

## The strategic descent and ascent to the margins of the cave in Plato and Nietzsche

*A descida e a subida estratégica às margens da caverna em Platão e Nietzsche*

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### ABSTRACT

The movements of descent (*καταβαίνεν* – *katabasis*) and ascent (*ἀνάβασις* – *anabasis*) of the characters Socrates and Zarathustra, in Books I and VII of Plato's *Republic* and the prologue and fourth part ("The Ass Festival") of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, respectively, although revealing apparently similar strategies, have radically divergent philosophical aims. Socrates's descent to the Piraeus is a cunning retreat on his journey for knowledge; far from abandoning it, this descent represents a gradual preparation for his ascent to a supersensible reality. Socrates descends so that he can guide others to ascend. In stark contrast, Zarathustra's ascent to the mountain illustrates moments of introspection and "self-knowledge". His subsequent decline only occurs after he is "overflowing with wisdom", a knowledge that symbolizes the valorization of the sensible world, a fundamental stage for the emergence of a new type of human being (*Übermensch*). In this article, we will argue that the allegorical representation of entering and exiting the cave, which can be observed in key passages of both works, is a fundamental indication of Nietzsche's attempt to invert Platonism.

KEYWORDS: Ascension. Decline. Katabasis. Socrates. Zarathustra.

### RESUMO

Os movimentos de descida (*καταβαίνεν* – *catábase*) e subida (*ἀνάβασις* – *anábase*) dos personagens Sócrates e Zaratustra, respectivamente no Livro I e VII de *A República* de Platão, bem como no Prólogo e Quarta parte ("A festa do asno") de *Assim falou Zaratustra* de Nietzsche, apesar de revelarem estratégias aparentemente semelhantes, têm finalidades filosóficas radicalmente divergentes. A descida de Sócrates ao Pireu é um recuo astucioso em sua jornada pelo conhecimento; longe de abandoná-lo, essa descida representa a preparação gradual para sua ascensão a uma realidade suprassensível. Sócrates desce para poder guiar outros a subirem. Em nítido contraste, a subida de Zaratustra à montanha ilustra momentos

de introspecção e de “autoconhecimento”. Seu subsequente declínio só acontece após ele estar “transbordando de sabedoria”, um conhecimento que simboliza a valorização do mundo sensível, palco fundamental para o surgimento do novo tipo humano (*Übermensch*). Argumentaremos, neste artigo, que a representação estratégica de entrada e de saída da caverna, observável em passagens-chave de ambas as obras, constitui um indício fundamental da tentativa de Nietzsche de inverter o platonismo.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Ascensão. Declínio. Catábase. Sócrates. Zaratustra.

## INTRODUCTION

During his lectures as a professor of classical philology at the University of Basel (between 1869 and 1879), Friedrich Nietzsche showed great admiration for Plato. He described him as “[...] the most talented prose writer: highly versatile, mastering all nuances, the perfect scholar of the most erudite era. In structuring his dialogues, he shows great dramatic talent”<sup>1</sup>.

The controversial relationship between Nietzsche and Plato arouses considerable interest among scholars, especially considering that it is based not only on praise, but also on Nietzsche’s severe criticism of metaphysics, a tradition that has one of its pillars in Plato.

According to Maicon Reus Engler, Nietzsche’s philosophical project aimed to reverse the structure of the philosophical tradition inaugurated by Plato (Cf. ENGLER, 2017, p. 115). In the preface to *Beyond good and evil*, Nietzsche explains his motivation: the need to revise Platonic thought, considered responsible for establishing a dogmatic philosophy.<sup>2</sup> In Nietzsche’s words, “[...] a dogmatic error: the Platonic invention of pure spirit and the good in itself” (BM, *Prologue*<sup>3</sup>) would have compromised existence, conditioning it to the realm of the ideal (Cf. GIACOIA, 1997, p. 25).

According to Laurence Lampert (2004, p. 209), the preface to *Beyond good and evil* “[...] places us in the ruins of two millennia of Platonic dogmatism and several centuries of successful spiritual warfare.” Given this enduring hegemony of Platonism, would it be conceivable to reverse a philosophy as deeply

<sup>1</sup> NIETZSCHE, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Lectures on Plato*. Translated by Ernani Chaves. In: Revista Artefilosofia, Ouro Preto, Ouro Preto, n. 13, 2012, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> It is common to attribute this adjective to the Greek philosopher. In fact, in this regard, Engler (Cf. 2018, p. 87) considers various interpretations in different areas of the Hellenic thinker’s philosophical structure, commonly interpreted as the product of a dogmatic philosophy. Although in the aforementioned text Engler argues the opposite of this statement, there is no doubt about the central point of criticism in the realm of metaphysics, that is, disregarding “[...] the sensible configuration of all entities – including obvious things such as the body – to rediscover their true nature reduplicated in a supersensible plane.”

<sup>3</sup> This preface also contains Nietzsche’s well-known statement that “Christianity is Platonism for the ‘people’” (BM, *Prologue*).

rooted as Nietzsche presupposed? Furthermore, even considering Nietzsche's ambitious project, would it be possible for his philosophy to completely escape the influence of Platonic elements? As Oswaldo Giacoia observes, after all, what exactly does it mean to "[...] reverse, overturn Plato and Platonism?" (GIACOIA, 1997, p. 29).

In agreement with the commentator,

Nietzsche means by this that, with his belief in pure reason and in goodness itself, the Platonic Socrates gives rise to the metaphysical gesture par excellence, which consists in the *instauratio* and consecration, as matrix elements of subsequent philosophical thought, of the 'idealistic' opposition between the sensible and the supersensible, that fatal division that puts an end to the 'realism' of the ancient Hellenes, insofar as it implies and presupposes a disqualification of the sensible in favor of the intelligible, of the temporal in favor of the eternal, of the true world in favor of the merely apparent world, of being as opposed to becoming (GIACOIA, 1997, p. 30).

Effectively, reversing the Socratic-Platonic logic implies considering and accepting the consequences of valuing what has traditionally been rejected from human existence, as it has been treated as something horrible. That is, art and everything it represents: the terrible, the dark, the tragic, were avoided in the structure of Platonic philosophy. In this sense, Angelo Marinucci points out that the fundamental divergence between Plato and Nietzsche lies in the central philosophical question that each sought to answer: while the Greek thinker inquired about essence ("what is something?"), the German thinker investigated its meaning ("how is something?"). In Plato, then, there is an attempt to determine the origin of a phenomenon, while in Nietzsche the debate is centered on the meaning of this genesis (Cf. MARINUCCI, 2017, p. 148).

By way of illustration, the essential problem that Plato devoted himself to solving, notably in *The Republic*, through the voice of Socrates, was to answer "What is justice?" Interestingly, before presenting his own conception, Plato, through Socratic dialogue, explores various definitions, a method that illustrates Socratic irony, as observed in the violent intervention of the character Thrasymachus (Cf. Rep., 336b). In contrast, Nietzsche, in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in tracing the origin of the definitions of good and evil, seeks to demonstrate how this genesis may have negatively impacted life.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In section 12 of the second dissertation of *Genealogy*, Nietzsche demonstrates that there is a subtle difference between the purpose of a thing and its origin. In this context, one can understand, for example, that the purpose of punishment does not refer solely to the act of revenge or the process of intimidation. After all, what would its purposes be? Thinking about the purposes of punishment in the plural already implies subverting the *modus operandi* of Western philosophy based on teleological reflection. Based on this understanding, Nietzsche points out that the philosophical tradition has commonly fixed the origin and purpose of punishment at the same point of investigation. In Lawrence Hatab's interpretation, the philosopher from Sils-Maria, on the other hand, "[...] insists that any form of meaning is never fixed, but 'fluid'" (HATAB, 2010, p. 111). Therefore, it is unlikely that anything would originate from a single interpretative aspect, as Western philosophical tradition would have us believe.

The controversy between the two philosophers lies fundamentally in a methodological question. Consequently, their results diverge or oppose each other, given that Plato based his philosophy on the metaphysical domain, while Nietzsche rejected it. Despite this apparent ambiguity, it is likely that Nietzsche appropriated the Platonic philosophical structure to build his own thinking. Thus, even though he was antagonistic to Platonic understanding, Nietzsche maintained a certain “fidelity” to the Greek thinker, which, however, requires caveats. The main one is perhaps that Nietzsche often uses his opponents as a kind of “magnifying glass.”

Regarding this presumed closeness, the philosopher from Sils-Maria himself makes a note, as can be seen in a fragment from his youth: “Socrates, just to confess, is so close to me that I almost always struggle with him” (FP, 1875, 6[3]).

