

THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the classical discourse of "The Allegory of the Cave", that we have received in an inheritance from Plato, with Socrates, as the main character, and his spiritual philosophy of enlightenment. Different aspects of the discourse have been analyzed under separate headings.

KEYWORDS: *Allegory, Puppet Show, Enlightenment Truth, Ideal State*

INTRODUCTION

Plato and His Works

Generally, Plato's lifetime is said to be from 428 to 347 B.C. He was born in an aristocratic family in Athens, once the most important place of learning in Greece. Athens is also known as the birthplace of Socrates and his philosophy. Besides, it was the shrine of the universal wits and their philosophy. Plato was the most celebrated disciple of Socrates. A real contribution has been from him to immortalize the Socrates' work and teaching. In 384 B.C., Socrates was sentenced to death by Athenian officials. He was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens. As a political environment in Athens was very dangerous, Plato lived aloof from the politics. Rather, he devoted himself to writing. The Academy, established by him, was effective for many centuries.

Most of Plato's philosophy is the vision of Socrates. Socrates' dispassionate quest of truth, which often challenged established belief and convention, is profoundly dominant in Plato's philosophical investigation.

Essence of Plato's philosophy is spiritual ideology, though it has been less effective in the present world of materialistic life. Plato looks for essential form of goodness. This an essential form of goodness lies in the world of ideal entities. These ideal entities exist only in a purely spiritual realm. For the perception of these things, one must produce sixth sense. This sixth sense is soul or spirit (mind or heart?) which is acquired by the study by possessing knowledge superior to the material entities. Plato believes that senses are unreliable, and as a result of that, sense perceptions are imperfect and inferior to spiritual perceptions. In his opinion, the ideal entities are perceived by one before his or her birth. The person remembers them dimly in this earth. Yet or she is believed to perceive them by senses. Plato thinks that these perceptions are only illusions (delusion). For the reality, he or she must rise to the spiritual world.

Plato gives value to the spirit. He concedes that, by giving value to the spirit, one can free oneself from the tyranny of sensory (adj. of "sense") perception and sensory reward. Next, he argues that the body is a metaphor for spiritual delights. It is also very controversial because people of this present world consider the body as a metaphor for *sensual and sensuous pleasures* (pleasures to body and senses). The body is a means of spiritual fulfillment and of appreciation of true

beauty. Why do people have a *reverence* (love) for the body? Human *instincts* (natural inborn tendency) are of two kinds: those that *conserve* (prevent change) and *unify* (make a whole). These human instincts are called "*erotic*" (sexual), which is the meaning Plato gives to *Eros* in his in his *Symposium*. In Plato's view, love is also a sensual delight. Eros leads people to a love for the body and its pleasure.

In short, we have to read Plato and his works with classical spiritual views. "*The Dialogues*" is his great work. *The Republic* is a *treatise* (essay/long writing) on justice and the ideal government. The present text "The Allegory of the Cave" is a discussion of politics from *the Republic*.

The Allegory of the Cave

The text is a dialogue between Socrates and his disciple Glaucon. It is a discussion of politics based on the difference between the world of sense perception and the world of spiritual perception. There is *integration* (progression) of philosophical basis to anti-materialistic thought. Usually we depend on our sense perceptions to know the world, but actually, we know very little of the truth. In fact, we need spiritual perception to know the truth as a whole.

Synopsis

Socrates describes an image of the cave. There are some prisoners in a cave. Their bodies are tied and chained. They are not allowed to move their heads. Behind the cave there is fire, and between the cave and the fire, there is a raised wall along, which some people walk carrying statues, vessels, and figures of animals. Their shadows fall on a wall opposite of the prisoners. They see the shadows and name them what they are. Moreover, there is an echo of their noises coming in the cave. Prisoners will guess that the noises are coming from the passers-by. But to them, the truth will be literally nothing but these *shadows of the images* (i.e. shadows of images of passers-by). Again, one of the prisoners is brought out into the light and is asked to name what he sees on the raised wall. In this situation, the prisoner will be confused. Shadows are better and easier to be recognized than the real passers-by. For them, shadows will be more real.

Furthermore, Socrates goes on explaining that the prisoner, when he is brought to the glow of the sun, will be unable to see anything in front because of his dazzled eyes. He will wonder for the unacceptability of seeing anything in the light. Therefore, he will like to see reality in the shadows. In fact, he will require growing accustomed to the sight of the *upper world* (spiritual realm). He will see the shadows first, next reflection of men and another object in the water, then finally the objects themselves that means he will see the real sun at the end of his trials. Then, he will make out reasons behind seasons, years, etc. He will see the sun, the central source of all these things. Thus, he will see the sun first, and then he will make reasons about the sun. The sun will be real in the end. Once he has perceived the reality after his labor, he will desire to live in poverty and virtuous world rather than the world of honors and glories. He will rather suffer anything than entertain the false notions of the ignorant cave.

