



<http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/ideasyvalores.v66n165.55201>

# THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PLATO'S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE



## EL SIGNIFICADO POLÍTICO DE LA ALEGORÍA DE LA CAVERNA DE PLATÓN

GABRIEL ZAMOSC\*

University of Colorado Denver - Denver - United States of America

.....  
*Artículo recibido el 24 de junio de 2015; aprobado el 17 de noviembre de 2015.*

\* *gabriel.zamosc@ucdenver.edu*

### Cómo citar este artículo:

**MLA:** Zamosc, G. "The Political Significance of Plato's Allegory of the Cave." *Ideas y Valores* 66.165 (2017): 237-265.

**APA:** Zamosc, G. (2017). The Political Significance of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. *Ideas y Valores*, 66 (165), 237-265.

**CHICAGO:** Gabriel Zamosc. "The Political Significance of Plato's Allegory of the Cave." *Ideas y Valores* 66, n.º 165 (2017): 237-265.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

**ABSTRACT**

The article argues that Plato's cave is fundamentally a political and not an epistemological allegory, and that only if we see it thus can we understand its relation to the images of the sun and the line. On the basis of textual evidence, the article raises questions regarding the main hypotheses grounding the effort to find an epistemological parallel between the cave and the line: that the prisoners represent humanity in general, and that the cave symbolizes the visible world of everyday experience, while the world outside the cave represents the realm of ideas. The suspension of these assumptions makes possible a reading that highlights the cultural and political issues at stake in this famous allegory.

*Keywords:* Plato, allegory, cave, culture, politics.

**RESUMEN**

El artículo sostiene que la caverna de Platón es fundamentalmente una alegoría política, no epistemológica, y que solo así podremos apreciar la relación que guarda con las imágenes del sol y de la línea. Sobre la base de evidencia textual, se ponen en duda las dos hipótesis principales sobre las que se funda el esfuerzo por encontrar un paralelo epistemológico entre la caverna y la línea: que los prisioneros representan a la humanidad en general, y que la caverna simboliza el mundo visible de la experiencia corriente, mientras el mundo fuera de esta representa el reino de las ideas. La suspensión de estos supuestos posibilita una lectura que resalta los temas culturales y políticos que están en juego en esta famosa alegoría.

*Palabras clave:* Platón, alegoría, caverna, cultura, política.

## I

The audacity of attempting another reading of Plato's allegory of the Cave may require some kind of justification.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in the case of the present essay this might seem especially pertinent, since the reading that I will be defending here is not particularly new or original. It was preceded by a series of very insightful papers written by one of this allegory's most eminent interpreters, A.S. Ferguson (1921, 1922, 1934). It is, however, a reading that, I think somewhat surprisingly, has been relegated to a fringe position within a debate that—at least in the English speaking literature on the subject—is completely dominated by the problem of how to understand and defend the Cave's alleged epistemological parallelism to the Line. So a fresh reconsideration of it may be warranted.

For the most part, it is unquestionably assumed that Plato intended a one-to-one correspondence between the different sections of the Line and the various stages in the prisoner's drama, leading him from his initial condition of bondage through his upward journey, after his liberation, out of the cave and into the sunlight. Since the difficulties of finding said correspondence are immediately evident to anyone who attempts the task, it has been necessary to devise ingenious, if often strained, solutions to the problem.<sup>2</sup> The more simple and, as I hope to show, also more

1 The general argument and the idea for this paper first occurred to me in my initial encounter with *The Republic* as a high school student at the *Fundación Colegio de Inglaterra* (The English School) in Bogotá, Colombia, where I grew up. I wish to thank Iván González Puccetti, who was my philosophy teacher at the time and who encouraged me to develop my ideas on this topic. He listened patiently and approvingly to what must have been a somewhat conceited tirade against the orthodox reading of the parallelism between the Line and the Cave. I obviously did not know at the time that Ferguson and others, with much greater discernment and more dignified aplomb, had actually already articulated the main elements of the position that I took myself to be pioneering with youthful bravado in the confines of my high school philosophy class. Many thanks are also due to Rachana Kamtekar who had the fortune of reading a more coherent and better-reasoned version of the argument that was composed many years later, while I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and who gave me very valuable comments. I am also grateful for the invaluable feedback provided by my colleagues, Robert Metcalf, David Hildebrand, Sam Walker, and Candice Shelby, as well as for that offered by the anonymous referee. A much shorter version of this paper was presented at the Ancient Philosophy Society conference in 2008. I wish to thank attendants at the event for their questions and feedback.

Throughout this paper I will use the capitalized word, "Cave," to refer to the allegory itself and its lowercase counterpart, "cave," to refer to the actual physical location or cave-like dwelling that Socrates describes as part of the various elements of the allegory. I will also use the words "allegory" and "image" interchangeably.

2 For some examples of commentators that defend some version or other of the parallelism between Line and Cave, see: Nettleship (1901), Adam (1902), Murphy (1932), Raven (1953), Gould (1955), Malcom (1962; 1981), Ferguson (1963), Cross and Woolley (1964),

natural solution of desisting altogether from the task of finding this kind of epistemological correspondence between the images is rarely attempted. In this paper, I will side with those few who take the derelict path of rejecting the parallelism between the Line and the Cave, and especially with Ferguson and his prescient view that the Cave must be read as fundamentally a political, not an epistemological, allegory.<sup>3</sup> My modest aim in what follows will be to offer a fresh new reading that may lend a little more support to this silenced minority position, in the hope that one day the tide may turn in favor of what I take to be a more adequate way to approach this famous allegory.

Counting this introduction, my paper is divided into six parts. In section 2, I will briefly present the standard story and the two main assumptions that support the alleged epistemological parallelism between the Line and the Cave: first, that the prisoners represent humankind in general, and, second, that the cave itself represents the visible world of ordinary experience while the world outside the cave represents the intelligible realm of the Forms. In section 3, I question the first assumption and suggest that we should rather interpret the prisoners as representing Socrates and his interlocutors, that is, as standing for philosophically minded people who are interested in virtue and the good life. In connection with this theme, I argue that, by disrupting the common assumption that the prisoners represent all of humanity, we are able to appreciate better the way in which the imagery in the Cave is meant to point back to the various discussions at the beginning of *The Republic* concerning sophistic education and culture (especially the theatrical culture of tragedy and comedy), as well as to anticipate the ending discussion on art in Book x. These discussions highlight the connection of the Cave to cultural and political themes. In section 4, I continue to follow these clues concerning Plato's ironic contest with the theatrical culture of his time and the sophistic methods of education all the way to the very beginning of *The Republic*, where the political themes of liberation and of Socrates's trial loom large, and then connect those judicial and emancipatory themes back

---

Morrison (1977), Sze (1977), White (1979), Annas (1981), Karasmanis (1988), Bloom (1991), Irwin (1995), Sayers (1999), Fine (2003), and Wilberding (2004).

- 3 Besides the aforementioned essays by Ferguson, other interpreters who reject the parallelism include: Joseph (1948), Robinson (1953), and Strang (1986). In his essay on the Cave, Hall does not fully reject the orthodox interpretation of parallelism, and attempts to walk a middle path that emphasizes both the epistemological reading and also the political interpretation favored by Ferguson. However, given his general focus on reading the Cave as an allegory about the human condition, his compromised position seems to me to be much more reliant on the political reading, and to lean overall more heavily towards it than towards finding a one-to-one correspondence between Line and Cave (cf. Hall 1980).

to the Cave's imagery which, I argue, is meant to make us recollect them. With these various cultural and political considerations in mind, in section 5 I turn to the task of challenging the second assumption supporting the parallelism reading: that the cave represents the visible realm whereas the world outside the cave represents the intelligible realm. I argue that the Cave is not comparing the visible and the intelligible but the natural and the cultural (political). Finally, in section 6, I conclude by briefly suggesting that the political reading allows us to appreciate better how the images might fit together and makes greater sense of Plato's strange allegory of the Cave. Before proceeding with the argument, let me stress that my claim is not that there is no epistemological significance to the Cave. Rather, what I wish to show is that the true epistemological significance of the Cave can be properly understood only when its political significance is brought to the fore.

