

### **Plato's "Allegory": A Description and Analysis<sup>i</sup>**

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," begins with an image outlined by Socrates to Plato's brother Glaucon, of people, who since childhood, but not from birth, are in a cave, which surrounds and imprisons them. That is, chains bound these people to the walls of their underground abode, and they lack the power to free themselves or even move their heads about the cave. Moreover, there is a fire above and behind them, dimly lighting this den, and the things that pass by this fire, project images of themselves onto the walls of the cave, leaving these captives to only see the shadows of those things themselves. In other words, our prisoners of the cave, merely see the reflections, or copies of the things that pass this ember, blazing in their subterranean dwelling, not the real sight of those things themselves.

Next, Socrates continues to describe to Glaucon a scenario regarding these prisoners; namely, if their chains disappeared, and with the loosening of these constraints, one of them wanders the cave and notices that there is an ascent. This ascent, Socrates claims, is beyond the fire, and the rays of the sun serve as that which guides our freed prisoner, to emerge from this earthly pit, to behold actual reality, or that world which the sun brightens, allowing this captive to see the world for what it is; not merely its shadow. Lastly, we should note that Socrates does utter to Glaucon, that this realm outside of the cave, would take an ample amount of time to adjust to, and as such it would not be far from outlandish to claim that our freed prisoner would start to understand such a world in increments, or by degrees.

Now, after glimpsing this realm of truth, Socrates continues to tell Glaucon, that this escapee, upon returning to the underground cave would attempt to enlighten the others on the world beyond just the shadows and images of things. However, these other captives would ridicule our escapee, and assert that he/she must be lying or mistaken about what he/she claimed to behold. As a punishment for this supposed error, on the part of our escapee, Socrates claims, that he/she would be in danger, facing the threat of death by the others, if he/she continues to stick to his/her story that there is a world lush in detail, more faithful to reality, than only that of the cave.

Despite this threat of harm to our escaped cave dweller, Socrates continues to state to Glaucon that that dweller, who witnessed the brightness of the world yonder above, must indeed share his/her vision with those who remained underground. That is because, albeit not fully enlightened by the rays of the sun, or the eternal realm transcending our reality, this escapee at least incites, or awakens a new reality to those who never even thought of its possibility. In other words, unlike those who proclaim that knowledge must be first placeable in the soul by the proper instructor, Socrates adheres to the view that the capacity for knowledge must precede the actual awakening of such knowledge, without excluding any.

One reason as to why Socrates assumes the position that the capacity for knowledge must precede knowledge itself is that those who assert that the first condition for the soul's wakefulness is a masterful teacher, are akin to those who claim that things are seeable merely because they are seeable. Although appearing unproblematic, Socrates would assert that we could equally claim that the power for knowledge is innate to us, allowing for the extraction of knowledge from the depths of the mind to rise to the forefront of consciousness; just as we could cogently argue with the same vigor, that that which is seeable requires some seer's eye, initially.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is for good reason that Socrates continues to reason that it is only those more adept in the ways of the eternally abiding reality, or the world transcending the cave,

who could guide others along the way outside of the cave, to experience the beauty of this transcendent realm themselves.

That is, to Socrates, those who possess more of an acquaintance with the world beyond merely the dark cave, are best fit to guide others, and share with them the knowledge of the life-giving rays of the true sun, in the world above. For, aside from its logical justifiability, and common-sensical appeal, Socrates informs Glaucon that despite their craving to dwell in the light of the sun all by themselves, it is this immense passion for the goodness of beauty, that will drive them to become whom they must become; the philosopher-king and guardians, or leaders of the *Republic's* ideal state. Hence, Socrates and Glaucon wholeheartedly agree that an education suitable for those who escape the cave, and intake the glory of the epitome of all reality, must commence. That is because without proper education, and a process of intellectual refinement, those who are knowledgeable of the world external to our dimmed cave below, may use this knowledge dangerously.

Next, Plato shifts his dialogue, to enter into a deliberation concerning the education required by the fabled philosopher-king and the leaders of the perfect state, which should center around gymnastics, or the disciplines associated with harnessing the technical proficiency, or mastery of the body. While, at the same time, recommending music, or the study of the muses, to restrain the mind from excess, and in the process tame the mind to be in harmony with the body. Lastly, this is to achieve excellence of self, for ultimately the ultimate battle; that of transcending our earthly existence to someday reach the splendor of absolute reality, accessible to us by inner reflection into the soul via the contemplating mind, is Plato's chief concern. Hence, because, in the end, it is the mind which peers into the soul, to achieve awareness of its progress from becoming to being, or from spatial and temporal life, to a transcendent, eternal reality, Plato's Socrates continues to detail to Glaucon, studies paramount in the development of the mind.

