

Life and the Search for Philosophical Knowledge

Plato, *Republic*

Systematic Western philosophy began in Greece, most influentially with the engagingly profound dialogues written by Plato (c.428–c.348 BC). They are centered upon his teacher Socrates (469–399 BC) being constructively puzzled by ... well, almost anything about which others within his hearing claim *not* to be puzzled. When Socrates wanders around Athens, he meets many people who are eager to share with him their confidently held views as to what is ethically right, what is religiously proper, what is natural, what is socially just, what is beauty, what is knowledge, what is real, etc. Socrates listens – before asking for more details, requesting help in understanding, suggesting alternative formulations and ideas. Time and again, he enters into other people’s thoughts, earnestly wondering, seeking clarity on one point after another as he professes slowness of wit and paucity of comprehension. (He was inquiring with what philosophers now call the *Socratic method* of inquiry used by many teachers: questions guiding gently and adaptively, sometimes professing a lack of understanding even when the questioner understands better than the audience does.)

What happens as a result of Socrates’ questioning? Subtle thinking occurs; new possibilities emerge; and Socrates’ companions tend to acquire feelings of uncertainty and frustration. Thanks to Plato’s writing, we are privileged to be able to immerse ourselves in this fascinating process, this way of improving our powers of reflection. That Socratic form of thinking has contributed powerfully to the subsequent centuries of philosophy.

Plato, *Republic*, 475b–480, 514a–520d (excerpts). From *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968). Copyright © 1991 Allan Bloom. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group.

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But philosophy has also been influenced by some of Socrates' *themes*. We see this in our extract from the *Republic*, one of Plato's most famous dialogues. Two themes are especially important in this reading. (1) Philosophy seeks *knowledge*. (2) Not just any knowledge, though; it should be knowledge of a reality worth knowing, indeed a reality deeply worth knowing. With philosophy spurring on our hearts and minds, we should strive to know the true nature of *goodness* ("the Good," Socrates names it). We should settle for nothing less than that ultimate prize. And we should hold in mind that what *seems* good and ultimately valuable might not be. We must learn the difference between settling for an appearance of something ultimately good (e.g. something really only transiently or superficially valuable) and finding something that really is fundamentally good.

Plato brings alive that human mission with what has become one of philosophy's lasting images – a picture of how we are if we do *not* succeed in knowing true goodness. This is Plato's celebrated image of *the cave*. It is a metaphor for how too many of us do, yet how none of us should, live our lives – by being trapped within a cave of shadows and human lighting, settling for mere appearances of ultimate value. Even when not held back by poverty and oppression, people might be trapped in the way envisioned by Socrates – constricted by their lack of philosophical imagination about, and genuine insight into, their real underlying natures and achievements. Can we escape this? Suitable knowledge is needed. Philosophy is the means.

Book V

[...]

[Socrates:] "Then affirm this or deny it: when we say a man is a desirer of something, will we assert that he desires all of that form, or one part of it and not another?"

"All," he [Glaucón] said.

"Won't we also then assert that the philosopher is a desirer of wisdom, not of one part and not another, but of all of it?"

"True."

"We'll deny, therefore, that the one who's finicky about his learning, especially when he's young and doesn't yet have an account of what's useful and not, is a lover of learning or a philosopher, just as we say that the man who's finicky about his food isn't hungry, doesn't desire food, and isn't a lover of food but a bad eater."

"And we'll be right in denying it."

"But the one who is willing to taste every kind of learning with gusto, and who approaches learning with delight, and is insatiable, we shall justly assert to be a philosopher, won't we?"

And Glaucón said, "Then you'll have many strange ones. For all the lovers of sights are in my opinion what they are because they enjoy learning; and the lovers of hearing would be some of the strangest to include among philosophers, those who would never be willing to go

voluntarily to a discussion and such occupations but who – just as though they had hired out their ears for hearing – run around to every chorus at the Dionysia, missing none in the cities or the villages. Will we say that all these men and other learners of such things and the petty arts are philosophers?”

