
UNIT 2 PLATO: THEORY OF FORMS AND THE IDEA OF PHILOSOPHER KING*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Theory of Forms
 - 2.2.1 Allegory of Cave
- 2.3 The Idea of Philosopher King
 - 2.3.1 Who is a Philosopher?
 - 2.3.2 Ideal State and the Role of Philosopher
 - 2.3.3 Criticism
- 2.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.5 References
- 2.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

2.0 OBJECTIVE

In this unit, you will be reading about the concept of Ideas of Form as described by Plato. The Unit also presents an introduction to the idea of Philosopher King. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the Theory of Forms
- Enumerate the Idea of Philosopher King
- Discuss the Ideal State and the role a Philosopher plays in it.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Plato (c.428-347 B.C.) is one of the most important figures of the Ancient Greek world and in the history of Western thought. Political philosophy in the West begins with the ancient Greeks and Plato. Plato was one of the most influential authors in the history of western philosophy. In his written dialogues, he expanded on the ideas and techniques of his teacher Socrates. Plato's recurring theme of writing was the distinction between ideal forms and everyday experience, and how it played out both for individuals and for societies. In the *Republic*, his most famous work, he envisioned a civilization governed not by lowly appetites, but by the pure wisdom of a philosopher-king.

* Dr. Ankita Dutta, Research Fellow, Indian Council of Word Affairs

Expanding on the idea that the world that appears to our senses is in ways imperfect and filled with error, but there is a more real and perfect realm, populated by entities called “forms” or “ideas” that are eternal and changeless. In Plato's writings, it is often asserted that the true philosophers are those who recognize the importance of distinguishing the one from the other and in a position to become ethically superior to unenlightened human beings, because of the greater degree of insight they can acquire. In the following sections, Plato’s theory of ideas is discussed to understand the form of good. It also looks at how a Philosopher is different from others and why he should be the one to rule the ideal state.

2.2 THEORY OF FORMS

Influenced by the tradition of scepticism, the early Greek philosophers were aware of the fact that the world was constantly undergoing change and that nothing was permanent. This was also reflected in the *Socratic Dialogues* of Plato, where he argues that because the material world is changeable it was unreliable. For him, behind this unreliable world of appearances there was a world of permanence and reliability. He called this world as “world of forms or ideas”. Plato’s Theory of Forms can be considered as the first metaphysical debate in the western political thought. In his Theory of Forms, Plato explores the structure of reality and questions what this reality is as opposed to what it appears to be. He concluded that everything in the world was only a copy of a perfect form existing in the realm attainable to us through contemplation.

For Plato, the ideas or forms are abstract representation of things around us which are timeless in nature as they are unchangeable, eternal, intelligible, divine, and incorporeal. On the other hand, physical things are existing things but are changeable, finite, perceptible, corporeal, and are caused by the forms. The Theory of Forms typically refers to Plato’s belief that the material world as it seems to us is not the real world, but only a shadow of the real world. One of the key ideas in Plato’s theory of form is its correlation to the theory of knowledge. Like Socrates, Plato believed that knowledge could be acquired and he postulated that it has two characteristics of knowledge. First, knowledge must be certain and infallible. Second, knowledge must have as its object that which is genuinely real as contrasted with that which is an appearance only. The real must be fixed, permanent, and unchanging.

According to Plato, philosophers were able to comprehend the Form of Good through their intellect, and this served as the basis for what he believed as ideal society. He saw the world divided into two realms – the material world of appearances which was ever-changing and imperfect and second, was the world of ‘forms’ which was perfect and unchanging. He argued that everything in the first realm was only a copy of the perfect form in the perfect realm. He further argues that material realm was perceived through our senses while the realm of forms could only be perceived through intellect and contemplation. Plato was of the opinion that philosophers can transcend material world and understand the

forms of virtue, justice and goodness and for precisely this reason, Plato opined that the philosophers were the best to rule the ideal society.

This was so because according to Plato, true and reliable knowledge rests only with those who are able to comprehend true reality that is hidden behind the reality of everyday. Therefore, to perceive this world of Forms, individual needs to undergo extensive education. From this idea of forms, the concept of philosopher kings emerges who were required to perceive the true reality and the form of good so as to be well-informed rulers. Plato further uses the Allegory of Cave to explain the relations with the world of form.

