

Plato's Philosophy

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Abstract

Plato's philosophy is in line with the pre-Socratics, sophists and artistic traditions that underlie Greek education, in a new framework, defined by dialectics and the theory of Ideas. For Plato, knowledge is an activity of the soul, affected by sensible objects, and by internal processes. Platonism has its origins in Plato's philosophy, although it is not to be confused with it. According to Platonism, there are abstract objects (a notion different from that of modern philosophy that exists in another realm distinct from both the external sensible world and the internal world of

consciousness, and is the opposite of nominalism). An essential distinction for Plato in his philosophy is the theory of Forms, the distinction between perceptible but unintelligible reality (science) and imperceptible but intelligible reality (mathematics) Geometry was Plato's main motivation, and this shows the influence of Pythagoras. Forms are perfect archetypes whose real objects are imperfect copies.

Keywords: Plato, philosophy

Plato's Philosophy

Plato's philosophy is in line with the pre-Socratics, sophists and artistic traditions that underlie Greek education, in a new framework, defined by dialectics and the theory of ideas. For Plato, knowledge is an activity of the soul (Brisson and Pradeau 2007), affected by sensitive objects and internal processes. Platonism has its origins in Plato's philosophy, although it is not to be confused with it. According to Platonism, there are abstract objects, a different notion from that of modern philosophy, which exists in another realm distinct from both the external sensible world and the internal world of consciousness, and is the opposite of nominalism (Rosen 2001). His philosophy is the theory of forms, a distinction between perceptible but unintelligible reality (science) and imperceptible but intelligible reality (mathematics), Geometry was Plato's main motivation, and it also shows the influence of Pythagoras. Forms are perfect archetypes whose real objects are imperfect copies (Rosen 2001).

In *The Republic*, the highest form is considered to be the Form of Good, the source of all other Forms that could be known by reason (Rosen 2001). Glaucon classifies the three kinds of good and asks who is right: those we accept for their sake without regard to consequences, those we accept both for their own sake and for the sake of their consequences, and those we do not

accept them for their sake but we accept them for the sake of their consequences. Socrates attributes justice to the second kind of good.

Aristotle summarizes Plato's philosophy as follows:

” After the philosophies which have been described there succeeded Plato’s treatment, which for the most part followed them (apparently the Pythagoreans and Eleatics, who have been last spoken of), but also possessed peculiar features over and above the Italian philosophy. For Plato had been) from his youth up familiar with Kratylus and so with Hera- ' kleitan opinions, to the effect that all which is “sensed” is in perpetual flux and there can be no science about it, and this conception he retained. Socrates, however, though deal-^ ing with moral ideas and not at all with the nature of the. world, yet in those subjects did search after the universal and-pay attention to obtaining definitions; and Plato, adopting his method, yet assumed, owing to the influence above-mentioned, that the definition must be of somewhat else, and not of what is “ sensed.” For he held it impossible that a general determination should apply to any of what are sensed, seeing that these are in perpetual change. Therefore he gave the name of “forms” (*ideai*) to being of this kind (i.e. to what could be defined), and held that what was sensed had its name from this being, and as alongside it; for the manifold of what have the same name with the forms (as light objects with lightness, etc.) are what they are (he said) by participation in the forms.” (Aristotle 1991)

Friedrich Nietzsche criticized Plato's "idea of good" and some elements of Christian morality in *Beyond Good and Evil* (F. Nietzsche 1886), interpreting them as "Platonism for the masses." Martin Heidegger argued against Plato's philosophy of existence in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 2010), and the philosopher of science Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Popper 2020) considers the utopian political regime in the Republic as a totalitarian prototype.

Soul

Plato does not give a precise definition of the soul, but some of its properties seem to be more important than others, such as the principle of motion and thought. (Plato 1993, 245 c). The soul is connected with the Ideas, the divine, with its own movement. It is immortal and tripartite, consisting of three components: *epithumia* (*ἐπιθυμία*, "appetite", the seat of desire and passion), *thumos* (*θυμός*, the irascible, aggressive, courageous element) and *logistikon* (*λογιστικόν*, the "rational" or spiritual element, immortal, divine, a "demon" (*daimon*)). In *Timaeus*, Socrates locates

the parts of the soul in the human body: reason is in the head, the spirit in the upper third of the trunk, and the appetite in the middle third of the trunk, to the navel (Plato 2015, 44d, 70).

Francis Cornford considers, in addition to the theory of Forms, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul (Campbell 2021), considered to be the one who gives life to the body and the bearer of moral properties (the mind, what thinks in us).

