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Explaining Processes of Beliefs as Plato's Forms

Abstract

Plato's Theory of Forms is a response to Heraclitus' philosophy that all things are in a state of becoming. Heraclitus argued that changes in nature are perceived by the senses, while Plato claimed the forms exist in a timeless and static place. Since ideas either exist outside of time or in experience, there is debate as to whether or not the forms are efficient causes for the particular objects of reality. This view suggests that there are processes in experience that stem from cause and effect relations, which are mental or physical. These ideas determine the ways in which reasoning, belief, opinion, and knowledge are practical actions. In making the connection between time and understanding, there are teleological explanations that account for the nature of change. Let us suppose that the forms only exist as those ideas which have certainty. Moreover, they are reasons that connect objects to classes as formal causes, which supports the Kantian notion that there are conceptual categories that exist according to the logical relationships between the mind and world.

Epistemic Contextualism:

Epistemic contextualism is the view that a person is an attributor rather than a subject of knowledge.¹ Thus, they can be regarded as the causal processes that lead to the generation and destruction of the forms because there are changes in their substances. In the *Phaedo*, Plato does not distinguish between different kinds of causes (*aitiai*).² Aristotle's objection to Plato's theory of the forms seems to be an appeal to time itself because he thinks the forms can be generated or

¹ Attributes are purposes, intentions, expectations, and presuppositions of mind (Rysiew, 2016, Cohen 1999, 187-188; cf. DeRose, 1992, 1995, 2009; Heller, 1999b, 117ff.).

² It is unclear what *aitiai* means, but Plato seems to have meant something which generates a thing other than itself.

destroyed only if it occurs in time. If Plato does not meet these two conditions, then the argument for the existence of the forms fails because the forms are contingent on experience. In “Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*”, Vlastos defends Plato by explaining that the forms are not intended to be causes at all, but only reasons (Vlastos, 1971, Byrne, 1989).

According to Bertrand Russell, there is certain knowledge of things by acquaintance and description, which suggests that the forms are known by two methods. Both kinds use context-sensitive words that show how something exists in objective reality and being itself.³

In the proposition, “Socrates is taller than the youth Theaetetus, but in a few years, Socrates is shorter than Theaetetus,” it is uncertain who is taller, Socrates or Theaetetus. But it is clear that there is a reason of the judgment of experience, “I know that Socrates or Theaetetus will be taller in the future.” Therefore, there is knowledge from both acquaintance with each person and a corresponding description based on an observational truth. Hence, attributes are written in the logical form, “S knows that P.”⁴ The mind comes to know something from the experience of concrete reality and observation. This brings us to the distinction between particular and universal ideas, which are significant because they have different meanings and cognitive natures.

Modal Rationalism:

While particular ideas change through perception, universal ideas remain fixed and occur in a process of being interpreted by an infinite community of minds. Knowledge of objects exists in a determined state with other minds (Parker, 2014). The problem with determinism has to do

³ Russell also thought that names have unique functions in propositions since they only name the word itself. For Frege, reference was the objective grounds for justification of reals. In this case, reference shows that there are limits of action, which exist as modes in terms of reality, being, and necessity (Russell, *On Denoting*, 1905).

⁴ Spinoza defined an attribute as a quality of a person perceivable by the intellect. In *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes explains that an attribute is the essence of a thing. The essence of the mind is thinking, and the essence of the body is the extension of it (*Principles*, I, S53, CSM. I, 210, 25).

with language. That is, word meaning is not fixed because of beliefs. For Royce, errors are ideas that represent or misrepresent objects, so the contents of judgments are true or false according to the kind of representation. Therefore, the object of thought is distinct from the reality of objects. According to Wittgenstein, a problem for rationalists is that, “there must be an identity of logical form between the sign and the signified” (Cohen, 1988). This informs the entire atomist conception of the world that there are many objects in configuration (and language as many corresponding names in configuration). Plato reconciles these issues by attributing the functions of the individuality of objects to reasons that stem from the forms. Consequently, the contents of thinking are dependent on experience.

