

SESSION TWO

THE ENTANGLEMENT OF ISSUES OF KNOWLEDGE AND REALITY

Introduction

Plato's epistemology is tightly entangled with his metaphysics, and any discussion of Plato's doctrine of knowledge will involve a discussion of his ontology (ontology is a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being). This is because, for Plato, knowledge must necessarily be knowledge of the real, of what *is*. As Nickolas Pappas notes, 'Plato interweaves questions of reality with questions of knowledge, on the grounds that each kind of object in the world corresponds to a different kind of human perception of it. This grand unification of all philosophical inquiries is typical of the middle sections of *The Republic* [Books 5 – 7] and is one reason for its philosophical importance' (Pappas, 1995, p.125). It is to these sections of the *Republic* that we shall turn in this lecture.

The subjective and the objective

This 'grand unification of all philosophical inquiries', mentioned by Pappas, can be found in Plato's Theory of Forms; a theory which is essentially a systematic account of what is real and of what we can know. In our discussions of Plato's Theory of Forms, we begin at Book Five of *The Republic*, where we have a dialogue between Glaucon and Socrates. It is thought that Socrates here either is a mouthpiece for Plato's own views, or adopts different positions at different times in order to stimulate and criticise different stances on a variety of topics.

Many of the discussions that take place in *The Republic* are oriented around an investigation of what the ideal form of society and government would be. In Book Five, Plato presents a discussion that culminates in an argument that distinguishes between knowledge and belief, and that provides the basis for his Theory of Forms. In order to understand his argument, we would do well to provide an interpretative outline of the relevant section of dialogue from Part Seven of Book Five in which Glaucon and Socrates have been discussing the ideal society.

Bk.5, Part 7

1. Glaucon begins the dialogue by challenging Socrates, asking how an ideal society is *actually realised*: 'The more of these excuses we hear... the less likely we are to let you off explaining how this social system can be realised. Get on, and don't waste time' (472b). Socrates' response is to say that the issue is not how an ideal society can be realised, and he reminds Glaucon that their discussion began with the attempt to consider the nature of justice and injustice: 'Well... perhaps I ought to remind you first of all that we started our discussion by trying to find out what justice and injustice are'. But, as Socrates goes on to say, it does not follow that once we discover what justice is, we can then expect a just person to be 'an exact counterpart of what of justice is' (472b). The purpose of their enquiry is not 'to show that the ideal could be realized in practice' (472d). In other words, they are not seeking to show that perfect

justice or injustice could *actually* exist. All one can ask, Socrates suggests, is that a person resembles the ideal of justice as closely as possible.

2. Similarly, in their discussions of the ideal community, what the two philosophers seek to elucidate is ‘a theoretical paradigm’ of such a community. All one can expect is that an actual society might strive to come close to this ideal. However, we might ask how one could strive to approximate the ideal society. At 473d in the dialogue we see the answer to this. Through the character of Socrates, Plato says that ‘The society we have described can never grow into a reality or see the light of day, and there will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed, my dear Glaucon, of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers’. For Socrates to establish what this claim means or justify it, he must define what a philosopher is: ‘If we are somehow to escape the attack which you say threatens us, we must define these philosophers who we dare to claim should be rulers’ (474b-c).

3. So what is a philosopher? The literal meaning of the word is ‘lover of wisdom’. Socrates tells Glaucon that if a person loves something he loves that thing as a whole, not just some particular aspects of it: ‘Well, I hardly need to remind you... that if a man can be properly said to love something, it must be clear that he feels affection for it as whole, and does not love part of it to the exclusion of the rest’ (474c). And so it is with the philosopher. A philosopher desires the whole of knowledge, not just some part of it (474b). Moreover, philosophers can now be further defined as ‘those we love to see the truth’ (475e).

4. We are introduced next to the distinction between real beauty and particular beauty: ‘Those who love looking and listening are delighted by beautiful sounds and colours and shapes, and the works of art which make use of them, but their minds are incapable of seeing and delighting in the essential nature of beauty itself’ (476b). Theatre-goers and sightseers enjoy beautiful sounds and colours, but their minds are incapable of seeing beauty itself, or what beauty really is. Such people only see *particular* instances of beauty, not *real* beauty or beauty itself. They do not engage with the question of what beauty really is. In some sense, they live in a dream world rather than reality; dreaming makes things *appear* real but the things in our dreams are actually only *like* reality. Similarly, beautiful things in our dreams are only like the beautiful *itself*. At 476d Socrates says, ‘Then what about the man who... believes in beauty itself and can see both it and the particular things and that in which they share?’ ‘He is very much awake’, replies Glaucon. ‘And so, because he knows, we can rightly call his state of mind one of knowledge — and that of the other man, who holds opinions only, opinion’. So there are some individuals endowed with the ability to contemplate beauty itself, or beauty as it actually is. To be such a person is to be someone who contemplates reality, and is to be in a state of knowledge. We can see then that a person who contemplates reality is different from a person who just enjoys beautiful things. The person who contemplates reality has *knowledge*; the person who just enjoys beautiful things simply has *opinions* or *mere beliefs*.

