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Abstract

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis attributes global climate change to a destructive “technocratic paradigm” of thought and action. He then calls for a renewed educational program to resist the technocratic paradigm. This paper shows how reading C. S. Lewis’ *Abolition of Man* and Plato’s *Republic* alongside *Laudato Si* can help students better appreciate some of Francis’ central points. *Abolition of Man* illuminates the technocratic paradigm’s essential features: (1) a reduction of value-laden creation (which demands respect) to value-neutral “nature” (which does not) and (2) the development of techniques to transform nature—including *human* nature—according to the desires of the dominant class. The allegory of the cave and the tripartite account of the soul in Plato’s *Republic* help clarify the notion of “objective value” at play in Francis’ encyclical, and also give students tools to foster a critical perspective on consumerist culture.

Cover Page Footnote

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Resisting the Technocratic Paradigm: *Laudato Si*, *The Abolition of Man* and Plato's *Republic*

C. P. Ragland¹

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis connects the looming environmental crisis of climate change with 'today's self-centered culture of instant gratification' (162/120).² 'The present world system is certainly unsustainable,' he declares, because we are reveling in 'extreme . . . consumerism' (50/36). This consumerism springs from what Francis calls the 'technocratic paradigm' and culminates in 'a technocracy which sees no intrinsic value' in non-human life (118/88). To avoid catastrophe, Francis suggests, we must develop 'a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm' (111/84). This new way of thinking 'would necessarily have to take into account . . . philosophy and social ethics' (110/83).

This paper aims to make a small contribution to the educational program Francis calls for. Because Francis hopes that his encyclical will begin a dialogue among all people (3/4), not just Catholics, it makes sense for the educational program to put *Laudato Si* into conversation with non-Catholic voices. Here, Pope Francis will be read along side a 20th-Century Anglican—C.S. Lewis—and an ancient pagan—Plato. The goals are (1) to clarify some key concepts implicit in Francis' thinking, and (2) to suggest some topics of reflection that may help students shake off the technocratic paradigm and reach for a more authentic mode of living (my message is first and foremost directed to Catholic educators). Lewis' *Abolition of Man* helps throw the nature of the 'technocratic paradigm' into stark relief (part I), and Plato's *Republic* provides a helpful perspective on the problems of consumer culture and the education required to resist reflexive technocratic thinking (part II).

I. The Technocratic Paradigm and *The Abolition of Man*

Pope Francis insists that our current complex environmental problems demand engagement with diverse perspectives; 'the solutions,' he insists 'will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality' (63/45). Indeed, in the chapter entitled 'The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis,' Francis argues that the problem has been created by the almost complete dominance in the modern world of the 'technocratic paradigm' (101/75) a sort of intellectual monoculture (Francis calls it 'undifferentiated and one-dimensional' (106/79) that

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threatens both the earth and the diversity of human thought and culture. This section focuses on the nature and origin of that paradigm, using C. S. Lewis to help clarify it.

Francis begins his most extended description of the technocratic paradigm as follows:

This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a *technique of possession, mastery and transformation*. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but *for a long time* this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently *ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us*. (106/79; my emphasis)

Here Francis clearly assumes two different eras of human history: a past age that lasted ‘a long time’ and in which humans respected ‘what nature itself allowed,’ and the current era of the technocratic paradigm, with its emphasis on a human subject’s mastery of objects. Given the link he sees between the ‘scientific and experimental’ method and the technocratic paradigm, Francis likely thinks that the technocratic paradigm began in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, with the advent of modern empirical science. It is far less clear what exactly Francis thinks is ignored or forgotten in our current mindset, or what it means for nature to ‘allow’ something. These questions will be taken up shortly. But first it will be helpful to consider some of Francis’ other descriptions of the technocratic paradigm.

In the section just after the one quoted above, Francis continues:

Many problems of today’s world stem from the tendency, at times unconscious, to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society. The effects of *imposing this model on reality as a whole*, human and social, are seen in the deterioration of the environment, but this is just one sign of a *reductionism* which affects *every aspect of human and social life*. We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines *dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups*. (107/80; my emphasis)

Francis here describes the current dominant paradigm as a kind of ‘reductionism’ that not only degrades the environment, but also affects people’s relations with each other. Francis implies that the paradigm serves the interests of the powerful, probably at the expense of the weak. This implication becomes explicit when he associates a kind of ‘relativism’ with the technocratic paradigm.

The ‘subject’ that seeks to possess, master, and transform objects in the technocratic paradigm is a human subject. Francis presents a less abstract picture of this subject’s ‘mastery’ in the following passage:

When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests. (122/ 90-91)

To master something is to make it serve one's own interests, to make it convenient for oneself. For the master, 'all else becomes relative' to convenience in the sense that the value of mastered objects *consists in* their degree of convenience: they get their value *in relation* to the master's interests. Francis goes on to make clear that the 'object' in this relation of mastery can just as easily be another human as it can be some bit of nature:

The culture of relativism is the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labour on them or enslaving them to pay their debts . . . In the absence of objective truths or sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs, what limits can be placed on human trafficking, organized crime, the drug trade, commerce in blood diamonds and the fur of endangered species? (123/91)

The technocratic paradigm, as Francis understands it, is part of a modern mentality in which we 'think that our subjective feelings can define what is right and what is wrong' (224/164). This relativistic mentality, he suggests, gives rise not only to runaway consumerism and environmental degradation, but also to countless crimes of human against human.

Francis clearly thinks that something has gone horribly wrong in the modern era. His quarrel is not with modern science itself, but rather with the current tendency to impose the model of modern scientific rationality on 'reality as a whole.' In the passages we have just considered, Francis suggests that this modern mentality is (1) morally relativistic, (2) reductionist, and (3) detrimental to human relationships with one another as well as to humanity's relationship to the earth. It contrasts, furthermore, with a pre-modern mindset in which people respected 'what nature itself allowed.' These claims raise a host of questions: in what sense is the modern view reductionist? What is the connection, if any, between this reductionism and relativism? In what sense were pre-modern people 'in tune with' what nature 'allowed'? To get a firm grip on Francis' thinking about the technocratic paradigm, we must wrestle with these questions.

Although Francis does not quote it, C. S. Lewis' 1943 lecture *The Abolition of Man* is very helpful to read alongside *Laudato Si*. Like Francis, Lewis sees a tight connection between moral subjectivism, a kind of reductionism, and the tendency to dominate. And he too contrasts these with an older tradition of being more in tune with nature. By examining Lewis' remarks on these topics and honing in on points of resonance between the two works, we can gain a deeper insight into Pope Francis' thinking.

Abolition of Man contrasts two different views about the nature of value. The first is 'the doctrine of objective value'³ according to which the universe is 'such that certain emotional

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man; or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York,: Macmillan, 1968), 29.

reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it,’⁴ so that ‘our approvals and disapprovals are . . . recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order’⁵; this view posits what Lewis calls the Tao: ‘the way in which the universe goes on . . . [and] also the Way which every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic progression.’⁶ The Tao is the ‘Natural Law’ or the ‘First Principles of Practical Reason,’⁷ a universally binding moral code deriving its content in part from the nature of the non-human world.

The second is ‘the philosophical theory that all values are subjective.’⁸ This view is perhaps best understood as one on which our emotions of approval or disapproval are *not* responses to value inherent in things objectively. Instead, on the subjectivist view, our emotional responses *create* value where there was none before. In Francis’ words, moral subjectivism is the view that our ‘subjective feelings can define what is right and what is wrong’ (224/164). This view *reverses* the explanatory order posited by objectivism: rather than the mind-independent value of things explaining our reactions to them, our reactions explain why they have value. Subjectivism implies a kind of relativism. If subjectivism is correct, then objects or actions are not *inherently* good or bad. They become good or bad only *in relation to* our emotional responses (of approval or disgust). It becomes impossible to speak strictly of the goodness of something, full stop. There is only goodness *for* those persons who view the thing favorably.

Belief in an objective moral order—a system of value inherent in the natural order independently of the human mind—is entailed by theism (though it is also a feature of many non-theistic religious and philosophical views). As Christian theists, Lewis and Francis both adhere to objectivism. From this standpoint, Francis insists that ‘authentic human development has a moral character,’ presuming not only ‘full respect for the human person,’ but also concern ‘for the world around us’ (5/6). Expanding on this last point, he says that ‘human beings . . . must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world,’ noting that ‘the laws found in the Bible dwell on relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings’ (68/50). This requirement that we ‘respect creation and its inherent laws’ (69/51) flows from the fact that ‘other living beings have a *value of their own* in God’s eyes’ (69/50; my emphasis).

With Lewis’ subjectivist/objectivist dichotomy in mind, it becomes easy to see what Francis means when he suggests that premodern people were ‘in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves’ (106/79). He is talking about people who understood natural creatures to have inherent objective value that they sought to respect even as they used the creatures. This value set a limit on what they could legitimately do to the non-human world. The ‘possibilities offered by the things themselves’ are the possible uses consistent with preserving the things themselves, and the dignity and value inherent in them.

Lewis’ dichotomy also helps us understand why Francis speaks of the technocratic paradigm as ‘reductionist.’ From the perspective of moral objectivism, those who act from within a subjectivist framework refuse to admit the real value inherent in non-human creatures; they reduce creatures in the sense that they see in them only their non-value-laden features. The

⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁸ Ibid., 16.

difference between the objectivist and subjectivist views is captured in the contrast between the terms 'nature' and 'creation.' Francis says,

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the word "creation" has a broader meaning than "nature", for it has to do with God's loving plan in which *every creature has its own value and significance*. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion. (76/56; my emphasis)

From this perspective, the subjectivist, who admits no intrinsic value in natural beings, must reduce value-laden creation to value-neutral nature, must represent the world in a way that leaves out some of its real features.

