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Sideways at the entrance of the cave: A pluralist footnote to Plato

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Abstract

The idea of a ‘true’ account of pluralism is ultimately contradictory. Liberal political philosophers often fell prey to a special version of this fallacy by presupposing that there might be only one correct argument for justifying the acceptance of pluralism as the core of a liberal democratic polity. Avoiding this trap, Rawls’s ‘political liberalism’ has offered a more sophisticated view of reasonable pluralism as linked with the ‘burdens of judgement’. His philosophical agenda, however, left some questions underexplored: What is the relation of pluralism to relativism? How can a conception of pluralism (epistemic, moral and political) avoid being either one view among others with no special claim to truth, or a foundationalist claim? If pluralism is a fact, in what sense can it bind us? These questions – crucial for grasping the distinctiveness of ‘political’ liberalism – are addressed by revisiting Plato’s simile of the cave, in order to make it accommodate the groundbreaking Rawlsian notion of the ‘reasonable’.

Keywords

exemplarity, Plato, pluralism, political liberalism, public reason, Rawls, reasonability, simile of the cave

Why a paper on Plato’s simile of the cave? The title of the 2018 *ResetDoc Seminars – Fountainheads of Toleration* – is an invitation to revisit one the most influential sources of the Western conversation on philosophy and politics – one traditionally *not* interpreted as a fountainhead of pluralism – in order to glean a different teaching from it. Because a ‘view from nowhere’ hardly exists, and because to pretend to offer a view from elsewhere than one’s place is arrogant at best, I take that title as an invitation to critically revisit a familiar place. But why Plato?

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The notion of pluralism is one of the most impervious to elucidate. Unproblematic for anyone who understands pluralism along the lines of political realism, as a shorthand signifier for the factual diversity of orientations operative in the political field under observation, for the *normative* political philosopher pluralism raises a dilemma whose solution is the object of this paper.

The dilemma does not concern the definition of pluralism, but its normative credentials. I take it as relatively unproblematic to define pluralism, for the purposes of political philosophy, as the simultaneous presence within the same polity of broad, ‘comprehensive’ conceptions of society, of the human condition and of what is desirable that are pervaded by, and responsive to, competing values not reconcilable on the basis of a shared hierarchy of priority. That pluralism so understood should count not as an unfortunate predicament to be remedied as urgently as possible, but as a permanent condition that legitimate institutions and authorities *ought* not to try to alter through the coercive force of law, is the claim which poses a difficult dilemma for the normative philosopher.

On the one hand, this stance cannot count as one opinion among others – a Rortyan ‘that’s the way we do things here, in democratic contexts’, ‘that’s how we feel, in liberal progressive circles’ – without thereby emptying it of all normative force and reducing it to a matter of ‘political taste’, as it were. On the other hand, the obligation not to try to bring the predicament of pluralism to an end (through the coercive use of law and the agency of institutions) cannot be claimed to be objectively binding on us, as though it were part of the normative furniture of the universe, without incurring a performative contradiction: the plurality of perspectives predicated at one level is implicitly denied at the meta-level of the justification offered for endorsing pluralism.

Plato’s simile of the cave still offers an invaluable ‘expository device’ for this dilemma and, as I hope to show, provides a language for overcoming it. As political philosophers, how can we defend pluralism without ending up entangled in the dilemma mentioned above?

Rawls’s ‘political liberalism’ will be argued to provide a fruitful framework for avoiding such dilemma, once its central normative standard – the reasonable, especially in the version of ‘the most reasonable for us’ – is elaborated along lines revolving around exemplarity. The simile of the cave, revisited once again, will be modified in order to make visible this element of novelty inherent in the ‘political liberal’ view of pluralism.

The simile of the cave revisited

For about 24 centuries, Plato’s simile of the cave has influenced Western philosophy and cast a spell over political philosophy – a spell that only in recent times has been broken and overcome by Arendt and Rawls.

