

Research Essay

Plato's Republic as Metaphor for Enlightenment: Part I

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ABSTRACT

Plato uses the most rigorous logic, stories, and analogies in an effort to show what appears to be a mystical vision. Indeed, this is affirmed if we consider his aim of turning the cave dweller towards the light. In essence, as we have seen, this is a turning inward --or the self-reflecting on itself, which ultimately leads to a subject-to-object merging. It is through the cognitive progression, however, from image, to belief, understanding and knowledge that enlightenment is achieved. This, we have seen, corresponds to mystical experiences. Why is this occurring? If we follow Plato's procession of knowledge, it follows logically that this must occur. The true nature of self (at the lower levels of the hierarchy) cannot be perceived unless directly perceived at the level of forms--where images dissolve. If we examine the dialogues closely, I believe clues can be found that point to the mystical experience. I propose that the merging into one with regard to the tripartite soul--with each component becoming aligned with the rational--which is really a way of "purifying us from the defilements of the passions..."as well as Socrates' refutation of opinions or belief to find universals are both evidence of a synoptic perspective characteristic of mystics who have achieved a mystical experience.

Part I of this two-part research essay includes the following sections: Introduction; Enlightenment; Mystical Experiences; Plato's Rules; and Plato's Rules.

Key Words: Plato, Republic, metaphor, enlightenment, vision, form, mystical experience.

Introduction

Many scholars regard the *Republic* as Plato's most comprehensive and seminal work. However, its central theme has been the subject of much debate, resulting in many varying opinions. For instance, some interpretations regard it as a response to the weakness of democracy that resulted in the Peloponnesian War, a reaction to the sophists (masters of the art of illusion), clever rhetoricians who twisted the truth to suit their arguments, an ethical treatise on the nature of justice; or a pedagogical treatise on education encouraging open-mindedness, thinking outside the box, not accepting convention, and thinking mathematically or scientifically. However, I contend there is another interpretation that suggests an underlining unity to Plato's thought: to bring the soul nearer to the truth or to achieve enlightenment. I propose that the dialogues of Plato are stories and analogies crafted deliberately to explain and set up the conditions for achieving enlightenment.

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Although the word enlightenment usually connotes something mystical in nature, it is my contention that Plato offers a more discursive or intellectual approach to an understanding of what enlightenment really is. In other words, I believe Plato is deliberately attempting to appeal to the intellect in grasping an inner spiritual experience. This seems to be his chief concern in many of the dialogues. It is the “hidden law governing what the thinker says” (Heidegger 9). It is not my claim, however, that every dialogue reflects this, but is true if the dialogues are taken as a whole.

What I mean by enlightenment, generally speaking, is a journey of the soul (self's) from bondage to direct knowledge and understanding of the true nature of self. I refer to self in the sense of the soul being experienced as the self. In other words, in terms of Plato's tripartite theory of soul, the self is the same as soul--the rational part that controls and corrects the balance between the appetite and the spirit. To experience the true nature of self, however, involves an integration of the tripartite soul (the many becoming the one) with the rational governing the other components. This process involves, as I will attempt to show, the soul's (self) journey through the stages of cognition (represented by Plato's Divided line analogy or Allegory of the Cave) from the world of images through the intelligible world and ultimately to the level of forms, or the Good. Enlightenment occurs once the soul has reached the Good. Cognitively speaking, however, this entails a unifying experience characterized by a blurring of subject-to-object relationships.

My focus in this paper, therefore, is to try to unveil this unity by addressing the following; 1) an explanation of what mystics say about it; 2) a demonstration of parallels between mystics and platonic ideas in the discussion of Book II- IV with emphasis on justice and the many becoming one; 3) a discussion of the Cave and Divided Line as they relate to achieving enlightenment; 4) a discussion of Book VIII-X with emphasis on Plato's return to the earlier theme of justice; and 5) Conclusion.

Enlightenment

I have already laid out, in the above context of Plato's *Republic*, that enlightenment is the journey of the soul from bondage to a deeper understanding of the nature of self. It entails the integration of the tripartite soul. However, to make the argument that Plato's central concern is enlightenment, we must define it more precisely and, in doing so, dispel misconceptions about its meaning. In Sanskrit the word for enlightenment is “bodhi,” which means "awakened.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary online, the following definitions are listed:

- 1.** The action of bringing someone to a state of greater knowledge, understanding, or insight; the state of being enlightened in this way.
- 2.** The state of spiritual insight or awareness which frees a person from the cycle of suffering and rebirth.

It is evident by looking at some of these definitions that they vary in meaning. It is common knowledge, for instance, that the word was used to refer to the eighteenth-century movement called the Enlightenment that promulgated self-autonomy and reason. However, of course, this is not the meaning to which I am referring here. There is also the meaning derived mainly from religious sources such as Buddhism or Hinduism and involves an awakening of some kind, which is closer to my meaning. For the sake of clarity, perhaps it is useful, at this point, to define precisely what I mean by enlightenment. I can think of no better definition of enlightenment than the one put forward by the renowned British scholar Evelyn Underhill. Although she uses the term mysticism, I will be using the word enlightenment as a synonym for mysticism. These words are often used interchangeably when referring to the same experience. Underhill's definition is as follows: "Mysticism is the art of union with reality. The mystic is a person who has attained union in greater or lesser degree; or who aims at or believes in such attainment" (Underhill 5). The attainment of union with reality is usually characterized as a mystical experience. Enlightenment, as I am using it in this paper, refers to union with reality. Some refer to that reality, however, by different names such as God, the Good, the ineffable, oneness, emptiness, the void or silence. Precisely what Plato believes this reality to be can be uncovered in the pages of the *Republic*.

