

# 3

## Socrates, Plato

Love [is] between the mortal and the immortal. . . . [It is] a grand spirit which brings together the sensible world and the eternal world and merges them into one great whole. — Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, 202e

I [Socrates] affirm that the good is the beautiful. — Plato's *Lysis*, 216d

If you have heard of only one philosopher, it is probably one of the big three: Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle. These three were the most important philosophers of ancient Greece and in some respects the most important, period. Plato was the pupil of Socrates, and Aristotle was the pupil of Plato. This chapter covers Socrates and Plato and the following chapter, Aristotle.

### SOCRATES

In the fifth century B.C.E., the center of Western civilization was Athens, a city-state and a democracy. This period of time was some three centuries after the first Olympic Games and the start of alphabetic writing, and approximately one century before Alexander the Great demonstrated that it is possible to conquer the world, or what passed for it then. Fifty thousand citizens of Athens governed the city and the city's empire. Athenians did not settle disputes by brawling but, rather, by discussion and debate. Power was not achieved through wealth or physical strength or skill with weapons; it was achieved through words. Rhetoricians, men and women with sublime skill in debate, created plausible arguments for almost any assertion and, for a fee, taught others to do it too.

These rhetoricians, the Western world's first professors, were the **Sophists**. They were interested in practical things, and few had patience with metaphysical speculation. They demonstrated their rhetorical abilities by “proving” the seem-

ingly unprovable—that is, by attacking commonly held views. The net effect was an examination and a critique of accepted standards of behavior within Athenian society. In this way, moral philosophy began. We will return to this topic in Chapter 10.

At the same time in the fifth century B.C.E., there also lived a stonemason with a muscular build and a keen mind, **Socrates** [SOK-ruh-teez] (470–399 B.C.E.). He wrote nothing, but we know quite a bit about him from Plato’s famous “dialogues,” in which Socrates almost always stars. (Plato’s later dialogues reflect Plato’s own views, even though “Socrates” is doing the speaking in them. But we are able to extract a reasonably detailed picture of Socrates from the earlier dialogues.)

Given the spirit of the times, it is not surprising that Socrates shared some of the philosophical interests and practices of the Sophists. We must imagine him wandering about the city, engaging citizens in discussion and argument. He was a brilliant debater, and he was idolized by many young Athenians.

But Socrates did not merely engage in sophistry—he was not interested in arguing simply for the sake of arguing—he wanted to discover something important, namely, the *essential nature* of knowledge, justice, beauty, goodness, and, especially, traits of good character such as courage. The method of discovery he followed bears his name, the “Socratic method.” To this day, more than twenty centuries after his death, many philosophers equate proficiency within their own field with skill in the **Socratic** (or **dialectic**) **method**.

The method goes like this: Suppose you and Socrates wish to find out what knowledge is. You propose, tentatively, that knowledge is strong belief. Socrates then asks if that means that people who have a strong belief in, say, fairies must be said to *know* there are fairies. Seeing your mistake, you reconsider and offer a revised thesis: knowledge is not belief that is *strong* but belief that is *true*.

Socrates then says, “Suppose the true belief, which you say is knowledge, is based on a lucky guess. For instance, suppose I, Socrates, ask you to guess what kind of car I own, and you guess a Volvo. Even if your guess turns out to be right, would you call that knowledge?”

By saying this, Socrates has made you see that knowledge cannot be equated with true belief either. You must therefore attempt a better analysis. Eventually you may find a definition of knowledge that Socrates cannot refute.

So the Socratic/dialectic method is a search for the proper definition of a thing, a definition that will not permit refutation under Socratic questioning. The method does not imply that the questioner knows the essential nature of knowledge. It only demonstrates that the questioner is skilled at detecting misconceptions and at revealing them by asking the right questions. In many cases the process may not actually disclose the essence of the thing in question, and if Plato’s dialogues are an indication, Socrates himself did not have at hand many final, satisfactory definitions. Still, the technique will bring those who practice it closer to this final understanding.

The **Delphi Oracle** is said to have pronounced Socrates the wisest of people. (An oracle is a shrine where a priest delivers a god’s response to a human question. The most famous oracle of all time was the Delphi Oracle, which was housed in the great temple to Apollo in ancient and Hellenistic Greece.) Socrates thought the pronouncement referred to the fact that he, unlike most people, was *aware* of his



Socrates' prison—or what is left of it

ignorance. Applying the Socratic method, one gets good at seeing misconceptions and learning to recognize one's own ignorance.

Socrates was not a pest who went around trapping people in argument and making them look idiotic. He was famous not only for his dialectical skill but also for his courage and stamina in battle. He staunchly opposed injustice, even at considerable risk to himself. His trial and subsequent death by drinking hemlock after his conviction (for “corrupting” young men and not believing in the city's gods) are reported by Plato in the gripping dialogues *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. These dialogues portray Socrates as an individual of impressive character and true grit. Although it would have been easy for him to escape from prison, he did not do so because, according to Plato, by having chosen to live in Athens, he had implicitly promised to obey the laws of the city.

Richard Robinson summarizes the greatest value of Socrates, as we perceive him through Plato, as lying in Socrates' clear conception of the demands placed on us by reason:

[Socrates] impresses us, more than any other figure in literature, with the supreme importance of thinking as well as possible and making our actions conform to our thoughts. To this end he preaches the knowledge of one's own starting-points, the hypothetical entertainment of opinions, the exploration of their consequences and connections, the willingness to follow the argument

wherever it leads, the public confession of one's thoughts, the invitation to others to criticize, the readiness to reconsider, and at the same time firm action in accordance with one's present beliefs. Plato's *Apology* has in fact made Socrates the chief martyr of reason as the gospels have made Jesus the chief martyr of faith.

## PLATO

When we pause to consider the great minds of Western history, those rare individuals whose insight elevates the human intellect by a prodigious leap, we think immediately of Socrates' most famous student, **Plato** (c. 427–347 B.C.E.), and Plato's student, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.). Both Plato and Aristotle were interested in practically every subject, and each spoke intelligently on philosophical topics and problems. Platonic metaphysics formed the model for Christian theology for fifteen centuries. This model was superseded only when translations of Aristotle's works were rediscovered by European philosophers and theologians in the thirteenth century A.D. After this rediscovery, Aristotle's metaphysics came to predominate in Christian thinking, although Christianity is still Platonic in many, many ways.

### Plato's Metaphysics: The Theory of Forms

Plato's metaphysics is known as the **Theory of Forms**, and it is discussed in several of the two dozen compositions we have referred to as **Plato's dialogues**. The most famous dialogue is the *Republic*, from the so-called middle period of Plato's writings, during which Plato reached the peak of genius. The *Republic* also gives Plato's best-known account of the Theory of Forms.

According to Plato's Theory of Forms, what is truly real is not the objects we encounter in sensory experience but, rather, **Forms**, and these can only be grasped intellectually. Therefore, once you know what Plato's Forms are, you will understand the Theory of Forms and the essentials of Platonic metaphysics. Unfortunately, it is not safe to assume Plato had *exactly* the same thing in mind throughout his life when he spoke of the Forms. Nevertheless, Plato's concept is pretty clear and can be illustrated with an example or two.

The Greeks were excellent geometers, which is not surprising because they invented the subject as a systematic science. Now, when a Greek geometer demonstrated some property of, say, *circularity*, he was not demonstrating the property of something that could actually be found in the physical world. After all, you do not find circularity in the physical world: what you find are *things*—various round objects—that approach perfect circularity but are not *perfectly* circular. Even if you are drawing circles with an excellent compass and are paying close attention to what you are drawing, your “circle” is not perfectly circular. Thus, when a geometer discovered a property of circularity, for example, he was discovering something about an *ideal* thing. Circularity does not exist in the physical world. Circularity, then, is an example of a Form.

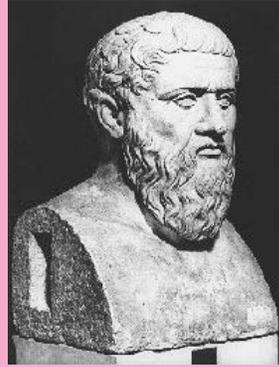
## PROFILE: Aristocles, a.k.a. “Plato” (c. 427–347 B.C.E.)

“Plato” was the nickname of an Athenian whose true name was Aristocles. The nickname, which means “broad shoulders,” stuck, and so did this man’s philosophy. Few individuals, if any, have had more influence on Western thought than Plato.

Plato initially studied with Cratylus, who was a follower of Heraclitus, and then with Socrates. He was also influenced by the Pythagoreans, from whom he may have derived his great respect for mathematics. Plato thought that the study of mathematics was a necessary introduction to philosophy, and it is said that he expelled from his Academy students who had difficulty with mathematical concepts.

Plato founded his Academy in 387, and it was the first multisubject, multiteacher institution of higher learning in Western civilization. The Academy survived for nine centuries, until the emperor Justinian closed it to protect Christian truth.