First, the character of Socrates believes that the preliminary to the initial study to refine the minds of sovereigns and lesser rulers, which ought to bring forth the idea of Pythagoras's influence on Ancient Greek thought, is the analysis of number. By the examination of numbers, Socrates is aiming to explain the thought processes used to resolve what appears to be a contradiction; specifically, the problem of unity and plurality. In other words, Socrates believes that through the study of numbers, we can help resolve the dichotomy between how we can think of something as both a singularity and a multitude of parts, at the same time.

For example, let us, like Socrates, entertain the number "1." As understood by Socrates, the number "1" can explain the unitedness of the one reality we partake in, and the many manifestations of it, that we are examples of. That is, Socrates believes that we can coherently account for the multitude of entities we find around us, in the everyday world, with the abstract and universally surrounding cosmos, through an investigation of the number "1."

Now, if we take the number "1," we can assert that it is singular with itself, for as an individual number, it must be selfsame, such as to say " $1=1$ ." Likewise, we can look at "1" as a collection, totality, or sum of increments leading to the single concept of "1," through the ideas of its subdivisions like " $.25+.25+.25+.25=1$ ." However, how are we to claim that four quarters of "1" can be the same as "1" itself? Simply stated, we may do so by drawing light to

the equivalency between both four quarters of “1,” in unison, and “1” itself. In other words, on the one hand, although “.25” is identical to itself and not to “1,” it is nevertheless that in unity, four “.25’s” equal “1.” On the other hand, this “1,” would then be the same as itself; “1.”

Moreover, we may take an alternate route, and assert that “ $((.25*4):1)$ ” which would still leave us with the answer of “1;” for, “1,” and “ $(.25*4)$ ” are in equal ratio, as “1.” Hence, whether we take “ $1=1$ ,” or “ $.25+.25+.25+.25=1$ ,” or “ $((.25*4):1)$ ,” we always wind up with the same, single “1,” which Plato’s Socrates believes is an example, helping to show that there is a simultaneous unitedness between the many instances of what we believe are individual parcels, becoming, as well as a collective formal being, amalgamated from all these fragments, conceived in immutable logical abstraction.

Afterward, Socrates then invites Glaucon to consider the first study needed by legislators and the enlightened sovereign, which is arithmetic, or the application of numbers, through adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing them in abstract relation. Now, Socrates points out to Glaucon that arithmetic is not the apex of all learning, for it is not free of certain logical conundrums. These contradictions rest in the analysis of the operations of numbers which could produce the same numeric answer, appearing to us both big and small, at the same instant.

In other words, if we take for example “ $2+1=3$ ” and “ $17-14=3$ ,” we find that the same number “3” is both the outcome of addition and the most significant number in the set “{1,2,3}” while also the smallest resulting number from the set “{3,14,17}.” As such, we may claim that because this same “3” is the largest and smallest consequent of both our adding “ $1+2$ ,” as well as subtracting “ $17-14$ ,” there is an aporia, or confusion when faced with the question of whether this very “3” is the highest or most minuscule conclusion of our manipulation of numbers, as just described. Hence, Socrates informs Glaucon that arithmetic is the first step in gaining knowledge of the absolute reality outside our terrestrial dwelling; however, it is not at the pinnacle of an education suitable for leaders and the philosopher-king, in the perfect state, for it is, to a degree, an unstable foundation for attaining the highest knowledge.

Then, Socrates, continues to discuss the importance of the second study, in his and Glaucon’s quest for the right education for obtaining knowledge of absolute reality, proper to rulers and the philosopher-king, and that discipline is geometry. First, Plato’s Socrates describes geometry as the analysis of sensible objects, via the application of universal formulae, to translate questions derived from these sensible objects, into math’s steady and reliable, albeit abstract terminology.<sup>33</sup> However, we should recall that Socrates lists geometry as the second study out of four needed to grasp absolute reality, and thus, it must possess flaws. Unsurprisingly, Socrates does indeed talk to Glaucon of the flaws of geometry, and like arithmetic, these issues stem from logical contradictions.

