PLATO'S MYTH OF THE CAVE

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In the seventh book of the *Republic* (514a *ff.*), Plato narrates a myth that is known as the 'myth of the cave,' and it symbolizes man's relationship with the Good (a foundational philosophical concept representing an ideal standard of value, virtue, and ultimate purpose) as a process of education and psychological remolding.

In the depths of a gloomy, underground chamber like a cave, are men who have been prisoners there since they were children. They are fastened in such a way that they cannot turn their heads. Some way off, behind and higher up, a fire is burning. Between the fire and the prisoners and above them runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall

has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience. Furthermore, there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, projecting above it. Hence, due to the way in which the prisoners' legs and necks are fastened, the only things that the prisoners can see are the shadows of the objects carried along the road (these shadows are thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite them). Suppose that one of these prisoners were let loose, suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk toward the fire and that, ultimately, he were forcibly dragged up the steep and rugged ascent and not let go until he had dragged out into the sunlight. The previous process would be a painful one, to which the prisoner would much object. However, during his march toward the sun, the prisoner would realize that, apart from the shadows, there were other things, too, such as a burning torch and several objects carried along the road, and, when, at last, he would manage to get out of the cave, he would see things in the upper world outside the cave, and, finally, he would manage to look at the sun itself. Later on, he would come to the conclusion that, when he was in the cave, he was looking at the shadows of things and not at things themselves. Finally, according to Plato's narration, this ex-prisoner would think of the gloom of the cave, and he would decide to descend again into the cave in order to bring the good news to his ex-fellow prisoners, even though he was aware that they would not believe his word and they would react aggressively.

After the narration of the myth of the cave, Plato makes interpretive comments about it. The space of the cave corresponds to an unilluminated sensible world, and it can be properly understood only if one bears in mind the ancient Greek philosophy of optics. In the context of ancient Greek philosophy, 'sight' and 'intellect' are essentially united with each other.

According to Plato's *Timaeus* (45b: "light-bearing eyes"), 'seeing' means that the light of one's eyes coalesces with the light of the seen body, which, according to Plato's *Meno* (76d), "is an effluence of figures, commensurate with sight and sensible." However, the meeting between the previous two lights takes place in the context of a third light: the daylight. In other words, Plato argues, sight is possible due to a slim stream of light which has the same essence with sunlight, it is emitted from the eyes, and it is interwoven with daylight. Thus, in *Timaeus* (46b), Plato argues the following: "owing to the fire of the reflected face coalescing with the fire of the vision on the smooth and bright surface."

Even though Aristotle, in his work *On Senses and the Sensible* (437b11 *ff.*) and in the second book of his work *On the Soul*, criticizes Plato's optics and argues that the eye's light is not fire, since the eye's major component is liquid, Aristotle's optics does not substantially contradict Plato's optics. Both Plato and Aristotle argue that we see through the soul by means of the organ of sight and that intellect is inextricably linked to sensation, and, more specifically, that intellect is the deepest layer of sensation and not a totally different process.

In his works *On Senses and the Sensible* and *On the Soul*, Aristotle agrees with Plato's thesis that we see through the soul (Plato, *Timaeus*, 45d: "distributes the motions of every object it touches, or whereby it is touched, throughout all the body even unto the soul, and brings about the sensation which we now term 'seeing'"). But, because, *contra* Plato, in Aristotle's philosophy, the soul is united with the body as its form and entelechy (actuality), Aristotle proposes the theory of the 'transparent.' By the term 'transparent,' Aristotle means that which is between the sense organ and the sensible; it receives the information about the species of the sensible and transfers this information to the sense organ. Thus, in the second book of his work *On the Soul*, Aristotle maintains that, by the term 'transparent,' he means what is visible, but not

visible in itself, since it owes its visibility to the color of something else; of this character are air, water, and ether. According to Aristotle's *On the Soul*, sight is the entelechy, or energy, of what is transparent, and, therefore, both the soul and the body participate in the process of knowledge (for more details, see also Thomas K. Johansen, *Aristotle on the Sense-Organs*, 2007).

In his work *On Senses and the Sensible* (438b22–23), Aristotle describes sight as a potential and an actual sense, and he explains the difference between the 'potential' and the 'actual' (e.g., it is owing to this difference that we do not actually see its ten-thousandth part in a grain of millet). Moreover, in his work *On Senses and the Sensible* (439a15), Aristotle describes the soul *qua* exercising sight. Since the soul perceives, and especially during the process of seeing, it is the center of the senses (each faculty of sense perception is connected with the soul), it operates within the eye (Aristotle, *On Senses and the Sensible*, 438b10), and it needs an inner light, while the eye needs an external light. Thus, from Aristotle's perspective, the cause of sight is light and not the fire of the eyes. Additionally, according to Aristotle, light is the entelechy of what is transparent (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 419a11). As a conclusion, according to Aristotle, when some light actualizes what is transparent, we perceive the mental reality of the visible bodies.

