

Bard Immediate Decision Plan

Plato's *The Republic*

Here allegory may show us best how education—or the lack of it—affects our nature. Imagine men living in a cave with a long passageway stretching between them and the cave's mouth, where it opens wide to the light. Imagine further that since childhood the cave dwellers have had their legs and necks shackled so as to be confined to the same spot. They are further constrained by blinders that prevent them from turning their heads; they can see only directly in front of them. Next, imagine a light from a fire some distance behind them and burning at a higher elevation. Between the prisoners and the fire is a raised path along whose edge there is a low wall like the partition at the front of a puppet stage. The wall conceals the puppeteers while they manipulate their puppets above it.

So far I can visualize it.

Imagine, further, men behind the wall carrying all sorts of objects along its length and holding them above it. The objects include human and animal images made of stone and wood and all other material. Presumably, those who carry them sometimes speak and are sometimes silent.

You describe a strange prison and strange prisoners.

Like ourselves. Tell me, do you not think those men would see only the shadows cast by the fire on the wall of the cave? Would they have seen anything of themselves or of one another?

How could they if they couldn't move their heads their whole life long?

Could they see the objects held above the wall behind them or only the shadows cast in front?

Only the shadows.

If, then, they could talk with one another, don't you think they would impute reality to the passing shadows?

Necessarily.

Imagine an echo in their prison, bouncing off the wall toward which the prisoners were turned. Should one of those behind the wall speak, would the prisoners not think that the sound came from the shadows in front of them?

No doubt of it.

By every measure, then, reality for the prisoners would be nothing but shadows cast by artifacts.

It could be nothing else.

Imagine now how their liberation from bondage and error would come about if something like the following happened. One prisoner is freed from his shackles. He is suddenly compelled to stand up, turn around, walk, and look toward the light. He suffers pain and distress from the glare of the light. So dazzled is he that he cannot even discern the very objects whose shadows he used to be able to see. Now what do you suppose he would answer if he were told that all he had seen before was illusion but that now he was nearer reality, observing real things and therefore seeing more truly? What if someone pointed to the objects being carried above the wall, questioning him as to what each one is? Would he not be at a loss? Would he not regard those things he saw formerly as more real than the things now being shown him?

He would.

Again, let him be compelled to look directly at the light. Would his eyes not feel pain? Would he not flee, turning back to those things he was able to discern before, convinced that they are in every truth clearer and more exact than anything he has seen since?

He would.

Then let him be dragged away by force up the rough and steep incline of the cave's passageway, held fast until he is hauled out into the light of the sun. Would not such a rough passage be painful? Would he not resent the experience? And when he came out into the sunlight, would he not be dazzled once again and unable to see what he calls realities?

He could not see even one of them, at least not immediately.

Habituation, then, is evidently required in order to see things higher up. In the beginning he would most easily see shadows; next, reflections in the water of men and other objects. Then he would see the objects themselves. From there he would go on to behold the heavens and the heavenly phenomena—more easily the moon and stars by night than the sun by day.

Yes.

Finally, I suppose, he would be able to look on the sun itself, not in reflections in the water or in fleeting images in some alien setting. He would look at the sun as it is, in its own domain, and so be able to see what it is really like.

Yes.

It is at this stage that he would be able to conclude that the sun is the cause of the seasons and of the year's turning, that it governs all the visible world and is in some sense also the cause of all visible things.

This is surely the next step he would take.

Now, supposing he recalled where he came from. Supposing he thought of his fellow prisoners and of what passed for wisdom in the place they were inhabiting. Don't you think he would feel pity for all that and rejoice in his own change of circumstance?

He surely would.

Suppose there had been honors and citations those below bestowed upon one another. Suppose prizes were offered for the one quickest to identify the shadows as they go by and best able to remember the sequence and configurations in which they appear. All these skills, in turn, would enhance the ability to guess what would come next. Do you think he would covet such rewards? More, would he envy and want to emulate those who hold power over the prisoners and are in turn revered by them? Or would he not rather hold fast to Homer's words that it is "better to be the poor servant of a poor master," better to endure anything, than to believe those things and live that way?

I think he would prefer anything to such a life.

Consider, further, if he should go back down again into the cave and return to the place he was before, would not his eyes now go dark after so abruptly leaving the sunlight behind?

They would.

Suppose he should then have to compete once more in shadow watching with those who never left the cave. And this before his eyes had become accustomed to the dark and his dimmed vision still required a long period of habituation. Would he not be laughed at? Would it not be said that he had made the journey above only to come back with his eyes ruined and that it is futile even to attempt the ascent? Further, if anyone tried to release the prisoners and lead them up and they could get their hands on him and kill him, would they not kill him?

Of course.

Now, my dear Glaucon, we must apply the allegory as a whole to all that has been said so far. The prisoners' cave is the counterpart of our own visible order, and the light of the fire betokens the power of the sun. If you liken the ascent and exploration of things above to the soul's journey through the intelligible order, you will have understood my thinking, since that is what you wanted to hear. God only knows whether it is true. But, in any case, this is the way things appear to me: in the intelligible world the last thing to be seen—and then only dimly—is the idea of the good. Once seen, however, the conclusion becomes irresistible that it is the cause of all things right and good, that in the visible world it gives birth to light and its sovereign source, that in the intelligible world it is itself sovereign and the author of truth and reason, and that the man who will act wisely in private and public life must have seen it.

I agree, insofar as I can follow your thinking.

Come join me, then in this further thought. Don't be surprised if those who have attained this high vision are unwilling to be involved in the affairs of men. Their souls will ever feel the pull from above and yearn to sojourn there. Such a preference is likely enough if the assumptions of our allegory continue to be valid.

Yes, it is likely.

