

Why did Plato believe in Forms?

In his metaphysical inquiries, Plato explored the question of how human beings can live a happy and self-fulfilling life in such a contingent world that is subject to continuous *change*. He believed that happiness and virtue can be attained through *knowledge*, which can only be gained through *reasoning/intellect*. Compatible with his ethical considerations, Plato introduced “Forms” that he presents as both the *causes* of everything that exists and also sole *objects of knowledge*. This essay begins with a brief introduction to the main features of forms, and then explores why Plato believed in forms by considering his main ideas behind and arguments for the theory of forms in the successive subtitles.

What are “The Forms”?

Forms can be thought of as abstract entities or qualities that are the essence of sensible things. Take, for example, an apple: Roundness, color and weight of the apple are all the properties that make up that apple, each of which is a separate form in itself. According to Plato, two apples are “round” because they both *partake* in the form of “roundness”. This “*partaking*” in any form is what makes things share similar attributes. All material objects owe their existence to these forms; whereas each form exists by itself, independently of the object that exemplifies the particular form. In *Phaedo*, which is widely agreed to be the first dialogue Plato introduced the forms, forms are “*marked as auto kath auto beings, beings that are what they are in virtue of themselves*¹.”

Forms are *transcendent* to our material world in that they exist beyond space and time, whereas material objects occupy a specific place at a specific time. Atemporal and aspatial features of forms have very important implications. First, this explains why the form of F does not change, and remains stable beyond a spatio-temporal world while particulars are subject to continuous change. Second, since F does not exist in space, it can be instantiated in many particulars at once or need not even be instantiated to exist.

The forms are also *pure*. The roundness of an apple is one of its properties and roundness is only “roundness” in its pure and perfect form. Unlike forms, material objects are impure, imperfect, and are complex combinations of several forms.

Being is the ontological relation that ties the form of F to its essence, and each form of F is of one essence (*monoeides*). It follows from these principles that each form *self-predicates*; each form of F is *itself* F. The form of beauty is *itself* beautiful, and Helen would not be beautiful if the form of Beauty were not beautiful *itself*.

The forms are *real, sublime* entities that belong to an intelligible realm that can only be grasped by reason. They are *not* subject to change; are stable and enduring, while particulars/material objects belong to this material world of change, becoming and perishing in a *Heraclitean flux*.

The Idea Behind Platonic Forms

As can be seen from his early and middle period dialogues, Plato both explored ethical concepts such as “virtue” and “justice” just like his mentor, Socrates, and he also elaborated upon the essence of the

1 Silverman, A., Fall 2014 Edition, ‘Plato’s Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 10

universe by questioning what there really is in this world of appearances. Plato's theory of forms, then, can be thought to explicate basically two vital concerns of philosophical inquiry.

First, the theory explores the question of how everything seems both to be changing and permanent at the same time. We know that the physical world we perceive through our senses is exposed to continuous change by "becoming" and "ceasing to be"². Nonetheless, there is also permanence beyond what seems to be changing and that can only be grasped by reasoning. *Second*, the theory of forms is an attempt to find the answer to the question of how people can live a happy and fulfilling life in a world that is ultimately defined with beginnings and endings, and is exposed to change in every possible respect.

In the *Republic*, Plato poses questions about moral concepts in an effort to demonstrate that the life committed to *knowledge* and *virtue* will result in happiness and self-fulfillment. To achieve happiness, one should render himself immune to changes in the material world and strive to gain the *knowledge* of the eternal, immutable forms that reside in the *intelligible realm*.

Indeed, Plato splits the existence into two realms: the visible realm and the transcendent realm (intelligible realm) of forms. The visible realm is the physical world that is perceived through senses, and is susceptible to "becoming" and "ceasing to be". On the contrary, the intelligible realm represents the ultimate reality, is enduring, and is accessible only via *reasoning* or *intellect*.

Furthermore, Plato believes that this visible world is an imperfect model of the transcendent realm of forms. As is depicted in his famous *Allegory of Cave*, he thinks that everything perceptible through senses is like the shadows on the Cave Wall, or merely imperfect representations of the *reality*. Since what we perceive through our deceptive senses in this world of appearance are merely shadows of reality, one cannot have any genuine *knowledge* of these things, but can only have *beliefs/opinions* about these objects. In other words, Plato thinks that one can only have "*knowledge of forms and of Forms one can only have knowledge*"³.

Because forms are the only objects of *knowledge*, individuals should endeavour to reach the intelligible realm and endow themselves with the knowledge of forms in order to achieve a happy and fulfilling life.

Plato employs the Sun metaphor, which represents the form of "Good" to compare intelligible and visible realms. As the Sun provides the light to see the physical world, the "Good" provides the power to "know", and is not only the ultimate cause of knowledge, but it is also the object of truth and knowledge. Being *virtuous* or *pursuing good* relies on having the *knowledge* of the Good, and because forms are the only objects of knowledge, one can only live a fulfilling life and pursue good if one *knows* the Form of Good.

Plato's Arguments for the Forms and Concluding Remarks

According to Plato, reality is very much associated with objectivity. His argument from objectivity asserts that the more objective concepts are of higher reality, and that because what we perceive via

2 Wyss, P., 2015, 'Key Features of Platonic Forms'

3 Silverman, A., Fall 2014 Edition, 'Plato's Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 41

our senses is usually deceitful, the objects of experience cannot be *real* entities. Besides, it is possible to form different subjective views of the same objects; depending on the perceptual or mental states of the observer. However, forms represent a higher *objectivity*, and thereby *reality* through a dialectic process, which is illustrated in the hierarchical system of forms and physical objects, “good” being first among others.

Plato appeals to mathematical examples to further his arguments and states that the most *definite* knowledge is the knowledge of mathematics, and that this knowledge cannot be gained via senses or experience, but only by *reasoning*. For example, we know for certain that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle is 180 degrees, yet we also acknowledge that no such perfect triangle exists in the world. Then, he concludes, if these abstract entities do not reside in this world, there must a different realm of such perfect forms outside this world of experience that is ultimately real.

As an objectivist, Plato presents several objections to Protagoras, whom he counts as one of the Sophists, famous for his statement; “*Man is the measure of all things.*” Though Protagoras’ account of relativism is ambiguous, Plato interpretes “*Man the Measure*”⁴ doctrine as a denial of objective truth. In *Theaetetus*, he asserts the *Self-Refutation Argument* by saying that if truth is relative, and what a person holds as “true” is true for that person, then the truth of relativism itself is questionable because those who believe the falsity of the “Man the Measure” must also be right. Accepting the self-refutation argument, then, Plato thinks that relativism is false, and there must be objective, real values.

Another argument Plato presents in this context is that if there were *not* any objective values like justice, virtue and goodness, then we would not be discussing these concepts from our subjective points of view. When we talk about these, we somehow compare the way these values embody themselves in the ordinary world with some higher standards, and notice that ordinary things fail to meet those standards. Plato views these perfect standards as forms we *recollect* and *know* by reason. This argument also explains the *archetypical* features of forms, constituting perfect models for all the properties of the objects in the physical world.

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⁴ Taylor, C. C. W, Lee, Mi-Kyoung, Spring 2014 Edition, ‘The Sophists’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 4