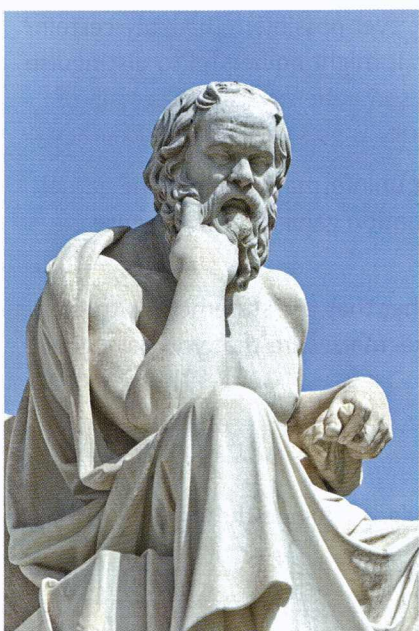


# Chapter 2

## Ancient philosophy: Plato

### 1 Introduction



Plato was a pupil of Socrates

#### Chapter checklist

The chapter begins by placing Plato in his time and place. Plato's philosophy was shaped by his experience of previous Greek thought and by the events and politics of Athens, where he lived, taught and wrote. It gives a brief overview of the thought of Heraclitus and Pythagoras as well as the ideas of Socrates. It goes on to outline Plato's understanding of reality and his theory of the Forms, including detailed explanations of the similes of the Divided Line and the Cave. Finally, it looks at the objections to Plato's theories, including those by Aristotle as well as some modern ones.

Ancient Greece is often considered to be the cradle of Western philosophy. Socrates (469–399bc), his pupil Plato (427–347bc), and Aristotle (384–322bc) who studied with Plato for twenty years, were undoubtedly three of the greatest philosophers who ever lived. They have had an influence that can be seen throughout philosophical discussion to the present day. What makes a philosopher great is the ability to articulate fundamental questions and to develop lines of thought which illuminate future discourse. Philosophy is, at heart, a discussion in which truth is sought through reflection, consideration, disagreement, refinement of description and study of ideas. The British philosopher A. N. Whitehead (1861–1947) described the whole history of philosophy as a series of footnotes to Plato. What is true of philosophy is no less true of Christian thought. The early Christian Church was influenced by Greek thought, in particular Plato and Aristotle. Their ideas weave their way through the theories of the great Christian thinkers.

#### Background

It is important to have a setting for understanding any ideas. The information in this box is not required material for the examination, but having an awareness of the context in which a philosopher worked is important for giving depth to your thought and answers.

When we think of ancient Greece, we must be careful not to think of it as an empire, like the Roman Empire. Instead we should think of it as a civilisation, a set of guiding ideas and shared customs and habits. There was no single centre of power.

There were different states. They were sometimes called city-states, though not all were centred on cities. Famous examples include Thebes, Corinth, Ithaca (an island community, not a city), Samos and Miletus. These were found not just on the mainland of modern Greece, but on the islands of the Aegean and Ionian Seas, in Asia Minor and Sicily. Each of these states was self-governing with its own system of government. They were each known in Greek as a *polis*, from which we take our term 'politics'. Sometimes the states were



at war with each other; at other times they were in alliance. But over and above their differences, there were many common features. They worshipped the same gods, spoke varieties of the same language, and came together in religious ceremonies and games, such as the Pythian and Olympic Games. Above all, they thought of themselves as Hellenes (Greeks) as opposed to the outsiders, who were known as 'barbarians'.

### Athens and Sparta

Two of the most significant states were Athens and Sparta. Both are important to understanding the thought of Plato and Aristotle. From 431 to 404BC, Sparta and Athens were at war. The Peloponnesian War was one of the bitterest conflicts of the ancient Greek world.

Sparta was a kingdom, based on strictly military lines. Children were trained to be warriors, taken from their parents at a young age and brought up in barracks with strict military discipline. Sparta was not a centre of art or culture. The development of appropriate warrior culture was the focus of the state.

Athens, on the other hand, was a centre of civilisation and the arts. It was also a democracy, ruled by its citizens. This rule was conducted through elections, but also through direct decision of the citizens meeting together in the *agora* (marketplace) in the centre of the city. Here generals were chosen and laws decided. It is worth remembering that this was a direct democracy rather than the indirect democracies found in modern countries, such as the United Kingdom or the United States. In Athens citizens spoke for themselves, rather than electing representatives to decide on their behalf. Of course, citizenship and the right to speak were not given to everyone. Women, children, slaves and foreigners were excluded. Trials were also public affairs, heard by large juries who voted on guilt or innocence and, when necessary, on the appropriate sentence.

