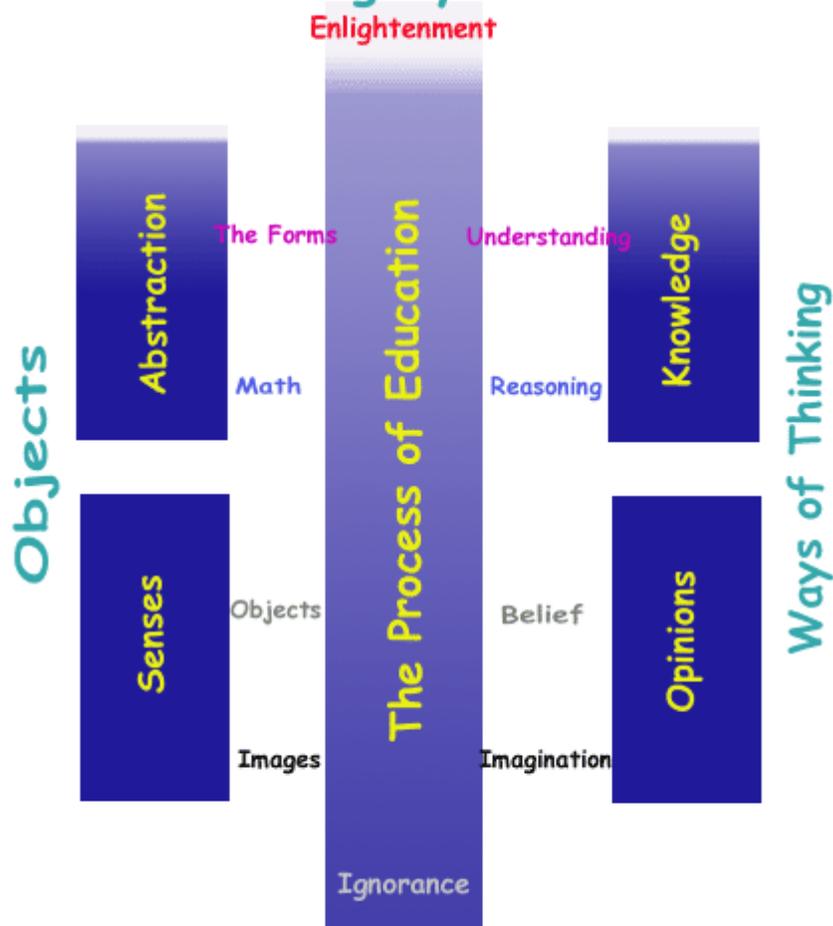


Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"



An Analysis of "The Allegory of the Cave"

The Allegory of the Cave is Plato's explanation of the education of the soul toward enlightenment. He sees it as what happens when someone is educated to the level of philosopher. He contends that they must "go back into the cave" or return to the everyday world of politics, greed and power struggles. The Allegory also attacks people who rely upon or are slaves to their senses. The chains that bind the prisoners are the senses. The fun of the allegory is to try to put all the details of the cave into your interpretation. In other words, what are the models the guards carry? the fire? the struggle out of the cave? the sunlight? the shadows on the cave wall?

Socrates, in Book VII of *The Republic*, just after the allegory told us that the cave was our world and the fire was our sun. He said the path of the prisoner was our soul's ascent to knowledge or enlightenment. He equated our world of sight with the intellect's world of opinion. Both were at the bottom of the ladder of knowledge. Our

world of sight allows us to "see" things that are not real, such as parallel lines and perfect circles. He calls this higher understanding the world "abstract Reality" or the Intelligible world. He equates this abstract reality with the knowledge that comes from reasoning and finally understanding.

On the physical side, our world of sight, the stages of growth are first recognition of images (the shadows on the cave wall) then the recognition of objects (the models the guards carry) To understand abstract reality requires the understanding of mathematics and finally the forms or the Ideals of all things (the world outside the cave).

But our understanding of the physical world is mirrored in our minds by our ways of thinking. First comes imagination (Socrates thought little of creativity), then our unfounded but real beliefs. Opinion gives way to knowledge through reasoning (learned through mathematics). Finally, the realization of the forms is mirrored by the level of Understanding in the Ways of Thinking.

