Reading
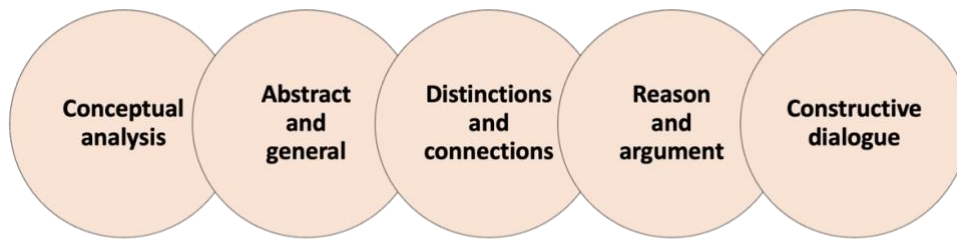
- Introduction to Plato: by Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith on the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: https://iep.utm.edu/plato/
- Kenneth Seeskin. (2008). Plato and the Origin of Mental Health. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, *31*(6), 487–494.
- Marke Ahonen (2019). Ancient Philosophers on Mental Illness. *History of Psychiatry*, *30*(1), 3–18.

The Philosophy Toolkit

Plato

Ancient Greek Philosopher of the 5th century. Student of Socrates, teacher of Aristotle. Known for his philosophical dialogues. Notable for various philosophical ideas:

- **The Theory of the Forms**: the physical, sensible world is a mere imitation of the pure, eternal, and unchanging extra-sensible world of the Forms.
- **Theory of Souls**: souls are immortal and exist before our birth. Our souls can be reincarnated into different bodies.
- **Knowledge and Recollection**: our disembodied souls acquire knowledge of true reality, this is recollected when we are embodied.
- **Ethical Theory:** the highest aim of moral thought and action is happiness (living well, or flourishing). Virtues are the skills or excellences needed to achieve happiness.

Plato on Mental Health

Plato thought that just as proper balance is needed to maintain a healthy body, so too is it needed to maintain a healthy soul (mental health). But balance of what? For Plato, it is the **parts of the soul**. For he holds that the soul has three parts:

1. a *rational* part (loves truth, rules over the other parts through the use of reason)
2. a *spirited* part (wherein courage and anger lie)
3. an *appetitive* part (where there are desires, e.g., for food, drink, and sex)

Proper balance = **harmony of parts**, working together well and not interfering with each other. This is mental health. Mental ill-health is when there is disorder and disharmony in the parts of the soul.

Plato regarded mental disorder, as a form of **immorality** – detriment to happiness: immorality is to the soul what disease is to the body.

- Should we follow Plato in linking mental health to morality?
- If we don't follow Plato in this last idea, is there still insight in his conception of mental health?

Philosophy as Therapy

Seeskin says:

"On the question of treatment, [Plato suggested] that philosophy, more specifically **Socratic questioning**, acts as a purge by eliminating "the spirit of conceit." The result is that a person becomes angry with himself but gentle with others. In this way, a person is freed of "great prejudices and harsh notions" and in the process learns modesty. The passage concludes by saying that this is the best and wisest state of the mind. It is not going too far to suggest that this is the first explicit defense of talk therapy. The idea is that false beliefs often result from self-deception, and that by preventing reason from doing its job, self-deception is the root of emotional distress. In the Platonic dialogues, self-deception goes hand-in-hand with arrogance, intolerance, and lack of self-control. By getting people to see things clearly, Socrates [as Plato's spokesperson in the dialogues] believed, he was also improving their character… he described his mission as one of examining and cross-examining people, and if needs be rebuking them, for scorning what is important and caring instead for what is less important." (p. 490).

Ahonen says:

"In ancient medicine, there were no psychiatrists, that is doctors of the soul, but in ancient philosophy there were. From Democritus and Socrates onwards, numerous philosophers professed to be 'doctors of the soul', taking care of the ills of the soul analogously to the medical doctors taking care of the ills of the body. These ills were essentially emotional dispositions and responses conceived of as being detrimental to human happiness, and they were often referred to as 'diseases of the soul'. The philosophical therapy approaches varied, but they tended to be of the 'cognitive' kind. The idea of philosophy as therapy becomes especially prominent in **Hellenistic philosophy** [the period of Ancient Greek philosophy following the classical period that Plato was in]. Of the three major Hellenistic schools, **the Stoics** aspired to instil into the soul an idea of 'life according to nature', helping it to overcome its self-centred emotional hang-ups and inciting it to look for purpose in the cosmos and identify with the cosmic reason governing all things; the **Epicurean** therapy sought to free people from ungrounded fears and anxieties concerning death and the supernatural world and to teach them to find contentment in the simple satisfaction of their basic needs; and the **Pyrrhonian sceptics** urged their adherents to discard unnecessary beliefs and theories and find peace of mind in the realization that uncertainty is the only (relatively) certain thing. Philosophical therapies of this kind were intended for people troubled by worries, fears and dissatisfaction; they were not intended for people with medical disorders affecting the mind." (pp. 3-4).

- What do you think of the idea of philosophy as therapy? Can we broaden it out beyond these Ancient Philosophy contexts?
- Can the Philosophy Toolkit be used therapeutically?
- Is the philosophy we do in this group in anyway therapeutic?

Email: Craig.French@Nottingham.ac.uk
Website: www.pomhnottingham.org