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**THE POWER OF PLATO’S CAVE**

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The allegory of the cave is considered by many readers to be compelling, or even Plato’s ‘most compelling’[[1]](#footnote-1) image. At the same time, the general consensus would have it that the image is deeply confusing.[[2]](#footnote-2) The individual elements of the allegory pose many difficulties of interpretation, and while Socrates himself asks Glaucon to map the allegory onto the image of the divided line, scholars continue to disagree about whether or how this works.[[3]](#footnote-3) We may reasonably ask, then, what exactly makes the image so compelling. Although scholars have not tackled this question head-on, they have indirectly suggested some answers: the allegory functions protreptically to motivate the emotions[[4]](#footnote-4); the cave aims to elicit the ‘shock of disillusionment about the moral values current in the world of the city as it is . . .’ in its audience[[5]](#footnote-5); the image ‘instills dissatisfaction with the sum total of experience (up till now)’[[6]](#footnote-6) These answers share a common feature: the cave image makes us feel disappointed, shocked, inferior, eager to become better, because it tells us that we are like the prisoners in the cave, that is, we are in a much worse condition than we may have imagined we were in.[[7]](#footnote-7) I would like to make a radically different suggestion. My suggestion is that Plato has designed the cave passage as a whole to make us feel quite the opposite. He has designed it, in fact, to make us feel that we have escaped the cave, and furthermore that our escape is a particularly high stakes enterprise. The success of this design, I will argue, is one of the features that lends the cave image its tremendous power.

The ‘story’ of the cave could have been told in many different ways, and not all of them would have been as powerful as the version Plato offers. This paper will examinethe specific ways that Plato has designed Socrates’ narrative and how its seemingly inessential features shape our interpretation of it. I will make two main points. The first concerns how Socrates’ complex use of Homeric quotation invests that cave image with a life-or-death significance and an unusual degree of authority. My second and overriding concern is to argue that Plato has designed this passage so that the conversation taking place between Glaucon and Socrates mirrors the prisoner’s ascent from the cave. Ultimately I will suggest that the cave narrative gains its power by giving Glaucon, and the reader, an experience analogous to the ascent from the cave that the allegory’s image describes.

# 1.THE STRUCTURE OF THE CAVE NARRATIVE

While it is easy to say where the allegory begins, it is more difficult to say where it ends. Having just concluded his discussion of the divided line in Book 6, Book 7 opens with Socrates launching straight into the cave allegory: ‘Next, I said, compare the effect of education and the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this: Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling . . .’. This marks an emphatic beginning. But where exactly does ‘the allegory of the cave’ end? In Catalin Partenie’s recent Oxford edition of selected myths of Plato, the passage ends at 517a, and one can see justification for this.[[8]](#footnote-8) At 517a Socrates finishes setting out the details of the image. However, on a different interpretation, the allegory continues past this point. At 517b Socrates begins to interpret the allegory and references to the cave continue on through 520 and beyond. Although these references continue in Socrates’ discussion, a case can be made for considering 518d an important ending. 518d is where Socrates reaches what is arguably the moral of the story, his definition of true education. I will examine this definition later, but for now the crucial point is that the allegory of the cave sets out from the start to articulate what education is, and what it is not. Socrates’ concern is embedded in the larger discussion of the guardians’ education, but it also goes all the way back to Book 1 where Thrasymachus, in a pitch of frustration with Socrates, assumes the wrong definition of education: ‘And how am I to persuade you, if you aren’t persuaded by what I said just now? What more can I do? Am I to take your argument and pour it into your very soul?’ ‘God forbid! Don’t do that!’ Socrates replies.[[9]](#footnote-9) This passage from *Republic* 1 humorously illustrates the view of education that Socrates uses the cave allegory to counteract. At 518b-c Socrates finally reveals what the cave allegory has been designed to illustrate: briefly, that ‘education is not what some people declare it to be, namely putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes,’ but rather ‘turning the whole soul’ around. For the purposes of this discussion, therefore, let us consider this the ending of the cave allegory.