The key to the struggle for knowledge is the reasoning skills acquired through mathematics as they are applied to understanding ourselves.

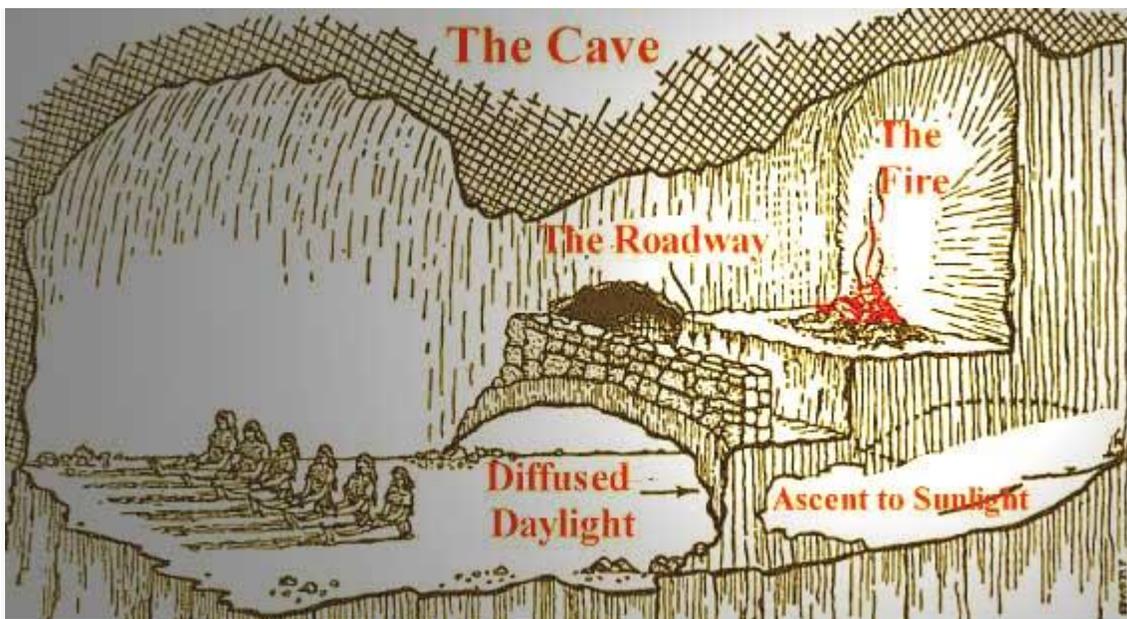
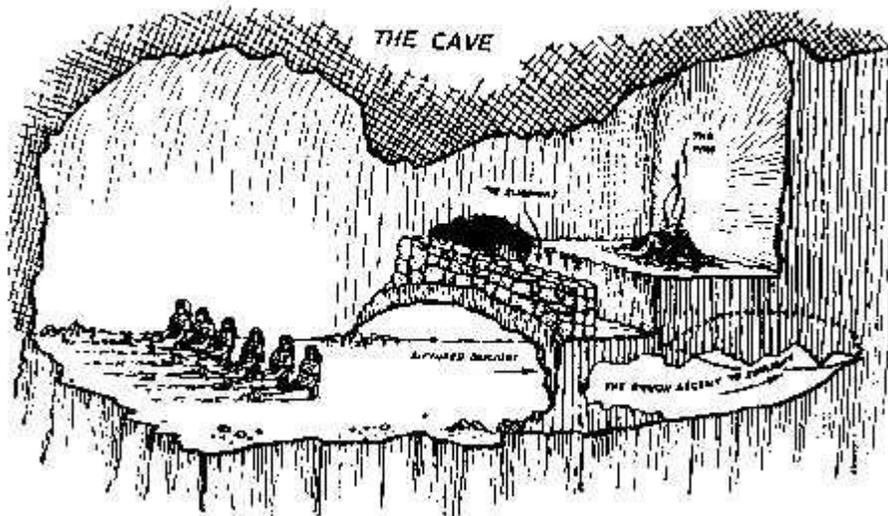
The shadows on the cave wall change continually and are of little worth, but the reality outside the cave never changes and that makes it important. The ideals are mainly our concepts of courage, love, friendship, justice, and other unchanging qualities.

