

Criticisms of Plato's theory

Plato used the analogy of the cave to criticise the unphilosophical and to 'get back' at the rulers of the Athens who had executed his tutor, Socrates. He argued that the world that we perceive is a world of illusions, of 'shadows' of the 'real world' of the form. He thought that every object in our world corresponds to its form in the world of ideas. Plato believes that our experience of the form pre-dates our experience of the 'real object.' Aristotle, Plato's pupil was critical of this idea as he believed that the 'form' is developed through continued experience of physical things. It does not seem reasonable that we have the 'world of ideas'. It may be reasonable that there can be 'perfect forms' of concrete objects, and those ideas can exist eternally, where as the concrete objects are subject to constant change. There could be concepts of perfection such as beauty, justice and the good but Plato's argument that there is a world where these concepts exist seems unreasonable. Are these concepts a simple way of understanding the world around us? If this is so, they exist only in the realm of language and not in a real 'world of the form'. Plato argues that the world of the form is 'self-evident' but most people would disagree. Self-evident is usually taken to mean that there is evidence that is incontrovertible-Assuming these are the forms of all things in the world-what are these forms like? If there is a form for everything this could include the most basic particles. Is there a form for atoms? Or even a form of the nucleus of an atom? If this were the case then it is possible that nothing is really static, as every single particle is unique. The world of being effectively becomes the world of becoming. Plato would not wish to hold to such a view, but he is unclear as to the extent the Forms can be reduced. Is there a form for the species 'humanity' or a form for each individual person? What is there is one form for the whole planet? If the latter is the case then we are faced with Forms within a Form. A related problem is there could be an infinite regress of forms. For example, if you imagine you have a series of particular beds then you add the Form of the bed to this series you now have an additional series of beds which means you must have an additional form that shares what all these beds have in common. You now have a series of beds that includes two forms. However, you must now have an additional form for this series. And so on. Plato was aware of this criticism and was adamant that a form is unique but again he does not really defend why the form is unique. Also does the world of the form also include the form of the cockroach and smallpox virus?

We can imagine there being a 'form of the horse' to which the objects in the real world refer to. Does the single form refer to all objects, or does each object have its own form? If the single form of the horse is perfect, are the varieties of horses different through their imperfections, or is there an individual form for every horse, mule and donkey ever to have lived? Plato believed that the highest form is the form of the good. He believed this form to be like the sun in the Allegory of the cave- it illuminates all the other forms. All the other forms are a derivation of the form of the Good. We recognise things in our world, which are 'good', but they are still part of the contingent world and subject to change. We know they are good because we have knowledge of the form of the Good. How do we know what goodness is? There doesn't appear to be complete agreement on this. There is an argument over relative and absolute ethics. Society's values change over time and also in different parts of the world. If Plato's idea of the Form of the Good was valid, there would not be these disagreements. Plato believed that the soul is like the driver of a car. The body is merely a vehicle for the soul on its journey through life. The body is the physical part of the person, and the soul is the immortal, immaterial part. The mind can access the world of the eternal. Plato also believed that there was conflict between the body and the soul. The soul was fixed on "higher things", such as the knowledge of the Forms, while the body was only interested in sensual things, such as eating and drinking, but obviously Plato's views on the soul will only work if you accept his idea of the world of the form. Basic to Plato's idea are the concepts of a priori and a posteriori knowledge. Plato undervalues sense experience

(a posteriori). He also has a low opinion of the body and he regards it with contempt. It is reasonable to argue that the instinctive behaviour of a human being, which is essential to its survival, is more important than plato gives credit. Our senses give us data that we need to make our way through society. Physical experience is vital to this. Plato's own teaching was conducted through a series of discussions, without the auditory sense experience of his pupils, he would have been wasting his time. Plato's beliefs about Justice are irrelevant if he is to argue that the body is unimportant. It doesn't matter if the body is made to suffer injustice if the body doesn't matter.

Plato's politics

Plato's most famous work "The Republic" is based on the question "What is justice?" For Plato justice is achieved in a individual's life when they are ruled by reason. Likewise, a state can only be just when it is governed by reason.

For Plato justice is achieved within the state when each class of people is able to perform its own function in harmony with others. In other words, you should know your station in life and stick to it. People divide the Human soul into 3 parts:

- Reason
- Spirit/ emotions/ will
- Appetite / desires

For an individual to live a good life reason must rule and control the appetite through the use of the will. Reason is like a charioteer in charge of two unruly horses, the spirit and the appetites. If reason is in control you achieve harmony.

Plato divides the ideal society into 3 parts:

- Rulers, rational philosophers who understand true knowledge of the forms. Govern the state. (Gold)
- Military, courageous and spirited required for defending the state (Silver)
- Workers, economic class, based on appetites, produce the goods needed for society. (Bronze)

Below these groupings would be slaves who possessed no rights at all. Plato saw nothing immoral with this, which illustrates how Plato was a product of his time. Plato's ideal state would be harmonious and unchanging but how could it be achieved?

You need propaganda to get people to accept and not question their status in society. A 'noble myth' tells a person that they were born with either a Gold, Silver or Bronze nature and that determines their status.

Selective Breeding must take place to ensure the creation of "gifted rulers" (like animal breeding) sex is freely permitted but marriage partners selected by the state for breeding purposes. Children born outside of state control must be aborted or killed. Children removed from families to be raised communally. They are not to know who their parents are but to treat all with equal respect. Plato is prepared to sacrifice what others would consider fundamental individual rights and the natural family unit in order to develop the intellectual ruling elite.

The Rulers or Philosopher Kings in Plato's state would work for the benefit of others, for the whole of society. Could be termed an Aristocratic or Meritocratic system.

Plato outlines his ideal state, not because it is ever going to be possible to construct it, but to have a standard by which to judge actual states.

Sparta- Timocratic State- run by the military

Corinth-Oligarchy-run for the benefit of the ruling class.

Athens-Democracy- The "polis", "citizens" vote on major issues.

Syracuse- Tyranny-run by a despotic ruler

Plato's influence

On philosophy

The history of philosophy was described by 20th century British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead as a "series of footnotes to Plato." This means that Plato laid the foundations for all western philosophy, which came after him. He formulated methods and terminology which is still used in philosophy today. He defined and defended philosophy as a distinct discipline. Many of the issues and debates raised by Plato are still discussed today. E.g. "how can we gain true knowledge about the world?" "How should society be ruled?" "Why should we be good?" "Do human beings have souls?" "Is morality objective or subjective?" Plato began a movement called 'Rationalism' which has been important within philosophy. Basically the idea that truth is discovered through reason rather than experience.

Headline: Plato set an agenda for the whole discipline of philosophy. Although remember that very few people would agree today with all of Plato's thought.

On Christianity

'Plato had more influence on the development of early Christian thought than any other non-Christian' Bryan Magee

Plato's Realm of the Forms=influenced Christian ideas about heaven.

Plato's Form of the Good=influenced Christian ideas about God. God being the perfect source of goodness, above and beyond the physical world.

Plato's ideas on Body and Soul= influenced Christian ideas that the soul is more important than the body, that spiritual pleasures and possessions are more important than bodily or material possessions or pleasures. That this current world is ultimately not our home, and our soul will continue to exist after the death of our body.

Headline: Plato and Socrates were often referred to as "Christians before Christ"

On politics:

Plato's republic is charged by Brian Magee as having an influence on the totalitarian philosophies and regimes of the 20th century. He appears to advocate

extensive government interference in the lives of individuals and censorship of the arts.