



THE REPUBLIC

by: Plato (*Aristokles*) c. 428 – 348 BCE

Translated by: BENJAMIN JOWETT

*Additions, corrections, and footnotes by Barry F. Vaughan*¹

Books VI and VII (*in part*):
The Divided Line and Allegory of the Cave

Persons of the Dialogue: *Sokrates, Glaukon (Plato's older brother)*

...Still, I must implore you, Sokrates, said Glaukon, not to turn away just as you are reaching the goal; if you will give an explanation of *the* [G]ood as you have already given of

[J]ustice and [T]emperance and the other virtues, we [will] be satisfied.

Yes, my friend, and I [will] be at least equally satisfied, but I cannot help fearing that I [will] fall, and that my indiscreet zeal will bring ridicule upon me. No, [gentlemen], let us not at present ask what is the actual nature of *the* [G]ood, for to reach what is now in my thoughts would be an effort too great for me. But of the child of *the* [G]ood who is most like him, I would [willing] speak, if I could be sure that you wished to hear—otherwise [I will] not.

By all means, he said, tell us about the child, and you [will owe us an explanation] of the parent [later].

⁵⁰⁷I wish, I replied, that I could [give], and you [could] receive, [an] account of the parent [now], and not of the [child] only; however, [take] this [as a down payment], and at the same time [be careful] that I do not render a false account, although I have no *intention* of deceiving you.

Yes, we will take all the care that we can: proceed.

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I have changed spellings of proper names to more accurately match the Greek text as opposed to the more traditional Latinized spellings which were dominant in Jowett's time. I have also changed UK spellings to US spellings where appropriate, as well as made clarifications in translation (noted with brackets) and have added explanatory footnotes.

Yes, I said, but I must first come to an [agreement] with you, and remind you of what I have mentioned in the course of this discussion, and at many other times.

What?

The old story, that there are many beautiful [things] and many good [things], and so of other [objects] which we describe and define; to all of them [the word] 'many' is applied.

True, he said.

And there is an absolute [B]eauty and an absolute [G]ood, and of other things to which the term 'many' is applied there is [one] absolute [reality]; for they may be brought *under a single [I]dea*, which is called the *essence* of each.²

Very true.

The many, as we say, are seen [i.e., perceived] but not known [i.e., comprehended], and the [I]deas are known [i.e., comprehended] but not seen [i.e., perceived].³

Exactly.

And what is the organ with which we see visible things?

Sight, he said.

And with hearing, I said, we hear, and with the other senses perceive the other objects of sense?

True.

But have you [every noticed] that sight is by far the most costly and complex piece of workmanship which the [creator] of the senses ever contrived?

No, I never have, he said.

Then reflect [with me for a moment]; has the ear or voice need of any third or additional nature in order that the one may be able to hear and the other to be heard?

Nothing of the sort.

No, indeed, I replied; and the same is true of most, if not all, the other senses; you would not say that any of them requires such an addition?

² The 'many' are usually referred to by philosophers as "particulars" while the 'one' is called a "universal". The universal is that which all the particulars have in common.

³ The distinction introduced here is between material objects which are grasped with the senses and nonmaterial entities that are grasped with the mind.

Certainly not.

But you [understand] that without the addition of some other nature there is no seeing or being seen?

How do you mean?

Sight being, as I conceive, in the eyes, and he who has eyes wanting to see; color being also present in them, still unless there be a third nature specially adapted to the purpose, the owner of the eyes will see nothing and the colors will be invisible.

Of what nature are you speaking?

[What you call] light, I replied.

True, he said.

Noble, then, is the [connection] which links together sight and visibility, and ⁵⁰⁸great beyond other bonds by no small difference of nature; for light is their bond, and light is no ignoble thing?

No, he said, the [opposite] of ignoble.

And which, I said, of the gods in heaven would you say was the lord of this element? Whose is that light which makes the eye to see perfectly and the visible to appear? You mean the sun, as you and all mankind say. May not the relation of sight to this deity be described as follows?

How?

Neither sight nor the eye in which sight resides is the sun?

No.

Yet of all the organs of sense the eye is the most like the sun?

By far the most like.

And the power which the eye possesses is a sort of [discharge] which [comes] from the sun?

Exactly.

Then the sun is not sight, but the author of sight who is recognized by sight.

True, he said.

And this is he whom I call the child of the [G]ood, whom the [G]ood [produced] in his own likeness, to be in the visible world, in relation to sight and the things of sight, what the [G]ood is

in the intellectual world in relation to [the] mind and the things of [the] mind.

