
Platonic Theory of Ideas

Platon'un İdealar Kuramı

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Abstract: Undoubtedly, Plato's most fundamental philosophical foundation is the theory of Ideas; not only his ontological and epistemological discussions but also his politics, ethics and other aspects of his thoughts are directly or indirectly affected by this theory. This Platonic view has traversed a large part of the history of philosophy. Meanwhile, the author has considered Aristotle's criticism of the theory of Ideas to be important, because first, he was a direct disciple of Plato; secondly, since he was himself a great philosopher like his teacher, his criticisms will be certainly precise. However, unfortunately, Aristotle was also exposed to the accusation of misunderstanding and even the inner affluence in explaining Plato's view on the Ideas, and that in some cases the theory of Platonic Ideas has been introduced so rude and insignificant that as if this theory has no justification. The author has tried to go through the moderation of these extremes and claimed that these philosophers be exonerated of these accusations, and as much as possible to do justice in explaining the theory of Ideas.

Keywords: Ideas, cause and effect compatibility, universals, singulars, ontology, epistemology.

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Introduction

It is worth noting, before discussing the theory of Ideas, that this theory has been studied by historians of philosophy both ontologically and epistemologically. Because the theory is closely related to both parts of Plato's philosophy; he, in fact, solves both the ontological and epistemological problems of his philosophy with this theory, and for this reason, the author believes that affirmation or denial of this theory has a fundamental effect in Plato's philosophy. It is not so, for example, that if, for example, someone rejected a Platonic theory of Ideas, he rejected only one theory of Plato, but, in general, the rejection of this question implies questioning all of Plato's philosophy, and accepting it means accepting many of the logical and philosophical requirements of this theory.

Theory of Ideas

Plato explains his theory in an analogy, called the "analogy of the cave", which is summarized as follows:

In Plato's view, the human beings living in the natural world, that is, the present universe, are like prisoners who are so fastened from the beginning by the chains unwantedly and unknowingly in an underground cave that they are not able to see out of the cave and sunlight at all.

Now, if these prisoners of the cave are released and look outside the cave, and they are told, look at the facts that had already been shadowed by them (*ie* within the cave) and considered them to be a false reality, due to the high brightness of the light they are blinded and think that the shadows they were familiar with in the cave are more real than the real and extraterrestrial realities. Plato believes that the majority of human beings are like those prisoners who live their lives in "imagination" and see only the shadows of reality and hear only true sound reflections (Coppleston, 1989: 190-1).

He goes on to say that if one of these released prisoners accustomed his eyes to the brightness and can see the very tangible objects in the light of the fire representing the visible sun, then he would be in the state of "opinion," because he has been able to see the sensible things and not their shadows. After these two phases, there are two other stages, although they may appear the same, but they are in fact two stages. The third



stage is that the person goes out from the cave to the sunlight with constant and diligent efforts, and sees the world in the sunlight and clear things that represent the realities of the rational realities. Eventually, in the fourth stage, the seeker can see the sun itself, representing the Idea of the good and the supreme form, the general cause of all the right and beautiful beings, and the source of truth and reason, and reach the stage of "knowledge" (Copleston, 1989, 191; Russell, 1986: 196-7).

Why did Plato inquire about the theory of Ideas? In other words, which philosophical, cosmological, and epistemological problem Plato had intention to solve with the theory of Ideas? To answer this question, we examine the theory from both the ontological and epistemological views. Because Plato seems to have organized and developed both areas due to his theory of Ideas.

In this section, we deal with the definition of knowledge in Plato's view, in order to determine why we, in Plato's view, need real-world knowledge to understand and reach true knowledge.

In Plato's view, true knowledge must have two characteristics:

- A. It must correspond to its object. That is to say, it is infallible.
- B. It must be about "what it is". So it does not belong to nothing or what's happening or "becoming" at all. That is to say, it does belong only and solely to the constant being.

