

A Comparative Study of Plato's Allegory of the Cave and Suhrawardī's Tale of the Western Exile

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Abstract

An important allegory throughout the history of philosophy is Plato's allegory of the cave. There are remarkable similarities between this allegory and an allegory from Islamic philosophy—that of western exile (*al-ghurba al-gharbiyya*) proposed by Suhrawardī. This paper seeks to consider fundamental components and issues within the two allegories, including the issue of the soul as the true human essence, its immateriality and origin, the material world as a cave and Kairouan prison of the soul, and an immaterial world as a locus of light, knowledge, and perfection, as it is referred to by some as *the world of the image* (imaginal world or *'ālam al-mithāl*) or *the world of intellects* (*'ālam al-'uqūl*) and by others as *the world of forms* (*'ālam al-muthul*). There is also an epistemological issue underneath both allegories regarding how knowledge is acquired and what true knowledge consists in. Although there are differences in thoughts and philosophies of the two philosophers, a commonality can be discerned between them in light of these allegories. The main points of this commonality are that knowledge constitutes the main essence of human happiness and that the soul as the immaterial human origin should seek release from the cave and Kairouan prison of the material world and return to its true abode—that is, the eastern world—because human perfection consists

in the transcendence of his soul and its emancipation and arrival at pure truth, knowledge, and light.

Keywords: allegory of the cave, allegory of the western exile, Plato, Suhrawardī, comparative study.

Introduction

It is important to study Shaykh al-Ishrāq Suhrawardī's philosophical and mystical allegories and Plato's allegory of the cave, because, notwithstanding their fictional and literary nature, these allegories reveal to us thoughts and major philosophical and mystical views of these prominent philosophers. The allegory of the western exile (*al-ghurba al-gharbiyya*) is a philosophical and mystical fable, written in Arabic in symbolic and allegorical terms (Suhrawardī 1375 Sh, 2:273ff.). The fable of the western exile is like a dream had in full wakefulness. It is an ascent in which one returns to his origin. Just like Plato's allegory of the cave, the fable of the western exile is a story of the exile of the soul and its captivity in the material prison, where it holds a light in its hand and looks for its true origin or home—it searches a way out of the abysmal pit of the alien cave of exile, looking for a bright horizon and emancipation from the material darkness of the western exile. In fact, the allegory of the western exile begins where Avicenna's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* is finished. This is why Ahmad Amin lists it among the works concerning *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* (Amin 1959). However, Plato put forth his allegory of the cave because he believed that the sages before him were in error when they looked for an invariant truth and substance in this natural world. Thus, Plato propounded the world of Forms and his allegory of the cave in an attempt to solve the problem of unity and multiplicity—the problem of how something can be multiple despite its unity. The idea was that unity and multiplicity exist independently of the thing that has both aspects,

participating in both the Form of Unity and the Form of Multiplicity at the same time. By the same token, one thing can be both similar and dissimilar, or big and small without contradiction (Bréhier 1352 Sh, 160).

Many commentators believe that Plato proposed the theory of Forms in order to account for natural causation, the eternity of the soul, and the problem of unity and multiplicity. However, the truth is that the problem of knowledge was what mattered most for him, because he maintained that knowledge of the good is what prevents evil conduct, and a person with knowledge has a happy life (Popkin and Stroll 1402 AH, 10). As Jaspers says, "From the very outset Plato searched for the supreme authority, knowledge of which first lends meaning to all thought and action" (Jaspers 1957, 28). For Plato, grasping the Form of the good is like arriving at the sun: we do not see the sun itself, but we see everything in its light, and true knowledge is affiliated with "the good" (Jaspers 1957, 28), and what can be contemplated in light of the good is what is called a "Form." Thus, it wills the world of unchangeable, incorruptible, hidden, and self-subsistent Ideas, which can only be grasped via thinking, rather than a changing, perishable world which is in constant motion. In his *Phaedrus*, Plato makes reference to a world in which "Ideas" or "Forms" have their true existence. This is referred to as a "world of thoughts" or what is "above the heavens," in which one can observe the "truth itself," "beauty itself," and "everything itself" (Plato 1362 Sh, 139ff.). Plato's view was criticized by some philosophers, including Heidegger who believed that Plato's thoughts should be found and discovered. He makes it explicit that "an intellectual's doctrine is what has remained unsaid in what he has said" and what has remained unsaid in Plato's thoughts is a development in what determines the essence of truth (Heidegger 1954,