### Socrates

Socrates was born in Athens and was a stonemason by trade. When he was young, he was a fine soldier. While he was a soldier, he was, on one occasion, struck dumb, standing motionless as the activity of the camp happened around him. He stood through the heat of the day and the coolness of the night, lost in thought. When he came to, he claimed to have been visited by a daimon, a spirit which told him not when he was correct, but when he was mistaken. Socrates claimed that this spirit would return throughout his life. We can date his emergence as a philosopher from this event. When he completed his military service, he returned to Athens to begin his philosophical career. He wrote

nothing, but taught through asking questions and probing the answers given by his listeners, always with the aim of being clear in explaining the good life for mankind.

Unfortunately, Socrates' habit of questioning to find truth could lead to discomfort among his listeners, as he went about the city of Athens. For many young men he was a hero, questioning the certainties of their elders. There were more significant problems, however. Some of Socrates' teaching admired aspects of Spartan life. Most significantly, he was the lover of Alcibiades, the talented and charismatic Athenian general and orator, who fled Athens for Sparta, where he advised the enemies of Athens on strategy. Alcibiades did not admire the Athenian democratic system. According to the Ancient Greek historian Thucydides (*The Peloponnesian War* VI, 89), Alcibiades told the Spartans:

*As for democracy, men of sense among us [the Athenians] – myself as well as anyone, as I have cause to complain about it – knew what it was. There is nothing new to be said about it: it is a patent absurdity.*

Taken together with Socrates' seeming provocation of law and order, it is perhaps not surprising that the philosopher came under suspicion. Socrates was put on trial, accused of mocking the Gods and corrupting the morals of the young men of Athens.

His trial, as was usual in the Athenian democracy, was heard by a large jury. The accused were expected to defend themselves. To do so effectively, those who could afford to would consult one of the Sophists, men who would help them to construct an argument that might persuade the jury, and one of the Orators, men who trained others in public speaking and taught the arts of persuading listeners to agree with them.

Socrates made a point of not seeking the advice of the Sophists or the Orators in preparing his defence. His defence seems to have been provocative in tone (even as reported by his disciple Plato, in *The Apology*). It was so provocative so that there is a case for suggesting that he sought his own death. Socrates was convicted and sentenced to die by drinking hemlock. He refused the various schemes his disciples thought up to preserve his life, dying in 399BC.

After his death, some of Socrates' followers wished to honour his memory by writing down his teachings. The most significant of these followers was Plato, who was in his mid-twenties at the time of Socrates' death.

### Plato

Plato was both a philosophical and literary genius. He gave up his earlier plans for a career in politics,



instead devoting his life to continuing the tradition of philosophical enquiry encouraged by Socrates. He did this in two ways, by founding the Academy in about 385BC, the equivalent of a modern-day university where philosophical teaching would continue, and by writing a series of dialogues capturing and expanding on the thought of Socrates. (The Academy was destroyed by the Roman leader, Sulla, in 84BC, but revived quite soon afterwards, eventually surviving until 529AD when it was closed by the Emperor Justinian as a potential threat to Christianity.)

The Dialogues dramatise ideas in extraordinary ways. It is suggested that these were used for teaching within the Academy. The repetitions within the dialogues suggest that parts were read in groups, then summarised before moving on to the next part. Most of the Dialogues present Socrates as the main speaker, discussing ideas with various followers and opponents. Plato never appears as a participant, though his brothers (or possibly uncles) Glaucon and Adimantus are major figures. In the *Republic*, the most famous of the Dialogues, Socrates is cast as narrator.

It is important to remember that the Socrates of the Dialogues is not necessarily the Socrates of history. In the earlier dialogues, we may assume that the character 'Socrates' fairly accurately represents the words and ideas of the historical Socrates. From *Gorgias* onwards, the remaining two-thirds of the dialogues, while using Socrates as a mouthpiece, represent the views of Plato himself. This is why we speak of *Plato's* philosophy, ideas, theories, and so on. This is important as the notion of the Forms, central to Plato's ideas, is not mentioned at all in the early dialogues.

### Pythagoras

Plato was deeply influenced by the thought of Pythagoras (c.570–495BC) and his followers.

Most importantly for our present discussion, the Pythagoreans were fascinated by mathematics, and held a notion of a kind of atomic theory with the basic elements being numbers, which were considered real things. Just as we may think of objects being made of atoms, electrons and various sub-atomic particles, the Pythagoreans thought in terms of things being made of twos, threes and so on. Together with this, they were fascinated with the idea of ratios and how one thing was in proportion to another. Additionally, Pythagoreans made a sharp distinction between the material body and the spiritual soul. All these points emerge in Plato's theory of the Forms. It is interesting that Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, talks about the close affinity between Plato and the Pythagoreans.

