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# 1. Influences on Religious Philosophy

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Though Plato was not the first philosopher, he has been one of the most influential thinkers of all time.

Plato believed that there were different levels of reality. At the lower level was the observable world of material objects. This was subject to constant change and so a statement made today about the world, e.g. it is sunny outside my house, will be false tomorrow, when rain is forecast. As knowledge is characterized by certainty, according to Plato no statement about the observable world may be classed as knowledge. It can only be accounted as belief, a lower kind of mental activity. Higher than the material world is the realm of the forms. The forms are the ideas in which all lower realities participate. Thus, for example, all individual women participate in the form of woman; all individual acts of justice participate in the form of justice. True knowledge consists of knowing the forms, the highest of which is the Form of the Good, obtaining which enables us to understand goodness itself. In Plato's view only an elite handful were able to make the ascent to knowledge of the forms, and then after long education. These people would be the rulers of society. The structure of knowledge was as follows:

- Knowledge of all forms dependent on the Form of the Good, e.g. justice. Knowledge of this kind was episteme or noesis, the highest form of knowledge.
- Knowledge of forms not dependent on the Form of the Good, for example, Mathematics. This knowledge was known as dianoia.
- Awareness of the material world through the senses. This is only belief, pistis.
- Illusions. "Knowledge" of stories, poems, etc, all of which are mere fiction.

Plato told a famous story called the simile (or parable) of the cave. There are many people in a cave, bound so that they face in one direction. Behind them is a fire, and people walk past carrying objects that throw shadows on the walls. The prisoners think that the shadows are the reality, but they are not. This is the level obtained by those who have only belief in the physical world. Eventually one man escapes from the cave and ascends to the outer, real world. At first he is blinded by the light, but then as he becomes accustomed to the sunlight he sees things as they really are. This is the stage of those who know the forms. Finally he can look at the sun, the true light. At this stage he knows the Form of the Good, the form in the light of which the higher forms such as truth and justice are known. When he returns to the cave intent on rescuing his fellow prisoners, he is first blinded in the darkness, making them think that he is useless. When he tells them the truth they try to kill him. This may be a reference to the death of Plato's beloved tutor Socrates, who was killed by the citizens of Athens. Plato was arguing that this higher knowledge befitted its possessor to rule those who did not possess it, but was observing that the majority was unlikely to respect him enough to follow him.

There have been many criticisms of the theory of the forms. One is that Plato is treating concepts as though they were a distinct kind of reality. For example, I possess the concept "human". But does this concept have any existence as an entity outside the mind of the possessor? Would it not be better to regard it as an abstraction from the experience that we have of various humans rather than a reality in which humans participate?

Scholars often claim that Plato was trying to solve the problem of universals, but in doing so committed a major error. Universals are those concepts which apply across a wide area of reality. Take an example: the statement, “the book is green”, contains a common noun, book, and a universal, green, which is predicated to it. I cannot give the concept green an independent existence in the real world, but to deny it reality would be erroneous. Somehow there is a base for greenness in reality, even if it is in our own minds. Bertrand Russell solves the problem by saying that universals subsist rather than exist, by which he meant that they were real but not in the same way as things exist. Russell also points out that there are different kinds of universals. Some universals denote relationships rather than qualities of a being. For example, the concept “long” denotes a relationship between the dimensions of an object, but a long book is not the same as a long walk because we determine length not by an absolute standard but in relation to the type of object whose length is being determined. Plato, therefore, can be criticized because he gave too simple an answer to the problem of universals, in which he reified (made things of) objects which ought not be regarded as things.

Furthermore, the concept of forms can lead to ridiculous consequences, as even Plato saw later. For example, if I have the form of a man, is it composed of the form of a head, hand etc, and if it is so, are these forms similarly composed of other forms. Is there a form of chair, and if so, how does the form relate to the parts of the chair, do they all have their own forms?

