

# The Philosophical Foundations of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration Part 1: The Allegory of Plato's Cave.

Presented by Bill Tillier at  
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- Plato represents essentialism:
  - An approach to philosophy that emphasizes essence.
  - There are universal essences, for example, that represent absolute truths, these are true everywhere and in every time.
  - There are individual essences “within us” that determine who we will be as individuals.
  - Each of us must uncover or discover these essences.
  - These essences are both our potentials and our limitations.

- Plato said the absolute and eternal Forms represent essences. Forms are literally beyond our day-to-day world.
- This is a metaphysical approach.
- Summary: Things, and people, have essences, for Plato, represented by their metaphysical Forms.
- [In contrast, Aristotle said essence is contained within everyday matter. For example, the basic essence of a frog resides within the cells of a tadpole and while its Form may change (it becomes a frog), its "frog essence" remains unchanged. Things, and people, have enduring essences, for Aristotle, contained within their matter.]
- Dabrowski: echoes Aristotle, a person's essence is in their genes.

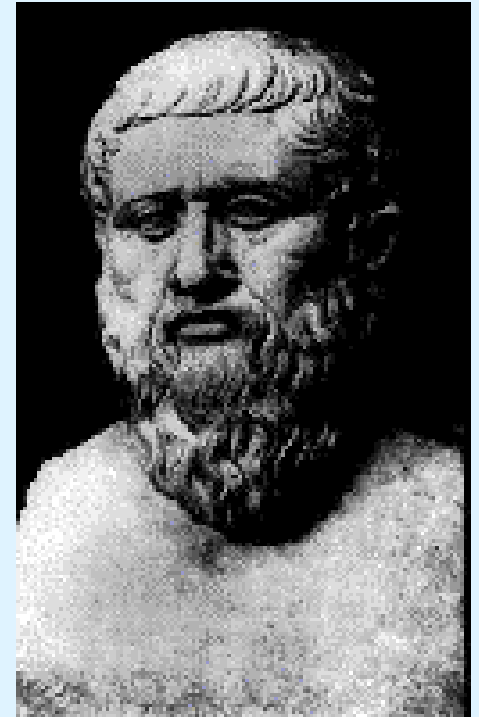
- Existentialism emphasizes existence rather than essence:
  - Existence precedes essence.
  - Existentialism emerges from: Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre among others.
  - There is no timeless or absolute truth or reality and therefore life is largely meaningless. Whatever truth or meaning we experience, we create as we participate in the experience of life.
  - Each of us must create our own truth out of our own experience. The self is not predetermined, over time, we build our autonomous self from our actions.
  - Sartre: We each have a responsibility and freedom to choose our actions; to do so is authenticity: "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself."

- Dabrowski was influenced by essentialism & existentialism:
  - The individual has certain individual essences and as well, has a degree of individual freedom he or she must exercise to become an authentic individual.
- Ultimately, Dabrowski felt that essence was the more important of the two aspects:
  - "Essence is more important than existence for the birth of a truly human being."
  - "There is no true human existence without genuine essence." (both quotes from: Existential thoughts and Aphorisms, page 11).
- Plato's approach was a key element in Dabrowski's theory. This presentation will review Plato's philosophy.

- Socrates had a tremendous influence on his student, Plato.
- Socrates believed that everyone holds moral truth and knowledge within; however, most people are unaware of it.
- Reasoning, not perception, will reveal this deep & timeless Knowledge.
- Knowledge is of critical importance: we must KNOW before we ACT.
- By asking someone questions in a dialogue, the person answering can be drawn to discover this truth for him or herself.

- Complacent acceptance of traditional or external views is the status quo but is unsatisfactory.
- We must be conscious of something and be able to explain it for it to have any meaning; “the unexamined life is not worth living.”
- People seek to be happy and thus naturally seek virtue, people are not inherently evil, only ignorant of the Good.
- What are absolute beauty and justice, apart from beautiful objects and good deeds? What are beauty and justice in all places and at all times?
- Theory is a critical necessity; we must aspire toward ideals of theory.

- Plato: "Mankind will not get rid of its evils until either the class of those who philosophize in truth and rectitude reach political power or those most powerful in cities, under some divine dispensation, really get to philosophizing."
- Plato was born to an aristocratic family in Athens and lived from 428 - 354BC.
- Always interested in politics, Plato became a student of Socrates.
- Information from this period is often questionable.