## II

The standard story concerning the allegory of the Cave is familiar enough. Since Socrates himself tells us prior to constructing this allegory that we should use it for the purpose of grasping the effects of education and its lack on our nature (*cf.* 514a),<sup>4</sup> it is rather obvious that the whole image is supposed to convey the power of philosophy to enlighten and liberate the soul. But –one may ask–, to liberate it from what? The answer, of course, appears to be also rather clear: from ignorance. This seemingly straightforward reading, however, is bound to provoke some uneasiness. For at the same time that we are moved by the beautiful way in which this allegory captures the virtue and splendor of philosophical life and philosophical thinking, we cannot help but feel disturbed by the implication that our natural state of affairs is one fraught with oppression, darkness, and illusion. Are we really to believe that our ordinary cognitive states are no better than a play of shadows? Indeed, that the whole world we live in and experience is only a fantasy world, and that our lives are as pathetic and denigrating as those of the prisoners in the cave? This all sounds somewhat extreme and ludicrous.

Yet, this reading is not only apparently the most natural way to interpret Plato here, it is, in fact, the way that he himself seems to be explicitly recommending. After Socrates describes the Cave, he urges Glaucon to fit the whole image together with what was said before (*cf.* 517b). This looks as if Socrates is suggesting that the Cave should be understood as complementing the scheme he had just introduced through the image of

4 All references to *The Republic* are taken from the edition of John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson of *Plato: Complete Works*.

the Line, which in turn was developed as an extension of the image of the Sun. Plato wants us to see the three images as somehow fitting together into a coherent whole. The Cave, then, is usually assumed to be restating the same point that was made by the other images, namely, that of distinguishing the various features of our epistemological makeup and the different objects that we may come to know in the world. To be sure, the Cave adds a new dimension to the discussion because it throws in the mix a claim about our human condition and its relation to our epistemological constitution. The drama of our lives is that we are born in chains, fettered to a world of appearances that condemns us to a situation in which our beliefs will forever be no more than shadows of the truth unless philosophy comes to our aid and helps us escape this wretched sensible world of deception, so that we can contemplate the intelligible Forms that are the real essence of all truth and reality.

But, perhaps not surprisingly, trying to follow this line of approach has proven notoriously difficult. The images seem to defy harmony. It is very hard to see how exactly they are supposed to correspond with and to each other. In particular, it seems impossible to map the Line and the Cave onto one another without ultimately undermining the alleged message each tries to convey on its own. The natural way to fit them together is to suppose that the prisoners are in the state depicted by the lowest level of the Line, that of *eikasia* (imaging). But when we couple this with the notion that the prisoners are supposed to be representing the natural human condition, the images conflict: *eikasia* cannot simply be what the Line tells us it is, because literally looking at reflections is something that ordinary human beings seem to spend very little time doing. Hence, in what appears to be a direct defiance of the Line, *eikasia* must be understood more broadly in order for it to fit the message of the Cave.

To be sure, I am not trying to suggest that this problem is completely insurmountable. As was mentioned, commentators have attempted many ingenious strategies for coping with these and other difficulties. But it is an unquestionable fact that all such readings take their point of departure from a universally recognized *prima facie* clash between the images. The task of these readings is precisely to find a way in which to dispel this initial incongruence. In my mind, charity demands that we adopt a default presumption in favor of any interpretation that can circumvent this problem altogether by showing us that the images do not need to clash because there is really no dissonance to begin with: Plato did not intend for us to relate the images in the way that traditional approaches have assumed.<sup>5</sup>

---

5 In this way, my position is contrary to that expressed by commentators like Karasmanis, for whom the obvious, default presumption is that the natural interpretation is that

For this reason, I shall not spend time trying to discuss or evaluate the merits and shortcomings of these traditional approaches. My aim here will be to take a few steps back and ask whether the starting assumptions that we usually take for granted, and that unavoidably push us in the direction of trying to find a parallelism between the two images, are really well founded, or whether instead we may have been mistaken about their true import in a way that has blinded us to the fact that, through the allegory of the Cave, Plato does not really want us to focus so much on the epistemological situation of the human being, but on his political situation instead. After all, if we were to approach the whole image without presuppositions and follow Socrates's description up to the point prior to his telling us to fit the image with what was said before, I submit that our most obvious reaction would be to take the whole image to be portraying a political drama of some kind. It traffics with what seem to me to be obvious political concepts and themes, such as imprisonment and liberation (*cf.* 514a-515d); compulsion and force (*cf.* 515e-516); competition, honors, praises, prizes, and power (*cf.* 516c-517a); veiled suggestions of revolutionary overthrow that is punishable by death (*cf.* 571a); perhaps even manipulation, since some people inside the cave seem to be able to roam free and have a direct hand in what the prisoners can see and hear (*cf.* 514b-c); and so on. Ferguson will be forever right in remarking that all signs point to the cave being contrived by human hands for human purposes (*cf.* 1922 16); a point and an insight to which I will return shortly. If we ever take our eyes off the political dimension of the whole drama, and turn them in the direction of some alleged epistemological predicament of the human condition as such, it is only because we take Socrates's injunction to fit the image with what said before to mean an explicit instruction to find a one-to-one correspondence with the Line.

Of course, there are other assumptions that militate in favor of reading the aforementioned injunction in this way, and that may seem quite natural for commentators to make in response to other things Socrates says when describing the Cave. Two in particular are especially important in this regard: the first, is that the prisoners represent the general and natural condition of human beings; and the second, is that the cave itself represents the world of ordinary experience, while the world outside of the cave corresponds to the intelligible realm of the Forms. Both claims support and complement each other, but ultimately, in my view, they are not really well founded.

.....  
 of parallelism and that other interpretations are sought only because difficulties are encountered in the process of spelling out the correspondence between the images (*cf.* Karasmanis 151). On the contrary, I take the fact that difficulties are so easily encountered to be an indication that the default assumption of parallelism is likely wrong and that the interpretation is not "natural".

## III

Let me begin with the first claim. Why do commentators readily assume that the prisoners represent ordinary human beings? I take it they do so because it seems the most natural way of interpreting Socrates's statement that the prisoners are "like us" (cf. 551a). But notice that the statement itself is very ambiguous in this respect. In its most literal reading, the statement would compel us to only say for certain that the prisoners are like Socrates and Glaucon, and perhaps the other interlocutors who have been following the conversation thus far. What is much less certain, and takes us beyond the immediate sense of the claim, is that the respect in which Socrates takes the prisoners to be like him, and perhaps like the others present at the conversation, is *that of representing his and their humanity broadly construed*. After all, if that had been Socrates's intention why did he not simply say that the prisoners are "like all human beings" or that they are "like *all* of us"?<sup>6</sup> Moreover, if the prisoners represent all of humanity, who are the puppeteers suppose to represent? If –as is only natural– they are seen as also representing human beings in some way, then it becomes obvious that, at best, the prisoners must be symbolizing a majority of people, and doing so in some special respect. This concession, however, is enough to realize that the claim that the prisoners represent ordinary human beings cannot be accepted without qualification: there is something extra-ordinary about their situation.<sup>7</sup>

We must, therefore, ask a new the question of whom the prisoners are supposed to be representing. Since the only thing that Socrates says for certain is that they are like him and Glaucon, and perhaps his other interlocutors, the proper question to ask is what is it that those people have in common? The answer, I think, is that they are all philosophically minded people who are inquiring about justice and the

6 Though the latter claim would still be ambiguous with respect to the intended referent, it would be, nonetheless, much less so than the claim that "they're like us".

