CHAPTER 3

THE IDEA OF FORM

Philosophy really came of age with Plato (427–347 B.C.). Here we encounter the first full-fledged philosophical *system.* By a philosophical system we mean a fundamental idea or theory that is worked out for all aspects of experience. Thus Plato's philosophy addresses everything from reality, to knowledge, to ethics, to art, to religion, to cosmology, and so on. So encompassing and magnificent is Plato's philosophy that Alfred North Whitehead called all subsequent philosophy a series of footnotes to it!

Plato, the first "systematic" philosopher

PLATO AND SOCRATES

Plato, who is sometimes called the finest writer of ancient Greece, expressed his philosophy in numerous "dialogues." In the earlier dialogues Plato develops the ideas of his teacher Socrates through portrayals of Socrates' discussions with his contemporaries, discussions that proceed by questions and answers. Socrates is usually represented as asking in one way or another, What is *X*? His respondent's answer is then subjected to a searching analysis that generates still more and better answers.

Platonic dialogues

A good example is the early dialogue *Euthyphro.* Here Socrates raises with Euthyphro the question "What is holiness?" The following excerpts show how Socrates deals with two of Euthyphro's answers. Notice the characteristic Socratic comment "Come, then, and let us scrutinize what we are saying," and the final bewilderment of the hapless Euthyphro, who complains that nothing seems to stay put. Incidentally, Socrates' question "Is

what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?" is one of the most famous in the history of philosophy. If you agree with the first, then God's will seems to be arbitrary; if you agree with the second, then God's will seems to be determined by something beyond God himself.

> SOCRATES: At present try to tell me more clearly what I asked you a little while ago, for, my friend, you were not explicit enough before when I put the question. What is holiness? . . .
>
> EUTHYPHRO: Well, then, what is pleasing to the gods is holy, and what is not pleasing to them is unholy.
>
> SOCRATES: Perfect, Euthyphro! Now you give me just the answer that I asked for. Meanwhile whether it is right I do not know, but obviously you will go on to prove your statement true.
>
> EUTHYPHRO: Indeed, I will.
>
> SOCRATES: Come, now, and let us scrutinize what we are saying. What is pleasing to the gods, and the man that pleases them, are holy; what is hateful to the gods, and the man they hate, unholy. But the holy and unholy are not the same; the holy is directly opposite to the unholy. Isn't it so?
>
> EUTHYPHRO: It is.
>
> SOCRATES: And the matter clearly was well stated.
>
> EUTHYPHRO: I accept it, Socrates; that was stated.
>
> SOCRATES: Was it not also stated, Euthyphro, that the gods revolt and differ with each other, and that hatreds come between them?
>
> EUTHYPHRO: That was stated.
>
> SOCRATES: Hatred and wrath, my friend—what kind of disagreement will produce them? Look at the matter thus. If you and I were to differ about numbers, on the question which of two was the greater, would a disagreement about that make us angry at each other, and make enemies of us? Should we not settle things by calculation, and so come to an agreement quickly on any point like that?
>
> EUTHYPHRO: Yes, certainly.
>
> SOCRATES: And similarly if we differed on a question of greater length or less, we would take a measurement and quickly put an end to the dispute?
>
> EUTHYPHRO: Just that.
>
> SOCRATES: And so, I fancy, we should have recourse to scales, and settle any question about a heavier or lighter weight?
>
> EUTHYPHRO: Of course.
>
> SOCRATES: What sort of thing, then, is it about which we differ, till, unable to arrive at a decision, we might get angry and be enemies to one another? Perhaps you have no answer ready, but listen to me. See if it is not the following—right and wrong, the noble and base, and good and bad. Are

not these the things about which we differ, till, unable to arrive at a decision, we grow hostile, when we do grow hostile, to each other, you and I and everybody else?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, Socrates, that is where we differ, on these subjects.

SOCRATES: What about the gods, then, Euthyphro? If, indeed, they have dissensions, must it not be on these subjects?

EUTHYPHRO: Quite necessarily.

SOCRATES: Accordingly, my noble Euthyphro, by your account some gods take one thing to be right, and others take another, and similarly with honorable and the base, and good and bad. They would hardly be at variance with each other, if they did not differ on these questions. Would they?

EUTHYPHRO: You are right.

SOCRATES: And what each one of them thinks noble, good, and just, is what he loves, and the opposite is what he hates?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes, certainly.

SOCRATES: But it is the same things, so you say, that some of them think right, and others wrong, and through disputing about these they are at variance, and make war on one another. Isn't it so?

EUTHYPHRO: It is.

SOCRATES: Accordingly, so it would seem, the same things will be hated by the gods and loved by them; the same things would alike displease and please them.

EUTHYPHRO: It would seem so.

SOCRATES: And so, according to this argument, the same things, Euthyphro, will be holy and unholy.

EUTHYPHRO: That may be.

SOCRATES: In that case, admirable friend, you have not answered what I asked you. I did not ask you to tell me what at once is holy and unholy, but it seems that what is pleasing to the gods is also hateful to them. . . .

Euthyphro then regroups his thoughts and advances another definition: Holiness is what is loved by all the gods.

SOCRATES: Then what are we to say about the holy, Euthyphro? According to your argument, is it not loved by all the gods?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Because it is holy, or for some other reason?

EUTHYPHRO: No, it is for that reason.

SOCRATES: And so it is because it is holy that it is loved; it is not holy because it is loved.

EUTHYPHRO: So it seems.

SOCRATES: On the other hand, it is beloved and pleasing to the gods just because they love it?

EUTHYPHRO: No doubt of that.

SOCRATES: So what is pleasing to the gods is not the same as what is holy, Euthyphro, nor, according to your statement, is the holy the same as what is pleasing to the gods. They are two different things.

EUTHYPHRO: How may that be, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Because we are agreed that the holy is loved because it is holy, and is not holy because it is loved. Isn't it so?

EUTHYPHRO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Whereas what is pleasing to the gods is pleasing to them just because they love it, such being its nature and its cause. Its being loved of the gods is not the reason of its being loved.

EUTHYPHRO: You are right.

SOCRATES: But suppose, dear Euthyphro, that what is pleasing to the gods and what is holy were not two separate things. In that case if holiness were loved because it was holy, then also what was pleasing to the gods would be loved because it pleased them. And, on the other hand, if what was pleasing to them pleased because they loved it, then also the holy would be holy because they loved it. But now you see that it is just the opposite, because the two are absolutely different from each other, for the one [what is pleasing to the gods] is loved because it is of a sort to be loved. Consequently, Euthyphro, it looks as if you had not given me my answer—as if when you were asked to tell the nature of the holy, you did not wish to explain the essence of it. You merely tell an attribute of it, namely, that it appertains to holiness to be loved by all the gods. What it is, as yet you have not said. So, if you please, do not conceal this from me. No, begin again. Say what the holy is, and never mind if gods do love it, nor if it has some other attribute; on that we shall not split. Come, speak out. Explain the nature of the holy and unholy.

EUTHYPHRO: Now, Socrates, I simply don't know how to tell you what I think. Somehow everything that we put forward keeps moving about us in a circle, and nothing will stay where we put it.[1]

The Socratic Problem

In the dialogues, which were composed over many years, Plato gradually introduced his own (and more developed) ideas in place of those of the historical Socrates, though he continued to employ Socrates as the mouthpiece of these ideas. It is, of course, a problem to know where the real Socrates leaves off and Plato's own ideas begin. This is called the Socratic Problem. For the purpose of our discussion here we will not concern ourselves with this problem and will simply speak of the philosophy embodied in the dialogues as Plato's philosophy.

[1]Plato, *Euthyphro,* 6D, 7A–8B, 10D–11B, in *On the Trial and Death of Socrates*, tr. Lane Cooper (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1941).

PLATONIC DIALOGUE

"Plato presented philosophy in an entirely spontaneous form, not as ponderous treatises but in dramatic dialogues between friends, in which Socrates figured as the presiding genius. He invented the form to make his concepts intelligible to the layman, and never was philosophy graced with more beauty; this first attempt to humanize knowledge was warm, personal, fresh, and frequently humorous, an intoxicating mixture of poetry and hard thought."

Felix Marti-Ibanez, *Tales of Philosophy* (New York: Potter, 1964), p. 31.

THE TWO WORLDS: APPEARANCE AND REALITY

The two-layer view of reality

Many philosophers have found it necessary to conceive of reality in two spheres or levels: what *appears* to be real, and what *is* real. Already in the beginning stages of the history of philosophy Plato introduced this two-layer view of reality. For Plato, too, it is the difference between Appearance and Reality, though he expressed it also by means of the terms *Becoming* and *Being*. With such talk Plato affirms his conviction that in addition to the ever-changing world around us (Becoming), there is another world, an eternal and unchanging reality (Being). Why would one believe in an *additional* world such as this?

