

# Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave* and The Existence of Parallel Realities: A Study of Parallel Universes in Cinema with Special Reference to the movie *Coherence*.

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## **Abstract:**

*The purpose of this paper is to study the philosophical as well the scientific concept of reality, specifically parallel realities, right from the time of Plato to the modern times by making use of both philosophical arguments and scientific theories. Plato explains the philosophy of reality in his **The Allegory of the Cave**, which has been compared to that of the scientific theory of the hypothetical existence of parallel realities in Hugh Everett's Multiple Worlds Theory. While it is only a hypothesis and can be considered as a manifestation of the human psyche, a number of modern fiction and sci-fi cinema emerged that used parallel reality as their dominant theme. This paper intends to study the manner in which the notion of parallel reality has been employed in the movie **Coherence** (2013), directed by James Ward Byrkit. The significance of this study is to underline the fact that reality is not concrete but easily malleable. It focuses on the power of the human mind to alter realities by making a choice in one's individual realities. The study has been conducted by making use of secondary sources like books, a number of websites and YouTube videos.*

Keywords: Reality, Parallel Reality, Doppelganger, Chaos, Butterfly Effect.

What is reality? Is it concrete? Or is it potentially malleable? The idea of reality has always induced contemplation for those who are curious about it. Erwin Schrodinger, the Austrian-Irish physicist, conducted a thought experiment in 1935 that illustrates a hypothetical cat being simultaneously considered both dead and alive as a result of placing the cat inside a steel chamber along with a bottle of poison and a radioactive substance. From the hypothetical experiment, Schrodinger derives that there lies a possibility of the cat being either dead or alive from the explosion of poison until the chamber is opened to check as to which reality the cat has yielded to. Thus, Schrodinger's cat is either dead or alive in an indeterminable reality which is full of possibilities. Albert Einstein, the famous scientist, once quipped: "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." It might be discerned from the statement that the illusion of reality shifts over time. It is never static but constantly under change. It is full of endless possibilities.

2400 years ago, Plato, one of history's most famous thinkers said that life is like being chained up in a cave, forced to watch shadows flitting across a stone wall. This is what Plato suggests in his *The Allegory of the Cave*, found in Book VII of *The Republic*. In the allegory, a group of prisoners are kept confined in a cavern since birth, with no knowledge of the

world outside. They are chained facing a wall, unable to turn their heads. There is a fire burning higher up at a distance that gives off a faint light. Occasionally, people pass by the fire, carrying figures of animals and other objects that cast shadows on the wall. The prisoners name and classify these illusions, believing they are perceiving actual entities. They deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial objects. Suddenly, one prisoner is freed and brought outside the cave for the first time. Blinded by the sunlight, he finds the new environment disorienting. When he realizes that the things around him are real while the shadows were mere reflections, he finds it difficult to believe. The prisoner returns to the cave to share his discovery, but the other prisoners think the journey has made him stupid and blind and are least interested in his realization, and violently resist his attempts to free them.

Plato introduces this passage as an analogy of what it is like to be a philosopher trying to educate the public. With the cave parable, Plato might be arguing that the masses are too stubborn and ignorant to govern themselves. However, the allegory has captured imaginations for 2400 years because it can be read in far more ways. The allegory is connected to Plato's theory of forms, which holds that like the shadows on the wall, things in the physical world are flawed reflections of ideal forms. Plato's theory of forms understands reality in two contrary levels: "The unchanging forms, which are the objects of the philosopher's knowledge, are what is ultimately real. But the world perceived by the senses, the world of change, though not unreal, has a lower status ontologically than the realm of forms."

In this way, the cave leads to many fundamental questions including the origin of knowledge, the problem of representation and the nature of reality itself. And it is a matter of wonder whether the things outside the cave are any more real than the shadows.

To further understand the nature of reality, the discussion on Plato's philosophy can be stretched and compared to the scientific theory of the existence of parallel realities or multiverses. Until the recent years, scientists were sure that there existed only one universe that contained everything known to humankind, hence the word 'uni.' But, back in 1954, a Princeton graduate student named Hugh Everett came up with the first theory of multiverses. He believed that the universe was constantly splitting and that each of these splits became its own universe, which is now known as the Multiple Worlds Theory. Everett visualized the Multiple Worlds Theory as a flowchart that keeps branching off continuously with a series of possibilities. For instance, every time we take a decision, or something happens to us, there exists the possibility of making an alternative decision, or an alternative reaction in a parallel universe. In fact, there are infinite possibilities in the way a certain individual exists, each in their own universe! But we are stuck living out just one of the infinitely many possible lives available to us.

