

# Plato

427-347 BC

The Greek thinkers who created rational philosophy in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC were obsessed with the problems of permanence and change. They were convinced that the mind could have real knowledge only of what was permanent, unchanging, and undifferentiated. The senses, however, show us a chaotic world of individual things in constant flux; how can we, then, have a real knowledge of anything? The Greek assault on this problem culminated in the philosophy of Plato. Plato taught that the things of this world, which we know as particulars through the evidence of the senses, are but imperfect copies of the "ideas" or "forms" of things, and he sometimes spoke of these "ideas" or "forms" as existing in another, ideal world beyond the senses. Real knowledge for Plato (as opposed to mere "opinion") is always knowledge of the pure, eternal, unchanging forms. Trapped as we are in this illusory world of matter and the senses, our knowledge of the world of forms is strictly limited. Yet, through proper education, philosophical study, and contemplation, souls can attain a dim intellectual understanding of the forms, much as we come to know the truths of mathematics and logic.

This difficult theory of knowledge also determined Plato's political and ethical beliefs. Good government is possible only under the rule of philosopher-kings who have raised themselves to contemplate the real world of the forms, where alone the absolute idea of "the Good" is to be found.

In the following extract, Plato presents all these difficult ideas in the form of an allegory. It is the famous passage from Plato's *Republic* known as the "Allegory of the Cave." In this word-picture the character Socrates (who expresses the view of Plato) is trying to explain to two young men, Glaucon and Adeimantus (the names of Plato's brothers in real life), the difference between "opinion" and "knowledge" and the importance of this issue for determining the best form of government for a city or state. Socrates describes a group of prisoners in a cave, who falsely take the flickering shadows on the wall for true reality. They are like most people in the world; they have only "opinion" about things because they know them only through the world of appearances, of the senses. The prisoner who escapes upward to the light of the sun and of real objects gains "knowledge"; he corresponds to the Philosopher who, through study and contemplation, succeeds in making contact with the ideal world of the Forms.

Plato goes on to draw out the implications of this story for education and for politics. Education he says through the Socrates character, is not to be seen as putting sight into blind eyes, but turning the eyes toward the light. The eyes, of course, represent the human mind; education consists not of putting something into it, so much as getting it headed in the right direction. Similarly, the best government is possible only when it is in the hands of those who have seen the Form of "the Good," *i.e.*, those who have escaped from the cave to the light of the sun. Of course, those who have once seen the Form of "the Good" will want to spend their lives contemplating it and not wish to return to the darkness of the cave; they will not want to rule, and Plato suggests that anyone who seeks political power voluntarily is unfit to exercise it. The philosopher-kings will have to be

especially brought up to their tasks and, if necessary, **forced** for the good of the whole commonwealth to rule. The intellectual, Plato insists, has a moral duty to assist those who have not yet seen the light.

### Review Questions

1. Why would the prisoner who escaped from the cave at first be blinded upon leaving the cave?
2. Why might the prisoner seem awkward and become a laughing stock if he reentered the cave?
3. Why would his fellow prisoners ridicule or even kill the prisoner who had been out of the cave and returned? How would they kill him? With hemlock? Crucify him? Put him in an insane asylum?
4. Why is democracy not a viable form of government for Plato? Could the execution of Socrates have influenced his views on this question?

### Issues For Discussion

1. Plato and the Presocratics agreed that absolute knowledge was possible only of things that were eternal and unchanging. Do we agree today with this point of view? Why do you think they might have held it? Are there any things in the universe which we hold to be eternal and unchanging? Can you suggest some?
2. Plato's theory of knowledge insists that the evidence of the senses is not reliable and that there is more to reality than what we can discover through the senses. Do you think this is true? Do we have knowledge which we did not gain through our senses, and if so, what kinds? Our knowledge of God (if we believe we have it)? Of the laws of logic? Of mathematical and geometrical truths? Of our own existence?
3. If Plato's theory of government is right, is our system of government wrong? What, if anything, is wrong with Plato's ideal of rule by philosopher-kings? Could we improve the Government of Canada by replacing the Parliament with a council of fifty leading philosophy professors, appointed for life and given absolute power? What could be expected from this new government? Would it be better or worse than the old one?

