

A History of Philosophy

04 Plato's Epistemology

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Now, this afternoon, we turn our attention to Plato, and in dealing with Plato, I want to follow this general format for the next couple of weeks. We'll start with his epistemology, then look at his famous theory of forms, which of course is precisely what nominalism denies, then how all this bears on his understanding of God and the cosmos, then his understanding of the human soul, and finally the good life. Ethics, social philosophy, etc.

Now, to make the transition to Plato, let's cast our minds back into the pre-Socratics and the sophists, where we've made emphasis on two lines of thought that developed there. One has to do with that pre-scientific cosmology, the orderedness of nature as a whole, which, for the sophists in their scepticism, raised questions about the possibility of knowing anything about the reality of what governs nature at all. And that epistemological question surfaces then because of the efforts of pre-scientific cosmology.

The other line of thought we emphasized was the notion of moral order. The city-state and its proper ordering of justice, and the moral ordering of an individual's life. Now, that also raises epistemological questions, questions about moral knowledge.

Can we really know the objective truth in ethical matters? Or are we again caught in the competition between knowledge claims and mere opinion? Are there universal moral ideals, or are we left hanging in some relativistic situation in which every man is the measure of all things? Protagoras, you remember. So, whether we take the scientific cosmology approach or the moral order approach, the same questions about knowledge versus scepticism develop in the sophists and, of course, in Socrates' attempt to counter the thinking of the sophists. Now, Plato inherits that debate from Socrates, so that whether Plato is talking about the virtues, or about his major concern over the improvement of the soul, or whether he's talking about the ordering of the city-state in his political writings, or whether he's doing some things as he does in a few places on cosmology, the order of nature.

In all of those areas, the same question arises. How can we know for sure? How can we get beyond relatively varying opinions? And we see that the sort of direction which Socrates started, the alternatives of rhetoric versus dialectic, come into focus in Plato's thinking. Now, this week, you are reading Plato's *Mino*, among other dialogues.

And that particular dialogue, the *Mino*, gets right at the heart of this issue, and helps you to see the way in which it's related to ethical matters. The overall question that

the Mino focuses on is the question that people still ask, I guess every parent asks it, and I hope most educators ask it: Can virtue be taught? Can virtue be taught? We still talk about character development, moral education, and moral development. Essentially, that's the question that the Mino is discussing: whether virtue can be taught.

It becomes obvious, of course, that to teach something requires, presumably, that one has some knowledge of the subject to teach. So, in asking, "Can virtue be taught, Plato has Socrates, the principal character, ask the intermediate question," Well, what is knowledge? And in the light of that, can virtue be taught? And you'll find that the dialogue ends with a note of ambiguity. Because, while of course, the sophists, with their rhetoric, can't teach something when all they've got is their own relative opinions, rhetoric doesn't teach virtue, in the hands of those rather un-virtuous sophists.

But the people who should know what virtue is, outstanding, morally upright, civic leaders, and parents, well, they don't seem to have been very effective at teaching virtue. Look at the kinds of kids they've got, the sons that grow up in their homes, you see. So, can virtue be taught? Now, of course, there are other variables involved in moral education, besides simply imparting knowledge of what is virtue.

Even what is a particular virtue, like the classic Greek virtues of temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice. There's more to moral development than knowing the essence of any of those virtues. And in the Mino, Plato doesn't get into the more.

He does a little bit in the Republic and elsewhere. But the question is posed, and immediately we are precipitated into epistemology. Now, what I want to do, however, is to broaden the picture from the Mino.

And to comment briefly about a variety of things which Plato talks about, both in the Mino and in other dialogues on epistemology. You'll find both in the Mino and in the selection from the symposium, and in the selection from the Phaedo. Those are the three that you're into this week.

In all three of them, that distinction between knowledge and mere opinion comes through. Opinion is based on experience. Experience is basically a matter of sense perception.

The sense perception of particular things in the world in which we live. And sense perception, Plato points out, some of his predecessors had, sense perception tends to be relative. Relative to the condition of the sense organs.

