

Abstract of "Philosophical Motivation for the Doctrine of Forms." Charles Kahn

Plato's classical doctrine of Forms (as presented in Symposium, Phaedo and Republic) is a doctrine in metaphysics and epistemology, that is, in theoretical philosophy. Nevertheless, its primary philosophical motivation is ethical and political, i.e. practical. The distinction between practical and theoretical philosophy is of course Aristotelian rather than Platonic. But its use here will help to bring out both the strengths and also the limitations of the theory as presented in the Republic and other "middle" dialogues.

The evidence for Plato's primary concern with matters of ethics and politics in his theory of Forms is 1) the central role of the Form of the Good, and 2) more generally, the systematic emphasis on what I call the normative trio: the Beautiful (kalon), the Just and the Good. More theoretical elements in the doctrine enter with the Forms of the Equal, Large and Small in the Phaedo, and more generally with the concern for mathematical knowledge in Books VI and VII of the Republic. So the doctrine of Forms is by no means merely a practical theory. But it is the practical implications of theoretical knowledge (e.g. the effect of mathematics on the soul) that is of primary concern. The theoretical advantages of applying mathematical methods to a better understanding of natural phenomena are largely ignored.

These observations are not new, but they point the way to two deeper insights. One is the fundamental change in the orientation of Plato's later work, leading up to the Timaeus, where Plato extends his theory to cover the domain of natural philosophy -- a domain that he has inherited from the Presocratics, but largely avoided (or treated only in myth) in his earlier and middle dialogues. The other insight is to see the practical concerns of the Republic as reflecting, and unifying, two earlier phases of Plato's work: (a) the positive Socratic moral doctrine of the Apology, Crito, and Gorgias, followed by (b) the methodological concerns of the aporetic dialogues. My paper will seek to develop this second insight, by showing how these two earlier sets of dialogues present problems for which the Republic offers a solution. The teleological development of Plato's thought from the Apology to the Republic can thus be seen as an objective pattern inscribed in the texts, without the need for any psychological assumption of prolepsis or deliberate planning in advance.