5. We are next introduced to the distinction between reality and unreality. Socrates asks, ‘Does a man who knows, know something or nothing?’ ‘I shall answer that he knows something’, replies Glaucon. ‘Something which is, or which is not?’, questions Socrates. Glaucon responds by saying, ‘Something which is, how could he know

something that was not?’ Socrates finalises this part of the discussion, stating ‘Then we are satisfied that, whichever way we look at it, what fully *is* is fully knowable, what in no way *is* is entirely unknowable’ (476e-477a). A person who has knowledge knows something that has reality; ‘knowledge correlates with *what is*’. By the same token, what is unreal is inaccessible to knowledge, and those concerned with that which is unreal grasp nothing; ‘ignorance correlates with what *is not*’ (478b). However, there are some things that fall between reality and unreality. Socrates tells us that ‘since knowledge is related to what *is*, and ignorance necessarily, to what is not, we shall have to find out whether to what lies *between* them there corresponds something *between* ignorance and knowledge, if there is such a thing’ (477b). It is *belief* or *opinion* which falls in the domain between reality and unreality; it cannot be said to be either real or unreal. Belief is a mental state that is ‘darker than knowledge, but clearer than ignorance’ (478b).

6. We might ask who are those people who can be said to have beliefs, as opposed to knowledge? Those people who see only beautiful, particular things but do not contemplate beauty itself, or who see just acts but do not contemplate justice itself, merely ‘entertain beliefs’ and cannot be said to *know* anything which they believe (479e). Only people who can see beauty, justice, etc., in their *real state* can claim to have knowledge of what they are thinking about, rather than mere belief or opinion. Such people, for Plato, are philosophers; they are ‘those whose hearts are fixed on the true being of each thing’ (480a). Since philosophers are concerned with what is real, they are concerned with what is objective, i.e. what is true irrespective of belief or opinion. Belief concerns that which is merely subjective.

7. Plato goes on to suggest the nature of that which is real: ‘And what about those who have eyes for the eternal, unchanging things? They surely have knowledge and not opinion... [T]hey set their hearts on the field of knowledge, while the other type set theirs on the field of opinion — for, as you will remember, we said that their eyes and hearts were fixed on the beautiful sounds and colours and so on, and that they could not bear even the suggestion that there was such a thing as beauty itself... So we shall make no mistake to call them lovers of opinion, rather than lovers of wisdom or philosophers’ (479c-480a). That which is real then has a permanent and unchanging nature.

Theory of Forms

The ideas and arguments presented in the dialogue just outlined provide the basis for Plato’s Theory of Forms. This theory holds that all particular things have something in common, and they have something in common because they are all instances of a universal idea. Take beauty as an example. We can think of particular instances of beauty; say, a flower, a sunset and a beautiful face. All these are different things and will be beautiful in different respects. However, they all participate in the Idea of Beauty or the Form of Beauty. Take, as another example, three human beings. All are different, all have different characteristics and features, different personal histories, and so forth, but all are human. Thus, all three are connected somehow by virtue of the fact that they are all instances of the universal idea of a human. What links them together is the notion of the human itself. One can make the same point with other notions, including, for example, justice and the circle.

In relation to the Forms, what is being claimed is that in the realm of sensory experience no objective judgements are possible. When, for example, we hold that some particular state of affairs out there in the world, in the realm of sensory experience, is just or beautiful, it will always fall short of absolute Beauty or absolute Justice (absolute in the sense of that which is ideal and complete). Indeed, all particular instances of, say, beauty and justice, can be defined as such because they partake in Beauty in-itself and Justice in-itself.

In the realm of sensory experience, all we can obtain are beliefs that are in a sense correct because they reflect what *appears* to be the case. However, beliefs involve just an *appearance of reality*. By contrast, complete knowledge would entitle us to say that what we believe *truly is* the case. For Plato then, knowledge and belief belong in different realms and are very different in kind. The distinction between appearance and reality is one that has been widely discussed throughout the history of Western philosophy, and continues to dominate many philosophical discussions to do with truth and reality.

