

The Lure of the Advertising Image:
A Platonic Analysis

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I. Introduction

Sut Jhally begins his essay “Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse” with the following alarming claim: “Advertising is the most powerful and sustained system of propaganda in human history and its cumulative effects, unless quickly checked, will be responsible for destroying the world as we know it.”¹ By forging an association between human aspiration and the desire for consumable goods, says Jhally, the advertising industry creates an inflated demand for such goods that is, at once, far in excess of that needed for human flourishing and catastrophic to the global environment. This association, now driving modern global culture, will destroy the earth if left unchallenged.

Jhally sees capitalism as the ultimate culprit. In a system that understands wealth as a “vast collection of commodities” (Marx, *Capital*), those who produce such commodities have no other choice but to promote excess consumption. Hence the advertising industry emerges as the propaganda arm of capitalism, whose job is not so much to inform the public of capitalism’s products as to modify society’s basic values in a materialistic direction. Jhally seems to believe that if the advertising industry were to disappear, society’s materialism would go with it: “Capitalism has to try really hard to convince us about the value of the commercial vision. In some senses consumer capitalism is a house of cards, held together in a fragile way by an immense effort, and it could just as soon melt away as hold together. It will depend if there are viable alternatives to motivate people to believe in a different future, if there are other ideas as pleasurable, as powerful, as fun, as passionate with which people can identify.”²

My paper argues that, though Jhally's description of the problem is compelling and disturbing, his diagnosis fails to reach its heart. Indeed, it is not Marx but Plato who best provides the terms needed to understand and respond to the problem Jhally cites. Plato's critique of oratory in the *Gorgias* displays striking parallels to Jhally's depiction of modern advertising. Plato's discussion of the 'shadowy' nature of human belief formation (*doxa*), as presented in his divided line theory and allegory of the cave, provides insight into the ways modern advertising achieves its end. In both accounts Plato suggests that the dual immediacies of bodily desire and sensory experience collude to cause in us a misapprehension and misvaluation of self and world. As a result we confuse the true goods of the soul (e.g., friendship, justice, beauty, etc.) with the relatively superficial but more immediate gratifications of the body. A Platonic analysis indicates that modern advertising, like the questionable oratory of Plato's own day, works through a more or less deliberate fostering of such shadow-like confusion.

Viewed with Platonic eyes, however, what is needed is not, as Jhally contends, a new vision of the world that is as "pleasurable, powerful, fun, and passionate" as that of advertising, but a new pedagogy targeted at undoing the confusion itself. My paper concludes with some suggestions as to what such a pedagogy might look like.

II. Goods and 'The Good'

In the *Republic* Plato writes, "Every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake. It divines that the good is something but it is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what it is or acquire the sort of stable beliefs about it that it has about other things, and so it misses the benefit, if any, that even those other things may give" (*Rep.* 505e).³

The goal of philosophy, from the Platonic perspective, is, precisely, the resolution of this perplexity. The goal of modern advertising, as Jhally's work suggests, is precisely the reverse. Jhally writes that modern advertising operates through a kind of bait and switch, associating the material products it has to offer with more intangible goods we value more. "The advertising industry . . .," writes Jhally, "has stopped trying to sell us things based on their material qualities alone. If we examine the advertising of the end of the nineteenth century and in the first years of the twentieth century, we would see that advertising talked a lot about the properties of commodities – what they did, how well they did it, etc. But starting in the 1920s, advertising shifts to talking about the relationships of objects to the social life of people. It starts to connect commodities (the things they have to sell) with the powerful images of a deeply desired social life that people say they want."⁴

That such a practice – magnified in its influence by the modern mass media and in its effects by modern technology – would lead to catastrophic results is something Plato might well have foreseen. But its emergence would not have surprised him. The native epistemic condition of human beings, which Plato famously likens to that of prisoners trapped in a cave only able to see shadows on the wall, is itself such as to foster confusion between material objects and the socio-spiritual goods (goods of the soul) that both Plato and Jhally regard as basic to human well-being. Advertising does not create this confusion but promotes and manipulates it for its own ends.

