



McKenzie Study Center, an Institute of Gutenberg College

## Handout 4

### The Bible and the History of Ideas

Teacher: John A. "Jack" Crabtree

## Plato

### A. Plato vis à vis Socrates

#### 1. Plato was a student of Socrates.

- a. Commitment to the priority of understanding and to the philosophical pursuit of understanding; commitment to goodness.
- b. Expanded the scope of Socrates philosophical inquiry: from seeking an understanding of those truths that define how a man should live to seeking an understanding of the cosmos, reality, and everything.
- c. Method of dialectic reasoning; but he expanded the domain over which it was to be utilized.
- d. Plato was a "rational mystic" who turned philosophy into a sort of religious mystical pursuit (*a la* Pythagoreanism).

#### 2. Plato, more than Socrates, reflected Greek philosophical prejudices.

- a. Define philosophical prejudice.
  - i. *Freedom / democracy / diversity / fairness*
- b. Greek philosophical prejudice reflected by and established by Plato:
  - i. *The Greek Dichotomy (one thing commonly meant when referring to something as "Platonic"):*

<b>Spiritual</b>	<b>Non-spiritual</b>
<b>Immaterial</b>	<b>Material</b>
<b>Good</b>	<b>Bad / evil</b>
<b>Beautiful</b>	<b>Non-beautiful</b>
<b>Perfect</b>	<b>Imperfect</b>
<b>Real</b>	<b>Unreal</b>
<b>Unchangeable</b>	<b>Changeable</b>
<b>One</b>	<b>Many</b>
<b>Simple</b>	<b>Composite</b>
<b>Rational</b>	<b>Non-rational</b>
<b>Eternal</b>	<b>Non-eternal</b>
<b>Immortal</b>	<b>Mortal</b>
<b>Universal</b>	<b>Particular</b>
<b>Infinite</b>	<b>Finite</b>

- ii. *This Greek Dichotomy will work its way into Christian thought for centuries (millennia) to come. It is NOT consonant with the biblical worldview!!*
  - (A) To interpret the Bible through the lenses of this philosophical prejudice can only distort our understanding of the Bible and its worldview.
  - (B) Most early Christian thinkers were Platonists. They read and thought about the Bible from a Platonic perspective.
    - (1) Indeed, early Christian theology is a syncretism of Platonism and biblical ideas.
    - (2) The more familiar a believer is with Platonism, the better equipped he will be to sort out and untangle the Biblical from the Platonic in the attitudes and teachings of Christianity.
- c. Plato’s (Greek?) Concept of “Real” / Plato’s (Greek?) Continuum of Being
  - i. *Real = not vulnerable to NOT-existing*
    - (A) Real does NOT = being concrete (this is the modern notion).
  - ii. *Reality is a continuum of gradual gradations of being.*
    - (A) Objects can be more or less real from one another.
    - (B) Not the case that an object can only be either real or not-real.
  - iii. *Biblical view is NOT Plato’s view; but it is closer to Plato’s view than to the modern view.*
    - (A) In biblical view, there are two kinds or levels of being: transcendent, necessary being (God) and contingent being (created reality).
      - (1) The “reality” of each level is better described as Platonism would: vulnerability to non-existence.
- d. Plato’s (Greek?) Knowledge-Object Correlation
  - i. *Objects in reality that are more real are known with a higher form of knowledge*
  - ii. *Allegory of the Cave*
  - iii. *Impact on Christian thought*
    - (A) concept of “contemplation” of God
    - (B) concept of “faith” as highest form of knowing
    - (C) concept of faith as absolutely certain and as perfect knowledge

## **B. Plato’s Theory of Forms**

### **1. Two kinds of sameness**

- a. Qualitative sameness
  - i. *He is the same as his identical twin.*
  - ii. *That Snickers bar is the same as that other Snickers bar.*

- b. Numerically identical sameness.
  - i. *He is the same man I saw at the library yesterday.*
  - ii. *That is my Snickers bar. It is the same bar I had in my hand a second ago.*Also, “representational sameness” is a third kind of sameness.

