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After presenting the Allegory of the Cave, Plato has Socrates say explicitly that ‘this simile must be connected throughout with what preceded it’ (517b)¹. But what does this mean? Most immediately the Cave is preceded by the Divided Line, which itself is presented as an extension of the Simile of the Sun. Lee has suggested, I think correctly, that Plato’s ‘what preceded’ be read liberally to include passages in Book V (on the two orders of reality) and even later in Book VII (on dialectic in the educational curriculum). To take all these together, for Lee, is ‘the first step to understanding them’².

In what follows I focus on the three central images³ in Books VI and VII – Sun, Line, and Cave – and deal with Lee’s other passages only insofar as they clarify these. My primary question will be: to what extent do Sun, Line, and Cave form a single coherent picture, and if they don’t then where do they diverge? I combine this with a secondary question: how does Plato present the ‘Form of the Good’ in these passages, and what can we surmise in broad terms about his understanding of it? I start by taking each image separately, giving a brief exposition and assessing some relevant critical issues, then conclude with an assessment of these questions.

Simile of the Sun

Exposition

One cannot get far in understanding these images without considering Plato’s description in Book V of the two orders of reality (474c-484a) and introduction of the Form of the Good in Book VI (503d-507a).

Philosophers, we are told (475b-c), are indiscriminate in their love of wisdom and pursue truth in all branches of learning. But this multiplicity of interests stems from a vision of the ‘one’ underlying the ‘many’, and not from a care for multiplicity as such. Plato distinguishes the philosopher from the ‘sight-lover’, who, in the case of beauty, ‘recognizes the existence of beautiful

¹ Translations throughout are from Desmond Lee (2nd ed., Penguin, 1987) unless otherwise noted.

² Lee, p. 394.

³ Which of course I mean in its literary and not Platonic sense.

things, but does not believe in beauty itself' (476c). The philosopher does see things 'in themselves', their essences or 'Forms', and so has knowledge (*gnosis*) where the sight-lover has only opinion (*doxa*). Opinion is called a middle state between knowledge and ignorance.

Plato leaves aside the state of ignorance to focus on the relation between knowledge and opinion. Each depends on a different 'faculty' and corresponds to a different 'natural field'. Within these fields, each is concerned with its own 'objects' – even opinion has an 'object', it is *about* something real, or else it would be ignorance. Knowledge, by definition, takes as its object *that which is* (i.e., the eternal); opinion, being between knowledge and ignorance, concerns what both *is and is not* (i.e., the changeable), and includes 'many conventional views ... about beauty and the rest' (479d). So we have two orders of reality: one of the eternal and unchanging things; the other, a 'fluctuating intermediate realm' of visible things. Thus ends Book V.

Book VI opens with a discussion of the philosophic nature, culminating in Socrates' assertion at 503b that 'our Guardians, in the fullest sense, must be philosophers'. This 'fullest sense' is important, since it takes us beyond the qualities thus far described to acknowledge the Form of the Good (505a) as 'the highest form of knowledge' and 'that from which things that are just and so on derive their usefulness and value'. Guardians must know what things are 'right and valuable' but also 'in what [these things'] goodness consists' (505e). Plato's description is clearly very important, but cryptic. The good is not knowledge, not pleasure – what is it?

Adeimantus forces the issue, demanding Socrates' own *opinion*, and an aside follows concerning the nature of opinion⁴. Socrates: 'isn't anyone who holds a true opinion without understanding like a blind man on the right road?' Glaucon bursts into the conversation, pressing Socrates to give an account of the Good like his earlier accounts of 'justice and self-control and the rest', but Socrates is firm that such is 'beyond' him. In its place, he offers to describe a 'child [offspring] of the good' which 'resemble[s] it very closely' (506e), and so presents the simile of the sun.

Taken on its own the simile (507b-509c) is not hard to understand. Socrates reviews his earlier distinction (Book V) between particular objects and their forms, then considers the sense of sight. Sight is different from the other senses in that it requires a *third thing* other than the eye and the object of sight. This is *light*, which 'yokes' together 'the sense of sight and the visibility of objects'. The sun is responsible for light, though itself is not identical with 'sight, nor with the eye in

⁴ Socrates again speaks of 'opinion' at 517b, after relating the Cave to the Line. 'That at any rate is my interpretation, which is what you are anxious to hear; the truth of the matter, after all, is known only to god. But *in my opinion, for what it is worth ...*' Emphasis mine.

which sight resides'. The sun 'infuses' the eye with sight, and it is by means of sight that the eye can see the sun – we have a circle.

