

PLATO OVERVIEW

Theory of Being or Reality (Metaphysics)

Plato contends that this *material* world of flux and movement (to use the terms of one of the most important pre-Socratics Heraclitus) and everything in it is a reflection or imitation of a stable *ideal* world beyond this in which are found the unchanging ideal forms or eternal essences of all physical objects. For example, physical tables are imperfect, transient imitations of an enduring ideal form or essence of 'tableness' (?) to be found in the world beyond. The key element in Plato's metaphysics is, thus, the concept of *mimesis* or imitation. The world as we know it derives its significance from the ideal world of which it is a reflection. The dominant metaphor which Plato uses in this regard is that of the mirror.

Plato concludes that there must be something perfect beyond this imperfect world by reasoning that if the impermanent and imperfect here and now was all there is and if knowledge derives only from what one perceives through the senses, how would one have any conception of perfection? It stands to reason, for example, that even though at best we can only act on Earth in ways that approximate perfect virtue, we yet have a sense of what perfect virtue is. Where does that ideal come from if our senses are our sole source of knowledge and what they reveal is only imperfection? Hence, his logical conclusion (note the process of reasoned deduction at work) that there is a world of Ideal Forms or essences (a world of pure thought or spirit) of which this world is an imperfect imitation.

Essence	World of Ideal Forms	The 'True Reality'	Bedness	Ideal virtues
Existence	Physical Reflections	Physical universe	Bed	Human conduct

Theory of Knowledge and Reasoning (Epistemology)

Ontological claims (i.e. theories of the ultimate nature of things) in turn presuppose the question whether the truth can be known. Plato offers a hierarchical model of knowledge which privileges rational knowledge over empirical knowledge: the senses, he argues, only deliver knowledge about this physical world, not the ultimate spiritual reality. In a nutshell, Plato's argument is that where our physical senses are confined in their usefulness to apprehending (and often misleadingly so) the physical world, our Reason is that which allows us to glimpse or intuit the non-physical world beyond. The more cultivated our Reason (via the exercise of deductive logic), the more profound our apprehension of the world of ideal forms.

In Plato's hierarchical model of cognition, empirical 'knowledge' (i.e. that afforded by the physical senses) is located at the bottom of the scale in that the senses are the basis most often for only misleading impressions (not knowledge) concerning the outer appearances of things. The opinions derived from empirical perception are themselves divisible into two categories. At the very bottom of the scale is that pseudo-knowledge provided by our sensual perception not of the objects themselves but of images of objects (their shadows, reflections, representations, etc.). This is the realm of supposition or imagination where unenlightened minds take sensible appearances at their face value. (Plato uses the Greek word *eikasia* for this level of knowledge which is difficult to translate into English: the term simultaneously implies a combination of the following meanings: likeness [representation], likening [comparison] and likelihood [conjecture].) Located above this, but equally mired in illusion, are the common sense beliefs (the Greek word for which is *pistis*) derived from sensing the

physical appearances of the visible and tangible objects themselves. The senses even at this level do not provide the truth about the ultimate nature of reality but, rather, common sense beliefs which are most often erroneous precisely because appearances cannot be trusted. For example, a straight stick when held under water only appears to be broken or crooked to the eyes when in fact it is not. Hence, Plato's contention that the senses are the basis only of opinion, not of knowledge or fact. In the moral sphere, what is at stake here are beliefs without reasoned knowledge as to why a given belief may or may not be correct.

Plato places above the misleading opinions afforded by the senses the certitude afforded by the reason (this is why Plato is viewed as a proto-Rationalism and the first opponent of Empiricism). Education must at all costs seek to cultivate the individual's reason which is that part of us which transcends the world of appearances and of visible things and links us to the world of intelligible things. Where the Sun is the source of perception in the world of appearances in which the capacity for vision reigns supreme, Plato will argue that it is the Good (this is how some translators have translated his term for purest Reason, the sense of absolute right and wrong, the rational order and purposiveness informing the universe, perhaps even God?) which is the source of conception in the intelligible world. Rational knowledge, however, is also internally hierarchised. At the first level, Plato places what he describes as the 'understanding' or 'thought' (*dianoia*) derived from mathematical propositions. At this level, the rational testing of geometrical and related hypotheses and deductions derived therefrom begins to transform unreflective perception (e.g. that squares appear to have 4 sides) into reasoning intelligence (e.g. that all squares have 4 sides). All branches of mathematics start from unquestioned assumptions (these are called variously postulates, axioms, definitions) from which conclusions are deduced. The premises may be true as may be the conclusions but, as Cornford puts it, the "whole structure hangs in the air until the assumptions themselves shall have been shown to depend on an unconditional principle" (223). In other words, mathematics depends upon hypotheses which it does not verify but, rather, takes for granted. The hypotheses employed at this level are necessary but still incomplete forms of cognition. *Dianoia*, which implies deductive thinking or reasoning from premiss to conclusion, is accordingly not the ultimate form of true knowledge.

