

Essay

Eric Richardson, Student No. 2117450

Assignment 2

HPPH 7010 "Knowledge, Reason, and Reality"

Plato's Position in Philosophy

Plato was a Greek philosopher that addressed some of the most important concepts in philosophy. The concepts that Plato wrote about include justice, courage, the Forms, politics, epistemology, and many other important ideas. The *Republic* is commonly regarded to be his most influential work, but he has many shorter dialogues that were also influential. These dialogues include the *Meno*, *Euthyphro*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Crito*, and many other works. When scholars evaluate Plato's work some are critical towards Plato's ideas, and others think that he discovered almost everything in philosophy. For example, there is a quote by Alfred North Whitehead that states, "All of Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato." (Whitehead, Lapham's Quarterly) I disagree with Whitehead, because he marginalized the philosophers of the medieval, modern Western, and contemporary periods. Philosophy has a long historical tradition where thought has been developed, and this tradition is valuable. The volume of philosophical contributions that have occurred after Plato outweigh the contributions that Plato as a single philosopher has made. The idea of Western philosophy being a footnote to Plato goes too far in praise of Plato, and it also devalues the tradition of philosophy including thinkers such as Aquinas, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein. However, Plato has established himself as one of the top philosophers, and I think that it is good to keep a traditional view of Plato. I do not aim to be overly critical of Plato given how much he has contributed to philosophy. However, some scholars have thoroughly read Plato, and they might have some

valid criticisms of where Plato made errors. I will discuss some of the criticisms of Plato, and provide my own assessment. I think that there is a problem with both being too critical of Plato, and on the contrary some people offer too much credit to Plato at the expense of the philosophical tradition. The intended aim of this paper is to propose and argue that the traditional view of how Plato is regarded as a major thinker should remain as the accepted viewpoint.

It is important to know about Plato's life and position in the philosophical tradition to provide some context of where his thinking emerged. Plato was a Greek philosopher that was born in approximately 429 B.C. although his birth year is not known with certainty, and he died in 347 B.C. ("Plato", Kraut) Ancient Greece was a civilization that promoted excellence in many areas including sculpture, architecture, playwrighting, philosophy, politics, and other areas. The ancient Greeks were able to achieve more than many other civilizations. M. R. Wright provides some explanation for the accomplishments of the Greeks, and it partly had to do with their competitiveness. (Wright, Introduction) Wright states, "The spirit of competition was rife in the Greek world, not only in politics and athletics but also in rival events in music and poetry, and Greek tragedies were produced not so much for the glory of literature as to win prizes, and the first cosmologists were in a similar competitive mood. For the Greeks, to be best was a way of life, and this self-awareness of what they were doing, and the desire to be better at it than anyone else, stimulated their speculation and gave it a sharp edge." (Wright, Introduction) Wright proposes that the competitiveness of the Greeks was a major factor in why they were able to achieve what they did. Plato was a member of society in ancient Greece, and he was also probably competitive in his philosophical thinking. It is likely that Plato aimed to be the best possible philosopher that he could be. The culture of ancient Greece was supportive in Plato's pursuit of being a great philosopher. This supportiveness was helpful to Plato, because it is a lot

easier to attain more if the culture wants you to improve in your philosophical thought. However, ancient Greece was strongly against any ideas that might harm the society. Socrates was a

philosopher that was the teacher of Plato, and he was accused of proposing ideas that were

damaging to the society. People accused him of making weaker arguments appear stronger, and

they thought that this misled the society into believing in many false ideas. (*Apology*, 19c, Plato)

People believed that Socrates corrupted the youth and had impiety towards the gods. (*Apology*

23d) He was put on trial to determine the truth of these accusations, and he lost the trial forcing

him to go into exile or suffer the death penalty. (*Apology*, 39a, Plato) Socrates decided to not go

into exile due to ethical reasons, and he accepted the death penalty through drinking hemlock.

(*Apology*, 39a, Plato) The death of Socrates must have had a large impact on Plato, because

Socrates was his teacher who had helped him become a better philosopher. If it had not been for

Socrates' teaching of Plato, then Plato might not have reached as many profound ideas that he

did as a philosopher. Plato would most likely still be remembered as a philosopher in our current

time, but he would not have attained as much without Socrates' help. Plato was able to pass his

knowledge on to Aristotle who was a student of his. This interaction greatly helped Aristotle, and

he was able to become one of the highest-ranking philosophers in history. Socrates, Plato, and

Aristotle are all remembered as being great philosophers, and many scholars place them near the

top of philosophical attainment. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) states about

Plato that, "Few other authors in the history of Western philosophy approximate him in depth

and range: perhaps only Aristotle (who studied with him), Aquinas, and Kant would be generally

agreed to be of the same rank." (*Plato*, Krant) I agree with this ranking, because I also think

that Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant should be at the top of philosophy in terms of ranking.

