
A Study of Ancient Greece Using Plato's Allegory of the Cave

Philosophy dwells on ideas and theories that tend to surpass the thoughts of human perception and the nature of reality. An idea may be perceived idealistic rather than based on knowledge. The following quote, “And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: Behold! Human beings living in an underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the cave; here they have been from their childhood, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads,” comes from an accredited philosopher by the name of Plato, particularly from one of his works, the Allegory of the Cave.

He avowed that in order to have “real” knowledge per se, one must obtain it through philosophical beliefs and reasonings. He believed in two levels of reality, archetypal and earthly. An archetype is an idea and it is the highest and most purest form of level of reality. It is the absolute. Plato values absolutes as well as the natural tendencies of perception. The other level, earthly, is material and this level of reality is impure and distorted. It is an unwholesome reflection of the absolute archetype. The highest and purest level can be achieved through reasoning, which most people do not achieve. Individuals base their decisions on emotions as well as misinformation and because of this, individuals are easily manipulated. Plato’s theory is quite rational as this symbolic story has had long term influences on 21st century norms as well as shaped the beliefs of individuals during his time and forward.

The appearance of new thoughts and ideas are often questioned of their pre-existence. As in the story, Plato places a group of prisoners in this cave while having them face the opposite direction of the entrance/exit, which allowed them to only observe the shadows that were casted by pedestrians that would pass by. They offered new or recognizable sounds. When dragged out of the comfortness and familiarity of the cave, one of the prisoners were introduced to the sunlight of the the outside world. By being forcibly introduced to this new world and adjusting to what he is experiencing, the prisoner tries to notify the other fellow prisoners of the cave. After multiple failed attempts, the other prisoners don’t believe what he is saying as they remain content with their current environment.

This symbolism demonstrates the society of ancient Greece, as Plato distinguishes the difference between individuals who mistake sensory knowledge for the truth and those individuals who can see the “real” truth. Groups can easily become complacent with what is around them as well as conform to what others may deem as acceptable. With such a society,

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perspectives may range and vary from individual to individual. Once an individual finally witnesses the “real” truth and gain new knowledge, while attempting to inform others, those who are content become naïve as this new information is disregarded which in turn becomes irrelevant.

Ancient Greece has elements of leadership that corresponds with the Allegory of the Cave. Living in an environment that not only promotes what would make the best leader, but to have a community of citizens as well as these individuals having rights and responsibilities created the world’s first democracy. Democracy is a structured system where it is based by the majority rule of its citizens, therefore this tends to be a flawed system due to the fact that it allows the ignorant to rule. These individuals have no transcending values and no absolutes. With the Greek polis, it was more than just a city-state. It was a structured community that consisted of an urban centre along with a sacred centre built on a natural acropolis. Ancient Greece was a collection of about 200 of these independent poleis.

The Greeks also referred to the polis as “the never ending struggle between the individual and the state”. In comparison with Plato’s the Allegory of the cave, the prisoners represent the citizens, the shadows represents the reality of those citizens, and by being forcibly exiting and entering into the sunlight of new knowledge and experience represents these citizens discovering and seeking the “real” truth while leaving behind the false reality. Only those malleable individuals will remain content and stay naïve while a true leader will have the ability to leave this facade as well as being able to return to encourage other individuals to join them. If the majority of these individuals are content, they won’t follow or they may even try to rebuttal the truth and may congregate like events such as the citizen’s assembly to take power of Areopagus.

Plato’s theory has left long lasting influences and continues to be applicable in relation to 21st century norms. It demonstrates how little society has changed as well as how complacent individuals have become. Regardless of advancements in technology, defining what is moral still pre-exists as an uncomfortable subject for those who live amongst us in today’s society. Those who are able to go beyond the boundaries of sensory knowledge become social outcasts because of the appearance of new information and may be subjected to silence or in turn, not reaching the level of inquisition that drives the want for more.

All in all, individuals perceive reality differently, rather it be through reasoning or through absolutes. The ability to break such boundaries of what society is willing to accept could be perceived as audacious behavior, but rather inquisition. An individual must be able and willing to leave their comfort zone in order to challenge their surroundings as well as find the answers to the unknown. By looking into the world with a narrow mindset, philosophers are able to push the limits and make people be vulnerable while questioning the nature of their reality while reaching

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a higher understanding. Plato's theory is quite rational as this symbolic story has had long term influences on 21st century norms as well as shaped the beliefs of individuals during his time and forward. Until society is ready to notice, philosophical satisfaction will continue to be non-existent.

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