7 In this connection, it should be noted that when Socrates describes the situation of the prisoner outside the cave, he claims that: "at first, he'd see shadows most easily, then *images of men* and other things in water, then the things themselves" (516c, emphasis added). The use of the plural in the italicized portion of this quote suggests that the human images that the prisoner sees reflected in the water are not exclusively his own, which I take to be an indication that there are other human beings living and walking freely outside of the cave. Who are these men? Nothing in the text suggests that they are former prisoners. In fact, the full description of the allegory would militate against this reading, since, on the account given by Socrates, the released prisoner is compelled to return into the cave to take his place among the others (cf. 519c-520e). I thus take Plato's suggestion of the existence of these other men outside of the cave to be another indication that the prisoners do not represent all of humanity and that their cognitive condition is not that of the ordinary human being.



good life. This fits very nicely with the only comment Socrates makes about the content of the shadows that the prisoners are seeing on the wall, namely, that they are shadows of justice (*cf.* 517d). It appears that the prisoners, like Socrates and his interlocutors, are also interested in justice and in the good life. Of course, there is a difference between them: though the prisoners can talk among themselves and, indeed, as Socrates at some point tells us, can honor, praise, and give prizes to one another for being the sharpest at identifying the shadows and remembering and predicting their order of appearance (*cf.* 516c-d), they do not know that what they are looking at are shadows of justice and not justice itself. Socrates and his interlocutors, on the other hand, are consciously trying to lay hold of justice itself, and, at this point in the dialogue, they certainly know that theirs is an elusive prey. However, this difference aside, the important thing is that the prisoners share a common interest with Socrates and his interlocutors: they want to know about virtue and the good life.<sup>8</sup>

If the prisoners are like philosophically minded people, a pressing question now emerges: why are they in shackles? And who are the people that are carrying the objects whose shadows they are seeing? It is clear from the way the image is constructed that they are in some way responsible for the bondage of the prisoners, or at the very least for their upbringing and education concerning the ethical matters

8 Although I am claiming that the prisoners should be understood as standing for Socrates and his interlocutors, I do not wish to commit to the idea that all of the people present at the conversation are like the prisoners. In my view, the prisoners represent a much narrower segment of the population than has been traditionally assumed: namely, the philosophically inclined souls like Glaucon and Socrates who are interested in justice and the good life. While presumably some of the interlocutors would also fit this description, it is by no means necessary to imagine that they all would. Similarly, on my reading, it is also quite possible that some of those present (and, obviously, also some of the readers) could see themselves as being represented, though in different respects, *by both* the prisoners *and* the puppeteers. As I will indicate below, I suspect that the character of Thrasymachus probably conforms to this dual role.

In response to a possible objection to the interpretation of the Cave he defends, Wilberding also argues that perhaps a more adequate understanding of Socrates's comment that the prisoners are "like us" would be to take "us" to refer narrowly to Socrates and his listeners. However, he thinks that the respect in which Socrates and his interlocutors are like the prisoners is that they are among the few who must cater to the public at large (*cf.* Wilberding 137). I disagree with this aspect of his interpretation for, on my reading, pandering to the multitude is not the most important feature of the prisoners, but the fact that they are philosophically inclined souls who have unfortunately grown in a cultural milieu that has kept them away from their authentic selves and their true vocation (*cf.* Smith 1997), who at page 188 also literally likens the prisoners to Socrates and those in his company, including some whom I would more readily associate with the puppeteers and not necessarily the prisoners, like Cephalus and Polemarchus.

treated by the shadows. If we attend to the way Socrates describes the whole scene we will immediately notice several things: first, the prisoners are seeing imitations, some of which we know are imitations of justice; second, the people who are walking along the wall are not carrying real objects but simulations of natural objects; third, the relation of the prisoners to those people is like that of an audience to actors in a theater: the carriers are described as puppeteers who are putting on a show for the prisoners (*cf.* 514b). The artistic quality of this set up is what I think stands out most from Socrates's description: the prisoners are watching a performance that seems to be primarily about virtue and human relations; precisely the kind of performance familiar to the type of Greeks Socrates is addressing, who were accustomed to have tragedies and comedies as part and parcel of their cultural milieu. This is why we are explicitly told that the puppets themselves represent (whether exclusively or primarily) people and other animals (*cf.* 514b); that is, the sorts of characters that would be needed to produce plays and dramas with moral content. In fact, as Asli Gocer has argued, it is likely that Plato meant for this whole theatrical setup inside of the cave to not only evoke popular entertainment at large, but more specifically, to bring to mind the entire culture of comedy and, in particular, Aristophanic theatre (*cf.* Gocer 121).<sup>9</sup>

This aspect of the Cave therefore foreshadows some things Socrates will say later in Book x about poets, playwrights, and other artists. Notoriously, Socrates is there preoccupied with the nefarious effects of these arts on the philosophical spirit and on the ideal city. He tells us that, "all poetic imitators, beginning with Homer, *imitate images of virtue* and all the other things they write about and have no grasp of the truth" (600e, emphasis added); and adds later on, that it is precisely because they do not know the truth, and they so easily influence the irrational side of the soul, that these imitators and their imitations are for the most part "able to corrupt even decent people" (605c). The talk about corruption is significant here because we should recall that the Cave is, by Socrates's own account, concerned with education and its

---

9 Again, I believe that it would be a mistake to think that the puppeteers only represent Aristophanic comedy, or even playwrights and artists in general. While in the case of the metaphor of the prisoners, I lean towards a reading that extends the symbolism narrowly to just a few targeted people, namely, the philosophically inclined (see previous note), in the case of the puppeteers, I would argue that the intended referent of the metaphor is actually broader in scope: it refers to any representative of cultural forces that has a direct impact on the upbringing of citizens in general, but especially on that of the philosophically inclined (given the purpose of the allegory as I see it). The list would include not just playwrights and artists, but, as I will argue shortly, also sophists, and perhaps legislators, wealthy men, and many others.

effect on the soul, which means that it is presumably also concerned with the effects of bad education. The message Socrates seems to be trying to convey to his interlocutors here is that there is a kind of upbringing that keeps the philosophically inclined person imprisoned. As we find out later, such bad education is partly the result of the effects of poetic imitation on the soul, and in that respect, as I have said, the Cave points us forward to the last part of *The Republic*. But it also points us back to Socrates's previous discussion of the influence of the sophists on the young, and even to the opening scenes in Book I with which the whole dialogue begins.

Recall that Socrates urges Glaucon to fit the whole image with what was said before (cf. 571b). This is the place to comment a little more on this very ambiguous statement. For "what was said before" can be anything from the prior two images that had been discussed just a moment ago by Socrates and Glaucon, to the opening claims that were made at the very beginning of the whole dialogue. The phrase itself does not point us in any particular direction. Of course, the sentence that immediately follows this statement seems to settle the matter in a definitive direction, for it instructs us to liken the visible realm to the prison dwelling, and the fire burning inside of it to the power of the sun (*ibid.*). This seems to be a clear reference to the Sun and the Line, with the added explicit instruction that we think of the inside of the cave (the prison dwelling) as standing for the visible realm, and hence for the two lower segments of the Line. I will discuss my disagreement with this implication later when I examine the second assumption that was mentioned above, namely, that the cave corresponds to the visible realm while the world outside the cave stands for the realm of the Forms. For now, I want to draw attention to the fact that the injunction to fit the image with what was said before seems to have been worded in an intentionally ambiguous manner. It is, after all, a little suspicious that after having established a clear link between the prior two images, that of the Sun and the Line, by suggesting that the latter constitutes a more detailed examination of the former (cf. 509a), Socrates now gives us a very open-ended instruction to fit the image of the Cave with what was said before. He could have spared his interlocutors this ambiguity by explicitly suggesting to Glaucon that he fit the Cave image with the prior two images. That he does not could be construed as an indication that he wants the attentive listener (or reader) to ask himself whether the strange drama of the Cave, that has just been described, might not be related to *something else* the group had been discussing earlier.

Indeed, in Book VI, not long before they started considering the images of the Sun and the Line, Socrates and his interlocutors had been debating the demerits of sophistic education. Especially, that education

afforded by the greatest sophist of them all: the many. In that prior conversation, Socrates attacked the sophists and the many for corrupting the young and for educating them through compulsion (*cf.* 491e-492e). The link between that prior discussion and the Cave is clearly discernible in the fact that both conversations are framed around the problem of education, which by Socrates's own admission is the central topic of the Cave (*cf.* 514a). Socrates's emphasis on the coercive nature of the sophistic education resonates strongly with his description of the Cave. Take for instance, the passage in 492c where Socrates tells us that one of the distinctive marks of the many, is the use of public gatherings to comment on the various things that are said and done in a very loud manner, "so that the very rocks and surroundings echo the din of their praise or blame and double it" (492b-c). Later, in the image of the Cave, Socrates speaks of the voices of the carriers as also echoing in the rocky walls of the cave (*cf.* 515b).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, according to Socrates, the result of this type of exposure is of the worst kind, since, in effect, the young are compelled to become whatever the many want them to be. Indeed, this compulsion is so great that, should their words fail to influence, the many "punish anyone who isn't persuaded, with disenfranchisement, fines, or death" (492d). The alternatives for the philosophically inclined seem plain: either be a slave or a prisoner of the sophists and educators (whether the many, or individual sophists like Thrasymachus, who is present at the conversation), or be vanquished by them.<sup>11</sup>

10 This would imply that the carriers are representing the multitude or the many, which is the view defended by Wilberding against what he calls the Orthodox interpretation that associates these puppeteers with sophists, artists, and politicians (*cf.* Wilberding 119-120, 128). While I partly agree with Wilberding's reading, it should be obvious from what I said above that I do not share his narrow understanding of the puppeteers as representing only the multitude of ordinary citizens and craftsmen, for, as I indicated earlier, I think that Plato intended for them to play a metaphorically much broader function (see previous note). That poets and playwrights are among the intended targets of those represented by the puppeteers is established not only by the fact, mentioned previously, that the whole setup of puppets and puppeteers seems to deliberately mirror and recall the theatrical culture of popular entertainment, but also by the many other ways in which the Cave establishes a poignant and ironic dialogue with salient epics, tragedies, and comedies that formed an integral part of the cultural heritage of the Greeks. I will explore this latter link in more detail in section 4 below. In this connection, it is also worth bearing in mind Howland's observation that in Book X Socrates mentions "shadow painting" and puppeteering together in the context of his criticism of art and imitation in general (*cf.* Bloom 285 and Howland 1986 44).

