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Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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Assignment Mark

1 st Marker's Provisional mark	67.
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NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the Final Examination Board.

Gr = grammar, syntax

'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' (RH, Lecture for CSPH7040). Discuss. In your discussion, you should incorporate an assessment of Plato's contribution to epistemology.

It is almost a cliché to say that one cannot overstate the importance of Plato to the Western tradition of philosophy, however there is truth in that cliché and through this paper I shall be demonstrating how Plato's work is unparalleled in its influence. I will be focusing primarily on an explanation of Plato's epistemology, with key focus given to his theory of knowledge, the theory of Forms, the various allegories, and similes he deployed as well as the role of the philosopher. I will aim to demonstrate how Plato raised many of the problems and issues that we are still grappling with to this day, and that whilst he raised these questions, he was unable to satisfactorily answer many of them which is largely why he has been so influential. I will also demonstrate a few key prominent areas of Plato's work which have not been taken up by other philosophers but still remain vital to fully understanding Plato's epistemology and metaphysics.

Plato's epistemology can be seen as initially a response to various pre-Socratic philosophers, primarily Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Pythagoras. This is best seen in in Book VI of *The Republic*¹ on the differing nature of opinion and knowledge, where Plato gives an account of a knowledge which is hierarchical. Whilst Plato agreed with Heraclitus' assessment that the world as we typically experience it is in constant flux, and he also agreed with the traditional view that knowledge must be unchangeable certainty, he emphatically disagreed that due to this flux that there is no actual knowledge. Instead, he made a distinction between knowledge and opinion, which is best demonstrated in the analogy of the divided line.² The analogy creates two major divisions of the understanding of reality and within each of those divisions two further sub-divisions. Each section denotes a different form of knowing with the first major section being that of opinion (*doxa*) and the second major division being that of knowledge (*epistēmē*); the former representing the conception of supposed knowledge of the world in flux, which according to Plato was not true knowledge as it was not permanent and the latter representing true knowledge which is unchanging and what can actually be considered true knowledge in the sense which it was considered by the Greeks.³ This distinction between opinion and knowledge is incredibly influential as whilst Plato was not the first to popularise either concept, as they can be seen clearly in Heraclitus and Pythagoras before him, he was the first that we know of to combine the two of them into one coherent system that allows for both. It allowed for an acceptance of the world as we understand it *prima facie* with the conclusions reached by Heraclitus whilst also accepting that there is unchangeable, as he saw it, true knowledge without the need to go to the extent that Parmenides did in arguing that the world was without motion.

✓ The distinct categories of knowledge and opinion has become one of the most influential contributions that Plato made, as it lay out the original separation of rationalism and empiricism which became the foundation of Early Modern philosophy.⁴ Rationalists who argued that true knowledge could only come from reason alone, as the senses cannot be trusted, took great amounts of influences directly from Plato's writings on epistemology; whilst not agreeing on his conclusions as to where knowledge

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd edn. (London: Penguin Group, 2007).

² *ibid.* pp.235-239

³ *ibid.* p. 235

⁴ *ibid.* pp. 201-202

came from, they agreed that the world of phenomena cannot give genuine knowledge.⁵ The empiricists on the opposite side, who argued that primarily knowledge came from the senses, took much of Plato's criticisms, and tried to answer them via either looking for universal rules, such as scientific principles or by simply accepting that the best that we can manage is temporary knowledge.⁶ Both these theories were fused together by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*⁷ and whilst he answered the question in a very different manner, as well as the fact he took empiricism much more seriously than Plato, he was trying to answer the same question that Plato was, namely how can these two theories co-exist. For Plato, rationalism trumped empiricism, however one could gain glimpses of the Forms via empirical observations, but for Kant they more worked hand in hand together.⁸ It is important to stress this point as without this idea to combine what would become known as empiricism and rationalism into one methodology, rather than one or the other we would not have gotten Kant's transcendental idealism⁹ and from that the explosion of thought which came after such as the work of Hegel, Wittgenstein, Marx, Heidegger and many more. ✓

