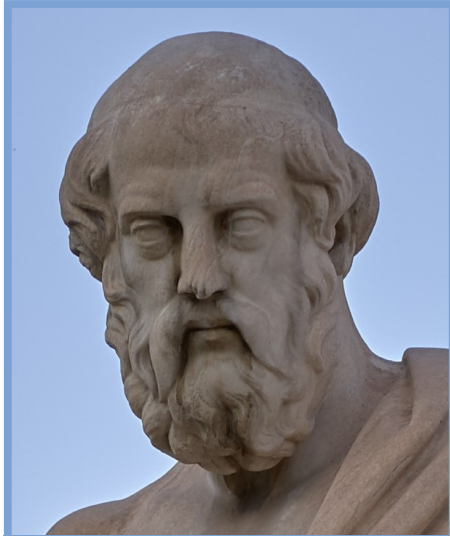


Plato and the Allegory of the Cave

1. **What** is the allegory of the cave?

Arguably, the allegory of the cave is the most famous passage in the Republic, which is itself widely regarded as the most famous dialogue of Plato (c. 428-347 BCE). For some people, the cave is synonymous with Plato, and philosophy students are often taught that it is a neat encapsulation of Platonic thought. As an allegory, Plato's cave is an extended analogy; the difference between an analogy and an allegory is that the former involves a simple comparison between one thing and another, whilst the latter involves a complex comparison with numerous elements. A famous modern allegory is George Orwell's novella, *Animal Farm*; although the allegory of the cave is not as long, it functions in a similar way.



Plato

The first half of the allegory of the cave is outlined in Plato's Republic by the character of Socrates. He begins by asking his intellectual sparring partner, Glaucon, to imagine a group of prisoners chained in a cave and facing a wall so they cannot see what is behind them. Behind the prisoners is a fire that a group of puppeteers use to cast shadows on the wall using a series of models; consequently, the prisoners think the shadows they see on the wall constitute reality in its entirety, because these shapes are the only things they can sense (along with some of the sounds coming from the puppeteers).

In the second half of the allegory, a prisoner mysteriously manages to escape from his chains. When he turns around, he is dazzled by the firelight, but glimpses the models held by the puppeteers; he realises that they are more real than the shadows on the wall, but this is only the start of his journey towards enlightenment. After struggling out of the cave entirely, the escapee eventually reaches the surface. Here, he is blinded by the Sun, but when his eyes adjust he is able to see the things around him in the real world from which the puppeteers have created copies: he can see reality at last.

2. **How** does the allegory of the cave work?

Just as *Animal Farm* reveals something about Russian history, the allegory of the cave reveals something about society, nature, and human knowledge of reality. In the first half of the allegory, Socrates portrays a group of prisoners that is beholden to a shadow puppet show, and claims that all human beings are like these prisoners in some way. In *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Julia Annas explains that Plato believed all human beings are prisoners of both their societies and their natures. In other words, human beings are born trapped in a state of ignorance, which society facilitates, and that only the somewhat mysterious process of education is capable of freeing them from intellectual conformity. Society and nature prevent people from thinking freely.

Nevertheless, it is possible to escape the cave, which one of the prisoners manages, and see reality as it really is (i.e. outside the cave). Here, the Form of the Good, represented by the Sun, reveals the world as it actually is. For the first time in his life, the escapee is able to contemplate and understand how things like beauty and justice really are, instead of making do with the shadows of the imitation copies manipulated by the puppeteers in the cave. Plato followed this thought through to its ultimate conclusion, and claimed that, once he had reached the surface, the escapee would do anything to avoid returning to the cave. According to Plato, the escapee would pity the prisoners: anyone who escapes the cave is a philosopher, and the thought of descending back into it again, with its petty and inconsequential concerns, is unattractive.

Allegory

A literary device in which a fictional story is used to reveal hidden truths about the real world.



The cave: a visual representation of Plato's allegory of the cave.

3. **Why** is the allegory of the cave important?

The allegory of the cave is important for a number of reasons; however, in *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Julia Annas points towards three of particular significance. First, the allegory is pessimistic. Although Plato's cave includes the vivid and uplifting imagery of a man, imprisoned by his nature and society, breaking free from the bonds of intellectual conformity and struggling towards enlightenment, this act of escape is the exception not the rule. According to Plato, most of the prisoners remained trapped in the cave, entirely preoccupied by petty and inconsequential concerns that have nothing to do with how things are in the real world (i.e. on the surface). Second, it is an astonishingly powerful piece of writing. Plato's cave is one of the most evocative and enduring allegories of all time, because it resonates on a number of levels (e.g. it can be interpreted as a commentary on the constraints of nature, the constraints of society, or both). Additionally, it has survived for thousands of years, and is constantly reinterpreted in literature and film (e.g. *The Matrix*, *Shutter Island*, and *The Conformist*).

Finally, Julia Annas points out that the allegory of the cave is deeply problematic. For example, it follows on from the analogy of the Sun and the analogy of the divided line, and appears designed to assimilate these ideas; however, for various reasons it cannot be read as a simple synthesis. The allegory of the cave, as an extended analogy, contains too many complex elements that go beyond the simple imagery of the earlier analogies. Likewise, it raises a number of questions that are either never answered or left unsatisfactorily addressed. For example, how does the prisoner manage to free himself, and did Plato know himself? This issue goes entirely ignored, along with how philosophers, once enlightened, can be convinced to return to the cave for the benefit of the prisoners, given the fact that Plato previously concluded they would do everything in their power to avoid this. It is because of these knotty problems that the allegory of the cave continues to fascinate; and, even in the twenty-first century, new thoughts about it continue to be articulated.

George Thinks

I'm in awe of the allegory of the cave as much as anyone, not least because it inspired one of my favourite films, *The Matrix* (I know, what a cliché)! I think it's an amazing and moving piece of writing, because it challenges us all to question the societal assumptions that we so often lazily accept. However, at another level I find Plato's cave particularly challenging. As Julia Annas points out, the allegory is not as easy to understand as it initially looks; it doesn't quite do what Plato claimed, and it's open to interpretation in a variety of ways. Plus, every now and again, I can't help but think, "Am I trapped in the cave myself?" So, overall, my feelings about Plato's cave are somewhat mixed, and it's an area of philosophy I have much more learning and thinking about to do in order to straighten out my own understanding. I hope this is something you'll consider doing yourself. As with almost all areas of philosophy, the allegory of the cave demands critical engagement; so, please, go away, read it for yourself, and consider your own conclusions carefully.

