

PLATO -The Republic - The Allegory of the Cave (ca. 360 B.C.E.)

*The Peloponnesian War ended badly for the Athenians: they lost to the Spartans, the Athenian democracy fell, and the city came under the rule of tyrants. The Athenian democracy was eventually restored but was unstable. During that time, the philosopher Socrates (ca. 470-399 B.C.E.) gathered a following of young Athenians as he pointed out the shortcomings of the wealthy, powerful, and wise. Socrates was put on trial and executed for impiety and corrupting the youth. After his death, his student Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) wrote *The Republic*, which is perhaps the best-known example of Greek political philosophy. In it, Plato's emphasis is not so much on what kind of state is best but on what kind of people make the best leaders. The section included below is a discussion between Socrates and Plato's older brother, Glaucon. Much of the dialogue is taken up with an extended allegory about the difficulties humans face as they struggle to see things as they really are. As the allegory comes to a conclusion, its political implications become clear. In Plato's view, very few people succeed in the quest for truth, and the best states were those that ensured that these few, most enlightened citizens took up the mantle of leadership.*

SOCRATES: And now, 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 towards 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 pre-vented 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.

GLAUCON: I see.

SOCRATES: And do you see 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.

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

SOCRATES: Like ourselves, and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

GLAUCON: True; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

SOCRATES: And of the objects that are being carried in a like manner, would they only see the shadows?

GLAUCON: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

GLAUCON: Very true.

SOCRATES: And suppose further that the prison had an echo that came from the wall behind them, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice they heard came from the passing shadow?

GLAUCON: No question.

SOCRATES: To them ... the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

GLAUCON: That is certain.

SOCRATES: 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 towards 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 approach-ing nearer to being, and his eye is turned towards 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?

GLAUCON: Far truer.

SOCRATES: 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?

GLAUCON: True.

SOCRATES: And suppose once more that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent and held fast until he's 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.

GLAUCON: Not all in a moment.

SOCRATES: He will be required 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?

GLAUCON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Last of all, he will be able to see the sun, 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.

GLAUCON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: 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 that he and his fellows have been ac-customed to behold?

GLAUCON: Clearly ... he would first see the sun and then reason about it.

SOCRATES: 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?

GLAUCON: Certainly, he would.

SOCRATES: 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 to-gether; and who were, therefore, best able to draw conclusions as to

the fu-ture, do you think that he would care for such honors and glories, or envy the possessors of them?...

GLAUCON: I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

SOCRATES: Imagine once more ... 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?

GLAUCON: To be sure.

SOCRATES: 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 ... 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.

GLAUCON: No question.

SOCRATES: 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 upwards 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 ef-fort 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 pub-lic or private life, must have his eye fixed.

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

SOCRATES: Moreover ... 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 de-sire of theirs is very natural, if our allegory may be trusted.

GLAUCON: Yes, very natural.

SOCRATES: And is there anything surprising in one who passes from divine contemplations to the evil state of man, behaving 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?

GLAUCON: Anything but surprising

SOCRATES: Whereas our argument shows that the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already and that just as the eye was unable to turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too the instrument of knowledge can only by the movement of the whole soul be turned from the world of becoming into that of being, and learn by degrees to endure the sight of being, and of the brightest and best of being, or in other words, of the good. And there is another thing which is likely or rather a necessary inference from what has preceded, that neither the uneducated and uninformed of the truth nor yet those who never [finish] their education, will be able ministers of State...

GLAUCON: Very true

SOCRATES: Then ... the business of us who are the founders of the State will be to compel the best minds to attain that knowledge which we have already shown to be the greatest of all. They must

continue to ascend until they arrive at the good, but when they have ascended and seen enough, we must not allow them to do as they do now.

GLAUCON: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: I mean that they remain in the upper world, but this must not be allowed; they must be made to descend again among the prisoners in the den and partake of their labors and honors, whether they are worth having or not.

GLAUCON: But is this not unjust? Should we give them a worse life when they might have a better one?

SOCRATES: You have again forgotten, my friend ... the intention of the legislator, who did not aim at making any one class in the State happy above the rest; the happiness was to be in the whole State, and he held the citizens together by persuasion and necessity, making them benefactors of the State, and therefore benefactors of one another; to this end he created them, not to please themselves, but to be his instruments in binding up the State. And will our pupils, when they hear this, refuse to take their turn at the toils of the State when they are allowed to spend the greater part of their time with one another in the heavenly light?

GLAUCON: It is impossible, for they are just men, and the commands which we impose upon them are just; there can be no doubt that every one of them will take office as a stern necessity and not after the fashion of our present rulers of State.

SOCRATES: Yes, my friend... and there lies the point. You must contrive for your future rulers another and better life than that of a ruler; and then you may have a well-ordered State; for only in the State which offers this, will they rule who are truly rich, not in silver and gold, but in virtue and wisdom, which are the true blessings of life. Whereas if they go to the administration of public affairs, poor and hungering after their own private advantage, thinking that hence they are to snatch the chief good, order there can never be for they will be fighting about office, and the civil and domestic broils which thus arise will be the ruin of the rulers themselves and of the whole State.

GLAUCON: Most true.

READING QUESTIONS

1. What is the condition of the people in the cave? How does their condition affect the way they understand the world?
2. How does the one who leaves the cave react to the things he encounters? Why does he go back into the cave?
3. How do the people in the cave treat the one who left? Why?
4. What is Plato saying about the balance between the needs of an individual and the needs of the state? How does he think justice can be found for both individuals and states?