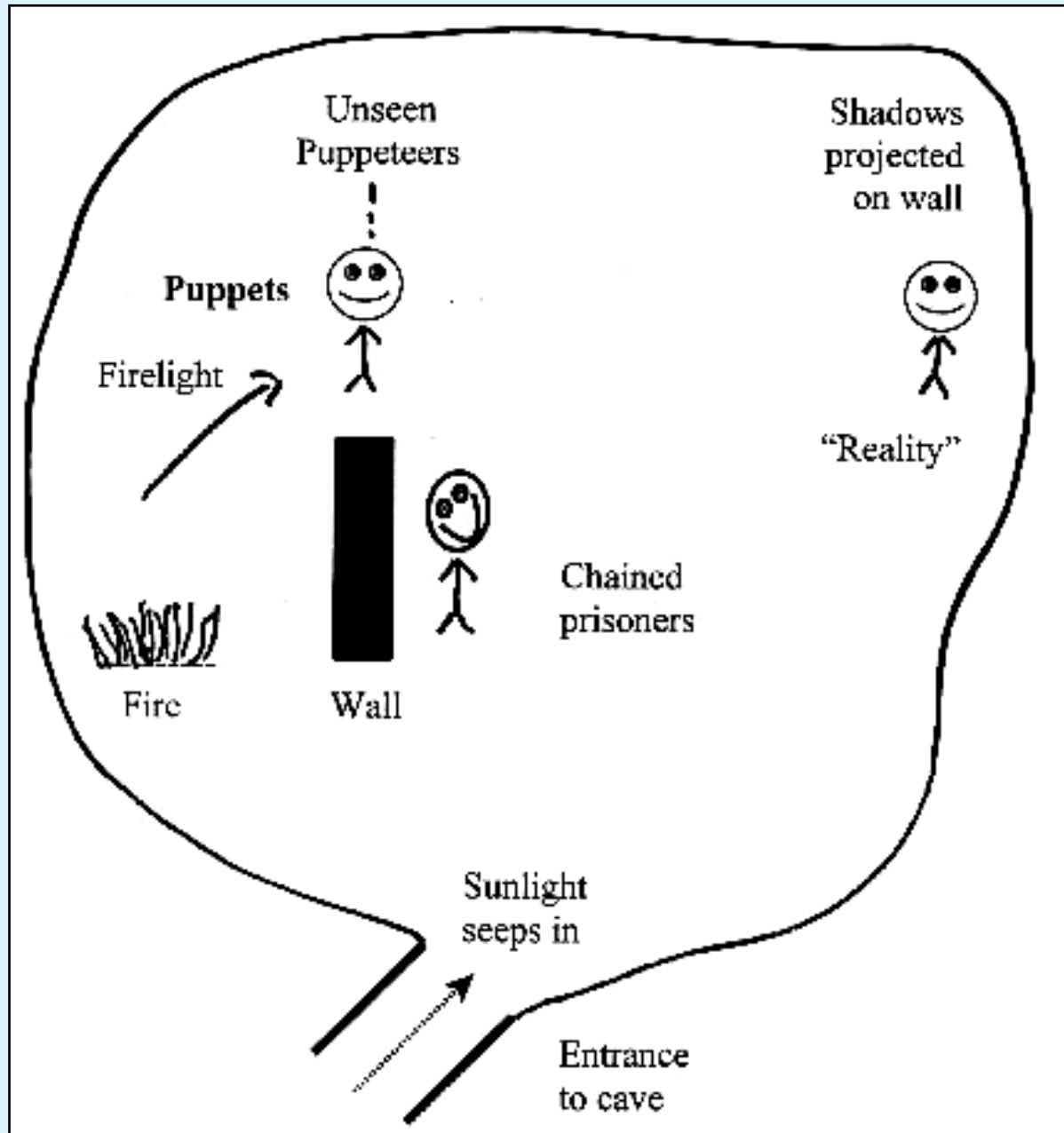




- When Socrates was purged, Plato became disillusioned with politics and came to see that “mankind's fate was hopeless unless there was a deep change in men's education, and especially in the education of those intending to become statesmen”  
(<http://phd.evansville.edu/life.htm>).
- Plato founded the Academy, a prototype of the Modern University. Based on mathematics and with a wide focus, the Academy lasted 900 years.
- Academy's first major student (for 20 years) was Aristotle:
  - Aristotle later rejected Plato's basic view of reality.
- Plato was concerned about social and individual justice: to get out of life what is deserved, not less, not more.

