

A History of Philosophy

05 Plato's Theory of Forms

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What is the difference between knowledge and opinion? Opinions about which people use a great deal of rhetoric to try to manipulate and persuade others. And knowledge which is gained and transmitted by the art of dialectic.

Transmitted is actually the wrong word. Because if knowledge of unchanging truths is innate from a previous existence of the soul, as Plato holds, then we don't transmit knowledge. We elicit what is already there, innately.

But it's elicited by the dialectic And the intent of the Socratic method is, of course, to do the eliciting. To bring to birth the ideas with which people's minds are pregnant from their previous state. And in contrast to that, of course, while knowledge is then certain, rationally grounded, opinion is relative.

Changing. Because, even in the case of perceptual beliefs, opinion is based in experience of changing particulars. Temporal processes.

And our experiences tend to vary from one to another in the course of time. So that experience is an unreliable source of knowledge. At best, it provides you with a changeable opinion.

Which, in fact, may work in practical situations. But there's a distinction between what might work for some practical purpose and what constitutes knowledge in the sense of gaining unchanging wisdom. So, that distinction, I'd hope by now, is pretty clear.

Before we move on, are there any questions that have arisen in your minds or elsewhere in you since the last time about this? If you say that opinion is unreliable or temporal or whatever, how can you explain, or would you talk more about the mean now, and how he talks about tethered opinion as knowledge? Yeah. Yeah, there are two possible responses to that. One is that in a variety of dialogues, Plato is trying to think through, dialectically, what knowledge is.

And consequently, you have a series of progress reports on his own quest. And perhaps the best that he can come up with here or there is that knowledge is true opinion supported by reasons, which is one of the things he proposes in the *Thaetetus*. Now, to say it's a true opinion supported by reasons is to say that it's tethered by those reasons.

And so it's firmed up. Looks like it's true. Though elsewhere, and certainly in the *yes*, in the *Parmenides*, but also in the *Republic* particularly, he rejects the notion that knowledge is any subset of opinion because it is gained differently than opinions are gained, namely by means of dialectic rather than on the basis of experience, even when it's been cross-examined.

So that may be that it's a progress report. On the other hand, it may be that it's simply as far as he chooses to pursue the thing in that particular dialogue. You see, part of Plato's art in giving a dramatic setting to any inquiry is that the purpose of that art is to arouse people to inquiry rather than to set forth a systematic position.

The *Meno* is not a systematic treatise that Plato would stand by as his final conclusion on things. It's, as it were, a chapter in an unfolding story. And, of course, the first explanation suggests that at the time when he wrote that chapter he wasn't aware of what the final one might be, which might actually be so.

After all, how many of us are there who hold to exactly the same view of some things as we did, well, let me say to you, five years ago? And certainly on philosophical matters. You see. Oh, yes, there may be some continuity, but you change your mind along the way about certain things.

So it's conceivable that Plato did something like that. And you may note in some of the discussions that you read, the secondary source material, that Plato's scholars variously distinguish certain stages in Plato's philosophical development, characterized by certain of his writings. So you get the early Socratic dialogues, which seem to be not exactly transcripts, but pretty true to what Socrates said, did, you see.

Then there's a middle period of dialogues, which seem to be very much in the spirit of Socrates, though perhaps taking it further and fictionalizing it more. And then you get the mature dialogues in which Socrates appears, but Plato gets beyond even Socrates' method and launches into long speeches about things, which certainly in the early dialogues doesn't happen. So, stages in his development.

All right. Now, this afternoon, we want to move from the epistemological side of Plato's divided line over to the metaphysical side. From the nature of knowing to the objects of knowledge.

What is it that we know? And it's pretty plain from the diagram itself, in addition to the reading, that the object of knowledge is not the world of particulars, the world of time, change, decay, that all around we see. It strikes me that that hymn, you know, change and decay and all around I see, it's a good Platonic hymn, the theme of it. Nothing.

No, because opinion is all we can have about things that change. So the objects of knowledge have to be another kind of reality, a different kind of entity than sticks and stones and puppy dogs' tails and cabbages and kings. And such luck.

