



# Notes to Literature

Weekly  
reading  
booklet

#3 : Plato's  
*The Republic*

NL

NOTES TO LITERATURE

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# 1 Plato

**..whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort.**

*From The Republic (c. 375 B.C.), Book 7*

**S**ocrates - GLAUCON

And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: --Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

I see.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

No question, he replied.

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

That is certain.

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow it' the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, -what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, -will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Far truer.

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take and take in the objects of

vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

True, he now

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he 's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? 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.

Not all in a moment, he said.

He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And 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?

Certainly.

Last of 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.

Certainly.

He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the 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?

Clearly, he said, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.

And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

Certainly, he would.

And if they were in the habit of conferring honours among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which

of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honours and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer,

Better to be the poor servant of a poor master, and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?

Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

Imagine once more, I said, 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?

To be sure, he said.

And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak, and before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable) would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

No question, he said.

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally, either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.



## *From Friedrich Nietzsche, On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense (Fragment, 1873: Tr. Walter Kaufmann)*

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of "world history"—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die. One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened.

For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it. But if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that he floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that it cannot immediately be blown up like a bag by a slight breath of this power of knowledge; and just as every porter wants an admirer, the proudest human being, the philosopher, thinks that he sees on the eyes of the universe telescopically focused from all sides on his actions and thoughts.

It is strange that this should be the effect of the intellect, for after all it was given only as an aid to the most unfortunate, most delicate, most evanescent beings in order to hold them for a minute in existence, from which otherwise, without this gift, they would have every reason to flee as quickly as Lessing's son. [In a famous letter to Johann Joachim Eschenburg (December 31, 1778), Lessing relates the death of his infant son, who "understood the world so well that he left it at the first opportunity."]

That haughtiness which goes with knowledge and feeling, which shrouds the eyes and senses of man in a blinding fog, therefore deceives him about the value of existence by carrying in itself the most flattering evaluation of

knowledge itself. Its most universal effect is deception; but even its most particular effects have something of the same character.

\*

The intellect, as a means for the preservation of the individual, unfolds its chief powers in simulation; for this is the means by which the weaker, less robust individuals preserve themselves, since they are denied the chance of waging the struggle for existence with horns or the fangs of beasts of prey. In man this art of simulation reaches its peak: here deception, flattering, lying and cheating, talking behind the back, posing, living in borrowed splendor, being masked, the disguise of convention, acting a role before others and before oneself—in short, the constant fluttering around the single flame of vanity is so much the rule and the law that almost nothing is more incomprehensible than how an honest and pure urge for truth could make its appearance among men. They are deeply immersed in illusions and dream images; their eye glides only over the surface of things and sees "forms"; their feeling nowhere lead into truth, but contents itself with the reception of stimuli, playing, as it were, a game of blindman's buff on the backs of things.

## Gorgy Lukács on “Class Consciousness” in *History and Class Consciousness* (1920)

In 1920, Gorgy Lukács introduced the notion of “false consciousness” as a necessary concept in order to understand how it is that all working class people are not ipso facto, socialist revolutionaries. He defined “false consciousness” in contrast to an “imputed consciousness,” a juridical term meaning what people themselves would think if they were to have sufficient information and time to reflect, what they “ought to know,” so to speak.

In his famous essay on *Class Consciousness*, Gorgy Lukács commented as follows:

It might look as though ... we were denying consciousness any decisive role in the process of history. It is true that the conscious reflexes of the different stages of economic growth remain historical

facts of great importance; it is true that while dialectical materialism is itself the product of this process, it does not deny that men perform their historical deeds themselves and that they do so consciously. But as Engels emphasises in a letter to Mehring, this consciousness is false. However, the dialectical method does not permit us simply to proclaim the 'falseness' of this consciousness and to persist in an inflexible confrontation of true and false. On the contrary, it requires us to investigate this 'false consciousness' concretely as an aspect of the historical totality and as a stage in the historical process."

Herbert Marcuse revived the use of the term 'false consciousness' in the early 1960s, as part of his analysis of the stability of capitalism after the post-WW2 settlement.

To the degree to which they correspond to the given reality, thought and behavior express a false consciousness, responding to and contributing to the preservation of a false order of facts. And this false consciousness has become embodied in the prevailing technical apparatus which in turn reproduces it.

[*One-Dimensional Man*, Chapter 6].

# From Miguel Abensour and Martin Breugh, “Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory” in *Social Research* , Winter 2007, Vol. 74, No. 4, pp. 955-982

In a letter dated May 8, 1954, in which she attempts to explain to Heidegger the broad outline of her work, Arendt writes,

Starting with the parable of the cave (and your interpretation of it), a representation of the traditional relationship between philosophy and politics, [we see] actually the attitude of Plato and Aristotle toward the polis as the basis of all political theories. (It seems to me decisive that Plato makes the *agathon* [the good] the highest idea - and not the *kalon* [the beautiful] - for political reasons) (Hannah Arendt- Martin Heidegger letter, 1925-1975).