Plato had many reasons for believing in a transcendent world—that is, a reality lying beyond space and time. We will limit ourselves to two of these reasons, but perhaps the two most important.

First, Plato's view of reality is a reaction to that of his predecessor, Protagoras. Protagoras, a Sophist[2] who was active in about 425 B.C., was responsible for one of the most famous lines ever uttered: "Man is the measure of all things." His meaning is clear from a more accurate and complete quotation:

> A man is the measure of all things; of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.[3]

Protagoras: "A man is the measure of all things"

This means that the individual—each and every person—is the criterion unto himself or herself as to what exists and what doesn't. The thought was expanded, of course, to include truth and morality. Whatever you perceive as true or false *is* true or false, and whatever you think is good or bad *is* good or

[2]The Sophists (literally, "wise men") were the first to teach wisdom for a fee, something that irked Socrates. Actually, the Sophists may not have been as wise as they were clever with words, and they were accused of "making the stronger argument appear to be the weaker, and the weaker argument appear to be the stronger." But in the days of Athenian democracy, when an individual was required to defend himself in the law courts, the Sophists' "wisdom" was, understandably, much in demand!

[3]Protagoras, *Fragment 1*, tr. Ed. L. Miller.

bad. This is known as relativism or subjectivism because it makes the most important things *relative* to and dependent upon the individual (or community, society, etc.), or because it asserts that the subject (an individual, community, society, etc.) is the source and standard of being, truth, and goodness.

For Plato (and for most philosophers since) it was absurd to say that being, truth, and morality are "up for grabs" and can be or mean whatever an individual wishes! This would mean the immediate collapse of not only all serious talk about what's real and unreal, and what's true and false, but also all talk about moral responsibility, praise, blame, punishment, and so on. No, says Plato. Our understanding of being, truth, and goodness must—if it is to be really meaningful—be anchored in some *objective* (that is, it exists outside of our own minds), *independent* (it is not dependent on anything else for its existence), and *absolute* (it does not come or go or otherwise change) Reality. There must then exist above our minds and beyond this world another world, a world of Reality (Being).

Plato's rejection of subjectivism

Second, Plato's view of reality is a reaction to still another of his predecessors, the Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. Heraclitus went about saying things like, "The sun is new every day" and "We are and we are not." These are ways in which Heraclitus expressed his view—a very famous view—that everything is constantly changing, nothing stands still for a moment, the world and everything in it are in a ceaseless movement, activity, coming and going, ebbing and flowing. In fact, "All things flow" caught on as a Heraclitean slogan, and Heraclitus himself appears to have likened the fluctuating universe to a river: "You can't step twice into the same river." The idea is that by the time you have put a foot into the water, different water is flowing there.

Heraclitus: "All things flow"

What did this colorful and dynamic view of the world have to do with the development of Plato's conception of reality? Just as Protagoras' relativism, says Plato, leads to impossible conclusions, so does Heraclitus' doctrine of flux: If all reality is constantly changing, then all discourse is impossible, and the same is true for knowledge itself. Why is this? For the answer, read on.

Plato inherited from still another Pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides, the idea that genuine knowledge and discourse must be about what *is*, not what *is not*—after all, you can't think about, talk about, or have any knowledge of

TRANSCENDENT REALITY

. . . in philosophy usually means reality that transcends or lies beyond *space* and *time.* Thus God, as represented in classical theology, is a transcendent being, and true Reality, for Plato, is transcendent. Can you imagine a transcendent being in the sense of forming a mental image? The answer is No, for images are bound by spatiotemporal conditions, such as size, color, shape, motion, and the like. Can you *conceive* of a transcendent being? The answer is Yes, if by that you mean that you can have an idea or concept of that being. Thus you cannot *imagine* God, though you may have an *idea* of him.

HOW TO AVOID PAYING YOUR DEBTS

It appears that the playwright Epicharmus, a contemporary of Heraclitus, spoofed Heraclitus' doctrine of the ever-changing nature of things: You will have difficulty making me pay back money I borrowed from you because everything changes and I am no longer the one who borrowed it!

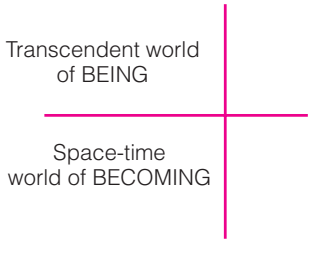
what *isn't*, can you? (The word "nothing" does not denote something, but rather the negation or absence of something.) Furthermore, what *is* (Being) must be *one* and *unchanging*. Do you see why Being must be one and unchanging? Do not multiplicity and change involve difference, absence, relativity, and degrees? And do not these in turn involve various sorts of nonbeing? Now since a thing cannot both be and not be (the Law of Non-Contradiction), it is *logically* impossible that what *is* could also be what *is not*. How then could that which *is* involve multiplicity and change? True Being is therefore one and unchanging. And only this can be an object of knowledge and discourse.

The implications of Heraclitean flux

Now consider again Heraclitus' world of flux. What is it that you refer to when you comment on that table over there in the corner? "Why," you say, "just that table over there in the corner." But in the Heraclitean view there *is* no table over there in the corner: By the time you say "that table" it is no longer *that* table but has already become a *different* table. Likewise for everything in the Heraclitean world of flux. If then, says Plato, knowledge and talk about tables, chairs, dogs, cats, justice, and anything else are about anything *real*, it must be because there is more to reality than the sensible world of multiplicity and change. There must be a world of *Being* in addition to the world of *Becoming*.

In his dialogue *Timaeus*, Plato himself poses the distinction between the two worlds, the worlds of Being and Becoming, and the corresponding difference between knowledge and opinion, as clearly as one could hope for:

> . . . we must make a distinction and ask, What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state, but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is.[4]



[4]Plato, *Timaeus*, 27D–28A, tr. Benjamin Jowett, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*.

The same distinction is strikingly posed in the *Republic,* where Plato clearly represents the world of Becoming as a "twilight" zone or "half-way region" between reality and unreality:

> . . . we have discovered that the many conventional notions of the mass of mankind about what is beautiful or honourable or just and so on are adrift in a sort of twilight between pure reality and pure unreality.
>
> We have.
>
> And we agreed earlier that, if any such object were discovered, it should be called the object of belief and not of knowledge. Fluctuating in that halfway region, it would be seized upon by the intermediate faculty.
>
> Yes.
>
> So when people have an eye for the multitude of beautiful things or of just actions or whatever it may be, but can neither behold Beauty or Justice itself nor follow a guide who would lead them to it, we shall say that all they have is beliefs, without any real knowledge of the objects of their belief.
>
> That follows.
>
> But what of those who contemplate the realities themselves as they are for ever in the same unchanging state? Shall we not say that they have, not mere belief, but knowledge?
>
> That too follows.
>
> And, further, that their affection goes out to the objects of knowledge, whereas the others set their affections on the objects of belief; for it was they, you remember, who had a passion for the spectacle of beautiful colours and sounds, but would not hear of Beauty itself being a real thing.
>
> I remember.
>
> So we may fairly call them lovers of belief rather than of wisdom—not philosophical, in fact, but philodoxical. Will they be seriously annoyed by that description?
>
> Not if they will listen to my advice. No one ought to take offence at the truth.
>
> The name of philosopher, then, will be reserved for those whose affections are set, in every case, on the reality.
>
> By all means.[5]

THE THEORY OF THE FORMS

Grasping the distinction between the two worlds is the first step toward an understanding of Plato's theory of reality. The next step is to grasp that for Plato the transcendent world, the world of Being, is populated by realities called Forms, which are the causes of the particular things that exist beneath them, like tables, chairs, dogs, cats, circles, human beings, instances of beauty, examples of justice, and so on for every different kind of thing there is.

We are ready, then, to consider Plato's *theory of the Forms*—at least that is what it is usually called. It is also sometimes called the *theory of Ideas*. But here we must be on guard not to confuse *these* Ideas (capital *I*) with

[5]Plato, *The Republic,* 479D–480A, tr. Francis MacDonald Cornford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

PLATO

Plato was born in Athens in 427 B.C. According to one tradition he was originally named Aristocles but came to be called Plato (from the Greek *platus,* "wide") because of his broad shoulders. He came from an aristocratic family and no doubt received a very cultured education. He was at first bent on a career in politics, but was soon captivated by Socrates and his philosophy, and the fate of Socrates at the hands of the Athenian democracy (he was present at Socrates' trial) further sealed Plato's revulsion at such politics. From Socrates Plato learned to fix his attention not on the fluctuating objects of sense experience, but on the fixed and abiding *essence* of things as the only possible objects of true knowledge.

