

# The Republic: the Simile of the Cave

**There are roughly four stages:**

- 1** The chained prisoners, who can only see the shadows cast on the wall by images carried before a fire within the cave (vi. 514a-515c);
- 2** The same prisoners unchained, who are forced to look in the opposite direction at the images themselves (515c-e);
- 3** The same prisoners dragged outside the cave, who find it easier to look at shadows and reflections (515e-516a);
- 4** The same prisoners outside the cave, who can now look at the heavenly bodies, and eventually the sun itself (516a-c).

These invite at least two kinds of interpretation, of which the first, A, is metaphysical:

- A1** Men who go by the appearances, by how things appear to the senses (e.g., sight and hearing);
- A2** Men who have learnt to correct the appearances by the use of measurement and calculation (cf. x. 602c-603a);
- A3** Men who investigate numbers and geometrical figures through the use of diagrams (cf. 510b-511b);
- A4** Men who investigate the Forms, and ultimately the Form of Goodness, with dialectic.

A second kind of interpretation, B, is moral:

- B1** Men who live their lives by conventional moral rules;
- B2** Men who think for themselves in concrete situations;

**B3** Men who use their concrete judgements to try to answer questions like  
`What is justice?';

**B4** Men who investigate the Forms of Justice, Self-discipline, and ultimately  
Goodness, with dialectic.

There are two main polarities in the imagery of the cave: darkness and light; up and down. There are two paradoxical features: the prisoners have to be released, but also compelled; they see less clearly those things that are clearer. There is a quiet contrast between the manipulators of the puppets (514b9-c1), who cast shadows, and educators (515c6, d1-2, e1, e6-7), who force the prisoners to see reality for themselves.