

Plato
 “The Allegory of the Cave”
 From *The Republic*. Bk. 7

Plato (428-347? BCE) was the son of a wealthy Athenian who, as a youth, became one of the followers of the notorious Socrates. Socrates was well-known by his fellow Athenians for his love of oral debate and his penchant for discomfiting those he debated, especially those who claimed to be authorities on moral or political affairs. During the height of its power, Athens had been inundated by many foreigners, a number of whom set themselves up as teachers of the sons of the wealthy. Specifically, they taught the arts of rhetoric and oratory (valuable for becoming a leader in a democracy) and were known as sophists. When the Athenians lost the Peloponnesian war in 404, the so-called “tyranny of the thirty” was established by the Spartans to rule Athens after they departed. However, these aristocrats, who had little love for the Athenian democracy, instituted what might be called a reign of terror, and within a year they were overthrown and the Athenian democracy re-established.

Casting about for someone to blame for the catastrophe of the war and the tyranny, the Athenians looked to the hangers-on and followers of Socrates, many of whom, like Plato, were from the upper class and suspected of anti-democratic leanings. So, in 399, Socrates himself was put on trial for disrespecting the gods of the state and leading its youth astray. After mounting a spirited defense, reconstructed by Plato in “The Apology,” Socrates was found guilty and condemned to execution. His death, as retold by Plato in the *Crito*, has become famous because he was given a chance to escape (the authorities would have looked the other way) but refused because, as he explained to his attending companions, he had lived his whole life in Athens and had urged his fellow citizens of the democracy to abide by her laws. He could not now, in good conscience, break his commitment to truth and the law simply because it had condemned him. See the famous painting, [The Death of Socrates](#), by Jacques Louis David, where he is depicted just as he is about to drink the hemlock, the poison used by the state to execute criminals.

The Republic is Plato’s attempt to define the perfect political state. It is thus, arguably, the first description of a utopia in the western tradition. Plato believed that a just state should be ruled by those who had been trained in the art of governing, those who had been taught, first, to govern themselves, their own desires and impulses. The true leaders would be *Aristos*, literally the best and most qualified to lead. For Plato, they would be philosophers, lovers of wisdom, those trained to pursue man’s ultimate good.

In “The Allegory of the Cave,” Plato explains why those who have pursued wisdom, using the light of Reason, should lead those—trapped in ignorance and prejudice in the darkness of a cave—upward, into the light of truth.

Trans. Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893). The text has been modernized for contemporary students.

Socrates. And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: —Behold! human beings living in an underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the cave; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing

at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

Glaucon. I see.

Socrates. And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

Glaucon. You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Socrates. Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

Glaucon. True. How could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

Socrates. And of the objects which are being carried, in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Glaucon. Yes, he said.

Socrates. And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Glaucon. Very true.

Socrates. And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

Glaucon. No question, he replied.

Socrates. To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

Glaucon. That is certain.

Socrates. And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, —will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Glaucon. Far truer.

Socrates. And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

Glaucon. True.

Socrates. And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

Glaucon. Not all in a moment, he said.

Socrates. He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the

objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Glaucon. Certainly.

Socrates. Last of he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.

Glaucon. Certainly.

Socrates. He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

Glaucon. Clearly, he said, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.

Socrates. And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the cave and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

Glaucon. Certainly, he would.

Socrates. And if they were in the habit of conferring honors among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honors and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer, "Better to be the poor servant of a poor master, and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?"

Glaucon. Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

Socrates. Imagine once more, I said, such a one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

Glaucon. To be sure, he said.

Socrates. And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the cave, while his sight was still weak, and before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable) would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if any one tried to untie another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

Glaucon. No question, he said.

Socrates. This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed, whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

Glaucon. I agree, he said, as far as I am able to understand you.

Socrates. Moreover, I said, you must not wonder that those who attain to this beatific vision are

unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell; which desire of theirs is very natural, if our allegory may be trusted.

Glaucon. Yes, very natural.

Socrates. And is there anything surprising in one who passes from divine contemplations to the evil state of man, misbehaving himself in a ridiculous manner; if, while his eyes are blinking and before he has become accustomed to the surrounding darkness, he is compelled to fight in courts of law, or in other places, about the images or the shadows of images of justice, and is endeavoring to meet the conceptions of those who have never yet seen absolute justice?

