



The Myth of the Cave



by Plato

edited by Raymond Souland, Jr.
& Kassandra Souland

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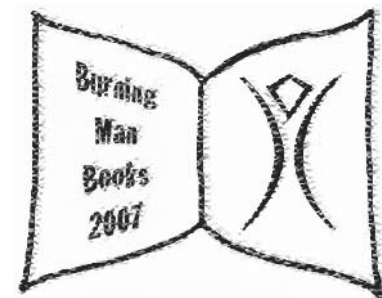
PORTLAND, OREGON



SCRIPTOR PRESS

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Number Fifty-two

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Burning Man Books is
an imprint of
Scriptor Press
2442 NW Market Street-#363
Seattle, Washington 98107
cenacle@mindspring.com
www.geocities.com/scriptorpress

*This volume in remembrance of a grizzled old philosophy professor who
walked early mornings into a very large college classroom and tried to
share the wisdom of the ancients with an unruly and barely comprehend-
ing herd of yawning freshmen.*

This volume was composed
in the AGaramond font
in PageMaker 7.0 on the
Macintosh G4 computer

[The great Greek teacher Socrates is speaking with Glaucon, an older brother of Plato. Socrates speaks first.]



“I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber like a cave, with a long entrance open to the daylight and as wide as the cave. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Some way off, behind and higher up, a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets.”

“I see.”

“Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, projecting above it and including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and all sorts of other materials, and that some of these men, as you would expect, are talking and some not.”

“An odd picture and an odd sort of prisoner.”

“They are drawn from life,” I replied. “For, tell me, do you think our prisoners could see anything of themselves or their fellows except the shadows thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite them?”

“How could they see anything else if they were prevented from moving their heads all their lives?”

“And would they see anything more of the objects carried along the road?”

“Of course not.”

“Then if they were able to talk to each other, would they not assume that the shadows they saw were the real things?”

“Inevitably.”

“And if the wall of their prison opposite them reflected sound, don’t you think that they would suppose, whenever one of the passers-by on the road spoke, that the voice belonged to the shadow passing before them?”

“They would be bound to think so.”

“And so in every way they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were the whole truth.”

“Yes, inevitably.”

“Then think what would naturally happen to them if they were released from their bonds and cured of their delusions. Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire; all these actions would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects of which he used to see the shadows. What do you think he would say if he was told that what he used to see was so much empty nonsense and that he was now nearer reality and seeing more correctly, because he was turned towards objects that were more real, and if on top of that he were compelled to say what each of the passing objects was when it was pointed out to him? Don't you think he would be at a loss, and think that what he used to see was far truer than the objects now being pointed out to him?”

“Yes, far truer.”

“And if he were made to look directly at the light of the fire, it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and retreat to the things which he could see properly, which he would think really clearer than the things being shown him.”

“Yes.”

“And if,” I went on, “he were forcibly dragged up the steep and rugged ascent and not let go till he had been dragged out into the sunlight, the process would be a painful one, to which he would much object, and when he emerged into the light his eyes would be so dazzled by the glare of it that he wouldn't be able to see a single one of the things he was now told were real.”

“Certainly not at first,” he agreed.

“Because, of course, he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the upper world outside the cave. First he would find it easiest to look at shadows, next at the reflections of men and other objects in water, and later on at the objects themselves. After that he would find it easier to observe the heavenly bodies and the sky itself at night, and to look at the light of the moon and stars rather than at the sun and its light by day.”

“Of course.”

“The thing he would be able to do last would be to look directly at the sun itself, and gaze at it without using reflections in water or any other medium, but as it is in itself.”

“That must come last.”

“Later on he would come to the conclusion that it is the sun that produces the changing seasons and years and controls everything in the visible world, and is in a sense responsible for everything that he and his fellow-prisoners used to see.”

“That is the conclusion which he would obviously reach.”

“And when he thought of his first home and what passed for wisdom there, and of his fellow-prisoners, don't you think he would congratulate himself on his good fortune and be sorry for them?”

“Very much so.”