The solution Plato proposes is education, *paideia*, by which he means a discipline of rational self-examination through which the basic goods of the soul may be distinguished from the material objects on which they are projected and with which they become confused. But in order

to understand the kind of *paideia* Plato regarded as necessary we must first examine more closely the nature of the perplexity it is designed to overcome.

III. Plato's Theory of Confusion

Plato's allegory of the cave is an allegory of human confusion. Plato's cavedwellers are so situated as to be able to see only shadows of artifacts that are themselves but 'copies' of true reality, represented by the world outside the cave. The prisoners confuse the shadows they apprehend with reality itself. Given their constraints, writes Plato, "the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts."⁵ In order to interpret the allegory we must come to understand the meaning of the shadows, how they may be contrasted with the artifacts that cast them, and how these artifacts may themselves be contrasted with unmediated truth, as present only outside the cave.

The first thing to note is that Plato's conception of knowledge is both hierarchical and axiological. We understand lower-order truths in the context of higher-order truths, and truth itself is disclosive of value. At the apex of this axiological hierarchy is 'the idea of the good,' represented in the allegory by the sun. Although it is the task of philosophy as a whole to gain a substantive understanding of this comprehensive good, it may be formally defined as that which satisfies the fundamental longings of the soul. Thus, for Plato, the intellect's pursuit of truth is always *interested*, it seeks knowledge as a way of achieving its good.⁶ This interestedness, indeed, determines what truth itself means. We know a thing *in truth* only to the extent that we know its true worth, the way in which it either serves or detracts from the satisfaction of the soul. Thus, to know what is worthwhile in itself, the good, is necessary for knowing the truth of other things.

The Platonic ‘forms’ – represented in the allegory by the objects outside the cave – might best be thought of, then, as ideal complexes or structures essential to the fundamental well-being of the soul. Among the principle forms of which Plato speaks in this regard are ‘friendship,’ ‘justice,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘virtue,’ etc., although for Plato every positive reality might be said to have an ideal structure, or form, through which some aspect of the good may be realized in a particular context. To understand these forms of the good and to know how they relate to the lives we lead is to have wisdom. The achievement of such wisdom is the philosophic quest.

Plato’s cave allegory, of course, suggests that human beings in general are cut off from direct apprehension of these forms of the good. Entrapped in the twilight world of the cave, the prisoners are able to see only shadows of artifacts; artifacts which are themselves but artificial replicas – images – of the true goods outside the cave.

What do these artifacts represent? Plato gives us two clues which help us to identify them. First, he tells us that the cave as a whole stands for “the visible realm” (*Rep. 517b*), i.e., the sensible world. Next, we are told that the entire allegory is to be “connected” to the immediately preceding account of the divided line (*Rep. 517b*), with respect to which the artifacts would clearly correspond to the second division. Taking these two together, we can take these artifacts to represent material-sensible objects.⁷

But what can Plato mean in likening such objects to artifacts? Plato’s suggestion is that such objects have for us a dual meaning. On the one hand, as sensible objects they make an immediate sensible impression upon us to which we immediately respond. On the other, as, in some sense, artificial images of the goods of soul outside the cave, they serve as symbols, signs, and, perhaps, means through which these immaterial goods might more easily be known and actualized in the sensory world.⁸ To see the artifacts *truly*, then, would be to see them, precisely, *as* artifacts, that

is to say, as artificial images that point beyond themselves to a realm of meaning they signify but cannot fully or truly embody.

But Plato's prisoners do not see these artifacts truly, that is, *as* artifacts, rather they see only the shadows cast by the artifacts and erroneously take these shadowy perceptions for truth itself.

