

A Critical Analysis of Plato's Philosophical Thought: A Geographical Approach

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Abstract

This paper aims to critically analysis Plato as a philosopher of Geography. Plato's contribution as a philosopher towards the growth of geographical science is also a part of the analysis. Plato's conception about earth and regions put such impact on the study of Geography. Plato analysed geographical conditions as factors of development of society. His deep philosophical thought on climate, terrain, agricultural resources, locations and regions reveals connections between communities and nature. He put much emphasis on education, morality, political institutions, social organizations to shape a society. Plato's concepts of *Phaedo*, *Timaeus*, environment, ideal state, influence of the sea still seeks critical analysis.

Keywords: epistemology, Plato's philosophy, Geography.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is divided into three sections to focus on distinctive parts of Plato's philosophy. The first section makes a distinction between science and philosophy of science. It is a truism to say that Geography is a science, and that philosophy of Geography is an important branch of philosophy of science. Therefore, distinction between science and philosophy of science will suffice to bring out the fundamental difference between science and philosophy of Geography. The second part gives a brief exposition of the relevant sections of Plato's dialogues, *Phaedo* and *Timaeus* (Wright, 1947). The last and third part highlights the contribution of Plato to the philosophy of Geography.

Section I

A discussion on the nature of philosophy of science is a precondition for writing an article on philosophy of Geography. Philosophy of Geography shares the basic principles of philosophy of science. Philosophers and scientists differ in their views as to the nature of this branch of philosophy. According to the first view, it is the business of the philosophers of science to emphasise the broader and metaphysical implications of philosophy of science, which consists in speculating about the ontological categories that are to be used in talking about "being-as-such". The second view assigns the task of giving an exposition of the pre-suppositions and pre-depositions of the scientists to the philosopher of science. Adopting this view, the philosopher of science may point out that the scientists pre-suppose that there is some sort of order in nature, and he may point out the preferences of the scientists for deterministic rather than statistical laws, or for mechanistic rather than teleological explanations. The third view treats philosopher of science as a discipline which analyses and clarifies the concepts and theories of science. Gilbert Ryle, one of the

renowned philosophers critically viewed opined that it is based on the presumptuous assumptions that the scientists need the philosopher of science to explain to them the meanings of scientific concepts (Gilbert, 1951). There are certain types of conceptual analysis that should be classified as part of philosophy of science. What type of conceptual analysis are they? The fourth view of philosopher of science answers this crucial question. Here philosopher of science is a second order criteriology, which seeks to answer the following kinds of questions: (i) what are the distinguishing features of scientific enquiry? (ii) what procedures should be prescribed to scientists in investigating nature? (iii) what conditions must scientific explanations satisfy in order to be correct? (iv) what is the cognitive status of scientific laws and principles? This view recognises three orders of disciplines, namely, 0 (zero) level order, first level order and second level order. The following chart brings out the distinction between these three levels.

Level	Discipline	Subject Matter
0	None	Facts
1	Science	Explanation of facts
2	Philosophy of science and philosophy of Geography	Analysis of procedures and logic of scientific explanations

It can be said that it is not possible to draw an absolute and sharp distinction between science and Philosophy of science, for the distinction can be

Based only on a difference of intent rather than a difference of subject matter. In order to explicate Plato's philosophy of Geography, the first two views mentioned above must be taken into account rather than the last two views for the simple reason that they are not applicable to him. Only when the first two views are related to Plato, it will be possible to highlight his views about 'being-as-such' as well as his teleological explanation of the earth.

Section II

The myth of the human soul, a comprehensive and intricate construction, comes at the conclusion of the *Phaedo*. It is composed of two lines of thought: one cosmological, physical, geographical, the other mythico-eschatological. A brief but unargued exposition of thought is as follows:

Socrates narrates his belief about the appearance of earth and the regions in it. He comes forward with two articles of his belief concerning the shape and size of the earth. The first article of his belief is as follows. The earth is spherical in shape. The earth has equilibrium. This equilibrium and the uniformity of the heavens support the earth as well as prevent it from falling. The second article of his belief runs as under. The size of the earth is very large. Ordinary human beings live in only a minute portion between river *Phasis* and the *Pillars of Hercules*. They live around the sea like ants or frogs round a pond. There are many other similar regions which are inhabited by many other people. There are many hollows round the earth. They are of different shapes and sizes into which water, mist and air have collected. But the earth itself is pure as the starry heavens in which it lies. Most of the authorities call this true earth or ether. The hollows serve as the drainages of the dregs of the ether, which are water, mist and air. The imaginative description of the real earth is as follows. Viewed from above, the real earth looks like a beautiful ball of different enchanting colours. The trees, flowers and fruits of this earth are proportionately beautiful. It has precious stones like jaspers, rubies and emeralds. It has pure gold and pure silver too. The climate is so

