



ASSESSMENT OF PLATO'S IDEALISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCHES

Ishaku Nuhu Kambai, PhD.

Federal Capital Territory Administration, Universal Basic Education Board,
Junior Secondary School, Phase 3, Gwagwalada, Abuja.
nuhukambai1969@gmail.com 08036274663
nuhukambai1969@gmail.com

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Isuwa Timothy, PhD.

Department of Arts And Social, Science Education
Faculty of Education, Federal University, Lafia, Nasarawa State
isuwa97@gmail.com 08065343837

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Simon Arena Waziri, PhD.

ECWA, Kwali DCC, FCT -Abuja

ABSTRACT

This study examines Plato's Idealism and its implications for the churches, a philosophical system that posits the existence of a higher, eternal realm of abstract forms or Ideas, and investigates its implications for Christian Churches. Plato's philosophical framework emphasizes the eternal and spiritual realm as the true reality, influencing Western thought on play as a means to access higher truths. This research assesses how Plato's Idealism shapes the understanding and practice of play in Christian contexts, exploring its potential to foster spiritual growth, community, and moral formation. The study examines Plato's key ideas, including the nature of reality, the role of the human soul, and the relationship between God and the world. The paper analyzes the implications of Plato's Idealism for the churches, including its potential impact on spiritual focus, understanding of God's nature, and views on human nature and salvation, engaging with relevant Christian theological perspectives., Augustine's Confessions. The study delves into the challenges and criticisms of Plato's Idealism, such as dualism, intellectualism, and otherworldliness, considering critiques of Platonism in the New Testament (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:18–31). The paper concludes that Plato's Idealism offers important insights into the spiritual realm; it also poses significant challenges for Christian theology and practice, such as dualism, Gnosticism, intellectualism, otherworldliness, lack of the personal God, and determinism. The following recommendations were also made: balance spiritual and material, emphasize Scripture's authority, integrate faith and reason, focus on a personal relationship with God, avoid determinism, encourage critical thinking, and also emphasize community involvement. Recommendations are offered to churches to navigate the complexities of Plato's Idealism in a way that is faithful to Christian teachings and relevant to contemporary culture.

Keywords: Plato's Idealism, Philosophy of Religion, Church Leadership, Moral and Ethical Values and Christian Theology



INTRODUCTION:

Plato's Idealism, a philosophical system rooted in the works of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (c.428–348 BCE), has had a profound impact on Western philosophy and Christian theology. This paper presents a critical assessment of Plato's Idealism, examining its key features, such as the nature of reality, the role of the human soul, and the relationship between God and the world, drawing on specific references from **The Republic**. As noted by Augustine, a prominent Christian theologian, Platonic philosophy was influential in shaping early Christianity. The paper explores the implications of Plato's Idealism for the churches, including its potential impact on spiritual focus, understanding of God's nature, and views on human nature and salvation, engaging with relevant Christian theological perspectives. By critically evaluating Plato's Idealism, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between philosophy and theology, and to offer practical recommendations for churches seeking to navigate the challenges and opportunities of Plato's Idealism in a way that is faithful to Christian teachings and relevant to contemporary culture.

Who is Plato?

According to Maheshwari (2020), Plato was born between 424 and 423 BC. Both of his parents came from the Greek Aristocracy. He was born into a wealthy Athenian family. Plato's father, Ariston, descended from the Kings of Athens and Messenia. His mother, Perictione, is said to be related to the 6th century BC statesman Solon.

Plato had three siblings, two brothers, Adeimantus and Glaucon, and a sister Potone. As per popular sources, his father is believed to have died when Plato was young. Since he was the descendant of early Kings, he had the privilege and opportunity to go to school (Gbari, 2012). Eventually, his mother married Perilampes, and ambassador to the Persian court several times.

According to Diogenes, cited by Maheshwari (2020), Plato was named after his grandfather Aristocles, following the tradition of naming the eldest son after the grandfather. He was taught grammar, music, painting and gymnastics by the most distinguished teachers in Athens. According to Gbari (2012), prominent among his teachers were Cratylus who actually followed Heraclitus teaching and philosophy. The teaching of Cratylus brought him close to Socrates who influenced his life seriously. He also attended courses in philosophy. In his youth, Plato took the profession of poetry. At first he wrote dithyrambs and then turned into writing lyric poems and tragedies.