Conditions for knowledge

Plato is effectively examining some of the conditions that distinguish knowledge from belief (or opinion). To have knowledge of something, it is not enough for one to believe that something is the case. Having knowledge involves much more than this. Having knowledge of X entitles us to say that X is *true*. In contrast to this, belief alone is not indicative of the truth of the matter; belief in X does *not* entitle us to say that X is true. As such, mere belief is not sufficient for knowledge. This claim is plausible; most of us will have of a number of beliefs, not all of which will be true, and not all of which will turn out to be true once they have been further examined. Indeed, we usually think that for something to count as knowledge, that something *must be true*, whereas having a belief does not require that our belief must be true. Truth then appears to be a necessary condition for knowledge. However, although the person who has a mere belief cannot be said to have knowledge of that which he believes, the person who has knowledge *can be said to have a belief in that which he knows*. Indeed, for Plato, one who has knowledge of, say, beauty, ‘believes in beauty itself and can see both it and the particular things which share in it’ (476d). As well as truth then, belief is a necessary condition for knowledge.

We might then be inclined to think of knowledge as true belief. We have said that belief is not sufficient for knowledge, but is the truth of a belief *sufficient* for knowledge? Probably not. It would seem that we could have a belief about something that was true coincidentally. Consider my belief that Bethan is in Cardiff today; a belief based on the fact that she lives in Cardiff. Now consider the fact that Bethan is indeed in Cardiff today. My belief in this case would be true, but it could easily have been false. Bethan could have gone to Newport. Indeed, my belief just happens to be true. I have no real evidence upon which I could base my belief; nothing substantial that would entitle me to say that I *know* Bethan is in Cardiff. Consider also my judgement that John has coins in his pocket. Perhaps I believe this since I have heard what I take to be the movement of coins in his pocket. Now it might be true that there are coins in John’s pocket, but it could well be false (I might have mistaken the sound of keys jangling for coins jangling), and if it were true, it would not involve knowledge on my part. It would not then entitle me then to say that I *knew* the coins to be in John’s

pocket. Indeed, it seems reasonable to suppose that we could have a whole range of beliefs that are true, but which do not constitute knowledge. Such beliefs would include beliefs that are true coincidentally, as well as those beliefs that are the result of guesswork. The truth of a belief then, although necessary for knowledge, is not sufficient.

What else might be a required condition for knowledge? Well, take the examples above. For my beliefs to constitute knowledge in these examples, some form of justification or evidence for my beliefs would be required, something which would *establish* or provide a *justification* for their truth or certainty. This extra condition is revealed in another of Plato's texts, *Meno*: 'True opinions are fine as long as they stay with us; but they do not stay, and they depart from the mind. So they are not of great value until you fasten them down by working out the reason why... Once they are fastened, they become knowledge and then they are more permanent. Hence knowledge is a finer and better thing than true opinion, since it is secured by a chain' (*Meno*, 98a, 1-5). The 'chain' referred to in this extract is a chain of reasoning, a chain that will *justify* or establish the true belief in question.

So we have arrived at three necessary conditions for knowledge: truth, belief and justification. The idea that a justified true belief constitutes knowledge is a notion that has held fast throughout the history of Western philosophy. We shall return to this notion of knowledge in a later lecture when we discuss Edmund Gettier's paper, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' (1963).

We should note that in this section of the lecture we have been talking about the conditions for knowledge, and about the conditions that distinguish belief from knowledge. But to talk about such conditions is to say little about appropriate objects of knowledge. However, we have already seen, in our discussion of Plato's Theory of Forms, that particular things are not suitable objects of true knowledge as far as Plato is concerned. Being of the sensible world, particular things have an impermanent nature and are subject to change. For Plato, that which is an object of knowledge must have an unchanging and a fixed nature, and as such must not be of the sensible world (a world that is subject to change). As Copleston says, 'in Plato's ideas the object of true knowledge must be stable and abiding, the object of intelligence and not of sense... these requirements are fulfilled by the universal... In the *Republic* it is assumed that whenever a plurality of individuals have a common name, they also have a corresponding idea or Form. This is the universal, the common nature or quality which is grasped in the concept, e.g. beauty. There are many beautiful things, but one form of the universal concept of beauty itself... and Plato assumed that these universal concepts are not merely subjective concepts, but that in them we apprehend objective essences... [F]or Plato it is thought that grasps reality, so that the object of thought, as opposed to sense-perception, i.e. universals, must have reality' (1946, pp.163-64). A universal concept picks out that which the particulars have in common, and points to the *Idea* or *Form* in which those particular objects *partake*. It is these Ideas or Forms which are, for Plato, the objects of knowledge.