Socrates explains that the sun is the child of the Good he promised. It plays the same role in the visible realm (of particulars) as the Good plays in the intelligible realm (of forms). In sunlight we see clearly, while at night we see only shadows. In the same way, a vision of the Good illuminates the mind's eye and allows for *knowledge*, whereas blindness to the Good leaves one in the shadow land of *opinion*. Just as the sun illuminates objects (i.e., makes them visible) and 'infuses' the eye with the power of sight, so the Form of the Good 'gives the objects of knowledge their truth and the knower's mind the power of knowing' (508e). And further: just as the sun is like but greater than either light or sight, so too the Good is like but greater than either truth or knowledge. The Good is 'even more splendid' than these, and, just as the sun causes generation and growth, so too the Good is the 'source' of 'being and reality'. In this sense, it is 'beyond being', a notion popular today but which Glaucon regards as a 'demonic excess'.

Critical issues

These passages, together with the Line and the Cave, form the center and peak of the dialogue and ready the way for a major change of orientation. As Bloom puts it, we move from a concern with *philosophy as it affects the city* to a concern with *philosophy itself*, and in so doing reveal 'a new world of incredible beauty ... an unexpected realm, from the standpoint of which everything looks different' (401). This seems to me right. Sun and Line especially are highly abstract and fit oddly with the rest of the dialogue, but the new world they open – the intelligible realm – really does make all the rest 'look different'.

The central element in these central passages is of course the Form of the Good – as one author puts it, a 'byword word obscurity'⁵. In the work of one ancient Greek comedian a slave is made to remark, 'I understand that less than I understand the Good of Plato'⁶, and the joke banks on what was a common frustration. Plato's own public lecture on the subject exasperated the crowd, who came expecting talk of health or wealth but were met with a discussion of geometry⁷. Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* famously lambastes Plato for defending such an impractical and abstruse notion as his Form of the Good⁸.

⁵ Annas, p. 146.

⁶ Denyer, p. 284.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Barney (2007), who considers the strength of Aristotle's argument against Plato at *Nich. Ethics* I.6.

So what does Plato mean by it? I will put off a more thorough treatment until the conclusion, but several assertions made in these passages should be noted.

First, the Good is absolute and objective, not relative to anything. There is one Good only, which is ‘the end of all endeavor, the object on which every heart is set’ (505e). As Annas puts it, ‘right at the start ... Plato parts company with someone who believes that for something to be good is always for it to be good *for X*, or *from Y’s point of view*, or a good *Z*’⁹. And so he parts company with Aristotle, but also with most of us today, and without argument.

Second, the Form of the Good seems to be a Form unlike all other Forms. It is a kind of ‘super’ Form¹⁰, the Form *of* Forms, and certainly not a peer. This is made most clear in Socrates’ pregnant assertion that the Good is the *source* of ‘being and reality’, and that itself it is ‘*beyond being*, exceeding it in dignity and power’¹¹. It is perhaps for this reason that Socrates cannot give an account of it as he did ‘for justice and self-control and the rest’ (506d). This view of the Good or of ethics as extra-ontological has been defended recently by Murdoch, Levinas, and others. Plato drops it without explanation.

A third point concerns the notion of genesis, and somewhat threatens the integrity of the simile¹². The sun causes growth and generation, and so too the Good is the ‘source’ of being and reality (Plato avoids the language of cause, this perhaps being too close to *efficient* causation which is business for the Demiurge if anyone.) Two issues arise. First, the sun is at best a *partial* cause of at least some things, while the Good is presumably the *sole* cause of everything. Second, it seems problematic that the Good should give ‘being and reality’ to the Forms at all, as though there were change in the eternal, intelligible realm. Plato needs this of course, and the notion will be central to Neo-Platonism, but there is a tension here.

