Plato's Allegory of the Cave

Required Reading

Plato. (2004). Republic. (pp. 208-212; 514a-518d). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. Inc. ISBN: 0-87220-736-6

Learning Outcomes and Connections to Course Outcomes

After completing this lesson, you will be able to:

- Explain Plato's view of how the "real world" relates to the world revealed through our senses
- Describe what it might mean to say that we are "living in a cave."
- Critically evaluate the obligation we have to understand the world accurately.
- Distinguish between objective and subjective knowledge
- Compare Plato's understanding of education to other ideas concerning what education is really about

Main Topics

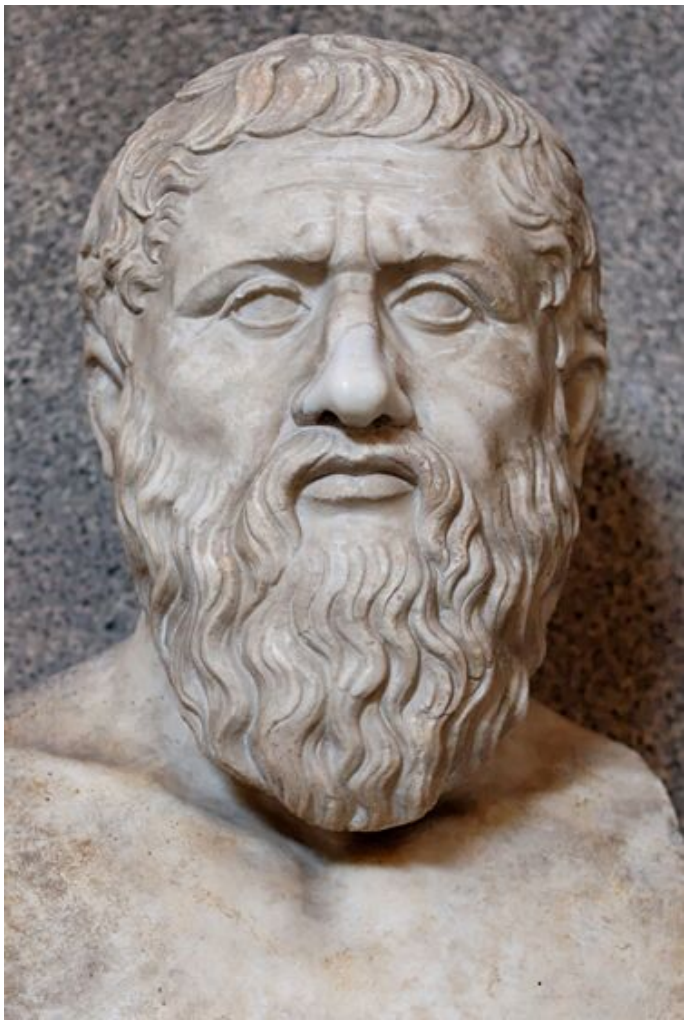
- The Nature of Reality
- The Possibility of Misunderstanding what the world is really like
- Objective and Subjective Knowledge

