

Why did Plato believe in the Forms?

by Marija Kirjanenko

Mavro: Hello, my dear friend, Tripto.

Tripto: Ah, Mavro, here we meet again, in this garden full of apricots and roses.

Mavro: You look concerned, my dear Tripto. Pray to explain what worries you, my dear friend?

Tripto: Plato and Forms.

Mavro: What is it about Plato and Forms?

Tripto: Why do you think Plato believed in Forms?

Mavro: I see. Let me ask you, my dear friend, how would you describe what are the Forms.

Tripto: Well, Forms are entities that are essential for any sensible things, aren't they?

Mavro: They are, in Plato's mind. Take, for example, this apricot that is lying on the ground— there are properties that make up this apricot: the shape, the colour, the smell, the texture and the taste. Properties that appeal to our senses and help us recognize that this is an apricot indeed. These properties are, in fact, separate Forms that together make apricot the apricot.

Tripto: So, one can say that two apricots are similar because Forms of "ovalness", "yellowness" and so on partake in apricot?

Mavro: Indeed.

Tripto: But why Plato believed in Forms?

Mavro: Plato believed that we perceive the world through our senses, and senses can deceive us. Take for example colour – a tritanopic person will say that this apricot is greyish like the sky on a sunny day as such person is colour blind to yellow as well as blue. And I can think of many other times when my senses have deceived me greatly. So based on this, Plato concluded that everything perceived through the senses in our world is just an imperfect copy. The original things are the Forms – they are supreme, beyond the ordinary things and are transcendent. One can touch the apricot, or see a few apricots at once, or recognize the apricot because there is somewhere "the perfect form of the apricot" that is made of a combination of several Forms that partake in "apricotness". And if I were to eat this apricot – it will cease to exist in our physical world, and yet we both will still know what apricot is. And this knowledge is because the essential Form of the apricot exists in the realm of Forms that we cannot touch but we know it with our mind.

Tripto: But how can we know that this realm of Form exist?

Mavro: My dear friend, that is a tricky question. Let me try to answer it. Firstly, you have to understand the world at time of Plato – it was nothing like our modern world

with all the gadgets and discoveries. That was the time when people thought the Earth was disk-like and believed in many gods. They did not know about the atoms or neutrons; and many could not read and write. It's hard to say if Plato himself believed in gods, but I dare to say he did to some extent, as in *Timaeus* Plato speaks about separation of body and soul and afterlife and hence some supreme being that judges the souls of humans in a different realm to our physical world. I believe that this other realm is where Forms exist to Plato's mind.

Tripto: But why the Forms?

Mavro: The answer is quite simple and you already know it. Look at this tree full of the apricots – they are all different and yet the same – they all are apricots in different stages of ripening. So Form of apricot partake in all of them at once and we are able to recognize them all as apricots. How can this be possible, you ask my friend? I'd say because everything in this world we perceive through senses and senses can deceive us, therefore we cannot see the perfect Form. We can only strive to know the Form by mind.

Tripto: So you want to say that our sense of world is wrong?

Mavro: To some extent. Look at this apricot again – once upon a time it was just a bud that turned into the flower, and then into this apricot. So you observe the change – the bud changes into flower and then into the apricot. However, if you observe this garden for a few years you will see that there is a certain order to the things at a larger scale –there is no real change, as this cycle of bud-flower-apricot will repeat itself.

Tripto: Ah, like change of season- summer followed by autumn, that is followed by winter and so on; a flower transforms into a fruit then this fruit falls and transforms into elements that would form another flower. So one Form ceases to be in this world and is replaced by another Form. Things change but at the same time are permanent – if the flower ceases to exist, the fruit will follow and when this ceases to exist the flower will follow – one becoming the other – the change, but it is actually the constant circle if you look at the bigger picture. So both change and permanently exist – it is some sort of sense-deceptive play. We cannot touch this seasonal change and yet we all believe that winter will be followed by the summer.

Mavro: Indeed. Furthermore, with entities like “love” or “justice”, we cannot physically touch them and yet we all know what “love” or “justice” is. So it is possible that we have in us the knowledge of those entities despite never seeing the actual Form of “love” or “justice”. Same with the physical entity, like apricot – we have the knowledge of “apricotness” in us to know what apricot is. However, here is a word of caution, my dear friend Tripto - despite assuming that everyone has intrinsic knowledge of the pure Forms, it is not always the case of being able recognize such knowledge. As Plato writes in his famous Allegory of the Cave, we perceive the world through our

senses and hence see the shadows on the cave wall, and unless we turn around, we will believe that this imperfect presentation of the world is the real world. So those who do not strive to find the truth, the real Form of everything, will stay ignorant and be fooled forever. Be mindful of such people, as they think they know everything and yet know nothing. And I would add that, with physical objects of this world, it is easier to avoid the ignorance, as one can easily accept the apricot because one can see it and touch it; and one might even care less about the Form of apricot. But with the abstract ethical entities like “justice” and “virtue” and so on, it is much harder to avoid ignorant fools as there are no physical equivalents one can touch and say it’s “justice” or “virtue”.

Tripto: I see the point but am still not sure why Forms are so important?

Mavro: The inquiry into Forms is Plato's attempt to understand what the physical world is about and what happens when we cease to exist in this physical world. In some way, if one can prove that the perfect Form of apricot exists in the transcendent realm, than one can prove that the so called “after life” exists and when we cease to exist in this physical world, we still will exist in the transcendent realm and may even return again to the physical world.

Tripto: You want to say Plato believed in after life?

Mavro: It’s hard to say, but I believe that Plato, with his belief in Forms, was looking to explain how people can live and have meaningful life in this physical world of continuous change and not feel that everything ceases once the person ceases to exist in this world. If apricot ceases to exist in this physical world but the Form of apricot continues to exist in the transcendent world until it reappears in another apricot, it could mean that when I cease to exist, there still could be some Form of me in the other realm – something that could make human life more bearable indeed. However, this puts me on the dangerous path of a further question – what makes “Me”? Like I said before, apricot is made out of many different perfect Forms that partake in “apricotness”. So, it is possible that “I” is made out of many Forms as well that partake in “being me”, and once I cease to exist in this physical world the Forms that partake in “being me” would return to the realm of Forms. And it is possible that those Forms will partake in “being me” again after a certain time, but due to the deceptiveness of our senses the “Form of me” is not perceived as me upon return to physical world, like in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Shadows are quite difficult to differentiate and recognize unless we strive to find that true Form.

Tripto: So it could be that we are the shadows of ourselves and that is why we don’t remember the life before, nor are recognized by others...

Mavro: You might be right my dear friend... Let’s take a walk about the garden and think in silence about world.

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