### Heraclitus

Plato was also very aware of the thought of Heraclitus (c.535–475BC), who was fascinated by the endless change we find in things. To Heraclitus is attributed the saying 'No man can step in the same river twice.' This is not found directly in surviving works, but Plato, (in *Cratylus* 401d), explains Heraclitus's view as:

*Everything changes and nothing stays still – you cannot step twice into the same stream.*

Plato did not agree. For him, there had to be things fixed and certain so that there might be fixed and certain knowledge.

In his work, Plato seeks to relate everything to the nature of the good life, the soul, and the nature and purpose of reality. Above all, he seeks a certain basis for all our knowledge of reality. This world is obviously one of change and uncertainty, so Plato assumes there must be another, unchanging, spiritual world where certainty *can* be found.

#### Key quote

I cannot teach anybody anything.  
I can only make them think.  
Socrates

#### Key persons

**Pythagoras** (c.570–495BC): best known to us as the mathematician of the famous theorem, he was also a philosopher who created a school of Pythagoreans who deeply influenced Plato. He held a form of atomic theory, based on number and an almost mystical belief in the power of number.

**Heraclitus** (c.535–475BC): pre-Socratic philosopher best known for his concern with constant change in nature. In later years he suffered from dropsy (oedema) and doctors were unable to help. He tried to reduce the fluid with his own remedy of anointing himself with cow manure and basking himself in the sun. He died within a day.



## 2 Understanding of Reality

### Background

Plato's need to explain the workings of thought and the mind – and to find permanence and certainty in a shifting world – led him to his theory of the Forms, most famously developed in his longest dialogue, *The Republic*.

### Key term

**The Forms** Ideal, eternal single versions of things found on Earth. The Forms are found in the realm of Forms, which is above our daily world, and wholly spiritual. For Plato only the realm of Forms is truly real, and only this, for him, can be described as 'reality'.

Plato is often considered the first great rationalist philosopher. This is true in two senses.

He was a rationalist, as opposed to an empiricist, in that he believed that certain truths about the universe were knowable by mind alone, something the empiricist denies. Through the light of reason alone, and not through any observation, he believed that the enlightened individual – the philosopher – could see beyond the world of the senses, to the real nature of things. For him, to know things like true goodness or true beauty, the mind had to go beyond anything sensed.

But Plato was also a rationalist in perhaps a more usual sense of the word. He believed that the best part of humanity was the power of reason, something that animals lack. For him, as indeed for other Greek thinkers, if only we reason properly then we will always know the right way to live our lives. People do bad things when they do not use their reason and let themselves be carried away by their emotions.

This rationalism raises questions about how we can relate the material, emotion-feeling body with the mind which rises above it.

### (a) The Forms

When we try to make something we begin with an idea of what we shall make. If I want to bake a cake, I have in my mind a picture of the finished product, a beautifully baked cake. (This is my example, not Plato's.) But where does this idea come from? I might answer that I have experienced cakes throughout my life, seen cakes of different kinds, and perhaps created a composite picture of the new sort of cake I want to bake. That would also be Aristotle's answer. But Plato's answer is quite different. He would point to the permanence of the idea in my mind. The cake I bake would either be eaten or cease to exist in some other way, but the *idea* of the cake, once in my head, does not suffer the same decay as the material cake.

This thought leads Plato to argue that there must exist an ideal cake. My attempt at baking is simply an imperfect copy. This ideal cake obviously does not exist in this world, so it must exist elsewhere. So Plato suggests the existence of the Realm of the Forms. In this realm there is a Form for everything that exists. There is an ideal cake, chair, vacuum cleaner, textbook and so on. These Forms are spiritual. That is, they are permanent and non-material. We long for the permanence of the Forms and are always dissatisfied with the transience of the world.

Why is this? What is our relationship to **the Forms**? For Plato, our souls belong naturally in the Realm of the Forms, the realm of reality, not this world. For reasons which are not entirely clear, we were trapped in bodies and born into this world. The consequence of this is forgetfulness. We forgot the Realm of the Forms, which was true, good and permanent. But we remember glimpses of it, as when I think of the cake I wish to bake, I remember and aspire to the ideal cake. The more I reflect on the concept of the cake, the clearer my memory becomes. For Plato, all learning is actually recollection of the Forms experienced in a previous life or lives. For him, education does not put anything into a child's mind – it draws out what is already there, hidden by forgetfulness. In the same way, an inventor is not creating something new, but is the first to remember the



perfect Form of it. Any subsequent improvement in an invention is the result of people focusing their minds ever more clearly on the original idea.

Certain consequences follow from this understanding. For Plato there are two Realms:

- 1 the Realm of the Forms, inhabited by spiritual souls and the true beings in themselves
- 2 the Realm of Appearances, this world in which things look more or less like their originals in the Realm of the Forms.

### (b) Hierarchy of the Forms

There is a hierarchy in the Forms. The Realm of the Forms is superior in every way to the Realm of Appearances – the latter is a rather pale reflection of the former. As we shall see, even among the Forms there is also a hierarchy, with the Form of the Good above all.

