

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1993–1994

Volume 21 Number 2

- 105 Thomas Lewis Identifying Rhetoric in the *Apology*: Does Socrates Use the Appeal for Pity?
- 115 Joel Warren Lidz Reflections on and in Plato's Cave
- 135 Bernard Jacob Aristotle's Dialectical Purposes
- 169 Mary L. Bellhouse Rousseau Under Surveillance: Thoughts on a New Edition and Translation of *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*
- 181 Peter Augustine Lawler Tocqueville on Socialism and History
- 201 Maurice Auerbach Carl Schmitt's Quest for the Political: Theology, Decisionism, and the Concept of the Enemy
- Discussion*
- 215 Victor Gourevich The End of History?
- Book Reviews*
- 233 Will Morrissey *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, by Charles L. Griswold, Jr.
- 245 Leslie G. Rubin *Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle's Politics*, by Mary P. Nichols
- 253 John S. Waggoner *The Liberal Political Science of Raymond Aron: A Critical Introduction*, by Daniel J. Mahoney

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libraries and all other institutions \$40
students (four-year limit) \$16
Single copies available.
Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
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Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
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Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603

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Reflections on and in Plato's Cave

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Despite Socrates' explicit statement to the effect that the Cave image has to do with the effect of *paideia* and the lack thereof upon our nature (514a), a majority of those who have written about the Cave have focused instead on other issues, particularly that of the degree to which the Cave is formally consistent and/or parallel with the Divided Line.¹ I suspect that the emphasis which has been placed upon the Cave's relation to the Divided Line can be attributed to two considerations, the first being the modern philosophical tradition's focus on epistemological issues and attendant bifurcation of sense and reason.² Had Socrates intended the Cave to deal primarily with knowledge, as most commentators seem to take for granted, however, he would probably have spoken of *mathēsis* or *epistēmē* instead of *paideia*. *Paideia* connotes the process of enculturation, not the simple acquisition of theoretical or practical knowledge. Moreover, even if we make the plausible assumption that the Cave must be understood from within the context of the Sun and Line, we are still left with the obvious fact that all three images occur within the framework of the *Republic* as a whole, while the *Republic's* most fundamental theme is the nature of the relation between well-being (*eudaimonia*) and moral excellence (*aretē*), the latter being the proper work (*ergon*) of a human being (353a).

When Socrates asks about the prisoners' condition, he does not ask merely whether they would see anything of the artifacts carried at the parapet, but rather he also asks: "do you think these people would have seen anything *of themselves or of one another* except for the shadows?" (515a; my emphasis). In other words, Socrates' concern is not only with ignorance of the true sources of one's experience of the world, but also with one's self-ignorance. The Cave is concerned not only with the distinction between perception/appearance/opinion versus thought/reality/knowledge, but also with that between prephilosophical versus philosophical life.

The second reason which I believe accounts for the popularity of formal interpretations of the Cave lies in the fact that when Socrates offers his own explication of the Cave, he begins by saying, "this image as a whole must be applied to what was said before" (517b). But the fact that Socrates tells Glau-

con to “apply” or “attach” (*prosapteon*) what has been said about the Cave to “what was said before” need not imply that Socrates intends the Cave to be interpreted solely with reference to the Sun and Divided Line. A.S. Ferguson noted long ago that if one translates *prosapteon* as “applied,” then one will be led to interpret the image in the light of what precedes it, whereas if one translates it as “attached,” then the image becomes supplemental to the Sun and Line similes.³ However, I can think of no reason why the Cave image cannot both relate to the preceding images of Sun and Line, while also superseding them in various respects.

Another question arises in this regard: When Socrates says that the Cave should be “applied to what was said before,” might he not mean everything that had been previously discussed between himself and Glaucon? This seems eminently plausible in view of the fact that the bulk of Socrates’ discussion with Glaucon both before and after the Cave image deals with various courses of *paideia*: “noble lies” for some citizens, dialectic for others. Following his presentation of the Cave image, Socrates draws, in the space of less than one page, a few parallels between the contents of the Cave and the Sun image, and then notes that those who manage to escape from the Cave are unwilling to concern themselves with human dealings. Socrates then begins a very lengthy discussion concerning the nature and content of a philosophical education, the sort of *paideia* which would enable one to best rule the multiplicity of parts within a city or within oneself.

This paper tends toward the conclusion that the Cave image is best understood as a protreptic, soteriological myth.⁴ Socrates in fact refers to the philosopher-rulers as “the saviors of our regime” (502c), but such saviors are only possible because they have first guarded their own souls (413c) by becoming attuned to the intelligible structure of Being. By viewing this attunement to the structure of Being as the Cave’s leitmotif, we can avoid the sort of interpretive reductionism which has prevailed in so much of the secondary literature.

As a final introductory remark, I should say that in my attempt to avoid reducing the cave to any single theme, it may appear that I have gone too far in the opposite direction, providing what is largely a series of observations and reflections on the meaning of the Cave. This approach seemed appropriate, however, in that Socrates describes the Cave as an image, and his discussion of the Divided Line explains that *eikasia* is the least clear of the four faculties of apprehension (509d). Yet it is precisely this lack of clarity which provides the first intimations of our goal—intimations which can never be other than more or less vague signposts on our way toward the Sun. I must also confess to a longstanding predilection for writing which exhibits spontaneous suggestiveness, as such writing is especially well suited to evoking the reader’s own reflections. In the present instance, such writing seems faithful to the Cave’s many hidden meanings.

