

Founders of Western Philosophy: Thales to Hume
a 12-lecture course
by

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Lecture 3
THE METAPHYSICS OF TWO WORLDS:
ITS RESULTS IN THIS WORLD



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Lecture 3

THE METAPHYSICS OF TWO WORLDS: ITS RESULTS IN THIS WORLD

1. The Apex of Plato's Reality

Last week I presented the essence and base of Plato's metaphysics, but not yet the climax of it—to say nothing of the rest of his philosophy: his epistemology, psychology, ethics, and politics. That is our assignment for this evening.

As to the climax of Plato's metaphysics, I promised you that we would begin this evening with an excursion into the world of Forms, to find out something about its content and structure. Well, the otherworldly trip is about to begin. Let us now leave this world and ascend to the world of Forms, where we can observe some characteristics of true reality.

The first thing is that the Forms, according to Plato, are *not* a disconnected grabbag of universals—manness, subwayhood, justice, etc., without interrelationships. All of the Forms are logically connected to one another, in one integrated system. Indeed, says Plato, every scientific law and every mathematical theorem is merely a statement of how specific Forms are logically interconnected. If I say, for instance, “The sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees,” that is not a statement about any one particular triangle; it is a statement about triangularity as such. It says that triangularity is intrinsically connected with 180-degree-hood, and that that is an unavoidable logical tie. Or if I say, “All men are mortal,” I am saying that manness by its very nature entails mortality. Such is the basis of any universal law or principle we can state.

Sciences, therefore, for Plato, are really attempts to discover the structure of the world of Forms, to show the organization or connections uniting the various Forms.

How do the sciences do it? Each science, says Plato, begins with certain basic premises stating how the Forms in its particular field are related. It then proceeds to deduce a host of consequences from these basic premises. Each science, in this sense, is a description of the structure of some part of the world of Forms. This is obvious in the case of mathematics: It starts with certain premises and then deduces their consequences. It is true of ethics: You must start somewhere, with some basic premises, and then deduce your whole system. It is true of physics: Whatever theory of physics you have, it begins somewhere, with your physical axioms, and then deduces the consequences. In other words, every individual science assumes certain relationships among certain forms and then infers what will follow deductively.

This, says Plato, poses a problem: Unless we can validate the basic premises in each science, all our knowledge remains hypothetical. Every science would be reduced to the level of assumption. We would only know that *if* the premises are true, *then* everything we deduce from them is true. But how do we know that the premises are true? We need in each field, therefore, *true* axioms—which means, says Plato, that we need some foundation point from which we can deduce the axioms of the various individual sciences.

He says, in effect, just imagine that you could find one fundamental Form, which was such that it was self-intelligible or self-luminous. In other words, you need no explanation of it, you need no proof of it. Once you grasp it, once you simply mentally come into contact with it, by that act alone, you understand what it is and why it must exist. Suppose also, says Plato, that, having grasped this one Form, we could see that absolutely everything else followed from it. We could deduce from it all of the axioms

of all the individual sciences. If we could do that, says Plato, we would have put every science on absolutely firm ground.

In addition, we would have achieved a marvelous result of intellectual unity. Instead of psychologists talking their language, and moralists theirs, and physicists theirs, all in a splintered, unconnected, and often contradictory fashion, we would have tied all the areas of human knowledge together into one whole, by deducing the basis of each separate science from one fundamental principle. After all, says Plato, we live in one integrated universe, and, therefore, there must be one ultimate principle from which everything else follows.

Clearly, it is crucial to find this principle. So we are started again on a quest for the one in the many—but now the whole quest is transferred to the world of Forms. We are looking for the one supreme Form uniting the many Forms.

Plato believed, of course, that there was one such Form, the ultimate axiom from which everything else follows. Indeed, if you grasp this Form, you are omniscient: By grasping it, you thereby have grasped all the other Forms. And, since the sensible world is simply the reflection in space of the Forms, you thereby also have grasped everything there is to know about this world, insofar as it is intelligible at all. You would have explained, by grasping this Form, the total of existence on every level.

Plato's reality, therefore, can be compared to a pyramid, and we are now looking for its apex: the climax, the jackpot, the ultimate key to reality.

Plato does not give an argument to prove that the supreme Form must be single in nature, that there must be only one. On this point, he is simply reflecting the monism characteristic of most of Greek philosophy. His view here is another instance of the Greek desire to reduce the many to the one, but applied to Plato's other world.

What could be the nature of this fundamental Form? Well, we know it explains the entire universe. So this raises the issue:

What do you take as an explanation? Plato has a firm answer to this question: He is a thorough teleologist. You remember that I defined teleology as the view that purpose is operative somewhere in the universe, and perhaps in the universe as a whole (there are various forms of teleology); and it is contrasted with mechanism, the view that everything happens by mechanical law, devoid of purpose, as in the Atomist viewpoint. Plato is a universal teleologist. He believes that every event in the universe must be explained in terms of the purpose it serves, some goal or end that the events of the world are striving to accomplish, a *good* of some kind that everything is aiming at.

In other words, Plato regards the Atomists as completely wrong in their view of what constitutes an explanation. The Atomists, he says, at best tell us *how* things happen. They say that under these circumstances, this is the way the particles of matter jostle, giving us only the descriptive laws that characterize the behavior of the physical world. A mechanist simply describes, says Plato. But if we want to know not just how but *why*, if we want explanation and not just description, we must think in terms of purpose—and purpose means some good that everything is aiming at.