11 In this connection, we should observe that the whole discussion on the sophists is prefaced by Socrates's statement that, "it is reasonable to say that the best nature fares worse, when unsuitably nurtured, than an ordinary one" (491d). This claim and the one that follows it, indicate that Socrates himself focuses this first discussion of bad

To be sure, it cannot be said with certainty that these sophists have a malevolent intent in their teaching; this is especially true of the many, which at 492e-493c are described as a kind of mindless mob and a beast that is simply viscerally responding to its appetites, so that the pedagogical influence it exerts through its praise and blame seems to be instinctually driven. Both private sophists and the sophistic multitude could be simply victims of their own ignorance.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Socrates's main concern is with the terrible effects that their methods have in the philosophically inclined soul. The emphasis is on the coercive nature of those methods not on whether there is an actual malicious aim behind them. The distinctive feature of those methods, at least in this first discussion on the effects of bad education, seems to be the practice of pandering to the appetitive side of the soul (both of individuals and of the city at large) through praise and blame, which is a feature that seems to echo the Cave's talk of honors, praises, and prizes among the prisoners.<sup>13</sup> This

education not so much on what it would do to the ordinary human being, but rather on the effect it would have in the philosophically inclined whom he regards as the best natured. If I am right in suggesting that there is a parallel between this argument and the later discussion of education in the image of the Cave, then this should be taken as another indication that the prisoners in the cave are probably not ordinary people, but rather philosophically inclined souls enslaved by bad education.

- 12 Though I do not wish to commit to the view that the sophists are malicious, it should be said nonetheless that Socrates's description in the passages I have mentioned does seem to suggest that they are in some sense manipulative, especially when he claims that the sophistic public turns people into what they want them to be instead of letting them become what they ought to be. That seems to imply that there is some sort of bad intention, some ulterior, perhaps self-interested, motive behind the educational techniques of the sophists.
- 13 Socrates's words concerning the chains that bind the prisoners in 519b suggest that they represent pleasures like greed and fasting, which, like leaden weights, pull a person's vision downwards, keeping it from the truth. This may seem to contradict the interpretation I am defending which should see them instead as symbols of political oppression. However, Socrates's description of the chains occurs within the context of discussing the effects of bad education on the virtue of reason, and the more propitious effects of an educational program that turns reason away from appetitive pleasures and towards the truth. Thus, in the final analysis, the chains can be seen as signs of political oppression too, since the enslavement of reason to the appetites results from the political dynamics of the city which places the upbringing of the noble and philosophically inclined citizens in the hands of sophists, poets and playwrights, as well as the many, all of which pander to the appetitive side of the soul, thereby corrupting its harmonious constitution. That is why the discussion in 519 culminates with the suggestion that the best natures, who manage to break free from the bonds of appetitive pleasures and ascend to the good, should be forced to descend again into the cave so that the prisoner's dwelling can stop being governed, like the majority of cities, "by people who fight over shadows and struggle against one another in order to rule" (519d-520c) (thanks to the anonymous referee for pressing me on this point).

provides further evidence for the kind of reading I am defending here. Additionally, it should be observed that in this earlier discussion it is suggested that poets and craftsmen in general would be compelled to produce the things that the multitude praise (*cf.* 493d), which means that their artistic products only cater to the pleasures of the many and not to the truth.<sup>14</sup> We know that an important part of moral education in ancient Greece was the work of sophists, but also of poets and specially playwrights, who were the acknowledged writers on ethical matters and from whom sophists would draw lessons and illustrations for their private teachings (*cf.* Pappas 11; Smith 1955 133-34).<sup>15</sup> Since the performance the prisoners are compelled to watch is about virtue and human relations and, as was mentioned above, seems meant to evoke the work of tragedians and other playwrights, it is very likely that this early discussion was intended to prefigure those aspects of the drama we would later encounter in the allegory of the Cave.

#### IV

I have argued that the admonition to link the Cave with what was said before could be read as an invitation to recall Socrates's first pedagogical discussion in Book VI concerning the bad effects of sophistic education. This discussion itself is conducted against the background of a prior argument in Books II and III regarding the correct education for the guardians in the ideal city, which, significantly, revolved around the bad influence of art on the young, and the urgency of finding an austere form of artistic education and storytelling that could better serve the real needs of the guardians and the citizens at large (*cf.* 376e-398b). All this anticipates the more detailed discussion and criticism against art in Book X that I mentioned already. The Cave appears to be the central axis upon which all these different strands, coming from both the beginning and the end of *The Republic*, converge and are woven together into a strange drama that is predicated on the pernicious influence of current educators on the philosophically inclined soul, and on the necessity of instituting a genuine philosophical upbringing that can reform the city and liberate us from such bad cultural influences.

But following these connections between the Cave and Plato's ironic contention against the theatrical culture and the corrupting educational

14 This idea is actually expressed again in Book X where Socrates tells us that artists seek to imitate "what appears fine or beautiful to the majority of people who know nothing" (602b).

15 At 376e, Plato himself acknowledges the fact that education in Greece was highly influenced by the arts, and he proceeds to describe and develop a purged and more austere program of education in music and poetry for the guardians of the city that Socrates is building in speech.

system of his time, leads us to another very notable place that clearly seems connected to this famous allegory, and that is likely meant to be part of the things that we are supposed to recall when Socrates urges us to link the Cave to what was said before. It is a place that in its treatment of the topics of heroic liberation, of death and rebirth, and of Socrates's trial and execution, also confirms the supreme importance of political themes for the image of the Cave, an image that, as I have claimed, seems to be the real heart of the book as a whole and of all the discussions that precede and succeed it. Let me begin with the theme of liberation and Plato's portrayal of Socrates as a kind of heroic and revolutionary emancipator who is meant to enact the kind of reform needed to cleanse the city of its corrupt politics.

As commentators have noted, *The Republic* opens with a metaphor of descent and return that sets the stage for everything else that is to follow. Socrates begins the narrative with the words "I went down (*kateben*) to the Piraeus yesterday" (327a). The sentence appears to deliberately echo Odysseus's remarks to his wife towards the end of Homer's *Odyssey*: "I went down (*kateben*) inside the house of Hades, seeking to learn about homecoming, for myself and for my companions" (1999 xxiii 252). The suggestion, then, is that Socrates's descent to the Piraeus is like Odysseus's own descent into the underworld; an apt metaphor since, as has been noted by others, the Piraeus constituted the underworld to the political life of Athens, a disorderly place populated by non-citizens, merchants, and criminals (*cf.* Bloom 440-41, n3; Pappas 18-19 and Seery 232).

But, of course, the important point to emphasize here is that talk of descent into Hades brings to mind, the released prisoner's return by way of descent into the cave. This is no mere circumstantial association, for the Cave's connection to these themes is clearly established, among other things, by the direct quotation of the dead Achilles's words to Odysseus in Hades, that Socrates employs while insisting to Glaucon that the released prisoner would "feel, with Homer, that he'd much prefer to 'work the earth as a serf to another one without possessions', and go through any sufferings rather than share their opinions and lives as they do" (516d).<sup>16</sup> Socrates's remark itself anticipates the more explicit suggestion at 521c that we should compare the prisoners to the residents of Hades, and their upward journey out of the cave in order to contemplate the sun, as the journey that is sometimes told in stories of men who have gone from Hades up to the gods.

