Plato lived in Athens and started a school of philosophy called the Academy. Along with his pupil Aristotle, Plato is the most influential thinker in the history of Western philosophy. He is also the earliest Greek philosopher whose writings have come down to us. They are composed of dialogues in which people think together about philosophical questions and problems—much as the characters do in this book.
Socrates is the main character in Plato’s dialogues, which often makes it difficult to tell whether Plato is presenting his own views or those of his teacher. While Plato builds upon the thought of Socrates, he definitely comes into his own when he introduces what is known as his theory of ideas. Plato held that nothing in our everyday world is perfect. Nothing is perfectly good, beautiful or just, for example. Perfect goodness, beauty and justice exist only as ideas. Plato thought of these ideas as eternal and as more real than the things that we see about us. He held that everyday things were imperfect copies of those in an ideal world.

Plato explained how this relates to our everyday experience in his Parable of the Cave. He imagined prisoners who have been chained up their entire lives to face the wall of a cave, upon which a fire at the back of the cave projects the shadows of things passing behind the prisoners. They never get to see the things themselves, and mistake the shadows for reality. While this was like the way that he took most people to live, Plato thought of the philosopher as someone who was freed from the chains and came to know the difference between appearance and reality. Watch out for a version of Plato’s cave in ‘Scruffy, Mutt and the Ideal Dog’.
Scruffy, Mutt and the Ideal Dog

Scruffy and Mutt are the greatest of friends. They often disagree with each other, but they never fight. They know the difference between disagreeing with what someone says and snarling and snapping at them. The two stray dogs like to stroll around the park while the day is young and no one is about, and as they walk they love to talk about their lives and the world in which they live.

‘Did I ever tell you that I come from a family of show dogs, Mutt?’

‘I can’t imagine you as a show dog, Scruffy. You don’t look the type.’

‘No, Mutt, and I never was. Even when I was little my fur was always tangled and I looked a mess, no matter how much I was brushed.’

‘No wonder they called you Scruffy.’

‘I was such a scruffy puppy that the breeder was willing to give me to anyone who would take me, but no one wanted me and in the end I decided to run away and make a life for myself on the streets.’
‘At least you have fur,’ Mutt grumbled. ‘Just look at me. It’s a wonder that they didn’t call me Baldy.’

‘None of us is perfect,’ Scruffy volunteered. ‘Even the best show dogs have imperfections. Their colour is too dark, their muzzle is too short, their coat is too long, or something is not quite right.’

‘They’re perfect by comparison with us,’ said Mutt.

‘But not by comparison with the ideal dog,’ replied Scruffy.

‘Didn’t you just claim that none of us is perfect, Scruffy? In which case, there is no such thing as the ideal dog.’

‘Oh, there is such a thing as the ideal dog, Mutt. Only it isn’t one of us.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Mutt. ‘Sometimes I can’t make head or tail of what you say.’

‘Then I will explain it to you,’ replied Scruffy. ‘Take judges at dog shows. They don’t just compare one dog with another. They compare them all to the ideal dog—or rather to the ideal poodle, the ideal corgi, or the ideal Dalmatian. How could they measure the dogs of this world against the ideal if there were no ideal dog with which to compare them?’

‘What you say is kind of right, Scruffy. Except that the ideal poodle or the ideal Dalmatian is only the dog lover’s idea of the perfect poodle or Dalmatian. It doesn’t actually exist. It isn’t something real.’

‘Come on, Mutt! Next you will be telling me that there is no such thing as a real circle.’
‘Why would I be telling you that?’

‘Because none of those things that we regard as circles—like roundabouts or bicycle wheels—are perfectly circular.’

‘I agree that such things aren’t perfectly circular, Scruffy, although some of them are more perfect than others.’

‘You are right about that, Mutt. Yet we couldn’t judge how good any of them are if there were no such thing as a perfect circle with which to compare them.’

‘I see,’ said Mutt. ‘So you’re saying that there must be such a thing as an ideal or perfect circle in order for us to be able to judge that something like a wheel or a roundabout isn’t perfectly circular.’

‘That’s right, Mutt. That’s exactly what I mean.’

‘And are you also saying that there must be a perfect poodle and a perfect Dalmatian, against which we can judge the imperfections of ordinary poodles and Dalmatians?’
‘Something like that,’ said Scruffy.

‘But no one has ever seen a perfect circle or an ideal dog, Scruffy. How can we judge actual dogs and circles by comparing them with things that we have never seen?’

‘We see them with our mind’s eye, Mutt.’

‘We see them with our mind’s eye? What on earth does that mean?’

‘But that’s just it! The perfect circle and the ideal dog aren’t on earth. They are things that we perceive in our minds rather than through our senses.’

‘Wouldn’t that make the perfect circle and the ideal dog weird kinds of things? If we can see them only with our minds, then they must be very different from the circles and dogs that we see with our eyes.’

‘That’s what I meant when I said that the ideal dog isn’t one of us, Mutt. The ideal dog is something that no breeder can produce, just as the perfect circle is something that no one can make, no matter how hard they try. They are not in the world that we see with our eyes, but in the world that we perceive with our minds.’

