PHILOSOPHY 151: Moral Philosophy

PLATO: Knowledge & Virtue

Summary

1. Context
   1. Period of social, political and intellectual change
      1. Due to an expansion in trade with other cultures
      2. Lead to two major tendencies:
         1. Question the validity of Greek customs and ways of life
         2. Relativistic attitude towards ethical standards & beliefs
            1. Nothing is objectively right or wrong
   2. The Sophists
      1. Mostly associated with this relativistic attitude
      2. Lead mainly by Protagoras
         1. One of Plato’s major opponents because of his relativistic & hedonistic view point – that pleasure is good
      3. Threat to civic order & tradition
         1. Went around Greece teaching and lecturing on all sorts subjects
         2. Taught the practice of how to speak convincingly about any subject – for the right price
         3. Gained the reputation of being “self-seeking tricksters” who “used clever language to manipulate others to their own advantage”
   3. Socrates
      1. Was often seen as a Sophist because of his exploratory rather than dogmatic thinking and teachings
      2. Expressed the difficulty in finding the objective truth, but never gave up on it, making him different from Sophists
      3. However, he still ended up offending Athenian traditionalists, and was put to death because of it
   4. Plato
      1. Socrates’ death plus other experiences left him disillusioned and averse towards political activity
         1. Lead to a life of practical philosophizing
      2. Presented Socrates’ way of thinking in his works
         1. Format was usually a dialogue with Socrates as the leading role
         2. Usually about searching for definitions of important ethical concepts [*Charmides* – temperance, *Laches* – courage, *Euthyphro* – piety]
         3. Reaches few firm conclusions and is usually more on exploring philosophical problems and disagreements – very Socratic
      3. Other readings, however, shows Plato setting forth his own personal doctrines in a much more definite way.
         1. *The Republic* – Plato’s belief that there us an objectively correct answer to questions like “What is justice?”
      4. Justice
         1. Justice is the most important virtue
         2. Balance of three major kinds of desire: reason, spirit and bodily appetites
            1. Can be seen in society as the balance of philosopher-rulers, military and artisans/farmers.
            2. Each one has his role to play to maintain stability of the community
            3. On a personal level, each desire, governed by reason, has its role to play as well.
            4. Serves as proof of an objective truth
      5. Theory of “Forms” or “Ideas”
         1. Entities that accessible by reason and operates independently of personal biases
         2. Determine the objective facts that exist to be known
            1. Includes the Form of Justice & Good
         3. Forms to serve as a standard or basis of determining objective facts
         4. Ultimate goal: Educate in the creation of the ideal city state through understanding the Good
2. Discussion on Justice and the Good
   1. Justice vs Injustice
      1. “Men are Naturally Unjust” [Sophists]
         1. Only the weak value justice because it restrains the strong
            1. If you were sure to get away with it, most would be unjust
            2. Injustice is more profitable than justice
         2. Used the story of Gyges, the shepherd
         3. Plato: Man is just not out of willingness but because of necessity
            1. Given the chance, man would choose to be unjust
      2. “Happiness Comes from Injustice” [Sophists]
         1. Justice is for the rulers and the stronger and a loss for a subject and a servant, while injustice is the opposite
         2. The just is always the loser compared to the unjust
         3. Injustice is more effective and realizes its potential at a larger scale
            1. Benefits are larger and “wholesale”
            2. Those around you will call you “happy and blessed” out of fear that they will be victims of injustice
      3. “Pleasure is Not Equal to Good” [Plato]
         1. There is no way that pleasure can be equated to good and pain equated to evil
            1. Good and evil are contradictory and mutually exclusive in an individual, while pleasure and pain happen simultaneously
            2. Pain and pleasure cease simultaneously while good and evil do not
         2. Can’t the good be good because they have and abide by an Idea of the Good present with them?
   2. Plato’s Ethics
      1. What is justice?
         1. Rests on two major psychologies:
            1. The soul of all individuals consists of three basic elements: reason, spirit (passion) and appetite (desire)

Each of which are involved in moral behavior and is characterized by a virtue: Reason – Wisdom, Desire – Temperance, Passion - Courage

* + - * 1. Character depends on the comparative development of the three under the dominance of one faculty
      1. The harmony of these three elements constitutes justice – the overarching virtue
      2. Justice found within the individual is no different from state justice
      3. Doing good and being just means to preserve and cooperate with this harmony while injustice is what impairs this balance
    1. Why should people be morally virtuous?
       1. Just actions create justice, while unjust actions create injustice
          1. Virtue is the health and beauty and well being of the soul, and vice the disease and weakness and deformity
       2. Injustice degrades life, degrades existence and justice the opposite – how can injustice be better than justice?
    2. The Idea of Good as the highest knowledge
       1. Everything else becomes useful only because of this
       2. Completely different from knowledge and reason
          1. Always has to resort to “knowledge of the good” or “good pleasure” thus knowledge & pleasure can’t be equal to good
       3. There is a difference between being good and seeming good
       4. Only when a leader has full grasp of this idea can the state be perfectly ordered
       5. Concept and definition, however is too exalted an idea to be grasped fully by the human mind – resorts to an analogy of the sun
          1. Sight is a combination of the eye, the object being seen and the sun illuminating the object
          2. Truth is then the mind or knowledge, the object being understood, and is illuminated by the understanding of the good, the Idea of the Good
          3. Good as the author of knowledge, being and essence of all things known, but Good itself exceeds this in dignity and power
    3. Conditions of our knowledge of the Good
       1. Knowledge of good appears last of all
       2. Only seen with an effort and is inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right
       3. Immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual
       4. Power upon which any who would act rationally must have his eye fixed
       5. Virtues of the soul can be implanted through habit and exercise – and only through this conversion are they rendered useful and profitable
  1. Summary of Plato’s Argument
     1. There is nothing to be gained from getting away with injustice
        1. You only get worse – he who is detected and punished has his brutal side humanized and silenced, his gentler side liberated
        2. Soul is perfected and ennobled by justice
     2. Any man of understanding will devote his life to preserving the harmony of the soul in all circumstances
     3. Need to apply this harmony to the city or state he belongs in as to assure that no disorder occur in it
     4. Philosophers, if properly trained, can model their lives after the ideal of perfection that reason discloses to them