

Plato's Cave: A Vision to Overturn Homer's

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My dear Glaucon, we are engaged in a great struggle, a Struggle greater than it seems. ...And neither ... honor ... nor poetry itself must be allowed to persuade us to neglect justice or ... virtue.¹

In the struggle that Plato has Socrates wage throughout The Republic for “the good” and what men need to achieve it, his most compelling device – that he cites again and again -- is not logic, analysis, dialectic or any of the methods of reason. Instead it is a vivid fable, an image. This may seem surprising at first. Plato attacks artists, poets and above all Homer as imitators, whose creations, at third hand from reality, are “far from truth,” displace reason and appeal “to that part in us which is far removed from intelligence”.² For Plato, however, there is no contradiction. The guardians may tell lies, since “noble lies” and myths which *support* the good are necessary and desirable.³ None is more powerful than that of the cave, one of the most persuasive metaphors ever created. Examined closely, in fact, the famous description of men trapped in darkness unaware of the brightness above is structured precisely and in each detail to create a vision as powerful, emotionally appealing and as opposite to Homer's as possible -- to make the immortal, non-bodily world as alluring as Homer makes the mortal one.

At each point, Plato shapes his description of the cave to undermine and attack Homeric values. With his first sentence, he establishes a narrative perspective and authority similar to Homer's. "Imagine men living in a cave with a long passageway stretching between them and the cave's mouth, where it opens wide to the light".⁴ This opening subtly gives us the same *double* point of view Homer provides, making us simultaneously aware of an immortal realm above and a changing, mortal one of men below. The Odyssey begins with this same dual perspective, showing us Odysseus bewitched and trapped "deep in ... arching caverns" and, far above him, the shining gods on Olympus.⁵ Odysseus is no more aware of the liberation the gods are planning than the men in the cave are of possible liberation above.

This choice of perspective creates a dramatic irony that returns to haunt us. Plato could easily have begun *within* the cave itself, with what to the men -- representing mankind in general and thus the reader -- is ordinary reality and thus not dim at all. Instead, he makes us aware from the outset of both this lower reality and a clearer, more open world above. We look down at men trapped in gloom from the perspective of the sun-lit earth. We can hardly picture them without the alternative world they are separated from. The irony we feel in our privileged position -- we know what they do not, why don't they simply escape, we ask -- hits us all the harder when we realize they are "like ourselves" and their "strange prison" like our own.⁶

This dual perspective also establishes the narrator's unique authority as the only one familiar with both worlds, the same authority Odysseus had after returning from Hades. Unlike the men in the cave representing mankind, Plato alone – by telling the story – knows of the long passageway and the light at the end. The more he describes the cave, the more we take for granted that only he has traveled to that outer world and returned. He is thus like Odysseus in the halls of Alcinous: the only living man who can describe the mysterious, other world that no one else has come back from. Indeed at the end of the Republic, Plato specifically compares Socrates' tales with "the kinds of tales told to Alcinous".⁷ We read on to learn more about the cave, as enthralled as Odysseus' avid listeners -- for Plato alone, it seems, knows the secret truth of what existence really is and how to reach it, of how *not* to remain in darkness.

Once we move within the cave itself, Plato makes a second narrative choice. The fundamental analogy of the cave is simple: men trapped inside for their entire lives know only shadows and take these as true reality. But if this is all Plato is after – to inspire philosophers to seek the truth, to escape from illusion – the cave could simply be a great room. Men could, indeed would, walk around and live as we do, in the world of our bodies and our sense perceptions, unaware of any other, higher world outside. Since Plato makes his cave into a dungeon with chains, he is driving at something else. That all men have been shackled to one spot since childhood, can never even move their heads, means someone else, someone malevolent, has done this to them. They are not

merely living in a cave but have been deliberately imprisoned there, bound more tightly than any galley slave, for a devious purpose: to only let them see what their keepers want. Their unseen jailers insist on controlling not only their shackled bodies but their vision and therefore their minds.

Who does Plato identify as these manipulators? Concealed behind the prisoners, puppeteers and others twist objects to cast moving shadows on the wall. "Presumably," he adds slyly, as if the story is not his own invention, they "sometimes speak and sometimes are silent."⁸ The entire cave is thus a theater in which the audience – mankind -- is confined and positioned for life for a single purpose: to believe only what they are shown. In this extraordinary image, the powerful, insidious influence of Homer and other poets, who Plato attacks throughout The Republic, comes monstrously to life. To Plato, the tragic poets and Homer as their master – like these shadow-masters -- "contrive appearances and not reality,"⁹ appearances men take as truth. It is hard to imagine a more negative vision of art's effect on man than this description of prisoners forced to watch these productions until they die.

In this harsh, brilliant scene, Plato inserts *two* further details – details necessary only to his critique of poetry and art. A fire burns between the entrance to the cave and the prisoners. Physically, the fire is superfluous. The puppet play does not require two sources of light, the distant natural light from the entrance and this other glow as well. The only reason for the fire, it seems, is metaphysical: so that the dim light in which men glimpse the shadows *not* be

the natural light from outside. The shadows are thus one more step removed from true reality outside. This additional separation is precisely what Plato criticizes in the work of imitative artists such as Homer: “the works of poets are thrice removed from reality.”¹⁰ “Beloved Homer,” he has Socrates taunt, “if your words about virtue are not a third remove from the truth...”.¹¹ This intermediate fire sets the shadows at a similar remove from the truth outside.