2.2.1 Allegory of Cave

Allegory of Cave is a dialogue between Socrates and his disciple Glaucon. During the dialogue, Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine people living in an underground cave, which is only open to the outside at the end of a difficult ascent. Most of the people in the cave are prisoners chained facing the back wall of the cave so that they can neither move nor turn their heads. A fire burns behind them, and all the prisoners can see are the shadows playing on the wall in front of them. There are others in the cave, carrying objects, but all the prisoners see are their shadows. Some of the others speak, but there are echoes in the cave that make it difficult for the prisoners to understand which person is saying what. Socrates goes on to describe the difficulties a prisoner might have adapting to being freed. When he sees that there are solid objects in the cave, not just shadows, he is confused. Instructors can tell him that what he saw before was an illusion, but at first, he will assume his shadow life was the reality. Eventually, as he leaves and steps into the sun, he is painfully dazzled by its brightness, and stunned by the beauty of the moon and the stars. Once he becomes accustomed to the light, he will pity the people in the cave and would want to stay above and apart from them. The new arrival will choose to remain in the light, but, according to Socrates, he must not. Because for true enlightenment, to understand and apply what is goodness and justice, he must descend back into the darkness of the cave and join the men chained to the wall, and share his newly acquired knowledge with them.

The allegory of the cave has deep allegorical meaning because variety of symbolic suggestions are used in this writing. The dark cave symbolically suggests the contemporary world of ignorance and the chained people symbolize ignorant. The raised wall symbolizes the limitation of their thinking and the shadow symbolically suggest the world of sensory perception which Plato considers an illusion. In his opinion, the appearance is false and reality is somewhere, which we cannot see. For Plato, the appearing world is just the imitation of the real world. The shadows represent such imitation and, the reality is possible to know with the spiritual knowledge. The chains symbolize our limitation in this material world so that we do not understand the true reality. The outer world of the light symbolically suggests the world of spiritual reality, which we achieve by breaking the chains that are used to tie us. The dazzling of the eyes for the first time symbolizes difficulty to accept ignorance after knowing the

reality. Hence, in allegory of the cave Plato has given a criticism of human's limited existence in the material world. In Allegory of the cave, Plato also described about the perception. He says that there are two types of perception: sensory perception and spiritual perception. Sensory perception is the world of appearance, which we perceive, with the help of our sensory organs. For this, world is the world of illusion or shadows, thereby a world of falsehood. The reality or truth is impossible to perceive with our senses, it is possible through spiritual perception, which is divine enlightenment. Spiritual perception is possible when we reject the world of sensory perception and break all the material chains.

In short, in his book, *Republic*, Plato uses the allegory of Cave to explain the relations with the world of forms. He uses analogy of people who have spent their while life living in a cave. They have only seen shadows on the wall created by their campfire. Compared with the reality of the world of Forms, real physical objects and events are equivalent to being only shadows. Plato also takes the opportunity to state that only those people who have the ability to step out into the sunlight and see the true reality (which are the Forms) should rule. Plato leaves no doubt that only special people are fit to rule. He describes the ideal ruler is a philosopher-king, because only philosophers have the ability to discern the Forms. Plato goes on to say that it is only when such a person comes to power that the citizens of the state will have the opportunity to step out of the cave and see the light.

2.3 THE IDEA OF PHILOSOPHER KING

The theory of philosopher king was the linchpin of Plato's Ideal State. It was derived from the conviction that the philosopher has the knowledge, intellect and training to govern, ruling, like any other task, required skill and qualifications, for its aim was the general well-being of all. A good ruler was one who not only preserved the lives of his subjects; but also transformed them as human beings. The most important and distinctive feature of the Ideal State is the philosophic rule or the 'rule of the philosophic king.'

