

# PLATO

(c. 484–c. 424 B.C.)

An enthusiastic disciple of the philosopher Socrates, Plato was strongly influenced by Socrates' view that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Socrates' persistent questioning of accepted values eventually resulted in accusations that he was "corrupting the young" and "introducing new gods." Tried and convicted on these charges, he was condemned to death. After Socrates' death, Plato traveled widely, later returning to Athens to found his school, the Academy, in the olive grove of Academus. Among his students was the young Aristotle. Most of Plato's writings take the form

of dialogues in which Socrates and another speaker discuss such subjects as virtue, justice, friendship, knowledge, and government. All of his known works have survived.

The heart of Plato's philosophy is his concept of Ideas (sometimes called Forms or Archetypes), which are abstract ideals that have no earthly embodiment but exist only as intellectual states. *The Republic*, from which this selection is taken, examines one such ideal—the perfect society. In the parable of the cave, Plato presents another ideal—perfect knowledge, which is beyond human reach.

from *The Republic*

## THE PARABLE OF THE CAVE

Translated by Benjamin Jowett

And now I<sup>1</sup> will describe in a figure the enlightenment or unenlightenment of our nature:—Imagine human beings living in an underground cave which is open towards the light; they have been there from childhood, having their necks and legs chained, and can only see into the cave. At a distance there is a fire, and between the fire and the prisoners a raised way, and a low wall is built along the way, like the screen over which marionette-players show their puppets. Behind the wall appear moving figures, who hold in their hands various works of art, and among them images of men and animals, wood and stone, and some of the passers-by are talking and others silent. "A strange parable," he<sup>2</sup> said, "and strange captives." They are ourselves, I replied; and they see only the shadows of the images which the fire throws on the wall of the cave; to these they give names, and if we add an echo which returns from the wall, the voices of the passengers will seem to proceed from the shadows. Suppose now that you suddenly turn them round and make them look, with pain and grief

1. I: the speaker is meant to be Socrates.

2. he: the other speaker is Glaucon, one of Socrates' students.

to themselves, at the real images; will they believe them to be real? Will not their eyes be dazzled, and will they not try to get away from the light to something which they are able to behold without blinking? And suppose further, that they are dragged up the steep and rugged ascent into the presence of the sun himself, will not their sight be darkened with the excess of light? Some time will pass before they get the habit of perceiving at all; and at first they will be able to perceive only shadows and reflections in the water; then they will recognize the moon and the stars, and will at length behold the sun in his own proper place as he is. Last of all they will conclude:—This is he who gives us the year and the seasons, and is the author of all that we see. How will they rejoice in passing from darkness to light! How worthless to them will seem the honors and glories of the cave! But now imagine further, that they descend into their old habitations;—in that underground dwelling they will not see as well as their fellows, and will not be able to compete with them in the measurement of the shadows on the wall; there will be many jokes about the man who went on a visit to the sun and lost his eyes, and if they find anybody trying to set free and enlighten one of their number, they will put him to death,<sup>3</sup> if they can catch him. Now the cave is the world of sight, the fire is the sun, the way upwards is the way to knowledge, and in the world of knowledge the Idea of good is last seen and with difficulty, but when seen is inferred to be the author of good and right—parent of the lord of light in this world, and of truth and understanding in the other. He who attains to the beatific vision is always going upwards; he is unwilling to descend into political assemblies and courts of law; for his eyes are apt to blink at the images or shadows of images which they behold in them—he cannot enter into the ideas of those who have never in their lives understood the relation of the shadow to the substance. But blindness is of two kinds, and may be caused either by passing out of darkness into light or out of light into darkness, and a man of sense will distinguish between them, and will not laugh equally at both of them, but the blindness which arises from fullness of light he will deem blessed and pity the other; or if he laugh at the puzzled soul looking at the sun, he will have more reason to laugh than the inhabitants of the cave at those who descend from above. There is a further lesson taught by this parable of ours. Some persons fancy that instruction is like giving eyes to the blind, but we say that the faculty of sight was always there, and that the soul only requires to be turned round towards the light. And this is conversion; other virtues are almost like bodily habits, and may be acquired in the same manner, but intelligence has a diviner life, and is indestructible, turning either to good or evil according to the direction given. Did you never observe how the mind of a clever rogue peers out of his eyes, and the more clearly he sees, the more evil he does? Now if you take such a one, and cut away from him those leaden weights of pleasure and desire which bind his soul to

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3. **put him to death:** This is probably an allusion to the death of Socrates, though the actual Socrates could not, of course, have made this allusion.

