

# The Nature of Ideas: An Examination into the real and the ideal as conceived by one's imagination

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Imagine that you have an idea. Any idea. Let it float around in your minds. It is an abstract thing, full of hope and possibility, capable of being whatever you wish for it to be. You are limitless in your exploration of that idea. Bounce it back and forth in your skull, transform it, transfigure it and play around with it. It is yours. You are its master. It's your slave.

And yet, what I am describing is only an abstract of the true idea in our minds. The true idea in our minds is multifaceted and multi-dimensional. It has hidden depths to it, depths which reach all the way to infinity if our imagination follows it there. In our exploration of the idea, we are limited only by our imagination, and in many cases actively aided by it, should our powers of thought be considerably fertile.

Let us consider the case of reading a story. Some of us dive into it, immersing ourselves into the scene and taking in all of the descriptions with our mental eye, filling in the details not provided. Others are more conservative with their imagination and envision a different setting, perhaps not as rich in background detail. In either case, each of us would be reading the same text, following the same sequence of actions, but in each person's head, there is a different story running.

All of this illustrates how our thoughts and the ideas we think of unique to us, a product of our experiences shaping our thought processes. When any idea is within us, it takes on an ethereal shape and form constrained only by our imagination. It is boundless. It is only when we have to bring this idea out of our minds and into reality when we face any problem at all. To misquote Shakespeare, therein lies the rub.

Perhaps an example would better illustrate this point. Follow along with this little thought experiment. Imagine a tree. Any tree. This tree would be ideal in your mind, the one tree which comes up as an image or a description whenever you think of trees in general. This ideal represents trees to you. Let this ideal tree take shape in your mind. Think of the branches that spread out wide across the sky, and the long, wide trunk. As details are given, your own tree will grow with those details. Now, take a moment to try and describe this tree as if you were explaining it to another person.

When we proceed to explain the tree within our mind to any entity outside of our mind, whether it be by speaking, by writing or any other means of communication currently available to us, we find that the more we explain, the less details are transferred. As with the case of going through the little thought experiment ourselves, our audience go through their own thought experiment in their own heads.

But we don't want the listener to imagine their own tree, we want them to imagine our tree. So we try to bring as much of our imagination out of our minds as possible. Perhaps we start by describing the colour of the leaves on this tree of ours. We can start off by saying dark green, light green and go through all shades in between. Maybe the technically inclined among us would offer up a hex code for the exact shade of green. Or the scientifically inclined can give us the exact wavelength of light which would produce the green that the leaves are.

Then we can proceed to describing the height of the tree, and the width of its trunk all the way down to millimeters and even nanometers if so preferred. But by doing this description, we miss an important point. The very act of describing the ideal in our mind, for this tree we are thinking about is the representation of how our ideal tree looks like, makes it lose its ideal nature. By drawing it out into the real world, it becomes mundane. What was once an indescribable ideal born out of our imagination has now been reduced into a series of numbers. Do these numbers carry within themselves any of the ethereality of the object in my mind? No, they don't. Rather, these numbers make the products of our imagination mundane.

This loss of authenticity and the ideal nature of any concept or object has been debated from times immemorial. In his book the *Timmaeus*, Plato, seeks to nullify this entire loss of authenticity by maintaining that our act of thinking itself is a deviation from a higher supreme ideal. Should we choose to accept Plato's hypothetical supreme ideal, the deviation of our idea, which is an imitation of the true ideal, into a real world description is inevitable. Plato posits the existence of a separate World of Forms, where the true ideal of every conceivable object exists. Plato called these true ideals forms. And not just objects, but true ideas and concepts have their ideals in this world of forms.

The name *World of Forms* gives away the nature of this thought that Plato was proposing. In this world, one which Plato posited was in a separate plane from ours (and for the sake of metaphysics, we assume to be true), the true form of objects and ideas are present. Plato sought to guide people's thought by asking them to look upon this World of Forms when they had to perform any action. In looking at the true form of that action or ideal, Plato says, we ought to model our own actions in such a way as to be as close to the ideal as possible. To Plato, these forms were very real, and residing in another plane of existence, they showed not just the life we should strive towards but also the ideals of commonplace objects, as our mind, a plane of existence separate from ours showed us an ideal of a tree when thinking about it.

Perhaps Plato's metaphysics of the ideals and the way objects in our thoughts and in the real world around us depend on these forms might not seem to have much value in of itself. After all, what use is metaphysics to a person struggling with their own self, with the real world around them. But interpretation of ideas is always up to

us as individuals, just as we had our own vision of the tree from earlier. Here, Plato gives us a way to strive for the ideals in our thoughts and actions. The form of the ideal is the guide which shows us how we ought to live. When we model our actions based on these ideals, we might not reach that ideal everytime, but the very act of trying to reach it would make our actions all the more true to what we are aiming for.

But there are times when an ideal seems too far to ever reach, too distant to ever yearn for. In this scenario, it is not us who reach for the ideal who are lacking, but the ideal itself. If an ideal is so high as to not have any impact on striving towards it, the ideal itself is beyond approach. In such a case it would do more good to change the ideal altogether than strive in futility, ever straining and never reaching.

The true nature of all these objects and ideas we think up in our mind is just in them being tools to help us and to guide us. At the end of the day, we decide what our ideals are, as we have always done, all the way from our ideal tree, to our ideal life. These act as torches in the darkness of a life yet to be lived, and we should strive to use them as such. If at the end of the journey, we have put in our efforts to live up the ideals we set for ourselves, we can rest assured that our life is not without purpose. It is only by striving to reach the moon, do we at least land among the stars, after all.