

Outline and critically assess Plato's distinction in 'The Republic'
between the 'visible' and the 'intelligible' realm.

In his dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, Plato details his concept of the ¹ 'divided line' stating "*take a line, cut into two unequal segments, one representing the visible, the other the intelligible,*" introducing his distinction between the visible and intelligible realms. This division underpins his broader epistemology, ² in which he separates opinion (*doxa*) from knowledge (*epistēmē*) due to their "*differing capacities.*" ³ The visible realm consists of objects accessible to sense perception, physical ones themselves as well as images such as shadows and reflections, corresponding to illusion. It is associated with 'ways' of understanding that Plato classes as ⁴ merely belief or opinion. ⁵ The intelligible realm includes objects grasped without using the senses, such as mathematical concepts, associated with reason, and at its highest level, the Forms, associated with intelligence and acquisition of true knowledge. This makes Plato's distinction hierarchical, with the latter given the weight of greater reality and epistemic authority, which this essay will use the Sun Analogy to further illustrate. This essay will also aim to assess the plausibility of such a rigid distinction.

It is important that we first understand the concept of Plato's 'divided line'. In it, he is not only concerned with epistemology and just distinguishing between types of knowledge but also presents metaphysical claims by ⁶ assigning degrees of reality. This is made clearer by

¹ Plato. 'Republic'. Trans by Rowe, C. 509d. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhcpRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false. (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26).

² Plato. 'Republic'. Trans by Rowe, C. 477a-477c. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhcpRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false. (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26).

("belief and knowledge are assigned to different things, according to their differing capacities.")

³ Plato. 'Republic'. Trans by Rowe, C. 509d-510a. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhcpRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false. (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26).

("The cuts represent differences in relative clarity and obscurity: thus the lower part of these being first of all shadows, then what appears to us on the surfaces...")

⁴ Plato. 'Republic'. Trans by Rowe, C. 479e. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhcpRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false. (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26).

("...all of it is a matter of believing [...] none of the things they believe do they know.")

⁵ Plato. 'Republic'. Trans by Rowe, C. 510b. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhcpRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false. (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26).

("...reaches a conclusion without using anything perceptible at all, only forms, themselves by themselves, to reach forms – and ends with forms.")

⁶ Plato. 'Republic'. Trans by Rowe, C. 511d-511e. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhcpRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false

Vlastos who argues too that the criteria Plato uses to distinguish knowledge from belief simultaneously determines what can be regarded as ‘real’. In this sense,⁷ *“the grounds on which sensible particulars are judged to be less real than their respective Forms coincide very largely... with those categorical features which disqualify them for serving as objects of a certain kind of knowledge”*. Therefore, the line not only depicts psychological states of intelligence, reasoning, belief and illusion, but also levels of being, with the intelligible realm accorded a⁸ superior ontological status as it *alone* satisfies the conditions required for knowledge. The particulars are assigned a lower degree of reality because they fail to meet the epistemic security held by that in the forms, since for Plato,⁹ they are necessary statements deriving from the intrinsic nature of their objects making them undoubtedly real. Vlastos supports this when he notes that¹⁰ *“any statements we make about a sensible instance... would be fallible... the sensible instance does not admit of such necessary connection with its predicates”*. This is because they are subject to change, making them merely the objects of belief or opinion and contained to the visible realm. So, it is clear that Plato is not merely distinguishing between two regions but constructing a hierarchy in reality.

However, this move from epistemology to ontology is arguably problematic. Plato attempts a smooth transition from the predicate that ‘because the particulars are less knowable’ to a conclusion that ‘they are less real.’ Yet, it is questionable whether the fallibility of our knowledge *about* physical objects adequately makes a deficiency *in* their being, and as a source of knowledge, necessarily true. It is possible that this more simply just reflects the limitations of human cognition, but Plato makes a leap from epistemic limitation to complete ontological insufficiency. Therefore, it is logical to take the position that Plato’s rigid hierarchy within the divided line, conflates the fact that we are epistemically limited in our access to the world, with the physical properties within and features of the world itself. It can

[7+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhcpRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false). (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26).

(“Do please take me as assigning these four states of mind to the four segments of the line [...] And arrange them in proportion to their clarity [...] as corresponding to the degree that the things are assigned to share in truth.”)

⁷ Vlastos. (1965). ‘Degrees of Reality in Plato’. R. Bambrough. ‘New Essays on Plato and Aristotle’. Section III. Page 17. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203101667-1/degrees-reality-plato-gregory-vlastos>. Accessed by download 13/05/26.

⁸ Plato. ‘Republic’. Trans by Rowe, C. 509b. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhcpRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false. (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26).

(“the good is not itself being, but is even beyond being, superior to it in dignity and in power.”)

⁹ Plato. ‘Republic’. Trans by Rowe, C. 511b. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhcpRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false. (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26).

(“...the other part of the intelligible segment of the line represents what reason itself grasps through the power of dialectic, treating its hypotheses not as first principles [...] like underpinnings [...] in order to pass beyond the hypothetical to the first principle of everything.”)

