

Notes: The Republic Book V To Book Vii

Theory of the Forms

Metaphysical Implications – the world we see is the world of appearances; the world of the Forms is reality

Epistemological Implications – the world of appearances yields only opinion; true knowledge comes from contemplating the Forms

Ethical Implications – we should strive towards the Forms, to contemplate not only beautiful, good and true things, but Beauty, Truth and Goodness itself. All immorality is down to a lack of true knowledge.

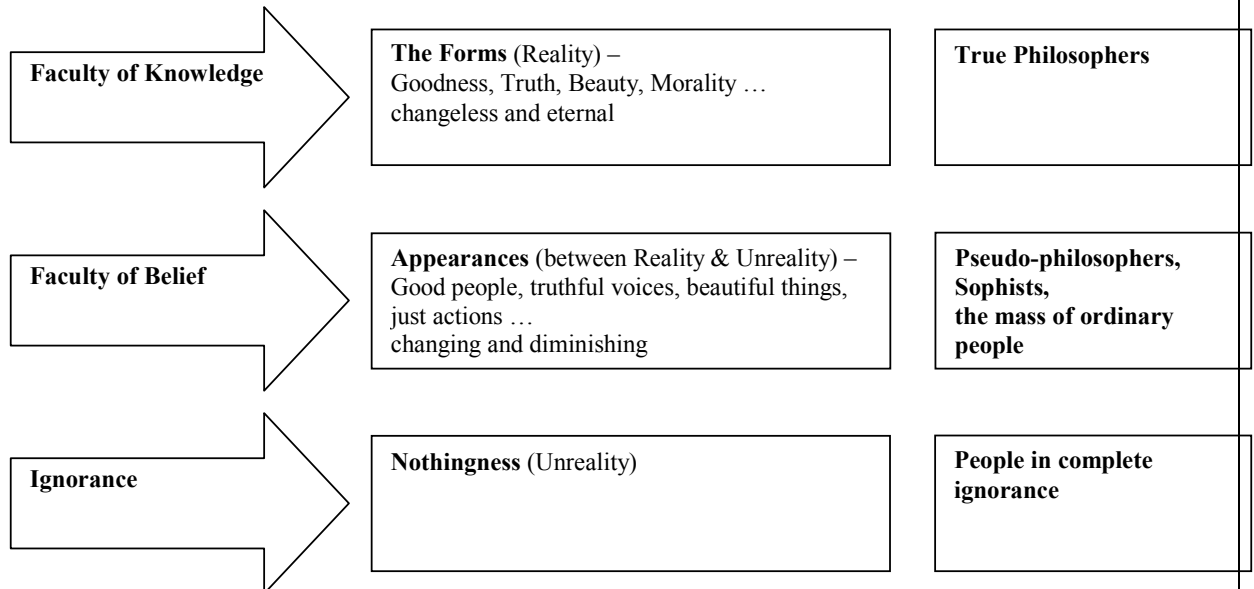
Knowledge, Belief and Ignorance (cf. Republic 475d – 479e)

Knowledge is, in Plato's view, is knowledge of *something*, of something that exists. Knowledge is therefore infallible, since it is logically impossible for it to be mistaken. Knowledge is of a super-sensible ('beyond-being-able-to-be-sensed') world, the world of the Forms. The Forms are real; they exist unchangingly in eternity.

Belief/Opinion is not knowledge – it can be mistaken. Belief cannot be of what is not, since that is impossible; nor can belief be of what is, since then it would be knowledge. Therefore opinion, according to Plato, must be of what both is and is not. How can this be? Plato explains it thus: all things in the world partake of opposite characters.

- What is beautiful is, in some respects, not beautiful/ugly.
- What is just is, in some respects, not just/unjust.
- What is good is, in some respects, not good/bad.
- What is truthful is, in some respects, not truthful/untruthful.
- A cat you see sitting on your car is, in some respects, not a cat/uncatlike.

All particular sensible (able to be sensed) things have a contradictory character. They are intermediate between being and not being. This makes them suitable objects of *belief*, not of *knowledge*.



The similes of the Sun, the Cave and the Divided Line. (p232 – 245)

What is the Republic all about? Tricky one. Some would say ‘justice’, others ‘morality’. This confusion arises because Plato (through the various Socratic discussions) is trying to explain simultaneously what it is for a community to be just and for an individual to be just. Some way into the Republic, Socrates declares that in order to find the true nature of justice, one must examine it on a large scale. And this is why the Republic from then on explores justice in the state and in the individual.

