



[Socrates:] And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is or unenlightened: --Behold! human beings living in a underground den, with their mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see shadows?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

No question, he replied.

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the

that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision. Will he not be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing out the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, -- will he not be pained and irritated? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the realities now shown to him?

Far truer.

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things now being shown to him?

True, he said.

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he 's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

Not all in a moment, he said.

He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and upon the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than he ever saw them before. But will he not be obliged to look at the light of the sun by day?

Certainly.

He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

Clearly, he said, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.

And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change to them?

Certainly, he would.

And if they were in the habit of conferring honours among themselves and were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went first and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer,

Better to be the poor servant of a poor master, and to endure anything, rather than to be as they do and live after their manner?

Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain those notions and live in this miserable manner.

Imagine once more, I said, such an one coming suddenly out of the sun to his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was to think of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

No question, he said.

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, it is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have.

Further Readings