Building on previous materials by Parmenides, Heraclitus, Pythagoras and Empedocles,¹ and elaborating on the theme, first outlined in *Phaedo*, of the captivity of the soul uninfused with philosophical insight, in the opening section of Book 7 of *The Republic* (at 514a–519b) Plato invites us, through Socrates addressing Glaucon, to imagine an ‘underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave’ wherein are human beings ‘from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of

the bond to turn their heads all the way around'.² The main source of light is 'from a fire burning far above and behind them'. Between the chained prisoners and the fire there is a road and on it 'a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets'.³ Along this wall we are to imagine that 'all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material' are being paraded by carriers some of which 'utter sounds while others are silent'.⁴

These prisoners are 'like us'. If 'they had been compelled to keep their heads motionless throughout life', they would base their knowledge of themselves and one another on little else 'than the shadows cast by the fire on the side of the cave facing them'.⁵ Likewise, they would take the shadows projected by the objects dragged along the wall for the objects themselves and would attribute the sounds emitted by the carriers to the shadows. Under such conditions, the inhabitants of the cave 'would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things'.⁶

Traditionally, some commentators have identified the meaning of Plato's simile as the contrast of *doxa* and *episteme*. Within this interpretive pattern, but in tune with his conception of truth as *alétheia*, Heidegger has pointed out that:

the prisoners do indeed *see* the shadows but not *as* shadows of something . . . It is only we, privy to the whole situation, who call what the prisoners face 'shadows' . . . They are entirely given over to what they *immediately* encounter.⁷

As we will see, this is one of the aspects of the simile that we, readers of the 21st century schooled in Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's respective versions of the Linguistic Turn, need to pause thinking about. Again, as Heidegger put it, 'When questioned, they always talk about shadows, which, however, they do not know *as* shadows'.⁸

A rupture in this static scheme of life in the cave occurs when Plato asks us to imagine that one of the dwellers is released and allowed to walk his way out of the cave, past the road and the fire. An important way-station on the way out occurs when the fugitive becomes aware of the puppets generating the shadows and the fire. The shape of the puppets is magnified and made fuzzier by their projected shadows, but Plato does not expand on their significance.

The third narrative juncture of the simile reports the gradual habituation of the temporary fugitive, now outside the cave:

at first he'd most easily make out the shadows; and after that the phantoms of the human beings and the other things in water; and, later, the things themselves. And from there he could turn to beholding the things in heaven and heaven itself, more easily at night . . . than by day.⁹

Only at the end of this process of ascent to knowledge would the former captive be able to turn his gaze at the sun, not the reflections of the sun in water, 'but the sun itself by itself in its own region'.¹⁰ It is indeed a path to become acquainted with a perfection of the orders of the worlds, which results in self-perfection.¹¹ The realm outside the cave

is a transcendent realm incommensurable with the deceitful quality of the realm of shadows below in the cave.¹²

The fourth turn is the most dramatic. The fugitive recognizes the sun as the source of the seasons and the ‘steward of all things’ and ‘in a certain way the cause of all these things he and his companions had been seeing’.¹³ He rejoices at his discovery and at the same time feels pity for his fellow captives back in the cave. The ‘honours, praises and prizes’ for which they would compete by guessing what shadow would pass next now seem worthless, and he’d rather be the servant of a day-labourer than live again that way. Breaking away from ‘the Homeric world order’ that located the afterlife in the underground Hades and human life on the surface,¹⁴ and for reasons that were left for endless speculation during the subsequent centuries, the former captive decides to return to the cave and share his discovery with all the others.

