

CVSP 201  
Plato's *Republic* II

21 November 2011

Dr. Gregg Osborne  
(Dept. of Philosophy)

**I. The assertion from which the reading for this week takes its start**

- Socrates asserts that philosophers should be in charge of the state (473d). This gives rise to a need to explain who qualifies as a philosopher and why people of this particular sort should be in charge.

**II. The theory of forms**

- The forms are not supposed to be concepts or ideas in the normal English sense of that word.
- The forms are not supposed to be things of the sort we can perceive through the senses.
- The forms are supposed to be things which exist in another sphere or dimension of reality.
- The form of the beautiful is supposed to be beautiful in every respect and at every time. The form of the good is supposed to be good in every respect and at every time.
- The reason things in this world qualify as beautiful is supposed to be that they resemble the form of the beautiful or share in its nature. The reason things in this world qualify as good is supposed to be that they resemble the form of the good or share in its nature.
- There are supposed to be a great many forms (forms of the just and the equal and the large and the small, etc.).

**III. Socrates' criterion of a true philosopher**

- A philosopher is a lover of knowledge (this is the literal meaning of the Greek word).
- In order to determine who truly qualifies as a lover of knowledge (and thus as a philosopher), Socrates must first determine what knowledge is.
- The view of Socrates or Plato is that knowledge relates to what absolutely is, ignorance to what altogether is not, and opinion to what falls between what absolutely is and what altogether is not.
- The view of Socrates or Plato is that all things in the visible or material sphere (buildings, paintings, symphonies, molecules, social arrangements, etc.) fall between what absolutely is and what altogether is not. The reason cited (479a-c) is that none of these things is what one says it is any more than it is not what one says it is.
- The implication is that one can only have opinions about things in the visible or material sphere (buildings, paintings, symphonies, molecules, social arrangements, etc.). Knowledge can only be had in regard to the forms (and thus in regard to things which exist in another sphere or dimension of reality).
- The implication is also that the forms are more real than the things of this world.
- It follows from all this that the only people who truly qualify as lovers of knowledge and thus as philosophers are people concerned and familiar with the forms.

**IV. Why Socrates asserts that philosophers should be in charge of the state**

- Only philosophers are familiar with the forms.
- Things in this world qualify as just or beautiful or good because they resemble or share in the nature of the forms of the just or the beautiful or the good.
- It follows that only philosophers are in a position to judge whether particular laws, institutions, or social arrangements are just or good, etc.

**V. Review of crucial points**

- According to Socrates or Plato, there are two different spheres, dimensions, or levels of reality. The first can be perceived through the senses; the second can only be perceived through the intellect. The second is higher and more real. Knowledge as opposed to opinion is possible only in regard to the second.

**VI. The need to know the form of the good**

- Knowledge of the form of the good is the most important knowledge. Unless one knows the form of the good, one cannot know what makes anything else good.

## VII. The simile of the sun

- The form of the good is held by Socrates to play a role in the sphere of intelligible things (the forms) similar to that played by the sun in the sphere of visible or material things (the things of this world).

## VIII. The simile of the divided line

- The fundamental point of this simile is that there are different spheres, levels, or dimensions of reality and that our cognition becomes more perfect as we (a) concern ourselves with those levels which are higher, and (b) do so in the best and purest way.
- The sphere of visible, material things is lower and less real than that of the forms. Genuine knowledge is possible only in regard to the forms.
- All of this is graphically illustrated by (a) having the line run up and down instead of side to side, (b) putting the lower and less real sorts of things (and also the less perfect sorts of cognition) nearer to the bottom, and (c) making the line segments nearer to the bottom shorter than those nearer to the top.

## IX. The simile of the cave

- This simile combines the doctrines put forth in your reading so far to present an evocative picture of the human condition.
- This picture is bleak in many ways but not entirely negative.
- Liberation is held to be possible but only by means of (a) hard, painful, frustrating intellectual labour, and (b) a turning away from bodily appetites and material pursuits.

## X. Concluding observation

- Many of the ideas and images put forth in your reading for this week turned out to be extremely influential in the history of both Christian and Islamic thought. Think back on them if you take CVSP 202 and read such authors as Augustine, al-Ghazali, Ibn Tufayl, and Ibn Rushd. Each one of those authors might be said to adopt at least some elements of the ideas introduced in these parts of the *Republic*.

## Crucial passages

1. Socrates' description of the form of beauty or beauty itself. This can be found in a different work of Plato's called the *Symposium* (210e-211b, Hackett edition, 1989, tr. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff):

“Try to pay attention to me,” she [Diotima] said [to Socrates], “as best you can. You see, the man who has been thus far guided in matters of Love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is coming now to the goal of Loving: all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labors:

First, it always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change.”

See also *Republic* 490b:

Then shall we not fairly plead in reply that our true lover of knowledge naturally strives for reality, and will not rest content with each set of particulars which opinion takes for reality, but soars with undimmed and unwearied passion till he grasps the nature of each thing as it is, with the mental faculty fitted to do so, that is, with the faculty which is akin to reality, and which approaches and unites with it, and begets intelligence and truth as children, and is only released from travail when it has thus attained knowledge and true life and fulfilment?

2. Passage beginning at 476e of your reading and ending at 477b. This passage has to do with the distinction between knowledge, opinion and ignorance.

*Socrates:* And if the man who we say holds opinions but does not know is annoyed, and questions the truth of our statement, can we manage to soothe him and win him over gently, without letting him know the extent of his disease?

*Glaucon:* We certainly must.

*Socrates:* Let's think what to say to him. Shall we begin our inquiry by telling him that we don't in the least grudge him any knowledge he has, and are indeed delighted he knows anything; and then go on to ask him if he will answer this question: "Does a man who knows, know something or nothing?" You answer for him.

