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Plato & Socrates

"The unexamined life is not worth living." — Socrates

The son of a wealthy and noble family, Plato was preparing for a career in politics when the trial and eventual execution of Socrates (399 B.C.) changed the course of his life. He abandoned his political career and turned to philosophy, opening a school on the outskirts of Athens dedicated to the Socratic search for wisdom. Plato's school, then known as the Academy, was the first university in western history and operated from 387 B.C. until A.D. 529, when it was closed by Justinian.

Unlike his mentor Socrates, Plato was both a writer and a teacher. His writings are in the form of dialogues, with Socrates as the principal speaker. In the "Allegory of the Cave," Plato described symbolically the predicament in which mankind finds itself and proposes a way of salvation. The Allegory presents, in brief form, most of Plato's major philosophical assumptions: his belief that the world revealed by our senses is not the real world but only a poor copy of it, and that the real world can only be apprehended intellectually; his idea that knowledge cannot be transferred from teacher to student, but rather that education consists in directing student's minds toward what is real and important and allowing them to apprehend it for themselves; his faith that the universe ultimately is good; his conviction that enlightened individuals have an obligation to the rest of society, and that a good society must be one in which the truly wise (the Philosopher-King) are the rulers.

The "Allegory of the Cave" can be found in Book VII of Plato's best-known work, *The Republic*, a dialogue on the nature of justice. Often regarded as a utopian blueprint, *The Republic* is dedicated toward a discussion of the education required of a Philosopher-King.

The following selection is taken from the Benjamin Jowett translation (Vintage, 1991, pp. 253-261.) As you read it try to see the cave Plato describes. Read it like you would the script of a play. It's a dialogue between Socrates and his student, Glaucon. If you're unfamiliar with this piece, give yourself some time to study it.

"For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of your soul. I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but that from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private. This is my teaching."—Socrates

The Republic

The Republic has intrigued and infuriated for thousands of years. Was Plato's plan for an ideal city—a place where philosophers are rulers and wisdom is the cornerstone of society—a blueprint, a satire, or a bit of both?

The Socratic Method

Pioneered by Socrates, the Socratic Method was a series of questions by which Socrates helped his students understand not only the point he was trying to make, but also that they didn't know as much as they thought they did. Socrates developed the method because he thought the youth of Athens needed to learn to think by themselves. He answered every statement with a question, making his students prove why they thought what they did. He often proved them wrong with this method, showing them that their reasoning was flawed. Below is an example of how it works:

Socrates: "What color is this table?"

Student: "It is blue."

Socrates: "And to a blind person, is this table still blue?"

Student: "Yes. I would say that is so."

Socrates: "What makes it blue to a blind person, and not green, or pink, or purple?"

Student: "If the blind person could see, they would see that it's blue, would they not?"

Socrates: "And if the table were in the middle of an empty room where no one could see it; would it still be blue?"

Student: "I don't know. I think so."

Socrates: "What about a dog that is colorblind; is the table still blue if only a dog looks at it?"

Student: "I suppose the table is blue only for the people who see it."

Socrates: "Can we say the table is blue only to those who can see—that color is not a property, but the result of perception?"

Student: "Yes, I think that must be so."

Socrates: "And so is it fair to say that color only exists in a person's mind and is the result of their perception?"

Student: "Yes, I suppose that must be so."

Socrates: "Then would you also agree that it's fair to say this table is not blue, that only your perception of it is blue?"

Socrates proves his point by asking questions. The last question is *rhetorical*, designed *not* to be answered. Socrates asks the question to sum up his argument. The only answer his student can give, when examining the argument Socrates has presented, is *Yes*. The Socratic Method is not about proving people wrong, but challenging assumptions. (Socrates is correct about color and perception)

The Allegory of the Cave

(an excerpt)

Socrates: And now, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: Behold human beings living in a 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, 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; 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.

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.

Socrates: To them 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 some one 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 that will make him turn away to take in the objects of vision that 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 itself. 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.

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 all, he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of it in the water. But he will see it in its own proper place, and not in another, and will contemplate it as it is.

Glaucon: Certainly.

Socrates: He will then proceed to argue that this is that which 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 would first see the sun and then reason about it.

