

Some Introductory Remarks on Reading Plato

I realize this week's reading excerpt from Plato will sound very odd to most of you (unless you have read *a lot* of Plato before) - As a matter of fact, several of our readings will be so abstract that you might feel like hitting yourself for taking a Philosophy course! Be patient, and hopefully you will get used to the style of writing and the types of questions which the Philosophers are asking - so that the "sea of abstraction" becomes more familiar.

There are three problems mentioned in our first reading which I will try to explain below:

1. The problem of the *one* and the *many*, or sometimes called the problem of the *universal* versus the *particular*.
2. How can the same thing be both "x" and not "x" at the same time?
3. What is the distinction between knowledge and opinion.

Let me briefly explain each:

The problem of the one vs. the many, or the universal versus the particular:

Suppose you say a song is beautiful. A philosopher might very well ask you what makes it beautiful? Is the song an example of just one particular thing (amongst others) which is beautiful - or is the song beauty itself?

Beauty itself would be considered the Universal. A particular song that is judged to be beautiful an instance of the Beautiful.

Now comes the basic Philosophical question:

Which comes first (philosophers would probably say, which one is ontologically prior?- but we will use more everyday language).

Do we form a concept of Beauty itself from particular instances of things which are beautiful? OR, do we somehow already know what Beauty itself is, and from that knowledge we are able to judge particular things beautiful (or not).

Let me give another example. Suppose you are in a geometry class, studying triangles in plane, or Euclidian, geometry (just think about triangles drawn on flat surfaces).

You learn that the interior angles of *all* triangles add up to 180 degrees. This becomes part of the definition of a triangle! That Universal definition can take on many, many particular, individual instances of triangles (for example, triangles with the following sets of interior angles {1,90,89}, {45,45,90}, {30,60,90}, {25,35,120} etc (see figure below)

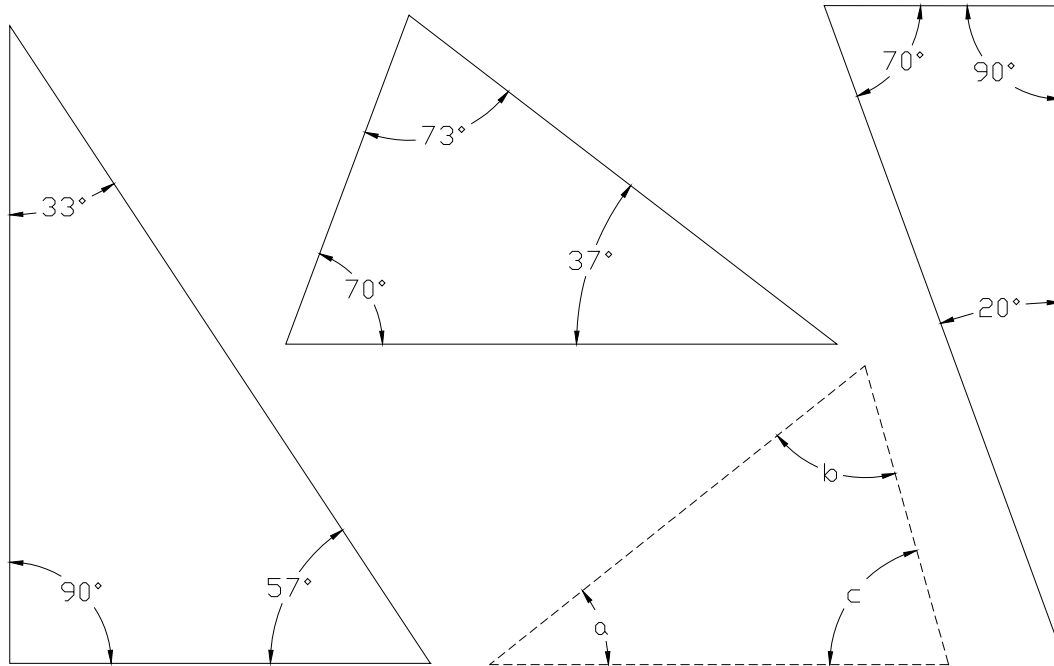


Figure 1-How do we know $a+b+c=180$ degrees?

But this brings about a question - does the definition follow from looking at several instances of triangles, and then discovering that *any* triangle *must have* interior angles which add up to 180?

If that is the case, you would say that the particular (many) come first, and the universal is simply an abstraction!

However, there is a problem: Try to create a triangle which does NOT have interior angles which add up to 180! You can not do it-it is impossible in plane geometry! In other words, it is NECESSARY that any particular triangle have interior angles which add up to 180 degrees. This leads to the conclusion that every particular triangle MUST conform to the universal requirement of triangle-hood!

So it seems, after all, that the Universal comes before the Particular!

Another way Philosophers say this is that the *essence* of a triangle is that its interior angles must add up to 180 degrees, or, "the *being* of triangle-hood is . . .

So the problem of the Universal vs. the Particular has to do with the essence of things. What is the essence of Beauty, the essence of Justness, the essence of Truth? Something is what it is (and not something else) because of its essence. Hence Justice is not injustice, because Just things somehow contain or exhibit the essence of justness.

This leads to question two, is it possible for the same thing to be both "x" and "not-x" at the same time?

I will invite all students to think about the answer to this question and discuss it in our Discussion forum.

The last question deals with how we come to know things. That question will form a major part of this class.

Suppose that all knowledge is based solely on experience - meaning what can be gleaned through the five senses. If this is the essence of knowledge, then how do I know that all triangles, no matter when they were drawn, yesterday, today, or any triangle drawn ever in the future, must have interior angles which add up to 180 degrees? If all triangles every drawn must have interior angles which add up to 180 degrees, then it seems to contradict the assumption that knowledge comes through experience (for the simple reason that no one can experience all triangles ever drawn or to be drawn in the future!)

This leads one to draw the conclusion, speaking metaphorically, that there is another "sense" organ, the organ of the intellect, which also leads us to knowledge (as a matter of fact, one uses the intellect to figure out things when your senses are in conflict)

So enough of the long introduction, here are some possible Discussion Questions (of course, you should come up with your own, but these may help you get started!):

1). What do you think Plato means when he says (page 126, 3rd edition)

But anyone with any understanding would remember that the eyes may be confused in two ways and from two causes, namely, when they've come in from the light into the darkness and when they've come from the darkness into the light.

2) Carefully examine the diagram on page 121 (Translation note. The Greek word, "psyche", is here translated as "soul" - a better translation for our day is, "mind") -Please note that the diagram is divided from top to bottom between knowledge and opinion - and then from right half to left half between "objects of cognition" (read: objects of experience, not necessarily sense experience), and "condition of the soul" (read: condition of the mind, perhaps mental state) Try to give examples of each category: forms, scientific objects, visible objects, etc.

3) Give as many examples of something that is known (rather than strongly believed to be true) whose knowledge does not come through the five senses.

4) What differentiates knowledge from opinion or strongly held belief?