

PLATO THE REPUBLIC (c. 370 BCE)

(all references are to Francis Cornford's translation)

Plato's dialogue The Republic is arguably one of the founding works of Western culture. One subsequent philosopher, Alfred Lord North Whitehead, aptly summed up his importance in this way: "All modern philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato." Plato's influence is simply incalculable. Many, for example, have described Christianity as one of the best examples of a Platonic world view and acknowledged that Plato's influence on the development of the early church and Christian doctrine is impossible to underestimate. Of course, not everyone of his successors would necessarily agree with his views but sometimes the views with which one most disagrees are the ones which are most influential. If Plato is profoundly influential on many successors, it is also true that, like any great thinker, he is either emulating (Plato ascribes most of his ideas to his teacher Socrates who is the central figure in each dialogue) or criticising important predecessors (many of his views are targeted at a long line of skeptics among the so-called Pre-Socratics, in particular Protagoras and the Sophists, who cast doubt on the existence of a spiritual world beyond this, interrogate all claims to know the absolute truth about things and emphasise the unstable nature of language in this regard).

If we are to understand Western intellectual history, therefore, we must start with Plato's philosophy and his views on the following subjects in particular:

- the nature of justice and goodness (ethics);
- the nature of reality (metaphysics);
- the possibility that we can know the truth and the role played by language in the production of knowledge (epistemology / philosophy of language);
- the nature of human consciousness and identity (philosophy of mind);
- the ideal form of society and political governance (social and political philosophy); and
- the role of art in his ideal state (aesthetics / critical theory).

The Republic, his magnum opus, is a great place to start. It is fundamentally, as the title might indicate, a work of social and political philosophy designed to ultimately answer the question of how a state should be constituted in closest proximity to the ideal of justice. However, in order to answer this all important question, Plato must first address the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge and the role of language therein, and the nature of human identity. His reasons for dealing with these issues in this order are logical. He felt that we can know for sure what is right or good only by first knowing the true nature of things. Plato believes that the universe is not merely a physical phenomenon but also a spiritual one. To know the true nature of things entails making sure that certainty is in fact possible and that words can in fact convey the truth. To recognise the truth about things, the human being must be constituted in such a way (partly physical and partly spiritual in nature) that renders him capable of knowing the truth of things. Humans are not mere bodies but also possess a soul (which he equated with our reason or intellect) that links them to the world beyond this one.

Ethics:

The dialogue begins with a discussion between Socrates and several interlocutors of the nature of justice (in other words, what does it mean to be good to our fellow man). Several current views are entertained only for each to be dismissed in turn by Socrates: Cephalus equates justice with honesty, that is, always doing the right thing (Socrates questions whether we can be sure what the right thing is); Polemarchus contends that justice is helping your friends and punishing your enemies (Socrates questions whether harm can ever be committed in the name of good); and Thrasymachus suggests that might is right (Socrates points out that sometimes what is right is not in the interest of the stronger party). This

leads to a discussion of the art of ruling. Socrates argues that "every art seeks, not its own advantage . . . but the interest of the subject on which it is exercised" (23). The art of ruling, therefore, enjoins the interest not of the superior party but "of the weaker over which it has authority" (23). Socrates concludes that the "genuine ruler's nature is to seek only the advantage of the subject" (29). Thrasymachus also suggests that the unjust are superior in character and intelligence and are stronger, and that injustice brings happiness, conclusions which Socrates rejects and, in fact, turns completely around. All this presupposes for Socrates a larger question: "what is the right way to live?" (37). It is Glaucon who asks the most probing question in this regard: is something to be classified as good in its own right or because of the benefit it brings?

Social and Political Philosophy I:

Socrates suggests that to understand what goodness is in an individual, it might be wise to consider what justice is in an entire community of individuals where it might be easier to discern. Socrates asks his interlocutors to imagine what a "luxurious society" (60) (one in which individuals are given over to satisfying their personal desires, regardless of others' well-being, rather than catering to necessity) would look like as the "consideration of luxury may help us to discover how justice and injustice take root in society" (61). If everyone looks after his own interest, key needs would be left unsupplied. The solution is for each person to be trained to perform a role that would contribute to the good of the community as a whole.

Perhaps the most important role performed is that of the guardian of the state. This leads Plato to consider how the best virtues may be cultivated in him through education. For him to rule his people with kindness and consideration, Socrates argues, the "love of wisdom and understanding" (66), a desire to know the absolute truth about all things, must be cultivated in him at all costs.

