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Intellectual Conversion and the Way Back in Plato

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Abstract. In this paper, I examine the intellectual conversion of the released prisoner in Plato's Allegory of the Cave in *Republic* vii. While most commentators and even Plato's Socrates are understandably focused on the difficult ascent and ultimate enlightenment, this paper focuses on the descent back into the cave, in other words, the return to the changeable world. Rather than focus on the ethical dimension of the return, I consider its cognitive dimension. I provide a summary of Lonergan's account of conversion, specifically, his account of intellectual conversion. I contend that there are two 'moments' to every conversion, and so two moments of intellectual conversion. The enlightened one in the Allegory who returns to the cave represents the second moment of intellectual conversion. I discuss how Socrates describes the philosopher who has returned as possessing enhanced powers of discernment and judgment. The superior cognitive power of the post-enlightened philosopher is supported by the detailed description of the role of the midwife in the *Theaetetus*. The final end of the philosopher in terms of knowing, I contend, is not contemplation of the eternal, but discernment and judgment of what is in the changeable world.
Keywords: the *Republic*, the *Theaetetus*, Cave Allegory, Bernard Lonergan, intellectual conversion.

According to Karl Jaspers, there are three themes central to Plato's philosophy: the turning around (μεταστροφή, περιαγωγή), the stages of knowledge, and the twofold direction of human life.[1] These three themes are interwoven in Plato's celebrated Allegory of the Cave in *Republic* vii. The Allegory is the account of one of the prisoners who is freed from the chains that bind him, forced to turn around, and gradually led up a steep ascent to the wonders of the world outside of the

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[1] Jaspers 1957: 33.

cave and to eventual enlightenment. This story, so rich in symbolic detail, serves as a counterpart to the rather dry, theoretical account of the levels of cognitive powers and corresponding objects at the end of Book VI — the Divided Line. Every element of the Divided Line has a counterpart in the Allegory. Both the Divided Line and the Allegory of the Cave are couched within Socrates' examination of the nature of the true philosopher, and his investigation of what sort of education would be required to produce such a philosopher as a future guardian of the polis. In the following, I shall focus first on the 'turning around' (conversion), and secondly on what Jaspers calls the twofold direction of the philosopher (the ascent out of the cave and the return to the depths of the cave). My specific interest in this paper is the cognitional difference that is evident in the enlightened one who returns to the world of becoming.

1. *Intellectual Conversion*

The Allegory of the Cave is celebrated as a classic account of conversion. The term 'conversion' in our contemporary world is most often associated with religious conversion, a momentous event in the life of a person that transforms their relationship to God. St. Paul on the road to Damascus and St. Augustine in the garden are prime examples of such transformative turning points. However, not all conversion is religious conversion; there are different kinds of conversion. Before we examine the nature of the conversion described in Plato's allegory, let us consider the work of Bernard Lonergan (1904–1984) on the nature of conversion and his account of three basic kinds of conversion.

Bernard Lonergan defines conversion as a vertical exercise of freedom, which moves one to a new horizon, a new standpoint or world. This movement "involves an about-face; it comes out of the old by repudiating characteristic features [of the old]; it begins a new sequence that can keep revealing ever greater depths and breadth and wealth."[2] Conversion for Lonergan is a dialectical shift between two opposing

[2] Lonergan 1972: 237.

positions; it is not a sublation. In his insistence on conversion as a moment of decision, Lonergan is echoing Kierkegaard, who contends contra Hegel that we cannot think or mediate our way into a radically new standpoint. Conversion is not a matter of development, but a distinct moment of conscious choice. Nevertheless, there is development involved leading up to the point of conversion, and following upon conversion as one deepens one's familiarity with one's new world. The shift from one standpoint or world to the next requires an act of choice. Conversion is self-constituting as well as world constituting. The self is confronted with the "startling strangeness"[3] of a radically different ground and orientation. At the same time, the self constitutes itself anew through this conversion.

Lonergan distinguishes three basic kinds of conversion: intellectual, moral, and religious. He explains: "While each of the three is connected with the other two, still each is a different type of event and has to be considered in itself before being related to the others."[4] Each basic form of conversion is an act of real self-transcendence. Inasmuch as in every act of real self-transcendence there is, for the self-same self, the self that is transcended and the self that is transcending, an act of self-transcendence necessarily possesses a negative and a positive dimension. The negative element is the pain of overcoming limitation; the positive element is the joy of transcendence. The first aspect involves sacrifice, rejection, and repudiation; the second aspect involves acceptance, appropriation, and fulfillment. I have argued elsewhere that the two-fold nature of self-transcendence is found in each of the three basic forms of conversion. Each kind of conversion has two moments or phases, and it is possible for one to undergo only the first moment of a conversion and stop there.

