



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 22 | Number 1 | Issue 83, Autumn

Article 3

10-15-1997

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Recommended Citation

Joeckel, Samuel T. (1997) "In Search of Narnia on a Platonic Map of Progressive Cognition," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 22 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol22/iss1/3>

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

In Search of Narnia on a Platonic Map of Progressive Cognition

Abstract

Discusses Plato's allegory of the cave and theory of Forms in relation to the physical and mental progression in the Chronicles of Narnia—from our world, to Narnia, to the Real Narnia, the transformed garden of the Western Wild, and beyond.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia; Plato. The Republic—Allegory of the cave; Plato. The Republic—Theory of forms; Progressive cognition

IN SEARCH OF NARNIA ON A PLATONIC MAP OF PROGRESSIVE COGNITION

Samuel T. Joeckel

In C. S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair*, the Marsh-wiggle Puddleglum successfully refutes the Queen of the Underland's attempt to undermine the concept of reality. Deep within the bowels of her cavernous dominion, the Queen tells Puddleglum, Eustace Scrubb, and Jill Pole that her world, the Underland, and all that it contains are the only realities. Overland and Narnia, she contends, are mere dreams, fanciful illusions that resemble Underland. She states that such is the case with Puddleglum and the children's notion of the sun, which, she tells them, is only an imaginative extrapolation from the image of a lamp in Underland: "Your *sun* is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing; the *sun* is but a tale, a children's story" (187) (emphasis in original). Puddleglum defeats the Queen's argument using what I believe to be a subtle appeal to the ontological argument: Puddleglum and the children's conception of Overland, by virtue of its *a priori* superiority to Underland, implies its very existence. Puddleglum states:

Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones (191) (emphasis in original).

Trapped in the shadowy, subterranean Underland, Puddleglum, despite the Queen's enchantments that induce oblivion and, consequently, with no recourse to empirical data in order to support his case, still believes in Overland, the land of the sun, even when Overland seems cognitively impossible.

Courtney Lynn Simmons and Joe Simmons have linked Puddleglum's plight in Underland with that of the unbound prisoner in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (14); the similarities between the two are, indeed, uncanny. Underland, like the cave, barricades the platonic sensibles in from the intelligibles that exist above in Overland (or, in the case of Plato, outside the cave). Also, as Puddleglum, Eustace, and Jill's confusion illustrate, when in Underland (or Plato's cave), the existence of Overland (or the platonic Forms) can seem a ludicrous proposition. Perhaps this is one reason why William G. Johnson and Marcia K. Houtman, who also note the platonic elements in Lewis' *Chronicles*, write: "In Plato, as in Lewis, one cannot be sure about the shadows—until the time when one leaves the cave and literally sees the light" (79).

However, in my reading of the *Chronicles*, "when one leaves the cave and literally sees the light" is uncertain.

Suppose that Plato's unbound prisoner exits the cave of the sensibles and enters the region of the intelligibles; there, he apprehends what he takes to be reality. However, much to his surprise, he begins to discern those familiar shadows and dim light. He realizes that he has walked out of the orifice of one cave into the much larger and brighter (more real) interior of another. In platonic terms, he has progressed toward the intelligibles, but he has not beheld them in their essence — in their full, unveiled brilliance. After all, he still views the interior of a cave; but this larger cave affords a much closer glimpse of the platonic Forms. The unbound prisoner has certainly not reached full enlightenment, but his journey from cave to cave represents a progression in cognitive apprehension and an increased knowledge of what is real.

This process of progressive cognition operates repeatedly in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Thus, the Puddleglum episode described above, the cognitive shift from Underland to Overland, serves as a microcosm of the epistemological geography of the *Chronicles* as a whole. In the "Allegory," Plato writes:

The prison dwelling corresponds to the region revealed to us through the sense of sight, and the firelight within it to the power of the Sun. The ascent to see the things in the upper world you may take as standing for the upward journey of the soul into the region of the intelligibles (358).

In the *Chronicles*, this "upward journey," or, to use my previous image, this progress from cave to cave, forms a continuum of progressive cognition upon which lies Underland, our world, Narnia, the real Narnia, and interminable lands "further up and further in" (*The Last Battle* 201). Evidence is scattered throughout the *Chronicles* that points to the metaphorical progression from platonic cave to cave. In *The Silver Chair*, after Puddleglum and the children escape from Underland and view the Narnian night sky, Lewis writes: "Out here, in the cold, with the moon and the huge stars overhead . . . and with kind, merry faces all round them, one couldn't quite believe in Underland" (236). The beauty, hugeness, and realness of Narnia make Underland seem a shadowy, fleeting, insubstantial image. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis writes of the Pevensies in Narnia: "So they lived in great joy and if ever they remembered their life in this world [our world] it was only as one remembers a dream" (201). In terms of reality in a platonic context, Overland is to Underland what Narnia is to our world. And by analyzing how different worlds fit onto the continuum of progressive cognition, we might better understand not only

where Narnia lies in relation to our world on a platonic map, but also the radical transformations characters in the Chronicles undergo as they progress from platonic cave to cave and inch toward the ineffable reality of the platonic Forms.¹