Going back to the divided line, in the sub-divisions of opinion, we have beliefs (*pistis*) and illusion (*eikasia*) in which the former is an object as we would normally understanding it and the latter is an image of the former, such as a painting depicting the world, or a distorted reflection.¹⁰ This further ordering of reality was influential to the sceptics, and can be easily seen in Descartes' *Meditations*,¹¹ particularly in his discussion of the stick which appears to bend when submerged in water.¹²

The work of contemporary philosophers of science can also be traced back to Book VI of *The Republic* in which Plato argues that the sciences 'treat their assumptions as first principles'¹³ as much of the field can be seen to be either be arguing in favour of this proposition, such as Thomas Kuhn,¹⁴ or against such as Karl Popper.¹⁵ It also predates Hume's writings on induction which showed how even the most basic of assumptions, that of causality can be doubted.¹⁶ Furthermore, the initial influences of the work of Kuhn, and Edmund Gettier,¹⁷ amongst others, is found in Plato's work, even if Plato himself rejected the idea that opinion is foundationally linked to knowledge.¹⁸ This was so influential

very good. could you add a bit more detail here?

⁵ Peter Markie and M. Folescu, *Rationalism vs. Empiricism*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>>. [Accessed 10/12/2022]

⁶ *ibid.* ✓

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁸ Derk Pereboom, *Kant's Transcendental Arguments*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-transcendental/>>. [Accessed 12/12/2022]

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Plato, *The Republic* p.238

¹¹ René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin Group, 2003).

¹² Gary Hatfield, *René Descartes*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/descartes/>>. [Accessed 12/12/2022]

¹³ Plato, *The Republic*, p.239.

¹⁴ Alexander Bird, *Thomas Kuhn*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/thomas-kuhn/>>. [Accessed 12/12/2022]

¹⁵ Stephen Thornton, *Karl Popper*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/popper/>>. [Accessed 15/12/2022]

¹⁶ Leah Henderson, *The Problem of Induction*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/induction-problem/>>. [Accessed 15/12/2022]

¹⁷ Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa and Matthias Steup, *The Analysis of Knowledge*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/knowledge-analysis/>>. [Accessed 17/12/2022]

¹⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, p.230

that it took until the 20th Century before philosophers finally started demonstrating that knowledge is often, if not always, dependent upon opinion and beliefs as can be seen in two very different ways in Gettier Problems¹⁹ and paradigm shifts.²⁰

In the analogy of the divided line the section devoted to knowledge is, as previously mentioned, further divided into two, the highest being that of intelligence (*noēsis*) or dialectic and the other subdivision being that of mathematical reasoning (*dianoia*). Mathematics were, and often are still to this day, seen as the highest form of knowledge, and this was largely the case for many pre-Socratic philosophers, particularly Pythagoras and his cult which held them in some form of religious reverence.²¹ This is still found in modern philosophy, most noticeably in logical positivist movement²² and particularly in one of their most prominent members A. J. Ayer.²³ The view point that members of the Vienna Circle held was one that if we can 'solve' many of the problems of philosophy by reducing them to either mathematical issues, or by trying to use applied mathematics in the form of logic to solve issues related to language, as can be seen in Bertrand Russell's paper *On Denoting*.²⁴

For Plato, unlike the logical positivists, pure mathematics were a steppingstone on the way to the highest type of knowledge, that of intelligence, which was the ability to know of the Forms in their own right. The Forms are the only truly real thing according to Plato and are what can be seen as the earliest attempt at trying to create a theory of universals. It is best seen the Simile of the Sun²⁵ in which it is explain that, just like how the Sun is the source of light and growth, which gives visibility to objects which allows for the faculty of sight, the Good (the highest of the Forms from which all partake), is the sources of reality and truth which gives intelligibility to objects of thought and allows for humans to know using their minds, therefore giving the faculty of knowledge.²⁶ The Forms are, as aforementioned the first true attempt at universals in which what we see in the realm of phenomena are partaking of in the form of particulars,²⁷ this type of explanation, that of universals and particulars has continued to this day in various forms and is important across epistemology, metaphysics and aesthetics. This wish to understand how to link what seem at first glance obviously connected concepts has plagued philosophers and can be seen in Derrida's work on difference,²⁸ Russell's attempts at demarcation²⁹ and in Wittgenstein's conception of language games.³⁰

