

# Plato on Ideas

The "theory of forms (or ideas)" is perhaps the most widely known of Plato's teachings and his famous story of the prisoners in cave who are only able to see shadows rather than real objects is equally well known as his way of explaining humankind's general view that physical objects are the reality rather than the ideas that lie behind them. But just because the theory is widely known does not mean that it is well understood, and several misconceptions about what Plato is actually putting forward need addressing if we are to clarify it before we can ask ourselves the all-important question: is it true?

Tonight we'll look at Ideas and consider some of these misconceptions through some selected extracts of Plato's dialogues and the Commentaries of the Platonists of late antiquity. But first we need to be clear that when Platonists talk about forms or ideas they are using the word (ἰδέα *idea* "form, pattern," from the root of ἰδεῖν *idein*, "to see") in a very definite way – as something which has its own existence and power independent of the human mind. In other words a Platonic idea is not a human concept, but rather something towards which our concepts tend insofar as they are true: you will understand, I think, that such a distinction allows philosophers to affirm that however changeable our concepts, ideas themselves remain unchangeably the same. As Proclus says,<sup>1</sup> "If any wish to attack the concept of Ideas, let them attack this definition, and not assume [ideas] to be either corporeal images of their own minds, or co-ordinate with things of this realm [of changes] . . ."

## Extracts – distinction between immaterial ideas and material manifestations of ideas

"Now then, in my opinion, one must first distinguish the following. What is it that *always is* and has no becoming; and what is it that *comes to be* and never is? Now the one is grasped by intellection accompanied by a rational account, since it's always in the same condition; but the other in its turn is opined by opinion accompanied by irrational sensation, since it comes to be and perishes and never genuinely is." (*Timaeus* 27d)

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"We both assert that there are," I said, "and distinguish in speech, many fair things, many good things, and so on for each kind of thing."

"Yes, so we do."

"And we also assert that there is a *fair itself*, a *good itself*, and so on for all things that we set down as many. Now, again, we refer to them as one *idea* of each as though the *idea* were one; and we address it as that which really *is*."

"That's so."

"And, moreover, we say that the former are seen, but not intellected, while the *ideas* are intellected but not seen." (*Republic*, Bk. VI 507b-c)

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<sup>1</sup> Proclus, an outstanding Platonist and head of the Athenian Platonic academy in the fifth century AD, writing in his *Commentary on the Parmenides* (ref. 935).

Two points we might like to think about here, since they bear upon the misunderstandings which have attached themselves to the modern view of Plato: firstly, is Plato saying that material manifestations of ideas are unreal? Secondly – and related to the first point – does this mean that the senses and opinion are to be rejected, and that we should only use intellection and reason?

Extracts – the causal and creative power of ideas

100b Socrates: However, I now assert nothing new, but what I have always asserted at other times, and in the preceding disputation. For I shall now attempt to demonstrate to you that species of cause which I have been discoursing about, and shall return again to those particulars which are so much celebrated; beginning from these, and laying down as an hypothesis, that there is *a certain something beautiful, itself subsisting by itself*; and a certain something good and great, and so of all the rest; which if you permit me to do, and allow that such things have a subsistence, I hope that I shall be able from these to demonstrate this cause to you, and discover that the soul is immortal.

c Cebes: But, in consequence of having granted you this already, you cannot be hindered from drawing such a conclusion.

Socrates: But consider the things consequent to these, and see whether you will then likewise agree with me. For it appears to me, that if there be anything else beautiful, besides *the beautiful itself*, it cannot be beautiful on any other account than because it participates of the beautiful itself; and I should speak in the same manner of all things. Do you admit such a cause?

Cebes: I admit it.

d Socrates: I do not therefore any longer perceive, nor am I able to understand, those other *wise* causes;<sup>2</sup> but if any one tells me why a certain thing is beautiful, and assigns as a reason, either its possessing a florid colour, or figure, or something else of this kind, I bid farewell to other hypotheses (for in all others I find myself disturbed); but this I retain with myself, simply, plainly, and perhaps foolishly, that nothing else causes it to be beautiful, than either the presence, or communion, or in whatever manner the operations may take place, of the beautiful itself. For I cannot yet affirm how this takes place; but only this, that all beautiful things become such through the beautiful itself. For it appears to me most safe thus to answer both myself and others; and adhering to this, I think that e I can never fall, but that I shall be secure in answering, that all beautiful things are beautiful through the beautiful itself. Does it not also appear so to you?

Cebes: It does.

Socrates: And that great things, therefore, are great, and things greater, greater through *magnitude itself*; and things lesser, lesser through *smallness itself*? (*The Phaedo*)

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<sup>2</sup> Socrates by "wise causes" is referring to what one might call mechanical causes – he is speaking somewhat ironically, because he has previously suggested that a too great a concentration on mechanical causes (the 'how' of things) confuses the mind, distracting it from the true causes which allow us to answer the question 'why'.

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In the *Timaeus*, the main speaker attempts to describe the production of the manifested universe: he says its intellectual creator, the "Demiurge", contemplated a paradigm, *autozoon*, "Animal Itself":

"it is perfectly evident that he [the Demiurge] regarded an eternal paradigm . . . . so the next question is what living being maker made the universe the likeness of . . . we shall affirm that there is nothing more similar than the universe to the whole (of which all other living beings, individually and collectively, are parts) – that whole which encompasses within itself all intelligible living beings, just as this world is made up of us and all other visible beings. For by choosing as his model the most beautiful of intelligible beings, perfect and complete, the god made the world a single, visible, living being, containing within itself all living beings that are naturally akin to it." (29a, 30c)

Each idea seems to bring into manifest reality something of its own character: the *Beautiful* itself gives things beauty, *Justice* itself gives things justice, *Animal itself* gives the whole universe life, *Greatness* itself gives things greatness. No real quality arises, it seems, without an idea having produced it from its own power.

So the things which we value – life, self-knowledge, creativity and so on – would, in this scheme of things, be the possession of ideas before they are manifested in the physical world. *How* they are manifested requires some further investigation, but *why* they are, is, says Socrates, simply because of the presence and power of ideas. And can we say, that ideas themselves are alive, have self-knowledge and are creative?

Some further points to consider: if the idea of the cosmos, *animal itself*, gives rise to all the possible living things in the manifested world from its own nature, in what way is it *one* and in what way *many*? We might ask the same question about every idea: if the Beautiful itself can make an endless stream of things beautiful, is it one or is it many? And if beauty itself is present to numerous beautiful things, is the whole of beauty present to each one, or does it split itself into an almost infinite number of parts?

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There are many difficulties involved with the theory of ideas, and in the *Parmenides*, a young Socrates is hard pressed to find clear solutions to them. Parmenides himself, who is the one asking the difficult questions says to him at the end of his inquisition:

"But on the other hand, in view of all these difficulties and others like them, Socrates, a man refuses to admit that Forms of things exist or to distinguish a definite Form in every case, he will have no direction to turn his thought, so long as he will not allow that each thing has a character which is always the same, and in so doing he will completely destroy the significance of all discourse."