**Characters:**

SOCRATES

GLAUCON (*Plato's brother in real life*)

**The Allegory of the Cave**

[Socrates] Next, let us compare our nature, regarding education and its lack, to a situation such as this. Consider men living in an underground cavern with a long entrance whose entire width is open to the light. They have lived here since childhood, chained by the leg and neck, so that they must remain in the same spot; they can only look forward, prevented by the chains from turning their heads. A fire burns higher up and some distance behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners, and above them, is a road, along which has been built a wall, just as puppeteers have a wall that hides them while they display their marionettes above it.

[Glaucou] I see.

[Soc] Now imagine men behind this wall carrying various artificial objects, including images of men and animals in wood or stone or other materials, which rise above the wall. Some of these men will naturally be speaking while others are silent.

[Gl] You speak of a strange picture and strange prisoners.

[Soc] Like us; for in the first place would such prisoners have seen anything of themselves or of each other, except the shadows cast by the fire on the cave wall in front of them?

[Gl] How could they, if they were prevented from moving their heads their entire lives?

[Soc] And would the same be true of the objects carried past, that they would see nothing?

[Gl] Of course.

[Soc] Now if they could talk to each another, would

they not suppose that in naming what they saw, that they were naming the passing objects?

[Gl] Necessarily.

[Soc] And imagine further their prison had an echo from the opposite wall; when one of those passing behind them spoke, do you think they would suppose anything other than that the passing shadow was the speaker?

[Gl] By Zeus, I don't.

[Soc] In every way, then, such prisoners would think reality was nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects.

[Gl] Inevitably.

[Soc] Now consider their release from the chains and the healing of their folly if it should happen in this way. When one of them is released and then forced to stand up suddenly and to turn his head and to walk and to lift his eyes to the light, he would feel pain in doing these things and would be unable, because of the dazzling light, to make out the objects whose shadows were all he had previously seen. What do you think he would say if someone told him that what he had previously seen was empty illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned towards more real objects, he was seeing things more truly? And then suppose that someone showed him each of the passing objects and forced him, through questioning, to say what each is. Do you not think this man would be at a loss and that he would judge what he had previously seen as more real than what was now shown him?

[Gl] More real by far.

[Soc] And if this man were forced to look at the light itself, wouldn't his eyes hurt, and wouldn't he try to escape and turn back to the things which he could make out clearly, and judge that they really were clearer than the objects now being shown to him?

[Gl] Yes.



[Soc] And if someone were to drag him away from there and force him up the rough and steep ascent and not release him until he had drawn him out into the sunlight, would this man not find such a situation painful and unwelcome? And when he had come into the light, wouldn't his eyes be so full of its radiance that he would not be able to see a single one of those things that were now called real?

[Gl] He certainly wouldn't be able to see them immediately.

[Soc] I suppose he would need a period of adjustment to see the things in that higher world. And at first he would most easily make out shadows, and afterward likenesses of men and other things as reflections in the water. Later he would make out the things themselves. And from these he would more easily contemplate the things in the heavens and even sky itself, looking by night at the light of the stars and the moon, than by looking at the sun and its light by day.

[Gl] Yes, surely.

[Soc] And finally, I suppose, this man would be able to look at the sun itself and discern its true nature, not as a reflection in the water or any other foreign medium, but by itself and in its own place.

[Gl] Yes, indeed.

[Soc] And next, he would conclude it is this that produces the seasons and the courses of the year and that controls all things in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all things they had seen.

[Gl] It is clear that this would be the next step.

[Soc] Then if he recalled his previous dwelling and what passed for wisdom among his fellow prisoners, do you not think this man would consider himself happy for the change and pity the others?

[Gl] Yes.

[Soc] And perhaps there were some honours or commendations which they used to bestow on each other and prizes for the man who is most keen in making out the shadows as they pass by and who best remembers their sequence and what accompanies what so that he is best at guessing what would come next. Do you think the released prisoner would envy or try to emulate those who were so honoured? Or would he not feel like Achilles in

Homer's *Odyssey*, that he would much prefer to live on the earth as a serf for someone else, a landless man suffering anything, than to live with the prisoners in his former way?

