

Talk to Midcity School for Seniors Hobart 8th March 2019

Is the World Really as I think it Is?

1 Introduction

My talk, entitled *Is the World Really as I think it is*, questions, in both a serious and a fun way, whether the perceptions we have through our senses give us true information about what is 'out there.' We receive information via our senses, but can we trust them? How do we know that they tell us the truth about how things really are? This is a big philosophical question.

To explore this question, I will be looking at an extract from Plato's *Republic*, famously known as the *Simile of the Cave*, the movie *The Matrix*, and make a brief reference to a mystical thinker, *George Ivanovich Gurdjieff*. If I have timed my talk correctly, there will be time for questions at the end. First, let us look at what *Philosophy* is.

2 Philosophy

Philosophy is the critical study of ideas. It considers important questions of life. Philosophy considers what words and concepts mean, and importantly, whether they mean what we think they do. Philosophy follows trains of thought, rather than meandering aimlessly. Philosophy can be done formally in an academic setting, by groups of interested, reflective people, or by individuals contemplating the big questions, such as there a God, or the meaning of life.

Philosophy deals with important, not trivial questions. The three major areas of philosophy are *metaphysics* – existence, *epistemology* – knowledge and *ethics* – human conduct. The two major types of questions that Philosophy asks are questions about *substance* – what something is, such as the question 'What is Justice?' and questions of *method*, sometimes referred to as *Socratic Questions*, such as 'What are you assuming here' or 'How do you know that – what is your evidence?'

A further distinction is between *closed* and *open* questions. Closed questions have a simple answer, such as 'Did you see him actually do that?' the answer being either 'yes' or 'no.' Open questions are much more interesting, as they lead to discussion and reflection, such as 'How do you know that you are not now living in the Matrix?'

At the end of the talk, I have a mixture of suggested questions for discussion - assuming there will be some time. As the talk proceeds, please make a note of suitable philosophical questions that you may think of that would be interesting to discuss. Not questions like 'How many books did Plato write?' as that is something you can look up. But questions like 'What was Plato trying to say in the *Simile of the Cave*?' would be much more interesting. As I will have been doing all the talking by then, I will facilitate the discussion, but the content will be up to you.

3 Plato

Plato lived in Athens during the 4th and 5th century BC. He was a pupil of Socrates and wrote extensively about Socrates after his death. Socrates was a rather eccentric figure who had upset the authorities by questioning the status quo. He would go around the market place asking questions about subjects such as truth and justice of all who would listen to and engage with him. The execution of Socrates for allegedly 'corrupting the youth' and 'worshipping false gods' along with the political upheavals of the time influenced Plato's thinking and philosophy.

Dissatisfied with the political leadership, Plato formed his own conception of how it should be. A key feature of his system was having the 'right knowledge.' Plato wrote about the ideal society in his work 'The Republic.' This work contains a very detailed analysis and description of what a society should be and how it should operate. One of the reasons that society failed to operate as it should was because humans did not have the right knowledge. They looked in the wrong places for the source of knowledge. For Plato, the true source of knowledge lies in the Forms.

4 *The Forms*

The 'Forms' are the ideal archetypes of all existing things and concepts of things. They exist in a 'supernatural' realm, distinct and separate from the world of ordinary existing things. The Forms are perfect. Things in the natural realm are imperfect copies. So if we defer to things in the natural realm as the exemplar of how things should be, we are falling short right from the start. To really know how things should be, we should contemplate the Forms, as they and only they will give us the information we need. In particular, we need to contemplate *The Form of the Good*.

Knowledge from the Forms, however, would be so much clearer, real and correct than the knowledge we gain here on earth, that we may not recognise it for what it is. We may, in fact, deny it, choosing instead to believe that all of our false beliefs about how things are and how they should be are true. To illuminate his point, Plato presents the 'Simile of the Cave.' As with most of his writings, Plato uses Socrates as his mouthpiece. Socrates is conversing with Glaucon.

5 *The Simile of the Cave*¹

Socrates 'I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber like a cave, with a long entrance open to the daylight and as wide as the cave. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads.