In the Greek world a city (*polis*) was commonly a self-governing state. Since the number of citizens in each *polis* would be small (a few thousand, typically), then you could assume that citizens will be closely involved in the running of the city’s affairs. Plato was disillusioned with the kinds of government he’d seen in the Greek city-states around him. These kinds were:

- democracy,
- oligarchy,
- tyranny.

In the Republic, Plato wants to explore what a perfectly just city-state would look like. He analyses the roles he thinks are needed in society, and boils them down to three classes in a city:

- an economic class of producers and traders,
- a military class (guardians/auxiliaries),
- a ruling class.

According to Plato, a ‘just state’ is where each of the classes fulfils its role without interfering in the others’ roles. It’s a strange utopia to modern eyes. Individual rights wasn’t a concept that occupied Plato. Basically, every citizen had one role in which to specialise. In Plato’s ideal state, the ruling class would set very clear guides for the people’s education, culture, marriage and reproduction. Censorship of the arts would be part of his ideal. According to Plato, artists do not have genuine knowledge and can corrupt the soul by appealing to its ‘lower’ emotional part, rather than to the rational part.

Plato makes an analogy between the city with its three classes and the tripartite soul (i.e. ‘three-part-soul’).

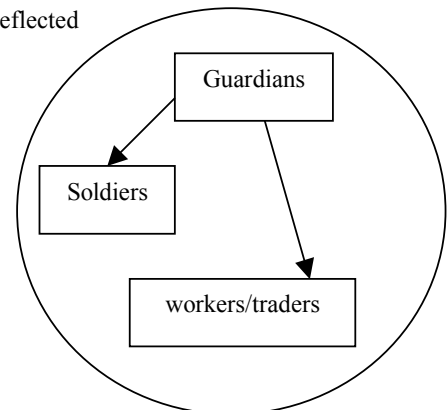
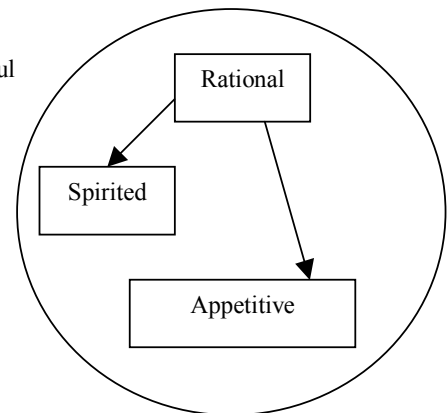
- ‘reasoning part’ (part which pursues truth by rational means),
- ‘spirited part’ (part with which we get angry, are competitive, etc.),
- ‘appetitive part’ (part having appetites).

Each part had its desires:

- the reasoning part desiring to learn the truth and to live by what is learnt.
- the spirited part desiring honour
- the appetitive part desiring to satisfy bodily appetites

Plato’s vision of the ideal state reflects the ‘soul writ large’. The tripartite soul is reflected in a tripartite state with

- Philosopher-Guardians guiding society (but not wealthy)
- Auxiliaries-Soldiers protecting society
- Traders, workers and artisans creating its wealth but with no power.



Context

Socrates has spent a long time explaining the qualities of true philosophers and of their fitness to rule. One of his companions, Adeimantus, says that it's a nice theory, but why are 'philosophers' in the Athens of their day seen as *'pretty weird (not to say rotten to the core)'* and that the best of them are *'incapable of performing any service to the community'*?

As part of the answer, Socrates gives the Simile/Analogy of the Ship.

What's he trying to explain?

- the state of Athenian democracy
 - full of people on the make
 - corrupt, violent
 - denying that there's such a thing as 'statecraft' (the skills one needs to lead a state)
- the low opinion these people have of true philosophers
 - if you deny the skill of statecraft, you rubbish those best-fitted to lead (i.e. the true philosopher)
 - the true captain, in their view, is *'nothing but a windbag with his head in the clouds'*
 - the only 'philosophers' they value are clever advisors who can help them in their plotting and planning
- Socrates/Plato believed that the natural tendency of the appetitive part of soul is *pleonexia* – continually wanting desire fulfilled, trying to get more than a fair share, even to chaos and (self) destruction.
- knowledge (of the Forms) is the only reliable way to steer the state (cf. yearly cycle, seasons, heavens, stars etc.)
- until 'true captains' are respected (i.e. until philosophers are kings), there will always be constant unrest, strife and infighting

