UNIT 3 PLATO

Contents

3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To study briefly the great contribution Plato has made to Philosophy and Western thought;
- To appreciate Plato as one of the greatest thinkers of all times; and
- To acknowledge some of the mistakes in his vision and still to appreciate Plato's grand ideal.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Plato (429–347 BCE) is one of the most dazzling thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition and one of the most penetrating, wide-ranging, and influential authors in the history of philosophy. An Athenian citizen of high status, he displays in his works his absorption in the political events and intellectual movements of his time. The questions he raises are so profound. The strategies he uses for solving them are suggestive and provocative that educated readers of nearly every period. Most of the Western philosophers have in some way been influenced by him, and in practically every age there have been philosophers who regard themselves Platonists. He was not the first thinker or writer to whom the word "philosopher" should be applied. But he was so self-conscious about how philosophy should be conceived, and what its scope and ambitions properly are, and he so transformed the intellectual currents with which he grappled, that the subject of philosophy (as a rigorous and systematic examination of ethical, political, metaphysical, and epistemological issues, armed with a distinctive method) can be called his invention. Few other authors in the history of philosophy approximate him in depth and range: perhaps only Aristotle (who studied with him), Aquinas, and Kant would be generally agreed to be of the same rank (Kraut 2009).

3.2 INTRODUCTION TO HIS THOUGHTS

After the death of Socrates, Plato, the most famous of his pupils, carried on much of his former teacher's work and eventually founded his own school, the Academy, in 385 BCE. The Academy would become in its time the most famous school in the classical world. The Academy lasted over nine hundred years and is often thought of as the first university. Its most famous pupil was Aristotle (Hooker 1996).

We know quite a lot about Plato's teachings, because he wrote dialogues between Socrates and others that would explore philosophical issues. These dialogues would be used in his school as starting points for discussion; these discussions and Plato's final word on the dialogues have all been lost to us. The Platonic dialogues consist of Socrates asking questions of another and proving, through these questions, that the other person has the wrong idea on the subject. Initially, Plato seems to have carried on the philosophy of Socrates, concentrating on the dialectical examination of basic ethical issues: What is friendship? What is virtue? Can virtue be taught? In these early Platonic dialogues, Socrates questions another person and proves, through these questions, that the other person has the wrong idea on the subject. These dialogues never answer the questions they begin with.

In the course of time, Plato later began to develop his own philosophy and the Socrates of the later dialogues does more teaching than questioning. The fundamental aspect of Plato's thought is the theory of "ideas" or "forms." Plato, like so many other Greek philosophers, was puzzled by the question of change in the physical world. Earlier Heraclitus had said that there is nothing certain or stable except the fact that things change, and Parmenides and the Eleatic philosophers claimed that all change, motion, and time was an illusion. Where was the truth? How can these two opposite positions be reconciled? Plato ingeniously combined the two; a discussion of Plato's theory of forms is below (Hooker 1996).

The most famous of Plato's dialogues is an immense dialogue called The Republic, is one of the single most influential works in Western philosophy (besides his account of Socrates's trial, The Apology). Essentially The Republic deals with the central problem of how to live a good life; this inquiry is shaped into the parallel questions (a) what is justice in the State, or what would an ideal State be like, and (b) what is a just individual? Naturally these questions also encompass many others, such as how the citizens of a state should be educated, what kinds of arts should be encouraged, what form its government should take, who should do the governing and for what rewards, what is the nature of the soul, and finally what (if any) divine sanctions and afterlife should be thought to exist. The dialogue, then, covers just about every aspect of Plato's thought. There are several central aspects to the dialogue that sum up Platonic thought extremely well: a.) what the nature of justice is; b.) the nature of an ideal republic; and c.) the allegory of the cave and the divided line, both of which explain Plato's theory of forms (Hooker 1996).

Plato wrote more than twenty dialogues covering a number of philosophical topics. Plato's writings are divided into three periods.

Early Period: *Apology, Charmides,Crito, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Gorgias, HippiasMinor, HippiasMajor, Ion, Laches, Lysis, Menexenus,* and *Protagoras*

Middle Period: *Cratylus, Meno, Phaedo, Phaedrus, Republic, Symposium and Theatetus*

Late Period: *Parmenides, Critias, Law, Philebus, Politicus, Timaeus* and *Sophist*

3.3 MAIN THOUGHTS

Following Richard Hooker (1996) we give the main notions of Plato which have influenced the whole Western philosophical world significantly.