Will you be a little more explicit, he asked?

Why, you know, I said, that the eyes, when a person directs them towards objects on which the light of day is no longer shining, but the moon and stars only, see dimly, and are nearly blind; they seem to have no clearness of vision in them?

Very true.

But when they are directed towards objects on which the sun shines, they see clearly and there is sight in them?

Certainly.

And *the soul is like the eye*: when resting upon that on which [T]ruth and [B]eing shine, the soul perceives and understands and is [glowing] with intelligence; but when turned towards the twilight of [B]ecoming and perishing, then she has opinion only, and goes [about] blinking, and first [holds] one opinion and then another, and seems to have no intelligence?

Just so.

Now, that which imparts truth to the known, and the power of knowing to the knower, is what I would have you term the [I]dea of [G]ood; and this you [should understand as] the *cause* of [knowledge], and of truth in so far as the latter becomes the subject of knowledge. [These are] beautiful, as are both truth and knowledge, you will be right in [believing] this other nature [to be] more ⁵⁰⁹beautiful than either [of the others]; and, as in the previous instance, light and sight may be truly said to be like the sun, and yet not to be the sun, so in this other [case], [knowledge] and truth may be deemed to be *like* the [G]ood, but not the [G]ood itself; the [G]ood has a place of honor [that is] higher.

What a beautiful [thing] that must be, he said, [that] which is the author of [knowledge] and truth, and yet surpasses them in beauty; for you surely cannot mean to say that pleasure is the [G]ood?

God forbid, I replied; but may I ask you to consider the [analogy from] another point of view?

[From] what point of view?

You would say, would you not, that the sun is only the author of visibility in all visible things, [and] of [birth] and nourishment and growth, though he himself is not [born]?

Certainly.

In like manner the [G]ood may be said to be not only the [cause] of knowledge of all known things, but of their *being* and *essence*, and yet the [G]ood is not [an] essence, but far exceeds

essence in dignity and power.

Glaukon said, with a ludicrous earnestness: By the light of heaven, how amazing!

Yes, I said, and [you are responsible for this extravagant analogy]; for you [forced me to talk about my beliefs on the matter].

[Well please continue]; at any rate [tell us] if there is anything more to be said about the [analogy] of the sun.

Yes, I said, there is a great deal more.

Then [don't leave anything out], however [small].

THE DIVIDED LINE

I will do my best, I said; but I'm [afraid] a great deal will have to be [left out].

You have to imagine, that there are two ruling powers, and that one of them is set over the intellectual world, the other over the visible. I do not say heaven, lest you should fancy that I am playing upon the [words] (οὐρανοῦ-*ouranos* – “heaven”, and ορατοῦ-*oratos* – “that which is seen”). May I suppose that you [understand] this distinction [between] the visible (perceivable) and intelligible (conceivable)?

I have.

Now take a line which has been cut into two unequal parts, and divide each of them again in the same proportion, and suppose the two main divisions to [correspond], one to the visible and the other to the intelligible. [T]hen compare the subdivisions in respect of their clearness and [lack] of clearness, and you will find that the first section in the [realm]⁵¹⁰ of the visible consists of images. And by images I mean, in the first place, shadows, and in the second place, reflections in water and in [mirrors] and the like: Do you understand?

Yes, I understand.

Imagine, now, the [next] section, of which [the first] is only the [reflection], to include the [objects] which we see, and everything that grows or is made [i.e., the objects that *cause* the reflections].

[Alright].

Would you not admit that both [parts] of this division have different *degrees of truth*, and that the copy is to the original as the [realm] of opinion is to the [realm] of knowledge?

Most undoubtedly.

Next proceed to consider the manner in which the [realm] of the [conceivable] is to be divided.

In what manner?

[In the following way]: [like the other part we just considered] there are two subdivisions. In the lower the soul uses figures; [such an] enquiry can only be hypothetical, and instead of going upwards to a principle, [it] descends to the other end. In the higher of the two [parts], the soul passes [beyond] hypotheses, and goes up to a principle which is above hypotheses, making no use of figures, as in the former case, but proceed[s] only in and through [I]deas themselves.

I do not quite understand your meaning, he said.

