

# Sources of knowledge

## Rationalism: Plato



# Overview



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Foundationalism as a response to the Infinite Regress

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Plato – the first Rationalist and his Theory of Forms

# Responding to the Infinite Regress

- Recall: Infinite Regress shows that our knowledge claims do not enjoy sufficient justification
- Some possible responses include:
  - A) **Foundationalism** – stopping the regress via a **self-justifying belief**
  - B) **Coherentism** – ‘**biting the bullet**’ of the regress, shares the idea with Foundationalism that beliefs are justified via appealing to other beliefs
  - C) **Reliabilism** – beliefs are justified via a **process that has a tendency to produce true belief**, not other beliefs
- Challenge: to recover as much knowledge as possible from the Sceptic
- This should include but not limited to knowledge of the external world

# Foundationalism



- Essence: there are certain beliefs that are simply **self-justified** and need **no further justification**
- 2 broad categories: Rationalists and Empiricists
- Note: the topic of **Reason vs Experience** is **both** a Structures of Knowledge (i.e. dealing with justification) issue **and** a Sources of Knowledge (i.e. from where do we obtain our knowledge) issue

# Intuitive Appeal of Foundationalism

- If we were to think of people who were wise and had knowledge, we could possibly think of 2 extremes
- The Wise Hermit and the Wise Traveller





## Aside: Why Intuitive Appeals?

- Philosophy is supposed to give us knowledge and help us to understand the world, not bamboozle us.
- Hence, there is a place for intuition in philosophy.
- Consider how intuition is often used in thought experiments like the Trolley TE.
- Note: this is distinct from the Faculty of Intuition that Rationalists refer to:



Appealing to intuition: appeal to what **makes sense**/appears commonsensical to you/the reader

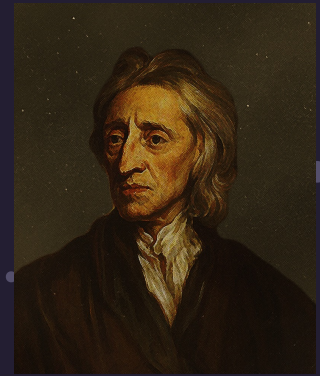
Appealing to the Faculty of Intuition: an **immediate apprehension** by the mind of the **truth** of a certain proposition; the mental analogue of empirical perception

# Rationalism and Empiricism

- Rationalism: the ultimate source of knowledge is **reason**
- i.e. Reason alone justifies what we can be said to know
- Empiricism: the ultimate source of knowledge is **experience**
- i.e. Experience alone justifies what we can be said to know
- The **difference** between Rationalism and Empiricism lies in what they view to be the **foundational building blocks** of knowledge

