Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave": A Summary

Author Anonymous

Socrates: "Why do people think philosophy is bs? Let me put it this way - imagine you're in a cave, all chained up so you can't turn your body at all, and all you get to look at is this one wall. Some jerks behind you are making shadow puppets using the light from a fire and making echo noises and that's all you or anyone else chained up has seen or heard all your life. Sounds terrible, right? Except it's all you've ever known, shadows and echoes, and that's your whole world - there's no way you could know that, really, you're watching a slightly-improved M. Night Shyamalan film.

"In fact, you get pretty good at understanding how the patterns in the show work, and everyone else chained up is like, 'Holy cow bro, how did you know that that tree was going to fall on that guy?' and you're like, 'It's because I freakinging pay attention and I'm smart as hell.' You're the smartest of the chained, and they all revere you."

Glaucon: "But Socrates, a tree didn't really hit a guy. It's all shadows."

Socrates: "No crap Glaucon, but you don't know that. You think the shadows are real things. Everyone does. Now shut up and let me finish.

"So eventually, someone comes and unchains you and drags you out of the cave. At first you'd say, 'Seriously, what the hell is going on?!' Well, actually, at first you'd say, 'AHHHH MY EYES!' and you'd want to go back to the safe, familiar shadows. But even once your eyes worked you wouldn't believe them, because everything you ever thought was real is gone. You'd look at a tree, and say 'That's not a tree. I know trees. And you, sir, are no tree. THAT DOWN THERE is a tree.' But you're wrong. Down there is a shadow of a tree.

"Slowly, as your eyes got better, you'd see more and more things. Eventually, you'd see the sun, and realize that it's the source of all light. You can't see *anything* without the sun. And eventually, you'd figure it out. Something would click in your brain: 'oh, damn, that IS a tree. Woops. So... nothing in the cave was real? I feel like such an idiot.' But it's not your fault, so don't be so hard on yourself.

"Finally you'd want to go down and tell everyone about everything you've discovered. Except, and here's the hilarious part, they think you've gone *freaking crazy*. You'd say, 'Guys, real trees are green!' and they'd say, 'What the hell is *green*? THAT is a tree over there.' And you'd squint and look at the wall, but you know you're screwed because now you're used to having sunlight, and now you can't see anything. So they'd laugh at you, and agree that wherever it was that you went, no one should go there because it turns people into idiots.

"Philosophy, same thing. The soul ascends and apprehends the forms, the nature of everything, and

eventually the very Idea of Good that gives light to everything else. And then the philosopher has to go back to the cave and try to explain it to people who don't even know what Green is, to say nothing of the Good. But the philosopher didn't make up the Good, it was always there, and the only way to really make sense of it is to uncover it for yourself. You can't force knowledge into a idiot any more than you can force sight into a blind man.

"So if you want to learn, be prepared for a difficult journey, and be prepared to make some mistakes. That's okay, it's all part of the process. True knowledge must be obtained the hard way, and some people just don't want to see the light."

Sam's Notes:

This probably was not exactly what Socrates said - many people believe that Plato says what he believes, and just writes as though Socrates says it. The last two paragraphs are key to understanding what Plato believes - that our world is like a shadow, and the real world (which he called the World of Forms) is made up of these things called Forms, which are sort of ideas, that we only see the shadow of. In the analogy, we are the ones in the cave, and only some philosophers have minds which have understood the real world, and they are trying to explain it to us. It is like deductive reasoning - the world of forms are axioms, and we have to go through a chain of reasoning to find them.

Next we see Aristotle's critique of this viewpoint.

Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics, Book I": A Summary

Author Anonymous

Look, bros don't do things for no reason. We have *reasons* when we do things - we act with ends in mind, whatever those ends may be. Sometimes we want to get rich, sometimes we want to meet ladies, whatever. My point is, we don't bumble through life arbitrarily. Now you might be thinking, "But Aristotle, isn't meeting ladies an activity, too?" Hell yeah it is - I didn't say activities have to have a single end. Often, we seek goods as instrumental to *other* goods - but there has to be a *highest* good, otherwise we get an infinite chain of goods, which is obviously impossible.

