

Plato, the man

Plato was born in Athens c. 427 BC. He was probably of noble birth. As a young aristocrat the natural career path for him would have been to go into politics (indeed, it would have been expected).

A successful political career required skill at arguing. Many charged money to teach this skill. They were known as 'Sophists', and could make fortunes. But Socrates charged nothing and was the most skilled arguer in ancient Athens. So Plato, being a rich aristocratic cheapskate, decided to hang around with Socrates and learn debating skills that way.

Plato was present at the trial of Socrates and was horrified at the outcome. As a result Plato became disenchanted with politics and public life in general and devoted all his energies to philosophy instead.

He bought a house and turned it into the first ever university. Yes, that's right – a philosopher invented university! Anyway, the house had a name. It was called 'The Academy'. And that's where we get the word 'academy' from.

Plato wrote a large number of dialogues (the exact number is a matter of debate because the authenticity of some is still disputed). Socrates is his mouthpiece in nearly all of them.

In Plato's early dialogues (or those thought to be 'early' – no one knows for certain when, or in what order, they were written) the Socrates in the text is probably outlining the authentic views of the real Socrates. But in the dialogues of the middle and later periods the views are thought to owe more to Plato.

In his most famous work – The Republic - Plato argued that a 'just' state could only come into being if "philosophers become kings... or those now called kings... genuinely and adequately philosophise" So Plato was in favour of rule by philosophers.

Plato had been teaching at the Academy for twenty years and was quite an old man when he received an invitation to come to Sicily in order to try and turn its young King - Dionysius II – into a philosopher. In other words, Plato got the opportunity to try and actually bring about his ideal state. Plato, rather reluctantly, took up the offer. Unfortunately, not everyone can be turned into a philosopher and Dionysius had many shortcomings.

Plato's philosophical views were always a work in progress. He never presented his views as discussion-ending, signed-sealed and-delivered, final words on the nature of reality. Indeed, in one of his later works – the Parmenides - Plato subjected his own views to a withering attack (from which it is not clear they survive).

The Tripartite Soul

Plato's most famous work is the Republic. In it Plato outlines his vision of an ideal state – the first utopia - and also introduces his famous Theory of the Forms. We will start by looking at Plato's ideal state, and then go on to his Theory of the Forms.

The best way to approach Plato's political theory is, I think, via his analysis of the human soul.

Plato divided the soul (or 'personality') of man into three parts.

- The Appetitive or 'Desiring' Part
- The Spirited Part
- The Rational Part

The Appetitive Part of the soul is the source of our desires and cravings. Included here are our desires for the most fundamental of things (such as, food, physical comfort, and sex) as well as more refined things (such as, the desire for a fine wine and quality europop). So, the Appetitive Part of the soul is the source of an almost endless variety of desires.

The Spirited Part of the soul consists in an ability to concentrate one's energies in a certain direction. So the spirited part can harness the energies provided by the appetitive part, and can also resist desires: it has the power to control or regulate the appetitive element. But in itself it is blind and will focus energies in an arbitrary fashion if it is not under instruction.

The Reasoning Part contains insight, the ability to see through to the underlying reality. Reason also provides us with an overview - the ability to compare, contrast and evaluate the appetites that arise in us and to judge which is the more desirable.

Different parts of our souls, or personalities, can dominate. Someone dominated by the Desiring Part of the soul is driven by impulse: forced one way then another. Their life has neither direction, nor a fixed purpose.

Someone dominated by the Spirited Part of the soul craves honour and glory. They have goals and can control and harness their appetites in the pursuit of these goals. They are capable of courage, loyalty and patriotism. However, they lack proper judgement and discernment. As such they are just as likely to be loyal to evil causes as to good causes.

Someone that is dominated by reason, the first part of the soul, is a philosopher. They recognise the good and pursue it. They use their spirit to control their appetites, and channel their appetites towards serving the good.

Our soul operates harmoniously only when reason dominates. The Reasoning Part of our soul is the best qualified to govern the whole. It has, or can acquire, knowledge of what is good, of the true reality. Thus, it can, and will, direct the Spirited Part of the soul to harness, control and channel the appetites into serving the good.

So, the best sort of person to be – the best sort of soul to have – is one dominated by reason. Such a soul exhibits all of the virtues, which, for Plato, were: Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, and Justice.

However, the Desiring Part of our soul can only exhibit this virtue when it is under the control of the Spirited Part of our soul, and even then only when the spirit is under the control of reason. The Spirited Part of our soul exhibits the virtue of courage, but it only exhibits true courage when it is under the instruction of reason.

The Republic

We can apply Plato's analysis of the individual soul to society as a whole. (Plato does the reverse – he begins by presenting us with his picture of the ideal 'just' state and asks us to see how this illustrates, gives us insight into, what it is to be a 'just' individual.

The healthy state is analogous to the healthy individual. In the healthy individual reason dominates, and, assisted by spirit, assisted by the auxiliaries (the brave, strong, loyal and honourable) will govern the workers.

