

Runaway Statues: Platonic Lessons on the Limits of an Analogy

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Runaway Statues: Platonic Lessons on the Limits of an Analogy

ABSTRACT: Plato's best-known distinction between knowledge and opinion occurs in the *Meno*. The distinction rests on an analogy that compares the acquisition and retention of knowledge to the acquisition and retention of valuable material goods. But [Plato](#) saw the limitations of the [analogy](#) and took pains to warn against learning the wrong lessons from it. In this paper, I will revisit this familiar analogy with a view to seeing how Plato both uses and distances himself from it.

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Recall Plato's analogy.

To acquire an untied work of Daedalus is not worth much, like acquiring a runaway slave, for it does not remain, but it is worth much if it is tied down, for his works are very beautiful. What am I thinking of when I say this? True opinions.(1)

When one owns a valuable statue fashioned by a great artist, one becomes responsible for its security. So life-like it is that it may "run away and escape," jokes Plato, the point being that because fine statues are attractive to other people, their owners must take precautions against their loss by tying them down.

Opinions, on this analogy, are potentially flighty, like a slave who runs away from an owner. A slave who runs away is, from the slave-holder's point of view, "worthless." Plato writes,

For correct opinion, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth very much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why... After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from opinion in being tied down.(2)

A valuable statue bought and put in a garden must be "tied down."

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