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# The Fly-Bottle and the Cave

**Abstract:** Wittgenstein's aphorism about the fly-bottle (PI 2009, §309) and Plato's parable of the cave (*Rep.* VII, 514a–521a) provide two of the most memorable images in the history of Western philosophy. In addition to their use in making philosophical points, they do so in a literary fashion through this imagery. In this paper, I examine and compare how this literary feature functions in their two philosophies. Then I consider both the positive and less-explored negative aspects of these images. It turns out that both Plato and Wittgenstein are engaged in that “ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (*Rep.*, 607b).

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein, Plato, The Fly-Bottle, The Parable of the Cave, Philosophy and Poetry

## 1 Philosophy and Poetry

In opening his defense in the trial for his life, Socrates begins by noting how persuasive his accusers have been with their “embroidered and stylized phrases” (*Ap.*, 17c). He also notes that his bad reputation has been ingrained in the jury since they were young. In response, he intends only to “speak the truth [...] at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind.” He later informs the jury that while other defendants “arouse as much pity as they can [...] [he] will do none of those things” (34c), trusting to the truth alone. While he realizes that this strategy is “not convincing” (37a) in the short time he has with the jury, he refuses to resort to any other.

Well, we all know how that turned out! Socrates was convicted and executed having successfully stuck by his principles, yet likely not having changed any or many minds.

After Plato shares what the man Socrates was like in the so-called early dialogues—dialogues written early in Plato's career; I think we can see Plato then reflecting on what lessons are to be learned from Socrates and his fate in the so-called middle dialogues—especially the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, and the *Symposium*—composed in the middle of Plato's career. Here we see a character named “Socrates” in action, but we also see those actions in larger contexts, as Plato explores, through “Socrates” as well as through other characters, other possibilities

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and implications that the man Socrates never seriously considered. For example, while the arguments for immortality in the *Phaedo* look rather weak—to the reader (or at least this reader), if not to Socrates' friends—Socrates warns his friends that he is not feeling particularly philosophical (*Phd.*, 91a): “I am in danger at this moment of not having a philosophical attitude about this, but like those who are quite uneducated, I am eager to get the better of you in argument.” Surely, you will agree that *could not* be the man Socrates speaking!

Instead, “Socrates” looks to other ways to reassure his friends, including telling a mythological bedtime story (107d–115a). And it turns out that the drama of the death scene (116a–118a) itself has a more uplifting impact than any syllogism could possibly have. (I offer a reading of this dialogue in Chapter 7 of my recent book *Wittgenstein's Artillery*.)

Although Wittgenstein took very little interest in the history of philosophy, he did read and enjoy Plato's dialogues. His friend Bouwsma reported: “Wittgenstein reads Plato—the only philosopher he reads. But he likes best the allegories, the myths. They're fine.”<sup>1</sup>

In the *Republic*, the character “Socrates” complains about the non-rational influence of what he calls “poetry”—and literature generally. And he refers to the “ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy” (*Rep.*, 607b). As for the Greek term in that passage, it is “*poiēsis*,” which could be used very broadly. The Liddell-Scott-Jones Lexicon gives its first meanings as “fabrication, creation, production.” In Book X, however, Plato uses it for poetry very broadly conceived (including epic, lyric, elegiac, tragic, and comedic at least), while he uses a different term for visual art. But we see Plato finding ways to use the tools of poetry on behalf of philosophy. Ironically it is the character of “Socrates” himself who, for example, tells the memorable parable of the cave, where it is not an argument but an *image* that carries the day.

But it is Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, who makes the point against Socrates most directly, though without naming names:

Now if arguments were in themselves enough to make men good, they would justly [...] have won very great rewards [...]; but as things are, [...] they are not able to encourage the many to nobility and goodness. [...] What argument would remold such people? It is hard, if not impossible, to remove by argument the traits that have long since been incorporated in the character [...].<sup>2</sup>

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1 Bouwsma (1986, 61). And for an exhaustive accounting of Wittgenstein's references to Plato, see Kienzler (2013).

2 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b4–18.

