

Plato, Allegory of the Cave, from *The Republic*, adapted for modern readers by Jim Nielson from the translation by C.D.C. Reeve

SOCRATES: If you want to understand education, I'd ask you to compare the effect of being educated versus not being educated to an experience like this. Imagine there are human beings living in an underground, cave-like place, with an entrance a long way up that is open to the outside world and as large as the cave itself. These people have been in this cave since childhood, with their necks and legs chained in such a way that they are stuck in the same spots, able to see only directly in front of them, because their restraints prevent them even from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the prisoners and the fire, there's an elevated road running. Imagine that along this road a low wall has been built.

GLAUCON: Okay, I'm picturing it.

SOCRATES: Now also imagine that there are people travelling along this wall carrying all kinds of things that stick out above the wall. They're carrying statues of people and animals, made of stone, wood, and other materials. Some of these carriers are talking among themselves and some are silent.

GLAUCON: It's a pretty weird scenario you're describing, and a strange kind of prisoners.

SOCRATES: They are like us. To begin with, do you think these prisoners have ever seen anything of themselves and one another apart from the *shadows* that the fire casts on the wall of the cave in front of them?

GLAUCON: How could they, if they can't even turn their heads from side to side?

SOCRATES: What about the things being carried along the wall behind them? Wouldn't it only be the *shadows* of those things that the prisoners have ever seen?

GLAUCON: Right.

SOCRATES: And if the prisoners could communicate with one another, wouldn't they assume that the words they use apply to the shapes they see passing in front of them, not knowing that those are only shadows?

GLAUCON: They would have to.

SOCRATES: What if there was also a reverberation coming from the wall they're staring at in this prison of theirs? When one of the carriers passing along behind them spoke, wouldn't they assume it was the passing shadow that spoke?

GLAUCON: Yeah, I guess they would.

SOCRATES: All in all, then, what the prisoners would take for true reality is nothing but the shadows of those things being carried along behind their backs.

GLAUCON: It would have to be.

SOCRATES: Now think about what it would be like for them if they were somehow released from these bonds and cured of their foolish faith in the shadows. When one of them was freed and suddenly forced to stand up, turn his neck around, walk, and look up toward the light, he would find all these things painful, and he wouldn't be able to see the things whose shadows he had seen before. The sudden brightness of looking directly toward the light would make it hard to see clearly. What would he say if we told him that what he had been seeing up till now had all been silly nonsense, but that now - because he is a bit closer to what is actually going on, and is turned toward things that are more substantial, he is seeing more correctly? And if we pointed to each of the things passing by on the road and demanded that he say what each of them is, wouldn't he be confused at first, and still believe that the things he had seen earlier in the shadows were more truly real than the ones he was being shown now?

GLAUCON: Yes, he would still think the familiar shadows were the more real things.

SOCRATES: And if he were forced to look directly at the light of the fire, wouldn't it hurt his eyes and wouldn't he turn around and run back toward the things he can see comfortably, the shadows, and believe that they are more clear-cut than the new things he is being shown?

GLAUCON: He would.

SOCRATES: And if someone dragged him by force away from there, along the rough, steep, upward path, and did not let him go until he had dragged him out into the light of the sun, wouldn't he be hurt and angry at being treated that way? And when he came into the light, wouldn't he have his eyes filled with sunlight and be unable to see a single one of the *real things* in front of him?

GLAUCON: No, he would not be able to - at least not right away.

SOCRATES: He would need time to get adjusted, if he is going to see the things in the world above. At first, he would still see shadows most easily, then maybe reflections of things in water, and then eventually the things themselves in broad daylight. And it would be easier for him to look up at the sky *at night*, gazing at the light of the stars and the moon, than to look up at the bright sky and the sun during the day.

GLAUCON: Agreed.

SOCRATES: Finally, I suppose, he *would* be able to see the sun itself - not just reflections of it in water or some other place, but the sun just by itself in its own place - and be able to look up at it and see what it's like.

GLAUCON: Yeah, I guess that's right.

SOCRATES: And he would eventually be able to conclude that it provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he and his fellows used to see down in the cave too.

GLAUCON: That would be the next step.

SOCRATES: What about when he thinks about his first dwelling place in the cave, and what had passed for wisdom down there, and his fellow prisoners? Don't you think he would count himself lucky that he had come into the light, and pity the others still down in the cave gazing at the shadows?

GLAUCON: Definitely.

SOCRATES: And if there had been honours or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by; and was best able to remember which shadow usually came first, which often followed it, and which ones typically came along at the same time, with rewards for those who could thus foretell the future of the shadows, do you think that our guy on the surface would still want those rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honoured and held power? Or wouldn't he give anything to avoid their fate?

GLAUCON: Yes, I think he'd probably rather go through anything than live like that.

SOCRATES: So now think about this. If this guy went back down into the cave and sat down in his previous seat, wouldn't his eyes be filled with darkness, coming suddenly out of the sun like that?

GLAUCON: That's right.

SOCRATES: And if he was forced to compete once again with the prisoners in recognizing the shadows, while his sight was still dim and before his eyes had recovered, and if it took some time for him to readjust to the darkness in the cave, wouldn't the other prisoners laugh at him? Wouldn't they say he had come back from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined, and that it was a waste of time even to try that journey? And as for anyone who attempted to free the other prisoners and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they maybe even kill him?

GLAUCON: I guess they might!

[The Platonic interpretation starts here]

SOCRATES: Now think about it this way. The world revealed to us through our senses is like the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside there is like the sun's power. And if you think of the upward journey and the seeing of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the realm of pure thought, you'll get my point - since that's what you wanted to hear about. God alone knows if this is true, but this is how it looks to me: in terms of things the mind can know, the last thing to be seen clearly is *The Good*, and it is seen only with lots of pain, hard work, and difficulty. Once you *have* seen it, though, you have to assume that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in everything, that in the visible realm it produces both light and its source, and that in the mental realm it controls and provides truth and understanding; and that anyone who is to behave sensibly for their own sake or that of society has to be able to get to the point of seeing it.

GLAUCON: I agree, so far as I am able.

SOCRATES: Okay. Then join me in this further thought: you should not be surprised that the ones who get to this point are not willing to occupy themselves with everyday human affairs, but that, on the contrary, their souls are always eager to spend their time above. I mean, that is surely what we would expect, if the image I described before is also accurate in the realm of ideas.

GLAUCON: It is what you would expect.

SOCRATES: What about when someone coming from looking at higher things looks at the evils of everyday existence? Do you think it is surprising that he behaves awkwardly and appears completely ridiculous, if – while he has not yet adjusted to the darkness of ordinary life - he is expected, either in the courts or elsewhere, to compete in disagreements about the *shadows* of justice, or about the statues of which they are the shadows; and to disagree with the way these things are understood by people who have never perceived justice itself in its higher form?

GLAUCON: It is not surprising at all.

SOCRATES: No, anybody with a bit of common sense would keep in mind that our eyes can be confused in two ways and from two causes: when they go from the light into the darkness, or from the darkness into the light. If you imagine that the same applies to the soul, then when we saw a soul disturbed and unable to see something, we would not automatically make fun of them. Instead, we would try to figure out whether the soul had come from a brighter place and was dimmed through not having yet become accustomed to the dark, or from greater ignorance into greater light and was now dazzled by the increased brightness. We would consider the soul who had come from greater light happy in its experience and life, and feel sorry for the one still coming out of the darkness into greater light.

GLAUCON: That makes sense.

SOCRATES: If so, then here is how we must think about these matters: **education** is not what some people boastfully profess it to be. They claim that they can pretty much put knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes.

GLAUCON: Yes, they do seem to think it works like that.

SOCRATES: But here is what this story about the cave shows about this potential to learn that is present in everyone's soul, and the instrument with which each of us learns: **the mind**. Just as an eye cannot be turned around from darkness to light except by turning the whole body, so the mind must be turned away from the material world along with the whole soul, until it can stand to see what really

is, and finally perceive the brightest real thing there is - what we call the good. Isn't that right?

GLAUCON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Of this, then-of this very **turning in a new direction** - there would be a craft concerned with how the instrument of the mind can most easily and effectively be turned around. It's not about putting perception into someone's mind. On the contrary, it takes for granted that perception is there, but not looking the right way, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.

GLAUCON: Makes sense!

