

# *A Brief History of Western Philosophy*

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# 2nd lesson

Plato and the Idea of  
Justice

1. Prior knowledge  
Q&A

*What are the features of the rational explanation of the philosophers of nature?*

*A. Systematic, theological, based on authority*

*B. Systematic, naturalistic, based on arguments*

*C. Ad hoc, theological, based on authority*

What Presocratic or philosopher of nature believed that fire was the origin and the cause of everything?

A. Parmenides

B. Thales

C. Heraclitus

**Why was Socrates sentenced to death by the people of Athens?**

A. He was accused of disobeying the law of Athens

B. He was accused of drinking hemlock in too much quantities

C. He was accused of corrupting the young and of not believing in the Gods of Athens

**Who were the sophists and how do we call their teachings?**

A. They were travelling teachers who taught skepticism

B. They were Athenian citizens who taught to believe in the Gods and traditions of Athens

C. They were foreign teachers who taught their student to search for truth and wisdom.

*Which one of them is a Socrates' teaching?*

*A. The unexamined life is not worth living*

*B. Be virtuous by pursuing your economic and social interests*

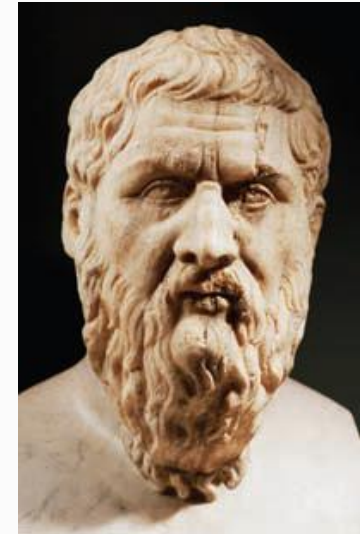
*C. The most important task in life is caring for your own children*



## *2. Plato's life and relevance*

## **PLATO** **(427-348 B.C.)**

*Plato came from an aristocratic Athenian family who groomed him to become a leading statesman in his society. To this end, he received the best education available in Athens.*



*However, while still a young man, Plato's life took a completely different course as the result of meeting Socrates and becoming his student. Years after Socrates' death, he started a school of philosophical studies, which could be considered the first university in the Western world. His school was called the Academy. Although it is difficult to distinguish neatly Socrates' from Plato's thought, it is thought that in the later writings, Plato used the voice of Socrates to present distinctively Platonic doctrines.*

## Plato's Relevance in Western Philosophy

- ◆ Plato attempted to give a solution to the problem posed by Parmenides and Heraclitus: the unity and the plurality, the being and the becoming, the eternal and the changing. Truth and opinion.
- ◆ His theory of forms or ideas would be the reference of any future rationalism (reason), and it would be in complementary opposition with his disciple, Aristotle, the reference of future empiricism (senses).
- ◆ The main feature of Plato's achievement is perhaps the way he laid down the highest standards for knowledge as absolutely universal, certain and necessary.

### *3. Plato's theory of forms or ideas*

## Theory of forms or ideas (eidos)

- ◆ However, since the physical world is constantly changing, sense perception gives us only relative (subjective) and temporary information about changing, particular things. Plato thought that ultimate knowledge must be objective, unchanging, and universal.
- ◆ Plato believed that the object of knowledge must be something that really exists independent of our mind, in the same way we say that mathematical truths correspond to properties of reality (objective, mind independent truth).
- ◆ Particular nations come and go and the degree of justice they manifest can rise or fall. But the objects of genuine knowledge such as true Justice or true Circularity are eternal and unchanging standards and objects of knowledge. To this standards, Plato called ideas or forms.

## *The idea of justice: controversy with Sophists*

- ◆ *Any reality partakes of its form in order to be. Then what is the form of a just act?*
- ◆ *For Sophists justice is the rule of the strongest.*
- ◆ *For Socrates, justice is the fulfilment of virtues, moral goodness, to do what is good.*

## *Plato's idea of justice (moral and political)*

- ◆ *The harmony of the parts within the whole, when each part rightly contribute (each does its job).*
- ◆ *Justice in the individual is harmony between desire, reason and temper (soul's health).*
- ◆ *Justice is doing one's own thing, or minding one's own business: it is harmony between the classes. Republic or society is just when each citizen fulfilled their own function.*



*Raffaell's fresco The School of Athens.*



## *4. Text on Plato's theory of forms or ideas*

In the following passage, Plato uses the character of Socrates to talk about perfect Justice, Beauty, Goodness, and Equality. He points out that we have never seen these standards in our experience of the physical world. For example, no matter how carefully we draw a circle on paper, the points on the drawn circle are not perfectly equal in distance from the center, but in true circles they are. Find out in this reading how Plato answers these questions through the voice of Socrates:

“-Well, but there is another thing, Simmias: Is there or is there not an absolute justice?

-Assuredly there is.

-And an absolute beauty and absolute good?

-Of course.

