Plato's Cave

I. Society and the individual

A. Plato ( b 429 d 348 bc) ancient Greek philosopher and social thinker

B. Philosophical dialogues - Socrates as Protagonist

1. seeking the truth

a. questions conventional wisdom

i. friendship

ii. love

iii. knowledge

iv. state

b. challenging authority figures

c. sentenced to death

i. impiety - challenging cultural idols

ii. corrupting the youth of Athens

d. seeking the truth is a death sentence

B. The Republic written prior to 388bc is dialogue regarding the ideal state

1. Book VII "The Allegory of the Cave" presents what

Plato thinks to be the major problem

2. it also presents in metaphorical terms the problem

we face today

II. The Allegory of the Cave

A. Situation

1. People are inside a cave and they are facing the

far wall

1. "Prisoners" whose legs and necks fastened so

a. they can only look at the far wall

b. can't see each other

c. since childhood

2. there is a fire behind them and a raised road upon

which people with objects travel

3. all the prisoners can see are the reflections

4. this is the only world they know

a. a shadow world

b. world of reflections

5. prisoners imagine that this is truth or reality

B. Enlightenment

1. image of sun is image of truth

2. turns toward fire and sees whole cave

a. psychologically "at a loss"

b. shadows truer

3. needs to be dragged out

a. dazzled by the glare

b. takes awhile but finally "sees" the truth

4. chooses to return

a. hard to see in dark now

b. appears like a fool trying to explain the truth

c. threatened by death because he has upset their

"taken for granted" lives

C. Meaning of the metaphor - Plato

1. society controls the individual by creating

a. a false or shadow reality - images, illusions,

ideology

b. creating a dependent psychology, oriented to that reality

c. social structures and arrangements

i. institutions

ii. arrangements - social roles

iii. norms, values, rituals

d. existing power arrangements and the status

quo never questioned

2. individual

a. thinks he is free and knows something because he hasn't experienced anything else

b. organizes life, goals, needs around false reality