With regard to the qualities that Plato mentions for knowledge, we conclude that, in his opinion, the knowledge is not equal to judgment, since a judgment may be a mistake; also the knowledge does not equal to the correct judgment, because the correct judgment may be unconscious and without knowledge and pure imitated, and so-called a person from whom has been issued the correct judgment or has spoken or written is not conscious of correspondence of his statement with the reality.

Sense perception is by no means an indication of true knowledge, because the sense perception is both fallible and variable, it has none of the two conditions of knowledge.

Additionally, knowledge is not a true judgment plus a "expression", whether it means the correct opinion, or it means analyzing something into its original components. Meanwhile, knowledge does not mean the



ability to mention the sign by which the object in question is distinguished from other objects (Copleston, 1989: 178; Malekian, 2000, 199-201; Russell: 1986: 228-32).

So where and by what means the true knowledge of Plato is obtained with regard to its specific features by him? It is clear that the only means for gaining true knowledge is not the sense but reason, and the place of true knowledge is not the sensible world that is constantly in change, but another world beyond this sensible one and beyond the sense; Plato has called that the world of Ideas and considers the true object of knowledge an Idea and a rational form.

Therefore, Plato has reached from epistemology to ontology. His theory of Ideas, which is an ontological theory, is based on his epistemological view, because Plato believes that because we have knowledge corresponding with reality, and because the object of this knowledge cannot be the sensible world, so there is a world of Forms or Ideas that are our object of true knowledge.

On the other hand, Plato's epistemology is also based on his ontology, since Plato, when he wants to prove true knowledge, says that there is the world of Ideas, so we can have true knowledge; that is, to prove the existence and possibility of true knowledge in the natural world is not possible. Additionally, Plato states that knowledge must correspond to reality, and then concludes that this correspondence cannot really mean the correspondence to sensible objects, since sensible objects are constantly changing, while this is an ontological not epistemological proposition; that the sensible objects are constantly becoming is an ontological rather than epistemological matter, hence his epistemology precisely is based on ontological discussions and proves at least some of the ontological propositions, including the above mentioned proposition (Malekian, 2000: 222-3; Copleston, 1989: 178-82). In other words, in order to prove the theory of Ideas, Plato first divides the world into two parts, the objective world which includes the world of forms (Ideas) on one side and the world of images on the other. Plato's meaning of an objective world is a world that exists outside the human mind. Therefore, he does not mean the objectivity of the world of Ideas as to be any way of the existence opposed to which is nothing.



Plato distinguishes between the two parts of the world, that is, the world of objects and the world of the images that we briefly describe:

- In the world of Ideas, unlike the image world, every being has an Idea.

- The world of Ideas, contrary to the image world, is the world of perfection.

- The world of Ideas is stable, while the world of image is originally in change.

- The beings of the world of Ideas (intelligible world) are absolute, but the those of the image world (the sensible world) are relative.

- The beings of the world of Ideas (intelligible world) are pure, but the those of the image world (the sensible world) are mixed.

- In the world of Ideas the beings are eternal, but in the sensible world (an image of Ideas) the beings are non-eternal.

- The beings (of the intelligible world) are not in place, while the beings (of the sensible world) are in place.

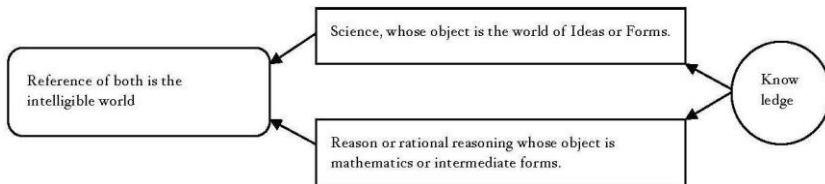
- Finally, the beings of the intelligible world are self-subsistent, whereas the beings of the sensible world are dependent to the other.

