

Plato – Knowledge and Its Objects (based on Jordan’s *History of Ancient Philosophy*)

Plato once studied under Cratylus – an extreme devotee of Heraclitus. In his dialogue, *Theaetetus*, Plato confronts what he finds to be a serious conflict between the teachings of Cratylus and those of Socrates.

According to Cratylus, everything is incessantly changing in every respect. This position reflects Heraclitus’ teaching that nothing remains the same from one instant to another, that each thing is constantly becoming something else.

This idea seems to directly conflict with Socrates’ search for true definitions of important concepts by looking for the distinctive patterns or forms exhibited in instances of (e.g.) virtue or beauty.

Plato’s dialogue *Theaetetus* concerns the nature of knowledge. In this imaginary conversation, Socrates and Theaetetus discuss Protagoras’ theory that knowledge is simply sense perception.

Protagoras (as portrayed in *Theaetetus*) defends relativism as a theory of knowledge. Supposedly, Protagoras said that each man is his own measure of what exists and of what is true *for him* at any given time. There is no objective truth distinct from the various opinions of different people.

Cratylus is reported to have said something about perception that could be used to support this sort of relativism. Perception arises from a relation between a sense organ and an object. But neither is stable for a moment. Different perceivers will perceive differently. None of them is any truer than any other.

Plato argued that relativism regarding knowledge is logically incoherent. If relativism is correct then all opinions are equally true.

So, a relativist must admit that both of the following propositions are equally true:

- 1) Some opinions are just false.
- 2) All opinions are equally true.

One who asserts 1) must deny 2). But one who asserts 2) must admit that 1) is equally true. But if 1) and 2) are both true, then the person who denies 2) on the basis of 1) is correct, just as correct as the one who admits both 1) and 2). Therefore, relativism must accept logically inconsistent claims. Given 2), it must be that not-2).

Some of Plato's other arguments against relativism regarding knowledge are as follows.

According to Protagoras, every opinion of every man is true. But if that is true, then no one is a better judge of anything than anyone else. This would include propositions concerning how things will be in the future as well as how things are in the present. Some people's predictions of future events turn out to be confirmed more often than the predictions of others. But, according to Relativism, both of the following statements, made by different people at the same time, are equally true:

- 3) The wine will be sweet tomorrow.
- 4) The wine will not be sweet tomorrow.

If the person who says 1) is just as sure of his prediction as the person who says 2), then there cannot be anything different, according to the relativist, about the conditions that make them true in either of the cases. What makes them true is conditions that exist in the person who asserts them. It is easy for the relativist to deal with assertions about how things are in the present. In that case, it may seem the one who sincerely makes an assertion cannot be wrong.

But when the assertion is about the future, it is clear that one's predictions can be wrong, because there is no such thing as perceiving the future by means of the senses. Future events have not occurred yet. It is those events that will determine whether our predictions are confirmed or refuted, not the confidence of the one who predicts. That means that there must be objective facts, facts that are not simply the opinions of any person.

Another, related, argument against relativism is this:

Everyone, including relativists, in actual practice, distinguishes between people who are more skilled at certain tasks than others. We call such people experts in some field or other. Even relativists, in fact seek the opinions of experts over those of amateurs when they are dealing with some matter of practical importance such as curing an illness. But if relativism is right, no one's opinions are worth more than any other person's opinions. Relativists thus refute themselves by their own practice.

In spite of its weakness, Relativism has enormous popular appeal, especially for young or naïve people. According to Socrates, Relativism is not just a weak, but harmless theory, it is socially and morally dangerous. It can easily be used to eliminate the legitimacy of all criticism. Without the possibility of critically examining our beliefs, actions and policies, we are doomed either to be ruled by tyrants or to social chaos.

So, what about the theory that knowledge is just perception?

In *Theaetetus*, Socrates argues as follows:

- 1) If sense perception is relative to perceivers then either knowledge is not perception or knowledge is not relative to individuals. Either way, Relativism is false.
- 2) If knowledge is not perception and not relative to individuals, then not everything can be incessantly changing.
- 3) If everything were in perfect flux, then even our own individual perceptions would be of no definite type for any real duration of time. But it is obvious that perceptions are of different types (visual, auditory, etc.)

