

Chapter 1 Questions of Philosophy

Section 6 Attempts at Universal Knowledge 2

19 Criticism of Plato

* Plato's theory of Ideas has been widely criticized for suggesting that the Ideas truly exist in celestial realm as transcendent substances or *noumena* that ground all entities.

These criticisms, raised by philosophers ranging from Aristotle to Russell, are based on *naturalistic*, objectivistic worldviews, which are, after all, incompatible with Plato's Idea theory. Russell objected to Parmenides' proposition that existence and thought are the same from the viewpoint of logicism and raised a similar *logistic* criticism against Plato's account of the Ideas.¹ Contemporary logicians largely disapprove of metaphysics and modern idealism from the standpoint of positivism and materialism. However, major modern idealists *deliberately avoided materialism methodically to address the challenges of epistemology*, a fact that has been largely overlooked by thinkers with positivism, materialism and logicism. Materialism presupposes the subject versus object schema discussed previously ; thus, an agreement between the two terms will never be verified. Contemporary logic also implicitly assumes that any statement can be judged as true or false, so it cannot avoid criticism from contemporary relativism, which asserts that no one can be sure of the correctness of a judgment of truth or falsity.

20 The Dialogue Method and Eidetic Insight

* Two major philosophers, Kant and Husserl, refrained from naturalistic and objectivistic criticism of Plato's theory of Ideas or Forms. They greatly admired his profound philosophical insight that led him to develop this theory. However, their areas of appreciation differ greatly.

Kant credited the notion of Ideas because it seemed to him to considerably overlap with his own concept of regulative ideas (see the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Second Division Book I Section 1 Of Ideas in General) Human recognition of realities is limited by principle and cannot transcend the empirical world. Nevertheless, human recognition strives by nature to reach the higher and the "supreme" beyond one's knowledge of empirical things and matters. This pursuit is grounded in the genuine nature of human reason and is not just the result of idle fantasy. Kant's evaluation of Plato's notion of ideas is much more profound and essential than criticisms that it involves logical contradictions.

¹ "There may be ways of getting round this argument, but at any rate it affords a *prima facie*, case in favour of universals. I shall provisionally accept it as in some degree valid. But when so much is granted, the rest of what Plato says by no means follows. In the first place, Plato has no understanding of philosophical syntax. I can say 'Socrates is human', 'Plato is human', and so on. In all these statements, it may be assumed that the word 'human' has exactly the same meaning. But whatever it means, it means something which is not of the same kind as Socrates, Plato, and the rest of the individuals who compose the human race. 'Human*' is an adjective; it would be nonsense to say 'human is human*'. [...] He fails altogether to realize how great is the gap between universals and particulars." (Russel 1945 p.142)

* Husserl's interpretation of Plato's (and Socrates') philosophy remains further significant (see *First Philosophy* available on Scribd, a social reading platform based in the US).

According to Husserl, Socrates' philosophy, as depicted by Plato, was groundbreaking. This is not only because it shifted the focus of philosophical inquiry from theories and views about worldly entities to the question of values in human life. According to Husserl, reason is capable of providing a philosophical foundation for a clear distinction between explicit convictions and vague or ungrounded "doxa," not only in terms of precise knowledge about the existence and the mode of existence of physical entities, but also with regard to the practical and ethical concerns of human life. Husserl evidently found these dispositions in Socrates' method of thinking. Socrates invented this method, which Plato named dialectic, or the method of dialogue, as typically seen in *Menon*. Although the younger philosopher only gave an equivocal account of how to gain insight into matters, he used the concept of *Ideas* to denote the *validity* of practical and ethical judgments about actual human life that Socrates himself strove to grasp and the possibilities of offering a foundation for such judgments and of rational and reasonable apprehension thereof.

* Husserl continues, explaining that Socrates' "dialectic method" arouses suspicions about people's mundane beliefs and opinions. He questions the true nature of his interlocutor's judgments and reveals that their "naturalistic" views and knowledge are mere *doxa* that cannot deeply delve into the truth of the matter. Socrates in the earlier dialogues always withholds definitive answers to the questions about truth to steadfastly maintain his attitude of irony. Yet, this demeanor rather implies his unique methodical dispositions: everyone lives within their own *doxa* and cannot attain universal knowledge, or *episteme*, by freeing themselves from the *doxa* as a common, naïve beliefs. Socrates' interlocution in the earlier dialogues discloses how to examine whether this *doxa* in a naturalistic attitude is worthy of something called *episteme*, and whether more universal and more essential knowledge can be extracted from *doxa* as a personal belief through this examination.