The Forms

On Plato's Theory of Forms, ideas of the Forms are immaterial; they belong to the mind and appeal to the intellect. They are also rational, ideal and exemplary. Each

particular thing can be brought under the Form in which they partake. For example, the true Form of Beauty (ideal Beauty) is to be discovered through reason (it can be seen in the mind's eye, so to speak); particular beauty can be brought under this ideal Form. Plato often contrasts the Forms with the objects of sight, and in doing so makes a distinction between the intelligible realm and the visible realm. For example, Beauty itself appeals to the intellect, whereas particular beautiful things, such as a beautiful flower or a beautiful sunset, appeal to the senses. These particular things are non-permanent and changing, and only have reality in so far as they succeed in imitating the Forms. We might then ask how it is supposed that the particular things imitate the Forms. Well, consider the Form of the Circle. The circle is a mathematical ideal Form. In a sense, it is not possible to draw a *real circle* (since our drawing will never be a geometrically perfect circle), only an imperfect copy of one. Particular things, like a wheel, can partake in the Form of the Circle, but they are not the Form in-itself. Note that his Forms are a metaphysical idea. Metaphysics aims to give us an understanding of the ultimate reality which lies beyond that which we confront in sensory experience. This understanding is not itself based on sensory experience, but on rational analysis. Similarly, our understanding of the Forms is based on rational insight, rather than empirical observation. Truth is to be sought via an understanding of the Forms.

The Form of the Good (Bk.6)

We have seen that, for Plato, knowledge concerns what is true irrespective of opinion. To know about, for example, beauty or justice involves comprehending the nature of Beauty itself or Justice itself, i.e., something universal, rather than simply entertaining the belief that some particular thing is beautiful or some particular act is just. Mere belief that something is beautiful or just cannot amount to knowledge because it ignores the issue of what it is that defines any specific instance of beauty or justice.

Plato, through the mouthpiece of Socrates, says that 'Philosophers are those who are capable of apprehending that which is permanent and unvarying' (*Republic*, 484b). They would therefore be those equipped to apprehend the Forms, and thus apprehend the nature of truth. In their ability to grasp the Forms, particularly the Form of Justice, philosophers are those who would be able to comprehend an ideal society; and as such, for Plato, they are best positioned to be guardians of a society's laws and customs. However, a guardian of society will not know what is right for a society and its citizens unless he can grasp the Good; the Good as it *really is*, not what is good from a subjective viewpoint: 'Is there any point in having all other forms of knowledge without that of the good, and so lacking knowledge about what is good and valuable?... At any rate, a man will not be a very useful Guardian of what is right and valuable if he does not know in what goodness consists; and I suspect that until he does no one can know them adequately' (505a-506a). There is, Plato says, a higher form of knowledge than the Forms themselves; this highest form of knowledge is 'knowledge of the good'. In his search for truth then, there is a moral aspect to the philosopher's endeavours. Indeed, truth itself has a moral aspect.

But what might be the nature of goodness, for Plato? In the *Republic* (Bk.6), the dialogue between Glaucon and Socrates provides some answers to this question. Socrates himself cannot furnish a simple definition of goodness: as he says, 'I'm afraid it's beyond me, and if I try I shall only make a fool of myself... So please let us

give up asking for the present what the good is in itself.' (507e). Rather than define 'goodness' Socrates proposes to offer a simile (the simile of the sun) as a means of coming to grasp it in some way. The use of a simile involves claiming that something is *like* something else, drawing a comparison between one thing and another.

Socrates starts his discussion of the simile by assuming the existence of Forms: he draws a distinction between beautiful things and good things on the one hand, and beauty and goodness on the other: 'We say there are many particular things that are beautiful, and many that are good, and so on.... And we go on to speak of beauty-in-itself, and goodness-in-itself, and so on for all the sets of particular things which we have regarded as many; and we proceed to posit by contrast a single form, which is unique, and call it 'what it really is'' (507b). Socrates goes on to note that individual instances of things are visible, i.e., encountered in the world of experience by way of the sense of sight. The Forms of these things are not visible but are intelligible, i.e., encountered only through thought: 'And we say that the particulars are objects of sight but not of intelligence, while the forms are the objects of intelligence but not of sight' (507b). Here then Socrates is contrasting the Forms with objects of sight, and effectively making a distinction between objects of the visible realm and objects of the intelligible realm. Socrates asks us to imagine a person who is using his sight to see something that is coloured. What will this person see? Unless the objects are illuminated, he will see nothing: 'the colours will remain invisible unless a third element is present which is specifically... adapted for this purpose' (507e). The 'third element' mentioned here is light. Light illuminates what is seen. And what is the source of this light? The answer of course, Socrates says, is the sun (508a). The sun cannot be identified with sight, nor can it be identified with the sensory organ in which sight is located (i.e. the eye). Rather, 'the eye's power of sight is a kind of infusion dispensed to it by the sun' (508b). Thus the sun is not the same as sight *but is responsible for it*.