*Glaucon:* I shall answer that he knows something.

*Socrates:* Something which is, or which is not?

*Glaucon:* Something which is; how could he know something that was not?

*Socrates:* Then are we satisfied that, whichever way we look at it, what fully is is fully knowable, what in no way is is entirely unknowable?

*Glaucon:* Quite satisfied.

*Socrates:* Good. Then if there is anything whose condition is such that it both is and is not, would it not lie between what absolutely is and what altogether is not?

*Glaucon:* It would.

*Socrates:* Then since knowledge is related to what is, and ignorance, necessarily, to what is not, we shall have to find out whether to what lies between them there corresponds something between ignorance and knowledge, if there is such a thing.

*Glaucon:* Yes.

*Socrates:* Isn't there something we call opinion?

*Glaucon:* Of course.

3. Passage beginning at 479a. Socrates is here concerned to make clear the identity of (a) the things which entirely are, and (b) the things which lie between what absolutely is and what altogether is not.

*Socrates:* Having established these principles, I shall return to our friend who denies that there is any beauty in itself or any eternally unchanging form of beauty, that lover of sights, who loves visible beauty but cannot bear to be told that beauty is really one, and justice one, and so on – I shall return to him and ask him, "Is there any of these many beautiful objects of yours that may not also seem ugly? Or of your just and righteous acts that may not appear unjust and unrighteous?"

*Glaucon:* No, they are all bound to appear in a way both beautiful and ugly; and the same is true of the other things you mention.

*Socrates:* And what about the many things which are double something else? If they are double one thing can't they equally well be regarded as half something else?

*Glaucon:* Yes.

*Socrates:* And things which we say are large or small, light or heavy, may equally well be given the opposite epithet?

*Glaucon:* Yes, they may be given both.

*Socrates:* Then can we say that any of these things is, any more than it is not, what anyone says it is?

*Glaucon:* They are ambiguous like the puzzles people ask at parties... They have a similar ambiguity, and one can't think of them definitely either as being or as not-being, or as both, or as neither.

*Socrates:* Can you think of any better way to treat them, then, than place them between being and not-being?

They are not so dark as to be less real than what is not, or so luminously clear as to be more real than what is.

*Glaucon:* Precisely.

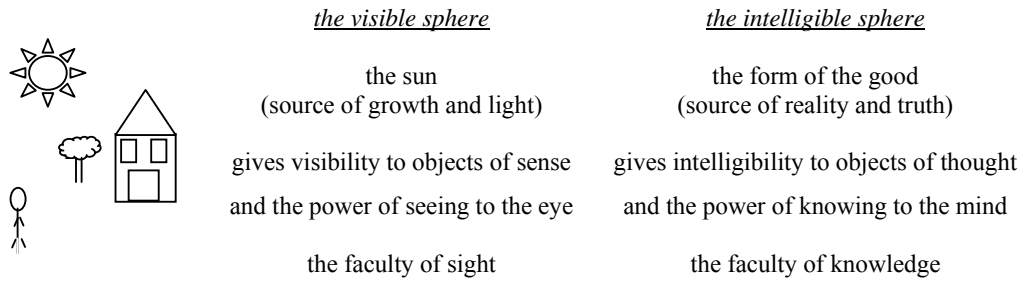
### Diagram I

<i>grade of cognition</i>	<i>what it relates to</i>
knowledge	what absolutely is
opinion	that which falls between what absolutely is and what altogether is not
ignorance	what altogether is not

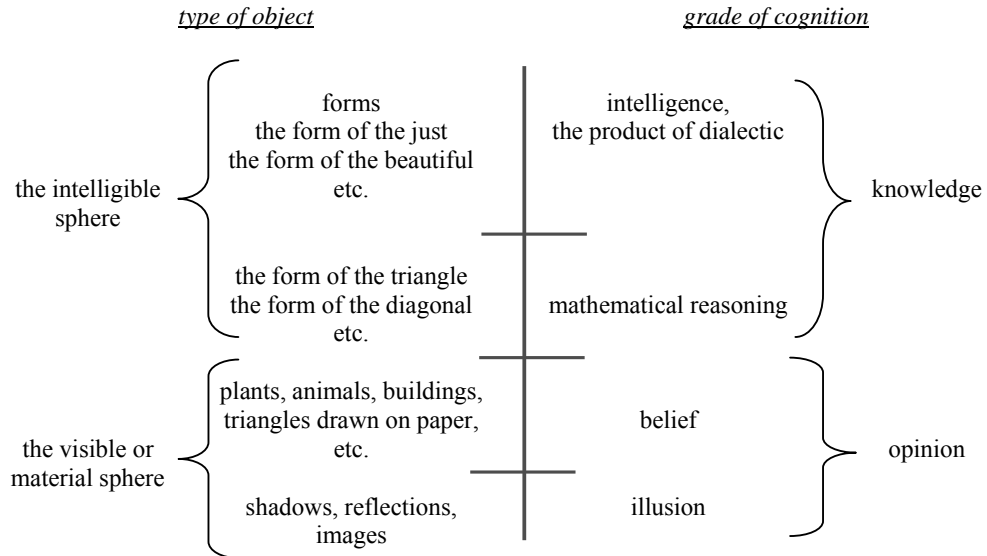
### Diagram II

<i>grade of cognition</i>	<i>what it relates to</i>	<i>identity of its object</i>
knowledge	what absolutely is	the forms
opinion	that which falls between what absolutely is and what altogether is not	visible or material things (buildings, paintings, molecules, social arrangements, etc.)
ignorance	what altogether is not	—

**Diagram III: Simile of the sun**



**Diagram IV: Simile of the divided line**



**Diagram V: Simile of the cave**