By this time Mutt and Scruffy had reached the pond where they always stopped to drink. As Mutt watched Scruffy lapping at the water he became fascinated by the way it made ripples that wrinkled their reflections.
‘Say, Scruffy,’ he began, ‘I can see a couple of dogs that are even scruffier than us.’
‘Where?’ barked Scruffy.
‘Just look in the water and you will see them. See how wrinkly and rippled they are.’
‘Mutt, sometimes you amaze me.’
‘I know that they aren’t real dogs, Scruffy. I’m not that silly. They are just our reflections in the water.’
‘No, I meant that your observation is a stroke of genius.’
‘Whatever do you mean, Scruffy?’
‘Well, you have just said that the dogs in the water are only our wrinkled reflections.’
‘Yes. What of it?’
‘Don’t you see, Mutt? That’s how we compare to the ideal dog.’
‘No, Scruffy, I don’t see.’
‘What I am saying is that just as the dogs in the water are only our rippled reflections, so we are only poor reflections of the ideal dog.’
‘Come off it, Scruffy! How can you compare us to our reflections? We are real dogs and our reflections are not.’
‘We may be real dogs, Mutt, but we are not as real as the ideal dog.’
‘How do you figure that out?’
‘Because the ideal dog is everything a dog should be and ever more will be so, while we are but poor reflections of such a dog and our lives are as fleeting as the play of light upon the water.’
'That sounds very deep, Scruffy. Yet it seems to me that, if we accepted your comparison, it would turn out that all the things we see about us aren’t really real. Only things like the ideal dog and the perfect circle are real.’

‘That’s right, Mutt. I might just as well have pointed to those dogs that spend their lives stretched out upon the sofa with their eyes glued to the television. Do you know the kind of dog I mean?’

‘I do, Scruffy. I have also heard of children who spend most of their waking hours glued to screens like that.’

‘Right, Mutt. Now imagine a pack of dogs that were brought up in a darkened room and chained up so that their eyes were always fixed upon the television.’

‘So that they never saw anything but what was on television?’

‘That’s exactly what I mean. The dogs would mistake the images on the television for the real thing, wouldn’t they?’

‘I suppose they would, Scruffy.’

‘Now suppose that one of the dogs was taken from the room and shown the outside world, so that he saw the actual things that were only pictured on television.’

‘Hot dog! I think that at first he might be very confused. Yet after a while he would discover that what he had taken to be the real world was only the world as it appears on television, and that the images that appeared on the screen were not the things themselves. I’ll bet he would be amazed at his discovery.’
‘No doubt he would be astounded to find out the truth, Mutt. Now let us suppose that he was taken back to the darkened room so that he could tell the other dogs what he had discovered. How do you think they would respond?’

‘They would probably think that he was mad, Scruffy. They might even turn on him if he kept whining on about all of them being deluded into thinking that the pictures on the screen were the things themselves.’

‘It is as you say, Mutt! And aren’t we like the dogs chained up in the darkened room? We think the images that light casts upon our eyes show us the world as it is in reality. So if someone were to say that we see nothing but appearances, and that the world in reality is something quite different, they would be thought to be as mad as that dog.’

‘No doubt you are right about that, Scruffy. Yet what about such things as the perfect circle and the ideal dog, which you say we can perceive with our mind’s eye? Are they also mere appearances?’

‘No, Mutt, they are like the world that the chained-up dogs never see—the reality that lies behind the appearances.’

‘So what are really real are those things that we can perceive with our minds and not the impressions that come to our senses.’

‘That’s what I have been suggesting all along, Mutt.’

‘So the ideal dog and the perfect circle that we inwardly perceive are real, while what we take to be dogs and circles in the world about us are mere appearance?’
‘That would be so, Mutt. What do you think?’
‘I’m not sure what to think, Scruffy. Except, couldn’t it be the other way around?’
‘What do you mean, the other way around?’
‘I mean that the things we perceive in the world about us are real, while those that appear before our inner eye are merely ideas conjured up in our minds.’
‘Why do you always have to tip everything over and turn it upside down, Mutt?’
‘I’m sorry, Scruffy. I didn’t mean to upset you. I just thought that maybe there is no such thing as a perfect circle—not really—while there are such things as bicycle wheels and roundabouts.’
‘You might say that, Mutt. But there wouldn’t be any bicycle wheels or roundabouts if the ideas of them had never suggested themselves to anyone; and how could those ideas have come to mind if no-one ever had the idea of a circle in the first place?’
‘So you’re saying that first there must be the idea of a circle and the idea of a bicycle wheel or a roundabout for bicycle wheels or roundabouts to be invented.’
‘Not only that. We couldn’t see bicycle wheels and roundabouts as circular if we didn’t have the idea of a circle in our minds in the first place.’
‘So we see things with our minds rather than just with our eyes, Scruffy? Is that what you mean?’
‘You are a genius, Mutt! What would I do without you? Without ideas, we couldn’t make sense of anything we saw. We would have no idea of what we were looking at.’

‘I have a very clear idea of what I am looking at, Scruffy.’

‘I am sure that you do, Mutt. What is it?’

‘It is the dog catcher coming down the path.’

Scruffy glanced over his shoulder and then looked back at Mutt. The two of them must have had the same idea, because they both scampered away in the other direction.