Concerning the motivation to return to the cave, Plato does not offer an explicit one. Two different interpretations are possible. A strong deontological interpretation is offered by Annas. She claims that educated philosophers would not wish to go back into the cave and rule but would come to the realization that they should do so because that is what justice – the organization of the city according to the principle of optimizing the competencies and functions of three classes of citizens, expounded in Book 4 – requires.¹⁵ Instead, a eudaemonistic interpretation is propounded by Sheppard. According to Sheppard, the philosopher descends into the cave again not so much in obedience to some deontological injunction inscribed in one impersonal Form but in order to fulfil his true self as he understands it (as a component of the whole cave community of fellow-humans),¹⁶ on the basis of the view of the polis outlined by Plato in Book 4. In any event, a close examination of Plato’s relevant passages¹⁷ discloses that he is considering the single prisoner ascending his way out of the cave as *representative of a group of individuals* – the philosophers, destined ideally to rule in the cave. My reformulation of the simile, for the purpose of solving the paradox of pluralism, will unfold precisely from that point.

We are now at the final turning point. When the fugitive-philosopher proceeds to report back to the fellow inhabitants of the cave, he once again suffers, this time from the sudden transition from the sunlit outdoor environment to the dark inside of the cave. Temporarily unable to distinguish those shadows that once bore no secrets for him, he is much scorned for this fault – attributed by all others to the foolishness of his venturing out of the cave. He even risks being killed when he tries to free his comrades from their chains and urges them to follow in his footsteps, an aspect of the simile widely reputed to convey a tribute to Socrates’ death.¹⁸

Plato does not tell us how and by what means the superior knowledge imported by the philosopher into the cave eventually wins the consent of those who never saw anything but shadows. All we are told is that the returning philosopher, after re-adapting to the darkness of the cave, eventually will see things ‘ten thousand times better than the men there’, but not how the men in the cave will come to recognize that the philosopher’s perception of things is ten thousand times better than theirs.¹⁹

Many metaphysical, moral and philosophical-anthropological meanings have been read into Plato’s simile of the cave, but undeniably the simile bears a *political philosophical* significance: truly entitled to legitimately rule over others is only the one

individual, taken as representative of a class, the philosophers, who has had the courage to leave *doxa*, which prevails inside the cave, and has endured the suffering that accompanies that quest for true ideas, and later the pains of violent rejection, when on re-entering the cave he has tried to convince his fellow inhabitants to embrace a true account of how things are and what the Good is. Legitimate rule is ultimately rooted in *episteme's* supremacy over mere *doxa*.

No interpreter has more perceptively captured this deep-seated and very influential teaching that has shaped all normative political philosophy for over two millennia, than Hannah Arendt. As she put it, in those initial passages of Book 7 of *The Republic*:

the rule of the philosopher-king, that is, the domination of human affairs by *something outside its own realm*, is justified not only by an absolute priority of seeing over doing, of contemplation over speaking and acting, but also by the assumption that what makes men human is the urge to see . . . human affairs, the result of speech and action, must not acquire a dignity of their own but be *subjected to the domination of something outside their realm*.²⁰

In a nutshell, the equation of legitimate rule and *epistocracy* is the enduring legacy of Plato's simile of the cave, and it contains a dangerous ambiguity. On the one hand, the simile embeds a deep critical, anti-traditionalist, anti-conventional thrust, and to that extent it may embed an unequalled transformative, even messianic, potential. On the other hand, it contains a seed of authoritarianism, lodged in the primacy of solitary seeing over action in concert or joint self-definition, and anchored in the subordination of politics to ethics (the Idea of the Good) or, in the modern secularist versions (e.g. Marxism and the social darwinism inaugurated by Spencer), the subordination of politics to some law-like, non-political sort of truth.

Rawls and the cave

The over 24 centuries elapsed from the time when Plato wrote *The Republic* have added substantive variations on this theme, while leaving the deep-seated overall teaching basically unchallenged. The idea of the Good, symbolized by the sun, has been over time replaced by the revealed will of a monotheistic God, by insights into the desiring nature of man, by the laws of evolution, by Reason in history, by the dynamics of class struggle and revolutionary emancipation. Underlying all these expressions is the idea that true knowledge, which precedes intersubjective deliberation and sets the standard for sorting out good and bad deliberation, provides the foundations for the legitimate use of coercive power, for political obligation and for all the normative concepts found in politics.

