

Philosophy essays - platonian epistemology socratic



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Platonic epistemology seeks answers to key questions regarding the nature of *reality*, *man*, *mind/soul*, *knowledge*, *being* and *becoming*. The nature of this paper allows only the broadest brush strokes across the Platonic canvas. However following a brief introduction in which I will discuss the Socratic method and its influence on Platonic philosophy.

Plato like his predecessor and mentor Socrates, aimed to identify the world around him using a more in depth methodology, from others that had been employed previously. The more Humanistic nature of Socratic enquiry was in marked contrast to the pre Socratic Naturalist approach. In *The Republic* Plato sets about an examination of specific concepts presented as a series of dialogues or in a dialectic style. Through various metaphors and dialectic prose Plato delineates theories of reality (including the world of forms and being), the doctrine of Recollection, the roles of dialectic and aporia, and the tripartite structure theories of man and state.

Benjamin Jowett in his edition of *The Republic* suggests the greater aim of Plato's work is the "search after justice" embodying the fields of reality, man and knowledge discussed "On the basis of proverbial morality by Socrates and Polemarchus - then caricatured by Thrasymachus - reduced to an abstraction by Glaucon and Adeimantus" all based on the constructs of man and state as delineated by Socrates

Influenced by his mentor Socrates and other Greek thinkers mentioned by Jowett.

Plato's work is still applicable today in *a priori* philosophies; Idealists concepts such as the tripartite nature of Man and State would have

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remarkable relevance in modern political theories including Utilitarianism and Communisms. Andrew Levine in his book *Engaging Political Philosophy* postulates:

“ Rousseau’s investigation in *The*

Social Contract was the realm of Platonic ideas or forms – in contrast to the world of appearances, where *de facto* legitimate states exists”

Any discussion on Platonic epistemology must inevitably weigh the influence of the Socratic school. Plato’s Socrates is the key to understanding the complexity of Plato’s thought. Socratic contrarianism and its methodology of *aporia*, a sort of constant intellectual [foundational] doubting, left Socrates free to claim that he was the wisest of men and was at the same time ‘ wise in no way great or small’.

Plato’s later theories and epistemology would develop with Socrates’ almost rebellious dialectical style, questioning the accepted traditional beliefs of Greek intellectual society. (The historic Socrates stood trial and was sentenced to death for preaching his philosophy publicly; he refused to discontinue the practise) Plato’s adoption of Socratic contrarianism pervades much of his writings, especially in concepts as fundamentally abstract as his denial of knowledge through empirical observation; As witnessed in the *Theaetetus* when the Socratic midwife prepares to assist the young *Theaetetus* with his labours while delivering a reply to Socrates question “ what is knowledge.” When questioned *Theaetetus* equates *knowledge* with perception, after intense dialectical questioning, during which Socrates successfully refutes arguments that perception is (biconditional) *knowledge*

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Theaetetus finally agrees, (with restrictions) that perception is not *knowledge*. So commences the search for an answer to the question Socrates asks, " what is *knowledge*?" Plato rejected all

empirical claims to understand the true nature of *knowledge*

" Knowledge is not constituted by sense impressions, but by the inferences we make about them, by that means being and truth are attainable, in the other way it is impossible"

In the Theaetetus Plato demonstrates the concept of *being* as " fundamental and universal" Socrates points to the specialization of bodily sense organs. If we ask which organs enable us to formulate opinions or judgements that range across more than one field of sense-experience, we cannot identify such a grouping. " the things you perceive by means of another - for example, that objects of hearing can not be objects of the seeing and vice versa?" The possession of mathematical knowledge or the ability to formulate judgements does not reside in some empirical

" Sorting office", Socrates states in the Meno,

" Then knowledge is related to what is and knows what is and is as it is. The objects of mind are eternal; those of the senses always changing. Knowledge never changes; opinion, which is not tied down, is subject to change."

It now seems clear that what the mind knows is *being*, that which is eternal and unchanging, while the senses inform us concerning the " intermediate flux" The realm of *being* is comprised of ideas or forms and that of *becoming* by changing things.

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“ Aporia and refutative cross examination serve to purify ambiguous

formulation by excluding false and misleading interpretations and opening the path to

true ones” reflects Rosemary Desjardins, in *Logos in Plato's Theatetus*.

Plato's dialogues may indeed be aporetic but by subjecting both his interlocutors and readers to *elenchus and meiotic method* he hopes to lead from gross perceptibility to finer cognition.