Lewis helpfully describes the process of this reduction, or re-conception of a thing, as follows:

When we understand a thing analytically and then dominate and use it for our own convenience we reduce it to the level of "Nature" in the sense that we suspend our judgements of value about it, ignore its final cause (if any), and treat it in terms of quantity. This repression of elements in what would otherwise be our total reaction to it is sometimes very noticeable and even painful: something has to be overcome before we can cut up a dead man or a live animal in a dissecting room . . . the object, stripped of its qualitative properties and reduced to mere quantity . . . is an artificial abstraction . . . something of its reality has been lost.⁹

This passage illuminates Francis' remark that adopting the technocratic paradigm involves 'ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us' (106/79). It is a replacing of real object with a flattened abstract representation.

Once the object is seen not as a creature with its own value, but merely as a (value free) quantity of matter, it cannot demand our respect. Respecting something (or someone) means restraining ourselves in order to preserve its inherent value. There is nothing we can do to a mere bit of matter that would reduce its inherent value, for it has none. Any value that it has, it gets only from its usefulness to us. Only our own interests set a limit on how we may treat it.

With a flattened nature requiring no respect, we no longer need to think about how we can modify ourselves, but only how we can modify *it*. According to Lewis, this is the fundamental stance shared by the modern technologist and the ancient magician:

There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the "wisdom" of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique;

⁹ Ibid., 81-82.

and both, in the practice of the technique, are ready to do things hitherto regarded as disgusting and impious—such as digging up and mutilating the dead.¹⁰

This is Francis' 'technique of possession, mastery and transformation,' (106/79), application of which requires stifling many of our own natural reactions to the situation. This stifling is a magician's bargain, a handing over of the soul in exchange for power.

Lewis' discussion also illuminates Francis' insistence that the 'technocratic paradigm' contributes to human social problems just as much as to environmental problems. In the third chapter of *Abolition of Man*, Lewis seeks to envision what would happen if—assuming only the existence of a value-neutral nature—technological power were exerted to its greatest conceivable extent. Since human beings are just another part of nature (on the assumed view), a full use of technology would not hesitate to use and modify humans at will. 'What we call Man's power over Nature,' Lewis notes, 'turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument.'¹¹ Therefore, if complete technological mastery were gained over not only non-human nature, but also over humanity, there would be

. . . one dominant age . . . which resists all previous ages most successfully and dominates all subsequent ages most irresistibly, and this is the real master of the human species. But even within this master generation . . . the power will be exercised by a minority . . . Man's conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men. There neither is nor can be any simple increase in power on Man's side. Each new power won by man is a power *over* man as well.¹²

Francis, too, sees the connection between power exercised over nature and power exercised over other humans. He says:

nuclear energy, biotechnology, information technology, knowledge of our DNA, and many other abilities which we have acquired, have given us tremendous power. More precisely, they have given those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world. (104/77)

The simple point behind both authors' remarks is that an absence of objective moral order affects human-to-human relations just as much as it affects the relationships between humans and other creatures. Just as we can ignore the inherent value of nature, we can also ignore the inherent value of other humans, treating them as mere objects that do not demand our respect. If nature can be sacrificed for the sake of my increased comfort, convenience, and pleasure, then why not also other humans—after all, they are just another part of nature! The logic of domination inevitably sacrifices the many for the few. Indeed, in its limiting instance, it is only a single self that dominates, exerting its will over all else. But this self is utterly alone, and having lost companionship, has lost its humanity.

¹⁰ Ibid., 88.

¹¹ Ibid., 69.

¹² Ibid., 71.

II. *Laudato Si* and Plato's *Republic*

Plato's *Republic* is a useful text to include in an educational program aiming to uproot the technocratic paradigm from students' minds. Such an ancient book might seem irrelevant to a modern phenomenon, but the *Republic*'s analysis of culture and poetry has been usefully applied to two staples of consumerism: mass media and advertising.¹³ Here, three aspects of the work will be discussed in connection to consumerism: the situation of Plato's cave prisoners (section (A)), education as a kind of 'waking up' (section (B)) and Plato's tripartite model of the soul (section (C)). Students of Plato's work gain powerful tools for thinking critically about consumer culture.

A. Life in the Cave

Francis maintains that consumerism is a practical upshot of the technocratic paradigm. He describes the lifestyle and mentality of consumerism as follows:

Since the market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending. Compulsive consumerism is one example of how the techno-economic paradigm affects individuals. This paradigm leads people to believe that they are free as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume. But those really free are the minority who wield economic and financial power. (203/149-50)

Most people, Francis insinuates, are not really free. They are prisoners who believe themselves free, because they have a false understanding of freedom. This depiction of consumerism calls to mind Plato's famous image of prisoners in the allegory of the cave.

