Politics in Socrates’ Cave

Commentary on Adriel M. Trott, “Saving the Appearances in Plato’s Cave.”

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Abstract

In her “Saving the Appearances in Plato’s Cave,” Dr. Adriel Trott argues that “the philosopher’s claim to true knowledge always operates within the realm of the cave.” In order to probe her claim, I challenge her to make sense of “politics in the cave,” namely the status and practices of two categories of people in the cave: “woke” cave dwellers (namely, those who recognize shadows as shadows but have not left the cave) and “woke” puppeteers (namely, philosophers ruling within the cave).

Keywords

Plato — *Republic* — Plato’s Cave — Trott — Kallipolis

Book VII of Plato’s *Republic* likens “our nature with respect to education and lack of education” to humans dwelling in a sort of cave (*Rep*. 7.514a1-2).[[1]](#footnote-1) Raphael (and the medieval tradition) may have put the *Timaeus* in Plato’s hands in the Vatican fresco that has subsequently been titled the “School of Athens”; but clearly the last century has viewed Plato’s *Republic* as his master work and the image of the cave is one of its most provocative and philosophically rich passages. Thus, we are especially grateful that Dr. Adriel M. Trott has offered us her reflections on the relationship between knowledge and politics within Socrates’ account of the cave. Such a question is important for a couple of reasons. First, Socrates’ account of politics in the cave is also a reflection of the politics that exists among the interlocutors Plato depicts in the home of Cephalus, down in the Piraeus of Athens, not too far distant from the site of the battle of Munichia, where members of the democratic resistance defeated the forces of the oligarchic Thirty in 403 BCE.[[2]](#footnote-2) Indeed, Socrates is quite explicit: the strange prisoners in his image “resemble us” (Ὁμοίους ἡμῖν [515a5]). Understanding the “politics of the cave” helps us understand the politics at play in the conversations that Plato depicts in his dialogues. But secondly, to paraphrase the 1950s cartoon character Pogo, “we have seen the cave and it is us.” Like Glaukon and company, we too lack equality between men and women in the ruling class, we allow amateurs—a.k.a. parents in a nuclear family—to raise the children of our polity, and—as far as I can tell—we currently lack philosophical autocrats (or philosophers who are autocratic [6.499a10-c5]). I presume that the description of politics in Socrates’ cave also applies to us and our uneducated natures.

I take Dr. Trott’s central claim in her paper to be that, contrary to appearances (and several centuries of scholarship) Plato does not intend the rationalistic account of the philosopher’s education—that ascent from arithmetic to geometry to astronomy and ultimately to dialectic and noetic comprehension—to serve as the basis by means of which we can distinguish the philosopher from the non-philosopher in the realm of politics, and thus ground the rule of the former over the latter. Rather, as she provocatively puts it,

I argue that the philosopher’s claim to true knowledge always operates within the realm of the cave, among those for whom every claim operates at the same level, requiring persuasion to make the case to be the way the others should see the world….The image of the cave operates as a warning to the listener that this structural problem requires the listeners themselves to think and consider and judge the claims of those who claim to know with all the tools that Socrates has offered but without the promise that some external knowledge can save the city. (p. 4)

Put more simply: whatever we make of Plato’s account of rational knowledge (as contrasted with the mere opinions and images of sensory experience) in the ascent *out of the* cave, nonetheless there still remains the predicament of what co-existence and cooperation, a.k.a. politics, looks like either for those who never leave the cave or for those who ultimately return to it, even if only temporarily (7.540a4-b7). Plato clearly envisions that the recipients of the philosophical education described in *Republic* VII will someday return to rule within the cave (e.g. VII.519c7-521a5, 539e2-540b5), but Dr. Trott—quite thoughtfully—asks us to think about what their rule will be like. Clearly, the cave will remain cave. Although Descartes, in the 6th Part of his *Discourse on Method*, mused about breaking open the windows of a cave and bringing universal enlightenment to those Scholastic philosophers therein, Socrates gives no evidence that the philosopher kings will subsequently enlighten the bronze and iron multitude within the city. Rather, as I think Dr. Trott correctly puts it, “Socrates describes the drama of the cave from the point of view of the philosopher to explain why the philosopher is not recognized as the philosopher in the cave” (p. 12).

By means of commentary, I would like to present Dr. Trott with two examples of “politics in Socrates’ cave” that she does not explicitly address at length in her paper, but which I think could serve as test cases for her thesis that Plato’s cave operates within the framework of the appearances (rather than noetic visions) of its cave-dwellers (including its philosophers). No doubt, there is no possible interpretation of Plato’s *Republic* that accounts for EVERY passage in that work. But I think these passages are significant enough that any interpretation of the cave should be able to explain how they work or depict the practice of the philosophical rulers of Kallipolis.

**Example 1: “Woke” cave dwellers**

All will recall that according to the image of the cave, we cave-dwellers are constrained to look at images that we take to be originals. Education begins

When one was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn his head around (περιάγειν) and walk and to lift up his eyes to the light, and in doing all this felt pain and, because of the dazzle and glitter of the light, was unable to discern the objects whose shadows he formerly saw, what do you suppose would be his answer if someone told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality, and turned toward more real things, he saw more rightly? (7.515c4-d5)