The Nature of Justice: The question which opens this immense dialogue is: what is justice? Several inadequate definitions are put forward, but the most emphatically presented definition is given by a young Sophist, Thrasymachus. He defines justice as whatever the strongest decide it is, and that the strong decide that whatever is in their best interest is just. Socrates dismisses this argument by proving that the strong rarely figure out what is in their best interest, and this can't be just since justice is a good thing.

The Analogy of the Ideal Republic: After Thrasymachus leaves in a royal huff, Socrates starts the question all over again. If one could decide what a just state is like, one could use that as an analogy for a just person. Plato then embarks on a long exposition about how a state might embody the four great virtues: courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice. The remainder of the dialogue is a long exposition of what justice in a state is; this section is considered one of the first major, systematic expositions of abstract political theory . This type of thinking, that is, speculating about an ideal state or republic, is called "utopian" thinking (utopia is a Greek word which means "no-place").

Plato (speaking on behalf of Socrates) divides human beings up based on their innate intelligence, strength, and courage. Those who are not overly bright, or strong, or brave, are suited to various productive professions: farming, smithing, building, etc. Those who are somewhat bright, strong, and especially courageous are suited to defensive and policing professions. Those who are extraordinarily intelligent, virtuous, and brave, are suited to run the state itself; that is, Plato's ideal state is an aristocracy, a Greek word which means "rule by the best." The lower end of human society, which, as far as Plato is concerned, consists of an overwhelming majority of people in a state, he calls the "producers," since they are most suited for productive work. The middle section of society, a smaller but still large number of people, make up the army and the police and are called "Auxiliaries." The best and the brightest, a very small and rarefied group, are those who are in complete control of the state permanently; Plato calls these people "Guardians." In the ideal state, "courage" characterizes the Auxiliaries; "wisdom" displays itself in the lives and government of the Guardians. A state may be said to have "temperance" if the Auxiliaries obey the Guardians in all things and the Producers obey the Auxiliaries and Guardians in all things. A state may be said to be intemperate if any of the lower groups do not obey one of the higher groups. A state may be said to be just if the Auxiliaries do not simply obey the Guardians, but enjoy doing so, that is, they don't grumble

about the authority being exercised over them; a just state would require that the Producers not only obey the Auxiliaries and Guardians, but that they do so willingly (Hooker 1996).

When the analogy is extended to the individual human being, Plato identifies the intellect with the Guardians, the spirit or emotions with the Auxiliaries, and the bodily appetites with the Producers, something similar to the caste-system in India. Therefore, an individual is courageous if his or her spirit is courageous and an individual is wise if his or her intellect is wise. Temperance occurs when the emotions are ruled over by the intellect, and the bodily appetites are ruled over by the emotions and especially the intellect. An individual may be said to be just when the bodily appetites and emotions are not only ruled over by the intellect, but do so willingly and without coercion.

The Allegory of the Cave: Far and away the most influential passage in Western philosophy ever written is Plato's discussion of the prisoners of the cave and his abstract presentation of the divided line. For Plato, human beings live in a world of visible and intelligible things. The visible world is what surrounds us: what we see, what we hear, what we experience; this visible world is a world of change and uncertainty. The intelligible world is made up of the unchanging products of human reason: anything arising from reason alone, such as abstract definitions or mathematics, makes up this intelligible world, which is the world of reality. The intelligible world contains the eternal "Forms" (in Greek, idea) of things; the visible world is the imperfect and changing manifestation in this world of these unchanging forms. For example, the "Form" or "Idea" of a horse is intelligible, abstract, and applies to all horses; this Form never changes, even though horses vary wildly among themselves—the Form of a horse would never change even if every horse in the world were to vanish. An individual horse is a physical, changing object that can easily cease to be a horse (if, for instance, it's dropped out of a fifty story building); the Form of a horse, or "horseness," never changes. As a physical object, a horse only makes sense in that it can be referred to the "Form" or "Idea" of horseness (Hooker 1996).

