# Polishing a Crystal: Understanding Plato's Allegory of the Cave

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Behold! He was born into chains and constrained to a chair. His head was held still, looking forwards. The world flickered as shadows on the wall in front of him. These shadows were life as he understood it; but he is being released. He is now being dragged out of this shadowy reality and into the light of actual objects. His eyes must adapt to the painful sunlight. And, once they have and he can see clearly the world as it is around him, he must return to the world of shadows. This is the philosopher.

Plato's allegory of the cave, summarized above, expresses Socrates' understanding of the philosopher, his role in society, and the experience one needs to become a philosopher. Here, we will offer an interpretation of this famous allegory from Plato's *Republic* to uncover the nature of the philosopher according to Socrates. To do so, we will examine the life experiences of the philosopher; his guiding principles and how he must come to arrive at them; and the practical use of philosophy within the polis. Moreover, we will examine these points with careful reference to the allegory of the cave and thereby reveal the allegory's powerful ability to express Socrates' notion of the philosopher.

The philosopher is a lover of knowledge. There is a difference, Socrates explains, between knowledge and

opinion. Knowledge aims at the truth of a thing; to know "nothing short of the most finished picture." [1] In understanding the *whole* of that thing, knowledge, Socrates argues, is always of being, of things as they are in their absolute form; that is, in accordance with the allegory, of the actual objects outside of the cave. Ignorance is of the "utterly unknown," and therefore takes the opposite extreme: It is always of non-being, of that which we do not know. Opinion falls in the intermediary, into the shadows within the cave:

> Since beauty is the opposite of ugliness, they are two?
>
> Certainly.
>
> And inasmuch as they are two, each of them is one?
>
> True again.
>
> And of just and unjust, good and evil, and every other class, the same remark holds; taken singly, each of them is one; but from the various combinations of them with actions and things and with one another, they are seen in all sorts of lights and appear many?
>
> Very true.[2]

Opinion sees things in many different ways; it is the understanding that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." It designates to a thing opposites: According to opinion, beauty and ugliness can be referred to the same object; that

1. Plato, *The Republic,* trans. Benjamin Jowett (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2000) 169.
2. Ibid., 143.

is, a thing under opinion is both *this* and *not this*. Like judging shadows, opinion is of things that are not *non-beings*, but equally as much of things that are not *beings*. Socrates concludes that the subject matter of knowledge is being, of ignorance non-being, and of opinion, therefore, *the space between them both*. While hopelessly being constrained in the cave, one can never know what the shadows really are: one can only hypothesize, be of the opinion that they are so and so. As such, there is no absolute beauty, according to opinion.

On the other hand, the lover of knowledge, Socrates insists, "recognizes the existence of absolute beauty and is able to distinguish the idea from the objects which participate in the idea."[3] What Socrates means by this is that there is an idea or form of beauty, which all things are capable of participating in, and that it is therefore the philosopher's task to understand this form, which is knowledge proper: "The many, as we have said, are seen but not known, and the ideas are known but not seen."[4] Hence, one who *sees* the many finds that some things are beautiful while others are not, whereas the philosopher *knows* the form of beauty and, therefore, how the many can be beautiful in their particular ways.

The difference between the two is as such: The philosopher knows that an object is capable of both beauty and ugliness; he understands what beauty is; when an object thus participates in beauty, he knows why the object is beautiful. When one arrives armed with opinion, on the contrary, he, not sure as to why, merely sees an object as being beautiful—an object that another can just as easily

3. Ibid., 143.
4. Ibid., 171.

see as being ugly, for neither sees the thing in its entirety: Like seeing the shadows on the wall, they miss the absolute, the form of beauty itself, which is *separate from the object at which they look*. In short, the philosopher sees beauty and then things that can participate in it, the actual and then the shadows.

Following opinion, one easily finds a comfortable resting place, a position to stand that can be both easily protected and easily fled from: "Persons are too apt to be contented and think that they need search no further."[5] Knowledge is far more demanding of its subject; the philosopher, who must take a long and grueling path towards the "highest of all knowledge": "Little things are elaborated with an infinity of pains…how ridiculous that we should not think the highest truths worthy of attaining the highest accuracy!"[6] Indeed, it is quite easy for one to remain constrained in the cave and form opinions of the shadows on the wall, but, as Socrates' allegory shows, it is quite painful for one to make the trip out of the cave and into the blinding light of the sun.