For Enrico Müller (2012, pp. 41–56), understanding Nietzsche’s project of “inverted Platonism” stems from a few fundamental aspects. In general, the “Socratic transvaluation” reveals Socrates’ break with his time. Furthermore, Plato, by giving prominence to Socrates<sup>5</sup> and other characters in his dialogues, almost always hides himself as the author, echoing Nietzsche’s strategy of highlighting figures such as Zarathustra, a “free spirit” among other “psychological types.” Müller (2012, p. 50), noting this similarity, characterizes both philosophers as “[...] hidden playwrights [...]” who stage their ideas through characters. This stylistic dimension is not merely ornamental, but essential to the potentiality of their philosophies.

Discussions about the similarities and differences between Nietzsche and Plato take on an ironic tone in two letters written by Nietzsche. In the first, dated October 22, 1883, and sent to his friend Frans Overbeck, Nietzsche ironically comments on his supposed ignorance of Plato’s philosophy. He writes: “I am increasingly astonished at how little I know about Plato and how much I have platonized Zarathustra” (NIETZSCHE, 2010, p. 414). This irony is repeated the following year, on March 31, 1884, in a letter to Resa von Schirnhöfer. In his characteristic style, which mixes the comic with the provocative, Nietzsche writes: “Every scholar has his cave, that is, within himself, and sometimes behind this cave there is yet another and another – I wanted to say that it is difficult to know a hermit” (NIETZSCHE, 2010, p. 448).

In addition to this fictional technique of cave exploration, there is an apparent relationship between the characters Socrates and Zarathustra, as Müller points out. This similarity is manifested in the way Plato and Nietzsche use them in their works (Cf. MÜLLER, 2012, p. 44). In this sense, the dialogues juxtaposed in the works *The Republic* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* adopt a narrative literary structure. The

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the factual nature of Plato’s characters, it is worth noting the way in which he shifts his characters within the work.

events parallel to the characters' lives directly influence conceptual production, placing both discourses between the philosophical and the poetic (Cf. MÜLLER, 2012, p. 53).

Regarding whether Socrates was a historical figure or not, Roberto Bolzani Filho (2016, p. 3) argues that Socrates and Plato, “[...] although it is the product of an undeniably deep relationship between disciple and master, everything Socrates says and does in Plato's dialogues is actually Plato, it is a Platonic construction [...]”.

The author emphasizes that this does not imply disregarding a complete disconnect between Socratism and Platonic philosophy. In accordance with Bolzani (2016, p. 3),

[...] it is not necessary to enter the murky terrain of the problem of demarcating boundaries between Socratism and Platonism to recognize the existence of important philosophical changes, which can be expressed either as an abandonment or as a refinement of the interrogative style traditionally called Socratic [...].

In view of these nuances, Müller (Cf. 2012, p. 54) demonstrates that Socrates and Zarathustra have typologies in common. Both, recognized for their wisdom, felt the weight of the “ignorance” of those who refused to listen to them, which resulted in the failure of their projects as teachers. In Nietzschean language, their projects were accused of “physiological degeneration” and distortion of the status quo, and therefore failed in their tasks. However, the fascinating uniqueness of their trajectories and the depth of their discourses, often delivered in solitude and uncertainty as to whether they would be understood or not, constitute a legacy. This experience of misunderstanding gave their dramas an impersonal and timeless character, as they addressed issues fundamental to humanity.

Similarly, Alexander Nehamas considers that (1985, p. 25), “Nietzsche’s project is essentially similar and parallel to Socrates’ project [...]”. The interpreter maintains that the similarities, as well as the oppositions reflected in both philosophies, stem from their specific singularities and the stimulation of moral qualities. On the one hand, Socrates pursues his purpose with a personal character; on the other hand, Nietzsche is more literate. Socrates feels that he has not asked enough questions; Nietzsche fears that too many answers have been given. Socrates believes in self-knowledge; Nietzsche denies self-knowledge. Values for the Greek thinker are objective, while for the German philosopher values are given in actions. For Socrates, knowledge, truth, and goodness are fundamental to human beings; for Nietzsche, knowledge must be linked to instincts. In short, both need public attention and, tragically, both failed in their respective endeavors (Cf. NEHAMAS, 1985, p. 25-28).

This article explores the intriguing relationship between Plato and Nietzsche, analyzing how the German philosopher adapts and subverts Platonic concepts to undermine traditional metaphysics. To

this end, we will specifically analyze Nietzsche's use of imagery and scenarios – a resource present in both authors – highlighting how these elements acquire meanings opposite to Platonic thought.

Our analysis will focus on *The Republic* (Books I and VII) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Prologue and Part IV, with emphasis on “The Feast of the Ass”). We will observe that the movements of descent (*καταβαίνεν* – *catabasis*) and ascent (*ἀνάβασις* – *anabasis*) at the edge of the cave, performed by the characters Socrates and Zarathustra, which metaphorically represent decline and ascension, reveal the strategies and philosophical nuances of each thinker. Finally, we will show that, ironically, Nietzsche's project of an anti-metaphysical philosophy, which seeks to reverse Platonism, is based on a strategy similar to the Greek thinker's own philosophical model.

## **I *The Republic*: movements of descent (*καταβαίνεν* – *catábase*) and ascent (*ἀνάβασις* – *anábase*) to the edges of the “cave”**

### **Book I: The descent (*καταβαίνεν* – *catábase*) socratic strategy**

It should be noted, as Julia Annas (1981, p. 16) points out, that it is clear

[...] for any reader of the *Republic* that Book 1 is different from the rest of the work. It begins with an elaborate setting and is rich in dramatic indications. Socrates states that he himself has no knowledge, but does his best to undermine, with his questions, the confidence of the people with whom he is speaking. The conclusion is negative; Socrates argued with his interlocutors to silence them, but nothing replaces their previous beliefs. In all this, Book 1 contrasts sharply with the rest of the *Republic*, where, despite the form of dialogue, there are no strongly characterized interlocutors, and Socrates delivers what is essentially a monologue.

Despite this circumstance, Annas (1981, p. 17) adds, “[...] even if Book 1 was written separately, it does not matter; it forms an entirely adequate introduction to the main discussion.”

Based on this, it is important to highlight the way in which Plato constructs the setting, where various philosophical reflections will be made. In Book I of *The Republic*, he outlines the location of the dialogues by presenting Socrates and Glaucon descending to Piraeus for a religious festival (Cf. *Rep.*, 327a). This downward movement, apparently paradoxical in Platonic philosophy, which associates Good with the higher plane and advocates a gradual ascent of knowledge, is of great importance.

Considering the vertical nature of Platonic epistemology, which progresses from simple to complex knowledge in an allegorical ascent, the descent – the return to the cave and to the rudimentary cognitive level – reflects the attitude of the individual who, after contemplating higher knowledge, feels compelled to return.

It is no coincidence that Plato begins *The Republic* in the region of Piraeus: this bustling port and commercial center, the scene of intense movement of people, especially during festive events, was home to a rich diversity on its coastal plain.

The character Socrates, upon descending to this place, takes with him all the aura from above, from the supersensible. However, in order to experience such a stage of knowledge, it was necessary to start from below – from the sensible world. Socrates' descent to Piraeus, in the company of his interlocutors, represents contact with those who also need to ascend toward knowledge and the Good.

Strategically, “[...] it is the descent that saves, for it is this that allows the general cosmic dimension of being to achieve its own salvation” (PEREIRA, 2008, p. 7). With this initiative, there is an attempt to save the sensible world for the benefit of the supersensible world; after ascending and contemplating, one must return, descend again. Such movements consist precisely of the Platonic philosophical attitude itself, since “[...] *to philosophize is to ascend in order to descend*” (PEREIRA, 2008, p. 9).

In this setting, Socrates accepts Polemarchus' “invitation,” or rather, his excessive determination to remain in the region and participate in other events (Cf. *Rep.*, 328b), triggering a series of discussions about justice with his interlocutors. Convinced to stay, the debate about justice takes place at the home of the host Cephalus, Polemarchus' father. This young man amazes Glaucon, for “[...] he forces Socrates to remain in Piraeus: he instigates the primordial revolt against Socrates' departure” (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 82).

According to William Altman (2012, p. 77),

[...] it is in his large and comfortable house – presumably staffed with enough slaves to ensure that Socrates and the others are discreetly served drinks and snacks (including parsley) – that the conversation takes place, and it is Cephalus who provides them with the topic that will lead them to justice.

