

## PLATO (427-327 BC)

**P**lato was a student of Socrates. His early writings were strongly influenced by those of his mentor and focused on the search for definitions of moral values such as virtue and justice. In *The Republic*, he described everything that our senses perceive in the material world as limited to mere shadows of reality and held that the real truth lies within. He uses the *allegory of the cave* to explain this idea. There are four phases to the allegory, which can be summarised as follows:

- Imagine you are **imprisoned** in a cave. You are shackled to a wall and can only see the shadows of objects, illuminated by a fire, cast on the wall opposite. These shadows are the only things that you have ever seen and all that you have ever thought about. They represent your current reality.
- Suppose that you are **released from the shackles** and allowed to roam freely around the cave. You now begin to see things as they really are and begin to understand the origins of some of the shadows. You begin to question your beliefs about what is real.
- Eventually, you are **allowed out of the cave** where you start to see the fullness of reality. You realise the errors in your beliefs.
- You **re-enter the cave** and try to convince your former inmates that what they accept as the truth is only an illusion. Your arguments are only met with ridicule and rejection by others less enlightened than you. You either succumb to ridicule and go back to your original beliefs about reality or persevere with the truth.

The allegory highlights Plato's belief in the separation of two distinct worlds: one of appearance and one of reality, and his belief that truth and knowledge were to be found within someone. His disagreements with his student Aristotle sparked the *nature vs nurture* debate that still resonates with modern-day thinkers (see Theory 4).

## SHADOWS OF REALITY

### How to use it

Stop me if you've heard this one before:

A forest fire is raging on a deserted island, killing all of the animals in its wake. The only remaining survivors are a scorpion and a frog. The frog asks the scorpion if he knows the way to the sea. The scorpion tells the frog that he will show him the way there if he will give him a lift. The frog asks the scorpion why he should trust him not to sting him. The scorpion replies that if he did that they would both die and that if they worked as a team they would both be saved. The frog agrees and tells the scorpion to jump on his back. The scorpion does so and immediately stings the frog. When the frog asks the scorpion why he had condemned them both to certain death, the scorpion simply replies that 'it was in his nature to do so'.

If you want to follow the doctrines of Plato:

- Start by believing that truth and knowledge are to be found within and that it is in someone's nature to behave in the manner that they do.
- Accept that if the territory represents reality, the map is merely a representation of that reality.
- Acknowledge that everyone responds according to their individual maps and although they may act in ways that you find unhelpful or unacceptable, you must respect that it is their map.
- Appreciate that behaviour is created specifically with regard to the context and reality currently being experienced. Change is necessary when the context and reality change.
- You may not be able to change a person's ingrained behaviour, or even have the licence to do this, but you can get people to reflect on the appropriateness of their actions.

### In the classroom

- Accept that some behavioural traits are ingrained and will be difficult to modify.
- Recognise that you may not have licence to change some aspects of a learner's behaviour.
- If it's questionable, get your learners to reflect on the appropriateness of their behaviour.

### For more on Plato's ideas, read

Plato (1970) *The Republic: The Dialogues of Plato* (trans./ed. B. Jowett). London: Sphere Books.

Plato (1997) *The Trial and Death of Socrates: Four Dialogues*. New York: Classic Books International.