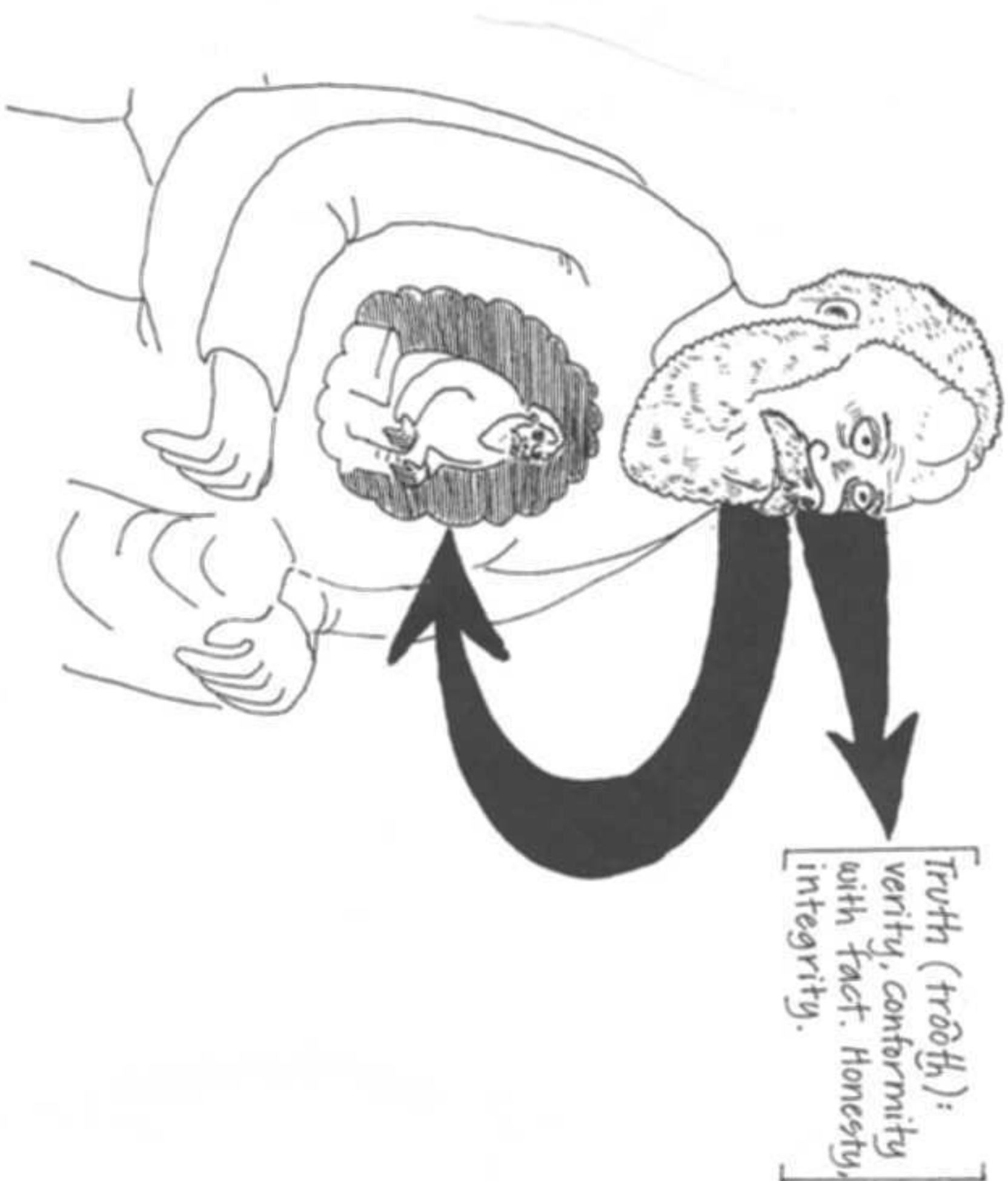


The Sophists, who were professional teachers, met their match in a man who was possibly the greatest teacher of all time, SOCRATES (469–399 B.C.). Despite his overall disagreement with them, Socrates followed the Sophists' lead in turning away from the study of the cosmos and concentrating on the case of the human. But unlike the way the Sophists discoursed about the human being, Socrates wanted to base all argumentation on objectively valid definitions. To say "man is the measure" is saying very little if one does not know what "man" is.



Socrates' discourse moved in two directions—outward, to objective definitions, and inward, to discover the inner person, the soul, which, for Socrates, was the source of all truth. Such a search was not to be conducted at a weekend lecture but was the quest of a lifetime.



Socrates was hardly ever able to answer the questions he asked. Nevertheless, the query had to continue, for, as we know from his famous dictum . . .



"The unexamined life is not worth living."

Socrates spent much of his time in the streets and marketplace of Athens, querying every man he met about whether that man knew anything. Socrates said that, if there was an afterlife, he would pose the same question to the shades in Hades.



Ironically, Socrates himself professed to know nothing. The oracle at Delphi said that therefore Socrates was the wisest of all men. Socrates at least knew that he knew nothing, whereas the others falsely believed themselves to know something.

Socrates himself wrote no books, but his

conversations were remembered by his disciple Plato and later published by him as dialogues. The typical Socratic dialogue has three divisions:

(1) A problem is posed (e.g., the problem of what

virtue is, or justice, or truth, or beauty): Socrates becomes excited and enthusiastic to find someone who claims to know something.

How wonderful that you know what virtue is — and to think, you're only 20 years old!



(2) Socrates finds

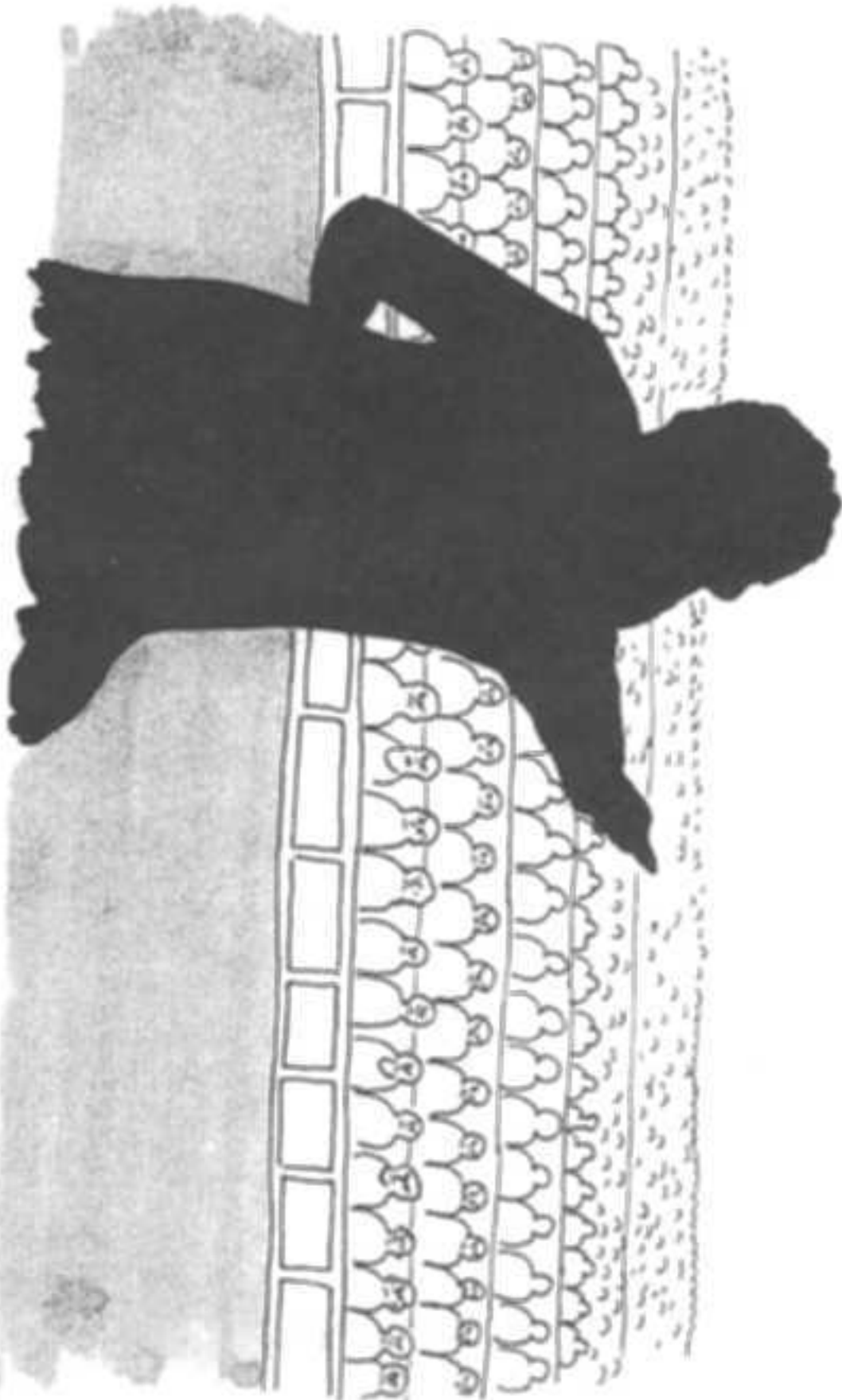
“minor flaws” in his companion's definition and slowly begins to unravel it, forcing his partner to admit his ignorance. (In one dialogue, Socrates' target actually ends up in tears.)

