



Lecture 4: Plato's ideal state



Plato's moral philosophy: against relativism





Like Socrates, Plato thought there is something universally right or wrong, good or bad. His moral philosophy thus contrasts with the Sophists, who thought that moral values and norms are relative to individuals (subjectivism) or society (cultural relativism, or conventionalism).

Plato was looking for universal truths beyond the changing and messy reality, also in his moral philosophy. He thought that no matter what our individual morality is, we still take some character traits to be virtues and others to be vices.

Common for all virtues is that they are seen as *good*. But what is good? For Plato, the Form of Good is the origin of all Forms.

What is good? The Sun analogy

Plato distinguished between our material world and the world of Forms (his ontological dualism). *In our world, the Sun is the origin of all life. In the world of Forms, the Good is the origin of all Forms.* And just like the Sun shines light on all material objects so the eye can see them; so does Good illuminate the Forms so that our soul can "see" the truth.

Source	 The Sun	The (Form of the) Good
Provides what?	Light, growth	Reality, truth – 'light of reason'
Where?	Sensible world	Intelligible World
In order to...	 See	 Know
With what?	 Objects i.e. 'particulars'	FORMS

By Falasfaz, slideshare <https://www.slideshare.net/falasfaz/platoppt>

The Forms are ideal beings. All objects are judged on how much they resemble their Form. If something has virtue, a horse or a knife, it is because it is similar to its Form. A virtuous knife is sharp. A virtuous horse is strong. Plato did thus not distinguish between the normative (values) and the descriptive (facts).

If we know what is right, we will do what is right

If we think it is wrong to steal, but we still do it, then Plato would say that we don't really know that stealing is wrong. If we knew, we would not do it. This is because both Socrates and Plato thought that, if we know what is right, we will do what is right. And if we do what is right, we will become happy:

KNOWLEDGE OF VIRTUES → MORAL ACTS → HAPPINESS

Happiness is then the ultimate aim in life and we can reach this aim through virtuous acts. But we must start with knowledge. We see, then, that also Plato's virtue ethics is a rationalist theory.

The functions and virtues of the soul

Humans should try to be like their Form. The Form of Human has a number of virtues and our souls know them all from before birth. But once the soul enters the body, it loses its harmony

from the world of Forms. Instead, the soul enters the chaotic, disharmony of the material body, driven by our senses.

The aim of the soul is to get back to the state of harmony that it had in the world of Forms. But to do this, each part of the soul must be virtuous.

Plato divides the human body into 3 parts that each have a function: *head, chest and belly/genitals*. This 3-division then reflects 3 functions of the soul: *Reason, Spirit and Appetite* (in Norwegian: *fornuft, vilje & begjær*). To each function belongs a virtue: *Wisdom, Courage and Self-control*.

Wisdom: when Reason functions at its best, it has the virtue of Wisdom. Reason loves Truth but its vice is Pride.

Courage: when Spirit functions at its best, it has the virtue of Courage and strength. Spirit loves Honour but its vices are Anger and Envy.

Self-control: when Appetite functions at its best, it has the virtue of Self-restraint and Moderation. Appetite loves Pleasure but its vices are Lust and Greed.

Justice: When all the three parts of the soul have virtue (Wisdom, Courage and Self-control), the soul has Harmony and Justice.

Political Philosophy: the Ideal State

How do people develop their virtues? How can we work to gain the harmony between the different parts of the soul? In *The Republic*, Plato argues that a person will be at their best when they do what they are best capable of: an athlete should pursue physical excellence just like a knife should cut.

The Ideal State would be one that helps its citizens find and develop their own abilities and strengths. In this state, each individual should have a function that fits their character.

The state needs 3 classes: Leaders (guardians), Soldiers (administrators) and Workers (producers). *Which people belong where should be decided through an education system.* For Plato, it was essential that all children get the same education, whether they are boys, girls, rich or poor.

Education thus works as a filtering system for finding one's place in the state, where everyone starts from the same basic training. Plato still thought we have different potentials: some people are made of bronze, some of silver and a few of gold.

The Producers will be those who finish a basic, but varied, education from 10 to 20. The next level is the Soldiers and Administrators, who gets 10 more years of education. The Leaders will study philosophy for 5 years, then move on to practical work until they turn 50 and become rulers.

