

## Article

# Escaping Plato's Cave as a Mystical Experience: A Survey in Sufi Literature

Heydar Shadi

Institute for Humanities and Islamic Sciences, 20097 Hamburg, Germany; heydarshadi@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This paper puts forward a mystical reading of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* by comparing it with some allegories from Sufi literature, Islamic mystical tradition. The paper argues that the determining parts of the allegory, such as escaping the cave as the world of shadows; seeing the sun/truth and becoming a philosopher; and the necessity of returning to the cave, have significant similarities to what Sufis have said about their mystical experience and spiritual enlightenment. The paper compares the *Allegory of the Cave* with some similar allegories in Sufi literature, focusing on the allegories of *prison*, *hunting the shadows of a flying bird*, *dying before dying*, and *the elephant in the dark Room* in Rumi's works. After an introduction to the reception of Plato in the Islamic intellectual tradition and different interpretations of the *Allegory of the Cave*, this paper discusses four similarities between these allegories. Finally, the paper supports the mystical reading of Plato's Cave by using Pierre Hadot's thesis on *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, which challenges the sharp dichotomy of philosophy and mysticism in mainstream intellectual historiography.

**Keywords:** Plato's cave; Rumi's *prison*; the allegory of *dying before dying*; the allegory of *hunting the shadows of a flying bird*; Pierre Hadot



**Citation:** Shadi, Heydar. 2022. Escaping Plato's Cave as a Mystical Experience: A Survey in Sufi Literature. *Religions* 13: 970. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100970>

Academic Editor: Stefan Tobler

Received: 30 June 2022

Accepted: 30 August 2022

Published: 14 October 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

As a graduate philosophy student at Tehran University in the late 1990s, together with other secular-minded fellow students, we had difficulties understanding the view of some traditional scholars of philosophy from Qom Seminary about ancient Greek philosophers. They regarded them, specifically Plato, as divine sages and, in some cases, as prophets of the Greeks (cf. [Hasanzāde 'Āmulī 1991](#), pp. 10, 105). Later, I learned that this approach to Greek philosophers is not an exceptional or odd contemporary view. Plato has been considered for centuries by many Muslim scholars as divine and a prophet (cf. [Al-Farabi 1996](#); [Suhrawardi 1999](#), p. 2; [Sadra 1981](#), p. 214). This topic was at that time merely an academic issue for me that gradually faded and was finally absent from the list of my research agenda. However, when I recently read Plato's *Republic* again, I was touched by the explicit mystical and spiritual dimension of Plato's philosophy in general and the *Allegory of the Cave* especially. It seems that the *Allegory of the Cave* depicts more or less a prophetic and mystical experience. However, it is difficult in the modern secular intellectual context to understand the mystical and spiritual interpretation of the *Allegory*. As Plato says in the *Allegory*, there should be a moment, a turning point, to turn the head/mind, to be able to go beyond the 'shadow words' and see the mystical interpretation of the *Allegory*. This paper introduces this mystical interpretation of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* and argues for this reading by showing the clear similarities between the *Allegory of the Cave* and some allegories in the Islamic mystical works, with a focus on Rumi's poetry. The paper's primary goal is not to study the Platonic and Neoplatonic elements in Islamic intellectual history; instead, the aim is to use the similarity of the *Allegory of the Cave* with Sufi allegories to argue for the mystical nature of Plato's Cave. After a brief introduction to the reception of Plato in the Islamic tradition and different interpretations of the *Allegory of the Cave*, I compare the *Allegory of the Cave* to some allegories in the Islamic mystical

tradition, such as *prison, cage, hunting the shadows of a flying bird, and dying before dying*. In the end, Pierre Hadot's thesis on *philosophy as a way of life* is referred to as a supporting idea for the ontological and mystical reading of Plato's Cave.

## 2. The Reception of Plato in the Islamic Tradition

Plato (*Al-Aflātūn*) has been celebrated in the Islamic tradition as a sage (*hakim*) and divine philosopher (*Al-Aflātūn al-Ilāhī*). The famous Muslim philosopher al-Farabi (870–950 CE), for example, wrote a book on the reconciliation of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle under the title of *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle* (Al-Farabi 1996). Suhrawardi (1154–1191 CE), the founder of *Islamic Illuminative Philosophy*, regards Plato besides Hermes, Pythagoras, and Empedocles as the Greek pioneers of illuminative philosophy. He writes in the introduction to his main book *Ḥikmat al-Ishrâq* (Philosophy of Illumination): “In all that I have said about the science of lights and that which is and is not based upon it, I have been assisted by those who have traveled the path of God. This science is the very intuition of the inspired and illumined Plato, the guide and master of philosophy, and of those who came before him from the time of Hermes, the father of philosophers up to Plato's time, including such mighty pillars of philosophy as Empedocles, Pythagoras, and others” (Suhrawardi 1999, p. 2). When Mulla Sadra (1572–1640 CE) talks in his book *al-'Asfār al-'Arba'a* about Greek philosophers, he says: “Among these five great Greeks is Plato the Divine, known for monotheism and wisdom” (Sadra 1981, p. 214). Rumi (1207–1273) analogizes Love to Plato and Galen as a remedy for mental and physical illnesses. He says in the first poem of *Masnawi* (Rumi 1926, vol. 1, verses: 23–24):

