

A MODERN WORLDVIEW  
FROM PLATO'S CAVE

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A Modern Worldview from Plato's Cave

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MFG 201

History of Creativity: Pre-1500

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**H**umankind was created with an innate curiosity about the world it inhabits. The earliest unearthed habitations of Mesopotamia show that the people there were earnestly seeking more knowledge about the earth and how to grow the best food. As we study these dwellings, we see how their knowledge about the world increased as they began to develop agriculture and found ways to flush the land of salt buildup. The early Hittites explored the ore they dug from the earth and found they could smelt it to form iron. The Phoenicians found dyes that could be extracted from natural resources of the earth.

Sometimes the discoveries and developments in civilizations were more mental than physical. The Egyptians looked to religion, particularly the study of the afterlife, to teach them about their existence here in this world and in the next. Other religions, such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Taoism, were created from this same desire to explain our presence in this world.

Inventions, such as writing systems, helped people learn more about the world around them. These inventions made it possible for knowledge to be passed on from one person to another. Instead of each person starting from nothing, they could now build on the achievements and knowledge of prior thinkers.

Of these inventions, the Greek alphabet had an especially profound impact on civilization and learning. This alphabet was different than any other because it allowed full phonetic detail to be written down. Instead of just recording ideas, people could now record sounds also. This innovation introduced the capacity to pass ideas on from one group to another. Furthermore, the Greeks could write things as they thought them, without being restricted by the established symbols or characters of other languages. Ideas, theories, and stories about this world and the people living in it flourished as they were able to be clearly written down.

One of the first people to take advantage of this new writing system to express new philosophies and theories about the known world was Thales. He reasoned, possibly for the first time, that the gods did not play chess with the world. He said, “All events, even extraordinary ones, can be explained in natural terms that can be understood by humans.”<sup>1</sup> This was radical for the age; it meant that man had the ability to truly understand the world around him. Corollary to this was the view that “Underlying all the change in the world, there is a fundamental order and unity that does not change.”<sup>2</sup> Pythagoras, another Greek thinker, further developed this notion and taught that the world could be explained in terms of math and geometry. This thinking continues to impact our view of the world.

Another Greek intellectual and philosopher that had a profound impact on the thinking of the time emerged two hundred years later during Greek’s Golden Age. His name was Plato. Student of Socrates, and later teacher to Aristotle, this man created a

new theory about the world and the universe that has deeply impacted society throughout history.

Plato's concepts, and particularly his depiction of our situation in this world in his Allegory of the Cave, are reflected today in modern pop culture, including music, TV, literature, and film. Contemporary scientific arguments and philosophical inquiries can also be viewed in relationship to the allegory. Perhaps most intriguing is the comparison of the theology of Christianity, particularly the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with Plato's theories. The present western worldview and Plato's worldview, though separated by nearly two millennia, have many compelling similarities. This may help explain why humanity remains fascinated with the concept of "leaving the cave."

## **Plato**

Plato lived during the height of Greek civilization from 427 to 347 BC. One of the chief students of the well-known thinker and philosopher Socrates in Athens, Plato established what could be considered one of the world's first universities and called it the Academy. This atmosphere of learning provided a place for his concepts, and those he had learned from Socrates, to be taught in a clear and orderly way. In fact, many of the teachings of Socrates are now known only through Plato's writings. At the Academy, Plato began to expound his thoughts about the true nature of reality and this world.

Plato taught that there existed a fundamental essence of the universe, a basic concept he took from Thales. In his own teachings, Plato labeled this essence the Form. He theorized that the Form was the perfect, unchanging, eternal constant of the universe that remained veiled in our current world. The true Form of things was located beyond our existence in the World of Forms. Every item in this world was created to mimic the

true Form of that particular item as found in the World of Forms; however, in the process of forming that item here on earth, imperfect matter was used and this resulted in a faulty representation of the true Form.

An example might clarify this concept. Consider a table. Tables come in many shapes, sizes, colors, and structures, but we all recognize each variation as a table. Plato would say that any representation of a table has “tableness.” That is, each representation contains the qualities of the true Form of the table that make us recognize it as a table. However, it remains an imperfect representation of the perfect Form. As Dr. Brent Strong and Mark Davis have said, “To Plato, the physical, material world we can see and touch was an illusion—it wasn’t real. It was just a corrupted version of the immaterial spiritual world, where all things existed in their perfect Form.”<sup>3</sup> The Form was the perfect, unchanging, eternal essence while the physical representation of it in this world was imperfect and changeable. Strong continues, “Therefore, to Plato and his followers, the theoretical or mental was more real than the physical. . . . Clearly, for Plato, the world is not fundamental. The world is an approximation of true reality.”<sup>4</sup> Since our senses are connected to our physical bodies, they too were considered imperfect, and therefore Plato taught that only the mind could best comprehend the true reality of the Forms.

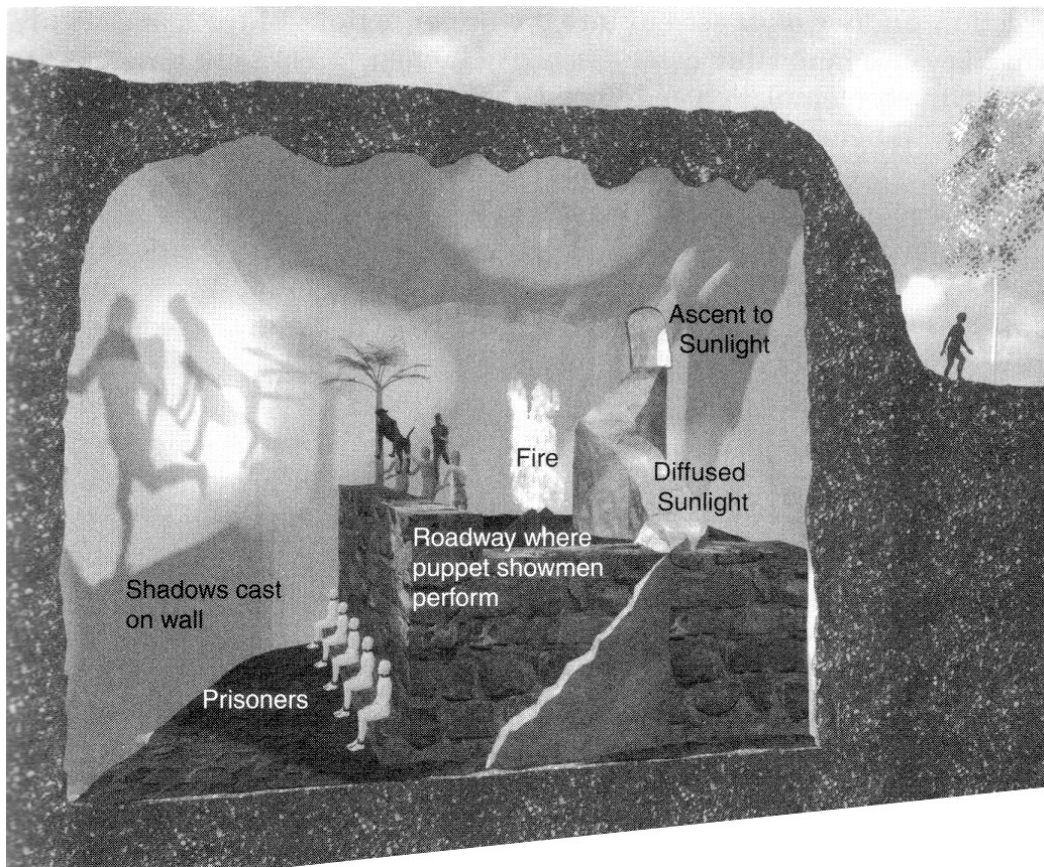
### *The Republic*

One of the most well-known works of Plato is his book *The Republic*. In this book, Plato describes his vision of the ideal society. He writes that the majority of humanity is unable to comprehend the true nature of the Form and, therefore, cannot know the truth about many things. Accordingly, only those capable of comprehending the Form, usually philosophers, are qualified to be rulers and leaders. A key part of this book

is an allegory that Plato gives to further explain his view of the nature of the world. It has become known as the Allegory of the Cave.