It can be argued that the word mysticism (in the manner to which we are referring) was a term introduced to the West by Dionysius the Areopagite (aka - Pseudo-Dionysius) For centuries, he was regarded as a preeminent theologian of Christendom where "nearly every great mediaeval scholar made use of his writings, and his authority came to be almost final" (Dionysius 1). Dionysius was thought to be a disciple of St. Paul; however, later scholars found this to be false as it was clear that his writings were Neo-platonic in nature and could not have been written during the time of St Paul. They showed a much later date of fifth to early sixth century. The writings of Dionysius are mystical in nature and called attention to the transcendence of God, and his ineffable nature. Of the ineffable nature of God, he writes:

"It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it" (Dionysius 2).

The experience of the ineffable quality of God is demonstrated clearly in this text as being so transcendent that it cannot be spoken of for there are no words or thoughts to describe it. In other words, it is beyond all categories of thought or anything humanly conceivable. To name it is to profane it and bring it into perceptible human terms. Naming it God or even eternal makes it into something which is antithetical to its ineffable nature. One must remain silent.

This recalls Plato's *Parmenides* and his paradoxical claim of the one-over-many theory, in which he assumes a connection between the one and many. It is paradoxical because if something is one, it follows logically that it cannot have parts or be said to change or become a multiplicity, or else it loses its oneness. However, in this case, the paradox lies in naming something that is by its very nature nameless; but Dionysius seems to be anticipating the inclination to name it. Thus, the exhortation "There is no speaking of it, nor name, nor knowledge of it" (2).

Mystical Experiences

This is but one description of a mystical experience in terms of encountering the ineffable nature of God. However, as we shall see, there are many other mystical experiences that, although different from each other in some ways, are evidence of a universal phenomenon. My point here is to describe mystical experiences to bolster the point I want to make later in this work, namely, that Plato, too, was a mystic and his dialogues reflect this. It is clear that although mystics claim the experience to be ineffable or beyond description, they nevertheless attempt to describe them anyway.

Therefore, let us explore some descriptions of mystical experiences. In the interest of structure, let us start with Western mystics and then move on to Eastern mystics. However, before doing this, I will digress a bit and give a brief synopsis of the Allegory of the Cave and Divided Line analogy, as they will be used as references in many of the descriptions of mystical experiences we will talk about. Later, we will expound upon them.

The Divided Line is an analogy Plato uses to express degrees of reality and being. The line is divided into four unequal segments. The proportions of the lengths reflect the degree to which one is farther or nearer to reality. The two lower rungs of the line (if viewed vertically) are said to be at the level of images (*eikasia*) and opinion (*pistis*) where one is furthest away from grasping reality. The two higher rungs are said to be understanding (*dianonia*) and knowledge (*noesis*) where one has achieved, cognitively speaking, a higher grasp of reality. Indeed, at the level of knowledge ultimate reality is perceived. Plato refers to this ultimate reality as the Good. The main divisions between the lower and higher levels, however, are the visible world perceived by sense perception and the intelligible world perceived by the intellect (or mind's eye).

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato expounds on the degrees of reality and being. He does it by way of an allegory in which groups of prisoners have been chained deep in a cave since birth. They are so immobilized by the chains they are forced to look forward at a wall. Behind them, is a fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway, the length of which, objects such as animals, plants, and statues are paraded across, thus casting shadows onto the wall. Further behind them is the opening of the cave that leads outside. The prisoner compelled to leave the cave begins eventually to free himself and turn his head, for the first time, toward the light. The prisoners turn toward the light of the fire is the first step up the latter of cognitive perception to greater degrees of reality and being. At the level of fire, which cast shadows on the wall, equates to level of opinion of the Divided Line whereas the shadows that are cast on the

wall equate with images. Eventually, the prisoner makes his way outside the cave where he sees objects as they really are without images and shadows. This reflects the higher rungs of cognitive perception of understanding and knowledge. This level is Plato's ultimate goal in terms of encountering truth and reality.

These are brief synopses of the Divided line and the Allegory of the Cave to aid the reader in understanding some of the ideas related to degrees of cognitive perception. Therefore, let us return to our discussion of mystical experiences.

The Mystical tradition offers a vast well to draw from, but for the purposes of this paper I will discuss only a few. My intention is not to get into a comparative analysis of the whole of mystical literature, but only to draw out commonalities as necessary.

In terms of Western mysticism, a mystic worth mentioning is Plotinus (204-270 C.E.). He was born in Hellenistic Egypt but studied philosophy under Ammonius Saccus, a Neo-Platonist in Alexandria--the hub of education in the ancient world. He later became a scholar and taught in Rome. Neo-Platonists were essentially Platonists who tried to fuse the Christian doctrine with Platonic ideas like the Good. Plotinus' central idea is that the universe consists of a series of emanations stemming from a one. This one is free of multiplicity and undifferentiated until emanations flow from it. There is a descending order of emanations that ultimately lead to its fall into matter; and there is an ascending order that leads to a union with the one. Plotinus' ideas are reflected in *Enneads* which are a collection of his works put together by his student Porphyry (Plotinus Xlii). In it, he writes about a mystical vision of the one:

“But in the vision, that which sees is not reason but something greater than and prior to reason, something presupposed by reason, as is the object of vision. He who then sees himself when he sees will see himself as a simple being, will be united to himself as such, will feel himself become such. We ought not even to say that he will see, but that he will be that which he sees, if indeed it is possible any longer to distinguish seer and seen, and not boldly to affirm that the two are one. In this state, the seer does not see or distinguish or imagine two things; he becomes another, he ceases to be himself and to belong to himself. He belongs to Him and is One with Him, like two concentric circles; they are one when they coincide, and two only when they are separated. It is only in this sense that the soul is other. Therefore this vision is hard to describe. For how can one describe, as other than oneself, that which, when one saw it, seemed to be one with oneself?” (Armstrong 136).