When he was about 40, Plato visited Italy, possibly to engage the Pythagoreans there and to see the volcanoes. In Italy he became friends with Dion, the brother-in-law of Dionysus I, tyrant of Syracuse. Dionysus I, however, disliked Plato and had him sold as a slave. He was recognized by an acquaintance, who ransomed him and had him sent back to Athens. There, in 388 B.C., he founded his school, the Academy, sometimes called the first European university. At the Academy Plato produced many elegant dialogues and lectured on many different topics (the lectures are lost), including rhetoric, biology, mathematics, astronomy, and, of course, philosophy—the pursuit of the highest reality and truth. Plato was intensely interested in political philosophy, and it was his desire to experiment with his ideal of the Philosopher-King that led him to return to Syracuse, where Dionysus I had been succeeded by his nephew, Dionysus II. Intrigues within the court spoiled Plato's philosophical education of Dionysus II, and the project was a failure.

Plato presided over the Academy until his death in 347 B.C. In the meantime, however, a pupil had matriculated at the Academy by the name of Aristotle.

Plato is universally regarded as one of the finest writers of Greek literature. His numerous and polished dialogues include the *Apology, Euthyphro, Phaedo, Phaedrus, Meno, Republic, Symposium, Theaetetus, Sophist, Timaeus, Statesman,* and *Laws*.

Forms of Ideas

the ideas (lowercase *i*) that exist merely in our minds. We will see that while our ideas have no existence apart from our minds, the Platonic Ideas exist objectively and absolutely: They would exist even if everything else were to disappear. In any case, it is useful to employ capital *F* and *I* to remind us of the unique status of the Platonic Forms and Ideas.

Why the word "Form"?

Why the word "Form"? It translates the Greek word *eidos,* which does, in fact, mean "form" in the ordinary, usual sense: shape, structure, appearance. As will shortly be seen, Plato certainly does *not* mean something visible. Still, it is easy to see why Plato took over this word for his own purpose. After all, a Platonic Form does have everything to do with what a thing *is,* and thus even with its physical structure, shape, or appearance. But if it helps, there are many expressions one could substitute for the word "Form": essence, nature, essential structure, object of a definition, and so on. Again, they all designate what a thing *is,* its "whatness."

It may be helpful, further, to outline the main features of Forms. They may be characterized as

Six features of Forms

- *Objective.* They exist "out there" as objects, independently of our minds or wills.
- *Transcendent.* Though they exist "out there," they do not exist in space and time; they lie, as it were, above or beyond space and time.
- *Eternal.* As transcendent realities they are not subject to time and therefore not subject to motion or change.
- *Intelligible.* As transcendent realities they cannot be grasped by the senses but only by the intellect.
- *Archetypal.* They are the models for every kind of thing that does or could exist.
- *Perfect.* They include absolutely and perfectly all the features of the things of which they are the models.

The theory of the Forms

Perhaps now we are ready for a more explicit statement of the theory of the Forms: It is the belief in a transcendent world of eternal and absolute beings, corresponding to every kind of thing that there is, and causing in particular things their essential nature.

More generally, for every particular and imperfect thing in the world of Becoming (a table, a chair, an instance of justice, an example of beauty, a circle) there is a corresponding reality that is its absolute and perfect essence or Form in the world of Being (Table, Chair, Justice, Beauty, Circle). The particular and imperfect thing, though imperfect, is what it is by virtue of its corresponding Form, which imparts to it, or causes in it, its essence or general nature. Because something has an essence or general nature it is an imperfect *something.* On the other hand, it is an *imperfect* something because, while it reflects being from above, it is invaded and contaminated by nonbeing from below: The changeless is set in motion, the one is multiplied into many, the absolute is relativized, the universal is particularized.

THE THEORY OF THE FORMS

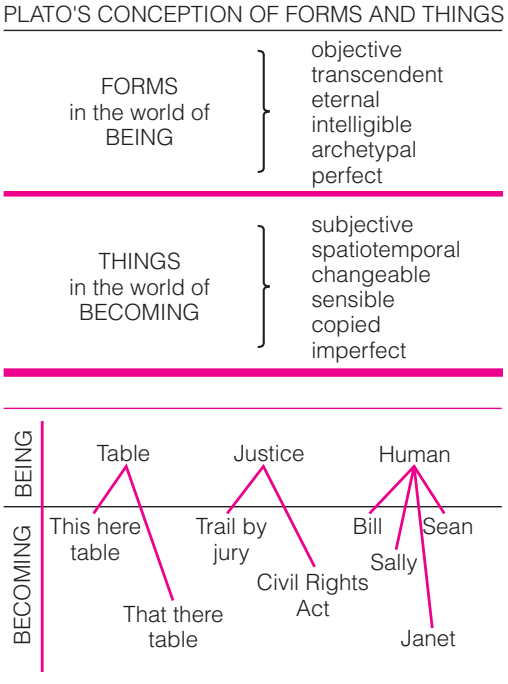
. . . lies at the center of the whole Platonic philosophy. It portrays every changing, multiple, imperfect thing of a certain kind in the sensible world (a Many) as caused by an eternal and ideal essence, or Form, in the transcendent world (a One). It is Plato's resolution to the ancient problem of the One and the Many, which we encountered at the beginning of Chapter 2.

In view of all of this, the following passage from Plato's *Euthyphro* should make a lot of sense. Here Socrates has asked Euthyphro about the meaning of holiness. Euthyphro responded with examples of holiness.

> SOCRATES: . . . try to tell me more clearly what I asked you a little while ago, for, my friend, you were not explicit enough before when I put the question. What is holiness? You merely said that what you are now doing is a holy deed—namely, prosecuting your father on a charge of murder.
>
> EUTHYPHRO: And, Socrates, I told the truth.
>
> SOCRATES: Possibly. But, Euthyphro, there are many other things that you will say are holy.
>
> EUTHYPHRO: Because they are.
>
> SOCRATES: Well, bear in mind that what I asked of you was not to tell me one or two out of all the numerous actions that are holy; I wanted you to tell me what is the essential form of holiness which makes all holy actions holy. I believe you held that there is one ideal form by which unholy things are all unholy, and by which all holy things are holy. Do you remember that?
>
> EUTHYPHRO: I do.
>
> SOCRATES: Well then, show me what, precisely, this ideal is, so that, with my eye on it, and using it as a standard, I can say that any action done by you or anybody else is holy if it resembles this idea, or, if it does not, can deny that it is holy.[6]

This brief passage expresses or embodies many of the things we have just explained. Notice for example, (1) Plato's use of words or phrases like "essential form" and "ideal" for the essence in the world of Being; (2) the contrast between the *one* essence in the world of Being (in this case Holiness) and the *many* instances of it in the world of Becoming (numerous holy acts); (3) the way in which the Form is said to be the cause of its many sensible

[6]Plato, *Euthyphro,* 6C–E.



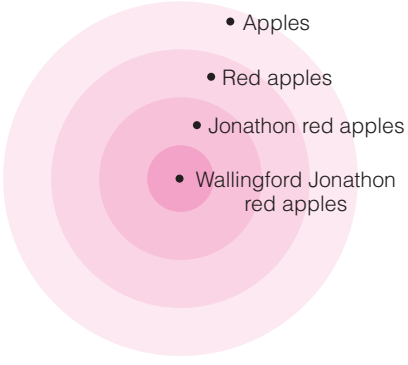
instances; (4) the Form referred to as a standard for judgment; and (5) the way in which the particular instance is said to resemble the model.

The relation of forms to particular things

This last point leads us further. We have said above that particular things have a nature or essence because they stand in some sort of relation to their Forms. But what, exactly, is this relation? How does the Form impart essence to the particular thing? This is a troublesome question, and Plato seems to have been bothered by it, though he never resolved it. Until now, we have been representing the Form as the model, and the sensible instance of the Form as a copy or imitation of it. This is the most common way of representing Plato's theory at this point. But Plato actually resorts to *two* explanations (really, *metaphors*) of how the Form gives essence to particular things. Sometimes, as in the above passage in the *Euthyphro,* he talks as if sensible things are *copies* or *imitations* of the Forms, and at other times he talks of a *participation* of the sensible thing in its Form. Thus a table is a table because it imperfectly reflects or is an imperfect copy of its pattern or model, the Form Tableness, or it is a table because it participates in the Form Tableness. The following passage from the *Phaedo* is useful not only because it makes explicit (though ambiguous) reference to a Form's relation to its sensible instances—he speaks of the Form's "presence in it or association with it"—but also because it shows that Plato did not concern himself with a rigorous explanation of this point:

> It seems to me that whatever else is beautiful apart from absolute beauty is beautiful because it partakes of that absolute beauty, and for no other reason. Do you accept this kind of causality?

