

Shadows and Reflections



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Now take a line which has been cut into two unequal parts, and divide each of them again in the same proportion, and suppose the two main divisions to answer, one to the visible and the other to the intelligible, and then compare the subdivisions in respect of their clearness and want of clearness, and you will find that the first section in the sphere of the visible consists of images. And by images I mean, in the first place, shadows, and in the second place, reflections in water and in solid, smooth and polished bodies and the like: Do you understand?

“Allegory of the Divided Line,” Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett

The key problem is, images lie to us. Or, essentially, we allow them to lie to us. Why do we let them do so? In most cases because we find it convenient, but we sometimes act out of fear – after all, to change our point of view, we need both to make an effort and to have the courage to call into question our own perceptions. Images not only obscure the reality for us, but even go as far as to take its place. However, it would be difficult to argue that this results from some sort of expansive nature on their part.

In Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” for instance, we encounter people who are trapped inside – forced to watch more or less distinct shadows projected on a wall, like on a gigantic screen in a movie theater. We know that the shadows are actually cast not by the real world, as the prisoners think, but by various objects being moved around by people hidden behind a low wall. Some of these figures are silent, others noisy. I have always wondered who these individuals are. Are they entities situated between the divine order and the human one, like the demiurge, the builder of the world? Are they intentionally misleading the hapless prisoners? Or are they simply fulfilling a task that was assigned to them by someone else? If so, then, first of all, assigned by whom, and, secondly, why so?

Chained to the wall, the prisoners do not protest, seeing their captivity as an existential given. Instead, they merely keep staring at the shadowy images, living out their completely unproductive lives trying to interpret them. One might say that they are driven by rivalry, for as Plato writes (and Jowett translates) – they “compete in measuring the shadows.” This resembles a television gameshow in which the only

prize is approval from other prisoners. In the only world they know, one that is completely devoid of sunlight, there are indeed no facts, only interpretations. It is impossible to verify their validity as there is no point of reference. The only things that remain, therefore, are esthetic criteria, allowing decisions to be made based on sensory sensitivity and the presence or absence of the feeling of pleasure, confused so often with being right.



PAWEŁ JACKOWSKI

Paweł Jackowski,
wood sculpture
2021/2022



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Paweł Jackowski,
ceramic mask
2010/2018

Everything continues in harmony until captivity starts to be questioned as an existential given. One person succeeds in breaking the shackles and leaves the cave. Once outside, this man faces the truth, symbolized by the sun, not mediated by images. In this allegory, the shadows symbolize our world, with the description of reality outside the cave referring us to the truth of eternal, immutable, perfect ideas. Enlightened by the sun, the philosopher

now returns to share his knowledge with his former fellow prisoners, but they not only mock him – they even kill him.

Is this really a story about the relation between truth and appearances? It has always seemed to me that it tells us more about fear, comfort, mental complacency, and habits. It shows that we consider ourselves guardians of the *status quo*, which proves to be just an illusion we have settled into comfortably. However, the image of the sun differs from the real sun in that we can look at it without risking loss of sight, sunburn, or skin lesions.

Obviously, it is also – by contrast – a story about the bravery and nobility of the prisoner who manages to leave the cave yet chooses to return.

A broken heart to some extent justifies Plato (his pining for Socrates), but I believe that an answer to the question of who actually deceives us is missing. Who is it that wants us to be sitting in a cave filled with shadows, and why?

According to some interpretations, it is our own inner nature that is to blame. But who is carrying around the objects behind the wall; who is operating the projector? Why can images hypnotize us so easily? What do they want from us?

According to Plato, thinking in images is the least valuable type of knowledge. Ranking higher in his hierarchy are belief (in the existence of the world around us), common sense, and reason, directed towards the highest things. Knowledge presupposes a constant pursuit of ideas, which in their abstract perfection reveal themselves directly, without the need for any appearances. ■



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