What’s so great about Plato? Along with Aristotle (who you’ll read about in the next chapter), he’s the most important of the ancient philosophers. As a matter of fact, the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead characterized the entire history of Western philosophy since the ancient Greeks as just “a footnote to Plato.” Plato, who lived in ancient Greece from 428 to 347 B.C.E., was the first philosopher to take all the main aspects of philosophy—being, knowing, and acting—and put them together in one coherent system.

Being is especially important to Plato; he bases his whole philosophy on being, but he includes a complete set of ideas about knowing and acting, too, that make sense in light of his view of what being is. His ideas hang together logically, and he thought about a wide range of topics. What’s more, Plato was an extremely talented writer. His works are clear and entertaining. Plato, then, is something of a king among philosophers. In fact, he actually believed that philosophers should be kings!
Politics’ Loss Was Philosophy’s Gain

Plato was always trying to see the big picture, but as a young man he was especially interested in politics. Plato shifted away from politics, though, when he came to believe that politicians didn’t think clearly enough about the proper relationship between political order and the ideal truth. He became especially disillusioned with politics when Socrates was forced to die. Even so, he remained hopeful that philosophy could have a positive influence on government.

Socrates was a major influence on Plato’s thinking, but not the only one. He was especially impressed by math, and by geometry in particular, and hoped that he could find ways of making all philosophy as reliable as geometric principles. He was also influenced by the political order of the Egyptians. He visited Egypt while traveling after Socrates’s death and admired the stability of Egyptian government.

Plato says in one of his dialogues, “There will be no end to the troubles of the state or indeed, my dear Glaucon, of humanity itself, until philosophers become kings in this world, or until those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers.”

Plato hoped that philosophy would come to play a strong part in government. In fact, he tried to use philosophy to influence government during his travels to Sicily, where he was visiting a friend whose cousin was a dictator of Syracuse. He tried to teach the young...
dictator philosophy and geometry, hoping to help make him a better ruler, but was unsuccessful. The dictator and his cousin, Plato’s friend, became enemies and Plato’s friend was eventually killed.

**Philosophy Through Dialogue**

After returning to Greece, Plato founded an important school known as the Academy, which is said to be the first university. He taught at the Academy for the rest of his life, and wrote a lot of philosophy in over two dozen works called “dialogues,” which present his ideas in the form of discussions among his friends.

Plato’s dialogues are important in the way they present his philosophy. Rather than say, “Here is what I think,” Plato presented his ideas in the form of discussions of philosophical topics between two or more people. Socrates is the leading figure in most of the dialogues.

The dialogue form makes Plato’s philosophy story-like. Although ideas themselves are of central importance, the characters of the people talking also enter in. And Socrates often raises particular philosophical issues with people who have a personal interest in those issues. For example, he discusses bravery with someone who prides himself on his courage, or piety with someone who thinks of himself as especially pious.

Not only are the characters of those who talk relevant to the ideas being discussed, but sometimes the setting and situation of the dialogues have dramatic significance. Socrates and those he talks to may be in the city surrounded by lots of people, or walking in the countryside, in the Academy, or in prison. The dialogue form, then, provides a way of showing how the ideas Plato talks about relate to the lives people actually lead.

**What’s the Big Idea?**

A key aspect of Plato’s thinking is the idea of the *idea*. Ideas for Plato are not just notions that pop into people’s minds and cause them to do nutty things like have the couch reupholstered in pink...
leopard fur. Ideas for Plato really exist in a world of their own. Ideas are *forms* that give their shape to ordinary reality. What’s more, they are always right. It’s the physical world—the world of becoming—that can be mistaken.

Of course, for most of us, it’s just the other way around. The physical world is always right but ideas tend to lose touch with the truth. The pink leopard fur on the couch is just what it’s supposed to be; it’s the idea that was a big mistake.

Finding the Ideal

Because he places ideas above the changing world of things, Plato is often called a rationalist—someone who believes we can know true ideas without ever learning them from experience. Just because we can know the truth, though, doesn’t mean we necessarily do know the truth. In fact, because physical reality isn’t the basis of truth for Plato, this truth can be a real challenge to discover.

The difficult tasks of the philosopher, according to Plato, include first figuring out what this ideal world is like and then teaching others to recognize it and regulate their lives and thoughts in accordance with it. These tasks are difficult for a couple of reasons. First, it’s hard to see the ideal world for what it is; second, it’s hard to act in keeping with its perfection.

Understanding the Ideal World

Not everyone would agree with Plato that there is an ideal reality. In fact, Plato came up with this concept in reaction to the sophists who were spreading the notion that truth is whatever you make it. Plato defied these relativists, arguing that right and wrong are different things and we need to figure out what they are.