Hail, O Love that bringest us good gain—thou that art the physician of all our ills,  
The remedy of our pride and vainglory, our Plato and our Galen!<sup>1</sup>

Plato's image was so positive in the Islamic civilization that even some conservative Muslim scholars who disagreed with Greek philosophy praised Plato as a monotheist believer. For example, Ibn Qayyīm (1292–1350 CE), the famous scholar of the 14th century who is considered one of the precursors of the contemporary radical conservative Salafi school, distinguishes Plato from Aristotle and regards Plato, besides Socrates, as a monotheist believer. One may disagree with this interpretation; however, it shows the positive reception of Plato in the Islamic tradition. Ibn Qayyīm writes (Ibn Qayyīm 2010, pp. 1028–31):

And they [the Greeks] were polytheists and worshiped their idolatry, which was their apparent religion and the religion of their forefathers. Socrates [...] declared his opposition to them in the worship of idols. [...] and that is why his people killed him. And he used to say: ‘We should be content with life and rejoice in death because a person lives to die, and then dies to live.’ Likewise, Plato was known for monotheism, denying idolatry, and proving the incidence of the world. He was Socrates' disciple. [...] And he used to say: ‘And there is no image or scheme in existence except that its likeness/form is with the Creator.’ [...] Plato declared the incidence of the world, as the sages were upon it, and his student Aristotle narrated this about him. However, he disagreed with him in it, claiming that it is eternal, and he was followed by atheists of the philosophers who affiliated with him from different nations.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to this wide reception of Plato in general, the *Allegory of the Cave* has not been famous and well-known in Islamic intellectual history. The only case of the explicit reception of the *Allegory of the Cave* that the author has so far recorded is in Ibn Rushd's commentary on *Republic* (Ibn Rushd 1974, pp. 95–96). We will discuss Ibn Rushd's epistemological interpretation of the Allegory briefly in the next session.

### 3. The Allegory of the Cave and Its Interpretations

Plato's Cave is one of the most famous allegories in the history of philosophy. It is, actually, also a good summary of philosophy. According to the *Allegory of the Cave*, humans are in this world like some people bound in a cave from the beginning of their life. Their hands, feet, and heads are bound so that they can only see the wall in front of them. On the wall, they can see shadows, which appear when creatures pass by behind them. As the shadows are the only things they know, they think they are real. Their whole life revolves around the shadows. When one of the prisoners is freed and makes his way out of the cave, he realizes that the life outside is totally different from the life in the cave, which is just a shadow and a copy of the real world. In the beginning, he has difficulties being outside with the sunlight. Gradually, however, he can see the sun, the Truth. This lucky free person, whom Plato regards as a philosopher, is happy now with what has happened and enjoys being in the real world. He does not wish to return to the cave; however, according to Plato, we should ask him to return to the cave and free his fellows as his debt to society. Nobody wants to believe him when the philosopher returns to the cave and talks about the outside world as the real one. They mock him and accuse him of being ill. When he insists, they even intend to kill him—indeed, as they killed Plato's teacher, Socrates (Plato 1997, Republic, sct. 514a–520a).

There have been many different readings of Plato's Cave. Some have regarded it as a pedagogical process and interpreted it as an emphasis on the vital role of education in training mature individuals and good citizens. Others have interpreted it as a political allegory that regards members of an unjust society as being prisoned in the cave of ignorance. The warders are the politicians and power holders of each society. What Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* teaches us, the political reading suggests, is rebellion and revolution against oppressive rulers. Moreover, it suggests that true political activists or politicians, in the role of the king philosopher, like Socrates, return to the cave and help citizens to have a just life (Diduch and Harding 2018). Iris Murdoch suggests a psychological-ethical reading of the allegory. She holds that the cave is our egocentric understanding of the world, which we step out of by *unselfing*. She writes: "The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness. This is the non-metaphysical meaning of the idea of transcendence to which philosophers have so constantly resorted in their explanations of goodness" (Murdoch [1970] 2013, p. 91).

Ibn Rushd, as was mentioned above, interprets Plato's cave epistemologically, not ontologically. When he explains the passage of the text of the *Allegory* on the difficulties that the philosopher faces at the beginning of his presence out of the cave and the gradual process of his coping with the sunlight and the real world, Ibn Rushd says that that is why Plato suggests learning different sciences/arts as preparation, starting from the easiest—arithmetic. He writes (Ibn Rushd 1974, p. 95):

Just as a man who suddenly goes forth from a cave into the sunlight finds that his eyes are grown dim and that it is impossible for him to look at something, so is it impossible for this class of humans—i.e., those who are disposed to knowledge—that we rush them to inquiry in the sciences since they find it hard to abstract the intelligible and to look at it. The cunning device adopted with them is to lead them upward gradually step by step so as to look at things, first by means of the light of the stars and the moon, to the point that they are able to look at them in the presence of the sun. Just so ought the latter to be led upward gradually step by step, and we direct them [at first] to what is easiest for them to learn. When he investigated which science it is that they ought to begin [their] study with, it became clear to him that it was arithmetic.