THE MYTHIC SETTING

The *Republic* opens quasi-mythically with Socrates descending “to Peiraias” (327a). Eva Brann has noted that this is an unusual linguistic formation, in that it atypically omits the definite article. She suggests that Plato intends the reader to recall *hē Peraia*, “the Land Beyond,” and notes that the festival which has captured Socrates’ curiosity is in honor of Bendis, a Thracian goddess identified with Hecate, goddess of the underworld. Socrates’ well-to-do host, Cephalus, is said to be at the threshold of death (328e). “We are in the city of shades, in the house of Pluto,” writes Brann.⁵

Socrates’ descent, like that of other Hellenic heroes before him (e.g., Hercules, Theseus, Orpheus) is fraught with danger. His ostensible mission is to save Glaucon and Adeimantus from the temptations and dangers of a deficient theory of justice, and thus of a deficient way of life. The symbolism of Hades suggests that not only are the prisoners dwelling in a world of insubstantial images, but that they themselves are like shades—insubstantial images of what it is to be human.

IMAGINING THE CAVE

From this “land beyond,” Socrates—who describes himself as “greedy for” or “sticking close to” images (*glischrōs eikadzō*; 488a)—will construct in speech diverse images of cities, ranging from a “cavelike dwelling” to an image of a “fair city” (*kallipolis*; 527c), which Glaucon does not believe to exist “anywhere on earth” (592a). Socrates commences his parable with a statement which implies that our nature is the sort of thing which can be influenced by education:

Imagine our nature in its education and want of education. (514a)⁶

1. Since Socrates begins the Cave image by telling us that it is a likeness of our nature “in its education and lack of education” (514a), I infer that to “apply” or “attach” it only to the Divided Line would be a mistake. Insofar as the Greek word *paideia*, like the German word *Bildung*, connotes our condition of enculturation—i.e., the process whereby one becomes fully human—I believe the image should instead, for purposes of comparison, be “placed beside” (the literal translation of the Greek *parabolē*) the whole of our experience.

2. The Cave image portrays prephilosophical life as a condition of enslavement: the cave-dwellers are “in bonds.” We can relate this condition of enslavement to Socrates’ renowned pronouncement, “The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being” (*Apology*, 38a). This standard translation seems to

me to miss the point. *Ou biōtos* can be translated either as “not worth living” or as “not [worthy] to be lived.” The fact that Socrates here makes reference to humans (when such is normally implicitly understood) only emphasizes his desire to contrast the properly human (rational-deliberative) mode of life with the nonhuman, rather than to contrast a human life which is worth living with another human life which is not.⁷ Thus, I suggest that a superior translation would be: “The unexamined life is not worthy of being lived by a human.” Bearing in mind the Hellenic contempt for slaves, we can understand why the prephilosophical (enslaved) condition of the cave-dwellers would symbolize a less than fully human condition when contrasted with the philosophical way of life. (In the *Sophist* [253c], dialectic is described as the *epistēmē* of the free man.)

3. The Cave image will concern images and that of which they are images; it is therefore self-referential. Such an image of “our nature in its education and lack of education” presented for didactic purposes will necessarily reflect the state of education both of the one who creates the image and of the one for whom the image is constructed. The image both conditions and is conditioned by “our nature in its education and lack of education.”

4. Why are we to rely on our capacity for image-making and image-apprehension (*eikasia*) as the most appropriate method for understanding our nature? Approximately fifteen pages prior to relating the Cave image, Socrates says that: “so hard is the condition suffered by the most decent men with respect to the cities that there is no other single condition like it, but I must make an image of it by bringing together elements from many sources, as when painters make goat-stags” (488a). Socrates implies that when attempting to describe an unfamiliar or unique sort of experience, it is best to rely upon the imagination as a means of bringing the unfamiliar into the ambit of the familiar. This is precisely what the Cave image does: it seeks to illuminate the distinction between the real need for a soul well ordered according to nature and those merely apparent needs (desires) which disrupt the psyche as a result of culturally conditioned opinions concerning what is true and good. Since the concept of images plays such an important role in Books VI and VII of the *Republic*, we should reflect on the nature of images.

EXCURSUS I: IMAGES AND IMAGINATION

a. Images contain reference to something other than themselves, namely, the originals of which they are images; they point beyond themselves. It is this pointing beyond themselves the prisoners fail to recognize and which, in effect accounts for their “imprisonment.”

b. The relation between images and originals is asymmetrical, in that images presuppose the existence of originals, but originals do not presuppose the exist-

tence of images. The One (Unity) is ontologically prior to the Many. As H.G. Gadamer writes: "As the unity of what is unitary, the idea of the good would seem to be presupposed by anything ordered, enduring and consistent. That means, however, that it is presupposed as the unity of the many."⁸ The soul's *erōs* impels it toward an overcoming of its condition of alienation from Self and Being, and thus, toward unity qua self-identity.

c. One original can produce many images of itself; there are many Caves, but only one exterior. Moreover, the many images can vary in their degree of resemblance to the original. Since the original is not accessible as such, the question arises as to how one is to determine the degree to which a resemblance holds between image and original. Consider the following analogy: Suppose that (i) there exist a number of Roman statues, each of which appears to be a copy of a Greek original, and that (ii) the Greek original has long since been lost. Under such circumstances, the look (*eidōs*) of the original is not accessible to us—at least not as such. Yet we hypothesize that the many Roman statues are all copies of one original, which is the cause or explanation of the resemblance between the copies. Such a resemblance would further constitute a unity, both of the copies in relation to one another and in relation to the original. Assuming that the copies only hint at the beauty of the original, and that we are lovers of beauty, we will no doubt be driven to wonder about the appearance of the original. But the best we could do in such a case would be to reconstruct ("recollect") the appearance of the original on the basis of the power of our imagination, by considering the similarities between the copies. We will thereby profess to have inferred a single, invisible look from many, similar looks. But insofar as the possibility always exists that something about the copies remains to be noticed, such a quest would seem to be interminable in principle.