Recall that the Pythagoreans were fascinated by number and by ratio. If we have two numbers, they are in a ratio with one another: 2 and 6 are in a ratio of 1 to 3. If there are two realms, Plato assumes that they are in a ratio to each other. Think of a scale model, such as a miniature model of a famous aeroplane. These models are made in a ratio of 1:72, so an inch on the model I make represents 6 feet on the real Spitfire or Lancaster. From the scale model, we can draw conclusions about the real aircraft.

Plato assumes that if something is true in this world of Appearances, it is even more fully true in the Realm of the Forms. In the world of objects, we need eyes to see them, and we need the light from the Sun to illuminate them so that our eyes can see. In the Realm of the Forms, similarly, we need the 'mind's eye' or the force of intellect to appreciate the Forms. But we also need something like the Sun to illuminate our understanding. This 'Sun equivalent' is the **Form of the Good**, the highest of the Forms. Below it come other 'higher Forms' such as Beauty, and below these are the individual forms of chairs, tables, cakes and all the other objects.

These Forms, then are the perfect versions of the inferior things of this world. As such, Plato believes, they must be eternal, just as our souls are. For him, eternity is part of perfection, because something perfect cannot be destroyed. As we shall see, this idea may be open to objection.

For Plato, most people won't look beyond the trivial to things themselves. Therefore they seek trivial things, such as earthly pleasures, money or fashionable clothes. He gives the example of people who call themselves lovers of beauty. They attend the various festivals and try to see every work of art, but never ask themselves what beauty is in itself. They distract themselves with things that appear beautiful but, as these are material, sensual things, they are imperfect and impermanent. A world-famous painting may be very beautiful, but if we turn it over, we find just rough wood and canvas, with nothing beautiful about it.

Those who think of the meaning of things in themselves are the philosophers. They ask what is true beauty, or true justice. They are capable of knowledge, not opinion. The Greeks thought that if we intellectually knew the good thing to do, we would always do the right

#### Key term

The **Form of the Good** is the highest form. All other forms have the goodness of perfection from participating in the Good. The Form of the Good also brings enlightenment to the rational mind.



**Key question**

Does Plato give enough support to justify his case? Is the argument for the Forms convincing?

thing. Plato shared this common view. The Greeks had no word for 'will' and tended, like Plato, to explain wrongdoing as the result of ignorance or incomplete knowledge. If I pursue material things, it is because I am ignorant of the true good. If I know the Form of the Good, I will be good.

Although Plato did not see democracy as the worst form of government, he believed firmly that the best form of government was a society led by the truly wise, the philosophers, with others obeying their lead. In the *Republic*, he sets out his ideas. Children are taken from their families and brought up according to their skills, as in Sparta. Only those carefully selected would be fit for leadership. The Athenian democracy was made up of ordinary people, not philosophers. Therefore it consisted of those taken in by what was apparently good, not what was truly good. This was why they misunderstood Socrates and thought they were doing the right thing by convicting him and sentencing him to death.

**(c) The Simile of the Divided Line**

Plato develops his case for the Forms in a sequence of three linked similes: the Sun, the Divided Line, and the Cave, in that order. The Simile of the Cave is the most developed and lengthy, as well as the most dramatic of the three similes, but knowledge of the Divided Line is very helpful in understanding the Cave.

Plato's Analogy of The Divided Line The Four Stages of Cognition			
Source of Perception	Things Perceived	Modes of Perception	Classes of Perception
<b>THE GOOD</b> Source of the intelligible order, of the world of reality	<b>A Forms</b> (Goodness, Reality, Beauty, Truth)	<i>Reason</i> (Dialectic)	<b>KNOWLEDGE</b>
	<b>B Mathematical objects</b> (Hypotheses)	<i>Understanding</i> (As in mathematical thought)	
<b>THE SUN</b> Source of the visible order, of the world of appearances	<b>C Physical Objects</b> (All objects perceptible by the senses)	<i>Belief</i> (Accepting sensory perceptions as givens)	<b>OPINION</b>
	<b>D Images of Physical Objects</b> (Shadows, reflections, illusions)	<i>Imagination</i> (Supposition)	

In the Divided Line, Plato asks us to think of a vertical line divided into two parts. The upper part is twice as long as the lower part – a ratio of 2:1. Each part is then further subdivided in the same 2:1 ratio. The upper part represents the Realm of the Forms (A/B on the diagram below) while the lowest part (C/D) represents the world of appearances. Plato notes how the process of observation in the world works in two ways. Sometimes we



look at things themselves, as I may look at your car. But sometimes we look at images and shadows, such as my looking at a photograph or painting of your car. In the case of images and shadows, we are not looking towards the objects as they are, but are looking away from them, turning our attention to something which has less reality. For Plato, looking at images is like looking at shadows, as far away from true reality (the ideal Form of the perfect car) as could be. This is why, in the *Republic*, he places artists, who make imperfect copies of material objects which are themselves inferior copies of the Forms, at the bottom of his social hierarchy.

