Plato's Moral Philosophies As Reflected In The Fable Of Atlantis

In the following report, I am going to explore the moral philosophies put forward by Plato throughout his work with a particular emphasis on his dialogue‘s of Critias and Timaeus, where he mentions the fable of Atlantis. I hope to give a new insight into the modern applications and examples of his philosophies and give reason on why they should not be ignored over two thousand years later.

Literary review

The legendary fable of Atlantis was first introduced to the western world by Plato in his PERSONS OF A DIALOGUE, “Timaeus” and “Critias”. In this, the characters of Socrates, Critias, Hermocrates and Timaeus discuss a tale, told by Critias, of a magnificent civilisation that was eventually destroyed by the gods. Since its first record in Ancient Greece, the fable has inspired many works of media and great literary discussions. Perhaps the greatest debate that Plato’s story ever inspired was the mystery as to where Atlantis could have ever resided. In the book Meet Me in Atlantis: My Obsessive Quest to Find the Sunken City by Mark Adams, he details his journey searching for the lost city. As well as talking through the theories and possibilities of its location. These theories ranged from the African savanna to the desolate Antarctica. Comparative to Mark Adams’ passion for the idea of the lost civilisation, most experts and scientists would agree that the city is a fable devised by Plato for a narrative purpose.

However, fact or fiction, Plato had chosen to recount this story for a reason most probably for the clear ethical messages hidden behind the decadence of the Atlantean empire. The subject of ethics is far-ranging and regularly revised, not only by philosophical scholars but by the general public alike. The concept of ethics can be described as the application of morality to reality. Morals are usually installed in people at a young age and often vary slightly from culture to culture. They are often influenced by upbringing, governmental laws and religion. It may be perceived that our morality is pushed on us by our surroundings, that we are effectively moulded and forced to take on a certain persona sometimes against our wishes. Amin Maalouf during a book about his personal experiences, On Identity, explains how he feels the aforementioned factors influence morals and hence identity. He was adamant that the most crucial of these was the influence of religion on both society and individuals claiming that it could often shape both. In contrast to Maalouf’s belief, an article in The Guardian by Mark Vernon titled Religion and the Science of Virtue argues that ethics and morality stem from a biological need to survive and is a question that could be solved by neuroscience. In chapter 35 of Philosophy and the Brain by J. Z. Young the same thought is put forward and evidenced in an experiment with monkeys. This is a summation that the reasons for ‘good’ actions, or actions that help society, are fundamentally selfish.

For more concise ethical literature that focuses on Plato, there are many analyses’ of his dialogues. I have been using an analysis by B. Jowett of Plato’s Volume 3, The Republic which includes some preliminary explanations and interpretations of Plato’s work. John Hare provides

a synopsis of how the philosophical attitudes towards religion and morality developed over time from Homer to the followers of Aristotle. It shows how the initial depictions of the gods were very divine and virtuous but that by Plato's time the integrity of the gods was starting to be questioned. Plato went on his own journey similar to this with his beliefs of morality, as shown in an overview of Plato's ethics by Dorothea Frede. It details how Plato's first dialogues had a more traditional view, possibly influenced by Socrates, however his last collection of dialogues has a much more severe view on moral ideals.

Ethics in Atlantis

The fable of Atlantis is a story of an incredibly virtuous community of people who lived in a land of wonderment and unending prosperity. Atlantis was begotten by Poseidon, the god of the sea, and its first rulers were his children. The city of Atlantis consisted of a huge temple to the gods at its centre, around which were many concentric islands.

Who was Plato, and what did he believe?

Before Plato was a philosopher, he was a playwright. He understood how to entertain the people, and this skill is evident in his dialogues. Athens was a city where democracy was flourishing but Plato was concerned that the people weren't sufficiently educated in the matters they had to vote on (18). His dialogues are meant to inspire people to think and contemplate there ethical and political values in a lively and informative way.

Taught by Socrates, Plato often used his teacher as a character in his dialogues and would speak through him. This can make it hard to distinguish between Socrates and Plato's opinions. During Plato's early dialogues he explored the idea of a 'Good Life', in which he and Socrates debate whether a good life is achieved through utilitarianism or eudaimonism. Socrates argued for utilitarianism stating that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, he believed that the good life would be achieved if everyone followed their role in society. However, Plato disagreed with his teacher and argued that a morally good life was achieved as everyone's actions helped their personal 'well-being' (20). To achieve this each person should examine themselves and their needs putting aside societal popularity or 'status quo'. By doing this, finding and striving, towards a goal will lead to the Good Life.

Plato believed that everything had an ideal form, this means that for every object there is a perfect version of what it should be. This theory can be applied to people as well. Among his Socratic dialogues, Plato made no implication that the answers in the search for virtue could be found in any spiritual plain but in the fable of Atlantis he brings about new ideas of the links between justice and morality. He believed in a perfect, or divine, form of justice, morality and life, he was the first utopian thinker and wanted a way to build an ideal society. Atlantis was first made as a utopia and the way it was described in Plato's dialogue shows how it starts off as a seemingly perfect society. Maybe Plato was experimenting with his ideal world?

