

# Plato's allegory of the cave and advertisements

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Julian Figueroa (#30973127) 1 An Allegory of Advertisements How does Plato's allegory influence the way we consume art today? Every minute of every day, millions of people are exposed to advertisements. They plague televisions, streets, radio waves, and all means of communication. These advertisements employ many methods of persuasion and their influence is irresistible. Just like prisoners in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, we are told every day to invest our time and interest into the subject of these advertisements, and to accept the forms of reality they serve us.

Whether it be a commercial for a must-have new car, to a spot featuring desirable fast food, or to magazines with photoshopped models; we are seduced to accept these false forms of reality. In actuality, the car is hardly distinguishable from models in the years past, the food is not near as glossy and fresh as the commercial depicts, and the bodies of models have unfeasible proportions. Like the prisoners in the cave, we still accept these forms to be reality, even though they are imitations and falsities of their actual subjects.

Puppeteers, like prisoners, are still within the boundaries of the cave, and some believe in their imitations whilst others know the falsehood they are presenting; just like advertisers of today. Even philosopher-kings must be part of the cave in certain ways, as they contribute their own forms of imitation to the prisoners, akin to puppeteers. The Allegory of the Cave has an abundance of meaning to our generation and future generations to come, as the themes and elements it contains relate directly to our society's consumption and production of promotional media.

In Plato's allegory, several metaphors are summoned to illustrate the effect of education on the soul. The allegory starts with the description of a cave; a place containing prisoners, shadows, puppeteers and fire. The prisoners are bound to look at the shadows, cast upon the wall by the fire and the objects utilized by the puppeteers. There is an exit to the cave, which is illuminated by the light from the sun outside. The outside represents true knowledge whereas the inside of the cave represents ignorance; a reality other than the truth.

Plato considers the puppeteers to essentially be artists; using their creations to depict a false reality for the prisoners. However, those who free themselves from the cave are the only ones who can realize true form. Those who do this are labeled as the philosophers. For the purposes of this essay, only the aspects of art and art interpretation in the allegory are important. What makes the allegory decisive in comparing it to our consumer-producer society is that the metaphors Plato uses directly correlate to the mantras of advertising.

Notwithstanding, for any of this argument to be relatable to Plato's allegory, which primarily focuses on artists and their creations, one must first know what makes promotional media a form of artistic expression. Let us assume Plato's definition; that art is a poor imitation of reality. He views the creators of art, or as he sees them, imitators "by nature third from the king and the truth" (Republic, 597e). Artists in publicity take this notion and exaggerate it to the furthest degree. For instance, what makes us want a Burger King burger over any other local burger joint product?

The answer to that is clear; advertising. Without its advertising in mass, one wouldn't be able to distinguish a Burger King product over any other competitor's. On the contrary, we are drawn towards their burgers because of their glorious depictions in media. From passing the giant billboards of luscious burgers, to seeing a family enjoy them on a television commercial; we are told to believe that these titillating combinations of veggies and protein are absolutely marvelous. These advertisements are nothing but mere deceptions of reality.

The billboards show us enlarged, crisp patties and fresh vegetables, when in reality, there is no guarantee of such a thing. Therefore they are what Plato defines as art; imitations of reality. Another example would be political commercials, which skew the truth in a variety of ways. From showing an out of context quote from their opponents, to showing themselves speak to a crowd with uplifting music in the background, politicians use the art of media to manipulate the public from seeing the truth. Advertising is a very sharp form of communication from puppeteer to prisoner; and it directly relates to Plato's allegory.

Most of us accept these false forms of reality regardless. Millions of people watch misleading commercials for a product, but they still purchase it in the end. Millions of people knowingly vote for politicians who offer false promises and deceptions, but they still return to vote for the same people in future elections. Like the repetitious cycle of puppeteers feeding prisoners art in the allegory, Julian Figueroa (#30973127) 3 consumers of today lust for producers to fill their fair supply as well. So how do we exit this cycle? Through education and enlightenment.

Plato believes that any ruler of men must pursue in “ calculation, geometry, and all the preliminary education required for dialectic” (536d). He also believes that “ no free person should learn anything like a slave. ” (536e). Therefore, one must exercise in their own free will to truly become educated. Plato believes that to be truly educated, one must question and study the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence. By doing this, along with decades of physical training, mathematical science, dialectic training, and political discovery, one then becomes a philosopher-king; the third human element in the allegory of the Cave.

