

PLATO: THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

Compare our nature in respect to education with our condition. Imagine men in an underground cave with an entrance open toward the light which extends through the whole cave. Within the cave are people who from childhood have had chains on their legs and their necks so they could only look forward but not turn their heads. There is burning a fire, above and behind them, and between the fire and the chains is a road above, along which one may see a little wall built along, just as the stages of conjurers are built before the people in whose presence they show their tricks. . . . Imagine then by the side of this little wall men carrying all sorts of machines rising above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought in stone, wood, and other materials, some of bearers probably speaking, others proceeding in silenced. . . . [Do you think] that such as these [chained men] would have seen anything else of themselves or one another except the shadows that fall from the fire on the opposite side of the cave? How can they . . . if indeed they are forced to always keep their heads unmoved? . . . [S]uch persons would believe that truth was nothing else but the shadows of the exhibitions. Let us inquire then, as to their liberation from captivity, and their cure for insanity. . . . [What if one of these chained persons was] let loose and obliged immediately to rise up, and turn round his neck and walk, and look upwards to the light, and doing all this still feel pained, and be disabled by the dazzling form seeing those things of which he formerly saw the shadows. What would he say if anyone were to tell him that he formerly saw mere empty visions, but now saw more correctly, as being nearer to the real thing, and turned toward what was more real. Then, what if you specially pointing out to him, and made him tell you the nature of what he saw. Do you think that he would be embarrassed? Do you think that he would think now that what he saw before was truer than what he sees now?

Even if a person could force him to look at the light itself, would he not have pain in his eyes and look away? And then, would not he turn to what he really could see [without pain] and think that these are really more clear than what had just been shown to him? But if a person was then to forcibly drag him out of the cave without stopping, until he was in the light of the sun, would he not be pained and indignant? Would not he, while in this light and having his eyes dazzled with the splendor, be able to see anything that he thought was true? No, he could not, at that moment. He would need to get some degree of practice if he would see things above him. First, he would most easily perceive the shadows, and then the images of men and other animals in the water, and after that the things themselves. And then he would more easily see the things in heaven, and heaven itself, by night, looking to the light of the stars and the moon, than after daylight to the sun and the light of the sun. How else? Finally, he might be able to perceive and contemplate the nature of the sun, not as respects its images in water or any other place, but itself by itself in its own proper place.

From: Plato, *The Republic*, George Burgess, trans. (New York: Walter Dunne, 1901), translation modified.