

PLATO

THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE



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PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

SOCRATES: So I said: Let's compare our natural condition – as regards education or the lack of it – to a state of affairs like the following.

PART ONE

SETTING THE SCENE

THE CAVE AND THE FIRE

The cave and the people imprisoned there.

SOCRATES: Imagine some people are living underground in a cave. The cave stretches a long way up towards the entrance and the sunlight. Those people have been in that place since childhood, shackled by the legs and neck. They're stuck in the same position with only one thing to look at: whatever they see directly in front of them. Because they're chained, they can't turn their heads around.

There is a fire behind the chained prisoners.

They get some light from a fire that is above and behind them at a certain distance. The fire casts its glow towards them [and towards the wall in front of them].

There is an elevated pathway behind the chained prisoners.

Behind the prisoners, between them and the fire, there's an elevated walkway. A low wall has been built along the length of the walkway, like the low curtain that puppeteers set up so that they can show their puppets over the curtain.

People walk along the pathway, holding things up higher than the wall.

Now imagine that behind this low wall there are people carrying things along, holding them above their heads, higher than the low wall – all sorts of things: statues, things carved out of stone or wood, and many other things. As you might expect, some of the people carrying these things are chatting with one other [as they walk along], while others are silent.

GLAUCON: It's a strange picture you're presenting here, and those are strange prisoners.

SOCRATES: They are very much like us, I responded.

What the prisoners see and hear

SOCRATES: From the beginning, the prisoners have never been able to see anything except the shadows of themselves and the other things that are projected on the wall in front of them by the glow of the fire.

GLAUCON: Yes, that would be the case, since they've been forced to keep their heads immobile for their entire lives.

SOCRATES: They would never see the things that are being carried along [behind them]. They'd see nothing but the shadows.

GLAUCON: Yes, exactly.

SOCRATES: If they could talk about the shadows and discuss them, they'd regard the shadows on the wall as *real things*, don't you think?

GLAUCON: Of course.

SOCRATES: And imagine that the cave had an echo reverberating off the wall in front of them. Whenever the people walking along behind the prisoners said something, the prisoners would think it was the *shadow* passing in front of them that was speaking.

GLAUCON: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: In short, the chained prisoners would think that the only shadows cast by the things behind them are *real and true* – the shadows and nothing else.

GLAUCON: That would certainly be the case.

PART TWO

LIBERATION COMES IN THREE STAGES

FREEDOM, STAGE ONE

A failed attempt within the cave

What if they got free?

SOCRATES: Now imagine what would happen if the prisoners were set free from their chains and cured of their lack of insight. From what follows, try to figure out *what kind* of lack of insight they must have suffered from.

A prisoner walks back to the fire and is blinded.

SOCRATES: Say one of them is unchained, forced to stand up suddenly, turn around and walk towards the fire, and look up at its bright light. The prisoner could do that only with great pain. And given the brightness of the fire, he wouldn't be able even to *look* at the things that are being carried along and are the source of the shadows that he saw earlier.

Afterwards, the freed prisoner is questioned about what he or she saw.

SOCRATES: If that were to happen, you can imagine what the prisoner would say if someone told him that the things he saw *before* were hardly real, whereas *now* he is much closer to reality. Now he is seeing more correctly precisely because he has been turned toward a higher reality. Imagine someone pointing to one of the things being carried along [the pathway], asking the prisoner "What is that?" and forcing him to answer. The prisoner would probably be completely confused and would think the shadows he saw earlier were much clearer than what's being pointed out now.

GLAUCON: Yes, of course.

The prisoner looks at the fire itself.

SOCRATES: And if someone forced him to look into the glare of the fire, it would certainly hurt his eyes. He'd turn away [from the blinding fire] and run back to the shadows that he was able to see before. He'd decide that *they* were actually clearer than what's being shown to him now.

GLAUCON: Precisely.

FREEDOM, STAGE TWO

The journey upward, and the sight of real things

Out of the cave into daylight

SOCRATES: And imagine that someone violently pulls the prisoner away and drags him up the cave's rough and steep ascent and doesn't let go of the prisoner until he has dragged him out into the sunlight.

Pain, rage, blindness

SOCRATES: The prisoner who is being dragged up there will feel both pain and rage during the ascent. And when he gets out into the sunlight, his eyes will be overwhelmed by the glare and he won't be able to see any of the *real* things that are now visible. [See endnote 1]

GLAUCON: Yes, at least not right away.

