

Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave” from *The Republic*, Book VII

Plato. The writings of Plato (427—347 B.C.) are our primary source of knowledge about the ideas of his teacher, the Athenian philosopher Socrates (469—399 B.C.). Plato’s thirty dramatic dialogues all feature Socrates as the main character; it is, therefore, difficult to say where Socrates’s philosophy begins and Plato’s begins. For the sake of convenience, then, the ideas conveyed in Plato’s dialogues are usually referred to as Platonic, while Socrates’s method of instruction through dialectical question-and-answer is usually referred to as Socratic.

The Republic. *The Republic* is Plato’s most ambitious dialogue, and one of the fullest expressions of both his political ideals, and his theories of ontology (the nature of existence) and epistemology (the nature of knowledge). The dialogue recounts a discussion among Socrates and some of his students (including Plato’s brother, Glaucon) about the nature of justice. Socrates gets his students to agree that justice is best understood as a social good, and suggests they form a definition of justice by first imagining what kind of social structure would be necessary to produce it. The bulk of the dialogue is an exposition by Socrates of what justice in the state is, making it not only one of the first extended works of political philosophy, but also one of the earliest known works of utopian literature.

During their discussion, Socrates and his students agree that for a state to be just, it must be wisely led. A large portion of the dialogue is taken up with a discussion of how wise leaders are to be created. In the following passage, known as “The Allegory of the Cave” — perhaps the most famous and influential passage in all of Western philosophy — Socrates defines his notion of wisdom as the ability to see through the deceptive appearances of things in the physical world of experience, to the true nature of things in the abstract realm of ideas.

Plato’s Theory of Forms. Underlying Plato’s image of the cave is his “theory of forms.” The theory assumes the existence of a level of reality inhabited by ideal “forms” of all things and concepts. Thus a form exists for all objects (like chairs and ducks), and for all concepts (such as beauty and justice). The forms are eternal and changeless, but inhabit changeable matter, to produce the objects and examples of concepts that we perceive in the physical, temporal world. These are always in a state of “becoming”—that is, on the way to another state. The ever-changing temporal world can therefore only be the source of opinion. In the “Allegory,” Plato likens our opinions about the temporal world to the prisoners’ perception of shadows on the wall of a cave. *True* knowledge requires that one perceive the forms themselves, which are eternal and unchanging. Thus for Plato the realm of ideal forms is “real,” while the constantly changing world of time and matter is illusory and unreal.

Although the forms are invisible to the eye, our souls have participated in the eternal world of forms before being incarnated in a physical body, and retain a memory of them. Although this memory is not readily accessible to the conscious mind, its presence is enough to enable our limited perceptions of the forms. Plato maintains, however, that the philosopher can achieve a state of perceiving the forms directly, through the strenuous exercise of insight and reason. All learning, Plato argues, is nothing more than the recognition of what our soul already knows.

“Next, then,” I said, “take the following parable of education and ignorance as a picture of the condition of our nature. Imagine mankind as dwelling in an underground cave with a long entrance open to the light across the whole width of the cave; in this they have been from childhood, with necks and legs fettered, so they have to stay where they are. They cannot move their heads round because of the fetters, and they can only look forward, but light comes to them from fire burning behind them higher up at a distance. Between the fire and the prisoners is a road above their level, and along it imagine a low wall has been built, as puppet showmen have screens in front of their people over which they work their puppets.”

“I see,” he said.

“See, then, bearers carrying along this wall all sorts of articles which they hold projecting above the wall, statues of men and other living things, made of stone or wood and all kinds of stuff, some of the

bearers speaking and some silent, as you might expect.”

“What a remarkable image,” he said, “and what remarkable prisoners!”

“Just like ourselves,” I said. “For, first of all, tell me this: What do you think such people would have seen of themselves and each other except their shadows, which the fire cast on the opposite wall of the cave?”

“I don’t see how they could see anything else,” said he, “if they were compelled to keep their heads unmoving all their lives!”

“Very well, what of the things being carried along? Would not this be the same?”

“Of course it would.”

“Suppose the prisoners were able to talk together. Don’t you think that when they named the

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shadows which they saw passing they would believe they were naming things?"¹

"Necessarily."

"Then if their prison had an echo from the opposite wall, whenever one of the passing bearers uttered a sound, would they not suppose that the passing shadow must be making the sound? Don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do," he said.

"If so," said I, "such persons would certainly believe that there were no realities except those shadows of handmade things."

"So it must be," said he.

"Now consider," said I, "what their release would be like, and their cure from these fetters and their folly; let us imagine whether it might naturally be something like this. One might be released, and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round, and to walk and look towards the firelight; all this would hurt him, and he would be too much dazzled to see distinctly those things whose shadows he had seen before. What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he saw before was foolery, but now he saw more rightly, being a bit nearer reality and turned towards what

was a little more real? What if he were shown each of the passing things, and compelled by questions to answer what each one was? Don't you think he would be puzzled, and believe what he saw before was more true than what was shown to him?"

"Far more," he said.

"Then suppose he were compelled to look towards the real light, it would hurt his eyes, and he would escape by turning them away to the things which he was able to look at, and these he would believe to be clearer than what was being shown to him."