SPECIFICITY
AMONG FORMS



> Yes, I do.
>
> Well, now, that is as far as my mind goes; I cannot understand these other ingenious theories of causation. If someone tells me that the reason why a given object is beautiful is that it has a gorgeous color or shape or any other such attribute, I disregard all these other explanations—I find them all confusing—and I cling simply and straightforwardly and no doubt foolishly to the explanation that the one thing that makes that object beautiful is the presence in it or association with it, in whatever way the relation comes about, of absolute beauty. I do not go so far as to insist upon the precise details—only upon the fact that it is by beauty that beautiful things are beautiful. This, I feel, is the safest answer for me or for anyone else to give, and I believe that while I hold fast to this I cannot fall; it is safe for me or for anyone else to answer that it is by beauty that beautiful things are beautiful. Don't you agree?[7]

We will see later that Plato's failure to be precise on the nature of the Form's relation to the particular is exactly what Aristotle seized as the Achilles' heel of Plato's whole theory.

The "blending" of Forms

Another important matter: Things can participate in more than one Form. This can happen in two ways. *First*, Forms themselves "blend" with one another, so that by imitating or participating in one Form, a thing may actually be sharing in many Forms. Is this not necessary, since the Forms of both *X* and *Y* may hold some essential feature in common? For example, if it is the essence of trees, dogs, cats, and humans to live, then however their Forms may otherwise differ, they must at least all blend with the Form Life; if apples, cherries, bananas, and oranges are all by nature sweet, then whatever else each of their Forms involves, they must all encompass Sweetness. Plato does not, however, believe that blending can go on forever as if we could just keep throwing in new ingredients to explain more and more specialized kinds of things. There must be a last, most specific definition in order to account for the ultimate difference of things.

[7]Plato, *Phaedo*, 100C–E, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, tr. Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1954).

Accidental features

But what about a feature that is not properly part of a thing's essence? Ink does not have to be blue in order to be ink, does it? This brings us to the *second* way things can imitate or participate in more than one Form. The Form Ink involves whatever it means to be *ink,* including having color. Now if this happens to be blue, then in addition to imitating or participating in the essential Form of Ink, including color, this ink must also participate in the Form Blue. Ask yourself: Is a certain feature of a thing part of that thing's very essence? If so, then that feature is one of the Forms that blend to make up the Form of that thing. If not, then that thing participates in this particular feature or Form accidentally or "on its own," as it were.

DEGREES OF REALITY AND KNOWLEDGE

So far we have been speaking as if Plato distinguished between two layers or levels of reality: *Being* and *Becoming,* Forms and their sensible copies. But Plato's theory of reality is somewhat more complicated than that. Here his famous image of the Divided Line, from the *Republic,* is helpful—Plato must have known that a picture is worth a thousand words.

The Divided Line

> . . . take a line divided into two unequal parts, one to represent the visible order, the other the intelligible; and divide each part again in the same proportion, symbolizing degrees of comparative clearness or obscurity. Then (*A*) one of the two sections in the visible world will stand for images. By images I mean first shadows, and then reflections in water or in close-grained, polished surfaces, and everything of that kind, if you understand.
>
> Yes, I understand.
>
> Let the second section (*B*) stand for the actual things of which the first are likenesses, the living creatures about us and all the works of nature or of human hands.
>
> So be it.
>
> Will you also take the proportion in which the visible world has been divided as corresponding to degrees of reality and truth, so that the likeness shall stand to the original in the same ratio as the sphere of appearances and belief to the sphere of knowledge?
>
> Certainly.
>
> Now consider how we are to divide the part which stands for the intelligible world. There are two sections. In the first (*C*) the mind uses as images those actual things which themselves had images in the visible world; and it is compelled to pursue its inquiry by starting from assumptions and travelling, not up to a principle, but down to a conclusion. In the second (*D*) the mind moves in the other direction, from an assumption up towards a principle which is not hypothetical; and it makes no use of the images employed in the other section, but only of Forms, and conducts its inquiry solely by their means.
>
> I don't quite understand what you mean.
>
> Then we will try again; what I have just said will help you to understand. (*C*) You know, of course, how students of subjects like geometry and arithmetic begin by postulating odd and even numbers, or the various figures and the three kinds of angle, and other such data in each subject. These data they take as known;

and, having adopted them as assumptions, they do not feel called upon to give any account of them to themselves or to anyone else, but treat them as self-evident. Then, starting from these assumptions, they go on until they arrive, by a series of consistent steps, at all the conclusions they set out to investigate.

Yes, I know that.

You also know how they make use of visible figures and discourse about them, though what they really have in mind is the originals of which these figures are images: they are not reasoning, for instance, about this particular square and diagonal which they have drawn, but about *the* Square and *the* Diagonal; and so in all cases. The diagrams they draw and the models they make are actual things, which may have their shadows or images in water; but now they serve in their turn as images, while the student is seeking to behold those realities which only thought can apprehend.

True.

This, then, is the class of things that I spoke of as intelligible, but with two qualifications: first, that the mind, in studying them, is compelled to employ assumptions, and, because it cannot rise above these, does not travel upwards to a first principle; and second, that it uses as images those actual things which have images of their own in the section below them and which, in comparison with those shadows and reflections, are reputed to be more palpable and valued accordingly.

I understand: you mean the subject-matter of geometry and of the kindred arts.

(*D*) Then by the second section of the intelligible world you may understand me to mean all that unaided reasoning apprehends by the power of dialectic, when it treats its assumptions, not as first principles, but as *hypotheses* in the literal sense, things "laid down" like a flight of steps up which it may mount all the way to something that is not hypothetical, the first principle of all; and having grasped this, may turn back and, holding on to the consequences which depend upon it, descend at last to a conclusion, never making use of any sensible object, but only of Forms, moving through Forms from one to another, and ending with Forms.

I understand, he said, though not perfectly; for the procedure you describe sounds like an enormous undertaking. But I see that you mean to distinguish the field of intelligible reality studied by dialectic as having a greater certainty and truth than the subject-matter of the "arts," as they are called, which treat their assumptions as first principles. The students of these arts are, it is true, compelled to exercise thought in contemplating objects which the senses cannot perceive; but because they start from assumptions without going back to a first principle, you do not regard them as gaining true understanding about those objects, although the objects themselves, when connected with a first principle, are intelligible. And I think you would call the state of mind of the students of geometry and other such arts, not intelligence, but thinking, as being something between intelligence and mere acceptance of appearances.

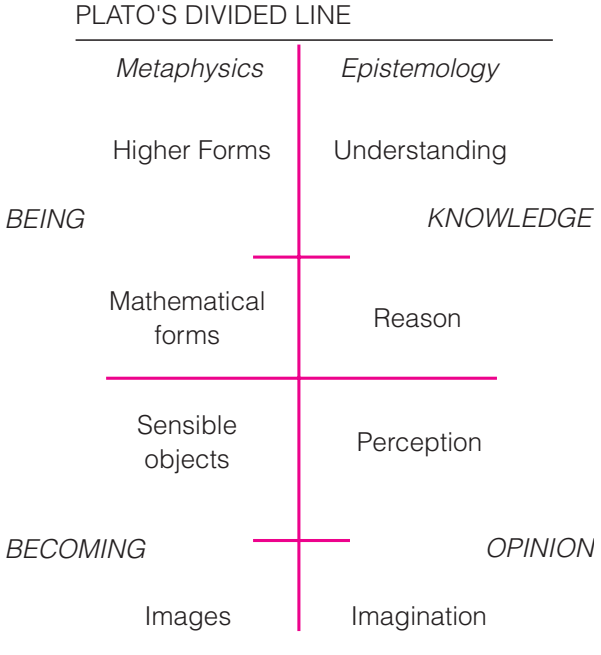
You have understood me quite well enough, I replied. And now you may take, as corresponding to the four sections, these four states of mind: *intelligence* for the highest, *thinking* for the second, *belief* for the third, and for the last *imagining*. These you may arrange as the terms in a proportion, assigning to each a degree of clearness and certainty corresponding to the measure in which their objects possess truth and reality.

I understand and agree with you. I will arrange them as you say.[8]

[8]Plato, *The Republic,* 509D–511E.

There is no end to what could be said about Plato's philosophy on the basis of the Line. Here we will summarize the most important points.

