



## On Plato's Theory of Forms

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### Abstract

Plato was not only the founder of modern philosophy, but also the first to systematically philosophize about the arts. He has a deep influence on western culture including a strong influence on the arts, and on theories of art. However, in the case of the arts and aesthetic theory that influence is mostly indirect, and is best understood if one knows more about his philosophy. The Theory of Forms is the core of Plato's philosophy. It expounded in specific way discussing cognitive structure by formulating reverse solution to prove dialectical process from perception, which reveals positive effect in the cognitive development of western society.

**Key words:** Plato; Theory of Forms; Knowledge

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## 1. PLATO'S BIBLIOGRAPHY

Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher, helped to build the philosophical basis of Western culture along with Socrates and Aristotle. He was also a mathematician, writer of philosophical dialogues, and founder of the Academy in Athens, the first institution of higher learning in the western world.

Plato published perhaps twenty-five philosophical dialogues which are usually divided into early, middle, and late period. His middle dialogues present doctrines known as Platonism. The key concept is the forms.

## 2. THEORY OF FORMS

### 2.1 General Introduction of Forms

The basis of Plato's thought is the theory of ideas or forms. Just like other Greek philosophers, Plato was absorbed by the question of change in the physical world. Heraclitus had said that there is nothing certain or stable except the fact that things change, and Parmenides claimed that all change, motion, and time was an illusion. Parmenides thought that nothing is changing, but Heraclitus considered things are changing all the time. Plato combined the two. He thought that the objects of knowledge are eternal and real, never changing, while the objects of opinion are constantly changing. Ideas, or forms, are the archetypes for the physical, sensible things in the world and exist in an eternal world above the world of sense experience.

Plato spoke of forms in formulating his solution to the problem of universals. The forms are the archetypes or abstract representations of the things around us. Ideas, or forms, are timeless, more being than a thing. They are unchangeable, eternal, intelligible (as opposed to perceptible), divine, incorporeal, are the causes of being (relates to The One and The Many), and are simply what their copies can only be with qualification. Physical sensible things are existing things, but are changeable, finite, perceptible, corporeal, and are caused by the forms.

The Theory of Forms typically refers to Plato's belief that the material world as it seems to us is not the real world, but only a shadow of the real world.

### 2.2 Theory of Forms

Plato distinguishes between instances and the form of a thing. Taking Beauty as an example, it is easy to find many different instances of beauty. But people's opinions on beauty vary a lot from person to person. What's more, the beautiful things are constantly changing too.

In order to explain the problem that one thing is different from others in reality, Plato puts forward the

theory of Forms (or Ideas). He says that everything has a form which is independent of the actual instances of the thing. It is by these forms that we recognize a characteristic when it occurs. So we can recognize beautiful things by the form of "beauty".

However, things in the reality can change, forms are eternal and single: There is only one form of "beauty" even though there are many different beautiful things.

The forms are eternal and never change, however, it produces the objects and cases of conceptions along with the various changeable matter in the temporal world. They are changing all the time and are in a succession of forms. Thus, the continuous changing world is the source of opinions.

Because the forms are invisible, we have entered the world of forms before they are incarnated in an object, and then memories of them are left. Although it is not easy to realize it, the memory is enough to enable our limited perceptions. Plato believes that the philosophers have the potential to achieve a state of perceiving the forms directly, with his mind's eye. They can achieve this goal by developing skill of distinguishing the abstract qualities, common to groups of things and ideas, in the world; by understanding these are only hypotheses; and by adopting the dialectic method, to classify the qualities in right relationships and order.

There are not certain shapes of Forms. It exists in our minds. According to Plato, Forms are real existence, colorless, shapeless, and incorporeal, visible only to the intelligence? Plato said, the Forms are the cause of the essence of all other things, and the One is the cause of the Forms? Therefore they cannot simply exist. Plato said Forms are related to things in three ways: cause, participation and imitation.

There are three ways to discover forms: recollection, dialectic and desire. Recollection is when our souls remember the Forms from prior existence. Dialectic is when people discuss and explore the Forms together. And third is the desire for knowledge. Plato's Theory of Knowledge enable us to see light to dark; ignorant to educated; reality to really real.

As is illustrated in the Allegory of the Cave, in the Cave we move from the dark of the cave to the light of outdoors, we even see a glimpse of how knowledge can affect us. The Forms told us although we can see something; it does not mean that we can see all of it. And we cannot see something does not mean it does not exist at all.

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### 3. THEORY OF FORMS AND THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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Theory of Forms correlated with the theory of knowledge, we cannot separate them. Influenced by his teacher Socrates, Plato believed that knowledge is acquirable. And he also convinced two essential characteristics of knowledge.

First, knowledge must be certain and infallible. Second, knowledge must have as its object that which is genuinely real as contrasted with that which is an appearance only. The Real must be fixed, permanent, and unchanging. Plato identified the real with the ideal realm of being as opposed to the physical world of becoming. Consequently, Plato opposed to empiricism which believed that knowledge is derived from sense experience. But Plato thought that propositions derived from sense experience have, at most, a degree of probability. They are not certain.

Moreover, the objects of sense experience are continuously changing in the physical world. As a result of this, objects of sense experience are not proper objects of knowledge. Human beings can acquire true knowledge only through forms, learning to recognize the forms under the transient reality. The object of knowledge is to learn the forms.

Plato expressed his theory of knowledge in the Republic, especially in the discussion of the image of the divided line and the myth of the cave. He distinguishes opinion and knowledge. The claims about our visible world, including the common sense observations and the propositions, are merely opinions, some of which are well founded, some not. But none of them is true knowledge. The Reason results in intellectual insights that are certain and the objects of these rational insights are the abiding universals, the eternal Forms or substances that make up the real world.

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### 4. AN ASSESSMENT OF THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE THEORY

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The Theory of Forms can adapt to all criticism: There are archetypal forms, corresponding to all terms used by man, many of the terms used by man are incorrect; only the Gods use correct names consistently. Socrates may be presented as agreeing with his interlocutors, this is usually a step in demonstrating their state of ignorance, and indeed that of Socrates. For in the true Socratic tradition the recognition of one's own ignorance is seen as an advancement of knowledge. What's more, if a discussion results in confusion and seeming contradiction, then that too can be seen as the theory at work, for Plato develops in Philebus and Phaedo the notion that because the world of the senses is compounded and finite, the one archetypal form gives rise to apparent opposites on that level.

The Theory of Forms is a hypothesis proved by the process of inference to the best explanation. The Theory of Forms identifies levels of reality, and metaphysical functionalities that Plato reasoned must exist, to make any sense of the world. The actual mechanical processes involved are only defined in a very abstract manner; however, the theory has a counter, in that man cannot conceive the physiology of the Gods.

The theory of Forms is an inference, so its strength must be measured by its continued use over time. The abstract nature of the definition enables it to be compatible with many systems of thoughts: Some derived from Plato, others developed independently; some arising after Plato's time, others predating him.

The Theory of Form is the conceptions of levels of reality and human faculties, it identifies as existing, or needing to exist if life is comprehensible. Its weaknesses illustrate the insufficiencies of the words and concepts to approach a definition of the infinite or timeless. The theory still stands as a beacon after two and a half thousand years, attesting to the vast sweep of mind Plato was able to attain, using the simple means he found in himself and the strength he found by the acknowledgement of his own weakness.

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## CONCLUSIONS

Plato is not only the founder of modern philosophy, but also the first to systematically philosophize about the arts. Therefore, trying to understand his Theory of Forms, the core of Plato's philosophy, is necessary to learn more about his philosophy and aesthetic theories.

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