Plato’s Epistemology and the Theory of the Forms

One way we can think about Plato’s theory is as a response to some of the philosophical problems raised by the Presocratics: the problem of the one and the many, the problem of appearance and reality, the problem of change. Heraclitus and Parmenides were both concentrating on one aspect of these problems but ignoring other aspects. Each was concentrating on just one side of what has been called the dilemma of change. Heraclitus, since he saw that difference must be admitted, rejected identity and tried to explain everything in terms of flux. Parmenides, realizing that whatever changes must be identical throughout its change, took identity as the basic concept and was forced to deny change. Both Plato and the Sophists were responding to the dilemma presented by this conflict between Heraclitus and Parmenides. Plato ends up arguing that both are right because they are talking about different types of objects. Reality, for Plato, is not single as many Presocratics had supposed but dual.

The World of Becoming: The Realm of the Senses
- Nothing is permanent, everything changes
- The realm of particulars
- Tangible/Material
- Visible
- Mere copies or imitations of the ideal forms
- We gain access through the senses
- The realm of mere opinion
- The realm of the body
- Mortal

The World of Being: The Ideal Realm of the Forms
- Eternal
- Immutable
- Universal
- Invisible (Ideal forms, perfect examples)
- Ultimate reality
- We gain access through reason
- The realm of true knowledge
- The realm of the soul
- Immortal

Plato’s Epistemological Argument for the Forms
Step One: Plato distinguishes between opinion and knowledge

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>opinion</th>
<th>knowledge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>is changeable</td>
<td>endures or stays put</td>
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<tr>
<td>may be true or false</td>
<td>is always true</td>
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<tr>
<td>is not backed up by reasons</td>
<td>is backed up by reasons</td>
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<tr>
<td>is the result of persuasion</td>
<td>is the result of instruction</td>
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**Step Two:** Plato argues that we do indeed have knowledge. This is what distinguishes him from the Sophists. Socrates’ discussion with the slave boy in the Platonic dialogue *Meno* establishes that at least in regard to mathematics we can be said to have knowledge. In the *Republic* Plato argues that we have knowledge of justice.

**Step Three:** The third step is to explain the nature of the objects that we can be said to know and it is the Forms (or Ideas) as the objects of knowledge that ground Plato’s epistemology. What are our truths of mathematics about? Obviously not any particular square or triangle drawn up on the board. Rather, they are truths about ideal mathematical objects, an object that can be apprehended only by the intellect, by thinking and reasoning. Knowledge endures and so requires an object that endures. The Square Itself does not fluctuate like visible and tangible squares. Therefore, it can qualify as an object of knowledge.

In recapitulating the major steps of Plato’s argument, Norman Melchert reconstructs the Epistemological Argument for the Forms:

1. Knowledge is enduring, true, rational belief based on instruction.
2. We do have knowledge.
3. This knowledge cannot be about the world revealed through the senses.
4. It must be about another world, one that endures.
5. This is the world of Forms.

Plato distinguishes between the world of the forms, of which we have knowledge, ignorance, of what it not, and opinion, which is of this world. The Forms are nonphysical, nonspatial, nontemporal. They are the objects of thought. For Plato, a science is a body of universal and necessary truths. Every science has for its objects, and must have for its objects, forms; nothing other than eternal, unchanging forms can qualify to be the objects of scientific knowledge. This world of universal forms, which the sciences discover, has the characteristics of the Parmenidean one. In the physical world, everything is changing and nothing is ever exactly what it is; it is always becoming something different. In the world of Forms, everything is always what it is and not another thing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objects of Cognition</th>
<th>Knowledge vs. Opinion</th>
<th>Imagining = Perceiving</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOESIS = intelligence, or rational intuition</td>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
<td>A</td>
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<tr>
<td>EPISTEME = knowledge</td>
<td><strong>Intelligence</strong> = Reason = Dialectic</td>
<td><strong>Thinking</strong> = Understanding</td>
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<td>The method of obtaining EPISTEME is the Dialectic, meaning philosophical conversation by question and answer seeking an “account” (logos) of some Form.</td>
<td>Pure Mathematics</td>
<td>Empirical Generalizations (Hypotheses)</td>
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<td>Ultimately: knowledge of the Good.</td>
<td>Dianoia = thinking Reasoning from premise to conclusion.</td>
<td>PISTIS = common sense belief in the reality of visible objects and correct moral teachings (that is, sufficient guides for action), without knowledge of the reasons for such beliefs.</td>
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<td>Actually, a bridge from the world of Opinion to that of Knowledge, brought about by higher education, especially mathematics.</td>
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