

1 Ancient philosophical influences

1.1 Introduction

Any history of western philosophical thought inevitably starts with ancient Greek philosophy. The three great philosophers of this period around 400–500 years before Jesus were Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The first of these wrote nothing of his own, but his ideas and character were preserved in the writings of his follower, Plato. Plato became a prolific writer and thinker in his own right and Aristotle in turn was one of his students.

- Plato and Aristotle are different in a number of key respects. Plato relied on reason and believed that the most important aspect of reality lay beyond this world. Aristotle relied on empirical knowledge and believed that the most important thing to do was to gain understanding of this world. They can be categorised as **rationalist** and **empiricist**, respectively.
- What they agree on is the importance of philosophical thought and **reason** as a means of gaining truth. This separates them from Christian thinkers who believe that truth comes through revelation.
- Both thinkers have been influential in shaping the views of Christians and others on various topics.

The specification says

Topic	Content	Key knowledge
Ancient philosophical influences	The philosophical views of Plato, in relation to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● understanding of reality● the Forms● the analogy of the cave	Plato's reliance on reason as opposed to the senses <ul style="list-style-type: none">● the nature of the Forms; hierarchy of the Forms● details of the analogy, its purpose and relation to the theory of the Forms
	The philosophical views of Aristotle, in relation to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● understanding of reality● the four causes● the Prime Mover	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Aristotle's use of teleology● material, formal, efficient and final causes● the nature of Aristotle's Prime Mover and connections between this and the final cause
	Learners should have the opportunity to discuss issues related to the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">● comparison and evaluation of Plato's Form of the Good and Aristotle's Prime Mover● comparison and evaluation of Plato's reliance on reason (rationalism) and Aristotle's use of the senses (empiricism) in their attempts to make sense of reality.	

Making links

Plato and Aristotle's philosophical method can be contrasted with those for whom faith based on revelation is a better means of reaching truth (see the Developments in Christian Thought book, Chapter 3).

1.2 The philosophical views of Plato: Plato's understanding of reality

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Plato believed that there was a greater reality beyond the world we experience. He believed that **a priori** reasoning was the key to unlocking this reality. His most famous illustration of these views is his analogy of the cave.

Key word

A priori Knowledge which is not dependent on experience, can be known 'prior' to experience, e.g. triangles have three sides

Typical mistake

It is important not to spend too much time retelling the story of the cave; marks are awarded for understanding and assessment of the philosophical ideas involved.

The story of the cave

The analogy of the cave plays a key role in Plato's philosophy. He uses it to sum up his key philosophical ideas. In the story he asks us to imagine that a group of prisoners are chained in an underground cave. They have been there since birth and are chained by their neck and ankles. They can only see the shadows projected on the wall by a fire. They believe that the shadows are all that exists. If one day a prisoner were released and were to venture outside the cave, once his sight adjusted he would realise that it was the outside world that was real and that the cave itself was just a shadow world. If the prisoner were to return and attempt to pass on his new knowledge, Plato argues that he would not be believed and the other prisoners might even threaten to kill him.

The features of the story explained

Plato's story is allegorical and each of the features in the story has a symbolic meaning. This is summarised in the table below.

Aspect of story	The meaning
The prisoners	Ordinary people in our world
The cave	The empirical world that we see and hear around us
The chains	The senses that restrict the way we experience things
The shadows	Our everyday sense experiences
The escapee	The philosopher who is able to access knowledge
The difficult ascent	An illustration that the road to philosophical knowledge is hard
The outside world	The real world, the world of the Forms
The sun	The highest of all the Forms, the Form of the Good
The return to the cave	The philosopher once enlightened feels it is his duty to free and educate the others
The difficulty in adjusting to the darkness	Once a philosopher knows the truth, it is difficult to experience things as the ordinary person does
The persecution given by the other prisoners	Like Socrates, who was executed by the leaders in Athens, the philosopher will be ridiculed and threatened

Going further

Plato's allegory of the cave is in his book *The Republic*. The electronic version is freely available and fairly readable. Section 514–521 gives the story of the cave.