And the term that Plato uses in talking about them is the term idea, which, as you can see, gets very quickly elided into the English idea, that the objects of knowledge for Plato are not what we customarily call ideas. Ideas are mental states. Ideas are notions, concepts that, as you say, come to mind, or you think of.

Now, that's not the kind of mental object, object of knowledge, that Plato's talking about. So even though the term is idea, it is better translated, if we're going to be clear and avoid the ambiguity, it's better translated from, which actually comes from the Greek *morphe*, which was introduced by Aristotle rather than by Plato. That notion.

Forms rather than ideas, then. Gives us a clearer notion. What he's talking about is variously discussed in the history of thought, and we'll see these notions as they arise.

At times, they're called archetypes, where an archetype is a pattern. It's a model. It's the first pattern that everything else follows.

So in that sense, the form provides an ideal, a model. And so rather than calling it an idea, you might call it an ideal. The form is the archetypal ideal for a whole class of things.

Human-ness is the archetypal ideal for all humans. Horse-ness for all horses. Though perhaps to avoid ambiguity there, we should say horsety or something of that sort.

The Greeks have a suffix, *icos*, which gets it without ambiguity. Or the ideal of justice as the archetype for all acts or policies, people, or situations that you can, to any degree, call just. These are ideals.

Plato himself, in one passage in the *Philebus*, which we're reading for next week, calls them patterns. And then he's not happy with the term pattern. For reasons I'll get into in a few moments.

But the thing to keep in mind then is that while these forms are ideals for classes of things, they are themselves real entities of an immaterial sort. You see, the notion that there are other kinds of entities than material entities, physical ones, should come easily to anybody in a theistic tradition where the prime example of a non-material being would be God. And in Judeo-Christian tradition, the concept of the human soul as an immaterial entity, at least in the hereafter, is separable from the material body.

You see? So you have two examples of immaterial entities. Well, Plato says there are more examples. Namely, forms.

The form of justice. The form of humanness. The form of love.

The form of equality, as, for instance, of length. You see? Forms, in fact, of qualities, forms of species and kinds of things, and forms of different sorts of relationships. Now, can you get that? Forms of qualities, kinds of things, and relationships.

And the examples that he's particularly fond of have to do with moral qualities, virtues, and other values, moral and aesthetic values. So you have objectively based moral ideals. You see? Plato was, in that sense, a moral absolutist.

Objectively based moral ideals. But he's also fond of talking of mathematical forms, both in terms of mathematical relationships, which are logical relationships, and in terms of numbers and geometrical figures, which, by Pythagoras, were all conceptualized in terms of numbers. You see? So what you have, then, is a whole realm of things.

A realm of things which, somehow or other, this world of particular things is, in varying degrees, like or unlike. Or, to use the language that Plato introduces, particulars participate in these forms. And you can't help but observe, of course, that to say particulars... Let's see.

Particulars participate is a tautology. What is it to be a particular but to be one which, in the same word, participates? You see? A particular is a participator in something bigger. In this case, in something more ideal, more normative than incidental.

You see? So you get, if you like, particular exemplifications of those forms. The forms, you will notice, can be regarded as universal and, therefore, unchanging. He says eternal.

Whereas particulars are always changing. And, as he puts it, temporal. Universal in the sense that each form is the ideal for a whole class of things.

It's universal with respect to that class. So the form of humanness applies to the ideal for every human individual, every particular human being that ever has been, is, or will ever be. Universal for the whole class of human beings.

The form of justice is universal for everything that anybody might probably call just. It's the ideal of what it could be. Ideally would be.

Okay. So, um, the vocabulary that develops includes the term universals. And the medievals had long debates about theories of universals.

Found all sorts of theological implications in theories of universals. How can God be one and three? Ah, three particulars, one universal? Ah, said somebody, that's tritheism. Not monotheism, but tritheism.

Well, how else can we conceive of that, you think? Well, you know the way in which the Chalcedonian Creed puts it. One in essence. The essential nature.