Introduction to the Allegory of the Cave

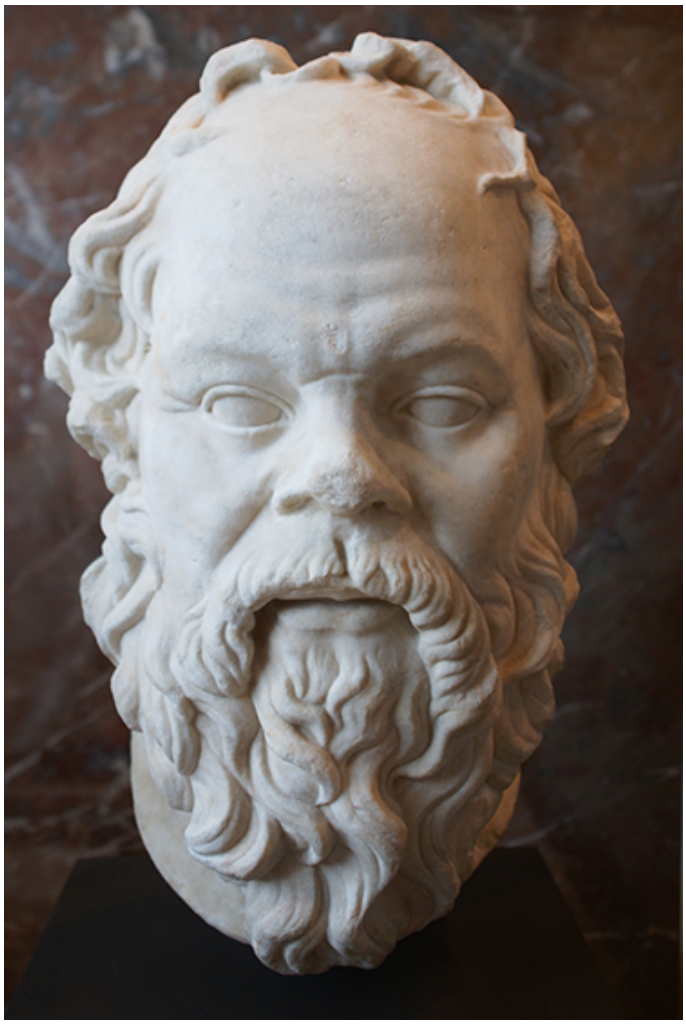
The story you are about to read is old…*very* old. 2400 years old in fact. For anything to survive for so long requires an astonishing amount of good luck, but it requires more than that. People had to really care about the story — not just when it was first told, but in each of the centuries between then and now, in order to have safely passed it down to the next generation. With very few exceptions, all it takes in order for something to disappear entirely from our awareness is for a single generation to think it is unimportant. Think about your favourite movie, or your favourite band. Now ask yourself: what are the odds that anyone will be listening to them, or watching that movie, in 100 years? Maybe… But 2400 years? Not likely!

Classics survive, but they do so only because we keep talking about them. And so, for a story to survive for 2400 years, it must have found an audience that thought it was important enough to discuss in almost every one of the roughly *10 000 generations* that stand between us.

The author of this particular story was a man named Plato, who lived in ancient Greece in the city of Athens. But to understand him, it helps to know something about the greatest influence on his life: his teacher, Socrates.



Plato
Source: Marie-Lan Nguyen [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plato_Pio-Clemetino_Inv305.jpg)



Socrates
Source: CherryX per Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ALouvre%2C_Socrates-Sculpture.jpg)

To his friends and admirers, Socrates was the wisest man in Athens, and the greatest teacher the world had ever known. To his enemies, he was a "gadfly," an annoying, pestering character who buzzed about in the downtown square, bothering people who had better things to be doing and putting strange ideas into the minds of the adolescents. Both views are likely at least partly true.

What Socrates was doing seems harmless enough on the surface. He would wander through the streets of his beloved Athens, trying to start discussions with the most influential and important citizens of that great city. Whether they were artists, soldiers, political figures, or religious leaders, Socrates would ask them to explain their beliefs on topics that we would today describe as "philosophical." That means such questions as:

- What is the best way to live?

- How should I treat other people?
- What is the difference between opinion and knowledge?
- Is there a God, or Gods?
- What is it that makes something beautiful?
- What does it mean to be human?

As you can see from this list, these are just about the most important questions a person can ask in life. Plato and Socrates certainly thought so. In fact, Socrates was so convinced of this that he once claimed, *"the unexamined life is not worth living."* Note that he wasn't saying that you had to have *answers* to these questions, or that your life was a waste if you got the answers wrong, but he was saying that if you didn't fairly regularly think about these sorts of questions, then you were missing out on the fullest potential of what a human life could be about. Alone amongst all the species on our planet, we can ask such questions; what a waste if we never do!

However, almost all of us sound pretty foolish when we first try to answer these questions, especially if we have someone as smart as Socrates keeping the pressure on us by bringing up all of the obvious problems with our answers. So, imagine if you can this peculiar old man, Socrates, trying to get answers from the best, brightest and most famous citizens of Athens to some of life's most important questions. Now, imagine further that almost none of them knew what to say, or they contradicted themselves in their answers, got flustered and confused, and eventually ran away from him in a state of frustration and anger. What inevitably happened was that a number of young people in Athens (often the children of those famous civic leaders) thought that this was *wonderful*. They *loved* seeing their parents reduced to blustering idiocy, and so they began to follow Socrates around to watch the show. They also tried to continue these philosophical conversations, often with much more success, once their parents were gone. One of these young people was Plato. Years later, when he became a writer, he made Socrates into the hero of most of the books he wrote.

