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THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE: THE NECESSITY OF THE PHILOSOPHER'S DESCENT*

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The allegory of the cave is about the Platonic ideal of education. It has been received, interpreted, and transformed throughout the entire course of the history of philosophy. After some preliminary remarks on this philosophical image (I), I shall focus on the hotly debated descent of the philosopher back into the cave. On the one hand, I shall examine the issue with regard to the ontological distinction between being and becoming: the middle dialogue in question is not concerned with the ontological aspect of the descent, as I label the return from being to becoming, and thus does not solve the problem so formulated (II). On the other hand, I shall consider a well-known crux: the ethical and political aspect of the problem (III). To do so, I shall center on the concept of necessity (*ἀνάγκη*) that plays a prominent role in the Cave¹ but nonetheless has not yet received due attention (IV). For this it is important to show *in what way* and *to what extent* we have to take "necessity" or "compulsion" seriously in the broader relevant context (500d4, 519e4, 520a8, 521b7, 540a-b); and also what kinds of necessity are at stake.²

^{*} This is the elaboration of the paper I gave at the *International Plato Society* Conference, Tokyo 2010, initially entitled as: *The Allegory of the Cave: Methodos and Kathodos*. I benefited considerably from the following discussion, and the very helpful comments of the anonymous reviewers.

¹ I will capitalize whenever referring to the simile of the cave or the line: from now on "the Cave" and "the Line".

² Even researchers who do focus on the special problem of the philosopher's descent do not consider the concept of necessity sufficiently, although they address the issue as it suits their purposes (e.g. Kraut 1999, p. 238f.). Brown (2000) does not differentiate between different kinds of necessity but reduces them all to external legislative compulsion. Schenke not only fails to differentiate between different kinds of necessity but he also conflates necessity and freedom in the philosopher's descent (fn. 5; already so White, 1986, fn. 6). Sedley, who provides a distinction between a kind of necessity as external enforcement and a more benign necessity, is an exception (2007). But a more general discussion of necessity would bring to the foreground the *Timaeus*, a connection with which Sedley takes issue (2007, fn. 33).

I discern two aspects for the philosophers' descent (in III), and also a twofold necessity as their source (IV). Accordingly, the levels in my reading prove to be two: On a first, exoteric level, the necessity of the philosophers' descent emerges as legislative compulsion and moral obligation. On a second, esoteric level,³ it shows itself as inner compulsion: after getting acquainted with the form of the good, the philosophers realize that they are demiurges called to form, unify and perfect the matter in their soul and city. The philosophers' ultimate motivation for descent lies in their wish to imitate the form of the good.⁴ Although this second motivation connected with the demiurgy motif is more profound than legislative and moral obligation, it is not adequately spelled out in the allegory of the cave. My endeavor will highlight the analogy to the *Timaeus*' context of demiurgy, but it will be sensitive to the disanalogies as well, offering a reflection on the relation to the later dialogue.

I. Preliminaries: The Cave as a Philosophical Image

Plato had to distinguish philosophy from its rivals, the arts and sophistry. In this dialogue and conflict over boundaries, in order to demarcate the three image rich activities, Plato both distinguished different types of images and defined the nature of image. And he did not remain content with a theoretical distinction but wanted to show what philosophical images are and how philosophers make good use of them in different contexts. We therefore learn some things about sensible and discursive, philosophical images in the *Republic*. But it is only when philosophy confronts sophistry, namely in the *Sophist*, that the question is raised about the nature of image *qua* image.⁵

The allegory of the cave is the last of the three celebrated philosophical images in the central books of the *Republic*. All three of them exemplify the form

³ I refer to Schleiermacher's distinction between esoteric and exoteric readings of Plato, pp. 33f., 36, 42, 47.

⁴ I am in accordance with what is labeled as the "creative" or "expressive" argument: According to Parry's terminology, 1996, 200ff.

⁵ Cf. Patterson's nuanced monograph, and my account of development on image and metaphysics in Plato.

of the good, in the acquisition of which the education of the philosopher-rulers culminates. Socrates had previously characterized the sun as an image and offspring of the form of the good,⁶ and provided an incomplete list of *images* as the objects he allocated to the very last section of the Line, which stood for conjecture: among them he enumerated first shadows, and then reflections in water, or in any dense, smooth, shiny surface and everything of that sort (509e1-510a3). In the Line, Socrates had furthermore condemned the mathematicians for using sensible images for their operations and confined dialectics exclusively to the intelligible forms.

