Queering Plato: Plato's Allegory of the Cave as a Queer-Theoretic Emancipatory Text on Sexuality and Gender

Abstract

This article "queers Plato" by focusing upon Plato's Allegory of the Cave as a fitting figurative account consistent with the theoretical and practical aims of queer theory and its application. To queer Plato, it applies thematic elements in Judith Butler's work, like the "heterosexuality matrix" and the emphasis on gender as being anti-essentialist, to show how Socrates' view of the forms can be understood as a precursor and a theoretical underpinning to much of Butler's scholarship. Ultimately, by queering Plato I argue that the works of these two thinkers not only seamlessly comport with one another but that taken in tandem they can provide a queer-theoretical glimpse of what it means to escape the "Cave" by transcending binaries.

Keywords: Plato; queer theory; epistemic oppression; gender; sexuality

Socrates and Butler

This article “queers Plato” by focusing specifically upon Plato’s Allegory of the Cave as a fitting figurative account consistent with the theoretical and practical aims of queer theory and its application. To queer Plato, it applies thematic elements in Judith Butler’s work, like the “heterosexuality matrix” and the emphasis on gender as being anti-essentialist, to show how Socrates’ view of the forms can be understood as a precursor and a theoretical underpinning to much of Butler’s scholarship. Ultimately, by queering Plato I argue that the works of these two thinkers not only seamlessly comport with one another but that taken in tandem they can provide a queer-theoretical glimpse of what it means to escape the “Cave” by transcending binaries.

To queer, as a verb, means to re-conceptualize a text or a body of work in non-normative ways, particularly in regard to gender and/or sexuality. As it would be antithetical to queering itself to establish orthodox methodologies for queering, there is no one correct way to queer things. Specifically here, queering Plato does not mean to reevaluate his sexuality/gender or the sexuality of the ancient Greeks through a contemporary prism. Indeed, it aims to avoid doing so as such an interpretation of queering can, in fact, perpetuate the very categorical problems that queer theory seeks to solve. In the context of this article, “to queer” Plato means to take an aspect of Plato’s dialogues (as expressed through Socrates) specifically with regard to gender and sex, and reinterpret/reevaluate it in a way that has the potential to provide new insight into his dialogues, themes, and/or his overall body of work. Ideally, these insights will provide a new appreciation of some queer-relevant topics and their application in contemporary society. The presently applicable understanding of queering, then, is more in line with Jennifer Coates’ exploration of the discursive production of everyday heterosexualities (2013). Coates argues that “queer” is to be understood as more than simply being “gay” or “lesbian” and that “queering the

sociolinguistic approach to gender and sexuality means challenging the unmarked status of heterosexuality" (Coates 2013, 537). This paper will go further and argue it also means challenging essentialist assumptions around gender and sex and that a combination of the works of Socrates, Butler, and Kristie Dotson reveal an apposite way forward.

Socrates' doxastic position is that we're not adept at knowing what we believe, particularly in regard to physical attraction. For Socrates, we believe we're attracted to a particular body (e.g., the body of Will Smith) or to particular types of bodies (e.g., bodies with penises), but we're actually attracted to idealized forms that these bodies approximate or evoke (*Symposium* 210a–212c). Specifically, where physical attraction is concerned, we're attracted to the form of beauty, which in turn is typically gendered—men and women regard certain features as "beautiful" in a complicated matrix across genders and sexualities. Beauty and the other forms, however, are for Socrates ideals that exist apart from bodies and are ultimately genderless. This dovetails perfectly with Butler's notion of gender as anti-essentialist and performative (Butler 1990, 1993). In this sense, Butler picks up where Socrates left off in attempting to explicate why and how individuals and cultures gender the form of beauty through physical attraction. For Butler, as an anti-essentialist, what women/men and female/male (likewise, homo/heterosexual) are and should be does not reflect a feature of nature; that is, Butler effectively avoids the facile application of the naturalistic fallacy that often introduces a moralizing element alongside factual statements in discourses surrounding sex, gender, and sexuality. Rather than mere consequences of natural reality that "should" be rigidly followed, manifestations of sexuality and gender are routinely determined/constructed and reproduced by culture. In other words, for Butler, gender is a social artifice, and the manifestations of beauty people pursue are constructions that are endlessly reproduced by and within a complex web of

cultural performances. Yet, for Socrates, particulars are but “shadows” of ideal forms that are also endlessly reproduced within the complex web of experience. Thus, for both thinkers the crucial social problem to be overcome is obliviousness to the ultimate nature of the artifices with which they engage.

