Excerpt from
Plato at the Googleplex – Why Philosophy Won't Go Away
by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein
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"GET ON OUT OF THAT CAVE"

The Myth of the Cave has come up multiple times in this book. Marcus at the Googleplex and Dr. Munitz at the 92nd Street Y both put their own spins on it. There are many spins and a vast literature of interpretation. I offer an interpretation based on the story I have tried to tell of how Plato drew philosophy forth from an ethos that made itself felt in the Greek city-states—and in Athens most of all.

It's a story of an extraordinary society that believed in being extraordinary, extolling exceptional individuals while at the same time creating a sense of participatory exceptionalism by means of which the extraordinary could be spread around. Athenian ideology was a response to an existential quandary that emerged dramatically during the Axial Age: What is it—if it's anything—that makes an individual human life matter? What must one be or do in order to achieve a life that matters? The existential quandary resonates no less in our time than it did during the Axial Age. Is it any wonder that the powerful religious traditions that emerged under the force of the existential quandary still resonate with so many today?

But the Greeks took a different approach. Even though religious cults and rites saturated almost every aspect of their lives, they approached the existential dilemma in secular terms. The most important of these terms is the complicated notion of *aretē*, bound up as it was with *kleos*. This approach also still resonates today, provoking ambitions to stand out from the great, massive mortal crowd, somehow or other, either individually or collectively.

The Athenian ethos might have nurtured the prerequisites for moral philosophy by approaching the existential dilemma in human, rather than divine, terms. Still, the value structure of Athenian ideology had to be challenged for moral philosophy to emerge. This was the project of Socrates, and he pursued it with his fellow Athenians wherever he found them: at the agora and the gymnasium, at dinner parties and at his trial. They often found his questions unintelligible, and it is little wonder. He was nudging the notion of *aretē* outside its familiar context, prying it away from *kleos* and pushing it closer toward a concept that English translators of the dialogues straightforwardly render as "virtue." Attempts to define this or that virtue organize many of the dialogues. The *Republic* revolves around the virtue of justice.

The dialogue opens with Socrates, the first-person narrator of the *Republic*, setting the scene. He has gone the day before, together with Glaucon, Plato's brother, to the Piraeus, Athens' harbor, to attend a religious festival surrounding a newly introduced goddess, identified by scholars as the Thracian goddess Bendis. He was

eager to see the festival because, he casually mentions, it was being celebrated in Piraeus for the first time (327a). Perhaps this detail gestures toward the theological openness of the Athenians, underlining the hollowness of the charge against Socrates that he introduced new gods? In any case, on their way back, they run into a friend, Polemarchus, who tells them that they must stick around in Piraeus for more festivities to come that evening, and Socrates and Glaucon are persuaded to go to Polemarchus' house. A crowd of worthies is gathered there, including several famous sophists and rhetoricians. Socrates first pays his respects to Polemarchus' father, Cephalus, taking the opportunity to ask him what it's like to be so old. Cephalus responds that one can bear old age so long as one has lived a just life. Wealth is important only because the exigencies of poverty might have tempted one to be unjust, which will make facing death difficult. This leads naturally to a discussion of how to define justice, for both the individual and the *polis*.

The discussion is long and complicated. Socrates and Glaucon, we can be pretty sure, never made it to the evening's festivities. Not only political theory, but moral psychology and moral philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology are enlisted in the answer that will eventually be ventured as to the nature of justice, political and individual. Both are a matter of structural soundness. The just city is composed of three parts—the guardians, the army, and the producers—with each part performing the function for which it is best suited, both by temperament and training. A person's psyche is also composed of three parts—the *logistikon*, which reasons; the *thumos*, which wills; and the *epithumia*, which craves. In the just person each part performs the function for which it is best suited. The just person, like the just polis, has the internal arrangement just right.