5). In Heidegger's view, Plato was mistaken when he drew an analogy between truth and light in his allegory of the cave (Heidegger 1998, 155; 1954, 5; see Inwood 2000, 14; Dostal 1992, 12). Heidegger's views of Plato came under attack by people such as Paul Friedländer (1969, 222-23), which we will not undertake to discuss in this paper. Instead, we will compare one of the most important allegories of Shaykh al-Ishrāq, the allegory of the western exile, with Plato's allegory of the cave to unearth their points of agreement. Thus, we will begin with a brief account of the two allegories and then compare their main themes and essential components so as to show where the two philosophers, both of whom were affected by ancient Persian wisdom, agree.

An Account of Suhrawardī's Allegory of Western Exile

The allegory involves a brief introduction in which Suhrawardī mentions Avicenna's fables of Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān and Salāmān and Absāl. Pointing out Avicenna's Illuminationist inclinations, he emphasizes nevertheless that Avicenna was not an accomplished mystic.¹ Here is how Suhrawardī tells the story:

When I travelled with my brother, 'Āṣim (Protector), from Transoxiana to the west (Maghreb) in order to hunt birds at the beach of the Green Sea, we suddenly ended up in the city of Kairouan (Qayrawān), whose people were oppressors. They chained us and then threw us into a pit, telling us that we were allowed to leave the pit into a palace built above it only at nights, then during the day we had to return to the bottom of the pit. The pit was a labyrinth, and sometimes doves came to us from decorated thickets of Yemen, and at other times Yemeni lights reached us from the eastern right side, giving us news that delighted us, and we yearned for our home. Thus, we ascended at nights and descended during the days, until we saw a hoopoe which entered through the window with a letter on its beak, coming from the right bank of the valley, and

1. For a discussion of Avicenna's Illuminationist aspect, see Corbin (1392 Sh).

told us, "I have come to you from Sheba with some news, which is elaborated in your father's letter." The letter said: "From your father, Hādī (Guide), to you. In the name of God, the All-Compassionate, the All-Merciful. We have aroused passion in you, but you did not become passionate; we have invited you, but you did not migrate; and we have signaled, but you failed to understand." And the letter also said, "If you seek rescue together with your brother, then do not hesitate to embark on the travel, and grasp the rope with your hand; once you arrive at the valley of the ants, dust the lowest part of your garment and say: 'Praise be to God Who gave life to us after our lifelessness, and thus is the resurrection.' Then kill your wife and sit in the ship and say: "In the name of Allah" is its course and its anchorage." The letter involved details of what would be encountered on the path. Then, the hoopoe went before us, and we boarded the ship, intending to visit the hermitage of our father on Mount Sinai. Then a wave came between me and my son, and he was among the drowned. Then I knew that the morning was near, and the city where evils were done is going to be turned uppermost nethermost. When waves were turbulent, I threw my nurse into the water, and we wrecked the ship lest it would be confiscated. The ship arrived at the mountain of Gog and Magog. I told the fairies beside me to blow into the copper, and then I erected a rampart between me and Gog and Magog. Thus, the promise of my Lord came true. On my way, I saw heads of 'Ād and Thamūd. I picked up the two weights together with heavenly spheres, and put them in a circular glass container, which I myself had made and on which there were stripes. I cut streams from the liver of the sky. When water was cut off from the mill, the mill was destroyed, and the essence was freed into essence and turned into ether, and then I threw the sphere of the spheres over the skies until it crumbled the sun and the moon and other stars. Thus, I was freed from fourteen coffins and ten graves, and I found the path of God, and I caught my sister, who was haunted by God's suffering. Then I saw a lamp illuminating all corners of the house with its light. So I put the lamp into the mouth of a dragon inhabiting the Aquarius, under whose foot was the Sea of Qulzum (the Red Sea) and above whom were stars the range of whose rays is unknown to anyone except their Creator and those firm in knowledge. Then I saw that Leo and