And universals get to be known as essences. One in essence, but three in personal subsistence. Hupostasis.

That's the vocabulary of Greek metaphysics applied to the doctrine of the Trinity. 453 A.D., you see. And the medievals took it much further in detail, in argument.

But notice that it's going to have implications not only for theology, not only for ethics, but for mathematics. Any math majors? Into the foundations of math at all? You see, theories of universals apply to mathematics. What is a mathematical object? What is mathematics about? You say, well, if you're doing geometry, mathematics is about lines, geometrical figures, touching certain points.

What do you mean by a point? Well, you know the way a mathematician describes a point. Has a location, but no dimension. In other words, it doesn't exist.

It's an ideal entity. Not a physical particular, spacetime particular. What's a line? There's length and no breadth.

So it doesn't exist. In a spatial world. No, a straight line is an ideal entity.

Not a physical particular. Mathematics deals with ideal entities. Sure.

And you get a platonic interpretation of mathematics. Now, that's not the only interpretation. Because other theories about universals, or that there are no universals, also have their applications to metaphysics and mathematics.

Oh, you remember that at our department colloquium last Thursday, Scott Chaydon was discussing a chapter from his doctoral dissertation on a nominalistic view of musical composition. And we had a very lively time, as one or two of you who were there recognize. And we're continuing next week.

But in that nominalistic view of musical composition, you see, nominalism is the view that there are no real universals. So he's trying to develop, trying to see what an aesthetic would be like that doesn't talk of universal musical structures, but sees

every particular ingredient of a composition as a particular physical event unrelated intrinsically to anything else. How would that look? Well, next week he's going to be discussing criticisms of a view that Nicholas Walderstaff has developed in his writings on metaphysics, on the aesthetics of music, to the effect that music deals with universal aesthetic potentialities inherent in the very nature of things.

Sort of a quasi-platonic view. Well, my point is that the theory of forms, which he is developing, is going to have tremendous ramifications for all other disciplines. You see.

But it's not brand new. All that Plato is doing, in effect, is saying we live in a rationally ordered cosmos. Get it? He is developing the Heraclitus-Logos concept in a much fuller way.

Or Anaxagoras-Neuss concept, that there's a rationality behind things. You see? There is a cosmic order in which there are kinds of particulars, kinds of relationships, kinds of qualities that we can identify and see logical relationships between. A rationally ordered universe.

And since the qualities and relationships include moral and social ones, you have a social order and a moral order that's objectively ideal. An ideal of cosmic justice, as we saw it in Homer and Hesiod. You see.

It's going to continue and be much more fully developed in Plato. Well, this is the direction he's going. And we'll keep coming back to it.

Now, what we get in Plato, then, is the first big metaphysical system in the history of Western thought. Now, it's an open-ended system in the sense that there was development and change as he began to work it out and expound it. When we get into Aristotle in another week or two, we'll see that Aristotle's is another system.

He was a student of Plato, so it's sort of an adaptation of Plato's. But it's much more of a closed system in the sense that he seems to have it all worked out, all in one package, with very little variation as it developed. Plato is more open-ended or suggestive at points.

But the point is that I want to make that as we look through the history of thought, we find a succession of what I call metaphysical models which provide the context, the structure of thought behind the philosophy that's going on for hundreds of years, underlying the science, the art, the social structure, the ethics, the whole of everything on the shish kebab. Yeah. And if we think roughly in these terms of the Greco-Medieval period, okay, of Renaissance and Enlightenment, and then of 19th and 20th centuries, which includes Romanticism, Existentialism, and what now is known as the Postmodern, okay, then in a very real way, you can see that these

represent three different metaphysical models that have shaped those periods in history.

And whether you're interested in art history or literature or the history of politics, in the history of theology, you see, all of it reflects the metaphysical arrangement. Oh, admittedly, there's no point where there's an end of the Greco-Medieval model and thereafter everybody thinks in the Renaissance Enlightenment. No, in actual practice, it comes in this sort of way that you get the Greco-Medieval model coming along, then another one picks up, and then another one picks up, but this one sort of continues even though it may not have as much influence, you see.

