Chapter Three

Plato’s Idealism

Key words: Idealism, theory of ideas, eternal essences, parable of the cave.

This chapter will introduce the important features of the idealistic philosophy of the ancient Greek thinker, Plato, who was a disciple of Socrates and the teacher of another celebrated philosopher, Aristotle. This chapter will discuss the following topics.

Plato’s Idealism: An overview

Plato, arguably the greatest metaphysician of European philosophy, was born in Athens in a noble family in about 427 BC. He was educated by Cratylus, who was a disciple of Heraclitus and Euclides of Megara. With the latter he studied the philosophy of Parmenides, whose conception of permanent, unchangeable and imperishable substance. He then became the disciple of Socrates, who remained till the end, as a source of great intellectual inspiration in his life. He belonged to a period in Greek philosophy, which had witnessed the emergence of many novel ideas, to which he too had actively contributed. An equally important thinker of this age was his own disciple Aristotle, who incidentally was his greatest critic as well. In terms of influence, both these thinkers have stimulated generations of thinkers across continents. Bertrand Russell in his A History of Western Philosophy observes:

Plato and Aristotle were the most influential of all philosophers, ancient, medieval, or modern; and of the two, it was Plato who had the greater effect upon subsequent ages. I say this for two reasons: first, that Aristotle himself is an outcome of Plato; second, that Christian theology and philosophy, at any rate until the thirteenth century, was much more Platonic than Aristotelian. (p. 104)

In his philosophical theory, Plato had advocated an uncompromising idealism which asserted that the experiential world (empirical reality) is fundamentally unreal and is a mere appearance and ultimate reality is constitutive of abstract universal essences of things. This can be elaborated with a simple example. The individual cats in this universe are unreal, but the essence of cat or cattiness is real and imperishable. Everything that exists in the empirical world is therefore unreal, as they are all particular concrete objects. The universals alone are real and they are
abstract essences of things. The objects of this world are mere copies of these abstract universal essences.

The problem of universals has always posed problems to philosophers. In ordinary language, the universals consist of what is the common element in the many particular objects that bear the same name. As long as they are treated as something the mind abstracts from day to day experience of common objects, they do not pose any specific philosophical perplexities. But when philosophers attempt to project them as possessing a reality independent of the objects experienced, they become metaphysically significant and need to be accounted for. This is precisely what Plato did. According to him, they are not only independent of concrete objects, but the latter are dependent on them; they are absolute realities.

Positing universals as independent realities raise certain other issues. We may then wonder what would be the relationship between particulars and universals. Again, what happens to the universals when particulars perish? We know the particular objects through perception. But what would be the method by which we know the universals? Can man ever know reality? Plato’s idealism addresses all these questions and tries to answer them with a comprehensive philosophical system that relates a theory of reality with a theory of knowledge and a theory of ethics.

**Influences on Plato**

Plato was indebted to many of his predecessors in the history of philosophy. He was influenced by Pythagoras, as the latter too had immense respect for mathematics and was subscribed to a theory of abstract realities. Plato shared with Pythagoras a mystic outlook that believed in immortality and other-worldliness. Parmenides was another thinker who influenced Plato when he developed his theory of eternal and timeless reality, which conceived change as fundamentally unreal. But Heraclitus, another Eleatic thinker, who interestingly held a position that is diametrically opposite to Parmenides’ view by famously advocating the impermanence thesis, “one cannot step into the same river twice”, too had
influenced Plato, as the latter had affirmed that there is nothing permanent in the sensible world. This impermanent status of the sensible reality led him to suspect the testimony of the senses in the acquisition of knowledge.

The most important influence on Plato’s intellectual and personal lives was exerted by **Socrates** from whom he has borrowed the technique of dialectics and further developed it into a systematic philosophical method. Socrates too considered the ethical problem as the most significant philosophical issue and has also inspired Plato for developing teleological rather than mechanical explanations of the world. Socrates has placed the philosophical and moral problems concerning the question of right living at the center. The practical task of philosophy according to him was to help man to think right in order that they may live right. It is important that one should know what is good so that one becomes good. In this sense the questions of knowledge, truth and goodness are intimately connected in the central philosophical question Socrates raised.

Socrates has also placed the domain of truth as the domain of absolute clarity, absolute certainty and absolute universality. It is very important that we should distinguish truth from the confused and vague opinions and thoughts we have. It is natural that human beings may hold different views about things. But despite such differences, we may be able to arrive at common ground or principles and finally reach the truth which can be expressed in universal judgements that are beyond all doubts and contradictions.

**The Socratic Method**

Socrates employed a unique method of argumentation for eliciting truth. He enters into conversation with a person on a topic and initially pretends knowing very less about it. He proceeds by asking questions and insists for clear definitions and explanations from his partner (not opponent). In this process he makes his partner contradict, as such persistent questioning will expose their confusions. Very soon they realize that Socrates is the master of the situation.