Relative to the condition and position of the object you're viewing. And, of course, particular objects are constantly changing in some regards. And so the condition of the object is very significant.

Sense perception, in other words, does not yield us unchanging knowledge of unchanging truths. It tends to yield a variable relative awareness of changing particulars. You see.

And, consequently, the accumulated opinions that we have on the basis of experience are simply not reliable. Now, in another of his dialogues, the *Thaitetus*, and all these dialogues are named after characters who appear, or most of them at least. In the *Thaitetus*, he debates various possibilities.

If knowledge is not sense perception, could it be that we can make a simple qualification and say that knowledge is the truth that we gain, true opinions, not mistaken ones, but true opinions based on sense perception. Could that be the case? And the debate argues, no, even that isn't really adequate and unchanging. It's too liable to change.

How do you know what is true if it's just based on sense perceptions? Well, could it be then that knowledge is true opinion based on sense experience, true opinion plus an account of why it is true? But that, of course, just opens up a whole can of worms. What sort of an account can you give other than one based on sense perception? Which would be quite circular, you'd think. So the question arises, if all we have to go on is experience, and that yields only opinion, we have difficulty nailing it down.

Or to use Plato's metaphor, tethering it. And he uses that metaphor in the *Mino*. Opinion, true opinion, may be alright for practical purposes like avoiding chariots while you cross the street.

It may be alright for the daily tasks in the world of particulars. But it really needs tethering. That's it, like a horse.

It'll wander away if it's loose. It needs tethering. And the thing to tether an opinion is dialectic.

Dialectic. So no matter what sort of rhetorical tricks you pull about your opinions, the opinions still aren't firmed up, nailed down, tethered, whichever metaphor you like, unless by dialectic. Well, that just poses the question, what is dialectic? You say, what is dialectic? And you can come at it in various ways.

Dialectic is, well, it's thinking something through to a conclusion that's gonna be true of all times and places. In other words, thinking beyond the relativities. Of a particular time or condition of an object.

Thinking beyond the relativity of different sense organs with different degrees of sharpness at different times. Thinking beyond the relativities of sense perception to something, some truth, which is unchanging. And in speaking of dialectic, he often associates it as well with what he calls recollection.

Reminiscence. Because the way in which dialectic uncovers what is true is very much like the way in which you recollect something that you have forgotten. You know the way that goes.

You simply don't remember meeting such and such an individual. But then, as I describe the individual, tell you certain of her mannerisms, and perhaps start describing the occasion when you met her, oh, it begins to, as we say, come back. And while it's not initially clear, you say, oh yes, now I begin to remember, to recollect.

Now, dialectic has that effect, except that it's not a matter of recollecting particular experiences. There is, as a result of dialectic, an actual recall going on. As dialectic enables you to recall the mind, unchanging truths that you knew in a previous existence.

Yeah, you see, we'll get into this later on, but Plato believed in the pre-existence of the soul. Pre-existence of the soul. So that you come into this life with certain innate knowledge.

Innate in the literal sense, inborn. You are born with certain latent ideas in your mind. Latent in the sense that you're not aware of them.

Until the dialectic enables you to recall them. So dialectic facilitates the recollection of innate knowledge from a previous existence of the soul. Now, perhaps you're acquainted with Plato's famous cave analogy.

Stumpf talks of it. But what Plato does is, and this is in his Republic, which is not named after a character, it's about the ideal city-state. But in the Republic, he likens the soul in this life to a prisoner in a cave.

Okay? The prisoner who is tied in such a way that he can only look towards the rear wall of the cave. And the light of the sun filters in. There's a fire burning in the mouth of the cave, casting a flickering light.

So that shadows appear on the wall in front of the prisoner. Constantly changing, never reliable. You can never really pin them down, nail them down, tether them.

Okay? Meanwhile, your captors scowl, big stick in hand, walk to and fro, casting further shadows on that wall ahead. The soul is a prisoner in the body. Born into this life, you are imprisoned by being born.

