Plato's Idealism and Religious Idealism: Any Dichotomy?

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Abstract

This paper examines Plato's Idealism and Religious Idealism as to ascertain if there is any dichotomy between them.. Idealism is the philosophical school that stresses on the central role of the ideal or the spiritual in man's interpretation of his experiences. Plato provided much of the conceptual framework within which idealist philosophy has dealth with 'the what' and 'the why' of reality. Plato contends that beyond the empirical world of change, the phenomenal world that we feel and see, the world of individual things, there is a supersensible world of forms, eternal essence, ideas, universals or concepts. The former is temporal and perishable, while the later is permement and eternal. Plato in his 'doctrine of forms', asserted that ultimate reality is not found in objects and concepts that we experience on earth. Instead, reality is found in 'forms' or 'ideas' that transcend our physical world. This paper through its assessment discovered that idealism exerted a lot of influence on Christianity. The idea of one God as pure spirit and the universal God can be readily recognized as compatible with idealism. Augustine accepted Plato's notion of the "divided lines" between ideas and matter, but he referred to the two worlds as the world of God and the world of man. It is very clear that idealism and religion are intertwined. To Plato, ultimate reality is idea and our bridge to it is the mind. To the Judeo Christian, ultimate reality is God and our bridge to it is the soul. It is a logical to connect idea and God on one hand, and mind and soul on the other. Finally, it is difficult to identify any dichotomy because religious idealism is more of a product or replication of Plato's idealism.

Keywords: Plato's Idealism, Religious Idealism, Plato, Augustine, Christian, Mind and Ideas.

Introduction

Idealism is the philosophical school that stresses on the central role of the ideal or the spiritual in man's interpretation of his experiences. The main thesis of idealism is that philosophy accords priority to spirit over matter by using language to talk about ideas. It holds that reality exists mainly as spiritual or mind, and that abstraction and law are more central to our knowledge than sense experience. We can know that a thing exists only through mind or ideas.

The goal of wisdom is to understand the meaning of life, and efforts to find meaning can only properly begin from the perspective of the human mind. The mind can only comprehend things

through the medium of ideas, so the nature of philosophy as human comprehension is inherently idealistic in character. The idealism inherent in philosophy flows from the fact that human understanding deals only with ideas and with their relations to other ideas and to the world.

Idealism lays great stress on supernatural or transcendental ideas. As a world-view, it holds that the basic reality consists of mind, ideas, thoughts, or selves. For the idealist, the world has a meaning beyond its surface appearance. Idealism stresses organic wholeness as a central principle. It holds that the world process exhibits organic unity.

Historically, the origin of idealism can be traced to early Greek philosophy. It started with Socrates when he dialogued with Pythagoras, Parmenides and other early Greek thinkers. Socrates' disciple, Plato, held that there are two worlds, namely, the world of forms or ideas, which are real and lasting, and the world of objects or senses which are transitory and imperfect.

However, our concern here is to expose Plato's idealism and religious idealism and to find out if there is any dichotomy. Plato's idealism is understood as that which influenced religious idealism. Thus, it is always seen that religious idealism is a byproduct of Platonic idealism.

Plato's Idealism

Plato (427 – 347 B. C.) was one of the first philosophers to argue that reality is primarily ideal or abstract. He provided much of the conceptual framework within which idealist philosophy has dealt with 'the what' and 'the why' of reality. Plato is the greatest original source for idealist philosophy. As a student of Socrates, Plato believed that knowledge is virtue and that no one does evil willingly. His focus was on ethical and aesthetic ideals such as beauty and the good. Concepts such as these are at the heart of idealism; not epistemological notions like 'whiteness', which Aristotle concentrated on in his criticisms of Plato's ideas.

Plato contends that beyond the empirical world of change, the phenomenal world that we feel and see, the world of individual things, there is a supersensible world of forms, eternal essences, ideas, universals or concepts. The former is concrete, temporal and perishable, while the latter is permanent and eternal. Forms or ideas are the original, transcendental patterns and perceptions, while individual things are mere copies, imitations or shadows of these forms. "While affirming that reality is immaterial, Plato held that there is nothing real except mind and its experiences. The unchanging forms or ideas, which are real, are known only through reason"[1].

