

PLATO

The Allegory of the Cave

Translated by Shawn Eyer

Plato's famous allegory of the cave, written around 380 bce, is one of the most important and influential passages of *The Republic*. It vividly illustrates the concept of Idealism as it was taught in the Platonic Academy, and provides a metaphor which philosophers have used for millennia to help us overcome superficiality and materialism. In this dialogue, Socrates (the main speaker) explains to Plato's brother, Glaukon, that we all resemble captives who are chained deep within a cavern, who do not yet realize that there is more to reality than the shadows they see against the wall.

Socrates: And now allow me to draw a comparison in order to understand the effect of learning (or the lack thereof) upon our nature. Imagine that there are people living in a cave deep underground. The cavern has a mouth that opens to the light above, and a passage exists from this all the way down to the people.

They have lived here from infancy, with their legs and necks bound in chains. They cannot move. All they can do is stare directly forward, as the chains stop them from turning their heads around. Imagine that far above and behind them blazes a great fire. Between this fire and the captives, a low partition is erected along a path, something like puppeteers use to conceal themselves during their shows.

Glaukon: I can picture it.

Socrates: Look and you will also see other people carrying objects back and forth along the partition, things of every kind: images of people and animals, carved in stone and wood and other materials. Some of these other people speak, while others remain silent.

Glaukon: A bizarre situation for some unusual captives.

Socrates: So we are! Now, tell me if you suppose it's possible that these captives ever saw anything of themselves or one another, other than the shadows flitting across the cavern wall before them?

Glaukon: Certainly not, for they are restrained, all their lives, with their heads facing forward only.

Socrates: And that would be just as true for the objects moving to and fro behind them?

Glaukon: Certainly.

Socrates: Now, if they could speak, would you say that these captives would imagine that the names they gave to the things they were able to see applied to real things?

Glaukon: It would have to be so.

Socrates: And if a sound reverberated through their cavern from one of those others passing behind the partition, do you suppose that the captives would think anything but the passing shadow was what really made the sound?

Glaukon: No, by Zeus.

Socrates: Then, undoubtedly, such captives would consider the truth to be nothing but the shadows of the carved objects.

Glaukon: Most certainly.

Socrates: Look again, and think about what would happen if they were released from these chains and these misconceptions. Imagine one of them is set free from his shackles and immediately made to stand up and bend his neck around, to take steps, to gaze up toward the fire. And all of this was painful, and the glare from the light made him unable to see the objects that cast the shadows he once beheld. What do you think his reaction would be if someone informed him that everything he had formerly known was illusion and delusion, but that now he was a few steps closer to reality, oriented now toward things that were more authentic, and able to see more truly? And, even further, if one would direct his

attention to the artificial figures passing to and fro and ask him what their names are, would this man not be at a loss to do so? Would he, rather, believe that the shadows he formerly knew were more real than the objects now being shown to him?

Glaukon: Much more real.

Socrates: Now, if he was forced to look directly at the firelight, ^{515e} wouldn't his eyes be pained? Wouldn't he turn away and run back to those things which he normally perceived and understand them as more defined and clearer than the things now being brought to his attention?

Glaukon: That's right.

Socrates: Now, let's say that he is forcibly dragged up the steep climb out of the cavern, and firmly held until finally he stands in the light of the sun. Don't you think that he would be agitated and even begin to complain? Under that light, would his eyes not be nearly blinded, unable to discern any of those things that we ourselves call real?

Glaukon: No, he wouldn't see them at first.

Socrates: It would take time, I suppose, for him to get used to seeing higher things. In the beginning, he might only trace the shadows. Then, reflections of people and other things in the water. Next he would come to see the things themselves. Then he would behold the heavenly bodies, and the heaven itself by night, seeing the light of the stars and the moon with greater ease than the sun and its light by day.

Glaukon: Indeed so.

Socrates: And then, I think, he would at last be able to gaze upon the sun itself—neither as reflected in water, nor as a phantom image in some other place, but in its own place as it really is.

Glaukon: Undeniably.

Socrates: And now, he will begin to reason. He will find that the sun is the source for the seasons and the years, and governor of every visible thing, and

is ultimately the origin of everything previously known.

Glaukon: Of course. First he would see and then draw conclusions.

Socrates: That being the case, should he remember his fellow prisoners and their original dwelling and what was accepted as wisdom in that setting, don't you imagine he would consider himself fortunate for this transformation, and feel pity for the captives?