Taurus had disappeared, and Sagittarius and Cancer were folded, and when Sirius or the Yemenite Star rose, Libra stayed balanced. And we had a sheep with us, which we left in a desert and which was destroyed by quakes and struck by the fire of lightening. When the path was crossed, the oven overflowed from the conical shape. Then I saw celestial bodies; I joined them, and heard and learned their melodies. My blood vessels, strings, and joints came almost apart. This was my condition until the clouds dispersed and the membrane was torn. I went out of cavities, caves, and chambers, and departed for the fountain of life. Then I saw a huge stone, like a mass of rock, on top of a mountain. I asked the fish in the fountain of life, which were enjoying the shade of that great mass, "What is the huge stone?" One of the fish said: "This is what you have been seeking; it is Mount Sinai, and the stone is your father's hermitage." We asked who those fish were, and it said, "Just like you; you are sons of the same father, and an event befell them just like the one that befell you." We put our hands around their necks, and were delighted to see each other. I then climbed the mountain and saw our father—a great old man from whose illumination the heavens almost ruptured and the earth split open. I was baffled by his face and went towards him. He greeted me. I prostrated myself before him, and I was almost burned by his illuminating light. So I cried and complained about the prison of Kairouan (Qayrawān). He said: "You have nicely freed yourself, but you will have to return to the western prison, since you have not unshackled all your chains." I sobbed before him. He said: "This return is inevitable, but I give you glad tidings of two things: first, when you return, you have the chance to come back, and, second, you will be finally redeemed." I was delighted. He then said: "This is Mount Sinai, and above this residence is my father and your grandfather. In relation to him, I am just like you in relation to me. And we have other ancestors up to a king, who is the greatest ancestor; he is very great and is above the above, and the light of lights, and everything will be corrupted or destroyed except his pure essence." In this condition, I found myself in the western prison all of a sudden. I sobbed and regretted. May God free us from the imprisonment of the nature and the chains of matter. Praise be to God, and peace be upon the Prophet and his family. (Suhrawardī 1375 Sh, 2:273ff.)

An Account of Plato's Allegory of the Cave

Plato says that if we imagine a number of people whose hands and feet have always been shackled by chains, remaining in captivity inside a cave, while there is a short wall behind them and there is fire outside the cave, where people carry things around on the edge of the wall, the inhabitants of the cave can see shadows of those things and their own shadows on the wall before them. Voices of people outside the cave are echoed from the wall, and the inhabitants think that the shadows are talking to each other. They treat all these as realities, thinking that they have knowledge. If we unshackle the chains of one of these captives and lead him to step outside the cave, he will be able to observe what is out there. At first, his eyes will be hurt by the light and he will have trouble seeing the objects shown to him, and thus he wants to go back inside the cave as quickly as possible. At this stage, he thinks of the shadows inside as more real than real objects. Therefore, he should be forced out of the cave in a gradual way: he should initially be shown the shadows or reflections of objects and then the objects themselves; then he should be shown the sky and stars at night, and finally the sun. In this way, he can begin to understand that the sun is not only the cause of the appearance of years, seasons, and all things but also the reason why he could go through different stages all the way to seeing different things. This is the point at which he acquires true knowledge and arrives at the reality. If he then remembers his life in the cave, he will become aware of the knowledge he has obtained; he will understand how different life in the cave is from the real life. However, he needs to return to the cave and keep the company of the other inhabitants of the cave, challenging the interpretations of the shadows offered by them. He will be ridiculed by the other inhabitants of the cave, because his eyes are not accustomed to the darkness inside the cave, and if he insists

upon his interpretation, he might lose his life. Now, take note of this significant point:

... likening the region revealed through sight [i.e., the west of the material, earthly world] to the habitation of the prison, and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun [in virtue of which the world appears, and whose appearance is the appearance of the world and realities]. And if you assume that the ascent and the contemplation of the things above is the soul's ascension to the intelligible region, you will not miss my surmise, since that is what you desire to hear. But [...] in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and that when seen it must point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light [that is, the sun] and itself in the intelligible world [that is, eternal ideas, or Forms] being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this. (Plato 1902, 517b-c).

An Analysis and Comparison of the Main Themes of the Two Allegories

Suhrawardī's allegory of the western exile is a story of the fall of the human rational soul and its imprisonment in the multiplicities and chains of the world of generation and corruption and of the body. The reference to the struggles of the soul in overcoming the obstacles and veils in order to arrive at Mount Sinai, the father's hermitage, and to meet him implies that an axiom or fundamental component of this allegory is the human rational soul; that is, the bright, transcendental, eastern aspect of human existence, or the soul's eternal and other-worldly existence: the soul is in exile away from its home, having fallen in this dark material world, and now it seeks freedom and return to its original place. Thus, it embarks on a journey and struggles in the hope of freedom from this dark prison of the world of the west.

When I travelled with my brother 'Āṣim (Protector)' [that is, the rational aspect of the human being] from Transoxiana [that is, the world of light and illumination, or the world beyond this dark material world] to the west (Maghreb) [that is, the sensible material world] in order to hunt birds at the beach of the green sea, we suddenly ended up in the city of Kairouan (Qayrawān), whose people were oppressors [that is, the world of multiplicities, which is as black as pitch or "qayr (qīr)" and as dark as Plato's cave; in other words, it is the "lowest of the low" (*asfal al-sāfilīn*)] (Suhrawardī 1375 Sh, 2:276-77).¹

This idea figures in Plato's allegory of the cave as well, because the image of chained people in the cave in that allegory signifies human souls imprisoned in the confinement of the material, earthly world. Plato seems to consider the material world and the human physical body as cages in which the transcendental and immaterial soul is captivated, and which prevents it from freedom and obtainment of knowledge, consciousness, true science, truths of the world, perfections, and the eastern celestial world. Plato's words obviously indicate that he has a particular view of the soul and its world, and the soul plays a crucial role in his allegory, as it focuses on the quality of the soul, how it was imprisoned, and how it can be freed, and all other issues are somewhat marginal to this. This is fully comparable with the allegory of the western exile. Furthermore, almost all allegories of Shaykh al-Ishrāq, including that of the western exile, are concerned with a world in which the human is in exile, and which is full of multiplicities, opacity, and

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1. Muslim logicians have defined logic as follows: "Logic is a regulative instrument using which protects (ta'ṣim) the mind from errors in thinking." Thus, logic is a "protector" ('āṣim). Thus, 'Āṣim or Protector here refers to the rational faculty of humans (Muṭahharī 1381 Sh, 1:23).
 2. In his *Kalimāt al-taṣawwuf*, Suhrawardī refers to carnal desires as a dark pit, from which one can save oneself by holding to the divine rope of the Quran (see Suhrawardī 1356 Sh, 82).

