

EDUCATION FOR SALVATION: PLATO'S CONCEPTION OF THE SOTERIOLOGICAL ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY

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If there is one doctrine that Plato learnt from Socrates and which he held very dear to his own philosophy it is the teaching that the best life for man is the life of reason and that the unexamined life is not worth living.¹ In the **Republic** we are told that the good man is the man who is just (*dikaios*) and that the just man is one in whom the three parts of the soul are in harmony, each performing its own role (*ergon*).² The just man is the man whose entire soul is governed by reason. Such a man will automatically be virtuous-temperate, wise and courageous. He will be temperate because temperance or self-control (*sophrosyne*) is no more than the harmonious co-existence of the various parts of the soul under the direction of reason.³ He will be wise because under the guidance of reason he will attain knowledge of what things are good and what things are evil. Similarly, he will be courageous where courage means possessing knowledge of what one ought to fear and what not.

But Plato's just man is the ideal - the utopia. In his eyes, only one man had achieved such perfection - his master Socrates. And yet the purpose or function of all men is to lead a perfect "human" life. To understand what Plato means by this we must examine his definition of function or "*ergon*".

Plato defines "*ergon*" as that which the thing in question does alone or does best.⁴ Each thing is equipped with a certain "*arete*" or excellence which makes it particularly suitable to carry out a given function. The eye is equipped with the "*arete*" which makes it a uniquely suitable organ of sight. This is true of bodily organs (the ear, nose, mouth etc.) but is also true of man himself. Unfortunately however, the fact that a thing is equipped with a given "*arete*" does not mean that it will necessarily function in the desired manner. A thing may have a given capacity with or without choosing to do that task, and with or without actually doing it.

According to Plato, the "*ergon*" of man is the performance of those activities which only man can perform and the "*arete*" which enables him to perform his "*ergon*" is justice (*dike*).⁶ This leads to the tautological conclusion that man is the only being that is equipped

with the "*arete*" to lead a life that is good for a human being to live. Here, it will be remembered that Plato, like his master Socrates, considered the human soul to be "*divine*" and regarded it as man's primary duty to look after its health.⁷ Armed with the conviction that every man has within him the ability to save his own soul, Plato set out to lead humanity out of its fallen nature into that utopia which it is capable of realizing.

Nowhere is Plato's concern for the "salvation" of humanity expressed more clearly and more vividly than in the **Republic** which is a pious expression of faith and hope. It is in this dialogue that Plato reveals his greatest confidence and trust in the soteriological role of philosophy.

In this paper, we propose to examine the concept of salvation (*soteria*) in the **Republic** and the role of philosophy in its attainment. To do this we have divided the paper into five sections.

I. Salvation from What?

In the seventh book of the **Republic** Plato gives us a famous and unforgettable picture.⁸ The simile of the cave is too well known to require any description. We are told that the purpose of this simile is to depict human nature with respect to education or lack of it. In the simile the original position of the prisoners is characterized by hearing only echoes and seeing only images. The prisoners, who have lived all their lives in chains have never seen anything but images - not even their very selves. To them, the images they see and echoes they hear constitute reality, the whole of reality.

According to Plato's own interpretation of the simile, the cave represents the physical world - the world that we perceive with our senses. The ascent of the prisoner from the total darkness of the cave to the brightness of the sun represents the progress of the human soul from ignorance to complete knowledge. The whole process of the prisoner's liberation from the moment he is unchained to when he beholds the sun outside the cave, represents the process of dialectic. Plato's interpretation, however, is incomplete. It does not account for the shadows and images within the cave. What do these represent? On this point there exists a wide variety of possible explanations. But if the meaning of the shadows is a matter of controversy that of the prisoners is unmistakable. Theirs is a life upside down. They live in a state of complete ignorance and their very souls are upside down. In this condition, reason (*noesis*) the

highest state of the soul has been subordinated to the lowest part of the soul, appetite. As a result the prisoners value and worship material goods at the expense of the spiritual ones. They live in a world of illusion, in a dream in which they are forever confusing the objects of *doxa* (belief, opinion) for truth and reality.

In Platonic terms, even though the prisoners are equipped with the "*arete*" to lead a life worthy of human beings, they either refuse to employ this "*arete*" or are simply unaware of such an ability. As a result, these prisoners are unable to perform the "*ergon*" of man. Their condition is such that they can only be saved by means of right education. Only this can save the prisoners from their present condition of "*amatheia*" which means "double ignorance".⁹

The tragedy of this situation is not just that the prisoners are ignorant but that they love their ignorance and will resist every attempt to change. Their ignorance is thus not a simple absence of education but positive miseducation. This is the meaning of habituation in the darkness of the cave. The prisoners build their "knowledge" (science or "*techne*") upon their ignorance. They excel at identifying images. The seriousness with which they consider these sciences (giving praise, honours and rewards) make it impossible for them to re-examine their basic assumptions and prejudices.

This then is the plight from which Plato wishes to redeem mankind. It is a condition of ignorance and complete irrationality. Elsewhere,¹⁰ Plato refers to this condition as a disease, a corruption or simply as a vice of the soul. Unfortunately, Plato does not tell us how man came to be in this awful condition.¹¹ There are clear indications, however, that "*aphrosyne*" is an acquired (not natural) state of the soul. Did Plato perhaps envisage something like the Biblical Fall of Man? Did he mean to blame the nature and methods of contemporary Greek Education for the miserable state of humankind? To what extent did he hold the contemporary Sophists responsible for the moral decadence?¹² Or did Plato perhaps attribute the soul's corruption to its imprisonment within a material body?¹³ It is difficult to say what Plato really regards as the source of human evil. What is beyond any doubt, however, is the fact that the philosopher regarded ignorance and evil as the soul's greatest enemies and that he conceived philosophy and philosophers as the only possible means to salvation for mankind. Only the desire of wisdom (*sophrosyne*) and the practice of philosophy can redeem human life from its present misery.¹⁴

II. Salvation for Whom? (Who Needs Salvation?)

As Socrates describes the picture of the cave, Glaucon observes that the prisoners in question are wierd and very strange. To this Socrates replies that they are really "like us"¹⁵. Now, how are we like the prisoners? In what respect can we be said to live in conditions similar to those of the cave prisoners?

It would appear that we are like the prisoners when we mistake appearance for the reality. We are like them when we imagine anything whatever that is not real. We are like the cave prisoners when we uncritically embrace second-hand opinions and judgements instead of thinking and forming our own opinions on matters concerning morals and politics. We are like the cave prisoners when we lead a life guided not by knowledge and philosphical wisdom but by greed and appetite. We are very much like the prisoners when we do not allow reason to choose and dictate which of our desires are good and which are bad, but instead we are driven to the worship of material goods at the expense of the spiritual ones. We are like the prisoners when we stubbornly refuse to shake off our moral ignorance (*amatheia*) and acquire the knowledge necessary to lead the life worthy of a human being. We are like the cave prisoners when we subordinate our reason to the other elements of the soul thereby denying it the opportunity to tell us what we ought to do. It is clear then that the prisoners in the cave simile represent us and that it is we (the entire mankind) that need to be saved. But how is this salvation possible?

III. Salvation by What Means?

In the **Republic** the first stage of salvation which we shall hereafter refer to as conversion or "*metastrophe*" occurs by nature and is therefore unexplainable. Furthermore, not only is it mysterious but also very rare. Perhaps this is due to the fact that very few people are suited by nature and disposition to the study of philosophy.¹⁶ Because philosophy is impossible for the vast multitudes of the people the original conversion will only be possible for a few. The majority of mankind is destined to live all their life in the cave and they are quite happy to do so.

After this initial conversion the process of salvation (or conversion) is carried on by means of the propaedeutic studies and by dialectic. The **Republic** names five propaedeutic studies -

arithmetic, geometry, symmetry or solid geometry, astronomy, and harmony or music. These subjects are chosen on account of their ability to turn the soul and place it on the right path in the pursuit of wisdom and truth.¹⁷ The purpose of proper education is to turn the soul around from the deceptive world of Becoming to that of Being, from the world of senses to the world of thought.¹⁸ The unique characteristic of the named subjects is their ability to draw the mind from its slumber and lead it on to the highest levels of thought. But how is that possible?