Plato later developed this technique into a systematic philosophical method and his dialogues actually demonstrate how it works as an effective method of
eliciting truth through rational argumentation. Plato deals with a variety of themes in his dialogues, which have Socrates as the protagonist, who ceaselessly engages in conversation with others. All of them follow the same method which emphasizes on conversation and dialogue.

**Theory of Forms/Ideas**

Gilbert Ryle makes an interesting observation about Plato’s theory of ideas. He says that it originated out of several different and partly independent features of the general ideas or notions that constituted the recurrent themes of dialectical disputations that include definitions, standards of measurement and appraisal, immutable things, timeless truths, one over many, intellectual knowledge, conceptual certainties, and ontology of forms.

Bertrand Russell states that, Plato’s theory of ideas is partly logical and partly metaphysical. It is logical, as it deals with the meaning of general words like manness, catyness etc. it is metaphysical as it projects an ontology of essences which is constituted of a domain of reality corresponding to the general world we experience. About the logical part, Russell elaborates:

The logical part has to do with the meaning of general words. There are many individual animals of whom we can truly say "this is a cat." What do we mean by the word "cat"? Obviously something different from each particular cat. An animal is a cat, it would seem, because it participates in a general nature common to all cats......something which is not this or that cat, but some kind of universal cattyness. This is not born when a particular cat is born, and does not die when it dies. In fact, it has no position in space or time; it is "eternal." This is the logical part of the doctrine.

The Metaphysical part of the Theory of Ideas is explicated as:

The word "cat" means a certain ideal cat, "the cat," created by God, and unique. Particular cats partake of the nature of the cat, but more or less imperfectly; it is only owing to this imperfection that there can be many of them. The cat is real; particular cats are only apparent. According to Plato, the ideas are objects of the intellect, known by reason alone and are objective realities that exist in a world of their own. Russell observes that there are as many ideas as there are common names and every common name designates an idea. Let us consider some common examples. Socrates, Parmenides and Heraclitus are all men. Here what is common is the fact that they are all men. What is common to all of them is the man-type, the essence or idea of man, which according
Aspects of Western Philosophy: Dr. Sreekumar Nellickappilly, IIT Madras

to Plato is an objective reality that exists in an independent ontological domain. Again, we see several beautiful things around us; beautiful flower, beautiful poem, beautiful painting etc. In such cases, we can isolate the idea of beauty as an essence. In the examples of a moving car, moving man, moving cycle, motion is the idea. Plato asserts that all these ideas exist in an abstract universal realm of essences, which alone is real. All the particular objects, events and instances of these ideas are therefore unreal and are mere appearances.

Plato's theory of universal essences now raises another important question. In our normal experience, we see beautiful things, but not, beauty as such, we see moving bodies, not the Idea of movement. We may wonder where do these generalizations, which re essences exist? Do they exist only in the minds of the individual knower? If yes, then what objectivity and universality can they have?

Plato affirms that the general ideas can be approached only through reason, as they are not perceived by the senses. One has to properly employ one's reason to comprehend the ideas, which are real, and for this purpose, reason needs to be properly trained. The philosopher knows that the world of senses is a constantly fleeting realm of entities which cannot be considered as real in the absolute sense of the term; that which is universal, imperishable and transcendent. Reality is changeless and eternal and hence it needs to be searched not in the world of senses, but in the intelligible world.

Plato here challenges the commonly held views about sense objects and general ideas, which assume that they are mental copies of the sensible objects. According to this latter view, general ideas, which are copies, depend on the objects. Moreover, they are not real but exist only in the individual's mind and hence cannot be communicated completely. Countering this perspective Plato affirms that ideas are the models or the originals and individual objects are the copies.

Plato holds that the real must be more stable and static and hence they must be eternal. On the other hand, individual objects and instances may come and go and they are not real. The Idea is what the individual expresses and without the idea it expresses, the individual cannot exist. The idea is an absolute entity and is completely independent of the mind, which has it. The sensible objects are copies of these Ideas, as they partake of the universal Idea.
The objects of the phenomenal world are therefore, subject to change and destruction and are not absolute realities. They depend on time, place and the person who experience them. In other words, everything in the world of phenomenal beauty is relative, fleeting, and uncertain. On the other hand, the essences or Ideas are ever-lasting, as they have neither beginning nor end. They are neither subjected to any changes, nor are they relative to any external factor. They are real transcendental realities.

In other words, the ideas are absolutely real entities, which are more real than the objects of empirical experience. Plato holds that, they alone can be real, being the eternal patterns after which the things of sense are made. On the other hand, the phenomenal world and its objects have a borrowed existence, as they are mere copies of the world of Ideas. They receive their reality from Ideas. They exist, not in themselves, but as reflections of their Ideas. They have no reality other than that which they receive from these Ideas.

Plato further argues that the ideal world exhibits a hierarchical arrangement. He compares this arrangement with the kind of arrangement seen in the sensible world. Things in the empirical world are arranged in such a manner that from the most imperfect to the most perfect there is a gradation. A similar kind of gradation is exhibited by the Ideal world as well. They too are order from lower to higher, the higher ones embracing the lower ones and finally the everything is embraced under the highest, the most powerful Idea or the Good.