The last reincarnation of such an epistemic approach to normative political philosophy is 'justice as fairness', as understood in *A Theory of Justice*. It is the weakest possible version of Plato's simile, topographically located at the extreme edge, beyond which the model undergoes radical transformation. In fact, within *A Theory of Justice* the fact of pluralism is already part of the 'circumstances of justice', the point of 'justice as fairness' being to enable us to build a just polity amidst conflicting conceptions of the good outside the cave, and ultimately it is the consensus of us inside the cave that can validate

the philosopher's argument.²¹ However, *A Theory of Justice* still lies *within* the bounds of Plato's line of thinking because it incorporates the expectation, later denounced as 'unrealistic' in *Political Liberalism*, that everybody in the cave will eventually recognize the superiority of 'justice as fairness' over all the rival accounts of what is outside the cave, and notably over utilitarianism – as though the 'burdens of judgement' could be fully neutralized by some philosophical argument.²²

With a radical departure from this long established tradition, public reason breaks free of Plato's spell.²³ It is a kind of *deliberative reason* which neither surrenders to the world of appearances, to *doxa*, nor presumes that salvation can originate from without, from subjecting politics in the cave to 'the whole truth' imported from out of the cave. As Rawls famously put it, 'the zeal to embody the whole truth in politics is incompatible with an idea of public reason that belongs with democratic citizenship'.²⁴ Public reason, instead, tries to distinguish better and worse, the more and the less just, the more reasonable and what is less so, *within the bounds of the cave*.

However, can a *non-epistocratic* version of the Cave be worked out? Why bother?

Starting from the latter question, to rethink the simile of the Cave matters for two reasons: first, it matters in order to gauge the distance our contemporary understanding of the just polity has come from its inaugural moments; and, second, it matters in order to highlight the potential of political liberalism to engage and overcome that inaugural normative model.

In the remainder of this section, I will reformulate the simile in such a way as to enable it to reflect the Rawlsian way of weaving pluralism, reasonable disagreement and a non-speculative form of reason, into the simile. I will then highlight the tension that this Rawlsian version of the simile leaves unsolved. Then in the final section, I will offer a reformulation of the simile.

If we wish to translate the gist of Rawls's non-perfectionist liberalism into the imagery of Plato's cave, we would have to press a host of question that the ontological assumptions undergirding ancient philosophy placed out Plato's critical reach: What language does the fugitive-philosopher use when reporting what he has seen outside the cave? Can a language shaped by the deceitful knowledge of the shadows provide him with adequate expressive resources for describing an altogether alien world? If all he has seen are shadows that, as Heidegger rightly points out, are not known *as shadows*,²⁵ then how can the fugitive-philosopher conclude that objects are causally related to *their own* shadows? How can he attribute a greater ontological significance to objects as opposed to perceiving them as 'thicker shadows'? Since the size and length of the projected shadow varies with the angle at which a light source and the object are placed relative to one another, how can the former prisoner come to the conclusion that such a variation is causally associated with the positioning of the light-source? Why does a low sun make the objects project a long shadow, as opposed to long shadows cause the sun to lower? If all he has seen are shadows, how can the fugitive have in his vocabulary terms for describing non-shadows, namely objects and sources of light, when he returns and wants to report what he has seen?

Maybe, for the sake of the Platonic argument, he will be assisted by 'intuition' and eventually will grasp 'the right order of things' – light-sources, and the sun above all, illuminate objects and illuminated objects project shadows – but conceivably he will lack

words to properly express this intuition. Will he forge a *private* language, with its syntax connecting terms to which no one else other than himself can assign any reference? How can that private language ever prevail over the local language shared in the community of the prisoners?

We can begin to answer these questions if we introduce a modification in the received version and imagine the scene of the cave *at a later stage*. At 519d Socrates undoubtedly speaks in the plural: ‘our job as founders is to compel *the best natures* . . . to go up that ascent; and, when *they* have gone up and seen sufficiently, not to permit *them* what is now permitted’. He and Glaucon are referring to a ‘class of philosophers’: ‘we won’t be doing injustice’, Socrates continues (at 520a), ‘to the *philosophers* who come to be among us, but rather that we will say just things to them while compelling them besides to care for and guard the others’.