Perceivable things, Plato tells us, are of two kinds. There are those that demand further thought because sensation of them is incapable of giving us reliable results and there are those others which are adequately apprehended by the senses and which therefore require no further investigations by the mind.¹⁹ The objects of the propaedeutic studies are of the former type. They compel the mind to strive harder in the attempt to resolve what appears to be a contradiction arising from sensation or sense experience. In doing this each of the five subjects teaches men to think at higher levels of abstraction. Plato is only too well aware that all knowledge and all true science rests on experience of this type. His recommendation of the propaedeutic lessons is the clearest statement of the recognition that experience, even though not itself the source of knowledge; nevertheless provides the opportunity for the mind to acquire knowledge.

But the propaedeutics are only a preamble or prologue to dialectic. *Dianoia* or scientific thinking has a limited effect on the human soul. At its very best *dianoia* prepares the way for the more effective means of salvation - dialectic or philosophy. In comparison with the sciences only dialectic is awake while these others are only dreaming.²⁰ Dialectic is the method or process of thought upon which is based that way of life known as "*philosophia*". It is the process that leads from the darkness of the cave to the brightness of the noon sun. The main characteristic of this method is that it proceeds by means of reason alone without reference to any sensible objects until it gets to the very essence (*ousia*) of the thing itself. Most important of all, dialectic leads directly to the apprehension of the Good "*agathon*" which is the source of all knowledge and truth.

Unlike "*dianoia*" or scientific thinking which relies on the senses and sense experience, dialectic is a direct and unmediated process of grasping the Forms (Ideas). It seeks the *a priori* understanding of what each thing is. The exact nature of the relationship between *dianoia* and dialectic is a matter of sharp

controversy but it would appear that the only real difference between the two is purely methodological. What is clear is that dialectic (philosophy) takes over where propaedeutic studies (*dianoia*) stop and that as the "Coping Stone" it can only follow, not precede the propaedeutics.

IV. The Effects of Salvation

The effects of conversion may be considered on two levels - the immediate and the long-term. The immediate effects are those that the prisoner experiences in passing from C1 (the state in which he is chained and can only see shadows on the wall in front of him) to C2 (the stage in which he is released and forced to turn back and look at the fire in the cave). This initial conversion symbolizes the first stage of man's education. It marks the transition from sensuous to non-sensuous thought, from mythology to philosophy. It signifies man's attempt to form his own opinions instead of always seeing things through the eyes of society, of religion, of tradition, of poets or of legislators. The initial conversion (*metastrophe*) stands for man's struggle to liberate himself from the fetters of societal orthodoxy. It marks, to borrow from Allan Bloom "a rejection of the sacred opinions of the cave".²¹

"*Metastrophe*" or the original conversion means the break with institutionalized religion, with unexamined taboos and with mysticism. The "*metastrophe*" represents the birth of a new era, the first step in a long trek which will only terminate in the vision of the Good (*agathon*). The prisoner at C2 has a higher level of moral and political awareness than at C1. At C2 the prisoner has lost his complacency and his consciousness is now restlessly searching for deeper understanding. He is now involved in rigorous thought and wonder. But this means that he is involved in philosophy because philosophy is no more than the interpretation of one's experiences and the articulation or clarification of the natural consciousness.²²

The permanent effects of the "*metastrophe*" are quite predictably associated with the "*agathon*." With the apprehension of the Good the prisoner-turned-philosopher has now attained special knowledge - the only type that deserves the name "*sophia*". But the philosopher's wisdom is not a theoretical affair. It is one that drives its possessor from moral wickedness to perfect virtue.

The apprehension of the "*agathon*" cleanses the corrupted soul and enables man to perform his proper function (*ergon*). The

philosopher who has perceived the Good automatically rearranges his soul in such a way as to subject the appetitive and the spirited parts of the soul to the harmonious and "wise leadership" of reason. Thus the true philosopher is not only wise but also just. Indeed, the philosopher is the only person who can be said to have attained moral autonomy and hence true happiness.