Plato’s dialogues are divided into three groups. According to recent respected scholarship, the ear-



liest include most important the *Apology*, which depicts and philosophically examines Socrates’ trial and execution; the *Meno*, which is concerned with whether virtue can be taught; the *Gorgias*, which concerns the nature of right and wrong; and the first book of the *Republic*. The dialogues from the middle period include the remaining books of the *Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Cratylus*, *Parmenides*, and *Theaetetus*. In the most famous of

these, the *Republic*, Plato explains and interrelates his conceptions of justice, the ideal state, and the Theory of Forms. Plato’s later dialogues include most notably the *Timaeus*, which is Plato’s account of the creation of the universe; the *Sophist*, which examines the nature of nonbeing; and the *Laws*, which is concerned with what laws a good constitution should contain. The *Laws* is Plato’s longest dialogue and the only dialogue in which Socrates is not present.

Here is another example. Consider two beautiful objects: a beautiful statue and a beautiful house. These are two very different objects, but they have *something* in common — they both qualify as beautiful. Beauty is another example of a Form. Notice that beauty, like circularity, is not something you encounter directly in the physical world. What you encounter in the physical world is always some object or other, a house or a statue or whatever, which may or may not be beautiful. But beauty itself is not something you meet up with; rather, you meet up with *objects* that to varying degrees *possess* beauty or, as Plato said, “participate” in the Form *beauty*. Beauty, like circularity, is an ideal thing, not a concrete thing.

You may be tempted to suppose that the Forms are just ideas or concepts in someone’s mind. But this might be a mistake. Before any people were around, there were circular things, logs and round stones and so on — that is, things that came close in varying degrees to being perfectly circular. If there were circular things when there were no people around, or people-heads to have people-ideas in, it would seem that circularity is not just an idea in people’s heads. It may be more difficult to suppose that there were beautiful things before there were people to think of things as beautiful, but this difficulty might only be due to assuming that

“beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.” Whether that assumption truly is justified is actually an unsettled question. (It is a question that belongs to the aesthetics branch of philosophy.)

Sometimes Plato’s Forms are referred to as *Ideas*, and the Theory of Forms is also said to be the Theory of Ideas. But *Idea* is misleading because, as you can see, Plato’s Forms are not the sort of ideas that exist in people. We will stick with the word *Forms*.

Forms have certain important and unusual features. We will begin by asking: How *old* is circularity? Immediately on hearing the question, you will realize that circularity is not any age. Circular things, sand dollars and bridge abutments and so on, are some age or other. But circularity itself has no age. The same thing is true of beauty, the Form. So we can see that the Forms are ageless, that is, *eternal*.

They are also *unchanging*. A beautiful house may change due to alterations or aging, but that couldn’t happen to beauty itself. And you, having learned that the circumference of the circle is equal to  $\pi$  times twice the radius distance, aren’t apt to worry that someday the circle may change and, when it does, the circumference will no longer equal  $2\pi r$ . (Mathematics teachers did not have to revise what they knew about circularity when New Math came in.)

Finally, the Forms are *unmoving* and *indivisible*. Indeed, what sense would it make even to suppose that they might move or be physically divided?

When you think of these various characteristics of Forms and remember as well that Plato equated the Forms with true reality, you may begin to see why we stated that Plato’s metaphysics formed the model for Christian theology. You may also be reminded, we hope, of what Parmenides said about true being (i.e., that it is eternal, unmoving, unchanging, and indivisible). Of course, you should also remember that for Parmenides there is only one being, but for Plato there are many Forms.

But why did Plato say that only the Forms are truly real? A thing is beautiful only to the extent it participates in the Form *beauty*, just as it is circular only if it participates in the Form *circularity*. Likewise, a thing is large only if it participates in the Form *largeness*, and the same principle would hold for all of a thing’s properties. Thus, a large, beautiful, round thing—a beautiful, large, round oak table, for instance—couldn’t be beautiful, large, or round if the Forms *beauty*, *largeness*, and *circularity* did not exist. Indeed, if the Forms *oak* and *table* did not exist, “it” wouldn’t even be an oak table. Sensible objects—that is, the things we encounter in sensory experience—are what they are only if they sufficiently participate in their corresponding Forms. Sensible objects owe their reality to the Forms, so the ultimate reality belongs to the Forms.

Many people scold philosophers, mathematicians, and other thinkers for being concerned with abstractions and concepts. “That’s all very interesting,” they say about some philosophical or mathematical theory, “but I’m more interested in the *real* world.” By “real world” they mean the world you experience with your senses. On the face of it, at least, Plato makes out a convincing case that that world is *not* the real world at all.

Plato was aware that there is a sense in which the objects we see and touch are real. Even appearances are *real* appearances. But Plato’s position is that the objects

## The Cave

In the *Republic*, Plato uses a vivid allegory to explain his two-realms philosophy. He invites us to imagine a cave in which some prisoners are bound so that they can look only at the wall in front of them. Behind them is a fire whose light casts shadows of various objects on the wall in front of the prisoners. Because the prisoners cannot see the objects themselves, they regard the shadows they see as the true reality. One of the prisoners eventually escapes from the cave and, in the light of the sun, sees real objects for the first time, becoming aware of the big difference between them and the shadow images he had always taken for reality.

The cave, obviously, represents the world we see and experience with our senses, and the world of

sunlight represents the realm of Forms. The prisoners represent ordinary people, who, in taking the sensible world to be the real world, are condemned to darkness, error, ignorance, and illusion. The escaped prisoner represents the philosopher, who has seen light, truth, beauty, knowledge, and true reality.

Of course, if the philosopher returns to the cave to tell the prisoners how things really are, they will think his brain has been addled. This difficulty is sometimes faced by those who have seen the truth and decide to tell others about it.

we see and touch have a *lesser* reality because they can only approximate their Form and thus are always to some extent flawed. Any particular beautiful thing will always be deficient in beauty compared with the Form *beauty*. And, as any particular beautiful thing owes whatever degree of beauty it has to the Form *beauty*, the Form is the source of what limited reality as a beautiful thing the thing has.

Thus, Plato introduced into Western thought a *two-realms* concept. On one hand, there is the realm of particular, changing, sense-perceptible or “sensible” things. This realm Plato likened to a cave (see the box “The Cave”). It is the realm of flawed and lesser entities. Consequently, it is also, for those who concern themselves with sensible things, a source of error, illusion, and ignorance. On the other hand, there is the realm of Forms — eternal, fixed, and perfect — the source of all reality and of all true knowledge. This **Platonic dualism** was incorporated into Christianity and transmitted through the ages to our thought today, where it lingers still and affects our views on virtually every subject.

Now, Plato believed that some forms, especially the Forms *truth*, *beauty*, and *goodness*, are of a higher order than other Forms. For example, you can say of the Form *circularity* that it is beautiful, but you cannot say of the Form *beauty* that it is circular. So the Form *beauty* is higher than the Form *circularity*. This fact will turn out to be very important when we consider Plato’s ethics in the second part of this book. Also, as we shall see in Part Two, Plato connected his Theory of Forms with a theory of the ideal state (see the box “What Is Beauty?”).

## Plato’s Theory of Knowledge

The first comprehensive theory of knowledge in philosophy was Plato’s. Certainly many of his predecessors had implicit theories of knowledge, and some of them spoke explicitly on epistemological subjects. Some were quite skeptical. A **skeptic**

## What Is Beauty?

The Hope Diamond and a Lamborghini Countach share a common property: both are beautiful. But what, exactly, is *beauty*? It is an abstract thing, an example of a Platonic Form. However, the beauty



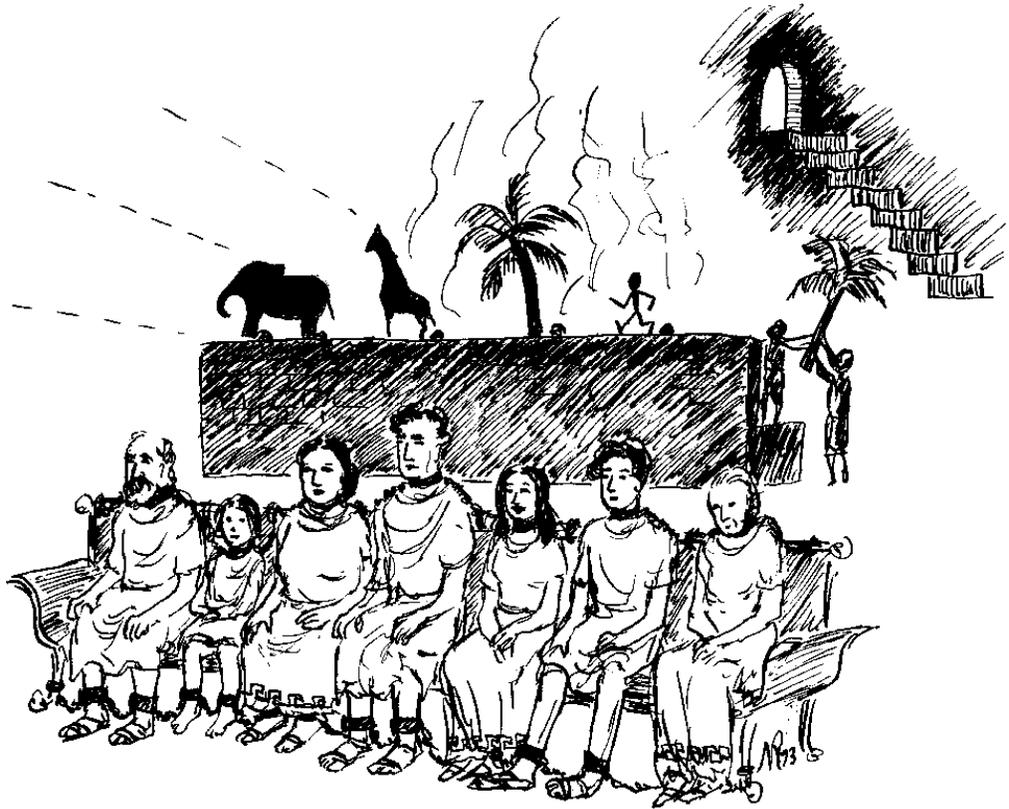
possessed by a diamond and an automobile is physical beauty, which is not identical with Absolute Beauty, which Plato equated with the Form *goodness*.



