

**Life, the Universe and the ‘Onion’: A Study of Plato’s Allegorical Cave in Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy***

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**Abstract**

*As a science fiction novel, The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy (1979) has been widely successful, owing to its plot, addressing many facets about society and human nature that are well and truly universal. As a philosophical work, this novel presents itself as a fascinating puzzle - one that uses humor and irony to illustrate a pattern of behaviour that we often unconsciously deny the existence of. As the characters in Douglas Adams’ novel search for “the Ultimate answer to Life, the Universe and Everything”, they come across a curious paradox: any and all of their previous knowledge/ideas/experiences seem to hinder rather than help them on their quest.*

*In ancient Greece, long before science fiction was even a concept, the philosopher Plato encountered an identical conundrum. His “Allegory of the Cave” is a metaphor for the errors of man’s attempt to understanding reality. Like Adams’ characters, man is “blinded” by his own misconstrued knowledge of his experience. This philosophical model is still relevant today, but one must wonder whether more than two millennia of human advancement have at least partially cured us of this blindness. Have we finally been liberated from this cave? Or are we still trying to read the shadows on its walls?*

*This paper will reconstruct and highlight the appearance of Plato's cave in contemporary terms using The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy as a literary reference, while noting any changes seen in the dynamics of this cave brought upon by our evolution as a species.*

**Keywords:** *Plato, allegory, cave, universe, hitchhiker*

## **INTRODUCTION**

To the researchers of our scientific community, the universe has always been something which must be quantified. Everything must be measured, explained and tangible - and those elements that are not so are seen as incorrectly measured, and are re-exposed to the same process of measurement until they fit in to our design. The reason the "scientific method" is so accurate is because our "design" i.e, the system of formulae we use has proven to be accurate so far in predicting the way the observable universe works. Yet, does this make our method infallible? Accuracy does not guarantee perfection, and indeed even our scientific models are not flawless. For example, the equations we use to calculate gravity and Newtonian forces of large objects fall apart when applied to the molecular level. Similarly, the rules of quantum physics do not apply to large bodies, even though the forces dictate the way our very atoms function.

Clearly, our attempts to understand the universe in concrete terms are at best slightly flawed and at worst wholly incorrect. Yet we still cling to the system we originally created, not because we believe it to already be perfect, but because we think that we can improve it to be so (which is why even today the laws of science are being challenged and rewritten). It is an admirable notion; after all, centuries of human progress is dependent on each succeeding generation feeding off the knowledge of the one preceding it. But what happens to that dependency when it turns into a handicap? What happens when our process of measurement is unable to measure something? With nothing but millennia of incompatible knowledge at our disposal, will we be able to understand that thing at all? Worse still, will we even know it's there?

This is a paradox central to Plato's argument in Book 7 of his manuscript *Republic* (circa 380 BC), where he explains to the philosopher Socrates in metaphorical terms what he believes the plight of man to be. In essence, Plato envisioned a subterranean den, or cave, in which several humans were held prisoners. These men (for it was indeed men Plato saw - those were chauvinistic times) were chained to a wall of the cave, so that all they might ever see is a single wall, and the shadows created on it by them. Their understanding of the world is limited to these shadows. They are neither unaware of the fire behind them (owing to their

chains) nor even of their captivity. Next, Plato creates a scenario in which one of these prisoners is dragged outside the cave (note here that it is implied that his removal is against his will and not a saving action):

“And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he is forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.” (Plato, 2002)

The reluctance of the prisoner is because he is well acquainted to his reality of the cave. While the outside world may seem (to us) to be more vivid, detailed and interesting, Plato’s prisoner seems entirely blind to this allure. However, given time, the man realizes his folly. As his eyes adjust to the “blinding” light of the sun (which is akin to the blinding realization of the true nature of reality) he treasures his new knowledge:

“And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change, and pity them? Certainly, he would.” (Plato, 2002)

