

# Class Thirteen - Plato's "Two Truths"

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 A Completely Opposite Orientation

- **Some Big-Picture Themes in Indian Buddhism**
  - **No Self:** The guiding thought of the Buddhist tradition is that there is ultimately no such thing as the self or soul. There appears to be, but, ultimately, this is a mere appearance devoid of any underlying reality.
  - **Conceptuality Aligned with Unreal:** Many of the Indian Buddhist philosophers we read, different as their views were, shared this common theme: what is conceptual is ultimately unreal.
    - \* For instance, *svabhava*—the apparent “essence” that things seem to have—is articulated by Yocagara as part of the “constructed nature,” which exists only as a conceptual imputation.
    - \* Ultimate reality, insofar as we can say anything about it at all, eludes conceptual articulation.
      - For Vasubandhu and Dharmakirti, this had to do with the momentariness of ultimate reality and its utter particularity at any moment. General “universals” such as *redness* or *roundness* which seem to persist across moments are conceptual imputations.
- **Inverting This Picture:** In the philosophical tradition that began around the same time in Ancient Greece, with Socrates and Plato, we get a completely opposite take on the distinction between conventional and ultimate.
- **Some Historical Context:**
  - **Socrates:** Born in 470 BCE and died in 399 BCE—so, lived about a century after the Buddha.
    - \* **Executed:** Was executed for “impiety” and “corrupting the youth.”
    - \* **The *Phaedo*:** Plato’s dialogue that takes place on the evening of Socrates’s death, where Socrates is justifying to his friends why he is not upset about dying (i.e. because the soul is immortal).
  - **Plato:** 427-348 BC. The most famous of Socrates’s student.
    - \* **The *Republic*:** Plato’s main political dialogue, but which also contains some of the most famous articulations of Plato’s metaphysics and epistemology.

## 2 Plato's Forms: the Argument from Recollection in the *Phaedo*

- **Two Sticks:** Consider the following two sticks:



When you look at these two sticks, you can see that they are (roughly) equal in length. If I give you two stones, you may judge that they are equal in weight. So there is this thing—*equality*—that the lengths of the sticks, the weights of the stones, and several other things partake in.

- **Perfection vs. Deficiency:** Equality itself is *perfect* in a way that the equality of such things as sticks and stones is *deficient*. The equality of sticks *falls short* of equality itself.
  - **An Epistemological Justification:** This premise seems to be based on the idea that things such as sticks and stones can appear to be equal but not be, equality itself never appears to be anything other than equal, (74b-c).
  - **A Metaphysical/Epistemological Principle:** If something is perfectly *X*, then it always appears to be *X* and never non-*X*.
  - **A Potential Argument:** Plato doesn't argue this way, but perhaps he could:
    - \* Insofar as we are capable of determining whether or not something is *X*, where the thing might appear to be *X* but not be *X*, we must have a grasp of *X*-ness itself which serves as a measure for judging whether that thing is *X*.
    - \* If *X*-ness itself could appear to be *X* but not be *X*, we would need another measure—*true X*-ness—to determine whether or not it is *X*, and so on.
    - \* In order to avoid the regress, we should just say that *X*-ness itself both always is *X* and always appears *X*.
  - **An Alternate Metaphysical Justification:** Plato doesn't argue this way, but he could also argue that sticks that we judge to be equal are never *really* equal, only roughly equal.
    - \* If you measure the sticks above with a really accurate ruler, they are likely to be off by a millimeter or so.
    - \* This is plausibly so with *all* ordinary objects that we judge to be equal—if we get a fine enough measure, we'll discover that they're really unequal to some degree.
    - \* So we must have a grasp of *true* equality which comes to mind whenever we see things that imperfectly
- **Prior Knowledge is Necessary:** When we see something and realize that thing we see aspires to some reality but falls short of it, we must have some prior knowledge of that other reality to which it aspires, (74e).
- **Knowledge Present in Perception from the Start:** We perceive such things as equal sticks right after birth (75b).
  - **Adding Some Justification:** If we didn't experience things as equal, or, more generally, as partaking in general forms, experience would be, as William James puts it, a "blooming, buzzing, confusion" and would do nothing for one.
- **Conclusion:** We have knowledge of equality itself before birth, (75c).
- **Generalizing:** This argument does not just apply to equality, of course, but to the beautiful, the good, the just, the pious, and so on.

### 3 Plato's Two Truths

- **Plato's Two Realms:** There are "two kinds of existences, the visible and the invisible,"(79a)
  - **The Visible:** Composite, impure, indissoluble, always changing, divine, immortal, (fully) intelligible
  - **The Invisible:** Non-composite, pure, soluble, unchanging, human, mortal, not (fully) intelligible

These things come as a package deal. The explanation of any of these attributes is in reference to the others.