We might also ask whether or not we can claim greater knowledge of the higher levels of reality than we can of the observable world. Plato thought that he had such knowledge, but he did not envisage that his theory of forms would be challenged. As it has been challenged very often, could he legitimately say that he knew the higher realm of the forms? As knowledge is characterized by certainty and has been proved, as opposed to belief, which has not been proved and which can only be justified, could Plato claim knowledge of the realm of the forms? Did he not only have belief, and false belief at that?

**Activity 1:** The simile of the cave has been criticized on grounds that it is not a valid analogy with the way things are in the real world. How far do you think this criticism is valid?

Plato did not think that the soul was one of the forms. It was the non-material dimension of human nature in which consciousness, will and all mental activity resided. It pre-existed birth in a human body, in which it was for a time imprisoned until death, when it could become free to achieve the higher realms of being. In this view of the soul there is no necessary connection between the soul and the body, and the soul may remain free after death and perfectly happy and fulfilled, contemplating the Form of the Good and other forms. On the other hand, it might reincarnate, Plato believed, into another human body. For this reason he believed that much knowledge was recollection from a previous life, which must be elicited by education. You can see that Plato believed that the soul did not depend on the body for its existence.

Aristotle, on the other hand, was one of Plato’s students, but he broke free from Plato and founded his own school which taught his own ideas. Aristotle taught that the soul was the form of the body. I can say, for example, that the vase is cylindrical. It has the form

of a cylinder. I cannot usefully pull the cylindrical element out of the vase and treat it as an entity on its own. Aristotle thought, however, that the soul has a function in the working of the body; as it is a substantial form, it is that which makes the body function. There are various levels of soul:

- The irrational soul, which subdivides into the vegetative soul, which governs basic functions (sleep, eating etc), and the appetitive soul, which governs desires. The irrational soul is inseparable from the body.
- The rational soul, which Aristotle sometimes calls the mind. He thinks that this is less tied to the body than the irrational soul is. It is the seat of all the rational functions that make us distinctly human.

Aristotle does not deny the immortality of the rational soul, but he is not clear about the issue of survival after death. But he is adamant that the natural state of the soul is to be united to a body. In this way he differs from Plato, who believed that the soul could happily be free of its material prison to contemplate the higher orders of reality.

The existence or otherwise of the soul is at the centre of a debate on whether humans are merely beings composed of matter who simply disappear at death or whether there is an element in their constitution that is not reducible to matter. Integral to this issue is the question of whether or not non-conscious matter can be the source of our consciousness, or whether there needs to be some other kind of reality within our psychophysical constitution that is our conscious element. Modern religious thought regards the soul as the conscious self or mind that is the area in which all conscious activity takes place, which is capable of acting on the body to affect the decisions of the individual's freewill and which can somehow survive death. Some modern religious thinkers take the traditional view that the soul is "breathed" in by God at the individual's conception and is newly created at that time; others believe that it somehow grows as the embryo develops; faiths that support reincarnation accept that the soul is independent of the body and passes from one body to another in a cycle of lives. How we settle this issue has grave religious implications, because we can only rely on the afterlife promised by religions if there is something of our personal selves that survives death, and this cannot be our material bodies, which we know to decay and return to the Earth.

**Activity 2:** Consider these statements:

"We are what we eat. When our bodies die, there is no self left."

"There is something about ourselves that is more than matter."

Discuss.

### **Aristotle on causation**

It was Aristotle who first analysed the idea of causation and identified the different types of causes, which are as follows:

- Material and formal causes. These are the elements of which a being is composed. The material causes are the substances from which something is made, and the formal causes are the structure into which the material is formed.

- Efficient causes. An efficient cause is the principle of change in a being. For example, if I drop my teacup, it falls to the ground because gravity causes it to do so. Gravity is therefore the efficient cause of the cup's change in location.
- Final causes. A final cause is the purpose for which an act is performed, the goal at which it is aimed.