I will offer some commentary on this passage since I think it will be relevant to our discussion later. “But in the vision, that which sees is not reason but something greater than and prior to reason, something presupposed by reason, as is the object of vision” (136). This passage seems to suggest that reason is useless in perceiving the vision. It follows that this is likely since, as we see further in the passage, he is referring to a vision of unity: “He belongs to Him and is One with Him, like two concentric circles; they are one when they coincide...” Reason, which usually involves a comparative judgment, meaning a comparison made relative to the objects you are measuring against, seems blunted in an undivided, or non-multiple, world. Why? Because there is nothing to compare--all is one. The seeing, thus, seems to result, not from reason but as the

passage suggests, from something “greater than and prior to reason.” What can this be? I would like to suggest here it is the mind’s-eye (noetic perspective) or, in terms of Plato’s Divided Line analogy, understanding at the intelligible level beyond sense-perception. “We ought not even to say that he will see, but that he will be that which he sees, if indeed it is possible any longer to distinguish seer and seen.” This passage seems to imply that seer and seen are one. In this respect, a vision may seem misleading as it presupposes a subject-to-object relationship--a seer (subject) who sees a vision (object). This point is the cause of much confusion and difficulty in understanding enlightenment experiences. This point is also key to understanding my thesis, as I will later attempt to show that Plato is attempting to achieve this blurring of subject-to-object vision through his dialogues. This involves the many becoming the one. What is interesting about Plotinus’ brand of mysticism is that, like Plato, his approach was more intellectual and discursive than religious, as the term religion is usually understood: that is, an approach that involves accepting doctrines or beliefs on faith.

Plotinus’ unifying experience created tensions among theistic religions. According to W. T. Stace (a scholar of mysticism of some renown), theistic religions believe that there is a “great gulf” between God and man, Creator and creature, which nothing can bridge (128). They are distinct substances. So for a man to claim to be one with God would be blasphemous. He points out that the propensity for Christian mystics to want to transcend duality and enter into union with God created problems between ecclesiastical authorities of the Roman Church. Many were accused of heresy. One such mystic was Meister Eckhart, who said “my eye and Gods eye are one and the same” and God and I are one.” (Blakney 97)

Meister Eckhart, a Christian theologian, was born in Germany (1260-1327). He was famous for composing sermons and using interesting terms to describe the mystical experience. For instance, he used the phrase “the birth of Christ in the soul” which seems to be a reference to a beginning stage of mystical development (Stace 140). A birth presupposes a maturing or gradation of some kind to higher stages of development--not unlike Plato’s Divided Line as we shall see later. He goes on to express how difficult this experience is to achieve:

“The birth, he says, is impossible without a complete withdrawal of the senses... and great force is required to repress all the agents of the soul and causes them to cease to function. It takes much strength to gather them all in, and without the strength it cannot be done” (Blakney 109).

The birth of the Christ within, the passages suggests, involves a withdrawal of the senses. Why? It is, cognitively speaking, when objects of thought that involve things derived from the senses are transcended. The repressing of agents presupposes a state of multiplicity that must be harmonized (or brought into a one). The term Christ seems to symbolize the mystical experience, which can only be achieved if senses “cease to function.” This seems to align nicely, as we shall see later, with Plato’s tripartite theory of the soul and its harmonizing.

In the mid 16th century, Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun from Spain, wrote in her autobiography the following passage about her mystical experience:

“the persons who must speak of it are those who know it, for it cannot be understood, still less described. As I was about to write of this...I was wondering what it is the soul does during that time [referring to mystical experience], when the Lord said these words to me: It dies to itself wholly, daughter in order that it may fix itself more and more upon me...It is no longer itself that lives but I” (Peers 119).

This clearly shows a unifying experience that is common to mystical experiences. The statement that “It is no longer itself... but I” demonstrates a union with God. This is one of the first instances in which we see the use of God rather than the term ineffable. The experience seems to be suggesting a merging of the soul with the godhead. Teresa of Avila was also known for hearing voices. However, they were regarded as an inner hearing rather than an audible one.

St John of the Cross, a contemporary of Teresa of Avila, was also part of the Carmelite order and Teresa's spiritual advisor. He similarly contends that in order to achieve a unifying experience with God that “the soul must be emptied of all these forms, figures, and images and it must remain in darkness in respect to these internal senses if it is to attain divine union” (Stace 185).

It is apparent that until the soul's “internal senses” are purged it cannot achieve union. This suggests a move, cognitively speaking, from the level of sense-perception to a cognitively higher perception similar to abstract thinking –or in a Kantian sense, the realm of *a priori*s: that is knowledge or concepts that are derived from intuitions rather than experience. Mathematical concepts are perfect examples of *a priori* knowledge. Geometry, for instance, involves spatial reasoning more than experience-based reasoning: in other words, reason based in intuition. This corresponds to Plato's intelligible world, as we shall see later.

