

PLATO

Republic

Translated from the New Standard Greek Text, with Introduction, by

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Book 7

SOCRATES' NARRATION CONTINUES:

514a SOCRATES: Next, then, compare the effect of education and that of the
lack of it on our nature to an experience like this. Imagine human beings
5 living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way
up that is open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They have been
b there since childhood, with their necks and legs fettered, so that they are
fixed in the same place, able to see only in front of them, because their fet-
ter prevents them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a
5 fire burning far above and behind them. Between the prisoners and the fire,
there is an elevated road stretching. Imagine that along this road a low wall
has been built—like the screen in front of people that is provided by pup-
peteers, and above which they show their puppets.

GLAUCON: I am imagining it.

c SOCRATES: Also imagine, then, that there are people alongside the wall
515a carrying multifarious artifacts that project above it—statues of people and
other animals, made of stone, wood, and every material. And as you would
expect, some of the carriers are talking and some are silent.

GLAUCON: It is a strange image you are describing, and strange prisoners.

5 SOCRATES: They are like us. I mean, in the first place, do you think these
prisoners have ever seen anything of themselves and one another besides
the shadows that the fire casts on the wall of the cave in front of them?

b GLAUCON: How could they, if they have to keep their heads motionless
throughout life?

SOCRATES: What about the things carried along the wall? Isn't the same
true where they are concerned?

GLAUCON: Of course.

5 SOCRATES: And if they could engage in discussion with one another,
don't you think they would assume that the words they used applied to the
things they see passing in front of them?

GLAUCON: They would have to.

SOCRATES: What if their prison also had an echo from the wall facing
them? When one of the carriers passing along the wall spoke, do you think

they would believe that anything other than the shadow passing in front of
them was speaking?

GLAUCON: I do not, by Zeus.

SOCRATES: All in all, then, what the prisoners would take for true reality
is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts.

GLAUCON: That's entirely inevitable.

5 SOCRATES: Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and
cured of their foolishness would naturally be like, if something like this
should happen to them. When one was freed and suddenly compelled to
stand up, turn his neck around, walk, and look up toward the light, he
would be pained by doing all these things and be unable to see the things
whose shadows he had seen before, because of the flashing lights. What do
you think he would say if we told him that what he had seen before was
d silly nonsense, but that now—because he is a bit closer to what is, and is
turned toward things that *are* more—he sees more correctly? And in partic-
ular, if we pointed to each of the things passing by and compelled him to
5 answer what each of them is, don't you think he would be puzzled and
believe that the things he saw earlier were more truly real than the ones he
was being shown?

GLAUCON: Much more so.

e SOCRATES: And if he were compelled to look at the light itself, wouldn't
his eyes be pained and wouldn't he turn around and flee toward the things
he is able to see, and believe that they are really clearer than the ones he is
being shown?

GLAUCON: He would.

5 SOCRATES: And if someone dragged him by force away from there, along
the rough, steep, upward path, and did not let him go until he had dragged
him into the light of the sun, wouldn't he be pained and angry at being
treated that way? And when he came into the light, wouldn't he have his
516a eyes filled with sunlight and be unable to see a single one of the things now
said to be truly real?

GLAUCON: No, he would not be able to—at least not right away.

5 SOCRATES: He would need time to get adjusted, I suppose, if he is going
to see the things in the world above. At first, he would see shadows most
easily, then images of men and other things in water, then the things them-
selves. From these, it would be easier for him to go on to look at the things
in the sky and the sky itself at night, gazing at the light of the stars and the
moon, than during the day, gazing at the sun and the light of the sun.

GLAUCON: Of course.

5 SOCRATES: Finally, I suppose, he would be able to see the sun—not reflections of it in water or some alien place, but the sun just by itself in its own place—and be able to look at it and see what it is like.

GLAUCON: Necessarily.

10 SOCRATES: After that, he would already be able to conclude about it that it provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he and his fellows used to see.

GLAUCON: That would clearly be his next step.

5 SOCRATES: What about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, what passed for wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners? Don't you think he would count himself happy for the change and pity the others?

GLAUCON: Certainly.

10 SOCRATES: And if there had been honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by; and was best able to remember which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously; and who was thus best able to prophesize the future, do you think that our man would desire these rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power? Or do you think he would feel with Homer that he would much prefer to "work the earth as a serf for another man, a man without possessions of his own,"¹ and go through any sufferings, rather than share their beliefs and live as they do?

5 GLAUCON: Yes, I think he would rather suffer anything than live like that.

SOCRATES: Consider this too, then. If this man went back down into the cave and sat down in his same seat, wouldn't his eyes be filled with darkness, coming suddenly out of the sun like that?

