

## The Spiritual Meaning of Plato's Cave Allegory

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The need to explain ideas and meanings which our daily language fails to convey is an ancient problem. Certain truths and secrets were preserved in stories, apparently very simple, but with deeply symbolic content, and that was for two reasons: first, the need to protect that knowledge from those alien to a certain circle of students, the *unprepared*, so to say; but mainly, because their meaning was of such a nature, that it could not be expressed by normal language. Thus great sages used stories, fables, allegories which were meant to hide some deep truths which could only be understood by a developed intuition, or with the possession of certain keys.

Those stories mainly fall under the category of what we call myth. Myth is a notoriously hard concept to define. What the ancient Greeks called *muthos* was quite different from what we and the media nowadays call "myth". Originally myths were tales, stories, handed down from generation to generation. In archaic Greece the memorable was transmitted orally through poetry, which often relied on myth.

The question often arises, whether myths, including those stories we were told as children, hide some truth. In this sense, a curious statement H. P. Blavatsky made in the SD is often overlooked: she said that the study of the hidden meanings in myths and legends had occupied the greater portion of her life. This is something, isn't it. She was convinced that no mythological story has ever been pure fiction: each of them has an actual historical lining to it, and is a vehicle of certain universal truths being passed on. All the experience and learning, revealed and acquired, of the early races of mankind, those human beings who existed in times unrecorded by official history, found their pictorial expression in allegory and myth. Why? Because she thought the spoken word has a potency unknown to, unsuspected and disbelieved in, by the modern so-called sages. Certain vibrations in the air are sure to awaken corresponding powers, she said. Therefore, those events had to be harmlessly recorded in symbols or stories, so that their hidden meaning could be unveiled by free-thinkers. Blavatsky spoke of an ancient pre-historic "Universal Mystery Language" of symbols and myths.

When Alice Bailey, in *"The Labors of Hercules"*, calls the hero *"that great and ancient Son of God"* she means the hero really existed, historically. However, as with Christ, or Buddha, or Krishna, and others, the important point is not whether they existed or not, but *their exemplary character*: that is to say, their stories are meant to teach us something about ourselves, and serve as a model for the modern disciple on his path of spiritual unfoldment.

Starting with the beginning of the seventh century BC philosophy began to emerge. One of the greatest philosophers, Plato, broke to some extent from the philosophical tradition in that he keeps using myths and gives them some role to play in his philosophical discourse. There are many myths in Plato's dialogues: traditional myths, as well as myths that he invents. In general, he uses myth to teach philosophical matters that may be too difficult to follow if expounded in a blunt, philosophical discourse. To some, it seems strange that a

Great philosopher like Plato resorted to myths as an educational means to explain certain ideas. He was a master of the Greek language and had all the capacity to use speech and words to explain any truth, no matter how obscure it may be. But he was also aware that in some cases a symbolic story would speak louder than a million words.

Plato was a student of the acclaimed teacher Socrates, and perhaps the most influential experience in Plato's life was the death of his revered teacher. Plato was about twenty-eight when Socrates was condemned to death by drinking the notorious hemlock. Following Socrates' death, Plato left Athens and traveled to Egypt, where he is said to have sought initiation into the Egyptian Mysteries. After an initial rejection, the ancients, according to tradition, did instruct Plato in the sacred and spiritual doctrines, and he was advanced in knowledge and understanding of the ancient mysteries. Following his travels and intellectual search for light, Plato returned to Athens and established a school, the Academy, where he instructed some of the greatest intellectual minds of Western Civilization, including Aristotle. Today, many scholars are sure to claim that he taught more than he wrote, and that there was an inner secret spiritual teaching being discussed and practiced in his Academy.

