2: PLATO: DOCTRINE OF IDEAS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- Know what Plato's theory of idea or form is
- Explain the main concept of Plato's theory of idea
- Explain the main characteristics of the Plato's theory of idea
- Know the criticisms of Plato's theory of idea

2.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we are going to learn and discuss about the Plato's doctrine of ideas. This theory of Plato is occupying a very significant role in philosophy. Plato's theory of ideas or form can be regarded to be one of the most important contributions of Plato to philosophy. According to Plato ideas or forms are ultimate reality of this universe. We can also say that according to Plato, ideas or forms are the universal essences, which have ontological status of their own. They can also be regarded to be the original, eternal and transcendental archetypes of things. Ideas are something, which is actually prior to the particulars and which actually exists independently to the particulars. So in this unit, we are going to know about the Plato's concept of form or ideas in details.

2.3 PLATO'S CONCEPT OF FORM OR IDEAS

While discussing the Plato's concept of Ideas or form, one point is to be very clear that his doctrine of ideas was very much influenced by two doctrines. One of them is the Socratic doctrine of concepts and the other is the Eleatic doctrine of being. According to Heraclitus, an Eleatic philosopher, reality is a constsant flux. He further said that one cannot step in to same water of a river twice. Because it is constantly in the flowing mood, same is the case with reality too. From Heraclitus, Plato has learnt that the visible universe is in a state of constant flux. Plato concluded that truth is not a thing that is to be found in the world of senses. Truth is rather to be found in the world of ideas. According to Plato truth is rather to be found in the world of ideas. It is remarked by many later philosophers that Plato's theory of idea is nothing but the modification of Socratic theory of concepts.

That is why for Plato, the forms or ideas are those changeless, eternal and non-material essences or patterns of which the actual visible objects that we see are only poor copies. As for example, we can mention about an apple. Actually there is a form or idea of an apple and all we see is the mere form of that apple. So far as pre-Socratic philosophers are concerned, for them reality is a material stuff of some sort, Plato now designated the non-material Ideas or forms as the true reality. The cognition of the ideas alone can be called knowledge. The world of ideas is not the visible world. It is the intelligible world. So far as ideas are concerned, ideas or forms are the entities, which are neither present in space nor in time. It is already been discussed that ideas or forms are not spatio-temporal entities. One important point which is to be mentioned here is that according to Plato, for their existence, ideas do not have to depend on our mind. They are totally independent of our knowing mind. They live in their own heaven of ideas. From this point of view, it can be said that Plato's theory of ideas has quality of both idealism and realism. It can be regarded to be Idealism in the sense that only ideas are real and whatever we perceive is the mere copies of those ideas or forms. Again it can be regarded to be realism in the sense

that ideas have nothing to do with our mind. They are totally independent of our knowing mind and reside in their own heaven of ideas. So form the above interpretation, it is found that Plato's theory of idea or form is in itself a very unique theory as it possessed the quality of both idealism and realism.

2.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF PLATO'S THEORY OF IDEAS

While discussing about the Plato's theory of ideas or form, some important and basic point is to be mentioned. They can be mentioned as follows:

1. Ideas or forms are the eternal patterns of the reality and whatever we perceive are the mere copies of those ideas. As for example any beautiful object is nothing but the copy of the idea of beauty.

2. So far as the ideas or forms are concerned, they are the objects corresponding to the abstract concept. One important point that is to be mentioned here is that ideas are not something which is depending on the knowing mind. They exist in their own world or as they are not spatio-temporal entity, so it can better be said that they subsist in their own world. The world of idea is regarded to be the heaven of ideas. In this particular point one question is found to be arisen, i.e. if the ideas are truly real and if they embody Being, they must be at some place. But how can the ideas, which are totally immaterial, have a location, as it can hardly be said that ideas are located spatially. In this regard, Plato has given his answer and has tried to clear the problem. He said that ideas are separate from the things. They exist or subsist apart from the things we observe. Here by the terms apart from and separate from, Plato merely means that the forms have an independent existence. They persist even though particular things perish. Ideas or forms actually do not have any dimensions. But the question of their location comes up as a consequence of our language.

3. Again so far as an idea or a form is concerned, it is something which is superior to a particular in terms of degree of reality and value. The form can be regarded to be a model or archetype of which the particular is a copy. According to Plato, in the doctrine of ideas, an idea can be related to particular things in three ways. These may be three ways of stating the same thing. First, the idea is a cause of the essence of a thing. Secondly, a thing may be said to participate in a form. Lastly, a thing may participate simultaneously in a plurality of forms. When it undergoes change it participates successively in different forms.

