Commentary on Gordon

Robert J. Yanal

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Yanal, Robert J., "Commentary on Gordon" (1997). OSSA Conference Archive. 44.
https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA2/papersandcommentaries/44

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.
RESPONSE TO JILL GORDON'S "WHY DIDN'T PLATO JUST WRITE ARGUMENTS?"

Robert J. Yanal
Department of Philosophy
Wayne State University
©1998, Robert J. Yanal

Professor Gordon undertakes the difficult project of justifying the role of the many instances of what we might term "image-mongering" within Plato's dialogues, in light of that philosopher's repeated disparagement of images. What's going on? Is this a case of "Do as I say not as I do"? Or, even worse, a sly Plato surreptitiously relying on the power of the very images he wishes to disparage, like a dictator who hides his unfettered use of power behind grand speeches in praise of democracy?

It is neither of these, according to Professor Gordon, who thinks that Plato's images, which are typically analogies of some philosophical point, offer a learning experience that "comes from the deeper exploration of images ... in which the several details of image and original are compared. The cave is like our empirical world; the cave's inhabitants take the shadows to be real as we take our empirical sensa to be real; the philosopher suspects another realm; leaving the cave to discover this other realm is like philosophical exploration; the other realm is brightly lit; its most prominent object is the sun which is like the form of the good; and so on. Professor Gordon interestingly points out that this comparison process resembles dialectical movement, at least in so far as "the reader moves forward and backward ... through the text while making sense out of it." A careful reader should ask himself such questions as, Why is the form of the good like the sun?, and should eke out the similarities Plato probably intended: both the sun and the good are the center of our world; they make daily life possible; without them we cannot live, and so on.

I would have no objection to this if it weren't Plato we were explicating, but since it is Plato, I must wonder if Professor Gordon hasn't side-stepped the main issue. If images have no truth in them, then are we gaining access to truth or being led astray when Plato makes philosophical use of them? It depends, I suppose, on whether the images are being used to help us understand something a good rational argument has already persuaded us of, or whether the images are being used, in part anyway, to persuade us. Put more briefly: are Plato's images persuaders or explicators? They would, it appears, make bad persuaders, for if images are falsehoods, they cannot count as reasons to believe anything (a falsehood being no evidence at all for anything further). They do, often, make good explicators, for myths and metaphors, even though false; and they do, as Professor Gordon points out, draw our attention to similarities and dissimilarities between original and analogue, thereby forcing us at the very least to consider the original more closely.

Does Plato use images only as explicators and never as persuaders? My sense is that he often does both, or what amounts to much the same thing, that he hasn't drawn the distinction between explicator and persuador. To return to the image of the sun in the myth of the cave, Plato has not already persuaded us that the form of the good is essential to our lives; if anything is doing any persuading, it is the analogy between the form of the good and the sun. In being led to consider Plato's intended similarities between these two otherwise disparate objects (one ideal, one empirical), the reader may find himself thinking that such similarities are more than what Plato
intended; he may find himself persuaded that these similarities are true, that is, that the form of the good really is the center of our lives, really does guide everyday life, and so on. I do not say these are falsehoods; my point, rather, is that it begets precisely what Plato seems to warn us against, namely being swayed into belief by mere images.

Professor Robert Binkley, in his comments on my paper for this conference, reminds me of a certain passage near the end of the *Meno* where the topic is whether correct opinion is just as good as knowledge—whether, for example, a man who knew the way to Larissa (who went there and guided others) would be as good a guide as someone who is of the opinion, which as it happens is correct, that the right way to Larissa is thus-and-such, though he has never gone there. Both Socrates and *Meno* agree that the man who has merely true opinion will be as good a guide as the man who knows the way "as long as his opinion is right."

