

Plato's Women: Postmodern Pitfalls.

By Katerina Baitinger

The Socratic philosophic corpus champions two principal ideas: (1) virtue is knowledge, and (2) the dialectical method of attaining knowledge is argument-counter-argument-resolution. Plato, through his writings, upholds a triadic structure of knowledge: (1) *epistémē* (encompassing facts through the knowledge of *Forms*); (2) *áгноia* (including false belief and ignorance); and (3) *doxa* (neither fact nor figment but rather pure knowledge). That is to say, in the heart of the *Theory of Forms* lies absolute and true meaning, and certainly absolute and true knowledge. According to Plato, only the *Philosopher-Ruler* is able to lead his followers to true meaning, absolute knowledge, and, ultimately, authenticity. In addition, only the *Philosopher-Ruler* is able to combine just political power and true wisdom. The consequence is not only that philosophers would make the best leaders based on the aforementioned ideas, but also that men or women who are inclined by nature to study and understand philosophy, including the *Theory of Forms*, may join the ranks of *Philosopher-Rulers*. In other words, in Plato's ideal society, women would flourish based on their nature rather than their sex (see *Republic*, Book V, 453b-458e).

Plato begins the *Republic* with a complex question: "What Is Justice?" The unfolding of a theoretical ideal political system, community, and proper education for its citizens then follows. The theory of knowledge, as it develops in the *Republic*, is offered by Plato in the form of an allegory: the *Allegory of the Cave* (*Republic*, Book VII, 514a-519b). Plato maintains that there are two levels of awareness and very clearly distinguishes between the two: mere opinion and pure knowledge. Claims or assertions about the physical or visible world, including both common sense observations and scientific theories are only opinions. Some of these opinions may be well founded; some may be faulty. Neither, however, is to be considered pure knowledge. Only *Reason* which exists in higher levels of awareness yields pure knowledge; only *Reason* when suitably realized may result in undeniable intellectual insight. This is where the abiding universals lie and shape the eternal *Forms* that constitute the real world. Consequently, it

is no coincidence that the *Allegory of the Cave* appears in the very work that proclaims female equality. In the unfolding of the Allegory both “men and women are chained, and both must find their way into the light of true Being and true knowledge” (Bluestone, 1987, 146).

The *Allegory of the Cave* is also used to demonstrate Socrates’s *Theory of Forms* (*Republic*, Book VI, 509d-511e): the notion that the whole being is made up of a visible and an intelligible “realm” (not what we conceive as our world). As a result, the allegory delineates the process by which we are inspired to rise from obscure knowledge (not well defined knowledge) of the visible realm through our senses, to the clearer knowledge of the intelligible realm through the use of reason (syllogismós).

Plato, in Book VII of the *Republic*, prompts the reader to imagine how life would be in a dark cave, where men and women have been confined since childhood, cut off from the outside world. Within the confines of that cave, men and women are chained by the legs and neck in such a way that they cannot see in any other direction but straight ahead. The only visual stimulus for the prisoners in the cave unfolds on a short wall situated directly in front of them. On that wall which assumes the function of a screen, a projected “show” takes place; it is similar to a puppet show—Shadow Theater. There are people involved whose job is to cast certain images on the wall of the cave that appear to the prisoners in the form of shadows. There is a fire burning in the back of the cave that the prisoners are not able to see. This accentuates the effect of the dark shadows in front of them. Plato prompts his readers to imagine that this is all the men and women, who are the prisoners and inhabitants of the cave, understand and experience as reality. They know nothing else (*Republic*, Book VII, 514a-b).

Suddenly, one of the prisoners is freed from the chains and forced, having been grabbed by the neck, exits the cave and sees the outside world, for the first time (what we consider the “real” world). At first, the prisoner is obviously confused; then there is a certain manifestation of disbelief. It is difficult, to say the least, for the ex-prisoner to accept that life inside the cave was an illusion and that the artificial images which were thought of as the real thing were, in fact, untrue and unreal. In other words, what appears to be true, is clearly not so (*Republic*, Book VII,

515c-d).

