

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 Meaning In 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](#)

“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.

“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.”

Post by “Don” of February 22, 2026 at 6:08 AM

Quote from Socrates/ Plato

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 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* (emphasis added)

By Zeus, *THIS* is the basis of Western philosophy??

THIS is why society or culture or academia refer to the natural philosophers as *PRE-SOCRATIC* and largely dismiss them as *irrelevant*???

I admit I've never heard of the "second sailing" but, from my perspective, that is a house of cards built on shifting sand. To put it another way:



Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2026 at 6:40 AM

That is exactly my reaction Don. And i am sorely embarrassed that this forum has been going for some fifteen years without my recognizing this adequately.

Mea maxima culpa!

For me, this places a lot of what I've been reading about Epicurus in a very new light. *No wonder* he reacted the way he did.

Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2026 at 7:13 AM

Anyone who wants to defend Socrates needs to be sure they have read the full Phaedo. Here's more of a taste of what Epicurus must have considered to be poison worse than hemlock. This is Socrates speaking, There is much more, and worse.

Quote

[66b] “And when they consider all this, must not true philosophers make a reflection, of which they will speak to one another in such words as these: ‘We have found,’ they will say, ‘a path of speculation which seems to bring us and the argument to the conclusion that while we are in the body, and while the *psūkhē* is mingled with this mass of evil, our desire will not be satisfied, and our desire is of the truth. For the body is a source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; **[66c]** and also is liable to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after truth: and by filling us so full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies, and idols, and every sort of folly, prevents our ever having, as people say, so much as a thought. For whence come wars, and fighting, and factions? Whence but from the body and the lusts of the body? For wars are occasioned by the love of money, **[66d]** and money has to be acquired for the sake and in the service of the body; and in consequence of all these things the time which ought to be given to philosophy is lost. Moreover, if there is time and an inclination toward philosophy, yet the body introduces a turmoil and confusion and fear into the course of speculation, and hinders us from seeing the truth: and all experience shows that if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body, **[66e]** and the *psūkhē* in itself must behold all things in themselves: then I suppose that we shall attain that which we desire, and of which we say that we are lovers, and that is wisdom, not while we live, but after death, as the argument indicates [*sēmainein*]; for if while in company with the body the *psūkhē* cannot have pure knowledge, one of two things seems to follow—either knowledge is not to be attained at all, or, if at all, after death. For then, and not till then, **[67a]** the *psūkhē* will be in

itself alone and without the body. In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we have the least possible concern or interest in the body, and are not saturated with the bodily nature, but remain pure until the hour when the god himself is pleased to release us. And then the foolishness of the body will be cleared away and we shall be pure and hold converse with other pure *psūkhai*, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere; and this is surely the light of truth. **[67b]** For no impure thing is allowed to approach the pure.’ These are the sort of words, Simmias, which the true lovers of wisdom cannot help saying to one another, and thinking. You will agree with me in that?”

“Certainly, Socrates.”

Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2026 at 8:08 AM

So the most relevant section comes near the end, when Socrates feels challenged by the argument that the soul might be longer-lasting than the body, but still might not exist forever. The main part starts with this opening:

Quote

“Then I will tell you,” said Socrates. “When I was young, Cebes, I had a prodigious desire to know that department of philosophy which is called Natural Science; this appeared to me to have lofty aims, as being the science which has to do with the causes of things, and which teaches why a thing is, and is created and destroyed; **[96b]** and I was always agitating myself with the consideration of such questions as these: Is the growth of animals the result of some decay which the hot and cold principle contracts, as some have said? Is the blood the element with which we think, or the air, or the fire? or perhaps nothing of this sort – but the brain may be the originating power of the perceptions of hearing and sight and smell, and memory and opinion may come from them, and science may be based on memory and opinion when no longer in motion, but at rest. And then I went on to examine the decay of them, **[96c]** and then to the things of the sky above and the earth below, and at last I concluded that I was wholly incapable of these inquiries, as I will satisfactorily prove to you. For I was fascinated by them to such a degree that my eyes grew blind to things that I had seemed to myself, and also to others, to know quite well; and I forgot what I had before thought to be self-evident, that the growth of man is the result of eating and drinking; **[96d]** for when by the digestion of food flesh is added to flesh and bone to

bone, and whenever there is an aggregation of congenial elements, the lesser bulk becomes larger and the small man greater. Was not that a reasonable notion?"

"Yes," said Cebes, "I think so."

"Well; but let me tell you something more. There was a time when I thought that I understood the meaning of greater and less pretty well; and when I saw a great man standing by a little one I fancied that one was taller than the other by a head; [96e] or one horse would appear to be greater than another horse: and still more clearly did I seem to perceive that ten is two more than eight, and that two cubits are more than one, because two is twice one."

"And what is now your notion of such matters?" said Cebes.

"I should be far enough from imagining," he replied, "that I knew the cause of any of them, indeed I should, for I cannot satisfy myself that when one is added to one, the one to which the addition is made becomes two, [97a] or that the two units added together make two by reason of the addition. For I cannot understand how, when separated from the other, each of them was one and not two, and now, when they are brought together, the mere juxtaposition of them can be the cause of their becoming two: nor can I understand how the division of one is the way to make two; for then a different cause [97b] would produce the same effect—as in the former instance the addition and juxtaposition of one to one was the cause of two, in this the separation and subtraction of one from the other would be the cause. Nor am I any longer satisfied that I understand the reason why one or anything else either is generated or destroyed or is at all, but I have in my mind some confused notion of another method, and can never admit this."

