

Sofia Turner

Political Theory

Lilly Goren

10/29/25

Televisual Paper: Plato's Allegory of the Cave in Disney's Brother Bear

Although philosophical ideas and messages can often be misunderstood, regular media like movies and tv shows can often be used to transcribe those messages and help individuals better understand. Plato's Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic* explains to readers how people can be trapped by something they believe is reality, whether that is true or not, making it more difficult to see the truth once it is revealed. In this story, prisoners are chained in a deep cave, only being able to look straight forward, watching the shadows on the cave walls which are illuminated by a fire. These prisoners believe the shadows are real things until one prisoner somehow breaks free and escapes the cave, seeing the real world for the first time. In Disney's *Brother Bear*, a story is told in a similar way where the main character Kenai is stuck in a more metaphorical cave in the beginning of the movie. Throughout the movie, Kenai's journey shows the process of leaving certain biases and ignorance behind, allowing him to see the world differently. The film visualizes what it means to break from a cave, to see things differently, and to face resistance from those still confined to their old worldview. By examining Plato's allegory and Disney's film perspective, it can be explained how the two parallel one another through the

process of leaving familiar illusions and embracing a better understanding of oneself and the world around them.

In Book VII of the *Republic*, Plato uses the cave to show the difference between what is being shown and what is reality. He asks readers to imagine a group of prisoners that are chained in a dark cave and facing a wall. The prisoners are unable to see anything besides shadows; they have only known shadows. Being born in the cave, all they ever see are illusions of the objects being cast behind them. Though, due to the restriction in movement, the prisoners are not necessarily aware that these 'figures' are only shadows. Plato explains that "in every way such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial objects," emphasizing the fact that having a limited perspective can make one believe something is real simply because it is all they know.¹ When one prisoner has the ability to escape, they are in shock due to the brightness of the sun, taking them some time to adjust. After initially resisting, the prisoner can perceive real objects, light (the sun), nature, and other objects surrounding the cave, ultimately coming to see the truth. The process is painful at first; when the prisoner is trying to approach the light, his eyes are essentially being burned of sorts due to the intensity of the sun, not allowing him to see clearly.² It can be interpreted through the allegory that one must help others understand what reality/the truth is once they have gained that knowledge, despite how hard it may be. Once the prisoner has had time to adjust, they return to the cave to try and tell the others, however they are faced with hostility as soon as they voice what they saw. The other prisoners, rather than believing the one who escaped, mock and reject their claims about a different world, even threatening to kill them.³ Plato uses the other prisoner's reaction to display

¹ Plato. *Republic*, Hackett, 1992. 515c.

² Plato. *Republic*. Hackett, 1992. 516a.

³ Plato. *Republic*. Hackett, 1992. 517a.

how enlightenment can often disrupt already established social norms, which in the end, can provoke resentment and anger rather than gratitude. Overall, the story can be seen as teaching individuals that no matter how hard or uncomfortable facing the truth may be, it will take effort to do so, while also affecting how you then view the world around you.

Disney's *Brother Bear* follows Kenai who is dealing with significant rage and hatred towards bears, blaming them for his brother Sitka's death. He is stuck in his own version of the cave. Everything he believes about bears is based on fear, misunderstanding, and folklore; this perception of hatred represents the shadows on the cave. After his brother Sitka dies during an encounter with a bear, Kenai seeks revenge and kills the bear that was responsible. When Kenai ends up transforming into a bear as punishment by the spirits, due to his killing of not just the bear that killed Sitka, but the mother of a cub named Koda; he is forced to step into an entirely new world. This is like the prisoner leaving the cave and being confronted by the sunlight, at first being confused and disoriented. Kenai is now forced to navigate the wilderness from the perspective of the creature he hates. As Kenai meets and travels with Koda, he begins to see that bears are not monsters like he assumed. Koda acts as a mentor towards Kenai, though he is only a kid, he pushes Kenai to learn about friendship, empathy, and have a self-reflection of how his actions can affect others, not realizing that Koda is the cub of the mother bear he killed. Through this experience, Kenai gains a new understanding of life and how everything is connected. Like the prisoner, Kenai comes to see the world in a much deeper way, allowing this transformation (the sun) to reveal reality from a new perspective. This film directly correlates to Plato's allegory, where Kenai has been 'enlightened' and must explain his new perspective to his other brother Denahi, who has been hunting him under the belief that Kenai—as the bear—killed his human self.