Divided Line

Exposition

The Line (509d-511e) is presented as a schematic exposition of the two world structure portrayed in the Sun. We are to imagine a line divided into two unequal segments, then divide each in the same ratio to yield four sub-segments. One of the original segments corresponds to the

⁹ Annas, p. 146.

¹⁰ Bloom, ‘a super Idea’, p. 202.

¹¹ Translation is Bloom’s, as against Lee’s ‘it is not itself of that reality [i.e., being], but is beyond it’, etc. Emphasis mine.

¹² This point is made by Rosen, p. 261.

intelligible realm (*episteme*¹³), the other to the visible realm (*doxa*), though it is left unclear which (the longer or shorter) corresponds to which. This is left for the hearer to decide – as is the orientation of the line, horizontal or vertical – and has been the subject of controversy¹⁴.

In any case, Socrates begins by describing the sub-segments of the visible realm. The lowest, D, corresponds to shadows and reflections¹⁵, and he seems to mean this literally¹⁶. The next sub-segment, C, stands for objects which are ‘the originals of these images’, so animals, plants, and artifacts. The contents of C are, then, ‘genuine’ relative to the contents of D, and the two stand in the same relation to each other as knowledge to opinion or as the intelligible to the visible.

Socrates then moves on to the intelligible realm. Here the difference between the sub-segments seems more a matter of method than of content. Both (call them A and B) concern the relation of Forms. One of them, B, contains abstract ‘images’ of the originals in the visible order (C), which are related one to the other on the basis of assumptions or ‘hypotheses’. Here, one starts from hypotheses taken for granted and moves toward a conclusion on their basis. Socrates here locates the ‘sciences’ (*techne*, especially ‘geometry and the kindred sciences’) which operate based on ‘reason’ (or ‘thought’, *dianoia*). The other sub-segment, A, also deals with Forms and also employs hypotheses, but has no truck whatsoever with the visible realm, moving ‘through forms to forms, and finish[ing] in forms’ (511c). Ultimately, this process of pure ‘dialectic’ (*noesis* or *nous*) leads the philosopher to ‘the first principle of everything’ purified of all hypotheses. Socrates seems to see these sub-segments of the intelligible realm, like those of the visible, as standing in a relation of ‘genuine’ to ‘image’ or of knowledge to opinion.

Glaucon offers a review of the Line which Socrates says is adequate, though it’s not clear that it is¹⁷, and Socrates concludes the discussion by linking the four segments of the line with ‘four states of mind’, for which it is best to use the Greek terms, so variously translated: For A, *noesis* (intelligence, intellection); for B, *dianoia* (reason, thought, derivation); for C, *pistis* (belief, trust, ‘commonsense assurance’; and for D, *eikasia* (illusion, imagination).

¹³ Note that Plato shifts his language here from the earlier *gnosis* in Book V.

¹⁴ Proclus linked the longer segment with the intelligible, whereas we learn from Plutarch that at least one Renaissance scholar, Brontius, saw this as gratuitous – no true Platonist would link the intelligible order with the greater visible length (see Denyer, pp. 292-3).

¹⁵ Denyer (p. 289) draws attention to the fact that modern silvered glass mirrors are nothing like the polished bronze mirrors antiquity. Mindful of this, we can join the ancients in thinking of reflections generally as ‘partial and disordered likenesses that are – the phrase is hard to resist – no more than shadows of the originals’.

¹⁶ Cf. Annas, pp. 148-9.

¹⁷ Rosen (p. 266) notes three inadequacies: (1) Glaucon collapses the distinction between C and D making for one ‘visible’ realm; (2) he blurs the already blurry relation between B and C; and (3) he overlooks the fact that dialectic, too, uses hypotheses though in a different way and to a different end. Socrates lets these pass without comment, only re-iterating that line has *four* divisions.