To begin with, note that the Line is not divided into equal parts but *unequal* parts, and likewise the bottom and top segments of the Line are divided in the same ratio. This is Plato's way of suggesting that as we proceed from the bottom to the top of the Line we attain greater and greater degrees of reality and certainty. The first and major division of the Line represents, obviously, the distinction between the world of Being and the world of Becoming. By now we are certainly familiar with this distinction. But now each of the resulting lines, below and above, is in turn divided. This results in a sort of ladder of reality (on the metaphysical side of the Line) and a ladder of knowledge (on the epistemological side). The ladder of reality extends from mere images of sensible things (reflections in pools of water, photographs, paintings, memories, etc.) to the sensible things themselves (actual tables, chairs, humans, instances of justice or beauty, etc.), to the Forms that these sensible things copy. If the Form or essence includes a specific and concrete physical embodiment (Table, Circle, Human), then the Form is a "lower Form"; if the Form has no specific and concrete physical embodiment (Justice, Beauty), then it is a "higher Form." Corresponding to this ladder of reality is the ladder of knowledge. This extends from mere imagination (which grasps images) to perception (which grasps actual sensible things) to reason (which is a rational and deductive way of grasping the lower Forms) to understanding (which grasps the higher Forms in a direct and intuitive way).



But there is more. It turns out that there is something above even the Forms themselves, something we must situate at the very top of the Line. In the *Republic* Plato calls it the "essential Form of the Good." Why must we believe in something even above the Forms, a sort of Form of the Forms? The answer is this: Just as the many images—say, in a pool of water—must derive their relative being from some one thing above them, like an actual table, and actual tables must derive their relative being from some one thing above *them,* the Form Table, so must the Forms (both lower and higher) derive *their* being from a source that is above *them:* the Form of the Good. And just as it is above all realities and is their ultimate source, so it is above all knowledge and is its ultimate source. Of course, in order to be the *source* of being and knowledge, it itself cannot be *a* being or *a* thing known. That is why Plato says of the Good that it is *beyond being and knowledge.*

The Good: Form of the Forms

In a well-known analogy, Plato likens the essential Form of Goodness to the sun. The Good is to the intelligible world, or the world of Being, as the sun is to the visible world, or the world of Becoming:

The Analogy of the Sun

> First we must come to an understanding. Let me remind you of the distinction we drew earlier and have often drawn on other occasions, between the multiplicity of things that we call good or beautiful or whatever it may be and, on the other hand, Goodness itself or Beauty itself and so on. Corresponding to each of these sets of many things, we postulate a single Form or real essence, as we call it.
>
> Yes, that is so.
>
> Further, the many things, we say, can be seen, but are not objects of rational thought; whereas the Forms are objects of thought, but invisible.
>
> Yes, certainly.
>
> And we see things with our eyesight, just as we hear sounds with our ears and, to speak generally, perceive any sensible things with our sense-faculties.
>
> Of course.
>
> Have you noticed, then, that the artificer who designed the senses has been exceptionally lavish of his materials in making the eyes able to see and their objects visible?
>
> That never occurred to me.
>
> Well, look at it in this way. Hearing and sound do not stand in need of any third thing, without which the ear will not hear nor sound be heard; and I think the same is true of most, not to say all, of the other senses. Can you think of one that does require anything of the sort?
>
> No, I cannot.
>
> But there is this need in the case of sight and its objects. You may have the power of vision in your eyes and try to use it, and colour may be there in the objects; but sight will see nothing and the colours will remain invisible in the absence of a third thing peculiarly constituted to serve this very purpose.
>
> By which you mean—?
>
> Naturally I mean what you call light; and if light is a thing of value, the sense of sight and the power of being visible are linked together by a very precious bond, such as unites no other sense with its object.

No one could say that light is not a precious thing.

And of all the divinities in the skies is there one whose light, above all the rest, is responsible for making our eyes see perfectly and making objects perfectly visible?

There can be no two opinions: of course you mean the Sun.

And how is sight related to this deity? Neither sight nor the eye which contains it is the Sun, but of all the sense-organs it is the most sun-like; and further, the power it possesses is dispensed by the Sun, like a stream flooding the eye. And again, the Sun is not vision, but it is the cause of vision and also is seen by the vision it causes.

Yes.

It was the Sun, then, that I meant when I spoke of that offspring which the Good has created in the visible world, to stand there in the same relation to vision and visible things as that which the Good itself bears in the intelligible world to intelligence and to intelligible objects.

How is that? You must explain further.

You know what happens when the colours of things are no longer irradiated by the daylight, but only by the fainter luminaries of the night: when you look at them, the eyes are dim and seem almost blind, as if there were no unclouded vision in them. But when you look at things on which the Sun is shining, the same eyes see distinctly and it becomes evident that they do contain the power of vision.

Certainly.

Apply this comparison, then, to the soul. When its gaze is fixed upon an object irradiated by truth and reality, the soul gains understanding and knowledge and is manifestly in possession of intelligence. But when it looks towards that twilight world of things that come into existence and pass away, its sight is dim and it has only opinions and beliefs which shift to and fro, and now it seems like a thing that has no intelligence.

That is true.

This, then, which gives to the objects of knowledge their truth and to him who knows them his power of knowing, is the Form or essential nature of Goodness. It is the cause of knowledge and truth; and so, while you may think of it as an object of knowledge, you will do well to regard it as something beyond truth and knowledge and, precious as these both are, of still higher worth. And, just as in our analogy light and vision were to be thought of as like the Sun, but not identical with it, so here both knowledge and truth are to be regarded as like the Good, but to identify either with the Good is wrong. The Good must hold a yet higher place of honour.

You are giving it a position of extraordinary splendour, if it is the source of knowledge and truth and itself surpasses them in worth. You surely cannot mean that it is pleasure.

Heaven forbid, I exclaimed. But I want to follow up our analogy still further. You will agree that the Sun not only makes the things we see visible, but also brings them into existence and gives them growth and nourishment; yet he is not the same thing as existence. And so with the objects of knowledge: these derive from the Good not only their power of being known, but their very being and reality; and Goodness is not the same thing as being, but even beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power.[9]

[9]Plato, *The Republic,* 507A–509B.

It may be useful to spell out exactly the various elements in the analogy: The sun is analogous to the Form of the Good; the visible world is analogous to the intelligible world (the world of Forms); Light is analogous to Truth; the objects of sight are analogous to the objects of knowledge (the Forms); and sight is analogous to knowledge. Or perhaps a more visual summary will help.[10]

SUN		GOOD
in		in
VISIBLE WORLD		INTELLIGIBLE WORLD
by its		by its
LIGHT	Analogous to	TRUTH
cause of		cause of
SIGHT		KNOWLEDGE
and existence of objects of sight		and existence of objects of knowledge (Forms)

The two main points of the analogy are: *First*, just as the sun lights up the world and makes physical objects visible to our eyes, so does the Good illuminate intelligible objects (Forms) and render them knowable by the mind. *Second*, and closely related, just as the sun actually causes things in the world to exist and sustains them—without the light of the sun, the world would wither away—so does the Good cause in the Forms their very being and truth.

In Plato's theory of reality, the Good is, then, the ultimate principle of reality and truth. Any degree or instance of being, truth, unity, harmony, beauty, or intelligibility found anywhere, either in the world of Becoming or in the world of Being, is traceable finally to the Good. This is, some would say, the closest thing in Plato to traditional conceptions of God, both Western and Eastern.

The Good is also the ultimate object of the soul's progress. And now we are ready for the Allegory of the Cave, one of the most famous passages in all literature. In this allegory Plato asks us to picture men imprisoned in an underground cavern who mistake the shadowy figures and echoes reflected on the wall facing them for reality. But how deluded they are! It is only by forcing them (and that is what it would take to dislodge them from their comfortable and familiar setting) out of the cave and into the upper world that, though temporarily dazzled and blinded by the true light, they would eventually recognize their former delusion. But read it for yourself.

[10]The chart is based on R. C. Cross and A. D. Woosley, *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 202, 231.

The Allegory of the Cave

. . . here is a parable to illustrate the degrees in which our nature may be enlightened or unenlightened. Imagine the condition of men living in a sort of cavernous chamber underground, with an entrance open to the light and a long passage all down the cave. Here they have been from childhood, chained by the leg and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them, because the chains will not let them turn their heads. At some distance higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between the prisoners and the fire is a track with a parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet-show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets over the top.

I see, said he.

Now behind this parapet imagine persons carrying along various artificial objects, including figures of men and animals in wood or stone or other materials, which project above the parapet. Naturally, some of these persons will be talking, others silent.

It is a strange picture, he said, and a strange sort of prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; for in the first place prisoners so confined would have seen nothing of themselves or of any other, except the shadows thrown by the fire-light on the wall of the Cave facing them, would they?

Not if all their lives they had been prevented from moving their heads.

And they would have seen as little of the objects carried past.

Of course.

Now, if they could talk to one another, would they not suppose that their words referred only to those passing shadows which they saw?

Necessarily.

And suppose their prison had an echo from the wall facing them? When one of the people crossing behind them spoke, they could only suppose that the sound came from the shadow passing before their eyes.

No doubt.

In every way, then, such prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects.

Inevitably.