- Plato's cave is described in a dialogue presented in chapter VII of his major work, *The Republic*.
- The cave is the best known of Plato's dialogues and is open to many different presentations and interpretations.
- The cave is an allegory given to simplify Plato's complex mathematical explanation of the levels of reality:
  - Plato's cave appears after a complex and subtle discussion of "The Divided Line," a geometric description of the levels of reality and their corresponding degrees of knowledge.
    - Although an accomplished mathematician, Plato's geometric description of the divided line doesn't quite "work" mathematically: it is assumed he intentionally designed it this way - but why?

- Basic division: visible / invisible, then subdivided into a series of higher and lower levels based on how we grasp things, and what these things are.
- As an analogy of the divided line, the cave is blunter; not an exact rendering of the levels.
- The cave has a blunt and clear political message: our leaders are often not fit to govern us and need to either “see the light” or to be replaced.
- Basic premise: Because of how we live, “true” Reality is not obvious to most of us. However, we mistake what we see & hear for Reality & Truth.



- **The Cave:** A large cavern with a long, narrow entrance off to one side.
  - The cave represents the visible world we live in.
- **The Prisoners:** A large group of “prisoners” are sitting in rows (as in a modern movie theater). Chained into their seats, they cannot turn around to see the whole cave.
  - The “prisoners” represent the average person:
    - [Glaucon] You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.
    - [Socrates] Like ourselves . . .
  - They watch life unfold on the cave wall in front of them.
  - They accept what they see as the Truth, as Reality.

- **The “roadway” and the puppets:** A short wall, often called the roadway, is situated behind the prisoners.
  - In the common presentation, puppets act out a play on the top of this short wall. A fire behind them casts their shadows onto to the wall in front of the prisoners.
  - The puppets and their masters pulling the strings are beyond the prisoner's view.
  - [In the original: “men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals” create the shadows / action that the prisoners see on the wall.]

- **The fire:** At the back of the cave is a campfire, the artificial light source of the shadow show.
- **The entrance:** There is an entryway leading up and out of the cave. Plato describes it as “a steep and rugged ascent.”
  - A glimmer of sunlight seeps into the cave.
  - The exit represents “the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world.”
- **Summary:** Prisoners sit in a cave watching images cast on the wall in front of them. They accept these views as reality and they are unable to grasp their overall situation: that the cave and images are a ruse, a mere puppet show orchestrated for them by unseen puppeteers (educators and politicians) illuminated by an artificial light and intended to feed them a biased and artificial view of Reality.

- At some point, a prisoner is “set free” and is “forced” to see the situation inside the cave, causing him to “suffer sharp pains.”
- Initially, one does not want to give up the security of his or her familiar reality; the person has to be dragged past the fire (by someone already enlightened) and up, out of the cave. The path up to the surface is a difficult and painful struggle.
- When individual steps into the sunshine, his or her eyes slowly accommodate to the light and his or her fundamental view of the world – of reality, is transformed. One comes to see a deeper, genuine, authentic reality: a reality marked by reason.
- The individual then returns to the cave to try to free other prisoners and makes a painful readjustment back into the darkness. However, to the other prisoners, the person now seems mad – stumbling around and describing a strange new Reality. They reject the person, often to the point of killing him or her.



- The cave is also an allegory of the life and death of Socrates.
  - Socrates had been a respected soldier and one of Plato's "prisoners."
  - When he discovered "the truth," he tried to help others to discover it as well.
  - Socrates called himself "a midwife of the truth."
  - In a political "realignment," Socrates was accused of "provocative and corruptive" teachings and given the choice of exile or death – he chose death (by suicide).
  - The allegory also resonates with the story of Christ.

- Plato's cave is also an allegory of the human condition:
  - Each of us is a prisoner, perceiving "reality" through our own imperfect eyes.
  - Most of us accept this distorted illusion of reality without question.
  - With great effort, some people can break free of ignorance and illusion.
  - Because the path is very difficult and dangerous, it is not for everyone:
    - Plato: not everyone wants to, or has it in them, to be free and to literally "see the light."
    - One's basic essential (genetic) character is critical to being able to break free.
  - It is difficult to get others to examine their secure sense of the world and conformity.