In book seven of the *Republic*, the character Socrates uses the allegory of the cave to to illustrate 'the effect of education and . . . the lack of it on our nature' (514a).¹⁴ Myles Burnyeat notes that the word here translated as "education"—*paideia*—can just as well be translated as 'culture,' because 'culture is what educates and forms the soul.'¹⁵ Plato's story serves first as an apt depiction of the culture of consumerism (the topic of this section) and then of the liberating power of education (the topic of section (B)).

In telling the Cave story, Socrates asks his interlocutors to

Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up that is open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They have been there since childhood, with their necks and legs fettered, so that they are fixed in the same place, able to see only in front of them . . . Light is

¹³Alexander Nehamas. "Plato and the Mass Media." *The Monist* vol. 71, no. 2 (1988): 214-34.

¹⁴ In-text citations of Plato use the Stephanus numbers found in the margins of most modern editions. Line numbers, when included, are approximate. All quotations are from the translation in Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004).

¹⁵ Myles F Burnyeat, "Culture and Society in Plato's Republic," *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 20 (1999): 240.

provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the prisoners and the fire, there is an elevated road stretching . . . along this road a low wall has been built—like the screen in front of people that is provided by puppeteers, and above which they show their puppets. (514a-b5)

On the other side of this wall from the prisoners—between the prisoners and the fire—are the ‘puppeteers’: people walking on the road ‘carrying multifarious artifacts that project above [the wall]—statues of people and other animals’ made of various materials (514c-515a). With the fire behind them, these puppets or statues cast shadows onto the wall in front of the prisoners. When the puppeteers speak, their voices echo off the wall, so that the shadows themselves seem to be speaking (515b7).

The prisoners are aware only of the apparently self-moving, noisy shadows. They know nothing about how these images are produced. Therefore, ‘what the prisoners take for true reality is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts’ (515b11), and they assume that words apply ‘to the things they see passing in front of them’ (515b5). For example, they think the word ‘horse’ refers to a certain kind of shadow before them on the wall. They think the shadow *is* a horse.

We modern consumers resemble the cave prisoners in several ways. First, we are accustomed to buying products without knowing much about how they are made. Sitting on their store shelves, these products

. . . speak for themselves, calling out to us . . . to buy them and take them home. They say little, however, of how they were produced: bright sweaters tell us nothing of the well-lit garment factories or dark sweatshops where they were produced; the glistening steaks in the meat counter are silent about the open plains or cramped feedlots where the cattle from which they were butchered lived; our electronics are mum about whether the tantalum in their capacitors was mined in Australia or in a way that perpetuated violent conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹⁶

In our ignorance of how these products are made, we exactly resemble Plato’s cave prisoners, who see the shadows but have no inkling of *how they are produced*.

Second, unreflective members of consumer culture are subject to an illusion similar to the one experienced by the cave prisoners. Just as the prisoners see the shadows as possessing a reality and life that they do not have in themselves (they exist, and seem to live, because of their relation to the puppets and puppeteers), so unreflective consumers often see products as possessing an intrinsic value that they do not have in themselves. As Vincent Miller notes, ‘the commodity appears to us as intrinsically valuable, when in fact its true value is dependent on a number of factors that do not appear with it.’¹⁷ Karl Marx explains this phenomenon in his discussion of the ‘commodity fetish.’

¹⁶ Vincent Miller, “Slavery and Commodity Chains,” *America: The National Catholic Review*, January 2, 2014, 2014, 2-3. <http://americamagazine.org/issue/slavery-and-commodity-chains-fighting-globalization-indifference>

¹⁷ Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 36.

A commodity is . . . a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour . . . In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself.¹⁸

Marx alludes here to modern thinking about sense perception and the so-called 'secondary qualities' such as color or taste. While color, for example, appears to be inherent in mind-independent objects themselves, phenomena such as color-blindness suggest that color-as-experienced is a subjective feature of our perceptual states rather than of the perceived objects. In naively thinking of objects as inherently colored, we project this subjective experience onto the objects. In a similar way, Marx suggests, when we see a commodity's value, we are actually *projecting* our own subjective mental states onto the commodity. We are seeing as intrinsic to the product a value that it *actually* gets from us as buyers, from its producers and their labor, and from the system of exchange that links us all together. As Marx puts it, 'a definite social relation between men . . . assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.'¹⁹ Marx calls this a commodity 'fetishism' because of the similarity he saw between it and religious fetishes. In both cases, Marx (an atheist) insists, 'the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race.'²⁰

Just a little reflection reveals that the economic value of commodities cannot be inherent in them. Consider diamonds. Would they be worth anything on the market if no one cared about them or wanted to buy them? Surely not. value is a function of supply and demand, and the more fundamental creator of value is the demand. Economic value is a function of human desire. Economic value, in fact, exactly fits the model of subjective value discussed by Pope Francis and C. S. Lewis (section one above). It is a mind-dependent value, in the sense that were humans not to have their pro-attitudes towards something, it would have no positive value. Economic value is a relative value, and insofar as we experience it as absolute or intrinsic to commodities, we are deluded. And yet this is precisely how most of us unreflectively think about commodity value: we see it as inherent in the things themselves, just as we unreflectively think that color *as we experience it* belongs to objects independently of our experience.²¹