GLAUCON: Certainly.

517a SOCRATES: Now, if he had to compete once again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, while his sight was still dim and before his eyes had recovered, and if the time required for readjustment was not short, wouldn't he provoke ridicule? Wouldn't it be said of him that he had returned from his upward journey with his eyes ruined, and that it is not worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And as for anyone who tried to free the prisoners and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?

GLAUCON: They certainly would.

¹ *Odyssey* 11.489–90. The shade of Achilles speaks these words to Odysseus, who is visiting Hades. Plato is likening the cave dwellers to the dead.

SOCRATES: This image, my dear Glaucon, must be fitted together as a whole with what we said before. The realm revealed through sight should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the sun's power. And if you think of the upward journey and the seeing of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you won't mistake my intention—since it is what you wanted to hear about. Only the god knows whether it is true. But this is how these phenomena seem to me: in the knowable realm, the last thing to be seen is the form of the good, and it is seen only with toil and trouble. Once one has seen it, however, one must infer that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that in the visible realm it produces both light and its source, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding; and that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.

5 GLAUCON: I agree, so far as I am able.

SOCRATES: Come on, then, and join me in this further thought: you should not be surprised that the ones who get to this point are not willing to occupy themselves with human affairs, but that, on the contrary, their souls are always eager to spend their time above. I mean, that is surely what we would expect, if indeed the image I described before is also accurate here.

GLAUCON: It is what we would expect.

SOCRATES: What about when someone, coming from looking at divine things, looks to the evils of human life? Do you think it is surprising that he behaves awkwardly and appears completely ridiculous, if—while his sight is still dim and he has not yet become accustomed to the darkness around him—he is compelled, either in the courts or elsewhere, to compete about the shadows of justice, or about the statues of which they are the shadows; and to dispute the way these things are understood by people who have never seen justice itself?

GLAUCON: It is not surprising at all.

518a SOCRATES: On the contrary, anyone with any sense, at any rate, would remember that eyes may be confused in two ways and from two causes: when they change from the light into the darkness, or from the darkness into the light. If he kept in mind that the same applies to the soul, then when he saw a soul disturbed and unable to see something, he would not laugh absurdly. Instead, he would see whether it had come from a brighter life and was dimmed through not having yet become accustomed to the dark, or from greater ignorance into greater light and was dazzled by the increased brilliance. Then he would consider the first soul happy in its experience and life, and pity the latter. But even if he wanted to ridicule it, at least his ridiculing it would make him less ridiculous than ridiculing a soul that had come from the light above.

5 GLAUCON: That's an entirely reasonable claim.

SOCRATES: Then here is how we must think about these matters, if that is true: education is not what some people boastfully profess it to be. They say that they can pretty much put knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes.

GLAUCON: Yes, they do say that.

5 SOCRATES: But here is what our present account shows about this power to learn that is present in everyone's soul, and the instrument with which each of us learns: just as an eye cannot be turned around from darkness to light except by turning the whole body, so this instrument must be turned around from what-comes-to-be together with the whole soul, until it is able to bear to look at what is and at the brightest thing that is—the one we call the good. Isn't that right?

GLAUCON: Yes.

5 SOCRATES: Of this, then—of this very turning around—there would be a craft concerned with how this instrument can be most easily and effectively turned around, not of putting sight into it. On the contrary, it takes for granted that sight is there, though not turned in the right way or looking where it should look, and contrives to redirect it appropriately.

GLAUCON: That's probably right.

5 SOCRATES: The other so-called virtues of the soul, then, do seem to be closely akin to those of the body: they really are not present in it initially, but are added later by habit and practice. The virtue of wisdom, on the other hand, belongs above all, so it seems, to something more godlike, which never loses its power, but is either useful and beneficial or useless and harmful, depending on the way it is led around. Or haven't you ever noticed in people who are said to be bad, but clever, how sharp the vision of their little soul is and how sharply it distinguishes the things it is turned toward? This shows that its sight is not inferior, but is compelled to serve vice, so that the sharper it sees, the more evils it accomplishes.

GLAUCON: I certainly have.

5 SOCRATES: However, if this element of this sort of nature had been hammered at right from childhood, and struck free of the leaden weights, as it were, of kinship with becoming, which have been fastened to it by eating and other such pleasures and indulgences, which turn its soul's vision downward²—if, I say, it got rid of these and turned toward truly real things, then the same element of the same people would see them most sharply, just as it now does the things it is now turned toward.

² See 611b9–612a6.

GLAUCON: That's probably right.