"... has not the soul an end which nothing else can fulfil? for example, to superintend and command and deliberate and the like. Are not these functions proper to the soul, and can they rightly be assigned to any other?"

To no other.

And is not life to be reckoned among the ends of the soul?

Assuredly, he said." (Plato and Jowett 1991, bks. 1, 353d)

Plato considered that love is motivated by the desire for the highest form of beauty (Beauty itself), and love is the motivational power through which it is realized (the ideal of "Platonic love").

Human life is a union of the soul with the human body. (Platon and Brisson 2001, 58)

The function of the myth

A feature in Plato's work is the use of myth for didactic purposes, as a form of traditional-popular knowledge that preceded the birth of Greek philosophy and to argue his philosophical reasoning. Myths highlight a relationship of ideas (Plato 2015, 38a3). They express the tradition transmitted through feelings, values and knowledge shared by a community. Plato believes that myth should be re-evaluated as useful and necessary for understanding, in ethics and politics. The myth is in fact an exposition of some ideas, difficult to accept by contemporaries, in the form of a story, with an allegorical and didactic function and concepts through images that facilitate the meaning of a rather complex discourse, creating in the reader an intellectual tension and a positive attitude towards the development of reflection. Thus, myth helps to overcome the limits imposed

by rational research, becoming an "alternative way" of philosophical thinking (Valgimigli 1942, XXXVIII).

In Plato's works, three types of myths can be distinguished: false myths (e.g., stories), myths based on true reasoning (verifiable), and false and unverifiable myths (Plato and Stewart 1905); and two types of myth topics: the origin of the universe and morality and the soul (Edelstein 1949).

"The myth designates the obligation imposed on philosophy to consider its project, that of a rational explanation of all things, in the light of what seems to elude reason. The use of myths is not a sign of renunciation, but rather of a strategy of solution: insofar as human life must be found in the knowledge of the world and the divine principle of its perfection, its model, the myth will give people a look plausible, the representation of this model, without which it could not live adequately. " (Platon and Pradeau 2004, 31)

The Platonic mythical tales touch on the fundamental issues of human existence, such as death, the immortality of the soul, knowledge, the origin of the world, and link them closely to the themes and logical-critical discourses to which the philosopher entrusts the task of producing true knowledge and representation of reality, such as the myth of the cave (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VII 514 A – 519 A) or the myth of Er (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. X 614 A – 621 D).

Notable Platonic stories for their inspiration generally include those about the forms of knowledge or the "line" (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VI 509 D – 511 E), and the "mystery of love" (Plato 2003, 209 E – 212 C) about the hierarchy of beauty.

Ideas - Theory of Forms

Plato rejects the foundation of knowledge based on sensation (Plato et al. 1992), considering that learning is in fact a memory (Plato 2020, 81 c-d), that the object of research is only partially unknown to man, who, after contemplating it before birth, he "forgot" it in the depths of his soul. The purpose of the search is a knowledge already present, but hidden in it, which philosophy will have to awaken it with reminiscence or "anamnesis". In the religious beliefs of

metempsychosis typical of Orphism and Pythagoreanism, the soul, when the body dies, being immortal, moves to another body. Plato assumes that there are Ideas that have characteristics opposite to phenomenal entities: they are incorruptible, ingenerated, eternal and immutable. These Ideas live in a supersensible world that is partially visible to souls once they are detached from their bodies. Ideas are more accurately translated as "Forms" (Reale 2001, 120).

Thus, the four stages of knowledge are imagination, mastery of shadows and superstitions (*eikasìa*); sensitive objects, which give rise to false beliefs (*pìstis*); geometric and mathematical truths, proper to discursive reason (*dianoia*); and intelligible ideas, accessible only by speculative and intuitive means (*nòesis*). Only what is absolute can be truly known (Philopon 1969) (Saffrey 1968). Perfect knowledge belongs only to the Gods. Human knowledge is based on philosophy, and is always imperfect, limited to the hyperuranion.

Forms are the true objects of definition and knowledge, immaterial and immutable realities, universal and intelligible (Plato 1993, 77 a). The theory of Ideas, or of intelligible Forms, can be summarized in two notions, that of form (which designates the intelligible being), and that of participation (which designates the relationship between being intelligible and becoming sensible). According to Aristotle, Plato's best-known argument in support of the Forms was the "one over many" argument (Aristotle 1991, bk. 1).