To queer Plato, first I’ll explicate relevant aspects of queer theory and unpack specific themes in Butler’s work relevant to my exegesis of Plato while connecting them to Dotson’s (2014) analysis of the epistemological salience of the Allegory of the Cave, specifically through multi-ordered epistemic exclusion. Second, I’ll explain Socrates’ view on knowing the contents of our mind and what has come to be known as “Socratic Intellectualism” (summarized as, “no one errs willingly”) and then show how this comports with Socrates’ explanation of the forms and with a proto-understanding of gender (Segvic 2005). I develop this thematic element by analyzing it through Dotson’s (2014) rubric of epistemic oppression as it relates to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Third, I’ll queer Plato by applying these themes as they intersect with one another, thus revealing the queer theoretical value latent within certain readings of Plato. Finally, I’ll argue merging these ideas offers a new queer interpretation of Plato’s Cave and a queer-theoretical glimpse of how to escape and thereby overcome hegemonic social expectations, particularly the expectations of gendered and sexual binaries.

Queer Theory: Butler and Essentialism

The word “queer” originally was used to describe the strange, peculiar, or eccentric, including the putatively perverse. By the 1920s, however, perhaps due to the categorization and pathologization of homosexuality as an aberrant sexuality opposed to heterosexuality, it evolved into an insult for gays and lesbians. Within the profoundly heteronormative (and homophobic)

cultural milieu that dominated most of the 20th century (Eaklor 2008), this pejorative use of "queer" gained in cultural dominance, replacing the "eccentric" denotation for the term until, at last, it was re-appropriated in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a political strategy in the struggle for equal rights among those whose sexualities were marginalized (Johnson 2014). It is in this historical and linguistic genesis that queer theory came to define itself as intrinsically disruptive and even intentionally ironic.

As a theoretical exploration, queer theory has, from the beginning, sought to expose heteronormativity as endemic and, from theoretical to practical positioning, shown how to overcome the marginalization of those who do not align with normative sexualities (heterosexual) or genders (male/female). By articulating the fluctuating and unstable epistemological, ontological, and moral nature of gender categories (male/female, masculine/feminine), queer theory is thus anti-essentialist. In other words, unlike the terms "lesbian" or "gay," the term "queer" does not refer to an essence. Rather, it is a relational word meaning "outside the norm" and "strange; odd" (Oxford English Dictionary). As such, queer theory does not and cannot marginalize an individual's sexuality if it falls outside of what is considered normative, e.g., a polyamorist, an asexual, a zoophiliac, or those who eroticize transgenerational sex.

Queer theory disrupts the normative/populist belief that there are essential—in that they exist in nature—genders and gender identity categories determined by and rooted in sex organs (Marinucci 2016). On the contemporary reductive and essentializing Western view, if one is born with a penis one *is* the male gender or born with a vagina one *is* the female gender. (The contemporary hegemonic moral analogue to this vis-a-vis gender is that males *should be* masculine and females feminine, and this baseless moralizing cultural default is a particularly

important site for queer criticism.) For queer theorists, the categories by which we understand gender identity are social constructs and not given or assigned by nature. (There is overwhelming empirical evidence for gender as a sociocultural construct. As just one point of entry, see Kulick's seminal ethnography *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes* [Kulick 1998]. The text details the lives of Brazilian men who live as females but do not self-identify as women.) Gender and "gender meanings" are "inscribed on anatomically different bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law" (Butler 1990, 14). Queer theory recognizes and advances the thesis that there's no objective, lawful relationship that holds between gender and sex and thus no basis for a moral imperative to align with, espouse, or reproduce dominant norms relevant to sex, gender, sexuality, and sex roles. In this sense, then, queer theorists can view Butler's gender meanings, as well as expectations about sexualities and sex roles, like Plato's shadows cast upon anatomically different bodies as particular manifestations on the walls of the cave.

Queer theory(ies) has employed a vast array of theoretic and intellectual tools to achieve its ambition of disrupting normative/essentialist/moralizing assumptions about sexuality and gender. By doing so, one of its primary objectives is to lend social and moral legitimacy/equality to those who are marginalized because of their sexuality or gender expression. These (emancipatory) approaches have included, but are not limited to poststructuralism and phenomenology (and even various pedagogical approaches, viz. queer pedagogy) (Larsson, Quennerstedt, and Öhman 2014; Whitlock 2010). A vector shared among these theoretical underpinnings is disrupting the replication of linguistic and epistemological normative/homophobic/identity issues (even the phrase "queer theory" is a way to recapture pejorative language that targets gays and lesbians). Another commonality is a subjective turn

toward seeking to understand queer lives and queer subjectivities (Butler 1997; Campbell 2011); that is, it's an attempt to understand the lived experiences/hardships of people who fall outside gender and sexual norms (see Yoshino 2007, esp 50–100).