The relentless inquisitiveness of the Socratic method in conjunction with *aporia* lends to a degree of abstraction in the nature of Plato's philosophy (referred to in Jowett's introduction to *The Republic*) evidenced by the allegory of the cave, the doctrine of recollection, the nature of reality, the concept of the divided line, and the theory of forms.

The allegory of the cave allowed Plato to postulate several ideas archetypal of Platonic philosophy. The allegory of the cave describes the limit placed on mankind, by an over reliance on sensory perception, and the subsequent systems of knowledge that relied on empirical evidence alone to deduct truths. For Plato, the resultant effect of man's self-shackling (empirical observation) is described in Book VII of *The Republic*. Plato views mankind as:

“ living in a underground [den] which has its mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and neck chained so that they cannot move, and can

only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads”

Plato does not give a finite explanation of enlightenment's form nor does he give an example of reality, what he demonstrates in the allegory of the cave is a clear method or path, that man and society must pursue to achieve deeper knowledge of reality. Like the prisoners emergence from the cave, enlightenment at first will be difficult to understand, like the temporary blindness they suffer when first exposed to sunlight, its an arduous path that takes time, patience, temperance and practice, with the temptation for a return to former ignorance always present. Ignorance when lifted will deliver us into the Real world of philosophy with man finally comprehending his own place on the path to true knowledge.

Plato delineates this movement with mathematics through the image of a straight line. He divides this imaginary line into two unequal segments, the large segment represents the intelligible world, and the smaller the visible world. He further divides these segments in the same ratio as his first division. The division in the larger segment represents the world of higher and lower forms (ideas). The division in the visible world represent visible objects and the lowest segment represents their shadows and reflections (imagination). For Plato the line represents the levels of cognition available to man and society.

Socrates' avowed mission was to educate the Athenian populace up until the last days of his life. He likened his mission to that of a gadfly, 'stinging the lethargic Athenian horse into wakefulness' through the application of

philosophical dialectic (Socratic method) Plato believed if entered into in good faith, this method would ensure a cognitive assent along the divided line. He believed until individuals and society, collectively questioned the political, ethical, and moral status quo, consciousness would remain in bondage much like the prisoners restricted *mechanical* life in the cave.

Answering his critics regarding the phenomenon of knowledge Plato states that the soul is immortal

“ the soul, since it is immortal, and has been born many times, and seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned every thing that is”

Plato offers proof of the souls immortality, in the *Phaedrus* he postulates that its the nature of the soul to initiate its own changes, in effect to be self moving, rather than moved by an outside agency. Therefore the soul cannot be destroyed nor can it *come* into being. ‘ It was not, nor will be, but always is, one whole continuum’.

(*Parmenides.*)

To contemporary ears the Platonic soul bears great similarities to the Christian Soul unlike his Doctrine of Recollection or *anamnesis*; Plato’s *Socrates* denies his own wisdom; in the *Apology* he states, “ human wisdom is worth little or nothing” he merely asserts that he is a “ midwife” assisting in the “ rebirth” of knowledge lying dormant in the mind Opinions proven wrong in the course Socratic investigation, does not demonstrate lack of knowledge, but rather, the clouding of mind on account of sensory perception. Plato’s Socrates asserts that dialectical investigation (with its

constant questioning) would lead the inquiring mind towards *clues*, allowing it a recollection of what was already known through the many cycles of rebirth. Although considered a Platonic absolute the Doctrine of Recollection cannot be contested or proved. Platonic abstraction, denies legitimate validity to Empirical investigation. The *a priori* solution given by the slave boy in the *Meno* to the mathematical question posed by Socrates, hardly resolves this problem.

Tying into the Doctrine of Recollection and the mind's compromised judgement on account of sensory perception, Plato's Theory of forms plays a greater role in the Allegory of the cave, where the impressions cast on the cave's wall are believed to be real. For Plato the shadows on the wall were a reflection of empirical reality, which in turn was a reflection of a *Reality* who's dwelling lay in the realm of Forms (ideas). Plato's theory of Forms is based on the notion that all things in the world share in common with a greater abstract (ideas) that in turn embodies all things in the empirical world. For example a small red chair, sharing certain physical characteristics in common with a large white chair, is not a real chair, but the perception of the abstract "chair" in which the white chair and all other chairs mimic.

Plato translated his notion of the intangible into the Tripartite nature of man; man Plato contended, was comprised of physical material (the body), and the abstract immaterial (soul and mind). While co-dependant, the two parts^{3/4} matter and form^{3/4}, function separately of each other.