To make sense of the allegory, then, we must ask ourselves what Plato intends by these 'shadows.' Judging from remarks Plato makes throughout the *Republic*, and indeed throughout his corpus, we can interpret the shadows to represent, at least in part, the material-sensible objects of the former level as *perceived through* the sensual appetites and passions they immediately excite. The prisoners take these sensual excitations to be the meaning of these sensible things, failing to recognize them as pointing beyond themselves to intangible goods that they can, at best, signify. As a result, they compete with one another for access to these things as if they were, in themselves, the bases of human fulfillment.⁹ This is the basic ignorance-confusion of the human condition, from which all folly and vice flow.

Plato gives us a classic depiction of just such shadowy ignorance in the *Apology*, where Socrates, the man whom Plato calls elsewhere the 'most just of his generation,' is condemned to death as a criminal after his failure to favorably sway the passions of his judges. The Athenian courthouse, ideally a symbol and vehicle of justice, is viewed and treated by the citizenry as a mere staging ground for contests over private interests and passions. The sophists, themselves engaged in a shadow of true pedagogy, teach their students the rhetorical skills needed to excel at this contest, irrespective of the justice of their cause. The 'truth' of the courthouse, as a place of justice, is hopelessly distorted and obscured.

But to complete our interpretation of the shadows we must make one addition. We must recall that the shadows continue to bear a relationship of meaning – although faint and indistinct – to

the immaterial goods, the goods of the soul, outside the cave. They are shadows of images of those very goods. Suggested here is that the prisoners do not simply substitute sensual aims for the aims of the soul but rather *confuse* the latter with the former; seeing in sensual gratification, and in the material things and circumstances associated with it, the very goods of soul for which they still fundamentally, but ignorantly, yearn.¹⁰ The speech of Diotama in the *Symposium* provides an excellent illustration of this. There sexual eros is viewed as but a ‘shadow’ of the loftier erotic yearning for participation in beauty itself. The intensity of the sexual drive, it is suggested, is a function of its confusion with this loftier and more fundamental desire, which the bare physical act of sex does not satisfy.

As a result of such confusion the material world acquires an allure that its mere materiality would never afford it. There is a breach between appearance and reality such that the material world comes to seem more enticing and more meaningful than it actually is. The prisoners grasp at faint shadows of fulfillment, supposing these shadows to be fulfillment itself. It is this overdetermination of meaning, resulting from a superimposition of our immediate material inclinations upon our more fundamental, but more remote, immaterial interests, that modern advertisers have learned to exploit for their own ends.

IV. Oratory and Advertising

Of course Plato composed his allegory of the cave long before the advent of modern advertising. It was not advertising images that Plato was alluding to but the images of material objects as such. Nevertheless, Plato was well aware that the confusion to which we are natively inclined can be magnified or lessened by societal conventions that shape the opinions (*doxa*) governing our everyday perceptions of the world. This is the great danger of the sophistical

orators Plato takes issue with in the *Gorgias*. Such oratory, writes Plato, “guesses at what’s pleasant with no consideration for what’s best.”¹¹

As Jhally views them, modern advertisers are like latter day orator-sophists. They achieve their ends by exploiting the confusion it was Plato’s goal to resolve. “What it [advertising] offers us,” writes Jhally, “are images of the real sources of human happiness – family life, romance and love, sexuality and pleasure, friendship and sociability, leisure and relaxation, independence and control of life. That is why advertising is so powerful; that is what is real about it. The cruel illusion of advertising is in the way that it links those qualities to a place that, by definition, cannot provide it – the market and the immense collection of commodities. The falsity of advertising is not in the *appeals* it makes (which are very real) but in the *answers* it provides. We want love and friendship and sexuality – and advertising points the way to it through objects.”¹²

Modern day advertising works, not by rationally persuading us that the products it offers will provide the gratification we seek – for at the level of rational discernment we know that they will not – but by short-circuiting rational discernment altogether.¹³ Advertisers quite deliberately target what Plato calls the ‘appetitive soul,’ eroticizing their products in ways designed to make them seem more interesting, alluring, and important than rational reflection would have us conclude. The effects of this are twofold. On the one hand, consumer products collectively acquire an aura of excitement and magical potency that, of course, we know they do not really possess. We are aware of the falsity in which we are nevertheless enmeshed. On the other, constant immersion in this world of falsity makes it ever more difficult for us to exercise the reflective judgment that would disentangle us from it. The very boundary line between reality and unreality fades away.

