Plato On Justice Essay, Research Paper

Plato (428-347 BC) The Greek philosopher Plato was among the most important and

creative thinkers of the ancient world. His work set forth most of the important

problems and concepts of Western philosophy, psychology, logic, and politics,

and his influence has remained profound from ancient to modern times. Plato was

born in Athens in 428 BC. Both his parents were of distinguished Athenian

families, and his stepfather, an associate of Pericles, was an active

participant in the political and cultural life of Periclean Athens. Plato seems

as a young man to have been destined for an aristocratic political career. The

excesses of Athenian political life, however, both under the oligarchical rule

(404-403) of the so-called Thirty Tyrants and under the restored democracy, seem

to have led him to give up these ambitions. In particular, the execution (399)

of Socrates had a profound effect on his plans. The older philosopher was a

close friend of Plato’s family, and Plato’s writings attest to Socrates’ great

influence on him. After Socrates’ death Plato retired from active Athenian life

and traveled widely for a number of years. In 388 BC he journeyed to Italy and

Sicily, where he became the friend of Dionysius the Elder, ruler of Syracuse,

and his brother-in-law Dion. The following year he returned to Athens, where he

founded the Academy, an institution devoted to research and instruction in

philosophy and the sciences. Most of his life thereafter was spent in teaching

and guiding the activities of the Academy. When Dionysius died (367), Dion

invited Plato to return to Syracuse to undertake the philosophical education of

the new ruler, Dionysius the Younger. Plato went, perhaps with the hope of

founding the rule of a philosopher-king as envisioned in his work the Republic.

The visit, however, ended (366) in failure. In 361, Plato went to Syracuse

again. This visit proved even more disastrous, and he returned (360) to the

Academy. Plato died in 347 BC. Plato’s published writings, of which apparently

all are preserved, consist of some 26 dramatic dialogues on philosophical and

related themes. The precise chronological ordering of the dialogues remains

unclear, but stylistic and thematic considerations suggest a rough division into

three periods. The earliest dialogues, begun after 399 BC, are seen by many

scholars as memorials to the life and teaching of Socrates. Three of them, the

Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito, describe Socrates’ conduct immediately before,

during, and after his trial. The early writings include a series of short

dialogues that end with no clear and definitive solution to the problems raised.

Characteristically, Plato has Socrates ask questions of the form "What is

X?" and insist that he wants not examples or instances of X but what it is

to be X, the essential nature, or Form, of X. In the Charmides the discussion

concerns the question "What is temperance??; in the Laches, "What is

courage?? in the Euthyphro, "What is holiness?" The first book of

the Republic may originally have been such a dialogue, devoted to the question

"What is justice?" Socrates holds that an understanding of the

essential nature in each case is of primary importance, but he does not claim

himself to have any such understanding. A formal mode of cross-examination

called elenchus, in which the answers to questions put by Socrates are shown to

result in a contradiction of the answerer’s original statement, reveals the

ignorance of the answerer as well. Typically, these answerers are self-professed

experts (the title characters of the Gorgias and Protagoras, for example, were

leading Sophists; thus their inability to provide a definition is particularly

noteworthy. In the Apology, Socrates describes his mission as one of exposing

this ignorance, an exposure he takes to be a necessary preliminary to true

wisdom. Although the dialogues appear to end in ignorance, the dialectical

structure of each work is such that a complex and subtle understanding of the

concept emerges. The dialogues of the middle period were begun after the

founding of the Academy. Here more openly positive doctrines begin to emerge in

the discourse of Socrates. The dialogues of this period include what is widely

thought to be Plato’s greatest work, the Republic. Beginning with a discussion

on the nature of justice, the dialogue articulates a vision of an ideal

political community and the education appropriate to the rulers of such a

community. Justice is revealed to be a principle of each thing performing the

function most appropriate to its nature, a principle of the proper adjudication

of activity and being. In political terms, this principle is embodied in a

society in which citizens perform the tasks for which they are best suited; in

the individual human soul the principle is to be discovered when each part of

the soul performs its proper and appropriate function. Reason in both instances

is to rule, but in both the political community and the individual soul, justice

is ideally coupled with the virtue of temperance, the harmony and self-mastery

that results when all elements agree as to which should do what. Thus the rule

of reason is not a tyranny but the harmonious rule of the happily unified

individual and society. In the middle books of this dialogue, Plato develops, as

an account of the nature of being and understanding, the theory of Forms

foreshadowed in his earlier writings. The Form is introduced as a principle

explaining individual instances of being X, the very thing itself that is meant

by the name X and that is the transcendent object of understanding what it is to

be X. The Forms constitute a realm of unchanging being to which the world of

individual changing objects is subordinate. The Form of good enjoys a unique

status, responsible for the being and intelligibility of the world as a whole.