What Plato calls *episteme* (or absolute knowledge of the truth) is reached at the fourth and highest level via rational intuition (the Greek word for which is *noesis*) or the direct apprehension of first principles. *Noesis* is the faculty that allows one to attain true knowledge of the nature of reality by grasping the Ideal Forms themselves: i.e. what is in the final analysis truly beautiful, truly good, truly just, etc. (i.e. the true essences of these things rather than their imperfect approximations found in this world). To put this another way, where *dianoia* functions deductively to produce conclusions derived from premises, *noesis* comprehends first principles by coming to an understanding of the premises themselves and seeking the ultimate principle (what Plato calls the Good) on which they all depend.

The predicament of the prisoners in Plato's famous 'Allegory of the Cave' is an epistemological parable, that is, one designed to demonstrate the hierarchical schema of knowledge outlined above, ignorance regarding the transcendental nature of reality, and the possibility of attaining intuitive illumination and, thus, absolute knowledge. Confined to a completely enclosed cave, the prisoners there come to accept the dim light in which vague impressions of objects reach their eyes as the way things are. By contrast, when suddenly exposed to the Sun after eons in the darkness, they are completely blinded. Allegorically-speaking, the dimly-lit cave represents the physical world in which we largely have only our physical senses to guide us. However, our physical senses are not equipped to translate the higher knowledge (represented by the blinding nature of the Sun) which would allow us to comprehend the transcendental nature of reality. Just as the Sun governs the visible world, so what Plato calls the Good governs and is the source of the intelligible or spiritual world. Just as one cannot see objects without the aid of the Sun, neither can one

understand the true nature of reality and the true nature of goodness without the aid of the Good.

Reasoning: the Dialectic

Plato has bequeathed to us at least one important method of enquiry: the dialectic (whereby the premises themselves are examined by comparing claim and counter-claim until truly valid truth-claims can be posited). One's reason is utilised less to understand phenomena in the temporal world than their Ideal Forms. That is, Plato's focus is less on knowing physical objects per se such as a table or a mountain (these belong to the visible world of appearances) than human behaviour and, by extension, abstract moral concepts such as goodness or beauty (which belong to the intelligible world).

The key instrument in the acquisition of absolute knowledge is the dialectic, a term which would become very important to later philosophers like Hegel who used it in a somewhat different, albeit related, way. Through the proper use of the dialectic, the validity of all propositions or truth-claims is tested by weighing one hypothesis (thesis) against an opposing hypothesis (antithesis) until the truth of the proposition in question is arrived at (Plato terms this the synthesis) by simultaneously discarding the errors and retaining any valid contentions to be found in each of the original propositions. By a process of attrition, false hypotheses are eliminated and the absolute truth is ultimately arrived at. The dialectic, in other words, means the process of philosophical exchange or dialogue carried on by question and answer whereby the pros and the cons are weighed against each other to produce a true conception of an ideal form (e.g. what is beauty? Or, what is justice?).

Plato's technique of the dialectic, in short, puts all hypotheses or truth-claims to the test in an effort both to show their relativity and incompleteness and to extract from them what is valid as the quest for truth is pursued. Recognition of the necessary shortcomings inherent in most commonly held hypotheses spurs the intellect to aspire towards a level of comprehension and certitude that transcends mere hypothesis and to move towards the intelligible world (the true reality) and to cast off worldly illusion. (After this, evidently, all need for further debate is eliminated. In the Platonic scheme of things, if you do not agree with what he says is truly good or beautiful, you are simply wrong: you 'don't get it' precisely because you are not advanced enough on the intellectual / spiritual path along which philosophy ought to lead you and/or you have not used logic correctly.)

