



[Home](#) > [Ancient Greece](#) > [Ancient Greece & Philosophy](#) > The Myth or Allegory of the Cave

[Site Map](#) | [Slide Shows](#) | [Guest Book](#) | [Links](#) | [About Us](#) | [Download Wisdoms](#) | [Support Us](#)

The myth or allegory of the Cave from Plato's "The Republic"

We can see the myth or allegory of the Cave, as presented in the seventh book of Plato's Republic, as discussing how far people may claim to be enlightened or unenlightened. It may well be that it has religious overtones relating to the Orphic mysticism that was a strong faith background to the works of Socrates and Plato. Plato seems to be suggesting that a philosophic realisation is possible and can help to lead people away from an unenlightened, into an enlightened, state.

[Ancient Greece](#)

[Pythagoras](#)

[Socrates](#)

[Plato](#)

[The myth or
allegory
of the Cave](#)

[Aristotle](#)

Now then, I proceeded to say, go on to compare our natural condition, so far as education and ignorance are concerned, to the state of things like the following. Imagine a number of men living in an underground chamber, with an entrance open to the light, extending along the entire length of the chamber, in which they have been confined, from their childhood, with their legs and necks so shackled, that they are obliged to sit still and look straight forwards, because their chains render it impossible for them to turn their heads round: and imagine a bright fire burning some way off, above and behind them, and an elevated roadway passing between the fire and the prisoners, with a low wall built along it, like the screens which conjurors put up in front of their audience, and above which they exhibit their wonders.

I have it, he replied.

Also figure to yourself a number of persons walking behind this wall, and carrying with them statues of men, and images of other animals, wrought in wood and stone and all kinds of materials, together with various other articles,

which overtop the wall; and, as you might expect, let some of the passers-by be talking, and others silent.

You are describing a strange scene, and strange prisoners.

They resemble us, I replied. For let me ask you, in the first place, whether persons so confined could have seen anything of themselves or of each other, beyond the shadows thrown by the fire upon the part of the chamber facing them? Certainly not, if you suppose them to have been compelled all their lifetime to keep their heads unmoved.

And is not their knowledge of the things carried past them equally limited?

Unquestionably it is.

And if they were able to converse with one another, do you not think that they would be in the habit of giving names to the objects they saw before them?

Doubtless they would.

Again: if their prison-house returned an echo from the part facing them, whenever one of the passers-by opened his lips, to what, let me ask you, could they refer the voice, if not to the shadow which was passing?

Unquestionably they would refer it to that.

Then surely such persons would hold the shadows of those manufactured articles to be the only realities.

Without a doubt they would.

Now consider what would happen if the course of nature brought them a release from their fetters, and a remedy from their foolishness in the following manner. Let us suppose that one of them has been released, and compelled suddenly to stand up, and turn his neck round and walk with open eyes towards the light; let us suppose that he goes through all these actions with pain, and that the dazzling splendour renders him incapable of discerning those objects of which he formerly used to see the shadows. What answer should you expect him to make, if someone were to tell him that in those days he was watching foolish phantoms, but that now he is somewhat nearer to reality, and is turned toward things more real, and sees more correctly; above all, if he were to point out to him the several objects that are passing by, and question him, and compel him to answer what they are? Should you not expect him to be puzzled, and to regard his old visions as truer than the objects now forced upon his notice?

Yes, much truer.

And if he were further compelled to gaze at the light itself, would not his eyes, think you, be distressed, and would he not shrink and turn away to the things which he could see distinctly, and consider them to be really clearer than the things pointed out to him?

Just so.

And if some one were to drag him violently up the rough and steep ascent from the chamber, and refuse to let him go till he had drawn him out into the light of the sun, would he not, think you, be vexed and indignant at such treatment, and on reaching the light, would he not find his eyes so dazzled by the glare as to be incapable of making out so much as one of the objects that are now called true?

Yes, he would find it so at first.

Hence, I suppose, habit will be necessary to enable him to perceive objects in that upper world. At first he will be most successful in distinguishing shadows; then he will discern the reflections of men and other things in water, and afterwards the realities; after this he will raise his eyes to encounter the light of the moon and stars, finding it less difficult to study the heavenly bodies and the heaven itself by night, than the sun and the sun's light by day.

Doubtless.

Last of all, I imagine, he will be able to observe and contemplate the nature of the sun, not as it *appears* in water or on alien ground, but as it *is* in itself in its own territory.

Of course.

His next step will be to draw the conclusion, that the sun is the author of the seasons and the years, and the guardian of all things in the visible world, and in a manner the cause of all those things which he and his companions used to see.

Obviously this will be his next step.

What then? When he recalls to mind his first habitation, and the wisdom of the place, and his old fellow- prisoners, do you not think he will congratulate himself on the change, and pity them?

Assuredly he will.

And if it was their practice in those days to receive honour and commendations one from another, and to give prizes to him who had the keenest eye for a passing object, and who remembered best all that used to precede and follow and accompany it, and from these data divined most ably what was going to come next, do you fancy that he will covet these prizes, and envy those who receive honour and exercise authority among them? Do you not rather imagine that he will rather imagine that he will feel what Homer describes, and wish extremely

*"To drudge on the lands of a master,
Under a portionless wight."*

and be ready to go through anything, rather than entertain those opinions, and live in that fashion?

For my own part, he replied, I am quite of that opinion. I believe he would consent to go through anything rather than live in that way.

And now consider what would happen if such a man were to descend again and seat himself on his old seat? Coming so suddenly out of the sun, would he not find his eyes blinded with the gloom of the place?

Certainly, he would.

And if he were forced to deliver his opinion again, touching the shadows aforesaid, and to enter the lists against those who had always been prisoners, while his sight continued dim and his eyes unsteady, - and if this process of initiation lasted a considerable time, - would he not be made a laughingstock, and would it not be said of him, that he had gone up only to come back again with his eyesight destroyed, and that it was not worth while even to attempt the ascent? And if anyone endeavoured to set them free and carry them to the light, would they not go so far as to put him to death, if they could only manage to get him into their power?

Yes, that they would.

Now this imaginary case, my dear Glaucon, you must apply in all its parts to our former statements, by comparing the region which the eye reveals, to the prison-house, and the light of the fire therein to the power of the sun: and if, by the upward ascent and the contemplation of the upper world, you understand the mounting of the soul into the intellectual region, you will hit the tendency of my own surmises, since you desire to be told what they are; though, indeed, God only knows whether they are correct. But, be that as it may, the view which I take of the subject is to the following effect. In the world of knowledge, the essential Form of Good is the limit of our inquiries, and can barely be perceived; but, when perceived, we cannot help concluding that it is in every case the source of all that is bright and beautiful, - in the visible world giving birth to light and its master, and in the intellectual world dispensing, immediately and with full authority, truth and reason; - and that whosoever would act wisely, either in private or in public, must set the Form of Good before his eyes.

Plato later in this same seventh book of *The Republic* introduces the notion that there are four planes upon which people know about things. These planes are words, perception, concepts, and ideas. These planes may be compared to the various levels depicted in the allegory of the Cave.

Men start out in the realm of words - where shadows are thrown upon the wall. A more true reality is that of the road and the images being carried by the

persons passing along it. These are as perceptions which cast the immediately apparent reality of shadows (words) upon the wall. The next approach to a fuller realisation of reality is more testing - it involves being out in the glare of the Sun and the conceptual recognition that the images being carried are not as real as the variously motivated people carrying them. The next phase suggested is that of ideas where people become, philosophic, observers of the world.

[Start of
The myth or allegory of the Cave page](#)