

# Allegory



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## The *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great

- ▶ A work on saintly miracles in sixth-century Italy
- ▶ Dialectical in form
- ▶ Book IV concerns “death, the afterlife, and the nature of the human soul” (Thomas 2017, 206).

# The Dialectical Method

Classical dialectic



Plato's Socrates



Boethius



early medieval dialectic (Gregory)



scholasticism (Thomas Aquinas) and the academic disputation

# Plato

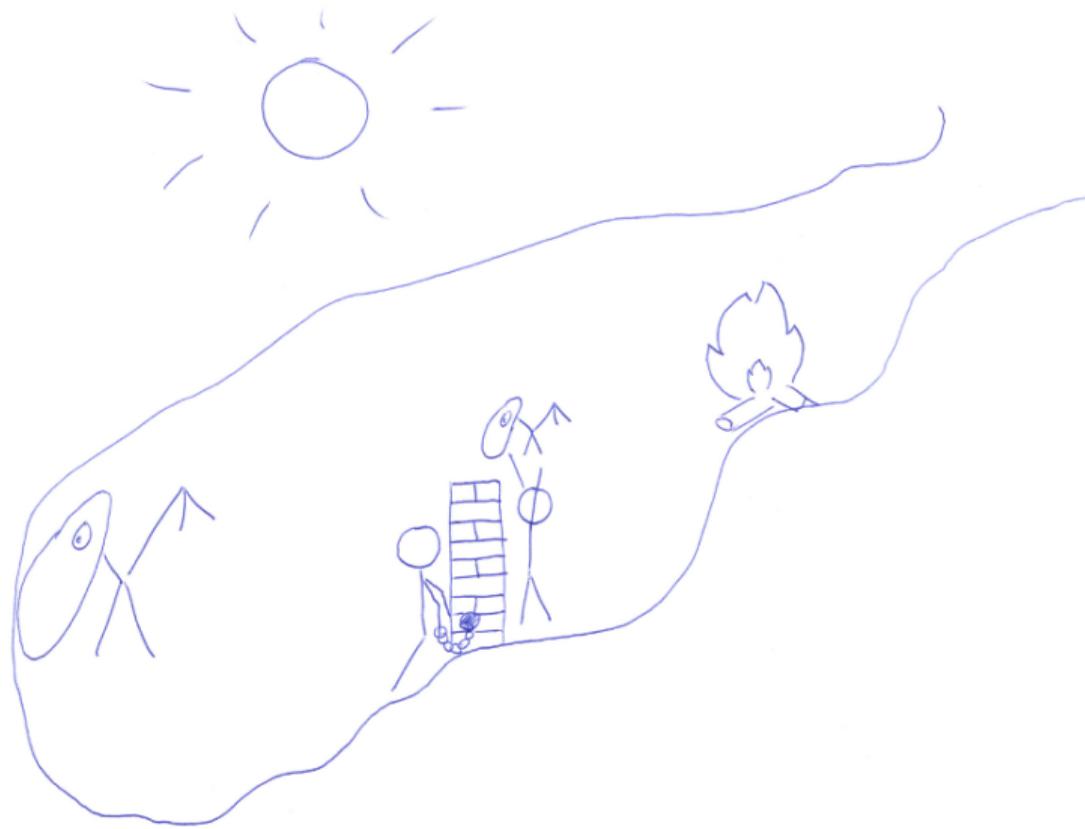


Figure: Plato's cave allegory

# Aristoteles, Cicero

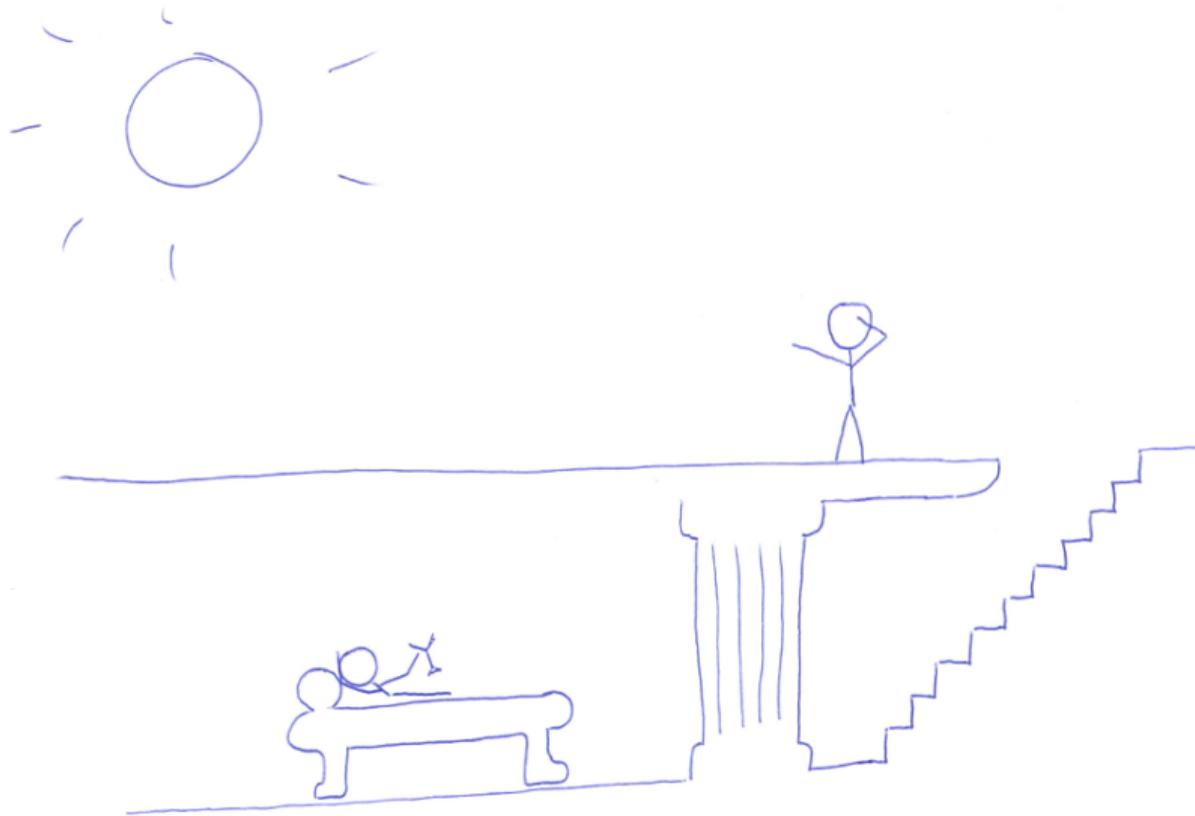


Figure: Cicero's bunker allegory

Gregory

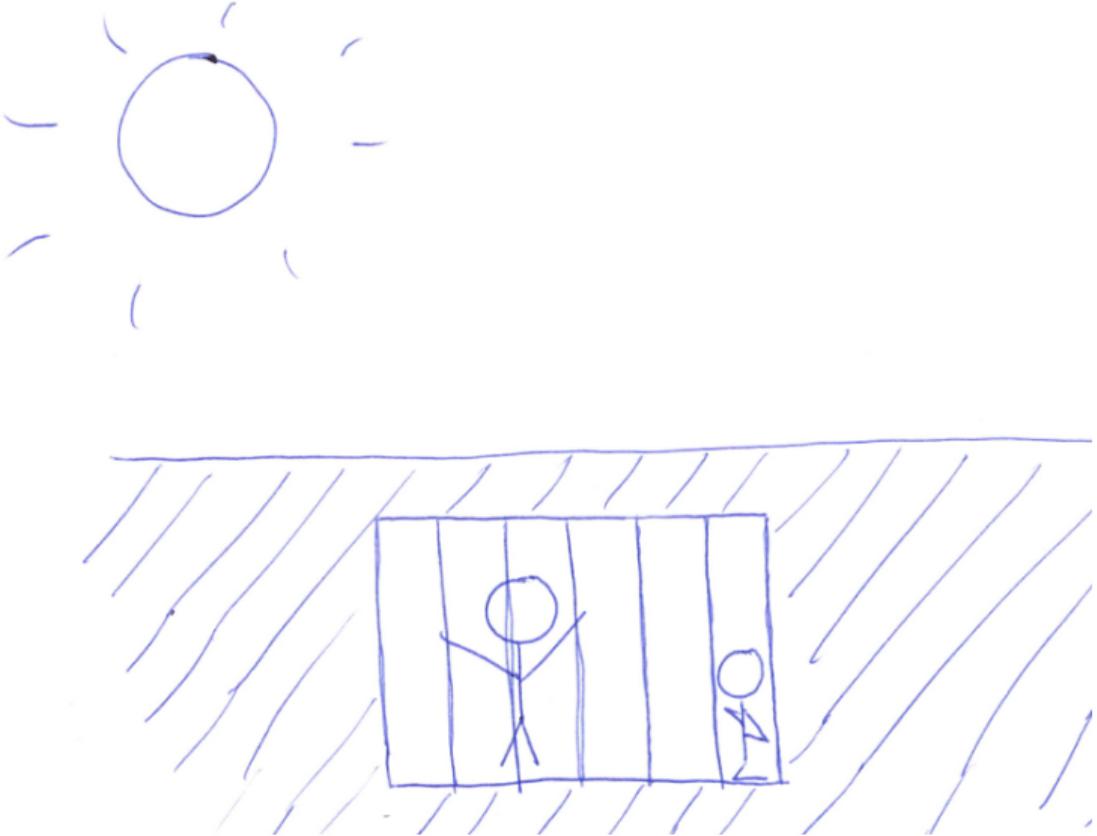


Figure: Gregory's prison allegory

## The Point of Gregory's Prison Allegory

Gregory's development of the prison analogy indicates that he is not, in fact, primarily concerned with emphasizing the epistemological limits of humanity's material existence, but with showing how, by means of grace, these limits can be transcended. For Gregory, the situation of the faithful is in reality unlike that of the boy born in prison, and his intention throughout Book IV is to show that certainty regarding the mysteries of the faith—specifically the fate of the soul after death—is made possible for Christians within the world through the coming of Christ [...]. Only a foolish boy, Gregory concludes, would doubt his mother's testimony simply because he cannot see the things that she described.

(Thomas 2017, 207)

## Modifications in the OE Prison Allegory

Napier I renders the first part of this passage quite closely, but goes on to elaborate on Gregory's general statement about carnal humanity's lack of direct experience by suggesting that with the passing of the generations, Adam's first-hand testimony becomes increasingly less meaningful for his descendants [...]. By introducing a temporal factor at this point, the text presents the epistemological fall as progressive and incremental, in contrast to the absolute distinction that Gregory presents between Adam and the remainder of humanity taken at large. This is then reflected in the presentation of the prison analogy, which is similarly extended forward in time through the addition of a reference to the possibility of further prison-born offspring.

(Thomas 2017, 216–17)

## The Point of the OE Prison Allegory

While the *Dialogi* attempt to show why the fate of believers within the world need not be like that of the youth born in prison, the analogy in Napier I instead insists, almost casually, upon the absolute epistemological limits of human experience. Through the suggestion that certainty concerning spiritual matters is possible only after death, the text implicitly privileges a kind of blind faith antithetical to Gregory's intellectual and rational approach.

(Thomas 2017, 218)

## Bibliography

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