And as a result, you're unable to see the way things are, out there in the real world, as you say. All you get is flickering shadows far removed from reality. A world of changing appearances, relative and unreliable.

You're suffering from amnesia. I guess that was the big stick on the head. You're suffering from amnesia.

You don't recall anything. Unless, of course, somebody can start probing with the right questions dialectically to elicit some awareness, you see. And recollection begins.

And so it's possible then that a person can be freed from those chains and be able at least to turn around and get acquainted with the erstwhile captors behind and with the reality of this cave, what this is. But that's still very shadowy, you see. It's only when we are able to reach outside the cave and see things that we come to know the way things are in reality.

So what Plato is depicting then is a scheme in which we have two realms of being. Two realms of being. A realm of physical particulars.

A realm of universal truths. Reality. Universal truths.

This is what we have to know. This is simply the arena of opinion. And somehow or other, even while we're in this life, we have to engage in a dialectic which enables us to think up there rather than being simply confined to particulars down there.

This takes dialectic. Stuck in the cave, all you can do is engage in face-saving rhetoric. So in the *Meno*, you find that Plato talks of knowing by recollection the unchanging universal essence of something.

Like the very essence of virtue. All recollection may be evoked by considering particular cases, particular examples, but dialectic is not empirical generalization across a lot of particular cases. Empirical generalization doesn't get you to the essence of the thing, only to similarities, some of which may be very incidental and unnecessary.

So you have to get beyond the sense perception and the empirical generalization to thinking abstractly, in abstraction from all of those particulars, about the essential nature of things. Dialectic, then, typically will start with a hypothesis about the essence of something. In the *Republic*, as I mentioned before.

The question is, what is justice? So the discussion starts with hypotheses as to what justice is, which are offered by Thrasymachus and others along the way. And it is by the analysis of those hypotheses about the essence of justice that finally the dialectic gets closer and closer to the truth about justice. In the *Phaedo*, you will find that Plato uses the concept of equality as an example.

How do you judge that two sticks, or two pieces of chalk, or for that matter, two sticks of so-called dry ink, or do they call this liquid chalk? Well, whichever it is, are equal in length. What do you say, by looking at them? No. You cannot say they're equal in length unless you already have a concept of equality to know what you're saying when you say they're equal in length.

In other words, a judgment like these two sticks are equal in length presupposes a non-empirical concept of equality, which may be elicited by talking about two sticks being equal in length, but is not, as such, an empirical property. No two physical things are ever exactly the same, after all. So, the example there is of things being equal in length, all right.

Now, it's with that in mind that we have this print-off from Plato's *Republic*. Well, let me mention one other. In the *Symposium*, you'll find he distinguishes between beauty, the essence of beauty, the ideal beauty, capital B, and particular beautiful things.

Particularly beautiful things are objects of sense perception. Beauty, the ideal, capital B, is grasped, as he puts it, by the eye of the mind. You see with your mind.

You see what I mean? Do you know how we often say that? You're following a mathematical proof, and the conclusion comes out clearly, and you say, oh, I see what I ought to have done. Yes, seeing abstractly, not with reference to sense particulars, but with reference to some abstract line of thought. You see? We say it again and again.

Well, look at this excerpt from *The Republic*. Everybody has a copy? Okay, it's from Book Seven of *The Republic*, in the context where the cave analogy appears. Conceive, said I, that there are these two entities.

One of them is sovereign over the intelligible order, and the other over the world of the eyeball. Okay, the sensory world. So this then is the sensory world, the world of the eyeball and the other senses, and this is the intelligible world.

Okay, intelligible and sense world. The visible and the intelligible. Now represent them, as it were, by a line divided into two unequal sections.

Two unequal sections, all right? Make this one a little bit longer. And cut each section again in the same ratio, all right? And you've got a line divided into four parts, Plato's famous divided line. Okay.

The section of the visible and that of the intelligible, and then as an expression of the ratio of their comparative clearness and obscurity, you will have as one section of the visible world, all right, as one section, images. Images. That is, shadows, reflections in the water, or on surfaces, things of that kind.