? ?

(3) An agreement is reached by the two admittedly ignorant men to pursue the truth seriously. Almost all the dialogues end inconclusively. Of course, they must do so. Socrates cannot give his disciple the truth. Each of us must find it out for ourselves.



In his quest for truth, Socrates managed to offend many of the powerful and pompous figures of Athens. His enemies conspired against him, getting him indicted for teaching false doctrines, for impiety, and for corrupting the youth. They brought him to trial hoping to humiliate him by forcing him to grovel and beg for mercy.



Far from groveling, at his trial Socrates humbled his prosecutors and angered the unruly jury of 500 by lecturing to them about their ignorance. Furthermore, when asked to suggest his own punishment, Socrates recommended that the Athenians build a statue in his honor and place it in the main square. The enraged jury condemned him to death by a vote of 280 to 220.

Ashamed of their act and embarrassed that they were about to put to death their most eminent citizen, the Athenians were prepared to look the other way when Socrates' prison guard was bribed to allow Socrates to escape.



The Death of Socrates
(Vaguely After Jacques-Louis David, 1787)

Despite the pleas of his friends, Socrates refused to do so, saying that if he broke the law by escaping, he would be declaring himself an enemy of all laws. So he drank the hemlock and philosophized with his friends to the last moment. In death, he became the universal symbol of martyrdom for the Truth.

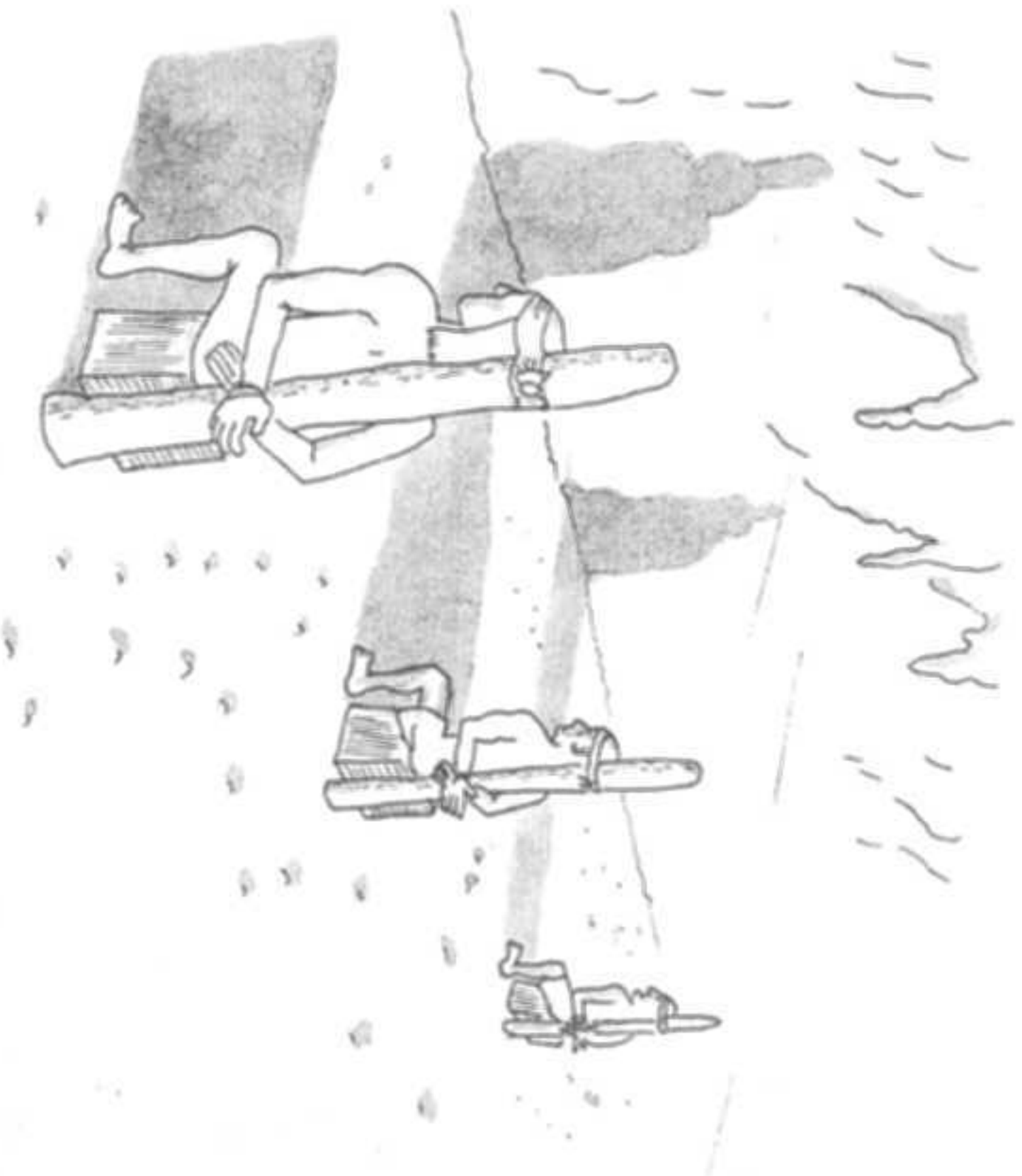
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The most important of Socrates' young disciples was PLATO (427-347 B.C.), who was one of the most powerful thinkers in history. He is also the founder of the first university, "the Academy," where students read as exercises the Socratic dialogues, which he had written.



Plato

Because of his authorship, it is often difficult to distinguish between the thought of Socrates and that of Plato. In general, we can say that Plato's philosophy was more metaphysical, more systematic, and more "otherworldly" than Socrates' philosophy.



Plato's philosophy is introduced allegorically in the "Myth of the Cave," which appears in his most important work, *The Republic*. There he has Socrates conceive the following vision: Imagine prisoners chained in such a way that they face the back wall of a cave. There they have been for life and can see nothing of themselves or of each other. They see only shadows on the wall of the cave.

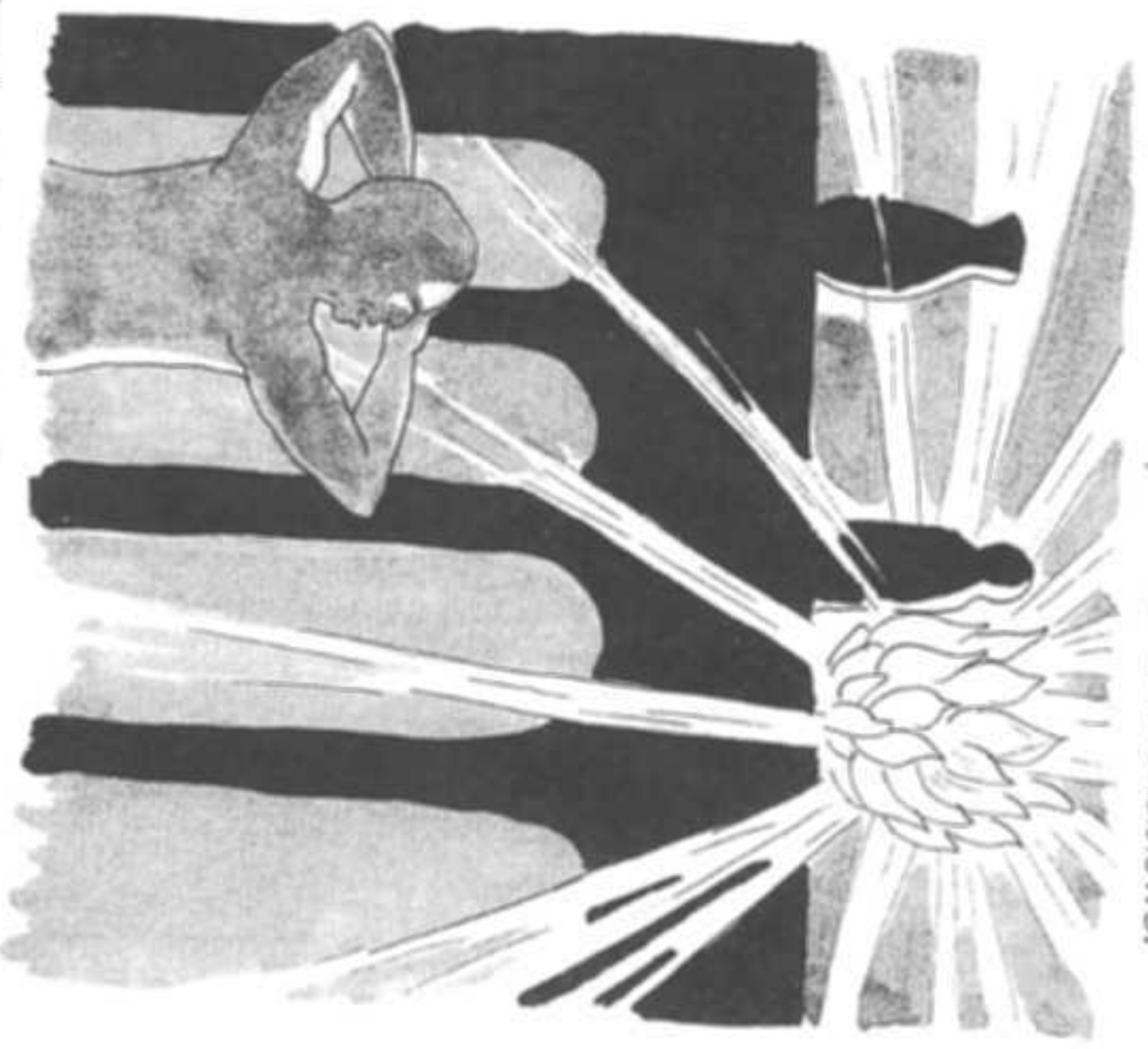
These shadows are cast by a fire that burns on a ledge above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners, there is a wall-lined path along which people walk



carrying vases, statues, and other artifacts on their heads. The prisoners hear the echoes of voices and see the shadows of the artifacts, and they mistake these echoes and shadows for reality.