That is, one shortcoming of geometry is that it analyzes sensible objects, subject to alteration, depending on their place and moment in time, which is odd because it is antithetic to the all-applicable, and universal formulae geometers use to explicate such sensible things. Easily surmised, we may claim that Socrates’s issue with geometry is how could it be that we could examine sensible objects with conceptual terms, when the former could change, whereas the

latter are eternally accessible to all, regardless of space or time. Finally, let us next enter the fourth study Socrates details to Glaucon, as well as that knowledge which surpasses these quadruple canons of learning, i.e., dialectic.

However, before we enter the fourth study of astronomy and even that which surpasses it in surety, dialectic, attentive readers may wonder what is the third study between that of geometry and astronomy? Well, Socrates does address this with Glaucon, and he seems to assert that standard plane geometry, was the variety of the geometric which he had in mind when proclaiming and explicating the second study necessary for leaders and the illumined monarch. That is, the third study which Socrates believes assists the souls of the guardians and the philosopher-king, to rise toward absolute reality is that geometry which investigates how objects are in real life, beyond the mere two-dimensional treatment of such things via plane geometric equations.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the studies of such features of objects mathematized, like depth, volume, vertices, contours, and edges all compose the higher, albeit somewhat controversial mode of geometry, Socrates believes, would fittingly constitute the third canon needed by guardians and the philosopher-king of the perfect state.

Although Socrates believes that this multidimensional geometry is the third study, paramount in the development of the mind for the benefit of the soul, he seems to believe that the lack of expertise and political support for such mathematics, renders such an esoteric field, to be, at the moment, lackluster in advancement.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, we may now entertain Socrates's and Glaucon's agreed account of the last study of astronomy and that which exceeds even its beauty, dialectical analysis.

Now, preceding Socrates's and Glaucon's defining and examining of dialectic, there is a final study that both entertain, to complete the quadruple disciplines demanded of the leaders of the ideal state, including the chief amongst these guardians, the philosopher-king. This study is the canon of astronomy, which Socrates asserts to Glaucon, serves to encourage the practice of applying mathematics to the celestial bodies above, as well as to train the student of this study to look upward to the heavens.

Next, insofar as the encouragement to apply mathematics to the celestial realm goes, Socrates tells Glaucon that this, in a sense, is the extension of applying mathematical formulae to moving bodies.<sup>43</sup> Although we may claim that this is reflective of geometric analysis, Socrates would assert that it is; however, he would also claim that there is one extra feature of astronomy that distinguishes it from only geometry; namely, the regularity, or harmony displayed by the heavenly bodies themselves. In other words, Socrates believes that astronomy, albeit dealing with the application of stable universal equations to everchanging matter still captures the reliability of the celestial sphere, of which we people possess no power to alter. Hence, we may claim that astronomy ultimately aims to study such heavenly stability, and since we possess no control over the heavens, it is we who must change our mistaken notions and, at times, our outdated calculations, to comprehend their movements, never the heavenly bodies themselves.

Moreover, Socrates's utterance that the study of astronomy assists in turning the soul upward, to study the ascent out of this world of sense to the next world of intellect, we can interpret as meaning that because it is only the mind which can apprehend matters regarding the permanency of the cosmic, it is the highest of studies. That is because Socrates asserts that it

is with this knowledge that one can best contemplate the source of all life, the creator of all perfections, and the structure of creation's harmony.

One reason why Socrates believes that astronomy is fittest for turning the mind to the light of the full day of being, which is the final task of the philosopher-king and the guardians of the ideal state to sentry and protect, is that such analysis allows us to entertain creation most purely. That is, creation's structure, as displayed through the regularity and stability of celestial motion, such that planets return to their original positions once during each of their annual cycles, while revolving, or splitting into periods of light and darkness, each during a single day, provides evidence to believe that a providence governs the universe.

That is because Socrates informs Glaucon that these planetary motions are the best examples of creation at its grandest scale. For, the continuousness of planetary motion throughout the ages implies an order higher than ours, or a harmony arranged by the most benevolent of creators, who produced such an everlasting system, that by its power we may place our faith in its orchestrated continuity. Finally, following this examination of astronomy, Socrates then informs Glaucon that these studies serve as the most optimal prelude to obtaining the highest powers of reason, or dialectic.

Now, as understood by Socrates and Glaucon, dialectic is that which captures the very nature, or essence of a thing under question. That is, Socrates and Glaucon believe that dialectical reasoning is akin to those who attain ultimate reality, and not just the witnessing of the light of being, which would be merely the result of just mastering the quadruple canons of study. Neither is it like the absence of light altogether, as those stuck in the mere perceptions of the dark cave. Instead, dialectic, by being able to analyze the root of all things, is the very inscription of creation itself, and it is this mode of ideation alone which could decipher the workings of the cosmos.