A third similarity between modern consumers and the cave prisoners concerns the way our cultural context inevitably shapes our capacities for making meaning out of our experiences. The shadows on the cave wall have *meaning* for the cave prisoners only in relation to one another and to the voices of the puppeteers bouncing off the wall. Only when the prisoners can begin to discern patterns in those relations can they be said to *understand* what they are seeing (for example, if a cow-shadow is always or usually followed by a lion-shadow, the prisoners will come to understand that the presence of a 'cow' *means* that a 'lion' is likely coming next). Because the puppeteers control the patterns exhibited by the shadows, they also control what the

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. B. Fowkes & D. Fernbach (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1981), Pt I, Ch I, §4, ¶4.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ This is the reverse of the "reduction" that Lewis and Francis associate with the technocratic paradigm. Instead of intrinsic value being ignored and stripped out of our representation of the objection, in this case we represent the object as containing a value that is not really there intrinsically.

shadows will mean to the prisoners. In the same way (though clearly not to the same extent), advertisers control the meanings we assign to products by creating associations in ads. Advertising images create an artificial context for the product, a vivid story giving it meaning and value for us. Thanks to the near omnipresence of advertising in our lives, we remain keenly aware of this made-up story even as we are usually almost completely ignorant of the product's *real* story (of production, distribution, etc.). The advertisers who create this sign-value resemble the puppeteers in Plato's story of the cave.

For us who are awash in images like no people before in human history, media and advertising—the contemporary analogues of the soul-forming poetry and drama that so concerned Plato in the *Republic*—also play a large role in defining behavioral conventions. And as C.D.C. Reeve notes, 'it is these conventions that largely determine a subject's conception of justice and the other virtues. By being trained to follow or obey them, therefore, a subject is unwittingly adopting an ideology.'²² In short, media powerfully shape our sense of who we are, who we ought to be, and of what kind of world we ought to live in. The cave story aptly captures the formative power of cultural contexts. As Myles Burnyeat puts it, 'the Cave image shows the prisoners unaware that their values and ideas are uncritically absorbed from the surrounding culture. They are prisoners, *as we all are to begin with*, of their . . . upbringing.'²³ For modern consumers, mass media not only shape their understandings of products and themselves, but also form their values and ideals.

B. Education, Escaping the Cave, and Waking Up

Because they take an image (the shadow) to be the very thing it represents (a horse), the cave prisoners are *dreaming*. For according to Socrates, to dream is 'to think—whether awake or asleep—that a likeness is not a likeness, but rather the thing itself that it is like' (476c4). This definition of dreaming captures what literally happens when we wake up from a very vivid dream: we realize that the events we took to be really happening to us during the dream were merely our own subjective images of such events. When we were 'taken in' by the dream, we confused these private sensations with the sorts of real events they normally represent to us.

For Plato, education involves being awakened from this dream-state. In the story, there are two awakenings. In the first, a prisoner is 'freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his neck around, walk, and look up toward the light' (515c6) and is presented with 'the things whose shadows he had seen before' (515c9)—i.e. the puppets, and perhaps also the fire and the puppeteers. At first, he would consider 'the things he saw earlier [i.e., the shadows] more truly real than the ones he was [now] being shown' (516d5), but after adjusting (516a4) to the initially dazzling and disorienting light (515c7), he could grasp that the shadows are merely effects of the statues and the fire, merely images of the statues—which he would now consider to be the real things. The newly freed prisoner would now think that 'horse' refers to a statue. But remaining in the cave, he would be unaware that the statue is itself merely an image of an above-ground animal. He would *still* be dreaming.

His full education requires a second awakening, in which someone drags him 'by force away from there, along the rough, steep, upward path . . . into the light of the sun' (515e6). Once his eyes have sufficiently adjusted, he will be able to see 'the things themselves' (516a6) that

²² Plato, *Republic*, xiii.

²³ Burnyeat, "Culture and Society in Plato's *Republic*," 240.

move on the surface of the earth, but also heavenly bodies including the sun (516bc). Now fully in touch with reality, he realizes that 'horse' refers to an animal outside the cave and so can finally point to the right thing if asked 'what is a horse?' (Whereas before, he would have pointed not to a horse but to a shadow or statue). He now knows 'precisely what each image is, and also what it is an image of' (520c4).

Socrates explains the meaning of the cave story as follows:

The realm revealed through sight should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the sun's power. And if you think of the upward journey and the seeing of things above as the journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you won't mistake my intention (517b; see also 532b5-d).

This 'upward journey' moves through the four levels of awareness in the divided line analogy at the end of *Republic* Book Six. These levels of awareness are individuated by their objects. First, there are 'visible' objects—those of which we can become aware through our senses. Of these, there are two kinds: images, such as 'shadows . . . reflections of bodies in water . . . and everything of that sort' (510a), and the physical objects of which those things are images (510a4). Second, there are 'intelligible' objects also divided into two classes: the many general forms or essences of which particular physical things are instances (e.g. the humanity of which Michelle Obama is an instance, or the definition of 'justice' which all just actions or persons exemplify), and the one 'unhypothetical . . . first principle of everything' (511b6): the form of the Good.