There are also other philosophers such as Descartes, Hume, Leibniz, Locke, and Wittgenstein

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that are also close to the top rank of philosophy. The areas that Plato discussed are mentioned and succinctly summarized in Kraut's SEP article. The article states, "But he was so self-conscious about how philosophy should be conceived, and what its scope and ambitions properly are, and he so transformed the intellectual currents with which he grappled, that the subject of philosophy, as it is often conceived – a rigorous and systematic examination of ethical, political, metaphysical, and epistemological issues, armed with a distinctive method – can be called his invention." (Kraut, 2022) The article mentions how Plato had a strong awareness of what philosophy was in its proper form and what areas should be included in philosophy. (Kraut, 2022) (Kraut, 2022) There is an element of invention in Plato's thought where he was exploring areas that had not been addressed before. ("Plato", Kraut) He also provided adequate answers in many of the important areas of philosophy and gave thorough explanations of his ideas. The large breadth of the areas that he focused on while remaining knowledgeable about the details of each area was a strong suit of Plato's. Another thing that is surprising about Plato is the level that he was able to reach over 2,300 years back in history. He did not have the advantages that we have now in terms of science, technology, information, and other factors. Plato was still able to produce high level philosophy despite these limitations. The philosophy that was done by the pre-Socratics was beneficial to Plato, because they provided him with information to build from. The pre-Socratics are sometimes overlooked due to only having fragments of their writings, and other people think that the pre-Socratic philosophers were not as developed as Plato. While Plato had a much more complete and advanced system of philosophy than the pre-Socratics did, I think that the early stages of philosophy were important for the later developments in philosophy. Plato's own thinking was also important for future philosophers in the medieval, modern Western, and

contemporary periods. Almost every major philosopher has read Plato and been influenced by his thinking.

Some major philosophers disagree with Plato's thinking and have criticisms of his

philosophy. It is necessary to look at some of the criticisms of Plato to give a more balanced critique of his philosophy. One of the concepts that Plato draws the most criticism from is his Theory of Forms. Plato's Theory of Forms proposes that there are ideal representations of objects in the world, and there are also concepts that are ideal. For example, Plato proposes that there is a Form of virtue in which there is an ideal concept of virtue. There are many different instances of virtue, because virtue includes several different ways that people can be virtuous. However, there is a single entity that is the most ideal way to be virtuous. The Form of virtue would be the most ideal representation of what virtue is. There are Forms of almost everything, because there is a possible representation of almost every object that is the most ideal representation. Aristotle was Plato's student who learned a large amount from Plato, but he was critical of Plato's Theory of Forms. There are also many other philosophers after Aristotle that are critical of Plato's Theory of Forms. Paul Horrigan states, "Plato's Ideas or Forms are primarily objective realities in themselves existing extra-mentally as universals. They are objective universal essences existing apart from the phenomena of the sense world and apart from our conceptual representations. How did he arrive at such a false conclusion, namely, that universal Ideas really exist apart from the human mind, in extra-mental reality, as universals, in a world of Ideas or Forms?" (Horrigan, 3) Horrigan is correctly pointing out a flaw in Plato's assertion that the Forms literally exist outside of the mind as independent realities. (Horrigan, 3) On both a dualist and materialist position it would be impossible for an abstract entity to exist apart from the mind. It is very unlikely that there is some space in the world where Forms are literally existing. Plato's Theory

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of Forms is much more acceptable if Plato proposed that the Forms existed as entities within the mind. The mind has the capability to imagine and get closer to the Form of an object or concept. For example, if a person was very interested in what virtue was and read several books about virtue, then they would be getting closer to what virtue was in their mind in the most precise understanding of it. The understanding that they possess in their mind would be close to the Form of virtue. I think that Plato's conception of the Forms as realities in the world is incorrect, but I think that Forms can exist in people's minds. I think that Plato's Theory of Forms is interesting, and it is also a useful concept in the approach to reach a precise definition of an object or idea. However, I agree with Horriagan criticism of Plato that the Forms cannot exist as literal entities in the world.

The *Republic* is an ambitious book by Plato, because it proposes how the ideal city should be set up. Plato goes into extensive detail about the ideal city, and provides justification for his decisions. A major criticism of Plato's ideal city is that it is proposing a utopia rather than a realistic city. ("Plato's Ethics and Politics", Brown) Eric Brown states, "The *Republic*'s

utopianism has attracted many imitators, but also many critics. The critics typically claim that Plato's political ideal rests on an unrealistic picture of human beings. The ideal city is conceivable, but humans are psychologically unable to create and sustain such a city." ("Plato's