Such a man, should he be reintroduced to the cave will now be unable to see clearly in his old home, accustomed as his eyes are to the blinding light of the outside. To his peers in the cave, it would seem like their comrade’s sojourn outside only served to blind him. They would see the outside world as harmful, and out of fear would never venture outside of their own volition. In a similar fashion, the newly enlightened man would look to the life of the cave in disdain, as well as the people he can no longer properly relate to. Still, Plato believes that it is the duty of the enlightened man to descend into the cave and work with his inferiors, instead of simply living in the “upper” world and ignoring them. This is for the benefit of both the prisoners and the enlightened one, as the former is slowly lifted to enlightenment and the latter receives intelligent, effective members of state like himself.

The logic of this argument is inherently sound, but highly simplistic in its assumptions of man’s behavior (of course, it needs to be ambiguous if it were meant to encompass all humans in general). Plato does not account for what might happen over aeons of existence, how we may either adapt to our blindness or cure ourselves of it. Since his philosophy was meant to apply only to his time and not the future, this oversight can be forgiven; however Plato also does not give enough substance to the nature of the “shadows” he describes in the cave. Since these shadows mimic reality, surely there also exists some entity which controls and formulates these shadows. In her paper “Cinematic Spelunking inside Plato’s Cave” Maureen Eckhert identifies these shadow-makers as the following: “In my view it seems most likely that the puppeteers represent the poets and the script followed is the poly and theocentric worldview they sustain in their poetry. There is textual support for this notion.

Hesiod, Homer, and the traditional poets' views of the gods are first attacked in Book II of *The Republic*. There, when constructing the first law of the ideal republic, the poets' notions that the gods shapeshift, deceive and can behave unjustly are purged from the ideal society." (Eckert, 2012) This reveals a startling truth about our incarceration within the cave - we humans act both as jailer as well as inmate. The realities created by poets and the like create for us an imitation, or "shadow" of the real world, which we in our ignorance come to understand as reality. Although, to blame it entirely on our ignorance would be folly. It must be realized that art and poetry are beautified imitations of reality; in essence this means that experiencing them is deceptively enjoyable. It is our desire to believe the truth in poetry that contributes to our situation. As Eckert writes: "Their skill in representation - the crafting of images of the material world that is itself an image of the world of ideas - is too grave, seductive and dangerous a power ... The poets' accounts bestow meaning on the shadows that are reflections of the artifacts they manipulate. The consistency, coherence and comprehensiveness of their shadow-play causes the prisoners to remain enthralled in the shadowplay at the level of imagination." (Eckert, 2012)

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Pouyiouttas, Philippos** in "Plato's Allegory of the Cave in the Digital Era of the Internet, Web 2.0 Applications, Social Networks and Second Life – An Educational, Political and Social Interpretation" explores the lessons learnt from an analysis and interpretation of Plato's allegorical cave in the context of modern society and digital era. (Pouyiouttas, 2012)

**Mitta, Dimitra** in "Reading Platonic Myths from a Ritualistic Point of View: Gyges' Ring and the Cave Allegory" discusses how myths and worshipping practices can be detected in Plato's text. (Mitta, 2003)

**Zamosc, Gabriel** in "The Political Significance of Plato's Allegory of the Cave" claims that Plato's Cave is fundamentally a political, not an epistemological image, and that only by treating it as such can we appreciate correctly its relation to the images of the Sun and the Line. (Zamose, 2017)

**Eckert, Maureen** in "Cinematic Spelunking inside Plato's Cave" discusses on Plato's employment of entertainment technology of his time to construct the allegory of the cave. (Eckert, 2012)

**Malcolm, J.** in "The Cave Revisited" focuses on the state of the prisoners viewing shadows on the cave wall and that of the released prisoners, still in the cave, but turning around and looking at the puppets. This paper mainly looks at the significance of the various levels of education or moral awareness portrayed by the Cave. (Malcolm, 1981)

**Hall, Dale** in “Interpreting Plato’s Cave as an Allegory of the Human Condition” focuses on the predicament of the cave’s inmates, who represent our own condition, to symbolize the state of mind of those who lack the innate capacity to be philosophers in Plato’s sense. (Hall, 1980)

Research Gaps:

A critical review of existing literature suggests that even though research have been undertaken on the relevance of Plato’s ‘Allegorical Cave’ in the modern times, the focus has been varied and has ranged from educational, social and political to cinematic interpretations of the allegory.

