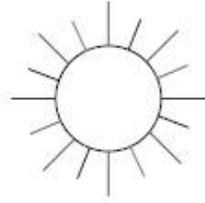
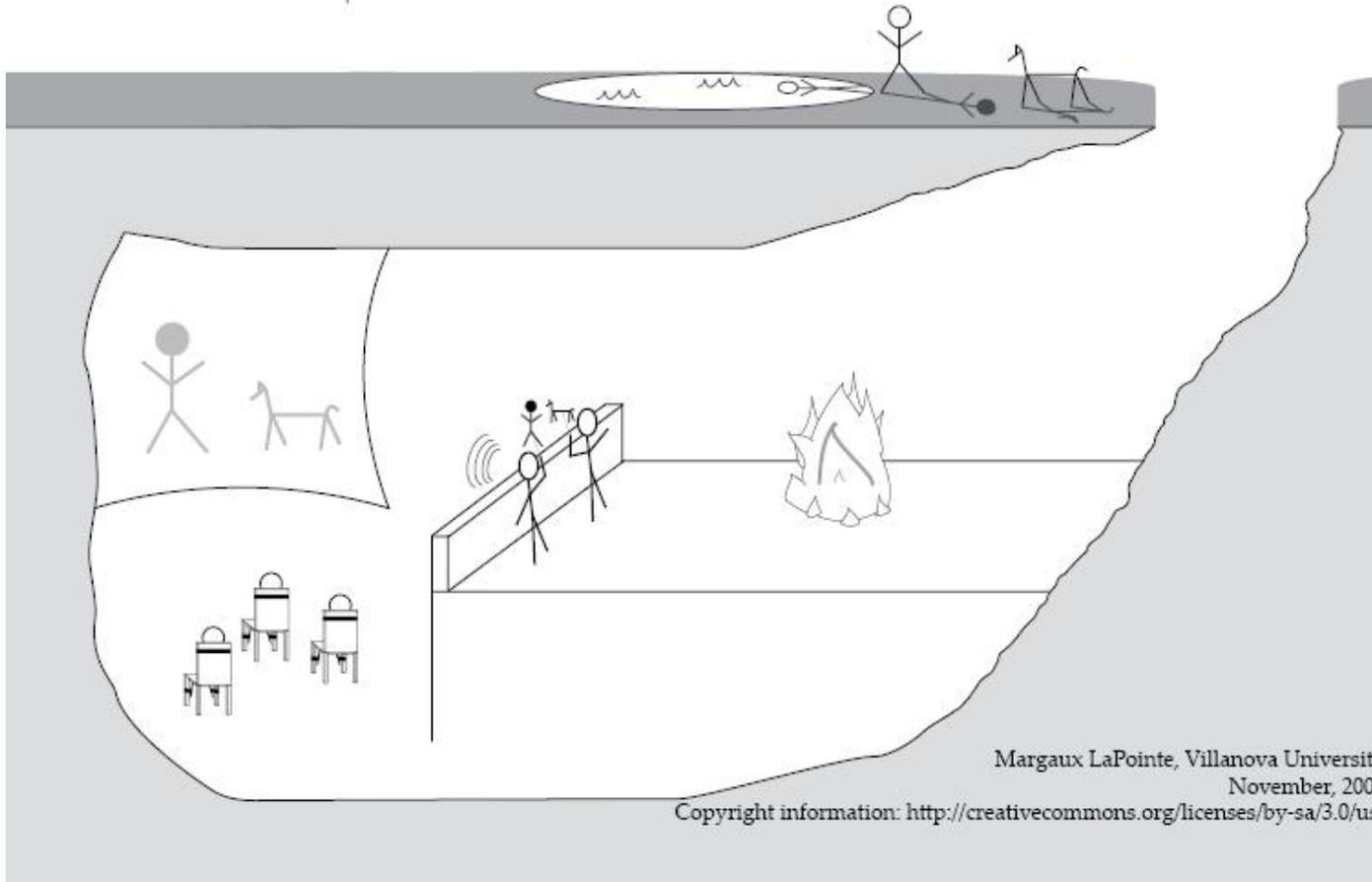


# Plato and the Cave



# Plato's Cave, Republic 514b



# Plato

## *Book VII of The Republic*

### The Allegory of the Cave

Here's a little story from Plato's most famous book, **The Republic**. Socrates is talking to a young follower of his named Glaucon, and is telling him this fable to illustrate what it's like to be a philosopher -- a lover of wisdom: Most people, including ourselves, live in a world of relative ignorance. We are even comfortable with that ignorance, because it is all we know. When we first start facing truth, the process may be frightening, and many people run back to their old lives. But if you continue to seek truth, you will eventually be able to handle it better. In fact, you want more! It's true that many people around you now may think you are weird or even a danger to society, but you don't care. Once you've tasted the truth, you won't ever want to go back to being ignorant!