### *Allegory of the Cave*

The context of the Allegory of the Cave is a conversation that Plato is having with one of his students, Glaucon. Plato uses the allegory to clarify his theories of the Form and the state of the world and instructs the student to “take the following parable of education and ignorance as a picture of the condition of our nature.”<sup>5</sup> (Because this text is crucial to our current discussion, it is included in full in Appendix A.<sup>6</sup>) Here is an illustration of the Allegory of the Cave:



Found at <http://normanschultz.org/Courses/graphics/Platocave.jpg>

With his Allegory of the Cave, Plato presents a scene of prisoners in a cave.

These prisoners are in chains at the back of the cave facing the back wall. They have been



there all their life and their chains keep their heads immobile so they are unable to look around. Behind the prisoners and before the opening to the cave is a fire. In front of the fire are puppeteers that hold objects up over a screen so that their shadows from the fire are cast on the back wall of the cave. These shadows are all that the prisoners have been able to see their whole lives; therefore, the prisoners take the shadows to be the actual items. As Plato says, “such persons would certainly believe that there were no realities except those shadows of handmade things.”<sup>7</sup>

Plato then poses the question: What would happen if one of the prisoners was released from his chains and allowed to turn his head? In answer, Plato explains that the prisoner would see the objects creating the shadows and realize that what he had seen before was a shadow. Plato says, “What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he saw before was foolery, but now he saw more rightly, being a bit nearer reality and turned towards what was a little more real? . . . Don’t you think he would be puzzled, and believe what he saw before was more true than what was shown to him now?”<sup>8</sup> In other words, it would, initially, be hard for the person to believe that what he saw before was not the real thing, but just a shadow of the real thing. The person would be puzzled and disoriented.

Plato continues the allegory assuming what would happen if the person were then compelled to go towards the entrance to the cave, towards the real light. The light would hurt his eyes, and he would want to turn back to look at the shadows he was used to seeing before. If he were taken to the entrance of the cave and then out into the sunlight, the light would completely blind him and he would not be able to see anything at first. He would have to get used to the light. After some time, he would be able to see the things in the outside world, including the sun.

What if the person was now reminded of his first place in the cave and of his fellow prisoners? Plato continues that he would much rather know the truth and be free from the cave than be left in that condition – “Would he not feel as Homer says, and heartily desire rather to be serf of some landless man on earth and to endure anything in the world, rather than to opine as they did and to live in that way?”<sup>9</sup> If he returned to the cave, his eyes would once again go blind and be filled with darkness and he would not be able to see anything for a time. Plato explains that his fellow prisoners would laugh at him, saying that he was not smart to have left the cave. If the freed one were to try and free the others of their chains, they would try to kill him.

Plato concludes his allegory by relating the symbolism given in the story to the world and its people. We will explore some of this symbolism in a moment. First, however, we will briefly discuss Plato’s possible sources of inspiration for this particular allegory.

## Origin of Plato’s Cave

As previously noted, the Greek philosophers Thales and Pythagoras preceded Plato by about two hundred years. These men established the philosophical foundation upon which Plato built his worldview. Thales first introduced the thought that there was a fundamental essence in the universe that did not change. Pythagoras furthered this thought and theorized that small whole numbers were that fundamental, unchanging element in the universe. Finally, Plato built upon this and conjectured that the Form was the fundamental. It is this view that he developed into the Allegory of the Cave.

Nonetheless, the origins of Plato’s cave may not have come solely from philosophical sources. John Henry Wright, in his essay “The Origin of Plato’s Cave,”<sup>10</sup> theorized that Plato might have visited caves within the general vicinity of Athens that

gave him the idea for the cave imagery used in the allegory. Wright highlights one possible cave in particular where slaves working in a mining capacity could have been observed by Plato. This scene would have included fires, people, chains, and shadows on the cave wall just as he relates in the allegory.

## Symbolism of the Allegory

The Allegory of the Cave that Plato presents is saturated with symbolism that Plato himself explains in part. He tells us, “The world of our sight is like the habitation in prison, the firelight there to the sunlight here, the ascent and the view of the upper world is the rising of the soul into the world of the mind.”<sup>11</sup> The cave, therefore, represents the world, while the prisoners are the people who inhabit the world. The shadows that the prisoners see are everything that people see in the present world, with its objects, environments, events, and so on. As a result, Plato interprets the physical world as only an illusion—an imperfect representation of a perfect Form. The chains might represent human ignorance of the Form. This ignorance inhibits mankind from understanding truth.

There has been much discussion over who the puppeteers might represent, as Plato does not give us a suggestion. They seem to understand the ignorant state of mankind, and be somewhat conniving in their purposes, because they send the images of the physical world which are fake or an illusion to the real thing. They thrive on trickery to keep the prisoners under a leash of ignorance. Who Plato thought the puppeteers were we may never know, but we can posit that they may be anyone in the world who may be keeping mankind from knowledge of the true reality.

The freed prisoner represents anyone who sees this physical world for the illusion that it is and who transcends this fallacy with their mind, thereby reaching the World of the Forms where one can know truth. Plato referred to these people as the philosophers of

the world. Once they escape the fake world and know the truth, it is hard to return to their original habitation, just as it is hard for the prisoner to return to the cave. Plato reasons, that “those who come thither are not willing to have part in the affairs of men, but their souls ever strive to remain above.”<sup>12</sup> If they do return to their uninformed company, they are laughed at and scorned. He continues,

Do you think it surprising if one leaving divine contemplations and passing to the evils of men is awkward and appears to be a great fool, while he is still blinking—not yet accustomed to the darkness around him, but compelled to struggle in law courts or elsewhere about shadows of justice, or the images which make the shadows, and to quarrel about notions of justice in those who have never seen justice itself?<sup>13</sup>

Below is a more artistic rendition of Plato’s cave that was done in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It shows philosophers on the left contemplating the fire, while humankind watches the shadows on the wall from behind the screen.



Found at <http://www2.arnes.si/~kpzkoizo1/platos-cave/jama-osnova-2.jpg>

This allegory and its symbolism are fascinating when compared with other peoples and cultures throughout history and especially with our present world. Plato’s theories and writings definitely had an impact on Greek society and on many societies thereafter either because these societies adopted Plato’s ideas, or because Plato’s ideas

reflected a universal truth later discovered by others. Truth tends to surface in the light of concentrated study and inquiry. Plato might have been one of those who attained some facet of truth. We will now explore these topics.

## Allegory of the Cave throughout History

### *Socrates*

We begin by looking at Plato's tutor, Socrates. Socrates was someone from whom Plato no doubt gleaned knowledge that furthered his own philosophy. Socrates exhibited many of the same ideas that Plato later developed into his concepts of the Form and his Allegory of the Cave. Socrates motto was "Know thyself." Interestingly enough, this phrase is included in a line in the movie *The Matrix*. In the movie, the character Neo is visiting with the Oracle who is to prophesy if Neo is the One. She asks,

"So, what do you think? You think you're the one?"

Neo responds, "I don't know."

The Oracle points to a decoration on the wall and says, "You know what that means? It's Latin. Means 'Know thyself'. I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Being the One is just like being in love. No one can tell you you're in love, you just know it. Through and through."

Socrates believed that wisdom was gained through extensive inquiry and examination of oneself. He did not care as much for the body as he did for the soul. The mind could only get so far in approaching truth while it was connected to the body. <sup>14</sup> In this case, his ideas are similar to Plato's reasoning that this physical world is not as important as the mind that can grasp the truth of the Form and transcend this illusory world.

## *Aristotle*

Aristotle was a student of Plato who took his ideas and further developed them to create his own philosophy that, in some ways, was at odds with his teacher's views.

Aristotle believed that there were two parts to all things: the matter (or potential) and the Form. He reasoned that the truth of all things could be gained from both the mind and the soul. His teachings led to the empirical method of scientific reasoning based on the notion that anything about the known world could be discovered by sensory observations.

However, Aristotle also believed that the human mind was somewhat blinded in this world. In the first book of *Metaphysics*, he related the human mind to the eyes of a bat, which can only see objects in their most obvious shape, and only in a kind of half-light.<sup>15</sup> However, if the mind went through the process of reasoning and empirical observation, there remained the potential for it to ultimately understand truth.

