

COLLEGE GUILD
PO Box 6448, Brunswick ME 04011

PHILOSOPHY

Unit 2 of 6

Metaphysics

In our first unit we briefly touched on five main branches of philosophy: Metaphysics, Epistemology, Ethics, Politics and Aesthetics. In this unit we will take a look at metaphysics.

Metaphysics is an area of philosophy that tries to answer the question, “What is reality?” Metaphysics seeks to discover general theories for what is real and how that differs from what may seem real but actually is not. Some well-known philosophers of metaphysics are Epicurus (341- 270 BCE), George Berkeley (1685 -1753 CE), and Immanuel Kant (1784 - 1804 CE). (What we used to know as BC and AD to denote its place in historical time is now known as BCE, “Before the Common Era”, and CE, “Common Era”.)

Reality is often defined by our perceptions. The way we see things, the way we interact with our senses, determines what we believe. Metaphysics attempts to determine the difference between appearance and reality. Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” elaborates on the relation between reality and perception.

In the last unit, we left off with Socrates describing a scene within a cave before us: *I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber like a cave, with a long entrance open to the daylight and as wide as the cave. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Some way off, behind and higher up a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets.*

1. Imagine the above scene. What kind of person would you be if all the things you knew were contained within the walls of a small cave? What would your everyday reality be like?

Socrates: Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear long behind the curtain-wall, projecting above it and including figure of men and animals made of wood and stone and all sorts of other materials, and that some of these men, as you would expect, are talking and some not.

Interlocutor: An odd picture and an odd sort of prisoner.

2. What makes each of them an “odd” sort of prisoner?

3. Socrates’s interlocutor talks about “an odd picture” here. Please sketch or draw out how you imagine this scene playing out with the prisoners, the cave, the shadows and the men outside. (Stick figures are fine.)

Socrates: They are drawn from life. For, tell me, do you think our prisoners could see anything of themselves or their fellows except the shadows thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite them?

Interlocutor: How could they see anything else if they were prevented from moving their heads all their lives?

Socrates: *And would they see anything more of the objects carried along the road?*

Interlocutor: *Of course not.*

Socrates: *Then if they were able to talk to each other, would they not assume that the shadows they saw were the real things?*

Interlocutor: *Inevitably.*

4. How is imprisonment different or similar to the life of the cave people?

5. If the cave men could talk to each other, how would that affect their view of reality?

Socrates: *And if the wall of their prison opposite them reflected sound, don't you think that they would suppose, whenever one of the passers-by on the road spoke, that the voice belonged to the shadow passing before them?*

Interlocutor: *They would be bound to think so.*

Socrates: *And so in every way they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were the whole truth.*

Interlocutor: *Yes, inevitably.*

6. Socrates is explaining metaphysics with a story that compares shadows to reality. Give two examples of how people mistake shadows for reality, one from another era and one from modern times.

Socrates: *Then think what would naturally happen to them if they were released from their bonds and cured of their delusions...And if, he were forcibly dragged up the steep and rugged ascent and not let go till he had been dragged out into the sunlight, the process would be a painful one, to which he would much object, and when he emerged into the light his eyes would be so dazzled by the glare of it that he wouldn't be able to see a single one of the things he was now told were real.*

Interlocutor: *Certainly not at first.*

Socrates: *Because, of course, he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the upper world outside the cave...Later on he would come to the conclusion that it is the sun that produces the changing seasons and years and controls everything in the visible world, and is in a sense responsible for everything that he and his fellow-prisoners used to see.*

Interlocutor: *That is the conclusion which we would obviously reach.*

7. Imagine what it would be like to be released from the cave after being there since childhood. What do you think the cave person experience through his five senses? What are some things he may just know "apriori" (without the senses)?

Socrates: *Then what do you think would happen if he went back to sit in his old seat in the cave? Wouldn't his eyes be blinded by the darkness, because he had come in suddenly out of the sunlight?*

Interlocutor: *Certainly.*

Socrates: *And if he had to discriminate between the shadows, in competition with the other prisoners, while he was still blinded and before his eyes got used to the darkness—a process that would take some time—wouldn't he be likely to make a fool of himself? And they would say that his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting. And if anyone tried to release them and lead them up, they would kill him if they could lay hands on him.*

8. Why does Socrates say he would make a fool of himself when he had previous knowledge of living in the cave?

9. Pick one of the following for a fictional person: returning to a home town after experiencing a big city; returning to work after a vacation; returning to prison after release; or returning to school after holding down a job. Compare the person's previous reality to his/her new reality? What did s/he believe to be true is no longer true?

10. What do you think the deeper meaning is behind Plato's allegory of the cave? What does it tell us about reality and perception?

11. Is Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave" a good example for explaining metaphysics? Make up another detailed story which compares what is real to what seems real.

12. What are three questions your interlocutors would ask you?

We will be traveling from Greece to Germany in our next unit!

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes