A2 Religious Studies.



Plato and the Analogy of the Cave.

Plato (c. 428 – 347BCE) was a pupil of Socrates in the city of Athens in Ancient Greece. Plato was 29 when Socrates drank hemlock. The fact that Athens could sentence its most noble citizen to death had a profound affect on Plato. It influenced his thinking and his entire philosophical career.

In ‘Sophie’s World’, (Jostein Gaarder) Plato is introduced to Sophie by asking her four questions to think about;

* ‘How can a baker make fifty identical cookies?’
* ‘Why are all horses the same?’
* Does man have an immortal soul?’
* Are men and women equally sensible?’

Reflect…

Sophie is able to think of possible answers to the first two questions quite easily. Write down the first two questions and how you think they could be answered. Explain how your answers might be argued against.

More about Plato.



Plato set up his own school of philosophy in Athens. He named it after the Greek hero Academus. The school was therefore called an academy. (This is where we get our modern use of the word academic from). The subjects taught were philosophy, maths and gymnastics. Lessons were rarely taught in the sense we know today, but took the form of discussions. This is why Plato’s writings took the form of dialogues.

Plato was mostly concerned with what was immutable (unchangeable) and with what ‘flows’, and with the relationship between them. For example, previous to Plato and Socrates philosophers thought that perceptions of right and wrong changed from city to city and from one generation to the next. Therefore right and wrong varied – they were something that ‘flowed’. Plato’s teacher, Socrates, believed this was wrong. He believed in the existence of eternal and absolute rules for what was right and wrong. By using our common sense we can all arrive at these immutable norms.

Task one.

1. Add *immutable* to your key terms sheet with an appropriate definition.
2. Draw up two lists, one of what you consider to be absolute rights and wrongs and another list of rights and wrongs, which you consider may vary.

**Sophie’s answers:**

**Does man have an immortal soul?**

**Sophie felt quite unqualified to answer this question. All she knew was that dead bodies were either buried or cremated. So there was no future for them. If man had an immortal soul then one would have to believe that a person consisted of two separate parts: a body that gets worn out – and a soul that operates more or less independently of what happens to the body.**

**‘Why are all horses the same?’**

**Sophie thought no two horses were the same, just as no two people were the same. Then she remembered what she had thought about the cookies. None of them was exactly like the others, some were a bit thicker than some others were broken. But still you could see that they were - in a way – the same.**

**What Plato was really asking was perhaps why a horse was a horse not for example a cross between a pig and a horse. Even though some horses were white and others black, they all had something in common.**

**‘How can a baker make fifty identical cookies?’**

**Whenever her mum baked cookies, they were never all exactly the same. But then she was not an expert pastry cook. Even the cookies from the baker’s were never exactly the same. Every single cookie was shaped separately in the baker’s hands. Then she remembered seeing gingerbread men spread out on the kitchen table. Even though they weren’t all perfect, in a way they were all the same because they had been made using a mould.**

**Are men and women equally sensible?**

**This question depended on what Plato meant by sensible. Socrates had pointed out to her earlier that everyone could understand philosophical truths if they used their common sense. He had pointed out that a slave had just as much common sense as a nobleman so she was sure that Socrates would think that men and women could be equally sensible.**

The World of Ideas.

Plato believed that everything *tangible* in nature flows. So there are no substances that do not change. Plato suggested that absolutely everything that belongs to the ‘material world’ is made of a material that time can erode. However he also said that everything is made of a timeless ‘mould’ or ‘form’ that is eternal or immutable.

To explain this in another way, let’s go back to the question – ‘why are all horses the same?’

An individual horse ‘flows’, naturally. It might grow old and lame and in time it will die. But the form of the species, horse, is eternal and immutable.



To Plato, that which is immutable and eternal is therefore not a physical substance. His idea was of eternal and unchanging patterns, spiritual and abstract in their nature. Plato concluded that there were a limited number of ‘forms’ *behind* everything we see around us. He called these forms *ideas.* Behind every horse there is an *idea horse,* behind every human there is an *idea human.*

The gingerbread cookie question can help us out here.

All the cookies look the same but one might have an arm missing, one might be over-cooked a little. Despite this, however, you would suspect that they have a common origin. You would realize that they were all made with the same mould. Every bakery has more than one type of mould, so the mould for making gingerbread men would be different from that for making jam tarts. Just as the mould or *idea* for horses is different to the mould or *idea* for making humans.



Plato came to the conclusion that there must be a reality behind the ‘material world’. He called this reality *the world of ideas*. It contained the eternal and immutable ‘patterns’ behind the things we come across in nature. This view is known as Plato’s *theory of ideas.*

Things to do…

1. Add the word *tangible* to your key word sheet with a definition.
2. Explain how a rock can both ‘flow’ and also be immutable.
3. Explain in your own words Plato’s theory of ideas.