darkness. The very title “The Tale of the Western Exile” is suggestive of this, and the journey of the soul and the protagonist of the allegory is indicative of a dark world, from which the traveler of the real light and of the east seeks freedom; that is, freedom from the imprisonment and from a land that is not his true home. It was unfortunate that he and his brother ‘Āṣim (Protector) fell into this dark land of Maghreb (west), where they were imprisoned in a city called Kairouan (Qayrawān), which was pitch dark and its people were oppressors. It was a dark prison, a seductive and deceptive house of ignorance, rife with opacity and dark material attachments, just like Plato’s dark cave of ignorance. This is the fall of the soul from the highest of the high to the lowest of the low—to the sensible, material land, the western world. The soul should struggle strongly to put this trap of ignorance behind itself and arrive at its original place and its eastern homeland—the world of knowledge and spirituality, the world of light and perfection, the world of love and truths. This is manifest in Plato’s allegory of the cave as well, where Plato talks about the material world or the pitch dark cave, in which people are chained in the prison of ignorance and darkness; that is, the bright immaterial souls of humans have fallen from the east of light and illumination, which is their original homeland, to the dark material west of this earthly world. Drawing on his allegory of the cave, in which the material world is likened to a dark cave, Plato has sought to characterize and uncover the nature of this perishable, material, changeable, and valueless world. He symbolizes material and physical attachments as chains with which people inside the cave—the material world of Maghreb—are shackled and which prevent them from embarking on a journey to free themselves from their cage and to achieve truth and perfection. The inhabitants of the cave (that is, imprisoned human souls) take whatever they see in the dark western cave as real and assume that they have achieved knowledge. Those

accustomed to the cave are symbols for human souls deceived by the material sensible world, and accustomed to material and worthless attachments of this world, failing to recognize its worthlessness and limits. Thus, they are deceived by the shadows in the dark cave of this world, accustomed to its suffering, and free from its limits only for few transient moments in their dreams. They are like a person who walks across a vast desert with tight shoes, and is relieved from the pain only during his sleep. To sleep for him is to remove the shoes, and this relieves him from the pressures for few moments (Zarrinkoub 1376 Sh, 261). Thus, only spiritual people, or people of the truth, can apprehend the limits and confinements of the sensible world, and so they look for a way to freedom. To achieve freedom, they finally destroy their individual life so as to construct a vast house well-deserved for their soul and to relieve themselves from the distressing heat of the bathhouse of the world.

Unshackling the chains on the feet of these captives signifies embarking on a spiritual journey, ignoring material faculties and attachments that have chained the soul, and managing to free oneself from these chains and obstacles to perfection. In other words, the journey of the cave's prisoners from a lower place to a higher place is an analogy of the soul and its freedom from the prison of the body, as well as its abandonment of the material world, or the west, and its ascent to the world of *malakūt* or east. The way to arrive at the truth and the higher world of the east is piety and goodness, as is adjudicated by reason. According to Plato, the soul, which is eternal, was imprisoned in the cage of the body. Thus, the body, its material, physical faculties, and material attachments are obstacles and veils, which have shackled the human soul and prevented its journey, ascent, knowledge, perfection, and return to its original home.

Another important component of Shaykh al-Isḥrāq's allegories, including that of the western exile, is a world beyond this material sensible world, which was the original home of the human, and then in a tragic fall, the human soul fell to this western material land, and now it seeks to return to its original homeland. Terms such as "nowhere-land," "Transoxiana," "Yemen," "the right side of the valley (*al-wādi l-ayman*)," "Sheba," and "the world of holiness" are all metaphors for a world beyond the dark material world of the west. They all indicate the existence of an eastern world of light, which is home to immaterial beings and is free of material opacity and darkness.

Now the east has different stages. At one stage, it is the world of images or *malakūt*; at another stage, it is another world beyond the dark material world. Let us take note of some of Shaykh al-Isḥrāq's sayings on "Transoxiana" in the allegory of the western exile. This word is a metaphor for a world beyond Maghreb or the west, and refers to the transcendental dimension of humans. It is interesting to note that, in historical sources, Transoxiana was known as a wealthy, affluent, and beautiful land with noble, righteous, knowledgeable, chivalric, and good-natured people (Gawharin 1347 Sh, 6-11). It might be said that such good features of Transoxiana led Shaykh al-Isḥrāq to zero in on this land as a symbol for its specific form in the imaginal world or *malakūt*. Other points about the world of east are as follows:

[A]t other times Yemeni lights [that is, eastern lights] reached us from the eastern right side, giving us news that delighted us and we yearned for our home [that is, the higher eastern world] ... in a bright moonlit night, we saw a hoopoe¹ which entered through the window with a letter on its beak, coming from the right bank of the valley, which read: "I have come to you from Sheba [a metaphor of the higher eastern world] with certain news." (Suhrawardī 1375 Sh, 2:279-81)

1. A hoopoe with a letter on its beak is an allusion to the Qur'anic story of hoopoe and Solomon (Quran 27:20-29).

In Plato's allegory of the cave, the dark world of the cave, or the west, is also contrasted to another world, immaterial and illuminated, whose existence or manifestation is a cause for the material world. It is an unchangeable and invariant world, which involves no sunset, decline, or darkness, unlike the world of the cave, because it is free of all the opacity of the material world, and it is the eastern world to which Plato refers as the world of Forms. Since the Platonic world of Forms is immaterial and beyond this mundane material world, it can be identified with the east, the original homeland of the soul, the world of knowledge, illumination, light, and true existence. It is a place of truths. Thus, it might be said that an important component of both allegories is a world beyond this earthly, dark, western, and cave-like world, which we call the eastern world.

Another feature over which there is an agreement or proximity between Suhrawardī's allegory of the western exile and Plato's allegory of the cave is the final destination in them. In the allegory of the western exile, the final destination is to arrive at true existence and the truth of existence and reunion with, and annihilation in, that existence, which is the pure truth and the highest and the brightest existence, with no further truth beyond it. It is the only truth of existence—the pure reality of God who is the final goal and the ultimate aim of every traveler of the spiritual journey. It is in light of this principle and this truth that a human being can obtain knowledge, perfection, light, and happiness. In Plato's allegory of the cave, the ultimate goal of a soul captivated in the exile of the dark cave is to achieve the truth. In this allegory, Plato seeks to uncover and reveal what exists beyond all sensible objects in this world; he wants to reveal something he considers to be the principle and essence of everything—a thing the discovery and demonstration of which serve as the foundation for revealing other things searched by

any intellectual and philosopher. Plato seeks to reveal this fundamental essence, which, according to his words and characterizations in the allegory of the cave, is nothing but the “truth” or reality, in virtue of which everything appears or is manifested. This is what he refers to as the Idea of the good. In Plato’s terms, the human soul is involved in material things, just like a chained prisoner who has no power to free himself from the prison, and within the darkness of this sensible world, he finds “truths” that are not indeed true though he wrongly treats them as true and real. When his chains are unshackled and he is freed from the dark prison of this unreal world, the truth will be revealed to him. At first, the light of the truth strikes him as difficult to see and apprehend. However, if he perseveres and finally achieves full-fledged freedom, he can find knowledge in light of this eternal truth, understand the absurdity of his ignorance, and cry for his blind awareness, because the sun of the truth has emancipated him from the chains of ignorance. It is in light of this manifestation that he can find the “truth,” and the bare reality will be revealed to him. In this allegory, Plato seeks to demonstrate that the truth is beyond what we regard as true: the truth cannot be found in this sensible world of perishable and changeable matter. In his view, only forms existing in the world of intelligibles or the world of Forms are true—eternal and invariant truths, and not sensible objects existing in this changeable material world. Plato considers objects in this world as copies of those eternal truths. Above all truths which human beings seek to attain is the Idea of the good—the highest Idea. In Book VI of his *Republic*, Plato provides an allegory of the sun, in which he talks about the Idea of the good as an Idea above all Ideas. Elsewhere, he refers to this as the good or the one: “[Y]ou have often heard that the greatest thing to learn is the idea of good by reference to which just things and all the rest become useful and beneficial” (Plato 1902, 505a). Plato takes the sun as the cause of the

existence and emergence of sensible objects: "The sun, I presume you will say, not only furnishes to visibles the power of visibility but it also provides for their generation and growth and nurture though it is not itself generation" (Plato 1902, 509b), and then regarding the causation of the good for the existence and nature of Ideas, he says: "[T]he objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power" (Plato 1902, 509b). Thus, it might be said that other ideas derive their existence and nature from the Idea of the good. Thus, the cause of their existence is the idea of the good or the one, and this can be a term for the light of lights (*nūr al-anwār*) or the Necessary Being (*wājib al-wujūd*). This is very close to, or comparable with, the pure truth or the mere existence sought by the exiled traveler of the western exile.

