

Plato and the Allegory of the Cave

Hi! This lesson is an investigation into Plato's allegory of the cave. It's a famous allegory, and you may know a lot about it already, but there's more to it than meets the eye. Of everything that Plato wrote, the cave is arguably the most enduring and evocative passage. Not only do students of philosophy learn it as a neat encapsulation of much Platonic thought, but it's found its way into popular culture too. Films like *The Matrix*, *Shutter Island*, and *The Conformist* (which the preeminent scholar of Plato, Julia Annas, claims is the only successful visual translation of the allegory), are all testaments to just how powerful its imagery is. Over the course of this lesson, we're going to learn more about this power, along with the allegory itself, how it works, and why it's important.

•• So, without further ado, what is the allegory of the cave? Well, first things first, we need to know what an allegory is, • and I've defined it here as, "A literary device in which a fictional story is used to reveal hidden truths about the real world." In layman's terms, it's an extended analogy. Famous analogies include William Paley's watchmaker argument (in brief, the relationship between God and life is like the relationship between a watchmaker and a watch); on the other hand, famous allegories include George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, in which the history of the Russian Soviet

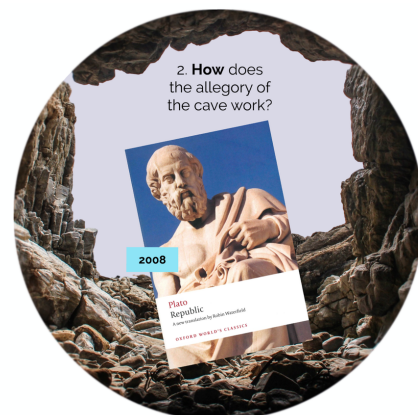
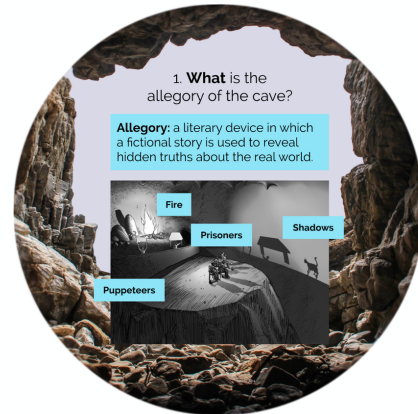
Federative Socialist Republic is told through a story in which animals seize control of a farm. Of course, the allegory of the cave isn't nearly as long as *Animal Farm*, but it's considerably more complicated than a simple analogy. • So, what is the allegory? • Well, in the *Republic*, Plato outlined it like this (although the character who does the outlining is actually Socrates): imagine a group of prisoners chained in a cave and facing a wall so they can't see what's behind them. Behind the prisoners is a fire that allows puppeteers to cast shadows onto the wall, and these shadows are the only things the prisoners can sense (along with the sounds created by the puppeteers). Eventually, in Plato's allegory, a prisoner manages to escape. When he turns around, he's blinded by the fire but glimpses the models held by the puppeteers; he realises they're more real than the shadows on the wall, but this is only the start of his journey. After struggling out of the cave entirely, the escapee eventually reaches the surface. Here, he's blinded by the Sun, but when his eyes adjust he's able to see the things around him in the real world from which the puppeteers have created copies. For the first time in his life, Plato told us, the prisoner can see the real world.

••• So, how does the allegory of the cave work?

Just as *Animal Farm* reveals something about Russian history, what does this allegory attempt to tell us? • Well, in order to answer that question, we're going to dive into the *Republic*, • which was reissued in a new edition of Robin Waterfield's incredibly famous and readable translation back in 2008. ••• First, the character of Socrates

articulates the first half of the allegory, in which the prisoners are chained with the puppeteers behind them, • and the shadows of the models manipulated by the puppeteers are cast on the wall. •