Another point that implies Ibn Rushd's reading from the Allegory to be epistemological, not ontological, is his comment on the position of music in education. Ibn Rushd discusses Plato's view about arithmetic as the easiest science that children's education

should start with it. As reasoning for Plato's view, Ibn Rushd adds that 'music is based on the story and it cannot help to train the abstracting faculty of the student'. He writes: "As regards music, the words which are communicated to them by means of it are tales. But a tale does not grant this faculty, that is, that through which man is able to take in the Intelligibles of the theoretical sciences" (Ibn Rushd 1969, p. 198). In this case, apart from the point that Ibn Rushd understands music not merely a mathematical and abstract science, but rather considers music primarily with lyrics. This argumentation reveals also that Ibn Rushd reads the *Allegory of the Cave* epistemologically not ontologically and for spiritual transformation.

The pedagogical dimension of the allegory is indeed evident from the text. Plato says at the beginning of the allegory that he wants to show the role of education in our life. He writes: "Next, I said, compare the effect of education and of the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this: Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling" (Plato 1997, sct. 514a).<sup>3</sup> However, this education is not, this paper suggests, merely about socio-political or vocational education. The education that is here supposed is, as Heidegger calls it, 'ontological education' (Heidegger 1988, p. v; Thomson 2001). The epistemological, political, psychological, and ethical dimensions of the allegory are, this paper holds, sub-dimensions and results of the ontological transformation that the allegory discusses. The allegory indeed depicts the humans' condition that is prisoned by their desires in the dark material life. They can only see the shadow beings until they free themselves from material affairs, escape the cave, become enlightened and see the eternal Good and Truth. The text of the allegory has many elements that call for mystical interpretation. The following sections introduce these mystical elements in the *Allegory of the Cave* with the help of similar allegories in the Sufi tradition. The *Allegory of the Cave* has been interpreted in a mystical way by many Neoplatonic scholars and thinkers in Western intellectual history (Steiner 1997; Yount 2017). This paper supports this reading by using Islamic mystical tradition.

#### 4. Similarities between Plato's Cave and Some Allegories in Sufi Literature

Many similarities can be seen between the *Allegory of the Cave* and some allegories that Muslim mystics have used to express their spiritual enlightenment. This paper discusses the following four similarities: The first common aspect is that this world is a shadow/copy world and that the true world/life is a totally different one. The ordinary/material life is nothing but neglecting the true life and being engaged with shadow and trivial affairs. The second common point is that this world is like a cave or prison in which we humans are imprisoned and it is not easy to step out of the cave. The third common point between Plato's Cave and the discussed Sufi allegories is that we, humans are ignorant about our condition in this world (prisoned, exiled) and do not wish to step outside the prison to return home. The fourth and final similarity of the allegories to be discussed is that when somebody is released from the prison of the world, they do not like to return to the cave. However, the philosopher/enlightened must return to the cave and help their fellow prisoners.

##### 4.1. Shadow World: Discussing and Hunting the Shadows

A very explicit similarity between Plato's allegory and Sufis' narratives about their mystical enlightenment is regarding this world and life as a shadow or copy. This idea is evident in Plato's allegory. According to the allegory, the people in the cave know just the shadows on the wall. "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 throughout life?" (sct. 515). Sufi literature is also very rich in this regard in that it considers this world and life as a shadow of a real; a secondary of a primary; a copy of an original; a dream of real life. In the metaphor of *Hunter of The Shadows of a Flying Bird*, Rumi depicts a person who tries to hunt a bird, but he shoots the shadows of the flying bird. Rumi analogizes indeed

a person who seeks happiness in material and worldly things to a person who mistakes the real with a copy and devotes himself to hunting the shadows of a flying bird, a foolish effort that inevitably ends in nothing but exhaustion and an empty quiver (Rumi 1926, vol. 1, verses: 417–21):

The bird is flying on high, and its shadow is speeding on the earth, flying like a bird:

Some fool begins to chase the shadow, running (after it) so far that he becomes powerless (exhausted),

Not knowing that it is the reflexion of that bird in the air, not knowing where is the origin of the shadow.

He shoots arrows at the shadow; his quiver is emptied in seeking (to shoot it):

The quiver of his life became empty: his life passed in running hotly in chase of the shadow.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.2. The Material and Shadow World as a Cave and a Prison

In both the *Allegory of the Cave* and Sufi tradition, the material world/life is nothing but an unpleasant place to be named a dark cave or a prison, where we humans are bound, and from which we should free ourselves and escape. At the beginning of *Republic's* chapter 7, when Plato begins to discuss the cave allegory and depicts the imprisoned individuals in the cave, the interlocutor, Glaucon, says: "It's a strange image you're describing, and strange prisoners." Socrates replies: "They're like us" (sct. 515a). Similarly, this material world/life is regarded in Sufi literature as a prison, a cage, or a well, where our souls are imprisoned and bound. In the following poem, Rumi sees this world/life as a prison we should escape by digging deep. He says in *Masnavi* (Rumi 1926, vol. 1, verse: 982):

This world's a prison, we're locked up inside, to free yourself dig all the way outside!<sup>5</sup>

Digging deep can be interpreted as hard spiritual exercises that should be tackled in order to control our material desires and our own ego which are indeed the chains that bind our soul in the prison of the world. In another case, Rumi compares the breath that we take to the wind; as the wind extracts the water that is confined and imprisoned in a pond and carries it little by little back home, so is the breath that takes the human soul little by little and carries it away from 'this world's prison' to the home (Rumi 1926, vol. 1, verses: 879–81).

