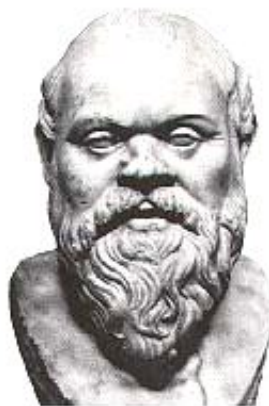


Reading: Plato's Myth of the Cave (514-517)

The passage below is an excerpt from Book VII of *The Republic of Plato*. According to Dr. Allan Bloom, a Plato scholar, *The Myth of the Cave* is usually the part of *The Republic* that leaves the greatest impression on students. It is perhaps the most famous image in the history of Western philosophy because it deals not only with knowledge, but it also refers to science, politics, psychology, education, theology – all rolled into one.

In this dialogue, Socrates speaks with two young friends, Adeimantus and Glaucon who are brothers of Plato. But only Glaucon and Socrates are heard speaking. In the text below, words in regular font are spoken by Socrates, while the words in *italics* are spoken by Glaucon.

For more background information on Plato and *The Republic*, here are two useful online sources: <http://www.hope.edu/academic/ids/171/Republic.html> (on *The Republic*) and <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/p/plato.htm> (on Plato).



Socrates

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To clarify the nature of knowledge, and our desire for knowledge, I would like you to think about the following image:

5 Now, imagine men living in a sort of underground cave. On one side of the cave, there is an exit that runs to the outside and the light, but it is a long way up.

10 The men have been there since childhood, necks and legs chained so that they remain in place and can only see straight ahead. Their restraints prevent them from turning their heads. Light streams down from a fire burning far behind and above them. Between the fire and the prisoners, some distance back and somewhat higher up, a path runs across the width of the cave, in front of which stands a low wall, built like the front of a puppet theater, as if to conceal the bodies of performers who will show their puppets along the top.

- *OK, I think I can see it.*

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15 Then see also how men are carrying along the wall – so that these things appear above it – all sorts of objects: statues of men, of animals, made of stone, of wood, fashioned in various ways. And, just as would be expected, some of these carriers are talking while others are silent.

- *This is a strange picture, and strange prisoners.*

20 They are like us. Do you think, first of all, that such men could see any more of themselves and each other than their shadows, cast by the fire onto the wall of the cave in front of them?

- *How could they, if their heads are locked into position all their lives?*

And would you say that the men wouldn't be able to see the objects carried along the wall either?

- *Yes.*

25 If they could talk to each other, don't you think the names they attached to these shadows would be taken for names of the real things?

- *Necessarily.*

30 What if their prison had an echo which reaches them off the front wall? Whenever one of the carriers spoke, while passing behind the wall, wouldn't they think it was the shadow passing in front that was doing the talking? Do you agree?

- *By Zeus I do!*

All in all then, such men would take reality to consist of nothing above and beyond these shadows of the carried objects?

- *They have to believe that.*



35 Consider then how the men would react, if they were ever freed from their bonds and ignorance: Say one of them was freed, had to stand up all at once, turn his head, walk, look up toward the light – doing all this would mean pain. The glare of the flame would make it impossible for the man to see those objects whose shadows were so familiar to him. What do you think he would say if told that what he saw before was just a lie, a delusion – that he had

40 come a step closer to reality, had turned to face things that existed more fully, that he now saw more truly? If one proceeded to point out each passing object, asking him what it was, and making him answer, don't you think he would be at a loss and believe the things he saw earlier were truer than those now before him?

- *Much truer.*

45 If one forced him to gaze into the fire itself, his eyes would hurt. He would turn round and flee back toward those shadows which he could see, supposing they were in fact clearer than those now revealed to him.

- *Quite so.*

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- 50 And if one were to drag him by force from that spot, up the steep and difficult path, if one refused to let him go before he entered the sunlight, wouldn't he be in physical pain and furious as he was hauled along? When he emerged into the light, when sunlight filled his eyes, he would not be able to see a single one of the things which are now said to be true.

– *Not at once, certainly.*



- 55 I think he would need time to adjust before he could see things in the world above. At first he would find it easiest to see shadows, then reflections of men and other things in water, then things themselves. Eventually he would see things in the sky and the sky itself – but more easily at night: the light of the stars and moon being easier to bear than the sun and its light during the day.

- 60 – *Of course.*

Then, in the end, he would be able to see the sun; not just images of it in water or in some other place but the sun itself in its own proper sphere. He would be able to contemplate¹ it.

– *That must be so.*

- 65 After this he would reflect that it is the sun which brings on the seasons and the years, which governs everything in the visible world, and which is also, in some sense, the cause of those other things which he used to see.

– *Clearly that would be the next stage.*

- 70 What then? When he thinks back to that place where he grew up, recollecting what passed for knowledge there and reminiscing about his fellow prisoners, wouldn't he think what had happened to him was fortunate indeed; wouldn't he pity the others?

– *Surely.*

- 75 And suppose the men below had praise and honors to bestow upon each other: a prize for the keenest eye for spying out shadows, and one for the best head for remembering which shadows usually come earlier, later, or at the same time – thus enabling predictions of the future. Do you think our man would covet these rewards and envy those so honored, who were so respected by the other prisoners? Or would he feel, as Homer² put it, that he would rather be "slave to another man without possessions on the earth," enduring any suffering for the sake of being spared such opinions, and such a life as these others live?

¹ To look at attentively and thoughtfully; to consider carefully and at length; to meditate on or ponder.

² Of The Iliad fame.

– *Quite so, he said, I think he would rather suffer anything else.*

- 80 Reflect on this as well: If this man went back into the cave and sat down in his old seat, wouldn't his eyes be filled with darkness, leaving the sunlight so suddenly behind?

– *They certainly would be.*

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- 85 And if he were forced to enter once again into all those games of shadow-spying? If – while his sight was still affected, and before his eyes readjusted – he had to contend in this way with those who had remained prisoners, wouldn't he be mocked at? Wouldn't it be said that his upward journey had wrecked his eyesight, that this showed it was not worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And as for any man who tried to free them and lead them upward: if they could lay hands on him and kill him, they would.

- 90 – *They certainly would.*

- 95 This whole image, my dear Glaucon, must be related to what we spoke of before. The visible world should be compared to the prison dwelling, the fire inside to the power of the sun. If you interpret the upward journey and the contemplation of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you will grasp what I take to be the case, since you were keen to hear it. Whether it is true or not only a god knows, but this is how I see it. In the intelligible realm, the Form of the Good is the last to be seen, and it is seen only with difficulty. When seen it must be called the cause of all that is right and beautiful, the source and wellspring of light in the visible world; while in the intelligible world it itself is the cause and control of truth and reason. He who would act rationally in public or private must see it.

- 100 – *I share your thought as far as I can*

[Sources: Project Gutenberg; The Republic of Plato (trans. Allan Bloom)]

Reading Guide

Use this list of questions to guide you in your understanding of the passage.

1. What is Socrates trying to illustrate by making this image?
2. Where are the human beings?
3. How long have they been in the cave?
4. Why can't they move?
5. How does light get in the cave?
6. What is between the fire and the prisoners?
7. What happens along the wall?
8. Who are the people in the cave like?
9. What do the prisoners do when they discuss things?
10. What do the prisoners believe to be true?
11. What happens to the man who is released?
12. What happens when he looks at the light itself?
13. What happens after someone drags him up the "rough steep, upward way"?
14. After seeing these things, how does he compare his new life with his old one in the cave?
15. What happens when the prisoner returns to the cave?