The *Republic* is organized into ten books, and the Myth of the Cave occurs at the beginning of Book VII. Here is how it is introduced (the respondent is Glaucon):"

> *Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the Cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets.*
>
> *I'm imagining it.*
>
> *Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you'd expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent.*

> *"It's a strange image you're describing, and strange prisoners.*
>
> *They're like us. (514a–515a)*

These prisoners are huddled together, their state of mind one of *eikasia*, which is the lowest level of awareness, deceived and ungrounded. The contents of a mind in the grip of *eikasia* is unconnected with anything having independent existence. It is a sooty, dim, and artificial world, with everything contrived so that the prisoners cannot discover the nature of what they are looking at. It is what we now might call a socially constructed reality. (If there are any thinkers still out there who still hold to the once-fashionable view (circa 1970s–1990s) that all is socially constructed, then they're going to stop following Plato any further at this point.) There are elaborate props supporting it, and people tending those props. The chained image-observers are prisoners of ideology, though they would prefer not to know it. In fact, they would do anything not to know it. All their questions are answered, and the questions worth asking are never considered. Their false beliefs are mutually validating, but their unanimity counts for nothing so far as truth is concerned. They live together in darkness. Later on in the myth Plato describes "the honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by and who best remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously, and who could best divine the future" (516c–d). Their celebrations of one another are pathetic, since none manages to attain anything worth winning. *Kleos* raises none of them above the other, despite what they might think. (But again, if you are a thinker committed to there being nothing but the socially constructed images on the cave's wall, you'll likewise recognize no higher standard than the *kleos* of your community: "The only 'proof' of membership is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community, someone who says to you what neither of us could ever prove to a third party: 'we know.' I say to you now, knowing full well that you will agree with me … only if you already agree with me."[13])

Plato doesn't tell us how it happens, but one of the prisoners becomes unfettered. It's curious how involuntary the process he describes is, especially in its beginning phase, as if someone on the road to knowledge resembles a resentful teenager being dragged on a family outing and determined not to enjoy himself.

> *When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before. What do you think he'd say, if we told him that what he'd seen before was inconsequential, but that now—because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are more—he sees more correctly? Or, to put it another way, if we pointed to each of the things passing by, asked him what each of them is, and compelled him to answer, don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that the*

things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown?

Much truer.

And if someone compelled him to look at the light itself, wouldn't his eyes hurt, and wouldn't he turn around and flee towards the things he's able to see, believing that they're really clearer than the ones he's being shown?

He would.

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, would he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? And when he came into the light, with the sun filling his eyes, wouldn't he be unable to see a single one of the things now said to be true?

He would be unable to see them, at least at first. (515c–516a)

Glaucon's "at least at first" is a necessary qualification, since gradually the escaped prisoner will be able to see extra-cavernously, but only slowly and by degrees. Recovery from ideology—deprogramming as we now call it—takes time. His eyes can't take in everything at once, because they have to adjust to the light. First he will simply look at images and shadows and reflections in water. Next he will be able to look at "the things themselves" (516a). Gradually he raises his eyes upward, studying the nighttime sky. Finally, his eyes will have adjusted sufficiently for him to see "the sun itself, in its own place, and be able to study it."

The various levels, both within the cave and without, represent levels of being in Plato's metaphysics.[14] These levels are ordered by the relations of explanation, of accounts, of *logoi*. One ascends to a higher level by explaining the level one has already secured. This is how the process of knowledge proceeds, by what philosophers call abduction, or inference to the best explanation. Grasping the best explanation is the job description of reality-discovering reason. It's the way that ontology can be expanded. Whether it is employed in theoretical physics[15] or in philosophical reasoning, it's by means of abduction that one can come to know the reality that isn't passively received, in either imagination or perception, whether that reality is of quantum fields or, as Plato would have it, a value-saturated reality, structured by the confluence of the True-the Beautiful-the Good. The expert knower, whether he's a cosmologist or a metaphysician, is discovering objective reality by seeking the best explanation (and as Plato points out in the *Timaeus* [29c–d; 44d], this form of knowledge is probabilistic at best, always prepared to give way to a better explanation).