The pioneers who worked within this space (e.g., Judith Butler, Michael Warner, Eve Sedgwick-Kosofsky) broadly focused upon rethinking non-normative sexual and gender identities in social, political, and moral theory (Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1990; Warner 2000). They either directly challenged the prevailing, dominant psychological understanding sex and gender or, rather than repudiate its underlying commitments, sought to subvert them through performative parody (Butler 1990), or simply refused to engage its theoretic engines. (In the last case, they refused to directly confront formal structures of thought that were foundationally flawed because they thought it would yield little benefit.) Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) in particular (perhaps because she was influenced by poststructuralism) was instrumental in laying the foundation for queer theory and forwarded the theoretical underpinnings for engaging subversive parody in performances of gender and sexuality as a queer methodology (for more here, see Scales 2016).

Butler's scholarship is arguably even more relevant today than it was in the 1990s and mid 2000s (a Google Scholar search will show a truly staggering number of citations of her work, many of them recent) (Breen and Blumenfeld 2017). In particular, her disruption of the idea that there is a "realness" or "essentialism" to gendered bodies specifically, and gender in general, is a pillar for much of contemporary queer theory. One of Butler's more significant contributions has been to conceptually shift the conversation from gender essentialism to the hegemonic "heterosexual matrix" and discourses that focuses upon gender performativity. Butler writes,

> I use the term heterosexual matrix… to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized… a hegemonic discursive/epistemological model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (1990, 151).

Thus Butler exposits gender as being normatively reproduced through the heterosexual matrix in which "real" or "authentic" expressions of performative femininity and masculinity are embedded with hegemonic heterosexuality. In other words, heterosexuality is *the* norm and the lens through which sexuality and gender are viewed. (She offers a more sophisticated and refined notion of Rich's [1980] "compulsory heterosexuality" and an extension of Wittig's [1992] "heterosexual contract".) This is what it means to claim that core of queer theory is anti-essentialist.

Moreover, for Butler, heterosexuality and gender are co-constituted and merged. Heterosexuality is sustained and maintained by shaming and othering abnormal gender and sexual practices. As Boldt writes, "Notions of 'normal femininity and masculinity' have neither intelligibility nor power without the contrasting presence of an 'abnormal gender'" (Boldt 1996, 119). This view has been reinforced by subsequent research and is, as such, largely uncontroversial (cf. Beasley, Holmes, and Brook 2015; Savin-Williams and Vrangalova 2013; Silva 2017). Gendered bodies, then, align with sexuality because of the social order (Butler 1990). The heterosexual matrix thus clarifies why there is a specific relationship between

masculine and feminine and male and female, and how eroticizing desires is normalized and reinforces heterosexuality.

This stands in stark opposition to the popular conception that there is a "realness" or "essence" to gender and a stable core to gender identity. That is, that males "should be" men and act "manly" because they were born with a penis, and by extension, men with smaller penises and testicles are "lesser men" who should be ashamed and those with larger genitalia are "greater men" who should be proud (Karioris and Allan 2016; Veale et al. 2014, Veale et al. 2015). (This also has mental health implications [see Gaither et al. 2017; Johnston, McLellan, and McKinlay 2014].) These popular notions can be contrasted with Butler's explanation of gender as being perpetually created and re-created by every day lived experience(s) and social and cultural practices. For Butler, there is no gender essence rooted in one's sex organ, as she writes, "There is no 'proper' gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex's cultural property. Where that notion of the 'proper' operates, it is always and only *improperly* installed as the effect of a compulsory system" (Butler 2013, 21). Gender is a social construct and performative. It's something we do over and over again, within the defined cultural constructs, and it thus becomes part of our identity.

Socrates' View

Plato writes about Eros, sexuality, beauty, and/or love in several dialogues (e.g., *Lysis*, *Parmenides*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, etc.) (Gordon 2010, 2012; Reeve 2012). In spite of some details which may conflict (e.g., Eros and the desire of the pleasurable in *Symposium* vs. *Phaedrus*), there is an emerging theme that runs throughout much of his work (Gordon 2012). That theme, that we are not in love with or attracted to what what/who we

think/feel/desire/believe ourselves to be in love with and attracted to is nonstandard, and requires explication in order to reveal its queer theoretical potential. (In order to approach broader elements thematically and not pedantically, throughout this section I am collapsing certain distinctions. For example, the distinction between want, *boulesthai*, and desire, *epithumein*. I am also merging overlapping terms like "love" and "beauty," even though Plato uses them in slightly different ways in the *Symposium* their categorical grouping helps to exposit broader themes in Plato's work.)

