

Philosophy of the Human Person

Lecture #15

Plato's Anthropology

1. Biographical Background

Socrates (469–399)

The Historical Socrates—It is not easy to distinguish the historical Socrates from Socrates the literary character who presents Plato's ideas in some of the dialogues. We have four basic sources, each with its own limitations

Aristophanes—the Athenian satirist who makes fun of philosophers in general in his play, *The Clouds*. He names the main character Socrates

Xenophon—the brilliant general and friend of Socrates, who wrote a number of Socratic dialogues. But Xenophon was not a philosopher himself and he presents a much less interesting character than does Plato.

Plato—Socrates' most brilliant pupil, who presents an interesting Socrates, but who himself seems to be too much a philosopher to be a reliable biographer. The consensus among scholars is that the “trial & death” series—*Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and parts of *Phaedo*—are probably generally accurate and that some other early dialogs—e.g., *Charmides* (on temperance), *Laches* (on courage), *Lysis* (on friendship), & *Republic I* (on justice)—show the typical activity of Socrates. Other dialogues, however, seem to use Socrates merely as a spokesman for Plato's ideas

Aristotle—Plato's pupil, who did not know Socrates, but was close enough & interested enough to be reliable.

biographical sketch

born in Athens in 469

by profession—a sculptor, poor by choice

by vocation—

a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, concerned with life of the mind

Euthyphro and similar dialogues show him at his typical activity;

Apology gives his account of why he thinks such activity is important.

executed for impiety in 399

Plato (429-347 BC)

life

He was born in Athens in 429

He was a disciple of Socrates until Socrates' death in 399

He established his own school "The Academy" in 367. Aristotle came to study there.

works

His early dialogues show Socratic inquiry

The dialogues from his middle period (*Phaedo*, *Republic*) develop his Theory of Forms.

His late works confront problems of the theory of forms.

significance

He is the first philosopher for whom entire works are still extant & has had an immense influence on later philosophers. Alfred North Whitehead once said that "all of later philosophy was a footnote to Plato."

interpretation— There are two distinct approaches

the literary

"We know by now how carefully Plato selects the circumstances and characters of a dialogue to fit the kind of arguments he wants to use. If he chose at this time to make Socrates expound the doctrine of Forms and a conception of the soul in a talk on the day of his death, with friends and sympathizers ready to meet him half way, rather than in, say, paternal, maieutic discussion with a young boy or argument with a Sophist, this was because they were for him articles of semi-religious belief: he is convinced of their truth, but not yet ready to offer full dialectical proof."¹

the philosophical

attempting to reconstruct & evaluate the central arguments of the text

2. Connection the Assigned Readings

Socrates—the biographical thread	<i>Euthyphro</i> — Socrates at his usual activity of searching for real definitions, here inquiring into the nature of <i>piety</i>	<i>Apology</i> — Socrates' defense of his search for wisdom	<i>Crito</i> — Socrates' justification of his refusal to escape from prison	<i>Phaedo</i> — Socrates' reflections on life & death; the account of his death
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¹ W. K. C. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy*, iv.364.

Plato—the philosophical thread	The Allegory of the Cave in Plato's <i>Republic</i> —from Socrates' search for real definitions emerges Plato's Theory of Forms (or Ideas)			The central passages of Plato's <i>Phaedo</i> —from Socrates' reflections on death emerge Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul
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3. Plato's *Phaedo*

Outline of the *Phaedo*

1. Dramatic Introduction 57a - 61e
2. Socrates on Body & Soul..... 62a - 70c
3. The Immortality of the Soul:
 - Socrates' First Three Arguments 70c - 84b
4. Objections of Simmias & Cebes 84c - 88b
5. Warning against Misology..... 88c - 91c
6. Socrates' Reply to Simmias..... 91c - 95a
7. Socrates' Reply to Cebes 95a - 107b
8. A Myth..... 107b - 114e
9. Death of Socrates 114e - 118a

Two Platonic (not Socratic!) doctrines feature prominently in the dialogue

The Theory of Forms (or Ideas), developed in *The Republic* & in other dialogues

The Immortality of the Soul

3. Plato's Theory of Forms

Plato's Theory of Forms—Ontology (a Theory of Being)

Background

Socrates' search for real definitions led him to search for the "the form (□□□□, *form, idea*) itself."

Plato hypostatizes the forms (hence, *the Forms*), attributing to them an existence independent of the objects of our experience.

To understand Plato, think mathematics. Over the door of Plato's Academy stood the inscription "Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here."

The fundamental contrast was between ordinary objects & the Forms. So, between any individual circle and the form Circle, between any particular piece of quartz and Quartz

This doctrine is developed in the *Republic* and used in the *Phaedo*

In the *Republic*, it is found in

- (1) The Myth of the Sun
- (2) The Divided Line
- (3) The Myth of the Cave

In the *Phaedo*, it is used

- (1) in the account of philosophy as preparation for death, as an *epistemological* doctrine with moral underpinnings
- (2) in the argument from the doctrine of recollection to the immortality of the soul, as an *epistemological* doctrine with metaphysical implications (cf. also the *Meno*)
- (3) in the final argument (against Cebes) for the immortality of the soul

The Content of the Theory

1. Words are the names of things
2. The Forms exist
 - cf. mathematicians' existence claims about mathematical objects
 - e.g., that for every pair of numbers, there exists a number that is their product

"[we assume] the existence of a single existential nature or Form for every set of things which we call by the same name."—*Parm.* 132d

Plato's dualism—There are two worlds

the sensible world—containing particular objects

the intelligible world—containing universal objects (the Forms), "universal" in the sense that they name the Form that corresponds to many particular objects

3. The forms are more real than ordinary objects (a gradational ontology)

The criterion of reality: What makes ordinary objects more real than their shadows? or originals more real than their copies? There are two possible answers

(1) greater permanence

(2) greater participation in whatever makes the thing a thing of its kind

The same relationship holds between

a triangle drawn on the board and a real triangle

or, a particular objects in the sensible world and the Form of that thing

4. Particular objects are related to the forms by "participation" (ἰσχυρίζομαι), but what does "participation" mean? This was a problem that Plato never solved.