Now consider what would happen if their release from the chains and the healing of their unwisdom should come about in this way. Suppose one of them were set free and forced suddenly to stand up, turn his head, and walk with eyes lifted to the light; all these movements would be painful, and he would be too dazzled to make out the objects whose shadows he had been used to seeing. What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he had formerly seen was meaningless illusion, but now, being somewhat nearer to reality and turned towards more real objects, he was getting a truer view? Suppose further that he were shown the various objects being carried by and were made to say, in reply to questions, what each of them was. Would he not be perplexed and believe the objects now shown him to be not so real as what he formerly saw?

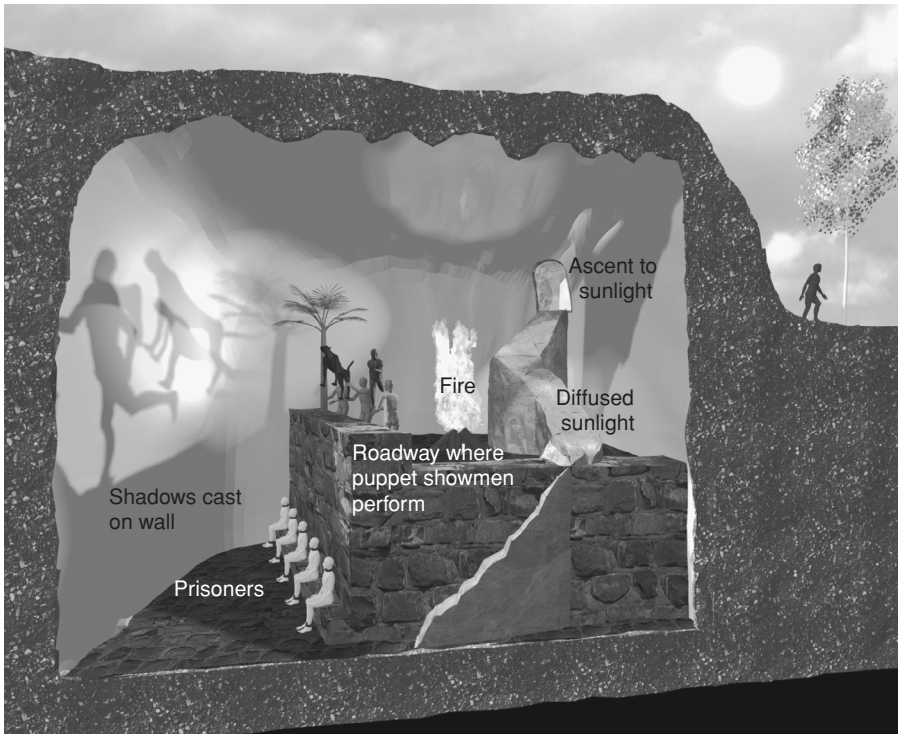
Yes, not nearly so real.

And if he were forced to look at the fire-light itself, would not his eyes ache, so that he would try to escape and turn back to the things which he could see distinctly, convinced that they really were clearer than these other objects now being shown to him?

Yes.

And suppose someone were to drag him away forcibly up the steep and rugged ascent and not let him go until he had hauled him out into the sunlight, would he not suffer pain and vexation at such treatment, and, when he had come out into

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is one of the most famous passages in all literature. This artist's rendering of Plato's cave may be helpful as you read the story.



the light, find his eyes so full of its radiance that he could not see a single one of the things that he was now told were real?

Certainly he would not see them all at once.

He would need, then, to grow accustomed before he could see things in that upper world. At first it would be easiest to make out shadows, and then the images of men and things reflected in water, and later on the things themselves. After that, it would be easier to watch the heavenly bodies and the sky itself by night, looking at the light of the moon and stars rather than the Sun and the Sun's light in the daytime.

Yes, surely.

Last of all, he would be able to look at the Sun and contemplate its nature, not as it appears when reflected in water or any alien medium, but as it is in itself in its own domain.

No doubt.

And now he would begin to draw the conclusion that it is the Sun that produces the seasons and the course of the year and controls everything in the visible world, and moreover is in a way the cause of all that he and his companions used to see.

Clearly he would come at last to that conclusion.[11]

The point of the story should be obvious. We, like the prisoners in the cave, are deluded about reality. We mistake the unreal for the real, and only

[11]Plato, *The Republic,* 514A–516C.

with the greatest difficulty can we be turned, and indeed we might have to be *forced*, in the direction of truth and reality. But we *must* be turned in that direction, and we *must* ascend into the upper regions of truth and reality. Why? Because rationality is the essence of humanity. Thus our nature is fulfilled in the contemplation and knowledge of reality. And this means happiness or well-being. Even in this life, as much as possible we must be liberated and detached from the darkness of the sensible world of Becoming and opinion and live as much as possible in the enjoyment of Being and knowledge. At death, however, the soul will be freed forever from the distractions and imperfections of Becoming and can enjoy absolutely and without interruption the knowledge of Being. That is why, says Plato, the real philosopher—lover of wisdom—looks forward to death.

ARISTOTLE'S CRITICISM OF PLATO

As Plato was a student of Socrates and developed his ideas, so Aristotle was the student of Plato and developed *his* ideas. Less charitably, Aristotle ruthlessly criticized his master's theory of the Forms and propounded a quite different one.

Toward the beginning of his *Metaphysics,* Aristotle provides his own summary of the Socratic-Platonic theory:

Aristotle on Plato

> . . . [Plato], having in his youth first become familiar with Cratylus[12] and with the Heraclitean doctrines (that all sensible things are ever in a state of flux and there is no knowledge about them), these views he held even in later years. Socrates, however, was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions; Plato accepted his teaching, but held that the problem applied not to sensible things but to entities of another kind—for this reason, that the common definition could not be a definition of any sensible thing, as they were always changing. Things of this other sort, then, he called Ideas, and sensible things, he said, were all named after these, and in virtue of a relation of these; for the many existed by participation in the Ideas that have the same name as they.[13]

Later Aristotle criticizes this view with a long string of objections; in fact, some have counted twenty-five or more. Not all of Aristotle's objections are as important as others, as when he twits Plato for creating an additional world of things, as if we did not already have enough to explain!

More important is Aristotle's so-called Third-Man Argument. It goes like this. In order to explain the similarity between (1) a first man and (2) a second man, we must posit (3) a third man, the Ideal Man or Form. But then

[12]Cratylus was a follower of Heraclitus but pushed the teaching of his master even further, for he said that one could not step into the same river even *once*!

[13]Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* 987a–b, tr. W. D. Ross, in *Basic Works of Aristotle,* ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

there will have to be a similarity between (1) the first two men and (2) the third man posited, the Form of Man. How do we now explain this similarity? We must again posit (3) a third and "higher" man. But then there will be a similarity between (1) all the previous men and (2) *this* third man. How do we explain *this* similarity? According to Aristotle, the process of positing a "third man" will have to go on forever, but in that case, the original similarity is never explained. Is this a fair argument against Plato? Some have countered that the argument will work only if you think the original third man, the Form of Man, is itself actually a *man* and possessing the features particular men possess. Would Plato agree to this? Is the Form of Man *itself* two-legged and rational? This is a difficult question, and much ink has been spilt trying to explain just how Plato viewed the Forms in this respect. Be that as it may, this is still not Aristotle's main objection to Plato.

The Third-Man Argument

The main problem, for Aristotle, is the problem of the *chōrismos,* a Greek word that means "separation." Aristotle correctly represents Plato as having placed the ultimate causes of things (the Forms) in a transcendent world and thus *separated* from the things they are supposed to be the causes of. But this gives rise immediately to two very big questions, as Aristotle shows in the following:

The Problem of the *chōrismos*

> Above all one might discuss the question what on earth the Forms contribute to sensible things, either to those that are eternal or to those that come into being and cease to be. For they cause neither movement nor any change in them. But again they help in no wise either towards the knowledge of the other things (for they are not even the substance of these, else they would have been in them), or towards their being, if they are not in the particulars which share in them; though if they were, they might be thought to be causes, as white causes whiteness in a white object by entering into its composition. . . .
>
> But, further, all other things cannot come from the Forms in any of the usual senses of "from." And to say that they are patterns and the other things share in them is to use empty words and poetical metaphors. . . .
>
> Again, it would seem impossible that the substance and that of which it is the substance should exist apart; how therefore, could the Ideas, being the substances of things, exist apart? In the *Phaedo* the case is stated in this way—that the Forms are causes both of being and of becoming; yet when the Forms exist, still the things that share in them do not come into being, unless there is something to originate movement.[14]

One question Aristotle poses is: How can the Forms be the causes of the natures or "whatnesses" of things without being *in* those things? His answer: They can't. *Another* question Aristotle poses is: How do Plato's transcendent and unchanging Forms account for the most evident fact about the things around us—namely, their coming into being and their motion and change? His answer: They don't. In sum, the *chōrismos,* or separation, between the Forms and particular sensible things, like a great gulf fixed, makes it impossible for the Forms to *do* anything for those things at the most

[14]Ibid., 991a–b.

critical points. That is bad enough. What is worse, when Plato attempts to explain how the Forms are related to sensible things, he provides no really rigorous philosophical explanation but resorts to "empty words and poetical metaphors" such as *participation* and *imitation*.