The first of these dialogues takes place between Socrates and the elderly Cephalus. Given the host's advanced age, he is given the honor of initiating the debate. As Altman points out, Cephalus' speech is guided by his advanced age and his eventual eschatological understanding (Cf. ALTMAN, 2012, p. 77). The conversation begins by exploring the experience of old age and the role of wealth, before turning to the central issue of justice.

It should be noted that Cephalus is from Syracuse. Therefore, he does not have the same rights as a Greek citizen of the time. In this regard, Julia Annas (1981, p. 18) observes that

Cephalus is a man who chose to spend his life making money, living in a foreign city, and renouncing all the rights, duties, and activities of a citizen, things of vital importance to the self-respect of most Greeks.

Predictably, Socrates questions Cephalus about his view of wealth. He replies that it consists of “[...] not to deceive anyone, nor to lie, even unintentionally, nor to remain indebted, whether to the gods or to a man, and then depart to the beyond without fearing anything” (*Rep.*, 331b).

According to Altman, Cephalus’ fear of death and possible condemnation in another world, where moral actions may be judged by a deity, leads him to consider

[...] life here is preferable to this second kingdom, even if it exists: his loyalty is to the earth, and he is only afraid that the fun he had here might cause him difficulties there. For Cephalus, justice is something to be feared. Cephalus considers the other world – if there is one – to be the place where claims of justice must be paid (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 79).

Socrates summarizes Cephalus’ argument as follows: “[...] to tell the truth is to restore what has been taken” (*Rep.*, 331d). In the dialogue with Cephalus, in addition to advice on aging well, there is a subtle criticism by Socrates against ways of life that are fully dedicated to the pursuit of wealth, suggesting that only in old age would there be time to reflect on one’s own existence (Cf. ANNAS, 1981, p. 19).

In fact, Annas adds that the Greek philosopher considered Cephalus’ definitions to be overly simplistic.

His notion of doing the right thing consists of observing a few simple rules or maxims such as ‘don’t lie’ and ‘return what isn’t yours.’ He thinks of them in a very external way: what matters is whether or not you perform certain actions, such as sacrifices to the gods, and not the spirit in which they are done: the rich man, he says, can die knowing that he has not deceived anyone, even against his will. That is why he frankly thinks it is more difficult for a poor man to be righteous; he may owe money to someone, or owe a sacrifice to the gods, and be unable to afford it, and thus may die having done something wrong, albeit against his will (ANNAS, 1981, p. 20).

Faced with a superficial definition, Altman observes that “[...] Cephalus is completely in the dark about justice” (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 79). This observation reinforces the idea that, metaphorically speaking, Socrates’ interlocutors still “inhabit the cave.” Although the honor bestowed upon Cephalus – the oldest character – may indicate Plato’s appreciation of elders in Athenian society, this idea is easily refutable. Accumulated life experience does not prevent individuals from remaining inside the cave, that is, without a sure knowledge of what may happen to their own existence.

Altman also thinks that

Cephalus continues to lay bare the traits of his tortured soul: most striking of all is that he cannot be sure whether he is seeing things (for the first time) more clearly or whether he is simply becoming a senile old fool (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 70).

Precisely for this reason, Altman reiterates that “Returning to the Cave is the practice of Justice. The philosopher who ‘descends’ *ipso facto* ‘restores justice’” (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 79), because “Those who return to the Cave expect this kind of thing and know that shadows are not reliable, no matter how clearly they are seen” (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 80).

Once the initial dialogue with Socrates has ended, the host Cephalus leaves the scene to attend to a sacrifice (cf. *Rep.*, 331d). With his departure, the discussion in *The Republic* takes a new turn with the sudden intervention of his son, the young Polemarchus, who takes over the debate. It is noteworthy that the probable heir to his father’s wealth also becomes the successor in the philosophical conduct of the dialogue.

The ongoing dialogue draws a parallel between his definition of justice and the clear reference to the poet Simonides, who understood it as “[...] giving each person what is due to him [...]” (*Rep.*, 332c). Polemarchus’ argumentative reasoning, however, is not so different from that of his father, “[...] for what matters is that debts be paid, whatever the spirit. The only reason to be just is that, perhaps in the long run, it is better for you” (ANNAS, 1981, p. 21). However, this definition soon becomes the target of Socratic criticism, which reduces it to the idea of seeking “[...] advantage from friends and harm from enemies [...]” (*Rep.*, 334b). This simplification exposes the difficulty of distinguishing, in practice, friends from enemies (Cf. *Rep.*, 335a).

Certainly, the example given by Socrates is quite emblematic. As Annas (1981, p. 21) points out, “If you borrow a gun from someone and then they go crazy, it would not be right to return it when they ask for it back; nor is it always right to tell the truth to someone who is not in their right mind.”

Upon further analysis, Socrates argues that, since justice is the perfection of the individual, causing harm, even to an enemy, would be an unjust act, since such action rarely contributes to human improvement (Cf. *Rep.*, 335c). In this sense, what is at stake in the debate between Socrates and Polemarchus, as Altman (2012, p. 86) points out, “[...] is the difference between what appears to be the case and what actually is.” Clearly, there is an allusion to the “dividing line” between the “sensible world” and the “intelligible world.” Basically, “[...] for Cephalus and Polemarchus, justice is quite trivial; it is certainly not something that structures their lives as a whole” (ANNAS, 1981, p. 27).

The conversation is then abruptly interrupted, this time by Thrasymachus. Seized by sudden fury, he demands that Socrates finally define what justice is (Cf. *Rep.*, 336c). It is worth remembering that Thrasymachus “[...] was well known as an orator and teacher of rhetoric in Athens in 427 BC” (KERFERD, 1981, p. 51). By identifying him as a sophist, Plato associates him with a class of intellectuals whose profession was motivated by financial interests rather than a genuine pursuit of knowledge.

As George Kerferd (1981, p. 25) points out,

Poets, artists, and doctors received fees. Pindar, writing after the end of the Persian invasion of 480 BC, says that gone are the days when poets wrote songs without receiving payment in cash – money makes the man!

Plato's aversion to sophists is evident, and he often uses Socrates in his dialogues to refute them. In the dialogue *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates disqualifies the Sophists with an incisive question: "Wouldn't a Sophist, Hippocrates, be a merchant or a shopkeeper who sells, retail or wholesale, goods that feed the soul?" (*Prot.*, 313c). This question suggests that the Sophists were not concerned with truth, but rather with profit, treating knowledge as a mere commodity.

Regarding Thrasymachus' argument, as Stephen Everson points out, he "[...] is presented by Plato as having a coherent theory of justice, although, unsurprisingly, scholars have not reached agreement on what that theory actually is" (EVERSON, 1998, p. 99).

Considering this disparaging view of the Sophists, the dialogue in Book I of *The Republic* continues with Socrates and Polemarchus' perplexity after Thrasymachus' intervention. Interrupted once again in his attempt to justify himself, Socrates now faces sarcastic laughter from Thrasymachus, who boasts of knowing his tactics. In front of the other guests, the sophist criticizes the Socratic method of avoiding direct answers and instead proposing new questions. He labels this attitude as "Socratic irony," whose essence is "knowing how not to know" – the simulation of ignorance (Cf. *Rep.*, 337a).

Faced with this impasse, Thrasymachus, disagreeing with the previous definitions (Cf. *Rep.*, 337d), is persuaded to present his own conception of justice. Amid Socrates' philosophical speculations, the character Thrasymachus, in Annas' conception, offers three distinct characterizations of the concept of justice: justice seen as the benefit of the strongest, justice understood as the observance of laws, and justice understood as the pursuit of the benefit of others (Cf. ANNAS, 1981, p. 35).

Fundamentally, he states that "[...] justice is nothing other than the convenience of the strongest" (*Rep.*, 338c). Prompted by Socrates, Thrasymachus argues that, although there are different forms of government (monarchy, democracy, and aristocracy), laws are always established by those in power. Thus, justice boils down to compliance with these laws, and is therefore "[...] the convenience of the strongest [...]" (*Rep.*, 339a), the class that institutes them. Ultimately, "The only content of injustice he is willing to consider is the violation of these laws" (ANNAS, 1981, p. 40).

After Thrasymachus presents his argument, Socrates reiterates that the formulation of a law capable of favoring the subjects does not exclude the possibility that it simultaneously confronts the interests of the rulers. Therefore, the reverse is also plausible: a law may well be detrimental to the governed and advantageous to those who hold power (Cf. *Rep.*, 340a).

In Annas' conception (1981, p. 41),

[...] justice can lead someone to do not only what is in the interest of the strongest, but its opposite – that is, what is in fact against the interest of the strongest, but has been ineptly transformed into law by those in power. What Socrates did is, in fact, extremely obvious: by treating his two formulations as equivalent, Thrasymachus was assuming that the ruler will always be the strongest: that is, that the existing legal and social structure always accurately reflects the distribution of power.