Then I will try again; you will understand me better when I have made some preliminary remarks. You [know] that students of geometry, arithmetic, and [other mathematical] sciences *assume* the [definitions of] **odd** and the **even** [numbers], and [shapes] and three kinds of angles, and [other mathematical axioms]. [T]hese are their hypotheses, which they—and everybody—are supposed to know. Therefore, they do not [bother] to give any [explanation] of them, either to themselves or [anybody else]. [Rather] they begin with [these axioms], and [proceed from them] until they arrive at last, and in a [logical] manner, at their conclusion?

Yes, he said, I know.

And [you also] know that although they use visible [images of points and lines and shapes] and [think] about [those things], they are [not *really*] thinking [about these images], but [about] the [Ideas] which they [represent]. [They are] not [thinking about] the figures which they draw, but of the *absolute square* and the *absolute diameter*, and so on—the [images] which they draw or make, [or] which have shadows and reflections in water, are converted by them into images, but they are really seeking to “see” the things *themselves*, which can only be “seen” with the *eye of the mind*?

⁵¹¹That is true.

[This is what I meant by] *the intelligible*. The soul is compelled to use hypotheses [in search of it]; not ascending to a first principle, because she is unable to rise above the region of hypothesis, but *employing the objects* of which the shadows below are resemblances in their turn, as images, they—in relation to the shadows and reflections of them—have a greater distinctness, and therefore, a higher value.

I understand, he said, that you are talking [about] geometry and the [mathematical] arts.

And when I speak of the other division of the intelligible, you will understand me to speak of that other sort of knowledge which reason herself attains by the power of dialectic, using the hypotheses not as first principles, but *only as hypotheses*. That is to say, as steps and points of departure into a world which is “above” hypotheses, [so] she may soar beyond them to the first principle of the whole. Clinging to this, and then to that which depends on this, by successive steps she descends again without the aid of any sensible object, from ideas, through ideas, and in ideas she ends.

I understand you, he replied; not perfectly, for you seem to me to be describing a task which is really tremendous; but, at any rate, I understand you to say that [K]nowledge and [B]eing, which the science of dialectic contemplates, are clearer than the [conceptions] of the arts—as they are termed—which proceed from hypotheses only. These are also contemplated *by the understanding*, and *not* by the senses. But, because they start from hypotheses and do not ascend to a principle, those who contemplate them appear to you not to exercise the higher [faculty of] **reason** upon them, although when a first principle is added to them they are [grasped] by the [faculty of] reason [alone]. And the habit which is concerned with geometry and the [mathematical] sciences I suppose you would term ‘understanding’ and not ‘reason’, [because it is] intermediate between **opinion** and **knowledge**.

You have quite conceived my meaning, I said; and now, corresponding to these four divisions, let there be four faculties in the soul—*reason* answering to the highest, *understanding* to the second, *faith* (or conviction) to the third, and *perception* of shadows to the last—and let there be a scale of them, and let us suppose that the several faculties have clearness in the same degree that their objects have truth.

I understand, he replied, and [agree], and accept your arrangement.

THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

⁵¹⁴ And now, I said, let me show in [an analogy] how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: [See]! Human beings living in a underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the cave; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see [in front of] them, being prevented by chains from turning [a]round]. Above and behind them is a blazing fire at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised [platform]; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the [front of the platform], like the screen which [puppeteers] have in front of them, over which they show their puppets.

I see.

⁵¹⁵ And do you see, I said, men passing [behind] the wall carrying all sorts of [objects], and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

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

[They are l]ike ourselves, I replied; and they only see 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 [they would also only see the shadows] of the objects which are being carried [on the

platform]?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to [talk] with one another, wouldn't [they] 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 [front]; [wouldn't they believe that] when one of the passers-by spoke [from the platform] that the voice which they heard came from the shadow [in front of them]?

No question, he replied.

To them, I said, the "truth" would [seem to be] nothing [more than] the shadows of the images [on the wall].

That is certain.

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn [a]round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then [imagine] someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to [B]eing and his eye is turned towards *more real existence*, he has a clearer vision; what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them; will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are "truer" than the objects which are now shown to him?

Far truer.

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

True, he now

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the [S]un himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he ⁵¹⁶approaches the light his eyes will be [blinded], 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 [have] 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 the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will *see* the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Certainly.

Last of [all] he will be able to *see* the [S]un, and not mere reflections of [it] in the water, but he will *see* [it] in [its] own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate [the sun] as [it] is [in itself].

Certainly.

He will then proceed to argue that this [i.e., the sun] is He who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and *in a certain way* the **cause** of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to [see]?

Clearly, he said, he would first *see* the [S]un and then *reason about* Him.

