

LECTURE 4.1 - Plato's Theory of Forms

Note #1: The Greek word for 'form' [in the case of Plato, use uppercase F whenever you are referring to Plato's Form] is '*eidos*.' It does not refer to shape but to the essence of a thing or to what makes the thing the kind of thing that it is.

Note #2: Read about Plato's life and work found in your Cahn text.

Note #3: The Theory of Forms of Plato is **foundational** to his overall philosophy. It is the basis of what Plato is claiming in the various aspects of his entire philosophical system. There **is no one single dialogue of Plato** that you can read that will give you his Theory of Forms, but its claims are implied or hinted in the various dialogues of Plato (for example, in the Meno, Republic, Phaedo, Symposium, etc.). It is part of his **metaphysics** or theory of reality. Implicit in it is his theory of knowledge (or his **epistemology**). What you will find in the following lecture is a **summary** of the basic claims that Plato is making in his Theory of Forms.

Plato makes **4 major claims** in his **Theory of Forms**.

CLAIM #1: According to Plato, **there are 2 worlds**: (1) the '**this**' world or the sensible/visible world or the world of the senses [in the Republic this corresponds to the **visible realm in his divided line analogy**, and **the inside of the cave in his cave metaphor**], and (2) the '**other**' world or the intelligible world or the world of Forms (or '*eidos*') [in the Republic this corresponds to the **intelligible realm in his divided line analogy**, and **the outside of the cave in his cave metaphor**].

About the '**this**' world, Plato says that this is the world we are born into. It is subject to space and time. Everything that is found in the 'this' world has a beginning and has an end. Everything in it is changeable.

About the '**other**' world, Plato says that it is not subject to space and time. Whatever is in the 'other' world has no beginning and has no end. It is unchanging and eternal. [NOTE: Plato is saying that this 'other' world is **not just an idea** conceived in some thinker's mind **but truly exists objectively and independently of anyone thinking about it**. In other words, for Plato, it is not just a figment in someone's imagination. Rather, **it truly exists** (but not in a sensible and material way) **on its own**.

CLAIM #2: For Plato, for every **kind of thing** [and there are **many kinds of things** (like the square things) in this world] that we find in 'this' world, there is a **Form** of it in the 'other' world. For example, for all the horses that we find in this world, there is the Form of Horse [or, as Plato calls it, the Horse Itself] in the other world. The same is true for all the pieces of chalk, for all the square things that we find in this world, etc.

Plato is saying that it is **the Form in the other world that gives essence to the things we find in this world**. For example, Plato is claiming that it is the Form of Horse (the Horse Itself) that

gives all (**all** here means in the **past**, in the **present** and in the **future**) the horses in this world their essence as a horse, so much so that without the Form of Horse in the other world, there would be nothing to give essence to the horses that we find in this world. Thus, without the Form of Horse in the other world there would be no horses in this world.

For Plato, between the Form (like the Form of Horse) in the other world and the things in this world (like the horses we see in this world), the **really real** is the Form in the other world. The things in this world (like the horses we see around us) are only **copies** of the Form in the other world. For example, for Plato, the really real horse is the Form of Horse [the Horse Itself] in the other world, and the horses we in this world are merely copies of the Form of Horse in the other world. [**Note:** Plato is not saying that the horses in this world have no reality. They are real (that is why we can sense them) but the **Form of Horse** (in the other world) is **far more real** than the horses in this world because they **owe their essence to the Form of horse** in the other world.

To understand better this claim of Plato, let us look at this example. Suppose you are standing before a mirror. You will see your reflection on the mirror. Between you and your reflection on the mirror, you are more real than your reflection because it owes its existence from your standing before the mirror. It cannot exist on its own. For it to exist, you need to stand in front of the mirror. It depends on your standing before the mirror for it to exist. It is just a ‘copy’ of you. The same holds true for what Plato is saying about how the things in this world are related to the Forms in the other world.

CLAIM #3: Since there are many kinds of things in this world, and since according to claim #2 there must be a Form in the other world for every kind of things in this world, it follows that for Plato **there are many, many Forms in the other world**, arranged in a kind of **hierarchy** (that is to say, arranged from the lowest Form all the way up to the highest Form). In this hierarchy of Forms, there are **2 special Forms**: (1) the **Form of the Good (FOTG)** or the Good Itself, and (2) **the Soul**.