The forms account for the modality of rational thinking because there are actual facts that describe experience. Furthermore, the forms exist as modal facts about possibility and necessity since they represent the contents of mind. Humans judge that things could be different than they actually are, while other things could not have been (Vaidya, 2015). Nonetheless, Quine’s regimented theory became a source for an ideal total theory of the world, which explained that there are scientific answers that should be known according to a first-order logic with identity.⁵ The forms can serve as foundations for an a priori metaphysics system that accounts for specific traits of reality that are independent from scientific ideas. They are reasons to suppose that structures of mind exist which determine the possibilities of objects according to certain truths about how sets in language exist.

On Identifying Forms:

⁵ This theory covers physical objects, sets, and also predicates. If words are not logical, they are strictly scientific and are excluded from the study of metaphysics. Forms create the patterns of ideas that are based on the reality of experience and objects. They suggest truths or falsehoods as perceptions and conceptions about beliefs.

From time, there are ideas of certainty that must come from acquaintance with objects and descriptions of experience. Nonetheless, skepticism presents an argument that suggests the contents of experience are not what they seem. Suppose I am a brain in a vat that only creates certain ideas, so I know that the production of ideas does not come from something other than me. Thus, knowledge of myself is through direct and immediate experience with my mind. From this knowledge, I draw three premises involving the skeptic argument that explain how there is an assumption about my existence.

Premise 1: I don't know that a form has an attribute.

Premise 2: I don't know what a form is.

Conclusion: I don't know that I have hands.

The first premise unites with the second premise because of a causal explanation. That is, I have no knowledge of a form because I cannot observe attributes. Since there is no experience with physical things in the vat, I cannot assert my existence by referencing attributes. The argument presents a paradox, which is a self-contradictory statement that remains true after analysis. DeRose (1995), explains that the solution must say which assumption should be rejected and explain reasons why it is true. For our purposes, the assumption is that I have ideas only because of the vat. I can assert that I know the truth that the forms exist only if I believe it is true.

In order for there to be knowledge, the belief must be justified or rational through an internal connection and telos of cognition so that the belief is true (Crane, 2005, The Need for the A priori). Crane's approach to epistemic justification explains that there is a structure of empirical knowledge, rather than viewing that knowledge requires a process that leads to the acceptance of the belief as reliable. A process view of a priori presents a competing account of

justification (Nozick, 1981), and (Goldman, 1985). If there are such mental structures, they must exist contingently with themselves for certain powers of reasoning to be considered valid.

As a pragmatist, in opposition to Cartesianism, Peirce criticized certain faculties that resulted in four denials explaining that we have no power of introspection, intuition, thinking without signs, and no conception of the absolutely incognizable. Thus, there should not be a connection between introspection and intuition with something in the external world since all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts. Also, every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions. (Peirce, 1868, *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities*). The mind forms conceptions of reality according to a whole representation a posteriori. If we justify intuition and reflection of mental contents with sensory experience, then the pragmatic idea of the purpose of reason is reduced to arbitrary causes. That is to say, an appeal to experience requires events themselves, while a priori ideas form from reason itself. A priori concepts depend on logical definitions and language but cannot explain how experience is related to them because the reasoning results in contradictions. Nonetheless, they are dialectical arguments such as what are found in Euclidean geometry.⁶

If there are no relations between empirical knowledge and a priori concepts, the alternative is radical skepticism. In experience, there are certain foundational beliefs that are justified by an appeal to sensory observation itself. These beliefs are also restricted to the observable specific situations in certain places. Thus, epistemic justification is an action that links foundational beliefs to a priori content that relates to the past, future, unobserved parts of the present, and general beliefs that are not directly observable. If there is no connection, the

⁶ This was a paradigm for a priori knowledge but turned out to be false because of empirical proofs. In addition to this example is set theory, which had propositions that were believed to be justified a priori but ended up leading to contradictions.

result is skepticism or solipsism. If there is, then these inferences rely on premises or principles of inference that are partially justified a priori (Crane, 2005). Since there are many ways that a belief is justified, the object of epistemic justification concerns something that is true or false. This is the first part of knowing how the a priori applies to arguments or inferences of reasoning. An argument is a set of beliefs or statements, or a set of propositions believed or stated, and the conclusion is believed to follow from the others (the premises).

