

# The Line and the Cave

JOHN MALCOLM

This article was stimulated by certain discussions of the Line and Cave passages in the *Republic*. These purported to find serious difficulties in the "traditional" view that Plato meant the two figures to be parallel. I shall offer an interpretation involving a slight modification of this traditional position. It avoids these difficulties and, I submit, indicates a unity of structure in the *Republic* which might otherwise be overlooked.

The traditional reading was that there were four levels of enlightenment in the Cave Allegory (*Rep.* 514a-517e) and these corresponded to the four parts of the Line (509d-511e).<sup>1</sup> This may be illustrated as follows:

	The Line	The Cave	
Noesis	Intelligence (νοῦς or ἐπιστήμη) —	Dialectic using L <sub>4</sub> — only Forms	Contemplation of C <sub>4</sub> actual objects in the world above
	Understanding (διάνοια) —	Mathematical L <sub>3</sub> reasoning starting from sensible figures	Viewing of C <sub>3</sub> reflections of objects in the world above
Doxa	Faith (πίστις) —	Material objects	Seeing the C <sub>2</sub> objects in the Cave which cause the shadows
	Conjecture (εἰκασία) —	Images, shadows, reflections in water	Watching of the C <sub>1</sub> shadows on the wall in the Cave

Intelligible  
(νοητόν)

Visible  
(ὄρατόν)

<sup>1</sup> See J. Adam, *The Republic of Plato*, Vol. 2, (Cambridge, 1929), p. 95, note to 517a-518b.

There is no question but that there are four divisions to the Line. These represent four different "states of soul" (*hexeis* or *pathemata*). At 511d the four states which arise in the soul are called *noesis*, *dianoia*, *pistis* and *eikasia*, but at 534a we find *episteme* substituted for *noesis* and the latter term used to include *dianoia* as well. *Nous* is used as equivalent to *episteme* at 534b and at 511d. Accordingly, in my diagram I have modified the list given at 511d.

Two difficulties arise when we turn to the Cave:

- (i) Are there four main divisions to the Allegory of the Cave?
- (ii) Do these divisions correspond to the parallel divisions of the Line, i.e.,  $C_1$  to  $L_1$ ,  $C_2$  to  $L_2$ ,  $C_3$  to  $L_3$ ,  $C_4$  to  $L_4$ ?

I now consider the first problem. The Cave represents the educational progress of the soul (514a). Plato does not explicitly state that there are four main stages in this enlightenment and any such interpretation must be offered with caution. But I do not believe that we must agree with the following passage in Robinson: "The prisoner's progress from captivity to the vision of the sun does not divide into three changes any more definitely than into two or ten; and the various stages at which he may be supposed to remain for a time are not more definitely four than three or any number."<sup>1</sup>

If one can show that the four stages given in the traditional interpretation correspond to the various levels of mental development we find in the *Republic* and, further, that they are "parallel" to the four sections of the Line, then there is little doubt that Plato meant to emphasize these four divisions in the Allegory of the Cave.

I have given the two lower divisions of the Cave ( $C_1$  and  $C_2$ ) as sections of the Visible, the two higher divisions ( $C_3$  and  $C_4$ ) as sections of the Intelligible. The justification for this is the passage 517b where the prison is taken to be the world revealed to sight and the fire in the cave symbolizes the sun. The entire underground area is a prison. Only when the prisoner leaves the cave and contemplates the things above does he enter the intelligible region. It follows that the turning to see the objects ( $C_2$ ) cannot symbolize coming to know the forms, for the forms have the highest position in the intelligible region. Indeed, at this stage, the prisoner is described (515d) as *nearer* to reality (*ἐγγυτέρω τοῦ ὄντος*) and turned towards more real things (*πρὸς μᾶλλον ὄντα*). As Ferguson

<sup>1</sup> Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (2nd. ed.), (Oxford, 1953), p. 182.

indicates,<sup>1</sup> we cannot take this as meaning “turned toward real things” (πρὸς τὰ ὄντα). The real things are discovered by dialectic. At 532a we have the power of dialectic identified with the seeing of real animals (ἀὐτὰ τὰ ζῶα), real stars, and the real sun. These realities in the world above are contrasted (532c) with the puppets on the wall which are *eidola* not *onta*.<sup>2</sup> I conclude that the step from C<sub>1</sub> to C<sub>2</sub> must be interpreted as an advance within the realm of the Visible and while the soul gains important educational improvement its cognitive objects are still in the world of “becoming”.

