

The Allegory of the Cave

Plato was a Philosopher who used a story based on people imprisoned in a cave to explain the way in which he thought humans formed ideas based on their senses.

The story is known as 'the Allegory of the Cave' and is one of Plato's most famous passages. The allegory has different meanings at different levels; therefore there is not just a single moral in this story.

Plato believed that there were two worlds, the world of appearance, the world we are in, and another world known as reality – a world we were all in before we entered the world of appearance, however we can't remember it. Plato suggests that the body is a kind of prison in which the soul is trapped.

The story begins with several prisoners tied up and trapped in a cave with little light. Plato uses this to show how he feels the soul is trapped in the body, as if it were imprisoned. The only light comes from a small fire, which is also used as a projector to show images of puppets on a wall in front of where the prisoners are positioned.

The prisoners are only aware of one thing in the cave, the images of the puppets. They believe that the images are a form of real life, real objects not just the images, which they really are. The prisoners have lived in the cave all their lives and know no different.

Plato uses this to show how we build up knowledge based on what we see. As the prisoners have never know any other form of live or even another world they are forced into thinking that there experience is normal, because that's all their senses have ever experienced.

The operators of the puppets then release one of the prisoners and lead it around to the fire. The prisoner struggles to understand that the puppets shadows were never real and exactly what a shadow is; he also finds it painful to look directly at the light from the fire.

Eventually the prisoner learns that the fire and the puppets are reality and the images were merely shadows of the puppets created by the firelight. The operator then leads the prisoner into the outside world. As he sees the natural light he is in great pain as his senses have never experienced anything so bright before. In the outside world he learns about new things, and how his senses effected what he believes to be reality.

In the outside world he adapts to the light, to start with he sees only reflections in water and shadows, then he starts to see all things but only at nighttimes, when the light is dim. He then starts to be able to see light from the stars and the moon and finally he can see all things in daylight, created by the sun. He learns how the sun is the most important object for people living on the earth, just as the fire was important to the prisoners despite them not knowing it was there. Plato uses this example to show that all we aware of, as reality is what we pick up from our senses. He claims that the world of reality is where we

were originally and where we get knowledge to know what things are. Therefore what we think is reality isn't actually reality at all. The free prisoner then chooses to return to the cave to tell the others about the outside world. But when he arrives at the cave the other prisoners are playing a game, guessing which puppet will come next on the wall, and he can no longer join in because his eyes have adapted to the sunlight and can't see in the dark. The prisoners reject him and say that if anyone ever tried to take them away again they will be killed. Plato uses this to show how we try to reject other possibilities and aren't always open to what is reality, only what our senses make us believe is reality.

I would agree to some extent with what Plato says when he talks about Humans never knowing the whole truth. I believe that we can never know everything and there are many things that only the most complicated scientific reasoning can explain. But I disagree with the way in which Plato makes some of his arguments. He claims that we build up all knowledge based on our senses; I consider this to be untrue. I think that we build up knowledge through what we experience via our senses and through our intellect. I can understand Plato's theory behind his decision but he doesn't seem to take into account human intellect.

It is obviously possible for human's to create a false sense of reality if they are put into extreme situations, such as the prisoners in the allegory of the cave, or a person who is blind. But as humans we do naturally think beyond the obvious, for example Plato is using his intellect to make these presumptions not his senses. If we were to rely solely upon our senses we wouldn't have discovered many areas of science and other complicated subjects.

I think Plato says we can never know the whole truth because he feels that we rely too much on our senses to gain knowledge. The most intelligent people are those who try to develop with the intelligence what they collect through their senses.

David Jackson