Okay, now that you know a little bit about the story-teller and his teacher, you are almost ready to hear the story itself, a story often referred to as "the allegory of the cave", taken from a longer work entitled *Republic*.

As you likely know already, an allegory is a special kind of story. An allegory is a made-up, fictional tale, often with fantastical elements, but in an allegory, almost every character, every aspect of the setting, and every event in the plot is meant to represent something that the

author thinks happens in the real world too. It's like an extended, elaborate metaphor, where part of the pleasure for readers is the "detective game" of trying to figure out what it is all really about. As you first watch, and then read the story, you should be trying to sort out what it is really about. One hint to help you out: in real life, Socrates was sentenced to death by the most powerful and important citizens of Athens, an event that had a life-long effect on Plato.

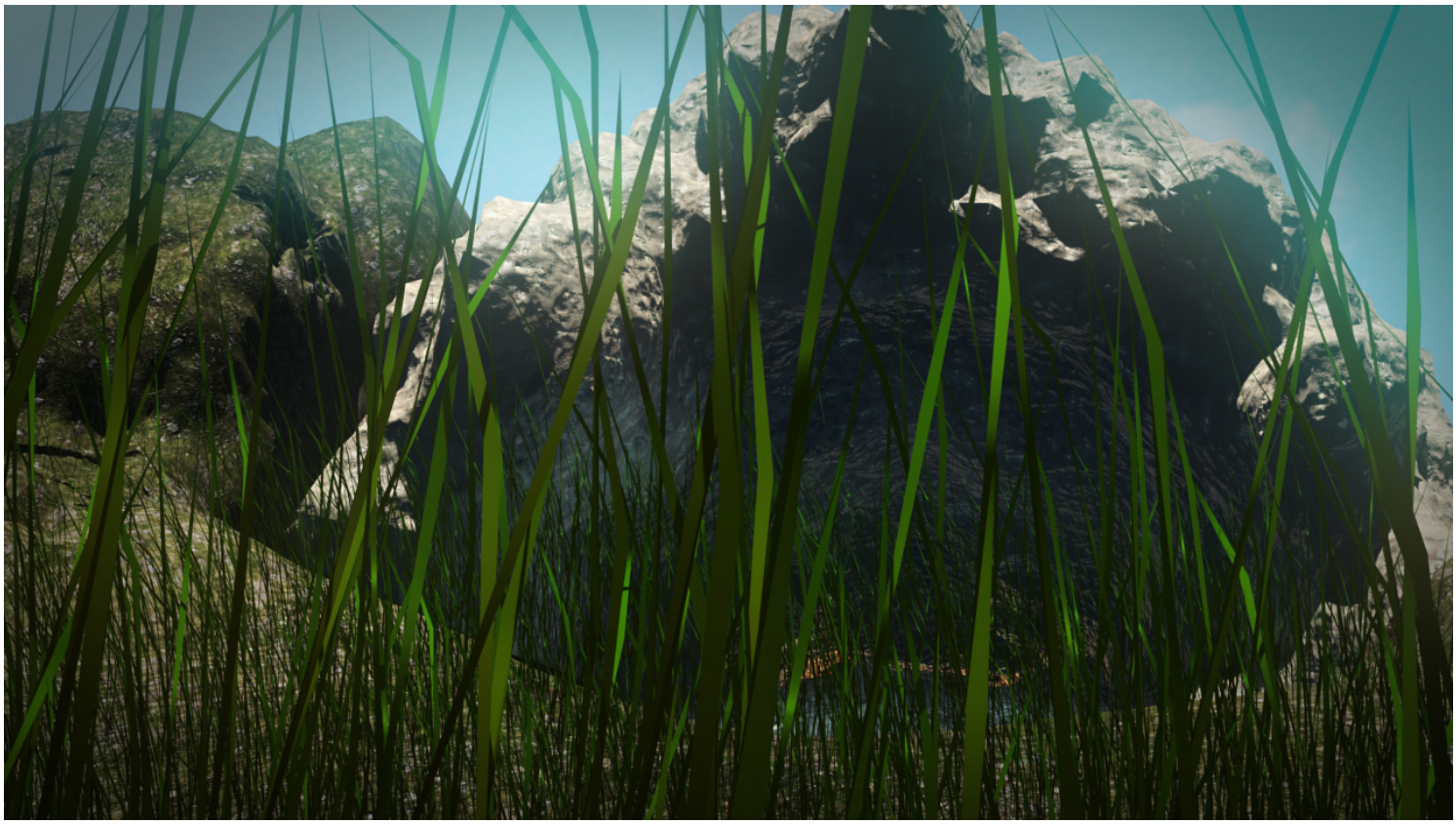
A Matter of Perspective

VIDEO — Plato's Allegory of the Cave (3D Animation) (https://youtu.be/sAu-CNSh9F0)