At twenty, Plato met Socrates and remained his ardent admirer until Socrates' execution in 399 BC (Howard and Sam (1976). Plato was initially interested in politics, but later changed his mind because of the murder of his great master Socrates, by the authority in Athens; Samuel (2005). Plato burnt his poems and turned to philosophy.

As a young man, Plato experienced two major events that set his course in life. One was meeting the great Greek Philosopher Socrates. Socrates's method of dialogue and debate impressed Plato. After Socrates's death, Plato travelled for twelve years throughout the Mediterranean region, studying Mathematics with the Pythagoreans in Italy, and geometry, geology, astronomy and religion in Egypt. During this time, or soon after, he began his extensive writing. Plato is largely known for his writings in which Socrates is the leading protagonist in a series of dialogues dealing



with almost every conceivable topic. Two of his most famous works are the Republic and the Laws.

When Plato returned to the city (Athens) at the age of forty. Sometimes round 385 BC, Plato founded a school, the Academy, a school of higher learning in Athens, Greece. This institution is often considered the first university in the Western World. He became a teacher and proprietor of the Academy for some years. He provided a comprehensive curriculum including such subjects like Astronomy, Biology, Mathematics, Political theory and Philosophy. Many prominent intellectual people schooled in the Academy including Aristotle. Aristotle became the best student in Plato's academy. Plato however died at the age of eighty (80) in his home town Athens (384 – 347 BC). All his writings and dialogue on the Republic and his Ideas were continued by Aristotle.

Concept of Idealism

Plato's Idealism, also known as Platonism, is a philosophical system that emphasizes the existence of a higher, eternal realm of abstract Forms or Ideas. This realm is considered more fundamental and real than the physical world, which is seen as a shadow or imitation of the spiritual realm (Republic, 514a – 520a).

Plato argued that the Forms or Ideas, such as justice, beauty and goodness, are eternal, unchanging, and perfect, whereas the physical world is changing and imperfect (Phaedo, 72e -77d). Plato believed that the human soul is immortal and exists before birth and after death, and that its true home is in the spiritual realm (Phaedo, 64a-67b). Plato argued that knowledge is not acquired through sense experience, but rather through recollection of the eternal Forms or Ideas that the soul know before birth.

Plato believed that the physical world around us is not real; it is constantly changing and thus you can never say what it really is (Samuel 2005). There is a world of ideas which is a world of unchanging and absolute truth. To Plato, this is reality. Does such a world exist independent of human minds? Plato thought it did, and whenever we grasp an idea, or see something with our mind's eye, we are using our mind to conceive of something in the ideal world. There are different proofs of this ideal world. The concept of geometry, such as the concept of circle which is a line equidistant from a point, is something which does not exist in the physical world. All physical circles wheels drawings etc. are not perfectly round. Yet our mind has the concept of a perfect circle. Since this concept could not come from the physical world, it must come from an ideal world. Another proof is from moral perfection. We can conceive of a morally perfect person, even though the people we know around us are not morally perfect. So, where does someone get this idea of moral perfection? Since it could not have been obtained from the world around us, it must have come from ideal world.

According to Plato cited by Howard and Craver (1976), men should concern themselves primarily with the search for truth. Since his definition of truth was that it was perfect and eternal; it could not therefore be found in the world of matter, for he held that matter was both imperfect and constantly changing. Mathematics demonstrated that eternal truths were possible. Concepts such as $2 + 2 = 4$ or $2 \times 2 = 4$. Mathematics shows that universal truths with which all men could agree could be found, but mathematics only composes a narrow range of knowledge. Plato believed that



we must search for other universal truths in the realms of politics, religion and education; hence, the search for absolute truth should be the quest of the true philosopher.