The passage as a whole falls into two main parts: (1)from 514a through 517a Socrates presents the image, and (2) from 517b through 518d he presents a series of interpretive glosses. References to the cave continue beyond this point, but these continuing references differ in important ways from the interpretive glosses. Socrates explicitly presents interpretive glosses from 517b to 518d as aids to interpreting the image (‘This whole image, Glaucon, must be fitted together with what we said before . . .’, 517a8-b1); Socrates interprets the prisoner’s upward journey as an ascent to the intelligible realm and the Form of the Good. He describes the prisoner’s return to the cave, and then he focuses on the two ways that the eyes can be confused (when they are disoriented by the ascent out of the cave and when they are disoriented by the return back in, which paves the way for his climactic definition of true education). In contrast, the allusions to the cave that continue beyond this point draw out implications that the cave allegory has for the education of the rulers in Socrates’ ideal city.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The specific presentation of the cave image reveals Plato’s attempt to produce certain effects. Socrates does not simply describe the cave and what happens when a prisoner is led out. That sort of description would be largely in the indicative (‘This is what the cave looks like; this is what the prisoners are like, when someone helps guide the prisoner to turn around the following happens . . .’). We might call such a narrative *straightforwardly descriptive*, and this is not how Socrates proceeds. He speaks only a few sentences at a time; the longest stretch is twelve lines and most are much shorter than that. Even more significantly, he phrases most of his narrative in the form of questions and often as hypothetical, leading questions to which Glaucon must respond: ‘Do you suppose .. . that these prisoner see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them’? (515a5-8); ‘If something like this came to pass . .’ (515c5-6); ‘if someone compelled him to look at the light itself. . wouldn’t he turn around and flee. . .’? (515e1-2);’If someone dragged him away from there by force . . wouldn’t he be pained. . .?’ (515e6-8); ‘If there had been any honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was the sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by and who best remembered which ones came earlier. . .do you think that our man would desire these rewards and or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power?’ (56c8-d4) and so on.

This hypothetical and (non-technically) dialectical structure of Socrates’ narrative shapes the passage crucially. Most simply, it engages Glaucon in a way that not all Platonic images engage the interlocutor.Consider for a moment the image of the soul as chariot in the *Phaedrus*, or the images of the soul as sieve and jar in the *Gorgias*, In those passages, Socrates speaks for long stretches of the narrative without interacting with his interlocutor.[[11]](#footnote-11) By contrast, in the allegory of the cave, Socrates spoon-feeds Glaucon the narrative a few lines at a time and formulates it largely in questions. Glaucon is not a mere spectator taking in the image. Almost every step of the way, Socrates demands that Glaucon draw inferences from the image and agree or disagree with the inferences that Socrates draws from it. Even now we can see a point that will come across again even more powerfully: the education that Socrates provides Glaucon in this passage does not ‘pour’ the image of the cave into Glaucon’s soul the way that a straightforward description might attempt to, but rather takes a more gradual and indirect approach that requires Glaucon’s active participation.

Socrates’ hypothetical questions in fact invite Glaucon to identify with the prisoners, who are, as Socrates says, ‘like us’ ([ὁμοίους](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=o%28moi%2Fous&la=greek&can=o%28moi%2Fous0&prior=a)to/pous" \t "morph) [ἡμῖν](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=h%28mi%3Dn&la=greek&can=h%28mi%3Dn0&prior=o(moi/ous" \t "morph) 515a5). Socrates’ questions ask Glaucon to think, experience, and feel what the prisoners generally, and what the one prisoner who gets out in particular, might be thought to think, to experience, and to feel. Socrates asks, for example, ‘Do you suppose that these prisoners see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them’; (515a5-8) ‘And if they could talk with one another, don’t you think they’d suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them’ (515b4-5); ‘Consider, then what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like . . . When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he’d be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he’d seen before’ (515c4-d1); ‘If someone dragged him away from there by force. . . wouldn’t he be pained and irritated with being treated that way?’ (515e6-516a1). Socrates invites Glaucon to engage not just logically with reasoning about the cave image, but also to identify with the prisoner’s thoughts, experience, and emotions. Socrates in fact spends quite a bit of time throughout the passage drawing attention to the difficulty, pain, confusion, irritation, and frustration felt by the prisoner at various stages, and asking Glaucon if that is the way the person would feel.

In summary, the general points I would like to make about the structure of the cave passage are as follows. Firstly, the passage is divided into two main parts, the second of which interprets the image. The presence of this interpretation is interesting in this particular context for what the interpretation may contribute to the persuasive power of the passage and to its effects on Glaucon and the reader. Secondly, I have pointed out that the structure of Socrates’ presentation of the image enacts a particular approach to education. [[12]](#footnote-12) If it is fair to say that Socrates attempts to educate Glaucon by discussing this image with him, then it follows that Socrates attempts in this instance to educate Glaucon (and by implication the reader) by a process of inviting him to reason hypothetically about the image and to identify with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the prisoners.[[13]](#footnote-13) We can see already that a parallel between Glaucon and the prisoners emerges not only in the brief moment when Socrates reveals that the prisoners are ‘like us’, but *systematically* through Socrates’ persistent and explicit attempt to engage Glaucon in a multifaceted identification with the prisoners.

# 2. THE RHETORIC OF ASCENT

Several of the less obvious features of the cave narrative shape the way the image, and the passage as a whole, work effectively to compel both Glaucon and the reader. A pattern emerges where the content of the image mirrors or has implications for the conversation actually taking place between Glaucon and Socrates. As we shall see, there is a way in which this entire passage is just as much about the conversation taking place between Socrates and Glaucon and the particular view of education enacted there as it is about the contents of the cave.

The beginning of any narrative marks an emphatic position and one that bears the double burden of setting the stage and drawing the reader in. Out of the countless ways that Plato could have had Socrates begin the cave allegory, he chooses to emphasize the following elements: the prisoners are in a cave or cave-like dwelling and they have been ‘stuck’ since childhood. They are ‘fettered’ ‘chained’, and in ‘bonds’. There is a road or a path (*hodon*, 514b4) in back of them. People in back of them hold up statues behind a wall and these statues create shadows on the wall that the prisoners can see. Socrates emphasizes what the prisoners can and cannot *see*. They cannot see anything of themselves or one another, only the shadows on the wall, which they take to be the things that they are actually only shadows of. They think that the shadows are ‘truth’. We are also told from the beginning that this image is designed to show us ‘the effect of education or the lack of it on our nature’.

This initial picture we get of the prisoners creates many parallels between the prisoners and the conversation taking place between Glaucon and Socrates. When Glaucon remarks that both the image and the prisoners seem ‘strange’ (*atopon*, 515a2) to him, Socrates replies with his succinctly disillusioning ‘They’re like us’ ([ὁμοίους](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=o%28moi%2Fous&la=greek&can=o%28moi%2Fous0&prior=a)to/pous" \t "morph) [ἡμῖν](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=h%28mi%3Dn&la=greek&can=h%28mi%3Dn0&prior=o(moi/ous" \t "morph),515a3). Who exactly is the ‘us’? Socrates’ remark explicitly fixes a doubling, but in more ways than scholars have recognized. Yes, the prisoners are perhaps like *all* of us in the world at large, and this is the usual interpretation. But the ‘us’ can also refer specifically to Socrates and Glaucon in the particular situation in which they find themselves. There is a more specific parallel at work here: the prisoners are mistaken about truth; they think that the shadows are the true things. Socrates and Glaucon are mistaken about the true nature and definition of education and that is why they are pursuing this conversation, in order to get clear about what true education is. At this point in the conversation, they have not yet seen what true education is, and at least Glaucon labors under the delusion that education is what others conventionally believe it is, namely, ‘putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes’ (518b5-6; cf. *Rep*. I ‘pouring the argument into your soul’). The prisoners in the cave have a ‘path’ (*hodon*, 514b4) in back of them that they must follow by reorienting the direction of their souls. So too, Glaucon and Socrates’ philosophical pursuit in this passage is a journey they take in search of getting clearer about the truth regarding education.

The narrative creates additional parallels between the picture we get of the cave and current conversation between Glaucon and Socrates. Socrates emphasizes that the prisoners are stuck, fettered, and chained and ‘at a loss’ (*aporein* 515d7). When Glaucon reacts to Socrates’ description by saying, ‘It’s a strange (*atopos*) image you’re describing, and strange (*atopous*) prisoners’ (515a3), he too is ‘stuck’; he is in a state of *aporia* and he cannot see what Socrates is getting at or what these prisoners are supposed to be. In this regard he is like the prisoners that Socrates has just described. The men in the cave who stand behind the wall hold up statues that create the shadows on the wall that the prisoners see. So too, Socrates at this very moment ‘holds up’ the image of the cave for Glaucon to see and imagine. Socrates specifically asks Glaucon to ‘see’ it (*ide*, 514b5). In this regard Socrates plays the role of the carriers who are compared to ‘puppeteers’ in the cave. More generally, the emphasis that Socrates places in this section on what the prisoner can and cannot *see* (*horan*, 514b1**;** *heôrakenai,* 515a6) is echoed by the language of sight applied to and used by Glaucon both when Socrates asked him to ‘see’ the image (514a3 *ide*; 514a2, b5) and when Galucon agrees that he ‘sees’ (*horô ephê,* 514b8) what Socrates asks him to.

