

Teaching Plato in Translation

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The Republic

“The Allegory of the Cave”

The Cave Allegory is the best known (and most widely excerpted) section of the *Republic*. This explanation works very well in describing the forms, even though it can be difficult to understand at first.

Basically, imagine a dark cave. There are many people there, weighted down with chains, sitting between a wall and a fire. Someone else is by the fire, putting objects in front of it so that their shadows are projected on the wall for the chained people to see. If all those people ever saw were those shadows, they may believe that shadows are the totality of the real world. This world inside the cave is that which most people experience.

In an amazing break with the known world, one prisoner escapes his chains. He is able to turn his head and see the objects that are being held in front of the fire. This sight is shocking! All of a sudden, his entire perception of reality must be changed. Now those objects are the new reality.

Seeking to know more, this escaped prisoner runs up a hill toward the mouth of the cave. Stepping out into the light of the sun, he is dazzled again. Once more, he experiences a shock. Again, his understanding of the world must change entirely.

Explain the connection between the allegory of the cave and the forms. The world of the forms is the world outside the mouth of the cave. Realizing that there are forms and that what we see is simply a projection of the forms into our world is the work of philosophy. Ask students about what they think of the cave allegory. Does it work as an explanation of forms?

The shock of the cave allegory should not be understated. Ask your students to imagine a time when what they believed was shown to be untrue (an example could be some of the myths we tell children about certain holidays). Think about how devastating it can be to realize that one has been lied to. Especially about something so vividly important. Ask your students how they know that what they think is reality is actually *real*?