No research seems to have been conducted on the allegory of the cave connecting it to Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhikers’ Guide*.

**METHODOLOGY**

The method adopted is Textual Analysis.

The methodology employed in the paper is an analysis of Douglas Adams’ text based on the theoretical framework of Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’.

**FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

For now, let us focus on the particular facet of human nature as described by Plato while we analyze *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979). Arthur Dent exists as the quintessential prisoner of our cave: the terms of his life are set in such a concrete fashion that he is quite institutionalized within it (chained to the wall of a cave) and he seems overtly content with that fact. In a certain sense, Arthur regresses even further than one of Plato’s prisoners, as the men in that story would at least be aware of a change within their own cave (such as a blind comrade returning home) but Arthur’s obliviousness to his situation borders on denial. Such is apparent when his home (his own personal cave) is about to be demolished without his realization:

“At eight o’clock on Thursday morning Arthur didn’t feel very good. He woke up blearily, got up, wandered blearily round his room, opened a window, saw a bulldozer, found his slippers, and stomped off to the bathroom to wash.” (Adams, 2017)

While the philosophy of Plato suggested a man from outside the cave saves the ones inside, it seems in this instance that the prisoner is one that may never leave even if is enticed by another. This is why, in order for Arthur to begin his journey of discovery, his cave had to be utterly destroyed or he would surely retreat back within it the moment he was pulled out. Before we play the blame-game with Arthur, it must be noted that we ALL show the same attachment to our caves as Arthur. Adams creates a poignant comment on this by describing

Earth and its people as “an utterly insignificant little blue green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.” (Adams, 2017) The true insult that lands upon injury here is when most of our race takes offence at the words “ape-descended”, or “primitive” (terms which are technically true), without realizing that Adams is truly mocking our concept of digital watches. After all, a watch calculates an arbitrary amount of time, designated by the motion of our “insignificant” planet around the sun. In terms of the galaxy, what does that concept of time even mean? Nothing at all. Yet to all of us within our cave (the Earth), this organization of time is an indispensable tool, one that dictates the functioning of our reality here. Think about this for a minute: Try to understand the idea of “time” without using our terminology for measuring it. We would hardly be able to even set up a meeting with a friend without using this system of measuring time; in fact were it not for our quantifying “time” into seconds, hours, days, years etc. we would not be able to understand it at all. The thought is as confusing as it is unsettling, and this is not lost on Arthur:

“A frightening thought struck him [Arthur]: “Hell,” he said, “how am I going to operate my digital watch now?” (Adams, 2017)

Arthur is just realizing that his watch measures the motion of a planet that no longer exists, in short, that his system while it may have been accurate to measure things in his cave, is entirely useless in the grand scheme of things. Like the freshly blinded prisoner, he longs for the familiarity of the darkness, and in order to be properly rehabilitated to the light of “reality”, he must repeatedly undergo blows to his faith in the established system, to counteract a lifetime of believing that it was foolproof.

It is here, in our opinion that the complexity of the modern human experience begins to tamper with the relative simplicity of Plato’s assumptions. In Plato’s mind, the prisoner when freed in the outside world is confused and disoriented by the brightness of the sun, but learns to translate images of “reality” instead of just shadows. He then is able to descend in the cave and teach his (unwilling) colleagues the same knowledge, but must do so gently:

“...our argument shows that the power and capacity of learning exists in the soul already; and that just as the eye was unable to turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too the instrument of knowledge can only by the movement of the whole soul be turned from the world of becoming into that of being, and learn by degrees to endure the sight of being, and of the brightest and best of being...” (Plato, 2002)