This creates a host of problems. Let us consider just a few.

First, the advertising culture creates a mentality of scarcity even in the midst of unprecedented material abundance. It does this by continually evoking a desire for things that cannot satisfy that desire. Thus one has the odd experience of feeling constantly empty despite one's constant access to that which the culture tells one should alleviate one's emptiness. Since, presumably, one has everything one could possibly desire, the fault must lie in oneself. We are 'depressed.'

Next, this mentality of scarcity leads to an intensification of restlessness and competitiveness, as we restlessly compete for access to the goods that falsely promise to resolve our restlessness. The problem here is not simply that we can never get enough, but that the very idea of 'enough' has lost its appeal. As the theologian and culture critic William Cavanaugh, writes, "In consumer society. . . dissatisfaction and satisfaction have ceased to be opposites. Pleasure resides not in having but in wanting. Insofar as an item obtained brings a temporary halt to desire, it becomes undesirable. This is why shopping, not buying, captures the spirit of consumerism."¹⁴

In the consumer culture one does not *want* to be satisfied. Since what is touted as 'satisfying' does not actually satisfy, the very thought of being satisfied with it is depressing. This realization, that we cannot be satisfied even in supposed satisfaction, produces a cynical desperation made tolerable only by the constant distractions the culture itself provides.

But Plato would no doubt consider the greatest problem to be the one we have discussed – the erosion of axiological discernment fostered by the constant superimposition of fantastical images of happiness onto materialistic-individualistic pursuits. The overall effect is to have us focus our lives on the procurement of individual, immediate, and, for the most part, material gratification. That we also know, on some level, that this will not satisfy us does not so much alter this focus as color it with a tincture of despair.

All of this helps make intractable the problem that Jhally highlights: the rape of the environment that material overproduction demands. Jhally's basic point is that our inability to respond to this catastrophe in a level-headed way is a function of the degradation to our capacity for rational judgment that the advertising culture spawns. We cannot focus on what is good for us because the culture itself is in the constant and deliberate process of blurring our vision of what is good. Though reason tells us clearly that global disaster looms, our envelopment in the shadows makes us unable to respond. We fiddle, as the earth burns.

V. Paideia

While Jhally's diagnosis of the problem is consistently illuminating, the solutions he advances seem to me weak. As noted in the introduction, Jhally writes that any solution will depend on whether there are "viable alternatives [to consumer culture] . . . as pleasurable, as powerful, as fun, as passionate with which people can identify." Plato might well respond that Jhally's invocation of 'pleasure, passion, and fun' as the values through which the consumer culture might be overcome is itself symptomatic of it. The goods of the soul that Plato thought fundamental – e.g., friendship, self-discipline (*sophrosyne*), justice, beauty, etc. – though deeply gratifying in their own ways, are not such as to elicit the sort of immediate excitation we tend to associate with the word 'fun.' Where 'fun' continues to be heralded as a primary value, the pursuit of individualistic, sensual, and egoistic gratifications at the heart of consumerism will almost certainly continue unabated.

From the Platonic point of view what is needed is not to make the goods of the soul more 'fun,' but more visible. To those who see them clearly, Plato was convinced, their superior worth and allure become obvious. The attainment of such intellectual clarity is the specific goal of the

philosophical education – *paideia* – Plato championed. He believed it to be the only way out of the cave of human ignorance and folly.

In the space remaining I would like to briefly sketch out some essential features of the Platonic *paideusis*, or system of education, and consider the possibility of its application to our modern circumstances.