Socrates says, furthermore, changing the situation, that the prisoner, who has come out and received spiritual knowledge, is asked to return to his own previous position into the cave. He will have difficulty to see anything clearly in the cave, unlike other prisoners. In the context of measurement of the shadows, he will be a failure. Other people will surely make fun of him saying that he has lost his eyesight going out in the light. He will be supposed to be mad and he will be an outcast. Maybe he will be killed because of his unadjusting behavior and talk. Socrates explains that the entire allegory of the prison-house is the world of sight. The light of the fire is the sun, and journey outside and upwards is the

ascent of the soul into the intellectual world. He says that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all. That can be seen only with an effort.

Socrates argues that those who have attained this spiritual beautiful knowledge are unwilling to descend to human affairs of this world. The bewilderment of the eyes of the prisoner is caused by two reasons, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light. Going into the light is truly the mind's eye. He means to say that a man is confused in adjustment either because of his knowledge and wisdom or because of the lack of these things.

Socrates changes this allegory to a philosophy of learning. He says that power and capacity of learning already exist in the soul of man. Professors, those who say that they will send the knowledge into the soul, are wrong in Socrates's view. The instrument of knowledge can only be by the movement of the whole soul turned from the world of becoming into that of being, i.e. learning by training and guidance by degrees to endure the sight of being of the good. The person may be seen walking in the wrong direction and looking away from the truth. As virtues of the soul are similar or attached to the bodily qualities, they can be developed by habit and exercise even if the person lacks such qualities. Sometimes a clever rogue has excellent intelligence. If he is properly guided, he can be turned to benefactor activities.

Analysis

Allegory of the Cave

Socrates is describing the following two images:

First, he shows the image of a cave:

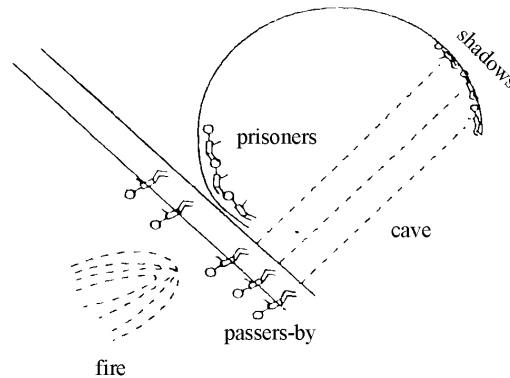


Figure 1

There are the prisoners in the cave. Their bodies are tied and chained. Their heads are not allowed to move. They are facing towards the opposite wall of the cave. Behind the cave, there goes a raised wall along which the passers-by are walking. To the left of the raised wall, there is fire. By the blaze of the fire, shadows of the passersby are reflected on the opposite wall. The prisoners see only the shadows of the people and of the objects they are carrying with them. Surely they can't tell with distinction whose shadows they are. They will hear the echo of noises made by the passersby. They will guess that the noises are coming from them. They can't distinguish noises if they come from other directions and from other creatures.

Next, he shows the image of a puppet show or a cinema hall

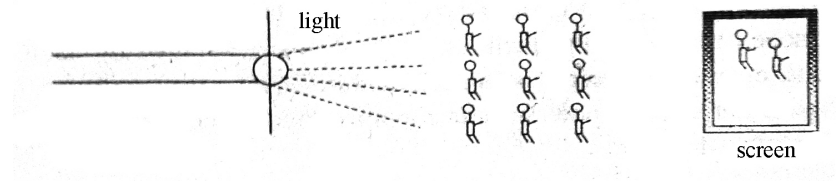


Figure 2

In this image, the audience is facing the screen. The light coming from the cine-projector behind the audience is making figures on the screen. These people will believe the moving figures of the screen to be real.

In both images, the lookers will see the shadows. Truth for them would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

Reality and Illusions

Socrates describes another situation. When one of the prisoners is released and driven to the light, he will suffer from it. The glare will distress him. Someone will tell him that the shadows seen by him before were only illusions. The instructor will ask him to name the real "beings". The prisoner will be confused. Certainly, he can't tell confidently that these were the "beings" whose shadows he had seen before. The prisoner will suppose that the shadows are truer than the real objects. It is true that the prisoner can't recognize the objects of the shadows. As he will be compelled to look straight at the light, and actually he is not accustomed to such behavior, he will have pain in his eyes. Rather, he will feel better to see the shadows because they are, in reality, clearer than the real objects shown to him. The same experience he will have in the presence of the sun. His eyes will be dazzled, so he will be unable to see absolute realities. These absolute realities are beyond everybody's reach. A person will have to tolerate the light and strain to reach into the realm of absolute realities.