Goodness is *like* the sun. It is the corresponding or comparable entity in the realm in the intellect. Just as the eye sees objects due to the sun's light, reason can know the Forms due to the Form of the Good. The Form of the Good makes knowledge possible. In this sense, it is the highest of Forms (Pappas, 1995, p.137). As Socrates says, 'what gives the objects of knowledge their truth and the knower's mind the power of knowing is the form of the good. It is the cause of knowledge and truth.... And just as it was right to think of light and sight as being like the sun... so here again it is right to think of knowledge and truth as being like the good, but wrong to think of them as being the good, whose position must be ranked still higher' (508e). When we look at things illuminated by the sun, we are able to see them clearly. Similarly, when the mind contemplates things that are 'illuminated by truth and reality, it understands and knows them' (508d), and is able to comprehend them with clarity. Goodness, in other words, is the source of knowledge and truth in the same way as the sun is the source of illumination that makes sight possible. Like knowledge and truth, goodness exists in the intelligible realm, not in the realm of the senses.

In the same way as the sun is not to be confused either with the ability to see or with what is seen, so goodness ought not to be confused with knowledge or truth. Just as light and sight ought not to be confused with their source (the sun), so knowledge and truth are different from their source. Goodness is what makes knowledge and truth possible, but it is not the same as either. Goodness, therefore, should be ranked higher

than knowledge or truth (509a). As Socrates says, ‘The sun, I think you will agree, not only makes the things we see visible but causes the processes of generation, growth and nourishment, without itself being such a process... The good therefore may be said to be the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their being and reality; yet it is not itself that reality, but is beyond it and superior’ (509b).

Plato talks of the Form of the Good as something that is ‘beyond’ reality. Nickolas Pappas notes that although this sounds like something mystical and theological, the Form of the Good is not a divinity, but a Form of Form-ness; it is the ‘next level up from the Forms in abstraction and reality’ and *the* essential element in his metaphysics (Pappas, 1995, p.137). Indeed, the Form of the Good is the ultimate principle of Plato’s metaphysics because of its superiority to other Forms and because it causes the Forms to be. The Form of the Good is also the ultimate principle of his epistemology: the Form of the Good must be understood or grasped if one wants to know the content of the Forms. As such, the analogy of the sun unites Plato’s epistemology and metaphysics: the sun is not only the source by which we see things in the world, it is also causes them to be in the sense that it is the cause of their ‘generation, growth and nourishment’ (509d). Similarly, the Form of the Good not only enables us to acquire knowledge of the Forms, but also causes the Forms to be.

Exercise:

You should be aware that Plato’s simile of the sun is not the only image that he uses to elucidate his ideas. Plato’s metaphor of the divided line further illustrates the distinction between the visible realm and the intelligible realm. We shall not discuss the divided line here, but you should do some independent reading about this allegory. First, read sections 509d-511e (on the divided line) of the *Republic*. Then search out secondary material on the divided line. Chapter seven of Pappas’s *Plato and the Republic* is a good source of information on this, as is Copleston’s *History of Philosophy*, Ch. XIX (both these texts are on the reading list). After you have done some reading, think about how the allegories of the divided line and the simile of the sun are related, as well as how the divided line further illustrates what Plato meant by the Form of the Good. (This is one of the exercises related to this lecture. See the ‘Study exercises’ attachment.)

The Allegory of the Cave (Bk.7)

Having already discussed two ways of alluding to the Form of the Good (the simile of the sun and the divided line), Plato offers his account of the allegory of the cave. An allegory is a narrative whose elements have a symbolic value, i.e. they stand for something else.

Plato’s allegory envisages a situation which he believes is somewhat analogous to the human condition: ‘I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition somewhat as follows’ (514a). We are asked to imagine a cave in which there are people imprisoned. These people are chained up so that they face the inside of the cave and cannot turn their heads to see the cave’s entrance. Behind them is a fire, and between the fire and themselves is a raised wall. Other people walk behind this raised wall carrying statues and figures of objects. These figures and

statues appear over top of wall. Of course, being chained up and unable to turn their heads, the prisoners are unable to see the actual statues and figures. All they see are the shadows of these figures, as well as the shadows of themselves; shadows cast by the light of the fire onto the wall of the cave in front of them:

‘Imagine an underground chamber... In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead. Some way off, behind and higher up, a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners... runs a road in front of which a curtain-wall has been built... Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, projecting above it ... figures of men and animals... For, tell me, do you think our prisoners could see anything of themselves or their fellows except the shadows thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite them?’ (514a)

The prisoners’ world is composed only of the shadows that they see and which are cast on the wall in front of them by the objects carried by the people behind them. The prisoners take the evidence that is given to them by their sense perceptions as true. They *believe* that what they see in front of them is reality. However, even what they see of themselves is only visible to the extent that their bodies cast shadows on the wall opposite them, and it does not occur to them to doubt that what they see is real. Likewise, the shadows of the objects will also, for the prisoners, be understood as real, not mere likenesses of real objects: ‘And so in every way they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were the whole truth’ (515c).