Another western mystic of note is Jan van Ruysbroek. He was a Flemish mystic from Brussels, born in 1293. The story goes that because he was dissatisfied with being a Cathedral chaplain, he left Brussels to seek refuge in a hermitage on the outskirts of town. He devoted himself to “the inner life of the spirit” (Stace 158). Gradually, he developed a following and lived a contemplative life. Some of his expressions of mystical consciousness resemble Meister Eckhart's, like the Christ born within. He taught that to attain mystical union it is necessary to empty the mind of sensations, images, and thoughts (158). He wrote:

“such enlightened men are, with a free spirit, lifted above reason into a bare and imageless vision wherein lies the eternal indrawing summons of the divine unity; and with an imageless and bare understanding they...reach the summit of their spirits” (Wynschenck 185).

Rising above reason seems to be a central feature in mystical experiences. An “imageless vision” seems to be an inference to a cognitive step above sense-perception to Plato's world of intelligibles. And as the passage suggests, the “imageless vision” is the point at which the spirit is summoned or drawn to the divine unity. This recalls Plato's dialectic method which, as a stepping stone, leads to a higher cognitive perception of the forms or the Good.

“I mean that which reason itself grasps by the power of the dialectic. It does not consider these hypotheses as first principles but truly as hypotheses--but as stepping-stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the unhypothetical first principal of everything” (511b).

Islamic mysticism which I shall group with the Western mysticism, is called Sufism. It is regarded as the esoteric side of Islam. The name Sufi means wool which some say was a nickname for the early Muslim mystics who wore wool clothing. Sufism flourished in Arab and Persian countries (Stace 201). Precisely when and where it originated from is not known, only that it probably started around the ninth century C.E. (201). In Turkey, Sufis were known for their whirling, which led to a higher unified state.

Early Sufi mystics were panentheistic, believing creation and creator were one. However, this view creates tension with some orthodox Muslims, who held ideas similar to the Christian orthodox. They think that any identification of being one with God is blasphemous. For instance, a Sufi mystic, Al Hallaj (922 C.E.), once claimed that he was one with God and was later crucified in Bagdad (Stace 202). There is another great Sufi worth mentioning. His name is Al Ghazali (1058–1111). However, there is not enough to go on to determine if he achieved a mystical experience. He was more a scholar of philosophy, science and theology who wrote many seminal works. He was said to be the Islamic Thomas Aquinas of his day. It is worth noting, however, that “his position was wholly sympathetic to the mystic claim to immediate experience of God, and one of his central aims was to reconcile Sufism and Islam orthodoxy” (Stace 203). However, a mystic more of the variety we are seeking is Abu Yazid (804-874) (Brown 141). He was a Persian mystic from Bastam, Iran, who was one of the first Sufi's to speak about the mystical experience in terms of a unitive experience as the following passage illustrates:

"Creatures are subject to changing 'states,' but the gnostic has no 'state,' because his vestiges are effaced and his essence annihilated by the essence of another, and his traces are lost in another's traces” (Nicholson 18).

Once again, this seems to be another unification process, as essence dissolves into another essence. Essence annihilation and the resulting sense of oneness are key to understanding the nature of the mystical experience. The annihilation occurs once subject and object are merged.

Jalal a-Din Rumi, who lived in the 13th century, is probably one of the better celebrated Sufis. He was and still is considered a poet who expressed his poetry in mystical terms. His most famous poem is called the Mathnawi, in which he writes about the vision of one by using light as an analogy for God:

“The lamps are different; but the light is the same. It comes from beyond... ..fix your gaze upon the light and you are delivered from dualism inherent in the finite body” (Nicholson 166).

The urge to fix one's gaze on the light seems to be inviting a deeper understanding of the lamp, much deeper than what sense-perception can offer, apparently. The light is clearly eternal in nature, but the lamp which embodies the light and differs in appearance, suggests change.

Change, as we will see in Plato's dialogues, is associated with sense- perception, or the world of becoming whereas things that are immutable or eternal belong to the world of being. The lamp, therefore, can be seen as a metaphor for the body (becoming) and the light, the soul (being). The gazing at the light which is eternal, thus results in the transcendence of dualism. We have yet another unifying experience.

Of the two eastern mystical traditions, Confucianism and Taoism, the latter seems more mystically oriented and thus more relevant to our survey. Confucius seems to be more known for what can be described as codes of conduct. Although his writings are filled with wise sayings and may reflect an enlightened consciousness, like Al Ghazali, there is not enough to go on to prove it conclusively.

Taoism developed out of a book *Tao Ching*, written by Lao-Tzu (570 B.C.E.). The word Tao literally means the way. The meaning of way is best described in poem no. 4 in the Tao. The way, it says, "is a void which is never filled but out of which all things come" (Stace 103). In other words, it is the source of everything. The word void seems paradoxical, however. If it is a void how can anything come of it? Suzuki, renowned Zen Buddhist scholar, offers an explanation. "The void," he says, "is a reservoir of infinite possibilities and not just mere emptiness. Differentiating itself and yet remaining itself undifferentiated...we may say that it is a creation out of nothing" (Stace103). The paradox is not an uncommon one. Rather, it seems to be a universally perplexing to all metaphysicians who grapple with first causes and how something comes out of nothing. The *Tao Ching*, however, seems to describe a method for achieving enlightenment in poem no. 48:

"Touch ultimate emptiness, Hold steady and still. All things work together: I have watched them reverting, And have seen how they flourish And return again, each to his roots. This, I say, is the stillness: A retreat to one's roots; Or better yet, return To the will of God, Which is, I say, to constancy. The knowledge of constancy call enlightenment and say That not to know it Is blindness that works evil. But when you know What eternally is so, You have stature. And stature means righteousness. And righteousness is kingly And kingliness divine And divinity is the Way Which is final. Then, though you die, You shall not perish" (Blakney 53-101).