For Socrates, we are not very good at knowing the contents of our own mind. That is, we may think we believe/desire something but we are not correct about the object of our belief/desire (Kahn 1987). In other words, we often don't believe what we think we believe and don't desire what we think we desire. In the *Symposium*, for example, Socrates explains that the true object of love is the form of beauty specifically and the forms generally (*Symposium* 201a–212c). That is, on Socrates' view, if you think you love some*one* you are mistaken. The true object of (erotic) love lies within the forms; the body of the person for whom you direct feelings of love is an ersatz embodiment of the form of beauty. Attraction to a particular person/body is thus a failure to understand the true nature of your attraction. When you think and feel you are in love you are mistaken about the ultimate (but not proximate, which would be the other person) object of your love. Erotic drives are actually drives for the forms (Payne 2017, esp. 16–35).

Upon first glance, the idea that we could be wrong about what we believe (or about the object of our desire) is both counterintuitive and surprising, if not bizarre. The popular (Cartesian) notion about belief is that we're infallible about what we think we believe. In virtually every domain of inquiry the standard for belief is verbal behavior and/or subjectively truthful/honest behavior. This even holds in what seems like extreme cases. For example, when

prison inmates go before a review board that determines whether or not they'll be released, they provide testimony. They may give verbal behavior and say they're sorry, but they may not be either *subjectively* or *objectively truthful*. That is, they may be lying, or, in more charitable cases, they may be confused by cognitive biases, by misapprehending their actual state, or by having confabulated upon those memories relevant to their incarceration or rehabilitation.

Additional insight into this phenomenon is available in Dotson (2014), who offers a compelling investigation of Socrates and the Cave Allegory to outline and clarify the problem of epistemic oppression and thus serves as a crucial connector between the seemingly theoretically disparate Butler and Socrates. Under epistemic oppression, one suffers from "persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production" (Dotson 2014, 115). For Dotson, the social milieu itself can be the means by which epistemic oppression occurs, and, when sufficiently hegemonically dominant, these social factors can be a limiting factor in our own knowledge about our own beliefs. As she writes, "where situatedness and interdependence can account for 'what' we can know and 'how' we can know it given our epistemological systems, resilience [the resistance of an epistemic system to accepting or even recognizing its flaws] constitutes a condition of the possibility of 'what' and 'how' we know" (Dotson 2014, 122). This she connects directly to the Allegory of the Cave thusly,

> Insofar as the fettered persons, by virtue of their situatedness, attend to certain features of the cave in ways consistent with their positioning, the imagery of the Allegory allows for acknowledgement of the role that one's position plays in constraining and facilitating what one can know. Also, the inclusion of an epistemic resource like language that is shared amongst the situated persons acknowledges the degree to which epistemic resources are interdependent.

> Finally, and most importantly, Socrates' question about the intractable nature of the worldviews amongst the prisoners allows for acknowledgement that the worldviews and the instituted social imaginaries that create and maintain those worldviews hold a kind of resilience. They will be able to absorb with no or a relatively small change a number of revelations incompatible with Shadowland-inspired epistemological comportment. (2014, 123)

Indeed, someone might really *feel* that if they lend their belief to a proposition, then no one else is in a position to tell them they don't believe what they think they believe. If I believe I desire chocolate ice cream, for example, nobody is situated to tell me I'm wrong because nobody has access to my belief, senses, or feelings. For Socrates, however, this popular view is incorrect. For example, I could be subjectively misinterpreting dehydration as hunger and a concomitant impulse to ingest something cold. For Dotson (2014), if this epistemic limitation arises due to the inadequacy of dominant shared epistemic resources, perhaps through prevailing assumptions about gender or sexuality (as are often challenged by queer theorists), I am suffering third-order epistemic exclusion (129). As Dotson puts it, overcoming this problem requires "those perpetrating third-order epistemic oppression take a step back and become aware of their overall epistemological systems that are preserving and legitimating inadequate epistemic resources" (131), or, in terms germane to the present discussion, queering.