True education *just is* this (difficult) process of ascent or waking up. It is not putting sight into blind eyes, but turning the eyes of the mind away from images and toward the most real thing—the Good (518b5-d). Rather than teaching us to think, the true educator changes what we think about, and so enables us to make progress up towards the highest form of consciousness. Because all forms—but especially the form of the Good—are standards against which their physical instances can be measured, education is a normative enterprise: it aims to help us see not only how things actually are, but also how they *ought* to be (see 476a-d; 478d-480).²⁴ It gives us a perspective from which to criticize the injustices and deficiencies of the status quo.

When Plato's account of 'the upward' journey is applied to modern consumers *qua* prisoners, two possible awakenings (shifts in thinking) become salient. The first is a shift from an uncritical to a critical perspective on economic value and consumer ideology. The second is a shift from thinking of economic value as the paradigm of all value, to an understanding of what Lewis and Francis call 'objective' values.

According to Malcolm Schofield, the cave prisoners 'are completely *unaware* that what they treat as reality is in fact nothing other than a reflection of human cultural artifice.'²⁵ Similarly, modern consumers, especially as children,²⁶ have no inkling of two important facts about the power of culture: (1) their own beliefs about how things ought to be—their conceptions

²⁴ According to Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1993), forms "are models, archetypes: universals, general concepts as distinct from particular entities, and, in their ethical role, moral ideals active in our lives, radiant icons, images of virtue" (10).

²⁵ Malcolm Schofield, "Metaspeleology," in *Maieusis*, ed. Dominic Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 225.

²⁶ See Paul M. Connell, Merrie Brucks, and Jesper H. Nielsen, "How Childhood Advertising Exposure Can Create Biased Product Evaluations That Persist into Adulthood," *Journal of Consumer Research* 41, no. 1 (2014): 120.

of beauty, justice, happiness, etc.—are ‘nothing more than [shadows] in their minds left by the culture in which they have been raised,’²⁷ and (2) the economic value of products is not intrinsic to them, but is a cultural creation. The first sort of waking up for consumers, akin to the prisoners’ initial turning away from shadows and towards the fire, is the simple realization of these twin facts: the economic value in products and the ‘values’ in our heads (i.e. their relevant beliefs) are cultural constructions.

Just as the cave prisoners are initially disoriented by the firelight, so modern consumers first realizing of the power of culture in this way naturally face some perplexing questions. Upon realizing that economic value is a cultural construction, it is natural to wonder: Is *all* value economic, or are there sources of value that lie outside the system of exchange? If there are other kinds of value, are they *also* created by human desire, so that *all* value is dependent on human minds, and therefore is relative to human interests? Or, as Lewis and Francis insist, are there some valuable features intrinsic to things (or actions), features constituting an objective standard against which our emotional reactions to those things can be measured? Similarly, once we discover that our ideas of justice and the good are not ‘the real truth’ but merely ‘cultural norms,’ this may give us ‘a numbed and faltering appreciation that the truth lies elsewhere’²⁸ or it may lead us to the cynical conclusion that there is no such truth, that there is nothing more to norms like justice than some sort of cultural agreement *about* them.

Those who think that all value is created by the system of exchange (and the human desires behind it), or who conclude that values in general are culturally constructed, will not be able to ‘wake up’ a second time, but will be like a prisoner who comes to the see how the shadows are produced, but never learns about the world outside the cave. Such a person would be in a position to see that the puppeteers dominate the lives of the prisoners, but would lack any standards for assessing the truth or falsehood of the puppeteer’s depictions of things. Plato’s character Thrasymachus in the *Republic* seems to be in this position.

Thrasymachus realizes that by controlling the system of education, rulers instill moral convictions and conventional practices in those they rule. But he does not believe in any higher standards by which the ruler’s practices can be assessed. So he reaches the cynical conclusion that the best sort of life is that of a tyrant (344a-d), who can do whatever he wants and make it legal (and perhaps even ‘right’ in the opinion of the people). Similarly, the natural course for those in our day who reject objectivity of value would seem to be a life of the ‘practical relativism’ that Pope Francis decries. If our own desires are the ultimate sources of all value, then it would seem that the best life is one of greatest economic power, which would allow one to manipulate the system that manipulates the minds of the masses. A person who thinks in this way would naturally seek to exploit the system rather than tear it down or try to ‘wake up’ other people. As Pope Francis puts it: ‘When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative’ (122/90).

However, when we are confronted with the relativity of what we heretofore took to be absolute or intrinsic value, nothing forces us to give up believing in absolute value. Rather, we may conclude that its source lies elsewhere, outside the realm of human cultural construction. Various meta-ethical views are non-constructivist in this sense. For example, Plato held that the most real thing—The Good—is a moral standard existing independently of all human (or even divine) minds. Many subsequent religious thinkers more-or-less identify God with Plato’s form

²⁷ Schofield, “Metaspeleology,” 225.

