

# PLATO'S CAVE AND THE MATRIX

## JOHN PARTRIDGE

"Philosophy involves seeing the absolute oddity of what is familiar and trying to formulate really probing questions about it." –Iris Murdoch<sup>1</sup>

"They say about me that I am the strangest person, always making people confused." –Socrates<sup>2</sup>

Imagine a dark, subterranean prison in which humans are bound by their necks to a single place from infancy. Elaborate steps are taken by unseen forces to supply and manipulate the content of the prisoner's visual experience. This is so effective that the prisoners do not recognize their imprisonment and are satisfied to live their lives in this way. Moreover, the cumulative effects of this imprisonment are so thorough that if freed, the prisoners would be virtually helpless. They could not stand up on their own, their eyes would be overloaded initially with sensory information, and even their minds would refuse to accept what the senses eventually presented them. It is not unreasonable to expect that some prisoners would wish to remain imprisoned even after their minds grasped the horror of their condition. But if a prisoner was dragged out and compelled to understand the relationship between the prison and outside, matters would be different. In time the prisoner would come to have genuine knowledge superior to the succession of representations that made up the whole of experience before. This freed prisoner would understand those representations as imperfect—like pale copies of the full reality now grasped in the mind. Yet if returned to the prison, the freed prisoner would be the object of ridicule, disbelief, and hostility.

### I. Introduction

Viewers of *The Matrix* remember the moment in the film when Neo is released from his prison and made to grasp the truth of his life and the world. The account above roughly captures that turning point in the 1999 film, and yet it is drawn from an image crafted almost twenty-four hundred years ago by the Greek philosopher, Plato (427-347 B.C.E.). Today the *Republic* is the most influential work by Plato, and the allegory of the Cave the most famous part of the *Republic*. If you know that Socrates was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by drinking hemlock, or that Socrates thought that the unexamined life is not worth living, you may also know that Socrates in the *Republic* likened the human condition to the state of prisoners bound in a cave seeing only shadows projected on the wall in front

of them. Transcending this state is the aim of genuine education, conceived as a release from imprisonment, a turning or reorientation of one's whole life, an upward journey from darkness into light:

The release from the bonds, the turning around from shadows to statues and the light of the fire and, then, the way up out of the cave to the sunlight...: [education] has the power to awaken the best part of the soul and lead it upward to the study of the best among the things that are.<sup>3</sup>

The allegory of the Cave gives literary shape to Socrates' most fundamental concern, namely that our souls be in the best condition possible (Plato, *Apology* 30a7-b4). Socrates also believed he was commanded by the god Apollo to practice philosophy; it both animated and cost him his life. Yet it is not obvious how philosophical investigation improves the condition of the soul—still less how the Socratic method in particular does so, consisting as it does in testing the consistency of a person's beliefs through a series of questions Socrates asks.

I believe, and will show here, that the allegory of the Cave is part of Plato's effort to make philosophical sense of Socrates' philosophical life, to link Socrates' persistent questioning to his unwavering aim at what he called the "care of the soul." On this theme of care of the soul, there is a deep resonance between *The Matrix* and Plato's thought in the *Republic*. Like the allegory of the Cave, *The Matrix* dramatically conveys the view that ordinary appearances do not depict true reality and that gaining the truth changes one's life. Neo's movements toward greater understanding nicely parallel the movements of the prisoner in the cave whose bonds are loosened. The surface similarities between the film and the allegory can run to a long catalog. The first paragraph of this essay reveals some of these connections. But there remains a deeper affinity between the two that I shall draw out here, especially in Part IV, having to do with Socrates' notion of the care of the soul.