[Gl] Yes, I think he would rather suffer anything than receive a life such as that.

[Soc] And now consider this. If this man went back down into the cave and took his previous seat, would his eyes be filled with darkness, since he had suddenly come out of the sunlight?

[Gl] Certainly.

[Soc] Now if he again had to offer opinions about these shadows, contending with the prisoners who had ever remained in chains, while his vision was still dim and before his eyes had time to adjust to the darkness (and it may take a long time to accustom himself), would they not laugh at him? Would they not say of him that he returned with his eyes ruined and that even to attempt such a journey was not worthwhile? If they were able to lay hands on the man trying to free them and lead them out, would they not kill him? [Note that this is an allusion, by Plato, to Socrates' fate—tr]

[Gl] Yes, they would.

[Soc] This image, my dear Glaucon, is entirely applicable to what we have been saying. The region revealed through sight corresponds to dwelling in the prison, and the light of the fire in it is likened to the power of the sun. If you think the ascent to the upper world and the contemplation of things in it stands for the journey of the soul to the intelligible region, you would not be wrong since that is what you wish to hear. But the god knows whether this is true. But this, at any rate, is how it appears to me. In the world of knowledge is the idea of The Good, the last to be perceived and only with difficulty; once it is perceived, it is necessary to conclude that it is indeed the cause of all that is right and beautiful. In the visible world it gives birth to light and the author of light; in the intelligible world it is itself author of truth and reason. It is necessary that anyone acting wisely, either in private or in public life, must have seen this.

[Gl] I agree, so far as I can understand your point.

[Soc] Come then, and see if you also agree that it is no wonder that those who have come this far are not willing to occupy themselves with the affairs of men, but their

souls are always striving to spend time in the upper world; indeed this could not be otherwise if our allegory holds true.

[Gl] That is likely.

[Soc] And do you think it strange if someone coming from the contemplation of divine things to the miseries of human things seems awkward and especially ridiculous if, still blinking and before he has become accustomed to the darkness, he must in courtrooms or elsewhere dispute about the shadows of justice or the images that cast these shadows and debate the notions of what is right with those who have never seen justice itself?

[Gl] Not at all strange.

[Soc] But a sensible man would remember that there are two disturbances of the eyes, arising from two causes: moving from light to darkness, and from darkness to light. Thinking that the same thing also happens to the soul, whenever he might see a soul disturbed and unable to perceive something, he would not laugh thoughtlessly; instead he would observe whether coming from a brighter life its unaccustomed vision was obscured by the darkness, or whether coming from a deeper ignorance into a brighter world it is dazzled by the brilliance of a more powerful light. Only after that would he consider the former happy in its experience and life, and the latter would he pity; and if it did please him to laugh at it, that would be less ridiculous than laughing at the soul that had come down from the light above.

[Gl] That's a very fair statement.

[Soc] If this is true, then, this is what we must conclude: that education is not what certain people say it is, those who claim that they can put knowledge into a soul which does not possess it, as if they could put sight into blind eyes.

[Gl] They do indeed say that.

[Soc] But our present argument suggests that this innate power of the soul and the instrument with which each of us understands, is more like the eye that could not be converted to light from darkness unless the whole body was turned. Just so, the entire soul must be turned away from the world of becoming until it can contemplate the world of being and the brightest region of being, which is what we call The Good, is it not.

[Gl] It is.

[Soc] There may be an art to accomplish this very thing, a quick and most effective conversion of the soul, not of causing it to see but, assuming that it has vision but does not properly direct it and that it does not look where it should, an art of bringing this about.

[Gl] That may be so.

[Soc] The other so-called virtues of the soul appear to be similar to those of the body; where they do not exist beforehand, they are later created by character and practice. But wisdom is certainly of some more divine quality, as it seems, something that never loses its power, but whether it is useful and good or useless and harmful depends upon the way toward which it is turned. Have you ever noticed in those who are called dishonest, but are in fact wise, how keenly the little soul sees and how quickly it discerns that toward which it is turned? Thus it is not that the soul has poor vision, but that the vision is forcibly turned toward evil so that the keener its sight, the more evil it may work.