Regarding the apparent inconsistency in Thrasymachus' thinking, Annas further states that

Some scholars argue that he is unclear about what he believes and shifts from one position to another in such a way that no defensible position can be recovered. Plato's reason for doing this would be to show the moral skeptic as a superficial and stupid person (ANNAS, 1981, p. 35).

In this sense, Everson thinks that, “At first glance, Thrasymachus seems not only rude but also confused, his complacency undermined by his inability to seriously develop a philosophical argument” (EVERSON, 1998, p. 99).

Nevertheless, Altman considers that Thrasymachus “[...] gives an admirable, irrefutable, and, in fact, perfectly true definition of the infinite many different things that are called ‘justice’” (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 87). This is yet another remarkable view of the “dividing line” between the “sensible world” and the “intelligible world.” According to Altman, the sophist's definition “is, in fact, a definition of what justice merely appears to be” (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 88).

However contradictory or consistent Thrasymachus' definitions may appear to be, they are refuted by Socrates, as the philosopher draws comparisons with experts in various fields, such as doctors and sailors. According to Socrates' argument, such experts act in harmony with the good of their respective subordinates (patients and passengers). By analogy, politicians should therefore act for the benefit of those who obey them (Cf. *Rep.*, 342d-e).

Regarding this Socratic definition, Altman believes that “[...] a good doctor – one who derives no personal benefit from practicing his art – should receive other incentives to benefit others. Furthermore, this also applies to politics” (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 89).

In contrast, in the narrative, Thrasymachus argues that those who obey are aware that their condition is, in fact, disadvantageous in relation to the stronger (Cf. *Rep.*, 343c). At this point in the dialogue, Thrasymachus showed his intention to withdraw, as if his participation were already complete. However, Socrates and the other guests insist that he stay and follow the discussion (Cf. *Rep.*, 344d). After much insistence, he gives in. While Socrates tries to convince him through his argument, Glaucon, his friend and Plato's brother, enters the scene, questioning whether or not each specialist should be remunerated for their work (Cf. *Rep.*, 347a).

Socrates resumes the discussion and establishes a crucial point for his defense, namely: the inadequacy of all individuals, however well-intentioned they may be, for the role of ruler. He argues emphatically: “Now the greatest punishment is to be ruled by those who are worse than ourselves [...]” (*Rep.*, 347c). Certainly, “[...] it would be an overwhelming pity to be ruled by Thrasymachus or one of his students” (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 90).

It is worth noting that Glaucon’s intervention at this point in the work, as Altman observes (Cf. 2012, p. 89), creates a significant pause in the progression of the story. Socrates, subtly taking advantage of this gap, uses it to begin to outline his conception of justice. In the context in which Socrates seeks to define justice and persuade Thrasymachus to continue the discussion, the latter, through his inquiries, presents a controversial view: justice would be a manifestation of naivety, while injustice would represent a form of cleverness (Cf. *Rep.*, 348d). This perspective, radically opposed to the Socratic view, which considers justice an intrinsic virtue and injustice a vice (Cf. *Rep.*, 348e), directs the central question of Book I to the possible connection between justice and injustice (Cf. *Rep.*, 351a). For Socrates, “[...] the just prove to be wiser, better, and more capable of acting, while the unjust are not even capable of acting together” (*Rep.*, 352b). What is evident is the constitution of the Platonic city, composed only of good men (Cf. ALTMAN, 2012, p. 90). This statement requires careful examination due to its relevance to the constitution of different modes of existence, something that Socrates will continue to do in subsequent books, for “[...] the most important things are yet to come” (ALTMAN, 2012, p. 102).

The descent to Piraeus thus takes on a particular meaning: after Socrates has contemplated the supersensible reality, the return – metaphorically, to the cave, toward Piraeus – becomes an essential plan. This is because many, as observed in the dialogues, are still unable to free themselves from the shadows and images produced within them and, thus, cannot free themselves from the burden of ignorance.

Therefore, only those who have already experienced the “world of ideas” can direct the “gaze” of those who remain “imprisoned” and, consequently, unable to acquire true knowledge.

Socrates descends in order to guide others to ascend.

Precisely for this reason, Book VII of *The Republic*, in which Plato narrates the well-known “allegory of the cave,” becomes a fundamental element for our understanding of the strategic effects of ascending and descending the cave’s edge.

### **Book VII: the exit from the cave (*Ἀνάβασις – anábase*), ascent, and strategic return**

In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato, through the character Socrates, presents the famous “allegory of the cave.” It should be noted, at the outset, that there is extensive debate about the origin of the term allegory.

Etymologically, the word *allegoria* is formed by *állos*, ‘other’, and *agoreíno*, ‘I speak’. That is, when speaking of one thing, one is actually speaking of another. Thus, in the ancient world, allegory can be defined as a figure of speech in which there is an apparent meaning and another hidden behind the apparent one. But it can also be understood as the hermeneutic procedure that aims to discover the hidden meaning of myths, which is the true meaning. The most common meaning of the term allegory in Antiquity is to make something understood by saying something else (OLIVEIRA, 2017, p. 4).

When it comes to the first scholars to adopt allegorical language, we usually refer to the poets Homer and Hesiod; but allegory was certainly already present in mythology, and later, among the first Greek philosophers, this linguistic device remained. Although these scholars criticized the authors of the Iliad and the Theogony, allegorical language still remained the fundamental basis of the philosophical structure of the early Greek philosophers (Cf. TATE, 1934, p. 105-106).

Before we move on to analyze the famous “allegory of the cave,” it is worth noting that in Book VI, Plato presents his theoretical foundation for knowledge in a more objective manner.

In general terms, in passages 509d to 511d-e (Cf. *Rep.*, 509d-511d-e), he explains how the human soul, through knowledge, reaches different levels until it approaches the notion of the “Ideal.” From this perspective, metaphorically speaking, “shadows” and “reflections in water,” for example, would correspond to a lower level of knowledge, since this type is based on imagination (*Eikasía*) or the representation of a given object, that is, its apprehension would occur by similarity to other objects; from the point of view of knowledge, the second object under analysis refers to corporeal things, situated in the realm of belief (*Pístis*). Such phenomena exist, but cannot yet be proven in their entirety at this level of knowledge; another, more refined plane of knowledge concerns *Dianóia*, that is, it corresponds to hypothetical formulations and contains traces of abstractions. Therefore, they would be similar to mathematical experiments.

Finally, the level to be reached refers to the (*Nous*), that is, the concept itself; without depending on external reality; without depending on images; without even depending on hypotheses, since a certain foundation has been reached in a completely abstract manner. In this sense, hypotheses would be a kind of impulse to reach the supersensible plane – knowledge at its highest level. This faculty of the soul manages to grasp the Forms (or Ideas), which are beyond the sensible world. In other words, according to Annas (1981, p. 244), the human mind understands that “The Form of Good is not in the world of our experience, since it is not the same as what we call good.” With the help of *Nous*, therefore, it is possible to understand that which is most supreme, namely, the Form of Good.

This level of knowledge in Plato is the supreme Form, precisely because understanding the Good allows us to understand other things as well. In fact, the Good is understood in relation to the Idea itself – the Form itself (Cf. ANNAS, 1981, p. 245).

Plato, in Annas' conception, examines the notion of Good from three figures: sun, line, and cave. With the figurative image of the sun, he means, by analogy, that

Light is provided by the sun, which thus makes vision possible, since we can only see things clearly when they are illuminated for us by the sun. The sun, supreme in the visible realm, corresponds to Goodness, supreme in the realm of thought. It allows objects of knowledge to be known by the mind, just as objects of vision are seen by the eyes (ANNAS, 1981, p. 245).

Through the illustration of a line, knowledge, as we have seen, is identified sometimes as inferior (*Eikasía* and *Pístis*), because it belongs to the realm of belief, and sometimes as superior (*Dianóia* and *Nous*), because it is closer to abstraction. In other words: the notion of knowledge, based on a dividing line, allows for “[...] an ambitious classification of the different states in which a person can find themselves in relation to knowledge, from the lowest to the highest” (ANNAS, 1981, p. 249). This, however, does not allow us to affirm that *Nous* is equivalent to Good; but with this faculty it is possible to know it.

The third figure, the cave, is fundamental to understanding the Idea of Good. In the allegory of the cave, Plato invites us to imagine men who, since birth, have lived chained inside a cave. Unable to turn their heads, they can only see the wall in front of them. What these captives can see are images/shadows reproduced by certain objects, which are being carried by other men inside the cave. These images observed by the prisoners correspond to reality, at least for them.

