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Plato, like many ancient Greek philosophers, presented a theory of reality. This theory of reality related the knowable world with the world of the forms. In Republic, Plato presents accounts of reality and knowledge. Plato uses the allegory of the cave, as well as the theory of The Line to present his accounts. Through each of the accounts Plato focuses on The Good and knowledge in his accounts. Plato relates The Good with Knowledge for the knowable world and the Sun for the visible world.

One method Plato uses to describe knowledge is through an analogy of the sun. Whereas sight requires a light source, most helpful of which being the sun, intelligence (as the acquisition of true knowledge), requires truth and reality to illuminate what is to the mind. Through this analogy Plato makes the affirmation that the mind on its own is but a tool for knowledge, and that without the proper third element (likely truth), the possession of knowledge is not possible. Plato disputes any theories of knowledge being true belief with the statement “One who holds a true belief without intelligence is just like a blind man who happens to take the right road.” While it is possible to have the right answer without knowledge of the topic of the problem, if that answer is arrived at through illogical methodologies, such as guessing, it is only as good as being wrong. Possessing knowledge moves a person closer to the Good. For example, if a beginning potter encounters a situation where a piece is becoming weak, the potter may decide to use the potter’s rib to correct what he perceives as the problem, an uneven side. This action strengthens the piece, but by realigning the structure of the clay, not by “ironing” the wall of the piece. In this aspect the possession of knowledge moves the person closer to the form of beauty



and to the Good. While an inexperienced potter can make a vessel that will stand and hold water, it requires experience and knowledge of the art to make elaborate works.

Plato discusses a divided line for the visual world and the knowable world. In the knowable world the mind moves between imagining things regarding reality and also moving from an assumption to a principle. Plato cites math students as an example for this division, they have a set of assumptions that they assume are true, but they do not prove the assumptions themselves, and from these assumptions they draw more conclusions. Plato also uses the math students to examine forms. Plato mentions “the Square”, the figure of which all squares are an image. “the Square” is a knowable thing, but it is not visible, but the images of the known figure are visible. The four divisions of the line that Plato describes are the states of mind: intelligence, thinking, belief and imagining. Each division has a level of clarity and understanding associated with it, intelligence having the highest of both.

Plato’s Allegory of the Cave is an account of the process of obtaining knowledge and the quest for wisdom. Plato describes an epistemological awakening by comparing the ignorant man to a prisoner in a cave forced to face forward and watch shadows of models of natural objects parading behind him. The ignorant prisoner is forced to stand up, and turn around to view the figures behind him. This painful experience should move the prisoner one step closer to knowledge from the images on the cave wall, but if the prisoner has known the shadows for so long it may be that the prisoner sees the shadows as real, but the models as being the images. While the prisoner would be closer to the real object than he was before, his belief may blind him, just as looking into the light being used to cast the shadows. At the pain of the turning around, and the pain of looking into the light, the instinct of the prisoner may be to turn around and return to the darkness. In this analysis Plato presents the struggle to obtain knowledge,



dismissing any notion that simply “knowing” of fact is knowledge and reinforcing that education is a process that must be endured to obtain knowledge of any value. In the next step of the allegory the prisoner is forced out of the cave and into the light, perhaps being analogous to beginning enlightenment. The prisoner would be startled and likely unable to see anything when initially thrust into the daylight, even though all things real would be just in front of him. Once allowed to adapt to the light the prisoner would be able to contemplate all things in front of him, as well as the light source providing him this view of real objects. Once out of the cave part of the prisoner’s journey towards intelligence is complete, but another aspect still remains. As time outside the cave begins to pass the prisoner may contemplate the celestial objects, including the sun, and begin making conclusions about the world around him. While in the cave the prisoner was experiencing a state of imagining, seeing only the images provided to him, but at the same time, having some level of belief that the shadows were real. Once standing and looking at the models the prisoner entered an unfamiliar situation, being faced with an object more real than the images, but unsure of whether the models or the images were more real, a state requiring thought. Once pushed out of the cave, the prisoner was introduced to things real, in some sense, obtaining knowledge about the real objects. At this point the prisoner continues thinking and is able to observe and make assessments of the real things, moving towards intelligence.

Plato focuses his work on moving towards a human goal, the Good, by way of knowledge. Knowledge is obtained through education, or as is stated in Republic, dialectic.