Another fundamental theme in the allegory of the western exile is the attainment of perfection and knowledge, as Suhrawardī says:

The hoopoe [a metaphor for inspirations of the Active Intellect (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*)] went before us until the sun [that is, the light of intellect and knowledge] was above our head and we arrived at the edge of the shade [that is, darkness and ignorance], and we boarded the ship, intending to visit the hermitage of our father in Mount Sinai [that is, once we found the light of knowledge, we were capable of traveling to the higher world, which is difficult to climb just like a mountain]. ... Then I saw a lamp [a metaphor for the Active Intellect or the Holy Spirit, which is divine light, apparently referring to the light of knowledge] illuminating all corners of the house with its light [referring to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in virtue of which human souls acquire knowledge, become aware of truths, and find perfection]. (Suhrawardī 1375 Sh, 2:282-89)

He also says:

When the path was crossed, the oven overflowed¹ from the conical shape [that is, the dawn emerged; in other words, the truth manifested itself and emanated its light and knowledge]. Then I saw celestial bodies [that is, I intuited angels or entities in the higher world—a reference to mystical revelations or intuitions on the path towards God]; I joined them and heard and learned their melodies,² and their sounds reverberated in my ears like the sound of a chain drawn across a solid rock. My blood vessels, strings, and joints came almost apart [since I was impressed by hearing those other-worldly songs and melodies]. This was my condition until the clouds dispersed [that is, the veils and obstacles were removed] and the membrane was torn. I went out of cavities, caves, and chambers [that is, I was fully freed from attachments, darkness, and obstacles], and departed for the fountain of life [that is, the eastern world of light, knowledge, and perfection]. . . . I then climbed the mountain [that is, this stage] and saw our father [that is, the Active Intellect or the Holy Spirit]—a great old man [or a great angel or one of the Victorious Lights (*al-anwār al-qāhira*) in the longitudinal class] from whose illumination the heavens almost ruptured and the earth split open [a reference to the fact that the closer angels or intellects are to the origin of the light, or “the light of lights,” the stronger the

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1. The overflow of the oven is interpreted to mean the rise of the dawn (Maybudī 1361 Sh, 4:387).
 2. This is a reference to the music of spheres and whispers of the worship of angels, which were heard by Adam when he was in Heaven. We human beings have also heard them since we have been parts of Adam. However, our exile in this world and our imprisonment in this body have made us forget these melodies. Rūmī says,

We all have been parts of Adam,
we have heard those melodies in Paradise
Although the water and earth (of our bodies) have caused a doubt to fall upon
us,
something of those (melodies) comes (back) to our memory
But since it is mingled with the earth of sorrow,
how should this treble and bass give (us) the same delight? (Zamāni 1377 Sh,
237-38)

It is said that Pythagoras invented principles of music based on harmonious songs of spheres, which he was able to hear because of the purity of his soul and the sharpness of his heart (Karim Zamāni 1382 Sh, 569).

illumination they enjoy]. I was baffled by his face, and I went towards him. He greeted me.¹ I prostrated myself before him, and I was almost burned by his illuminating light. So I cried and complained about the prison of Kairouan (Qayrawān). He said: "you have nicely freed yourself, but you will have to return to the western prison, since you have not unshackled all your chains." I sobbed before him. He said: "This return is inevitable, but I give you glad tidings of two things: first, when you return, you have the chance to come back, and, second, you will be finally redeemed." I was delighted. He then said: "This is Mount Sinai, and above this residence is my father and your grandfather. In relation to him, I am just like you in relation to me. And we have other ancestors up to a king, who is the greatest ancestor; he is very great and is above the above, and the light of lights, and everything will be corrupted or destroyed except his pure essence. (Suhrawardī 1375 Sh, 2:291-96)