earth, his intelligence will be turned round, and he will behold the truth as clearly as he now discerns his meaner ends. And have we not decided that our rulers must neither be so uneducated as to have no fixed rule of life, nor so over-educated as to be unwilling to leave their paradise for the business of the world? We must choose out therefore the natures who are most likely to ascend to the light and knowledge of the good; but we must not allow them to remain in the region of light; they must be forced down again among the captives in the cave to partake of their labors and honors. "Will they not think this a hardship?" You should remember that our purpose in framing the State was not that our citizens should do what they like, but that they should serve the State for the common good of all. May we not fairly say to our philosopher,—Friend, we do you no wrong; for in other States philosophy grows wild, and a wild plant owes nothing to the gardener, but you have been trained by us to be the rulers and kings of our hive,<sup>4</sup> and therefore we must insist on your descending into the cave. You must, each of you, take your turn, and become able to use your eyes in the dark, and with a little practice you will see far better than those who quarrel about the shadows, whose knowledge is a dream only, whilst yours is a waking reality. It may be that the saint or philosopher who is best fitted, is also the least inclined to rule, but necessity is laid upon him, and he must no longer live in the heaven of Ideas. And this will be the salvation of the State. For those who rule must not be those who are desirous to rule; and, if you can offer to our citizens a better life than that of rulers generally is, there will be a chance that the rich, not only in this world's goods, but in virtue and wisdom, may bear rule. And the only life which is better than the life of political ambition is that of philosophy, which is also the best preparation for the government of a State.

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4. **kings of our hive:** The Greeks referred inaccurately to king rather than queen bees.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

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1. How do you think Plato would react to the idea of elected leaders? Why? How do his assumptions about government differ from those of the typical American?
2. A parable is a story with a double layer—a surface meaning and an underlying meaning. Explain the underlying meaning of each of the following objects: the underground cave, the fire, the shadows, and the "steep and rugged ascent" out of the cave.
3. Socrates asserts that some teachers "fancy that instruction is like giving eyes to the blind." Why does he feel these teachers are mistaken?
4. The parable states that people who are freed from their chains and brought into the sunlight will not be happy, but will respond with "pain and grief." Why?

“The Sieve and the Sand”  
from *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

They read the long afternoon through, while the cold November rain fell from the sky upon the quiet house. They sat in the hall because the parlor was so empty and gray-looking without its wall lit with orange and yellow confetti and skyrockets and women in gold-mesh dresses and men in black velvet pulling one-hundred-pound rabbits from silver hats. The parlor was dead and Mildred kept peering in at it with a blank expression as Montag paced the floor and came back and squatted down and read a page as many as ten times, aloud.

“We cannot tell the precise moment when friendship is formed. As in filling a vessel drop by drop, there is at last a drop which makes it run over; so in a series of kindnesses there is at last one which makes the heart run over.”

Montag sat listening to the rain.

“Is that what it was in the girl next door? I’ve tried so hard to figure.”

“She’s dead. Let’s talk about someone alive, for goodness’ sake.”

Montag did not look back at his wife as he went trembling along the hall to the kitchen, where he stood a long time watching the rain hit the windows before he came back down the hall in the gray light, waiting for the tremble to subside.

He opened another book.

“That favourite subject, Myself.”

He squinted at the wall. “That favourite subject Myself.”

“I understand *that* one,” said Mildred.

“But Clarisse’s favorite wasn’t herself. It was everyone else, and me. She was the first person in a good many years I’ve really liked. She was the first person I can remember who looked straight at me as if I counted.” He lifted the two books. “These men have been dead a long time, but I know their words point, one way or another, to Clarisse.”

Outside the front door, in the rain, a faint scratching.

Montag froze. He saw Mildred thrust herself back to the wall and gasp.

“Someone—the door—why doesn’t the door-voice tell us—”

“I shut it off.”

Under the doorsill, a slow, probing sniff, an exhalation of electric steam.

Mildred laughed. “It’s only a dog, that’s what! You want me to shoo him away?”

“Stay where you are!”

Silence. The cold rain falling. And the smell of blue electricity blowing under the locked door.

“Let’s get back to work,” said Montag, quietly.

Mildred kicked at the book. “Books aren’t people. You read and I look all around, but there isn’t *anybody!*”

He stared at the parlor that was dead and gray as the waters of an ocean that might teem with life if they switched on the electronic sun.

“Now,” said Mildred, “My ‘family’ is people. They tell me thing: *I* laugh, *they* laugh! And the colors!”

“Yes, I know.”

“And besides, if Captain Beatty knew about those books—” She thought about it. Her face grew amazed and then horrified. “He might come and burn the house and the ‘family.’ That’s awful! Think of our investment. Why should I read? *What for?*”

“What for! Why!” said Montag. “I saw the damnedest snake in the world the other night. It was dead but it was alive. It could see but it couldn’t see. You want to *see* that snake? It’s at

Emergency Hospital where they filed a report on all the junk the snake got out of you! Would you like to go and check their file? Maybe you'd look under Guy Montag or maybe under Fear or War. And rake ashes for the bones of the woman who set fire to her own house! What about Clarisse McClellan, where do we look for her? The morgue! Listen!"