While it took Plato and Aristotle to see the limitations of Socrates' approach, Wittgenstein came to see his own limitations. As I tell the story in my book *Wittgenstein's Artillery*, it was only once Wittgenstein began to lecture in Cambridge in the early 1930s that he started to see the need to address the perspectives and temptations of his students and then his readers. By this route, Wittgenstein became his own critic. He spells out this challenge in passages such as these, from the early 1930s:

Difficulty of philosophy [is] not the intellectual difficulty of the sciences, but the difficulty of a change of attitude. Resistances of the will must be overcome. [...] philosophy requires a resignation, but one of feeling and not of intellect. And maybe that is what makes it so difficult for many.<sup>3</sup>

If it is said on occasion that (someone's) philosophy is a matter of temperament, there is some truth in this. A preference for certain comparisons [*Gleichnisse*] is something we call a matter of temperament & far more disagreement rests on this than appears at first sight.<sup>4</sup>

I don't try to make you *believe* something you *don't* believe, but to make you *do* something you won't do.<sup>5</sup>

Schopenhauer once said, "If you try to convince someone and get to a certain resistance, you then know you are up against the will, not the understanding". You are up against something else here. We have prejudices of thought.<sup>6</sup>

I think this last insight, which Wittgenstein attributes to Schopenhauer, would have served Socrates well. And it is an insight that we, in the current political climate, need to learn as well. Marcel Proust expressed the problem in this way:

Facts do not find their way into the world in which our beliefs reside; they did not produce our beliefs, they do not destroy them; they may inflict on them the most constant refutations without weakening them, and an avalanche of afflictions or ailments succeeding one another without interruption in a family will not make it doubt the goodness of its God or the talent of its doctor.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> BT 2005, §86. The sentence before the ellipsis has a source in MS 153b, 30r (probably 1931). The passage after the ellipsis first occurs at MS 110, 189 (June 20, 1931). Wittgenstein's manuscripts (MS) can be accessed at [www.wittgensteinsource.org](http://www.wittgensteinsource.org), last accessed Dec. 9, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> CV 1980/1998, 20/17–18 (MS 154, 21v–22r; 1931).

<sup>5</sup> MS 155, 42r (written in English). Von Wright conjectures that material in this notebook was composed in 1931 (von Wright 1993, 488 and 497).

<sup>6</sup> Dictations to Skinner in the so-called "Pink Book," tentatively dated to 1933–1934 (Skinner 2020, 134).

<sup>7</sup> Proust 2004, 151.

We need to find another way in. That is an insight that Plato *does*, however, appreciate.

In his search for a different and more effective method, Wittgenstein looked for ways to do philosophy *as poetry*. In 1933 or 1934, Wittgenstein confessed in a notebook:

I believe I summed up where I stand in relation to philosophy when I said: really one should write philosophy only as one *writes a poem* [dichten]. That, it seems to me, must reveal how far my thinking belongs to the present, the future, or the past. For I was acknowledging myself, with these words, to be someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do.<sup>8</sup>

I used this passage as the source for the subtitle of my book: *Wittgenstein's Artillery: Philosophy as Poetry*.<sup>9</sup> The German word in play here is "*Dichtung*," which has a wider meaning than the English word "poetry," encompassing literary writing generally. It seems that the Greek word "*poiēsis*" also has a broad meaning, even if not in the same ways. (Anyway, having neither Greek nor German myself, this is for others to comment on. But I understand that in his translation of *Republic* 607b, Schleiermacher used *Dichtkunst* for the Greek word "*poiēsis*." This means something like the art of making poetry.)

While Wittgenstein never felt he was successful in finding or using this approach, I take him seriously in this search, and consider a number of ways in which Wittgenstein uses parables, comparisons, vignettes and aphorisms to address our non-cognitive resistance to his ways of looking at issues.

## 2 The Fly-Bottle

In this paper, I want to look at two images, one in Wittgenstein and one in Plato, that expand into parables, and serve in ways that go beyond a mere presentation of an argument—the Fly Bottle and the Cave.

Let us start with PI §309: "What is your aim in philosophy?—To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." This line—should we call it a crack?—is among Wittgenstein's most memorable. And it illustrates, right off the bat, the difference between presenting an argument and doing something else. Wittgenstein does not propose to convince the fly of any proposition or argue it out of the bottle, but

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<sup>8</sup> This translation as well as the German original in CV, 1998, 28. Winch's earlier translation reads, in part: "philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition* [dichten]" (CV 1980, 24).

<sup>9</sup> David Antin suggested the rendering: "one should really only do philosophy as poetry" (1998, 61).

to help it to leave the bottle. Indeed, the “aim in philosophy” here is not to convince people of propositions or present arguments!