By the same token, would you think it strange if someone returning from divine contemplation to the miseries of men should appear ridiculous? What if he were still blinking his eyes and not yet readjusted to the surrounding darkness before being compelled to testify in court about the shadows of justice or about the images casting the

shadows? What if he had to enter into debate about the notions of such matters held fast by people who had never seen justice itself?

It would not be strange.

Nonetheless, a man with common sense would know that eyesight can be impaired in two different ways by dint of two different causes, namely, transitions from light into darkness and from darkness into light. Believing that the soul also meets with the same experience, he would not thoughtlessly laugh when he saw a soul perturbed and having difficulty in comprehending something. Instead he would try to ascertain whether the cause of its faded vision was the passage from a brighter life to unaccustomed darkness or from the deeper darkness of ignorance toward the world of light, whose brightness then dazzled the soul's eye. He will count the first happy, and the second he will pity. Should he be minded to laugh, he who comes from below will merit it more than the one who descends from the light above.

A fair statement.

If this is true, it follows that education is not what some professors say it is. They claim they can transplant the power of knowledge into a soul that has none, as if they were engrafting vision into blind eyes.

They do claim that.

But our reasoning goes quite to the contrary. We assert that this power is already in the soul of everyone. The way each of us learns compares with what happens to the eye: it cannot be turned away from darkness to face the light without turning the whole body. So it is with our capacity to know; together with the entire soul one must turn away from the world of transient things toward the world of perpetual being, until finally one learns to endure the sight of its most radiant manifestation. This is what we call goodness, is it not?

Yes.

Then there must be some art that would most easily and effectively turn and convert the soul in the way we have described. It would lay no claim to produce sight in the soul's eye. Instead it would assume that sight is already there but wrongly directed; wrongly the soul is not looking where it should. This condition it would be the purpose of the art to remedy.

Such an art might be possible.

Wisdom, then, seems to be of a different order than those other things that are also called virtues of the soul. They seem more akin to the attributes of the body, for when they are not there at the outset they can be cultivated by exercise and habit. But the ability to think is more divine. Its power is constant and never lost. It can be useful and benign or malevolent and useless, according to the purposes toward which it is directed. Or have you never observed in men who are called vicious but wise how sharp-sighted the petty soul is and how quickly it can pick out those things toward which it has turned its attention? All this shows that we have to do not with poor eyesight but with a soul under compulsion of evil, so that the keener his vision, the more harm he inflicts.

I have seen these things.

Consider then what would happen if such a soul had been differently trained from childhood or had been liberated early from the love of food and similar pleasures that are attached to us at birth like leaden weights. Supposing, I say, he were freed from all these kinds of things that draw the soul's vision downward. If he were then turned and converted to the contemplation of real things, he would be using the very same faculties of vision and be seeing them just as keenly as he now sees their opposites.

That is likely.

And must we not draw other likely and necessary conclusions from all that has been said so far? On the one hand, men lacking education and experience in truth cannot adequately preside over a city. Without a sense of purpose or duty in life they will also be without a sense of direction to govern their public and private acts. On the other hand, those who prolong their education endlessly are also unfit to rule because they become incapable of action. Instead, they suffer themselves to believe that while still living they have already been transported to the Islands of the Blessed.

So our duty as founders is to compel the best natures to achieve that sovereign knowledge we described awhile ago, to scale the heights in order to reach the vision of the good. But after they have reached the summit and have seen the view, we must not permit what they are now allowed to do.

What is that?

Remain above, refusing to go down again among those prisoners to share their labors and their rewards, whatever their worth may be.

Must we wrong them in this way, making them live a worse life when a better is possible?

My friend, you have forgotten again that the law is concerned not with the happiness of any particular class in the city but with the happiness of the city as a whole. Its method is to create harmony among the citizens by persuasion and compulsion, making them share the benefits that each is able to bestow on the community. The law itself produces such men in the city, not in order to let them do as they please but with the intention of using them to bind the city together.

True, I did forget.

Consider further, Glaucon, that in fact we won't be wronging the philosophers who come among us. When we require them to govern the city and be its guardians, we shall vindicate our actions. For we shall say to them that it is quite understandable that men of their quality do not participate in the public life of other cities. After all, there they develop autonomously without favor from the government. It is only just that self-educated men, owing nothing to others for their enlightenment, are not eager to pay anyone for it. But you have been begotten by us to be like kings and leaders in a hive of bees, governing the city for its good and yours. Your education is better and more complete, and you are better equipped to participate in the two ways of life. So down you must go, each in turn, to where the others live and habituate yourselves to see in the dark. Once you have adjusted, you will see ten thousand times better than those who regularly dwell there. Because you have seen the reality of beauty, justice, and goodness, you will be able to know idols and shadows for what they are. Together and wide awake, you and we will govern our city, far differently from most cities today whose inhabitants are ruled darkly as in a dream by men who will fight with each other over shadows and use faction in order to rule, as if that were some great good. The truth is that the city where those who rule are least eager to do so will be the best governed and the least plagued by dissension. The city with the contrary kind of rulers will be burdened with the contrary characteristics.

I agree.

When we tell them this, will our students disobey us? Will they refuse to play their role in the affairs of state even when they know that most of the time they will be able to dwell with one another in a better world?

Certainly not. These are just requirements, and they are just men. Yet they will surely approach holding office as an imposed necessity, quite in the opposite frame of mind from those who now rule our cities.

Indeed, old friend. A well-governed city becomes a possibility only if you can discover a better way of life for your future rulers than holding office. Only in such a state will those who rule be really rich, not in gold but with the wealth that yields happiness: a life of goodness and wisdom. But such a government is impossible if men behave like beggars, turning to politics because of what is lacking in their private lives and hoping to find their good in the public business. When office and the power of governing are treated like prizes to be won in battle the result must be a civil war that will destroy the city along with the office seekers.

