

Lecture 4: The Classical Greek Philosophers – Socrates & Plato

Protagoras	490-420 BC
Socrates	469-399 BC
Plato	427-347 BC
Aristotle	384-323 BC



We already learned a little about the Sophists, starting with **Protagoras**. A lot of what we know today about the **Sophists**, and about **Socrates**, we know from the writings of Plato (for example, his dialogues *Cratylus*, *Protagoras*, etc.). Today we'll learn a bit about **Plato**, the student of **Socrates**.

Plato (427-347 BC) was an immensely influential ancient Greek philosopher, a student of Socrates, writer of philosophical dialogues, and founder of the **Academy (386 BC)** in Athens. Plato's Academy became the most famous school in the classical world, lasting for 900 years (!), and its most famous pupil was **Aristotle** (N.B. Socrates taught Plato, and Plato taught Aristotle).

Plato lectured extensively at the Academy, and wrote on many philosophical issues, dealing especially in politics, ethics, metaphysics and *epistemology*¹. The most important writings of Plato are his dialogues. The dialogues of Plato are lively, often humorous or ironic, full of memorable characters and humble detail. It is generally agreed that Plato is the most enjoyable of philosophers to read.

Here is a short run of Plato's Life in context:

Sources of Information on the Historical Socrates (besides Plato):

Apology
 Aristophanes 445-385 *The Clouds*, 423 B.C.E.
 Aristotle: See *Metaphysics* 987B1-6, 1086a37-b5

Socrates was unlike Plato:

He

- concerned himself with ethics
- sought definitions of universals
- didn't separate the universals.

Key Events in Plato's Lifetime

Pericles (495-429 B.C.E.), Prosperity, and the Building Program on the Acropolis
 Athens dominates Sparta 454
 Peloponnesian War (Athens vs. Sparta) 431-404
 Socrates at Battle of Poteidaia (1/4 men killed) 432-29
 Fall of Athens: 404, Thirty Tyrants 403, Democracy Restored 399, Socrates Executed
 Plague in Athens 430-27 Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* 429 Sophocles' Death 405
 Plato visits Sicily: 387; 367; 360
 Founding of the Academy: 386 (lasted 900 years)
 Aristotle comes to the Academy (age 17): 367
 Philip of Macedon begins his conquests 359
 First Roman victory 340

General classification of Plato's Dialogues:

- **Early:** short, focused on ethical virtues, negative, Socrates has no knowledge (*Euthyphro*, *Ion*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Hippias*, *Charmides*)
- **Middle:** longer, Forms introduced and used, unity of virtues, (*Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, etc.)

¹ Epistemology = all existence, and our knowledge of it

- **Late:** ("Academic"): analytic, abstract, un-conversational, knotty, difficult (Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Laws)

<http://www.uh.edu/~cfreelan/courses/platotimeline.html>

Early dialogues: We know much about Socrates' ideas (and Plato's teachings), because Plato wrote down dialogues between Socrates and other philosophers. These dialogues were used in his Academy as starting points for discussion (the discussions themselves, and Plato's views on the issues discussed, have all been lost to us). Platonic dialogues typically feature Socrates asking questions of another and proving, through questioning, that the other person has the wrong idea on the subject. Initially, Plato (like Socrates) raised mainly ethical issues: what is friendship? What is virtue? Can virtue be taught?, etc. In these early Platonic dialogues, Socrates questions another person and proves, through these questions, that the other person has the wrong idea on the subject. **These dialogues never really answer the questions they begin with; rather, following the Socratic method, they provoke thought, and invite the reader (along with the dialogue participants) to come up with their own conclusions.**

The **middle dialogues** of Plato develop, express, and defend his own, now more firmly established views about central philosophical issues. Plato developed his own philosophy and the Socrates of the later dialogues does more teaching than he does questioning. The fundamental aspect of Plato's thought is the **theory of "ideas" or "forms."** Plato, like so many other Greek philosophers, was puzzled by the mystery of change in the physical world. *Heraclitus* had said that there is nothing certain or stable, except the fact that things change; *Parmenides* and the *Eleatic* philosophers claimed that all change, motion, and time was an illusion. Where was the truth? How can these two opposite positions be reconciled?

Plato ingeniously combined the two in his theory of forms.

