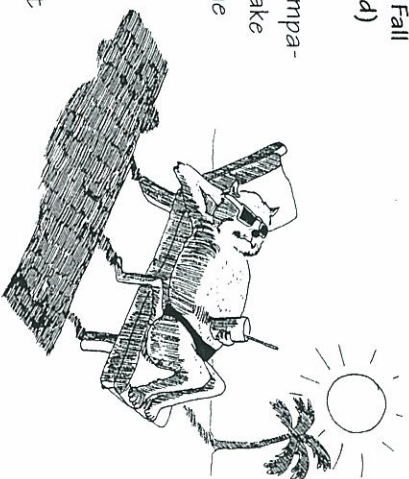




Trees and Cats Grow Old—Books Fall Apart (The Center Does Not Hold)

would be no trees, books, or cats and no images of them either.) And as we will see shortly, sensible objects are also dependent on the Forms.

Back to the left side of the line. If the object of your awareness is a sensible object, you are in a state of belief. Imagine seeing an animal in a field and asking a local farmer what the creature is. He says, "It's a horse." You ask him how he



Cats and Shadows Are Dependent on the Sun

knows it's a horse, and he says (impatiently, no doubt), "It's a horsel! Take a look. A horse is a horse!" OK. The farmer believes it's a horse (belief); it is a horse (truth); so why does Plato say that the farmer doesn't know it's a horse? Because the farmer hasn't given the Logos. What would that be like? Well, perhaps something like this: you ask the farmer:



This man knows. He was able to grasp the objects of individual perception at a higher level—the conceptual level. (There are lots of problems here, of course, including the problem of *elitism*. On this account, of all the millions of people who have dealt with horses, only a select few have actually known what one is—and Plato wasn't one of them! Furthermore, it's hard to see how you could know what a horse is without performing a biopsy and understanding biology and chemistry. Indeed, it's beginning to look as though one would have to know *everything* in order to know *anything*. Some interpreters believe that this dilemma is exactly what Plato had in mind. It would at least make sense of Socrates' claim to be ignorant.)

Concepts

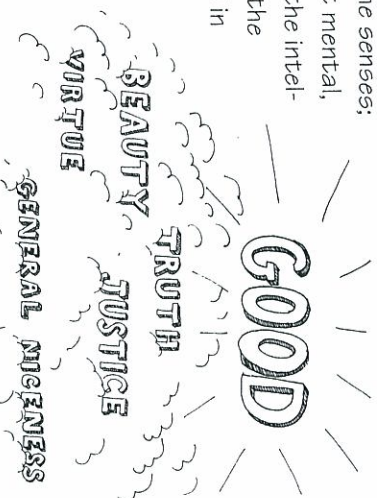
So we've seen that one leaves belief for understanding (and thereby opinion for knowledge) by grasping the perception at the conceptual level, that is, by subsuming the particular under the general. In doing so one leaves behind Heraclitus's world of flux and enters into "the intelligible realm," a world of Parmenidean permanence. One elevates objects from the constantly changing physical world and stabilizes them by placing them in the context of Logos, of a *theory* or a *science*. Let's illustrate these levels. Imagine three different episodes: (1) Your pen rolls from the desk and falls to the floor; (2) a meteorite falls into the earth's atmosphere, splashing silver sparks into the night sky; (3) in the sixth round of a heavyweight boxing match, the champion receives a body-jolting uppercut on the chin and falls to the canvas like a load of bricks. In each of these cases, the imagery would be described very differently (this is the level of perception), but to understand the three events, we would need a *theory*; the very theory later discovered by Sir Isaac Newton: given any two masses, these masses mutually attract each other in direct proportion to their mass and in indirect proportion to their distance. This is knowledge. But apparently for Plato it is not the highest kind of knowledge. There is still pure reason to be dealt with.



Gravity at Work

Forms

According to Plato, the concepts with which we have been dealing here (horse, gravity) are not mere abstractions from concrete cases. These concepts are *images* of higher truths, and he called these higher truths the **Forms**. These Forms are the archetypes of everything existing in the visible world. They exist outside time and space. They are not physical, but they aren't mental either. That is, they don't just exist as ideas in people's minds. Because they are not physical, they cannot be grasped by the senses; and even though they are not mental, they can be grasped only by the intellect, which has transcended the senses. These Forms are real in the sense that they are uncreated, indestructible, unchanging, and therefore eternal. Notice that they are not *absolutely* real because they are still dependent—upon something Plato calls “the Good”—