The Platonic theory of knowledge is best reflected in line theory:

“Now take a line which has been cut into two unequal parts, and divide each of them again in the same proportion, and suppose the two main divisions to answer, one to the visible and the other to the intelligible, and then compare the subdivisions in respect of their clearness and want of clearness, and you will find that the first section in the sphere of the visible consists of images. And by images I mean, in the first place, shadows, and in the second place, reflections in water and in solid, smooth and polished bodies and the like ... Imagine, now, the other section, of which this is only the resemblance, to include the animals which we see, and everything that grows or is made... Next proceed to consider the manner in which the sphere of the intellectual is to be divided... There are two subdivisions, in the lower of which the soul uses the figures given by the former division as images; the inquiry can only

be hypothetical, and instead of going upward to a principle descends to the other end; in the higher of the two, the soul passes out of hypotheses, and goes up to a principle which is above hypotheses, making no use of images as in the former case, but proceeding only in and through the ideas themselves.” (Plato and Jowett 1991, bk. VI, 509d-510a)

The division of the line can be summarized as follows:

- sensitive knowledge or opinions (*δόξα*)
 - imagination (*εἰκασία*)
 - faith (*πίστις*)
- intelligible knowledge or science (*ἐπιστήμη*)
 - discursive thinking (*διάνοια*)
 - understanding (*νόησις*)

Ontology

The representation of knowledge by a line has both ontological and epistemological significance, the modes of knowledge and the corresponding realities being: conjecture (*εἰκασία*, *eikasía* - images and illusions), faith (*πίστις*, *pístis* - living beings, object) thinking (*διάνοια*, *diánoia* - notions and numbers), intellect (*νόησις*, *nóēsis* - Forms), plus ignorance corresponding to non-being.

Is the ontology of Platonism based on the answers to the question of what Ideas are based on and how do they relate to the objects of sensible knowledge? Thus, in the famous myth of the cave in *Republics*, the sensitive world is presented as an imperfect image of the world of ideas, understood instead as the "real world". Plato offers the interpretation of the allegory: the slave freed from the cave represents the soul, which frees itself from bodily bonds through knowledge. The elements of the outside world represent the ideas, while the objects inside the cave (and the images of their design on the wall) are just their imperfect copies. The sun, which allows us to recognize the true aspect of reality, is a symbol of the idea of Good.

Platonic ontology is "dualistic", with two conceptual levels of sensible realities and ideas, between which there is an ontological difference. The only possible relationship between the plane of phenomena and that of ideas is the "mimetic" (*mimesis*): every sensible reality (*ente*) has its model (*eidos*) in the intelligible world. The "leap" between the two levels can be made by the human soul, rising through knowledge from material to intellectual existence.

Epistemology

Plato contrasts, in several dialogues, knowledge (*epistemes*) and opinion (*doxa*). Knowledge is not empirical and comes from divine understanding. Forms are also responsible for both knowledge, and are understood by pure reason. In some places Plato reverses the intuition of cognoscibility and reality. Reality is not accessible through the senses (the one who sees with the eyes is blind). In several dialogues Plato launches several hypotheses but does not reach any clarification of his position, thus ending in *aporia*.

Knowledge is found in an eternal, non-experiential form, and is acquired through pre-birth memories (Plato et al. 1992, 156a). Plato associates knowledge with the understanding of Forms and the relations between them, through processes of collection and division (Baird and Kaufmann 2008). Understanding Forms provides fundamental knowledge that does not need to be justified, thus avoiding infinite regression (Fine 2008, 411–36).

Plato is considered to be the father of the famous definition of knowledge, as a true justified faith (Fine 2008, 165–190), based in particular on the claims of *Theætetus* (Fine 2003) (Plato et al. 1992, 201c–d) and from *Meno* (Plato 2020, 97d–98a).

Ethics

Plato often addresses ethics in his dialogues, including virtues and vices, considering "Good" as the supreme form. Socrates states in Plato's works that no one does evil, and that virtue is innate and cannot be learned (Chappell 2010).

According to Plato's philosophy, ethics is based on the Form of Good, and virtue, through its three parts (wisdom, courage and moderation) represents the knowledge and recognition of this form with the three parts of the soul (reason, spirit and appetite). In addition, by virtue of Justice each part of the soul is constrained to perform its own function (Seyffert, Nettleship, and Sandys 1894, 481). The virtue of Justice involves addressing the issue of knowledge, so an understanding of the genesis of the "world of ideas" as a result of a more comprehensive and profound "political" commitment.