¹⁰ Vlastos. (1965). ‘Degrees of Reality in Plato’. R. Bambrough. ‘New Essays on Plato and Aristotle’. Section II. Page 13. Available at: <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203101667-1/degrees-reality-plato-gregory-vlastos>. Accessed by download 13/05/26.

appear that whilst Vlastos' interpretation does well in highlighting the *structural* coherence of Plato's system, he seems to present a possible logical inconsistency of assuming that degrees of certainty correspond directly to degrees of reality. Therefore, the plausibility of Plato's divided line and separation of an 'intelligible' and 'visible' realm, is dubious as it is not entirely adequate to say that cognitive certainty can successfully act as a measure of reality, or to so rigidly compartmentalise knowledge from perception. This position would be supported by ¹¹ Aristotle: "*For it is sense-perception alone which is adequate for grasping the particulars: they cannot be objects of scientific knowledge, because neither can universals give us knowledge of them without induction, nor can we get it through induction without sense-perception.*" In practice, knowledge depends upon the input of the senses, as seen through most reasoned methods, like in science which uses multiple investigative processes but still always allows for perception and the senses to contribute. Notably, if we were to accept Plato's distinction between the realms, one could argue we must nearly dismiss the entire discipline of philosophy, as it endeavours into the ways of humans which can only be understood through experience, and yet this ranks as illusory and not truly informative for Plato. In a way, he contradicts himself by making such a rigid distinction surrounding valuable knowledge, as he is a philosopher who inevitably was using sense, perception and experience as the starting point of all his formed thoughts on human beings and how they understand things i.e. when he says that the majority of people are ¹² 'mindless' he can only make this claim through observation.

Although, Plato *does* give an analogy of the Sun, for an explanation of why the intelligible realm *must* be ranked higher than the visible, inquiring: ¹³ "*while the sun is not sight, is it not seen by it – the very thing, it is cause of? [...] when turned to things lit by the sun, they see clearly...*" In the same way the Sun makes sight possible by illuminating objects in the visible world, the Form of the Good makes knowledge available by illuminating the objects of thought in the intelligible realm. While the Sun is not the *same* as sight, it is an enabler of sight, likewise, the Good is not the same as knowledge but is the source of intelligence and truth. Since this is the case, Plato deemed it valid to distinguish between the realms and to give them order, as the intelligible realm contains the unchanging objects, and since the objects of the physical world are subject to relativity, they can only be considered as opinion,

¹¹ Aristotle. 'Posterior Analytics'. Trans by G.R.G Mure. (1928). Chapter 18. Available at: <https://earlhaig.ca/departments/socialscience/downloads/Mr.%20Wittmann/2019-2020%20H2T4U1%20Handouts/H2T4U1%20Extra%20Readings/Aristotle,%20Posterior%20Analytics.pdf>. Accessed 15/05/26.

¹² Plato. 'Republic'. Trans by Rowe, C. 515c. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhpcRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false. (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26). ("*...released from their chains and cured of their mindlessness...*")

¹³ Plato. 'Republic'. Trans by Rowe, C. 508b-508c. Penguin Classics. (2012). Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=RgLhpcRKC7MC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=%27Republic%27+translated+by+Christopher+Rowe&ots=UegtCYPMfu&sig=U0CTMh_C2Z9O4wnyTwuL-NuZV2k#v=onepage&q&f=false. (Accessed physical copy 13/05/26).

and thus it is legitimate to rank them below. But, is this analogy enough to make his entire distinction plausible? Most obviously, it could be argued that this is a very weak, and to be most critical, contradictory comparison. The sun is a physical object, and functions causally, whilst the Form of the Good is an abstract principle. Ironically, despite looking down on physical objects as examples of providing knowledge, he uses one to make a metaphysical claim. Plato regards the roles of both things as equivalent in their configuration, yet if one were to be as critical of the physical objects and particulars as he is, and hierarchical about forms of knowledge, we could argue that it is illogical to choose a causal process of physical illumination to compare with intelligibility, which *must* be explained using sensory terminology and not causal. Therefore, it appears fair to argue against Plato's distinction, as well as his justification for it, by saying that seeing is not analogous to knowing, the same way in which illuminating something to make it visible is not equal to an abstract form of 'goodness' making knowledge accessible or understandable. Therefore, not only does Plato oversimplify knowledge as something paralleled by perception, but he also contradicts himself by using a comparison of it with something we know of *due* to sense-perception. This train of thought would be supported by ¹⁴ Ryle and his idea of a 'category mistake,' occurring when something belonging to one logical type is treated as if it belongs to another. This he illustrates with the example of a visitor shown a "*number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices*" who then asks, "*But where is the University?*" The mistake was that he allocated the University to the same category as that to which the other institutions belong, when rather the University was not a counterpart institution to what he had been shown, the University was just the way in which all that he had already seen was organised. Plato moves along a similar train of thought as the 'visitor' and arguably makes his own 'category mistake' by misusing explanatory categories. Plato takes the physical *process* of vision and likens it to the intellectual *act* of knowing, conflating a causal process with a conceptual activity as though their explanation is structurally the same. Therefore, presenting knowledge as something that can be "produced" (as sight is produced by light), makes the analogy *logically* confusing. Ultimately, transferring a physical explanatory model into an equal justification for a conceptual and abstract domain, weakens the plausibility of Plato's distinction between the 'intelligible' and 'visible' realm significantly.

To conclude, Plato's distinction between the 'intelligible' and 'visible' realms, presents a compelling framework for differentiating between genuine knowledge and mere opinion. It also very intriguingly distinguishes reality from simple appearance. The way in which he seeks to do this is commendable as he was applying a method of rationale to something which we should indeed understand separately to some regard as to not be foolish or mislead. However, it is built upon from an assumption about the existence of 'forms' and undermines the epistemic role of sensory experience, utilising analogies to justify it that are arguably categorically mistaken.

¹⁴ Ryle, G. (1949). 'The Concept of Mind'. Chapter I. Page 16. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/conceptofmind00ryle/page/16/mode/2up?>. Accessed 15/05/26.

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