Glaukon: I agree.

Socrates: Now ... suppose there were honors and awards among the captives, which they granted as prizes to one another for being the best at recognizing the various shadows passing by or deciphering their patterns, their order, and the relationships among them, and therefore best at predicting what shadow would be seen next. Do you believe that our liberated man would be much concerned with such honors, or that he would be jealous of those who received them? Or that he would strive to be like those who were lauded by the captives and enjoyed pride of place among them? Or would rather take Homer's view, and "rather wish, in earthly life, to be the humble serf of a landless man" (*Odyssey* 11.489) and suffer whatever he had to, instead of holding the views of the captives and returning to that state of being?

Glaukon: Truly, he would rather suffer a great deal than return to such a life.

Socrates: Well, here's something else to consider. If such a man would suddenly go from the sunlight to once more descend to his original circumstances, wouldn't his vision be obscured by the darkness?

Glaukon: It obviously would.

Socrates: And so, let's say he is with the captives and gets put into the position of interpreting the wall-shadows. His eyes are still adjusting to the darkness, and it may take a while before they are. Wouldn't he become a laughing-stock? Wouldn't they say, "You have returned from your adventure up there with ruined eyes!" Would they not say that the ascent was a waste of time? And if they had the opportunity, do you supposed that they

might raise their hands against him and kill this person who is trying to liberate them to a higher plane?"

Glaukon: I'm afraid so.

Socrates: Then, my friend Glaukon, this image applies to everything we've been discussing. It compares the visible world to the underground cavern, and the power of the sun to the fire that burned in the cavern. You won't misunderstand me if you connect the captive's ascent to be the ascent of the soul to the intelligible world (τὸν νοητὸν τόπον). This is how I believe, and I shared it at your wish, though heaven knows whether it is at all true. Regardless, it appears to me that in the realm of what can be known, the Idea of the Good is discovered last of all, and it only perceived with great difficulty. But, when it is seen, it leads us directly to the finding that it is the universal cause of all that is right and beautiful. It is the source of visible light and the master of the same, and in the intelligible world it is the master of truth and reason. And whoever, in private or in public, would behave in a sensible way, will keep this idea in focus.

Glaukon: I agree, to the extent I can manage to understand.

Socrates: Stay with me, then, for another thought. We should not be surprised that individuals who have reached this level might be unwilling to spend their time on mundane affairs, for would it not be that their souls always feel a calling to the higher things. If our illustration holds true, that would seem quite likely.

Glaukon: Yes, likely indeed.

Socrates: Now, would it be at all surprising for one who has been engaged in the contemplation of holy things, when he ventures into ways of degenerate humanity, to appear ridiculous in his actions? What if, for example, while his eyes were still adjusting to the mundane gloom, he would be forced to appear in court to hold forth about the mere shadows of justice or the other shapes that flitted across the wall? And to engage in debate about such concepts with the minds of others who has never beheld the Ideal Justice?

Glaukon: It would not surprise me the least.

Socrates: But one who has his wits about him would remember that there are two things that pain the eyes: being brought from darkness to light, and transitioning back from light to darkness. Now, considering that the soul experiences the same discomfort, this man would not make light of another when he met with a confused soul. He would take the time to understand if that soul was coming from a luminous realm and his eyes were blinded by darkness, or whether journeying from the darkness of ignorance into an illuminated state had overwhelmed his eyes. One, he would consider fortunate. He would pity the other—and if he laughed at either, it would be less justified if he laughed at the expense of the one who was descending from the light above.

Glaukon: That's a fitting way to put it.

Socrates: Of course, if I'm correct, then some of our educators are mistaken in their view that it is possible to implant knowledge into a person that wasn't there originally, like vision into the eyes of a blind man.

Glaukon: That's what they say.

Socrates: What our message now signifies is that the ability and means of learning is already present in the soul. As the eye could not turn from darkness to light unless the whole body moved, so it is that the mind can only turn around from the world of becoming to that of Being by a movement of the whole soul. The soul must learn, by degrees, to endure the contemplation of Being and the luminous realms. This is the Good, agreed?

Glaukon: Agreed.

Socrates: Therefore, of this matter itself, there must be a craft of some kind, which would be a most efficient and effective means of transforming the soul. It would not be an art that gives the soul vision, but a craft at labor under the assumption that the soul has its own innate vision, but does not apply it properly. There must be some kind of means for bringing this about.

Glaukon: Yes. Such a craft must exist.