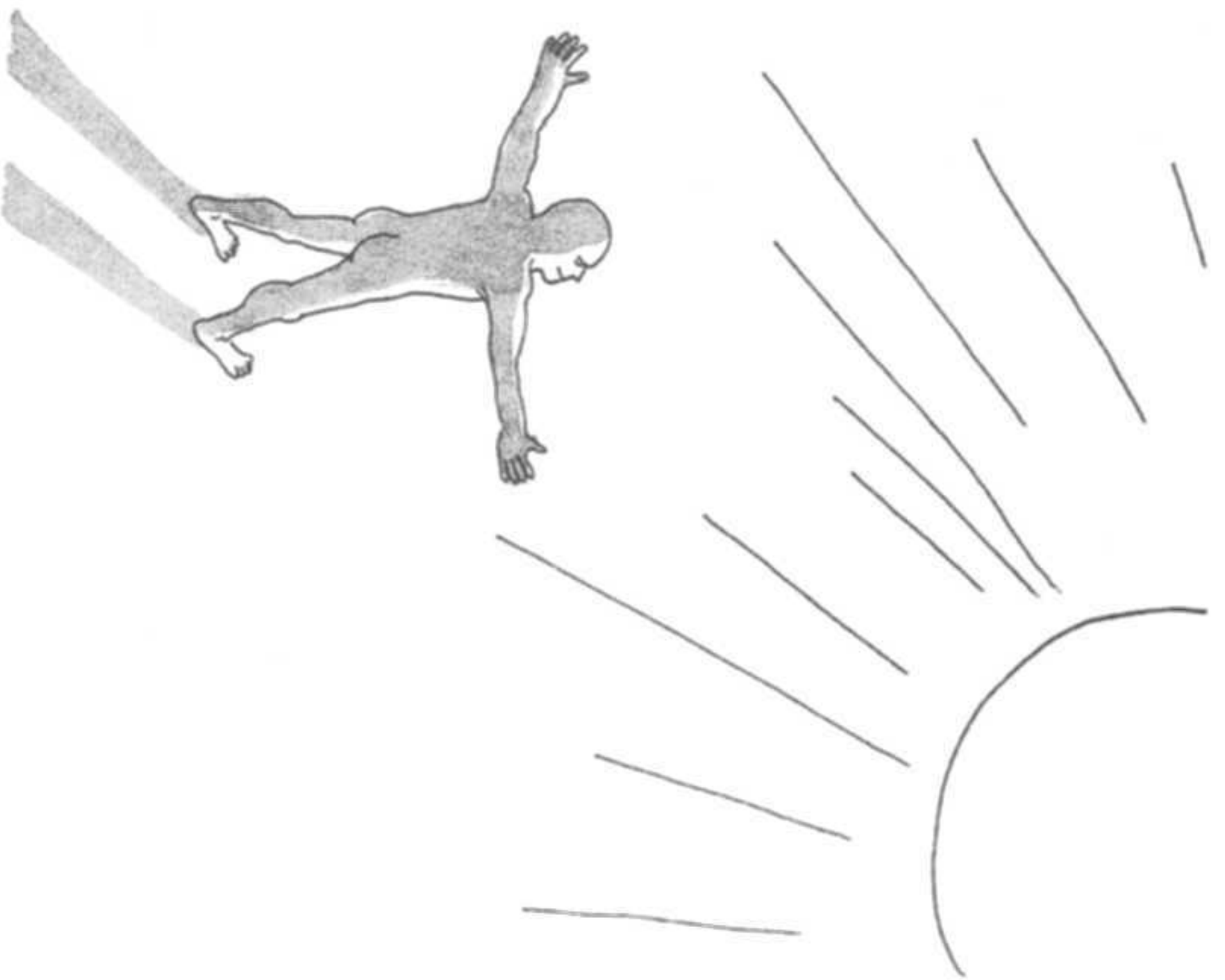
Plato has Socrates imagine that one prisoner is unchained, turned around, and forced to look at the true

source of the shadows. But the fire pains his eyes. He prefers the pleasant deception of the shadows.



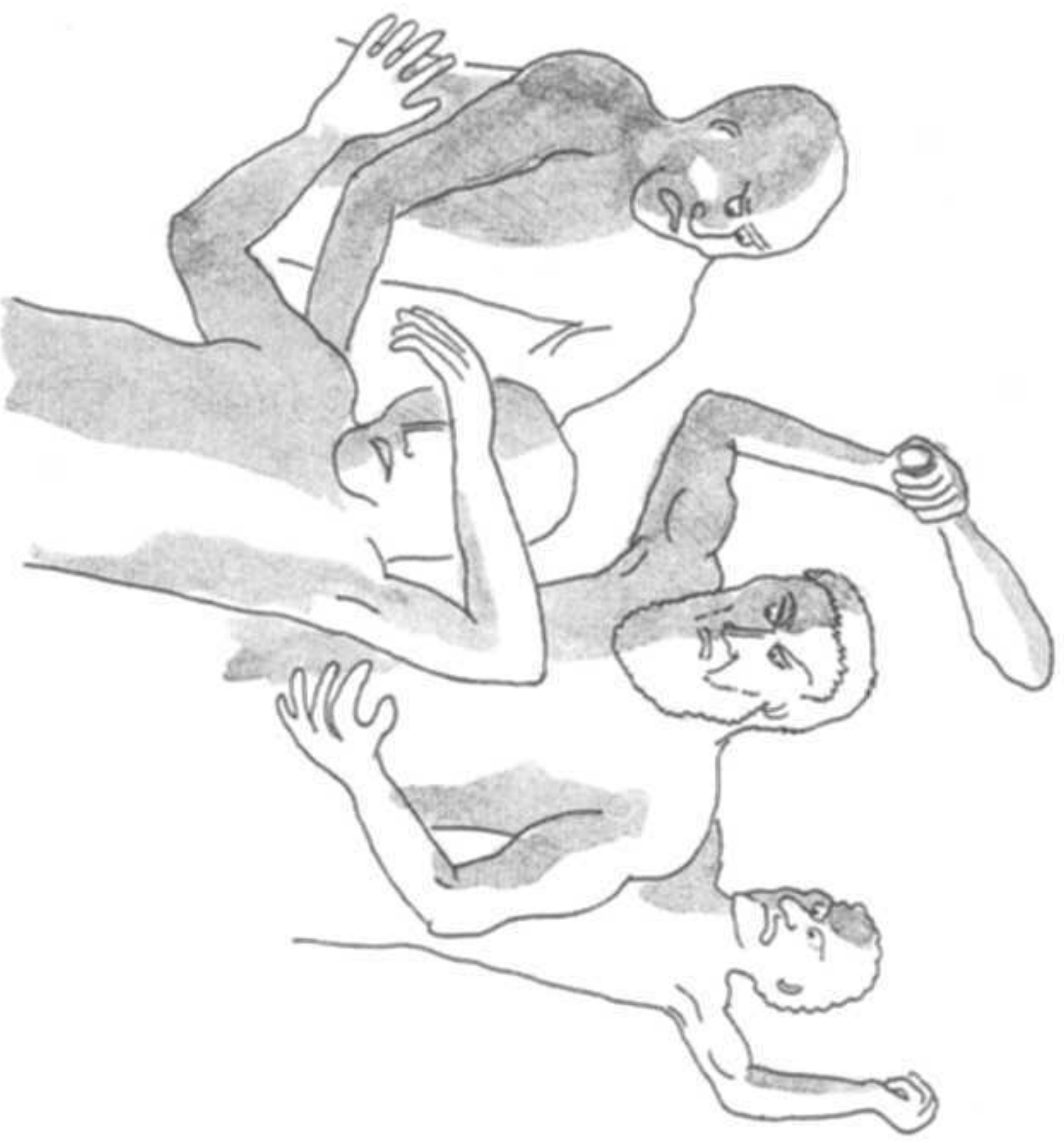
Behind and above the fire is the mouth of the cave, and outside in the bright sunlight (only a little of which trickles into the cave) are trees, rivers, mountains, and sky.