"Just so," said he.

"Suppose, now," said I, "that someone should drag him thence by force, up the rough ascent, the steep way up, and never stop until he could drag him out into the light of the sun, would he not be distressed and furious at being dragged; and when he

came into the light, the brilliance would fill his eyes and he would not be able to see even one of the things now called real?"

"That he would not," said he, "all of a sudden."

"He would have to get used to it, surely, I think, if he is to see the things above. First he would most easily look at shadows, after that images of mankind and the rest in water, lastly the things themselves. After this he would find it easier to survey by night the heavens themselves and all that is in them, gazing at the light of the stars and moon, rather than by day the sun and the sun's light."

"Of course."

"Last of all, I suppose, the sun; he could look on the sun itself by itself in its own place, and see what it is like, not reflections of it in water or as it appears in some alien setting."

"Necessarily," said he.

"And only after all this he might reason about it, how this is he who provides seasons and years, and is set over all there is in the visible region, and he is in a manner the cause of all things which they say."

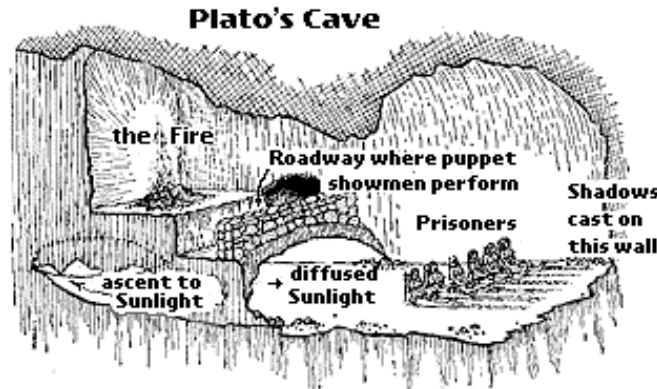
"Yes, it is clear," said he, "that after all that, he would come to this last."

"Very good. Let him be reminded of this first habitation, and what was wisdom in that place, and of his fellow-prisoners there; don't you think he would bless himself for the change, and pity them?"

"Yes, indeed."

"And if there were honours and praises among them and prizes for the one who saw the passing things most sharply and remembered best which of them used to come before and which after and which together, and from these was best able to prophesy accordingly what was going to come—do you believe he would set his desire on that, and envy those who were honoured men or potentates among them? Would he not feel as Homer says,² and heartily desire rather to be serf of some landless man on earth and to endure anything in the world, rather than to opine as they did and to live in that way?"

"Yes indeed," said he, "he would rather accept anything than live like that."



¹ Which they had never seen. They would say "tree" when it was only the shadow of the model of a tree.

² *Odyssey* XI 439.

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"Then again," I said, "just consider; if such a one should go down again and sit on his old seat, would he not get his eyes full of darkness coming in suddenly out of the sun?"

"Very much so," said he.

"And if he should have to compete with those who had been always prisoners, by laying down the law about those shadows while he was blinking before his eyes were settled down—and it would take a good long time to get used to things—wouldn't they all laugh at him and say he had spoiled his eyesight by going up there, and it was not worthwhile so much as to try to go up? And would they not kill anyone who tried to release them and take them up, if they could somehow lay hands on him and kill him?"

"That they would!" said he.

"Then we must apply this image, my dear Glaucon," said I, "to all we have been saying. The world of our sight is like the habitation in prison, the fire-light there to the sunlight here, the ascent and the view of the upper world is the rising of the soul into the world of mind; put it so and you will not be far from my own surmise, since that is what you want to hear; but God knows if it is really true. At least, what appears to me is, that in the world of the known, last of all, is the idea of the good, and with what toil to be seen! And seen, this must be inferred to be the cause of all right and beautiful things for all, which gives birth to light and the king of light in the world of sight, and, in the world of mind, herself the queen produces truth and reason; and she must be seen by one who is to act with reason publicly or privately."

"I believe as you do," he said, "in so far as I am able."

"Then believe also, as I do," said I, "and do not be surprised, that those who come thither are not willing to have part in the affairs of men, but their souls ever strive to remain above; for that surely may be expected if our parable fits the case."

"Quite so," he said.

"Well then," said I, "do you think it surprising if one leaving divine contemplations and passing to the evils of men is awkward and appears to be a great fool, while he is still blinking—not yet accustomed to the darkness around him, but compelled to struggle in law courts and elsewhere about shadows of justice, or the images which make the shadows, and to quarrel about notions of justice in those who have never seen justice itself?"

"Not surprising at all," said he.

"But any man of sense," I said, "would remember that the eyes are doubly confused from two different causes, both in passing from light to darkness

and from darkness to light; and believing that the same things happen with regard to the soul also, whenever he sees a soul confused and unable to discern anything he would not just laugh carelessly; he would examine whether it had come out of a more brilliant life, and if it were darkened by the strangeness; or whether it had come out of greater ignorance into a more brilliant light, and if it were dazzled with the brighter illumination. Then only would he congratulate the one soul upon its happy experience and way of life, and pity the other; but if he must laugh, his laugh would be a less downright laugh than his laughter at the soul which came out of the light above."

