

Interpretation of the Cave Metaphor in Plato's the Republic in Ancient Greek Philosophy Course

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Abstract: The Republic is the work of Plato's ideal country. The seventh volume discusses the issue of cave metaphor. Cave metaphor describes a story happened inside and outside the cave. In a cave, a group of bound prisoners took illusion as reality. One of the prisoners was unbound, he went out of the cave then saw the sun and the idea of supreme goodness, and then he returned to the cave to rescue the people, but was ostracized until he was killed. Thus Plato conceived an ideal country. In order to govern the ideal country, we should train the king of philosophy as the defender of the country, so that he can take on the task of rescuing the ignorant people in the cave and making them turn their souls. Plato conceived such a philosophical kingship, aiming at achieving the harmonious unity of philosophy and politics.

1. Introduction

The *Republic* is the work of the ideal country conceived by Plato. The sixth volume of *The Republic* discusses the problems of sun metaphor and linear metaphor. The seventh volume discusses the metaphor of cave in detail, which is the essence of the book. The cave metaphor describes such a story. A group of bound prisoners looked at the idol image reflected by the fire in the cave every day, and took the illusion as reality. One of the prisoners was liberated and went out of the cave then saw the objects under the sun and the sun and idea of supreme goodness. After seeing the truth, he went back to the cave to rescue the people, but was rejected by the people until he was killed. Plato thus constructed the idea of establishing an ideal country, educating and cultivating the king of philosophy through instilling dialectics, making him understand philosophy and reach the highest state of goodness, and then letting him go down to the caves of the city-state community to engage in politics, educating the people about the soul turn, and improving the level of the people's soul. This is intended to achieve the harmony between politics and philosophy.

2. Analysis of Cave Metaphor Text

In Plato's "cave metaphor", the inside and outside of the cave separately refer to the visible world as the political community of the city-state and the knowable world of the idea of supreme goodness. What we see in the visible world is images and opinions, and what we see in the knowable world is real objects and ideas. The fire in the cave symbolizes the power of the sun and the ideology of the city-state, which fetters the people of the city-state. What the cave people see is the illusion of the

conventionalism. The puppeteer in the cave refers to legislators, conventionalists and poets. The projection of firelight and puppet is only an image, not real. The sun outside the cave refers to the supreme goodness as the highest idea. Under the light of the supreme good idea, the free man who came out of the cave saw the truth of things, saw the real object and the supreme good idea. The rising process from the cave to the ground is equivalent to the gradual dialectic process of the soul acquiring knowledge. In this way, through dialectic reasoning, the ultimate goodness as the highest law and the origin of all things can be achieved. The idea of supreme goodness is the reason for the right and the beautiful in things, and also the maker of light and light source in the visible world. It is the source of truth and reason in the knowable world. The person who gets freedom in the cave can be called a quasi-philosopher. The soul turn in the cave metaphor is the double turn of the quasi-philosopher who has obtained freedom self-rescue and rescuing others.

The seventh volume of *The Republic* emphasizes the three dizziness of the libertarian --quasi philosopher. From the release of the shackles to see the fire, to going out of the cave to see the idea of supreme goodness, and then to go down the cave, three times dizziness occurred. He felt painful to see the fire light, because he was used to seeing the image and not adapt to the light. This symbolizes that people who are accustomed to seeing illusions are not accustomed to seeing real things. From the inside to the outside of the cave, dizziness occurred again, because the sunlight made it unfit. His understanding changed from shadow and reflection to material objects to the idea of goodness. Later, he saw the true idea and supreme goodness. When he saw the real truth, "he would rather live in the world as a poor slave and suffer, rather than have a common opinion with the prisoners and live the life of a prisoner."^[1] The liberated prisoner did not want to return to ignorance because he had understood philosophy. He did not want to go down to the cave again to share weal and woe with those prisoners who are bound, but they must take on the task of going down to the cave to save those ignorant people. When he went down the cave again, he was dizzy for the third time, and his vision was blurred because he did not adapt to returning to the darkness. The prisoners in the cave laughed at him when they saw his embarrassment and said that he had broken his eyes when he went outside, so they were not ashamed to look outside, and even killed those who tried to release them. Here, Plato implied the death of Sokoladi, indicating the difficulty of saving the people and turning the soul. People who have left the cave see supreme goodness. They hope that their hearts stay in the truth and supreme goodness forever. But when he had to return to the cave, he had not had time to adapt to the pain brought by the darkness, "he was forced to argue with others in court about the shadow or the idol that produced the shadow, and to debate the justice that others had never seen".^[2] It can be seen that the illusion of the opinion world is deeply bound to the people, and the tension between philosophy and politics is unbalanced.