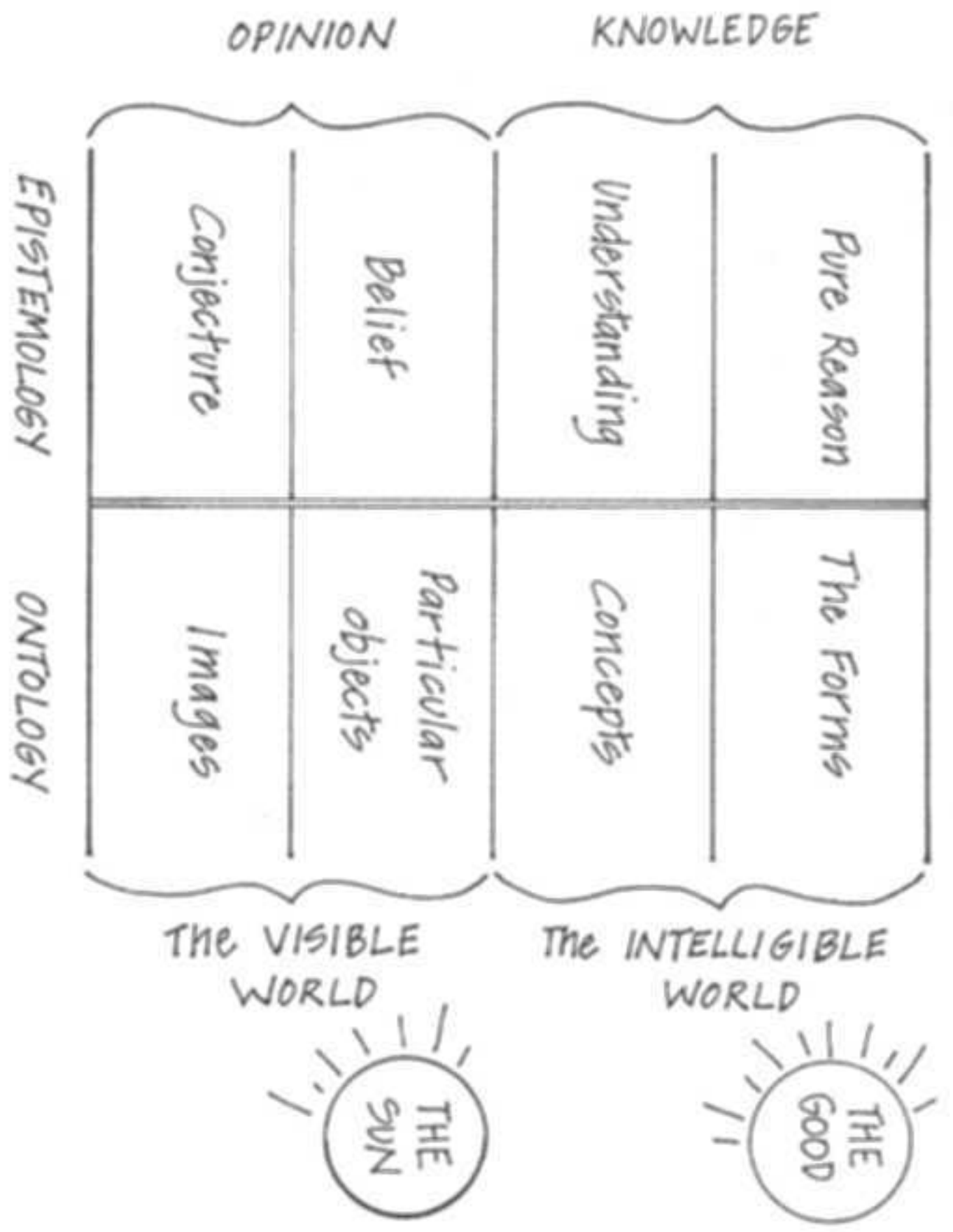


Now the former prisoner is forced "up the steep and rugged ascent" (Plato's allegory of education) and brought to the sunlit exterior world. But the light blinds him. He must first look at the shadows of the trees (he is used to shadows), then at the trees and mountains. Then finally he is able to see the sun itself (the allegory of enlightenment).

Plato suggests that if this enlightened man were to return to the cave, he would appear ridiculous because he would see sunspots everywhere and not be able to penetrate the darkness.

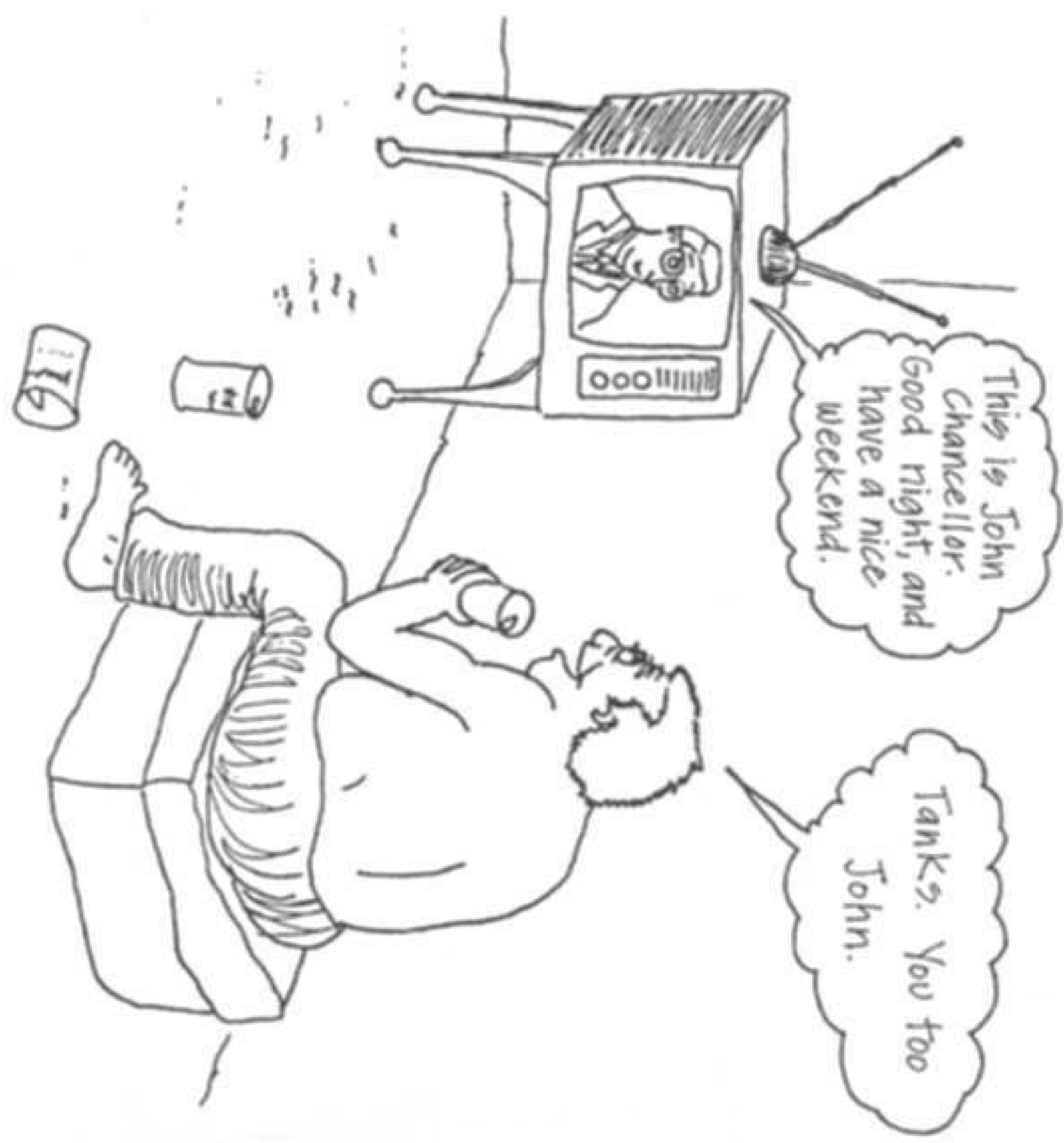


And if he tried to liberate his fellow prisoners, they would be so angry at him for disturbing their illusions that they would set upon him and kill him—a clear allusion to the death of Socrates.



The allegory of the liberation of the slave, from darkness, deceit, and untruth and the hard journey into the light and warmth of the Truth, has inspired many philosophers and social leaders. But Plato meant it as more than just a poetic vision. He also gave it a precise technical application, seen in his "Simile of the Line," also found in *The Republic*. On the left side of the line we have an **epistemology** (theory of knowledge), on the right side, an **ontology** (theory of being). In addition, we have an implicit **ethics** (moral theory) and **aesthetics** (theory of beauty). The totality constitutes Plato's **metaphysics** (general worldview).

For each state of being (right side of the line), there is a corresponding state of awareness (left side). The lowest state of awareness is that of "conjecture," which has as its object "images," such as shadows and reflections (or images on the TV screen and video games).



The person in a state of conjecture mistakes an image for reality. This corresponds to the situation of the cave-bound prisoners watching the shadows. The next level, that of "Belief," has as its object a particular thing—say, a particular horse or a particular act

of justice. Like Conjecture, Belief still does not comprise knowledge but remains in the sphere of Opinion. This is because it is not yet conceptual but is grounded in the uncertainties of sense perception. (The person in a state of belief is like a prisoner who sees the artifact held above the wall inside the cave.)



"Opinion" and the objects of which it is aware are all sustained by the Sun. Without the Sun, there could be no horse and no image of a horse nor could we be aware of them in the absence of light.

For Opinion to become Knowledge, the particular object must be raised to the level of theory. (This stage, called

"Understanding" by Plato, corresponds to the status of the released prisoner looking at the shadows of the trees in the world above the cave.)



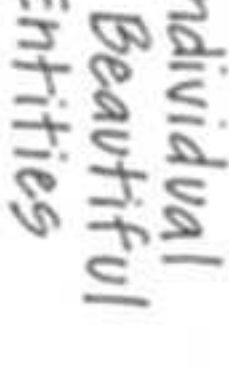
But according to Plato, theories and definitions are not empirical generalizations dependent on particular cases and abstracted from them. To the contrary, rather than coming from "below" on the Line, theories are themselves "images" of something higher—what Plato calls the "Forms." (In the same way that shadows and reflections are merely images of particular things, so theories or concepts are the "shadows" of the Forms.) When one beholds the Forms, one exercises Pure Reason, and one is like the liberated prisoner who gazed upon the trees and mountains in the sunlit upper world.

BEAUTY

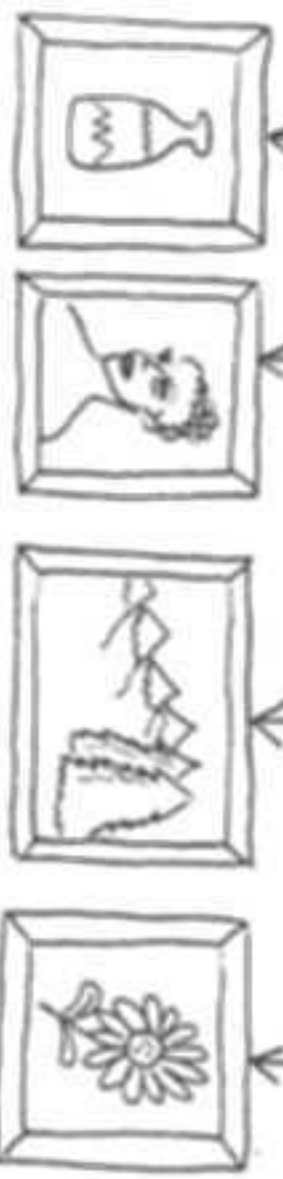
The Form of Beauty



The Concept of Beauty



Individual Beautiful Entities



Imitations of Beautiful Entities (paintings, photos, reflections, shadows)

Plato's conception of the Forms is very complicated, but we can simplify it by saying that they are the eternal truths that are the source of all Reality. Consider, for example, the concept of beauty. Things in the sensible world are beautiful to the extent that they "imitate" or "participate" in Beauty. However, these beautiful things will break, grow old, or die. But Beauty itself (the Form) is eternal. It will always be. The same can be said of Truth and Justice. (Also, more embarrassingly, of Horseness or of Toothpickness.)

Furthermore, just as the sensible world and awareness of it are dependent on the Sun, so are the Forms and knowledge of them dependent on the Good, which is a Superform, or the Form of all Forms. The state of beholding the Good is represented in the myth of the cave by the released prisoner beholding the Sun itself. Plato's theory is such that the whole of Reality is founded upon the Good, which is Reality's source of being. And all Knowledge is ultimately knowledge of the Good.

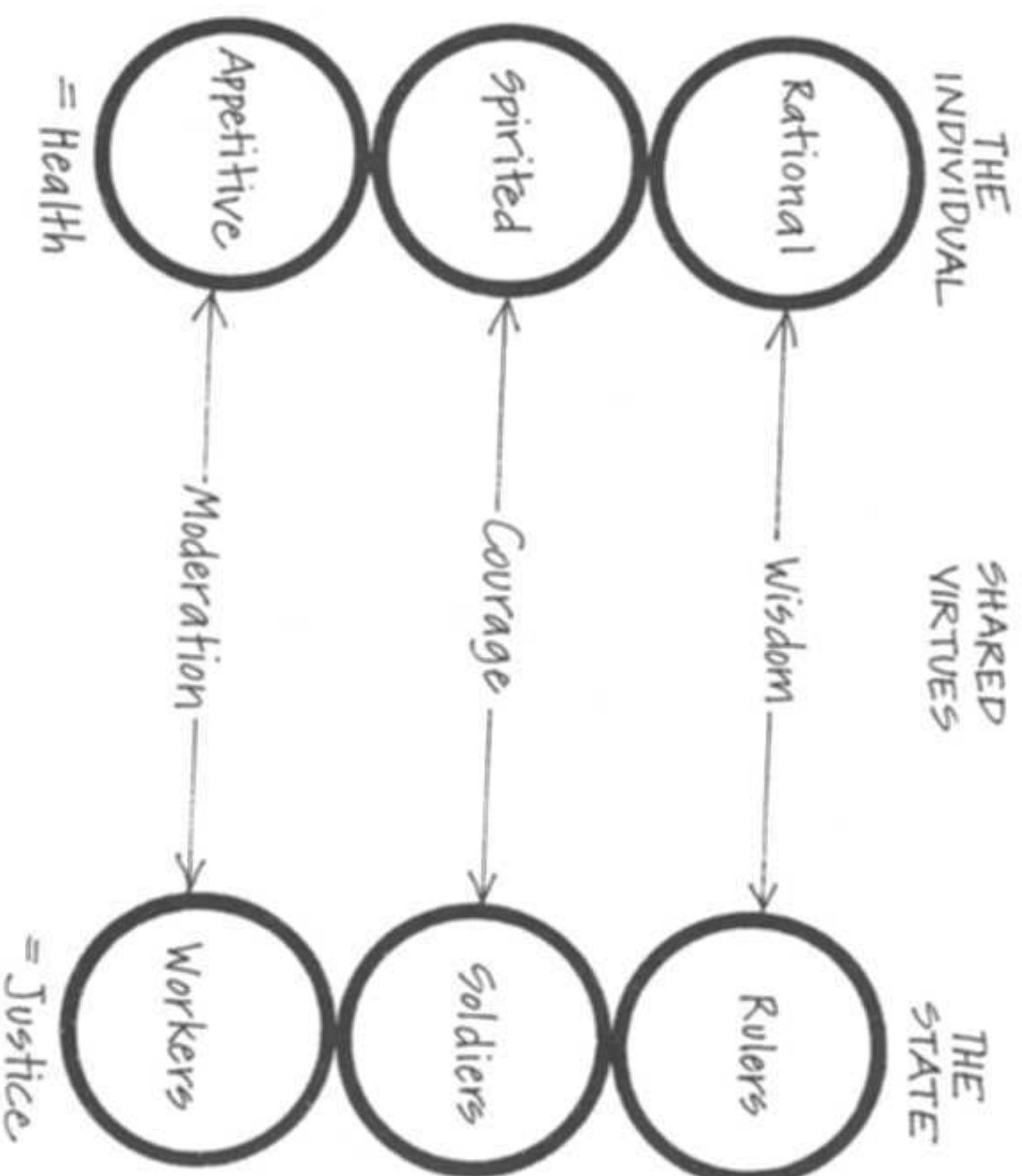


Moreover, Plato optimistically holds that if one ever comes to know the Good, one becomes good. Ignorance is the only sin. No one would willingly do wrong.

How can we learn the Truth? Where can we find the Forms and the Good? Who can teach us? Plato had curious answers to these questions. In the dialogue called *Meno*, Plato had an unschooled slaveboy solve a difficult mathematical problem by answering affirmatively or negatively a series of simple questions posed by Socrates. Plato concluded from this episode that the slaveboy always knew the

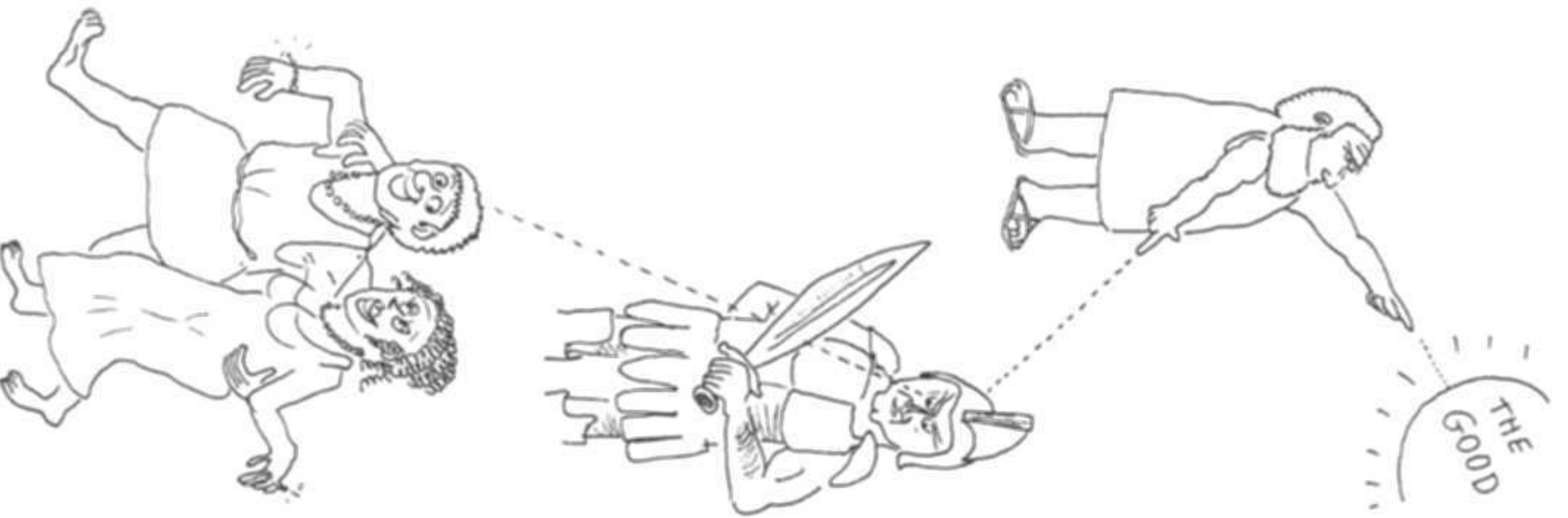


answer but didn't know that he knew. All truth comes from within—from the soul. One's immortal soul is born with the truth, having beheld the Forms in their purity before its embodiment. Birth, or the embodiment of the soul, is so traumatic that one forgets what one knows and must spend the rest of life plumbing the depths of the soul to recover what one already knows. Hence, Plato's strange doctrine that all Knowledge is recollection. Now we see Socrates' role as that of helping his student to remember, just as does the psychoanalyst with his or her patient today. (Plato's theory of recollection is the source of the Freudian conception of the unconscious.)