Okay, that's the story. But what on earth is it about? There are many possible answers, and to some extent, your challenge is to "interpret" the story yourself. Here are a few questions to get you going:

1. Plato thinks that we are like the prisoners in the story. They believe that the shadows they see are "reality itself." What might we treat as real and important that is "merely a shadow" of something more fundamental?
2. Why is it so difficult for the prisoner to leave the cave? Plato imagines the prisoners as being chained and bound; if we are like the prisoners, what are the chains that bind and limit us in what we can think about? Plato imagines the released prisoner as being pained by his first sight of the fire, and therefore being tempted to turn back to his familiar shadows again; what is Plato really talking about here?
3. When the former prisoner returns, he is treated as a fool, because he can no longer see in the darkness as well as before. In part, this is Plato's explanation for why Socrates seemed so odd to the people of Athens. How does this part of the allegory help to explain the strangeness of Socrates? Have you ever witnessed something like this, where someone speaking the truth has struck most listeners as being foolish?
4. Plato tells us that his allegory illustrates the nature of *genuine* education. It may be hard to see at first to see how the story has to do with education. What does Plato say near the end of the reading about the role a teacher has? Ask yourself these questions about how Plato seems to think about education as compared to one of the ways people tend to think of it today:

- How do his ideas about education differ from the idea that education is about learning and memorizing facts?
- How do his ideas differ from the idea that education is about learning skills or job-training?
- How do his ideas differ from the idea that education is simply about helping you to form your own opinion on a topic?