1. Non-doctrinaire

The first thing we might note is that Platonic education is non-doctrinaire. Its aim is not to inculcate a particular worldview but to “turn the soul around” (*Rep. 518c*) from immersion in the sensory to attention to the deeper sources of meaning. Of course, there is an epistemological-pedagogical doctrine implicit in this aim itself; nevertheless, the purpose is not to teach this doctrine but to help students develop their intellectual vision so as to enable them to think for themselves.

In this respect, at least, the philosophical *paideusis* accords well with the aims and constraints of public education in a liberal democracy. Its goal is not to impart what Rawls has called a ‘comprehensive doctrine,’ i.e., a particular religious, moral, and/or metaphysical worldview, but to provide students with the wherewithal to seriously examine the worldview they possess.

2. Distinction between Technical ‘Know-How’ and Truth

Among the first things such an educational program would need to emphasize is the distinction between technical knowledge (or know-how) and what Plato would have understood by ‘truth’ in the highest sense. This distinction has largely been blurred in the modern era due to the great successes of the empirical sciences, but Plato recognized it as crucial.¹⁵

Technical knowledge might be defined as knowledge that enables one to predict and control events in the phenomenal world. Truth, by contrast, refers to an understanding of the world in its axiological significance. A philosophical *paideusis* would make it clear to students that technical mastery, however extensive, can never yield axiological truth. The pursuit of such truth must proceed otherwise.

3. Inadequacies of Sensation

Next, a Platonic *paideusis* would engage students in a reflection on the paradoxes and inadequacies of sensory experience as a source of reliable knowledge. There are any number of ways of showing that sense experience alone provides neither the sources of meaning nor the principles of structure essential to adequate cognition.

Plato himself believed that reflection on mathematics would have this effect, given that numbers and numerical relations are not presented to us through the senses but are nevertheless integral to an adequate cognition of the world. The general aim here is to have students begin the process of discriminating between that which is immediately given by the senses and cognitive apprehension.

V4. Concept Formation

Having learned to make this distinction, students would now be prepared to reflect upon the nature of cognition itself, through an examination of the nature of concepts (universals) and concept-formation. How do concepts differ from sense-data? How do they operate to organize our cognitive apprehension of the world? How does such cognitive apprehension determine the

presuppositions we bring to experience and the meanings we derive from it? These are the sorts of questions students at this level would take up.

V5. Axiological Discernment

Finally, such a program of education would deliberately and systematically engage students in a practice of axiological discernment, through having them reflect upon specifically value-laden concepts, with respect to both their cultural and ontological bases as well as their individual and societal effects. Here we might engage students in a direct examination and critique of cultural influences on value-formation, especially the role that advertising and other mass media forces play in shaping society's values. At the same time we would make clear to students the enormous significance of valuation and value-systems for the conduct of individual, social, and political life.

My suggestion is that such an educational program, made part of the basic High School curriculum, would go some distance in helping students achieve the reflective sophistication Plato would have thought necessary to combating the corrosive influences of the advertising culture.

VI. Conclusion

Again, the aim of the Platonic *paideusis* is not to inculcate a worldview, but to have students learn to reflect intelligently upon the bases of their own and others' worldviews. The problem, as Plato was aware, is not simply that we have the wrong values – that is the symptom – it is that we do not know how to adequately reflect upon the values we have. The grave danger of

advertising, from this perspective, is not that it tends to make us materialists, but that it tends to make us stupid (quite literally, placing us in a ‘stupor’). Plato’s contention is that materialism and egoism follow from this as a matter of course.

The solution, thus, is not to promote ‘better’ values through the same questionable means the advertisers use to promote consumerism, but to educate people to be able to seriously and effectively reflect upon the values they have. Plato believed – and we might call this ‘Platonic faith’ – that this in itself would yield ‘better’ values.