The *Republic* is well known not only for its epistemology but also for its social philosophy. The latter for Plato is a combination of psychology and political science. He said that the City (the "Republic") is the individual writ large. Just as the individual's psyche has three aspects—(1) the appetitive, animal side, (2) the spirited source of action, and (3) the rational aspect—so does the ideal City have three classes—(1) the workers and the artisans, (2) the soldiers, and (3) the rulers. In the psyche, the rational part must convince the spirited part to help it control the appetitive. Otherwise, there will be an unbalanced soul, and neurosis will ensue.

Similarly, in the City, the rulers must be philosophers who have beheld the Forms, hence who know what is good. They must train the military caste to help control the naturally unruly peasants. The latter will be allowed to use money, own property, and wear decorations in moderation, but the members of the top two classes, who understand the corrupting effect of greed, will live in an austere, absolute communism, sleeping and eating together, owning no property, receiving no salary, and having sexual relations on a prearranged schedule with partners shared by all. These rules will guarantee that the City will not be frenzied and anarchic—a strange beginning for the discipline of Political Science (one from which it has still not recovered)!)



The members of the ideal City will be allowed to play simple lyres and pipes and sing patriotic, uplifting songs, but most artists will be drummed out of the Republic. This is for four reasons: (1) Ontological: Since art deals with images (the lowest rung in the Simile of the Line), art is an imitation of an imitation. (Art is "thrice removed from the throne.") (2) Epistemological: The artist is at the conjugal stage. He knows nothing but claims to know something. (3) Aesthetical: Art expresses itself in sensual images, hence distracts us from Beauty itself, which is purely spiritual. (4) Moral: Art is created by and appeals to the appetite side of the soul (Freud's ID). Art is either erotic or violent or both, hence it is an incitement to anarchy. Even Homer must be censored.

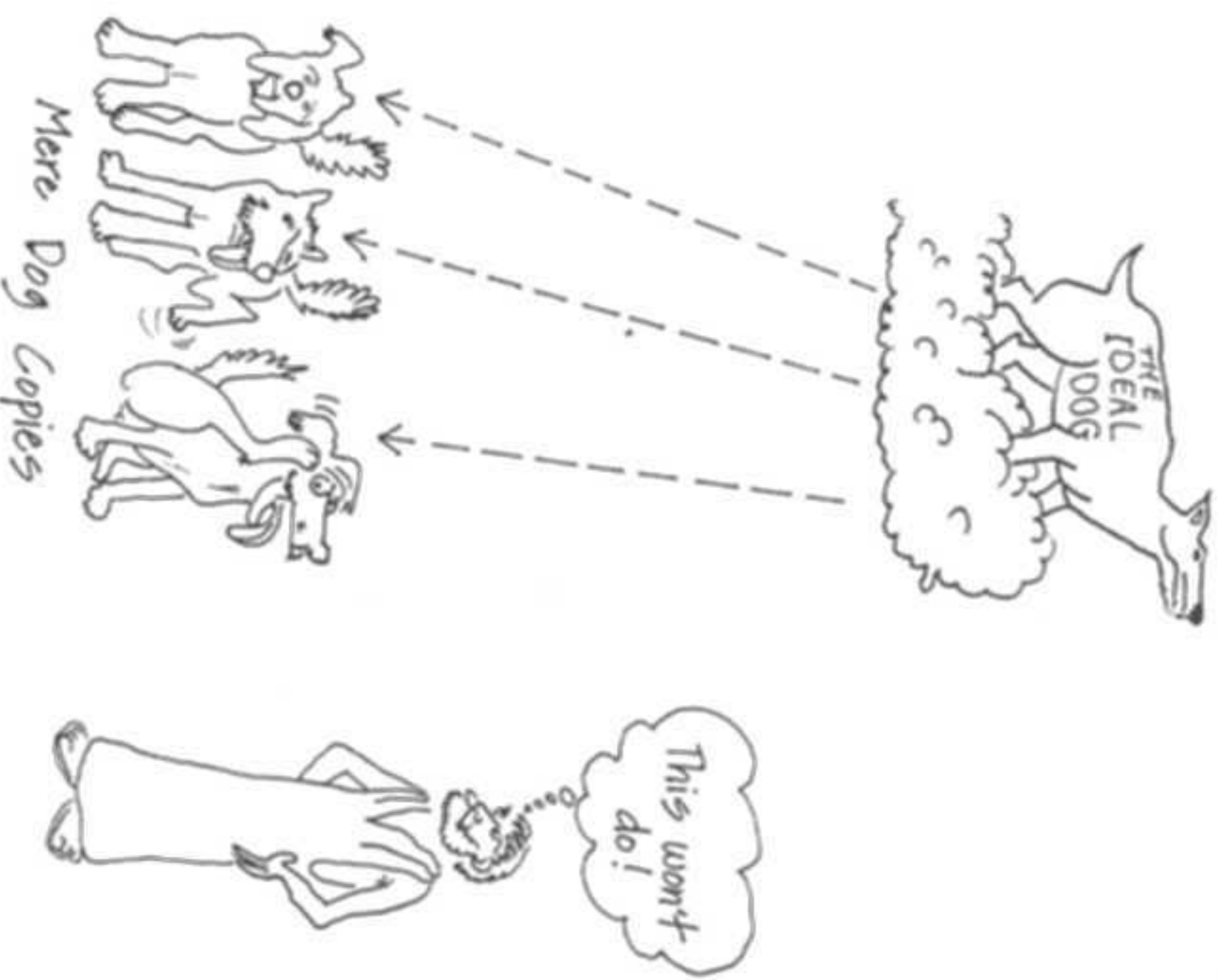
(The whole enterprise of *The Republic* can be viewed as a plea that philosophy take over the role that art had hitherto played in Greek culture.)



Plato did not live to see the inauguration of his ideal state, nor to see the installation of a Philosopher King who would know the Good, but the legacy that Plato left is still very much with us, for better or for worse. The eminent British-American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said that the history of philosophy is merely a series of footnotes to *The Republic*.

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Plato's influence is clearly seen in the thought of one of his best students, ARISTOTLE (384–322 B.C.). Aristotle, born in Stagira, spent 20 years at Plato's academy. Soon after the death of the master, Aristotle left the school because of disagreements with its new chiefs, and he founded an academy of his own, the Lyceum. In Aristotle's school, Platonic philosophy was taught, but it was also criticized.



The main thrust of Aristotle's dispute with his mentor concerned the latter's "other-worldliness." For Plato, there are two worlds: the unspeakably lofty world of Forms, and the world of mere "things," which is but a poor imitation of the former. Aristotle contradicted this view, asserting that there is only ONE world, and that we are right smack in the middle of it. In criticizing Plato, Aristotle asked: If Forms are essences of things, how can they exist separated from things? If they are the cause of things, how can they exist in a different world? And a most telling criticism has to do with the problem of CHANGE and MOTION, which the early Greeks had tried to solve.



They thought that either stability was an illusion (the view of Heracitus, for example) or that motion was an illusion (the view of Parmenides). Plato had tried to resolve the dilemma by acknowledging the insights of both Heracitus and Parmenides. The former's world is the unstable and transient realm of the visible. The latter's world is the immutable realm of the intelligible composed of the eternally unchanging Forms, which themselves are poorly reflected in the transitory world of the Visible. But did Plato's compromise

really solve the problem of motion and change? Is it really comprehensible to explain "changing things" by saying that they are bad imitations of unchanging things? Aristotle thought not.



In offering his own solution to the problem, Aristotle employed some of the same terminology as Plato. He said that a distinction must be drawn between FORM and MATTER, but that these two features of reality can be distinguished only in thought, not in fact. Forms are not separate entities. They are embedded in particular things.

They are IN the world. To think otherwise is an intellectual confusion. A particular object, to count as an object at all, must have both form and matter. Form, as Plato had said, is UNIVERSAL, in the sense that many particulars can have the same form. Aristotle called an object's form its "WHATNESS." That is, when you say what something is (it's a tree, it's a book), you are naming its form. The form is a thing's "essence," or "nature." It is related to the thing's FUNCTION (a wheel, a knife, a brick, etc.).

