

Plato's *Republic* (509d-511e) – the Divided Line

Plato's *Republic* examines the issues surrounding the living of a good human life – and especially the part justice plays in it. The main speaker, Socrates, moves the dialogue towards the matter of wisdom and knowledge, since for beings such as ourselves it is essential that we understand the nature of the world in which the life is to be lived. For rational creatures who more or less direct the course of their lives self-knowledge, too, is all-important: and Socrates distinguishes between opinion and true knowledge – the former marked by a degree of superficiality (it knows *that something is* but not *why it is*); the latter by a much more profound contact with its object. By book six (the dialogue is made up of 10 books) the question of truth and our access to it has become pressing and Socrates offers to his associates the analogy of the Sun, its light, visible objects and the eye as a parallel of the source of truth, its "light", intelligible objects and our minds. As there are different classes of perceptible objects – ranging from the most outward of sensible things to the most inward of intelligible things – we must have a similar range of means of perception. Socrates offers another insight about this which is called *the divided line*. . . .

509d Socrates: Understand then, that we say these are two [rulers and sources – the Good and the Sun]; and that the one reigns over the *intelligible* genus and place, and the other over the *visible*, not to say the heavens, lest I should seem to you to employ sophistry in the expression:<sup>1</sup> you understand then these two species, the visible and the intelligible?

Glaucon: I do.

510a Socrates: As if then you took a line, cut into two unequal parts, and cut over again each section according to the same ratio, both that of the visible species, and that of the intelligible, you will then have clarity and obscurity placed by each other. In the visible species you will have in one section (4) images: but I call images, in the first place, shadows, in the next, the reflections in water, and such as subsist in bodies which are dense, polished and shiny, and everything of this kind, if you understand me.

Glaucon: I do.

Socrates: Suppose now in the other section of the visible (3), put the originals of these images such as the animals around us, and every kind of plant, and manufactured things.

Glaucon: I suppose it.

b Socrates: Are you willing then that this section appear to be divided into true and untrue? And that the same proportion, which the object of opinion has to the object of knowledge, the very same proportion has the resemblance to that of which it is the resemblance?

Glaucon: I am, indeed, said he, extremely willing.

Socrates: But consider now again the section of the intelligible, how it was divided.

Glaucon: How?

Socrates: That with respect to one part of it (2), the soul uses the former sections as images; and is obliged to investigate from hypotheses, not proceeding to the beginning, but to the conclusion: and the other part (1), again, is that where the soul proceeds from hypothesis to an unhypothetical principle, and without those images about it, by the species themselves, makes its way through them.

Glaucon: I have not, said he, sufficiently understood you in these things.

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<sup>1</sup> A play upon the sounds of two words – *orano* (the heavens) and *orato* (the visible).

Socrates: But again, for you will more easily understand me, these things having been premised.

c For I think you are not ignorant, that experts in geometry, and computations, and such like, after they have laid down hypotheses of the odd and the even, and figures, and three species of angles, and other things the sisters of these, according to each method, they then proceed upon these things as known, having laid down all these as hypotheses, and do not give any further reason about them, neither to themselves nor others, as being things obvious to all. But, beginning from these, they directly discuss the rest, and with full consent end at that which their inquiry pursued.

d Glaucon: I know this perfectly well.

Socrates: And do you not likewise know, that when they use the visible species, and reason about them, their dianoëtic<sup>2</sup> power is not employed about these species, but about those of which they are the resemblances, employing their reasonings about the square itself, and the diameter itself, and not about that which they actually draw? These very things which they are forming and drawing, of which shadows and reflections are images, they now in turn use as their images and aiming to see those very things which they could not otherwise see except by their dianoëtic part.

Glaucon: You say true.

511a Socrates: This then I called a species of the intelligible; but observed that the soul was obliged to use hypotheses in the investigation of it, not going back to the principle, as not being able to ascend higher than hypotheses, but made use of images formed from things below, to lead to those above, as perspicuous, as objects of opinion, and distinct from the things themselves.

b Glaucon: I understand that you speak of things pertaining to the geometrical, and other sister arts.

Socrates: Understand now, that by the other section of the intelligible, I mean that which reason itself attains, making hypotheses by its own reasoning power, not as principles, but really hypotheses, as steps and handles, that, proceeding as far as to that which is unhypothetical, *viz.* the principle of the universe, and coming into contact with it, again adhering to those things which adhere to the principle, it may thus descend to the end; using nowhere anything which is sensible, but forms themselves, proceeding through some to others, and at length in forms terminating its progression.<sup>3</sup>

d Glaucon: I understand, but not sufficiently. For you seem to me to speak of an arduous undertaking: but you want, however, to determine that the perception of real being, and that which is intelligible, by the science of reasoning, are more conspicuous than the discoveries made by the arts, as they are called, which have hypotheses for their first principles; and that those who behold these are obliged to behold them with their dianoëtic power, and not with their senses. But as they are not able to perceive, by ascending to the principle, but from hypotheses, they appear to you not to possess intellect respecting them, though they are intelligible in conjunction with the principal. You also appear to me to call the habit of geometrical and such like concerns, the dianoëtic part, and not intellect; the dianoëtic part subsisting between opinion and intellect.

