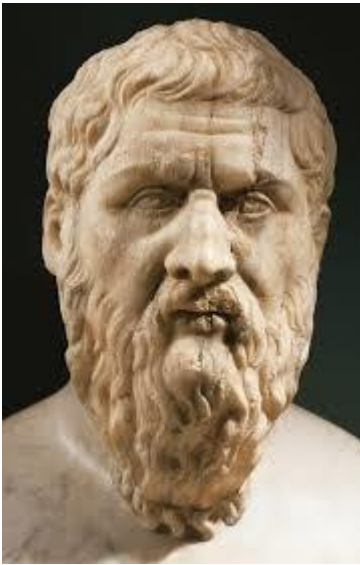


Year 11 Introduction to A-level Religion, Philosophy and Ethics

Each week I will be posting an extract from Sophie's World and asking you to answer some questions.



Week 3: Plato

Read the extract below and answer the following questions

1. What four tasks does Plato present to Sophie?
2. What must be true if a baker makes fifty absolutely identical cookies?
3. What happened when Plato was 29?
4. What was Plato's first deed as a philosopher?
5. What was the name of the school that Plato set up?
6. What did the Sophist claim about perceptions of right and wrong?
7. What did Plato believe about absolutely everything that belongs to the material world?
8. What is the difference between a particular horse and the "form" of the horse?

Plato

... a longing to return to the realm of the soul ...

Sophie woke with a start early the next morning. She glanced at the clock. It was only a little after five but she was so wide awake that she sat up in bed. Why was she wearing a dress? Then she remembered everything.

She climbed onto a stool and looked on the top shelf of the closet. Yes—there, at the back, was the video cassette. It hadn't been a dream after all; at least, not all of it.

But she couldn't really have seen Plato and Socrates ... oh, never mind! She didn't have the energy to think about it anymore. Perhaps her mother was right, perhaps she was acting a bit nuts these days.

Anyway, she couldn't go back to sleep. Perhaps she ought to go down to the den and see if the dog had left another letter. Sophie crept downstairs, put on a pair of jogging shoes, and went out.

In the garden everything was wonderfully clear and still. The birds were chirping so energetically that Sophie could hardly keep from laughing. The morning dew twinkled in the grass like drops of crystal. Once again she was struck by the incredible wonder of the world.

Inside the old hedge it was also very damp. Sophie saw no new letter from the philosopher, but nevertheless she wiped off one of the thick roots and sat down.

She recalled that the video-Plato had given her some questions to answer. The first was something about how a baker could bake fifty identical cookies.

Sophie had to think very carefully about that, because it definitely wouldn't be easy. When her mother occasionally baked a batch of cookies, they were never all exactly the same. But then she was not an expert pastry cook; sometimes the kitchen looked as if a bomb had hit it. Even the cookies they bought at the baker's were never exactly the same. Every single cookie was shaped separately in the baker's hands.

Then a satisfied smile spread over Sophie's face. She remembered how once she and her father went shopping while her mother was busy baking Christmas cookies. When they got back there were a lot of gingerbread men spread out on the kitchen table. Even though they weren't all perfect, in a way they were all the same. And why was that? Obviously because her mother had used the same mold for all of them.

Sophie felt so pleased with herself for having remembered the incident that she pronounced herself done with the first question. If a baker makes fifty absolutely identical cookies, he must be using the same pastry mold for all of them. And that's that!

Then the video-Plato had looked into the camera and asked why all horses were the same. But they weren't, at all! On the contrary, Sophie thought no two horses were the same, just as no two people were the same.

She was ready to give up on that one when she remembered what she had thought about the cookies. No one of them was exactly like any of the others. Some were a bit thicker than the others, and some were broken. But still, everyone could see that they were—in a way—“exactly the same.”

What Plato was really asking was perhaps why a horse was always a horse, and not, for example, a cross between a horse and a pig. Because even though some horses were as brown as bears and others were as white as lambs, all horses had something in common. Sophie had yet to meet a horse with six or eight legs, for example.

But surely Plato couldn't believe that what made all horses alike was that they were made with the same mold?

Then Plato had asked her a really difficult question. Does man have an immortal soul? That was something Sophie felt quite unqualified to answer. All she knew was that dead bodies were either cremated or buried, so there was no future for them. If man had an immortal soul, one would have to believe that a person consisted of two separate parts: a body that gets worn out after many years—and a soul that operates more or less independently of what

happens to the body. Her grandmother had said once that she felt it was only her body that was old. Inside she had always been the same young girl-The thought of the “young girl” led Sophie to the last question: Are women and men equally sensible? She was not so sure about that. It depended on what Plato meant by sensible.