Some Relations of Plato's Forms in Syllogisms:

Logic is the next step in defining the meaning of a form according to experience. In "Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic", Peirce describes that subjects have a 'relative' number of predicates, which means that the mind chooses many terms to connect belief with logic. In propositions, there are relationships with names and descriptions that inform the other about the truth or falsehood of the assertion. For example, 'Socrates' signifies the existence of a man that lived in ancient Greece, who was a student of Plato. In this case, knowledge of Socrates comes from the logical sign and memory of the context that he lived in during that time period. To predicate something means to understand its logical form, which shows its existence. Hence, names are corporeal substances that do not change in the extension of logical form, while beliefs are produced by the effects of experience and knowledge of context. The result is that there is more than one kind of syllogism to assert how forms are contingent with real things.

Premise 1: S is M; M is P; Therefore, S is P.

A form is a name; a name is a truth; Thus, a form is a truth.

Premise 2: S is M; M is not P; Therefore, S is not P.

A form is an attribute; an attribute is not an illusion; Therefore, a form is not an illusion.

Premise 3: Some S is M; M is P; Therefore, some S is P.

Some forms are beliefs; beliefs are justified-ideas; Therefore, some forms are justified-ideas.

Premise 4: Some S is M; M is not P; Therefore, some S is not P;

Some forms are objects; objects are not in mind. Therefore, some forms are not in mind.

From these premises, it seems that the forms are represented both in mind and the external world.

Even if we use Cartesian doubt to suppose that names are not necessary truths, speech is the only means to justifying how we know the name 'Socrates' since all of our knowledge is derived from history books and people that knew him. Consequently, there must be other reasons to justify how context makes reality 'real.' Goldman explains there are relevant alternatives that come from a person's psychology (1989, 147). These alternatives involve how we make decisions in ethics and say why something should be considered good or bad and also what is true or false according to the stakes of the situation (Plato, Gorgias, 448e6-461b2). In this dialogue, Gorgias believes Socrates because of how he asks the questions in relation to other possible contexts. This kind of dialogue leads to the development of knowledge because of asking alternative questions that suggest reality is an illusion. Seibt thinks there are varieties of future possibilities, which are distinguished from uniform continuity of existence. Hence, mental events can occur independently of what is coming about, making existence a source for criticism and reconstruction.

Hume's Problem of Induction:

Hitherto, it is unclear if the forms are impressions or mental representations of objects; a problem from the nature of time. While observations of events and nominative knowledge may justify events in the past and predictions about the future, there seems to be no way of proving the forms are one or the other. This brings us to the distinction between reality and appearance,

which was discussed by Plato, Hume, and Kant. According to Hume, knowledge of something is produced by the cause and effect relation that produces a subsequent impression. Bread has a certain taste that comes from its shape and also how it nourishes the body. In another case, we can infer the effect of gunpowder to be an explosion. In both instances, the causal relation links the past and present experience to certain expectations about the future (Enquiry, 4.1.4/26). At the same time, we cannot make a causal inference a priori (Enquiry, 4.1.7) since it depends on constant conjunction. The mind infers that the bread is soft and tastes good, and gunpowder explodes based on the experience of an association between gun powder and explosions. The flexibility of the forms provides grounds to make ideas subject to the past and able to determine what occurs in the context of the future. However, the present contains variable patterns of objects that make it difficult to justify why forms are not beliefs, and only ideas in reality.