I know this is a bit tricky, but it is how I see the allegory, and most of it is in the preceding and following books of *The Republic*. I think you should read those chapters, think about what I have said and zero in on what the allegory means to you.

For a real treat, compare the allegory to Sir Francis Bacon's [*Idols of the Mind*](#)

[Michael O'Leary](#)

Another Visual Representation



Idols

of the Mind

By Sir Francis Bacon

1

There are four classes of Idols which beset men's minds. To these for distinction's sake I have assigned names—calling the first class Idols of the Tribe; the second, Idols of the Cave; the third, Idols of the Market-place; the fourth, Idols of the Theatre.

2

The formation of ideas and axioms by true induction is no doubt the proper remedy to be applied

for the keeping off and clearing away of idols. To point them out, however, is of great use, for the doctrine of Idols is to the Interpretation of Nature what the doctrine of the refutation of Sophisms is to common Logic.

3

The Idols of the Tribe have their foundation in human nature itself, and in the tribe or race of men. For it is a false assertion that the sense of man is the measure of things. On the contrary, all perceptions as well of the sense as of the mind are according to the measure of the individual and not according to the measure of the universe. And the human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolours the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it.

4

The Idols of the Cave are the idols of the individual man. For every one (besides the errors common to human nature in general) has a cave or den of his own, which refracts and discolours the light of nature; owing either to his own proper and peculiar nature; or to his education and conversation with others; or to the reading of books, and the authority of those whom he esteems and admires; or to the differences of impressions, accordingly as they take place in a mind preoccupied and predisposed or in a mind indifferent and settled; or the like. So that the spirit of man (according as it is meted out to different individuals) is in fact a thing variable and full of perturbation, and governed as it were by chance. Whence it was well observed by Heraclitus that men look for sciences in their own lesser worlds, and not in the greater or common world.

5

There are also Idols formed by the intercourse and association of men with each other, which I call Idols of the Market-place, on account of the commerce and consort of men there. For it is by discourse that men associate, and words are imposed according to the apprehension of the vulgar. And therefore the ill and unfit choice of words wonderfully obstructs the understanding. Nor do the definitions or explanations wherewith in some things learned men are wont to guard and defend themselves, by any means set the matter right. But words plainly force and overrule the understanding, and throw all into confusion, and lead men away into numberless empty controversies and idle fancies.

6

Lastly, there are Idols which have immigrated into men's minds from the various dogmas of philosophies, and also from wrong laws of demonstration. These I call Idols of the Theatre, because in my judgment all the received systems are but so many stage-plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion. Nor is it only of the systems now in vogue, or only of the ancient sects and philosophies, that I speak; for many more plays of the same kind may yet be composed and in like artificial manner set forth, seeing that errors the most widely different have nevertheless causes for the most part alike. Neither again do I mean this only of entire systems, but also of many principles and axioms in science, which by tradition, credulity, and negligence have come to be received. But of these several kinds of Idols I must speak more largely and exactly, that the understanding may be duly cautioned.

7

The human understanding is of its own nature prone to suppose the existence of more order and regularity in the world than it finds. And though there be many things in nature which are singular and un matched, yet it devises for them parallels and conjugates and relatives which do not exist. Hence the fiction that all celestial bodies move in perfect circles; spirals and dragons being (except in name) utterly rejected. Hence too the element of Fire with its orb is brought in, to make up the square with the other three which the sense perceives. Hence also the ratio of density of the so-called elements is arbitrarily fixed at ten to one. And so on of other dreams. And these fancies affect not dogmas only, but simple notions also.

8

The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side yet these it either neglects and despises, or else by some distinction sets aside and rejects; in order that by this great and pernicious predetermination the authority of its former conclusions may remain inviolate. And therefore it was a good answer that was made by one who when they showed him hanging in a temple a picture of those who had paid their vows as having escaped shipwreck, and would have him say whether he did not now acknowledge the power of the gods—'Aye,' asked he again, 'but where are they painted that were drowned after their vows?' And such is the way of all superstition, whether in astrology, dreams, omens, divine judgements, or the like; wherein men, having a delight in such vanities, mark the events where they are fulfilled, but where they fail, though this happen much oftener, neglect and pass them by. But with far more subtlety does this mischief insinuate itself into philosophy and the sciences, in which the first conclusion colours and brings into conformity with itself all that come after, though far sounder and better. Besides, independently of that delight and vanity which I have described, it is the peculiar and perpetual error of the human intellect to be more moved and excited by affirmatives than by negatives; whereas it ought properly to hold itself indifferently disposed towards both alike. Indeed in the establishment of any true axiom, the negative instance is the more forcible of the two.

