

Constructing Knowledge in the Ancient Greek World: Plato

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Plato (c. 427-347 BCE)

- Plato (427-347 BCE) pioneer in the philosophy which centralizes the importance of reason
- Born in Athens to wealthy, influential family lived through political instability and war with Sparta.
- Not the first Greek to question human knowledge → but first to give systematic treatment of issues of knowledge
- *Theaetetus*: Knowledge and truth are not relative to individuals
- Protagoras (490-420 BCE) Man is the measure of all things
- *Republic*: most influential ideas about epistemology



Three Analogies

- **Sun analogy:** visual perception relates to the sun as knowledge is to intellectual source, “goodness”
- **Line analogy:** explores the relationship between perceiving likeness and the things they are likeness of → compared to mathematical understanding of physical things like geometry and pure understanding of the “Forms”
- **Allegory of the cave:** humans are prisoners of their own sensory experience → must escape the cave into the realm of the intelligible

“Plato is holding that only the realm of abstract, immaterial Forms can be the domain of knowledge, so that the everyday world of material objects, actions and so on is one about which only mere belief is possible” (David Cooper, *Epistemology*).

On Plato's Forms

- Eidos (forms): “It is most of all from Plato that we get the theory of Forms, according to which the world we know through the senses is only an imitation of the pure, eternal, and unchanging world of the Forms” (Thomas Brickhouse)
- The Phaedo contains an extended description of the characteristics and functions of the forms (S. Marc Cohen):
 - Unchangeable (78c10-d9)
 - Eternal (79d2)
 - Intelligible, not perceptible (79a1-5)
 - Divine (80a3, b1)
 - Incorporeal (passim)
 - Causes of being (“The one over the many”) (100c)
 - Are unqualifiedly what their instances are only with qualification (75b)
 - More real than physical things

On objects with characteristic of beauty vs. Beauty itself

“What shall we say about the spectators, then, who can see a plurality of beautiful things, but not beauty itself, and who are incapable of following if someone else tries to lead them to it, and who can see many moral actions, but not morality itself, and so on? That they only ever entertain beliefs, and do not know any of the things they believe”

“That’s what we have to say,” he said.

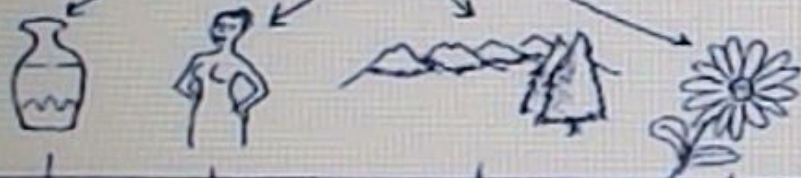
“As for those who can see each of these things in themselves, in its permanent and unvarying nature, we’ll say they have knowledge and are not merely entertaining beliefs, won’t we?” (Republic, 579e).

BEAUTY

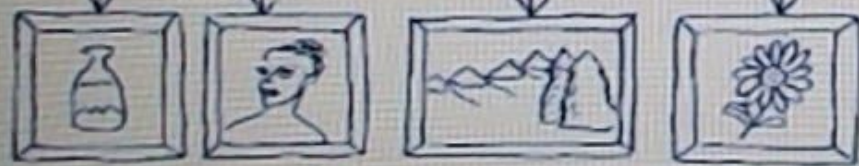
The
Form of
Beauty



The
Concept of
Beauty



Individual
Beautiful
Entities



Imitations of
Beautiful Entities
(paintings, photos,
reflections, shadows)



Joseph Kosuth
(American, b. 1945)

One and Three Chairs

Musee National
d'Art Moderne,
Centre Georges
Pompidou, Paris,
France

How does this relate to Plato's theory of forms?





The Sun Analogy

“Well, here’s how you can think about the mind as well. When its object is something which is lit up by truth and reality, then it has—and obviously has—intelligent awareness and knowledge. However, when its object is permeated with darkness (that is, when its object is something which is subject to generation and decay), then it has beliefs and is less effective, because its beliefs chop and change, and under these circumstances it comes across as devoid of intelligence.” [...]