4. Another important point that can be mentioned here is that according to Plato all the ideas or forms form a system. All of them are logically interrelated. Plato moreover said that there is hierarchy of ideas. Some ideas are regarded to be higher while some other ideas are regarded to be lower. It is said by Plato that the higher ideas use to communicate with the lower ideas.

5. The ideas cannot be apprehended by the senses. Had they been spatio-temporal entities, they could have been apprehended by the senses. According to Plato, they can be apprehended by reason. Of course the senses may provide the occasion and stimulus for the apprehension of the idea copied by a particular thing.

6. According to Plato, though all ideas are subordinate to the idea of Goods, yet there are a great variety of ideas or forms. As for example, we can say that there are ideas of values, like goodness and beauty. Again there are ideas of quality like whiteness and solidity, roundness etc. Again there are ideas of classes of things like house, dog, man etc. There are ideas of relations like equality, resemblance etc.

7. Plato again said that there are quite a few different ways in which the mind discourses the ideas, first there is recollection. Before it was united with the body, the soul was acquainted with the forms or idea. Men now recollect what their soul knew in their prior state of existence. Visible

things remind them of the essences or ideas previously known. Secondly, men arrive at the knowledge of forms through the activity of dialectic.

8. So far as Plato's doctrine of ideas is concerned, it is seen that according to one interpretation, Plato put forward the view that the universe is three-tier universe. The first tier is occupied by the idea of Good. The second tier is occupied by the other ideas. The third tier is occupied by the concrete particular things. In this interpretation the ideas are metaphysical principles. But according to another interpretation Plato's ideas are logical essences. The universe of Plato's conception is, according to this interpretation a one-tier universe.



ACTIVITY: 2.1

Q. 1. Can Plato's theory of ideas be regarded as a form of idealism or it is a form of realism? Discuss the point.

Ans: ……

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2.5 CRITICISM OF PLATO'S THEORY OF IDEAS

Plato's theory of ideas or form can be regarded to be one of the most important theories of philosophy. But this theory of Plato is also not free from criticism. This theory of Plato is mainly criticized in a particular point. It has been pointed out by many philosophers that Plato could not give an adequate explanation of the relation between Ideas and the particular copies of ideas. It is said by Plato that particulars are nothing but the mere copies of ideas. But according to the critics, if it is the case then a third something will be requires to explain the relation between the ideas and the particular things. That third something will have to be related to the ideas by a fourth something and this process will go till infinity. As a result of it, Plato's theory

of idea will commit a fallacy. This fallacy is regarded to be the fallacy of infinite regress. So committing of this fallacy can be regarded to be one serious drawback of Plato's theory of ideas or forms. One important point regarding this is that Plato himself was aware of this problem of his later dialogue. But this criticism appeared in its most pronounced form in the writings of Aristotle.

2.6 CONCLUSION

This is in brief about the Plato's theory of idea or form. Though some criticisms are present in this theory, but it is also true that this theory has played an important and significant place in the field of western philosophy. It can also be mentioned that Plato's theory is something which can be regarded to be the first step towards the growth of idealism. Many philosophers have even regarded it to be the Platonic realism. According Plato ideas or forms are real and exist in their own world of heaven of ideas; they are not simply the mind created entities. That is why it must have to be mentioned that Plato's theory of idea is unique theory in itself. So finally we can conclude that Plato's theory of idea or form is playing a significant role in the western philosophy. Many later theories and schools have been found to be influenced by Plato's theory of ideas or form.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What according to Plato is the ultimate reality?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 2: From which philosopher, Plato learns that the visible universe is in a state of constant flux?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 3: Are Plato's ideas are spatio-temporal entities?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 4: In terms of what, ideas or forms are regarded to be superior to the particulars?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 5: What cannot be apprehended by the senses?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 6: Who said that all the ideas are subordinate to the idea of Goods?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 7: According to Plato, ideas are apprehended by what?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 8: Before uniting with the body, the soul is acquainted with what?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 9: According to Plato, how many tiers are there in the universe?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 10: Plato's doctrine of ideas or form has committed a fallacy. What is the name of that fallacy?

Ans : ……..……..

Q 11: How Heraclitus has defined the reality?

Ans : ……..……..



2.7 LET US SUM UP

- According to Plato ideas or forms are ultimate reality of this universe.
- According to Plato, ideas or forms are the universal essences, which have status of their own.
- Ideas are something, which is actually prior to the particulars and which actually exists independently to the particulars.
- For Plato, the forms or ideas are those changeless, eternal and non-material essences or patterns of which the actual visible objects that we see are only poor copies.
- The cognition of the ideas alone can be called knowledge.

