

## 1.1

**Republic****PLATO****Preparing to Read**

The Cave Allegory, which appears in book VII of Plato's utopian essay *Republic*, is probably the best known story in Western philosophy. Plato asks us to imagine prisoners, bound hand and foot in a cave, who see only shadows cast on the wall by fire-lit images, and mistake them for reality. This story has much to say about reality, about how we know, and about what is worth valuing. Not surprisingly, philosophers in the Western world have found it very rich in meaning, and you will find its echoes throughout this book. For now, we want to look at what it has to say about our chapter title: Why Philosophy?

People who have spent their lives in a cave, unable to see even their fellow prisoners because their heads are fixed forward, will naturally be convinced they know everything worth knowing about reality. They will be confident, maybe even arrogant, about the correctness of their views. When we read about the prisoners, we chuckle at their expense. We know what they don't know—that they see only shadows of objects and that the objects themselves are copies of real things that exist in the world outside the cave. With our bird's eye view, we can see how limited the cave dwellers are and how blind they are to their own limitations.

Any one of them, who was released and dragged out of the cave, would leave unwillingly and, once outside, would be blinded by the sunlight and painfully disoriented. If that person could endure the pain and wait for his or her eyes to adjust, a whole new world would reveal itself—a world of real objects, the true objects of knowledge. But the process would be difficult.

Beyond the world we can apprehend using our senses (the cave world in this analogy), Plato asserted another realm containing perfect **Forms**—the perfect circle, true justice, and, above all of them, the Idea or perfect Form of the Good from which an accurate understanding of reality and the moral life must derive. We cannot reach these Forms or Ideas using our senses; they are only accessible to reason, and yet they exist independent of us in their own perfect world. Plato offers us this choice: Stay in the cave and remain ignorant or make the rough ascent to the world of true knowledge. The choice is ours.

Q Who are the Cave Dwellers of our day? →  
 ↳ Why? →  
 ↳ How would you suggest they "escape" from the cave?  
 Assignment

## *Republic, Book VII*

### *The Cave Allegory*

IF YOU WOULD LIKE an allegory of the human condition, with special attention to the question of education and ignorance, then imagine people living in a cave. They have been there since birth, forced by the chains that bind them to sit in a fixed position and stare straight ahead. At the far end of the cave is an opening to the outside world but, of course, the prisoners are unaware of this. Above and behind the prisoners a fire blazes, and between the fire and the prisoners is a path running beside a low wall. People pass by this wall, carrying human statues and figures of animals and plants crafted from wood or stone, and speaking to one another from time to time. The firelight casts shadows of these images on the wall the prisoners face and these shadows, accompanied by the intermittent sounds of voices, are the only reality the prisoners know. For as long as anyone can remember this has constituted the entire truth about the world.

Now, imagine that one of the prisoners is abruptly freed and forced to stand up and turn to face the firelight. How disoriented that person would feel! And how skeptical that person would be if told that the statues and figures being carried past the low wall were closer to reality than the much more familiar shadows on the far wall. Would this freed prisoner even be able to correctly name the objects that had previously appeared only as shadows? In fact, wouldn't the person be much more likely to insist that the shadows were real?

Suppose further that this person were dragged to the mouth of the cave and, finally, out into the bright light of the sun. The pain of its brightness would surely be overwhelming. Who among us would blame the prisoner for feeling angry and confused. It would take a long time, but with patience and perseverance, the prisoner might gradually be able to look at reflections of objects in the water or at the

world bathed in moonlight. Eventually, the former prisoner would even be able to gaze at the sun directly and, using reason, connect the sun with the seasons and with all of life in the visible world. With this fuller understanding, the freed prisoner would surely pity the inhabitants of the cave and realize how distorted and incomplete their vision of reality actually was.

If the former prisoner were to return to the cave, there would be another period of disorientation, another adjustment—this time from light into darkness. Surely this would tempt the cave dwellers to laugh and agree that (just as they had always supposed) leaving the cave ruins one's eyesight. They would likely be even more resistant than ever to anyone's urging them to explore beyond the shadows and they might even feel threatened enough to kill the person who tried to free them.

This whole allegory depicts the human condition. The cave is the world revealed to us by our senses, dimly lit by firelight and filled with shadows we mistake for reality. The climb out of the cave and into the sunlight represents the ascent of the soul into the intellectual life—the life of the mind and the path of reason. By applying the tools of the intellect, one will come, finally, to the idea of The Good, which is the source of all that is beautiful and right. In truth, it is the only reliable ground for moral conduct as well.

Those who have seen things as they really are, using the full powers of the mind, will understandably be reluctant to return to the mundane world of human exchanges. Such a person might even seem a fool amid the shadows of the law courts and the hypocrisy of everyday life. We would do well to remember that those who seem disoriented are as likely to be moving from light to darkness as from darkness to light. And, we should be very careful whom we laugh at lest we find ourselves in the position of the happy prisoners who cling fiercely to their ignorance and mock what they do not understand.

From this allegory, we must also conclude that much of our educational system is misguided. Schools and colleges sometimes imagine that they are pouring knowledge into empty, waiting vessels. But, we have seen that the ability to learn is already present in all of us. We are not putting sight into blind eyes but rather turning those eyes (speaking metaphorically) from the world of becoming, available to our senses, toward the world of being, crowned

by the idea of The Good, that is accessible only to our minds.

The process of freeing ourselves from reliance on the sensual world must begin in childhood. And, we must be vigilant over the course of our lives to keep our attention fixed always on what is good and true. Otherwise, we are in danger of becoming clever but shallow or, even worse, master criminals unwittingly serving evil ends.

### *Continuing to Think*

If you have ever met someone whose view of the world was very different from your own, the Cave Allegory may be especially interesting to you. Is the other person's view closer to or further from "the way things are" than your own? It is tempting to write off or ignore anyone who makes us question our certainties. Like the people in the cave, we probably associate mainly with people who see things the same way we do; someone with a different version of reality represents a threat.

What Plato means us to wonder about is whether the person seems wrong because he or she is more ignorant than we are or because he or she is more enlightened. Both variations will seem strange to us. At the very least, Plato wants us not to reject new ideas sight unseen. But, if we are to evaluate them, what standard shall we use? And, are all versions of reality equally valid?

Plato doesn't think they are. In fact, he has designed the Cave Allegory in such a way that only one interpretation is possible: A living tree is one step closer to reality than an image of a tree and two steps closer than a shadow cast by that image. Plato is not a relativist, someone who thinks everything is of equal value or correctness; instead, he thinks there are absolutes, things that are always true because there is an objective order, a "way things are."

Philosophy is the way out of the cave. For Plato, when we use our reason rather than our unreliable senses, we have the power to discover the truth about what is real and what has worth. The problem is that philosophy, in the hands of the unscrupulous, can be misused. People who care less about truth and more about making money can use the method of philosophy—its logic—to distort and confuse the unsuspecting. This is exactly what happens in our next reading.

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