

Assess the simile of the cave.

This essay will assess the simile of the cave by concluding whether the simile is strong in explaining society, both the way it is now and the ideology of it, with philosophers ruling, it will also decide whether it would be right to implement such a society.

The simile of the cave is a story within Plato's Republic.

The simile of the cave asks you to Imagine prisoners, who have been chained since their childhood deep inside a cave: not only are their limbs immobilized by the chains; their heads are chained in one direction as well so that their gaze is fixed on a wall. Behind the prisoners is an enormous fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway, along which puppets of various animals, plants, and other things are moved along. The puppets cast shadows on the wall, and the prisoners watch these shadows. When one of the puppet-carriers speaks, an echo against the wall causes the prisoners to believe that the words come from the shadows. Suppose a prisoner is released and compelled to stand up and turn around. At that moment his eyes will be blinded by the sunlight coming into the cave from its entrance, and the shapes passing by will appear less real than their shadows as that's all his ever known, shadows. He would go outside and see all sorts of objects; the last object he would be able to see is the sun. Which, in time, he would learn to see the sun as the object that provides the seasons and the courses of the year, presides over all things in the visible region, and is in some way the cause of all these things that he has seen. Once enlightened, so to speak, the freed prisoner would not want to return to the cave to free "his fellow bondsmen," but would be compelled to do so. Another problem lies in the other prisoners not wanting to be freed: descending back into the cave would require that the freed prisoner's eyes adjust again, and for a time, he would be one of the ones identifying shapes on the wall. His eyes would be swamped by the darkness, and would take time to become acclimated. Therefore, he would not be able to identify the shapes on the wall as well as the other prisoners, making it seem as if his being taken to the surface completely ruined his eyesight.

Plato is distinguishing between philosophers and non-philosophers, showing why the philosopher has the possibility to attain wisdom and happiness, whereas the non-philosophers do not.

Philosophers love knowledge, they are infallible and concerned with "what is", they have gold and reason within them. Non philosophers love opinion and belief, they are fallible and they are concerned "with what is" and "what is not", they have silver (the Auxiliaries) and bronze/iron (producer's) within them, they also have ignorance (producers) and belief (Auxiliaries) within them.

The prisoners are symbolising the Masses (Auxiliaries and Producers). They are content to believe those mere images are realty.

The man who leaves the cave is the true philosopher. He initially gains belief, while he is interested in the new "things" he sees. As he moves beyond images of things to things themselves, to the world of the forms and finally to the form of good itself (the sun) he gains wisdom, intelligence and the power of reason. When he looks at the sun, he

receives a vision of the Form of the Good; he then gains total and true understanding (this relates to the next simile, the simile of sun).

When the Philosopher returns to the cave to try to enlighten his fellow prisoners, this is when his mission begins. He returns out of a sense of fairness, not because he wants to revisit the ignorance of the cave. However the masses are comfortable with their world and refuse the philosophers attempt to free them. The idea here is that most people like their limited state and do not want to see and think more clearly. Eventually Plato argues the prisoners will kill the philosopher (Plato is thinking here of Socrates, who was killed by the people of Athens).

The biggest problem with this point is that if the masses will not accept what the philosopher is saying then how will he ever introduce the state of the Republic? How are the philosophers going to be leaders if they cannot get anyone to follow them, also the simile emphasises the reluctance of the philosopher to return to the cave to free the others, this is a bad quality in a ruler. Knowledge does not guarantee the qualities of a good ruler other qualities are needed e.g. empathy.

The simile of the cave and the society it suggest to be just is deeply criticised.

Surely for a society to be “just” it should be equal but in Plato’s Republic it is far from equal as the philosophers lead followed by the Auxiliaries and then the masses, it is very undemocratic and unfair to divide up people and categorize people.

The cave and the real world are far from identical so it can be argued that the simile of the cave is a bad analogy. Also it is argued that today’s general public are not comparable with the prisoners in the cave, however the public at the time the book was written may of then been comparable.

Do we live in an illusion? Is the Empirical world just an illusion? Plato is not clear. Is it even possible to live in an illusion all the time? Surely at least one person would realise but the Plato would argue the one person that realised is the true philosopher.

Are the philosophers really accessing the real world or are they living in an illusion?

Why can we not gain knowledge and not just belief from the Empirical world? Plato does not state.

The philosophers are ignorant to the potential of the producers but Plato believes the philosophers do not have ignorance but understanding.

Socrates was killed is Plato suggesting this is far as the philosopher will get?

The ideology of the Republic creates ethical danger, as there would be a majority ruled by the few.

Is the moral rational knowledge enough for the philosopher to rule? Many would argue it is not.

With the above criticisms in mind it is argued can the Republic be implemented? And can the Philosopher really do it?

Some of the criticisms relating to the cave may be relevant but Plato thinks the Philosopher’s can make real the Republic by “wiping the slate of human society and human habits clean”.

The first generation of Guardians would send away all those in the community over ten years old, leaving the children, whom they would educate to be citizens of the new community.

It is argued however that it is impossible to re-organise a society from the ground up as much violence and destruction would have to be justified to achieve this. It is also argued that an attempt to organise society along rational principles is destructive.

For society to be healthy it must be allowed to develop from within, growing naturally, not subject to a rigid system of rules and principles.

The simile of the cave is not strong in explaining society as it has many flaws and criticisms. It may have been a stronger analogy at the time it was written. However within today's society it has become very weak as we have a great knowledge of equality which the Plato's idea of society does not consider. Also we have a large understanding of morality and I personally find Plato's ideology of society to be very unmoral as it discriminates against the class one is in. e.g. Guardians, Auxiliaries or Producers. It would not be right to implement such a society as it would create a huge class divide, much violence and unequally which in today's society we would understand to be unethical. I also believe would be virtually impossible to implement such a society as I believe it would cause a huge revolt maybe even a war between the Producers and the higher classes, the Auxiliaries and the Guardians.