- The theory of Forms is a critical part of Plato's philosophy.
- The mathematician, Pythagoras influenced Plato:
  - The Pythagorean theorem (the square of the hypotenuse . . .) does not describe one triangle or another, it describes all possible right angle triangles that could hypothetically be drawn. Plato: the theorem describes an absolute truth, a knowledge, about an unseen, ideal triangle of no particular size, that exists "out there."
  - Triangles that people draw are mere images, impressions, opinions, representations, etc.. They are relative to each person: each rendering only approximates the ideal Form.
  - To discover the ideal Form (and to find Truth and Justice), we must approach / judge these objects with the mind – with reason, this is where real knowledge is found; it is not found through the senses or through the emotions.

- In the Natural world, there are hierarchies of Forms.
- Each Form fits within a hierarchy of other Forms and we need to appreciate each one in its larger context.
- Understanding one Form makes it easier to grasp others and, eventually, the whole hierarchy comes into view.
- Example hierarchy of ideal Forms:
  - The Cosmos as a whole. (highest)
  - Cities and societies
  - Individuals
  - Objects (lowest)

- An example - Michelangelo's sculpture of David:
  - There is a Form that represents the ideal physique of Man.
  - The Form exists somewhere "out there," apart from us.
  - Forms are available to anyone with a sufficiently developed sense of reasoning. Michelangelo discovered David's Form through a process of deep reasoning, not through his senses and perceptions.
  - Michelangelo relied on his mental image ("mind's eye") of this Form - he did not use an actual person as a model.
  - Reason can grasp the Forms as the eyes can see objects.
  - Michelangelo tries to represent, to reflect, this ideal Form through David.

- David succeeds to the extent that Michelangelo is in touch with this ideal Form (perfection), and can represent this in the stone.
- David is a closer likeness to the ideal Form than we are familiar with in our day-to-day lives, thus it has great impact on us.
- If Michelangelo had used a human model (even a “perfect” one) and relied on his perceptions to sculpt him or her, he would have been misled, creating an imperfect representation.
- In summary, because David resonates so with viewers, we can see that Michelangelo has succeeded in closely capturing and representing the ideal Form of Man.

- Ideal Forms are invisible to the normal senses / perception.
- The Forms represent a deep, absolute beauty and truth that we are normally not aware of, or in touch with.
- If a soul is “awake” it sees both “ordinary reality” (the shadow show of the cave) as well as the “real” Forms behind it.
- The closer we each come to Forms, the closer we come to the overall, natural Form (order and harmony) of the cosmos.
- Philosophy is about the study of Forms.
- Leaders need to be in touch with Forms. Plato's ideal governor is therefore a philosopher king.
- The enlightened have a compelling responsibility to return to the cave to help guide and govern those still unaware and to try to enlighten others.

- The highest Form is The Good.
- Plato believes that Good has power (energy) just as the sun has the power to warm our skin when exposed to it.
  - The Good is the source of beauty, right, reason and truth.
  - The Good is the parent of light.
  - Good sheds “light” on the other lesser Forms we “see” and allows us to make sense of them.
  - Ideals are arrived at through ideas: The Good guides us in this quest.



- Dialogue and discovery:
  - Through dialogue, we ought to help each other to discover and sort out (“to order”) the Forms and ideals (and moral truth) of the cosmos.
  - Dialogue helps point people in the right direction; the rest is up to the person. It takes strong character to break free and not everyone can: not everyone is strong enough.
  - In some special cases, a person can use Eros (love) to break free.
  - “[Plato] is giving us the truth as he sees it; but it is a truth that each of us must rediscover for ourselves before we can properly be said to possess it” (Annas, 3, 1981).

- Forms:
  - Eternal, absolute, changeless, nonmaterial, essence, archetypes.
  - The essence or deep structure of an object or idea.
- Thinking/Knowledge:
  - Scientist / mathematician – uses abstraction and symbolization.
  - New, greater reliance on the intellectual process over the senses.

