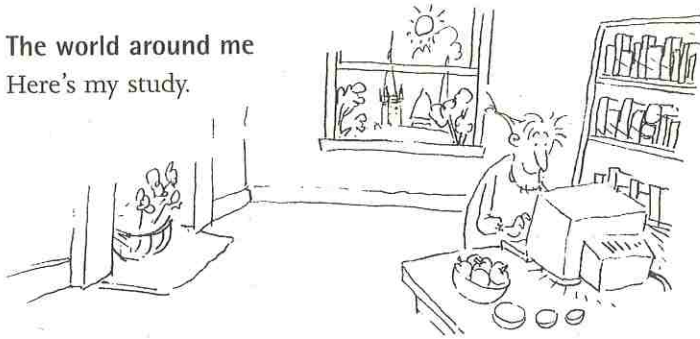


File 4

What is real?

The world around me
Here's my study.



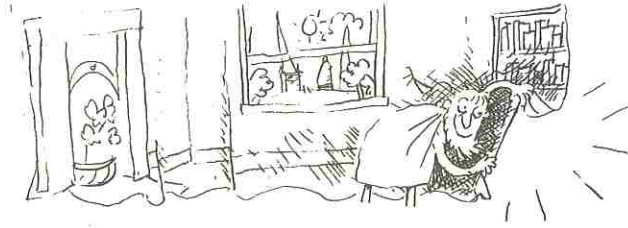
As you can see, I'm working on a computer. On my desk is a bowl full of apples. There are also some Tibetan singing bowls that I bought when I visited India. Beside the desk is a bookcase full of books. There's a fireplace with some rather dusty dried flowers in it. And on the other side of the room is a window. You can see some trees and clouds and the sun shining outside. Beyond them are the spires of Oxford.

Now most people, if you were to ask them: what is reality? would probably say that reality is what I'm experiencing all around me right now. The world of desks and chairs, trees and clouds: that's reality; that's the real world.

But not everyone would agree with this. In particular, Plato wouldn't agree. According to Plato, what I see around me are actually just shadows. The real world is hidden from our five senses. It cannot be seen, touched, heard, smelled or tasted.

So what is this hidden world like? According to Plato, it is quite wonderful.

WHAT IS REAL?



It contains everything that is essential and perfect. It has always been there and will always be there. It is the place from which we came. And it is the place to which we go when we die.

Plato also says that, if we want knowledge, it is to this world beyond the shadows that we must look. Our five senses cannot give us knowledge of how things really are. So how do we find out how things are beyond the shadows? As we shall see, Plato argues that the only way to genuine knowledge is through the use of reason.

This chapter is about Plato's world beyond the shadows. Does it really exist?

Plato

Who was Plato?

Plato was born nearly two and a half thousand years ago, in Ancient Greece. He is perhaps the most famous of all philosophers. In fact, Plato is considered by many to be the father of philosophy.

A good place to start with Plato is with a story – a story first told by Plato all those years ago (I've changed the story a bit, but it's essentially the same).

Plato's story of the cave

There is a cave. And at the very bottom of this cave are kept some prisoners. The prisoners are kept chained up, facing a wall. They



are never allowed to turn and see what is behind them. So the prisoners spend their entire lives looking only at the wall.



Then, one day, one of the prisoners – let's call him 'Alf' – is released. He is made to turn around and look up.

At first, Alf is blinded by a brilliant light. It hurts his eyes. But after a while Alf's eyes start to adjust.

As his eyes become accustomed to the light, Alf begins to see that up above the prisoners and behind them is a fire. It was this fire that first blinded him. And between the fire and the prisoners is a path, like this:

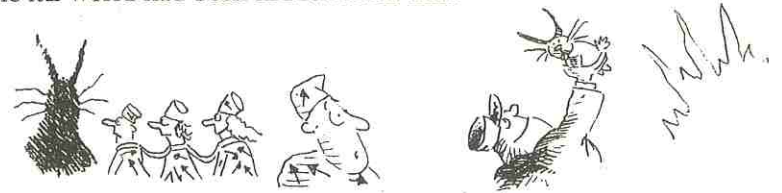


The path is used by the jailers. Alf can see that, as the jailers walk along the path carrying objects, the objects they carry cast shadows down on to the wall in front of the prisoners.