Glaucon. Anything but surprising, he replied.

Socrates. Anyone who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the mind's eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye; and he who remembers this when he sees any one whose vision is perplexed and weak, will not be too ready to laugh; he will first ask whether that soul of man has come out of the brighter light, and is unable to see because unaccustomed to the dark, or having turned from darkness to the day is dazzled by excess of light. And he will count the one happy in his condition and state of being, and he will pity the other; or, if he have a mind to laugh at the soul which comes from below into the light, there will be more reason in this than in the laugh which greets him who returns from above out of the light into the cave.

Glaucon. That, he said, is a very just distinction.

Socrates. But then, if I am right, certain professors of education must be wrong when they say that they can put a knowledge into the soul which was not there before, like sight into blind eyes.

Glaucon. They undoubtedly say this, he replied.

Socrates. Whereas, our argument shows that the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already; and that just as the eye was unable to turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too the instrument of knowledge can only by the movement of the whole soul be turned from the world of becoming into that of being, and learn by degrees to endure the sight of being, and of the brightest and best of being, or in other words, of the good.

Glaucon. Very true.

Socrates. And must there not be some art which will effect conversion in the easiest and quickest manner; not implanting the faculty of sight, for that exists already, but has been turned in the wrong direction, and is looking away from the truth?

Glaucon. Yes, he said, such an art may be presumed.

Socrates. And whereas the other so-called virtues of the soul seem to be akin to bodily qualities, for even when they are not originally innate they can be implanted later by habit and exercise, the of wisdom more than anything else contains a divine element which always remains, and by this conversion is rendered useful and profitable; or, on the other hand, hurtful and useless. Did you never observe the narrow intelligence flashing from the keen eye of a clever rogue—how eager he is, how clearly his paltry soul sees the way to his end; he is the reverse of blind, but his keen eyesight is forced into the service of evil, and he is mischievous in proportion to his cleverness.

Glaucon. Very true, he said.

Socrates. But what if there had been a circumcision of such natures in the days of their youth; and they had been severed from those sensual pleasures, such as eating and drinking, which, like leaden weights, were attached to them at their birth, and which drag them down and turn the vision of their souls upon the things that are below—if, I say, they had been released from these

impediments and turned in the opposite direction, the very same faculty in them would have seen the truth as keenly as they see what their eyes are turned to now.

Glaucon. Very likely.

Socrates. Yes, I said; and there is another thing which is likely, or rather a necessary inference from what has preceded, that neither the uneducated and uninformed of the truth, nor yet those who never make an end of their education, will be able ministers of State; not the former, because they have no single aim of duty which is the rule of all their actions, private as well as public; nor the latter, because they will not act at all except upon compulsion, fancying that they are already dwelling apart in the islands of the blest.

Glaucon. Very true, he replied.

Socrates. Then, I said, the business of us who are the founders of the State will be to compel the best minds to attain that knowledge which we have already shown to be the greatest of all—they must continue to ascend until they arrive at the good; but when they have ascended and seen enough we must not allow them to do as they do now.

Glaucon. What do you mean?

Socrates. I mean that they remain in the upper world: but this must not be allowed; they must be made to descend again among the prisoners in the cave, and partake of their labors and honors, whether they are worth having or not.

Glaucon. But is not this unjust? he said; ought we to give them a worse life, when they might have a better?

Socrates. You have again forgotten, my friend, I said, the intention of the legislator, who did not aim at making any one class in the State happy above the rest; the happiness was to be in the whole State, and he held the citizens together by persuasion and necessity, making them benefactors of the State, and therefore benefactors of one another; to this end he created them, not to please themselves, but to be his instruments in binding up the State.

Glaucon. True, he said, I had forgotten.