It is not surprising that Plato's ex-prisoner returns to the cave and tries to enlighten the rest of the prisoners by acquainting them with his newly acquired knowledge pertaining to the "real" world outside of the cave. Certainly, this jeopardizes the ex-prisoner's security and may even put her life in danger (*Republic*, Book VII, 517a). This is precisely because the people in the cave have not previously been introduced to the *Theory of Forms*; as a result, they have a very skewed interpretation of reality, based only on their personal observations. For instance, suppose that one of the shadows passing in front of the prisoners is that of a scroll. If the prisoners were allowed to communicate, one might say to another, "I see a scroll marching in front of me." The question is, however, does she see a scroll or an image of a scroll as it appears in its shadowy form? Regardless of the answer, she did use the word scroll. Why did she do that? The explanation lies in Book VII of the *Republic*. In 515b (*Republic*, Book VII), Socrates raises a valid question and perhaps an analysis of the *Theory of Forms* as related to the *Allegory of the Cave*. "If they could converse with each other, do you not think that they would consider that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them?" Hence if a prisoner says, "That is a scroll," she thinks that the word "scroll" refers to the very thing appearing straightforward. Obviously, what Plato attempts to establish is that the prisoner will be wrong in assuming this because she is looking at the mere shadow of the item. The prisoner cannot see the real referent of the word "scroll." In order to see it, she must turn to face the item itself, and that is not possible. According to Plato, and various linguists, general terms in language models are not names (signifiers) of the physical objects (signified) that we see. They are actually names of things that we cannot see, things that we can only grasp with the mind, hence the arbitrary nature of assigning names to items living or not. (The words dog or cat, for example, come to mind. What is it about dog quality or dogness incorporated in the word dog that gives its name to the four-legged creature?)

Consequently, in both Plato and Aristotle, mimesis is the relationship between reality and representation. Aristotle, on the one hand, conveys the positive notion of mimesis, whereas

Plato, on the other hand, conveys the negative notion of mimesis. In fact, Serena Anderlini-Onofrio explains,

Plato established an essentialist, negative notion of mimesis which presupposes that universals pre-exist particulars (the general precedes the specific, as we moderns would say). For Plato, cultural endeavors that imitate what is sensible were copies; hence they were one more step removed from perennial essences than the sensible world. Therefore, for Plato, mimesis, which is the art of making likeness of the objects that nature offers for observation, only threatens the purity of the perennial essences—the immutable ideas of which the shadows in the cave are a mere reflection. (Anderlini-Onofrio 1999, 160)

If and when the prisoners are released, after much pain and resistance, they are able to turn their heads and see the real objects. Socrates creates an analogy based on the prisoners' newly acquired ability to turn their heads and see the originators of the shadows: this action simply enables them to grasp the *Theory of Forms* with their minds. To put it in contemporary terms, we may acquire conceptual ideas because of our perceptual experience of physical objects, but we would be mistaken if we would think that the concepts we grasp are on the same level as the things we perceive.

Thus far, the majority of Feminist Literary Theorists have concluded that Plato uses the *Allegory of the Cave* as a metaphor for the womb. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for one thing, in their acclaimed book, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, maintain that Plato's cave is "a female place, a womb-shaped enclosure, a house of earth, secret and often sacred" (1979, 93). "To this shrine," they continue, "the initiate comes to hear the voices of darkness, the wisdom of inwardness" (1979, 93). They go on to say that "the womb-shaped cave is also the place of female power, the *umbilicus mundi*, one of the great antechambers of the mysteries of transformation and that women trapped in the cave might seem to have metaphorical access to the dark knowledge buried in there" (1979, 95).

