

The role of rational intellectuals in political life: a perspective through the Cave Metaphor

Sato Himari^{1, a}, Tanaka Minato^{2, b, *},

¹Keio University (Mita Campus), 2 Chome-15-45 Mita, Minato-Ku, Tokyo 108-8345, Japan

²Meiji University (Suruga Dai Campus), 1-1 Kanda-Suruga Dai, Chiyoda-Ku, Tokyo 101-8301, Japan

a.sato_himari_456852@foxmail.com, b.tanaka_tm_97@outlook.com

***Corresponding Author**

Abstract: The "Cave Allegory" is an important metaphor in Plato's **The Republic**, which elucidates Plato's theory of Forms, addresses the question of why a "philosopher-king" could be possible, and explains the emergence and sustenance of an ideal state. Starting from the philosophical implications of the Cave Allegory, this article analyzes the role played by philosophers—namely, rational intellectuals—in political life and examines the significance and limitations of their activities within political life. This analysis not only aids in understanding Plato's entire political philosophy but also offers valuable insights into the responsibilities and roles that rational intellectuals should undertake and play in contemporary political life.

Keywords: cave metaphor, philosopher, rational intellectual, political life

1. Introduction

The Western thinker Alfred North Whitehead once remarked, "More than 2,500 years of Western philosophy has merely served as an afterword to Plato's philosophy." Prior to Plato, Western political philosophy had already begun to take shape; however, Plato's political philosophy emerged in response to the development of ancient Greek politics and economy as well as the growing prominence of the humanistic spirit, thereby acquiring a more systematic and scientific theoretical foundation. Cicero observed that Socrates "brought philosophy down from heaven, placed it within the city, introduced it into every household, and made it indispensable for exploring life, morality, good, and evil" [1]; Plato continued this philosophical transformation.

The "Cave Allegory" is an important metaphor from Plato's *Republic*, which serves to elucidate Plato's theory of Forms and explains how an ideal state governed by philosophers could be conceived and sustained. To some extent, it also reveals the central themes and scope of classical Western political philosophy and holds profound significance for the development of Western political thought as a whole. The study and exploration of issues such as the conflict between philosophy and politics—and the possibility of resolving such conflicts—as well as the responsibilities and obligations incumbent upon rational intellectuals, offer valuable insights for understanding the development of contemporary society.

2. The philosophical implications of the "cave metaphor"

2.1. Division of the dual world

According to Plato, things in the world can be divided into the visible and the knowable; there exists a dichotomy between phenomena and Ideas. The images encountered by the prisoner in the cave constitute the "visible world"—that is, the phenomenal world; whereas when the prisoner emerges from the cave and sees the entities that exist independently of humans—namely, the world of Ideas—the latter represents the world of Ideas.[2] Plato held that both the visible world and the knowable world exist objectively, but the world of Ideas—as an eternal and unchanging reality—is the true existence; it is the object that reason can apprehend. In contrast, the visible world is the object of sensory perception; it lies somewhere between absolute existence and absolute non-existence; therefore, whatever is derived from it can only be called an "opinion," not "knowledge."

The dichotomy between the domain of knowledge and the domain of opinion not only clearly delineates the dual world of phenomena and ideas but also enables us to more clearly recognize that politics lies between these two domains—possessing its own distinctive nature; consequently, the questions and fields studied in political philosophy are also defined in a special way. "Political philosophy seeks to genuinely understand both the nature of political affairs and the knowledge pertaining to correct or just political systems," [3] aiming to attain a universal and comprehensive understanding of the optimal political order grounded in natural justice.

2.2. The two turns of the soul

The prisoner who emerges from the cave to behold the real world represents the first turn of the soul; yet, compelled by some kind of political obligation, he must return to the cave to rescue his companions, this constitutes the second turn of the soul. This turning of the soul permeates the entire cave metaphor: it transforms the opinion-based state of the non-philosopher's mind into the knowledge-based state characteristic of the philosopher's mind. This turning is, in essence, a process of "politicization of the soul." The philosopher's value system differs fundamentally from that of actual politics; its defining feature is not the just relationships between individuals, but rather the "just relationships" among the various elements within the soul.[4]

The political philosopher Leo Strauss argued that modern individuals reside in the "cave beneath the cave" that is, the second cave. This "second cave" represents the realm of public life; within this realm, the essence of public life does not lie in knowledge but in beliefs, opinions, and convictions. Consequently, the object of political philosophy is not merely the pursuit of truth along a purely cognitive trajectory. According to Strauss, people must first clarify what the cave even entails before they can discuss how to emerge from it; thus, philosophers must first return from this artificial second-level cave back to the natural first-level cave to escape it.