This familiar aphorism took shape in September of 1937, while Wittgenstein was living in his cabin in Skjolden: “What is your aim in philosophy?—I show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle [*Fliegenglas*]. This way is, in one sense, impossible to find, and, in another sense, quite easy.”<sup>10</sup> (I can imagine Wittgenstein had lots of flies in his cabin in the woods.) The *Fliegenglas* is the familiar image of the bottle designed to catch flies by luring them in by the smell of sugar water through a hole in the bottom, where they are then trapped by their obsession with flying upward toward the light. Wittgenstein repeats this line and a related one in several places in his manuscripts around that time.

In a lecture back at Cambridge from Easter term 1938, Wittgenstein provides a drawing of the bottle for the class and elaborates (WCL 2017, 7): “The fly catcher. The fly gets in but can’t get out. The stronger the wish to get out, the harder it is for it to get out. (It is fascinated by one way of trying to get out.)” This recalls Wittgenstein’s image of being stuck in a room with a door that one pushes on, but it only opens inward (CV 1980/1998, 42/48). Who has not pushed on a door even when the sign on the door clearly says “Pull?” or an unnoticed door that is behind one (Malcolm 1984, 44)? And Wittgenstein relates in conversation “a funny story—A man very drunk was pushing against a brick wall and saying ‘I will go out by this door’. It is like that in philosophy, [Wittgenstein continues], we push against a brick wall when there is really a door standing wide open. So we must often leave a problem unsolved for a time and turn to another because the way we were trying to solve the first may be pushing against a brick wall.”<sup>11</sup>

Something like this latter case was described by Wittgenstein in what is really an oral parable from his lectures. “Wittgenstein once described the situation in philosophy thus”:

It is as if a man is standing in a room facing a wall on which are painted a number of dummy doors. Wanting to get out, he fumblingly tries to open them, vainly trying them all, one after the other, over and over again. But, of course, it is quite useless. And all the time, although he doesn’t realize it, there is a real door in the wall behind his back, and all he has to do is turn around and open it. To help him get out of the room all we have to do is to get him to look in a different direction. But it’s hard to do this, since, wanting to get out, he resists our attempts to turn him away from where he thinks the exit must be.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> MS 118, 71r–71v, September 8, 1937.

<sup>11</sup> PPO 2003, 384.

<sup>12</sup> Gasking and Jackson 2016, 1038. The preface to the parable, “It is as if,” sounds just like the preface of one of Jesus’ parables, “It is like [...]” (Mark 13: 34) or “For it is as when [...]” (Matthew 25: 14).

The fly-bottle and the unnoticed door both rely on the direction of attention as the key issue. When we suppose the solution to a problem must be found in a certain place, we are unlikely or unable to look in more productive places or directions.

Recall the many points in the *Investigations*, over 100, where Wittgenstein addresses what we notice, can get ourselves to think, can be satisfied with, think of, overlook, do not realize, fail to see, or forget. A survey of Part I of the *Investigations* tells us that philosophical problems arise or remain because of:

1. What forces itself on us, holds us captive, demands an answer, must be, leads us, we can't help, or no one would say (14 times);
2. What we are tempted, seduced, bewitched, or dazzled by (19);
3. What suggests itself, strikes us, occurs to us, or impressions we are under (7);
4. How things look to us (2);
5. What we find surprising, convincing, senseless, ludicrous, sensible, or matter-of-course (8);
6. Our compulsions, needs, urges, wants, tendencies, inclinations, expectations, or prejudices (28);
7. What we notice, can get ourselves to think, can be satisfied with, only think of, overlook, don't realize, fail to see, or forget (14);
8. What we would like (6);
9. What we are committed to, choose, decide, allow, or refuse (6); and
10. How we look at, or represent things (5).

These tendencies in us can apply to a great variety of issues, leading to many different philosophical problems. And many of these can be thought of as the task of how to get us to redirect our attention or change our attitude. That is not a task of accepting or proving certain propositions or theories. It is a non-cognitive task that Wittgenstein anticipated in his methodological remarks from the early 1930s quoted above. These tasks do not make Wittgenstein an enemy of reason, but they make him aware that what is needed is something more than—or different from—reason. Reason by itself will not accomplish these things. Just as Plato came to see that reason alone would not enable Socrates to get his jurors or his friends to love reason—to become philosophers.

