

## Classic Text 01 – Plato’s Cave

The following extract is from book 7 of Plato’s longest work *The Republic* (Translated by Benjamin Jowett.) Here Socrates is explaining the nature and task of philosophy of by means of an allegory or simile. Glaucon (Plato’s brother) is his interlocutor.

And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened:—Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

I see.

And do you see, I said, men passing along the wall carrying all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures of animals made of wood and stone and various materials, which appear over the wall? Some of them are talking, others silent.

You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.

Like ourselves, I replied; and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave?

True, he said; how could they see anything but the shadows if they were never allowed to move their heads?

And of the objects which are being carried in like manner they would only see the shadows?

Yes, he said.

And if they were able to converse with one another, would they not suppose that they were naming what was actually before them?

Very true.

And suppose further that the prison had an echo which came from the other side, would they not be sure to fancy when one of the passers-by spoke that the voice which they heard came from the passing shadow?

No question, he replied.

To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.

That is certain.

And now look again, and see what will naturally follow if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error. At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive some one saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision,—what will be his reply? And you may further imagine that his instructor is pointing to the objects as they pass and requiring him to name them, — will he not be perplexed? Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?

Far truer.



*In this detail from Raphael's The School of Athens Plato at left gestures towards the heavens as the realm of the intellect and forms while Aristotle gestures towards the earth and sciences as the source of knowledge.*

And if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take refuge in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?

True, he said.

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.

Not all in a moment, he said.

He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world. And first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men and other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves; then he will gaze upon the light of the moon and the stars and the spangled heaven; and he will see the sky and the stars by night better than the sun or the light of the sun by day?

Certainly.

Last of all he will be able to see the sun, and not mere reflections of him in the water, but he will see him in his own proper place, and not in another; and he will contemplate him as he is.

Certainly.

He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way the cause of all things which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold?

Clearly, he said, he would first see the sun and then reason about him.

And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them?

Certainly, he would.

And if they were in the habit of conferring honours among themselves on those who were quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before, and which followed after, and which were together; and who were therefore best able to draw conclusions as to the future, do you think that he would care for such honours and glories, or envy the possessors of them? Would he not say with Homer,

'Better to be the poor servant of a poor master,'

and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?

Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.

Imagine once more, I said, such an one coming suddenly out of the sun to be replaced in his old situation; would he not be certain to have his eyes full of darkness?

To be sure, he said.

And if there were a contest, and he had to compete in measuring the shadows with the prisoners who had never moved out of the den, while his sight was still weak, and before his eyes had become steady (and the time which would be needed to acquire this new habit of sight might be very considerable), would he not be ridiculous? Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death.

No question, he said.

This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed – whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the

immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

I agree, he said, as far as I am able to understand you.

Moreover, I said, you must not wonder that those who attain to this beatific vision are unwilling to descend to human affairs; for their souls are ever hastening into the upper world where they desire to dwell; which desire of theirs is very natural, if our allegory may be trusted.

Yes, very natural.

This allegory is intended to illustrate the transition of the soul from the changing world of appearance and sensation to the changeless world of pure ideas or form. Although most people today would disagree that we could be so wholly mistaken about the world in which we inhabit as the ill-fated prisoners in the cave, the point of the analogy is that the Universe that we perceive via the senses is not the same as that with which we apprehend by the intellect. And that once we become accustomed to examining our beliefs, customs and sensations in such a light there can be no going back to the way we were – We shall have changed irrevocably.