From the perspective of Aristotle's optics, the eye is not light in itself, but it becomes the organ of sight through and due to the actualization of what is transparent. When we receive light, what is transparent inside and outside the eye is immediately actualized (i.e., it becomes light, too), and, therefore, it transfers the information about the species of the visible object to the eye, enabling us to see. Hence, Aristotle adopted Plato's notion of the third light. In his *Republic* (507d–e), Plato writes about the significance of the third light: "he will see nothing and the colors will remain invisible unless a third element is present which is specifically and naturally adapted for the purpose . . . What you call light." In his work *On Senses and the Sensible* (439a15–23), Aristotle adds that sight, which is the entelechy of the eye, and light, which is the entelechy of what is transparent, presuppose a common power, specifically, a light that generally exists in what is transparent and is actualized in the colored figure of the visible object as light sense.

In the context of Plato's and Aristotle's optics, 'shadow' is understood as an unilluminated object, an object that is deprived of light, and it is treated as a negative substance. Shadow is lack of light due to the presence of an opaque object, which hinders the progress of the rays of the source of light and, thus, causes lack of light. Therefore, a shadow cannot be seen, not because we cannot identify its figure, but because a shadow does not 'look at' us, in the sense that our eyes' light cannot meet a light deriving from a shadow. In other words, 'shadow' means lack of communication, lack of society, and an entity that remains closed toward the rays of the source of light.

The fire burning in the Platonic Cave corresponds to the sun of the 'Good,' namely, to the ultimate source of goodness. The liberated prisoner's ascent toward the view of the sun corresponds to the mind's ascent from the sensible world to the intelligible world. The previous correspondences imply that, at the edge of the sensible world, that is, at the borderline between the sensible world and the intelligible world, the mind just starts seeing the sunlight, the idea of the Good. When the liberated prisoner is in a condition to gaze at the 'sun' (i.e., the absolute good), he manages to realize that the 'sun' is the universal cause of goodness and beauty. The sun, which is outside the cave, is the source of light; it provides the necessary condition under which things can be disclosed (known) in the sensible world, and it is the necessary presupposition under which we can understand which of the things we see are true and which are not, since

it makes us capable of discerning the intelligible reality of things. Thus, Plato argues that everyone who intends to act wisely, either in public or in private life, must gaze at the sun; in other words, he must be in a position to discern one thing from another, guided by the idea of the Good.

From the aforementioned Platonic arguments, it follows that, contrary to what the sophists and the empiricists maintain, knowledge does not consist in the accumulation of experiences, or of data from the sensible world, but it can be achieved inside the soul; therefore, the *telos* of theorizing and education is to turn one's mind away from darkness until he can bear to gaze at the 'sun,' which symbolizes the idea of the Good. The *telos* of Plato's philosophy is psychotherapy, which, for the ancient Greeks, consists in psychic order, harmony, and beauty. Plato made this point clear in most of his works, such as in the following: *Republic* (580d), *Laws* (650b), *Cratylus* (440c), *Charmides* (157b), *Laches* (185e), *Protagoras* (312c), *Gorgias* (513e), and *Timaeus* (87c). There are several treatments for the various corporal illnesses, but, according to Plato, 'cleansing' is the essence of psychotherapy, and education, consisting in a spiritual orientation toward the truth, is the treatment for spiritual illnesses.

The issue of philosophical cleansing was methodically studied by Plato in his book *Phaedo*. In *Phaedo* (74a–c), Plato made the first presentation of his theory of ideas as autonomous entities and as the archetypal reality of beings. Additionally, in *Phaedo* (65e–66a), Plato studies the problem of the knowledge of ideas, since he argues that "he who prepares himself most carefully to understand the true essence of each thing that he examines would come nearest to the knowledge of it" and that this would be done most perfectly by employing "pure, absolute reason," and by removing oneself "so far as possible, from eyes and ears, and, in a word, from his whole body."

An idea, in its original Platonic sense, is the conception of one out of many. Thus, in *Phaedrus* (265d), Plato maintains that the process of knowing an idea consists in taking "a synoptic view of many scattered particulars" and collecting them "under a single generic term." Moreover, in his *Republic* (537c), Plato argues that "the only way to acquire lasting knowledge" is to "bring together the disconnected subjects . . . and take a comprehensive view of their relationship with each other and with the nature of reality." In Plato's philosophy, idea and species display the visible rational form of the life-giving universal One, and the theory of, or contemplation on, the life-giving universal One leads us to the conclusion that the truth of the world of ideas is identical with the essence of reality. Thus, according to Plato, a dialectical philosopher is 'synoptic'[1]; that is, he reduces a multitude of phenomena to the archetypal 'one,' instead of analyzing phenomena.