(When we look at this list of what Wittgenstein is trying to address, it is worth noting how absolutely *unusual* he is. Name me one other philosopher who has these concerns, or concerns anything like these!)

So, the fly-bottle aphorism is a reminder, and it is not a purely rational one. While I have long been fascinated by Wittgenstein's fly-bottle image, I never could really understand how he thought you could "show" the fly the way out. What did he have in mind?

Near the beginning of a European trip in 1999, one that ended here in Kirchberg, I had an opportunity to examine Yorick Smythies' papers at the Bernard Quaritch office in London, where they were up for sale! I was delighted to find that Wittgenstein had elaborated the fly-bottle scenario further in his comments on a paper by Yorick Smythies on "Understanding" (published eventually in WCL 2017, 196; from Lent term, 1940):

Cf. the fly catcher. If you want to let him out, you'd have to surround this by something dark. As long as there is light there, the fly can never do it.

If I am puzzled philosophically, I immediately darken all that which seems to me light, and try frantically to think of something entirely different. The point is, you can't get out as long as you are fascinated. The only thing to do is to go to an example where nothing fascinates me.

The fly is shown the way out by blocking the light that obsesses it, so that only the downward indirectly-lighted direction remains attractive. This shows how much the process is a negative one and also shows how much the process depends on knowing what happens to obsess the fly as well as how to redirect the fly's attention. Wittgenstein continues:

First of all, it is not at all clear that this will help every fly.

What happens to work with me doesn't work with him (Prof. Moore)—works with me now, and may not work with me tomorrow.<sup>13</sup>

There are always new ways of looking at the matter.

I constantly find new puzzles (I've thought about this for years, constantly ploughed these fields.)

### 3 The Cave

When looking for a parable that might compare with the fly-bottle, it is hard to avoid thinking of Plato's parable of the cave (*Rep.* VII, 514a–517a). In German,

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<sup>13</sup> On the *ad hoc* nature of countering temptations and obsessions, see also Wittgenstein's comment from a 1942 notebook (CV 1980/1998, 43/49): "At present we are combatting a trend. But this trend will die out, superseded by others. And then people will no longer understand our arguments against it; will not see why all that needed saying." Cf. also 65/74, and Wittgenstein 2003, 383.

This, perhaps, speaks to the relative unpopularity of Wittgenstein's work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. On this, see my book Klagge 2011, especially Chapter 11: "Wittgenstein in the Twenty-First Century." The key question is whether Wittgenstein provides or suggests tools to combat contemporary trends.

this is standardly known as “*das Höhlengleichnis*.”<sup>14</sup> Assuming you all are familiar with that parable, I will only recount some highlights:

Plato sees all of us, or at least the non-philosophers among us, as originally trapped in the cave, while Wittgenstein thinks it is the philosophers, or the philosophers-in-us, who are trapped in the bottle. There are notable similarities and differences, of course. For example:

The fly and the cave dweller are both fascinated with something—the fly with what is outside of the bottle, the cave dweller with what is on the wall. The cave dweller, even though called a “prisoner,” is happy as things are; the fly is unhappy and wishes to escape. According to the story there is something superior outside of the cave, but the cave dweller does not know about it, and will not as long as it is satisfied, and indeed bound, in the cave. According to the aphorism, the fly is right to want to escape but is unable to do so because of its conviction that it knows the way out. In both cases things would be better if this attitude were changed—if the cave dweller were not satisfied with its condition, and if the fly were not sure of its way out. So one challenge, common to both, is how to change this attitude.

Plato does not address how we got there or why the cave dwellers got to be in their situation or exactly how they are liberated. Several years ago, during Parents’ Weekend at Virginia Tech, departments were encouraged to offer relevant activities to engage and entertain their students and parents. So, we decided to enlist some of our majors to act out some scenes from Plato’s dialogues, including the parable of the cave. It was necessary to put some thought into whom to liberate and how to do so. Who is doing the liberating? Do we try to liberate all the prisoners but only succeed with some? Or if we try to liberate only some of the prisoners, how do we decide? How do the other prisoners react when they see others being liberated?

I do not say that we reached any deep insights or answers, but we did see the questions. Here is what Plato had to say (*Rep.*, 515c–d):

Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their foolishness would naturally be like, if something like this should happen to them. When one was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his neck around, walk, and look up toward the light, he would be pained by doing all these things and be unable to see the things whose shadows he had seen before, because of the flashing lights. What do you think he would say if we told him that what he had seen before was nonsense, but that now—because he is a bit closer to what is, and is turned toward things that *are* more—he sees more correctly? [...]