Even though there are many different tales of mortals dying and later becoming gods in Greek literature, likely this latter reference

.....  
16 The reference to the *Odyssey* within the quotation marks is from XI. 489-490.



is an explicit allusion to the story of Heracles for, as Eva Brann has noted, there are many signs in *The Republic* that point to the fact that the figure of Socrates is in different ways metaphorically playing the role of Heracles and reenacting his famous Labors (cf. Brann 119-120).<sup>17</sup> The encounter with Thrasymachus in Book I, for instance, re-enacts the bearding of the Nemean Lion. When he is finally able to interrupt the dialogue to interpose his own opinion, Thrasymachus roars and pounces upon Socrates like a wild beast (cf. 336b).<sup>18</sup> In the course of the argument, he himself invokes Heracles in a way that could be read as an identification of Socrates with Heracles, not just an address to the hero (cf. 337a). And at one point Socrates insinuates that quarreling with Thrasymachus is as crazy as shaving a lion (cf. 341c).

The metaphorical connection between Socrates and Heracles is significant because we should recall that the final and most important Labor of Heracles is his descent into Hades. In the course of performing this task, he also releases Theseus who has been chained down in the underworld. In fact, Heracles seems to have a knack for releasing chained prisoners since he is also responsible for liberating Prometheus, who was bound to a rock as punishment for having shared the secret of fire with humanity. The allegory of the Cave, with its fire burning behind the wall and its clear reference to the shades of the underworld, seems to have been crafted so as to deliberately recollect these myths of liberation, thereby emphasizing the very political theme of Socrates's role as a revolutionary figure that threatens the traditional order by attempting to emancipate the nobly inclined souls that have been corrupted by the political and cultural dynamics governing the democratic city (a role, of course, for which he was judged and executed. As we will shortly see, the Cave is also linked to these judicial and political themes). In fact, it is difficult not to hear in the Cave's imagery and descriptions an

17 Picking up on this suggestion, Wood outlines in more detail than does Brann, some of the Labors of Heracles that he thinks Plato seems to have wanted us to associate with Socrates various exploits (cf. 506-508). In his very insightful analysis of *The Republic*, Sallis also focuses principally on the Socratic reenactment of the myth of descent into Hades (cf. Sallis 312-455).

18 In fact, as Sallis has noted, metaphorically speaking, during his exchange with Socrates the figure of Thrasymachus doubles up not only as the Nemean Lion, but also as Cerberus, the hound of Hades, which Heracles was tasked with subduing. Referring to Thrasymachus's initial pouncing attack, Socrates comments: "I think that if I hadn't seen him before he stared at me, I'd have been dumbstruck" (336d). Since the reference is to an ancient popular belief that a man will be struck dumb if a wolf sees him first, the implication of Socrates's words is that Thrasymachus is a wolf, that is to say, a wild dog like Cerberus. At the end of their exchange, Socrates, like Heracles, has tamed the wild dog. He says to Thrasymachus: "you became gentle and ceased to give me rough treatment" (354a) (cf. Sallis 317).



ironic jab at Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, in which Prometheus tells us that, before he came to their aid, men "lived like swarming ants in holes in the ground, in the sunless caves of the earth" (*Prometheus* 327 449-450).<sup>19</sup> Plato ironically suggests that the Promethean gift turned out to be a double-edged sword through which the philosophically inclined soul has in fact been kept from the sun, confined to and en-chained within the underground world of the corrupt and corrupting polis (cf. Brann 155-156).<sup>20</sup>

Of course, Aeschylean tragedy is not the only target of Plato's biting pen here. As mentioned earlier, the image of the Cave seems to be also in direct dialogue with Aristophanic comedy. Indeed, Nickolas Pappas has argued that a case can be made that Plato constructed his dialogues as philosophical modifications of Aristophanes's plays, which, as far as we can tell from the works that have survived, appear to have dealt often with metaphors of death, regeneration, and rebirth (cf. 12-14). In *The Republic*, Plato ironically reverses many of Aristophanes's comedic and satiric invectives, most notably by presenting to us a Socrates that does not, as the comedian would have it, imprison his students inside a sun-deprived thinking-shop that resembles the cave of Trophonius, in order to turn them into pale intellectual bums (cf. Aristophanes 103-104, 108, 130). Instead, Plato has his Socrates act as a midwife that helps release his students out of their dark existence into the sunlight.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, the cave itself ironically doubles up as a metaphor not just of death and the underworld, but also of birth and rebirth, insofar as the prison dwelling and the ascent of the prisoner into the visible world outside resembles the passage of the baby out of the womb through the birth canal (cf. Howland 1993 141). In this connection, it is worth mentioning that Plato's description of Socratic education as an act of midwifery is meant to contrast with the description he gives in Book I of the sophist Thrasymachus's preferred pedagogical approach, which consists in having a wet nurse forcefully feed knowledge into a child or a person (cf. 343a, 345b); a violent and compulsory approach that,

19 See Lidz (1993 121).

20 In connection with the general argument I am advancing in this paper concerning the political significance of Plato's allegory of the Cave, it is worth highlighting in passing Brann's observation that in the *Protagoras*, the sophist Protagoras claims that Prometheus forgot to include the political art among the other arts he gave to mortals (cf. 322b-c; Brann 156). The lack of political wisdom is evident in all the nooks of the cave, which appears to be governed like most cities "by people who fight over shadows" (520c). See also the discussion that follows, as well as note 14 above.

21 Plato's ironic wrestling with Aristophanic comedy comes to a head in Book V, which is clearly made to mirror in different ways Aristophanes's comedy, *The Assembly of Women* [*The Ecclesiazusae*] (cf. Brann 137).

metaphorically speaking, fits seemingly with the fettered state of the prisoners in the Cave. This is, thus, another way in which the conversation in Book I is meant to prepare the ground for the Cave allegory with its instruction to fit the image with “what was said before”, while at the same time highlighting the Cave’s connection to the very political theme of the clash between an emancipatory educational system that could reform the city so as to turn into a birthing ground for justice and the good life, and the coercive pedagogy that actually rules in current cities, plunging them into the deadly underworld of corruption and injustice.

Additionally, we should note that these themes also link the Cave once again with Book x, through a route other than the one already mentioned above (*viz.* the criticism of cultural artistic influences that we encounter in both places). For the myth of Er that is told at the end of *The Republic* also traffics with themes of descent, death, and rebirth. The myth tells the story of Er, a man who descended into Hades, and was able to journey though the underworld to return to the world above; in other words, the very myth Socrates has just finished enacting himself by descending into the Piraeus and journeying through the whole dialogue which he is now recollecting on the next day (recall that Socrates begins his dialogue by telling us that his descent to the Piraeus happened “yesterday”) (*cf.* Sallis 316). The Cave seems to be the center point around which the whole work revolves and through which it is funneled back on itself, a circle that appears to symbolize a seemingly infinite loop or eternal recurrence of death and rebirth.

There are other indications that the Cave is meant to mirror in special ways the opening scenes of *The Republic* and to make us recollect them in the course of reflecting about the prisoner’s drama. I already mentioned the contrast it establishes between Thrasymachus’s pedagogical preferences and those favored by the released prisoner (*i.e.* force-feeding the soul versus turning it around) (*cf.* 518b-d). But Thrasymachus’s quarrel with Socrates in Book I has other elements that anticipate the description of the prisoner’s situation. In his initial intervention Thrasymachus accuses Socrates and Polemarchus of simply asking questions and refuting answers only to satisfy their own competitiveness and love of honor (*cf.* 336c). Yet he himself seems to be preoccupied with these things, for, as the argument advances, he demands that Socrates pay a fine in order to hear his answer about justice (*cf.* 337d), a gesture that could be interpreted as a demand for the sort of prize Socrates says the prisoners might give each other for being better at deciphering the shadows on the wall (*cf.* 516c). After suggesting that Thrasymachus wants to win the admiration of the others (*i.e.*, is searching after honors) because he thinks he has a good answer to the question regarding justice, Socrates addresses him directly and tells him

that since he has no money, he can only give him praise for his answer (*cf.* 338a-b), which we will later learn is another characteristic activity of the prisoners in the cave.

