

The allegory of the cave

Question 1

Plato tells us this allegory in an attempt to explain his theory of forms. This is his third and last attempt at explaining this theory.

Plato's allegory of the cave has meanings on many different levels. He uses the allegory to express his own understanding of the progress of the mind, from its lowest stages to an enlightened knowledge of the good. As humans we have no knowledge of forms in general until we begin to ask questions and wish to be enlightened.

In the allegory of the cave, the shackled prisoners represent us. The prisoners, who have been in the cave since childhood, can only see shadows of passing people and objects on the opposite cave wall. The people can hear echoes of voices, and assume that the voices they hear belong to the shadows, because they know no better. Plato likens these people to us, and tries to show us that the images we see are only a small part of what is really out there. He also says that although people think they know things, really they can barely see the surface of what is there.

When we begin to question things by trying to look beyond what we can actually see, we are likened to the prisoner who has been freed from his shackles and is forced to leave the cave. The prisoner would find it hard to walk and would find the bright light of the fire, in the cave entrance, painful to look at; this is otherwise known as aporia. The sight of the statues would confuse him, and everything he had known or believed in since childhood. Most prisoners would prefer to believe in the shadows and echoes in the cave, however those who chose or are forced out of the cave are able to begin their journey of clarification.

After leaving the cave, the now free man would be unable to look at the sun outside and would be forced to look at the floor, only seeing people's shadows or their reflection in lakes and ponds. As his eyes became more used to the light he would be able to look at people and things more directly. Finally the person would be able to see the sun, the form of the good. But only after he had been fully enlightened. The different stages from leaving the cave to seeing the form of the good represent us on the journey of enlightenment.

The free prisoner, now being enlightened and able to see everything wishes to free the other prisoners. When he returns to the cave his eyes have to readjust to the darkness and so he stumbles around a bit. The other prisoners also notice that the free prisoner cannot see and recognise the passing shapes very well any more and they think that

his journey outside has confused him and do not want to be freed. The man tries to explain to the prisoners all about what is outside but he uses transcendent language that means nothing to the prisoners (words like colour and texture). The prisoners say that if anyone tries to free them again they will kill them. This is where one of the problems with the allegory lies. Because not all of the people on earth seek to find the meaning of life, just like the prisoners.

Question 2

It is argued that humans can never know the whole truth because nothing ever stays the same. Hericlitis, who lived about two hundred years before Plato was famed for saying "Everything is in a constant state of flux". He believed that you could not believe in something because one minute it was there the next would be different. He said that nothing in the world is unchanging and reliable so therefore we can hold up nothing as certain, unchanging truth. Plato, however, believed that you could find truth but not on this level. He had the idea that there are certain things that are unchanging but these are in the non-material world of forms. Plato could find truth in these unchanging things. For example when we see justice in the world we recognise it as justice because we see that it reflects true justice or the form of justice. In the same way we have an innate knowledge of the form of beauty. These ideas are eternal so according to Plato we can find truth in them. We can also look at the theory of forms with mathematical objects. A circle, for example, is a two-dimensional shape made from infinity points each the same distance from the centre. As soon as we try to draw a circle it becomes imperfect but it exists as an unchanging, perfect shape in the form of a circle.