Simile of the Ship (Plato: The Republic, 488a-489a)

'Imagine the following situation on a fleet of ships, or on a single ship. The owner has the edge over everyone else on board by virtue of his size and strength, but he's rather deaf and short-sighted, and his knowledge of naval matters is just as limited. The sailors are wrangling with one another because each of them thinks that he ought to be the captain, despite the fact that he's never learnt how, and can't name his teacher or specify the period of his apprenticeship. In any case, they are ready to butcher anyone who says it is. They're forever crowding closely around the owner, pleading for with him and stopping at nothing to get him to entrust the rudder to them. Sometimes, if their pleas are unsuccessful, but others get the job, they kill those others or throw them off the ship, subdue their worthy owner by drugging him drunk or something, take control of the ship, help themselves to its cargo, and have the kind of drunken and indulgent voyage you'd expect from people like that. And that's not all: they think highly of anyone who contributes towards their gaining power by showing skill at winning over or subduing the owner, and describe him as an accomplished seaman, a true captain, a naval expert; but they criticise anyone different as useless. They completely fail to understand that any genuine sea-captain has to study the yearly cycle, the seasons, the heavens, the stars and the winds, and everything relevant to the job, if he's to be properly equipped to hold a position of authority in a ship. In fact, they think it's impossible to study and acquire expertise at how to steer a ship (leaving aside the question of whether or not people want you to) and at the same time be a good captain. When this is what's happening on board ships, don't you think that the crew of ships in this state would think of any true captain as nothing but a windbag with his head in the clouds, of no use to them at all?' 'They definitely would,' Adeimantus replied. 'I'm sure you don't need an analysis of the analogy to see that it's a metaphor for the attitude of society towards true philosophers.'

Context

A little later in the conversation with Adeimantus, another question has to be dealt with. Adeimantus had said that, commonly, philosophers were seen as 'out of touch' at best or 'rotten to the core' at worst. The 'Simile of the Ship' answered why true philosophers are not respected, but are seen as windbags with their head in the clouds. The 'Simile of the Beast' answers why the 'philosopher-crooks' seem to have some sway Athenian society.

Who are these 'philosopher-crooks' and how do they manage to be influential?

- Socrates' chief target is a group of professional educators who charged a fee for their lessons.
- These were the *sophists*.
 - in an earlier part of the Republic, Socrates has a lengthy dispute with Thrasymachus, a sophist who argued that morality was whatever was in the interest of the stronger party.
 - the sophists saw themselves as skilful arguers, revolutionary and subversive thinkers.
- Socrates dismisses them as panderers to and manipulators of popular opinion – the great beast of the simile.
 - cf. the 'experts' in the cave who predict the movement of shadows across the cave wall
 - you might also ask who are the skilful manipulators in the last simile, those who help the crew to grab control?

Simile of the Beast (Plato: The Republic, 493a-493d)

'Even though they call it knowledge, every one of those private fee-charging individuals - the ones who are called sophists and are regarded as rivals by these educators we've been talking about - teaches nothing but the attitude the masses form by consensus. Imagine that the keeper of a huge, strong beast notices what makes it angry, what it desires, how it is to be approached and handled, the circumstances and conditions under which it becomes particularly fierce or calm, what provokes its typical cries, and what tones of voice make it gentle or wild. Once he's spent enough time in the creature's company to acquire all this information, he calls it knowledge, forms it into a systematic branch of expertise, and starts to teach it, despite total ignorance in fact, about which of the creature's attitudes and desires is commendable or deplorable, good or bad, moral or immoral. His usage of all these terms simply conforms to the great beast's attitudes, and he describes things as good or bad according to its likes and dislikes, and can't justify his usage of the terms any further, but describes as right and good things which are merely indispensable, since he hasn't realised and can't explain to anyone else how vast a gulf there is between necessity and goodness. Wouldn't you really and truly find someone like this implausible as a teacher?'

'Yes, I would,' he (Adeimantus) said.

'Well, do you think there's anything to choose between him and someone who's noticed what makes the motley masses collectively angry and happy and thinks he has knowledge - whether it's in the field of painting or music or government?'

- The basic criticism against the sophists is that their teaching *conforms* to society's standards, whatever they are, but does not *transform* these standards to what they should be.
- This sense of 'standards as they should be' dwells within true philosophers, who have knowledge of the Forms – the 'ultimates' by which society should be guided.
 - You should begin to see why Socrates/Plato believed that knowledge is the source of morality.