In fairness to Plato, it should be noted that many of Aristotle's specific criticisms (for example, the Third-Man Argument) were anticipated and discussed by Plato himself. More generally, in the *Timaeus* Plato did account for motion and change in the world, and as for his attempt to bridge the two worlds with "empty words and poetical metaphors," we saw in an earlier passage from the *Phaedo* that Plato freely granted the difficulty of language at this point.

ARISTOTLE'S VIEW OF FORM

One must not conclude from the above that Aristotle rejected Plato's theory of reality for a radically different one. Aristotle too believed absolutely in Forms. As with Plato, so with Aristotle: Only by means of Forms, the objective essences of things, can we account for the order around us, both in nature and in morality, and only because of Forms is knowledge of anything possible. The *difference* lies in their views of how the Forms are related to particular things.

Aristotle: Forms must be in things

It should be clear from the above quotation that Aristotle rejected Plato's idea of *transcendent* Forms in favor of an idea of *immanent* Forms—that is, a view of Forms as existing *within* particular sensible things. He overcomes Plato's unbridgeable chasm between Forms and sensible things by asserting that Forms can be causes of things only if they are *in* those things. But understand: There is no abstract "tableness" out there any more than there is any unimaginable formless matter or formless "stuff." What *is* out there are particular *tables*—this table, that table, and other tables. The Form or essence Table exists only as individualized or particularized (that is, turned into a concrete, particular thing) by some wood, glue, and varnish. And likewise with everything. The Form (which accounts for the essence or whatness of a thing) combined with matter (which gives that essence a concrete and particular expression) is what is *real*. As one slogan puts it, "No form without matter, and no matter without form." For those who prefer a more technical expression, this view or idea is called *hylomorphic composition* (from the Greek *hylē*, "matter," and *morphē*, "form"): Everything in the natural world

"No form without matter, no matter without form"

HYLOMORPHIC COMPOSITION

Although Aristotle himself never used this expression, it was eventually coined to represent the Aristotelian emphasis on the necessary twofold composition, material and formal, of everything in the natural world.

Plato and Aristotle, from "The School of Athens" (detail) by Raphael. In this representation, Plato and Aristotle are distinguishable from one another in several respects. How many of them can you identify?

is composed of both form and matter; there can be no instances of unformed matter or "unmattered" form.

Thus it is with everything in the *natural* world. With respect to God, the situation is quite different. The matter in a thing provides for its changeability and movement, since matter is the potential in a thing to change or become something different. Think of a table. It can be chopped into bits, burned into ashes, or dismantled and turned into a chair, only because there is *wood* there. But there can be no matter, or potential for change and motion, in God, who is the Unmoved Mover. God, the immutable source of all motion, must himself be utterly devoid of matter. He is Pure Form.

God: Pure Form

All of this so far may sound rather technical and bland. But the whole show is considerably enlivened when the *teleological* side of this theory of reality is stressed. And it should be stressed because it is a major feature of the Aristotelian perspective.

"Teleology" comes from the Greek word *telos*, "end" or "goal," and means the study of, or the belief in, principles that give rise to the order and purpose that pervade all reality. (We will see momentarily that these principles

Teleology

are otherwise called "final causes.") The conviction that reality is infused and governed by teleological principles is not new with Aristotle, though he thought it was. It is an obvious feature of the Platonic philosophy too, and it is clearly discernible in some of the Pre-Socratics. Still, it received with Aristotle perhaps the strongest expression in the whole history of philosophy. For Aristotle, there is, so to say, both an "inside" and an "outside" story. The inside story concerns the way in which anything, say, an acorn, is propelled naturally, by the form within, into a full-fledged, giant oak tree. What is immanent, then, is more than a static form—it includes a power that develops the thing into its full reality. As for the outside story: The oak tree is nourished by the nutrients in the ground, is dependent on the change of seasons, and otherwise stands in a complex relation to the rest of nature—using it for its own purposes, maintaining its own structure in the face of perturbances, and producing more acorns. The whole of nature is, in fact, a network of intimately related things, conspiring, as it were, upon the production of the efficient, harmonious, beautiful, and value-laden universe that confronts our sense at every turn.

Aristotle vs. Plato on art

The real difference between Plato's idea of *transcendent* Forms and Aristotle's idea of *immanent* Forms shows up very vividly in their discussions of art. In the last parts of the *Republic,* Plato argued that art is "thrice removed" from reality: A painting is an imperfect representation or copy of a man who himself is an imperfect copy of the real thing, Man; likewise a drama imperfectly represents people and things that are themselves imperfect copies of their Forms. For these reasons Plato advocated banishing the arts—at least the *representative* arts—from the ideal society. Aristotle, with his view of immanent Forms, draws exactly the opposite conclusion. It is because the essence and ideal of things are embodied *in* those things that the artistic representation brings us *closer* to reality. As Aristotle says in a helpful passage in his *Poetics,* what the artist does is represent things in their *universality,* to use Aristotle's term, and that is why the artist's work is more philosophical than, say, the historian's work, which represents things merely in their *particularity.*

> . . . the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse—you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters; by a singular statement, one as to what, say, Alcibiades did or had done to him.[15]

[15]Aristotle, *Poetics,* 1451a–b, tr. Ingram Bywater, in *Basic Works of Aristotle.*

Two final points: First, although we have dwelt upon form and matter, according to Aristotle there are actually *four* principles, or "causes," that are necessarily involved in the constitution or explanation of a thing:

Aristotle's Four Causes

- Material cause
- Formal cause
- Efficient cause
- Final cause

The *material cause* is the matter, or "stuff," something is made out of; the *formal cause* is its essence, or whatness; the *efficient* or *moving cause* is what brings the thing into being; and the *final cause* is the end, or purpose, of the thing. Can you identify the four causes of, say, a table? It may be noticed that the last three causes are closely related, and Aristotle himself suggests that they may be lumped together under the formal cause, leaving us with the general twofold distinction: material cause/formal cause. Thus the key terms in the constitution and explanation of things are matter and form. Second, Aristotle stressed even more strongly than Plato the difference between "substantial" Forms and "accidental" Forms. Fido *necessarily* involves the Form Dog; it is of Fido's very nature or substance to be a dog. But it is only an accident that Fido involves the forms Shaggy, Brown, and Short-legged; it is not part of Fido's essence that he possesses these features—he might or might not, and still be a *dog*.

Substantial and accidental Forms

AFTER PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

Aristotle provides, thus, a criticism of Plato's theory of reality. But his own theory, after all, is not really all that different. For both Plato and Aristotle the true reality of something is identified with its Form. And this general view, often called *realism*, was propagated throughout subsequent centuries, mainly through the Christian thinkers St. Augustine (d. 430), who taught more or less the Platonic version, and St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1275), who taught more or less the Aristotelian version.

Realism

Obviously, this kind of philosophy is radically different from all those approaches that reject Form as sort of philosophically superstitious. It was, in fact, against this very idea that William of Ockham (d. 1349?) formulated the principle known as Ockham's Razor, in an attempt to cut away all unnecessary principles and realities: *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, "Entities are not to be multiplied without necessity." The resulting view was known as *nominalism* (from the Latin *nomen*, "name"), the view that Forms or universals (such as Animal, Whiteness, etc.) have no external or independent existence, but are merely names or words by which we group together things that possess similar features.

Ockham's Razor

Nominalism

Nominalism will perhaps appear to you as a very simple and clean approach: away with all that silly and needless talk about substantial forms,

"I can see the horse, Plato, but not horseness."

—Antisthenes

accidental forms, metaphysical causes, and the like! On the other hand, we must not forget about the problems that spawned the belief in Forms in the first place: Without objective Forms, or essences, how, for example, are real knowledge, rational discourse, and moral judgment possible?

Conceptualism

Or perhaps you would like a compromise. A third option is *conceptualism*. This is a philosophical halfway house between realism and nominalism inasmuch as it holds that there *are* universals but they are *mind-made*. Catness, for example, has no existence outside the mind, but it certainly does exist within the mind—a mental entity—and is employed for the sake of meaningful thought and discourse about reality.

What is mathematics about?

