Plato’s Allegory of the Cave

1. The Cave: Plato tells a story (some videos here and here):

Some prisoners are chained inside of a cave, facing the back wall. Behind them is a fire, with people passing in front of it. The prisoners cannot turn their heads, and have always been chained this way. All they can see (and hear) are shadows passing back and forth (and the echoes bouncing off of) the wall in front of them. One day, a prisoner is freed, and dragged outside of the cave. He is blinded by the light, and confused, and resists being led outside. But, eventually his eyes adjusts so that he able to see the things around him, and even the sun itself. He comes to realize that the things he thought were real were merely shadows of real things, and that life outside of the cave is far better than his previous life in chains. He pities those still inside. He ventures back into the cave to share his discovery with the others—only to be ridiculed because he can hardly see (his eyes have trouble at first re-adjusting to the darkness) and violently resisted (the other prisoners refuse to be freed and led outside, and even try to kill him).

2. Interpreting the Cave: But, what does this story mean? Some interpretations:

(a) What education is, and should be: The path to education is really about turning your attention toward the right things (i.e., justice, beauty, truth, and goodness). [Plato repeatedly uses the imagery of turning around] Then, knowledge will come to you naturally (just as seeing the things instead of their shadows will come naturally in time to one whose eyes are turned toward them).

The task of an educator is to get her students to turn their attention in the right direction (namely, toward Truth and Goodness), where she will realize that THOSE things are the things that matter. The method by which one “turns” is philosophy. [The prisoner who leaves the cave and returns represents the philosopher.]

Note also that education is PAINFUL. No one leaves the cave happily (even the original prisoner had to be “dragged” and “by force”). The process of learning involved the man’s recognition that everything he’d learned or been told in life, and everything he thought was true, was in fact an illusion—nothing but shadows of truth things. It can HURT to be led to the truth, because it is often (always?) accompanied by the uncomfortable realization of (i) your own ignorance and (ii) the fact that many of your dearest, most closely-held beliefs and assumptions about the world were false. The process of learning often involves challenging your fundamental pre-suppositions and, ultimately, giving up that which was dear to you—and this process can be unsettling.
(b) **What society values:** The people in the cave took the shadows very seriously, finding value in them, and their ability to predict the patterns, and so on. But, it was all just an illusion. The man outside no longer sees any value in the “honors, praises, or prizes” or “possessions” had by those inside the cave. The true philosopher is often “unwilling to occupy themselves with human affairs” and are rather “always pressing upwards, eager to spend their time above”. In short, Plato is criticizing us. He thinks that most of us value the wrong things, and waste our time pursuing empty or worthless “shadows” (e.g., wealth, fame, power, pleasure, and so on), rather than things of real value (Truth, Beauty, Justice, and Goodness).

(c) **Stubbornness, ignorance, and democracy:** When the man goes back into the cave, he is ridiculed, and even threatened with violence. The people in the cave don’t WANT to leave. People living in ignorance often resist truth, and don’t WANT to be led to the truth. Sticking with what is familiar is just too COMFORTABLE for most to risk giving up. They may even respond with hate or violence if pushed toward truth. Plato knew this all too well. His own teacher, Socrates, was executed for trying to lead others to Truth.

Additionally, Plato goes on to criticize democracy. Given that most people live in the cave (i.e., most people know nothing of philosophy), and only a few live outside of it, rule by the masses will likely always have terrible results (since the consensus of the majority will always align with ignorant cave-mentality).

(d) **Dialoguing with others:** Note that, not only was the man blinded when he LEFT the cave, but also when he RE-ENTERED the cave. If someone is ignorant, it will be hard for them to recognize truth, or understand how one could value the truly good things. But, likewise, if someone has “seen the Sun”, or knows Truth and Goodness, it will also be hard for them to understand the ignorant, or how someone could have such false beliefs or empty values. In short, it is often difficult for people to see things from each other’s point of view in EITHER direction.

The lesson is that we must dialogue with patience, seeking understanding, until our “eyes adjust” so to speak, to the other person’s perspective. If someone’s perspective doesn’t make any sense, it’s worth seeking understanding—it just might turn out that we’re the ones in the dark and they’re the ones in the light!

But, most importantly for our purposes is the observation that Plato’s Cave is an allegory for his theory of the Forms:
(e) **Theory of the Forms:** Just as the things themselves are more real than their shadows, Plato thought that there was another realm beyond the visible that was more real than the things themselves!

