

PLATO'S REPUBLIC: THE MYTH OF THE CAVE

What does it mean to live justly? What effect does it have upon the self – and what effect does acting unjustly have upon the self? This is the starting point for Plato's Republic. But if it is beneficial to live justly and to avoid injustice, how are we to recognize justice? And can we discern appearances of justice from justice itself? Most, perhaps all, human beings are struggling to understand not just the nature of the world in which their decisions are played out, but also the nature of themselves. The question of what is real and what, in varying degrees, is illusory is important to us if we are to live good lives and attain happiness. In the following passage from the Republic, Socrates poses this problem couched in mythic terms implying that for most of us our misunderstanding of reality ties us to a second-rate form of life.

In the dialogue Socrates and his companions are attempting to construct a theoretical working republic which parallels the human organism: as such the governors of the state are analogous to the rational part of the self which directs the whole towards the best ends. The state, says Socrates, must especially educate its future governors because only this will ensure the welfare of the whole – implying that we must educate the highest part of the self in order that our own true welfare is attained.

The myth of the cave follows another analogy in which the Sun is seen as a symbol of the highest Good – and just as the sun gives existence and visibility to the things on Earth, so the Good gives existence and intelligibility to the world of immaterial ideas. The contemplation of the Sun in the myth of the cave is, then, to be understood as symbolizing the highest form of intuitional contemplation of the Source of all.

SOC. Here's a situation which you can use as an analogy for the human condition – for our education or lack of it. Imagine people living in a cavernous cell down under the ground; at the far end of the cave, a long way off, there's an entrance open to the light. They've been there since childhood, with their legs and necks tied up in a way which keeps them in one place and allows them to look only straight ahead, but not to turn their heads. There's firelight burning a long way further up the cave behind them, and up the slope between the fire and the prisoners there's a road, beside which you should imagine a low wall has been built-like the partition which conjurors place between themselves and their audience and above which they show their tricks.

GLAUC. All right.

SOC. Imagine also that there are people on the other side of this wall who are carrying all sorts of artefacts. These artefacts, human statuettes, and animal models carved in stone and wood and all kinds of materials stick out over the wall; and as you'd expect, some of the people talk as they carry these objects along, while others are silent.

GLAUC. This is a strange picture you're painting, with strange prisoners.

SOC. They're no different from us: I mean, in the first place, do you think they'd see anything of themselves and one another except the shadows cast by the fire on to the cave wall directly opposite them?

GLAUC. Of course not. They're forced to spend their lives without moving their heads.

SOC. And what about the objects which were being carried along? Won't they only see their shadows as well?

GLAUC. Naturally.

SOC. Now, suppose they were able to talk to one another: don't you think they'd assume that their words applied to what they saw passing by in front of them?'

GLAUC. They couldn't think otherwise.

SOC. And what if sound echoed off the prison wall opposite them? When any of the passers-by spoke, don't you think they'd be bound to assume that the sound came from a passing shadow?

GLAUC. By Zeus, I'm absolutely certain of it.

SOC. All in all, then, the shadows of artefacts would be judged the only reality by people in this situation.

GLAUC. That's absolutely inevitable.

SOC. What do you think would happen, then, if they were set free from their bonds and cured of their ignorance? What would it be like if they found that happening to them? Imagine that one of them has been set free and is suddenly made to stand up, to turn his head and walk, and to look towards the firelight. It hurts him to do all this and he's too dazzled to be capable of making out the objects whose shadows he'd formerly been looking at. And suppose someone tells him that what he's been seeing all this time has no substance, and that he's now closer to reality and is seeing more accurately, because of the greater reality of the things in front of his eyes – what do you imagine his reaction would be? And what do you think he'd say if he were shown any of the passing objects and had to respond to being asked what it was? Don't you think he'd be bewildered and would think that there was more reality in what he'd been seeing before than in what he was being shown now?

GLAUC. Far more.

SOC. And if he were forced to look at the actual firelight, don't you think it would hurt his eyes? Don't you think he'd turn away and run back to the things he could make out, and would take the truth of the matter to be that these things are clearer than what he was being shown?

GLAUC. Yes.

SOC. And imagine him being dragged forcibly away from there up the rough, steep slope, without being released until he's been pulled out into the sunlight. Wouldn't this treatment cause him pain and distress? And once he's reached the light of the sun, he wouldn't be able to see a single one of the things which are currently taken to be real, would he, because his eyes would be overwhelmed by the sun's splendour?

GLAUC. No, he wouldn't, not straight away.

SOC. He wouldn't be able to see things in the world above the cave, I suppose, until he'd got used to his situation. At first, it would be shadows that he could most easily make out, then he'd move on to the reflections of people and so on in water, and later he'd be able to see the actual things themselves. Next, he'd feast his eyes on the heavenly bodies and the heavens themselves, which would be easier at night: he'd look at the light of the stars and the moon, rather than at the sun and sunlight during the daytime.

GLAUC. Of course.

SOC. And at last, I imagine, he'd be able to discern and feast his eyes on the sun – not the displaced image of the sun in water or elsewhere, but the sun on its own, in its proper place.

GLAUC. Yes, he'd inevitably come to that.

SOC. After that, he'd start to think about the sun and he'd reason with himself that it is the source of the seasons and the yearly cycle, that it governs the whole of the visible realm; and of those things he and his fellow prisoners below saw, he would think that in a certain way this splendid sun was the cause.

GLAUC. Yes, that would obviously be the next point he'd come to.

SOC. Now, if he recalled the cell where he'd originally lived and what passed for knowledge there and his former fellow prisoners, don't you think he'd feel happy about his own altered circumstances, and sorry for them?

GLAUC. Definitely.

SOC. Suppose that the prisoners used to assign prestige and credit to one another, in the sense that they rewarded speed at recognizing the shadows as they passed, and the ability to remember which ones normally come earlier and later and at the same time as which other ones, and expertise at using this as a basis for guessing which ones would arrive next. Do you think our former prisoner would covet these honours and would envy the people who had status and power there, or would he much prefer, as Homer describes it, "being a slave labouring for some ignoble man, to work for hire", and would put up with anything at all, in fact, rather than share their opinions and their life?

GLAUC. Yes, I think he'd go through anything rather than live that way.

SOC. But consider this: If he went back underground and sat down again in his old seat, wouldn't the sudden transition from the sunlight mean that his eyes would be overwhelmed by darkness?

GLAUC. Certainly.

SOC. Now, the process of adjustment would be quite long this time, and suppose that before his eyes had settled down and while he wasn't seeing well, he had once again to compete against those perpetually chained prisoners to give his opinions about those shadows. Wouldn't he make a fool of himself? Wouldn't they say that he'd come back from his upward journey with his eyes ruined, and that it wasn't proper to try go up there? And wouldn't they – if they could grab hold of anyone who tried to set them free and take them up there, and kill him?

GLAUC. They certainly would.

SOC. Well, my friend Glaucon, you should apply this allegory, as a whole, to what we were talking about before. This material region which is accessible to sight should be equated with the prison cell, and the firelight there with the light of our world's sun. And if you think of the upward journey and the contemplation of things up in that upper world as the soul's ascent to the intelligible realm, you will apprehend my meaning, since you want to hear it. Only God knows if it's actually true, however. Anyway, it's my opinion that the last thing to be seen – and it isn't easy to see either – in the realm of knowledge is the Good; but if it is contemplated, it leads one to reason that it is the cause of everything that is right and beautiful, whatever the circumstances, and that in the visible realm it is the progenitor of light and of the sun, and in the intelligible realm it is itself the lord and cause of truth and intellect; and this must be beheld by anyone who is to act wisely, either privately or in public governance.

GLAUC. I couldn't agree more.

SOC. All right, then: I wonder if you also agree with me in not finding it strange that people who've travelled there don't want to engage in human business: there's nowhere else their souls would ever rather be than in the upper region – which is hardly surprising, if our allegory has got this aspect right as well.

GLAUC. No, it's not surprising.

SOC. Well, what about this? Imagine someone returning to the human world and all its misery after contemplating the divine realm. Do you think it's surprising if he seems awkward and ridiculous while he's still not seeing well, before he's had time to adjust to the darkness of his situation, and he's forced into a contest (in a law-court or wherever) about the shadows of justice or the statuettes which cast the shadows, and into a competition whose terms are the conceptions of morality held by people who have never seen justice itself?

GLAUC. No, that's not surprising in the slightest.

SOC. In fact anyone with any intelligence would remember that the eyes can become confused in two different ways, as a result of two different sets of circumstances: it can happen in the transition from light to darkness, and also in the transition from darkness to light. If he took the same facts into consideration when he also noticed someone's mind in such a state of confusion that it was incapable of making anything out, his reaction wouldn't be unthinking ridicule. Instead, he'd try to find out whether this person's soul was returning from a mode of existence

which involves greater lucidity and had been blinded by the unfamiliar darkness, or whether it was moving from relative ignorance to relative lucidity and had been overwhelmed and dazzled by the increased brightness. Once he'd distinguished between the two conditions and modes of existence, he'd congratulate anyone he found in the second state, and feel compassion for anyone in the first state. If he did choose to laugh at someone in the second state, his amusement would be less absurd than when laughter is directed at someone returning from the light above.

GLAUC. Yes, you're making a lot of sense.

SOC. Now, if this is true, we must bear in mind that education is not capable of doing what some people promise. They claim to introduce knowledge into a soul which doesn't have it, as if they were introducing sight into eyes which are blind.

GLAUC. Yes, they do.

SOC. An implication of what we're saying at the moment, however, is that the capacity for knowledge is present in everyone's soul. If you can imagine an eye that can turn from darkness to brightness only if the body as a whole turns, then our organ of understanding is like that. Its orientation has to be accompanied by turning the soul as a whole away from the world of becoming, until it becomes capable of bearing the sight of real being and reality at its most bright, which we call the Good. Yes?

GLAUC. Yes.

SOC. That's what education should be: the art of orientation. Educators should devise the simplest and most effective methods of turning souls around. It shouldn't be the art of implanting sight in the organ, but should proceed on the understanding that the organ already has the capacity, but is improperly aligned and isn't facing the right way.

GLAUC. I suppose you're right

SOC. Our job as founders [of our Republic], then, is to make sure that the best people come to that fundamental field of study (as we called it earlier): we must have them make this great ascent we've been talking about and see the Good. And afterwards, once they've been up there and have sufficiently contemplated it, we mustn't let them get away with what they do at the moment.

GLAUC. Which is what?

SOC. Staying there, and refusing to come back down again to those prisoners, to share their work and their rewards, no matter whether those rewards are trivial or significant.

GLAUC. But in that case we'll be wronging them: we'll be making the quality of their lives worse and denying them the better life they could be living, won't we?

SOC. You're again forgetting, my friend, that the design of the Legislator is not to make one section of a community better off than the rest, but to effect this for the community as a whole. Legislators should persuade or compel the members of a community to mesh together, should make every individual share with his fellows the benefit which he is capable of contributing to the common welfare, and should ensure that the community does contain people with this capacity; and the purpose of all this is not for legislators to leave people to their own selfish impulses, but for them to use people to bind the community together.

The Republic, 514a-518d and 519c-e, translated by R Waterfield (with amendments)