“Not at all,” I said, “but they are like philosophers.”

“Who do you say are the true ones?” he said.

“The lovers of the sight of the truth,” I said.

“And that’s right,” he said. “But how do you mean it?”

[...]

“Well, now,” I said, “this is how I separate them out. On one side I put those of whom you were just speaking, the lovers of sights, the lovers of arts, and the practical men; on the other, those whom the argument concerns, whom alone one could rightly call philosophers.”

“How do you mean?” he said.

“The lovers of hearing and the lovers of sights, on the one hand,” I said, “surely delight in fair sounds and colors and shapes and all that craft makes from such things, but their thought is unable to see and delight in the nature of the fair itself.”

“That,” he said, “is certainly so.”

“Wouldn’t, on the other hand, those who are able to approach the fair itself and see it by itself be rare?”

“Indeed they would.”

“Is the man who holds that there are fair things but doesn’t hold that there is beauty itself and who, if someone leads him to the knowledge of it, isn’t able to follow – is he, in your opinion, living in a dream or is he awake? Consider it. Doesn’t dreaming, whether one is asleep or awake, consist in believing a likeness of something to be not a likeness, but rather the thing itself to which it is like?”

“I, at least,” he said, “would say that a man who does that dreams.”

“And what about the man who, contrary to this, believes that there is something fair itself and is able to catch sight both of it and of what participates in it, and doesn’t believe that what participates is it itself, nor that it itself is what participates – is he, in your opinion, living in a dream or is he awake?”

“He’s quite awake,” he said.

“Wouldn’t we be right in saying that this man’s thought, because he knows, is knowledge, while the other’s is opinion because he opines?”

“Most certainly.”

[...]

“Since knowledge depended on what *is* and ignorance necessarily on what *is not*, mustn’t we also seek something between ignorance and knowledge that depends on that which is in between, if there is in fact any such thing?”

“Most certainly.”

“Do we say opinion is something?”

“Of course.”

“A power different from knowledge or the same?”

“Different.”

“Then opinion is dependent on one thing and knowledge on another, each according to its own power.”

“That’s so.”

“Doesn’t knowledge naturally depend on what *is*, to know of what *is* that it is and how it is? However, in my opinion, it’s necessary to make this distinction first.”

“What distinction?”

“We will assert that powers are a certain class of beings by means of which we are capable of what we are capable, and also everything else is capable of whatever it is capable. For example, I say sight and hearing are powers, if perchance you understand the form of which I wish to speak.”

“I do understand,” he said.

“Now listen to how they look to me. In a power I see no color or shape or anything of the sort such as I see in many other things to which I look when I distinguish one thing from another for myself. With a power I look only to this – on what it depends and what it accomplishes; and it is on this basis that I come to call each of the powers a power; and that which depends on the same thing and accomplishes the same thing, I call the same power, and that which depends on something else and accomplishes something else, I call a different power. What about you? What do you do?”

“The same,” he said.

“Now, you best of men, come back here to knowledge again. Do you say it’s some kind of power, or in what class do you put it?”

“In this one,” he said, “as the most vigorous of all powers.”

“And what about opinion? Is it among the powers, or shall we refer it to some other form?”

“Not at all,” he said. “For that by which we are capable of opining is nothing other than opinion.”

“But just a little while ago you agreed that knowledge and opinion are not the same.”

“How,” he said, “could any intelligent man count that which doesn’t make mistakes the same as that which does?”

“Fine,” I said, “and we plainly agree that opinion is different from knowledge.”

“Yes, it is different.”

“Since each is capable of something different, are they, therefore, naturally dependent on different things?”

“Necessarily.”

“Knowledge is presumably dependent on what *is*, to know of what *is* that it *is* and how it is?”

“Yes.”

“While opinion, we say, opines.”

“Yes.”

“The same thing that knowledge knows? And will the knowable and the opinable be the same? Or is that impossible?”

