

**a) Explain Plato's Form of the Good**

Plato believed that the world we around us is an illusion, and that everyday things that we take for granted are merely weak imitations of the true object behind it. He believed that behind every earthly object, and every earthly concept (e.g. beauty), there is an unearthly truth; a perfect version. He believed that there was a place where everything that is, has been, or ever will be in existence in kept, and that is how we know that a pen is a pen, a chair is a chair. This he believed, was the only possible explanation to the philosophical question: 'What makes a thing, the thing that it is?'

Plato believed in the soul- the only part of a human that yields any importance or relevance. He believed that it was once, (before we were born), free to roam the World of the Forms, and now that it is in our world, held prisoner in our bodies, it longs to go back. Whilst I in the World of Forms, the soul had access to true knowledge, and everything that we 'know' today, is just remembering what we have already learnt.

Forms are placed in a Hierarchy, the Form of the Good, being the most important. It is central to the existence of our entire Universe and without it there would be no perfect beauty, no perfect justice, no perfect *anything*. It structures each form, giving it its own characteristics.

Plato used an analogy to explain his theories. He told people of a cave, where there is a row of men, chained up, facing the back wall. Behind them is a stage with actors and behind them a fire, casting shadows of the actors on to the wall of the cave. Because these men have been there their whole lives, these shadows are the only reality they know. They have grown to accept these shadows as what is real. A man breaks free of his chains, and gets outside. At first he is blinded by the overwhelming light of the sun, as he has never been exposed to such brightness. He soon sees, with amazing clarity, objects which he thought he knew before. He sees the sun for what it truly is- the source of all life. For the first time he would understand the truth. He completely disregards the cave and the shadows, and realises that they are not what is real. When he goes back to tell the others of his remarkable journey, they do not believe him, and think that he has become insane. The fact that he can no longer see the shadows reinforce their views of him, and when he tries to make them follow him, they put him to death.

This analogy aims to show the difference between appearance and reality. The prisoners represent ordinary people, who have not yet gained true knowledge. Their whole lives, all they have seen are shadows, so that is what they accept and believe to be 'real'. Our mistake, just like the prisoners' is that we are relying on our sense experiences. The shadows represent the illusion created to fool us in to believing what we sense is real. This however is not the case, as we can gain no true knowledge from sense experience. The cave is said to represent both the visible world, and the body in which the soul is entrapped. The escape, and journey into the outside world, represents the philosophers' discovery of true knowledge. Though it is a long and painful one, no one who has discovered and acquired true knowledge would ever want to go back to their former, ignorant self.

This leads on to perhaps the most important piece of symbolism of the analogy: the Sun. The Sun represents the Form of the Good, the most perfect of all realities. When a person gains true knowledge of this, they are able to understand everything else; just like everything depends on the sun for existence in our world, in the World of Forms, everything relies on the Form of the Good.

**b) 'Plato's Forms are no more than an invention'. Discuss**

Many people believe that the concept of forms seems so far-fetched and presumptuous, that it cannot possibly be true. Many are willing to accept the concept of forms, but for them to actually exist in reality seems rather absurd.

The main reason why so many believe that this theory has no credibility is the total lack of supporting evidence. Of course this is somewhat irrelevant in Plato's view as the whole premise of his theory is that there can be no evidence, as sense experience is to be totally disregarded. To many critics this just seems like Plato is taking the way out, saying that we cannot trust sense experience just so he doesn't have to try and justify a theory that would be near impossible to.

If there is a world with all forms, then surely there would be the perfect version of unpleasant things such as Death, Disease and Dishonesty. In the world of forms these would be 'perfect', so would be far more devastating. A counter-argument for this is that these things are the absence of other things, so do really exist or need a form. However there seems to be no argument for things like wasps, which definitely exist, and serve no good purpose. It can also be argued that there must be a form of imperfection. This is a contradiction as how can there be a perfect imperfection? These are gaping holes in a theory that seems to give people no reason to believe it.

Some people argue that something is either real or it isn't. One thing cannot be more real than another. This means that one of the underlying statements of the theory, that the World of Forms is more real than our visible world, is impossible. If it is impossible then the whole theory would fall to pieces.

The huge separation between the two worlds makes it hard to believe that we could ever gain knowledge of the World of Forms. Why should we believe in a world that we can gain no knowledge of, cannot fully understand, can never reach, and cannot even prove if or why it exists, because one man decided that it does?

As well as a lot of criticisms, there are also some arguments to support the theory. We automatically know that a chair is a chair. But why? A chair is something you sit on, but sitting on a table doesn't make it a chair. They are often made from wood, but not always. They usually have four legs, but a chair with three legs is still a chair. Two chairs can look completely dissimilar, yet we still somehow know a chair, when we see

one. The theory of forms is one of the few that address this question, and satisfactorily answer it.