If water is imprisoned in a tank, the wind sucks it up, for it (the wind) belongs to the original (source):

It sets it free, it wafts it away to its source, little by little, so that you do not see its wafting;

And our souls likewise this breath (of ours) steals away, little by little, from the prison of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Another Sufi poet, Humām-i Tabrizi (1238–1312 CE), expresses this meaning by the metaphor of a cage (Humām-i Tabrizi 1972, ghazal no. 142):

I am a bird from heaven, not from the soil world, they made a cage out of my body for two or three days<sup>7</sup>

In another poem, Rumi compares the world (earth and sky) to an apple and human individuals to worms inside the apple. The worm that knows there is a world outside the apple cannot remain calm and attempts to exit the apple. The apple cannot bear the movement of the awakened-worm, and spoils (Rumi 1926, vol. 4, verses: 1870–73).

Thou art as a worm in the midst of the apple and art ignorant of the tree and the gardener.

The other worm' too is in the apple, but its spirit is outside, bearing the banner aloft.

Its (the worm's) movement splits the apple asunder: the apple cannot endure that shock.

Its movement has rent (all) veils: its form is (that of) a worm, but its reality is a dragon.<sup>8</sup>

The famous allegory of the *elephant in the dark room* or the *elephant and the blind People* aims to convey the same message. The allegory of the *elephant in the dark room* which can be found in the works of many Muslim scholars and seemingly has an Indian background depicts an elephant in a dark room, where people are attempting to identify this new animal by touching it. Each person describes the elephant according to the different parts of the elephant that they touch, using words such as 'water-pipe', 'fan', 'pillar', and 'throne'. Rumi says at the end that if there was a candle in their hands, they could see the elephant and the differences would disappear (Rumi 1926, vol. 3, verses: 1259–68):

The elephant was in a dark house: some Hindús had brought it for exhibition.

In order to see it, many people were going, everyone, into that darkness.

As seeing it with the eye was impossible, (each one) was feeling it in the dark with the palm of his hand.

The hand of one fell on its trunk: he said, "This creature is like a water-pipe."

The hand of another touched its ear: to him it appeared to be like a fan.

Since another handled its leg, he said, "I found the elephant's shape to be like a pillar."

Another laid his hand on its back: he said, "Truly, this elephant was like a throne."

Similarly, whenever anyone heard (a description of the elephant), he understood (it only in respect of) the part that he had touched.

On account of the (diverse) place (object) of view, their statements differed: one man entitled it "dál," another "alif." If there had been a candle in each one's hand, the differences would have disappeared from their words.<sup>9</sup>

Rumi concludes that sensual knowledge is like the palm of a hand—it cannot cover the whole reality (Rumi 1926, vol. 3, verse: 1269):

The eye of sense-perception is only like the palm of the hand: the palm hath not power to reach the whole of him (the elephant).<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.3. In Neglect and Sleep, Nobody Wants to Leave the Cave/Prison

Another characteristic of the people in the cave, according to Plato, is their ignorance and their resistance to the truth. "Then the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts" (sct. 515c). According to Sufi teachings, humans are in neglect (*ghaflat*) and consider this world and life as real. An allegory that is used in the Sufi literature to say that we are in neglect about the real world is comparing this life to sleep. There is a famous *hadith* that says: "People are asleep, when they die, they wake up"<sup>11</sup> (Mulla Sadra 2004, p. 325). However, some people die in this life and wake up from the ignorance of sleep. This insight is probably the meaning of a *hadith* that calls, paradoxically, for people to "die before dying!" (Mulla Sadra 2004, p. 458).<sup>12</sup> It means then dying from the material and shadow life. This insight is expressed beautifully by replacing "die" with "life" in the Gospel when Jesus says to a man named Nicodemus: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." When Nicodemus asks: "How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" Jesus replies: "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (Gospel of John n.d.). This passage

of John's Gospel has been well-received in the Islamic spiritual literature. 'The famous Sufi, 'Ayn al-Qūḍāt al-Hamadhānī (1098–1131 CE), for example, refers to this passage of the Gospel and talks about man's two births: the first one from the mother and the second from himself. He writes: "In another place He [God through Jesus] says: 'He who was not born twice will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.' He says: the wayfarer must be born twice. He should once be born through his mother so that he can see himself and this perishing world. And he should once be born of himself, so that he can see God and that everlasting world" ('Ayn al-Qūḍāt al-Hamadhānī 1991, pp. 319–20, sct. 419; see also: Ibn Arabi 2010, p. 125; Mulla Sadra 2004, pp. 361, 417).<sup>13</sup> Ibn Qayyīm (1292–1350 CE) also narrates this passage from Gospel and adds: "It is mentioned about the Messiah, peace be upon him, that he said, 'O Children of Israel, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven until you are born twice.' I heard Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah, may God have mercy on him, mentions this and explains that birth is of two types, one of them is this known and the second is the birth of the heart and soul and their exit from the placenta of the soul and the darkness of nature" (Ibn Qayyīm 1973, p. 69). Ibn Qayyīm uses "placenta" as another metaphor for the material and shadow world. If somebody is not born a second time, he remains for his whole life in the darkness of ego and sensual desires—in Plato's words, this is in the cave and shadow world. Rumi indeed combines both these images, e.g., spiritual enlightenment as dying and birth, in a single poem where he says (Rumi 1995, poem no. 636):

"Die, in order to be born.