Metaphysics (Ontology):

This leads in turn to a consideration of the true nature of things. What, Plato asks, is the nature of reality? Plato contends that this *material* world of flux and movement (to use the terms of one of the most important pre-Socratics Heraclitus) and everything in it is a reflection or imitation of a stable *ideal* world beyond this in which are found the unchanging ideal forms or eternal essences of all physical objects. For example, physical tables are imperfect, transient imitations of an enduring ideal form or essence of 'tableness' (?) to be found in the world beyond. The key element in Plato's metaphysics is, thus, the concept of *mimesis* or imitation. The world as we know it derives its significance from the ideal world of which it is a reflection. The dominant metaphor which Plato uses in this regard is that of the mirror.

Plato concludes that there must be something perfect beyond this imperfect world by reasoning that if the impermanent and imperfect here and now was all there is and if knowledge derives only from what one perceives through senses, how would one have any conception of perfection? It stands to reason that, for example, that even though at best we can only act on Earth in ways that approximate perfect virtue, we yet have a sense of what perfect virtue is. Where does that ideal come from if our senses are our sole source of knowledge and what they reveal is only imperfection? Hence, his logical conclusion (note the process of reasoned deduction at work) that there is a world of Ideal Forms or essences (a world of pure thought or spirit) of which this world is an imperfect imitation.

Essence	World of Ideal Forms	The 'True Reality'	Bedness	Ideal virtues
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Existence	Material manifestations	Physical universe	bed	Imperfect human actions
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Epistemology:

These ontological claims (i.e. about the true nature of things) in turn presuppose the question whether the truth can be known. Plato offers a hierarchical model of knowledge which privileges rational knowledge over empirical knowledge: the senses, he argues, only deliver knowledge about this physical world, not the ultimate spiritual reality. In a nutshell, Plato's argument is that where our physical senses are confined in their usefulness to apprehending (and often misleadingly so) the physical world, our Reason is that which allows us to glimpse or intuit the non-physical world beyond. The more cultivated our Reason (via the exercise of deductive logic), the more profound our apprehension of the world of ideal forms.

In Plato's hierarchical model of cognition, empirical 'knowledge' (i.e. that afforded by the physical senses) is located at the bottom of the scale in that the senses are the basis most often for only misleading opinions (not knowledge) concerning the outer appearances of things. The opinions derived from empirical perception are themselves divisible into two categories. At the very bottom of the scale is that pseudo_knowledge provided by our sensual perception not of the objects themselves but of images of objects (their shadows, reflections, representations, etc.). This is the realm of supposition or imagination where unenlightened minds take sensible appearances at their face value. (Plato uses the Greek word *eikasia* for this level of knowledge which is difficult to translate into English: the term simultaneously implies a combination of the following meanings: likeness [representation], likening [comparison] and likelihood [conjecture].) Located above this, but equally mired in illusion, are the common sense beliefs (the Greek word for which is *pistis*) derived from sensing the physical appearances of the visible and tangible objects themselves. The senses even at this level do not provide the truth about the ultimate nature of reality but, rather, common sense beliefs which are most often erroneous precisely because appearances cannot be trusted. For example, a straight stick when held under water only appears to be broken or crooked to the eyes when in fact it is not. Hence, Plato's contention that the senses are the basis only of opinion, not of knowledge or fact. In the moral sphere, what is at stake here are beliefs without reasoned knowledge as to why a given belief may or may not be correct.

Plato places above the misleading opinions afforded by the senses the 'knowledge' afforded by the logical deduction deployed by the rational intellect. (This is why Plato is viewed as the founder of Rationalism and the first opponent of Empiricism.) Education must at all costs seek to cultivate the individual's reason which is that part of us which transcends the world of appearances and of visible things and links us to the world of intelligible things. Where the Sun is the source of perception in the world of appearances in which the capacity for vision reigns supreme, Plato will argue that it is the Good (this is how some translators have translated his term for purest Reason, the sense of absolute right and wrong, the rational order and purposiveness informing the universe, perhaps even God?) which is the source of conception in the intelligible world. Rational knowledge, however, is also internally hierarchised. At the first level, Plato places what he describes as the 'understanding' or 'thought' (*dianoia*) derived from mathematical propositions. At this level, the rational testing of geometrical and related hypotheses and deductions derived therefrom begins to transform unreflective perception (e.g. that squares appear to have 4 sides) into reasoning intelligence (e.g. that all squares have 4 sides). All branches of mathematics start from unquestioned assumptions (these are called variously postulates, axioms, definitions) from which conclusions are deduced. The premises may be true as may be the conclusions but, as Cornford puts it, the "whole structure hangs in the air until the assumptions themselves shall

have been shown to depend on an unconditional principle" (223). In other words, mathematics depends upon hypotheses which it does not verify but, rather, takes for granted. The hypotheses employed at this level are necessary but still incomplete forms of cognition. Dianoia, which implies deductive thinking or reasoning from premiss to conclusion, is accordingly not the ultimate form of true knowledge.