This, finally, is what Plato seems to have meant in saying that true education does not inculcate a system of belief, but ‘turns the soul around’ so as to enable it to discover that system of belief most conducive to its own true good. Today, in the face of unprecedented global challenges and all but unlimited media sway, the need for such a pedagogy seems to me critical as never before.

Notes

¹ Sut Jhally, "Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse," in *The Spectacle of Accumulation: Essays in Culture, Media, & Politics* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006), 97.

² *Ibid.*, 111.

³ Plato, *Republic*, tr. G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), p. 1126, 505e.

⁴ Sut Jhally, "Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse," *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, *Ibid.*, p. 1133, 515c.

⁶ "Plato recognizes no function of reason which is axiologically neutral. Consequently, the incentive of all inquiry is some tacit or acknowledged good which interest proposes and then promotes." Robert Earl Cushman, *Therapeia: Plato's Conception of Philosophy* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 254.

⁷ Some commentators (following the work of A.S. Furgeson) have suggested that the cave as a whole is intended to represent corrupt political society, with the puppeteers who display the artifacts representing corrupt molders of public opinion. I find this interpretation unconvincing given that the artifacts are depicted as images of things outside the cave (which clearly represent true goods), and that the cave as a whole is quite explicitly said to represent, not corrupt society, but "the visible realm" (*Rep.* 517b). This is not to say that Plato did not intend the puppeteers to represent crafters of public opinion – although Plato himself gives us little to go on as to what they represent. Still, Plato would certainly agree that those who have not made their way out of the cave (i.e., are not true philosophers) are largely reliant on the crafters of public opinion for their views. Indeed, Plato tells us that the mode of knowledge corresponding to the second level of the Divided Line is 'trust' (*pistis*). In other words, our understanding of the world at this level is largely a function of what we have learned (and come to believe/ trust) from our parents, our culture, etc. But this, in itself, does not imply corruption. In Plato's ideal *polis* the crafters of public opinion would be the true philosophers themselves, from whom the cavedwellers would learn 'true opinion.' It is only in corrupt society that the crafters of public opinion are themselves corrupt. For an excellent discussion of this see Dale Hall, "Interpreting Plato's Cave as an Allegory of the Human Condition," *Apieron: A Journal of Ancient Philosophy and Science*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1980, 74-86.

⁸ In this way, Plato tells us, geometers use visual images of geometrical figures as an aid to the contemplation of those figures' purely intelligible properties (*Rep.* 510d-e).

⁹ In the *Apology* Socrates chides the Athenians for doing just this: "O my friend, why do you who are a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? Are you not ashamed of this? . . . And this I should say to everyone whom I meet, young and old, citizen and alien, but especially to the citizens, inasmuch as they are my brethren . . . For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons and your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul. I tell you that virtue is not

given by money, but that from virtue come money and every other good of man, public as well as private” (*Apology*, 29d-30b)

¹⁰ Thus Plato is able to say in the *Gorgias* that tyrants, though they do what they think best, do not do what they fundamentally will – and hence exercise only a ‘shadow’ of power.

¹¹ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1988), p. 25, 465a.

¹² Jhally, “Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse,” *Ibid.*, 104.

¹³ “The real aim of advertising,” writes Jhally, “is not to give people information but to make them feel good.” Jhally, “Advertising as Religion,” *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁴ James Cavanaugh, “When Enough Is Enough,” in *Living Ethics*, edited by Michael Minch and Christine Weigel (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2009), 528.

¹⁵ We see this in Socrates’ account of his encounter with the technicians of his day in the *Apology*, as well as in Plato’s caricature of what counts for ‘knowledge’ among the cavedwellers: “And if there had been any honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by, and who best remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously, and who could thus best divine the future, do you think that our man [who had escaped the cave] would desire such rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power? Instead, wouldn’t he feel with Homer, that he’d much prefer to “work the earth as a serf to another, one without possessions,” and go through any sufferings, rather than share their opinions and live as they do?” Plato, *Republic*, *Ibid.*, p. 1134, 516c-d