Faced with this imagery, Socrates poses a series of questions: if an imprisoned person were to eventually break free and move outside the cave, would they be enchanted by everything outside and, for this reason, take full advantage of contemplating this reality? Or, due to the brightness of the light, which would probably blind him, would he return to the interior of the cave, terrified by partial blindness, and prefer to return to his companions? Or would this individual who broke his chains by leaving the cave contemplate the so-called reality and return to provide his companions with the possibility of visualizing this same reality? In this case, might the prisoners want to remain chained and, on top of that, attack – either verbally or physically – the one who managed to free himself from ignorance, from the shadow produced inside the cave? This could indeed happen if those who were unable to believe in other things – due to a custom engendered among the shadows of the cave – doubted the discoveries of the one who experienced new things and, with that, broke with habitual practices and thoughts (Cf. *Rep.*, 514a-517c).

According to Annas, “The cave is not, then, merely the degraded state of a bad society. It is the ‘human condition’. Even in an ideally just society, we are all in the cave. But we do not all end up there” (ANNAS, 1981, p. 253).

Considering that this scenario encourages Plato's readers to idealize things as a way of preparing for the concept, the Hellenic philosopher proposes above all the overcoming of the sensible world, of appearance, of copies, of untruths; he defends the contemplation of the supersensible world, of reality, of originality, of truth. As Altman (2012, p. 204) expresses, "[...] the nature of Justice is finally revealed in the reader's free choice to return to the Cave [...]". Or, as Annas (1981, p. 253) observes,

The person who begins to think is shown as someone who breaks the bonds of conformity with common experience and established opinion, and the progress of enlightenment is portrayed as a journey from darkness to light.

The movement out of the cave can be considered a stage of ascension to the world of Ideas, of approaching the Idea of Good, given that, illuminated by this Form, one understands that the ideal is to leave the cave. To get rid of the ignorance that only knowledge can provide. "The ascent out of the Cave is the ascent from the world of the senses and what they tell us to the world of thought" (ANNAS, 1981, p. 254).

Despite the outward movement, the return is equally essential to understanding the Socratic-Platonic philosophical structure and is precisely the starting point of the process of enlightenment, whose task, performed by the philosopher, must guide others to look in the right direction – towards the *Good* (Cf. *Rep.*, 518d). In fact, "[...] each one in turn must descend to the common dwelling of the others and accustom himself to observing the darkness" (*Rep.*, 520c), whereas after having contemplated the *Good*, and even though once again accustomed to darkness, the experience on the supersensible plane will not allow him to be the same anymore, since his worldview (*Weltanschauung*) understands reality distinctly.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, if knowledge of *Good*, ideas, and truth in Plato is the result of a transition from levels of understanding, that is, from the simplest to the most complex, this factor may explain, for example, Socrates and Glaucon's descent to Piraeus, as described above, since the initial dialogues about the definition of justice intensify as the arguments become more consistent. Given this, the catabasis (*καταβαίνεν*) would represent Socrates' attempt to lead his interlocutors toward truth, light, and the *Good*. In summary, Socrates' catabasis (*καταβαίνεν*) represents the departure of one who has already contemplated the "world of ideas" but needs to return to the cave, descend towards Piraeus, to teach the stages of knowledge to those who still have their vision obscured due to the absence of light inside the cave, that is, imprisoned in a kind of naive knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> "Few thinkers in philosophy or fiction have presented a more striking and moving image of philosophical thought as a liberation of the self from undifferentiated conformity to a developing and enriching struggle for the attainment of truth" (ANNAS, 1981, p. 253).

Before concluding the first stage of this analysis, it is worth highlighting two important considerations by Richard Kraut, particularly regarding the descent into the cave.

On the one hand, the commentator understands that:

The philosopher who returns to the cave does not do so merely because he wants to benefit those who live there; rather, he does so because he remembers what others have done for him and recognizes that this way of repaying his debt is precisely what the situation demands (KRAUT, 1999, p. 248).

On the other hand, he acknowledges that: “[...] the philosopher must have a love of justice – a love, that is, not only for moral forms, but for the people, institutions, and acts that participate in those forms” (KRAUT, 1999, p. 249).

Kraut also thinks that, “[...] these concerns – self-interest and the good of others – animate Plato’s attempt to show that justice and self-interest necessarily coincide” (KRAUT, 1999, p. 254).

In summary, as Mark Anderson (2014, p. 171) observes, “[...] in Plato, the goal of philosophical ascension is eternal life as a virtuous philosopher [...].”

## **II *Zarathustra*: decline and overcoming on the edge of the cave**

### **Prologue: strategic rise and decline as means of overcoming adversity**

If the goal of philosophical ascension in Plato is the eternal preservation of an ideal type of virtuous philosopher. For Nietzsche, in agreement with Anderson, “[...] it seems to be philosophy itself, or more immediately, perhaps, the philosopher himself, whose ‘small immortality’ is ‘the work in progress’ that forms in the womb of his mind” (ANDERSON, 2014, p.171).

Nietzsche’s understanding of Socratic-Platonic philosophy, however negative its connotations may be, encompasses its great capacity to designate and establish values. His struggle is intensified precisely against an idealized typology capable of creating “eternal” values. In other words:

[...] Nietzsche’s Plato is the genuine philosopher, who said at the source of our entire civilization: we must follow this path, a path that sustains the fictions of a permanent moral order and immortal souls in order to contemplate it and endure the punishment or reward imposed by the gods themselves for our behavior (LAMPERT, 2003, p. 207).

In contrast to this imperative, Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* seeks to deconstruct a series of causal chains that have underpinned human existence for centuries. Based on this assumption, we hope to show how Nietzsche, through *Zarathustra*, seeks to reverse Socratic-Platonic logic by proposing human

overcoming (*Übermensch*), while at the same time executing strategies similar to those of his adversaries—Socrates and Plato.

First, what genre does *Zarathustra* belong to? According to Jörg Salaquarda (1997a, p. 18), Nietzsche referred to his book in various ways.

Shortly after finishing the first part, he summarized his impression as follows: ‘It is a unique kind of ‘moral preaching’ (to Peter Gast, February 1, 1883).’ A few days later, he wrote to his publisher: ‘It is a poem or a fifth ‘Gospel’ or something for which there is as yet no name’ (February 13, 1883). Rohde confessed that he had always fought against his impulse to write poetry, and yet it was as a poet that he wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra...* (February 22, 1884). Shortly thereafter, he observed to Gast: ‘To which category does this *Zarathustra* actually belong? I believe it is almost that of ‘symphonies’ (April 2, 1883)’. Gast responded with another suggestion, which generalized the characteristic of the first part as the ‘fifth Gospel’: The work belongs to the ‘sacred writings’ (04/06/1883). Nietzsche welcomed what arrived in the mail: He had produced a new ‘sacred book’ (to Malwida von Meysenbug, 04/20/1883).

In *Ecce Homo*, the philosopher from Sils-Maria rightly stated that “This work occupies a place apart.” (EH, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, 6). Not without reason, Werner Stegmaier observes that,

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* became one of the most popular philosophical works, perhaps the most popular of our time, and at the same time remained the strangest. Nietzsche seems to have wanted both things. He gave his *Zarathustra* the subtitle: “A book for everyone and no one” (STEGMAIER, 2009, p. 12).

Considering this preliminary information, “It is not necessary to leaf through much of the first part of *Thus spoke Zarathustra* [...], to come across in the prologue [...]” (ZITTEL, 2018, p. 30), that through the voice of the protagonist, Nietzsche announces the concept of the “beyond man” (*Übermensch*).<sup>7</sup> In a performative manner, he prepares the concept amid descriptions of landscapes and other characters. He himself participates in the conceptual construction, being in the process of transmutation, that is, before proclaiming the *Übermensch* (the overcoming of man by man himself), *Zarathustra* needs preparation to bear the weight of the decision and, above all, the future consequences of his proclamation, which in the course of the narrative he does not even know well “[...] how to communicate his teaching” (JULIÃO, 2007b, p. 77). Despite this moment of formation (*Bildung*), it will be in the future, in contact with other beings, that the protagonist will understand his enormous task. In fact, it is only in the course of the work that he will understand that the annunciation of his knowledge “[...] must first be experienced, for it is only through interaction with men that overcoming can occur” (JULIÃO, 2007b, p. 77).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Prologue*, 3. Regarding the themes Nietzsche presents to readers in *Zarathustra*, José Nicolao Julião points out that there are three, namely: beyond man; last man; death of God (Cf. JULIÃO, 2007, p. 76).

