Physis
A General Theory of Metaphysics

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Introduction

In beginning an investigation into the nature of physics, it is not unreasonable to look as far back as Plato. While the Platonic conception of metaphysics is typically regarded as antiquated, I'd like to claim it has more to offer us than many contemporary philosophers might preach. There exist key metaphysical ideas within Plato's anthology that, provided the proper context, take on new life w.r.t. the contemporary philosophical landscape. This revivification is amplified by work from the likes of Rene Descartes and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Descartes' approach likely doesn't require much introduction, and would no doubt be looked on favorably by Socrates. With Wittgenstein we discover a perspective that doesn't completely supplant, but instead clarifies the ideas of his predecessors (and successors). An amalgamation of these methodologies amounts to a very strong working theory of metaphysics.

Original Theory

The divided line is a fundamental component of Plato's Republic and stands as his primary ontological position. In the Republic, Socrates lays out his political theory by verbally constructing the ideal city. Its governor, the Philosopher King, is tasked with consulting the Form of the Good to determine what is best for the city. Plato subsequently supports this formulation by suggesting that all of existence can be categorized into one of four kinds of being.

- illusions e.g. shadows, reflections, images, poems
- objects of sense perception e.g. tables, chairs
- mathematical entities e.g. circles, triangles, equations
- Forms; the essence of all objects

These categories can be described as a hierarchy of being, from "least real" illusions to "most real" Forms. According to Plato, each category also isomorphically reflects an individual's 'possible states of mind':

- illusions are to imagination as;
- objects are to belief as;
- mathematical entities are to thought as;
- Forms are knowledge.

Of these categories, it is apparent that the Platonic Forms are the most abstract and challenging. According to Plato, there exist Forms in correspondence with all objects of sense perception. The reason office chairs, dining room chairs, and dollhouse chairs are all called 'chair' is because each of these instantiations participate in the Form of the Chair. Similarly, rainbows, Bach's Brandenburg concertos, and Cleopatra all participate

in the Form of Beauty, and so on. To extrapolate, the four aforementioned categories can be logically abstracted into two distinct pairings:

- The apparent (sensual) world, consisting of both illusions and objects of sense perception
- The conceptual (intelligible) world, consisting of mathematical entities and Forms

This categorization is significant because it survives the following well-known criticism.

Parmenides and the Third Man

One of the first major criticisms of Plato's Divided Line comes from Plato himself in a dialogue titled 'Parmenides'. This middle-period dialogue features the renowned sophist Parmenides engaged with a young Socrates on the Theory of Forms. The elucidations from Parmenides deal considerable damage to the theory, particularly by the third man argument. This argument essentially exposes an infinite regress embedded in the principles of the theory.

One-over-Many and Self-Predication are two principles of the theory itself which Parmenides uses to expose the theory's major flaw. One-over-Many states that when multiple things share a property, there must be a single Form that explains this shared quality. Self-Predication claims that the Form itself possesses the property it defines. So for example, suppose we have a group of any three large objects {A, B, C}. According to the principle of One-over-Many, these objects are all large because they partake in a single Form of Largeness, which we can call "L1." The principle of Self-Predication further asserts that this Form, L1, is itself large. As a result, we now have a new set of large things {A, B, C, L1}. To explain why this expanded group is large, we would need to introduce another Form of Largeness, "L2," that accounts for the largeness of A, B, C, and L1. When One-over-Many and Self-Predication are applied together in this way, they imply that any Form would require another Form to explain its own participation, *ad infinitum*. This paradox will be familiar to those privy to some of the challenges that Bertrand Russel took up regarding set theory. However, this criticism can be reconciled with the aid of a refined understanding of the theory itself.

Descartes' Cogito

In order to ensure that an apple basket is free of rot, each apple must be removed and inspected. Rot-free apples can be replaced while rotten apples must be permanently removed. This is the epistemological and metaphysical approach taken by Rene Descartes. Descartes' investigation reveals that the basket is the self, or the cogito. Formally, to think is to exist. From here, Descartes is able to refill his basket with rot-free

ideas about nature and theology. The significance of these meditations is the foundation Descartes provides when he says *cogito, ergo sum*, which essentially prevents what might otherwise be another infinite regress. By what method we are able to discern about rotten apples (e.i. what we can derive from the information the cogito receives) is a question best answered by a student of Bertrant Russel.