## *Chuang Tzu*

Shifting our gaze to another area of the world, we find Chuang Tzu, a very well known Taoist philosopher who lived during the Zhou dynasty of China. One of his sayings was, "While they dream they do not know that they are dreaming. . . By and by comes the great awakening, and then we shall know that it has all been a great dream. Yet all the while the fools think they are awake, this they are sure of."<sup>16</sup> Many times throughout history people have referred to the human condition as a dream. While we think we are awake, experiencing reality, we are actually dreaming and everything around us is simply an illusion of our mind. Is there any way to know for certain whether we are dreaming or whether we are awake? The allusions to Plato's cave are recognizable.

## *Buddhism*

Looking at yet another world philosophy, a proverb from Buddhism reads, “Like images seen in a dream, thus should one see all things.”<sup>17</sup> Again, we see the reference to dreaming. The things we see in this life are “like images seen in a dream,” just illusions or representations, not true reality.

## *St. Augustine*

In the Christian world of the fourth century AD, St. Augustine adopted many of Plato’s ideas and related them to Christianity. He related the mental and theoretical images of Plato to the spiritual. As William G. Smith puts it, “For Augustine, what [was] outside the cave [was] the realm of the Christian God.”<sup>18</sup>

## *Origen*

Also working within a Christian framework, Origen, now considered one of the great church fathers, was not shy to base his teachings on Greek philosophy, including the Plato’s theories. The father of church history in the fourth century, Eusebius, said of Origen, “in his metaphysical and theological ideas he played the Greek, giving a Greek twist to foreign tales. He associated himself at all times with Plato, and was at home among the writings of . . . followers of Pythagoras.”<sup>19</sup> It is clear, then, that some of the writings of Origen exhibit Platonic ideas and possible allusions to Plato’s cave. A well-known Latter-day Saint scholar, Hugh Nibley, observed, “Origen compares the human intellect at its brilliant best with a tiny little candle, a feeble spark that can hardly light a foot of the way ahead.”<sup>20</sup> We can see that Origen did not think highly of the human mind. This is similar to Aristotle’s comparison of the mind with the eyes of a bat. The human mind of itself, he argues, does not know much of the truth of the world.

## *Tertullian*

Hugh Nibley also referenced Tertullian who likened the intellectuals and philosophers to men stumbling around and groping in the dark. Nibley writes, “Once in a while. . . [the philosophers] do ‘stumble on the truth by a happy accident,’ but it is inexcusable for a Christian to follow such blind and unreliable guides, since he has something far better—a revelation from heaven.”<sup>21</sup> To Tertullian, even the philosophers were not good guides out of the cave of deception and illusion and into the light of true reality. Only revelation from heaven could serve as that guide. We will explore these religious themes found in Plato’s cave later.

## *People Who Have Escaped the Cave*

As we have seen, people throughout history have likened their situations to the same concepts illustrated in Plato’s allegory – that mankind is ignorant of their situation and that there is a higher form of truth and reality out there. Some have speculated that there are many that have been able to “escape from the cave” into enlightenment. These individuals could include Socrates, Jesus Christ and his apostles, Gandhi, Joseph Smith, and Martin Luther King Jr. Interestingly enough, when these individuals have tried to “reenter the cave” and bring others to the light, they have been laughed at, rejected, and killed, just like Plato explains in his Allegory of the Cave. The prisoners did not want to leave the comfortable accommodations of the cave.

## **Contemporary Pop Culture**

We have seen how Plato’s allegory surfaces in myriad philosophies of the past; however, we may ask if it is still present today. We will examine several different aspects of modern pop culture that exhibit Plato’s themes. Then we will explore these same ideas



in modern science and philosophy, after which we will look at these concepts as they relate to Christianity, and more specifically, LDS theology and doctrine.

## Anarchists/Counterculture

Plato's Allegory of the Cave contains a subject matter which sounds very much like an anarchist, counterculture, or revolutionary view of the world. A revolutionary might say that we are all under the heavy hand of control, tyranny, and government and that we are bound to break free from these bonds and achieve liberty. Che Guevara, a Cuban revolutionary, could be compared to the freed prisoner that enters the cave to release the other prisoners and set them free. In 1965 Che left Cuba in attempt to raise socialist revolutions amongst citizens of countries worldwide.

## Music

Additionally, there have been several musical groups or songs in this century that have had a relationship to Plato's cave. Rage Against the Machine was a political musical group that promoted revolutionary ideas. They Might Be Giant's song "No One Knows My Plan," Jack Johnson's "Inaudible Melodies," and Pere Ubu's "Heart of Darkness" all refer to the allegory in their lyrics. Rush's album 2112 can be seen as a type of sci-fi Allegory of the Cave. These musical groups no doubt related to the philosophy of Plato and his cave, and chose to incorporate it into their songs.

## TV

Television shows have also experimented with Plato's philosophy of illusions or of a simulated environment which is not true reality. One TV show that comes immediately to mind is the *Star Trek* series and its holodeck. On the holodeck, a special room on the starship Enterprise, crew members may recreate any reality they choose by

just sending certain commands to the ship's computer. These realities seem authentic and the crew members can interact with, touch, taste, smell, and be a very real part of a simulated environment. A typical interaction on the holodeck might begin like this:

“Computer, give me Earth, year – 1066 AD, location – Battle of Hastings.”

The computer would look up the details of this time period (environment, people, customs, etc.) in its databanks and then recreate it in a 3D environment on the holodeck. The crew member could then interact with the people and the environment of that time as if they were actually there. Of course it is just a simulation and a crew member cannot die on the holodeck because of the safety guards that are in place.

When the crew member was done they would say, “Computer – end program.” The simulated environment would then close and the person would be left in the empty room of the holodeck.

Relating the holodeck with Plato's cave, the computer would be a type of puppeteer, manipulating the simulated images and environments on the holodeck. The crew member would be the prisoner viewing the images. Nothing the crew member was doing on the holodeck would be true reality, but fake and illusory. The difference between the holodeck and Plato's cave is that crew members purposefully entered a simulated environment to learn something new or to experience something that they could not otherwise experience on the starship. In this ironic way, they were trying to learn or experience something new and real in a fake and simulated environment.

## Literature

The Allegory of the Cave can also be seen in today's literature. Science fiction novels based in a counterfeit reality are plentiful as is the idea of an artificial intelligence conquering the human race. Some that are of note were written by William Gibson,

particularly his book *Neuromancer*. It is probable that the Wachowski brothers, writers and directors of *The Matrix*, originally got some of their ideas from Gibson's novels. In his Sprawl Trilogy Gibson created the concept of a world computer network with a virtual reality interface that he called "the matrix."<sup>22</sup> Even earlier, in 1964, Daniel F. Galouye, in his book *Simulacron Three*, wrote about a virtual reality where inhabitants did not realize that their world was completely simulated.

Another three books worth mentioning that all have their characters set in a fake universe constructed within a star ship's interior are *Captive Universe* by Harry Harrison, *Non-stop* by Brian Aldiss, and *Orphans of the Sky* by Robert Heinlein.<sup>23</sup>

Other books that reference Plato's cave explicitly are *Diary* by Chuck Palahniuk, and *The Cave* by Jose Saramago.<sup>24</sup> Obviously, our fascination with the Allegory of the Cave has not waned in the last two thousand years.

## Movies

Movies have definitely explored Plato's concept of the cave. Some worth mentioning are *Alice in Wonderland* (which is mentioned several times in the movie *The Matrix*), *Vanilla Sky*, *Permutation City*, *Open Your Eyes*, *Welt Am Draht*, *Crossworlds*, *Total Recall*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *ExistenZ*, *The Island*, and *Logan's Run*. Two movies that stand out from the crowd in their relationship to the cave are *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix*.

### *The Truman Show*

*The Truman Show* tells the story of a protagonist, Truman, who does not realize that he is the star performer of a television show that uses his life as the plot and is broadcast to the whole world. He is contained on the artificial island city of Sea Haven,

which acts as the show's set. Truman was born and grew up believing that he was living true reality amongst the actors playing the citizens of Sea Haven. His best friends, family, and coworkers are merely actors. It is the ultimate "big brother" or reality TV show. Christof is the director of the show and, like a god, controls all cameras, sound, scripts, and even the weather in Sea Haven.

