

The Analogy of the Cave

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a) Explain Plato's metaphor of shadows in the analogy of the cave.

In the analogy of the cave Plato puts forward the theory that a group of men (representing the vast majority of mankind) are captured at birth and chained in a cave, so they can only look at a wall. Behind them, the captors build a fire and then walk in front of the fire on a road running perpendicular within the cave so that shadows are cast on that wall. The captives can only see the shadows on the wall, for their heads are fastened so that they cannot turn around. The captors carry by various birds, animals and objects, making noises whilst doing this, and the prisoners think the shadows are making these sounds, and start giving names to the different shadows, believing they are the real objects, for they know nothing of the real objects. The captives compete with one another, and try to remember the order in which the shadows will appear,

These shadows represent the illusion of the particulars; they represent everyday life, and the way most people see it; at face value and not truly understanding the meaning of it, nor in fact trying to, the cave is the physical, changing world that we accept at face value everyday. A freed prisoner would be able to see beyond this illusion, after adjusting his eyes to the brighter light, as he can see the real objects being cast in front of the fire to make shadows, however he still would not understand their significance, although he would be able to see past the face value of the shadows, even if he did not accept the reality of the objects, as he would see that the shadows are cast from something, whether he believes the shadows are reality or the objects themselves, he can still see a degree deeper into the situation than those unable to see the fire, he has beliefs of common sense, although not a knowledge. If he were to be taken further up the cave, and into the sunlight, his eyes would be blinded immediately, however, as he adjusted, he would be able to slowly see the real world, this is the world of forms. Forms are the objects that are portrayed in front of the fire in the cave, however, in the cave, they are in the physical world, and in the light of the fire, it would be impossible for him to understand their meaning. First he would see their shadows and reflections in the light of the sun; Plato would say at this point he is using reason, and is beginning to understand the real world- the world of forms (the world of the perfect horse). When his eyes are fully adjusted, he can see the world of forms in its full, and begin to understand it, using his intelligence. Finally, when he can stare directly into the sun, he will understand the true form of the good.

Plato believed that our world as we knew it was based on forms, but what we saw were the shadows cast for us, and these shadows we see are the impermanent and changing particulars of the physical world, all based on the pure forms of the real world (the permanent world), which we are shielded from by the constraints placed upon us, and the blinding light that would deter us should we ever escape our constraints. However, according to Plato, we are perfectly content with the false world of change we are viewing on the back wall of the cave, as it is all we know about, and should we be freed, we would be utterly unwilling to be shown the real world, because of the uncertainties and the blinding light. We would in fact have to be

brought kicking and screaming into the real world of forms. His Use of the metaphor of shadows is to help us understand the relationship between the particulars of the physical world and the forms of the real world. This is necessary as it is hard to understand such complex ideas without a metaphor to refer to and aid in the explanation.

b) Plato's understanding of human reasoning basically consists of his belief that humans are terrified of change and incapable of helping themselves; they must be dragged into the light kicking and screaming, and then held there until they adjust to the light. He might be criticised on these grounds for being too harsh on the reasoning of humans. But his experience with people of that time would give him great grounds for criticising human reason in this way: his teacher and mentor, Socrates, was condemned to death for teaching philosophy to school children, and "introducing new gods". Plato would portray this in the analogy of the cave with Socrates as the man dragging the freed prisoner up through to the surface, and the prisoner's utter unwillingness to be enlightened. In this case, Plato saw the prisoners as the aristocrats who has Socrates killed, so unwilling to be shown the real world, that they killed the man helping them and their young to do so.

Plato is perhaps a little too harsh on those constrained in the bottom of the cave; stating that they take everything at face value and that their lives comprise of memorising their surroundings and competing with each other. He disregards the emotions and feelings of the masses. He fails to see the deeper side of those he regards as incapable of being helped, or ever escaping from their constraints, and holds a certain belief that their life is hardly worth living, under such false pretensions of reality. This could be seen as a rather elitist and arrogant point of view, but this is nothing if not expected of Greek philosophers, as they were the highest of the high in society, and regarded themselves even higher.

Finally Plato's argument that man would sooner abandon reality and return back to the comfort of the physical world than accept, or believe the real world, is again a rather pessimistic view of the curiosity and desire for knowledge and understanding that we as humans must satiate. He seems to believe that we have no desire for knowledge whatsoever, and are not only content in our ignorance, but utterly intent on protecting it. For this I see him as overly pessimistic, and rather vainglorious.