True.

Is there any life other than that of true philosophers that looks with scorn on political office?

None, by Zeus.

That is why we require that those in office should not be lovers of power. Otherwise there will be a fight among rival lovers.

Right.

Who else would you compel to guard the city? Who else than those who have the clearest understanding of the principles of good government and who have won distinction in another kind of life preferable to the life of politics?

No one else.

Should we then proceed to consider how such men might be produced and led upward to the light in the same way that some men are said to have ascended from Hades to the halls of the gods?

By all means.

This will be no child's game of flipping shells.¹ It is a conversion, a turning of the soul away from the day whose light is darkness to the true day. It is the ascent to that reality in our allegory that we have called the true philosophy.

Yes.

Then we should consider the kinds of studies that will achieve these things?

Yes.

Well, Glaucon, what kind of study would attract the soul from the world of change to the world of eternal things? A thought strikes me just now as I speak. Didn't we say that these men must be warrior-athletes in their youth?

Yes, we did.

Then the studies we prescribe must satisfy an additional requirement.

What is that?

They must be useful to warriors.

Of course, if possible.

We have previously accounted for their education in gymnastic and music, have we not?

We have.

And gymnastic is that which concerns the development and decline of the body and hence things that are perishable?

Clearly.

So this is not the study we are looking for.

No.

Could it be music as we have so far described it?

No. You remember we said that music is the counterpart of gymnastic and that it employed habit to educate the guardians. Melody instilled a certain harmony of spirit, and rhythm imparted measure and grace, but neither was the same as knowledge. It also nurtured qualities that are related to those in stories that range from sheer fables to tales whose content is closer to truth. But there is nothing relevant in these studies to your present purpose.

True. Your memory is very precise. But Glaucon, what kind of study ought we to be looking for then? All the arts seemed to us mechanical.

They did indeed. But if we exclude gymnastic, music, and the arts, what remains?

I would say that if we can't locate anything beyond these, we should consider something that applies to all of them.

What?

Virtually the first thing everyone has to learn. It is common to all arts, science, and forms of thought.

What?

Oh, that trivial business of being able to identify one, two, and three. In sum, I mean number and calculation. Is it not true that every art and all knowledge must make use of them?

Yes, it is.

The art of war as well?

Of course.

Well, on the stage, at least, Agamemnon was certainly made out to be an ignorant general in these matters. In several tragedies Palamedes, who is said to have invented number, claims to have been the one at Troy who marshaled troops into ranks and companies and enumerated the ships and everything else as if nothing had been counted previously. Agamemnon, he asserts, was literally incapable of counting his own two feet. And how could he if he did not know numbers. But in that case, what sort of a general would he be?

A very queer general.

So reckoning and the ability to number are studies we must prescribe for the soldier.

1. The refers to a game in which players toss a shell, one side of which is white and the other black, to see which side comes up.

We certainly must if he is to know anything about the ordering of troops—indeed, if he is going to be human at all.

I see something else in this study.

What?

It seems to me arithmetic is one of the studies we are seeking that naturally leads to real knowledge. But no one uses it rightly; no one treats it as something that can truly lead to reality.

What do you mean?

Here, at least, is my opinion. Stand by me and take note whether what comes to my mind is relevant or irrelevant. Then either concur or dissent so that we may better test my conjecture.

Explain.

What I mean is that there are two kinds of sense perception. The one is not conducive to thought because the testimony of the senses themselves appears to be sufficient to our needs. In the case of the other, however, the intellect is roused to reflect whenever sensation fails to yield trustworthy evidence.

You are obviously referring to the effect on the senses of distance and shadow painting.

No, you have missed my meaning.

What do you mean, then?

I mean that experiences only provoke thought when they are perceived as being contradictory, as manifesting two opposite characteristics with equal clarity, quite independent of their distance from the viewer. I shall try to make my meaning clearer with an illustration. Consider these three fingers: the smallest, the middle, and the index.

All right.

Assume that you are seeing them close up. Now consider this point.

What is it?

Each appears to be equally a finger, no matter whether it is the middle one or the one on one side or the other. Nor does it matter whether it is black or white, or thick or thin. Nor do any other features of this kind make any difference. Hence most people do not feel the need to ask the intellect what a finger is, for their perception has never indicated that a finger is at the same time not a finger.

That's right.

So it is obvious that a perception of this sort will never provoke thought.

Yes.

But now consider size. Can sight satisfactorily measure how small or big objects are? Does it make no difference that one finger is in the middle and another on the side? How about the sense of touch? Does it accurately perceive thickness and thinness, softness and hardness? Are not the other senses defective in what they report? Does not each one of them function approximately as follows: The same sense that discerns hardness necessarily discerns softness as well. Hence it must report to the soul that it perceives the same thing as being both hard and soft.

That's right.

Must the soul not be at a loss concerning the nature of the hard if the sense that reports it at the same time reports it as being soft? The same with light and heavy if the heavy is reported to be light and the light heavy.

Yes. These kinds of messages to the soul can be very misleading. They clearly require further analysis.

So these are the occasions when the soul summons up reason and calculation to help it ascertain whether each of the things reported to it is one or two.

Yes.

And if they turn out to be two, each of them is one.

Yes.

Then if each is one and both are two, the soul will think of the two as separate, for what is inseparable can only be one.

Yes.

Sight, too, perceives large and small, as we say, not separated but fused. Is that right?

Yes.

In order to clarify all this the intellect is required to do the opposite of what vision does; it must disentangle large from small and perceive them as distinct from one another.

Yes.

And isn't this the point where we first ask the question, what do we mean by large and small, anyway?

Yes.

And this same point prompted our earlier distinction between the intelligible and the visible.

Right.

