

46. - On Ideas*

1. Plato is held to be the first to use the term 'Ideas'. However, it is not the case that the term did not exist before Plato instituted it, or that the things themselves which he called ideas did not exist, or that they were not known by anybody. Perhaps they were spoken of by some other [thinker] under another name, and by others under yet other [names], for one can give whatever name one likes to something conceived of and which has no accepted name. Indeed, it is unlikely that wise men either did not call them anything before Plato, or else that the things which Plato called ideas, whatever they are, were unknown to them, since there is such power established in them that no one could know anything without understanding them.

It is credible that, prior to the Greeks, there were wise men among other peoples; Plato himself not only gives testimony to this by his journeying in order to perfect his own wisdom, but he also speaks of them in his books. Thus these [wise men], whoever they were, should not be thought to be ignorant of the Ideas, even though they perhaps called them by another name. But concerning the name, enough has been said by now. Let us look at the thing [itself], which is maximally to be considered and examined, in the power of constituted words, since that which anyone wants is to name the thing which he would learn of.

2. In Latin, therefore, we are able to call 'ideas' either forms or species, such that we appear to substitute one word for the [other] word. But if we were to call them 'reasons', we indeed depart from interpreting its character; for the Greek did not call the Ideas reasons: but nevertheless whoever would use this word will not be distant from the thing itself. For the principal Ideas are certain stable and immutable forms or reasons of things; contained in the divine intelligence, they are themselves not formed, and therefore are eternal and always related in the same way to each other. And while these same [Ideas] neither come to be nor perish, all those things which can come to be and perish are said to be formed according to them, as are all those things which [indeed] do come to be and perish.

Only the rational soul has the ability to regard them, through that part of it by which it excels, that is, the mind itself and the reason, which is like a certain interior and intelligible face or eye. And indeed not any rational soul whatsoever [will see] these things, but only that soul which is holy and pure is said to be suitable for this vision, i.e. that soul which has that very eye, by which it sees these things, healthy and sincere and serene and similar to those things which it intends to see.

But what religious person, imbued with the true religion, even though he has not yet been able to regard these things, would dare to deny, nay even not to profess, that all those things which exist, i.e. whatever things are contained in their genus by a certain proper nature so that they might be, are created by God as their author, and that by this author all those things which are to live indeed live, and that the universal security of things and the universal order itself, through which changing things run their temporal courses under certain governance, are contained and governed by the laws of the most high God? And with this established and conceded, who would dare say that God made all things irrationally? And if this cannot be rightly stated or believed, it remains that all things were made by reason, and that man and horse were not [made] by the same reason; for this would be absurd to believe. Therefore things were created individually by their own proper reasons.

* This translation is based on the Latin text in *S. Aurelii Augustini Opera omnia*, in *Patrologia Latina*, edited by J. P. Migne, v. 40, 1865. This translation is for informational purposes only, and should not be cited for the purposes of academic publications without prior comparison with the Latin text. Translation by [Erik Norvelle](#), published under a Creative Commons 2.0 Non-Commercial Share-Alike license.



But where would these reasons be judged to be, if not in the very mind of the Creator? For it was not the case that He was considering something external to Himself, according to which He would establish that which He was establishing, for to believe this is sacrilege. So, if these reasons of all things—created and to be created—are contained in the divine mind, and nothing can be in the divine mind which is not eternal and immutable, and Plato called these principal reasons of things ‘Ideas’, then they are not merely ideas, but they themselves are true, because they are eternal, remaining immutable and in an identical manner. Whatsoever exists comes to be by participation in these, in whatever manner it exists. But the rational soul, among those things which were made by God, surpasses them all and is most close to God, when it is pure; and insofar as the soul cleaves to Him in charity, it will discern these reasons, illuminated by the light diffused by that intelligible [Being], not by bodily eyes, but by the very principle by which it excels, i.e. its intelligence; through the vision [of these reasons the soul] becomes most blessed.

These ‘reasons’, as stated, can be called ideas or forms or species or reasons, and it is conceded to the multitude to call them however it likes, but it is for very few to see that which is true.