2.3.1 Who is a Philosopher King?

Throughout the *Republic*, Plato emphasises the importance of having rulers who know the form of good. Plato holds that a philosopher by his grasp of the idea of good was best qualified to rule, implying that knowledge could be obtained only by a select few who had the leisure and the material comforts. Plato shared the general Greek perception that leisure was essential for the pursuit of wisdom. A philosopher would be able to administer justice and act for the good of the community. He would have a good character, a calm disposition and a sound mind. He would have the qualities of a ruler namely truthfulness, high-mindedness, discipline and courage. Plato in *The Republic* insisted that politics and philosophy ought to be safe from one another. A philosopher ruler would make wise legislator and frame laws in accordance with the Idea of Good, thereby linking statecraft with soulcraft. For Plato, Ideal State ruled by

philosopher king was a divine institution perfectly worthy of emulation and imitation. He defined ideal state as one based on timeless and unchanging principles, suggesting that an ideal pattern existed which could be discerned and employed to reform a diseased polity, and transform into a thing of beauty. He implied that political order was highly malleable and could be moulded in order to receive the right imprint.

Since the work of the ruler requires knowledge of the forms, the instillation of such knowledge is a significant concern of the state. To Plato, entrusting the state to rulers without this knowledge would be like turning it over to blind. Though the philosophers prefer not to, they must be persuaded to rule. The philosophic curriculum is an institutionalised means of creating successors to the existing rulers. It is only when successors have been brought up and educated can the existing rulers unshoulder their burden and return to the realm of philosophy. According to Plato, the philosophers must undergo a rigorous program of education and then, spend fifteen years performing administrative servile in the city, before they are raised to glimpse the form of the good, which gives them perfect knowledge and completes their education.

In the *Republic*, Plato does not explain how philosophic wisdom is beneficial to the state. In fact, what the rulers of the state actually do and what they must know in order to do it, it is to be seen that the knowledge of the good is not discreetly required. The rulers main task is moulding souls. In order to succeed at this, they require detailed knowledge of human psychology. They must know proper propositions of mental and physical training to be applied in different types of personalities. They must understand different types of art. This knowledge must cover not only poetry but music and all the visual and other arts as well. The rulers must know how to devise the crucial series of task for aspiring ruler, how to weed out those unfit to rule and how to recognise and elevate superior members of the producing class. They must also devise means, preferably educational, to insure the loyalty of the lowest class, and thereby, spread contentment throughout the state.

The ruler must know eugenics, how to breed the best and how to rig the maturing lotteries towards this end. They must be able to keep the population stable. Various political skills are required for this task. Plato declares that the guardians must be versed in war. They must also be able to negotiate effectively with other states, including scheming to subvert potential enemies. There are other tasks as well for the rulers, such as avoiding great disparities between wealth and poverty. Thus, in order to rule the ideal state, the guardians require a formidable array of knowledge, skills and talent. Plato, here, fails to exactly explain how knowledge of the good contributes to the talents required by the ruler.

Yet, he does recognise the importance of rulers' knowing more than the good. Plato insists that they should be of superior knowledge, at the same time also not be deficient in practical experience. Plato devises means to provide experience. The clearest provision is that the philosopher must spend fifteen years in administrative service in the city, before they are given final knowledge and led

up to contemplate the good. The Republic also mentions the military applications of the philosopher's training. The study of arithmetic, geometry and even astronomy are all explicitly recommended in this regard. Knowledge of these subjects is required if the rulers are to be able to properly marshal their troops, construct encampments and array their forces for battle. Plato also pays attention to war, where he recommends that the guardian be exposed to battle at an early age just as the children of other craftsmen are exposed to their craft at an early age. For rulers as well as the auxiliaries, war will be an important matter of concern. Although Plato is aware that the knowledge of good is not a sufficient condition for being able to rule, in his political theory there is a significant gap because of his failure to explain exactly how knowledge of the form of the good is relevant in governing. Even so, Plato has his reasons for insisting that knowledge of good is a necessary condition for effective rule. To him, its moral effects are indispensable. It helps in training for philosophers to despise things of the world and gives superior value to the rulers. Thus, the importance of Plato's emphasis on the philosopher's having absolute knowledge can be defended more in regard to the moral than the cognitive effect of such knowledge. Philosophers, therefore, must rule not because of the practical value of their absolute knowledge but because absolute knowledge, ensures proper values.