Plato imagines these two worlds, the sensible world and the intelligible world, as existing on a line that can be divided in the middle: the lower part of the line consists of the visible world and the upper part of the line makes up the intelligible world. Each half of the line relates to a certain type of knowledge: of the visible world, we can only have opinion (in Greek: doxa); of the intelligible world we achieve "knowledge" (in Greek, episteme). Each of these divisions can also be divided in two. The visible or changing world can be divided into a lower region, "illusion," which is made up of shadows, reflections, paintings, poetry, etc., and an upper region, "belief," which refers to any kind of knowledge of things that change, such as individual horses. "Belief" may be true some or most of the time but occasionally is wrong (since things in the visible world change); belief is practical and may serve as a relatively reliable guide to life but doesn't really involve thinking things out to the point of certainty. The upper region can be divided into, on the lower end, "reason," which is knowledge of things like mathematics but which require that some postulates be accepted without question, and "intelligence," which is the knowledge of the highest and most abstract categories of things, an understanding of the ultimate good (Hooker 1996).

Plato's creative story combines nicely his metaphysics, epistemology and some of his ethical ideas. The story's setting involves human beings living in a cave that have been bound in chains since childhood. As the story develops, we find that one person is released from the chains by another. This story is very rich in symbolism. Plato uses the cave as a symbol for the realm of existence of the senses. When the person that is released comes out of the cave and into the world above the cave, he or she has moved symbolically into another realm of existence. Above the cave is symbolic for the world of the Forms. This is a drastic oversimplifying of the allegory of the cave to focus our attention on the metaphysical implications. The more important issues of enlightenment will be discussed in the presentation on epistemology. When the person that is chained finally escapes from the cave and becomes enlightened he realizes that he must go back and try to help the others This responsibility focuses on the correct use of wisdom from an ethical standpoint

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What do the Platonic dialogues consist of?

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2) Briefly describe Plato's understanding on the Nature of Justice.

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3.4 PLATO'S DUALISM

Things and Forms: To understand Plato's worldview, we can think of two different realms of existence: the world of the senses and the world of forms. The physical world, the world of the senses, is always changing, while the world of the forms remains constant.

It is important for us to understand the distinction that he makes between sensible "things" and "forms." Sensible things are those aspects of reality which we perceive through our senses: a tree, a car, a table, chair, a beautiful model, etc. Everything that we experience in the world of sensation is constantly changing (the table will start to get worn down, the beautiful model will age with time), imperfect and often fleeting. This is the realm of appearances, and we all know that appearances can be deceptive (Russo 2000).

Whereas things change, decay, and ultimately fade away, the Forms (the Greek term is Eidos which is sometimes translated as Ideas) are eternal and unchanging. This is the realm of perfect concepts and is grasped, not by the senses, but by the reason.

The Two World Theory: The realm of the senses and the realm of the forms are two most fundamental levels of reality. These two realms can be contrasted in the following way:

Sensible World	**World of the Forms**
appearance (seems real)	reality (is real)
immanent (within space and time)	transcendent (beyond space and time)
becoming (ever changing)	being (eternal and unchanging)
particular and imperfect	absolute and perfect
many instances (copy; imitation)	one essence (archetype)
perceived by senses	known by reason
subjective (dependent upon my perception)	objective (exist independently of my mind)
e.g., a table, a just act, a beautiful model, a circle	e.g., Table, Justice, Beauty, Circle, Human Being.

For Plato it is the world of the Forms (the realm of being) that is "really real" world; the world that we perceive with our senses (the realm of becoming) is little more than an imitation of this ultimate reality. He believes that for particular and imperfect thing that exists in the sensible realm (a table, a just act, a beautiful model, a circle) there is a corresponding absolute and perfect Form (Table, Justice, Beauty, a Circle).

In order to explain how sensible things come into being, Plato relies on the idea of participation. A table comes into being, he believes, because it participates in the form of Tableness. In the *Phaedo* Plato uses the metaphor of participation to explain the existence of particular beautiful things: "It seems to me that whatever else is beautiful apart from absolute beauty is beautiful because it partakes of that absolute beauty, and for no other reason. Do you accept this kind of causality? Yes, I do.