Additionally, Luce Irigaray, in her book, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, also prompts her reader to look at the *Allegory of the Cave* as "a metaphor of inner space, of the den, the womb or *hystera*, sometimes of the earth . . ." (1985, 243). She goes on to admit, however, that to look at

it as such is “strictly speaking, impossible” (1985, 243). She claims that all the words used by Plato to describe and identify the cave can be seen in the light of the word *hystera*. In other words, she says that the cave where men (she insists that the prisoners are men) with unspecified sex, live, is shaped like a cave or a womb (1987, 243). However, the noun *anthropos*, in Greek does not refer to “man, sex unspecified” as Irigaray would like us to believe. The word actually means neither man nor woman, but rather human being. Irigaray goes on to say,

The entrance to the cave takes the form of a long passage, corridor, neck, conduit, leading upward, toward the light or the *sight of day*, and the whole of the cave is oriented in relation to this opening. Upward—this notation indicates from the very start that the Platonic cave functions as an attempt to give an orientation to the reproduction and representation of something that is always already there in the den. The orientation functions by turning everything over, by reversing, and by pivoting around axes of symmetry. From high to low, from low to high, from back to front, from anterior to opposite, but in all cases from a point of view in front of or behind something in this cave, situated in the back. *Symmetry plays a decisive part here*—as projection, reflection, inversion, retroversion—and you will always already have lost your bearings as soon as you set foot in the cave; it will turn your head, set you walking on your hands, though Socrates never breathes a word about the whole mystification, of course. This theatrical trick is unavoidable if you are to enter into the functioning of representation. (1985, 244)

Irigaray emphasizes that the most important aspect of Plato’s allegory has to do with the passage from the cave upward as a “phallic progression” (1985, 247). She claims that the “neck, passage, conduit, that has been obliterated and forgotten, can be nothing but the one, the same, penis. Simply *turned inside out . . .*” (1985, 248). Note that the occupants of the cave are “always already,” to borrow Irigaray’s term, men. After she goes on to say that the function of the cave is a copy of a copy, she concludes that the entire Socratic dialectic is contained in the following idea: “Nothing can be named as ‘beings’ except those same things which all the same men see in the same way in a setup that does not allow them to see other things and which they will designate by the same names, on the basis of the conversation between them” (1985, 263). This idea is overreaching, especially if it were held up to the light of the former analysis based on the Platonic idea of the *Allegory of the Cave*.

There is something to be said, however, about Irigaray’s insistence that the occupants of

the cave are male, “sex unknown,” for she claims that inevitably they must be linked to the mother. “It is only after resistance and pain that the man be set on his feet in the cave and will begin to walk around it . . .” (1985, 258). On the one hand, one cannot help but wonder what happened to women in Irigaray’s cave, and, on the other, it doesn’t come as a surprise that she likens the coming out of the cave to the birthing process. According to her, when the man is, finally, out of the cave, he symbolically exits the womb. Perhaps what Irigaray is trying to say may be that women simply are the cave. Although Plato clearly explains that the ex-cave inhabitant returns to the cave, Irigaray believes that the ex-cave inhabitant’s departure is a one-way path with no return. Hence, the men will not be able to “turn back toward the mother.” However, they will act “as if it were possible to turn the scene of the womb or at least *its representation* back/over. As one might turn a purse, or a pocket, or a string bag, or even a wallet inside out” (1985, 284). Clearly, these are negative connotations to daylight, unconcealment, and truth. That is to say, since Irigaray associates daylight, unconcealment, and truth with men, ideas traditionally positive and good become negative and, as a result, wrong. As far as Irigaray is concerned, this move is an “effective way to prevent anything from remaining concealed, buried, shrouded, to stop its hiding, lurking, staying under wraps, in reserve” (1985, 284). In order that one may learn the wisdom of the philosopher and be introduced to “views that are fairer, loftier, and more precise,” one must “cut off any remaining empirical relation with the womb” (1985, 293). This will make men “orphans of a simple, pure—and Identical—Origin. At best, hybrids” (1985, 293). Certainly, according to Irigaray, Plato espouses a misogynist, sexist idea: “[h]e who has never dwelled within the mother will always already have seen the light of day” (1985, 295).