Wittgenstein, Mind, and Body

Ludwig Wittgenstein's metaphysical perspective revolves around the idea that the world consists of facts, not things, and that these facts are structured in a logical form that language can mirror. He believed that language and reality share a common logical structure, enabling propositions to picture facts about the world. However, he also emphasized that there are limits to what can be expressed through language—anything beyond logical facts (such as ethics, aesthetics, or metaphysics itself) falls into the realm of the unsayable and must be left silent. In his later work, Wittgenstein focused on how meaning arises from the use of language in various contexts, suggesting that metaphysical questions often stem from misunderstandings about how language operates. It's here that we find Wittgenstein at odds with Socrates. Where Socrates would request a ridgid, every/only definition for something like "chair" or "justice" (like we require in Mathematics), the late Wittgenstein would point to examples of use of the word. Incidentally, this kind of interaction plays out in Republic I between Socrates and Thrasymachus, though I wouldn't place Thrasymachus in the same category as Wittgenstien. Wittgenstien contends that language is intrinsically a social enterprise, and that it is not necessary for the definitions of words to be precise or logically complete. Revisiting the question of the various kinds of chair: what makes office chairs, dollhouse chairs, and, on occasion, stumps around a campfire, all chairs? Wittgenstein would argue: it's the fact that we call them chairs. The definitions of words, in his view, are allowed to change to account for context and scope. The Forms, therefore, do not exist anywhere but in our conversations.

In this way, Wittgenstein's observations dispense with many aspects of the Divided Line, but do not dispel the theory entirely. The salient aspects of the Theory of Forms don't just remain, but take on new and profound meaning. Wittgenstein's theory of language implies that the 'illusions' category on the Divided Line be subsumed under objects of sense perception. Where does that leave objects of sense perception and mathematical entities? It follows that all objects of sense perception are, too, merely constructions of the mind, and don't formally "exist" in the real world. That there is no real world at all, and that everything is internal to us. Even if this is the case, it turns out not to make much of a difference. External objects of sense perception can be considered

‘external’ regardless because they are not ‘the ego’ or thinking thing. The mere fact that we can distinguish objects from ourselves and other objects makes them different from us. This is also a way to address the mind-body problem, as it breaks down the apparent separation between the realm of the body (physical reality) and the realm of the mind (thought). So while these two realms exist as apparently separate, interaction between them is not illogical. In short, the realm consisting of objects of sense perception stands.

Categories of Knowledge

Mathematical entities stand apart in the following way: while it may have its root in the physical world, mathematics transcends that realm. There is no way of representing $\sqrt{-1}$, for example, in the physical world. Yet we know $\sqrt{-1} = \sqrt{-1}$ to be a true statement. Tautologies like these necessitate a distinction between conceptual and procedural knowledge and a more thoughtful definition of truth.

Procedural knowledge is based on memory of repetition. A child knows that they cannot walk through their bedroom doorway without first opening the door because any attempt to do so has been unsuccessful (and perhaps painful). This procedural knowledge is then abstracted to all kinds of doors. It's worth noting that this kind of knowledge is always “imperfect” meaning that cannot ever be guaranteed. It is indeed possible that, one day, it becomes possible to phase through a door. In contrast, as long as the presupposed mathematical axioms remain true, the pythagorean theorem will always be true of all right triangles. Using these terms, it can be said that science is the attempt to uncover the axioms of the physical world.

Conclusion

These two categories of knowledge gesture back at the divided line, as Plato makes the same classification between apparent, or procedural, and conceptual. While further subdivision may be stretching the limit of our observational ability, the aforementioned distinction remains. Science has shown that it may be possible to describe all physical phenomena using a conceptual framework, which collapses the distinction between Plato’s realm of illusions and objects of sense perception. Wittgenstein shows that the Forms exist not in a realm of their own, but in our heads and speech as part of the conceptual realm alongside mathematics. What remains of the divided line is not to be understated, and ought to be the epicenter for ontological, epistemological, and ethical study going forward.

References

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