The idea of parallel universes or parallel realities refer to an ideal world where we have second chances and things turn out differently. When physicists say 'universe', what they really mean is 'observable universe', the part of the whole universe that we have so far been able to see. Moreover, it is fine to talk about multiple observable universes because an alien (if at all they exist) near the edge of our observable universe will see parts of the whole universe that we cannot yet see, as they exist in a totally different timeline and the light has

not reached us yet. However, there is no experimental evidence for this kind of parallel universes, and it is just a hypothesis. So, the whole idea of the existence of parallel universe is just a manifestation of the human psyche.

The huge observable universe that we live in might therefore be compared to Plato's Cave where we are just prisoners of what comprises our reality. Just as the shadows cast on the wall of the cave is the accepted reality of the prisoners, in a similar manner, we only believe what we see or what shows up in our 3D reality, not knowing there might exist multiple universes – a parallel reality, which is an inner reality and not something external. In short, what we see is not real, because reality itself is an illusion. To make it clear, the whole crux of the matter lies in our perspectives, our beliefs, our choices that paves our reality in the 3D world. But, at the same time, this reality could be different with alternative perspectives, beliefs and choices, or who knows, this alternative reality is happening right now in a parallel universe?

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" provides an insight into his view of education and the relation between education and truth. The progress towards the light of the outside world, leaving behind the darkness of ignorance inside the cave is about getting educated and realizing that there exists an invisible quantum field of information that is beyond space and time, which can be experienced only with our consciousness, not our sense perceptions with which we register the apparently real world in our three-dimensional existence. Ronald H. Nash, in his book *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* has said that:

"One purpose of the allegory of the cave is to show that there are different levels of human awareness, ascending from sense perception to a rational knowledge of the Forms and eventually to the highest knowledge of all, of the Good."

Thus, just as the prisoners inside the cave are fooled into believing what they see as absolute reality, we too are stuck in the 3D reality. However, what makes it so much easier to shift to the parallel reality and thereby manifest into our physical existence is to simply know that the intended reality already exists. As suggested by Neville Goddard, the famous 20<sup>th</sup> century American author and mystic, the key is to identify the state of consciousness of that version of reality we want to experience and embody those qualities in the present moment. As a result, we begin to experience a reality equal to that emotion.

Bob Proctor, the famous author, philosopher and motivational coach talks about 'Paradigm Shift' where paradigm refers to a mental program that has almost exclusive control over our habitual behaviour. Paradigms are concepts about the self, the world and opportunity. They are the way one approaches change and challenges. Our paradigms are greater than our reality, and the best part is, they are fluid and can be controlled that ultimately influences our reality.

Therefore, to go by the cave analogy, the freed prisoner coming out of the darkness of the cave into the world of light and understanding is his shift of paradigm from the world of ignorance to the world of being awakened to understanding and freedom.

The theory of multiple realities or parallel universes is so fascinating that it is not limited to being just a concept or a belief but has been creatively incorporated into the realm of fiction. It is not just confined to the milieu of a scientific theory or a philosophical argument

but has been actively used as a theme in sci-fi movies, where the laws of nature are inverted and time travel or travelling in the fourth and fifth dimensions are possible; the narrative is presented as such that events take a different turn, often leaving the characters as well as the audience in a state of confusion. This paper seeks to understand and speculate the nature of parallel universes and the interaction between them through the movie titled *Coherence* (2013), directed by James Ward Byrkit.

*Coherence* is one of the most mind-bending movies made on parallel realities, the logic of which stems from Schrodinger's Cat thought experiment, as already discussed in the beginning of the paper. The movie begins with a group of eight friends – Emily, Kevin, Beth, Hugh, Mike, Lee, Amir and Laurie - enjoying a dinner party, who suddenly find themselves existing in multiple realities, encountering their doppelgangers and constantly switching realities unknowingly. In the film, the characters go through this strange situation due to the passing of a comet over the earth which results in alternate realities being intertwined, thereby breaking what is called the Quantum Decoherence. It is a state where different realities exist simultaneously but separately without interaction with one another, but the passing of the comet has led to the Decoherence being broken, which is why different realities have started to interact, leading to the chaos and confusion. Between the houses from multiple realities exists a dark area where the characters step only to emerge in realities different than their own and never going back to the original one.