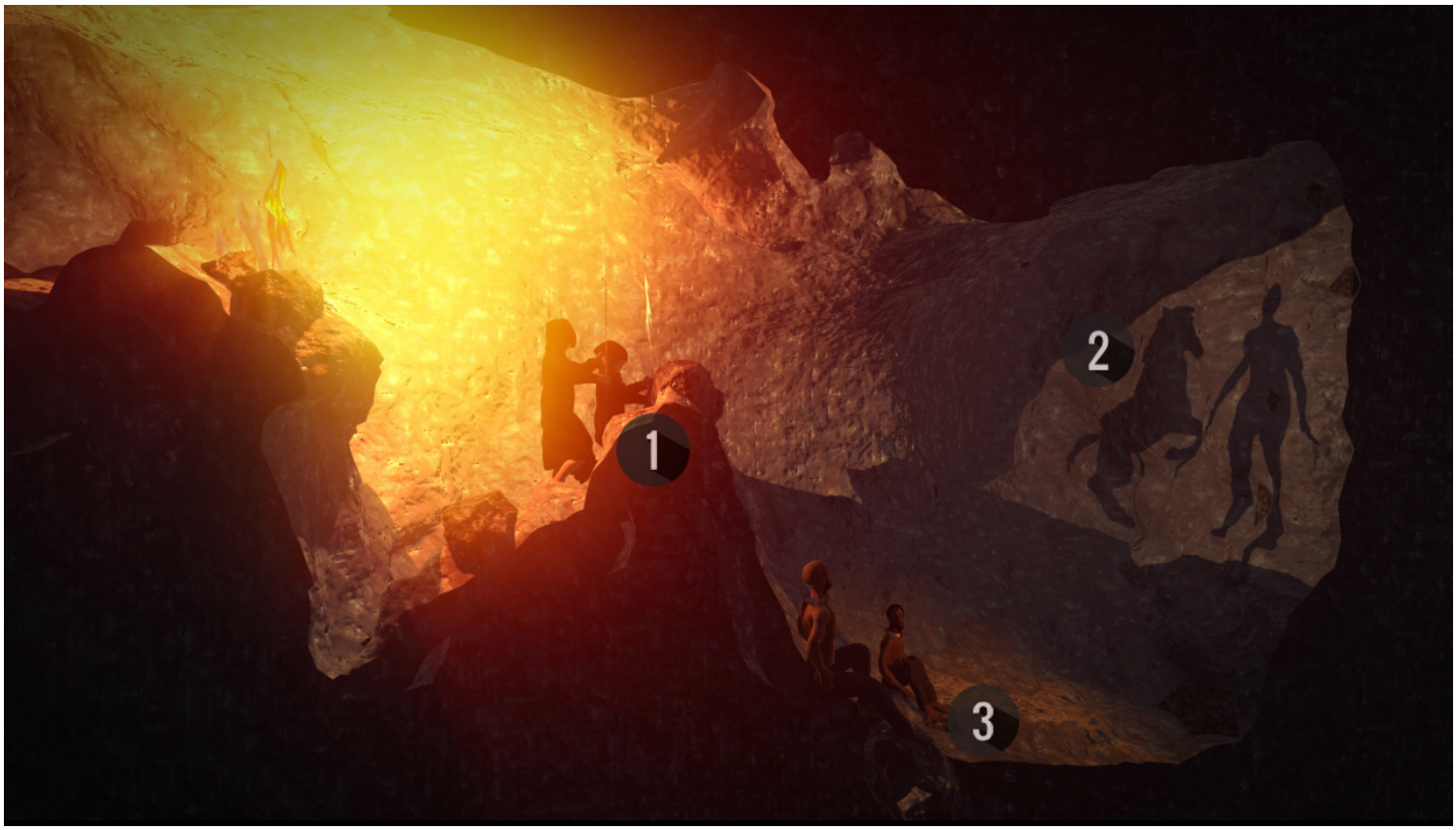


Introduction to the Allegory of the Cave

[Socrates] said, compare the effect of education and of the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this: Imagine human beings living in an underground, cave like dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets.

Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you'd expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent.

To continue to the cave, click on the ‘Explore’ button.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Puppeteers

It's a strange image [Socrates is] describing, and strange prisoners. They're like us. Do you suppose, first of all, that these prisoners see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them? How could they, if they have to keep their heads motionless throughout life?



Shadows

What about the things being carried along the wall? Isn't the same true of them? — Of course.

And if they could talk to one another, don't you think they'd suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them? — They'd have to.

And what if their prison also had an echo from the wall facing them? Don't you think they'd believe that the shadows passing in front of them were talking whenever one of the carriers passing along the wall was doing so? — I certainly do.

Then the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts. — They must surely believe that.



Prisoner

Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like. When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before. What do you think he'd say, if we told him that what he'd seen before was inconsequential, but that now — because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned toward things that are more — he sees more correctly? Or, to put it another way, if we pointed to each of the things passing by, asked him what each of them is, and compelled him to answer, don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown? — Much truer.

And if someone compelled him to look at the light itself, wouldn't his eyes hurt, and wouldn't he turn around and flee towards the things he's able to see, believing that they're really clearer than the ones he's being shown?

And if one were to drag him thence by force up the rough and steep path, and did not let him go before he was dragged into the sunlight, would he not be in physical pain and angry as he was dragged along? When he came into the light, with the sunlight filling his eyes, he would not be

able to see a single one of the things which are now said to be true. — Not at once, certainly.

I think he would need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above; at first he would see shadows most easily, the reflections of men and other things in water, then the things themselves. After this he would see objects in the sky and the sky itself more easily at night, the light of the stars and the moon more easily than the sun and the light of the sun during the day. — Of course.

Then, at last, he would be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or in some alien place, but the sun itself in its own place, and be able to contemplate it. — That must be so.

After this he would reflect that it is the sun which provides the seasons and the years, which governs everything in the visible world, and is also in some way the cause of those other things which he used to see. — Clearly that would be the next stage.

The Real World

One of the things that the allegory of the cave is about is the nature of reality itself. The mistake that the prisoners in the cave made was to treat what they could see as "reality," not realizing that these shadows were caused by something "more real." If that phrase "more real" sounds odd to you (as it surely does!), then it might help you if you thought of it as meaning "the best way to understand what is really going on in the world."

Thinking Critically

How might we be making the same mistake as the prisoners in our own understanding of reality? According to Plato, it is by assuming that "the best way to understand what is really going on in the world" is by focusing our attention on the physical world.



