



Supplementary activity- Perspectives Grades 9- 11

Plato's Allegory of the Cave

Learning Objectives

Students identify the key philosophical themes in Plato's Allegory of the Cave:

- *Never thinking critically or asking questions about one's life situation is like being in the dark*
- *Looking at the 'light' can be blinding and painful but it will always be better than staying in the dark*
- *It is hard work to 'see' some of life's realities!*



Materials

- Art supplies (foolscap; markers)
- Blanket or tarp & rope & flashlight

Teacher's Choice:

a) Tell the story while you re-enact it by throwing a blanket over the students, having them all pretend they are tied to a rope and actually making shadow puppets on the wall in front of them while holding a flashlight behind you.

b) Students read the story and then **draw it or re-enact it themselves** in small groups.

Class Discussion

What does this story mean?

(The prisoners represent people who do not know the truth about real life. They live in a dream-state where they believe that illusions are true. Their chains represent the myths we tie ourselves up with. The fire is a fake sun, representing illusion. When the prisoners break out of their chains, it is a painful process. It is a loss of innocence. The light outside- the real sun- represents truth and reality. It is difficult for the prisoners to leave the comfort of their illusions, but when they do, they are free.)

Compare with real-life experiences.

When was a time when you didn't know something, but wanted to find out, and you knew it would be difficult but once you did you were grateful?

Plato's 'The Allegory of the Cave'

Imagine prisoners who have been chained since childhood deep inside a cave. Not only are their limbs immobilized by the chains; their heads are chained as well so that their eyes are fixed on a wall.

Behind the prisoners is an enormous fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway, along which shapes of various animals, plants, and other things are carried. The shapes cast shadows on the wall, which occupy the prisoners' attention. When one of the shape-carriers speaks, an echo against the wall causes the prisoners to believe that the words come from the shadows.

The prisoners engage in what appears to us to be a game - naming the shapes as they come by. This, however, is the only reality that they know, even though they are seeing merely shadows of images.

Suppose a prisoner is released and compelled to stand up and turn around.

His eyes will be blinded by the firelight, and the shapes passing will appear less real than their shadows.

Similarly, if he is dragged up out of the cave into the sunlight, his eyes will be so blinded that he will not be able to see anything.

At first, he will be able to see darker shapes such as shadows and, only later, brighter and brighter objects.

The last object he would be able to see is the sun, which, in time, he would learn to see as that object which provides the seasons and the courses of the year, presides over all things in the visible region, and is in some way the cause of all these things that he has seen (*The Republic* bk. VII, 516b-c; translated by Paul Shorey).