



## THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

An Excerpt from Book VII of the Republic

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## THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

18 Introduction

19

20 *Socrates is talking to a young follower of his named Glaucon, and is telling him*  
21 *this fable to illustrate what it's like to be a philosopher -- a lover of wisdom*

22

23 And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or  
24 unenlightened: --Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth  
25 open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their  
26 childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only  
27 see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above  
28 and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners  
29 there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like  
30 the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the  
31 puppets.

32

33 *I see.*

34

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

38

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

40

41 Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one  
42 another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

43

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44           *True, how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed*  
45           *to move their heads?*

46

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

49

50           *Yes.*

51

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

54

55           *Very true.*

56

57   And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would  
58   they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they  
59   heard came from the passing shadow?

60

61           *No question.*

62

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

64

65           *That is certain.*

66

67   And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and  
68   disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly  
69   to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer  
70   sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which

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71 in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him,  
72 that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to  
73 being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, -what  
74 will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the  
75 objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, -- will he not be perplexed? Will he  
76 not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are  
77 now shown to him?

78

79 *Far truer.*

80

81 And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes  
82 which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see,  
83 and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being  
84 shown to him?

85

86 *True.*

87

88 And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and  
89 held fast until he 's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be  
90 pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will  
91 not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

92

93 *Not all in a moment.*

94

95 He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see  
96 the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the  
97 objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the

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98 spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the  
99 light of the sun by day?

100

101 *Certainly.*

102

103 Last of he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he  
104 will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as  
105 he is.

106

107 *Certainly.*

108

109 He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the  
110 guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things  
111 which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

112

113 *Certainly, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.*

114

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

118

119 *Certainly he would.*

120

121 And if they were in the habit of conferring honors among themselves on those who were  
122 quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and  
123 which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw

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124 conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honors and glories,  
125 or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer,

126

127 *Better to be the poor servant of a poor master, and to*  
128 *endure anything, rather than think as they do and live*  
129 *after their manner?*

130

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

133

134 Imagine once more, I said, such an one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in  
135 his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

136

137 *To be sure.*

138

139 And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the  
140 prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak, and before  
141 his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new  
142 habit of sight might be very considerable) would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of  
143 him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to  
144 think of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let  
145 them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

146

147 *No question.*

148

149

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150 This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous  
151 argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you  
152 will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul  
153 into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have  
154 expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion  
155 is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only  
156 with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things  
157 beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the  
158 immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon  
159 which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye  
160 fixed.

161

162

163 **THE END**

164