In the allegory, it is the sun that is the "highest of all knowledge." Socrates explains that when the philosopher exits the cave and enters the world above it, his eyes will need to become accustomed to the light and will slowly open to allow the objects of the world to take their shape. After many struggles and at long last, he will finally be able to look at the source of the blinding light itself, the sun. Upon reflection, he will conclude that it is the sun "who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the

5. Ibid., 169.
6. Ibid.

cause of all things."[7] Indeed, what the philosopher will come to understand is that the sun is what is good, for without the sun nothing could exist, and that which provides existence must be good.

The aim of philosophy, according to Socrates, is therefore to know the Good: "The idea of the good is the highest knowledge…all other things become useful and advantageous only by their use of this."[8] What good are the shadows to the prisoners in the cave? One might say that they are a good source of entertainment; but this can only be a superficial semblance of the Good, especially when considering that the prisoners have no other choice of entertainment. Objects can only become useful and advantageous when one can see them for what they really are—not as shadows of things but as things themselves, brought to visibility by the light of the sun. An object can be useful and advantageous to me only if I understand what good the object can do for me, that is, only if I understand how the object can participate in the Good, which, of course, requires me to understand the Good *first*.

This is what, according to Socrates, sets the philosopher apart from others: Others begin with a particular object, briefly inspect it, and then form an opinion; the philosopher inverts this process by beginning with a universal concept (such as the Good), meticulously examining it, and then applying the concept to a particular thing to draw a conclusion about it. This is why those who leave the cave are capable of becoming philosophers: The cave is the world of particular things, void of all concepts; whereas the outside world is the place of absolutes, of

7. Ibid., 178.
8. Ibid., 169.

universal concepts, of the forms of things. This, therefore, is what the philosopher must have experience with: absolute forms.

Socrates outlines "two parts [to his] scheme of education"[9] for the development of the philosopher. The first part takes place *within the cave* when the prisoner is released from his constraints. He is for the first time able "to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light";[10] this refers to gymnastics and music—particularly, first, the health of the body and, second, harmony and rhythm, which establishes "habit" (one might even say here, "feeling," as when one musician says to the other, "Oh, ya man: I don't know what you just did, but, whatever it was, that *felt* good!"; or as in death when it *feels* good to move "towards the light," in which case music can be understood as supplying "direction"). The second part of the "scheme" has the philosopher move through four disciplines and five stages of development: arithmetic, geometry (first, plane geometry, which is 2-dimensional and then solid geometry, which is 3-dimensional), astronomy, and dialectic. This, in turn, corresponds to the prisoner's liberation from the cave:

> He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And he will first see shadows best [arithmetic], next the reflections of men and other objects in the water [2-dimensional geometry], and then the objects themselves [3-dimensional geometry]; then he will gaze upon the light

9. Ibid., 184.
10. Ibid., 173.

> of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven [astronomy]….Last of all he will be able to see the sun…and he will contemplate him as he is [dialectic].[11]

In their own ways, these disciplines all deal in absolutes: arithmetic in absolute numbers; geometry, absolute shapes and proportions; astronomy, absolute movement (of the sun, stars, and earth); and dialectic, the analysis of absolutes. This is why the second part of the "scheme" occurs where one can find the absolutes: *outside of the cave*.

Arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy merely serve as a "prelude" to the final discipline, dialectic, because, while they do indeed deal in absolutes, "they only dream about [absolutes], but never can they behold the waking reality so long as they leave hypotheses which they use unexamined, and are unable to give account of them."[12] Arithmetic is beneficial to the philosopher's education because, as Socrates points out, it leaves particulars behind (in the cave), that is, the mathematician does not need apples and oranges to prove that 2 + 2 = 4; and, even if he does use apples and oranges to demonstrate the equation, these apples and oranges are understood to be standing in for absolutely anything; they are merely tangible objects taking place of the absolute forms (of 2 and of 4). This math, though, is based upon a presupposition: Two things can be one; that is, a 2 and a 2 can be a 4. *Why* can one thing be many or many things be one? This is something that the mathematician is not concerned with; he, rather, is concerned with *how* two things become one. Arithmetic

11. Ibid., 178.
12. Ibid., 195.

shows how groups can come together and how they can be divided—the implication being that things *can be* grouped. What is a group? Can a group not contain its own subgroups? And can a group not be part of a larger group still? Why make a group? These are questions that the mathematician leaves behind; he presupposes their answers: "Dialectic, and dialectic alone, goes directly to the first principle and is the only science which does away with hypotheses in order to make her ground secure."[13]

Dialectic is discussion; the back and forth of ideas and perspectives that turn the thing under inspection into a crystal with all the sides in view. The philosopher finds the "most finished picture" here because dialectic questions understanding, opposes it with all its strength, and does this until there are no more questions of the thing to be asked—until there is no longer an understanding of the thing but only knowledge of it, until there are no more sides of the crystal to be polished. Indeed, now *the philosopher knows why the crystal is beautiful*. With dialectic, the philosopher can uncover "the highest truths worthy of attaining the highest accuracy."[14] These "truths" are the virtues of courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom, which the philosopher will find to be all sides of the same crystal: the Good. Each virtue participates in the Good; for, when one acts according to the virtues, one acts towards the Good. These "truths" are each an aspect, a side of this crystal. Being each a side, the virtues, then, are the subject of the philosopher's dialectic.[15]

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 169.
15. Ibid., 112–113, 168–169.

