The "image" of the cave and the constant temptation to correct Plato: Benjamin Jowettt as an example[1]

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Abstract:
Translations of the first chapters of Book VII of Plato's *Republic*, in which he introduces the well-known image of the cave, εἰκών, reveals an astonishing and intriguing variety of interpretations of this image: "allegory", "myth", fable", "parable", "simile" and "comparison", to cite but a few. Taking as an example the work by Benjamin Jowett, the Victorian translator of Plato, remarkable for its textual accuracy and by means of a close analysis of the terms related to the image, this paper insists on the need to neither interpret nor correct the great ideal philosopher, in this case revealing some evident contradictions that arise when this advice is not followed and pointing out the occasional use of terms extraneous to the Platonic lexicon such as "allegory".

Keywords: Plato, Plato's cave, image, allegory, translations of Plato's texts

"*Allegory*", "*myth*", "*fable*", "*parable*", "*simile*", "*analogy*", "*comparison*" and "*image*"[3] are terms that philologists and writers commonly use to refer to Plato's cave, described in the first chapters of book VII of his *Republic* (514a-517d). Needless to say, translators must take into account the logical and evident semantic drift in the meaning of words, even those most seemingly univocal. Nonetheless, such an interpretative latitude in dealing with a term used by Socrates is certainly surprising, because he was truly fond of defining things according to what they are in themselves. There of course can be no objection to the frequent abandonment of literal translation whenever, for a variety of reasons, the inevitable betrayal called "translation" appears to demand it. However, we must note that for correcting Plato must always be a powerful one. Plato is likely to be interpreted based on non-Platonic notions, that is, some translators may boldly that "Plato says this, but in fact he means something different". These words quite clearly convey my thoughts regarding such boldness, but, if in order to defend my philological posture I have chosen as an example the great Victorian translator of Plato,

[1] This article was published in *Estudios Clásicos. Traducir a los clásicos.* Anejo 1, 2010, 105-115.
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[3] Regarding "myth", remember, for instance, the Italian edition of Findlay's texts on the cave, with an introduction by G. REALE: *Findlay, John Niemeyer. Il mito della caverna.* Milán 2003, or D. DWINCKLEAR, "La question de l'initiation dans le mythe de la Caverne", *Revue de Philosophie Ancienne* 2, 1993, pp. 159-75. Regarding "fable": J. J. MARTÍNEZ, *La fábula de la caverna. Platón y Nietzsche.* Barcelona 1991. Regarding "allegory": D. HALL, "Interpreting Plato's Cave as an Allegory of the Human Condition", *Apeiron* 14, 1980, pp. 74-86. Regarding "analogy": C. STRANG, "Plato's Analogy of the Cave", *OSAP* 4, 1986, pp. 19-34. Regarding the rest of the terms, see, page after page, the bibliographical references in the footnotes of this contribution and, bearing in mind its title, it is certainly worth mentioning: G. CASSERTANO, "La Caverne: entre analogie, image, connaissance et praxis", in M. DIXSAUT (ed.), *Études sur la République de Platon 2*, Paris 2005, pp. 39-70.

Benjamin Jowett, is precisely because, despite his initial efforts to preserve the accuracy of translation of the words of the Athenian philosopher, in the end he cannot or is unable to avoid interpreting Plato's intentions, whereas in my opinion, the inner logic of the text and of the translation itself advise against doing so. Thus, without further introduction, here follows my analysis.

Indeed, Jowett seems to opt in principle for strict accuracy in the translation of the Platonic text. Socrates asks Glaucon for an act of imagination following his suggestions: ἀπείκασον (514a1)[4], and Jowett translates: "let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened"[5]. We could reproach him –and probably should- for turning the second person imperative into the first person, since Socrates certainly has in mind what he is asking, and it is Glaucon who must obey his master's order. In any case, the noun "*figure*" –as well as the verb "*to figure*"- clearly denotes "image or representation"[6]. Following Jowett, it is Socrates and not Glaucon who creates this image, almost as if he had painted a picture and was going to explain it in public, while it is Glaucon who must superimpose the image on the intangible screen of his brain. In any case, Socrates now gives –and twice- a logical order, ἰδὲ (514a2 y 514b4, "look, see"), an order that Jowett translates coherently as "behold" and "you will see". The second imperative has become a future tense, but the translator has respected the logical physical contemplation of the image, although it is made of intangible material. Glaucon, then, also answers logically, using the present tense of the indicative mode: ὁρῶ (514b7, which Jowett translates with acceptable accuracy as "I see" and "do you see..?".