Later (Book VII) Socrates again evokes the image of the Line to describe the unique character of dialectic as final stage philosopher-ruler's curriculum (531d-534e). All sciences (*techne*) other than dialectic, we are told, serve to bring the prisoner out of the cave, but dialectic itself is a wholly further procedure, 'over and above what we have been describing [in the curriculum]' (533b). So great is the difference that it is technically incorrect to call other sciences 'branches of *knowledge*' – only dialectic leads to knowledge in the true sense. Unlike the sciences, dialectic is founded on the 'firm base' of a 'first principle', but *also* because dialectic alone leads us to the Form of the Good. It is left notoriously unclear whether this 'principle' and the 'Form of the Good' should be identified. We are counseled against discussing too much 'the relation of the realities' depicted in Line, as such leads only to fruitless argument.

Critical issues

There is a striking absence here: where is the Form of the Good? It's not mentioned in the Line, and there is no evidence in the text for identifying it with the 'first principle', though one is tempted to do so. Beyond this, two points should be addressed.

First, a question. Is the Line meant as an analogy, like the Sun relating two world orders, or not? Annas treats this question and I shall follow her here (148-9). There are reasons for thinking it is an analogy: (1) The four sub-segments are of different lengths, and notably the middle two are invariably equal. This suggests that Plato is less interested in steadily increasing clarity than in how the D-C relation (the visible) can illuminate the B-A relation (the intelligible). (2) If we take *eikasia* (D) to mean literally confusing reflections for reality – and the text seems to demand this – then we should admit that we spend very little time doing so. So, Annas: sub-segment D 'has a point only as illustrating the relation of imaging holding between the contents of [D] and [C] (which in turn illuminate the upper part of the line)'¹⁸.

Yet perhaps it is not an analogy. (1) We have *two* 'worlds' but only *one* continuous line, not two. (2) The contents of sub-segment B are actually *derived* from the objects in C, making for a very close connection just where one expects a break. And most importantly (3) Socrates' linkage of the sub-segments with 'states of mind' seems clearly to portray the Line as a hierarchy or continuum, not an analogy.

In the end commentators are simply divided on this question (so to speak), and evidence in the text seems insufficient to settle it. Perhaps Plato is just packing too much into one image. But

¹⁸ Annas, p. 149.

some authors express optimism. As one notes¹⁹, here ‘Plato has engaged his reader in a practical task as nowhere else in his dialogues’, and we should appreciate the opportunity to sweat a little. And another²⁰: the defects in the image prevent us from taking it too dogmatically. We’re forced to work with it and go beyond image to reality. Plato would be pleased.

A second point concerns Plato’s understanding of dialectic. One should note that dialectic, like the ‘reason’ of sub-segment B, *also* works from hypotheses, a point Glaucon leaves out of his summary. Yet the dialectician ‘treats [hypotheses²¹] not as [self-evident] principles but as starting points and steps in the ascent to ... the first principle of everything’ (511c). Mitchell and Lucas, commenting on Plato’s description of dialectic in the *Phaedo*, have noted a similarity between it and Hempel’s and Popper’s hypothetical-deductive method in the natural sciences: one forms a hypothesis, draws the consequences, searches for contradictions and, if none are found, then posits the hypothesis as true and its contradictions as false. The difference for Plato is of course his belief that dialectic will, eventually, hit upon assured knowledge of the Good (531d ff)²².

The comparison is helpful because it emphasizes that dialectic is cumulative, even though recognition of the Good may itself happen in an instant. Mitchell and Lucas illustrate this further with an image of a ‘ruined cathedral’²³, which is worth recounting. Imagine approaching a ruined building of which you know nothing – it could have been almost anything. Piece by piece you pick up fragments and consider what they were *for*, provisionally marking each one. You don’t regard these markings as self-evident – they’re ‘hypothetical’ at best – but you proceed and eventually reach ‘higher’ hypotheses (e.g., ‘all of these were part of an arch’). Finally, quite suddenly, ‘you “see” the entire plan, you grasp the concept underlying the design’ (Mitchell and Lucas), and quickly move back ‘down’ through the pieces you’ve marked, confirming or revising your earlier guesses to put everything in its proper place. The moment of insight here at *least* parallels Plato’s ‘first principle of everything’, and depending on one’s reading may be identified with the Form of the Good.

¹⁹ Diskin, p. 236.

²⁰ Denyer, p. 296.

²¹ Lee has ‘assumptions’. I follow Bloom, who seems closer to the Greek here (as ever).