To see what I am calling a deeper connection between the film and the allegory of the Cave, I begin in Part II by recounting the context in which the Cave appears and the philosophical positions it figuratively depicts.<sup>4</sup> In Part III I compare and contrast the film and the allegory, focusing attention on the difficulty in sorting out deceptive sensory information. Finally, in Part IV I examine the warnings and concessions Plato places in the dramatic spaces of *Republic*. The allegory of the Cave is a strange image, as one of Socrates' friends says (515a4), while Socrates himself confesses that the Cave is not exact (504b5; cf. 435c9-d2).<sup>5</sup> Rereading the Cave after a recent viewing of the film shows that these are not throwaway remarks. *The Matrix* likewise privileges the work that strangeness and calculated vagueness do; Morpheus, after

all, cannot show Neo what he most needs to see, but must get him to see for himself something that is difficult to recognize. In this way, *The Matrix* and Plato's Cave are faithful to a central tenet in Socrates' philosophical examinations: that proper teaching only occurs when students are prepared to make discoveries for themselves. Furthermore, the discovery that is most crucial is the discovery of oneself. Readiness for self-examination is, after all, what makes "care of the soul" possible.

## II. Plato's Cave

If Plato's *Republic* has a single unifying theme, it is to show that the life of the just person is intrinsically preferable to any other life. In order to prove this, Socrates is made to investigate the concept of "justice." After an elaborate effort that spans three of the ten books of the *Republic*, Socrates and his two interlocutors discover what justice is. Justice is shown to be a property of a soul in which its three parts do their proper work and refrain from doing the job of another part. Specifically, reason must rule the other parts of the soul. Only under the rule of reason is the soul's harmonious arrangement secured and preserved. Plato glosses this idea memorably by calling such a soul healthy. Just persons have psychic health; their personality is integrated in the proper way.

At the end of Book Four, there is one main gap in the argument: what is the precise role of reason, the "best part of the soul" mentioned in the passage above? There is little to go on at this stage. We know only that the soul in which reason does its job well is called wise, and wisdom is a special kind of knowledge: knowledge of the good. How are we to arrive at this knowledge? What is it like to possess it? What sort of thing is the good? The allegory of the Cave speaks to these questions.<sup>6</sup>

In order to impress upon us the importance of these questions, Book Seven of the *Republic* begins with a startling image of our ignorance. It is the allegory of the Cave:

Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers

above which they show their puppets . . . Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you'd expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent. (514a1-515a3)

Many contemporary readers recoil at the awful politics of the Cave. Who, after all, are the “puppeteers”? Why do they deceive their fellow cave-dwellers? Plato has so little to say about them that readers quickly imagine their own worst fears; a totalitarian government or the mass media struck mid- and late-20th Century readers as an obvious parallel to the prisoners who move freely within the cave. But this gets the aim of the cave wrong, I believe, since it deflects attention away from the prisoners bound to the posts. “They are us,” Socrates says, and this is what is truly sinister: an imprisonment that we do not recognize because we are our own prison-keepers. Let us turn to examine these prisoners and their imprisonment, specifically by examining the philosophical stakes of their ignorance. Only then will we see exactly why ignorance is likened to imprisonment and alienation.

In the cave, the prisoners can distinguish the different shadows and sounds (516c8-9, cf. e8-9), apply names to the shadows depicting things (cf. 515b4-5), and even discern the patterns in their presentation (516c9-10). To this extent they have some true beliefs. But insofar as they believe that this two-dimensional, monochromatic play of images—and the echoes reverberating in the cave—is the whole of reality (515c1-2), they are mistaken. Moreover, the opinions they have do not explain why the shapes they see are as they are. They do not know the source of the shadows, nor do they know that the sounds are not produced by the shadows but rather by the unseen people moving the statues (515b7-9).

The possession of a few, small-scale, true beliefs characterizes the condition of all of us, Plato believes. We can distinguish different things, but we lack a systematic, causal explanation of them. To put it loosely, we have, at best, assorted true beliefs about the *what* of things, but a mistaken hold (if any) on the *why* of things. Socrates' search for the definition of justice here, like his search for definitions in other Platonic dialogues, looks like an effort to get at these explanations, to grasp why things are the way they are and, perhaps further, what underlying relationship they have to one another. His questions are part of a search for the essence of things, or what he calls their “form.”<sup>7</sup> For Plato, when we possess knowledge of the form of a thing, we can give a comprehensive account of its essence. Without grasp of the form, we can have at best only true beliefs.