Die, die, die in this love, when you die in this love you get souls/life.

Die, die, and do not fear the saddle of death, if you get out of this earth you get the Heavens.

Die, die, and breathe, that this breath is closed and you are like that.

Take an ax to the prison hole, because you broke the prison, you are all kings and princes.

Die, die, go to the beautiful shah, you died on Shah Cho, you are all kings and martyrs.

Die, die and climb the cloud saddle, when the saddle cloud rises, all of you will die.

Silence Silence Silence is the tail of death, it is also of life, do not fly silent now.<sup>14</sup>

If we use the cave allegory as an interpretative tool to understand this view of life and death, we can say that dying before dying means emerging from the cave and dying from the shadow life. The second birth—or as Jesus calls it, the birth from self—is emerging from the cave and occupying the true and eternal life. These metaphors of life and death are also in connection with a saying from Socrates that defines philosophy as learning how to die. Plato narrates from Socrates in *Phaedo* (sct. 67e) in this regard: "In fact, Simmias, he said, those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying, and they fear death least of all men". Indeed, through philosophy and escaping the cave, we die (from the shadow world) and are born again—a new birth that enables us to overcome the enigma and fear of physical death. Plato saw this type of life and being fearless about physical death in the life of his mentor, Socrates. This concept was so central to Plato's philosophy that he wrote about the last hours and the death of Socrates in four different works: *Phaedo*, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*. This is also why Sufis talk differently and fearlessly about death and even welcome it. Rumi, for example, says that he will hug death (Rumi 1995, poem no. 1326):

If death is brave, tell him to approach me—I will hug him, tight and tight

I will take from him an eternal life—He will take from me a worn-out cassock<sup>15</sup>

Or he addresses his friends about his death and asks them not to be sad when he dies because the death is not separation but rejoining (Rumi 1995, poem no. 911):

On the day of my demise, as my casket leaves/Don't you think for this world my heart grieves  
 Don't you cry for me, don't say, "Pity! Pity!" /Falling into the demon's pit, that's the real pity  
 When you see my dead body, don't say "Gone! Gone!" /That's my day of meeting, time of uniting with the one  
 As you put me into the grave, don't say "Bye! Bye!" /The body-pit is the [falling] curtain for men of the sky  
 As you watched the downing, so behold the rising/What harm shall moon and sun get from the hiding?  
 It looks setting to you, yet it's [really] a sunrise/The jailing of gravestone is the soul's liberating rise  
 Every seed that fell into the ground, did it not later grow? /Should the seed of human be any different to you?  
 Never a bucket went down a well that didn't come up full/Who needs to wail now on the Josef's well of the soul?  
 As lips shut on this side, open them on the other side/As there, on the air of 'no there', your fanfare will reside<sup>16</sup>

This is to some extent comparable to Socrates' approach to his death. He did not fear physical death; not only did he not intend to escape prison and death, but he also rejected the help that his friends offered. This is also comparable to a tradition in Sufism in which the death of a Sufi is called *'urs* (wedding), because the Sufi rejoins his/her beloved.

#### 4.4. No Awakened Person Wishes to Return to the Cave; However, They Must Return

Another similarity between Plato's allegory of the cave and mystical experience is that the person who has managed to escape the cave and reach the outside world is delighted with his new condition and does not desire to return to the cave. Plato describes this situation in these words: "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?" (sct. 516c). "It isn't surprising that the ones who get to this point are unwilling to occupy themselves with human affairs" (sct. 517c). Then, Socrates continues to explain why the person who has escaped the cave does not wish to come back—because their sophisticated activities and highest honors and praises are nothing but discussion and competition regarding the shadows: 'which one comes next'; 'who remembers more shadows', and so on:

"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 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, "and go through any sufferings rather than share their opinions and live as they do?" (sct. 516c-d)

Similarly, in Sufi tradition, there has also been the opinion that after enlightenment and unveiling the Truth, the Sufi does not desire to return to the creature/people. Muhammad Iqbal quotes Abdul Quddūs of Ganguhi (1456–1537), a Sufi from the subcontinent, who says if he had Prophet Mohammad's journey to Heaven (*mi'rāj*) he would not return to this world: "Muhammad of Arabia ascended the highest Heaven and returned. I swear by God that if I had reached that point, I should never have returned" (Iqbal 2013, p. 99). In Sufi tradition, the spiritual journey is multiple journeys, and the journey to God also has a return phase. There are different accounts of the phases of the spiritual journey in



Sufism, but a famous one talks of four stages, which is also reflected in the title of Mulla Sadra's main book *Al-'Asfār al-'Arba'a* (The Four Journeys). These are I. The journey from the creature (*khalq*) to the Truth (*Haqq*) or Creator. II. The journey in the Truth with the Truth. III. The journey from the Truth to the creature (*khalq*) with the Truth. IV. The journey from the creature to the creature with the Truth" (Zamaniha 2022, p. 133). Some Muslim scholars have regarded the prophets as mystics who have completed all four journeys.

Although an enlightened person in Sufi tradition and Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* may prefer to enjoy his/her spiritual and enlightened life and would not wish to return to the earthly life, in both traditions, he/she *must* return. Plato says that the philosophers must return and go down to the cave, in order to free their fellow people, because they have benefited from the facilities of their society in order to escape the cave: "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 must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the others" (sct. 520b-c).

