

Exiting From and Returning to the Cave: Plato's Specific Methodology of Enlightenment

The significance of philosophy reaches through all time periods and cultures because of the universality of the human experience. Questions posed thousands of years ago hold the same validity in the present age, since by nature of being humans we encounter the same metaphysical, ethical, and practical dilemmas that have arisen since the dawn of the Homo Sapien. The specific ramifications of these dilemmas change as a product of many factors, especially technological and scientific advancement, however, each rational creature must grapple with the foundational questions of why, what, and how, at some point throughout their lifetime. Quandaries delving into the possible existence and consequent nature of the divine have decreased in mainstream philosophical relevance since the theoretical death of God was wrought by figures such as Darwin, Hegel, and Nietzsche, however, spirituality was a topic of primary concern in the pre-naturalistic youth of philosophy, especially Ancient Greece. Using Socrates as his literary mouthpiece, Ancient Greek philosopher Plato describes the qualities of the divine and the methodology of enlightenment through the famous allegory of the cave as found within Book VII of his Republic (Stephanus Numbers 514a-541b). This methodology, which Socrates calls dialectic,¹ appears to be what's presently known as the mystical experience.

One more crucial detail I would like to touch on in this introduction, is the distinction between contemporary application and hermeneutical interpretation of ancient texts. The former is the process that I, an undergraduate, will be undertaking in this paper, and the latter practice requires a much larger synthesis of historical data and scholarly weight resting behind it. Although my limited research supports the possibility that Plato, and the Ancient Greeks more broadly, were achieving altered states of consciousness with entheogenic compounds, this is a contentious claim among modern historians and

¹ The first explicit mention of dialectic in Book VII of The Republic can be found on page 531e.

anthropologists. Thus, the following interpretation of Plato's specific methodology of enlightenment exists among many, disparate interpretations with similar levels of historical plausibility.

Before I analyze Plato's work directly, it is essential to explain the phenomenon that I believe is being allegorized by his profound pictures of ascension. This methodology of ascension from the corporeal world of sense based reflections towards the divine forms being reflected, appears to be what psychedelic researchers have dubbed the mystical experience. This label originated from the research of Walter Pahnke (1969), wherein he laid the groundwork for the development of the Mystical Experience Questionnaire. The MEQ is a list of 30 phenomena accompanied by a 0-5 scaling system, that provided subjects with specific parameters to measure their otherwise ineffable contact with transcendence (Eisenberg 2021). Triggered by entheogenic compounds, socially structured religious practices, and other currently unidentified causes of hallucinations and altering of conscious states, the mystical experience is characterized by transcendence of regular perception, unification with the universe, and a sense that one has peered into a sacred, typically unobservable reality (Pahnke). Due to either the veridicality of these altered perceptions, or the power of human brains to draw significant wisdom and meaning from hallucinations, the mystical experience is almost always painted with a noetic quality, or enlightenment as Plato describes it in his allegory of the cave.

The intensity of these phenomena is generally correlated with the difficulty of the experience's genesis, and the blissful and noetic nature of the experience's peak is often followed by a painful dissolution of typical reality that allows one to dramatically alter their perceptions, often described as an *ego death*.² A common feature of one's first mystical experience is the recontextualization of their metaphysical beliefs, often involving the introduction of new perspectives regarding religion and spirituality, as well as newfound intrigue into ontology, or questions regarding the true nature of reality.

² Walter Pahnke elucidates "psychological ego death" in more detail on page 16 of his 1969 paper, *The Psychedelic Mystical Experience In the Human Encounter With Death*.

Sustained mystical practices such as prayer, meditation, and routine use of psychedelic compounds can facilitate the positive changes in character commonly associated with philosophical enlightenment, and lead to conflict if one's State³ attempts to maintain a dogmatic belief structure among its citizens. A further element of the mystical experience that is routine but not required, is an encounter with divinity. Walter Pahnke describes this perceived encounter in his research, writing "While some persons use such symbols as a More, a Beyond, or the Ground of Being, others speak of the presence of God as the most adequate reflection of what was encountered" (The Psychedelic Mystical Experience, pp. 18). All of these aforementioned metrics of the mystical experience appear symbolically in The Republic, which I shall now explain.