In one of the largest dialogues, the Republic, Plato uses a powerful allegory. This allegory is a kind of myth, meant to illustrate and instruct. In this story, human prisoners are held captive deep in the earth. Their necks and ankles chained, they have never seen the outside world, the sun, or each other. They are bound facing a stone wall. Light from the outside world shines in the cave casting shadows on the stone wall each prisoner is facing. Behind the captives is a fire, and in front of the fire a walkway on which men carry puppets and items from the outside world. These items include statues of gods, men, animals, and trees. The bondsmen have no understanding of their condition: their world is made up only of the illusions of distorted shadows cast upon the stone wall before them. The sounds and voices heard by those kept enslaved are only echoes from the outside. As they sit in darkness, their reality is limited and their morals only based on their own understandings of distorted truths and sounds from the outside world. The allegory continues to explain that the prisoners cling to their own prejudices and self-conceived notions of reality. Plato asserts that if the prisoners were released to turn and see the elements that created their reality, the prisoners would be blinded by the light of the fire. The prisoners, according to Plato, would quickly become angered by what they viewed, and desire to return to their shackled condition. However, Plato presents an amazing assumption: if only one prisoner had his chains removed, and dared go beyond his initial discomfort, the response would be vastly different. The prisoner would turn to see the fire, the walk way, and the other prisoners bound in a blind state. The allegory continues with the prisoner being led out of the cave by an agent and presented to the sunlit outside world. There he would finally see with his own eyes that the realities and morals of his world are only an illusion of the world about him.

Let us give this analogy some thought. Plato's allegory begins with men in a darkened condition. The men in the cave are groping in darkness and bound to the blighted beliefs of superstition and self-prescribed truths. It is noteworthy to point out that the allegory takes place within a cave. Caverns may be considered, symbolically, to be "a symbol of the

darkness of ignorance, as they are impenetrable to the light"; so the cave is a symbol of the imprisonment of the human soul and mind by ignorance, glamour, and illusion". A cave is an enclosed place, but also a protection. Hollow and self-contained places are related to Cancer and the Moon, the sign the Sun is now passing through. These limits contain everything that we consider our own, our kin, our past and family. So in some way a cave indicates the early stages of human growth, the childhood. Aristotle said that life on earth may be compared with life in a cave. The shackled individual in Plato's cave is kept in darkness to reality. During this time, he uses shadows and distorted noises to conceive the reality that is around him. At first, every aspiring human being is held in the bondage of ignorance, but at some stage an inner urge is noticed, and one searches, gropes, and gnaws for oneself. We are no longer satisfied by the broken image of ourselves, and we begin to suspect that everything we hold true and solid, are but passing shadows.

But then Plato presents an occurrence where all the prisoners are released to turn and see the images within the cave. But their eyes are not able to adjust to the offensive brightness of the fire's light. They quickly become disappointed by the image and desire to return to their once darkened condition. When certain recognitions are made, that we feel uncomfortable, courage is needed, as we feel tempted to go back to our dear comfortable things which make up our illusory world.

But if one of those prisoners were led out of the cave, his shackles removed, a new world would be revealed to him. He would be brought to the understanding that he was in a state of bondage. He would see the reality outside the cave, but not immediately, because he would first be blinded by the light. Let us allow Plato himself to tell us what happens then: *"When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities". "First he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day. Last of all he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is".*

So we have two aspects then, two stages, so to say. 1. The recognition that everything that is finite is illusion; and all that is eternal and infinite is reality. Form, color, that which we hear, feel, or we see with our mortal eyes, exists so far as it can be conveyed to each of us through the senses. Blavatsky wrote these words. She said, we all live under the powerful dominion of phantasy. However, the second aspect involves the recognition of those highest and invisible originals emanated from the thought of the Unknown, which are real, permanent things, forms and ideas. Of these we see but their reflection on earth, and they are totally dependent upon the psychic organization of the person who beholds them. In a way, we have, as human beings, our future outlined here. Can we see how true it is what the Tibetan has told us, that *life is, in terms of consciousness, one of revelation?* We may even imagine that the unnamed one who leads the released prisoner into the light can be one of those who are acquainted with a new type of perception, and with the principles ruling a new world, namely, a member of the New Group of World Servers.

So the freeman or woman, the determined disciple, is caused to pass through the ascension of knowledge to seek the bright light at the pinnacle of the summit, where she or he is brought to full illumination and entitled to freely see the realities of the world.

In the meantime, in a world always demanding update, it is so good to realize that we can still learn from ancient thinkers, that there is a perennial wisdom with no due date. We wonder how many world problems would be solved, if an increasing number of human beings gather the strength to symbolically leave the cave, and ***“build a lighted house and therein dwell”***, when he has seen the true light. There is no “red pill” for that: Ariadne’s thread is to be found inside. The teaching for us, here and now, is that we must not trust appearances, and search for the inner causes of all things and events. These ideas are just mine, I invite you all to read this allegory and draw your own conclusions.

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