It should not be thought that the realist-nominalist debate is just an antiquated piece in the Museum of Philosophical Ideas. The issue yet exercises contemporary thinkers. A good example is Willard V. Quine, one of the most influential English-speaking philosophers of the twentieth century, who relates the issue to mathematics. What is mathematics about? Is it about *anything*? There are three possible answers. First, you can say, as *logicism* does, that mathematics is about mind-independent objects, and this would commit you to a belief in something like Platonic or Aristotelian Forms, or realism. Second, you can say, with *formalism,* that mathematics isn't about anything, really; it is a formal game similar to chess where the pieces have no significance apart from the board, other pieces, the rules, and so on; and this would be to take a nominalist view. Third, there is an intermediate position, *intuitionism,* according to which mathematics is about mental constructs, and this, of course, corresponds to conceptualism. Quine himself (at least the later Quine) is the sort of philosopher who, in trying to answer the question of what exists, tries as much as possible to keep both feet in the physical world and appeals to the fewest abstract entities required to do the job. Nonetheless, he finds himself having to appeal to abstract or mind-independent entities, and thus he turns out to be a kind of mathematical Platonist.

Be that as it may, in the following extract from "On What There Is," Quine states how the very old problem of universals is alive and well ("ontology" is the theory of what is, and a "bound variable" is a formal logician's equivalent to a pronoun).

> Classical mathematics . . . is up to its neck in commitments to an ontology of abstract entities. Thus it is that the great mediaeval controversy over universals has flared up anew in the modern philosophy of mathematics. The issue is clearer now than of old, because we now have a more explicit standard whereby to decide what ontology a given theory or form of discourse is committed to: a theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true.

REALISM, NOMINALISM, CONCEPTUALISM

- *Realism:* The doctrine that Forms, or essences, possess objective reality.
- *Nominalism:* The doctrine that Forms, or universals, are merely universal names by which we group together things that possess similar features.
- *Conceptualism:* The doctrine that universals are mental constructs, and as such really exist in the mind.

Because this standard of ontological presupposition did not emerge clearly in the philosophical tradition, the modern philosophical mathematicians have not on the whole recognized that they were debating the same old problem of universals in a newly clarified form. But the fundamental cleavages among modern points of view on foundations of mathematics do come down pretty explicitly to disagreements as to the range of entities to which the bound variables should be permitted to refer.

The three main mediaeval points of view regarding universals are designated by historians as *realism, conceptualism,* and *nominalism*. Essentially these same three doctrines reappear in twentieth-century surveys of the philosophy of mathematics under the new names *logicism, intuitionism*, and *formalism*.[16]

CHAPTER 3 IN REVIEW

SUMMARY

"Form" is one of the most important words in the history of philosophy. In fact, when the first full-blown philosophies came on the scene, those of Plato and Aristotle, they were built almost entirely around this concept.

In an important sense, the idea of Form is an answer to many philosophies, such as those of Heraclitus (as Plato understood him) and Protagoras, that dissolve everything into a flux of relativity. According to Plato and other Form-philosophers, we must believe in an objective basis for the things existing around us, for knowledge and for value judgments. This basis is the Form, or essence, which constitutes the real *being* of a thing. As being, the Form must be one, immutable, ideal, transcendent, and the like, and this being is imperfectly represented in particular, sensible things by "participation" or "imitation." Plato conceives all reality as a ladder or scale and, corresponding to this, knowledge too (the image of the Divided Line). But the basic distinction is between the sensible world of Becoming and the transcendent or intelligible world of Being, with the essential Form of

[16]Willard Van Orman Quine, "On What There Is," in *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays,* second ed., rev. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 13f.

Goodness ranging over all (the Analogy of the Sun). The practical point is to make our way, as much as possible in this life, into the higher realm of the intelligible and to enjoy the illumination of reality and truth (the Allegory of the Cave).

Aristotle belongs to this philosophical tradition too, but represents an important variation. He criticized Plato's theory of the Forms in several ways, but mainly because of the gap it leaves between the Forms and the things they are the Forms *of:* the problem of the *chōrismos.* Instead, Aristotle insisted that although we must believe in the Forms or objective essences of things, they cannot be separated from those things. This is Aristotle's doctrine of *immanent* (rather than transcendent) Forms: The Forms must be *in* things. His conception of matter as potentiality and therefore providing for change, and his doctrine of the Four Causes, are also important features of his thought.

In subsequent centuries the realist metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle received Christian reinterpretations and restatements, most notably at the hands of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. On the other hand, it was also *attacked* by nominalist philosophers, such as Ockham, for whom the Forms were merely general or universal terms that lump similar things into classes. The debate between realism (Forms have objective reality), nominalism (Forms are universal terms), and conceptualism (Forms are mental entities) is a fundamental and continuing one.

BASIC IDEAS

- "Systematic" philosophy
- The nature of a Platonic dialogue
- The Socratic Problem
- The problem with Protagorean subjectivism
- The problem with Heraclitean flux
- The distinction between the worlds of Becoming and Being
- The meaning of "Form"
- Six features of Platonic Forms; they are:
  - Objective
  - Transcendent
  - Eternal
  - Intelligible
  - Archetypal
  - Perfect
- Platonic metaphors for the Form's relation to the particular
  - Imitation
  - Participation
- Two ways in which something can share in more than one Form
- The Divided Line: Degrees of reality and knowledge
- The Good as the Form of Forms

- The Analogy of the Sun
- The Allegory of the Cave
- Aristotle's main criticism of Plato's theory: The problem of the *chōrismos*, "separation"
- Aristotle's conception of immanent Forms
- Hylomorphic composition
- Aristotelian teleology
- Aristotle's Four Causes
  - Material
  - Formal
  - Efficient
  - Final
- Substantial and accidental Forms
- Ockham's Razor
- Realism, nominalism, and conceptualism
- Quine: a mathematical Platonist

TEST YOURSELF

1. True or false: Plato believed that "a man is the measure of all things."
2. According to Plato, the sun is to the _____ as the Good is to the _____.
3. What did Heraclitus and Parmenides contribute to Plato's theory of the Forms?
4. How does Quine figure in this chapter?
5. True or false: Aristotle's efficient cause is the agent through which something comes into being.
6. What is the point of the Allegory of the Cave?
7. Aristotle believed not in transcendent Forms but in _____ Forms.
8. Plato taught that Forms are related to particular things by means of (a) the final cause, (b) participation, (c) hylomorphic composition, (d) imitation.
9. True or false: Aristotle was a nominalist.
10. Plato's and Aristotle's theories of reality were preserved, in a Christian version, by_____ and _____, respectively.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Plato's philosophy is sometimes called a rather "poetic" one. What does this mean? Is it good or bad? What is to be made of the fact that Plato anticipated Aristotle's criticisms but did not regard them as decisive?
- If one rejects every philosophy of Forms, such as that of Plato or Aristotle, what then? What about the problems that sparked such philosophies in the first place?

- Is it necessary to accept, say, Plato's philosophy in its entirety and detail in order to be a "Platonist"? Is it possible to distinguish the central and essential idea of a philosophy from the particular, relative, and even mistaken trappings in which it was originally expressed? What is the *perspective* that characterizes any Platonic philosophy?

FOR FURTHER READING

Julia Annas. *An Introduction to Plato's Republic.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981. Chs. 8–10. An up-to-date discussion of Plato's theory of knowledge, theory of the Forms, and the Sun, Line, and the Cave.

Frederick Copleston. *A History of Philosophy.* Baltimore: Newman Press, 1946–1974. I, Parts 3 and 4. Readable and indispensable accounts of both Plato's and Aristotle's theories of reality and their relation to one another by an esteemed historian of philosophy.

G. M. A. Grube. *Plato's Thought.* London: Methuen, 1935. Ch. 1. A long and excellent chapter titled "The Theory of the Forms" in an old but useful work.

G. E. R. Lloyd. *Aristotle: The Growth and Structure of His Thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968. A classic work that describes Aristotle's intellectual development as well as major themes in his work.

William J. Prior. *Unity and Development in Plato's Metaphysics.* LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1985. A recent scholarly analysis of texts, showing the continuity and progress of Plato's metaphysical ideas throughout the most relevant of his dialogues.

David Ross. *Aristotle.* Fifth ed. London: Methuen, 1949. Ch. 6. Discussion of Aristotle's doctrines of substance, matter, form, and other topics from an old but still standard work on Aristotle.

A. E. Taylor. *Plato: The Man and His Work.* London: Methuen, 1926. A standard work that provides an overview of Plato's philosophy and brief, running commentaries on his dialogues.

Gregory Vlastos (ed.). *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays,* I. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1971. Scholarly and sometimes technical discussions by Plato specialists on a variety of metaphysical and epistemological issues in Plato's philosophy.

Nicholas White. *A Companion to Plato's Republic.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1979.

*In addition, see the relevant articles ("Plato," "Aristotle," "Universals," etc.) in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), and *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* http://plato.stanford.edu.