Some scholars have interpreted the book *Republic* as the result of Plato's return to the cave. The *Republic* begins with "I went down" (sct. 327a). This is indeed the return of Socrates to the Cave. He circulates among the people of Athens to tell them about the Truth/Good and what he has seen outside of the Cave.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Differences between Mystical Experience in Sufi Tradition and Cave Allegory

Mystical experience in Sufi tradition is similar to the escape from the cave that Plato describes in the *Allegory of the Cave* as a philosophical experience. However, there are also differences between these two narratives. For example, while education, namely liberal arts, body training, and dialectic, are essential in preparation for escaping the cave and becoming a philosopher/enlightened in Plato's philosophy, in Sufi tradition, the role of the spiritual master is central.

Another difference can be seen in the usage of the cave, unlike in Plato's allegory, the cave is considered an educational tool both in Sufi and in the Islamic prophetic tradition. Having an isolated life, at least for a while, and staying in a cave, literally not metaphorically, is regarded in Sufi tradition as a part of the way. We cannot find this in Plato's philosophy. In the Islamic and Sufi tradition, the cave (*kahf*) is not used for analogizing the human's condition in the material world; rather, the cave is used as an educational tool and place for spiritual enlightenment in Islamic and Sufi tradition. In some spiritual and intellectual cultures, including Sufism, for the enlightenment, staying for a while in a cave is recommended. After an isolated life in the darkness that gives you a chance for contemplation, you may be able to see the inner light. This tradition, which is often called *'arba'īn* (Arabic word for forty), lasts forty days. This is also narrated in the life of Prophet Mohammad. He received his first revelation in the *Hirā* cave in the *Nūr* mountains near Mecca, after staying for a while there. The fact that the cave is regarded positively and as a tool for attaining enlightenment may also explain why there has been no wide reception of the cave allegory in the Islamic tradition. There are, as discussed earlier, many similar metaphors such as *prison*, *cage*, and *well* which are used frequently in Islamic mystical literature; the cave has not been used as a metaphor for this world.

### 5.2. Explanation Models

The discussed similarity between Plato's cave allegory and mystical experience can be explained in different ways. The explanation of this similarity is not the primary aspect of this paper and needs independent work. However, for further research, it may be useful to mention some possible explanations. One explanation is to regard this similarity as the influence of Plato's thought among Muslim mystics. As we discussed at the beginning of the paper, Plato was for Muslim scholars well known, and he was celebrated among Muslims as a sage and divine philosopher. However, the cave allegory itself has not been widely received in Islamic tradition. Another explanation is to regard both Plato and

Muslim intellectuals as the consumer of a third original source. This may be preferred by those who regard the Asian (Mesopotamian, Egyptian) sources of Greek culture and philosophy. Some argue that early Greek philosophers, especially Pythagoras and Plato, traveled to Asia. A third explanation would be the independent phenomena, among which similarities are found due to the universality of the mystical and spiritual experiences. According to this model, as we may find similarities in other aspects of human life such as sheltering or nutrition, there can also be similar spiritual experiences and expressions. It may be interesting to know that the Koran also contains passages that resemble Plato's cave. As Victoria R. Holbrook has remarked in her fascinating paper, verse 8 of 36. Sura, which talks about the rejection of the Prophet's invitation to faith by people, is similar to Plato's cave (Holbrook 2021).

### 5.3. Pierre Hadot's Thesis on Philosophy and Mystical Interpretation of Cave Allegory

The mystical interpretation of Plato's cave allegory can be supported by Pierre Hadot's theses on philosophy as a way of life. Criticizing the currently dominant practice of philosophy as a merely discursive and argumentative intellectual activity, Hadot claims in his book *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Hadot 1995) that philosophy was in its formation and early phase in the ancient era. Moreover, it was not just an intellectual activity that we now find in philosophy departments, but it was more a significant element of life and an ontological transformation. Hadot claims that philosophy later became a maid for other disciplines, and in the Western world, it partly survived in the monasteries. This claim may be understood by an anecdote from Suhrawardi. In his book *Talwihāt*, Suhrawardi talks about his dream, where he asks Aristotle about knowledge. In the end, he says: "Then he began to praise his teacher, Plato, in which I was puzzled. I said: Has any of the philosophers of Islam reached him? He said: No, not to one-thousandth of his rank. Then I mentioned a group I know them. When he did not pay attention, I referred to Abu Yazīd al-Bastāmī and Abu Muhammad Sahl bin Abdullah al-Tustari [two famous Sufis from the 9th century] and their likes. It is as if he was rejoicing and said, "Those are the true philosophers and sages, they did not stop at the official knowledge, but rather they crossed over to the present, connected, and intuitive knowledge" (Suhrawardi 2018, pp. 87–88). Pierre Hadot's thesis can be used as a tool to study Islamic intellectual history, especially illuminative philosophy and Sufism as the continuity of the original understanding of philosophy as a way of life and ontological transformation.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper's aim was to offer a mystical interpretation of Plato's cave allegory. By introducing several essential similarities between the *Allegory of the Cave* and some allegories such as *prison*, *cage*, and *hunting the flying bird*, which Muslim mystics have used to share their spiritual experience, this paper argued that what Plato depicts in the *Allegory of the Cave* is indeed a Greek version of mystical enlightenment: regarding the material world/life as a secondary and shadow world; considering this shadow world as a cave and prison that humans are chained to without being conscious of the fact; the possibility of escaping from this cave/prison; and, finally, the joy of stepping out of the cave and unwilling to return. However, the ethical/ontological necessity of returning to the cave/society and helping fellow humans/prisoners to escape are some of the main similarities that the paper discussed in some detail. This mystical and ontological reading of Plato's cave has a mutually supporting relationship with Pierre Hadot's thesis about philosophy as a way of life and ontological transformation.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The English translations of all quotations from *Masnavi* are from Reynold A. Nicholson (Rumi 1926). Arabic and Persian originals of the quotations are given in the footnotes.