Well, now, that is as far as my mind goes; I cannot understand these other ingenious theories of causation. If someone tells me that the reason why a given object is beautiful is that it has a gorgeous color or shape or any other such attribute, I disregard all these other explanations—I find them all confusing—and I cling simply and straightforwardly and no doubt foolishly to the explanation that the one thing that makes the object beautiful is the presence in it or association with it, in whatever way the relation comes about, of absolute beauty. I do not go so far as to insist upon the precise details—only upon the fact that it is by beauty that beautiful things are beautiful. This, I feel, is the safest answer for me or anyone else to give, and I believe that while I hold fast to this I cannot fall; it is safe for me or for anyone else to answer that it is by beauty that beautiful things are beautiful. Don't you agree?" (Plato, *Phaedo* 100CE)

Significance of the Two World Theory

But why did Plato need to devise such an elaborate metaphysical system to ground his ethics? The answer seems to be that he trying to respond to the

relativism of the Sophists, who were persuasively arguing that true and false, good and bad, were simply matters of opinion. Plato clearly recognized that if this kind of relativism was accepted that it would lead to the death of philosophy and all legitimate attempts at moral discourse. To save the philosophical enterprise, Plato had to devise an idea of truth and goodness that was independent of individual perceptions of truth and goodness. Thus he needed to anchor these concepts in a transcendent realm—the world of the forms. While the Sophists, then, would maintain that there potentially could be as many legitimate ideas of justice or beauty as there are individuals, for Plato there is Justice and Beauty—objective and transcendent realities that have nothing to do with my individual perceptions or opinions (Russo 2000).

3.5 SEEKING GOODNESS AND TRUTH

Many people associate Plato with a few central doctrines that are advocated in his writings: The world that appears to our senses is in some way defective and filled with error, but there is a more real and perfect realm, populated by entities (called "forms" or "ideas") that are eternal, changeless, and in some sense paradigmatic for the structure and character of our world. Among the most important of these abstract objects (as they are now called, because they are not located in space or time) are goodness, beauty, equality, bigness, likeness, unity, being, sameness, difference, change, and changelessness. (These terms — "goodness", "beauty", and so on — are often capitalized by those who write about Plato, in order to call attention to their exalted status; similarly for "Forms" and "Ideas.") The most fundamental distinction in Plato's philosophy is between the many observable objects that appear beautiful (good, just, unified, equal, big) and the one object that is what beauty (goodness, justice, unity) really is, from which those many beautiful (good, just, unified, equal, big) things receive their names and their corresponding characteristics. Nearly every major work of Plato is, in some way, devoted to or dependent on this distinction. Many of them explore the ethical and practical consequences of conceiving of reality in this dualistic way.

Plato invites us to transform our values by taking to heart the greater reality of the forms and the defectiveness of the corporeal world. We must recognize that the soul is a different sort of object from the body — so much so that it does not depend on the existence of the body for its functioning, and can in fact grasp the nature of the forms far more easily when it is not encumbered by its attachment to anything corporeal. In a few of Plato's works, we are told that the soul always retains the ability to recollect what it once grasped of the forms, when it was disembodied (see especially Meno), and that the lives we lead are to some extent a punishment or reward for choices we made in a previous existence (see especially the final pages of Republic). But in many of Plato's writings, it is asserted or assumed that true philosophers — those who recognize how important it is to distinguish the one (the one thing that goodness is, or virtue is, or courage is) from the many (the many things that are called good or virtuous or courageous) — are in a position to become ethically superior to unenlightened human beings, because of the greater degree of insight they can acquire. To understand which things are good and why they are good (and if we are not interested in such questions, how can we become good?), we must investigate the form of Goodness (Kraut 2009) and that of Truth.

Thus Plato urges us not to get stuck with the mundane and ordinary, but to lift our eyes to the eternal, to the absolute Truth and Goodness.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Briefly state the two world theory of Plato.

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2) How is Plato's Philosophy related to our search for Goodness and Truth?

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3.6 PLATO ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PHILOSOPHY

For Plato "the man who is ready to taste every form of knowledge, is glad to learn and never satisfied - he's the man who deserves to be called a philosopher". In other words, philosophers are '"Those whose passion is to see the truth."