Images, shadows, illusions, hallucinations. Imaginations, if you like, where you fantasize about something, picturing to yourself something which doesn't exist physically. Okay.

The second section assumes that of which this is a likeness or an image, that is, animals, plants, and the whole class of man-made objects. So here you've got physical particulars. Okay, physical particulars.

Okay. And then what you do in the higher region is something similar. You make a distinction, as he puts it, such that there is one section which the soul is compelled to investigate by treating as images the things imitated in the former division and by means of assumptions, images and assumptions, from which it proceeds to the conclusion.

And another section in which it advances from its assumption to a beginning principle. All right, so here you've got, if you like, first principles. Okay.

And here you've got the reasoning and making of inferences. And as he goes on, he points out that it's in this area of reasoning and making inferences that mathematics fits, which, of course, is making inferences, reasoning things out all the time, so that mathematical objects, like mathematical relationships, like addition and so forth, come out there. But as we know from Euclidean geometry onwards, all mathematical systems and inferences depend on first principles.

First principles that are assumed in the inference. Okay. So now what we have is to distinguish the different kinds of awareness correspondingly.

Okay. If you take those images to be real, that's what we call illusion. This, dealing with physical particulars, is what we call sense perception.

Those are the two kinds of opinion. *Doxa*, the Greek word. Opinion, seeming.

Appearance, the Greek word *doceo*. And up here, you have, of course, deductive reasoning. Deduction, that kind of thinking.

And here, knowledge of first principles is by dialectic. Knowledge of first principles by dialectic. Okay, so that's the thing that he introduces.

Now, halfway down the second page in this handout, he comes to talking about dialectic. Understanding that by the other section of the intelligible, I mean that which reason lays hold of, the power of dialectic. Now, what is dialectic? It treats its assumptions not as absolute beginnings, but as hypotheses, underpinnings, footings, springboards that enable it to rise to that which requires no assumption and is the starting point of all.

And after attaining that, again, taking hold of the first dependencies and so proceeding downward to the conclusion. This is dialectic. And he goes on.

It's no slight task that you have in mind. I understand that you distinguish reality and the intelligible contemplated by dialectic as something truer and more exact than the object of arts and sciences, whose assumptions are arbitrary. Okay.

Those who contemplate them are compelled to use understanding and not the senses. They go back to the beginning, the foundations of the study. And then at the top of 747, your interpretation is sufficient so that answering these four sections, you have an intellectual reason for the highest, understanding or thinking things through for the second, belief or perceptual belief for the third, picture thinking, conjecture or illusion if you take it as reality for the fourth.

Okay. Well, and then the other two paragraphs are added from a little later in the text. Is not dialectic the only process of inquiry that does away with hypotheses, advances to the first principle itself? It's true that when the eye of the soul is sunk in the barbaric slough of orthic myth, dialectic gently draws it out, leads it up, employing as helpers, cooperators, the studies and sciences we've enumerated, and so forth.

And then in the, what remains, we give the name dialectician to the man who's able to exact an account of the essence of each thing. Will you not say that the one who's unable to do it, capable of rendering an account to himself and others, doesn't possess full reason and intelligence about the matter? But the man who is able, so forth, is different. So, notice the description he gives in the final paragraph.

As it were in battle, running the gauntlet of all tests, striving to examine everything by essential reality and not opinion, he holds on his way through all this without tripping up in his reasoning. The man who lacks this power doesn't really know the good itself or any particular good. So you see, dialectic is analysis of argument and of idea, looking for consistency, looking for something which doesn't beg any question, which has no prior assumptions, scrutinizing it relentlessly, facing every objection, every other competitor, every counter-argument.

You see? And if it survives that test of careful, honest, relentless dialectic, then you can be pretty sure you've grasped the truth. You see? Now, that's Plato's account of dialectic. And with the rest of what we've been doing, it tells us what he thinks of knowledge.

