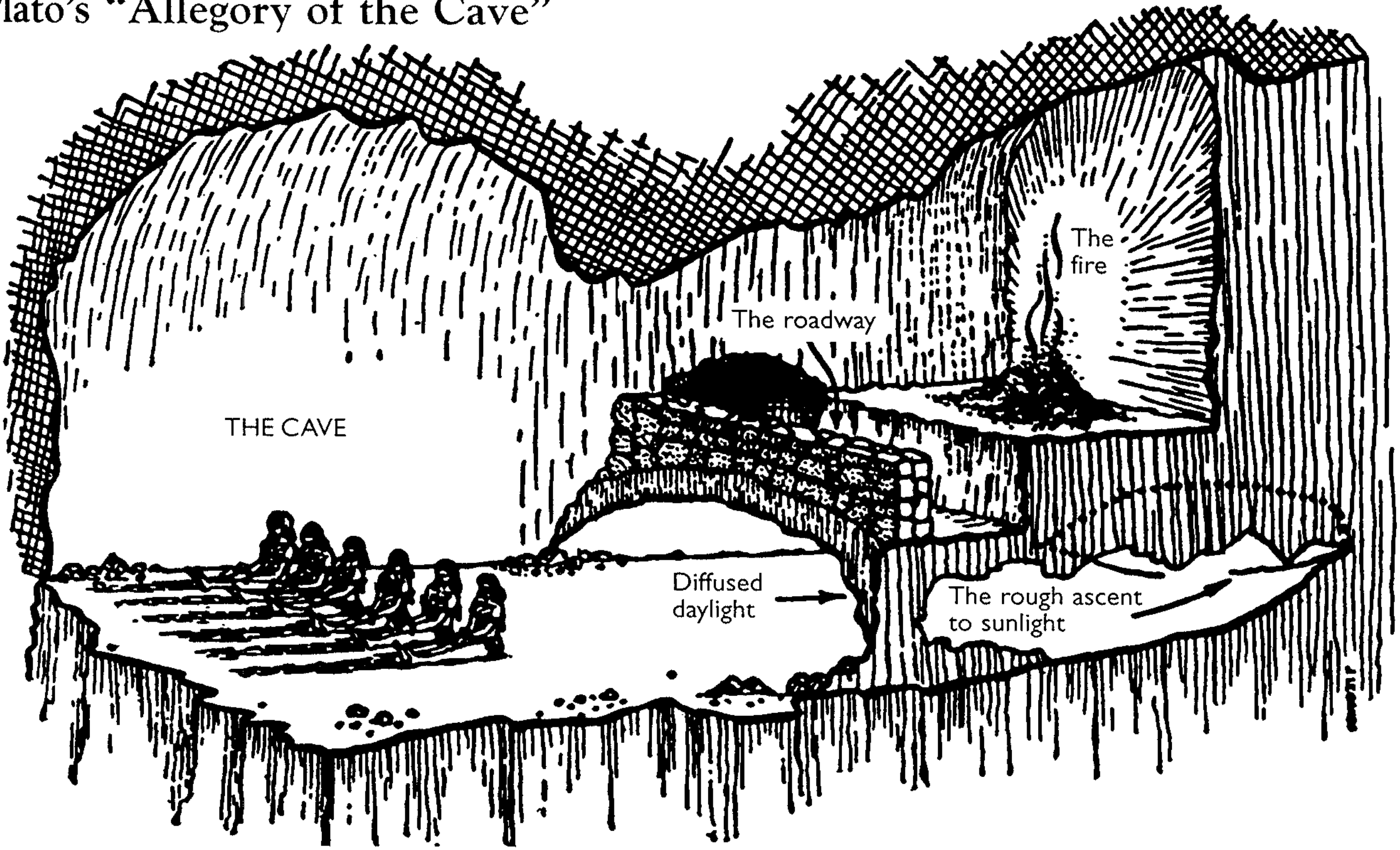
Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"



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Plato

REPUBLIC VII

Book VII begins with another unforgettable image, the allegory of the Cave, which fits together with the Sun and Line (517b), and which illustrates the effects of education on the soul (514a). It leads to a brief but important discussion of education (518b–519b), in which Socrates makes it clear that the aim of education is to turn the soul around by changing its desires.