Getting used to the light

SOCRATES: Obviously it will take some time for his eyes to get accustomed to the light before he can begin to take in things outside the cave, bathed as they are in the light of the sun.

At first the freed prisoner is able to look at only shadows and reflections.

SOCRATES: In the process of getting accustomed to the light, he will be able to look most easily first at (1) only shadows, and after that (2) the reflections of people and other things in pools of water.

Finally looking at the things themselves.

SOCRATES: Later, he'll be able to look at (3) the things themselves [instead of their dim reflections]. It will be easier to start at night and contemplate the things in the heavens: the light of the stars and moon and the heavenly dome itself. That will be easier than looking at the sun and its glare during the day.

GLAUCON: Certainly.

FREEDOM, STAGE THREE

The highest stage: looking directly at the sun

Looking at the sun itself

SOCRATES: Finally, I think, he'll be in the condition to look at (4) the sun itself, not just its reflection in water or somewhere else, but the *sun itself*, as it is in and of itself and in the place that is proper to it. He can even begin to contemplate the nature of the sun.

GLAUCON: Yes, he could.

Thinking about the sun: its nature and functions

SOCRATES: By now he will be able to figure out (1) that the sun is the source of both the seasons and the years; (2) that it governs everything that he can now see thanks to the sunlight; and (3) that it is the cause of [the visibility of] everything that those in the cave can [more or less] see.

GLAUCON: Yes, after he gets beyond those previous things – the shadows and the reflections – he will finally look at the sun and the things that show up in the sunlight.

Thinking about life in the cave

SOCRATES: Imagine that he then thinks about where he used to live, remembering what counts for “knowledge” down there and recalling the people with whom he once was chained. He will consider himself lucky thanks to the transformation that has taken place, and by contrast he will feel sorry for those others, don't you think?

GLAUCON: Very much so.

What counts for “wisdom” in the cave

SOCRATES: Down there, where he used to live, they give out awards to the prisoner who most clearly can make out the shadows as they pass by. They lavish praise on the prisoner with the best memory of which shadows normally come first, which ones later, and which ones usually come along together at the same time. And there are honors for the prisoner who can best predict which shadow might come next.

What would the liberated prisoner prefer?

SOCRATES: Do you think this prisoner, now that he is out of the cave, will envy the ones who are still down there? I can’t imagine he’d want to compete with those who are held in high esteem in the cave or have the most power. I think the freed prisoner will instead prefer, as Homer says, “to live on the land [above ground] as the lowest paid servant of the poorest dirt farmer” [*Odyssey*, XI, 489-90]. I imagine the freed prisoner would put up with absolutely anything rather than be associated with the opinions that dominate in the cave. He’ll do anything rather than be *that* kind of person, don’t you think?

GLAUCON: Yes, exactly. He’ll endure anything rather than be like those prisoners.

PART THREE

THE FREED PRISONER GOES BACK INTO THE CAVE

The return: a “reverse” kind of blindness

SOCRATES: Now imagine that the prisoner who has gotten out of the cave goes back down there and sits in the same place he occupied before. By coming so suddenly out of the bright sunlight [into the dark cave] he’ll find he can’t see very well.

GLAUCON: Yes, of course.

The debate with the other prisoners

SOCRATES: Imagine that the former prisoner has to go back to arguing with those who remained behind, that he has to get involved in the back-and-forth of making claims about the shadows and defending his opinions. Remember, this will be while his eyes are still weak and haven’t yet readjusted [to the darkness of the cave], something that will take quite a while. I can imagine he will be the object of ridicule down there. The other prisoners will say, “Yes, you went up above – but then you came back down with your eyesight ruined!” They’ll say it certainly doesn’t pay to go up there.

And the final outcome:

SOCRATES: And if they can get hold of that [bothersome] former prisoner as he is trying to free them from their chains and lead them out of the cave, and if they have the power, they certainly will kill him.

GLAUCON: Yes, they certainly will.

PART FOUR

SOCRATES EXPLAINS THE MEANING OF THE ALLEGORY

SOCRATES: This whole allegory fits together with what I said earlier, Glaucon.