Ethics were of particular interest to Plato as they are inherently tied to the forms, and this can be seen as it takes much of the first half of the *Meno*³¹ where Socrates tries to establish what is virtue, which

Again, add a bit more detail about these areas to work.

¹⁹ Ichikawa and Steup, *The Analysis of Knowledge* [Accessed 17/12/2022]

²⁰ Alexander Bird, *Thomas Kuhn* [Accessed 12/12/2022]

²¹ Carl Huffman, *Pythagoras*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/pythagoras/>>. [Accessed 17/12/2022]

²² Richard Creath, *Logical Empiricism*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/logical-empiricism/>>. [Accessed 18/12/2022]

²³ Graham Macdonald and Nikhil Krishnan, *Alfred Jules Ayer*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/ayar/>>. [Accessed 18/12/2022]

²⁴ Bertrand Russell, 'On Denoting', *Mind*, 114.456 (2005), pp.873-87

²⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, p.231

²⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, p.231

²⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, p.232

²⁸ Leonard Lawlor, *Jacques Derrida*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/derrida/>>. [Accessed 19/12/2022]

²⁹ Bertrand Russell, 'On Denoting', *Mind*, 114.456 (2005)

³⁰ Stewart Candlish, and George Wrisley, *Private Language*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/private-language/>>. [Accessed 20/12/2022]

³¹ Plato, *The Meno*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* in eds. Edith Hamilton, and Huntington Cairns, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.) pp.353-384.

to the Greeks was closely linked to ethics, by asking what is it that links virtues together with Meno only being able to name various virtues. Socrates says this is akin to asking what colour is and answering with examples of colours, it does not actually answer the question, merely giving links between them.³² The question of what the virtues are and how do they link to morality is a topic which was taken on by Aristotle in *The Nicomachean Ethics*³³ but also in modern philosophy by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*³⁴ and Rosalind Hursthouse in *On Virtue Ethics*.³⁵ However, this is not to say that this question of how we establish a base of ethics is the grounding of much of the literature of meta-ethics as well as normative ethics, such as Kant's reliance on being able to universalise a statement³⁶ or in how Jeremy Bentham placed pleasure and pain as the sovereigns of all morality.³⁷

Plato's most famous allegory is that of The Cave,³⁸ which he uses as a guide to how to become enlightened to the true nature of the Forms. The allegory itself raises various parallels with how Plato viewed society, both how it was in Athens when he lived, but also how it should be in the perfect republic. Each stage of the allegory can be seen as a section on the divided line which represents not just attainment of knowledge but also one's place within society. At the beginning of the allegory where the prisoners are chained looking at shadows this represents illusion on the divided line, and is where much of the population are, and the best many will ever achieve. Once the prisoner breaks his chains and sees the fire and starts to understand that the shadows were mere shadows of objects from the fire this is getting to the level of beliefs, which would include all empirical scientific study is to many the best knowledge they think is available; the fire is a false lead to which those who devote themselves to empiricism can never gain higher understanding. Eventually the prisoner is, through hard work and strife, pulled themselves or be dragged up to the mouth of the cave, which is akin to learning pure mathematics, and finally seeing the Sun, which is knowledge of the Forms themselves. What is most pertinent about the allegory of the cave in regard to Plato's influence on the history of epistemology is that one major aspect never gained much traction, that epistemological endeavours are in some way taxing and are not available to everyone. Apart from some Neo-Platonists epistemology is considered to be readily teachable, any difficulty is the result of academic difficulties which are akin to those difficulties found in any other form of study. The closest outside of direct Platonic thought would be some form of religious asceticism which is telling as it shows how for Plato the pursuit of the Forms is akin to a religious pursuit, this is especially pertinent when it is, for Plato, the soul recollecting knowledge of the Forms.