-- The “**Divided Line**” *a loose continuum between levels* --

- Beliefs:
  - More certainty than opinion but still not absolute because features are relative to the context of the person or situation.
  - For example, objects have different weights on different planets.
- Opinions:
  - Imagining an object, conjecture, guessing, illusions, etc.
  - Object seen with the eyes: a poor imitation of its ideal Form.
  - We wrongly accept the appearance of a thing as the thing itself.
  - Usually, we only interact with people’s shadows – their opinions.

## Objects “out there”:

- Highest Forms:  
(GOOD, beauty, justice)  
(highest reality: “best representations”)
- Mathematical Forms

## States of Mind (Soul):

- Intelligence or Knowledge  
Reason, Dialectic / Dialogue  
(Discover moral truth via debate)
- Thinking, understanding

Intelligible world. World of Forms. Realm of knowledge. Being.

--- The “**Divided Line**” *a loose continuum between levels* ---

Visible world. World of Appearances. Realm of opinion. Becoming.

- Particular visible things
- Images, shadows  
(lowest reality:  
most inaccurate  
copies of reality)

- Perception and belief
- Imagining and conjecture  
(lowest type of cognition)

- |                                 |  |                                      |
|---------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| - Form of the Good<br>(The Sun) |  | - Intelligence/Reason<br>(Dialectic) |
|                                 |  |                                      |
| - The world outside.            |  | - Intelligence / Understanding       |

Above - Outside the cave.

----- **“The sunlight”** *a sharp line of distinction* -----

Below - Inside the cave.

- |                        |  |                         |
|------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| - Puppets, the fire.   |  | - Perception of objects |
|                        |  |                         |
| - Shadows on the wall. |  | - Images/”Opinions”     |

- Level 1). Rational soul (Reason):
  - Perfection. This soul is located in the head.
  - The only immortal soul (this soul & its associated knowledge is reincarnated).
  - Characteristic of the elite guardians, the governing class.
  - This soul arises from the discovery of the Forms.
- Level 2). Spirited Soul (Courage):
  - Located in the chest, individuals still driven by glory and fame, but can also feel shame and guilt.
    - Example: Soldiers.

- Level 3). Desiring Soul (Appetites):
  - Located in the stomach and below.
  - “Irrational” desires for food, sex (as in animals), power, money, fame, etc.
  - Human appetites are dominated by ego and self-interest.
  - Prominent in the productive masses (therefore, they are unfit to govern).

- Plato describes a winged chariot pulled by two horses.
- One horse is white; the spirited soul, it is upright and easily follows commands because it knows of virtue and honor.
- The other, dark horse, is desires. It is lumbering and hard to control, even with a whip; at any moment it may rear up.
- The charioteer is the rational soul. His task is to control and direct the horses.
  - This creates the traditional image in psychology of a homunculus. In this context, a “little rational man” inside our heads that controls and directs our behaviour.

- Human souls have a natural tendency (represented by wings on the chariot) to try to move up to the realm of the Forms, but they are often dragged down by their desires.
- Those who attain the “beatific vision” want to continue on their journey to the “upper world where they desire to dwell,” and keep ascending to maximize their personal growth. However, these people must now be compelled to return to the cave. It is “not proper” to let them be happy and be above the rest. Rather, they must be called upon to descend back to the cave to bring their new vision to the others there. We create the ideal state only when everyone is free of their illusions – then we can all start again to move up another level.
- Plato on rulers: “The state in which the rulers are reluctant to govern is always the best.”



- There are two types of people, each with very different cognitive realities:
  - Conforming, everyday people (“prisoners”) essentially fooled by their perceptions of reality. The soul is asleep.
  - Ascenders to the intelligible level who now see a different, higher realm of reality. The soul is awake.
- Those in the cave face practical, lower moral concerns (steal the bread?). Ascenders face higher, theoretical and contemplative concerns (What does life mean?).
- Not everyone is able to ascend, so many must have reason imposed: therefore, slavery is tolerated if reason prevails.
- High status is given to ascenders (governors & philosophers); however, responsibilities are also assigned.

- Plato: Identification with reason makes us human:
  - If reason is able to succeed, then rationality, justice, order and harmony prevail and we are human and happy.
  - Reason may succeed by our discovery of Forms (higher reality) or it may be imposed on us by others; either route is valid as long as reason ultimately prevails.
- If reason/rationality fail, the lower animal in us prevails, this must be avoided at all costs (even at the cost of Human slavery).

