

'In the realm of sensory experience, no objective judgments are possible'. Critically discuss with reference to Plato's theory of forms.

The existence of objectivity in the physical world has been contemplated and discussed by philosophers since before Plato and his theory of forms, and continues to be a point of debate today. There are arguments to be made on both sides on whether we can hold objective knowledge of the physical world, or if we can merely hold opinions on what we experience through our imperfect human senses.

Heraclitus was a greek philosopher whose work would influence that of Plato, notably his doctrine of flux. The doctrine of flux is the idea that everything in the physical world is constantly moving and changing, including us, and so it is impossible to know anything in this physical reality for more than an instant, as once you know it, it has already changed. This change takes place in the form of movement and atoms changing position in the object. An example of this is his example of everything being like a river, and that you could not step into the same river twice, as the water had flowed and changed and the river was now different to the one that you had just stepped in.

Through Heraclitus' doctrine of flux, there are different conclusions that have been drawn. There is the more moderate conclusion which is believed to be Heraclitus's belief by Daniel w. Graham in "*Heraclitus (fl. c. 500 B.C.E.)*" from the website "*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*" is that though parts of an object are changing, the overall object is able to stay the same.¹ A more extreme form of fluxism is that every aspect of every object is in constant flux, and so it is impossible to hold any knowledge on anything in the physical reality, as at any one moment, an object is an entirely different entity to the one that we had previously known.

It is my opinion that though everything is in constant flux, that does not mean that it is unknowable, as an object still has the same features that had made it that original object but slightly altered at a level that our imperfect human senses cannot perceive, and though we cannot hold perfect knowledge of physical reality, perfect knowledge is unnecessary due to our limited perception of the world around us.

Though a possible counter argument could be made that this doctrine of flux wasn't created to be put into practice for everyone, and so we can still understand that we cannot hold perfect knowledge of anything while still acting as if the knowledge that we hold about the world is objective.

Plato was influenced by the Heraclitean doctrine of flux, and it partially shows in his theory of forms, which is the idea that all objects in the physical realm are merely shadows or reflections of the forms, which are a perfect metaphysical form for the object. This means that as objects are merely copies of the original form of the object, and so are unable to be perfect representations of the true form. This means that true knowledge is impossible in the physical world as it is only subjective and an opinion, while only those with understanding of the forms are able to hold true knowledge as the forms and constant and perfect, and so are objective.²

¹ Daniel W. Graham, *Heraclitus (fl. c. 500 B.C.E.)* (Last Update Unknown)
<<https://www.iep.utm.edu/heraclit/#H3>> [accessed 24 December 2019].

² Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee, 2nd edn (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

Plato created the allegory of the cave in order to explain his theory of forms, and it is in this allegory that he compares physical objects to the shadows cast of objects by the sun, which represents the form of good which all forms share. This means that all forms are sharing in the form of the good, as they are all perfect representations of themselves. Plato defends that this is the case by saying that we can all imagine these forms in our mind, as we can all imagine perfection, which he says proves that these perfect forms exist on at least some level, and are constant as we all share them.³

The allegory depicts the man breaking free of his chains of ignorance of the world, which to him is a cave wall with shadows being cast on it, to see the source of these shadows, and then exiting the cave. He then sees the sun and the real objects casting the shadow, which represent the forms, and the sun in the form of the good. Though the point of the allegory is also to show how Socrates, who he believed to have achieved knowledge of the forms was murdered by the people of Athens, not for any crime, but instead because he had learned to understand the forms through his philosophy and wisdom, and so they feared him for what he was trying to teach them, as the people in the cave do to the man who is freed of his restraints and allowed to venture to the surface. This is to make a point that only those trained as philosophers can hold this objective knowledge of the forms that he speaks about.

