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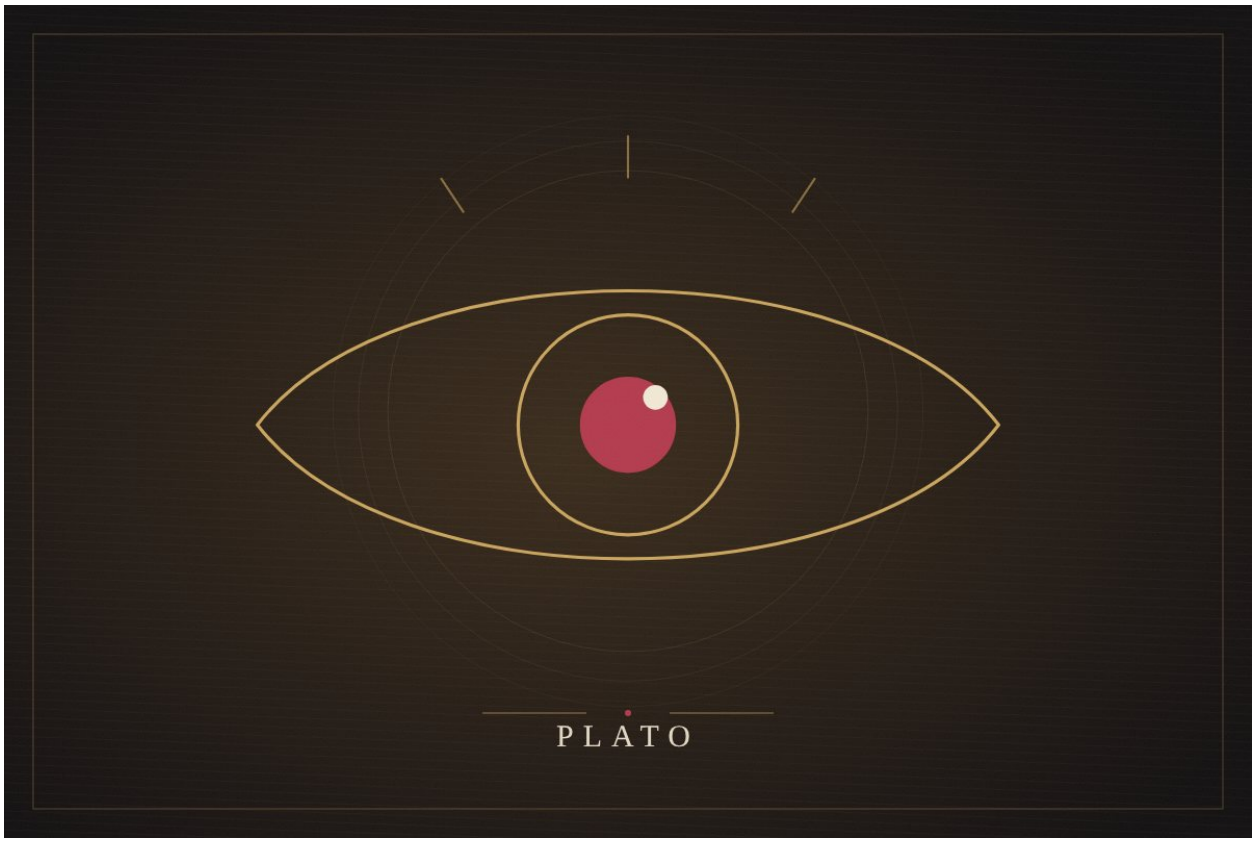
Wisdom

Plato's cave: why education is a turning of the gaze

Prisoners who see only shadows, a man who climbs into the light and Plato's idea in the Republic that learning does not mean filling an empty vessel

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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Plato (c. 428–348 BCE) was a student of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle. Around 387 BCE he founded the Academy in Athens, one of the first schools of philosophy. His works are dialogues, and in most of them the main character is Socrates. In the seventh book of the Republic he tells one of the best-known images in philosophy.

The scene

Imagine some people who since childhood have been chained deep in a cave, facing the wall. They cannot turn their heads. Behind them a fire burns, and between the fire and them pass people carrying objects and figures. The prisoners see only the shadows of these objects on the wall and hear the echo of voices. For them, the shadows are the only reality.

The ascent

Now suppose one of them is freed and forced to turn round. The light of the fire hurts his eyes; the real objects seem less real to him than the shadows he knew. If he is dragged outside the cave into the sun, at first he sees nothing. Gradually he adjusts: he sees shadows, then reflections in water, then the things themselves, and finally the sun.

If this man returns to the cave to tell the others, his eyes no longer see well in the dark. The prisoners laugh at him and say that going up has ruined his eyes. Plato adds that, if they could, they might kill the one who tries to free them: a clear allusion to the fate of Socrates.

> *According to Plato, education is not putting knowledge into an empty soul, like putting sight into blind eyes, but turning the soul towards what ought to be seen.*

What he meant

For Plato the cave represents the world of the senses and of opinion, while the world outside represents the truth reached through reason. The sun is the symbol of the Good, the source of light and knowledge. This is part of his theory of forms, which many later philosophers have criticised. But the image of the cave has lived on beyond that theory.

Three linked images

The cave does not stand alone in the *Republic*. Shortly before, at the end of book six, Plato uses two other images. The first compares the Good to the sun: just as the sun gives things the light to be seen and the life to grow, the Good gives the forms their truth and being. The second is the "divided line", a line cut into four parts representing the levels of knowledge, from guesses about shadows to the understanding of forms. According to the scholar Julia Annas, the cave should be read as a continuation of these two images, not as a story on its own.

The duty to return

Plato's hardest question is not how to leave the cave, but why we should go back. He admits that those who have seen the light will not want to deal with the dark affairs of the city. Even so, he argues that the city should compel them to go down and govern in turn, precisely because they do not want power for its own sake. In his view, the city is best governed by those who least wish to govern. This idea remains provocative for politics today.

The experience in Syracuse

Plato did not remain only a theorist. According to the *Seventh Letter*, whose authenticity is debated by scholars, he travelled several times to Syracuse in Sicily, hoping that he could educate the young ruler Dionysius II as a philosopher. The attempts ended badly: he was held almost as a prisoner and his friend Dion was exiled. The letter shows the disappointment of a man who believed that philosophy should influence politics, but discovered how hard this was in practice.

Aristotle's criticism

Plato's best-known student, Aristotle, studied at the Academy for about twenty years. Even so, in the *Metaphysics* he criticised the theory of forms sharply. According to him, if the forms exist separately from things, it is not clear how they can explain those things, and the separation leads to logical difficulties, such as the argument known as the "third man". Aristotle looked for form within things themselves, not in another world. This debate between teacher and student shaped all the European philosophy that followed.

The Academy after Plato

After Plato's death in 347 BCE, the Academy continued under other heads. According to the historian of philosophy John Dillon, its first leaders after him, such as his nephew Speusippus and then Xenocrates, developed his ideas in different directions. Later the Academy passed into a sceptical period, in which it was not claimed that certain truth could be reached. So even the school founded by the author of the cave went through many interpretations, as happens with every living tradition of thought.

The cave today

Today many people read the allegory as a question about the information we receive: do we see the things themselves, or only the shadows shown to us on a screen? The question has no simple answer, but it is worth asking.

1. **Accept the discomfort of learning.** Like the light in the prisoner's eyes, new ideas often feel unpleasant at first.
2. **Look for the source.** Before believing a piece of news, ask: what is creating this "shadow"?
3. **Be patient with others.** The one who left the cave was mocked because the others had not seen what he saw.

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