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Republic: The Sun, Line and Cave

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Socrates repeatedly claims that the Form of the Good is the most important thing to learn and it is by relation to it that all just and fine things become beneficial [505, 532d]. In lieu of explaining the Form of the Good, he presents three imageries. In this paper, I attempt to analyze these imageries and understand their significance.

Allegory of the Cave and the Analogy of the Line²:

In [517b-c] Plato draws out some parallels between the Cave and previous analogies. Extrapolating this passage, one could arrive at the following relationship:

Cave	Line
Inside the cave	Visible world, Opinion segments
Prisoners confusing reality with shadows and echoes	Eikasia
Freed prisoner looking at the statues in the light of the fire	Pistis
Outside world	Intelligible world, Knowledge segments
Freed prisoner studying things in the light of the Sun	Dianoia
Prisoner confronting the Sun itself	Noesis

However, this raises some difficulties. Firstly, the cave's images don't fit neatly into the four subdivisions of the line. Once outside, the prisoner looks at reflections, then the things themselves, then the nocturnal sky and stars and eventually, the Sun [516]. It is not evident how these experiences can be classified between *dianoia* and *noesis*, as it is not clear which objects

¹ Excluding References

² Please refer attached diagrams of the Cave and the Line

outside represent the Forms. Secondly, the objects in *dianoia* in the Line are the same as in *pistis*, but help the geometer to think about the Forms [510e]. In the cave parable, the reflections outside and the statues inside don't seem to be related in the same way. Lastly, the Line depicts different affections of the soul, while the Cave depicts the ascent of the soul through education. It does not necessarily follow that the ascent needs to be in the same steps as the Line.

Why are the prisoners “like us” and how do they differ from the philosopher?

The prisoners are “like us” because they mistake appearance for reality. They look at shadows on the wall and mistake them to be ‘true reality’. When they talk amongst one another and name different shadows, they are merely referring to the shadows, instead of the objects behind them [515b]. Similarly, when we see a book and call it as such, we are referring to the particular at hand, instead of realizing the Form of the Book. The prisoners can confront a ‘truer’ reality by breaking their shackles and turning towards the light. Similarly, we can elevate our understanding by studying the world through the Forms, like the philosopher.

Difference between the geometer’s method and the dialectician’s and the unhypothetical first principle of everything.

The methods of the geometer and the dialectician offer access to the intelligible as opposed to the perceptible. However, they differ in their use and attitude towards hypotheses. A geometer works with visible figures such as squares and diagonals, but thinks about the Square Itself and Diagonal Itself which cannot be perceived sensually. Using these figures as hypotheses and first principles, the geometer reaches conclusions about their Forms [510b]. However, the hypotheses are left unevaluated. This renders the clarity of the conclusions to be only as clear as the hypotheses.

The dialectician also begins with hypotheses, but merely treats them as stepping-stones for initial progress. He will subject his own hypotheses to dialectical scrutiny [511b-c] and will eventually reach the unhypothetical first principle of everything, which is the Form of the Good, as it is the cause of knowledge of all objects as well as their cause itself. Upon knowing this first principle, the dialectician can descend on conclusions, even geometric ones, solely using the Forms.

At what stage in the ascent is Euthyphro?

Euthyphro appears to be in the lowest stage - *eikasia* or imaging. He claims to know the true meaning of piety [5]; however, his attempts at defining it - prosecuting one's father [5e], what's god-loved [7] etc. - seem muddled at best. They fall apart quickly under dialectic scrutiny. Eventually, his answers reach a state of confusion, like the statues of Daedalus [11b]. This reminds one of the prisoner who glimpses the fire after breaking his shackles. By the end of the dialogue, it is clear that Euthyphro's understanding of piety rests on conjectures from mythological tales and cultural mores, which are like shadows or images of the true piety.

At what stage in the ascent are those who give “unsafe answers” in the Phaedo?

People who give “unsafe answers” try to explain the world solely through materialistic ways [96-101]. I believe that such people fall in the *pistes* or belief segment of the line as their analyses requires the actual examination of the objects themselves. However, relying solely on sensory perceptions renders such answers unacceptable on several counts:

- The same answer can account for opposite phenomena - one can be taller or shorter by a head.
- The same phenomena can be explained using multiple answers - the ‘being’ of two can be achieved through addition and division.
- The answers might hold for one particular observation, but not for others.