The next topic is the education of the philosopher-kings. (1) Their initial education is in music and poetry, physical training, and elementary mathematics (535a–537b). (2) This is followed by two or three years of compulsory physical training, rather like the military service that some countries still have (537b–c). (3) Those who are most successful in these studies next receive ten years of education in mathematical science (537c–d, 522c–531d). (4) Those who are again most successful receive five years of training in dialectic (537d–540a, 531e–535a). (5) Those who are still most successful receive fifteen years of practical political training (539e–540a). Finally, (6) those who are also successful in practical politics are "compelled to lift up the radiant light of their souls" to the good itself (540a) and are equipped to be philosopher-kings.

The third city, which contains philosopher-kings and the educational institutions necessary to produce them, constitutes the final stage in Plato's construction of his ideal city (535a–536d, 543c–544a).

Next, I said, compare the effect of education and of the lack of it on our
514 nature to an experience like this: Imagine human beings living in an under-
ground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both
open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since
childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able
to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turn-
ing their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and
b behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path
stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low
wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they
show their puppets.

I'm imagining it.

Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all
kinds of artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other ani-

[Socrates/Glaucon]

mals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you'd expect, c
some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent. 515

It's a strange image you're describing, and strange prisoners.

They're like us. Do you suppose, first of all, that these prisoners see
anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire
casts on the wall in front of them?

How could they, if they have to keep their heads motionless through-
out life? b

What about the things being carried along the wall? Isn't the same true
of them?

Of course.

And if they could talk to one another, don't you think they'd suppose
that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before
them?

They'd have to.

And what if their prison also had an echo from the wall facing them?
Don't you think they'd believe that the shadows passing in front of
them were talking whenever one of the carriers passing along the wall was
doing so?

I certainly do.

Then the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing c
other than the shadows of those artifacts.

They must surely believe that.

Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their
ignorance would naturally be like. When one of them was freed and sud-
denly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the
light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose
shadows he'd seen before. What do you think he'd say, if we told him that d
what he'd seen before was inconsequential, but that now—because he is a
bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are
more—he sees more correctly? Or, to put it another way, if we pointed to
each of the things passing by, asked him what each of them is, and com-
pelled him to answer, don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe
that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being
shown?

Much truer.

And if someone compelled him to look at the light itself, wouldn't
his eyes hurt, and wouldn't he turn around and flee towards the things he's e
able to see, believing that they're really clearer than the ones he's being
shown?

He would.

And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough,
steep path, and didn't let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight,
wouldn't he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? And when he

[Socrates/Glaucon]

516 came into the light, with the sun filling his eyes, wouldn't he be unable to see a single one of the things now said to be true?

He would be unable to see them, at least at first.

I suppose, then, that he'd need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above. At first, he'd see shadows most easily, then images of men and other things in water, then the things themselves. Of these, he'd be able to study the things in the sky and the sky itself more easily at night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than during
b the day, looking at the sun and the light of the sun.

Of course.

Finally, I suppose, he'd be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place, and be able to study it.

Necessarily so.

And at this point he would infer and conclude that the sun provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in
c some way the cause of all the things that he used to see.

It's clear that would be his next step.

What about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, his fellow prisoners, and what passed for wisdom there? Don't you think that he'd count himself happy for the change and pity the others?

Certainly.

And if there had been any honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by and who best remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which
d simultaneously, and who could thus best divine the future, do you think that our man would desire these rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power? Instead, wouldn't he feel, with Homer, that he'd much prefer to "work the earth as a serf to another, one without possessions,"[1] and go through any sufferings, rather than share their opinions and live as they do?

e I suppose he would rather suffer anything than live like that.

Consider this too. If this man went down into the cave again and sat down in his same seat, wouldn't his eyes—coming suddenly out of the sun like that—be filled with darkness?

They certainly would.

And before his eyes had recovered—and the adjustment would not be quick—while his vision was still dim, if he had to compete again with the
517 perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, wouldn't he invite ridicule? Wouldn't it be said of him that he'd returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and that it isn't worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And, as for anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?

1. *Odyssey* 11.489–90. The shade of the dead Achilles speaks these words to Odysseus, who is visiting Hades.

[Socrates/Glaucon]

They certainly would.

This whole image, Glaucon, must be fitted together with what we said b
before. The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it's true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it: In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source c
in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.

I have the same thought, at least as far as I'm able.

