Guide to Responding

Study Guide for Plato’s *The Allegory of the Cave*

Main Point Summary/Background:

Plato’s *The Allegory of the Cave* is a meditation on “the essence of truth” and its paradoxical relation to human comportment. Plato uses this allegory to gradually guide readers toward a personal realization of knowledge and philosophy as the key elements for freedom and enlightenment. This fable also contains exquisite reflections on concepts such as knowledge, education, and politics.

*The Allegory of the Cave* is one of the most famous pieces of philosophical literature and a pillar of western philosophy. To this day, it remains the best known and most critically assessed of Plato’s works. Just remember that this text is full of complex symbols and analogies, which scholars still differ as to their full meaning.

Related Readings:

This reading is related to the other readings in subunit 5.3 “Greek and Hellenistic Culture,” particularly to Dr. Steven Kreis’s “Greek Thought: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.” Remember that Plato’s *The Allegory of the Cave* is considered as one of the most important of Classical Greece’s literary and philosophical works; thus, this reading is of great importance to understand the entirety of Unit 5 “Classical Greece and the Hellenistic World.”

Instructions:

Below are excerpts from the reading and responses that serve as sample answers for the study questions. Review these answers after you have completed the study questions. Highlighting or taking notes while you read paired with later outlining and paraphrasing is an excellent method to ensure comprehension and retention of difficult material.

1. In *The Allegory of the Cave*, Plato describes the physical world as a “dark place” in which humans can only perceive objects through the senses. Plato referred to these objects as phenomena, or weak forms of reality. Thus, the physical world is not a realm where humans can obtain knowledge of true reality.

2. Plato believed that true reality of an object is not found through the senses. According to Plato, the senses are untrustworthy, and what we perceive through them is just phenomena—weak forms of reality. Only through abstract thinking, we can learn the “true essence” of an object.

3. According to Plato, the soul is universal, pure, and immortal. Moreover, the soul has the ability to sense reality or the “true essence” of objects.
4. Plato describes the process of acquiring knowledge as the evolution from darkness to the light. In this journey, humans are able to see the essence of truth, or in other words, they are able to gain an understanding of what is actually real. This process, though painful and distressing, will at the end offer freedom and enlightenment to those who have acquire knowledge.

5. In *The Allegory of the Cave*, Plato suggests that “happiness” is the final reward for those who “leave the darkness of the cave.” Thus, happiness is achieved by gaining an understanding of what is actually real.

6. The “people chained in the cave” are those who, knowing no better and having no opportunity to know better, accept phenomena as reality. What they perceive through their senses, they interpret as real.

7. For Plato, education focuses on discovering what the soul already knows. To achieve this, a person should engage in reflection, dialogue, and contemplation to discover the essence of the soul and, by doing so, what the soul knows and desires.

8. Because the philosopher has knowledge, his task is to descend to the cave to help as many people as possible to gain knowledge, or in other words, to learn the truth.

9. The philosopher-kings, or guardians, are the best of the philosophers, the “most enlightened.” They are to be the rulers.

10. Philosopher-kings are the best equipped to rule. They not only have acquired knowledge of “true reality,” but they have reasoned to the conclusion that they are the most capable to extend knowledge among others.

   Ironically, the philosopher-kings must not desire to rule. In fact, they should despise governing and politics. They should be compelled to rule in order to extend goodness in an imperfect world.

11. It does not. Science involves the pursuit of knowledge of general truths by using observation and systematic experimentation. However, Plato did not think a philosopher should use observation or empirical investigation in order to find truth. He believed only abstract thinking could lead to true knowledge.