Socrates. Observe, Glaucon, that there will be no injustice in compelling our philosophers to have a care and providence of others; we shall explain to them that, in other States, men of their class are not obliged to share in the toils of politics: and this is reasonable, for they grow up at their own sweet will, and the government would rather not have them. Being self-taught, they cannot be expected to show any gratitude for a culture which they have never received. But we have brought you into the world to be rulers of the hive, kings of yourselves and of the other citizens, and have educated you far better and more perfectly than they have been educated, and you are better able to share in the double duty. Wherefore each of you, when his turn comes, must go down to the general underground abode, and get the habit of seeing in the dark. When you have acquired the habit, you will see ten thousand times better than the inhabitants of the cave, and you will know what the several images are, and what they represent, because you have seen the beautiful and just and good in their truth. And thus our State, which is also yours, will be a reality, and not a dream only, and will be administered in a spirit unlike that of other States, in which men fight with one another about shadows only and are distracted in the struggle for power, which in their eyes is a great good. Whereas the truth is that the State in which the rulers are most reluctant to govern is always the best and most quietly governed, and the State in which they are most eager, the worst.

Glaucon. Quite true, he replied.

Socrates. And will our pupils, when they hear this, refuse to take their turn at the toils of State, when they are allowed to spend the greater part of their time with one another in the heavenly

light?

Glaucón. Impossible, he answered; for they are just men, and the commands which we impose upon them are just; there can be no doubt that every one of them will take office as a stern necessity, and not after the fashion of our present rulers of State.

Socrates. Yes, my friend, I said; and there lies the point. You must contrive for your future rulers another and a better life than that of a ruler, and then you may have a well-ordered State; for only in the State which offers this, will they rule who are truly rich, not in silver and gold, but in virtue and wisdom, which are the true blessings of life. Whereas if they go to the administration of public affairs, poor and hungering after their own private advantage, thinking that hence they are to snatch the chief good, order there can never be; for they will be fighting about office, and the civil and domestic broils which thus arise will be the ruin of the rulers themselves and of the whole State.

Glaucón. Most true, he replied.

Socrates. And the only life which looks down upon the life of political ambition is that of true philosophy. Do you know of any other?

Glaucón. Indeed, I do not, he said.

Socrates. And those who govern ought not to be lovers of the task? For, if they are, there will be rival lovers, and they will fight.

Glaucón. No question.

Socrates. Who then are those whom we shall compel to be guardians? Surely they will be the men who are wisest about affairs of State, and by whom the State is best administered, and who at the same time have other honors and another and a better life than that of politics?

Glaucón. They are the men, and I will choose them, he replied.

Socrates. And now shall we consider in what way such guardians will be produced, and how they are to be brought from darkness to light, —as some are said to have ascended from the world below to the gods?

Glaucón. By all means, he replied.

Socrates. The process, I said, is not the turning over of an oyster-shell, but the turning round of a soul passing from a day which is little better than night to the true day of being, that is, the ascent from below, which we affirm to be true philosophy?

Glaucón. Quite so.

Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. This famous allegory can be interpreted in a number of different ways: First, it uses the contrasting symbols of darkness and light to illustrate ignorance and wisdom. An individual is born in the darkness of ignorance and can only be freed from its chains by someone who has already cast them off, who can then lead (educate) him out of the darkness into the light of knowledge. Next, it illustrates Plato's (and many religions') belief in dualism, the idea that above and beyond the material world we live in there exists an unseen but real world of spirit that will remain when the physical world dies. It can also illustrate Bacon's idols of the mind (see Chapter 1), as an individual is led astray by his perceptions and society and must see beyond them to grasp the truth. The cave dweller who is able to break his chains and turn toward the light has a revelation that the world he has always known is not real. Have you ever had a similar revelation? Have you discovered that something you always took for granted was not true? Write an essay about this incident and what you learned, how you were led out of ignorance to the light.

2. Contemporary science tells us similar stories about nature, the world that surrounds us, and our (false) perceptions of it. For instance, physicists tell us the material world of seemingly solid objects, of rocks and our own bodies, is composed mostly of empty space, where unimaginably small atoms are composed of even smaller entities and ultimately of forces that hold all things together. And astronomers tell us that the universe is immensely large and composed mostly of dark matter and energy that we cannot even detect. If, as the eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope put it, we are “Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,” and are “Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err,” how can we ever come to know the truth that Plato envisions? Do you think that humans will ever understand reality? Is ultimate knowledge even possible? Discuss with your group and the class.