



6.2 How reliable is our perception and understanding of 'reality'?

In order to remain open to other ways of thinking, it is useful to ask ourselves a simple question: to what extent do we actually have access to 'reality'. In the Introduction to this program, competing theories about the ways in which language constructs, reflects or distorts 'reality' were outlined. But the question about how we access reality in the search for truth goes far beyond issues of language. First and foremost, we are embodied beings, and through our senses we receive primary data about 'the world'. From then on, however, the story of how this data is processed, and this processing is represented and imagined, becomes complex.

In the film, *The Matrix*, what is taken as 'reality' turns out to be no more than a virtually constructed world based on a computer simulation.



Now view this short clip from *The Matrix*:



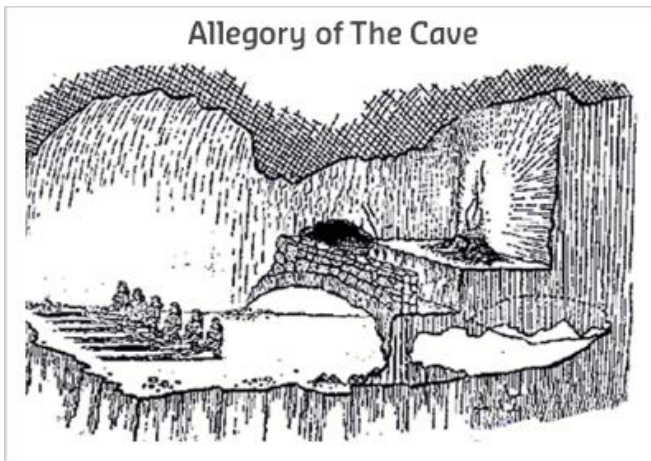
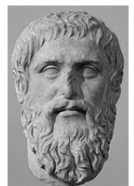
["The Matrix" \(1999\) – 'Construct' Scenes](#) (2 mins, 59 secs)

More than two thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher, Plato, created his own version of *The Matrix*, and this is depicted in two short sections of his well-known work, *The Republic* (Plato, 1972). Firstly, in the *Analogy of the Divided Line*, Plato draws a clear distinction between the more authentic world of ideal forms (e.g. 'roundness', beauty', 'truth') and the illusory, physical world which we perceive through our senses.

Plato
Greek Philosopher

Born: c. 425 in Athens, Greece
Died: 348/347

(image source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato>)



This is followed by the *Allegory of The Cave*, which depicts a group of prisoners chained up in a cave since birth, and unable to leave. The prisoners think that the shadows which they see are 'real', and accurately represent the nature and scale of the world. They did not even know that there is a vast universe beyond the cave.

Even when one of them leaves to discover the 'real' world outside the cave, upon his return, he is unable to convince the others that they have been deluded as to the nature of reality. If they could be convinced by the account of the returning prisoner, Plato asks us to think about...

"...what would naturally happen to them if they were released from their bonds and cured of their delusions." (*The Republic, Section 7, 515* Penguin, p.279)

Plato sets out to demonstrate our limitations in attempting to know 'the world' when we think that we have direct access to 'reality'. He shows how our limited faculties of perception determine the ways in which we filter sense data and interpret that data through representations as we try to make and communicate meanings.



5.1 Introduction

Watch one (or both) of following videos to help you understand Plato's ideas about this topic:



[Plato's Allegory of the Cave - Alex Gendler](#) (4 mins, 32 secs)



[The Cave: An Adaptation of Plato's Allegory in Clay](#) (3 mins, 10 secs)

What we can learn from the above examples is that as critical thinkers, we are faced with the problem of being able to clearly recognize how our access to the truth is blocked by various obstacles; how we are deluded by processes of which we may not be aware.

One way to deal with this is to always specify which aspect, level or perspective of the object we are trying to describe and understand. Moving beyond mere belief, opinion and speculation, we need to be adept at recognizing the limiting (and enabling) frames of our understanding.

It is clear, then, that we should always strive to 'think outside the square', and remain sceptical about our access to the truth. We should constantly challenge 'conventional' methods – even when they have been around for a long time, and seem to work very well.

In what follows in the rest of this section, are some brief examples of the ways in which some approaches to thinking have sought to challenge conventional methods. Beginning with a challenge to the idea that an argument is 'valid' based solely on its logical form.

Finally, for a more sophisticated, philosophical look at this topic, see the video below on the relation between Plato's Cave Allegory and the Matrix:



[The Matrix and the Cave](#) (5 mins, 1 sec)