

## ***Study Guide: Plato's Metaphysics & Epistemology***

Metaphysics: A branch of philosophy that studies the nature of existence.

Epistemology: A branch of philosophy that studies knowledge and evidence.

In other words, the study of metaphysics and epistemology amounts to studying what the world is like and what we can know about it.

### **Metaphysics: The Theory of Forms**

Plato's theory of Forms is intended to answer the following 3 questions:

1. Why do objects have the properties they do?
2. How should objects be classified?
3. What makes an object good of its kind?

The answers Plato proposes are based on his theory of Forms. A Form is an abstract, ideal object. Forms are the perfect archetypes of each sort of object we see around us.

- Forms are perfect, eternal, and unchanging.
- There is a Form for each property or characteristic an object could have. There are also forms for abstract objects and concepts (e.g., numbers, beauty).
- The Forms are real, but the material objects around us are not.

This leads to the following answers to Plato's questions:

1. An object has a characteristic because it participates in the Form for that characteristic. E.g., An object is round because it participates in the form of roundness.
2. Objects belong together in a category when they participate in the same Form. E.g., All round things belong together because they all participate in the form of roundness.
3. An object is better of its type because it participates in the relevant Form to a greater extent. E.g., An object is more round than other things because it participates in the Form of roundness to a greater degree.

### **Epistemology:**

- We can have genuine *knowledge* only of things that are perfect and unchanging. We can have knowledge about the Forms, but not about material objects. We can have only beliefs or opinions about the material world.
- Before we are born, our souls live in the Realm of the Forms and have complete knowledge of the Forms. When we are born, we still have this knowledge but we do not realize it. We can recollect this knowledge only with difficulty.
  - The Socratic method of teaching consists in asking the right questions so that the student recovers his/her knowledge of the Forms. (This is illustrated in the *Meno*.)
- The process of recovering our knowledge of the Forms is illustrated in Plato's Allegory of the Cave (in the *Republic*).
  - The prisoners chained up in the cave represent the ordinary person who regards the material world as real and important (and who has not yet recollected the knowledge of the Forms).
  - The shadows on the cave wall represent material objects.

- The difficult ascent out of the cave represents the process of recollecting our knowledge of the Forms.
- Objects outside the cave represent different types of Forms.
  - Physical objects represent the *Forms* of physical objects.
  - The objects in the night sky (moon, stars) represent the Forms of abstractions (e.g., numbers, logic, beauty, justice).
  - The sun represents the Form of the Good, which is the highest of all the Forms. It is the organizing principle in which all other Forms participate.