

philosophers. The guardians who are selected to be educated as philosophers must not only show a natural ability for doing philosophy, but must also have stable, reliable characters (503c).

However, Plato's argument that love of wisdom produces virtue cannot only appeal to those cases that confirm the claim. Common sense and experience would suggest that philosophers are just as lacking in virtue as anyone else. Plato's argument, that love of wisdom suppresses physical pleasures, the desire for money, and fear of death, lacks empirical backing. His own argument that philosophers are particularly prone to corruption seems to assert that love of wisdom is not enough. In a democratic society, the naturally gifted philosopher will be influenced by popular praise and blame and become corrupt. So a love of wisdom only produces virtue in a society that supports and encourages a love of wisdom. Becoming virtuous depends on being trained and encouraged to be virtuous, not just on philosophy.

But are they also virtuous? The love of wisdom is a passion that subdues one's other passions: 'if a man's desires set strongly in one direction, they are correspondingly less strong in other directions' (485d). A person who desires knowledge will take pleasure in the things of the mind, so physical pleasures won't be tempting. He will be self-controlled, not greedy about money, broad-minded and generous, and not fear death, and so be courageous. Anyone who doesn't show these traits, Plato suggests, can be dismissed as not a true philosopher.

So philosophers are virtuous because of their love of wisdom. Does their knowledge of the Good, when they achieve it, also help? Plato argues that it does, because you cannot stop someone 'assimilating himself to anything with which he enjoys dealing... So the philosopher whose dealings are with the divine order himself acquires the characteristics of order and divinity so far as a man may' (500d). So a philosopher who knows the Form of the Good will make himself good, i.e. virtuous.

ASSESSING PLATO'S ARGUMENT

Plato's argument that knowledge of the Good (not just love of wisdom) will help make philosophers virtuous is left very vague. The idea of 'assimilation' is unclear. Suppose being good is a matter of character: How is it that knowledge could transform someone in the way Plato suggests? Suppose being good is a matter of acting morally: Plato never says the very abstract, theoretical knowledge of the Good could be applied to everyday life and help someone make the right decisions about what to do.

One possible response draws on the connection between the Form of the Good and harmony, and the idea that the good (virtuous) soul is in a state of harmony. Perhaps Plato means to suggest that knowledge of the Good enables the philosopher to recognise and implement this harmony in his soul. But this suggestion still doesn't tell us how this is possible.

If we turn from knowing what is good to wanting to be good, we face similar problems. Why should knowledge of the Good on its own create the motive to be good oneself or to bring about goodness in society?

Plato is highly sensitive to the possibility that the guardians may become corrupt. He remarks that a philosophical nature is particularly prone to corruption (491d, 495a), that philosophical examination of moral principles is dangerous for young people, as they are not yet stable enough to cope with uncertainty (539d), that the rulers must be highly vigilant and weed out any guardian being trained to rule who shows signs of corruption.

Does this suggest that studying philosophy is not particularly effective at encouraging virtue? Plato could respond that in people who become corrupt the passion for wisdom is not sufficiently strong to reign in their other passions. But this begs the question: does the acquisition of philosophical knowledge help this self-restraint?

Producing virtue

In Plato's perfect state, philosopher-rulers are selected from the wider ruling class, called 'guardians'. Only the best guardians are selected for training as rulers. In his description of this selection process, Plato suggests that those guardians who don't show the character traits that he lists as marks of the 'true philosopher' can be judged not to be

and derive their existence from the Forms. But the Forms in turn derive their being from the Form of the Good, which is the first principle of everything.

So, second, knowledge of what *is* is related to knowledge of what is *good*. To know what something is is to understand its essence. Exemplifying its essence is what it is for that thing to be good. So if we understand something's essence, we understand what it is for it to be good (of its kind). This is a clear example of the way in which the Form of the Good is the source of knowledge.

Third, the Good and all the Forms do not change, which is why they can be known. Since the Good does not change, the good person will also not change. There is one absolute standard for being good. (Plato's account of the good person is discussed in the handout on 'The nature of morality'.)

'Turning the soul around'

In other works, Plato famously argues that virtue is knowledge: if you know what the good thing is, you will be good. How does coming to know what is good involve becoming virtuous?

