

Theory of forms essay



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The Ancient philosophers wrestled with the problem of change. There were two prominent philosophers: Heraclitus and Parmenides. Heraclitus argued that the fundamental character of reality is change itself. Everything in reality, said Heraclitus, is changing. "One cannot step into the same river twice," he wrote, since it is endlessly flowing.

Thus, he denied any permanence or immutability in the world. In contrast, Parmenides of Elea, in southern Italy argued that permanence and not change is the fundamental character of reality. Reality is one, single, permanent, and unchanging. Change is mere appearance to the senses, whereas truth is unchanging.

The way in which Plato solves these problems is to identify what is true in each of these philosophies and to marshal these truths into a single, unified, original philosophy of his own. The major line of synthesis is to show that Heraclitus and Parmenides were on the wrong track in supposing that either change or permanence must be true of all reality. Reality, according to Plato is not all of one piece, of one nature. Reality is not monistic. Reality is duality in nature.

Plato offers a dualistic metaphysics. In order to explain this dualistic nature of reality Plato presents the theory of forms. What is theory of forms? Form is an abstract property or quality. Take any property of an object, separate that property from the object and consider it by itself and you are contemplating a form. Let us take a round basketball. If we separate roundness from other properties of the basketball and consider only the roundness, we are contemplating the form of roundness.

This form of roundness exists apart from the ball. It exists independently and exists whether someone thinks about it or not. Therefore, it is not just an idea. All round objects participate in this form of roundness, The properties of forms are as follow: Forms are transcendent-they are aspatial (outside space) and atemporal (outside time)Forms are Pure-they exemplify only one property. Roundness is roundness only. Forms are the archetypes or perfect models of the properties that are present in material world-they are the blue print of perfection.

They are perfect themselvesForms are ultimately real. Forms are causes of all that exists-they are that without which a thing cannot be a kind of thing it is. Forms are systematically interconnected. Let us explain each of this property by taking the example of a round red basketball. The first two properties explain what a form is and how it is different from material object.

The forms are transcendent, which means they do not exist in space and time. A material object, a basketball exists in at a particular place and time. A form, roundness, does not exist at any place or time. These properties are very important because they explain why forms are unchanging. It does not exist in time.

Therefore, it is same at all times. It does not exist in space; therefore, it can be instantiated in many places at once. Even if all round balls are destroyed in this world roundness will still exist. The forms are also pure.

This means they pure properties separated from all other properties. A material property such as a basketball has many properties: roundness, ballness redness etc. These properties are put together to make up an

individual basketball. A form is just one of these properties, existing by itself apart from space and time. Roundness is just pure roundness without any other properties mixed in.

Thus, the forms differ from material objects in that they are transcendent and pure, while material objects are complex of properties located in space and time. The other properties forms explain how they relate to material objects. Forms are archetypes or perfect models for all of the properties that are presenting material objects. The material world is just similar to the real world of forms.

The form of roundness is the perfect model of roundness. All round material objects are mere copies of the form of roundness. In the virtue of the fact that all objects in this world are copies of the form, they are the causes of all that exists in this world. The forms are causes in twoways.

Epistemological and ontological. The forms are the causes of all our knowledge of all objects. We can know something insofar as it has order or form. The forms are also the cause of the existence of all objects.

Things are said to exist only when they have some order or form. The forms are also systematically interconnected. They are connected to each other and to the material objects in an intricate system that reflects both the way they flow down from the form of the good and the process that we must go through in working our way up to knowledge of the forms. Plato uses two allegories, which explains the concept of forms.

In the allegory of divided line he places the knowledge of forms in the highest place and sensual experience in the lowest place. In the allegory of the cave, he explains to us how humans are bonded by the experience of senses and only when they have the knowledge of the form of good they are liberated. Allegory of divided line. Plato uses the allegory of divided line. Plato imagines two worlds. The sensible world and the intelligible world existing on a line, which is divided in the middle.

The lower part of the line consists of the visible world and the upper part consists of the intelligible world. Each half of the line relates to certain type of knowledge. We can have only opinion of the visible world but we can have knowledge of the intelligible world. The Visible world can be divided into lower half “ illusion,” which is made up of shadows, reflections, paintings, poetry, etc., and an upper region, “ belief,” which refers to any kind of knowledge of things that change, such as individual round reed basket balls. The upper region can be divided into two, on the lower end, “ reason,” which is knowledge of forms like mathematics but which require that some postulates be accepted without question, and “ intelligence,” which is the knowledge of the highest and most abstract categories of things, higher forms, an understanding of the ultimate good.

