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Moral theories

Plato's moral theory

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Editor's note

This paper introduces a new series on important theories in moral philosophy. The series is primarily aimed at non-philosophers with an interest in ethics.

Plato's ethics lie at the centre of his philosophy. His approach to 'how best to live' must deal with questions of what there is in the world where we live – and how we talk, think or know about it. So to grasp his moral theory we need to understand how it is integrated with the enterprise as a whole. Moreover, since he was a dialectician *par excellence* we must discover what is his method of doing philosophy *with us* and how he will enveigle *us* into philosophical inquiry – the answer to these questions may overturn our view of his moral theory.

All talk of Plato must take a preliminary tilt at the windmill – which of the ideas we encounter in the Platonic dialogues belong to Plato himself, and which must be attributed to his master Socrates? There is no short answer to the academic 'Socratic question'. For now, suffice it to register that there is development from the earlier works, such as the *Protagoras* (1), to the rich theory of the 'middle period', from the *Gorgias* (2) to the *Symposium* (3) and *Republic* (4). Plato's philosophy is organic, subject to growth and decay; we may look for the flower of his moral theory in the *Republic*, but must search for its roots in the early period.

To know 'how best to live' we must know what is 'best'. In contrast to the subjectivist or the relativist, Plato supposed that evaluative qualities really belong to the object that is valued. Thus we call something 'beautiful' not because we are pleased by it, but because it genuinely has, independent of being appreciated, the quality of beauty (5). Values are natural and objective. From his early days, Plato supposes therefore that what is valuable can be calculated and assessed in a decisive way. *Prima facie*, I could judge whether x is more pleasant than y just as I do judge that a is bigger than b. All I need (6) is the right measuring skill – then, with its help, I can maximise my goods, and be happy.

Key words

Ethics; moral theories; Plato.

However, Plato comes to see that a naturalist approach to evaluative qualities, and to relations, causes difficulties. For no sensible (perceivable through the senses) object has a particular value any more than – at a different time, for a different person, in a different relation – it has its opposite. That values vary *subjectively* is taken to show that the phenomena themselves embody an *objective* contradiction (7). To be able to assess them, we must understand them; but since they are contradictory, they are cognitively unreliable. Plato concludes, therefore, that over and above sensible objects there exist entities that give absolute understanding of values. These are the Forms, cognitively reliable, pure instantiations, or absolutes, of value. They provide us with the knowledge of what is best.

Furthermore, when we use a value term twice, on separate occasions, we must have the same meaning in mind. From an early thesis that terms can have only one meaning, Plato develops the view that for any given term, there will be just one Form representing it (8). But that move, which derives, after all, some plausibility from our linguistic behaviour, excludes tautologically the possibility that words might be ambiguous. So there can be no disjunction between the aesthetic term 'beautiful' and the moral term 'noble', inasmuch as they are both rendered by the Greek *kalos*; nor can there be a structured complexity of meaning – 'just' must have a single sense. Consequently, just so long as two objects are given the same value predicate we could - given the right skill - judge between them. What is more, one value may be explained in terms of another (9), so that we may decide between objects that instantiate different evaluative qualities – 'useful', 'pleasant' and 'fine'.

So values are objective, naturally instantiated in the physical world; and we can really decide what is best. However, any valued object in the physical world is *ipso facto* valueless – at some time, from some perspective etc. So to achieve what is most valuable, we should aspire to reach the Form, which contains no such contradictions (10). This pursuit is achieved by *intellectual* means: by reasoning we rise above the dubious values of the imperfect world to grasp the Form of the beautiful. Intellect and desire join together

in the pursuit of happiness.

That individuals always pursue happiness is taken as obviously true. Equally obviously, however, we are often mistaken about where our happiness lies. None the less, says Plato (2) what we *really* desire is happiness; anything that we *appear* to desire which turns out badly for us is not the object of our real desire, we did not really want it. Thus desire is for true happiness; and any falling short of that goal may be explained in terms of our having made a mistake about our objectives. So a desire for x only exists if x is genuinely valuable. Now we, subjectivists that we are, tend to view a desire as genuine just when it occurs, irrespective of its object, and to regard the desire as an independent product of the psyche of the individual. Plato, on the other hand, asks us to believe that the desires we think we have, but which turn out to be sawdust and ashes, are not desires at all. All failure, then, will run counter to our real desire for happiness – all failure will be involuntary.