In the following passage from 515c-d, Socrates turns to the antagonistic and painful experience of the prisoner who protests and the guide who forces him to turn around while the prisoner struggles and is still unable to see. The prisoner is ‘pained’ and ‘dazzled’ when he is compelled to look toward the light; he is ‘unable to see’ and ‘at a loss’; he is afraid and he ‘flees’ toward the things that he can see in the cave and which he takes to be real. The prisoner is in a state where, in order to make progress, he now must be ‘forced’ and ‘dragged’ up a ‘rough steep path’ into the sunlight.[[14]](#footnote-14) The prisoner’s agitated state is both intellectual and emotional. He is unable to discern the truth clearly, he is confused, and he is pained and so afraid that he turns around and runs away. The difficulty he experiences is complex. He remains attached to his error, both intellectually and emotionally. He can discern falsehood more clearly, so he mistakenly thinks it is the truth. He is at this point unable to apprehend the truth when he turns toward it. At the same time he finds his disorientation painful, confusing, and it inspires fear in him – so much fear that he flees. Socrates tells us something crucial about education here. Education understood as turning toward the truth and grasping it involves emotional upheaval and confusion, and it demands that we endure that upheaval and confusion.[[15]](#footnote-15) As Socrates goes on to explain at 516a, education involves a long process of habituation, as does returning to the cave after one has left it.

Paul Shorey remarked, and there are perhaps many who would agree with him, that the entire passage at 515c-d that I have just describedis obviously an ‘allegory of the painful experience of one whose false conceit of knowledge is tested by the Socrates *elenchus*.[[16]](#footnote-16) Shorey’s interpretation may be true enough – we see evidence throughout the Platonic dialogues of interlocutors struggling through the Socratic elenchus with both a lack of intellectual clarity and various emotional reactions. However, this interpretation also jumps to a generalization about the Socratic elenchus throughout the dialogues without stopping to ask how this part of the image relates to the particular conversation currently taking place between Socrates and Glaucon. The cave image has now narrowed down to a relationship between two people – the prisoner and the guide who attempts to lead him out. Socrates no longer generalizes about all of the prisoners. In this way the image becomes even more parallel to the one-on-one conversation taking place between Glaucon, and *his* guide, Socrates. As I have already remarked, in the conversation taking place between Glaucon and Socrates, there is a process of education underway, just as there is a process of education underway between the prisoner and his guide. When we consider these parallel situations, we see not only the doubling I have been remarking on, but also the implications that the cave image carries for the conversation taking place between Socrates and Glaucon. Education, the cave image tells us, is a long process that demands that we tolerate confusion and lack of discernment. For Glaucon in this particular conversation, this implies that any confusion he is experiencing at the moment about the nature of education is not incompatible with his actually being educated and progressing in education. Glaucon does not run away from Socrates in fear, but he is certainly still confused and unable to see the whole point of what Socrates is saying with the cave image. The cave image itself, as it applies to his current conversation with Socrates – and Plato’s conversation with the reader – suggests that we, and Glaucon, are ourselves undergoing a journey of ascent (‘out of the cave’) headed toward a clearer understanding of the nature of education. As it applies to Glaucon and we the readers, the cave image at this point tells us that this enlightenment is not an easy process and requires that we endure a period of confusion.

When Socrates finally explains to Glaucon what it would be like for the prisoner to see the sun directly and to be able to study it, he is quick to focus even more on what the prisoner’s attitude would be toward those who are still in the cave and on what it would be like for him to return to the cave (516-517a). Keep in mind that this is the passage that prepares Glaucon and the reader for the interpretive section of the cave passage, which concludes with Socrates’ definition of true education. When, after a long period of adjustment, the prisoner would finally be able to see the sun and study it, he would conclude that the sun ‘provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see’ (516 b7-9). Socrates proceeds to a more extended, poetically embellished, and somewhat puzzling account of how, if there had been

any honors, praises, or prizes among them [the prisoners in the cave] for who was the sharpest at identifying shadows as they passed by and who best remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously, and who could thus best divine the future, do you think that our man would desire those rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power? Instead, wouldn’t he feel, with Homer, that he’d much prefer to ‘work the earth as a serf to another, one without possessions,’ and go through any sufferings, rather than share their opinions and live as they do? (516c7-d6)[[17]](#footnote-17)

Socrates goes on to remark that if the escaped prisoner returned to the cave, his eyes would now be ‘filled with darkness’ when he tried to discern things there, and he would become the subject of ridicule among the unenlightened prisoners.

This passage is complex, and we can begin by asking some simple questions: why is Socrates so concerned with the prisoner’s attitude to ‘honors,’ ‘praises,’ and ‘prizes’ in the world of the cave? Why does he quote Homer at this point, and what is the significance of this particular quotation? We need to keep in mind that the passage sets the stage for the interpretive section of the cave image, which immediately follows. It would be reasonable to consider the possibility, then, that Plato crafts this passage of Socrates’ narrative to set Glaucon up to be persuaded by the interpretation that follows. Indeed, I would suggest that, after it lays the groundwork for the conception of the Good that will soon be revealed explicitly, this passage aims to boost Socrates’ (Plato’s) authority about education, and to invest the cave image with a particular sense of seriousness and urgency.

