

## BB READING #4 IDEALISM

### A. PLATO'S CAVE

And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: Behold! Human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

I see.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking...others silent.

You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave . . . And of the objects which are being carried, in like manner they would they would only see the shadows . . . And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passersby spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow? ...To them...the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.... And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any one of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision—what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them—will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Far truer.

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take refuge in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him? ... And suppose once more that he is forced into the presence of the rugged ascent and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities ... He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day ... Last of all he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water; and he will see him in his own proper place and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is ... He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the seasons and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows here have been accustomed to behold?

Clearly, he said, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.

And if they were in the habit of conferring honors among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honors and glories or envy the possessions of them? Would he not say with Homer, "Better to be the poor servant of a poor master," and to endure anything rather than think as they do and live after their manner? ... Imagine once more ... such as one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

To be sure, he said.

And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak and before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable), would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if anyone tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

No question, he said.

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intelligible world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed—whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the form of the good appears last of all and is seen only with an effort; and when seen is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in the visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intelligible; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

I agree, he said, as far as I am able to understand you...

But then, if I am right, certain professors of education must be wrong when they say that they can put a knowledge into the soul which was not there before, like sight into blind eyes... Our argument shows that the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already; and that just as the eye was unable to turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too the instrument of knowledge can only by the movement of the whole soul be turned from the world of becoming into that of being, and learn by degrees to endure the sight of being, and of the brightest and best of being, or in other words, of the good.

### **B. SOCRATES' LAST DAY**

'Very well then; let me try to make a more convincing defense to you than I made at my trial. If I did not expect to enter the company, first, of other wise and good gods, and secondly of men now dead who are better than those who are in this world now, it is true that I should be wrong in not grieving at death. As it is, you can be assured that I expect to find myself among good men; I would not insist particularly on this point, but on the other I assure you that I shall insist most strongly: that I shall find there divine masters who are supremely good. That is why I am not so much distressed as I might be, and why I have a firm hope that there is something in store for those who have died, and (as we have been told for many years) something much better for the good than for the wicked.'

'Well, what is your idea, Socrates?' asked Simmias. 'Do you mean to keep this knowledge to yourself now that you are leaving us, or will you communicate it to use too? I think that we ought to have a share in this comfort; besides, it will serve as your defense, if we are satisfied with what you say.'

'Very well, I will try,' he replied. 'But before I begin, Crito here seems to have been wanting to say something for some time; let us find out what it is.'

'Only this, Socrates,' said Crito, 'that the man who is to give you the poison has been asking me for a long time to tell you to talk as little as possible; he says that talking makes you heated, and that you ought not to do anything to affect the action of the poison. Otherwise it is sometimes necessary to take a second dose, or even a third.'

'That is his affair,' said Socrates. 'Let him make his own preparations for administering it twice or three times if necessary.'

'I was pretty sure you would say that,' said Crito, 'but he's been bothering me for a long time.'

'Never mind him,' said Socrates. 'Now for you, my jury. I want to explain to you how it seems to me natural that a man who has really devoted his life to philosophy should be cheerful in the face of death, and confident of finding the greatest blessing in the next world when his life is finished. I will try to make clear to you, Simmias and Cebes, how this can be so.'

'Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death. If this is true, and they have actually been looking forward to death all their lives, it would of course be absurd to be troubled when the thing comes for which they have so long been preparing and looking forward.'

'Simmias laughed and said 'Upon my word, Socrates, you have made me laugh, though I was not at all in the mood for it. I am sure that if they heard what you said, most people would think - and our fellow-countrymen would heartily agree - that it was a very good hit at the philosophers to say that they are half dead already, and that they, the normal people, are quite aware that death would serve the philosophers right.'

'And they would be quite correct, Simmias; except in thinking that they are "quite aware". They are not at all aware in what sense true philosophers are half dead, or in what sense they deserve death, or what sort of death they deserve. But let us dismiss them and talk among ourselves. Do we believe that there is such a thing as death?'

'Most certainly,' said Simmias, taking up the role of answering.

'It is simply the release of the soul from the body? Is death nothing more or less than this, the separate condition of the body by itself when it is released from the soul, and the separate condition by itself of the soul when released from the body? Is death anything else than this?'

'No, just that.'

'Well then, my boy, see whether you agree with me; I fancy that this will help us to find out the answer to our problem. Do you think that it is right for a philosopher to concern himself with the nominal pleasures connected with food and drink?'

'Certainly not, Socrates,' said Simmias.

'What about sexual pleasures?'

'No, not at all.'

'And what about the other attentions that we pay to our bodies? Do you think that a philosopher attaches any importance to them? I mean things like providing himself with smart clothes and shoes and other bodily ornaments; do you think that he values them or despises them - in so far as there is no real necessity for him to go in for that sort of thing?'

'I think the true philosopher despises them,' he said.

'Then it is your opinion in general that a man of this kind is not concerned with the body, but keeps his attention directed as much as he can away from it and towards the soul?'

'Yes, it is.'

'So it is clear first of all in the case of physical pleasures that the philosopher frees his soul from association with the body (so far as is possible) to a greater extent than other men?'

