

# Wakefulness in The Republic and The Old Testament

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A Buddhist teaching suggests that practicing Buddhism is like taking a raft over a great river. One riverbank represents the realm of 'samsara,' the cycle of suffering that we are all spinning around in. On the other side is 'wakefulness,' or 'nirvana,' an enlightened state of awareness characterized by an infinite sense of unity and bliss. The raft symbolizes Buddhism; its purpose being to help us cross over from samsara to nirvana. According to the teaching, however, a curious thing happens to the individual who manages to reach the 'banks of enlightenment.' Having climbed off of the raft, she turns around to discover that she cannot now see any riverbank on the side from which she departed. In fact, she realizes that there is no river, no raft, and – to her pure astonishment – no Buddha at all! (Zimmer, 82-90)

The story is a way of reminding us that the state of wakefulness involves an experience of reality so utterly beyond linear comprehension, so overwhelming and indescribable, and so categorically unlike anything one could possibly imagine or articulate in finite terms, that even the means of achieving it are, at best, illusory roadmaps – roadmaps that use boundaries in an attempt to help people grasp a condition of being that has no boundaries. Thus, in essence, it would never be possible to attain a complete understanding of wakefulness using Buddhism or any other practice or paradigm arising out of the substrate of finite consciousness. It could be said that systems like Buddhism are limited to pointing us in an appropriate direction or helping us to look in places where we might be more likely to become enlightened. They may embody or convey truth in one form or another, but as an inevitable consequence of their fixed and limited nature, do not represent the *whole of Truth* as it exists in the ultimate sense.

From such an understanding, it is well reasoned to develop an interpretive framework for analyzing such systems that is rooted in what Ken Wilber, borrowing from Leibniz and Huxley, refers to as the Perennial Philosophy. (7-8) This is the idea that the world's great religions and wisdom traditions possess a "transcendental unity". That is, manuscripts and teachings the world over, spanning thousands of years of human history, can be viewed as together describing one unified vision of the cosmos. In this way, each text is like a section on a quilted tapestry, seeming to approach reality from a distinctive position due to the unique contextual medium out of which it emerges, but essentially congruent with the other sections in terms of certain key themes and ideas. This being the case, the entire tapestry, of course, is likely to provide us with a more acute representation of those themes and ideas than would any individual portion thereof.

The Perennial Philosophy, then, is exactly the point of view I will work from as I elucidate the connections between Plato's allegory of the Cave and the Judeo-Christian myths. Both of these accounts, I will argue, make reference to precisely the same state of wakefulness that we encountered in the Buddhist parable above, but each does it in a manner constrained by the historical and cultural situations that inform them. Furthermore, by examining the similarities between the two texts, we might enhance our conception of wakefulness as we come to view the tapestry more as a whole, so to speak.

To begin with, let us turn to the story of the Garden of Eden as outlined in Genesis. The story tells us that God used His voice to bring the entire universe into being and, after creating humans in His image, stood back and evaluated His efforts: "And God saw everything that He had made,

and, behold, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31a) Of course, most of us are likely to possess a modicum of familiarity with the story as it transpires from there:

And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there He put the man whom He had formed.

And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

...And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden, thou mayest freely eat:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

(Gen. 2:8-9, 16-17)

The scriptures don't indicate how much time passed before it happened, but eventually, needless to say, Adam and Eve sinned by eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Subsequently, they became aware of their nakedness and hid themselves from God.

The story tells us that humans once lived in a harmonious and blissful state – paralleling the idea of wakefulness – in which they experienced complete communion with God and the total absence of suffering. This condition was lost, however, when they attained 'knowledge of good and evil,' which I interpret as an idiom for 'duality consciousness,' or 'separation-as-a-state-of-being.'

There are at least two instances in the text that support this reading. The first of these arises out of the conversation between the serpent and Eve, during which he encourages her to eat the forbidden fruit by advising her that in doing so she will become godlike. (Gen. 3:5) If we return to the first chapter of Genesis for a moment, we'll be reminded that God created the world out of some kind of formless reality by dividing it into various components; He separated light from darkness, dry land from water, day from night, and so forth. I think it is this divine faculty of division (without which the act of creation might be impossible) that the serpent misleadingly refers to when he seduces Eve into eating the fruit. In this case, however, something goes terribly wrong. As they begin to experience the world as dichotomous and disunited, Eve and Adam find themselves alienated and out of touch with God.

The very occurrence of alienation, in fact, provides a second corroboration of the preceding exegesis. The knowledge of good and evil caused Eve and Adam not only to become aware of their nakedness but (we can infer from Gen. 2:25) ashamed of it also. This is significant in that it is indicative of their newly acquired self-consciousness, a condition which necessarily requires a sense of "otherness" or division between self and not-self. As a result, presumably for the first time, Adam and Eve were able (or at least disposed) to hide themselves from God directly after eating the forbidden fruit. Their sin dislocated them into a painfully fragmented universe, one in which they had lost their connection to the divine.