Touching ultimate emptiness can be viewed as transcending duality, where multiplicity is non-existent. The turning to the roots seems to be a method for getting there and recalls the prisoner of Plato's Allegory of the Cave turning in the direction of the light. It also seems clear that it is a reference to essence or being. Knowing what is "eternally so" which is equated with righteousness and kingliness leads to not perishing, but smacks of immortality--a belief espoused in the dialogues.

Although it can be argued that Dionysius disseminated many of the ideas regarding mystical experiences, the same can be said of Hinduism and Buddhism, though the experience is usually referred to as Enlightenment. Indeed, the sense in which mysticism is understood today stems from them.

The Hindu tradition is rich with mystical experiences. In fact, according to W.T. Stace, the mysticism reflected in the Upanishads is remarkably similar to the more contemporary mysticism of Sri Aurobindo, despite the fact that they are separated by a three thousand year span. Stace argues that this is not surprising given that “mystical consciousness is the same in all ages” (49). Most of what we know about Hindu mysticism comes from the Upanishads. The Upanishads are said to be the work of anonymous Indian forest dwellers who lived between three thousand and twenty-five hundred years ago (20). “They are among the oldest records of mysticism in the world” and are comprised of multiple texts like the Mandukya Brihadaranyaka, Jaiminiya and Aitareya, to name a few. From the Mandukya we get the following description of the mystical experience: “It is beyond the senses, beyond the unitary consciousnesses, wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated” (20). Likewise, from the Upanishads there is another passage which describes the value of self reflection: “The self, Maitreyi, is to be known. Hear about it, reflect upon it, and meditate upon it. By knowing the self, my beloved, through hearing, reflection, and meditation, one comes to know all things” (Manchester 68-69).

In these two passages, we find the familiar down playing of the senses and multiplicity. But there is also the urging of self-reflection and meditation, which leads one to know all things. Could there be a connection between self-reflection and enlightenment? There clearly is. The self seems to be the doorway to uncovering the truth. It is the lens through which the world is viewed or perceived. We will explore the idea of self later.

Sri Aurobindo, as mentioned earlier, is a more contemporary Hindu mystic, born in India in 1872 and educated at Cambridge, England. He later became a professor of English literature. Although his writings appear to be influenced by the Upanishads, they were not reproductions of the ancient texts (Stace 49). Stace cautions against this and argues that Hindu mystics are by nature spiritually inclined, not “copyist.” Sri Aurobindo wrote many books, but his mystical writings are captured in “The Life of the Devine,” in which he writes about a mystical experience:

“At the gates of the Transcendent stands that mere and perfect spirit described in the Upanishads, luminous, pure sustaining the world..., without flaw of duality, without scar of division, unique, identical, free from all appearance of relation and multiplicity, the pure Self...the inactive Brahman, the transcendent Silence. And the mind when it passes those gates suddenly...receives a sense of the unreality of the world and the sole reality of the Silence which is one of the most powerful and convincing experiences of which the human mind is capable” (Aurobindo 1-6).

The phrase “free from all appearance of relation and multiplicity” seems to reference a reality beyond appearance (sense-perception) which is the “sole reality of the silence.” This sounds like a unifying experience but is characterized as silence. The ineffable quality recalls Dionysius’ description of the ineffable quality of God; in this sense, it is so transcendent as to be silent. “Pure self” suggests an awareness without an object or a self that does not say “I.” Saying “I” introduces dualism or multiplicity. In other words, it creates the subject-to-object relationship. Awareness without identification with I is “pure self.” The discovery of the “pure self,” as the most profound experience a human mind can experience, is a common sentiment among mystics. There is no doubt that the experience is life-altering.

With regard to Buddhism, when recounting the story of the Buddha, there is the obligatory disclaimer: Little is known about him. Much of what we do know is from second-hand sources. His name was Siddhartha Gautama, (one who has achieved his goal). He was an Indian prince born circa 550 B.C.E. and as the story goes he lived a sheltered life behind the walls of his father's palace wanting for nothing. The main reason he was sheltered was due to a prophecy that one day he would either become a great king or a great holy man. Wanting an heir, his father did everything in his power to ensure his son would be king including preventing him from leaving the palace walls. He was determined to do anything to prevent his arousal to the holy life. However, Siddhartha felt a stirring within and wanted to see what lay beyond the walls. His father reluctantly agreed and allowed him to leave. While outside the walls, he encountered an "old man, a diseased man, and a decaying corpse" and was puzzled. His charioteer, Channa, explained to him that everyone will grow old one day, get sick and die. Profoundly moved by the suffering and misery, he abandoned his sheltered life including his beautiful wife and child, to join a monastic sect in hopes that they would provide answers on how to end suffering. India at the time had monastic schools or sects that taught their own methods to achieve enlightenment. Siddhartha practiced with most of them and even became adept at various meditative and extreme ascetic practices but failed to reach his goal of finding a solution for ending suffering.

