Notes from Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave":

**Allegory:** The concrete presentation of an abstract idea, typically in a narrative—whether prose, verse, or drama—with at least two levels of meaning. The first level is the surface story line . . . the second level is typically moral, political, philosophical, or religious.

**Veiled in:**
- personification
- characters who bear the names of the qualities or ideas the author wishes to represent (Simon, Lily, etc.)
- extended metaphor

**Two major categories:**
- the political and historical allegory: figures, settings, or actions correspond directly and specifically to historical people, places, and events
- the allegory of abstract themes: characters stand for ideas or abstract qualities

*Plato's Theory of Forms:*

Written by Michael Vlach

Plato is one of the most important philosophers in history. At the heart of his philosophy is his "theory of forms" or "theory of ideas." In fact, his views on knowledge, ethics, psychology, the political state, and art are all tied to this theory.

According to Plato, reality consists of two realms. First, there is the physical world, the world that we can observe with our five senses. And second, there is a world made of eternal perfect "forms" or "ideas."

What are "forms"? Plato says they are perfect templates that exist somewhere in another dimension (He does not tell us where). These forms are the ultimate reference points for all objects we observe in the physical world. They are more real than the physical objects you see in the world.

For example, a chair in your house is an inferior copy of a perfect chair that exists somewhere in another dimension. A horse you see in a stable is really an imperfect representation of some ideal horse that exists somewhere. In both cases, the chair in your house and the horse in the stable are just imperfect representations of the perfect chair and horse that exist somewhere else.

According to Plato, whenever you evaluate one thing as “better” than another, you assume that there is an absolute good from which two objects can be compared. For example, how do you know a horse with four legs is better than a horse with three legs? Answer: You intuitively know that “horseness” involves having four legs.

Not all of Plato’s contemporaries agreed with Plato. One of his critics said, “I see particular horses, but not horseness.” To which Plato replied sharply, “That is because you have eyes but no intelligence.”

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**Equation: What is X?**

**Problem: assumption that there is one, single correct answer**
Forms:
1. mind-independent entities
2. independent of our beliefs and judgments
3. they do not become; they simply are

- In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato described symbolically the predicament in which mankind finds itself and proposes a way of salvation.

- The Allegory presents, in brief form, most of Plato's major philosophical assumptions:

  * his belief that the world revealed by our senses is not the real world but only a poor copy of it, and that the real world can only be apprehended intellectually

  * his idea that knowledge cannot be transferred from teacher to student, but rather that education consists in directing student's minds toward what is real and important and allowing them to apprehend it for themselves

  * his faith that the universe ultimately is good

  * his conviction that enlightened individuals have an obligation to the rest of society, and that a good society must be one in which the truly wise (the Philosopher-King) are the rulers.

The Allegory:

- [Socrates]: "To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images."

- [Socrates] This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

  [Glaucon] I agree, he said, as far as I am able to understand you.

  [Socrates] Moreover, I said, you must not wonder that those who attain to this beatific vision are unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell; which desire of theirs is very natural, if our allegory may be trusted.

  [Glaucon] Yes, very natural.

  [Socrates] And is there anything surprising in one who passes from divine contemplations to the evil state of man, misbehaving himself in a ridiculous manner; if, while his eyes are blinking and before he has become accustomed to the surrounding darkness, he is compelled to fight in courts of law, or in other places, about the images or the shadows of images of justice, and is endeavoring to meet the conceptions of those who have never yet seen absolute justice?
[Glaucon] Anything but surprising, he replied.

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Socrates] Observe, Glaucon, that there will be no injustice in compelling our philosophers to have a care and providence of others; we shall explain to them that in other States, men of their class are not obliged to share in the toils of politics: and this is reasonable, for they grow up at their own sweet will, and the government would rather not have them. Being self-taught, they cannot be expected to show any gratitude for a culture, which they have never received. But we have brought you into the world to be rulers of the hive, kings of yourselves and of the other citizens, and have educated you far better and more perfectly than they have been educated, and you are better able to share in the double duty. Wherefore each of you, when his turn comes, must go down to the general underground abode, and get the habit of seeing in the dark. When you have acquired the habit, you will see ten thousand times better than the inhabitants of the cave, and you will know what the several images are, and what they represent, because you have seen the beautiful and just and good in their truth. And thus our State which is also yours will be a reality, and not a dream only, and will be administered in a spirit unlike that of other States, in which men fight with one another about shadows only and are distracted in the struggle for power, which in their eyes is a great good. Whereas the truth is that the State in which the rulers are most reluctant to govern is always the best and most quietly governed, and the State in which they are most eager, the worst.

- taken from: http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/allegory.html

Lessons:

- appearance vs. reality

- "the general terms of our language are not “names” of the physical objects that we can see. They are actually names of things that we cannot see, things that we can only grasp with the mind" (Cohen)

- "We can come to grasp the Forms with our minds" (Cohen).

- "our very ability to think and to speak depends on the Forms. For the terms of the language we use get their meaning by “naming” the Forms that the objects we perceive participate in." (Cohen)

- "we may acquire concepts by our perceptual experience of physical objects. But we would be mistaken if we thought that the concepts that we grasp were on the same level as the things we perceive" (Cohen)

- taken from: http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm