

THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH - PLATO THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

[Plato, *Republic, Book Seven, 514a-520a*, (translated by Oleg Bychkov, Theology Department, St. Bonaventure University)]

SOCRATES: At this point I will show you something about the nature of education and ignorance. Picture the following in your mind. Imagine human beings living in an underground cave-like residence. Its entrance opens up to the light and reaches all along the cave. They have been there since their childhood, their ankles and necks chained, unable to move or turn their heads, forced to look ahead. The light from a fire blazing at a distance comes from above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised walkway. Imagine also a low wall built along the way, similar to the screen that divides puppeteers from the audience and allows them to show puppets over it.

GLAUCON: I picture the scene.

SOCRATES: Now imagine that people walk behind the wall and carry various artifacts that extend above the wall. These artifacts include carvings of humans and other animals made of stone, wood, and other materials. Some of the people carrying these objects are talking, while others are silent.

GLAUCON: You paint a strange picture and describe strange prisoners.

SOCRATES: They are like ourselves. Now do you think they see anything else except their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which light from the fire casts on to the opposite wall of the cave?

GLAUCON: How could they see anything else if they were forced to keep their heads still for their whole life?

SOCRATES: And what would they see of the objects that are being carried? Would they not see only shadows of them as well?

GLAUCON: What else?

SOCRATES: And if they were able to talk to one another, would they not think that the object of their conversation were the shadows they saw in front of them?

GLAUCON: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: And what if an echo bounced off the opposite wall of the prison? Would they not think that when one of the passers-by spoke the voice came from the passing shadow?

GLAUCON: Definitely.

SOCRATES: Such prisoners would think that the truth is nothing but the shadows cast by the artifacts.

GLAUCON: Most certainly.

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SOCRATES: Now imagine what would happen naturally if the prisoners were released from their shackles and cured of their ignorance. Right after they are released and suddenly forced to stand up, turn their necks around, walk, and look towards the light, these activities will cause them pain; because of the bright glare they would be unable to see those things which they previously had seen only as shadows. Now what do you think they would say if one were to tell them that what they saw before was fooling them, but that now, when they are closer to what really exists and when they face that which more truly exists, they see more clearly, in a straightforward manner? What if that person pointed to the objects as they passed and asked the former prisoners to tell him what they were? Don't you think they would be baffled and think that the shadows they formerly saw were truer than the objects that are now being pointed out to them?

GLAUCON: Far truer.

SOCRATES: And if they were forced to look straight at the light, would that not make their eyes hurt? Would they not try to avoid the light and turn back to the things that they can see? And would they not think that in reality the shadows are more clear than the objects they are forced to look at?

GLAUCON: True.

SOCRATES: But what if someone dragged them along a steep and harsh ascent against their will, and did not let go until they were dragged right into the sunlight? Would they not feel pain and discomfort? And if they walked towards the sun and their eyes suddenly filled with brilliant light, would they be able to see even one of those things that are now called true realities?

GLAUCON: No, not right away.

SOCRATES: I think that if they wanted to see the objects of the upper world they would need to grow accustomed to them. First of all, it will be easier for them to see the shadows. After that, they will see the reflections of people and other things in the water, and only after that they will see the objects themselves. After that, they will see celestial objects and the sky itself; it will be easier to see them first at night, by looking at the stars and the light of the moon, than during the day, by looking at the sun or the light of the sun.

GLAUCON: How could it be otherwise?

SOCRATES: Last of all, I think, they will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of it in the water or other media. They will be able to look at the sun itself directly and see it as it is.

GLAUCON: Definitely.

SOCRATES: Now after making all these observations they will conclude that it is the sun that is responsible for the four seasons and the passing of the years, and that it governs all that exists in the visible world, and that in some way the sun was even the cause of all those things that they used to see in the cave.

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GLAUCON: Clearly, they will come to such conclusions after having made those observations.

SOCRATES: What do you think, then? When they recall where they used to live, and the backward wisdom of that place, and the fellow prisoners they once had, would they not think that this change is fortunate for them, and then would they not pity those who stayed behind?

GLAUCON: No question.

SOCRATES: What if some honors, praise, and gifts were bestowed on them by other cave dwellers while they still were in the cave for their superior ability to detect the passing shadows; to remember best in which sequence those shadows usually moved (which of them went before, and which followed after, and which moved together); and to predict how the shadows would move in the future based on their past observations? Do you think they would care for such honors or even envy the ones who were honored and considered powerful among the cave dwellers? Or do you think they would rather choose “to become servants of a poor man,” to quote Homer (Odyssey 11.489-490), and to endure anything, rather than admire such things and live in that way?

GLAUCON: Yes, I think that they would rather suffer anything than accept this sort of life.

SOCRATES: Now imagine this. If such a person goes back down into the cave and ends up back in the same boat as the other prisoners, would her eyes not be filled with darkness after she suddenly comes out of the sun?

GLAUCON: To be sure.

SOCRATES: And what would happen if such a person were once again to compete against the permanent cave dwellers in judging those shadows? Remember that his sight would still be weak before his eyes once again got used to the darkness, and the recovery time could be considerable. Would he not, then, become the butt of jokes, and would they not say about him that up he went and down he came with his eyes totally destroyed, and that it is not advisable even to think of climbing up? And if someone attempted to free another prisoner and then lead him upwards, would they not kill that leader if they could only lay their hands on him?

GLAUCON: No doubt.