Remember that Plato assumes that if something is true in this world of appearances it is a kind of scale model of the Realm of the Forms. If something is true in the world, it is even more true in the higher Realm of the Forms. So, for Plato, if we have shadows and images ('looking away' from the objects of this world) in this world, then there must be an equivalent in the relationship to the Realm of the Forms. This is found in mathematical reasoning. The mathematician begins with an assumption of something abstract. He assumes a triangle, or numbers, as his starting point. He does not ask what a triangle is, in itself, or what a number is in itself. He considers what calculations he can do with that triangle or those numbers. For Plato, only the philosopher asks what things are in themselves.

Plato makes the assumption that truth and knowledge only apply to what truly exists. So he restricts the term 'knowledge' simply to our awareness of the Forms. He argues that things in our world do not exist as truly as beings in the Realm of the Forms. So we do not have knowledge of them, as they are not real in the full sense. We have only opinion or belief (*doxa* in Greek) about the things in our world. There is nothing to be known about things that do not exist. So Plato calls 'ignorance' the awareness of what does not exist. Plato appears to be confusing states of awareness with the objects of awareness. If I say 'There are no abominable snowmen in my study at present', I would call my awareness 'knowledge'. In Plato's analysis, this would count as ignorance as I am referring to something that does not exist. I am not convinced by his argument.

### (d) The Simile of the Cave

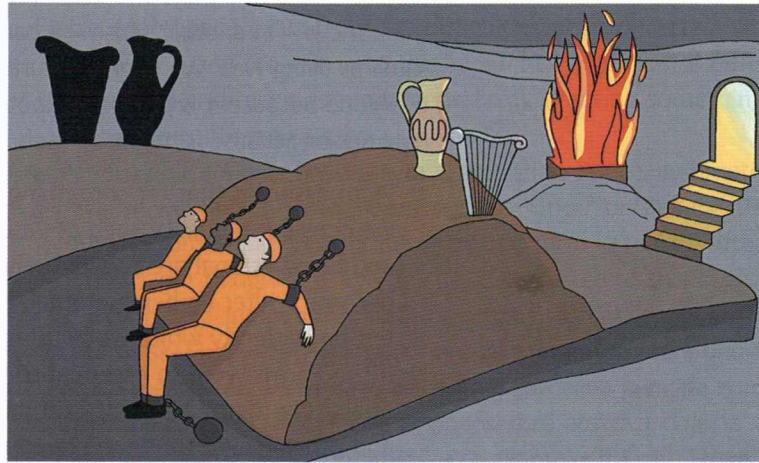
This simile demonstrates Plato's literary skill. Writers through the centuries have referred to it, often as a metaphor for their own societies and the process of enlightenment. Different interpretations have been offered, but a straightforward way to understand it would be as dramatising points made in the Simile of the Divided Line.

Plato asks us to imagine an underground cave, connected to the surface by a steep tunnel. In the cave, there is a road which runs across its width. On one side of the road is a wall, running parallel with both the road and the far surface of the cave. Prisoners are chained to the wall, with the road behind them and on the other side of the wall. They have been there all their lives and are chained in such a way that they can only look towards the wall in front of them. They have never been able to see the road. On the opposite side of the road from the wall, and higher up, there is a fire. This fire means that shadows are cast on the wall which the prisoners face. People walk along the road, carrying objects of various kinds. The shadows of these objects appear on the wall in front of the prisoners. The prisoners also hear the voices of those passing along the



road. The result is that the only 'reality' the prisoners ever know is the shadow world. They devise competitions between themselves to guess which shadows will appear next. This stage represents the images (D) on the Divided Line – the lowest level of awareness.

Plato asks us to imagine that a prisoner is one day released. He stands up, turns round, and sees the real objects carried by the men on the road. He learns that what he has previously believed was illusion. This represents the seeing of the objects of this world ('looking at' rather than his previous 'looking away') – C on the Divided Line. Then he is at last able to look at the fire. This would be difficult at first as his eyes would be used to seeing only shadows, but gradually he would be able to look at it. The fire represents the Sun in our visible world.



An illustration of Plato's Simile of the Cave

Then the prisoner is forced to make the difficult ascent to the outside world. This difficulty represents the hard road of philosophical enlightenment. At first, the sheer brightness of the outside world would be painful and dazzling, and the prisoner would be able to look only at the shadows of objects in the outside world ('looking away' representing mathematical reasoning (B) on the Divided Line).

