

# PLATO

Alfred North Whitehead once remarked that all of philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. Whether or not that is actually the case, Plato has certainly wielded an enormous influence on every philosopher who came after him, and by extension, has been an enormously influential figure in theology. Platonic philosophy undergirds the work of many of the great early Christian theologians, such as Origen and Augustine, as well as the mystical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius.

There were philosophers prior to Plato's time, but, as with so many other things, they are defined in relationship to the work of Plato and Socrates, and thus are usually referred to as "pre-Socratic" philosophers. Very little remains of their work, and what does remain exists only in fragments. They were a diverse group. Thales of Miletus believed that all things derived from water,

while Anaximenes believed they derived from air. Anaximander argued that they derived from a separate, unnamed substance. Meanwhile, Pythagoras attempted to understand all of reality in terms of numbers.

Heraclitus, one of the best known of the pre-Socratics, believed that all things were in flux, and nothing was constant, while Parmenides argued that the appearance of motion was an illusion, and all things were simply manifestations of an unchanging being. His pupil Zeno was known for formulating paradoxical riddles to illustrate this idea, such as proving that motion was impossible by demonstrating that movement of any distance required one to first travel half of that distance, which first required moving half of *that* distance, and so on. What unified the pre-Socratic philosophers was not a particular philosophical perspective, but their interest in discovering what it was that defined the *essence* of reality.

Plato, who lived in the fifth century BCE, was a student of the first great Athenian philosopher, Socrates. Socrates was known for walking the streets of Athens stopping passersby and quizzing them about what they claimed to know. In doing so, he attempted to demonstrate that they did not actually possess genuine knowledge, but only poorly grounded opinions about the nature of the world. Socrates himself never claimed to know anything, and according to the Oracle at Delphi, this actually made him the wisest of all. Socrates viewed himself not so much as a teacher but as a gadfly, pestering his fellow Athenians in order to reveal to them their ignorance. This was, as one can imagine, annoying. Nevertheless, he developed a following among the young men of Athens, who saw him as challenging the social, political, and religious presuppositions of a society that they were themselves questioning.

At the time, there was another group of public thinkers who were active in Athens, known as the “sophists.” Unlike Socrates,

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.



*Their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell.*



Plato, De Republica, Book VII

the sophists advertised themselves as possessing actual knowledge that they were happy to share—at a price. The sophists were often portrayed as engaging in pointless argumentation for its own sake, rather than teaching any genuine knowledge (thus giving birth to the term “sophistry” to describe deceptive argumentation). The playwright Aristophanes made fun of them in his comedy *The Clouds*, lumping Socrates in among the sophists, despite his insistence on his own ignorance and his refusal, unlike the sophists, to charge money. When *The Clouds* was performed, Socrates was apparently in the audience, and when the actor portraying him entered, he stood to allow the audience to see the resemblance between them.

Eventually Socrates was arrested and tried in Athens on charges of “corrupting the youth” of the city and making impious statements about the gods. His trial is recounted in Plato’s dialogue the *Apology*, which consists largely of Socrates’s defense against the charges. In spite of (or perhaps because of) his defense, Socrates was sentenced to death by a jury of Athenian citizens. Although he was given a chance to escape, Socrates accepted his sentence and died after drinking a cup of hemlock.

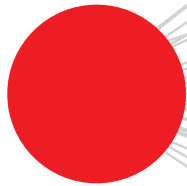
Building on Socrates’s philosophy, Plato began to teach and write, founding the first university in Athens, known as the Academy. His writing primarily took the form of dialogues on moral and metaphysical questions between Socrates and an opponent or opponents. Most dialogues had a similar structure, in which Socrates would begin by posing a question, such as “What is justice?” or “What is piety?” to his conversation partner, who would then offer a definition. Socrates would then chip away at that definition until his adversary was forced to admit that they did not in fact know what they were talking about. The dialogues usually ended with both Socrates and his foe going their separate ways agreeing to continue thinking about the question.