This is a logical enough assumption, and in Plato’s time it would stand true. However, as man evolved over the millennia, certain newer facets of the prisoner-cave relationship become apparent:

- Like Arthur, we have become heavily indentured within our cave. There is little to no hope of getting “pulled out”, as nothing short of the cave being destroyed will remove us from it.
- The “blindness” in the outer world erases a prisoner’s ability to understand things the way he once did in the cave. However, in his fear of being blind, a man in the outside world may turn his back on the sun and continue to observe only his shadows, as he once did in the cave. This is what Arthur tries desperately to do by checking “human time” and constantly making associations of the universe to his own tiny planet.
- Finally, Plato assumes all men of the “upper” world to be enlightened, yet with our previous premise we can assume that there may even be those from outside the cave that are blind in their own way.

Keeping this in mind, a disconcerting pattern emerges when we apply this knowledge to the allegory of the cave. If we maintain that the inside of the cave demarcates “ignorance” and the outside symbolizes “reality”, we see a two sided cave. However, if there should exist a middle ground where a prisoner believes he is seeing reality BUT it is only a reality which he still misunderstands, then this prisoner is still inside a cave, with true understanding of reality still existing in another external area. We see then that “the cave” is a many layered construct, and the prisoner’s only hope for salvation is the prisoner of the cave above him. Should it be up to us, we would even go so far as to rename “Plato’s Allegorical Cave” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as “Plato’s Allegorical Onion”: Our understanding of the universe is revealed in layers, and should we choose to strip these layers away, we reach closer to the core; at the expense of a few tears, of course.

The Onion model has pros and cons to its design. On the one hand, with humanity spread out over “layers” of understanding reality, the phenomenon of “cave blindness” exhibited by anyone moving from one layer of understanding to another becomes much more common, and we learn to accept rather than fear people coming forward with new ideas. This can be seen much more strongly in the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when new discoveries blow old ideas out of the water all the time. Moreover, with the sudden rise of enhanced telecommunications and the internet, this information is far more accessible to us, cave or no cave. Regarding this phenomenon, Philippos Pouyioutas writes:

“The emergence of the Internet and later of Web 2.0 has broken the chains of space and time that held us ‘prisoners’ for so many years to our own cave of restricted access to information. All this knowledge and information always existed outside our cave but access to it was hurdled by space and time limitations. Books, written articles and newspapers, telephone and television provided us with better access to our search for the truth, but only the emergence of the Internet really managed to break the chains.” (Pouyioutas, 2012)



In short, we may not be as indentured in our cave as Arthur was, as new concepts tend to keep us on our toes. On the other hand, we can find ourselves in a similar position as the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius, who in his *De rerum natura* pondered what would happen if he shot an arrow off the “edge of the Earth”. According to Lucretius, if the said arrow hits a wall, one must be able to climb that wall and shoot another arrow in the distance, doing the same every time it hits any walls. Either the arrow keeps finding new walls, or just flies forward forever. In both cases the universe is found to be infinite and boundless. Similarly, how do we know when we truly escape the cave? If it truly exists in layers, is it possible to see “true” reality, or would the layers just go on forever? The short answer is, Yes. After all, reality does exist, that’s what makes it... Real. However, it is our human understanding of reality that is woefully limited, and our attempts to explain the same are what gives substance to the layers of Plato’s Onion. And while all of us are ready to admit that we do not know everything, and are even ready to absorb new information, too often we are unready to accept that the few things we do know are incorrect. We can see this effect in play after Arthur and Ford have their first meeting with their soon to be friends: Tricia McMillian (Trillian), and Zaphod Beeblebrox (President of the Galaxy). In chapter 14 of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide*, the four protagonists are trying to rest after a rather stressful (and highly improbable) encounter with each other:

“Its crew of four were ill at ease knowing that they had been brought together not of their own volition or by simple coincidence, but by some curious principle of physics – as if relationships between people were susceptible to the same laws that governed the relationships between atoms and molecules.” (Adams, 2017)

All of a sudden, four people who have all the right reasons to be friends are discomfited by the exchange they just had. What could be the cause of it? As they try to rest in isolation, their introspection reveals a curious source for this collective disquiet.