The relevance of the various kinds of causes to religion is as follows:

- We must ask whether the universe has a final cause to which all life is aimed.
- We can ask whether there was an efficient cause that made the universe come to be.
- The discussion of formal and material causes links to questions about the soul, and whether or not matter alone is a material cause sufficient to explain all human behaviour.

Among the causes that exist, the most significant is what Aristotle called the prime mover. This is the first cause of the universe, the ultimate efficient cause, the principle of change that brought all things into motion. Plato and Aristotle both accepted this idea that there was an ultimate, first cause of all things and that it had a mind. Without mind, they felt, it would not have the ability to direct the universe towards a goal, and it was hard to conceive how a being without mind could be responsible for any design or consciousness occurring in the world. Kant, a German philosopher of the eighteenth century, criticized the idea of the prime mover, because he felt that to make a statement about such a being or cause would involve unjustified metaphysical speculation, going beyond the evidence possible to the senses. However, the idea is still current, because it has turned up in a different form as the Big Bang, though this was not an intelligent event as far as we know.

If we think that the universe had a beginning there are reasonable grounds for postulating some kind of first mover. Aquinas claimed that this first mover is God, in his view the personal God of Christianity. However, we cannot say this with certainty, because even if we agree that the first mover is God, we may not infer that it is the Christian God. A Hindu could equally well say that it is Vishnu or Brahman. Aristotle accepted the existence of God, but in his view God was a distant being uninterested in humans. It is equally possible to say that it is not a personal deity, but some being that is neither personal nor non-personal. Those who identify a first cause with the specific deity in which they believe are going beyond philosophy and making a faith response.

**Activity 3:** “God is the final cause of all our lives, the goal to which we must direct ourselves.” Do you agree?

**Activity 4:** Do you think that the universe needs a first cause or prime mover?

The Western understanding of God has two roots, the Greek and the Hebrew. The Hebrews (Jews) gave us the Christian and Muslim understanding of God. In this view God is a personal being, who created the world and is actively involved in it, either by governing its daily workings, as Muslims believe, or by acting within it, as many Christians think. He did not create the world from his own substance, as a kind of emanation from his being, but by a free act of his will, out of nothing. The Judaeo-Christian tradition believes that God is omnipotent (all-powerful) omniscient (all-knowing) omnipresent (everywhere) and eternal. He has no beginning or end and is a perfect spirit. He is transcendent, a term which means that he is greater than the world that he has created, and he is not to be identified with the world or any creature in it. God can be regarded as a great craftsman, one whose skill produced and is producing a wonderful creation.

Furthermore, God is supremely holy, a term which in the Judaeo-Christian tradition means totally good. He is therefore morally perfect, having no evil in him. Unlike Aristotle's supreme deity, the God of the Hebrews is so interested in humans that he is a lawgiver, having given them a set of moral teachings intended to lead to a state of affairs in which all live happily in a just society under his benign rule. He gave these laws, so the Judaeo-Christian tradition believes, through intermediaries, specially selected people through whom he speaks to humankind. He then acts as judge, at the end of the world and/or at the end of each person's life, to decide on the moral quality of their acts, determining whether they are saved or lost.

There are issues deriving from this majestic understanding of God. Firstly, if God created the world, is he then responsible for everything that happens within it. Thus, if an earthquake destroys a town, would God be responsible? Is God guilty of allowing evil to take place? Views vary. Those who believe that God controls every single event in the world have to accept that he allows some evils when he could have stopped them. Others believe that God has a permissive will and has created an area in which human free will can operate. It is also possible to believe that in creating an autonomous world with free individuals in it God has committed himself to a course of action that he cannot change. Maybe, some Christians say, we are wrong to say that God is omnipotent, for there might be things that he cannot do, or there may be divine acts that have to take time, maybe a long time. These questions are open.

God's role as lawgiver raises questions, one called the Euthyphro dilemma. This is the question of whether an action is good because God commands it, or whether he commands it because it is good. This issue will be taken up further on.

**Activity 5:** Compare the Judaeo-Christian understanding of God with Aristotle's idea of the prime mover.