Chapter 2

Plato

In the extended discussion of principality of the being in Parmenides, what will be followed is that how Plato conceives of ‘Being’, how he knows it, how his ideas are affected by Eleatic philosophy particularly by Parmenides, Heraclitus and Protagoras, and what the result of Platonic perspective is.

Roots of the Eleatic Doctrines

Plato- an Athenian Greek of aristocrat family- was borne “some thirty years before the end of the fifth century B.C., and
his life ended soon after the middle of the fourth century.”¹ The influence of the Eleatic on his doctrine is considerably distinguished and we may say he is not only a devoted follower of Socrates, but in some respect his ideas are influenced by Parmenides, Heraclitus and Protagoras.

Not so with Parmenides who with his main speculative efforts is to address “the being” accounting for the things that are and “the non-being” for the things that are not, Plato conceives that the reality of the real world may be very different from its appearance. He accepts, from Heraclitus that objects, individual and particular things, are always incoming and passing away, flux and change, shortly, in a state of becoming, which are not real being, yet not quite non-being.

Instead of being and non-being of Parmenides- that is-reality and appearance, Plato argues that even in appearance there is a measure of reality or the being. There are degrees of reality or beings proportioned to the degree of knowledge. Later, we will discuss Plato’s ontology and epistemology. He agrees with Pythagoras in saying that “man is the measure of

reality”¹, but he will not accept a universal relativism. He believes in the relativity of sense and sense perception. For him knowledge and real being or the object of knowledge must be real and absolute. True knowledge is infallible and attainable, but through sense perception it is impossible, because its objects are always in a state of becoming.

As sensible things are not reliable as real being but they are not non-being. Sensible particular things are always in a state of flux; they come into being and pass away, are indefinite in number and cannot be object of scientific knowledge. But he does not draw the conclusion that they are not non-being or the knowledge through them must be ignored. They cannot be objects of true knowledge and objects of thought. The object of true knowledge must be stable and abiding, fixed, capable of being grasped as clear as Socrates conceived of universal. Under the influence of the Eleatics he believes the reality of the world may be very different from its appearance, and by rigorous argument that we can ascertain the reality. So what is reality?

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What is real being

Counter to the question of what does the word “real” signifies, Plato replies that it represents the Forms or Ideas. Then, the Form must be unified with real being and as well as with truth. As being correspondence between his ontology and epistemology or subjective knowledge and its objects, Plato’s response to what is real being would be equal to what is true knowledge about? “Plato’s Idea, on the other hand, is clear mental state in which the object is directly known. But only a fully real object can be known in this way. Thus, for Plato, truth on the objective side and certainty on the subjective are not independent.”¹ There is some kind of correlation between real science (knowledge) and real being.

In the Republic Plato defines the Idea as a name for various multiplicities:

“I take it, of posting a single idea or form in the case of the various multiplicities to which we give the same name. It is assumed that wherever a plurality of individuals have a corresponding Idea or Form. This is universal, the common nature or quality which is grasped in the concept such as

¹. Ibid. P.22
beauty, there are many beautiful things, but we form one universal concept of beauty itself”¹.

What is the nature of Idea? According to Plato, even though they are in our mind, they are in sensible things; they are objective, independent from our mind and sensible things even in God’s mind (Demiurge). This is due to Plato’s distinction between identity of scientific knowledge and its objects on the one hand, and his justification of Forms and particular things on the other hand.

**Relation of the real being to sensible world**

Plato was well aware of difficulties to prove reasonable relation between universals which are unchangeable, transcendental, timeless, intelligible real beings and particulars, which are changeable, coming to being and passing away of sensible things. His efforts to encounter with this problem are manifested through the Dialogues, which are valuable from philosophical aspects, even though he couldn’t present a quite justified response.

Many critical evaluations have been posed against Plato’s doctrine. Such as Aristotle’s expression that Plato has duplicated the “real” world, posited a multitude of subsistent essence with no sufficient metaphysical ground or as Nietzsche\(^1\) has accused him of being an enemy to this world, created a dream and ideal world to escape this world and everyday life.

If we were eager to prove some defects in different parts of Plato’s philosophy unrelated to his whole philosophy, it would not be a true interpretation of what he meant. Naturally there would be some deficiencies in each philosophy that is not equivalent to not being a philosophical system in it. The more important point is to understand Plato’s main purpose of expounding the philosophy of ‘Idea’, the specific way of his expression, limitations of Greek language in which he uses many metaphors and idioms in his dialogues and finally not to interpret his doctrine from our contemporary topics.

