

# Interpretations of plato's allegory of the cave in erasmus' praise of folly



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In the Praise of Folly, Erasmus creates a character critical of, yet indebted to, philosophical wisdom. Through Folly, Erasmus weaves his own ideas into her message, confusing readers unable to distinguish between the two voices. In Praise of Folly, Folly refers to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from The Republic to enhance her statements of self-praise. Her interpretation of this philosophical piece strays from Plato's intentions, and at the end of the text, Erasmus offers his reconciliation between the two accounts. Folly's account revolves around the benefits of life in a material world, whereas Plato describes positive aspects of living in an immaterial realm of thought. Folly begins her lecture against the idea of Platonic enlightenment: To destroy the illusion is to ruin the whole play, for it's really the illusion and make-up which hold the audiences eye. Now what else is the whole life of man but a sort of play? Actors come on wearing their different masks and all play their parts... it's all a sort of pretense, but it's the only way to act out this farce (Erasmus 44). She reasons that life lacks substance beyond what the eyes perceive. She lives in a material world where the sense of sight controls one's outlook on life, and therefore people in her world only understand what is on the surface. The "comedy of life" (45) lies in the overall illusion of humankind. According to Folly, life is scripted and people play their assigned roles, oblivious to any other realms of existence. Folly finds joy in this lifestyle because it keeps the people, or her "audience," engaged and allows justification for folly, or foolishness, to enter their lives. Folly finds outlets for self-praise by associating life with superficiality. She believes in the message of life as a theatrical illusion, and she refuses to accept any importance in life outside of the "cave." Once Platonic enlightenment destroys life's illusions, then it ruins the "farce" of Folly's life. In the "Allegory of the Cave," Plato

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disagrees with Folly's desire of mental simplicity and fails to find it redemptive. Plato does not associate happiness or tranquility with life's outer, material surface, but rather along the path to knowledge. Folly's actors are "strange prisoners...no different from us" (Plato 241). His use of the word "prisoners" identifies a limiting force, for example a mental binding, forbidding the experience of knowledge. In Plato's account, people living in Folly's "pretense" are "tied up in a way which keeps them in one place and allows them to look only straight ahead, but not to turn their heads" (240). Folly describes the "audience's eye" as the most important sense needed in life, while Plato believes that the audience's focus on costumes, or "shadows cast by fire on the cave wall," (241) suggests that they live in a material, superficial world. The "Allegory of the Cave" makes a distinction between a tortured, inferior, material world and an intangible, superior, immaterial world of ideas. Folly maintains that inquisitive men who search for a deeper understanding of the world are disrespecting the greater force of Nature: I believe I hear the philosophers protesting that it can only be misery to live in folly, illusion, deception, ignorance. But it isn't – it's human. I don't see why they call it a misery when you're all born, formed, and fashioned in this pattern, and it's the common lot of mankind (Erasmus 50). She continues with nature as a justification for rejecting Plato's ideas. For example, by comparing humans to animals, she argues a need for humans, like animals, to settle on their natural abilities. "But a horse who knows nothing of grammar isn't unhappy, and a foolish man is not unfortunate, because this is in keeping with his nature" (50). Her argument states that nature gives mankind what it needs to live a happy life. Nature does not give humankind wisdom, and therefore wisdom produces

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unhappiness. However, Folly contradicts herself when she claims that “nature hates any counterfeit and everything turns out much more happily when it’s unspoiled by artifice” (53). Earlier, Folly compares life to a play, or a type of artifice, with no depth underneath the one dimensional surface. These two interpretations of nature’s wishes confuse her argument. Plato, however, believes that nature blesses humankind with an intricate and complicated world, and people like Folly live in shadows of artifice, which cover up nature’s requests for the pursuit of knowledge. Plato’s understanding with nature involves eliminating the shadows and illusions through a process of enlightenment. Plato’s view of enlightenment involves a reconciliation and understanding with nature, not an opposition. The sight of the prisoners, or actors, represents an imprisoned material world. The firelight corresponds with “the light of the sun” (Plato 244) which brightens and illumines the world to new areas of study. Moreover, the “minds ascent to the intelligible realm” equals the “sight of the things on the surface of the earth” (244). Folly uses Plato’s arguments to advocate how nature purposefully limits understanding. Plato feels that nature forms these dual worlds to increase possibilities for the human condition rather than impose limitations. In addition, people like Folly refuse to appreciate the natural boundlessness of the world and this fetters mankind’s natural state away from “the light of the sun.” Another way in which Folly misconstrues the two accounts relates to their respective views on wisdom and its role in life’s progression: Then follows adolescence, which everyone finds delightful... youth has so little wisdom and so few frowns...as soon as the young grow up and develop the sort of mature sense which comes through experience and education, the bloom of youthful beauty begins to fade at once... (then) old