A simple example should show what difference it makes to have knowledge of

forms.<sup>8</sup> Suppose someone in the cave carries a chair in front of the fire. The bound prisoners see the chair's shadow on the cave wall, and some of them remark, "There is a chair." They are partially correct. If they broke their bonds, they could turn to see the actual chair. In this case their cognitive grip on the chair would be more complete. They would be able to recognize that the shadow was less real than the chair and that the chair is the cause of the shadow.

Ultimately, the physically-real chair is explained in terms of its representation of the form of chair. After all, to have genuine knowledge of a thing it is necessary for our intellects to grasp its form. One might think of the difference this way. A shadow is better grasped when the object casting it is seen. Plato would wish us to see that, in a sense, ordinary objects are like mere shadows of forms. Thus, to grasp objects as fully as possible, one must attain a grasp of its form.

There is a curious complication on the horizon that I shall point out here. It turns out that knowing the form of a thing is not sufficient for gaining a final understanding of that thing. Even to know fully the form of chair, Plato holds, one must know the form of the good.

This does not make sense at first. Recall, the form of the good is what reason ought, ideally, to know, for in knowing it you become wise. Furthermore, knowing the form of the good contributes to your being a just person, since one part of you, reason, is doing its job (and this is what it means for you to be just). Now Plato suggests that grasping the form of the good or the good-itself (the terms are interchangeable; see note 7) is necessary for attaining the best intellectual grasp of *anything* that our intellects can know. The distinctive importance of the form of the good is indicated by two images that immediately precede the Cave: the Sun and the Line, and I will consider them now.

The Sun analogy (507a ff.) reveals the special epistemological role played by the good-itself. Just as the natural world depends upon the sun (for warmth and light), so too the intelligible world depends on the good-itself (508b13-c2).<sup>9</sup> This is the force of the light metaphor. The sun, as Plato puts it, gives the power to see to seers, while the form of the good gives the power to know to knowers (508e1-3).

In our example of the chair, it is only in virtue of the light produced by the fire above and behind the prisoners that the chair and its shadow are visible. The fire, then, is a condition for our acquiring a more complete true belief about the shadow. But the fire is nothing more than a "source of light that is itself a shadow in relation to the

sun" (532c2-3). Out of the cave the sun represents the good-itself. The good-itself illuminates the true, intelligible world of ultimate reality, and in this way, the form of chair relies on the form of the good for its intelligibility. The good-itself is the most preeminent item in the universe. It is both an object of knowledge and the condition of fully knowing other objects of knowledge.

Plato is not finished with his specification of the role played by the form of the good. He goes on to suggest that the good-itself nourishes the being of intelligible things in a way analogous to the sun nourishing organic life. For this unusual idea we have some help from the Line image (509d ff), the most obscure of the three images. Imagine a vertical line dividing two realms—physical reality and intelligible reality—into unequal spaces. Each realm is then subdivided in the same uneven proportion as that which separates the physical and intelligible world. To take only the smaller, bottom portion of the line, we find the physical realm divided between actual, physically-existing items and their ephemeral copies (e.g., reflections in water, shadows, and artistic depictions). In the Cave, this is the distinction made between the chair and its shadow. And so too the Line presses us to think that the physically real objects perceived by our senses are, in effect, shadows—pale, diminished or distorted copies of something more real.

The Line offers a ranked order of Plato's ontology according to which the degrees of reality and being of a particular class of things increases as you go up the line. The higher up the scale, the more real the items become; and since the form of the good is the most real item in all of reality, it is located at the very top of the Line, just above the forms. Things lower on the line are derivative and owe whatever reality or being that they have to the things above them. Physical objects are, metaphorically, nourished by their corresponding forms. They depend for their very reality, not just their knowability, on the perfect, eternal Forms existing in the intelligible realm.