- For instance, the explanation for the fact that the visible is not really intelligible is that it is always changing, so one cannot get a *grip* on it—it always slips away.
- **The Basic Claim:** Whereas the body belongs to the first kind of existence, the soul belongs to the second kind of existence. Since existences of the second kind are immortal, the soul is immortal.
- **The Main Justification:** The dealings of the body are with the visible, whereas the dealings of the soul (for instance, in philosophical activity), are with the invisible—the forms.
  - Things deal with the kind of existence that they themselves belong to.
  - Recall the characterization of philosophy as an activity in which “turns away from the body” so as to “observe things in themselves by themselves with the soul by itself.”
- **Further Thought:** Those who have philosophized and have purified the soul from the body to some extent will be better off in death (80d-84c).
- **On the Ordinary Folk:** “The lovers of sights and sounds like beautiful sounds, colors, and shapes, and everything fashioned out of them, but their thought is unable to see and embrace the nature of the beautiful itself,” (Republic 476b).
  - **As if in a Dream:** “Someone who believes in beautiful things, but doesn’t believe in the beautiful itself and isn’t able to follow anyone who could lead him to knowledge of it [ . . . ] is living in a dream rather than a wakened state,” (476c).
- **On the Philosopher:** Someone who “believes in the beautiful itself, can both see it and the things that participate in it and doesn’t believe that the participants are it or that it itself is the participants is [ . . . ] very much awake,” (476c-d).
- **Opinion vs. Knowledge:** Socrates distinguishes the domains of *opinion* from the domain of *knowledge*.
  - This further elaborates the distinction in the *Phaedo* between the *visible* realm, of the changing and sensible, and the *invisible* realm of the unchanging and intelligible.
  - Socrates articulates opinions as being intermediate between knowledge and ignorance, the objects of which belong to the ever-changing realm of *becoming*, which lies in between non-being and being, whereas the objects of knowledge belong to the unchanging realm of true *being*, which does not at all partake in non-being.
- Philosophers possess knowledge rather than mere opinion, and it is on that basis that they alone are qualified to rule.

## 4 The Analogy of the Sun and Line

- **The Sun:** Some facts:
  - Sight and the eyes (which have the capacity for sight) are not themselves sufficient for seeing.
  - One needs a third thing in makes the visible things capable of being seen. That’s *light*, cast by *the sun*.
  - Not only does the sun make visible things actually visible, but it’s also responsible for their very existence, the source of growth and nourishment.
  - The sun *enables* sight (making the visible things capable of being seen, and, indeed, making them be at all) and it can also be *seen* by sight.
  - So, it is a visible thing, but a very special visible thing: that in virtue of which the other visible things are visible and, indeed, are at all.
- **The Good:** Analogous to the Sun in the following ways:
  - Understanding and the soul (which has the capacity for understanding) is not itself sufficient for understanding.

- One also needs a thing which makes the intelligible things capable of being understood. That's *the good*.
- Not only does the good make intelligible things actually intelligible, but it's also responsible for their very existence.
- The good *enables* understanding (making intelligible things capable of being known) it it can also be *understood* by the intellect.
- So, it is an intelligible thing (a form), but a very special intelligible thing: that in virtue of which the other forms are intelligible, and, indeed, are at all.
- **The Divided Line:** Below the main division, there are images (objects of imagination), then there are the originals of images (i.e. sensible things) (the objects of belief). Above the main division, there are the intelligible forms (objects of thought), then there are the highest forms (objects of philosophical understanding).
- **Ascending the Sciences:**
  - **The Epistemology of Such Disciplines as Geometry:** “[A]lthough they use visible figures and make claims about them, their thought isn’t directed to them [. . .] They make their claims for the sake of the square itself and the diagonal itself, not the diagonal they draw,” (510d).
    - \* **Not the Highest Science:** Geometers and other non-philosopher scientists still don’t give an account of their fundamental first principles. Consider for instance, the notion of *equality* appealed to in this proof, but not accounted for by it.
  - **The Epistemology of Philosophical Understanding:** The top section of the intelligible is “that which reason itself grasps by the power of dialectic.” Philosophy is learned through the science of *dialectic*, of reasoning, and, as such grasps things clearly, basing all knowledge on “a genuine first principle.”

“It does not consider these hypotheses as first principles but truly as hypotheses—stepping stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the unhypothetical first principle of everything. Having grasped this principle, it reverses itself and, keeping hold of what follows from it, comes down to a conclusion without making use of anything visible at all, but only of forms themselves, moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms,” (511b)

## 5 The Allegory of the Cave

- **The Basic Image:** Imagine a group of prisoners in a cave. They’ve been in the cave since childhood—they know nothing outside of life in the cave. They are bound, hands, legs, and, importantly, necks to keep their heads from turning around. They’re all looking in the same direction, their eyes gazed upon the cavern wall in front of them. Upon this wall, shadows are cast. A fire is burning behind them. Puppeteers are yielding puppets in front of the fire that are casting the shadows on the world. All they ever know, and, indeed, all they can ever imagine is the shadows.
- **The Metaphor:** The shadows represent the things in the *sensible world* whereas the various perceptible things responsible for the shadows represent the things *intelligible world*, namely, the forms.
  - Recall, on Plato’s divided line, the *images* (of which shadows are included) are less real than the *perceptible things* just as the *perceptible things* are less real than the *forms*.
  - On Plato’s account, the vast majority of people, operating within the realm the visible, only have *opinions*; they don’t really have *knowledge*, grasping the forms, as the philosopher does. That is, most people are in the cave, and it is the rare few who leave.