The movement away from the difficult recollection of knowledge by the soul to a methodology that is more akin to the study of history or geography, i.e., where we iterate upon previous knowledge which is examined for issues and proofs is more Aristotelian in nature and I think it is reasonable to say that at least in this regard Plato was an epistemological dead-end.

This concept of recollecting leads nicely to Plato's conception of the philosopher and by extension the philosopher king, in which he further elaborates on the nature of philosophy, in particular epistemology and theories of virtue. He starts by trying to define what it is do philosophy as an actual

³² *ibid.* p. 237

³³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2009)

³⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd edn. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press: 2007)

³⁵ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2010)

³⁶ Robert Johnson, and Adam Cureton, *Kant's Moral Philosophy*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/kant-moral/>>. [Accessed 20/12/2022]

³⁷ James E. Crimmins, *Jeremy Bentham*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/bentham/>>. [Accessed 20/12/2022]

³⁸ Plato, *The Republic* p.240

activity,³⁹ and in doing so lays the foundation of what it is to do epistemology and does this by demonstrating it as a methodological search for truth. This methodology is the groundwork of almost all of western epistemology since then and the topic of what is philosophy and why do we do it has been taken up by nearly every major philosopher as Graham Priest observes in his paper *What is Philosophy?*⁴⁰

The role of the philosopher is often portrayed as being a life which is separate from the general populous, that of a type of elite, not due to wealth, status or prestige but rather *due to seeing* the world differently. This is quite clear in the death of the prisoner at the end of the allegory of the cave⁴¹ which is an allusion to the treatment of Socrates at the hands of the Athenians and that the entirety of Plato's play *Socrates' Defence*.⁴² Which is a direct commentary on Socrates' speech at his trial and throughout tries to deliver the message that the populous of a city are not able to as a collective appreciate the whole truth, but rather it is only available to a few select important figures. This elitism can be seen in Hegel's view of the *great men of history*⁴³ who stand above all others and are the driving force for change and in a different manner that of Fredrick Nietzsche's *übermensch* who by throwing of the shackles of an intellectually repressive society are truly able to actualise themselves.⁴⁴ Gr.

Accordingly, philosophers, according to Plato, are beings of a different class to others, free of prejudice and constraints who have reached the ability to be aware of the truth of the Forms themselves, or at least are trying to achieve that enlightenment itself.⁴⁵ Plato in giving the most influential account of what it is to be a philosopher, possibly inadvertently, set the groundwork for modern epistemology. One which is the individual striving for self-actualisation via knowledge. To this day one can still sense an undercurrent of mistrust in the opinion of the general public, such as can be seen in Wittgenstein's earlier work in the *Tractatus*⁴⁶ where many of the 'problems' we face are just misunderstandings. As a style this also means that generally collaborative work is discouraged with a scepticism placed on a shared knowledge, this could be seen in modern scepticism of Descartes and Hume to the Vienna Circle and again Wittgenstein and their ideas which share the concept that most of the time people are confused and need philosophers to help them.

This trend is furthered in the rejection of knowledge which comes from the common man.⁴⁷ There is throughout Plato's epistemological and political work a clear rejection, and snobbery, about skills of trade work, to the extent that they are not seen as actual knowledge. Whilst one could say that this is the case for Plato because they can, at best, achieve is knowledge of beliefs as there is only transitory knowledge and without changing their lives to become a philosopher they do not having access to knowledge of the Forms. This is not a defence for many modern epistemological philosophers who still can be seen today almost exclusively dealing with abstract knowledge and discounting everyday knowledge or thought. Gr.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 197-204.