What compels us to ascend to another level are the questions posed at the level we are at. We only know where we have been after we have left it. It's our pursuit of explanation that pushes us along. At the first level of the cave, we understand that we've been looking at shadows only when we see the shadow-making operation that's going on inside the cave, the ways in which everything was elaborately rigged in there to create the illusions we took for real. One only understands that one has been living in a subterranean cave when one exits it, leaving behind the constructed values of a society imprisoned by its ideology with all its ruses designed to keep the prisoner from making contact with what is out there—in other words, reality. Climbing upward and exiting the cave is stepping outside ideology, terrifying and painful at first, but liberating and natural at the end, so that the thought of returning to the abandoned ideology becomes unthinkable. "I would suppose he would rather suffer anything than live like that" (516e). Exiting the ideological cave, where all our questions are answered and everyone we know agrees with us—"I say to you now, knowing full well that you will agree with me … only if you already agree with me"—is the hardest and most significant step we can take. But if we don't take that step, then we will leave this life no closer to the truth than when we entered it. And that is exactly what it is to live a life not worth living, even if it proves to be the most pleasant sort of existence.

Still, there are many levels still to be achieved outside the cave. Plato enumerates the extra-cavernous levels: images and reflections, the things themselves, the sun. What do these signify? His Analogy of the Divided Line (509d–513e) is the key. The images and reflections correspond to mathematics, the various branches of which Plato has his guardians of the *Republic* spend several decades mastering. The things themselves are the forms, those abstract theoretical entities that Plato believes, at least at this stage of his philosophical thinking, are necessary to explain the identities of concrete particulars.

But the trail of explanations doesn't hit a dead end, not even here, in this theorized domain of abstractions so far from common sense. Not even the intelligible forms are self-explanatory. There is a structure to this abstract domain—not all possible forms exist, some entail others, some exclude others. A complex structure is superimposed over this abstract domain. The abstract forms and their relationships with each other give reality the shape it has. But why is it this shape rather than another? Why is it anything at all?

A further ascent is required, to the form of the good. In the Myth of the Cave, this last ascent is reached when the former prisoner, now enlightened, casts his eyes up to the heavens and beholds the source of light itself, the sun, and the language becomes appropriately heated. "In the knowable realm the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it" (517b).

Plato, in the *Republic*, is firmly on the side of the Reasonables. Everything we need to know—intellectually and morally—is out there, and the way we come to see what is out there is no more private and unshareable than the reality itself is. One proceeds by way of reason, by offering the best explanations for the questions that each level presents. An anonymous, allegorical knower stands in for any of us, so allow me to change the gender of the pronoun. The knower doesn't come with any special cognitive equipment of a kind to make her privy to special messages from outside the cave. It's on the power of her own reason that she achieves the vision of the sun. Not only is this a path that is, in principle, open to anyone, but it is a path that requires collaborators, since judging what is the best explanation is an activity best done with others, as the man who founded the Academy, gathering the best thinkers of his day there to join him, must have believed. The prisoner was herself first freed and dragged forward on the first leg of her trip by someone else, and once she sees the sun she remembers the prisoners still fettered in the cave and pities them, returning to help them make the ascent that she has achieved. (It doesn't necessarily end well. Prisoners of ideology don't necessarily welcome liberation.)[16]

The form of the good, of *agathon*, is the place where all explanations stop. It is the level of the self-explanatory. There must be such a level of the self-explanatory, if reality is, as Plato has assumed it to be, thoroughly intelligible. There are no brute contingencies, facts which are facts for no other reason than that they are facts. Explanations must penetrate the whole of what is. It's not turtles all the way down, but rather reasons, *logoi*, all the way down. This is the fundamental intuition of the rationalist; it was picked up again in the seventeenth century by such hard-core rationalists as Spinoza and Leibniz. Leibniz named it the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

Like them, Plato has demanded that reality thoroughly account for itself, every step of the way, and this entails that there must be a level of the self-explanatory. The way we ascended to each next level was to judge (as best we could) the best explanation. We've been led, every step of the way, by the intuition that the best explanation—the most beautiful, the most elegant—is the right explanation. The good is simply that intuition affirmed. Reality is what it is because it realizes the best of all possible explanations. This is the Sublime Braid—the True-the Beautiful-the Good. The structure of the world is shot through with a sublimity so sublime that it simply had to exist. Reality exists because it, too, is striving to achieve an existence worth the existing. The cosmos itself is a high achiever, and existence is the prize.

