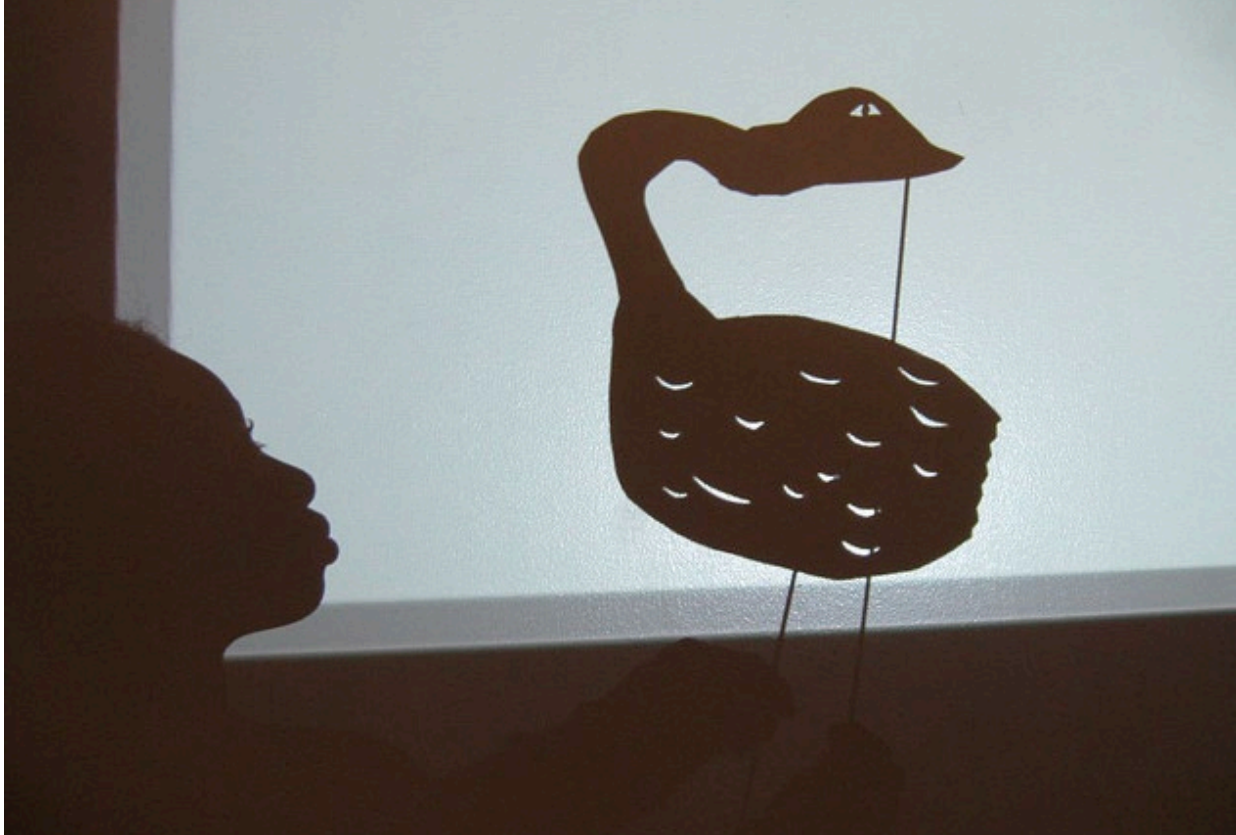
CINEMATIC SPELUNKING INSIDE PLATO'S CAVE

by Maureen Eckert

The Allegory of the Cave follows Socrates' presentations of the Analogy of the Sun and Divided Line in *The Republic* Book VI. These two earlier images illustrate the metaphysical status of the Good and the Ideas (aka "Forms") in relation to the familiar material world. These images present an inverted reality—that which we are most familiar with is the least real and cannot actually be known through sense experience. The Allegory of the Cave takes a further step, illuminating the manner in which we are condemned to live because we do not know what reality is. We are informed that the prisoners inside the cave, chained and unable to move or turn their heads, are "like us."[1] According to the allegory, we are all born into bondage, forced to stare at the back wall of the cave where we perceive the shadow-play cast upon it. We prisoners take these shadows and sounds to be reality, ignorant of the wall positioned behind us and a huge fire further behind it. Puppeteers (thaumatopoio) concealed on a path behind the wall are holding artifacts of all kinds and moving them, casting the shadows and voices that create the "reality" of the prisoners. As Socrates notes, "the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts."[2] Who are these puppet-masters in the Allegory of the Cave in *The Republic*? Plato gives no clue to their identity—at least not directly—in the presentation of the cave interior's structure.