“On the basis of what’s been agreed to, it’s impossible,” he said. “If different powers are naturally dependent on different things and both are powers – opinion and knowledge – and each is, as we say, different, then on this basis it’s not admissible that the knowable and the opinable be the same.”

“If what *is*, is knowable, then wouldn’t something other than that which *is* be opinable?”

“Yes, it would be something other.”

“Then does it opine what *is not*? Or is it also impossible to opine what *is not*? Think about it. Doesn’t the man who opines refer his opinion to something? Or is it possible to opine, but to opine nothing?”

“No, it’s impossible.”

“The man who opines, opines some one thing?”

“Yes.”

“But further, that which *is not* could not with any correctness be addressed as some one thing but rather nothing at all.”

“Certainly.”

“To that which *is not*, we were compelled to assign ignorance, and to that which *is*, knowledge.”

“Right,” he said.

“Opinion, therefore, opines neither that which *is* nor that which *is not*.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Opinion, therefore, would be neither ignorance nor knowledge?”

“It doesn’t seem so.”

“Is it, then, beyond these, surpassing either knowledge in clarity or ignorance in obscurity?”

“No, it is neither.”

“Does opinion,” I said, “look darker than knowledge to you and brighter than ignorance?”

“Very much so,” he said.

“And does it lie within the limits set by these two?”

“Yes.”

“Opinion, therefore, would be between the two.”

“That’s entirely certain.”

“Weren’t we saying before that if something should come to light as what *is* and what *is not* at the same time, it lies between that which purely and simply *is* and that which in every way *is not*, and that neither knowledge nor ignorance will depend on it, but that which in its turn comes to light between ignorance and knowledge?”

“Right.”

“And now it is just that which we call opinion that has come to light between them.”

“Yes, that is what has come to light.”

“Hence, as it seems, it would remain for us to find what participates in both – in *to be* and *not to be* – and could not correctly be addressed as either purely and simply, so that, if it comes to light, we can justly address it as the opinable, thus assigning the extremes to the extremes and that which is in between to that which is in between. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Now, with this taken for granted, let him tell me, I shall say, and let him answer – that good man who doesn’t believe that there is anything fair in itself and an *idea* of the beautiful itself, which always stays the same in all respects, but does hold that there are many fair things, this lover of sights who can in no way endure it if anyone asserts the fair is one and the just is one and so on with the rest. ‘Now, of these many fair things, you best of men,’ we’ll say, ‘is there any that won’t also look ugly? And of the just, any that won’t look unjust? And of the holy, any that won’t look unholy?’ ”

“No,” he said, “but it’s necessary that they look somehow both fair and ugly, and so it is with all the others you ask about.”

“And what about the many doubles? Do they look any less half than double?”

“No.”

“And, then, the things that we would assert to be big and little, light and heavy – will they be addressed by these names any more than by the opposites of these names?”

“No,” he said, “each will always have something of both.”

“Then is each of the several manys what one asserts it to be any more than it is not what one asserts it to be?”

“They are like the ambiguous jokes at feasts,” he said, “and the children’s riddle about the eunuch, about his hitting the bat – with what and on what he struck it. For the manys are also ambiguous, and it’s not possible to think of them fixedly as either being or not being, or as both or neither.”

“Can you do anything with them?” I said. “Or could you find a finer place to put them than between being and not to be? For presumably nothing darker than not-being will come to light so that something could *not be* more than it; and nothing brighter than being will come to light so that something could *be* more than it.”

“Very true,” he said.

“Then we have found, as it seems, that the many beliefs of the many about what’s fair and about the other things roll around somewhere between not-being and being purely and simply.”

“Yes, we have found that.”

“And we agreed beforehand that, if any such thing should come to light, it must be called opinable but not knowable, the wanderer between, seized by the power between.”

“Yes, we did agree.”

“And, as for those who look at many fair things but don’t see the fair itself and aren’t even able to follow another who leads them to it, and many just things but not justice itself, and so on with all the rest, we’ll assert that they opine all these things but know nothing of what they opine.”