d. Images may or may not reveal themselves as images; i.e., they may present themselves as what they are—images—or (deceptively) as what they are not—originals. Unity can appear as multiplicity. As Socrates states: "each [Form] is itself one, but, by showing themselves everywhere in a community with actions, bodies, and one another, each looks like many" (476a). Opinions are *about* reality but masquerade *as* reality. Opinions are inevitably mis-taken for truth if one fails to examine them dialectically.

e. Images are ambiguous in that they both are and are not what they appear to be. An image is a mask which both conceals and reveals the original; it points both toward and away from its source. (As Heraclitus said: "The nature of things likes to hide itself" [Diels-Kranz, fr. 123].) Plato's identification of the real and the intelligible suggests that what it is to be *in sensu strictu* is to be absolutely (*kath hauton*). Something which is deficiently F provides a clue as to what the absolute F is like. Whether one could determine what F itself is like simply by performing a feat of mental abstraction would seem to depend upon the way in which the elements of the mixture are combined. If each element

retained its pristine character within the mixture—like a mixture of M and M candies—then abstraction would suffice; but if being mixed were to alter the look or nature of the elements (as in the case of colors of paint, or sodium and chlorine), then abstraction will not do the trick. In the latter case, the character manifest in a thing is affected as a result of its being related to something else. Judging from Socrates' statement at 476a, the latter seems to be his view.

f. Images (qua shadows) present a relatively unarticulated version of their originals. Analogously, opinions are inarticulate accounts of reality, which stand in need of examination (*elenchos*), not mere refutation. For example, all three definitions of justice in Book I recognize that justice has to do with that which is owed (borrowed property, benefits or harms, obedience), but each fails to account for the Good as the prime determinant of what is owed. Cephalus, who is ruled by love of money and practical affairs (*philochrēmata*) and thus represents the appetitive part of the soul, adopts strictly conventional criteria for determining what one owes others. His son, Polemarchus, who defines justice as "Doing good to friends and harm to enemies," is ruled by love of victory (*philoneikia*) and love of honor (*philotimia*), and fails to see that if a friend is one who knows one's good, then one must know one's own good in order to be able to know one's friends. Thrasymachus, who is ruled by a love of ruling (*philarchia*), defines justice as "the advantage of the stronger," but does not see that his definition points toward the question of what possesses the strength (ability) requisite to determine what is truly advantageous. He represents the philosophical character gone bad (cf. 491b–496a).

Perhaps we have been asked to use our capacity for *eikasia* in thinking about our nature, because our nature—like that of images—is erotic, deceptively ambiguous and constantly transcending itself, and of all our faculties, imagination is best suited to encompass this myriad of existential modes.

TOPOGRAPHY OF THE CAVE

See human beings as though they were living in an underground cavelike dwelling (*oikeisei spelaiōdei*) with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. (514a)

1. The fact that the humans dwell underground is consistent both with the notion that the *Republic* takes place in Hades, and with Socrates' "noble lie" of metallic souls, which describes the citizenry's common ancestry from the Earth (414d f.).

2. That the dwelling is described as cavelike (i.e., as an image of a cave, rather than as a cave per se) is probably intended to imply that the Cave is artificial. Dale Hall attributes to A.S. Ferguson the recognition that: "the Cave can be understood only if we recognize that the inmates' condition is 'in some sense unnatural.' Unnatural, that is, because their confinement deprives them

of sunlight, the 'natural medium for the eye'." This, however, assumes that by nature, all "eyes" possess the same capacity for sight. In terms of the myth of metallic souls, we all possess souls (eyes), but some souls are golden, others silver, and yet others bronze; i.e., some souls function better, are less alienated from reality than others, and so are more valuable than others.

3. Socrates implies that it is natural for us to be born into a cavelike dwelling, and this suggests that everything which we experience after taking leave of it will be understood in the light (or should we say, darkness) of our previous subterranean life. The Cave can never be entirely transcended.

They have been there since childhood with legs and necks in bonds, so that they remain in the same place, seeing only in front of them. (514a)

1. Contra Rousseau, Socrates suggests that we are born in chains. The parable reveals what it means to be imprisoned within—as well as to be liberated from—a *polis*, construed as a source of tyrannical opinion. The story contrasts with a predecessor, that in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, wherein Prometheus reminds mortals of their origins:

Hear what troubles there were among men, how I found them witless and gave them the use of their wits and made them master of their minds . . .
For men at first had eyes but saw to no purpose; they had ears but did not hear. Like the shapes of dreams they dragged through their long lives and handled all things in bewilderment and confusion. . . They lived like swarming ants in holes in the ground, in the sunless caves of the earth. . . . All their doings were indeed without intelligent calculation. . . .¹⁰

Prometheus then describes how he provided humankind with useful, mundane things—in short, *ta chrēmata*—the sort of things of which Protagoras tells us "Humanity is the measure." To the humans within the cave, Prometheus provides numbers and letters, beasts of burden, ships and medicines. By contrast, the Socratic myth focuses on those things requisite for the proper functioning of the soul.¹¹ This shift from *chrēmata* to *dikaia*, from things good (useful) for the body to things good for the soul (and from outward behavior to an internal condition), is exemplified by Socrates' discussion with Polemarchus, who defines justice as "helping one's friends and harming one's enemies." Socrates subtly shifts from Polemarchus' understanding of harming as physically hurting or debilitating one's enemies to harming in the sense of corrupting another's character (335a–d). For Socrates, true justice deals with "that which is truly about oneself and is [properly] one's own" (443d).¹²