Immediately after describing the features of the inside of the cave and the shadow-reality of the prisoners, Socrates discusses what would happen if one of the prisoners were to be released. He describes the prisoners escaping the chains, first becoming dazzled by the light of the fire, then confused as to the difference between the artifacts and their shadows. The prisoner would have to overcome the temptation of turning back to the more familiar, darker shadows. "And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough steep path, and didn't let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight," Socrates continues, "wouldn't he be pained and irritated at being treated that way?"[3] Progress out of the cave is painful in two stages. Freed from her chains,



"Shadow puppets," 2008. Image courtesy of flickr member, das_kaninchen.

the prisoner initially contends with the pain and confusion caused by the firelight and artifacts. Next, the prisoner contends with the experience of being forced out of the cave into real sunlight. The passage does not provide an analogy for the puppeteers—they move around freely inside the cave and are not, it seems, exactly "like us." So, who are they like?[4]

Over the years, students in my courses have noted that the Allegory of the Cave describes the experience of seeing movies. The cave and the prisoners inside it remind them of a darkened movie theater. The shadow-play fully engrossing the prisoners' attention seems like a film. In fact, Plato describes the wall behind which the puppeteers work as being "like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets."[5] Plato very much seems to employ the entertainment technology of his time to construct his allegory.[6, 7] Would Plato object to a little cinematic spelunking in his cave? It is hard to say, but I'd guess he'd approve of thinking through it as carefully as possible.

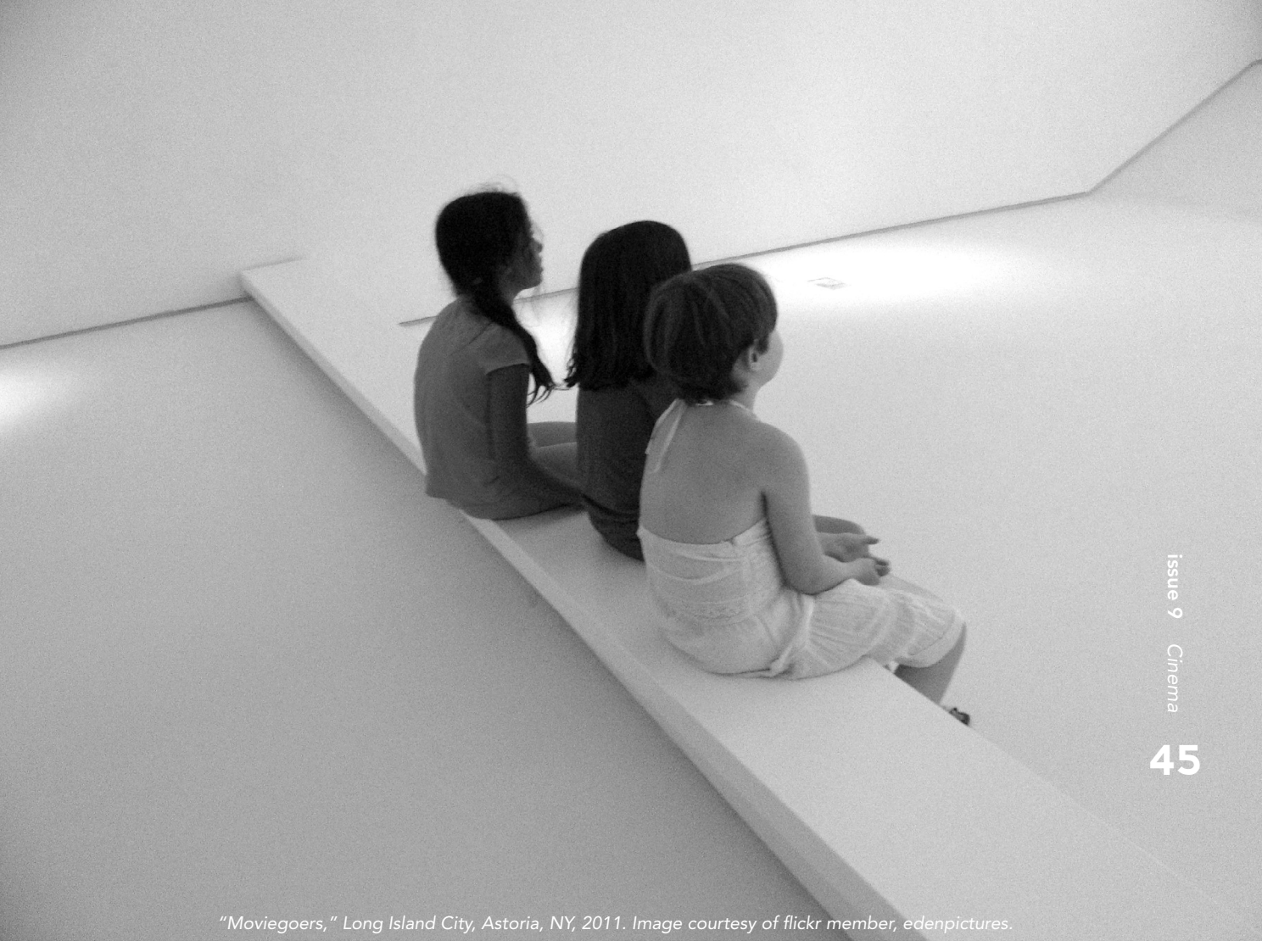
Let's start with an analogy. 1) Cave: Cinema Theater, 2) Shadow-play: Film, 3) Prisoners: Audience, and 4) Puppeteers: Directors. The puppeteers in Plato's Cave have a constructive role instead of a passive one. Like film directors, they re-present material artifacts and voices—sights and sounds—in a coherent presentation for the audience/prisoners. Individual things represented within films, like actors and locations, are part of the shadow-play and parallel the artifacts held up by the puppeteers. Directors, like the puppeteers, work behind the scenes.

