

Platos cave analysis



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Imagine a subterranean cave in which humans are shackled by their necks to a single place. They have been held there all of their lives. Fires placed behind the group by unseen forces have left these prisoners to see their own shadows play upon a screen. Those held are not even aware that the images and shadows that they see are themselves. Yet, these shadows hold sway; the prisoners are fascinated. The illusion so effective, that the prisoners do not recognize their imprisonment and are satisfied to live their lives in this way. What would happen if one of these prisoners would be set free? The prisoner would be helpless, his eyes would be overloaded, and he could not stand up on his own. Inundated with sensory information, his mind would refuse to accept what the senses were submitting as true. It would not be surprising if anyone released from such a prison would wish to stay. Stay with the known. Stay with what is comfortable. Not for our prisoner though. Our prisoner, forced to turn away from the fire, begins a long uncomfortable journey through a tunnel toward a blinding light coaxed by the liberator toward the uncomfortable. The light is blinding. Finally emerging from the cave, eyes burning, senses raging, the prisoner soon finds a new, unimaginable world. No longer fascinated by shadow, the prisoner is free to learn about the world, and more importantly, themselves. This paper will explore how this story has been translated to modern audiences through the film, *The Matrix* (Wachowski Bros 1999).

Plato's cave myth has been a wonderful allegory for the quest for knowledge for 2,400 years. Plato published this cave myth in *The Republic*; the allegory of the cave is arguably the most famous section of this work. What may come as a surprise to many is that there are parallels to the cave myth in

many of today's contemporary stories. One of which, is the tale of Neo in The Matrix (Wachowski Bros 1999). Who can forget the image when Neo wakes to find himself bound in a tube, he struggles free, released from his prison, he is made to grasp the truth of his life and the world. He finds that all of his life up to that point has been an elaborate illusion created for him to hide him from the fact that he been held prisoner his entire life. This paper will show that both of these stories reflect a Socratic search for knowledge and a deeper understanding of the good.

The myth of the cave is an allegory in which we follow our prisoner on his quest for what Socrates, Plato's teacher, referred to as " the just life" (Plato: The Republic). Socrates primary concern was that our souls be in the best condition possible (Plato: Phaedo). The way in which this is accomplished is through examination and questioning one's place within the world. The cave myth gives a literary account of the Socratic Method, as well an example as to the logic and approach of Socrates relentless questioning. In this way, we have a view into Socrates methodology, and furthermore, into Socrates' notion for " care of the soul" (Plato: Phaedo). Socrates' care of the soul is comprised of these four elements: beliefs in meaning, admission of ignorance, questioning of reality, and hope in an answer, or to put it another way, trust in the knowledge of the good (Plato: Phaedo). On this subject of care of the soul, there is a deep comparability between The Matrix (Wachowski Bros 1999)and Plato's allegory (Plato: The Republic).

We can make a closer examination into the comparison between Neo and our prisoner on his quest for the care of the soul. 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. Using the ideas of care of the soul, we are asked to examine belief in meaning. Saying this differently we are asked to believe what we hold to be true. The prisoners can differentiate shadows and sounds, apply names to the shadows depicting things and even discern the patterns in their presentation. To this extent, they have some true beliefs and some false assumptions, but before the discussion regresses into a metaphysical exercise; whether or not a thing is a thing because we name it so, or whether or not the thing has its own inherent "thingness" it is safe to say that we can all hold some things to be true. However, there are things that are mysterious to all in the case of the cave and in The Matrix. In both stories, there is omnipresent image of the unseen hand at work; those who are responsible for the structure of the cave and the world in which the matrix exists. In an online posting, John Partridge, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Wheaton College, explores the correlation between these two stories. He suggests that,

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 (Partridge)?

It is only through the understanding and realization that there is an unseen hand, or truths with which we had been oblivious, that we can fully come to learn the truth. For the prisoner, it is through his release that he comes to realize that his notion of truth is skewed. For Neo, he had been suspicious of his reality for some time and seeks understanding. The fascinating thing for Neo is that when his situation comes to a head and he finally meets

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Morpheus, his liberator and teacher, he is informed that he cannot be told what is untrue, he must be shown. Interestingly, Neo is afforded a choice, the path of ignorance in the form of a blue pill or the path of knowledge in the form of a red pill. The taking of the red pill is an admission of ignorance. In this way, the notion of admission of ignorance is forced on him in the form of a choice. The prisoner and Neo are similar, they must be brought into the light of knowledge, and into the admission of their own ignorance. The similarities continue, they both share a common path to understanding that their notions of truth have been given to them and that reality itself is not what it seems.