Plato has, in his explanatory ascent, implicitly posed the fundamental question of metaphysics: Why is there something rather than nothing? Leibniz is customarily credited with first explicitly formulating the question, and in those very terms, but, once again, Plato got there first (and Spinoza certainly beat Leibniz to it as well).[17] Plato implicitly posed the question by explicitly proposing his answer. The good is what bestows existence, he tells us in the *Republic*. *Agathon* binds the structure of reality—whatever that reality might turn out ultimately to be. (In the *Timaeus*, he

voices skepticism that we can ever know it in its entirety. Reality's being intelligible doesn't entail its being intelligible to us.) Plato is open to reality's turning out to be quite different from the way we conceive it at any point in our joint adventure to figure it out. The self-questioning is of the essence of the rational process. But what he holds firm to is that whatever reality turns out to be like, it is like that because the best of reasons makes it so, and we are led to those best of reasons by our own sense of intelligibility-maximizing beauty: "Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful then they" (508e).

The Myth of the Cave consigns anything that cannot give an account of itself—including whispers in one's own privileged ears from one's own private oracle—to the interior of the sooty cave. It is, in the end, hostile to the Unreasonables, who have to be placed at the level of *eikasia*, prisoners of ideology, unable to give a *logos*. Inferences to the best explanation are put on the seminar table, there for all to evaluate—not just in philosophy but in all theoretical domains (except mathematics, where conclusive proofs are possible). Inference to the best explanation captures what it is to theorize.

The word "best" is overtly evaluative. There is no escaping evaluation, no more in deciding what is rational to believe than in deciding what is ethical to do. The fact that evaluation is involved—different people may disagree on what constitutes the best of the available explanations—makes it all the more imperative to expose one's reasoning to a multiplicity of perspectives. When I had Plato say to Roy McCoy that he would rather be refuted than to refute, I was quoting him verbatim.

But what criteria are to be used in evaluating which are the best explanations? Here, too, disagreements erupt. We might ask: Is an explanation that increases the sense of mystery in the world to be valued over one that decreases the mysterious, or is it the other way round? There are excellent reasons, well argued and generally accepted, for embracing the latter alternative. In fact, precisely because the explanation that decreases mystery is judged the better explanation, Plato's own explanation of universals in terms of the abstract forms has been dropped in favor of other explanations. His so-called Theory of Forms created more mysteries than it solved. There's evidence that he himself drew the same conclusion as a result of the battery of criticisms he lodged at the theory in the *Parmenides*. In the *Timaeus* and the *Laws*, the most intelligible—and therefore beautiful—of the forms are conceived of in terms of mathematical structures, other forms dropping away.

The demiurge of the creation myth presented in the *Timaeus* created the physical universe as a living organism, imparting a soul to it and infusing it with as much eternity as it is possible for a time-dwelling entity to enjoy. The infusion comes about by making time itself an image of eternity. Unlike the truly eternal, the universe is in motion, but its motion is subtended by the law of number, which means it partakes, as best it can, of eternity. It's the mathematical motions within the cosmos that itself generate time, the image of eternity.[18]

> *So, as the model was itself an everlasting Living Thing, he set himself to bringing this universe to completion in such a way that it, too, would have that character to the extent that was possible. Now it was the Living Thing's nature to be eternal, but it isn't possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten. And so he began to think of making a moving image of eternity: at the same time as he brought order to the universe, he would make an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity. This number, of course, is what we now call "time." For before the heavens came to be, there were no days or nights, no months or years.… These all are parts of time, and was and will be are forms of time that have come to be. Such notions we unthinkingly but incorrectly apply to everlasting being. For we say that it was and is and will be, but according to the true account only is is appropriately said of it.… And all in all, none of the characteristics that becoming has bestowed upon the things that are borne about in the realm of perception are appropriate to it. These, rather, are the forms of time that have come to be—time that imitates eternity and circles according to number. (37c–38b)*

The mathematics inscribed in the heavens' motions, giving us time, also, in the *Timaeus*, generate the structure of matter. Reason saturates the cosmos in the form of mathematics, which not only allows the world of was and is and will be to partake in the everlasting is, but also renders the cosmos accessible to our mathematical reason. Our saving virtue is that our human reason can penetrate the cosmic reason:

> *And when reason which works with equal truth whether she be in the circle of the diverse or of the same—in voiceless silence holding her onward course in the sphere of the self-moved—when reason, I say, is hovering around the sensible world and when the circle of the diverse also moving truly imparts the intimations of sense to the whole soul, then arise opinions and beliefs sure and certain. But when reason is concerned with the rational, and the circle of the same moving smoothly declares it, then intelligence and knowledge are necessarily achieved. (Timaeus 37b–c, translation by Benjamin Jowet)*

It's no wonder that Galileo and Kepler were passionate Platonists. Since the time of Thomas Aquinas, the Church had favored Aristotle. And whom the Church favors it becomes heresy to challenge. But it is Plato, particularly the Plato of the *Timaeus*, who is made to carry the spirit of rebellion that rose up in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries against the dogmatized Aristotelian teleology. Finding their way back to Plato, the new physicists seize on mathematics as the very soul of explanation—and the more beautiful the mathematics, the more explanatory value it is judged to have. If the Aristotelian/Ptolemaic geocentric system is rejected, it isn't on the basis of observation alone—the epicycles can accommodate all the observed motions of the planets—but because the epicycles are mathematically hideous. Make the sun the point of origin around which the earth and planets

revolve and the mathematics becomes beautiful. Plato's aesthetic realism profoundly affected the men who created modern physics, and both Galileo and Kepler often mention the "divine Plato," using Plato's criteria for judging the best of explanations as their own.

Inference to the best explanation is inescapably value-laden, but then so, too, in Plato's scheme of things, is reality. The positioning of *agathon* at the apex of the prisoner's vision means that there is something inherently superior about reality *as it is* that dictates that this is the reality that *had to be*. *Agathon* entails that reality can ultimately give an account of itself, which doesn't mean that we, mere humans, will ever be able to arrive at that ultimate accounting. But by Plato's lights, we can trust that the accounting exists. Trusting that it exists can be regarded as a part of the metaphysics of physics, on the basis of which enormous expansions of ontology have been argued, among which none could be more expansive—could it?—than the controversial notion of the multiverse. The physicist Brian Greene wrote an article in *The Daily Beast*, explaining the current thinking (of which he's a fan) according to which our universe is only one of a vast number of universes, which are composed of different particles and governed by different forces. How vastly many? According to string theory, "the tally of possible universes stands at the almost incomprehensible 10^{500}, a number so large it defies analogy."[19] Allowing mathematical elegance to carry us along has gotten us far beyond the cave. Who knows? Perhaps we'll someday be able to answer why our universe—whether a multiverse or not—had to be exactly as it is. And if we do, it will be because of Plato's intuition that, when it comes to the universe, it's reasons all the way down, and that's what's so good about it. That's why *agathon* is sovereign.

The sovereignty of the good isn't challenged by pointing out all the ways in which reality could be improved. The view isn't challenged by such horrors as childhood leukemia, shifting tectonic plates, or wild fires. Such tragedies loom large in the human point of view. Reality doesn't take the human point of view, and it can't be expected to. The sublimity that had to burst into existence is not one that particularly concerns itself with us. Such a human-constrained goodness would not pack the ontological wallop required to bring forth existence. Benedictus Spinoza points out the irrelevance of the human point of view at the grand metaphysical scale, remarking that "the perfections of things is to be reckoned only from their own nature and power; things are not more or less perfect, according as they delight or offend human sense, or according as they are serviceable or repugnant to mankind" (*Ethics* I, Appendix).[20] Plato makes a similar argument in the Book X of the *Laws* (903c).

The view of an intelligible reality that shows no tilt toward human welfare strikes many as cold and inhuman. Well, it is cold and inhuman. What I ought to have said is that the view strikes many as repugnant as a consequence of being inhuman. It is no wonder that when Platonism met monotheism—in the Jewish thinker Philo and the Christian thinker Augustine—a user-friendly substitution was made in the tenancy at the top story of the explanatory scale. The good moved out, and God moved in.

The new tenant was reputed to be nearly as interested in us as we are interested in us. From the point of view of Plato (or Spinoza), this substitution at the top level carries us back in the direction of the cave and its self-aggrandizing ideology. From the point of view of a Plato or Spinoza, the overvaluation of the human point of view is itself an ideology.

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