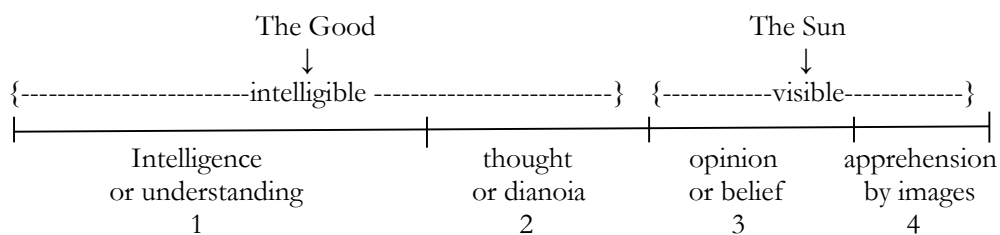


## Plato's Cave

The story that Socrates tells in the seventh book of the *Republic*, popularly known as “The Cave”, outlines in accessible terms the Platonic view of the nature of reality and our own understanding of it. To put the passage in context, Plato’s ideal philosopher has put forward differences of focus between non-philosophers and what he considers to be true philosophers: the former are called “lovers of sights and sound” because while valuing beauty and goodness, for example, as they appear in material manifestation, they don’t consider these (amongst other things) as having an independent reality in themselves in the eternal order.

In an attempt to explain the origin of eternal ideas, Socrates goes right back to the First Principle which he compares to the Sun – in just the same way that the Sun brings all living things on Earth into existence, and also gives light which allows us to see those things, so the First Principle (which he calls “the Good”) gives existence to the eternal ideas of the upper realm – the intelligible order – and also unfolds the light of truth which allows our mind to perceive those ideas.

He then uses a further image of the levels of reality and their matching levels of our perceptions – a figure now known as the “divided line” – a fourfold order of things and faculties which sit beneath the Good and which range from the highest to the lowest of our experiences. The lowest level is a kind of shadowy sort of reality, which we think about through what might be called “image-thinking”; moving up one level, we have appearances of material objects which we view with sense and opinion. Moving up to the next level we have partial elements of immaterial reality which are not tied to appearances but are still somewhat obscure and hypothetical approached by reasoning; finally, we have the forms which spring directly from the Good, and which are approached by non-hypothetical reasoning and intuition which at its purest allows us to contact – in some fashion – to the light emerging from the Good.



**Socrates:** After these things now compare, with reference to understanding and lack of understanding, our nature to such a condition as follows. Consider men as in a subterraneous habitation, resembling a cave, with its entrance expanding to the light, and answering to the whole extent of the cave. Suppose them to have been in this cave from their childhood, with chains both on their legs and necks, so as to remain there, and only be able to look in front them, but by the chain incapable to turn their heads round. Suppose them likewise to have the light of a fire, burning far above and behind them; and that between the fire and the fettered men there is a road above. Along this road, observe a low wall built, like that which hedges in the stage of puppeteers on which they exhibit their wonderful tricks.

c **Glaucon:** I observe it.

**Socrates:** Behold now, along this wall, men bearing all sorts of artefacts, raised above the wall, and human statues, and other animals, in wood and stone, and furniture of every kind.  
515a And, as is likely, some of those who are carrying these are speaking, and others silent.

**Glaucon:** You mention a wonderful comparison, and wonderful fettered men.

**Socrates:** But such, however, as resemble us; for, in the first place, do you think that such as these see anything of themselves, or of one another, but the shadows formed by the fire, falling on the opposite part of the cave?

b **Glaucon:** How can they if through the whole of life they be under a necessity, at least, or having their heads unmoved?

**Socrates:** But what do they see of what is being carried along? Is it not the very same?

**Glaucon:** Why not?

**Socrates:** If then they were able to converse with one another, do not you think they would deem it proper to give names to those very things which they saw before them?

**Glaucon:** Of necessity they must.

**Socrates:** And what if the opposite part of this prison had an echo, when any of those who passed along spoke, do you imagine they would reckon that what spoke was anything else than the passing shadow?

**Glaucon:** Not I, by Zeus!

c **Socrates:** Such as these then will entirely judge that there is nothing true but the shadows of artefacts.

**Glaucon:** By an abundant necessity.

**Socrates:** With reference then, both to their freedom from these chains, and their cure of this ignorance, consider the nature of it, if such a thing should happen to them. When any one should be loosed, and obliged on a sudden to rise up, turn round his neck, and walk and look up towards the light; and in doing all these things should be pained, and unable, from the splendours, to behold the things of which he formerly saw the shadows, what do you think he would say, if one should tell him that formerly he had seen trifles, but now,  
d being somewhat nearer to reality, and turned toward what was more real, he saw with more rectitude; and so, pointing out to him each of the things passing along, should question him, and oblige him to tell what it were; do not you think he would be both in doubt, and would deem what he had formerly seen to be more true than what was now pointed out to him?

e **Glaucon:** By far.