The Ideal State as a giant person

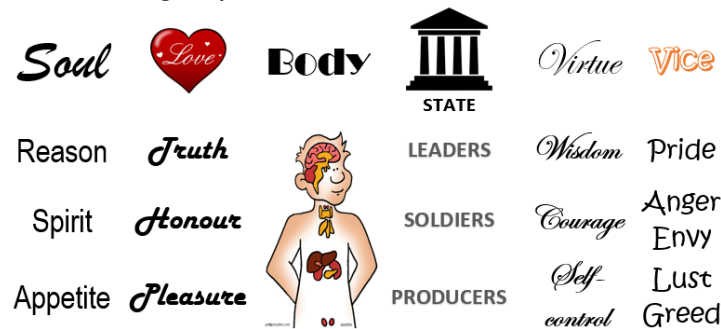
Plato compared the state to a giant person. The state reflects the 3-division of a person: Head (Leaders), Chest (Soldiers) and Belly/Genitals (Producers). The Leaders are those driven by Reason, Soldiers are driven by Spirit and Producers are driven by Appetite.

The main virtue of the state is Justice, just like a person. But in order for a state to have Justice, it must be in harmony. For this to happen, its citizens must fulfil their function with *virtue*. The Leaders must have Wisdom, the Soldier must have Courage and the Producers must have Self-Control.

Discussion questions

- How does Plato compare the Form of the Good with the Sun?
- What are the four main virtues of a person, according to Plato?
- What is the relationship between the virtues of the soul and its different functions?
- To Plato, happiness is the ultimate aim. How does one become happy?
- How does the harmony of the soul relate to the justice of the State?
- Do you see a connection between Plato's ontology, epistemology and moral philosophy?*
- What does it mean that the state is a giant person?
- Do you agree that Plato's Ideal State is one of Justice?*
- Do you see anything from Plato's education system in today's school system or society? Do we use education as a filtering system, or a preparation for functioning in society according to our personal abilities and virtues?*

The State as a giant person:



By Sirius Ram Basnet <https://www.thebasnet.com/platos-virtue-of-justice/>



Mary Margaret McCabe is Professor of Ancient Philosophy at King's College London and is an expert on Plato, Aristotle and the pre-Socratics. She has written several books and papers on Plato's philosophy and is the general editor of the Cambridge University Press series Studies in the Dialogues of Plato. She was interviewed on the *Philosophy Bites* podcast about the Socratic method. <https://philosophybites.com/2008/08/mm-mccabe-on-so.html>

Virtue ethics in China 中国 (Zhōng guó)

By Maritza Ilich Mauseth

Confucius Kǒngzǐ 孔子 or Kǒngfūzǐ 孔夫子 (551 – 479 BCE) – a contemporary of Plato



Lived in the Kingdom of Zhōu 周, a feudal state in present day central China, in the Spring & Autumn period (770-476 BCE).

- Did not write his own texts
- The Analects (論語 Lúnyǔ) were compiled after his death in the years c. 399-300 BCE.
- Roots in Daoism, but **not** Daoism.
- Confucius revered ancient texts from the Shāng 商 & Zhōu 周 periods (17th – 11th century BCE)

Ideal life

A person should aim to become a 君子 jūnzǐ. (This means "son of the ruler" but is usually translated as "gentleman". It is a term for the ideal.) The ideal is to return to what Kǒngzǐ saw as the 道 dào – the Way.

This was achieved by practicing the key virtues:

Key virtues

仁	rén	Good, cultivated, benevolent/kind
禮	lǐ	Ritual/observing ritual propriety
義	yì	Rightness/appropriateness
孝	xiào	Filial piety/dutiful

Other concepts

道	dào	Path, "Way of Heaven"
天	tiān	Divine, natural, heaven-like
德	dé	Virtue, moral character, integrity

QUOTES

1. Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself ("Golden rule")
2. Learning without thinking is useless. Thinking without learning is dangerous.
3. If a man takes no thought about what is distant, he will find sorrow near at hand.

Another philosopher & Plato contemporary:

Mèng Ke 孟軻 (385-304 or 372-289 BCE)

Also known as Mèngzǐ 孟子 and Mencius.

Focussed on Confucian thought applied to rulers.