

## The Cave

Dear Book Club members,

I feel compelled to make amends to the group and Joel for my inadequate answer to Joel's suggestion (made during my description of Buddhism at our last Book Club meeting) that Buddhism looks at thoughts, in the same way that Plato describes the difference between shadows and Form (as the play of shadows on the wall of a cave that Plato described in his Allegory of the Cave).

After a quick review of Plato's the Allegory of the Cave (googled on the internet and attached hereto), I believe that Joel was completely correct in his analogy of Buddhism's attempt to dispel illusion (or illusive thought processes) as being exactly the same as the distinction that Plato makes between illusive thought (shadows) and Form (reality) in The Allegory of the Cave. The problem we all face is distinguishing between accurate direct perception (reality) and illusive thoughts created by our intervening thought process. This is done in Buddhism by meditation, which is the process of observation of the process by which our mind generates thoughts through our thought process that manipulates reality, most commonly by emotional reactions to perceived reality.

In my opinion, Buddhism attempts to short circuit the distortion of reality by our thought process by teaching us to become observers of the changing moment to moment reality and preventing ourselves from becoming confused and distracted by our thought processes, often caused by the inter-mediation of emotion or historic experience or lack of diligent scrutiny of reality. This distorted and confused perception of reality caused by our thought process is what Plato calls shadows. When we confuse our thoughts with reality, we become upset and confused, from which Buddhism says all suffering springs.

Thus it appears to me that the thrust of Buddhism is the same as Plato's lesson in the Allegory of the Cave: that only way we can release ourselves from the confusion caused by our thinking process' manipulation of reality that creates the shadows on the wall (illusion) and turn our heads to see reality in its true Form is by becoming aware of and identifying the cause of the shadows (our thought process). Again it appears to me that the lesson taught by both Buddhism and Plato is to learn to see the thought process for what it is and cease to be confused between reality and the illusions created by our thought process. When we mistakenly associate our thoughts (shadows) for reality; we have missed seeing true reality: seeing each moment as a new reality without any intervening thought process. Buddhism teaches that attachment to our illusive thought process separates us from the reality of living our lives in each new moment. By recognizing this paradox between illusion and reality caused by our thoughts, Buddhism teaches that we have stepped onto the path that leads toward liberation of ourselves from cause and effect. That reality is what the Buddha was referring to when he said, "There is no past, there is not future, there is no present." .

In Paragraph 9 of the Allegory of the Cave, it appears to me that Plato is saying much the same thing when the author states, "We can come to grasp the Forms with our mind."

Mediation is a good tool to grasp reality (Form) because it allows us to connect directly to reality (Form) with our mind (without any intermediating thought process). That is why it is often said in Buddhism that you can not describe reality. Because in order to describe it, you must put it into words, which is putting the thought process into motion that distorts or separates us from the reality of that moment.

The way it was described to me in 1976 at the Zen Center in San Francisco was, "How do you step into the spot in the stream you see before you step?" The answer is, "You can not, because between the moment of perception of that spot in the stream and your foot touching that spot, the stream has moved the water you first observed downstream and it is gone." I think Plato would agree that to think you have stepped into the same spot in the stream you first perceived is to become confused between reality and the world of shadows and that that illusion is caused by your thought process (literally, confusing the first perceived spot in the stream with the spot your foot actually touches in the stream).

Thank you for allowing me to more fully compare Joel's brilliant analogy of Plato's Allegory of the Cave to one of the essential teachings of Buddhism and the refreshing experience of being a member of a group both willing and able to explore such topics.

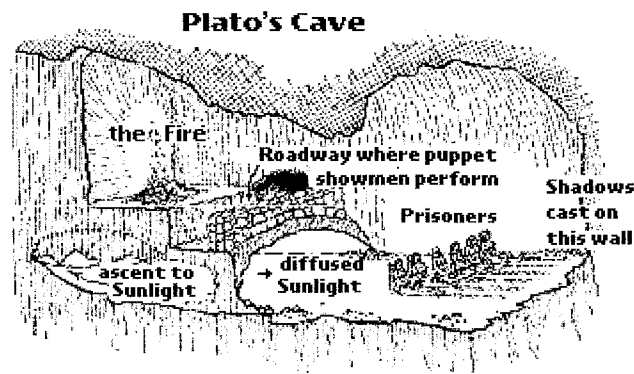
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bob".

Bob Simon

# The Allegory of the Cave

1. Plato realizes that the general run of humankind can think, and speak, etc., without (so far as they acknowledge) any awareness of his realm of Forms.
2. The allegory of the cave is supposed to explain this.
3. In the allegory, Plato likens people untutored in the Theory of Forms to prisoners chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects, that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects that they do not see. Here is an illustration of Plato's Cave:



From *Great Dialogues of Plato* (Warmington and Rouse, eds.) New York, Signet Classics: 1999. p. 316.

4. Such prisoners would mistake appearance for reality. They would think the things they see on the wall (the shadows) were real; they would know nothing of the real causes of the shadows.
5. So when the prisoners talk, what are they talking about? If an object (a book, let us say) is carried past behind them, and it casts a shadow on the wall, and a prisoner says "I see a book," what is he talking about?

He thinks he is talking about a book, but he is really talking about a shadow. But he uses the word "book." What does that refer to?

6. Plato gives his answer at line (515b2). The text here has puzzled many editors, and it has been frequently emended. The translation in Grube/Reeve gets the point correctly:

*"And if they could talk to one another, don't you think they'd suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them?"*

7. Plato's point is that the prisoners would be mistaken. For they would be taking the terms in their language to refer to the **shadows** that pass before their eyes, rather than (as is correct, in Plato's view) to the real things that cast the shadows.

If a prisoner says "That's a book" he thinks that the word "book" refers to the very thing he is looking at. But he would be wrong. He's only looking at a shadow. The real referent of the word "book" he cannot see. To see it, he would have to turn his head around.

8. Plato's point: the general terms of our language are not "names" of the physical objects that we can see. They are actually names of things that we cannot see, things that we can only grasp with the mind.
9. When the prisoners are released, they can turn their heads and see the real objects. Then they realize their error. What can **we** do that is analogous to turning our heads and seeing the causes of the shadows? We can come to grasp the Forms with our minds.
10. Plato's aim in the *Republic* is to describe what is necessary for us to achieve this reflective understanding. But even without it, it remains true that our very ability to think and to speak depends on the Forms. For the terms of the language we use get their meaning by "naming" the Forms that the objects we perceive participate in.
11. The prisoners may learn what a book is by their experience with **shadows** of books. But they would be mistaken if they thought that the word "book" refers to something that any of them has ever seen.

Likewise, we may acquire concepts by our perceptual experience of physical objects. But we would be mistaken if we thought that the concepts that we grasp were on the same level as the things we perceive.

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