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[Socrates is speaking with **Glaucon**]

[Socrates:] And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: --Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

**[Glaucon:] I see.**

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

**You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.**

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

**True, how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?**

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

**Yes.**

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

**Very true.**

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

**No question.**

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

**That is certain.**

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, -what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, -- will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

**Far truer.**

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

**True.**

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he 's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

**Not all in a moment.**

He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

**Certainly.**

Last of he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.

**Certainly.**

He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

**Clearly, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.**

And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

**Certainly, he would.**

And if they were in the habit of conferring honours among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honours and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer,

*Better to be the poor servant of a poor master, and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?*

**Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.**

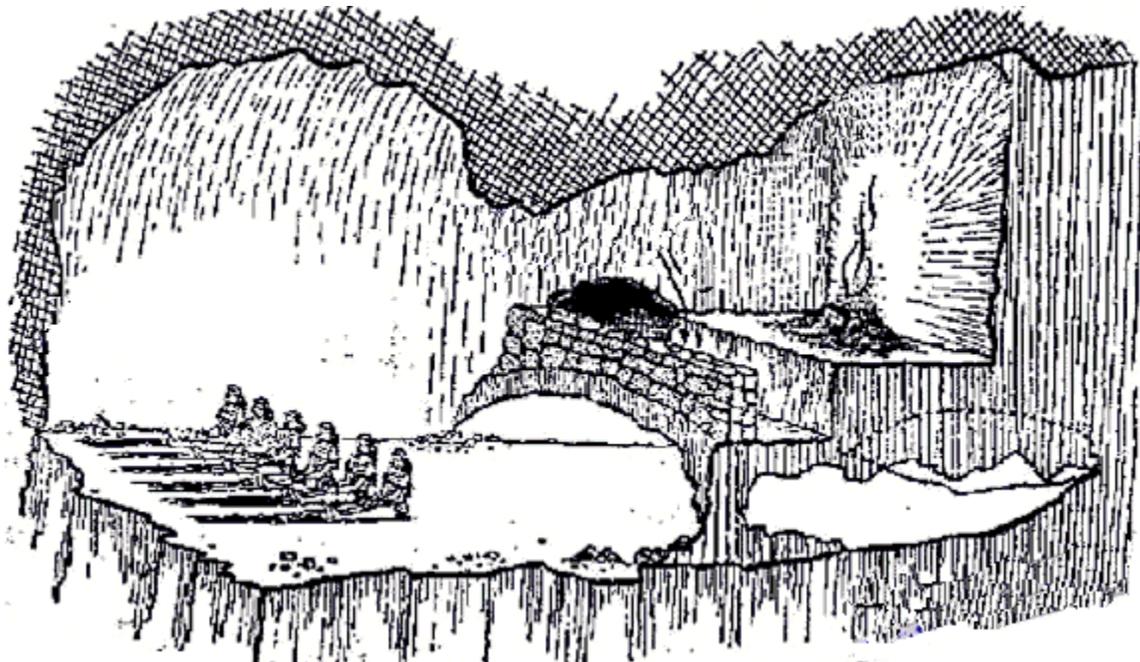
Imagine once more, I said, such an one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

**To be sure.**

And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak, and before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable) would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

**No question.**

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.



## Plato and the Cave

### ***Question: What do the shadows in Plato's cave represent?***

Plato comments that in presenting his description of the cave he intends to, "...picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition..." One purpose of his description is thus to demonstrate the differing ways in which humans understand the nature of reality. Specifically, Plato wants to demonstrate that there is a fundamental difference between the everyday opinions of people and true philosophical knowledge. Crucial to Plato's ideas is the distinction between non-philosophical and philosophical understanding.