We should also notice that among the people present at the conversation in Book I (and thereafter) there are some who remain silent throughout the whole dialogue. In this they resemble the puppeteers some of whom, we are explicitly told, are speaking while others are quiet (*cf.* 514c-515a).<sup>22</sup> It is highly telling that those who do speak at the initial encounter, Cephalus and Polemarchus, and even Socrates himself, do so by invoking numerous references to populist politicians and tyrants, rich men, and, especially, poets and playwrights; the list includes: Sophocles (329c-d), Themistocles (329e-330a), Pindar (331a), Simonedes (331d-e), Homer (334b), Bias and Pittacus (335e), and Ismenias of Corinth (336a). Thus, the opinions Socrates and his interlocutors voice at the beginning of the dialogue are grounded in and produced by the cultural heritage of the Greeks. Socrates applies the scalpel to these cultural opinions regarding justice and the good life that have been preserved in the work of artists like Sophocles and Homer, or in the memory of other authoritative figures, and that are taken at face value by those present at the conversation, since they have been indoctrinated from childhood to believe what those authorities say. This early exchange, then, anticipates again the setup of the Cave, in which the prisoners are examining culturally sanctioned opinions of justice, symbolized by the drama of shadows produced by puppeteers with the help of puppets

22 Again, we should not, therefore, conclude that everyone present at the conversation represents the puppeteers or that the association that I am now making here casts doubt on my prior claim that the prisoners represent those who are philosophically inclined. As previously indicated, I take the referent targets of the imagery in this allegory to be more fluid than is usually thought. This is not just because I take the allegory to be mainly political, but also because it is being described to a socio-politically diverse audience of interlocutors. The primary function of Socrates's claim that the prisoners are "like us" is to make those present at the conversation –and, of course, also the readers– pause and reflectively ask themselves who they think is representing them in the metaphor that he has just described: are they the puppeteers? The prisoners? Both? The personal nature of the ambiguous Socratic address to Glaucon is what allows us to see that someone like Thrasymachus could play both roles of prisoner and puppeteer at once. Insofar as he embodies the principles of sophistic education, favoring a wet-nurse approach to knowledge, Thrasymachus seems to represent a puppeteer; but insofar as he genuinely tries to compete with Socrates in Book I at deciphering the culturally produced shadows of justice, he resembles more a prisoner that is competing for honors and prizes (*i. e.* he resembles a philosophically inclined soul that has been corrupted away from his true vocation); he is, indeed, a prisoner of his own ignorance and of the pedagogical approach he favors.

and other artifacts, and projected onto the back wall of the cave with the help of the burning fire that stands behind them (*i.e.* with the help of the culture-producing power Prometheus gave the Greeks).<sup>23</sup> This drama itself, Socrates tells us, proceeds in regular or customary ways (*cf.* 516c-d), which helps cement the feeling that the prisoners are witnessing a display of cultural norms, ideas, and traditions regarding justice and the good life of the sort that the Greeks could find encapsulated in their tragic or comic theatre (*cf.* Howland 1993 135).

These links between the Cave and Book I that I have been discussing are important for my argument because, as has been observed, the action in Book I is also teeming with veiled and ironic allusions to the very political theme of Socrates's trial and execution (*cf.* Bloom 310; Sallis 335-ff). The city of Athens compelled Socrates to defend himself and win his acquittal against charges of impiety and of corrupting the youth. In the same way, at the beginning of *The Republic*, Socrates is thwarted from returning to Athens by Polemarchus and his men, who jokingly "compel" him to stay through threat of force, and it is Socrates himself who proposes that he win his own release through persuasion (*cf.* 327c). We are also told that Socrates has descended into the Piraeus to pray to the new Thracian moon goddess, Bendis, whose cult had been recently introduced into Athens's harbor partly in order to sediment the alliance with Thrace, thereby ensuring a steady supply of timber for the city's war fleet (*cf.* 327a, 354a; Pappas 20). Since the charge of impiety included the accusation that Socrates had introduced new deities into the city, this is Plato's ironic way of suggesting that it is Athens itself that is really guilty of introducing new gods, and of doing so for venal reasons. The parody of Socrates's trial in Book I culminates in the exchange with Thrasymachus, who in his initial intervention accuses Socrates of shielding himself behind his "usual irony" (*cf.* 337a), a reference to the very practice for which

23 In a somewhat more speculative vein, I think that the argumentative exchanges that take place during the dialogue, and, in particular, the Socratic cross-examination of the various answers that are given to the question, what is justice, in Book I (and thereafter), could be construed as resembling a process akin to what we are told the prisoners are doing by attempting to remember and predict the order of appearance of the shadows (*cf.* 516c-d), which, if I am right, would help cement the close relation Plato establishes, and that I have been discussing, between Book I and the image of the Cave. The often-repeated formulas, "if we are to follow the previous answers" (332d), "it follows" (334d, 340b), "doesn't it necessarily follow" (339e), or "doesn't it follow" (342e), and so on, could be read as predictive locutions of sorts that aim to anticipate the shapes and forms that the shadowy opinions under examination will take, once they are driven to their ultimate consequences or the unspoken assumptions inherent in them are brought to the light.

the city of Athens accused him of corrupting the youth. In a manner reminiscent of Plato's account in the *Apology*, Socrates is also asked to propose his own punishment in case Thrasymachus is able to give a better answer regarding justice (*cf.* 337d); and his proposed penalty, that he should learn from one who knows, is bound to sound outrageous to Thrasymachus, in the same way as his suggestion that he be rewarded instead of punished was bound to outrage his real accusers during his actual trial.

The allegory of the Cave incorporates the political theme of Socrates's trial in the description of the response of the prisoners to the return of the released prisoner to the cave. These prisoners, we are told, would kill the returning escapee for attempting to reveal to them the truth and the extent of their ignorance (*cf.* 517a); in other words, for doing precisely what Socrates's "usual irony" aimed to do for his fellow Athenians, and for which they forced him to drink the hemlock. Socrates also suggests at 517d that the prisoners are like people in courts who contend about shadows of justice or the statues of which they are the shadows, which not only reinforces the allegory's connection to the judicial themes we have been discussing, but also brings back to mind Socrates's suggestion in Book 1 that, in investigating the question of justice by seeking agreement with each other, he and Glaucon can be both jury and advocates at once (*cf.* 348b); thereby seemingly reaffirming the suspicion that when Socrates says that the prisoners are "like us", he really means no more than like Glaucon and himself, and perhaps just a few of the others present at the conversation, and not humankind as a whole as has been traditionally assumed.

## V

With all this in mind we can now turn to the second main point of contention I wish to raise about the traditional interpretation. This involves the supposition that, in the words of Julia Annas, "clearly the cave and fire correspond to the visible world, and the world outside the cave to the realm of thought" (254). I think that one reason why this seems such a natural reading of the Cave is that it has in its favor Socrates's own insistence that "the visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire to the power of the sun" (517b). Here it seems as if Socrates is very explicitly advising us to interpret the cave as the natural world of our everyday experiences, which would mean that the realm outside of the cave must lie beyond the natural world. And what can that be if not the realm of Forms? But things are not as clear as Annas and as others would have us believe, and as we might be first inclined to think from Socrates's own statements. For we should notice that the remark is, once again, very ambiguous: Socrates says that the prison dwelling is

*like* the visible realm. In other words, the cave is an imitation of the visible world and not the thing itself. Socrates has already warned us against thinking that a likeness is not a likeness but the thing itself (*cf.* 476c). Thus, in order to understand how the cave is like the visible we would do well by asking how it is *unlike* the visible.<sup>24</sup>

The artificial nature of the environment Socrates is describing is perhaps the surest fact that can be ascertained with respect to the Cave. This was, as I said earlier, one of Ferguson's most prescient observations (*cf.* 1922 16-19).<sup>25</sup> The cave embodies the visible realm insofar as it is and has been manipulated by human beings. In that respect, it stands in contrast to the realm outside of the cave in which the visible is encountered in its pure form. What the image is comparing is not the visible and the intelligible, but the natural and the cultural. That this is what is at stake here is further corroborated by Socrates's insistence that the fire is to be likened to the power of the sun. We know from the image of the Sun that for Socrates the sun represents the offspring of the Form of the Good in the sense that, just as the Good gives being and is the cause of everything in the intelligible realm, so too the sun gives being and is the cause of everything in the *visible realm*. If now the fire is to be understood as representing the sun inside the cave, then we must construe it as standing for something that, outside the cave, governs the natural visible realm, but inside the cave, governs a very different realm, namely, the cultural

.....  
 24 I realize that taken by itself the claim in 517b is hard to square with the type of reading I am pushing here. To liken the visible with the cave seems to commit us to regarding the realm outside of the cave as other than the visible realm. Nonetheless, as I hope will soon become clear, when the claim is coupled with the other descriptions Socrates offers to us about what goes on outside of the cave, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of interpreting the outside realm as also in some sense belonging to the visible realm, and so as being also "like it". The issue then becomes one of spelling out the different way in which both, the inside and the outside of the cave, partake of the visible realm.