The key messages of the cave

Plato's main overall conclusions can be summarised as follows.

- **Metaphysics. What is real?** Plato's view on metaphysics is that this world is not real and that the real world is an unchanging world of Forms.
- **Epistemology. How do we gain knowledge?** Plato's view is that knowledge is through the mind (a priori) not the senses (a posteriori). The senses only provide opinions and shadows.
- **Politics. Who should rule?** The philosopher is the only one who has knowledge and, thus, philosophers should rule. Democracy puts power into the hands of the majority who lack knowledge, the cave dwellers in the story.
- **Ethics. What is good?** It is the philosopher who is able to see and understand the good; they know what goodness is.

Key words

Metaphysics The branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of reality

Epistemology The branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge

A posteriori Knowledge which is dependent on sense experience, can only be known after sense experience

Now test yourself

TESTED

- 1 What is represented by the outside world in the story of the cave?
- 2 Why should the philosophers rule according to Plato?

Assessing Plato's ideas on the cave

Plato's analogy of the cave raises a number of issues.

- It is not clear why it is important for the philosophers to rule if this is only a shadow world.
- Plato may be right to suggest that our senses are not always reliable; however, the information we get through our senses is not unimportant; we need this to survive.
- Plato does not offer proof of the existence of another realm and he is unclear how the two worlds relate to each other.
- He is guilty of elitism. The philosopher is not completely different to the ordinary person. While he may be correct to say there are differences in knowledge, these are differences in degree of knowledge. Having two groups of people – those who know and those who are ignorant – is too simplistic.

In addition to the comments above, it is worth looking at the assessment of Plato's Forms (page 5) and the discussion of Plato and Aristotle's method (page 10) as these are both relevant to the conclusions that Plato tries to argue in the cave analogy.

1.3 Plato's Forms

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In the analogy of the cave, Plato has argued that the objects in our world are merely shadows of real objects; the philosopher is able to 'leave the cave' and understand the **Forms** – the true objects – in the real world.

Understanding the Forms

To understand why Plato believes that there are Forms, consider the difference between our world and the mathematical world. In our world, everything is in a process of change: people grow old and die, trees grow and shed leaves, water continually flows. Yet mathematical truths do not change: triangles always have three sides, $2 + 2$ will always be 4. Plato believes that there is a similar unchanging truth about every type of object or quality.

For example, if we were to examine lots of different chairs, we would see that despite their differences, there is something that they have in common. Likewise, to use one of Plato's own examples, there may be many beautiful things, and there is one thing that they have in common, this is the Form or idea of beauty.

Key point

Plato states that these ideas which we recognise but can't easily define do actually exist. They are ideas but, according to Plato, are more real than any physical objects. They are invisible and intangible; they are known to the mind.

Key words

Forms The name Plato gives to ideal concepts that exist in reality

Particulars The name Plato gives to the objects in the empirical world which are merely imperfect copies of the Form

Forms and their Particulars

In contrast to the Form, there are many different objects in our world which may to some extent participate in the Form. These objects, which are imperfect imitations of the Form, are called **Particulars**; they may to a greater or lesser extent have the quality of beauty, to use Plato's example, but none of them is beauty itself.

The world of the Forms (the real world)	The world of Particulars (our world/the cave)
Each Form is one single thing (there is one idea of perfect beauty)	There are many Particulars (many beautiful things)
They are known by the intellect or reason	They are known through empirical senses
They are eternal	They pass in and out of existence
They are immutable (unchanging)	They are constantly changing
They are non-physical	They are physical
They are perfect	They are imperfect

The Form of the Good

The Form of the Good is the ultimate Form according to Plato. Just as a Form is what all the Particulars have in common (all cats share in the Form of the Cat) so too in a sense the 'Good' is what the Forms have in common. The perfection of the Forms comes from the Form of the Good. In the allegory of the cave, the Good is represented by the sun in the outside world. Just as the sun gives light to the real world, so the Form of the Good illuminates the other Forms:

- It is the reason why the Forms are good.
- It enables us to 'see' the Forms.
- It is the ultimate end in itself.

