Plato’s Cave Allegory Implication: Stage of Life

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The allegory of the cave is regarded as the most beautiful and famous metaphor in Western philosophy, which is described by Plato and presented by Socrates in his book The Republic Chapter VII. This metaphor is meant to illustrate how education affects the human soul.

It is described as in a dark scene, a group of people have lived in a deep cave like prisoners since birth but have never seen the light of day. These people are bound so that they cannot look to anywhere else except from straight ahead. Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is a partial wall. On top of the wall are statues, which are manipulated by another group of people from the outside cave world. The shadows of statues are projected on the wall that the prisoners are facing, due to the fire. The prisoners can only watch the stories that these shadows play out and deeply believe these stories as mostly the real world is like. This is the imagination of the prisoners, as the lowest stage of their life.

Along with a prisoner is freed from his bonds, and is forced to look at the fire and at the statues themselves. He can gradually understand the stories he was looking at all the time is just created by the fire and statues. Because he is now making contact with real things rather than just shadows, he believes that the fire and statues are the most real things in the world but still has no idea that outside the cave, there is a bigger world with more realities. Next stage when this prisoner is dragged out of the cave into the world above. He has the chance to contact more real objects than fire and statues. He is now coming to another new stage which could make him begin to think and improve his cognition because he realized the most real things exist in the Forms. Furthermore, when he realizes that the sun light makes him see the world, he begins to understand the Form of the Good.

The goal of education is to emancipate people from their cave of cognition, to make them realize that there are way more things and realities than they have currently known. Education should not aim at putting knowledge into the soul, but at turning the soul toward right desires and get to understand the principle. Education should help those with the right natures to turn their minds sharply toward the Form of the Good. I think in the allegory of the Cave, Plato means to depict not only four ways of thinking, but four ways of life. For example, if we ask a person in each of these stages that what responsibility is. The answer from different stages is likely of great difference.

I will assume that at the stage of imagination, the person might explain responsibility by saying something like, “I did something, that is responsibility.” At the belief stage, this might be explained by giving an exact real world example such as the firemen extinguish a fire.

Further deeper, someone at the stage of thought might try to give a definition of responsibility such as something that it is your job or duty and categories the type of job and duty according to different people. They will have their own opinions on the topic because they understand the knowledge and can defend the knowledge based on the first principle.

Understanding is the highest stage because you need to understand everything to proceed to understand more things. It is inevitable to proceed through the lower stages in order to reach the higher stages. Everyone begins at the cognitive level of imagination and gradually being educated to struggle to move up to a higher level of understanding, in order to walk out of the cave. That is the importance of education and thinking, and the implication I obtained from the allegory of the Cave.