But the philosopher is called upon not only to reshape his own life but also that of his community. Having tasted the blessedness of the "*agathon*" he will be filled with contempt for the life of the cave and its ignorance. He will only go back into the cave very reluctantly and as a matter of obligation. He will however be made to understand that philosophy is not idle speculation but a dynamic soteriological process. He will come to understand that, as Ernest Barker puts it "the Good is seen by the man who lives it"²³. The philosopher will also realize that the conversion of his own soul is only preliminary to the service of mankind and that the long term effect of *metastrophe* is the salvation of all men.

V. Evaluation

It will be clear that for Plato salvation is from ignorance to wisdom and that the primary means of salvation is philosophy.²⁴ It will also be clear that this reasoning is founded on the Socratic principles according to which (i) to know the good is to do the good, and (ii) no one does evil knowingly. To evaluate Plato's concept of human salvation is in effect to evaluate Socrates' conception of soteriology. But quite apart from the problematic issue of the connection between goodness (virtue) and knowledge Plato's concept of salvation is open to serious criticism. One of this has to do with the utopic nature of his entire system. To what extent is the **Republic** a realistic ideal and to what extent is it merely speculative and unattainable? Did Plato really mean to create an ideal state such as the one described in the dialogue or did he employ this as a theoretical model approaching some kind of perfection but in itself unachievable? Here again opinions are sharply divided. Those who reject Plato's serious intentions of building an ideal state point out that the philosopher's concept of salvation is equally unachievable. Unfortunately, we find no convincing reason for taking this view. That Plato seriously meant to create the kind of perfect society he describes in this dialogue is borne out not only by the **Republic** but also by his **Seventh Letter**, and **The Laws**.

As we saw earlier Plato sometimes gives the impression that the initial conversion occurs "naturally". In the simile of the cave he does not explain why the individual soul which has been corrupted by injustice and moral decay will suddenly develop the will or determination to undergo the *metastrophe*. In fact Plato is not the man to leave things to chance or nature. He is fully aware of the importance of correct education in making the soul abandon its pseudo-values into which it had descended. The philosopher's faith in the power of correct education is best manifested in his founding of the academy. But just what kind of education is capable of bringing about the desired change? Why should a man who is well versed in arithmetics or geometry be a more moral individual than one who is not? Why should the philosopher and not the politician or the pastor be entrusted with the salvation of the entire mankind? What is the connection between scientific knowledge and the knowledge of the Good? The exact nature of the relationship between knowledge and the "*agathon*" is perhaps Plato's weakest link in his entire soteriological thought.

What goes for the initial conversion may also apply to the philosopher who has completed his painful and difficult journey to the vision of the Good. Why should this man who has tasted the bliss of pure contemplation of the Good want to go down into the cave and, once there, run the risk of being killed by his former colleagues? Only education, the right education, could prepare the philosopher for this difficult mission.

It is well known that Plato did not draw a distinction between the political and the ethical. **The Republic** is as much a work of politics as it is of morals. To argue for a purely political interpretation of the **Republic** is to ignore the cause for which the philosopher gave up his political ambitions and hence to belittle or deny the ethical mission of philosophy. But it would be equally misleading to see the dialogue as a purely religious or moral affair. It is, of course, quite true to say that the experience described in the cave simile does in many ways resemble a religious conversion.

For this reason Plato's philosophy has acquired significant religious colouring, most notably the identification of the Good with God. There is however, no evidence to show that religious salvation is what Plato had in mind. Unlike religious conversion, the *metastrophe* Plato is talking about is not eschatological and does not depend on the separation of the soul from the body. Instead, the Platonic conversion appears to be a multi-sided experience which

affects man psychologically, intellectually, morally and politically. Thus Plato envisages *metastrophe* as an all round experience. It would be interesting to compare the views of Plato to those of Jesus Christ and those of Karl Marx on this subject. However, such a task is outside the scope of the present paper.