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<sup>14</sup> There may be an allusion to the parable of the cave in a lecture by Wittgenstein in 1946 (PGL 1988, 32), when Wittgenstein imagines “a world in which black circles move on a wall according to mechanical laws.”



The physical liberation of the cave dweller seems to be a metaphor for a sort of spiritual or intellectual enlightenment, performed presumably by the philosopher. The task of education is turning the soul around, to see what it does not now see (515e–517a):

And if someone dragged him by force away from there, along the rough, steep, upward path, and did not let him go until he dragged him into the light of the sun, wouldn't he be pained and angry at being treated this way? And when he came into the light, wouldn't he have his eyes filled with sunlight and be unable to see one of the things now said to be truly real?

[...]

What about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, what passed for wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners? Don't you think he would count himself happy and pity the others?

[...] Yes, he said, I think that he would rather suffer anything than live like that.

(We will come back to this point presently.)

Consider this too, then. If this man went back down into the cave and sat down in the same seat [...]

[...] And as for anyone who tried to free the prisoners and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?

Certainly.

(If you are a parent of a teenager and have tried to separate your teen from his or her smart phone, you might know what Plato is talking about here! In fact, social media memes have juxtaposed the fascinating images on the wall of the cave, and the addicting imagery of social media.) Then there follows a commentary on the parable (517b–518b). This resembles in some ways the commentary on the fly-bottle aphorism that Wittgenstein offers in his lectures.

Imagine for a moment how Wittgenstein might try to show the prisoner the way out of the cave. Perhaps he would block the shadows so the prisoner could not enjoy the show. (I guess this would be like taking the teenager's phone away! Or more cleverly terminating the phone contract!) Maybe this would cause the prisoner to look around and see the source of the shadow, and finally maybe even the mouth of the cave. In any case, this would not seem to require any force—unless of course the prisoner turns violent!

Notice, on the other hand, how Plato's strategy of using force seems so *un*-promising in the case of the fly. I guess Plato would have to *catch* the fly in the bottle and pull it out. Not likely...

## 4 Parables

Anyway, what I want to focus on is their function *as* parables. It is interesting to note that Wittgenstein's fly-bottle image functions basically as an aphorism, one that he modified only slightly over time. But in lectures and discussions he elaborated on it, so that orally it took on the dimensions of the parable of the cave. The cave is likely the most famous parable in the history of philosophy. Much of its worth comes from how many dimensions of Plato's philosophy it engages. But the parable of the cave could not be reduced to an aphorism, because too much needs to be explained. Amazingly, the fly-bottle works its magic in two sentences.

One of Wittgenstein's friends and students, Rush Rhees (2015, 62-63), relates:

I remember one time when Wittgenstein was mentioning Nietzsche's remark: "We—i. e., philosophers—want to be learnt by heart."

Nietzsche, in "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," writes: "Whoever writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read but to be learned by heart."<sup>15</sup> Rhees continues:

Wittgenstein was emphasizing the difference between a book on philosophy and a theoretical or scientific work. He was completing the Part I of the *Investigations*.<sup>16</sup> In connexion with this 'We want to be learned by heart', he said that he could understand why certain ancient philosophers had tried to write what they had to say as poems. (Once or twice later he referred to his [own] manuscripts of the *Investigations* as 'my poems.')

I mentioned earlier Wittgenstein's affection for Plato's myths. But his reference to the ancient philosophers may also be an allusion to Parmenides and his (mostly lost) poem "On Nature," or Empedocles and his poems, or Heraclitus and his aphorisms. Indeed, upon his return to philosophy in 1929, Wittgenstein took Heraclitus' aphorism "all is in flux" as a springboard for his own reflections.<sup>17</sup>

Wittgenstein later disparaged his own work by lamenting that if it was philosophy, one could learn it by heart. Elizabeth Anscombe reported: "Someone who admired his 'Philosophical Investigations' once asked him why he called it not good. He turned the pages over with an expression of distaste, and then said 'It limps.' And then 'If this were philosophy, you could learn it by heart!'"<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Section 7: On Reading and Writing, in Nietzsche (1976, 152).