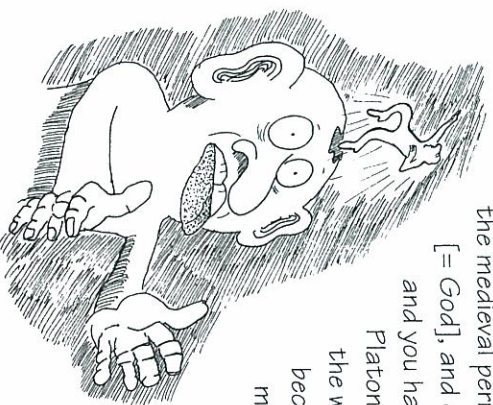


The Heaven of Forms

dependent in the same way that sensible things are dependent upon the sun. The Good seems to be a kind of Super-Form, the Form of all Forms, which is an absolute value that grounds all reality and bestows worth on it, very much the way God would later do in the ontology of the medieval period. (Drop one letter; “o,” from “Good”

[= God], and change the “u” in “Sun” to “o” [= Son], and you have a crude version of medieval Christian Platonism.) It is the Good that is the center of the whole Platonic system. The center holds because the Good holds. It has a kind of Parmidean permanence. If it did not hold we would be plunged into a world of Heraclitian flux.

Now how can the mind grasp the Forms? Only by *totally* transcending the senses, which are somehow committed to the world of Becoming, hence naturally hostile to the world of Being. Concepts, though definitely



Transcending the Five Senses

part of the intelligible sphere, are still image-bound and hence, somehow, still contaminated. (Notice the anti-body bias that enters into Western philosophy here with Plato. It is very uncharacteristic of the Greeks, whose social practices, art, and even religion showed no signs of disdain for the body.) Earlier, when you were presented with Newton's definition of gravity ("Given any two masses . . ."), you saw two masses in your mind's eye. However, the mind grasps the Form and not merely the concept when it frees itself from that visual imagery. This it does by mathematizing its object. It is as if, for person P, the move from the definition ("Given any two masses . . .") to the formula

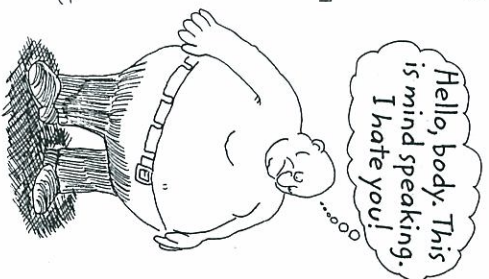
$$(F = \frac{Gm_1m_2}{d^2})$$

liberates the truth from the flux of the world, and to grasp the ultimate intelligible order of the universe is to grasp it purely formally, i.e., mathematically. If this interpretation of Plato is correct (and there certainly are other interpretations), then Plato believed that there existed not only a correct formula for Horse and Gravity, but for Love and Beauty as well.

Many of us today are prepared to grant the former, but we resist the latter: We point to the notorious relativity in the aesthetic taste of different individuals and cultures to refute Plato. (Parisians and Ubangis do not agree as to what beauty is.) But for Plato, if both the Parisian fashion model and the Ubangi princess are truly beautiful, a common denominator must exist. Perhaps it has to do with a mathematical account of "order" involving grace, balance, and **eros**. Perhaps someday Beauty's Sir Isaac Newton will come along and finish this equation: "B = . . ."

Finally, concerning Plato, let's ask about the process of learning in his theory. The dialogue that deals with this process is the *Meno*. In it, Meno and Socrates have been discussing "virtue" and whether it can be taught. Socrates has forced Meno to admit that he doesn't know what virtue is, hence that he doesn't know whether it can be taught. (That is, Socrates has brought the dialogue to the end of the "second phase" referred to in Chapter 1.) Both Socrates and Meno admit that they are ignorant, and Socrates says that he is willing to pursue the issue seriously if Meno is willing. Here Meno states what has come to be called

Meno's paradox:



MENO: And how will you try to find out something, Socrates, when you have no notion at all what it is? Will you lay out before us a thing you don't know, and then try to find it? Or, if at best you meet it by chance, how will you know this is that which you did not know?

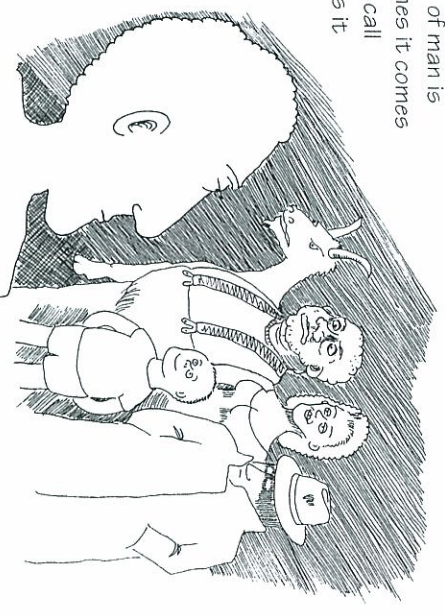
SOCRATES: I understand what you wish to say, Meno. . . . as if a man cannot try to find either what he knows or what he does not know. Of course, he would never try to find what he knows because he knows it and in that case he needs no trying to find or what he does not know because he does not know what he will try to find.