The process of liberating and educating prisoners who are bound and ignorant in the cave is called soul turning or soul shaping. It leads the best part of the soul to see the real idea of goodness. Plato opposed the saying that "the soul has no vision", and believed that "education does not infuse the soul with knowledge that was not originally in the soul, as if they could put vision into the eyes of blind people"^[3]. Plato's Socrates first affirmed that the human soul itself has vision, just like the eyes have vision, but is blinded by some illusions and ignorance, and therefore cannot see the truth. If the eyes are turned to light and the soul is turned from the world of ignorance and changing opinions to the eternal truth, the whole body must be turned. On the premise that the soul itself has vision, it depends on the acquired education and training practice to make it turn. There are both sacred and lowly parts in the soul, which can become useful and beneficial or useless and harmful due to different directions. If the vision in the soul is used for evil, people will become "smart bad people". The sharper the eyesight of the "smart bad man", the more evil things he does. If the human soul turns to its sacred part, it must be trained and educated from an early age, so that the soul can release the burden and move towards the supreme good and justice.

In the fourth volume of *The Republic*, it is mentioned that there are three parts in human beings: reason, passion and desire. Passion is capricious. It can become an ally of reason, subject to the good of reason, and can also be seduced by the evil of desire. If the three parts are harmonious under the guidance of reason, then people have the virtues of wisdom, courage and temperance, which are rooted in justice. Temperance is the restriction of desire and a kind of harmony. “My master” is the control of the superior part of the soul over the inferior part of the soul. Plato believes that those who have seen justice and supreme goodness must be the queen of bees in the hive. Although they are not enthusiastic about rights, they should commit themselves to the cave and live a lower life. They have to live with prisoners in caves, and are accustomed to seeing blurred images and distinguishing different shadows, rather than fighting for shadows. There are many opinions in the cave of the city-state community. The liberator understands the noble nature of philosophy, and must be good at seeing through the illusion in the city-state, and not forget to save the poor and ignorant people. This kind of soul turn includes the soul turn of the successor of the patriot and the soul shaping of the bound ignorant people. That is to train defenders and let them engage in political management of the country and educate the people.

3. Interpretation of the Soul Turn in the Cave Metaphor

At the end of the sixth volume of *The Republic*, the sun metaphor and the line metaphor are described. Plato's Socrates tells the sun metaphor by analogy with the idea of supreme goodness. The visibility of things is realized by light. Light comes from the sun. The supreme good is the idea of the knowable world, which produced the sun, the son of the knowable world. Plato's line metaphor distinguishes the visible world from the knowable world. The visible world is the opinion world of changing images. The knowable world is the idea world of eternal reality. There are four levels of soul. The order of these four levels is: reason, intelligence, belief and imagination. Reason and intelligence belong to the knowable world. Faith and imagination belong to the visible world. The idea of supreme goodness is the highest person who knows the world. “The relationship between the sun of the visible world and visual and visible things is like the relationship between goodness and reason and known things”.^[4] The sun gives vision to the eyes and the ability to understand things. It is the source of human vision and the existence of visible things. “Goodness give truth to the object of knowledge and give knowledge subject the ability to know things, so it is the source of truth in knowledge and human understanding.”^[3] Truth and knowledge are beautiful, and the idea of goodness is higher than both. The object of sight gets its visibility from the sun, and the object of knowledge gets its knowability from the goodness. The soul turn is the process that through education, the soul of the educated can rise from the visible world to the knowable world through dialectics, see the image clearly, and see the truth and the idea of supreme goodness under the sun. First, we should use dialectics to turn the soul of the educated to shape the king of philosophy, and then let him educate the people.