The masterpiece among the **middle dialogues** is **Plato's Republic**. It is one of the single most influential works in Western philosophy. Essentially, it deals with the central problem of how to live a good life; this inquiry is shaped into the parallel questions

- **What is justice in the State**, or what would an ideal State be like, and
- **What is a just** (in other words, *good*) **individual?**

Naturally these questions also span many others, such as, "How the citizens of a state should be educated? What kinds of arts should be encouraged? What form its government should take? Who should do the governing, and for what rewards? What is the nature of the soul? And, finally, "What (if any) divine sanctions and afterlife should be thought to exist?" The dialogue, then, covers just about every aspect of Plato's thought. There are several central aspects to the dialogue that sum up Platonic thought extremely well (particularly on the nature of justice and on the nature of an ideal republic). In *The Republic*, Plato uses the *Allegory of the Cave*, which explains his *theory of forms*.²

Among the other dialogues of this period are Plato's treatments of human emotion in general (and of love, in particular) in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*.

Plato's later writings often modify or completely abandon the formal structure of dialogue. They include a critical examination of the *theory of forms*, an extended discussion of the problem of knowledge, cosmological speculations, and lengthy discussion of government.³

² <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/GREECE/PLATO.HTM>

³ <http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/plat.htm>

Plato's Theory of Forms

Theoretical entities (Forms/ Ideas) are postulated, which are

- **Intelligible** ('knowable' to the mind, but not perceptible through the senses)
- **Immutable** (unchanging)
- **Eternal** (lasting forever), and
- **Objective** (mind-independent) realities: even if there were no just acts, or just people, there would still be such a thing as Justice Itself.

Terminology

Forms are sometimes called "*Ideas*" - Plato's words are *eidos* and *idea* (which suggests the English "idea"). Calling '*Forms*' '*Ideas*' does not carry the same meaning, however, because **Plato's Forms are not mental entities** – they are not even mind-dependent! Their existence and nature are totally abstract – they ARE *graspable* only by the mind, but they do not depend on being grasped, in order to exist.

Plato's Arguments for the Existence of Forms

Each argument is connected to a function which Plato thinks Forms should play. Some of these "reasons" for believing in Forms don't really add up to logical arguments, but some do:

1. **Forms** are *objects corresponding to Socratic definitions*.
They provide an objective basis for moral concepts. A definition is correct, if it accurately describes a Form; Justice is that statement which correctly tells us '**What Justice Is.**'
2. **Forms** are *objects of recollection* – Plato refers to that instinctive knowledge we get from our genetic ancestors, who have experienced the world before us (this refers to the Socratic definition is *a priori* meaning, not empirical, not gained through experience. That is how Forms become ABSOLUTE *a priori* truths.
3. **The Imperfection Argument:** Forms are the real entities to which the objects of our sensory experience (approximately) correspond. We make judgments about such properties as *equal*, *circular*, *square*, etc., even though we have never actually experienced any of them in perception. Forms are the entities that perfectly embody these characteristics we have in **mind** even though we have never experienced them perceptually.
4. **Argument from Knowledge** ("from the sciences"): What is our knowledge "about"? When we know something, what is our knowledge "*knowledge of*"? Plato supposes that there is a class of **stable**, **permanent**, and **unchanging** objects that warrant our knowledge claims.
5. **"One over Many" argument:**
A famous passage in the *Republic* (596a) suggests a **semantic** role for the Forms ("there is one Form for each set of many things to which we give the same name"). That is, when you use the word 'just' and I use the word 'just', what makes it one and the same thing that we're talking about? Plato's answer is: the Form of *Justice*, the "one over the many."

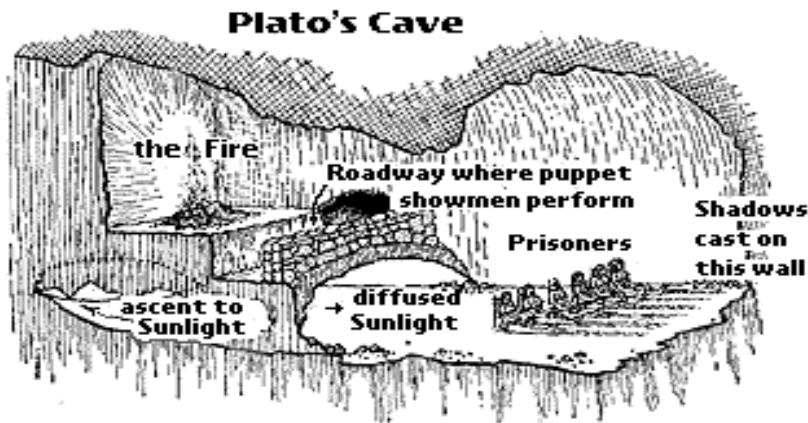
The Allegory of the Cave

Plato realizes that the general run of humankind can think, and speak, etc., without (so far as they acknowledge it) any awareness of his realm of Forms.