9

The human understanding is moved by those things most which strike and enter the mind simultaneously and suddenly, and so fill the Imagination; and then it feigns and supposes all other things to be somehow, though it cannot see how, similar to those few things by which it is surrounded. But for that going to and fro to remote and heterogeneous instances, by which axioms are tried as in the fire, the intellect is altogether slow and unfit, unless it be forced thereto by severe laws and overruling authority.

10

The human understanding is unquiet; it cannot stop or rest, and still presses onward, but in vain. Therefore it is that we cannot conceive of any end or limit to the world, but always as of necessity it occurs to us that there is something beyond. Neither again can it be conceived how eternity has flowed down to the present day, for that distinction which is commonly received of infinity in time past and in time to come can by no means hold; for it would thence follow that one infinity is greater than another, and that infinity is wasting away and tending to become

finite. The like subtlety arises touching the infinite divisibility of lines, from the same inability of thought to stop. But this inability interferes more mischievously in the discovery of causes: for although the most general principles in nature ought to be held merely positive, as they are discovered, and cannot with truth be referred to a cause; nevertheless the human understanding being unable to rest still seeks something prior in the order of nature. And then it is that in struggling towards that which is further off it falls back upon that which is more nigh at hand, namely, on final causes: which have relation clearly to the nature of man rather than to the nature of the universe, and from this source have strangely defiled philosophy. But he is no less an unskilled and shallow philosopher who seeks causes of that which is most general, than he who in things subordinate and subaltern omits to do so.

11

The human understanding is no dry light, but receives an infusion from the will and affections, whence proceed sciences which may be called 'sciences as one would.' For what a man had rather were true he more readily believes. Therefore he rejects difficult things from impatience of research; sober things, because they narrow hope; the deeper things of nature, from superstition; the light of experience, from arrogance and pride, lest his mind should seem to be occupied with things mean and transitory; things not commonly believed, out of deference to the opinion of the vulgar. Numberless in short are the ways, and sometimes imperceptible, in which the affections colour and infect the understanding.

12

But by far the greatest hindrance and aberration of the human understanding proceeds from the dullness, incompetency, and deceptions of the senses; in that things which strike the sense outweigh things which do not immediately strike it, though they be more important. Hence it is that speculation commonly ceases where sight ceases, insomuch that of things invisible there is little or no observation. Hence all the working of the spirits inclosed in tangible bodies lies hid and unobserved of men. So also all the more subtle changes of form in the parts of coarser substances (which they commonly call alteration, though it is in truth local motion through exceedingly small spaces) is in like manner unobserved. And yet unless these two things just mentioned be searched out and brought to light, nothing great can be achieved in nature, as far as the production of works is concerned. So again the essential nature of our common air, and of all bodies less dense than air (which are very many), is almost unknown. For the sense by itself is a thing infirm and erring; neither can instruments for enlarging or sharpening the senses do much; but all the truer kind of interpretation of nature is effected by instances and experiments fit and apposite; wherein the sense decides touching the experiment only, and the experiment touching the point in nature and the thing itself.

13

The human understanding is of its own nature prone to abstractions and gives a substance and reality to things which are fleeting. But to resolve nature into abstractions is less to our purpose than to dissect her into parts; as did the school of Democritus which went further into nature than the rest. Matter rather than forms should be the object of our attention, its configurations and changes of configuration, and simple action, and law of action or motion; for forms are figments of the human mind, unless you will call those laws of action forms.

14

Such then are the idols which I call Idols of the Tribe, and which take their rise either from the homogeneity of the substance of the human spirit, or from its preoccupation, or from its narrowness, or from its restless motion, or from an infusion of the affections, or from the incompetency of the senses, or from the mode of impression.

15

The Idols of the Cave take their rise in the peculiar constitution mental or bodily, of each individual, and also in education, habit, and accident. Of this kind there is a great number and variety, but I will instance those the pointing out of which contains the most important caution, and which have most effect in disturbing the clearness of the understanding.