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age with its troubles, unwelcome to others but just as much to itself (Erasmus 22). Folly explains that in the cycle of life, wisdom ages the physical body and spirit until it becomes “witless” in old age before reverting back to a childhood mentality. Her description of these changes brought upon by wisdom upsets a common impression about maturity. Folly equates the acquisition of wisdom with a mental decline into immaturity. The mature children and dying elderly conform to Folly's idea of nature. On the other hand, the adult population strays from nature's acceptable, limited knowledge into an unfulfilling state like immaturity. “But if mortals would henceforth have no truck with wisdom...there would be no more old age and they could be happy enjoying eternal youth” (24). While Folly argues about unnecessary wisdom, Plato believes that wisdom is essential. According to Plato, without wisdom, humans never leave their prison cell. “People who've traveled there don't want to engage in human business: there's nowhere else their minds would ever rather be than in the upper region” (Plato 244). In Plato's life journey to wisdom, man finds fulfillment and substance as he progresses. The children and elderly represent happiness to Folly, yet they are useless to Plato. His allegory admits that life and the pursuit of knowledge involves “pain and distress” (242) yet the incorporation of wisdom into life transports one to a transcendental universe without material pain. Folly however, cares more about physical comfort through the reduction of pain and the increase in tranquility than mental accomplishment. Plato describes this world of the soul as “goodness [...] [that] leads one to deduce that it is responsible for everything that is right and fine, whatever the circumstances [...] progenitor of light [...] source and provider of truth and knowledge” (242). Plato's understanding of the human

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world as misery and the divine world as happiness contrasts with Folly's understanding of life. Erasmus' interpretation of Plato mediates between the two accounts, and he finds reconciliation between the privilege of wisdom and the assurance of tranquility. Erasmus provides both an ironic and sincere interpretation of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." First of all, the ironic outlook on the world occurs in Folly's voice, not that of Erasmus: What difference is there, do you think, between those in Plato's cave who can marvel at the shadows and images of various objects, provided they are content and don't know what they miss, and the philosopher who has emerged from the cave and sees the real things? (Erasmus 72). In the text, Erasmus means for Folly's lecture to be confusing, ridiculous, and at times unjustified. This quote from Folly emphasizes the extent to which Erasmus allows her to misread a text. She admits to the existence of two worlds, the natural and unnatural, yet she ignores their differences. The evidence of contentment contradicts earlier passages where she balances the dual world based on an uneven amount of happiness. In addition, she warns readers that the pursuit of truth leads to the removal of tranquility. This invites readers to seek out answers and doubt Folly's message of truth. But Erasmus also displays a sincere side of Folly as he implements his opinions into her speech: "Philosophers [...] insist that they alone have wisdom and all other mortals are but fleeting shadows" (Erasmus 84). Erasmus struggles with the attitudes of philosophers more than their ideas. He creates Folly as a compromise between conceit and humility. He moves away from the stereotype of the arrogant philosopher. Folly's criticism of those philosophers who ignore "human business" (Plato 244) shows Erasmus' concern for an intellectual midpoint which allows the ascent into Plato's immaterial realm without the arrogant

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transition. Finally, Erasmus unifies Folly and Plato's accounts of the "Allegory of the Cave" at the end of the text. Folly is converted from a rejecter of Platonic philosophy into a proponent. Erasmus reconciles the two ideas, pointing out that both Plato and Folly have correct, although different, opinions of the world: The happiness which Christians seek with so many labours is nothing other than a certain kind of madness and folly. Don't be put off by the words, but consider the reality. In the first place, Christians come very near to agreeing with the Platonists that the soul is stifled and bound down by the fetters of the body, which by its gross matter prevents the soul from being able to contemplate and enjoy things as they truly are... Undoubtedly this happens because the mind is beginning to free itself from contamination by the body and exercise its true natural power (Erasmus 128). Erasmus advocates the idea of Platonic enlightenment using the example of Christianity as a reason to escape the cave. The childish believer remains "stifled and bound." When they question their faith, they develop personal convictions and a stronger argument for their faith. Erasmus, through the voice of Folly, notices that men on their death bed are divinely inspired through this enlightened realm, a complete change from the earlier belief about the superficial state of dying. This statement accepts Plato's view while the next quote accepts Folly's view. And so we have a situation which I think is not unlike the one in the myth of Plato...This man who has gained understanding pities his companions and deplores their insanity, which confines them to such an illusion, but they in their turn laugh at him as if he were crazy and turn him out. In the same way, the common herd of men feels admiration only for the things of the body and believes that these alone exist, whereas the pious scorn whatever concerns the body and are

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wholly uplifted towards the contemplation of invisible things (Erasmus 129). Folly recognizes that Christianity relies on blind faith and illusions. In Plato's cave, man is blind to worldly things and seeks a contemplative life, where he worships intangible ideas. The illusion of Christian belief incorporates Plato's view of the divine realm of knowledge as well as the importance of maintaining Folly's illusions. The character Folly represents someone whose " eyes become confused in two ways, as a result of two different sets of circumstances: it can happen in the transition from light to darkness, and also in the transition from darkness to light" (Plato 244). Folly begins her lecture as a prisoner who will " grab hold of anyone who tried to set them free...and kill them" (244). This places Folly in the category of " relative ignorance" according to Plato. Her contradictions and obvious shift in opinion indicates that Folly enters a position on the brink of light. The confusion in her speech is only her adjustment period between ignorance and enlightenment. Therefore, Erasmus' Praise of Folly can be read as a similar allegory where Folly begins as a prisoner unable to have " intelligent conduct either of one's own private affairs or of public business," (244) and changes to a more enlightened individual as she gradually escapes her cave and adjusts to new vision in the light. Erasmus intends for the readers to challenge Folly's statements in his Praise of Folly. He uses Plato's " Allegory of the Cave" as an example of how interpretations vary. Erasmus, above all else, values the idea of questioning others' beliefs. Erasmus also demonstrates that in some cases, two separate beliefs can coexist. This applies to the way Sixteenth Century humanists translate ancient texts, like Plato, and find potential danger in their philosophical wisdom. Praise of Folly promotes a message of unification between modern and ancient

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