

Shadows on the Wall

Behold! human beings living in an underground cave. They have been there since birth, their legs and necks chained to the wall. They can look only to the front, toward the wall opposite them. Above and behind them at a distance a fire burns bright. Between the cave opening and the fire various people pass by, carrying all sorts of things such as vessels and statues and even figures of animals carved of wood. The shadows of those passing by and what they carry are cast upon the cave wall. What is seen by the prisoners is their world, is their truth.

Some of the prisoners are released from their chains. Still in the cave, they look around and, at first, are blinded by the bright light and suffer sharp pains. They are unable to see the realities of what formerly were the sources of the shadows. As they grow accustomed to the light, they realize the illusion of what they had seen and the real existence of what they now see. They see the carved images that were being carried by those passing by.

The prisoners are then reluctantly dragged up entirely out from the cave into the world of the sun. Again they are blinded and suffer much pain. But as they become accustomed to the bright light, they begin to see. At first only the shadows of things, then the reflections off the waters, and finally the things themselves are seen. They see the animals that had been the inspiration for the wood carvings. Then the moon and stars, and finally the sun itself are seen by those who once only knew of the shadows cast upon the walls of their cave. What had been reality is now shown to be an illusion, and what was thought to be an illusion is now shown to be reality. It is the ideas behind the overt that are indeed the real. Out from the cave came the prisoners into the light. The sun is seen!

One of the prisoners decides to go back into the cave and free the others. At first he is blinded by the darkness, but then grows accustomed to the lack of light. And then he realizes his foolishness. If he should try to convince the prisoners that the shadows are illusions, they would only argue that he is wrong, blinded by the bright light. If he should try to bring them up out of the cave, the prisoners would certainly kill him!

And so Plato (428-347 B.C.) told of the parable of the cave in *Republic*, Book VII.