* What Husserl found in Socrates' and Plato's dialogue method was exactly the precursor to his own method of "eidetic insight", which he developed after a long period apart. Husserl's interpretation greatly differs from the conventional understanding of Plato. Nevertheless, his assertion that Socrates' dialogue method preceded of his own method of eidetic insight is far more valuable than Heidegger's argument that the concept of Being of beings (the existent) can be traced back to Anaximander's fragmentary text. For the idea of "the Being of the existent" to emerge, apart from an understanding of the objective and general objectivity of the existent, it is necessary to focus on the existential correlative in the existent, that is, on the essence of the meaning and value of the object, but this was not possible in the pre-Socratic Greek worldview. The diversity of value manifestations in human beings and things was prepared only by the dismantling of the classical, beautifully harmonious Greek community symbolized by the prosperity of Athens

* Husserl found in Plato's interpretation of Socrates an entirely new methodical awareness for *universal cognition*. There are two central issues in Husserl's phenomenology: The first is the elucidation of the epistemological problem inherent in European philosophy – the impossibility of subject-object accordance – and the second is the elaboration of the method of “eidetic seeing” developed from the elucidation, which ensures the possibility of universal knowledge. The essence of the method of “eidetic seeing” is to extract from experience the essence of things, matters and events through reflection, and then to intersubjectively examine it and bring it to a common understanding. This method is not like the Aristotelian method that derives conclusions from external knowledge, intellectual reasoning and synthesis, but essentially overlaps with the Platonic-Socratic theory of “recollection,” which examines and secures the validity of knowledge through inner reflection,

* The “Allegory of the Cave” appearing in Plato's *Republic* is a metaphor for the theory of forms.

People who live in the world of appearances and do not see the “noumenon”, or the true nature of things. They lack awareness of the nature of this appearance and the basis, or the “cause” that brings about this appearance. They engage in regressive inquiry into the “cause of causes, or Idea of Ideas. They refer to the “sun,” or the “Idea of the Good” as the “cause of causes.” The philosopher strives to make people aware of this “truth,” and is executed in retribution for this effort …

The Allegory of the Cave is often criticized by anti-Platonic philosophers as the dogmatic arrogance of philosophers who claim that only they know the truth (e.g., Russell). However, it is clear that Plato presented this allegory to suggest the essence of the Idea and to demonstrate the nature of education and cultivation. In other words, Plato here shows Socratic “dialectic” as a possible method to derive from various different “doxa” or arbitrary opinions, universal knowledge or *episteme*, the basis of which is the concept of the “Idea of the Good.” If we lack a method to derive, when needed, universal knowledge that can be shared by everyone, from various “opinions” and beliefs, then the very notion of “education” (cultivation) become meaningless. Or rather, “philosophy” itself, which is to seek universal knowledge, loses its meaning.

If philosophy as a pursuit of true knowledge is not a method to extract something universal from diverse beliefs, but merely a tool to justify and strengthen one's own beliefs, then everything people see is nothing more than shadow pictures. This is what happened in the situation of diversifying values in the ancient Greek world.

21 Being and Value

* According to Heidegger, Plato's metaphor of the sun suggests the “idea of the Good”, which is the truth of Being as a basis for making possible the Being of all beings as well as the knowledge of beings. “... the ‘idea of the Good’ is not only something that confers “unconcealment,” on the basis of which knowing and knowledge become possible, but is also what makes knowing, the knower,

and beings as beings possible." (Heidegger 1982 p.168) However, this is also an *ontological usurpation* of Plato's philosophy. Despite the metaphysical hermeneutics of Greek philosophy, which includes Heidegger's includes philological knowledge, Plato's philosophy does not engage in metaphysical inquiry into "Being" *itself*.

* In order to get to the heart of Plato's theory of ideas, it is necessary to note the primary motivation behind his philosophy. Plato portrayed Socrates as the discoverer of an entirely new philosophical principle in Greece.

Then I heard someone reading, as he said, from a book of Anaxagoras, that mind was the disposer and cause of all, and I was delighted at this notion, which appeared quite admirable, and I said to myself: If mind is the disposer, mind will dispose all for the best, and put each particular in the best place. (Plato *Phaedo* Project Gutenberg)

Socrates is depicted here as a philosopher who, for the first time, explores the *principles of truth, goodness, beauty, and the nature of the order of human values*, rather than the traditional ontological theory that seeks the primordial principles of the world. The mind (*nous*) that "disposes all for the best" is clearly oriented toward the order of value of "truth, goodness, and beauty," transcending Anaxagoras' conception of the *nous* as the primordial cause of things. When Plato understood the concept of *nous* as the cause that disposes all things in the best possible way, a new intuition of "principle" emerged that immediately transcended the conundrum of knowledge that Greek philosophy had faced.

