Plato on a Page

# The Forms

Plato believed that, in addition to the material world, there is a “world of the Forms” where the perfect Forms exist. (This isn’t another planet somewhere inhabited by Forms, but another “layer of reality” in which the Forms exist).

For Plato, the changing and imperfect world cannot be a source of genuine knowledge. The Forms (or Ideals) are the source of true knowledge about reality because they are: **perfect, unchanging, immaterial, eternal concepts.** True knowledge comes not from the material world, but from knowing the forms through reason.

## The Hierarchy of Forms

1. At the top of the Form of the Good. This is the most important Form because none of the other Forms can exist without it. (It is meaningless to talk about “generosity” without any reference to “goodness”).
2. The next layer down includes the Forms of virtues (generosity, bravery, kindness, self-control, beauty etc).
3. Below these are physical objects. **It is unclear whether Plato thought there were actually Forms of objects, or whether he used objects to help people understand the concept** (see Russell’s criticism)**.**

## Evidence for the Forms

1. The Problem of Universals: How do we recognise things for what they are? Plato argues that we must have knowledge of the Forms already to help us here (we recognise “beauty” because we have experienced the “Form of Beauty”).
2. The Problem of Knowledge: How do we learn anything? Plato argues that learning is actually a kind of remembering: we learn about courage and notice it because we already knew it in the world of the Forms and experience jogs our memory. (If we hadn’t seen it before how could we know what we were seeing?)

# The Cave

The Cave is the analogy Plato uses to help people understand the Forms:

* The Prisoners represent human beings trapped in a world of shadows they think are reality.
* The shadows on the back of the cave represent the material world: imperfect and changeable.
* The people/objects outside the cave represent the Forms – this is the true reality, not the shadows that the prisoners see.
* The sun represents the Form of the Good – just as the sun gives life to everything, so the Form of the Good gives meaning to the Forms (and therefore to the material world).
* The escaped prisoner represents the philosopher who escapes from the world of shadows.

# Dualism

Plato is a “dualist” because he believes there is a separation between the real world (Forms) and the material world (that we live in). It essentially means that he believes in two realities.

# Criticisms of Plato

* If we take the Forms too literally (Forms of objects) we end up with a “bottomless pit of nonsense”.
* The Form of the Good makes Plato a moral absolutist – many would argue that morals are relative.
* We perceive our world to be “real” – why should we suppose there is another reality out there?
* We learn about the world through our senses (and science seems to do quite a good job of this) – why would anyone believe that we really learn through reason alone?