

## Plato

Though he probably regarded himself a teacher, artistically, by some accounts Plato started out life as a playwright. I guess then, artistically, as the chronicler of Socrates he ended his life as a playwright as well. Anyway this is what makes the Dialogues so readable. They are witty and insightful. The language is rich and full, just as you would expect from a poet or writer during this high time of Greek culture.

Still, Plato saw the dialogues only as popular reading. We will find little of him in the dialogues as they mainly feature Socrates. If that is the case, what do we know of Plato the Philosopher? Now we have sort of the opposite problem. As we try to see Socrates shine through the words of Plato so we try to see Plato within the words he gives to Socrates.

We know that he met Socrates early in his life, yet pursued a military career (as would be the want of his family) and politics. However, with the death of Socrates at the hands of an increasingly autocratic government, he seems to have shifted away from politics. He began to see only the worthy, those who have followed Socrates' lead and sought wisdom, as viable leaders.

Plato takes Socrates' basic ideas and expounds, extends and conforms them to his view of the ideal state, where people get along and the state looks out for the needs of its citizens. And not just an ideal state but a state of ideals where we can move beyond the partial images of selfish and ignorant thought to full vision and wisdom.

To this end he returned to Athens and sets up the "Academy" (named for its location near the Grove of Academus) in order to educate future statesmen.

## Virtue

As with Socrates, Virtue is everything for Plato as well. Striving for the best is the only way to live life; in this he is truly Socrates' disciple. Sure the bar is high and may seem pie in the sky, but that does not mean we do not strive for it. "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, Or what's a heaven for?" (Robert Browning). Plato tempers and expands Socrates' ideas, giving form and meaning to the incessant questioning. He handles a lot of the how as well as the why, but he too sees an objective truth and guiding principle. There must be an objective base for all things. If the subjective is the rule then there is nothing which permanently binds us to the Good; I can change social or cultural norms or abide by them only as a matter of convenience and convenience is not virtue.

## The Forms

Plato's foundational idea is the differentiating of material and immaterial, one that influences many early Christian theologians, what is called *the Forms*. We must now take a moment then and explore Plato's idea of *the Ideal*. In many of his dialogues, Plato mentions 'supra-sensible' (above the senses) entities he calls 'Forms' (or 'Ideas'). In the *Phaedo* (cf. *Phaedo* 74a-75d), Plato talks about 'equality' as a thing and also the *idea of equality* as a concept ("equality in the abstract" he calls it), that is, particular sensible things like sticks and stones are *equal* and can be

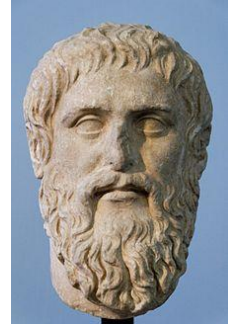


Figure 1: Bust of Plato

considered equal because of their “participation” or “sharing” in the character of the *Form of Equality*, which embodies absolutely, changelessly, perfectly, and essentially ‘equal’. It is important to see that Socrates views this Form as the driving force. We know two sticks are equal from the Form; we do not posit the Form from two equal sticks.

Think of it this way: for us to recognize two pieces of a tree on the ground as ‘sticks’, because their *accidents* could be completely different (one could be oak and the other magnolia, making them unequal) there must be some set formal idea of what a ‘stick’ *is*, aside from its accidents. Not only must there be an *ideal* but we must be something that we humans are able to grasp, that is, that these things can ‘participate’ in the larger idea of ‘stick’. Plato sometimes characterizes this participation in the Form as a kind of imaging, or ‘approximation’ of the Form.

The same may be said of insensible, non-particular things, the many things that are greater or smaller and the *Forms of Great and Small* (*Phaedo* 75c-d), or the many tall things and the *Form of Tall* (*Phaedo* 100e), or the many beautiful things and the *Form of Beauty* (*Phaedo* 75c-d, *Symposium* 211e, *Republic* V,476c). When Plato writes about ‘instances’ of Forms ‘approximating’ Forms, for Plato, Forms are *archtypes*. So, in this way the *Form of Beauty* is also *perfect* beauty, the *Form of Justice* is *perfect* justice, and so on. This also allows for judgment calls about how much an object participates in the Form. The nearer to perfection, the nearer to the Form; that is to say we can make a judgment about the quality of a thing in relationship to the perfect aspect of it. We can easily judge the value of a desk created by a master craftsman and one made by a five year old. In the end this allows the judging of something by an *objective* norm.