Allegory of the cave. Imagine prisoners who have been chained since childhood deep inside a cave. Not only are their limbs immobilized by the chains; their heads are chained as well so that their gaze is fixed on a wall. Behind the prisoners is an enormous fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway, along which shapes of various animals, plants, and other things are carried. The shapes cast shadows on the wall, and the

prisoners watch these shadows. When one of the shape-carriers speaks, an echo against the wall causes the prisoners to believe that the words come from the shadows.

The prisoners engage in what appears to us to be a game – naming the shapes as they come by. This, however, is the only reality that they know, even though they are seeing merely shadows of images. They are thus conditioned to judge the quality of one another by their skill in quickly naming the shapes and dislike those who begin to play poorly. Suppose a prisoner is released and compelled to stand up and turn around.

His eyes will be blinded by the firelight, and the shapes passing will appear less real than their shadows. Similarly, if he is dragged up out of the cave into the sunlight his eyes will be so blinded that he will not be able to see anything. At first, he will be able to see darker shapes such as shadows and, only later, brighter and brighter objects. The last object he would be able to see is the sun, which, in time, he would learn to see as that object which provides the seasons and the courses of the year, presides over all things in the visible region, and is in some way the cause of all these things that he has seen.

Once enlightened, so to speak, the freed prisoner would want to return to the cave to free “ his fellow bondsmen.” Another problem lies in the other prisoners not wanting to be freed: descending back into the cave would require that the freed prisoner’s eyes adjust again, and for a time, he would be one of the ones identifying shapes on the wall. His eyes would be swamped by the darkness, and would take time to become acclimatized.

Therefore, he would not be able to identify shapes on the wall as well as the other prisoners, making it seem as if his being taken to the surface completely ruined his eyesight. In the simplest sense, Plato is talking about waking up to the truth of reality about us.

Plato's arguments. The world that we perceive with senses often deceive is. This would not be so if the world and objects that we perceive with senses were real objects. It seems, therefore, that all objects we perceive with senses are simply images in our mind. They are only subjective points of views on the real objects. What then are real objects? They cannot be subjective images we perceive.

These often deceive us. What about everyday material objects, like chairs tables, rocks and trees that we think our subjective perceptions of things refer to? The concepts we form of these are slightly more objective than subjective images. Yet there are reasons to avoid taking this as real object as well because we only contact these objects through subjective images and these objects always changing, taking up different properties from moment to moment, going in and out of existence..; For these reasons, it seems that the only real level at which things really exists must be the level of single properties separated from particular objects.

These are formsThe argument from Mathematics: The most certain knowledge we have, the knowledge of mathematics, could not come from sense perception. We can know truths such as $2+2=4$ without having to check our experience of the material world. The objects that we think about in mathematics must be real, since they are most certain. Since they could

not exist in material; world, there must be another realm in which they exist that is even more real, the realm of forms. Plato's theory of forms, therefore, can be summed up as follows: 1) All things are physical manifestation of forms. 2) Knowledge is only knowledge of the forms: beliefs are of the material world 3) The highest form is that of good.

Criticism of the theory of forms: Plato is considered one of the greatest of ancient philosophers because he really wrote his philosophy with a sincere effort to find the truth. He was the first philosopher who tried to explain the change in the world. He tried to solve two problems: the ethical problem: how can humans live a fulfilling, happy world in a contingent changing world and the problem of permanence and change. He tried to solve these problems by splitting realms into two, the material world, and the world of forms.

Plato's theory of forms cannot be totally disregarded at the same time we do have certain objections to his theory. The positive aspects of theory of forms: Plato's allegory of cave enlightens us even today. Each historical generation since Plato's time has been tantalized by the question, how does the allegory of cave apply to our time? to what may the cave be compared to our life. It is an allegory of sleep and waking, of our time as asleep in the dark of the cave and needing to awake to a clear vision of the world. It is an allegory of our time as needing to be born again to emerge from darkness of corruption into a life of truth and morality. It is a religious allegory of Christian conversion from the cave of self-love to the love of God and devotion to His truth.

How often we see ourselves bounded by external pressures like media, press, religion etc. These forces bond us. They do not allow us to know the truth for their profit. We are comfortable going along the crowd because knowing the truth causes pain.