The bombers crossed the sky and crossed the sky over the house, gasping, murmuring, whistling like an immense, invisible fan, circling in emptiness.

"Jesus God," said Montag. "Every hour so many damn things in the sky! How in the hell did those bombers get up there every single second of our lives! Why doesn't someone want to talk about it! We've started and won two atomic wars since 1990! Is it because we're having so much fun at home we've forgotten the world? Is it because we're so rich and rest of the world's so poor and we just don't care if they are? I've heard rumors; the world is starving, but we're well fed. Is it true, the world works hard and we play? Is that why we're hated so much? I've heard rumors about hate, too, once in a long while, over the years. Do *you* know why? I don't, that's *sure!* Maybe the books can get us half out of the cave. They just *might* stop us from making the same damn insane mistakes! I don't heard those idiot bastards in your parlor talking about it. God, Millie, don't you *see?* An hour a day, two hours, with these books, and maybe..."

The telephone rang. Mildred snatched the phone.

"Ann!" She laughed. "Yes, the White Clown's on tonight!"

Montag walked to the kitchen and threw the book down. "Montag," he said, "you're really stupid. Where do we go from here? Do we turn the books in, forget it?" He opened the book to read over Mildred's laughter.

Poor Millie, he thought. Poor Montag, it's mud to you, too. But where do you get help, where do you find a teacher this late?

Hold on. He shut his eyes. Yes, of course, Again he found himself thinking of the green park a year ago. The thought had been with him many times recently but now he remembered how it was that day in the city park when he had seen that old man in the black suit hide something, quickly, in his coat.

...The old man leapt up as if to run. And Montag said, "Wait!"

"I haven't done anything!" cried the old man, trembling.

"No one said you did."

They had sat in the green soft light without saying a word for a moment and then Montag talked about the weather and then the old man responded with a pale voice. It was a strange quiet meeting. The old man admitted to being a retired English Professor who had been thrown out upon the world forty years ago when the last liberal arts college shut for lack of students and patronage. His name was Faber, and when he finally lost his fear of Montag, he talked in a cadenced voice, looking at the sky and the trees and the green park, and when an hour passed he said something to Montag and Montag sensed it was a rhymeless poem. Then the old man grew even more courageous and said something else and that was a poem, too. Faber held his hand over his left coat pocket and spoke these words gently, and Montag knew if he reached out, he might pull a book of poetry from the man's coat. But he did not reach out. "I don't talk *things*, sir," said Faber. "I talk the *meaning* of things. I sit here and *know* I'm alive."

That was all there was to it, really. An hour of monologue, a poem, a comment, and then without either acknowledging the fact that Montag was a fireman, Faber, with a certain trembling, wrote his address on a slip of paper. "For your file," he said, "in case you decide to be angry with me."

"I'm not angry," Montag said, surprised.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

“The Parable of the Cave” and *Fahrenheit 451* Comparative

**Background:** Katabasis comes from the Greek *katábasis* which means a going down or a descent of some type, such as moving downhill, or the sinking of the sun, a military retreat, a trip to the underworld, or a trip from the interior of a country down to the coast. Multiple related meanings exist in art, poetry, and rhetoric. For instance, in the opening of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates recounts "going down" to the port city of Piraeus, located south of his native Athens. In poetry and rhetoric, the term *katabasis* refers to a "gradual descending" of emphasis on a theme within a sentence or paragraph, while *anabasis* refers to a gradual ascending. In the ancient world, the descent in search of understanding was known as katabasis, thus endowing mythic and poetic accounts of katabasis with a symbolic significance. *Katabasis*, as noted above, is also seen as the epic convention of the hero's trip into the underworld. In Greek mythology, for example, Orpheus enters the underworld in order to bring Eurydice back to the world of the living. Most *katabases* take place in a supernatural underworld, such as Hades or Hell — as in the 11th book of the *Odyssey*, which describes the *kateben* “I went down” as an allusion to Odysseus’ descent into the underworld. However, katabasis can also refer to a journey through other dystopic areas, like those Odysseus encounters on his 10-year journey back from Troy to Ithaca or when Montag sees the light in *Fahrenheit 451*. Pilar Serrano allows the term *katabasis* to encompass brief or chronic stays in the underworld, including those of Lazarus and Castor and Pollux. In this case, however, the *katabasis* must be followed by an *anabasis* in order to be considered a true *katabasis* instead of a death.

**Short Essay Question:** How is Plato’s “Parable of the Cave” a central metaphor for Ray Bradbury’s novel *Fahrenheit 451*? Be sure to use your newfound understanding of the katabasis as the basis for your analysis.