Following this analogy, it is easier to notice that the prisoners, like any audience, need to accept the shadows as real. This may remind us of the function of the Matrix in the film, *The Matrix*. The puppeteers, whoever they are, are unknown to the prisoners. Like good film directors (or the Architect of *The Matrix* trilogy), their film must not disrupt the audience's suspension of disbelief. While the film runs, it must fully engross the viewers' attention—they must believe the reality presented. The fact that it is artifice needs to remain concealed. Achieving these ends requires something more than a random series of images and sounds. Socrates notes that if the prisoners could speak to one another, "they'd suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them."[8] This would require that the shadows and sounds are not presented as a confusing flux, but have an order and consistency. The shadow-play is thus directed coherently. The puppeteers are doing so. But what could be the script they follow?

NOT ONLY MUST THE SHADOW-PLAY BE COHERENT, IT MUST ALSO BE COMPREHENSIVE ... IT IS A VERY LONG SHOW, TO SAY THE LEAST.

At this point, the analogy between film and shadow-play may prove a bit inadequate. Not only must the shadow-play be coherent, it must also be comprehensive—like the Matrix within the film. The prisoners spend their entire lives inside the cave (unless set free). It is a very long show, to say the least. The film reels cannot be changed, nor can there be an intermission or a time to go back home to real life. Moreover, if different directors/puppeteers presented radically different shows, based upon incompatible premises, the seamless feel of reality would be jeopardized. Pigs cannot suddenly fly unless they do so all the time. To paraphrase Aristotle in the *Poetics*, coherence at the reality-building level of this narrative would require "consistent inconsistencies."[9]

So far, based on our set of analogies between Cinema and the Cave, we have discerned that the shadow-play that engrosses the prisoners inside the cave has some important scripted features: (1) Coherence; an order that enables prisoners to follow and potentially name artifacts in a believable reality, (2)



"Moviegoers," Long Island City, Astoria, NY, 2011. Image courtesy of flickr member, edenpictures.

Consistency; any features that could jeopardize suspension of disbelief must be regular enough so as not to do so and (3) Comprehensiveness; there is no outside of the shadow-play that is apparent to the prisoners.These three features of the shadow-play, if we are right, set up a challenge to some interpretations of the Allegory of the Cave. If the shadow-play and the puppeteers are interpreted too narrowly, as only representing politicians or only the Sophists, we lose facets of comprehensiveness, consistency and coherence. It would be better that the shadow-play and puppeteers represent a much more inclusive group, ideally one that could incorporate the politics at large of Athens in 5th century BCE and the Sophist intellectual movement.[10]

In my view it seems most likely that the puppeteers represent the poets and the script followed is the poly and theocentric worldview they sustain in their poetry. There is textual support for this notion. Hesiod, Homer, and the traditional poets' views of the gods are first attacked in Book II of *The Republic*. There, when constructing the first law of the ideal republic, the poets' notions that the gods shapeshift, deceive and can behave unjustly are

