

### The Problem of Change

Plato has a problem. The ancient Greeks were exercised by the question of change – how do things come to be and how can they be known since they never stay the same. There were two major rival theories, both credible in their day but not compatible. Heraclitus looks around the world and sees universal flux; and worse, the road up is the same as the road down, so is it up or down? He puts forward a theory of opposites, unity in diversity. Meanwhile Parmenides throws in a proof of the complete reverse – everything is one and there is no such thing as change at all. How are they to be reconciled?

Plato conceives of an answer. Render unto Heraclitus what is due to Heraclitus, and give the rest to Parmenides. He divides the world in two and allocates the sensible to Heraclitus and the intelligible to Parmenides. It is a clever and attractive solution, but there is a problem – the problem of perfection.

We have clues to the nature of the difficulty when looking at the judgements Plato attaches to the two realms. The sensible is a world of becoming, appearance, experience, change and is illusory, deceptive, unworthy; the intelligible is real, eternal, stable, true: a utopian realm of pure being and perfect Forms. And because of its perfections the intelligible world, the world of the spirit, is superior and therefore the sensible world, the world of the body, is inferior, ruled by corrupting appetites and desires. It follows that the superior must rule and we must follow. It is a theory rich with mythological possibility to be abused by those seeking power and influence, a process with many examples since and up to the present day.

### A search for knowledge

Unifying theories to reconcile contradictions are necessary in the pursuit of knowledge. Witness the tale of gravity. Newton thought he had it all wrapped up. Gravity is an attractive force between masses acting at a distance across space. Except that it isn't. Einstein showed it to be the effect of mass on space (and time) itself. Except that can't be the whole story because there is a problem with quantum mechanics. What we need is a unifying theory of everything. So far, so good.

### The problem with Plato

However, the search for a unifying theory must beware of resorting to formulations of perfection - you cannot unify by segregation. For unity in diversity Plato substitutes unity in isolation, splendid isolation. But there is a problem with Plato, and with all the franchised theories of perfection that have come after him - a theory of perfection precludes interaction between the perfect and the imperfect, since otherwise the perfect would be contaminated by the imperfect and fail to be perfect. But then it would make no sense to aspire to perfection because it would not be achievable and, since it is perfection which is required, anything less would be insufficient. Worse, there can only be one instance of perfection since the theory entails unity: duplication is imperfection.

### Contingency

Where does that leave the world of events, the empirical world of contingency. Plato denies this world any credence so maybe this is not an issue for him, but it is a problem for those of us who agree that we do, and must, live in an actual sensible world and that this has significance and relevance to the debate. For a theory of perfection to be of any actual use it has to be applicable to the world of events and free choice. But a theory of perfection is unable to mingle with real events. Take an example, say Kantian moral theory – its categorical nature makes it pure and so it stands impregnable above the world of contingency, but because of that it fails to take account of moral complexity in the messy actual real world. Ideals are all very well, but they are only able to be ideal because they are divorced from reality. Which makes them cease to be relevant.

Conceptions of the good are the enemy of the good enough. Plato is hoist by his own petard. Granted that no actual circle is or can be a perfect circle, but his conclusion is upside down – rather than all the actual circles being rejected due to imperfection, the idea of a real perfect circle is just that: perfect because it isn't and cannot be real. Let's reject that one.

After all, we live in the messy world of contingency and it does not help to deny that in praise of and search of the perfect, or to claim that the perfect can usefully be appealed to in judgement of the world we live in. These are the distractions of fantasy, ok in the world of fiction, but not in action.