# Rationalism and Empiricism

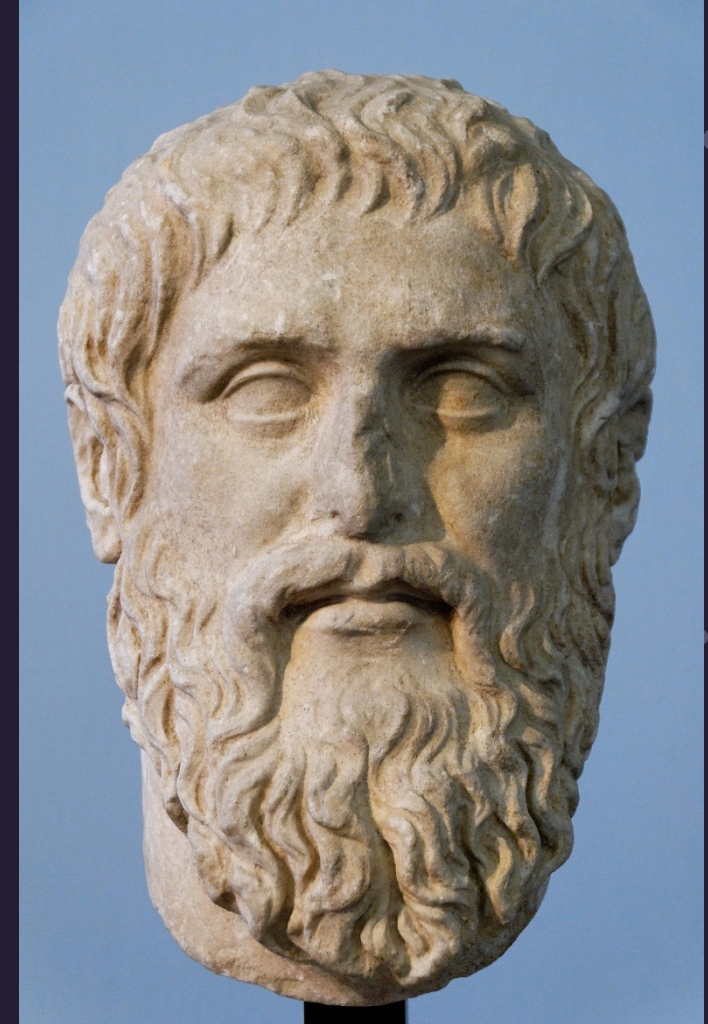
- A Priori (before experience) vs A Posteriori (after experience)
  - Note: Rationalism and Empiricism are **extreme** positions
  - Few, if any, are purely rationalist or purely empiricist
  - Think of the two as poles on a spectrum
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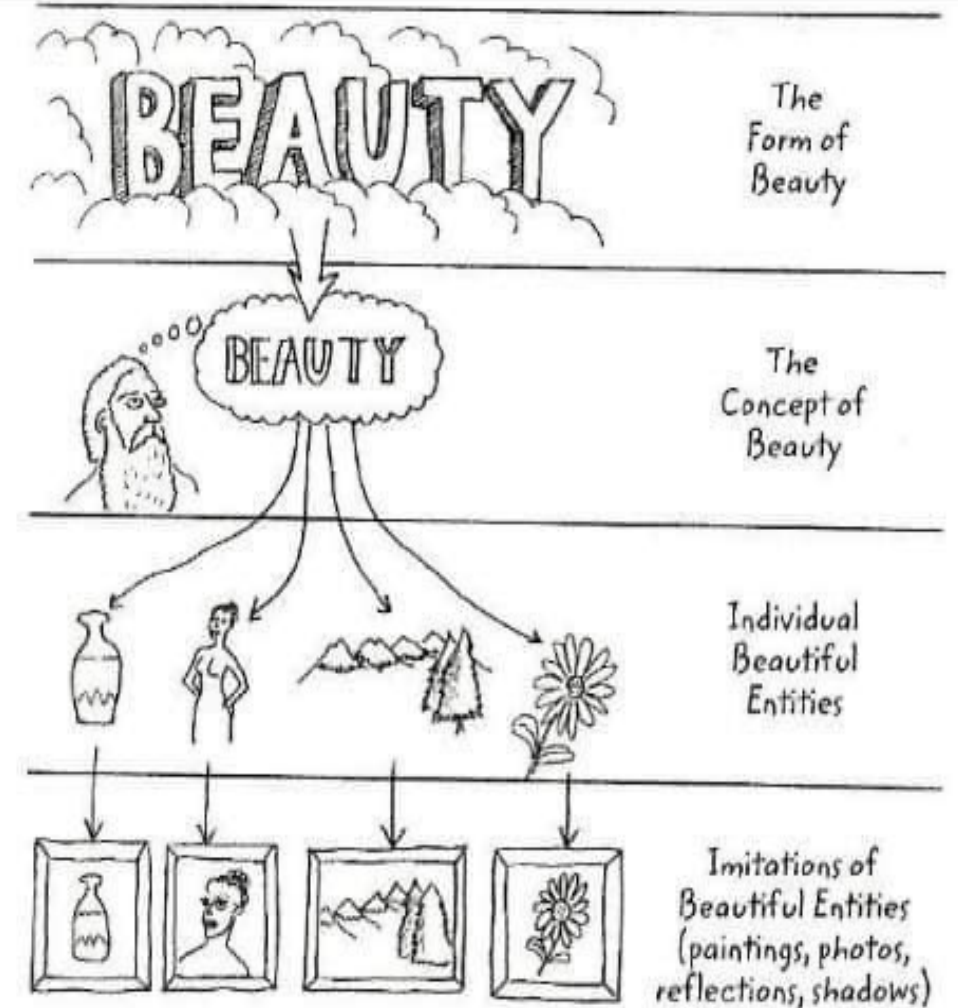
# Plato – the first Rationalist