“Trillian couldn't sleep. She sat on a couch and stared at a small cage which contained her last and only links with Earth – two white mice that she had insisted Zaphod let her bring. She had expected not to see the planet again, but she was disturbed by her negative reaction to the planet’s destruction. It seemed remote and unreal and she could find no thoughts to think about it.” (Adams, 2017)

Trillian originally came from the same cave that Arthur did - Earth (although Arthur was a layer deeper within Earth, the cave of his Home). She exists a “layer above” Arthur because of her decision to leave Earth and explore the outer layer of the Galaxy with Zaphod. She is uneasy because of both the caves she escaped from, and the one that she only just realized exists above her. Tricia is a character that was desperate to escape the layer of her existence because she knew more existed above her, and she thought she had reached the light of the



outside world. Meeting Arthur again provided more than just one unsettling revelation for her, she was forced to face certain feelings about losing her planet which she never knew she had, a planet she longed to leave behind. Realising she loved the planet was akin to acknowledging a love for a lesser evolved version of herself, a love for the ignorance of the cave. This comes hand in hand with the blow that she is in fact not on par with Zaphod as far as knowledge goes. She is slowly becoming aware of the existence of another layer above her

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“Zaphod couldn’t sleep. He also wished he knew what it was that he wouldn’t let himself think about. For as long as he could remember he’d suffered from a vague nagging feeling of being not all there. Most of the time he was able to put this thought aside and not worry about it, but it had been re-awakened by the sudden inexplicable arrival of Ford Prefect and Arthur Dent. Somehow it seemed to conform to a pattern that he couldn’t see.” (Adams, 2017)

Zaphod represents the layer of Plato’s Onion that exists closest to the true nature of reality, and paradoxically enough he enjoys this position not because of what he knows, but what he does NOT know (which borders on everything). Plato once said, “I am the wisest man alive, for if I know one thing, it is that I know nothing.” This platitude is more than fitting for Zaphod - not only is he infuriatingly stupid, he realizes later in the story that he actively had parts of his own brain disabled so that he could block out certain understandings of the universe. Why did he have to invasively remove certain ideas from his head, instead of just disregarding them? A standard reader may not understand, but to those who see Plato’s Onion in play it may just become apparent why certain knowledge actually impedes us from understanding the truth. We will leave an analysis of Zaphod’s antics for a little later, as now we focus solely on his discomfort. We see that curiously enough, Arthur’s arrival sets him off. Why is it that someone apparently on the outermost layers of understanding the universe would feel put out by the arrival of an Earthman from deep within the cave of ignorance? Could it be that Arthur, through his recent trauma is slowly developing a nihilistic mindset to rival the surgically altered blankness of Zaphod’s mind? Again, it’s a matter to be pursued in detail - the point of significance here is that so far, every person is shaken by their dissimilitude, owing from very differing positions within the Onion:

“Ford couldn’t sleep. He was too excited about being back on the road again. Fifteen years of virtual imprisonment were over, just as he was finally beginning to give up hope. Knocking about with Zaphod for a bit promised to be a lot of fun, though there seemed to be something faintly odd about his semi-cousin that he couldn’t put his finger on. The fact that he had become President of the Galaxy was frankly astonishing, as was the manner of his leaving the post. Was there a reason behind it? There would be no point in asking Zaphod, he never appeared to have a reason for anything he did at all.” (Adams, 2017)

Ford Prefect is the rendition of Plato's "enlightened man", not in the sense of one that knows the true nature of reality, but in the sense of one that travels in the cave to offer his knowledge (such as it is) to the other prisoners. However, the modern day enlightener also comes with a modern day agenda. Ford works as a writer for the 'Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy', supposedly a compendium of all knowledge regarding the universe and its multitude of inhabitants:

