

The highest and best kind of knowledge is knowledge of Goodness itself; the second level of knowledge is of the other Forms. The first degree of belief is present when we see physical objects, trees, stones, etc. The second and lower kind of belief is our mental state when we see only shadows and images of physical objects. Thus there are four kinds of "objects": a) Goodness itself, b) the other Forms, c) ordinary things, d) shadows and images. The first two of these are objects of knowledge; the other two are objects of belief.

BOOK VII, Section 19

Summary

Socrates now proceeds with the last of this series of analogies. This one is much more than a simple comparison; it is a carefully worked out parable. It is known as the "Allegory of the Cave." Its main purpose is to illustrate the four "states of mind," the two degrees or kinds of belief and the two degrees of knowledge.

Imagine a cave, says Socrates, very far underground and with a long passage leading out into the daylight. In this cave there are men who have been prisoners there since they were children. They are chained to the ground, and even their heads are fastened in such a way that they can look only in front of them, at the wall of the cave. Behind the line of prisoners a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a roadway. People walk along this road and talk to one another and carry things with them. The prisoners would see the shadows of those people, shadows thrown by the light of the fire on the cave wall in front of them. And, supposing the cave wall reflected sound, the prisoners would hear sounds coming from the shadows. Since the prisoners cannot turn their heads, the only things they will see and know are shadows; and so they will assume that the shadows are real things, for they cannot know anything about the fire and the roadway and the people behind them.

Now, suppose we unchain one of the prisoners, and make him turn around. This will be very frightening and painful for him; the movements of his body will hurt him, and his eyes will be dazzled

by the fire. And if we tell him that the things he now sees are more real than the shadows, he will not believe us, and he will want to sit down again and face the wall of shadows which he understands. Now, suppose we go even further than this, and forcibly drag him out through the long tunnel into the sunlight. This will be even more painful and frightening for him; and when he arrives above the ground he will be blinded by the sun. But slowly, let us imagine, he will get used to it. At first, he will be able to look at the stars and the moon at night. Later he will look at shadows thrown by the sun and at reflections in pools of water. Finally, he will be able to see the trees and mountains in full daylight, and he will recognize that these, not the shadows in the cave, are the real things. And when he has become accustomed to looking around him, he will at last realize that the light which makes all this possible comes from the sun.

And now, of course, he will be sorry for his fellow prisoners in the cave, and he will consider himself much luckier than they. If he were to be suddenly brought back to the cave, his eyes would be unaccustomed to the darkness, and he would no longer be able to recognize the shadows. His fellow prisoners would say that his experiences had ruined him, and they would consider him a fool for going out into the daylight.

Socrates now explains the meaning of this parable. The cave corresponds to the realm of belief; the daylight world corresponds to the realm of knowledge. And the sun, of course, corresponds to the "Form" of Goodness. Each move, from the lowest stage in the realm of belief to the highest stage in the realm of knowledge, is a painful one; but once the move has been successfully made, it can be seen to be a move in the right direction. Moreover, anyone who has had a taste of knowledge and has seen the Form of Goodness will seem a fool to those who have never stepped outside the realm of mere belief.

The experience our prisoner has had, Socrates continues, corresponds to the training that must be given to the philosopher-rulers of the Ideal State. They must, that is, be educated so as to recognize the Forms, and ultimately Goodness itself.

But the story is not yet complete, for a philosopher will not be a good ruler if he is merely an intellectual; he must also return to his fellow men and apply the knowledge he has gained. In the words of the parable, we must force our freed prisoner to return to the cave and get used to the shadows again. He will have a much better understanding of the shadows themselves than he had before he left the cave; he will know what the shadows really are, and why they are what they are, and so he will be able to teach and guide his fellow prisoners in the right ways.

But surely, Glaucon protests, it would be unfair to make our philosophers return to the world of belief; it would be making them live a poorer life than they would otherwise live. Socrates reminds Glaucon, as he had reminded Adeimantus earlier, that it is not our purpose to make the rulers happy, but to make the whole community happy. True, the philosopher-rulers would be happiest if they were left alone to contemplate the Forms and Goodness. But if they are to be good rulers, they must be made to be responsible for the welfare of the rest of society; they must take their share in the hard work of politics.

Commentary

Here is a rough diagram of the Allegory of the Cave and its interpretation:

| | Allegory | | Interpretation |
|-----------------|---|--------------------|--|
| Cave | 1) Shadows on the wall 2) Roadway and Fire | Realm of Belief | 1) Shadows, reflections, images, etc. 2) Ordinary visible objects |
| Day-light World | 1) Shadows and reflections 2) Trees, mountains, etc. 3) The sun | Realm of Knowledge | 1) Mathematical objects 2) The Forms 3) Goodness |

On the bottom right-hand side of the diagram, you will see "mathematical objects" as number one. Plato does not in fact

discuss mathematical objects (e.g., triangles and squares) in this section. Nor does Plato say what corresponds to the first things the prisoner sees when he first comes out into the daylight. However, we have reason to believe that Plato thought that such things as triangles and squares were objects of knowledge, not merely objects of belief, and that he considered them of a lower kind than the Forms. One reason we have for believing that this was Plato's view is that he considered mathematics to be the first stage in the intellectual education of the philosopher-rulers. We shall come to this in Section 20.

The Allegory of the Cave contains a number of important and interesting messages. For one thing, it illustrates Plato's belief that all knowledge is connected. For example, when the prisoner is unchained and made to turn around, then he does not just learn something *new*, unconnected with what he understood before. Rather, his new situation helps him to understand his previous experiences better. He now knows that the shadows *are* shadows; previously he had considered them to be real things. Exactly the same thing happens when the prisoner turns from the shadows above ground to the trees and mountains of which they are the shadows. Plato's message here is this: while we do not know the Forms, we do not really understand even the ordinary things around us. When we do know the Forms, we shall come to see that these ordinary things are mere "images." The same is true on the higher stage: we cannot fully understand the Forms unless we have knowledge of Goodness. And if we should ever come to know Goodness itself, then we should know everything that depends upon it—that is, we should know everything that can be known. Goodness, as Socrates said in Section 17, is the source of all truth.

In Plato's view, therefore, there are not a whole lot of different kinds of knowledge, unrelated and unconnected with one another. The various different "kinds," e.g., mathematical knowledge, political knowledge, etc. are ultimately all united in the knowledge of Goodness itself. This is certainly not a very easy point to understand, for Plato nowhere tells us what Goodness actually is. Why he does not tell us this is clear. For, in his view, we would not be able to understand what Goodness is without going on a long and arduous journey, corresponding to the travels of the prisoner from the cave wall to the sunlight above. We are, so to speak, in the position of the people in the cave; it would be no use telling them what the sun is, for they could not possibly understand until they had seen the daylight themselves.