Failure to Understand: Plato as a student of Socrates

Because Plato was a student of Socrates, one might expect that Plato would expand on the theories presented by Socrates, and indeed he did. However, Plato chose to expand on the points that Socrates was not so concerned about and neglect the central tenants of his teachings, and in doing so created a much weaker philosophy and undid many of the efforts of his master.

When Athens was in a state of decline, Socrates arose as a response to the Sophistical movement that had become the norm. In some ways, his beliefs matched quite closely with the Sophists, for instance both pursued human excellence. In most other areas, however, Socrates and the Sophists disagreed, stemming from the fact that Socrates believed in an ultimate truth to the universe, while the Sophists believed no such thing existed, and so pursuing what was best for the individual was the most logical course of action. However, this led to a lack in pursuit of the truth of reality by the people of Athens, and so Socrates made it his life’s work to convince others look for the truth. To do so, he first had to convince them they did not know the truth, and so his whole model of teaching by removing all preconceptions was born.

Plato was a student of Socrates. He took it upon himself to document the teachings of his master, and once Socrates had died, looked to continue his work. Like his teacher, he believed there was some ultimate truth to the world, and so he set out to find it. In order to do so, he expanded on the ideas of Socrates, particularly the idea of Forms. His train of thought led him to conclude that reality must consist of Forms, and that all that we sensed were but shadows of the Forms. In turn, the Forms are all just shadows of the one truth of reality, which is the Form of Goodness.

Throughout most of his dialogues, Socrates does not speak much on metaphysics. Indeed, he does not speak much on his own beliefs at all, preferring to use his Socratic Midwifery to help others throw out their preconceptions about reality and start their search for the truth. Plato, on the other hand, spent a good deal of time on what exactly the nature of reality is, and he already believes to have the solution. Sure, he doesn’t claim to know precisely what the Form of Goodness is, but he does believe that reality is made of Forms rather than what our senses would teach us. This is a key difference. Where Socrates says “one thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing”, Plato claims to say that he knows the true nature of reality. Socrates deliberately avoided giving arguments on the nature of reality, and yet Plato spent most of his teachings on giving arguments on the nature of reality.

The fact that Socrates avoided metaphysical arguments was very important. In other words, what Socrates did not say was just as important as what he did say. Plato seems to have overlooked this fact, however, and expanded on an area Socrates deliberately avoided as a part of his teachings.

In addition, the fact that the area Plato chose to focus on was metaphysical rather than epistemological is important. When Socrates discusses the form of piety with Euthyphro, he does so not because he believes that the form of piety is realer than a pious action, but instead to become closer to the truth of the world. His pursuit of forms was done for an epistemological understanding of the world, so that he may be able to identify pious acts, and not as a judgement of what is real and what is not. This method leaves room for improvement, for more understanding and more discussion, because it is not a judgement as to what is real and what is not, but merely an attempt to understand the world. Plato, however, is concerned mainly with the Forms, and not how they inform us in the world of senses. Because of this, he has already come to absolute conclusions about the world, what is and what should be. In example, he claims that “Unless communities have philosophers as kings...there can be no end to political troubles”, demonstrating a belief in knowledge of absolutes in the world. While Socrates believes there are absolutes, he does not claim to know them, while Plato does, and that makes a significant difference.

Socrates spent his life trying to convince people that they did not know the truth of the world, and Plato, with the best of intentions, spent his life essentially contradicting this. Where Socrates admits ignorance, Plato does not, and it is this difference that make the teachings of Socrates much more powerful and relevant than the teachings of Plato.