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 be pleased with 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, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

Socrates: Imagine once more, such an 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.

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 loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

Glaucou: No question.

Socrates: This entire allegory, you may now append, dear Glaucou, 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.

Understanding Plato's Allegory

The Greeks had two different words for two fundamentally different kinds of communication. One word, *logos*, referred to the kind of linear and logical communication of the sort that you hear in lectures and in most ordinary conversations, and that you read in most non-fiction books, magazines and newspapers. Their other word, *mythos*, refers to the kind of communication that you hear in poetry, in drama, in song, and in many stories and myths.

Logos strings things out in *linear discourse*,

mythos tries to show things whole, by painting a word picture, or by sculpting, painting, singing, telling a story, or otherwise trying to show things whole.

Mythos, in other words, is different than ordinary daily discourse.

The Greeks felt that *mythos*, as a way of communicating, was able to somehow convey bigger truths and deeper values than could ordinary, logical discourse.

Most *wisdom traditions* around the world have felt the same way and have therefore often communicated their deepest truths in the form of *stories, parables, and powerfully moving mythologies*.

The word *myth*, as the Greeks used it and as we are using it here, clearly does not mean what today's popular culture means when it uses the word *myth*; people today usually use the word to mean only *some untrue account of things*, as in the phrase, "That's just a myth."

We will use the word in the sense that the Greeks used it, *namely to refer to a powerful story or image that attempts to communicate deeper truths that are often difficult to communicate adequately in normal linear, logical discourse*.

In that sense, *Plato's cave is a kind of mythic communication*. It is trying to convey kinds of

truth that are not so easily conveyed in normal discourse.

The question we're considering is: what might some of those truths be?

The story probably has meanings at many different levels.

Plato's concept of *degrees of separation from the real*. When Plato tells the cave story he is also trying to say something about one of his favorite themes, namely, the ways in which we human beings are typically living at multiple “removes” from reality.

Let's recall the image: people in a cave, chained to a wall and watching shadows cast on the back of the cave. This is their whole life. Behind them is a raised walkway on which people walk carrying statues of dogs and table and mountains and books and trees and everything else in the world. Behind the people carrying the statues burns a fire. Its light casts the shadows of the statue onto the wall.

So what the people are actually seeing are *shadows of statues of things*. That is, what they are seeing is something several times removed from what is real—namely *an image of an image of a real thing*.

Then suppose one of the people says something to another person about the shadows they are all watching. *That person will utter some words that represent the shadows of the statues of things. So the words are yet again removed from the real*. Then when the second person hears what the first person has uttered, the second person is hearing a copy of the word that the first person uttered, and that is yet one more remove from the real. If that second person then writes down the words that s/he has heard the first person utter, then those written words are a copied visual replica of the heard words, which are a copy of the spoken words, which are a representation of the shadow of the statue of a thing.

And, Plato believes, this is how we all live: removed from what is real, at *many degrees of separation* from what is ultimately real.

For Plato, the *real* dog (or tree or deer or whatever) that the statue is representing is not itself *ultimately real* either. This individual dog is not really real, for Plato, but is instead just one instance, one expression of the *essence of dogness*. The individual dog is just one example of ***dogness***.

The seeker after wisdom, that unique person in the cave who is dragged out of the cave, in the journey toward understanding, *moves from what is less real toward what is more real*. That journey begins by turning away from the wall of shadows that everyone is engrossed in, i.e., by turning 180 degrees away from where they've all been spending their attention and energy all their lives, and going off *in an opposite direction*. The philosopher then passes from living in a world of shadows, *to now seeing the statues that caused those shadows*, then out of the cave where he sees individual deer and trees and dogs, then finally up the mountain to encounter the sun/pure essence.

This world of essence is, for Plato, the most real world of all.

Plato thinks of our physical world as a kind of shadow world, one that is a little bit real, but not ultimately real. The true philosopher is one who seeks to understand the deeper nature of

things and to not be satisfied with only a surface, superficial, understanding of the nature of what is ultimately real.