However, unlike the puppeteers and the prisoners, the philosopher-kings reside outside the cave, and they harness the ability to see true forms, not mere shadows. So if we live in a society of art production and art consumption, who are the modern day philosopher-kings? There is no simple answer to that question, and this is where Plato's allegory begins to cave in on itself (pun intended). Plato is a philosopher himself, and by channelling his ideas through Socrates in *The Republic*, he creates a forum. Socrates starts the allegory of the Cave with the word “ imagine” (514a).

The definition of the term “ imagine” is to believe something unreal or untrue to exist. Therefore, Socrates is envisioning an imitation of reality with his allegory, making him an artist. Based on his definitions, Socrates (and therefore Plato) dips his feet back into the cave. If all philosophers followed the same methods of Plato, in terms of creating art forms of philosophy, doesn't that mean that we are all either puppeteers and/or prisoners? If, in conclusion, philosophers subject their knowledge in an understandable

format to puppeteers and prisoners, they are essentially creating art; which means nobody is truly free from the cave.

Yet, to generalize philosophers exactly as puppeteers would also be incorrect, contrary to the Allegory. As discussed previously, philosophers only dabble in the art of imitation. This does not make them true puppeteers. Whereas philosophers are able to educate without false forms of reality, true puppeteers are only showing imitation. So what forms do puppeteers accept to be true? Imitation or reality? Relating back to the "Burger King Theory", do the Julian Figueroa (#30973127) 4 puppeteers knowingly accept their imitations?

Most likely not, as they are aware of the flaws in their advertisement. If a Burger King representative accepted their imitations as reality, they would probably be tempted to eat burgers everyday and eventually die from malnutrition or diabetes. Rather, these representatives are still true puppeteers and are therefore still in the dark among the prisoners. So what reality is accepted from the puppeteers? If we look at the representatives of, say Ford, for example's sake, we find that they reject their own imitations of reality, or art, but that they still consume in similar ways to prisoners.

A representative of Ford may make the commercials for the newest model of truck, but does that dictate that they necessarily drive one? Not at all. At the same time, it is not an impossibility either, and their experience as an advertiser, or artist, may even lead them into believing that it is necessary to buy the newest model every year. After all, they are surrounded with their advertisements constantly, influencing them even more so than a consumer, so couldn't they eventually accept them to be correct?

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Unless one becomes a monk and sanctions themselves completely away from society, which Plato would most likely condemn, one will always be a target of advertisements. Therefore puppeteers must be partially prisoners in that regard, as they will fall target to other puppeteer's or even their own shadow imagery. This concept works symbiotically with the notion that philosophers are partially puppeteers; as Plato concedes to enjoying the influence of children's tales on youth, stating that mothers " will shape their children's souls with stories much more than they shape their bodies by handling them. " (377c).

He openly admits to enjoying some forms of art, and accepting them even if they " are false, on the whole, though they have some truth to them. " (377a). Hence, he is also as prisoner in that regard, akin to a puppeteer. This draws yet another parallel to art consumption in our modern day society; even a philosopher in our day and age must appreciate certain things to survive, and may be drawn towards imitation of reality through advertisement; car commercials, food spots, or anything. With the acceptance of this concept, the consequence is that everyone in our modern society still resides at least somewhat within the boundaries of the Cave.

Is this not true? Can anyone truly claim in this era that they are free from advertisements? Julian Figueroa (#30973127) 5 Can we go one day without seeing a commercial and not remotely showing interest, even in our subconscious? In some countries around the world, it is not even an option to reject an imitation of reality. For example, citizens of Australia are forced by law to vote, and in that sense, it is impossible not to be persuaded by inevitably deceptive political advertisements. The relation of things such as

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politics, billboards for burgers, and car commercials to the allegory of the Cave is certainly an odd concept to comprehend.

Nevertheless, it proves that many of forms of misleading advertising can harken back to the shadows created by the backlit fire and sculptures in Book VII of Plato's Republic. Society has always revolved around art producers and art consumers, just like the puppeteers and prisoners in the cave. Advertising and its respective forms encompass many lessons that we have learned from Plato's allegory, and perhaps one day humanity will recognize the seemingly inescapable cycle of art production and consumption we are all enveloped in.

Only then can we fathom escaping the cave and becoming true philosophers, by having the ability to distinguish imitation from actuality. In conclusion, it is safe to say that there are major implications of the allegory of the Cave on advertisements in our modern society, and thus Plato's piece will continue to be purposeful for such media centuries to come. Texts: Plato. Republic. Trans. G. M. A Grube. Indianapolis, USA: Hackett Publishing, 1992. Print.