

Chapter 14

Sun, Line, and Cave

14.1 Readings and Homework

14.1.1 Readings

Required

- Plato, *Republic* VI and VII and *Phaedo* 95e-102a (264-268 RAPG)

Recommended

Finish the *Republic*

14.1.2 Homework

Give a short answer to the following questions on the basis of the readings:

1. Why is it crucial for the guardians to learn about the form of the good?
2. Draw a table with the different elements of correspondence in the analogy between the sun and the good.
3. Draw the line with, in each section, the proper kind of object and the corresponding condition of the soul.
4. What are the two characteristics of thought (third section of the line: 510b-511a)

5. What are the four stages in the cave? How do they correspond to the sections of the divided line?

14.1.3 Special notes

Beside Marc Cohen's course notes, I am using the commentary of the books VI and VII by Monique Dixault (French edition, Hatier).

14.2 Why is knowledge of the good so important

According to Plato:

- The most important kind of knowledge is the knowledge of the good:
 - Only such knowledge of the good implies true **happiness**.¹ A man who would know everything would be happy, not because of his knowledge in any particular domain, but because of his knowledge of the good and the evil.
 - Knowledge of the good and evil is knowledge of **the ends**. Whatever your favorite activity is, its value ultimately depends on your ends. Without the knowledge of the ends, all the rest of possible knowledge is worthless.
- Thus, knowledge of the good is the most important knowledge to have.
- Knowledge is fundamentally different from belief or opinion. Knowledge is never mistaken, opinion can be mistaken.
- Now, the problem is that we are lacking knowledge of the good and evil: in everyday life, our decision about ends are based on opinion, whether true or not, not knowledge.
 - Most people identify the good with pleasure (success with money and evil with death)
 - Some identify the good with knowledge

¹See *Charmides*.

- Both are mistaken. **The good is above both pleasure and knowledge.** But is not the philosopher striving most of all toward knowledge of the good? **Then, is the good a form?** Socrates cannot answer directly: this is not a yes/no answer. In a sense, the good is a form, but it is also *above* the forms.
- Note: Remember that, in the *Symposium*, the beautiful is put above all, in particular because nobody is mistaken about beauty. Obvious form.

Pb: In what sense the good is “above” the other forms?

14.3 First image: The Sun analogy

The analogy

	Sight	Knowledge
Faculty	Eye	Soul
Object	Sensibles	Forms
Cause	Light	Truth
Source	Sun	Good

SO: **The good is the cause of knowledge: how?**

- Just as the eye sees only what is bathed in light, the soul cannot know but what is bathed in truth.

This is consistent with Plato’s “absolutist” take on knowledge (i.e., the claim that knowledge is not knowledge if it is not perfect.)

- That said, truth and light are “secondary causes”
- Just as the sun is the source of light, the good is the source of truth.
- Just as the sun is cause (through light) of the sight, the good is the cause of knowledge

Note that there is an ambiguity here: to say that the good is the cause of the truth seems to say that the good is the cause of the forms being truly what they are, with again the ambiguity over the meaning of “is” (existential or veridical).

In other words: **Is the Sun/Good the cause of the forms' being (tout court) or of the forms' being known?** The analogy has really two sides: one ontological and one epistemological:

- From the side of what is, the good is cause of the forms' being.
- From the side of how we apprehend what is, the good is cause of our true knowledge of the forms

The good as cause of our knowledge of the forms

While the comparison between truth and light, knowledge and sight, are quite usual, **the addition of the good as a source of the truth and knowledge is much more original.**

This means that there is neither truth nor knowledge which is not enlightened by the good. In other words, you cannot know anything unless you know what it is good for in the ethical sense. The ethical perspective is, again, playing an important role in Plato' metaphysics.

This means that opinion is blind, not only of the truth, but also of the good.

How the good is the cause of knowledge?

- Sight: seeing is explained as the conjunction of two beams of "light". One is going out of the eye, the other out of the object, but both these "lights" are borrowed from the sun.
- SO: an object in itself, or in its plain truth, is good, knowledge is good too, and true knowledge comes from the conjunction of these two good. However these goods are borrowed from the form of the good in itself.

The good as a cause of the forms' existing the way they are

- We have just seen that truth and knowledge are good. That said, they are not *the* good
- SUN: cause of the generation in the sensible world – the sun is the cause of the sensibles' existing the way they are.
- SO: the good is the cause of the forms's having an *ousia*, an essence, this "divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the

same as itself” (*Phaedo* 80b) form of being that Plato attributes to the forms – the good is the cause of the forms’ existing the way they are.