Emily is the protagonist of the film and it is by keeping track of the original Emily that the audience can steer through the film through the path of least confusion, because getting disoriented is in anyway inevitable. In the beginning, Kevin, Emily's boyfriend is making plans to go on a work trip to Vietnam for four months and wants Emily to accompany him, but she is hesitant to go along with him leaving behind her life in America. Laurie and Amir arrive a little late to the party, possibly after the passing of the comet, which might indicate that they have stepped into a reality to which they do not belong. It is also suggested by a little conversation at the dining table between Laurie and Mike when she fails to recognize Mike from the TV show *Roswell*, even though she claims to love the show. The comet has led to the intertwining of parallel realities, which means that there are infinite number of houses where multiple versions of the group of eight friends are having dinner. This twisting of realities in the film makes everything topsy-turvy and perplexes not only the characters but the audience as well. When the group of eight people step out of the house to watch the comet, they step into the dark area from which they go back to their house, however the house that they go back to belongs to a different reality, suggested by the presence of a broken glass on the dinner table which was not previously broken. Both Emily and Hugh's phone were somehow broken by the impact of the passing comet. Hugh and Amir leave the house to borrow a phone from another reality but this is the last time the original Hugh and Amir are seen in the film because they end up in a different reality. Another version of Hugh and Amir walk into the house but none of them realize that they are from a different reality. Hugh tells everyone of having seen their doppelgangers having dinner in an alternate reality. Hugh writes a note for the other house but before he could leave the house, the group finds an identical copy of the note Hugh has just written. Emily, Kevin, Mike and Laurie decide to leave the house holding blue glowsticks and in the dark area they come across their other versions holding red ones. The originals run away from their doppelgangers and end up

being in yet another reality. Hugh and Amir realize that they have come to the wrong reality because they were in possession of red glowsticks, but the rest had blue glowsticks. At this moment, all of them believe that there are only two houses from two realities. Mike schemes a plan to kill their other versions from the other reality out of fear as to what his other version might do, because he has issues with drinking. He is afraid that if the other Mike is drinking, then he might easily become violent and kill them all. However, the group resist his plan, especially Hugh and Amir, who belong to the other reality. Mike sneaks out of the house, still intending to carry out his plan. He escapes into another reality and this is the last time original Mike is seen in the film. Emily too realizes that she is in the wrong reality when she hears a conversation between Beth and Lee which she had already heard before. Meanwhile, another Mike from another reality comes and secretly tells Kevin of leaving a blackmail note for the other Mike. Upon hearing a car window smashing, the group step out of the house and check their individual cars. Emily finds a ring from her glove box which Kevin gave her. She finds Kevin behind her and after a brief conversation, they both realize that they belong to different realities. A different version of Hugh and Amir return to the house where Hugh reveals that he never managed to send the note to the other house, but the group already had two notes. This is when they realize that there are not just two realities, but they are dealing with multiple realities. The characters have ended up in realities to which they do not belong, and the originals have mixed up with the other versions of other characters. Now, Hugh receives the blackmail note which the other Mike from other reality wrote to this Mike, revealing a past affair between Mike and Beth, Hugh's wife. While Hugh is furious about this, Mike tells him that Hugh is angry at the wrong Mike. Also, in this reality, Hugh does not have a broken phone. This is when Kevin and Laurie figure out that they are in the wrong reality, which was already known to original Emily. At this moment, another Mike enters with a green glowstick and violently attacks the Mike in this reality. So, the multiple versions of the group are stuck in a conundrum of chaotic realities from which there seems to have no escape route. Emily decides to leave this chaotic reality and find a better alternative. She wanders from one reality to another in search for the reality where everything is in order. She finally finds the house where the group of eight friends are merrily enjoying the party. Emily plans to replace the Emily of this reality who is happily making plans with Kevin for their trip to Vietnam. She smashes a car window in order to distract the group and make them step out of the house. This is also suggestive of the loud sound of the smashing of a car window which another version of the group hears somewhere in the middle of the film in another reality. While Emily was retrieving her ring from the glove box, original Emily renders her unconscious and replaces her in this reality. She even hits her violently and leaves her in the bathtub when Emily of this reality manages to crawl back into the bathroom. When original Emily wakes up in this reality the next morning, she is afraid of others finding the wounded Emily. However, she finds everyone normal. A happy Kevin greets her outside the house, but the fate of original Emily takes a different turn when Kevin receives a call from the other Emily's phone. The film ends with Kevin looking at original Emily suspiciously while listening to what the other Emily has to say over the phone. It is left for the audience to decide the fate of original Emily in this reality. Thus, the movie keeps us hooked and confused until the end, making us jump from one reality to another.

The events in the film are also highly suggestive of the Chaos Theory where minor, small-scale changes and occurrences in a system can lead to major, unpredictable differences in the system's behaviour. Also called the Butterfly Effect, the term is associated with the work of mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz. He put forward a metaphorical example of a butterfly flapping its wings at a particular time and place that could later result in a tornado at another place. This has become a popular image of chaos, explaining the idea of sensitive dependence. Nevertheless, the switching of multiple realities and encountering different versions of the characters from other realities is presented in a literal sense in the film, but what if the shifting of realities is just a mental manifestation of the central character Emily? After all, it is the reality that we get to choose and embody first in the mindscape that later gets manifested in the physical world.

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