Okay? And roughly, the dates of transition, well, you'd have to say 14 to 1600 AD, and there is the transition time. Okay, the transition here is 18 to 1900 in that range, depending on the discipline, what aspect of culture and intellectual history you're talking about, you see. Now, the metaphysical model here is drawn from the Greeks, from Plato and Aristotle.

Plato dominates the scene, I think it's fair to say, from, let's say, about 400, 300, or 400 AD. Now, he wrote it 400 BC, you see, and there were Platonic developments all the way along after that, but he began to dominate Western culture 300, 400 AD until 1100, 1200, you see. Then an Aristotelian surge before the Renaissance.

Well, what is characteristic of Plato and Aristotle is their theory of forms. If you like, the model that dominates the scene is this. A hierarchical model.

And you have a hierarchical social structure in the Middle Ages. Hierarchical ecclesiastical structure. So much so that some people still think that everything ought to be hierarchically organized.

To this day. Sex is included. That's a Greek model.

Well, and what you get in the Renaissance Enlightenment, and of course, if you call this model number one, this is model number two. What's the model? Well, it's that of mechanistic science. The thing that was systematized by Newton.

Began a lot earlier. The scientific revolution. And that has tremendous implications.

Philosophically, it rejected the notion that there is any intrinsic cosmic order. Everything's a product of matter and motion. There's no metaphysical basis for morals and the nature of things.

Who could take a thing so dead and embrace it for his mortal good? Remember the lines of Tennyson in Memoriam? Can I take a thing so dead and embrace it for my

mortal good? He's talking about the world of blind, dead, inert matter. Being pushed around by blind forces. A world that's devoid of any intrinsic meaning or value.

And the nihilism of some of the existentialists, like Sartre, is simply a late reaction against that. A reaction that began with Romanticism. And on the scientific side, with the development of a more organic model.

Organic relationships. In biology, the rise of developmental biology around 1800 marked the beginning of early genetics. In physics, electromagnetic field theory.

And then the development of relativity physics, quantum mechanics, and that sort of thing. Energistic physics. Where you think not in terms of isolated chunks of matter pushed around, but in terms of whole energy fields and systems.

Organic holes. Talk of an ecosystem. An organic hole.

The trouble is that while we learn to think that way scientifically, we still do some of our thinking and living as if the mechanistic thing were true. And some disciplines are much more tied to this than others. Well, my point is that in introducing Plato's theory of forms, we're getting a first look at model number one, which tends to dominate, not in an exclusivist sense, but tends to dominate Western thought and incidentally Muslim thought as well, way through into the Renaissance.

And continues to have a profound influence thereafter. Some of you in literature may be aware of the Cambridge Platonists and their influence on people like Milton and so forth. But that metaphysical model of profound influence.

Okay. Now, you might say, what's this model usually called? Well, obviously, Plato's version is referred to as Platonism. Trouble is the word Platonism is used as well for a Neo-Platonism that developed in the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. Sometimes used also for a Middle Platonism in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. We'll be looking at that incidentally because it had a profound influence on the Alexandrian church and on the development of Christian thought.

That Middle Platonism. So, the term Platonism itself is ambiguous. Sometimes the term Realism is used because if we're talking about the theory of forms, the distinctive thing here is that the forms are real.

Real entities, in some sense. Seems true for Aristotle in a somewhat different sense. They're real entities.

So, this becomes known as Realism. Realism about universals. Realism about forms.

And the mechanistic denies the reality of forms. So it's not realistic in this sense. And there are some aspects of the organic model, the way it's worked out philosophically, which reintroduce theories of forms in different... I was going to say in a different form.

Well, in a different way. Now, this theory of forms of Plato, then, is about the objects of knowledge, which are another kind of reality than physical particulars or any other particulars. They're eternal.