شاد باش ای عشق خوش سودای ما - ای طیبیب جمله علت‌های ما  
ای دوی نخوت و ناموس ما - ای تو افلاطون و جالینوس ما

<sup>2</sup> The reception of the ancient Greek philosophers in the Islamic civilization is not limited to intellectual circles. They also have a rich reception in general culture and society. Plato and Aristotle have been the names of individuals, as well as places and figures of folkloric stories. See for example: (Hasluck 1911).

<sup>3</sup> All citations of Plato's works (given with the section numbers) are from: (Plato 1997).

<sup>4</sup>

مرغ بر بالا و زیر آن سایه‌اش - می‌دود بر خاک پران، مرغ و ش  
ابلهی صیاد آن سایه شود - می‌دود چندان، که بی مایه شود  
بی خبر کآن عکس آن مرغ هواس - بی خبر که اصل آن سایه کجاست  
تیر اندازد به سوی سایه او - ترکشش خالی شود از جست و جو  
ترکش عمرش تهی شد، عمر رفت - از دویدن در شکار سایه تفت

<sup>5</sup>

این جهان زندان و ما زندانیان - حفره کن زندان و خود را و راهان

<sup>6</sup>

آبها در حوض اگر زندانیست - باد نشفش می‌کند کار کانیست  
اندک اندک تا نبینی بردنش - می‌رهاند می‌برد تا معدنش  
وین نفس جانهای ما را همچنان - اندک اندک دزد از حبس جهان

<sup>7</sup>

مرغ باغ ملکوتیم نیم از عالم خاک - دو سه روزی قفسی ساخته اند از بدنم

<sup>8</sup>

آسمانها و زمین یک سیب دان - کز درخت قدرت حق شد عیان  
تو چه کرمی در میان سیب در - وز درخت و باغبانی بی‌خبر  
آن یکی کرمی دگر در سیب هم - لیک جانش از برون صاحب‌علم  
جنیش او وا شکافد سیب را - بر نتابد سیب آن آسیب ر  
ابر دریده جنیش او پرده‌ها - صورتش کرمست و معنی ازدها

<sup>9</sup>

پیل اندر خانه تاریک بود - عرضه را آورده بودندش هنود  
از برای دیدنش مردم بسی - اندر آن ظلمت همی‌شد هر کس  
دیدنش با چشم چون ممکن نبود - اندر آن تاریکیش کف می‌بسود  
آن یکی را کف به خرطوم او فتاد - گفت همچون ناودانست این نهاد  
آن یکی را دست بر گوشش رسید - آن برو چون بادبیزن شد پدید  
آن یکی را کف چو بر پایش بسود - گفت شکل پیل دیدم چون عمود  
آن یکی بر پشت او بنهاد دست - گفت خود این پیل چون تختی بدست  
همچنین هر یک به جزوی که رسید - فهم آن می‌کرد هر جا می‌شنید  
از نظر که گفتشان شد مختلف - آن یکی دالش لقب داد این الف

<sup>10</sup>

در کف هر کس اگر شمعی بدی - اختلاف از گفتشان بیرون شدی

<sup>11</sup>

الناس نیام اذا ماتوا انتبهوا

<sup>12</sup>

موتوا قبل ان تموتوا

<sup>13</sup>

لن يلج ملکوت السموات من لم يولد مرتین

<sup>14</sup>

بمیرید بمیرید در این عشق بمیرید - در این عشق چو مردید همه روح پذیرید  
بمیرید بمیرید و زین مرگ مترسید - کز این خاک بر آید سماوات بگیرید  
بمیرید بمیرید و زین نفس ببرید - که این نفس چو بندست و شما همچو اسیرید  
یکی تیشه بگیرید پی حفره زندان - چو زندان بشکستید همه شاه و امیرید  
بمیرید بمیرید به پیش شه زیبا - بر شاه چو مردید همه شاه و شهیرید  
بمیرید بمیرید و زین ابر بر آید - چو زین ابر بر آید همه بدر منیرید  
خمشید خمشید خموشی دم مرگست - هم از زندگیت اینک ز خاموش نغیرید

15

مرگ اگر مرد است گو پیش من آی - تا در آغوش بگیرم تنگ؛ تنگ  
من از او جانی ستانم جاودان - او ز من دلقی ستاند رنگ رنگ

