



Plato in a Nutshell: A Beginner's Guide to the Philosophy of Plato

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Who was Plato?

Plato was born in Athens in 427 BC to a well established aristocratic family. His father, Ariston, could trace his lineage back to the old kings of Athens; his mother, Perictione, was a sister of Charmides and the cousin of Critas, two prominent figures in the Athenian oligarchy of 404-403 BC. Plato also had two brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, who are portrayed in his masterpiece, *The Republic*. Given this illustrious background it is almost certain that Plato, as a young man, was groomed for a life of public service.

Only a few years before Plato was born, Athens entered into a drawn-out war with Sparta (the Peloponnesian War), that eventually led to the decline of Athens' power in the Mediterranean world. Although he grew up during Athens' great experiment with democracy during the Fifth Century, it was certainly evident at this time that democracy was failing, and that some other type of political system was needed.

Around the age of twenty, he became a disciple of Socrates, the father of Western philosophy. Socrates, as you may recall from reading the *Apology*, made it his mission to examine the beliefs of his fellow Athenians in order to help them and himself attain wisdom. Socrates' tenacious style of philosophical examination earned him a number of powerful enemies. In 399 BC he was tried on the charges of impiety and corruption of the city's youth, found guilty, and eventually forced to take his own life. The influence of Socrates on Plato's philosophical career cannot be understated. Plato was so taken by the character and ideas of Socrates that he used Socrates as the central figure in all his philosophical dialogues, and made considerable use of Socrates' method during his early part of his career.

Disillusioned by the manner of Socrates' death, Plato gave up all thoughts of a political career, dedicating himself instead wholly to philosophy. He left Athens and for the next twelve years traveled around the Mediterranean, studying philosophy, geometry, religion, and other sciences. During this period, Plato was also invited to Syracuse, where he became friendly with Dion, the brother-in-law of Dionysius, the tyrant of the city. He would return to this city twice again (in 367 and 361) in a futile effort to implement some of the political ideas that he had developed in his *Republic* (Ep. 7).

Eventually Plato returned to Athens in 387 to found his Academy, the aim of which was to philosophically educate the future leaders of Greek society. The Academy has been called the first European university, since its studies included, not just philosophy, but all the known sciences. Plato himself was said to have delivered many of the lectures at the

Academy, although the notes from these lectures were never published. Among the most famous students of the Academy was Aristotle, who would later go on to found his own school, the Lyceum. Plato's Academy would continue to educate Athenian noblemen for several centuries, influencing most of the major philosophical schools of the Western world. Plato died at the age of 80 in 347 BC.

Plato's Dialogues

Most of Plato's philosophical writing takes the form of dialogues. It is believed that all forty-two of the dialogues that Plato wrote have survived. These dialogues were written for educated laymen (as opposed to the elite in his academy) in order to interest them in philosophy (Taylor 10). To sum up their common characteristics, Plato's dialogues:

- are philosophical discussions between two or more participants.
- usually focus on a specific theme: e.g., justice, friendship, piety.
- are written for the most part like regular conversations, which often include digressions and frequently are inconclusive.

Plato's dialogues are not just great works of philosophy; they are also recognized as great literary works as well. He goes to much effort to carefully set the scene of each dialogue and to develop the personalities of each of the characters in them. One is frequently amazed at just how dramatic many of these dialogues are, considering their lofty topics.

Plato's dialogues can be divided into three periods:

Early Dialogues	Middle Dialogues	Late Dialogues
Apology Crito Laches Euthyphro Republic, Book 1	Gorgias Meno Euthydemus Hippias I and II Cratylas	Symposium Phaedo Republic, Books 2-10 Timaeus Laws

As has already been pointed out, Plato uses Socrates as the main interlocutor in his dialogues. The specific way that Plato makes use of the character of Socrates varies somewhat during the different periods in which Plato wrote.