About the **FOTG** (Form of the Good), it is a very special Form for Plato for **2 reasons**: (1) it is the highest Form (all the other Forms are below the FOTG), and (2) it is the cause of the very existence and being of all the other Forms (such that without the FOTG, all the other Forms would not exist and, in turn, all the things in the world, which owe their respective essences from the Forms in the other world, would not likewise exist). In other words, **if you take away the FOTG, then there would be absolutely nothing that exists**.

About the **Soul**, it is also very special for Plato because, among all the Forms below the FOTG, it is the **closest to** or **nearest to** the FOTG. Because of that nearness or closeness, it has a **special bond** or **oneness** or **unity** or **affinity** with the FOTG which is **not shared** by all the other Forms below the FOTG. As a result of that special bond or oneness with the FOTG, the

soul enjoys **3 things**: (1) it enjoys **perfect happiness**; (2) it has **perfect knowledge** (that is, for Plato, **real knowledge** consists in knowing the Forms which are the really real, and since the soul is in the other world, it knows all the Forms in the other world – so, it has perfect knowledge); and (3) it has **self-consciousness**.

Having said all these about the soul, **for some reason**, Plato says that **the soul committed some error** (**NOTE**: Plato does not elaborate any further about this error, other than saying the soul committed it). Because of this alleged error of the soul, it became **unconscious**. But it seems only for a while, because then Plato says that when the soul **regained** consciousness, it found itself **embodied**. This soul that committed an error and became embodied is the **explanation of Plato** of why we, **human beings**, come to exist in this world.

NOTE: Before you go to the 4th and final claim of Plato's Theory of Forms, **REFLECT** here on what Plato is saying about **our soul**, **our having a body**, **about human knowledge**, and his **overall view of human nature**.

CLAIM #4: Here Plato is talking about the **purpose of our existence** in this world as human beings. Since the **human being** for Plato **is the soul that became embodied** because of some error it committed in the other world, it follows that we are in this world to **'make-up'** so to speak for that error. In other words, it seems that Plato is saying that when the soul committed the error, it became **'undeserving'** of that special bond or oneness with the FOTG (or that the soul became somehow **'impure'**). So, for Plato we are in this world, as humans, **to become worthy** again of that special bond with the FOTG or **to purify our soul** so it can be **deserving** of that special relationship with the FOTG.

If, for Plato, we are in this world to **'make-up'** for the error the soul committed in the other world, the question is **HOW?** Plato's answer is (and this is one of the influences of Socrates on Plato) **to live a good life**. So, for Plato **we are in this world to live a good life**.

By **good life** Plato means **2 things**: (1) live a morally good life or a life of moral virtue, and (2) live a life in which we attain our excellence (or, in the Greek language, **arête**). The concept **'arete'** is connected to another Greek term, **'telos'** (or purpose or function or end). The Greeks are convinced that whatever exists has a **'telos'** or a function or an end or a purpose. Now, if it performs that **'telos'** excellently, then it has achieved its **'arete.'** For example, the **telos** of our eyes is to see, so if we are able to see well, without using corrective lens, then we can say that we have excellent eyes. So, for Plato, we as humans have our own **'telos'** that is why Nature has endowed us with natural talents and abilities. Part of our responsibility is to discover those areas in which we can be good, and once we know those areas, we should strive to attain excellence/*arete* in the said areas.

Now, according to Plato, **if we have lived this good life** that he is talking about, and we **die** (**Note**: Plato defines **death** as **the separation of the soul from the body**), then the soul separates from the body, and returns to the other world where it becomes reunited with the

FOTG and regains perfect happiness. **If, however, we die and we have NOT lived a good life** (as per the specifications of Plato), then the soul separates from the body but it **does not return** to the other world. Instead, it becomes **re-embodied** to return to this world and live again as another human being. In other words, Plato affirms that the soul can be reborn (or 'reincarnated'). And this rebirth will go on until finally we have lived the good life Plato is talking about.