In the Republic, Plato wrote about the separation of the world of Ideas from the world of matters. The world of Ideas (or Forms) had the God as its knowledge. The world of matter, the ever-changing world of sensory data, was not to be trusted. Generally, Idealism states that the things we touch, feel, and see with the human senses are not real; rather, they are images of reality. Reality according to them is beyond what we see, notice or touch. Reality cannot change, die or be destroyed; but the objects of the senses are in the state of constant continuous flux and destruction to illustrate the point, one may destroy all the motor cars in the world but the idea of a motor car cannot be destroyed. Ideas are expressions of the mind. The mind is able to create them and they are not perishable. As such the mind is real, whereas matter is subject to decay and destruction. In other words, reality is spiritual and not material.

The Idealists' emphasis is on the supremacy of mind. The mind is the only part of man that can understand and comprehend reality. Human mind, which could be commonly understood as the spirit min (God) where realities exists. Accordingly, they posit that ultimate reality is mental and spiritual; whereas, the physical world is a mere shadow of the real and original world of Ideas.

Idealists lay great emphasis on metaphysics arguing that all things in the universe are interpreted by the mind, otherwise they are not real and do not exist. In other words, they cannot be known to be real or exist until the mind notices or thinks of them. Human being is spiritual and works with the universal authority (God). Man is first and foremost a spiritual being. His physical body is just a make-up.

The big difficulty about Idealism is its lack of proof. The Idealist philosophers talk on at enormous length. But what they say seems not only contrary to common sense but indemonstrable. It is one thing to build up a system of ideas; it is something else entirely to show that the ideas are true.

Philosophers believe that Idealism originated in Greece from Socrates and Plato. Later, it was picked up by Christian scholars like St. Augustine. Philosophers who came post-Renaissance (that is, after the 17th century A.D.) also inquired into Idealism. Idealism has been said to be the oldest philosophy known to man. According to Isidore (1997), it is a doctrine that all reality consists of the mind, ideas, or thought. Understanding and interpretation of the world lie beyond physical appearance and can be attained by studying the laws of thought and consciousness. Idealism regards the Mind, Soul, God, and Metaphysics highly. The layman's idea of metaphysics refers to an abstract discourse that is difficult to comprehend and, on that account, feared by people. According to Popkin and Stroll (1981), a theory or view is called metaphysical if it seems complicated beyond comprehensibility. The term "metaphysics" was coined from two Greek words: "meta," meaning "after," and "phusis," meaning "physical" or "nature." Literally, it means "after physics," referring to "those things beyond the realms of the physical world." Metaphysics, therefore, deals with the essence of being, the study of ultimate reality, and this borders on the whole of existence, the entire universe. According to this literal meaning of the word, it is concerned with things beyond the world of our existence.



As a branch of philosophy, metaphysics tries to resolve such issues as:

- *What is the nature of man and the world in which he lives?
- *Whether man has a soul, and if he has, how does it function and what happens to it at death?
- *Where does man come from and where does he go after death?
- *Does God exist? If He does, does He have a body, and if yes, how does He look?

Types of Idealism

The following are the major types of Idealism:

- **Subjective Idealism:** Famously championed by George Berkeley, this is the philosophical view that reality is fundamentally mental dependent on perception, minds, and spirits rather than independent material substance. It posits that “to be is to be perceived,” meaning objects only exist as Ideas within a perceiving mind or God’s mind (Britannica). Bishop Berkeley’s contention is that there is no such entity as a physical world, or matter, in the sense of an independently existing object. Instead, all that we ordinarily call physical objects are actually collections of Ideas in a Mind. A table is the set of perceptions that I have when I touch, look, and so on. But this is not to say that things are really different from what they appear to be.

According to Popkin and Stroll (1981), Berkeley insisted that all that we can ever know about objects is merely the ideas we have of them. The appearances we experience are the very objects, and the appearances are sensations or perceptions of a thinking being. According to Berkeley’s theory, mind is active and is an agent, while ideas are only the passive effects of mental activity. In fact, the only sort of power that can produce anything exists solely in the Mind, either in the finite spirit which is ourselves, or in the infinite Mind of God. The entire, magnificent world of nature, with its wonderful scientific harmony, is nothing but an expression of the Ideas in the Divine Mind. As he suggested, the natural world was presented to us as a kind of sign language for interpreting God’s Mind.