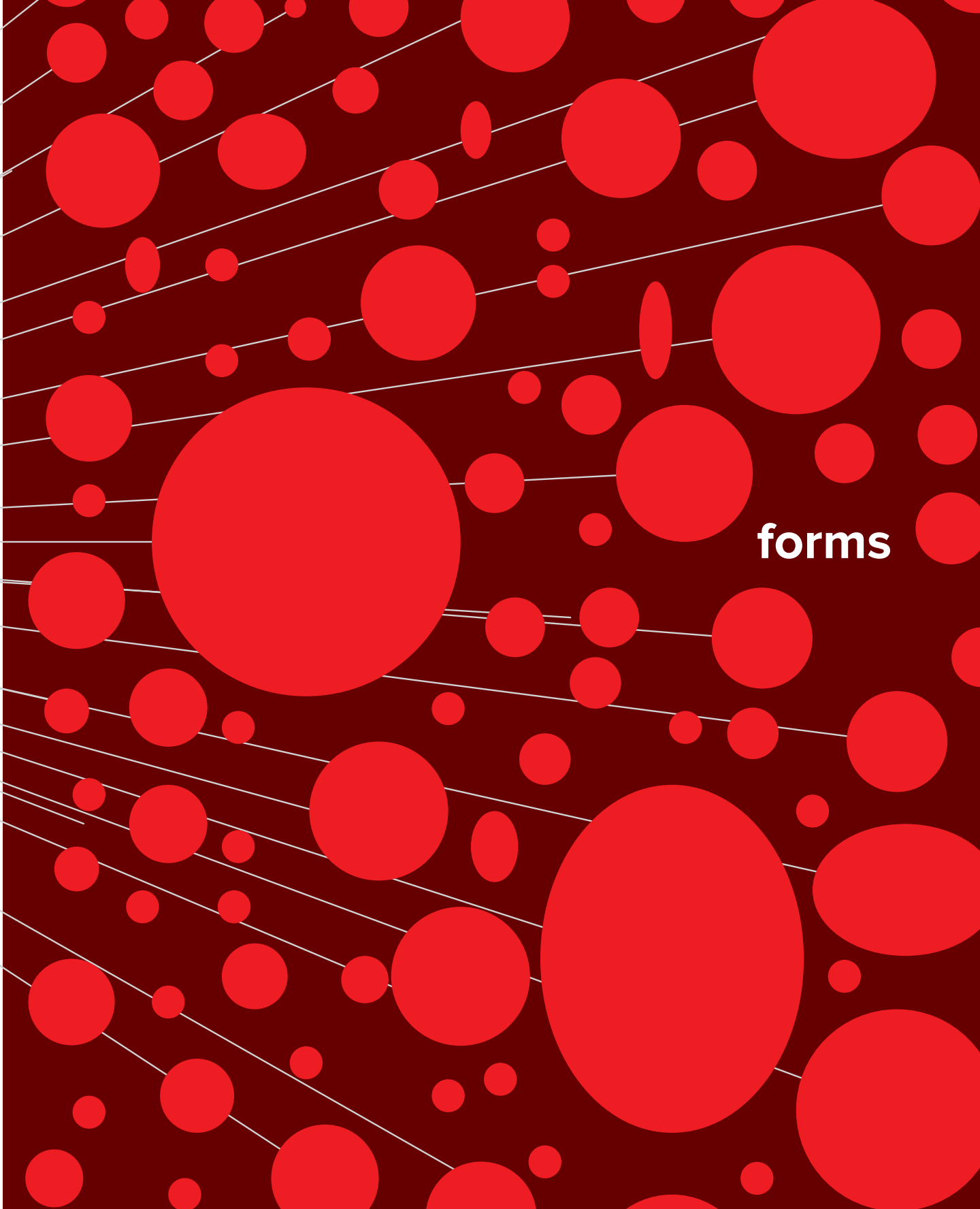
Plato used this structure (and the character of Socrates) to pose philosophical problems for his students. Unlike Socrates, however, he did have some answers to offer. In his most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, Plato presents a compelling picture of the relationship between knowledge, morality, politics, and the nature of reality itself.

The putative question in *The Republic* is “What is justice?” Socrates begins by knocking down a number of proposed answers to the question, and then suggests that justice is about the balance between three aspects of human nature: the mind, the heart, and the appetites. The just person is one whose mind and heart are allied with one another to keep their appetites under control, while those who are governed by their appetites are consumed by vice and live unjust lives. This leads Socrates and his conversation partners into a larger conversation about the nature of justice in society and what would be required to make a society that was not susceptible to the kind of corruption that they were familiar with from the recent history of Athens.