As his eyes became accustomed, he would gradually be able to look directly at the objects themselves ('looking at', (A) on the Divided Line). These real objects represent the Forms in themselves. Last of all, he would be able to see the Sun, the brightest object, which gives the light that enables seeing and understanding, and which enables the life of everything else. The Sun in the simile represents the Form of the Good.

Plato then speculates on what would happen if the prisoner were forced to return to the cave. Those in the cave would not be impressed by his adventures. Indeed, they would not believe him. They would deny that there was a more real world. After all, the returned prisoner would no longer appreciate the games they played, having seen the truth, and his eyes would find it difficult to readjust to the shadow world. The others would mock him and might even kill him.

Plato is here trying to show how those with true philosophical insight are not understood by those unable to see beyond the world of appearances, unaware of the true nature of things. The reference to the possibility that the enlightened one might even be killed by the ignorant is an obvious reference to Socrates and his fate.

### Key question

Glaucon: You have shown a very strange picture, and they are very strange pictures.

Socrates: They are just like ourselves.

Are they?



### 3 Objections to the theory of the Forms

#### (a) Aristotle's objections

One of the first to develop objections to Plato's notion of the Forms was his pupil Aristotle. He lists many reasons for not believing in them. Objections to the Forms in general obviously apply also to the Form of the Good. Some can be summarised as follows:

We may question whether there can be a single Form of the Good. We use terms such as 'good' in so many different ways that there can simply be no single 'good'. Aristotle identifies some of these different ways. A good human does not have the same good qualities as a good horse. A good harpist is one who plays the harp well. We may call her a good harpist but think she is – in another sense – a bad person. Playing a harp well is not the same as living well. We might go further. A good rifle is not morally good – it is good because it is good for shooting with, not because it has moral qualities or because it might be useful for shooting people or shoveling snow.

- Plato assumes that for something to be pure it needs to be eternal. If we consider a quality such as whiteness, we recognise that be white and being eternal are two entirely different things. Something does not become whiter by being eternal. Something might last a few moments, but be perfectly white while it lasted.
- If the Forms were so essential to true understanding, why does no one study them? It seems odd that carpenters, doctors, politicians and others seem to feel no need to study the Forms if they are as necessary to clear thought as Plato thinks.
- The Forms have no practical value. In matters of health there is no 'perfect health'. The health of a seventy-year-old is different from that of a youth. The doctor seeks only what is healthy for an individual. Knowledge of an abstract 'health' does not help in diagnosis or prescription.
- The idea that theoretical knowledge of something leads necessarily to being able to do it is wrong. Practical knowledge is learned through practice and observation, not through intellectual knowledge, which is a different sort of thing. Knowledge of politics comes through careful observation of different constitutions, observation of how policies work out and, above all, knowledge of people and their behaviour. Which is more useful in treating illness – someone who knows that light meat is healthy but has no direct knowledge of white meat, or someone who just knows that chicken is good for you?
- Some things have no Form, according to the Platonists. An example is that there is no Form of Number, but only forms of oneness, twoness, threeness and so on. This raises a further issue, not directly developed by Aristotle. If there are Forms of each number, and there is an infinity of possible numbers, then there is an infinity of possible Forms.

#### Key question

Does Plato's theory survive Aristotle's criticisms?

#### (b) Other objections

Perhaps the most obvious objection to Plato's thought is that he does not justify several of his assumptions:

- A more technical objection is sometimes used against Plato. You would not be expected to know this, but you might wish to do so. Plato



### Key terms

**A priori** That which is known by mind alone and whose truth is not dependent on the facts of this world. See previous chapter for a more detailed account.

**Empiricism** The view that all truth is dependent, directly or indirectly, on what can be known through sense experience. Empiricists are sceptical about the possibility of *a priori* knowledge of things that exist.

assumes both that there are things in the Realm of Appearances and that their perfect counterparts are in the Realm of the Forms. He only says there are. He provides no justification for this assumption. It is not valid to declare that there is a ratio, and, without defining exactly what that ratio is.

- **Empiricists** would object to the various assumptions that we may know anything about the world *a priori*, other than by sense experience.
- There is no empirical evidence for the Forms. Plato argues by assertion and it is easy to be swept along by his imaginative and colourful writing.
- Karl Popper, in Volume I of his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (various editions, Routledge), argues that Plato is determined to find a certainty that cannot be found in this world. Because he cannot find certainty in a world of continual change, Plato assumes it must exist somewhere else. Many people run from the difficulties of an uncertain world (which is why so many are drawn to the apparent certainties of different types of political and religious fundamentalism). Wanting something to be certain does not make it so.
- Various philosophers have drawn attention to Plato's assumption that because we have a name (noun), such as 'Good' or 'Beauty' there must be something corresponding to that term in reality. After all, nouns name things. A. J. Ayer (1910–89) referred to this assumption as a 'primitive superstition', and the great Polish philosopher, Tadeusz Kotarbiński (1886–1981), argued that certain nouns were *onomatoids*, which means sentences have to contain so-called genuine names (referring to concrete objects) as opposed to abstract objects' names or non-genuine names (onomatoids). For example, if I say 'There is *nothing* in my cupboard', 'nothing' is not the name of a thing called 'nothing' (that would be inherently contradictory) but the name 'nothing' stands for an absence. In the same way, terms such as 'Love', 'Good', 'Justice' are not names of particular things, but stand for qualities of other things. The terms are convenient shorthand when constructing sentences.

