An Analogy That Should Live Forever In Infamy Along With His Ridiculous "Cave" Analogy - Socrates' "Second Sailing"

Post by “Cassius” of February 19, 2026 at 1:52 PM

Carl Sagan's "Backbone of the Night" episode has me wanting to pursue further the condemnation of Socrates and Plato for deprecating the study of natural philosophy. Here's some initial research into a term apparently that is a key part of that terrible turn of philosophy:

What was Socrates' "second sailing"?

Socrates' "second sailing" (in Greek: deuteros plous, δεύτερος πλοῦς) is a famous metaphor and methodological turning point described in Plato's Phaedo (around 99c–d). It occurs during Socrates' intellectual autobiography, where he recounts his early disillusionment with natural philosophy (the "inquiry into nature," or physis historia) and his subsequent shift in approach.The phrase draws from an ancient Greek proverb: when the wind fails during a sea voyage (the "first sailing," relying on sails), one resorts to the "second sailing" by taking to the oars — in other words, the next best or fallback method when the preferred/direct one doesn't work.Context and MeaningIn the Phaedo, Socrates explains that he initially pursued explanations for natural phenomena (causes of generation, growth, decay, etc.) through direct empirical investigation of physical processes — examining things themselves (erga, deeds/works, or material realities) in the manner of the pre-Socratic natural philosophers (like Anaxagoras). He hoped to discover the ultimate cause, especially the good as an ordering principle.This approach disappointed him: it either led to mechanistic, material explanations that ignored purpose/teleology or failed to deliver satisfactory answers about causation and the good. Disillusioned and fearing he might go blind (metaphorically) by staring directly at things, Socrates decided on a new path:He would take refuge in arguments, reason, discourse, or accounts (logoi) — "fleeing into the logoi" (eis tous logous kataphugonta) — and examine the truth of beings (tōn ontōn tēn alētheian) through them instead.This "second sailing" is thus Socrates' famous turn from direct, physical/sensory investigation of the world to investigating reality through reasoned discourse, definitions, and ultimately the hypothesis of the Forms (the intelligible, eternal realities like Beauty itself, Equality itself, etc.).Key Implications

- It is "second best" only in a provisional sense (as a safer, more reliable method after the failure of the first), but for Plato/Socrates it becomes the philosophically superior path.
- It leads directly into the theory of Forms as explanatory causes: beautiful things are beautiful because they participate in the Form of Beauty, etc. (the "safe" hypothesis Socrates adopts at 100a ff.).

- This shift is foundational for much of Plato's metaphysics and epistemology — moving from the visible realm to the intelligible, from becoming to being.

In short, the "second sailing" marks Socrates' decisive turn to rational, conceptual inquiry (dialectic and the Forms) as the proper way to seek truth and causes, after abandoning the inadequate direct study of nature. It's one of the clearest articulations in Plato of why philosophy must prioritize logos over mere empirical observation.

> Quote from Phaedo
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> “Then I heard someone who had a book of Anaxagoras, as he said, **[97c]** out of which he read that mind was the disposer and cause of all, and I was quite delighted at the notion of this, which appeared admirable, and I said to myself: If mind is the disposer, mind will dispose all for the best, and put each particular in the best place; and I argued that if anyone desired to find out the cause of the generation or destruction or existence of anything, he must find out what state of being or suffering or doing was best for that thing, **[97d]** and therefore a man had only to consider the best for himself and others, and then he would also know the worse, for that the same science comprised both. And I rejoiced to think that I had found in Anaxagoras a teacher of the causes of existence such as I desired, and I imagined that he would tell me first whether the earth is flat or round; **[97e]** and then he would further explain the cause and the necessity of this, and would teach me the nature of the best and show that this was best; and if he said that the earth was in the center, he would explain that this position was the best, and I should be satisfied if this were shown to me, **[98a]** and not want any other sort of cause. And I thought that I would then go and ask him about the sun and moon and stars, and that he would explain to me their comparative swiftness, and their returnings and various states, and how their several affections, active and passive, were all for the best. For I could not imagine that when he spoke of mind as the disposer of them, he would give any other account of their being as they are, except that this was best; **[98b]** and I thought when he had explained to me in detail the cause of each and the cause of all, he would go on to explain to me what was best for each and what was best for all. I had hopes which I would not have sold for much, and I seized the books and read them as fast as I could in my eagerness to know the better and the worse.
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> “What hopes I had formed, and how grievously was I disappointed! As I proceeded, I found my philosopher altogether forsaking mind **[98c]** or any other principle of order, but having recourse to air, and ether, and water, and other eccentricities. I might compare him to a person who began by maintaining generally that mind is the cause of the actions of Socrates, but who, when he endeavored to explain the causes of my several actions in detail, went on to show that I sit here because my body is made up of bones and muscles; and the bones, as he would say, are hard and have ligaments