**Socrates:** And if he should oblige him to look to the light itself, would not he find pain in his eyes, and shun it; and, turning to such things as he is able to behold, reckon that these are really more clear than those pointed out?

**Glaucou:** Just so.

516a **Socrates:** But if one should drag him from thence violently through a rough and steep ascent, and never stop till he drew him up to the light of the sun, would he not, whilst he was thus drawn, both be in torment, and be filled with indignation? And after he had even come to the light, having his eyes filled with splendour, he would be able to see none of these things now called true.

**Glaucou:** He would not, immediately at least.

**Socrates:** But he would require, I think, to be accustomed to it some time, if he were to perceive things above. And, first of all, he would most easily perceive shadows, afterwards the images of men and of other things in water, and after that *the things themselves*. And, with reference to these, he would more easily see the things in the heavens, and the heavens themselves, by looking in the night to the light of the stars, and the moon, than by day looking on the sun, and the light of the sun.

b **Glaucou:** How can it be otherwise?

**Socrates:** And, last of all, he may be able, I think, to perceive and contemplate the sun himself, not in water, not resemblances of him, in a foreign seat, but himself by himself, in his own proper region.

**Glaucou:** Of necessity.

c **Socrates:** And after this, he would now reason with himself concerning him, that it is he who gives the seasons, and years, and governs all things in the visible place; and that of all those things which he formerly saw, he is in a certain manner the cause.

**Glaucou:** It is evident that after these things he may arrive at such reasonings as these.

**Socrates:** But what? when he remembers his first habitation, and the wisdom which was there, and those who were then his companions in bonds, do you not think he will esteem himself happy by the change, and pity them?

**Glaucou:** And that greatly.

d **Socrates:** And if there were there any honours and accolades and rewards among themselves, for him who most acutely perceived what passed along, and best remembered which of them were likely to pass first, which latter, and which of them went together; and from these observations were most able to predict what was to happen; does it appear to you that he will be desirous of such honours, or envy those who among these are honoured, and in power? Or, will he not rather wish to suffer that of Homer, and vehemently desire

As labourer to some ignoble man

To work for hire . . . . .

and rather suffer any thing than to possess such opinions, and live after such a manner?

e **Glaucou:** I think so, that he would suffer, and embrace anything rather than live in that manner.

**Socrates:** But consider this further: If such an one should descend, and sit down again in the same seat, would not his eyes be filled with darkness, in consequence of coming suddenly from the sun?

517a **Glaucou:** Very much so.

**Socrates:** And should he now again be obliged to give his opinion of those shadows, and to dispute about them with those who are there eternally chained, whilst yet his eyes were dazzled, and before they recovered their former state, (which would not be effected in a short time) would he not afford them laughter? and would it not be said of him, that, having ascended, he was returned with ruined eyes, and that it was not proper even to attempt to go above, and that whoever should attempt to liberate them, and lead them up, if ever they were able to get him into their hands, should be put to death?

**Glaucou:** They would by all means put him to death.

b **Socrates:** The whole of this image now, friend Glaucou, is to be applied to our preceding discourse: for, if you compare this region, which is seen by the sight, to the habitation of the prison; and the light of the fire in it, to the power of the sun; and the ascent above, and the vision of things above, to the soul's ascent into the intelligible place; you will apprehend my meaning, since you want to hear it. But God knows whether it be true. Appearances then present themselves to my view as follows. In the intelligible place, the idea of *the good*  
c is the final object of vision, and is scarcely to be seen; but if it be seen, we must collect by reasoning that it is the cause to all of everything right and beautiful, generating in the visible place, light, and its lord the sun; and in the intelligible place, it is itself the lord, producing truth and intellect; and this must be beheld by him who is to act wisely, either privately or in public.

**Glaucou:** I agree with you, as far as I am able.

**Socrates:** Come now and agree with me likewise in this. And do not wonder that such as arrive hither are unwilling to act in human affairs but their souls always hasten to converse with things above; for it is somehow reasonable it should be so, if these things take place  
d according to our above-mentioned image.

