

U3A Philosophy Group, July 2025 report by Christine Price

The topic was Plato's Theory of Forms.

Plato described the world as consisting of two realms: firstly the material world, a world of appearances which is changeable and therefore unreliable, and secondly, a realm of permanence and reliability which he called the world of Forms (or Ideas).

Using 'chair' and 'beauty' as examples, there are multiple examples of chairs that exist in our material world and in our imaginations. These chairs all share the characteristics of 'chairness' and are said to *participate* in the Form or Idea of 'chair' but none are able to fully replicate the perfect, unchanging Form which exists as an abstract concept that most people are unable to perceive.

We can perceive beautiful things such as flowers, paintings etc. which are said to participate in the Forms of flowers and paintings respectively, but also both participate in the Form of Beauty which is a concept that cannot be perceived by the senses.

Plato argues that only those trained to reach to highest abilities of thought and reason, and recall innate knowledge (Philosophers) could perceive the Forms and be fit to be rulers.

Although Aristotle (and indeed Plato himself) found weaknesses in the Theory of Forms, aspects of it are found in the work of later philosophers such as Descartes and Kant who argued that certain knowledge was present at birth (innate), rather than learnt from experience.

Empiricist philosophers such as Locke and Hume, however, found that all knowledge was gained from the evidence of the senses and experience - the basis for scientific enquiry.

After some interesting discussion, we ended by considering whether Plato's theory had any relevance for today, for example in how we relate to what we think is the 'reality' of things such as news reports.

The next philosophy group meeting will be on Tuesday 26th August at 10am at Enterprise House, during which Pete Redgrave will conclude our discussion on Consciousness, including How would we know how to exclude AI?

The following month we will meet on Tuesday 23rd September at which Clare Tuddenham will lead a discussion on Wisdom.