Disillusioned with the schools and what he had learned up to that point, he resolved to sit under a bodhi tree: come rain or shine, or death, he would remain there until he achieved enlightenment. On the seventh day, so the legend goes, he reached enlightenment. Thereafter he was known as the Buddha or the "awakened" (Laumakis 12). To what did he awaken? Scholars have often debated about what awakening really means. But the general consensus seems to be (even though there is no direct description from the Buddha himself), that he achieved an "ineffable transcendental state" or "experience of direct and intuitive understanding of the ultimate nature of phenomena" (Stace 68). His ideas are captured in the Pali Canon (Laumakis 47). They were written 100 years after his death and are considered the oldest records reflecting what the Buddha actually taught.

The following passage is a quote often cited and found in the Pali Canon:

"There is, monks, that plane where there is neither extension, nor motion, nor the plane of infinite ether.... nor that of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, neither this world nor another, neither the moon nor the sun. Here, monks, I say that there is no coming or going or remaining or deceasing or uprising, for this is itself without support, without continuance in samsara, without mental object - this is itself the end of suffering. There is, monks, an unborn, not become, unmade, uncompounded, and were it not, monks, for this unborn, not become, not made, uncompounded, no escape could be shown here for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded. But because there is, monks, an unborn, not become, unmade, uncompounded, therefore an escape can be shown, for what is born, has become, is made, is compounded" (Conze 94-95).

This passage is admittedly confusing. The Buddha seems to suggest, however, that there is a plane wherein it is possible by means of arriving at a state of "non-perception...without mental object" -- to result in ending suffering. Cognitively this appears to imply a blurring of subject-to-object relationship- a unifying or dissolving into a one. This explains paradoxical statements like

“neither-perception-nor-non-perception or neither this world nor another.” In a state of unity nothing can be said about it or else the said thing renders it no longer a one. The ineffable quality is part and parcel of a sense of oneness.

As an aside, the peculiar thing about Buddha, unlike other mystics we have seen, is that he repudiated any idea of a supreme being, self or soul. The reason for this seems to be that because his sole aim was to end suffering, he did not concern himself with issues like first causes or a supreme being. In a sense, he was a pragmatist and cared only about the matter at hand and not what could not be proven. The notion of self, or soul, is a bit confusing. On the one hand, he believed there was no I or self that persisted through time, yet he believed in reincarnation. The only way of getting around this paradox is if we consider that what he intended was to end immortality by achieving nirvana (a blowing out) which extinguishes self. That way, self disappears. In this light, it can be understood what he meant by “no I.” The issue then appears to be a matter of semantics.

When it comes to demonstrating that all mystical experiences are similar, I defer to W.T. Stace's analysis, which acknowledges differences in mystical experiences reported by different cultures, or different ages, but nevertheless sees a number of common characteristics (14). He believes, as do I, the differences are very superficial. However, the chief feature which he argues is common to all mystical experiences involves an “apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness, a one to which neither sense nor reason can penetrate.” He characterizes experiences that lack this central feature as borderline experiences (14).

Moreover, according to the W. T. Stace, these experiences can further be divided into seven features: (1) a unifying vision and perception of the One; (2) the apprehension of the One as an inner life; (3) and an objective and true sense of reality; (4) feelings of satisfaction, joy, and bliss; (5) a religious element that is a feeling of the holy and sacred; (6) a paradoxical feeling; and (7) and inexpressible feelings. (131).

Stace also divides the experiences into two categories: introversion mysticism, meaning an experience characterized as absolute undifferentiated and distinctive changeless unity, in which all multiplicity has been obliterated (35), and extroversion mysticism, an experience that involves making use of sense-perception and coming to see objects in nature “transfigured in such a manner that the unity shines through them” (15). The distinction is that the former experience entails going inward to have a mystical experience whereas the latter involves one looking outward. Stace believes the extroversion to be inferior to the introversion experience. The introversion is the full experience.

Stace associated introversion mystics with Christian mystics (i.e., Eckhart and Ruysbroeck) and almost all Hindu and Buddhist mystics. He believes the experiences are “wholly unknown to, and independent of one another” (Stace 36). In other words, they are universal experiences that occur in all cultures and have been occurring from time immemorial. This, incidentally, adds more credibility to my thesis that Plato was also a mystic. One need only look for some of the features common to the experience to uncover the truth of this fact.

However, much of the criticism of mysticism is that it is seen as a purely subjective experience that can tell us little about the outside world. Although the mystics have given us descriptions of their mystical experiences, the nature of the experience makes it inherently at odds with language, as language is made of conceptualizations. As we have seen, the tendency of mystics is to refer to the experience as ineffable. This presents a problem: "to say that X is ineffable is to say something about X, which contravenes ineffability" (Plantinga 23-25). Whether the experience is described as ineffable, silence or God, it appears to be only a matter of semantics. Mystical descriptions are often confusing and paradoxical. Frequently myths and metaphors are often used to explain the experience. Barker illustrates the function of myths or metaphors in the following passage:

"Perhaps, the, myths are neither true nor false, but distanced from reality by being images of what is real and what is true. They are, that is, fashioned to suit the inadequacies of belief, the state of mind of people enmeshed in the sensible world, susceptible to the persuasive words of poets and orators, who observe what is likely at the expense of what is true" (Barker 48).

