

Philosophical Background: Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus
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I. Socrates (469-399 BCE)

- Socrates saw himself as a midwife to the ideas of others.

My art of midwifery is in most respects like theirs [midwives’]; but differs, in that I attend men and not women; and look after their souls when they are in labour, and not after their bodies. The triumph of my art is in thoroughly examining whether the thought which the mind of the young man brings forth is a false idol or a noble and true birth. And like the mid-wives, I am barren, and the reproach which is often made against me, that I ask questions of others and have not the wit to answer them myself, is very just—the reason is, that the god compels me to be a midwife, but does not allow me to bring forth. And therefore I am not myself at all wise, nor have I anything to show which is the invention or birth of my own soul. But those who converse with me profit.

[Theaetetus 149a-151d]

- In 399 BCE, Socrates was convicted and executed for corrupting Athens’ youth—specifically, for teaching them to believe in new spirits rather than the classical Greek gods recognized by the polis.
- In Socrates’ work and his death sentence we see that from the beginning philosophy was used to aid—or others might say, confuse—religious knowledge.

II. Plato (427-347 BCE)

- Like Socrates, Plato believed that if he could discover a definition of a property that explained all instances of that property, then he would know what that property is.
- But Plato was also influenced by the Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus who taught that “all sensible things are in a state of flux and that there is no such thing as knowledge of them.”
- Combining Socrates’ quest for knowledge with Heraclitus’ view that nothing in the sensible realm can be known, Plato developed the idea that objects of knowledge—forms—must exist in a realm of reality outside the sensible world.
- In his middle and later dialogues, Plato moved beyond Socrates thought, developing the theory of forms.
- The theory of forms is meant to explain how we can know things, like that an act is courageous or a clock round.
- Forms are properties themselves—for example, courageousness itself, roundness itself, or beautifulness itself.
- The theory of forms posited that two distinct levels of reality exist: 1) The level of ultimate reality: unchanging intelligible forms which exist outside of space and time; 2) and the level of apparent reality: changing sensible objects that exist within space and time.
- This is the view of reality suggested in the Simile of the Cave.
- Plato argued that sensible objects participated in the forms, taking on certain properties, but always imperfectly.
- A person is capable of recognizing and even defining these forms, Plato argued, because prior to her embodied life in the sensible realm, her soul inhabited the realm of ultimate reality, where it encountered the forms.

III. Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

- Aristotle rejected Plato's separation of the forms from sensible objects, arguing that ideas of properties are formed by generalizing from experiences of sensible things.
- For Aristotle, the sensible realm can be known. But if we want to know why a thing is the way it is, then we must explain the causes that brought that thing about.
- He posited that all sensible things can be explained in terms of four causes:
 - 1) Material cause: that out of which something is made
 - 2) Formal cause: What something is to be
 - 3) Efficient cause: The primary source of change for a thing
 - 4) Final cause: That for which the thing is made
- Aristotle also thought that our observations of sensible things can provide us with reasons to believe that a god must exist.

IV. Plotinus (204-270 CE)

- Plotinus is commonly referred to as the founder of Neoplatonism—a new variety of Platonism that took Plato's thought in directions that Plato never imagined. But Plotinus and his followers never used this label, and saw themselves simply as Platonists offering the best defense of Plato's teachings. As Plotinus put it:

“[W]hat we say represents no novelty, and was said not now, but long ago, though in inexplicit fashion. Our present exposition is merely an exegesis of what was then said, and relies for its proof of antiquity on the writings of Plato himself” (Enneads V.1.8).

- Plotinus developed a monistic view of reality, which posited that all being derives, or overflows, from a single source—which Plotinus called the One, or the Good.
- Like Plato in the Simile of the Cave, Plotinus took the Good as the primary source of all things. Unlike Plato, Plotinus argued that the One/Good must transcend Being. Since the intelligible realm of the forms is ultimate reality—that which truly is—Plotinus argued, the source of the intelligible realm must somehow “be no Being” since it generates being (the intelligible realm). If the One/Good simply existed like others forms, then it could not be the source of being.
- Plotinus' concept of the One is difficult to grasp. Indeed, Plotinus suggests that it is not thinkable. Nevertheless, it will go on to influence how some practitioners of Abrahamic religions think of God. Practitioners will use a similar account to explain why God, the creator of all things, cannot be like the things God creates. Some will even go so far as to argue that we can say nothing positive about God.