

Plato's Allegory of the Cave

Imagine a group of prisoners who from infancy have had their necks and legs chained to posts within a dark cave. Behind them is a raised walkway on which people and animals travel to and fro, bearing diverse objects. Behind the walkway is a large fire that projects the shadows of the people, animals, and objects onto the wall in front of the prisoners. The shadows on the wall grow and diminish, move up and down and around as the fire behind the objects wafts and wanes. But the prisoners do not know that the shadows are merely appearances of real objects. They take the shadows for reality, talk about them as though they were real, name them, re-identify them, and incorporate their knowledge of the various forms into their social life. Their lives are centered on the shadows.

Now imagine that someone tried to liberate one of the prisoners from the cave. At first, the prisoner kicked and screamed as he was forcibly moved from the only home and social milieu he had ever known. Being dragged through the cave against his will, he was, at last, taken outside, where the dazzling bright sunlight blinded him. Our prisoner cries to be allowed to be returned to his safe shelter in the cave, but the way is closed. Gradually, his eyes adjust to the sunlight, and he is able to see the beautifully colored flowers and wide-spreading branches of oak trees, hear the songs of birds, and watch the play of animals. Delighted, his powers of sight increase until, at last, he is able to look at the bright sun itself and not be harmed.

But now his liberator, who has become his friend and teacher, instructs him to return to the cave to teach the other prisoners of the real world and to get them to give up their chains and journey upward to the sunlight. But our hero quakes with fear at such an ordeal, for he wants no part of that dark, dismal existence, preferring to enjoy the light of day to the dark of the abyss.

He is told that it is his duty to go, and so he makes his way into the cave again, returns to his mates in chains, tells them that the shadows are merely illusions and that a real world of sunlight and beauty exists above outside the cave. As he is proclaiming this gospel, his former mates grab him, beat him for impugning their belief and value system, and put him to death.

But every now and then, the liberator comes back, drags one or two prisoners out of the cave against their wills, teaches them to enjoy the light, and sends them back to instruct the slaves to appearances.