

Evaluating Plato's Theory of Forms

What do you need to be able to do?

According to the AS Specification, you need to be able to:

- Discuss the validity of the points being made in the analogy of the cave.
- Describe criticisms of the theory of Forms, and be able to discuss whether such criticisms are valid.

These notes will enable you to achieve both of these things. In practice, there is no real difference between them.

Evaluating the analogy of the cave



*What do you think is a **strength** of Plato's analogy of the cave?
(think here about why he devised it in the first place)*

*Can you think of any **weaknesses** of the analogy?
(e.g. is the experience of human life really like the lives of the prisoners?)*

According to **Martin Hollis**:

“The picture painted by Plato in the analogy of the cave is indeed an odd one. You may well ask whether we are truly like these prisoners. Unlike them, we are surely in touch with things as often as with shadows and we know the difference.”

*Taken from **Invitation to Philosophy**, p. 60*

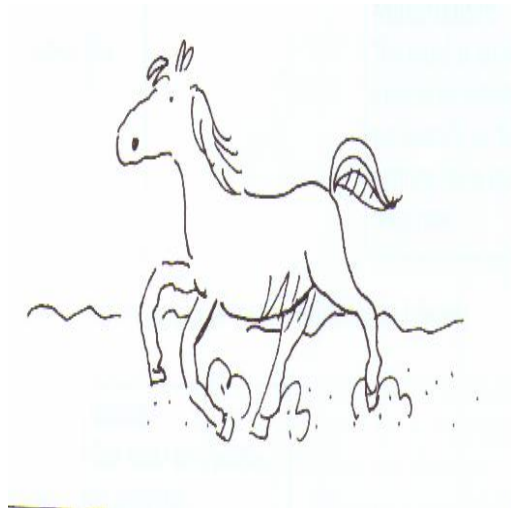
- **What is Hollis saying here to criticise Plato’s analogy of the cave?**

- **What do you think Plato would say in response to Hollis?**

Evaluating the Theory of Forms

You must remember this!

All of the criticisms that are written here of the theory of forms can also be used if you get asked to discuss the validity of the analogy of the cave.



The Form of Horse

What do you think are the weaknesses of Plato’s theory of Forms?

Criticisms of the Theory of Forms

When evaluating the theory of Forms, we can put our criticisms into 4 groups:

1. Criticisms of Plato's view about the nature of reality.
2. Criticisms of Plato's idea about the 'world of Forms'.
3. Criticisms of Plato's ideas about how things in the ordinary world relate to their Forms.
4. Criticisms of Plato's ideas about the Form of the Good.

1. Criticisms of Plato's dualist worldview

One of the great debates in philosophy concerns the question of 'what is real?':

- are individual, material objects (e.g. tables, chairs, horses etc) more 'real' than the ideal representations of them ('table', 'chair', 'horse' etc) or is it the other way around?
- are ideas merely 'names' or 'intellectual abstractions' that have been created by people to help them group together similar objects, or are the ideas (or 'forms') the main reality to which the individual objects owe their existence?

Plato was a *dualist* because he believed that there are two worlds: the material world and the world of ideas or Forms. The world of ideas or Forms is the true reality – everything in the ordinary, material world are but pale reflections of their corresponding ideas in the world of Forms. Plato believed that our knowledge of the Forms was *a priori* – that is, we have it prior to experiencing the objects with our senses. Plato believed that:

- everyone is born with an intuitive – but imperfect - understanding of the Forms
- the philosopher is able, through using his *intellect*, to achieve true knowledge of the abstract Forms (this knowledge that cannot be attained with the senses)

Plato's dualist view about the nature of reality has been criticised by others who believe that abstract ideas (e.g. 'chair', 'horse', 'beauty', 'justice') are actually only names that have been invented to help people describe their experiences of the physical world. This is a **materialist** view because it says that the ordinary, material world is the true reality and that ideas develop only because of our experience of physical things. From this point of view, the idea of 'tree' exists because human beings have had experience of trees and needed an idea or word to describe them. 'Tree' is not some eternal idea waiting to be discovered independently with the intellect – we only come up with the idea because we have first experienced the physical object. This way of achieving knowledge is known as *a posteriori* – knowledge that comes *after* sense experience. **Aristotle** argued that the ideas or 'Forms' are developed from our continued experience of physical things – they do not exist eternally or independently. They exist only in language – not in some independent 'world of Forms'.

In Plato's defence...

- Modern genetics could be used to support Plato's argument that what is really real are ideas or Forms. Individuals are members of a species because they share a common genetic code. The genetic code comes first, and the individual is able to grow and become a member of his or her species only because of it.

- Plato is obviously on to something when he says that there are *universal ideas* (e.g. 'chair', 'man', 'tree', 'dog') that we use to make sense of *particular things* (armchairs; dining room

chairs; thrones; etc). According to **Bertrand Russell**, Plato's theory made a *'very important advance in philosophy, since it is the first to emphasise the problem of universals'*.

2. Criticisms of Plato's idea about the 'world of Forms'

Plato's theory was a two-world theory: every object in the ordinary *'world of appearances'* corresponds in an imperfect way to its ideal master-copy in the perfect *'world of Forms'*. Many critics of Plato have questioned whether it is reasonable to believe in a separate, perfect, eternal, and unchanging *'world of Forms'*.

- Ideas and concepts are things that we have and make use of on a daily basis – few would deny this. However, Plato's argument that there is a separate world where these concepts have existed for eternity seems unreasonable.
- According to Plato's theory of the Forms, every object and idea in our world corresponds to its Form in the world of ideas. This would mean that there is a perfect Form of things like Cockroach, Mud, Hair, Smallpox, Snot, Mucus and so on. According to **Bertrand Russell**, his ideas of the Forms when taken to its extreme falls into *'a bottomless pit of nonsense'*. Plato himself seemed to struggle with the implications of his theory: sometimes he says there is a Form for everything but at other times he seems unsure.

3. Criticisms of Plato's ideas about how things in the ordinary world relate to their Forms

Plato argued that all of the particular objects in the real world imperfectly reflected a perfect Form in the world of Forms. For example, all horses are pale reflections of the Form of the Horse. Many people have been critical of this idea and raised objections.

- Does the single Form refer to all objects, or does each object have its own Form? In other words, is each individual horse that has ever lived a pale reflection of its own Form? Or is there one Form that refers to all the particular objects?

- If the single Form of the Horse is perfect, are the varieties of horses different *because of their imperfections?*

4. Criticisms of Plato's ideas about the Form of the Good

Plato believed that the highest Form is the Good. This is like the sun in the analogy of the cave because it illuminates all the other Forms and all of the other Forms are in some way dependent on the Form of the Good. Plato's views of the 'Good' have been criticised.

Plato was a **moral absolutist**: he argued that there is an absolute Good that is eternal and unchanging and which can be discovered through using the intellectual (i.e. it is *a priori*). According to Plato, once we understand the 'Good' there will be no disagreement about moral issues or differences across cultures about what is right or wrong.

Others hold a **relativist** point of view and argue that there is no such thing as an absolute good. They argue that ideas of right and wrong develop in the world of time and space through human relationships and situations (i.e. they are *a posteriori*). Society's values change over time and also differ in different parts of the world. They will always continue to do so no matter how intelligent people become and so the idea of the Form of Good is not valid.

