

Conspiracies in Bedrock: The Flintstones Visit Plato's Cave

Fred: Wilma! I'm home! You're never going to believe what my boss, Mr. Slate, said today -- he claims the earth is round! Round, Wilma! Round!! Ha! Every time my feet hit the earth as I drove home today, it felt pretty flat to me. Geesh. What batty, dinosaur-bone-spinning nonsense is that?!

Wilma: Fred, the earth is round.

Fred: What?!?! Not you too, Wilmaaaaaaaaaa!!

Wilma: Sit down, Fred. I want to explain something that might help bring you out of your conspiracy theory mindset -- Plato's allegory of the cave. The allegory begins with prisoners chained in a cave, unable to move, and only able to see one wall. Behind the prisoners but in front of the fire, people carry sticks of animals and objects, like puppeteers, casting shadows on the wall. The prisoners believe the shadows are real animals and objects. One prisoner is then freed. After their eyes adjust, they see there was a fire that cast the shadows. They are then forced to walk out into the sun and realize that the shadows represented a false reality. Reality, they now understand, exists outside the cave. The freed prisoner returns to the cave to share his good news with the other prisoners. But they don't believe him. They think he was duped. They mock him, and continue to believe the falsehood. Do you see the analogy here?

Fred: Ummmm... I'm the prisoner who sees the sun and you guys are chained in the cave?

Wilma: Noo. *You* are the one still chained in the cave believing the shadows are real when they are not. Mr. Slate is right, the earth is round.

Fred: How do you know that?

Wilma: Science? Physics? Overwhelming evidence for the past 500 years?

Fred: Wait. What does my belief in a flat earth have to do with the allegory of the cave?

Wilma: Plato ties the allegory of the cave to his theory of the divided line, belief or opinion (doxa) vs. knowledge (episteme). The prisoners *believe* the shadows represent reality, but they do not. Once the freed prisoner gains the *knowledge* that the shadows represent a false reality, their *beliefs* change.

Belief is concerned with the visible world and is unreliable since it's tied to the senses and is subject to change. Knowledge is concerned with the intelligible world -- unchanging forms, especially the Form of the Good -- and is acquired through effort and education. It's reliable because it is grounded in a rational understanding of the Forms. To quote Plato, "In the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right." (Plato, book VII).

You, Fred, believe that the earth is flat when it is not. Your belief is not rooted in scientific evidence. It's rooted in false beliefs based on false claims in a false reality. Beliefs do not equal knowledge. We know, through rigorous science, that the earth is round. This is not a belief; it's accepted scientific fact, or knowledge.

Fred: Well, I read the science on the Flat Earth Society's website, and it said --

Wilma: Stop! That website is full of dinosaur dung! Just because it's on the Internet does not make it true. You need to cultivate better media literacy skills so you can separate credible sources from junk-science clickbait.

Fred: But who's to say your beliefs are right and mine are wrong? Maybe Plato's cave prisoners were right all along. And even if my beliefs are wrong, who cares? Can't you allow me my beliefs as I allow you yours? Live and let live, Wilma.

Wilma: Plato's allegory is complex. According to O'Grady et al., complex allegories "tend to develop a strong ironic tone" (O'Grady, 1968 p. 172), meaning they seem to be about one thing but are actually about something else. This allegory has multiple layers of meaning, from epistemological -- illusion to knowledge -- to metaphysical -- unintelligible world to the intelligible Forms.

The underlying message of Plato's allegory is to expose the darkness the prisoners are in. To show that they are blind to knowledge, to the Form of the Good. Ironically, the prisoner must be dragged, kicking and screaming, out of the cave of ignorance and into the light of knowledge. Once one grasps the Form of the Good, however, their beliefs essentially become "the right beliefs" because they now possess true knowledge. One cannot understand truth without understanding the Good. The prisoners do not possess true knowledge or the Good; therefore, their beliefs are incorrect.

Believing in a flat earth may seem harmless on the surface, but it often leads to other harmful conspiracy theories and belief systems that can negatively impact others. Flat earthers overlap with creationists, who overlap with science and climate denialists, who overlap with Covid deniers, who may believe vaccines cause autism. Moreover, dangerous and violent actions can spring from conspiracy theories like QAnon, the Great Replacement Theory, or Red-to-Black Pill ideology.

If you insist on believing the moon landing was fake, I won't fight you (except it *did* happen), but otherwise I'll keep "pre-inoculating" you with the truth, with knowledge, with the Form of the Good. If I don't, before long, you'll start saying that we were walking around with the dinosaurs!

[dino pokes his head through the window]

Ah, touché.

Fred: Blucifer? You gotta give me Blucifer!

Wilma:[sigh] Okay, I'll grant you Blucifer.

Fred: Yabba Dabba Doo!!!!

Works Cited

O'Grady, Jean, et al., eds. [*The Critical Path and Other Writings on Critical Theory*](#), 1963-1975. University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Plato. [*The Republic*](#). Translated by B. Jowett. *The Internet Classics Archive*, 1908.