

PLATO AND THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

Plato (ca. 427 – ca. 347 BC) is one of the three most enduring philosophers of ancient Greece. In his youth he seemed to be intended for an auspicious political career, but the execution of his teacher Sokrates in 399, on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth, proved a turning point. After Sokrates' death, Plato traveled a great deal. In 387 he founded the Academy, where he spent the balance of his life teaching and writing. His major works include the *Apology of Sokrates* and *Crito* (in which he defends his teacher against the charges leveled by the city of Athens), *Gorgias*, *Ion* (a critique of poetry), the *Symposium*, *Cratylus*, and *Republic* (a long dialogue in which he puts forth his plan for the ideal State), as well as *Timaeus*, *Critias*, *Sophist*, *Phaedrus*, and a collection of letters.

That Plato's written output was so voluminous is unusual for a philosopher of antiquity. Sokrates never wrote a line; indeed, we know Sokrates mostly because he appears as a central character in Plato's writing. Almost all of Plato's output takes the form of a dialogue between two characters: Sokrates and some variable person inquiring of the master. Sokrates claims a disarming ignorance, and through a series of questions leads his fellow character into a more complete understanding. It is important to note, however, that this is not the historical Sokrates, but Plato's version of him. It is often impossible to tell if the philosophy coming from Sokrates belongs to him or to Plato.

Our selection, one of the most famous from the *Republic*, is an allegory explaining Plato's Theory of Ideas, also called the Theory of Forms. Plato held that everything we perceive with the senses is an imperfect echo or shadow from the World of Ideas, where immutable perfection dwells. Human souls originated in the World of Ideas, and though now imprisoned in our world, they vaguely remember their place of origin. All horses in our world, for example, are shadows of a perfect Idea horse. We vaguely remember this Idea horse. That is why, though no two horses are alike, they are all recognizable to us as horses. The Idea horse, because it is immutable and perfect, is more real than any horse we see in our material world, which after all is only a copy.

Sources:

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PLATO: THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

from *THE REPUBLIC*, BOOK VII

trans. Benjamin Jowett

Sokrates And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened:

Behold! Human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open toward the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

Glaukon I see.

Sokrates And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

Glaukon You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Sokrates Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

Glaukon True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

Sokrates And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Glaukon Yes, he said.

Sokrates And if they were able to converse with one another, would they suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Glaukon Very true.

Sokrates And suppose further that the prisoners heard an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

Glaukon No question, he replied.

Sokrates To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

Glaukon That is certain.

Sokrates And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look toward the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned toward more real existence, he has a clearer vision – what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them – will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Glaukon Far truer.

Sokrates And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take refuge in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

Glaukon True, he said.

Sokrates And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

Glaukon Not all in a moment, he said.

Sokrates He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Glaukon Certainly.

Sokrates Last of all he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.

Glaukon Certainly.

Sokrates He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

Glaukon Clearly, he said, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.

Sokrates And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

Glaukon Certainly, he would.

Sokrates And if they were in the habit of conferring honors among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honors and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer, "Better to be the poor servant of a poor master," and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?

Glaukon Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

Sokrates Imagine once more, I said, such a one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

Glaukon To be sure, he said.

Sokrates And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak, and

before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable), would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if anyone tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

Glaukon No question, he said.

Sokrates This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upward to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed – whether rightly or wrongly, God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

Glaukon I agree, he said, as far as I am able to understand you.

Sokrates Moreover, I said, you must not wonder that those who attain to this beatific vision are unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell; which desire of theirs is very natural, if our allegory may be trusted.

Glaukon Yes, very natural.

Sokrates And is there anything surprising in one who passes from divine contemplation's to the evil state of man, misbehaving himself in a ridiculous manner; if, while his eyes are blinking and before he has become accustomed to the surrounding darkness, he is compelled to fight in courts of law, or in other places, about the images or the shadows of images of justice, and is endeavoring to meet the conceptions of those who have never yet seen absolute justice?

Glaukon Anything but surprising, he replied.

Sokrates Anyone who has common sense will remember that the bewilderment's of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the minds eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye; and he who remembers this when he sees anyone whose vision is perplexed and weak, will not be too ready to laugh; he will first ask whether that soul of man has come out of the brighter life, and is unable to see because unaccustomed to the dark, or having turned from darkness to the day is dazzled by excess of light. And he will count the one happy in his condition and state of being, and he will pity the other; or, if he have a mind to laugh at the soul which comes from below into the light, there will be more reason in this than in the laugh which greets him who returns from above out of the light into the den.

Glaukon That, he said, is a very just distinction.

QUESTIONS:

- 1) What is the layout of the cave?
- 2) How does this allegory illustrate Plato's Theory of Ideas?
- 3) How does Plato's chosen form, the dialogue, work? Do you find it more or less persuasive than someone just writing their claims down, without the theatrics of two people talking? Why or why not?
- 4) In his Theory of Ideas, Plato claims that entities in the material world are less real than those in the World of Ideas. If every *thing* we can perceive with our senses is already an imperfect reflection of some sort of Idea *thing*, and if words are not things at all but merely refer to them, what, if anything, should we make of writing?