We are further asked to imagine that a prisoner escapes. He will for the first time be able to see the firelight but would at first be blinded by this light:

‘[H]e would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows. What do you think he would say if he was told that what he used to see was so much empty nonsense and that he was now nearer reality and seeing more correctly, because he was turned towards objects that were more real? Don’t you think he would be at a loss, and think that what he used to see was far truer than the objects now being pointed out to him?’ (515d)

Now, what if the prisoner were forced to look at the fire itself? We are told that ‘it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and retreat to the things which he could see properly, which he would think really clearer than the things being shown him’ (515e). Plato is suggesting that humans have a tendency to think that what is familiar to them has the greatest reality. Indeed, we tend to think that we understand or know that with which we are familiar. Against this, Plato is suggesting that familiarity is no guarantee of the truth.

Suppose now that the prisoner is dragged out into the open sunlight? He will be blinded by the light of the sun and will find himself in a situation that he cannot comprehend:

‘The process would be a painful one, to which he would much object, and when he emerged into the light his eyes would be so dazzled by the glare of it that he wouldn’t be able to see a single one of the things he was now told were real... [H]e would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in

the upper world outside the cave. First he would find it easiest to look at shadows, next at the reflections of men and other objects... and later on at the objects themselves. After that he would find it easier to observe the heavenly bodies and the sky itself at night, and to look at the light of the moon and stars... The thing he would be able to do last would be to look directly at the sun itself' (516a)

So here we are offered an ordered list of the things that the prisoner would slowly be able to see: shadows, reflections (of men and other objects), objects themselves, the stars and the moon, and finally the sun itself. At this point in the dialogue, we find ourselves being reminded of the simile of the sun; from observing the sun the prisoner would be able to work out that it 'produces the changing seasons... and controls everything in the visible world, and is in a sense responsible for everything that he and his fellow-prisoners used to see' (516b-c). Having been acquainted with reality, the escaped prisoner would come to fully understand the abysmal state of his former existence within the depths of the cave, where all he was ever acquainted with were illusions and imitations of the real world. He would rather live a miserable life outside the cave 'than hold the opinions and live the life that they [the prisoners] do' (516d). Indeed, 'he would prefer anything to a life like theirs' (516e).

Socrates now asks us to imagine further that the prisoner returns to the cave:

'[W]ouldn't his eyes be blinded by the darkness, because he had come in suddenly out of the sunlight?... And if he has to discriminate between the shadows, in competition with the other prisoners, while he was still blinded and before his eyes got used to the darkness – a process that would take some time – wouldn't he be likely to make a fool of himself? And they would say that his visit to the upper world has ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting. And if anyone tried to release them and lead them up, they would kill him if they could lay hands on him' (516e)

Upon his return to the cave, disorientated by the darkness, the returning prisoner is likely to appear a fool in the eyes of his fellow prisoners. It is unlikely that they will take seriously anything he says about the outside world, and would certainly not think of this fellow as having acquired knowledge. Socrates' point here is that a person who seeks to communicate the kind of knowledge that throws doubt upon the everyday certainties of life runs the risk of being very unpopular (or even runs the risk of being killed for his beliefs). (Plato may be alluding to the death of Socrates here; as we saw in the introductory lecture, Socrates was sentenced to death for communicating what were thought to be corruptive beliefs.)

The metaphor of light / dark

Providing an analysis of the allegory will involve understanding how the allegory works and what the various aspects of the cave represent. In the dialogue, Socrates elucidates the representative function of each aspect of the allegory:

'The realm revealed by sight corresponds to the prison, and the light of the fire in the prison to the power of the sun. And you won't go wrong if you connect the ascent into the upper world and the sight of the objects there with the upward progress of the mind into the intelligible region... the final thing to be perceived in the intelligible region, and perceived only with difficulty, is the form of the

good; once seen, it is inferred to be responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything, producing in the visible region light and the source of light, and being in the intelligible region itself controlling source of truth and intelligence. And anyone who is going to act rationally either in public or private life must have sight of it' (517b)

