

The Divided Line

Book One of the Noumenal Realm Trilogy

Level G Philosophy Curriculum
Guidebook

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Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

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ISBN: 978-0-88092-598-3

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kemnitz
Editors: Jennifer Ault and Dr. T.M. Kemnitz
Book & Cover Designer: Christopher Tice
Photos on pages 2, 5 (top), 7, 9, 10: Dr. T.M. Kemnitz

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free
paper using vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility.



Noumenal Realm Trilogy

Volume 1

The Divided Line

The Noumenal Realm Trilogy is a set of three novels geared for middle school-age children. Although each novel stands alone, it is best to read them all, and in order. Readers do not need any prior training in philosophy to understand the trilogy. It is meant to be accessible and interesting to anyone who likes to think about deep questions. Readers familiar with the first six volumes of the Royal Fireworks philosophy curriculum will recognize a number of the philosophers and theories discussed, but the characters and the storyline are new.

The trilogy is a work of historical fiction that follows a handful of middle school students through a series of adventures with classic philosophers from the ancient and early modern periods. Its aim is to acquaint readers with the great minds that shaped Western civilization.

The trilogy as a whole focuses on the unconventional educational initiatives of an institution called the New Smithsonian Foundation, whose aim is to educate the children of America through virtual reality experiences instead of through the Smithsonian Institution's dusty museum artifacts. The Foundation selects Roslyn Hart, Jonah Ziv, and Brent Bentley, along with some other students, to participate in a program that teaches kids about the history of philosophy through virtual reality simulations. In *The Divided Line*, the children enter famous paintings, where they meet Socrates, Plato, and René Descartes, who show them the secret to entering the Noumenal Realm. They have to interpret the paintings and the philosophers' theories in order to complete the simulations and escape from virtual reality.

The storyline of this volume focuses on the famous "Analogy of the Divided Line" from Plato's masterpiece of world literature *The Republic*. Socrates divides a line into four sections in order to show how the human mind progresses from imagination to facts to concepts to ideas. But is the goal of this progression certainty, as René Descartes argues? The young heroes of this novel discover a fatal flaw in Descartes's logic and find the goal of the Divided Line hidden in a Grecian urn instead.

This companion book is called a "Guidebook" instead of a "Teacher Manual" in recognition of the fact that students at this level should be able to use it on their own. Of course, the story can be enjoyed without the Guidebook, but the Guidebook will help to bring home the philosophical content. It provides for each chapter a summary of the plot developments, a philosophical basis for the key concepts of the chapter, discussion questions, and suggestions for further exploration to extend the learning.

There are quotations from famous philosophers for each chapter. These quotations have been heavily edited for ease of reading and are not intended for scholarly reference. There is a list of sources at the end of this book for further reading.

Chapter 1

Summary

Talented writer Roslyn Hart and four other award-winning middle school students are selected to experience an educational simulation for an organization called the New Smithsonian Foundation. The simulations are to take place in a semi truck designed for that purpose. Roslyn and Jonah Ziv, the boy whose painting won the Scholastic Art Award, have a bad feeling about it.

Philosophical Basis: Arthur Schopenhauer on Genius

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote one of the most famous opening lines in history. His book *The World as Will and Representation* begins with this sentence:

The world is my idea.

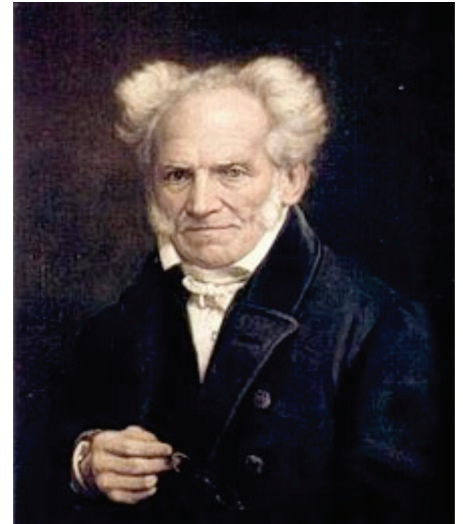
What a way to start a book! The sentence is outrageous. It cannot be true. Yet it resonates at a deep level. Upon further reflection, one begins to wonder if it may be true after all. It could mean so many different things.

Schopenhauer argued that even animals see the world as their idea, but only human beings are able to reflect on this truth. He further claimed that certain human beings are especially good at understanding and communicating the world as an idea. He called these select few “geniuses.”