The similarities in this movie with Plato's cave are readily apparent. Sea Haven is the cave, and Truman is the prisoner. He is the only one ignorant of the fact that nothing in his world is real. As Christof, the puppeteer, says in the movie, "We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented." This is very similar to Plato's description of the chained prisoners when he says, "such persons would certainly believe that there were no realities except those shadows of handmade things."<sup>25</sup> In other words, why question the only existence you have ever known? It is only when Truman's reality starts falling apart that he begins to question it.

When Truman's best friend, Marlon, is interviewed he says, "It's all true. It's all real. Nothing here is false. Nothing you see on the show is fake. It's merely controlled." However, does this constitute an actual reality? Is a controlled reality real? Marlon seems to maneuver the puppets with the best of them.

Eventually, Truman begins his journey out of the counterfeit reality of Sea Haven, or out of the cave, and into the light of the real world. When he encounters the edge of his existence, the literal set wall, he is fearful and cautious. This is similar to Plato's prisoners who, when freed, are confused and blinded by the brightness of the fire and the natural outside light. They turn away from the light because they are more comfortable viewing the shadows on the wall. The prisoner must be dragged by force, "distressed and furious at being dragged."<sup>26</sup> The prisoner is almost certainly fearful of what might lie outside the cave door. At the end of the movie, Truman leaves the television studio set

and enters the real world. Freed from the chains of illusion and artificiality, he can now experience truth.

### *The Matrix*

One of the best representations of Plato's Allegory of the Cave is found in the movie *The Matrix*, released in 1999. Numerous books, articles, and websites are dedicated to documenting this movie and its relationships to religion, science, and philosophy. This, again, is an indication that the concept of Plato's cave is very much alive in today's culture.

The premise of the movie *The Matrix* is that Neo, the protagonist, and most humans are unknowingly living in a virtual world called the Matrix that was created by computer machines called Artificial Intelligence (AI). The AI have conquered humankind and enslaved them in an energy farm. Here, the energy generated by the human bodies, harvested for this express purpose, is captured and used by the machines. The humans, meanwhile, believe themselves to be living out their normal lives in the world of the year 1999. In truth, however, this "normal life" is all in their minds. It is like a very real dream to them, one that they cannot wake from. A small group of humans that have been freed from the Matrix are on a mission to find "the one" who will help them free the rest of humanity from the artificial reality of the Matrix. They believe Neo is "the one" and after freeing Neo from the Matrix, one of the lead characters, Morpheus<sup>27</sup>, takes the lead in explaining the Matrix to Neo. He tells Neo:

"The Matrix is...the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth..."

Neo replies, "What truth?"

Morpheus continues, “That you are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch. A prison for your mind. . . Remember, all I’m offering is the truth, nothing more.”

A few moments later, Morpheus relates to Neo the well-known dream allusion:

“Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream? How would you know the difference between the dream and the real world?”

Once Neo is released from the Matrix he is taken into Morpheus’ ship, the Nebuchadnezzar, and Morpheus greets him by saying, “Welcome to the real world.”

Neo’s training resumes and Morpheus attempts to clarify what the Matrix is by saying:

What is real? How do you define real? If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain. This is the world that you know. The world as it was at the end of the twentieth century. It exists now only as part of a neural-interactive simulation that we call the matrix. You’ve been living in a dream world, Neo. This is the world as it exists today.... What is the matrix? Control. The matrix is a computer generated dream world built to keep us under control in order to change a human being into this.

Morpheus then holds up a battery.

These are some of the most intriguing scenes from the movie as it relates to Plato’s cave. After Neo is told that his whole life has been lived in an illusion, he is angered and confused and demands to be put back into his old existence. He screams that he doesn’t believe it, that he wants out. Then he vomits and loses consciousness. This is in direct correlation with Plato’s description of the freed prisoners: “all this would hurt him, and he would be too much dazzled to see distinctly those things whose shadows he had seen before. . . *Don’t you think he would be puzzled, and believe what he saw before was more true than what was shown to him now?*” (emphasis added) <sup>28</sup>

The correlations between this movie and Plato's allegory are almost too obvious to mention.<sup>29</sup> The humans that are imprisoned in the Matrix are like the prisoners in the cave. Neo is the prisoner that is freed from the cave into the true reality of the world. The Matrix is the cave, the real world is existence outside the cave. The Artificial Intelligence machines are the puppeteers, tricking the humans into believing the Matrix is actual reality. All that the humans see in the Matrix are the shadows cast on the wall in front of the prisoners of the cave. It is all a constructed, and false, reality. The red pill that Neo finally takes to release himself from the Matrix breaks the chains that held him in the cave.

There are some other interesting, if less apparent, similarities to the cave in *The Matrix*. Cypher is a crewmember on Morpheus' ship who secretly wants to return to the Matrix. He says, "I think the Matrix can be more real than this world." Sometimes the prisoner in the cave would rather remain looking at the shadows on the wall – "Don't you think he would be puzzled, *and believe what he saw before was more true than what was shown to him now?*" (emphasis added)<sup>30</sup> Cypher kills several people in his efforts to return to the Matrix, just as prisoners in the cave resorted to killing if forced from their chains and toward the light. As Plato explains, "would they not kill anyone who tried to release them and take them up, if they could somehow lay hands on him and kill him?"<sup>31</sup>

Details, such as Neo having to gradually adjust to the real world, are fascinating. After Neo is released from the Matrix he complains, "Why do my eyes hurt?" Morpheus responds, "You've never used them before." In Plato's cave, the free prisoner is constantly bombarded by the light from both the fire and the light of the sun outside the cave, which cause the prisoner to go temporarily blind. Plato relates, "when he came into the light, the brilliance would fill his eyes and he would not be able to see even one of the things now called real? . . . He would have to get used to it."<sup>32</sup>

John Shirley, in *Exploring the Matrix*, says “For all its intricacies, *The Matrix*’s final message is fairly simple: Look around and question what you see, what you accept. And start with yourself. Know thyself.”<sup>33</sup> And once again we see the reference to Socrates.

*The Matrix* is a significant example of Plato’s cave in our modern culture, especially in light of its success. The producers budgeted \$63 million to shoot the film, but the movie earned \$171 million in the USA and \$456 million worldwide.<sup>34</sup> With such a mainstream acceptance of this film, we can surmise that the people of the modern world have a fascination and attraction to the basic principles and plot of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave.

## **Modern Science & Philosophy**

Not only has Plato’s cave made its way into our modern pop culture in the form of music, TV, books, and movies, but it has also surfaced in current scientific explorations and philosophical thinking. Many different theories have been published by scientists from the 20<sup>th</sup> century that purport that the objective reality of the universe as we know it may not be accurate. From a scientific standpoint, reality may not be what we think it is. Philosophers from the last few centuries have also continued themes which are extremely Platonic in nature. Humankind, they theorize, may actually be living inside Plato’s cave.

### **The Holographic Paradigm**

Several scientists around the globe have performed experiments whose results were not readily understandable under known physical law. The results of these experiments have led these scientists to create what they call the holographic paradigm.

In 1982, a physicist at the University of Paris, Alain Aspect, found that:



under certain circumstances subatomic particles such as electrons are able to instantaneously communicate with each other regardless of the distance separating them. It doesn't matter whether they are 10 feet or 10 billion miles apart. Somehow each particle always seems to know what the other is doing. The problem with this feat is that it violates Einstein's long-held tenet that no communication can travel faster than the speed of light. Since traveling faster than the speed of light is tantamount to breaking the time barrier, this daunting prospect has caused some physicists to try to come up with elaborate ways to explain away Aspect's findings. But it has inspired others to offer even more radical explanations.<sup>35</sup>

One of these "others" is University of London physicist David Bohm. He believes that Aspect's findings tell us that the objective reality of the universe as we know it does not exist. Rather, the universe is a gigantic hologram, a kind of "whole in every part" structure, where each part of the universe contains all the information contained in every other part, just like a hologram. This explains Aspect's findings because it says that the apparent separateness of the electrons is just an illusion. As he explains, "at some deeper level of reality such particles are not individual entities, but are actually extensions of the same fundamental something."<sup>36</sup> Bohm further clarifies that

apparent faster-than-light connection between subatomic particles is really telling us that there is a deeper level of reality we are not privy to, a more complex dimension beyond our own . . . we view objects such as subatomic particles as separate from one another because we are seeing only a portion of their reality. Such particles are not separate 'parts', but facets of a deeper and more underlying unity that is ultimately . . . holographic and indivisible.<sup>37</sup>

Our current understanding of the universe as distinct parts that make up a whole could be incorrect. In truth, our universe may be a whole with an infinite array of interconnectedness.