So this is what I was trying to explain earlier when I said some things are likely to provoke thought and some not. Those things are provocative that the senses perceive as contradictory; where no contradiction is evident, there is no cause for reflection.

Now I understand you, and I agree.

To which of these classes do unity and number belong?

I don't know.

Well, what has just been said may help you to find an answer. For if the eye or some other sense could apprehend unity as complete and indivisible, the soul would have no incentive to discover unity's essence, just as in the case of the finger. But if unity is always paired with its opposite so that it appears to be one thing and equally something else, there would be an immediate need to judge between them. The soul would be perplexed; it would be compelled to summon up thought and inquire into the true nature of unity. Hence the study of unity will be among those studies that guide and turn the soul to the contemplation of reality.

Well, unity certainly provides a good illustration of how sight can generate contradictory impressions. For we see unity both as one and as infinite multiplicity.

If this holds for unity, then it must also hold for all number?

Yes.

And arithmetic and calculation are entirely occupied with number?

Yes.

Then it looks like they lead us nearer to reality.

Very much so.

It follows that they must be among the studies we want to prescribe. Both the soldier and the philosopher must master them: the one in order to marshal his troops and the other so that he may transcend the world of appearances and reach out to the world of reality. Otherwise, he will never be a master of calculating.

True.

And our guardian is both soldier and philosopher?

Yes.

So our laws will prescribe these studies. We should persuade those who are to perform high functions in the city to undertake calculation but not as amateurs. They should persist in their studies until they reach the level of pure thought, where they will be able to contemplate the very nature of number. The object of study ought not to be buying and selling, as if they were preparing to be merchants or brokers. Instead, it should serve the purposes of war and lead the soul away from the world of appearances toward essence and reality.

Well said.

Our discussion of calculation has made me think about the subtlety and charm of its properties and how it can aid us in many different ways. All this provided it is turned to the uses of knowledge and not to buying and selling.

What do you mean?

We made the point before that calculation thrusts the soul upward, compelling it to consider pure number. It will resist any attempt to link numbers to visible or tangible things. You know, of course, how experts in mathematics behave in discussions about these matters. They laugh at anyone who attempts to argue for dividing up the unity. Indeed, they won't permit it: if you divide it, they will multiply it back again. They stand guard against anyone who asserts that one is not one but many.

You are right.

Now suppose, Glaucon, that someone were to say: My good friends, keeping in mind your axiom concerning the nature of the one, the absolute equality of all ones, and their indivisibility what kind of numbers are you talking about? How do you suppose they would answer?

I think they would answer that they are referring to units that can be apprehended only by thought and in no other way.

Then, my friend, you can see that this is the kind of study that appears to be indispensable for us it compels the soul to apply pure intellect in a quest for pure truth.

It certainly does.

Another point: have you noticed that those naturally skilled in calculation are also quick in most other studies? And that those naturally slow, when trained and drilled in the subject, become quicker and perform better, even if no other benefits are apparent?

That's right.

I also believe that we could not find many studies in which learning and practice are more demanding than these.

I don't think we could.

For all these reasons, then, this is a study that must not be neglected. It must be part of an education devised for the finest natures.

Agreed.

Having reached accord concerning the study of calculation, we should consider whether the study next following it also fits our purpose.

Do you mean geometry?

Precisely.

So much as is related to military use is clearly worthwhile. Selecting sites for encampments, securing strong points, deploying troops in column and line as well as in march and battle formations—all these are operations in which a man skilled in geometry would perform very differently than one without such skills.

At the same time, however, these kinds of uses require only a modicum of geometry. What we need to do is to consider whether the principal and more advanced part of the subject serves to make the idea of the good easier to comprehend. We have identified this effect as common to all studies that compel the soul to turn around and behold the most joyous part of reality and so attain what the soul most stands in need of

I agree

Then if a study compels the soul to contemplate reality, it is suitable: if not, it is not suitable.

That will be our contention.

Well, then, no one with even the slightest knowledge of geometry will want to deny that this is a science that completely contradicts the language geometers use to discuss it.

How so?

They can't help it, of course, but what they say is really ludicrous. They speak as though they were doing something practical, as if their propositions were designed to be useful in action. All they talk of is squaring, extending, and adding, whereas the real purpose of their science is pure knowledge

That is certainly true.

Then we ought to be able to agree on still another point

What is that?

That the knowledge of which we speak concerns the eternal and not the temporal and transient

Agreed. Geometry has to do with unchanging reality.

In that case, my friend, it would tend to draw the soul upward toward truth. It would produce minds attuned to philosophizing, elevating those faculties that now wrongfully remain below.

Nothing could be more certain.

It is equally certain, then, that geometry must not be neglected in your fair city. Even its by-products are valuable.

What are they?

What you have already mentioned: its uses in war. Further, we know that a man who has studied geometry is a better student across the board than one who has not.

Yes, by Zeus. There is a great difference between the two.

Shall we then prescribe this as the second study to be undertaken by the young?

Yes.

And how about setting down astronomy as the third such study?

I am strongly in favor of it. A heightened awareness of the seasons and the months and years will be useful both in agriculture and navigation, and still more in the art of war.

You amuse me, Glaucon. You are so obviously concerned lest people think you are sanctioning studies that could turn out to be useless. Nonetheless, I realize your concern is not a trivial one. Only with greatest difficulty can one understand that every soul has that power of knowing that studies like these can refresh and purify. This holds true even if the soul's habitual behavior has left it blind and corrupt. Such a power is more precious than ten thousand eyes, for it is the only means we possess to see the truth. All who hold this belief will accept these words with deep conviction. But those others who are wholly unaware of such things will naturally call them nonsense, for they can see no profit in them. So you must decide, here and now, to which group you will address your argument. Or will you speak to none of them, pursuing the discussion rather for your own profit, while leaving others free to gain from it what they will?