The passage is preoccupied, first of all, with dismantling notions of conventional authority. The cave is the space of conventional life, immersed in error according to Socrates’ account. The inhabitants of the cave give out honors, praises, and prizes to people who, by Socrates’ standards, are unworthy of them. What exactly are these prizes and honors given for? According to Socrates’ account, conventional society honors those who are good at ‘identifying shadows,’ ‘remembering which shadows come earlier, which later, and which simultaneously,’ and who can “best divine the future.” Socrates’ reference to divination signals that one thing he has in mind is religious authority. Scholars have not been puzzled enough by the question of what Socrates means by ‘identifying shadows’ and ‘remembering which shadows come earlier, which later, and which simultaneously’[[18]](#footnote-18)I would suggest that when we look more closely at this formulation it brings something specific to mind closely connected with the reference to those who ‘best divine the future.’ A familiar formulaic line found in the proem to Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the *Odyssey*, and elsewhere attributes poetic knowledge of the ‘past, present, and future’ (*ta t’eonta ta t’essomena pro t’eonta*, *Theog*. 38 ) to the Muses and other figures with privileged religious-poetic authority.

I would suggest that when Socrates speaks of ‘remembering which shadows come earlier, which later, and which simultaneously’ he alludes to the religious-poetic authority associated with traditional epic poetry and more generally with all poets, rhapsodes, actors, and teachers who make claim to poetry’s authority over the past, present, and future, or are viewed as possessing this authority. This allusion becomes even more apparent in the context of Socrates’ mention of prizes, contests and the quotation of Homer that follows. Before we turn to that quotation, it is worth pointing out that in his preparation for overturning what he takes to be the conventional notion of education, Plato has Socrates concentrate on undermining the power of traditional epic poetry. In the context of Plato’s critiques of poetry in the *Republic*, we may not find this surprising. What may be surprising, however, is the way that Socrates manipulates Homeric quotation 516d6-7 in order to endow the cave image with a particular kind of persuasive power.

In a climactic moment of the *Odyssey*’s *Nekuia* Odysseus confronts Achilles in such a way that Homer creates a looming sense that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* themselves are finally coming face to face. When Odysseus meets the shade of Achilles in the underworld and attempts to console him, Achilles’ poignant and chilling response flouts Odysseus’ attempts at flattery: ‘O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying / I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another / man, one with no land allotted to him and not much to live on / than be king over all the perished dead.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Achilles’ position here asserts that being alive, even in a state of abjection, is preferable to being dead. Socrates’ use of this quotation, itself placed in a climactic moment of the cave allegory, works in anything but a straightforward way.[[20]](#footnote-20) In Socrates’ version, it is the escaped prisoner who would rather be a slave without possessions than share the sufferings and opinions of those in the cave, that is, the sufferings and opinions of conventional people on earth. The *sentiment* in this simile really does apply to both Achilles and the prisoner; both Achilles and the prisoner would rather be a slave without possessions than in a place they do not want to be. However, the simile begins to break down when pressed further. Plato’s radical re-contextualizing of the quotation in fact reverses the Homeric idea at work here, namely the idea that ordinary, conventional life on earth is tremendously desirable even in its most lowly form.[[21]](#footnote-21) The prisoner who has escaped from the cave would do anything in order to *avoid* this conventional life. Achilles, it would seem, would rather be in the cave, a part of conventional, everyday life. The reversal at work here is clear, if not perfect: Achilles wants to avoid death at all costs, and would prefer conventional life. The prisoner wants to avoid conventional life at all costs and would prefer, not death, but to get out of the cave. [[22]](#footnote-22)

This quotation from Homer is not just any quotation, and it is not the only time that Socrates quotes it in the *Republic*.[[23]](#footnote-23) It is arguably the most famous quotation from all of Homer, and it is spoken by Achilles, who is not only the paradigmatic Homeric hero, but also speaks at this point in the *Odyssey* about nothing less than the meaning of life from the vantage point of someone who has obtained the super-wisdom of the dead. Plato’s choice of this paradigmatic quotation indicates that the stakes are high. What exactly is at stake here? By integrating the Homeric quotation into the context of Platonic education, Plato associates that education with the very meaning of life (the subject of Achilles’ exchange with Odysseus). The suggestion is that the cave analogy does not merely offer a view of what true education is, but it also holds the key to life’s value. By re-contextualizing and reversing this prominent Homeric formulation, Plato practices one-upmanship and signals his competition with Homer; he performs a feat of re-appropriation, of rewriting, of usurpation, in order to claim his advantage as an authority on the meaning of life. While Achilles articulates the Homeric view that life, in whatever form, holds tremendous value, Plato contends that the life of one who has escaped the cave is incomparably more valuable than that of a prisoner.