In the sequel, Socrates makes clear that such a freed person would be puzzled (in ἀπορεῖν [7.515d6]), presumably a reference to the effects of *elenchus* we find in many Socratic dialogues. Nonetheless, I understand the description of these persons freed from bondage to correspond with the “art of turn-about” (τὲχνη...τῆς περιαγωγῆς [7.518d2-3]) that Socrates subsequently discusses in his critique of what Freire 1970 subsequently called the “banking theory of education.” I would go further and suggest that such “turn-about” consists in moments when one recognizes one’s own ignorance, a presumably not-insignificant moment in Socratic education. Cave dwellers in bondage think they know the truth of the images they see, but when they see the puppeteers that produce those images they recognize their ignorance. But presumably such freed cave dwellers (who, as far as I can tell, are still denizens of the cave and not yet philosophers) have something more than appearances. Put slightly differently, Dr. Trott wants to draw a firm divide between the realm of appearances within the cave and the external knowledge available to philosophers outside the cave. But these “freed but not yet enlightened” cave dwellers suggest to me that within an imperfect or unjust political society (namely, every society except for Kallipolis), there is a group of people—larger than that of the group of philosophers—who have come to realize that not everything expressed or embraced by the community is true.

Imagine, for instance, the teenager—raised in the Jim Crow south—who through whatever process calls into question and learns to deny the doctrines of racial supremacy that permeate her society.[[3]](#footnote-3) Perhaps she develops a friendship with an African-American peer who shows her that in practice blacks and whites are the same in intelligence, dignity, and personhood. She is by that realization no philosopher king. She is not a Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who had worked out in his mind both a doctrine of justice, based equally in the teachings of Augustine, Aquinas, and modern human rights, and the means of implementing such justice through direct action and civil disobedience. But that teenage girl is also no longer operating solely on the basis of the “appearances” of her Jim Crow southern community. What place is there, in Dr. Trott’s account of appearances, for proto-philosophical persons who have been freed from their bonds and recognize their ignorance, even if they have yet to find the knowledge to alleviate their aporia? What place is there, in our politics, for those who recognize the wrongness of current social and political institutions but nonetheless do not have a full-blown theory for either the design or implementation of truly just social and political institutions?

**Example 2: “Woke” Puppeteers**

All will recall that the cave image includes a rather unusual class of “image-makers.” Socrates characterizes them as follows:

Imagine that there are people alongside the wall carrying multifarious artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other animals, made of stone, wood, and every material. And as you would expect, some of the carriers are talking and some are silent. (7.514b8-515a3)

Dr. Trott writes that the cave image “stages the way it is impossible to distinguish between the philosopher-king and the rhetorician-tyrant in a way that opens the possibility that anyone claiming to have knowledge of a different order than that knowledge that is available in the political sphere is acting as a tyrant” (p. 13).[[4]](#footnote-4) Rather than look to either philosophers or rhetorician-tyrants, she believes that “the cave is the place in which intersubjective confirmation and support determines how the world is viewed and understood” (p. 15). Nonetheless, I don’t believe (or apologize if I missed it) how she understands the identity of the puppeteers. One option, of course, is that the “rhetorician-tyrants” that her paper describes at some length are demagogues like those familiar to us from the late-fifth century (e.g. the Athenian generals Kleon or Alcibiades). But although the *Republic* obviously is quite concerned about the place of demagoguery in a democracy (e.g. 6.493a4-e2), it seems to me that Socrates does not model the tyrant—although a leader of the demos—as a demagogue (much less as a rhetorician [e.g. 8.565b6-566a7]). At least based on Xenophon’s *Hellenica*, Critias is clearly an orator who calls for cruel, blood-thirsty, and tyrannical actions (*Hellenica* 2.3.24-34); but I’m hard-pressed to see the oligarch as a demagogue.

A second option is that the puppeteers are the philosopher kings, paternalistically keeping the residents of the cave orderly in blissful ignorance. I need only remind us that the story of the metals that serves as the basis of the “motherland” of Kallipolis and its institutional stratification is a falsehood told by the leaders of the society in order to make its citizens territorial, collegial (if not fraternal), and obedient (3.414b7-415e6).[[5]](#footnote-5) I completely respect that Dr. Trott wants to find a more inclusive or intersubjective form of politics within the appearances of Socrates’ cave, but I do wonder what she makes of the possibility that the philosopher kings have rigged the cave in such a way that they can rule even without justifying that rule on the basis of their superior knowledge.

**III Conclusion**

No doubt, the philosopher whose account of justice in the city concludes with the invocation of exile and/or killing fields for all those over the age of ten is well-aware of the problems of utopian thinking (7.540e5-541a7). Dr. Trott invites us to consider whether the philosopher, whose account of rational enlightenment is the basis for all subsequent articulations of rationalism, was also deeply aware of the political irrelevance of such philosophical knowledge. Clearly, Plato (or Socrates) envisions the image of the cave as a depiction of the problem of knowledge and politics. But I wonder about ways that light could nonetheless dissipates the shadows and mere appearances within the cave, even if that light is not the complete noetic illumination of the Sun, i.e., the Idea of the Good. I welcome hearing how Dr. Trott makes sense of my two textual examples of possible instances of light within the cave.

**References**

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1. Parenthetical references to Plato’s *Republic* are to my own translations, adapted from the Greek of Shorey 1937 and indebted to the translation of Reeve 2004. Parenthetical references (with page numbers) to Dr. Trott’s paper refer to her pre-session circulated text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for instance, Xenophon, *Hellenica* II.iv.10-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. At our BACAP session Prof. William Wians reminds me that I am essentially retelling the story of Scout in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dr. Trott, in her paper, clearly was working from the description of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. But I suspect the account of philosophical rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, based in dialectic and science (*Phdr*. 265d3-266c5) presents a much harder case for her thesis on the indistinguishability of the philosopher-king and rhetorician-tyrant. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a compelling re-examination of the “noble lie,” see Kasimis 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)