Now, Alf has never seen a real object before. When he was a prisoner, he could only see the shadows that were cast on to the wall. So, like all the other prisoners, he ended up supposing that these shadows were the real objects. He mistook what he saw on the wall for reality.

But now Alf can see how he and the other prisoners had been fooled. He now understands that what he had earlier taken to be the real world was merely a parade of shadows. He realizes that the real world had been hidden from him.



A little later, some of the jailers lead Alf from the cave into the sunlight outside. The brightness of the light again blinds him at first. But gradually Alf's eyes adjust. Finally, he recognizes the sun.



Now, Alf is a kind man. Not surprisingly, he feels very sorry for the other prisoners he left behind in the cave. So he decides to return down into the depths to tell them what he has seen, to explain to them how things *really* are. He feels sure they will want to know all about his journey into the real world.

But then Alf reaches the bottom of the cave, his eyes are no longer accustomed to the dark. He stumbles. He bumps into things. So the other prisoners think that Alf's journey has made him blind.

Then things get worse. When Alf starts to explain to them how things really are, they don't want to listen. They are happily engrossed watching the shadows in front of them. They tell him to shut up. They act just like a grumpy person acts when their favourite TV programme has been interrupted.

But Alf won't give up. He wants to help them. So he carries on trying to tell them all about the hidden world up above them. Then the prisoners get really angry. They start shouting at him. 'Just go away!' they yell. 'Stop pestering us with your stupid talk! We can see perfectly well how things are – it's you that's blind!'

And when Alf still won't give up, the prisoners throw rocks at him. They drive him away. And so the prisoners waste away their lives watching shadows. They never do find out the truth.

The world beyond the shadows

You've probably guessed that Plato's story about the prisoners in the cave is not just a story. Plato is trying to tell us something. But what is he trying to tell us?

Well, we are the prisoners in the cave. And the things we see around us are those shadows on the cave wall. Just like the prisoners in the cave, we are taken in by the shadows. We mistake the shadows for reality. We suppose that what we can see is the real world. But the real world cannot be seen.

Souls

Plato also argued that each of us has a soul. He argued that it is in this real world that the soul goes when we die. So death is really nothing to be afraid of. When you die, your soul doesn't stop existing. It carries on. It goes to a much better place.

Heaven

A number of religions talk about Heaven. Heaven is where we are

supposed to go when we die (at least if we have been good).

Now, Plato's idea of a perfect world – the real world that lies beyond the shadows – certainly does sound a bit like this modern idea of Heaven, doesn't it? And that's not entirely a coincidence. Over the centuries religious thinkers have read Plato and borrowed from his ideas. The modern idea of Heaven – in particular, the modern Christian idea of Heaven – has been shaped in part by Plato's ideas.

C.S. Lewis and the Shadowlands

Plato's thinking has influenced our thinking about the world right up to the present day. In particular, Plato's philosophy has had an important part to play in shaping western philosophy, religion, art and literature.

Let me give you one example. You may have heard of C.S. Lewis. C.S. Lewis was a Christian. He wrote children's books about a land called Narnia. The best-known book about Narnia is called *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.



The final book about Narnia is called *The Last Battle*. In its closing pages, Narnia comes to an end. The land is covered by sea and the sun is put out. All the good creatures from Narnia pass through a door into an extraordinary new land.

Finding themselves in this new land, the children whom the Narnia stories are about wonder where they can be. Parts of the new land seem like the Narnia they remember, only far more

wonderful. And parts of it seem like the England they remember, only, again, far more wonderful.

Then one of the characters in the story explains to the children that the Narnia and England that they remember were not the real Narnia or the real England. They were just shadows of the real world in which they now find themselves. This real world has always existed and will always exist, and is as different from the old Narnia and the old England as a real object is different from its shadow.

Finally, on the very last page of *The Last Battle*, the children wonder how they could have ended up in this wonderful place. They are afraid they might be made to leave. But then it is explained to them that they are actually all dead – they were killed in a railway accident. They have now passed over from what C.S. Lewis calls the *Shadowlands* into the real world where they will live happily ever after. Their old lives were but a dream: this is the morning.