Plato divides the citizens of the state into three classes – the guardians, the auxiliaries, and the workers. Membership of these classes is determined by one's abilities (those who show early promise are singled out and given a special education). Depending upon their success (both educational and moral) a select few will make it to the rank of guardian whereupon they will begin a life of contemplation funded by the state. In return the guardians will, out of a sense of duty, reluctantly spend some of their time running the state. Note the word 'reluctantly'. Plato thought that anyone who wants to rule isn't fit to rule. Guardians – being philosophers – are happy with their contemplative inner lives and do not want power or glory or the hassle of having to rule.

The auxiliaries are the soldiers and police: the instruments of the state. The auxiliaries assist the guardians, providing the muscle needed to implement policies and to defend the state against enemies.

The workers are, as the name suggests, the workers. However, 'worker' includes business owners – basically anyone involved in the nitty-gritty of the economy. Because the workers are engaged in providing for the state they lack the leisure to engage in reasoned reflection and so lack the insight needed to make policy decisions. It is in their interests to be governed because they lack the skill and insight to govern themselves effectively.

In the healthy individual reason dominates. With the assistance of spirit, reason tempers our otherwise unruly desires. In a healthy state the wisest rule (analogous to 'reason' in the individual).

Today most of us (in the western world anyway) are democrats (by which I mean, 'in favour of democracy'). But Plato was very hostile to democracy and made some scathing criticisms of it as a form of government.

Democracy is rule by the people – the demos. But the people are not experts in ruling and have no training. Political decisionmaking requires great skill and judgement. The 'people' do not possess these skills and are ill equipped to recognise their presence in others. So, if the people are in charge the state will be governed by the people's arbitrary and uninformed desires, and furthermore those who will be 'elected' will tend to be those who lust after power and are good at rhetoric and pandering to fashion. The result is a disaster – a state that is governed by whim, by indulgence, by greed, selfishness and so on.

Families don't exist in Plato's republic, at least not in any traditional sense. At birth children are taken from their parents to be reared by specialists. This ensures that there are no obstacles to loyalty to the state as well as generating a stronger feeling of community, as children held in common. (Consider your own parents: are they more loyal to you, or to the state? Probably you. And that's the point. Plato thought that was unhealthy – the citizen's first loyalty should be to the state.)

You don't even get to choose your mate. Sex is regulated. Citizens are only allowed to have sex at special festivals. Your sexual partner is determined by a lottery.

Knowledge, Caves, and the Forms

The guardians, being those in whom reason is dominant, are ideally suited to govern. A ruler needs to see reality as it truly is and so see what is just.

For Plato, knowledge cannot be attained through the senses. Knowledge is of what is distinct, permanent, unchanging. But the sensible world - the world as revealed to us by our senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste) is indistinct, unfixed, and constantly changing. Everything in the sensible world is partly one thing, partly another. Everything in the sensible world is unstable, impure, and in tension. Because of this the sensible world is not truly, ultimately, 'real' and about it we can only have 'opinion'.

What, then, is real? Plato's answer is the 'Forms'. Have you ever seen a perfect circle? There aren't any in the sensible world. There are things that come close to being circles, but there are no perfect circles - in our sensible world anyway.

The perfect circle is one of the Forms. We recognise circular things in the sensible world only because we recognise them as imperfect reflections of the perfect circle – imperfect reflections of a Form.

The Forms are not limited to shapes. Plato thought that there were Forms for everything for which we have terms. Consider the quality of being green. Gooseberries, bogies and grass are all green. But what is greenness? It cannot be identified as any one of them. Greenness and grass are not one and the same thing – grass has the quality of being green, but it isn't greenness itself.

The same goes for goodness. Is anyone perfectly good? No, in the sensible world there are no perfectly good people. We can pick faults with anyone (Ghandi was a terrible litter bug and Mother Teresa swore like a trooper). But how could we recognise this if we didn't also recognise the ideal of moral perfection that they fall short of? The ideal of moral perfection is the Form of goodness.

Plato didn't use the word Form. He used Idea. But to our modern ears this is likely to mislead us into thinking that they are just something in the mind and nothing more. For Plato they are more than this: they actually exist. They are not just in minds, but recognised by minds. In fact, they are, in a sense, the only things that truly, ultimately, exist: everything else is indistinct and in flux, whereas the forms are distinct, unchanging and timeless.

The Forms, then, are distinct, unique, and unchanging. And as such it is the Forms that can be the object of knowledge.

It does not follow that one will have knowledge. In fact, a major problem for Plato's theory is to explain exactly how we can acquire knowledge of the Forms given that we are part of the sensible world. Plato held that it is through exercising our reason that we begin to see the reality of the Forms, but it is not entirely clear how this works, and in later works Plato explains by arguing that our souls have existed before birth in the intelligible realm, and through reasoning we come to 'remember' the Forms.