

Plato's Concept on Ideal Forms

Plato believes we are living in the shadow of reality, if we were to face reality, it would be overwhelming and we could misunderstand or be frightened back to the shadows. He believes in order to face reality, we have to slowly introduce ourselves to what is really real, to get access to reality. Plato portrays this view using an analogy.

There is a man, he is tied to a chair in a cave and he is facing the back of the wall, he sees shadows of everything that walks past the cave, such as elephants, camels and Irish Red Setters. Throughout his existence he has known the shadows of the objects he sees to be reality. Finally, he is untied and allowed to turn around and see what reality really is, but he was scared, he did not like what he saw. He turned around and returned to the reality in which he thought was real. Living in the façade of shadows of reality did not bother the man, as this was easier for him to accept than what is really real. The objects represent Ideal Forms, Plato believed that Ideal Forms are idealised notions of whatever object, behaviour or description we are thinking of. For example, if we think of a happy shopper, we recognise the shopper to be happy because they are complying with our ideal forms of happy, which are stamped in our minds. Another example, used by Plato is a Table, when someone sees a table and says, "That's one hot table" it is because according to Plato the table comes close to the Blueprint of the ideal table, which he already possesses in his mind. Ideal Forms represent Absolute Reality, as opposed to the many particular objects, which in small ways resemble them. The Ideal Forms precede existence; in order to fulfil our tasks as humans we must become aware of the Ideal Forms of everything.

Eventually, the man might become accustomed to the real objects and not their shadows, and ultimately, be able to stare at the objects themselves. Conclusively, Plato believes that we cannot trust our understanding of the world, that reality is unobvious, hidden, beneath the surface. Unfortunately, most people will be content with the dance of shadows of reality; they will be satisfied with appearances and will reject the philosophic path. But the philosophers job is to be freed from the delusion of supposed reality, that represent the world as it appears to us, and to see the Ideal Forms of everything.

However, the theory of Ideal Forms put forward by Plato has certain faults and problems. Firstly, we don't share the common ideals; if we did then everyone would like the same thing, because it would all remind us of the same Ideal Form. Secondly, people's ideal forms cannot change, so what about fashions over periods of history, for example in the Elizabethan times it was fashionable to be pale and white but nowadays it is more fashionable to be tanned and brown. We change our minds all the time; therefore our minds or opinions on objects can never change if the ideal form was to remain the same before, after and during our physical existence. Finally, we cannot pass judgement on something we have never seen before, so what about new inventions? A thousand years ago they could not have known what a mobile phone or laptop would look like because they had not been invented, so how could we possess the image of an Ideal Form in our head, if we do not even know it exists at that time.

In conclusion, where do these ideal forms come from? In short they are proof that we must have had existence before our physical existence, there must be life before life. Despite the flaws held by Plato's concept on Ideal Forms, the philosopher can still see that to see reality as it really is and not just shadows, he must realise the Ideal Forms on everything.