Therefore, Platonic idealism asserts that the idea of Good is the only real and absolute Idea. It comprehends, contains, or summarizes the entire reality. But if this is the case, what about the reality of these so-called lower Ideas? In the absolute sense, they are less real than the Idea of Good and hence cannot claim absolute status and do not exist in themselves. Therefore, their absolute status is relative to the objects which are their copies and hence depend on them. Compared to the Idea of Good, their existence is only relative and hence they are only modes of the idea of Good. Another important feature of the Ideal world is its organic unity. Despite the hierarchical ordering the ideas exhibit an organic unity and live a common life. It is not possible to separate them from each other as they are independent of time and space, which are principles of separation.
Plato ultimately situates these ideas in the intelligence. They exist, neither in the physical world, not in the human minds. Metaphorically they are placed in the heavens, but in reality the home of the Ideas is the Idea as such. It cannot have a place outside of itself and it exists by virtue of itself in the intelligence, in the mind and form the very essence of the mind. Plato says that they are latent in the mind in such a way that we are not conscious of them initially.

Now the questions are the following. If they are latent in the mind, then the mind must know them always. Then what is the source of error and mistakes? Again, do we get an access to them in our sensations, as they are apparently the only sources of all our knowledge? Plato categorically denies the possibility of accessing the ideas through the senses. The senses can access only the external copies of Ideas and the originals exist in us. Plato argues that the sensations can only provoke Ideas and they cannot produce them. Moreover, the senses are fundamentally deceptive. They drag the mind to the world of particularities and real truth can be accessed only through reasoning.

It is relevant to mention about Plato’s concept of matter in this context where we are discussing the reality of the material world. According to Plato, matter is essentially non-being. The Idea becomes a creator, a cause, a will in reference to non-being and what is essentially non-being becomes like being and takes part in the absolute existence of the Idea.

In order to explicate his extremely complex theory of reality Plato introduces the famous Parable of the Cave. It basically says the story of people who remain ignorant about the real world and live in the inferior world of sense objects, thinking that it is reality. Plato compares such ignorant people to the prisoners in a cave. These prisoners are chained and are only able to look in one direction; to their front. They have a fire behind them and a wall in front. Between them and the wall there is nothing; all that they see are shadows of themselves, and of objects behind them, cast on the wall by the light of the fire.

These prisoners, who have never seen anything else but only the shadows, think that these shadows as real. They have no idea about reality. At last one man succeeds in escaping from the cave to the light of the sun. Initially he feels shocked, seeing the sun and the objects in daylight and gradually comes in terms with the state of affairs. He then realizes that he had hitherto been deceived by shadows.
Plato says that if he thinks that it is his duty to help his fellow-prisoners also to escape from the prison-house. He thus becomes a guardian; the ruler of the people, who leads them to truth and enlightenment.

In this parable, the prison and chains symbolize our body and the senses respectively. They prevent us from accessing the truth—the world of ideas—as they drag us to the world of sensible objects, which are mere shadows of the real ideas. The Sun in the parable stands for enlightenment and wisdom. One who is enlightened would comprehend the reality of the world.

Plato further introduces the analogy of vision in order to clarify the theory of ideas further. He explains the difference between clear intellectual vision and the confused vision of sense-perception. When there is sufficient Sunlight objects are revealed to us clearly. During twilight we have blurred vision and in darkness, nothing is revealed. Here the eye stands for the soul and the Sun which is the source of light, symbolizes wisdom which consists in accessing truth or goodness. Darkness symbolizes the state of complete ignorance and twilight represents confused vision.

Plato takes up this parable because, sight is different from the other senses as it requires not only the eye and the object, but also light. It categorically states that we have access to the world of ideas only when there is enlightenment and the world of passing things is a confused twilight world.

**Quiz**

1. According to Plato, Ideas or essences are:
   (a) Mental copies of the sensible objects  
   (b) Exist in the individual’s mind  
   (c) Absolutes and are independent of the mind  
   (d) Are representatives of objects
2. Who among the following is a later Ionian thinker?
   (a) Thales  
   (b) Anaximander  
   (c) Anaximenes  
   (d) Anaxagoras
3. Who held that the primordial substance is an eternal, infinite, boundless and imperishable substance?
   (a) Anaximenes  
   (b) Parmanides  
   (c) Thales  
   (d) Anaximander
4. Who said “one cannot step into the same river twice?”
   (a) Heraclitus  
   (b) Parmanides  
   (c) Thales  
   (d) Anaximenes
5. Which among the following is not advocated by the atomists?
   (a) Absolute change is impossible  
   (b) Atoms are simple and invisible  
   (c) Atoms are not extended  
   (d) Motion is inherent in atoms.

**Answer Key:**

1. (c)
Assignment

1. Discuss the major contributions of the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers.
2. Examine the problem of substance and the problem of change as discussed by early Greek thinkers.

References and Further Reading

Books


Web Resources