2. Although the prisoners are aware only of that which lies before them, they are affected also by that which lies invisibly behind them. They thus run the danger of missing a lesson taught by Heraclitus:

Men are deceived by their cognizance (*gnōsin*) of what is manifest (*to phanerōn*) as was Homer, wisest of the Greeks. For he was deceived by boys killing lice when

they said to him: "What we see and catch, these we leave behind; what we don't see or catch, these we carry away." (Diels-Kranz, fr. 56)

Heraclitus here speaks ironically of Homer's wisdom, for the latter failed to grasp the riddle of life and death. The meaning of the riddle of the lice—like the lice themselves—is elusive. I interpret the riddle as follows: Having caught and killed a number of lice, the boys leave them behind; but other lice attach themselves to the boys and are unwittingly carried away by them. Moral of the story: What we don't "know"—i.e., are not aware of—*can* hurt us. In the cave parable, shadows function much like Homer's lice: many shadows (i.e., opinions) are unknowingly "carried" (i.e., held) by the prisoners, yet are nonetheless potent.

Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers (*thaumatopoiōis*) set in front of the human beings and over which they show their puppets. . . . See along this wall humans carrying artifacts . . . and statues of men (*andriantas*) and other living things made of stone, wood and every other sort of material. Some utter sounds (*phthengomenous*), others are silent. "It's a strange image," he said. "They're like us," I said. (514b–515a)

1. Socrates modestly includes himself among the prisoners. He does not say whether the "they" who are "like us" refers to the prisoners, the puppet-handlers or both.

2. Why does Socrates say "They're like us" rather than "We're like them"? After all, the cave and its denizens were constructed as the model against which we were to compare ourselves. Are we images of them or are they images of us? Who is more real? Perhaps the prisoners are images of us in the sense that their existence depends upon ours; we created them "in our own image." But this mythic image we create of ourselves in order to understand ourselves differs from the images seen by the prisoners, in that the cave image is synoptic (537c): it is an image of both images and originals, and we are aware of it as an image.

3. Socrates does not say the puppet-handlers speak, only that they "utter sounds," which is presumably meant to suggest their utterances are relatively inarticulate, and so in need of dialectical examination. In the *Apology*, Socrates even goes so far as to approach the pronouncements of the Oracle in this way, thereby raising questions as to his piety. But then, the fact that Socrates treats divine speech with the same modesty he treats human speech might better be construed as evidence of his piety.

4. Note that while fire (an image of the sun) is a natural substance, it—unlike the sun—can be artificially created (more than once) and controlled. Those persons behind the parapet control the fire. Although the fire is important to the environment of the cave, the prisoners can't see it. The prisoners'

knowledge of reality is thus mediated by those who control the shadows. So long as the prisoners fail to recognize the nature of their situation, the motives of those controlling the shadows will be all-important in determining the prisoners' fortune (*daimōn*).¹³ Thus, the prisoners will be unable to choose a way of life for themselves.

The theme of a choice between a life of intellectual bondage versus freedom is anticipated near the beginning of Socrates' discussion with Glaucon in Book II, where Glaucon speaks of a "choice of lives" between justice and injustice (360e), and that phrase recalls the choice of lives made by the mythic Heracles, who was forced to choose between Pleasure and Virtue. The Cave image can be understood as a continuation of this theme of choosing a life, presenting the alternatives in a highly picturesque manner. It contrasts an image of the Beauty of the noetic realm (the object of the philosopher's *erōs*) outside the Cave with the life of comfortable familiarity within. By describing what it is like to undergo a transition from a life of familiar appearances toward Being in itself, it also suggests why the life of Virtue is unpleasurable in the short term only.

5. Dale Hall argues that: "the upper level of the cave must represent the state of those who have been made as good as possible by the musical and gymnastic training directed by the philosopher-ruler."¹⁴ But two considerations militate against this conclusion: First, the fact that *thaumatopoiōis* connotes "wonder-workers" implies that those chained within the cave are in effect mesmerized by persons whose stock in trade is deception. Secondly, those on the upper level of the cave carry images of objects, not the originals. Those images will presumably resemble their originals to a greater or lesser degree, though insofar as those carrying the artifacts have not taken leave of the cave, any such resemblance will be strictly accidental. The best the wonder-workers can achieve is right opinion.

6. It is a serious question as to whether those chained might not by virtue of being so chained be in a position best suited for their nature—i.e., the question of natural versus conventional slavery is raised—and whether it is therefore not meet for the escapee who returns to the cave to take control of the parapet for the sake of the entire cave. In this way, those born with defective "vision" will not be in danger. Liberation of the few proves salvific for all.

Do you suppose such men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another other than the shadows cast by the fire? (515a)

Not only is the prisoners' understanding of the world determined by others, but even their understanding of their own nature is. Strictly speaking, therefore, there is no true self-understanding for the prisoners, any more than there is understanding of their environs, since their understanding of self is mediated by others whose understanding of the self's nature is deficient.

If they were able to discuss with each other, they would think they are naming the things going by them that they see (515b). They would consider the truth to be nothing but the shadows of artificial things. (515c)

The prisoners would identify the familiar (in this case, images of images) as the one true reality. The familiar (which as Hegel noted, remains unexamined by virtue of its familiarity) has the distinct advantage of being predictable, and at 516d Socrates notes that the prisoners pride themselves on being able to predict the images passing by. But this ability is only possible because those in control present the prisoners with an arbitrarily created order (presumably aimed at maintaining the status quo), not because that order is inherent in nature.