And they provide a realm of ideals so that they have not only significance in epistemology, in providing possible objects of knowledge, significance in cosmology, in explaining the orderedness of nature, significance in ethics, yes, social and political thought, and aesthetics in terms of values. Wide, wide ranging. Now, you might find yourself raising all sorts of difficulties with this.

It's by no means a theory that all the Greeks accepted. It's not a theory in Plato's form of it that Aristotle was satisfied with. In fact, the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which we'll be reading, is a criticism of what all of his predecessors, all of the pre-Socratics, have to say about the orderedness of nature, including Plato.

It's very critical of Plato. But Plato himself isn't satisfied with it either. It's a fascinating thing.

Plato himself isn't satisfied with it. And in one of the segments, which we have in Kaufman, that you'll be reading for this coming week, you have Plato's own self-criticism on the theory. Plato's own self-criticism.

Now, of course, the *Parmenides* is a dialogue. And to suppose that Plato and Socrates ever had a dialogue with Parmenides would be a gross anachronism. Especially since one of the other characters in the dialogue is none other than Zeno, the Eleatic.

Parmenides and Zeno. Remember those two guys? Absolute monism. Everything is one, all-inclusive, unchanging, eternal thing.

No plurality, no change. Well, that's quite a dramatic setting. All right.

What he does, and this is really my structuring of the *Parmenides* section, which is tough reading. Okay. What he does in this section of the *Parmenides*, which we're reading, is to get Zeno, the Eleatic, to state a thesis.

Okay. Zeno's thesis. Now, since it's fictionalized, we're not at all sure that this was actually Zeno's thesis.

It doesn't sound like the Zeno of the fragments. Though it sounds like it's related to it. So we take it as it is, without worrying about the historical question.

Okay. Zeno's thesis. As follows.

If the many exist, if the many exist, then things are both like and unlike each other. But to both be like and not be like is self-contradictory. Therefore, pluralism, the view that the many exist, is false.

Do you get it? Very simple hypothetical syllogism in which the consequent is denied, and so the antecedent is denied. If the many exist. Now, for the many to exist, of course, that would be pluralism.

Reality consists of many, many things. And we all know that Zeno and Parmenides categorically denied any plurals. So there seems to be, then, a possible Zeno argument against pluralism.

If pluralism is false, what's the alternative? Monism. So it's an argument for the Eleatic position that they held. But if the many exist, then the many existing, they're going to be unlike each other.

But yet, obviously, they're going to be like each other in some ways, in such a variety of things. But how can something be and not be something at the same time? You know what I'm saying? You say, oh, obviously, there's something wrong with that. Well, what's wrong? What's wrong is pretty obvious.

The appeal here is to the law of non-contradiction. A thing cannot both be and not be. But as Aristotle later spelled out the law of non-contradiction, it does not state that the thing cannot both be and not be.

It says a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect. So, if the many exist, they cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect, but they might be at different times and in different respects. So you and I might be alike in some ways and unlike in others.

So what? No contradiction there. Well, Zeno puts it that way, and Socrates then questions Zeno as if he held to real forms or forms to Zeno. Okay? And what you get coming out of it is a discussion of forms.

And in that discussion, what surfaces is a variety of possible difficulties. Now, one of them, which you'll find on page 200, is posed by pointing out that likeness and unlikeness, what we've been talking about in Zeno's thesis, are not contradictory. It starts with that.

Likeness and unlikeness are not contradictory. Being like something is not the same as being unlike something. That is to say, you can be like something with respect to form, ideal, pattern, archetype A, and you can be unlike something with respect to form, pattern, archetype B. Okay? Unlike in terms of size, but like in terms of the color of the hair.

Okay? Size is one quality. Color is a different quality. No problem.

So, in terms of the theory of forms, this problem, which Zeno's thesis implies, may be difficult. That is to say, can a form both be and not be X, like and unlike, and so forth? And the difficulty here, you see, is that a form, in its very nature, is the principle of unity for a whole class of things. There's only one form of color, of a certain color.

Only one form of a certain color. Only one form of likeness. A particular may be like and unlike something, but a form cannot, because it's not a mix.