We can see from Socrates' analysis of the allegory here, that the Form of the Good is understood last of all, it being the most difficult notion to understand. What is also quite clear is that truth is to be found in the intelligible realm, and accessing truth involves some sort of epistemological ascent (in a metaphorical sense) of the mind from the sensory world of experience ('The realm revealed by sight') to the intelligible world of the intellect. With reference to the particular aspects of the allegory, it is usually thought that the prisoner who sees the objects being passed along the wall has ascended from the shadow world of mere opinion to the real world of objects of which we can form commonsense beliefs. Indeed, the prisoner now sees particular things, not just shadows and illusions. When he eventually makes his way out of the cave and becomes accustomed to the light, he will then be acquainted with the real, sun-illuminated objects of the world (which represent intelligible realities), not just statues and figures of particular objects, and will also be able to see the astronomical bodies (the Forms). Finally, of course, he sees the sun; we have already seen that the sun represents the Form of Good, the highest Form, and as such, in seeing the sun, the prisoner is interpreted as having gained access to truth and to the highest form of knowledge. Overall, the ascent from the cave in a sense represents an ascent from the world of particular things towards abstract things; a metaphysical and epistemological ascent from the changing, impermanent and irrational world of experience to the rational intelligible realm in which the permanent and rational objects of knowledge reside.

The prisoner's ascent is also, as said above, an ascent of the mind, from ignorance to knowledge and clarity, represented through a metaphorical opposition of darkness and light. Indeed, the different aspects of the allegory could be seen to correspond to different mental states. The chained prisoner, in being able to behold only shadows of reality, is representative of illusion; the escaped prisoner, in being able to form commonsense opinions about the figures and statues of which he previously saw only their shadows, could be seen to represent belief; the ascent from the darkness of the cave to the sun-illuminated world represents the progress to reason; the mental state of intelligence is represented via the escaped prisoner's ability to clearly see the real things outside of the cave; whilst the vision of the Form of the Good is represented through the prisoner being able to look up at the sun. Viewed in this way, the ascent from the cave is overall representative of an ascent from the lower sections of the mind to the higher sections.

Socrates has thus given us an account of reality that ends up claiming that there are two modes of existence (518a). One is of lesser worth than the other and is linked to the metaphor of darkness. The highest mode of existence is linked to the metaphor of light. This metaphorical opposition (light / dark) provides us with an account of the nature of knowledge and its source (i.e. goodness). The allegory, overall, offers a narrative account of the progression from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge. The imagery of the cave illustrates this progression as one which involves an ascent from darkness to light (to 'enlightenment') and which involves considerable effort.

The imagery that associates knowledge with light is a pervasive element within Western philosophy. Consider Descartes (1596-1650), for example. One of his central claims is that the truest ideas will be those which are presented to us clearly and distinctly (see *Meditation Three*). Another example is the seventeenth century intellectual movement known as ‘The Enlightenment’. Enlightenment thinkers (such as Kant) expressed a belief in the ability of reason to comprehend the world, as well as a belief that progress could be achieved using self-reliant reason. The idea implicit in the term ‘enlightenment’ is that knowledge is about achieving clarity with respect to the truth; in a metaphorical sense, knowledge is about shedding light on those claims that we take for granted as true. Enlightenment thinkers often criticised traditional ways of thinking; they often rejected traditionalism and authoritarianism. Their views highlighted a contrast between what they considered to be the enlightened power of reason and the dominance of superstition and mythology in contemporary society — a contrast not dissimilar to that made by the Pre-Socratic philosophers (see lecture one). Note how our discussion here can be linked back to the ideas discussed in the introductory lecture; specifically to the idea of philosophy as essentially concerned with reasoned argument, as well as to the idea that the distinctiveness of the inquiries of many philosophers partly lies in their preparedness to challenge conventional wisdom.

Plato’s Theory of Forms: objections and problems

1. The Third Man Argument and the infinite regress.

A version of the case for the Forms can be found in Plato’s *Parmenides*. Here we find the claim that when many things have the same character, there must be something that is common to them all, *a single thing which is the Form*, and which, unlike particular things, is abstract and unchanging. In this text it is also suggested that if knowledge is of the abstract and the unchanging then without the Forms there will be no knowledge, for the world of particulars is constantly changing (1999, pp.61-64). (This is illustrated in the Master-Slave passage (ibid., p.62).) Meaningful discourse requires some fixed, abstract ideas which can serve as the basis for discussion and debate; without the Forms, there will be no such discourse (ibid., p.64).

In *Parmenides*, what has become known as the ‘Third Man Argument’ is raised in criticism of the Theory of Forms. Gregory Vlastos (1954) generalises the first step of the argument as follows:

If a number of things, a, b, c, are all F, there must be a single Form, F-ness, in virtue of which we apprehend a, b, and c as all F.