Kenai's new awareness motivates him to act more compassionately towards others, creating new relationships between supposed enemies and fostering understanding. Plato emphasizes that the enlightened individual has a new responsibility to return to the cave to help others perceive the truth they have just discovered; in the movie, Kenai enacts this responsibility by protecting Koda and creating a truce between humans and bears, changing the way they interact. This responsibility is taken on by Kenai towards the end of the movie when he is forced to face the challenges of explaining to his other human brother Denahi that he has been transformed into a bear and that he had chosen to remain as one for the sake of Koda. The moment highlights the difficulty of settling a new understanding with those (his brother) who are still 'in the cave.' Denahi represents familiar beliefs and perceptions, not fully understanding Kenai's transformation or growth. Kenai's transformation demonstrates that enlightenment includes both knowledge and moral growth. Given that at first, when Kenai realizes that he is a bear, he rejects the idea that he could learn anything from this new perspective; he clings to his identity as a human, continuing with the same beliefs and hatred for bears. It depicts how understanding something requires experience on top of thinking/imagination. Kenai's journey embodies Plato's insight that true knowledge extends beyond perspective, needing the actual experience with that truth, as well as the willingness to confront the discomfort yet move beyond it so that it can be shared with others. Like the prisoner adjusting to sunlight, Kenai, slowly but surely, becomes accustomed to his new reality and begins to recognize parts of himself that were overlooked before.

A crucial part of Plato's allegory is the tension of the prisoner who has just been 'enlightened' and those who choose to remain in the cave. As noted, the prisoners would take

hold of anyone who tries to release them and kill them⁴. In *Brother Bear*, Denahi embodies those prisoners. He is stuck in his beliefs that a bear killed Kenai, so he hunts Kenai (in his bear form), with a certain rage and grief to do the same thing Kenai did with Sitka's bear. Though, when they finally come face-to-face, Kenai tries to explain the truth to him, but Denahi refuses to accept it. To him, Kenai is a dangerous bear and not his actual brother. This moment in the movie mirrors Plato's idea that individuals still trapped in the cave will often reject any changes to their worldview. His refusal to accept the truth would require him to change his thoughts on what he believed happened with Kenai's death. The final scene of the movie illustrates Plato's point that enlightenment can create tension and distrust between the enlightened individual and those who have not yet seen it. Kenai must communicate this new perspective and convince his brother to accept that his understanding and way of life has changed. Like the prisoner returning to the cave, Kenai's task is not easy, requiring patience and empathy. In the end, Denahi does come to an understanding and accepts that Kenai will remain a bear, giving him closure and acceptance. The movie does a great job at showing how enlightenment is not about personal gain, but also about the desire to teach others and use the knowledge for good. His decision to remain a bear reinforces that understanding will require making choices that challenge norms, even if it may be difficult.

Disney's *Brother Bear* acts as an animated dramatized version of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, displaying how a movie can explore philosophical themes and portray them properly. Kenai goes from pure ignorance to enlightenment, similar to the prisoner's path, highlighting the struggles, confusion, and clarity described by Plato. The movie shows that leaving behind false beliefs can be hard, but it is necessary for personal growth and for understanding others. By showing

⁴ Plato. Republic. Hackett, 1992. 517a.

enlightenment in a way individuals can better understand, *Brother Bear* helps viewers connect with Plato's ideas.

Bibliography

Plato., G. M. A Grube, and C. D. C. Reeve. 1992. *Republic*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.

Brother Bear. Walt Disney Pictures, 2003.