This view looks too simple. It ignores the possibility of psychological conflict, and denies weakness of the will – knowing the better and doing the worse. As Plato moves away from the Socratic influence he develops a richer view of our psychological make-up than this (11). The soul (the person) has three parts: reason, spirit (the source of moral indignation) and appetite. Given such a complex, appetite, (for example) may desire x, while reason tells us to avoid x – and that is psychological conflict. So Plato seems to retract his earlier position. However, the tripartite analysis still requires that cases where appetite overcomes the prudence of reason, and bad results follow, count as ignorance, the failure of reason. He who fails to get good results, therefore, is still ignorant, and so acting involuntarily. Reliable success, on the other hand, only occurs once the lower elements of the soul are subdued and reason is in control.

Some formal continuity, then, subsists between the early thesis that knowledge (skill) brings success, and the *Republic's* analysis of the soul. In Plato's view of virtue, too, there is a superficial uniformity. In the early dialogues he claims that the virtues – wisdom, temperance, justice, piety and courage – are a unity, held together by the central function of wisdom. The wise man knows what is right and what is wrong; and does what is right and eschews what is wrong – this is the skill of virtue. In the *Republic*, the rule of reason is likewise the cohesive factor – true virtue only and always occurs in the person whose reason is in charge. Thus, throughout his life Plato is, in one way or another, committed to the Socratic dictum 'virtue is knowledge'.

Nevertheless, the difference between the early and the middle periods of Plato's thought runs deep. Originally he argued, often by dubious means, that virtue and only virtue is the craft which is productive of happiness. Thus the agent who knows what he or she is doing will act virtuously, knowing that such action will produce happiness. It follows that 'no one does wrong willingly'. By the middle period however, a challenge is issued to this consequentialist account of morality – the challenge of *luck*, (12). Surely the slings and arrows of fortune may sometimes detach the proper consequences from virtue? Some tyrants may get goods, some heroes perish in misery – all by luck. In the face of that possibility, how may the connection between virtue and happiness be maintained?

Plato's answer lies in his account of the virtuous soul. The soul is a complex entity. Reflection will show that the best state of a complex is harmony. That can only occur in the soul when each part has and does its own – when reason rules and the other parts are subdued. Thus, as the health of the body, intrinsically desirable, is physical order, so the health of the soul is psychic harmony – and that is happiness. However, order in the soul is exactly like order in the State – and it is justice. The harmonious soul, then, is the just (virtuous) soul, where reason rules. Such an internal disposition is happiness, which is immune from the invasions of luck.

This analysis is manifestly vulnerable, not least because of its persistent use of analogy, and its insistence on the single meaning of terms (justice in the State = justice in the soul). Instead of an account of behaviour, Plato has presented us with an account of a state, a disposition of the soul. In doing so, he lays himself open to the criticism that his theory is not about *morality* at all – even if he has explained happiness, his 'justice' is nothing to do with the justice that we know in the world of actions. Similarly, his conception of happiness bears very little relation to our notions, consequentialist as they are. His account is so heavily intellectualist that it even betrays his own complex psychology and offers us instead an arid intellectualist ideal, which bears no relation to us, the individuals he started with. In short, Plato's theory of virtue and happiness is beside the point. Between the crude calculi of his early consequentialism and the *rara avis* of the philosopher in the *Republic* a satisfying theory of morality has slipped between his fingers.

Yet Plato's theory does remain true to many of our central intuitions about justice, justice as a distributive, static matter (13). Moreover, his account of happiness reveals some of our unease at a consequentialist morality. One response to misfortune might be the tragic one – to accept it, to learn to live with it. The alternative is to explore our intuitions for a new conception of happiness free from the dangers of contingency. That is exactly what Plato offers us – the freedom of 'peace of mind'. It remains to be seen whether his innovation has gone too far.

Plato's moral theory, as it appears in its full version in the *Republic* (4) is of a piece with – and as vulnerable as – his whole philosophy. It incorporates elements from his ontology (his theory of what exists): the naturalist approach to evaluative qualities, and the theory of Forms; and his epistemology (theory of knowledge): given that there are real values, they are, ideally at least, accessible to those who know. The

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knowers are the philosophers, happy in the contemplative life; but they are also the rulers of the ideal State, since they alone know the good, understand perfectly how the State and each member may achieve the most happiness. For the sake of the community, then, they should rule, and their benevolent despotism should be accepted, for therein lie the best interests of the ruled.