One clear implication of the Line is the metaphor of ascent. The Cave exploits it as well: the upward escape from the cave represents the difficulty of gaining ever more abstract knowledge while not relying on information gathered by the senses. By connecting the three images together we discover that the human condition is abject: we see only the most downgraded forms of reality (image, shadows) and are as far from the sun (the good-itself) as we can be. This is what it is to be ignorant of the truth.

But to see why our alienation from what is genuinely good makes a difference in our lives, there is one more feature of the good-itself that deserves attention. Whatever

exactly the form of the good is, it serves as a paradigm or model, and it has a remarkable effect on those who grasp it. As Socrates says of fully-educated philosophers near the end of Book Seven, "once they've seen the good-itself, they must each in turn put the city, its citizens, and themselves in order, using it as their model (*paradeigmati*)" (540a8-b1). This was anticipated in a longer passage in which the philosopher, by means of studying the "things that are" (500b9), acts as a craftsman (cf. 500d6), or a "painter using a divine model (*paradeigmati*)" (500e3-4). Not only do physical things take on the qualities they have through a process of copying, reflecting or imitating the forms, so too we can take on goodness through intellectual contact with the good-itself.<sup>10</sup> By coming to understand the good-itself, we become like it. In short, we become good.

We can see now why being just depends on knowing the form of the good. Reason's rule affords the soul the opportunity to study and therein to become like the good-itself, that is, properly proportioned, well ordered, healthy. Finally, once this knowledge is acquired, and the self is transformed, one becomes productive.<sup>11</sup> Those who gain knowledge of the good-itself are capable of crafting virtues in their souls and in the souls of others, and they can paint divine constitutions for cities. This is what enables Plato to put words into Socrates' mouth that, were he on Aristophanes' stage, would have returned thunderous laughter:

Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide . . . cities will have no rest from evils, Glaucon, nor, I think, will the human race.  
(473c11-d6)

### **III. Plato's Cave and *The Matrix***

There are no forms in *The Matrix*, and thus our epistemic and metaphysical circumstances in Plato's *Republic* look very different from those in the film. The world inside the cave is a diminished one, a shadow or reflection of the real, but broadly continuous with the true world. Even though there is a marked difference between the sensible and intelligible realms viz. method, epistemic certainty, and metaphysical reality, on Plato's view the sensible is somehow derived from the intelligible. Thus, for Plato, our speaking and thinking in the cave is not meaningless, and some of our opinions are true, in spite of our ignorance of the deeper causes of things.

In *The Matrix*, by contrast, the two worlds are far less continuous with one another. The real world is profoundly dystopian, and the substance of lives inside the Matrix is supplied in mental states almost entirely cut off from this

reality. (Ironically, the real world in *The Matrix* is very like the world inside the cave.) In spite of its realism, the world inside the Matrix is not a copy of the real world but is a simulation. Nevertheless, there is at least one continuity between the real world and the computer-simulated world: your body. Owing to an unexplained principle, called "residual body memory," your body looks the same to you and to others in both worlds. And you are able to retain your memories of one world when you are in the other and when you return back to the first. (This means that Cypher will have to have his memories of the time spent outside the Matrix removed if he is to return to the illusion of reality inside the Matrix.)

Since the real world and the simulated world are worlds in which the senses receive information, the practical problem is not that they are discontinuous, but that they are indiscernible. This is part of the initial difficulty for Neo since he cannot determine which sensory information is genuine and which false. Although he (and the viewer) settles this question soon enough, a skeptical worry remains in the wake: how can he ever be sure his sensory information is truthful if there is no certificate of authenticity on his experiences?

Suppose Agent Smith creates a program that launches right when Neo picks up a phone within the Matrix. Instead of being whisked back aboard the ship, Neo's consciousness is supplied with a computer-generated experience of the interior of the Nebuchadnezzar, and of course he believes he has successfully exited the Matrix. Such a trick might enable Agent Smith to obtain compromising information about the Nebuchadnezzar and its crew or, worse, the passwords for Zion.

