

Plato and the Forms

Plato (428–347BCE)

Plato was a pupil of **Socrates**, who was executed by the Athenian authorities for 'corrupting the youth of the city': he had been encouraging people to challenge the views and opinions of the city elders. After Socrates was executed, Plato travelled around the eastern Mediterranean, before setting up his university in Athens.

The allegory of the cave

Imagine some prisoners in a cave. They are chained to the floor so that they can only see the back wall of the cave, and the shadows of things passing the mouth of the cave. One man escapes, and is dazzled by the 'real' objects that were casting the shadows. He sees colours and shapes – he returns to tell his fellows, but they reject his news.

The allegory of the cave suggests that people are 'philosophically ignorant', and are like the prisoners chained to the floor of the cave. They can only see the shadows playing on the back of the cave. They assume that these shadows are in fact the whole of reality.

The world outside represents the world of the **Forms**. The prisoner who escapes is like the person who achieves 'philosophical enlightenment'.

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the cave is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upward to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed – whether rightly or wrongly, God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/text/plato/rep/rep-7.htm>

Plato's 'Forms' are sorts, kinds or types of things. They were not created, and they do not do anything. They are simply 'there'. The forms are timeless, unchanging and beyond space.

The created world, by contrast, is made of **contingent**, imperfect 'stuff', subject to change and decay.

This idea of **Form** and **matter** is central to Plato's view of the world. There are basically two worlds:

The finite world

Here the material objects exist, subject to change and decay. They take their identity from the way that they conform to their corresponding idea in the world of the Form.

The finite world is a shadow of the 'real' world of the Form.

The world of the Form

Here the patterns for the objects and concepts for the material world exist in a state of unchanging perfection.

It is the job of the philosopher to break free from the shackles of the finite world and find the world of reality in the world of the Form.

Plato and the Forms (continued)

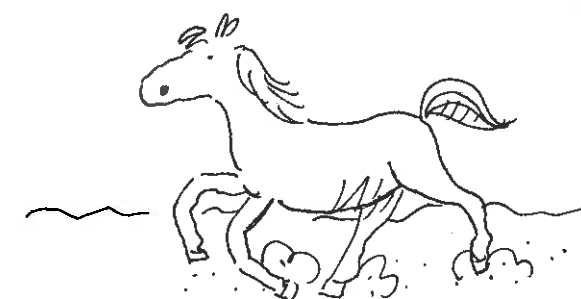
Many Greek philosophers believed that the soul was trapped in the material world – they thought of the body as a prison. Plato believed that the soul broke free from the body on death and returned to the world of the Form, which is where it came from in the first place. The **Demiurge** created the universe using changeable 'chaotic' material, and using the Forms as a model. The material that the universe is made from is constantly changing and being redistributed. Plato believed that we categorise the objects that we experience using our knowledge of those eternal Forms. A thing has its identity according to the way that it conforms to its corresponding Form. Plato believed that the Forms exist independently of anything in the finite world.

Demiurge
(Greek:
craftsman)

Plato believed that the Demiurge was the maker of the universe. However, the Demiurge was not the same as the Christian God – the Demiurge was not omnipotent.

For example:

A person sees a horse. He recognises it as a horse because of its characteristic 'horseness'. This is how he knows it is not a dog, or a lion, or an elephant.



The Form of the Good

Plato thought that the highest Form was the Form of the Good. Through an understanding of the Form of the Good, we can understand the value of all things. Any good act that we carry out in this world is a pale imitation of the perfect Good that exists in the world of ideas.

This idea of the Form of the Good was understood by later (Christian) thinkers as a way of explaining God. The idea of the Good is also important for an understanding of Plato's (and Augustine's) view of the nature of evil.

Plato believed that ordinary things gain their nature by either:

Imitating

This would mean that the Forms are independent of the physical world – they **transcend** or go beyond the material. The ordinary object simply imitates the eternal Form.

or

Participating

This would mean that the Forms are present in the objects of the physical world, and are much less mysterious. The ordinary object has something of the eternal Form in it.

Plato believed that we understand something to be 'good' – we are born with a dim recollection of the 'Form' of justice, or goodness, or whatever. Plato talks of the **a priori** knowledge of mathematics. For example, '2 + 2 = 4' is something that we know before we find four things to add together. Plato thought that this knowledge was a recollection of things known in an earlier existence.

a priori

Knowledge that is held before sense experience is gathered

a posteriori

Knowledge that comes after sense experience