We have to leave our friends and relations. We may look like fools. However, once we break our bondage and know the truth we want to save others. According to Plato, forms exist in a platonic heaven. When people die, their souls achieve reunion with the forms.

Souls originate from the platonic heaven and reach there after death.

Christian theology takes some of its notion from Plato's philosophy. It is believed that Man is created in the form of God. God is the ultimate good. In the form of the Good, Plato has given expression to a vision of an absolute source of the intelligibility, truth and value of all other forms.

The form of Good is the source of the world's moral purpose. Thus Plato prepared the way for the Christian God. Like the God of Christianity, form of the Good is the absolute truth, the supreme value and is the source of all other values. St. Augustine one of the greatest philosophers of Christianity produced his greatest philosophies by fusing Christianity with Plato's philosophy. He is, infact, called the platonizer of Christianity, for his synthesizing of Christianity with the philosophy of Plato.

Plato's theory of forms stands against ethical relativism. The problem of ethical relativism is faced even today. For ethical relativists, there are no universal standards for any ethical values and therefore no society can be judged better or worse than another for its performance on any of them. This

point of view is for its tolerance of every kind of society, as some of its defenders like to say. However according to the relativist position, no judgment could be passed on even the Nazis. Two thousand years ago, Plato was attacking the Sophists for being cultural and ethical relativists, for failing to recognize that human beings share universal human standard.

All virtues are universal therefore common for all men and all cultures. Plato sets high standards for human beings. Objections to theory of forms Plato's philosophy of forms and matter is also reflected in Hindu philosophy, which speaks of "Maya." Maya, according, to Hindu philosophy is an illusion, all that we see and experience in this material world. Material world do not exist since they are subjected to change.

However, this obsession to the concept of change makes the whole material world imperfect and not worth living. It gives a pessimistic approach to the material world. Plato's philosophy of perfect forms existing separately and objects in this world as imperfect, is very utopian not suitable for a ordinary people. There are abstract terms that exists only in our mind for example mathematical terminologies like triangle circle. However, Plato makes these concepts a being in themselves.

Plato's theory of recollection is also debatable. Plato argues that we are able to remember certain mathematical concepts without anybody teaching us. Therefore, our souls should have known these forms when they existed in the Platonic heaven. Our experience shows that mathematical concepts are know to us only by experience. A child comes to know that $2+2=4$ only by seeing two apples in one hand and other two in another hand.

In the allegory of the divided line, he gives the painting sculptures poetry the lowest rank. Plato does it because he is suspicious of all forms of communication that uses images. He feared that passions of public are easily influenced and controlled by their persuasive imagery. However we see some profound truths can be expressed by way poetry, art etc. The theory of forms by Plato does not solve the problems it set itself to solve.

Aristotle one of his Pupil refuted Plato's theory of forms. According to Plato, material objects participate in or imitate the forms. It is in virtue of this relation to the realm of forms that material objects are knowable and have order. However, it is impossible to explain what exactly is this participation and imitation. Plato states that forms can exist by themselves . But can whiteness exist without an object, which is white.

This concept of perfect forms lead to idealism. We find this in Hegel's philosophy of absolute idealism. Like Plato, Hegel says the rational, the concept, the idea is what is real. By giving priority to a metaphysical concept like form in defining everything like justice, truth love goodness Plato seems to reduce man to just an essence downgrading senses and material.

Platonic concepts of form is opposite of what existentialist like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche argue. Existentialists give primacy or priority to existence, in sense of my existence as a conscious subject rather than to any forms or essence. Thus, existentialists appear to address the problems of today's man. Aristotle's theory of matter and form are more acceptable and rational than Plato's. Aristotle divides the objects into two parts. Form and matter.

All objects are composed of a certain material arranged in a certain way. The material they are composed of is their matter. The way it is arranged is their form. Take as an example a child playing with building blocks. The child could use the same blocks to first build a wall, and then tear it down and build a house.

The material or matter in each case would be the same, the blocks. Yet, the house and the wall have the matter arranged in different ways. They have different forms. The house is still just one material object; yet it has two different aspects, its form, and its matter. This is more acceptable by modern philosophers.

Conclusion: The theory of forms meant to solve two problems: ethical and problem of change. Plato has effectively countered the arguments of the Sophists of his times. His pupil Aristotle opposed his theory of forms and presented his version of dualism. Nevertheless Plato's theory of forms finds place all along the history of philosophy.