2.3. The pursuit of the ultimate goal of "the highest good"

Plato stated, "The last thing one can perceive in the world—and the one that requires tremendous effort to finally discern—is the Idea of the Good"; "It is the cause of all that is right and beautiful among all things; it is the creator of light and light sources in the visible world, and in the world, it itself serves as the definitive source of truth and reason." [5] Thus, the philosopher's pursuit of the sun—as an eternal source of light—after emerging from the cave represents a quest for the goal of "the highest good." In Plato's view, only those who see the Idea of the Good can act rationally in both their private and public lives; therefore, those who govern a state should understand the "Good," and those who comprehend the "Good" should align themselves with the Idea of the Good, making the pursuit of the "highest good" their ultimate aim.

Socrates brought philosophy down from the heavens back to everyday life, focusing on human existence; he possessed the virtue of striving for the ideal of "the highest good," yet his fate was tragic. Socrates' trial did not stem from the Athenians misunderstanding him, but from a deeper conflict between philosophy and politics. To some extent, Socrates' death was inevitable; philosophy and the realities of the city-state represent two distinct and fundamentally opposed forces.

3. The role of philosophers in political life

3.1. "The revealer":from the ontological perspective of the cave metaphor

3.1.1. Revelation and liberation in the cave metaphor

The term "Xiebi" (unveiling) originates from the Xiebi chapter in the *Xunzi*, meaning to overcome cognitive obfuscation and gain a correct understanding of things. In modern Western philosophy, Heidegger also developed numerous theories concerning the state of "no-obscuration." In the cave metaphor, the philosopher breaks free from his chains, emerges from the cave, sees the real world under the sun, overcomes the obscuration imposed by the shadows cast upon the cave walls, correctly comprehends the world of ideas, and thus assumes the role of the "unveiled."

In his Cave Allegory, Plato bifurcates the world, presupposing that humans exist in a "prisoner state"; by escaping from the cave, the prisoner achieves a turn of the soul—overcoming internal obscurity and entering a state of "unobscured Ness." "The complete shift from the artificial firelight within the cave to the sun represents true liberation," [6] through which the prisoner attains human freedom and personal emancipation. However, to achieve social liberation and attain an absolute state of freedom, the prisoner must return to the cave and rescue more individuals trapped in similar predicaments; this illustrates the "obscuring" role played by the prisoner who has escaped the cave.

For Plato, the liberated individual is the true philosopher; in ontological terms, the Idea constitutes the fundamental substance of all things, while knowledge represents the foundation of human cognition. The human being is both a participant in political life and the subject of cognitive activity; the stability and harmony of political life depend on the justice of the state, and the realization of such justice requires that all social classes fulfill their respective roles and adhere to their proper courses—conditions that are made possible by the freedom and liberation of individuals.

3.1.2. The conflict between truth and opinion

The truth revealed by the Unveiled is not central to civic life; to some extent, it conflicts with citizens' beliefs. Late Greek philosophy also expressed skepticism about the certainty of truth. In his works, Cicero emphasized that such a view of truth would undermine the essential beliefs and convictions required for political life. In his treatise on the State, Cicero argued that only force could exert a profound influence over all members of a community; thus, there is a contradiction between the pursuit of truth and faith in practice, indicating that truth and opinion are inherently at odds. It was precisely this conflict that led to Socrates' trial; therefore, philosophers should pay close attention to rhetoric to avoid the dangers associated with Socrates' approach.

3.2. The "enlightener":from the epistemological perspective of the cave allegory

The Cave Allegory is Plato's philosophical exposition of the relationship between truth and opinion; the philosopher recognizes the distinction between the essence of things and their appearance, and also perceives the Forms—pure, unadulterated by any cave imagery—thereby transcending the realm of opinion in a self-actualizing manner and attaining truth by liberating himself from opinion. [7] The philosopher later returns to the cave—a turn that is both passive and inevitable—and through this process, he establishes the fundamental opposition between knowledge and opinion.

The transition from the phenomenal world within the cave to the conceptual world beyond it is, in essence, a process of discovering truth; in this process, philosophers play the role of "enlighteners." In political life, knowledge and opinion serve distinct functions. Plato believed that "philosophy" should replace opinion through the pursuit of truth, whereas the existence of a political society depends on the "opinion" of that society—namely, the prevailing moral and religious beliefs as well as the relevant laws within it; therefore, what dominated the city-state of his time could only be opinion, not truth. [8]

Therefore, as enlighteners, political philosophers must understand the power of language and pay attention to rhetoric; they should not directly impart their so-called absolute knowledge to the public, as this could easily undermine faith and tradition or lead to conflict with reality. People need to uncover truth—yet this is not merely about uncovering truth itself, but also about learning the ways of rational thinking and methodology. Modern Enlightenment, in turn, addressed this challenge by emphasizing the individual's conscious application of reason. Thus, the philosopher as enlightener does not "give a man a fish" – that is, impart ready-made knowledge or truths – but rather "teaches a man how to fish" – that is, trains individuals in the use of reason.

