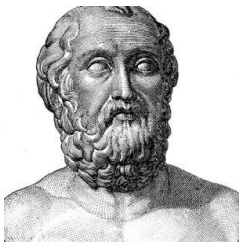
# PLATO'S CAVE ANALOGY AND THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)



**Plato** (428 BCE – 347 BCE) was a philosopher in Classical Athens (a city in modern day Greece). He wrote over 30 dialogues on topics such as justice, knowledge, friendship, love, and physics. The twentieth century philosopher Alfred Whitehead once said that all later philosophy was "a series of footnotes to Plato." There is a clear sense in which this is true: Plato was the first writer to formulate a huge number of philosophical problems regarding morality, religion, the acquisition of scientific knowledge, the importance of literature and art, and the structure of a good government. However, Plato obviously didn't *finish* philosophy, since his (often tentative) answers to these various questions have been challenged and revised by the last 2,500 years of science, philosophy, and so on.

When Plato was young, his teacher **Socrates** was tried and executed for "corrupting the youth" and "denying the gods of the state." (Athens was the world's first democracy, and the citizens on the jury voted to execute Socrates.) This event deeply influenced Plato, and he often used Socrates as a character in many of his dialogues. This includes his most famous book, *The Republic,* in which the analogy of the cave appears. Other famous works by Plato include *The Apology of Socrates* (about Socrates' trial), *Euthyphro* (about the relationship between religion and morality), *Crito* (about civil disobedience, and our duty to obey laws), *Phaedo* (about the soul), and *Meno* (about knowledge).

## WHAT HAPPENS IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*?

*SOCRATES: I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon the son of Ariston, that I might offer up my prayers to the goddess; and also because I wanted to see in what manner they would celebrate the festival, which was a new thing. I was delighted with the procession of the inhabitants; but that of the Thracians was equally, if not more, beautiful. When we had finished our prayers and viewed the spectacle, we turned in the direction of the city; and at that instant Polemarchus the son of Cephalus chanced to catch sight of us from a distance as we were starting on our way home, and told his servant to run and bid us wait for him. The servant took hold of me by the cloak behind, and said: Polemarchus desires you to wait. (*Plato, *The Republic,* Bk 1*)*

**Why should I care?** Plato's *Republic* is probably the single most important work of philosophy done by any Greek or Roman writer, and it would prove to be a *huge* influence on subsequent philosophers, political theorists, Jewish-Christian-Islamic theologians, and writers. It holds a central place in the so-called "Western Canon." It's also well-written (at least for a philosophy book!).

**What is the plot?** The *Republic* consists of a (fictional) dialogue that is supposedly written from the perspective of Socrates, who is recording what happened the previous day. When the story begins, Socrates and Glaucon (Plato's brother) have attended a new religious festival in the Piraeus (the port of Athens), and have begun the long walk home (which would have taken several hours). They are intercepted by Polemarchus and Adeimantus (also Plato's brother), and go to the house of Cephalus (Polemarchus's father), where they meet with some other people, including a nasty guy named Thrasymachus. The bulk of the subsequent conversation takes place at the house. They are trying to figure out the definition of "justice," and end up describing a perfectly just city called the "Republic" or *kallipolis.*

**What is it *really* about?** The study of philosophy is often broken into four sub-disciplines: **metaphysics** (the study of existence at the most basic level), **epistemology** (the study of knowledge, and how we learn things), **ethics** (the study of personal and social morality), and **logic** (the study of reasoning). In the *Republic,* Plato discusses all four branches of philosophy, and offers a detailed, unified picture of society and the individual's place in it. He also tries to show how studying philosophy can help improve both us as individuals and as a society.