It is hard to imagine how Neo might see past Agent Smith's ruse, especially if he only had a few moments to figure things out. Would Plato's freed prisoner fair better? Recall, Plato urges us to regard the sensible world as unreliable, no matter the source of our information about it.<sup>12</sup> We must adopt a different method for apprehending the truth of things. This is, of course, not nearly as simple as it sounds, nor is it obviously helpful; after all, what we are to grasp is the intelligible world from which our ordinary, sensible world is copied, not the sensible world itself. The reward is that once you grasp the forms in the intelligible world, you would be an expert in discriminating items in the sensible world (cf. 520c1-6). This doesn't mean you'd never be mistaken, however; rather, you would simply be the best

sensible world discriminator there could be. Therefore, in the case where Agent Smith launches his deceptive program, the only advantage the freed prisoner might have is slight: a general unease about all sensory information. Since the ordinary world is too murky and ever-changing to permit genuine knowledge of it, our awareness of this mutability should assist us in determining which of our beliefs were relatively more reliable.

It seems that the metaphysical differences between Plato and *The Matrix* do not prevent them from telling a roughly similar story about the epistemological unreliability of the senses and the need to abstract from the senses in order to gain genuine knowledge. In fact, we find Neo at the end of the film doing more than simply bending the laws of physics with the Matrix. He has, it seems, stepped almost entirely out of that very world itself. He does not, however, appear in two places at once, but his destruction of one of the Agents, and his ability to fly, suggest that the laws of physics are more than merely bent.

Where Plato's dialogue and *The Matrix* agree most is in drawing out the enormous psychological difficulty in calling the world into question and the ethical dimensions of failing to do so. Neo and Plato's freed prisoner must accept truths about themselves (namely, that their lives have been unreal) before they can acquire deeper knowledge about fundamental truths. To achieve this, both Neo and the freed prisoner need the shocking demonstration that the senses are inadequate and that they can be systematically deceived. Both then undertake an introspective turn to discover the truth, and must take steps to disregard knowledge derived from the senses.

This is the point to ask, finally, what knowledge Neo attains that operates in him like the knowledge of the Platonic form of the good. What does Neo know only after great difficulty but whose truth is fundamental? What object is grasped by Neo's intellect that he understands to be the condition of his knowing anything else? What knowledge enables him to be productive, to be a savior of himself and others? It is nothing more than proper self-understanding. In both *The Matrix* and in the Cave, there is a single item the knowledge of which makes the knower more integrated and more powerful, and for Neo it is self-knowledge.

Ought we to see Neo as adhering to the letter of Socratic self-examination

and care of the soul? Only at high-altitude will a perfect connection be visible. For Neo's enlightenment is ultimately about his own specific path and role. Socratic care of the soul involves self-knowledge, but the parts of yourself that are peculiar to you, that make up your individuality, are not relevant.<sup>13</sup> Since the prisoners in the cave have only dim self-awareness (they see only the shadows of themselves [515a5-8]), it might seem that release involves getting the right beliefs about oneself. But the very abstractness of the knowledge that Plato prizes, which is very unlike the specificity of the knowledge that Neo eventually gets (namely, that he is the One), suggests that the self-knowledge the prisoners need is neither the end of their search nor even the proper beginning.

In other dialogues Socrates was made to endorse the idea that knowledge was in you, that a kind of introspection aided by proper questioning could elicit true beliefs. But these are not truths that are *about* you, rather they are truths that are *in* you. Neo's case is different. The truths he must grasp are both in him and about him. The film reveals furthermore how he must demonstrate and experience his capabilities before he is able to believe entirely that he possesses them. And when he believes in himself at last, his capabilities are further enhanced. *This* result is produced neither by the method nor the aim of Socratic care of the soul.