Source of Cognition	Object of Cognition	Mode of Cognition	State of Mind
The Good (author and governor of the intelligible world)	Ideal forms or essences (of justice, truth, etc.)	Dialectical reasoning (process of dialogic question and answer) by which premisses are examined and traced to the first principles on which they are based	Knowledge of the absolute truth (<i>episteme</i>) via rational intuition or apprehension of essences (<i>noesis</i>)
	Mathematical figures and propositions	Deductive reasoning from premisses to conclusions	Thought or understanding that falls short of true knowledge (<i>dianoia</i>)

Source of Cognition	Object of Cognition	Mode of Cognition	State of Mind
The Sun (author and governor of the visible world of appearances)	Physical objects	Sensory perception	Opinion or belief (<i>pistis</i>)
	Images of physical objects (shadows, reflections, illusions, etc.)	Illusion	'Imagining' (<i>eikasia</i>)

Theory of the Self

Plato's model of human identity is the inevitable correlate of his metaphysics. In a nutshell, he contends that if our bodies are part and parcel of the physical world in which we find ourselves, it is our reason or intellect, in Plato's schema, which is our link to the non-physical world beyond this. In the same way that the universe is divided into physical and non-physical components, so too are humans more than mere physical bodies. For Plato, each human being possesses a pre-given, immutable, essential self prior to life on Earth and which remains captive for the duration of our lives here. This 'soul,' as Francis Cornford translates the Greek word *daemon*, is, Plato contends by means of a celebrated metaphor, imprisoned in the dungeon of the flesh which at death it joyfully casts off. If the senses of our body are the means by which we apprehend the physical world, the rational intelligence associated with the soul is the means by which we apprehend the immaterial world.

In fact, Plato contends that the soul, that intangible part of our identity, is non-physical or spiritual in nature and 'tripartite,' that is, it has three constitutive parts (each of which is associated with a distinct part of the body). These are the 'Reason' or consciousness or thinking part of the self (associated with the head), the 'spirited element' or 'affections' or emotions (associated with the heart) and the 'appetites' (associated especially with one's lower extremities – the stomach, the genitals). The existence of these as separate, potentially warring parts within the 'soul' is demonstrated for Plato by the conflict of desires and interests which all humans experience. For example, one might be thirsty for alcohol (this is a function of the appetites), but another part of oneself (the Reason) might encourage one to resist such an impulse for the logical reason that it might not be the best thing for you; alternatively, the heart might make one resist such an impulse by causing one to experience a feeling of shame when one remembers the last time one had one too many and fell down in the street, thereby making a spectacle of oneself. Ideally, the happy man or woman is one in whom Reason or the intellect holds sway over and holds in balance the other warring parts. The potential evidently exists for a divided self on the part of the man in whom reason does not preponderate over the other parts of the soul.

In short, where both the appetites and the emotions are tied to the body, the Reason is something extra-corporeal, that is, it transcends or precedes and postdates the physical body and the physical world of which it is part and which is itself only an imperfect reflection of that world of ideal forms with which our Reason has closer affinity. For Plato, in a nutshell, the soul is immortal and transcendental. The proof of this is, in his view, the fact that some of our ideas (e.g. of perfection) simply must come from elsewhere (the world of Ideal Forms) given that if our senses are the only source of knowledge in this imperfect world, we could have no ideals whatsoever.

Plato on Art and Literature

Plato's aesthetics in general and his philosophy of literature in particular (a synonym for critical theory or theory of criticism) is partly what M. H. Abrams, in The Mirror and the Lamp, would term *mimetic* and partly *pragmatic*. That is, he is of the view that the meaning of a literary work is in part derived from what it imitates or reflects or represents (*mimesis* means imitation) and partly derived from how it affects the reader and encourages him to behave in certain ways (the pragmatic view).

Mimetic Approach:

Plato's view of literature is understandably mimetic given that the key element in his metaphysics (his conception of the nature of reality) is, as we have seen, the concept of *mimesis* or imitation. This world and everything in it is, you might recall, thought to be a reflection of an ideal world beyond this in which are found the ideal forms or essences of all physical objects. Plato's philosophy of language is also mimetic or *referential*: he argues that words too function like mirrors. Words, that is, mean what they do by virtue of the fact that they reflect, represent, or refer to real objects. Plato's concept of literature is based at least in part on this mimetic metaphysics and philosophy of language. Like words, art in general and literature in particular mean basically because they 'hold a mirror up to nature,' to use a famous phrase coined by Plato or 'reflect' it. To use some other familiar metaphors, a literary work means what it re-presents, imitates, reproduces or labels. For example, if a work represents a dog, then that is the meaning of the work, that is what it is about.