In other words, myths are designed to appeal to mindsets that are of the lower rung of cognitive perception. The truth is framed in images to make it more amenable or understandable. However, if the mystical experience could be reduced to only few chief features that characterized the experience the best, I would propose just two: 1) a sense of unity, which transcends sense-perception and reason, and 2) a powerful and life-altering experience.

Let us conclude, then, what enlightenment is. It is a unifying experience in which the mystic has pure awareness and is free of content or subject-object relationships. The pure consciousness is so pure there is no other content other than itself. And since it has no content, it is described as ineffable, as a one, God or emptiness. To use an analogy to help illustrate the point, picture an eyeball staring into a mirror. In gazing at the mirror, the eye will see an image of itself. Now let us suppose that the eye decides it wants to see itself. How will it do this? We know the image in the mirror is just a reflection and not the eye itself. Can the eye turn around and see itself? It is obvious it cannot. The first step in the eye wanting to see itself is the realization that the image in the mirror is a reflection (image) and not the eye. The eye will then become self-aware. In other words, its gaze will no longer be directed toward the image but inwardly at itself. This is analogous to a subject-to-object merging. What is occurring, without the metaphor, is that the self is reflecting on itself. The self, which usually maintains a self-conceptualization (equated with the image in the mirror), no longer identifies itself with it but rests in pure awareness. Another analogy would be to imagine a screen and projector. The images projected onto the screen are analogous to the mirror and the screen to the eye (or self). Identifying with screen and not projections is another analogy for subject-to-object merging. It is important to note that this process always involves a turn inward. This is evident in Socrates' call to "Know thyself!" (Charmides 164d-165a). Self-inquiry, therefore, into the nature of self is part and parcel of any sincere request for what is real.

To begin the process of drawing parallels with what has already been said about enlightenment and Plato's *Republic*, let us begin by making some preliminary points.

I argue that the dialogues of the *Republic* demonstrate precisely how to achieve enlightenment. Its aim, I believe, is to direct the soul nearer to the truth. This involves a progression up the steps of cognitive perceptions of image, belief, and understanding to ultimate reality, or the Good. I contend that the process of education, which the *Republic* is supposedly about, is a way of preparing the conditions to achieve enlightenment--a converting of the tripartite soul from many into one. Part of the long discourse on justice and how it relates to the tripartite theory of the soul, and the state, is meant to show how the soul of many becomes the one. Or, as Dorter suggests, "the narrative displays a progressive ascent through opposition in the direction of greater inclusiveness, which is perhaps intended as a literary image of the noetic dialectic"(Dorter 4). Noetic (Greek- meaning insight) means intuitive understanding which suggests a deeper cognitive perception. In the noetic sense, the dialectic as Doeter refers to it, is the means by which the soul can rise to level of the Good. Moreover, the Cave and Divided Line, I believe, are a more focused and discursive attempt at explaining what enlightenment is. Plato does this by showing the cognitive progression from ordinary consciousness to enlightenment. For instance, the categories of the Divided Line such as image, belief, understanding and knowledge are the stages in the development of enlightenment. Knowledge then corresponds to the merging of subject-to-object.

Plato's Rules

When reading the dialogues, Plato follows a few rules, which are good to keep in mind. These, I suggest, will be clues in support of my thesis that Plato's sole aim is to bring the soul nearer to the truth or enlightenment (which is a unifying experience), and that Plato himself is a mystic. The first rule: He never refers to the visible world or world of sense-perception, except through metaphor; his only concern is the Good and the noetic thought (mathematical thinking) that impels the thinker (soul) to view the Good itself. Second, he never refers to a multiplicity of parts, only the whole or pure oneness. It is also important to note that the Books of the *Republic* are written in dialogue form in which Socrates and at least one other person are engaged in a fictitious conversation. Essentially, Plato uses Socrates as his mouthpiece to espouse his own ideas.

In all the ensuing dialogues where Socrates is seen as constantly refuting ideas put forward by his interlocutors, who demonstrate multiple points of view (world of opinion or belief), Socrates always looks for a unity, a oneness. This is referred to as the elenchus (dialectic), which is a form of cross-examination where a statement is made and series of questions are then asked about the statement and an effort is made to determine if the statement is true. After the cross-examination, however, the original statement turns out to be false. Another series of questions are then asked to probe the inconsistencies or wrong assumptions of the original statement until the truth is made self-evident. In this respect, Socrates seemed to be a walking refutation. His certainty of the refutation gives the feeling that he was privy to knowledge that others were unaware of. However, his position was always "I know that I know nothing" (Apology 21d). This is demonstrated in a passage in the Charmides:

"You treat me as if I professed to know the matters I ask about, and as if I might agree with you if I wished to. But that is not so. On the contrary, I inquire into the proposition

along with you because I do not know. I will tell you whether I agree or not when I have examined it” (165B).

This is a method used by Plato (through the character of Socrates) mainly throughout Book I. More broadly, the dialectic is used to refer to thinking directed away from thoughts derived from sense-perception to the truth. I want to suggest here that Plato's method, which has the uncanny ability of arriving at the truth, is symptomatic of a mystical consciousness. It is a mindset that draws everything into a oneness. However, to prove this will require another thesis. The difficulty will lie in cross-examining the writings of other mystics in an effort to detect a drawing of everything into oneness. The difficulty will be compounded when sorting through the diverse ways of articulating the mystical experience and then attempting to find a common thread. So let us continue with our present course.