Some way off, behind and higher up, a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets.

Imagine further that there are men carrying all sorts of gear along behind the curtain-wall, projecting above it and including figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and all sorts of other materials, and that some of these men, as you would expect, are talking and some are not. Do you think our prisoners could see anything of themselves or their fellows except the shadows thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite them?'

Glaucon 'How could they see anything else if they were prevented from moving their heads all their lives?'

Socrates 'And would they see anything more of the objects carried along the road?'

Glaucon 'Of course not.'

Socrates 'Then if they were able to talk to each other, would they not assume that the shadows they saw were the real things?'

Glaucon 'Inevitably.'

Socrates 'And if the wall of their prison opposite them reflected sound, don't you think that they would suppose, whenever one of the passers-by on the road spoke, that the voice belonged to the shadow passing before them?'

Glaucon "They would be bound to think so.'

Socrates 'And so in every way they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were the whole truth.'

Glaucon 'Yes, inevitably.'

Socrates 'Then think what would naturally happen to them if they were released from their bonds and cured of their delusions. Suppose one of them were let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk towards the fire; all the actions

¹ Ed. Betty Radcliffe, *Plato The Republic* 1979, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, England, pp 317-321.

would be painful and he would be too dazzled to see properly the objects which he used to see in the shadows.

What do you think he would say if he was told that what he used to see was so much empty nonsense and that he was now nearer reality and seeing more correctly, because he was turned towards objects that were more real, and if on top of that he were compelled to say what each of the passing object was when it was pointed out to him? Don't you think he would be at a loss, and think that what he used to see was far truer than the objects now being pointed out to him?'

Glaucon 'Yes, far truer.'

Socrates 'And if he were made to look directly at the light of the fire, it would hurt his eyes and he would turn back and retreat to the things which he could see properly, which he would think were really clearer than the things being shown him.'

Glaucon 'Yes.'

Socrates 'And if he were forcibly dragged up the steep and rugged ascent and not let go till he had been dragged out into the sunlight, the process would be a painful one, to which he would much object, and when he emerged into the light his eyes would be so dazzled by the glare of it that he wouldn't be able to see a single one of the things he was now told were real.'

Glaucon 'Certainly not at first'.

Socrates 'Because, of course, he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the upper world outside the cave. First, he would find it easiest to look at shadows, next at the reflections of men and other objects in water, and later on at the objects themselves. After that he would find it easier to observe the heavenly bodies and the sky itself at night, and to look at the light of the moon and stars rather than at the sun and its light by day.'

Glaucon 'Of course.'

Socrates 'The thing he would be able to do last would be to look directly at the sun itself, and gaze at it without using reflections in water or any other medium, but as it is in itself.'

Glaucon 'That must come last.'

Socrates 'Later on he would come to the conclusion that it is the sun that produces the changing seasons and years and controls everything in the visible world, and is in a sense responsible for everything that he and his fellow-prisoners need to see.'

Glaucon 'That is the conclusion which he would obviously reach.'

Socrates 'And when he thought of his first home and what passed for wisdom there, and of his fellow-prisoners, don't you think he would congratulate himself on his good fortune and be sorry for them?'

Glaucon 'Very much so.'

Socrates 'There was probably a certain amount of honour and glory to be won among the prisoners, and prizes for keen-sightedness for those best able to remember the order of the sequence among the passing shadows and so be best able to divine their future appearances. Will our released prisoner hanker after these prizes or envy this power or honour?'

Won't he be more likely to feel, as Homers says, that he would far rather be "a serf in the house of some landless man",² or indeed anything else in the world, than hold the opinions and live the life that they do?'

Glaucon 'Yes, he would prefer anything to a life like theirs.'

² *Odyssey*, xi, 489.

Socrates “Then what do you think would happen, if he went back to sit in his old seat in the cave? Wouldn’t his eyes be blinded by the darkness, because he had come in suddenly out of the sunlight?”

Glaucon ‘Certainly.’

Socrates ‘And if he had to discriminate between the shadows, in competition with other prisoners, while he was still blinded and before his eyes got used to the darkness – a process that would take some time – wouldn’t he be likely to make a fool of himself? And they would say that his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting. And if anyone tried to release them and lead them up, they would kill him if they could lay hands on him.’

