



Lecture 3: Plato's theory of Forms

Introduction

Plato's philosophy covers a range of areas, including *epistemology* (theory of knowledge), *ontology* (theory of reality), *ethics* and *politics*. In this lecture, we deal with the first two.

Plato was a student of Socrates. His known works are written as dialogues, featuring Socrates in philosophical conversations. Some of his most influential ideas are from *The Republic*.

What really exists can only be grasped by thought

Socrates emphasises the importance of dialogue for philosophical insight. Only through reflection, reasoning and conceptual analysis can we get to *the real nature of things*. Plato develops this idea to include both a theory of reality (ontology) and a theory of knowledge (epistemology).

Much of Plato's philosophy can be seen as an answer to the Sophists' relativism. By using rhetorics, the Sophist were able to make any side of an argument seem equally true. In contrast, Plato was interested in real knowledge (EPISTEME), not in persuasion or strong beliefs (DOXA). He argued that the Sophists did not give people EPISTEME, but only DOXA.

Plato divides reality into two (dualism = a 2-part division): *the material world*, which we can access through our senses, and *the world of Forms*, which we can only access through thinking and abstraction. The world of Forms is for Plato more real than the material world. How does he explain this?

What are the Forms?

Plato thought that we recognise particular things (x, y, z) through their universal properties. x is Red. y is a Book. z is a Horse. He called such universals *Forms*. Forms are unchanging, eternal, perfect, ideal and abstract. They are non-material, but real.

Forms are the *causes* or *origin* of all material things. The objects *imitate* the Forms. While Forms are perfect, material things are only imperfect copies. All horses are physical, imperfect copies of the abstract, ideal Form *Horse*.

Plato thought of Forms and virtues as closely related. Objects have *virtue* (ARETÉ) when they are similar to their Form. A knife has ARETÉ/virtue when it functions at its best as a knife, e.g. sharp blade and a good grip. In this way, material objects should be as much like their Form as possible. Humans should also try to be virtuous and imitate the Form *Human*.

There is a Form for each virtue: Justice, Good, Honesty, Beauty, and so on. Since Forms are perfect and ideal, there can be no Form for evil, selfishness, stupidity, hypocrisy or other vices. A vice is simply a lack of virtue.

According to Plato, Forms exist in a different realm of reality. The world of Forms is also where our souls lived before they came into our bodies, and to which they will return after our death.

When our souls are in the world of Forms, they have real knowledge of them. But once the soul enters a body, it forgets all this knowledge of the Forms and the virtues and instead gets occupied with bodily pleasures and needs.

Plato called philosophy "a preparation for death", since it is a way for the soul to visit the world of Forms, its home. Education can help people remember, or *recollect*, what their souls once

knew, but forgot. Education won't teach people something new, but its aim is to turn a person's soul in the right direction. The soul must turn its "eye" (thought) in the right direction (towards the Forms).

In order to explain his theory of Forms, Plato uses allegories, or narratives. These can help us better understand both his ontology and his epistemology.

The cave allegory: we are like prisoners, trapped in a cave

In a cave, prisoners have been chained by their legs and necks since childhood. They cannot move, and all they can see is the cave wall in front of them. Behind them is a wall and above it a fire. Between the fire and the wall, some people are holding up objects that cast shadows on the wall in front of the prisoners. The prisoners think the shadows are reality.

One day a prisoner is released and forced away from the others. On the way out, he sees the objects being held up, then the fire. He is then dragged up and out in the open air. He sees the trees, the birds and eventually the sun.

Plato says we are like the prisoners. We live in the cave (the material world), without knowledge about the real world or the origin of our experiences (the Forms). To be pulled away from the familiar surroundings and life in the prison and into the real world, is a painful and frightening experience, and it will take time to adjust. Still, it is what we need to if we want true knowledge of reality.

If the prisoner, returning from the outside world, tried to explain it to the prisoners, he would be thought crazy. His eyes would not be used to the dark and he would not have much interest in the shadows. And if he tried releasing others, he might even get killed. Plato thought of Socrates as the released prisoner.

The divided line: 4 levels of existence and knowledge

Plato uses a second allegory. With the cave in mind, we start at the lowest level of the shadows that the prisoners see. These are the least real. The objects behind them are more real, but still in the cave. Shadows and objects belong to the visible, material world, of which we only have strong belief (DOXA).

Once we move out of the cave, toward the trees and the sun, we are in the world of Forms. But this reality can only be grasped by thought and abstraction. True knowledge (EPISTEME) can only be gained through thinking (see figure on the back).

How to understand this? We can see the 4 levels as *degrees of knowledge*. First, superficial understanding is gained from rhetorics and persuasion. Second, we study the particular things directly. Science, however, must move beyond the particular objects and towards abstractions. Here we find more general hypotheses and principles, and mathematics.

The highest level of knowledge in science are the laws of nature, the ultimate explanations of everything that goes on in the world. These go beyond particular experiences and objects, and often involve a high level of idealisation.

Science could then be seen as a Platonic activity, where we try to go from ungrounded beliefs (truth by authority), to studying particular objects, in order to find classifications, general hypotheses, and, ultimately, universal laws.