5. The forms are causally responsible for what happens in the sensible world

Plato's Theory of Forms— Epistemology (a Theory of Knowledge)

The two worlds can be described with a focus on epistemology

The *intelligible world* is known but not seen

The forms are the (only) proper object of knowledge

The *sensible world* is seen but not known

There can be no knowledge of the sensible world

Argument

Any proposition that is *known* must always be true

claims about the sensible world are not always true

since the sensible world is always changing

So, no claims about the sensible world are known

There are three ways of coming to know about the world of the forms

recollection (ἀνάμνησις)—recovery of knowledge by acquaintance in a previous existence

dialectic ("talking-through")—cf. flow of dialogue in *Euthyphro*, &c., working one's way back from hypothesis to basic principle

love (Ἔρως) (the *Symposium*)

4. Plato's Anthropology

(1) Man is composed of body (σώμα) & soul (ψυχή)

These are two distinct kinds of substance. Hence, Plato is sometimes called a *dualist*.

(2) Plato's Theory of the Soul

[ontology]

(a) The soul is a non-material thing

(b) The soul is capable of independent existence and functioning

(i) It exists before the body does. This is based on his doctrine that learning is recollection.

(ii) It survives the death & destruction of the body. This is the doctrine of immortality, though Cebes forces distinction between survival of one death & immortality in the sense of survival of all deaths and perpetual existence

[epistemology]

(c) The soul is the part whereby real knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the Forms) is possible. This is the central function of the soul in the *Phædo*. *The Republic* acknowledges more functions of the soul. This account of knowledge is elaborated in the Allegory of the Cave.

[anthropology]

(d) The soul is the real person.

(3) Plato's Theory of the Body

[ontology]

(a) The body is a material thing

(b) The body is capable of independent existence, but not functioning existing after death, but first as inert, then as decomposing

[epistemology]

(c) The body is an impediment to attainment of real knowledge

[anthropology]

(d) The body is not the real person

(e) Indeed, the body is a prison (το σῶμα κάθειρξις) [62b]

(4) Theory of Death

(a) Death is the separation of body & soul (by definition), but that does not cause either to cease to exist (cf. 2b & 3b). It does not even cause the soul to cease functioning.

(b) Death is not end of personal existence [64c] (from 2b & 2d)

(i) The soul survives after death

- (ii) The soul will later be put into another body. This is the doctrine of the transmigration of souls.
- (c) Death is a good thing. This follows from 2b & 3c.

4. Christianity & Platonism

Platonism has a certain appeal to Christians, probably because of its insistence on the spiritual aspect of human existence. The apparent similarity can be summarized in four points.

1. Christianity & Platonism share a concern for a life characterized by moral virtue
2. Both see life on earth as part (& not the best part) of human existence (cf. the doctrine that the Beatific Vision is the ultimate human good)
3. Both seem to present the body as an impediment to the good life.
“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”²
4. Christianity & Platonism share a positive attitude towards death
cf. St. Ambrose [in the handout]

But this similarity is only apparent

1. The similarities on the first two points is compatible with real and significant differences. We have a common enemy, but not a common doctrine.
St Augustine wrote “I found [in some books of the Platonists] [something similar to a Christian doctrine] but I did not find [this particular important element]” with respect to a number of Christian doctrines.³ [See the handout]
2. The New Testament passages do not contrast *body* vs. soul. [See the C. S. Lewis passage in the handout]
3. The accounts of death are different.
 - a. Platonism & Christianity differ in their evaluation of death:
 - i. For Platonism, death is a liberation from the prison of the body
 - ii. For Christianity:
Death is the penalty for (“the wages of”) sin. ⁴ Since penalties are bad things, death is seen as a bad thing, even if it has good aspects.
At best death is a remedy good only because, having sinned, we need it. [See the continuation of St. Ambrose passage on handout.]
 - b. Platonism's doctrines of pre-existence and reincarnation are inconsistent with Christian anthropology
4. Platonism & Christianity show real differences on relation of body, soul, and person

² Matt 26:41.

³ St Augustine, *Confessions* 7.9

⁴ *Catechism* 400–403, 1006–8. *Gen* 2:17, 3:19; *Rom* 5:12.

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- a. Two features of Platonist doctrine—(1) the insufficient unity of body & soul & (2) the identification of soul & man,
 - i. make the Incarnation unnecessary—why assume a human body if the body did not need to be saved?
 - ii. make general resurrection (*of the body*) bad, not good—Christian doctrine is that every human being will get his body back on the last day⁵
 - b. Platonism's doctrine of pre-existence and reincarnation are inconsistent with Christianity

⁵ The Apostles' Creed says "resurrection of the body." See also *Catechism* 988-1004.