LIBERATION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

Consider what their release and healing (*iasin*) from bonds and folly would be like if something of this sort were by nature to happen to them. Take a man who is released and compelled to stand up . . . and to walk and look up toward the light. It would be painful, and because he is dazzled, he would be unable to make out the things whose shadows he had seen before. (515c)

1. Socrates speaks not merely of a release, but of a healing, which implies that the effects of imprisonment are not erased simply by virtue of being liberated. The healing undergone by the soul parallels the movement from partial apprehension of one's object toward a fuller grasp: healing, as a making whole, renders the soul capable of apprehending reality in its plenitude.

2. Socrates does not explain how this liberation takes place, though it seems fair to assume that the parable seeks to produce the very phenomenon it describes. One escapes the cave by recognizing that it exists and by understanding its nature. Our liberation paradoxically consists in an understanding of our finitude: "Know Your Self."

3. While under natural conditions light makes the power of sight able to function, it here temporarily produces the opposite result (in accordance with the principle *mia dunamis tōn enantiōn*).

What do you suppose he'd say if someone were to tell him that before he saw nonsense (*phluarias*), while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what is and more turned toward beings, he sees more correctly? (515d)

1. The escapee is at first so confused that he cannot distinguish between nonsense and reality, but must have the difference pointed out to him by his guide. Despite the fact that the beings are inherently clearer than their shadows, the shadows seem clearer to the escapee. The prisoners' thought comes to rest among things that become (*gignomena*).

2. The issue here is which way of life is best: that guided by artificial firelight or that guided by natural sunlight. Like J.S. Mill's man who is most capable of judging pleasures only because he has experienced a wide variety of them, only the escapee is in a position to choose between life within or without the cave (cf. 582b).

And being shown each of the things which pass by, he was compelled with questions to distinguish what each thing is? Wouldn't he believe that what he saw before was truer (*alēthestera*)? and if compelled to look toward the light itself, would not his eyes hurt and would he not flee back to the objects he can make out and hold them to be really clearer than what is being shown? And if someone dragged him away by force . . . Wouldn't he find it painful? When he came to the light . . . he would be unable to see even one of the things now said to be true. He'd have to get accustomed in order to see what is above. At first he'd easily make out the shadows and then the images (*eidōla*) of the humans and other things in water, and, later, the things themselves. (515d–516a)

1. Once again, the familiar is the comfortable, and the comfortable is so attractive that it leads the escapee to deny the evidence of his own senses. Such is the power of one's origins, and hence the importance of the examined life.

2. The movement from less clear to more clear is a gradual process, not a sudden revelation of truth, and demands an arduous process of habituation on the escapee's part. No pain, no gain: *chalepa ta kala*.

Finally he would be able to make out the sun itself in its own domain (*chōra*) not its appearances (*phantasmata*)—and see what it's like (516b). Finally, he would be in a position to conclude that this is the source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward (or governor) of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of (i.e., that which explains: *aitios*) all those things he and his companions had been seeing. (516b–c)

1. Not surprisingly, only the interior of the cave is described in any detail. Like the heavenly lights of Genesis (1:16 f.), the sun outside the cave seems to exist for the sake of earthbound mortals, that they might “find the way.”

2. Plato presumably does not mean that the ultimate point of the journey is to see the sun. In the *Phaedo* (99d–e), Socrates speaks of the danger of looking directly at the sun or of trying to make out things directly with his eyes—which led him to search for the “truth of beings” in *logoi*. He describes this as a “second-best way.”¹⁵

When he recalled his first home and what was held as wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners, he would consider himself fortunate (*eudaimonidzein*) and would pity the others. (516c)

Having adjusted to the new environment, the escapee's understanding of his own situation undergoes a reversal. His initial experience was one of pain, but

he now regards himself as fortunate, and can only pity those who cannot understand him; thus, even the escapee's understanding of his own experience undergoes a reversal. Ironically, this good fortune will prove to be a very mixed blessing, in that it will not extend to the escapee's physical well-being. For while the escape has made possible a truer perception of life in the cave, it has at the same time alienated the escapee from the others to the point where he is perceived as a threat. Amidst unenlightenment, the mind's freedom jeopardizes the body's life.

He would hold in disdain their honors and those quickest at making out (*katharōnti*) the shadows and predicting what would pass by next. (516d)

The practice of "making out" shadows would, in the language of the Gorgias, be a mere "knack" (*tribē*) unlike true *paideia*, which Socrates refers to as a skill (*technē*; 518d). A knack is an image of a skill, in that a knack is also a kind of "know-how," but knacks are put into the service of the mere appearance of the Good, as rhetoric is a mere knack/image of dialectic.

If he went back to his old place in the cave, his eyes would be full of darkness again, and so he would provoke laughter. It would be said that his vision had thereby been corrupted. If it were possible to get hold of the one who attempted to lead them upward, he would be killed. (516e–517a)

1. This implies that the appearance of ridiculousness can be the product of conventional beliefs and values (cf. 457a).

2. The prisoners' perception of the escapee is no more correct than their perception of anything else in the cave. Like the realities to which he has been privy, the escapee's true nature is inaccessible, because alien, to them. Before escaping, he is (at) one with the others, but other than himself; now he is one with himself, but is other than the others. The escapee (i.e., his soul) is once again in the cave, but is no longer of the cave. In a wonderful novel, Rebecca Goldstein has made much the same point in a discussion between an undergraduate student and his philosophy professor:

"The unexamined life is not worth living," Eva said quietly.