is a doubter, a person who doubts that knowledge is possible. Xenophanes (c. 570–480 B.C.E.) declared that even if truth were stated it would not be known. Heraclitus (c. 535–475 B.C.E.), whom we talked about earlier, was a contemporary of Xenophanes. He had the idea that, just as you cannot step into the same river twice, everything is in flux; this theory suggests it is impossible to discover any fixed truth beyond what is expressed in the theory itself. (Heraclitus, however, apparently did not himself deduce skeptical conclusions from his metaphysical theory.) Cratylus, a younger contemporary of Socrates (470–399 B.C.E.), carried this flux theory even further, arguing that you cannot step even once into the same river because both you and the river are continually changing. And, as if that were not enough, he said that our words themselves change in their meaning as we speak them, and therefore true communication is impossible. Likewise impossible, one would think, would be knowledge. Cratylus, it is said, largely abstained from conversation and merely wiggled his finger when someone spoke to him, figuring that his understanding of words he heard must necessarily be different from the meaning the speaker intended.

Skeptical themes are also found in the pronouncements of the Sophists. If you were a citizen of Athens and wanted to be influential, you needed to be trained by a Sophist, who could devise an argument to back up any claim. Because the Sophists could make a plausible case for any position, they seemed to show that one idea is as valid as the next, a theory that supports skepticism.

Gorgias (c. 485–380 B.C.E.), one particularly famous Sophist, said: “There is no reality, and if there were, we could not know of it, and even if we could, we could not communicate our knowledge.” This statement parallels that of Xenophanes, just mentioned.



In Plato's Myth of the Cave a group of prisoners is placed so they can see, on the wall of the cave, only reflections of objects carried back and forth in front of a fire behind them. Because the reflections are all they see, the prisoners assume the reflections to be reality.

The best-known Sophist philosopher of all, Protagoras (c. 490–421 B.C.E.), said that “man is the measure of all things.” This can be interpreted — and was interpreted by Plato — as meaning that there is no absolute knowledge: one person's views about the world are as valid as the next person's. Plato argued strenuously against this theory. In his dialogue *Theaetetus*, Plato pointed out that if Protagoras is correct, and one person's views really are as valid as the next person's, then the person who views Protagoras's theory as false has a valid view. To this day beginning philosophy students subscribe to Protagoras's theory (without knowing it is Protagoras's theory), and to this day philosophy instructors use Plato's argument against it.

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato also tried to show that another popular idea about knowledge is mistaken. This is the idea that knowledge may be equated with sense perception. Plato had several reasons for thinking this equation is false.

One reason for thinking that knowledge is not just sense perception is the fact that knowledge clearly involves more than sense perception. For example, sense perception by itself tells us a straight stick stuck in water is bent—*thinking* is required for us to know the stick is actually straight. Further, just to know the stick

*exists* or is of a certain *length* involves thought. Visual sensations give you colored expanses, auditory sensations give you sounds, but existence itself is a concept that cuts across several senses simultaneously and is supplied by thought. Judgments of length, for example, involve making comparisons with rulers or tape measures, and comparing is a mental activity.

Another reason knowledge is not just sense perception is that you can retain knowledge even *after* you are no longer sensing a thing. Finally, and even more important, in Plato's view true knowledge is knowledge of what *is*. Because the objects of sense perception are always changing (remember Heraclitus?), sense perception and knowledge cannot be one and the same.

True knowledge, Plato was positive, must be concerned with what is *truly real*. This means, of course, that the objects of true knowledge are the Forms because the objects of sense perception are real only to the extent that they “participate” in the Forms.

This, then, is essentially Plato's theory of knowledge, and he elaborated on it in the *Republic*—especially in a passage known as the **Theory of the Divided Line** and in the **Myth of the Cave**.

The Theory of the Divided Line is used by Plato to contrast knowledge, on one hand, with mere belief or opinion, on the other. Plato illustrates his theory by dividing a line in two parts. The upper part of the line stands for knowledge, and the lower part stands for belief (opinion). Knowledge is concerned with absolutes—absolute beauty, absolute good, and so forth—in short, with the Forms. And this is not unreasonable of Plato. If your “knowledge” of beauty or goodness or circularity or the like is limited to this or that beautiful car or good deed or round plate, then you really do not have knowledge of *absolute* beauty, goodness, or circularity. At best you have a bunch of opinions that, as they are as likely as not to be riddled with error, come closer to *ignorance* than to true knowledge.

In Plato's Divided Line, the upper part of the line represents knowledge and the lower part represents opinion. Plato also subdivided the knowledge section of the line into two parts, and did the same for the opinion section. (How these further subdivisions are to be understood is a matter of controversy.) What is essential to remember is that, according to Plato, the highest form of knowledge is that obtained through the *use of reason* because perfect beauty or absolute goodness or the ideal triangle cannot be perceived.

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### Plato's Theory of Love and Becoming

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As mentioned earlier, knowledge is true ultimately because it is knowledge of what is. Plato believed that it is not enough to know the truth; rather, a person must also become that truth. This is where Plato's epistemology, or theory of truth, becomes a metaphysics, or theory of being. To know for Plato is to be. The more you know, the more you are and the better you are.

Plato began, as we saw, with the Myth of the Cave that shows how and why human beings are in the dark about the truth of things. And this ignorance is almost universal—even Socrates admits that he has no knowledge. What allows humans eventually to come into the light of day regarding the truth of things is the Forms.

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Each individual has in his or her immortal soul a perfect set of Forms that can be remembered (*anamnesis*), and only this constitutes true knowledge. To remember the Forms is to know the absolute truth and simultaneously to become just and wise. Through the Forms, all skeptical doubts are laid to rest and the individual becomes good in the process. This way of thinking is so powerful and compelling that twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger suggested that all Western philosophy since Plato is but a variety of Platonism.

Plato believed in two radically separate spheres: the realm of shadows or imperfect, changing beings and the realm of perfect, eternal, unchanging Forms. The problem is, how do we get out of the cave to the perfect world of Forms? In his dialogue *The Symposium*, Plato postulated the notion of love as the way in which a person can go from the state of imperfection and ignorance to the state of perfection and true knowledge. He defined love as a longing for and a striving to attain the object of longing. Love is that which seeks to possess the beautiful and to recreate in beauty. Human beings love to love: they truly come alive only in seeking a beloved, whether that beloved is another human being or an idea or health or money.

For Plato, love is meant to be the force that brings all things together and makes them beautiful. It is the way by which all beings, but especially human beings, can ascend to higher stages of self-realization and perfection. Plato's love begins as an experience of lacking something. Love provokes both thought and effort in the pursuit of what is lacking. The deeper the thought, the greater the love.

Plato initially mirrored the Athenian view that the deepest human relationships were between two men, usually an older man and a younger one. Women were not only considered the weaker sex but were also thought to be superficial, excitable, and superstitious. Marriage had as its purpose the reproduction and raising of children, and physical lovemaking was considered a low form of love. Plato's love does not exclude physical beauty, but "Platonic love" begins at a higher stage of development, namely, with the sharing of beautiful thoughts with a beautiful person. Plato believed that this kind of love should be experienced while a person is young. It is this intellectual or spiritual love that begins the ascent of love, which may eventually lead to the permanent possession of Absolute Beauty or Goodness.

The love for just one other human, even if that person is as noble as a Socrates, remains a limited form of intellectual eros. It is but the first step in the ascent of philosophical love to Absolute Beauty. To reach the higher stages of love means entering what is called the *mysterics*. Plato has Socrates recount a theory of love given to him by a woman named Diotima. Socrates implies that few may be able to follow this line of reasoning, which he himself has difficulty comprehending, but Diotima's theory of love was this: The higher forms of love express the will to immortality and the will to produce immortal "children," not merely physical children. All love seeks to possess beauty and to reproduce in beauty, but the creation of immortal children (like the writings of Homer) can grant the author immortality. A first step beyond merely loving a beautiful person and begetting beautiful thoughts lies in the realization that beauty in all things is one and the same and that all love is one. A further step involves the recognition of the superiority of intellectual or spiritual beauty over physical beauty. Then love must expand beyond pre-occupations with a particular person to an appreciation of the beauty of moral practices and laws. An individual is part of larger social groupings, each with ac-

companying obligations. Love here takes the form of appreciating and aptly participating in organizations such as a city-state like Athens. Yet no matter how wide a person's involvement is in the moral and social spheres of love, this still does not represent the highest and most inclusive love. A person begins to glimpse the all-inclusive, all-uniting kind of love by first seeing the beauty of knowledge as a whole or at least many of the different forms of knowledge. This leads to an appreciation and love of the whole realm of beauty or the integrated beauty of everything there is. In the happiness of viewing such vast beauty, a person will have beautiful thoughts and be able to speak beautiful words. Eventually such a person may be able to make the final leap to the beauty and truth, which is beyond all mortal things.