It's a unity. It's indivisible, whereas particulars are divided. You can divide one quality from another, and all the rest of it.

So, what about form? Well, that's one unanswered question. The second question arises from this. Are there forms of everything? For instance, forms of opposites.

If a form cannot be both like and unlike, is there a form of likeness and a form of unlikeness? Because for something to be both like and unlike, it must participate in a form of likeness and a form of unlikeness. So are there forms of opposites? There's a form of solid. Is there a form of something that has lost its solidity and is now slime? There's a form of right.

Is there a form of wrong? There's a form of beauty. Is there a form of ugliness? There's a form of good. Is there a form of bad? Forms of opposites.

But opposites are not the only thing. It's one thing to say there are forms of certain qualities and ideals, but are you really sure, Zeno, that there are forms of particular kinds of things? A form of humanness? A form of fire, the element? A form of water, the element? A form of hair, something so trivial? Or of mud and dirt, so undignified, for the Greek aristocratic to talk about? A form of excretion, and so forth? Are there forms of everything? Oh, no, there couldn't be. Now, you see, what's coming up, in addition to this question of opposites, is the extent of forms.

Are there forms of everything or only some things? And what's coming up particularly is the forms of things that have a negative meaning, like evil. Oh, the problem of evil in an ordered cosmos. Yeah.

If everything participates in an ideal form, is there an ideal form of wickedness? Is there an ideal adultery and an ideal murder? You know what I'm saying? And this is a puzzle which Plato has to take up in other dialogues. And before we're through, we'll see that there are two ways in which, in the Platonic tradition, the problem of evil is handled. One is by reverting to an eternal dualism.

That is to say, there's an ordered realm of good and an ordered realm of evil. And some of you are familiar with ancient Gnosticism, which had some of that notion in it. We'll be talking about that subsequently.

The other is to view evil as a privation of the good, as a deprivation, a loss, a lack, a negative. So that if I am ugly, and you know, to avoid insulting anybody, I use the first person instead of the second person. If I'm ugly, it's not because I participate in the form of ugliness, it's because I fail to participate as fully as I might in the form of beauty.

I suffer from some privation. Some depravity, which is where the word comes from, of my beauty. So those questions have to be addressed.

Third, are forms inherent patterns? That is to say, are there patterns of some sort inherent in the nature of things so that forms are like patterns? Like, particulars are like patterns. Copies. Now, the question arising there is, what does it mean to say that a particular participates? A participation question.

And that participation question gives rise to what's called the third man argument. The third man argument. To the effect that if a particular is known to be, is said to be like the form, then in order for us to be able to say that a particular is like the form, we must have not only a conception of the particular, not only a conception of the form, but also a conception of the particular and the form together and that in which they share, the likeness.

A third something. If you are like the form of humanness, then in order to say that, we must be able to know the form of likeness, which binds the two together. A third man.

And when are you going to stop? In order to know that the third man concept applies, then there must be another one that unites the third man with the particular or with the form, and you've got a fourth. And then you must have a fifth. That's like a Zeno's paradox going on.

How long does the chicken ever cross the street? Always further to go. And then the final problem that we get in this section is the question, can forms really be known? Because you notice that one dialogue of Plato's after another finishes by saying, well, this is the way then in which we conclude, or well, we don't know. And, you know,

whenever you get a dialectic going on, you always feel as if you want to say at the end, well, I suppose that's right, until some smarter aleck comes along with another difficult question.

You know, like debates, they don't settle anything, just who's the smartest aleck? Until the other guy thinks of something else. In other words, is there as much difference between rhetoric and dialectic as Plato seems to be assuming? Can forms be known? One of the problems is that if a form is going to be known, it's going to be known by a mind. But if there's going to be any knowing relationship between a mind and a form, then a mind must be like a form.

But a mind is a particular. My particular mind. Now, presumably, we want the form of mind to be closest to the form that we know.

But the form of mind is God, so God could know. But can we? Well, that's the kind of problem that he poses. And watch that list of problems as you try to unravel what he's saying in that segment of the Parmenides.