And when he remembered his old [life], and the wisdom of the cave and his fellow-prisoners, [don't you] suppose that he would [think himself lucky at] the change, and pity them?

Certainly, he would.

And if they were in the habit of conferring honors among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honors and 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 think as they do, and live after their manner?”

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

⁵¹⁷Imagine once more, I said, such a [person] coming suddenly out of the [S]un to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

To be sure, he said. And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the cave, while his sight was still weak, and before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable) would he not be ridiculous? [The slaves] would say of him that [he went up and came back down] without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if anyone tried to [free] another [slave] and lead him up to the light, let

them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.⁴

No question, he said.

This entire allegory, I said, you may now [add], dear Glaukon, to the previous argument;⁵ the [cave] *is* the world of sight, the light of the fire *is* the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be *the ascent of the soul* into the [conceivable] world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly, God [only] knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the World of Knowledge the idea of [G]ood appears last of all, and is “seen” only with an effort; and, when “seen”, is also inferred to be the [absolute cause] of all things beautiful and right, [cause] of [illumination] and of the lord of light in this visible world, [as well as] the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual [world]. This is the power upon which [the rational person]—[whether acting] in public or private life—must have his eye fixed.

I agree, he said, as far as I am able to understand you.

Moreover, I said, you must not wonder that those who attain to this [divine] vision are unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell; [and this] desire of theirs is very natural, if our allegory may be trusted.

Yes, very natural.

And is there anything surprising [about] one who passes from divine contemplation to the evil state of man, misbehaving himself in a ridiculous manner; if, while his eyes are blinking and before he has become accustomed to the surrounding darkness, he is compelled to fight in courts of law, or in other places, about the images or the shadows of images of justice, and is endeavoring to meet the conceptions of those who have never yet seen absolute [J]justice?

Anything but surprising, he replied.

⁵¹⁸Any one who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from *two causes*, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the mind's eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye; and he who remembers this when he sees any one whose vision is perplexed and weak, will not be too ready to laugh; he will first ask whether that soul of man has come out of the brighter light, and is unable to see because unaccustomed to the dark, or having turned from darkness to the day is dazzled by excess of light. And he will count the one happy in his condition and state of being, and he will pity the other; or, if he have a mind to laugh at the soul which comes from below into the light, there will be more reason in this than in the laugh which greets him who returns from above out of the light

⁴ This is a rather transparent reference to Sokrates himself and his destiny at the hands of the Athenians.

⁵ “The previous argument” refers to the Divided Line. The allegory is a narrative account of the same divisions and capacities elucidated in the metaphor of the line: the shadows of the cave equal reflections on the line, the shadow puppets represent the material objects which cause reflections, the objects outside the cave are the universals, or Ideas, derived via hypothesis, and the Sun represents Being itself which is grasped with unaided reason.

into the cave.⁶

That, he said, is a very just distinction.

But then, if I am right, professors of [learning] must be wrong when they say that they can put knowledge into the soul which was not there before, like sight into blind eyes.⁷

They undoubtedly say this, he replied.

Whereas, our argument shows that the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already; and that just as the eye was unable to turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too the instrument of knowledge can only—by the movement of the whole soul—be turned from the world of *Becoming* into that of *Being*, and learn by degrees to endure the sight of being, and of the brightest and best of being, or in other words, of *the* [G]ood.

Very true.

And [mustn't] there be some [skill] which will effect conversion in the easiest and quickest manner; not implanting the faculty of sight, for that exists already, but has been turned in the wrong direction, and is looking away from the truth?

Yes, he said, such a [skill] may be presumed.

And whereas the other so-called virtues of the soul seem to be akin to bodily qualities, for even when they are not originally innate they can be implanted later by habit and exercise, the virtue of wisdom, more than anything else, contains a [god-like] element which always remains, and by this conversion is rendered useful and profitable; or, on the other hand, ⁵¹⁹hurtful and useless. Did you never observe the narrow intelligence flashing from the keen eye of a clever rogue—how eager he is, how clearly his paltry soul sees the way to his end; he is the reverse of blind, but his keen eyesight is forced into the service of evil, and he is mischievous in proportion to his cleverness.

Very true, he said.

