

Last Lectures on Plato:

Republic promises both "What is F?" answer and a New Method which overcomes the weaknesses of elenchus. This is Plato's Dialectic.

Plato's dialectic: elenchus + X. But what is X?

Any ideas?

X = relentless hypothesis revision + Final Intuition. Elenchus (searching for inconsistencies between a hypothesis and other beliefs we hold) and the practice of revising hypotheses that have failed to repair the fault which lead to contradiction help us to move out of the cave, to see things more as they really are. But at best these hypo's will lead us to some hypo which seems, after all efforts to undermine it, to be unquestionable. Would this establish, according to Plato, that the hypothesis is absolutely certainly true?

No. Plato associates such absolute certainty with an act of recognition performed by a mind entirely uncluttered by association with the body. And, indeed, this is the second part of the X method: a "dawning" or sudden recognition that the hypothesis is certainly true. This "dawning" goes beyond hypothetical method.

Problem: if final certainty comes from direct intuitive recognition, and this is not itself any part of the hypothetical method, why not bypass hypothetical method and go directly to the act of recognition?

Answer: the hypothetical method is needed to get you out of the cave (since the mind is yet too cluttered to see with reason alone), but since demonstration of certain truth is revelation about the cause of appearances, and this demonstration proceeds not by showing how appearances are caused by what is most Real, but by removing the scales from one's eyes so she can see the Real as it is, the final step in getting to certainty involves leaving elenchus behind (when you finally "see" reality without interference).

Plato's twin bogies: Relativism & Scepticism

Overcomes these in theory of justice how?

Relativism:

Justice is the same in every individual and every state. Not conventional.

Scepticism:

Books I-IV show that it is possible for ordinary mortals to understand what justice is. No problem of knowledge, of how we can know what justice is. In fact, we can use familiar ideas to understand it (psychic harmony, communal harmony, division of labor, etc.).

What is Plato's answer to relativism and scepticism regarding general knowledge of the world?

Theory of Forms. Forms, as objects of knowledge, are public (kills relativism) and accessible to minds roughly like ours (kills scepticism).

Fine and good. But what do Forms do?

Give us explanations/accounts of things. The form of a man tells us what it is to be a man. Doing natural science, like pre-Socratics, but much richer than theirs. Forms come in differing levels of generality, depending on what is to be explained. So we explain Pygmy by speaking about the form of the Cat. But that explanation, which speaks about muscle tissue, bone, and blood, etc., is incomplete. We will need other forms to explain each of these, and each in turn will be incomplete. Notice: each new level of form is more general. The form of "bone" covers many creatures, not just cats, just as the form "cell structure" covers more than "bone" does. The only form which is not incomplete, and which is universal, is the Form of the Good. The idea is that there is some form which explains everything else, if only we could comprehend it. This would be the hypothesis which presupposes nothing else, the First Principle of Reality. Plato thinks we can only apprehend this through an act of reason alone, and only under the special circumstances he outlines in the Meno, the Republic, and elsewhere (when the mind has been cleansed of the polluting influence of the body and spirited part of the soul, and has been guided by a good education).

Criticisms of Plato:

1. Senses nec. for K (A thinks this). Plato denigrates world of senses, and hence denies something important to acquire knowledge.

a. The theory of forms and of recollection seem plausible for concepts like triangle, beauty, goodness. But what about concepts like "apple" or "water"? Here the role of sense experience seems crucial to determining the possibility of knowledge of the corresponding concepts. But on Plato's Theory of Recollection, why would the unfettered mind be interested in less-real things like apples, when it can see the core of reality, the Good Itself?

2. If Forms are non-S-T, have problem explaining how they can have causal relations with that which has S-T properties (material/non-material interaction). Plato's notion of "participation in a form" which is supposed to explain how individual cats participate in the Form of Cat, seems to require material things (bodies) to be influenced by immaterial things (concepts). How can that be?

3. The problem of the Third Man.

Socrates and Thrasymachus each has manhood because he participates in (i.e., imitates or copies) the Form of Man. Fine. But Plato also thinks that the form of Man possesses manhood (i.e., the form of Man has the qualities which are characteristic of being mannish). Now the similarity between Socrates and Thrasymachus is explained by the fact that they both imitate the same Form of Man. But what explains the fact that the Form of Man and Socrates are similar (in each having the set of mannish properties)? Some new Form must be proposed to serve this function, which is copied by both Socrates and the first Form of Man. But this could go on forever. But now the answer to the question "what explains what Socrates has in common with other men?" must include an infinite series of forms of man, which cannot end. Thus, there seems to be no Form of man which explains the similarities among men. But then, the idea of a Form of Man no longer explains what it was supposed to.

Conclusions

While we can see how he answers the Big Question "How is it that the world is intelligible for minds like ours?", his answer seems better suited to abstract forms of knowledge like mathematics, whose objects are themselves abstract and insensible, than to concrete knowledge of tables, chairs and cats. The world of sensible experience seems a bit beside the point for Plato, particularly since he thinks that

concepts are more real than any of the individuals that participate in them (the Good is the First Principle, and is more real than anything). His claim that sensory experience has nothing to offer knowledge looks very peculiar when you consider that we must see rabbits with our eyes in order to recognize the form of rabbit with our reason.

Aristotle will offer a way of accounting for the fact that we seem to be able to think usefully about the world that does not seem so brazenly at odds with our ordinary way of thinking about how we come to know things about it. But let us not be too quick to chastise Plato: one of the deepest problems in philosophy is how to account for the fact that concepts, which are immaterial things, can seem to reflect correctly our experience of things which are not immaterial at all. "How are ideas related to things?" often causes thinkers to resolve the tension between material things and immaterial things by claiming "well, EVERYTHING IS IDEAS", or "EVERYTHING IS MATERIAL".