On the human level, this is obvious. If Bobby Fischer makes a move at chess, no amount of mechanistic explanation will explain it. You can talk about the quivering of his cortex until you are blue in the face. But you will not capture the reason he made that move until you name his motive, the goal he was aiming at, namely, to defeat Spassky.

Plato adopts this pattern of explanation for the entire universe. His procedure is an unjustified overgeneralization, but he does it nevertheless. As he sees it, the alternative is Atomistic mechanism across the board or teleology across the board, and he takes the latter.

Consequently, he calls the ultimate Form the Form of the Good, since the good is that which everything is aiming at.

Another word for it is Goodness; and therefore, the expression “Goodness gracious” is pure Platonism.

What are the functions of the Form of the Good? It has two fundamental functions in Plato, one metaphysical and one epistemological. Metaphysically, it is the purpose of the whole universe. Epistemologically, it is the single axiom of all knowledge.

Metaphysically, it is what makes all of reality possible. On a teleological model of the universe, if you removed the purpose, you would remove everything which exists to serve the purpose. If Fischer did not have any purpose, he would not play the chess game; it could not exist. Similarly, if you hold that the entire universe exists to serve a purpose, the whole universe would vanish without that purpose. This is what it means to say that the Form of the Good is (for Plato) the source of all existence.

Epistemologically, as a result, it is the source of all intelligibility. It is what makes anything understandable, because it is the thing that leads to the axioms of the sciences and all the way down. Short of intellectually reaching the Form of the Good, reality remains a mystery to us: We could not understand why.

In this way, on both of these points, the Form of the Good performs for Plato a function enormously similar to the function that God performed for later Christian philosophy. God, for Christianity, is the source of reality and the ultimate source of intelligibility. Until you grasp him and, in Christian terms, “His plan,” you simply cannot make any sense out of the universe. In this respect, Christianity took over entirely Plato’s view. But Plato’s Form of the Good is not yet itself a god. It is, remember, a universal: impersonal, unconscious. It is simply abstract universal goodness. It has no plan, no will, no awareness; it just exists in the world of Forms and everything strives for it. To get God from Plato’s Form of the Good, you in effect have to do two things: drop an “o,” and add a personality—which was soon done.

Plato himself compares the Form of the Good, in an analogy only, to the sun. Metaphysically, he says, the sun enables everything to exist on earth (at least it enables living things to exist) by providing the heat and the life sustenance that is required; otherwise the earth would turn cold and die. In that loose, analogical sense, the sun enables the earth to exist. Epistemologically, the sun makes everything visible; without it (this is in an age prior to Thomas Edison) the whole world would be black, and no one could have any awareness of the world. So the Form of the Good is like the sun.

Finally, what is it? If the Form of the Good is so vital, the most urgent philosophic question will be: What is the nature of the Good? We have to know it to understand anything. What is Plato's answer? What *is* the ultimate purpose of everything?

Unfortunately, I can't tell you. I cannot tell you because Plato held very strongly the view that his deepest thoughts should not be put into writing. He held that the Form of the Good is ineffable. "Ineffable" is a technical philosophic term meaning "outside the power of human conceptualization; beyond human language, logic, discussion, or concepts." To grasp the Form of the Good, you do not do any intellectualizing; you must simply transcend the intellect and have an intuition, a vision. This vision, when you have it, is completely, blindingly self-illuminating—which means that if you do not have it, there is nothing anyone can say to you. *To those who understand, no explanation is necessary; to those who do not understand, no explanation is possible.* In either case, we don't explain.

This, of course, is mysticism, technical mysticism—mysticism being the view that knowledge is obtainable by means other than reason or the senses. In this respect, Plato is the father of mysticism in Western philosophy. If you do not already know it, you will see the extent of his following in this regard as the course proceeds.

Plato himself believed that there was a definite course of action required to have this special vision. He could not tell you what the vision was like, but he could tell you the steps necessary to attain it; he outlines them in detail. In essence, you must endure a rigorous period of mathematical training, stretching across decades, and becoming progressively more abstract. Plato felt that mathematics was very valuable because the more you engage in higher mathematics the more tenuous is your tie to the physical world, in his opinion. And at a certain point, you cut your ties altogether, at which time you are finally free to go on to the Form of the Good. Here is the influence of Pythagorean mathematical mysticism on Plato.

Thus, to sum up Plato's metaphysics: There is a world of Forms, presided over by the Form of the Good, all of it reflected into space, thereby generating this half-real reflection that we call the physical world, which, if we are not Platonists, we mistakenly call reality.

2. Plato's Epistemology: Knowledge as a Mixture of Logical Deduction, Reminiscence, and Mystical Insight

Now let us turn more systematically to Plato's epistemology. I said last week that one main purpose of Plato's whole philosophy was to answer the Sophists, to show that objective knowledge is possible. But here we immediately have a question. How can we ever come to know the Forms? After all, they constitute a completely different world, a nonmaterial world, and as such they are neither in space nor in time. Yet here we are on earth, limited by our bodies and our senses. How are we ever to come in contact with the Forms? Plato obviously answers: by thought. But the question is, how does thought "down here" ever come in contact with the Forms "up there"? (Of course, "up" and "down" here are simply metaphors, because, being nonspatial, the Forms are not anywhere.)