R. C. Cross and A. D. Woozley discuss the issue of what have been called subjective and objective theories of duties in the *Republic* (Cross, Woozley, and Platón 1964): whether we should help the man who looks good or the man who is good, a matter of general morality, "whether a man is to be judged morally for acting (or failing to act) as he thinks the situation requires, or for acting (or failing to act) as the situation actually requires".

The fundamental purpose of ethical or political education is not to provide knowledge, but to socialize desires in pursuit of true happiness (Plato and Jowett 1991, 518b—519d).

The highest form of justice in Plato is righteousness, both at individual and community-level. There is a fundamental responsibility to seek the wisdom that leads to the understanding of the Form of Good, which leads to a good life under a philosopher-king in a society with three classes (philosopher-kings, guardians and workers), a mirror of the individual tripartite soul (reason, spirit and appetite). Justice thus occurs naturally in a society in which all its parts are harmonized (Murphy 2015).

Politics

For Plato, the role of politics is to create unity, especially through virtue and education. Monique Dixsaut, considers that the *Republic* "focuses on a cultural reform and outlines the plan of a constitution model", while the *Laws* "aim to establish a second-hand city for which it determines the legislation and institutions", and the *Statesman* deals with the science needed for good policy (Dixsaut 2003).

Platonism arose from Plato's reflections on politics. According to Alexandre Koyré: "Plato's entire philosophical life was determined by an eminently political event, the condemnation of Socrates to death", with a clear distinction between "reflection on politics" and "political activity" (Koyré 1945). It is certainly not in this last sense that we must understand the centrality of politics in Plato's thinking. Reflection on politics focused on the process of human growth as a member of the organic polis.

According to Socrates, a non-harmonized state will degrade by going through all forms of organization with their specific leaders, from aristocracy (with philosopher-kings) to timocracy (warriors), oligarchy (rich), democracy (people) and, finally, tyranny (tyrants) (Plato and Jowett 1991, 488, 561a–b 571a).

R. J. Rowan credits Plato as the first to suggest that social change necessarily reflects the workings of deeper principles and models, of laws that determine visible external events. "The relation of social classes and class conflict is taken by Plato to be central to these changing patterns," and revolutions are not accidental. Also, patterns of social and political change are inseparable from the structure of the soul or character of individuals (Rowan 2014).

The philosophical state

Plato's dualism between truth and appearance, soul and body, is also found in the political conception. A state that assigns to its citizens functions incompatible with their level of wisdom risks easily degenerating. Plato interprets society by analogy with a living organism (Plato and Jowett 1991) (Plato 1988). The task of harmonization belongs to those who manage to reach the essence of the idea of Good: philosophers, whose function is identical to that of the rational component of the human soul, which harmonizes the other two components of the soul, the intellectual and the lust.

Plato's political conception is based on the idea of justice, the same as that of his professor Socrates. The city, according to Socrates, in Book II of the *Republic*, arises from the need of people to associate to produce and the need to resort to a division of tasks (Dixsaut 2003, 218). For Alexandre Koyré, solidarity is the main driving force. And in order to be defended, a new social class appears: the warriors, the guards of the *Republic* (Koyré 1945, 110, 112). In Book I of the *Laws*, Plato appeals to the myth of puppets to represent the soul as a reality made up of parts that are not spontaneously in harmony, thus justifying the role of politics (Schuhl 1954). The purpose of a well-established city is the conformity of its citizens with the Good. The unity of the city is achieved through a political regime (*politeia*), with the help of philosophy (Pradeau 2010), which harmonizes the three social classes: leaders, guards and workers, each with specific virtues. In order to eliminate any form of earthly and personal interests, the ruling class and the warriors must share all the properties, even the children, and the community will take care of them. Arts-based education such as poetry or music are disapproved because they are limited to a sterile imitation of the sensible world of the Idea.

In *Laws*, according to Jean-Jacques Chevallier, Plato "abandons the perfect state, ruled autocratically only by wisdom", and proposes a mixed regime between monarchy and democracy (Chevallier 1951).

Plato's ideal state was also criticized by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Popper 2020). Others saw it as an early form of communism, an anticipation of the egalitarian society proposed by Karl Marx. Marx, on the other hand, reproached Plato for conceiving of a rigid, aristocratic caste state. But Plato's "aristocrats" are in fact intellectual aristocrats, according to moral criteria that are found in everyone, not on the basis of a right acquired at birth.