Socrates resorts to the image of the cave in order to explain how the ideal education takes place. The Cave is a discursive image, not a visible one,⁷ which underlines the philosophers' ascent from the Sensible to the Intelligible. In this respect, the Cave is an apt image in contrast to both the mathematician's visualisations in the sixth and seventh books and the contemporary artistic production of copies in the tenth book. The Cave exemplifies not only the philosophers' ascent but also their descent, to which we now turn.

II. From the Possibility to the Problem of the Descent into the Cave: Ontological and Ethical/Political Aspects of the Problem

Socrates introduces the descent of the philosophers into the cave as a hypothesis but not as a problem:

If someone like that should come back down into the cave and take up his old seat, wouldn't he get his eyes full of darkness, coming suddenly from the sunlight? (516e3-6).⁸

⁶ 509a.

⁷ 517d1: προειρημμένη εικόν. And it is rather a complex discursive image, which is a whole made out of parts, as Socrates stresses in 517b2.

⁸ Similarly in 517c8 we hear about the ones who have returned to the cave and prefer not to participate in politics, but the return in itself does not yet pose a problem.

This conditional expresses a real possibility. Although remote and difficult to realize, the third and largest wave of Socrates' political proposals for Callipolis can indeed become true as he stated in the sixth book. The necessity derived from fortune, which Socrates addresses in 499b5 (*ἀνάγκη τις ἐκ τύχης*), concerns the external circumstances of realization. This necessity is divine, as a much later passage (592a7-9) makes explicit: the coincidence of philosophical knowledge and political power can neither be predicted nor expected, but the project is feasible, and no mere wishful thinking (499c7-d6).⁹

In the Cave, Socrates draws the distinction between becoming (*τὸ γιγνόμενον*) and being (*τὸ ὄν*) for the first time in the *Republic*,¹⁰ which correlates to the Line's twofold distinction between the Sensible and the Intelligible.¹¹ Based on the former ontological distinction, we can formulate the philosopher's descent as a return from being to becoming. The ontological problem, which the philosophers' descent seems then to raise, is the following: How does the dialectician return to the realm of becoming after studying the realm of being and acquiring the form of the good, i.e. after thirty-five years of studies and practical experience according to the proposed educational *curriculum*?

Against the entire background of the upward philosophical motion, the ontological version of the philosopher's descent poses a serious problem: For

⁹ R. 499b-d: "[...] under compulsion of the truth [*ἡναγκασμένοι*] we said that no city or regime, and likewise no man either, can ever be perfect until some necessity derived from fortune [*ἀνάγκη τις ἐκ τύχης περιβόλη*], invests the few philosophers [...] with the charge of the city, whether they want it or not, and the city with obedience. Either that, or until due to some divine inspiration the sons of those in positions of authority or sole rule, or the actual holders of those positions, are seized by with a true love of true philosophy." "If some necessity [*τις ἀνάγκη*] has arisen in the boundless past for the experts in philosophy to take charge of their city, or if it exists now [...] or will ever arise in the future," Socrates continues, the project is real and not mere wishful thinking." Cf. Szlezák (1996), 29ff.

¹⁰ In 518c.

¹¹ After introducing the Cave, Plato gives us the following interpretative hint: the entire comparison has to be applied to the things said so far (517a8-b1). Rather than just the Visible and Sensible, the cave represents what in the Line was called *δοξαστόν*, the object of opinion, for example the social and cultural patterns and opinions about justice, like the ones introduced in the discussion in the first book.

sensu stricto, the Line and the Cave depict dialectics as inseparably connected with, defined by, and even confined to, its own, genuine objects of inquiry: the forms. The dialectician may "descend" from more to less general *forms* (510b3-c2) but the *Republic* never attests that the dialectical science comprises the investigation into the sensible realm of becoming.¹² In a broader sense, the "dialectical journey" that leads the soul from becoming to being includes the mathematical disciplines as well:¹³ but in any case, it concerns the upward transition from becoming to being.