These two kinds of inferences from the observed to the unobserved are inductive (Treatise, 1739; Enquiry, 1748). Thus, Hume asks on what grounds we come to beliefs about unobserved things based on inductive, and not deductive, inferences. He gives an argument that rules out the possibility of reasoning from the premises to the conclusion of inductive inference. He wants to prove that ideas are not beliefs because of their causal constructions. While ideas are justified by cause and effect, beliefs are not always rational because they are generated from preferences and dispositions. The first argument is demonstrative because it can be proven by observation, and the second argument is probable since it is not always true. Neither will suffice because the first produces an incorrect conclusion, and the second is circular. The conception of reality relies on the effects of beliefs in the present because they are the foundations of inference, logic, and the process of argument (Enquiry, 4.2.21). This seems difficult if there are no ways to explain how ideas come to be unless through some reason. The uniformity of conceptions directs

future inference to the beliefs themselves that have immediate effects in the present. It is clear causation that is the main reason why there is evidence aside from the senses and memory (Enquiry, 4.1.4, and Treatise, 3.2.3/74).

Kant's Categories: Foundations of Forms

It was Hume that awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumbers, and caused him to invent the a priori category, a breakthrough in philosophy for the understanding of the purpose of mind and how it creates unknown concepts about reality.⁷ The benefits to a priori ideas include knowledge of existence through the mind, acquaintance with beliefs about God, and describing the nature of the world through logic and argumentation. According to Kant, there are metaphysical structures, of the mind that connect ideas with experience. There are also truths that are not contingent on the events of nature. Human ideas are generated from mind, which is distinct from the soul. Immortality, God, and freedom are purely cognitive, and cannot be derived from the external world. Yet, mental causation is the root of conception, and ideas must be connected to the structure of reality.

It is thought that a priori ideas exist even if there is no external world. Since their identities are unknown, their effects are not observed. If forms are viewed as a priori, they provide a foundation for coherence of beliefs. Dennis Bonnette explains that incoherence is precisely what can reject a classical concept of God because it is inconsistent to describe its attributes, which are also the limits of all extended things so God cannot be observed by the senses. Thus, the categories show that the mind is known by inferences of beliefs, which manifest as forms. Kant's conceptualist approach explains that categories are a priori necessary for any possible cognition of objects (Amie, 2019). Hence, there must be a brief consideration of

⁷ A priori ideas are independent from sensory experience, such as the idea of four from the sum of two plus two. They are thought to be derived from reasoning itself rather than the mind's interaction with objects.

the empirical view of the nature of mind and objects to say how forms are separate from the rules of language.

Empirical and Rational Ideas Concerning the nature of the Forms:

The opposite of a priori is a posteriori, which is described as a kind of idea that must follow from the interactions between the mind with the objects of experience. In the eighteenth century, John Locke founded empiricism, the philosophy of science that held certain truths as not being self-evident principles but produced by the mind from perceptions. The subsequent ideas that were created included different types of observable attributes that appealed to their mental substances. The qualities of objects were reasons to assert that mind was separate from reality because of the known and expected operations of the senses when they came into contact with certain objects, which entered the mind as simple ideas of sensation and reflection (Locke, *Of Simple Ideas of Sense and Idea of Solidity*). In addition to this, there are complex ideas, which are combinations of many simple ideas, setting two ideas by one another so there is no unity or relations, and separation from real existence (abstraction). Some examples include a man and the universe (one entire thing) signified by one name.⁸ Modes are dependences on affections of substances, such as a triangle, which has more than kind. Substances are compounded of simple ideas of several ideas to make one complex one such as beauty, which has a certain composition of color and figure. Ideas of substances are combinations of simple ideas that represent particular things subsisting by themselves. (Essay, 111). As an empiricist, Locke thinks that practical ideas show that general names are not understood by particular ideas nor the idea of God. The forms are reasons that justify why particular ideas are consistent with beliefs. Hence, knowledge of action and rules must be abstracted from words and antecedent to the knowledge of names,