“There was probably a certain amount of honor and glory to be won among the prisoners, and prizes for keensightedness for those best able to remember the order of sequence among the passing shadows and so be best able to divine their future appearances. Will our released prisoner hanker after those prizes or envy this power or honor? Won't he be more likely to feel, as Homer says, that he would far rather be ‘a serf in the house of some landless man,’ or indeed anything else in the world, than hold the opinions and live the life that they do?”

“Yes,” he replied, “he would prefer anything to a life like theirs.”

“Then what do you think would happen,” I asked, “if he went back to sit in his old seat in the cave? Wouldn't his eyes be blinded by the darkness, because he had come in suddenly out of the sunlight?”

“Certainly.”

“And if he had to discriminate between the shadows, in competition with the other prisoners, while he was still blinded and before his eyes got used to the darkness—a process that would take some time—wouldn't he be likely to make a fool of himself? And they would say that his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting. And if anyone tried to release them and lead them up, they would kill him if they could lay hands on him.”

“They certainly would.”

“The realm revealed by sight corresponds to the prison, and the light of the fire in the prison to the power of the sun. And you won't go

wrong if you connect the ascent into the upper world and the sight of the objects there with the upward progress of the mind into the intelligible region. That at any rate is my interpretation, which is what you are anxious to hear; the truth of the matter is, after all, known only to god. But in my opinion, for what it is worth, the final thing to be perceived in the intelligible region, and perceived only with difficulty, is the form of the good; once seen, it is inferred to be responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything, producing in the visible reason light and the source of light, and being in the intelligible region itself controlling source of truth and intelligence. And anyone who is going to act rationally either in public or private life must have sight of it.”

“I agree,” he said, “so far as I am able to understand you.”

“Then you will perhaps also agree with me that it won’t be surprising if those who get so far are unwilling to involve themselves in human affairs, and if their minds long to remain in the realm above. That’s what we should expect if our simile holds good again.”

“Yes, that’s to be expected.”

“Nor will you think it strange that anyone who descends from contemplation of the divine to human life and its ills should blunder and make a fool of himself, if, while still blinded and unaccustomed to the surrounding darkness, he’s forcibly put on trial in the law-courts or elsewhere about the shadows of justice or the figures of which they are shadows, and made to dispute about the notions of them held by men who have never seen justice itself.”

“There’s nothing strange in that.”

“But anyone with any sense,” I said, “will remember that the eyes may be unsighted in two ways, by a transition either from light to darkness or from darkness to light, and will recognize that the same thing applies to the mind. So when he sees a mind confused and unable to see clearly he will not laugh without thinking, but will ask himself whether it has come from a clearer world and is confused by the unaccustomed darkness, or whether it is dazzled by the stronger light of the clearer world to which it has escaped from its previous ignorance. The first condition of life is a reason for congratulation, the second for sympathy, though if one wants to laugh at it one can do so with less absurdity than at the mind that has descended from the daylight of the

upper world.”

“You put it very reasonably.”

“If this is true,” I continued, “we must reject the conception of education professed by those who say that they can put into the mind knowledge that was not there before—rather as if they could put sight into blind eyes.”

“It is a claim that it is certainly made,” he said.

“But our argument indicates that the capacity for knowledge is innate in each man’s mind, and that the organ by which he learns is like an eye which cannot be turned from darkness to light unless the whole body is turned; in the same way the mind as a whole must be turned away from the world of change until its eye can bear to look straight at reality, and at the brightest of all realities which is what we call the good. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes.”

“Then this turning around of the mind itself might be made a subject of professional skill, which would effect the conversion as easily and effectively as possible. It would not be concerned to implant sight, but to ensure that someone who had it already was not either turned in the wrong direction or looking the wrong way.”

“That may well be so.”

“The rest, therefore, of what are commonly called excellences of the mind perhaps resemble those of the body, in that they are not in fact innate, but are implanted by subsequent training and practice; but knowledge, it seems, must surely have a diviner quality, something which never loses its power, but whose effects are useful and salutary or again useless and harmful according to the direction in which it is turned. Have you never noticed how shrewd is the glance of the type of men commonly called bad but clever? They have small minds, but their sight is sharp and piercing enough in matters that concern them; it’s not that their sight is weak, but that they are forced to serve evil, so that the keener their sight the more effective that evil is.”