Someone might try to play this problem down by suggesting that the philosophers' descent is nothing but a moment of the entire method,¹⁴ which would also include the path that leads upwards, from becoming to being. Such a refuge in a holistic concept of the dialectician's journey would render what I called the ontological problem trivial, yet it does not hold: Whenever Socrates mentions the dialectical journey, he always addresses the upward movement and never the one that leads back to the Sensible. Moreover the philosopher's *love* is directed exclusively to *being* as a whole and not to being *and* becoming (475aff.). The philosophers may be the only ones who understand becoming in its dependence on the forms, but this happens on the basis of their investigation into the realm of forms. The sensibles are neither real nor knowable but degraded into mere shadows and images of the forms upon which they are dependent. The only knowledge attributed to the sensibles is the knowledge of the forms they are copies of.¹⁵

Only in the later dialogues, like the *Philebus* and the *Timaeus*, the philosopher turns anew to the sensibles, which are no longer degraded as "rolling about in the midregion between being and not-being",¹⁶ but are rather reevaluated and rehabilitated. We do not encounter this crucial shift in the

¹² On the dialectical ascent cf. 532a1-b2 and 532b6-d1.

¹³ R. 532b-c.

¹⁴ R. 510b8, 533b3, c7.

¹⁵ Cf. 520c4f., which throws light on the knowledge of the things our beliefs are about in 479e1-5.

¹⁶ R. 479d.

Republic. What I initially labeled the ontological problem of the descent is not dealt with in the Cave. Thus I will leave aside the ontological aspect of the descent for now only to come back to it at the end, and will introduce the second aspect of the descent, which the text itself poses.

Plato scholars were right to find the celebrated crux only later in the seventh book (519b-521b) and not when the notion of descent is introduced. The ethical problematic can be summarized as follows: the philosophers seem to be acting against their own self-interest and sacrificing it when they are compelled to return to the cave because they have to give up the life that is much more worth living, namely their pure theoretical endeavour. How could this necessity be reconciled with the thesis that just acts promote the agent's own interest? As for the political dimension, the pivotal role of compulsion jeopardizes the practicability of the entire project: Doesn't the element of compulsion after all underscore the impracticability of the political ideal?

III. The Story of the Descent Retold: Motivations for the Descent

Here I cannot even outline the solutions given to this battery of problems¹⁷ but briefly depict my own proposal according to which neither the ethical doctrine nor the practicability of the political ideal are jeopardized, since the external compulsion will prove to be grounded in an inner compulsion that arises as part of the transformative process of philosophical education. This education renders external compulsion or command unnecessary.¹⁸ The philosophers descend into the cave both because law compels them to do so and because they realize they are demiurges. These are the two fundamental motivations for the descent, which Plato neither differentiates adequately from one another nor analyzes to the same extent.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive overview cf. Schenke.

¹⁸ Plato would certainly concur with the Aristotelian answer to what is the benefit of the philosophical education: Diog. Laertius V, 20.

Let us take the issue from the very beginning. Already in the first book, the good rulers' motivation is problematized. In 347a-e, Socrates replies to Glaucon's question and explicates the kind of penalty he considers the good rulers' motivation. There he argues, namely, that there should be a compulsion on the rulers or a penalty, since payment or fame are disgraceful.

So if they are going to agree to be willing to rule, some additional compulsion and penalty must be imposed on them (*δεῖ δὴ αὐτοῖς ἀνάγκην προσεῖναι καὶ ζημίαν*); that is why it has been regarded as disgraceful to seek office voluntarily and not await necessity (*μὴ ἀνάγκην περιμένειν*). And the greatest penalty is to be ruled by someone worse, if they are not willing to rule themselves. It is because of this fear that decent people seem to rule, when they rule. And it is then that they enter an office not because they are entering something good, or it will bring them any benefit but because they enter something necessary (*ὡς ἐπ' ἀναγκαῖον*) and do not have anyone better than themselves, or as good as themselves, to delegate the task. (347b9-d2).