The last and highest stage of love lies in the discovery of the ultimate mystery, Absolute Beauty itself. The beauty of this being contains no change of any kind. It was never born and will never die, nor will it increase or decrease. It is not good in one part and bad in another. It is perfect and one with itself forever. All imperfect things participate in this Beauty, thereby receiving a modicum of fulfillment and self-realization. Plato indicated that once a person has seen Absolute Beauty, then such a fortunate person would no longer be dazzled by mere physical beauty or the other rubbish of mortality. This, for human beings, is the ultimate kind of immortality, he thought.

Thus, love for Plato is the ultimate way of knowing and realizing truth. For mortals, love is a process of seeking higher stages of being: physical love begets mortal children; intellectual or spiritual love begets immortal children. The greater the love, the more it will contain an intellectual component. The lifelong longing and pursuit seeks ever higher stages of love so that it can eventually lead to the possession of Absolute Beauty. This is the pursuit that motivates the highest sorts of human beings and that transforms entire civilizations. To love the highest is to become the best.



### SELECTION 3.1

## Apology\*

*Plato*

[In 399 B.C.E., Socrates was sentenced to death by an Athenian court for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. This excerpt is from Plato's dialogue *Apology*, in which Socrates is seen defending himself.]

I will make my defense, and I will try in the short time allowed to do away with this evil opinion of me which you have held for such a long time. I hope I

may succeed, if this be well for you and me, and that my words may find favor with you. But I know to accomplish this is not easy—I see the nature of the task. Let the event be as the gods will; in obedience to the law I make my defense.

I will begin at the beginning and ask what the accusation is which has given rise to this slander of me and which has encouraged Meletus to proceed against me. What do the slanderers say? They shall be my prosecutors and I will sum up their words in

\*From Christopher Biffle, *A Guided Tour of Five Works by Plato*, 3rd Edition, Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 2001, pp. 36–40. Based on the nineteenth century translation by

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an affidavit. “Socrates is an evil-doer and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in the heavens. He makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger and he teaches these doctrines to others.” That is the nature of the accusation and that is what you have seen in the comedy of Aristophanes. He introduced a man whom he calls Socrates, going about and saying he can walk in the air and talking a lot of nonsense concerning matters which I do not pretend to know anything about—however, I mean to say nothing disparaging of anyone who is a student of such knowledge. I should be very sorry if Meletus could add that to my charge. But the simple truth is, O Athenians, I have nothing to do with these studies. Very many of those here are witnesses to the truth of this and to them I appeal. Speak then, you who have heard me, and tell your neighbors whether any of you ever heard me hold forth in few words or in many upon matters of this sort. . . . You hear their answer. And from what they say you will be able to judge the truth of the rest.

There is the same foundation for the report I am a teacher and take money; that is no more true than the other. Although, if a man is able to teach, I honor him for being paid. There are Gorgias of Leontium, Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis,<sup>2</sup> who go round the cities and are able to persuade young men to leave their own citizens, by whom they might be taught for nothing, and come to them, whom they not only pay but are also thankful if they may be allowed to pay them.

There is actually a Parian philosopher residing in Athens who charges fees. I came to hear of him in this way: I met a man who spent a world of money on the sophists, Callias, the son of Hipponicus, and knowing he had sons, I asked him: “Callias,” I said, “if your two sons were foals or calves, there would be no difficulty in finding someone to raise them. We would hire a trainer of horses, or a farmer probably, who would improve and perfect them in their own proper virtue and excellence. But, as they are human beings, whom are you thinking of placing over them? Is there anyone who understands human and political virtue? You must have thought about this because you have sons. Is there anyone?”

“There is,” he said.

“Who is he?” said I. “And of what country? And what does he charge?”

“Evenus the Parian,”<sup>3</sup> he replied. “He is the man and his charge is five minae.”

Happy is Evenus, I said to myself, if he really has this wisdom and teaches at such a modest charge. Had I the same, I would have been very proud and conceited; but the truth is I have no knowledge like this, O Athenians.

I am sure someone will ask the question, “Why is this, Socrates, and what is the origin of these accusations of you; for there must have been something strange which you have been doing? All this great fame and talk about you would never have come up if you had been like other men. Tell us then, why this is, as we should be sorry to judge you too quickly.”

I regard this as a fair challenge, and I will try to explain to you the origin of this name of “wise” and of this evil fame. Please attend then and although some of you may think I am joking, I declare I will tell you the entire truth. Men of Athens, this reputation of mine has come from a certain kind of wisdom which I possess. If you ask me what kind of wisdom, I reply, such wisdom as is attainable by man, for to that extent I am inclined to believe I am wise. Whereas the persons of whom I was speaking have a superhuman wisdom which I may fail to describe, because I do not have it. He who says I have, speaks false and slanders me.

O men of Athens, I must beg you not to interrupt me, even if I seem to say something extravagant. For the word which I will speak is not mine. I will refer you to a wisdom which is worthy of credit and will tell you about my wisdom—whether I have any and of what sort—and that witness shall be the god of Delphi.<sup>4</sup> You must have known Chaerephon. He was a friend of mine and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the exile of the people and returned with you. Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous in all his doings, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him whether—as I said, I must beg you not to interrupt—he asked the oracle to tell him whether there was anyone wiser than I was. The Pythian prophetess answered, there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is dead himself but his brother, who is in court, will confirm the truth of this story.

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, “What can the god mean and what is the interpretation of this riddle? I know I have no wisdom, great or small. What can he mean when he says I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be

against his nature.” After long consideration, I at last thought of a method of answering the question.

I reflected if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I would say to him, “Here is a man who is wiser than I am, but you said I was the wisest.” Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom and observed him — his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination. When I began to talk with him I could not help thinking he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many and wiser still by himself. I tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise but was not really wise. The result was he hated me, and his hatred was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: “Well, although I do not suppose either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is — for he knows nothing and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter, then, I seem to have an advantage over him.” Then I went to another who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him and of many others besides him.

After this I went to one man after another, being aware of the anger that I provoked; and I lamented and feared this, but necessity was laid upon me. The word of the god, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, “I must go to all who appear to know and find out the meaning of the oracle.” And I swear to you Athenians, by the dog, I swear,<sup>5</sup> the result of my mission was this: I found the men with the highest reputations were all nearly the most foolish and some inferior men were really wiser and better.

I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the Herculean labors,<sup>6</sup> as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle was right. When I left the politicians, I went to the poets: tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. There, I said to myself, you will be detected. Now you will find out you are more ignorant than they are. Accordingly, I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings and asked what was the meaning of them — thinking the poets would teach me something. Will you believe me? I am almost ashamed to say this, but I must say there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than the poets did themselves. That quickly

showed me poets do not write poetry by wisdom, but by a sort of inspiration. They are like soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of what they say. The poets appeared to me to be much the same, and I further observed that upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men in other things in which they were not wise. So I departed, conceiving myself to be superior to them for the same reason I was superior to the politicians.

At last I went to the artisans, because I was conscious I knew nothing at all, and I was sure they knew many fine things. In this I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets. Because they were good workmen, they thought they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom. Therefore, I asked myself on behalf of the oracle whether I would like to be as I was, having neither their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both. I answered myself and the oracle that I was better off as I was.

This investigation led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind and has given rise also to many falsehoods. I am called wise because my listeners always imagine I possess the wisdom which I do not find in others. The truth is, O men of Athens, the gods only are wise and in this oracle they mean to say wisdom of men is little or nothing. They are not speaking of Socrates, only using my name as an illustration, as if they said, “He, O men, is the wisest who, like Socrates, knows his wisdom is in truth worth nothing.” And so I go my way, obedient to the gods, and seek wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise. If he is not wise, then in support of the oracle I show him he is not wise. This occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the gods.

There is another thing. Young men of the richer classes, who have little to do, gather around me of their own accord. They like to hear the pretenders examined. They often imitate me and examine others themselves. There are plenty of persons, as they soon enough discover, who think they know something, but really know little or nothing. Then those

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who are examined by the young men, instead of being angry with themselves, are angry with me. “This confounded Socrates,” they say, “this villainous misleader of youth!” Then if somebody asks them, “Why, what evil does he practice or teach?” they do not know and cannot tell. But so they may not appear ignorant, they repeat the ready-made charges which are used against all philosophers about teaching things up in the clouds and under the earth, and having no gods, and making the worse argument defeat the stronger. They do not like to confess their pretense to knowledge has been detected, which it has. They are numerous, ambitious, energetic and are all in battle array and have persuasive tongues. They have filled your ears with their

loud and determined slanders. This is the reason why my three accusers, Meletus and Anytus and Lycon, have set upon me. Meletus has a quarrel with me on behalf of the poets, Anytus, on behalf of the craftsmen, Lycon, on behalf of the orators. As I said at the beginning, I cannot expect to get rid of this mass of slander all in a moment.

This, O men of Athens, is the truth and the whole truth. I have concealed nothing. And yet I know this plainness of speech makes my accusers hate me, and what is their hatred but a proof that I am speaking the truth? This is the reason for their slander of me, as you will find out either in this or in any future inquiry.



