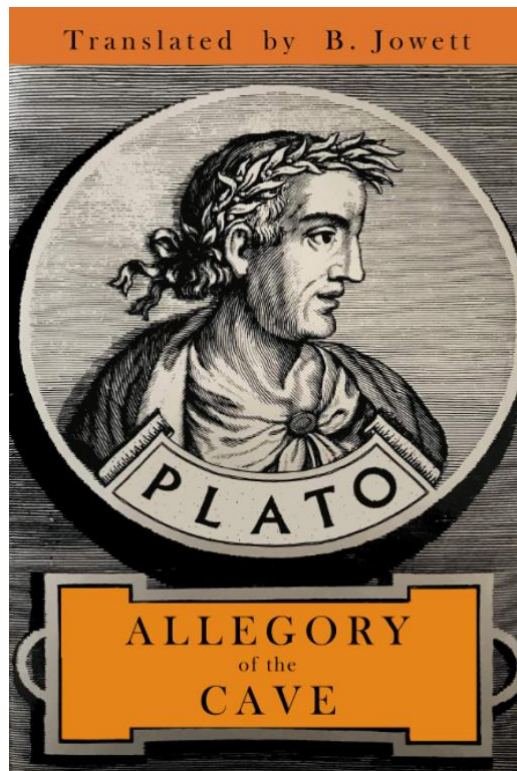


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Plato's The Allegory of the Cave
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The Allegory of the Cave' by Plato*

The main idea of this allegory is the difference between people who simply experience their sensory experiences, and call that knowledge, and those who understand real knowledge by seeing the truth.

The allegory actually digs into some deep philosophy, which is not surprising since it comes from Plato. Its main idea is the discussion of how humans perceive reality and if human existence has a higher truth. It explores the theme of belief versus knowledge.

The Perception

Plato theorizes that the group of people tied up in the cave would assume that the shadows they see on the wall are reality. Plato's theory further states that the echoing sounds the prisoners hear are perceived as reality.

This false reality is all that the people in the cave know. They have no true knowledge of the real world. However, they fully believe that what they see on the cave wall is reality, and even try to name the shadows they see passing by.

Plato's cave allegory further proposes that one of the prisoners escapes or gains freedom from the cave. The freed prisoner moves toward the fire, which temporarily blinds him. As he gains his eyesight and moves into the real world, he gains a greater sense of reality.

After understanding greater reality, the prisoner returns to the cave to try to compel the other prisoners to experience this new world, but when he returns to the cave, his eyes can no longer see in the darkness.

Plato's cave allegory also shows four stages of life. The first stage, that of the prisoners in the cave, is imagination. In this stage, human beings are only imagining what reality is like, just like the prisoners viewing the shadows on the wall.

The second stage is the stage of thought. This stage occurs when the person realizes that there are real things, what Plato calls the Forms, that exist outside of the shadow world.

When his eyes adjust, he is able to take in the actual sun and its light, and this is the stage of understanding. Eventually, he reaches full enlightenment, which Plato called the Form of the Good.

The idea – that we may not know what true reality is – becomes the basic meaning of this allegory, and this theme comes up in pop culture quite often. Many books and movies carry this theme, giving the reader or viewer the chance to question their own perceptions. Here are some examples:

The Truman Show—* In this popular movie, the main character, Truman Burbank, discovers he is living in an elaborately created reality TV show, and that discovery shakes his understanding of the world.

The Lego Movie—* Though it's meant for children, The Lego Movie explores the same ideas of the Allegory of the Cave as Emmet discovers he is just a plaything for a boy and his dad.

Fahrenheit 451—* In this book by Ray Bradbury, society becomes the fake reality and the main character must ascend to true reality as he pulls away from society and its rules.

The Allegory of the Cave proposes one of life's ultimate questions: what is reality? According to the allegory, reality is dictated by our perception of it, and as we gain knowledge through education, perception changes.

Because the Allegory of the Cave answers one of the most basic human questions, its main themes are the foundation for many books and movies in modern culture. If you look closely, you can see the idea of reality and perception woven into many compelling tales.

Thus, according to Plato, the cave is the world of the senses, which prevents our upward journey to the world of reality. The upward journey is the rise of the soul into the intellectual world. In this world of knowledge, the idea of good comes at the end. Once this good is achieved, man gains all things beautiful and right ethically, and reason and truth intellectually.

Plato is of the opinion that it is the duty of the legislators to use such intellectuals in the management of the public affairs. At present, only the selfish and ambitious people are interested in administration. Such people are more interested in their self-gratification than in public service. That is why a state which is governed by many selfish people is always experiencing unrest. Those intellectuals, if pulled into public services, will govern the state jointly and therefore there will be peace, order and progress in such a state.

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato distinguishes between people who mistake sensory knowledge for the truth and people who really do see the truth. It goes like this:

The Cave

- Imagine a cave, in which there are three prisoners. The prisoners are tied to some rocks, their arms and legs are bound and their head is tied so that they cannot look at anything but the stonewall in front of them.
- These prisoners have been here since birth and have never seen outside of the cave.
- Behind the prisoners is a fire, and between them is a raised walkway.
- People outside the cave walk along this walkway carrying things on their head including; animals, plants, wood and stone.

The Shadows

- So, imagine that you are one of the prisoners. You cannot look at anything behind or to the side of you – you must look at the wall in front of you.
- When people walk along the walkway, you can see shadows of the objects they are carrying cast on to the wall.
- If you had never seen the real objects ever before, you would believe that the shadows of objects were 'real'.

The Game

- [Plato](#) suggests that the prisoners would begin a 'game' of guessing which shadow would appear next.
- If one of the prisoners were to correctly guess, the others would praise him as clever and say that he were a master of nature.

The Escape

- One of the prisoners then escapes from their bindings and leaves the cave.
- He is shocked at the world he discovers outside the cave and does not believe it can be real.
- As he becomes used to his new surroundings, he realizes that his former view of reality was wrong.
- He begins to understand his new world, and sees that the Sun is the source of life and goes on an intellectual journey where he discovers beauty and meaning
- He sees that his former life, and the guessing game they played is useless.

The Return

- The prisoner returns to the cave, to inform the other prisoners of his findings.
- They do not believe him and threaten to kill him if he tries to set them free.

*' The Allegory of The Cave' by Plato – The Meaning

The Allegory of the cave by Plato should not be taken at face value. In essays and exams, whoever is marking it expects you to have a deeper understanding of the meaning of the theory. You can then use these to think about criticisms and then to form your own opinion.

- In Plato's theory, the cave represents people who believe that knowledge comes from what we see and hear in the world – empirical evidence. The cave shows that believers of empirical knowledge are trapped in a 'cave' of misunderstanding.

The Shadows

- The Shadows represent the perceptions of those who believe empirical evidence ensures knowledge. If you believe that what you see should be taken as truth, then you are merely seeing a shadow of the truth. In Plato's opinion you are a 'pleb' if you believe this (their insult for those who are not Philosophers)!