Another scientist's studies of the brain also support this holographic nature of reality. Stanford neurophysiologist Karl Pribram became fascinated in the way the brain stores memories. In his experiments with rats, he found it impossible to remove certain memories of rats, no matter what part of the brain he removed in surgery. Pribram concluded that the only explanation for this phenomenon was that the brain also acts like

a hologram where memories are contained in “patterns of nerve impulses that crisscross the entire brain in the same way that patterns of laser light interference crisscross the entire area of a piece of film containing a holographic image.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, the brain contains memories not in a specific part of the brain, but in nerve impulses across the whole brain.

Pribram has also theorized that since the brain is like a hologram, it functions as a hologram, encoding and decoding frequencies that are received through the senses. Light is received in different frequencies, as is sound, etc. Our mind does the computing to decode these frequencies and constructs the reality that we know and experience.

However, as Michael Talbot explains to us,

the most mind-boggling aspect of Pribram’s holographic model of the brain is what happens when it is put together with Bohm’s theory. For if the concreteness of the world is but a secondary reality and what is ‘there’ is actually a holographic blur of frequencies, and if the brain is also a hologram and only selects some of the frequencies out of this blur and mathematically transforms them into sensory perceptions, what becomes of objective reality? Put quite simply, it ceases to exist.<sup>39</sup>

So our objective reality may not be what we think it is. In fact, our whole *universe* may be something quite different than what we think it is. Talbot continues:

As the religions of the East have long upheld, the material world is Maya, an illusion, and although we may think we are physical beings moving through a physical world, this too is an illusion. We are really ‘receivers’ floating through a kaleidoscopic sea of frequency, and what we extract from this sea and transmogrify into physical reality is but one channel from many extracted out of the superhologram.<sup>40</sup>

What we know as the physical world may not be physical at all. We may be living in a frequency pool and simply interpreting those frequencies into what we consider the reality of our existence. However you choose to interpret Aspect’s findings about the behavior of subatomic particles, one thing is certain. As Basil Hiley, a London physicist said “we must be prepared to consider radically new views of reality.”<sup>41</sup>

The holographic paradigm presents a view of reality that in many ways reveals that we may actually be prisoners in a cave and that cave may indeed be our own minds. In this scheme, our minds present a physical reality that is not actually there but that is an illusion, almost precisely the same concept that Plato taught over two thousand years ago in ancient Greece.

In an interview with David Bohm in Copenhagen in 1989, Bohm's new worldview of the universe as a "whole in every part" was addressed. The impact this new worldview may have on society is very much like the impact the truth would have on a freed prisoner of Plato's cave. When asked how his new notion might be accepted in the world, Bohm responded:

The psychological attitude to this new worldview could be one of feeling happy to be liberated, or feel that your old worldview crumples. You may want to hold on to your old worldview or you may feel happy that you're free of it. I think people are becoming less satisfied with the old worldview as it presents a fragmentary view, with all sorts of problems and incoherence in society.<sup>42</sup>

Bohm also explained that "In the long run it is far more dangerous to adhere to illusion than to face what the actual fact is."<sup>43</sup>

In Plato's cave, the freed prisoner initially wants to return to his prior state because he is more comfortable there, but then when he sees the true reality he feels great joy in freedom and knowledge. However, back in the cave, the prisoners scoff at the freed man and cling to their worldview of the shadows on the wall.

So is the physical reality we see around us real? How do we know for sure? How do we know if we are merely dreaming? These are questions that only time will answer. However, for the time being, it is fascinating to consider these alternate understandings of reality.

## The Fermi Paradox

Another scientific argument for a particular strangeness in our universe is what is known as the Fermi Paradox. Scientists across the globe have spent decades looking for extraterrestrial intelligence. The fact that none has been found remains perplexing.

Stephen Baxter explains that,

Because the likely time scales of the expansion of a civilization through the galaxy are so much shorter than the age of the galaxy itself, and given the evolution of at least one intelligent race (ourselves), we should have overwhelming evidence of the existence of others. But we don't. <sup>44</sup>

Baxter tells us there are many possible reasons for this. Some options are “filters” that destroy intelligences before they make themselves known to us, or the “zoo hypothesis” in which other civilizations are consciously concealing themselves from us. The problem comes in terms of consistency. Either every intelligent species would end up destroyed, as in the filter theory, or they would be forced to follow rules of concealing themselves, as in the zoo hypothesis. As Baxter explains, “The Paradox is surely telling us that something is fundamentally wrong with our universe and our place in it: There is something wrong with the world, indeed.” <sup>45</sup> This was also Neo’s predicament in *The Matrix* and the one that eventually freed him from the Matrix. He realized something was wrong with the world.

## The Planetarium Hypothesis

Stephen Baxter presented a theory which he thinks is a solution to the Fermi Paradox. He highlighted this theory in his article, “The Planetarium Hypothesis: A Resolution of the Fermi Paradox,” in the *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society* in the May/June issue of 2001. His theory can be summarized as follows:

What if we have been placed in some form of ‘planetarium,’ perhaps generated using an advanced virtual reality technology, designed to give us the illusion of an

empty universe—while beyond the walls with their painted stars, the shining lights of extraterrestrial civilizations glow unseen? <sup>46</sup>

This would certainly account for the Fermi Paradox, and our failure to find other life in the universe. This view is very much like *The Truman Show*'s premise, except in the Planetarium Hypothesis, the artificial environment would have to be at least the size of the solar system for us to be unable to detect it. It would also have to be extremely energy-hungry, since it would have to be able to perfectly simulate the natural world around us. Baxter explains that “the scope of the simulation will naturally impose different requirements on its builders... but a primary quality required of any such planetarium is, of course, its ability to fool inhabitants at least as smart as ourselves into believing that what they see is real.” <sup>47</sup>

The puppeteers of this galactic size planetarium would have to be very careful in their presentation of the simulation, “otherwise curious fact-hunters like humans would inevitably, in the end, find a flaw.” <sup>48</sup> People like David Bohm and Karl Pribram believe they have discovered such a flaw (like Neo's déjà vu “glitch” in *The Matrix*). It is the best explanation for certain quantum phenomena observed which do not obey the physical laws of the universe as we know it. If we have indeed found a flaw in the fabric of the universe, we are as Plato's prisoners in the cave beginning to turn our heads for the first time.

## The Simulation Argument

Even modern-day philosophy exhibits Plato's theories about the world. Several well-known and respected philosophers have voiced their thoughts in this area.

Nick Bostrom, a philosopher at Yale University, has asked, “Are you living in a computer simulation?” <sup>49</sup> That might sound like a funny question; however, how would you know if you were? Bostrom has suggested that

we may all be living in a Matrix developed by a post-human society of the future. . . The argument goes like this. You may be living in the ‘original’ version of history—but there’s only one copy of that, while there are many more (infinitely many?) possible simulations of history. So, if you imagine your consciousness as a counter dropped at random into any one of the possible reality frames, it’s a lot more likely you’d find yourself dropped into a sim than the real thing.<sup>50</sup>

Not only does Bostrom give us this strange and unbelievable theory of our world, but he also tells us that we are “overwhelmingly *likely* to be living in such a simulation.”<sup>51</sup>

Though this might seem like an incredible idea, when paralleled by the same type of concept from a well-known author such as computer programmer Stephen Wolfram, it cannot be ignored. In his popular and groundbreaking book *A New Kind of Science*, Wolfram describes this universe as a giant computer running a program of what Wolfram terms “cellular automata,” and possibly an artificial reality created by an unknown entity. Another author, David Deutsch, in his book *The Fabric of Reality*, speaks of the possibility of parallel universes. As Cypher tells Neo in *The Matrix*, “buckle your seatbelt, Dorothy, because Kansas is going bye-bye.” Why so many theories about a virtual or simulated reality? Why do so many people think our world as we know it has a problem? We will discuss this further at a later point.