[Gl] Quite true.

[Soc] However, if this part of such a soul hammered from childhood and been freed of the lead weights, as it were, of our being, which attach themselves by food and by similar pleasures and gluttonies turning the vision of the soul downwards; if, freed from these, the soul were turned towards the things that are true and real, the same faculty of the same men would have been as keen in seeing truth as it is in seeing the things to which it is now turned.

[Gl] Yes, it is likely.

[Soc] Is it not also likely and indeed necessary following what has been said that neither could uneducated men or those inexperienced in truth ever properly govern the polis, nor could those who spend their time in the pursuit of culture? The ignorant have no single aim and purpose in life toward which all their public and private actions must be directed, and the others will not willingly take action, supposing that they have been translated to the Islands of the Blest while still alive.

[Gl] True.

[Soc] It is our duty as founders, then, to compel the best natures to reach the knowledge that we have called

the best, to know The Good, and to climb the ascent; and when they have made that ascent and have looked long enough, we must not allow what is presently permitted.

[GI] What is that?

[Soc] That they should remain there refusing to go down again among the prisoners and share their labours and honours, no matter how much they are worth.

[GI] Will we not be doing them an injustice, if we make them live a worse life when they are able to live a better one?

[Soc] You have forgotten again, my friend, that the law is not concerned with the happiness of any one class in the polis, but is striving to engender this in the polis as a whole, harmonizing the citizens by persuasion and compulsion requiring them to share any benefits with each other that might contribute to the entire polis. And they should produce such men in the polis, not so that each might go in whatever direction he wishes, but so that they might be used to bind together the polis.

[GI] True, I had forgotten.

[Soc] You will see, then, Glaucon, that we will not be committing an injustice to the philosophers arising among us, but that we are acting properly toward them, forcing them to watch over and guard their fellow citizens. For we will say to them that men similar to them, arising in other cities, do not share in the labours there. They have grown up spontaneously, in spite of their governments; and it is right that the self-sprung, owing their upbringing to none, should refuse to pay the price for their nurture. But we have engendered you, we would say, for yourselves and for the polis to be kingbees and leaders of the hive; you have been better and more fully educated and are better able to share both ways of life [to be men of thought and of action]. You must go down again, each in turn, to the dwellings of the others and grow accustomed to observing the obscure things. For once accustomed, you will see infinitely better than those who dwell there and you will know what each of the images is and what it represents, because you have seen the reality of the beautiful, the just and The Good. Thus our polis will be governed by us and you awake, not as if in a dream as most cities are now darkly ruled by men who fight among themselves for shadows and rule as if it were some great good; the truth is that the polis in which those who are to rule are least eager for it is necessarily administered best and most free from conflict, while the polis ruled by the opposite type will turn out

opposite.

[GI] Quite true.

[Soc] Then do you think our pupils will be unwilling to listen to us and choose not to share in the work of the polis, each in his turn, even though they may live together for most of their time in a purer air?

[GI] Impossible, since we will be placing fair demands on fair men. No doubt, they will look at ruling as an unavoidable necessity, contrary to those who presently rule in each polis.

[Soc] The truth is, my friend, if you can find a better way of life than office-holding for those who are destined to rule, then it is possible that you can have a well governed polis. Only in that state will power be in the hands of those who are rich, not in gold, but in the wealth that creates happiness—a good and wise life. But if, as beggars and starving from lack of any goods of their own, men come to governing, thinking thus to seize some good, then a well-governed polis is not possible. For when rule becomes the object of struggle, such civil and internecine strife destroys both the office seeker and the polis itself.

[GI] Most true.

[Soc] Can you name any other type of life that scorns political office except the life of a true philosopher?

[GI] By Zeus, I cannot.

[Soc] But it is necessary that those who enter upon rule should not be lovers of rule. Otherwise, rival lovers will fight.

[GI] Of course.

[Soc] What others would you compel to assume guardianship of the polis, than those who are most enlightened concerning what is necessary for good government and who have other honours and a way of life better than politics?

[GI] There is indeed no other choice.

[From Plato, *The Republic*, tr. J. Geysen, 2001]