⁸ According to Locke, there are processes of reduction that make complex ideas. The mind varies and multiples the objects of its thoughts to have ideas of modes, substances, and relations.

independent from language (Essay, 77). This suggests that the forms meet the conditions of reality that work together to show relations of principles and are independent from innate ideas.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant says that there are two kinds of statements of logic called analytic and synthetic that can be identified in different particular propositions. He thinks that language has a certain structure that does not change. Analytic propositions have predicates contained in the subjects of propositions, and also add nothing to the concept in the subject. Synthetic statements do not recognize the predicate in lawful ways. It seems that Kant only focused on physical things for these two kinds of ideas.

But suppose the forms match the twofold distinction with descriptions because they are static, and thus can be placed into the analytic proposition, "All forms are beliefs" because the idea of beliefs is contained in forms. In this case, it seems possible that certain analytic logical statements are classified as being metaphysical agents. Also, in the synthetic sentence, "Some forms are attributes" the idea of attribute is not necessarily contained in forms. Rather, it is a description of the subject that does not apply to all members of that species because of concrete objects. The truth or falsity of synthetic statements is proved by whether or not they conform to the way the world is and not by virtue of the meaning of the words they contain. Combining these two ideas, Kant invented another kind of statement called synthetic a priori, which stated that there were a priori concepts presupposed by the possibility of experience.⁹ The boundaries of the categories becomes greater due to universal identities of forms that show how thought is dependent on belief.

⁹ In logic, a synthetic a priori proposition means there is a predicate that is not logically or analytically contained in the subject (i.e. synthetic), and also a truth that can be verified independent of experience (a priori).

Hegelian Dialectic:

Speculation of the metaphysical relationships between the mind and reason continued in Hegel's philosophy of dialectical methods that relied on a contradictory process between opposing sides of subject matter. This approach is relevant to Kantian logic because it explains that the unity of ideas appears through separation. Plato's arguments, on the other hand, are back and forth dialogue between Socrates and other people, which are met with oppositions that are justified by experience. Thus, Plato accounts for changes in thought, views, and positions among Socrates and the interlocutors because of beliefs. In logic and the Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel presents different definitions of logic, consciousness, and the object it is aware of to say that there is an internal process between opposing sides that leads to a linear evolution or development from less sophisticated definitions or views to more sophisticated ones later (Maybee, 2019). The dialectical method as the speculative mode of cognition (PR §10) is widely used in other works by Hegel such as the Science of Logic. Unlike Hegel, Plato's dialectics deal with claims about knowledge in relation to perception. Theaetetus says, "It seems to me that one who knows something perceives the thing that he knows, and, so far as I can see at present, knowledge is nothing but perception."¹⁰ Socrates concludes that, "Perception, then is always something that is, and as being knowledge, it is infallible." Thus, there are opinions that result from the outcomes of arguments and produce certain ideas that are sometimes logical and stable, and at other times, come into agreement through contradictions.

The Creation of a Rational Nature

Plato's interpretation of the meaning of idea causes consistent variations in arguments that are reasons for believing in the truths and falsehoods of propositions. Hegel also thinks that

¹⁰ Socrates confirms this truth from the doctrine of Protagoras, which says that "Man is the measure of all things." This implies that, "Any given thing is to me such as it appears to me and is to you such as it appears to you."