*Meno*: That appears to be so of necessity, and it makes me wonder, Socrates, this being the case, why knowledge is prized far more highly than right opinion, and why they are different? ... *Socrates*: It is because you have paid no attention to the statues of Daedalus, but perhaps there are none in Thessaly. *Meno*: What do you have in mind when you say this? *Socrates*: That they too run away and escape if one does not tie them down but remain in place if tied down. *Meno*: So what? *Socrates*: To acquire an untied work of Daedalus is not worth much, like acquiring a runaway slave, for it does not remain, but it is worth much if tied down, for his works are very beautiful. What am I thinking of when I say this? True beliefs. For true beliefs, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why. ... That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down. (From G.M.A. Grube's translation, Hackett Publishing, 1976)

It seems that Plato is using the analogy of the statues of Daedalus indiscriminately to persuade Meno (and by extension the reader of the dialogue) that true opinion is a fleeting thing and to further elucidate the proposition that knowledge is more permanent than true opinion, hence superior to it. Note that Plato even tells Meno that the reason he doesn't know why knowledge is better than true opinion is because he hasn't paid attention to the statues of Daedalus! This of course is Socratic irony, though the irony turns back on itself when we take note that the statues of Daedalus never actually ran away (they were popularly thought to be so lifelike that they could get up and walk). So if Meno is being persuaded, he is being persuaded by a fiction. Note, too, that we might not be able to escape the metaphorical altogether even in simply comparing true opinion with the run away statutes. True opinion, to stay put in the mind, must be "tied down" by justifying evidence (and will then graduate and become knowledge), but evidence doesn't literally "tie down" true opinion.

Professor Gordon quotes with apparent agreement Charles Griswold to the effect that "myth reveals in iconic form the initial truth of the world." The problem is that "reveals" is ambiguous between *persuades us of* and *further elucidates*. The latter is unobjectionable; the former problematic. Yet Plato, as I've briefly attempted to show, cannot be held only to elucidation, for he is on occasion guilty of using myth to persuade. Professor Gordon attempts to absolve Plato of any guilt here, not by denying that he sometimes uses myth to persuade, but by arguing that his doing so is philosophically kosher. "Reason alone as an avenue to enlightenment is not a
possibility for humans," Professor Gordon claims, in part because the forms "are meant to have no physical manifestation" and yet "Plato expects us truly to have some access to this reality from the images he creates ..." Now I grant that there may be things that can be spoken of, if at all, only mythically, metaphorically, imaginistically. Plato himself in the *Phaedo* thinks we can speak of the soul only in nonliteral ways. As quoted by Professor Gordon, "To tell what [the soul] really is would be a matter of utterly superhuman and long discourse, but it is within human power to describe it briefly in an image; let us therefore speak in that way." But can we take seriously Plato's warnings against images *and* allow ourselves to be persuaded that a certain way of speaking about the soul is true? Professor Gordon thinks so. "Philosophy certainly includes arguments, but it relies as well on images in the form of myth, analogy, metaphor, and the like."

Relies how? I have understood Plato's attacks on mimetic art especially in Book X of *Republic* as based on his belief that reliance on sensa is unreliable as the *sole* route to the truth. The problem with empirical data (a glance at a table, say) is not that it is false, but that it is not the whole truth about the table, though it may be taken to be such by the careless. The problem with painting is that it gives us even less truth than a sensory glimpse, though the vulgar may take a Chardin painting of the table to be the whole truth. What should not be overlooked is that Plato thinks that *some* truth resides in sensory data, and a bit less but nonetheless *some* truth can be gleaned from poetry. So images are not *entirely* false; and in thinking of the soul in metaphorical terms, we are not *altogether* off track. But I think that Professor Gordon aligns philosophical argument and imagistic thinking a bit too closely. Philosophy is supposed to offer another method to the truth, rational dialectic as opposed to sensory input or imagistic stimulation. Plato would have liked to jettison sensa and images entirely in favor of deductive argument (or maybe better yet: for pure transcendental meditation on the forms). But of course he can't. He wants to communicate with us, yet how else can he do this except through discourse which is perforce riddled with the sensory and imagistic? Does he wish us to be persuaded by, say, the myth of the cave or the anecdote about the runaway statues? Taking Plato in his best light, I think he would like his myths and metaphors to coax us into doing the philosophy necessary for us to come to believe on some rational ground—this means some ground other than merely those images—that this or that is true. But this is not to say, as I think Professor Gordon wishes to say, that myth and metaphor are part of what Plato thinks of as philosophy proper.