Unlike Socrates, whose journey began by descending to the region of Piraeus, Zarathustra, however, begins his journey by climbing the mountain. This factor is emblematic, since the cave, in Nietzsche's imagery, is located at the top. It is at the top of the mountain that Zarathustra seeks refuge.

At the top of the mountain, his education (*Bildung*) will last for ten long years. Isolated from humans, he fills this apparent void by living with nature and animals, from which he draws his inspiration. Interestingly, Zarathustra's education begins at the age of thirty. Only after a decade of preparation does he feel ready for his craft.<sup>8</sup> Regarding this formative period, it is often common to compare Zarathustra's experiences with the life of Jesus, especially to establish a distinction between the two attitudes.

Unlike Jesus, Nietzsche's character does not pass

[...] forty days, but ten years in the desert. Unlike Jesus, who is taken to the desert, Zarathustra enters on his own: he is not assisted by angels, but by wild beasts: he does not suffer in his solitude nor is he tempted, but instead enjoys his spirit and his solitude (LAMPERT, 1986, p. 14).

In this regard, Stegmaier (2009, p. 21) adds that

Parallels with Christ and the Bible are intertwined with reminiscences of sun gods from different religions, but also with chthonic gods, as well as Goethe, who wrote poetry about 'golden chalices' and 'colorful splendor', in which we possess life, and, finally, with memories of Nietzsche himself, in his works *Aurora* and *The birth of tragedy*, of the contrast between the sun god Apollo and the wild god Dionysus. Nietzsche overloads the opening scene with so many possibilities for interpretation that they intersect and remain suspended.

Given these various interpretative possibilities, it is only after ten long years of preparation, in the company of his animals and often illuminated by sunlight, that Zarathustra decides to leave the cave. Isolation, reflection, and withdrawal from human society have made him wiser (Cf. AZ, *Prologue*, 1).

With regard to the metaphorical aspect of the presence of the sun, as Roberto Machado points out, "This reference to the sun is important. [...] It highlights the [...] parody of the Platonic myth, in whose cave the sun does not enter [...]" (MACHADO, 2001, p. 35). Furthermore, given the importance of the sun in Nietzsche's narrative, in line with Lampert (1986, p. 14), "[...] Nietzsche's Zarathustra is a

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<sup>8</sup> According to the biblical narrative of the New Testament, "Jesus began his work when he was about thirty years old" (THE HOLY BIBLE, With reflections by Luther. Barueri: Sociedade Bíblica do Brasil, 2015. Luke 3:23). It is also important to note that, in addition to this founder of a religion, another important religious leader began his spiritual activity at the age of thirty. This was Buddha. "When Prince Siddhattha and Princess Yasodharā had a son, Siddhattha saw this event as a bond, an obstacle, and decided to name the child Rāhula, which means obstacle. However, the child did not turn out to be an obstacle, as Siddhattha chose to renounce worldly life before his attachment became stronger. He decided to adopt the life of a wanderer in search of truth. One night, he left the palace accompanied by his servant Channa. After traveling a sufficient distance, he discarded his royal robes and adornments, giving them to Channa; then he cut his hair and became an ascetic. He was then twenty-nine years old" (Vipassana Research Institute, Gautama the Buddha: His Life and Teaching, 1992, p. 7).

modern man who addresses the sun as ‘you, great star’, a celestial body similar to other stars [...]’. The protagonist presents himself as a being superior to the sun, for he owes it no honors. His divine recognition has been completely undone by the knowledge constructed in modernity, so much so that Zarathustra questions whether “the happiness of the great star” depends exclusively on human contemplation. In Zarathustra’s words: “O great star! What would become of your happiness if you did not have those whom you illuminate?” (AZ, *Prologue*, 1). Although Zarathustra demonstrates superiority over the sun, he also has his dependence; “[...] he also needs those who can receive his light” (LAMPERT, 1986, p. 14).

As expected, contrary to what is illustrated in Plato’s *Republic*, in *Zarathustra*, living inside a cave symbolizes a higher form of learning, since the absence of “light” and contact with human beings was the opportune moment for Zarathustra to consider new possibilities of existence. Like a hermit, the protagonist is prepared to express his convictions and return to human society.

It should be noted that, even though his knowledge was acquired in the shadows of the cave, “Like the sun that descends into the sea, bringing light to the underworld, he must descend to bring wisdom to humanity” (LAMPERT, 1986, p. 14). Lampert also believes that “Zoroaster descends to bring a comprehensive teaching that will alter the experience of all humanity” (LAMPERT, 1986, p. 15).

Or, as Nicolao Julião observes:

[...] just as the sun needs those it illuminates, Zarathustra also needs to give away the wisdom (*die Weisheit*) he has accumulated during his years of exile, and announces his need to decline, to give away that which is abundant in him. Zarathustra also wants his twilight (JULIÃO, 2007b, p. 77).

Despite his grand design, was Zarathustra truly aware that his task was a painful one? Would his knowledge, built on his own experience, be assimilated by others? In other words: does Zarathustra truly know his fate?<sup>9</sup> Does he recognize that his decline (*Untergang*) corresponds to his own decadence (*décadence*)? As he declines (*untergehen*) like the sun, will his accumulated wisdom protect him from eventual failure during his journey? In Nietzsche’s words: “[...] he is strong enough for that [...]” (EH, *Why I am a destiny*, 5). Salaquarda reiterates that the decline of “Zarathustra represents becoming himself [...]”. Nietzsche describes how he became and becomes more and more himself, that is, through mistakes, temptations, experiences, etc...” (SALAQUARDA, 1997a, p. 20).

<sup>9</sup> “I know my fate. One day, my name will be linked to the memory of something tremendous – of a crisis such as has never been seen on Earth, of the deepest collision of consciousness [...]” (EH, *Why I Am a Destiny*, 1).

Despite all determination, in fact, its decline may culminate in its decay, since regardless of how fascinating its announcement may be, eventually not all “ears” will be willing and, above all, able to accept the uniqueness of its thinking. Lampert also interprets the decline as an attempt to

[...] demonstrate that transcendent things are products of the earth and the body, thus requiring a reassessment of both the things to which one descends and the traditional ideal of ascension, with its hatred of the earthly and the corporeal (LAMPERT, 1986, p. 16).

Although aware of the omen of Zarathustra’s fateful ruin, Nietzsche does not shy away from characterizing his opponents – Socrates and Plato – as the effective propagators of a decadent philosophy.

By way of illustration, in *The birth of tragedy*, the philosopher states:

While in all productive people instinct is precisely the affirmative-creative force, and consciousness conducts itself in a critical and dissuasive manner, in Socrates it is instinct that becomes critical, consciousness that becomes creative – a true monstrosity *per defectum!* (NT, 13).

In *Twilight of the Idols*, the philosopher from Sils-Maria also highlights the eminent formula of decadence attributed to Greek thinkers: “Having to fight instincts – that is the formula of *décadence*: while life *ascends*, happiness equals instinct”. (CI, *The problem of Socrates*, 11).

Certainly, Nietzsche’s observation is that Socratic-Platonic philosophy represented a *décadence* by teaching a type of moral valuation based on the suppression of instincts in favor of rationality.

In view of this supposed failure of the Socratic-Platonic value judgment, could this be the real reason why Zarathustra is equally frustrated in his endeavor? Perhaps the famous passage from aphorism 125 (*The madman*) of *The Gay Science* can illustrate why this episode was unsuccessful, namely: “‘I come too soon’, he said then, it is not yet my time. This enormous event is on its way, it is still walking: it has not yet reached the ears of men” (GC, *The madman*, 125). Not only was Zarathustra’s speech not understood by everyone, it was even ignored and scorned. Evidently, Nietzsche did not intend to achieve such a purpose, that is, the philosopher did not really expect to be understood by everyone, at least as we perceive it in the course of the narrative.

With regard to Zarathustra’s descent, his journey is excessively dramatic and tragic. This factor is emblematic, as Nietzsche already announced his intention in the title of aphorism 342 of *The Gay Science*: “*Incipit tragoedia* (The tragedy begins)”. In this regard, Roberto Machado observes that, “*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the dramatic narration of Zarathustra’s tragic learning” (MACHADO, 2001, p. 29).

Nietzsche’s narrative has a dramatic tone, mainly because the concept that Zarathustra intends to announce is so heavy that gravity pulls it down, given that it is among men, below the mountain, that the

experience of thought must make sense. It is in crossing the mountain, in the village, in contact with the other characters, that Zarathustra reconstructs the concept he is about to announce.

