

Plato's similes of the Cave and the Divided Line

Plato's theory of the Forms means that acquiring knowledge involves turning away from the world of the senses, which can only ever produce opinion, towards the Forms and the world of the intellect. He uses metaphors and analogies to help us understand his theory.

THE DIVIDED LINE

We may divide the world into the realm of the 'sensible' – what we detect through our senses – and the realm of the 'intelligible' – what we discover using the intellect. Opinion relates to the former, knowledge to the latter. As we saw above, our epistemic states can be divided into two, and aligned with what is real. We can think of these states as lying on a line (see Plato's *Republic*, p. 236 for a diagram), knowledge as one half, opinion as the other. Plato goes on to divide each half of the line again, making four divisions in total.

Opinion is divided into belief (*pistis*) and illusion or imagination (*eikasia*). Illusion, the lowest form of epistemic state, is characterized in Plato's discussion by shadows and reflections. These things, and our thoughts about them, are very changeable and unclear. But Plato means more than just physical shadows and reflections. He also means the sorts of second-hand, uninformed views that people hold, not finding out for themselves about the world, but just believing what they are told, e.g. in the newspapers; and in the last book of the *Republic*, Plato implies that art and poetry fall under 'illusion' as well.

One step up, our commonsense views on the physical world, and on other matters such as morality, fall under 'belief'. In the *Timaeus*, Plato also includes the natural sciences under belief, since they deal with the changeable, physical world. Unlike 'illusion', belief is informed by a direct study of the world, and it is more stable and a little clearer. But it still takes the world as it appears for reality, so it isn't yet knowledge.

Knowledge also has two divisions, *dianoia*, which we can translate (in this context) as 'reasoning', and *noesis*, which we can translate as 'intelligence' or 'full understanding'. Both relate to the Forms, but *dianoia* relies on assumptions and imagination (images from the realm of the sensible) while *noesis* does not. A good example of *dianoia* is geometry. In studying triangles, e.g. in proving that the three internal angles add up to 180°, students of geometry don't study the actual, imperfect triangles they draw; they create proofs using the idea (the Form) of a triangle. They

make use of and argue about visible figures, though they are not really thinking about them, but about the originals which they resemble; it is not about the square or diagonal which they have drawn that they are arguing, but about the square itself or diagonal itself... The actual figures they draw or model... these they treat as images only, the real objects of their investigation being invisible except to the eye of reason (510d).

And that is why *dianoia* relates to the realm of the intelligible, not the sensible. But this type of knowledge works with unproven hypotheses, e.g. about different types of angle (obtuse, acute, right), and it uses images from the realm of the sensible to help its investigation.

Noésis is a ‘purer’, more perfect knowledge of the Forms, which doesn’t use images and which treats the assumptions of mathematical reasoning as assumptions. We acquire this knowledge of the Forms, of the very first principles ‘of everything’ (511b), using *nous*. By engaging in dialectic – philosophical argument – we finally reach a vision or insight of the Forms directly, without relying on sensory images or assumptions. By seeking first principles, *nous* does away with the need for the ‘hypotheses’ that it takes for granted when using *dianoia* (*nous* can be said to include *dianoia*, but goes beyond it). When the first principle has been reached, *nous* can reason through the consequences to generate further knowledge, *noésis*, ‘moving solely through Forms to Forms’ (511c). When we know the Forms in this way, we understand what the objects of mathematical study, and all other Forms, truly are. This type of knowledge has the greatest clarity, and its objects (the Forms understood directly) have the greatest truth.

THE CAVE

The Divided Line informed us of the different types of epistemic state we can have, and what they relate to. The simile of the cave gives us a story about moving up the line, from illusion to intelligence, and the consequences of doing that.

In the cave, prisoners are chained to face a wall. Behind and above the prisoners, people carry objects along a road. Beyond the road, there is a fire. The fire casts shadows of the people onto the wall in front of the prisoners; so images is all the prisoners see. If a prisoner is freed, and forced to turn around, he will see the people on the road and then the fire. If he is then ‘dragged’ outside the cave – and he must be dragged, or drag himself, because the process will be painful as he won’t be used to the light, he will experience reality as it is, not as it seems in the cave.

The simile of the cave	
The cave	The world of the senses
Prisoners	People who believe ‘second-hand’
Images on the wall	Illusion (<i>eikasía</i>)
The fire	The (physical) sun; more generally, what enables us to have sense experience
Seeing the fire and the people on the road	Belief (<i>pistis</i>)
Outside the cave	The intelligible world – reality
The prisoner dragged outside the cave	The philosopher
Objects outside the cave	The Forms
Looking at reflections of objects outside the cave	Reasoning (<i>dianoia</i>)
Looking at objects outside the cave	Intelligence (<i>noésis</i>)
The sun	The Form of the Good

The difficult ascent

The simile of the cave is about gaining knowledge. But it is also the beginning of Plato’s focused argument that only philosophers should rule. Plato uses the analogy to argue that for society to be a just society, the rulers must be educated as philosophers, so that they

acquire knowledge of the Good, but then they must be forced 'back down' into the cave, to rule.

Plato emphasises that moving from being a prisoner to eventually being able to look directly at the sun itself will be a difficult and painful process. This fact also explains why philosophers, having achieved knowledge of the Forms, will not want to be rulers; and why people (the prisoners) would not welcome philosophers or recognize that what they say is true. Philosophers, having finally got used to sunlight, will not want to go back into the cave, and will (at least at first) find it very difficult to see properly in the darkness. Meanwhile, people who can only see the images cast on the wall by the fire will believe that those images are reality, and dismiss claims about a 'world outside the cave' as madness. Since the philosopher has difficult seeing, they will also argue that 'the visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not even worth attempting' (517a).