16

Men become attached to certain particular sciences and speculations, either because they fancy themselves the authors and inventors there of, or because they have bestowed the greatest pains upon them and become most habituated to them. But men of this kind, if they betake themselves to philosophy and contemplations of a general character, distort and colour them in obedience to their former fancies: a thing especially to be noticed in Aristotle, who made his natural philosophy a mere bond-servant to his logic, thereby rendering it contentious and well nigh useless. The race of chemists again out of a few experiments of the furnace have built up a fantastic philosophy, framed with reference to a few things; and Gilberts also, after he had employed himself most laboriously in the study and observation of the loadstone, proceeded at once to construct an entire system in accordance with his favourite subject.

17.

There is one principal and as it were radical distinction between different minds, in respect of philosophy and the sciences, which is this: that some minds are stronger and apter to mark the differences of things, others to mark their resemblances. The steady and acute mind can fix its contemplations and dwell and fasten on the subtlest distinctions: the lofty and discursive mind recognizes and puts together the finest and most general resemblances. Both kinds however easily err in excess, by catching the one at gradations, the other at shadows.

18

There are found some minds given to an extreme admiration of antiquity, others to an extreme love and appetite for novelty; but few so duly tempered that they can hold the mean, neither carping at what has been well laid down by the ancients, nor despising what is well introduced by the moderns. This however turns to the great injury of the sciences and philosophy, since these affectations of antiquity and novelty are the humours of partisans rather than judgements; and truth is to be sought for not in the felicity of any age, which is an unstable thing, but in the light of nature and experience, which is eternal. These factions therefore must be abjured, and care must be taken that the intellect be not hurried by them into assent.

19

Contemplations of nature and of bodies in their simple form break up and distract the understanding, while contemplations of nature and bodies in their composition and configuration overpower and dissolve the understanding: a distinction well seen in the school of Leucippus and

Democritus as compared with the other philosophies. For that school is so busied with the particles that it hardly attends to the structure, while the others are so lost in admiration of the structure that they do not penetrate to the simplicity of nature. These kinds of contemplation should therefore be alternated and taken by turns; that so the understanding may be rendered at once penetrating and comprehensive, and the inconveniences above mentioned, with the idols which proceed from them, may be avoided.

20

Let such then be our provision and contemplative prudence for keeping off and dislodging the Idols of the Cave, which grow for the most part either out of the predominance of a favourite subject, or out of an excessive tendency to compare or to distinguish, or out of partiality for particular ages, or out of the largeness or minuteness of the objects contemplated. And generally let every student of nature take this as a rule—that whatever his mind seizes and dwells upon with peculiar satisfaction is to be held in suspicion, and that so much the more care is to be taken in dealing with such questions to keep the understanding even and clear.

21

But the Idols of the Market-place are the most troublesome of all: idols which have crept into the understanding through the alliances of words and names. For men believe that their reason governs words, but it is also true that words react on the understanding; and this it is that has rendered philosophy and the sciences sophistical and inactive. Now words, being commonly framed and applied according to the capacity of the vulgar, follow those lines of division which are most obvious to the vulgar understanding. And whenever an understanding of greater acuteness or a more diligent observation would alter those lines to suit the true divisions of nature, words stand in the way and resist the change. Whence it comes to pass that the high and formal discussions of learned men end oftentimes in disputes about words and names; with which (according to the use and wisdom of the mathematicians) it would be more prudent to begin, and so by means of definitions reduce them to order. Yet even definitions cannot cure this evil in dealing with natural and material things, since the definitions themselves consist of words, and those words beget others: so that it is necessary to recur to individual instances, and those in due series and order; as I shall say presently when I come to the method and scheme for the formation of notions and axioms.

22

The idols imposed by words on the understanding are of two kinds. They are either names of things which do not exist (for as there are things left unnamed through lack of observation, so likewise are there names which result from fantastic suppositions and to which nothing in reality corresponds), or they are names of things which exist, but yet confused and ill-defined, and hastily and irregularly derived from realities. Of the former kind are Fortune, the Prime Mover, Planetary Orbits, Element of Fire, and like fictions which owe their origin to false and idle theories. And this class of idols is more easily expelled, because to get rid of them it is only necessary that all theories should be steadily rejected and dismissed as obsolete.