In the early dialogues the Socrates that Plato presents to the reader is probably close to the historic Socrates. Socrates is portrayed in these dialogues as precisely what he was in real life—a gadfly, whose aim was to make people recognize that many of their beliefs are baseless. The Socrates of these early dialogues claims to be ignorant of everything except his own ignorance, and as such rarely presents his own position on the topics being discussed. Plato's aim, then, in these early dialogues primarily, is critical: that is, to tear apart the inadequate moral views of others.

In the middle dialogues, Plato is coming into his own as a philosopher and is starting to develop some of his own metaphysical and epistemological positions. It is during this period that Plato begins to introduce his theory of the forms into his writings. In the late dialogues, Plato uses Socrates almost exclusively to advance his own views. His approach in these dialogues is essentially constructive—that is, to develop his own mature philo-

sophical system.

The Republic is an interesting work because in it we get the best of both the early and later dialogues. Book one is written as a traditional dialogue in which Socrates is represented in a fairly historical way, critically reacting to the views of others in the dialogue. But the rest of the text (Books 2-10) is much more of a monologue in which Socrates serves as little more than a mouth-piece for Plato's own political views.

Plato's Metaphysics

To understand Plato's worldview, it is important to grasp the distinction that he makes between sensible "things" and "forms."

Things are those aspects of reality which we perceive through our senses: a tree, a car, a table, chair, a beautiful model, etc. Everything that we experience in the world of sensation is constantly changing (the table will start to get worn down, the beautiful model will age with time), imperfect and often fleeting. This is the realm of appearances, and we all know that appearances can be deceptive.

Whereas things change, decay, and ultimately fade away, the Forms (the Greek term is Eidos which is sometimes translated as Ideas) are eternal and unchanging. This is the realm of perfect concepts and is grasped, not by the senses, but by the reason.

Thus, for Plato there are two fundamental aspects or realms of reality—the realm of the senses and the realm of the forms. These two realms can be contrasted in the following way:

Sensible World	World of the Forms
appearance (seems real)	appearance (seems real)
immanent (within space and time)	transcendent (beyond space and time)
becoming (ever changing)	being (eternal and unchanging)
particular and imperfect	absolute and perfect
many instances (copy; imitation)	one essence (archetype)
perceived by senses	known by reason
subjective (dependent upon my perception)	objective (exist independently of my mind)
eg., a table, a just act, a beautiful model, a circle, Sue	e.g., Table, Justice, Beauty, Circle, Man

For Plato it is the world of the Forms (the realm of being) that is "really real" world; the world that we perceive with our senses (the realm of becoming) is little more than an imitation of this ultimate reality. He believes that for particular and imperfect thing that exists in the sensible realm (a table, a just act, a beautiful model, a circle) there is a corresponding absolute and perfect Form (Table, Justice, Beauty, a Circle).

In order to explain how sensible things come into being, Plato relies on the idea of participation. A table comes into being, he believes, because it participates in the form of Tableness. In the *Phaedo* Plato uses the metaphor of participation to explain the existence of particular beautiful things:

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?

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 the 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 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? (100c-e)

But why did Plato need to devise such an elaborate metaphysical system to ground his ethics? The answer seems to be that he is trying to respond to the relativism of the Sophists, who were persuasively arguing that true and false, good and bad, were simply matters of opinion. Plato clearly recognized that if this kind of relativism was accepted that it would lead to the death of philosophy and all legitimate attempts at moral discourse.

To save the philosophical enterprise, Plato had to devise an idea of truth and goodness that was independent of individual perceptions of truth and goodness. Thus he needed to anchor these concepts in a transcendent realm—the world of the forms.

While the Sophists, then, would maintain that there potentially could be as many legitimate ideas of justice or beauty as there are individuals, for Plato there is Justice and Beauty—objective and transcendent realities that have nothing to do with my individual perceptions or opinions.