²⁸ Ibid., 229.

of the good,²⁹ so that God serves as the objective standard. Others might hold that moral standards exist relative to God's desires (e.g., good things are good or right *because* God loves or commands them). Naturalists might argue that moral standards are intrinsic to the order of nature (this is the view Lewis seems to invoke when speaking of 'The Tao'), or that facts about natural selection determine what sorts of moral reasoning and valuing behaviors have allowed humans to coordinate sufficiently to flourish biologically.³⁰ Despite their metaphysical differences, all these views share Pope Francis' and C. S. Lewis' conviction that morality is in some way objective: moral values are not mere conventions, not relative to our thoughts or desires, but exist independently of any human systems of exchange or ideology—just as the sun shines above-ground regardless of the goings-on in the cave.

Our entire economy and consumer culture are the cave, and to 'wake up' for the second time is to realize that we are capable of standing outside them (if only briefly in moments of reflection) and evaluating them by holding them against objective standards. In light of this evaluation, we can work to change the respects in which they fall short. From this perspective, Pope Francis is right to look for allies outside the church. Various religious and non-religious ethical views share the conviction that there is much more to human life than the market, and that non-market values provide a perspective from which to evaluate the market.

Perhaps the most important task for educators is simply to get students to engage with the question about where value comes from. Until they are exposed to the question, most students who grew up in a consumer economy will reflexively and unthinkingly assume that the value of natural creatures (and perhaps even other people) is created by their usefulness to us; having no awareness of the distinction between intrinsic and projected value, they will tend to think that all value is like the value of money—socially constructed. The mere raising of the question whether creatures have their own ends and value can open up new ways of thinking for students. Perhaps this is why Pope Francis urges us to 'continue to wonder about the purpose and meaning of everything' (113/85). To wonder, to voice this natural philosophical question, is to break a perilous silence.

C. The Three Parts of the Soul

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis notes a further key dimension of anti-technocratic education: we must seek to understand *ourselves*.

There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology . . . Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time,

²⁹ For example, in *Proslogion* Ch. 22, Anselm says to God: "you are nothing other than the one supreme good, utterly self-sufficient, needing nothing, whom all things need for their being and their well-being." Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion: With the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub, 2001), 21.

³⁰ See for example Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). For an overview of naturalist metaethical theories on which morality is not reducible simply to social convention, see sections 3 and 4 of Geoff Sayre-McCord, "Metaethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/metaethics/>

their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued. (118/88)

Consumerism, according to Francis, teaches us to think reductively not only about the natural environment, but also about human nature. Plato's Tripartite theory of the soul provides a helpful contrasting anthropology, an anthropology to which Pope Francis seems implicitly to appeal.

In *Republic* 435b through 442, Plato depicts the human psyche as composed of three basic parts: the 'irrational and appetitive element' with which the soul 'feels passion, hungers, thirsts, and is stirred by other appetites'; the rational part 'with which it calculates'; and the 'spirited element . . . with which we feel anger' (439d-e5). Elsewhere each of the three parts is defined in terms of the kind of thing it desires, loves, and enjoys. The appetitive part is called the 'money-loving' part of the soul, because its intense 'appetites for food, drink, sex, and all the things that go along with them . . . are most easily satisfied by means of money,' (580e-581a) and hence 'its pleasure and love are for profit' (581a3). The spirited part aims wholly at 'mastery, victory, and high repute' and so is called the 'honor-loving' part of the soul (581b, see also 550b7). The rational part 'is always wholly straining to know where the truth lies' and so is called the 'learning-loving and philosophic' element of the soul (581b-c).

Cooper helpfully clarifies some important aspects of these three distinct motivational systems. First, while desires for food, drink and sex are the *clearest* examples of appetitive motivation, they are by no means the only appetitive motivations. The drives of the appetitive part are those which 'have their ultimate origin simply in facts of experience, in the fact that the person in question happens to get a certain pleasure from doing these things.'³¹ In other words, appetite pursues pleasant feelings, whether of the body or the mind. It is even possible to dabble in philosophy for the fun of it (*Republic* 561c-d).

According to Cooper, the spirited part is

that wherein one feels a) the competitive drive to distinguish oneself from the run-of-the-mill person, to do and be something noteworthy within the context provided by one's society and its scheme of values; b) pride in oneself and one's accomplishments, to the extent that one succeeds in this effort; c) esteem for noteworthy others and (especially) the desire to be esteemed by others and by oneself.³²

It expresses itself in the desire 'to be effective both in one's own private life and in the community's.'³³

Finally, the rational part concerns itself not merely with a theoretical search for truth (though it *is* concerned with that), but also with the practical pursuit of goodness. According to Cooper, 'what is inherent in reason is the desire for good as such—not the desire for any particular good;' in other words, this is 'the desire on the part of reason to work out the ends of life on its own and to achieve them.'³⁴ So the rational part seeks to know truth in order to live

³¹ John M. Cooper, "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 1 (1984): 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

well (but also seeks truth for its own sake because simply knowing the truth about certain questions is *part* of living well).