16

به روز مرگ چو تابوت من روان باشد - گمان میر که مرا درد این جهان باشد  
برای من مگری و مگو دریغ دریغ - به دوح دیو درافتی دریغ آن باشد  
جنازه ام چو ببینی مگو فراق فراق - مرا وصال و ملاقات آن زمان باشد  
مرا به گور سپاری مگو وداع وداع - که گور پرده جمعیت جنان باشد  
فرودن چو بدیدی برآمدن بنگر - غروب شمس و قمر را چرا زبان باشد  
تو را غروب نماید ولی شروق بود - لحد چو حبس نماید خلاص جان باشد  
کدام دانه فرورفت در زمین که نرسد - چرا به دانه انسانیت این گمان باشد  
کدام دلو فرورفت و پر برون نامد - ز چاه یوسف جان را چرا فغان باشد  
دهان چو بستنی از این سوی آن طرف بگشا - که های هوی تو در جو لامکان باشد

## References

- Al-Farabi, Abū Naṣr. 1996. *Kitab Al-Jam' Bayna Ra'yay Al-Hakimayn*. Edited by Ali bu Mulham. Beirut: Maktab al-Hilal, English translation: "The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle". In Abū Naṣr Al-Farabi. *Alfarabi, The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*. Translated by Charles Butterworth. Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 2001, pp. 115–68.
- ʿAyn al-Qūḍāt al-Hamadānī. 1991. *Tamhūdāt*. Edited by ʿAfif ʿUsayrān. Tehran: Manūchehrī, English translation by Firoozeh Papan-Matin. *Beyond Death: The Mystical Teachings of ʿAyn Al-Qūḍāt Al-Hamadānī*. Brill, 2010.
- Diduch, Paul J., and Michael P. Harding, eds. 2018. *Socrates in the Cave: On the Philosopher's Motive in Plato*. Berlin: Springer.
- Gospel of John. n.d. The Holy Bible, Berean Study Bible. Available online: <https://biblehub.com/bsb/john/3.htm> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Edited with an Introduction by Arnold I. Davidson. Translated by Michael Chase. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hasanzāde ʿĀmulī, Hasan. 1991. *Qurān, Būrhān, va ʿIrfān az Ham Judāyī Nadārānd*. (The Koran, Philosophy, and Mysticism are not separated). Tehran: Muʿassese-yi Muṭālīʿāt-i Farhangī.
- Hasluck, Frederick William. 1911. Plato in the Folk-Lore of the Konia Plain. *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 18: 265–69. [CrossRef]
- Heidegger, Martin. 1988. *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit: Zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet*. Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, vol. 34.
- Holbrook, Victoria. 2021. Plato, fetters round the neck, and the Quran. *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* 4: 27–45. [CrossRef]
- Humām-i Tabrizi. 1972. *Dīwān-i Humām-i Tabrizi*. Edited by Rashid Eyvazi. Tabriz: University of Tabriz, Faculty of Humanities.
- Ibn Arabi. 2010. *Tafsīr al-Qurān al-Karīm*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya.
- Ibn Qayyīm. 1973. *Madīrij al-Sālikīn bayna ʿIyyāka Naʿbudu va ʿIyyāka Nastaʿīn*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabi, vol. 3.
- Ibn Qayyīm. 2010. *Ighathat al-lahfān min maṣāyid al-shayṭān (Aid for the Yearning One in Resisting the Shayṭān)*. Mecca: Dar ʿĀlam al-Fawāid.
- Ibn Rushd. 1969. *Averroes' Commentary on Plato's Republic*. Edited, with an Introduction, Translation and Notes, by EIJ Rosenthal. Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press.
- Ibn Rushd. 1974. *Averroes on Plato's "Republic"*. Edited by R. Lerner. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, vol. 145.
- Iqbal, Mohammad. 2013. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Murdoch, Iris. 2013. *The Sovereignty of Good*. Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge. First published 1970.
- Plato. 1997. *Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Rumi. 1926. *Masnawi*. Translated and edited by Reynold A. Nicholson. Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press.
- Rumi. 1995. *Diwan-i Shams*. Edited by Furuzanfar. Tehran: Nashr-i Rād.
- Sadra, Mulla. 1981. *al-Ḥikmat al-Mūtaʿālīya fi al-asfār al-qlīyya al-ʿarbaʿa*. Beirut: Dar ʿĪhyaʿ al-turath, vol. 5.
- Sadra, Mulla. 2004. *Sharḥ-i Uṣūl-i al-Kāfī*. Tehran: Muʿassisi-yi Taḥqīqāt va Muṭālīʿāt-i Farhangī, vol. I.
- Steiner, Rudolf. 1997. Plato as a Mystic. In *Christianity as Mystical Fact*. Hudson: SteinerBooks, pp. 27–42.
- Suhrawardi, Shihab al-Din. 1999. *The Philosophy of Illumination. A New Critical Edition of the Text of Hikmat al-Ishraq*. With English trans., notes, commentary and intro. John Walbridge and Hossein Ziai. Provo: Brigham Young University Press.
- Suhrawardi, Shihab al-Din. 2018. Al-Talwīḥāt al-Lawḥīyya and al-ʿArshīyya. In *Muwsūʿat Muṣannafāt al-Suhrawardi*. Edited by Muhsin ʿAqil. Beirut: Dar Rawāfīd.
- Thomson, Iain. 2001. Heidegger on ontological education, or: How we become what we are. *Inquiry* 44: 243–68. [CrossRef]
- Yount, David J. 2017. *Plato and Plotinus on Mysticism, Epistemology, and Ethics*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Zamaniha, Hossein. 2022. Mulla Sadra's Four Journeys as the Four Levels of Self Consciousness. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding (IJMMU)* 9: 132–38.