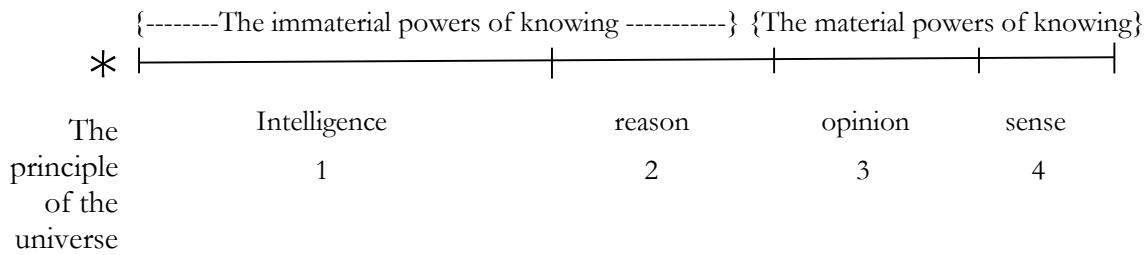
e Socrates: You have comprehended, most sufficiently: and conceive now, that corresponding to the four sections there are these four passions in the soul; intelligence answering to the highest, the dianoëtic part to the second; and assign belief to the third; and to the last imagining.<sup>4</sup> Arrange them likewise analogously; conceiving that as their objects participate of truth, so these participate of perspicuity.

Glaucon: I understand, and I assent, and I arrange them as you say.

<sup>2</sup> Dianoëtic: literally "knowing through" – the dianoëtic power is that power by which we know things through a process of thought.

<sup>3</sup> An alternative translation of this speech runs: "So understand, too, what I mean by the other section of the intelligible, which reason itself grasps by the power of dialectic, using hypotheses which are not first principles, but genuine hypotheses, like steps and starting points, in order to go as far as what is unhypothetical and the first principle of everything. And, grasping this principle, it returns once again, keeping hold of what follows from it, and comes down to a conclusion in this way, using no sense perception in any way at all, but Forms themselves, going through Forms to Forms and ending up at the Forms.

<sup>4</sup> The word here is *eikasía* for which there is no exact English translation. Taylor used "assimilation" while others use "apprehension by images".



## The Cave

Immediately after the divided line passage, we get the famous story of the cave: Socrates says that with respect to our understanding, or lack of it, we are like men who have spent all their lives at the bottom of a long cave, sitting on benches and only able, because of chains, to look at the far end of the cave wall. Behind them is a fire burning and between the fire and the benches a wall is placed with people carrying statues of animals and artificial objects just above the wall. The light from the fire causes shadows to be projected against cave wall – and because the chained prisoners cannot even turn their heads to look at themselves, the shadows are taken to be the only reality. Even the conversations of the carriers of the statues are taken to be evidence of that reality because of their echoes bounce off the far wall. The cleverest amongst those prisoners are able to predict what shadows will appear next, and prizes are awarded for their astuteness in this respect. Here we take up the words of Socrates:

515c 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

d 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.

e 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?

516a GLAUC. No, he wouldn't, not straight away.

b 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.

- e 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. . . .

\*\* A little further on, Socrates talks about how their imagined republic will educate those who are able to press on to that very highest vision of the sun, which stands as the story's analogy of the good. He makes a surprising remark:

- 519d SOC. It is our business then, to oblige those of the inhabitants who have the best geniuses, to apply to that learning which we formerly said was the greatest, both to view *the good*, and to ascend that ascent; and when they have ascended, and sufficiently viewed it, *we are not to allow them what is now allowed them*.

GLAUC. What is that?

SOC. To continue there, and be unwilling to descend again to those fettered men, or share with them in their toils and honours, whether more trifling or more important.

GLAUC. Shall we then, act unjustly towards them, and make them live a worse life when they have it in their power to live a better?

SOC. You have again forgot, friend, that this is not the legislator's concern, in what manner any one tribe in the city shall live remarkably happy; but this he endeavours to effectuate in the whole city, connecting the citizens together;

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We might note that we have four objects of vision in this story: the shadows, the statues seen in the light of the fire, the objects seen outside the cave in the light of the bright light of the cave – or, more specifically at first the shadows and reflections of them, and finally the sight of the heavens themselves seen in the night sky. There is a fifth and final vision – seen after a long time spent getting the eyes used to the brightness – the Sun itself.

We might understand from the last passage, that Platonism, too, has its concept of *bodhisattva* – compassionate souls who descend from on high to aid those yet to make the ascent to that enlightenment beyond the cave.