Art

Plato's philosophical relationship with art was ambivalent, often even negative, considering that the visual arts in particular, but also certain forms of music and poetry, are imperfect imitations of the world of Ideas. Due to the strong influence of art, Plato believed that the state should limit artistic manifestations in order to prevent harmful effects on the community. He accepted only the simple traditional forms of art, believing that innovations in art could compromise the ideal, harmonious and stable characteristic of society. Order, measure (adequacy) and harmonic proportions (*συμμετρία*: symmetry) were considered decisive criteria for beauty (Sauerland 2019, 152–54).

Sean McAleer lists several arguments developed by Socrates in the *Republic* against art (McAleer 2020): the metaphysical argument (art only makes copies of the copies and therefore not worth taking seriously), the epistemological argument (artists do not know what they are talking about and what he paints), the moral argument (art corrupts even the best of us).

Unwritten doctrines: One and the Dyad

Plato considers the written word to be of limited value:

"... writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. (Plato 1993, 275d)

and in the Seventh Letter he says:

"... every man of worth, when dealing with matters of worth, will be far from exposing them to ill feeling and misunderstanding among men by committing them to writing." (Plato 2021, 341c)

Jacque Derrida also comments on the predominance of speech over Plato's writing (logocentrism in Platonic thought) (Derrida 1968). Aristotle speaks of Plato's "unwritten teachings" (*ἀγραφα δόγματα*), mentioning a lesson entitled Good (*Περὶ τἀγαθου*) which Plato gave, concerned with "mathematics, that is, numbers, geometry, and astronomy, and that the Good is One" (Aristotle 2012, 41–42).

According to Plato's *7th Letter*, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (Aristotle 1991, bk. I, XIII, XIV) and other sources (Busa 1995), Plato would have omitted in his writings to discuss some of the most important ideas (Sarri 1997, X), named by Tübingen school exponents (including Hans Joachim Krämer, Konrad Gaiser and Thomas Alexander Szlezák) as "unwritten doctrines", recovered on the basis of "indirect traditions".

"Now since the Forms are the causes of everything else, he [i.e. Plato] supposed that their elements are the elements of all things. Accordingly, the material principle is the Great and Small [i.e. the Dyad], and the essence is the One (τὸ ἓν), since the numbers are derived from the Great and Small by participation in the One."

"From this account it is clear that he only employed two causes: that of the essence, and the material cause; for the Forms are the cause of the essence in everything else, and the One is the cause of it in the Forms. He also tells us what the material substrate is of which the Forms are predicated in the case of sensible things, and the One in that of the Forms—that it is this the duality (the Dyad, ἡ δυάς), the Great and Small (τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ μικρόν). Further, he assigned to these two elements respectively the causation of good and of evil." (Aristotle 1991, 987b)

and in *Physics* he says:

"It is true, indeed, that the account he gives there [i.e. in Timaeus] of the participant is different from what he says in his so-called unwritten teachings (Ancient Greek: ἀγραφα δόγματα, romanized: agrapha dogmata)." (Aristotle 2012, 209b)

Aristoxenus states in this regard that:

"Each came expecting to learn something about the things that are generally considered good for men, such as wealth, good health, physical strength, and altogether a kind of wonderful happiness. But when the mathematical demonstrations came, including numbers, geometrical figures and astronomy, and finally the statement Good is One seemed to them, I imagine, utterly unexpected and strange; hence some belittled the matter, while others rejected it." (Gaiser 1980)

Alexander of Aphrodisias, according to Simplicius, stated that, "according to Plato, the first principles of everything, including the Forms themselves are One and Indefinite Duality (ἡ ἀόριστος δυάς), which he called Large and Small (τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ μικρόν)". (Tarán 1981, 226)

According to Friedrich Nietzsche (F. W. Nietzsche and Oehler 1920), Plato's work has the sole purpose of bringing back to the memory of his disciples the knowledge already learned orally in the Academy. Heinrich Gomperz states that a full understanding of Plato's work could only be achieved through indirect evidence: Plato's philosophical system is not explicitly developed in dialogues, but is found only, at least starting from the Republic, behind them. This system is a deductive and dualistic system because it leads "all things" to two essentially different original factors. (Ryle 1931, 48–49)

According to these analyzes, for Plato, starting from the Pythagorean conceptions, the whole reality, not only the sensitive one, but also the world of ideas, is the result of two first principles: One and Dyad (Platone, Reale, and Andolfo 2000, 56). One (the "Good" of dialogues) is all that is unitary and positive, while the Dyad, or the world of differences and multiplicity, generates disorder.

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