## WHAT ARE PLATO'S VIEWS?

*"Plato possessed the art to dress up illiberal suggestions in such a way that they deceived future ages, which admired the Republic without ever becoming aware of what was involved in its proposals. It has always been correct to praise Plato, but not to understand him. This is the common fate of great men. My object is the opposite. I wish to understand him, but to treat him*

*with as little reverence as if he were a contemporary English or American advocate of totalitarianism." (*Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy)*

There have been tens of thousands of articles and books written about *The Republic,* and it's notoriously tough to say *exactly* what Plato is up to in the book, especially since Plato never actually tells us "Here's what I think". However, at least in *The Republic,* the character of Socrates seems to defend something like the following conclusions:

**What are Plato's metaphysical views?** Plato is a **metaphysical realist** about just about everything: he thinks that numbers exist, he thinks that objective ethical truth exists, he thinks immortal souls exist, he thinks that the abstract perfect bed exists (though it's not exactly clear *where* these things exists). He thinks that the most basic things in existence are abstract, non-physical things called **forms**. He dislikes **anti-realism** in just about every form.

**What are Plato's epistemological views?** Plato defends **rationalism,** which is the view that the most important sorts of knowledge come from rational reflection and NOT from observation or experimentation. He thinks that mathematics has the right idea: any idea that's worth having (even those that concern things like medicine or politics) should be figured out from self-evident first principles. He is opposed to **empiricism,** which claims that the most important knowledge comes from the five senses.

**What is PLATONISM?** Plato's combined metaphysical and epistemological views are sometimes called **Platonism.** Contemporary Platonists are usually a bit less ambitious than Plato, and often confine their claims to things such as ethics or mathematics (and not to science or medicine). However, there are still notable scientists (Einstein, for example) who are quite Platonist. An "ethical Platonist" is somebody who believes that the truth (or falsity) of claims about ethics is determined by something entirely independent of humans and their interests.

**What are Plato's ethical and political views?** Plato is a strong proponent of **ethical realism,** which is the view that there are objective, interpersonal ethical truths that hold for all times and peoples. Plato is suspicious of democracy, since he thinks democratic governments often pander to people's worst natures, and are easy prey for demagogues and tyrants. The "Republic" he describes is run by **philosopher-kings** (or maybe "philosopher-rulers" since Plato is one of the only ancient thinkers who thought women could do philosophy!)**,** who are essentially extremely well-educated people who care *only* about the good of society. The cave analogy is, among other things, supposed to show how to train a philosopher-ruler (it's really tough!)

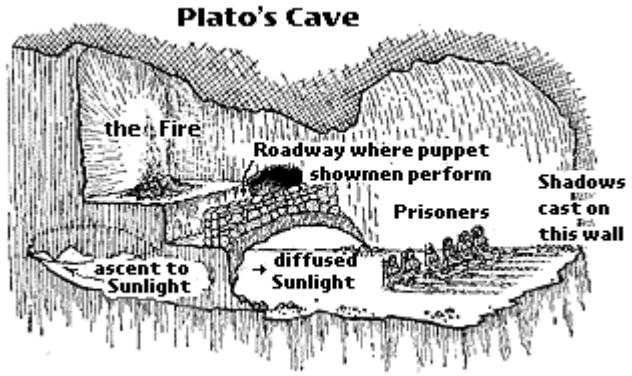
- Plato (at least in the *Republic*) describes a **paternalistic** government that actively intervenes in citizens' lives to ensure that they are pursuing the "right" sorts of goals (i.e., the ones that will make actually them happy, as opposed to what the people *think* will make them happy). In this sense, Plato has something in common with other critics of modern "liberal democracy," including both communists and religious conservatives (and Plato has actually been an important, though often indirect, influence on some members of both groups). The "Republic" contains numerous laws concerning the sorts of allowed religion/art/literature, citizens' family and sex lives, and private property (the rulers can't have any).
- Plato's political philosophy stands in sharp contrast to modern political **liberalism,** which holds that the government's goal is to help citizens lead the lives *they* want to lead. Liberals (including both "left-wing liberals" and right wing "libertarians") hold that a government should be neutral as to what is really "good" and should intervene in citizen's lives only if they are a threat to *other* people (i.e., laws against theft, rape, murder, etc.).
- The Republic is famous for its critique of democracy, which Socrates suggests would lead inevitably to tyranny, when a clever tyrant would exploit the (largely ignorant) people's various fears and hatreds to rise to power. This would be aided by things like the media (in this case, Greek theater and poetry), which gave people a warped perspective on reality.

**What does Plato think about logic?** Plato has two models for what counts as a good argument: the proofs given by geometers (where one starts with a first principle, and shows what follows) and the **dialectic** method of question-and-answer used by Socrates (where one starts with a view, figures out what is wrong with it, makes revisions, criticizes the *new* view, and so on).