But the other class, which springs out of a faulty and unskillful abstraction, is intricate and deeply rooted. Let us take for example such a word as humid, and see how far the several things which the word is used to signify agree with each other, and we shall find the word humid to be nothing else than a mark loosely and confusedly applied to denote a variety of actions which will

not bear to be reduced to any constant meaning. For it both signifies that which easily spreads itself round any other body, and that which in itself is indeterminate and cannot solidize; and that which readily yields in every direction; and that which easily divides and scatters itself; and that which easily unites and collects itself; and that which readily flows and is put in motion; and that which readily clings to another body and wets it; and that which is easily reduced to a liquid, or being solid easily melts. Accordingly when you come to apply the word, if you take it in one sense, flame is humid; if in another, air is not humid; if in another, fine dust is humid; if in another, glass is humid. So that it is easy to see that the notion is taken by abstraction only from water and common and ordinary liquids, without any due verification.

There are however in words certain degrees of distortion and error. One of the least faulty kinds is that of names of substances, especially of lowest species and well-deduced (for the notion of chalk and of mud is good, of earth bad); a more faulty kind is that of actions, as to generate, to corrupt, to alter; the most faulty is of qualities (except such as are the immediate objects of the sense) as heavy, light, rare, dense, and the like. Yet in all these cases some notions are of necessity a little better than others, in proportion to the greater variety of subjects that fall within the range of the human sense.

23 But the Idols of the Theatre are not innate, nor do they steal into the understanding secretly, but are plainly impressed and received into the mind from the play-books of philosophical systems and the perverted rules of demonstration. To attempt refutations in this case would be merely inconsistent with what I have already said: for since we agree neither upon principles nor upon demonstrations there is no place for argument. And this is so far well, inasmuch as it leaves the honour of the ancients untouched. For they are no wise disparaged—the question between them and me being only as to the way. For as the saying is, the lame man who keeps the right road outstrips the runner who takes a wrong one. Nay it is obvious that when a man runs the wrong way, the more active and swift he is the further he will go astray.

But the course I propose for the discovery of sciences is such as leaves but little to the acuteness and strength of wits, but places all wits and understandings nearly on a level. For as in the drawing of a straight line or a perfect circle, much depends on the steadiness and practice of the hand, if it be done by aim of hand only, but if with the aid of rule or compass, little or nothing; so is it exactly with my plan. But though particular confutations would be of no avail, yet touching the sects and general divisions of such systems I must say something; something also touching the external signs which show that they are unsound; and finally something touching the causes of such great infelicity and of such lasting and general agreement in error; that so the access to truth may be made less difficult, and the human understanding may the more willingly submit to its purgation and dismiss its idols.



Allegory of the Cave

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Allegories and metaphors

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The **Allegory of the Cave** – also known as the **Analogy of the Cave**, **Plato's Cave**, or the **Parable of the Cave** – is an [allegory](#) used by the [Greek philosopher Plato](#) in his work *The Republic* to illustrate "our nature in its education and want of [education](#)" (514a). It is written as a fictional dialogue between Plato's teacher [Socrates](#) and Plato's brother [Glaucou](#)n at the beginning of Book VII (chapter IX in [Robin Waterfield](#)'s translation) (514a–520a). The Allegory of the Cave is presented after the [metaphor of the sun](#) (507b–509c) and the [analogy of the divided line](#) (509d–513e). Allegories are summarized in the viewpoint of [dialectic](#) at the end of Book VII and VIII (531d-534e).

Plato describes a group of people who have lived chained to the wall of a cave all of their lives, facing a blank wall. The people watch shadows projected on the wall by things passing in front of a fire behind them, and begin to ascribe forms to these shadows. According to Socrates, the shadows are as close as the prisoners get to viewing reality. He then explains how the philosopher is like a prisoner who is freed from the cave and comes to understand that the shadows on the wall are not constitutive of reality at all, as he can perceive the true form of reality rather than the mere shadows seen by the prisoners.

The Allegory is related to Plato's [Theory of Forms](#),^[*citation needed*] according to which the "Forms" (or "[Ideas](#)"), and not the material world of change known to us through sensation, possess the highest and most fundamental kind of reality. Only knowledge of the Forms constitutes real knowledge.^[1] In addition, the Allegory of the Cave is an attempt to explain the philosopher's place in society: to attempt to enlighten the "prisoners".