**Glaucou:** It is indeed reasonable.

517d **Socrates:** But what? do you think that this is anything wonderful, that when a man comes from divine contemplations to human evils, he should behave awkwardly and appear extremely ridiculous, whilst he is yet dazzled, and is obliged, before he is sufficiently accustomed to the present darkness, to contend in courts of justice, or elsewhere, about  
e the shadows of justice, or those statues which occasion the shadows; and to dispute about this point, how these things are apprehended by those who have never at any time beheld justice itself?

**Glaucou:** This is not at all wonderful.

518a **Socrates:** But if a man possesses intellect, he must remember, that there is a twofold disturbance of the sight, and arising from two causes, when we betake ourselves from light to darkness, and from darkness to light: and when a man considers that these very things happen with reference also to the soul, whenever he sees any one disturbed, and unable to perceive anything, he will not laugh in an unreasonable manner, but will consider, whether the soul, coming from a more splendid life, be darkened by ignorance, or, going from abundant ignorance to one more luminous, be filled with the dazzling splendour, and so  
b will congratulate the one on its fate and life, and pity the life and fate of the other. And if he wishes to laugh at the soul that goes from darkness to light, his laughter would be less improper, than if he were to laugh at the soul which descends from the light to darkness.

**Glaucou:** You say very reasonably.

**Socrates:** It is proper then that we judge of them after such a manner as this, if those things be true. That education is not such a thing as some declare it to be; for they  
c somehow say, that whilst there is no knowledge in the soul, they will insert it, as if they were inserting sight in blind eyes.

**Glaucou:** They say so.

**Socrates:** But our present reasoning now shows, that this power being in the soul of every one, and the organ by which every one learns, and being in the same condition as the eye, which cannot turn around except it do so with the whole body, in order to move from darkness to light, must, in like manner, with the whole soul, be turned from generation, till it be able to endure the contemplation of being itself, and the supreme reality we call *the good*. Do we not?

d **Glaucou:** We do.

**Socrates:** This then would appear to be the art of his conversion, in what manner he shall, with greatest ease and advantage, be turned. Not to implant in him the power of seeing, but considering him as possessed of it, only improperly situated, and not looking at what he ought, to contrive some method by which this may be accomplished.

**Glaucou:** It seems so.

**Socrates:** The other virtues now then of the soul, as they are called, seem to be somewhat resembling those of the body (for when, in reality, to begin with they were not in it, they are afterwards produced in it by habits and exercises); but that of wisdom, as it seems,  
e happens to be of a nature somewhat more divine than any other; as it never loses its power, but, according as it is turned, is useful and advantageous, or useless and hurtful. Or have you not observed of those who are said to be wicked, yet wise, how sharply the little soul  
519a sees, and how acutely it comprehends everything to which it is turned, as having no contemptible sight, but compelled to be subservient to wickedness: so that the more acutely it sees, so much the more productive is it of wickedness?

**Glaucou:** Entirely so.

**Socrates:** But however with reference to this part of such a genius; if, immediately from  
b childhood, it should be stripped of everything allied to generation, as leaden weights, and of all those pleasures and lusts which relate to feasting and such like, which turn the sight

of the soul to things downwards; from all these, if the soul, being freed, should turn itself towards truth, the very same principle in the same men would most acutely see those things as it now does these to which it is turned.

**Glaucou:** It is likely.

**Socrates:** But what? is not this likely and necessarily deduced from what has been mentioned? that neither those who are uninstructed and unacquainted with truth can ever sufficiently take care of the city; nor yet those who allow themselves to spend the whole of their time in learning. The former, because they have no one goal in life, at which all their actions, both in private and in public, are aimed; and the latter, because they are not willing to manage civil affairs, thinking that whilst they live this life yet they have emigrated to the islands of the blessed.

**Glaucou:** True.

**Socrates:** It is our business then to oblige those of the inhabitants who have the best geniuses, to apply to that learning which we formerly said was the greatest, both to view *the good*, and to ascend that ascent; and when they have ascended, and sufficiently viewed it, we are not to allow them what is now allowed them.

**Glaucou:** What is that?

**Socrates:** To continue there and be unwilling to descend again to those fettered men, or share with them in their toils and honours, whether more trifling or more important.

**Glaucou:** Shall we then act unjustly towards them, and make them live a worse life when they have it in their power to live a better?

**Socrates:** You have again forgot, friend that this is not the legislator's concern, in what manner any one tribe in the city shall live remarkably happy; but this he endeavours to effectuate in the whole city, connecting the citizens together; and by necessity, and by persuasion, making them share the advantage with one another with which they are severally able to benefit the community: and the legislator, when he makes such men in the city, does it not that he may permit them to go where each may incline, but that himself may employ them for connecting the city together.