Book VII of Plato's Republic begins with Socrates conceptually beholding a dimly lit cave, within which prisoners have always been chained up to the effect that they are forced to stare at the cave wall opposite of a burning bonfire, that sits atop a raised platform behind them. In between the stationary prisoners and the flame, a bridge is erected across the cave floor upon which men carry vessels, statues, and figures of objects in such a way as to cast a shadow of these material puppets across the cave wall using the light of the fire. Some of these puppeteers are silent, but others speak, causing the prisoners to associate their words with the shadows they create as they pass by. Because these shadows are all the prisoners have ever seen, they take what appears before them to be the true nature of reality. They are convinced of this apparent truth by all of their available senses, as they have no reason to doubt what they have always known (515b). Outside of the cave there exists an upper world, full of real objects as opposed to wooden puppets made in their likenesses, as well as water, sky, and the sun. Socrates intentionally refers to the sun by the proper pronoun *him*,⁴ denoting a status of personhood

³ For our purposes, State can be defined as any organized body of societal authority, including but not limited to nations, religious institutions, and family structures.

⁴ This usage of *him* is present in Benjamin Jowett's 2016 translation, but is replaced with the pronoun *it* in other translations. In the context of the rest of the allegory, *it* denotes personhood just as much as *him*, since Plato's God is not necessarily gendered, but is loosely characterized as a male in some translations.

(516b). The philosopher does this to poetically describe the divine, as I will discuss in further detail later. When the prisoners, or common people, are liberated from their chains by a mysterious process later revealed to be dialectic, and travel through and outside of the cave, they hurt their eyes straining to stare directly at light for the first time, and become perplexed once their sight adjusts and they realize the falsity of what they previously considered to be unquestionable (514a-518c).

Interpreting Socrates' allegory to be a symbolic portrayal of the mystical experience, the cave represents the prisoners' mental construction of spiritual reality, that is determined by the puppeteers' portrayal of objects on the cave wall, or the public sphere. The puppeteers represent religious authorities who, whether intentionally or not, have built the fire of organized religion to influence the prisoners' perceived reality of shadows by maneuvering wooden representations of real objects back and forth in front of the fire. This fire is built and maintained to imitate the light of the sun and mirror his divine quality as the creator of the cosmos, and the prisoner's eyes are blinded with pain when they realize the nature of their religious institutions; purposefully constructed to control their perceptions and keep them from exiting the cave by imitating the perception enabling power of absolute being, or reflective light. Once the prisoner is finally capable of focusing on the puppets reflected by the fire, they are blinded even more viciously as they step into the upper world. After one has exited the cave, grown accustomed to the upper world of real objects, and painlessly gazed at the sun in all of its divine beauty, Socrates proclaims that "he will contemplate him as he is . . . then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold" (The Republic, 516b-516d).

This upper world of real objects symbolizes the invisible realm of forms that is referenced constantly throughout Plato's dialogues, and is the most central theoretical piece to his metaphysics. This plane of ultimate existence contains the absolute expression of all objects and concepts including

the divine, which is the source of eternal good, wisdom, and being⁵ itself. Since the light of the sun illuminates everything outside of the prisoner's cave of sense-derived mortal opinion, the realm of forms can be understood as the residence of God's unchanging ideas, from which all material objects and mortal concepts are derived. This theory is displayed whenever the prisoner encounters real animals, trees, and the source of light itself outside of the cave, when they have only ever seen representational figures in the waking consciousness of their perceptually constructed reality (516a-516b). When discussing branches of science such as geometry and astronomy as possible means to arriving at "knowledge of the eternal, and not of aught perishing and transient" (527b), Socrates says of the starry heaven "although the fairest and most perfect of visible things, [it] must necessarily be deemed inferior far to the true motions of absolute swiftiness and absolute slowness" (529c-529d). Since observational sciences are confined to the visible world, Socrates claims that they cannot lead us to understanding of true reality. Only dialectic can launch us from ignorance into philosophy, from opinion to intellect, from perception to understanding, and from becoming to being (534a).