Now test yourself

- 3 Which of the Forms is the ultimate Form?

TESTED

1.4 Assessing Plato on the Forms

REVISED

Plato's arguments for the Forms

- **The one over many argument.** When we observe different Particulars, for example, chairs, cats or beautiful things, we are able to recognise that they are the same sort of thing even if we cannot explain exactly why that is. Even a small child can correctly identify that the new thing in front of her is a cat even though she has never seen one quite like this before. Plato argues that we have an innate ability to recognise the Forms that our souls knew before we were born. Without the Form, it is not possible to explain the sameness. We are able to recognise the 'one' that is over the 'many'.
- **The ideal standard.** The idea of Forms can be used to support a belief in absolute unchanging moral rules. The Form is the ideal standard of a property. While it may not seem important to judge which is the best dog or who is more beautiful (although judges at Crufts and beauty pageants do often agree!), some of the higher Forms, such as goodness and justice, seem too important to be a matter of opinion. The Form of the Good gives us an absolute idea of what goodness really is, it is not a matter of opinion.

Making links

Plato's views on the pre-existence of the soul can be found in Chapter 2, Soul, mind and body.

Arguments against the Forms

Other philosophers reject the Forms for a number of reasons.

- Wittgenstein (1889–1951) rejected the one over many argument with his family resemblance theory. He suggested that there is no 'one over many' but merely a series of overlapping characteristics. Just as members of a family may each resemble other members of the family, but there is no one thing that is specific to the family.
- The Third Man argument also responds to the theory's claim to explain reality. If, as Plato argues, we need the idea of Forms to explain what objects have in common then what is to stop us once we have arrived at the Form asking what the Form and the Particulars have in common and thus requiring a third thing (a third man) to explain this. This process could proceed infinitely and we would never get an explanation of anything.
- Plato's claim that there must be Forms for everything can be carried to absurdity. Must there really be the ideal Form of dirt, hair or even, as Stephen Law argues, 'the Form of the bogey'?
- There is also the problem of new inventions and things that become extinct. Plato's belief in the unchanging nature of the world of the Forms seems to require that the Form of the iPad has always existed and the Form of the T-Rex still exists.
- The Forms do not seem to have a practical value; study of them takes us away from useful scientific study of the world.
- If there are Forms of every possible number, as Plato claimed, then there are an infinite number of Forms.
- The theory of evolution and advances in chemistry mean that we do now have an empirical means of explaining what similar objects or animals have in common.

It can be argued that some of the above criticisms only arise if we take Plato's theories too literally. Plato is ambiguous about whether all objects have Forms. He is primarily concerned with properties such as goodness, justice and beauty.

1.5 Aristotle's understanding of reality

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Whereas Plato believed that ultimate reality was beyond this world and could only be grasped by a priori reasoning, his pupil Aristotle took the opposite view. Aristotle's aim is to explain the world around him as this world is the real world. In order to explain the world he uses empirical method.

The four causes

Everything in the world is constantly moving and changing. At birth we are actually a baby but are potentially an adult. You are now actually an A-level student, but you are a potential graduate. In order to explain the movement of all things from potentiality to actuality, Aristotle uses the theory of the four causes.

Key quote

... we must proceed to consider causes, their character and number. Knowledge is the object of our inquiry, and men do not think they know a thing till they have grasped the 'why' of it (which is to grasp its primary cause). So clearly we too must do this as regards both coming to be and passing away and every kind of physical change.

Aristotle, *Physics*, 2.2

- 1 The first cause is the **material cause**. This is the thing that it is made from, for example, the bronze of a statue. This is the thing that the process of change begins with.
- 2 Second, there is what Aristotle calls the **formal cause**. This is the structure or form of the finished thing. This is similar to Plato's understanding of the word 'Form' but for Aristotle the form is in the object itself. It is not an idea in another world.
- 3 Aristotle refers to the **efficient cause** as the 'primary source of the change'. It is the maker of the object, it is the parents of a child or the person giving you the advice that you acted upon. It is this that makes the material transform into its final form.
- 4 The last and most important of the causes for Aristotle is called the **final cause**. It is the purpose for which something is done or made. In one of Aristotle's own examples, the final cause or *telos* of walking about is to be healthy.