Ethics and Politics", Brown) I agree with the criticism to the extent that Plato is proposing the design a city that is a utopia. Plato is aiming for a city with the best possible results and maximization even if it is unrealistic. However, I think that the pursuit of designing an ideal city is not a fruitless endeavor even if it cannot be applied. Through focusing on what is the best possible city, it teaches the readers about how to maximize. This can help the readers set their sights in a more positive direction instead of dealing with the limitations that cities have. The

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Republic typically has the effect of inspiring people to make the situation better, and discover ways to modify the world in their favor. However, I realize the to the skeptical reader, The

Republic can seem as if it is proposing an unfounded utopia that has no applicability to designing a real city. Skeptics would argue that Plato is wasting time through describing an ideal city, when he would be better to deal with the obstacles of designing a real city. It is a fair criticism that some readers are bothered by the unrealistic design of Plato's city. However, the advantage to proposing an ideal city is that it gets people's mind set on how to improve the world, which is a productive task.

Another possible criticism that people might have of Plato is that he was a philosopher from ancient Greece which was 2,300 years in the past, and that means that he is less relevant to current philosophy. There are some errors that Plato makes, because the ancient Greeks did not have the same scientific and technological advantages of our current time. However, I think that philosophy is a discipline that could be done well during the time of Plato. The relevance of

Plato's thinking to our own society is something that stands out. Plato was a great philosopher across time, and he has stayed relevant to philosophy today. His system is so developed and well thought out that it is difficult to find errors with his philosophy. The vision that Plato has with his thinking and his commitment to following through with his ideas is something that stands out as one of his best abilities. His ability to convey his ideas with a strong writing style and ability is something that is noticeable. There are also many other merits to Plato's philosophy that have

not been mentioned. Plato has a strong argument for being ranked with Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant as being at the top of philosophy. ("Plato", Krant)

Plato made significant contributions in epistemology with the Allegory of the Cave, the *Meno*, and other texts. The Allegory of the Cave is a passage from Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*

that demonstrates some of Plato's epistemology. (Plato, 514a, *Republic*) The allegory explains a possible situation where prisoners are in a cave and have been shackled since birth facing a wall. (Plato, 514a, *Republic*) There is a fire that helps light the cave wall, and people carry objects that cast shadows on the wall. (Plato, 514b, *Republic*) The prisoners facing the wall see the shadows and believe that the shadows are the objects of the world. (Plato, 515a, *Republic*) They believe that the shadows are reality, because they have never seen any objects outside of the cave. (Plato, 515a, *Republic*) This connects to epistemology, because it demonstrates a situation where people believe that they know what reality is through their senses but are not perceiving what is real. The prisoners are lacking basic knowledge about the world, and this causes them to take reality to be the shadows. (Plato, 515a, *Republic*) If a prisoner was forcibly dragged out of the cave into the light, then it would be painful to their eyes at first, because their eyes are not accustomed to the light. (Plato, 515e, *Republic*) However, their eyes would adjust over time, and they would eventually be able to see the objects clearly. (Plato, 516a, *Republic*) The prisoner would realize that the world outside of the cave is the real world, and that they have falsely believed that the shadows were reality. (Plato, 516c) This raises an epistemic question of "How can we trust in our sense perception of the world if we are potentially lacking complete information?" I think that people vary to large degrees in the extent to which they understand the world. For example, a child usually does not have as good of a grasp of the world as an adult does, because they do not possess as much knowledge. The child still lives their life with real experiences, but they remain unaware of the many aspects of the world. When a person becomes an adult, they usually have a better understanding of the world by having more experiences and gaining knowledge. Humans are all on a spectrum of their understanding of reality and knowledge. A person can trust their sense perception to the extent that they grasp the world with their senses, mind, and knowledge.

If a person learns more about the world in an accurate way, they get closer to understanding reality and the world around them. Plato proposes that education is the way in which people come to know the actual world around them. (Plato, 514a, *Republic*) I agree with this, because I think that education increases people's knowledge substantially which helps with an understanding of the world. People also learn more about the world through experiences, and developing themselves at different activities.

The *Meno* is a dialogue written by Plato that puts forward the idea of recollection. (Bedu-Addo, 228) The dialogue involves a discussion between Socrates and a slave-boy in which

Socrates asks a series of questions. (Bedu-Addo, 236) Many of the questions are about geometry, which is an area that the slave-boy does not have prior understanding in. (Bedu-Addo, 236) The slave-boy was able to determine the answers to many of the geometrical questions that Socrates asked. Plato provides an explanation to why the slave-boy knew about geometry without having a prior background in it by proposing the Theory of Recollection. (Bedu-Addo, 236) Bedu-Addo states, "The slave-boy experiment is intended to demonstrate the truth of the theory of

recollection. It is, however, something more than that; it shows us the process whereby the mind can begin to recollect its prenatal knowledge." (Bedu-Addo, 236) Bedu-Addo correctly points out that Plato's position is that people have knowledge about the world that is already possessed prior to any experience in the world. (Bedu-Addo, 236) Plato thought that people came into the world with knowledge, and the process of recollection is remembrance of knowledge. (Bedu-