An object's MATTER is what is unique to that object. Aristotle called it the object's "THISNESS." All wheels or trees have the same form (or function), but no two have the same matter. Matter is "the



principle of individuation." An

object with both form and matter is what

Aristotle called a

substance. His

anti-Platonic

metaphysics holds

that reality is com-

posed of a plurality of

substances. It is not com-

posed of an upper tier of eternal Forms and a lower tier of

matter that unsuccessfully attempts to imitate those

Forms. This is Aristotle's **pluralism** as opposed to Plato's

dualism (a dualism that verges on **idealism** because, for

Plato, the most "real" tier of reality is the nonmaterial).

How does Aristotle's pluralism solve the problem of motion and change, a problem that was unsuccessfully addressed by his predecessors? It does so by reinterpreting MATTER

and FORM as POTENTIALITY and ACTUALITY and by turning these concepts into a theory of change. Any object in the world can be analyzed in terms of these categories.



Aristotle's famous example is

that of an acorn. The

acorn's matter contains

the potentiality of

becoming an oak tree,

which is the acorn's actu-

ality. The acorn is the

potentiality of there being an oak

tree. The oak tree is the actuality of the acorn. So, for

Aristotle, "form" is an operating cause. Each individual

substance is a self-

contained **teleological** (i.e.,

goal-oriented) system.

In fact, Aristotle ana-

lyzed all substances in

terms of four causes: The

material cause is the

"stuff" out of which some-

thing is made (e.g., a chunk

of marble that is to become

a statue). The formal cause

is the form, or essence, of

the statue, that which it

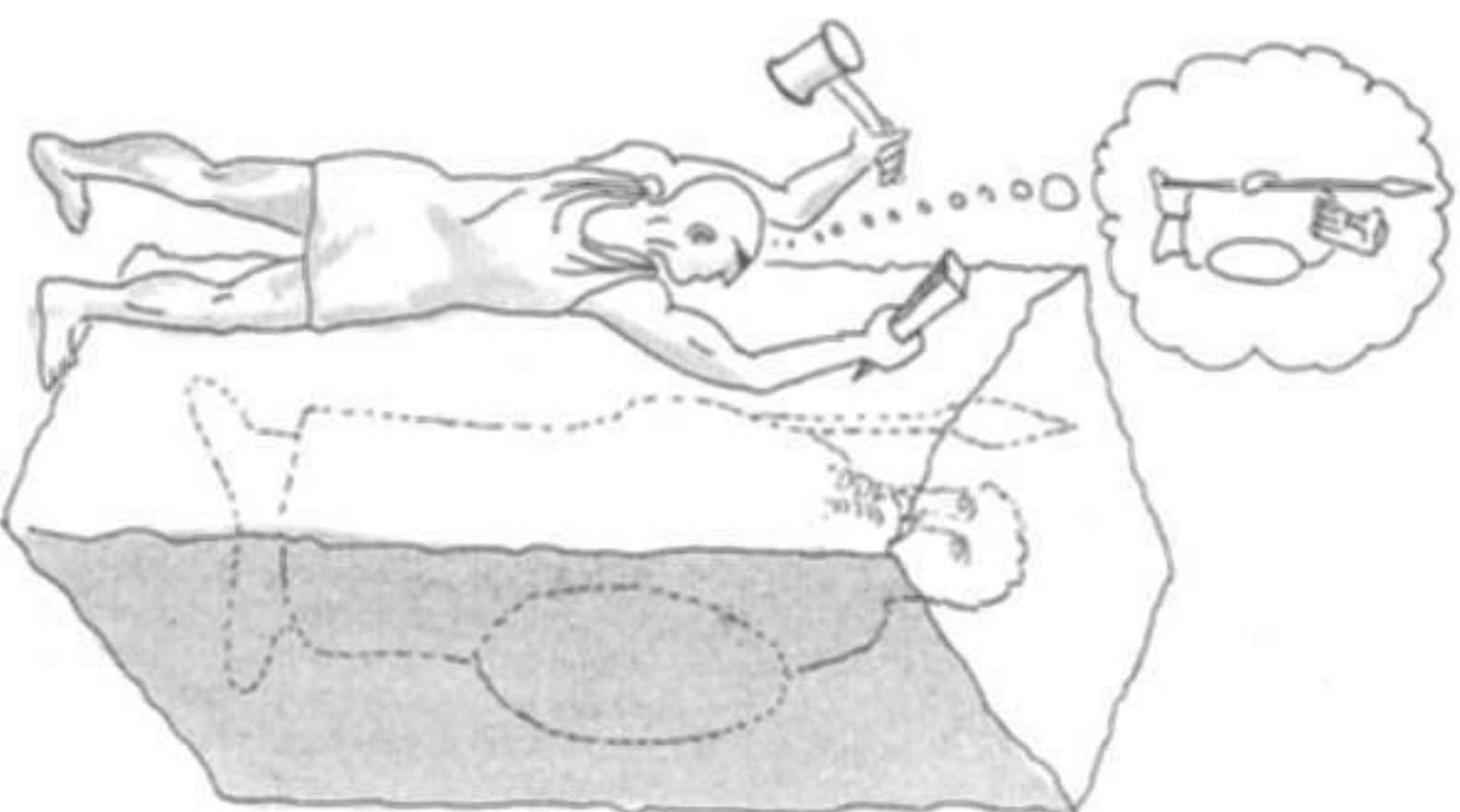
strives to be. (This exists

both in the mind of the

artist and potentially in the

marble itself.) The efficient

cause is the actual force



that brings about the change (the sculptor's chipping the block of stone). The final cause is the ultimate purpose of the object (the beauty of the Parthenon).

Nature, then, is a teleological system in which each substance is striving for self-actualization and for whatever perfection is possible within the limitations allowed it by its particular essence. As in Plato's theory, everything is striving unconsciously toward "the Good." Aristotle believed that for such a system to work, some concrete perfection must actually exist as the TELOS (or goal) toward which all things are striving.



This entity Aristotle called "the Prime Mover." It serves as a kind of god in Aristotle's metaphysics, but unlike the traditional gods of Greece and unlike the God of Western religion, the Prime Mover is almost completely nonanthropomorphic. It is the cause of the universe, not in the Judeo-Christian sense of creating it out of nothing, but in the sense of a Final Cause; everything "moves" toward it in the way a runner moves toward a goal. The Prime Mover is the only thing in the universe with no potentiality because, being perfect, it cannot change. It is pure actuality, which is to say, pure activity. What activity?

The activ-

ity of pure thought. And what does it think about?

Perfection! That is to say, about itself.

The Prime Mover's knowledge is immediate, complete self-consciousness.

—What we seem to have here is an absolutely divine case of narcissism.



Aristotle's moral philosophy, as it appears in his manuscript now called *The Nicomachean Ethics*, reflects his teleological metaphysics. The notion of goal, or purpose, is the overriding one in his moral theory. Aristotle noted that every act is performed for some purpose, which he defined as the "good"

of that act. (We perform an act because we find its purpose to be worthwhile.) Either the totality of our acts is an infinitely circular series (we get up in order to eat breakfast, we eat breakfast in order to go to work, we go to work in order to get money, we get money so we can buy food in order to be able to eat breakfast, etc., etc., etc.), in which case life would be a pretty meaningless endeavor. Or there is some ultimate good toward which the purposes of all acts are directed. If there is such a good, we should try to come to know it so that we can adjust all our acts toward it in order to avoid that saddest of all tragedies—the wasted life.



According to Aristotle, there is general verbal agreement that the end toward which all human acts are directed is happiness; therefore, happiness is the human good since we seek happiness for its own sake, not for the

