

## Explain Plato's allegory of the cave.

Plato's allegory of the cave starts begins with the description of prisoners in a cave; they are kept in a cave with no natural daylight, they are chained facing a wall and cannot move or look around. These prisoners have always been like this and no nothing else. Already from Plato's description we get the idea of a group of people with very limited knowledge, having grown up in these surroundings they are ignorant to anything else. The fact that they are prisoners suggests they are trapped into living like this and kept from other knowledge.

The allegory then continues with a description of a fire at the back of the cave, on the opposite wall to the prisoners, they cannot see the fire or anything else behind them, in front of the fire is a run way on which models and shapes of objects are taken across, the shadows of these objects created by the fire projects onto the wall the prisoners are facing. The shadows are hazy, with unclear outlines; they aren't even the shadows of real objects, just models and shapes of them. The prisoners see these shadows, and given their lack of knowledge of anything else assume these shadows are real, that the shapes on the wall are the realities of their world. Furthermore the people moving the shapes past the fire speak to each other, causing echoes to bounce off the opposite wall for the prisoners to hear. The prisoners assume these are the noises of the shapes they see. Here Plato is showing how what the prisoners take to be reality is based only on what they can see; they do not know anything else and take the shadows and noise at face value. They believe these shadows are all that is real and that this world is the reality and as far as life goes. Plato called this 'eikasia' meaning the lowest level of understanding, the prisoners do not know any better and do not strive to find out any better, they do not question these shapes and noises, do not worry that their sensory perception may be mistaken. The eikasia state of mind could today be represented by narrow minded people, who are set in their views and do not wish to develop their beliefs further, question them, or attempt to understand other views. The prisoners in the cave represent those who have not opened their minds to question, who have not held philosophical thoughts and so take the world as it is by what they see or have been told is true.

Next Plato asks us to imagine if one of the prisoners was removed from the cave, when they get up from their shackles and turn to face the fire, they will be in great pain, first from the ache of moving muscles they have not used and then from the glare of the fire. He will come face to face with the objects they first saw as shadows, however his eyesight will not have adjusted to light and the real objects will appear less real than the shadows he originally knew, this will confuse the prisoners, why has he been released to experience pain and puzzlement? This represents the confusion people feel when they first open their minds to new philosophical ideas, the ideas may be more complicated, so seem less favourable to their original ideas and thus cause confusion and maybe distress as the person has been forced to examine what they thought was reality.

The prisoner is then forced up a steep and rocky incline to the daylight outside, it is bright and his eyes are still not adjusted, the journey will be painful. His journey upwards is very symbolic of the journey we go on in our minds when we start to ask philosophical questions, the fact that it is not an easy journey shows how you cannot go from ignorance to wisdom is one step, but that it will take a while and the path their may not be easy.

Once the prisoner is outside he will not be able to take in everything he sees, much like a person receiving a wealth of knew information, it will take him a while to 'digest' his surroundings and make sense of them. Plato's point here is that this world of truth and *real* reality is so different it takes us time to adjust from our previous mistaken existence. In time the prisoner will be able to look at the ground, trees, objects and see

himself in water. Eventually he will be able to look at the sun and see it as the basis for all life. Here Plato is using the sun as a metaphor for wisdom, and enlightenment or even God. The prisoner is like us, experiencing all these new things, which eventually lead him to the sun, we experience new thoughts and grasp a new understanding of the world.

With his newly found knowledge the prisoner feels sorry for the others in the cave, he knows now that their skills and perceptions are useless in the *real* world. He decides to go back down and tell them what he has learned, much like when someone learns something that will benefit others they want to 'spread the news'. The prisoners in the cave have a game; naming the shadows that go past and seeing who is quickest to name the next shadow. When the prisoner who has been outside returns he will not be used to darkness, his skill at this game will have worsened and he will not be very good at it. He knows this does not matter as he has seen what is beyond this cave, the other prisoners however will see him as useless; he has left them and is now worse off, in their eyes, than before. He cannot play their game properly and given their lack of awareness this is all that is of value in the cave. If the prisoner tries to tell the rest what he has seen they won't believe him, they will see his journey as a waste of time as they do not understand what he's speaking about and he has lost his cave skills. The prisoners are in a state of ignorance, and do not want to improve their present state. It is suggested that in the end they will kill him.

Plato's allegory works on many levels; it can be seen as a criticism of those who revel in ignorance and do not try to extend themselves as well as an example of how critical people can be to new ideas. The chained prisoners personify the phrase 'ignorance is bliss' and it could be said that their chains are influences of society which stop us from questioning but also represents that people are scared of big changes. The cave could also be a useful allegory to explain Plato's world of Forms; the shadows of the cave represent the falsities of this world, the imperfect, transient and changing qualities, whereas the outside and daylight are the perfect Forms of justice, truth, beauty etc which are unchanging. People think that what they can see visually is reality when in fact it is, according to Plato, what they cannot see that is actually reality. The fact that the prisoner who has been outside cannot convey what he has experienced to the others shows how we can only describe through experience and that you have to go on the long, arduous journey yourself. The prisoner who is freed could also represent Socrates, who tried to inspire thought among the people of Athens but was killed for turning people against the ideas of the normal Greek gods and corrupting the young. Nowadays we could compare the cave to technology and the media, many people's opinions are narrowed by what they see on T.V or read on the internet, and so they do not look 'outside' to find knowledge themselves but accept what they read on a screen, like shadows on a wall.

