

# Plato's Allegory of the Cave

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Let me show in a parable to what extent our nature is enlightened or unenlightened.

Envision human figures living in an underground cave, with a long entrance across the whole width of the cave. Here they've been from their childhood and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning their heads around.

Above and behind them a fire is blazing in the distance. They see only their own shadows which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave. For how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

Between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way and a low wall built along the way like the screen which puppet players have in front of them over which they show the puppets. Do you see men passing along the wall, carrying all sorts of articles which they hold projected above the wall? Statues of men and animals made of wood and stone and various materials?

Of the objects which are being carried in like manner, they would only see the shadows, and if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

And suppose further that there was an echo which came from the wall. Would they not be sure to think when one of the passers by spoke that the voice came from the passing shadows? To them, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

And now look again and see what will naturally follow if one of the prisoners is released. At first, when he is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his head round and look towards the light, all this would hurt him and he would be much too dazzled to see distinctly those things whose shadows he had seen before.

And then conceive someone saying to him that what he saw before was an illusion. But that now when he's approaching nearer to reality and his eyes turn toward more real existence, he has a clearer vision. What will be his reply?

And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, will he not be perplexed? Would he not think that the shadows, which he formerly saw, are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

And suppose once more that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun itself. When he approaches the light, his eyes

will be dazzled. He will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities. He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world.

But first he would see the shadows best, next the reflections of objects in the water, and then the objects themselves.

Then he will gaze upon the stars and the spangled heavens and the light of the moon. He will see the sky and the stars by night. Last of all, he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of it in the water but he will see the sun in its own proper place and not in another.

And he will contemplate the sun, as it is. Would he not proceed to argue that it is the sun who gives the seasons and the years and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which his fellows have been accustomed to behold? Truly he would first see the sun, then reason about it. And when he remembered his old habitation and what was the wisdom of the cave his fellow prisoners, do you not suppose that he would bless himself for the change? Pity them? And if they were in the habit of conferring honors among themselves on those who were the quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before and which followed after and which were together and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honors and glories? Or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say, with Homer, "better to be the poor servant of a poor master and to endure anything rather than think as they do and live after their manner."

Imagine, once more, such a one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation. Would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness? And if there were a contest of measuring the shadows and he had to compete with the prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak and before his eyes have become steady, wouldn't they all laugh at him and say he had spoiled his eyesight by going up there? That is was better not to even think of ascending?

And if anyone tried to release another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

It is the task of the enlightened not only to ascend to learning and to see the good but to be willing to descend again to those prisoners and to share their troubles and their honors, whether they are worth having or not. And this they must do, even with the prospect of death.

They shall give of their help to one another wherever each class is able to help the community.