Now test yourself

TESTED

- 4 Which of the four causes is the most important as far as Aristotle is concerned? What does this show about his philosophy?

Why the four causes matter

For Aristotle, the four causes illustrate several of his key ideas.

- This world is the real world and the task of philosophers is to explain it.
- The key to knowledge is the empirical method.
- The world and all that is in it has purpose or *telos*.

Key words

Material cause What a substance is made of

Formal cause What form or structure does something have, what is it that makes it that type of thing?

Efficient cause What brought something about or what made it

Final cause The purpose or reason for something

Telos Literally 'end' or 'purpose'. The idea that everything has a purpose or aim

Revision activity

Take some objects and attempt to explain how the four causes might apply, for example, a statue, a table, a human being.

1.6 Aristotle's Prime Mover

REVISED

The four causes explain individual changes within the world. Aristotle also believes that the world as a whole needs explaining. This explanation is the Prime Mover.

The characteristics of the Prime Mover

The key to understanding the Prime Mover is perhaps the idea of immutability. Everything in the world is constantly changing; however, the Prime Mover is unchanging. As the Prime Mover is **immutable**, several other things logically follow.

- It is eternal – beginning to exist or ceasing to exist would both constitute a change, therefore the Prime Mover must be eternal.
- The Prime Mover must be perfect. To be perfect means to have complete actuality. Objects in the world have potential, they could become something else. As the Prime Mover does not change, it must be perfect already. Becoming perfect or losing perfection is a change!
- The Prime Mover is also **impassive** – it does not experience emotion. To experience emotion would bring about a change in one's inner state.

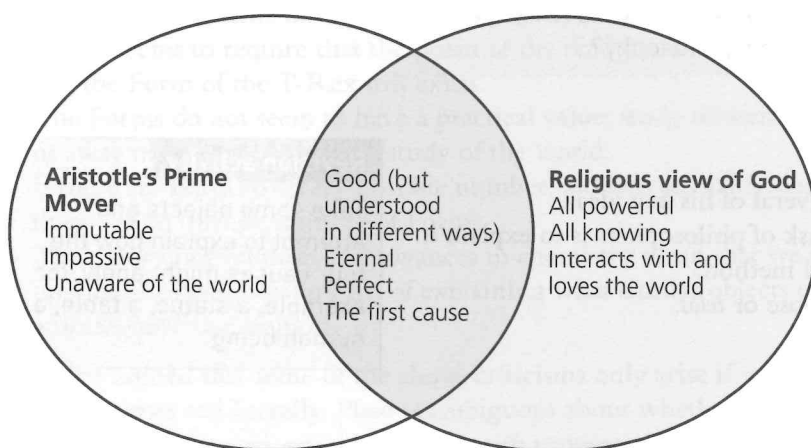
The reason why things change in this world is because they are material substances. Aristotle believed that physical substances – all objects made of matter – are subject to change. In order to be immutable, the Prime Mover must be non-physical, an immaterial substance.

The Prime Mover and the world

The Prime Mover causes all the changes that occur. However, the Prime Mover cannot be aware of the world, this would produce changes. The Prime Mover in order to be perfect and unchanging can only think about perfect things. So, logically, it must think about itself and thought. The Prime Mover's perfection moves other things towards him. All things desire the good/perfect and the process of change is a move in the direction of the Prime Mover. One way of thinking about this is the analogy of a cat drawn to a saucer of milk. The milk is unmoved, but attracts the cat. In a sense, the Prime Mover is the final cause of all things.

The Prime Mover and God

Aristotle refers to the Prime Mover as God yet we need to be careful not to confuse what is essentially a **deistic** view of God with the **theistic** view of God offered in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.



