

Introduction to Plato

Plato (427-347 BCE) was born into a wealthy and noble family in Athens. He was preparing for a career in politics when the trial and eventual execution of Socrates (399 BCE) changed the course of his life. He abandoned his political career and turned to philosophy. He opened a school on the outskirts of Athens dedicated to the Socratic search for wisdom. Plato's school was known as the Academy. It is generally regarded as the first university in western history. It remained open from 387 BCE until when it was eventually closed by the Christian Emperor Justinian I in 529 CE.

Unlike his teacher Socrates, Plato was both a writer and a teacher. His writings are in the form of dialogues. In these dialogues Plato places Socrates as the principal speaker. It is therefore sometimes difficult to know where Socrates' philosophy ends and Plato's begins.

Plato's most famous teaching is known as the Allegory of the Cave. It can be found in Book VII of Plato's best-known work, 'The Republic'. In the Allegory Plato described symbolically the predicament in which mankind finds itself and proposes a way of salvation. The Allegory presents most of Plato's major philosophical assumptions:

- the belief that the world revealed by our senses is not the real world but only a poor copy of it, and that the real world can only be apprehended intellectually
- the concept that knowledge cannot be transferred from teacher to student, but rather that education consists in directing student's minds toward what is real and important and allowing them to apprehend it for themselves
- his conviction that the universe is ultimately good
- the conviction that enlightened individuals have an obligation to the rest of society, and that a good society must be one in which the truly wise are the rulers

The Republic is really a dialogue on justice. It is often regarded as a utopian blueprint for society. The Republic is dedicated toward a discussion of the education required of a rulers - the so-called "Philosopher-Kings".

Plato's Allegory of the Cave

Definition of Allegory

Allegory = f. Gk allos other + -agoria speaking, A story, play, poem, picture, etc., in which the meaning of message is represented symbolically e.g. George Orwell's Animal Farm is an allegory of life in Communist Russia. The pigs represent the Communist leaders and the other animals represent the proletariat workers...etc.

Plato's Allegory and the Republic

Plato's famous allegory is found in the beginning of book VII in his Republic in which he discusses the ideal society and who should rule over it. He reflects upon the sort of education and up bringing that the person would have to have in order to rule over it with justice.

http://www.scandalon.co.uk/philosophy/plato_intro.htm ; http://www.scandalon.co.uk/philosophy/plato_cave.htm

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The Knowledge of the Good

An allegory is meant to work on several levels. At its simplest level it is merely a story about some prisoners being held captive in a cave. However, on another level it is about the progress of the mind from the lowest stages of understanding reality to a complete or enlightened understanding of reality. For Plato this enlightened understanding of reality is the knowledge of the Good represented by the brilliant light of the sun outside.

Senses verses Reason

He suggests that the body is a kind of prison in which the soul is trapped. For Plato, Socrates was put to death because of the stupidity of people who could not see reality as it actually is.

The allegory of the cave contrasts those who see only appearances with those who are able to look beyond appearances and reality as it actually.

Breaking Down the Allegory

The philosopher Empedocles (of Acragas in Sicily, c. 492-432 BCE) described the plight of the human soul trapped in the body in a poem as coming '...under this cavern's roof'. Plato may be recalling this poem to his readers.

Cornford suggests that Plato was familiar with 'mystery' religions, where a person being initiated was lead through a series of tunnels into daylight.

The prisoners are trapped, forced to look only at poorly projected shadows. Plato called this state of mind 'eikasia'. An 'eikon' is an image or likeness. Plato uses the word in connection with the lowest level of understanding. The prisoners take the images at face value.

One of the prisoners manages to break free. The experience is uncomfortable. The prisoner is torn between looking beyond the fire and returning to the comfort of the shadows projected against the back wall. The journey out of the cave is not without its hardships. Once outside he finds it difficult to focus. It takes time but eventually he is able to see things as they actually are. For the first time in his life he realises that what he has seen up to that point is not reality but merely poorly cast shadows. Much of what he has understood as being reality is really folly. The conversations he had had with his fellow prisoners were meaningless nonsense, guesswork at what the shadows could be.

The prisoner feels compelled to return and tell his fellow prisoners what he has seen. However, on his return he finds it difficult to adjust to the darkness. The poorly lit shadows appear worse than before. His fellow prisoners laugh at him. They point out that his journey beyond the fire has in effect made his ability to see the shadows worse. They have no incentive to escape and see the outside world for themselves

Plato and Christianity

Some scholars suggest that as Christianity spread through the Greco-Roman world in the first century, it became heavily influenced by Greek 'mystery' religions. Some see the Christian initiation ceremony of baptism, with its emphasis of death and re-birth as having Greek pagan overtones.

Again there is much debate concerning the influence of Greek thought on Christianity. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul says, 'Now we are seeing a dim reflection in a mirror; but then we shall be seeing face to face.' I Cor 13:12. Certainly later on in its history, Christianity did adopt Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy.

Plato's Allegory in Film

The original Matrix has many similarities with Plato's cave. The main character Neo is given the choice of continuing to live life connected to a vast computer through which he lives out his life or breaking free and experiencing reality as it actually is. By choosing the later option Neo encounters previously unknown problems.

The Truman Show has similar overtones of Plato's cave. Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) is the most famous man in the world, and he doesn't even know it. Raised entirely 'within' a television show which comprises his entire world. Through a series of production blunders Truman slowly realises that he is being controlled and that perhaps all in his world is not as it seems. Burbank is faced with the problem of how to break free.