Therefore, the intangible screen in Glaucon's brain is now occupied by those persons and objects suggested by Socrates, and Glaucon is truly astonished: "ἄτοπον εἰκόνα" (515a4, "strange image"), he says, but Socrates replies: "ὁμοίους ἡμῖν" (515a5, "like to us")[7]. Here Jowett continues to opt for strict accuracy, translating the phrases as: "strange image", "strange prisoners" and "like ourselves"[8]. In fact, the act of

[4] I use the edition by J. BURNET, *Platonis Opera*, vol. 4, Oxford 1984 (1901, 1ª ed.). All the Greek quotations and the numbers in brackets correspond to this edition. All these quotations are in agreement with the text of Stallbaum's edition of Plato used by B. Jowett.

[5] B. JOWETT, *The Dialogues of Plato translated into English. Vol. 3.* Oxford 1924 (1871, 1ª ed.). All the English quotations correspond to this edition. As noted in the previous footnote, Jowett followed the Stallbaum's edition of Plato: "The Text which has been followed in this Translation of Plato is the recent 8th. edition of Stallbaum; the principal deviations are noted at the bottom of the page" ("Preface to the First Edition". Vol. 1, p. 9).

[6] In the first edition, for instance, of the commentary by J. ADAM (*The Republic of Plato. Edited with critical notes, commentary and appendices by James Adam,* vol. 2, Cambridge 1902), one reads: "514A ff. The simile of the cave presents us with a picture of the life of the uneducated man...". On the other hand, the first meaning in the dictionary *Greek-English Lexicon* by LIDDELL & SCOTT (Oxford 1978, p. 182) is "form from a model, represent".

[7] See, e.g., N. D. SMITH, "How the Prisoners in Plato's Cave Are 'Like us'", *BACAP* 13, 1997, pp. 187-204.

[8] The general meaning we read, for instance, in the *Greek-English Lexicon* de LIDDELL & SCOTT, above mentioned, p. 485: "image", "image in a mirror", "personal description", "living image", "représentation"; *imago* in the *Lexicon Platonicum sive Vocum Platonicarum Index*, vol. 1, of F. ASTIUS, New York 1969 (1835, first edition), pp. 616-17; "image, representation" in the *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque. Histoire des Mots*, Tome 2, of P. CHANTRAINE, Paris 1970, p. 355.

contemplation of the image referred to is quite similar to that of the prisoners in the cave as they look at the shadows reflected on the bottom part of the wall. Bearing in mind that they are shadows, σκιὰς, we may put them on the same level as any other intangible image -that is, simply imagined and, as a consequence, unreal- but, at any rate, the prisoners, owing to their condition, "cannot have seen" (ἑωρακέναι, 515a6) but shadows –"how could they see…?", Jowett translates-, and they would consider real precisely what "they could see" (ὁρῷεν, 515b5) –Jowett renders this as: "what was actually before them". To sum up, the ocular vision imposes itself, leaving aside that what the prisoners see are shadows and, on the contrary, what Socrates and Glaucon see are mental images.

Jowett seems to be so determined to reflect this ocular vision in his translation that he insists on it even when the text does not actually demand it. Socrates has spoken about some human beings who are truly strange because they have always been prisoners, so now he must ask Glaucon to take into consideration what, given the circumstances, could by no means be foreseen, that is, their release and the end –the "healing"- of their ignorance: σκόπει… αὐτων λύσιν τε καὶ ἴασιν τῶν τε δεσμῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφροσύνης (515c4-5). Jowett translates: "and now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error". In my opinion, his previous translation was certainly correct, but now it is this single hypothetical released prisoner who will doubt and consider more real "what was seen then" (τότε ὁρώμενα, 515d6) during his captivity. It is he who, if forced to look directly at the light, would avert his eyes turning towards what, looking down (κατά), he can contemplate (καθορᾶν, 515e3); and it is also the released prisoner who, finally released from the cave, will at first most easily (ἂν ῥᾷστα καθορῷ, 516a6) see the shadows, and then images reflected in water. Later, at night he would be able to easily contemplate (ἂν ῥᾷον θεάσαιτο, 516a6) the stars in the sky and, finally, although once again by looking down (κατά), he would be able to see and contemplate the sun (δύναιτ' ἂν κατιδεῖν καὶ θεάσασθαι, 516b6), not a reflection in the water but the actual sun in its own place.