the understanding fixes itself on a certain object in order to form a definition or determination of an idea (EL §80). The mind goes through the dialectical (EL §§79, 81) or negatively rational (EL §79) moment of instability to understand or face a one-sidedness and oppose itself (EL §81).¹¹ The understanding sublates itself because its own character or nature, and changes its definition, which leads to its opposite. Self-sublation is a process in which the understanding sublates itself, so that it cancels and preserves itself. This is central to Heraclitus' philosophy of flux that states reality is made of processes in nature that always change. Finally, there is the speculative or positively rational (EL §§79, 82) moment in which it grasps the unity of the opposition between the first two determinations or is the positive result of the changing of the determinations (EL §82 and Remark to §82).¹² This unity of opposites explains how cognition becomes valid in logic and argumentation. At the same time, Hegel's logic is a certain method to place concepts in particular categories so that reality has a structure that meets sufficient conceptual boundaries. This is Hegel's approach to philosophy (Rosen, 1982: 30; Stewart, 1996, 2000: 41-3; Winfield 1990: 56). This distinguishes him from Plato because it makes logic like a science. There are no claimed abstract ideas that cause other kinds of ideas to come into being since all concepts must be grounded in a different kind of certainty. Cognition is derived from the nature of consciousness and certain knowledge of necessity. This is what causes determinations to change into opposites. Hegel's dialectic does not introduce any ideas from the external world, which he explains by the form that arises from the self-sublation. The future

¹¹ Hegel describes this process as self-sublation (EL §81). In German, sublate translates to the verb, *aufheben*, which has a doubled meaning. It means both to cancel (or negate) and to preserve at the same time (PhG §113; SL-M 107; SL-dG 81–2; cf. EL the Addition to §95).

¹² Hegel rejects the *reductio ad absurdum* argument, explaining that it is skepticism that only views nothing in its result and abstracts this nothingness from which it results (PhG §79)

determinations do not cancel or negate previous forms, and also are preserved because they exist as they are, with effects.

Being-for-itself is the first concept of universality, and absorbs other things, and replaces them as a new concept while they remain active according to the definition of Being-for-itself. Other things must have effects in order for Being-for-itself to collect them. A form is a concept that is defined by other forms, which are similar to it. This is the one-sidedness that causes it to pass into its other or opposite. Therefore, the “somethings” are both “something-others.” The processes that define them lead to an endless process of passing back and forth into one another. A form only exists as it does because it shares a relation to another something that is the same as it is (cf. EL §95). “Form” as a Being-for-itself stops the endless, passing-over process by absorbing individual something-others (forms) in its content. It takes the character or quality as forms. Still, the particular forms must work out themselves before the concept of “form” as the Being-for-itself can absorb them for its definition.

On Certainty:

Thus, Plato’s Forms appear to have particular existences that give universal identities to the concepts of certainty. While the Hegelian dialectic is different from the Socratic method, both approaches show certain ways that the forms can come into existence by the evolution of metaphysical conception. There are particular existences for the forms because they can be justified by a principle of sufficient reason and meet the conditions for *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. This is an argumentative tool that explains logical relations must have causes that cannot be reduced to contradictions or the arguments are invalid. Thus, the attributes justify modes of objects because they assert a substance into causes of the forms.

The forms are reasons that show how there are connections to beliefs in addition to logical configurations in propositions. That is to say, justification is part of being-for-itself and the nature of things according to language and perception. Forms account for the objects of beliefs and ideas of truth, which generate a process of inference that moves the mind from uncertainty into certainty. A physical proof of a form may be shown by the direct function of an attribute and its opposites. If something is true, then it is by inference that the mind makes a connection to a different context. Although there is motion and change in the body, forms are part of a cycle that is shared on universal terms of beliefs.

Peter Murphy explains that coherent systems of beliefs are justified and in themselves sufficient.¹³ Coherence is a philosophical word that aims to show where our ideas are logically related to themselves. Through mental associations, the mind forms a net of concepts that know beliefs about experience and reality. This understanding has its roots in existence, which is the principal condition of the natural world.

¹³ This is strong coherentism. “S believes that P” means that P is justified only if it coheres with a system of S’s beliefs. It differs from necessity coherentism, which imposes coherence on justification (i.e., a structural condition of related justified beliefs).

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