

Plato Questions

Explain Plato's use of the metaphor of shadows in his Allegory of the Cave. (33)

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is about understanding what true reality is, and how it differs from what we perceive as reality. It starts off with describing prisoners, who have been chained since their childhood deep inside a cave; not only can they not move their arms and legs, but their heads are chained in one direction as well so that they are continually looking at a wall.

Behind the prisoners is a fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised platform/walkway where puppets and other things are moved. This causes shadows to form on the wall where the prisoners are looking. Behind the cave is a well-used road, as well as people talking and making noise, which echoes off the cave walls. The prisoners, then, believe that these noises are coming directly from the shadows on the wall. The prisoners try and name the shapes of the shadows as they come by (a sort of game). This is the only reality they know, even though they are just shadows. They judge each other by how quickly they name the shapes.

If a prisoner's chains break, he will be able to walk around. It is human nature to explore so he will walk out of the cave, and the sun will instantly blind him. He naturally turns to the shadows on the floor as it is easier for him to see. Then, gradually he is able to look at the reflections in the lakes and slowly starts to understand that his mind was deluded. Eventually he will also be able to look at the sun and understand that it is the object that controls the seasons and without it life would not be as it is.

After the prisoner has experienced all this, he would probably not want to go back into the cave, but he feels he should free the other prisoners. However, what if the other prisoners do not want to be freed? When he goes back into the cave, his eyes will have to adjust to the light, and for a time, he would not be able to identify the shadows on the wall. He might also stumble, as he cannot see properly. The other prisoners would conclude that his experience outside the cave had ruined him (and his eyesight).

Plato's Allegory of the Cave symbolizes how humans had to travel from the visible realm of image-making and objects of sense, to the intelligible, or invisible, realm of reasoning and understanding. Plato is saying that humans are the prisoners, and that the world is our cave. Things that we think are real are actually just shadows on a wall. Just as

the escaped prisoner ascends into the light of the sun, we gather knowledge and ascend into the light of true reality; where ideas in our minds can help us understand the form of 'The Good'.

The Allegory can be directly related to Plato's Analogy of the Divided Line, which categorises the world into four different divisions – reflections/shadows/images of the physical world, then actual physical things, the 'forms' that are understood by mathematical reasoning, and lastly the forms which are truly understood by philosophers. In relation, they are categorised in groups: D, C, B and A. Groups C and D represent the visible realm whereas groups A and B represent the intelligible realm. When using Plato's example of the prisoners in the cave, we can see the shadows that the prisoners gaze at as category D – images of the physical world. The puppets and objects can be seen as category C – the actual physical things. When the prisoner first leaves the cave, he looks at the reflections of the sun in the lakes. This can be perceived as category B – 'reflections' of the intelligible world. Lastly, the sun can be perceived as category A – the forms which are truly understood by philosophers. The sun can also be related to Plato's Analogy of the Sun. In this analogy, the sun represents the 'form of the good'.

Overall it seems that Plato seems to think that we naturally do not want to discover new things. The prisoner that was released was actually released against his will; he was dragged out of the cave. This symbolises that we are happy with things the way they are, and we do not want change for fear that it will ruin us, that it would be somehow worse than how it is already. It also shows that if we are ignorant of something our whole life it is hard to then understand it and naturally we will not. Hence how the prisoners naturally believe that the shadows are real physical objects. The shadows to them are what the world is to us. Is this the real world, or is it just clouding our eyes and preventing us from realising the truth?

On what grounds might Plato's understanding of human reason be criticized?

Plato firstly assumes that when one of the prisoners is freed, they must be 'compelled' to turn around and explore the cave, and then must be dragged outside of it. He does not seem to take into account human curiosity and that perhaps prisoners themselves would have wanted to explore the cave and find out the truth about what they thought was reality. The majority of the time, humans are willing to be educated and are on the quest for knowledge. They prisoner s would have probably searched around the cave, had they all been released. However, people could reject what they do not know. They may be afraid of what they do not understand, and therefore try not to understand it.