During his discussion of the simile of the cave, Plato says that the prisoner, when freed, must be turned around to face the fire and then the outside world. So, he infers,

our argument indicates that the capacity for knowledge is innate in each man's mind, and that the organ by which he learns is like an eye which cannot be turned from darkness to light unless the whole body is turned; in the same way the mind as a whole must be turned away from the world of change until its eye can bear to look straight at reality, and at the brightest of all realities which is what we call the good.... (518c)

The philosopher, Plato argues, will not be concerned with or distracted by things of this world, but only with the Forms, and above all, with the Form of the Good. His *whole* mind must be turned around. He has to be this focused in order to acquire knowledge of the Good. But then, having achieved knowledge of the Good, what motivations could a philosopher have for not *being good* himself? The usual temptations won't be there, because as a philosopher, he is just not interested in money, fame, and so on. He is only interested in the Good. So to know the Good is to be good.

However, the philosophical temperament necessary to acquire knowledge of the Forms is very rare (503b-d). So Plato's theory of the Forms, and the Form of the Good, means that most people will never achieve knowledge of what is good. This, of course, can be challenged. For example, Kant, while agreeing that ethical understanding depends on rationality, argues that everyone is sufficiently rational to understand the good. Christians would argue similarly that everyone has a conscience. To agree with this universal knowledge of the good, if we do not reject Plato's theory of the Forms altogether, we must reject his stringencies on what is required to acquire knowledge of them and produce a different story about the development or nature of reason.

Are philosophers virtuous?

Plato's argument that philosophers should rule is that they have both the knowledge and virtue required of a good ruler. He argues that the height of their knowledge, 'the greatest study' (503e), is knowledge of the Form of the Good. They are 'experts' on the Good, so they know what makes human life go well.

Philosophers, knowledge and virtue

THE PHILOSOPHER'S LOVE OF TRUTH

When Plato has Socrates first introduce the idea that the rulers of the republic should be philosophers, Socrates does so with hesitation and in recognition that the view is somewhat ridiculous. But in fact, it was not so unheard of as might be thought; there were a number of city-states in which men of learning were the rulers. More to the point, however, is Glaucon's warning (473e) that Socrates would be punished for the proposal. Not long before, Athens, under the rule of Socrates' associates, had lost a war with Sparta, and very antidemocratic reprisals had followed which Athenians still resented. Plato therefore takes pains to distinguish the true philosopher from people who would pretend to be philosophers and have a false confidence in their wisdom.

A philosopher, by definition, loves wisdom. Plato conceives this as a form of real love; and as love, must love the whole of the object – so philosophers love all learning. Glaucon suggests that many people love new experiences, and seek out new sights and sounds. But that isn't enough to be a philosopher. People who love sights and sounds don't have a genuine passion for truth and knowledge. They rest content with discovering and experiencing the many particulars; they don't search for the reality behind the appearances.

Plato then begins his discussion of the difference between particulars and the Forms, to explain his claim that experiences of particulars is not knowledge, but opinion, and to think otherwise is to mistake appearances for reality. Only someone who has a passion for knowledge, who will not rest with experiences of particular things, can be called a philosopher. Only philosophers, he argues, can see the distinction between opinion and knowledge, because only they keep searching to attain true knowledge – of the Forms. Lovers of sights and sounds have only opinions, not knowledge (480a); whereas Philosophers see that what others think of as 'knowledge' is just opinion, what others think of as 'reality' is just appearance.

The other qualities of philosophers

Plato does not pretend that philosophy is easy. It is, in fact, very difficult, and the 'true philosopher', someone who loves all learning, is very rare. This is in part because we 'can't expect anyone to have much love for anything which he does with pain and difficulty and little success' (486c). So there are a number of traits that philosophers need to have 'naturally', to equip them with the ability and temperament to love learning. A philosopher needs an ability to learn, a good memory, a sense of proportion, a breadth of vision, and a quick mind.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE GOOD AND VIRTUE

Plato clearly believes that there is moral truth. We can have moral knowledge, knowledge of the Good. However, knowledge and the Good are more closely related to this.

First, there is a close relation between reality (which is what knowledge is of) and goodness. The Forms are perfect and more real, whereas particular objects are imperfect,