

## **Republic 7**

Outline by John Protevi / Permission to reproduce granted for academic use

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Book 7 begins with the third and cumulative image, **the cave**. It will incorporate the ontological and epistemological doctrines of the first two images and include political and educational dimensions. With these last two, it brings into play all three levels of the *Republic*, that is, *logos*, *mythos*, and *ergon*.

First, we should note the **structure** of the cave (514a-15a; 516a-c) as a sort of underground "theater." Starting from the bottom, we see 1) the screen; 2) the chained prisoners; 3) the "projection room" with its barrier, puppets, puppet masters, and fire for light source; 4) the path out of the cave; 5) the reflecting pool outside; 6) the objects outside; 7) the sun as outside light source. 1-3 correspond to the lower section of the divided line; 4 to education; 5-7 to the upper section. More on this later.

Second, we see the **political** implications of the cave as an allegory for the "unexamined life" (515a-c). Here we see the mythic or image level of the text. Remember the Piraeus as "going down" into slums or even into Hades. Living chained in the cave looking at shadows on the wall is like living with unexamined cultural presuppositions. The people on puppet master duty are the political leaders, manipulating the people by appealing to cultural myths. If this were the just city, the puppets would be "noble lies" and the puppet masters would be philosopher-kings on **political duty**; if an unjust city, then the puppets would be stereotypes, prejudices, etc. and the puppet masters professional politicians, working for tyrants, etc. Plato includes two returns to the city for the philosophically initiated. The first is motivated by pity and ends in disaster (516c-17a), as the enthusiastic neophyte tries to straightforwardly de-mystify the world for his fellow prisoners; remember the fate of Socrates. The second is motivated by fear of being governed by those worse (519d-21b); it is said to be done under compulsion and as a duty. What would the philosopher-kings rather be doing? Being just plain philosophers, living up above all the time.

Third, we see the **epistemological/ontological** meaning of the cave (517b-c). Here the philosopher-kings are on **research duty** as it were. They have to make sure their political judgments are attuned with the structure of the universe. Thus up above, the sun represents the form of the Good; being able to understand its role in the intelligible order ensures that they have an understanding of the whole and the polis as part of the whole, each obeying the principle of unity. The upper world is the world seen through teleological explanation, not just the mechanical explanation (=guessing what shadow comes next available to the cave prisoners). Hence we can maintain a one-world interpretation: the "upper world" is just our world seen philosophically rather than on the basis of everyday unquestioned cultural presuppositions. However, remember that to what extent human philosophers could ever "see the sun in its own place and be able to contemplate it" (516b) is controversial, given all we have said about *nous* and *logos*, insight and explanation, parallel and serial, synchronic and diachronic, etc. Perhaps all Plato means is understand the role of the Good in the construction of philosophical/teleological explanations as necessary assumption of whole allowing convergence of partial explanations.

Fourth, we see the **educational** meaning of the cave. Here we see the *ergon* level: Socrates must educate Glaucon in this way, guide him out of the Piraeus, Hades, the cave. The philosopher-kings must pick out likely candidates and free them from their chains, guiding them up the path to the "outside world" of teleological understanding. Once in the other world they can see their former chains as chains: their former cultural presuppositions are no longer transparent, but have become noticeable. Only living in a "different world," following the path of education, allows this de-mystification. Now what is this type of education? It cannot be information transfer (518b), for that would just allow more accurate prediction of the next shadow, more accurate mechanical explanation. Rather it is turning the soul (518c) in the direction of the Good, allowing people to see the world in terms of teleological explanation. Some of Plato's most "democratic" statements come here, e.g., "the capacity to learn and the organ with which to do so are present in every person's soul" (518c). The learning here is noetic, by *nous*. This is the "divine part" of the soul: insight comes in mysterious

flashes, as if from above. Given oppositional logic, the human, mortal transparent body faded into the background seems not to have anything to do with the rare flashes of insight that sometimes come. They must be something other, something divine.

This brings us to the last, **forgotten** part of the cave image, forgotten that is, by Plato's discussion, but present in his description if we just shift our focus. What's all this about transcending the earth and caves, anyway? Some have seen the underground cave that is to be left behind by the upward moving divine element as signifying the feminine element, the body/labor base of male transcendence that is supposed to fade into the background to allow thought after having nurtured the body of the philosopher. In other words, yet another female sacrifice to allow male action. Remember Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigeneia, or the Olympians conquering the Titans, or Apollo and Athena domesticating the Furies? Now of course to the extent that in the just city women and the children of workers are supposed to have equal chance of becoming transcending philosopher-kings this criticism would lose its gender and class implications. It would of course retain them in any city that claims to have philosophy but falls short of Plato's rigorous criteria of justice.