So how can we tell? If the ideal world is not actually physical, how do we know it’s there? Two ways, said Plato: one way is logical, the other, intuitive.

It's Logical

The logical way of figuring out what the ideal world is like relates to Socrates’s work of examining concepts dialectically in order to make sure they get used correctly. We need to ask what one particular example of a concept has in common with all the other examples.
Take, for example, courage. Is it just a word or is there really a thing called courage that some people have?

To answer this question, Plato looked at specific examples of courageous acts. By thinking about what these examples have in common, says Plato, we can understand the idea of courage as it always is, apart from specific, changing situations. This universal idea of courage is the true courage, according to Plato, the kind that exists regardless of the situation, without being influenced by other considerations.

To Plato, the idea of courage is the universal characteristic that all specific instances of courage have in common. By looking at particular examples, you can figure out the general idea that is true. This logical process is known as induction. Induction, as you saw in Chapter 3, “What There Is to Know About Knowing,” is the logical process of working from particulars to generalities. Through induction, you can find the nature of universals, ideas that hold true, no matter what the situation.

Notice that Plato’s view is only one way of looking at courage. You could say instead that there is no such thing as courage except as an idea people have invented in order to get certain kinds of people to act in a certain way. The idea of courage has a practical use: it gets soldiers to fight well and it keeps them from complaining about things that scare them. It does this in effect by rewarding them for conquering their fear. Everyone knows war is scary. If you have to go to war anyway and you put up with your fear, people will compensate you with praise by saying you have courage.

This is the difference between Plato’s ideas and Marx’s ideology. Ideas are true and really exist. Ideology is invented to get people to behave in certain ways.

Plato connects his ideas about how people should act not simply to his view of how society should work, but to his view of reality in general. He said that universal ideas are the source of the physical world and the things that happen in it. Visible reality emanates, or comes from, the ideal world. This idea leads to the second way of figuring out what the ideal world is like, the intuitive way. What this means, quite simply, is that the ideal world thinks the physical world into shape.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

To illustrate how this works, Plato made up a little story known as the parable of the cave. A parable is a story that has to be interpreted for its unstated meaning. The parable
appears in Plato’s famous dialogue, *The Republic*, where Plato has Socrates tell it to a group of young men who want to hear his ideas about the education of a ruler.

Socrates says to imagine a cave in which prisoners have been chained since early childhood by some nasty ogre. Their heads are propped so they can only look one way—at a wall of the cave. There’s a humongous fire burning behind the prisoners, and between them and the fire there are people walking back and forth, carrying things.

The prisoners, because they’re facing the other way, cannot see the fire, the people, or the things they are carrying. They can only see shadows of these things on the wall, cast by the firelight. Socrates says that these prisoners would probably imagine that the shadows on the wall of the cave were real things.

Imagine how a prisoner would feel if he were taken out of his chains and shown the fire and things the people were carrying. Socrates said that he would think that the unfamiliar things were imaginary, since he would be used to the shadows that he believed were real.

What’s more, the fire would hurt his eyes and he would turn away from it.

Now imagine the prisoner being taken outside into the light of day. Wow, is the light bright! If this poor prisoner were made to look directly at the sun, which, says Socrates, is the source of all things, his eyes would hurt and he wouldn’t know what he was seeing.

The point of this story is to show how hard it is to understand ideal reality. The shadows on the wall of the cave are like the representations of things. A picture of something or a reflection of something is not the thing itself, although we might believe it to be. Similarly, the shadows in the cave are not the things that cast the shadow, although they may help us figure out what these things are.

These things—the things being carried around in the cave—are like the things of our ordinary experience. The world outside the cave represents the ideal world of forms. They can be hard to see if you are used to the dim light of the cave. The sun represents the ideal form of goodness itself. It is the source of everything, but it’s hard to look at directly, even though it’s what gives everything life and makes everything visible.
Here’s a likely interpretation of Plato’s parable of the cave:

- Shadows on the wall stand for echoes, perceptions, reflections, and other images.
- Things being carried around in the cave stand for things in the physical world.
- Things outside the cave stand for ideal forms.
- The sun stands for the ideal form of all goodness.

The parable of the cave suggests that it can be difficult understanding ideal reality because we get accustomed to thinking that apparent reality is all there is. To be a philosopher and learn to do the right thing in any situation, you need to see through appearances and act according to the ideal truth.

### Remembering Truth

Plato had still more to say about how we can understand ideal reality through intuition. He said that we are all born with an understanding of ideal reality. The problem is, most of us forget what we were born knowing because we get fooled by the appearances of things.

Although we may forget ideal reality, we can sometimes remember it again. Plato called this process of remembering anamnesis. Anamnesis explains how we can know things even if we have never experienced them.