Plato's Analogies: The Sun, The Divided Line and the Cave

If Plato's metaphysics strikes you as being difficult to grasp, you're definitely not alone. The highly abstract nature of Plato's theory has probably frustrated students since he first developed it. Perhaps recognizing this, in the *Republic* Plato resorts to using three analogies to illuminate his philosophy. A brief examination of these analogies is definitely in order before examining Plato's discussion of them in the *Republic*.

In the first of these analogies, Plato compares the Form of the Good with the sun. Just as the sun provides the light that is necessary for us to see things in the sensible realm, so does the Form of the Good provide the intellectual light that enables us to know the Forms. This comparison can be summed up in the following way:

Source	Provides...	Where?	In Order to...	What?
The Sun	light	in the sensible world	see	visible things (the sensible)

The “Good”	intellectual light	in the intelligible world	know	invisible things (the forms)
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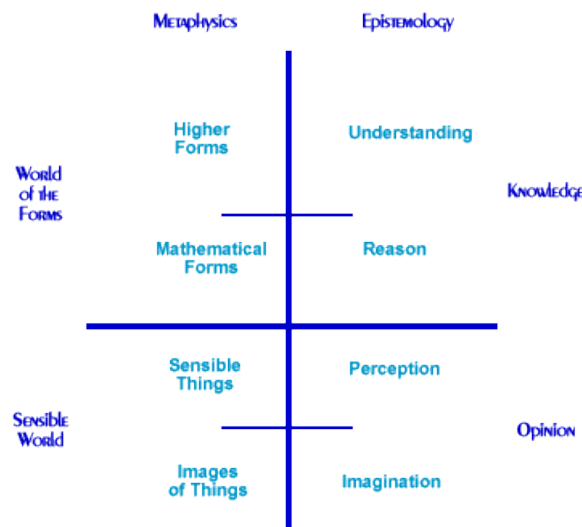
Plato also believes that just as the sun causes things in the sensible world to exist and sustains them, so too does the Good cause the forms to be. Plato’s Form of the Good, then, is the ultimate principle of reality and truth and is the source of all order, harmony, beauty and intelligibility in the universe.

The Two World’s Theory lays the foundation for understanding the two realms of reality—the sensible world and the world of the forms—that are at the heart of Plato’s metaphysics. In Book 6 of the *Republic*, however, Plato goes one step further by dividing each of these realms into additional subdivisions:

The Sensible World		The World of the Forms	
images of sensible things	sensible things	mathematical forms (table, circle, human)	higher forms
<i>reflections, paintings, photos</i>	<i>a chair, a table, a just act, a beautiful person</i>	<i>table, circle, human (based on sensible things)</i>	<i>Justice, Beauty (purely abstract)</i>

Plato argues that each of these four aspects of reality—images, things, mathematical forms and higher forms—must be grasped by a different faculty of the mind. We now move from metaphysics (the study of the nature of reality) to a different but related branch of philosophy—epistemology. Epistemology seeks to understand how we know or grasp that which exists in reality.

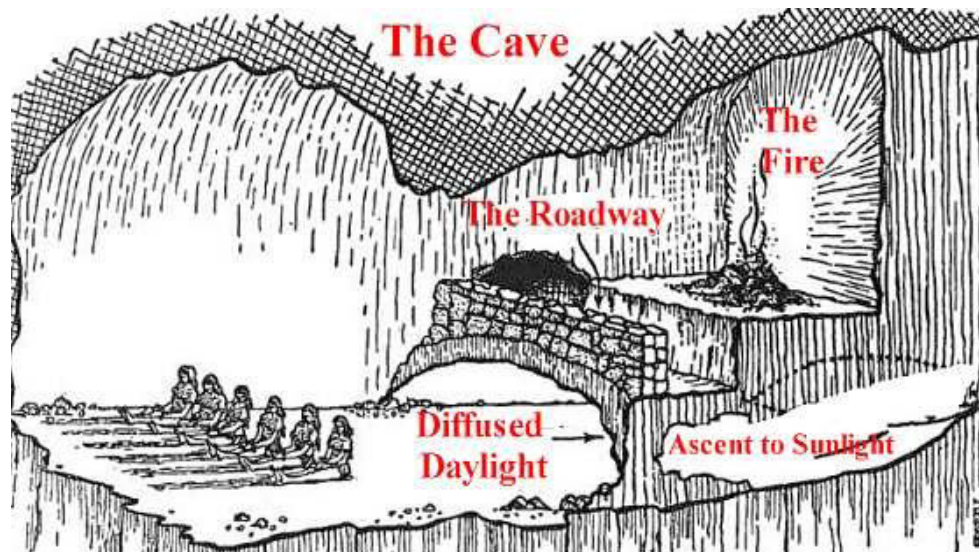
In an attempt to illustrate his epistemological system, Plato gives us his famous image of the divided line. The line is divided into four parts signified by the main horizontal and vertical lines:



According to Plato's understanding, everything below the horizontal line represents the sensible world; everything above it, the world of the forms. Plato means us to proceed from the bottom to the top, from images to higher forms, from the lowest level of reality to the highest.

Plato divides the image further by introducing the vertical line. Everything on the left-hand side of the vertical line represents particular dimensions of reality within the sensible world and the world of the forms. Everything on the right hand side represents the particular faculties one uses to grasp the corresponding dimension of reality. Thus one uses imagination to grasp images, perception to grasp sensible things, and so on. The higher up one goes on the right-hand side of the image the greater the degree of intellectual certainty one attains. Thus the highest degree of certainty is attained by using our understanding which enables us to grasp higher forms.

In some ways, Plato's entire philosophy can be summed up in his most famous analogy—the allegory of the Cave. Plato has us imagine an underground cave, in which a group of prisoners are chained and able to see only what is in front of them. Behind the prisoners is a fire in front of which men walk carrying objects that cast shadows on the walls of the cave. Since all they've been exposed to are these images, the prisoners naturally come to think that the shadows on the wall are in fact reality. But in a dramatic twist, Plato has one of the prisoners escape and escape from the darkness of the cave. At first, he is blinded by the bright light of the sun, but after his eyes adjust he comes to realize that what he is experiencing outside the cave is reality, and all he thought was real was mere illusion. Feeling pity for his fellow prisoners, he goes back in the cave to try to liberate them. In the end, the other prisoners kill the one who is trying to free them, so convinced are they that the shadows they experience inside the cave are the only true reality.



The allegory of the cave ties together all of the other analogies that Plato uses to explain his worldview. Those who are enamored with the world of images are like the prisoners in the cave, completely caught up with images they perceive to be real. The man who breaks free of his chains is the philosopher who, using his intellect ascends out of the cave (out of the world of the senses and into the world of the forms). Plato believes that the true philosopher—and we should think of Socrates here—would elect to return to the world of the senses to try to liberate his fellow man, even though he naturally would prefer to remain permanently in the world of the forms and would face persecution and possible death for doing so.

Plato on the Good Life

While all this discussion about the world of the forms vs. the sensible world and knowledge vs. opinion might seem fairly esoteric, it actually serves a fairly practical function in Plato's philosophy. You see, Plato was convinced that as long as human beings remained fixated on the sensible realm with impermanence and imperfections, there really was no hope that they'd ever attain true happiness in life. Only by using philosophical understanding could we break free of the illusions perpetuated by sensible things and grasp higher forms such as Beauty, Truth, and Goodness that are the source of both morality and happiness.

In a sense, what Plato was doing in his philosophy was building upon the insights of his intellectual mentor, Socrates. Socrates, as we have seen, believed that virtue was the key to the good life. Plato's insight—or mistake, depending upon how you view it—was to reason that true virtue was impossible as long as one was fixated on the transient goods of the sensible realm. The World of the Forms was his way of ensuring that virtue and goodness remained grounded in a Good that was beyond space and time and, therefore, eternal and incorruptible.

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