SELECTION 3.2

**Republic\***

*Plato*

[After the Bible, Plato’s dialogue Republic is perhaps the most widely read Western book of all time. In this selection, Plato compares Goodness (or the Good) to the sun, sets forth his famous Theory of the Divided Line, and explains the Myth of the Cave.]

*Glaucon:* But, Socrates, what is your own account of the Good? Is it knowledge, or pleasure, or something else?

*Socrates:* There you are! I exclaimed; I could see all along that you were not going to be content with what other people think.

*G:* Well, Socrates, it does not seem fair that you should be ready to repeat other people’s opinions but not to state your own, when you have given so much thought to this subject.

*S:* And do you think it fair of anyone to speak as if he knew what he does not know?

*G:* No, not as if he knew, but he might give his opinion for what it is worth.

*S:* Why, have you never noticed that opinion without knowledge is always a shabby sort of thing? At the best it is blind. One who holds a true belief without intelligence is just like a blind man who happens to take the right road, isn’t he?

*G:* No doubt.

*S:* Well, then, do you want me to produce one of these poor blind cripples, when others could discourse to you with illuminating eloquence?

*G:* No, really, Socrates, you must not give up within sight of the goal. We should be quite content with an account of the Good like the one you gave us of justice and temperance and the other virtues.

*S:* So should I be, my dear Glaucon, much more than content! But I am afraid it is beyond my powers; with the best will in the world I should only disgrace myself and be laughed at. No, for the moment let us leave the question of the real meaning of good; to arrive at what I at any rate believe it to be would call for an effort too ambitious for an inquiry like ours. However, I will tell you, though only if you wish it, what I pic-

\*From *The Republic of Plato*, translated by Francis McDonald Cornford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941). By permission of Oxford University Press.

ture to myself as the offspring of the Good and the thing most nearly resembling it.

G: Well, tell us about the offspring, and you shall remain in our debt for an account of the parent.

S: I only wish it were within my power to offer, and within yours to receive, a settlement of the whole account. But you must be content now with the interest only; and you must see to it that, in describing this offspring of the Good, I do not inadvertently cheat you with false coin.

G: We will keep a good eye on you. Go on.

S: First we must come to an understanding. Let me remind you of the distinction we drew earlier and have often drawn on other occasions, between the multiplicity of things that we call good or beautiful or whatever it may be and, on the other hand, Goodness itself or Beauty itself and so on. Corresponding to each of these sets of many things, we postulate a single Form or real essence, as we call it.

G: Yes, that is so.

S: Further, the many things, we say, can be seen, but are not objects of rational thought; whereas the Forms are objects of thought, but invisible.

G: Yes, certainly.

S: And we see things with our eyesight, just as we hear sounds with our ears and, to speak generally, perceive any sensible thing with our sense-faculties.

G: Of course.

S: Have you noticed, then, that the artificer who designed the senses has been exceptionally lavish of his materials in making the eyes able to see and their objects visible?

G: That never occurred to me.

S: Well, look at it in this way. Hearing and sound do not stand in need of any third thing, without which the ear will not hear nor sound be heard; and I think the same is true of most, not to say all, of the other senses. Can you think of one that does require anything of the sort?

G: No, I cannot.

S: But there is this need in the case of sight and its objects. You may have the power of vision in

your eyes and try to use it, and colour may be there in the objects; but sight will see nothing and the colours will remain invisible in the absence of a third thing peculiarly constituted to serve this very purpose.

G: By which you mean——?

S: Naturally I mean what you call light; and if light is a thing of value, the sense of sight and the power of being visible are linked together by a very precious bond, such as unites no other sense with its object.

G: No one could say that light is not a precious thing.

S: And of all the divinities in the skies is there one whose light, above all the rest, is responsible for making our eyes see perfectly and making objects perfectly visible?

G: There can be no two opinions: of course you mean the Sun.

S: And how is sight related to this deity? Neither sight nor the eye which contains it is the Sun, but of all the sense-organs it is the most sun-like; and further, the power it possesses is dispensed by the Sun, like a stream flooding the eye. And again, the Sun is not vision, but it is the cause of vision and also is seen by the vision it causes.

G: Yes.

S: It was the Sun, then, that I meant when I spoke of that offspring which the Good has created in the visible world, to stand there in the same relation to vision and visible things as that which the Good itself bears in the intelligible world to intelligence and to intelligible objects.

G: How is that? You must explain further.

S: You know what happens when the colours of things are no longer irradiated by the daylight, but only by the fainter luminaries of the night: when you look at them, the eyes are dim and seem almost blind, as if there were no unclouded vision in them. But when you look at things on which the Sun is shining, the same eyes see distinctly and it becomes evident that they do contain the power of vision.

G: Certainly.

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S: Apply this comparison, then, to the soul. When its gaze is fixed upon an object irradiated by truth and reality, the soul gains understanding and knowledge and is manifestly in possession of intelligence. But when it looks towards that twilight world of things that come into existence and pass away, its sight is dim and it has only opinions and beliefs which shift to and fro, and now it seems like a thing that has no intelligence.

G: That is true.

S: This, then, which gives to the objects of knowledge their truth and to him who knows them his power of knowing, is the Form or essential nature of Goodness. It is the cause of knowledge and truth; and so, while you may think of it as an object of knowledge, you will do well to regard it as something beyond truth and knowledge and, precious as these both are, of still higher worth. And, just as in our analogy light and vision were to be thought of as like the Sun, but not identical with it, so here both knowledge and truth are to be regarded as like the Good, but to identify either with the Good is wrong. The Good must hold a yet higher place of honour.

G: You are giving it a position of extraordinary splendour, if it is the source of knowledge and truth and itself surpasses them in worth. You surely cannot mean that it is pleasure.

S: Heaven forbid. But I want to follow up our analogy still further. You will agree that the Sun not only makes the things we see visible, but also brings them into existence and gives them growth and nourishment; yet he is not the same thing as existence. And so with the objects of knowledge: these derive from the Good not only their power of being known, but their very being and reality; and Goodness is not the same thing as being, but even beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power.

(Glaucon exclaimed with some amusement at my exalting Goodness in such extravagant terms.)

It is your fault; you forced me to say what I think.

G: Yes, and you must not stop there. At any rate, complete your comparison with the Sun, if there is any more to be said.

S: There is a great deal more.

G: Let us hear it, then; don't leave anything out.

S: I am afraid much must be left unspoken. However, I will not, if I can help it, leave out anything that can be said on this occasion.

G: Please do not.

S: Conceive, then, that there are these two powers I speak of, the Good reigning over the domain of all that is intelligible, the Sun over the visible world — or the heaven as I might call it; only you would think I was showing off my skill in etymology. At any rate you have these two orders of things clearly before your mind: the visible and the intelligible?

G: I have.

S: Now take a line divided into two unequal parts, one to represent the visible order, the other the intelligible; and divide each part again in the same proportion, symbolizing degrees of comparative clearness or obscurity. Then (A) one of the two sections in the visible world will stand for images. By images I mean first shadows, and then reflections in water or in close-grained, polished surfaces, and everything of that kind, if you understand.

G: Yes, I understand.

S: Let the second section (B) stand for the actual things of which the first are likenesses, the living creatures about us and all the works of nature or of human hands.

G: So be it.

S: Will you also take the proportion in which the visible world has been divided as corresponding to degrees of reality and truth, so that the likeness shall stand to the original in the same ratio as the sphere of appearances and belief to the sphere of knowledge?

G: Certainly.

S: Now consider how we are to divide the part which stands for the intelligible world. There are two sections. In the first (C) the mind uses as images those actual things which themselves had images in the visible world; and it is compelled to pursue its inquiry by starting from assumptions and travelling, not up to a principle,

	Objects	States of Mind
Intelligible World	<i>The Good</i>	
	Forms	D Intelligence ( <i>noesis</i> ) or Knowledge ( <i>episteme</i> )
	Mathematical Objects	C Thinking ( <i>dianoia</i> )
The Visible World	<i>The Sun</i>	
	Actual Things	B Belief ( <i>pistis</i> )
	Images	A Imagining ( <i>eikasia</i> )

but down to a conclusion. In the second (D) the mind moves in the other direction, from an assumption up towards a principle which is not hypothetical; and it makes no use of the images employed in the other section, but only of Forms, and conducts its inquiry solely by their means.

- G: I don't quite understand what you mean.
- S: Then we will try again; what I have just said will help you to understand. (C) You know, of course, how students of subjects like geometry and arithmetic begin by postulating odd and even numbers, or the various figures and the three kinds of angle, and other such data in each subject. These data they take as known; and, having adopted them as assumptions, they do not feel called upon to give any account of them to themselves or to anyone else, but treat them as self-evident. Then, starting from these assumptions, they go on until they arrive, by a series of consistent steps, at all the conclusions they set out to investigate.
- G: Yes, I know that.
- S: You also know how they make use of visible figures and discourse about them, though what they really have in mind is the originals of which these figures are images: they are not reasoning, for instance, about this particular square and diagonal which they have drawn, but about *the Square* and *the Diagonal*; and so in all cases. The diagrams they draw and the models they make are actual things, which may

have their shadows or images in water; but now they serve in their turn as images, while the student is seeking to behold those realities which only thought can apprehend.