It is obvious from all this that when a spiritual traveler overcomes obstacles and the Active Intellect manifests itself to him, he will be blessed by the Active Intellect, and much of his ignorance will disappear. This is where the truth is revealed to him in virtue of the Active Intellect or the guiding angel; veils will disappear and true knowledge will be obtained, and whoever attains knowledge attains perfection *ipso facto*, because with a connection to the Active Intellect, the stages of existence, his place, that of other beings, the light of lights, and the Necessary Being from whom everything else derives its light and existence will be revealed to him, and he will know the origin and the reality of existence and light; he will find that the origin of light and existence and the principle of emanation is nothing but the pure essence of God as the cause of all beings, and all other things come to exist from the light of His existence. If one achieves such awareness through

1. This seems to be the last stage of a mystical traveler's ascent: a stage at which the father or the Active Intellect or the angel close to God greets him, since he managed to struggle and free himself of all the chains and obstacles and return to his father.

intuition, one will obtain such certainty and knowledge that he will become oblivious to himself out of bewilderment, astonishment, and delight, and such perfection will be facilitated in light of this true existence. Thus, there is no doubt that a main theme of this allegory is the obtainment of knowledge and perfection. This is a main theme of Plato's allegory of the cave as well, because Plato does not consider the western material world of the dark cave as an object of knowledge. He seeks true knowledge and awareness in a realm other than this world. For Plato, knowledge can be achieved in two ways: One is via senses through an encounter with the apparent material and sensible world. Such knowledge cannot be deemed genuine, because its object is in constant change and thus cannot be grasped by the human mind. The second is rational knowledge, which has unchangeable and universal entities as its objects—entities outside this world to which Plato refers as Forms or Ideas. Thus, Plato seeks knowledge not in this earthly western world, but in a world beyond it. With his allegory of the cave, he shows the darkness of this world and redirects everyone to the realm of knowledge beyond this material world. It should be noted that although Platonic Forms might be objectionable in this regard, our discussion does not deal with such details—what matters for us is that Plato believes in a world beyond the material world as the world of truths and knowledge as indicated by this allegory. This is why it can be compared to Shaykh al-Ishrāq's view in his allegory of the western exile.

Conclusion

Given the above discussion, we can detect consonance between Plato's allegory of the cave and Suhrawardī's allegory of the western exile, because they share the same fundamental themes and components. Put in a nutshell, the main components and themes underlying the two allegories consist in what follows:

1. The centrality of the soul as the origin of the human, its immateriality, and its original home in both allegories.

2. Both allegories talk about a world in which the soul is captivated; in one allegory, such a world is referred to as “Qayrawān,” and, in the other, as the cave.

3. Both philosophers point to a world abstract from material opacity beyond the material world. For both, this other world is the original home of the soul and is the world of illumination, light, consciousness, knowledge, and perfection. Suhrawardī refers to this world as the world of images or intellects, and Plato refers to it as the world of Forms. These two worlds might not perfectly match each other, but they are comparable, because they both count as worlds beyond the material world.

4. Another theme underlying both allegories is knowledge and how it can be acquired. Both philosophers agree on the true origin of humans, the path towards their perfection, their return to their true home, their knowledge of existential worlds from the lowest to the highest, and what it is like to have true knowledge.

5. Another theme within both allegories is the ultimate goal or destination they look for: Suhrawardī talks about achieving, or approximating to, the true existence or the pure light, and then existential perfections and knowledge of truths of the being, as well as true freedom or emancipation, and Plato talks about the Idea of the good, which is one and goes beyond all Ideas, serving as the sun for the world of intelligibles, in whose light all other Ideas exist and confer knowledge.

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