In the allegory of the cave, the moon and stars are mentioned alongside the sun, though it is unclear what they represent in this allegory. It is possible that they simply share in representing the form of the good, just like the sun, as they all cast shadows of the objects that represent the forms on earth. They could however represent forms in themselves, as a lunar eclipse is where the sun casts the shadow of the moon onto the earth, which would mean that the moon in this allegory is the perfect form of the moon. The stars however cannot have their shadows cast anywhere, as they are sources of light, and so they are likely in my opinion to be the theory of the good at night, which is a metaphor for how the forms are constant and unchanging, as they are the only constant and perfect ideas in existence as they exist metaphysically and beyond the physical world.

A possible counter argument to this is that though we can all imagine a perfect circle and it will look exactly the same, concepts like beauty or justice are far more subjective, and we all have different ideas of perfect beauty or perfect justice. This subjectivity means that there cannot be one single form for beauty, as we all see beauty differently in our mind's eye. This leads me to believe that if there are perfect forms for everything then instead of there being a single form that many objects share characteristics of, that instead each object has its own form, which would make all objects perfect, and so objective knowledge would be possible in the physical world.

This however would require forms to exist, which I believe is unlikely as the theory of forms is a weak theory in my opinion, as it does not hold up to its own scrutiny, because though you can hold knowledge of the forms in Plato's theory, that does not prove that the forms exist in themselves, and could simply be ideas shared by humans through culture or our ideas of perfection are all different and subjective.

Plato could make the argument however that the subjective nature of these ideas is simply because we all hold a lesser understanding of the forms, and so are incapable of knowing the complexity of the form of beauty or justice until we have studied philosophy, and that all of our ideas of beauty and justice are merely opinions, as they are based on subjective information, while a philosopher's idea of beauty and justice is objective because he understands the characteristics of the forms, and so holds knowledge.

³ Robert Heinaman, *From the Beginning to Plato*, ed. by C.C.W. Taylor (Oxford: Routledge, 1997).

The shadows that are cast in the cave however, could be interpreted as art and propaganda, as the men are holding wooden cutouts of the physical objects that they are portraying. To Plato, artists hold even less knowledge of a door for example than a carpenter, as even though the carpenter has no knowledge of the form of the door, he still understands how the door is created and knows the properties that make a door, while an artist simply creates an imitation of an imitation, which in regards to objective knowledge is worthless.

A possible argument against this way of thinking is that art is its own form, and so when an artist creates a piece of art, he is instead creating an object in the form of art, which would mean that he holds just as much knowledge of what he is painting as the painter, as though he is painting from the world, he has knowledge of where to place brush strokes, and how to use perspective, which are just as important as knowledge of joints is to crafting a door.

Though if these forms are the perfect representations of the objects and ideas that they are based on in the physical world, that could mean that everything that we see in the physical world is a form of false reality, and no objective knowledge is possible without access to understanding of the forms. This in my opinion makes art, which Plato viewed as worthless, to be just as far from the truth as the objects in the physical world, and so as they both lack objective knowledge, then they are both as pointless as each other. This makes the existence of all humans equally pointless, as only the philosopher is fully able to understand knowledge, as only the philosopher is able to hold true understanding of the forms.

Though Plato only claims that mimetic art is inherently pointless, as it draws from life, and is the only form of art that directly attempts to mimic physical objects, which is an argument that mimetic art is pointless for holding knowledge of what is being represented, though it still meets the form of art, and the form of a painting, despite it not meeting the form of that which is being depicted. I believe that Plato attacking mimetic art, instead of attempting to reconcile his theory with it was because of his own bias towards this form of art, and instead of attempting to understand it, he merely tried to attack and remove it from our society, as art that is based on other physical manifestations of the forms is worthless because it is merely a shadow of a shadow.

I would like to conclude that though Plato's theory of forms is a great theory, I am not convinced of the idea of objective metaphysical forms, and that even if forms existed, that there would only be one for every kind of object or idea, instead of there existing a form for every individual physical manifestation of that object or idea. It also assumes that there all forms already exist and simply need to be discovered, which I believe is a form of predeterminism, as it leaves no creation up to originality, and so this would require a higher power.

Word Count: 1827

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