

Explain the significance of Plato's analogy of the cave. Is it of relevance to 21st century man?

Plato is probably the most well known philosopher of all time and is also one of the most influential philosophical writers along with his tutee Aristotle. Indeed many modern philosophers establish themselves by either agreeing or disagreeing with Plato. As A.N. Whitehead wrote in his piece, *Personnelist*, 'all philosophy is simply a footnote to Plato' this merely backs up the fact that Plato was a genius. Of Plato's writings the *Republic* is the best known of Plato's dialogues and 'the most famous passage in all Plato's writings happens in the Republic, and is known as the Myth of the Cave' :- Bryan Magee, *The Story of Philosophy*.

Plato uses the myth to illustrate his beliefs on the human condition, especially that of human knowledge although there are also metaphysical, ethical and political meanings. The allegory was written in a dialogue form as was much of Plato's other work and displays a Socratic style of argument. That is to say, a dialogue where the Socrates figure probes the other man's arguments and then finally, by asking questions brings the man to contradicting himself in his answers.

The ideas of the cave are not original but Plato draws from several other sources including some of his own works. Firstly the idea of an imprisoned life can be found in his other work, the *Phaedo*, where he debates the notion of prison. In the allegory he replaces the prison with the constrictions of the cave. Plato also drew ideas from other earlier philosophers namely Empedocles, an Italian, and Porphyry, a Greek. Plato quoted both of these writers extensively but highlighted several distinguished points. For instance, Empedocles called the world a 'roofed cave' where certain 'powers conduct the soul'. Empedocles also said that the world was 'an alien and joyless place'. Secondly, Porphyry had already discussed a cave 'being a symbol of the sensible world' in his ancient theologoi. Another point in this case was the notion that puppet shows would have been known to Plato at the time of his writing. These puppet shows were of Turkish origin and had been introduced to Greece within Plato's lifetime. In these shows the audience does not actually see the puppets but merely their shadows thrown onto a screen. Immediately a link becomes obvious. Finally on this point one historian believes that Plato actually had a real cave in mind when he was writing his allegory. John Ferguson has written that Plato used the cave at Vari as a working example of such a cave used in the allegory.

A summary of the dialogue, though, is needed if one is to truly interpret and explain it. Imagine a cave which has a long enough entrance to prevent any light from reaching the actual cave. Within the cave lined up are a group of prisoners who are all sitting with their heads chained forward so that they can only look straight ahead. Behind the prisoners lies a fire which is perpetually lit and between the fire and the prisoners objects pass causing their shadows to be cast on the wall in front of the prisoners. None of the prisoners have ever been out of the cave and they have spent all their time in the cave and to pass the time they play games of recognising the objects and guessing which one is going to come next. The guards also talk and it would appear as though the objects thus due to the fact that the only entities that the prisoners can perceive are the shadows and the noise, the prisoners are led to believe that the shadows and noises consist of the only reality there is.

However, this is all disrupted when one prisoner is unchained and forced to stand up and turn around. He would find himself in quite a lot of pain and would want to turn back towards the wall and the friendly shadows. If he was dragged out of the cave though, he would be in a lot of pain and when he reached the sunlight he would be bewildered and blinded. Nonetheless, over time he would become accustomed to the bright light and eventually would be able to look at the sun directly. After a while the prisoner thought that it would be good to share his new found pleasure with his old companions in the cave. Unfortunately, when he returned to the cave he was again blinded, although this time by the darkness. When he was back in the cave he was scorned by the others as his ability at the guessing games had been lost and his sight was much worse. Thus they dismissed his excursion to the surface as pointless and threatened him with death if he ever tried to take them to the light.

As an allegory the myth of the cave has several different meanings beneath the obvious overlying one. To start with though, one should go through the myth and analyse it and examine how it is significant. First one should look at the cave itself and the significance that it bears. The cave signifies the constrictions and limits put on normal life, the general lack of freedom but as the prisoners have never experienced anything but the cave they do not understand the fact that they are being restrained. Also on the point of restraint the chains signify custom, tradition and habit, all things that in reality might limit one to a placid life. In general though, the cave and the general use of prisoners is to signify the falseness and pretences of society. The games that the prisoners play can be interpreted as the things that in reality keep the minions happy and an example of this in

Plato's time would have been something like the numerous games that Plato regularly scorned.