“Necessarily,” he said.

“And what about those who look at each thing itself – at the things that are always the same in all respects? Won’t we say that they know and don’t opine?”

“That too is necessary.”

“Won’t we assert that these men delight in and love that on which knowledge depends, and the others that on which opinion depends? Or don’t we remember that we were saying that they love and look at fair sounds and colors and such things but can’t even endure the fact that the fair itself is something?”

“Yes, we do remember.”

“So, will we strike a false note in calling them lovers of opinion rather than lovers of wisdom? And will they be very angry with us if we speak this way?”

“No,” he said, “that is, if they are persuaded by me. For it’s not lawful to be harsh with what’s true.”

“Must we, therefore, call philosophers rather than lovers of opinion those who delight in each thing that is itself?”

“That’s entirely certain.”

Book VII

“Next, then,” I [Socrates] said, “make an image of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind. See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets.”

“I see,” he [Glaucón] said.

“Then also see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material; as is to be expected, some of the carriers utter sounds while others are silent.”

“It’s a strange image,” he said, “and strange prisoners you’re telling of.”

“They’re like us,” I said. “For in the first place, do you suppose such men would have seen anything of themselves and one another other than the shadows cast by the fire on the side of the cave facing them?”

“How could they,” he said, “if they had been compelled to keep their heads motionless throughout life?”

“And what about the things that are carried by? Isn’t it the same with them?”

“Of course.”

“If they were able to discuss things with one another, don’t you believe they would hold that they are naming these things going by before them that they see?”

“Necessarily.”

“And what if the prison also had an echo from the side facing them? Whenever one of the men passing by happens to utter a sound, do you suppose they would believe that anything other than the passing shadow was uttering the sound?”

“No, by Zeus,” he said. “I don’t.”

“Then most certainly,” I said, “such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things.”

“Most necessarily,” he said.

“Now consider,” I said, “what their release and healing from bonds and folly would be like if something of this sort were by nature to happen to them. Take a man who is released and suddenly compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light; and who, moreover, in doing all this is in pain and, because he is dazzled, is unable to make out those things whose shadows he saw before. What do you suppose he’d say if someone were to tell him that before he saw silly nothings, while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what *is* and more turned toward beings, he sees more correctly; and, in particular, showing him each of the things that pass by, were to compel the man to answer his questions about what they are? Don’t you suppose he’d be at a loss and believe that what was seen before is truer than what is now shown?”

“Yes,” he said, “by far.”

“And, if he compelled him to look at the light itself, would his eyes hurt and would he flee, turning away to those things that he is able to make out and hold them to be really clearer than what is being shown?”

“So he would,” he said.

“And if,” I said, “someone dragged him away from there by force along the rough, steep, upward way and didn’t let him go before he had dragged him out into the light of the sun, wouldn’t he be distressed and annoyed at being so dragged? And when he came to the light, wouldn’t he have his eyes full of its beam and be unable to see even one of the things now said to be true?”

“No, he wouldn’t,” he said, “at least not right away.”

“Then I suppose he’d have to get accustomed, if he were going to see what’s up above. At first he’d most easily make out the shadows; and after that the phantoms of the human beings and the other things in water; and, later, the things themselves. And from there he could turn to beholding the things in heaven and heaven itself, more easily at night – looking at the light of the stars and the moon – than by day – looking at the sun and sunlight.”

“Of course.”

“Then finally I suppose he would be able to make out the sun – not its appearances in water or some alien place, but the sun itself by itself in its own region – and see what it’s like.”

“Necessarily,” he said.

“And after that he would already be in a position to conclude about it that this is the source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing.”

“It’s plain,” he said, “that this would be his next step.”

“What then? When he recalled his first home and the wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners in that time, don’t you suppose he would consider himself happy for the change and pity the others?”

“Quite so.”