It is worth noting that Plato's meaning of the sensible world is two things:

A. Picture and image of the world of Ideas

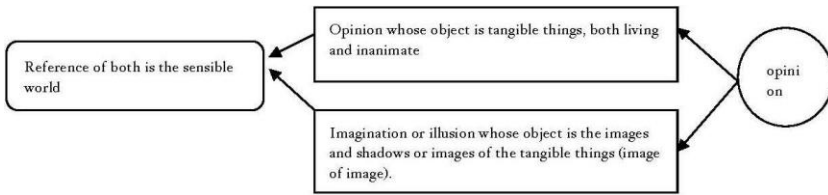
B. Copy and image of sensible beings

For Plato, the world of Ideas is the real world, and the sensible world is the image of that world. He has also divided knowledge, according to the sensible and intelligible world.



And he divides the opinion in the following way:





Let's now consider what the reasons for proving the world of Ideas are. His reasons are briefly:

The necessity of being unity over multiplicity: for example, there are many objects having unity in one thing, for example, beauty, and because the common and unified reference of all these beauties is not existed in this world, we conclude that this very reference must be in a world beyond the tangible world (that is, the world of Ideas).

- The reasons derived from the sciences: for example, in the geometric definition, the existence of an object represented by this definition is required.

- The durability of the object's imagination after its degeneration: this requires the stability of the object of knowledge and its non-compliance with the change of objects.

- In addition, since the rational things are real beings, and they are not in the mind, as Aristotle believed later nor in the sensible world, which, due to change cannot be the reference of rational things, we conclude that these rational things must exist in the world of Ideas.

- Also, with regard to the existence of the soul before this world, as his founding principle, Plato is inevitably led to believe in the existence of the world of Ideas, that the spirit existed before the body in that world.

Some Criticisms on the Theory of Ideas

Some critiques on theory of Ideas, since Plato proposes it, has so far been enormous and varied, but in the meantime, the critiques of Aristotle, both due to the age and the fact that Aristotle himself was a student of Plato are more important.

Aristotle had several major criticisms to the theory of Plato, which can be briefly summarized and placed in several categories (Aristotle, 2000: 35-40):



1. From Plato's point of view, general concepts are real not mere imaginative, illusory, or mental. The so-called universals are not mere subjective to being present only in the mind, but they are reality and objectivity. Now, the question asked of Plato is whether the negations and relations are of Ideas. If it is said, these are also of Ideas, in this case, this is contrary to external reality, because it is certain that these things do not have external reality; and if it is said that these cases are not of Ideas, then it will be said that at least some of the universals, which are relations and negations, are not of Ideas.

2. Aristotle believes that the theory of Ideas is useless. for some reasons:

A) The theory has led to a useless doubling of the sensible objects. Plato, in order to explain the multiplicity of the world, devised the theory of Ideas. In other words, Plato is like a person who, because he cannot count with a small number, thinks it will be easier to count if the number doubles (Copleston, 1989: 236-7).

B) The Platonic Forms are useless regarding our knowledge of objects. In other words, they do not give us new knowledge of sensible things. Because the forms are not the substances of the objects of this world and are outside the objects of this world, not within them.

C) Platonic forms are also useless in explaining the movements of objects. Because the forms do not move, but the objects of this world are moving. The question now is from where is the movement of the sensible objects of this world (which, according to Plato, are copies of Ideas)?

2. In Aristotle's view, the theory of Ideas is absurd.

A. According to Plato's theory, the Ideas are separate from the objects of the world and are in the world of Ideas, while it is not possible for the substance to be separate from that which it is its substance. So, we conclude that it is impossible the Ideas as the substances of the objects of the sensible world be separate from these objects.