It is from the exigence created by this myth that the whole of Judeo-Christian teaching emerges. In essence, the scriptures can be thought of collectively as a focused campaign to bring human beings back to the original state in the Garden of Eden, that of bliss and harmony with God. For the Christian, this effort culminates in the person of Jesus who, not coincidentally, is in many ways a compelling symbol of nonduality. For example, He is God incarnate, and thus exists simultaneously as absolutely human and yet absolutely divine in

every conceivable way, disintegrating the boundary between God and not-God. In addition, His resurrection seems to liquefy the division between life and death. Ultimately, perhaps, His descent into the underworld represents a kind of unity between the highest and lowest aspects of reality. In any case, these accounts, along with many others, accord with an explication of biblical narratives that renders separation-as-sin and oneness-as-redemption.

If we entertain the belief that Plato's allegory of the Cave refers – albeit through a drastically different matrix of semiotically and socially constructed meanings and assumptions – to the same codes and patterns located in the story of Adam and Eve, which is what the Perennial Philosophy would lead us to do, then we should expect to extract similar themes from it and to be able to draw parallels between key figures and metaphors in both texts. Indeed, it is possible to perform precisely this kind of analysis, and to synthesize the readings in such a way that any incongruities between the two seem to either fade away or become inconsequential.

The purpose of Plato's allegory is to “show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened.” (152) According to Plato, most of us are merely able to perceive ‘shadows’ of the truth, enslaved within the prison of ignorance and caught up in hopeless competitions and struggles as a result. Should we liberate ourselves from the cave and bring about “the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world,” we'd see things as they really are and consequently be transformed in terms of our desires, behaviors, and conceptions of ourselves. (153) Ultimately, we would encounter the form of good, which is itself “inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual.” (153) Thus, Plato, like the Old Testament, contemplates two divergent states of consciousness.

This is perhaps not an astonishing similarity in and of itself. What is more remarkable in my opinion is how the Platonic and Judeo-Christian accounts of these two states mirror each other in terms of unity versus fragmentation. I think there is one succinct, key phrase within *The Republic* that is of utmost significance in this regard. Plato writes that the enlightened soul is “turned from the world of becoming into that of being,” which allows us to deduce crucial information about his conception of the qualities of both modes of consciousness. (154)

To begin with, we can observe that the word ‘becoming’ implies an innate sense of linearity. It seems almost bound up in the relationship between past, present, and future, whereas the reverse is true for ‘being.’ The world of becoming, therefore, is marked by fragmentation on a very basic level – that of time. In effect, the ability to experience time at all is linked to duality consciousness in that it is entrenched in the perception of a division between phenomena that we might label ‘now’ and ‘not-now.’ To this end, the allegory of the cave decisively echoes the story of the Garden of Eden in terms of a key distinction about wakefulness. Like Adam and Eve in their original state of harmonious unity with God, the liberated prisoner in *The Republic* has no conception of the world as dual. Rather, she is in contact with ultimate, whole, universal truth.

This premise is further substantiated by the fact that Plato associates enlightenment with liberation itself. If we understand freedom to entail the absence of resistance (or constraint), then it also must require unity consciousness, or the absence of the boundaries that give rise to resistance. By releasing herself from the chains that kept her locked up within the cave, the prisoner has transcended the previous limitations of her awareness and is no longer effected by them. This is demonstrated by her reluctance to engage in the

competitions carried out in the cave. Unlike the unenlightened rulers, who “fight with one another about shadows only and are distracted in the struggle for power, which in their eyes is a great good,” she is able to transcend conflict because she has “seen the beautiful and just and good in their truth.” (154) The ‘battle lines’ that once divided her reality have melted away, leaving behind a holistic, unified world.

It is this realm of unity that both *The Republic* and the Old Testament point us toward, each in their own unique way. And whether that realm is mediated to us through the sun in Plato’s allegory or through the Hebrew God is a question of epistemology more than ontology. In the final analysis, as we appreciate the fact that the world of the infinite, by its very nature, resists definition (itself a function of finite existence), we begin to recognize that no human words could possibly render an accurate picture of ‘oneness’ and all that is contained therein. Truth may well be universal and ultimate, but as long as we use language to pull it into the corporeal dimension, we inevitably corrupt it with the limitations of communication and culture.

Consequently, it seems reasonable to accept a kind of pluralism. We can appreciate Plato’s description of the nature of reality because it sets up perimeters for identifying with the Ultimate from within a specific historical and intellectual context, but this does not prevent us from encountering the Ultimate in the writings of the Old Testament as well. The texts each approach the subject from foreign perspectives, describing unique facets of the same idea. If we work from that point of view, we can see unity between them, and develop a broader, more encompassing understanding of the world.

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