

# The Metaphor of the Cave

By Sanderson Beck

From Plato's Republic

SOCRATES: Next compare the nature of our experience concerning education and lack of education. For look, humans dwell in a kind of underground cave open to the light all along the cave; in it from childhood their legs and necks are in chains so that they stay seeing only in front, and they're unable to turn their heads around; the light of a fire above and distant from them is burning behind them, and between the fire and the chained is a road along which a low wall has been built, like screens are set before wonder-workers in front of people, above which they show the wonders.

GLAUCON: I see.

SOCRATES: Now see people along this wall carrying all kinds of artifacts above the wall and human statues and stone and wooden animals; some carrying them speak, and others are silent.

GLAUCON: You tell of unusual images and prisoners.

SOCRATES: Similar to us, for first do you think they would see anything of themselves and each other except the shadows from the fire on the cave wall in front of them?

GLAUCON: How could they, if they're forced to keep their heads unmoved throughout their life?

SOCRATES: So if they could converse with each other, don't you think they would believe they're naming the things present as seen?

GLAUCON: They must.

SOCRATES: If their prison had an echo from the opposite wall, when a passer-by spoke, do you think they would believe the passing shadow was the speaker?

GLAUCON: By God, I do.

SOCRATES: Then in every way they would consider the truth nothing but the shadows of the artifacts.

GLAUCON: It's quite necessary.

SOCRATES: Now consider what would naturally happen if some of them were released and healed from the chains and thoughtlessness: When they're released and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn around and slowly go and look up at the light, feeling pain while doing all this, and due to the glare being unable to look upon those objects whose shadows they had seen, what do you think they would say, if someone said that things seen then were illusions, but that now nearer to reality turning to the more real they would be looking more correctly? And being shown each passing thing if they were compelled to

answer what it is, don't you think they would be in doubt and believe that what was seen before is more true than what is shown now?

GLAUCON: Much more.

SOCRATES: If they were compelled to look at the light itself, wouldn't their eyes be in pain and turning away escape to those things which they can look upon and are accustomed to as more clear than the things shown?

GLAUCON: That's so.

SOCRATES: If someone dragged them from there by force up the steep ascent and didn't let go until they were drawn out into the sun's light, wouldn't they suffer pain and struggle, and when they came to the light, their eyes being full of sunbeams wouldn't they be unable to see even one of the things now called true?

GLAUCON: At least not suddenly.

SOCRATES: I think they'd need to get used to seeing things above: first the shadows would be easy to look upon, after this images in water, and last the things themselves; from these at night they would go on to view things in heaven and heaven itself, looking at the light of the stars and moon more easily than by day the sun and its light.

GLAUCON: Why not?

SOCRATES: Finally they'd be able to look upon and view the sun, not in water nor phantoms of it in other settings, but itself by itself in its own place.

GLAUCON: That's necessary.

SOCRATES: After this they'd conclude about it that this is what provides the seasons and years and presides over all things in the visible region and somehow is the cause of all those things which they had seen.

GLAUCON: It's clear they would come to that next.

SOCRATES: So remembering their first dwelling and what passed for wisdom there with the prisoners, don't you think they'd be happy with the change and pity them?

GLAUCON: Definitely.

SOCRATES: And if some were honored and praised by each other then and given prizes for seeing those passing by sharpest, and for remembering their habitual moving sequences, and for being most able to predict their future return, do you think they would want to have these and would envy those honored and successful, or with Homer would they definitely prefer being a serf to another landless man and endure anything rather than believe those and live in that way?

GLAUCON: I think they'd accept anything rather than that.

SOCRATES: Notice this too. If they went down again and sat on their old seat, wouldn't their eyes be full of darkness, suddenly coming out of the

sunlight?

GLAUCON: Very much.

SOCRATES: If they had to compete in discerning those shadows again with those perpetual prisoners while dim-sighted, before the eyes adjusted, the habit's time certainly not being short, then wouldn't they provoke laughter, and wouldn't those say about them, that having gone up they returned with eyes ruined, and that it's not worth even trying to go up? And if those could lay their hands on them and kill them for attempting to release and lead up any, would they kill them?

GLAUCON: Definitely.

SOCRATES: Now this image, dear Glaucon, applies to everything said before, comparing the setting revealed through sight to living in the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the sun's power; and if you assume the ascent and the view above is the soul's way up to the intelligible region you'll not mistake my hope, since you want to hear this; but God knows if it happens to be true. So the phenomena appear thus to me: in the known the idea of the good is the ultimate and is seen with difficulty, and having been seen the conclusion is that it's the cause of all things correct and beautiful, generating light and lord of this in the visible; in the intelligible it's the lord providing truth and intelligence, and those intending to act sensibly either in private or public should see this.

GLAUCON: I'm following as best I can.

SOCRATES: Do you think it's surprising if someone returning from the divine view to evil human affairs is put to shame and appears quite ridiculous while dim-sighted and before becoming adequately adjusted to the dark environment is compelled to contend in courtrooms or elsewhere about the shadows of the just or of the statues, and to debate about this when these undertaking them have never seen justice itself?

GLAUCON: It wouldn't be surprising.