W. D. Ross suggests<sup>3</sup> that Plato has in fact two incompatible interpretations of the Cave. These occur at 517a8-b6 and 532a1-d1. I shall not quarrel with his analysis of the first passage which, except for the debatable distinction between Mathematical Ideas and Higher Ideas, is in harmony with my own reading. On the other hand, I do not think there is any change in the second passage and I believe that Ross is misreading Plato here. Plato describes the turning of the prisoners from the shadows to the images in the cave (C<sub>2</sub>) and thence to the shadows of the things in the world above (C<sub>3</sub>) as due to “the whole course of study in the arts”. Ross takes him to mean the mathematical arts and so interprets Plato as saying that *dianoia* is “symbolized by looking at *skeuasta* (*eidola*) in the cave and at images of animals, stars, moon, and sun”. This is, of course, quite inconsistent with the proposed parallelism where C<sub>3</sub> must correspond to L<sub>3</sub> alone. Ross concludes, “In Plato’s final interpretation, then, there is no distinction in the cave symbol answering to the distinction between *eikasia* and *pistis*. Both together are symbolized by the earliest stage in the life of the prisoners”.<sup>4</sup>

I submit that this complex and confusing portrayal of Plato’s procedure is due to Ross himself. As noted above, he identifies “arts” with “mathematical arts”. But what of *mousike*, mentioned in connection with the arts at 521a and 522b? If the “whole course of study in the arts” (532c) includes both music and the mathematical arts, then *dianoia* is limited to mathematics alone and there is no difference between the first passage and the second.

I have defended the standard interpretation of the Cave and now propose to compare it with the Divided Line. It has been said that Plato

<sup>1</sup> Ferguson, A. S., “Plato’s Simile of Light again”, *Classical Quarterly*, XXVIII (1934), p. 204, n. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Plato’s Theory of Ideas*, (Oxford, 1951), pp. 74-75.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

never intended there to be any correspondence between them.<sup>1</sup> In the light of his own remarks as to the incompleteness of his images (532d, 534a) it must be admitted that whatever degree of correspondence may be found cannot be expected to be precise or worked out in detail. However, I agree with Gould that “it seems beyond coincidence that, while there are clearly four divisions of the line, and, apparently at least, four stages in the cave allegory, these should not be in some degree parallel”.<sup>2</sup> The structure of Books 6 and 7 indicates that some parallels are to be expected. Plato passes from the Line to the Cave, then to a discussion of the three levels of education and then again to the Line. Furthermore, there is a remark of Plato’s to the effect that the Cave image must be applied to what has gone before (Ταύτην . . . τὴν εἰκόνα . . . προσεπτέον ἄπασαν τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν λεγομένοις) (517ab). It is argued that this must refer primarily to the Sun<sup>3</sup> (506e-509d) and indirectly, at most, the Line.<sup>4</sup> This is certainly no proof that the Line and Cave are “parallel” in any way but it does hint at a unity between Sun, Line and Cave. If we can, on other grounds, establish a correspondence between the sections of the two last mentioned, this should not surprise us. A discussion of the Sun Image is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>5</sup>

I shall argue for a persuasive parallel between the Line and the Cave and so will give an affirmative answer to the second question on page 39 above. There does not seem to be any real difficulty with the sections found under the label “Intelligible” (L<sub>3</sub>, L<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>3</sub>, C<sub>4</sub>). The dialectic and resulting knowledge of L<sub>4</sub> is surely to be identified with the dialectic of the Cave Allegory (532a). Thus L<sub>4</sub> corresponds to C<sub>4</sub>. At L<sub>3</sub> the mathematicians are described as using sensible figures. These are treated as images or shadows in water of the true realities, the forms. This evidently corresponds to the objects seen by the man at C<sub>3</sub> (516a). He is engaged in studies that “dream about being” and cannot clearly see reality until he stops using uncriticised hypotheses (cf. 511a). I conclude that C<sub>3</sub> is parallel to L<sub>3</sub> and represents the stage of enlightenment reached by someone who is following the course of study from arithmetic to harmonics (522a-532a).