## HOW DO I LEARN TO BE WISE? THE STORY OF THE CAVE?

*"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." (Plato, The Republic, Bk VII)*




In book 7 of the *Republic,* Plato uses the story of the cave to illustrate the relationship between the visible and intelligible world, and to provide an idea of how we can *train* people to become more ethical (or wise). While this story is supposedly "about" the education of the philosopher-kings, it also serves as more general account of how Plato thinks education in ethics/philosophy is supposed to work.

1. Most people spend their lives attending to "shadows on the cave wall"—that is, they attend to *images* or *descriptions* of visible entities. For example, people who spent most of their lives watching TV, playing video games, or blindly trusting whatever they were told about the world by a religious guru would fall into this class of people. Unless someone comes and "breaks your chains" (and makes you turn around), this is something like the "default" condition for humans.
2. A good education (in music and literature, athletics, and science) can help to get us "turn around" and see the real objects in the visible world (these are the puppets in the cave). Of course, this is a bit of a pain—when you first look toward the fire (which represents the real-world sun), you won't be able to see anything, and it will probably hurt your eyes at first. On Plato's view, the early Greek "scientists" have probably reached this stage—they have stopped accepting what they were told, and have begun trying to understand the physical world for themselves.
3. Eventually, we need to stop *describing* the visible world and answer a deeper question "*Why* is the visible world the way it is?" In order to do this, we need to master the art of abstract thinking about the abstract *forms* of objects, instead of about individual objects themselves. The best way of learning to think about abstract forms of objects is by mathematics and geometry, which teaches us to see that the object of thought (e.g., a "triangle" or a "line") cannot possibly be identified with any particular, really existing triangle or line. Plato calls this the **method of hypothesis.** In the cave analogy, the abstract forms of objects live *outside* the cave.
4. Finally, after the future philosopher-rulers have gotten the hang of thinking about abstract objects (and after they have become accustomed to the precise definitions and rigorous proof methods that characterize mathematics), we gave them engage in *dialectic* (e.g., philosophical and ethical conversations about the deep issues). In the end, they will finally see the **Form of the Good** itself. The Form of the Good is a bit mysterious, but it seems to be something like "whatever is it is that ultimately makes knowledge possible, and gives meaning to life." This is represented by the Sun in the cave analogy—it provides the "light" that allows us to see everything else. In later Judeo-Christian-Islamic philosophy, the Form of the Good would be equated with God.
5. After the philosopher-rulers have seen the Form of the Good (i.e., after they have finished their education, which will take until they are around fifty years old), we can send them back into the cave to help out the other people. We shouldn't expect that these other people will be immediately impressed by the philosophers, however; after all, the philosophers will be pretty bad at doing things like predicting what the movements of the shadows on the cave wall (which is all the people in the cave care about). For this reason, the philosophers (who are just trying to help!) will often make the cave dwellers mad, and bad things will result (e.g., the people of Athens voted to put Socrates to death). However, this is a risk that the philosophers must take—after all, it isn't the cave-dwellers' *fault* that they don't know any better, and the only way to help them is to educate them and to "show them the way out of the cave."

One might ask: Why can't we just skip all of this, and teach *everyone* dialectic right away (and just skip all the arduous training required of the future philosopher-rulers)? In practical terms: why do we need philosopher-rulers at all? Why can't we just educate *everyone* to make the sort of good ethical and philosophical decisions Plato expects of philosopher-rulers? While Plato doesn't give the details, the *Republic* suggests that doing dialectic successfully requires a number of skills you learn along the way "out of the cave." These include the capacity to make objective, dispassionate judgments, the ability to think abstractly, the skill and endurance to work through long, detailed arguments, and the courage to abandon beliefs that turn out not to be supported by good reasons (no matter how important those beliefs are to you). In Plato's view (at least in the *Republic*), trying to teach dialectic to people without this background might simply lead to the sorts of problems that always plague democracy: e.g., it would create even more politicians capable of making clever arguments, but wouldn't do anything to ensure that these skills were actually deployed for the common good. (It's also worth remembering that Ancient Athens didn't have anything like our modern day K-

12 or university systems, and the vast, vast majority of people had almost no "formal" education. Plato's Academy is something like the "first" university ever, and it certainly didn't have the capacity to educate more than a small number of people.)