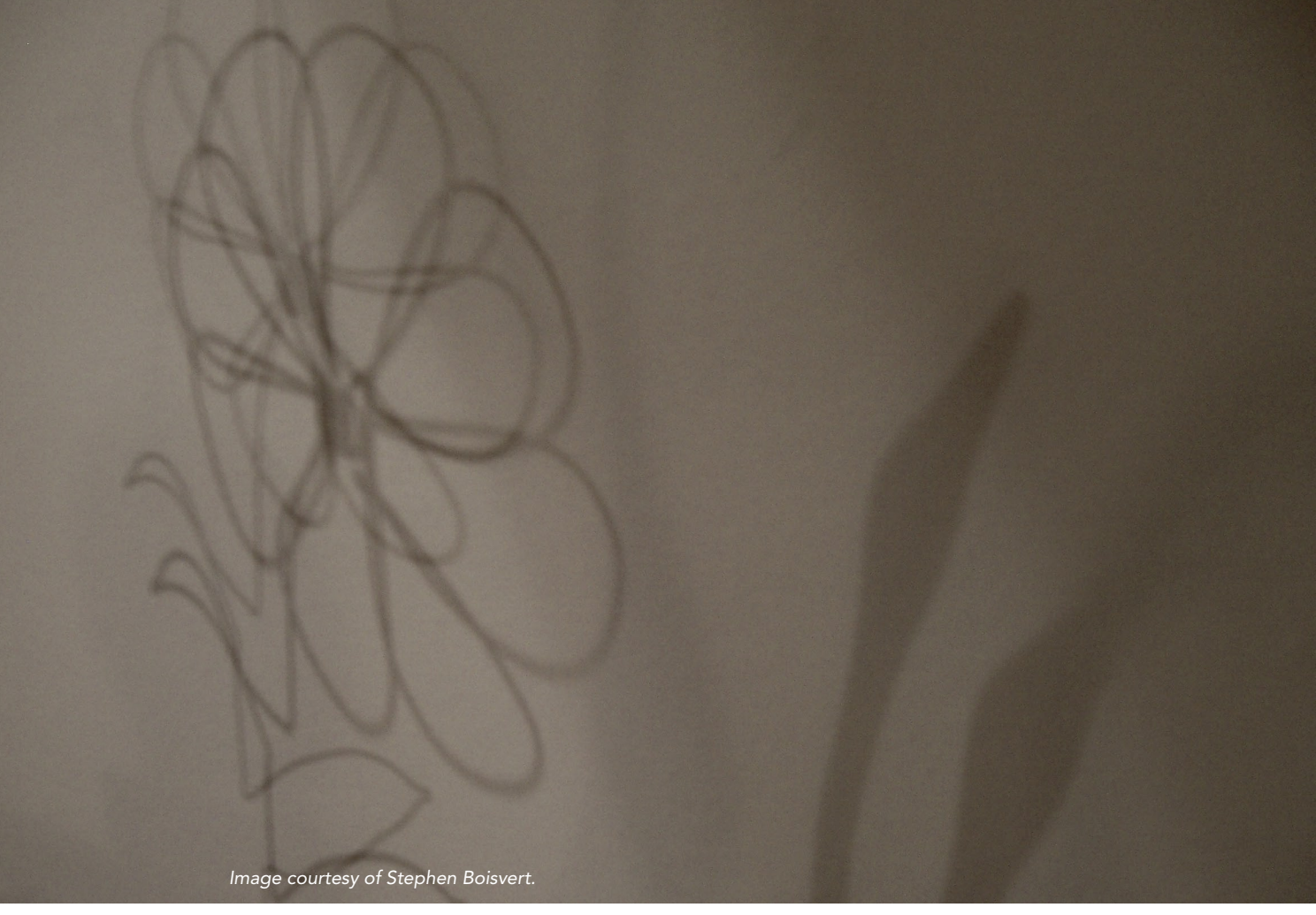


Image courtesy of Stephen Boisvert.

purged from the ideal society.[11] Later on, famously, in Book X, the poets are altogether purged from the ideal state. Their skill in representation—the crafting of images of the material world that is itself an image of the world of ideas—is too grave, seductive and dangerous a power.[12,13] To the extent that the poets' works represent a comprehensive and relatively coherent view, it seems that they would be good candidates for the script of the puppeteers. The puppeteers within this analogy are the poets. The theocentric worldview presented in the great works of ancient Greek poetry would be the script they follow.