"It (The Hitchhiker's Guide) already supplanted the *Encyclopedia Galactica* as the standard repository of all knowledge and wisdom, for two important reasons. First, it's slightly cheaper; and secondly it has the words DON'T PANIC printed in large friendly letters on its cover." (Adams, 2017)

While public opinion certainly doesn't lie, there seems to be something overtly fishy about the reasons 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' (the guidebook described in the story) is deemed 'the standard repository of all knowledge and wisdom'. And while it deems true that the guide proves to be invaluable to Arthur in his misadventures, it is packed with bias, and a certain attention to pedantic details:

"The introduction begins like this: "Space," it says, "is big. Really big. You just won't believe how vastly hugely mindbogglingly big it is. I mean you may think it's a long way down the road to the chemist, but that's just peanuts to space. Listen..." and so on." (Adams, 2017)

Here is an element of the Cave which is the result of generations of (mostly redundant) knowledge coming together - creating a monolith of information whose power only comes from its immense history and contents, NOT from accuracy or relevancy. In her thesis "Excavating Plato's Cave", Marisa Diaz-Waian personifies this sort of modern entity by naming them as "mouthpiece interpreters". They are the misinformed prisoners who are seen as highly erudite (like the Hitchhiker's Guide handbook is perceived). They expound their knowledge as absolute truth, without ever realizing their folly. She writes: "... the mouthpiece interpreters are, to a certain extent, akin to the prisoners of Plato's cave. Now clearly, to suggest that said scholars are lacking intelligence or untrained in thought would be a ludicrous contention; this is not what I am suggesting. Rather, what is being implied is that mouthpiece interpreters seem to be stuck in the dark about the true purpose, it seems, of Plato's dialogues, particularly regarding their approach to Plato's works. Metaphorically speaking, their sight, like that of the prisoners, is misdirected. Ultimately, I am making a simple claim that advocates of such an approach seem to be, not ignorant, but rather "lovers of opinion rather than...lovers of wisdom and knowledge," insofar as they "[hold]...conventions...that [roll] around as intermediates between what is not and what purely is." (Diaz-Waian, 2012) Although the universe of the Hitchhiker's guide is chock full

of these mouthpiece interpreters, each with their own philosophies, it is sources like the Hitchhiker's Guide handbook which are especially dangerous because of the high credibility with which its information is accepted all over the Universe. One thing is clear: It is indeed a source of great information, but one that restricts itself to the necessities of biological life. In terms of the Platonian Onion, 'The Hitchhiker's Guide' as a handbook serves as a repository of all the information within the layers of the onion itself: any false delusions that are generally believed by the masses would nonetheless be added to the guide. Ironically, by holding firm that it is the ultimate source of knowledge, the guide itself commits the error of conditioning the slaves in Plato's allegory to the cave. Their belief in its authenticity deprives them of further growth.

## **CONCLUSION**

While each character in this story seems to react differently to the events that transpire, it is at least now evident that the inciting incident behind the turmoil was not the destruction of Earth - nor was it the improbability of their encounter. It is simply the knowledge that the things they once knew for certain may not be set in stone as they once thought. It is also worth noting that the impact of this realization is just as strong on the relatively more enlightened beings such as Zaphod and Ford as it does on the "ape-man" Arthur (meaning that they are no nearer to finding the true nature of reality than Arthur is). After all, since they are inter- galactic space travellers, the level of conviction by which they hold on to their ideas as correct may be even stronger than Arthur's; and it is clear that such convictions are what stands in the way from truly understanding reality.

Having described the new multilayered form of Plato's allegorical cave in a modern sense and established presence of the same in *The Hitchhiker's Guide*, further analysis is possible to see how each of these unique personalities develops as they go on to search for the very same idea that Plato did when his mind emerged from the cave; opening up scope for a multi-dimensional research on the meaning of Life, the Universe, and Everything.

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