

The allegory of the cave describes individuals chained deep within the recesses of a cave. Bound so that vision is restricted, the only thing visible is the wall of the cave upon which appear shadows cast by models or statues of animals and objects that are passed before a brightly burning fire. Breaking free, one of the individuals first turns back and recognizes the fire as the source of the shadow, then he escapes from the cave into the light of day. With the aid of the sun, that person sees for the first time the real world and returns to the cave with the message that the only things they have seen heretofore are shadows and appearances and that the real world awaits them if they are willing to struggle free of their bonds. The shadowy environment of the cave symbolizes for Plato the physical world of appearances. Escape into the sun-filled setting outside the cave symbolizes the transition to the real world, the world of full and perfect being, the world of IDEAS, which is the proper object of knowledge.

The allegorical correspondences are then:

- a** between the shadows and reality as experienced everyday (BELIEF),
- b** between the radiance of the cave fire and the light in which the habitual and closest "reality" stands (REASON),
- c** between the things outside the cave and the ideas, between the sun and the highest idea (INTELLIGENCE).

These correspondences do not exhaust the content of the allegory. Rather than just reporting on the dwelling places and conditions of people inside and outside the cave, the allegory recounts a series of movements. These are movements of passage out of the cave into the daylight and then back out of the daylight into the cave. They require in each case that the eyes accustom themselves to the change from darkness to brightness and from brightness back to darkness. This means that there are two possibilities. On the one hand people can leave their hardly noticed ignorance and get to where beings show themselves to them more essentially, but where initially people are not adequate to the essential. On the other hand people can fall out of the stance of essential knowing and be forced back into the region where common reality reigns supreme, but without their being able to recognize what is common and customary there as being the real.

But why does this process of getting accustomed to each region have to be slow and steady? The reason is that the turning around has to do with one's being and thus takes place in the very ground of one's essence. This means that the normative bearing that is to result from this turning around must unfold from a relation that already sustains our essence, and develop into a stable comportment. This process is conceived by Plato as education, which means at the same time impressing a character on people and guiding people by a paradigm. Plato's assertion is clear: the "allegory of the cave" illustrates the essence of "education."

But it has a lot to tell in terms of truth as well, being Platonic "doctrine" of truth strongly involved in this allegory. Remarkably is that even those who have been freed from their chains still assess wrongly in what they posit as true, because they lack the prior condition for "assessing": freedom. Certainly removing the chains brings a sort of liberation, but being let loose is not yet real freedom: the glow of the fire, to which their eyes are not accustomed, blinds those who have been liberated. Liberation does not come about by the simple removal of the chains, and it does not consist in unlimited license; rather, it first begins as the continuous effort at accustoming one's gaze to be fixed on the firm limits of things that stand fast in their visible form. Authentic liberation is the steadiness of being oriented toward that which appears in its visible form and which is the most unhidden in this appearing.

The telling of the story does not end, as is often supposed, with the description of the highest level attained in the ascent out of the cave. On the contrary, the allegory includes the story of the descent of the freed person back into the cave, back to those who are still in chains. The one who has been freed is supposed to lead these people too away from what is unhidden for them and to bring them face to face with the "MOST UNHIDDEN". But the would-be liberator no longer knows his way around the cave and risks the danger of succumbing to the overwhelming power of the kind of truth that is normative there, the danger of being overcome by the claim of the common "reality" to be the only reality.

Originally for the Greeks hiddenness, as an act of self-hiding, permeated the essence of being and thus also determined beings in their presentness and accessibility ("truth"); and that is why the Greek word for what the Romans call "veritas" and for what we call "truth" was distinguished by the alpha-privative. Truth originally means that which has been wrested from hiddenness. Truth is thus a wresting away in each case, in the form of a revealing. The hiddenness can be of various kinds: closing off, hiding away, disguising, covering over, masking, dissembling.

This allegory can have the structure of a cave image only because it is antecedently codetermined by the fundamental experience of the unhiddenness of beings, which was something self-evident for the Greeks. For what else is the underground cave except something open in itself that remains at the same time covered by a vault and, despite the entrance, walled off and enclosed by the surrounding earth?

ABOUT THE CAVE ALLEGORY

Already within the cave, when those who have been liberated turn away from the shadows and turn toward the things, they direct their gaze to that which, in comparison with the mere shadows, "is more in being" (truer) "and thus turned to what is more in being, they should certainly see more correctly." The movement of passage from one place to the other consists in the process whereby the gaze becomes more correct. Everything depends on the the correctness of the gaze. Through this correctness, seeing or knowing becomes something correct so that in the end it looks directly at the highest idea and fixes itself in this "direct alignment."

In so directing itself, apprehending conforms itself to what is to be seen: the "visible form" of the being.

The story recounted in the allegory of the cave provides a glimpse of what is really happening in the history of Western humanity, both now and in the future: taking the essence of truth as the correctness of the representation, one thinks of all beings according to "ideas" and evaluates all reality according to "values." That which alone and first of all is decisive is not which ideas and which values are posited, but rather the fact that the real is interpreted at all according to "ideas," that the "world" is weighed at all according to "values."

Ever since, there has been a striving for "truth" in the sense of the correctness of the gaze and of the correctness of its direction (ethics). Ever since, what matters in all our fundamental orientations toward beings is the achieving of a correct view of the ideas.

ABOUT THE KNOWLEDGE PROCESS (VISION) AND HOW IT AFFECTS THE PERCEPTION OF TRUTH