The double status of the good

The good has thus a double status:

- it is a **form** and as such it is intelligible
- it is **above the form**, in so far as it makes them what they are, separate intelligible perfect being

14.3.1 What sort of cause is the good?

- It cannot a set of conditions mechanistically provoking a change...
 - this would be the stupid causes that Socrates rejected in the *Phaedo*
 - no possibility for any “material” idea of cause

- So what then ?

One hypothesis: Just as beauty, the good is something that is appealing to us.

- Beauty helps us to understand what absolute being is: Everybody agrees on beauty

- Goodness helps us to distinguish between the sensibles and the intelligible worlds. Looking for the ends of our actions, we come to see the deficiency of appearances and the opinion that we reach through the bodily senses. It is the only context in which the distinction between appearances and true reality is just obvious. **The form of the good help us to encounter the intelligible realm, helps us to grasp that there is something beyond the sensibles.** The good presents itself to our soul, unique, independent, and the same, as something that we cannot rule or deceive, without deceiving ourselves.

- Note that this explains only how the good is the cause of our knowledge of the forms: because the form of the good presents itself to us as obvious, we grasp that there is something more than the sensible realm. But that’s all about us: this does not explain how the good is making the forms what they are (it does not explain the metaphysical side

of the analogy): how is the good causing the form of equality being equality? This is harder to understand.

We know now in what sense the good has a double status of a form above the forms. The next step is to tell, by another image. what is the knowledge of the good.

14.4 Second Image: The Line analogy

Here is a table for the analogy (for the proportions, see the drawing in RAPG)

type of being	Visible – Images		Intelligible – Originals	
objects used	images	sensibles objects	abstract objects	forms
soul state	illusion, conjecture	belief, conviction	reason	understanding
	<i>eikasia</i>	<i>pistis</i>	<i>dianoia</i>	dialectics
	opinion (<i>doxa</i>)		thought (<i>noesis</i>)	

Images and Originals

This is the main relation between the different sections of the Line. That said, **there are two kinds of image-to-original relation in the line:**

- **Ontological difference:** between the sensible and the intelligible
- **Epistemological difference:** in each main section, two different ways of using the same kind of object: as images, or as originals

Thus, there are two kinds of being and two kinds of ways of using each kind being. You can use an ontological-original as an epistemological-image – that’s what the mathematician does. Or you can use a ontological-image as an epistemological-original – that is what opinion about the sensibles does.

The four sections correspond to each of the four combinations, each section corresponding to a specific state of the soul, from mere conjecture to true knowledge.

Visible

The section of the visible is the section where the soul considers the sensibles, ontologically dependant on the forms, being the latter's images.

- **Image:**
 - any sensible that **resembles** an original
 - Resemblance implies **difference**
 - **not all images are deceiving, but none of them contains by itself the means to uncover the extend and nature of its difference with the original**
 - About images, the soul can reach, at best, **conjecture**, at worse, **illusion**.
- **Sensible objects:**
 - are the originals of the images
 - the soul can reach **conviction**
 - that said, objects can be ambiguous: statue
 - all sensible objects have a **double status: ontologically images but epistemologically originals**. That is to say: between the sensible images and the sensible objects, the difference is epistemological. That is to say, the difference does not consist in their way of being, but in the way they are used.

Invisible

The section of the Invisible is the section where the soul considers the forms, ontological originals of the sensibles.

- **Reason**
 - hypothesis and deduction
 - mathematics
 - Cf. also *Meno* 86e-87 a-b
 - uses the sensibles as images (as they should be)

- but uses the forms as images instead of as originals – they stay hypothetical

- **all the abstract objects have a double status: ontologically originals, but epistemologically images.**

- **Understanding:** dialectics (*dia*= through): moving thought, questioning and answering – **thought is a dialogue of the soul**

- thought implies moving from the multiplicity to the unity – from the deficiency of the multiple sensibles to the perfection of the unique form

- thought implies moving within the forms: it is necessary to avoid the triviality of the unity (Good is good, beautiful is beautiful). The dialectics has to circulate among the forms, introduce new ones to produce understanding

For example: we have seen that it is impossible to understand the good without introducing and going through the distinction between sensibles and intelligible, or and the latter without introducing the distinction between between opinion and knowledge

- Unlike reason, understanding uses the forms as originals and not images – they are not hypothetical anymore.