- Plato (and Socrates) believed that knowledge is to be gained **a priori**, i.e. before experience.
- For Plato, knowledge is **only** of a certain type of things, **mental** things, a.k.a. the Forms
- The rest are only opinions – e.g. Imagination and Conjecture, Empirical Claims



# PLATO'S DIVIDED LINE

Faculty (within the soul)		Object (out there)	
KNOWLEDGE	Reason (Dialectic)	Higher Forms (Beauty, Justice, Truth, etc.)	Intelligible World Lit by the Form of the Good
	Understanding (based on assumptions)	Forms of Math and Science	
OPINION	Perception, Belief	Particular Things - Living and Artificial	Visible or Sensible World Lit by the Sun
	Conjecture, Imagining	Shadows, Images, Reflections, Copies	



# Forms and Knowledge

- Each level of reality (images/ objects/ Lower Forms/ Higher Forms) corresponds to a level of knowledge or understanding.
- Note how Plato's Metaphysics and Epistemology are intertwined
- Not always the case e.g. Berkeley

# Example: Dinosaur

- Imagination (lowest level): You can only imagine what dinosaurs looked like because you have never seen a real live one.

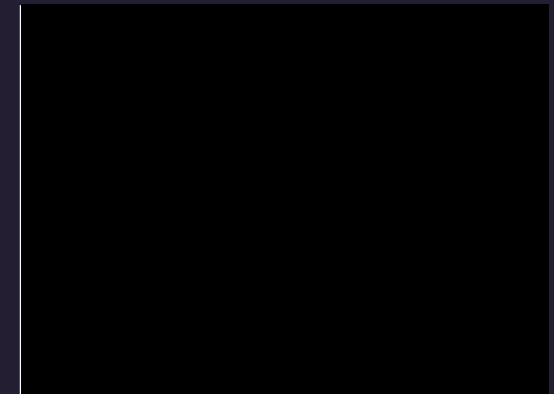
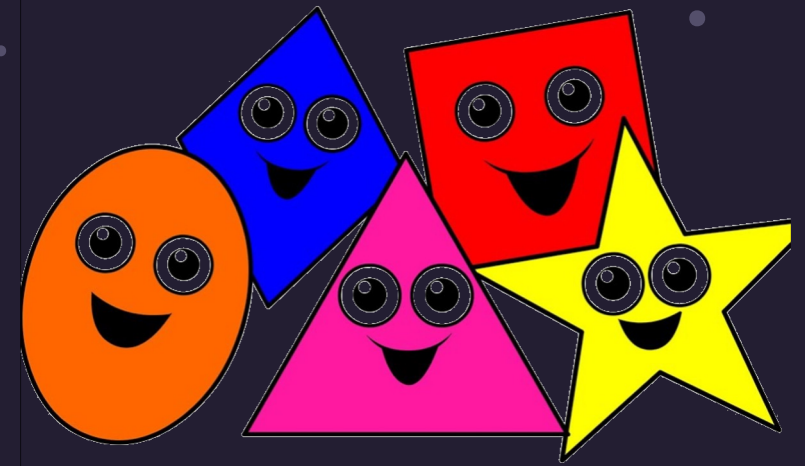


Perception: You can see a dinosaur bone but your senses alone will not tell you about its real essence and the truth about it will keep changing as the bone slowly degenerates



# Example: Dinosaur

- Reason: Using your reason, you can figure out more truths about the bone or learn about things that do not change, such as geometric shapes and numbers, so that you have a higher grade of truth.
  - For example, from the dinosaur bone, you can gain a clearer understanding of the Form, Bone, and then the Form, Extended Thing, and then the Form, Shape etc.
- True Knowledge: the perfect understanding of perfect, unchanging things – Justice, Beauty, Truth, Good.