The latter. I speak and ask and answer questions mainly for my own sake.

I think we ought to back up a little here. We were mistaken about the study we said should follow upon geometry.

What was the mistake?

After discussing plane surfaces we failed to consider solids in themselves; instead we immediately went ahead to examine solids in motion. The proper course would have been to proceed from the second dimension to the third, where we would have to consider cubes and all things sharing the attribute of depth.

That's true, Socrates. But this subject seems generally to have gone unexamined.

There are two reasons for that. First, it is a difficult subject, and since it has nowhere found favor, there is little incentive to study it. Second, students need someone to direct them. This is an indispensable requirement, but a suitable director is difficult to find. Further, the way things are now, even were he available, the conceit of those who have talent for this field is so great that they would refuse to accept his guidance. On the other hand, if an entire city should honor and support such studies, these gifted students would more readily submit to his direction. Then continuous and energetic inquiry would discover the true nature of the subject matter. Even now, although the public has no use for it and students are ignorant of the true reasons for studying it, it steadily gains ground against all obstacles by virtue of its inherent charm. I shouldn't be surprised if someday it would be fully understood.

It's true. The subject has a great deal of charm. But explain more clearly what you meant just now. You defined geometry as the study of plane surfaces?

Yes.

And you followed it up with astronomy, but then you draw back.

Because I wanted to explain everything quickly, I lost ground. The proper order would have put three dimensional studies next. I omitted them because they are so absurdly neglected; then I went on from geometry to astronomy as the study of solids in motion.

That's right.

If we assume that a city will sponsor the neglected third study, let us then count astronomy as the fourth.

We could likely do that. This time, Socrates, I shall not discuss astronomy in terms of the vulgar utilitarianism you rebuked me for just now. Instead I shall adopt your principles in its praise. It is evident to everyone that astronomy propels the soul away from mundane matters and toward the contemplation of higher things.

It may be evident to everyone else, but not to me. I don't think it does this

Why not?

As it is approached by those who currently seek to lead us toward philosophy, it has quite the opposite effect of turning the soul's attention downward

How so?

You have an overgenerous conception of what is meant by "higher things." Should anyone try to learn something by throwing back his head and staring at the decorations on a ceiling, I suppose you would assume he was engaging in intellectual contemplation instead of simply using his eyes. Maybe you are right, and I am being foolish. But in my opinion only the study of unseen reality can draw the soul upward. To anyone who tries to learn about sense objects, whether gazing above or squinting below, I would say he can never really learn because such things cannot be known. I would add that his soul is looking down and not up even though he may be carrying on his studies by land or by sea while lying or floating on his back.

A fair retort; your rebuke is just. But if astronomy is to be taught contrary to present practice, what manner of learning will serve our purposes?

One that perceives the sparks lighting the sky simply as decorations on a visible surface. To be sure, they may be properly regarded as the purest and most beautiful of all material things. But we must realize that they fall far short of truth. They do not reveal the motions expressed in absolute speed and absolute slowness. Nor do they explain true number and true figures and how they move in relation to one another, nor what they contain and what they carry. These kinds of things can be comprehended not by sight but only by means of intellect and argument. Do you think differently?

No.

Then we must use the ornaments of heaven as heuristic models. They can aid us to understand those things we are looking for, just as if we had unexpectedly come upon some high-precision and richly elaborated diagrams drafted by Daedalus or some other craftsman or painter. Anyone knowing geometry and seeing such designs would appreciate the beauty of their workmanship. But he would think it absurd to suppose that by examining them he could discover the true essence of equals or doubles or any other ratio.

How could he think otherwise?

And don't you agree that any real astronomer would think the same way when he looks upward to observe the movements of the stars? He would admire the work of the heavenly craftsman who gave the skies their form and content as a structure of unsurpassed beauty. But it is another matter when it comes to the ratios of day and night, their connection to the month and of the month to the year, and how the stars relate to all of these time spans and to one another. The real astronomer would recognize these things as visible and tangible objects and would therefore count as folly any assumption that they are changeless and eternal. And he would believe that anyone who mistakes such a false assumption for truth is wasting time.

Now that you say so, I will agree.

Then in astronomy, as in geometry, we shall pursue our studies by setting and solving problems, and we shall let the heavens be. Only by practicing the true science of astronomy can we convert the natural and inherent intelligence of the soul from uselessness into something useful.

You set tasks that will require many times the amount of effort now invested in astronomy.

If we are to be of any use as lawgivers, I suspect our prescriptions in other areas will include similar requirements. Now, do you have any other suitable studies to suggest?

Not right now.

Then remember that the general concept of motion finds expression in many forms and not just one. Whoever is wise in these matters could probably enumerate all of them. But between us we could recognize at least two.

What are they?

Add to astronomy its counterpart.

What is it?

We may suppose that as we are given eyes to study the stars so we have ears to hear harmonic movement and that consequently a certain kinship exists between the two forms of knowledge. This is the position taken by the Pythagoreans, Glaucon, and we agree with them, don't we?

Yes.

Then let us consult them since our task is difficult. Let us see what their opinion is and whether they can add to our knowledge. At the same time, we must guard well our own interests.

What do you mean?

We must not permit our students to try to learn things that are imperfect or that do not lead to the results all studies should attain. We just cited shortcomings of this kind in the study of astronomy. Do you know that the same problems exist in harmony? Those who teach the subject attempt to measure sounds and chords within the context of audibility and so repeat the waste of time we discovered in astronomy

Yes, by the gods, that's right. And they are so absurd, too, with their talk of "dense" notes and the like. They press their ears against the instruments as if they were trying to overhear a voice from next door. Then some claim to detect an extra note between the intervals which should henceforth be accepted as the smallest interval and the basic unit of measurement; others insist that it is no different from the notes already sounded. Both parties prefer their ears to their intelligence.