According to Plato, reducing a collection of phenomena to an idea is equivalent to understanding their unity into a 'whole,' which is a universal signification or value (idea). In other words, the *telos* of the mind's movement from impressions to the truth and from phenomena to ideas is a value. Hence, within the framework of Plato's philosophy, ideas are neither one's own concepts of things nor images of things, but they are the fundamental values of things, which hold universally, regardless of whether some persons (e.g., the prisoners in the Platonic myth of the cave) want to know them or not. Ideas hold universally because within their context life acquires an intrinsic value (i.e., a value beyond ephemeral conventions). Every other existential condition lacks intrinsic value, because it is conventional, and, hence, perilous, since it is self-

[1] The term 'synoptic' is derived from the Greek words 'syn' (σύν), meaning 'together,' and 'opsis' (ὄψις), meaning 'view,' and it describes observations that give a broad, comprehensive view of something/someone.

overcoming and, thus, potentially self-destructive. For instance, the prisoners in the Platonic myth of the cave could establish an order of things based on their illusions, but such an order of things would be threatened with collapse immediately after the first expression of doubt about its merits, and the expression of doubt about its merits would be only a matter of time, since illusions preclude the knowledge of truth *qua* universal value, which could underpin a real and ontologically stable order of things.

Plato's myth of the cave is intimately related to what Plato has described as the graph of knowledge in the sixth book of his *Republic* (510a–511e). According to Plato, knowledge can be graphically represented by a divided line: (i) the first half of this divided line corresponds to the knowledge of the visible things, and it is further divided into two parts: the realm of shadows, and the realm of images (which are more visible than shadows); (ii) the second half of this divided line corresponds to the knowledge of the intelligible things, and it is further divided into two parts: the ideas of logical reasoning (the realm of logical reality), and the supersensuous reality (the realm of the Good). The myth of the cave transforms the previous graph of knowledge into a lively story, and, thus, it explains the manner in which the problem of knowledge is experienced by humans. By narrating the myth of the cave, Plato's graph of knowledge becomes a symbol of man's relationship with truth, the levels of knowledge become steps of spiritual life, and the divided line corresponds to the human condition. Thus, truth corresponds to an existential condition, to a way of life and to a struggle.

Finally, according to Plato's *Republic*, the 'idea' is a principle that guides practice, but the 'idea' itself is irreducible to practice, meaning it is not a practical, quantifiable goal *per se*; it is a transcendent strategic vision or formula. From Plato's perspective, ideas constitute the life of God's essence, and, therefore, the partaker of the world of ideas is a partaker of divinity. Thus, the Platonic conception of the world of ideas and Plato's conception of man's participation in the world of ideas is philosophically akin to the Christian teachings about grace and divine energies.

In his graph of knowledge and in his myth of the cave, Plato discerns four different types of 'seeing,' which are four different types of knowledge and four different states of consciousness, or existential conditions: (i) illusion, or conjecture, which provides only the most primitive and unreliable opinions; (ii) belief, being empirical knowledge which allows one to distinguish objects from their shadows, but it lacks epistemological and methodological rigor; (iii) rule-based reasoning, or logic (*dianoia*), with which one can achieve systematic knowledge of the objects of consciousness through a disciplined application of the understanding, and (iv) intelligence (*noesis*), which is the comprehension of the true nature of reality.

Given the level of existential perfection that one can attain by becoming a partaker of the world of ideas, the confinement of one's mind to the realm that Plato calls 'intellect' (which corresponds to mere logical formalism) is equivalent to the "ancestral sin," because such a person is self-confined to his own logical structures and refuses to receive the light of the metaphysical 'sun' of the Good. Thus, according to Plato, 'intelligence,' not 'intellect,' is the most perfect and *ne plus ultra* level of knowledge, and it corresponds to the knowledge of the Good, which presupposes a particular method of knowledge. Plato calls the method that leads to the knowledge of the Good "dialectic." This is a logical as well as meta-logical method of knowledge, in the sense that it transcends logical formalism, without being irrational. The knowledge of the Good is logical, in the sense that it presupposes that the mind has progressed from illusions and a basic empirical type of knowledge to logic. Simultaneously, the knowledge of the Good is meta-logical, in the sense that it presupposes that the mind is aware of the limits of logical formalism, and it has acquired a type of knowledge that

is derived from an experience of enlightened intellectual intuition and ethics. As a conclusion, from the perspective of Plato's philosophy, intelligence implies and underpins a transition from 'being' to a 'more-than-being,' thus embracing 'becoming'—a growth-oriented, lifelong process that values learning and evolution over static identity or finality. This shift requires cultivating a growth mindset, moving from a narrow self-concept to a broader sense of connection.