Plato uses the concepts of imitation, partaken, and an image to justify the relation between real being or Idea and particulars or sensible world. He explains that they are (οὐσία) real, not ideas in our mind but independent from particulars and us.

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“…These Forms are as it were pattern fixed in the nature of thing. The other things are made in their image and likeness, and this participation they come to have in the forms is nothing but their being made in their image.”

Sensible things are imitation of them, their existence is in virtue of taking part of Forms and sharing in the essence of them, what they really are. That which can truly be said to be, yet sensible things are subjected to change, pass away, build up our empirical world, the world of becoming. That which can be said are not, as much as they are lacking in selfhood; therefore regarding to degree of their selfhood there would be innumerable degrees of being or reality.

The being of Idea

If ideas are real being and sources of this world, in what sense they can be said ‘to be’? Plato says that in such sentences as “beauty is” or “equality is” existence of the Ideas are objective such essences that can exist in their own, apart from particulars, in the way not affected by changes in particulars, it means they are transcendental.

1. Parmenides, 132. J.
Firstly, Plato argues that ideas are separate, and independent of sensible things does not mean that they exist in heaven or in a special space. It cannot be denied that main purpose of Plato is to suggest the existence of ideas in a separate world, because to dignify the property of transcendental in Ideas as such existence that are abiding and unchangeable, not subjected to the changes and perishes in sensible things. If he says they are self-existent, it means, they have a reality independent of sensible thing.

Secondly, his doctrine as given in his lectures is not precisely the same as that given in the dialogues. In his dialogues he has manifested his doctrine in some pictorial and mystical context that scarcely manifest in the lecture. We should be careful to be overstressed of these concepts and, instead of it, try to understand what this relation is from his eyes and his way of talking.

Thirdly, it must be remembered that language is primarily designated to refer to the objects of our sense experience, and is very often found inadequate for the precise expression of metaphysical truths. We have no experience of metaphysical entities and our language is limited to have
enough expression. Therefore, we must be cautious in attaching too much weight to mere language or phrases in Plato.

There is scarcely other way for Plato to prove transcendence of Ideas by saying that they are in things, instances embody them, copy of them, partake in them, manifest them in different degrees. As much as they are in particulars, they are outside of them. While the metaphors of participation and imitation implies distinction between the imitations and imitated, participation and partaken, it must not to reduce Ideas to a mere logical principles. Denying ontological aspect of Ideas, which Plato indicated as real being, and the most distinguished property of it i.e. transcendental aspect of Idea, leads to deny the sublimity of his metaphysic. For instance in the symposium he explains how to understand the Idea of beauty. Socrates says men usually start loving with sensible things, then in next step of ascending, they love the nature spiritual loveliness, finally they ascend to grasp “an ever lasting loveliness that never comes or goes, neither flower nor fade.” It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exist in something else, but a subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of
it in such way that it will be neither more or less, but still the same inviolable whole.”

Plato considers that Ideas are understandable through an intelligible effort, but they are not dependant on our mind, they are not like sensible things subjected to fallibility. Through a systematic dialectic process we can start from unclear concepts to a definite and obvious concept to discover the real being or Idea. This process is much more important, not only because it is an accurate philosophical procedure, but it needs to bring that ascending movement to soul as well as everyday life.

**Relation of Real beings to each other**

Plato considered some reality for sensible particulars in so far as they are subsumed elements of reality as well as knowledge. They are not wholly illusion, but the lowest level of being, reality and knowledge. They partake in the specific form. Sensible particulars in their particularities are indefinable and unknowable as real knowledge, but knowledge starts from them.

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1. *Symposium*, 211. b
Regarding the necessity of unity in the many not to annihilate the many, Plato admitted the unity in the world of Forms as necessary element, while each Form remains itself. Each idea can melt in others and be many, at the same time be one. For instance, the class concept of “flower” is one, but at the same time it is many, because it contains in itself the sub-classes of “Rose”.

There is a hierarchy communion between the Forms, “the generic Form pervades the subordinate specific Form, combining with each other, yet retaining its own unity.”\(^1\) The higher Form is richer containing more Forms, while it is more abstract. Therefore, the higher the Form the more the Forms; in short, to understand the highest of Form is equivalent to understand the whole Forms of the world. What is the highest Form, for Plato?