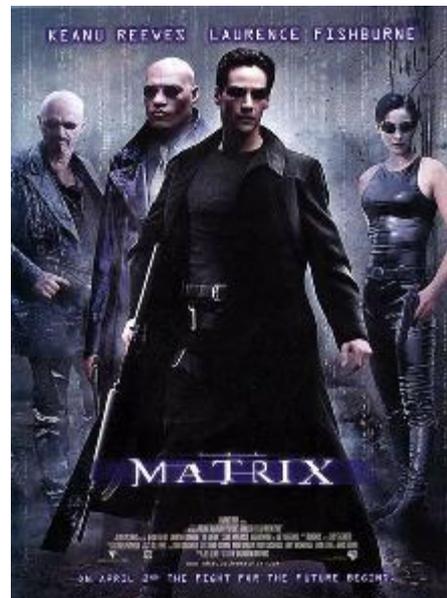
In a modern day version of Plato's cave, the 1999 film *The Matrix* presents a far more menacing dystopia in which almost all of humanity live in state of simulated perception (the Matrix) created by sentient machines which use human bodies as a source of energy. Clearly such humans are utterly deceived and in a worse predicament than even the prisoners in the cave. When Morpheus offers Neo a choice between a blue pill (blissful ignorance) and a red pill that will allow him to escape the Matrix into the real world beyond he accepts the red pill, not without perilous consequences. Of course, the Matrix is a story (and so is Plato's cave) which can be taken allegorically either separately or together.

Understanding:

1. Retell the story of the Plato's cave to a modern audience whereby you replace the shadows cast upon the far wall of the cave with a large screen TV. Be sure to preserve the logical framework of the story.
2. What do you think is the point of using similes and allegories in Philosophy to convey an idea? Why not just state such an idea outright?
3. Given that someone gave you the choice of being lead out of the prisoner's cave (or the Matrix,) how would you choose, and more importantly, could you motivate your choice?
4. Do you think that in this extract Plato might have wanted to persuade us of something more than just a simile? Could we really be prisoners of our own imperfect senses?

Feedback:

1. There are plenty of ways of retelling this story to a modern audience using the images displayed by large screen TV to stand in place of the shadows cast on the far wall of the cave. What is especially important however is that the two stories should correspond in all



A Theatrical release poster for *The Matrix*

relevant respects. *E.g.* there should be an element of false or distorted perception on the part of the prisoners and some mechanism by which it is brought about. There should also be some means by which one or more prisoners might escape or be lead out of captivity into a free world where they can perceive reality directly. The issue of adjusting to the light and then again to the dark (should the liberated prisoner want to return to save his former inmates,) should be preserved analogously because this represents an inborn reluctance in our psychological makeup to be uprooted from our comfortable notions. Finally the hostility of the prisoners to being confronted by one of their former inmates dismissing most of their concepts and claiming to know reality first hand, should be preserved analogously because human nature, on the whole, is very antagonistic to being exposed as being manifestly wrong.

2. Analogies, similes and allegories are useful not just in Philosophy but in all branches of Science and Humanities. They are useful because they can relate highly abstract concepts to more concrete examples with which we are familiar in such way that we might more readily understand them. If Plato had simply stated in point form what he thought was the nature of the soul in ascending to and participating in the realm of form and intellect, we would probably not have understood him, besides which we would have been deprived of some of the world's greatest literature.
3. Someone philosophically inclined would never be content with blissful ignorance, however consoling. If you would have taken the red pill then welcome to the world of Philosophy. Your motivation would have to include your own reasons for why it is better for your consequences to be bound up with reality (however perilous or boring) rather than with sensory simulations (however blissful) which are not real. Also you would have to something about the premium we place on reality almost above all else.
4. Plato surely did not intend for this or any other of his analogies to be taken literally however he did intend for the outcomes of his reasoning to be taken both seriously and literally. For example Plato held it to be literally true that there exists a realm of ideas or forms in which the intellect participates, quite apart from the world of the senses.

#### **Afterword:**

Since this study unit was written a number of websites and social media pages have appeared that have used the red pill / blue pill metaphor to recruitment youths to fundamentalist and terrorist organisations. Despite this we have decided to maintain what is a useful metaphor, if used responsibly. Note that even philosophical ideas in the minds of depraved people can be put to evil purposes, so we have an especial duty to reason honestly and try to communicate our ideas in a way that fosters tolerance, if not respect.