The necessity which is introduced here is imposed by the external circumstances, is said to be added and waited for. It is left open what kind of necessity this could be. We are long before the seventh book, and Socrates has not yet presented the ideal state and its educational institution, which will provide the explanatory frame for the philosophers' descent.

Before we enter the context of the seventh book, let our second station be a crucial and dense passage in 500b-d, in which the philosopher is said to imitate the intelligible divine model as far as this is possible. Against this background of the paradigm and its imitation, the concept of demiurgy finds its appropriate place in 500d4-8:

Suppose then, I said, that a necessity arose for the philosopher, instead of molding only herself,¹⁹ to practice putting what she sees in that world yonder into the characters of men in private and public life. Do you think she will be a bad *craftsman* of temperance and justice, and civic virtue as a whole?

The philosopher is compared to a demiurge, who looks at her paradigm and works on her material.²⁰ She searches at first in herself for the material she has to mold:²¹ becoming just means turning the three parts of her soul into a unity (443d7-e1). But she will also be willing to become bond and cause of unity in her own city, which admittedly is a far cry from the intelligible order of the forms. Her goal is to bind the individual co-citizens and the city together (520a4).

Socrates exposes the exact educational path of the ideal state in the seventh book. After ten years of mathematical studies, five years of dialectics follow before the dialecticians devote themselves to fifteen years of practical experience in the cave. The problem of the descent into the cave, which Socrates addresses in the seventh book, does not concern this first return to the cave, but the one after the completion of their education, namely after their acquaintance with the form of the good (540a). Thus the relevant question to ask is how the knowledge of the form of the good motivates the philosophers to descend. It is there in the specific knowledge of the good that the definite motivation for the descent is to be looked for. After all, the well-ordered ideal patterns (500b-d) can explain that their imitation can produce good results in the human realm, but are not sufficient to motivate and explain the philosopher's descent.²²

¹⁹ I allow myself to use the feminine pronoun as Socrates underlines the real possibility of queen-rulers of Callipolis.

²⁰ Cf. the programmatic text on demiurgic activity, Gorg. 503d5-504a5; in 503e Socrates speaks of the demiurge compelling different elements of his material so as to arrange and order his entire work. My point is that although Plato depicts the notion of demiurgy differently, the demiurge, the paradigm and the material are present in all diverse contexts.

²¹ Molding is used both for the soul and the city (cf. 374a5, 377c3, 420c2, 466a5f).

²² Kraut offers a solution along this line (1999), which is refuted by Brown (2000).

The knowledge of the form of the good is not just a pure theoretical definition of goodness as unity,²³ which the philosopher kings and queens add to their *curriculum vitae* as an achievement worthy of mention. What they learn on the basis of arduous and painstaking learning experience, is *that* the form of the good is cause of everything that is good (517b8-c2) and *how* it creates, promotes and preserves goodness in all possible fields of reality, namely as a unifying bond of plurality and diversity.

The unity of a multiplicity manifests the presence of goodness, both in the case of justice in individual souls (443d-e) and rule in the city (519e-520a). In the first case the person aims at unifying the three parts of soul. In the second case, the philosopher binds together the three parts of the city. Additionally it should be kept in mind that in the fourth book we do not reach the ultimate account for justice, which needs a longer account (435c-d), on which the interlocutors embark in the sixth book in their investigation into the form of the good (504b). And as far as the second case is concerned, the philosopher is said to become the bond of the city only after her acquaintance with the form of the good.

The realization that they are demiurges motivates the philosophers to return to the cave. To understand this "demiurgic" activity means to extend the understanding of one's self and thus redefine one's self-interest, but not sacrifice it.²⁴ Admittedly, the argument in 519c8-521a9 follows another strain and suggests a different motivation for the descent: The founders of the city compel the philosophers to descend (520a8, 521b7). The former embody the civic law (219e) and thus the source of the motivation is not externally imposed, in comparison to the argument in the first book²⁵. According to this kind of legislative necessity, the philosophers' descent appears to be a kind of sacrifice: the

²³ I do not discuss but presuppose the validity of the Aristotelian reports about the first Platonic principle as the One, as well as Krämer (1959), Gadamer (1978) and Burnyeat (2000) on goodness as unity. There is a clear statement about the form of the good as unity in 519b-c, where it emerges like a single aim.