If we now take stock of the passage at 516-517a as a whole and the role it plays in presenting the image of the cave, we can see that this passage is preoccupied not only with rejecting the value of common opinion, but with identifying that common opinion with poetic and religious authority. Traditionally, the Muses and all of the poets and performers connected with them know the true order of things – the past, present, and future, but in Plato’s scheme, it is the escaped prisoner who knows the true order of things. Plato here attacks not only the poets, but also the traditional sources of the poets’ authority. **[[24]](#footnote-24)** Socrates’ culminating re-writing and re-contextualization of a famous and poignant Homeric quotation accomplishes something even more undermining than a straightforward rejection of Homer: it subsumes Homer within a new Platonic framework. In this new framework, Homer’s characters express an authoritative Platonic vision of what makes life meaningful.

This final section of the cave passage is distinguished by its interpretive register, which lends it the anticipatory tone of a final revelation. It all leads up to and culminates in Socrates’ articulation of the whole point of the allegory – the definition of the true nature of education at 518b through 518d. The passage as a whole is designed around this final formulation, which brings us back to the very beginning of the allegory where Socrates set out to teach Glaucon something about the nature of education through a comparison. For Glaucon, I will suggest, this final section of the cave passage functions as an ascent. So too, the reader at this point will be especially apt to put herself in the position of the interlocutor because the reader too is eager to know how to interpret the image. Insofar as Glaucon and the reader are made to feel enlightened about how to interpret the image, they themselves experience an ascent, which is what makes the passage as whole so powerful.

At 517b Socrates tells Glaucon that the whole image of the cave must be fitted together with the image of the divided line that he presented previously. Socrates by no means ties up this comparison systematically, and in fact he focuses mostly on revealing that the sun in the visible realm is the analog to the Good in the knowable realm, and when one has seen it one ‘must conclude the it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.’ (517b9-13). These remarks about the Good might count as Socrates’ first interpretive revelation, and it is important to note that they are qualified both by Socrates’ admission that ‘Whether or not it’s true only the god knows’ (517b6-7) and by Glaucon’s guarded agreement to Socrates’ description of the Good: ‘I have the same thought, at least as far as I am able’ (517c5). Socrates’ condensed description of the Good as a cause is also, of course, famously under-elaborated and raises many questions. As a revelation to Glaucon, it is limited, although perhaps promising, and in any case it does not dispel all confusion.

From this point forward, Socrates’ narrative is structured as a crescendo. If we divide the sections by topic, they gradually increase in length, culminating in Socrates’ revisionary definition of education. Five lines are devoted to repeating a topic that Socrates has just treated, namely that the prisoner who has escaped from the cave will no longer be interested in human affairs (517c6-d1). The following seven lines turn to a variation of a topic that also repeats what Socrates has previously said, namely that if the escaped prisoner does turn toward the human world, he will behave awkwardly and appear ridiculous (517d3-e1). Here we cannot help but be put in mind of Socrates’ trial by the choice of examples the narrative makes. The prisoner would appear ridiculous ‘if he’s compelled, either in the courts or elsewhere, to contend about the shadows of justice.’ Note that in the previous section Socrates had also alluded to himself (in a breech of realism) when he said that if anyone tried to lead the prisoners upward against their will, they would ‘kill him’ ‘if they could somehow get their hands on him’ (517a5-5-6). Having Socrates so pointedly allude to his own future, so well known to us, is a way that Plato inserts himself into the narrative. Plato and his reader know very well that this is Socrates’ fate, and yet when the character Socrates himself unknowingly makes the allusion, we are strikingly made aware that Plato crafts the narrative from a superior vantage point. The following 11 lines -- notice that the sections are gradually increasing in length—again repeat a topic already familiar from the previous section. Like the eyes, the soul can be confused in two different ways, ‘when they have come from the light into the darkness *and* when they’ve come from the darkness into the light’ (518a3-4). Socrates seems most concerned to emphasize that we should not be quick to make fun of the person who has come down from above, and who for that reason feels confused and appears ridiculous. All of this prepares for the final and most lengthy section which I consider the finale of the allegory of the cave and which formulates Socrates’ definition of true education over and against the conventional understanding (518b4-518d7). Education is not what most people think it is, it is not ‘putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes’ (518b5-6). Rather,