Enlightenment/Metamorphosis/Metaphysics

At this point, there is a real climax. If the prisoner (any human beings) grows to accustom to the sight of the upper world, he will be enlightened. He will be free from the illusion. He will be free from prejudice, ignorance, and superstition. He will see the shadows first. Next, he will see the real objects themselves. Then, he will see the light of the moon, of the stars and finally of the sun. He will be able to recognize the real existence, value, and significance of the sun in the world. He will easily reach the upper world.

The man will start reasoning. He will find the sun to be absolute truth. The sun will be, in his eye, the guardian of all that is in the visible world.

By the metaphysical approach, he will deal with the nature of existence, truth, and knowledge. His knowledge and wisdom will cover a wide realm like the sunlight. His superiority will be widely recognized. The Metamorphosis of the nature of the existence, truth, knowledge and every other world's activity will enable him to get into the depth of everything through spiritual perceptions.

Felicitation/Honour to the Enlightened One

Well, the prisoner will realize now the difference between the nature of the enlightened one, and of the unenlightened one. In the cave, the world of the prisoners, they may have a system of giving honours on those who will be

able to make a quick decision of the passing shadows. But the enlightened one will never consider such honors to be praiseworthy. He will not care for such honors, glories and false benefits. Rather, he will follow Homer (Greek poet), and remain poor and unprivileged forever to acquire much more spiritual delights.

If he is called to the same old situation, he will have his eyes full of darkness. He will fail in a contest of measuring the moving shadows. Other prisoners, who have never gone out, will make fun of him. They will say that the man has lost his power of vision going out of the cave. If the man tries to release another prisoner, lead and guide him up to the light, that act will be considered to be a great offense. They will put him to death. This alludes to the offense, trial and death-penalty of Socrates. He was also accused of misguiding the youth of Athens. After trial, he was sentenced to death.

Meaning of the Cave Allegory

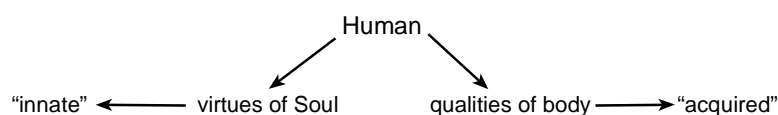
The cave is the world of sight. The light of the fire is the sun. Journey upwards is the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world. Socrates says that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all. The idea of good is the universal author of all beautiful and right things. It is the very thing the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual.

Those who attain the idea of good are unwilling to descend to human affairs. These good souls like to dwell in the upper world. This is their natural desire. After much suffering and confusion, they are able to reach this dwelling place. They are ridiculed when their eyes are blinking. They are tried in courts of law. They face shadows of images of justice. Only they see the absolute justice which is beyond the general people's reach.

The bewilderment of the eyes is of two kinds, and arise from two causes-either from coming out of the light or from going into the light. This second is true of the mind's eye. The man of the second type knows the cause of confusion of vision. So he does not laugh at someone whose eye is perplexed. He makes reasoning and inquires whether the man has come out of the light or he has gone into the light. He will look for distinction in his satisfaction.

Education and Knowledge

Socrates's view is very controversial at this point because he believes that the power and capacity of learning exist in the soul already before his birth. The body is only the means that carries the soul within to turn his eyes (mind's eye) from darkness to light. The soul is an actual instrument of knowledge. It is turned from the world of becoming into that of being. By learning by degrees to endure the sight of being, of the good, the person achieves the knowledge. No professors of education can put a knowledge into the soul. Surely he cannot put sight into blind eyes. It is not clear here, whether Socrates argues about knowledge or about wisdom. Often it has been seen that wisdom is innate whereas knowledge is acquired. Anyway, Socrates is seen talking about the innate instincts (inborn attitude or nature). Socrates believes that no one needs to implant the faculty of sight because that exists already. Maybe that sight has turned in the wrong direction. Maybe he is looking away from the truth. This fact is remarkable to notice. He leads us to the norm of *pedagogy* (teaching). Specific objectives of teaching are to bring a person (sight and body) into the right direction and to make him or she look into the truth.



Socrates hinders here his own previous argument, saying that "for even when they (virtues of the soul) are not

originally innate they can be implanted later by habit and exercise". Why are there exceptions? Was Socrates himself an exception? Socrates had the virtues of soul innately. The contemporary politicians of Athens lacked such divine gifts. Did Socrates want to implant them into their souls? By the way, the conversion of the faculty of sight becomes useful and profitable, or hurtful and useless. Sometimes there is intelligence in the keen eye of a clever rogue. His unimportant soul is different from the blind. However, his eyesight falls in service of evil. His eyesight can be brought into the right direction, but his soul must be released from sensual pleasures. Sensual and sensuous pleasures are attached to the human body at their birth, and therefore, their souls are also diverted to wrongs. They see only the illusions of the world. They can be led into right tracks by habit and exercise. A virtue of wisdom should be developed.

Ideal State

Socrates comes to the major part of his *discourse* (talk). Neither *enlightened* (educated) nor unenlightened ones will be able ministers of state. The former cannot be able ministers if they do not make an end of their education. They will not act until they are compelled. The latter cannot be so because they do not know about any kinds of duty or responsibility. Therefore, the enlightened ones should be compelled to descend to the human affairs. They must not live forever in the upper world. These people, possessors of the best minds, should be benefactors of the State. Only with their help, the happiness can be achieved in the whole State. Though they do have spiritual pleasures in the upper world, they are never good if they remain away from others who have not tasted the pleasures. These people do not take advantage of the ignorant people. No one has to show any gratitude for their service. They have the double duty of being educated and of educating the people of the State. Socrates's philosophy of sight even in the dark underground den is very figurative and metaphysical:

"Wherefore each of you, when his turn comes, must go down to the general underground abode, and get the habit of seeing in the dark. When you have acquired the habit, you will see ten thousand times better than the inhabitants of the den,"

After learning about the beauty, justice and good, the wise philosophers have to think of descending to their old place to share fortune and misfortune alike. The State will be a reality. It is not only a dream to them. Usually, in most States, men fight for power and benefits. They are actually fighting for illusions- the shadows. Only wise philosophers can administer a State in a real spirit. Socrates's wisdom is admirably *relevant* in the modern political environment:

"Whereas the truth is that the State in which the rulers are most reluctant [unwilling] to govern is always the best and most quietly governed, and the State in which they are most eager, the worst."

Wise and intelligent people are unwilling to take any kinds of participation in the administration of the State. They do not want to be involved in religion, politics, war, and other human affairs. Their life passes in the solitude of nature, study, knowledge, etc. These people are required to rule the State wisely in a spirit and virtues of the soul. They will rule who are truly rich, not in silver and gold, but in virtue and wisdom. Politically ambitious people ruin themselves and the whole State. Socrates is quite against the life of political ambition:

"And the only life which looks down upon the life of political ambition is that of true philosophy."

Plato's Rhetoric

Plato's style is very simple, clear and direct. To describe the major point, that is, the power and supremacy of the sun in the world, he talks about darkness and light in the cave. Figuratively, the darkness represents ignorance, and the light means knowledge. Yet we don't have to get the support of figurative notes because Plato gives us many examples and images one after another illustrating the meaning and situation clear. Examples are all from daily experiences. One's eyes will be dazzled at the approach of light, and they will be weak at the approach of darkness. However, difficulty arises from philosophical ideas. Ideas about spiritual perceptions are difficult to grasp with the mind. His argument runs two ways- one criticizing and undermining the sense perception, and another favoring and overpraising the spiritual perception. With the help of ideal entities, acknowledging the superiority of upper intellectual world, he set an ideal state.

There are strange and beautiful images. The entire allegory is full of images. Cave, fire, raised wall, cave's walls, shadows on the wall, the sun etc. are the images. Actually, the allegory is a very important rhetorical technique practiced in this text. The allegory is a story in which the characters and situations are meant to resemble people and situations in another context. The objects, events or people are presented symbolically, so the story conveys a meaning other than and deeper than the actual incident or characters described. Socrates himself has said in the text:

".....the prison house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun..... the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world....."

Usually, an allegory is used to teach a moral lesson. In this text, too, we do have a moral lesson. If we rely on sense perceptions, we will know very little truth about the world. For the knowledge of the absolute truth, one must know ideal entities of the world. 'One must grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world'. Besides this moral lesson, Plato writes about the virtues of the soul that can develop happiness all around him or her. He speaks of an ideal person for an ideal State.

Another remarkable rhetorical technique is a dramatic presentation of ideas. Dialogue is an importantly favorable device used by Plato. Most of Plato's works are in the form of dialogue. We overhear the question-answer dialogue between Socrates and his disciple Glaucon. However, Socrates speaks more than Glaucon. His speech is lengthy. A single sentence has run in many lines, being joined by commas, semi-colons and linking words. Furthermore, the charm of the dialogue has been added by Homer's line and Socratic philosophy. The person in the sight of the upper world would not care for honors and glories. Rather, he would speak Homer's line:

Better to be the poor servant of a poor master.

Similarly, who won't be impressed by Socratic philosophy, when he says?

"..... The truth is that the State in which the rulers are most reluctant to govern is always the best and most quietly governed, and the State in which they are most eager, the worst."

In short, there is unity in a presentation of ideas through allegory dialogue and fine rhetorical devices.

CONCLUSIONS

Socrates opines that, in an ideal state, every citizen should be educated, enlightened, and ideal. Spiritualism is in the heart of his dialogue. Ethics is everywhere in the text. It's pedagogical in process and theme.

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