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Plato’s Theory of Forms: Analogy and Metaphor in Plato’s Republic

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It would be impossible to understand Plato’s writings on the nature of justice, beauty, or the good without first understanding Plato’s theory of Forms. Plato gives us a variety of different arguments in favor of his theory; most, if not all, of these arguments are analogical. I will explicate two such arguments, the sun analogy and the argument for the Forms found in book X, evaluating each as they are discussed. The evaluation will be geared toward cogency and consistency. First, though, I briefly explain Plato’s theory of Forms in general before examining these arguments. Ultimately, I will conclude that they illustrate both the relationship between the Forms and their instantiations, and among the Forms themselves, namely, the relationship between the good and the other Forms, but the arguments do not prove Plato’s ontology. From examining only these two arguments, it is clear how the Forms would function if they did exist, but the arguments themselves do not establish this existence, and, as a consequence, the arguments have limited persuasive power.

The Theory of Forms in General:
Before we address the Forms directly, let’s first layout Plato’s metaphysical and epistemic framework from the bottom up. Plato makes a distinction between the sensible world and the supersensible world; he calls the former the “visible” and the latter the “intelligible.” The visible is further divided into shadows or images and their corresponding objects; for example, the shadow, reflection, or painting of a tree and the tree itself. He divides the intelligible into mathematical objects and the Forms; for example, conceptual ideas of circles are located in the former, and the ideal, universal circle is located in the latter.

There is a faculty of the soul or species of cognition corresponding to each of these. Plato links images with imagination and perception (eikasia); objects with belief (pistis), mathematics and logic with thought and hypothesizing (dianoia); and Forms with understanding and dialectical reasoning (noesis). It is important to note that the above distinctions, as intimated before, are both metaphysical and epistemic: the visible corresponds to opinion and the intelligible corresponds to knowledge. The degree of reality also increases as we move from images to Forms. Said differently, the Forms are what is true and real, therefore the Form of tree has more reality than an actual tree which, again, has more reality than its reflection.
The Forms, then, are universal, eternal, and unchanging. They are perhaps best understood as concepts or essences. Take, for example, the concept dog. Plato would say that each particular dog that we encounter in the visible world participates in the Form of dog; there are many particular dogs, but there is only one Form of dog. The fact that we employ the word “dog” implies that there is something common to all dogs, that is, some kind of dog-essence. Even though particular dogs are born, live, and die, the concept dog remains eternal and unchanging. For Plato, we can only have beliefs, and not knowledge proper, of dogs in the sensible realm. In order to get beyond beliefs of particular dogs we would need to employ dialectical reasoning to acquire real knowledge; and knowledge, as we will see, is reserved for the Forms only. So, to have knowledge of dogs would be to have knowledge of the Form of dog. Let us now look at several arguments or metaphors that Plato provides to help us understand the Forms.

The Sun Analogy:

Plato’s Republic is primarily concerned with the nature of justice and how, by cultivating the virtues, we may foster inner harmony to achieve justice. Toward the end of book six, Glauccon urges Socrates to “discuss the good as [he] discussed justice, moderation, and the rest” (506d). Socrates, however, feels that the good itself “is too big a topic” and, by attempting to discuss it, “[he’ll] disgrace [himself] and look ridiculous by trying” (506e). Rather, Socrates offers to discuss an “offspring” of the good, an offer to which his interlocutors promptly agree. This is the beginning of a series of analogical arguments—the sun, the divided line, and the allegory of the cave—which, while all concerned with the nature of the Forms, tend to emphasize different aspects of Plato’s theory. The sun analogy will be the first of two arguments we’ll discuss.

Socrates begins by reminding Glauccon and Adeimantus that, though “there are many beautiful things and many good things,” there is only one Form of each such that there is the Form of the beautiful and the Form of the good. The many things belong to the visible and are not intelligible while the universal Forms belong to the intelligible and are not visible (507c). Socrates distinguishes sight from all the other bodily senses because it is the only sense that requires “a third thing apart from the thing that senses (the eye) and the thing sensed (the object), namely light. Socrates asks Glauccon “which of the gods in heaven is both the ‘cause and controller’ of ‘our sight to see […] and the visible things to be seen?’” (508a). The answer, of course, is the sun. Socrates goes on to say that although sight and the eye are not the sun itself, sight “is the most sunlike of the senses” by virtue of their relationship to one another (508b). Here, Socrates arrives at the conclusion that the sun is “the offspring of the good” or its “analogue” (508c). The good is essentially the sun of the intelligible realm. The analogy runs thus: “What the good itself is in the intelligible realm, in relation to understanding and intelligible things, the sun is in the visible realm, in relation to sight and visible things” (508c). Glauccon wants more.