The crucial thing to bear in mind is that the script of the poets is not a narrative in the typical sense, but rather a metaphysical view of the nature and structure of reality. Hesiod's *Theogony* is a creation account that lays out natural and divine order.[14] Hesiod's further writing, *Works* and *Days*, and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* present varied accounts of the relationships between gods and humans, and the setting for ethical values.[15,16,17] The shadow-play watched by the prisoners, if it follows this type of script, has the strength of being meaning-bestowing. That is to say, it is a type of narrative that generates an account of reality to be believed. Moreover, each individual artifact forming a piece of the show has a meaningful place within this type of narrative.

[THE POETS'] SKILL IN REPRESENTATION ...IS TOO GRAVE, SEDUCTIVE AND DANGEROUS A POWER

On this interpretation, the Allegory of the Cave still preserves the "three degrees from reality" problem that is described in *The Republic*, Book X, while maintaining connection with the Divided Line in *The Republic*, Book VI.[18] The shadow-play in the cave is this "third degree" representation, the artifacts, second degree, and the world outside the cave is the world of ideas.

The next thing to keep in mind is the image of the Divided Line preceding the Allegory of the Cave divides phenomenal experience into two distinct segments.[19] The lowest segment is that of images and reflections, which are grasped by the mind in imagination. The level above is that of artifacts and material entities which are grasped by belief (*pistis*—'belief' with a sense of trust). The shadow-play inside the cave represents phenomenal experience. The poets' accounts bestow meaning on the shadows that are reflections of the artifacts they manipulate. The consistency, coherence and comprehensiveness of their shadow-play causes the prisoners to remain enthralled in the shadow-play at the level of imagination, demonstrating three degrees from reality.

The script of the poets is quite compatible with the political life of Athens. The Athenian law against impiety went un-challenged, just as the Laws argue in the *Crito* that Socrates, himself, never challenged it.[20] Despite its democratic constitution, Athens did not separate church and state. The Sophists, a group of intellectuals the public viewed as threatening to traditional moral values, were never tried for impiety as Socrates was.[21, 22] Their training of the wealthy political elite to "make the weaker argument the stronger" and to succeed in civic life went politically unopposed in any real terms and Sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias died wealthy men. The Sophists' entrenchment in political life at Athens and other Greek city-states did nothing to overturn the social glue of the religious worldview expressed by the poets.

One might object that there was great variation in ancient Greek myth, and the works of the tragic playwrights present moral complexities and challenging ethical dramas. How could poets like these be counted as puppet-masters? In short, I would claim that the poetic script in play tolerated a great amount of variation. This elasticity is permitted by commitment to a

polytheistic pantheon. Gods and goddesses within a polytheistic pantheon necessarily have differences, and in the traditional, poetic accounts, are not constrained by having to be good. Local traditions in different city-states enable variations on traditional themes, and the conflicts between deities and humans caught up in these divine dramas provide topical themes for poets. The interesting question is at what point the elasticity of the poetic tradition gives out. I believe this is precisely what is so important in Plato's presentation of Socrates.

In *The Republic*, Socrates is forthright in rejecting the traditional accounts of the poets. Making things more difficult, however, is the way that Socrates also calls upon the gods in the *Apology*, claiming that he is, indeed, a pious man. Careful reading of the dialogues may suggest that Socrates' belief in the gods is sincere while representing a reformation of traditional beliefs.[23] Socrates' is the case that tests the elasticity of traditional religious beliefs. Should Athenians have tolerated his seemingly reformed theology, rejecting the poets' accounts of the gods? Readers of Plato are challenged with this question.

Plato leaves the identity of the puppet-masters in his Allegory of the Cave open to interpretation. This seems intentional on his part and a significant feature of the allegory. Although I have made a case for identifying the puppet-masters as the traditional ancient Greek poets, the very fact that we need to flesh out his allegory in order to figure out who or what in a culture might be "running the show" suggests something fascinating. If we are in the position of the prisoners inside the cave, the puppeteers are invisible to us. They are present yet absent, just as a director and the whole machinery of filmmaking arts can successfully achieve an illusory absence for the audience. According to Plato's model, someone or some system is, in fact, in the director's position with respect to what we take for granted as "real." The power of his allegory might very well be that it requires us to consider who or what, at any given period of history, directs our shadow-play.