3.3. "The guide" :from the value perspective of the cave metaphor

With the aid of patient reasoning, rationality, and education, true philosophers can help every individual participate in the good according to their nature. [9] Plato believed that in the ideal state he envisioned, philosophers possessed genuine wisdom; they had received a better and more complete education than others and were better equipped to engage in both types of life [5] namely, the philosophical life and the political life. The ideal life is precisely the philosophical life; its realization requires an ideal state, city-state,

ruled by a philosopher-king. Only when philosophers assume sovereign authority can the state become just; "justice" signifies the harmony, self-sufficiency, and strength of everyone's soul. It is only when philosophers serve as the leaders of the city-state that they can guide people on how to live their ideal life.

Philosophers undertake two distinct roles: pursuing wisdom (contemplating the good) and governing the city-state. [10] A just city-state is one designed for the happiness of all people, not merely for the happiness of a single individual; indeed, the true philosopher "regards justice as the most important and essential matter and guides his city-state onto the right path by promoting and upholding justice." [5] In the ideal state governed by philosophers, justice serves as the criterion for distinguishing between good and evil, as well as the highest moral guide.

4. The significance and limitations of philosophers' activities in political life

4.1. The philosopher's civic duty

The story of Plato's failed attempt to liberate a prisoner serves as a metaphor for Socrates' tragedy; from this failure, Socrates drew lessons and crystallized the mission and role of the philosopher. In *The Republic*, he wrote: "Unless philosophers become kings of this world, or unless those whom we now call kings and rulers truly become philosophers, then the calamities of the state and of humanity will know no end." It is the civic duty of philosophers to enlighten and rescue individuals confined to tragic circumstances who lack self-awareness. The philosophers depicted by Plato possess a distinctive character—they are unwilling to rule the city-state or participate in political life; only coercion can compel them to engage in the political life of a just city-state, since such a city-state regards the proper cultivation of philosophers as its most important task. [11]

4.2. The conflict and integration of philosophy and politics

Thus, the cave metaphor also reveals a conflict between philosophy and politics. Of course, this conflict can be mitigated—namely, by emphasizing the role of political philosophy: philosophers should strive to resolve the tension between philosophy and politics in political life and promote their integration. Through their education, philosophers come to understand the real world of ideals, pursue the goal of the highest good, master political skills out of political duty, engage in political education, and realize justice within an ideal policy.

4.3. Strauss's "first cave" and "second cave"

The political philosopher Ernst Friedrich Strauss introduced the renowned concepts of the "First Cave" and the "Second Cave" in his work *Philosophy and Law*. He argued that true philosophy can only be accessed by ascending from Plato's "First Natural Cave" (the world of opinion, the political society) – a perspective that can only be revealed through an interpretation of what he termed the "History of Political Philosophy." The entire endeavor of Strauss's "political philosophy" consists in attempting to trace a path back from the Second Cave (the scientific, universal harmonious world presupposing the "true man") to the First Cave (the pre-scientific, political world presupposing the "ordinary man"). [12]

According to Strauss's theory, philosophers have a certain limit regarding their role in political activity; they cannot fully replace statesmen in political life. The task of philosophers is first to break free from the artificial cave, to escape the constraints of the so-called scientific world, and to return to the pre-scientific political realm—namely, the natural cave—only then can they emerge from within this cave—the "world of opinions" —and employ the methods of knowledge rather than the methods of opinion to pursue truth.

5. Learning from rational intellectuals in modern politics

5.1. Insights and return to strauss's theory

Strauss's Second Cave Theory posits that the realization of political life requires breaking free from the constraints of the scientific realm and returning to the perspective of political philosophy—shifting from a scientized, universal community-based world premised on the notion of the "real person" to a pre-scientific, particular political world premised on the notion of the "ordinary person." This view carries certain positive

significance: it highlights the inherent limitations of philosophers within political activity and explores how these limitations can be overcome to fulfill the proper role that philosophers should play in political life. However, while returning to pure political life, we should also base our approach on the realities of contemporary political society and draw upon the beneficial aspects of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" itself, leveraging its insights into the development of modern political society.