- **Objective Idealism:** Objective Idealism is a philosophical theory that affirms the idea and spiritual nature of the world and conceives of the idea of which the world is made as the objective and rational form in reality rather than as subjective content of the mind or mental representation (Wikipedia). Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) is regarded as the greatest and also the most difficult exponent of nineteenth-century German Idealism. According to Hegel, Spirit is alone Reality (Colin 1968). All reality is the outworking of Spirit. This is true, says Hegel, whether we think of nature, history, or thought. The sum total of human knowledge is none other than the Absolute Spirit thinking out its thoughts through human minds. History, nature, and human thought are really aspects of the Absolute Spirit coming to self-consciousness. One of the main Hegelian contentions is that everything in the universe can be understood only in terms of an objective or absolute Mind which has been evolving throughout the world’s history into a transcendent, self-contained being. The Hegelian Absolute Mind becomes the real universe, manifesting itself outwardly as world history and inwardly as the rational dialectical process marching towards self-realization.

THEOLOGIANS ALIGNED WITH PLATO’S IDEALISM

ANSELM: According to Colin (1968), Anselm is remembered for his ontological argument. Here, he tried to work out a logical demonstration of the existence of God. He describes God as that than which no greater can be thought. His argument is usually thought of as an attempt to deduce



the existence of God from the idea of the most perfect being. It cannot be denied that people do have such ideas of a perfect being in their minds. How, then, could such an idea get there if there was no such being? If it were merely an idea of the mind and did not actually exist, it would not be the most perfect being, for the lack of the quality of existence would mean that the being was not perfect.

THOMAS AQUINAS: Aquinas's proofs of the existence of God are known as the Five Ways (Colin, 1968). They include what later came to be known as the Cosmological and Teleological Arguments (the former looking for an ultimate cause of the cosmos, and the latter for an ultimate designer). His starting point was the conviction that the existence of God was not evident of itself to men; it requires proof. Proof was possible because God was the creator of the world. And just as a cause can be known at least partially by its effects, so the First Cause of the universe could be known from the created order. Taking his cue from Aristotle's pre-Christian idea of an unmoved mover and what he understood the apostle Paul to have meant in Romans 1:20, Aquinas believed that one could argue back from the things that we observe in the world to a prime mover, a first cause, or a great designer behind it. In each case, the drift of the argument follows the same basic pattern: Every event must have a cause, noting causes (or, for that matter, moves or designs) itself.

Such arguments are attractive and plausible. They seem to offer objective proof of the existence of God without having to fall back upon mere faith and Christian testimony.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA: Clement believed Greek philosophy prepared people for Christianity. He argued that Plato's Ideas were a precursor to Christian truth, emphasizing the importance of reason in understanding faith. There are many theologians today who have aligned with Plato's idealism and are yielding fruitful results apart from the two theologians discoursed above.

CRITIQUES OF IDEALISM: The big difficulty about idealism is its lack of proof. The idealist philosophers talk on at enormous length, but what they say seems not only contrary to common sense but indemonstrable. It is one thing to build up a system of ideas; it is something else entirely to show that the ideas are true. According to Colin (1968), in an article on 'The Conception of Reality,' Moore accused Idealists of falling into the basic error of not distinguishing between ideas and reality. When one leaves the problems of the materialists aside and examines the claims of the idealists, who explain everything in terms of mind, the same difficulties arise. The concept of mind is just as unclear as that of matter. If we search for some impression that gives rise to such an idea, we find that there is none. We are not aware of some entity to which all of our thoughts belong. Instead, we are acquainted only with the succession of our ideas. Hence, we do not know of any mental substance, nor do we find any way in which our perceptions or thoughts might belong to it.

KARL MARX: Marx critiqued idealism for being detached from material reality. He argued that idealists focus on abstract thoughts/ideas, ignoring the physical, economic conditions shaping society. Marx flipped Hegel's idealism, emphasizing materialism (dialectical materialism). He believed that social and economic conditions drive human history, not abstract ideas.



