TO
F. C. C.
in gratitude for many hours
patiently given to the amendment of
this version
by one whose sense of good English
is a never-failing guide

THE REPUBLIC
OF PLATO

TRANSLATED WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
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CHAPTER XXIV

I may understand me to mean all that unaided reasoning apprehends by the power of dialectic, when it treats its assumptions, not as first principles, but as hypotheses in the literal sense, things 'laid down' like a flight of steps up which it may mount all the way to something that is not hypothetical, the first principle of all; and having grasped this, may turn back and, holding on to the consequences which depend upon it, descend at last to a conclusion, never making use of any sensible object, but only of Forms, moving through Forms from one to another, and ending with Forms.

I understand, he said, though not perfectly; for the procedure you describe sounds like an enormous undertaking. But I see that you mean to distinguish the field of intelligible reality studied by dialectic as having a greater certainty and truth than the subject-matter of the 'arts,' as they are called, which treat their assumptions as first principles. The students of these arts are, it is true, compelled to exercise thought in contemplating objects which the senses cannot perceive; but because they start from assumptions without going back to a first principle, you do not regard them as gaining true understanding about those objects, although the objects themselves, when connected with a first principle, are intelligible. And I think you would call the state of mind of the students of geometry and other such arts, not intelligence, but thinking, as being something between intelligence and mere acceptance of appearances.

You have understood me quite well enough, I replied. And now you may take, as corresponding to the four sections, these four states of mind: intelligence for the highest, thinking for the second, belief for the third, and for the least imagining. These you may arrange as the terms in a proportion, assigning to each a degree of clearness and certainty corresponding to the measure in which their objects possess truth and reality.

I understand and agree with you. I will arrange them as you say.

Plato never uses hard and fast technical terms. The four here proposed are not defined or strictly employed in the sequel.

CHAPTER XXV (vii. 514 a-521 b)

THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

The progress of the mind from the lowest state of unenlightenment to knowledge of the Good is now illustrated by the famous parable comparing the world of appearance to an underground Cave. In Empedocles' religious poem the powers which conduct the soul to its incarnation say, 'We have come under this cavern's roof.' The image was probably taken from mysteries held in caves or dark chambers representing the underworld, through which the candidates for initiation were led to the revelation of sacred objects in a blaze of light. The idea that the body is a prison-house, to which the soul is condemned for past misdeeds, is attributed by Plato to the Orphics.

One moral of the allegory is drawn from the distress caused by a too sudden passage from darkness to light. The earlier warning against plunging untrained minds into the discussion of moral problems (498 b, p. 266), as the Sophists and Socrates himself had done, is reinforced by the picture of the dazed prisoner dragged out into the sunlight. Plato's ten years' course of pure mathematics is to habituate the intellect to abstract reasoning before moral ideas are called in question (537 b, ff., p. 259).

Next, said I, here is a parable to illustrate the degrees in which our nature may be enlightened or unenlightened. Imagine the condition of men living in a sort of cavernous chamber underground, with an entrance open to the light and a long passage all down the cave. Here they have been from childhood, chained by the leg and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them, because the chains will not let them turn their heads. At some distance higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between the prisoners and the

The length of the 'way in' (eiros) to the chamber where the prisoners sit is an essential feature, explaining why no daylight reaches them.
fire is a track 1 with a parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet-show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets over the top.

I see, said he.

Now behind this parapet imagine persons carrying along various artificial objects, including figures of men and animals in wood or stone or other materials, which project above the parapet. Naturally, some of these persons will be talking, others silent. 2

It is a strange picture, he said, and a strange sort of prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; for in the first place prisoners so confined would have seen nothing of themselves or of one another, except the shadows thrown by the fire-light on the wall of the Cave facing them, would they?

Not if all their lives they had been prevented from moving their heads.

And they would have seen as little of the objects carried past.

Of course.

Now, if they could talk to one another, would they not suppose that their words referred only to those passing shadows which they saw? 8

Necessarily.

And suppose their prison had an echo from the wall facing them? When one of the people crossing behind them spoke, they could only suppose that the sound came from the shadow passing before their eyes.

No doubt.

1 The track crosses the passage into the cave at right angles, and is above the parapet built along it.

2 A modern Plato would compare his Cave to an underground cinema, where the audience watch the play of shadows thrown by the film passing before a light at their backs. The film itself is only an image of ‘real’ things and events in the world outside the cinema. For the film Plato has to substitute the clumser apparatus of a procession of artificial objects carried on their heads by persons who are merely part of the machinery, providing for the movement of the objects and the sounds whose echo the prisoners hear. The parapet prevents these persons’ shadows from being cast on the wall of the Cave.

8 Adam’s text and interpretation. The prisoners, having seen nothing but shadows, cannot think their words refer to the objects carried past behind their backs. For them shadows (images) are the only realities.

In every way, then, such prisoners would recognize nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects. 3

Inevitably.

