

Explain Plato's use of the metaphor of shadows in his allegory of the cave

Plato used the concept of a cave, with which prisoners lived within, to explain the different types of worlds (world of ideas and the natural world). In this story, he writes about many different concepts, in which is illustrated throughout his work. Most of the story corresponds to the beliefs in which Plato has.

To begin with, there are some prisoners sitting, chained to the back of the cave, with a fire creating shadows of themselves and the objects behind them, on the back wall. They see this as the real objects because they have no real knowledge of what the real world or real things are like as they only see reflections.

When one man breaks free, he gets to experience the real world, instead of just seeing shadows of the objects and other prisoners. This prisoner realises that up until this point he has only been seeing shadows. This part of the story corresponds to the way that objects shadows, will always be different and forever changing.

Whilst in the real world, the prisoner notices the beauty of the world (the flowers and animals). He begins to question where the objects etc in the real world, actually come from. He then notices the sun, which is giving life to the flowers and animals, and compares it to the fire, which as creating the shadows in the cave. This corresponds to the form of the good. As the form of the good is the start of everything, it is where the 'forms' in the world of ideas, gets their existence from. Which is what is happening in this analogy. The sun is seen as the form of the good, as it is giving life to the rest of the human world.

The escaped prisoner then decides, that he wants explain to the other prisoners that the shadows are not the real world, but in fact are just reflections of the actual real world. So he returns to the cave and he starts to stumble because he is no longer used to the dark. As he tries to convince the other prisoners about the real world, and how the world they are living in is just a mere illusion and reflection of what is actually real. They do not believe him and are happy to live the life they are living without knowing the true world. In the end they end up killing him. Which is like what happened to the famous philosopher Socrates.

The analogy of the cave is very similar to the concept Plato uses of the world of ideas and the real world, which we live in. He uses the shadows as the real world and the idea of the cave in which the prisoners are trapped in as the natural world. They have been believing this all their lives and don't like change.

The analogy of the cave helps to understand the two different types of world's as it helps to understand that there is change in the real world, and is all brought to life by the sun, which is the same in the world of ideas, with the form of the good.

On what grounds might Plato's understanding of human reason be criticised.

Plato might be criticised on many reasons due to his understanding of human reason. He believes that there are two worlds, the world of ideas (where we gain all knowledge and ideas of everything, from the perfect forms), and the natural world (where we recall everything we have learnt from the world of ideas).

Plato believes that in the world of ideas, there is a perfect form of everything, (e.g. perfect form of a horse, justice, table etc). He believes that our souls before birth and after death are taken to the world of ideas to pick up more knowledge of the different things, which is then taken back to the natural world, where these are put into practice.

As the soul picks this up from the world of ideas, it uses it in the natural world to understand what is right and put this into practice. But this could be criticised because, if you know right then you do right. Whereas, this is not true, because there is crime etc going on which is done by humans. So this is criticised because the form of right is in the world of ideas where all of our souls go and picks this up, and uses it in the real world, but this does not happen.

Plato might also be criticised for his understanding of human reason, because over time good and justice changes. Whereas, if we were to go along with the forms in the world of ideas, this would not be true. This is because the forms never change and therefore the form of justice will never change, but this is not true within the natural world, because everything is constantly changing here.

We also use our mind to decide what we do, which we gain from our senses, and things in this world are constantly changing so it is not very reliable. Whereas Plato believed that everything was the same and non-changing in the world of ideas.

Justice is experienced in both worlds. Your soul will get the form of justice/injustice from the world of ideas. But you will also see and experience justice/injustice in the real world. Which will enable us to see things from both points of view.

Plato was criticised on many of his concepts about human reason, but even though the concepts make sense. They may not be able to be used because the natural world is constantly changing and is timeless, whereas the world of ideas is not. It stays the same.