Key words

Immutable The idea that God does not change

Impassive The idea that God does not experience feelings or emotions

Deism The idea that God causes or creates the world but is then separate and uninvolved

Theism The idea that God both creates and continues to be involved in the world

Key quote

There is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things. It has been shown that this substance cannot have any magnitude, but is without parts and indivisible ... But it has also been shown that it is impassive and unalterable; for all the other changes are posterior to change of place.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1073

Now test yourself

- 5 What are the differences between Aristotle's Prime Mover and religious ideas of God?

TESTED

1.7 Assessing Aristotle

REVISED

Assessing Aristotle on causation

- There is an element of common sense in the four causes. Most objects conform to the idea.
- The four causes focus on purpose and this gives us a way of determining whether something is any good or not. We intuitively know that if things don't do the job they were meant to do, then they are not really being the object they were meant to be.
- Aristotle's claim that everything has a purpose is subjective. What the purpose of an object is may depend upon our point of view. A Religious Studies textbook may not have been intended to balance a wonky table but if it does the job who is to say that it couldn't have other purposes?
- Twentieth-century philosophers, known as existentialists, claim that human beings have no purpose. As atheists, they argue that our existence is a matter of chance and that there is no purpose until we freely choose to give ourselves a purpose. However, this purpose is entirely a matter of our choice.

The causes are essentially empirical and as such have the strengths and weaknesses of the empirical method. It is the scientific empirical method that has enabled us to make discoveries about the world, yet, as anyone knows who has attempted to place a pencil into water, our senses do not always give us accurate information. This can be linked to Plato's criticism of the senses in the analogy of the cave.

Assessing Aristotle on the Prime Mover

There are elements of the idea of the Prime Mover that are more logical than the religious idea of God.

- It is more difficult to believe in a God who is perfect if that being is liable to changing emotions. An impassive Prime Mover seems more logical.
- The idea of the Prime Mover avoids the traditional problem of evil. There is no issue about evil and suffering in the world because the obvious question of why doesn't the Prime Mover prevent evil is avoided.

However, there are also advantages of the religious idea.

- It is difficult to understand how a being can be described as perfect yet have no knowledge of the world.
- If the Prime Mover is pure thought but is in some way responsible for everything, then where did matter come from?
- The idea of a 'God' who is not involved is unsatisfactory for religious believers. The Prime Mover is not worthy of worship nor would there be any point in prayer. Although Aristotle sees the Prime Mover as being ultimately good, it is a static and logical goodness rather than the goodness one might experience in a relationship.

Both Aristotle and the religious view of God seem to require that there has to be an explanation of the universe – that the chain of causes must stop somewhere. However, it is just as possible that he is wrong and that the universe is the product of random chance.

Now test yourself

- 6 How do existentialists differ from Aristotle on the idea of purpose?

TESTED

Typical mistake

Students can think of the Prime Mover as an efficient cause, a little like pushing over the first domino in a row of dominoes. Yet for Aristotle, the Prime Mover is the ultimate *telos* or final cause drawing all things towards it, a little like a magnet attracting iron.

1.8 Plato versus Aristotle – reason and experience

REVISED

Use of reason (rationalism) versus use of the senses (empiricism)

The main contrast between Plato and Aristotle lies in their philosophical method.

- Plato favours the use of reason rather than empirical method. Philosophical truths are known a priori without any reliance on the senses. Plato also believes that there are innate ideas; our souls already contain knowledge of the Forms prior to being united to our bodies. The analogy of the cave and the theory of the Forms can be used to illustrate these ideas.
- Aristotle favours the use of the senses over reason. Philosophical truths are acquired via the empirical method using our senses; they are a posteriori truths. Empiricists do not believe in innate ideas; our mind is a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) at birth and it is via experiences that the mind gradually fills with ideas. Aristotle's theory of the four causes helps to illustrate this empirical method.

