



THINKER IN BOXES

PLATO

Team: Classical Greek United

Position: First slip

Status: Long dead

There are those who claim that all of Western political theory is really only a response to Plato (427–347 BC). There are also those who claim the pyramids were built by aliens. Who are we to judge?

The reality is that the pyramids were built by humans. They were time-traveling clones of an art student who was supposed to be creating one of those junk and garbage sculptures that spring up around campus from time to time, but still, the reality is that the original art student is mostly human. The other reality is that Plato was also an elitist snob and his antidemocratic ideas, beliefs, and arguments would be distinctly out of step with the liberal ideology that permeates modern Western political theory. While Plato envisions an ideal society in the *Republic*, that society is not in any sense democratic. Plato did not believe that the majority should have its way, and he especially did not believe that any decision should be accepted as correct simply because the masses favored it. After all, he had witnessed the democratic majority in Athens condemn his friend and mentor Socrates to death for corrupting the youth of Athens. Plato's disregard, if not contempt, for the average person derived from his understanding of the very ability of people to perceive the world around them.

Plato believed that one could not rely on his or her senses to discover what was real. He believed that what we see, touch, and taste are just imperfect representations of another actual reality. Unlike the universe about which we are aware, the hidden “real world” is unchanging and perfect; it is a world of “forms.” We may think we *know* what beauty is, but that is just our *opinion* of beauty. All we can have are opinions, because we do not know the true form of beauty. However, Plato would have us believe that there is such a thing as perfect beauty, which is real and unchanging. Similarly, he also believed that there was such a thing as perfect justice, or correct living, although this perfect form would correspond not with what a society commonly understood as just but rather with a real, unchanging equity.

Plato believed that it was only philosophers, like him, who could obtain the ability to see the true forms, and they are the only ones who are in a position to share it with the general public. Basically, it was a lot like our pretentious self-cloning art student saying that only artists understand why building a replica of Stonehenge out of old computers is art and not a pile of garbage in the middle of the quad.

Key to Plato's theory is the belief that it is important for every person to do what he or she does well. Plato believed that people who are good at making shoes, for example, should stick to making shoes; that athletes should only concern themselves with athletics; and that those who can see the true forms (the philosophers) should be the ones to rule. Because of the importance of this governing class, much of the *Republic* is devoted to constructing a state that allows for the proper training of the elite ruling class of philosophers and to specifying the type of training that philosopher-kings should receive.