The concept of *genius* is as old as it is controversial. A genius is someone who is exceptionally intelligent or creative. Everyone grants that there have been a number of especially talented people in history, such as the philosophers Plato and Aristotle, the composer Ludwig van Beethoven, the artist Michelangelo, and the physicist Albert Einstein. Some people think that these men were born with superior minds. Others think that they worked hard and received good training or were in the right place at the right time.

No matter the source, Schopenhauer suggested that everyone has some degree of genius, just by virtue of being human. He theorized about the nature of genius, writing:

Imagination has rightly been recognized as an essential element of genius; it has sometimes even been regarded as identical with it, but this is a mistake. The objects of genius are the eternal Ideas, the permanent, essential forms of the world and all its phenomena. Our knowledge would be limited to the physical world if our imagination did not extend our horizon. Imagination extends the intellectual horizon of geniuses beyond the objects presented to our senses, both as regards quality and quantity. Therefore, extraordinary strength of imagination accompanies, and is indeed a necessary condition of, genius.



Schopenhauer’s account of the difference between imagination and genius helps to explain the difference between a picture by a kindergartener and a picture by the famous twentieth-century artist Pablo Picasso. Consider these two examples of portraits:



Xavier Hopkins, age 5



Pablo Picasso, age 81

The kindergartener’s picture will be admired by his parents and other family members, but eventually it will probably end up in a box or a recycle bin. In contrast, Picasso’s picture is treasured by members of the international art world. What’s the difference? Both are imaginative. Picasso’s picture, however, is based on the idea that the portrait represents things about the person that you ordinarily cannot see. Although he could paint realistic paintings, Picasso chose not to so that he could use his artwork to explore deeply, beyond the physical realm, into the realm of what people and objects represented to him on a broader, more expansive level.

Schopenhauer explained the difference between imagination, which is about the physical world, and genius, which is about the eternal world. The kindergartener was trying to represent a human—a physical object that we can observe with our five senses. Picasso was trying to represent humanity. That object is eternal in the sense that it does not come and go the way physical objects do; it lives on forever. His picture enables the viewer to glimpse something invisible to the senses—something that cannot be seen or heard but only understood.

Schopenhauer’s theory presumes that there is an eternal world beyond the physical world. In his view, that is the only way to explain the difference between talent and genius. He wrote:

Talent hits a target no one else can hit; genius hits a target no one else can see.

We could call genius “thinking outside the box.” Schopenhauer believed that genius is proof that there is a world beyond the physical world and that we are all aware of it in our best moments.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe that the concept underlying the message in the brown envelope could be true—that we could be living in a virtual world and that our memories are fabricated? Why or why not?
2. The authors of the message in the brown envelope ask, “Can you trust us?” and then answer, “Yes, you can.” Is this answer credible, especially in light of the fact that they also recommend against telling anyone else about the message? Explain your answer.
3. What is a genius? Give some examples. Why do you think Hugh associates genius with being left-handed?

4. The five middle school students were selected for the simulation because they had won awards. Do you think this was fair? Does being an award-winner necessarily make each of them better-qualified than others to participate in the simulation? Explain your answer.
5. Do you think that Brent is too affectionate with Roslyn? Name some things he does that might make her uncomfortable. What do you think she should do about it, if anything?
6. Both Roslyn and Jonah have reservations about doing the simulation but agree to do it anyway. Why do you think they do that? Do you think Dr. Kim and the others pressured them into participating? Should they have followed their instincts and opted not to participate? Why or why not?

For Further Exploration

Visit the Smithsonian Institution's website: www.si.edu

Chapter 2

Summary

The five students follow Aaron Ronbon into the Smithsonian truck, where Raphael's famous Renaissance fresco the *School of Athens* is projected onto a screen. They all strap themselves into chairs that will enable them to play a computer simulation game about the painting, but Jonah secretly leaves his left arm unstrapped.

Philosophical Basis: Marsilio Ficino and the Renaissance

The Renaissance period, which lasted from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, was a critical turning point in Western civilization. "Western civilization" is the name historians have given to the western part of Europe and North America—a group of people with a shared history. At first, Western civilization was off to a great start. It enjoyed a Golden Age during the period of "classical antiquity," starting around the seventh century B.C., when art and science began to flourish in ancient Greece.

Why did our civilization start in ancient Greece? The government became stable there. People had time to read and write and create works of art. In Athens, a genius named Plato started a school for philosophers—meaning "lovers of wisdom"—called the Academy. It was the first university in the history of the world. Men and women would gather there to discuss controversial questions freely and to pursue their passions for truth and beauty.