Lonergan describes religious conversion as a shift to "a total being-in-love as the efficacious ground of all self-transcendence, whether in the pursuit of truth, or in the realization of human values, or in the

[3] Lonergan 1992: 22.

[4] Lonergan 1972: 239.

orientation man adopts to the universe, its ground, and its goal." [5] It is being grasped by ultimate concern; it is total and permanent self-surrender. Clearly, this account is not specific to any particular religion or even to any form of theism. It covers the profound life-transforming commitments to values like truth and justice of those who do not profess any religious affiliation. In the context of Christianity, religious conversion is "God's love flooding our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us."[6] It is the gift of grace.

Religious conversion involves two moments. The first is remorse over one's own sin and the rejection of the worldly. The second is the joyous acknowledgement of God's forgiveness and love. Religious conversion involves both the sorrow of repentance and self-sacrifice and the joy of fulfillment and consolation. It is not only God's love flooding our hearts, an otherworldly falling in love; it is also total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations. We can question whether these two dimensions of religious conversion are properly differentiated as two distinct religious moments of decision. Consider the Kierkegaardian moments of infinite resignation and the subsequent act of acceptance through faith.[7] It is possible for someone to make only a partial religious conversion, to renounce one's attachments to the world and live a life of self-denial, and yet fail to accept God's love and forgiveness. But, it may be more accurate to name the act of total self-abnegation a moral, rather than a religious, act of freedom.[8]

The second kind of conversion is moral conversion. It is a radical shift from a life completely focused on oneself and one's own satisfactions and interests to a life committed to values. Lonergan characterizes it as a turn from the world of appetites to the world of objective good.[9] One can organize one's life around the satisfaction of one's ap-

[5] Lonergan 1972: 241.

[6] Lonergan 1972: 241.

[7] Kierkegaard 1983: 37–50.

[8] Kierkegaard considers infinite resignation to be the highest ethical act through which one attains eternal consciousness yet falls short of faith; *ibid.* 48.

[9] Lonergan 1992: 234.

petites and interests or one can organize one's life around the good as known intelligently and reasonably — the objective good. He sums up these opposite orientations with the two questions: What's in it for me? What ought I do? In moral conversion, the two opposing poles are satisfactions and values:

> Moral conversion changes the criterion of one's decisions and choices from satisfactions to values… [It] consists in opting for the truly good, even for value against satisfaction when value and satisfaction conflict.[10]

As there are two moments in each of the other two kinds of conversion, so there are two moments of moral conversion. The first moment or aspect of moral conversion requires the personal realization that a choice must be made, and that one constitutes oneself through that choice. It consists of a choice of good and evil over the merely aesthetic. To be a choice for the good, to become a person of good will in the Kantian sense, one must choose the commands of reason over one's own inclinations; that is, one must choose the most difficult with all the pain and suffering that entails. It is possible to live a moral life in this negative sense alone, to bear up under the burdens of ethical duty, reined in by rational consistency, and spurred by the prick of conscience. But Lonergan's account of moral consciousness suggests that there is a second, positive dimension to moral consciousness.

Lonergan, influenced by Max Scheler's axiological ethics, develops a notion of moral conversion focused on values, in contrast to Kant's deontological ethics of reason. Duty is founded in the *a priori* law of reason; an ethics based on duty is purely formal. Values, on the other hand, are given in the *a priori* order of the heart; they are the material or content of moral intention. The shift from Kantian formal ethics to Scheler's material ethics affords a richer and more positive account of the motivation of one's acts of decision.

The third basic kind of conversion is intellectual. Lonergan defines it as "a radical clarification and, consequently, the elimination of an

[10] Lonergan 1972: 240.

exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge. The myth is that knowing is like looking, that objectivity is seeing what is there to be seen and not seeing what is not there, and that the real is what is out there now to be looked at."[11] The twofold nature of conversion as self-transcendence is evident in Lonergan's notion of intellectual conversion. The first moment is to assent to a radical critique and rejection of the standpoint of empiricism or naive realism, to reject the presumption that what is real is what is already out there to be known through simple sense-perception. One transcends this naive philosophic worldview to the worldview of idealism, the position that being and truth are only found in understanding not in experience. The difficulty of the first moment of intellectual conversion was not lost on Plato, who incorporated into the curriculum years of mathematical training for students in the Academy. In order even to begin the arduous, disorienting climb out of the darkness, one must break the chains of sense, imagination, and accepted opinion. This can only be done, as Lonergan puts it "by severing the umbilical cord that [ties one] to the maternal imagination of man."[12]

The second moment of intellectual conversion is the move beyond idealism to critical realism, which is the philosophic position that knowledge of the real is possible, but only through intelligence and rational judgment.[13] Judgment for Lonergan requires a return to the evidence provided in experience. Knowledge, for Lonergan, is only attained in judgment; knowing is not a single act but a process of experience, understanding, and judging. The first movement of intellectual conversion is from naive realism, which is the view that knowledge is the result of sense-experience alone, to idealism, which is the view that knowledge is the result of intelligence alone. The second movement of intellectual conversion is from idealism to critical realism, which is the view that knowledge is the result of experience, understanding, and judging. This second movement of intellectual conversion is not possi-

[11] Lonergan 1972: 239.

[12] Lonergan 1992: 15

[13] Murray 2009: 277–94.

ble without the first. One cannot experience the 'startling strangeness' of the new world of critical realism without having first experienced something like Kant's Second Copernican Revolution. For a clear example of intellectual conversion, we can turn to descriptions provided by Fichte of his encounter with Kant's thought. He wrote enthusiastic accounts of his own intellectual transformation in letters to his friends in 1790:

> I have been living in a new world ever since reading the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Propositions which I thought could never be overturned have been overturned for me. Things have been proven to me which I thought could never been proven… and I feel all the happier for it.
> [Similarly], I hurled myself into philosophy, namely, the Kantian philosophy… The influence that this philosophy, especially its moral part… has upon one's entire way of thinking is unbelievable — as is the revolution that it has occasioned in my way of thinking in particular.[14]

To summarize, conversion for Lonergan is a radical transformative and self-transcending dialectical shift from one worldview or horizon to its opposite. There are three basic kinds of conversion — religious, and moral, and intellectual; and in each case the conversion has two moments, one that is negative and repudiating, and one that is positive and affirming. The two moments of intellectual conversion are, first, the turn away from sense experience to the ideal realm and, second, the return to experience as necessary for intelligence and reason to make judgments. In light of Lonergan's account of conversion and intellectual conversion, let us return to Plato's Allegory of the Cave to examine what kind of conversion he is portraying.

2. *Conversion in the Allegory of the Cave*

In the Allegory, the freed prisoner is unchained and forcibly turned around towards the light from the fire in the cave: "When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk,

[14] Fichte 1988: 357–360.

and look up toward the light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before."[15] The former prisoner does not just turn his eyes toward the light, he is compelled to turn his entire body right around and walk. "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?"[16] He is dragged bodily up the rough, steep path all the way into the sunlight.

In this partial description of the start of prisoner's conversion, we note the disorienting and arduous nature of the prisoner's turning and slow ascent. Here we have the marks of conversion in general, that it is a 180-degree shift, and that it introduces one to a completely unfamiliar reality. The conversion involved in philosophic education, as Dominic Scott writes, "involves a complete reorientation" that "goes directly against the grain."[17] Socrates elaborates that it is the whole soul that is turned around.

> But our present discussion… 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 it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good.[18]

The point that the whole man is turned around suggests that we are not dealing with just one of the basic forms of conversion. This conversion is not simply a turning of the eyes or the head, that is, not just an intellectual conversion; it is at the same time a moral and a religious conversion. That this is the case is clear when we consider the ultimate objective of the turning and the ascent: "the study of that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good."[19] The ob-

[15] *R.* VII, 515cd. Translation by G.M.A. Grube.
[16] *R.* VII, 515e.
[17] Scott 2008: 380.
[18] *R.* VII, 518c.
[19] *R.* VII, 518c

jective of the ascent out of the darkness into the light is to fulfill the philosophic erotic desire for the truth, to attain knowledge of the being that always is, the eternal and divine, and ultimately to contemplate the good, represented by the sun which "governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see."[20] Given the objective of the conversion in the Allegory of the Cave, it is fair to conclude that it has intellectual, moral, and religious dimensions.

3. *The Way Back*

Having arrived at the height of enlightenment, the true philosopher descends again into the cave even if he must be compelled to do so. (Note that he must be compelled at each stage.)

> It is our task as founders, then, to compel the best natures to reach the study we said before is 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… stay there and refuse to go down again to the prisoners in the cave.[21]

Socrates gently ridicules those enlightened ones who would wish to remain in glorious contemplation of the good. He says that they would fail as future leaders of the polis, "because they'd refuse to act, thinking that they had settled while still alive in the faraway Isles of the Blessed."[22] Socrates considers it to be one's moral duty to contribute what one can to the community, to act for the common good. This moral dimension of the Allegory of the Cave is a central point of the account of the education of the future leaders of the polis.