**Glaucou:** True, I forgot, indeed.

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### Proclus on the Cave – from his *Scholia on the Republic*

Everything in this cave is analogous to things visible; the men, animals and furniture of every kind in it corresponding to the third, and the shadows in it, and the images appearing in mirrors, to the fourth section in the division of a line at the end of the preceding book. Things sensible also are imitations of things dianoëtic, or, in other words, of the objects of scientific energy, which form the second section of Plato's line. For the circle and triangle which are described upon paper are imitations of those which geometry considers; and the numbers which are beheld in things visible, of those which the arithmetician contemplates; and so with respect to everything else. But observe that Plato here does not consider human life so far as it is essence, and is allotted a particular power, but merely with reference to erudition and the want of erudition. For in the ninth book he assimilates our essence to an animal whose nature is mingled from a man and a lion, and a certain many-headed beast. But the present image in the first place shows what human life is

without real learning, and what it will be when educated conformably to the above-mentioned sections, and acquiring knowledge corresponding to that arrangement.

In the next place, when Plato says that we must conceive a road above between the fire and the fettered men, and that the fire from on high illuminates the men bearing utensils, and the fettered men, who see nothing but the shadows formed by the fire, it is evident that there is a certain ascent in the cave itself from a more abject to a more elevated life. By this ascent, he signifies the contemplation of dianoëtic objects, (which form the second section of his line,) in the mathematical disciplines. For as the shadows in the cave correspond to the shadows of visible objects, and visible objects are the immediate images of dianoëtic forms, or the essential reasons of the soul, it is evident that the objects from which these shadows are formed must correspond to such as are dianoëtic. It is requisite therefore, that the dianoëtic power, exercising itself in these, should draw forth from their latent retreats the reasons of these which she contains, and should contemplate these, not in images, but as subsisting in herself in impartible involution; which when she evolves, she produces such a beautiful multitude of mathematical theorems.

After these things, he says "that the man who is to be led from the cave will more easily see what the heavens contain, and the heavens themselves, by looking in the night to the light of the stars, and the moon, than by day looking on the sun, and the light of the sun." By this he signifies the contemplation of intelligibles: for the stars and their light are imitations of intelligibles, so far as all of them partake of the form of the sun, in the same manner as intelligibles are characterized by the nature of *The Good*. These then such a one must contemplate, that he may understand their essence, and those summits of their nature by which they are deiform processions from the ineffable principle of things. But if as prior to the vision of the sun it is requisite to behold the whole heaven, and all that the heavens contain; in the same manner prior to the vision of *The Good*, it is necessary to behold the whole intelligible order and all that it comprehends, we may from hence collect that some things in intelligibles are analogous to the whole starry spheres, but others to the stars which those spheres comprehend, and others again to the circles in them. Hence too, the spheres themselves, considered as wholes, may be said to be images of those Gods that are celebrated as total; but the circles, of those that are called total, and at the same time partial; and the stars, of those that are properly denominated partial Gods.

After the contemplation of these, and after the eye is through these accustomed to the light, as it is requisite in the visible region to see the sun himself in the last place, in like manner, according to Plato, the idea of *The Good* must be seen the last in the intelligible region. He likewise adds, in a truly divine manner, that it is scarcely to be seen; for we can only be conjoined with it through the intelligible, in the vestibule of which it is beheld by ascending souls. The intelligible indeed is the first participant of *The Good*, and indicates from itself to those that are able to behold it, what that nature is, if it be lawful so to speak, which is the super-intelligible cause of the light it contains. For the light in an intelligible essence is more divine than that in intellectual natures, in the same manner as the light in the stars is more divine than that which is in the eyes that behold them. Thus also Socrates, in the *Philebus*, says, that *The Good* is apprehended with difficulty, and is scarcely to be seen, and that it is found with three monads, and these intelligible, arranged in its vestibule, *truth, beauty, and symmetry*. For these three produce the first being, or being itself, and through these the whole intelligible order is unfolded into light. With great propriety, therefore, does Plato assert, that the idea of *The Good* is to be seen the last thing in the intelligible; for the intelligible is the seat of its vision. Hence it is seen in this, as in its first participant, though it is beyond every intelligible. And in the last place Plato exhorts him who knows *The Good*, "to collect by reasoning that it is the cause to all of everything right and beautiful, in the visible place generating light, and its lord the sun, and in the intelligible place being itself the lord of all things, producing intellect and truth." For, if it generates the sun, it must by a much greater priority be the cause of those things which originate from the sun; and if it is the cause of essence to intelligibles, it must be celebrated as in a greater degree the cause of things of which these are the causes.