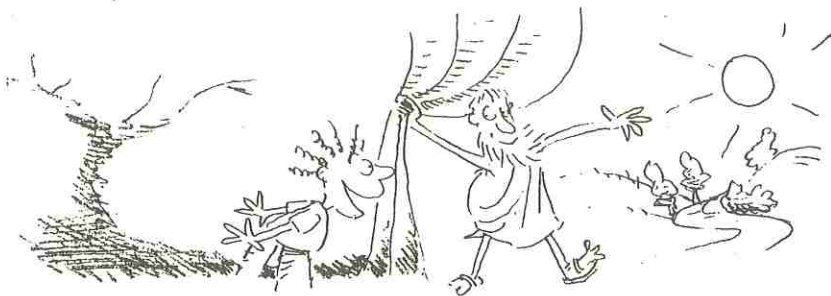
As you have probably guessed, C.S. Lewis borrowed this idea of the real world beyond the shadows – the real world to which we go when we die – from Plato. In fact, if you read *The Last Battle* carefully, you will discover that near the end of the story one of the characters actually tells the children that it's all in Plato.

An invisible world

So Plato believes that this world – the world that you and I are experiencing right now – isn't the real world. These are merely the *Shadowlands*, as Lewis calls them.



The world we see around us might seem like the real world, but it's not.

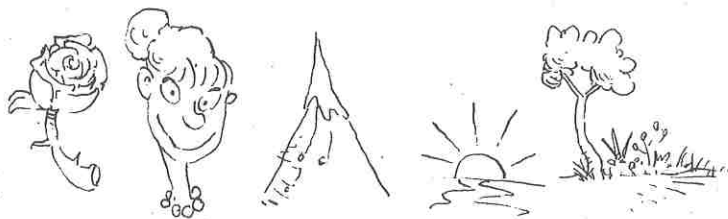


The real world is invisible. It lies beyond what we can see, touch, hear, smell and taste.

But why did Plato suppose that these are merely the *Shadowlands*, that the real world lies beyond? What's the philosophy, the argument behind these extraordinary views? That's what I shall now explain.

The form of beauty

Here are five beautiful things:



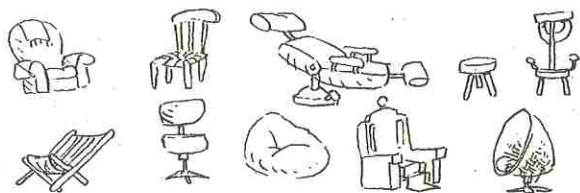
They are: a beautiful flower, a beautiful person, a beautiful mountain, a beautiful sunset and a beautiful garden. Of course, these five beautiful things are different in many ways (for example, the person has hair and the mountain doesn't). Still, each is beautiful.

But what is *beauty* itself? While each of these things may be a beautiful thing, it seems that none is beauty itself. Beauty itself seems to be something else – a further thing that exists in addition to all the particular things that there are.

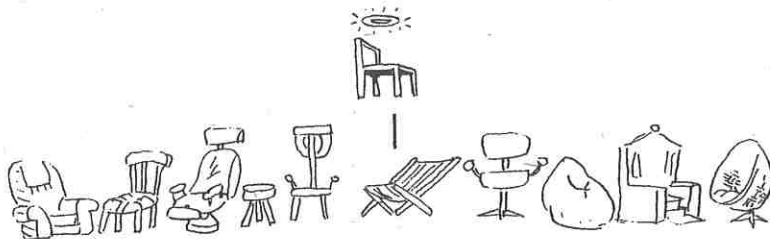
Plato calls this further thing – beauty itself – the *Form* of beauty. He says that what makes particular beautiful things beautiful is the fact that they share this Form.

Other Forms

According to Plato, it's not just beautiful things that share a common Form. Beautiful things are just one type of thing. There are many other types of thing. Take chairs, for example.



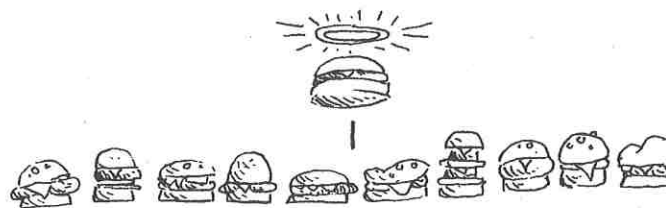
Chairs are a type of thing. So, despite their many differences, there is something that all chairs have in common – the something that makes them chairs. According to Plato, this 'something' is another Form: the Form of the chair.



This Form of the chair exists in addition to all the particular chairs that there are.