Now the conclusion of the argument is:

If a, b, c, and F-ness are all F, there must be another Form, F-ness1, in virtue of which we apprehend a, b, c and F-ness as all F.

But if so, there must be another and another Form for us to apprehend this, and so on to infinity; thus no single Form performs the role that they were introduced to perform. This is a vicious regress. (Since Aristotle’s example for F was ‘man’, the name ‘Third Man Argument’ has been given to this argument.)

As said, for Plato, a Form is something that all particular things with a certain feature have in common. Therefore, the Form of Beauty is something that all beautiful things have in common. All beautiful things can be said to partake in the Form of Beauty. Likewise, the Form of Man-ness is something that all men have in common. 'But the forms are also thought of as ideal paradigms: the form of beauty is most beautiful, and has therefore something in common with other beautiful things. Similarly, the form of man has something in common with other men. That common element is yet another form, 'a third man'. In a similar way we get a fourth, fifth, and indeed an infinite series' (Mautner 1999, p.565).

Exercise: Is the Third Man Argument a valid objection to the Theory of Forms?

2. *Is there a Form of everything, including evil and ugliness?*

Is there a Form of evil? Is there a Form of ugliness? Is so, there will be a conflict between the role of Forms as (morally and aesthetically pleasing) paradigms and their role as universals. These things do not have a good version.

3. *There are other problems too, including the problem of how unchanging Forms are related to particular changing things.*

Plato, contemporary metaphysics, and family resemblance

The nature and existence of universals has been a matter of much debate ever since Plato's Theory of Forms. Aristotle's view of universals was quite different from that of Plato's. He thought that Forms, what he calls 'universals', reside in substances. (For Aristotle's view on this, see his *Metaphysics*, Bk. Zeta.) Contrary to Plato, Aristotle claimed that universals were not transcendent but 'immanent' (Crane and Farkas, 2004, p.219); they are instantiated by the various objects in the sensory world of experience. Indeed, for Aristotle, universals are concretely tied to particulars, and as such are 'less mysterious than Platonic universals' (Carroll and Markosian, 2010, p.233).

In contemporary metaphysics, debates surrounding universals have focused on the rival claims of realists (who claim universals exist or are real) and nominalists (who claim that only particulars exist in any meaningful sense). Contemporary realist philosophers tend to say that universals exist but only in and through the particulars that exemplify them (and thus advocate an Aristotelian concept of the nature of universals), rather than claim that universals exist independently of all particulars (the Platonic notion of universals). See, for example, D. M. Armstrong, 'Selection from *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*' [Westview, 1989], in Crane and Farkas, *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.235-48. Armstrong is one of those modern realists who defend Aristotle's position. Nominalists include W. Quine and David Lewis.

Plato's idea of the Forms can, then, be linked to contemporary debates and ideas in philosophy. One of the problems Plato is trying to solve concerns our use of general terms, which denote a universal characteristic shared by indefinitely many particular things. How is it that we can say of particulars both that 'x (for example, a rose) is beautiful' and 'y (a face) is beautiful?' How can one predicate ('is large', 'is red', 'is a

dog', etc.) be applied to indefinitely many particular objects? Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblances is one modern approach to solving this problem. Wittgenstein coined the term 'family resemblance' to refer to that pattern of resemblances that we see between members of the same family. Family members may all have the 'family face' but do not necessarily all share the same features (they do not necessarily all have, for example, the same eye colour or the same hair colour, etc.). When we look at members of the same family, what we see are similarities between the family members; we see a pattern of resemblance, rather than one thing that all the family members have in common. Family members resemble one another not by virtue of a single thing that they all share, but rather by virtue of a range of different relations between the members of the family. There is no single essence that picks out all the family members. Similarly, what Wittgenstein calls a 'family concept' does not have a single essence that picks out all the objects falling under it. As he says of 'games', 'if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that...we see a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities as 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes...etc.' (1958 [1953], Part I, paragraphs 66-67).

Wittgenstein is essentially rejecting the Platonic idea that all general concepts refer to an underlying essence or single feature which the objects falling under those concepts have in common. For Wittgenstein, it is a mistake to think that all objects falling under general concepts have a common property, for the objects falling under family concepts do not have such a property. Indeed, for family concepts, the objects to which the concepts apply do not have one thing in common, but rather the objects resemble each other in a variety of different ways.

Although the work of Plato has been criticised by many philosophers, both early and contemporary ones, there is no doubt that his work has played a central role in the history of ideas and the development of contemporary philosophy. A great many of the issues and concerns of modern philosophers were originally taken up by Plato, some 2,300 years earlier.

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