

# Plato on Ideas

Plato is perhaps best known for his "theory of forms" – the view that things in the material world are produced and shaped by eternal ideas or forms. But although the fact of the theory is well known, the actual nature of forms as envisaged by Plato is badly misunderstood, and this has been the case for many centuries. Thomas Taylor, the great English Platonist, wrote, "The Platonic doctrine of Ideas has been, in all ages, the derision of the vulgar, and the admiration of the wise. Indeed, if we consider that Ideas are the most sublime objects of study, and that their nature is no less bright in itself, than difficult to investigate, this opposition in the conduct of mankind will be natural and necessary; for, from our connection with a material nature, our intellectual eye, previous to the irradiations of science, is as ill-adapted to objects the most splendid of all, 'as the eyes of bats to the light of day.' And yet unless the existence of these lucid beings is admitted, there can be no such thing as science; nor, indeed, any genuine knowledge at all."

First we must make a distinction between things which are eternal, unchanging, immaterial and only appreciable by thought, and things which are temporal, changing, material and perceived by the senses. You will notice that this distinction is both a matter of metaphysics (how things are in themselves) and epistemology (how things are known). Here is the *Timaeus*:

"In the first place, therefore, as it appears to me, it is necessary to define what that is which is always *real being*, but is without generation; and what that is which is generated indeed, or consists in a state of *becoming to be*, but which never really is. The former of these indeed is apprehended by intelligence in conjunction with reason, since it always subsists according to same. But the latter is perceived by opinion in conjunction with irrational sense; since it subsists in a state of generation and corruption, and never truly is."

27d-28a

Amongst those things which are "always real beings" are forms or ideas which have a power to lend to the material universe their particular properties, so that in the material world we have things which are identifiable because of those properties. Plato does point out that because of the nature of the material world, the particular material instances of these ideas are in a continual state of becoming, and that when we say that something is water, or fire, or circular, or a man, we should in fact be aware that this is an approximation, and named only as such. Only the underlying pure matter (whatever that mysterious substrate is) continues, and that every thing that makes its appearance in matter is on its way to being something else even as we look and speak about it. He says it is like someone,

"fashioning all possible figures from gold, and without ceasing transform each figure into all; and if, during this operation, someone who is present should, pointing to one of these figures, inquire what it is; it might most safely, with respect to truth, be replied, that it was gold: but he who should assert that it is a triangle, or any other of the figures which are continually generated, and which ought by no means to be denominated beings, would fall from the truth in the midst of his

assertion. But we ought to be content with that answer as most safe, which denominates it *such-like*, or of such a determinate nature."

Timaeus, 50b

So the material instance of fire should be called fire-like; the circle, circle-like; the man, man-like.

Each material thing takes on its essential quality because of the presence of the idea, and while we can acknowledge that other causes contribute to the actual production of a particular thing, without the form's presence nothing could take on that quality. Here is Diotima in the *Symposium* talking about the Form of Beauty:

"In the first place, it never had a beginning, nor will ever have an end, but always is, and always flourishes in perfection, unsusceptible of growth or of decay.

In the next place, it is not beautiful only when looked at one way, or seen in one light; at the same time that, viewed another way, or seen in some other light, it is far from being beautiful: it is not beautiful only at certain times, or with reference only to certain circumstances of things; being at other times, or when things are otherwise circumstanced, quite the contrary: nor is it beautiful only in some places, or as it appears to some persons; whilst in other places, and to other persons, its appearance is the reverse of beautiful.

Nor can this beauty, which is indeed no other than the beautiful itself, ever be the object of imagination; as if it had some face or hands of its own, or any other parts belonging to body: nor is it some particular reason nor some particular science. It resides not in any other being, not in any animal, for instance; nor in the earth, nor in the heavens, nor in any other part of the universe: but, simple and separate from other things, it subsists alone with itself, and possesses an essence eternally uniform.

*All other forms which are beautiful participate of this*; but in such a manner they participate, that by their generation or destruction this suffers no diminution, receives no addition, nor undergoes any kind of alteration."