Now consider what would happen if their release from the chains and the healing of their unwisdom should come about in this way. Suppose one of them set free and forced suddenly to stand up, turn his head, and walk with eyes lifted to the light; all these movements would be painful, and he would be too dazzled to make out the objects whose shadows he had been used to see. What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he had formerly seen was meaningless illusion, but now, being somewhat nearer to reality and turned towards more real objects, he was getting a truer view? Suppose further that he were shown the various objects being carried by and were made to say, in reply to questions, what each of them was. Would he not be perplexed and believe the objects now shown him to be not so real as what he formerly saw? 4

Yes, not nearly so real.

And if he were forced to look at the fire-light itself, would not his eyes ache, so that he would try to escape and turn back to the things which he could see distinctly, convinced that they really were clearer than these other objects now being shown to him?

Yes.

And suppose someone were to drag him away forcibly up the steep and rugged ascent and not let him go until he had hauled him out into the sunlight, would he not suffer pain and vexation at such treatment, and, when he had come out into the light, find his eyes so full of its radiance that he could not see a single one of the things that he was now told were real?

Certainly he would not see them all at once.

He would need, then, to grow accustomed before he could see things in that upper world. 5 At first it would be easiest to make out shadows, and then the images of men and things reflected in the sunshine. 6

3 The state of mind called elation in the previous chapter.

4 The first effect of Socratic questioning is perplexity. Cf. p. 8.

5 Here is the moral—the need of habituation by mathematical study before discussing moral ideas and ascending through them to the Form of the Good.
petition with the prisoners who had never been released, while his
eyesight was still dim and unsteady; and it might take some time
to become used to the darkness. They would laugh at him and say
that he had gone up only to come back with his sight ruined; it
was worth no one's while even to attempt the ascent. If they could
lay hands on the man who was trying to set them free and lead
them up, they would kill him. 1

Yes, they would.

Every feature in this parable, my dear Glaucon, is meant to fit
our earlier analysis. The prison dwelling corresponds to the region
revealed to us through the sense of sight, and the fire-light within
it to the power of the Sun. The ascent to see the things in the
upper world you may take as standing for the upward journey of
the soul into the region of the intelligible; then you will be in
possession of what I surmise, since that is what you wish to be told.
Heaven knows whether it is true; but this, at any rate, is how it
appears to me. In the world of knowledge, the last thing to be
perceived and only with great difficulty is the essential Form of
Goodness. Once it is perceived, the conclusion must follow that,
for all things, this is the cause of whatever is right and good; in
the visible world it gives birth to light and to the lord of light,
while it is itself sovereign in the intelligible world and the parent
of intelligence and truth. Without having had a vision of this Form
no one can act with wisdom, either in his own life or in matters
of state.

So far as I can understand, I share your belief.

Then you may also agree that it is no wonder if those who have
reached this height are reluctant to manage the affairs of men.
Their souls long to spend all their time in that upper world—natur-
ally enough, if here once more our parable holds true. Nor, again,
is it at all strange that one who comes from the contemplation
of divine things to the miseries of human life should appear awk-
ward and ridiculous when, with eyes still dazed and not yet ac-
customed to the darkness, he is compelled, in a law-court or else-

1 The empirical politician, with no philosophic insight, but only a 'knack of re-
membersing what usually happens' (Gorg. 501 λ). He has elthasis = conjecture as to
what is likely (eikon).

2 This verse (already quoted at 386 c, p. 76), being spoken by the ghost of
Achilles, suggests that the Cave is comparable with Hades.
where, to dispute about the shadows of justice or the images that cast those shadows, and to wrangle over the notions of what is right in the minds of men who have never beheld Justice itself.  

It is not at all strange.

No: a sensible man will remember that the eyes may be confused in two ways—by a change from light to darkness or from darkness to light; and he will recognize that the same thing happens to the soul. When he sees it troubled and unable to discern anything clearly, instead of laughing thoughtlessly, he will ask whether, coming from a brighter existence, its unaccustomed vision is obscured by the darkness, in which case he will think its condition enviable and its life a happy one; or whether, emerging from the depths of ignorance, it is dazzled by excess of light. If so, he will rather feel sorry for it; or, if he were inclined to laugh, that would be less ridiculous than to laugh at the soul which has come down from the light.

That is a fair statement.

If this is true, then, we must conclude that education is not what it is said to be by some, who profess to put knowledge into a soul which does not possess it, as if they could put sight into blind eyes. On the contrary, our own account signifies that the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth and the organ to see it with; and that, just as one might have to turn the whole body round in order that the eye should see light instead of darkness, so the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eye can bear to contemplate reality and that supreme splendour which we have called the Good. Hence there may well be an art whose aim would be to effect this very thing, the conversion of the soul, in the readiest way; not to put the power of sight into the soul’s eye, which already has it, but to ensure that, instead of looking in the wrong direction, it is turned the way it ought to be.

