

Plato on the Importance of Incommensurables

Plato was among the group of people for whom the “eye of the soul” was sufficient justification for intellectual activity. He seems to have had a rather dim view of the others, the practical-minded people. Here, for example, is a passage from his long dialogue *The Laws*. The speakers are an Athenian stranger (*Ath.*) and Kleinias (*Kl.*), a Cretan:¹

Ath. . . . In measurements to determine length, breadth, and depth, and about all that pertains to nature, there is a ridiculous and shameful ignorance among human beings.

Kl. What ignorance do you mean?

Ath. Complete ignorance, my dear Kleinias, and when I myself learned of our deficiency in this regard, I was amazed, and it seemed to me that we were suckling pigs rather than human beings; I was ashamed, not only of myself, but of all the Greeks.

Kl. Concerning what? Say what you mean, stranger.

Ath. I am telling you; but I had better demonstrate by asking you some questions. Answer me briefly: Do you know what length is?

Kl. What a question!

Ath. Indeed; what about breadth?

Kl. I understand it completely.

Ath. And that these things are two, and that there is a third called depth?

Kl. How could anyone not know that?

Ath. But is it not your opinion that these things can all measure one another?

Kl. Yes.

Ath. Length, I suppose, can be measured against length, breadth against breadth, and depth, to the extent that the nature of measurement allows.

Kl. Precisely.

Ath. But if there is something around that cannot be measured precisely or even partially, if some things can be but others can't, and you think they all can be, what should you think of your opinion?

Kl. Clearly, it's defective.

Ath. And, what is more, length and breadth against depth, or breadth and length against each other, do not all Greeks believe that it is possible in some way to measure any of these against the others?

Kl. Absolutely.

Ath. But if there are yet things that cannot be measured in any way, while, as I said, all the Greeks think it is possible, should one not be ashamed of them all and say to them, “O finest of the Greeks, here is one of those things that we said it would be shameful not to understand, but to understand is no great merit.” [Laws, Book 7, 819D–820B]

Plato appears here as a familiar “schoolmaster” type of person, holding up an appreciation of “the finer things,” just like so many who came after him. Americans are familiar with the type: the English teacher who wants the pupils to read Thackeray rather than watch anim  programs on television is a sufficient example. The reader can no doubt supply others. But very few, even among intellectuals, go as far as Plato in holding up philosophical abstractions as an essential part of the education of every citizen.

¹ This translation is my own. It differs from the standard translation mostly in using the words *breadth* and *depth* in place of *area* and *volume* respectively. The standard translation makes no mathematical sense: Plato would never have believed that a length could be commensurable with an area; nor would he have thought that most Greeks believed this.