Descending from the mountain – similar to dawn – Zarathustra begins his “aurora”. On the way, he encounters an old man who lives in an isolated hut. The presence of this experienced figure draws the reader’s attention, as in *The Republic*, where the dialogues are opened by Socrates and the elder Cephalus.

The character of the old man in *Zarathustra*, according to Julião (2007b, p. 77), “[...] notes a change in Zarathustra who, according to him, had awakened from his sleep and returned to being a child. The hermit is a key witness to the process of change that Zarathustra underwent.”

However, he still believes in the existence of God and in prevailing moral values. For this reason, he explains to Zarathustra that the best thing to do is to distance himself from humans; and, instead of giving them anything, to take something away from them. In Nietzsche’s words: “‘Give them nothing’, said the saint. ‘Take something away from them, that’s what’ [...]” (AZ, *Prologue*, 2). Hearing this cry, the protagonist decides to continue his journey without hesitation and not to respond to the man in the forest, before the only thing that still comforts him, namely his faith in a deity, is taken away. This is how Zarathustra expresses himself: “Let me go, so that nothing takes you away!” (AZ, *Prologue*, 2). Regarding this farewell, Lampert observes that, “As they part, they laugh at each other, each knowing the folly of the other’s belief, that of Zarathustra in humanity, that of the old saint in God” (LAMPERT, 1986, p. 17).

In this initial dialogue, Zarathustra notes that even the old and experienced man still does not understand that God is no longer among us. “‘How is it possible? This holy old man, in his forest, still does not know that *God is dead!*’” (AZ, *Prologue*, 2). On this subject, Stegmaier (2009, p. 29) considers that

The old saint, whom Zarathustra encountered at the beginning, does not cling to God because he wants to maintain the meaning of life, but because he wants to preserve for himself the ‘love’ of life, and Zarathustra lets him keep that belief. The old saint loved men ‘too much’; therefore, he became suspicious and severe towards them, and now he loves only God. His love for God grew out of suffering, out of ‘disgust’ for men.

Following his brief conversation with the old saint, Zarathustra arrives at the nearest town. There, he begins to speak to the crowd. He announces man’s self-transcendence. In addition, he implores them to pay attention and says: “[...] brothers, *remain faithful to the earth* and do not believe those who speak to you of super-earthly hopes!” (AZ, *Prologue*, 3). With this exhortation, “Zoroaster teaches that men must learn the way to the beyond-man, through creativity, and by wanting their destiny” (JULIÃO, 2007, p. 88). But, unfortunately, the people, who were engrossed in watching a tightrope walker in the public

square, mocked Zarathustra, preferring a moment of entertainment to experiencing significant changes in their respective lives.

Or, as Julião (2007b, p. 88) points out,

[...] the last men gathered in the market square, to whom he speaks, are not paths, for they seem preoccupied with the mere banalities of life, which bring them comfort and, consequently, preserve them. Therefore, they behave arrogantly, without caring what Zarathustra says to them. The last man is Nietzsche's caricature of modern man, the man of the present, the last representative of a decadent humanity that does not want to go any further and boasts of something that brings him happiness, culture (*Bildung*).

Although treated indifferently, convinced, however, of his purpose, the character continued to announce, through eighteen exclamations, what he loves most and through which he can reveal what lies beyond man (Cf. *AZ, Prologue, 4*).

With these exclamations, he attracted the attention of the crowd; they now want Zarathustra to provide this "last man", the discoverer of happiness, even if the happiness that comes from this supposed individual is illusory. With this, Zarathustra realizes that the people want to be led; they want to receive everything in an easy way. Like a flock, they want to wait for the order of their shepherd (Cf. *AZ, Prologue, 5*). But it was precisely a teaching contrary to this model of living that the protagonist came to announce.

Unexpectedly, the attention given to Zarathustra is interrupted, as all eyes now turn to the tightrope walker, who has suffered a violent fall while performing his craft. Given the significance of this event, Katharina Grätz (2020, p. 124) believes that

The acrobatic act results in something very serious, because during his acrobatic act, the tightrope walker falls off the rope. However, he does not fall due to bad luck or his own mistake, but because he is disturbed by another tightrope walker, who appears out of nowhere. With this, the episode takes on an enigmatic and ghostly character. If, traditionally, the theme of the tightrope walker expresses artistic lightness and existential balance, here it has the opposite meaning: it alludes to the risk of man. Nietzsche's tightrope walker not only falls, but, as a result of his fall, ends up dying shortly thereafter.

Suddenly, the tightrope walker's body falls at Zarathustra's feet, who tries to reassure him. In his last words, he is not distressed by his injuries, but by the thought that his grief would increase after his death, in another place beyond Earth. The tightrope walker does not "[...] find comfort in his own belief, but rather experiences even greater agony through it" (GRÄTZ, 2020, p. 127). Because of this torment, Zarathustra comforts the dying man by affirming that neither the devil nor hell exist and, therefore, the fainted man had nothing to lose, since he made danger his occupation (Cf. *AZ, Prologue, 6*). In the next scene, the crowd disperses and Zarathustra remains with the deceased, taking him with him as he departs. (Cf. *AZ, Prologue, 7*).

Seeking shelter and food to continue his journey, he knocks on the door of a house with the aim of convincing the resident to offer him refuge. In this scene, he utters a phrase that resembles that of the biblical narrative<sup>10</sup>: “Whoever feeds the hungry revives his own soul: thus speaks wisdom” (AZ, *Prologue*, 8). After this plea, the host gives him bread and wine. Fed, he continues walking for another two hours until finally his day ends and he gets a night’s rest, still in the company of the deceased. “Then he placed the dead man in a hollow tree, at the height of his head – for he wanted to protect him from the wolves [...]” (AZ, *Prologue*, 8). In addition to protecting the deceased, “[...] Zarathustra then seeks to value the existence of the tightrope walker, promising the deceased to bury him with his own hands” (GRÄTZ, 2020, p. 127).

The next day, still haunted by the events of the previous day, he recognizes that he needs living companions, not dead ones. In fact, he no longer intends to announce himself to the crowd, opting instead to have a few companions, but not “blind” followers, incapable of creating their own purposes. “Zarathustra declares that he wants to draw many out of the herd” (JULIÃO, 2007b, p. 94). His task from now on is to gather with those who are also able to create and destroy values, if necessary (Cf. AZ, *Prologue*, 9).

In line with Julião (2007b, p. 94), “Zarathustra knows that the creators of new values are always despised and labeled as destroyers of good and evil, but in fact they are sowers of new seeds.”

“Thus began the decline of Zarathustra” (AZ, *Prologue*, 10). Frustrated by his attempts to convince the masses, he feels more secure among his animals – some of whom are always present – than among humans. In this last section of the prologue, Zarathustra reveals an unusual image: “And behold, an eagle was circling vast circles in the air, and from it hung a serpent, not as prey, but as a friend: for it was coiled around its neck” (AZ, *Prologue*, 10). With reference to this semiotics of Zarathustra, Lampert points out that the “[...] intertwining symbolizes the overcoming of the ancient dualisms of light and darkness, heaven and earth, good and evil; their intertwining is beyond good and evil, a harmony between earth and heaven” (LAMPERT, 1986, p. 29).

Salaquarda believes that this image illustrates, albeit metaphorically, the doctrine of eternal recurrence. The allusion refers to the “circle of the eagle and the coiling of the serpent” (SALAQUARDA, 1997a, p. 20). Directly or indirectly, this doctrine will appear at other points throughout the work, but it is precisely in the third part, specifically in the section *On vision and enigma*, that Zarathustra will address it in detail.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Mt 25:35. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me [...]”. Cf. Mt 25, 35.

Given the relevance of animals and the nature of the descent and ascent to the cave's banks in *Zarathustra*, we will analyze below the fourth part of the book, especially the chapter entitled *The feast of the ass*, whose event inside the cave brings together beings of all kinds, and Zarathustra, above all, has already had various experiences.

### **The feast of the ass: the shadows of the ancient gods and the attempt to overcome humanity**

When I first went to the men, I committed the folly that hermits commit, the great folly: I stood in the market square. And when I spoke to everyone, I spoke to no one. At night, tightrope walkers and corpses were my companions; and I myself was almost a corpse. But with the new morning came a new truth: I learned to say, 'What do I care about the square, the crowd, the noise of the crowd, and the long ears of the crowd?' O superior men, learn this from me: no one in the market believes in superior men (*AZ, On the superior man*, 1).

After Zarathustra begins his decline, following the narrative in the fourth part of the book (Cf. *AZ, On the superior man*), he recalls the recent events he has experienced up to that point. Regarding this account, Zittel observes that the initial story of the fourth part is narrated analogously to that described in the prologue.

