

Shadowplay: Plato's Cave and Political Spin

by Mark Gullick (September 2015)

Much sport has been made recently concerning the career path of the average British politician. Travel smoothly from graduation to internship, from SpAd (or special adviser) to policy adviser, possibly with a brief sojourn in advertising, PR, publishing or journalism, and Westminster is your oyster. The route is bland, anodyne and lacking in anything but mastery of the managerial and technocratic arts, and gives us a political class to match. There is nothing of substance, nothing which could remotely be called life experience. There is one rite of passage for the elites, however, which may hold the key to this world of artifice and salesmanship.

Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) has long been a staple of the upper echelons of politics. David Cameron, Theresa May, the Miliband brothers, William Hague, Danny Alexander, Yvette Cooper and, interestingly, Peter Mandelson are all PPE graduates, along with two other members of the current Conservative Cabinet. A cursory glance at the current state of British politics and economics may cause Oxbridge dons to shake their heads and pass on, but the relationship between philosophy and our political masters and mistresses is an interesting one when one considers one seminal philosophical text in particular.

Plato's *Republic* is one of the best known of philosophy's texts, and contains a famous pronouncement on the relationship between philosophy and political leadership;

Until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophise, that is until political power and philosophy entirely coincide... cities will have no... rest from evils nor, I think, will the human race. [473c. Note: The Stephanus numbering system for Plato's works is used throughout.]

The *Republic* takes as its subject the ideal state, a title which only the doughtiest spin-doctor would claim for the UK. But, in whatever state we find ourselves, philosophy is far from absent in the modern corridors of power. As a

review of our current 'kings and leading men' shows, we are not as distanced from the Platonic lament as we might think.

It's not really feasible that an Oxford PPE student could – or would have wanted to – avoid this seminal political and philosophical text. The *Republic* also shows up on many other degree courses; Oxford's current syllabus lists the text as part of a 'compulsory core course'.

The *Republic* is perhaps the best known of the Platonic dialogues, and is probably based on what Plato knew of Sparta. Many of its ideas are well known: the communal upbringing of children, the expulsion of the poets, metempsychosis (reincarnation), the tripartite roles of guardian, auxiliary and worker, the noble lie or necessary falsehood, and the famous myth of the cave.

At the start of the *Republic*'s Book VII, Plato's perennial mouthpiece Socrates invites us to consider the following scenario;

Imagine human beings living in an underground, cave-like 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 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. (514a/b)

There is a wonderful animated version of Plato's cave [here](#). Socrates supposes that there are people on the wall 'carrying all kinds of objects', statues of people and other animals which, from the light of the fire, cast shadows on the wall in front of the shackled prisoners, shadows which are all they are able to see.

Unable to see their genuine cause, the prisoners take these shadows as reality, and the familiar Platonic division between the real and the ideal is played out in this subterranean drama. Plato believed that the things of this world are second-order shadows or copies of ideal realities, a metaphysics which would later fund Christianity.

Concerning the myth of the cave, Plato scholars have always taken the master at his word; we are temporal creatures who see only the shadows of the ideal, Plato's ultimate reality. The meaning of the allegory of the cave, it is generally accepted, has to do with our actual perception of reality, our sensory experience of the world, flawed and illusory as it is compared with the realm of the Platonic ideal. Plato states as much. But Socrates' student, as we shall see, may have had his reasons for disguising political comment as philosophy.

The *Republic* has concerned itself, right up to the scenario in the cave, with politics. Why the sudden switch to ontology? Why not, rather, see the story of the cave as an unpacking of another famous Platonic concept, albeit one which occurs only twice in the *Republic*[here](#).

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