

Plato

The Allegory of the Cave (*Republic*, Book Seven)

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SOCRATES: At this point I will show you something about the nature of education and ignorance. Picture the following in your mind. Imagine human beings living in an underground cave-like residence. Its entrance opens up to the light and reaches all along the cave. They have been there since their childhood, their ankles and necks chained, unable to move or turn their heads, forced to look ahead. The light from a fire blazing at a distance comes from above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised walkway. Imagine also a low wall built along the way, similar to the screen that divides puppeteers from the audience and allows them to show puppets over it.

GLAUCON: I picture the scene.

SOCRATES: Now imagine that people walk behind the wall and carry various artifacts that extend above the wall. These artifacts include carvings of humans and other animals made of stone, wood, and other materials. Some of the people carrying these objects are talking, while others are silent.

GLAUCON: You paint a strange picture and describe strange prisoners.

SOCRATES: They are like ourselves. Now do you think they see anything else except their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which light from the fire casts on to the opposite wall of the cave?

GLAUCON: How could they see anything else if they were forced to keep their heads still for their whole life?

SOCRATES: And what would they see of the objects that are being carried? Would they not see only shadows of them as well?

GLAUCON: What else?

SOCRATES: And if they were able to talk to one another, would they not think that the object of their conversation were the shadows they saw in front of them?

GLAUCON: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: And what if an echo bounced off the opposite wall of the prison? Would they not think that when one of the passers-by spoke the voice came from the passing shadow?

GLAUCON: Definitely.

SOCRATES: Such prisoners would think that the truth is nothing but the shadows cast by the artifacts.

GLAUCON: Most certainly.

SOCRATES: Now imagine what would happen naturally if the prisoners were released from their shackles and cured of their ignorance. Right after they are released and suddenly forced to stand up, turn their necks around, walk, and look towards the light, these activities will cause them pain; because of the bright glare they would be unable to see those things which they previously had seen only as shadows. Now what do you think they would say if one were to tell them that what they saw before was fooling them, but that now, when they are closer to what really exists and when they face that which more truly exists, they see more clearly, in a straightforward manner? What if that person pointed to the objects as they passed and asked the former prisoners to tell him what they were? Don't you think they would be baffled and think that the shadows they formerly saw were truer than the objects that are now being pointed out to them?

GLAUCON: Far truer.

SOCRATES: And if they were forced to look straight at the light, would that not make their eyes hurt? Would they not try to avoid the light and turn back to the things that they can see? And would they not think that in reality the shadows are more clear than the objects they are forced to look at?

GLAUCON: True.

SOCRATES: But what if someone dragged them along a steep and harsh ascent against their will, and did not let go until they were dragged right into the sunlight? Would they not feel pain and discomfort? And if they walked towards the sun and their eyes suddenly filled with brilliant light, would they be able to see even one of those things that are now called true realities?

GLAUCON: No, not right away.

SOCRATES: I think that if they wanted to see the objects of the upper world they would need to grow accustomed to them. First of all, it will be easier for them to see the shadows. After that, they will see the reflections of people and other things in the water, and only after that they will see the objects themselves. After that, they will see celestial objects and the sky itself; it will be easier to see them first at night, by looking at the stars and the light of the moon, than during the day, by looking at the sun or the light of the sun.

GLAUCON: How could it be otherwise?

SOCRATES: Last of all, I think, they will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of it in the water or other media. They will be able to look at the sun itself directly and see it as it is.

GLAUCON: Definitely.

SOCRATES: Now after making all these observations they will conclude that it is the sun that is responsible for the four seasons and the passing of the years, and that it governs all that exists in the visible world, and that in some way the sun was even the cause of all those things that they used to see in the cave.

GLAUCON: Clearly, they will come to such conclusions after having made those observations.

SOCRATES: What do you think, then? When they recall where they used to live, and the backward wisdom of that place, and the fellow prisoners they once had, would they not think that this change is fortunate for them, and then would they not pity those who stayed behind?

GLAUCON: No question.

SOCRATES: What if some honors, praise, and gifts were bestowed on them by other cave dwellers while they still were in the cave for their superior ability to detect the passing shadows; to remember best in which sequence those shadows usually moved (which of them went before, and which followed after, and which moved together); and to predict how the shadows would move in the future based on their past observations? Do you think they would care for such honors or even envy the ones who were honored and considered powerful among the cave dwellers? Or do you think they would rather choose “to become servants of a poor man,” to quote Homer (*Odyssey* 11.489-490), and to endure anything, rather than admire such things and live in that way?