Socrates attempts to expand the sun analogy. In the visible realm, when we turn our eyes toward dimly lit objects it is as though sight has left them but, “when [we turn] them on things illuminated by the sun, they see clearly” (508d). In the intelligible realm, when the soul fixes its attention on things “illuminated by truth and what is, it understands, knows, and apparently possesses understanding,” but, when it is absorbed with “what comes to be and passes away,” the soul “opines” and is “bereft of understanding” (508d). What Socrates means by this goes back to the distinctions presented above. Things in the visible realm are not fixed but rather constantly “[coming] to be and [passing] away,” which means we can only have opinion about these things, not understanding or knowledge. When the soul examines those things in the intelligible realm, e.g., mathematical objects and Forms, it can then be said to have some knowledge or understanding precisely because the forms are fixed, eternal, and unchanging.

There is one final point Socrates makes in the sun analogy which we may have already intimated. The form of the good not only gives to the soul the capacity to know, but also gives to objects of knowledge the quality of truth. The good is itself an object of knowledge because it is a Form, but it is also “the cause of knowledge and truth” (508e). The sun allows the eye to see but it is also itself something to be seen. In the same way the sight and the eyes were considered sunlike, knowledge and truth are considered goodlike. The last similarly between the sun and the good is as follows: for things in the physical world, the sun is both the cause of their growth and nourishment and the cause of their very existence; likewise, the good is responsible for objects of knowledge being known and the existence of objects of knowledge, i.e. Forms, in the first place (509c). At this point in the Republic the sun analogy ends and the divided line analogy begins, so, before we discuss a second argument, let’s pause and evaluate what has been said.

Analysis of the Sun Analogy:

In looking at this first argument, what is immediately striking is the richness of Plato’s metaphor. The analogy makes understanding the good quite accessible but only insofar as its function is concerned. We know that the function of the good in the intelligible realm is like that of the sun in the visible, but we don’t know how it is that the good came to exist and why it has the features that it has. Plato, though, might have an idea as to the origin of the good but chooses not to discuss
it in the Republic; Socrates' reason is simply that it “is too big a topic,” and to address it would both disgrace him and make him sound ridiculous.

If we accept the good's ontological status, however, the metaphor works on another level. Just as we cannot look directly at the sun in the visible realm, we cannot be in direct epistemic contact with the good. Our souls are unfortunately embodied and thus our senses inhibit the acquisition of true knowledge. It appears the best we can do is a quick glance in the direction of knowledge as we are unable to dwell on it.

Even if we accept the good's ontological status, is there any reason to believe that the good has the properties which Plato attributes to it? Plato doesn't really offer reasons for our believing that the good is the source of all other Forms or that it is what enables us to know them. We could argue that because the seer and the thing seen require a third thing, namely light, that this is somehow a reason that the knower and the thing known require a third thing, namely the good. This, though, in and of itself is not a reason. The analogy helps us understand what Plato means when he talks about the good, but doesn't help us see that the good necessarily exists. Certainly though other concepts like "dog" or "circle" exist, in some capacity, why should one concept or Form be the source of all the others? The way in which Plato presents this idea seems more like a pronouncement than an argument. As an analogy, however, the sun works quite well; it's just a matter of accepting the good as given.

There is one other criticism of this first argument. If the good is the source of all Forms and a Form itself, how can they all be eternal and unchanging? If the good is the source of the other Forms, this seems to imply that they aren't eternal but rather were created by the good and thus had a definite beginning. This could be due to an equivocation with the word "eternal." If by eternal Plato means "without beginning or end," then the only Form that fits this definition is the good; the other Forms would have had a beginning, namely, the good. If by eternal Plato means something like "endless," then perhaps the good can produce the other Forms, but now that they are in existence, they can never go out of existence. Finally, it could be the case that without the good, if the good were somehow taken away, the other forms couldn't exist. This would allow for all of the Forms to be eternal in the usual sense of the word. In any case, though, there is an ambiguity which Plato leaves unresolved, at least within the sun analogy.

The Forms according to Book X of the Republic:

In book ten of the Republic, Socrates ostensibly condemns artists; more specifically, he condemns imitators in general, and poets in particular, because they tend to distort what is true and real. For reasons I'll discuss later, this must be taken as more an ironic admonition than an outright denunciation. Nevertheless, Socrates continues his discussion with Glaucon about the education of the ideal city's guardians. He mentions that they had previously excluded imitative poetry and they were right to do so because of its destructive influence. If, however, the person viewing or hearing the imitative art is educated enough his or her knowledge will act "as a drug to counteract" the negative effects on the psyche (595b). Glaucon wants some clarification as to what exactly Socrates means by imitation. The usual dialectic process begins with Socrates drawing the distinction between a universal Form and the particular things that participate in that Form. The things chosen as examples are beds and tables. Socrates points out that we say the maker of beds and tables is looking "towards the appropriate form" rather than being the maker of the Form itself. Socrates jokingly suggests that Glaucon could easily become a craftsman who could make all the objects and artifacts in the world "if [he] were willing to carry a mirror with [him]" (596e). Glaucon sees where Socrates is going with this argument and anticipates him by saying that he could only make the appearance of things but not "the things themselves as they truly are" (596e). Painters would then fall into the same category because they do not make a particular bed but the appearance of one. A craftsman who makes a particular bed, however, does make something closer to the bed itself, but still does not make the Form of the bed.

