

a) Explain what Plato meant by the Form of the Good?

The basis of Plato's philosophy is his theory of Ideas, or doctrine of Forms while the notion of Forms is essential to Plato's philosophy, over years of philosophical study, it has been difficult to understand what these Forms are supposed to be, and the purpose of their existence. When examining Plato's forms and evaluating the theory, some conclusions have proved to be unclear and unanswered. However, the doctrine of Forms is essential to Plato's philosophy. Plato came to his view of the Forms based on two premises: first that knowledge cannot come through the senses; and second, we do nevertheless manage to know things – in mathematics, for instance. Plato believed in two worlds; the empirical realm of concrete, familiar objects known through sensory experience, and the rational realm of perfect and eternal Forms. According to Plato, the empirical realm is not real, as sensory objects are not completely real. Beliefs derived from experience of such objects are therefore vague and unreliable, whereas principles of mathematics and philosophy, discovered by inner, rationalistic meditation on the Forms, constitute the only real "knowledge". Such familiar, concrete things as trees, human bodies and animals, which can be known through the senses, are merely shadowy, imperfect copies of their Forms.

In the Republic Plato used the "Allegory of the Cave." to help illustrate his theory of the world and appearance versus reality. In the Allegory Plato uses the metaphor of slaves living in a cave who are chained to a wall in the lower part of a cave and can only see one wall. Above the slaves is a fire and the fire casts shadows onto the wall, which faces the slaves, and shadows of certain figures and objects are cast on the wall. The slaves know nothing of reality except the one of which they are presented as the Sun, which represents the Form of the Good is outside the cave but the slaves have no idea of its existence. One day a prisoner is released from his shackles and goes up to the upper part of the cave and sees the fire and the objects, which are casting the shadows, and he also sees the sun and is blinded by this higher form of reality. Plato believed that the way to find or realise true reality is not through gathering empirical evidence or through deep scientific tests such as studying the shadows to determine what they are. But rather that in order to break the "chains" we can only do so through inner contemplation or philosophical investigation in order to ascend out of the cave and see the sun which gives light to all the forms.

For every sense object in the empirical world, there is a corresponding perfect Form. These Forms are non-physical, permanent, eternal, and invisible. How then, you may ask, can one ever know of the Forms if they cannot be known by sense perception? Plato answers this question by stating that the Forms are known in thought. They are the objects of thought, therefore, whenever you are thinking, you are thinking of Forms. An important point to note about the Forms is the idea of permanence as the Forms are forever unchanging. An important standard of Plato's theory of knowledge was that all genuine objects of knowledge be described without contradiction. Therefore, because all objects perceived by sense undergo change, an assertion can be made that such objects at one time will not be true at a later time. Because what is fully real must, for Plato, be fixed, permanent, and unchanging, he identified the real with the ideal realm of "being" as opposed to the empirical world of "becoming". This all leads to Plato's inevitable rejection of empiricism. He thought that propositions derived from sensory experience have, at most, a degree of probability; they are not certain. Pure knowledge may only be derived from certain, permanent facts. The argument is really that not only do the things we perceive

change, but so do the circumstances in which we perceive them. Moreover, things must often seem different to one person than they do to the next, for the circumstances of one is rarely the same as another's. We are also liable to experience illusions, states of dreaming and hallucination, and our initial judgments are also often influenced by our expectations and biases.