There are many other sorts of Form, according to Plato. For example, large things (such as elephants, mountains and Giant Redwood trees) are a type of thing. To them corresponds the Form of largeness. Actions that are just (an example of a just action would be when a judge and jury fairly punish someone for a terrible crime) are yet another type of thing. To them corresponds the Form of justice. And so on.

In fact, if we follow Plato's reasoning here, it seems there must be a Form for *every* type of thing there is. There must be a Form of the flower, a Form of red things, a Form of the rabbit, a Form of the house, a Form of the cheeseburger, even.



So what are Plato's Forms like?

The Forms are perfect

First of all, the Forms are perfect. Take beauty, for example. Any beautiful thing that you might experience will not be *perfectly* beautiful. It could always be more beautiful than it is. But the Form of beauty – beauty itself – is quite perfect. For there can't be anything more beautiful than beauty itself, can there?

All the things we see around us are imperfect. All are flawed. All will break or wear out or go mouldy. Take beds, for example. Any particular bed that you might happen to see will not be perfect. It could always be more comfortable. It will eventually wear out or break. But, again, the Form of the bed is quite perfect. Each Form is the one and only perfect example of things of that type.

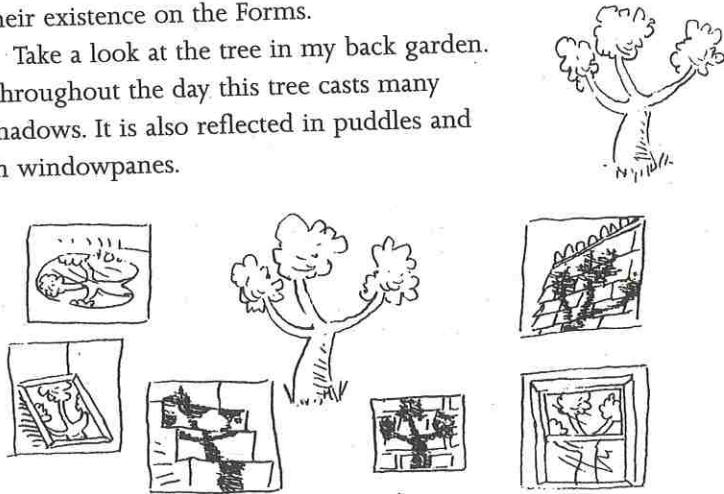
The Forms are invisible

Secondly, the Forms are not the sort of thing that one can see, touch, smell, hear or taste. Nothing that we can experience is ever perfect. So the Form of the chair, being perfect, is not something that we can experience. We can see particular, imperfect chairs, of course, but the Form of the chair is invisible.

The Forms are more real

Thirdly, the Forms are more real than are the particular things that we experience around us. For those particular things depend for their existence on the Forms.

Take a look at the tree in my back garden. Throughout the day this tree casts many shadows. It is also reflected in puddles and in windowpanes.



These fleeting images of the tree are distorted and imperfect copies of the tree. They depend for their existence on the tree being there. Without the tree there can be no shadows or reflections of it.

Similarly, without the Form of the tree there can be no particular trees. Those trees we see around – including that tree in my garden – depend for their existence on the Form of the tree: they are imperfect shadows or reflections of this Form.

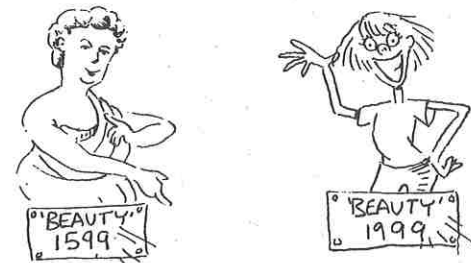
And the same goes for all the other objects we see around us. They are not the real objects. The real objects are the Forms, of which the objects we see are but fleeting shadows or reflections.

The Forms are eternal and changeless

According to Plato, the Forms are eternal. They have always been there and always will be there. While particular beautiful things may come and go, beauty itself remains.

The Forms are also changeless. Of course, the world around us is changing all the time. Chairs and tables warp, bend and break. Plants and animals grow, wither and die. The weather varies from day to day. The seasons come and go. Mountains eventually tumble into the sea. Everything is shifting. But according to Plato, the Forms never change.

You might wonder about this. Take beauty, for example. Don't we consider different things beautiful at different times? For example, our current ideal of a beautiful person is someone who is thin, but not so long ago heavier people were considered more beautiful.