### Layers of existence

Plato claimed that there are four "layers" of existence and that for each layer there is a corresponding *mode of knowing*. By mode of knowing, I mean that in order to comprehend existence at each level, certain tools and techniques of thought have to be utilized. These tools and techniques vary according to the layer of existence they attempt to comprehend. I will refer to the layers of existence as A, B, C and D. It would help if you were to visualise these placed in a vertical line with A at the top and D at the bottom. (see following page)

The layers are not equal in status. The layer of existence that contains *images* is considered to be the most inferior. We can give this layer the label D. Images are completely dependent on material objects for their existence and as such have a low status. The mode of knowledge that corresponds to this layer (i.e. that mode of knowledge which contemplates images) is considered by Plato to have a correspondingly low status.

The layer of existence that has a status above that of images is that layer which contains the world of *things*. We can give this layer the label C. Plato is describing here the material world. It is the messy, complicated and constantly changing world that we experience with our senses. The mode of knowledge with which we comprehend this world has a higher status than that which comprehends images but is still not the highest (and most true) way in which things can be known.

Plato makes a radical move and claims the existence of two other layers of existence (A and B), neither of which is contained in the world of material things. Both these layers contain *objects of thought*, and the modes of knowledge that apprehend them are purely mental. Layers A and B are sometimes referred to as the realm of the forms. In layer B the ideas still have some relationship with the material world. In this layer are the real objects, of which the ordinary objects around us are mere reflections or copies. When we identify an object as, for example, a human being in the material world, we do so because it bears some resemblance to the perfect idea of a human being that resides in layer B.

## The Layers of Knowledge

A	Realm of the Forms (abstract reasoning)
B	Realm of the Forms (still connected to material reality in some way)
C	Material things
D	Images

Our knowledge becomes more perfect as we go up from level D to level A

Unlike layer B, layer A contains ideas that are not really connected to objects in the material world. In this layer are abstract concepts or ideas that, unlike the objects in the material world, do not change with time. These ideas are, for Plato, the ultimate truths, untainted by exposure to the constantly changing material world of layers C and D. Amongst many other things, this layer contains the perfect (and true) idea of justice. Plato believes that when we use a concept like justice in the material world (layers C and D), we are alluding to the perfect idea of justice that resides in layer A. In this layer is the true idea of "good", which Plato believes is the most important aspect of reality

Layer A is contemplated by the highest mode of knowledge. This highest form of knowledge is philosophy. The job of philosophers is to use their minds to contemplate this realm and describe its contents accurately.

Plato believes that most people (non-philosophers) only ever use the modes of knowledge that correspond to the two lower layers (C and D). In other words, most people have an understanding of reality that is severely limited. What upset Plato was the fact that most people do not even realise that there is another "higher" level of reality and that there is a correspondingly "higher" (truer) mode of thought to accompany it. They spend their lives convinced that the type of knowledge they have is the best, and are even prepared to defend this limited understanding in the face of challenges from philosophy.

### **The Cave**

In the cave, Plato describes the prisoners who, fastened so that they can only look at the back of the cave, see shadows moving on the wall. Because these prisoners have spent their entire lives looking at these shadows, they mistakenly assume that reality consists of these shadows. It is also perfectly reasonable to assume that these people will have some form of knowledge that can explain and possibly predict the movement of the shadows on the wall.

What the prisoners don't realise is that there is a world outside of the cave, a world of real objects, and that the shadows represent these real objects in a very crude way. What they don't realise is that if they were to free themselves from the cave and go into the world outside, their mode of knowledge which comprehended the world of shadows would be utterly unsuitable as a guide. Any ideas they held about the nature of the shadows would seem completely inadequate and trivial when it came to dealing with the source of the shadows. Some of the prisoners may even deny the existence of a world outside the cave and challenge anyone who claimed otherwise.

Hopefully it should be clearer now what the shadows in the cave represent. They represent the reality experienced at levels C and D of reality. The knowledge that the prisoners create in order to understand the movement of the shadows represents the limited mode of knowledge utilized (and cherished) by those who

do not accept the existence of a higher layer of reality. And just as the prisoners mistake the world of the shadows as the truest form of reality, so do the non – philosophers when they deny the existence of any layers of reality above C and D.

The world outside of the cave, where the real objects that create the shadows exist, represents layer A. And just as the prisoners, upon leaving the cave, will be forced to abandon their old ways of understanding their world, so too will the person who realizes the existence of layers A and B. They will be forced to think philosophically.

S. Drew (2002)

*[http://www.philosophos.com/knowledge\\_base/archives\\_15/philosophy\\_questions\\_1580.html](http://www.philosophos.com/knowledge_base/archives_15/philosophy_questions_1580.html)*