"You really believe that, don't you? I think it's the examined life that's not worth living, at least what these guys call the examined life. *Sub quādam aeternitatis specie.*"

"So you prefer the existence of those pathetically chained prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave?"

"At least they're chained together. The philosopher who makes his way out of the cave makes his way alone. And when he comes stumbling back inside, with all those pretensions about enlightening the others, he doesn't even know how to live in their world anymore. He can't even see in there. For him it's all darkness and shadows."

"That's because it really is all darkness and shadows in there."

"Not for the others. Not for the ones who are chained together. They can see."

"But chained, Michael! Think! So unfree that they don't even know they're unfree. So foolish they have no idea they are fools."

"I'm not so sure who the fool is in this story. . . ."

"So you think the fact that they are attached to one another transforms their bondage into a blessing."

"Yeah. I think I do."

"But viewed from outside, from the objective point of view, these attachments between people count for nothing."

"I don't believe that. And I don't believe you do either. I don't believe any woman does."¹⁶

SOCRATES' COMMENTARY ON THE CAVE

This image as a whole must be applied to what was said before. Likened the domain revealed by sight to the prison home, the light of the fire in it to the sun's power, and the ascent to what's above to the soul's journey to the intelligible. A god knows if it happens to be true. (517a–b)

The Cave image is preceded by the images of the Sun and Divided Line, the former having arisen in the context of a discussion of knowledge versus opinion concerning the Good. The "divine" sun is an erotic image: not only is it said to be responsible for our seeing things "as beautifully as possible" (508a), but also for those objects' birth, growth and nurture (509b). The Line image, by contrast, is meant to illustrate certain things about logical form, which is something *erōs* lacks. The Line illustrates that the ontological dependence of visible things upon the Sun is paralleled by the relation between (a) visible images and visible objects; (b) visible objects and intelligible beings; and (c) dianoetic images (*hypotheses*) and noetic beings. The Cave effects a sort of *Aufhebung* of the other two images, for while it subsumes the points made in the preceding images it introduces something which they had omitted: human beings. Moreover, the Cave integrates an element of negativity absent in the other images, inasmuch as it makes lack of *paideia* (symbolized by darkness, the absence of light) an important element of the myth.

EXCURSUS II: LIGHT

a. Perhaps Plato uses a light metaphor because light, being purely homogeneous, has the quality of oneness, and does not create the heterogeneity manifest in the world, but merely allows that heterogeneity to manifest itself. Light has the character of a power (*dunamis*)—specifically, a power of showing forth

(*apophainesthai*). It permits that which is other than light itself to be seen while itself not being an object of perception.

b. In the *Parmenides* (130e–131e), the young Socrates compares Forms to light in an unsuccessful attempt to respond to Parmenides' criticism of the notion of Forms. It seems that the young Socrates wishes to point out that unlike the objects it renders visible, light is ubiquitous and nonphysical. Eugen Fink writes that: "Light is no arbitrary metaphor of Platonic ontology, it is the symbol of the main difference between Being and beings. Light becomes manifest in all illuminated things, yet is no mere part thereof; it is neither divided nor dispersed throughout that which is divided and dispersed in it. As the dispersing and scattering, it is nonetheless one and concordant."¹⁷

In the knowable, the idea of the good is seen last and with difficulty (or barely: *mogis*). Once seen, it must be concluded that it is the cause of all that is right and fair in everything. One who is to act with sound judgment in public or in private must see it. (517c)

Just as the sun was seen last in the visible realm, so the Good is seen last in the intelligible realm. One does not need to see the Form of the Good to act, but one does need to see it in order to act prudently. The Good makes prudence possible.

Those who reach this point aren't willing to attend to human affairs, but their souls are eager to spend (or waste: *diatribein*) time above. (517c)

Plato's concern with intellectualism is here made quite clear. Discussing the nature of the philosopher, Socrates had earlier distinguished between three types of men. He mentions first those "who are able to approach the Beautiful itself and see it by itself." Such men are described with ironic understatement as being "rare" (*spanioi*; 476b). Second, there are those who hold that there are beautiful things, but who deny that there is Beauty itself; such persons are "dreaming," in that they mistake likenesses for that of which the likenesses are likenesses (476c).¹⁸ Finally, there are those who believe there is Beauty itself and who are able "to catch sight both of it and of what participates in it," and who do not confuse that which participates with that which is participated in; such persons are deemed "awake" and possess knowledge. The philosopher is identified not with the first class of men (who see that-which-is alone by itself), but rather with the third sort of men, who do not confuse that which participates and that which is participated in—the sort of men who distinguish between *noēta* and *aisthēta*.

Whereas the second class of men, the "dreamers," remain unaware of the eidetic realm, the members of the first class are oblivious to the domain of becoming. They have escaped the cave, but choose not to return to it. Such dispensing with the "body of the world" (*Timaeus*, 32c) by those persons who

prefer the purity of the noetic realm is satirized in an exchange between Socrates and Protarchus in the *Philebus* (62a ff.):

Socrates: Now let us imagine a man who understands what Justice itself is, and can give an account of it conformable with his knowledge, and who moreover has a like understanding of all that is.

Protarchus: Very well.

Socrates: Will such a man be adequately possessed of knowledge if he can give his account of the divine circle and the divine spheres themselves, but knows nothing of these human spheres and circles of ours, so that when he is building a house, the ruler that he uses, no less than the circles, are of the other sort?

Protarchus: I am moved to mirth, Socrates, by this description we are giving of ourselves confined to divine knowledge.¹⁹

This interchange emphasizes that human existence occurs in a physical, less than pure form, never in a “bodiless cosmos” (*Philebus*, 64b). Humans seek knowledge of the “divine circle” not for its own sake, but to measure the human circle against it.