It is the released prisoner who must adapt his eyes to the bright light he has never seen before, whereas Glaucon is asked to take into consideration (σκόπει) something that could not be foreseen. Certainly, one could replay that σκόπει can -and it often does- indicate physical observation, but what Glaucon must observe here is the prisoner's release and the healing of his ignorance" (λύσιν τε καὶ ἴασιν τῶν τε δεσμῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφροσύνης, 515c4-5) and, above all, he must discern their nature and distinctive quality (οἵα τις ἂν εἴη, 515c5), so that it is quite clear that he is asked to do something more than merely watch[9]. Indeed, the second order is an even more revealing one: he must think –that is "put in his mind" (ἐννόησον, 516e3), something even less foreseeable: that the prisoner who has already known what freedom is should want to go

[9] After "behold" and "contemplate", the second meaning one reads in Liddell & Scott, pp. 1613-14, is "consider", "examine".

back down into the cave. "Imagine once more", Jowett translates and, although in this case it would be better to use a term suggesting an intellectual act such as "to examine" or "to take into consideration", at least he has not insisted on a physical act of watching as he did previously when translating σκόπει.

After this unexpected κατάβασις of the released prisoner, Socrates describes what might occur between the permanent prisoners, doomed to the contemplation of shadows, and their erstwhile fellow, who has been transformed by the light and the vision of what is real. At this point Jowett's translation is marked by an unexpected change. Needless to say, Plato continues to be true to himself and Socrates says: ταύτην… εἰκόνα, ὦ φίλε Γλαύκων, προσαπτέον ἅπασαν τοῖς ἔμπροσθεν λεγομένοις (517a8), that is, "This image must be applied as a whole to what has been said before" but Jowett prefers to put it thus: "this entire allegory… you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument".

From Plato's "ideocentric" perspective, "must be applied" means first to equate (ἀφομοιοῦντα, 517b3) the physical world to the prison -and the light of the fire in it to the power of the sun- and, secondly, to equate the ascent towards the light and the contemplation of the outer reality with the ascent of souls towards the intelligible region (τὴν εἰς τὸν νοητὸν τόπον τῆς ψυχῆς ἄνοδον, 517b4-5). However, although we imagine ourselves to be in an intelligible world, the truth is that Socrates, in order to be able to explain what "appears to him" (τὰ… ἐμοὶ φαινόμενα οὕτω φάινεται, 515b7-8), continues to use his eyes. Indeed, in the cognitive world –in the region of the known- (ἐν τῷ γνωστῷ, 517b8), the last idea "to be seen" (ὁρᾶσθαι, 517c1) –and with great difficulty seen- is the idea of good, and "after having seen it" (ὀφθεῖσα, 517c1), one must reach the conclusion that this is the cause of all things, of all that is right and beautiful, and that anyone aiming to act wisely in public and in private must "see" it (ἰδεῖν, 517c5). Glaucon affirms that he agrees as far as he is able (ὅν... τρόπον δύναμαι, 517c6), and Socrates in his turn maintains that it is not surprising that those who have attained the intelligible region no longer take care about human affairs and their souls strive to remain there always. Consequently, what has been discussed so far is natural or probable –in fact, one can "imagine" it or can "get an image" of it, εἰκὸς (ἐστι) (517d1), "if this is really so in accordance with the above mentioned image" (εἴπερ αὖ κατὰ τὴν προειρημένην εἰκόνα τοῦτ' ἔχει, 517d1-2).

