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PHIL 102 Paper 1

In his Republic[1], Plato attempted to define what he considered to be philosophy by placing all possible kinds of knowledge onto a divided line, with true knowledge at one extreme, abject ignorance at the other, and everything non-certain in between.[2] This explicit categorization notably places science and mathematics into the latter section, somewhere between opinion and truth. It is very difficult to agree with this assertion, although it is also little easier to disprove his argument.

Plato takes as self evident that "what fully is, is fully knowable, and what in no way is, is altogether unknowable."[3] However, it is clear that there are many things that we consider to exist that are not fully and unobjectionably knowable. Beliefs about such things as the beauty of particular objects or people under particular circumstances can be fickle and arbitrary. He argues that therefore these cannot be considered to be either true knowledge or ignorance, but something else entirely that is between the two: opinion, the pale shadow of knowledge that is directed towards things that neither fully exist nor are fully non-existent.

This assertion relies on there actually being something that can be considered to exist completely and unambiguously. According to Plato, only his idea of abstract Forms meet that standard. One may argue whether any one thing is beautiful and to what degree, but Beauty itself simply is. His ideal philosopher would seek to understand Beauty, not beautiful things, and only thereafter could anything meaningful be said of those particulars.

He continues by raising an important distinction regarding the nature of a Form through

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1 Plato, *The Republic*, as translated by G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing, 1974), V, 474b-480a
2 Ibid., 509d
3 Ibid., 477a

the example of mathematics. A geometer may draw circles and lines in their work, yet refer not to these drawings in their proofs but to the ideal conception of circle and line.[4] Nonetheless, these are not considered to be Forms. They are clearly closer to truth than opinion, but are derived from observations of natural things; the conclusions from hypotheses arising from such activities can only move downward on Plato's line, not up. From mathematics or physics one cannot derive the first principle of all that exists.

This last point is the critical one in Plato's consideration of all sciences. Only through facts that can be discovered "without the use of anything visible at all,"[5] which correspond to his Forms, could one hope to arrive at a first principle. Thus, although Plato places scientific-like reasoning above that of simple opinion, he nevertheless considers it, in Glaucon's words, to be "reasoning but not understanding, reasoning being midway between opinion and understanding."[6]

Plato bases most of this reasoning on his conception of Form, and on the claim that that which is fully true is fully knowable. These claims are so fundamental to the logic of his argument that it seems almost certain that they are explored in greater depth elsewhere in his writing. For this reason it makes little sense to do more than point out that were such additional support lacking his argument would be flimsy. What is a Form, exactly? Why can Beauty be reasoned toward without any reference to the physical world, by reason alone, and a circle can’t? It seems close to certain that some kind of answer to these questions must be provided in his extensive writing beyond the mere excerpts I have read. Nonetheless, I will have to discuss the argument insofar as I have read it, even if it were the case that all the points I might make

4 Plato, *The Republic*, 510d
5 Ibid., 511c
6 Ibid.

have already been addressed elsewhere.

The most apparent flaw is the one raised above regarding the nature of form. Beauty, Justice, Good, and the like are all very much human concepts, existing only insofar as something can conceive of them. However, the very same could be said of a circle, or of the concept of addition, or any other mathematical process. If there is no real, perfect circle as conceived in mathematics, as is certain, then how could it be said that there is a perfect Justice? Even if Plato's theory were modified to accept the Circle, the Arithmetic, or similar, where would it end? Without knowing Plato's specific definition of Form, which I have no doubt he must enumerate in depth, they seem to be entirely arbitrary. If any arbitrary concept, provided it is abstracted to some degree, could satisfy the definition of a Form, the concept would carry little meaning, and could further easily contain the entirety of scientific knowledge.

It could be argued that science could at least arrive at partial truths, even if it were to be fully accepted as not capable of yielding full truth. No modern scientist would argue that they deal with absolute certainties. Science always changes. I don't consider this to be convincing for at least two reasons. Firstly there is the notable fact that admitting that science cannot produce knowledge (as Plato understands it) is hardly productive in an argument claiming to prove the contrary. Secondly, even ignoring this, Plato's myth of the cave aptly demonstrates that it is possible in theory for our understanding of the world as shown by our senses to be so completely wrong as to preclude the possibility for even the most rigorous inquiry. The only ways his prisoners could learn the truth of their situation are either through the equivalent of divine revaluation (being dragged to the surface) or it were somehow possible to arrive at truth totally independently of sense. Whether the information and theories they might amass and produce should be called knowledge in spite of Plato depends on the value of his theory of

Form, as discussed above.

It is difficult to pretend to conclude an essay like this. Given the poorly defined conception of knowledge presented in the excerpt material I believe that my first argument, that Forms are ambiguous and arbitrary, renders the second moot. Scientific knowledge should therefore be at least in potentially possible. However, as repeatedly mentioned, this argument is worthless if any consistent definition were offered. In that case this paper would have to be entirely re-written to deal with the new data. It is possible that the same could be said of any introductory philosophy paper ever written.