According to Socrates, when certain truths are concealed, pure knowledge is suppressed and censorship is imposed. Philosophers do not flourish in such societies. After all, one cannot be a carpenter without hammer and nails. When all that human beings know comes to them in the form of a shadow theater, as impressions of spoon-fed knowledge on an imaginary wall, always concealed from the truth, how can they seek pure knowledge? Furthermore, even though some may find their way out of the cave because it may be increasingly difficult for them to live

the lie, it is impossible to convince the rest of the cave occupants to “see the light.” As a result, the enlightened find themselves back in the cave trying, to their dismay, to convince the others that their lives are an illusion.

Likewise, Simone De Beauvoir terms the *Myth of the Cave*, “The myth of the Androgynes (a man-woman, hermaphrodite)” (Liddell and Scott, 1987, 58). De Beauvoir claims that in Plato’s *Myth of the Cave*, “The organism of the male supposes that of the female. Man discovers woman in discovering his own sex, even if she is present neither in flesh and blood nor in imagery; and inversely it is in so far as she incarnates sexuality that woman is redoubtable” (1989, 161). Be that as it may, Plato’s *Myth of the Cave* has nothing to do with sexuality. Yet when, De Beauvoir restricts woman to her sex, she limits and categorizes feminist notions of equity. Moreover, her attempt to reterritorialize the term woman without first taking it through the concept of deterritorialization results in stereotyping. It may be true that men fear women’s sexuality, but that has nothing to do with Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*. Michel Foucault, in fact, maintains,

For a long time they tried to pin women to their sex. For centuries they were told: “You are nothing but your sex.” And this sex, doctors added, is fragile, almost always sick and always inducing illness. “You are man’s sickness.” And towards the 18th Century this ancient movement ran wild, ending in a pathologization of woman: the female body became a medical object *par excellence*. . . . (1988, 115)

Moreover, Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* is “[a]bout the seductiveness of appearances,” according to Susan Bordo and very befitting to today’s societal ideology. Bordo goes on to say,

For Plato, the artificial images cast on the wall of the cave are a metaphor for the world of sense perception. The illusion of the cave is not mistaking that the world—what we see, hear, taste, feel—for the Reality of enduring ideas, which can only be “seen” with the mind’s eye. For us, bedazzlement by created images is no metaphor; it is the actual condition of our lives. If we do not wish to remain prisoners of these images, we must recognize that they are not reality. But instead of moving closer to this recognition, we seem to be moving farther away from it, going deeper and deeper into the cave of illusion. (1997, 2)

Undeniably, the *Allegory of the Cave* has to do with human perception, and it is certainly

not antifeminist propaganda. Reaching inward for truth and wisdom is up to each and every human being. In fact, according to Plato, everyone has the capability to attain true knowledge regardless of his or her gender. Thus, through the use of the original texts, relying on authentic translations, one can easily decipher a deeper meaning in Plato's words. Was it all in jest? We may never know. Be it as it may, the Platonic corpus indicates that women should be treated with respect and given the same opportunities as men based on nature and not gender. Clearly Plato, in his *Republic*, argues that women ought to gain membership in the *philosopher-ruler* class and be chosen based on ability (nature) and not gender (Book V, 458c-e). Additionally, women in Plato's utopian polis may partake in what is considered traditionally male pursuits, such as education (music) and exercise (gymnastics), for he believes that there is an innate need in men and women to coexist happily, in a fortunate, prosperous (eudemon) city (Book V, 458d). After all, Plato manifestly proclaims: "Is there anything better for the city than to have the best possible man and women citizens" (Book V, 456e)? That is to say, encouraging men and women to pursue that in which they are able to excel, based on nature and not gender, will positively contribute to a thriving, flourishing society.

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

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