In the apocalyptic closing to *The Last Battle*, Puddleglum's philosophical perspective in *The Silver Chair* is reversed. Whereas Puddleglum argued for the existence of metaphorical platonic Forms in a land of platonic substance (Underland), Aslan and the British children, in *The Last Battle*, attempt to convince the recalcitrant dwarves of the existence of platonic Forms in the land of the Forms themselves (real Narnia). In other words, in *The Silver Chair*, Puddleglum makes a case for the intelligibles in a region of sensibles; in *The Last Battle*, Aslan and the children attempt to open the dwarves' eyes to the very intelligibles around them, where, as Digory Kirke expresses, everything seems "more like the real thing . . ." (210). However, the dwarves' lack of belief and myopic cognitive vision preclude any ability to see rightly. Aslan tells Lucy:

They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out (186).

The dwarves' inability to see real Narnia resembles Uncle Andrew's inability to hear the Talking Animals in *The Magician's Nephew*. In both cases, defective senses result from unbelief and cognitive myopia. In fact, in *The Magician's Nephew*, Aslan offers Polly Plummer a similar explanation for Uncle Andrew's inability to hear to the explanation he gave Lucy for the dwarves' inability to see in *The Last Battle*.

[Uncle Andrew] thinks great folly, child . . . This world is bursting with life for these few days because the song with which I called it into life still hangs in the air and rumbles in the ground. It will not be so for long. But I cannot tell that to this old sinner, and I cannot comfort him either; he has made himself unable to hear my voice. If I spoke to him, he would hear only growlings and roarings. (202-203).

The platonic overtones in both the dwarves' and Uncle Andrew's case are resounding. We might link the dwarves and Uncle Andrew to Plato's bound prisoners, who take the silhouettes of figures on the cave wall cast by firelight as reality. Plato writes: "In every way, then, such prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of those artificial objects" (357). Like these prisoners, both the dwarves and Uncle Andrew have become ingrained to see only their original worlds. You can take them out of their world, but you cannot take their world out of them.

The single biggest difference between the dwarves' inability to see and Uncle Andrew's inability to hear lies in the cognition required for sensual perception in their respective original worlds. Uncle Andrew goes from our world to Narnia; the dwarves go from Narnia to real Narnia. Thus, platonically speaking, there exists a qualitative difference between the platonic shadows viewed by

Uncle Andrew and those viewed by the dwarves. For Uncle Andrew, the shadows cast by our world are darker than those seen by the dwarves. After all, the dwarves can at least clearly hear the Talking Animals of Narnia; Uncle Andrew's eyes are veiled by opaque shadows that, metaphorically speaking, cast only figures of the dumb animals of our world. Lewis writes:

'Now, sir,' said the Bulldog in his business-like way, 'are you animal, vegetable, or mineral?' That was what it really said; but all Uncle Andrew heard was 'Gr-r- r-arrh-ow' (152).

Uncle Andrew's inability to hear what the Narnian dwarves can hear in Narnia, and the Narnian dwarves' inability to see what the children can see in real Narnia illustrate something about the cognitive relation between our world, Narnia, and real Narnia. By analyzing each world in cognitive progression, and to use my previous image, we have exited one cave (our world), entered a larger and less shadowy cave (Narnia), and passed through the Door into real Narnia, which, as Lewis writes, is as different from Narnia "as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream" (*The Last Battle* 212). We have, in fact, sketched the continuum of progressive cognition to which I alluded earlier. On one end of the continuum lies our world, dimmed by shadows and half-light and dominated by platonic sensibles. In the middle lies Narnia, where the light can break through the shadows and where the senses of a person from our world (Uncle Andrew) fail. And on the other end of the continuum lies real Narnia, where Aslan greets his creatures, where even some Narnians (the dwarves) misapprehend the "more real" reality, and where, as Lewis writes, "every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more" (213).

If the continuum of progressive cognition that I have plotted holds true, then on one end of the continuum, on the cognitively weakest end, lies our world. Ours is the figurative platonic bottom rung of the totem pole, the first of the Shadowlands. In our world, more so than Narnia, we see as through a glass darkly; the truly real looms perpetually on the unattainable horizon.

