

Plato's (428–348 BC) Forms

Plato's theory of forms is perhaps a little difficult to get a handle on. In order to make his point he offered his "allegory of the cave" to indicate how sensory impressions were illusory and that there was a greater truth behind such impressions (Hergenhahn, 2001). The role of the philosopher is to go beyond the world of sense information, to discover what is true and permanent. The world as sensed is but an imperfect expression of the underlying form. According to Plato an individual lives life according to the information provided by sensory experience instead of with the true reality beyond sensory experience.

Imagine, he suggested, prisoners who have lived their whole life in a cave. They are chained, facing the cave wall while behind people outside the cave pass by on a road. A fire outside causes the passersby to cast shadows onto the interior, cave wall. The bound prisoners take the shadows to be what is real (appearance), unaware of the people outside (reality). Now imagine that a prisoner escapes and enters the world of light and sees the real cause of the shadows. The escaped prisoner—the knowing philosopher (escaped from sensory impression)—embraces true knowledge, the forms which cast the shadow.

Hergenhahn, B. R. (2001). *An introduction to the history of psychology* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

By way of further analogy, consider the impressions left in iron filings of a magnetic field. The magnetic field, which is not part of immediate sensory experience, is rather like a form that manifests imperfectly in the pattern produced. For images see:
www.evilmadscientist.com/2010/start-seeing-magnetic-fields/