temperate that people in this earth are free from diseases, and have a longer span of life, they are blessed with superior sight, hearing and understanding. The true earth has sanctuaries and temples too, which are inhabited by gods. People inhabiting the true earth have the rare privilege of communion with gods. The small portion of earth occupied by ordinary human beings is nothing but an imitation or copy of the many splendoured true earth above. All over the surface of the true earth there are many hollows which are joined together underground by many connecting channels, some narrower, some wider. These channels have water both hot and cold. There are channels of fire. There are channels of liquid mud and lava streams too. There is a hollow or cavity which is much larger than the rest known as *Tartarus*. All the rivers not only originate from this cavity but also eventually flow back into it. And each river acquires the nature of that part of the earth through which it flows. Though it is possible for the rivers to descend in either direction as far as the centre, they can not go any farther because either direction from the centre is uphill (Livingstone, 1992).

There are four important streams amongst the various mighty streams. The greatest of these is *Oceanus*, which describes the outer most circle. The second one is *Acheron*, which runs directly opposite to *Oceanus*. The third river is called *Pyriphlegethon*, whose fiery streams belches forth jets of lava here and there in all parts of the world. The fourth river breaks out directly opposite to the third river. This is known as *Cocytus*.

The incurable criminals are hurled into *Tartarus*, from where they can never come out. The curable criminals are also cast into *Tartarus*. However, they can come out of *Tartarus* provided they repent for their sins. And those who have lived a life of holiness pass upward into their pure abode of pure ether and blessedness.

In the *Timaeus*, a geographical foundation is laid for the legend of *Atlantis*. The legend of *Atlantis* is as follows. There was a mighty power which invaded the whole of Europe and Asia without the slightest provocation. This power came out of the Atlantic Ocean. During those days the Atlantic was navigable. There was an island in the Atlantic Ocean, which was larger than Libya and Asia put together. This island was known as the island of *Atlantis*. There was great and wonderful empire in this island, which ruled over the whole island and several other, and also on certain parts of Libya and Europe. This powerful island tried also to overpower Athens and Hellene. Hellene stood alone and fought against this mighty power and eventually defeated it. Thus, it was able to liberate itself and other countries including Athens from subjugation. After this great war of liberation, violent earthquakes and floods occurred. As a result, both the brave warriors of Hellene and the island of *Atlantis* disappeared in the depth of the sea. Due to the reason, the sea in these parts has become impassable and impenetrable. A shoal of mud was formed in the way which was caused by the subsidence of the island. An exposition of the relevant portions of the unbroken cosmological discourse of the *Timaeus* is discussed here. The world has a beginning and, therefore, it was created. God created this world after an unchanging pattern. God, the maker, was perfectly good, and because of this reason he did not keep his Goodness to himself but decided to make something like himself. The whole visible *sphere* was in a chaotic condition. The world is an animal with a soul. There is only one world as there is only one perfect animal. The created world is necessarily corporeal, visible and tangible. But nothing is visible where there is no fire, tangible which has no solidity, and nothing is solid without earth. Therefore, God in the beginning of creation made the body of the universe consisting of fire and earth. Fire and earth being volumes and having three dimensions, a single mean proportional cannot be inserted between them. The reason is that no rational mean can be inserted between two integers, when each is the product of prime factor and no more. Precisely for this reason,

God provided water and air as the means between fire and earth, and made them to have the same proportion as far as possible; as fire is to air so is air to water, and as air is to water so water is to earth. Thus, out of these four elements, fire, earth, water and air, the body of the world was created by God. He gave the world the figure which was suitable and also natural, he made the world in the form of a globe, round as from a lathe, having its extremes in every direction equidistant from the centre, the best possible copy of the original figure (Annas, 1999).