SOCRATES: Isn't it also probable, then—indeed, doesn't it follow necessarily from what was said before—that uneducated people who have no experience of true reality will never adequately govern a city, and neither will people who have been allowed to spend their whole lives in education. The former fail because they do not have a single goal in life at which all their actions, public and private, inevitably aim; the latter because they would refuse to act, thinking they had emigrated, while still alive, to the Isles of the Blessed.

GLAUCON: True.

SOCRATES: It is our task as founders, then, to compel the best natures to learn what was said before³ to be the most important thing: namely, to see the good; to ascend that ascent. And when they have ascended and looked sufficiently, we must not allow them to do what they are allowed to do now.

GLAUCON: What's that, then?

SOCRATES: To stay there and refuse to go down again to the prisoners in the cave and share their labors and honors, whether the inferior ones or the more excellent ones.

GLAUCON: You mean we are to treat them unjustly, making them live a worse life when they could live a better one?

SOCRATES: You have forgotten again, my friend, that the law is not concerned with making any one class in the city do outstandingly well, but is contriving to produce this condition in the city as a whole, harmonizing the citizens together through both persuasion and compulsion, and making them share with each other the benefit they can confer on the community.⁴ It produces such men in the city, not in order to allow them to turn in whatever direction each one wants, but to make use of them to bind the city together.

GLAUCON: That's true. Yes, I had forgotten.

SOCRATES: Observe, then, Glaucon, that we won't be unjustly treating those who have become philosophers in our city, but that what we will say to them, when we compel them to take care of the others and guard them, will be just. We will say: "When people like you come to be in other cities, they are justified in not sharing in the others' labors. After all, they have grown there spontaneously, against the will of the constitution in each of them. And when something grows of its own accord and owes no debt for

³ 505a–b.

⁴ 420b–421c, 462a–466c.

its upbringing, it has justice on its side when it is not keen to pay anyone for its upbringing. But both for your own sakes and for that of the rest of the city, we have bred you to be leaders and kings in the hive, so to speak. You are better and more completely educated than the others, and better able to share in both types of life.⁵ So each of you in turn must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the other citizens and grow accustomed to seeing in the dark. For when you are used to it, you will see infinitely better than the people there and know precisely what each image is, and also what it is an image of, because you have seen the truth about fine, just, and good things. So the city will be awake, governed by us and by you; not dreaming like the majority of cities nowadays, governed by men who fight against one another over shadows and form factions in order to rule—as if that were a great good.⁶ No, the truth of the matter is surely this: a city in which those who are going to rule are least eager to rule is necessarily best and freest from faction, whereas a city with the opposite kind of rulers is governed in the opposite way.”

GLAUCON: Yes, indeed.

SOCRATES: Then do you think the people we have nurtured will disobey us when they hear these things, and be unwilling to share the labors of the city, each in turn, while living the greater part of their time with one another in the pure realm?

GLAUCON: No, they couldn't possibly. After all, we will be giving just orders to just people. However, each of them will certainly go to rule as to something compulsory, which is exactly the opposite of what is done by those who now rule in each city.

SOCRATES: That's right, comrade. If you can find a way of life that is better than ruling for those who are going to rule, your well-governed city will become a possibility. You see, in it alone the truly rich will rule—those who are rich not in gold, but in the wealth the happy must have: namely, a good and rational life. But if beggars—people hungry for private goods of their own—go into public life, thinking that the good is there for the seizing, then such a city is impossible. For when ruling is something fought over, such civil and domestic war destroys these men and the rest of the city as well.

GLAUCON: That's absolutely true.

SOCRATES: Do you know of any other sort of life that looks down on political offices besides that of true philosophy?

GLAUCON: No, by Zeus, I do not.

⁵ I.e., the practical life of ruling and the theoretical life of doing philosophy.

⁶ See 476c–d.

SOCRATES: But surely it is those who are not lovers of ruling who must go do it. Otherwise, the rivaling lovers will fight over it.

GLAUCON: Of course.

SOCRATES: Who else, then, will you compel to go be guardians of the city if not those who know best what results in good government, and have different honors and a better life than the political?

GLAUCON: No one else.

SOCRATES: Do you want us to consider now how such people will come to exist, and how we will lead them up to the light, like those who are said to have gone up from Hades to the gods?

GLAUCON: Yes, of course that's what I want.

SOCRATES: It seems, then, that this is not a matter of flipping a potsherd,⁷ but of turning a soul from a day that is a kind of night in comparison to the true day—that ascent to what is, which we say is true philosophy.

GLAUCON: Yes, indeed.

SOCRATES: Then mustn't we try to discover what subjects have the power to bring this about?

GLAUCON: Of course.