Fashions change. What at one time might be considered beautiful later generations may find vulgar or even downright ugly. So if there is a Form of beauty, doesn't it change over time?

Not according to Plato. He thought that while fashion may change, beauty itself does not. Real beauty is always the same. It's only our ability to recognize it that varies.

The supreme Form

So there you have it: the world we see around us is not the real world. The real world is a hidden world of perfect, changeless and eternal Forms.

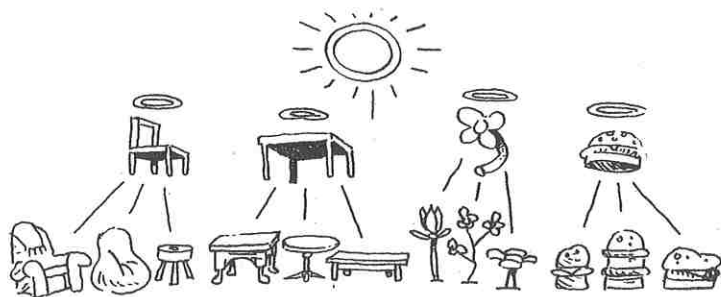
But there is one last Form that we still need to put into place. There are many Forms. So the Forms themselves are a type of thing. So there must also be a Form of the Forms.

What is the Form of the Forms like? Well, what do all the Forms have in common? They all exist and they are all perfect. So the Form of the Forms is the Form of *existence and perfection*.

Plato called this supreme Form the *Form of the Good*.

The arrangement of the Forms

According to Plato, then, the Forms are arranged like this:



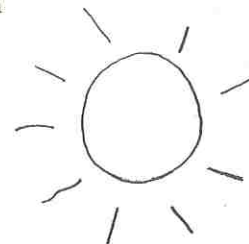
At the very top of the pyramid is the Form of the Good. Below the Form of the Good are all the other Forms: the Form of beauty, the Form of the chair, the Form of the table, and so on. And below these Forms are the particular objects that we see around us: particular beds for example.

Just as the particular chairs, tables, beautiful things and so on gain what existence and perfection they have from their corresponding Forms, so these forms in turn get what existence and perfection they have from the Form of the Good. So ultimately

all existence and perfection flows down from the Form of the Good.

In Plato's story about the cave, the Form of the Good is represented by the sun shining outside the cave.

Just as we sometimes think of the sun as being that from which everything ultimately comes (because it makes night and day, controls the seasons and the weather, makes the plants grow on which animals in turn feed, and so on), so the Form of the Good is that to which everything ultimately owes its existence.



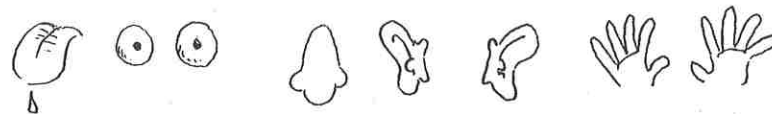
God

Plato's idea of the Form of the Good – the Form from which all existence and perfection flows – sounds much like the modern idea of God, doesn't it? Many modern religions – in particular, Christianity, Islam and Judaism – suppose that God has precisely this role. God is that to which everything owes its existence and from which all perfection comes.

Again, this similarity is not completely accidental. This is another example of how Plato's ideas have helped to shape religious thinking right up to the present day.

Where does knowledge come from?

We experience the world around us by using our five senses – sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing.



But, as we have seen, Plato argues that the world we experience in this way is not the real world. The world that we experience is merely a shadow world.

This is one reason why Plato says that our senses cannot provide us with genuine knowledge. According to Plato, our senses can only deceive us. Genuine knowledge is knowledge of the true reality, the world that lies beyond what our five senses reveal. Genuine knowledge is knowledge of the Forms.

So how do we come by knowledge of the Forms, if not by our senses? According to Plato, real knowledge comes through doing philosophy. Real knowledge comes through the use of reason, through thinking and reflecting. Those who want real knowledge must ignore the senses. They must close their eyes, put cotton wool in their ears, sit in their favourite armchair and think.