### Immortal Souls

To prove anamnesis really works, Plato told this story: Socrates asked a young Greek slave what he knew about geometry. “Not much,” was the reply. Socrates then gave him a mini-geometry quiz, and he got a big fat 0 on it. Socrates next had the slave draw lines in the sand with a stick. The lines represented the geometric forms Socrates was asking about. After working through a series of questions, guess what? The slave was able to correctly answer Socrates’s original questions.

Plato says this shows that we know things that we have never experienced and can remember them if we think about them clearly. This is proof that the human soul is immortal. The thinking goes that we must have existed in some form prior to this life if we are able to understand things that we’ve never actually learned about. This idea went a long way with the neo-platonic religious philosophers of the Middle Ages; they loved it.
The True Sciences

Plato applied his ideal reality to a number of different subjects. The true sciences, he said, are arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music because they only involve figuring out ideal relationships; their purpose is not to be practical. Studying these things teaches us about form and doesn’t confuse us with questions like how much things cost or who has the most influence, or how you can come out ahead. These sciences are the proper study of the philosopher king, revealing the most about the ideal goodness—their perfect, unchanging source.

Living Up to Perfection

Plato said that when people understand how they ought to behave but don’t behave that way, they have a special kind of weakness he called akrasia. Akrasia is weakness of will that takes place when you give in to your short-term, selfish desires rather than doing what you know is right.

Philosophers need to guard not only against ignorance, but against akrasia. Doing so makes them special people, fit to rule others who are naturally more ignorant and weak willed. They must possess the quality Plato called arete—the integrity and strength of character to behave in accordance with ideal goodness.

The Republic—Plato’s Paradise

Plato believed that not everyone has equal amounts of akrasia and arete. Some people are just better than others. Plato took this idea of natural inequality when he wrote his famous dialogue, The Republic, which includes his recommendations for what the ideal government should be like.

If everyone were equally virtuous, there would be no need for government; people would be able to govern themselves. They would live in small groups and help each other voluntarily, making their own basic necessities and sharing them freely. People would recognize that material possessions serve no useful purpose beyond basic survival and they wouldn’t want anything more. There would be no need for wealth, so there would be no greed or jealousy. In turn, there would be no need for an organized government, or for police or soldiers to protect people’s material possessions. Sounds heavenly, doesn’t it?
Chapter 6: The Philosopher King

Rulers, Soldiers, and Tradespeople

The problem is, most people do not realize that real truth and goodness is only to be found in ideal reality. Instead, most people want a lot of worldly possessions. Such desire leads to an imperfect society made up of special groups of people who make luxury items, doctors who give people medicine when they make themselves sick by overindulging, and rulers and soldiers who protect property from those who would try to take it from them. In order to take care of all these needs, Plato theorized a republic divided into three classes of people: rulers, soldiers, and tradespeople. Just guess who get to be rulers? The philosophers, of course! They understand ideal reality—including truth, goodness, and justice—most clearly, so they are in charge. Also they have the fewest selfish desires, not needing many material possessions. They don’t even need to have families, since they regard everyone under their rule as part of their family, loving them all equally. Most important, they don’t form special attachments; the rulers are guided in all things by their intellect.

Next come the soldiers. The soldiers, like the philosopher kings, are unselfish and virtuous. All they want is to protect the state from outside hostility and inner conflict. Their characteristic virtue is courage.

That leaves everybody else to become tradespeople. The tradespeople are motivated mainly by their appetites. They may be more or less courageous or intelligent, but they don’t have to be. Their very appetites, their very desires to get material possessions, make them good tradespeople. They can be as greedy as they want up to the point of causing trouble for others. At that point, the rulers and soldiers step in and make sure that no one gets either too rich or too poor.

The three classes in Plato’s republic correspond to the three main characteristics Plato saw in every individual: wisdom, courage, and appetite. Although people naturally have all of these characteristics, people have varying amounts of each one. So people are tested when they are children to see whether they are naturally wise, courageous, or appetitive. Wise children are trained to become rulers, courageous children to become soldiers, and appetitive children to become tradespeople.

Better Than Democracy or Tyranny

The point of the republic is to promote maximum stability in government, given the characteristics of human nature as Plato understood it. It provides a theoretical alternative to
the existing forms of government in Greece: democracy and tyranny. Plato was happy with neither of these forms. He believed that both of them let selfish people have too much power. Plato thought that philosophers should run things because they are unselfish and would look to the good of all people.

**The Least You Need to Know**

- Plato turned to philosophy when he was disillusioned with politics.
- Plato believed that the world of appearances is only a shadowy emanation of an ideal reality.
- We can come to know the ideal world of forms through inductive reasoning and by “remembering” what we’ve always known (anamnesis).
- In Plato’s ideal republic, philosophers rule with the help of soldiers, keeping the tradespeople in line.