Come, then, share with me this thought also: It isn't surprising that the ones who get to this point are unwilling to occupy themselves with human affairs and that their souls are always pressing upwards, eager to spend their time above, for, after all, this is surely what we'd expect, if indeed things fit the image I described before. d

It is.

What about what happens when someone turns from divine study to the evils of human life? Do you think it's surprising, since his sight is still dim, and he hasn't yet become accustomed to the darkness around him, that he behaves awkwardly and appears completely ridiculous if he's compelled, either in the courts or elsewhere, to contend about the shadows of justice or the statues of which they are the shadows and to dispute about the way these things are understood by people who have never seen justice itself? e

That's not surprising at all.

No, it isn't. But anyone with any understanding would remember that the 518
eyes may be confused in two ways and from two causes, namely, when they've come from the light into the darkness *and* when they've come from the darkness into the light. Realizing that the same applies to the soul, when someone sees a soul disturbed and unable to see something, he won't laugh mindlessly, but he'll take into consideration whether it has come from a brighter life and is dimmed through not having yet become accustomed to the dark or whether it has come from greater ignorance into greater light and is dazzled by the increased brilliance. Then he'll declare the first soul happy in its experience and life, and he'll pity the latter—but even if he chose to make fun of it, at least he'd be less ridiculous than if he laughed at b
a soul that has come from the light above.

What you say is very reasonable.

If that's true, then here's what we must think about these matters: Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes. c

[Glaucon/Socrates]

They do say that.
But our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to
learn is present in everyone's soul and that the instrument with which each
learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light
without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around
from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until
d it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the
one we call the good. Isn't that right?
Yes.
Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this
turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be
made to do it. It isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education
takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or
looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.
So it seems.
Now, it looks as though the other so-called virtues of the soul are akin to
those of the body, for they really aren't there beforehand but are added
e later by habit and practice. However, the virtue of reason seems to belong
above all to something more divine, which never loses its power but is
either useful and beneficial or useless and harmful, depending on the way
519 it is turned. Or have you never noticed this about people who are said to be
vicious but clever, how keen the vision of their little souls is and how
sharply it distinguishes the things it is turned towards? This shows that its
sight isn't inferior but rather is forced to serve evil ends, so that the sharper
it sees, the more evil it accomplishes.
Absolutely.
However, if a nature of this sort had been hammered at from childhood
and freed from the bonds of kinship with becoming, which have been
fastened to it by feasting, greed, and other such pleasures and which, like
b leaden weights, pull its vision downwards—if, being rid of these, it turned
to look at true things, then I say that the same soul of the same person
would see these most sharply, just as it now does the things it is presently
turned towards.
Probably so.
And what about the uneducated who have no experience of truth? Isn't it
likely—indeed, doesn't it follow necessarily from what was said before—
that they will never adequately govern a city? But neither would those
who've been allowed to spend their whole lives being educated. The former
c would fail because they don't have a single goal at which all their actions,
public and private, inevitably aim; the latter would fail because they'd
refuse to act, thinking that they had settled while still alive in the faraway
Isles of the Blessed.[2]

2. A place where good people are said to live in eternal happiness, normally after death.

That's true.
It is our task as founders, then, to compel the best natures to reach the
study we said before is the most important, namely, to make the ascent and
see the good. But when they've made it and looked sufficiently, we mustn't
allow them to do what they're allowed to do today. d
What's that?
To stay there and refuse to go down again to the prisoners in the cave
and share their labors and honors, whether they are of less worth or of
greater.
Then are we to do them an injustice by making them live a worse life
when they could live a better one?
You are forgetting again that it isn't the law's concern to make any one class e
in the city outstandingly happy but to contrive to spread happiness
throughout the city by bringing the citizens into harmony with each other
through persuasion or compulsion and by making them share with each other
the benefits that each class can confer on the community. The law produces
such people in the city, not in order to allow them to turn in whatever 520
direction they want, but to make use of them to bind the city together.
That's true, I had forgotten.
Observe, then, Glaucon, that we won't be doing an injustice to those
who've become philosophers in our city and that what we'll say to them,
when we compel them to guard and care for the others, will be just. We'll
say: "When people like you come to be in other cities, they're justified in
not sharing in their city's labors, for they've grown there spontaneously, b
against the will of the constitution. And what grows of its own accord and
owes no debt for its upbringing has justice on its side when it isn't keen to
pay anyone for that upbringing. But we've made you kings in our city and
leaders of the swarm, as it were, both for yourselves and for the rest of the
city. You're better and more completely educated than the others and are
better able to share in both types of life. Therefore each of you in turn c
must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the others and grow
accustomed to seeing in the dark. When you are used to it, you'll see vastly
better than the people there. And because you've seen the truth about fine,
just, and good things, you'll know each image for what it is and also that of
which it is the image. Thus, for you and for us, the city will be governed,
not like the majority of cities nowadays, by people who fight over shadows
and struggle against one another in order to rule—as if that were a great
good—but by people who are awake rather than dreaming, for the truth is
surely this: A city whose prospective rulers are least eager to rule must of d
necessity be most free from civil war, whereas a city with the opposite kind
of rulers is governed in the opposite way."
Absolutely.
Then do you think that those we've nurtured will disobey us and refuse
to share the labors of the city, each in turn, while living the greater part of
their time with one another in the pure realm?

Aristotle

POLITICS

Aristotle's Politics *and Plato's* Republic *are the two great works of ancient political philosophy. But unlike the* Republic, *the* Politics *was probably not written as a single work; it is, rather, a collection of essays unified by a common theme. In the excerpts included below, Aristotle discusses the definition and structure of the state (Book I); criticizes the ideal societies proposed by Plato and others (Book II); classifies constitutions and such forms of government as democracy, oligarchy, and monarchy (Book III); and presents his own account of the best state (Book VII).*

Book I

1

1252a We see that every city is some sort of community, and that every community is constituted for the sake of some good, since everyone does everything for the sake of what seems good. Clearly, then, while all communities aim at some good, the community that aims most of all at the good—at the good that most of all controls all the other goods—is the one that most of all controls and includes the others; and this is the one called the city, the political community.

It is wrong, then, to suppose, as some do, that the character of the politician, the king, the household manager, and the slave-master is the same. People suppose this because they think the difference is not a difference in kind, but only in the number who are ruled, so that the ruler of a few is a master, the ruler of more people is a household-manager, and the ruler of still more people is a politician or a king—on the assumption that a large household is no different from a small city. And all they can say to distinguish a king from a politician is that someone who directs things himself is a king, whereas someone who follows the principles[1] of political science, ruling and being ruled in turn, is a politician. These views are not true.

What we mean will be clear if the investigation follows our recognized line of inquiry. Just as in other cases we must divide the composite into incomposites, since these are the smallest parts of the whole, so also in this

1. **principles:** *logoi*. See REASON.

case we must investigate the components of the city; for then we will also see better the difference between these rulers, and the prospect of finding any sort of scientific treatment[2] of the questions we have mentioned.

2

The best way to study this as well as other matters is to trace things back to their beginnings[3] and observe their growth. First, then, those who cannot exist without each other have to form pairs, as female and male do for reproduction. And they do this not because of any decision, but from the natural impulse that they share with other animals and with plants to leave behind another of the same kind as oneself.

Self-preservation <rather than reproduction> is the basis of the natural division between ruler and subject. For the capacity for rational foresight makes one a natural ruler and natural master, and the capacity to execute this foresight by bodily labor[4] makes another a subject and a natural slave; that is why the interests of master and slave coincide.

Now there is a natural distinction between the female and the slave. For *1252b*
nature makes nothing stingily, like a smith making a Delphic knife,[5] but makes one thing for one function, since the best instrument for a particular function is made exclusively for it, not for many others. Among foreigners, however, female and slave have the same rank; the reason is that no foreigners are natural rulers, and so their community consists of a female slave and a male slave. Hence the poets say 'It is to be expected that Greeks rule over foreigners', assuming that the foreigner and the slave are naturally the same.

And so from these two communities <between female and male and between slave and master> the first community that results is the household. Hesiod[6] was right when he said 'Get first of all a house, a wife, and a plow-ox'—for the poor use an ox in place of a slave. Hence the community naturally formed for every day is a household of 'breadbin-mates' (as Charondas calls them) or (as Epimenides the Cretan says) 'manger-mates'.

The first community formed from a number of households for long-term advantage is a village, and the most natural type of village would seem to be an extension of a household, including children and grandchildren, sometimes called 'milkmates'. That is why cities were also originally ruled

2. **scientific treatment:** Lit. 'belonging to a craft', *technikon*.
3. **beginnings:** *archai*. See PRINCIPLE #1.
4. **to execute . . . labor:** Read *tauta tōi sōmati poiein*. (OCT: 'to labor with one's body'.)
5. **a Delphic knife:** like a Swiss army knife, with several different functions.
6. **Hesiod:** *Works and Days* 406.

by kings and some nations are ruled by kings even at present; they were formed from communities ruled by kings—for in every household the oldest member rules as its king, and the same is true in its extensions, because the villagers are related by kinship. Homer[7] describes this when he says 'Each rules over his children and wives', because they were isolated, as households were in ancient times. And for the same reason everyone says the gods are ruled by a king; it is because we were all ruled by kings in ancient times, and some still are, and human beings ascribe to the gods a human way of life, as well as a human form.

The complete community, formed from a number of villages, is a city. Unlike the others, it has the full degree of practically every sort of self-sufficiency; it comes to be for the sake of living, but remains in being for the sake of living well. That is why every city is natural, since the previous communities are natural. For the city is their end, and nature is an end; for we say that something's nature (for instance, of a human being, a horse, or a household) is the character it has when its coming to be is complete.
1253a Moreover, the final cause and end is the best <good>, and self-sufficiency is both the end and the best <good>.

It is evident, then, that the city exists by nature, and that a human being is by nature a political animal. Anyone without a city because of his nature rather than his fortune is either worthless or superior to a human being. Like the man reviled by Homer,[8] 'he has no kin, no law, no home'. For his natural isolation from a city gives him an appetite for war, since, like <a solitary piece> in a game of checkers, he has no partner.

It is evident why a human being is more of a political animal than is any bee or any gregarious animal; for nature, we say, does nothing pointlessly, and a human being is the only animal with rational discourse. A voice signifies pleasure and pain, and so the other animals, as well as human beings, have it, since their nature is far enough advanced for them to perceive pleasure and pain and to signify them to one another. But rational discourse is for making clear what is expedient or harmful, and hence what is just or unjust. For this is distinctive of human beings in contrast to the other animals, that they are the only ones with a perception of good and evil, and of just and unjust, and so on; and it is community in these that produces a household and a city.

Further, the city is naturally prior to the household and to the individual, since the whole is necessarily prior to the part. For if the whole animal is dead, neither foot nor hand will survive, except homonymously, as if we were speaking of a stone hand—for that is what a dead hand will be like. Now everything is defined by its function and potentiality; and so anything

7. **Homer:** *Odyssey* ix 114, referring to the Cyclopes.

8. **Homer:** *Iliad* ix 63.

that has lost them should not be called the same thing, but a homonymous thing.

Clearly, then, the city is also natural and is prior to the individual. For if the individual separated from the city is not self-sufficient, his relation to it corresponds to that of parts to wholes in other cases; and anyone who is incapable of membership in a community, or who has no need of it because he is self-sufficient, is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god.

Everyone has a natural impulse, then, towards this sort of community, and whoever first constituted it is the cause of the greatest goods. For just as a human being is the best of the animals if he has been completed, he is also the worst of them if he is separated from law and the rule of justice. For injustice is most formidable when it is armed, and a human being naturally grows up armed and equipped for intelligence and virtue, but can most readily use this equipment for ends that are contrary to intelligence and virtue; hence without virtue he is the most unscrupulous and savage of animals, the most excessive in pursuit of sex and food. Justice, however, is political; for the rule of justice is an order in the political community, and justice is the judgment of what is just.

Book II[9]

1

Our decision is to study the best political community for those who are *1260b*
capable of living, as far as possible, in the conditions they would aspire to live in; hence we must also investigate the political systems that are found in cities said to be well governed, and also any systems other people have proposed that seem well conceived. Our aim is to see what the correct condition is for a city and what is useful, and also to show that, in searching for something different from these systems, we are not behaving like people who want above all to play the sophist, but are undertaking this line of inquiry in response to the inadequacies of current systems. . . .

2

The proposal that all <the rulers'> women should be shared[10] raises many *1261a*
objections. In particular Socrates' arguments do not make it apparent why he thinks this legislation is needed. Moreover, the end he prescribes for the

9. Book II is concerned with the proposals of various theorists and with the actual states (e.g. Sparta and Crete) that some people have presented as models. The extracts translated come from the criticism of Plato's *Republic*.