Plato in the *Republic* discussed about the separation of the world of ideas from the world of matter. The forms or ideas are those changeless, eternal and nonmaterial essences or patterns of which the actual visible objects we see are only poor copies. There is the form of the triangle and all the triangles we see are mere copies of that form. Plato was of the view that knowledge is absolute because the true object of thought is not the material order but the changeless and eternal order of the Ideas or Forms.

The doctrine of Forms represents a serious attempt to explain the nature of existence. We have certain kinds of experience that raise the question about existence for us. For instance, we make judgments about things and behaviour, saying about a thing that it is beautiful and about an act that it is good. This suggests that there is somewhere a standard of beauty, which is different from the thing we are judging, and that there is a standard of good, which is somehow separate from the person or his act that we judge. Plato concluded that the real world is not the visible world but rather the intelligible world. The intelligible world is most real, said Plato, because it consists of the eternal Forms.

Plato showed that the true philosopher is concerned to know the essential nature of things. When he asked what is justice or beauty, he did not want examples of just and beautiful things.

He wants to know what makes these things just and beautiful. The difference between opinion and knowledge is just this that those who are at the level of opinion can recognize a just act but cannot tell you why it is just.

In Plato's 'theory of forms', he asserted that ultimate reality is not found in objects and concepts that we experience on earth. Instead, reality is found in 'forms' or 'ideas' that transcend our physical world. These forms operate as perfect universal templates for everything we experience in the world. For example, all horses on earth are imperfect replicas of the universal 'horseness' that exists in another dimension. "One result of Platonism was the belief that matter is inferior to the spiritual. Thus, there is a dualism between matter and the immaterial"[2]. This perspective naturally leads to negative perceptions concerning the nature of the physical world and even our human bodies. Plato's account of Socrates in *Phaedo* is one such example. The *Phaedo* is Plato's account of Socrates' final conversation before death, and the subject of the dialogue is the problem of life after death and now people can find absolute truth and immortality through cultivation of the soul. "When sentenced to death, Socrates rebuked his friends for mourning over him by declaring that he longed for death so he could escape his carnal body and focus on higher spiritual values in a spiritual realm"[3]. For Plato (and Socrates), the human body is like a tomb for the soul. Plato's ideas have had an enormous impact. Gary Habermas observes that Plato's concept of forms, along with his cosmology and his views on the immortality of the soul, "probably has the greatest influence in the philosophy of religion"[4].

One passage which illuminates the central themes of Platonic idealism is the discussion of the nature of equality. Socrates argues that before we began to see and hear and use our other senses, we must somewhere have acquired the knowledge that there is such a thing as absolute equality; otherwise we could never realised, by using it as a standard for comparison, that all equal objects of sense are only imperfect copies. We can only know that two sticks, or three boxes of apples, or two philosophy essays, are equal in quality or quantity by reference to an

ideal standard, and knowledge of this standard cannot be derived from the things themselves, but must be a priori, from reason alone, because physical things never completely measure up to it. Plato maintained that this applies no more to equality than it did to absolute beauty, goodness, uprightness, holiness, and all those characteristics which we designate by the term 'absolute'.

"The exaltation of the spiritual over the physical in Platonism carried over to Judaism as evidenced in the writings of the Jew, Philo (20 B. C. – A. D. 50)"[5]. Phlio, in an attempt to make the Old Testament more attractive to the Greeks influenced by the Platonic ideals, allegorized many Old Testament passages that appeared too crass and unworthy of God.

Platonism also influenced its more religious counterpart, Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism was a complex system for understanding reality that was founded by the Roman philosopher Plotinus (A. D. 204 – 270). The Egyptian born Plotinus carried on some of the main ideas of Plato such as (i) there is an immaterial reality that exists apart from the physical world; (ii) a strong distinction exist between an immaterial soul and the physical body; and (iii) the immortal soul finds its ultimate fulfilment as it becomes one with an eternal, transcendental realm. According to Plotinus, "the lowest level of reality is matter"[6]. Thus, matter is viewed very negatively in Neo-Platonism.

