

Plato's theory of forms essay



**ASSIGN
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Term paper Plato's theory of forms " Everything which exist in this world and all things that we see around us are not as they appear to us" this is the core idea behind plato's theory of forms. From this idea only he moves towards explaining his world of forms or ideas. In his book called THE REPUBLIC he tell us that the " Good" is the end of all endeavour, it is the object on which every heart is set, so this good according to him has a form, infact all the abstract ideas like good, justice , beauty , love etc has an ideal form according to plato. This form exist outside of space and time. This form remains permanent and is real. All that we see around us with human eye is just the fleeting image of reality.

This world of our senses fluctuates but the real world does not. In his text he uses three images to explain us his forms. He uses the simile of a sun , a line and a cave. Just as in our world of senses sun is the source of growth and light , which gives visibility to our eyes and the objects around us in a similar way, the ideas or the forms are the source of truth and reality which provides intelligibility to the objects of thought and the power of knowing to the mind. So, we can say that here plato tell us that the form gives us the ultimate standard by which we can know reality.

In his another analogy of the cave, where he places all these prisoners who are chained in such a way that they cannot move their heads and they believe that the shadows which appears on the wall in front of them because of the fire behind them are real, but it is only when someone who frees himself from the chains comes to know that the shadows is because of the fire and when he goes out in open he further comes to know what the real world is. This analogy explains plato's forms in a very systematic way. The

people in the cave are we people who live in the world and take material objects around us to be real, which is not so, but when we move out of the chains of material objects, we come near to reality and once we are totally out of the cave we get acquainted by what plato calls " The Forms" , though he says that in the beginning that prisoner finds it difficult to adjust in the outside world in the same way to get acquainted with the forms is also not an easy task, not everyone is capable of doing this, one has to have a rational thinking to know the forms may be, a philosopher is in a better position to understand the forms. This brings us to his third image of the divided line, in this he makes a distinction between the intelligible realm and the visible realm. At the lowest level in this line in the visible realm occurs the shadows and images, which is a mere opinion , then comes the physical objects, then if we move to the intelligible realm we first get to know the simple mathematical entities and further at the highest level we get more significant forms of good , truth, beauty etc. where we get knowledge.

Just as we take an example of a chair, we first at the lowest level have the shadow of a chair, then the chair, then comes the mathematics of the chair and finally we arrive at the form or idea of a chair which itself becomes the cause of the physical chair that appears to us as real. This third image of plato gives us a clear picture of what is opinion and what is knowledge. Real knowledge exist in the highest level and down below we have the opinion which we wrongly take as to be knowledge. Forms are the the cause of the existence of all objects. Things are only said to exist insofar as they have order or structure or form. Everything in this world is what it is by the virtue

of its participation in the forms, for example, anything is beautiful in the world upto the extent that it participates in its form of beauty.

Well, plato's forms are very well explained with the help of these three images and I think, plato could find no better way to explain his forms, because he knows very well that people in this world are living in the realm of shadows and images by taking the material world around them to be real which would not remain as it is now and by taking the help of similies he is telling us that these shadows are just the first step towards the ladder of truth and reality as his images are moving from ignorance to knowledge, the cave moves from darkness to light and the divided line from visible to an intelligible realm. In a way it solves the problem of permanence and change. in a way it solves the problem of being and becoming which has existed in the greek philosophy since long. plato's divided line is a perfect answer to this problem.

It combines both being and becoming and tell us that from becoming we have to reach upto the being that is real. We perceive a different world through our mind than we do through the senses. It is the material world, perceived through the senses and this world changing. It is the realm of forms, which one sees through the mind, this world is permanent.

It is this world that is more real; the world of change is merely an imperfect image of this world. A form is an abstract property or quality. Take any property of an object and separate it from that object and consider it by itself, this is a form. For instance, when we talk of a triangle we say that it is a three sided enclosed figure and the sum of whose all sides is 180degrees,

but have we ever seen a perfect triangle what we have seen is just a close approximation of an ideal triangle but not an ideal triangle. Now I want to bring in plato's Parmenides where Parmenides bring out the criticism of forms in front of " young Socrates" who tries to defend theory of forms but fails to do so.