## 4 Conclusions

The greatness of Plato lies, as we have said, in his ability to ask fundamental questions about life, reality and meaning. He sets out on an innovative adventure of ideas, and those ideas, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, have had lasting influence. Plato's search for truth has been inspirational for many, and his vision of enlightenment and the good life, a life lived in accordance with true knowledge, has acted as a model for studying such questions. Few philosophers would accept his ideas about the Forms, although in modern times, Iris Murdoch, in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge, 1970) and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Chatto, 1992) has made a spirited defence of a version of the Form of the Good.

## Study advice

There is quite a lot of material in this chapter and it is helpful to remember that for the examination, you do not need to know it all. For example, many objections to Plato's theory of Forms are listed.

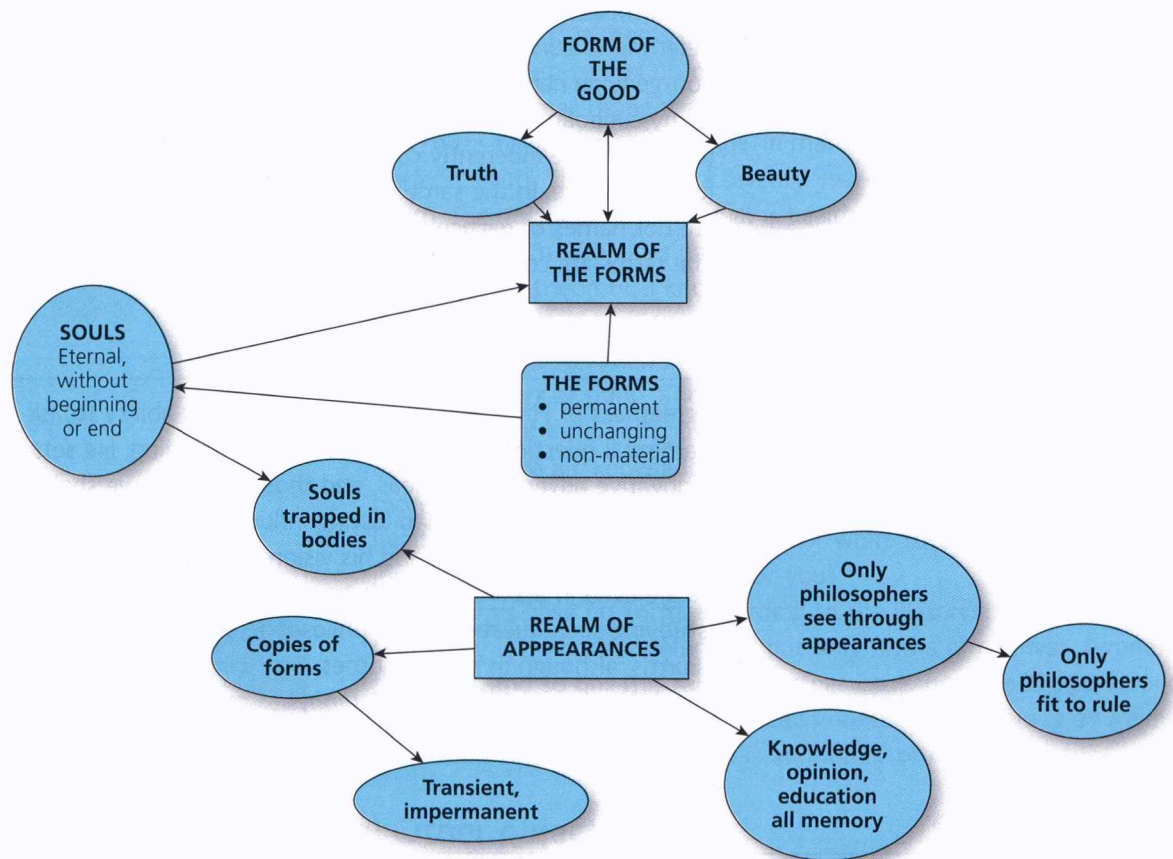


In the examination, it will simply not be possible in the time to write sensibly and fully about all of them. You may find some of the objections unattractive or may not feel confident about how well you could explain some of them. Think about which of these objections you find yourself most happy to use – perhaps two or three from Aristotle and one or two others, and concentrate on these in your essays and in your revision. The same point is true for the other chapters in this book.