GLAUCON: Yes, I think that they would rather suffer anything than accept this sort of life.

SOCRATES: Now imagine this. If such a person goes back down into the cave and ends up back in the same boat as the other prisoners, would her eyes not be filled with darkness after she suddenly comes out of the sun?

GLAUCON: To be sure.

SOCRATES: And what would happen if such a person were once again to compete against the permanent cave dwellers in judging those shadows? Remember that his sight would still be weak before his eyes once again got used to the darkness, and the recovery time could be considerable. Would he not, then, become the butt of jokes, and would they not say about him that up he went and down he came with his eyes totally destroyed, and that it is not advisable even to think of climbing up? And if someone attempted to free another prisoner and then lead him upwards, would they not kill that leader if they could only lay their hands on him?

GLAUCON: No doubt.

SOCRATES: Now, dear Glaucon, apply this entire imaginary picture to our previous discussion. The prison-house stands for the visible world; the light of the fire in the cave represents the power of the sun. And you will not miss my intended meaning if you interpret the journey upwards (and the sight of the things that are up above) as the ascent of the soul into the intelligible world, for this is what you wish to hear about. Only God knows if my attempt has been successful, but here is how things seem to me.

In the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all and we are barely capable of seeing it. However, when we do manage to see it, we conclude that it is the cause of all that is beautiful and right. It gives birth to light and to the lord of light in the visible world, and in the intelligible world it rules itself and is the source of truth and intelligibility. Now anyone who intends to act prudently either in public or private life must have her mind’s eye fixed upon this idea.

GLAUCON: I think I follow you, as far as I can.

SOCRATES: Come, now, and follow me a step farther. You should not be surprised that those who come to this place have no desire to be involved in the affairs of the cave dwellers. Instead, their souls long to remain here forever. This is how they are likely to behave, since that is what our analogy so far has suggested.

GLAUCON: Yes, very likely.

SOCRATES: Now consider the following. Suppose someone comes down from contemplating divine things to participate in human affairs. (Remember that such a person's sight would still be weak before he gets adjusted sufficiently to the surrounding darkness.) Now suppose that before his eyes get used to the darkness he is compelled to fight in courts of law, or in other places, about the shadows of justice as opposed to the objects of which these are the shadows. Suppose that he will have to struggle to understand how these things are perceived by those who have never seen justice itself. Do you think it is surprising if he badly discredits himself and then appears totally ridiculous?

GLAUCON: Not for a moment.

SOCRATES: However, anyone who has common sense would recall that someone's vision can be impaired for two reasons. The first is when someone comes out of the light and goes into the dark, and the second is when one comes out of the dark and goes into the light. Now assuming that the mind's eye works in the same way, when a sensible person sees a soul whose vision is confused and impaired, he would not burst into laughter senselessly. He would first try to determine whether this soul's vision is impaired because it is unaccustomed to the dark on its way from the world of light, or it is dazzled by bright glare on its way out of the life of ignorance and to the world of light. Now after a sensible person has determined this, he would consider the life and condition of former kind fortunate, and would pity the latter kind. And if he chose to laugh at the latter person, it would make more sense than to laugh at the former person, who is on her way from the upper world.

GLAUCON: What you say is very reasonable.

SOCRATES: Now if this is correct, our way of thinking about these things should be as follows. We must not think that education really works the way some self-professed educators say it works. For they say that knowledge is not present in the soul and that they somehow put it in there, like sight into blind eyes.

GLAUCON: This is exactly what they say.

SOCRATES: However, our present discussion here indicates that this capacity, as well as the instrument that allows us to learn, exists in everyone's soul already. It is as if our eyes were unable to turn from darkness to light without the entire body; in the same way, our instrument of learning, together with the entire soul, must keep turning away from the fleeting appearances of things, until our soul is able to see steadily into the true nature of things and detect the clearest part of it, which we call the good. Is this not true?

GLAUCON: It is.

SOCRATES: So there should be some art of turning around that would consist in finding the easiest and most efficient way of turning to light. This is not the art that gives us the ability to see, because we already have that; instead, it enables us to turn in the right direction and look where we are supposed to. Should there not be such an art?

GLAUCON: Most likely.

SOCRATES: Now the other so-called virtues of the soul come closer to the fine qualities of the body, for even when they are not initially present, they can be developed later by habit and exercise. But it seems that the virtue of wisdom more than anything else is akin to something divine, for it never loses its power, except that this turning around can turn it either into

something useful and valuable or into something useless and harmful. Have you never observed a clever crook—how sharp his sight is and how keenly his narrow mind sees the things to which it turns? His eyesight is by no means impaired, but it is forced to serve evil purposes, and the more sharply he sees, the more evil his deeds are.