²² A conviction Plato shares with Bloom, who defines dialectic as ‘the art of friendly conversation’ which, ‘beginning from the commonly held opinions, will lead to an ultimate agreement’ (Bloom, p. 407).

²³ Mitchell and Lucas, pp. 104-5.

Allegory of the Cave

Exposition

The details of the allegory (514a-521b) are familiar. Prisoners are bound from childhood in fetters against a wall, such that they cannot move their heads, are made to watch shadows projected on a far wall as on a screen. These shadows are cast by the light of a fire, before which ‘puppeteers’ carry ‘figures of men and animals’. The prisoners take these shadows to be ‘the real things’. We are asked to consider ‘what would naturally happen’ to a prisoner released from his bonds, first ‘compelled’ to look at the fire then ‘forcibly dragged’ up the steep ascent to the outside world. There, once acclimating to the light by looking first at shadows and reflections and then at the ‘heavenly bodies and the sky itself at night’, finally the prisoner looks directly at the sun ‘as it is in itself’ without using any medium. In light of this vision, he realizes that this sun in fact ‘controls everything in the visible world, and is responsible for everything that he and his fellow-prisoners used to see’. Happy in the contemplation of this insight the prisoner will not desire to return to the cave, but (Socrates says) will be ‘persuaded or compelled’ to do so to honor ‘the unity of the whole’.

As noted this allegory is explicitly related to ‘what preceded it’, and in some ways does uncontroversially parallel the Line. The cave with its fire is the visible realm with its sun; the upper world is the intelligible realm of the forms, and the final thing perceived directly – the sun – is identified with the Form of the Good.

Critical Issues

Yet there are important ways in which the Cave does not parallel the Line. In the Cave we have two unambiguously distinct worlds, visible and intelligible as in the Sun, with no suggestion of continuity as in the Line. In this sense the Cave is more pessimistic than the line about movement from one world to the other. From the Line one may imagine that simple talent and effort can do the job, but the Cave makes clear that powerful forces are at work against the philosopher²⁴ (bonds, the steep ascent, a tendency to be blinded), and that the philosopher may herself rebel and need to be compelled, perhaps violently²⁵. And of course the apex of the Cave image, the Form of the Good, is absent from the Line.

²⁴ Bloom, p. 403.

²⁵ A circumstance familiar to many high school educators.

More schematically, it has been suggested that the Line's sub-segments and the stages in the Cave do not clearly correspond²⁶. This is most clear inside the cave. We are told that looking at shadows represents *eikasia* while seeing the puppets represents *pistis*. The prisoners are said to be 'like us'²⁷, yet they almost *always* confuse shadows for reality (literally) – and again, how often do we do this? When the prisoners finally do turn and look at the puppets themselves – bringing them into sub-segment C, *pistis*, containing our own ordinary beliefs – they are dazzled and in pain. There is no parallel for this in the Line or in our own ordinary experience. To square the two images one needs either to enlarge the Line's sub-segment D (*eikasia*) to include most ordinary beliefs, or else enlarge the meaning of 'looking at shadows' in the Cave. Most commentators (Annas, Bloom, et al.) choose the latter. Bloom for instance suggests that it is the prisoners' attachment to their particular city which 'binds them to certain authoritative opinions about things' and sets them within 'horizons constituted by law or convention' (404). One moves from *eikasia* to *pistis*, on this view, when one recognizes these opinions and horizons as the constructions they are²⁸.

Whatever reading one adopts it seems clear that Cave and Line are not strictly parallel, and that one does well to take Plato's 'what preceded it' to include not Line only but also the other 'philosophical' passages. The Cave functions masterfully in the way Plato claims to have intended it – as a parable of 'the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition' (514a). For one determined to find a closer connection it may be suggested that the Line is 'individual', showing the progression in its 'pure' form, while the Cave is 'social'²⁹, revealing the interpersonal and even physiological obstacles one will encounter – though this will be subject to argument.

Conclusion

We may now return to the questions posed above: (1) Do Sun, Line, and Cave form a coherent picture? And (2) what can we learn about the Form of the Good?