Everyone pretty much agrees that that final good is happiness. Who doesn't want to be happy? What jerk is moping around going, "Screw happiness. I hate being happy." *No one*, that's who. The problem is, not everyone agrees on what *happiness* is or how to get it, which is what I'm here to clear up for you guys. Some people think that happiness is pleasure, which is just stupid. How could it be? Pleasures conflict all the time. When we're presented with two competing pleasures, it's a tough choice, and we always agonize about it; when two options make us equally *happy,* though, we shrug and say, "I don't give a damn, bro. Honestly, I'm happy either way."

Some other political bros think that happiness is honor, and we should seek that. But who wants honor? And why do we give it? People honor bros because of their virtue, so obviously we value virtue

more; besides, honor is only had in relation. I'm honored because people honor me; happiness isn't anything like that at all. So yeah, honor is sweet, but it's not the final good.

Now, some bros (Plato) think that we're after the Form of the Good, whatever the hell that is. Bro, think of all the things that we consider 'good'. Literally every activity we do has some 'good' as its aim. We stay up late to laugh with our friends sometimes. Is staying up late good? Well, that depends on a lot of things, like if we are already tired and if we have important things to do tomorrow; at best, it's good in relation to a bunch of other conditions. And 'staying up late,' the thing, has so few properties in common with 'friends,' which aren't very like 'exercise,' which isn't like 'God' at all. If we're trying to figure out what we want, how to be happy, all that Form crap isn't going to get us anywhere helpful.

So happiness isn't some other *thing* we need to identify and seek - it's the reason we do stuff. It's the aim of all our activities, we're always seeking it, and it's self-sufficient. It's always a final good. If someone was like, "Why do you want to be happy?" You'd look at him like an idiot. "Because... it's... happiness, dummy."

If we're trying to figure out how to be happy, we have to figure out our purpose. *Everything* has a purpose, and good things accomplish their purpose well. What makes a good student council? They're cheerful, hard-working, and have great memories. That allows them to accomplish their *purpose* well. What makes a good human? Well, what sets us apart is the soul, our ability to recognize virtue; our purpose, then, is to live in virtue. And what makes people happy? Being good at what they're supposed to be good at. Who doesn't love getting As on tests? Who isn't *thrilled* to be the best at something? And our *highest* purpose is virtue; we have to get good at being virtuous to truly be happy.

"But Aristotle, virtue is *hard*. It doesn't make me happy at all to hear you say that. How can this be?" Being the best at something is *always* hard if it's worth doing. You don't get to just sit around and *be* happy or virtuous; you have to work for it. At the Olympics, how do we know who's the strongest? *The guy who lifts the most*. And if some guy lifted more at his house the week before, he swears, it doesn't matter one bit - it's a matter of who earned it that day. Virtue is hard work, but work isn't *bad,* not if you're doing what you love to do. So yeah, a virtuous woman enjoys her virtue, and takes pride in learning it, and improving herself, even if she has to sweat it out once in a while. Virtue has to be learned; we must spend our lives striving for virtue. It's not a switch you flip and Oh! Now I'm Virtuous.

Happiness isn't a second-by-second thing, it takes a lifetime. In fact, if you want to know whether a man is truly happy, wait until he dies - you should be able to look back over his life and say by the end, "Yup. *Definitely* happy." "But Aristotle, how can dead men be happy?" Well, whiny-guy-I'm-using-rhetorically, that just proves my point. Happiness isn't something you *do*, it's an end you *achieve*. We can't say dead men *do* stuff, but we can definitely look back and know they

achieved stuff.

And since all of this starts with the soul, we have to know the soul, which has two parts - rational and irrational. When we let the irrational part take over, that's when things gets out of hand. Yeah, it feels really good to let the irrational part take over sometimes and just fulfill all our appetites, but when it all comes crashing down, then what? "Bro, I spent all my money, and bought a bunch of crap, but now I have nothing." Was it worth it? Nope, not if they've abandoned virtue - those bros are *miserable*. We must, therefore, tame the irrational part of the soul with the rational, and allow that to direct us; after all, that's what makes us special. We must think, and we must *act*; we must be virtuous both in mind and in character. And as a bro masters these, becomes wise and temperate, you bet your [butt] he's happy.

Sam's Notes: Aristotle believed that through the systematic observation and analysis (breaking down and classification) of the natural world, in combination with rigorous logic we can make True statements about the natural world and understand:

1) The nature of essences (what something is)

2) The nature of causes (why things occur)

And, by thinking this way, we would be understand how to be happy.

In a nutshell: Aristotle's in-depth treatment of the correct methodology for achieving these types of understanding created what we would now call "science."