14.5 The Allegory of the Cave

Introduction to the Cave

The Cave is an allegory, which means:

1. That at each concrete element corresponds an abstract element
2. That each element are articulated to the whole which forms a complete symbolic system
3. That the Cave needs to be interpreted
4. As an image of course... it is deficient and only dialectics can reach proper knowledge for these matters.

Presentation and Comments

Authorized reproduction of Marc Cohen's course notes:

1. Plato realizes that the general run of humankind can think, and speak, etc., without (so far as they acknowledge) any awareness of his realm of Forms.
2. The allegory of the cave is supposed to explain this.
3. In the allegory, Plato likens people untutored in the Theory of Forms to prisoners chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects, that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects that they do not see.
4. Such prisoners would mistake appearance for reality. They would think the things they see on the wall (the shadows) were real; they would know nothing of the real causes of the shadows.
5. So when the prisoners talk, what are they talking about? If an object (a book, let us say) is carried past behind them, and it casts a shadow on the wall, and a prisoner says "I see a book," what is he talking about?

He thinks he is talking about a book, but he is really talking about a shadow. But he uses the word "book." What does that refer to?

6. Plato gives his answer at line (515b2). The text here has puzzled many editors, and it has been frequently emended. The translation in Grube/Reeve gets the point correctly:

And if they could talk to one another, don't you think they'd suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them?

7. Plato's point is that the prisoners would be mistaken. For they would be taking the terms in their language to refer to the shadows that pass before their eyes, rather than (as is correct, in Plato's view) to the real things that cast the shadows.

If a prisoner says "That's a book" he thinks that the word "book" refers to the very thing he is looking at. But he would be wrong. He's only looking at a shadow. The real referent of the word "book" he cannot see. To see it, he would have to turn his head around.

8. *Plato's point: the general terms of our language are not names of the physical objects that we can see. They are actually names of things that we cannot see, things that we can only grasp with the mind.*
9. When the prisoners are released, they can turn their heads and see the real objects. Then they realize their error. What can we do that is analogous to turning our heads and seeing the causes of the shadows? We can come to grasp the Forms with our minds.
10. Plato's aim in the *Republic* is to describe what is necessary for us to achieve this reflective understanding. But even without it, it remains true that *our very ability to think and to speak depends on the Forms*. For the terms of the language we use get their meaning by "naming" the Forms that the objects we perceive participate in.
11. The prisoners may learn what a book is by their experience with shadows of books. But they would be mistaken if they thought that the word "book" refers to something that any of them has ever seen.

Likewise, we may acquire concepts by our perceptual experience of physical objects. But we would be mistaken if we thought that the concepts that we grasp were on the same level as the things we perceive.

14.6 The forms as causes – the notion of participation

From the line and the allegory of the cave, we get the idea that the forms are the causes of the sensibles. Now, how this works is still unclear. All we

have for now is a original-to-image relationship. Let's go back to the *Phaedo*, where Plato tries to explain this relationship.

- **Forms as the true causes: How?**

It is not clear from the text, but it seems a recurring claim that the form of F is what **makes** some sensibles to be F. Remember that this was present right from the beginning when we read the *Euthyphro*: the answer to the “what is X?” question has to be *explanatory*. The form of F is what makes all the things that are F be F. Now, what is behind this “make” is difficult to explain.

It cannot be a causal relation as we usually understand it. We usually take causal effects to occur between material entities and through material contact. A typical example would be the chock between two billiard balls. A billiard ball on a given trajectory and with a given impulsion causing a change in trajectory and impulsion in another billiard ball. Another example could be that someone punching the face of someone else has caused pain. You can trace back in space and time a continuous series of actions and reactions from the feeling of pain to the fist.

Well, forms cannot be causes in this sense: they are immaterial and outside space and time. And further, Plato explicitly states that it takes this kind of causes, the physical causes, to be deficient. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates explains that the physical causes are not true causes but mere conditions *sine qua non*. That is to say: The fact that “Socrates sits where he sits” would not be possible if Socrates did not have a body, some muscles and nerves, but these are not the true causes of Socrates' sitting where he sits. **Socrates ask for the sufficient reason** of the being of all things. The sufficient reason of what exists and how is given by the forms, and most of all by the form of the good.