Addo, 236) Plato proposes that the knowledge that people have when they are born comes from the experience of previous souls. (Bedu-Addo, 233) Bedu-Addo states, "...we are explicitly told in this dialogue that all knowledge is the result of the recollection of things known in a previous

discarnate existence...." (Bedu-Addo, 233) The idea that knowledge comes from previous souls

provides an explanation of how people can possess knowledge prior to having experiences. The idea that knowledge is passed from prior souls into the souls of people in the future makes sense on a certain level. I think that the knowledge and experiences from our past ancestors has led to people today possessing certain abilities, instincts, understanding, and knowledge. It is somewhat unclear how the knowledge is passed from one generation to the other. I think that the process of evolution might give some answers to how knowledge is transferred gradually over many generations. I agree with Plato that people come into the world with prior knowledge, because I do not think that people are born knowing absolutely nothing. People know certain things inherently that they have not thought out, but possess the knowledge regardless of experience. However, the idea of whether people possess prior knowledge before birth has been debated by many modern Western philosophers. John Locke proposed that people have a "blank slate" when they are born and that their experience and reason is how they come to know the world. Kant has also discussed the idea of prior knowledge in his writings about people having certain faculties *a priori*. I agree with Plato and Kant's idea that people possess prior knowledge, but there are several other philosophers including Locke that disagree with that position.

Philosophy has had a long tradition since the time of Plato, through the medieval, modern Western, and contemporary periods. There have been several major thinkers in philosophy since Plato, and many other scholars that have also contributed to philosophy. About 2,300 years have passed since the time of Plato, which is a substantial amount of time for philosophical work to be done. There have been times where philosophical development has accelerated such as the modern Western period where there several substantial contributions. Contemporary philosophy of the twentieth century has numerous amounts of publications and notable thinkers such as Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Medieval philosophy went at a slower pace over a longer period,

but there are major thinkers including Aquinas that have made contributions. Philosophers have differing opinions on the philosophical tradition and how it should be interpreted. My current position is that there have been many philosophers across a long period of time that have helped the overall development of philosophy. I think that Plato is a major philosopher that contributed a significant amount to philosophy. However, I think that Alfred North Whitehead overestimates Plato's contribution to philosophy at the expense of the philosophy that has been done since

Plato. Whitehead states, "All of Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato." (Whitehead, *Lapham's Quarterly*) This is in one aspect giving a large acknowledgement to Plato, but at the same time trivializing the philosophy that has been done since Plato. I think that philosophy has generally had a good trajectory and development. I think that quotes such as the one provided by Whitehead should not be popularized, because it gives the wrong impression of philosophy. It is possible that Whitehead was using hyperbole to make his quote more impactful. Alfred North Whitehead co-authored the *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell which was a major publication that contributed to logic. This leads me to think that Whitehead's intent was to acknowledge Plato rather than minimize philosophy since Plato. I think that the quote was meant to emphasize Plato's importance, and breadth of the subjects that he covered.

In conclusion, Plato is regarded by most scholars to be a great philosopher, and I think that this is appropriate to him as a thinker. Plato had a large breadth of work, but he was able to be knowledgeable on many subjects. I think that Plato was more influential, because he wrote about many of the larger concepts of philosophy with highly developed thinking and insight. Plato's ability as a writer makes his philosophy clearer and more precise, which is important when conveying specific ideas. His writing ability also allows him to convey passages like The Allegory of the Cave with more detail in the way he wanted to describe it. The Theory of Forms

has been criticized by scholars, because Plato proposed that the Forms existed as entities in the physical world. I agree with the criticism that the Forms do not exist in the actual world, because there would not be a logical place where they would exist. However, I think that Plato's Theory of Forms is a good theory when applied to clarifying ideas in the mind. People may be able to approach a precise definition of an object or concept that is in the mind and that is how they can get closer to the Form of the object or concept. Plato's *Republic* been criticized for designing a city that is a utopia, and I admit that this can be frustrating for readers that wanted a more realistic city design. However, I propose that there are merits to focusing on maximalization and improvement of a city, because people learn ways to structure the society in a better way. Plato has made several contributions to epistemology. The Allegory of the Cave cast some doubt on how we know that our interpretation of the world is legitimate. Plato proposes that education is a way to become more aware of the world and see it closer to how it is. The *Meno* puts forward the Theory of Recollection, which proposes that people have inherent knowledge in them at birth. I think that this is a good theory that is based on the transference of prior ancestors' knowledge into a current human being. It is fair for people to make criticisms of Plato's writings, because there are some mistakes in his thinking. However, I think that the way that Plato has been regarded as a top philosopher correlates with his publications, and his position in philosophy should be maintained.

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