Eventually their conversation turns to questions of truth and knowledge, and here Plato offers one of his most enduring contributions to philosophy in the form of his Analogy of the Cave. Socrates asks his conversation partners to imagine a group of prisoners trapped together in a cave, forced to face a blank wall. Behind them, a light projects the shadows of various objects on the wall as they are carried past. What would happen, he asks, if one of those prisoners were freed and forced to turn around and face that light? He would see that the objects he had assumed to be real were merely images projected on a screen. If he were then taken up out of the cave, he would see the real objects rather than just their copies. First, he would look at their shadows on the ground, then at the objects themselves, until finally he could look up at the sun itself, as the source of illumination for these objects. He would

**ideal**





**forms**



have come to see the reality behind the images he had once taken to be real. Socrates then suggests that, if he were to go back to the cave and tell his fellow prisoners what he had seen, they would not believe him and would even kill him if it meant they could continue to live in their illusions.

The condition of the prisoners is akin to those who live their lives distracted by illusions, such as, in Plato's time, things like poetry and plays (television and video games would be apt contemporary analogues). The condition of those who are freed and come to know the objects that are projected behind them on the wall is akin to how we interact with the physical world around us. We perceive the world with our senses, but we lack knowledge of the reality that underlies those senses. This is why, when quizzed by Socrates, most of his opponents could not offer coherent answers. They could recognize justice or piety when they saw them, or identify physical objects such as horses or trees, but they could not explain *why* those things were what they were. In order for that to take place, they needed to go beyond the world of sense perception.

This leads to one of Plato's most significant ideas, the theory of Forms. Plato argued that things in the perceptual world were imperfect images or copies of a greater reality. Reality was not the physical world in which we lived, but rather was a realm of pure ideas, uncontaminated by material substance. Thus, the reason why a chair was a chair was because it took part in the perfect Form of the chair. In the same way a horse was a horse because it partook of the Form of horseness. In a similar manner, particular instances of ideas such as justice and beauty were recognizable to us because we innately understood them to be representations of the perfect forms of Justice and Beauty. So, for example, a beautiful picture of a person was a less perfect copy of the person themselves. But the person's beauty is itself a reflection of the idea of beauty that

we possess within our intellects. But even that concept of beauty is itself only a reflection of The Beautiful itself, the perfect form of beauty from which we are able to recognize beauty when we perceive it.

The same approach can be taken for such ideas as justice or truth. For something to be true simply means that it partakes of the metaphysical form of Truth, but in an imperfect way. Ultimately, all of these Forms themselves are simply reflections of the Good itself. The only way, Plato argues, to truly understand the nature of the reality in which we live is to dedicate one's life to the contemplation of these Forms. Most of us, however, are at best consumed by the demands of the physical and sensory world in which we live, and at worst, fascinated by the world of illusions projected at us by TV screens or computer monitors.

This idea of a division between the physical world, which is ultimately imperfect, transitory, and illusory, and the "real world" of the Forms proved to be influential throughout the ancient period. Both the Stoic philosophers and the Neo-Platonists picked up on these ideas and took them in different directions. In the same way, both Gnosticism and early Christianity were influenced by platonic ideas. While the gnostics took up Plato's condemnation of the physical world as prison from which those with the proper knowledge could learn to escape, Christian philosophers emphasized the idea of God as the ultimate source of reality, and the physical world as participating in the Forms as created by God, and thus not wholly evil or corrupting.

# ARISTOTLE

Aristotle's philosophy built on the foundation established by Socrates and Plato, but sought, as it were, to bring Plato "down to earth." While Plato's viewpoint depended on a distinction between the material world of objects and the transcendent world of the Forms, Aristotle's approach sought to embed metaphysical reality in the midst of the world we perceive.

Aristotle had been Plato's student at the Academy, although after Plato's death he went on to establish his own school called the Lyceum. He also served for several years as the tutor of Alexander the Great, the future king of Macedonia and conqueror of the Mediterranean world. After Alexander's death Aristotle fled Athens in fear for his life lest, he is reported to have said, "Athens sin twice against philosophy."

Aristotle's work encompasses an immense amount of