**Keep In Mind:** this is different than the relationship of *substance* and *accidents*.

**One question:** is this *a priori* or *a posteriori* thinking?

## Answers, I got Answers: The Middle Dialogues (Forms, Morality and Love)

As mentioned in previous chapters (and rehashed here), Plato's early works mainly reflect the teachings of his teacher, Socrates, and are almost all in the form of *Socratic Dialogues*, using the *Socratic Method* in which Socrates because he is merely seeking to understand (cough, cough) asks somebody what appears at first glance to be a straightforward question, such as “what is beauty?” or “can virtue be taught?”. The person, often sought out by Socrates because of their expertise in an area (though the encounters *seem* accidental) confidently gives an answer, but Socrates, by asking further ‘questions’, shows that the person really *doesn't* know the answer after all. The key feature of the early works is that they never give the answer to these questions – their purpose is to make the reader think for himself and come to conclusions about the subject being asked. These dialogues are skillfully written ‘plays’ in their own right and often feature real historical figures, other philosophers or their disciples. They probably give a reasonably accurate picture of what Socrates was really like (an astonishingly irritating man to try to have a conversation with!).

In the “middle” dialogues, Plato's Socrates actually begins supplying answers to some of the questions he asks, or at least beginning to put forth positive doctrines on the subjects. This is generally agreed to be the first appearance of Plato's own views. What becomes most prominent in the middle dialogues is the idea that knowledge comes of *grasping* knowledge one already has of objective truths, the unchanging *Forms*, along with active seeking of the knowledge of such

Forms. The immortality of the soul, and specific doctrines about justice, truth, and beauty, begin appearing here. The *Symposium* (originally a drinking party) and the *Republic* (a political party?) are considered the prime examples of Plato's middle dialogues. It is here that we also meet the *Allegory of the Cave* (see below).

## The Late Dialogues (Methodology, Forms and Law)

Those dialogues considered to be written last by Plato look more at the “big picture” – how was the world created; what are the ideal characteristics of the good ruler; what laws should the state have, etc. Plato has danced about the edges in the earlier dialogues, laying foundations for the difficult ideas, and now begins to hammer them out. Consequentially these are probably the most difficult and challenging philosophical works. These are not, it must be said, remotely as easy and enjoyable to read as his earlier works.

*Timaeus*, *Sophist*, and *Laws* probably represent the centerpieces of the Late writings, with *Laws* being one worth concentrating on for understanding their influence on later ideas of governance.

## Putting It Together

*Reading*, as one might say, *is believing*. Once again it is the delving into the works which will help us to fully appreciate and understand these over-simplifications. Alfred North Whitehead, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century mathematician and philosopher stated that all of Western Philosophy was a series of *footnotes* to Plato<sup>1</sup>.

In terms of theology, Plato's influence cannot be over-emphasized. His decisions about the nature of the things and the division of material and immaterial things (with the immaterial being the foundation of the material) as well as the idea of body and soul sync very nicely with the Judeo-Christian understanding of God, Creation, and humanity. We will examine these ideas in the Christian context in later chapters.

But that does not mean that Plato is swallowed by Christianity hook, line, and sinker. Plato is considered inspired but has the flaw of being just human, without the advantage of Revelation. Later theologians point out his genius but, as always happens with mere human speculation, they also point out where he gets some things wrong. His teachings about the immortality of the soul were good; his belief in what is called the “Transmigration of the Soul” in which the soul is immortal because it basically keeps recycling, not so much.

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*There is far greater peril in buying knowledge than in buying meat and drink: the one you purchase of the wholesale or retail dealer, and carry them away in other vessels, and before you receive them into the body as food, you may deposit them at home and call in any experienced friend who knows what is good to be eaten or drunken, and what not, and how much, and when; and hence the danger of purchasing them is not so great. But when you buy the wares of knowledge you cannot carry them away in another vessel; they have been sold to you, and you must take them into the soul and go your way, either greatly harmed or greatly benefited by the lesson.*

**Plato**, *Protagoras*

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<sup>1</sup> “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of *footnotes to Plato*.” To be exact.

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*There is great reason to hope that death is good; for one of two things -- either death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another. Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed by the sight of dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain. For if a person were to select the night in which his sleep was undisturbed even by dreams, and were to compare with this the other days and nights of his life, and then were to tell us how many days and nights he had passed in the course of his life better and more pleasantly than this one, I think that any man ... even the great king will not find many such days or nights, when compared with the others. Now if death is like this, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead are, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this?*

**Plato**, *Apology*

## A Plato Addendum: Allegory of The Cave

Socrates (and Plato) uses illustration and comparison in order to educate and convince; what we might (and probably should) call *allegory* (the using of symbolic or physical representations to express spiritual or abstract ideas). Recall how Socrates said that just like a body does ill or well and we can see that, so the soul too can be understood in the same light (*Crito* 47). We can see a certain a posteriori method in his illustrations – take what you know and push through to understanding. Hopefully I am making some sense here (and sense of Platonic thought): we move (journey) from partial, incomplete or faulty knowledge to pure complete knowledge; this is equally true in the material world and the objective world.

### But First: The Analogy of the Divided Line

The basic framework for understanding Platonic thought is a table, divided into quadrants. The quadrants are further divided by level of ‘reality’ so to speak, in an ever increasing upward depth.