On Socrates' view, all errors are effectively cognitive mistakes. This is broadly referred to as Socratic Intellectualism, meaning that people never knowingly act wrongly or desire the bad (*Gorgias* 468c–d, 499e; *Meno* 78a–78c; *Protagoras* 357d, 358bc). Rather, they misunderstand (see Kamtekar 2018, esp. 70–126). This is ultimately part of Dotson's (2014) point, though her reasons are deeper and speak to a difficulty intrinsic to power dynamics that Socrates apparently

misunderstood. Similarly, people caught up in the matrices of gender performances, especially the heterosexual matrix, misunderstand the true nature of the objects of their desires. Erotic development, then, is the process of becoming conscious of the *proper* object of desire. It's not just a particular body or even beautiful bodies that are desired. In fact, it's not even bodies at all. It's beauty itself. The form of beauty is the ultimate, causal object of desire but because we don't have immediate access to the form of beauty we direct our love to the shadow of the form of beauty, that is, to a particular body.

Supporting this thesis, the Divided Line (*Republic* 509d–511e), which separates the world into the lower "visible" ("shadows and reflections" and physical things themselves) and the higher "intelligible" (roughly, thought and understanding), is the first step in the process of articulation and is found immediately before the Allegory of the Cave (*Republic* 514a). Broadly, your shadow is dependent on you for its being, and likewise, though on a higher level, the physical "you" depends upon your soul (your true being) for its existence. This basic idea can be mapped onto the forms and their related parallels. Particularly, physical bodies are "shadows" of the forms and we don't *really* love the shadows, we love the forms. By combining these Socratic concepts with Butler's deconstructive insights into performativity, linked by Dotson's analytical articulation of how epistemic oppression precludes certain types of understanding, it is clear that the shadows we think we love are determined and constrained by performative aspects of gender and sexuality—including the heterosexual matrix.

Queer Theory and Plato

For Plato, we have a trajectory of seeking to grasp the forms generally and the form of the Good in specific. In the *Symposium*, for example, our erotic impulses are directed toward knowing the

forms and our innate drive guides us accordingly (*Symposium* 204d–212c). What is rarely discussed, however, is that the forms are not gendered. It is through performativity of gender and sexualities that these are affixed to a gendered body, which is a kind of shadow. Put differently, we have erotic and emotional affections for something different than what we suppose, and queer theory is little more than a means of recognizing this fact while "being queer" is little more than challenging it at its most fundamental level. Moreover, these challenges are necessary, as by the dominance of extant social mores regarding gender, sex roles, and sexuality, a pervasive third-order epistemic exclusion (Dotson 2014) prevents those blinkered by their own dominance from recognizing these problems for what they are and thus remediating them. As Dotson observes, "This kind of recognition, which can be seen as akin to a broad recognition of one's 'cultural traditions systems,' is extraordinarily difficult" (131). This is also ultimately what a queer reading of the Allegory of the Cave indicates.

Of course, the shadowed nature of gender and sexuality is/can be neither heteronormative nor homonormative. Heteronormative or homonormative renderings would entail an immediacy between one's erotic desires and a particular body or gendered bodies as (partially) determined/mediated by culture, participation in certain discourses, and repetitive gender-based actions, e.g., manners of dress, manspreading, dating/sex roles, professional and social roles, mansplaining (Bridges 2017; Husson 2013; Jane 2016; Saint-Martin 2017). For Socrates, however, the critical point is that souls are not gendered. Bodies have physical characteristics that participate in certain erotic activities, and although we think we enjoy sex with particular types of bodies and specific sex organs, we are mistaken because we mistake the shadows for the forms. Enter Butler.

Butler's view of the soul differs profoundly from that of Plato. For Plato, as throughout most of Western culture, the body is seen as a "mortal coil" that the soul temporarily inhabits. Butler (1990), however, following Foucault (1975) in *Discipline and Punish*, sees the body as imprisoned by the soul, which is produced by discourses, and primary among these is gender. This concept is the root of her "metaphysics of substance," which, for her, proves that gender is ultimately performative (Butler 1990, 24–25). Thus, while Butler is anti-essentialist, her articulation of the realities of gender performativity and heterosexual matrix perfectly comport with Socrates' notions of a lack of intrinsic or objective gender (to say nothing of how they enable the types of epistemic exclusion described by Dotson's [2014]). For Butler, we produce or "do" gender by our routine actions as situated agents who participate in a given cultural milieu. We engage in a social fiction by actively replicating and reinforcing gender. Butler writes,

> The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. (2012, 22)

We're not inherently/innately born with gender roles; they're assigned to us through expectations of routine cultural performances based upon our (perceived) sex organ. For Butler, gender is performative because of repetition, social and cultural reinforcement, and participation in various hegemonic discourses. This leads to the production of what is named "male" and "female" (as well as "gay" and "straight," by extension). (The only sense that this is a causal attribution is because of the traditional wedding of sex organs to gender, but even then the link is arbitrary.) Because gender is actualized through a perennial, ceaseless series of gender performances, this

creates the (nearly) indelible illusion of a fixed or natural gender essence (Butler 1990, 1993, 2004). Moreover, because these performances are inherently reproductive in themselves and of structures of dominance, they lead to self-reinforcing epistemic exclusion (per Dotson 2014) that prevents their disruption, for instance by application of queer theoretic principles.

