THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE: THE NECESSITY OF THE PHILOSOPHER’S DESCENT

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The allegory of the cave is about the Platonic ideal of education. It has been received, interpreted, and transformed throughout the entire course of the history of philosophy. After some preliminary remarks on this philosophical image (I), I shall focus on the hotly debated descent of the philosopher back into the cave. On the one hand, I shall examine the issue with regard to the ontological distinction between being and becoming: the middle dialogue in question is not concerned with the ontological aspect of the descent, as I label the return from being to becoming, and thus does not solve the problem so formulated (II). On the other hand, I shall consider a well-known crux: the ethical and political aspect of the problem (III). To do so, I shall center on the concept of necessity (ἀνάγκη) that plays a prominent role in the Cave but nonetheless has not yet received due attention (IV). For this it is important to show in what way and to what extent we have to take “necessity” or “compulsion” seriously in the broader relevant context (500d4, 519e4, 520a8, 521b7, 540a-b); and also what kinds of necessity are at stake.

1 This is the elaboration of the paper I gave at the International Plato Society Conference, Tokyo 2010, initially entitled as: The Allegory of the Cave: Methodos and Kathodos. I benefited considerably from the following discussion, and the very helpful comments of the anonymous reviewers.

2 I will capitalize whenever referring to the simile of the cave or the line: from now on “the Cave” and “the Line”.

3 Even researchers who do focus on the special problem of the philosopher’s descent do not consider the concept of necessity sufficiently, although they address the issue as it suits their purposes (e.g. Kraut 1999, p. 238f.). Brown (2000) does not differentiate between different kinds of necessity but reduces them all to external legislative compulsion. Schenke not only fails to differentiate between different kinds of necessity but he also conflates necessity and freedom in the philosopher’s descent (fn. 5; already so White, 1986, fn. 6). Sedley, who provides a distinction between a kind of necessity as external enforcement and a more benign necessity, is an exception (2007). But a more general discussion of necessity would bring to the foreground the Timaeus, a connection with which Sedley takes issue (2007, fn. 33).