Section III

Many geographer and philosophers are of the view that Plato should not accorded the status of philosopher of geography. They should rather echo the view of Rousseau. This is what he says, “The reign pseudo-science in Greece begins with Plato.” This sort of evaluation reflects the prevailing antipathy against teleological and h construction. However, the fact should not be lost sight of that this sort of criticism is directed against the man who was the president of an academy for the pursuance of science by original research. Certain passages of *Phaedo* and the *Tomaheus* should not be taken literally; for in passages like these, Plato combines at least three different objectives. First, genuine teleology, second, mockery of the kind of teleology that reduces nature to human measure; and third, a moral imperative, clothed within the irony of myth, in teleological language. The *Phaedo* and the *Tomaheus* do not have the form of scientific treaties, but of a myth for the following reasons. A modern geographer may be delighted within the shape of the earth, within the origin and confluence of rivers, with the height of the mountains, and the like; but his delight has little or nothing to do his scientific research. Plato would not make such a distinction. The earth that his scientific mind tries to penetrate is, at the same time, the object of his aesthetic admiration and of his religious awe-a perceptible God, supreme in greatness and excellence, in beauty and perfection. The *Phaedo* and the *Tomaheus* have the form of myth since it ‘consists of things wondrous’ as said by Aristotle. The second reason is deeply rooted in Plato’s epistemology and ontology (Wright, 1947). While his epistemology emphasises the fact that we cannot speak with exactness about the earth of change which consists of many causes or hollows, his ontology claims that we can speak with exactness about the true or real earth which consists of everything pure and pristine. His epistemology allows only a ‘plausible account’ of the earth of change. How, then, it is possible that we are able to construct in ‘concepts’ of the earth of change? According to Plato, we are able to do this sort of construction because the changing, moving earth has, at the same time, a great deal of stability. Plato considers the earth of change to be the outcome of blending of two principles, namely *Nous* or ‘mind’ accounting for law, order, stability, for that which ‘makes sense’ and *Ananke* or ‘necessary’ or blind force. He takes both the principles to be causes with the conservation that ‘mind’ is the real cause, ‘necessary’ only the concomitant or accessory cause. The expression such as ‘the earth itself’, ‘the true earth’ and ‘the true sky’ of the *Phaedo* belongs to Plato’s central thoughts. The metaphysical contrast between the world of Forms and the world of appearances has been brought down to the earth here, and is reflected in value contrast between the ‘true earth’ and the dwelling place of ordinary human beings, which is called *Oikoumene*, at the bottom of the hollow.

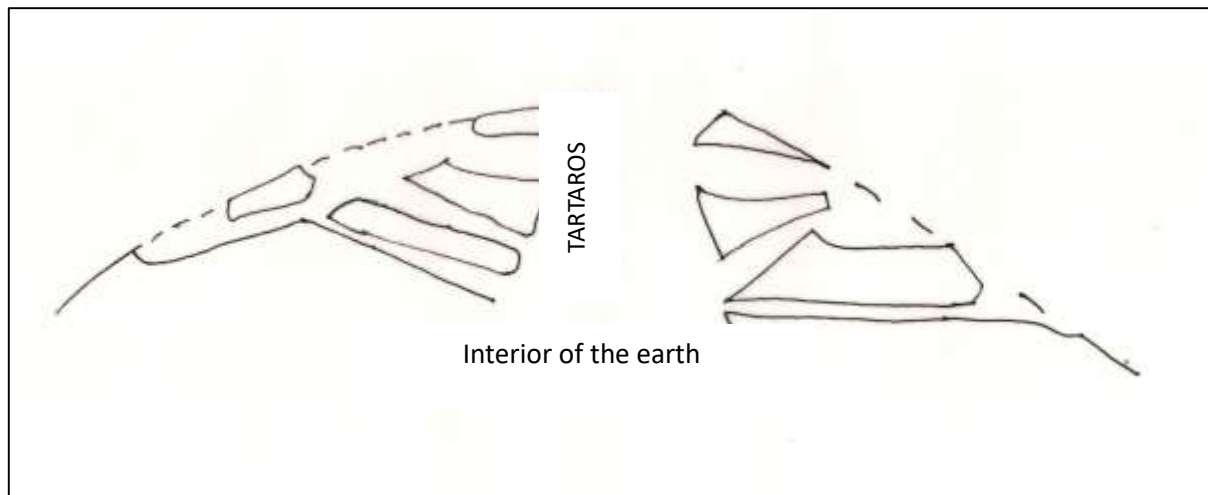


Fig. 1 cross-section part of the terrestrial sphere (Friedlander, 1969)

The description of the sub-terranean stream is designed as a topographical basis for the description of the world beyond. These sub-terranean passages, filled more or less with water, liquid mud and fire, as the great central reservoir, do not have anything to do with eschatology. The description furnishes a theory, developed in great detail, of source and river, ebb and flow, flood and drought, mud and lava eruptions, wind and other *geographical processes*. This geophysical theory, freed from all theology, is closely connected with the theory of the hollows, which is presupposed as a *fare requisite* of the theory. This presupposition is based on two reasons, namely (i) if we were to omit the hollows, the passageways between the hollows would lose their meaning, and (ii) if we were to omit the hollows, we would have to disperse with *Tartaros*, which itself is a hollow, and the channels. Figure 1 illustrates the connection of various hollows by the channels.

