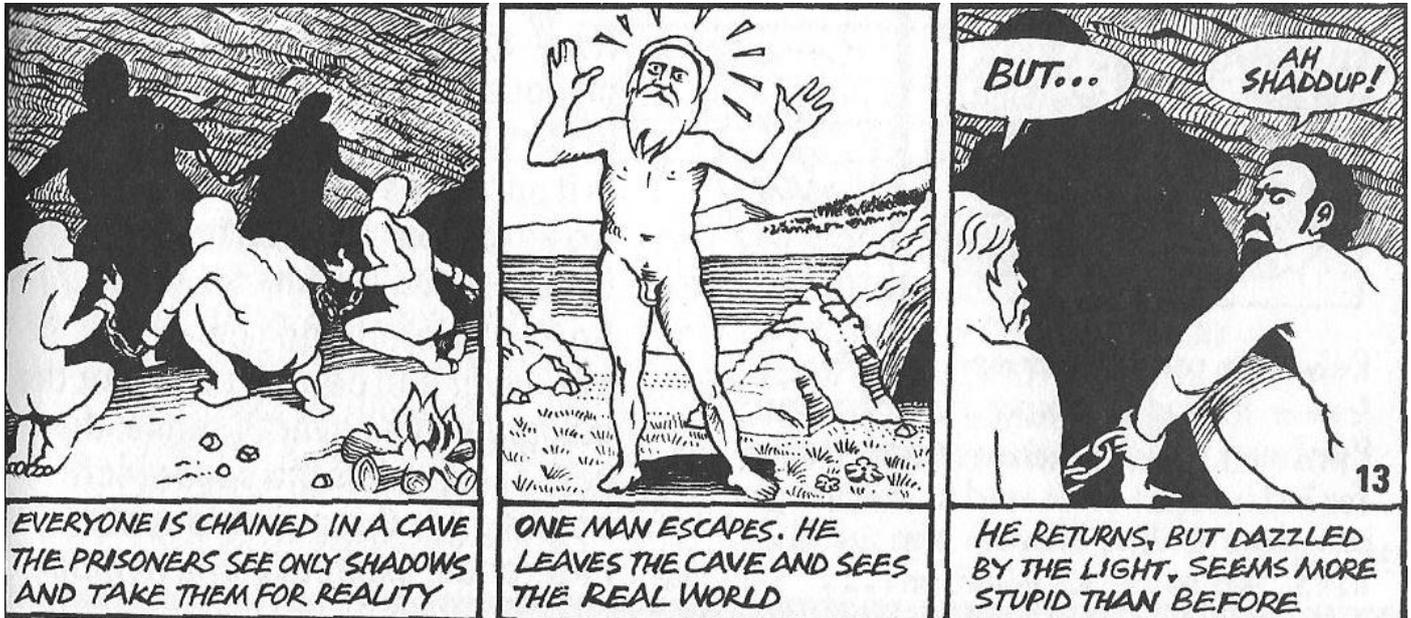


Plato: The Allegory of the Cave

The Allegory of the Cave—also known as the Analogy of the Cave, Plato's Cave, or the Parable of the Cave—is an allegory used by the Greek philosopher Plato in his work “The Republic” to illustrate "our nature in its education and want of education" (514a). It is written as a dialogue narrated by Plato's friend Socrates and Plato's brother Glaucon.

What is an allegory?

A kind of story in which what happens is being compared to something else that is similar and unstated.



Plato thought a lot about the natural world and how it works. He thought that everything had a sort of ideal form, like the idea of a chair, and then an actual chair was a sort of poor imitation of the ideal chair that exists only in your mind. One of the ways Plato tried to explain his ideas was with the famous metaphor of the cave.

He said, Suppose there is a cave, and inside the cave there are some men chained up to a wall, so that they can only see the back wall of the cave and nothing else. These men can't see anything outside of the cave, or even see each other clearly, but they can see shadows of what is going on outside the cave. Wouldn't these prisoners come to think that the shadows were real, and that was what things really looked like?

Suppose now that one of the men escaped, and got out of the cave, and saw what real people looked like, and real trees and grass. If he went back to the cave and told the other men what he had seen, would they believe him, or would they think he was crazy?

Plato says that we are like those men sitting in the cave: we think we understand the real world, but because we are trapped in our bodies we can see only the shadows on the wall. One of his goals is to help us understand the real world better, by finding ways to predict or understand the real world even without being able to see it.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. Would you want to be released from the cave? Why or why not?
2. What is like the cave in our world?
3. How is the way you understand the world, your ideas and beliefs, shaped by the actions of others?
4. Who has the power to shape your ideas and beliefs? In what ways is this good and in what ways is it not so good?
5. Are there things you know to be true? What are they, and how do you know them?