## Descartes

The seventeenth century philosopher Rene Descartes also shared many of these same ideas. In fact, in some very specific ways, Descartes wrote some parts of *The Matrix* movie more than 400 years ago. (Although he lived during the seventeenth century, he is still a fairly contemporary philosophical figure in comparison to ancients like Plato and Aristotle.) The concept of “creating deceptive artificial environments dates back at least as far as Descartes, who . . . speculated on the philosophical implications of a sense-manipulating ‘demon’ – effectively a pre-technological virtual-reality generator.”

<sup>52</sup> Descartes was very specific in his interpretation of how this demon might be fooling

humankind. Lou Marinoff, an Associate Professor of Philosophy at The City College of New York, said,

When Descartes speculates that some “evil genius” may be deceiving us entirely about the nature of reality, so that for all we know we are merely “brains in vats” hard-wired to simuli-generating devices that make us think we have bodies and lives, Descartes has literally anticipated the holding tanks and program architecture of *The Matrix*.<sup>53</sup>

Descartes had seen the vats of “goo” that hold Neo and humankind prisoner to the virtual reality that is fed into their minds. It is not unreasonable to assume that the writers and directors of *The Matrix*, the Wachowskis, adopted this image from Descartes’ writings for use in their film.

Descartes also wrote about our senses and about how we may be deceived by them because of their faulty nature. How can we know anything for sure about the reality of the world around us if we cannot trust our senses? In his well-known *Meditations*, Descartes presents it thus:

All that up to the present time I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to any thing by which we have once been deceived.

Then he continues with, yet again, the dream allusion which we have discussed previously as described in various cultures:

In addition, I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself (things that are not there). . . How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed! At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend my hand and perceive it; what happens in sleep does not appear so clear nor so distinct as does all this. But in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream.<sup>54</sup>

So was Descartes dreaming when he wrote *Meditations*? If he was, we must be part of his dream, for we have his writings. He was obviously concerned with his senses feeding his mind improper or unreal images or shadows instead of true things. The concept of imprisonment in a cave due to faulty senses and the inability to perceive the difference between dreams in sleep and wakeful consciousness troubled Descartes.

## Subjective Idealism (Phenomenalism)

Similar philosophical themes of not knowing the true reality of the world around us can also be seen in the teachings of 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, George Berkeley, also called Bishop Berkeley. He was a strong proponent of the concept of subjective idealism, or what is sometimes called phenomenalism. In this theory of perception, the relationship between human experience of the world and the world itself is that we cannot know if an object is—we can only know if an object is perceived by a mind.<sup>55</sup> Objects are simply groupings of sensory information in those people who perceive them. Therefore, reality is ultimately made up of mental objects.

Again we see philosophers explaining that we cannot know for certain if a table is really sitting in front of us, we can only know that our eyes are receiving that visual information. The table may not be there at all. This is what Plato would call a shadow on the cave wall.

## LDS Theology

We have seen how Plato's philosophy of the cave is found in many aspects of modern culture and thought. Could such radical ideas and strange perceptions of the world also be found in Christianity, or even in LDS theology? We will discuss this issue



as well as possible explanations for this steady stream of skepticism related to reality throughout history and in our present day.

## Why do we see Plato's cave everywhere?

For many millennia, mankind has played the part of the skeptic when it comes to this world and its purposes. People innately understand that this world is not what it appears to be, that there is something more to our being here. John Shirley recounts,

The emergence of a remarkable number of films questioning reality – each suggesting a sinister puppeteer, pointing to a kind of dreamy lostness prevailing in the median consciousness of the industrialized world – seems a defined cultural current, however unplanned, emerging from a tacit consensus about our condition. What is it we're trying to tell ourselves with *The Matrix* and all these other films on the same theme? <sup>56</sup>

A host of filmmakers seem to be producing films centered around the very same plot. So what is it that drives this trend? Shirley continues,

Every thoughtful person knows that something is fundamentally wrong in the world – that we usually see the shadows on the cave wall and not that which casts them – and thus the fundamental message in “The Matrix” is one that we on some level ache to hear. We hunger to have our nagging intuition confirmed, as that confirmation entails hope that once the problem is identified, a solution will be found. And freedom will become possible. <sup>57</sup>

This confusing situation is felt deeply by Neo in *The Matrix*:

Morpheus: I can see it in your eyes. You have the look of a man who accepts what he sees because he is expecting to wake up. Ironically, this is not far from the truth. Do you believe in fate, Neo?

Neo: No.

Morpheus: Why not?

Neo: Because I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life.

Morpheus: I know exactly what you mean. Let me tell you why you're here.

You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain. But

you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Neo: The Matrix.

A similar vein of thought has been felt by many of the greatest minds in the history of the world. In the public sphere, these people spoke of lofty ideals and of future conquests of humanity, while behind closed doors, they lamented their situation. The poet A. E. Houseman eloquently penned, “When men at whiles are sober, and think by fits and starts. And if they think, they fasten their hands upon their hearts.”<sup>58</sup> They realized that there was something fundamentally lacking in their comprehension of the world and their life. As LDS scholar Hugh Nibley would put it, they were plagued by the terrible questions. Where did I come from? What am I supposed to do here? Where am I going once my life here is done?

What is humanity missing in their understanding of the reality of the world? Why did Plato and many since him question the world around them, believing that something was fundamentally wrong with the universe? I believe it is because they were devoid of the true gospel of Jesus Christ which liberates mankind from this kind of ignorance of the reality of our existence. Our existence in the universe, quite simply, does not make sense unless you know and understand and participate in the true gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the key to the chains that bind us in Plato’s cave. It frees us from the shadow dance on the wall into the light of truth.<sup>59</sup> Jesus Christ quite profoundly stated that, “For behold, I am the Father, I am the light, and the life, and the truth of the world.”<sup>60</sup>

Many connections can be made between Plato’s cave and Christianity. For example, this scripture found in John 3:19-21 reads:

And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

A strong comparison rests between this scripture and the prisoners in the cave who choose to remain watching the shadows on the wall, hating anyone who tries to pry them away, rather than being freed to come into the light of the truth. This kind of doctrine is repeated many times throughout Christian scripture. I believe, however, that there is only one gospel today that is truly successful in bringing people into the light of the truth of the world and their existence. This is the gospel of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the only one that can liberate mankind from the “splinters” in their minds.

## In the world but not of the world

There is a popular phrase in Christianity, and even LDS culture, that at first glance seems innocent enough. However, upon further inspection, it is found to be untrue. Many times we are taught that we must be “in the world but not of the world.” LDS scholar Hugh Nibley says, “That happens to be a convenient parascripture (we have quite a few of them today), invented by a third-century Sophist (Diognetos) [sic], to the great satisfaction of the church members, who were rapidly becoming very worldly.”<sup>61</sup> We often use this parascripture to justify our lives in the world as we try to stay out of the world. But as Brigham Young told us, “Come out of the world. We like to have both today. There is nothing in the world more painful and hard that will tear you apart like trying to have it both ways at once.”<sup>62</sup>

So what exactly did this Diognetus say? It actually wasn't Diognetus, but an unknown writer sending an epistle to Diognetus during a time of severe Christian persecution, sometime between the time of the apostles and the empire of Constantine. It

is in response to Diognetus' desire to know more about the religion of the Christians. <sup>63</sup>

This unknown writer, sometimes referred to as Mathetes, says,

To sum up all in one word – what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world. <sup>64</sup>

And so the phrase became known – “in the world but not of the world.”

Again Nibley explains that this epistle was the first record implying that we can be in the world and not of the world and still succeed. He says, “People were worried because the church was getting too popular. As Brigham Young said, nothing could be worse than to be a fine popular church and have the world approve of us. Then we would know we were of the world, a very bad sign.” <sup>65</sup> So this person invented this parascripture to accommodate the Saints being in the world, rather than the Saints changing themselves to live their religion.