It is clear that the conversion in the Allegory qua moral would be incomplete if one simply stopped at recognition of the truly valuable without acting for the sake of others. One could also argue that qua religious, the conversion would be incomplete if it stopped at union

[20] *R.* VII, 516c

[21] *R.* VII, 519cd.

[22] *R.* VII, 519c.

with the divine in a kind of monastic separation from the world, and did not involve re-embracing the world of becoming, and bear fruit in works of love. But, qua intellectual conversion, has not the enlightened one reached the ultimate intellectual fulfillment? How can one surpass understanding of the eternal and perfect? One way to approach this question is to examine the kind of cognition characteristic of the true philosopher as returned, that is, post-enlightenment.

According to Mitchell Miller, the philosopher returns to the cave in an intellectual sense, not just political.[23] Socrates clarifies the enhanced cognitive powers of the philosopher who reenters the cave:

> Therefore each of you in turn must go down… 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 the fine, just, and good things, you'll know each image for what it is and also that of which it is the image.[24]

In this passage, Plato claims that the returned philosopher sees better than the people who have never left the world of appearance, and that it is the knowledge of the truth that enables him to recognize images for what they are, and the true forms which they represent. As David Sedley comments, the philosopher has "absorbed the reality of the outside world before returning."[25] Mitchell adds, "it is this heightened grasp of all that becomes that particularly qualifies the philosopher to rule"[26]

In Book VI, Plato previews what is to come in his account of the education of the philosopher in Book VII when he discusses the nature of the real lover of learning: It is his nature "to struggle toward what is, not to remain with any of the many things that are believed to be… he neither loses nor lessens his erotic love until he grasps the being of each nature itself… he knows, truly lives, is nourished, and — at that point,

[23] Ferrari 2007: xxiv.
[24] *R.* VII, 520c.
[25] Sedley 2007: 262.
[26] Miller 2007: 313.

but not before — is relieved of the pains of giving birth."[27] He offers here a similar account of an ascent and the kind of life that follows, one in which he no longer suffers the pains of giving birth because he has already gained knowledge of the Forms. His reference to the pains of giving birth calls to mind Socrates' claim that he function as a midwife. If we consult the extended account of midwifery in the *Theaetetus*, we can glean additional insight into the cognitive power of the enlightened philosopher.

Socrates begins his account by describing general facts about the art of midwifery. He makes the point that women who operate as midwives are beyond childbearing age, because it is most advantageous for a midwife to have already had the experience of giving birth herself.[28] The properly experienced midwife represents the philosopher, like Socrates, who has already been through the labor and accomplishment of attaining knowledge. He explains, further, "it is the midwives who can tell better than anyone else whether women are pregnant or not."[29] This suggests an ability in the teacher of philosophy to recognize real potential in another, or more proximately to recognize the real potential in another's argument. Socrates' analogy of his own philosophic practice with the art of midwifery only goes so far, as he explains:

> So the work of the midwife is a highly important one; but it is not so important as my own performance. And for this reason, that there is not in midwifery the further complication, that the patients are sometimes delivered of phantoms and sometimes of realities, and that the two are hard to distinguish. If there were, then the midwife's greatest and noblest function would be to distinguish the true from the false offspring.[30]

The most important cognitive power of the enlightened philosopher, suggested in this passage, is to distinguish or judge what it true and what is false. Socrates has returned to the world of becoming, the realm

[27] *R.* VI, 490b.
[28] *Tht.* 149b. Translation by M.J. Levett, revised by M. Burnyeat.
[29] *Tht.* 149c.
[30] *Tht.* 150ab.

of appearances, and in this realm he practices the art of discernment. In the words of Jaspers, he is "equal to his work in the world only because he is at home in the supra-celestial realm that is the source of norms and guidance."[31]

In conclusion, the conversion depicted in the Allegory of the Cave is a transformation of the whole self. In its central intellectual dimension, it reflects both the great achievement of ascending to understanding of the good, and the commitment to take up the task of philosophizing in the world. The enlightened philosopher possesses the critical power of discerning and judging what is real, true, and good in the world, because he is grounded in the understanding of the eternal and unchanging. In this regard, the enlightened philosopher who returns to the world, in the words of Kierkegaard, makes one movement further than eternal consciousness.[32]

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[31] Jaspers 1957: 35.

[32] Kierkegaard 48: 1983.

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