Two years later, July 1, 1956, in a letter to Karl Jaspers, Arendt once again speaks of Plato's position:

It seems to me that in the *Republic* Plato wanted to "apply" his own theory of ideas to politics, even though that theory had very different origins. Heidegger, it seems to me, is particularly off base in using the cave simile to interpret and "criticize" Plato's theory of ideas, but he is right when he says that in the presentation of the cave simile, truth is transformed on the sly into correctness and, consequently, ideas into standards (Arendt and Jaspers, 1992: 288).

From these letters, three essential points can be drawn:

►The importance of the allegory of the cave, which is the heart of Plato's political philosophy. Arendt also adds the importance of Heidegger's interpretation in "Plato's Doctrine of Truth." Here we must admit that Arendt expresses a reserve concerning Heidegger's attempt to interpret the Theory of Forms via the cave allegory (Heidegger, 1998:155-182).

► The hypothesis that Plato, in the Republic, sought to apply his Theory of Forms to politics, even if this theory is of a different origin, inasmuch as its aim is to answer the philosophical question of the truth rather than the political question of the organization of the city. It is during this problematic application that Plato realizes the no less problematic passage from the idea of Beauty to the idea of Good.

► The hypothesis of the passage from the idea of Beauty to the idea of Good is confirmed by Heidegger's interpretation, which insists on the ambiguity of the platonic concept of the essence of truth, that would experience a transformation of the truth as "non-voilement de l'étant" to the truth as exactitude of view, a transformation from *alêtheia* to *omoiosis*.

By making the allegory of the cave the central aspect of Plato's political philosophy, is Arendt not articulating a most profound critique of the idea of political philosophy, a superior form of critique, the general principal of which is expressed in a fragment of the introduction to the Politics: "Plato, the father of political philosophy in the West, attempted in various ways to oppose the polis and what it understood by freedom by positing a political theory in which political standards were derived not from politics but from philosophy" (Arendt, 2005: 130-131). From this stems a domination of reason over politics that, following Arendt, had a decisive effect on the destiny of political philosophy in the Western world. "Quelque chose de fondamentalement faux" writes Arendt about political philosophy in the *Journal de pensée*.

# Further Reading Suggestions

Recommended Secondary Literature:

- \* Annas, J. *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (1985)
- \* Howland, J. *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy* (2004)
- \* Popper, K. *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1950)
- \* Roochnik, D. *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's Republic* (2003)
- \* Samons, L. *What's Wrong with Democracy?* (2004)

You can find a full list of suggestions for further reading and secondary literature on all of the primary texts in these booklets on the website:

**<https://www.notestoliterature.com/twelve-books-to-have>**

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If you would like more information about Notes to Literature, please do get in touch with me at [jonathan@notestoliterature.com](mailto:jonathan@notestoliterature.com) or visit the website: [notestoliterature.com](http://notestoliterature.com).

If you are a school, or a company, and would like to inquire about arranging courses for your students or employees, please reach out. I can provide further details on the different kinds of approaches and services I offer depending on the particular learning contexts.

If you would like to pursue further independent reading on any of the authors in the booklet, or if you are setting up a reading group, I'm always happy to send on reading lists and guided reading questions that might be helpful for your discussions.

And of course, if you are interested in taking a course with Notes, I'd be delighted to hear from you. I offer free no-obligation meetings to discuss your goals, talk about some aspects of my approach, and think about how the courses could be tailored for you.

Happy reading.



## *About Me : Jonathan Gallagher*

I received my doctorate in 2019 from the University of Edinburgh, where I taught several undergraduate courses, ranging from medieval and early modern literature, to Romantic, Modernist and Late-Modernist poetry and drama. My doctoral research examined the relationship between processes of state-formation in early modern England and the spectacular flourishing of religious poetry witnessed during the same period. This work has been published by leading academic journals in my field, and tries to show that religious poetry was vitally and critically responsive to broad changes in social relations and practices of rule in 17C England.

In my teaching, as in my research, I'm drawn to examining intellectual history and literary art in the context of given social and political conditions. With that in mind, in 2022, I founded Notes to Literature. My hope is that Notes will grow into a distinguished provider of personalised adult education in the humanities. The plan is to go about this one client at a time.

You can learn more about Notes and me here: <https://www.notestoliterature.com/my-work>

<https://edinburgh.academia.edu/JonathanGallagher>