Lecture 3-4

Plato’s Concept of Soul

About the lecture: In this lecture, we discuss mainly about the concept of soul in Plato’s philosophy. The soul, according to Plato, is not a natural entity, rather a transcendental reality. The dichotomy between the forms and the particulars is indeed creates an impression of dualism. We construe Plato as a dualist, from the point of view of epistemology and ethics.

Keywords: Cognition, Knowledge, Knower, Forms, Particulars, Dualism, Soul, Akin

Cognition and Motion: Plato’s dualism

Soul has the power of performing cognitive activity. As knowledge presupposes a knower, the soul plays the role of a knower. It is the subject of knowledge. The process of knowledge acquisition is the matter of our study here to explore the kind of dualism Plato presupposes in his epistemology. As we have mentioned earlier that this engagement is an epistemic engagement which shows the relationship between the knower and the known. The known here signifies the object of knowledge. In Plato, this subject (Knower) and object (the Known) dichotomy is not only epistemological but also ontological. These two forms of dichotomy are in fact related. The epistemological dichotomy refers to the division that Plato maintains between the forms/ideas and the particulars. The forms represent the essence of things. For example, horseness is the form of all horses. Horseness participates in all existing particular horses in the world, irrespective of their physical appearances and differences in terms of their size, colour, gender, and ability. The particulars are thus the copies of the forms which according to Plato participate in all the particulars – things in the world. Forms are universal and don’t change their ontological status. Forms are the basic source of knowledge. The knowledge about the particulars is possible because of the existence of forms.

The forms are independent of particulars and akin to the soul through which the existence of the particulars is being conceived. For instance, to know that ‘this is a horse’ is to have idea (knowledge of form) about the horse. The soul is conscious and hence is able to conceive the ideas. Ideas/forms, according to Plato exist in an independent world. Their participation in the particulars does not make them dependent on the particulars. Rather, the particulars exist in the world. The knowledge of the particulars is not only dependent on the existence of ideas/forms but also derived from sense experiences. The sense experiential knowledge varies from person to
person. So, the knowledge of particulars can be *subjective*, whereas the knowledge of forms is *objective*. Thus, briefly the world of forms/ ideas is different from the world of particulars. The forms and the particulars belong to two different worlds. Hence, they have two different ontological statuses.

The soul is the cause of the *motion* (bodily movements) or the action (voluntary/ intentional action). Plato compares the nature of the soul with the nature of the universe. Soul comprises of two aspects: the subject of knowledge or the source of cognitive activity, and the principle of movement. In Greek philosophy soul is defined as the *vital force*. It is the center of intelligent personality. The soul is autonomous and is independent of the world. The soul is the source of all kind of cognitive activities. The nature physical activities are different from the cognitive activities. Nevertheless, the soul is subject of performing or initiating actions. So far as the cognitive activities are concerned, it experiences thought, emotions and so on. The aspect of the soul departs at the time of the death. Plato here mentions of the *motion* and the *cognition* as two aspects. Modes of action mean the recognition of cognitive action or thought as one of the important activities of the soul. As the self performs spontaneous action, it is considered to be a self moving reality. This motion is rational. Nevertheless, soul is an intermediary between the two realms of the existence. Theory of being (the soul) was an unexamined presumption. Soul is thus a metaphysical entity that intermediates between two realms of the existence; the eternal Ideas/ *forms* and the mundane particulars. Thus the soul is not absolutely merged with the world.

In this way, we trace from Plato’s ontological dualism from the discourse of epistemology, particularly when he delve into the study of the nature of Forms/ Ideas with reference to Soul. Knowledge, according to Plato, is an unchanging reality. It is universally true which is intuitively conceived by the soul. And, knowledge of the changing world, i.e., ceaseless flow of the particulars in the world, is known through the senses organs. There are two kinds of knowledge – knowledge through sense experience and knowledge through intuition. The *knowledge of forms* is *intuitive* knowledge. In this connection, Plato makes a distinction between *doxa* (opinion) and the knowledge. “Opinions are based on sense perception. The changing objects in the perception are relatively unreal”.

**Ideas are knowable unchanging objects of the knowledge.**
Knowledge of particulars may vary from context to context; hence there is a possibility that such impression can create *opinion* means mere beliefs that are relatively true. In this context, Plato maintains that ‘knowledge is justified true belief.’ Justified belief involves certainty whereas an unjustified belief is uncertain and relative.\(^1\) Opinions are often formed without any proper justification. Hence, opinions are not regarded as valid knowledge. From the above discussion we can also conclude that the soul is a third kind of entity. It is the presumption of knowledge. Knowledge of the soul is a *transcendental* knowledge. Soul is the central to Plato’s epistemology as well as metaphysics. The true nature of forms is grasped by gradually transcending the experiences of the empirical world. The empirical world, for Plato, is the copy of the world of Forms. Forms themselves are real and universal. They participate in the particulars. This, however, does not eliminate the dualism in Plato’s philosophy. Rather, this dualism of *Form* and *Content* reappears again and again because of the abstract opposition between these two realms.