You are evidently speaking of those worthy musicians who chafe and torment their strings and put them to the rack on the pegs of the instrument. I won't try to extend the metaphor by bringing the blows of the plectrum into the comparison or those complaints of musicians against their strings that they are either too responsive or too resistant. I will simply say that I do not mean these kinds of people. Instead I mean the same people we just now said we would consult about harmony. Their approach corresponds exactly to that of the astronomers. They seek numbers in the accords they hear, but they do not make the ascent to the universal problems of number where they might consider which numbers are harmonious and which not, and why.

The task is beyond human capacity.

Say, rather, that the task is useful in the quest for the beautiful and the good. If undertaken for other purposes, then it is useless.

That is likely.

Still further, my assumption is that if we carry on all these studies to the point where their kinship and affinities with one another are evident, our effort will have contributed to our purpose, and no labor lost. Otherwise, we shall have striven in vain.

I suspect you are right, Socrates, but you are talking about an enormously difficult undertaking.

Do you speak of the prelude, or what? Do we not understand that all this is but prelude to the main themes we still have to learn? Or do you suppose that the experts we have so far been speaking of can have taught us anything about reason and dialectic?

No, by Zeus, excepting only a very few whom I have met.

Further, do you think that men will ever know what we say they must know if they are unable to account for what they say or compel others to do the same?

Once again the answer must be no.

Then Glaucon, we confront at last the main theme of dialectic and of the law that evolves in harmony with it. Dialectic belongs wholly to the intelligible order, but we also find its counterpart in the visible order, in that decisive moment when the eyes are able to see real creatures, then stars, and finally the sun itself. So it is when a man enters into dialectic, shunning reliance on sense perceptions and seeking understanding solely by means of rational discourse. He strives to know each thing in its essence and does not desist until he is led by pure intelligence to know goodness itself. Then he will have arrived at the limits of the intelligible, just as the man of our allegory reached the limits of the visible.

Exactly.

And is this not the journey we call the dialectic?

Yes.

Now recall the course of liberation from the cave: first from the chains, then from the shadows, and then from the images that produce them, into the light. There follows the passageway from the cave to the sun and, once the passage is completed, the prolonged inability to look directly at plants and animals and the light of the sun. In its

stead there is the capacity to see reflections in the water and shadows again—but this time shadows of the divine, not those produced by artificial images and by an artificial light which, when compared with the sun, is as unreal as the shadows around it. Observe the parallel to the course of studies we have just reviewed. These studies have the power to liberate and raise the soul's best portion to the level of what is best in the intelligible world. Our allegory showed in just the same way how the body's most sunlike element may be converted to the contemplation of all that is brightest in the visible world.

I accept this as the truth. It is hard to accept, but it is also hard to reject. However, since these are words that we shall hear not just this once but will return to many times over, let us now assume that they describe things the way they really are. It is time that we consider the main theme and go through it just as we went through the prelude. So describe to us the character and power of dialectic. What are its parts, and what are its ways? These are the things, it seems to me, that could bring us to the point where we might find some resting place alongside the road and then, finally, reach our journey's end.

My dear Glaucon, you won't be able to follow me any further, and not because good will is lacking on my part. If I could, I would no longer show you allegories and symbols but the very truth itself—at least as I see it. Whether or not I see it rightly I cannot properly say. But that there is something like this we need to see I cannot doubt. Do you agree?

Yes.

Can we also agree that it cannot be seen except by way of the dialectic, and then only by someone experienced in the studies we have been discussing and that there is no other way?

We may insist on it.

So much, at any rate, cannot be gainsaid: no other form of inquiry makes a systematic and comprehensive effort to understand what each thing really is. All the other arts are concerned with human opinions and desires, with growing things or making them and tending to them after they are grown or made. Those who pursue geometry and the allied arts apprehend reality to some degree, as we have seen. But mostly they dream. It is impossible for them to be fully awake so long as they neglect to examine the assumptions they employ and fail to account for their use. If one doesn't know his own first principles, if the conclusion and the intervening parts are themselves barely known, how could any solution that might be put forward ever be the equivalent of true knowledge?

It couldn't.

Then dialectic remains the only intellectual process whose method is that of dissecting hypotheses and ascending to first principles in order to obtain valid knowledge. Even when the soul's eye is sunk in the muddy pit of barbarism, the dialectic will gently release it and draw it upward, calling upon the studies we recently examined to support its work of conversion. We should note here that habit has several times caused us to call these studies sciences. We really need another word that would connote something more enlightened than opinion but less pure than science. I believe we used the word *understanding* earlier. But I would think this is no time to dispute over names while considering things of much greater importance.

Agreed.

Then we shall be content to continue using the terms and classifications we set forth previously. Intellection or reason first, then understanding, then belief, and, finally, conjecture. Taken together, the latter two comprise opinion and so focus on transient things. The former comprise knowledge and so are drawn to the eternal. These relationships, in turn, are expressed in a series of ratios: as timelessness is to transience, so is knowledge to opinion, and as knowledge is to opinion, so is reason to belief, and understanding to conjecture. But we had better forgo further inquiry into these kinds of cognition and how they relate to their collateral subject matter. The same with the arrangement of these subject matters into two classes we call the opinable and the knowable. Otherwise, Glaucon, we shall be involved in discussions many times longer than those we have already had.

I agree to what you say insofar as I can follow you.

And is not the dialectician one who can explain the reason for each thing's existence? And will you not agree that anyone who is unable to do this because he cannot account for what he says to himself or others lacks the required intelligence?

How could I say otherwise?