Religious Idealism

Idealism exerted a lot of influence on Christianity. The idea of one God as pure spirit and the Universal Good can be readily recognized as compatible with idealism. Much attention in recent years has been devoted to the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian doctrine. This has been especially true in regard to the nature and attributes of God. Some have also contended that Christian eschatology has been negatively influenced by Greek Platonic assumptions and

ideas. Alcorn's book, *Heaven*, for instance, asserts that "biblical eschatology has been largely replaced by Christoplatonism which is a merger of Christianity and the ideas of Plato"[7].

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430) who is one of the fathers of the Roman Catholic Church and other early founders of the Church were also heavily influenced by idealism. Augustine was very much concerned with the problem of evil and believed that since man inherited the sin of Adam, he was continuously in a struggle to regain the kind of purity he had before the fall. This idea is akin to Plato's myth about the star where souls that lived near the Good were exiled the world of matter to suffer pain and death and struggle to return to the spiritual existence they once had.

Augustine accepted Plato's notion of the "divided line" between ideas and matter, but he referred to the two worlds as the world of God and the world of man. The World of God is the world of spirit and the Good. The World of Man, the material world of darkness, sin, ignorance, and suffering. Augustine contended that one should, as msuch as possible release oneself from the World of Man and enter into the World of God. Augustine believed that people do not create knowledge: God has already created it but people can discover it through trying to find God. Since humans have souls, they are the closest things people have to divinity, and Augustine believed that we should look within our souls for the true knowledge that exists there. He promoted an intuitive knowledge and agreed with Plato that concentration on physical phenomena could lead us astray from the path of true knowledge.

It is very clear that idealism and religion are intertwined. Christianity promotes the idea of God as transcendental and core spirit or idea. The Christian believe that God created the world out of Himself or out of spirit or Idea is similar to the Platonic concept that true reality is, after all, basically idea. To Plato, ultimate reality is idea and our bridge to it is the mind. To the Judeo Christian, ultimate reality is God and our bridge to it is the soul. It is a logical step to connect

Idea and God on the one hand, and mind and soul on the other. Therefore, man's contact with ultimate reality is by means of mind and soul (or their congeners, self, consciousness, and subjectivity).

Christianity followed Platonism as the dominant expression of the perennial philosophy in the West. The most dramatic evidence of this is seen in its view of Jesus Christ as God incarnate, 'true God and true Man'. Inasmuch as Christ is the ultimate role model, the implicationis that each Christian, like Christ, should be a mediator of heaven and earth.

The influence of Platonism on Religious Idealism

Many of the early Christians were not suspicious of or threatened by Plato. According to Diogenes, Plato "astounded the Apologists and the early Church Fathers"[8]. For instance, when early Christians encountered Plato's creation story in his *Timaeus*, some believed he had read Moses or received his insights from divine revelation. The similarity of some of Plato's ideas with Christianity was seen as evidence why pagans should be open to Christianity.

Platonic thinking influenced significant theologians of the early Church. This was true for the Christians of the Eastern Church, particularly those in the Alexandrian tradition such as Clement of Alexandria, Clement and Origen. As Jeffrey Russell states, "The great Greek fathers of Alexandria, Clement and Origen, firmly grounded in Scripture, were also influenced by Platonism and Stoicism"[9].

Theologians of the Alexandrian tradition carried a high view of Greek philosophy and attempted to show that Christianity was consistent with the best of Greek philosophy. Viviano points out that Clement of Alexandria (150 – 215) followed in the footsteps of his predecessor Philo by adopting a "preference for an allegorical meaning of history which turns out, upon closer acquaintance, to transform much biblical history into general moral truths of a philosophical cast"[10]. For Clement, God used philosophy to prepare the Greeks for Christ just

like He used the Law of Moses to prepare the Hebrew people for Christ. Clement held Socrates and Plato in high regard. He even believed that Plato served a role that was similar to that Moses. In line with Greek philosophy, Clement viewed the body and matter as lesser in nature than the spirit (although he did not view the body as evil).