… our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole soul body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely what we call the good. Isn’t that right? Yes. Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn’t the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn’t turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This final revelation, the moral of the story for the cave allegory, clarifies some matters, and leaves unanswered questions about others. Both Glaucon and the reader now know that the whole soul must be turned around in education, with all of the attendant confusion and frustration that entails. Education, moreover, does not function according to a transmission model where the teacher puts knowledge into the soul that it did not previously have. Instead, a true educator ‘redirects’ the whole soul, suggesting that the entire person, including his intellectual and sensory faculties, as well as his desires, undergo a transformative reorientation. Glaucon may now have a better understanding of what Socrates means by true education, but it would be reasonable for him to have some remaining questions. For example, Socrates claims that education is not a matter of putting knowledge (‘sight’) into souls that lack it. However, he does not make it clear – at least here – why obtaining knowledge of the good does not count as putting new knowledge into the soul. The theory of recollection might help explain this, but Socrates does not appeal to that theory here. Questions might also be said to remain about what this total and painful reorientation of the soul really amounts to – what exactly makes this process involve such upheaval of the entire person. The success of the cave allegory, however, does not depend on its having tied up all loose ends. Recall that the theory of education elaborated throughout the cave image posits that confusion and frustration are not unfortunate by-products of the educational process, but necessary for the process to move forward. Glaucon’s ‘ascent’ in understanding the nature of true education is therefore perfectly compatible with his – and the reader’s – remaining confused about certain elements. Socrates’ final definition of education at the conclusion of the cave allegory is designed to make us recognize that through the process of thinking (and feeling) through the image of the cave, Glaucon is himself being educated.

In conclusion, then, Plato has designed Socrates’ cave narrative so that the conversation between Glaucon and Socrates in many ways mimics the content of the image itself. This mimesis is achieved through verbal and thematic parallels, and most fundamentally through the fact that the prisoner and Glaucon are simultaneously led through a process of ascent. Socrates invites Glaucon to identify with the prisoners both intellectually and emotionally. Socrates accomplishes this by presenting the image through a series of questions that require Glaucon to draw inferences about what the prisoners would feel and think. Socrates’ educates Glaucon in a way that opposes both Thrasymachus’ suggestion that an argument be poured down Socrates’ throat, and what Socrates takes to be the conventional understanding of education as putting new knowledge into the soul. The prisoner’s ascent from the cave to his vision of the Good is mirrored dynamically in the conversation between Glaucon and Socrates, where Glaucon moves gradually from a state of aporia to Socrates’ final, revisionary definition of education. Glaucon does not ascend to a vision of the Forms and the Good as the prisoner does, but he ascends analogously to an enlightened view of education.[[26]](#footnote-26) The notion of ascent is made especially vivid by the crescendo structure leading up to the final definition.[[27]](#footnote-27) Insofar as the reader identifies with Glaucon or simply plays the part of a reader interested in how to interpret the image, the reader to will experience this ascent. The notion of education formulated by the cave image, where education requires not only intellectual insight, but also considerable confusion and upheaval, has implications for how we interpret Glaucon’s own education in this passage. Among other things, it suggests that any lingering confusion that Glaucon (or the reader) may have is compatible with his having made actual progress. Finally, through his bold re-appropriation of Homer and what turns out to be a reversal of a prominent Homeric formulation, Plato aims to boost his own authority on the subject of education, to identify Platonic education as critical to the meaning of life, and thereby to enhance the power of the cave image itself.