And does this not also pertain to the good? A man must be able to define the idea of the good in his discourse, distinguishing it and abstracting it from all other things. Like a warrior he must run the entire gauntlet of trials, striving to measure everything in terms of reality and not by opinion. He must meet and overcome every obstacle without permitting his reason to falter. The man who lacks this competence, you will agree, can know neither the good nor any good thing. If he perceives any likeness of the good, it will be the product of opinion and not of knowledge. Dreaming and dozing away his life on earth, he will arrive at Hades before he awakens, and there he will fall asleep forever.

Yes, by Zeus. I will certainly agree to all that.

Now, should the imaginary children we are educating in our discourse ever become your real children, I presume you would not permit them to govern the city or decide matters of great moment while they remain like the irrational lines in geometry.²

No, I wouldn't.

Are you, then, prepared to provide by law that they shall give special heed to the discipline that enables them to master the technique of asking and answering questions?

I shall promulgate such a law, with your help.

Then we shall have established dialectic at the summit of all studies as the capstone above which no other study could legitimately find a place. And with that, our discussion of the course of studies is complete. Do you agree?

Yes.

What remains, then, is for us to decide how we shall assign these studies and to whom.

That is evident.

When we were choosing rulers earlier, do you recall the types of men we selected?

Of course.

For the most part, we shall want to choose these same types now. The most stable and the bravest must be given preference and, so far as possible, the most comely. But at this point we must get additional requirements. The rulers must be high-minded and tough, but they must also possess those gifts from nature that equip them to pursue the kind of education we have been discussing.

Be more specific.

To begin with, my friend, they must relish study and must be able to learn with ease. For men's minds will sooner falter when confronting rigorous intellectual work than hard physical exercise because intellection is more specifically a matter for the soul and is not shared with the body.

True.

A good memory, tenacity, and love for labor of every kind are further requirements. Without these, how would anyone be willing to follow the prescribed regimen as well as persevere in so difficult a course of study?

No one would unless he was very goodnatured.

This is the cause of philosophy's current difficulties and disrepute: the unfitness of those who seek to be her consorts. Instead of true sons they are bastards.

What do you mean?

First of all, the philosopher candidate must not be halfhearted in his love of labor, zealous for one side of it and shunning the other. This is what we see in someone who is a lover of gymnastic and the hunt and all manner of bodily exercise but has no love for learning, listening, or inquiry and hates the discipline such pursuits require. A man who goes to the other extreme exhibits the same flaw.

True.

Likewise, the love of truth ought to be unblemished. But blemish there will be if a man scorns the conscious lie—whether he encounters it in others or within himself—yet tolerates the witless lies spawned by ignorance. Should he himself be convicted of ignorance, he shrugs it off, wallowing about like some pig in the muck.

2. Irrational lines are those that cannot be related to others as one whole number to another.

You are right.

With regard to temperance, bravery, magnificence of soul, and the other ingredients of virtue, we must be particularly careful to discriminate between the true sons and the bastards. When the necessary knowledge to make such discriminations is lacking in the individual or the state, the result must be that bastards or defectives will be chosen to be friends or rulers.

So it is.

And so it must be that we take good care in matters of this sort. If we bring men of sound body and mind to undergo so rigorous a training and to undertake such difficult studies, justice itself will find no fault with us. We shall be able to save the city and the government. But if we bring forward men of another sort, we shall achieve just the opposite. We shall deluge philosophy with still more ridicule.

That would be shameful.

Certainly. But I think I have been making myself a bit ridiculous.

How so?

By forgetting that we are jesting, I spoke with too much intensity. While I was speaking, I thought of philosophy and how shamefully it has been reviled. It made me angry, and so I spoke with heat and much too earnestly against those responsible.

By Zeus, you were not too earnest for me as a listener.

Too much so for me as speaker. But here let us recall something we ought not to forget. Earlier we chose old men as rulers, but that won't do for the selection we are making now. We mustn't credit Solon's word that in growing old a man is able to learn many things. He is less able to do that than to run a race. All hard labor belongs to the young.

Necessarily.

Then arithmetic, geometry, and all the other preliminary studies that constitute the indispensable preparation for the dialectic must be introduced to the young. But the instruction must not be compulsory.

Why not?

Because a free man ought not to be slavish in learning. Compulsion in physical training doesn't hurt the body, but the mind will not retain anything that it is forced to learn.

True.

Then, my friend, we must not keep the children at their studies by force. Instead, we must make learning fun. With this method it will also be easier for us to recognize the natural bent of each.

You have a good point.

You remember we said that the children must be spectators of war, mounted on horseback and brought to the front wherever it is safe, so that even as puppies they might have a taste of blood?

I remember.

Then those who show the greatest aptitude in dealing with studies, labors, and dangers must be selected to join the ranks of the very best.

At what age?

When they have finished with compulsory physical training; during the period when it is required, some two or three years, they are simply incapacitated for other activities. Fatigue and sleepiness are the enemies of study. Moreover, athletic prowess will in any case be one of the tests they must pass, and by no means the least.

Right.

Then at the age of twenty those who have been specially selected will be given greater honors than the others. They must return to the studies they pursued in random fashion as children and organize them in such a way that their interrelations and their relevance to reality become manifest.

That is the only kind of education that will endure.

And it is also the most important test available to discern who has the gift for dialectic and who does not. For he who can see the connection between things is a dialectician; he who cannot is not.

I agree.

Then you will want to use these qualities as your criteria for selecting the best from among those who are steadfast in their studies and in war and in all the other duties the law prescribes. From these you will want to make still another selection at age thirty, promoting them to still higher honors you must test their qualifications in the dialectic in order to see which ones are able to abstract themselves from sight and the other senses and arrive at the place where truth and reality dwell. But at this point, my friend, you must be very careful.

Why?

Haven't you noticed that current practice in the dialectic is causing great harm?

In what way?

Its students have become lawless.

That is true.

But is their behavior any cause for wonder? Can you find no sympathy for them?

Just why should I?

