

# Class Eleven - The Republic (book seven and bit of book eight)

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 The Allegory of the Cave

- **The Basic Image:** Imagine a group of prisoners. They've been in the cave since childhood—they know nothing outside of life in the cave. They are bound, hands, legs, and, importantly, necks to keep their heads from turning around. They're all looking in the same direction, their eyes gazed upon the cavern wall in front of them. Upon this wall, shadows are cast. A fire is burning behind them. Puppeteers are yielding puppets in front of the fire that are casting the shadows on the wall. All they ever know, and, indeed, all they can ever imagine is the shadows.
- **The Metaphor:** The shadows represent the things in the *sensible world* whereas the various perceptible things responsible for the shadows represent the things *intelligible world*, namely, the forms.
  - Recall, on Plato's divided line, the *images* (of which shadows are included) are less real than the *perceptible things* just as the *perceptible things* are less real than the *forms*.
  - On Plato's account, the vast majority of people, operating within the realm the visible, only have *opinions*; they don't really have *knowledge*, grasping the forms, as the philosopher does. That is, most people are in the cave, and it is the rare few who leave.
- **The Release and Return to the Cave**
  - Upon release, a prisoner would be in a daze, unable to really see the things whose shadows they were seeing before.
  - They would be reluctant to believe that these things are more real than the shadows.
  - Upon returning to the cave, his eyes would also need to adjust, and so wouldn't be able to see the shadows clearly.
    - \* The prisoners would think leaving the cave has destroyed their eyesight, and they'd regard going out as a terrible thing.
    - \* If someone "tried to free them and lead them upward" they would "kill him," (517a).
      - Perhaps a reference to Socrates?
- **The Dispositions and Duties of the Philosophers**
  - Given what often happens when one leaves the cave and returns to it, it seems that one who leaves the cave would not want to return back down, but, rather, would continue to press upwards towards the Sun.
    - \* This is the natural disposition of the philosopher, and, plausibly, the sort of thing that we see in Socrates's embrace of death—a sort of sailing into the Sun.
  - The philosopher must "go down again to the prisoners in the cave and share their labors and honors," (519d). They must *educate* the few and *rule* the masses.
  - Even though this is against their natural disposition, it is not unjust to require it of them, because, as members of the city, it is their civic duty to "guard and care for the others," (520a).
- **The Aim and Structure of the Education of Philosophers**

- Education aims to “redirect” sight such that it’s “looking where it ought to look,” (518d). The goal of education is to turn people around so that they can go up from the cave.
  - \* **Important Caveat:** Recall from previous discussion on the philosopher kings in book six that only those with the “best natures” (519c) are fit for education. Not everyone is capable of turning away from the shadows and towards the light.
- The early education of philosophers essentially involves physical education and mathematical education (especially geometry).
- Only after this initial education is one, at the age of thirty, introduced to *dialectic*, the main way in which the soul learns the path upwards.
  - \* Dialectic is essentially just the art of engaging in argumentative dialogue in the Socratic fashion, “doing away with hypotheses and proceeding to the first principle itself,” (533d).
  - \* If not introduced in the right way, one will treat dialectic “as a kind of game of contradiction,” (539b).
- After five years of dialectical education before they must “go down into the cave again” to “take command in matters of war and occupy the other offices suitable for young people, so that the won’t be inferior to the others in experience,” (539e).
- After fifteen years of this service, at the age of fifty is the philosopher finally fit to rule and to take part in this education of others.
- **The Philosopher Alone as Fit to Rule**
  - Once again, most people aren’t capable of being led out of the cave—they remain in the cave but are ruled by one who has been out and returns.
  - The philosopher, once again, *won’t desire* to rule, but, for precisely that reason, they are fit to rule (521b).
  - Socrates clarifies that this model should apply to “women who are born with the appropriate natures” (540c) just as well as men.
- **Some Questions:**
  - This model seems to assume that all philosophers educated in this way will end up sharing the same basic philosophical vision. What about potential disagreements among philosophers? Plato’s vision is radically unlike that of his teacher Socrates; why would he not think that the vision of his greatest students would be radically unlike his own? (Spoiler: as we’ll see, this will turn out to be the case.)
  - Given that only a few are capable of actually achieving knowledge of the good in this very anti-egalitarian political model, it seems that the unphilosophical masses will have to simply trust that the few philosophers genuinely do grasp the good and have the best interest of the public in mind. Why would the public actually have this trust in philosophers?

## 2 The Critique of Democracy

- **The Ranking of Democracy:** For Plato, democracy is quite low on the “best government tier list,” which goes like this:
  - **S-Tier:** The kallipolis - city ruled by philosopher kings that Plato’s been describing in books six and seven.
  - **A-Tier:** Timocracy - city ruled by those who are honorable and victorious.
  - **C-Tier:** Oligarchy - city ruled by the rich.
  - **D-Tier:** Democracy - city ruled by the masses.
  - **F-Tier:** Tyranny - city ruled by a vicious tyrant.

With the exception of the kallipolis, each one of these non-ideal governments descends into the worse one below it on this tier

- **Distributes Equality to Non-Equals:** Democracy “distributes a sort of equality to both equals and unequal alike,” (558c).
- **The Analogy to the Soul:** If one treats all desires equally, for instance, treating the desire for health on a par with the desire for money, one’s soul will have no order. One’s soul must be “governed” by the higher desires such as that of health in order for one’s soul to be orderly.
  - For instance, the desire to eat candy can be part of a healthy soul but it must be ruled by a desire to be healthy, such that one only eats candy in moderation (for instance, a few pieces on Halloween).

Likewise, the different people in the city must be organized into roles by the higher people who rule (ideally, the philosophers).

- **Democracy Inevitably Descends into Tyranny:**
  - The basic “good” of democracy, valued by it above all else, is freedom.
  - Because of the great freedom of democracy, the most powerful class ends up being the “do nothings,” the idlers, who end up having the greatest political voice.
  - The “people are always in the habit of setting up one man as their special champion, nurturing him and making him great,” (565c).
  - Because the people are generally ignorant, lacking knowledge of what is genuinely good, the person that they elect as their “special champion” is generally not going to be a good man, but, rather a tyrant.

**Question:** Do we think this sort of critique is applicable to today’s democracy?

### 3 Contrasting Plato with Socrates

- **Stance on “Higher Wisdom”:** Socrates took himself to be wise but only in the modest way that he took himself to know that he lacked the sort of higher wisdom that other people took themselves to have. Plato, however, clearly takes himself to have higher wisdom of just the sort that Socrates denounced.
  - Most people only have *opinion*, whereas Plato and the few other true philosophers alone have genuine *knowledge*.
  - Plato explicitly deploys the metaphor of “higher” and “lower,” taking himself and the other few philosophers to be capable of life on a higher realm than the masses.
- **Stance on Democracy:** Socrates was a strong proponent of Athenian Democracy and took himself to be bound by the laws, given that they were established by the democratic process. Plato, on the other hand, thinks that democracy is one of the worst political systems, since people are not equal and so should not be given equal ruling power.
  - It is not unreasonable to suppose that part of Plato’s discontent with democracy was due to his seeing Socrates’s demise at the hands of it.
- **Question:** We have now gone through the first two of the three great classical philosophers we’re reading in this course, Socrates and Plato. Whose general outlook do we sympathize with more?