

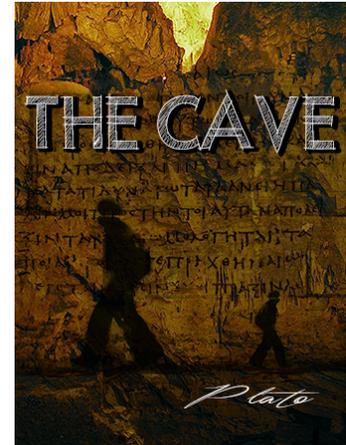


Plato's Allegory of The Cave

Things To Know/ Things To Think About

Plato's allegory of the cave is one of the most heavily cited, but least understood, excerpts from his seminal work, *The Republic*. Ostensibly, *The Cave* describes a scenario where a number of men are imprisoned within the confines of a dark cave. Significantly, their movements, and more importantly, their vision, are restricted. Also in the cave is an ever-burning fire that projects the images of passing figures onto the surrounding walls. The prisoners are limited to watching the walls of the cave. As a result, all they see, and all they've ever known, are the shadows cast on the walls. For Plato, the cave is emblematic of our ordinary experience of waking life, and the shadows on the walls are emblematic of all perceivable phenomenon that we assume, unwarrantedly, are the source of what we're seeing. Crucial to understanding this analogy is that Plato believed reality was divided into two parts: the visible realm, and the intelligible realm. In this case, the intelligible realm is Plato's world of forms, an invisible realm of ideas that can only be intuited through knowledge. In contrast to the intelligible realm is the realm of the visible, or the world of direct experience we ordinarily assume is reality itself. For Plato, however, the visible realm is only a hollow imitation of the world of forms.

For Plato, education is the process of leaving the cave, and walking out into the light of day. Through knowledge, one comes to reject the visible world--symbolized by the shadows on the wall--and embrace the intelligible realm symbolized by the world outside the cave. Plato notes, however, that walking out into the symbolic light of knowledge is not always easy, and is sometimes painful, because its disorienting and the light is blinding. Despite this impulse to cling to the familiar, or the cave, Plato's philosopher must stay in the outside world until his eyes adjust to the light. At this point, the philosopher has a moral obligation to return to the cave and liberate his fellow prisoners. Like walking out into the light for the first time, however, returning to the darkness of the cave is an equally disorienting experience that comes with its own share of difficulties. For one, the prisoners, convinced of the reality of the shadows on the wall, will remain adamant in their beliefs, and will scorn the radical ideas of the philosopher. Despite these



setbacks, the philosopher will stop at nothing to educate the prisoners, and turn their eyes away from shadows, and towards substance. This piece is perfect for an introduction to ancient philosophy, and also works well as a thought exercise, in any discipline, to encourage students to question knowledge, and equally important, to ask questions.

Standards Addressed:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9

Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

Before Reading

1. In your opinion, what is the end goal of any form of education? If you were an educator, what goals would you set for your students?

During Reading

1. What is meant by the “shadows” in Plato’s allegory of the Cave? What do they represent? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1)

2. Similarly, what does the world outside of the cave symbolize? And why is leaving the cave difficult? Support your answers with details from the text. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1)

After Reading

1. How would you define Plato's conception of "The Good"? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2)
2. Based upon the reading, is true knowledge possible? If so, under what circumstances? Support your answer using the text. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1)

Connections In Text

1. In Plato's Allegory of The Cave, there is the implication that Plato denies all knowledge related to the self. This implication is based on Plato's ideas pertaining to the ability to glean knowledge of the visible world. Connect Plato's ideas to knowledge of the self to ideas put forth by Siddhartha in the Books That Grow piece, "Siddhartha: Meeting the Buddha." How are the ideas explored similar? And how are they different? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9)

Further Readings

For Teachers:

http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Allegory_of_the_cave.html

This link provides teachers with an in depth guide to understanding, and teaching, Plato's famous Allegory of The Cave.

For Students:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D25eKPWa-j0>

This youtube video provides students with an entertaining, but informative animated film about the story where Anansi gets eight legs.