GLAUCON: Very true.

SOCRATES: But what if the instrument of sight attached to such natures were to be trimmed down in their childhood and severed from, as it were, the leaden weights that have been tied to it from birth? For those weights gravitate towards gluttony and other such sensual pleasures and desires and deflect the vision of these souls downwards. What if their instrument of sight were freed from these weights and turned in the opposite direction to face true realities? Would that same instrument in those same people not see those realities as sharply as they currently see what their eyes are turned to now?

GLAUCON: Most likely.

SOCRATES: But what about the following? Would the following not be likely, or rather certain from what has been said? Consider two categories of people. The first are the uneducated and ignorant of the truth. The others are those who are allowed to remain permanently in training. Neither category can ever become able administrators of the state. Not the former, because they have no single goal in their life, and one must have some end in sight while doing everything that they do, either privately or publicly. Not the latter, because they will not do anything on their own accord, thinking that they are already living far away in the islands of the blessed.

GLAUCON: Very true.

SOCRATES: In that case, then, if we were the founders of the state, our task would be to compel the best minds to attain that learning which we have previously shown to be the greatest of all, that is, to see the good after they have completed their climb up to the higher regions. However, once they have seen enough upon their ascent, our further task is not to permit them what they are currently allowed to do.

GLAUCON: And what is that?

SOCRATES: Why, of course, not to permit them to remain in the upper regions and to refuse to go back down to the prisoners and to participate in their labors and honors, whether they are serious or worthless.

GLAUCON: But would we not do them wrong by making their life worse while it is possible for them to live better?

SOCRATES: You don't seem to realize, my friend, that the law is not concerned with the well-being of any one class of people in the state by giving them a special status; its aim is the well-being of the entire state. One achieves this aim by holding the citizens together by persuasion or compulsion and by making sure they serve the common good and benefit others as much as they can. For these purposes, qualified people are installed throughout the state not so that they could do whatever they want to, but to ensure the cohesion of the state through them.

GLAUCON: True, I haven't thought of that.

SOCRATES: See, Glaucon, we will not do wrong by those lovers of wisdom among us if we compel them to care for others and protect them, but we will ask them to do the right thing. For we will tell them: “Those who become lovers of wisdom in other states usually do not participate in their political activities. They grow up on their own, for none of the political systems want to have anything to do with them. It is also fair that someone who matures on her own and does not owe anybody for her upbringing does not have to provide upbringing and nurture to anybody. However, we have made you, as it were, to be queens of the hive, leaders of yourselves and of the rest of the citizens, and we have educated you much better and more perfectly than the rest and made you more able to bear this double responsibility. Now each of you must take turns, go down into the cave where the others live and get accustomed to seeing in the dark. For once you do get accustomed to the conditions of the cave you will be able to see a thousand times better than the cave dwellers and will know what all the shadows are and what casts them, for you have seen true beauty, true justice, and true goodness. And in this way the state, both for your sake and for our sake, will be governed by people who are truly aware of reality, and not by those who wander in the land of dreams, like in the other states that are currently governed by those who fight each other about shadows and struggle for power as if it were some great good. But in truth the situation is as follows: the state is necessarily governed in the best and most peaceful manner if those who are destined to rule it are the ones most reluctant to rule, and the state where the rulers are most eager to rule fares the worst.”

GLAUCON: Quite so.

SOCRATES: What do you think, then? Upon hearing this, will our nurslings refuse to obey us and will they remain unwilling to take part in the daily labors of the state, taking their turns, while spending most of their time with one another without getting their hands dirty?

GLAUCON: Impossible. For we will ask something fair of the people who have a sense of fairness. It is most certain that every one of them will feel obligated to take power, which is the opposite of what is the case with rulers of currently existing states.

SOCRATES: So this is how things stand, my friend. If you will design a life for intended rulers that is better than the life of a mere ruler, you will be able to have a well-managed state. For only in such a state will those rule who are truly rich, not in gold but in virtue and wisdom, the sort of things that a truly blessed person should be rich in. However, if those who crave only after their own private advantage take on the administration of public affairs, thinking that this is how they grab at the greatest good, the state will never be managed well. A struggle for power will result, and this internal domestic war will destroy both themselves and the rest of the state.

GLAUCON: Most true.

SOCRATES: The life that embodies the true love of wisdom, then, is the only life that looks down upon political power. Or can you think of any other?

GLAUCON: By Zeus, I cannot.