⁴⁰ Graham Priest, *What is Philosophy?*, The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2006.

⁴¹ Plato, *The Republic*, pp.240-248.

⁴² Plato, *Socrates' Defence (Apology)*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* in eds. Edith Hamilton, and Huntington Cairns, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.) pp.3-26

⁴³ Julie E. Maybee, *Hegel's Dialectics*, *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/hegel-dialectics/> [Accessed 20/12/2022]

⁴⁴ Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche's Moral and Political Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/nietzsche-moral-political/>. [Accessed 20/12/2022]

⁴⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, p.216

⁴⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (Oxon: Routledge, 1974)

⁴⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, p.218

However in saying this it should be remarked that while there is certainly still some elitism and snobbery of the experience of 'working' knowledge in philosophy, it is also true that a theme that has disappeared in modern philosophy is that certain knowledge should be available or is only attainable to only some exclusive groups and needs to be highly restricted as Plato wished it to be.⁴⁸ The consensus that everyone should have access to education has shifted from being of epistemological significance to one that this is seen as a political. For Plato, political theory was hand in hand with epistemology, with the former being a reflection of the first. This is interesting as it has almost completely disappeared from modern philosophy where there is a clear demarcation between the realms of epistemology and political philosophy.

Another area which Plato linked which is rarely today seen as connected is that of epistemology and ethics. As aforementioned, Plato spent the first part of the *Meno* discussing what it is to be virtuous and directly links it with how we learn, by asking is it developed as is practical knowledge such as a trade, some variety of innate aptitude or something else altogether.⁴⁹ Socrates uses the term virtue as that was how ethics were discussed in the Greek world, this terminology has largely been removed from modern ethical discussions apart from in virtue ethics, as deontological and consequentialist theories have gained popularity. The only major figure in modern philosophy who directly links epistemology with ethics is Baruch Spinoza in his work *Ethics*⁵⁰ which primarily shows how to have a coherent ethical system requires a solid epistemological and metaphysical groundwork.

Plato during *Meno*, using a classic example of Socratic dialogue, has Socrates ask Meno what virtue is as he cannot teach something if he does not know what it is;⁵¹ this is reminiscent of modern meta-ethical debates which try to still establish what is it to be ethical and if it is in anyway teachable. As the *Meno* continues it becomes more evident that pinning down what is virtue and by extension ethics is illusive as it seems to vary by person and position in society. There is the thought that virtue appears to change depending on various considerations such as gender, age and if one is a free citizen or slave. Overall, there is an assumption within the work that one position within a society dictates one's ethical responsibilities and this is interesting as ethics been dictated by one's relation to the state is often seen negatively in the modern world, with it often being seen, and not incorrectly, as a hallmark of the far right, particularly fascism.

Gr-
Revised: However, it should also be noted that this line of enquiry is important within other forms of critical theory, but rather as a form of emancipation than control. Instead of asking what the state or society requires of us, various progressive movements have turned this line of questioning into asking in what way are we repressed or shaped into being in which are deemed helpful by the hegemonic forces. An excellent example of this is how Simone de Beauvoir argued in the *Second Sex*⁵² that the concept of woman is created as a second sex which is subservient and lesser to that of men; this is in a way remarked upon in *The Republic* when Plato argues that male and female guard dogs when treated the same are of the same ability and why would the same not be true of humans. In a surprisingly feminist argument for the time and place, he argues that women often do not achieve as well as men due to social conditions.⁵³ Likewise those who argue for a form of sentientism, within the field of environmental ethics often take a position that the reason that many animals are treated abhorrently, especially in the food industry, is because we are sociality conditioned into this in what Peter Singer

⁴⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, p.246-247.

⁴⁹ Plato, *Meno*, p.35

⁵⁰ Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin Group, 1996)

⁵¹ Plato, *Meno*, p.35

⁵² Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage Books, 2015)

⁵³ Plato, *The Republic*, p.160-161