Useful Questions

1. What is the story about? What is it saying?
2. Who are the people in the cave?
3. There is one person in the cave who is different than the others, “the philosopher.” What is different about that person?
4. Why does the philosopher leave the cave? What moves him to go out?
5. What does he find outside? What are some of the differences between what is inside and what is outside the cave?
6. Why does he return to the cave? What moves him to return?
7. When he returns, he says something (in Greek) to the others. What do you suppose he is saying?
8. Why do the people in the cave attack him? What provokes them to attack him?
9. “They beat him to death with their own chains.” What’s the symbolism in this sentence as you understand it?
10. *Why do you suppose their chains have no locks on them?* What does that mean?

What kind of people mistake appearances for reality?

Who thinks shadows are real?

What is the cave? What is the prison?

What is the real causes of the shadows?

Is Socrates guilty of corrupting the youth?

Is it about Education?

One interpretation says that it’s all about education, that there is danger when a person moves from the darkness of misunderstanding to the light of knowledge, that there’s a loss of facility before there’s a sense of stability in that new understanding. This is really what it means to talk about experiencing a paradigm shift, there’s a way in which a change in understanding is unnerving, even frightening. Education, at its best is meant to assist a person, or push a person into and through that process. That’s why real learning is not necessarily easy or comfortable. The purpose of education, from Plato’s point of view is not to instill knowledge, but to change behavior and desire... I would say, to change understanding. Plato believes that we’re pursuing happiness in shallow ways, this is what’s symbolized by the prizes and the competition over the shadows. We reward one another for things that do not actually lead to happiness, though we tell ourselves and each other they do.

Plato (and Socrates) believed true happiness can be found only in pursuing virtue and reason. They believe our soul must rule over our appetites and our desires. Socrates was on a quest for self-perfection.

Stages of Understanding

1. **Prisoners:** This is the predicament in which we all find ourselves. Those who are content to remain in the cave, and who have no understanding of their circumstances, no education and no interest in it, are those whose thoughts and perceptions are ruled by appetite and desire. They mistake shadows for reality and are content to manipulate those shadows as if they were real.
2. **Artisans:** After appropriate education, they break free and begin to be ruled only by “necessary desires.” This would be the moment they turn around and see what makes the shadow. Plato believed this education involved gaining an understanding of craft, the ability to craft something like a poem or a piece of music, or the body (perhaps this is why the Olympics), but here he’s putting the focus on creativity and transformation.
3. **Guardians:** He believed the next stage of education was mathematics and science, that this was like leaving the cave, perhaps because one takes the creative impulse they have mastered and uses it to uncover new knowledge and understanding, to discover the world, as Einstein did in discovering relativity or those scientists who led us to our understanding of the big bang and the expanding universe. Plato believed this level of knowledge moved humans from the daily needs to the realm of spiritual needs, changed one’s priorities. This is what allows a person to escape the cave, to decide to see for themselves what is out there.
4. **Philosopher Kings:** Plato believed you could not stop there, however. He believed there was yet another stage of understanding that superseded even this. In this fourth stage one learns philosophy and governance. Plato felt these two elements must move together, that rulers must be philosophers or that philosophers should rule. At this level one is motivated not by the needs of self, but by the desire to serve, that the greatest object of study is goodness itself, that is pursuit of goodness leads to true wisdom. These are the people who return to the cave with the intention of freeing their peers.

Plato believed we self-select into these categories based on our ability to address and work through desire.

Thinking annoys the people who are imprisoned. They prefer to occupy themselves with play and useless activity.

The message: “Do not deceive yourself.” Plato suggests that morality is intentional, not accidental or naive.

The Matrix: A modern take on the Allegory of the Cave

Thousands of years later, is the Allegory of the Cave relevant to our lives today? Do we live in a cave where reality is constructed by someone else? Conversely, is this allegory outdated? Has the internet, public education, and improvements in transportation metaphorically killed the puppeteer? Is our world more transparent than it ever has been? Or less transparent than it's ever been? Or is it probably about the same?

Symbol	Meaning	How does this symbol relate to me?	How can I apply this knowledge?
The Cave			
The Light inside the Cave			
The Prisoners			
The Chains			
The prisoner being dragged			
The philosophic teacher			
The shadows			
The objects that cast the shadows			
The people casting the shadows			
People near the exit of the cave			
Outside of the cave			
