Homo erectus appeared 1.5 million years ago, archaic sapient humans 300,000 years ago, fully modern humans 50,000 years ago. The earliest habitations appeared six or seven thousand years ago. A case can be made for the claim that the foundations of Western science are rooted in the Platonic theory of knowledge that sees a sharp division between time and the timeless—when it is combined with Christian theology, that sees the same sharp division. These roots of the family tree of the globalizing mankind of the 21st century may be dated as the turn of the fifth century B.C. When Plato’s theory of knowledge is represented by his parable of the cave is combined with his image of a divided line—both explained in the essay that follows—they may serve as a visual-narrative metaphor for the immense human journey.

That journey, Socrates would say, is one from the darkness of the temporal to the light of the timeless. Through the Socratic dialogues Plato bequeathed to Christianity and, through Christianity to Western civilization, the preference of timelessness to time, of the eternal to what is passing. He maintained, for instance, that the true, the good and the beautiful, as we perceive them on earth, are but poor copies of their sources and paradigms: the ideals of eternal values of the true, the good and the beautiful. Twenty centuries after him Spinoza reasserted this view when he wrote that it is only “love toward a thing eternal and infinite [that] feeds the mind wholly with joy, and is itself unmingled with any sadness.”[1] As I implied earlier, the Platonic dichotomy between time and the timeless came to be built into the foundations of the sciences as well as into all Western philosophies and religions.

The essay that follows maintains that the evolutionary journey of man may still be described as one from darkness to light but not one from time to the timeless. Rather, it is one from the primitive reality of whatever is timeless, to the immense wealth of whatever is temporal. The least significant aspects—the electric charge on the proton, the speed of light—are eternal, are timeless. The most sublime aspects of the human world—love, beauty, knowledge, our lives—are temporal, are passing.
The Platonic theory of knowledge, represented by the metaphor of the cave, is probably the most significant contribution of Antiquity to the Renaissance birth and subsequent growth of Western science. Plato’s dichotomy between timeless forms and the temporal world of the senses is implicit in the character of scientific law. However, with the advance of evolutionary biology, psychology, and social science increasingly more doubt has been cast on the validity of any theory of knowledge which sees the world as divided into the temporal and the timeless. Such a division cannot accommodate the post-Darwinian, post-Freudian, and post-Einsteinian understanding of matter, life, and man. In this essay I wish to outline a new theory of time and knowledge, one which is consistent with the evolutionary view of the world.

In Plato’s Timaeus we find a creation story which depicts time as an impoverished image of the eternally revolving and hence timeless heavens.

The nature of the ideal being was everlasting, but to bestow this attribute in its fullness upon a creature was impossible. Wherefore [the father and creator] resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity, and this image we call time.

Time, however, can no longer be understood as simply related to eternity by contrast. Our age demands a richer metaphor, a new theory which can accommodate our understanding of the world and yet retain a place for the dignity of man.

I argue that time is not a one-way thrust in which all the phenomena of the world equally partake, but a hierarchy of temporalities ranging from human time to the timeless. Each temporality has its distinct qualities and each is associated with one of the stable integrative levels of nature. I will present my case in the form of an epistemic-literary metaphor, as Plato presented his in the narrative of the cave.