Crucially, for both Butler and Socrates, then, there is no "stable sex expressed through a stable gender" (Butler 1990, 151). Stable sex and stable gender are as illusory as they become hegemonic. These apparently rigid categories are illusory for Butler specifically because gender is performative and not essential, hence the popular academic expression "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987), which Butler subversively plays upon and effectively queers in *Undoing Gender* (Butler 2004). That is, we "do" gender by performing and repeating and not because our actions flow from or are entailed by an (objective) essence, and for Butler this leads to a prerogative to "undo" gender performances through parodic acts that effectively queer it. These subversive performances, in Butler's (2004) view, may not be sufficient to overcome (third-order) epistemic exclusion (cf. Dotson 2014), and thus to effect radical change, but they may create the opportunity. Importantly, this ultimately accords with Socrates in that there is no relevant essential and thus stable *form* of sex/gender. Indeed, to underscore the depth of Socrates' view, he may go further than merely to deny the concreteness of gender; for him, in the endless sea of reincarnation, genderless souls inhabit many bodies across many species (*Phaedo* 72e–77b, 80e–84c; *Phaedrus* 248c–249b; *Republic* 614a–621d).

This reading of Socrates is underscored by his theory of souls (*Republic* 435–442a). For Socrates, it's not just human souls that incarnate into different human bodies after death, but souls can incarnate into other species as well (see Socrates' conversation with Cebes in *Phaedo* 81e–82b). Socrates argues that you're not your body (or a body composite), which is but a

shadow of your true essence. Rather, you are your soul, which is not gendered and possesses the capacity for multiplicities. This is clearly seen in the *Timeaus*, where Socrates paints an animalistic picture of the Demiurge making the world and the world's soul (for Socrates, the world is a living organism) (*Timeaus* 34b10–36d7). From the leftover "soul stuff" that made the world, the lesser gods (it's effectively portioned out) make souls and incarnate them. As souls are objects belonging to the higher realm of forms, for Socrates, when you die your soul is reincarnated into another body.

As in most cultures that embrace beliefs about reincarnation, this process becomes a site of explicit moralizing in Socrates' view. If you're bad (i.e., if you have a deficient psychological character) you may be born into a different species (*Phaedo* 81e–82b). Regardless, from one life to the next, the sexual form your body takes can change. Sometimes you have a penis, other times a vagina. (For Socrates, who lacked the benefit of advances in feminist and queer theories, this hierarchy reflects the usual patriarchal structure endemic to his epoch: the "male sex" is a higher category, female the lower, and below female are various manner of non-humans [*Timaeus* 42b–c]. This hierarchy, in fact, in addition to being intrinsically sexist, is profoundly speciesist as well, and not only in the usual anthropocentric way: among non-human animals, the highest are the birds because they're closest to the heavens, and those lower, such as serpents, are deemed worse [*Republic* 614a–621d].)

On this rendering it seems all that is necessary to queer Plato is to shift philosophical focus to the ways in which Plato queers himself. Already, Socrates' argument is essentially queer because he asserts that you are your ungendered soul and that soul happens to instantiate in a particular body across various species and with or without various sex organs. For Socrates, like Butler, gender identity is what you happen to become in that it's transitory and (somewhat)

accidental (depending on the degree of truth it has obtained, *Phaedrus* 248c–249b), though the mechanism for how this happens differs (by reincarnation for Plato; by socialization for Butler). Plato gives no direct account, however, for how gender arises in any particular body, and thus his locus for gendering is not exclusive of socialization. Indeed, in a sense, his theory of reincarnation is merely one of socialization *across lives* rather than within a single life.

Returning to etymology, this is a very "strange; odd" interpretation of reality. If this were not queer enough, Plato's interpretation goes even further by transspecies queering. For instance, it may be that in your last incarnation you had the body of a mollusk (see *Philebus* 21c on mollusks and the worth of a life without reason), but you were re-instantiated into a human female body. The critical point is that even if in your previous life you were born into a mollusk's body, this is not because you have the *soul* of a mollusk. For Socrates, this is inconceivable as there no such a thing/form/object as a mollusk's soul; you're just are a soul that happens to be within a body that has a particular physical form. Within the realm of sex and gender, Socrates' example raises curious points because mollusks may be sexless or hermaphrodites and yet all mollusks are genderless (Ruppert et al. 2004, 286–289).