Most fundamentally, the film and the allegory share a pedagogical conceit. Both hold that in teaching the most basic truths, there is an important role for a strategic strangeness and the confusion it produces. The allegory of the Cave puzzles Socrates' audience, yet as it hooks them, the Cave provides only the outline for solving the puzzle. Might Morpheus be doing the same? Might Morpheus, like the allegory, act as a kind of Socratic teacher, urging Neo toward self-understanding and care for his soul?

#### **IV. Socratic Education in the Cave and *The Matrix***

To see to what extent this is so, I want now to return to a remark by Socrates' friend, Glaucon, that the cave and its prisoners are "strange" (*atopon . . . atopous*, [515a4]). The remark is important because it indicates that the image is operating on its audience in a particular way, one that Plato elsewhere gives us reason to believe is significant. Prompting someone to recognize strangeness, something being out of place (*atopia*), is how the Socratic method achieves one of its aims. This can occur when Socrates asks

one of his deceptively simple questions. But it can also occur when he professes ignorance, or when he is silent. Similarly, Plato's allegory of the Cave describes what our ignorance is like in stark images and what it would be like to become educated; it says nothing about what starts the process of becoming educated.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the imprisonment is metaphorical, as is the release. Pressing for specific details is to demand too much of the image. By refusing to say precisely how *this* prisoner is freed, Plato retains the openness of his allegory.<sup>15</sup>

What are we to say about *The Matrix*? On the surface, it appears the *The Matrix* departs from the allegory. First of all, it gives answers to the question above, for it is Morpheus who frees Neo, and Morpheus chooses to free him because there is something particular about Neo that recommends his release. Yet, on closer inspection, Neo's early encounters with Morpheus produce the same kind of confusion that Socrates produces in his interlocutors. Neo receives strange communications via computer ("wake up, Neo,"<sup>16</sup>) to follow the white rabbit he soon sees on a tattooed shoulder. These odd messages disrupt Neo's expectations of the world, especially his need for control over his life and his facility with computers. Another disruption comes when Neo swallows the red pill. This drug quickly begins to alter his perception of the stability of the world inside the Matrix.<sup>17</sup> Taken together, the computer messages uncannily anticipate what is about to happen, while the pill calls into question his grasp of what is now happening. This surely prepares Neo to accept the truth that everything that has already happened is an illusion.

If we suppose that Morpheus asks the right questions, and supplies the right drugs, it is still the case that Neo has to recognize the questions and accept the drugs. Neo proves to be a particularly apt pupil. Indeed, there are features of Neo's life that might explain how he begins to see the falsity of the world inside the Matrix. Neo is an accomplished hacker who would have the best chance of anyone to discover that the whole of his experience is itself nothing more than highly-sophisticated computer code. He is also living a double life. He works as a software engineer perhaps to maintain a steady income, perhaps as cover for his underground activities. Maybe playing the role of an office worker affords him a sense of the absurd that makes it easier to believe that his life is hollow. Insomnia might work for this purpose as well. Besides, who hasn't had the gut feeling Neo has that "there is something wrong with the world"?

Of course, one of the themes of the film is Neo's struggle to accept his role as the One, the savior of humanity. He is the subject of a number of prophecies made by the Oracle.<sup>18</sup> In fact, he is the only person whose prophecy does not refer to someone other than himself. He only accepts his true nature well after the series of strange clues Morpheus presents to him and the confusion this produces in him. Ultimately, he must experience firsthand his fitness for the special role that the others urge him to perform.

In this way, Morpheus can be seen as a Socratic gadfly, stinging Neo to take the first steps he needs in order to discover the truth on his own. Similarly, Plato's sketch of the role played by the form of the good only points the way to the complete answer that Plato would have us seek out. In this way, Plato draws the reader to think for him or herself in the same way that Socrates wished his interlocutors to feel the sting of the realization of their ignorance as a motivation to join him in inquiry and care of the soul.