Narnia interacts with our world in *The Magician's Nephew* perhaps more so than in any of the Chronicles. As a result, by analyzing this interaction, we might see how the truly real is more tangible, more accessible and within view in Narnia than it is in our world. Toward the end of the book, Digory Kirke brings to our world the Apple that, Aslan tells him, will heal his ailing mother. When Digory pulls the Apple out of his pocket in his mother's bedroom, it has a strange effect upon the surrounding objects in the room:

And just as the Witch Jadis had looked different when you saw her in our world instead of her own, so the fruit of that mountain garden looked different too. There were of course all sorts of colored things in the bedroom; the colored counterpane on the bed, the wallpaper, the sunlight from the window, and Mother's pretty, pale blue dressing jacket. But

the moment Digory took the Apple out of his pocket, all those things seemed to have scarcely any color at all. Every one of them, even the sunlight, looked faded and dingy. The brightness of the Apple threw strange lights on the ceiling. Nothing else was worth looking at: you couldn't look at anything else (215-216).

The Apple highlights the contrast between Narnia and our world.² The Apple makes objects of our world appear insubstantial. After all, the Apple originates from a land in closer proximity to the platonic Forms. It brings its luminescence to a world accustomed to the darkest of shadows.

Up to this point, I have plotted three points on what I have called the platonic map (or continuum) of progressive cognition. The figurative platonic cave of our world connects to the larger and brighter platonic cave of Narnia which subsequently leads to the real Narnia. In other words, our world is a shadow or copy of Narnia is a shadow or copy of the real Narnia.

However, the continuum of progressive cognition does not end with the real Narnia. To mix stories, the real Narnia is not Plato's unbound prisoner's terminus in his "upward journey of the soul into the region of the intelligibles." As I have already alluded, the continuum progresses "further up and further in." In *The Last Battle*, the transformed mountain garden of the Western Wild represents the next stop on the "upward journey" or the next plotted point of the continuum. As Narnia is more real than our world, and as real Narnia is more real than Narnia, so, as we now see, the transformed garden of the Western Wild is more real than real Narnia. Upon surveying her surroundings in the transformed garden, Lucy summarizes my thesis in her dialogue with Mr. Tumnus:

'I see,' she said. 'This is still Narnia, and more real and beautiful than the Narnia down below, just as it was more real and more beautiful than the Narnia outside the stable door! I see . . . world within world, Narnia within Narnia . . .'

'Yes,' said Mr. Tumnus, 'like an onion: except that as you continue to go in and in, each circle is larger than the last' (224-225) (emphasis in original.)

The unpeeling of Mr. Tumnus' onion is not unlike the progression from platonic cave to platonic cave. With each layer, with each cavernous entryway, higher degrees of reality are apprehensible. Elsewhere, Mr. Tumnus tells Lucy: "The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside" (224). Thus, the wardrobe, the stable Door, and the mountain garden gate are thresholds permitting entrance into larger, interior worlds, which, on a platonic map, arrange themselves in cognitively ascending order. These worlds, unpeeled like Mr. Tumnus' onion, ultimately culminate with the final threshold that leads to the "great mountains of Aslan," the last and farthest point of the continuum, the region of the platonic Forms of which everything below is only a copy.

I have now plotted five points on the continuum of progressive cognition: our world, Narnia, the real Narnia,

the mountain garden, and the mountains of Aslan (the final point on the platonic intelligible side of the continuum).³ I need only to add that inestimable worlds may feasibly exist between points four and five (the mountain garden and the mountains of Aslan). This contention rests on evidence already proffered. In order to get from the mountain garden to the mountains of Aslan, one must travel further up and further in. And as Lewis says, "The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets." This statement leaves open the possibility of the existence of more worlds on the upward and inward journey. To use Mr. Tumnus' illustration, each world on the journey corresponds to one peel of the onion.

As characters in the Chronicles experience progressive cognition as they travel from one end of the continuum to another (as they figuratively unpeel Mr. Tumnus' onion), so too do the characters undergo physical transformations. The body, like the mind, must acclimate itself to the progressively more real worlds. In so doing, the body becomes more refined, nobler, and attains a fuller potential for benevolence.

Nearly all travelers from our world to Narnia experience such bodily transformations. In *The Magician's Nephew*, the Narnian air affects not only the horse Strawberry but, despite his rascality, Uncle Andrew as well: "The air had apparently suited Strawberry as well as it suited Uncle Andrew. He no longer looked like the poor, old slave he had been in London; he was picking up his feet and holding his head erect" (135-136).⁴ King Frank (previously the London Cabby) and his wife Helen the Queen undergo a similar physical transformation in Narnia. Lewis writes:

Their faces had a new expression, especially the King's. All the sharpness and cunning and quarrelsomeness which he had picked up as a London cabby seemed to have been washed away, and the courage and the kindness which he had always had were easier to see. Perhaps it was the air of the young world that did it, or talking with Aslan, or both (198).