As to the first question, I think it demands a negative answer. There is no single picture here, at least strictly speaking. I have noted many points at which these images fail to coincide and these seem too numerous to allow for the three to be harmonized. Yet of course they *are* related in some way, as Plato clearly means them to be. All three stress vision and sight. Rosen sees each image as

²⁶ On this point I follow Annas, pp. 154-5.

²⁷ Lee translates as, 'they [the prisoners] are drawn from life'.

²⁸ To complicate matters, though in a way which seems to support Bloom's reading, Plato (at 517d) suggests that the puppets *also* represent 'justice', leaving the prisoners to dispute about 'shadows of justice'. So we have a metaphor within a metaphor.

²⁹ The question of what the Cave allegorizes – soul or city – is beyond our scope here.

belonging to a different genre: the Sun is primarily ontological, the Line epistemological, and the Cave serves to introduce something conspicuously absent in the first two – ‘human life’³⁰. Annas suggests that taken together the three illustrate ‘the place of the Good in the just person’s knowledge, and the form that knowledge takes’³¹.

The second question may then be related to the first, but it is harder. Every passage considered except the Line includes some mention of the Form of the Good. An excellent essay by Seel³² suggests that Plato here presents a ‘wanted poster’ for the Good – i.e., he lists its characteristics but never its real identity, which is of course revealed only to true philosophers, not us. On the basis of these characteristics, some of which I noted above in connection with the Sun, it seems to me that three broad *sorts* of understanding of the Good are possible³³.

1. *The Form of the Good is utterly transcendent*, ‘beyond being’, and is the source of all truth, knowledge, and being. It is the final cause of everything. Being transcendent it is absolute, not-relative to anything, and wholly impersonal. As also for angels, *particular* goods, people, or situations are of no interest to it. Annas, Rosen, and many others defend some version of this.
2. *The Form of the Good is (in a sense) immanent*. A vision of the Good is *useful* to us, and lets us derive benefit from the other knowledge we possess³⁴. Penner suggests that Plato would better have called it the Form of Advantage or of Benefit³⁵, and Rowe argues that we should regard the Form of the Good as virtually identical with our the practical, human good³⁶.
3. *The Form of the Good is the ‘structure of ideas’ or ‘eternal plan’* according to which all Forms are ordered. This is suggested by Mitchell and Lucas’s picture of the ruined cathedral. Rosen seems also to defend this view, holding that the Good is beyond being ‘in the metaphorical sense that it is neither this nor that of a separate and definable kind but is rather a property or set of properties of Platonic Ideas, namely, intelligibility, stability, and eternity’³⁷.

³⁰ Rosen, p. 269. Cf. Annas, p. 156: ‘the Cave is a dynamic image whereas the other two are static’.

³¹ Annas, p. 156.

³² Seel (2007) opens his essay with a thorough catalog of characteristics listed on the ‘wanted poster’, drawing on all the passages here under consideration.

³³ Of course I am aware that listing these as I do risks running roughshod over important distinctions and details. I offer these only as an analytic tool which is hopefully not too crude or distortive.

³⁴ Cf. *Republic* 505a: It is ‘that from which things that are just and so on derive their *usefulness* and *value*’.

³⁵ Penner, p. 178.

³⁶ Such is the thesis of Rowe’s article (2007), which he defends based on a reading of several earlier dialogues.

³⁷ Rosen, p. 262

Of these the third, ‘structure’ or ‘property’ reading, and especially Rosen’s version, seems to me most able to bring together the Sun, Line, and Cave images, though this will be the subject of argument and cannot be pursued here.

These philosophical passages in the *Republic* may be set alongside related passages in the *Phaedrus*, where beauty awakens the soul to a ‘recollection’ of the Forms, and the *Symposium*, where *eros*, creativity, and (again) a love of beauty drive one ultimately to philosophy. Simone Weil has described these other texts as revealing ‘the way to salvation through feeling’, and indeed they seem far removed from the *Republic*’s austere salvation through thought and dialectic. Yet all three texts are products of the same author, and in each case the philosophic quest is presented as a deeply personal experience (though never ‘subjective’), always eluding precise verbal expression. The ambiguities in Plato’s presentation are in this sense perhaps ultimately fruitful, forcing his hearers to work through his claims rather than accepting them as dogma.

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