“That’s true.”

“But suppose,” I said, “that such natures were cut loose, when they were still children, from all the dead weights natural to this world of change and fastened on them by sensual indulgences like gluttony, which twist their minds’ vision to lower things, and suppose that when

so freed they were turned towards the truth, then this same part of these same individuals would have as keen a vision of truth as it has of the objects on which it is at present turned.”

“Very likely.”

“And is it not also likely, and indeed a necessary consequence of what we have said, that society will never be properly governed either by the uneducated, who have no knowledge of the truth, or by those who are allowed to spend all their lives in purely intellectual pursuits? The uneducated have no single aim in life to which all their actions, public and private, are to be directed; the intellectuals will take no practical action of their own accord, fancying themselves to be out of this world in some kind of earthly paradise.”

“True.”

“Then our job as lawgivers is to compel the best minds to attain what we have called the highest form of knowledge, and to ascend to the vision of the good as we have described, and when they have achieved this and see well enough, prevent them behaving as they are now allowed to.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Remaining in the upper world, and refusing to return again to the prisoners in the cave below and share their labors and rewards, whether trivial or serious.”

“But surely,” he protested, “that will not be fair. We shall be compelling them to live a poorer life than they might live.”

“The object of our legislation,” I reminded him again, “is not the special welfare of any particular class in our society, but of the society as a whole; and it uses persuasion or compulsion to unite all citizens and make them share together the benefits which each individually can confer on the community; and its purpose in fostering this attitude is not to leave everyone to please himself, but to make each man a link in the unity of the whole.”

“You are right; I had forgotten,” he said.

“You see, then, Glaucon,” I went on, “we shan’t be unfair to our philosophers, but shall be quite fair in what we say when we compel them to have some care and responsibility for others. We shall tell them that philosophers born in other states can reasonably refuse to take part in the hard work of politics; for society produces them quite involuntarily

and unintentionally, and it is only just that anything that grows up on its own should feel it has nothing to repay for an upbringing which it owes to no one. ‘But,’ we shall say, ‘we have bred you both for your own sake and that of the whole community to act as leaders and king-bees in a hive; you are better and more fully educated than the rest and better qualified to combine the practice of philosophy and politics. You must therefore each descend in turn and live with your fellows in the cave and get used to seeing in the dark; once you get used to it you will see a thousand times better than they do and will distinguish the various shadows, and know what they are shadows of, because you have seen the truth about things admirable and just and good. And so our state and yours will be really awake, and not merely dreaming like most societies today, with their shadow battles and their struggles for political power, which they treat as some great prize. The truth is quite different: the state whose prospective rulers come to their duties with least enthusiasm is bound to have the best and most tranquil government, and the state whose rulers are eager to rule the worst.’”

“I quite agree.”

“Then will our pupils, when they hear what we say, dissent and refuse to take their share of the hard work of government, even though spending the greater part of their time together in the pure air above?”

“They cannot refuse, for we are making a just demand of just men. But of course, unlike present rulers, they will approach the business of government as an unavoidable necessity.”

“Yes, of course,” I agreed. “The truth is that if you want a well-governed state to be possible, you must find for your future rulers some way of life they like better than government; for only then will you have government by the truly rich, those, that is, whose riches consist not of gold, but of the true happiness of a good and rational life. If you get, in public affairs, men whose life is impoverished and destitute of personal satisfactions, but who hope to snatch some compensation for their own inadequacy from a political career, there can never be good government. They start fighting for power, and the consequent internal and domestic conflicts ruin both them and society.”

“True indeed.”

“Is there any life except that of true philosophy which looks down on positions of political power?”

“None whatever.”

“But what we need is that the only men to get power should be men who do not love it, otherwise we shall have rivals’ quarrels.”

“That is certain.”

“Who else, then, will you compel to undertake the responsibilities of Guardians of our state, if it is not to be those who know most about the principles of good government and who have other rewards and a better life than the politician’s?”

“There is no one else.”