Do you get it? What do you think of it? Feedback? Questions? Yes, David. Yeah, we'll look at that a bit more later on. He seems to think that it's only at death that we get the full vision of the sun, which in the analogy is the most ultimate reality, the source of being, the source of light.

Yeah. So that full understanding comes later. And incidentally, that becomes the basis for the development of certain mystical traditions when Platonism was taken over in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the sun becomes likened to God.

So the vision of God, the mystical vision, you see. Is it possible in this life? In a limited way? Does it await the hereafter? Fully, yes. Yeah, Karl.

Yeah, I think he would say we're living in a world of images, illusions, particulars. We simply don't get back to ultimate first principles. Our society hangs not on the knowledge of some ultimate, eternal, unchanging good, but on some social contract, you see.

Yeah. Yeah, I think he would talk that way. It would not be Plato's ideal republic in which we live.

Right. Yeah, Jason. No, not, is it Jason? Tim, okay.

Yes. Right. Yes, he does.

And we'll look at it when we get down to talking about the human soul. The fado, which you're reading, is part of the full fado, which gives a whole series of arguments for both the pre-existence and the immortality of the soul. You may know, incidentally, that in the early church, there were three views that were debated concerning the origin of the individual soul.

Either the platonic view that it pre-existed, or the view that it was somehow reproduced with physical procreation, or that it is a special creation of God at some point in fetal development. Curiously, the first was characteristic of Plato and the Platonic influence. The second of the more of the Stoics.

And the third seems to have been separately introduced. So, the history of theology in that way is very much indebted to the Greek tradition. Very much.

But we'll get back to that as we get to the human soul. Yeah, Tim. What is recollection? Yeah.

Okay. Dialectic recollection of innate ideas. Yes, dialectic is the means, the method employed.

Okay? That facilitates recollection of innate ideas about those first principles. Get it? So, recollection is seeing with the eye of the mind, whereas dialectic is how we get our minds into the position to be able to see. Okay? If you like, dialectic is focusing the mind.

Focusing the mind. Jess. Yeah.

Yeah. No, if you go back to the differences in ethical matters, which we saw emerging in the pre-Socratics, those are the differences which Plato would say are represented here. That is to say, if we understand the first principles of moral order, okay, we'll have to think about the principle of justice.

And he tries to define what justice is as a result of dialectical inquiry in the Republic. But in the meantime, what were some of the Greek poets interested in when they weren't interested in the moral order of justice? You see? What are the Sophists after? What are they talking about? Well, in the materials we have, take a look at Democritus again. Where Democritus was saying, yeah, be savvy, use your head, but in order to ensure pleasure rather than pain.

In order to be successful. In order to enjoy life. Get ahead.

Now, those were the kinds of values that are represented down here. The values associated with this world. Now, you can see immediately, I suspect from that, why this had such an appeal to a religious thought.

Christian, Jewish, and later on Islamic. You see? It's as if Plato was saying, set your affection on things above, not on things below. Yeah.

And as we get to the early church fathers, we'll see that Plato was their principal resource in resisting non-Christian criticisms in those first three to four centuries. And indeed, I think as a result of assimilating it into Christian thought, Platonism was the dominant philosophical influence within Christianity until, oh, 1200, 1100, thereabouts. Yeah.

And you can see its appeal right away. You mentioned Alan Bloom last week. Yes.

He suggested post-colonialism. Yeah. Well, I think what Alan Bloom is doing is calling us back to the kind of liberal education through a study of the classics for which the University of Chicago is famous.

That is to say, while his criticism is that the contemporary university student talks as if there is no such thing as truth or falsity, right or wrong, by the time you get to the end of the book and he talks about his prescription for our society and for education, he's talking about reading all of the classics back to the Greeks and so forth. Now, why? It's not that you find one set of unchanging values. I mean, if you go through the great books, you find a whole variety of different things.

A potpourri. It's a regular cafeteria assortment. You see.

Now, I think what he is after is a dialogue that would go on with those great books. If you like, a kind of informal dialectic with those alternatives that would lead people to ask basic questions, even though they might disagree on the conclusions. They'll be trying to get back to first principles.

