

Plato's Big Idea: Being and Knowing

Introduction

- Lecture 1: Plato's intellectual and political hinterlands.
 - Lecture 2: Plato's Dialogues—aporetic beginnings to grand syntheses.
 - **Lecture 3 focus:** Plato's *animating core*—his metaphysics, epistemology, and the big idea behind Platonism.
 - Approach: *via negativa*—we define Plato's vision **by contrast** with modern philosophical “-isms.”
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I. The Modern Opponents of Platonism

Plato stands in opposition to nearly every modern doctrine of knowledge and reality.



Empiricism

- From *empeiria* ("experience").
- Truth = what can be verified through sense experience.
- Locke, Hume, Berkeley.
- **Plato's critique:** Sense experience is unstable. It belongs to the world of **Becoming**, not **Being**.



Constructivism

- Meaning is *made*, not discovered.
- There's no reality beyond our conceptual schemes.
- Plato: No—truth exists *outside* us, not merely in language or thought.



Positivism

- Associated with Auguste Comte.
- “What you see is all there is.”
- No natural law, no transcendent moral order—only human law and facts.

- Legal, scientific, and logical positivism all deny a higher reality.
- Plato: **There is a moral universe.** Law should reflect it.

Evolutionism as Metaphysics

- Evolution explains *everything*—not just biology, but ethics, beauty, consciousness.
 - Plato: No. Evolution explains *change*, but not eternal truths.
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II. The Masters of Suspicion

Modern thinkers who reduce truth to power, bias, or unconscious drives.

- **Karl Marx:** Morality is bourgeois ideology—used to **control** the proletariat.
- **Friedrich Nietzsche:** Morality is slave revolt—used by the weak to **control** the strong.
- **Sigmund Freud:** Morality is **repression**, reason is a mask for buried desires.

*All three cast suspicion on **reason**—but exempt their own philosophies from the same doubt.*

III. The Transcendent World of Plato

What is a Form?

- Greek: *ἰδέα* (idea), *εἶδος* (form).
- Not mental constructs—not “just an idea.”
- **Forms are more real than physical objects.**
- They are **eternal, objective, non-physical essences.**

 **Example: Numbers**

- Think about the number 2.
- Did it begin with the Big Bang? Will it die with the heat death of the universe?
- If not, then you already believe in *transcendent reality*.
- If the number 2 exists, **infinite transcendent objects** exist.

“Finitude demands explanation. Infinity does not.”

IV. Plato’s Three Big Pictures (Republic)

1. **The Sun**

- Just as the sun is the source of all light and life in the physical world,
- So the **Form of the Good** is the source of all truth and being in the metaphysical world.
- The Good doesn’t just *have* goodness—it *is* goodness itself.

“Candlelight is borrowed. Sunlight is not.”

2. **The Divided Line**

A visual metaphor for Plato’s entire philosophy.

Vertical Line (degrees of reality and knowing):

Knowing	Reality
Contemplation	The Good
Reasoning	Mathematical Forms
Belief	Physical Objects
Imagination	Shadows & Images

Horizontal Line: Divides the **World of Becoming** (below) and the **World of Being** (above).

*Modern world puts science and sense at the top. Plato flips it: **the visible is the lowest tier of reality.***

3. ● **The Cave (Allegory of the Cave)**

- Prisoners are chained, watching shadows on a wall, mistaking them for reality.
- One escapes, blinded by the **sun** (truth), slowly adjusts, and returns to free others.
- They reject him—too used to the shadows.

This allegory captures Plato's metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and political philosophy all in one.

V. The Role of Beauty

- Plato sees **beauty** as a *pathway* to transcendence.
- In the *Symposium*: Beauty awakens desire (eros) for the **Form of Beauty**.
- Beautiful things **participate in** the Form of Beauty—they're not beauty itself.

"Beauty is not anywhere in another thing... but itself, by itself, with itself."

VI. Universals and Particulars

- How can *different things* be called the *same* (e.g., all blue shirts)?
- Plato's answer: They **participate in a Universal**—a Form.
- Modern logic struggles to explain resemblance without some version of this.

VII. The Sacred and the Ineffable

*“Some truths are not provable—they must be **felt**.”*

- The Sacred points to what lies **beyond** the cave.
- Postmodernists want *proof* by the standards of the cave.
- But some intuitions—the divine, beauty, love—**break through the cave walls**.

“You either see it or you don’t.”

VIII. Final Image: C.S. Lewis

*“They are only the scent of a flower we have not found,
the echo of a tune we have not heard,
news from a country we have never yet visited.”*

Key Takeaways

- **Plato believes** in a transcendent reality—a **world of Forms**.
 - **Truth, beauty,** and **goodness** are **real**, not invented.
 - The Good is beyond Being. It is **the source** of all meaning.
 - Philosophy = **a way out of the cave**.
 - Plato’s goal: **educate the soul** to see the real world, not the shadows.
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Next Lecture: *Plato and the City – Philosophy Meets Politics*