Their situation resembles that of an adopted son raised in a great and numerous family with abundant wealth, all of which has attracted a horde of flatterers. On reaching manhood he becomes aware that he is not the flesh and blood of his adopted parents and that he will be unable to locate his real parents. Can you imagine the difference in his feelings toward his adopted family and toward those flatterers before and after he learns the truth about his adoption? Or should I do the imagining?

You do it.

I would guess that before knowing the truth, he would more likely honor his adoptive parents and family than his flatterers. He would be less likely to neglect the needs of the foster parents and family. It would be improbable that he should think ill of them or act unlawfully against them. In matters of importance he would be more apt to heed them than the flatterers.

Likely enough.

But afterward, I should guess, his sense of honor and devotion to the family would languish. His attachment to the flatterers would grow. He would pay them more heed, openly maintain relations with them, and finally go over to living by their rules. He would have lost all concern for his adoptive family unless he were of an exceptionally good nature.

Everything you have said seems plausible. But what is the relevance of the story to the students of dialectic?

This. From childhood on we have been brought up with certain convictions about what is just and honorable, and we have obeyed these convictions with the same reverence with which we have obeyed our parents.

That is true.

Then we meet with various kinds of behavior contrary to these convictions. They are pleasurable and seek to reach the soul through flattery and seduction. Men of any decency will resist their blandishments and will continue to honor and obey what their fathers have taught them.

That is so.

But what happens when such a man confronts the question: what is honorable? After giving the answer he learned from the one who taught him the laws, he is refuted in argument. Many and diverse refutations follow, upsetting his faith and making him believe that there is really no difference between being honorable and being base. When he goes through the same thing with justice and goodness and all the things he values most, will he honor and respect them as before?

Impossible.

Then, when he no longer regards the old beliefs as binding, and true principles still elude him, will he not be likely to settle into the life that feeds and flatters his desires?

He will.

Then he will have ceased to be a lawabiding man; he will have become an outlaw.

Necessarily.

Does this not recapitulate the experience of those who enter the dialectic but lack the requisite discipline? Ought we not to be lenient with them?

Yes, and we ought to pity them too.

Very well. However, so that we won't need to pity your class of thirty year olds, we must take the greatest precautions when the time comes to introduce them to the dialectic.

Yes; we must.

Is it not true that the chief safeguard is to prevent them from tasting it too young? Surely you have observed how the first taste of argument provokes lads to misuse it as a kind of sport, that is, they use it competitively. Having been proven wrong in argument, they must go on to prove others wrong. They are like puppies, welcoming all comers to pull and tear at words with them.

Very much so.

And after they have refuted many, and many have refuted them, they rapidly fall victim to a radical distrust of all they formerly believed. The result is that they discredit themselves as well as the entire profession of philosophy.

Very true.

An older man, however, will resist such madness. He will prefer to follow the example of someone who wants to use dialectic in the service of truth and not to play games of contradiction. Hence he will be more reasonable and moderate, thereby bringing credit rather than discredit to philosophy.

Right.

Hence our insistence on safeguards and precautions just now. We must require that those allowed to participate in argument have developed stable and steady natures. The present practice of admitting any who chance by, whether suitable or not, cannot be countenanced.

I agree.

If a man devotes himself to an exclusive and strenuous study of the dialectic with the same zeal he dedicated previously to gymnastic, would it be enough to require twice as many years for dialectic as we did for gymnastic?

Do you mean six or four?

Make it five. In any case, they will afterward have to be sent back down to the cave. You must compel them to take up military commands and other offices suited to youth so that in this kind of experience as well they will be second to none. And while holding these offices, they must continue to be tested to see if each remains steadfast in the face of temptation, or yields instead.

How much time do you allot to this phase?

Fifteen years. Then, at the age of fifty, those who have shown their mettle and preserved their integrity through every trial and proven best in all tasks and realms of knowledge must at last be shown the way to the goal. There they must lift up the sunlike part of their souls and behold that which sheds light on all things. Having seen goodness itself, they will adopt it for the rest of their lives as their governor, for themselves, for their city, and for their fellow citizens. From then on each will devote most of his time to the study of philosophy. When his turn comes, however, he will take office and toil to serve the city, understanding it to be an obligation and not an honor. And so, when each generation of guardians has readied those like them in the next to take their places, they go off to dwell in the Islands of the Blessed. The city will decree public memorials and sacrifices in their names. If the Pythian oracle approves, they shall be revered as divinities. If not, they shall be known as divine and happy men.

Done like a sculptor, Socrates. You have given our rulers a marvelous luster.

And the ruling women too, Glaucon. You mustn't think that any thing I have said applies any more to men than to women endowed with similar capacities.

That is only right if we are to respect our own commitment that women must have an equal share in everything with men.

Well, then, will you agree that our notion of what city and government should be is no mere daydream? Difficult it is, but in some way possible. Not, however, in any other way than we have described. When true philosophers—whether one or many—come to power in the city, they will scorn honors, counting them illiberal and worthless. Their first care will be to do what is right and accept the honors such care merits. They will reform, serve, and maintain the city, and justice will be its chief quality and most indispensable standard.

How will they be able to do all this?

By sending out all those over ten years of age into the country. They will take over the children, taking care that they are far removed from the dispositions and habits of their parents. They will be raised according to their own laws and customs in the manner we have been describing. This is the fastest and easiest way to establish the city and the government we have portrayed and to bring happiness and true benefits to its citizens.

By far the fastest and easiest, Socrates. And I think you have explained very well how it might come into being, if it ever does.

Then we have said enough about this kind of city and the kind of man who is its counterpart? Henceforth we shall know them.

Evidently. To answer your question, I think we have finished.

Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. Richard W. Sterling and William C. Scott. New York: Norton, 1985. pp. 209-234.