“And if in that time there were among them any honors, praises, and prizes for the man who is sharpest at making out the things that go by, and most remembers which of them are accustomed to pass before, which after, and which at the same time as others, and who is thereby most able to divine what is going to come, in your opinion would he be desirous of them and envy those who are honored and hold power among these men? Or, rather, would he be affected as Homer says and want very much ‘to be on the soil, a serf to another man, to a portionless man,’ and to undergo anything whatsoever rather than to opine those things and live that way?”

“Yes,” he said, “I suppose he would prefer to undergo everything rather than live that way.”

“Now reflect on this too,” I said. “If such a man were to come down again and sit in the same seat, on coming suddenly from the sun wouldn’t his eyes get infected with darkness?”

“Very much so,” he said.

“And if he once more had to compete with those perpetual prisoners in forming judgments about those shadows while his vision was still dim, before his eyes had recovered, and if the time needed for getting accustomed were not at all short, wouldn’t he be the source of laughter, and wouldn’t it be said of him that he went up and came back with his eyes corrupted, and that it’s not even worth trying to go up? And if they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up, wouldn’t they kill him?”

“No doubt about it,” he said.

“Well, then, my dear Glaucon,” I said, “this image as a whole must be connected with what was said before. Liken the domain revealed through sight to the prison home, and the light of the fire in it to the sun’s power; and, in applying the going up and the seeing of what’s above to the soul’s journey up to the intelligible place, you’ll not mistake my expectation, since you desire to hear it. A god doubtless knows if it happens to be true. At all events, this is the way the phenomena look to me: in the knowable the last thing to be seen, and that with considerable effort, is the *idea* of the good; but once seen, it must be concluded that this is in fact the cause of all that is right and fair in everything – in the visible it gave birth to light and its sovereign; in the intelligible, itself sovereign, it provided truth and intelligence – and that the man who is going to act prudently in private or in public must see it.”

“I, too, join you in supposing that,” he said, “at least in the way I can.”

“Come, then,” I said, “and join me in supposing this, too, and don’t be surprised that the men who get to that point aren’t willing to mind the business of human beings, but rather that their souls are always eager to spend their time above. Surely that’s likely, if indeed this, too, follows the image of which I told before.”

“Of course it’s likely,” he said.

“And what about this? Do you suppose it is anything surprising,” I said, “if a man, come from acts of divine contemplation to the human things, is graceless and looks quite ridiculous when – with his sight still dim and before he has gotten sufficiently accustomed to the surrounding darkness – he is compelled in courts or elsewhere to contest about the shadows of the just or the representations of which they are the shadows, and to dispute about the way these things are understood by men who have never seen justice itself?”

“It’s not at all surprising,” he said.

“But if a man were intelligent,” I said, “he would remember that there are two kinds of disturbances of the eyes, stemming from two sources – when they have been transferred from light to darkness and when they have been transferred from darkness to light. And if he held that these same things happen to a soul too, whenever he saw one that is confused and unable to make anything out, he wouldn’t laugh without reasoning but would go on to consider whether, come from a brighter life, it is in darkness for want of being accustomed, or whether, going from greater lack of learning to greater brightness, it is dazzled by the greater brilliance. And then he would deem the first soul happy for its condition and its life, while he would pity the second. And, if he wanted to laugh at the second soul, his laughing in this case would make him less ridiculous himself than would his laughing at the soul which has come from above out of the light.”

“What you say is quite sensible,” he said.

“Then, if this is true,” I said, “we must hold the following about these things: education is not what the professions of certain men assert it to be. They presumably assert that they put into the soul knowledge that isn’t in it, as though they were putting sight into blind eyes.”

“Yes,” he said, “they do indeed assert that.”

“But the present argument, on the other hand,” I said, “indicates that this power is in the soul of each, and that the instrument with which each learns – just as an eye is not able to turn toward the light from the dark without the whole body – must be turned around from that which *is coming into being* together with the whole soul until it is able to endure looking at that which *is* and the brightest part of that which *is*. And we affirm that this is the good, don’t we?”