The allegory of the Cave issues a pointed challenge: in what way are we living lives of diminished prospect, resting content with our knowledge, failing even to ask the right questions? These are precisely the questions Morpheus puts to Neo. And like Morpheus, Plato's pessimism about the human condition gives way to an optimistic view of the power of education to liberate anyone:

Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes . . . Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately. (518b7-c2, d5-7)

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## Endnotes

1. "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 8. Originally published in Magee, *Men of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
2. Plato, *Theaetetus* 149a8-9.
3. Plato, *Republic* 532b6-8, c3-6. What I have dubbed "education" in the brackets is specifically the study of mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and harmony. When properly pursued, each discipline involves abstraction from the senses, and is "really fitted in every way to draw one towards being" (523a2-3). These disciplines prepare our minds for the most important discipline, dialectic, Plato's term for the right kind of philosophical examination.

Hereafter I include citations to the “Stephanus pages” of the *Republic* in the text. Stephanus pages may be found along the vertical margins of most translations of the *Republic*. For example, “527d6-e3” refers to a passage beginning on Stephanus page 527, section d, on line 6 of the Oxford Classical Text. The translation I cite here is by Grube/Reeve (1992), which is also found in Cooper (1997).

4. I shall refer to the philosophical positions advocated by the character Socrates as Plato’s, though this scholarly convention is under attack in some quarters. Plato never appears in the *Republic* or any other dialogue (save for the *Apology*, and he does not speak there). Thus some scholars find it presumptuous to fob off the character Socrates’ views onto Plato; would we automatically assume that Ian Fleming took his martini shaken, not stirred, in the manner of his fictional agent? Of course, more is at stake in the first case than getting a drink order wrong, but this is true largely because other assumptions normally accompany the identification of Socrates’ utterances with Plato’s considered philosophical views. One worry is that this identification narrows the range of answers we might give to the question why Plato wrote dialogues. Another worry is that it may distort our understanding of what Plato took an adequate philosophical theory to be.

5. Contemporary readers generally agree with Socrates. Some refer to “the treacherous analogies and parables” (Cooper [1977], 143) as “over-ambitious” and “overloaded” (Annas [1981], 265; 252, 256). Much ink has been spilled in the effort to provide a consistent, plausible philosophical interpretation of the images in the *Republic*.

6. I say “speaks to” because the Cave is only part of a generally sketchy account of the nature of the good. Socrates disclaims precision, warning us that his talk about the good is schematic (504d6-8) and fuzzy (cf. 504d8-e3); a shortcut to the truth of things (cf. 504b1-4; 435d2). Given his lack of knowledge about the good (505a4-6, 506c2-3, d6-8), the most Socrates can do is provide stories, not reasoned accounts. This, at least, is the stated rationale for why he gives “the child and offspring of the good” (507a3-4) rather than a fully articulated, rationally defensible account.

Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge does not mean that he is completely ignorant. Most obviously, he knows enough to know that he does not know. He also knows that knowledge of the good is important to have (505a6-b4), and what method must be used to get it: dialectic (532a1-d1). Moreover, he provides a formal account of the good, saying it is the chief or ultimate end to all our actions (cf.: “Every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake” 505d11-e1). And with this premise, he rules out rival attempts to spell out the formal account, arguing against pleasure and knowledge as candidates for a substantive account of goodness itself (505b5-d1). Finally, he seems capable of saying more than he says here, though we cannot be sure that he takes himself to be able to give something more secure than images and other “offspring” (cf. 506e1-3).

7. See 507b5-7. The essence of good things is called, variously, the good-itself (506d8-e1, 507b5) or form of the good (505a2, 508e2-3). This item is really what reason is attempting to grasp; not what is good for me, nor what is ‘a good x’, but something that is good in and of itself.