In the *Symposium* he talks of ascending degree of beauty, in such way that first level starts from loving an individual body, then to love the spiritual loveliness, then loving the Idea of absolute beauty, one single universal unchangeable Form which is including all other beauties. He has considered identification between the Idea of beauty in the *Symposium* and

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1. *Sophist*, 259, b
the Idea of Good in the *Republic*, and has put them under the One. The idea of the beauty and the Idea of the Good are One. By studying the principal of unity i.e. the Beauty, the Good, and the One, Soul can ascend from visiting sensible particulars of Beauty and Good to observe the spiritual knowledge of the Beauty, the Good and the One. What is more important is Plato’s struggle to solve the problem of the unity in the many; particularly his effort is devoted to solve this problem in the world of Ideas by creating a descending hierarchy process.

In the *Republic* he speaks about One as union basic in the Ideas world:

“For if unity is adequately seen by itself or apprehended by some other sensation, it would not tend to draw the mind to apprehension of essence, as we were explaining in the case of the finger. But if some contradiction is always seen coincidently with it, so that it no more appears to be one than the opposite, then would forth will be need of something to judge between them, and it would compel the soul to be at a loss and to inquire, by arousing thought in itself, and to ask, whatever then is the one as such, and thus the study of unity
will be one of the studies that guide and convert the soul to the contemplation of true being.”\(^1\)

Socrates in the *Republic* compares the Good with the Sun. The point of this comparison is that while the sun is supremely visible and the source of the light that we can see everything in it, but it dazzles us if we want to look at it. Same situation is with the cavern when they try to get rid of the cave, come out and look at the sun or real being but suffer.

“Goodness provides the light with which all our thinking is done and is itself the last thing that we can come to understand. Objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the Good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived from it, though the Good itself is not essence, but still transcend essence in dignity and surpassing power.”\(^2\)

Therefore, the Idea of the Good is the source of knowledge that by it not only other Idea would be understandable but also they all receive their being from it, which is visible only by pure intelligence.

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1. *The Republic*, 525
2. Ibid, 509. C
Object of true knowledge, the being.

In reply to the question what is knowledge, is it teachable or not, Plato says that knowledge is not teachable, but attainable. In this world men cannot learn, but just recall. In the *Republic*\(^1\) he declares that he does not know what is true knowledge, he knows art of midwifery not with the body but with the soul. Through the dialectic process we can have right means to test every hypotheses of thought to prove whether it is a “false phantom or instinct with life and truth.”

“I can myself bring nothing to light, because there is no wisdom in me… they have never learned anything from me. The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within.”\(^2\)

He is inclined to assume that our souls had a previous existence independent of our body, they were possessed of intelligence beholding the Ideas or true knowledge, after coming to these bodies they have forgotten everything, then just by exercise of dialectic and starting to know from sensible

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2. Ibid. d
particulars which are the samples of true being and knowledge we will recover the knowledge we have possessed.

He believes there are some corresponding relations between the degree of knowledge of something and it may be that knowledge is necessarily related to some particular type of object. The lowest level of knowledge as Heraclitus taught is always in a state of flux and becoming, as Pythagoras taught knowledge of sense perception is relative.

Plato concludes that the first level of knowledge is sense perception knowledge; its objects are shadows of realities and imitations of them. This knowledge is not infallible, because its objects are always in a state of becoming and change. This level of knowledge is not reliable and true knowledge since it is subjected to the influence of both subject and object. The state of mind in this step is an opinion.

He accepts Parmenides who says that true knowledge must be knowledge of what is stable, fixed, abiding; which is the object of the reason and not of the sense. Opposition to Parmenides he corresponded the object of reason or intellect to the Forms. They are immaterial, universal, stable and ontological real being.
Plato is well aware of the gulf between true knowledge and real world. His efforts to establish ascending degrees in knowledge corresponding to the hierarchical existence of the beings shows he has setup this relations ontologically, considered different levels of knowledge in mind which is indissolubly bound up with the different objects of those knowledge. Then, “different degrees or level of knowledge are distinguished according to objects”\(^1\) is an ontological approach of him.

Second level of knowledge, he says, is mathematics. This is an intermediate level between opinion and pure reason. The object of mathematics is in some part visible and sensible and in some part invisible and intelligible. They can be investigating from hypothesis and proceeding not to the first principles, but to the conclusions. What is interesting is to draw the conclusion which is not related to the visible and sensible things such as particular triangle or square, but by use of them a general conclusion will be drawn.

Mathematics shows that the formula can be detached from material. Cleanness of mathematics is due to detachable

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formula of properties of things in abstract from other material properties. In the things, which we encounter in the world, we can separate out their experimental parts from reasonable parts.

