Plato believed that the soul was immortal; it was in existence before the body and it continues to exist when the body dies. Plato thought this to be true because of his Theory of Forms. Plato thought we had such ideas as a 'perfect circle', not because we have seen one before or that it had been described to us, but the image was already known to us through the world of Forms. Plato was also a rationalist. He believed that you only have true knowledge and understanding of reality through reason. The physical world is inferior, of course, to the realm of Forms. Any knowledge we have of the physical world is through our senses and is subjective and inexact.

Plato adopted the theory that our soul had already lived a life in the World of Forms, and as the body experienced things, this caused the soul to recollect lost memories. Plato called this the Theory of Recollection – All our ideas are innate such that all learning is a remembering. At birth, as the soul is cast into a body, it is thrown into a state of forgetfulness. Learning, then, is a process of reawakening to what we already know in the depths of our souls but is nonetheless concealed to our normal, everyday consciousness. Plato often viewed the process of life as a moving from darkness or a state of sleep toward the light and full wakefulness. Given this view, Plato viewed teachers such as Socrates to be not instructors who instill knowledge but rather as “midwives” whose job is simply to help give birth to those ideas that are already within us.

Plato believed that the human person also has different elements: the physical body, the mind, and the immortal soul. The body, like everything else physical, is in a constant state of change, and therefore cannot be the source of the object of reliable truth, because it is never the same from one moment to the next. The soul, in contrast, is immortal and unchanging, and therefore can both know and be known. Plato divided the soul into three parts: the appetitive part, the spirited or emotional part, and the intellectual part. The appetitive part seeks the fulfillment of various bodily pleasures such as food, drink, sex, etc. The spirited or

emotional part seeks honor and dignity. Finally, the intellectual part seeks truth and knowledge.

However, Plato also believed that the mind and the body are often in opposition. The mind wants to understand ideas, to gain real knowledge of the Forms; but the body is interested in sense pleasures, and it has needs such as eating and sleeping which are constantly getting in the way of intellectual pursuits, because they keep interrupting. Often, the demands of the body are so great that they take over completely, cluttering the mind with thoughts of what might be for lunch, or whether we are looking our best, or whether we are too hot or too cold. He thought that the intellectual part or power must be in control, or otherwise our bodily desires will wreak havoc in its reckless striving for its own fulfillment (Plato uses the metaphor of a many-headed beast, which devours itself in self-consumption). An example of Plato's writings:

"The body is the source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery, and in fact, as men say, takes away from us all power of thinking at all."

Plato, then, saw the body as a nuisance and a bind. It is not the real person. A good example is this: If we say "I have a cat", we mean something entirely different from "I am a cat"; "I have a cat" means that I am not the cat itself, I am separate, distinct, the cat is something I own but it is not me. We say "I have a body", not "I am a body"; this hints at Plato's idea that the real person is separate and distinct from the body it inhabits.

Plato believed that the soul is the driving force of the body. He compares the soul to a charioteer, in charge of two horses. One of the horses is the body, and the other is the mind. The soul tries to guide them together, rather than letting them go off in opposite directions (i.e. contradicting each other). Many people never achieve this direction; they allow their bodily desires to control their life and have no time left for intellectual pursuits, and are satisfied with the world of appearances, and mistake their opinions for true knowledge. They can be related to the prisoners in the cave, who did not want to be released, and who thought that the shadows on the wall were actually making noises.

If Plato believed that the soul is immortal, and that it exists before, during, and after it is trapped in a human body, then it has to pre-exist the body, because it is unchanging, and part of being unchanging means that it cannot come into existence or go away again, it has to stay the same. It is connected with Plato's view that all real knowledge is remembering, recollection. As a person discovers different elements of the physical

world, this begins a process of remembering. The soul, or psyche, begins to remember the world of Forms which it once inhabited, and it longs to return to this unchanging world; it has become dissatisfied with the limitations of the body and the world of appearances.

b) To what extent is Plato convincing in his views on the soul's 'innate knowledge'?

Plato's views on the soul's 'innate knowledge' is that the soul has the knowledge of the world of Forms, but when it enters the body at birth, it forgets its knowledge and understanding of its natural realm, because it is in the body.

Plato believes that as we live our life, the soul gradually 'wakes up' as we see particulars, which remind it of the ultimate Forms, of which the particulars are mere reflections of. The soul wants to return to the world of Forms, and be free of the body.