25 In this connection it should be noted also that Socrates describes the cave itself as an underground, "*cavelike*" dwelling (*cf.* 514a); in other words, he describes it not as a natural cave, but as a place *resembling* a natural cave. This is thus another way in which we are made aware of the artificial nature of the residence the prisoners inhabit. In his essay on the Cave, Hall credits Ferguson for recognizing that the condition of the inmates inside the cave is in some sense unnatural, but he also argues against Ferguson that there must be a natural condition of prisoners inside the cave once their liberation is ensured by the correct *paideia* or educational program Socrates favors for the reformed city (*cf.* Hall 78-82). While I disagree with some of the details of Hall's argument – perhaps most notably, with his equation of the prisoners with ordinary human beings in general – I find myself in agreement with its general tenor, and with the conclusion he reaches that, once the city is reformed, the released inmates would likely inhabit only the upper level of the cave where the fire is burning (*cf.* Hall 83-84).

visible realm. I believe that this makes a lot of sense since, as I indicated earlier, fire is the symbol of culture par excellence in Greek mythology: it is the Promethean gift that allows them to transcend their merely natural condition. Recall once again the discussion in section 4 above about the Cave's ironic targeting of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and the metaphorical connection to Heracles's labors. The fire in the cave is the power that, like the sun in the visible realm, gives being and is the cause of everything in the realm of culture.

This reading can be further confirmed if we look more closely at Socrates's account of what happens to the soul outside of the cave. Take, for example, the passage that describes the liberated soul as finally reaching the stage in which he now can see the sun itself and studies it. Socrates remarks that, "at this point he would infer and conclude that the sun provides the seasons and the years, *governs everything in the visible world*, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see" (516b-c, emphasis added). I call attention to this passage because it reinstates the connection between the sun and the visible realm, and it explicitly connects the latter with the world outside of the cave. To be sure, the liberated prisoner may be here thinking of his former prison dwelling as the visible realm. In that sense, "what he used to see" refers to the sorts of things he saw while inside the cave. But if that is the case, then it is hard to make sense of Socrates's query immediately following this remark. He asks: "what about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, his fellow prisoners, and what passed for wisdom there?" (*ibid.*). If Socrates meant to imply that the person was thinking of the cave when he came to the conclusion that the sun governs the visible realm, then it makes no sense to ask that he now be reminded of the cave, for he must have been thinking about it all along. That he was not should alert us to the fact that he takes the realm outside of the cave to be the *visible realm*.

Furthermore, we should notice that in the outside world there is a kind of repetition of the cognitive moves performed by the prisoner inside the cave. This repetition serves to stress the relationship of likeness that holds between both places at the same time that it makes us aware of the dissimilarity between the life of the prisoner inside and outside the cave. The person outside the cave begins by looking at shadows and images of things in shiny surfaces. If the outside realm were really the realm of Forms this would seem a very puzzling statement, for what place do imitations and images of *this kind* have within the intelligible realm?<sup>26</sup>

.....  
 26 To be sure, Socrates says that *dianoia* (the lower segment of the intelligible portion of the Line), makes use of images in order to investigate on the basis of hypothesis and arrive at a conclusion (*cf.* 510b). But while this statement might indicate that images are



But the situation makes perfect sense if we take it to be a situation in which the prisoner is making a cognitive fresh start in a visible realm that has been purged of the manipulative aspect of human endeavors. What Socrates seems to be saying is that in order for the philosopher to ascend to the intelligible realm, he must look at the visible realm with eyes untainted by the pernicious cultural influences of the city. In particular, the influences exercised over the soul by the artists and by the sophists (both in the form of the public at large and/or in that of individual sophists). The statement is thus, once again, *political*: only by stepping out of the political dynamics of the city (and specially of democratic cities like Athens) can the philosopher engage in the type of inquiry that will eventually lead him to the intelligible Forms.<sup>27</sup>

Socrates compares the power of *dialectic* in the intelligible realm with the power sight exercises in the visible realm. He tells Glaucon that

sight tries at last to look at the animals themselves, and, in the end, at the sun itself. In the same way, whenever someone tries through argument and apart from all sense perceptions to find the being itself of each thing and doesn't give up until he grasps the good itself with understanding itself, he reaches the end of the intelligible, *just as the other reached the end of the visible*. (532a-b, emphasis added)

---

being used at the intelligible realm, it would not support the idea that these images are of the sort that the prisoners first encounters outside of the cave, for we are explicitly told that the images used by *dianoia* are “the things that were imitated before” at the lower segment of the Line or at level of opinion. In other words, the images used by *dianoia* are objects of the visible world like animals, artifacts, and things that grow, which served as the originals of the things imaged at the level of *eikasia*. But the things that the prisoner sees on his first venture outside of the cave are not actual objects but images of them like shadows and reflections of things in water (cf. 516a). On the other hand, from the perspective of the reading I am defending, it is highly telling for Socrates to say that the first things the prisoner observes outside of the cave are *shadows*, for that immediately establishes a contrast between these exterior shadows and the interior ones that the prisoner grew up contemplating. The difference is that the latter, interior ones, are artificially produced with the help of man-made fire, artifacts, and puppets, while the outside ones occur naturally without human manipulation.

- 27 As Sallis, correctly notes, the Cave metaphorically enacts a philosophical transcending of the city, among other things, by suggesting that the released prisoner needs to get beyond the wall along which the puppeteers are carrying their puppets and artifacts, in order to recognize that the opinions enshrined and discussed by his fellow prisoners are no more than shadow-play, a collection of conventions and customs that are determined by the cultural “legislators” hidden behind the city-walls (cf. Sallis 447). In this connection, it is also important to note that at 496b, Socrates claims that today only a few philosophically inclined souls really consort with philosophy in the appropriate way, and he explicitly tells us that those few are the ones who have been exiled from their city or who happen to live in a small city where they can be disdainful of the city's affairs and look beyond them.



Notice that the passage once again refers –this time quite explicitly– to the journey of the prisoner outside of the cave as a *journey of the soul in the visible realm*, a journey that is meant to stand metaphorically for that of the dialectician through the intelligible realm.

It is no wonder that the philosopher has to go outside the cave to engage in *dialectic*. Prior to the philosopher's return, the cave represents the contrary of the ideal city. This is important because Socrates's contention is not that culture and politics *per se* are bad. Instead, the claim is that culture and politics thus far, especially of the democratic variety, have been unsuitable grounds for true philosophical development and, hence, badly equipped for bringing the just society into place.<sup>28</sup> Presumably, once the philosopher returns to the cave and reforms it, the cultural influences that are an unavoidable part of human affairs will no longer have the terrible effects Plato thought they had in the Athens of his time. Of course, as we know from Book x, reforming the city in the way Plato envisioned would require major cultural restructuring. A lot of what the Greeks took to be representative of their culture in the form of tragedy, music, and poetry would have to go. Yet, it is clear from Socrates's discussion that some forms of imitative art (admittedly somewhat more austere ones) would remain (*cf.* Burnyeat 276-277).

## VI

I hope that by now a different interpretation of the Cave is more forcefully recommending itself to us. The image is not making the epistemological claim that our natural cognitive situation is suspect, but the political claim that educators and their methods have thus far been detrimental for philosophical development; so much so that as Socrates comments on Book vi, “if anyone is saved and becomes what he ought to be under our present constitutions, he has been saved –you might rightly say– by a divine dispensation” (492e); which, let us remark in passing, resonates strongly with the manner Socrates describes the first “miraculous” release of one of the prisoners.