At the beginning of the fourth book, Zarathustra is in his cave, just as he was in the last chapter. There, in addition, the entire beginning of the text of the 'prologue' is repeated, which seems to produce a tense mirror symmetry (ZITTEL, 2018, p. 42).

With this reminiscence, Zarathustra is convinced that his misfortune stems from philosophical conclusions sought in the public square. In this context, Socratic-Platonic philosophy is emblematic, since Greek thinkers are known as philosophers who were part of the crowd. However, this practice cost Socrates his life, which was seen as a noble gesture, given that he sacrificed his own existence for the sake of an ideal.

To better understand this purpose, it is worth noting Socrates' last words at his trial: "But it is time to go – I to die, and you to live – which of us will have the better fate, only God can see clearly" (*Ap.* 42). The case of Socrates uniquely illustrates that Zarathustra's experience in the public square could only be disappointing, since the crowd did not pay attention to what he wanted to communicate.

Aware of this fact, Zarathustra continues on his journey. He once again finds shelter in a cave, in the company of his "animal friends". It is important to mention that in this place,

[...] sitting next to each other were all those with whom he had been during the day: the king on the right and the king on the left, the old sorcerer, the pope, the voluntary beggar, the shadow, the conscientious spirit, the sad fortune teller, and the ass; the ugliest of men [...] (AZ, *Greeting*).

Accompanied by these caricatures, at a certain point, the protagonist is encouraged by his companions to climb to the top of the mountain. During the journey, Zarathustra encounters other eccentric figures, with whom he converses. Unexpectedly, when he returns to the cave, an image leaves him stunned.

Stunned, Zarathustra stares at his guests (fearful of nihilism), for the announcement of God's death is still considered shocking at that point. Haunted, as if crying out for help, they eagerly await Zarathustra to utter some words of comfort, due to the absence of a deity and a person to lead the group. After a brief conversation, they proceeded to a meal. When it was over, some of those present sang songs as if they were at a celebration; when suddenly there was an abysmal silence. Zarathustra, who at that moment was once again outside the cave, smells the fragrance of incense coming from inside.

As he approached, he was confronted with a bizarre scene. His guests were all kneeling on the ground, and in the center of the cave stood the ass. One after another, they began to recite a litany, and as the supplications ended, the ass exhorted them with a bray: "I-A!" (AZ, *The feast of the ass*, 1).

This "I-A" brayed by the donkey was interpreted by Otto Gramzow (1907, p. 57), as mentioned by Salaquarda (1997b, p. 168), as an expression similar to amen, or so be it, a word of Hebrew origin also uttered, for example, by Christians after saying a prayer. In addition, "I-A" expresses a pun on the German word Ja, which means yes.

In any case, Nietzsche, by associating the pronunciation of the word "I-A" uttered at the end of each exhortation with the amen uttered by religious people, inserts into the narrative a distrust of absurd and superstitious beliefs. In fact, the worship surrounding the animal may seem absurd, but it is precisely this belief in the absurd that synthesizes nihilism, since at this point in the work the characters had already received the announcement of the death of God.

As Julião (2007a, p. 99) observes in the section

[...] 'The Feast of the Ass', superior men worship the donkey as a God, believing that it is better to worship a God in the form of a donkey than to have no God at all. It is the 'ugliest of men', who once killed God, who now resurrects him, admitting that: 'when it comes to gods, death is always and only a prejudice'.

With the knowledge of the announcement of God's death, he expected Zarathustra's companions to change their ways of existence, given that this announcement would prompt a review of their own way of thinking and living. Zarathustra's followers, however, were not yet prepared to assume this new

condition; on the contrary, they even made Zarathustra the image of the ideal type, which must be sought. This was contrary, therefore, to Zarathustra's own project.

Given this, his followers, who until then had been bound to a set of moral values from the past, could not bear the fact that they felt helpless even in Zarathustra's company. His guests, fearful of nihilism and discouraged, prostrate themselves in worship of the ass<sup>11</sup> in order to preserve their existence. In addition, they transfer their respective deliberations to others, because by placing their trust in an external being, they renounce the possibility of governing themselves.

From this perspective, the preference for nothingness symbolizes the drama of human will, which cannot bear the fact of wanting nothing. In this episode of Zarathustra's narrative, the vacuum caused by the absence of belief in a given deity provokes in the individual the need to seek comfort in any divine representation, even if it seems absurd.

Next, similar to the donkey that uttered an "I-A" at the end of each prayer, Zarathustra interrupts abruptly, places himself among them, and utters an "I-A," only much louder than the sound emitted by the animal. The first character to be addressed by Zarathustra was the old pope: "[...] 'how can you be at peace with yourself when you worship a donkey as if it were God?'" (AZ, *The feast of the ass*, 1). The answer given by this guest corroborates the "nihilistic spirit", namely: "It is better to worship God like this, in this form, than in no form at all! Reflect on this sentence, exalted friend, and you will soon see that it contains wisdom" (AZ, *The feast of the ass*, 1).

Finally, Zarathustra ends this tense episode on an optimistic note, confirming that the celebration of the ass revealed at least "[...] a good sig – only convalescents invent things like this!" (AZ, *The feast of the ass*, 3). Consequently, fragile beings who have not fully recovered may relapse, regress, and return to unhealthy practices.

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<sup>11</sup> According to Jörg Salaquarda, the image of the ass is commonly interpreted as representing the "people" or the "plebs" (Cf. SALAQUARDA, Jörg. *Zarathustra and the ass. An investigation into the role of the ass in the fourth part of Nietzsche's Thus spoke Zarathustra*. Discourse. São Paulo: no. 28, 1997, pp. 168-169). Salaquarda, in turn, interprets the function of the animal within the fourth part of the work in a different way. In a first definition, the commentator states "[...] that with the term ass Nietzsche designates a specific form of stupidity, which can be described as ineptitude, lack of spirit in the sense of 'esprit', mediocrity, etc." (SALAQUARDA, 1997, p. 174). In this sense, through the metaphor of the ass, he can designate "[...] convictions, that is, consolidated perspectives that are no longer questioned, or rather, their bearers" (SALAQUARDA, 1997, p. 178). Eventually, the metaphor of the ass could allude to the biblical story known as "The Golden Calf." In the narrative recounted in the book of Exodus, the story unfolds as follows: "The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. So they gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'We don't know what happened to Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt. So make us gods who will go before us. Aaron said to them: - Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me. So the Israelites took the gold earrings off their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took the earrings, melted them down, poured the gold into a mold, and made a golden calf. Then they said: - People of Israel, these are our gods who brought us out of Egypt! Aaron built an altar before the golden calf and announced to the people: - Tomorrow there will be a feast in honor of God, the Lord" (Holy Bible, with reflections by Luther. Exodus, chapter 32, verses 1-5).

In short, Zarathustra still maintains hope, out of excessive love for human beings themselves, that if this event should occasionally happen again, it will be for the celebration of life itself.

### III FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We consider that in Book I of *The Republic*, on the one hand, Socrates descends towards Piraeus, whose bustling location is home to diversity, metaphorically representing the images inside the cave, as there is empirical evidence that the inhabitants of this region still remain in ignorance; Zarathustra, on the other hand, in the Prologue to *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, climbs the mountain and takes refuge for ten long years inside the cave, because it is in his solitude that he will learn his grand design. These opposing movements contrast two divergent philosophical views. Despite this conceptual disagreement, when Zarathustra is prepared for his decline, both philosophies converge, since both Socrates and Zarathustra intend to free the inhabitants of the public square from their respective ignorance. The theoretical foundations that drive their communications, however, are significantly different. While Socrates points upward, Zarathustra points to the earth. If the break with mediocrity in Socratic-Platonic philosophy consists of the elevation and valorization of the soul, in Nietzschean philosophy human overcoming involves the valorization of the body and an earthly dimension.

What Zarathustra points out to us is that there are paths – means, bridges – for carrying out this process. Thus says Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* when commenting on *Zarathustra*:

Another ideal runs before us, a prodigious, tempting ideal, full of dangers, to which no one easily recognizes the right: the ideal of a spirit that naively, that is, without meaning to, and through overflowing abundance and power, plays with what until now has been called holy, good, untouchable, divine [...] (EH, AZ, 2).

Finally, we also emphasize that Socrates and Zarathustra want to spread their accumulated wisdom. The failure, however, resulting from their communications, is profoundly similar. Despite this supposed failure, for both Plato and Nietzsche, the return to the cave is an essential element in showing their readers the direction of the paths they can take. This path, as we have demonstrated throughout this article, has absolutely distinct meanings and purposes.

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