That is because dialectical reasoning enables us to merge two opposing notions without contradiction. For example, if we analyze the phrases "perfectly imperfect," and "imperfectly perfect," we will find that the latter involves a contradiction, negating the possibility of something being "imperfectly perfect." On the other hand, we find that the former, "perfectly imperfect," although possible, and thus withstanding full-on critique, would only be identical to itself, and thus not a true synthesis of opposing operations, capturing an essential oneness as two compatible and thus equivalent, or at least alike statements.

However, we may still claim that since neither "perfectly imperfect," nor "imperfectly perfect" is trouble-free, and do indeed stand in a frictional relation, when made equal, they like the mathematical truth that two negative numbers, when multiplied, become a positive number, will share a commonality. That commonality rests in the idea that both statements are alike in their estrangement and opposition from one another, and to one another. Accordingly, in theory, we may claim that the statements "imperfectly perfect" and "perfectly imperfect" imply the possibility of unveiling or discovering a source that we could attribute as that which could posit such a mystery, and the ultimate reservoir of goodness. For, that which could conceive, or pose such a paradox, or cosmic riddle, enabled the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, which is better than never possessing the chance to attain certainty. Lastly, since what is best is what is good, and since what is worst is what is evil,

what is better must participate in the good, and thus the engenderer of a chief mortal good, knowledge, must itself be that which is best, omniscient, optimal, supreme, or the good itself.

Consequently, this dialectical chain of reasoning leads us to the very reason why Socrates and Glaucon praise this form of knowing; for, it, as shown above, leads us to the core of anything under examination, albeit without the ability to tests such analysis with our so-called empirical sciences. That is, how can we claim to know anything scientifically unless we establish the first principles of what we are investigating, which only the dialectic achieves since it is independent of needing perceptions, impressions, facts, or evidence from the senses, for us to establish its reality. Hence, to Socrates and Glaucon the dialectic is pure reason itself, and thus an extraordinary power reserved for the philosopher-king, to know and execute with virtuosic precision, with, and in, the spirit of the good itself.

In other words, the philosopher-king, Socrates and Glaucon define as one who must take the reins of power, not out of the love of power, instead quite the opposite; for the common good of the ideal state, of which this person possesses vast knowledge of in the crystallization of his/her wisdom of years. That is, the chief among the guardians of Plato's *Republic* is the philosophical potentate, who would instead not hold power, but knows that because of his/her age and the wisdom he/she accumulated over the years, is best for the task.

As such, it is this leader who is the embodiment of the good of the state, just as the good of being harbors all instances of becoming. In other words, it is the philosopher-king whom Socrates believes would be the most suitable match for the ideal state, as he/she who ultimately facilitates the continuity of all. For, just as the beingness of the world above the becomingness of the cave is requisite for the continuity of the entirety of reality, the philosopher-king takes upon the burden of the state hesitantly, however, most aptly. Thus, we may claim that Plato's philosopher-king embodies both the authentic humility of the most admirable of genuine philosophers, as well as the most tactful benevolence of proper leaders. Lastly, this derives from the fact that Socrates and Glaucon both seem to suggest that the pristine state is that state, housing leaders who are physically meticulous, intellectually sharp, reluctant of their stations, mature in years, as well as upright, or just.

However, Socrates and Glaucon close Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" by discussing whether all of this is even possible.<sup>6</sup> That is, could anyone ever honestly say that they emerged from the cave, a philosopher-king, ready to live in concert with all who are their equals, in readiness to participate for all time in the goodness of the light of the world above, which their righteousness helped them to achieve? Quickly stated, the answer is "yes," and it is via the spread of education, and the inciting of the want for knowledge, as well as concern for the well-being of the body, which allows for a life of justice to unfurl. That is, when all develop their capacity for the desire of knowledge, for want of all to be in complete harmony, can the perfect state as that place where ethicality is paramount, becomes real. Finally, to achieve this end Socrates and Glaucon agree upon rigid rules regarding the constitutional aspects of the perfect state as detailing specific times when novices are to go about their education, and even when they should surpass being initiates, all for the awe-inspiring affirmation of truth rather than never-ending falsehood.

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<sup>1</sup> Unveiling Ultimate Reality in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* and the *Bhagavad Gita* By Rocco A. Astore