What Plato calls *episteme* (or absolute knowledge of the truth) is reached at the fourth and highest level via rational intuition (the Greek word for which is *noesis*) or the direct apprehension of first principles. Noesis is the faculty that allows one to attain true knowledge of the nature of reality by grasping the Ideal Forms themselves: i.e. what is in the final analysis truly beautiful, truly good, truly just, etc. (i.e. the true essences of these things rather than their imperfect approximations found in this world). To put this another way, where dianoia functions deductively to produce conclusions derived from premises, noesis comprehends first principles by coming to an understanding of the premises themselves and seeking the ultimate principle (what Plato calls the Good) on which they all depend.

The predicament of the prisoners in Plato's famous 'Allegory of the Cave' is an epistemological parable, that is, one designed to demonstrate the hierarchical schema of knowledge outlined above, ignorance regarding the transcendental nature of reality, and the possibility of attaining intuitive illumination and, thus, absolute knowledge. Confined to a completely enclosed cave, the prisoners there come to accept the dim light in which vague impressions of objects reach their eyes as the way things simply are. By contrast, when suddenly exposed to the Sun after eons in the darkness, they are completely blinded. Allegorically-speaking, the dimly-lit cave represents the physical world in which we largely have only our physical senses to guide us. However, our physical senses are not equipped to translate the higher knowledge (represented by the blinding nature of the Sun) which would allow us to comprehend the transcendental nature of reality. Just as the Sun governs the visible world, so what Plato calls the Good governs and is the source of the intelligible or spiritual world. Just as one cannot see objects without the aid of the Sun, neither can one understand the true nature of reality and the true nature of goodness without the aid of the Good.

Source of Perception	Object of Perception	Mode of Perception	Class of Perception
The Good (author and governor of the intelligible world)	Ideal Forms (justice, truth, etc.)	Dialectical Reasoning	Grasping <i>the</i> Truth (Episteme)
The Good (author and governor of the intelligible world)	Mathematical propositions	Understanding	Knowledge (Dianoia)
The Sun (author and governor of the visible world)	Physical objects	Beliefs (sensory perceptions accepted as givens)	Opinion (Pistis)
The Sun (author and governor of the visible world)	Images of physical objects (shadows, reflections, illusions, etc.)	Supposition	Illusion (Eikasia)

Method:

The key instrument in the acquisition of absolute knowledge is the dialectic, a term which would become very important to later philosophers like Hegel who used it in a somewhat different, albeit related, way. Through the proper use of the dialectic, the validity of all propositions or truth-claims is tested by weighing one hypothesis (thesis) against an opposing hypothesis (antithesis) until the truth of the proposition in question is arrived at (Plato terms this the synthesis) by simultaneously discarding the errors and retaining any valid contentions to be found in each of the original propositions. By a process of attrition, false hypotheses are eliminated and the absolute truth is ultimately arrived at. The dialectic, in other words, means the process of philosophical exchange or dialogue carried on by question and answer whereby the pros and the cons are weighed against each other to produce a true conception of an ideal form (e.g. what is beauty? Or, what is justice?).

Plato's technique of the dialectic, in short, puts all hypotheses or truth-claims to the test in an effort both to show their relativity and incompleteness and to extract from them what is valid as the quest for truth is pursued. Recognition of the necessary shortcomings inherent in most commonly held hypotheses spurs the intellect to aspire towards a level of comprehension and certitude that transcends mere hypothesis and to move towards the intelligible world (the true reality) and to cast off worldly illusion. (After this, evidently, all need for further debate is eliminated. In the Platonic scheme of things, if you do not agree with what he says is truly good or beautiful, you are simply wrong: you 'don't get it' precisely because you are not advanced enough on the intellectual / spiritual path along which philosophy ought to lead you and/or you have not used logic correctly.)

Plato has bequeathed to us two important methods of enquiry: those of logical deduction (i.e. reasoning from premises to conclusions) and the dialectic (whereby the premises themselves are examined by comparing claim and counter-claim until truly valid truth-claims can be posited). These are utilised less to understand phenomena in the temporal world than their Ideal Forms. That is, Plato's focus is less on knowing physical objects per se such as a table or a mountain (these belong to the visible world of appearances) than human behaviour and, by extension, abstract moral concepts such as goodness or beauty (which belong to the intelligible world).