Exploring reasons behind Atlantis' ethical purity

The concentric structure of Atlantis shows that the life of an Atlantean literally revolved around the gods. We could wonder whether this devoutness and innate spiritually was linked to their famous virtue.

The idea that one's ethics is linked to their religion is a philosophy called supernaturalism. It is the idea that God can be the only source of ethics. A paradox known as 'the Euthyphro dilemma' and was first brought to question by Socrates. It consisted of two questions:

- Is a thing good because it's what God wants?
- Does God want a thing because it is good?

To strive to fulfil God's every need or desire is often seen as virtuous. However, in the Euthyphro dilemma, we face the idea that there is no justification as to why God wants it. Many religions have certain rules that have been put forward by God are all these rules fundamentally ethically moral? One classic example is a parent stealing a loaf of bread to feed their starving children. This questions the commandment – Do not steal, because in this example you could argue that it is unethical to condemn the parent therefore not every rule is always the most ethical route.

Atheists are often the most obvious argument against supernaturalism because by most standards most tend to lead a moral, ethical life. Although it is justified that most of their ethical values have been influenced by society, which in turn is influenced heavily by predominant religions. Despite this, the theory still holds to some extent, because many different cultures, religions and society seem to have the same core beliefs. This may support the theory of moral realism.

Moral realism it the idea that there are set rules and ethics that are always right. They are fact. It seems that throughout the world people have gravitated towards certain rules and ethical standpoints. If their rules do not come from God, then they must be implemented by people of influence within the community for which they all must have had the same ingrained into their being, which they are born with. For example, 'it is wrong to kill people' is now almost universally acknowledged as unethical. To dispute this there have been cultures where killing has been encouraged and sanctioned. The Inca civilisation would sacrifice children to please the gods, in this example, the priests were performing a spiritual act that they thought would please their god and today this would be considered highly unethical around the globe. Even now, terrorists and extremists cause fear and death in the name of religion, this is not in line with the values of virtues.

Therefore, if religion cannot define ethics, and we aren't born with ethics, perhaps what is ethically wrong and ethically right is just something society has collectively decided to agree upon to encourage harmonious living. Many organisms display altruistic tendencies towards each other, they help each other to survive as a collective. There is a philosophy that the reason people do morally good actions is always for some form of self-gratification eventually. This can include strengthening a society that supports you to the release of hormones you may feel from helping another person. Some experiments performed on mice and simulations run on monkeys show that they tend to value their own gratification over helping a fellow member of their species even if the gratification wasn't.

Through this small exploration, it seems that generally ethics has no defining cause but is somewhat linked to spirituality, self and society. In Plato's narrative of Critias, the two are very strongly linked. When Atlantis was first ruled by the children of a god the Atlanteans valued virtue above all else and had little desire for material wealth. It was only when the following generations of the royal lineage began to lose their spirituality from mixing with the humans that

Atlantis began its famous fall from grace.

“Human nature got the upper hand” was how Plato described the unbecoming of Atlantis. By this, he means that as the children of the gods procreated with normal human beings their morals declined. But even before the decline of Atlantis, there were strong opinions on the connections between gods and men. Near the beginning of the dialogue, Critias talks of art and how it is easy to criticise a sculpture of human form because of how familiar we are with it when we would not find fault with a beautiful landscape of a place we had never seen. He is comparing this to how people glorify the gods when they do not know them but find it easy to criticise humankind because it is something we are familiar with. Perhaps, Plato is suggesting that we as people cannot live up to the unrealistic expectations of gods, yet despite this, it is the standards and judgments of gods that define our ethics and morality, and this is ultimately why Atlantis was punished.

Why was Atlantis punished?

The reason that the gods sent the tsunami to Atlantis was because Atlantis attempted to invade Athens however, this is only the turning point of the story, Atlantis was in slow decline before that. Plato is not explicit in the areas where Atlantis failed but there is much we can infer from his dialogues.

Wealth and luxury corrupted the people of Atlantis. Their human nature couldn’t bear the divine gifts that the gods had given them, and they began to behave “unseemly”. By this Plato is probably referring to the increase in the value of material goods. To which Atlantis previously had no interest in. When Atlantis attacks Athens it is out of greed and hungering after power, the attack was unjustified and only served as an act of showmanship for the leaders of Atlantis. Due to their ignorance, they thought their army was unrivalled, but the Athenians defeated them (1). Atlantis had colonised many countries and is supposed to have attacked most of Europe and Asia “unprovoked” when Athens defeated Atlantis it is written that many people were “saved from slavery” suggesting that rule Atlantis in different countries was a cruel regime that others felt they had to be freed from (23).

It would seem that the behaviour shown by Atlantis was outside the divine realm of ethics set by the gods. Greed, megalomania and ignorance were the qualities a once noble leadership showed, causing others to intercede and strip them of their power. I believe that Plato aimed to show that this disregard of ethics in leadership can only result in disaster.