Third level and highest degree of knowledge for Plato is scientific knowledge that its objects are Forms and Ideas. By pure reason - that of the state of mind- they are understandable. At this level man uses the hypotheses of the understanding as starting point, but goes beyond them and ascends to first principle. Through process of dialectic and by abstract reasoning- not sensible images- men can clearly grasp the first principles. These principles are not merely epistemological principles, but also ontological principles. He explains this point in the Republic:

“But at any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of Good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world, being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone
who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this.\textsuperscript{1}

**Ontological results**

What is the result of Plato’s doctrine especially knowing the world of the Ideas or real beings? In the *Republic* and the *Theatetus*, Plato talks about the process of knowledge from opinion to true knowledge developed with different levels of its objects. He explained how different levels of knowledge correspond with different levels of being, from the not real being to non-being, means from the shadows of real being to Ideas or real beings. This correspondence is not only extended in the entire level of the being in the world, but it affected the state of men in his life. The men who are acquainted with the world of Ideas are not the same as those who are engaged with sensible and shadow world. Familiar with unchangeable, transcendental and abiding Forms and values converted the men’s prospect of believing low, partial, changeable values to visit real values and live with them. His ascending process of epistemology is real and well ontological. It is an introversive, intellectual and transcendental process for every body who understand it. Philosophers are on its high peak, be able to

\textsuperscript{1} *The Republic*. 517. b, c.
distinguish the real being and the true knowledge from imitations of being and fallible knowledge.

Plato illustrates this process by the famous allegory of the Cave in the seventh book of the *Republic*. The majority of mankind is in the situation of prisoners in the cave. They are in the state of sensible cognition and should change their vision from visiting sensible and every day happenings to universal, unchangeable abiding real true values, in this way their soul effectively will shift from low state of almost non-being and knowledge of imitation of real knowledge to highest state of real being and knowledge of reality. He states:

“But a sensible man, I said, would remember that there are two distinct disturbances of the eyes arising from two causes, according as the shift is from light to darkness or from darkness to light, and, believing that the same thing happens to the soul too, whenever he saw a soul perturbed and unable to discern something, he would not laugh unthinkingly, but would observe whether coming from a bright life its vision was obscured by the unfamiliar darkness, or whether the passage
from the deeper dark of ignorance into a more luminous world and the greater brightness and dazzled its vision.”

This shift could not be just mentality, to know real beings needs to convert from every day habits, and sensible pleasure turn the whole body to a situation prepared to understand the Forms easier. He says:

“But our present argument indicates, said I, that the true analogy for this indwelling power in the soul and the instrument whereby each of us apprehends is that of an eye that could not be converted to the light from the darkness except by turning the whole body. Even so this organ of knowledge must be turned around from the world of becoming together with the entire soul, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being. And this, we say, is the good, do we not?”

He also explains how under a physical and intellectual discipline and by hard effort to ascend this process would be possible.

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1. *The Republic*. 518. b
2. *The Republic*. 518. d
“Observe then, said I, that this part of such a soul, if had been hammered from childhood, and had thus been struck free the leaden weights, so to speak, of our birth and becoming, which attaching themselves to it by good and similar pleasure and gluttonies turn downward the vision of the soul. If, I say, freed from these, it had suffered a conversion toward the things that are real and true, that same faculty of the same men would have been most keen in its vision of the higher things, just as it is for the things toward which it is now turned.”

Primary duty of a philosopher who realizes the true good for men, life, and the state is education, where by the young gradually brought to behold eternal and absolute truths and values. This duty has been discussed in the allegorical cave that its dwellers are blind, needed education to observe the sun, real truth and being.

“Down you must go then, each in his turn, to the habitation of the others and accustom yourselves to the observation of the obscure things there. For once habituated you will discern them infinitely better than the dwellers there, and you will know what each of the “idols” is and where of it is a semblance, because you have seen the reality of the beautiful, the just and the good. So our city will be governed by us and by

1. Ibid. 519. b
you with waking minds, and not as most cities now which are inhabited and ruled darkly as in a dream by men who fight one another for shadows and wrangle for offices as if that were a great good when the truth is that the city in which those who are to rule are at least eager to hold office must need be best administered and most free from dissension, and the state that gets the contrary type of ruler will be the opposition of this.”