Jesus Christ often taught that you cannot be “in the world but not of the world.” Said he, “For all that is in the world . . . is not of the Father, but is of the world.” <sup>66</sup> Clearly, all that is in the world, of necessity, is of the world and not of God. In fact, it is probably this scripture that was altered to become the parascripture used in the Epistle to Diognetus—a convenient change, but one that completely altered its meaning. Again Jesus tells us, “If ye were of the world, the world would love his own . . . but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.” <sup>67</sup> Jesus is plainly telling us that his followers are not to be in the world at all. “I have chosen you out of the world,” he says. And again, “I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” <sup>68</sup>

Jesus teaches his disciples and followers that they are not to be in the world anymore. He calls them out of the world. And since they are no more in the world, the

world hates them. This is similar to the situation of the freed prisoner of Plato's cave. The prisoner was freed from his "world," or from the reality of the shadows on the wall to a higher truth. In spite of this achievement, all the other prisoners could do was laugh at him for his folly. "Why did he turn his head around and look at the light?" they laughed. "He is only going to hurt his eyes that way."

So Christ has called his people out of the world, and sometimes in a very literal sense. Hugh Nibley has often called this the Rekhabite principle:

Long before the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, Robert Eisler called attention to the existence of societies of ancient sectaries, including the early Christians, who fled to the desert and formed pious communities there, after the manner of the order of Rekhabites (Jeremiah 35:4). . . No aspect of the gospel is more fundamental than that which calls the Saints out of the world; it has recently been recognized as fundamental to the universal apocalyptic pattern, and is now recognized as a basic teaching of the prophets of Israel, including the Lord himself.

In a way, the gospel calls the Saints out of the cave and into the light, or out of the world and into Zion:

It is the central theme of the Book of Mormon, and Lehi's people faithfully follow the correct routine of flights to the desert as their stories now merge with new manuscript finds from the Dead Sea and elsewhere. And while many Christian communities have consciously sought to imitate the dramatic flight into the wilderness, from monastic orders to Pilgrim Fathers, only the followers of Joseph Smith can claim the distinction of a wholesale, involuntary and total expulsion into a most authentic wilderness.<sup>69</sup>

Again Nibley tells us, "The Lord has repeatedly commanded and forced his people to flee out of the world into the wilderness, quite literally; there is only one way to avoid becoming involved in the neighborhood brawls, and that is to move out of the neighborhood."<sup>70</sup>

Of course we may ask, how am I supposed to live if I can't live in the world? I'm a physical person aren't I? Nibley helps us understand what is meant by the term "world." These are some of the things that are associated with that word: all things are for sale, you can buy anything, Satan is the God of this world, great and spacious building,

Babylon, Rome, Roman Empire, great and abominable church, whoever fights against Israel, carnal (cleansing products, hairdos, body building, clothes, cars), sensual, external appearance, temporal things (shampoos, foods, curatives, investments, money lines).<sup>71</sup> All these things are going to pass away very quickly – “you aren’t going anywhere if you put your mind on these things.”<sup>72</sup>

In other words, these are the things that we are commanded by the Lord to flee from, to get away from. “Go ye out from Babylon,”<sup>73</sup> is the call. And what if we stay behind? “I will not spare any that remain in Babylon,”<sup>74</sup> is the reply. Not only are we supposed to get out of the cave, but if we stay in this ignorant state we will die. The scriptures continue, “Come out of her [Babylon, or the world], my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.”<sup>75</sup> In Isaiah 52:11 we read, “Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her (Babylon); be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD.”

The Prophet Brigham Young has often clarified this subject. “We have been called out of the world,” he teaches, “therefore the world hates us. If we were of the world, then the world would love its own, and we should have no trouble with them.”<sup>76</sup> The prophet continues on the same note, “the testimony of God’s servants has sounded like the voice of a trumpet from nation to nation, and from people to people, warning the honest and meek of the earth to flee from Babylon to the chambers in the mountains for safety until the indignation shall be past.”<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, Latter-day Saints often even sing to this refrain in their meetings – “O Babylon, O Babylon, we bid thee farewell. We’re going to the mountains of Ephraim to dwell.”<sup>78</sup>

Our only excuse for being in the world is to help get others out of it. “In short,” Nibley explains, “the saints must be in the world to do their dangerous work of recruiting other saints out of the world.”<sup>79</sup> The missionary work of the church is threefold: bring the

gospel to the world, to the dead, and to ourselves. We are trying to help everyone exit the cave. This is just like Plato's prisoner returning to cave to tell those still staring at the shadows the good news found outside and that they are living a lie. And yet, as we have discovered, many resist the change and continue to live their lives in ignorance. LDS missionaries will tell you that they have encountered plenty of this type of person, and that they have been laughed at and even threatened with death, just as in Plato's cave.

In Hugh Nibley's book, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, volume 4, he compares Nephi's missionary work in third Nephi chapter 7 specifically to Plato's cave. After seeing the people turning from righteousness to wickedness, Nephi desires to go in and preach the truth among them:

Then he (Nephi) has powerful motivation here. From his vantage point everything is black. Remember Plato's cave? In this world we're in a dark cave. The real world, the sun, is shining from behind our backs, but we're facing the wall here. We see our shadows on the wall, and we say 'That's the real world. That's the real thing.' And when we get on the outside, we're absolutely dazzled—we're blinded by it. We want to get back to our comfortable real world, which is actually in the dark. That's what you have here. Verse 16: 'Therefore, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, (he) went forth among them to testify,' and minister to them. From his vantage point they were in the cave. He was grieved to see them there, and he went forth to minister to them. <sup>80</sup>

Indeed, missionary work is like the freed prisoner returning to tell the glorious news to the others in the cave. Bildad the Shuhite probably understood Plato when he said in Job 8:9, "For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow."

In the *Clementine Recognitions*, the mysterious Clement is having his first gospel conversation with Peter. He too experiences what many other great minds feel when the world and human existence do not quite make sense. Clement was plagued by the "terrible questions" and had gone to various philosophers' schools trying to find the

answers to the questions. However, all he found was a competition of rhetoric, and no real answers. Nibley tells us of the conversation when Clement met the apostle Peter:

Peter compares the world in which we live to a great house filled with dense smoke—blinding smoke produced by human unbelief, malice, ambition, greed, etc. Because of this smoke, the people who live in the house can see nothing clearly, but we must imagine them groping about with weak and running eyes, coughing and scolding, bumping into each other, tripping over furniture, trying to make out a bit of reality here and there—a corner, a step, a wall—and then trying to fit their desperate and faulty data together to make some kind of sense.<sup>81</sup>

Peter's allegory strongly reminds us of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. In Peter's allegory, the people of the world are bewildered and ignorant of reality and truth because of the smoke that blinds their eyes. They only know parts and pieces of the truth, which serves to confuse them even more. Peter gives Clement the answer to all this confusion:

There is only one possible way to get any sure knowledge either of the building or its builder, and that is to consult one who has come from the pure air of the outside where he has viewed the house with clear detachment and spoken with its builder. Such as clear view comes only by revelation and can only be conveyed to men, Peter insists again and again, by a true prophet.<sup>82</sup>

Peter knows that the truth about the world can only come from one who has visited outside “the cave,” seen it as it really is with their own eyes, and come back to tell the others. This person can only be a true prophet of God and the only true prophets during this recent dispensation of the world are those that began with Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was called of God, released from the cave of ignorance into the light, and his mission was to take the light to the rest of the world. Every prophet since Joseph Smith has tried to do the same thing. As noted previously, Joseph Smith was martyred by those “prisoners” still in the cave, who refused to accept the truth of the light.