Glaucon, who is Socrates's intellectual sparring partner (although the traffic is often one way), comments that this is a particularly strange picture with strange prisoners, • to which Socrates replies, "They're no different from us." • The prisoners can only see the shadows cast by the fire, • and the models that the puppeteers manipulate before it. • And they talk about the shadows, • and think the sounds of the puppeteers actually come from the shadows themselves. • For the prisoners, Plato concluded, the shadows cast by the puppeteers constitute reality in its entirety, even though we know that the real things casting the shadows, or the models of the puppeteers, are being waved around behind the heads of the prisoners. ••• In *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Julia Annas's outstanding work on the subject, she tells us that Plato thought we were all prisoners, and whilst we're tricked into thinking the



shadows are reality by the societies we live in, we're also duped into this way of thinking by our natures. In brief, we're born trapped in a state of ignorance, and only by the somewhat mysterious process of education can we free ourselves and become enlightened. Second, the character of Socrates invites Glaucon to imagine the escapee being forcibly dragged out of the cave, up a rough, steep slope, and into the blinding sunlight. This is the second half of the allegory. • and Socrates indicates that the escapee would find it a painful and stressful ordeal, and that in the end he still wouldn't immediately be able to see anything because of the Sun's power. • But, eventually, the escapee's eyes would adjust, and he'd be able to see not just the world around him (outside of the cave), but the Sun itself; he'd be able to look directly at it. • By this process, the character of Socrates claims, the escapee would come to understand the importance of the Sun and its responsibility for everything, even the shadows of the imitation copies of reality that the prisoners are forced to watch in the cave. • But thinking about the cave would cause the escapee considerable sadness: he would remember the condition of his fellow prisoners and pity them for their ignorance of reality. • In fact, Socrates goes on to claim, the escapee would rather go through anything than return to imprisonment in the cave. • However, if the escapee did return, the prisoners would claim the journey had ruined his eyesight and wasn't worth making; • in fact, if anyone tried to release the prisoners from their chains and drag them to the surface, they'd turn and kill him. As a brief aside, Plato is alluding to Socrates's actual death here: he glimpsed reality, and returned to Athens to make his students aware of it; however, he was convicted of corrupting the young and sentenced to death by poison. Socrates tried to drag Athenians out of the cave, but they turned on him. ... The key thing in this passage is the Sun. Julia Annas tells us that it's analogous to the Form of the Good, which we don't have time to cover in detail here, but which illuminates the rest of reality; it is the Form of the Good that allows us to truly understand how other things (like beauty and justice, for example) really are. To a certain degree, it fulfils the function of the fire in the cave; however, its illuminating power is so potent that the escapee cannot bare the prospect of returning to imprisonment in the cave (trapped by the ignorance of society). ... Third, the character of Socrates carries this observation through to its conclusion. • People who have escaped the cave and seen the world as it really is can't bare to return to the sphere of petty human concerns; • a point that Plato developed at length. • In fact, once the escapee had become capable of distinguishing between the ignorance of imprisonment and the knowledge of intellectual freedom he would congratulate anyone else who managed to escape and pity those still imprisoned in the cave. • Perhaps reflecting bitterness on Plato's part, the character of Socrates observes that if the escapee decided to laugh at the prisoners, his laughter would be considerably less absurd than if the prisoners decided to laugh at the escapee. ... Anyone who escapes the cave is a philosopher, and the thought of descending back into it again is unattractive.

•• This brings us to why the allegory of the cave is important, and I've got three suggestions that I've gleaned from Julia Annas's excellent introduction to the Republic, although there are many more.

• First, it's pessimistic. Although the imagery of the free thinker escaping the shackles of society and his nature, striving upwards through the earth, and enlightening himself on the surface, is incredibly positive, most people remain imprisoned by their preoccupation with petty and inconsequential concerns. Ultimately, very few people become enlightened philosophers, most remain ignorant.

• Second, it's powerful. As I suggested at the very beginning of this video lesson, Plato's imagery is incredibly evocative and enduring. His allegory has survived for thousands of years, and is constantly reinterpreted in literature and film. • Finally, it's problematic. As Julia Annas points out, it produces persistent issues about exactly what Plato meant and a number of unanswered questions remain (like how exactly the prisoner manages to free himself in the first place). These knotty problems mean that Plato's cave continues to fascinate, and, even in the twenty-first century, new thoughts about it continue to be articulated.

•• That brings us to the end of this investigation into Plato's allegory of the cave. Truth be told, I'm not entirely sure what to make of it. I find it a moving metaphor about the struggle for intellectual freedom that we all face, because of the preconceived ideas we inherit from our family and society. But, I can't help thinking, "Am I trapped in the cave myself?" And I struggle to understand the Form of the Good; Julia Annas does a fantastic job of pointing out problems related to separating it from the other forms, but how Plato conceives of it is still something of a conundrum to me; so the best advice I can give you is to read it for yourself. And on that confusing note, goodbye!

