

The Allegory of the Cave

Plato

His life: 428–347 BCE

Published in *The Republic*

Socrates: Next, I said, compare the effect of education and the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this: Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there's a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets.

Glaucon: I'm imagining it.

Socrates: Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it — statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you'd expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent.

Glaucon: It's a strange image you're describing, and strange prisoners.

Socrates: They're like us. Do you suppose, first of all, that these prisoners see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them?

Glaucon: How could they, if they have to keep their heads motionless throughout life?

Socrates: What about the things being carried along the wall? Isn't the same true of them?

Glaucon: Of course.

Socrates: And if they could talk to one another, don't you think they'd suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them?

Glaucon: They'd have to.

Socrates: And what if their prison also had an echo from the wall facing them? Don't you think they'd believe that the shadows passing in front of them were talking whenever one of the carriers passing along the wall was doing so?

Glaucon: I certainly do.

Socrates: Then the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts.

Glaucon: They must surely believe that.

Socrates: Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like.

When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before. What do you think he'd say, if we told him that what he'd seen before was inconsequential, but that now — because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned toward things that are more — he sees more correctly? Or, to put it another way, if we pointed to each of the things passing by, asked him what each of them is, and compelled him to answer, don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown?

Glaucon: Much truer.

Socrates: And if someone compelled him to look at the light itself, wouldn't his eyes hurt, and wouldn't he turn around and flee towards the things he's able to see, believing that they're really clearer than the ones he's being shown?

Glaucon: He would.

Socrates: And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn't let him go until he dragged him into the sunlight, wouldn't he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? And when he came into the light, with the sun filling his eyes, wouldn't he be unable to see a single one of the things now said to be true?

Glaucon: He would be unable to see them, at least at first.

Socrates: I suppose, then, that he'd need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above. At first, he'd see shadows most easily, then images of men and other things in

water, then the things themselves. Of these, he'd be able to study the things in the sky and the sky itself more easily at night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than during the day, looking at the sun and the light of the sun.

Glaucon: Of course.

Socrates: Finally, I suppose, he'd be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place, and be able to study it.

Glaucon: Necessarily so.

Socrates: And at this point he would infer and conclude that the sun provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see.

Glaucon: It's clear that would be his next step.

Socrates: What about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, his fellow prisoners, and what passed for wisdom there? Don't you think that he'd count himself happy for the change and pity the others?

Glaucon: Certainly.

Socrates: And if there had been any honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by and who best remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously, and who could thus best divine the future, do you think that our man would desire these rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power? Instead,

wouldn't he feel, with Homer, that he'd much prefer to "work the earth as a serf to another, one without possessions," and go through any sufferings, rather than share their opinions and live as they do?

Glaucon: I suppose he would rather suffer anything than live like that.

Socrates: Consider this too. If this man went down into the cave again and sat down in his same seat, wouldn't his eyes — coming suddenly out of the sun like that — be filled with darkness?

Glaucon: They certainly would.

Socrates: And before his eyes had recovered — and the adjustment would not be quick — while his vision was still dim, if he had to compete again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, wouldn't he invite ridicule? Wouldn't it be said of him that he'd returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and that it isn't worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And, as for anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?

Glaucon: They certainly would.

Socrates: This whole image, Glaucon, must be fitted together with what we said before. The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it's true or not,

only the god knows. But this is how I see it: In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.

Glaucon: I have the same thoughts, at least as far as I'm able.

Socrates: Come, then, share with me this thought also: It isn't surprising that the ones who get to this point are unwilling to occupy themselves with human affairs and that their souls are always pressing upwards, eager to spend their time above, for, after all, this is surely what we'd expect, if indeed things fit the image I described before.

Glaucon: It is.

Socrates: What about what happens when someone turns from divine study to the evils of human life? Do you think it surprising, since his sight is still dim, and he hasn't yet become accustomed to the darkness around him, that he behaves awkwardly and appears completely ridiculous if he's compelled, either in the courts or elsewhere, to contend about the shadows of justice or the statues of which they are the shadows and to dispute about the way these things are understood by people who have never seen justice itself?

Glaucon: That's not surprising at all.

