

The Cave

Plato

For Plato, the world of the Ideal Forms is the world of real being. This is not to say that the world we live in is unreal, but rather it is the world of becoming. It is less real, not in the sense of being an illusion, but in the sense of not having those qualities of eternity and necessity, that are the marks of true reality, as are found the realm of the Ideal Forms.

The best illustration of Plato's two-world view is his parable called the Myth of the Cave. It is a parable about bringing people from the less real to the truly real. It asks us to seriously evaluate that which we assume to be reality and question whether or not the world we live in might not only be a shadow of some much greater reality beyond our normal everyday experiences. To discern this greater reality is the pursuit of the philosopher and her pursuit of wisdom.

Vocabulary:

Subterranean:	under the earth
Fettered:	chained
Chafe:	to irritate by rubbing
Habituation:	to accustom by frequent exposure or repetition
Phantasms:	fantasies
Emulate:	to imitate
Opine:	to think; suppose

Perpetual:	continuous
Surmise:	guess; conjecture
Authentic:	real

Concepts:

True Reality:
False Reality:
The Good:

Questions:

1. *Explain Plato's idea of the cave.*
2. *What is the main point to this analogy?*
3. *How would the prisoners think of reality?*
4. *How would they react to the prisoner who escaped into the "real" world?*
5. *What is the idea of good?*

The Myth of the Cave

Next, said I, compare our nature in respect to education and its lack of such an experience as this. Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and pre-

vented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets.

All that I see, he said.

See also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking and others silent.

A strange image you speak of, he said, and strange prisoners.

Like to us, I said. For, to begin with, tell me do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave that fronted them?

How could they, he said, if they were compelled to hold their heads unmoved through life?

And again, would not the same be true of the objects carried past them?

Surely.

If then they were able to talk to one another, do you not think that they would suppose that in naming the things that they saw they were naming the passing objects?

Necessarily.

And if their prison had an echo from the wall opposite them, when one of the passers-by uttered a sound, do you think that they would suppose anything else than the passing shadow to be the speaker?

By Zeus, I do not, he said.

Then, in every way, such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial objects.

Quite inevitably, he said.

Consider, then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly if in the course of nature something of this sort should happen to them. When one was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn his head around and walk and to lift up his eyes to the light, and in doing all this felt pain and, because of the dazzle and glitter of the light, was unable to discern the objects whose shadows he formerly saw, what do you suppose would be his answer if someone told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw more truly? And if also one should point out to him each of the passing objects and constrain him by questions to say what it is, do you not think that he would be at a loss and that he would regard what he formerly saw as more real than the things new pointed out to him?

Far more real, he said.

And, if he were compelled to look at the light itself, with the pain in his eyes, would he not turn away and flee to those

things which he is able to discern and regard them as in every deed more clear and exact than the objects pointed out?

It is so, he said.

And if, said I, someone should drag him thence by force up the ascent which is rough and steep, and not let him go before he had drawn him out into the light of the sun, do you think that he would find it painful to be so haled along, and would chafe at it, and when he came into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things that we call real?

Why, no, not immediately, he said.

Then there would be need of habituation, I take it, to enable him to see the things higher up. And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likenesses or reflections in water of men and other things, and later, the things themselves, and from these he would go on to contemplate the appearances in the heavens itself, more easily by night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, then by day the sun and the sun's light.

Of course.

And so, finally, I suppose, he would be able to look upon the sun itself and see its nature, not by reflections in

water or phantasms of it in an alien setting, but in and by itself in its own place.

Necessarily, he said.

And at this point he would infer and conclude that thus it is that provides the seasons and the courses of the year and presides over all things in the visible region, and is in some sort the cause of all these things that they had seen. Obviously, he said, that would be the next step.

Well then, if he recalled to mind his first habitation and what passed for wisdom there, and his fellow bondsmen, do you not think that he would count himself happy in the change and pity them?

He would indeed.

And if there had been honors and commendations among them which they bestowed on one another and prizes for the man who is quickest to make out the shadows as they pass and best able to remember their customary precedences, sequences, and coexistences, and so most successful in guessing at what was to come, do you think he would be very keen about such rewards, and that he would envy and emulate those who were honored by these prisoners and lorded it among them, or that he would feel with Homer and greatly prefer while living on earth to be a serf of another, a landless man, and endure anything rather than

opine with them and live that life?

Yes, he said, I think that he would choose to endure anything rather than such a life.

And consider this also, said I. If such a one should go down again and take his old place would he not get his eyes full of darkness, thus suddenly coming out of the sunlight?

He would indeed.

Now if he should be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in “evaluating” these shadows while his vision was still dim and before his eyes were accustomed to the dark – and this time required for habituation would not be very short – would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said of him that he returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worth while even to attempt the ascent? And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?

They certainly would, he said.

This image then, dear Glaucon, we must apply as a whole to all that has been said, likening the region revealed through sight to the habitation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the

things above is the soul’s ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear. But God knows whether it is true. But, at any rate, my dream, as it appears to me, is that in the region of the known, the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and when seen it must point us to the conclusion that this is indeed, the cause for all things of all that is, right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this.

From Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, 1930.