When explaining the effect of the mystical experience on one's subjective conception of Ultimate Reality, Pahnke says "This knowledge is not an increase in facts but is a gain in psychological, philosophical, or theological insight" (The Psychedelic Mystical Experience, pp. 7). The mystical experience and the Socratic quantification of dialectic share so many similarities because they appear to be numerically identical phenomena; or one and the same thing. Many have described the mystical experience as an inward dialectic, and seeing as the entirety of The Republic is speaking of the State as an analogy for the individual, when Socrates says "dialectic, and dialectic alone, goes directly to the first

⁵ This is why Plato's god can be referred to as *absolute being*. He is the originator of all existence, and all capacity for philosophical experience comes from the radiance of his divine light, both in the instantiation of the cosmos and the subsequent illuminating of real objects, or forms. Conceiving of God in this way makes Plato's representation of religious authority all the more damning, as the stokers of the bonfire are not only preventing the masses from perceiving objects as they truly are, but from encountering God as he truly is, the absolute form of all that is good.

principle . . . the eye of the soul⁶ . . . is by her gentle aid lifted upwards; and she uses as handmaids and helpers in the work of conversion, the sciences which we have been discussing” (533c-533d), further reinforcement is provided for the claim that the methodology of transcendence is indeed mystical. The inward process of reason and intelligent conversation described by Socrates as the facilitator of enlightenment is a primary aspect of the mystical phenomenology, in the form of noetic conversation with gods, human interlocutors, or a significantly modified version of oneself “characterized by astonishingly lucid thought”⁷ (The Psychedelic Mystical Experience, pp. 6).

After elucidating all of the central symbols, Socrates says on pages 515c to 516b of The Republic, “when any one of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light . . . he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows . . . And suppose . . . that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent . . . and . . . forced into the presence . . . of the sun himself . . . he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.” The element of force involved in the ascension from the cave towards the sun is a focal point in the mystical experience, as one’s soberly perceived reality often painfully melts away without their control, and they can no longer see or interact with their previously reflected surroundings in the same manner. This forceful transition between perceived realities is not only blinding when one travels from the darkness of the cave towards the light of the upper world, but equally so when one returns to the all encompassing sight of shadowy reflections, as Socrates touches

⁶ The theoretical sixth sense associated with the perception of psychedelic insights is commonly allocated to a conceptual organ known as *the third eye*, or *mind’s eye*, a representation of noetic mysticism present throughout many ancient and contemporary cultures, especially in Eastern mystic traditions.

⁷ Pahnke says this in reference to the *cognitive psychedelic experience*, which he distinguishes from the *mystical psychedelic experience* based on a variety of distinct qualities, however it should be noted that the categories of psychedelic experience Pahnke lays out are almost never experienced in isolation from each other, and the *cognitive PE* is often inseparable from the *transcendental* or *mystical PE* in the experiences of many.

on when he asks his interlocutor Glaucon to imagine “such an one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?”⁸ (516e).

The attainment and eventual receding of the states described by the Mystical Experience Questionnaire follows a rise and fall pattern mirrored in the Platonic quantification of enlightenment, where the subject enters the world of the forms for a brief moment, and is by nature forced to return to the world of regular sense perception. Upon re-entering the sober state of self and object conceptualization, one is capable of remarkably increasing in appreciation for their reflective reality, as they were forever changed by their direct contact with the forms and absolute being. Two figures of insurmountable historical significance that had constant mystical experiences, or internal and external philosophical dialogues if you are not yet convinced of my interpretation, are the characters of Socrates and Jesus Christ. I use the word *character* here because among a near infinite pool of similarities,⁹ both Socrates and Jesus Christ have had doubt placed upon their historical existence outside of the mythological and philosophical corpus’ their stories are contained within. Avoiding a deep dive into the rich comparison of these figures, I have mentioned them because they so perfectly illustrate the societal consequences that so often follow the Platonically enlightened. Both Socrates and Jesus disregarded and criticized the dominant religions of their respective societies, and were executed by their governments for the same crimes; following foreign gods¹⁰ and corrupting the youth. Speaking of those who return to the cave from an encounter with absolute being, Socrates states in *The Republic*, “Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes . . . and if any one tried to loose another and lead