From Plato's point of view, sensible things depend on the intelligible things through the similarity or participation. Similarity means that the sensible things are similar to the world of Ideas, and participation means that they have a participation from the intelligible things of the world of



Ideas. Plato has used both interpretations. Accordingly, according to the similarity the evolution means the increase of similarity of sensible things with the world of Ideas, and on the basis of participation, it is to increase the exploitation of the sensible things of the world of Ideas. Now, if we accept any one of these two issues, the problem is not resolved, because:

1. If we say that sensible objects are similar to the Forms (the intelligible world), then the argument of the "third man" comes up; that is, it is said that, for example, for the similarity of this man with that intelligible man, there must also be a third object, so using the rule of "the similar of the similar is similar," we can say this is like that. Because there is no perfect similarity between two things, because then there are not two things, but one and the same thing; the similarity is either in one aspect or in several aspects.

Plato may, of course, respond that any similar is not similar to the similar. For example, if A is similar to B, there is no reason to assume a third thing for similarity of object A to B. Therefore, there is no need to assume an intermediary called "c" to prove the similarity of A and B (Makleian, 2000: 220-1; Copleston, 1989: 336-41).

2. But if it is said that the objects of the sensible world participate from the world of Ideas, then the question arises whether the objects of the sensible world have all the participation of that, or some of it; if it is said to have all the participation of it, in this case, the following two states arise: both states are incorrect according to Plato's view:

A. It implies that there is only one individual from each object and all the participation have been taken by that individual, whereas in the sensible world we have many objects, not one individual.

B. It implies that we have the complete object in the sensible world; whereas the sensible world is a defective one, not the perfection world.

But if it is said that the sensible objects have some participation from the world of Ideas, then there are two probabilities that both are incompatible with Plato's foundations:

A. It implies that the sensible objects are not the same beings of the world of Ideas;

B. Also, there is no reason for unified naming of all the objects, be-



cause each of the objects of the sensible world has taken part of the world of Ideas, and their shares are not the same, so we cannot put a single name on them.

It is worth noting that Plato can say in answer to this difficulty that it is not a problem in naming. Because the objects are homogenous and therefore the components are not incommensurable, so that they do not have a common name, and Plato also says that the form and the Idea of the paper, for example, are homogenous (Malekian, 2000: 221).

C. Other objection is that all objects cannot be generated from the Forms. Of course, it refers to the sensible things, because there is no compatibility between sensible things and the forms of the world of Ideas (intelligible beings). While the requisite of issuing the effect from the cause is that there is a certain compatibility between the two.

D. The forms of objects, as well as other objects whose forms are their forms, will be individual. While forms should not be individuals, they must be universal. For example, an Ideal man will be an individual like Socrates. In addition, based on the assumption that there must be a "form" or an eternal type when a large number of objects have a common name, we must set up a third man, that not only Socrates but also the Idea man be an imitation of it. Because Socrates and the Idea man have a common nature, then beyond these two, there must be a self-subsistent universal man and it implies regression. Previously, this is also referred to, proposed as the issue of similarity and participation.

Of course, this critique of Aristotle comes only when Plato considered Forms to be objects, while Plato considered Forms to be self-subsistent concepts that, in an organized system, constituted the rational building of the world, which is almost similar to the theory of Ideas (Coppleston, 1989: 239-40).

5. There is a longitudinal system among the essential concepts. For example, the animal is a corporeal growing sensitive, volitionally moving substance. Now, if we want to define man, we will add to this definition the concept rational too. In this case, there is a longitudinal system between man and animal. Man is along the animal and the animal along the growing and the growing along the body etc. It is necessary that if



something wants to be human, then it must be the body, also the growing, the animal, and this is incompatible with this that there is purity in the world of Ideas.

Also, there is difficulty in the accidental natural concepts; in addition to the aforementioned difficulty, the difficulty is that, since the accident is dependent to substance, it is asked about the accidental form and Idea, for example the Idea of white, whether it is also dependent to the substance which in this case it is not pure, while the Idea of anything should be pure; if it is said that it is not dependent to substance, then it will be said that so it is not the Idea and the form of this particular accident (for example whiteness) (Malekian, 2000: 226; Russell, 1986: 244-5).