Glaucon ‘They certainly would.’

Socrates ‘Now, my dear Glaucon, this simile must be connected throughout with what preceded it. The realm revealed by sight corresponds to the prison, and the light of the fire in the prison to the power of the sun. And you won’t go wrong if you connect the ascent into the upper world and the sight of the objects there with the upward progress of the mind into the intelligible region. That at any rate is my interpretation, which is what you are anxious to hear; the truth of the matter is, after all, known only to God.

But in my opinion, for what it is worth, the final thing to be perceived in the intelligible region, and perceived only with difficulty, is the **Form of the Good**; once seen it is inferred to be responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything, producing in the visible region light and the source of light, and being in the intelligible region itself, the controlling source of truth and intelligence. And anyone who is going to act rationally either in public or private life must have sight of it.’

Plato goes on to explain how the Forms can be accessed, such as through *recollection* and *contemplation*. In other words, if we are to obtain true knowledge, we need to look beyond our comfort zone in this world, stop taking things for granted, and assuming that things are as we think they are. True knowledge lies beyond what is provided by normal sense experience.

6 *The Matrix*

In more recent times, the film series of ‘The Matrix’ poses a similar idea. The Matrix tells the story of Neo, a computer hacker, who discovers that the existence he thought was real was actually a computer simulation. His real existence is as a body connected by wires to a machine. The energy of his body, along with that of millions of others, is farmed by a machine society for their own use. What Neo thought were real experiences were merely computer generated scenarios in order to keep him functioning.

When Neo discovers his dilemma, he is faced with a choice. Does he choose the Blue Pill and stay in the delusion, protected from the shock of the real, seeing life only as he wants to see it? Or does he take the Red Pill, and embrace reality, with all its pitfalls, sufferings, and rewards?

7 *Gurdjieff*

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, a mystical thinker in the late 19th and early 20th century famously claimed that we are all ‘asleep.’ Not just what we call sleep, but a state of unconsciousness as to how things really are. Gurdjieff felt that humanity was in a malaise. We had lost touch with important facts about life. Along with his band of followers – the ‘Seekers after Truth,’ he travelled the world, seeking ancient lost wisdom. From what he discovered, he formed a system of self-improvement, through which individuals come to know his or her true self.

One of Gurdjieff’s claims is that there are levels of consciousness. Most people operate at the lower levels. Only a few evolved individuals can get out of his or her conditioning to reach the higher levels. If we waste our energy living at the lower levels, there is not sufficient to ascend to the higher levels. Consequently, most us are living in a delusion. We operate on automatic

pilot, never seeing things as they really are, and never reaching our full potential. Most of the time, we are 'asleep.'

8 *Summary and Conclusion*

The Simile of the Cave, The Matrix and the 'Gurdjieff Work' all in their own way tackle an age-old philosophical question of *appearance* and *reality*. What is really real? Is the world as I experience it the real world? Is myself as I experience it really myself? Do I live in an illusion about my life? Do I delude myself about myself?

Am I half asleep, operating on automatic pilot, blind to real facts of life and existence, coasting along on the surface of reality, and never really plumbing the depths?

While these questions interest us on an epistemological (knowledge) level and a metaphysical (existence) level, they matter crucially on an ethical level. If we do not perceive things as they *really are*, or I do not know myself as I *really am*, I could be making wrong decisions, taking wrong actions, and generally living in a deluded, false version of reality. What do you think?

9 *Suggested Questions for Discussion*

1. What do you think Plato was trying to say in the 'Simile of the Cave?'
2. What do you think the movie series of 'the Matrix' is trying to tell us?
3. Do you ever feel that you are 'asleep' and missing something important about life?
4. Is the world really as I think it is? How could I know?
5. How do you know that you are not living in the Matrix, hooked up to a machine, imagining the world that you think is real?
6. Do you know yourself as you *really are*?
7. What is your criterion for something to be 'real?'
8. What does it mean to be 'real?'
9. Can you really know anything for certain?