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A-level Religious Studies
OCR H573/01 · Ancient philosophical influences

Sample factfile

Plato's Cave and the Theory of the Forms

IN A NUTSHELL **Plato (c. 427–347 BCE) argued that the senses show us only shadows, and that reason can lead us to the eternal Forms. The analogy of the cave (Republic VII, 514a–517a) illustrates the journey.**

1 Key terms

Rationalism
knowledge comes from reason

Form
perfect, eternal essence of a thing

Doxa
opinion from the senses

Form of the Good
the highest Form

2 The two worlds

- World of appearances: physical, changing, known by the senses, gives opinion (doxa).
- World of the Forms: eternal, unchanging, known by reason, gives knowledge (episteme).
- Physical things are imperfect copies that "participate in" their Forms.

3 The cave in brief

- Chained prisoners see only shadows cast by a fire, and think they are real.
- One is freed, dragged up into the sunlight, and finally sees the sun.
- He returns to free the others, who mock him and would kill him.

4 What it represents

- Shadows: opinion. The cave: the world of appearances.
- The ascent: education, the soul's turning (518c–d).
- The sun: the Form of the Good. The return: the philosopher's duty to rule (520c).

5 Evaluation

- Strength: a vivid picture of the gap between opinion and knowledge.
- Weakness: it assumes the world of the Forms rather than proving it.
- Popper (1945): rule by philosopher-kings is authoritarian.

6 Exam tip

In a 40-mark essay, AO2 is worth 24 marks. Judge whether the cave is convincing in every paragraph, not only at the end.

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