He tries to show how men can overcome, through his dialectic way, disordered and fragmentary life, how to shift and transcend from not real being to real being and values, how to rise up from inferior thought to superior thought and knowledge, how be always in the way of discovering of the truths, how under specific discipline, body and soul can be treated, how epistemology and ontology can correspond with ontological effects bring up to this life. Whether his answers can be conceived as sufficient is not as important as that he has initiated to discuss these complicated subjects in his contemporary philosophy. He is well aware of the most difficult problems in his philosophy and his struggle to pose them and then tries to solve, must not be ignored.

1. *The Republic*, 5
Conclusion

Three questions are discussed by Plato; first, what is the being; second, how we know it; third, what is the result of this knowledge on men. In his response to these questions, the Eleatic’s influence is considerably distinguished. Plato accepts from Heraclitus that particulars are always in coming and passing away, flux and change, which are not real being, yet not quite non-being. Instead of being and non-being of Parmendies- that is reality and appearance- he argues that the reality of real world may be very different of its appearance. There is a measure of reality or being in appearance. There are degrees of reality or being proportioned to the degrees of cognition.

He agrees with Pythagoras that “man is the measure of reality”, but he will not accept a universal relativism. For him relativity of sense perception is acceptable. As Socrates said true knowledge and its object must be infallible, stable, abiding, fixed and universal. Sense perception and its objects- particulars- are always in a stable of becoming, they are not real being and knowledge through their objects is not reliable, but yet they are not non-being, they are the lowest level of being and first step of cognition.
He illustrates that there is a correlation between cognition and its objects. Our cognition can be graded for clarity and certainty. Cognition of sense perception is like fog and shadow, and rational perception is like sun.

Idea, for Plato, is fully real and can be known clearly and certainly. Thus, for Plato truth on the objective side and certainty on the subjective are not independent. Between these two level- opinion and pure reason- he regards mathematics as intermediate knowledge. The objects of mathematics are in some part visible and sensible and in some part invisible and intelligible. They can be started from hypothesis and proceeding not to the first principles but to the conclusions. What is interesting is to draw a conclusion that is not related to the visible and sensible things, but by use of them, a general conclusion will be drawn.

He asks what relation real beings or Ideas have with particulars or things in this world, and what relations they have to each other. The nature of these highest state of beings are independent from our mind and sensible things, they are not like sensible thing subjected to fallibility and change, although they are in things, through a systematic dialectic process and by intelligible efforts can be start from unclear sense concepts to a
definite intelligible obvious concepts to discover the real being or Idea.

He uses the concept of imitation, partaken and image to justify relation between the real being or Idea and particulars. As Aristotle and many other critics argue he has duplicated the world without a substantial metaphysic, but what is more important is that he brings Ideas and ascending movement as transcendental and unchangeable values to soul and everyday life. Further more while the metaphors of participation and imitation imply distinction between the imitation and imitated, participation and partaken, must not to reduce Ideas to a mere logical principles. Deny ontological and transcendental aspects of Ideas as real being leads to deny the sublimity of his metaphysics. His Ideas are not some accumulative information in mind, but they are real values and being can be effect men’s soul and life.

There is a hierarchical communion between the Forms, the generic Form pervades the subordinate specific Form, combining with each other, yet retaining its own unity. The higher Form is richer containing more Forms, while it is most abstract. The highest Form, the Good, the Beauty and the One are in union and identify. Plato is more concerned to solve the
problem of the unity in the many in the world of Ideas than in the world of particulars. He tried to solve this problem in the world of Ideas by creating a descending hierarchy process, which by studying them the soul converts to the contemplation of true being. Studying Goodness which includes all Ideas provides the light with which all our thinking is done and is itself the last thing we can come to understand, and transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.

He compares the situation of men in this world with dwellers in the cave engaged with idols and sense perception and shows how they can discover the sun or real being and true knowledge. He talks of the process of knowledge from opinion to true knowledge devoted with different levels of its objects can affect man’s life.

The men who are acquainted with the world of Ideas are not the same as men who are engaged with sensible and world of shadow. Through knowledge of real being and goodness followed in his dialectic process men can overcome disordered and fragmented life, shifted and transcendent from not real being to real being and values, raised up from inferior life and thought to the superior thought, knowledge and life.
Philosophers are on the highest peak of knowledge of the Ideas being able to teach and recall them to others to remember the Ideas, the real being and real knowledge, distinguished them from imitation of being and fallible knowledge.

Whether Plato’s doctoring can be considered as sufficient is not as important as that he has initiated to discuss these complicated subjects in his philosophy. He is aware of many difficult problems in philosophy and his struggle to transcend from inferior being to superior being through his epistemology must not be ignored.