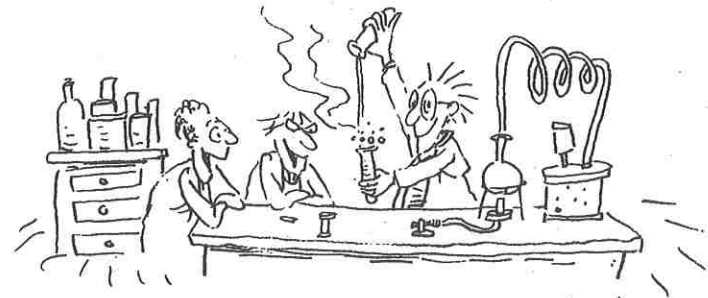
Of course, Plato admits that it is very difficult for philosophers to turn people away from the world of the senses, to convince them that the world we see around us is a mere shadow world. For it does *seem* so real.

The world of the senses can also seem so enticing. We learn to love our senses and the pleasures they bring us: the taste of ice-cream, the sound of music, the sight of a beautiful tree. But, according to Plato, there are rarer, higher pleasures – the pleasures that only philosophy can bring. Compared to these higher pleasures, the pleasures of the senses are very crude and measly indeed.

Still, most of us are captivated by our senses. We reject the philosopher who tries to turn us away from the world of the senses and towards the unseen Forms. That's what Plato was trying to warn us about at the end of his story about the cave. We are like the grumpy prisoners who threw rocks at Alf when he tried to turn them away from the shadows and towards the real world.

Science

You might find Plato's views about knowledge rather surprising. For nowadays we think of science – physics, chemistry, astronomy and the rest – as being one of the best routes to knowledge. Science rests ultimately on our five senses: on sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. Scientists make observations. They watch, listen, prod, sniff. Sometimes they even lick. They perform experiments and carefully examine the results. It is upon all these different observations that they base their scientific theories.



Now surely, you may think, isn't this sort of scientific method one of the best methods of finding out what the world is really like? So isn't Plato wrong to say that our senses cannot give us true knowledge?

Perhaps you are also thinking to yourself: how could someone discover anything of any importance by sitting in their favourite armchair with their eyes shut? Isn't this the last way in which we

could find out anything about reality? So, again, isn't Plato wrong to say that quiet reflection is the only way to true knowledge? Isn't it quite obvious that no genuine knowledge can be had without the use of the five senses? Surely reason alone is blind. Aren't our senses our only real window on to reality?

It may be that Plato is wrong about the senses not being able to give us knowledge. But perhaps there is something to what he says. Perhaps it's at least true that some of the most important questions are questions our senses cannot help us answer. Have a look at the following argument.

An argument

Some of the questions that are most important to us are questions that ask: *what-is-X?* For example, we want to know: what is justice? The question: what is justice? is obviously a very important question. We want our society to be just. For example, we want it to have just laws. We want courts to hand out just punishments: punishments that are deserved and that fit the crime (for example, it would hardly be just to execute someone for stealing an apple from their neighbour's tree, would it?). So it is very important that we know what justice is. If we don't know what justice is, we won't know how to build a fair and just society.

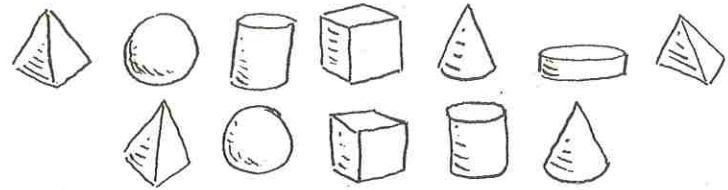
Other important *what-is-X?* questions are: what is good? what is courage? what is beauty? and so on.

Now Plato argued that, if you don't yet know what good is, or what courage is, or what beauty is and you want to find out, it is impossible to find out by observing the world around you.

Take beauty, for example. There may be many beautiful things around you. So why can't you find out what beauty is by observing those things? The problem is this: if you don't already know what beauty is, you won't be able to tell which of the things around you are beautiful. You won't be able to recognize beauty.

Here's another example (which I just made up – it's not from Plato). Take a look at these different objects:

Suppose I tell you that some of these objects are blibblies and



some of them are not. Now, you don't yet know what a blibbly is, do you? You have no idea what it is to be a blibbly. Could you find out what it is to be a blibbly by observing these different objects? No. Obviously not. For you don't yet know which of them are blibblies.

Of course, if I now tell you that something is a blibbly if and only if it is a cube, then you will know which of these objects are blibblies. Now you can tell that just the middle two objects are blibblies. But of course, observing the blibblies won't be of any help now because you already know what a blibbly is.