Source: © istockphoto.com/ cookelma

Plato had a very unusual theory about the relationship between ideas and the physical world. Most of us would assume that the physical world is real, permanent, and the same for everyone who lives within it, while ideas are purely "subjective"; they exist only within our own minds. When you and I both notice the same flower, for instance, it is natural for us to assume that we each have a fleeting awareness of what we are seeing, and that these impressions or ideas in our minds are best explained by the real flower in front of us. We think that "the best way to understand what is really going on" is to say that the physical thing caused our ideas.

Plato thinks that we have things backwards. As he sees it, the physical world that we see, hear, smell, and touch is a world that is always changing; that flower that we are looking at certainly wasn't here a year ago, and just as certainly, it won't still be here next year. What will never disappear, however, is the idea of what a flower is. Ideas are eternal, and so for Plato, they are *more real* and important than the things in the world which temporarily happen to reflect them. Those eternal ideas that shape the world we experience don't even need us to exist. I didn't "invent" the idea "Flower" any more than you did. We both simply learned to "see" an idea that was there before either of us came along.

Objective and Subjective Knowledge



Source: © istockphoto.com/ cosmin4000

If we could ever learn to "see," or understand these timeless, big Ideas that shape the world, we would understand life a lot better than we do at present. Real knowledge, according to Plato, occurs when the little ideas in our individual minds "match up" with these eternal Ideas. In his allegory, this is what happened when the former prisoner finally came to see the sun.

Plato thought that there were right answers to all of the big questions in life, and he hoped to find them. He certainly didn't think that all opinions were equally true. If everyone was busy arguing about the shadows on the cave wall, and only one person had turned around to see the *real cause* of those shadows, then that one person would be right and everyone else would be wrong. Just like the cave dwellers in the story, we might howl our disagreement, and we may even say that there can't be a right or wrong answer, since none of us can agree, but we'd still be wrong, according to Plato.

Thinking Critically

Nowadays, we are often very quick to say that there are no answers to the big questions. We often say so long before we have ever really *tried* very hard to find them. After all, it is a lot easier to say that everyone's opinion is equally good than it is to try to find the truth! Maybe our motives are more noble than mere laziness; maybe we simply want to remain open-minded and tolerant of the many different things that people believe about the big questions. That is certainly a generous and decent impulse. However, it is worth remembering that there is a big difference between saying "everyone has a right to their opinion" and saying "everyone's opinion is right."

Part of what we will be doing in this first unit of the course is trying to figure out which areas of life *allow* for certainty — for "getting it right" — and which areas do not. For example, most people would readily agree that there is a single, correct answer to the question "what is the molecular composition of sugar?" whether or not they personally happen to know what it is. Similarly, most people would agree that there is not a single, correct answer to the question "which kind of ice cream tastes better: chocolate or vanilla?" The first question is about an **objective** fact in the universe around us, while the second question is about a **subjective** experience.

A Matter of Perspective

But there are areas that are trickier than these two examples, where it is hard to know whether we are in the realm of knowable, get-right-able stuff, or in the realm of taste, opinion, and preference. Consider these questions for a moment (the list should look familiar to you!):

- What is the best way to live?
- How should I treat other people?
- What is the difference between opinion and knowledge?
- Is there a God, or Gods?

- What is it that makes something beautiful?
- What does it mean to be human?

These are important questions. But are they questions that have objective answers? Plato thought so, and he spent his life trying to find them. But do you agree that these questions have objective answer? On some of them, you likely think "yes," and on others, "no." On still others, you may think that there *are* answers, but that a lowly little species like ourselves can't ever hope to know for sure what those answers are.

Another thing that we'll be doing in this first part of the course involves looking at the different methods of thinking and understanding that we use in different parts of our lives. The way we think about and experience art, for instance, is very different from the kind of thinking we might do in science, and different again from the kinds of experiences we might have within a religious or spiritual context.

To think about any of this is to engage in what Plato and the other ancient Greek philosophers — and most philosophers since — called "epistemology." Epistemology is the study of **knowledge** — how we *know* things, what kinds of things are knowable, and what obligation we might have to try to get the answers right.

Much of unit one focuses on epistemological questions, but throughout the entire course, it will always be worth asking about each issue we address and each reading we consider: Is this author presenting an opinion, or is he or she attempting to present objective facts? If the latter, how certain are these facts, and how are they known? And finally, how important is it for us to try to get it right on each issue?