5.2. The responsibility and virtue education of rational intellectuals

First, the philosopher as described by Plato—namely, the rational intellectual—is an "educated person" who has emerged from the shadows of reality and entered a true world of ideals; only after overcoming numerous difficulties did they come to see the sun—as a symbol of the "highest good"—as an eternal source of light. Although their actions may involve a degree of contingency, they nonetheless embody a certain inevitability. Their journey out of the cave represents a spiritual transformation—a pursuit of freedom and liberation; thus, it highlights the crucial role played by rational intellectuals in achieving both personal and social freedom, as well as individual and collective emancipation. In contemporary society, however, intellectuals are often constrained by specific real-world circumstances and may no longer seek a state of freedom; instead, they content themselves with the present reality and find it difficult to attain self-awareness of their souls. Nevertheless, within an orderly political society, the spirit of courageous exploration inherent in intellectuals is indispensable, and they should also bear certain political responsibilities.

Secondly, rational intellectuals are those who, through education, gain the possibility of emerging from their "cave" of ignorance. They can become rulers because philosophers possess exceptional qualities and profound knowledge, giving them an unparalleled advantage over individuals from other social strata; as rulers, they can grasp the concept of the Good and guiding their states toward justice. Therefore, for a state or a political society, it is essential to prioritize the education of its citizens—not only in terms of intellectual education but also in terms of moral education. In modern society, people's eagerness for immediate material gains often leads them to neglect the public good of morality, giving rise to a series of instances of moral decline. As early as the political life of ancient Greece, Socrates proposed the classic proposition that "virtue is knowledge," emphasizing the relationship between morality and knowledge as well as the social role played by both; Aristotle also placed great emphasis on the significance of ethical virtue. Thus, in today's political life, alongside intellectual and political education, greater emphasis should be placed on moral and ethical education.

5.3. Elite development and rational self-orientation

Once again, rational intellectuals are individuals endowed with wisdom; they constitute a minority within the political polis. Therefore, the state should also place importance on nurturing elite talent and establish an elite-based political system. Intellectuals hold certain positive significance for political life, yet the scope of their influence is nonetheless limited. By educating and cultivating elite talent, society can be guided in shaping its value orientations. Intellectuals—particularly elite individuals—should possess the capacity to break free from the constraints of the status quo, dare to explore new political models, and make choices that contribute to a healthier and more rational political life.

6. Conclusion

Ultimately, intellectuals make rational choices, redirect their inner selves, and pursue the value goal of goodness. In modern political life, although rational intellectuals constitute only a portion of those who dominate political affairs, those among them who hold political power possess both the capability and the obligation to employ their rational knowledge to guide and educate the public—teaching them how to apply rational methods and how to engage in rational self-awareness. In political practice, they return to politics itself, seek the point of convergence between politics and philosophy, and through this fusion of politics and philosophy, achieve the orderliness and rationality of political life.

7. References

- [1] Zeller, E. (1996). *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*. Shandong People's Publishing House.

- [2] Wang, D. (2008). An analysis of Plato's theory of Forms. *Journal of Harbin University*, (5).
- [3] Strauss, L. (2011). *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Li, S., et al., Trans.). Huaxia Publishing House.
- [4] Bao, L. (2010). *On the History of Classical Political Philosophy*. People's Publishing House.
- [5] Plato. (1986). *The Republic* (Guo, B., & Zhang, Z., Trans.). The Commercial Press.
- [6] Heidegger, M. (2008). *On the Essence of Truth: Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus Lectures* (Liu, X., & Zhao, W., Trans.). Huaxia Publishing House.
- [7] Zeng, Y. (2005). Philosophy and politics: An interpretation of Plato's political philosophy. *Journal of Xiamen University (Arts & Social Sciences)*, (4).
- [8] Liu, H. (2009). Politics and philosophy in Plato: The interplay of justice and wisdom. *Journal of Guangdong University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, (6).
- [9] Tannenbaum, D., & Schultz, D. (2008). *The Inventors of Ideas: An Introduction to Western Political Philosophy* (Ye, Y., Trans.). Peking University Press.
- [10] Li, S. (2011). *Friendship and Justice: An Introduction to Western Classical Political Philosophy*. Jilin University Press.
- [11] Strauss, L., & Cropsey, J. (2009). *History of Political Philosophy* (Li, H., et al., Trans.). Law Press China.
- [12] Strauss, L. (2006). The political philosopher Leo Strauss: The revival of classical conservative political philosophy. In *Natural Right and History* (Gan, Y., Ed.; Peng, G., Trans.). SDX Joint Publishing Company.