

Departure from the cave

Plato then supposes that one prisoner is freed. This prisoner would look around and see the fire. The light would hurt his eyes and make it difficult for him to see the objects casting the shadows. If he were told that what he is seeing is *real* instead of the other version of reality he sees on the wall, he would not believe it. In his pain, Plato continues, the freed prisoner would turn away and run back to what he is accustomed to (that is, the shadows of the carried objects). He writes "... it would hurt his eyes, and he would escape by turning away to the things which he was able to look at, and these he would believe to be clearer than what was being shown to him."

Plato continues: "Suppose... that someone should drag him... by force, up the rough ascent, the steep way up, and never stop until he could drag him out into the light of the sun." The prisoner would be angry and in pain, and this would only worsen when the radiant light of the sun overwhelms his eyes and blinds him.

"Slowly, his eyes adjust to the light of the sun. First he can only see shadows. Gradually he can see the reflections of people and things in water and then later see the people and things themselves. Eventually, he is able to look at the stars and moon at night until finally he can look upon the sun itself. Only after he can look straight at the sun "is he able to reason about it" and what it is (See also Plato's analogy of the sun, which occurs near the end of *The Republic*, Book VI.

Return to the cave

Plato continues, saying that the freed prisoner would think that the world outside the cave was superior to the world he experienced in the cave and attempt to share this with the prisoners remaining in the cave attempting to bring them onto the journey he had just endured; "he would

bless himself for the change, and pity [the other prisoners]" and would want to bring his fellow cave dwellers out of the cave and into the sunlight.

The returning prisoner, whose eyes have become accustomed to the sunlight, would be blind when he re-enters the cave, just as he was when he was first exposed to the sun. The prisoners, according to Plato, would infer from the returning man's blindness that the journey out of the cave had harmed him and that they should not undertake a similar journey. Plato concludes that the prisoners, if they were able, would, therefore, reach out and kill anyone who attempted to drag them out of the cave.

Symbolism

The allegory contains many forms of symbolism used to instruct the reader in the nature of perception. The cave represents superficial physical reality. It also represents ignorance, as those in the cave live accepting what they see at face value. Ignorance is further represented by the darkness that engulfs them because they cannot know the true objects that form the shadows, leading them to believe the shadows are the true forms of the objects. The chains that prevent the prisoners from leaving the cave represent that they are trapped in ignorance, as the chains are stopping them from learning the truth. The shadows cast on the walls of the cave represent the superficial truth, which is the illusion that the prisoners see in the cave. The freed prisoner represents those who understand that the physical world is only a shadow of the truth, and the sun that is glaring the eyes of the prisoners represents the higher truth of ideas. The light further represents wisdom, as even the paltry light that makes it into the cave allows the prisoners to know shapes.