Conversely, there are some differences between the two stories by way of the coming to admission of ignorance and the understanding of truth. Neo's path to understanding truth is one that starts out with him living comfortably with the sneaking suspicion that there is something not quite right with the world. His quest to understand what is wrong with the world leads him inexorably into a very dark and dystopian reality filled with conflict and misery. Their only purpose is as food for "the machines". Furthermore, it is a world with people forced underground. His quest literally leads him into the cave. By contrast, we have the story of the prisoner. The prisoner is released from bondage. He/She did not actively seek to understand their world or acquire new knowledge. He/She would have been just as happy watching shadows on the screen. The path to understanding may have been difficult and uncomfortable, but in the end, the prisoner is led to the "light" of knowledge, a utopian world within which the prisoner is now truly free. Neo, knowing what being a prisoner means, has his greatest fears realized when

he discovers that he has always been a slave and is now relegated to a fearful existence. The prisoner, on the other hand, comes to the realization of what being a prisoner means, and is delighted with his/her new life. Thus, we have the juxtaposition of the objective versus the subjective.

The next tenet of understanding Socrates' care of the soul is the questioning of reality. Released from the illusory world, our prisoner is lead down the path of understanding. Socrates states,

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 (Plato: The Republic)?

What would his reply be? He would be drawn into questioning everything after he now believes that he had been mystified all this time. This is where we would find Neo brought back into the matrix for training by Morpheus, again we have an inverse of realities but the aims are the same. The prisoner is coming to question and understand the real world. Neo is coming to question and understand the unreal world of the matrix. Now we are diving into the world of the metaphysical. Discerning whether we can determine reality in either of these two worlds is a real problem. Partridge states,

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 (Partridge).

This is a real problem for Neo; as we find after his kung fu training with Morpheus, when his teacher questions Neo's understanding of reality, " You believe your really breathing"? He is later told, coming upon a child bending spoons with his mind in Yuri Gellar fashion, that he will only come to understand the real nature of the matrix once he comes to understand that in the matrix, " there is no spoon" (The Matrix).

It seems as though the differences between the two tales on a metaphysical level does not inhibit them from sending a similar message. They both send the message of the unreliability of the epistemological information gathered through the senses. They stress a need to disconnect from the senses in order to attain genuine knowledge. The stories also wonderfully illustrate the psychological hardship that is placed on the characters having to do so.

Thus, the question, by what means does Neo come to discover hope in an answer or trust in his knowledge of the good. For our prisoner, the question is answered very succinctly,

Last of 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... Clearly, he said, he would first see the sun and then reason about him (Plato: The Republic).

For Neo hope in answer comes in a much more personal form. After many trials, the film climaxes with Neo coming to grips with the fact that he has been The One all along. Coaxed into questioning his reality by Morpheus, he is left to follow the path of self-realization on his own. In this way, he can develop his own " care of the soul." He overcame the introduction of self-

doubt in the form of the oracle. He overcame the overpowering force of the agents to become reborn, phoenix like, to the understanding of himself. This revelation would prove to be extremely transformative. Clearly, he has come to grips with his knowledge and belief in the good. Partridge claims, " There is a single item the knowledge of which makes the knower more integrated and more powerful, and for Neo it is self-knowledge." The same message holds true for our prisoner. It is through the knowing of the true self, which causes the prisoner to become productive, a savior of himself and others. After the prisoners' revelation of the good, his first thoughts are of the others in the cave. They both have come to know of Socrates primary concern of care of the soul, trust in the knowledge of the good.

Finally, we look to ourselves concerning what these stories tell us. It is the path of knowledge that is placed before us and the stakes are for the care of the soul. For Neo, his quest was to take him through the trials and hardships of self-realization that he would have to endure so that he might come to know for himself that he was indeed The One. Our prisoner's quest mirrors this. Ultimately, we are drawn to Socratic questions; in what ways are we living diminished lives? Are we resting on our own ideas of knowledge? Are we even asking the right questions? It is through the stinging realization of our own ignorance that we are finally able to start our own paths toward the understanding of the good. Plato makes it plain when he uses Socrates to tell us that we are all prisoners in the cave. If any doubt this, recall the position we are in when go to see movies such as The Matrix itself. Imagine a dark world filled with people watching shadows on a screen...