Interestingly, these three parts of the soul map onto the three stages of awareness discussed above in connection with the allegory of the cave. The appetitive part is fundamentally concerned with good *feelings*, which are subjective perceptual states much like the sensations and mental images by means of which we perceive the world. Plato would surely include all such images and feelings as part of 'imagination' since they can (at least in principle) be experienced in vivid dreams. So the appetitive part is at home at the level of images, and would be unfazed by thought that the good feelings it enjoys might be illusory—produced by computers as in the film *The Matrix*, say, or by Descartes' evil demon—for veridical or not, such sensations still *feel* the same.

The spirited part is concerned with real physical things—the objects of Plato's second level of awareness (belief). When we desire to have a good reputation, we are not just looking to *feel like* other people appreciate us; we want them to *actually* hold us in high regard. This requires that the world outside our minds be a certain way (the other people need to really exist, to be thinking about us, to have positive feelings in so thinking, etc.). Nevertheless, the spirited part's concern with social reality is fundamentally self-regarding: the concern is with how *I* appear to others (love of honor) and with how dominant *I* am in the social order (love of victory and control). The only motivation here is to climb in the current social system (as mentioned above in the discussion of Thrasymachus); there is no capacity to evaluate that system.

For Plato, only the rational part is capable of getting in touch with the Forms or objective values, and so reaching the highest levels of consciousness (see 585d-587). This awareness of forms—especially that of the Good—puts it into a position to see what is best for the soul as a whole and to exercise foresight on its behalf (this is why Plato thinks the rational part both wants to and should 'rule' the soul—i.e., determine how we behave) (441e). But more importantly for our purposes, the rational part also enables a person to grasp the common good not just of oneself but also of *society*. Through it, we can understand how to 'contribute [our] own work for the common use of all' (369e), to make our lives a gift to those around us. Through it, we can see where current social arrangements undermine the common good, and we can begin to work to change them.

The three parts of the soul, then, fall on a scale from most self-centered (appetitive part) to most altruistic (the rational part), a 'series with egoistic fantasies at one end and . . . mystical selflessness' at the other.³⁵ Plato sees education as the gradual empowerment of the rational part, and hence as a turning away from egoism toward altruism.

Modern marketing largely seeks to exploit the appetitive and spirited motivational systems. It might seem that marketing—since it is trying to get us to spend money—targets only the appetitive or 'money-loving' part. But ancient Athenians associated spending money almost exclusively with ephemeral bodily pleasures.³⁶ They did not engage, as we do, in purchasing high-quality durable goods to express social status. In modern times, money has become an easy means for satisfying the desires of *both* the appetitive part and spirited parts. Since money cannot in the same way satisfy the desires of the rational part, there is some danger that those

³⁵ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.

³⁶ James Davidson, "Citizen Consumers: The Athenian Democracy and the Origins of Western Consumption," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

growing up in a consumer culture will fail to notice (or properly emphasize) their own rational desires for something more.

Teaching students Plato's theory of motivation provides them with an important tool for self-reflection about their economic decision-making. Are we mostly trying to *feel* good? Or to get status? Or are we doing what we do in order to be our best selves, selves that contribute to the common good? Does that best self really need the product here on offer? Perhaps more importantly, do we have a flattened and cynical understanding of humanity, acknowledging only our appetitive and spirited motivations? Or will we also admit the pull of objective goodness and beauty on our hearts?

Plato reminds us of the importance of the distinctively human, rational part. The rational part of the soul is essential to us. Like the objective goods to which it is attracted, it exists whether we like it or not. It is the most essential part of us. At *Republic* 588b-589c, Plato uses pictures to represent the parts of the soul: for the appetitive part, a many-headed monster; for the spirited part, a lion; and for the rational part, a human. By choosing to represent it as a human, Plato clearly identifies with the rational part, considering it 'the inner human being' (589b) or true self. For Plato, the rational part is our heart, and no way of life that frustrates it can deeply satisfy us. If we act only on the basis of selfish appetite or concern for our reputation, we will miss the deepest pleasures in life (583, 586-87).

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis suggests that this very dissatisfaction should give us cause for hope:

... all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts. I appeal to everyone throughout the world not to forget this dignity which is ours. (205/151)

Here, Francis seems to agree with Plato that our innate desire for objective goodness (our rational part) is essential to us. As C. S. Lewis noted, something of our own natural reactions to the world must be suppressed when we take up the technocratic paradigm, and though such suppression may become habitual, it cannot entirely eradicate our tendency to recognize the true, good, and beautiful. Let us hope that Pope Francis is right, and that our deep dissatisfactions with consumerism will motivate us to wake up—before it is too late.