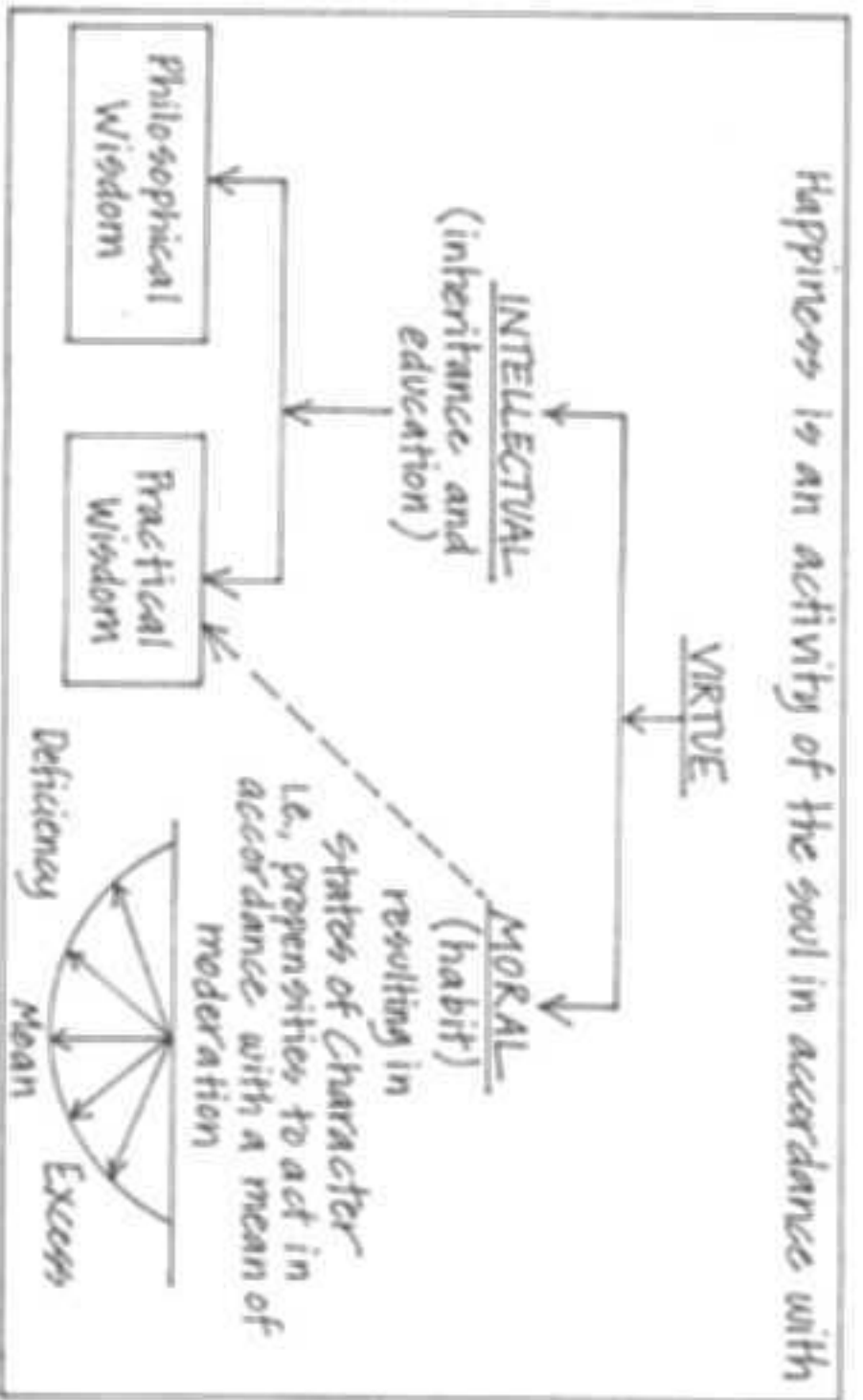
sake of something else. But unless we philosophize about happiness and get to know exactly what it is and how to achieve it, it will be platitudinous simply to say that happiness is the ultimate good. To determine the nature of happiness, Aristotle turned to his metaphysical schema and asked, "What is the function of the human?" (in the same way he would ask about the function of a knife or an acorn). He came to the conclusion that a human's function is to engage in "an activity of the soul which is in accordance with virtue and which follows a rational principle." Before grasping this complicated definition, we must determine what "virtue" is and what kinds of virtues there are. But first, as an aside, it must be mentioned that Aristotle believed that certain material conditions must hold before happiness can be achieved.



This list of conditions will reveal Aristotle's elitism: We need good friends, riches, and political power. We need a good birth, good children, and good looks ("... for the man who is very ugly in appearance... is not very likely to be happy"). We must not be very short. Furthermore, we must be free from the need of performing manual labor. ("No man can

practice virtue who is living the life of a mechanic or laborer:”)—It should be noted that Aristotle’s moral theory would be left substantially intact if his elitist bias were deleted.

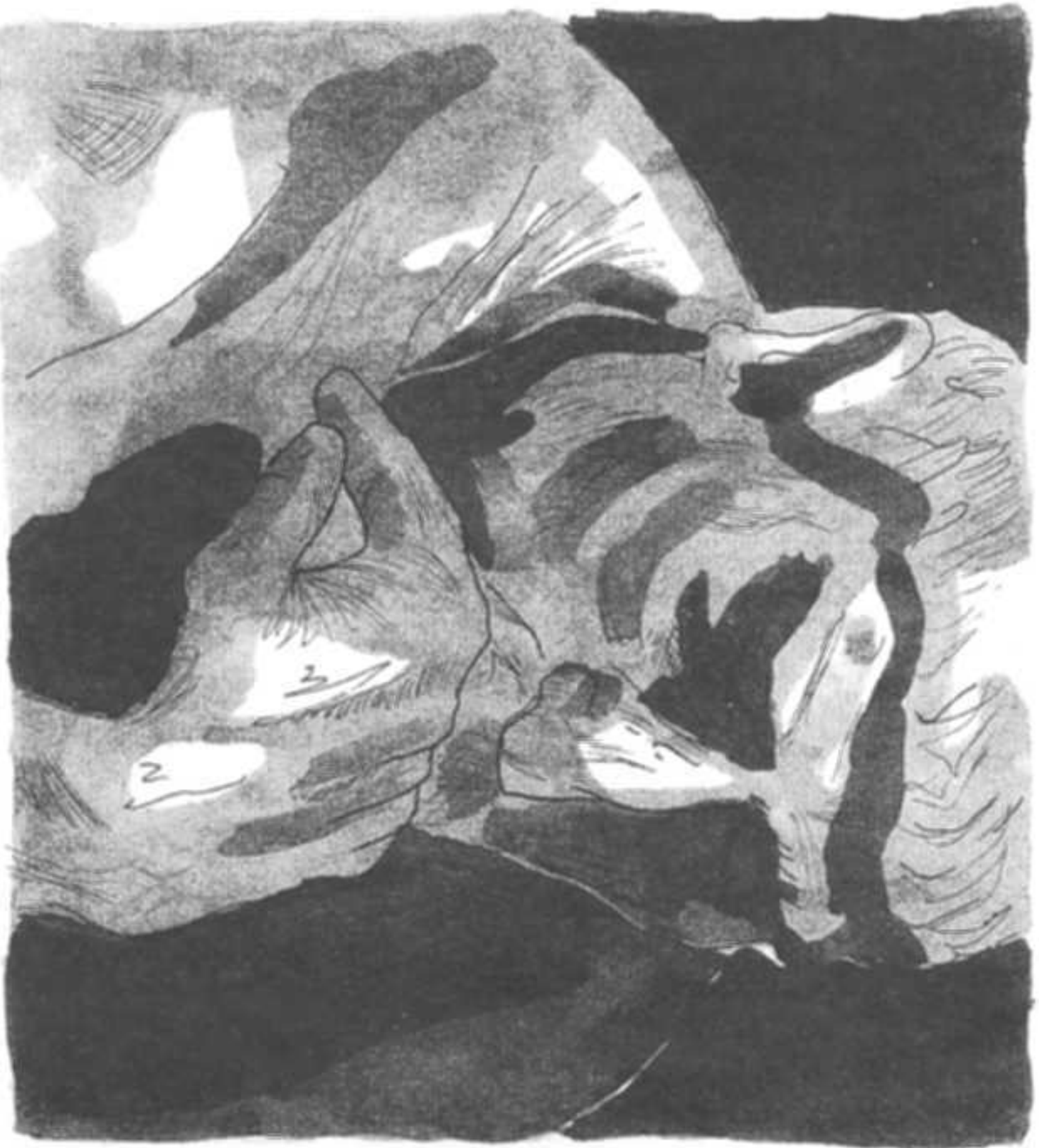
Now, as to virtues, there are two kinds: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtues are acquired through a combination of inheritance and education, and moral virtues through imitation, practice, and habit. The habits that we



develop result in “states of character,” that is, in dispositions to act certain ways, and these states of character are “virtuous” for Aristotle if they result in acts that are in accordance with a “golden mean” of moderation. For example, when it comes to facing danger, one can act with excess, that is, show too much fear. (This is cowardice.) Or one can act deficiently by showing too little fear. (This is



foolhardiness.) Or one can act with moderation, and hence virtuously, by showing the right amount of fear. (This is courage.) Aristotle realized that the choices we must make if we are to learn moral virtue cannot be made mathematically; rather, they are always context-bound and must be approached through trial and error.



Returning to the intellectual virtues of practical and philosophical wisdom, the former is the wisdom necessary to make judgments consistent with one’s understanding of the good life. It is therefore related to moral virtue (as in the diagram). Philosophical wisdom is scientific, disinterested, and contemplative. It is associated with pure reason,

and, for Aristotle, the capacity for reason is that which is most human; therefore, philosophical wisdom is the highest virtue. So, when Aristotle defined happiness as "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue," the activity referred to is philosophical activity. The human being can only be happy by leading a contemplative life, but not a monastic one. We are not only philosophical animals but also social ones. We are engaged in a world where decisions concerning practical matters are forced upon us constantly. Happiness (hence the good life) requires excellence in both spheres.

Not only did Aristotle make major contributions to metaphysics and ethics, he also wrote important treatises on aesthetics and politics. Furthermore, he singlehandedly founded the science of **logic**, that is, the science of valid inference. Symbolic logic has developed a long way since Aristotle's time, but it is indebted to him as its founder, and it has made more additions than corrections to his work.

Some of Aristotle's empirical claims about the world leave something to be desired (for instance, his claim that falling rocks accelerate because they are happy to be getting home, or his claim that snakes have no testicles because they have no legs). Nevertheless, Aristotle's metaphysics, his ethics, his logic, and his aesthetics remain permanent monuments to the greatness of human thought.