The next event in the myth is the standing up and turning around of the prisoner. If one relates this motion to a higher level of reality then one might see that the standing up is the same as questioning one's beliefs and it is the first step towards enlightenment. Secondly the action of turning around would cause great pain for the convict. Plato adds detail like this to help illustrate the point that the route to enlightenment is not easy and will be painful. This theme continues later on in the myth when the prisoner receives great pain firstly being dragged up to the sunlight and secondly when he first sees the sun.

The sun represents the highest form or as Plato interpreted it as, the form of the good. Thus when the prisoner reaches the end of the cave he is at first dazzled and blinded by the light. This light is the '*intelligible sun, the good, the source of existence and true knowledge*'. J.A. Stewart *The Myths of Plato*.

However, over time he adapts to the different conditions and starts to be able to look at brighter objects. This represents the epistemological transition that great men such as Socrates went through. Eventually they see 'the light' and they achieve an understanding of the form of the good.

The final twist in the myth has severe ethical and political implications. When the enlightened prisoner returns to his compatriot prisoners he wishes to take them up to the light but they spurn his offer and threaten him with death if he ever tries to take them to the surface. This can be related to how Socrates, Plato's teacher and mentor, was put to death for his views.

The significance of the cave, though, is that although it is just a story it conveys a metaphysical, epistemological and ethical meaning as well as having severe political implications. The metaphysical meaning is portrayed by depicting the prisoners in a cave where their lives are greatly hindered by their conditions but they do not know it as it is the only reality that they know. The epistemological meaning is evident throughout Plato's analogy of the cave and is characterised by the enlightenment of the prisoner figure. In reality the prisoner figure is the man that breaks away from the masses, the other prisoners, and after a long hard uphill challenge, sees the light or in reality starts to understand the form of the good. The ethical and political meanings that are implied by the analogy are mainly featured in the final part of the myth and they had a very significant effect upon people in Plato's time.

The analogy of the cave will have relevance to all humans for all of time and not even 21st century man with all his scientific and cultural advantages are separate from this group. This is mainly because of the epistemological meaning that the parable has. Until one finds true knowledge that man is perpetually trying to look further and further into the sun of the allegory. As true knowledge is unfortunately, truly elusive, men will always be subject to the principles of the myth of the cave. One can really say that everyone is in a cave as their personal reality is very different to the harshness of the true reality.

If one transfers the parable into modern thinking, the principles still stand as they did in Plato's time. One can imagine the lone prisoner going forward and becoming enlightened but when he returned to share his new found knowledge his discoveries being rejected. In this particular case one can use the example of a scientist, going forward, seeking a new theory and eventually finding it. However, when he tried to share his theory with other contemporary scientists they rejected his theory and threatened to cut his funding if he did not work on projects that were more similar to the other scientists' works. Although he was very much not a 21st century man, Galileo's discoveries involving the cycle of planets was treated very similarly to this.

One more recent and thus more suitable example of this would have been the scientist Einstein. Einstein battled with both the advanced laws of quantum physics as well as the harsh criticisms of his contemporaries. Einstein's research was in a way related to Plato as Einstein was exploring the conceptual reality and how one might access this reality by using the laws of maths and physics.

There is also a severe ethical and moral meaning implied by the myth. This appears at the end of the cave when the enlightened prisoner is threatened with death if he tries to help any other prisoners to the light. This directly relates to the death of Socrates, Plato's teacher. Plato felt very strongly about how Socrates had been treated and he expressed his feelings in the three dialogues that he wrote concerning Socrates, the Apology, the Crito and the Phaedo.

In conclusion, the allegory of the cave was one of the greatest works that have lasted from an ancient era. The words of Couturat about the cave sum up how Plato's parable is held in such awe by so many, *'It is certainly an allegory and is offered as such together with its interpretation. But when a great poetic genius like Plato builds an allegory, the edifice, while serving its immediate purpose as an allegory, transcends that purpose.'* Not only is Plato one of the greatest philosophers ever, his works are also very relevant to modern man.