- G: True.
- S: This, then, is the class of things that I spoke of as intelligible, but with two qualifications: first, that the mind, in studying them, is compelled to employ assumptions, and, because it cannot rise above these, does not travel upwards to a first principle; and second, that it uses as images those actual things which have images of their own in the section below them and which, in comparison with those shadows and reflections, are reputed to be more palpable and valued accordingly.
- G: I understand: you mean the subject-matter of geometry and of the kindred arts.
- S: (D) Then by the second section of the intelligible world you may understand me to mean all that unaided reasoning apprehends by the power of dialectic, when it treats its assumptions, not as first principles, but as *hypotheses* in the literal sense, things 'laid down' like a flight of steps up which it may mount all the way to something that is not hypothetical, the first principle of all; and having grasped this, may turn back and, holding on to the consequences which depend upon it, descend at last to a conclusion, never making use of any sensible object, but only of Forms, moving through Forms from one to another, and ending with Forms.
- G: I understand, though not perfectly; for the procedure you describe sounds like an enormous undertaking. But I see that you mean to distinguish the field of intelligible reality studied by dialectic as having a greater certainty and truth than the subject-matter of the 'arts,' as they are called, which treat their assumptions as first principles. The students of these arts are, it is true, compelled to exercise thought in contemplating objects which the senses cannot perceive, but because they start from assumptions without going back to a first principle, you do not regard them as gaining true understanding about those objects, although the objects themselves, when connected with a first principle, are intelligible. And I think you would call the

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state of mind of the students of geometry and other such arts, not intelligence, but thinking, as being something between intelligence and mere acceptance of appearances.

S: You have understood me quite well enough. And now you may take, as corresponding to the four sections, these four states of mind: *intelligence* for the highest, *thinking* for the second, *belief* for the third, and for the last *imagining*. These you may arrange as the terms in a proportion, assigning to each a degree of clearness and certainty corresponding to the measure in which their objects possess truth and reality.

G: I understand and agree with you. I will arrange them as you say.

S: Next, here is a parable to illustrate the degrees in which our nature may be enlightened or unenlightened. Imagine the condition of men living in a sort of cavernous chamber underground, with an entrance open to the light and a long passage all down the cave. Here they have been from childhood, chained by the leg and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them, because the chains will not let them turn their heads. At some distance higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between the prisoners and the fire is a track with a parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet-show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets over the top.

G: I see.

S: Now behind this parapet imagine persons carrying along various artificial objects, including figures of men and animals in wood or stone or other materials, which project above the parapet. Naturally, some of these persons will be talking, others silent.

G: It is a strange picture, and a strange sort of prisoners.

S: Like ourselves; for in the first place prisoners so confined would have seen nothing of themselves or of one another, except the shadows thrown by the fire-light on the wall of the Cave facing them, would they?

G: Not if all their lives they had been prevented from moving their heads.

S: And they would have seen as little of the objects carried past.

G: Of course.

S: Now, if they could talk to one another, would they not suppose that their words referred only to those passing shadows which they saw?

G: Necessarily.

S: And suppose their prison had an echo from the wall facing them? When one of the people crossing behind them spoke, they could only suppose that the sound came from the shadow passing before their eyes.

G: No doubt.

S: In every way, then, such prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects.

G: Inevitably.

S: Now consider what would happen if their release from the chains and the healing of their unwisdom should come about in this way. Suppose one of them set free and forced suddenly to stand up, turn his head, and walk with eyes lifted to the light; all these movements would be painful, and he would be too dazzled to make out the objects whose shadows he had been used to see. What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he had formerly seen was meaningless illusion, but now, being somewhat nearer to reality and turned towards more real objects, he was getting a truer view? Suppose further that he were shown the various objects being carried by and were made to say, in reply to questions, what each of them was. Would he not be perplexed and believe the objects now shown him to be not so real as what he formerly saw?

G: Yes, not nearly so real.

S: And if he were forced to look at the fire-light itself, would not his eyes ache, so that he would try to escape and turn back to the things which he could see distinctly, convinced that they really were clearer than these other objects now being shown to him?

G: Yes.

- S: And suppose someone were to drag him away forcibly up the steep and rugged ascent and not let him go until he had hauled him out into the sunlight, would he not suffer pain and vexation at such treatment, and, when he had come out into the light, find his eyes so full of its radiance that he could not see a single one of the things that he was now told were real?
- G: Certainly he would not see them all at once.
- S: He would need, then, to grow accustomed before he could see things in that upper world. At first it would be easiest to make out shadows, and then the images of men and things reflected in water, and later on the things themselves. After that, it would be easier to watch the heavenly bodies and the sky itself by night, looking at the light of the moon and stars rather than the Sun and the Sun's light in the day-time.
- G: Yes, surely.
- S: Last of all, he would be able to look at the Sun and contemplate its nature, not as it appears when reflected in water or any alien medium, but as it is in itself in its own domain.
- G: No doubt.
- S: And now he would begin to draw the conclusion that it is the Sun that produces the seasons and the course of the year and controls everything in the visible world, and moreover is in a way the cause of all that he and his companions used to see.
- G: Clearly he would come at last to that conclusion.
- S: Then if he called to mind his fellow prisoners and what passed for wisdom in his former dwelling-place, he would surely think himself happy in the change and be sorry for them. They may have had a practice of honouring and commending one another, with prizes for the man who had the keenest eye for the passing shadows and the best memory for the order in which they followed or accompanied one another, so that he could make a good guess as to which was going to come next. Would our released prisoner be likely to covet those prizes or to envy the men exalted to honour and power in the Cave? Would he not feel like Homer's Achilles, that he would far sooner 'be on earth as a hired servant in the house of a landless man' or endure anything rather than go back to his old beliefs and live in the old way?
- G: Yes, he would prefer any fate to such a life.
- S: Now imagine what would happen if he went down again to take his former seat in the Cave. Coming suddenly out of the sunlight, his eyes would be filled with darkness. He might be required once more to deliver his opinion on those shadows, in competition with the prisoners who had never been released, while his eyesight was still dim and unsteady; and it might take some time to become used to the darkness. They would laugh at him and say that he had gone up only to come back with his sight ruined; it was worth no one's while even to attempt the ascent. If they could lay hands on the man who was trying to set them free and lead them up, they would kill him.
- G: Yes, they would.
- S: Every feature in this parable, my dear Glaucon, is meant to fit our earlier analysis. The prison dwelling corresponds to the region revealed to us through the sense of sight, and the fire-light within it to the power of the Sun. The ascent to see the things in the upper world you may take as standing for the upward journey of the soul into the region of the intelligible; then you will be in possession of what I surmise, since that is what you wish to be told. Heaven knows whether it is true; but this, at any rate, is how it appears to me. In the world of knowledge, the last thing to be perceived and only with great difficulty is the essential Form of Goodness. Once it is perceived, the conclusion must follow that, for all things, this is the cause of whatever is right and good; in the visible world it gives birth to light and to the lord of light, while it is itself sovereign in the intelligible world and the parent of intelligence and truth. Without having had a vision of this Form no one can act with wisdom, either in his own life or in matters of state.
- G: So far as I can understand, I share your belief.
- S: Then you may also agree that it is no wonder if those who have reached this height are reluctant to manage the affairs of men. Their souls long to spend all their time in that upper world —

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naturally enough, if here once more our parable holds true. Nor, again, is it at all strange that one who comes from the contemplation of divine things to the miseries of human life should appear awkward and ridiculous when, with eyes still dazed and not yet accustomed to the darkness, he is compelled, in a law-court or elsewhere, to dispute about the shadows of justice or the images that cast those shadows, and to wrangle over the notions of what is right in the minds of men who have never beheld Justice itself.

G: It is not at all strange.

S: No; a sensible man will remember that the eyes may be confused in two ways — by a change from light to darkness or from darkness to light; and he will recognize that the same thing happens to the soul. When he sees it troubled and unable to discern anything clearly, instead of laughing thoughtlessly, he will ask whether, coming from a brighter existence, its unaccustomed vision is obscured by the darkness, in which case he will think its condition enviable and its life a happy one; or whether, emerging from the depths of ignorance, it is dazzled by excess of light. If so, he will rather feel sorry for it; or, if he were inclined to laugh, that would be less ridiculous than to laugh at the soul which has come down from the light.

G: That is a fair statement.

S: If this is true, then, we must conclude that education is not what it is said to be by some, who profess to put knowledge into a soul which does not possess it, as if they could put sight into blind eyes. On the contrary, our own account signifies that the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth and the organ to see it with; and that, just as one might have to turn the whole body round in order that the eye should see light instead of darkness, so the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eye can bear to contemplate reality and that supreme splendour which we have called the Good. Hence there may well be an art whose aim would be to effect this very thing, the conversion of the soul, in the readiest way; not to put the power of sight into the soul's eye, which already has it, but to ensure

that, instead of looking in the wrong direction, it is turned the way it ought to be.

G: Yes, it may well be so.

S: It looks, then, as though wisdom were different from those ordinary virtues, as they are called, which are not far removed from bodily qualities, in that they can be produced by habituation and exercise in a soul which has not possessed them from the first. Wisdom, it seems, is certainly the virtue of some diviner faculty, which never loses its power, though its use for good or harm depends on the direction towards which it is turned. You must have noticed in dishonest men with a reputation for sagacity the shrewd glance of a narrow intelligence piercing the objects to which it is directed. There is nothing wrong with their power of vision, but it has been forced into the service of evil, so that the keener its sight, the more harm it works.