Let us then recalibrate the simile in a way, not entirely beyond Plato’s mindset: not just one single prisoner, as in the canonical version, but a number of them, say an expedition-team of three or four philosophers, have made their way up to the outside world. Then we no longer have to imagine a private language, conjured up in order to express a single person’s intuitions, but we can fathom a small community, no different from a scientific community, that comes to a conclusion about how things – light, objects, shadows – relate out there, and reassesses the beliefs formerly held in the cave. The philosophers create a new vocabulary in an intersubjective process no different, except for its content, from what goes on in any linguistic community, including the cave. When they descend inside again, they also meet with scorn and incredulity, but are better able, relative to the single isolated fugitive, to sustain their counter-account of the reality of the cave.

Assume, for the sake of the argument, that their account of things outside the cave, after the initial difficulties in all ways similar to the ones described by Plato, convinces the fellow inhabitants: life in the cave is now under the rule of the philosophers under the legitimation of an account of reality consensually endorsed by the people of the cave.

The Rawlsian revolution is connected with the *pluralization* of the number of the former prisoners imagined to have experienced the outside world. On coming back, their accounts of what lies outside conceivably would *partly overlap and partly differ*, not because the returning philosophers lie or are individually blinded by prejudice but simply because they are all-too-finite beings faced with an overwhelmingly complex, if not infinite, reality. Even allowing for the fact that they obviously come from the same shared culture of the cave, some of the ‘burdens of judgement’ may be quite operative. Out there in the outside world, when trying to make sense of the relation of light to the sun, to objects and to shadows, our philosophers may legitimately converge on identifying the relevant aspects of reality yet may assign a different weight to these single aspects, due to their singular experiences in the cave, their specific location and point of observation in the outside world and their propensities or personal characteristics. *We do not need to imagine that their accounts be radically diverse*. All that the case for pluralism requires is the assumption that their accounts, coming from individuated single human beings, *are not identical*.

This assumption suffices in order to reinterpret Plato’s simile of the Cave in a *non-epistocratic* way. Imagine that the philosophers’ accounts prevail in the cave, yet are

discovered to be partly the same, partly different. What then? Should the operation of politics, within the cave, the ordinary workings of authority, of government, be suspended until it is determined which of the diverse accounts is the true one? Should authority be exercised according to what each official deems the best account? Should the cave collectively decide, with a somewhat “populist” referendum, to adopt one account to the exclusion of others? If oppression means to be forced through the coercive power of law, to live according to principles or ideas one does not endorse, how can life without oppression take place under such conditions in the cave even if the philosophers are ruling?

The non-perfectionist solution to the problem of avoiding oppression consists of dividing the public space in two areas, which Rawls calls ‘the public forum’ and ‘the background culture’.²⁶ In the public forum legislative, executive or judicial decision binding for all are made. Their legitimacy, the legitimacy of legal coercion and of the exercise of power in order to secure compliance, and the corresponding obligation of every citizen to abide by these decisions must be justified, if oppression is to be avoided, on principles that derive from the overlapping part of the reports on the outside world and its objective values. Only if life in the cave is ruled in this way no one can lament to be a victim of oppression.

This normative restraint, at the core of public reason, does not hold in the institutions of the ‘background culture’ and thus does not suppress the desire for truth-seeking that human beings share to find out which of the distinct and rival accounts better mirrors the order of the world. That natural impulse must simply be relocated from the public forum into the ‘background culture’, or the public sphere, or any other segment of social life where no practical decision binding for all is expected to follow, and therefore no exercise of authority and legal coercion is linked with the prevailing of one or the other view.