Platos, as it is to be expected, thinks highly of the philosophers. They are best suited to rule the world and to solve its problems. "The society we have described can never grow into a reality or see the light of day, and there will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed, my dear Glaucon, of humanity itself, till philosophers are kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands, while the many natures now content to follow either to the exclusion of the other are forcibly debarred from doing so. This is what I have hesitated to say so long, knowing what a paradox it would sound; for it is not easy to see that there is no other road to happiness, either for society or the individual." He adds further: "there are some who are naturally fitted for philosophy and political leadership, while the rest should follow their lead and let philosophy alone."

He criticises the society that does not give due respect to philosophers. Let us follow Plato with his long quote: 'Suppose the following to be the state of affairs on board a ship or ships. The captain is larger and stronger than any of the crew, but a bit deaf and short-sighted, and doesn't know much about navigation. The crew are quarrelling with each other about how to navigate the ship, each thinking he ought to be at the helm; they know no navigation and cannot say that anyone ever taught it them, or that they spent any time studying

it; indeed they say it can't be taught and are ready to murder any one who says it can. They spend all their time milling around the captain and trying to get him to give them the wheel. If one faction is more successful than another, their rivals may kill them and throw them overboard, lay out the honest captain with drugs and drink, take control of the ship, help themselves to what's on board, and behave as if they were on a drunken pleasure-cruise. Finally, they reserve their admiration for the man who knows how to lend a hand in controlling the captain by force or fraud; they praise his seamanship and navigation and knowledge of the sea and condemn everyone else as useless. They have no idea that the true navigator must study the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds and other professional subjects, if he is really fit to control a ship; and they think that it's quite impossible to acquire professional skill in navigation (quite apart from whether they want it exercised) and that there is no such thing as an art of navigation. In these circumstances aren't the sailors on any ship bound to regard the true navigator as a gossip and a star-gazer, of no use to them at all?'

'Yes, they are,' Adeimantus agreed

'I think you probably understand, without any explanation, that my illustration is intended to show the present attitude of society towards the true philosopher'

He holds clearly that philosophers are necessary for the society. "And tell him it's quite true that the best of the philosophers are of no use to their fellows; but that he should blame, not the philosophers, but those who fail to make use of them." (Plato)

3.7 CRITICISM AND COMMENT

There are several ideas of Pythagoras that can be seen to have a marked influence on Plato's Middle and Later period writings:

- The Dualism of Body and Soul
- Women would be allowed in this body
- The division of human kind being divided into three basic types: Tradesman –lowest type; Persons that have an ambitious and/or Competitive spirit – next highest type; Persons who prefer Contemplation –Highest type
- Knowledge and a philosophic life are necessary for salvation of the soul
- The organization of a political body that would be a salvation for its members
- This society would hold all possessions in common
- The Transmigration of Souls

In short we can say that Plato has brought in the dualism of body and soul, world and spirit or material and spiritual. In this way, he has exalted the spiritual and demeaned the material. So even today many of us see the body as evil, the world as bad and the material as illusory. From this it follows that women are inferior and contemplation is better. Every system today has been influenced by Plato. That is why Paul Ricoeur holds that Christianity has moved away from its original vision and has become today "Platonism for the masses." This is a negative contribution of Plato.

On the positive side, we must acknowledge the tremendous philosophical contribution he has made to Western thought. He has influenced every intellectual field of the Western civilization. In fact the great British Mathematician and Philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, has said it simply: "All Western Philosophy consists of footnotes to Plato."

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Who are philosophers, according to Plato?

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2) What is "Platonism for the masses?"

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3.8 LET US SUM UP

We have taken up, in this unit, some of the key notions of Plato and its impact on us. Plato has been one of the greatest thinkers of Western Philosophy.

3.9 KEY WORDS

Dualism : The division of dualism into two opposed or contrasted aspects, the spiritual and the material. There is no relationship between the two.

Forms : Forms (*Eidos*) is the philosophical concept of Plato regarding the perfect and imperfect objects of this world. The perfect belongs to the World of Forms and the Imperfect belongs to our world. The Imperfect are simply copies of the perfect that exists in the World of *Eidos*. As we see in the Allegory of the cave, the Perfect world belongs to the world with sunlight where the free man (Socrates of Athens) is blinded by the highest luminosity of the sun which is the truth. The Imperfect world is in the cave where the prisoners sees the shadows as the reality of their lives.

Utopia : An ideally perfect place, especially in its social, political, and moral aspects.

3.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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