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| 1. <i>the underground prison</i> | stands for the physical world around us |
| 2. <i>the light of the fire</i> | stands for the Sun in that physical world |
| 3. <i>the journey upwards</i> | is the ascent into the world of the mind. |

At least that's my opinion – God knows whether I'm right or wrong. But whether my opinion is true or false, I think that in the world of the mind, the "idea of good" – the ultimate allempowering power – is seen last of all, and the mind comes to see it only after a great effort. But when you see it, you can understand that it is the Universal Author of everything that is beautiful and right.

This all-empowering Good begets the light of the mind; and it rules over the Sun that sheds its light on the physical world. In the world of the mind, this all-empowering Good is the immediate source of reason and truth. If you want to act reasonably, whether in public or private life, the eye of your mind must remain fixed on this all-empowering power.

GLAUCON: I agree, at least as far as I am able to understand you.

SOCRATES: And you won't be surprised that those who have managed to achieve this blessed vision do not want to descend back into the business and dealings of everyday ordinary life. Their minds are always hurrying back to the upper world, which is where they desire to live. And if the allegory can be trusted, this desire is built into our very nature.

GLAUCON: Into our human nature, you say.

SOCRATES: And it's no surprise that someone who has contemplated the divine and then goes back down again into the ordinary, misguided level of human life will act awkwardly and will look ridiculous – because his eyes haven't yet gotten accustomed to the darkness of the cave. He'll be squinting until his eyes become used to the surrounding darkness. He'll look especially ridiculous if he is forced to go to the law courts or other places and present his case in face of the mere *images* of justice, or worse yet, the *shadows* of the images of justice. He'll be laughed at when he engages the ideas of the cave dwellers who have never seen absolute justice.

GLAUCON: Yes, that would hardly be surprising.

SOCRATES: Common sense tells us that the eyes can be temporarily blinded in two ways and because of two different causes – either when you come out of the sunlight into the dark, or when you go from a dark place into the sunlight. That’s certainly the case with the eyes of our body, but it is equally true of the eye of the mind. And yes, when people meet someone who’s intellectual vision is weak and confused, they’re all too ready to laugh at him. But we should first ask:

Is that person’s mind confused because he is coming *into the dark* from out of the brighter light and can’t see because he is not yet accustomed to the dark?

Or is he temporarily blinded because he has come *out of the dark* into an excess of sunlight?

In the second case, we would feel sorry for him. But in the first case, we would judge that person to be happy with his new situation and his new state of being.

If people chose to laugh at either one of them, it would be more reasonable to laugh at the person who comes from the darkness below into the light above, than it would be to laugh at someone who’s been in the bright sunlight and returns into the dark cave.

GLAUCON: Yes, that’s a very good distinction.

SOCRATES: But then, if I’m right, teachers have to be wrong when they claim they can put knowledge *into* the mind of someone, knowledge that wasn’t there before – like putting sight into the eyes of the blind. On the contrary, our argument shows that the power and ability to learn are *already present* in the mind.

In the allegory, the prisoner was able to turn from the darkness to the light *only* by turning his whole body around. So too with the mind: we can see what is truly real only by turning our whole mind around, away from the world of change and becoming and onto the world of true stability, the world of *true being*. We have to learn step by step how to endure the sight of true being, true reality – the brightest and best light of all, the light of the Good that empowers everything.

Therefore, those among us who want to found the ideal city-state have the task of compelling the best minds to strive for and attain that higher knowledge, which we’ve shown to be the greatest and best of all. Those minds must continue to ascend and keep ascending further until they arrive at the all-empowering power, the Good. However, once they have made this ascent and have seen enough, we can’t let them continue doing what they most want to do.

GLAUCON: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: I mean we can’t let them remain in the upper world – we must not allow that. They have to be compelled to go back down and live among the prisoners in the cave, and share their work, and even their honors, whether those honors are worth having or not.

GLAUCON: But isn’t that unjust? Why should we force them into a worse life when they could have a better one?

SOCRATES: Perhaps you've forgotten, my friend, the intent of the lawgiver who wants to found the ideal city-state. His purpose is not to make any one class of people happier than the rest. Rather, happiness is to be spread to *all* in the polis. He wants to hold the citizens together by persuasion and necessity and let them *all* benefit from the polis and to benefit from each other, not to please themselves individually but to help bind the society into a harmonious unity.

Endnotes

1. Literally "would be filled with the glare." Plato thought that in order to see something, light first had to fill the eye and thereby make it able to see things. The same applies to the "eye of the mind."
2. Literally "his eyes were filled with darkness." See the previous note.