Philosophic knowledge, whatever be the contents and applicability to the concerns of the rulers, it nevertheless supplies the state with an active probing, critical intelligence. This is an important theme in the *Republic* of Plato. However it is to be seen that Plato's view entails a renunciation of the Socratic faith in moral autonomy. To Plato, justice as virtue is bound up with balance and harmony, the predominant rule of reason and control of appetite. Here, Plato sets aside the Socratic ideal of each individual caring for his own soul, because according to Plato, an individual can achieve this condition only through intensive conditioning. The introduction of the theory of forms also leads Plato to oppose Socrates's belief in the limited power of human knowledge. To Plato, the most exhaustive truths are accessible to only the highly privileged few. Since the philosopher can reach these heights, many must be enslaved to the few in order to benefit by divine intelligence, thus, the state as a whole is wise through the wisdom of the philosophers.

Thus, Plato departs from Socrates' commitment to critical rationalism. The philosopher in the Republic knows the truths of "all times and all existence". The philosopher kings will bring such knowledge to bear in ruling the state they govern according to the dictates of their exalted knowledge. Plato shapes his ideal state around the presence of an active critical intelligence. Plato argues in the *Statesman* that the ruler is like a doctor who has no compulsion on abiding by his prescriptions previously written should the condition of the patient demand a change of treatment, the true ruler too would not feel bound to abide by the laws, but is superior because he can adapt to changed circumstances.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. What are qualities of the Philosopher King described by Plato?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2.3.2 Ideal State and the Role of Philosopher

As the philosopher has undergone the programme of studies as defined in *The Republic*, Plato has left the task of structuring the society in the hands of the philosopher. Many aspects of the state are therefore left incomplete, sketched broadly leaving the details for the rulers to fill in. For instance, they must determine the extent to which the state can safely expand beyond its original borders, and the number of marriages needed to keep the male population stable. They must formulate the program of trials and tests through which the perfect guardians are selected from their fellows. Regarding early education, Plato presents only broad outlines, while the specific details are the responsibility of the guardian. Thus, the rulers are empowered to fill in what the original founders have left out. Because they possess exalted knowledge, Plato believes it is possible for them to evaluate and criticise the state. They can alter features that do not work.

Therefore, the central elements in the ideal state are subject to revision and reviews. Thus, philosophers are to play the role of an active critical intelligence in governing the state. As in the analogy presented in the *Statesman*, the philosophers have the knowledge of the doctor who writes the prescriptions and not just of the pharmacist who carries them out. They are not merely to shape their surroundings according to a blueprint that is given. They must take appropriate measures where the blueprint is found incomplete or faulty as well as when the circumstances change. The problem that arises with this view of the philosopher as active critical intelligence is that it seems difficult to understand how the philosophers can maintain open critical attitude when Plato has described them in mystical terms as doing their work with an eye on the idea of forms when knowledge comes to them in a sudden burst of life. As Popper and Burke point out, if the role of a philosopher is to enforce the divinely sanctioned laws, how could he criticise and change them? However, when Plato is portraying the philosopher king as shaping the state according to the forms, the forms he looks to are those of moral qualities – justice, beauty, moderation, the good itself and not the forms of the ideal state. The task of the philosopher king is to embody these moral qualities in men’s souls while the means to this end must

be fabricated. How to shape the political institution for the desired outcome is a problem to the solution of which they are not given metaphysical guidance.

Thus, the philosopher king bears responsibility for devising the institutional structure of the state. Even if they are given a divinely grounded aim, they are not given divine guidance concerning the means. Hence, philosopher bears a critical, open minded attitude towards the laws and institutions of the ideal state. Another reason for this quality in philosopher king is because of their unwillingness to rule. They love contemplation of the eternal forms more than political power. Therefore, they would not be afflicted by the common rulers' fear of making changes. They are willing to criticise and reform the state in order to improve it. Thus, the central motif of the political theory of the Republic is putting the philosophic intelligence in control of the state. Although, Plato fails to explain how the philosophic wisdom is beneficial to the state, his insistence that they possess this appears to express the ideal that the state be governed by the highest of the truths. Thus, the political theory of the Republic centres on the rule of the state by supreme intelligence. For Plato, philosophers must be kings because only they can discover what must be done. The rulers maintain some measure of moral autonomy, and they do not merely accept the structure and institutions of the state as metaphysically grounded. They are to understand the state's rational basis and alter and improve things whenever and wherever necessary.