IMMANUEL KANT: Kant had a nuanced view. He critiqued “dogmatic” idealism (like Berkeley’s), arguing we can’t know “things-in-themselves”; we only know phenomena (appearances shaped by our minds). Kant distinguished his transcendental idealism from subjective idealism, emphasizing the limits of knowledge. He argued that the human mind plays a role in shaping our experience of reality.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE: Nietzsche saw idealism as a form of “will to power” – a drive to impose values, disguised as objective truth. He critiqued philosophers’ ‘prejudices’ (like Platonic ideals). Nietzsche emphasized perspectives: all knowledge is from a particular perspective, not an “absolute” view. He believed that truth is a creation, not a discovery.

Bertrand Russell (and G.E. Moore)

Bertrand Russell (and G.E. Moore) critiqued idealism for blurring perception versus reality. Russell argued for a “representative realism”: perceptions represent (don’t constitute) reality. Moore emphasized common sense: we know some things (like hands exist) without needing idealist proofs. The idealists’ emphasis was on the supremacy of mind. The mind is the only part of man that can understand and comprehend reality. The writer also wants to argue that man’s eyes can also understand and comprehend reality. The human mind, which could be commonly understood as the spirit of man, if properly nurtured, links man to the universal mind (God) where realities exist.

CHALLENGES OF PLATO’S IDEALISM FOR CHURCHES

Below are the challenges of Plato’s Idealism for the churches:

- i. Dualism: Plato’s distinction between the spiritual and material realms can lead to a devaluation of the physical world and human embodiment.
- ii. Gnosticism: Plato’s Idealism can lead to a Gnostic view of salvation, where knowledge (gnosis) is the path of salvation, rather than faith in Jesus Christ.
- iii. Intellectualism: Plato’s emphasis on reason and intellectual contemplation can lead to an elitist view of spirituality, where only the intellectually gifted can truly understand God.
- iv. Otherworldliness: Plato’s focus on the eternal realm can lead to a disregard for the present world and its problems.

IMPLICATIONS OF PLATO’S IDEALISM FOR THE CHURCHES

Below are the implications of Plato’s Idealism for the Churches.

- i. Spiritual Focus: Churches can focus on cultivating a deeper relationship with God and seeking spiritual guidance, recognizing that spiritual growth is essential for a fulfilling life. This can lead to a deeper focus on prayer, meditation, and other spiritual disciplines.
- ii. Eternal Perspective: Plato’s externalism can help Churches focus on eternal values and the afterlife. This can lead to a greater emphasis on sharing the gospel and making disciples, recognizing that earthly life is short and eternal life is the ultimate goal.
- iii. Intellectual Engagement: Plato’s philosophical approach can encourage Churches to engage with intellectual and philosophical discussions. This can lead to a greater appreciation for



apologetics, theology, and intellectual pursuits within the church, which is essential for a deeper understanding of God.

CONCLUSION

Plato's Idealism is a complex and influential philosophical system that offers insights into the spiritual realm and the nature of reality. However, its implications for Christian theology and practice are significant and require careful consideration. By balancing spiritual and material aspects, emphasizing scripture's authority, and integrating faith and reason, churches can engage with Plato's Idealism in a way that is faithful to Christian teachings and relevant to contemporary culture. A proper approach to Plato's Idealism can enrich Christian understanding and practice, leading to a deeper appreciation for the complexities of God's nature and humanity's relationship with Him.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

1. Teach Plato's Forms to express strong belief objective truth, but always anchor in Christ as the Symbol
2. Preaching should be regularly on creation Genesis 1:31, incarnation John 1:14, and bodily resurrection 1 Corinthians 15.
3. Equip Pastors with basic philosophy of religion to distinguish helpful verse harmful Platonic elements
4. Members should be encouraged to integrate care for body and soul as it aligns with "body as temple" 1 Corinthians 6:19-20
5. Encourage critical thinking and discernment, helping congregants evaluates Plato's Idealism and other Philosophical Ideas in light of Scripture (1 Thessalonians 5:21)
6. Encourage intellectual engagement, using reason and philosophy to deepen understanding of God's nature and humanity's relationship with Him (1 Corinthians 1:18-31).

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