Through the image of the Cave Plato advances further his critique of Athenian society and politics. The cave itself is an extended metaphor for the city. Plato is making a political statement about the dreadful effects that corrupt cultures, especially those with a democratic bent, have on the philosophical soul. That is why he claims that it is only by means of a complete restructuring of government that the ideal city will come into effect. The philosophical soul that miraculously manages to surmount the obstacles posed to him by the cultural milieu and becomes what he ought to be must return to the cave in order to reform it. Only

.....  
28 For an interesting discussion on Plato's views on culture, see Burnyeat (1997).

then, Socrates tells us, “the city will be governed, not like the majority of cities nowadays, by people who fight over shadows and struggle against one another in order to rule [...] but by people who are awake rather than dreaming” (520c). The Cave, then, is a political allegory about the experience of the philosopher in relation to the city.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, however, in suggesting the preeminence of the political over the epistemological reading of the Cave, I do not mean to deny altogether the presence and the significance in this image of epistemological themes. After all, by Socrates’s own admission the primary function of the Cave is to illustrate the effects of education on our nature (*cf.* 514a), which immediately places concerns with knowledge and truth at the center of this image’s description. The pedagogical program and the epistemological steps outlined in the Line turn the soul in the right direction so that it can acquire the sort of knowledge that, I have said, is requisite for governing properly: the enlightened state that results from the right pedagogical program is what allows the prisoner to stop fighting over shadows of justice and instead keep true justice in sight, even as he is forced back and made to reside once again among the other prisoners within the sun-deprived cave. To that extent one cannot really draw a sharp distinction between the epistemological and the political in the allegory. The only person who can liberate the city from evil and ignorance, and institute the correct system of government is the philosopher who has seen the truth by following the epistemological plan outlined in the Line.

But this emphasis on the liberating effects of the educational program described by the Sun and the Line can be badly misleading if one fails to hear the special accent that, as I have argued, the Cave places on the political situation of the philosopher with respect to the city. For we may be led to believe that this educational program begins the moment the prisoner in the cave is liberated from his bonds and turns around to start his ascend out of the cave. We would then fall prey, once again, to the mistaken belief that we ought to find a one-to-one correspondence between the various segments of the Line and the prisoner’s journey in and out of the Cave. It is this emphasis on an epistemological parallelism that my reading has called into question. And here, I believe, it is legitimate to introduce a relevant distinction between the epistemological and the political in the Cave. It is highly telling that, when discussing the way in which education can redirect a person’s soul and orient it toward the truth, Socrates insists that a precondition of this kind of turning is that the person be rid of the bonds that have come to fasten to him due to overindulging his appetitive side, which can happen only if those bonds have been relentlessly “hammered at

from childhood” (519a-b). Such hammering away can proceed with relative ease, if we suppose that the person is living under the political regime of the ideal city that Socrates builds in speech. But what happens if the situation is as the one described at the onset of the Cave? If instead of chipping away at said chains since childhood, the prisoner had throughout all his life been subjected to a political regime that (cf. 514a), as the Cave suggests and I have argued above, is dominated by cultural and pedagogical forces that pander to our appetites and tighten those bonds more firmly instead of loosening them? Then the prisoner's release, upon which his turning around is predicated, can happen only if he somehow escapes these oppressive political dynamics. This is the real, and very political, moral of the Cave. A moral that, of course, we are supposed to take to heart, so that instead of waiting for divine intervention (cf. 492e), or for the whimsical circumstance of finding ourselves either exiled from the city or living in a small city where we can be disdainful of political life (cf. 496b), we can instead self-consciously and voluntarily take active steps to shun the corrupting influences that have thus far governed our lives in current cities, whereupon we can begin to execute the epistemological program outlined by the Line and enlighten our souls.

Now that the political significance of the Cave has been brought to the fore, we may perhaps begin to appreciate somewhat more clearly the way this image fits with the others. In my view, the images hang together in something like the following way: the first –that of the Sun–, introduces the contrast between the intelligible and the visible realms. The second –that of the Line–, further develops this contrast along epistemological lines, by explaining what is cognitively required to reach the Forms. The third –that of the Cave–, completes the analogies by clarifying what is *politically* required to carry out the cognitive project successfully: namely, that the philosophically inclined soul refrain itself from politics until it has reached the enlightened stage that can allow it to return to the cave in order to govern with justice. Spelling out these relations in more detail reaches beyond the scope of this paper. Let me just say by way of conclusion that I think this way of interpreting the relationship is not only more promising than the one that stresses the epistemological side, but also helps us make better sense of the admittedly strange and nonetheless powerful image of the Cave.

## References

- Adam, J. *The Republic of Plato*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902.
- Aeschylus. *The Complete Greek Tragedies, Volume I: Aeschylus*. Eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959.

- Annas, J. *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Aristophanes. *Aristophanes, 3: The Suits, Clouds, Birds*. Eds. David R. Slavitt and Palmer Bovie. Trans. Greg Delanty, Carol Poster, and Paul Muldoon with Richard Martin. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.
- Bloom, A. *The Republic of Plato: Translated with Notes and an Interpretative Essay*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.
- Brann, E. T. H. *The Music of the Republic*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004.
- Burnyeat, M. F. "Culture and Society in Plato's Republic." *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. 217-324.
- Cross, R. C., and Woozley, A. D. *Plato's Republic: A Philosophical Commentary*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964.
- Ferguson, A. S. "Plato's Simile of Light. Part I. The Similes of the Sun and the Line." *The Classical Quarterly* 15 (1921): 131-152.
- Ferguson, A. S. "Plato's Simile of Light. Part II. The Allegory of the Cave (Continued)." *The Classical Quarterly* 16 (1922): 15-28.
- Ferguson, A. S. "Plato's Simile of Light Again." *The Classical Quarterly* 28 (1934): 190-210.
- Ferguson, J. "The Sun, Line and Cave Again." *Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (1963): 188-193.
- Fine, G. *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Gould, J. *The Development of Plato's Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955.
- Gocer, A. "The Puppet Theatre in Plato's Parable of the Cave." *The Classical Journal* 95 (2000): 119-129.
- Hall, D. "Interpreting Plato's Cave as an Allegory of the Human Condition." *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 14 (1980): 74-86. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/APEIRON.1980.14.2.74>
- Homer. *The Odyssey of Homer*. Trans. Richmond Lattimore. New York: Harper Perennial, 1999.
- Howland, J. "The Cave Image and the Problem of Place: The Sophist, the Poet, and the Philosopher." *Dionysius* 10 (1986): 21-55.
- Howland, J. *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993.
- Irwin, T. *Plato's Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Joseph, H. W. B. *Knowledge and the Good in Plato's Republic*. London: Oxford University Press, 1948.
- Karasmanis, V. "Plato's Republic: The Line and the Cave." *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 21 (1988): 147-171.
- Lidz, J. W. "Reflections on and in Plato's Cave." *Interpretation* 21 (1993): 115-134.
- Malcom, J. "The Line and the Cave." *Phronesis* 7 (1962): 38-45.

- Malcom, J. "The Cave Revisited." *The Classical Quarterly* 31(1981): 60-68.
- Morrison, J.S. "Two Unresolved Difficulties in the Line and Cave." *Phronesis* 22(1977): 212-231.
- Murphy, N.R. "The 'Simile of Light' in Plato's Republic." *The Classical Quarterly* 26(1932): 93-102.
- Nettleship, R. *Lectures on the Republic of Plato*. London: Macmillan and Company Limited, 1901.
- Robinson, R. *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953.
- Pappas, N. *Plato and the Republic*. London: Routledge Philosophy Guide Books, 1995.
- Plato. "The Republic." *Plato Complete Works*. Eds. John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997. 971-1223.
- Raven, J. E. "Sun, Divided Line and Cave." *Classical Quarterly* 3 (1953): 22-32.
- Sallis, J. *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Sayers, S. *Plato's Republic: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.
- Seery, J.E. "Politics as Ironic Community: On the Themes of Descent and Return in Plato's Republic." *Political Theory* 16.2 (1988): 229-256.
- Smith, N. "How the Prisoners in Plato's Cave are 'Like Us'." *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 13 (1997): 187-204.
- Smith, W. A. *Ancient Education*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1955.
- Strang, C. "Plato's Analogy of the Cave." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 4 (1986): 19-34.
- Sze, C. P. "Eikasia and Pistis in Plato's Cave Allegory." *The Classical Quarterly* 27 (1977): 127-138.
- White, N. P. *A Companion to Plato's Republic*. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979.
- Wilberding, J. "Prisoners and Puppeteers in the Cave." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2004):117-139.
- Wood, R. E. "Image, Structure and Content: On a Passage in Plato's Republic." *The Review of Metaphysics* 40.3 (1987): 495-514.