It seems, then, that when it comes to answering the question: what is a blibbly? observing the world around us can't help. Neither, it seems, can it help us answer the questions: what is justice? what is beauty? and so on.

Does this argument convince you? Is Plato right to say that the senses can't help when it comes to answering such questions as: what is justice? and: what is beauty? What do you think?

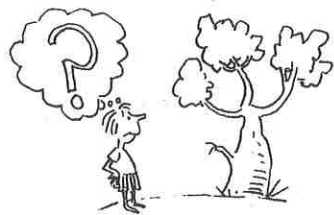
The soul and knowledge of the Forms

As I have already mentioned, Plato believes that each of us has an immortal soul. One reason why the soul is important in Plato's philosophy is that he uses it to explain how we come to have

knowledge. As we have just seen, according to Plato, true knowledge comes not from the senses but through the use of reason. But that raises the question: how can reason give us knowledge of the Forms?

Plato's answer to this question seems to be: by somehow reminding us of the Forms. Through reasoning we *recollect* what we have somehow always known. Our souls existed before our physical bodies were born. Our souls were at that time presented with the Forms. And what knowledge we have of the Forms is actually remembered from back then.

That means, for example, that you are able to recognize beauty now only because you experienced the Form of beauty before you were born. That's also how you are able to recognize a tree. Before you were born, your soul experienced the Form of the tree.



Then, when you see a tree now . . .



. . . it reminds you of the Form.

That's how you recognize it's a tree.

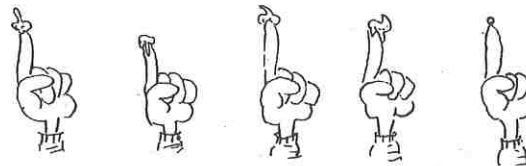
Now that I have explained Plato's theory of Forms to you, let's look at two of the best known criticisms of it.

Criticism 1: the Form of the bogey

Plato paints a glorious picture. His perfect, eternal world beyond the shadows certainly sounds wonderful. In fact, it sounds like heaven. Plato certainly seems to think of it as being very heavenly.

Now one of Plato's arguments for the Forms seems to be this. Whenever there are things that form a *type* of thing (such as beautiful things or chairs or whatever) there is always a further thing – a Form – that exists in addition to them. Let's call this argument the *Extra Thing Argument*.

However, there is a problem. Some types of thing are pretty revolting. Take bogeys, for example – they are a type of thing. So by the Extra Thing Argument there must also be a Form of the bogey. There must be a *perfect eternal and changeless bogey*.



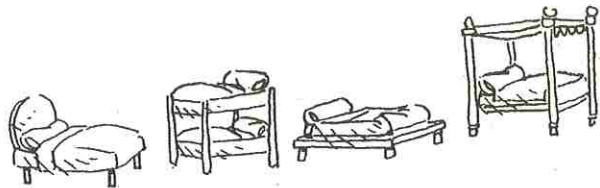
But that can't be right, surely? The perfect bogey doesn't sound very heavenly, does it? Do we really suppose that the real, heavenly world beyond the shadows contains such disgusting things? I guess not. Certainly, Plato himself didn't seem very keen on the idea.

So the problem is this. Either Plato has to accept that there is a Form of bogey (which it seems he wouldn't accept) or else he must admit that the Extra Thing Argument is no good. He can't have it both ways. And if the Extra Thing Argument is no good, then it can't be used to show that any Forms exist.

Criticism 2: too many Forms

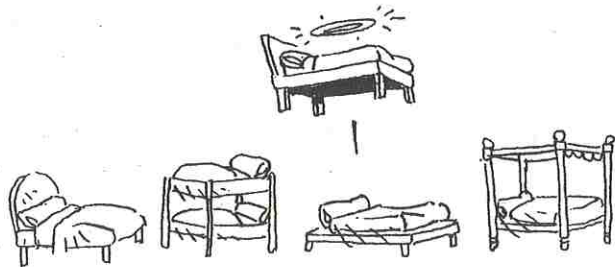
One of the most famous criticisms of Plato's theory goes like this.