²⁴ Foster reads the first emergence of Duty or Moral Obligation in Greek philosophy in this passage, p. 301.

²⁵ See above on 347b9-d2.

sacrifice of a better, contemplative life is their debt to their city, which educated them.

The argument in 519c8-521a9 addresses Glaucon's question, whether the philosophers must be made to live a worse life when it is in their power to live a better one (519d8f.), and reminds us of the relevant discussion in the first book. It is in order to answer the question raised by Glaucon that Socrates distinguishes between two kinds of lives the way he does in the seventh book: the life of genuine philosophy the philosopher prefers and the life of political office he repudiates (521b1f.). But this clean-cut separation of the contemplative and the practical lives should not be taken at face value and even less should we conclude a Platonic understanding of a theoretical life deprived of any practical component.²⁶ The intellectualists who think the theoretical pursuit is the only goal we should set blatantly misunderstand the form of the good. Socrates' *curriculum* shapes or rather reshapes one's soul and changes one's life. And it is not the practical and political aspect of their philosophy that Plato's philosophers reject but the cave-dwelling citizenship when the political situation is far from ideal and the co-citizens fight over shadows, whose nature as shadows they do not comprehend (520c-d). This contempt guarantees that the philosophers will not turn the political office into their only and ultimate goal but always regard it as the necessary means to an end, i.e. unification and preservation of the entire city (520e1-3).

IV. Necessities of the Descent

I differentiated between two kinds of motivations for the philosophers' descent, which we can read in the text: in an exoteric reading, namely in the dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, I detected the legal motivation, while an esoteric reading revealed the realization of demiurgy, which is not thoroughly exposed but nonetheless addressed in a crucial textual moment. Let me now turn to the relevant notions of necessity as the sources of these two motivations. As I retell the story of the descent, I understand the necessity for the return into the

²⁶ In contrast, compare the *Theaetetus*' digression (172c-177a), which promotes a purely theoretical ideal of philosophical life.

cave primarily as an "inner compulsion". Since moral goodness is a presupposition for climbing up the Platonic educational ladder, we are right to conclude that the philosopher who makes it through the entire series of tests to acquaint herself with the form of the good cannot be a "small scoundrel" (*ψυχάρπιον*, 519a3). The philosopher who reaches the form of the good can thus *desire* to imitate it as a cause of goodness. In comparison to her, the philosophers who fulfill their duty by returning to the cave are *willing* to rule, which means they are reluctant to disobey, but this does not necessarily presuppose any desire.²⁷

If Plato would spell out the more profound demiurgy motif, the ethical and political problems that are raised in the context of the descent would dissolve. And he would have underlined the analogy with the *Timaeus*. At the beginning of the cosmological narration in Plato's later dialogue, god's goodness is depicted as overflowing. Because he is good, he wants to share his goodness and creates the world (29e1-30a6). Similarly, the philosopher who gets acquainted with the form of the good imitates its overflowing goodness and creates order in her soul and the city.²⁸ The parallel with the demiurgic creation of the universe cannot be disputed: As far as the creator of the universe is a demiurge, we are entitled to appeal to him as a model-case of demiurgy and draw the parallel to the case of the philosopher-king. This analogy notwithstanding, we ought not to sideline a very crucial difference between the philosopher as demiurge and the divine demiurge. The latter is free to create the world.²⁹ The former, when she reaches the very end of her journey, is confronted with a choice instead: to hide herself behind the Academy's wall or to rule. Her descent does not happen automatically and without any choice. But her choice is not between a non-political, theoretical life and a political life but between two genuinely philosophical ways of life intertwined with politics.

²⁷ Cf. 346e8f., 347c1f. and 519d4. Notice the contrast to the divine demiurge, who is not just *willing* but *desires* to make everything share in his goodness (Tim. 29e3 and 30a2).

²⁸ Cf. Schenke; but similarly Parry (1996, 211ff.) and Irwin (2007, 111).

²⁹ In comparison to the *Republic*, Plato does not speak of necessity in the case of the divine demiurge in the *Timaeus*. Philosophers overlook this small but very significant detail when they draw the analogy between the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*.