But how? Plato regularly appeals to the notion of **participation**.

- **Participation**

We will not make a precise account of participation in this class. It is a very controversial topic among scholars. So, we shall confine ourselves to the strict minimal characterization of the notion of participation in Plato's philosophy.

– What we have is:

*Sensible things are X or Y because they participate
in the form of X or Y.*

– Now, this means, minimally, that:

- * The sensible things that are F **resemble** the form of F – note that any resemblance relationship necessarily involves a difference;
- * Such a **difference is also deficiency** – the sensibles imperfectly resemble the forms they participate in;
- * So that the form of F is a **paradigm**, that is, a perfect example of what it is to be F;

- Participation and Self-predication:

The participation theory seems to imply both the self-predication and the self-participation of the forms:

A form F is itself F

This is how it can “cause” things to be F through participation understood as a kind of resemblance: both the form and the sensible thing are F. Only the form is perfectly F and the sensible thing would not be F but for the existence of the form of F being perfectly F.

Now, the self-predication and self-participation theses give rise to the well problem of the third man argument.

- **The third man argument** – infinite regress of forms. Interestingly, Plato formulates himself the argument in the *Parmenides*. Does he give an answer to it? or does he give up on the forms? Well, this is very controversial between scholars...
- The issue of the theory of forms in Plato’s late period metaphysics.

If you want to know more about the infamous third man argument: see Marc Cohen’s course notes on the topic and the references therein.

14.7 Conclusion about the forms

(Marc Cohen)

14.7.1 Problems solved by the postulation of the forms

The forms are postulated to solve certain philosophical problems:

1. **Epistemological:** what are the objects of knowledge? How is knowledge possible? How is knowledge distinguished from (mere) belief or opinion?

Plato's objection to the physical universe: it's Heraclitean (as he conceived Heraclitus' theory). Objects in flux can't be known.

2. **Metaphysical (Ontological):** What things are real? Is there a mind-independent reality? Is there anything permanent behind the changing phenomena that can be perceived?

The two-worlds theory: Cf. the Allegory of the Cave in Republic VII. The intelligible world is Parmenidean, the visible world is Heraclitean. Forms in the intelligible realm are postulated to be the objects of knowledge. The metaphysical theory is thus designed to fit epistemological requirements.

3. **Moral:** can there be moral knowledge? Are there objective moral truths? Is morality founded in nature or convention?

For Plato, goodness and being are intimately connected. Platos universe is value-ridden at its very foundations: value is there from the start, not imposed upon an antiseptic, value-neutral reality by the likes of us - external imposers of value on what in itself has no intrinsic value.

4. **Semantical:** what do general terms stand for? What is it that we grasp when we understand something? Cf. again the Allegory of the Cave in Republic VII.

14.7.2 Problems arising with the postulation of the forms

Plato solves the heraclitean problem of the possibility to know and to talk in separating the immutable forms from the always flowing sensible things. That said, just what such a separation amounts to is a matter of dispute.

Now, two problems emerge from the idea of stable forms, separate from a world of flux:

1. If the forms are separate from the flux of sensible things that our senses reach, how can we know them?
2. If the forms are separate from the sensible things, how can any sensible thing share anything with whatever being those forms have? In simple words: how can anything down here be beautiful, or virtuous?

Answer that Plato gives:

1. Doctrine of recollection: knowledge of forms is recollection of prenatal contact with them (before being embodied).
2. Doctrine of participation: a kind of resemblance – Line and Cave – but probably Plato’s whole life quest.

14.7.3 To go further

- Did Plato stick to the theory of forms? (some may think that it raises more problems than it solves) Strikingly enough, Plato is the one who raised the best objections against the theory of form in the *Parmenides*.
- Third Man Argument, again.
- He did not seem to have consider these objection as fatal to his theory though. Indeed, he still claims their existence in the *Timaeus*, supposed to be among the latest dialogues. That said, Plato is again more instigating puzzlement in the reader than implementing ready-made doctrines in the student’s brain. Some also maintain that Plato changed his theory of forms in the late period.
- For this, see Plato’s *Sophist* and *Statesman*, and for help, see for example:
 Mary Louise Gill, “Method and Metaphysics in Plato’s *Sophist* and *Statesman*”, SEP
 See also Marc Cohen’s course notes !
- On how some philosophers still postulate the existence of universal, see David Armstrong, *Universals* – short but hard: watch out!