As a result of these circumstances, Plato supposes that we can never gain knowledge through our senses. Empiricism is rejected in Plato's philosophy, contradicting with his theory of Forms to a large degree. Plato conceived the Forms as arranged hierarchically. A dividing line splits the rational realm into the division of the lower Forms and the higher Forms (including the Form of the Good). The Form of the Good is the supreme Form, the highest in the hierarchy, and includes all other forms within it. Everything depends on this Form, and the Form itself depends on nothing. If we could know this Form, we would illuminate and readjust our knowledge. Truth, beauty, and justice coincide in the Form of the Good, and it is something that answers all ultimate questionings. In Plato's Republic, the sun in the Allegory of the Cave represents the Form of the Good. Plato sums up his views in an image of ignorant humanity, trapped in the depths of a cave and not even aware of its own limited perspective. They mistake shadows on the walls of the cave as true reality, when in fact reality lies in the world outside of the cave, the world of Forms. The rare individual escapes the limitations of that cave and, through a long intellectual journey, discovers a higher realm, a true reality, and the sunlight on the other side of the cave. The sunlight is discovered with a final, almost mystical awareness of Goodness as the origin of everything that exists. Such a person is then the best equipped to govern in society, having a knowledge of what is ultimately most worthwhile in life and not just a knowledge of techniques; but that person will frequently be misunderstood by those ordinary people back in the cave who haven't shared in the intellectual insight. Ideally, it is the philosopher who is able to penetrate the world outside the cave of ignorance and achieve the true reality of the world of Forms. Also the word "Good" when used by Plato should not be confused with the meaning of the word in a moral sense for instance the "Form of the Good" is likened more to the form of the Truth rather than "This movie is good." The Truth is a better word to be used when talking about Plato and the Forms as the Sun gives light to all other forms and they are all particulars of the form of the Good and all partake in the form of the Good and the Form of the Good is the truth and the closer you get to it the closer you are to reality rather than appearance.

b) "Plato's Forms are no more than an invention." Discuss.

A philosopher who might agree with this statement would be a philosopher who would criticise Plato's theory of the Forms there are a few criticisms of Plato's theory here are a few of the most common. The first criticism that a philosopher might have of Plato's theory of the Forms might be the problem that the theory of the Forms suggests a metaphysical world whose existence cannot be proved and that the existence of the Forms is not necessarily the obvious conclusion of logical reasoning

or the only conclusion after the evidence that Plato presents us with. Plato also doesn't provide a convincing argument in favour of belief that there is a world of ideas which is more real than the world of appearances. Some philosophers might even agree that we need to have certain concepts of perfect equality or perfect goodness as tools to help us understand the world around us but that this doesn't mean that they must have an independent existence. Plato himself believed that this higher level of reality of the Forms was self-evident however some might argue that this is not the case as the floor seems real enough when we fall over and graze our knee whereas the ideal form of a dog doesn't seem to be that real even as a concept. This problem of the forms being a remote force that we can't relate to is another problem as it works better for certain concepts such as the form of a circle is easier to relate to than the form of disease as it's harder to imagine the form of disease. Therefore the theory of the forms seems to be an invention as we cannot relate to it as much as Plato would like and the theory works better for certain forms than others and the idea of a metaphysical world which can't be proved that easily and is therefore open to criticisms like the ones stated above and can be called an invention.

Another criticism most famous to philosophers throughout history is the problem with too many Forms. If all things have a Form, and there is always something further and higher, then wouldn't there then be Forms for Forms? According to the theory, the cycle would be endless. The problem is that Plato can't stop at just one Form for each type of thing. An infinite number of Forms is a ridiculous notion. If we deny that there are an infinite number of Forms for each thing, which Plato surely would, then how would it be proven that there is even one Form for each type of thing?

The theory of the Forms can be seen as an invention is so far that Plato tells us that we are ignorant and too accepting of the world that is presented to us and that there is a higher form of reality and that what appears to be the real world is not the truest form of the world as we are not enlightened to the truth or the form of the Good. This is fine as we are told of this and that we need to get to the form of the Good and it will shed light on all other forms and will show us the truth and expose everything in its truest form but Plato fails to mention how exactly we should go about reaching the form of the Good all he does is tell us what not to do. Plato says that the way to reach reality is not to go down the path of empiricism and try to analyse the world around the forms and us and try to assume from empirical evidence of what is reality, instead Plato tells us only through inner contemplation can we hope to know the truth.

Finally I think that another problem with Plato's theory of the Forms is the problem that he's not very clear about how specific forms relate to certain items in the world of appearances. Is there a ideal Form of Animal to which all animals relate ourselves included or do Forms relate to specific animal species. Is there a ideal form for a dog what about a pregnant, blind and three legged Scottish terrier then the Forms stop being "universals" and degenerate into something which has little meaning or use. In my opinion I think the statement is correct and although some may argue Plato didn't need the empirical evidence that people criticised his theory on as it has very little I would say that we live in a sceptical world where in most cases it's not what you know but what you can prove that is believed in the world and I see Plato's theory as too remote a concept to not be an invention.