

Plato and the Forms

One way of thinking about the forms is to consider something such as a 'table' or a 'cat'. Each example of these things that we see is slightly different from the other examples yet we are able to recognise that they are the same sort of thing even if we can't explain the exact similarity. Even a very small child can recognise that the creature that has come into the room is a cat even if it is slightly different from the other examples it has seen

This also applies to abstract concepts – for example beauty. We have many different things (Plato calls these 'particulars') that can be described as 'beautiful' eg an attractive friend, a sunset, a painting,
What is the thing 'beauty' that they have in common?

One further difficulty that Plato is trying to solve in arriving at the idea of Forms is the problem posed by Heraclitus that everything in this world changes. ('You cannot step into the same river twice') This means that there can't be anything that is totally 100% beautiful in this world. The real and perfect must lie beyond this world.

Remember that for Plato, our world is a cave world. It is not real! The real world is the world of the forms. Unlike our world, it is a constant world of knowledge when contrasted with this world of opinion. Hence all the above objects are – to some extent - beautiful because they share in the form of beauty. There is a perfect form of beauty in the real world that does not change. We all participate in it. (some of us more than others!!)

What are 'Forms'?

Plato's Forms are ideas and they are ideals. They are sorts, kinds or types of things. Forms are abstract non-physical 'ideas' of perfect objects/qualities. They exist in the REAL World.

How many types of forms are there?

- There are Forms for values like Beauty, Justice and Wisdom.
- There are Forms for things-both natural kinds like dogs and frogs and artefacts like tables and chairs. (Plato mentions the form of the bed but people aren't sure if he is joking or not!)
- There are Forms for mathematical objects like circles and triangles

How do Forms relate to this world

Plato sometimes says particulars are "copies" or "pictures" of the Forms. This leads him to say particulars "resemble" the Forms. Plato also says particulars "share in" or "participate in" the Forms

Plato is 'dualistic' in his philosophy – and one helpful way of thinking about forms and particulars is to see them as opposites as illustrated in the table on the other side of the page

The World of the Forms

The World of Particular Things

Each Form is **One**

Particulars are **many**

Intelligible = only known through intellect/reason

Sensible = only known through **senses**

Eternal

Always coming in and out of existence

Unchanging

Always **changing** into something else

Perfect

Imperfect

Non-Physical.

Matter