Assessing Plato

- A priori knowledge gives us certainty but it only seems to give certainty with regard to maths and logic. It does not bring certainty to the things that we experience.
- There are a number of things, such as colour, that are very difficult to know without experience.
- The arguments for and against the Forms (page 5) are also relevant in assessing Plato's rational method.

Assessing Aristotle

- A posteriori knowledge is knowledge of the world around us and is thus more useful than a priori knowledge.
- It seems right to say that we could not have thoughts about most things without the senses.
- The senses can be in error, so empirical method offers probability but not certainty.
- It is hard to understand how we get ideas, such as God or morality, which do not obviously link to the senses.

The Form of the Good versus the Prime Mover

Both Plato's Form of the Good and Aristotle's Prime Mover are the ultimate concepts in their respective philosophical systems. There are a number of similarities and differences.

- Neither the Good nor the Prime Mover is directly or personally involved with the world.
- Both are perfect and necessary beings; they are eternal.
- Both are to some extent responsible for the existence of things in the world, albeit indirectly. They are explanations; the Prime Mover explains change. The Good as a Form is a refuge against the uncertainties of change. It is an attempt to find permanence in a world of change.
- The Prime Mover has consciousness – it thinks about thought and its own nature. The Good is not conscious. It is an idea.
- Both have been influential to the Christian idea of God, though it may or may not be a helpful influence. The Prime Mover has been adapted by Aquinas and others and used as an argument for the existence of God. The Good and the idea of the Forms as perfect and unchanging have also influenced the idea of God.

Now test yourself

- 7 Which of the thinkers believes in a priori knowledge?
- 8 Which of the thinkers believes in a posteriori knowledge?

TESTED

1.9 Summary and exam tips

REVISED

Exam checklist

- Explain the key ideas presented in Plato's analogy of the cave.
- Assess the conclusions that Plato draws from this analogy.
- Explain Plato's views about the nature of the Forms and which are more important.
- Evaluate Plato's ideas about the Forms and the Good.
- Explain Plato and Aristotle's understanding of reality and the world around them.
- Explain Aristotle's ideas of the four causes.
- Explain Aristotle's understanding of the Prime Mover.
- Assess the views of Aristotle on the four causes and the Prime Mover.
- Critically compare the Form of the Good with Aristotle's Prime Mover.
- Critically compare Plato's reliance on reason with Aristotle's empirical method.

Sample work

One of the potential dangers in writing A-level answers is writing descriptively rather than providing an explanation. For example, in the story of Plato's cave, it is important to focus on the philosophical ideas he conveys. Why he is telling us this story is more important than what he says.

Basic explanation	Better explanation
In the seventh book of his <i>Republic</i> , Plato tells the story of several prisoners. They are trapped in a cave and are chained to its floor. Plato says that they have been there from birth and they cannot move their heads. They are constantly facing forwards. There is a fire behind them in the cave and the fire projects shadows onto the cave wall. These shadows are all that the prisoners are aware of. The people who hold them captive hold up puppets and the prisoners have to guess what each of the shadows is.	Plato's analogy of the cave involves prisoners chained to the floor of a cave restricted by the chains on their necks and ankles so that they can only see shadows on the wall. Plato is representing the human condition that ordinary people are trapped by their senses and are unaware of the greater reality beyond what they immediately perceive.

Going further: Descartes versus Hume

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, modern philosophers Rene Descartes (1596–1650) and David Hume (1711–1776) continued the discussion on philosophical method that began with Plato and Aristotle.

- Descartes' Wax Example supports rationalism. He asks us to imagine a piece of beeswax removed from a hive. We could examine its properties: it has shape, colour, is hard and makes a sound when struck. If we left it by the fire and returned to the room later, all those properties would have gone, we would find a puddle. Descartes claims that we would know it is the same wax despite our senses giving us different information.
- Hume claims that all the contents of our mind are impressions (things we experience) and ideas. Our minds are able to manipulate ideas and add these together – we have never seen a unicorn but we have seen horses and horns. If we have no experience of something, we are unable to think of it. People who are blind or deaf from birth can form no idea of colour or sound respectively.