Something the philosopher had said about Socrates came into her mind. Socrates had pointed out that everyone could understand philosophical truths if they just used their common sense. He had also said that a slave had the same common sense as a nobleman. Sophie was sure that he would also have said that women had the same common sense as men.

While she sat thinking, there was a sudden rustling in the hedge, and the sound of something puffing and blowing like a steam engine. The next second, the golden Labrador slipped into the den. It had a large envelope in its mouth.

“Hermes!” cried Sophie. “Drop it! Drop it!” The dog dropped the envelope in Sophie’s lap, and Sophie stretched out her hand to pat the dog’s head. “Good boy, Hermes!” she said. The dog lay down and allowed itself to be patted. But after a couple of minutes it got up and began to push its way back through the hedge the same way it had come in. Sophie followed with the brown envelope in her hand. She crawled through the dense thicket and was soon outside the garden.

Hermes had already started to run toward the edge of the woods, and Sophie followed a few yards behind. Twice the dog turned around and growled, but Sophie was not to be deterred.

This time she was determined to find the philosopher—even if it meant running all the way to Athens.

The dog ran faster and suddenly turned off down a narrow path. Sophie chased him, but after a few minutes he turned and faced her, barking like a watchdog. Sophie still refused to give up, taking the opportunity to lessen the distance between them.

Hermes turned and raced down the path. Sophie realized that she would never catch up with him. She stood quite still for what seemed like an eternity, listening to him running farther and farther away. Then all was silent.

She sat down on a tree stump by a little clearing in the woods. She still had the brown envelope in her hand. She opened it, drew out several typewritten pages, and began to read:

PLATO'S ACADEMY

Thank you for the pleasant time we spent together, Sophie. In Athens, I mean. So now I have at least introduced myself. And since I have also introduced Plato, we might as well begin without further ado.

Plato (428-347 B.C.) was twenty-nine years old when Socrates drank the hemlock. He had been a pupil of Socrates for some time and had followed his trial very closely. The fact that Athens could condemn its noblest citizen to death did more than make a profound impression on him. It was to shape the course of his entire philosophic endeavor.

To Plato, the death of Socrates was a striking example of the conflict that can exist between society as it really is and the true or ideal society. Plato's first deed as a philosopher was to publish Socrates' *Apology*, an account of his plea to the large jury.

As you will no doubt recall, Socrates never wrote anything down, although many of the pre-Socratics did. The problem is that hardly any of their written material remains. But in the case of Plato, we believe that all his principal works have been preserved. (In addition to Socrates' *Apology*, Plato wrote a collection of Epistles and about twenty-five philosophical Dialogues.) That we have these works today is due not least to the fact that Plato set up his own school of philosophy in a grove not far from Athens, named after the legendary Greek hero Academus. The school was therefore known as the Academy. (Since then, many thousands of "academies" have been established all over the world. We still speak of "academics" and "academic subjects.")

The subjects taught at Plato's Academy were philosophy, mathematics, and gymnastics—although perhaps "taught" is hardly the right word. Lively discourse was considered most important at Plato's Academy. So it was not purely by chance that Plato's writings took the form of dialogues.

The Eternally True, Eternally Beautiful, and Eternally Good

In the introduction to this course I mentioned that it could often be a good idea to ask what a particular philosopher's project was. So now I ask: what were the problems Plato was concerned with?

Briefly, we can establish that Plato was concerned with the relationship between what is eternal and immutable, on the one hand, and what "flows," on the other. (Just like the pre-Socratics, in fact.) We've seen how the Sophists and Socrates turned their attention from questions of natural philosophy to problems related to man and society. And yet in one sense, even Socrates and the Sophists were preoccupied with the relationship between the eternal and immutable, and the "flowing." They were interested in the problem as it related to human morals and society's ideals or virtues. Very briefly, the Sophists thought that perceptions of what was right or wrong varied from one city-state to another, and from one generation to the next. So right and wrong was something that "flowed." This was totally unacceptable to Socrates. He believed in the existence of eternal and absolute rules for what was right or wrong. By using our common sense we can all arrive at these immutable norms, since human reason is in fact eternal and immutable.