The second detail shows the falseness of representational art itself. The objects casting shadows, Plato emphasizes, are neither human nor animal artifacts, but “human and animal images made of stone and wood...”.¹² This detail too seems unnecessary at first. No other materials are mentioned, and since prisoners see only shadows, it makes no difference to them if the objects are original or imitation. For Plato's attack on imitative artists, however, this difference is crucial. The shadows the prisoners believe are men or animals are not even derived from those beings. In this way, too, they are further removed from true forms or ideas.

What Plato objects to is not simply that puppeteers, Homer and other poets “contrive appearances” or illusions; the entire temporal world is, for him, after all, only one of appearances. What is dangerous is that the illusions created by artists *strengthen* the pull of the temporal, unreal world on us. He can hardly stress this enough: “When Homer ... imitates a grieving hero we are held captive by the imitation,” as the prisoners are captivated by the moving shadows.¹³ Poetry makes all pleasures and pains, all desires, “grow great

instead of drying them up".¹⁴ "The poet calls forth the worst elements in the soul and then nourishes them and makes them strong".¹⁵ The allegory of the cave seeks precisely to dissuade us from and undermine the way poetry draws us even closer to the world of our bodies and emotions.

Poetry, and Homer, as "the greatest of poets," make us believe in the illusions of the body, Plato argues, by playing a clever trick on a weakness inside us. There is "a flaw in our nature that the imitators exploit, where they manipulate light and dark so that the conjuror's tricks and marionette shows appear to be nothing short of magic."¹⁶ Only after many re-readings of the allegory of the cave, does Plato's own "conjuror's trick" become clear. Our ordinary world of daylight, movement, sensation, Socrates portrays as dark, immobile imprisonment. The perpetual world we reach by turning away from the body and "shunning reliance on sense perceptions,"¹⁷ where we can never see light, he shows as radiant instead. Plato reverses light and darkness. He has made the invisible bright.

This allegory is inspiring because it suggests there is a higher, more glorious world than the one we take for granted. For Plato, this higher world is that of the soul, as opposed to the dark imprisoning reality of the body. The soul "must be seen as it truly is... not ... distorted as we find it when hinged to the body and its miseries".¹⁸

This devaluation of the body lies at the heart of Plato's opposition to Homer. Homer glorifies this world, its beauty, pain, pleasures, a world in which

bodies, armor, seas gleam. He makes "tables laden with bread and meat/ the cup bearer drawing wine from the bowl" seem "the fairest thing in all the world".¹⁹ Of all verses, the first Plato would expunge from the Republic is Achilles' lament from Hades, "I would rather be a poor serf / on the land of one himself penurious / than ... monarch of all who ever died,"²⁰ for it values living itself, above all ideals.

The allegory of the cave creates an opposite vision, to draw us away from the world of the senses which Homer makes us value even more, to turn "our entire soul...away from the world of transient things toward the world of perpetual being ... its most radiant manifestation... we call goodness".²¹ This is Plato's "great struggle," in which he must *first* undermine and remove our attachment to Homer's values, he believes, in order for us to pursue reason and the soul. Having witnessed at first-hand Socrates' own fate, killed by those he tried to educate or lead out of the cave, Plato has decided the critical first step must be to do away with Homer's influence. As he says in introducing the story of the cave, "allegory may show us best how education – or the lack of it – affects our nature."²² For The Republic is perhaps the most extreme tract of educational reform, in which all children would be taken from their parents to be raised in the new values. To those who will attack this extraordinarily controversial proposal, the Allegory of the Cave provides a ready-made answer: the current education, which reflects, glorifies and inculcates Homer's values, itself poisons the minds, enslaves, all who receive it.

To this end of attacking Homer's influence, he creates a tale, an image, as extraordinary as any in Homer. The story of the cave stirs us to reject the enticements, the pull of the transient, bodily world as if it was Calypso's prison-cave. It inspires us to yearn and strive for the immortal world of the good as if it was Ithaca, the true home where we belong. The allegory of the cave is an antidote to Homer's corrupting power.²³

Notes

¹ Plato, The Republic, translated by Richard W. Sterling and William C. Scott (New York: W. W. Norton and Company) 1985, 298.

² Plato 293.

³ Plato 85.

⁴ Plato, 209.

⁵ Homer, The Odyssey, translated by Robert Fagles, (New York: Penguin Books) 1996, 78.

⁶ Plato, 209.

⁷ Plato 294.

⁸ Plato 209.

⁹ Plato 289.

¹⁰ Plato 289.

¹¹ Plato 289.

¹² Plato 209.

¹³ Plato 296.

¹⁴ Plato 296.

¹⁵ Plato 296.

¹⁶ Plato 293.

¹⁷ Plato 226.

¹⁸ Plato 302.

¹⁹ Plato 87.

²⁰ Plato 82.

²¹ Plato 212.

²² Plato 209.

²³ Plato 285.