Reinterpreted along these lines, Plato’s simile of the cave can continue to capture our sense of what a just political order would look like when reflection, or the Socratic ‘examined life’, is at the centre of communal deliberation, when ‘we, the cave-people’ are freed from the spell of the shadows and also when the plurality of views emerging from the exercise of the reason of limited finite beings confronting an overwhelmingly transcending realm is not compressed to the detriment of the equal consideration owed to everyone. With this modification of the simile, we can translate the Rawlsian notion of reasonable pluralism into Platonic parlance: whereas a just polis is premised on the primacy of *episteme* over *doxa*, if we allow for a plurality of fugitive-philosophers venturing out of the cave and returning possessed not of a monolithic form of *episteme*, but of a plurality of partially diverging *epistemai*, then it follows that a polis where one controversial kind of *episteme* is imposed, through legal and institutional coercion, not over *doxa*, but over *rival versions of episteme*, is not in the least a just polis.

Sideways at the entrance: A pluralist footnote

We now need to address a normative blind spot that affects Rawls’s view and to do so in terms of yet another modification of the simile of the cave.

The normative blind spot concerns the justification of the pluralistic stance. Clearly the burdens of judgement are *facts* that *explain* why, in the absence of positive and negative incentives, the expected outcome of the deliberation of finite and situated human minds over issues of broad significance should be plurality and not unanimity. Likewise, the existence of a plurality of orientations among the philosophers who ventured out of the cave is a fact. How can it project a *normative* cogency and enjoin respect? Why couldn't one of them, as Larmore has rightly observed, dig in his heels and refuse to accommodate views not corresponding to the account of the external world, or the comprehensive conception, deemed the only correct one by him? How can it be a virtue to accommodate what one considers less than adequate? Who said forcing others to comply with principles one considers the only true ones is worse than compromising with error?

Two answers seem problematic. The first answer, provided by Larmore, consists of maintaining that a principle of equal respect is operative underneath Rawls's case for a pluralism-respecting public forum and for "justice as fairness" as a political conception of justice. This principle – the 'moral heart of liberal thought' – is 'the idea that basic political principles should be rationally acceptable to those whom they are to bind'.²⁷ The reason why forcing others to accept political principles they do not endorse is unjust, Larmore argues, cannot be that using force is in and of itself wrong or unjust. Then political association would be impossible. The reason is rather that to seek compliance on a forced basis, without engaging the person's ability to think for herself, or by engaging that person's ability only through the threat of a prospective use of force against her, means to treat that person in a demeaning different way from the way in which we consider ourselves. Thus, in so far as political justice is concerned, 'to respect another person as an end is to require that coercive or political principles be as justifiable to that person as they presumably are to us'.²⁸

It is not difficult to realize what is problematic with this answer. As Larmore points out, 'Respect for persons lies at the heart of political liberalism, not because looking for common ground we find it there, but because it is what impels us to look for common ground'.²⁹ Consequently, the principle of equal respect must be 'understood as having more than just *political* authority', indeed an authority 'that we have not fashioned ourselves' and that is 'binding on us *independently of our will as citizens*'.³⁰ This way of understanding the normative credentials of pluralism-respecting institutions forfeits the 'political' quality of our liberalism. It restores the epistocratic reading of the simile of the cave. Once again, out of the cave the sun symbolizes one unitary moral hyper-good, now reconceived as 'equal respect'. The philosophers become its exclusive interpreters, and in its name they select 'justice as fairness'. In turn, justice as fairness is understood not *qua* political conception of justice compatible with all the different accounts of the outside, but *qua* view of justice most responsive, relative to its competitors, to the principle of equal respect that emanates from the sun. We are back to an epistocracy that happens to single out a principle which requires us to respect pluralism.