Of the Good, Socrates says, "Every soul pursues and makes the end of all his actions." [16] Armed with the opinions from the cave, though, each prisoner can only see one side of the crystal, and they dispute, therefore, which side is more beautiful, more good. The philosopher, on the other hand, armed with dialectic can demonstrate how each side seen by the various prisoners are all good from their own perspectives (demonstrating how each prisoner is correct); and, in seeing the whole crystal, the philosopher can also see how each side can be united, brought together. He now arrives at complete knowledge, that is, knowledge of the Good in its entirety. Indeed, we all act according to various understandings of the Good, and can offer a perspective on the Good that a certain action aims towards. What we fail to do, however, is really examine other perspectives; we "are too apt to be contented and think that [we] need search no further." [17] In turning the crystal around and inspecting all of its sides, the philosopher is able to determine the act that is capable of achieving the most Good; he begins with the universal in order to apply it to a particular:

> To compel the best minds to attain that knowledge which we have already shown to be the greatest of all—they must continue to ascend until they arrive at the good; but when they have ascended and seen enough we must not allow them to do as they do now.
>
> What do you mean?

16. Ibid., 170.
17. Ibid.

> I mean that they remain in the upper world: but this must not be allowed; they must be made to descend again among the prisoners in the den, and partake of their labors and honors, whether they are worth having or not.[18]

What good is knowledge of universals if one never applies this knowledge to particulars? In fact, can one even be said to have knowledge if he never uses it? Socrates is quite adamant about sending the philosopher back into the cave because one who uses a thing will always have the most knowledge of it.

Socrates makes clear that "there are three arts which are concerned with all things: one which uses, another which makes, a third which imitates them."[19] Employing the example of flutes, Socrates explains that it is the flute-player who is most knowledgeable about flutes. The player knows which flutes play best (which is, of course, the flute's purpose—to be played), so the flute-maker will ask for the player's advice. Thus, the maker "will only attain to a correct belief";[20] his knowledge is secondhand, given to him by the flute-player. The imitator, moreover, is the artist who paints a picture of (perhaps, the player playing) the maker's flute, and is therefore the farthest of the three from knowledge of the flute; he is only able to form opinions or impressions. In order to *know*, one must *use*; hence, the philosopher's knowledge will be worthless to him if he does not put it to use, and, indeed, his

18. Ibid., 181.
19. Ibid., 258.
20. Ibid., 259.

knowledge will remain incomplete until he does put it to use.

According to Socrates, this is the final stage of the philosopher's development: putting knowledge—knowledge of the Good to use. So, when we had said at the outset that the philosopher is a lover of knowledge and that knowledge aims at the truth of a thing, what we therefore mean by this is that knowledge is always of *how to put a thing into good use*, how to use that thing for the Good; indeed, *that* is the *true* way to use a thing. To do so, one must, therefore, return from the universal forms to the particulars; one must head back to the cave:

> When you have acquired the habit, you will see ten thousand times better than the inhabitants of the den, and you will know what the several images are, and what they represent, because you have seen the beautiful and just and good in their truth.[21]

The philosopher returns to the cave armed with truth; that is, "truths." Guided by the principles of courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom, the philosopher must practice the Good. The above quote is taken from Socrates' explanation to the philosophers that they must return to the cave to be "kings"; that is, he is arguing for the rule of philosophers: From this position, the philosopher's knowledge is put to the greatest use. The point here being that the head-of-state, above all others, has the greatest ability to spread knowledge: Philosophy is practical in the polis when its knowledge is shared, when the crystal is

21. Ibid., 182.

polished so that others can see it more clearly and act accordingly. Even if what they gain from this only manages reflections in the water, this is certainly a clearer visibility than mere shadows. And we here and now have come to such an understanding of Socrates' notion of the philosopher: He is one who is patient and determined enough to map the terrain, judge the soil, dig into dirt, sift the earth, polish a crystal and return home with it to share its wealth. This is a lover of knowledge.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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