Post by "Patrikios" of March 5, 2026 at 4:25 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

further the condemnation of Socrates and Plato for deprecating the study of natural philosophy

[Cassius](#)

Here is another view of how humans have devolved in some of our senses and prolepsis abilities, due to Socrates turn away from observing nature, especially observing it deeply. Since

Epicurus saw himself as a healer, the Socratic/Platonic turning away from a deeper understanding of nature's healing processes, would have horrified Epicurus.

See how a modern psychotherapist, who has studied 'nature's healing processes' up close, describes what many of us civilized humans have lost.

Quote

In Western society, there is an overvaluation of the conscious, analytical mind and, with it, an atrophy of dozens of senses and abilities. Sojourns to the Amazon and the Serengeti have reminded me of the many skills that indigenous people have not forgotten—abilities that guide them safely through life's inevitable challenges. I have met shamans who can look into another person's body with their mind's eye to diagnosis an illness, Hadza Bushmen who can "wire" messages long distances without the use of a cell phone or a letter, and Native Americans who can smell approaching changes in the weather. It is in the quiet of Nature that shamans can listen with their hearts, skin, eyes, and noses as well as their ears—a synesthetic talent that today is largely disbelieved or simply unknown outside of indigenous cultures.

[Awakening the Healing Soul, by Geral Blanchard]

Post by "Cassius" of March 5, 2026 at 4:38 PM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

Since Epicurus saw himself as a healer, the Socratic/Platonic turning away from a deeper understanding of nature's healing processes, would have horrified Epicurus.

I agree and I think "horrified" is in the vicinity of the right emotion. I don't think they considered this to be a mild disagreement to politely gloss over. It goes to the heart of everything, and in analogy to the way Lucretius describes theories that contradict the Epicurean view of the universe,** Socrates' approach opens the way to massive destruction and the Epicureans would have realized that.

**I'll have to look up that reference - can't remember it at the moment but it's something about positing the existence of something besides atom and void.

Post by “Cassius” of March 5, 2026 at 4:43 PM

** I'm thinking of this being the analogy (admittedly not right on point but good for pointing out how abandoning the study of nature / confidence in the senses will open the door for a flood of other problems:

For on whatever side you maintain that the bodies fail first, this side will be the gate of death for things, by this path will all the throng of matter cast itself abroad.

1-1083

Moreover, since they do not pretend that all bodies press towards the centre, but only those of earth and liquid, the moisture of the sea and mighty waters from the mountains, and those things which are, as it were, enclosed in an earthy frame; but on the other hand, they teach that the thin breezes of air and hot fires at the same time are carried away from the centre, and that for this cause all the sky around is twinkling with stars, and the flame of the sun is fed through the blue tracts of heaven, because all the heat fleeing from the centre gathers itself together there; nor again can the topmost branches grow leafy upon trees, unless from the earth little by little each has food [supplied by nature, their thoughts are not at harmony with themselves. There must then be an infinite store of matter], lest after the winged way of flames the walls of the world suddenly fly apart, dissolved through the great void, and lest all else follow them in like manner, or the thundering quarters of the sky fall down from above, and the earth in hot haste withdraw itself from beneath our feet, and amid all the mingled ruin of things on earth and of the sky, whereby the frames of bodies are loosed, it pass away through the deep void, so that in an instant of time not a wrack be left behind, except emptied space and unseen first-beginnings. For on whatever side you maintain that the bodies fail first, this side will be the gate of death for things, by this path will all the throng of matter cast itself abroad.

Post by “Cassius” of March 5, 2026 at 4:47 PM

Of course even more on point as to the disaster of not trusting the senses is [Lucretius 4-500](#)

4-500

And if reason is unable to unravel the cause, why those things which close at hand were square, are seen round from a distance, still it is better through lack of reasoning to be at fault in accounting for the causes of either shape, rather than to let things clear seen slip abroad from your grasp, and to assail the grounds of belief, and to pluck up the whole foundations on

which life and existence rest. For not only would all reasoning fall away; life itself too would collapse straightway, unless you choose to trust the senses, and avoid headlong spots and all other things of this kind which must be shunned, and to make for what is opposite to these. Know, then, that all this is but an empty store of words, which has been drawn up and arrayed against the senses.

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 6, 2026 at 8:59 AM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

See how a modern psychotherapist, who has studied ‘nature’s healing processes’ up close, describes what many of us civilized humans have lost.

Quote

In Western society, there is an overvaluation of the conscious, analytical mind and, with it, an atrophy of dozens of senses and abilities. Sojourns to the Amazon and the Serengeti have reminded me of the many skills that indigenous people have not forgotten—abilities that guide them safely through life’s inevitable challenges. I have met shamans who can look into another person’s body with their mind’s eye to diagnosis an illness, Hadza Bushmen who can “wire” messages long distances without the use of a cell phone or a letter, and Native Americans who can smell approaching changes in the weather. It is in the quiet of Nature that shamans can listen with their hearts, skin, eyes, and noses as well as their ears—a synesthetic talent that today is largely disbelieved or simply unknown outside of indigenous cultures.

[Awakening the Healing Soul, by Geral Blanchard]

"Wiring messages" ... 🤔 ...made me think about this:

[One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge - Wikipedia](#)