For Socrates, the ultimate determiner is reason. Particularly, the character of your soul can change, and you can learn to reason, which means that you'll progress psychologically through learning, education, philosophy, and from society (*Republic* 614a–621d). As a result of this learning, which is a process of socialization, one's future incarnations, including as male or female, are determined. In a sense it is the same for Butler who instructs upon the performative realities of gender and sexuality in order to enable a liberatory "rebirth" beyond established binaries. Though it requires much work, this process of social learning is what Dotson (2014) insists overcomes epistemic exclusion by serving to increase the extent of shared epistemic

resources, and it is essential to Butler's (2004) subversive (queering) paradigm that undoes gender by providing parodic alternatives to (pre)dominant conceptions. Although Dotson and Butler take different approaches, drawing on different but overlapping scholarly history and a certain amount of care needs to be taken not to conflate the poststructuralist methods of queer theory with the analytical work done by women of color who examine epistemological oppression, these ideas are highly compatible especially in terms of their anti-essentialism and unlearning of hegemonic assumptions. Equally, the peculiar details and mechanisms posited in ancient thought diverge so wildly from contemporary understanding as to make the connection not at all obvious, yet this is another way in which Socrates' argument is anti-essentialist and Socrates' ontology can be seen as a precursor to Butler's conception of gender identity.

Out of the Cave

Plato presents the Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic* (514a–520a). Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine a cavern where prisoners have been kept from childhood in fixed positions and can't move their bodies. They're forced to gaze at a wall and can't view anything, not even other prisoners. A fire is behind them, and between the prisoners and the fire is an elevated walkway with a wall to partition them from the fettered men. Behind the wall people are walking while carrying various objects, such as marionettes, and the shadows of these objects being cast by the fire are all the men can see (514b). Socrates asks,

> do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave that fronted them? How could they, he said, if they were compelled to hold their heads unmoved through life? (515a)

Socrates continues by questioning Glaucon,

> When one was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn his head around and walk and to lift up his eyes to the light, and in doing all this felt pain and, because of the dazzle and glitter of the light, was unable to discern the objects whose shadows he formerly saw, what do you suppose would be his answer if someone told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw more truly? (515c–515d).

Butler calls out these "cheat[s]" and "illusion[s]" in gendered society by identifying them as gendered performances, hegemonically sorted into various binaries. For Butler, as rephrased through Socrates, discourses around gender are delimited by the performative shadows one sees, while the constant exposure to gendered shadows—which are (almost exclusively) heterosexual or at least heteronormative—is a kind of "discursive praxis" whereby "natural sex" is produced and understood as normative (Butler 1990). For Butler explicitly and Socrates implicitly, gender and sexuality can be understood to be active appropriations deriving from repetition and not from sex organs. The "prisoners" of a queered Cave, being those people socialized into norms of gender and sexuality, are incessant, passive recipients of shadow images, who through the mechanism of socialization are made subject to dominant and normative constructions of gender and sexuality. As Dotson (2014) informs us, this explicitly represents the roots of various forms of epistemic exclusion that need to be overcome if epistemic justice, thus liberation from oppressions, is to be achieved.

Within the queered Cave, binaries with regard to sex, gender, and sexuality imprison people within prevailing dominant social paradigms so that they can only see—as shadows—sex

organs and endless repetitions of gender performativity/sexual acts. Their continual exposure to the heterosexual matrix is thus forced and reinforced, recurs throughout their lifetimes, and appears to them as normative, unconstructed, and "natural." Because, as Dotson (2014) points out, they are epistemically limited, if not oppressed, by being (epistemically and performatively) fettered within the sociocultural assumptions defining the queered Cave, it is important to produce frequent reminders that the forms behind their gendered and sexual identifications and desires are genderless. It is by interacting merely with entrenched performative shadows that people are gendered and forced into rigid categories of sexuality. Attraction thus *becomes* gendered and (predominantly) heteronormative or (less so) homonormative because we, as prisoners, *learn* to discharge our sexual impulses in culturally "proper" ways by being subjected to specific constant repetition of dominant expectations of sex, gender, and sexuality *and* because we mistake the shadows for a kind of "natural order." The shadows, however, are just that—shadows, here cast upon bodies. They are not essential elements and they are certainly not ultimate reality, that is, they are not the form of beauty.