In the Theaetetus the nature of understanding itself is explored. A critique of

suggested definitions shows that understanding, or knowledge, involves judgment

concerning the being of things, not a mere acquaintance with them in perception

or simple mental awareness. The Phaedo and the Symposium are dramatically

elaborate pieces dealing, respectively, with death and love. The Phaedo, which

represents Socrates’ final hours, considers the nature of the soul and portrays

the philosophical life as a separation of soul from body, which prepares the

philosopher for death. In the Symposium, Socrates portrays love as the creative

attraction toward the beautiful and the good itself. In the dialogues of the

later period, begun after Plato returned from Syracuse, the figure of Socrates

recedes into the background. In the Sophist and Statesman the central figure is

an unnamed visitor from Elea. The Sophist shows how a proper understanding of

appearance depends on an account of being and nonbeing and of the relation

between particulars and Forms. In the Parmenides the theory of Forms comes under

exacting scrutiny, and arguments are presented to show that the Forms cannot be

entities of the same sort as those whose being they explain. The Timaeus

presents a semimythical description of the origin and nature of the universe,

and the Philebus considers the place of pleasure in the good life. In the Laws,

Plato’s longest and last work a model constitution for an ideal city is

considered. Central to Plato’s thought is the power of reason to reveal the

intelligibility and order governing the changing world of appearance and to

create, at both the political and the individual level, a harmonious and happy

life. Socrates’ view that virtue is a form of understanding and that the good

life must consequently be grounded in knowledge. It is refined into the view

that philosophical education is to effect a harmony between reason and passion,

?a life of self-mastery? in which reason governs the will not as something

alien to it but as its natural guide and source. The doctrine of recollection,

according to which learning is the remembering of ?a wisdom? that the soul

enjoyed prior to its incarnation, is a mythical statement of this view that

neither reason nor the intelligible order that it reveals is alien to the human

soul. This order–seen by Plato as providing an account both of the being and of

the intelligibility of the world of appearance–is articulated in the theory of

Forms. Forms are the principles of being in the world, of the fact that the

world presents itself as instances of being this or that, as well as the

principles of human understanding of those instances of being. The nature and

intelligibility of the world of appearance can thus be accounted for, in Plato’s

view, only by recognizing it as an "image" of the truly intelligible

structure of being itself, which is the world of Forms. The relationship between

Forms and particulars, or between the world of being and the world of

appearance, was recognized by Plato to be deeply problematic. He remained clear,

however, that no theory could fail to recognize both features of the world

without falling prey to either the relativism of Heraclitus or the monism of

Parmenides, both of which destroy the very possibility of being and

understanding. Plato sees the world of being itself governed by the Form of the

good, as also the source of value and the object of proper desire. The

philosopher is thus pictured as in love with the Forms, that is, in love with

the world as it truly is. His wish to see through the world of flux to the true

principles of its being is thus basically an act of love. This love is not

simply an attraction to the good but a creative force for the procreation of the

good. Directed toward others, it is the power of education, the bringing to

birth of understanding and virtue through the process of dialectic, as portrayed

in Socrates’ relation to the youths about him. Reason for Plato, as for the

Greek tradition in general, is most clearly manifest in logos, the word, and

language, as the medium in which reason articulates being, is a central topic

throughout the dialogues. Plato was impressed by the fact that language has the

capacity both to articulate the intelligibility of the world and to belie the

world’s true being. He constantly addresses the question of how to purge

language of its potential deceptiveness, how to win the fidelity of words to the

world. Bad poetry and bad rhetoric alike are pathological forms of the

inescapable dissociation of word and world; the Platonic question is how to make

this dissociation benign. The central vehicle that Plato envisions for this

purpose is dialectic, the dialogue that refines and articulates the true shape

and tendency of speech and understanding. This dialectic is presented

mimetically in the dialogues themselves, which are thus not simply presentations

of philosophical views but representations of philosophy at work, of human

beings engaged in the distinctively human and highly civilized activity of

rational conversation. The influence of Plato’s thought is seen in the

continuing vitality of the Platonic tradition through subsequent centuries. The

major philosophers of late Hellenism, most notably Plotinus and Proclus, were

self-professed Platonists. After the closing of the Academy, Neoplatonism

continued to flourish in the Islamic and Byzantine world, and Latin Neoplatonism

was a strong intellectual factor throughout the Middle Ages. During the

Renaissance there occurred a great rebirth of Platonic thought in the West. The

Byzantine philosopher Giorgius Gemistus Pletho (c.1355-1452) introduced the

study of Plato to Renaissance Florence, and the subsequent translations and

commentaries of Marsilio Ficino and others laid the groundwork for a flourishing

school of Platonic thought in the Florentine Academy. In 17th-century England

the rationalistic theologians known as the Cambridge Platonists based much of

their thinking on Plato. The 19th and 20th centuries have witnessed, besides the

important influence of Plato on the Romantic Movement, the development of a

strong Anglo-European tradition of Platonic scholarship.