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[] Synopsis

[] Inside the cave

[Socrates](#) begins by describing a scenario in which what people take to be real would in fact be an illusion. He asks [Glaucon](#) to imagine a [cave](#) inhabited by prisoners who have been chained and held immobile since childhood: not only are their arms and legs held in place, but their heads are also fixed, compelled to gaze at a wall in front of them. Behind the prisoners is an enormous [fire](#), and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised [walkway](#), along which people walk carrying things on their heads "including figures of men and animals made of wood, stone and other materials". The prisoners watch the shadows cast by the men, not knowing they are shadows. There are also echoes off the wall from the noise produced from the walkway.

Socrates suggests the prisoners would take the shadows to be [real](#) things and the echoes to be real sounds, not just reflections of [reality](#), since they are all they had ever seen or heard. They would praise as clever whoever could best guess which shadow would come next, as someone who understood the nature of the world, and the whole of their society would depend on the shadows on the wall.

[] Release from the cave

Socrates next introduces something new to this scenario. Suppose that a prisoner is freed and permitted to stand up. If someone were to show him the things that had cast the shadows, he would not recognize them for what they were and could not name them; he would believe the shadows on the wall to be more real than what he sees.

"Suppose further," Socrates says, "that the man was compelled to look at the fire: wouldn't he be struck blind and try to turn his gaze back toward the shadows, as toward what he can see clearly and hold to be real? What if someone forcibly dragged such a man upward, out of the cave: wouldn't the man be angry at the one doing this to him? And if dragged all the way out into the

sunlight, wouldn't he be distressed and unable to see "even one of the things now said to be true," viz. the shadows on the wall (516a)?

After some time on the surface, however, Socrates suggests that the freed prisoner would acclimate. He would see more and more things around him, until he could look upon the [Sun](#). He would understand that the Sun is the "source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing" (516b–c). (See also [Plato's metaphor of the Sun](#), which occurs near the end of *The Republic*, Book VI)^[2]

[_] Return to the cave

Socrates next asks Glaucon to consider the condition of this man. "Wouldn't he remember his first home, what passed for wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners, and consider himself happy and them pitiable? And wouldn't he disdain whatever honors, praises, and prizes were awarded there to the ones who guessed best which shadows followed which? Moreover, were he to return there, wouldn't he be rather bad at their game, no longer being accustomed to the darkness? Wouldn't it be said of him that he went up and came back with his eyes corrupted, and that it's not even worth trying to go up? And if they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up, wouldn't they kill him?" (517a)

[_] Remarks on the allegory

Socrates remarks that this allegory can be taken with what was said before, namely the [metaphor of the Sun](#), and the [divided line](#). In particular, he likens

"the region revealed through sight" – the ordinary objects we see around us – "to the prison home, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the Sun. And in applying the going up and the seeing of what's above to the soul's journey to the [intelligible](#) place, you not mistake my expectation, since you desire to hear it. A god doubtless knows if it happens to be true. At all events, this is the way the phenomena look to me: in the region of the knowable the last thing to be seen, and that with considerable effort, is the idea of [good](#); but once seen, it must be concluded that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful – in the visible realm it gives birth to light and its sovereign; in the intelligible realm, itself sovereign, it provided truth and intelligence – and that the man who is going to act prudently in private or in public must see it" (517b-c).

After "returning from divine contemplations to human evils", a man

"is graceless and looks quite ridiculous when – with his sight still dim and before he has gotten sufficiently accustomed to the surrounding darkness – he is compelled in courtrooms or elsewhere to contend about the shadows of justice or the representations of which they are the shadows, and to dispute about the way these things are understood by men who have never seen justice itself?" (517d-e)

[_] See also

- [Metaphor of the sun](#)
- [Analogy of the divided line](#)
- [The Form of the Good](#)
- [Plato's Republic in popular culture](#)
- [Cave Automatic Virtual Environment](#)

Theory of universals

See also: [Problem of universals](#), [Allegory of the Cave](#), and [Theory of Forms](#)

The *Republic* contains Plato's [Allegory of the cave](#) with which he explains his concept of [The Forms](#) as an answer to the [problem of universals](#).