I have already given a brief overview of mystical experiences. Reference to these accounts will show how closely these experiences correspond to Plato's Divided Line analogy or Allegory of the Cave in terms of the cognitive progressions through images, belief, understanding and knowledge. However, some discussion will be required here to frame the context in which the Divided Line and Cave are used. Therefore, I will discuss the books in the *Republic* that precede these analogies and attempt to illustrate the points mentioned previously. What should be noted, however, in the discussion of the dialogues, is Plato's constant interest in the whole and not parts. This is an important key in understanding the mystical nature of his writings. The reason for this, as we shall see, is because parts belong to lower cognitive levels--the realm of the opinion and multiplicity. Seeing things as a whole or drawing everything into a unity is an indication of a higher cognitive level. So, with this in mind, let us begin with Book I.

Book I

Book I begins with an imaginary dialogue between Socrates and Cephalus, a rich elderly man. Socrates asks, “Is life harder toward the end, or what report do you give of it?” (328b) He explains that relative to other men, “he lives in justice and holiness”(331). A discussion about what justice is ensues. Cephalus suggests it is to “tell the truth and pay what you owe”(331). Socrates points out a contradiction in his argument by using an example of giving a weapon (what is owed) to a madman. “It would prove to be an unjust act, if the mad man decided to use it to harm others (331c). Cephalus excuses himself before defending his point and his son, Polemarchus, weighs in and suggests that justice is to help friends and harm enemies (332e-333e). Socrates finds inconsistencies that result in finding the just man useless in peacetime and concluding that justice cannot be used to harm because it is antithetical to the nature of justice. He makes the point by giving a series of examples. For example, he asks if “the musician by his art can make men unmusical, to which Polemarchus replies, “Certainly not.” So it follows if “just is the good,” then... “to injure a friend or any one else is not the act of a just man, but of the opposite” (334b). This then leads to Thrasymachus' assertion that “justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger” (335-b-d). In other words, “right is might and justice an invention of the strong, who have been shrewd enough to lay down the rules of the game of life in their own

interest – for the weaker and less wise to obey” (Urwick 45). Socrates immediately sees a discrepancy in this argument.

“Socrates: Let me first understand you...justice, as you say, is the interest of the stronger. What, Thrasymachus, is the meaning of this? You cannot mean to say that because Polydamas, the pancratiast, is stronger than we are, and finds the eating of beef conducive to his bodily strength, that to eat beef is therefore equally for our good who are weaker than he is, and right and just for us?” (338c).

“Thrasymachus replies: “That’s abominable of you sir, Socrates, you take the words in the sense which is most damaging to the argument.”

“Not at all, my good sir, Socrates says; I am trying to understand them; and I wish that you would be a little clearer” (338c).

The confusion that often arises after Socrates has pointed out inconsistencies in the assertions of the interlocutor is called *aporia* (impasse or confusion.) This is part of the pattern of his dialectic method. For the interlocutor, this was usually unnerving. However, for Socrates it was the point at which one embarked on a more substantive search for the truth.

Thrasymachus clarifies his point by equating the stronger with the government. Socrates then asks if governments are “liable to err”(339c). Thrasymachus answers in the affirmative. Socrates argues then that because the rulers are fallible and could make laws that are not in their interest, it follows that rulers do not always act in their own interest. Moreover, he draws a parallel between practitioners of justice and practitioners of medicine. He argues that practitioners of medicine consider the interests of the body, not medicine. He concludes, therefore, that justice is for the benefit of the ruled, not the ruler himself (342-343).

Thrasymachus counters with the shepherd and sheep analogy. The shepherd (equated with the rulers) who fatten or tend the sheep, are doing it to serve their own interest. Since this creates conditions where the ruler’s interests are out of sync with the interest of their subjects, the subjects have no choice but to behave unjustly to pursue their own interest. It is this kind of “injustice,” he says, “in which the criminal is the happiest of men, and the sufferers or those who refuse to do injustice are the most miserable ...” (344). In other words, the unjust person is happier than the just one. Being unjust, for Thrasymachus, then becomes virtuous and just, its opposite.

Socrates addresses what he perceives as a fundamental misuse of the word justice. He does this by establishing the premise that arts (like justice) are “different, by reason of their each having a separate function” (352). For example, the purpose of eyes is to see and the function of ears is to hear, “and although we can prune a vine with any kind of knife we can best do so with a pruning knife” (Dorter 48; Republic 352-353). However, a thing can only perform its function, according to Socrates, if it has virtue (or excellence). Blindness is a case in which the virtue of eyes is lacking. Socrates then argues that the function of the soul is living, and since living poorly does not equate well with the good or virtuous aspect of the soul, it must be a vice or injustice. The soul’s virtue is justice, which enables living well (353e). The conclusion is that justice can only

be said to perform its function, living a good life. Therefore living unjustly is antithetical to the soul's virtue.

Eventually Plato gets Thrasymachus to revise his idea and agree that the just are “the wise and good and the unjust evil and ignorant” (350c). However, later he will insist that Socrates elaborate further on why this is so. What can we conclude from this? Since Plato is concerned with the deeper nature of justice (the form), he seems to be purposefully drawing attention to the more crude conceptions of justice to use them as examples of what not to think. Moreover, he seems to be laying down the groundwork for a more sophisticated, in depth, inquiry into the nature of justice.

(References are listed at the end of Part II)