In order to determine the place of Plato's conception of the earth in the *Phaedo* within the begin by asking what Plato had in mind when he conceived the peculiar 'hollows' in the surface of the world, that is, *Oikoumene*, is of them – the only one we can know – it must have been the starting point of the theory and the model for the other hollows. For it stands to reason that one could not begin by constructing the unknown, fashioning the relatively weak known often what was unknown. Rather the procedure must have been something like this. Our *Oikoumene* was believed to be situated within a relatively small hollow upon the vast sphere of the earth. Since it would have been against all probability that this inhabited space known to us was really the only one in existence, numerous other dwelling places were by way of analogy, place upon the surface of the earth and given an appropriate shape, that is, they were conceived as hollows. To grasp the origin of this strange thought, therefore, we have to start out with our *Oikoumene* and ask why it was place at the bottom of such a hollow, to arrive at an answer will require a brief review of the two lines of thought along which the science of Geography had developed up to that time. (i) in *Ionia*, Anaximander had originated geography as a science by designing the first map of the earth. It must be noted here that this map was not a practical, but essentially a theoretical accomplishment. Thus, it became a foundation for science. However, it was not the first map for practical use, itineraries and harbour maps, had long been in existence. Anaximander's accomplishment consists in the fact that he created a *whole*. This map was so theoretical that it included regions not known by any experience. For Anaximander, the earth was a drum and the *Oikoumene* was approximately circular in shape, and (ii) Herodotos, an ancient Greek empiricist, protested against the premature construction of things about which there was no assured

knowledge. In a sense of this objection was justified and not without good results, for nothing helped more to advance the science of Geography than the continual alteration between theoretical construction and experience.

Another detail must be mentioned. If the body of the earth was envisaged as a disc, and the *Oikoumene* as well as the surrounding *Oceanos* plotted upon it, Plato must have raised the question of the exterior limit of the construction. To put it bluntly, the ocean would flow off over the edge if there were nothing to hold it back.

Plato in the *Tomaieus* lays a geographical foundation in the myth of Atlantis. And this foundation is not a play of fantasy but a geographical hypothesis. The principal contrast between the *Phaedo* and the *Tomaieus* with regard to Plato's philosophy of Geography is the following. The individual hollows of the *Phaedo* are separated by inseparable boundaries. It would mean that the idea of passing from our *Oikoumene* would be fantastic and nonsensical, for in order to do this, we would have to be differently constituted human beings, breathing ether instead of air. Plato in the *Tomaieus* breaks the absolute barriers of the *Phaedo*. He makes the earth's surface a unit, open to further exploration and discovery. Philosophy of Geography as advanced by Plato in the *Tomaieus* has been greatly instrumental for the exploration of all the parts of the earth and further developments in the science of Geography. He lays the theoretical foundation for the empirical science of Geography. Thus, Plato's contribution is very significant. Doubts may be raised as to whether this theory belongs to Plato or somebody else. The conclusive argument to show that the theory belongs to Plato consists in the following. The experience 'true ocean' and 'true continent' reflect Plato's important and crucial contrast between 'Form' and 'particulars', or between reality and appearance.

Conclusion

Plato's contribution to the science of Geography on the basis of the foundation of this science laid by him in his philosophy of Geography as explicated in his dialogues, the *Phaedo* and the *Tomaieus*. His contributions are as follows, (i) the *Phaedo* provides a theory of source and river, ebb and flow, flood and drought, mud and lava eruptions, wind and other geographical processes, (ii) the picture of the earth presented in the *Phaedo* showed significant features of geographical constructions, (iii) in the *Phaedo* and the *Tomaieus*, Plato advocates the theory of the sphere, which is a tremendous advancement as regards the science of Geography, and (iv) the philosophy of Geography advanced by Plato in the *Tomaieus* is mainly responsible for further developments of the science of Geography.

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