The most valuable advice is always to read original texts for yourself. Examiners often complain of very fanciful renditions of the cave, with references to puppets hanging from the ceiling (there are no puppets mentioned by Plato: his only reference to puppetry is when he describes the wall behind the prisoners as being like the wall in the theatre which hides the puppeteers from the audience) or the prisoner being killed on return to the cave (Plato says only that a prisoner who returned might be killed). Make sure that you are familiar with what the text actually says, here as elsewhere.

Background material is important to your understanding, but be careful in the examination to refer only to points directly relevant to the question. Many examination candidates begin answers with lengthy accounts of the life of a philosopher, with no relevance to the question set, and for that they gain no marks.

## Summary diagram: Plato





**Revision advice**

The background to Plato is worth re-reading in order to give depth to your understanding of his ideas. Above all, he seems to have been driven to find certainty in a very uncertain world. Unable to find permanence in a shifting world, he sought it in the Realm of the Forms. Think about whether this is convincing or whether he makes too many unjustified or incompletely justified assertions in developing the idea of the Forms. How effective do you think that Aristotle and others have been in criticising Plato? Thinking about the issues in this way is helpful in learning to justify your own views of Plato – it is a critical engagement in the conversation, in line with the approach to philosophy outlined in Chapter 1. Think about whether Plato truly justifies his view, and think about whether we could ever have innate knowledge of the Forms.

Can you give brief definitions of:

- the Form of the Good
- the Forms
- the Realm of the Forms
- Plato's view of the knowledge

Can you explain:

- how Plato resolves the problems of constant change raised by Heraclitus
- how Plato uses the idea of proportion and ratios to develop his ideas
- the Simile of the Divided Line
- the Simile of the Cave?

Can you give arguments for and against:

- the Realm of the Forms
- the Form of the Good
- the idea that this world is not true reality
- Plato's treatment of knowledge and belief
- Plato's belief that only the philosopher has true knowledge?

**Sample question and guidance**

**'The Simile of the Cave tells us nothing about reality.' Discuss.**

This type of question is often asked in the examination, and it can be difficult for students who do not take a moment to think about the title. It does not ask you to describe every detail of the simile, but rather to think about the picture of reality Plato is trying to teach us through it. It is useful early in your essay to write about what Plato's intention is. Although he uses the simile to say something about political life, about knowledge, about education and about the death of Socrates, among other things, the quotation you are discussing picks out the claim that it is a guide to the real world, and, in particular, to the Form of the Good. It is this area which should be the focus of the essay.

The word 'Discuss' in the question is an instruction not to describe the simile, but to consider it. What reasons can be given – what reasons does Plato give – to support his view? What may be argued



against his ideas? What is your reasoned opinion on the matter? When you are asked to discuss something, it is hoped that you will weigh both sides of the question and present your own developed conclusion, explaining the factors which have led to your judgement. What matters is not what conclusion you reach but whether you have selected and developed good reasons for your conclusion. Some people try to dismiss Plato by saying that we are too modern to hold such a view. That is hardly a philosophical argument. The belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  predates Plato by centuries and probably millennia, but we do not dismiss the belief because it is so ancient. We must always engage with the idea in itself – there may be something valuable within it. If you think Plato is mistaken, then you need to demonstrate precisely why.

### Further essay questions:

To what extent can it be argued that education is about remembering, not learning?

How convincing is Plato's idea of the Form of the Good?

### Going further

The literature on Plato is vast with many sound introductory texts. Julia Annas: *Plato: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2003) can be recommended with confidence as a succinct and clear guide to major ideas.

Plato himself is very readable and it is very useful to look at any text of the *Republic*, especially Books VI and VII, where Plato sets out his vision, including his similes. Reading these should take no more than an hour. Aristotle's criticisms of Plato can be found in various places, notably in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In Book I, Chapter 6, he lists a series of objections. These take only a few minutes to read (two sides in the Penguin edition) and it will stimulate your own thought to read the criticisms and choose two or three which you think you could use effectively in your own essays. Making this kind of choice is the type of personal reflection which examiners expect.

You might find it helpful to read the first volume of Karl Popper: *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (various editions, Routledge), both for its interesting analysis and criticisms of Plato but also as a model of clear thinking and writing in philosophy.

For a view of Socrates as less than the heroic martyr and proponent of truth of popular myth, you might wish to entertain yourself with the much-read essay, *Socrates Had it Coming*, which may be found at <http://christian-identity.net/lindstedt/socrates.html> and elsewhere. It is brief, informative and provocative. It is also funny.