The other answer essentializes pluralism as though it was itself part of the furniture of the world outside the cave. Isaiah Berlin is the champion of this view. Vico and Herder are for him proponents of the idea that:

there are many objective ends, ultimate values, some incompatible with others, pursued by different societies at various times, or by different groups in the same society, by entire classes or churches or races, or by particular individuals within them, any one of which may find itself subject to conflicting claims of incompatible, yet equally ultimate and objective, ends.³¹

This solution posits pluralism directly as a normative aspect of the world outside the cave. The philosophers returning to the cave would announce that the sources of light out there are more than one and cannot be ordered in a hierarchy. Legitimate institutions within the cave then should mirror this pluralized source of value: after all, if the world outside is not capable of bringing this plurality of values to a unity, why expect that the miracle be effected within the cave? Again, like Larmore's solution, also 'metaphysical pluralism' à la Berlin restores the epistocratic reading of the simile of the cave, with all its authoritarian implications. The philosophers are the trustees of an ontological truth that happens to have pluralism as its content but incurs an ironic performative contradiction: it asserts pluralism, but does not allow for a pluralist understanding of its claim. Who can question that 'there are' several, diverse values 'not structured hierarchically'?³²

In the light of these difficulties incurred by the attempts to ground respect for pluralism in some out-of-the-cave objective principle or to turn pluralism into the essence of the outside world we are still in search of a different answer to our normative question: How could the acceptance of pluralism be something other than one opinion among the many voiced in the cave or an authoritative message coming from out of the cave?

That *tertium* has long existed in philosophy under the headings of *phronesis*, reflective judgement, exemplarity. Rawls has built that *tertium* into the core of his later political philosophy under the heading of *the reasonable*, the standard of public reason. The reasonable is precisely what is neither part of the normative furniture of the outside world (lest public reason be turned into the mouthpiece of practical reason within the cave) nor one preference among many others. According to our modified version of the simile, life in the cave must be somehow regulated *before* the controversy concerning which of the full accounts truly matches the outside world is over. The predicate 'reasonable' applies to *all* positions that embed an awareness of this predicament and of their own validity as something other than full scale mirroring of the order of the outside world. Among these positions, the protection and respect of pluralism and 'justice and fairness', qua political conception of justice equally endorseable by the supporters of all the complete accounts of the external world, can aspire to the status of 'most reasonable for us'.

That status is not a second best. It is the idea of normativity that *we* can have if we wish to avoid the epistocratic interpretation of the simile of the cave and at the same time to avoid embracing a *relativism* that cannot spell out how one position could ever be "more reasonable" than another or actually be the 'most reasonable for us'.³³

Let us return to the simile of the cave. Can that complex symbolic structure, so influential on our political imaginary, still accommodate the new non-foundational normativity opened up by the later Rawls? Does it contain enough symbolic resources? The answer is positive. We political philosophers of the 21st century can still articulate

our normative sensibility through that ‘expository device’ created by Plato in 4th-century Athens.

Just imagine, as illustrated above, that not just one but a group of philosophers, destined to rule the cave, were heading back from the outside world for motivations not different from the ones found in the original version. They want to report what they have seen and reform life in the cave. Wouldn’t they also perhaps want to stop for a while, on their way back, at the entrance of the cave and consult among them to exchange their impressions and check if they can come to a common story that one of them, as their spokesperson, would relate? And if upon conversing at the entrance of the cave, standing sideways and alternatively casting their gaze at the misery inside and at the splendour outside, the conversation dragged on without coming to a close, and they came to the realization that they would come to no common report, wouldn’t they agree to keep their report to the observations blessed by full overlap and to make them the only basis for ruling the cave and exercising legitimate authority? As to the contentious conclusions and observations, wouldn’t they agree to bar any divisive enforcement of them through whatever authority each of them would happen to wield when back in the cave, and to further explore their merit in proper venues, for the purpose of seeing if the area of agreement could be further extended in the future?

And finally, would they describe the argument that established the prohibition, for those ruling in the cave, to enforce controversial portions of the accounts (in order to avoid that any of the accounts triumph or succumb in the cave due to the contingency of the distribution of power instead of its intrinsic merit) as just another ‘opinion’ like the ones exchanged in relation to the passing shadows?

‘Certainly not’, any 21st-century Glaucon would concede.

