Plato's *Republic*

What is the nature of knowledge? And of ignorance? The 4th-century-bc Greek philosopher Plato used the myth, or allegory, of the cave to illustrate the difference between genuine knowledge and opinion or belief. This distinction is at the heart of one of Plato’s most important works, *The Republic*. In the first part of the myth of the cave, excerpted here, Plato constructs a dialogue in which he considers the difficult transition from belief based on appearances to true understanding founded in reality.

From *The Republic*
By Plato
**Book Seven: The Simile of the Cave**

“I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human conditions somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber, like a cave with an entrance open to the daylight and running a long way underground. 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. Behind them and above them a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners 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.”

“I see.”
“Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and other materials, and that some of these men, as is natural, are talking and some not.”
“An odd picture and an odd sort of prisoner.”
“They are drawn from life,” I replied. “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?”
“How could they see anything else if they were prevented from moving their heads all their lives?”
“And would they see anything more of the objects carried along the road?”
“Of course not.”
“Then if they were able to talk to each other, would they not assume that the shadows they saw were real things?”
“Inevitably.”
“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?”
“They would be bound to think so.”
“And so they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were in all respects real.”
“Yes, inevitably.”
“Then think what would naturally happen to them if they were released from their bonds and cured of their delusions. Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire; all these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows. So if he was told that what he used to see was mere illusion and that he was now nearer reality and seeing more correctly, because he was turned towards objects that were more real, and if on top of that he were compelled to say what each of the passing objects was when it was pointed out to him, don’t you think he would be at a loss, and think that what he used to see was more real than the objects now being pointed out to him?”
“Much more real.”
“And if he were made to look directly at the light of the fire, it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and take refuge in the things which he could see, which he would think really far clearer than the things being shown him.”
“Yes.”
“And if,” I went on, “he were forcibly dragged up the steep and rocky 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 overwhelmed by the brightness of it that he wouldn’t be able to see a single one of the things he was now told were real.”
“Certainly not at first,” he agreed.
“Because he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the world outside the cave. First he would find it easiest to look at shadows, next at the reflections of men and other objects in water, and later on at the objects themselves. After that he would find it easier to observe the heavenly bodies and the sky at night than by day, and to look at the light of the moon and stars, rather than at the sun and its light.”
“Because he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the world outside the cave. First he would find it easiest to look at shadows, next at the reflections of men and other objects in water, and later on at the objects themselves. After that he would find it easier to observe the heavenly bodies and the sky at night than by day, and to look at the light of the moon and stars, rather than at the sun and its light.”
“Of course.”
“The thing he would be able to do last would be to look directly at the sun, and observe its nature without using reflections in water or any other medium, but just as it is.”
“That must come last.”
“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.”
“That is the conclusion which he would obviously reach.”