In addition, in the relative accidental concepts, such as the concept of love, this problem also arises; for example, the Idea of love requires the Idea of the lover and the loved, and the so-called Idea of love will be established between two humans, while Plato believes that any general form has only one individual, and the same is true of the concept of hatred and other relative accidental concepts. The question is whether the yellow Idea is yellow? If it is not yellow, it does not look like the color of this world, and if it is yellow, then it would be necessary an intelligible object to be material, which is also impossible (Malekian, 2000: 226-7).

Conclusion

1. It seems that the basis for most of Aristotle's critiques on Plato is the question of the compatibility between cause and effect. That is, Aristotle wants, according to the fact that between the cause and effect must be compatibility, to prove that there is no compatibility between Ideas that are general, abstract and of eight characteristics, as mentioned before, and the sensible world, so that the relation between these two worlds be explained. On the other hand, Plato, to get rid of this dilemma, has devised the concept of *Damiurge*, which is not a completely clear subject.

2. Both Plato and Aristotle consider knowledge as universal; with the difference that Plato considers universality to be intelligible, real and independent, while he says that sensible singulars without universals are illusory and uncertain. They are visual appearance of intelligible things and attributable to them (Papkin & Strole, 1980: 280).



But Aristotle sees the separation of the universals from the details only in the mind and not in the outside, and sees the singulars to be in mind not in the external world and considers the sense as introduction of knowledge and the external individuals as real beings; for him the discovery of their nature and truth depends to the observation and induction leading to their essential definitions (Foroughi, 1988: 336-41; Brehier, 1995: 244-6). But his theory of universals is also unclear, much like the metaphysics of Plato.

In Aristotle's view, individuals are really substance, but the universals are not so except in the secondary and derivative sense. The individual is a real substance, because it is a subject of predication and is not a predicate of others. But the species of man is secondarily substance; that is, only because it is an object of knowledge. Because the essential element has a reality higher than the individual as individual (Copelston, 1989: 336-41; Brehier, 1995: 244-6).

3. The third point that Russell and other historians of philosophy have pointed out is that most of the critiques Aristotle had put on the theory of the Ideas, Plato himself had already raised them in the *Parmenides* and considered them. Meanwhile, Plato has responded to these according to his own criteria. For example, proposing the problem of the Demiurge, which was posed by Plato for justifying many subjects, is not even mentioned by Aristotle (Russell, 1986: 244-9).

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Öz: Kuşkusuz, Platon'un en temel felsefi esası İdealar kuramıdır; yalnızca ontolojik ve epistemolojik tartışmaları değil, siyaseti, etiği ve düşüncelerinin diğer yönleri de bu kuramdan doğrudan veya dolaylı olarak etkilenir. Bu Platonik görüş, felsefe tarihinin büyük bir bölümünü baştan başa etkilemiştir. Bu arada, yazar, Aristoteles'in İdealar kuramına yaptığı eleştiriyi önemli olarak değerlendirmiştir, çünkü önce Platon'un doğrudan öğrencisi; ikincisi, kendisi öğretmeni gibi büyük bir filozof olduğu için eleştirileri kesinlikle kusursuz olacaktır. Bununla birlikte, ne yazık ki, Aristoteles aynı zamanda yanlış anlama suçlamasına ve hatta Platon'un İdealar hakkındaki görüşünü açıklamadaki içsel refaha da maruz kalmıştır ve bazı durumlarda Platonik İdealar kuramı o kadar kaba ve önemsizdir ki, sanki bu kuramın hiçbir gerekçesi yoktur. Yazar, bu üç noktaların ılımlılığından geçmeye çalışmış ve bu filozofların bu suçlamalardan ötürü ve İdealar kuramını açıklamada mümkün olduğunca adil olduklarını iddia etmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İdealar, neden ve sonuç uyumluluğu, tümeller, tikeller, ontoloji, epistemoloji.