“Well, what I’m saying is that it’s goodness which give the things we know their truth and makes it possible for people to have knowledge. It is responsible for knowledge and truth, and you should think of it as being within the intelligible realm, but you shouldn’t identify it with knowledge and truth, otherwise you’ll be wrong: for all their value, it is even more valuable. In the other realm, it is right to regard light and sight as resembling the sun; so in this realm it is right to regard knowledge and truth as resembling goodness, but not to identify either of them with goodness, which should be rated even more highly” (Republic, 508d-509a)



The Sun

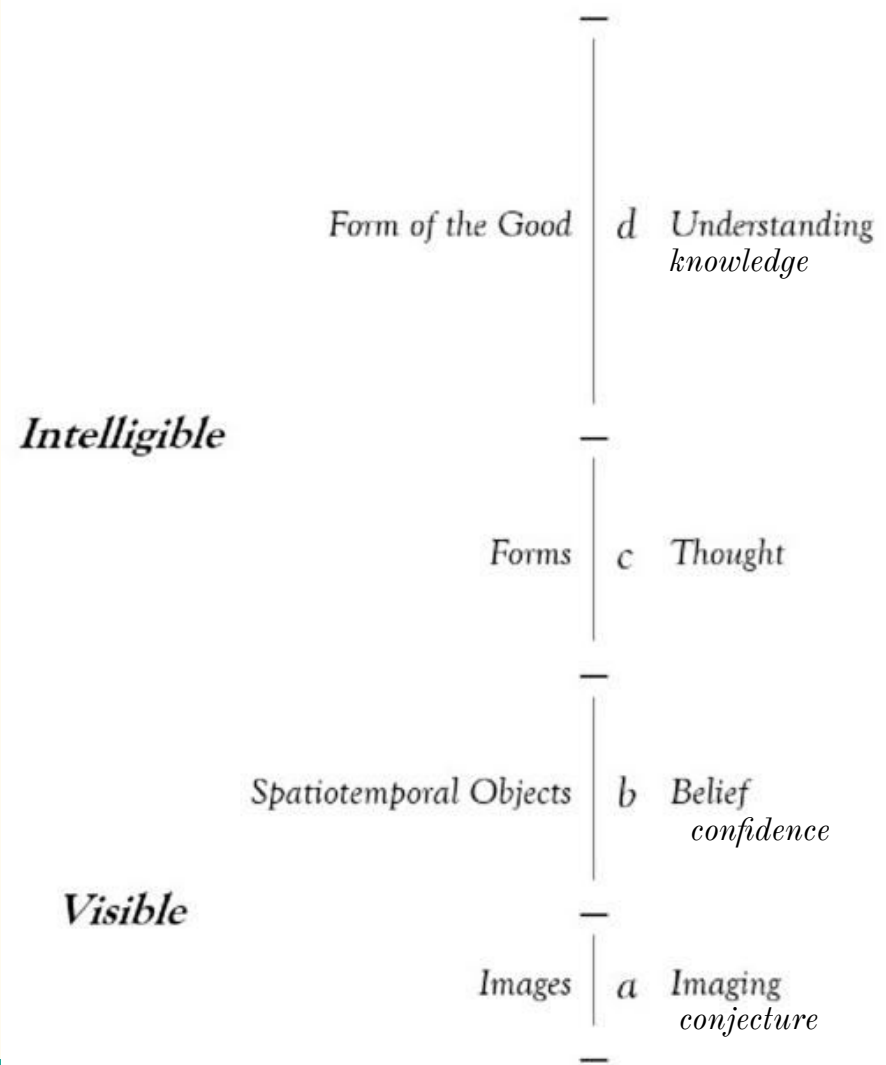
Source	 The Sun	The (Form of the) Good
Provides what?	Light, growth	Reality, truth – 'light of reason'
Where?	Sensible world	Intelligible World
In order to...	 See	 Know
With what?	 Objects i.e. 'particulars'	FORMS

The Line Analogy

Used to differentiate between belief (opinion) and knowledge (truth).

Division between what is visible (sensory perception) and what is intelligible (known through reason, but not seen).

The visible portion is smaller than the intelligible portion.



Plato's Cave



On the empirical sciences

‘Back in the cave they might have had rewards and praise and prizes for the person who was quickest at identifying the passing shapes, who had the best memory for the ones which came earlier or later or simultaneously, and who as a result was best at predicting what was going to come next. Do you think he would feel any desire for these prizes? Would he envy those who were respected and powerful there? Or would he feel as Achilles does in Homer? Would he much prefer “to labour as a common serf, serving a man with nothing to his name,” putting up with anything to avoid holding those opinions and living that life?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘If you ask me, he’d be prepared to put up with anything to avoid that way of life.’