

Dear philosophers

In our next class (Thursday April 21st @ 2PM) we take leave of Plato by looking at some aspects of his legacy. We shall meet two prominent natural scientists influenced by his thought and briefly consider his impact on Christian thought ever since the 1st century.

I would like to clear up a misunderstanding that emerged in our last class. It concerns revelation. The idea of revelation belongs to the religious traditions. Put briefly, it is the idea of God making himself known to humanity through certain people (e.g. Jesus, Moses, Mohamed etc) and events. Plato is not claiming a revelation from God. He is a philosopher seeking knowledge through reason and argument (Socratic dialogue). The two passages we looked at last time are his attempts to explain his philosophy, not to justify it. In our class we did not consider his reasons or arguments for the forms. We could have, but I judged that in a short introductory course there was not sufficient room for it. And I may have been wrong. Anyway here is just one of several arguments he produces

“Take for example a perfect triangle, as it might be described by a mathematician. This would be a description of the Form or Idea of (a) Triangle. Plato says such Forms exist in an abstract state but independent of minds in their own realm. Considering this Idea of a perfect triangle, we might also be tempted to take pencil and paper and draw it. Our attempts will of course fall short. Plato would say that peoples’ attempts to recreate the Form will end up being a pale facsimile of the perfect Idea, just as everything in this world is an imperfect representation of its perfect Form. The Idea or Form of a triangle and the drawing we come up with is a way of comparing the perfect and imperfect. How good our drawing is will depend on our ability to recognise the Form of Triangle. Although no one has ever seen a perfect triangle, for Plato this is not a problem. If we can conceive the Idea or Form of a perfect triangle in our mind, then the Idea of Triangle must exist.” (copied from an article on Plato’s theory of knowledge)

And here is another one based on the contrast between knowledge and belief

1.
 - a. There is knowledge. (implicit premise)
 - b. Knowledge is of what is. (premise)
 - c. Knowledge is infallible, belief is fallible. (premise)
 - d. Therefore, what is known must be, what is believed may not be.
 - e. That is, what is known is something that “purely and absolutely is,” what is believed is something that “partakes of both being and not-being.”
 - f. Therefore, there are things that purely and absolutely are – things we call Forms (the *F* Itself, etc.). The participants in the Forms both are and are not.
 - g. That is, Forms are the objects of knowledge; their participants are objects of belief.

The point is not whether we find such arguments convincing but that we recognise that Plato is doing philosophy (reasoned process) not announcing a revelation from God. I hope this helps made the distinction clear.

Anyway, Our next class concerns the ongoing influence of the platonic tradition today. I look forward to seeing you on Thursday.

Cheers
Keith