**2. Reason is capable of judging two beings to be “the same.”**

- a. Mystery: how do we recognize that two things are the same when their differences are as numerous and striking as their similarities?
  - i. *Saint Bernard, Mexican Chihuahua, and cartoon drawing of dog are all the same; they are all a dog.*
- b. Plato’s answer: they all “participate” in one and the same “form” (or “Idea” or “Arche” = universals).
  - i. *Qualitative sameness is explained in terms of numerically identical sameness.*

**3. Plato’s Basic Insight**

- a. Universals are concepts that have a standing in reality itself; they are not inventions of the mind of man; they have actual being in objective reality outside of man.
- b. Universals (forms) are somehow more real, really, than the particulars to which they apply.

**4. Simplistic version of Plato’s Theory of Forms**

- a. All of the forms (universals) exist in a parallel world alongside this material world; a world apart from this one, but corresponding to it, that is real, eternal, and unchanging.

**5. Alternate (less-simplistic) interpretation of Plato’s Theory of Forms**

- a. All of the forms (universals) exist in a sphere of existence apart from the changing, sensible world. But they do not exist in some other place than this changing, sensible world.
- b. They exist with a sort of reality that is independent of the empirical reality of individual things; but they don’t exist in any other PLACE than within individual things.

**6. Aristotle’s critique of Plato seems to suggest that Plato taught the simplistic view.**

**7. Plato’s other distinctive doctrines are reflected in his Theory of Forms:**

- a. The “FORMS” exist in a hierarchical order of ONE-containing-MANY and MANY-existing-within-ONE.
  - i. *The ONE = Absolute Beauty = The GOOD (Absolute Good).*
  - ii. *All the various eternal FORMS are contained in the Good, the One, the Beautiful; they are logically subordinate to the ONE; they all “participate” in the ONE.*
  - iii. *Many other levels of subordination exist below this first level until you reach a level of “atomic ideas (forms).”*

- (A) An atomic idea is an idea that can be analyzed no further.
- (B) Atomic ideas exist on the boundary of the "intelligible world" and the "sensible world."
- b. The ONE and the eternal Forms are very, very real; the objects in the sensible world are barely real at all.
- c. The foundational ideas (the *Arche*) can be apprehended in one of two ways:
  - i. *discursively*
  - ii. *intuitively (mystically, through a kind of rational contemplation)*
    - (A) This appears to be achieved through a proper preparation of a disciplined, intellectual, discursive search.
- d. Grasping the eternal Forms (the *Arche*) and/or the ONE that subsumes them is the highest form of knowledge; it is the true fulfillment of a human being (*eudaimonia*).
  - i. *How does this compare to eudaimonia in the biblical perspective?*

## C. Other doctrines or concepts of note in Plato

### 1. Regarding knowledge:

- a. Knowledge is not sense perception (which is mere appearance or seeming); knowledge is judgment.
  - i. *Plato puts the history of ideas on a path of rationalism, not empiricism; empiricism will need to be revived.*
    - (A) Biblical view is that knowledge comes from sound reasoning from and about empirical data.
      - (1) Radical empiricism is a mistake.
      - (2) Radical rationalism is a mistake.
- b. True knowledge = true belief with an account (*logos*).

### 2. Regarding the soul:

- a. Following Pythagoreans, Plato understood the soul to be tripartite: (i) Rational part, (ii) Spirited part (will-power, motivation), (iii) Appetitive part (appetite, desires).
  - i. *Tripartite view of soul is attempt to do justice to our experience: we have to overcome our passions in order to be and do what is good.*
- b. The soul (or is it just the rational part of it?) is immortal.
- c. Seemed to teach judgment after death and the transmigration of souls (re-incarnation).

### 3. Regarding morality:

- a. The rational part of the soul must succeed in ruling over the other parts of the soul.
- b. *Eudaimonia* consists in the right cultivation of the human soul = the development of a person's rational (and, therefore, his moral) being.

- i. Pursuing philosophy is a means to true eudaimonia and to goodness.*
- c. A man never knowingly chooses what is harmful to him (evil) > Socratic or Platonic doctrine?
  - i. Compare to biblical view.*

**D. Plato's Republic is a mystery (to me).**