

PHIL 321
Lecture 11: Plato's Cave (*Republic* 7, 514-521b)

10/1/2013

Background

Socrates draws a sharp ontological distinction between two kinds of entities: perceptible objects and intelligible objects:

Perceptible objects: Entities about which we can gain information *directly* through the five senses. It also includes groups of such objects.

- Examples: Socrates, Socrates' dog Fido, this building, each person in this room
- Also: The people in this room (we do not see this entity directly, rather we gain information about it by seeing (hearing, touching, etc.) each individual person in this room

Intelligible objects: Entities about which we gain information *solely* through the activity of thought (**NB:** The "solely" is crucial here, since we can think about and, hence, gain additional information about perceptible objects. The point is that, in addition to being able to think about perceptible objects, we can *also* perceive them through the senses.)

- Examples: Mathematical objects (squares, triangles, the number 2), Natures or Essences, which Socrates also calls "Forms" (*eidê*) or "Ideas" (*ideai*) (e.g. the nature of Piety, the nature of Justice, the Nature of Goodness)
- This is a development from the conception of Natures or Essences we found in the Socratic dialogues (e.g. *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, *Meno*). In those dialogues there was no indication that Natures or Essences existed separately from the perceptible world.

Perceptible objects do not perfectly instantiate intelligible objects but, rather, "approximate," "resemble," or "participate in" them. S also says that perceptible objects are "images" or "imitations" of intelligible objects.

Consider the following two figures:



Fig. 1

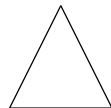


Fig. 2

Figure 1 is not a perfect square, but it more closely approximates the nature of Square than Figure 2 does

Similarly, S claims that, while nothing in the perceptible world perfectly instantiates the nature of (for example) Justice, certain things in the perceptible world (e.g. distributions of resources, social institutions, etc.) can more closely approximate the nature of Justice than others (and, hence, can be "more just" than others).

At 471, Glaucon questions Socrates whether a city with the constitution they laid out in Books 2-4 can be realized on earth

S maintains that the way to bring about a city *closest to* the ideal city is to vest political power in the hands of philosophers

Philosophers are distinguished from non-philosophers insofar as only philosophers can attain understanding (*epistēmē*) and knowledge (*gnōsis*) of intelligible objects, which makes them epistemic authorities about matters in the perceptible world (think of a doctor's expert "medical opinion" that a particular patient should undergo a particular course of treatment)

The Cave is an allegory of how education effects a radical change in people and can ultimately lead them to understanding of Forms, the most fundamental of which is the Form of the Good.