Could then the fugitive-philosophers describe that pluralism-affirming argument as something that they *found* in the outside world, as objectively as they found the light of the sun? ‘Hardly so’, a contemporary Glaucon again would have to admit.

Glaucon would have to concede that the philosophers, during their en route conversation, *standing sideways at the entrance of the cave*, saw in this pro-pluralism argument neither *doxa* nor *episteme*, but simply the most reasonable thing for them to do. The philosophers have discovered *public reason* and its standard, *the reasonable*.

The simile of the cave can still speak to us if we are prepared to filter away its epistocratic implications, and to add another footnote to Plato.

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Notes

1. For a reconstruction of the background philosophical imaginary which could conceivably have nourished Plato’s elaboration of the simile, see J. H. Wright, “The Origin of Plato’s Cave,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 17 (1906): 131–42. **[AQ2]**
2. Plato, *The Republic*, translated, with notes and an interpretive essay by A. Bloom, 2nd edition (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 193, 514a.
3. Plato, *The Republic*, 193, 514b.
4. Plato, *The Republic*, 193, 515a.

5. Plato, *The Republic*, 193, 515a.
6. Plato, *The Republic*, 194, 515c.
7. M. Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth. on Plato's Cave Allegory and Thaletus*, trans. T. Sadler (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 20.
8. Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 23.
9. Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 194, 516a–b.
10. Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, 194, 516b.
11. For an thought-provoking comparison of the simile of the Cave and the exemplariness of Buddha's life, see R. Bellah, "The Heritage of the Axial Age," cit., 459–60. **[AQ3]**
12. On the axial-like radicality of the opposition of the outside world to the inside of the cave, see also J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 253–54. **[AQ4]**
13. Annas, *An Introduction*, 194, 516b–c.
14. See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 265.
15. See J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 267.
16. See D. J. Sheppard, "Why the Philosopher Returns to the Cave," *Richmond Journal of Philosophy* 6 (2004): 5, emphasis mine.
17. Plato, *The Republic*, 519d–520a.
18. See H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, One-Volume Edition (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1978), 81.
19. On this point, never clarified properly by Plato, see Sheppard, "Why the Philosopher," 7.
20. H. Arendt, "What is Authority?," cit., 114–15, emphasis mine. **[AQ5]**
21. See J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 129–30.
22. See J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 58. **[AQ6]**
23. At three junctures, the later Rawls takes explicit distance from *A Theory of Justice*. First, in footnote 7 of Lecture 2 of *Political Liberalism* he dismisses his own attempt, pursued in *A Theory of Justice*, to ground a justification of the principles of justice on the theory of rational decision as 'incorrect'. Second, in the text, on p. 53, Rawls calls the idea of justice as fairness as embedding the attempt to derive the reasonable from the rational a 'misinterpretation' of the original position. Finally, on p. 179 of 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited', Rawls admits that the kind of 'well-ordered society' envisaged in *A Theory of Justice*, namely a society whose members affirm justice as fairness as a comprehensive liberal doctrine, 'contradicts the fact of pluralism and hence *Political Liberalism* regards that society as impossible' (my emphasis).
24. J. Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 442. **[AQ7]**
25. In fact, prior to his ascending out of the cave we are not given any indication that the fugitive philosopher is in any different position than his fellow-prisoners, except for his shackles being suddenly released.
26. *Ibidem*, 215 and 220–222. On the relation of the 'background culture' to Habermas's 'public sphere', see J. Rawls, "Reply to Habermas," in *ibidem*, 382. **[AQ8]**
27. Ch. Larmore, "The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism," *Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 12 (1999): 605.
28. Larmore, "The Moral Basis," 608.
29. Larmore, "The Moral Basis," 608.

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30. Larmore, "The Moral Basis," 609, my emphasis.
 31. I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Random House, 1992), 79–80.
 32. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber*, 80. In the same passage, Berlin contends that this view of pluralism is distinct from relativism.
 33. See R. Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy over Philosophy," in *The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom: Two Hundred Years After*, ed. R. Vaughan (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988). **AQ9**