<sup>16</sup> Georg Henrik von Wright (von Wright 1980, 114) suggests this was 1945–1946.

<sup>17</sup> E. g., MS 107, 159, published in Wi2, 92; MS 110, 34–39, published in Wi3, 179–182; and also, Z 1967, §459.

<sup>18</sup> Anscombe (2019, 231).

We know that Wittgenstein cared about learning things by heart. As his friend from prison-camp Ludwig Hänsel said about literature, he “knows a lot by heart” (Hänsel 2012, 51). Indeed, he seems to have read *Brothers Karamazov* dozens of times and could quote passages from memory. And his Russian teacher Fania Pascal recalls that “once he [Wittgenstein] quoted a Pushkin lyric to me” (Pascal 1984, 21).

Despite his pessimism, some passages from Wittgenstein really do manage to rise to this level—and the fly-bottle aphorism is one of them. It is brief, but more importantly it is memorable, offering an unexpected image and a remarkable comparison.

While the art of learning things by heart has become something of a *lost* art, it still remains in religious circles. In my own experience, Biblical passages such as the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, or other things such as the Lord’s Prayer, or the Apostle’s Creed are regularly recited in church services without the need of a script. It is notable that all three of these cases, at least when recited in English, are recited in an archaic English from (the era of) the King James translation of the Bible. (Does Luther’s translation have an archaic sound to it?) While the use of multiple translations of the Bible may be valuable from a semantic point of view, helping to better capture the nuances of meanings in the texts, it makes it less likely that readers will commit passages to memory.

Another passage from Wittgenstein that has risen to the level of memorability is the closing line of the *Tractatus*: Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. That, of course, is the original Ogden-Ramsey translation. Pears and McGuinness later render it as: What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. The original translation is more memorable—it has a poetic feeling, which is not unconnected with its use of the archaic words “whereof” and “thereof.”

Here are a few other memorable lines from Wittgenstein:

- The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.
- What can be shown, cannot be said.
- Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.
- Don’t think, but look!
- Explanations come to an end somewhere.

(And you might have some other suggestions as well.)

Among the parts of *Brothers Karamazov* that most impressed Wittgenstein was Book VI about the Russian monk Father Zosima. Passages from this book drew on the language of Church Slavonic and echoed rites of the church that would have been familiar to the original Russian readers. Dostoevsky did this so

that it would have a certain emotional effect on the reader. Wittgenstein learned Russian specifically so that he could read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in the original.<sup>19</sup> All of this would have contributed to being able to learn passages by heart.

But there is another point worth considering. Earlier I noted that I would return to Plato's claim that the person liberated from the Cave "would rather suffer anything than live like that." In the parable as Plato tells it, this seems convincing, but in fact it is not at all clear. Case studies of people who have either gained sight for the first time, or regained sight after a long period of blindness, contain virtually *no* success stories. One might suppose, and blind patients or their family members often *do* suppose, that gaining sight will be a tremendous asset. In fact, surprisingly, it is not. For those who have come to live and flourish as blind, adding a sense is apparently only disorienting.

Oliver Sacks, the late neuropsychologist, personally studied such a patient, Virgil, and collected historical memoirs from several others, in his paper "To See or Not to See."<sup>20</sup> One thing that becomes clear is that seeing is not simply opening a window (or rather, opening blinds) onto the world, but is rather something that we *learn to do*. And we generally learn to do it at an early stage when our brains have and use the capacity for acquiring that ability. When it is not acquired, or when it is lost for a long period of time, that capacity gets put to other purposes and is not (easily) available for such use again. As a result, vision has no useful place in the patient's relation to the world. Sacks and others emphasize (Sacks 1995, 138) "the emotional dangers of forcing a new sense on a blind man—how, after an initial exhilaration, a devastating (and even lethal) *depression* can ensue." Sacks finds no successes to report, and concludes his own case study (1995, 152): "Now, at last, Virgil is allowed not to see, allowed to escape from the glaring, confusing world of sight and space, and to return to his own true being, the intimate, concentrated world of the other senses that had been his home for almost fifty years." He is, you might say, happily back in the cave—for good.

This gives one considerably more sympathy for the residents of the cave. While Plato notes the need for the liberated prisoner to adjust to the glare of the fire and then of the sun (515c–516b), he assumes that the adjustment will happen, and happen fully. And this is what sighted people assume as well. But it turns out to be extremely problematic. And when Plato imagines that the prisoners would try to kill the enlightened person when he returns to the cave (517a), that is not far from how the previously blind person in fact feels toward those (includ-

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<sup>19</sup> Redpath (1990, 28).