But a century and a half later, the Roman Empire conquered Greece. It continued to provide stability until it collapsed in the fifth century A.D. In the ensuing chaos, there was no stable government. Trade ceased. Food was scarce. Disease was rampant. No one built schools or hospitals or roads. Life was hard for a long time. There was no time for art and science; people spent their days trying to survive. The Catholic Church emerged as the only source of hope for the vast majority of people.

This period, from about the fifth century to the fourteenth century, is known as the Medieval Period or the Middle Ages. It is also called the Dark Ages because almost no one knew how to read or write. The Church gave the people hope in those difficult times. Because people relied so much on the Church, it grew in power until it controlled every aspect of life. When Europe finally began to recover from the fall of the Roman Empire, and stable government returned, the Church tried to control what kind of art and science was allowed.



The Renaissance began the long fight against Church control. The word *renaissance* means rebirth—a rebirth of the Golden Age of ancient Greece, when people were free to read and write and create artwork according to their passions, rather than according to what the Church allowed.

The first task of the Renaissance philosophers was to recover the ancient Greek philosophy books that had been forbidden by the Church. Marsilio Ficino, who lived from 1433 to 1499, translated Plato's complete works so that people could read them for the first time in more than a thousand years. Ficino wrote:

Books that discuss things with as daring a freedom as we use in dreams put us on our feet again.

Plato didn't just put Ficino back on his feet; Plato put all of Europe back on its feet.

Ficino was so inspired by Plato that he set up an academy just like Plato's Academy for all the geniuses of his day. Since the universities were still controlled by the Church, Ficino's academy was a freer place to study ancient philosophy and discuss controversial issues. Even so, Ficino and the other members of the academy were constantly threatened by the Inquisition, a violent police force known to torture and even kill anyone who read or wrote things forbidden by the Church. Through his academy, Ficino bravely nurtured the rebirth of the Renaissance. He wrote:

Poets of long ago declared that there are four ages: lead, iron, silver, and gold. Plato, in *The Republic*, assigned these four metals to types of men, according to their intelligence. If we are to call any age golden, it must certainly be our age, which has produced such a wealth of golden intellects. Evidence of this is provided by the innovations of this age, for this century, like a golden age, has restored to light the liberal arts that were almost extinct: grammar, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, and music.

The liberal arts are crucial to our modern conception of the university, which is free of Church control so that people can follow their passions for truth and beauty without fear. The Renaissance was a new demand for freedom that put Western civilization back on the track toward greatness.

Discussion Questions

1. The simulation is a team effort, which Roslyn is disappointed to learn. What are the benefits and drawbacks of working with a team? Is there any way to overcome the drawbacks?
2. Why do you think Jonah keeps his left arm unstrapped from the chair? Is he wrong to do that, since he agreed to participate in the simulation? Why or why not?
3. Roslyn sees that Jonah is not cooperating with Ronbon's instructions. Do you think she should say something? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think that the instructions include the directive not to allow the non-player-characters to know who the player-characters are?
5. What do you suppose Ronbon can learn from watching the kids go through the simulation?
6. If you could create a virtual reality simulation for any painting, which one would it be, and why?

For Further Exploration

- Watch this Charlie Rose talk show episode about virtual reality: <https://charlierose.com/videos/28049>
- Watch this video about the Renaissance: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fI1OeMmwYjU

Chapter 3

Summary

Through the magic of virtual reality, Roslyn and her classmates enter the world of the *School of Athens* with the goal of trying to discover which person in the painting does not belong. Roslyn, Olivia, and Brent become three of the geometry students on the lower right side of the painting. Roslyn rallies them to begin their investigation with the two men standing under the arch in the center of the painting, who turn out to be Plato and Aristotle.

Philosophical Basis: Plato and Aristotle on Truth

The ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle were the best of friends, though they disagreed about nearly everything. The debate between them set the stage for two opposing streams of philosophical thought throughout the history of Western civilization. Each side, vying for dominance, criticized the other side, both sides thereby pushing each other to ever greater insights. Both sides were searching for the truth; they disagreed about where and how to find it.

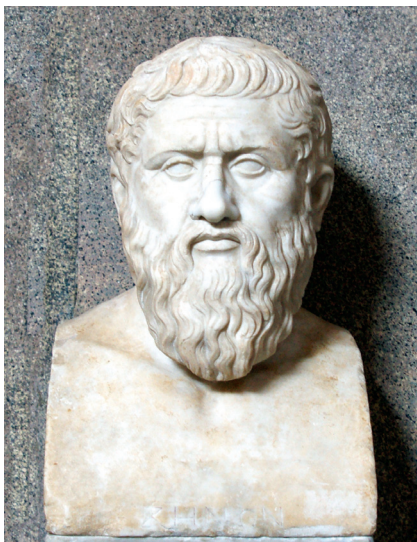
On one side, Plato viewed truth as a perfect “exemplar,” meaning a model or ideal. He looked around this world and saw nothing perfect, which led him to the conclusion that the truth must exist in another world. He famously told the “Allegory of the Cave” to support his conclusion.