The allegory of the cave is supposed to explain this.

In the allegory, Plato likens people untutored in the Theory of Forms to prisoners chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these

puppets, the real objects that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects that they do not see. Here is an illustration of Plato's Cave:



From *Great Dialogues of Plato: Complete Texts of the Republic, Apology, Crito Phaido, Ion, and Meno, Vol. 1.* (Warmington and Rouse, eds.) New York, Signet Classics: 1999. p. 316.

Such prisoners would mistake appearance for reality. They would think the things they see on the wall (the shadows) were real; they would know nothing of the real causes of the shadows.

So when the prisoners talk, what are they talking about? If an object (a book, let us say) is carried past behind them, and it casts a shadow on the wall, and a prisoner says “I see a book,” what is he talking about?

He thinks he is talking about a book, but he is really talking about a shadow. But he uses the word “book.” What does that refer to? Plato gives his answer at line (515b2):

“And if they could talk to one another, don’t you think they’d suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them?”

Plato’s point is that the prisoners would be mistaken, for they would be naming the terms in their language to refer to the **shadows** that pass before their eyes, rather than (as is correct, in Plato’s view) to the real things that cast the shadows.

If a prisoner says, “That’s a book” he thinks that the word “book” refers to the very thing he is looking at. But he would be wrong. He’s only looking at a shadow. The real referent of the word “book” he cannot see. To see it, he would have to turn his head around.

Plato’s point: the general terms of our language are not “names” of the physical objects that we can see. They are actually names of things that we cannot see, things that we can only grasp with our mind.

When the prisoners are released, they can turn their heads and see the real objects. Then they realize their error. What can **we** do that is analogous to turning our heads and seeing the causes of the shadows? We can come to grasp the Forms with our minds.

Plato’s aim in the *Republic* is to describe what is necessary for us to achieve this reflective understanding. But even without it, it remains true that our very ability to think and to speak depends on the Forms. For the terms of the language we use get their meaning by “naming” the Forms that the objects we perceive participate in.

The prisoners may learn what a book is by their experience with **shadows** of the “bookness.” But they would be mistaken if they thought that the word “book” refers to something that any of them has ever seen. Likewise, we may acquire concepts by our perceptual experience of physical objects. But we would be mistaken if we thought that the concepts that we can only grasp with our minds were on the same level as the things we perceive.

<http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm>

The “One over Many” Argument

According to Aristotle, the Platonists had an argument for the existence of Forms that he called the “One over Many.” Plato himself never used this title, although he sometimes described a Form as being a “one over many.”

The idea behind the One over Many is probably best exemplified in Plato’s dialogues in the principle enunciated at *Rep.* 596a:

We are in the habit of positing a single Form for each plurality of things to which we give the same name.

The idea is this: If there is a set of things all of which have the same “name,” then there is a Form for that set. By “name” here we should probably understand “general term” or “predicate” (to use the word that Aristotle invented for this kind of “name”) - that is, a term that can be applied in the same way to many different things that all have something in common, a term like ‘bed’ or ‘table’. Cf. the next speech in *Rep.* 596a-b:

Then let’s now take any of the manys you like. For example, there are many beds and tables ... but there are only two forms of such furniture, one of the bed and one of the table.

What the principle tells us in this case is:

For any set of things to which we apply the term ‘table’, there is a single Form.

This is the Form of Table, or (perhaps) Tablehood, or (as Plato would say) The Table Itself.

Since the things to which we apply the term ‘table’ are obviously **tables**, we can reformulate this instance of the principle as follows:

For any set of tables, there is a single Form.

But surely the principle must tell us more than this. It must tell us in what way the single Form is relevant to the set of tables (or whatever) it is Over. Here we get some help from *Phaedo* 100c-d, where we also see One-Over-Many reasoning at work:

... if there is anything beautiful besides Beauty itself, it is beautiful for no other reason that that it shares in that Beauty. ... nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of, or the sharing in, or however you may describe its relationship to that Beauty we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all things are made beautiful by Beauty.

So what the principle tells us can now be fleshed out a bit:

For any set of tables, there is a single Form, and it is in virtue of some relationship to that Form that they are all made to be tables.

That is, it is the Form of Table that makes something a table.

We are now in a position to see why Aristotle called this an **argument** for the Forms. The only thing we have seen so far that even looks like an argument would go like this:

a, *b*, and *c* are all tables (i.e., things to which we apply the name “table”).