- Justice results when an individual identifies with his or her rational soul.
  - Reason and rationality (however achieved) leads to justice.
  - The benefits of achieving justice ought to be obvious to the individual; people go wrong primarily out of ignorance: people are asleep. Second cause: they know better but their appetites (desiring soul) are too strong for them to control.
- Anticipated Dabrowski's contextual approach to diagnosis:
  - If we meet someone whose eyes (both the literal and mind's eye) are "bewildered" (are adjusting), we need to ask, "Is it because they have just come up into the bright light, or because they have just returned down into the dark of the cave?"

- Individual autonomy, by definition, is severely limited or irrelevant. The ideal person is dedicated to a social ideal.
- While a lack of self-knowledge is part of the problem, insight doesn't wake up a “prisoner.” One needs to discover the “external” Forms, an impersonal “outer” knowledge.
- The intellectual study of abstract ideas (mathematics) is the method of discovery – not through a process of self-growth.
- The struggles and conflicts linked to ascending center around our difficulty in letting go of conformity and security, our reliance on perception and in the challenge of understanding and attaining truth, not on inner psychic conflicts per se.
- There is no intrinsic, personal sense of reward or fulfillment in ascendance. “Reality-actualization” not self-actualization.

- The “normal” reality we commonly experience and perceive through our senses is an illusion – merely a poor copy of Reality.
  - Our “usual” perceptions create distortions and thus they cannot be trusted.
- “Reality” can only be appreciated through reasoning.
  - Through reason, some people are able to “wake up” to Reality and to “see” what is real and important in life.
  - Not everyone has the “character” to be able to “wake up.”
- Objective moral truths are a part of Reality that people must discover.

- People who ascend have a responsibility to try to share their “new” insight – this is part of their social ideal:
  - Through a careful dialectic conversational process, we must try to lead others to discover and appreciate life more accurately for themselves.
- Society ought to be governed by people who “get it”:
  - However, by saying it is legitimate for enlightened governors to impose reason on the people, Plato ironically ended up advocating a very totalitarian state.
- Wrongdoers are not evil, simply ignorant or they are overcome by strong desire.
- Reality, the natural order of the cosmos, is fundamentally good.

- Plato's Form of the individual: similar to the personality ideal?
- Parallels between Plato's ascender and Dabrowski's Level V?
- Plato disdains emotion:
  - Plato typifies the traditional approaches that Dabrowski objects to so strongly, they are lopsided toward cognition and ignore or disdain emotion.
- Plato also disdains imagination:
  - For Plato, imagination seems to reflect a meaningless copy – a distorted illusion of objects; therefore it is a low feature.
  - Dabrowski: imagination of higher possibilities is a key element in development.
- Plato and Dabrowski differ on the role of intrapsychic conflicts.
- Both see development as more than simply self-actualization.

- Overviews of Plato:
- <http://people.delphi.com/~gkemerling/ph/plat.htm>
- <http://people.delphi.com/~gkemerling/hy/2h.htm#cave>
- <http://www.friesian.com/plato.htm>
  
- Overviews of Plato's Cave:
- <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/cave.htm>
- <http://www.cco.net/~trufax/paradigm/plato.html>
- <http://www.shpm.com/articles/wf/platocav.html>
- <http://www.fred.net/tzaka/plato1.html>
- <http://www.fred.net/tzaka/plato2.html>
- <http://studentweb.tulane.edu/~abrown4/platoscave.htm>
- <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html> (Presents the Jowett translation of Plato)



- A nice image of David:
- <http://www.anthroarcheart.org/tblm36.htm>
- An Illustration of the cave:
- <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/departement/fad/fi/woodrow/plato.htm>
- A related essay by Arthur C. Clarke:
- [http://www.wasserburg\\_inn.de/herbert\\_huber/HHL59Z.htm](http://www.wasserburg_inn.de/herbert_huber/HHL59Z.htm)
- Simone Weil's analysis of the cave:
- <http://www.rivertext.com/simonescave.html>
  
- Books:
- Annas, J. (1981). An introduction to Plato's republic. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leahey, T. H. (1997). A history of psychology: Main currents in psychological thought. (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

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Dedicated to a wise cat, Hobbes.

The end.