"That is fairly put," said he.

"Then if this be true," I said, "our belief about these matters must be this, that the nature of education is not really such as some of its professors say it is; as you know, they say that if there is not understanding in the soul, but they put it in, as if they were putting sight into the blind."

"They do say so," said he.

"But our reasoning indicates," I said, "that this power is already in the soul of each, and is the instrument by which each learns; thus if the eye could not see without being turned with the whole body from the dark toward the light, so this instrument must be turned round with the whole soul away from the world of becoming until it is able to endure the sight of being and the most brilliant light of being: and this we say is good, don't we?"

"Yes."

"Then this instrument," said I, "must have its own art, for the circumturning or conversion, to show how the turn can be most easily and successfully made; not an art of putting sight into an eye, which we say has it already, but since the instrument has not been turned aright and does not look where it ought to look—that's what must be managed."

"So it seems," he said.

"Now most of the virtues which are said to belong to the soul are really something near to those of the body; for in fact they are not already there, but they are put later into it by habits and practices; but the virtue of understanding everything really belongs to something certainly more divine, as it seems, for it never loses its power, but becomes useful and helpful or, again, useless and harmful, but the direction in which it is turned. Have you not noticed men who are called worthless but clever, and how keen and sharp is the sight of their petty soul; and how it sees through the things towards which it is turned? Its sight is clear enough, but it is compelled to be the

servant of vice, so the clearer it sees the more evil it does."

"Certainly," said he.

"Yet if this part of such a nature," said I, "had been hammered at from childhood, and all those leaden weights of the world of becoming³ knocked off—the weights, I mean, which grow into his soul from gorging and gluttony and such pleasures, and twist the soul's eye downwards—if, I say, it had shaken these off and been turned round towards what is real and true, that same instrument of those same men would have seen those higher things most clearly, just as now it sees those towards which it is turned."

"Quite likely," said he.

"Very well," said I, "isn't it equally likely, indeed, necessary, after what has been said, that men who are uneducated and without experience of truth could never properly supervise a city, nor can those who are allowed to spend all their lives in education right to the end? The first have no single object in life, which they must always aim at in doing everything they do, public or private; the second will never do anything if they can help it, believing they have already found mansions abroad in the Islands of the Blest."⁴

"True," said he.

"Then it is the task of us founders," I said, "to compel the best natures to attain that learning which we said was the greatest, both to see the good, and to ascend that ascent; and when they have ascended and properly seen, we must never allow them what is allowed now."

"What is that?"

"To stay there," I said, "and not be willing to descend again to those prisoners, and to share their troubles and their honours, whether they are worth having or not."

"What!" he said, "are we to wrong them and make them live badly, when they might live better?"

"You have forgotten again, my friend," said I, "that the law is not concerned how any one class in a city is to prosper above the rest; it tries to contrive prosperity in the city as a whole, fitting the citizens into a pattern by persuasion and compulsion, making them give of their help to one another wherever each class is able to help the community. The law itself creates men like this in the city, not in order to allow each one to turn by any way he likes, but in order to

use them itself to the full for binding the city together."

"True," said he, "I did forget."

"Notice then, Glaucon," I said, "we shall not wrong the philosophers who grow up among us, but we shall treat them fairly when we compel them to add to their duties the care and guardianship of the other people. We shall tell them that those who grow up philosophers in other cities have reason in taking no part in public labours there; for they grow up there of themselves, though none of the city governments wants them: a wild growth has its rights, it owes nurture to no one, and need not trouble to pay anyone for its food. But you we have engendered, like king bees⁵ in hives, as leaders and kings over yourselves and the rest of the city; you have been better and more perfectly educated than the others, and are better able to share in both ways of life. Down you must go then, in turn, to the habitation of the others, and accustom yourselves to their darkness; for when you have grown accustomed you will see a thousand times better than those who live there, and you will know what the images are and what they are images of, because you have seen the realities behind just and beautiful and good things. And so our city will be managed wide awake for us and for you, not in a dream, as most are now, by people fighting together for shadows, and quarreling to be rulers, as if that were a great good. But the truth is more or less that the city where those who rule are least eager to be rulers is of necessity best managed and has least faction in it, while the city which gets rulers who want it most is worst managed."

"Certainly," said he.

"Then will our fosterlings disobey us when they hear this? Will they refuse to help, each group in its turn, in the labours of the city, and want to spend most of their time dwelling in the pure air?"

"Impossible," said he, "for we shall only be laying just commands on just men. No, undoubtedly each man of them will go to the ruler's place as to a grim necessity, exactly the opposite of those who now rule in cities."

"For the truth is, my friend," I said, "that you will only have a well-managed city if you can find for your future rulers a way of life better than ruling; since only in that city will those who rule be truly rich, not rich in gold, but in that which is necessary for a happy man, the riches of a good and wise life."

³ The world of physical, changeable existence.

⁴ That is, they have already reached paradise.

⁵ Both the Greeks and the Romans spoke always of "king," not "queen," of a hive.

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