2.3.3 Criticism

One of the most common criticisms is that Plato has little to say about how the philosopher's knowledge actually enables them to rule. In other words, how is this knowledge necessary for ruling the state? Aristotle criticises the kind of moral knowledge supplied by the form of good. He criticises it on two grounds – first, vagueness and second, the apparent uselessness of such knowledge. In the first place, it is vague because it is difficult to say exactly what the form of good is and what knowledge of it would entail. According to the theory of forms, the forms of good must exemplify some quality or set of qualities common to all things. However, things may be called 'good' in many different ways such as good book, good runner etc. It is difficult to isolate one specific sense of good common to all these uses. To many philosophers, good is used always in reference to a set of criteria specific to its object, which differs in different kinds of cases. But if as Plato believes the form of good supplies the intelligible principle according to which all things are ordered, it is difficult to explain the precise connections between the various senses in which things are called 'good' and their role in the rational pattern of things.

Second, since the connection between the form of the good and real world is indefinite, it is difficult to identify the practical value of knowing the forms. As Aristotle puts it, people engaged in different activities do not see the value in knowing the good for their work. For example, a weaver is not interested in the good, but only in making cloth. They are only interested in the specific criteria of goodness in their arts rather than the good by itself. The role the good plays in their art is difficult to specify. Moreover, craftsmen attain professionally in their

fields through study of the objects of their crafts, and not through studying metaphysics. Therefore, Aristotle gives importance to practicing wisdom. For him, practical wisdom is concerned with the needs and interests of particular individual in particular situation and deals with the concrete. The man of practical wisdom is able to assess particular situation in order to decide which rule to apply.

Another criticism can be that Plato denied participation of the average person in politics and decision making process. He defined citizenship not as participation, but in terms of shared benefits flowing from that principle because to allow participation would be to pave the way for the government by opinion. It can be argued that by denying the participation of average person, Plato was trying to prevent any opposition or dissent in his ideal state. He justified this exclusion on the grounds that it could lead to factionalism whereas the ideal society should promote the common good. Plato rejected majoritarianism and participation on the grounds that ordinary person did not have the capacity to comprehend absolute truth and the idea of good.

The platonic ideals were criticised by Aristotle as well for confusing unity with harmony. If a political community was tightly organised unified, it would cease to be a political association. The essence of a state was its diversity, making it different from organisations. The state and family represented two different kinds of organisations and both ought to remain that way without either imitating the other. In view of the nature of the state and governance, it would be better for a ruler to be worldly wise than to be wise in the world of ideas.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Critically analyse Plato's idea of Philosopher King.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2.4 LET US SUM UP

One of Plato's most influential contributions to philosophy is the Theory of Forms. In basic terms, Plato's Theory of Forms asserts that the physical world is not the 'real' world; instead, true reality exists beyond our physical world. Plato's philosophy asserts that there are two realms: the physical realm and the spiritual realm. The physical realm is the material stuff we see and interact with on a daily

basis; this physical realm is changing and imperfect. On the other hand, the spiritual realm exists beyond this physical realm. Plato calls this spiritual realm the Realm of Forms. Plato's Theory of Forms asserts that the physical realm is only a shadow, or image, of the true reality of the Realm of Forms. This is also a recurring theme in idea of the Philosopher King. Throughout the Republic, Plato emphasises the importance of having rulers who know the form of good. Plato holds that philosopher by his grasp of the idea of good was best qualified to rule. An important theme of Plato's social and political thought, especially of the *Republic*, is that philosophy alone offers true power - it is also the way to knowledge. The philosopher knows the forms and the ideals. He alone is fit to rule because for those who are guided by reason and knowledge alone should have the power. They alone are capable of establishing justice, to see that everyone contributes to the best of his abilities, of maintaining size and purity and unity of the state.

2.5 REFERENCES

Julia Annas. (2003). *Plato: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Subrata Mukherjee and Sushila Ramaswamy. (2007). *A History of Political Thought*. Prentice Hall. India.

Richard Kraut (ed.). (1992). *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Cambridge University Press.

2.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:

- Good Character
- Clam disposition
- Sound mind
- Truthfulness discipline, courage

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:

- Plato denied participation of average person in politics
- Plato confused unity with harmony