# Plato's Innate Ideas

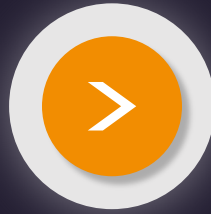
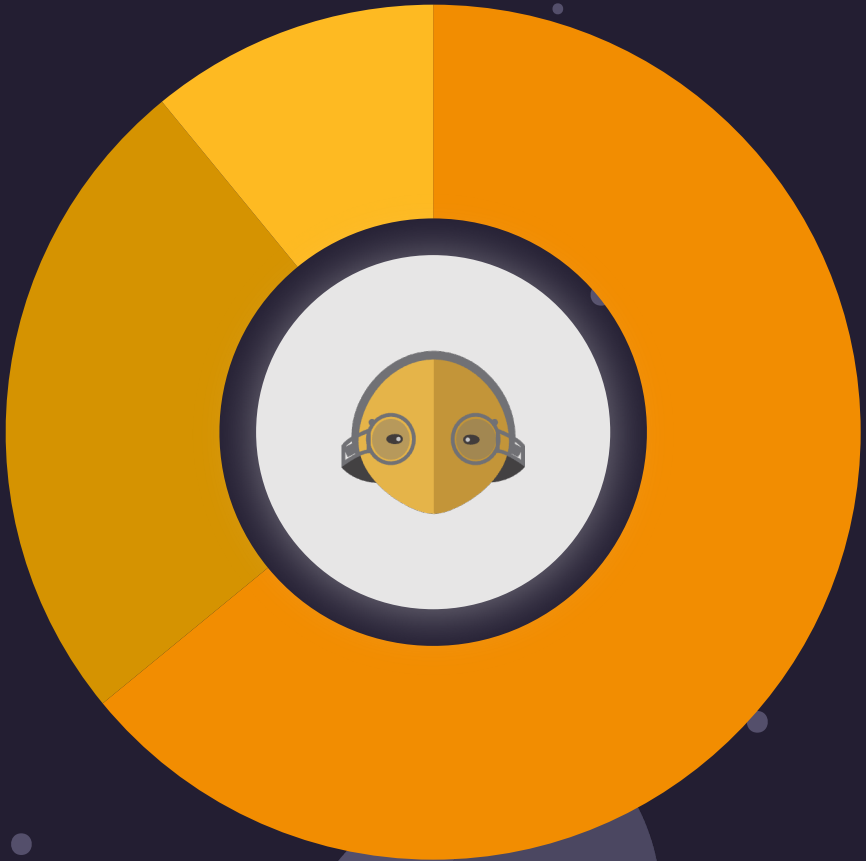
- Further, knowledge of the forms is already within us
- Consequence?
- Plato: "all learning is simply RECOLLECTION" (Meno)
- "The boy is asked how to double the area of a square. His confident first answer is that you achieve this by doubling the length of the sides. Socrates shows him that this, in fact, creates a square four times larger than the original. The boy then suggests extending the sides by half their length. Socrates points out that this would turn a 2x2 square (area = 4) into a 3x3 square (area = 9). At this point, the boy gives up and declares himself at a loss. Socrates then guides him by means of simple step-by-step questions to the correct answer, which is to use the diagonal of the original square as the base for the new square." (Emrys Westacott)



# Plato's Innate Ideas

- E.g. of Socratic questioning
- The boy was able to arrive at the answer only with the aid of guiding questions and not new content being given to him.
- How is this possible?
- Since he didn't acquire it beforehand in this life, he must have acquired it at some other point – Platonic Heaven!
- Our souls have been 'stamped' with the Forms.

# Summary



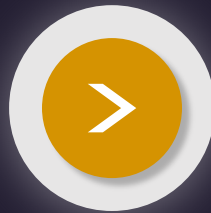
Plato offers us an early attempt at a Rationalist epistemology through his Theory of Forms

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Knowledge is ever only of the (mental) Forms; the rest is opinion

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Knowledge is a matter of discovery – a remembering – of what we already knew

# Online Discussion

- 1) What are some strengths of Plato's view? (he doesn't actually provide much of an argument, if at all)
- 2) What are some weaknesses?

# ***THANK YOU***

**Lorem Ipsum**

24Slides

*Presented by :*  
**Lorem Ipsum**