As I say, Plato seems to use the Extra Thing Argument. Take these beds, for example:

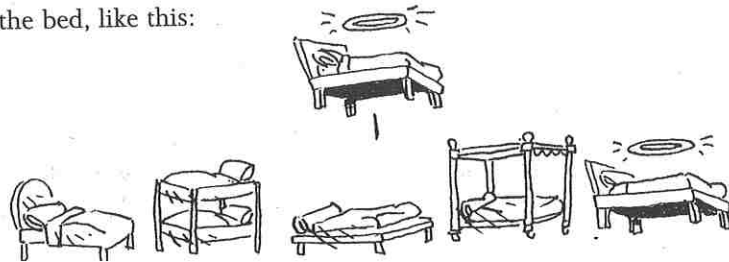


Beds form a type of thing. So, by the Extra Thing Argument, there must be an extra thing – the perfect bed – that exists in addition to them all, like this:

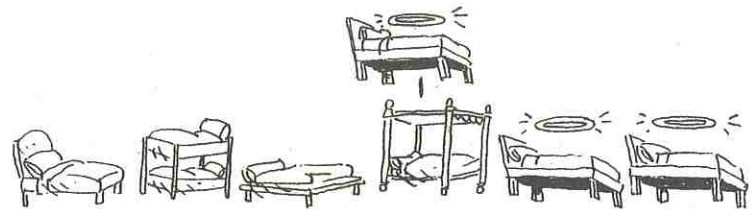
This form is the thing that all particular beds have in common.



But now the original beds plus the Form also form a type. They too are all beds, so they all have something in common too. So by the Extra Thing Argument we must now add a second Form of the bed, like this:



But of course, the original beds plus the two Forms now also form a type. They too are all beds. So by the Extra Thing Argument there must be a third Form of the bed, like this.



There must also be a fourth Form of the bed, and a fifth, and a sixth, and a seventh. The Extra Thing Argument applies again and again without end. So if the Extra Thing Argument is any good there must actually be an infinite number of Forms of the bed. But that is ridiculous.

Of course, the same problem arises for all the other Forms too. The problem is that Plato can't stop at just one Form for each type of thing. In each case, the Extra Thing Argument seems to require that there be an infinite number of Forms for each type of thing.

If, on the other hand, we deny that there are an infinite number of Forms for each type of thing, as Plato surely would, then we must accept that the Extra Thing Argument is no good. In which case it can't be used to show that there is even one Form for each type of thing.

Do we live in the Shadowlands?

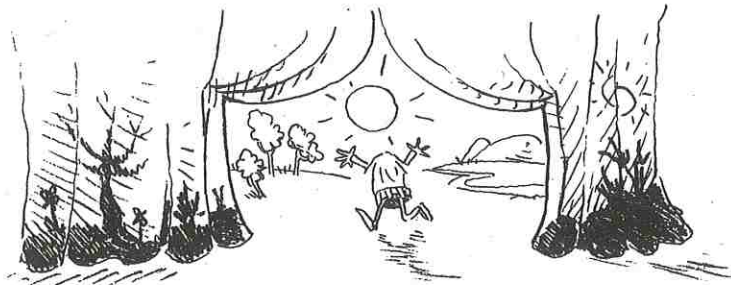
We have now looked at two criticisms of Plato's theory of Forms, both of which seem to be quite good criticisms. But some philosophers argue that these criticisms don't really work. It is also worth remembering that Plato himself knew about these criticisms and wasn't convinced by them. Plato stuck with his theory (as, of course, have very many other philosophers, religious

thinkers, writers, artists and others down through the centuries).

Has Plato convinced you? Is what we see around us the real world? Or are these merely the Shadowlands? What do you think?

I must admit that I am not convinced by Plato's arguments. Still, I have to admit that Plato touches on a feeling that I and many other people seem to have, a feeling that there is more to life, more to reality, than just this. We feel that the essential thing – the important thing – is hidden.

We feel that, if only the curtain could be pulled back, we would see something wonderful. We cannot see, touch, hear, smell or taste this 'something', but still we feel it is there.



File 5

Can I jump in the same river twice?

Aisha's amazing philosophical 'discovery'

Not long ago Aisha and Carol went down to the river near where they live. They went for a swim. Then they sat at a picnic table and ate their sandwiches.



Aisha was looking at the river and thinking to herself. Suddenly she became very excited.

Aisha: I've just made an amazing philosophical discovery!

Carol: What is it, then?

Aisha: You can't jump in the same river twice!

Carol: Don't be silly! Of course you can.

Aisha: I'm not being silly. Look, suppose you jump into that river over there ...

