

THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

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 den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; 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.

I see.

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

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

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?

True, he said; How could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

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

Yes, he said.

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

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison has 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?

No question, he replied.

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

That is certain.

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any one of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck around and walk and look towards the fire 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 in 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? As 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?

Far truer.

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 refuge 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?

True, he said.

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent and held fast until he is 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.

Not all in a moment, he said.

He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. 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 then the stars and the spangled heaven and he will see the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Certainly.

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 he will contemplate it as it is.

Certainly.

He will then proceed to argue that this is what determines the season and the years and that it 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?

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

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

Certainly, he would.

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?

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

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?

To be sure, he said.

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 den, 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 to not even think of ascending; if anyone tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender and put him to death.

No question, he said.

This entire allegory, I said, you may 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 . . . 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. The immediate source of reason and truth is in the intellectual, and this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

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

. . . 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. He who remembers this when he sees any one who 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 he is unaccustomed to the dark, or having turned away from darkness, is dazzled by the excess light of day. . . . The best minds must attain that knowledge which we have already shown to be the greatest of all - they must continue to ascend until they have arrived at the good. But when they have ascended and seen enough, they must not be allowed to remain in the upper world. They must be able to descend again among the

Plato's Republic5

prisoners in the den and partake of their labors and honors, whether they are worth having or not Each of you, when his turn comes, must go down to the general underground abode [the world of common, uneducated people] 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 den, 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.