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1. Schofield (2007), 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As Annas (1981), 252 puts it: ‘The Cave is Plato’s most famous image, dominating many people’s interpretation of what Plato’s most important ideas are. This is a pity, because, as in the Line, severe problems arise over interpreting the imagery philosophically, and there are persistent disagreements.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Much of the scholarly literature has in fact been devoted to this issue. See Karasmanis (1988) for an overview. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Destrée (2012), 117-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schofield (2007), 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lear (2006), 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nightingale (2004), 96, 99 finds in the cave allegory both a ‘rhetoric of estrangement’ (an attempt to ‘uproot and displace us’) and a ‘highly idealized narrative that invites us ‘to adopt the alterity of the theoretical gaze’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Partenie (2004), 51-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Rep.* I, 345b4-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See 518e ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See *Phaedrus* 246a-250c7, *Gorgias* 493a-494b. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The image of the cave is enacted by the parallel between the process of education described by the image and the process of education simultaneously taking place between Socrates and Glaucon. In addition to presenting us with an *enacted image*, the allegory of the cave itself offers us a *moving image* since it describes the prisoner’s literal and metaphorical movement out of the cave. The cave allegory therefore functions more like a film than like a static photograph. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The cave image helps the reader to understand the education of Glaucon, and, at the same time, Socrates’ education of Glaucon helps the reader to understand the nature of the world as the cave describes it. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On puzzles raised by the notion of compulsion here, see Barney (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The emotional reactions of interlocutors like Callicles and Thrasymachus to the Socratic elenchus often result in intransigence. Scott (1999) argues that in the *Republic* Plato diagnoses the problem of intransigence as the result of indelible beliefs (caused largely by the influence of poetry) and irrational desires of the soul. The irrational pain, fear, and desire in the soul have to expel true beliefs (413b9-10) and therefore the guardians in training must be tested repeatedly (see 413cff.) Gill (1985) raises important questions about whether Plato’s educational program integrates the training of emotion with the development of intellect. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Shorey (1935), 124. See also Elliot’s (1967) reading of the entire Cave image as an account and critique of Socratic method. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. τιμαὶ δὲ καὶ ἔπαινοι εἴ τινες αὐτοῖς ἦσαν τότε παρ᾽ ἀλλήλων καὶ γέρα τῷ ὀξύτατα καθορῶντι τὰ παριόντα, καὶ μνημονεύοντι μάλιστα ὅσα τε πρότερα αὐτῶν καὶ ὕστερα εἰώθει καὶ ἅμα πορεύεσθαι, καὶ ἐκ τούτων δὴ δυνατώτατα ἀπομαντευομένῳ τὸ μέλλον ἥξειν, δοκεῖς ἂν αὐτὸν ἐπιθυμητικῶς αὐτῶν ἔχειν καὶ ζηλοῦν τοὺς παρ᾽ ἐκείνοις τιμωμένους τε καὶ ἐνδυναστεύοντας, ἢ τὸ τοῦ Ὁμήρου ἂν πεπονθέναι καὶ σφόδρα βούλεσθαι ‘“ἐπάρουρον ἐόντα θητευέμεν ἄλλῳ ἀνδρὶ παρ᾽ ἀκλήρῳ” Hom. *Od*. 11.489’ καὶ ὁτιοῦν ἂν πεπονθέναι μᾶλλον ἢ ‘κεῖνά τε δοξάζειν καὶ ἐκείνως ζῆν; [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Adam (1902) on 516c claims that “Plato is thinking chiefly of the empirical politician and political adviser, who foretells the future from the present and the past (cf. Thuc. I 22), but limits his intellectual horizon by his own experience, and knows nothing of the real determining causes of events. The vast majority of Athenian statesmen belonged in Plato's opinion to this category.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Odyssey* 11.488-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. According to Yamagata (2012), 136, Plato chooses this quotation for its extraordinary vividness. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Fago (1994), 218 notes the reversal and views it as ironic. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For excellent discussions of the Homeric undercurrents in the cave allegory more generally, see O’Connor (2007) and Cavarero and Kottman (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. At *Republic* 386c5-8, Socrates quotes the passage to expunge it on the grounds that it would make the guardians fear death. On the tension between Plato’s two uses of this passage see O’Conner (2007) 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For more on the connection between the allegory of the cave and Plato’s critique of poetry see Destrée (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. ὁ δέ γε νῦν λόγος, ἦν δ᾽ ἐγώ, σημαίνει ταύτην τὴν ἐνοῦσαν ἑκάστου δύναμιν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ καὶ τὸ ὄργανον ᾧ καταμανθάνει ἕκαστος, οἷον εἰ ὄμμα μὴ δυνατὸν ἦν ἄλλως ἢ σὺν ὅλῳ τῷ σώματι στρέφειν πρὸς τὸ φανὸν ἐκ τοῦ σκοτώδους, οὕτω σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ ψυχῇ ἐκ τοῦ γιγνομένου περιακτέον εἶναι, ἕως ἂν εἰς τὸ ὂν καὶ τοῦ ὄντος τὸ φανότατον δυνατὴ γένηται ἀνασχέσθαι θεωμένη: τοῦτο δ᾽ εἶναί φαμεν τἀγαθόν. ἦ γάρ; ναί.τούτου τοίνυν, ἦν δ᾽ ἐγώ, αὐτοῦ τέχνη ἂν εἴη, τῆς περιαγωγῆς, τίνα τρόπον ὡς ῥᾷστά τε καὶ ἀνυσιμώτατα μεταστραφήσεται, οὐ τοῦ ἐμποιῆσαι αὐτῷ τὸ ὁρᾶν, ἀλλ᾽ ὡς ἔχοντι μὲν αὐτό, οὐκ ὀρθῶς δὲ τετραμμένῳ οὐδὲ βλέποντι οἷ ἔδει, τοῦτο διαμηχανήσασθαι. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For more on the limits of the parallel between the guardians’ and Glaucon’s education, see Blondell (2002), 216-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. We could say that the crescendo structure of the narrative provides an additional level of imagery -- an auditory image of an intellectual phenomenon. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)