⁸ Following a profound mystical experience, subjects often speak of an *afterglow*, wherein their typically observed reality seems less tangible and dull when compared to their previous state of transcendence.

⁹ I shall not get into them here for sake of spilt technological ink, but the article *Socrates vs Jesus* by Steve Fuller contains an excellent elucidation of their surface level comparisons, although it doesn’t even dive past the tip of this comparative iceberg. A separate project would be required to do this comparison justice.

¹⁰ Jesus claimed to be God, but I believe this is similar enough to what Socrates was executed for in order to place them in the same category. Just like Jesus, Socrates said he was in constant communication with a personal god that superseded the theological understanding of his government.

him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death” (517a). Even as Socrates and Jesus were being killed, they were so dramatically influenced by the mystical experience that they peacefully accepted their death, and felt no hostility or anger towards their murderers. Jesus asked absolute being to “forgive them, for they know not what they do” (The Holy Bible, Luke 23:34), and Socrates tells the prison guard who is to deliver him the hemlock “Fare you well, too, I will do as you say” (Phaedo, 116d).

Now that I have defined the mystical experience, unfolded each symbol present in the allegory of the cave, and deciphered the connection between mysticism and Platonism, I shall complete this linguistic adventure with a contemporary example of violence propagated against subjects of the mystical experience by a religious institution.¹¹ In 1970, the Nixon Administration signed the Controlled Substances Act into national law, a legislation that categorized a myriad of drugs, including entheogenic compounds, into five schedules based on their supposed potential for abuse and medical utility (Drug Policy Alliance). These couldn't be further from the actual parameters Nixon and his goons relied on, as Assistant for Domestic Affairs and Water-Gate co-conspirator John Erlichman confessed in a 1994 interview with journalist Dan Baum, “The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did” (Legalize It All). Not only has this policy that is still in effect today slaughtered and disenfranchised a

¹¹ I consider the United States Government to be a religious institution, not only due to the historical lack of the separation of church and state, but by virtue of its dogmatic adherence to the absolute forms of corporate greed, racism, and global terror. They fit very neatly into the hooded frames of the Platonic symbol-bearers.

truly incalculable amount of directly targeted minorities, and created the brutal drug trade that has claimed a similarly untraceable number of souls, but the American Drug War has prevented countless people from exiting the cave, and experiencing the incredible healing central to the entheogenic mystical experience that science further supports with every second of continued research.

Whether or not this theory of Plato's methodology of enlightenment is what he originally intended to communicate through the allegory of the cave, I hope this analysis proved to be a thought provoking and refreshing escapade from my hermeneutical opponent's worldview regarding Plato's indefinitely rich metaphysical philosophy. Those who disagree with me may hold that dialectic as Plato describes it is a sober and secular process, uninfluenced by the mystical in any form or fashion. I would respectfully ask them to read Book X of The Republic and get back to me. If Plato did not have the mystical experience in mind when he placed the art of dialectic as the process by which "a person starts on the discovery of the absolute by the light of reason only" (The Republic, 532a-532b), then in the very least, it is the contemporary interpretation that reason and conversation has shown me to be most likely real, and what could be more Platonic than that? Further, there is never a wrong time to reflect on the corruption of religious institutions and the profound evils of The Drug War, and I would encourage all readers to make themselves as informed as possible regarding these subjects.

With Peace,

-Asher

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