Imagine a group of prisoners facing the back wall of a cave. Behind them, prison guards cast shadows of puppets shaped like plants and animals onto the wall. The prisoners watch the show. They have never been outside the cave. The shadow-puppet show is their entire reality.

One day, one of the prisoners escapes the cave. The journey out is difficult and scary. On the way, he sees the puppeteers and realizes that his whole reality was only the shadows of puppets. When he comes at last to the mouth of the cave, he is blinded by the light of the sun. Through great effort, he slowly accustoms his eyes to see the world. He realizes that the puppets he saw were only copies of the plants and animals that exist outside the cave.

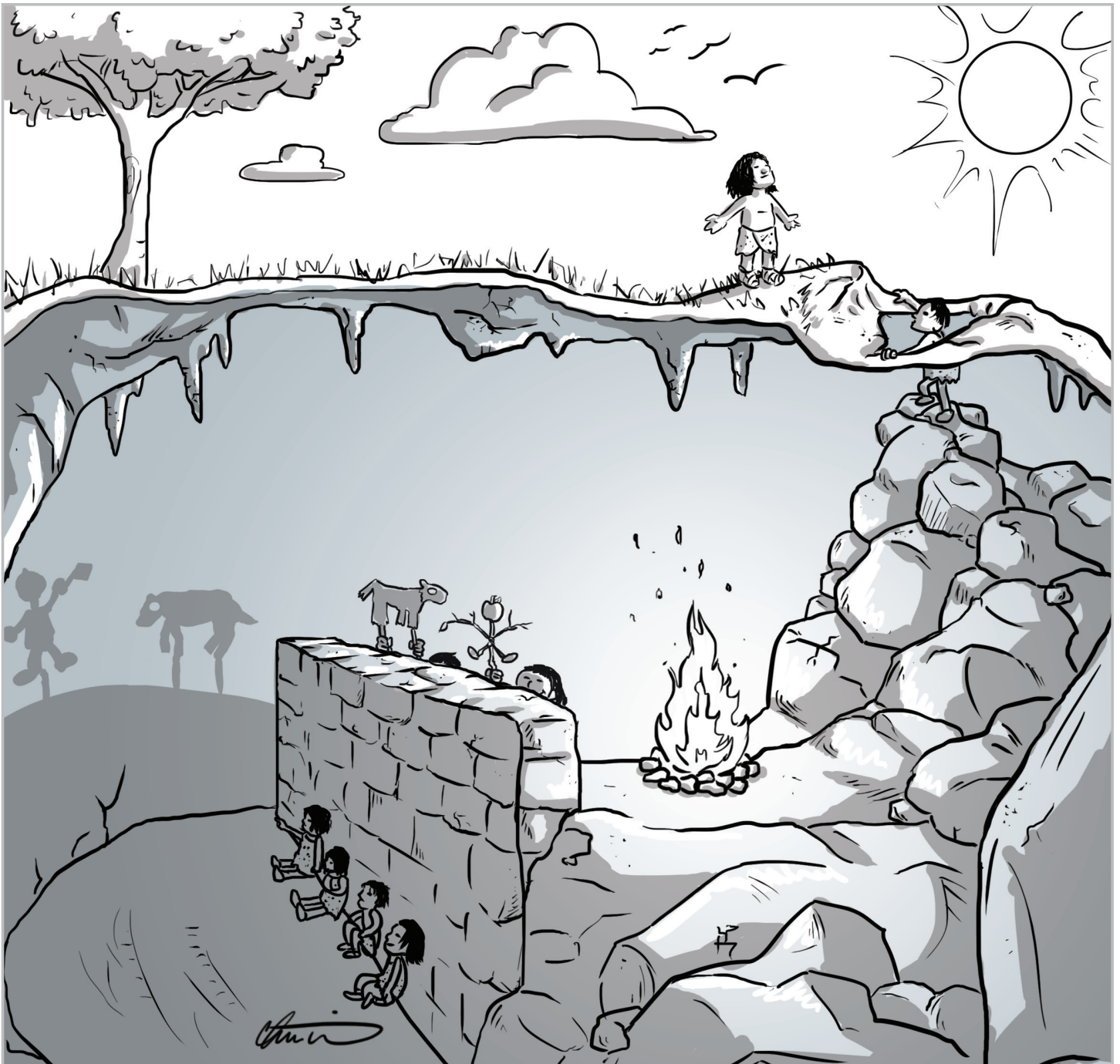
The escaped prisoner is astonished. He rushes back into the cave to tell his former prisonmates about his amazing discovery, but they are absorbed in the shadow-puppet show and don’t want to listen to him. He tries to tell them that their whole reality is a copy of a copy. They become angry and want to kill him.