Therefore, there is a Form (the Table Itself) that *a*, *b*, and *c* all share in; and it is by virtue of sharing in this Form that they are all tables.

The argument moves from a premise asserting the existence of a plurality of things **that have something in common** to a conclusion that asserts the existence of something **else**. But what is this something else?

One might suggest: it is some **feature** that they all have in common. But this seems too weak; for it's already asserted in the premise that they all have something in common: they are all tables.

Rather: the conclusion asserts the existence of some entity that **explains** the fact that they all have some feature in common.

Plato never made completely clear the nature of the relationship between the many things and the one Form that is “over” them. He tended to use the term “participation” or “sharing in” to describe this relation. The idea seems to be that it is by **participating** in a Form that a thing comes to be the kind of thing that it is - tables are tables because they participate in the Form Table; beautiful things are beautiful because they participate in the Form Beauty. That is: **participation explains predication**. A thing is *F* because it participates in the Form, *F*-ness.

But what more can be said about the nature of participation? There are some clues in the *Phaedo*. Recall 74-76: equal sticks and equal stones are said to be **like** the form of Equality, but to be **deficient**, to fall short. This suggests that participation involves, at least in part, **deficient resemblance**.

The **Allegory of the Cave** in *Republic* also supports the idea that:

Forms are **paradigms**, perfect examples of the properties or common features of the things they are invoked to explain. These paradigms are accessible to the mind, and it is by comparison to them that we apply their “names” to objects of sense perception.

The **semantic** theory embedded in this: **general terms are proper names of Forms**. We can apply these terms to participants in the Forms by a kind of courtesy, provided that the participants measure up sufficiently closely to the paradigms.

<http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/1ovrmany.htm>

A review of the essential points of the middle period Theory of Forms:

- A “Two-Worlds” theory
- A Form is a “one-over-many”:
- There’s a Form whenever two or more things have something in common. Cf. *Rep.* 596a:
- *We are in the habit of positing a single Form for each plurality of things to which we give the same name.*
- Forms are **paradigms**
- Things participate in the Forms by being appropriately related to these paradigms (by resembling them).
- In general: *x*’s being *F* is explained by *x*’s participating in *F*-ness.

A good summary statement from Parmenides, 130e-131a:

There are certain forms, whose names these other things have through getting a share of them – as, for instance, they come to be like by getting a share of likeness, large by getting a share of largeness, and just and beautiful by getting a share of justice and beauty.

Some Objections to the Theory of Forms

1. The Extent of the World of Forms - What things are there Forms for?

- Moral and aesthetic ideals: “just, beautiful, good”
- Natural kinds: “human being”
- Natural stuffs: “fire, water” [Socrates expresses uncertainty about the last two]
- “Undignified” things: “hair, mud, dirt.” [Socrates denies Forms for things in this group, but Parmenides says that when he gets older he’ll learn not to be so fastidious. This is clearly a point where there is a conflict between the role of Forms as (morally or aesthetically pleasing) *paradigms* and their role as *universals*.]

2. The Nature of Participation - Part or Whole? The dilemma of participation:

Is (a) the **whole** Form, or only (b) a **part** of it, in each participant?

If (a), then each Form will be “separate from itself” if it is in many things.

If (b), then the Form is divisible, and hence no longer a unity.

[The conclusion of this dilemma seems to be that Forms will either be **divisible** or **not shareable**. But Forms **have** to be shareable, that is the whole point of having the theory!]

Puzzling consequences if Forms are divisible (131d-e):

The parts of Largeness are **small** (with respect to Largeness) but still make the things they are in **large**.

[Note: this conflicts with one of Plato’s requirements in the *Phaedo*: what makes something *F* must itself be *F*.]

A part of Equality which is “less than Equality itself” nevertheless makes what it is in *equal*.

The parts of Smallness are smaller than Smallness itself! And the **addition** of such a part to something makes that thing **smaller** than it was before the addition of that small part!

<http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/tmalect.htm>

Conclusions:

1. The Sophists’ interest in language (its use, structure, sounds and meaning) may have a practical explanation (all Athenian citizens were their own lawyers, and language skills were the key to success in court).
2. The Classical Greek Philosophers were interested in the relationship between Grammar and Logic (Language and Reasoning). That is why so much thought was given to the *meanings* that Language allows us to understand, think, and express.
3. Plato’s Theory of Forms has semantic implications (generic terms = the proper names of Forms).