Yes, it may well be so.

It looks, then, as though wisdom were different from those ordinary virtues, as they are called, which are not far removed from bodily qualities, in that they can be produced by habituation and exercise in a soul which has not possessed them from the first. Wisdom, it seems, is certainly the virtue of some diviner faculty, which never loses its power, though its use for good or harm depends on the direction towards which it is turned. You must have noticed in dishonest men with a reputation for sagacity the shrewd glance of a narrow intelligence piercing the objects to which it is directed. There is nothing wrong with their power of vision, but it has been forced into the service of evil, so that the keener its sight, the more harm it works.

Quite true.

And yet if the growth of a nature like this had been pruned from earliest childhood, cleared of those clinging overgrowths which come of gluttony and all luxurious pleasure and, like leaden weights charged with affinity to this mortal world, hang upon the soul, bending its vision downwards; if, freed from these, the soul were turned round towards true reality, then this same power in these very men would see the truth as keenly as the objects it is turned to now.

Yes, very likely.

Is it not also likely, or indeed certain after what has been said, that a state can never be properly governed either by the uneducated who know nothing of truth or by men who are allowed to spend all their days in the pursuit of culture? The ignorant have no single mark before their eyes at which they must aim in all the conduct of their own lives and of affairs of state; and the others will not engage in action if they can help it, dreaming that, while still alive, they have been translated to the Islands of the Best.

Quite true.

It is for us, then, as founders of a commonwealth, to bring compulsion to bear on the noblest natures. They must be made to climb the ascent to the vision of Goodness, which we called the highest object of knowledge; and, when they have looked upon it long enough, they must not be allowed, as they now are, to remain on the heights, refusing to come down again to the prisoners or to take any part in their labours and rewards, however much or little these may be worth.
Shall we not be doing them an injustice, if we force on them a worse life than they might have?

You have forgotten again, my friend, that the law is not concerned to make any one class specially happy, but to ensure the welfare of the commonwealth as a whole. By persuasion or constraint it will unite the citizens in harmony, making them share whatever benefits each class can contribute to the common good; and its purpose in forming men of that spirit was not that each should be left to go his own way, but that they should be instrumental in binding the community into one.

True, I had forgotten.

You will see, then, Glaucus, that there will be no real injustice in compelling our philosophers to watch over and care for the other citizens. We can fairly tell them that their compatriots in other states may quite reasonably refuse to collaborate: there they have sprung up, like a self-sown plant, in despite of their country’s institutions; no one has fostered their growth, and they cannot be expected to show gratitude for a care they have never received. ‘But,’ we shall say, ‘it is not so with you. We have brought you into existence for your country’s sake as well as for your own, to be like leaders and king-bees in a hive; you have been better and more thoroughly educated than those others and hence you are more capable of playing your part both as men of thought and as men of action. You must go down, then, each in his turn, to live with the rest and let your eyes grow accustomed to the darkness. You will then see a thousand times better than those who live there always; you will recognize every image for what it is and know what it represents, because you have seen justice, beauty, and goodness in their reality; and so you and we shall find life in our commonwealth no mere dream, as it is in most existing states, where men live fighting one another about shadows and quarrelling for power, as if that were a great prize; whereas in truth government can be at its best and free from dissension only where the destined rulers are least desirous of holding office.’

Quite true.

Then will our pupils refuse to listen and to take their turns at

sharing in the work of the community, though they may live together for most of their time in a purer air?

No; it is a fair demand, and they are fair-minded men. No doubt, unlike any ruler of the present day, they will think of holding power as an unavoidable necessity.

Yes, my friend; for the truth is that you can have a well-governed society only if you can discover for your future rulers a better way of life than being in office; then only will power be in the hands of men who are rich, not in gold, but in the wealth that brings happiness, a good and wise life. All goes wrong when, starved for lack of anything good in their own lives, men turn to public affairs hoping to snatch from thence the happiness they hunger for. They set about fighting for power, and this internecine conflict ruins them and their country. The life of true philosophy is the only one that looks down upon offices of state; and access to power must be confined to men who are not in love with it; otherwise rivals will start fighting. So whom else can you compel to undertake the guardianship of the commonwealth, if not those who, besides understanding best the principles of government, enjoy a nobler life than the politician’s and look for rewards of a different kind?

There is indeed no other choice.

CHAPTER XXVI (vii. 521 c–531 c)

HIGHER EDUCATION. MATHEMATICS

The Pythagorean Archytas, Plato’s contemporary, enumerates as sister subjects (mathemata) geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music. Plato adopts these four, adding solid geometry. These sciences are here described and criticized with respect to their

1 Aristotle, Politics iii. 6: ‘Nowadays men seek to be always in office for the sake of the advantages to be gained from office and from the public revenues.’ Thucydides, iii. 83 (on the revolution at Corinth): ‘The cause of all these things was the pursuit of office for motives of greed and ambition.’