8. It is notoriously difficult to count the population of forms, and we cannot be certain that Plato thought there was a form of chair. Reeve’s comment (on whether there is a form in the intelligible world for every group of things in the sensible world to which a single name applies) is useful for the general question of how many or what sort of forms there are. “Assumptions are one thing; truths are another. Thus forms are assumed with ontological abandon, but the only ones there really are are those needed by dialectical-thought for its explanatory and reconstructive purposes. Ordinary language is the first word here, but it is not by any means the last word” (1988, 294). Will there be a last word? According to one commentator writing at the beginning of the last century, even what Plato meant by the forms “is a question which has been, and in my opinion will always be, much debated” (Adam [1902], 169).

9. The intelligible world is Plato’s way of referring to the class of things that can be known

by the mind alone and that are imperceptible to the senses. A list would include mathematical or logical truths and geometrical items, as well as the vaunted forms. (The types of study that yield knowledge of items in or aspects of the intelligible world are mentioned in note 3 above.)

10. "Instead, as he looks at and studies things that are organized and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in rational order, he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can. Or do you think that someone can consort with things he admires without imitating them? . . . Then the philosopher, by consorting with what is ordered and divine . . . himself becomes as divine and ordered as a human being can" (500c2-7, c9-d2).

On some ears, this kind of talk encourages mysticism, or the view that the good-itself has occult qualities. But we do well to remind ourselves that dialectic is the only route to grasping the good-itself, and that dialectic is studied only after ten years of mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and the like (537b-c). Indeed, Cooper has argued that we think of the good-itself "somehow or other as a perfect example of rational order, conceived in explicitly mathematical terms" ([1977], 144; see also Kraut [1992]). Again, it is intellectual grasp—not oneness with or absorption into the good—that we are striving to attain.

11. Plato's *Symposium* famously stresses the fertility of the philosopher who has grasped the forms (212a-b).

12. For this reason, Plato might appreciate the irony of Morpheus stressing, again and again, that Neo must see for himself in order to understand. Plato would regard Neo's transformed conception of reality partial at best since Neo is not called upon to regard all sense impressions as false or diminished, only those that have the wrong source.

13. Annas (1981), 257-59, makes this point when she compares Plato's allegory to Bertolucci's 1970 film, *The Conformist*.

14. In the allegory, the prisoner's chains are removed but Socrates is silent on who or what removes them. Here are his words: "Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like. When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he'd be pain and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before" (515c4-d1). The Cave depicts an astonishingly thorough imprisonment. Throughout, Plato remarks on the difficulties that the freed prisoner meets with on the way out of the cave. Given this detail, it is not unreasonable to expect an account of precisely what sort of prisoner it is who begins to question whether the cave contains the whole of reality, or precisely what circumstance prompts his inquiry. Does the prisoner find the play of shadows internally inconsistent? Or does one or more of the unbound prisoners decide to remove the bonds? We are not told.

15. Moreover, the freed prisoner is referred to generically by the indefinite pronoun "someone" (*tis*); if we wish for specifics, we miss the generality that Plato intends, for his point surely is that *anyone* could escape the bonds of ignorance.

16. The film surely intends us to read the figurative sense of this expression alongside the literal one, and it may be Morpheus' hope that Neo reflects on the figurative meaning as well. After all, one of the other messages that appears on his screen—"knock, knock, Neo"—is consciously riddling. It invites the question, "who's there?"

17. Although the aim of the pill is to assist in locating Neo's body, the suggestion of a psychoactive effect on him is unmistakable.

18. The Oracle eventually tells Neo "what he needed to hear," namely that he is not the One. This inverts the account of Socrates' oracle as Plato portrays it in the *Apology*. First, Socrates does not hear the oracle directly but relies on Chaerephon's report that "no one is wiser than Socrates." Second, Neo's reluctance to believe that he is not in control of his actions requires that the Oracle tell him something false. This Neo is happy to hear, and

thus he has no motive for questioning it; it is eminently believable that he is not their long-awaited savior. By contrast, Socrates' oracle tells him something true but whose unlikely implications must be carefully interpreted through testing and questioning.

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