

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007  
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## I. Plato's theory of forms.

Last week we saw that Plato thinks that knowledge must be firm and stable.  
Thus, we can not have knowledge of the changing world, the world of becoming.  
Instead, any knowledge must be of the world of eternal truths, the world of forms.  
Perhaps mathematical examples will make Plato's point clear.  
We have lots of mathematical knowledge.  
E.g. the central angle in a circle is twice the measure of an inscribed angle which intercepts the same arc.  
But, we never have any sensory experience with circles, and their arcs.  
The theorems we know hold only of perfect mathematical objects.  
Similarly, we never experience anything perfectly straight, or pitched, or just, or beautiful.  
We must have knowledge of the perfect archetypes, since we can compare sensible things to them.

Though there are several problems with the theory of forms, it will take us far afield to talk too much about the problems.

Plato himself acknowledged the problems, in the *Parmenides*.

I will just mention the Third Man Argument, which Aristotle thought was convincing.

Participation in a form explains why we call anything by its name.

We call the form blueness blue.

Thus, the form blueness itself must be blue.

Then, how do we explain the resemblance between a blue object and the form of blueness?

There must be another form, which itself, by a similar argument, must also be blue.

That is, the theory of forms says that for any two objects with a common property, there is a third object which explains the commonality.

Since the third object will also have that property, there will be another blueness, and another after that, and, indeed, an infinite number of blue forms.

There are turtles all the way down.

All of the infinite number of forms lack an explanation of their similarity.

So, the theory of forms fails to explain what it set out to explain.

We will put aside criticisms of the forms, for now, to focus on Plato's account of the nature of the soul.  
For more on Plato's theory of the forms, see Plato's *Parmenides*, and *Republic*.

## II. The argument from recollection

The first argument for the immortality of the soul relies on the existence of these forms.

In summary, Plato argues that knowledge of the forms must precede any knowledge of particulars.

Learning thus must be recollection, and the soul must have been acquainted with the forms prior to birth.

The argument starts by characterizing recollection.

Recollection can come from experiencing something we once knew.

It might be from something similar, or something dissimilar.  
So, I can look at my watch and think of my daughter.  
Or, I can see a picture of her.  
So, recollection is defined as seeing one thing, but thinking of another.

When I see the picture of my daughter, I can note similarities and dissimilarities with my idea of her.  
In order to note the similarities and differences, I have to know both my daughter and the picture.  
That is, I have to know when two things are equal, and unequal, in order to compare them.  
So, I must have knowledge of equality.

Where could I have gotten my knowledge of equality?  
It seems that my thoughts of the form of equality are triggered by my experiences with ordinary objects, comparing logs, stones, etc.  
I can compare logs, and see their similarities and differences.  
Still, I know that equality, as applied to logs, is not real equality.  
Real equality must be absolute identity, which I never experience with my senses.  
There are no two identical snowflakes, or logs.  
Further, I could not have gotten my idea of equality from the logs and stones, since I would need to have it already in order to use it.  
So, I must be recalling it.

If I am recalling the forms, then my knowledge of them must precede my birth.  
So, the soul has to be able to exist independently of the body.  
See Plato's *Meno*, for a longer argument that knowledge is recollection.

Here is a generalized version of Plato's argument for the existence of the soul:

1. Humans have knowledge of non-sensible objects.
  2. The body can not account for such knowledge.
- So, there must be something else, call it a soul, which is responsible for it.

The argument about recollection just goes to support the second premise.  
The form of Plato's argument has appeared repeatedly throughout history.  
Chomsky calls it a poverty of the stimulus argument.  
Plato is saying that the stimulus, our experience with sensible objects, is too minimal to explain our knowledge of the forms.  
Chomsky uses a poverty of the stimulus argument to conclude that there is a universal grammar hard-wired into every person's brain.  
Descartes uses a poverty of the stimulus argument for ends similar to Plato's, to argue that our knowledge of mathematical truths, and of God, must be innate.

### III. The cyclical argument

Morton calls the other argument he reprints the cyclical argument.  
The argument is that the soul preceded us: 70c-72a.  
(In a portion not reprinted in our book, 79b-81a, Socrates also argues that the soul outlives us; see p 13 in

the Morton text for a brief summary.)

Socrates first argues that any quality of a thing arises from participation in its opposite form.

For example, sleeping from waking; something can get bigger only if it was smaller.

Then, he states that living and death are opposites, so living things must come from dying things.

1. For any property that has an opposite, an object comes to participate in one of the pair only by losing participation in the other.
2. Living and death are opposites.  
So, one comes to life only from death.

In questioning the first premise, you might wonder whether all opposites behave this way.

In particular, you might wonder whether living and death are like getting bigger and getting smaller.

Essentially, Plato is arguing from analogy.

The problem with arguments from analogy is that everything is like everything else, in some respect.

And nothing is like anything else in every respect.

So, the question is always whether the two things which are supposed to be analogous are analogous in the right way.

For example, consider that trains are like buses.

For someone who does not know what a train is, but knows what a bus is, the analogy might be useful.

They both carry passengers and ride on wheels.

But, you could not conclude, from the fact that buses have pneumatic tires, that trains do.

Here is a more interesting argument from analogy.

Iraq is like Vietnam. Since Vietnam went so badly, we should get out of Iraq immediately.

Now, if the analogy holds, *in the right way*, then the conclusion follows.

So, the argument must be examined to determine if Iraq and Vietnam are analogous in the right way.

In the case at hand, the analogy is that life and death are opposites *in the relevant way* to other opposites, like bigness and smallness, such that the one only comes from the other.

Here, I think, Plato has no support.

He shores up this part of the argument by noting that all opposites have two processes which represent the cycling from one to the other (e.g. getting bigger).

Then, it is clear that there is a process of going from living to death.

So, we can verify that living and death are similar to other opposites in this way.

Still, that does nothing to show that there is a process of going from death to living, which is what Socrates is trying to establish.

Our focus, in examining this argument, should be on the nature of the mind.

We can tell that Plato takes the mind to be eternal.

Or, at the least, longer-lasting than, and pre-existing to, the body.

Either way, the soul is independent of the body.

Also, note that Plato's soul is not exactly what we think of as a mind, today.

In other writings, Plato indicates that the soul is divided into three parts: a rational part, an appetitive part, and a spirited part.

See the *Republic*, Book IV, especially.

Furthermore, while there are sensory impressions, pure intellect is focused on abstract forms, which are not available to the senses.

Our sensory mental states are less important, or less real, than the purer states.

#### IV. A word about Aristotle

For Plato, the body and the soul were two distinct kinds of things.

The soul consorts with the forms, while the body is stuck in the sensible world.

Remember that Plato's theory of forms was constructed to explain why objects have their properties.

Aristotle was less skeptical about worldly causes.

He was a scientist, at heart, and saw causes as essentially material.

Where Plato took the unchanging forms to be the most real things, Aristotle took particular objects, what he called primary substances, to be the starting point of our reasoning.

Aristotle did not have a modern notion of causation, but he shared with us the idea that causes of change in the perceivable world are to be explained primarily by reference to the things in the sensible world, and not by appealing to an independent world of perfect, unchanging realities.

How could a world of unchanging realities cause change in the sensible world, anyway?

I'll try to remember the copies of Reading Guide #2 for next class, on Wednesday.

We should be able to start reading Descartes, then.

Please start by reading the second meditation, pp 75-9 in Morton.