-But did you ever behold any of them with your eyes?

-Certainly not. . . .

-And shall we proceed a step further, and affirm that there is such a thing as equality, not of wood with wood, or of stone with stone, but that, over and above this, there is equality in the abstract? Shall we affirm this?

-Affirm, yes, and swear to it, replied Simmias, with all the confidence in life.

-And do we know the nature of this abstract essence?

-To be sure, he said. . . .

-And must we not allow that when I or anyone look at any object, and perceive that the object aims at being some other thing, but falls short of, and cannot attain to it—he who makes this observation must have had previous knowledge of that to which, as he says, the other, although similar, was inferior?

-Certainly.

-And has not this been our case in the matter of equals and of absolute equality?

-Precisely.

-Then we must have known absolute equality previously to the time when we first saw the material equals, and reflected that all these apparent equals aim at this absolute equality, but fall short of it? -That is true. . . .

-Then before we began to see or hear or perceive in any way, we must have had a knowledge of absolute equality, or we could not have referred to that the equals which are derived from the senses, for to that they all aspire, and of that they fall short?

-That, Socrates, is certainly to be inferred from the previous statements.

-And did we not see and hear and acquire our other senses as soon as we were born?

-Certainly.

-Then we must have acquired the knowledge of the ideal equal at some time previous to this? -Yes.

-That is to say, before we were born, I suppose? -True.

-And if we acquired this knowledge before we were born, and were born having it, then we also knew before we were born and at the instant of birth not only equal or the greater or the less, but all other ideas; for we are not speaking only of equality absolute, but of beauty, goodness, justice, holiness, and all which we stamp with the name of essence in the dialectical process, when we ask and answer questions. Of all this we may certainly affirm that we acquired the knowledge before birth?

-That is true. . . .

-But if the knowledge which we acquired before birth was lost by us at birth, and afterwards by the use of the senses we recovered that which we previously knew, will not that which we call learning be a process of recovering our knowledge, and may not this be rightly termed recollection by us? -Very true. . . .

Then may we not say, Simmias, that if, as we are always repeating, there is an absolute beauty, and goodness, and essence in general, and to this, which is now discovered to be a previous condition of our being, we refer all our sensations, and with this compare them—assuming this to have a prior existence, then our souls must have had a prior existence, but if not, there would be no force in the argument?

*5. Questions for text  
comprehension*

1. According to Socrates in the text, how is it that we can think about the perfect standards of Justice, Beauty, Goodness, and Equality if they are never found in our experience?

*Answer A*

Because we acquired this knowledge before our birth and thus we come to our existence already with ideas of justice, beauty, equality, goodness and so on.

*Answer B*

Because although our senses conceals the perfect standards or ideas of justice, goodness and on, our mind can go beyond and can abstract the ideas out of our experience.

*Answer C*

Because our standards of justice, beauty, goodness and so on are taught in schools and through political institutions and social media.

2. According to Socrates, are absolute Equality, Goodness, and the rest simply ideas in our minds, or are they realities that exist independently of us?

*Answer A*

Ideas are not in our minds, they are realities which can be known in this world of senses through objective knowledge.

*Answer B*

Ideas are in our minds, for Plato they exist dependent of our minds, and we acquire them through our senses, it is his way of explaining objectivity in human knowledge.

*Answer C*

Ideas are not in our minds, for Plato they exist independently of our minds, and we compare with them what we encounter in our experience to recognize that something is equal or good.

3. Find the words that complete this sentence: "What we call learning will be — — — —, and surely we should be right in calling this — — — —." What does Socrates mean by this statement?

*Answer A*

Plato through Socrates' voice is pointing at a our current existence where we come to know ideas by recollecting our experiences, so he considers learning the p r o c e s s o f remembering those past experiences in life.

*Answer B*

Plato through Socrates' voice is refering at a prior existence where our souls came to know the i d e a s o f everything, so he considers learning the p r o c e s s o f remembering that knowledge obscured by our senses.

*Answer C*

Plato through Socrates' voice is pointing at a prior knowledge learned through life but constantly forgotten, and thus the process of learning is that effort to not forget what we learned especially in our childhood.



## Summary

### *Plato's theory of forms or ideas*

Plato thought that knowledge is possible because it refers to unchanging forms that constitute the essence or nature of sensible objects. The truth is in the objective knowledge of these forms, whereas our experience can only feed opinions (not true knowledge).

### *controversy about the idea of justice*

While Sophists such as Thrasymachus thought that justice is the interest and the rule of the strongest. Socrates thought justice to be a virtue, that of a morally good man. Plato develops this position and states that actually justice is the harmony of the parts within the whole (individual and society)

# Thanks!

Any questions?

See you next week

# *History of Western Philosophy*

*This presentation and the program of the subject  
can be found at this website:*

[\*https://www.danigareses.wixsite.com/pensarenespanol\*](https://www.danigareses.wixsite.com/pensarenespanol)