Plato declares that he would banish poets altogether from his ideal 'republic.' His reasons for so doing are two-fold. One of his grounds is *epistemological*: poetry is a representation at a third remove from *the* truth and, thus, at best only an approximation and at worst a sheer distortion of the absolute truths found in the world of Ideal Forms. It is an imitation of the physical world which is, in turn, an imitation of the world of Ideal Forms. That is, it is an imitation of an imitation (the physical object in question) of the true reality, that is the ideal form or essence of the worldly object in question. This is precisely why he is so distrustful of it: as an imitation of an imitation, literature in particular and art in general are 'at a third remove' from the 'true' reality. For example, a given work of art may offer a picture of a physical bed rather than of 'bedness' itself, that is, the ideal form per se of which all physical beds are imperfect replicas. Hence, the following chart:

Essence	World of Ideal Forms	True Reality	Bedness	Ideal virtues and actions
Existence	Material manifestation	Physical universe	A bed	Human virtues and actions
Artistic Representation	Human imitation	Images (in shapes, and/or colours [visual art] or words [poetry]) of physical universe	Picture or verbal rendition of a bed	Visual or verbal representation of human actions

Pragmatic Approach:

The focus of those whom M. H. Abrams would call *pragmatic* critics is on the *formative effect* (both for good and bad) which literature has on the reader. That is, these critics focus on the way in which literature moulds or fashions the identity of its readers by encouraging them to emulate the behaviour portrayed in the text or on stage. The pragmatic approach to criticism is essentially an *evaluative* one that focuses on the literary work's *moral* impact. It should be noted that there is an inextricable link between what the work does to the reader and what it is about. To put this another way, in order to discuss the impact which literary works have, critics most often have to talk about what the work is about (to be precise, the correctness or not of what it represents or imitates).

In an earlier Book of The Republic, Plato contends that the self is tripartite in nature, that is, has three constituent parts, each of which is associated with a distinct part of the body. These are the Reason (associated with the head), the 'spirited element' or emotions (associated with the heart) and the appetites (associated especially with one's lower extremities--the stomach, the genitals). The existence of these as separate, potentially warring parts within the 'soul' is proved for Plato by the conflict of desires and interests which all humans experience. For example, one might be thirsty for alcohol (this is a function of the appetites), but another part of oneself (the Reason) might encourage one to resist such an impulse for the logical reason that it might not be the best thing for you; alternatively, the heart might make one resist such an impulse by causing one to experience a sense of shame when one remembers the last time one had one too many and fell down in the street, thereby making a spectacle of oneself. Ideally, the happy man or woman is one in whom Reason or the intellect holds sway over and holds in balance the other warring parts. The potential evidently exists for a divided self on the part of the man in whom reason does not preponderate over the other parts of the soul.

The second reason why Plato would banish poets is *ethical* or *moral*: poetry appeals to the emotions of the reader, rather than the reason, and accordingly has a negative impact upon the reader's character, leading him to behave in improper ways. Poetry in depicting human actions and behaviour appeals to that dangerous part of the soul which ought to be subordinated to the Reason: the passions. Plato attacks tragedy, for example, precisely because it encourages us to feel sympathy: in real life, the rational response to suffering, according to Plato, is not to indulge our sorrow. In other words, it is not a good idea to feel too sorry for oneself. By the same token, comedies encourage us to laugh when we would normally seek to restrain what he calls our "risible faculty" (14) (our disposition to laugh) lest we appear the buffoon in public. In short, poetry does not appeal to the most important part of human identity, the Reason. The latter is the faculty that ought at all costs be cultivated because it is that part of the human being which links him to and allows him to intuit the true reality beyond this world. It is for this reason that, in Plato's view, the study of Philosophy (the logical exercises of which cater to and strengthen the faculty of Reason) is superior to the study of Homer, ancient Greece's most celebrated poet, in the education of individuals.

Plato's fear is that when poets imitate or represent undesirable behaviour, members of the audience will in turn imitate or emulate such undesirable characters. In Books II and III, accordingly, Plato advocates censorship, urging that morally suspect tales be suppressed and that mothers and nurses be allowed to tell their wards "the authorised ones only" (476). However, Plato leaves the door open for the poet's return from exile by inviting others to demonstrate that "there is a use in poetry as well as a delight" (16), in other words, that poetry is (to use Horace's classic formula) both *utile et dulce*, that is, both morally useful (didactic) and pleasurable. Sir Philip Sidney, for example, took up this invitation many years later in Renaissance England in his celebrated An Apology for Poetry.