Plato is clearly an individualist, even if his political interests sometimes obscure this tendency. Taking it as self-evident that we all pursue happiness he sees himself as justified in doing moral philosophy, and his philosopher-kings as justified in paternalistic activity, provided they maximise the happiness of the individual. In this situation he envisages no separate, independent moral imperative; and he is committed to traditional morality only so far as traditional morality coheres with individual happiness. What is more, Plato is a rationalist: the moral system he offers is one where the conflicts of normal moral life are reasoned away:

i) He allows no difference between matters of fact and matters of value: all qualities inhere in their objects. Do they? Even if they do, are they commensurable?

ii) The early view of choice and the rationalism of the *Republic* psychology suppose that if we know, we choose goods rightly. Do we? Even if we *know* that virtue is happiness, can we still withstand weakness of the will (14)?

iii) The *Republic* argues that virtue is identical with happiness. Plato supposes that moral terms of value may be identified with the values of prudence. But can morality be explained in terms of prudence? Are all moral imperatives to be analysed in terms of my own interest? If not, we may be unable to show that moral action is reasonable. If so, we may have left out of account some irreducible moral 'ought'. To put the problem another way – it is still an open question whether true altruism is *either* possible, *or* to be enjoined.

iv) Plato's very enterprise betrays that he is vulnerable to this difficulty. Plato and his philosopher-kings act benevolently by urging on us the means to happiness. However, Plato's own argument does not show how his own benevolent action might be reasonable on his own terms – how it might be in his own interests. Nor does he allow any other imperative to benevolence. He cannot easily demonstrate how the philosopher can be required to return to the world of politics, and rule, given that to do so is against his own interests. Plato's rationalist egoism cannot justify benevolence.

v) From the point of view of the subject, the patient or the criminal, however, the benevolent action of legislator, doctor and judge is justified just because it promotes the interests of the beneficiary. He, when he recognises his good, will give retrospective consent – *vide* Plato's psychology of desire – even if he is the incurable criminal treated by euthanasia. The singularity of Plato's system does not allow any counter-claim by the beneficiary – and his intellectualism supposes that the benefit, conferred by he who knows, is genuine. Even if the benefit is secure, however, and we know it to be so, may we not have rights, running counter to our interests, against paternalist interference?

vi) In a similar vein, Plato's moral theory appears to ride roughshod over the complexity of our notions of responsibility and culpability. We are inclined to assert responsibility even for failure, and we exculpate ourselves completely only at the risk of destroying our sense of self. Plato, however, is committed throughout his life to the dictum 'no one does wrong willingly', whereby only the good, knowledgeable man leads a life that is voluntary. Against him, we who fall far short of such perfection still resist the swallowing up of ourselves into the morass of paternalist pity.

In short, in the face of such rationalism, we appear to insist on an irrational element in morality – an irreducible 'ought' that cannot be explained in a comprehensive analysis of our interests. We repudiate Plato's moral theory on the grounds that it is reductionist dogma which does not fit the realities of moral life.

Yet Plato's intellectualism is ideal, as he himself stresses. The State and the moral agent he describes are, dogmatically, the ideal; but they are impossible. The dialogues detailing the life and death of the philosopher (2) (15) (4) end, puzzlingly, with ill-fitting, traditional myths. In the lack of fit between traditionalism and the radical innovations of Plato we may discern, I suggest, his true purpose in setting out such a moral theory. In general, Plato is not a dogmatist, since he believes that only dialectic can convince. In that spirit, perhaps the moral theory was constructed as a challenge – a touchstone for unthinking moral views. The contrast between the traditional eschatology of the myths and the radical new moves of the arguments is intended to make us think, not to put doctrines into our minds. The fact that he raises dilemmas and puzzles which are still alive vindicates the procedure: the challenges were accepted, the questions successfully asked about the actual world, the world of moral contradiction.

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(1) Plato. *Protagoras*.
(2) Plato. *Gorgias*.
(3) Plato. *Symposium*.
(4) Plato. *Republic*.
(5) See reference (3): 210ff.
(6) See reference (1): 351ff.
(7) Plato. *Phaedo*: 74. See reference (3): 211. See reference (4): 479.
(8) Plato. Parmenides: 129.
(9) See reference (2): 474.
(10) See reference (3): 210. See reference (4): Book VII.
(11) See reference (4): Book IV.
(12) See reference (2): 464. See reference (4): Book II.

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(13) See reference (4): Books I and II particularly with reference to the preliminaries about 'having and doing one's own'.
(14) Aristotle. *Nichomachean ethics*: Book VII.
(15) Plato. *Phaedo*.

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