At this point one might be tempted to venture into a discussion of the

<sup>1</sup> Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-183; also Joseph, *Knowledge and the Good in Plato's Republic*, Oxford Classical and Philosophical Monographs (Oxford, 1948), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> *The Development of Plato's Ethics* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 174-175.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-186; Ross, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>4</sup> Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> For evidence of the continuity between Sun, Line and Cave see J. E. Raven, “Sun, Divided Line and Cave”, *Classical Quarterly*, n.s. III (1953), p. 26.

“mathematicals” with which some scholars<sup>1</sup> try to populate  $L_3$ . My purpose, however, is merely to try to show a rough correspondence between Line and Cave and not to analyse each section exhaustively.

So far the path has been relatively easy. The real difficulty arises when we turn to the realm of the Visible ( $L_1$ ,  $L_2$ ,  $C_1$ ,  $C_2$ ). H. W. B. Joseph puts the problem as follows:

The crux of the matter, if we are to make the Allegory of the Cave correspond with the Line, is in the lowest stage. The contents of the lower division of the *horaton* are *skiai kai eikones* and the prisoners see nothing but shadows; do the prisoners typify men who see no more of what exists than objects of *eikasia*? The correspondence of the Line and the Cave seems to require it, and yet surely it is not true. Who lives all his life at this level? Do not common men take for real the animals and plants and human works they see, of which the lower *horata* are shadows and images, as the shadows in the cave are of the marionettes? And yet the prisoners are unaware of the marionettes until the conversion which few undergo begins.<sup>2</sup>

The ordinary uneducated man is at  $C_1$  in the Cave, chained so as to see only the shadows on the wall. But he is at  $L_2$  on the Line, for he can certainly recognize “everything that grows and everything that is made.” On the assumption that  $C_1$  and  $L_2$  must be made to correspond, scholars have adopted ingenious devices such as dropping  $L_1$  or equating  $L_1$  and  $L_2$ .<sup>3</sup> These efforts have not proved convincing and it seems that the presently accepted view (Raven and Gould are exceptions) is that the two images are not intended to be parallel.

I believe the key to a solution is to be found in the identification of the three levels of the Cave Allegory with the stages in the education of the philosophic rulers of the state.  $C_4$  corresponds to dialectic, the highest level of insight;  $C_3$  to the study of mathematics where students are in the “world of the intelligible” but are still only dreaming about the forms (533bc). Thus they are represented as seeing only *copies* or images and reflections in water. Now let us take  $C_2$ , where the prisoners are released and become aware of the “more real” artifacts, as symbolizing music and gymnastic, the first stage in Plato’s educational program. The Cave Allegory may be summarized as follows (*Rep.* 521c-535a):

<sup>1</sup> Ross, *op. cit.*, pp. 59, 65.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Many of these are listed by Joseph, *ibid.*, pp. 34-41.

Knowledge, attained through dialectic	$C_4$	↑ ↓	The
The study of mathematics	$C_3$		Intelligible
True belief, attained through <i>mousike</i>	$C_2$	↑ ↓	The
The uneducated state of the common man	$C_1$		Visible

The first step is that of music and gymnastic and will inculcate true belief. What are the pupils to gain by this education? It is certainly not the ability to discern particular chairs, horses or shooting stars. Their training is to enable them to distinguish the true images of justice, goodness and the like, for a man needs education truly to recognize the particular instantiations of such value-forms. Here we have what we are looking for, a step ( $C_1$  to  $C_2$ ) in moral enlightenment which does not bring the soul out of the realm of the Visible. The figures carried along the wall are symbols of a degree of enlightenment (true belief). It is not to be supposed that they, *qua* material objects, are to be the objects of true belief after release though education. No training in "music" is needed to enable one to recognize chairs. Someone completely lacking Plato's corrective educational program may surely be expected to do this.