The question is therefore: why does Jowett use "allegory" when it is quite obvious that Plato insists on the visibility or contemplation of what he has described and not on that "other additional" (ἀλλ / **all**egory) conception that any allegorical reading demands? As we have seen, with σκόπει and ἐννόησον Socrates asked to examine and take into consideration the unexpected release of those strange human beings condemned to remain imprisoned forever but, for the rest, his orders were truly specific, that is, to create images and, afterwards, to contemplate them. Through his master, Plato speaks about an image that must be applied –therefore a προσαπτέα εἰκών– and, although he demands a mental shift from the physical world to the ideal one, he never

speaks of an allegory. Even the usual meaning of the verb ἅπτω, "to hold"[10], which is the second part of the compound προσάπτω and of the verbal adjective προσαπτέος, τέα, τέον should persuade us not to go beyond a simple and effective "applicability". "Allegory" implies in principle the planned endowment of a text with a literal meaning and with another one that must be discovered but, in this text by Plato, there is no room for any sort of discovery, because the image is accompanied by the explanation of its meaning, in other words, we are simply asked to apply the second one, the explicit meaning, to the image.

In fact, one should always bear in mind that ἀλληγορία is a term that Plato does not use[11], whereas in his texts we find ὑπόνοια, that is, a noetic act or process through which we must elucidate or conjecture what underlies, ὑπό, the first level of intellection of a text[12]. We might suppose, as stated in the *Republic*, that Homer spoke of "battles among gods" (θεομαχίας), confident they would be rightly interpreted by attributing to them an allegorical meaning, but Plato decides in the end that, although they have been conceived –or not- as *hypónoiai* (ἐν ὑπονοίαις… ἄνευ ὑπονοιῶν, 378d5-6) [13], they are a theme not be mentioned. His radical refusal is due to the fact that a boy, for instance, is not able to discern what is a *hypónoia* and what is not (ὁ γὰρ νέος οὐχ οἷος τε κρίνειν ὅτι τε ὑπόνοια καὶ ὃ μή, 378d7-8)[14]. Glaucon, for his part, is far luckier because Socrates decides to explain to him how to apply the image they have been speaking about, which would confirm in my opinion that this icon of the cave has not been conceived as a *hypónoia* whose correct "under-intellection" depends on the noetic skills of the interlocutor but as an image or painting –that "figure" at the beginning of Jowett's translation- that the master, precisely because of his well-known skills, knows and explains how to apply.

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[10] "Fasten" is the first meaning given in Liddell & Scott, p. 231.

[11] This term appears for the first time in the Hellenistic period: as figure of speech in *De elocutione* by Demetrius (270 b.C.) and, as allegorical interpretation (ἀλληγορικῶς), with the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes, third century B.C. See, for example: J. WHITMAN, *Allegory. The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique.* Oxford 1987, Appendix 1: "On the History of the Term 'Allegory'.

[12] "Suspicion", "conjecture", guess", according to the *Greek-English Lexicon*; and "suspect" for ὑπονέω, p. 1890; "soupçoner, conjecturer" (*Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque. Histoire des Mots*, Tome 3, p. 756); *sententiae tectae significatio vel simpl. significatio* (*Lexicon Platonicum sive Vocum Platonicarum Index*, vol. 3, p. 457)

[13] *Cf. Lg.* 679c: ψεῦδος γὰρ ὑπονοεῖν οὐδεὶς ἠπίστατο διὰ σοφίαν, ὥσπερ τὰ νῦν, ἀλλὰ περὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἀνθρώπων τὰ λεγόμενα ἀληθῆ νομίζοντες ἔζων κατὰ ταῦτα ("For none of them had the shrewdness of the modern man to suspect a falsehood; but they accepted as true the statements made about gods and men, and oredered their lives by them" –translated by R. G. Bury. *Loeb Classical Library.* London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967.

[14] Regarding the terms ἀλληγορία y ὑπόνοια, and the Greek allegorical interpretation of mythical texts, see e.g.: L. BRISSON, *How Philosophers saved Myths. Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*, Chicago 2004, and J. PEPIN, *Mythe et allegorie: les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes.* París 1976.

