

Republic Bk VI–VII 502c–521b¹

These passages comprise the metaphysical core of the *Republic*, viz. Plato's theory of Forms. This theory is not fully spelled out, but employed in three famous similes that aim to characterise the Good, or goodness itself (αὐτοῦ ἀγαθόν, *auto agathon*).

1. Why is knowledge of goodness (τὸ ἀγαθόν, *to agathon*) central for the ideal city? (504d–506b)
2. What is the central idea behind the simile of the sun? (507d–509c)
3. What are the four domains analogous to the sections of the divided line? (509d–511e).
- 4.* Briefly explain the importance of 'not taking things for granted', which Socrates mentions a few times in the simile of the line.
5. The cave is introduced as 'an analogy for the human situation' (514a). What is this situation?
- 6.* What does the cave analogy tell us about the guardians of the ideal city? (519c–521b)
- 7.* Sketch some connections between the three analogies.

Background. (a) At 505a, Socrates makes explicit a tension between the pivotal importance of knowing or understanding the Good (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα μέγιστον μάθημα, *to agathou idea megiston mathema*) and our inadequate knowledge of it. Later, Socrates admits that the definition of the Good is beyond him (cf. 506d–e). This suggests that Socrates rules himself out as a guardian; but it is consistent with the view expressed in the *Symposium* (199e–200b) that we love or desire what we lack: so, a *philosopher* is one who is not yet wise (i.e. σοφός, *sophos*) but loves (i.e. φιλεῖν, *philein*) to become wise. (b) The common (utilitarian?) view associates goodness with pleasure (ἡδονή, *hedone*, 505b), but Socrates suggests a link with knowledge, intelligence, or practical wisdom (φρόνησις, *phronesis*). This is a key assumption for Plato's ethics. (c) At 506c, there is another allusion to the difference between knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, *episteme*) and belief or opinion (δόξα, *doxa*); see 478c. This matters for the line analogy at 511d–e. (d) Descartes makes frequent use of the *light* or sun analogy: the 'natural light of reason' provides us with immediate insights or intuitive apprehensions of fundamental truths (cf. 508d). Furthermore, like Plato's ascent into the realm of Forms, Descartes promotes to 'withdraw the mind from the senses' (*Meditations*, Preface, AT VII 9)², i.e. to reject (Aristotelian) empiricism.

1 Waterfield translation chapter 9.

2 See Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R. & Murdoch, D. (1984). *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II (p. 8). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.