G: Quite true.

S: And yet if the growth of a nature like this had been pruned from earliest childhood, cleared of those clinging overgrowths which come of gluttony and all luxurious pleasure and, like leaden weights charged with affinity to this mortal world, hang upon the soul, bending its vision downwards; if, freed from these, the soul were turned round towards true reality, then this same power in these very men would see the truth as keenly as the objects it is turned to now.

G: Yes, very likely.

S: Is it not also likely, or indeed certain after what has been said, that a state can never be properly governed either by the uneducated who know nothing of truth or by men who are allowed to spend all their days in the pursuit of culture? The ignorant have no single mark before their eyes at which they must aim in all the conduct of their own lives and of affairs of state; and the others will not engage in action if they can help it, dreaming that while still alive, they have been translated to the Islands of the Blest.

G: Quite true.

S: It is for us, then, as founders of a commonwealth, to bring compulsion to bear on the no-

blest natures. They must be made to climb the ascent to the vision of Goodness, which we called the highest object of knowledge; and, when they have looked upon it long enough, they must not be allowed, as they now are, to remain on the heights, refusing to come down again to the prisoners or to take any part in their labours and rewards, however much or little these may be worth.

- G: Shall we not be doing them an injustice, if we force on them a worse life than they might have?
- S: You have forgotten again, my friend, that the law is not concerned to make any one class specially happy, but to ensure the welfare of the commonwealth as a whole. By persuasion or constraint it will unite the citizens in harmony, making them share whatever benefits each class can contribute to the common good; and its purpose in forming men of that spirit was not that each should be left to go his own way, but that they should be instrumental in binding the community into one.
- G: True, I had forgotten.
- S: You will see, then, Glaucon, that there will be no real injustice in compelling our philosophers to watch over and care for the other citizens. We can fairly tell them that their compeers in other states may quite reasonably refuse to collaborate: there they have sprung up, like a self-sown plant, in despite of their country's institutions; no one has fostered their growth, and they cannot be expected to show gratitude for a care they have never received. 'But,' we shall say, 'it is not so with you. We have brought you into existence for your country's sake as well as for your own, to be like leaders and king-bees in a hive; you have been better and more thoroughly educated than those others and hence you are more capable of playing your part both as men of thought and as men of action. You must go down, then, each in his turn, to live with the rest and let your eyes grow accustomed to the darkness. You will then see a thousand times better than those who live there always; you will recognize every image for what

it is and know what it represents, because you have seen justice, beauty, and goodness in their reality; and so you and we shall find life in our commonwealth no mere dream, as it is in most existing states, where men live fighting one another about shadows and quarrelling for power, as if that were a great prize; whereas in truth government can be at its best and free from dissension only where the destined rulers are least desirous of holding office.'

- G: Quite true.
- S: Then will our pupils refuse to listen and to take their turns at sharing in the work of the community, though they may live together for most of their time in a purer air?
- G: No; it is a fair demand, and they are fair-minded men. No doubt, unlike any ruler of the present day, they will think of holding power as an unavoidable necessity.
- S: Yes, my friend; for the truth is that you can have a well-governed society only if you can discover for your future rulers a better way of life than being in office; then only will power be in the hands of men who are rich, not in gold, but in the wealth that brings happiness, a good and wise life. All goes wrong when, starved for lack of anything good in their own lives, men turn to public affairs hoping to snatch from thence the happiness they hunger for. They set about fighting for power, and this internecine conflict ruins them and their country. The life of true philosophy is the only one that looks down upon offices of state; and access to power must be confined to men who are not in love with it; otherwise rivals will start fighting. So whom else can you compel to undertake the guardianship of the commonwealth, if not those who, besides understanding best the principles of government, enjoy a nobler life than the politician's and look for rewards of a different kind?
- G: There is indeed no other choice. One who holds a true belief without intelligence is just like a blind man who happens to take the right road, isn't he?



### SELECTION 3.3

## Meno\*

Plato

[In this selection from the dialogue Meno, “Socrates” explains another of Plato’s theories about knowledge: Knowledge about reality comes from within the soul through a form of “recollection” rather than from without through being taught. The passage also serves to show that, in Plato’s opinion, the soul is immortal. In the dialogue, Socrates has a boy who knows nothing of geometry construct a square twice the size of a given square. After one or two failed attempts, the boy succeeds without having been taught how to do it by Socrates. How could he succeed unless knowledge of geometry was not already within his soul?]

*Meno:* But how will you look for something when you don’t in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don’t know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn’t know?

*Socrates:* I know what you mean. Do you realize that what you are bringing up is the trick argument that a man cannot try to discover either what he knows or what he does not know? He would not seek what he knows, for since he knows it there is no need of the inquiry, nor what he does not know, for in that case he does not even know what he is to look for.

*M:* Well, do you think it a good argument?

*S:* No.

*M:* Can you explain how it fails?

*S:* I can. I have heard from men and women who understand the truths of religion —  
(Here he presumably pauses to emphasize the solemn change of tone the dialogue undergoes at this point.)

\*From Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, translated by W. K. C. Guthrie (London: Penguin Press, 1956). Translation copyright © 1956 W. K. C. Guthrie. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

*M:* What did they say?

*S:* Something true, I thought, and fine.

*M:* What was it, and who were they?

*S:* Those who tell it are priests and priestesses of the sort who make it their business to be able to account for the functions which they perform. Pindar speaks of it too, and many another of the poets who are divinely inspired. What they say is this — see whether you think they are speaking the truth. They say that the soul of man is immortal: at one time it comes to an end — that which is called death — and at another is born again, but is never finally exterminated. . . .

Thus the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is. So we need not be surprised if it can recall the knowledge of virtue or anything else which, as we see, it once possessed. All nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, so that when a man has recalled a single piece of knowledge — *learned* it, in ordinary language — there is no reason why he should not find out all the rest, if he keeps a stout heart and does not grow weary of the search; for seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection.

We ought not then to be led astray by the contentious argument you quoted. It would make us lazy, and is music in the ears of weaklings. The other doctrine produces energetic seekers after knowledge; and being convinced of its truth, I am ready, with your help, to inquire into the nature of virtue.

*M:* I see, Socrates. But what do you mean when you say that we don’t learn anything, but that what we call learning is recollection? Can you teach me that it is so?

*S:* I have just said that you’re a rascal, and now you ask me if I can teach you, when I say there

is no such thing as teaching, only recollection. Evidently you want to catch me contradicting myself straight away.

*M:* No, honestly, Socrates, I wasn't thinking of that. It was just habit. If you can in any way make clear to me that what you say is true, please do.

*S:* It isn't an easy thing, but still I should like to do what I can since you ask me. I see you have a large number of retainers here. Call one of them, anyone you like, and I will use him to demonstrate it to you.

*M:* Certainly. (*To a slave-boy.*) Come here.

*S:* He is a Greek and speaks our language?

*M:* Indeed yes—born and bred in the house.

*S:* Listen carefully then, and see whether it seems to you that he is learning from me or simply being reminded.

*M:* I will.

*S:* Now boy, you know that a square is a figure like this?  
(*Socrates begins to draw figures in the sand at his feet. He points to the square ABCD.*)

*Boy:* Yes.

*S:* It has all these four sides equal?

*Boy:* Yes.

*S:* And these lines which go through the middle of it are also equal? (*The lines EF, GH.*)

*Boy:* Yes.

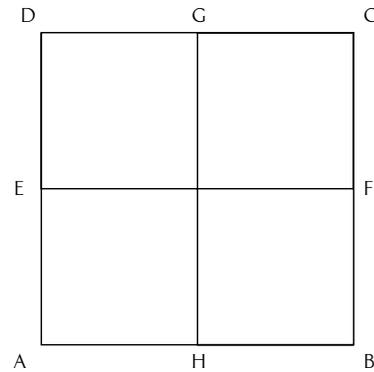
*S:* Such a figure could be either larger or smaller, could it not?

*Boy:* Yes.

*S:* Now if this side is two feet long, and this side the same, how many feet will the whole be? Put it this way. If it were two feet in this direction and only one in that, must not the area be two feet taken once?

*Boy:* Yes.

*S:* But since it is two feet this way also, does it not become twice two feet?



*Boy:* Yes.

*S:* And how many feet is twice two? Work it out and tell me.

*Boy:* Four.

*S:* Now could one draw another figure double the size of this, but similar, that is, with all its sides equal like this one?

*Boy:* Yes.

*S:* How many feet will its area be?

*Boy:* Eight.

*S:* Now then, try to tell me how long each of its sides will be. The present figure has a side of two feet. What will be the side of the double-sized one?

*Boy:* It will be double, Socrates, obviously.

*S:* You see, Meno, that I am not teaching him anything, only asking. Now he thinks he knows the length of the side of the eight-feet square.

*M:* Yes.

*S:* But does he?

*M:* Certainly not.

*S:* He thinks it is twice the length of the other.

*M:* Yes.

*S:* Now watch how he recollects things in order—the proper way to recollect.

You say that the side of double length produces the double-sized figure? Like this I mean, not long this way and short that. It must be equal on all sides like the first figure, only twice its

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size, that is eight feet. Think a moment whether you still expect to get it from doubling the side.

Boy: Yes, I do.

S: Well now, shall we have a line double the length of this (AB) if we add another the same length at this end (BJ)?

Boy: Yes.