211a-b

Plato has a range of different kinds of forms: in the *Phaedo* Socrates discusses how it is that we recognize the idea of *the equal* and tries to show that it is something we possess even before the experiences of approximate equality of material things which the senses deliver to us in embodied life. After his demonstration he concludes,

"If, therefore, receiving this before we were born, we were born possessing it; we both knew prior to our birth, and as soon as we were born, not only *the equal, the greater, and the lesser*, but everything of this kind: for our discourse at present is not more concerning *the equal* than *the beautiful, the good, the just, and the holy*, and in one word, about everything which we mark with the signature of *that which is*, both in our interrogations when we interrogate, and in our answers when we reply . . ."

75d

Alongside these kinds of forms, there are forms which play an important part of producing a world of living creatures. These are discussed in the *Timaeus*, in which dialogue the production of the manifested world is understood to stem from the contemplation of the idea of the "All" (called *animal itself*) by the "Demiurge" – the All

being a single all-comprehensive idea, or whole with implicit rather than explicit parts, and the Demiurge (or "artificer") being the creative divinity whose eternal contemplation brings forth the genera and species – the implicated parts to that whole.

"But as the universe did not yet contain all animals in its capacious receptacle, in this respect it was dissimilar to its exemplar. Its artificer, therefore, supplied this defect by impressing it with forms, according to the nature of its paradigm. Whatever ideas, therefore, intellect perceived by the dianoëtic energy in *animal itself*, such and so many he conceived it necessary for the universe to contain."

39e

So the various species of animals and plants which appear in the material world are related back to the particular paradigms in the eternal world. These are clearly not the same as ideas such as the equal, the beautiful or the just, but in the *Philebus* these differing types of ideas are mentioned when Socrates says,

"I mean, young man, when a thing is proposed to be considered which is one, but is not of the number of things generated and perishable. For as to the ones of this latter sort, it is agreed [in non-philosophical dealings], as I just now said, to reject them, as unworthy of a serious confutation. The ones which I mean are such as man, ox, beauty, good."

15a

Socrates sums up his discourse about ideas in the *Republic* with these words:

"That there are many things said I, beautiful, and many good, and each of these we say is so, and we distinguish them in our reasoning.

But as to the *beautiful itself*, and the *good itself*, and in like manner concerning all those things which we then considered as many, now again establishing them according to *one idea of each particular, as being one*, we assign to each that name which belongs to it; and these [many instances] indeed we say are seen by the eye, but are not objects of intellectual perception; but that the [singular] ideas are perceived by the intellect, but are not seen by the eye."

507b

Proclus (in his *Commentary on the Parmenides*) says that although there are different uses of the word idea, if we are going to speak about Platonic ideas (or forms) in the strictest sense of the word we should understand that each has some very distinct properties: "Idea, therefore, truly so called, is an incorporeal cause, exempt from its participants, is an immovable essence, is a paradigm only and truly, and is intelligible to souls from images, but has a causal knowledge of things which subsist according to it. So that from all the doubts [raised by Parmenides] we derive one definition of idea truly so called."

Modern thinkers usually reject Platonic Forms – although the reality of some types of form are accepted by some in our age. "Mathematical" forms such as number, sameness, unity, equality are, perhaps, easier than most to accept – it is clear that these incorporeal forms underpin the manifested cosmos, and were active before humankind existed on Earth. Such things as the Good, the Beautiful and the Just seem to most to be ideas in the process of change. And the assertion that there are eternal Forms of particular species is generally seen as running counter to the theory of evolution. We need to examine these

varying reactions to Platonic Forms along with the subsequent rejection of Plato and others in his tradition as being "only interested in the world beyond our own", and being supporters of a kind of "tyranny of perfect Forms" which diminishes the world over which we have some influence and in which we must live our political, social and artistic lives.

But are these anti-Platonic positions actually rejecting a view of forms which are not in reality Platonic?