Plato & the Forms

You need to know:
- What Plato meant by the Forms
- The relation between concepts and phenomena
- The concepts of ideals
- The relation between the Form of the Good and the other Forms

Key Terminology

Phenomena  Plato believed that we live in a world of appearances - a world of how things look to us. The things we see are called phenomena (observable things perceived through the senses).

Forms  Plato believed that the real world (as opposed to how it just looks) is a world of ideas or concepts. He calls this world the realm of Forms. In the realm of Forms, the things that exist are the perfect example, the ideals, of the phenomena that appear on earth. The Forms are transcendent (beyond the universe) and changeless.

Why does Plato think this?

When you see a dog, we already have an idea of what a dog is. This is why we recognise it as a dog. It doesn’t matter if the dog is a Beagle, a Pug or a St Bernard - we would still recognise it as a dog even though these dogs are very different.

The reason we recognise all these types of dogs is because there must be an idea or concept of what a dog is. This is the Form of the dog - an ideal of what a dog is.
The Form 'dog' must exist somewhere, because all the dogs on our world imitate or 'participate in' the Form dog. The Form is the ideal / concept; the dog on earth is the particular.

Dogs and other physical objects (phenomena) change - they get old, and deteriorate and die. The Form must be eternal and unchanging - otherwise future dogs could not participate in it and in the future we would not know what dogs were. The Form cannot exist in our realm of existence (where everything changes), so it must exist in another realm.

**The Realm of Forms**

Plato maintains that there are perfect examples, ideals, of things - he calls these Forms. The Form of something is not a particular type of thing, but a general ideal.

For example, we might think of the Form Beauty. This is not a beautiful picture, a beautiful flower of a beautiful dog. It is simply Beauty.

There are beautiful things on Earth. These are particular instances of Beauty found in things. There are beautiful pictures, flowers sunsets, people and dogs. These are called particulars - particular instances of the Form.

Anywhere in the world, at any time in history, people have been aware of beautiful things. Without being taught, they recognised Beauty. Why? Plato said that this is because we all 'remember' the Forms from when our soul lived in the realm of Forms.
Plato and the soul

Plato and the Soul

Plato (427-347), here giving 'the finger' to any monists (who don't think there is a soul) who were knocking about, maintained that each of us are a soul, imprisoned in a body.

Plato’s whole philosophy is based on dualism – Forms/particulars, knowledge-opinion, etc. He believed that the eternal immaterial soul was the opposite of the physical body.

Plato argued that the soul is more important than the body. This is because the body is a physical thing, belonging to the physical world where everything changes. As a result, the body (and its senses) cannot be relied upon to find the Truth (which will not change). Hence real knowledge can only be accessed by the soul (which is a unified, constant thing).

Plato’s Soul

- The soul for Plato is everything the body is not.
- The soul is changeless (so it cannot come into or go out of existence).
- The soul is eternal – it existed before birth and will exist after death.
- The soul is indivisible and only the soul is capable of true knowledge.

That said, Plato characterises the soul as having three 'roles'.

- The Spirit (will) makes us determined to do the right thing.
- The Appetite (desires) lead us in directions that are often unhelpful.
- The Reason balances the demands of the Spirit and the Appetite.

Before birth, the soul existed in the Realm of Forms – so it had knowledge of the Forms. However, the soul is pulled to earth by the appetites. On earth, there is a tension between body and soul, as the soul wants to return to the Realm of Forms. Plato sees the body as a prison from which the soul can escape from at death.

Plato likens the soul to charioteer (the Reason) in charge of two horses (Spirit and Appetite) who are pulling in different direction. A good person will be one in whom the charioteer (Reason) is in control.
Plato’s Theory of Recollection
This explains that we all possess some non-empirical knowledge (knowledge we have not gained through our senses). Plato demonstrates this argument in both the Meno and the Phaedo. Socrates questions an uneducated slave boy about geometry and demonstrates that the slave knows about Pythagoras’ theorem and the Form of Equality. Plato argues that the only way the boy (and all of us) could understand such concepts without being taught them is because our soul remembers them from its prior existence in the Realm of Forms, making learning an easier process as it is simply recollection.

The soul for Plato, then, explains how we learn and understand things. The soul exists in the Realm of Forms, where it sees the Forms. When we understand abstract concepts such as ‘beauty’, it is because our soul remembers the Form of Beauty from when the soul existed, disembodied, in the Realm of Forms. After death the soul escapes from the imprisonment of the body and tries to return to the Realm of Forms. The punishment for evil people is that their soul is re-imprisoned in another mortal body.

The Physical World
Our world is the physical world, the world of appearances and particulars. Things in our world are imperfect copies of the Forms. Each particular instance of something on our world is recognised as what it is because it ‘participates in’ the Form (Plato’s terminology). Looking at the things on our world will never allow us to see the true Form of which the particular is a poor example.

The Form of the Good
Plato thought that particulars conform to a Form. However, some Forms are more important than other Forms. The most important Form is the Form of the Good. In the Cave Analogy, the Form of the Good was represented by the Sun. The reason for this is that Plato though once you understood the Form of the Good, you would understand everything else. The escaped prisoner from the cave, after seeing things in sunlight, could understand everything.
Plato’s Hierarchy of Forms

Form of the Good
The Form of the Forms (most important)

Form of Justice  Form of Truth  Form of Beauty
Universal qualities

Form of Equality  Form of Length  Form of . . .  Form of .

Concepts & Ideals

Dog  Bear  Woman  Mouse  Man  Cat  Fish
Physical living objects

Chair  Tree  Brick  Potato  Book  Shoe  Leaf
Physical inanimate objects

Plato believed that once you understand the Form of the Good, you will understand everything else. The form of the Good makes clear the Forms of Truth, Justice and Beauty. Similarly, you will understand principles such as Proportion and other geometrical rules. The closer you get to the Good, the more you will understand everything else. The further you are from the Good, the less you understand.

Remember the escaped prisoner - in the light of the Sun (the Form of the Good) everything becomes clear - back in the cave, far from the Sun (the Good) nothing is clear and everything is an illusion. The Form of the Good, like the Sun on Earth, allows us to see things as they really are.

In terms of our understanding, reliance on the senses (which most people do) is clearly not going to allow you to ‘see’ true reality (the Forms) - only by the use of a priori reason the philosopher truly understand.
Strengths of Plato's Theory of Forms

✓ Encourages us to question what we see and look beyond appearances.

✓ Explains why we all recognise basic principles and concepts.

✓ Explains why there are imperfections in things in our world (imperfect copies).

Weaknesses of Plato's Theory of Forms

× It is speculation - there is no evidence that there is a Real of Forms

× We have to rely on our senses - we live in the sensual, empirical world. Reliance on a priori reason will not help us in our world.

× The Third Man Argument - Plato actually puts this criticism of the Theory of Forms forward himself, in his book Parmenides. If a man is made to be what he is by participating in a Platonic Form, then another Form will be needed to explain how both the man and the Form can be called 'man'. This Form will be a 'third man', and yet another Form (a 'fourth man') will be needed to explain how these three items can all be called 'man', and so on to an infinite regress.

× There are no absolutes where values are concerned, such as Good and Beauty. People disagree about what is good and beautiful, suggesting that all people do not recognise these concepts and ideals.

× Does everything have an ideal form? Is there a Form Cancer? In fairness Plato said that evil or bad things do not have a Form. Cancer is an imperfection of the Form Human.