One who returns from divine contemplation to human things will seem graceless and ridiculous when he is compelled to contend about the shadows of justice. There are two kinds of disturbances of the eye, stemming from two sources—when they have been transferred from light to darkness and when they have been transferred from darkness to light. (517d–518a)

The reason for disorientation when one has left the Cave is different from when one returns to it. Upon leaving the Cave, disorientation is due to the newness of the situation, but upon returning to it, the problem is not lack of familiarity, but that a transformation of vision has occurred, such that the cave is no longer intelligible. The way of life pursued by the denizens of the Cave now seems nugatory.²⁰

Education is not what certain men profess it to be. They assert that they put into the soul knowledge that isn't in it, as though they were putting sight into blind eyes. . . . But this power is in the soul of each, and the instrument with which each learns must be turned around, together with the whole soul, from that which is coming into being, until it is able to endure looking at that which is and the brightest part of that which is. And we affirm that this is the good. (518b–d)

This conception of education bears closely upon the way in which Plato writes and explains the widely divergent interpretations which his writings have elicited over the centuries. If his writing aims at such a turning around of the whole soul, then clearly he must find a manner of writing best suited to effect this. The primary goal will not be to convey his own thoughts, but to educate by e-ducing (drawing out) the reader's thought, and thought is educed by the

apparent presence of opposites in an object (532a–c). Hence the reader should expect to be presented with real or apparent conflicts which stand in need of resolution.

Another way of looking at this is to note that when the Platonic Socrates engages others in discussion, he does not primarily aim at persuading others to a certain point of view. As he says to Theodorus: “You are truly a lover of argument, Theodorus, the way you take me so facilely for a sack full of arguments” (*Theaetetus*, 161a). Rather, he provides an occasion for his interlocutor to learn something about himself, and in so doing, to become better prepared to examine the “greatest subject” (505c). The order of the cosmos reveals itself only to those with a well-ordered soul.

There would be an art of this turning around, concerned with how the power can be most easily and efficiently turned around. This art takes it as given that sight is there, but neither rightly oriented nor looking at what it ought. The other virtues of the soul thus seem close to those of the body; they aren’t there beforehand, but are later produced by habits and exercises, while sound judgment is more divine. It never loses its power, but according to the way it is turned, becomes useful and helpful or useless and harmful. The vision of those with a small soul (*psucharion*), who are said to be wicked but wise (or clever: *sophos*), sharply distinguishes the things toward which it is turned, so that the more sharply they see, the more evil they accomplish. If this part of such a nature were trimmed in childhood, and its ties with becoming severed, then it would see true things. (518d–519c)

Cleverness is a form of intelligence, but considered as such, it is strictly means-oriented. The persons here referred to as having “small” (i.e., petty) souls would seem to correspond to those in control of the fire and artifacts: their vision is relatively clear when compared to that of those in chains. The original condition of the soul is that of being attached to “food and similar pleasures” which “turn the soul’s eye downward” (519b).

The reference to food and its effect on the soul is reminiscent of another soteriological myth, that of Adam and Eve. Eve’s attraction to the fruit of the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil leads her to eat the fruit not out of willfulness—she hadn’t even been created at the time God gave Adam the proscription—but because of the fruit’s aesthetic, nutritive and intellectual value (Genesis, 3:6). The Primal Pair is then evicted from the Garden, not because of their disobedience, but because of God’s concern that his status qua immortal might be usurped by them (3:22), and the price they pay is loss of moral innocence, as well as alienation from God, Nature and each other.

But the Eden myth portrays no mere loss of Paradise, but rather presents a gloss on the pains and gains of moving from Nature (symbolized by unabashed nudity) to Culture. The myth of the Cave also presents a transformation which is Janus-faced, for the escapee both gains and loses something as a consequence of his escape. Whereas Eve’s failure to keep her soul turned upwards

toward the word of the Creator produced a rupture in her being such that she was no longer subordinate only to God, but now subordinate to the relatively inferior Adam, so the failure of those with small souls to keep their souls looking upward toward true beings renders them subject to an inferior mode of being.

Neither the uneducated nor those who spend all their life educating themselves could govern well. The former lack a single aim and the latter refuse to act (519c). We must compel the best natures to go to the study which we are saying is the greatest, to see the good and to go up that ascent . . . [but] not permit them . . . to remain there. (519c–d)

That is, the former lack direction, while the latter lack the proper motivation. A mean must be struck even in the case of education. Socrates here lays emphasis on not educating solely oneself. On the other hand, one must be discriminating in choosing students. In keeping with the myth of metallic souls, only the “best natures” are to be liberated by way of the “greatest study” because only they can be liberated.

Such people grow up spontaneously against the will of the regime and don't owe their rearing to anyone and so are right in not paying off the price of rearing to anyone. (520b)

The “soil” of the Cave produces an inferior crop. Superior plants grow despite, not because of, the Cave. This passage makes an interesting counterpoint to the *Crito* (50d–51b), where the Laws argue that the citizens must obey because they owe their rearing to the Laws.