The allegory of the cave primarily depicts Plato's distinction between the world of appearances and the 'real' world of the Forms, as well as helping to justify the philosopher's place in society as king. Plato imagines a group of people who have lived their entire lives as prisoners, chained to the wall of a cave in the subterranean so they are unable to see the outside world behind them. However a constant flame illuminates various moving objects outside, which are silhouetted on the wall of the cave visible to the prisoners. These prisoners, through having no other experience of reality, ascribe forms to these shadows such as either "dog" or "cat".

Plato then goes on to explain how the philosopher is akin to a prisoner who is freed from the cave. The prisoner is initially blinded by the light, however, when he adjusts to the brightness he sees the fire and the statues and how they caused the images witnessed inside the cave. He would see that the fire and statues in the cave were just copies of the real objects; merely imitations. This is analogous to the Forms. What we see from day to day are merely appearances, reflections of the Forms. The philosopher, however, will not be deceived by the shadows and will hence be able to see the 'real' world, the world above that of appearances; the philosopher will gain knowledge of things in themselves. In this analogy the sun is representative of the Good. This is the main object of the philosopher's knowledge. The Good can be thought of as the form of Forms, or the structuring of the world as a whole.

The prisoner's stages of understanding correlate with the levels on the [divided line](#) which he imagines. The line is divided into what the visible world is and what the intelligible world is, with the divider being the Sun. When the prisoner is in the cave, he is obviously in the visible realm that receives no sunlight, and outside he comes to be in the intelligible realm.

The shadows witnessed in the cave correspond to the lowest level on Plato's line, that of imagination and conjecture. Once the prisoner is freed and sees the shadows for what they are he

reaches the second stage on the divided line, the stage of belief, for he comes to believe that the statues in the cave are real. On leaving the cave, however, the prisoner comes to see objects more real than the statues inside of the cave, and this correlates with the third stage on Plato's line, understanding. Lastly, the prisoner turns to the sun which he grasps as the source of truth, or the Form of the Good, and this last stage, named as dialectic, is the highest possible stage on the line. The prisoner, as a result of the Form of the Good, can begin to understand all other forms in reality.

At the end of this allegory, Plato asserts that it is the philosopher's burden to reenter the cave. Those who have seen the ideal world, he says, have the duty to educate those in the material world. Since the philosopher recognizes what is truly good only he is fit to rule society according to Plato.

[] The dialectical forms of government

Plato spends much of the *Republic* narrating conversations about the Ideal State. But what about other forms of government? The discussion turns to four forms of government that cannot sustain themselves: timocracy, oligarchy (also called plutocracy), democracy and tyranny (also called despotism).

Timocracy

Socrates defines a [timocracy](#) as a government ruled by people who love honor and are selected according to the degree of honor they hold in society.

Oligarchy

These temptations create a confusion between economic status and honor which is responsible for the emergence of [oligarchy](#). In Book VIII, Socrates suggests that wealth will not help a pilot to navigate his ship. This injustice divides the rich and the poor, thus creating an environment for criminals and beggars to emerge. The rich are constantly plotting against the poor and vice versa.

Democracy

As this socioeconomic divide grows, so do tensions between social classes. From the conflicts arising out of such tensions, [democracy](#) replaces the oligarchy preceding it. The poor overthrow the inexperienced oligarchs and soon grant liberties and freedoms to citizens. A visually appealing [demagogue](#) is soon lifted up to protect the interests of the lower class. However, with too much freedom, the people become drunk, and tyranny takes over.

Tyranny

The excessive freedoms granted to the citizens of a democracy ultimately leads to a [tyranny](#), the furthest regressed type of government. These freedoms divide the people into three socioeconomic classes: the dominating class, the elites and the commoners. Tensions between the dominating class and the elites cause the commoners to seek out protection of their

democratic liberties. They invest all their power in their democratic demagogue, who, in turn, becomes corrupted by the power and becomes a tyrant with a small entourage of his supporters for protection and absolute control of his people.

Ironically, the ideal state outlined by Socrates closely resembles a tyranny, but they are on opposite ends of the spectrum. This is because the philosopher king who rules in the ideal state is not self-centered but is dedicated to the good of the state insofar as the philosopher king is the one with knowledge.