Socrates asks Glaucon if he wants to continue the discussion of imitation with reference to the examples already given, and, when Glaucon agrees, Socrates lays out three kinds of beds. The first is the bed a god makes, i.e., the Form; the second is a bed the craftsman makes, i.e., a particular bed; and the third is a bed a painter makes, i.e., an appearance of a bed. The god made just the one Form of the bed because he wished to be the maker of what is real and true and not "just a maker of a bed" (597d). If the god is the maker of the Form, the craftsman the maker of a bed, then what, asks Socrates, does a painter do to a bed? Glaucon responds: "he imitates it" (597e). A more formal definition of an imitator is "one whose product is third from the natural one," i.e., third from the Form (597e).

Before the conversation turns back to poetry and the tragedians, Socrates makes clear that the painter is concerned only with the appearances. The painter doesn't paint the Forms, but rather "that which appears as it appears," thus "it is an imitation of appearances" (598b). Said differently, the painter can only deal with a small part of a physical object which in turn is just an image. For example, the side of a bed would be a small part of the bed and, indeed, not the entire bed itself. The painter, then, works with only the image of the side of the bed.
Analysis of the Book X Argument:
It is probably best to address the ironic element to which we intimated earlier. It must be the case that Plato does not agree completely with his denunciation of imitative arts because the way in which he chooses to express this idea is through an imitative art, namely, the dialogue. It is more likely that he means to address those arts which bypass the most important faculty of the soul, reason, and instead aim at the inferior part of the soul, emotion or desire. In Plato’s Ion, too, we find Socrates criticizing poetry. This is largely due to the fact that Plato reserves knowledge for the Forms. A common belief in ancient Greece was that poetry contained, or was a source of, knowledge. As we have seen, this runs contrary to Platonic philosophy. Plato attacks poetry, then, for these two reasons: first, poetry bypasses the best part of the psyche, that is, the rational portion and; second, poetry, according to Plato, is not a valid source of knowledge. But let us return to our analysis of book X.

In relation to the theory of Forms, is the argument in book X persuasive? Again, if we are concerned with the ontological status of Forms, then this section of the Republic does not clarify the concerns raised in the middle sections. We can say, as I mentioned before, that the Forms, construed as concepts, have some existence. For instance, there is something that is common to all things we call beds, yet the argument provides no further detail.

There is one additional criticism we must discuss. If physical objects are inferior instantiations of the Forms, then are all instantiations inferior in the same way or are some closer to the real thing? We could have, for example, an imitation of dialectic, such as the Republic, but not all of the imitations may be inferior in the same way. We can easily conceive of a good imitation of philosophical dialogue, perhaps the Republic, but we can also conceive of a worse imitation. It seems that there is gradation when it comes to imitations; Is there also gradation when it comes to objects? It seems that there might be gradation for artifacts: we can imagine a better shovel, but what about natural objects like dogs and trees? For Plato, does there exist some dog in the visible realm that is a truer instantiation than some other dog?

Comparing the two Arguments:
When we compare these two arguments there seems to be a discrepancy between them. If it is the case that the good is responsible for the existence of the Forms, does this preclude a god having made the Form of bed? It could be that Plato is exercising some poetic license when he states that a god made the Form of the bed, but he also doesn’t mention how the good came into existence. If the good begot all the other Forms, including the Form of bed, then it is not likely that a god had also made the Form of bed. Plato may have had in mind a certain cosmogony that could explain the production of Forms, but it does not appear in the Republic. As it stands, this issue of the origin of Forms is left unresolved.

Conclusion:
The overall cogency of Plato’s theory of Forms depends largely on how much we are persuaded by analogical arguments. Analogies are useful tools for exposing the relationships between and among ideas, but in and of themselves they have limited persuasive power. We may understand how the good functions (just as the sun in the visible realm), but what we don’t understand, or at least what is not evident from the two arguments, is how the good came to be and why it has the properties it has. Plato’s dialogues, though, were written for a popular audience, and this, to be sure, is a good reason for Plato’s reliance on metaphor and analogy. His use of metaphor allows for a popular audience to readily understand, or at least begin understanding, some subtle philosophical point. For, after all, the dialogues are not lectures, they are stories with characters. This is not meant to undermine the philosophical import of Plato’s writing, but rather it is a suggestion of why Plato chose to rely heavily on metaphor and analogy rather than relying strictly on straightforward argument.

Notes
I am using the distinctions Plato makes in the divided line analogy (but devoid of substance) to discuss the Forms in general. It is important to know what the Forms are but also to know where they fit into Plato’s metaphysics.

Socrates is often regarded as a conduit for Plato. But to regard the character Socrates as such is potentially to undermine the dialectical nature of nearly all of Plato’s writings. In what follows, however, “Plato” and “Socrates” will be used interchangeably, since we are concerned with Platonic thought.


Works Cited