

English 96

Pre-Reading Activities for Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"

What is an allegory?

An allegory is a story where the things in the story represent other things. (You might already be familiar with the term "parable" which is similar.) Can you think of an allegory you know? Plato's allegory is about a cave.

Questions to Help You Prepare to Read

The following questions do not necessarily have specific answers. Rather they are intended to get you thinking about the problems that Plato tries to address in his philosophy.

1. Is what you see always what you get?
2. Is what you see always the truth?
3. Describe an experience you have had in which something that looked true turned out to be false or in which something that looked false turned out to be true.
4. How is it possible that people can believe in illusion and accept it as reality? Can you think of any examples where people today believe in illusion and accept it as reality?
5. What sometimes happens to people when the illusion is shattered and reality is revealed? Has this ever happened to you?

Questions to Help You After You Read

1. Try to draw an illustration of the cave. Where would you put the fire? Where are the "prisoners"? And so on.
2. What other "caves" are there in modern life in which people might be "imprisoned" or feel "imprisoned"?
3. Glaucon says the people in the story are "strange prisoners." Socrates then gives the stunning reply that they are "like ourselves" (p. 285). Why do you suppose Socrates compares us to these prisoners?
4. If a prisoner is released from the cave and compelled to look toward the light, what will he experience? Why?
5. What happens to the liberated prisoner outside of the cave?
6. If the liberated prisoner goes back to the cave and tries to explain to his former fellow prisoners, what kind of reaction will he get? Why?
7. According to this allegory, what is truth?
8. To what extent do you find Socrates point about human tendency to confuse "shadows" with "reality" relevant today?