To return to the Line, the ordinary man is at  $L_2$  (the ability to recognize particulars) with respect to material objects but not with respect to "value-particulars". He needs education to bring his knowledge of moral qualities to the level of his knowledge of things. As for the Cave, when the soul reaches  $C_2$  it has the same level of enlightenment with respect to justice, courage and the like as it has at  $L_2$  with material objects. If we are permitted to assume that, for Plato, particular instances of beauty and temperance are of the same ontological level as particular beds and tables, we shall find a correspondence between  $L_2$  and  $C_2$ .  $C_2$  would contain a sub-class of the objects included in  $L_2$ .

Robinson objects:

If there were a precise correlation, the state of the unreleased prisoner would have to be "conjecture", and the state immediately succeeding his release would have to be the

adjacent state in the Line, namely *pistis*. But *pistis*, which means conviction or confidence, and refers at least primarily to our ordinary attitude to "the animals about us and all that grows and everything that is made" (510a), bears no resemblance to the prisoner's condition immediately after his release; for the latter is expressly described as bewilderment and as the belief that his present objects are less real than his previous objects (515d). In view of this observation we must say that Plato's Cave is not parallel to his Line, even if he himself asserts that it is.<sup>1</sup>

I cannot see that this is conclusive. Plato represents the prisoner as bewildered after his release. There is no indication that he is to stay in this condition and that, after a given time, he will not be able to treat the artifacts as more real than their shadows. Whoever mistakenly believes that the best things in life are those which give the most physical pleasure may, when released from this conviction, have difficulty adjusting his vision to the true instantiations of the Good.

There remain  $L_1$  and  $C_1$ . The epistemological status of the objects of cognitive attention (shadows, images) of the chained prisoners is surely on the same level as the images, shadows and reflections of  $L_1$ . Therefore  $L_1$  and  $C_1$  correspond and the proof of a parallelism between the two images is complete.

This interpretation is acceptable only if some content can be given to the shadows and images of  $C_1$ . These must represent the faulty moral beliefs of the uneducated man including the deceptive teachings of the sophists and poets. As N. R. Murphy puts it, "The momentary [sic.] state of visual *eikasia* illustrates the general mental condition of those whom their natural appetites, reinforced by . . . vicious education, hold down as if by bonds to the lowest levels of moral experience."<sup>2</sup> At 520d we have a reference to the existing cities which are ruled by men who fight over shadows, thinking that holding office is a great good.

It may be objected that the transition from  $C_1$  to  $C_2$  cannot be properly interpreted as a transition from faulty everyday moral notions to true belief on such matters, for it involves a progress from shadows to images, from things of lesser reality to things of greater reality.

In reply I offer the following evidence: Plato gives us three levels of moral enlightenment in the *Republic*. There is (i) the knowledge of the philosophers who know the forms, (ii) the true belief of those with proper conditioning through music and gymnastic and (iii) the less

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 183; also Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> Murphy, "The 'Simile of Light' in Plato's *Republic*", *Classical Quarterly*, XXVL (1932), p. 101. Murphy denies that Plato intended to distinguish moral *eikasia* from moral *pistis*.

permanent, less satisfactory beliefs of the uneducated. "For I should think that you would call something else than courage the true belief . . . which has come about without education and is like that of a beast or a slave" (430c). Levels (i) and (ii) differ ontologically, for the people at (ii) recognize correctly the true instantiations or copies of the forms. What of (ii) and (iii)? Plato has a third, lower level of reality, for he refers to shadows or copies of particular visible things (copies of copies of the "truly real" forms). Moreover, he speaks of these three ontological levels with regard to moral qualities such as justice.

"Then do you think it at all surprising . . . if one . . . is compelled to contend in law courts or elsewhere concerning the shadows of the just or the images which throw those shadows, or to dispute concerning the manner in which those images are conceived by men who have never seen real justice?" (517e) (trans. Lindsay, Everyman).

The two higher levels of moral enlightenment incorporate the two higher levels of reality. I submit it is reasonable to interpret Plato as letting the lowest level of reality represent the lowest level of moral enlightenment. If this move is defensible, it follows that the traditional view of a close correlation between Line and Cave is correct. Furthermore, the linking of both these figures with the stages in the education of the philosopher-kings is vital to an appreciation of the structure of the *Republic*.

*Huron College, London, Ontario.*