Origen of Alexandria (c. 185 – 254) was important in bringing Platonism into Christianity. As McGrath observed, Origen "was a highly creative theologian with a strongly Platonist bent"[11]. Viviano also points out that Origen wrought some bold changes in Christian eschatology. Origen dissolved the Christian expectation of the resurrection of the body into the immortality of the soul, since Christian perfection consists, on this Platonizing view, in a progressive dematerialization. He even went further than most of the early Christian theologians by asserting that the resurrection body was purely spiritual.

The influence of Platonic thinking was not just on theologians of the eastern tradition. Alister observes that Ambrose of Milan (c. 339 – 97) "drew upon the ideas of the Jewish Platonist writer, Philo of Alexandria" in promoting "a Platonic world of ideas and values, rather than a physical or geographical entity"[12]. Ambrose's pupil, Augustine of Hippo, too, was influenced by Platonic thinking. Allen refers to Augustine as "one of the great Christian Platonists"[13]. Christian thought also came under the influence of Platonism, as scholars of the third century such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen mixed this Greek philosophy with theology. In particular, Augustine's interpretation of Plato dominated Christian thought for the next thousand years after his death in the fifth century. In his *Confessions*, Augustine openly described the help he received from the Platonists. Augustine was also influenced by Neo-Platonism as well. As Viviano states,

> We need only note that Augustine was strongly influenced by Neo-Platonic
> philosophy and has even read Plotinus and Prophyry…. This philosophy
> was highly spiritual and other-worldly, centered on the one and the eternal,

treating the material and the historically contingent as inferior stages in the ascent of the soul to union with the one[14].

Thus Augustine was attracted to the spiritual interpretation of the kingdom we have already seen in Origen. Indeed, ultimately for Augustine, the kingdom of God consists in eternal life with God in heaven. That is the *civitas dei*, the city of God, as opposed to the *civitas terrena*. Augustine view dominated and became the normal Roman Catholic view down to our own time.

Conclusion

However, we cannot conclude without this paper without identifying whether there is any dichotomy in Plato's idealism and Religious idealism. It is difficult to note the dichotomy because religious idealism is more of a product or replication of Plato's idealism. It is difficult to deny the importance of Platonic thinking running through the religious idealism. Plato exercised an enormous influence on Western thought and seems to be dealt with by those of all philosophical persuasions. This influence also applies to the area of Christian eschatology.

The influence of platonic thinking on religious idealism is evident in the following religious beliefs:

(i)   Belief that our eternal dwelling place is in a spiritual dimension and not on earth.

(ii)   Belief that planet earth is basically evil and is beyond restoration.

(iii)   Belief that heaven is entirely beyond human comprehension.

(iv)   Belief that our experience in eternity will be mostly that of spiritual contemplation and inactivity.

(v)   Belief that there is no time or linear progression of history.

(vi)   Belief that there will be no nations or governments.

However, in the account of creation, Christians denied Plato's view of the use of pre-existing materials for creation. Christians asserted 'creation out of nothing'.

End Note

[1]Andrew F. Uduigwomen, *A Textbook of History and Philosophy of Science* (Aba: AAU Vitalis Book Company, 2007), 168.

[2]Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 9.

[3]Steven M. Cahn, ed. "Phaedo" in *Classics of Western Philosophy* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 49.

[4]Gary R. Habermas, "Plato, Platonism", *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 859.

[5]Gary, "Plato, Platonism", *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 859.

[6]Christopher Kirwan, "Plotinus", in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 689.

[7]Randy A. Alcorn, *Heaven* (Sandy, OR: Eternal Perspective Ministries, 2004), 82.

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[9]Jeffrey B. Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 69.

[10]Benedict T. Viviano, O. P. *The Kingdom of God in History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 39.

[11]Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 33.

[12]McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven,* 51.

[13]Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 82.

[14]Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History,* 52.