ENDNOTES

1. Plato. 360 BCE. *The Republic*. Benjamin Jowett, trans. Book VII, (515a). Accessed May 27, 2012, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html
2. Plato, *Republic*, Book VII, (515b).
3. Plato, *Republic*, Book VII, (515e).
4. Interestingly, we have not been told precisely how a prisoner is set free, nor who it is that drags a prisoner further up the steep path into the blinding sunlight. This topic goes beyond the scope of this essay, but hopefully it is easier to figure out!
5. Plato, *Republic*, Book VII, (514b)
6. See Asli Gocer. 1999-2000. "The Puppet Theater in Plato's Parable of the Cave," T*he Classical Journal*, 95, no.2: 119-129.

   The practice of puppetry in Ancient Athens has features worth noting. According to Asli Gocer's research, ancient Greek puppet-theater was a bawdy, burlesque, comedic style of theater presented to popular audiences. Thaumatopoio was the term meaning "puppeteer," but also designated other popular performers like conjurers, jugglers, acrobats and mimes. Puppetry thus bore association with all "low-brow" forms of entertainment. Ancient Greek puppetry is thought to be the ancestor of Turkish Karagoz Theater. Karagoz Theater is improvised and often satirical, contemptuous of customs and aimed at entertainment of "the masses." Gocer claims that the puppetry depicted in the Allegory of the Cave as of a piece with Plato's critique—not just of drama—but specifically of comedy and popular art forms.

7. See Graham Ley. 1991. *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theater*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 10-13.

   Graham Ley notes that puppets in Ancient Greece may have been more akin to marionettes controlled by strings (neurospatos; drawn/operated by cord) and self-moving, mechanical automata. Ley also remarks that, given Plato's comments in the Laws, puppet shows might have been comedic, and aimed at an audience of children.

8. Plato, *Republic*, Book VII, (515b)

9. Aristotle. 350 BCE. *Poetics*. S. H. Butcher, trans. Section 2: XV. Accessed May 27, 2012, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.2.2.html

10. For an explanation of the Sophist movement, see http://www.iep.utm.edu/sophists/

11. Plato, *Republic*, Book II, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.3.ii.html

12. Plato, *Republic*, Book X, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.11.x.html

13. Plato. 1966. "Euthypro," *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1, Harold North Fowler, trans., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd), sec. 6a, accessed May 27, 2012, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0170%3Atext%3DEuthyph.%3Asection%3D6a

    In Plato's Euthyphro we also find a clear comment from Socrates about his negative view of the poets. Euthyphro has just expressed his commitment to the traditional myths about the gods, describing Zeus' castration of Chronos. To this, Socrates responds: "Indeed, Euthyphro, can this be the reason I'm under indictment, because whenever such things are said about the gods I find them so difficult to accept? It seems that because of this I will be told that I do wrong."

14. Hesiod. 1914. "Theogeny," *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd.), accessed May 27, 2012, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0130

15. Hesiod, "Works and Days" in *Homeric Hymns*, accessed May 27, 2012, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0132

16. Homer. 800 BCE. *Iliad*. Samuel Butler, trans. Accessed May 27, 2012, http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/iliad.html

17. Homer. 800 BCE. *Odyssey*. Samuel Butler, trans. Accessed May 27, 2012, http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.html

18. Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.7.vi.html

19. Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, (509d-511e), http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.7.vi.html

20. Plato. 360 BCE. *Crito*. Benjamin Jowett, trans. (51e-52a). Accessed May 27, 2012, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/crito.html

21. Aristophanes. 419 BCE. *The Clouds*. Accessed May 27, 2012, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristophanes/clouds.html
    Aristophanes' depiction of Socrates in his comedy *The Clouds* is an interesting case in which Socrates is depicted as a practicing sophist—setting up a school (The Thinkery) and offering to teach young men to win lawsuits at any cost. Materialistic views of the world including rejection of the gods are also attributed him in the play, although such views reflect those of the natural philosophers (Milesians, such as Thales and Anaximander, and Pluralists, such as Anaxagoras).

22. Plato. 1966. "Apology," *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 1,* Harold North Fowler, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd), 18b. Accessed May 27, 2012, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0170%3Atext%3DApol.%3Asection%3D18b .

    In Plato's Apology, especially at 18b, Socrates makes the effort to disambiguate his practice of philosophy from both of these intellectual groups.

23. See Gregory Vlastos. 1991. "Socratic Piety" in *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 157-178.

    I find Vlastos convincing on the point that Plato's Socrates is very much "a man of his time," maintaining some religious beliefs while, at the same time, advocating for rational, philosophical investigation. Relegating each instance of his mention of religion to irony seems to do damage to Plato's careful presentations of actual irony in the dialogues.