But what if there had been a [curtailing] of such natures in the days of their youth; and they had been severed from those sensual pleasures, such as eating and drinking, which, like weights, were attached to them at their birth, and which drag them down and turn the vision of their souls upon the things that are below—if, I say, they had been released from these impediments and turned in the opposite direction, the very same faculty [i.e., reason] in them would have seen the

⁶ The coming and going between the cave and the light is a reference to the doctrine of reincarnation, or *metempsychosis*. Herodotus attributes this doctrine to Pythagoras, who was an influence on Plato. Pythagoras is supposed to have picked up the idea from Egypt. However, while there is an idea of an afterlife—at least for the aristocracy—in pre-classical Egypt, they do not seem to have an idea of an immortal soul that passes back and forth between different metaphysical realms. If Pythagoras was indeed exposed to this idea in Egypt, it would make far more sense to attribute the idea to Indian traders who may have brought the idea—already long established in India—to Egypt along with goods from their homeland.

⁷ See Meno 81d, Phaedo 70dff.

truth as keenly as they see what their eyes are turned to now.

Very likely.

Yes, I said; and there is another thing which is likely—or rather a necessary inference from what has preceded—that neither the uneducated and uninformed of the truth, nor those who never make an end of their education, will be [competent] rulers of [the] Polis; not the former, because they have no single aim of duty which is the rule of all their actions, private as well as public; nor the latter, because they will not act at all except upon compulsion, fancying that they are already dwelling apart in the islands of the blest.

Very true, he replied.

Then, I said, [our] business [as] founders of the Polis will be to *compel* the best minds to attain that knowledge which we have already shown to be the greatest of all—they must continue to ascend until they arrive at the [G]ood; but when they have ascended and seen enough we must not allow them to do as they do now.

What do you mean?

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

But isn't this unjust, he said; [should] we give them a worse life, when they might have a better [one]?

You have again forgotten, my friend, I said, the intention of the [ruler], who did not aim at making any one class in the Polis happy above the rest; the happiness was to be in the whole Polis, and he held ⁵²⁰the citizens together by persuasion and necessity, making them benefactors of the Polis, and therefore benefactors of one another; to this end he created them, not to please themselves, but to be his instruments in binding up the Polis.

True, he said, I had forgotten.

Observe, Glaukon, that there will be no injustice in compelling our philosophers to have a care [for] others; we [will] explain to them that in other Cities, men of their class are not obliged to share in the toils of politics: and this is reasonable, for they grow up at their own sweet will, and the government would rather not have them. Being self-taught, they cannot be expected to show any gratitude for a culture which they have never received. But we have brought you into the world to be rulers of the hive, kings of yourselves and of the other citizens, and have educated you far better and more perfectly than they have been educated, and you are better able to share in the double duty. Wherefore, each of you, when his turn comes, must go down to the [cave], and get the habit of seeing in the dark. When you have acquired the habit, you will see ten thousand times better than the [other] inhabitants of the cave, and you will know what the several images are, and what they represent, because you have seen the [B]eautiful and [J]ust and

[G]ood in their truth. And thus, our Polis, which is also yours, will be a reality, and not only a dream, and will be administered in a spirit unlike other Cities, in which men fight with one another about shadows and are distracted in the struggle for power, which in their eyes is a great *good*. Whereas the truth is that the Polis in which the rulers are most reluctant to govern is always the best and most quietly governed, and the Polis in which they are most eager [is] the worst.

Quite true, he replied.

And will our pupils, when they hear this, refuse to take their turn at the toils of Polis, when they are allowed to spend the greater part of their time with one another in the heavenly light?

Impossible, he answered; for they are just men, and the commands which we impose upon them are just; there can be no doubt that every one of them will take office as a stern necessity, and not after the fashion of our present rulers of Polis.

Yes, my friend, I said; and there lies the point. You must contrive for ⁵²¹your future rulers another and a better life than that of a ruler, and then you may have a well-ordered Polis; for only in the Polis which offers this, will [those who] rule [be] truly rich, not in silver and gold, but in virtue and wisdom, which are the true blessings of life. Whereas if they go to the administration of public affairs, poor and hungering after their own private advantage, thinking that [afterwards] they are to snatch the chief [G]ood, [there will never be] order; for they will be fighting about office[s], and the civil and domestic broils which thus arise will be the ruin of the rulers and the whole Polis.

Most true, he replied.

And the only life which looks down upon the life of political ambition is that of true philosophy. Do you know of any other?

Indeed, I do not, he said.

And those who govern ought not to be lovers of the task? For, if they are, there will be rival lovers, and they will fight.

No question.

Who then are those whom we [will] compel to be guardians? Surely they will be the men who are wisest about affairs of Polis, and by whom the Polis is best administered, and who at the same time have other honors and another and a better life than that of politics?