As stated above, if I have chosen the translation by Benjamin Jowett is because of his accuracy –which I certainly appreciate-, although some of the opinions he expresses in the preface might have led us to foresee just the opposite:

> "An English translation ought to be idiomatic, not only to the scholar, but to the unlearned reader... the translator... seeks to produce on his reader an impression similar or nearly similar to that produced by the original. To him the feeling should be more important than the exact word" (XIV).

However, his accuracy disappeared when he opted finally to use the term "allegory" instead of "image or figure", and, while I will not be dogmatic about the cause I will dare to suggest some suspicions:

> "The translation, being English, it should also be perfectly intelligible in itself without reference to the Greek, the English being really the more lucid and exact of the two languages. In some respects it may be maintained that ordinary English writing, such as the newspaper article, is superior to Plato... The translator will often have to convert the more abstract Greek into the more concrete English" (XV-XVI).

Needless to say, Jowett might not have had in mind the concrete image of the cave when writing this thesis; however, we might remind him that probably "an image to be applied" (προσαπτέα εἰκών) seems to be something more exact and concrete, in spite of coming from the "abstract Greek", than "allegory", undoubtedly a more abstract term, since in my opinion it indicates a more subtle noetic move.

Nevertheless, Jowett is not the only one who interprets Plato, since, many years later, for instance, Martin Heidegger published his *Vom Wessen der Wahrheit* (1943) [15] where he affirms:

> "Wir sprechen von einem 'Gleichnis', sagen auch 'Sinn-Bild'. Das heisst: ein sichtbarer Anblick, so freilich, dass das Erblickte allsogleich ein Winkendes ist. Der Anblick will nicht und nie für sich allein stehen; er gibt einem Wink: dahin, dass es etwas und was es bei diesem Anblick und durch diesen Anblick zu verstehen gibt. Der Anblick winkt, - er lenkt in ein zu Verstehendes, d. h. in den Bereich von Verstehbarkeit (die Dimension, innerhalb deren verstanden wird): in einen Sinn (daher Sinn-Bild)".

When dealing with a text by Heidegger, translation is undoubtedly a risky business. First of all, I do not dare to maintain that "Gleichniss" here means allegory, although Ted Sadler does believe this, as shown by his translation into English of *Vom Wessen der Wahrheit*[16]. However, I do think that the unquestionable meaning of "Sinn-Bild" is

[15] Frankfurt am Main 1988 (1943, 1ª ed.), p. 18.

[16] *The Essence of Truth. On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, London, New York 2002, according to the German edition of 1988): "We speak of an 'allegory', also of 'sensory image' (Sinn-Bild), of a sort that provides a hint or clue. The image is never intended to stand for itself alone, but indicates that something is to be understood, providing a clue as to what this is. The image provides a hint -it leads into the intelligible, into a region of intelligibility (the dimension within which something is understood), into a sense (hence sensory image)".

a "meaningful image" [17] if, as stated, from its contemplation we must move towards the realm of what is intelligible. Consequently, I do not think that "sensory image" [18] is a good translation for the two occurrences of "Sinn-Bild" in Heidegger's text.

In any case, Heidegger's interpretative translation is logical from the perspective of a philosopher who thinks it necessary to explain the Platonic text and situate it in a more subtle interpretative space than that of simple literality with a second meaning. And, with regard to "Gleichniss", if he considers that it is a comparison, both ἰδὲ ("look") and ὁρῶ ("I see") almost immediately following the initial ἀπείκασον ("imagine") are hardly understandable. If he considers that it is an allegory, as Sadler does, we should remind him once again that "allegory" –unlike image- is a term that does not appear in Plato's dialogues, leaving aside that "Wink" ("clue") would imply the will to conceal something –or at least the will to not reveal it openly- rather than Socrates' clear intention in Plato's text, to explain the image and what is seen in it by means of a simple application to what was discussed before.

In order to draw my analysis to a conclusion, I think that it would be highly significant to examine some translations of the *Republic*, now compared with Jowett's, so that, if I am not mistaken, we shall be able to confirm that one should never correct Plato, thus turning his cave into something other than an image.