How to cultivate and shape the king of philosophy? How to “bring this talent to the world above, that is, from the dark earth to the sky”^[2]? This is the key issue of the soul turn of cave metaphor. As mentioned earlier, Plato affirmed that human beings have an inherent soul nature, which is equivalent to the vision of the eyes. Because human beings are in the visible world of birth and death, their souls have lost their sight and only see some moving images. They cannot rise to the height of intelligence and reason and see the truth about the goodness of reality. This needs to try to turn the soul of people. Through education and training, people can realize the essence of things, from darkness to light, from opinion to knowledge. Opinion is an uncertain image about the visible world, and knowledge is an eternal and definite truth about the known world. Turning to the soul of the educated is to make them abandon their opinions and turn to the truth by learning dialectics, so

that their soul can rise to the highest goodness and understand the knowledge of the goodness, and then let them fall to the cave to liberate and educate the prisoners, that is, to rescue the people who are not aware of it. Because they have seen the goodness, understood justice, beauty and ugliness, they must clearly distinguish various images in the cave, know their essence, and get used to seeing blurred images.

How can we turn the soul of “quasi philosopher” through the dialectic process? The second half of the seventh volume of *The Republic* states that before the soul turns, we should first understand dialectics and related knowledge. Socrates, Glaucon and Ademantos discussed two different feelings, which are those that need rational thinking and those that do not need rational thinking. Things that can stimulate the senses in the opposite direction are things that require rational thinking, and those that do not cause the opposite stimulation of the senses are things that do not require rational thinking. Human vision can see the size, but the size is consistent, not separate. People have the ability to understand and calculate, so we can see the size by reason. For the number “one”, our vision can see it clearly, but it will not trigger the soul to grasp the reality. When we grasp it with reason, we will study and think about it and explore its essence, so as to guide or turn the mind to the attention of reality. “One” makes people see the same thing as both one and many. Arithmetic is the knowledge of “one”, which can lead the soul to the truth, surpassing other specific disciplines. Plato still emphasized the importance of mathematics. He asked the guardians of the city to learn mathematics, break away from the changeable world and grasp the truth. In order to make the king of philosophy both a soldier and a philosopher, they must also be educated in gymnastics and music. Before learning dialectics, the guardians of the city-state should master the specific disciplines of intelligence.

Plato's Socrates believed that to realize the soul turn, first of all, we should select the most suitable talents, educate and train them, make their souls achieve reality and supreme goodness through dialectics, and then let them return to the cave, share weal and woe with the ordinary people, and be the guardians of the city. Choose young people who are firm, noble, serious, love work, love learning, temperance, brave, generous, and good at distinguishing true from false. First, they should take necessary physical exercises, and then take part in the war to receive training, and be educated to learn mathematics, geometry, astronomy and other specific disciplines. At the age of 30, they were tested with dialectics to see whether they could follow the truth to achieve pure reality. Plato put the cultivation of the king of philosophy in a particularly important position.

Plato believes that philosophers are interested in knowable ideas, and the highest goal is to pursue the goodness. In addition, they have no secular interests and interests, including the interest in participating in politics. Philosophers reach the highest level of goodness, and they are not enthusiastic about rights, and do not want to participate in public affairs. Their hearts desire to stay in the sacred realm of philosophy above. However, in order to manage the city for the benefit of others, they had to give up their personal speculative and noble interests and return to the caves to participate in politics and save the people. Their civic duty as the king of philosophy is to enlighten and rescue the people who are trapped in a tragic situation and have no consciousness. For the benefit of the country, the city and the human being, they can only give up the happiness of personal thinking and seek happiness for the public, and master the political power and philosophy.