	Objects	Mental States
Intelligible World	The Good	Knowledge / Wisdom
	Forms	Thinking
	Mathematical Objects	
World of Appearances	Visible Things	Belief
	Images	Imagination

Table 1: Plato -- The Divided Line

The sensible world is the world of things, but these things are only sense-perceived images of things. Whether physical or mental, these things really are not *real* in the sense that they are mere reflections of the *real* things which we can know through our intellect.

Therefore there is a ‘division’ between the flawed sensible/mental world and the perfect objective/intelligible world.

### Digging Deeper – The Cave

So what is all this talk I hear about a cave? In Chapter XXV of the dialog known as *The Republic*, Plato seeks to illustrate the above tenets using a cave in which prisoners are trapped in a pretty stringent time-out corner. Unable to move or look around they are left with only the things they can see by which they can understand their world, which in their case turns out to be the back wall of the cave. Behind and unbeknownst to them is an elevated walkway on which passers-by carry objects. To light their way is a large fire. This fire casts shadows on the back wall, which consequentially are all that the prisoners can perceive. Most people, Plato feels, live at this level,

never knowing the source of their understanding or the faint shadow of reality which it represents.

The cave then shows the nature of the universe as well as the levels of knowledge, understanding, reality and frankly effort which go with the path of enlightenment. Outside the cave lies the pure light of Forms and Reason, which he also says can be a bit overwhelming even for the seeker of Wisdom. It serves the dual purpose of explaining the physical and the interior worlds at the same time. Everything in one is paralleled in the other for we are beings of both body and soul, in a universe which is both physical and non-sensible.

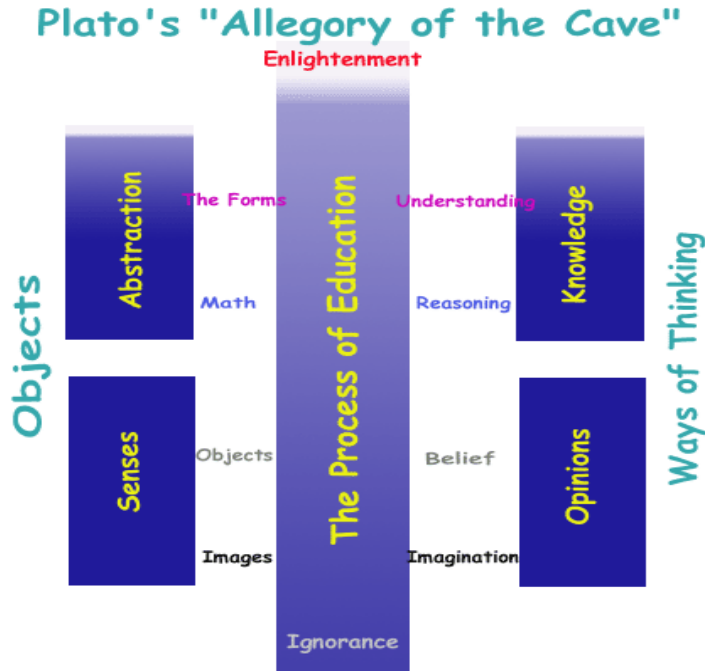


Figure 2: The Allegory Of the Cave

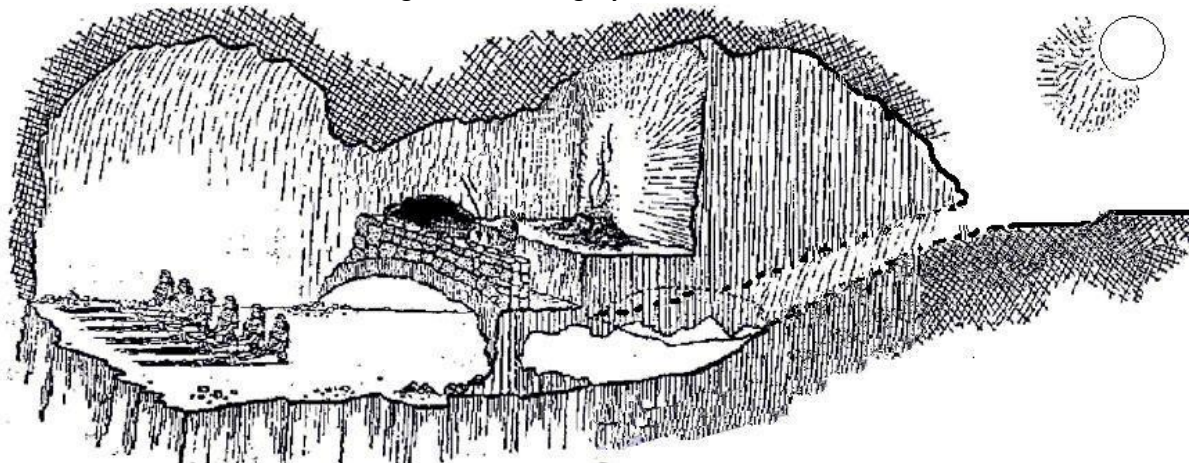


Figure 3: Illustration of the Cave Allegory