'It seems so.'

'And most people think, do they not, Simmias, that a man who finds no pleasure and takes no part in these things does not deserve to live, and that anyone who thinks nothing of physical pleasures has one foot in the grave?'

'That is perfectly true.'

'Now take the acquisition of knowledge; is the body a hindrance or not, if one takes it into partnership to share an investigation? What I mean is this: is there any certainty in human sight and hearing, or is it true, as the poets are always dinning into our ears, that we neither hear nor see anything accurately? Yet if these senses are not clear and accurate, the rest can hardly be so, because they are all inferior to the first two. Don't you agree?'

'Certainly.'

'Then when is it that the soul attains to truth? When it tries to investigate anything with the help of the body, it is obviously led astray.'

'Quite so.'

'It is not in the course of reflection, if at all, that the soul gets a clear view of facts?'

'Yes.'

'Surely the soul can best reflect when it is free of all distractions such as hearing or sight or pain or pleasure of any kind - that is, when it ignores the body and becomes as far as possible independent, avoiding all physical contacts and associations as much as it can, in its search for reality.'

'That is so.'

'Then here too - in despising the body and avoiding it, and endeavoring to become independent - the philosopher's soul is ahead of all the rest.'

### C. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FREEDOM AND LIBERATION (HANNAH ARENDT)

‘The word “revolutionary” can be applied only to revolutions whose aim is freedom. Crucial, then, to any understanding of revolutions in the modern age is that the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide. And since the current notion of the Free World is that freedom, and neither justice nor greatness, is the highest criterion for judging the constitutions of political bodies, it is not only our understanding of revolution but our conception of freedom, clearly revolutionary in origin, on which may hinge the extent to which we are prepared to accept or reject this coincidence. Even at this point, where we still talk historically, it may therefore be wise to pause and reflect on one of the aspects under which freedom appeared – if only to avoid the more common misunderstanding and to catch a first glance at the very modernity of revolution as such.

It may be a truism to say that liberation and freedom are not the same; that liberation may be the condition of freedom but by no means leads automatically to it; that the notion of liberty implied in liberation can only be negative, and hence, that even the intention of liberating is not identical with the desire for freedom. Yet if these truisms are frequently forgotten, it is because liberation has always loomed large and the foundation of freedom has always been uncertain, if not altogether futile. Freedom, moreover, has played a large and rather controversial role in the history of both philosophic and religious thought, and this throughout those centuries – from the decline of the ancient to the birth of the modern world – when political freedom was non-existent, and when, for reasons which do not interest us here, men were not concerned with it.

If we leave aside personal motives and practical goals and identify the revolutionary spirit with the principles which, on both sides of the Atlantic, originally inspired the men of the revolutions, we must admit that the tradition of the French Revolution – and that is the only revolutionary tradition of any consequence – has not preserved them any better than the liberal, democratic and, in the main, outspokenly anti-revolutionary trends of political thought in America. These principles are the public freedom, public happiness, public spirit. What remained of them in America, after the revolutionary spirit had been forgotten, were civil liberties, the individual welfare of the greatest number, and public opinion as the greatest force ruling an egalitarian, democratic society. But this was not possible in those countries which were affected by the French Revolution. In its school, the revolutionists learned that the early inspiring principles had been overruled by the naked forces of want and need. Forever haunted by the desperate urgency of the ‘social question’, that is, by the specter of the vast masses of the poor whom every revolution was bound to liberate, they seized invariably, and perhaps inevitably, upon the most violent events in the French Revolution, hoping against hope that violence would conquer poverty. This, to be sure, was a counsel of despair; for had they admitted that the most obvious lesson to be learned from the French Revolution was that *la terreur* as a means to achieve *le bonheur* sent revolutions to their doom, they would also have had to admit that no revolution, no foundation of a new body politic, was possible where the masses were loaded down with misery.

The revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in sharp contrast to their predecessors in the eighteenth, were desperate men, and the cause of revolution, therefore, attracted more and more the desperadoes, namely, ‘an unhappy species of the population ... who, during the calm of regular government, are sunk below the level of men; but who, in the tempestuous scenes of civil violence, may emerge into the human character, and give a superiority of strength to any party with which they may associate themselves. These words

of Madison are true enough, except that we must add, if we are to apply them to the affairs of European revolutions, that this mixture of the unhappy and the worst received their chance to rise again 'into the human character' from the despair of the best, who, after the disasters of the French Revolution, could not abandon the cause of revolution – partly because they were driven by compassion and a deeply and constantly frustrated sense of justice, partly because they too knew that 'it is action, not rest, which constitutes our pleasure. In this sense, Tocqueville's dictum, 'In America men have the opinions and passions of democracy; in Europe we have still the passions and opinions of revolution', has remained valid deep into our own century. But these passions and opinions have also failed to preserve the revolutionary spirit for the simple reason that they never represented it; on the contrary, it was precisely such passions and opinions, let loose in the French Revolution, which even then suffocated its original spirit, that is, the principles of public freedom, public happiness, and public spirit which originally inspired its actors.