The Power of Plato’s Cave

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The allegory of the cave is considered by many readers to be compelling, or even Plato’s ‘most compelling’ image. At the same time, the general consensus would have it that the image is deeply confusing. The individual elements of the allegory pose many difficulties of interpretation, and while Socrates himself asks Glaucon to map the allegory onto the image of the divided line, scholars continue to disagree about whether or how this works. We may reasonably ask, then, what exactly makes the image so compelling. Although scholars have not tackled this question head-on, they have indirectly suggested some answers: the allegory functions protreptically to motivate the emotions; the cave aims to elicit the ‘shock of disillusionment about the moral values current in the world of the city as it is …’ in its audience; the image ‘instills dissatisfaction with the sum total of experience (up till now).’ These answers share a common feature: the cave image makes us feel disappointed, shocked, inferior, eager to become better, because it tells us that we are like the prisoners in the cave, that is, we are in a much worse condition than we may have imagined we were in. I would like to make a radically different suggestion. My suggestion is that Plato has designed the cave passage as a whole to make us feel quite the opposite. He has designed it, in fact, to make us feel that we have escaped the cave, and furthermore that our escape is a particularly high stakes enterprise. The success of this design, I will argue, is one of the features that lends the cave image its tremendous power.

1 Schofield (2007), 216.
2 As Annas (1981), 252 puts it: ‘The Cave is Plato’s most famous image, dominating many people’s interpretation of what Plato’s most important ideas are. This is a pity, because, as in the Line, severe problems arise over interpreting the imagery philosophically, and there are persistent disagreements.’
3 Much of the scholarly literature has in fact been devoted to this issue. See Karasmanis (1988) for an overview.
4 Destrée (2012), 117–120.
5 Schofield (2007), 222.
6 Lear (2006), 35.
7 Nightingale (2004), 96, 99 finds in the cave allegory both a ‘rhetoric of estrangement’ (an attempt to ‘uproot and displace us’) and a ‘highly idealized narrative’ that invites us ‘to adopt the alterity of the theoretical gaze’.
The ‘story’ of the cave could have been told in many different ways, and not all of them would have been as powerful as the version Plato offers. This paper will examine the specific ways that Plato has designed Socrates’ narrative and how its seemingly inessential features shape our interpretation of it. I will make two main points. The first concerns how Socrates’ complex use of Homeric quotation invests that cave image with a life-or-death significance and an unusual degree of authority. My second and overriding concern is to argue that Plato has designed this passage so that the conversation taking place between Glaucon and Socrates mirrors the prisoner’s ascent from the cave. Ultimately I will suggest that the cave narrative gains its power by giving Glaucon, and the reader, an experience analogous to the ascent from the cave that the allegory’s image describes.

1 The Structure of The Cave Narrative

While it is easy to say where the allegory begins, it is more difficult to say where it ends. Having just concluded his discussion of the divided line in Book 6, Book 7 opens with Socrates launching straight into the cave allegory: ‘Next, I said, compare the effect of education and the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this: Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling …’. This marks an emphatic beginning. But where exactly does ‘the allegory of the cave’ end? In Catalin Partenie’s recent Oxford edition of selected myths of Plato, the passage ends at 517a, and one can see justification for this. At 517a Socrates finishes setting out the details of the image. However, on a different interpretation, the allegory continues past this point. At 517b Socrates begins to interpret the allegory and references to the cave continue on through 520 and beyond. Although these references continue in Socrates’ discussion, a case can be made for considering 518d an important ending. 518d is where Socrates reaches what is arguably the moral of the story, his definition of true education. I will examine this definition later, but for now the crucial point is that the allegory of the cave sets out from the start to articulate what education is, and what it is not. Socrates’ concern is embedded in the larger discussion of the guardians’ education, but it also goes all the way back to Book 1 where Thrasymachus, in a pitch of frustration with Socrates, assumes the wrong definition of education: ‘And how am I to persuade you, if you aren’t persuaded by what I said just now? What more can I do? Am I to take your argument

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