First of all –as shown above- if the translation of ἀπείκασον is not "imagine" but rather: "paragona" –as in Vegetti (V)[19]-; "compara" -Pabón-Fernández Galiano (P-FG)[20]; Eggers (E)[21] and Balasch (B)[22]-; "compare" -Shorey (S)[23]- or "vergleiche" -Rufener (R)[24]-, we are left with no other option but to avoid the most obvious translation of the two following occurrences of ἰδὲ, "look" and "contemplate" (i.e. the image)", and to use a verb suited to a comparison: "immagina… immagina" (V); "imagina... suponte" (P-FG); "represéntate… imagínate" (E); "contempla… imagina" (B); "picture… picture" (S); "stelle dir… denke dir" (R). Even Miralles (M)[25] and Chambry (Ch)[26], who translate ἀπείκασον respectively as "afigura't" and "représente-

[17] "Bild, äusserer gegenstand als ausdruck irgend eines sinnes", we read, for instance, in the *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Band 16, by J. UND W. GRIMM, Munich 1984. And, at the same time, the term "Bild" in the *Platon-Lexikon. Begriffswörterbuch zu Platon und der platonischen Tradition* by CH. SHÄFER (Darmstadt 2007) take us, needless to say, *eikón*, p. 29.

[18] At least taking into account the univocal meaning given by the dictionaries, for instance, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. XIV, by J. A. SIMPSON & E. S. C. WEINER, Oxford 1989, p. 988: "Belonging to sensation".

[19] M. VEGETTI, *Platone. La Repubblica. Vol. V, libro VI-VII*, Bibliopolis, 2003.

[20] J. M. PABÓN, & M. FERNÁNDEZ GALIANO, *Platón. La República. Tomo III,* Madrid 1969.

[21] C. EGGERS, Conrado, *Platón. Diálogos. IV República,* Madrid 1998.

[22] M. BALASCH, *Plató. Diàlegs. Vol. XI. La República (Libres V-VII),* Barcelona 1990.

[23] P. SHOREY, *Plato In Twelve Volumes. VI The Republic,* London; Cambridge, Massachusetts (Loeb Classical Library)1970.

[24] R. RUFENER, *Platon: Der Staat. Über das Gerechte.* Zurich 1950.

[25] C. MIRALLES, *Plató. La República. Llibre VII. Educació. Materials de Filosofia 1,* Valencia 1990.

[26] E. CHAMBRY, *Platon. Oeuvres Complètes. Tome VII, 1re Partie. La République,* Paris (Les Belles Lettres) 1946.

toi", continue later on with "imagina't… imagina't" and "figure-toi… figure-toi". Cornford (C)[27] opts for "here is a parable" followed by "imagine".

As these are the translations of the two occurrences of ἰδὲ, it would be logical that, when approaching the next occurrence of ὁρῶ, the translation would not be "lo veo, lo contemplo" but rather "me lo imagino", which only E and B do ("me lo imagino", "tot m'ho imagino"), because the others do not dare not to take into account the physical connotation of the verb ὁράω > ὁρῶ: "vedo" (V); "ya lo veo" (P-FG); "all that I see" (S); "Ich sehe es vor mir" (R); "ho estic veient" (M); "je vois" (Ch); "I see" (C), and neither do they forget –although some do- the imperative ὅρα coming afterwards: "vedi allora" (V); "ve ahora" (P-FG); "imagínate" (E); "doncs ara afigura't" (B); "see also" (S); "stelle dir nun" (R); "doncs veges ara" (M); "figure-toi maintenant" (Ch); "now imagine" (C).

It is quite evident that Plato's text, like any other, demands common sense when being translated, and what we have just read suggest rather the opposite. It is difficult in the end –or it should be- not to surrender to the evidence of the previously mentioned final passages of the text: "this image must be applied to..." and "if this is so in accordance with the above mentioned image" (εἰκόνα in both cases). However, the results are varied: V, B, P-FG y S opt for "image"; M for "picture"; C for "parable"; R for "comparison" or "simile" (Gleichnis), and E and Ch for "allegory".

I would like to conclude my analysis with a rhetorical question whose answer, as far as I am concerned, is quite obvious: "in this, as in many others passages, is it really necessary to either correct or interpret Plato?".

[27] F. M. CORNFORD, *The Republic of Plato.* Oxford 1966 (1941, first edition).