- The world of ideas is not the visible world but it is the intelligible world.
- Ideas or forms are the eternal patterns of the reality and whatever we perceive are the mere copies of those ideas.
- Ideas or forms are not spatio-temporal entities. It means ideas or forms are beyond space and time. It has neither beginning nor end.
- Ideas use to live in their world of ideas, which is called heaven of ideas.
- An idea or a form is is something which is superior to a particular in terms of degree of reality and value.
- The form can be regarded to be a model or archetype of which the particular is a copy.
- According to Plato, in the doctrine of ideas, an idea can be related to particular things in three ways. These may be three ways of stating the same thing. First, the idea is a cause of the essence of a thing. Secondly, a thing may be said to participate in a form. Lastly, a thing may participate simultaneously in a plurality of forms. When it undergoes change it participates successively in different forms.
- Plato said that there is hierarchy of ideas. Some ideas are regarded to be higher while some other ideas are regarded to be lower.
- It is said by Plato that the higher ideas use to communicate with the lower ideas.
- The ideas cannot be apprehended by the senses as they are not saptio-temporal.
- The ideas are apprehended by the reason.
- According to Plato, though all ideas are subordinate to the idea of Goods, yet there are a great variety of ideas or forms.

- There are ideas of values, like goodness and beauty. Again there are ideas of quality like whiteness and solidity, roundness etc. again there are ideas of classes of things like house, dog, man etc. There are ideas of relations like equality, resemblance etc.
- It is said by Plato that before soul is united with the body, the soul is acquainted with the forms or idea.
- According to Plato, the universe is three-tier universe.
- According to Plato, the first tier of the universe is occupied by the idea of Good.
- The second tier of the universe according to Plato is occupied by the other ideas.
- The third tier of the universe according to Plato is occupied by the concrete particular things.
- In the three tier interpretation of the universe, ideas are regarded by Plato to be metaphysical principles.
- According to another interpretation, Plato's ideas are logical essences and from this interpretation, the universe of Plato's conception is a one-tier universe.
- Many philosophers have criticized Plato's theory of ideas in the point that Plato could not give an adequate explanation of the relation between Ideas and the particular copies of ideas.
- Plato's theory of idea or form has committed the fallacy of infinite regress.



2.8: FURTHER READING

1) Kenny Anthony (1988). An Illustrated History of Western Philosophy. Wiley Publishers

2) Russell Bertrand (1946).History of Western Philosophy. George Allen & Unwin Ltd

3) Mahis Y (1994). A Critical History of Western Philosophy. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

4) Thilly Frank (1914). A History of Philosophy. H. Holt and Company

8.9: ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Q No 1: Ideas or forms

Answer to Q No 2: Heraclitus

Answer to Q No 3: No

Answer to Q No 4: In term of degree

Answer to Q No 5: Ideas or forms

Answer to Q No 6: Plato

Answer to Q No 7: Reason

Answer to Q No 8: Ideas or forms

Answer to Q No 9: Three

Answer to Q No 10: Fallacy of Infinite Regress

Answer to Q No 11: According to Heraclitus, reality is a constsant flux

2.10: MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions:

Q 1. Which are the universal essences according to Plato?

Q 2: What kind of status an idea owns?

Q 3: Ideas are what kind of archetype of things?

Q 4: What are the two doctrines from which, Plato's theory of ideas have been influenced with?

Q 5: Are ideas depends on our knowing mind?

Q 6: According to which interpretation, Plato's doctrine of ideas are one tier in nature?

Q 7: How Plato was influences with Socrates theory of concept?

B) Short Questions: (Answer within 100-150 words)

Q 1: From which two doctrines, Plato's doctrine of ideas or form has been influenced with?

Q 2: Why Plato's doctrine of ideas has been regarded as changeless, eternal and non-material essences or patterns?

Q 3: Briefly explain the statement, "Ideas are not something which is depending on the knowing mind"

Q 4: How ideas are related with the reality and value?

Q 5: In Plato's doctrine of ideas, Universe is considered as a three tier universe or one tier universe? Briefly explain.

Q 6: Briefly explain why Plato's doctrine of Ideas has committed the fallacy of infinite regress?

C) Long Questions: (Answer in within 300-500 words)

Q 1: Critically discuss Plato's doctrine of ideas or forms.

Q 2: What are the main characteristics of Plato's theory of ideas? Explain

Q 3: "Plato's doctrines of ideas are not spatio-temporal entity"- discuss the statement.

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