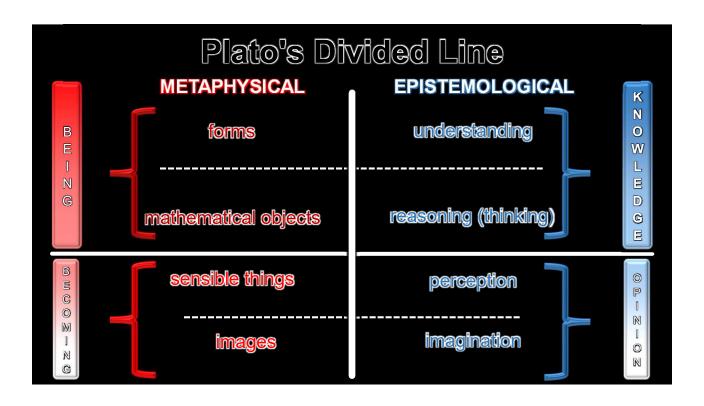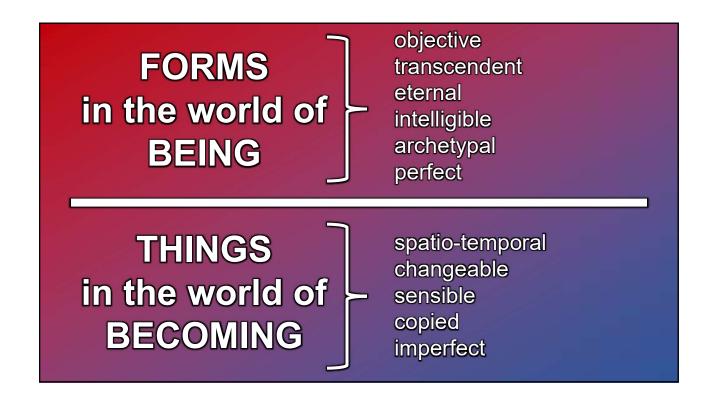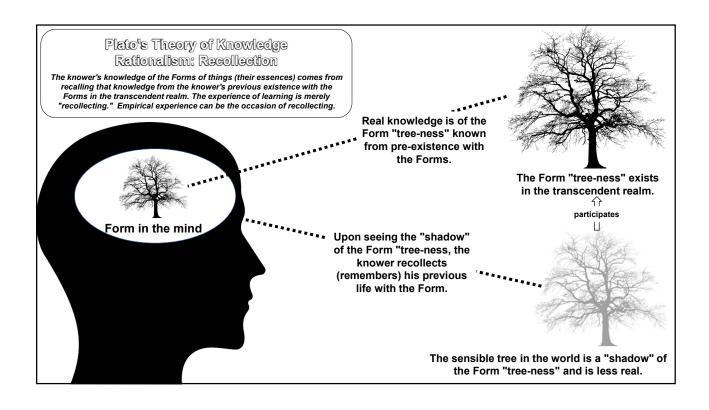# Introduction to Philosophy
Epistemology: Rationalism

Richard G. Howe, Ph.D.
Provost
Norman L. Geisler Chair of Christian Apologetics

Southern Evangelical Seminary
Rock Hill, South Carolina, USA

The Rationalism of Plato

Plato's Divided Line

METAPHYSICAL	EPISTEMOLOGICAL
forms	understanding
mathematical objects	reasoning (thinking)
sensible things	perception
images	imagination

BEING — KNOWLEDGE
BECOMING — OPINION

FORMS in the world of BEING
- objective
- transcendent
- eternal
- intelligible
- archetypal
- perfect

THINGS in the world of BECOMING
- spatio-temporal
- changeable
- sensible
- copied
- imperfect

Plato's Theory of Knowledge
Rationalism: Recollection

The knower's knowledge of the Forms of things (their essences) comes from recalling that knowledge from the knower's previous existence with the Forms in the transcendent realm. The experience of learning is merely "recollecting." Empirical experience can be the occasion of recollecting.

Form in the mind

Real knowledge is of the Form "tree-ness" known from pre-existence with the Forms.

The Form "tree-ness" exists in the transcendent realm.

participates

Upon seeing the "shadow" of the Form "tree-ness, the knower recollects (remembers) his previous life with the Form.

The sensible tree in the world is a "shadow" of the Form "tree-ness" and is less real.

The Continental Rationalist Philosophers

Descartes
(1596-1650)

Spinoza
(1632-1677)

Leibniz
(1646-1716)

Rational vs. Rationalism

One can be rational without being a Rationalist.

❧ **Rational** ☙

the quality of being coherent and reasonable; being consistent with the laws of logic and of common sense as opposed to being overly emotional, irrational, unreasonable.

❧ **Rationalism** ☙

a particular theory of knowledge (epistemology) that maintains that reason is the primary or superior source of knowledge about reality.

Truths of Rationalism

Examples of truths about reality that reason can know include:

➢ *logical truths, e.g., the law of non-contradiction*

➢ *mathematical truths, e.g., 2 + 2 + 4*

➢ *metaphysical truths, e.g., If a is bigger than b and b is bigger than c, then a is bigger than c.*

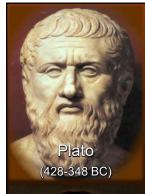➢ *ethical principles, e.g., Harming an innocent person is always wrong.*

Rationalism and Sense Experience

Rationalism either:

➤ *denies that knowledge comes from empirical experience*

or

➤ *Maintains that at least some knowledge is attainable only by reason apart from empirical experience.*

Plato
(428-348 BC)

Plato: Sense experience is an unreliable and inadequate route to knowledge, if not outright deceptive.

Descartes
(1596-1650)

Descartes: Sense experience is unreliable and inadequate as a basis for knowledge, but it may play some secondary part in knowledge.

Characteristics of Rationalism

✓ *The fundamental truths about the world can be known a priori.*

✓ *They are either innate or self-evident to our minds.*

❖ *innate: ideas that are in-born*

❖ *self-evident: a truth immediately known to be true as soon as one understands it*

- *Note: A truth can be self-evident to one person and not to another. For example, the mathematical equation 2 + 2 = 4 might be self-evident to an adult but not to a young child.*