At what stage in the ascent is Socrates of the Apology?

In the Apology, Socrates repeatedly asserts that his sole claim to wisdom was knowing that he knew nothing, while others claimed to know many fine things without knowing anything [21d, 22d]. The people of Athens are like the prisoners in the cave, in the stage of *eikasia*. They confidently mistake the shadows in front of them for true reality. Socrates is also a prisoner trapped in the cave, but he has realized that the shadows are not true reality. Like a prisoner struggling with his shackles to turn towards the light, Socrates of the Apology is beginning to embark on the philosophical journey.

What are the Sun, Line and Cave supposed to represent?

The Analogy of the Sun introduces a broad division between the visible and intelligible worlds. The Sun causes, nurtures and governs the visible world [509b]. It is the source of light which bestows eyes with the power to see and things with the power to be seen. The Form of the Good is to the intelligible world, as the Sun is to the visible [508c].

The Line extends the analogy of the Sun by laying the visible and intelligible worlds on an unequally divided line. Its four segments represent four affections of the *psuche* (soul). The lower two represent the visible world and constitute Opinions. The upper two segments represent the intelligible world and constitute Knowledge. The segments partake in increasing levels of reality and truth [511e].

The Allegory of the Cave represents the effect of education on one's nature. It shows that the ability to learn through reason is present in every soul [518d] and the purpose of education is to re-orient the soul towards subjects that will stir this ability to learn towards the Good.

Evaluate Plato's account. Do you think what Plato says is correct?

The analogies suggest that Plato's thoughts on epistemology, ontology and morality are closely intertwined with one another.

Let's consider the Line, in which Socrates talks about two different, but related proportions. The first proportion consists of:

1. Shadows, reflections (AD)
2. Physical originals (DC)
3. Realm of opinions (AC)
4. Realm of knowledge (CB)

Socrates says that the shadows are to their originals as opinions are to knowledge, i.e. AD:DC::AC:CB [510b]. This presents an ontological view that truth or lack of, is the basis for classifying reality. Shadows are less true than their originals as their existence depends on originals. This division of reality is said to be in the same proportion as the division of the epistemic states of opinion and understanding. The second proportion consists of:

1. *Eikasia* (AD)
2. *Pistis* (DC)

3. *Dianoia* (CE)

4. *Noesis* (EB)

This epistemological proportion, AD:DC::CE:EB, represents various affections of the soul. This is the basis of the educational program for the philosopher-kings. This also tells us that Plato holds a rigorous notion of knowledge - as infallible and permanent - and denies the possibility of knowledge for sensory things subject to endless change [515b]. Hence, knowledge about reality argues for the presence of the permanent Forms as the basis of reality. This suggests that Plato's metaphysical views are retrofitted from his epistemology. One concern I have with this idea is explaining permanent relationships between non-permanent objects. For example, the knowledge, that oil and water don't mix, can be obtained solely by empirical means without invoking the Forms. Physical sciences are constructed through such methods.

Through the preeminent status of the Form of the Good, Plato expresses his view of reality as inherently 'good'. And since Knowledge can only be about the Forms, it follows that it is about the best of each thing. Particulars are said to be inferior and partake in the Form for their being. It is not clear whether 'bad' particulars are the result of an insufficient partaking in the 'good' Form or due to a sufficient partaking in the 'bad' Form. For example, is a misshapen wooden thing bad because it does not sufficiently partake in the Form of the Table or because it partakes sufficiently in the Form of the Misshapen Wooden Thing?

Plato's Forms raise several questions, including by Plato himself in the Parmenides, but one cannot deny the elegance of his attempt to solve diverse questions in metaphysics, epistemology and ethics through a singular theory.

References:

1. Cohen, S. Marc, Patricia Curd, and Charles David Chanel Reeve, eds. Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: from Thales to Aristotle: from Thales to Aristotle. Hackett Publishing, 2011.
2. Silverman, Allan, "Plato's Middle Period Metaphysics and Epistemology", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/plato-metaphysics/>>.