In *The Last Battle*, only a few days after arriving in Narnia, Eustace Scrubb and Jill Pole mature at an astronomical rate and develop a physical prowess engendered by the Narnian air. King Tirian notes this transformation:

[King Tirian] was surprised at the strength of both children: in fact they both seemed to be already much stronger and bigger and more grown-up than they had been when he first met them a few hours ago. It is one of the effects which Narnian air often has on visitors from our world (72).

Perhaps the most extraordinary physical transformation is the incarnation of Father Christmas in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. What is only myth in our world becomes fact in Narnia. As King Frank became more himself Narnia (i.e., "the kindness which he had always had" was easier to see), so Father Christmas becomes more himself as well. In this case, he becomes real. And it is the realness of Father Christmas, among other things, that impresses the Pevensies.


sies: "He was so big, and so glad, and so real, that they became quite still" (117). Narnia's closer proximity (in comparison to our world) to the platonic Forms permits slave horses to talk, children to be dubbed kings, and a fairy tale to become a living, breathing person."

The most radical and indescribable bodily transformations occur beyond, or further up and further in from, real Narnia. In *The Last Battle*, with the Shadowlands at their backs, racing toward the mountain garden with the mountains of Aslan beyond, the children of our world and the Narnian creatures run at a phenomenal speed, by both our world's and Narnian standards. Following Jewel the Unicorn, the children and the Narnians realize that they can somehow not only keep pace with the unicorn, but also keep pace without experiencing fatigue:

Everyone else began to run, and they found, to their astonishment, that they could keep up with him: not only the Dogs and the humans but even fat little Puzzle and short-legged Poggin the Dwarf, The air flew in their faces as if they were driving fast in a car without a windscreen. The country flew past as if they were seeing it from the windows of an express train. Faster and faster they raced, but no one got hot or tired or out of breath (214).

Thus, what is physically impossible not only in our world but Narnia as well becomes possible (becomes real) in the world in the vicinity of the platonic Forms.

As the children and the Narnians ascend beyond the mountain garden, Lewis invokes what I believe to be a literary device employed by Dante in the *Paradise*: the ineffability topos.⁵ The cognitive and physical progressions entailed in the movement from our world to Narnia and to real Narnia form a trajectory that reaches an indescribable height in the lands beyond. The cognitive and physical progressions are so great beyond the mountain garden that even Aslan Himself undergoes a transformation. Lewis writes: "And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them" (228).

The ineffability topos most likely signifies the end of the successive platonic caves and the arrival at the platonic Forms. These Forms, as we have seen, provide the models of reality that filter down from the mountains of Aslan, to the mountain garden, to real Narnia, to Narnia, and finally to our world. Although we might speculate as to what lies furthest up and furthest in, on a platonic map of progressive cognition, this region remains uncharted. 

Notes

1. As Johnson and Houtman observes, Lewis' version of Platonism is highly "Christianized" (76). Thus, the journey toward platonic Forms in the *Chronicles* is a thoroughly Christian experience.
2. Since Digory plucked the Apple from the Tree that sprouted from the seeds of an apple brought from the mountain garden of the Western Wild where, as we find in *The Last Battle*, only Digory and Polly have been (218), it can be argued that the Apple is not Narnian; if this is true, then my Apple illustration proves nothing about the contrasting

degrees of reality between our world and Narnia. However, at this point in the essay, I am analyzing three worlds: our world, Narnia, and real Narnia. And by methods of deduction I conclude that the Apple is, in fact, Narnian. The Apple clearly does not come from real Narnia, because, in *The Last Battle*, we learn that, in real Narnia, the mountain garden is transformed (224). The garden in *The Magician's Nephew*; and the garden in *The Last Battle* are different by virtue of degrees of reality.

3. I have attempted to correlate roughly these five points with one of Plato's four stages of cognition: Imagining (*eikasia*), Belief (*pistis*), Thinking (*dianoia*), and Knowledge (*episteme*). Any such endeavor proves unsatisfactory. I do not think Lewis intended the *Chronicles* to be so rigidly platonic. Platonism operates in general principles in the books. Moreover, as Johnson and Houtman already observed, Lewis' Platonism is hardly pure Platonism.
4. That Uncle Andrew can undergo such a physical transformation but, as we have already seen, is incapable of a cognitive transformation attests to the fact that proper cognition hinges upon belief (or, more properly, a willingness to believe). Thus, whereas cognitive transformations in Narnia are voluntary, physical transformations are involuntary.
5. In Canto II Dante writes: "I have been in His brightest shining heaven / and seen such things that no man, once returned / from there, has wit or skill to tell about . . ." (4-6).

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