Well, you know, I see Christian liberal arts education very much related to that. Liberal arts education involves us in dialectic, dialogue with the great minds and great ideas of the past and the present, while all the time looking at those ideas from the perspective of the Christian faith and trying to see the relationship. On the other hand, I think there is a kind of education that is much more the rhetorical kind that teaches you the tricks of the trade so you can get ahead in your chosen vocation.

You see, that's more the rhetoricians kind. Okay. A couple of other things to round out this picture of his epistemology.

And we'll pick up on these later on. You might gain the impression from what I've said that Plato thinks of the pursuit of knowledge and the exercise of dialectic as a detached, unimpassioned, purely objectified kind of intellectual exercise. Not so.

Not so. You find that Plato talks a lot about love of the good. And of course, in the intellectual realm, love of truth.

The question is what the psychological dynamics are involved in getting a person to focus attention on first principles rather than on the titillating, fascinating particulars that absorb us for most of our lives. You see. And in the symposium, therefore, you find, for instance, the whole dialogue devoted to the question what is love? It's interesting.

What is love? Now, the word that he's using is the word eros. Desire. Now, the word eros and its cognates erotic in our day have narrowed down in their reference to sexuality.

But not so among the Greeks. Eros was simply the kind of love that wants, that desires. And when he talks of an eros for the good, it means love of what is good.

A desire to know what's good. Love of truth. A desire to know what's true.

You see. A love of wisdom. A love of beauty.

You're going to be reading the Phaedrus next week. Another of his dialogues. And you will find the dialectic versus rhetoric theme coming out in the second part of the Phaedrus.

Powerfully. What constitutes good rhetoric as against not so good rhetoric? It's rhetoric guided by knowledge gained through dialectic. You see.

But how do you get people to seek that? You see. To seek the good. There must be a love of the good.

A love of beauty. And that in turn raises the question of what can be done to get people to love? You see. In a way, there's a vicious circle.

If only you could grasp the vision of the good, the beautiful, in its ideal, in principle, grasp it with your mind, you would love it. Yeah, but how can I grasp it if I don't love it? Get the vicious circle? It takes love to see with the eye of the mind. But how can I love what I don't see? Unless there is an unsatisfied hunger.

A desire, an eros, in that sense. In The Republic, Plato makes, I think, two suggestions that he works with in a variety of places. One is that it's the task of the city-state so to order the good society as to encourage that sort of pursuit of the good.

So he sees the task of government as the improvement of the soul. Loving the right, the good, the true. Secondly, he conceives of an educational system that will gradually take people through a developmental process.

So that things like physical exercise and music, both of which involve the physical and the senses, physical exercise and music cultivate an appreciation of rational order rather than particular sense experiences. Yeah. Physical exercise Yeah, I think so.

Oh, the example that he uses is military training. Well, I don't know what military training was like in the Greek days. I know what it was like when I went through it in World War II.

The parade ground drill got the whole contingent of people behaving as if they were choreographed. Yeah. Oh, I remember Cliff Schimels, who coached football for a while.

He showed some of us one time a film of the players going into a scrimmage and coming out, and he ran it forward and backward, forward and backward, forward and backward, and it looked like a choreographed dance. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. You see.

And music, yes, you're trying to get as you listen to the music, the overall order and pattern. At least, says Plato, if it's the right sort of music. Not the Dionysian type.

You see. And so, those are the beginning stages of education. Cultivating the capacity of the mind to love and to know the ideal pattern, order.

You see. And then moving on until you work through literature of various sorts, carefully selected, so as not to arouse passions but to cultivate a love of the good. You see.

And the discipline of mathematics, which is the best preparation for doing dialectics. Yeah, to this day I buy that. Math majors who come to philosophy are usually much sharper in their logical processes than other people.

So, I think it's the same question as how do you get people to love mathematics? To love order. Intelligible order in any field.

You love it by doing it. And gradually rise to higher and higher levels. So, that is, I think, necessary to round out the picture of what he's talking about in this talk.