Proposition 3) by itself eliminates perception as a definition of knowledge, for Cratylus.

Sense-experience is highly unstable, constantly changing and variable among individuals, but it can't be a perfect flux because *perceptions are of different types* (seeing, hearing, etc). Types do not change, even if particular perceptions are constantly changing.

Even if perception is the mere awareness of sensory qualities like color or sound, this does not constitute knowledge because it does not concern anything that is true (qualities are neither true nor false).

However, we do make true, correct *judgments about* these sensory qualities. But these judgments are not perceivings. These judgments involve the use of general concepts that are not obtained by perception (likeness, difference, existence, oneness, twoness, etc.) and they are not restricted to specific senses. These universal

notions (*eide`*) are the sort of thing that knowledge is really concerned with because they are constant and stable.

Plato's solution to the problem of knowledge is his theory of Forms.

Perceptual objects are highly variable and relative to perceivers. Similarly with actions and characters of persons and works of art. By some standards they are F; by others they are not-F. By contrast, knowledge of that which **is**. There can be no knowledge of that which is not. In other words, knowability requires constancy and permanency. The more variable and relative, the less real and the less knowable. Yet sensory objects cannot be said to be nothing at all. Parmenides was wrong to say that either something absolutely is or absolutely is not. Sensory objects are between absolute being and nothingness. So, they are not objects of knowledge but we are not totally ignorant of them. We have beliefs about them. Beliefs can be either true or false depending on what perceptual objects happen to be like. Knowledge cannot be false under any conditions. Judgments about sensory objects can only be approximately correct, or temporarily true or relatively true. But we could not make judgments about them without some use of unchanging standards (Forms).

Sensory objects, such as triangles, are highly variable. Their sides, for example, may not be perfectly straight. They may be of different colors or of made of different stuff. But this variability has not prevented people from discovering that the sum of the interior angles equals 180 degrees and that this fact is unchangeable. Even when actually existing triangles are taken as the standard of comparison and it is commonly said that their interior angles equal 180 degrees, still have no more than true belief.

We do not get genuine knowledge of what it is to be triangular until we discover through our own reasoning about the sort of figure that all imperfect existing triangles approximate to. But this ideal type of figure is not something changeable or observable by the senses. Neither is the characteristic of Honesty (as opposed to particular “honest” actions).

One who knows the characteristic of Honesty in itself, knows (e.g.) that honesty is incompatible with deliberate deception, even he has never met an honest person.

Knowledge is of unchangeable universal standards for judging actually existing perceivable things. So, knowing and believing are about completely different kinds of things. Plato called such standards ideas (*ideaae*) or forms (*archai*). They are the meanings of universal terms in the language of whatever field – Mathematics, Ethics, Politics or Science.

Though forms cannot be perceived by the senses, they can be *thought of* by the mind. If we couldn't think of them, we couldn't make comparative judgments or approximations about sensible things. What Circularity, Justice, Equality or Courage are, does not vary from time to time, circumstance or point of view.

Forms are not things in any person's mind. They are not mental images or thoughts. These may come and go. Forms are what they are eternally whether thought of or not. They are not in Space. They do not get older with the passage of time. Only Forms are fully and completely real. They exist independently of sensible things. Sensible things are real to the degree that they measure up to and resemble Forms. They are unreal to the degree that they do not resemble forms. Forms make possible common membership in a kind. To love wisdom must then be to seek to penetrate beyond the approximations of experience. This is the process of awakening

to the forms that is described in the four-part classification of being and knowing found in Plato's *Republic*.

To say that a particular action is just or that a particular figure is triangular is to say that it participates the idea of justice or the idea of triangularity. This is not to be explained as meaning that these particular things are parts of an idea. Plato is saying that it approximates to the standard of Justice or Triangularity.

Depending on how closely it approximates to the idea of Justice it is more-or-less-just. We could not make judgments of comparative justice or triangularity if the only standards we could use were the sensible actions or objects. The choice of which ones to take as better or worse examples would be completely arbitrary.