Philosophy of Mind:

Plato's model of human identity is the inevitable correlate of his metaphysics and epistemology. In a nutshell, he contends that if our bodies are part and parcel of the physical world in which we find ourselves, it is our reason or intellect, in Plato's schema, which is our link to the non-physical world beyond this. In the same way that the universe is divided into physical and non-physical components, so too are humans more than mere physical bodies. For Plato, each human being possesses a pre-given, immutable, essential self prior to life on Earth and which remains captive for the duration of our lives here. This 'soul,' as Francis Cornford translates the Greek word *daemon*, is, Plato contends by means of a celebrated metaphor, imprisoned in the dungeon of the flesh which at death it joyfully casts off. If the senses of our body are the means by which we apprehend the physical world, the rational intelligence associated with the soul is the means by which we apprehend the immaterial world.

In fact, Plato contends that the soul, that intangible part of our identity, is non-physical or spiritual in nature and 'tripartite,' that is, it has three constitutive parts (each of which is associated with a distinct part of the body). These are the 'Reason' or consciousness or thinking part of the self (associated with the head), the 'spirited element' or 'affections' or emotions (associated with the heart) and the 'appetites' (associated especially with one's lower extremities – the stomach, the genitals). The existence of these as separate, potentially warring parts within the 'soul' is demonstrated for Plato by the conflict of desires and interests which all humans experience. For example, one might be thirsty for alcohol

(this is a function of the appetites), but another part of oneself (the Reason) might encourage one to resist such an impulse for the logical reason that it might not be the best thing for you; alternatively, the heart might make one resist such an impulse by causing one to experience a feeling of shame when one remembers the last time one had one too many and fell down in the street, thereby making a spectacle of oneself. Ideally, the happy man or woman is one in whom Reason or the intellect holds sway over and holds in balance the other warring parts. The potential evidently exists for a divided self on the part of the man in whom reason does not preponderate over the other parts of the soul.

In short, where both the appetites and the emotions are tied to the body, the Reason is something extra-corporeal, that is, it transcends or precedes and postdates the physical body and the physical world of which it is part and which is itself only an imperfect reflection of that world of ideal forms with which our Reason has closer affinity. For Plato, in a nutshell, the soul is immortal and transcendental. The proof of this is, in his view, the fact that some of our ideas (e.g. of perfection) simply must come from elsewhere (the world of Ideal Forms) given that if our senses are the only source of knowledge in this imperfect world, we could have no ideals whatsoever.

Social and Political Philosophy II:

Plato's model of the ideal state is an organic one derived by analogy from Plato's philosophy of mind. His central thesis is that the factors that contribute to a harmoniously balanced and thus happy human being should, in his view, be operative by analogy with regard to the state. In other words, the best and most just society ought to be structured in the same way as the best human beings who, in Plato's view, find happiness only by seeking a certain equilibrium within themselves (or, rather, an internal hierarchy in which reason rules the roost). In the same way that the happy person is one in whom the three parts exist in harmonious equilibrium (but with the head / Reason ultimately in charge), so too is the perfect state one in which there is a hierarchical balance in which all know their place. At the bottom, are the masses, the rank and file (these correspond to the appetites) who constitute the brawn of society. In the middle are to be found the nobility and aristocracy (the heart) from whose ranks are drawn the artisans, learned persons and other leaders of society. At the top is to be found the philosopher-king (he is the head). He is the leader who through a combination of nature and nurture, natural aptitude and careful education, is the member of the aristocracy best suited and carefully groomed to be leader.

Moreover, those qualities in the individual which contribute to his equanimity will, by the same token, be those which ought to be cultivated in the philosopher-king who will be at the head of and thus responsible for the creation and maintenance of Plato's ideal state. The education of the philosopher-king consists precisely in the turning of the soul away from the changing world of the senses to the unchanging reality which transcends and thus informs this world. Education, from this point of view, is ultimately a process of recollecting the objective unchanging nature of the universe by developing those capacities and forms of reasoning with which the infant enters the world. (The danger is, however, that along the way the child and then the adult commences to forget, caught up as he is in the illusory world of appearances and frequently seduced by the half-truths and subjectivism of thinkers such as the sophists.) In this way, true knowledge of the rational order of the universe is replicated in the soul of the philosopher-king and the desire nourished to mould other characters and, by extension, wider society in the shape of his own. Given that the Good (the rational order which informs the universe) is the highest object of knowledge, it stands to reason that the Commonwealth will be perfectly regulated only when the Guardian thereof possesses this knowledge and attempts to mould the state in its image.