Do you follow, Sophie? Then along comes Plato. He is concerned with both what is eternal and immutable in nature and what is eternal and immutable as regards morals and society. To Plato, these two problems were one and the same. He tried to grasp a "reality" that was eternal and immutable. And to be quite frank, that is precisely what we need philosophers for. We do not need them to choose a beauty queen or the day's bargain in tomatoes. (This is why they are often unpopular!) Philosophers will try to ignore highly topical affairs and instead try to draw people's attention to what is eternally "true," eternally "beautiful," and eternally "good."

We can thus begin to glimpse at least the outline of Plato's philosophical project. But let's take one thing at a time. We are attempting to understand an extraordinary mind, a mind that was to

have a profound influence on all subsequent European philosophy.

The World of Ideas

Both Empedocles and Democritus had drawn attention to the fact that although in the natural world everything “flows,” there must nevertheless be “something” that never changes (the “four roots,” or the “atoms”). Plato agreed with the proposition as such—but in quite a different way.

Plato believed that everything tangible in nature “flows.” So there are no “substances” that do not dissolve. Absolutely everything that belongs to the “material world” is made of a material that time can erode, but everything is made after a timeless “mold” or “form” that is eternal and immutable.

You see? No, you don't.

Why are horses the same, Sophie? You probably don't think they are at all. But there is something that all horses have in common, something that enables us to identify them as horses. A particular horse “flows,” naturally. It might be old and lame, and in time it will die. But the “form” of the horse is eternal and immutable.

That which is eternal and immutable, to Plato, is therefore not a physical “basic substance,” as it was for Empedocles and Democritus. Plato's conception was of eternal and immutable patterns, spiritual and abstract in their nature that all things are fashioned after.

Let me put it like this: The pre-Socratics had given a reasonably good explanation of natural change without having to presuppose that anything actually “changed.” In the midst of nature's cycle there were some eternal and immutable smallest elements that did not dissolve, they thought. Fair enough, Sophie! But they had no reasonable explanation for how these “smallest elements” that were once building blocks in a horse could suddenly whirl together four or five hundred years later and fashion themselves into a completely new horse. Or an elephant or a crocodile, for that matter. Plato's point was that Democritus' atoms never fashioned themselves into an “eledile” or a “crocophant.” This was what set his philosophical reflections going.

If you already understand what I am getting at, you may skip

this next paragraph. But just in case, I will clarify: You have a box of Lego and you build a Lego horse. You then take it apart and put the blocks back in the box. You cannot expect to make a new horse just by shaking the box. How could Lego blocks of their own accord find each other and become a new horse again? No, you have to rebuild the horse, Sophie. And the reason you can do it is that you have a picture in your mind of what the horse looked like. The Lego horse is made from a model which remains unchanged from horse to horse.

How did you do with the fifty identical cookies? Let us assume that you have dropped in from outer space and have never seen a baker before. You stumble into a tempting bakery—and there you catch sight of fifty identical gingerbread men on a shelf. I imagine you would wonder how they could be exactly alike. It might well be that one of them has an arm missing, another has lost a bit of its head, and a third has a funny bump on its stomach. But after careful thought, you would nevertheless conclude that all gingerbread men have something in common. Although none of them is perfect, you would suspect that they had a common origin. You would realize that all the cookies were formed in the same mold. And what is more, Sophie, you are now seized by the irresistible desire to see this mold. Because clearly, the mold itself must be utter perfection—and in a sense, more beautiful—in comparison with these crude copies.

If you solved this problem all by yourself, you arrived at the philosophical solution in exactly the same way that Plato did.

Like most philosophers, he “dropped in from outer space.” (He stood up on the very tip of one of the fine hairs of the rabbit’s fur.) He was astonished at the way all natural phenomena could be so alike, and he concluded that it had to be because there are a limited number of forms “behind” everything we see around us. Plato called these forms ideas. Behind every horse, pig, or human being, there is the “idea horse,” “idea pig,” and “idea human being.” (In the same way, the bakery we spoke of can have gingerbread men, gingerbread horses, and gingerbread pigs. Because every self-respecting bakery has more than one mold. But one mold is enough for each type of gingerbread cookie.)

Plato came to the conclusion that there must be a reality behind the “material world.” He called this reality the world of ideas; it contained the eternal and immutable “patterns” behind the various phenomena we come across in nature. This remarkable view is known as Plato’s theory of ideas.