Socrates: No, it isn't. But anyone with any understanding would remember that the eyes may be confused in two ways

and from two causes, namely, when they've come from the light into the darkness *and* when they've come from the darkness into the light. Realizing that the same applies to the soul, when someone sees a soul disturbed and unable to see something, he won't laugh mindlessly, but he'll take into consideration whether it has come from a brighter life and is dimmed through not yet having become accustomed to the dark or whether it has come from greater ignorance into greater light and is dazzled by the increased brilliance. Then he'll declare the first soul happy in its experience in life, and he'll pity the latter — but even if he chose to make fun of it, at least he'd be less ridiculous than if he laughed at a soul that has come from the light above.

Glaucon: What you say is very reasonable.

Socrates: If that's true, then here's what we must think about these matters: Education isn't what some people declare to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes.

Glaucon: They do say that.

Socrates: But our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to learn is present in everyone's soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good. It isn't that right?

Glaucon: Yes.

Socrates: Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.

Glaucon: So it seems.

Plato: Biography

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Plato, born into an aristocratic, probably Athenian, family received an education according to the best precepts available. He immortalized his teacher, Socrates, in his works. Plato mostly wrote philosophical essays in which Socrates speaks as a character dialoguing with one or more students or listeners.

Both Socrates and Plato lived in turbulent times. In 404 B.C.E. Sparta defeated Athens, and tyrants took over the government, endangering political life. Plato felt, however, that he could positively change Athenian politics—until governmental forces unjustly tried Socrates for corrupting youth and sentenced him to death in 399 B.C.E. This situation caused Plato to withdraw from public life and to devote himself to writing and to the academy he founded in an olive grove in Athens. This academy endured for almost a thousand years, showing how seriously people valued his ideas.

Plato held the world of sense perception as inferior to the world of ideal entities that exist only in a pure spiritual realm. Plato argued that before birth, everyone perceived these ideals, or forms, and dimly remember them now, on earth. The memory, even in its dimness, enables people to understand what the senses perceive, despite their unreliability and

imperfection.

Philosophers have valued this view on reality because it gives a philosophical basis to antimaterialistic thought. It values the spirit first and frees people from sensory perceptions' tyranny and sensory reward. Regarding love, Plato held that Eros leads individuals to revere the body and its pleasures, but he insists that the body is a metaphor for spiritual delights. Plato maintains that the body is only a starting point which eventually can lead to both spiritual fulfillment and true beauty's appreciation.

On one hand, "The Allegory of the Cave" discusses politics: *The Republic* is a treatise on justice and the ideal government. On the other hand, it exemplifies the notion that if we rely on our perceptions to know the truth about the world, then we will know little about it. To lie ethically, we must know what is true, and, therefore, important beyond sensory perception.

For centuries, people have looked to this allegory to counter the pleasures of sensual life. Because most religions aim for spiritual enlightenment and praise the soul's qualities which lie beyond perception, they have developed thought systems that resemble Plato's.

Interpretation Advice

Adapted from Lee A. Jacobus

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- On one level the story is a metaphorical representation of Plato's **metaphysical** picture (his view of the ultimate nature of reality) and his **epistemological**

perspective (his account of knowledge). According to Plato, reality divides into the Realm of Being and the Realm of Becoming. The Realm of Being contains the

Forms, the eternal, unchanging archetypes of things, such as perfect Justice, perfect Beauty, perfect Goodness, etc. The Realm of Becoming contains the always changing objects we experience everyday which merely copy imperfectly the Forms. The world of the Forms provides absolute reality and knowledge (the world of light above the cave), while the everyday world of our experience provides only appearance and opinion (the world of darkness in the cave). The story shows the progress from object appreciation in our daily experience to grasping the Forms.

- On another level the allegory serves as a tribute to **Socrates** (470-399 BCE), Plato's teacher. Socrates sought to loosen the chains of thought binding his fellow citizens, but he was put to death for his threatening habit of persistent questioning. Socrates figures as the central character in most of Plato's dialogues.
- On another level one can read the story for what it offers about critical thinking and **learning to think for oneself**. What does it offer about finding enlightenment and learning to think for oneself? How does it relate to everyone's life?

Use this diagram to help you envision the cave:

