

Thought for the Day

Excerpt from Plato's *The Republic*



LIVINGSTANDARDSNZ

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Source: Butler-Bowden, T. (eds) (2012). *Plato: The Republic*, p. 18-20. Chichester: Capstone Publishing

The Allegory of the Cave

We turn now to the most famous passage of *The Republic*, Plato's allegory of the cave (or underground den, as Jowett translates it), which is to be found in Book VII.

Socrates has his friends imagine a group of people living in a cave which has only a small opening to the light of the outside world. These individuals have spent their whole lives in the cave, chained in such a way that they can only see the walls, and cannot turn around to see the light. Behind them is a perpetual fire, and between the fire and the walls walks a parade of people carrying various things, including models of animals, with the shadow of them cast onto the wall in front of the prisoners. The chained people can only ever see the shadows of this procession and their own shadows, ensuring that reality is for them a simple two-dimensional film of shadows, and never the original things that cast them.

Then, however, someone comes to release one of the prisoners from their bondage. One assumes that the prisoner will be delighted to see that what they had perceived as real was in fact just a projection of true reality, but this shift in perception is too much. The prisoner is in fact dazzled by the light of the fire. Nevertheless he is brought out of the cave and shown the sun, which again appears horribly bright and pains his eyes. However, in time the prisoner comes to appreciate the sun, understanding it as the real light of the world and the source of all perception. He pities his fellow prisoners back in the cave, still believing that what they dimly see is 'reality'.

When the prisoner returns to the cave and cannot see in the dark so well any more, his fellows contend that his journey into the light was a waste of time that only damaged his eyes. They can't appreciate that this world has changed forever, and he himself cannot imagine going back to his former life in which mere appearances count for truth.

Socrates uses the sun as a metaphor for the Form of the Good, and the fact that appreciation of the Good is not arrived at easily. However, when properly seen for the first time, the viewer understands this form to be:

‘...the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.’

Elsewhere, he describes the journey out of the cave as a movement from ‘becoming’ to ‘being’, from conditioned to absolute reality. Having had this experience, Socrates says, is it any wonder that those philosophers who have seen the essential Form of Justice in real courts of law, which is filled with people who have no appreciation of what justice is? Well they might, but it is their duty to discern the shadows from the truth, ensuring that they will not do such things as starting wars for power’s sake, but will work tirelessly for the long-term benefit of the state and the people. Socrates sagely notes to Glaucon 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.’