MENO: Then don't you think that is a good argument, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Not I.³

In the dialogue, Socrates seems not to take Meno's paradox very seriously. This (false) impression is fortified by the fact that Socrates responds to Meno not with a philosophical argument but with a story he had heard from priests and poets:

They say that the soul of man is immortal, and sometimes it comes to an end—which they call death—and sometimes it is born again, but it is never destroyed. . . . Then, since the soul is immortal and often born, having seen what is on earth and what is in the house of Hades, and everything, there is nothing it has not learnt; so there is no wonder about virtue and other things, because it knew about these before. (p. 42)

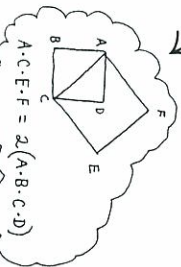


How Do You Recognize the Truth
When You See It?

But the seriousness with which Socrates takes both Meno's paradox and the poetic rejoinder to it is seen in the episode that occurs immediately after in the dialogue. Meno and Socrates are strolling in a garden, and they come across the gardener, an untutored slave boy. Socrates asks the boy to solve a fairly complicated geometrical problem—that of doubling the square. The boy objects that he hasn't studied mathematics, but Socrates, undeterred, begins to ask him a series of questions: Should we solve the problem by using arcs or straight lines? (Try straight lines.) Should we put the straight lines inside or outside the square? (First

outside, then, when that fails, inside.) After a long series of questions that the boy can answer with a “yes” or a “no,” the boy eventually produces the correct answer—a diagram like this:

So, according to Socrates, the unschooled slave boy was able to answer a difficult mathematical question without being given any information he did not already possess. You and I may feel that Socrates’ method in this case involved some intellectual sleight of hand. Plato’s conclusion, though, is that the slave boy already knew the answer to the question, but he did not know that he knew it. The truth, according to Plato, existed in the slave boy’s soul. It was a piece of unconscious knowledge, knowledge based on an **innate idea**, that is, an idea present at birth in the soul of the individual. Plato’s view may have been that all true knowledge is an expression of a version of the principle of identity ($A = A$), and because this principle cannot be learned through observation (i.e., because it is a priori), it must be an innate idea—an idea with which we are all born. However, there is some debate about whether this is the correct definition of Plato’s view. At any rate, for Plato, all learning is truly remembering, and it answers “Meno’s paradox” (how will we recognize something we don’t know?) by saying that in fact we do know what we don’t know, and recognition is recollection. So, Plato, like Freud and Proust (author of the seven-volume novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*) takes



The Slave Boy Knows More Than He Knows That He Knows

we recognize something we don’t know? by saying that in fact we do know what we don’t

W A A A H
 $V = h \text{ cm}^3$
 $D = w/v$
 $P = h d$
 $KE = \frac{1}{2} m v^2$
 $F = m r \omega^2$



know, and recognition is recollection. So, Plato, like Freud and Proust (author of the seven-volume novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*) takes

the phenomenon of memory absolutely seriously and makes it a central feature of his theory of knowledge.

Let's review some of the key features of Plato's epistemology. To know is to transcend the ever-changing flux of the physical world and to grasp a permanent rational order behind the flux, an order that will demonstrate the universal in the particular. This "grasping" is an intellectual act of the mind, which, in its purest manifestation, is exclusively formal (i.e., mathematical). Such an intellectual act can only take place if there are certain innate ideas upon which it can be based. Knowing, then, is an act of making the observable world intelligible by showing how it is related to an eternal order of intelligible truths. These features of Plato's epistemology are part of the program of rationalism, one of the two key epistemological poles in Western thought.

Platonic rationalism was immediately countered by the philosophy of Plato's student, Aristotle, which moved toward what would eventually become empiricism (to be discussed in Chapter 3). Yet rationalism managed to dominate later Greek and Roman philosophy and all of the early Middle Ages, only to be countered once again by a revival of Aristotelianism in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century.

René Descartes's Rationalism

Rationalism may have achieved its fullest maturity in the seventeenth century in the work of RENÉ DESCARTES (1596–1650). We will inspect his version of rationalism before looking at rationalism's alternatives.

Theories of knowledge are never created in a vacuum. There are always psychological, economic, social, and political conditions behind them, acting as motives for them. In a certain sense each epistemology, rather than describing and accounting for some autonomous thing called "knowledge," perhaps actually creates and validates its own "knowledge," which is circumscribed and limited by the intellectual, economic, social, and political forces that motivated the epistemology in the first place. The external circumstances that motivated Plato were very different from those that motivated Descartes.



René Descartes (1596–1650)