* Plato developed this new intuition by naming it "Idea" in his prolific writings. However, as indicated by the fact that Aristotle failed to grasp it as a principle of value hierarchy, this principle was not described in a complete manner. Plato's explanations about the nature of "Idea" were, in many cases, offered in the form of parables, allegories, or narratives rather than philosophical logic.¹

* We must understand the essence of the theory of Ideas, which states that "good" is the basis of all existence, from the perspective of phenomenology and our "philosophy of desire." Here, "Idea" is that which "disposes all for the best." This concept bears a striking resemblance to Nietzsche's notion of "power-correlativity," which interprets everything in the world in the best and most appropriate way for living organisms to survive and thrive. While Nietzsche's philosophy views the world and its objects as manifestations of life's will to persist, Plato's "Idea of the Good" portrays all knowledge as an expression of humanity's innate desire to pursue what is good and right.

* For a long time, Plato's theory of Ideas was considered a type of essential realism that placed a transcendent realm above our sensory reality. However, the core of Plato's theory is a revolutionary idea: the primacy of "value" over "being" in our thinking. While Aristotle believed that the puzzles

of knowledge and language that Greek philosophy grappled with could be solved through a robust metaphysics of “being” (exploring what truly exists), Plato took a different approach. He had a profound insight that these challenges could be overcome by setting aside the metaphysics of “being” and instead grounding all existence in the concept of the “Idea of the Good.” This is why Platonic philosophy places the “Idea of the Good” at its pinnacle, as the “Idea of Ideas.” It’s the fundamental reason why, in Plato’s view, goodness (or value) precedes and takes precedence over “being” (or truth).

* While Plato’s philosophy lacks the systematic nature of Aristotle’s work, it’s often categorized into three main branches: ethics, logic, and natural science. However, from our own perspective, we can distill the core themes of Platonic philosophy into four key areas:

- (1) The Theory of Forms: This overarching concept is explored in dialogues such as *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*.
- (2) Anti-skepticism and Metaphysics: *Theaetetus*, *Protagoras*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, and *Cratylus*.
- (3) Love and Beauty: *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.
- (4) Ethics and Politics: *Gorgias* and the *Republic*.

* Plato challenged the Sophists’ skeptical views by demonstrating the potential of the method of “eidetic seeing” of some phenomena, but this method was not effectively employed in his dialogues. However, Plato truly shines when discussing love and beauty. His philosophical insights of Eros, blended with literary flair, offer a particularly illuminating perspective on these themes.

* In the realm of Greek philosophy, the free, unfettered movement of ideas inevitably gave rise to two fundamental puzzles: the nature of knowledge and the enigma of language. Against this backdrop, Aristotle and Plato explored a method for achieving “universal knowledge” with unparalleled awareness and intellectual vigor. However, their methods significantly differ as we saw above. Aristotle sought to integrate all fundamental principles through dialectical reasoning, while Plato pursued intuitive understanding of internal essences. Both approaches aimed to establish a method for attaining universal knowledge. However, despite their profound insights, neither philosopher fully succeeded in overcoming the linguistic challenges posed by skepticism and relativism.

* Since the dawn of philosophy, thinkers have pursued a fundamental dream: the possibility of attaining “universal knowledge” – an objective, absolute truth. But why did this dream remain elusive in Greek philosophy? The answer isn’t straightforward. We’re yet to determine *whether the very principle of universal knowledge can exist*. If it does exist, it can only be realized by fully overcoming the powerful skepticism of Gorgias, who argued that existence and knowledge are impossible.

As we entered the modern era, philosophers returned to this problem of knowledge. In the final act of modern philosophy's epistemological struggle, we see the first significant breakthrough, setting it apart from Greek philosophy. We term this breakthrough the "dismantling of the idea of the noumenon."¹

¹ That, then, is enough about the soul's immortality. Now here is what we must say about its structure. To describe what the soul actually is would require a very long account, altogether a task for a god in every way; but to say what it is like is humanly possible and takes less time. So let us do the second in our speech. (Plato 1995 p.524)