SOCRATES: So what subject is it, Glaucon, that draws the soul from what is coming to be to what is? It occurs to me as I am speaking that we said, didn't we, that these people must be athletes of war when they are young?⁸

GLAUCON: Yes, we did say that.

SOCRATES: Then the subject we are looking for must also have this characteristic in addition to the former one.

GLAUCON: Which?

SOCRATES: It must not be useless to warlike men.

GLAUCON: If possible, it must not.

SOCRATES: Now, earlier they were educated by us in musical and physical training.

GLAUCON: They were.

SOCRATES: And surely physical training is concerned with what-comes-to-be and dies, since it oversees the growth and decay of the body.

⁷ A proverbial expression, referring to a children's game. The players were divided into two groups. A shell or potsherd—white on one side, black on the other—was thrown into space between them to the cry of “night or day?” (Note the reference to night and day in what follows.) According as the white or black fell uppermost, one group ran away pursued by the other.

⁸ 404a, 412b–417b.

GLAUCON: Obviously.

SOCRATES: So it could not be the subject we are looking for.

522a GLAUCON: No, it could not.

SOCRATES: Is it, then, the musical training we described before?

GLAUCON: But it is just the counterpart of physical training, if you remember. It educated the guardians through habits, conveying by harmony a certain harmoniousness of temper, not knowledge; and by rhythm a certain rhythmical quality. Its stories, whether fictional or nearer the truth, cultivated other habits akin to these. But as for a subject that leads to the destination you have in mind, of the sort you are looking for now, there was nothing of that in it.

SOCRATES: Your reminder is exactly to the point. It really does not have anything of that sort. You're a marvelous fellow, Glaucon, but what is there that does? The crafts all seemed to be somehow menial.⁹

GLAUCON: Of course. And yet, what subject is left that is separate from musical and physical training, and from the crafts?

SOCRATES: Well, if we have nothing left beyond these, let's consider one of those that touches all of them.

10 GLAUCON: Which?

SOCRATES: Why, for example, that common thing, the one that every type of craft, thought, and knowledge uses, and that is among the first things everyone has to learn.

GLAUCON: Which one is that?

SOCRATES: That inconsequential matter of distinguishing the numbers one, two, and three. In short, I mean number and calculation. Or isn't it true that every type of craft and knowledge must share in them?

GLAUCON: Indeed it is.

10 SOCRATES: Then warfare must too.

GLAUCON: It must.

SOCRATES: In tragedies, at any rate, Palamedes is always showing up Agamemnon as a totally ridiculous general. Haven't you noticed? He says that by inventing numbers he established how many troops there were in the army at Ilium and counted their ships and everything else. The implication is that they had not been counted before, and that Agamemnon apparently did not even know how many feet he had, since he did not know how to count. What kind of general do you think that made him?

⁹ 495c-e.

GLAUCON: A very strange one, I'd say, if there is any truth in that.

SOCRATES: Won't we posit this subject, then, as one a warrior is compelled to learn so he can count and calculate?

GLAUCON: It is more essential than anything else—if, that is, he is going to know anything at all about marshaling his troops—or if he is even going to be human, for that matter.

SOCRATES: Then do you notice the same thing about this subject as I do?

GLAUCON: What?

SOCRATES: That in all likelihood it is one of the subjects we were looking for that naturally stimulate the understanding. But no one uses it correctly, as something that really is fitted in every way to draw us toward being.

GLAUCON: How do you mean?

SOCRATES: I will try to make what I believe clear, at any rate. I will distinguish for myself the things that lead in the direction we mentioned from those that do not. Then you must look at them along with me, and either agree or disagree, so that we may see more clearly whether the distinction is as I imagine.

GLAUCON: Show me the things you mean.

SOCRATES: All right, I will show you, if you can see that some sense-perceptions do not summon the understanding to look into them, because the judgment of sense-perception is itself adequate; whereas others encourage it in every way to look into them, because sense-perception does not produce a sound result.

GLAUCON: You are obviously referring to things appearing in the distance and illusionist paintings.

SOCRATES: No, you are not quite getting what I mean.

GLAUCON: Then what do you mean?

SOCRATES: The ones that do not summon the understanding are all those that do not at the same time result in an opposite sense-perception. But the ones that do I call *summoners*. That is when sense-perception does not make one thing any more clear than its opposite, regardless of whether what strikes the senses is close by or far away. What I mean will be clearer if you look at it this way: these, we say, are three fingers—the smallest, the second, and the middle finger.

GLAUCON: Of course.

SOCRATES: Assume that I am talking about them as being seen from close by. Now consider this about them with me.

GLAUCON: What?