“Yes.”

“There would, therefore,” I said, “be an art of this turning around, concerned with the way in which this power can most easily and efficiently be turned around, not an art of producing sight in it. Rather, this art takes as given that sight is there, but not rightly turned nor looking at what it ought to look at, and accomplishes this object.”

“So it seems,” he said.

“Therefore, the other virtues of a soul, as they are called, are probably somewhat close to those of the body. For they are really not there beforehand and are later produced by habits and exercises, while the virtue of exercising prudence is more than anything somehow more divine, it seems; it never loses its power, but according to the way it is turned, it becomes useful and helpful or, again, useless and harmful. Or haven’t you yet reflected about the men who are said to be vicious but wise, how shrewdly their petty soul sees and how sharply it distinguishes those things toward which it is turned, showing that it doesn’t have poor vision although it is compelled to serve vice; so that the sharper it sees, the more evil it accomplishes?”

“Most certainly,” he said.

“However,” I said, “if this part of such a nature were trimmed in earliest childhood and its ties of kinship with becoming were cut off – like leaden weights, which eating and such pleasures as well as their refinements naturally attach to the soul and turn its vision downward – if, I say, it were rid of them and turned around toward the true things, this same part of the same human beings would also see them most sharply, just as it does those things toward which it now is turned.”

“It’s likely,” he said.

“And what about this? Isn’t it likely,” I said, “and necessary, as a consequence of what was said before, that those who are without education and experience of truth would never be adequate stewards of a city, nor would those who have been allowed to spend their time in education continuously to the end – the former because they don’t have any single goal in life at which they must aim in doing everything they do in private or in public, the latter because they won’t be willing to act, believing they have emigrated to a colony on the Isles of the Blessed while they are still alive?”

“True,” he said.

“Then our job as founders,” I said, “is to compel the best natures to go to the study which we were saying before is the greatest, to see the good and to go up that ascent; and, when they have gone up and seen sufficiently, not to permit them what is now permitted.”

“What’s that?”

“To remain there,” I said, “and not be willing to go down again among those prisoners or share their labors and honors, whether they be slighter or more serious.”

“What?” he said. “Are we to do them an injustice, and make them live a worse life when a better is possible for them?”

“My friend, you have again forgotten,” I said, “that it’s not the concern of law that any one class in the city fare exceptionally well, but it contrives to bring this about for the whole city, harmonizing the citizens by persuasion and compulsion, making them share with one another the benefit that each class is able to bring to the commonwealth. And it produces such men in the city not in order to let them turn whichever way each wants, but in order that it may use them in binding the city together.”

“That’s true,” he said. “I did forget.”

“Well, then, Glaucon,” I said, “consider that we won’t be doing injustice to the philosophers who come to be among us, but rather that we will say just things to them while compelling them besides to care for and guard the others. We’ll say that when such men come to be in the other cities it is fitting for them not to participate in the labors of those cities. For they grow up spontaneously against the will of the regime in each; and a nature that grows by itself and doesn’t owe its rearing to anyone has justice on its side when it is not eager to pay off the price of rearing to anyone. ‘But you we have begotten for yourselves and for the rest of the city like leaders and kings in hives; you have been better and more perfectly educated and are more able to participate in both lives. So you must go down, each in his turn, into the common dwelling of the others and get habituated along with them to seeing the dark things. And, in getting habituated to it, you will see ten thousand times better than the men there, and you’ll know what each of the phantoms is, and of what it is a phantom, because you have seen the truth about fair, just, and good things. And thus, the city will be governed by us and by you in a state of waking, not in a dream as the many cities nowadays are governed by men who fight over shadows with one another and form factions for the sake of ruling, as though it were some great good. But the truth is surely this: that city in which those who are going to rule are least eager to rule is necessarily governed in the way that is best and freest from faction, while the one that gets the opposite kind of rulers is governed in the opposite way.’ ”

“Most certainly,” he said.