S: It is on this line then, according to you, that we shall make the eight-foot square, by taking four of the same length?

Boy: Yes.

S: Let us draw in four equal lines (*i.e.*, counting AJ, and adding JK, KL, and LA made complete by drawing in its second half LD), using the first as a base. Does this not give us what you call the eight-foot figure?

Boy: Certainly.

S: But does it contain these four squares, each equal to the original four-foot one? (*Socrates has drawn in the lines CM, CN to complete the squares that he wishes to point out.*)

Boy: Yes.

S: How big is it then? Won't it be four times as big?

Boy: Of course.

S: And is four times the same as twice?

Boy: Of course not.

S: So doubling the side has given us not a double but a fourfold figure?

Boy: True.

S: And four times four are sixteen, are they not?

Boy: Yes.

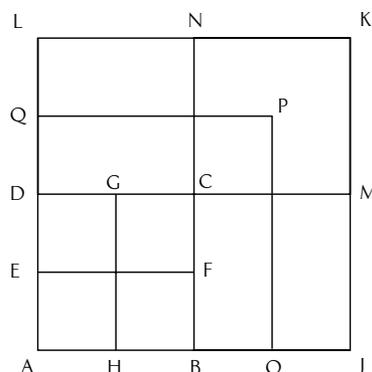
S: Then how big is the side of the eight-foot figure? This one has given us four times the original area, hasn't it?

Boy: Yes.

S: And a side half the length gave us a square of four feet?

Boy: Yes.

S: Good. And isn't a square of eight feet double this one and half that?



Boy: Yes.

S: Will it not have a side greater than this one but less than that?

Boy: I think it will.

S: Right. Always answer what you think. Now tell me: was not this side two feet long, and this one four?

Boy: Yes.

S: Then the side of the eight-foot figure must be longer than two feet but shorter than four?

Boy: It must.

S: Try to say how long you think it is.

Boy: Three feet.

S: If so, shall we add half of this bit (BO, half of BJ) and make it three feet? Here are two, and this is one, and on this side similarly we have two plus one; and here is the figure you want. (*Socrates completes the square AOPQ.*)

Boy: Yes.

S: If it is three feet this way and three that, will the whole area be three times three feet?

Boy: It looks like it.

S: And that is how many?

Boy: Nine.

S: Whereas the square double our first square had to be how many?

Boy: Eight.

S: But we haven't yet got the square of eight feet even from a three-foot side?

Boy: No.

S: Then what length will we give it? Try to tell us exactly. If you don't want to count it up, just show us on the diagram.

Boy: It's no use, Socrates, I just don't know.

S: Observe, Meno, the stage he has reached on the path of recollection. At the beginning he did not know the side of the square of eight feet. Nor indeed does he know it now, but then he thought he knew it and answered boldly, as was appropriate — he felt no perplexity. Now however he does feel perplexed. Not only does he not know the answer; he doesn't even think he knows.

M: Quite true.

S: Isn't he in a better position now in relation to what he didn't know?

M: I admit that too.

S: So in perplexing him and numbing him like the sting-ray, have we done him any harm?

M: I think not.

S: In fact we have helped him to some extent towards finding out the right answer, for now not only is he ignorant of it but he will be quite glad to look for it. Up to now, he thought he could speak well and fluently, on many occasions and before large audiences, on the subject of a square double the size of a given square, maintaining that it must have a side of double the length.

M: No doubt.

S: Do you suppose then that he would have attempted to look for, or learn, what he thought he knew (though he did not), before he was thrown into perplexity, became aware of his ignorance, and felt a desire to know?

M: No.

S: Then the numbing process was good for him?

M: I agree.

S: Now notice what, starting from this state of perplexity, he will discover by seeking the truth in company with me, though I simply ask him questions without teaching him. Be ready to catch me if I give him any instruction or expla-

nation instead of simply interrogating him on his own opinions.

*(Socrates here rubs out the previous figures and starts again.)*

Tell me, boy, is not this our square of four feet? (ABCD.) You understand?

Boy: Yes.

S: Now we can add another equal to it like this? (BCEF.)

Boy: Yes.

S: And a third here, equal to each of the others? (CEGH.)

Boy: Yes.

S: And then we can fill in this one in the corner? (DCHJ.)

Boy: Yes.

S: Then here we have four equal squares?

Boy: Yes.

S: And how many times the size of the first square is the whole?

Boy: Four times.

S: And we want one double the size. You remember?

Boy: Yes.

S: Now does this line going from corner to corner cut each of these squares in half?

Boy: Yes.

S: And these are four equal lines enclosing this area? (BEHD.)

Boy: They are.

S: Now think. How big is this area?

Boy: I don't understand.

S: Here are four squares. Has not each line cut off the inner half of each of them?

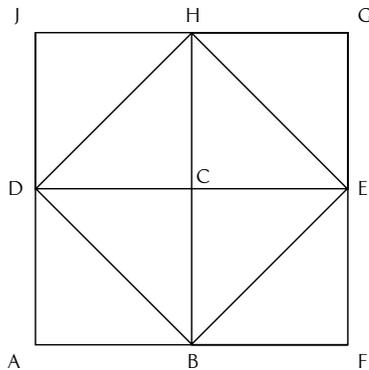
Boy: Yes.

S: And how many such halves are there in this figure? (BEHD.)

Boy: Four.

S: And how many in this one? (ABCD.)

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Boy: Two.

S: And what is the relation of four to two?

Boy: Double.

S: How big is this figure then?

Boy: Eight feet.

S: On what base?

Boy: This one.

S: The line which goes from corner to corner of the square of four feet?

Boy: Yes.

S: The technical name for it is ‘diagonal’; so if we use that name, it is your personal opinion that the square on the diagonal of the original square is double its area.

Boy: That is so, Socrates.

S: What do you think, Meno? Has he answered with any opinions that were not his own?

M: No, they were all his.

S: Yet he did not know, as we agreed a few minutes ago.

M: True.

S: But these opinions were somewhere in him, were they not?

M: Yes.

S: So a man who does not know has in himself true opinions on a subject without having knowledge.

M: It would appear so.

S: At present these opinions, being newly aroused, have a dream-like quality. But if the same questions are put to him on many occasions and in different ways, you can see that in the end he will have a knowledge on the subject as accurate as anybody’s.

M: Probably.

S: This knowledge will not come from teaching but from questioning. He will recover it for himself.

M: Yes.

S: And the spontaneous recovery of knowledge that is in him is recollection, isn’t it?

M: Yes.

S: Either then he has at some time acquired the knowledge which he now has, or he has always possessed it. If he always possessed it, he must always have known; if on the other hand he acquired it at some previous time, it cannot have been in this life, unless somebody has taught him geometry. He will behave in the same way with all geometrical knowledge, and every other subject. Has anyone taught him all these? You ought to know, especially as he has been brought up in your household.

M: Yes, I know that no one ever taught him.

S: And has he these opinions, or hasn’t he?

M: It seems we can’t deny it.

S: Then if he did not acquire them in this life, isn’t it immediately clear that he possessed and had learned them during some other period?

M: It seems so.

S: When he was not in human shape?

M: Yes.

S: If then there are going to exist in him, both while he is and while he is not a man, true opinions which can be aroused by questioning and turned into knowledge, may we say that his soul has been for ever in a state of knowledge? Clearly he always either is or is not a man.

M: Clearly.

S: And if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul must be immortal, and one must take courage and try to discover—that is, to

recollect—what one doesn't happen to know, or (more correctly) remember, at the moment.

*M:* Somehow or other I believe you are right.

*S:* I think I am. I shouldn't like to take my oath on the whole story, but one thing I am ready to fight for as long as I can, in word and act: that

is, that we shall be better, braver and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover.

*M:* There too I am sure you are right.

### CHECKLIST

To help you review, here is a checklist of the key philosophers and terms and concepts of this chapter. The brief descriptive sentences summarize the philosophers' leading ideas. Keep in mind that some of these summary statements are oversimplifications of complex positions.

#### Philosophers

- **Sophists** were ancient Greek teachers of rhetoric. Through them and Socrates, moral philosophy began.
- **Socrates** was Plato's mentor and philosophy's most illustrious practitioner of the Socratic/dialectic method.
- **Plato** was most famous for his Theory of Forms and his two-realm doctrine: two separate worlds with two types of knowledge.

#### Key Terms and Concepts

Socratic/dialectic method	skeptic knowledge not identical to sense perception
Delphi Oracle	Theory of the Divided Line
Forms/Theory of Forms	Myth of the Cave
Plato's dialogues	
Platonic dualism	

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REVIEW

1. Can you step into the same river twice? once?
2. Plato's metaphysics incorporates ideas from some of the earlier philosophers mentioned in Chapter 2. Identify those philosophers and their ideas.

3. Give an example of a Platonic Form not mentioned in the text. Explain whether it really exists, and why.
4. Does a world of Forms exist separately from the world of concrete, individual things? Explain.
5. What is the Myth of the Cave?
6. Is sense perception knowledge?
7. Can beauty be in more than one object at one time? Explain.
8. Are appearances real for Plato? Are they real in fact?

### SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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- Ronna Burger, *The Phaedo, A Platonic Labyrinth* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine's Press, 1999). A comprehensive study of Plato's *Phaedo*, which contains the Theory of Forms and Plato's ideas on the immortality of the soul.
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