which divide them, **[98d]** and the muscles are elastic, and they cover the bones, which have also a covering or environment of flesh and skin which contains them; and as the bones are lifted at their joints by the contraction or relaxation of the muscles, I am able to bend my limbs, and this is why I am sitting here in a curved posture: that is what he would say, and he would have a similar explanation of my talking to you, which he would attribute to sound, and air, and hearing, and he would assign ten thousand other causes of the same sort, **[98e]** forgetting to mention the true cause, which is that the Athenians have thought fit to condemn me, and accordingly I have thought it better and more right to remain here and undergo my sentence; **[99a]** for I am inclined to think that these muscles and bones of mine would have gone off to Megara or Boeotia—by the dog of Egypt they would, if they had been guided only by their own idea of what was best, and if I had not chosen as the better and nobler part, instead of playing truant and running away, to undergo any punishment which the State inflicts. There is surely a strange confusion of causes and conditions in all this. It may be said, indeed, that without bones and muscles and the other parts of the body I cannot execute my purposes. But to say that I do as I do because of them, **[99b]** and that this is the way in which mind acts, and not from the choice of the best, is a very careless and idle mode of speaking. I wonder that they cannot distinguish the cause from the condition, which the many, feeling about in the dark, are always mistaking and misnaming. And thus one man makes a vortex all round and steadies the earth by the sky; another gives the air as a support to the earth, which is a sort of broad trough. **[99c]** Any power which in disposing them as they are disposes them for the best never enters into their minds, nor do they imagine that there is the power of a *daimōn* in that; they rather expect to find another Atlas of the world who is stronger and more everlasting and more containing than the good is, and are clearly of opinion that the obligatory and containing power of the good is as nothing; and yet this is the principle which I would want to learn if anyone would teach me. But as I have failed either to discover myself or to learn of anyone else, **[99d]** the nature of the best, I will exhibit to you, if you like, what I have found to be the second best mode of inquiring into the cause."

"I should very much like to hear that," he replied.

Socrates proceeded: "I thought that as I had failed in the contemplation of true existence, I ought to be careful that I did not lose the eye of my *psūkhē*; as people may injure their bodily eye by observing and gazing on the sun during an eclipse, unless they take the precaution of only looking at the image reflected in the water, **[99e]** or in some similar medium. That occurred to me, and I was afraid that my *psūkhē* might be blinded altogether if I looked at things with my eyes or tried by the help of the senses to apprehend them. And I thought that I had better have recourse to ideas, and seek in them the truth of existence. I dare say that the simile **[100a]** is not perfect—for I am very far from admitting that he who contemplates existence through the medium of ideas sees them only as an image, any more than he who sees them in their working

> and effects. However, this was the method which I adopted: I first assumed some principle which I judged to be the strongest, and then I affirmed as true whatever seemed to agree with this, whether relating to the cause or to anything else; and that which disagreed I regarded as untrue. But I should like to explain my meaning clearly, as I do not think that you understand me.”