The shadows are (i) *dependent on*, (ii) *caused by*, and (iii) *inferior representations of* the things themselves. Similarly, for Plato, the things themselves are (i), (ii), & (iii) with respect to the IDEAL FORMS of those things. For instance, consider all of your classmates. They are a bunch of human beings. But, none of them is perfect. They all have their differences, their strengths, weaknesses, imperfections, and so on. Yet, they all share in their natures—i.e., they are all human. Plato thought that each human being was merely an imperfect participator in, or reflection of, the one, true, eternal, unchangeable ideal FORM of HUMANITY. Like this:

**shadow of some humans < the actual humans < the ideal FORM of HUMANITY**

Perhaps most bizarre is that Plato thought that the Forms really existed out there somewhere, in another realm beyond the heavens and the Earth. These Forms are the TRUE things. All that we observe are merely shadows of the true things. In the Allegory, the Sun represents the most fundamental of all the Forms, The Good, which is responsible for giving existence to all of the grass and trees and animals and so on beneath it.

**Application to life:** True knowledge is about contemplating the IDEAL forms of things; i.e., the BEST versions of things, or what things OUGHT to be like. Things are flawed to the extent that they are unlike the Forms. Once we understand this, we are able to live the right way, value the right things, set the proper goals, etc.

For my Skepticism (PHIL 306) students: Descartes’ dreaming and evil demon scenarios are often described as updated versions of Plato’s Cave. So too is the film *The Matrix* often referred to as a modern day Plato’s Cave. There certainly are parallels: Each story leads us to ask, What is real? or even, Is all of this stuff the MOST real stuff there is? And in both the Cave and *The Matrix*, the protagonist journeys from the less real to the more real. But, Descartes’ evil demon is a SKEPTICAL scenario. Its purpose is to cast doubt on our ability to trust our senses; on the belief that our perceptions accurately represent the world around us; and, ultimately, on our ability to know what is real. On the other hand, Plato says, “In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty.” **Question:** Was Plato’s Cave ALSO intended as a skeptical scenario? What lesson should we (or did he want us to) take away from his story, regarding knowledge, belief, perception, the external world, and so on?

*Some interesting reflections on the lesson of The Cave [here]*
3. **Plato vs. Aristotle**: Plato’s student, Aristotle, disagreed with his teacher on the theory of the Forms. According to Aristotle, this world isn’t a (so to speak) “copy” of some “more real” world out there somewhere. Rather, this (the visible, observable world around us) IS the world. In short, the visible things around us are the most real things—not some ideal Forms existing in some other-worldly realm. In fact, Aristotle rejects the existence of such Forms altogether.

Arguably, Aristotle was the first real scientist, and the inventor of science as we know it. His primary objects of study were the observable things around him. He conducted experiments in biology, dissecting animals and constructing a taxonomy of all living things; he put forward hypotheses in astronomy, physics, and cosmology based on observations; and so on.

Whereas Plato’s metaphysics, ethics, and politics both emphasized and aimed at perfect, eternal, unchangeable ideals, Aristotle’s philosophies proceeded from a point of acceptance that the world is an imperfect, ever-changing, non-ideal place. For this reason, some cast Platonism vs. Aristotelianism as a sort of idealism vs. realism (e.g., as portrayed in Raphael’s painting, *The School of Athens* where Plato is pictured pointing up to the heavens, while Aristotle gestures down toward the Earth).

“*What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?*”
- Tertullian, an early Church Father (~200 AD)

4. **Influence on Medieval Theology**: Medieval philosophy and theology falls very roughly into the two camps of Platonic Idealism and Aristotelian Realism.

**Platonism**: It shouldn’t be surprising that Plato’s view of reality was very amenable to a theistic worldview which dominated the entire Medieval period. During the earlier part of the Medieval era, most theologians simply adopted Plato’s worldview and replaced ‘The Good’ with ‘God’, and the ideal Forms became ideas in the mind of God.

These philosophers emphasized contemplating Goodness, Truth, and Justice, and often had a very cynical view of worldly things (some even claiming that the body was evil, like a cage that the soul will be liberated from when it ascends to heaven to be with God).

Proofs for God included the claim that, by contemplating Truth, we could know that God exists (Augustine), or that by contemplating the greatest and most perfect Good, we could know that God exists (Anselm).
Aristotelianism: The later Medieval period was more influenced by Aristotle (whose works were revived and came to Christian writers around 1200 via the Islamic philosophers, who had been influenced by them during the 900’s-1100’s).

These philosophers approached theology more scientifically, and began referring to God more often as the First Cause rather than The Truth or The Good.

Their proofs for God started from what we can observe, rather than from ideal concepts. For instance, some argued from the observation that, because everything needs a cause, the universe too must have a cause (e.g., Avicenna & Aquinas); or, from the observation that, since all purposefully intricate and complex things require a designer, the universe too (which also has these features) must also have a designer (e.g., Averroes). Namely, God.

[This is of course just a rough overview. We will see many more instances of Platonism and Aristotelianism pop up again and again throughout the semester. Keep an eye out for them!]