Plato said that the cave stands for this world, and the escaped prisoner stands for the philosopher. Through diligent study, philosophers catch a glimpse of the perfect truth, which all imperfect things reflect. He called this perfect truth “the idea of the good,” as when he wrote:



Whether true or false, my opinion is that, in the world of knowledge, the idea of good appears last of all and is seen only with an effort. When we see the idea of the good, we know it to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right. Just as the sun lights this visible world, the idea of goodness is the immediate source of reason and truth in the mind. This is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.

In Plato’s view, the physical world is nothing but a shadow-puppet show—the imitation of an imitation. Lovers of wisdom must escape it to find the truth.



Aristotle began as a student at Plato's Academy, but his own genius soon became apparent. After teaching at the Academy for a while, he left to start a school of his own, called the Lyceum. Aristotle agreed with Plato that the physical world is imperfect. But when we study plants and animals closely, we note similarities and differences among them that enable us to classify them. For example, a human being is similar to other animals in that it can move itself around, eat, sleep, and reproduce. But it is different from other animals in that it uses reason to understand the world and accomplish its goals. Therefore, the human being can be defined as the "rational animal."

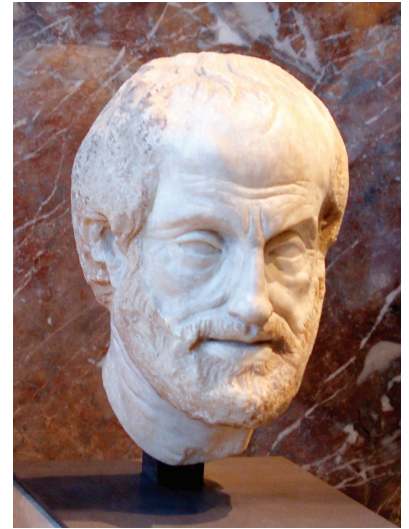
Of course, no human being is perfectly rational, but these classifications provide a basis upon which we can guide our senses. Aristotle wrote:

All people by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses, for, even apart from their usefulness, the senses are loved for themselves. And we love the sense

of sight above all others. It helps us take action. But even when we are not going to take action, it gives us knowledge by bringing to light many differences between things.

For Aristotle, the classifications allow us to compare one thing to another in this world. There is no need to compare the things in this world to perfect exemplars in another world.

Though Aristotle's approach was more scientific than Plato's, it did not win out. Followers of Plato continued to point out problems with the effort to form definitions without perfect exemplars. Through the late ancient period, Plato's view was dominant. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, however, Aristotle's view took over. Then the Renaissance brought Plato back again. The pendulum has continued to swing back and forth throughout history, inspiring each side to more and more ingenious discoveries.



Discussion Questions

1. Roslyn discovers the identity of Olivia by her middle-schoolish language. However, if the kids' bodies were changed, their voices were changed, and the language they spoke was changed, why wouldn't their expressions also be changed (i.e., instead of "Holy stinkin' cats," the words would translate to "By the trident of Poseidon" or another ancient Greek exclamation)? Why do you think their expressions didn't change?
2. Roslyn rallies Olivia and Brent to begin their investigation without trying to find Jonah and Hugh first. Do you agree with her decision, or do you think they should identify the other kids in the simulation before doing anything else? Explain your answer.
3. Roslyn wants to get to work identifying the imposter so that she doesn't miss her creative writing class, but Olivia wants to have fun in the simulation. Who do you think is more likely to take full advantage of the learning opportunities in the simulation, and why?
4. Roslyn judges that she may be able to trust Brent to do his part based on how seriously he plays Marco Polo in the pool. Do you think that this is a good enough reason to trust Brent? Why or why not?
5. Do you think that it would be more difficult for a girl to enter the simulation than for a boy, given the gender change that the girls have to go through? Or are they all changed so much in the virtual reality that it doesn't really matter? Explain your answer.
6. If you were doing this simulation, which character from the painting would you want to be, and why?

For Further Exploration

- Watch this narrated animation of Plato's Allegory of the Cave: www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQfRdl3GTw4