

AO1: Explain Plato's theory of the forms

Plato gave detailed explanation of his Theory of Forms over a writing career of some forty years. The theory was being refined over this period and is never fully explained in any one dialogue. So any explanation of the theory involved piecing together fragments as they appear throughout Plato's writing.

The theory basically is the existence of a level of reality or "world" inhabited by the ideal forms of all things and concepts. A form exists, for objects like tables and chair and for concepts, such as beauty and justice. The forms are eternal and changeless. However in contrast, the ever changing temporal world can only be a source of opinion. Plato likens the opinions derived from our senses, to the shadows of the real objects cast upon the wall of the cave. According to Plato true knowledge is the perception of the perfect forms themselves, which are real, eternal and unchanging.

Plato's entire allegory of the cave can be represented by another meaning. For example the physical world of the senses in which we are in now, is actually the cave in the story. Plato is showing us that we need to be less sheltered and leave the cave. The prisoners are the people trapped in the world of the senses. Plato would see every one but philosophers as prisoners because they are oblivious to the world of the forms. The shadows represent ideas of reality, because we believe we can see them and that they are actually there but, because we cannot touch them, they could quite possibly be illusions. One prisoner's journey out of the cave is seen to Plato as the ascent to the knowledge. He sees the escape as a philosophers attempt to reach the world of the forms. The outside world is a representation of the world of the forms which in Plato's eyes is the real world. Plato sees the sun as a form of the good, and the return to the prisoners in the cave, as the philosopher to share the reality of the world of the forms.

Whilst the forms are invisible to the eye, our souls have participated in the eternal world of forms prior to being incarnate in a physical body, and retain a memory of them. Although this memory is not readily accessible to the conscious mind, its presence is sufficient, to enable our limited perceptions. Plato maintains however, that the philosopher can achieve a state of perceiving the forms directly, with his mind's eye; by realizing these are merely hypotheses. Therefore reason is able to construct a chain of command of forms, to scale to the height of first principle and attain a state of true knowledge.

Plato also believed that each person has a soul which lives on after their body dies. He believed that this theory can be justified through logical argument. However Plato's views, theories and beliefs change as he challenges them on a quest for knowledge. In addition Plato fails to provide a obvious conclusion or convincing argument in favour of the belief there is another world, the world of the forms.

Another criticism of Plato's theory is that he believes that this higher level of reality in the realm of the forms to be self evident. In contrast we might argue that it is not self evident to us. The appearance of the wall is real enough if you walk into one! Whereas the ideal form of a cat does not seem it have much reality even as a concept.

Finally the last criticism of Plato's theories is that he believes that the highest of all forms of knowledge is an understanding of the form of the good, which he holds to be absolute. This encourages the question "how are we to know what goodness is?" if Plato is correct, surely we would all agree on what is good?