

Explain Plato's use of the metaphor of the shadows in his Allegory of the Cave.

Plato uses this Allegory of the caves in an effort to explain his theory of Forms. The Allegory of the cave is one of his three attempts to explain his all-important theory. Plato uses the Allegory of the cave to show the difference between belief and knowledge, i.e., nothing is what it seems. He uses it to express his theory, his own knowledge of how the mind grows and how everything we know is from what we experience.

In the allegory of the cave, which is in Plato's infamous book, the 'Republic', tells the story of prisoners in a cave. Plato creates a story using metaphors so that we can grasp the concept of his ideas more easily.

Now in the allegory, he begins to describe the cave. Now in this cave are chained up prisoners; the prisoners represents us. The prisoners have been in this specific cave all their lives and have seen nothing else but the opposite wall and the shadows of passing people. They not only see the shadows of the passing people but they hear what they believe are echoes of voices from the shadows that they see as they know no better. He compare the prisoners to us and the shadows that they see is the equivalent to his theory of forms, he explains that what we see is only a small part of what really exists and what is really out there for the prisoners. He also mentions that what we believe is real or what we believe we know is nowhere near what is real.

Further on in the allegory, a prisoner is freed from his chains and is forced to leave the cave. Plato tries to associate the prisoner with us. The prisoner would obviously find it hard to walk and the light of the flames hard and painful to look at. Everything he sees from that point forward would confuse him a great deal as everything he has seen, known and believed in, begins to change as he gets closer to the exit of the cave.

Once he leaves the cave, the prisoner would not be able to look up into the sky as the light from the sun would cause him great pain, therefore, as a result, he would be forced to look down, meaning he would, again, see the shadows of the people or reflections in puddles and lakes. Every stage he goes through after he leaves the cave is a voyage towards enlightenment. Once his eyes become less sensitive to the light, he would BE able to look at people directly and soon he would be able to see the sun. Plato explains that the sun is a form of the good. This means that he has been enlightened because one can only look at the form of the good once they had been enlightened.

Now, the enlightened prisoner wishes to set free the other prisoners in the cave as he can now see everything. When he returns to the cave, he gives the other

prisoners the wrong impression as he has to readjust to the dark cave and so he stumbles around a bit, leading the other prisoners to believe that he has been confused by the outside world. They fear that the outside world has puzzled him and they do not want to be freed. However, the enlightened prisoner tries to tell the prisoners that there is a whole other world beyond the cave walls but unfortunately he uses a language that the others do not understand, i.e., colour, smell, texture etc. as a result the prisoners say that if anyone else tries to free them again. They will kill them. Plato explains the problem in our world with theirs. Since not all of us wants to seek beyond what we know we cannot all find out the meaning of life, just like the other prisoners.

Evaluate on what rounds mite Plato's understanding of human reason be criticised.

There are many criticisms about Plato's understanding of human reason on quite a lot of grounds. In my opinion, the first and most important would be the abstractness of his theories, particularly the theory of Forms. It is clear that many may argue that Plato's idea of having a universe with no sense of time and space where there is a perfect form for every single object in this world is absolutely ridiculous.

However people may agree with Plato that we need to have concepts of perfect equality or perfect goodness to understand and have a better world. Whenever we question what the world of forms is and what the background is, Plato's answer would simply be that, that knowledge is self-evident. We would argue that this is absurd and not self-evident. We can easily see, feel and touch things, i.e., a wall, pictures a dog etc, and we can understand this but having a ideal form of a cat, or a dog doesn't seem that easy to understand. What can he say when we ask whether there is an ideal form of dirt or disease. He can't. He chooses to ignore these questions and does not answer the harder questions.

Another problem is that Plato is not clear how the Forms relate to the object in this world. Is there a group of forms which then branch out to each individual, i.e., a form of animals and that summarises all animals in this reality or is there an individual form i.e., a form of a pig, a cow, a sheep. Is there a form for every individual?

Plato says that any knowledge we gain through the years is what we are remembering from the time that we were in the world of Forms. He says that the highest form of knowledge is an understanding of the form of good, which he says is an absolute. However this raises a problem, which is quite common in ethics? What is good? How can we gain the highest form of knowledge if we cannot determine what good is? 'How can two equally intelligent and sincere

people come up with two separate conclusions of right and wrong. One man's good can be someone else's wrong.

When Plato is describing his world of Forms he misses so many points out that it draws a lot of criticisms and any questions he couldn't answer, he dismissed.