Discussion questions

Plato thought that there is a real world and a world that only *seems* real. What are these two worlds?

Which of these two worlds do we live in?

What is a Form?

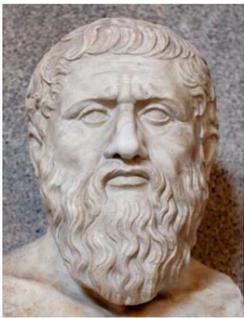
Explain how the Forms relate to particular objects.

Plato thought that the only way to have knowledge of the particular things is through knowledge of what is universal. *How did Plato think we can gain such real knowledge?*

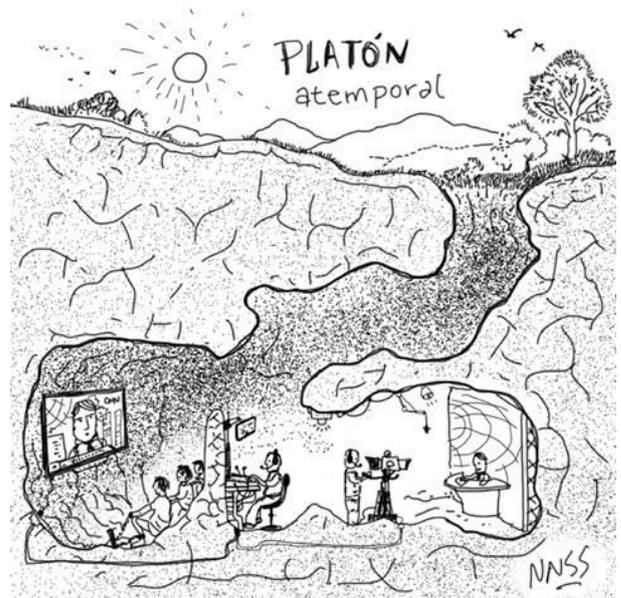
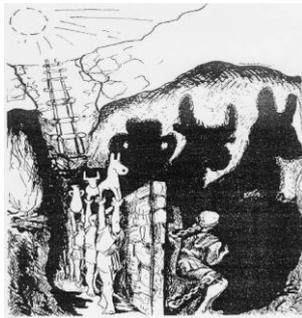
Explain the divided line allegory.

Plato was concerned mainly with what is universal, eternal and ideal, not with the particular, changing and perishable. *Do we think like this today at all, or is Plato outdated?*

How is his theory both an ontology and an epistemology?



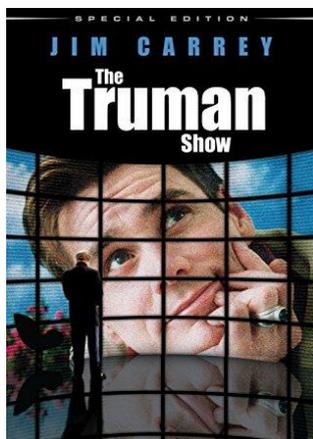
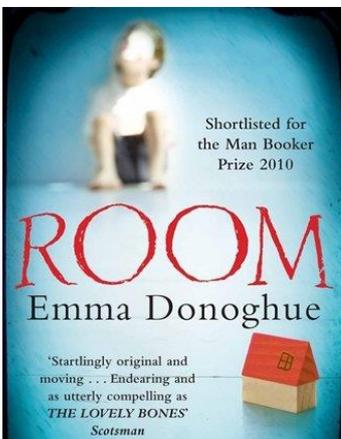
Plato (429? – 347? BCE)



Doxa or Episteme? Compare reality as presented by media and education with the complexities of real life phenomena. Who should we trust to inform us of the truth?

The divided line allegory:

REALM	ONTOLOGY	EPISTEMOLOGY	PERSPECTIVE	
the world of Forms	the Forms	knowledge	Universal and abstract principles	EPISTEME
	concepts, mathematics, hypotheses	thinking		
the material world	objects	beliefs	Particular and concrete events and objects	DOXA
	shadows, (fiction, rhetorics)	imaginations		



Many stories are inspired by Plato's cave allegory: *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix* and the novel *Room*, by Emma Donoghue: 5 year-old Jack thinks *Room* is the entire world and *Ma*, protecting him from the truth, allows him to believe that everything else exists only on television.

Hypatia (c. 350/70 – 415 CE)

Alexandria, Egypt (NB: 700 years after Plato)



Neoplatonist philosopher, and, in her time, the world's leading mathematician and astronomer.

She taught at the Neoplatonist school of philosophy and became the school director at 400.

A popular teacher and lecturer on philosophical topics, attracting many loyal students and large audiences.

Her Neoplatonist philosophy was concerned with the approach to the One, with focus on Platonic forms and abstraction from everyday reality.

Said to have invented the plane astrolabe, the graduated brass hydrometer, and the hydroscope.

With her intellectual accomplishments and academic duties, Hypatia lived a life very different from most women of her time and she dressed like a scholar.

She politically influential but also a controversial figure in public life (in the time of religious conflict and being a female intellectual).

She was murdered (stripped naked and dragged through the city until she died) by a mob.

Reserve your right to think, for even to think wrongly is better than to not think at all.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hypatia>