According to Plato, the soul is ‘akin’ to ideas or forms. This relationship is defined as an affinity. Affinity is a condition by the virtue of which the soul contemplates or apprehends true being. Moreover Plato puts emphasis on the ethical as well as the ontological considerations which tend to deny that there is an essential relationship between the soul and the objects of the sense experience.\(^2\)

**Ethics and Ontology**

So far as ethics and ontology are concerned, Plato emphasizes that truth and good are one. Knowledge is identical with the virtue.\(^3\) (p. 374) In the hierarchy of virtues, Plato places goodness at the highest level. Goodness is the supreme virtue. Every individual must live a virtuous life – the life must be expressed in performing with good actions. Along with the form of Good, Plato did also talk about Justice and Beauty which are in harmony with each other so far as living the virtuous life is concerned. Hence, it is essential to have the knowledge of the form. Referring to the autonomy of Forms, Mackie writes, “In Plato’s theory of Forms, and in the particular the Form of the Good, are eternal, extra mental, realities. They are a very central

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\(^2\) Ibid., p.373  
\(^3\) Ibid., p.374
structural element in the fabric of the world. But it is held also that just knowing them or ‘seeing’ them will not merely tell men what to do but will ensure that they do it, overruling any contrary inclinations. The philosopher-kings in the Republic can, Plato thinks, be trusted with unchecked power because their education will have given them knowledge of the Forms. Being acquainted with Forms of the Good, and justice and beauty and the rest they will, by this knowledge alone, without any further motivation, be impelled to pursue and promote these ideals.” Plato’s emphasis on the epistemic articulation of the ethical highlights the how moral actions are ought to be performed and what short of life the human beings are ought to live. The cognitive activity of the soul is to contemplate on the ideas.

Soul works with the bodily facilitation as well. Soul is neither a divisible substance nor it is concrete. It has got a unique cognitive status in Plato’s epistemology. The nature of the cognitive activity is epistemological but not psychological. The epistemological activities are concerned with truth, whereas the psychological is not concerned with truth. Moreover, the soul’s engagement with the external reality is something significant, but so far as the epistemology is concerned, the soul deals with the understanding of one’s own reality. That is, the power of conceiving its own existence is indeed a unique cognitive act performed by the soul. The knowledge of the soul is not derived through sense organs. For example; to be good and have the knowledge of good are two different things. One can just perform good action accidently without knowing the significance. On the other hand, the wise person not only possesses the knowledge of good, but also cultivates the virtue of goodness. The seeker of knowledge is a lover of wisdom.

**Does soul perform action with an ethical reason?**

The ethical aspect of the ontology talks about living a virtuous life. For Plato, the human beings are ought to live a virtuous life. Virtue is knowledge. Soul as the originator of voluntary action performs action rationally.

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6 Ibid., p. 375
The virtues are to rationally construed as the soul has three different parts namely, reason, spirit and appetite. The reason is considered supreme as it has the power to evaluate and reflect on things. Appetite and spirit are akin to the body rather than to the soul. The body is a hindrance to the soul, in the sense that it restricts its function to the sense activity and thereby prevents the soul from reaching pure truth.

Goodness is considered supreme Idea. It is represented as an organizing principle in the universe and knowledge. The reason to have a good life and form the habit of living a good life is a virtue. Rational and scientific thinking (knowledge) is stepping stone towards the knowledge of truth.

Immortality of soul in Plato corresponds to divinity and eternity in its knowledge of Ideas. Immortality in the sense of continued existence conceived by Plato as ‘personal being’ – is the principle of personality. Souls differ according to their respective degree of development. Roberts also mentions that “the other kind of immortality – that to which the soul approximates in virtue of its kinship with ideas – is qualitative rather than durational.”

Plato’s notion of Ideas is to be understood as eternal, timeless and self explanatory. And, the basic particulars in the world is not entirely or absolutely one with reason.

Roberts writes “He whose heart has been set on the love of learning and on true wisdom, and has chiefly exercised this part on himself, this man must without fail have thoughts that are immortal and divine, if he laid hold upon truth; and so far as it lies in human nature to possess immortality he lacks nothing thereof.”

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7 Ibid., p.386
8 Ibid.