

Plato's Cave:  
Deceitful Shadows

Behold! human beings living in an underground den (Jowett 224). Such is the premise to one of the most significant and examined pieces of philosophy to this day, Plato's Allegory of the Cave. In the Allegory of the Cave, slaves are chained and unable to move their limbs or neck, only allowed to look straight ahead at the shadows being shown to them by unknown entities. Incapable of knowing any better, and only having experienced the world of the shadows in the cave, for them the truth and reality would be literally nothing but these shadows of the images on the wall (Jowett 225). Plato's allegory is as relevant today as it was over two thousand years ago, essentially because it is deeply concerned with human perception of the world. The majority of the public is shackled and shown only images or shadows, and only very few are strong enough to break free from these shackles and see the world for what it truly is. This has many implications that can be applied to political, religious, individual philosophical issues, reality, and is deeply connected to Plato's simile of the line and his idea of the Forms.

According to Plato, everything we perceive in this world are copies of higher truths, truths which he called the Forms (Palmer 47). These forms exist outside of time and space, are eternal, uncreated, indestructible and unchanging. They are not physical, but they are not mental either, and can only be grasped by the intellect. Palmer says that according to Plato, the only way for the mind to grasp these Forms is for it to transcend the senses (47). It is simple to see the connection here that Plato is trying to convey. When the slaves of the cave are *ascended* out of

the steps into the Sun and shown the world, it is a metaphor for the mind *transcending* the senses and seeing the world of the Forms. We can also see the symbolism and connection of Plato's cave when we compare it to another of his most famous works, the Simile of the Line. In the Simile of the Line, Plato divides all knowledge into sections, having the Forms as the highest and most real, and images and imaging as the lowest. The slaves are shown only shadows, which according to Plato's Line, it is the least trusted way in which a person can grasp reality. When the slave steps out of the cave, he will be required to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world (Jowett 225). Until his eyes adjust, he will only be able to look down at the shadows and reflections of men and other objects in the water and then at the objects themselves. Still, even after exiting the cave, the slaves would have a narrow understanding of reality because they are looking at images, shadows, and reflections. However, these are slightly more real than the shadows inside the cave. Then, the slave will be able to lift his head and see the night stars, the moon and the heavens. Lastly, he will be able to look at the Sun. It is important to know that for Plato, the Good was the ultimate form, that which grounds all reality and bestows worth on it (Palmer 47). In the Allegory of the Cave, the Good is being represented by the Sun, and the journey does not end when the slave exits the cave, it is just the beginning of it.

In addition, the story of the cave may be more prominent in today's time more than ever before. It can be said that the majority of the world today lives in a Platonic cave in one way or another. According to the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, it is estimated that there are 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children around the globe, representing 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion (The Global Religious Landscape).

Religion is a form of shackles that restrain the individual to look only straight at the shadows being produced on the wall. Like the slaves, that reality is comfortable for them and is all they know. It is quite like Freud says, that religion can be escaped only by those who can develop the courage to face the harshness of life without delusions and replace them with scientific concepts (Palmer 184-185). However, religion is not the only cave in which people may be living today. Many people around the world live in censorship imposed on them by their own governments, obvious and not so obvious. It is quite reminiscent of Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" in the way that we are slowly turning into a dystopian society and that we are choosing not to see the truth. Just like the slave who ascended out of the cave and saw the world for what it was, when he returned to the cave and his eyes had not adjusted to the darkness, he was ridiculed by the other slaves for leaving and not being able to measure the shadows on the wall as well as them (Jowett 227), people have been ridiculed for breaking free from the chains of misinformation and coming back to enlighten those who are less fortunate. Perhaps one of the greatest illusions we perceive to be real are those portrayed by the media and society. We are fed false stereotypes and dogmatic views through a myriad of electronic devices that capture our attention. We are told that, for example, all Muslims are terrorists, or that in order to be happy you need the latest and most luxurious car, or cell phone, or the big house, or the diet pill that will make you lose five pounds and be more attractive. All of these are false beliefs placed by the other unknown entities in order to keep the majority of the public drowned in pseudo information and not concerned with the substantial.

Lastly, and perhaps one of the deepest implications that the story of the cave has, is that

which can be applied individually to pursuit virtue and knowledge. In the story, Socrates tells Glaucon, Plato's brother:

“Let's assume that 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 upward to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world... (Jowett 227).”

Here we see that in order to have a better understanding of what is true, one must leave the senses behind. It is no coincidence that Descartes had a similar approach in his way of thinking, he understood what Plato and Socrates meant, and that in order to truly grasp what is most real one must first abandon the senses and leave the material world behind. Plato would argue that one must always start from nothing, to abandon the idea that one knows what anything really is, to accept the possibility that one does in fact live in a cave, and then, once ignorance is acknowledged, the journey to achieve excellence, or *aretê*, is possible. Once one has been enlightened and attained these visions, one is compelled to let his fellow men know, it is his or her duty to deliver the message so that others can achieve excellence as well. In his book the Republic, Plato writes that it shouldn't be surprising that a man who has seen the Good and whose eyes are still adjusting to the darkness of the real world may be compelled to fight in courts of law, or other places, so that his fellow men could see that what they think is Justice is only an image or a shadow of true Justice (Jowett 227-228). This can be considered to be a statement made against those who prosecuted Socrates when, in fact, his intentions were to open the eyes of the people of Athens.

In conclusion, it is evident why even to this day, Plato's Allegory of the Cave is an

remarkable piece of philosophy with countless interpretations. I believe that the Allegory of the Cave has many more meanings, and each individual who reads it and tries to grasp it will find it relatable to his or her life in one way or another. The idea that we are the slaves and the cave is the perceivable world is a very profound one, and if taken seriously it could amount to remarkable self-improvement and life changing revelations. I remember first finding out about Plato's cave when I was younger, but only scratching the surface. However, the core idea was so simple that I was able to grasp it, yet so complex I found myself able to apply it practically everywhere, and it is one of the reasons for my present way of thinking. If more people realized that these shackles and the cave are metaphorical, and if they leave their "know-it-all" attitudes aside and admit some kind of ignorance, then they would be able to stand up and turn around, see the shadows for what they truly are, and step out into the Sun.

### Works Cited

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