Hyrum L. Andrus, a gospel scholar from Brigham Young University, has related the gospel well to Plato's cave:



We may thus conclude that attaining the good life is not primarily an intellectual, but a spiritual, process. To set this fact in contrast with the position taken by some who falsely call themselves liberals, may I refer to Plato's illustration of the cave, which he likened to the ignorance and darkness of the world, out of which man must emerge by the power of his intellect into the light of reason and truth. Following Plato's emphasis on the supremacy of human intellect, this class of liberals inquires, 'Have you intellectually emerged from the cave?' But a true Latter-day Saint liberal would ask, 'Have ye spiritually been born of God?' <sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

The concepts that Plato thought, taught, and wrote about in *The Republic* during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, especially his well-known Allegory of the Cave, have been visible throughout history even into our present time. Whether it was Plato himself and what he wrote that directly influenced those who came after him, or whether these thinkers found the same concepts on their own is hard to determine. One way or the other, humanity has found that we are trapped in the cave of this world and that we must free ourselves in order to experience the truth. The significance of Plato's cave can be seen on multiple levels. The aching of the human soul for something more in this world, or the intuition that there is something missing in our existence, I believe, is due to the fact that most of humankind does not enjoy the truths of the restored gospel as found in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The true gospel gives the answers to the "terrible questions" that have plagued mankind for centuries. We know where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going after this life and into the eternities. This knowledge certainly liberates the Saints from fruitless conclusions to these types of soul-searching inquiries.

On an even more specific level, John A. Widstoe, a former member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the church, when discussing Plato's cave said:

With reference to our absolute knowledge of the phenomena of nature, this splendid comparison is as correct today as it was in the days of Plato, about 400 B.C.; we are only as prisoners in a great cave, watching shadows of passing

objects thrown upon the cavern wall, and reflecting upon the real natures of the things whose shadows we see. We know things only by their effects; the essential nature of matter, ether and energy is far from our understanding. . . It is also true that very seldom is the mind able to comprehend why certain causes, save the simpler ones, should produce certain effects. In that respect we are again nothing more than Plato's cave prisoners, seeing the shadows of ultimate realities.<sup>84</sup>

## Appendix A

### The Allegory of the Cave<sup>6</sup>

“Next, then,” I said, “take the following parable of education and ignorance as a picture of the condition of our nature. Imagine mankind as dwelling in an underground cave with a long entrance open to the light across the whole width of the cave; in this they have been from childhood, with necks and legs fettered, so they have to stay where they are. They cannot move their heads round because of the fetters, and they can only look forward, but light comes to them from fire burning behind them higher up at a distance. Between the fire and the prisoners is a road above their level, and along it imagine a low wall has been built, as puppet showmen have screens in front of their people over which they work their puppets.”

“I see,” he said.

“See, then, bearers carrying along this wall all sorts of articles which they hold projecting above the wall, statues of men and other living things, made of stone or wood and all kinds of stuff, some of the bearers speaking and some silent, as you might expect.”

“What a remarkable image,” he said, “and what remarkable prisoners!”

“Just like ourselves,” I said. “For, first of all, tell me this: What do you think such people would have seen of themselves and each other except their shadows, which the fire cast on the opposite wall of the cave?”

“I don’t see how they could see anything else,” said he, “if they were compelled to keep their heads unmoving all their lives!”

“Very well, what of the things being carried along? Would not this be the same?”

“Of course it would.”

”Suppose the prisoners were able to talk together, don’t you think that when they named the shadows which they saw passing they would believe they were naming things?”

“Necessarily.”

“Then if their prison had an echo from the opposite wall, whenever one of the passing bearers uttered a sound, would they not suppose that the passing shadow must be making the sound? Don’t you think so?”

“Indeed I do,” he said.

“If so,” said I, “such persons would certainly believe that there were no realities except those shadows of handmade things.”

“So it must be,” said he.

“Now consider,” said I, “what their release would be like, and their cure from these fetters and their folly; let us imagine whether it might naturally be something like this. One might be released, and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round, and to walk and look towards the firelight; all this would hurt him, and he would be too much dazzled to see distinctly those things whose shadows he had seen before. What do you think he would say, if someone told him that what he saw before was foolery, but now he saw more rightly, being a bit nearer reality and turned towards what was a little more real? What if he were shown each of the passing things, and compelled by questions to answer what each one was? Don’t you think he would be puzzled, and believe what he saw before was more true than what was shown to him now?”

“Far more,” he said.

“Then suppose he were compelled to look toward the real light, it would hurt his eyes, and he would escape by turning them away to the things which he was able to look at, and these he would believe to be clearer than what was being shown to him”

“Just so,” said he.

“Suppose, now,” said I, “That someone should drag him thence by force, up the rough ascent, the steep way up, and never stop until he could drag him out into the light of the sun, would he not be distressed and furious at being dragged; and when he came into the light, the brilliance would fill his eyes and he would not be able to see even one of the things now called real?”

“That he would not,” said he, “all of a sudden.”

“He would have to get used to it, surely, I think, if he is to see the things above. First he would most easily look at shadows, after that images of mankind and the rest in water, lasting the things themselves. After this he would find it easier to survey by night the heavens themselves and all that is in them, gazing at the light of the stars and moon, rather than by day the sun and the sun’s light.”

“Of course.”

“Last of all, I suppose, the sun; he could look on the sun itself by itself in its own place, and see what it is like, not reflections of it in water or as it appears in some alien setting.”

“Necessarily,” said he.

“And only after all this he might reason about it, how this is he who provides seasons and years, and is set over all there is in the visible region, and he is in a manner the cause of all things which they saw.”

“Yes, it is clear,” said he, “that after all that, he would come to this last.”

“Very good. Let him be reminded of his first habitation, and what was wisdom in that place, and of his fellow-prisoners there; don’t you think he would bless himself for the change, and pity them?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“And if there were honors and praises among them and prizes for the one who saw the passing things most sharply and remembered best which of them used to come before and which after and which together, and from these was best able to prophesy accordingly what was going to come—do you believe he would set his desire on that, and envy those who were honored men or potentates among them? Would he not feel as Homer says, and heartily desire rather to be serf of some landless man on earth and to endure anything in the world, rather than to opine as they did and to live in that way?”

“Yes indeed,” said he, “he would rather accept anything than to live like that.”

“Then again,” I said, “just consider; if such a one should go down again and sit on his old seat, would he not get his eyes full of darkness coming in suddenly out of the sun?”

“Very much so,” said he.

“And if he should have to compete with those who had been always prisoners, by laying down the law about those shadows while he was blinking before his eyes were settled down—and it would take a good long time to get used to things—wouldn’t they all laugh at him and say he had spoiled his eyesight by going up there, and it was not worthwhile so much as to try to go up? And would they not kill anyone who tried to release them and take them up, if they could somehow lay hands on him and kill him?”

“That they would!” said he.

“Then we must apply this image, my dear Glaucon,” said I, “to all we have been saying. The world of our sight is like the habitation in prison, the firelight there to the sunlight here, the ascent and the view of the upper world is the rising of the soul into the world of mind; put it so and you will not be far from my own surmise, since that is what you want to hear; but God knows if it is really true. At least, what appears to me is, that in the world of the known, last of all, is the idea of the good, and with what toil to be

seen! And seen, this must be inferred to be the cause of all right and beautiful things for all, which gives birth to light and the king of light in the world of sight, and, in the world of mind, herself the queen produces truth and reason; and she must be seen by one who is to act with reason publicly or privately.”

“I believe as you do,” he said, “insofar as I am able.”

“Then believe also, as I do,” said I, “and do not be surprised, that those who come thither are not willing to have part in the affairs of men, but their souls ever strive to remain above; for that surely may be expected if our parable fits the case.”

“Quite so,” he said.

“Well then,” said I, “Do you think it surprising if one leaving divine contemplations and passing to the evils of men is awkward and appears to be a great fool, while he is still blinking—not yet accustomed to the darkness around him, but compelled to struggle in law courts or elsewhere about shadows of justice, or the images which make the shadows, and to quarrel about notions of justice in those who have never seen justice itself?”

“Not surprising at all,” said he.

“But any man of sense,” I said. “would remember that the eyes are doubly confused from two different causes, both in passing from light to darkness and from darkness to light; and believing that the same things happen with regard to the soul also, whenever he sees a soul confused and unable to discern anything he would not just laugh carelessly; he would examine whether it had come out of a more brilliant life, and if it were darkened by the strangeness; or whether it had come out of greater ignorance into a more brilliant light, and if it were dazzled with the brighter illumination. Then only would he congratulate the one soul upon its happy experience and way of life, and pity

the other; but if he must laugh, his laugh would be less down right laugh than his laughter at the soul which came out of the light above.”



## Notes

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23. Exploring the Matrix, Stephen Baxter, “The Real Matrix,” pg. 35.
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