From the beginning of the seventh book, "necessity" occurs several times even before we encounter the problem of descent. The concept is used very broadly, starting with physical violence (515a9-b1) or force that causes pain, aversion and reluctance to the imprisoned (515c-e). The image of violence continues up to their ascent to the second dwelling, outside the cave. After the Cave, the mathematical studies are referred to as necessary fields of study for the trainees (521c10ff.). They all compel the soul to ascend from becoming to being.

Finally I quote one of the very last passages of the seventh book, namely 540a4-b7:

Then, when they are fifty years old, those who have survived (the tests) and gained every highest distinction in every field, both in actions and studies, should now be brought at last to the goal. They should be compelled [*ἀναγκαστέον*] to lift up the bright light of the soul and gaze steadfastly at that which provides light for everything. And when they have seen the good itself, they have [(to be compelled to), *ἀναγκαστέον*] to order the city, the citizens and themselves using that as a model, throughout the rest of their lives, when the turn comes for each. They can spend most of their life in philosophy, but when their turn comes, then each one must labour at the business of politics and be ruler for the sake of the city. They will regard the task not as something fine but as necessary [*ἀναγκαῖον*]. And after educating others like themselves in this way, and leaving them behind as the city's guardians, they have [to be compelled!! *ἀναγκαστέον*] to live in the islands of the blest after their departure.

This passage corroborates my interpretation that it is not the imitation of the realm of forms but of the form of the good that explains the philosophers' descent. The form of the good emerges namely as a paradigm to be imitated here before the descent takes place and so that it takes place, which was missing in the earlier passage (500b-d)³⁰. In these very few lines, Plato's overuse of "necessity" or

³⁰ In 500d, the necessity that arises for the philosopher is intentionally left vague. It could mean not only legislative compulsion but also inner necessity. Thus Allen's translation

„compulsion” in the seventh book of the *Republic* comes to the fore. And Plato appears to be not always extremely careful with the most important concept for the problem of descent. I underlined the three infinitives that depend on ἀναγκαστέον (540a7). In the case of the first infinitive, the educators of the ideal city compel the philosophers to reach the goal of the program through strenuous work. In the second case, compulsion refers to the philosophers' coming back to the cave. Since the ones who compel the philosophers are the founders of the ideal city, the necessity that is here referred to is the legislative. But how can, in the third case, dead philosophers be compelled, and by whom, to live on the Islands of the Blessed?³¹ Far from accusing Plato of a mindless slip, I end uttering my caution because of the all too frequent occurrences of necessity that Plato does not systematically differentiate.

To conclude, I return to the initial ontological formulation of the philosopher's descent, which I cannot find in the *Republic*. The descent into the sensible realm is carried out in the later Platonic dialogues and culminates in the *Timaeus*. In the *Timaeus*, Plato distinguishes more systematically between different cases of necessity: It is there that Plato persuades blind necessity to become his “hypothetical necessity” in the physical world. And he addresses the crucial notion of mathematical necessity, since he proves mathematics to be of the greatest importance not only for the philosopher's ascent but also for her descent into the depths of matter. Plato's *Republic*, on the other hand, problematizes the notion of moral necessity, which the later dialogue does not address: a clear division of labour. In the middle dialogue, Plato makes clear that philosophical education renders external compulsion or command unnecessary. My esoteric reading regarded the inner necessity as more profound than any legislative motivation, even if Plato does not spell this out in the Cave. He is not confused, but is rather writing a middle dialogue: Had he elaborated the demiurgy motif to

(„Suppose then, I said, that a necessity arose for him...”) is more felicitous than Griffith's (And if there were some compulsion on him...“).

³¹ In personal correspondence, David Sedley tried to save Plato from nonsense in that he suggested the notion of compulsion doesn't really extend all the way through. In English, one may say to a child "I am going to force you to do your homework first, and to watch television afterwards", without meaning that one is going to force her to watch television. Christopher Rowe suggested to me that in this case Plato playfully alludes to a former passage (519c5f.). “The philosophers will be *compelled* to depart for the islands of the blessed” means that they really have to be forced to do so whereas they themselves prefer to do philosophy.

clarify in detail inner necessity, he would have delved into the ontological aspect of the philosophers' descent. But this elaboration was to come later in his career.

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