That is, within the queered Cave prisoners only see only two-dimensional projections of bodies, attraction, and sexuality. These arise as gendered and sexual performances, binaries, and norms that are then mistaken for timeless, immutable realities about gender, sex, sex roles, and sexuality. These misapprehensions go on to produce and reproduce epistemic limitation and exclusion that ensures their perpetuation, and so the dance of the Shadowlands becomes normative and difficult to disrupt (cf. Dotson 2014). Realizing this dynamic renders queer theory a vital pillar of disruptive social politics and indispensable for understanding how one can be liberated by escaping the "queered" Cave of gendered expectations, binaries, and prevailing mores of sexual normativity. This realization encourages one to take up Butler's subversive

parodic approach to gender performance and, by extension, to sexuality. The result is the opportunity to overcome binaries and to recognize that (oppressive) norms are not immutable features of reality so much as social constructs reproduced endlessly throughout culture and institute a third order of change (Dotson 2014). In this view, overcoming binaries is the means by which gendered bodies interacting with sexuality can escape the queered Cave, and thereby situate themselves in a way that enables a direct appreciation of the form of beauty that casts the shadows of being and desiring bodies with particular sex organs.

In summary, gender and sexuality are routinely constructed by our ineluctable experience of the shadows within Plato's queered Cave Allegory. As Butler writes, "Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself" (Butler 2013, 722). In other words, even thinking that the shadows cast by the penis accurately captures the reflection of the form of beauty sought by those desiring sex with a penis is part of the illusion. Physical bodies and their sex organs therefore help produce a kind of counterfeit beauty and we're mistaken about our attraction to and desire for them—we're actually attracted to some*thing* different. This leads to Socrates question,

> But tell me, what would happen if one of you had the fortune to look upon essential beauty entire, pure and unalloyed; not infected with the flesh and color of humanity, and ever so much more of mortal trash? What if he could behold the divine beauty itself, in its unique form?" (*Symposium* 211e)

What would happen, as posited throughout queer theory, is that you'd realize that gender is ultimately a socially constructed illusion, binaries would collapse, and you'd come to understand that you've been mistaken about the objects and nature of your attractions and attractedness to

bodies (especially, rather than to persons). In this way, Plato's Cave Allegory is most usefully understood through a queer lens and as an allegorical account of how queerness overcomes binaries and thus disrupts traditional understandings of sex and gender.

Hemlock

For Socrates, Dotson, and Butler, we're effectively prisoners to certain self-reinforcing illusions. For Socrates, our *entire* reality is predicated upon illusions that, under Dotson, are self-reinforcing and oppressive, and while Butler's scope and epistemological ambitions are far narrower as their focus on sex and gender, these illusions are entrenched and govern fundamental aspects of human lives. For all three thinkers, a way to overcome/disrupt specious views of binaries/essentialism and escape the Cave is by challenging dominant assumptions wherever they arise (*Phaedo* 69a; *Philebus* 55d; *Statesman* 285a). As Pettersson and Songe-Möller write, "The resource brought by reason [does not] necessarily… banish the illusion (whether of pleasure or of vision) but… counteract[s] its influence upon our judgments and actions" (2017, 132). So too it is with the hyper-prolific Butler, whose highly influential works and insightful arguments have contributed to the spawning of an emancipatory and theoretical academic discipline, broken entrenched taboos, helped to ameliorate oppression and discrimination, and raised awareness of constructed illusions (Breen and Blumenfeld 2017). In this way, Plato's Cave allegory can be—and perhaps is best—read as accomplishing Coates' goals of challenging "the unmarked status of heterosexuality" by "queering the sociolinguistic approach to gender and sexuality" (2013, 537) by queering the shadows of the Platonic form of beauty.

As Dotson (2014) observes, the difficulty in overturning entrenched patterns of epistemic oppression and exclusion is immense, and resistance by those holding dominance is to be

expected (cf. Bailey 2017). Indeed, for Socrates, the consequences of helping people see through illusions and attempt to escape the Cave were a legal trail in which he was charged with impiety and corrupting the youth (*Apology* 24b) and a subsequent guilty verdict in which jurors voted for his death (*Apology* 38c), which was effected by being compelled to drink hemlock. This ultimate challenge to all disruptive or queering disciplines thusly stands as the definitive answer to Socrates' question as to what would happen to the person who went back into the Cave to help others escape: "And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?" (*Republic* 517a). But is this not, more than anything, precisely what needs (and why we need) disruption, even queering, more than anything?

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