

“Allegory of the Cave”

Part A.

Read the “Allegory of the Cave” from Plato’s *The Republic*.

SOCRATES: I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human conditions somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber, like a cave with an entrance open to the daylight and running a long way underground. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Behind them and above them a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets.

GLAUCON: I see.

SOCRATES: Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and other materials, and that some of these men, as is natural, are talking and some not.

GLAUCON: An odd picture and an odd sort of prisoner.

SOCRATES: They are drawn from life. . . . For, tell me, do you think our prisoners could see anything of themselves or their fellows except the shadows thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite them?

GLAUCON: How could they see anything else if they were prevented from moving their heads all their lives?

SOCRATES: And would they see anything more of the objects carried along the road?

GLAUCON: Of course not.

SOCRATES: Then if they were able to talk to each other, would they not assume that the shadows they saw were real things?

GLAUCON: Inevitably.

SOCRATES: And if the wall of their prison opposite them reflected sound, don’t you think that they would suppose, whenever one of the passers-by on the road spoke, that the voice belonged to the shadow passing before them?

GLAUCON: They would be bound to think so.

SOCRATES: And so they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were in all respects real.

GLAUCON: Yes, inevitably.

SOCRATES: Then think what would naturally happen to them if they were released from their bonds and cured of their delusions. Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire; all these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows. So if he was told that what he used to see was mere illusion and that

he was now nearer reality and seeing more correctly, because he was turned towards objects that were more real, and if on top of that he were compelled to say what each of the passing objects was when it was pointed out to him, don't you think he would be at a loss, and think that what he used to see was more real than the objects now being pointed out to him?

GLAUCON: Much more real.

SOCRATES: And if he were made to look directly at the light of the fire, it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and take refuge in the things which he could see, which he would think really far clearer than the things being shown him.

GLAUCON: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if . . . he were forcibly dragged up the steep and rocky ascent and not let go till he had been dragged out into the sunlight, the process would be a painful one, to which he would much object, and when he emerged into the light his eyes would be so overwhelmed by the brightness of it that he wouldn't be able to see a single one of the things he was now told were real.

GLAUCON: Certainly not at first.

SOCRATES: Because he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the world outside the cave. First he would find it easiest to look at shadows, next at the reflections of men and other objects in water, and later on at the objects themselves. After that he would find it easier to observe the heavenly bodies and the sky at night than by day, and to look at the light of the moon and stars, rather than at the sun and its light.

GLAUCON: Of course.

SOCRATES: The thing he would be able to do last would be to look directly at the sun, and observe its nature without using reflections in water or any other medium, but just as it is.

GLAUCON: That must come last.

SOCRATES: Later on he would come to the conclusion that it is the sun that produces the changing seasons and years and controls everything in the visible world, and is in a sense responsible for everything that he and his fellow-prisoners used to see.

GLAUCON: That is the conclusion which he would obviously reach.

SOCRATES: And when he thought of his first home and what passed for wisdom there, and of his fellow-prisoners, don't you think he would congratulate himself on his good fortune and be sorry for them?

GLAUCON: Very much so.

SOCRATES: There was probably a certain amount of honor and glory to be won among the prisoners, and prizes for keen-sightedness for anyone who could remember the order of sequence among the passing shadows and so be best able to predict their future appearances. Will our released prisoner hanker after these prizes or envy this power or honor? Won't he be more likely to feel, as Homer says, that he would far rather be "a serf in the house of

some landless man," or indeed anything else in the world, than live and think as they do?

GLAUCON: Yes . . . he would prefer anything to a life like theirs.

SOCRATES: Then what do you think would happen . . . if he went back to sit in his old seat in the cave? Wouldn't his eyes be blinded by the darkness, because he had come in suddenly out of the daylight?

GLAUCON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And if he had to discriminate between the shadows, in competition with the other prisoners, while he was still blinded and before his eyes got used to the darkness—a process that might take some time—wouldn't he be likely to make a fool of himself? And they would say that his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting. And if anyone tried to release them and lead them up, they would kill him if they could lay hands on him.

GLAUCON: They certainly would.

SOCRATES: Now, my dear Glaucon, . . . this simile must be connected, throughout, with what preceded it. The visible realm corresponds to the prison, and the light of the fire in the prison to the power of the sun. And you won't go wrong if you connect the ascent into the upper world and the sight of the objects there with the upward progress of the mind into the intelligible realm—that's my guess, which is what you are anxious to hear. The truth of the matter is, after all, known only to God. But in my opinion, for what it is worth, the final thing to be perceived in the intelligible realm, and perceived only with difficulty, is the absolute form of Good; once seen, it is inferred to be responsible for everything right and good, producing in the visible realm light and the source of light, and being, in the intelligible realm itself, controlling source of reality and intelligence. And anyone who is going to act rationally either in public or private must perceive it.

GLAUCON: I agree, . . . so far as I am able to understand you.

SOCRATES: Then you will perhaps also agree with me that it won't be surprising if those who get so far are unwilling to return to mundane affairs, and if their minds long to remain among higher things. That's what we should expect if our simile is to be trusted.

GLAUCON: Yes, that's to be expected.

SOCRATES: Nor will you think it strange that anyone who descends from contemplation of the divine to the imperfections of human life should blunder and make a fool of himself, if, while still blinded and unaccustomed to the surrounding darkness, he's forcibly put on trial in the law-courts or elsewhere about the images of justice or their shadows, and made to dispute about the conceptions of justice held by men who have never seen absolute justice.

GLAUCON: There's nothing strange in that.¹

¹Adapted from *The Republic*, Plato, trans. H. D. P. Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 278-282.

Part B.

On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions.

1. Draw the cave as it looks to you.
2. What does the fire in the cave represent or illuminate?
3. What do the forms and the men passing the forms in front of the fire to create shadows represent?
4. What does the light of the sun represent?
5. Why is there pain when the escaped prisoner looks into the light?
6. What happens to the prisoner when he gets out of the cave?
7. Why does the escaped prisoner return to the cave? And what happens to him when he does?
8. Why do the prisoners reject the escaped prisoner?
9. What do you think Plato was trying to represent with each of the following?
 - a. the Cave
 - b. the prisoners
 - c. the form holders
 - d. the escaped prisoner

e. The Fire
10. For each of the items in question 9, what would be some present-day applications?