<sup>20</sup> Sacks (1995). See also Gregory and Wallace (1963).

ing perhaps his own previously-optimistic self) who advocated for the sight-giving surgery.

So too, it is worth trying to imagine the journey of the liberated prisoner to and in the upper world. As Plato tells the story, he makes it seem as though exposure (and acclimation) is all that is required for the enlightened to “settle while still alive in the faraway Isles of the Blessed” (519c). But is that so? And how do we know?

Similar questions occur to me when I read some of the miracles attributed to Jesus in the Christian Greek Testament. There are three different stories in which Jesus heals a blind man:

In one case (Mark 10: 46–52; Matthew 20: 29–34; and Luke 18: 35–43), a blind beggar asks to be cured, and “at once his sight returned” and he followed Jesus. So, apparently, he had not been blind since birth, but we do not know how long he had been blind.

In a second case (Mark 8: 22–26) other people ask Jesus to cure the blind man, and in a two-stage process, at first the man can “see people; they look like trees as they walk around,” and then “he could see everything plainly and distinctly.”

And the third case (John 9: 1–12) specifies that the man was a beggar who had been blind since birth.

The second case seems rather implausible—when he says that people look like trees, you wonder how he knows what trees look like! But the fact that he soon can see everything “plainly and distinctly” suggests that perhaps he had not been blind all that long. It is harder to believe the third story, that the one blind since birth could see so readily—but then, of course, this *is* a miracle story! My question for each of these stories is—what happens next? And then, what? Being no longer blind, the man can no longer beg for a living so I wonder what he went on to do? In the first story he “followed Jesus along the road.” In the second story he is warned by Jesus to not “go into the village.” But I am more interested in the long-term impact. Did they, like Virgil, come to regret the miracle cure? It is implied that “they lived happily ever after,” but we just do not know.

In 1931, in his diary, Wittgenstein expressed some concerns about Kierkegaard’s use of poetic tools to influence his readers. These cases of giving eyesight to the blind, I believe, constitute an illustration of the qualms that Wittgenstein expressed about Kierkegaard’s approach, when he wrote: “The idea that someone uses a trick to get me to do something is unpleasant. It is certain that it takes great courage (to use this trick) & that I would not—not remotely—have this courage; but it’s a question whether if I had it, it would be right to use it. I *think* that

aside from courage it would also take a lack of love of one's fellow human being."<sup>21</sup> I propose that the "trick" here is using a good story to foist an untested idea on the reader, and the moral question becomes whether Plato shows "a lack of love of one's fellow human being" thereby. Here is a danger of *Dichtung*—sometimes our imagination misleads us.

I think this captures some of the concern that Socrates expressed about the poets in the Republic. The poet is able to make any message, regardless of its content, more attractive to the hearer, and this makes the poet dangerous. But while the character "Socrates" banishes the poets in one breath, the author Plato adopts their tools in the next—by writing dramatic dialogues of great emotional power. Wittgenstein seeks to do the same thing, though he realizes and acknowledges that his poetic powers are rather limited. Yet I think he opens a path and implicitly invites others to follow and "do it better" (TLP, Preface), for he "cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do." (I trace Wittgenstein's evolution on this issue in Chapter 5 of *Wittgenstein's Artillery*.)

Over time, in the course of the 1930s, Wittgenstein seems to have lost his qualms about doing philosophy as poetry, though he never really felt he was particularly successful. As he finally writes in 1947 (CV 1980/1998, 62/71; MS 134, 147–148, April 14, 1947): "Quite different artillery is needed here from anything I am in a position to muster."

Plato seems to have shared Socrates' qualms, while forging ahead with his poetic approach nevertheless. Yet in both cases the authors—Plato and Wittgenstein—employed a dialogical style, so they were never fully committed to the views of any one character, or voice. But we are left with the conversations—to make of them what we will. And there is indeed much to be made of the images of the fly-bottle and the cave.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> DB 2023, 61; diary entry for November 7, 1931.

<sup>22</sup> Presented at the 43<sup>rd</sup> International Wittgenstein Symposium in Kirchberg, Austria, August 2022. Many thanks to the organizers as well as the attendees who participated in the discussion.

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