Here in my paper I have made an attempt to examine those criticism in my own way and through my own understanding of plato's forms. The first argument which Parmenides put forward in front of " young Socrates", as Parmenides calls him, is that If particular things partake of the Form of Beauty or Likeness or Largeness and so they become beautiful or like or large, then each particular thing must receive either the whole of the Form of which it partakes, or a part of that Form. So the form in that way becomes many and doesn't remain a one. But plato said that the forms do not have any properties. The forms themselves express possessionlessness. It seems to me that Parmenides assumes that the form would be distinct from itself by having certain distinct properties.

So Parmenides is here assuming that the forms can possess qualities or properties. And this assumption as I have stated earlier is wrong. Form is the quality itself of the things partaking it. When Parmenides say that everything partakes of the form, it nowhere seems to me that the forms themselves becomes many, plato calls the form as the common quality which a particular group of physical objects have.

For example if there is a form of a sun and it has many rays we cant' say that those rays have sun in them if we say that then we are dividing the sun

into many but we can say that those sun's rays have that quality of sun in them that is sunness and not the sun. So there is only one single form and not many. The second argument in Parmenides comes from the fact that Socrates' believe in a single Form. In every case when he views a number of large things, there appears to be a single character which they all share, the character of greatness and there are many great things and in a same way Parmenides argue that another great must appear to make all these great. As far as I understand, Plato's form say that the forms are the referents of truth, from them truth can be known, so there cannot be any difficulty about the form of " good" being the ultimate good. In the real sense the forms exist and particulars do not, they only exist upto their participation in their forms.

The form is the ultimate reality, there is no question of being a form of a form. Then socrates suggests that each Form is a thought and so it maintains the unity of the Form, Parmenides replies that then all things that partake of ideas are made of thoughts and yet they may or may not think. Plato speaks of thoughts, but thoughts which " do not think" that means they have the potentiality to think but are not yet thinking. Which can mean that the physical objects which consists of thoughts and yet do not think have the potentiality to think that is why they are called not thinking thoughts. The last difficulty with the theory of Forms arises out of the fact that forms exist separetly. Forms do not exist in our physical world but in some another own world of their own.

So parmenides draws a conclution that things which are in our world are not related to Forms. And so all our knowledge is just with respect to our world,

not to the world of the Forms, while ideal Knowledge is knowledge the world of the Forms. o this means that we can never know the Forms. But this problem again can be solved when plato divides his two realms and says that we have to let go off the visible realm and grasp that permanent realm of knowledge, in other words he is telling us that we who are living in the realm of visible world are descended down from the world of knowledge only then how can not we have that same knowledge though unto the lowest levels though it becomes less but the knowledge is there, and so how can not the ultimate reality have the knowledge of us? The only thing is that we need to make our thoughts think we have the potentiality to merge with the ultimate being or the forms but we have to make an effort to do so.

I believe that plato in his parmenides section is testing our knowledge about his forms by criticising them and as we can see that parmenides call socrates " young" and says that he still needs to undergo training, in a similar way we all have to undergo training to understand his forms. Using similes of cave line and sun he wants to tell us that shadows and images have the potentiality to reach upto the highest level of forms. In other sense he is showing us the way to success by failure. So here I conclude that Plato's theory of forms is a great contribution in philosophy as it tell us how can one know the truth and not only this it also systematically differentiates between the world of becoming and the world of being.

So plato's forms teaches us that though we can see a particular object through our eyes it does not mean that we see it fully, and just because we cannot see something does not mean that it does not exist. The real world is the one which does not change , it is permanent and gives us true

knowledge and our world of physical objects tend to undergo change and so does not or cannot be used as a basis for knowing the truth. in order to know the reality we have to transcend the ever changing flux of the physical world and have to grasp a permanent rational order, which exists in the realm of forms or ideas.