Plato has sometimes been accused of abandoning Socrates's doctrine of the unexamined life in favour of the Burckhardt's dichotomy - "rationalism for the few, magic for the many".²⁵ Scholars who attack Plato for this shift fail to appreciate his concern for the salvation of all mankind. They fail to see the length to which the philosopher is willing to go and the price he is prepared to pay for human redemption. His knowledge of human nature leads Plato to the shift from the idealistic Socratic position in which all men could be brought to philosophical contemplation to that (a second best) in which they lead a life examined and ordered for them by a knowledgeable person or persons. Connected with this is the role of the individual philosopher in his society.

For all his insistence on the proper education of the philosopher it is clear that Plato has no regard for the personal needs of the individual. Even though he constantly refers to two levels of salvation - the personal and the communal there can be little doubt that preference is given to the latter. There is overwhelming evidence in the **Republic** to support this view. The interests of the state are presented as being supreme and above those of any group or individual. Individual salvation only counts as long as it is part of, and a contribution towards the salvation of the whole community. The individual exists for the community and cannot exist outside of it. (cf. J. Mbiti's "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am")²⁶

It would be rash however to conclude from this that the individual is exploited or neglected in the Platonic system. In any case Plato would say that such exploitation or neglect is in the best interest of the individual and of the society at large.

The relevance of the simile of the cave today lies in the call for the intellectuals to play an active role in the moral, social and political affairs of society. The philosopher cannot afford the luxury of leading a life that is purely speculative. While speculation and theory-building is an integral part of philosophy its ultimate aim is not theory but application, practice. No true philosopher can be indifferent to the moral and political developments of his society. The

slogan "leave politics to the politicians" is one that the philosopher cannot heed because he (the philosopher) is by his very nature a leader - a moral and political leader. Consequently the philosopher must be in the front line in the battle for moral and political education. There is no guarantee that philosophy can bring about the kind of salvation that Plato has envisaged. There is no doubt however that philosophy has the ability to enhance the quality of human life. In our days when education in general is regarded more and more as a means of earning a living we do well to remember that the primary duty of education is the intellectual and spiritual improvement of self - "*gnothi seauton*". In that connection we must constantly re-examine the role of education in the eradication of social and moral evils. How does the kind of education we give to our children prepare them to take their place in society as both moral and political leaders? What is the contribution of our education system to the eradication of corruption, nepotism, tribalism and other moral and social evils?

FOOTNOTES

1. Plato, **The Apology**, 38a
2. Plato, **The Republic**, 441-d-e
3. **Ibid** 442 c-d.
4. **Ibid** 353a.
5. **Ibid** 353 b, c, d.
6. **Ibid** 433b, 443e .
7. Plato, **The Apology**, 514a.
8. Plato, **The Republic**, 30a, b, **Laches** 185 e.
9. R. Cushman, **Therapeia: Plato's Conception of Philosophy**, Chapel Hill N. Carolina, 1958 p.46.
10. **Gorgia** 477, **Laws** 888b, **Sophistes** 227d-228e.
11. There exists a wide variety of opinions concerning the sources of evil in the Platonic thought. see H. Cherniss, "The Source of Evil According to Plato" in G. Vlastos (ed), **Plato III**, N.Y., Doubleday, 1971, pp.244-58

12. cf. L.R. Nettleship, **Lectures on Plato's Republic**, London (1963 ed), pp. 241-6.
13. cf. **Phaedo**, 67a.
14. cf. **Seventh Letter**, 343c; see also A Diels, **Platon Les Lois**, Paris Les Belles Lettres, 1951, p. XVIII.
15. **Republic** 515a.
16. **Republic** 428e-429a, **Phaedo** 69c.
17. **Ibid** 521c.
18. **Ibid** 521d.
19. **Ibid** 521b.
20. **Ibid** 521 b-c.
21. A. Bloom, **The Republic of Plato**, N. York, 1968, pp. 404, 406.
22. M. Heidegger, **Was ist das die Philosophie**, (Greek translation by B. Bitsoris, Athens 1968) p. 9.
23. E. Barker, **Greek Political Theory**, London, 1977 (1918), p. 235.
24. Plato uses the terms "philosophy" and "education" almost interchangeably.
25. E.R. Dodds, **The Greeks and the Irrational**, Un. Calif. Press 1951, p. 218.
26. J. Mbiti, **African Religions and Philosophy**, London, Heinemann, 1969, pp. 108-9.