It can be said that Plato pioneered the classical political philosophy. The basic problem of Plato's political philosophy is the relationship between philosophy and politics. He conceived a wise and moderate philosopher as the king of philosophy. After being trained, the king of philosophy first engages in politics, and then specializes in philosophy. He combines the philosophy of individual speculation with the politics of the city, so that philosophy and politics can reach a harmonious unity.

4. Explanation of the Relationship between Philosophy and Politics Derived from Cave Metaphor

Socrates tells the story of the navigator as a metaphor, implying that the plight of the real philosopher in the city state shows the importance and difficulty of educating the people. Because philosophy is easily slandered, it is inevitable that most philosophers will deteriorate. There are many fake philosophers, but few really have excellent talents. There are many powerful factors that corrupt them in the city. “No seed or germ can get proper nutrients, the stronger it is, the farther it is from its proper level of development.”^[1] The king of philosophy must be educated and cultivated in a suitable environment. Improper training will make good talents get worse results than bad ones, and they are often swept away by the flood of criticism or praise from the public in a bad environment. This reflects the complex relationship between politics and philosophy. Philosophy can serve politics, but inappropriate politics will damage philosophy. Socrates believes that the current political system is not suitable for the survival of philosophy. Just as the seeds are sown on a foreign land and overcome by local soil and water and lose their nature, philosophy will also lose its nature and deteriorate under an inappropriate system.

In the seventh volume of *The Republic*, Plato said that the soul of the educated should be transformed into the king of philosophy in a dialectic way, and then he should educate the people. Therefore, the supreme goodness and justice in the three metaphors in the sixth and seventh volumes have a strong sense of ideal city-state. Plato's *Seventh Letter* said that only the unity of political rights and philosophy can save the city from corruption. The sixth and seventh volumes of *The Republic* and *Phaedo* tell us that philosophers should be good at observing real things through shadows, not just the truth under the sun. The things in the shadow are the opinions of the people in the cave. People are used to seeing shadows instead of taking them as shadows, but they regard them as reality. The fifth volume of *The Republic* states that philosophers love wisdom, and those who love wisdom love knowledge, and “can go to and see beauty itself”. Plato distinguished knowledge: knowledge is related to “being”, ignorance is related to “nothing”, and “what is between knowledge and ignorance is called opinion”. Philosophers “pass by opinions” and transcend opinions and rise to knowledge and ideas. The philosopher's love points to the real existence, while others pursue the love of some low-level things, which is to love opinions and love illusion. The opinions of those who wander between the real and non-existent are the things that the ordinary people in the caves of the society and the city are eager to pursue and are obsessed with.

Plato affirmed that the human soul itself has vision, and believed that there are two different natures in the human soul, the nature of good and the nature of evil, either to good or from evil, because of the different directions taken. We should use the nature of good to conquer the nature of evil, and use reason to control passion and desire. The cave theory contains the double meanings of self-rescue and redemption. In order to become the king of philosophy, philosophers must turn back and save those who have not seen the sun and the best truth, and even risk their lives. People who do not understand philosophy are like prisoners trapped in prison. They only see the shadow of themselves and their own kind, which is just the projection of fire. They only see the image in front of them and take illusion as reality. The liberation process of philosophy is the guiding journey for the soul to seek the light, and the pain is also accompanied. The switch between dark and light makes the turner dizzy several times. He must first adapt to the turn, and then guide others to turn. Socrates is a good example of seeing images. He went down to the cave to see the images to guide the people to see through the images and rise.

Socrates aims to guide philosophy to serve the political community of the city-states with the truth and the supreme goodness state he has achieved. However, in the opinion world of the city-states, philosophy guides politics at a cost and sacrifice. There is often a disconnect between

philosophical theory and political practice. Plato believed that only when philosophy precedes politics, goes beyond politics and reaches the realm of truth can it effectively guide politics and educate the people, and philosophy and politics can achieve harmonious unity. However, due to the limitations of reality, Socrates' soul turning practice had finally failed, which shows that the power of the city-state political community is so strong that it is difficult to realize the philosophy guiding politics.

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