## FINAL THOUGHTS: HOW TO DO PHILOSOPHY

Plato's Cave Analogy is among the most famous pieces of philosophy ever written, and debates about its correct interpretation have been going on for thousands of years (in particular, it's always been very unclear as to what Plato actually thinks, which was probably intentional on his part.) So, it's unlikely we can settle all these debates here. That being said, I think there are some key points that sometimes get overlooked when discussing it:

**Analogies, metaphors, and thought experiments are great. However, make sure to attention to the details.** Philosophical ideas and arguments are often tricky to understand, especially since they are (in many cases) trying to convince you that common sense is in some way mistaken. Because of this, thought experiments and analogies are often the best (or only) way for philosophers to communicate their ideas. However, when interpreting thought experiments, it's important to look at the WHOLE thought experiment, and not just the general idea. So, for example, Plato's Cave thought experiment doesn't just consist of a bunch of people living in a cave, and his point isn't just the (obvious) one that many people have false beliefs. He's trying to communicate a much more complex idea of what reality is *really* like, and how we might go about finding out about it. Because of this, it's important to focus on the detail: what role do the puppets play? The fire? The world outside? And so on.

**Don't assume Plato (or any philosopher) agrees with you, or (alternatively) that he is saying something that is obviously wrong.** There is an (understandable) temptation to read philosophers as saying something that you already know: either something you agree with, or that you already know is wrong. DON'T DO THIS. In most cases, philosophers are trying to raise *tough* questions or problems, and you should always be trying to figure what these questions or problems are. In the Cave Analogy, Plato is challenging ideas that many people (both in Ancient Greece and in the modern day) hold dear. These include the ideas that experience is the source of knowledge, that the people can be trusted to govern themselves, and that most important parts of existence are things that we can directly interact with (whether these be ordinary objects like tables, other humans, or even the Greek gods to whom one might pray). The Cave Analogy, if taken seriously, suggests that ordinary ways of thinking about science, democracy, religion, and many other things are deeply mistaken.

**Philosophy, for Plato, is incompatible with both dogmatism and skepticism.** Plato's Socrates once claimed that he was the wisest of all humans since he alone knew that he "knew nothing." Socrates basic idea seemed to be that most people (nearly all of us, actually) live as if we have good answers to the most important questions about life and how we should live it. He thought that self-examination would quickly reveal this sort of dogmatism is completely unfounded—we often have *no idea* how to defend our most cherished beliefs. However, Plato (and Plato's Socrates) are most certainly NOT skeptics—he clearly thinks there are better and worse ways of doing things, and that figuring these things out requires genuine effort and commitment. Of course, there is no guarantee that we'll ever arrive at the correct answer, but this is no excuse for not trying. For example, Plato later seems to recant both his Theory of Forms and some of his criticisms of democracy, but this didn't lead him to conclude that "all ideas were equal" or anything of the sort. In this sense, Plato's attitude is typical of the philosophical tradition he's inspired: while we should be highly critical of all ideas (including our own), it would irresponsible (and probably immoral) to abandon the quest for better ideas and arguments, even if we find ourselves frustrated by our failures.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Pretend you are teaching the allegory of the cave to a group of 12-year-olds. Use simple, clear words and examples they can relate to in order to explain both the structure of the allegory and "what it means." In your explanation, be sure to include each of the following parts: the shadows, the puppets, the fire, the objects in the world outside, and the cave.
2. During his life, Plato saw democratic Athens make a number of bad decisions, which led to a long, losing war with Sparta, a plague (caused in part by the response to the war), and the execution of Socrates. He also saw many Athenian citizens collaborate with the "Thirty Tyrants." In the *Republic,* Plato suggests these sorts of problems are a necessary consequence of allowing "the majority" (who don't have much expertise in governing, and are mostly interested in helping out themselves and their families) to govern. To what extent do you think these worries apply to modern democratic governments (such as the U.S.)? How might a defender of democracy respond to Plato's worries?