So you must go down into the common dwelling of the others and get habituated along with them to seeing obscure things (*skoteina*). . . Then you'll know far better than they what each of the images is because you have seen the truth about the fair, just and good things. Thus the city will be ruled by us and by you in a waking state, not in a dream as the many cities are nowadays. If you discover a life better than ruling for those who are going to rule, it is possible that your well-governed city will come into being. For there alone will the truly rich rule, rich not in gold, but in the riches needed to be happy, a life of goodness and wisdom. (520c)²¹

NOTES

1. See, e.g., the following: J. Ferguson, “Sun, Line and Cave Again,” *Philosophical Quarterly* (1963): 188–93; J. Malcolm, “The Line and the Cave,” *Phronesis* 7 (1962): 38–45; J. Malcolm, “The Cave Revisited,” *Classical Quarterly* 31 (1981): 60–68; J.E. Raven, “Sun, Divided Line and Cave,” *Classical Quarterly* n.s. 3 (1953): 22–32; R.G. Tanner, “Dianoia and Plato's Cave,” *Classical Quarterly* n.s. 20 (1970): 81–91.

2. At 507b, Socrates makes it seem that the sensible and intelligible regions are externally related, but at 508d he states that the soul can be turned either toward sensible or intelligible objects, suggesting that an internal relation obtains between the two kinds of beings.

3. "Plato's Simile of Light," Part I, *Classical Quarterly* 15 (1921): 152. On the same page, Ferguson complained about interpretations of the Cave exclusively with reference to the Line: "if the Cave is applied to the Line, can one avoid assimilating their content and purpose?" For discussion of articles which focus on these formal issues, see J. Malcolm, "The Cave Revisited" and R.C. Cross and A.D. Woozley, *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 206–28.

4. Myths are said in the *Republic* to deal with the genesis of something whose true origins lie beyond our ability to know (382d) and to influence the development of moral character (377b). Although a myth may not be entirely true, it can nonetheless be useful, like a drug (382c). "Metaphors can be a mode of understanding, and so of acting upon, our condition. Philosophers merely do explicitly and systematically and often with art what the ordinary person does by instinct. Plato, who understood this situation better than most of the metaphysical philosophers, referred to many of his theories as 'myths,' and tells us that the *Republic* is to be thought of as an allegory of the soul [592]." Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Ark, 1985), p. 94.

5. "The Music of the *Republic*," *Agon* 1 (1967): 3. The *Republic* is replete with imagery of ascent and descent. Brann also notes (p. 88) that Pythagoras is said to have "told how he descended [*katabas*] into Hades to look on the way of life of those who have gone below." John Sallis has pointed out that in the *Odyssey*, "Odysseus tells Penelope of the day when, in his words, 'I went down to Hades to inquire about the return of myself and my friends.'" *Being and Logos* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities, 1975), p. 316.

6. Quotations from the *Republic* are based primarily upon *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968). I have used Shorey's Greek text and have made numerous modifications in the translation. Some passages have been paraphrased. Stephanus pagination refers to the *Republic* unless otherwise indicated.

7. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates attacks Callicles, not by arguing that one who lives a disciplined life will be of good fortune (*eudaimon*), but by attempting to shame Callicles by likening the life of greed (*pleonexia*) which he advocates to the life of a catamite (494e) or cormorant (*charadrios*; 494b).

8. H.G. Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 31.

9. "Interpreting Plato's Cave as an Allegory of the Human Condition," *Apeiron* 14 (1980): 78.

10. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. D. Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), pp. 440–55, *passim*.

11. Although Socrates speaks highly of the crafts when he wishes to use them as a paradigm of knowledge, in the *Gorgias* (518e), wherein he criticizes excessive concern with the material products of the crafts, he speaks disdainfully of them.

12. From the opening of the *Republic*, Socrates seems to describe the dwelling of the body in the Cave exclusively from the standpoint of the soul, which would explain the appropriateness of the *Republic* being set in Hades. For a discussion of related themes, see Stanley Rosen, "The Role of Eros in Plato's *Republic*," *Review of Metaphysics* 18 (1965): 452–75.

13. Heraclitus anticipated this pillar of Platonism: "One's way of life (or "character") is one's fortune" (Diels-Kranz, fr. 119).

14. "Interpreting Plato's Cave," p. 83.

15. We know from Menander (fr. 241) that this phrase was used by sailors to refer to the taking to oars in the absence of sufficient wind. It can also connote a safer attempt at something.

16. Rebecca Goldstein, *The Late-Summer Passion of a Woman of Mind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), p. 117.

17. My translation from *Metaphysik der Erziehung* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1970), p. 33. The German reads: "Das Licht ist keine willkürliche Metapher der platonischen Ontologie, es ist das Symbol der zentralen Differenz von Sein und Seiendem. Das Licht west in allem Belichteten an und ist doch kein Stück daran; es wird nicht zerteilt und zerstreut durch das was in ihm zerteilt

und zerstreut ist. Es als das gleichsam Zerstreuende und Auseinandersetzen- de ist gleichwohl eins und einig."

18. At the opposite extreme to the lovers of sights and sounds is what R.W. Hall refers to as an "intellectual glutton." One with such "an omnivorous appetite for learning cannot be left forever to its own devices, or fed whatever it desires in the way of intellectual fodder. . . . [A]t a certain stage the proper ordering of studies becomes crucial, along with the resulting synoptic vision of these matters arrayed systematically." "Plato on Philosophical Character," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987): 333.

19. *Plato's Philebus*, trans. R. Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

20. "For Plato, the task of theorizing was to make men better; to arouse in men a Desire to reassess their place in the order, and through the action of such a re-assessment to become beings better fitted to participate in that order. For the moderns . . . [t]heorizing became re-defined as a method for producing agreement." Alan Blum, *Theorizing* (London: Heinemann, 1974), p. 168.

21. I wish to thank my friend Kenneth Quandt (formerly of the Classics Departments of University of California at Berkeley and Boston University) and the anonymous reader for their many helpful comments.

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