10. **The proposal . . . shared:** Plato, *Rep.* 457d.

city is impossible, taken literally, and he has not explained how else we should take it. I refer to Socrates' assumption that it is best if all the city is as unified as possible. It is evident, on the contrary, that as the city goes further and further in the direction of unity, it will finally not even be a city. For a city is by nature a mass of people; as it becomes more and more unified, first the city will turn into a household, and then the household will turn into just one person—for we would say that a household is more unified than a city, and one person more unified than a household. And so, even if someone were capable of completely unifying a city, he should not do it, since he would destroy the city.

Besides, a city is composed, not merely of a number of human beings, but of those different in kind—for similar people do not constitute a city. For a city is different from an alliance; for since an alliance naturally aims at assistance, the added quantity, even of something the same in kind, makes the ally useful (like a weight that pulls a balance down further). A city differs in the same way from a nation that is not scattered in separate villages but <is all together>, as the Arcadians[11] are. <In contrast to these cases,> the parts from which a unity comes to be must differ in kind.

This is why reciprocal equality preserves a city, as we said before in the *Ethics*. Even free and equal people need this, since they cannot all rule at the same time, but must rule for a year, or some other fixed length of time. Such an arrangement ensures that they all rule—just as if cobblers and carpenters were to change occupations, and the same people were not cobblers or carpenters all the time. Since <the normal practice in the crafts> is also better in the political community, it is clearly better if the same people are, if possible, always rulers. But in some circumstances this
1261b is not possible, because all are naturally equal, and moreover it is just for all to take part in ruling—whether it is a benefit or a burden. This arrangement—where equals yield office to each other in turn and are similar when they are not holding office—at least imitates <the practice of the crafts>; some rule and others are ruled, taking turns, as though they had become other people. In the same way, among the rulers themselves, different ones rule in different ruling offices.

It is evident, then, from what we have said, that a city is not naturally unified in the way that some claim it is and that the unity alleged to be the greatest good for cities in fact destroys them, whereas a thing's good preserves it.

It is evident in another way too that attempts at excessive unification do not benefit a city. For a household is more self-sufficient than an individual person is; and a community of a mass of people counts as a city only if it

11. **Arcadians:** Their villages formed a federation, without the structure that Aristotle takes to be necessary for a *polis*.

proves to be self-sufficient. Since, then, what is more self-sufficient is more choiceworthy, what is less unified is <in this case> more choiceworthy than what is more unified.

3

But even if it is indeed best if the community is as unified as possible, <Socrates'> argument does not seem to demonstrate that this will be the effect of agreement in saying 'mine' and 'not mine'[12]—though Socrates regards this agreement as a sign of the city's being completely unified.

For 'all' is said in two ways. If all, taken each one at a time, <speak of what is 'mine'>, then perhaps the <unity> that Socrates wants to produce would be more likely to result; for each one will call the same person his own son, and the same person his own wife, and will speak in the same way of property, and whatever else he has. In fact, however, those who share wives and children will not speak in this way. They will, all together, not each taken one at a time, regard <wives and children as theirs>; and similarly, all together, not each taken one at a time, will regard property <as theirs>. Evidently, then, speaking of 'all' is a fallacious inference; for 'all', 'both', 'odd', and 'even' also produce contentious deductions in discussions, because they are spoken of in these two ways. Hence if all say the same thing, the result is in one case fine, but not possible, and in the other case contributes nothing to concord.

Besides this, the proposal mentioned involves a further harm. For what is common to the largest number of people gets least attention, since people think most about what is private to them and think less about what is common, or else think about what is common only to the extent that it applies to each of them. They care less about it because, in addition to other reasons, they assume that someone else is thinking about it—as in household service many attendants sometimes serve worse than a few. <In Socrates' city> each citizen will have a thousand sons, but not as sons of each taken one at a time; any given son will be the son of this father no more than of any other, and so all the fathers alike will care little about them. . . .

4

. . . And in general the results of this sort of law <eliminating private *1262b*
property> are bound to be contrary to the results to be expected from correctly established laws, and contrary to Socrates' aim in prescribing

12. **agreement . . . 'not mine'**: Lit. 'saying "mine" and "not mine" at the same time'. See Plato, *Rep*. 462c.