

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a jungle scene. In the foreground, the silhouette of a man with a fedora and a whip is visible on the left, looking towards a large, ancient stone temple in the background. The temple has a prominent portico with columns and a pediment. The scene is dimly lit, with a warm, golden light emanating from the temple's entrance, creating a sense of mystery and adventure.

The Shadow Realities of Indiana Jones

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Philosophy begins in wonder, and mysterious voids fuel a sense of wonder. It's a natural connection. Truly, caves have captured the imagination of everyone from the prehistoric Lascaux painters to modern-day spelunkers and moviegoers. It's philosophically fitting, then, that some of the most memorable scenes in the *Indiana Jones* films occur underground. We can remember being on the edge of our seats watching Indy fleeing the rolling boulder in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and feeling intrigued by the beam of sunlight pinpointing the Ark's true location in the map room. Who could forget the alarming events in the cave under Pankot Palace in *Temple of Doom*, as Indy navigates psychological and physical labyrinths to come out wiser? We recall Indy choosing wisely again in the cavern near the end of *The Last Crusade*, and escaping his subterranean trials in the *Crystal Skull* with the revelation about the alien spaceship. All these examples are to be expected given that Indy is a comic book archaeologist. But is something deeper going on?

Storywriter George Lucas was a fan of the mythologist Joseph Campbell, who showed that humankind faces primal realities that consequently lurk in collective imagination and hence in cross-cultural mythic archetypes.¹ One of those archetypes is the cave. Exploring this, our chapter focuses on *Crusade* to argue that there is indeed something philosophically deeper to the cave imagery we see in the *Indiana Jones* saga.

Shadows in Plato's Cave

Among the most famous cave stories of all time is Plato's (428–348 BCE) allegory in which the philosopher asks us to imagine prisoners chained and perpetually facing a subterranean wall. A fire burns at

their backs, and between the flames and the prisoners there is a walkway over which people carry sculptures. Because the prisoners only ever see shadows, they take them to be true reality. In fact, though, the shadows are only silhouettes of the sculptures, which in turn imitate true things outside of the cave.

Plato loved geometry, and the allegory is often explained in terms of that subject. Suppose a teacher draws a circle and then asks students to close their eyes to imagine it. The fuzzy image students will picture is a low level of reality—an imitation of the figure on the chalkboard. Yet even the figure on the board is not a real circle, but only an approximation of the true circle “seen” through reason and understanding. This is because the chalkboard circle is never rendered perfectly so as to have a circumference everywhere equidistant from the center. Notice further that the color, specific size, whether it’s drawn on slate or plastic, produced with chalk or ink are all irrelevant to its true nature, indicating that the real circle is *ideal* and independent of the material world.

The true circle is real and discoverable in the same way the Pythagorean theorem is. From this standpoint, true form is immaterial, unchanging, and perfect: eternal and god-like. Though the quest for eternity is part of our mythic heritage and a driving force in *Crusade*, it’s worth noting—as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) did—that true form lacks attributes of living beings, which are material, changing, and messy.² Above the rest of the world outside the cave, Plato also spoke of a still more transcendent realm, identifying it with the Sun in his allegory. The Sun allows life to flourish and lets us see it, so it is simultaneously the source of reality and our knowledge of it. Plato used the Sun to represent what he called the Good. Many later philosophers equated it to God, here, too, understood as the wellspring of being and knowledge.³

Paralleling Plato’s allegory, *Crusade* has obvious religious significance in its title and content. Indeed, the movie begins and ends with stand-ins for God in caves, namely, a golden cross and the Holy Grail. The pattern holds elsewhere. Part way through, Indy and Elsa—a Nazi agent pretending to be an ally—navigate catacombs beneath a church that has been converted into a library. Religious iconography is everywhere, including the dead knight’s shield and sarcophagus (and Indy is “pretty sure” he sees a drawing of the Ark of the Covenant). However, none of these things are God; they are instead representations of God. So it’s fitting that they’re inside cavernous enclosures. Indeed, the movie’s culmination incorporates decoy chalices, which are imitations of a representation of God, giving them the same status as Plato’s shadows. It’s also Platonically appropriate that pivotal moments of self-realization and fulfillment of certain values—for example, Indy and Henry Jones Sr. actualizing their roles as father and son at the end of the film—occur near cave entrances within the reach of sunlight.

Crusade sets other self-transformative truths near cave entrances. Most notably, a flashback to a cavern in the American West shows a teenage Indiana confronting an archaeological looter, who is an archetype for the Odysseus-like rogue Indy will become. Odysseus, the hero of *The Odyssey*, was a cunning and daring trickster. The young maverick Indy follows his mythic counterpart in voyaging through underworlds in search of “fortune and glory,” as he puts it in *Temple*. After the initial confrontation with the looter, there’s a frenzied chase involving knife- and gun-wielding assailants, horses, automobiles, and a train with dangerous circus animals, typifying situations Indy will find himself in as an adult. The scene also explains some of his character traits. It is by falling into a serpent pit on the train that Indy develops his snake phobia. In fending off a lion with a nearby bullwhip, he accidentally strikes his own chin, accounting for the scar and his bullwhip fixation. Jones goes on to adopt elements of the comportment, dress, and even verbal tropes of the rogue, who puts his hat on Indy when he takes the looted crucifix back, gruffly but affectionately remarking: “You lost today, kid, but that doesn’t mean you have to like it.”

Although Indy never becomes a model archaeologist, he seems to inch from the depths of Plato’s cave to its opening, rising to an ideal higher than that of the crass materialist, who plunders for mere gain and without interest in uncovering hidden truths. In *Temple*, Jones ends up more preoccupied with mysteries than physical artifacts, also displaying moral character by giving the remaining Sankara Stone to the desperate villagers. This pattern repeats in *Raiders* and *Crystal Skull*, not incidentally in the context of caverns. Likewise in *Crusade*: Indy does not steal the cross from the looters to keep or sell it, but because “it belongs in a museum,” an idealistic observation he makes just within the reach of sunlight near the cave opening. At the movie’s culmination, he seeks the Grail to use its healing powers to save Henry Sr. from a mortal gun wound. Ultimately he relinquishes the cup to take his father’s hands, and he avoids falling into a dark abyss. This elevation of life and family over treasure is again accented by sunlight flitting through the cavern entrance.

Indy never quite reaches the ideal, though. The opening scene of *Crusade* has him stealing the cross from its legal owners; later, he shatters a beautiful marble floor, smashes through a wall, and callously overturns the ornately carved sarcophagus lid in the library crypt; and he similarly breaches norms of good archaeology on his way to the Holy Grail at the end of the movie, albeit to help his dying father. One might say Indy is a shadow of a good archaeologist, but he’s still interested in higher truths and values, in this way clawing closer to the exit of Plato’s cave.

New and Old Shadows: Action and Revelation

Roughly 2,500 years after Plato, American transcendentalists and pragmatists built on Greek philosophy to refashion concepts of truth. Specifically, they abandoned static concepts, arguing that we discover things by systematically jostling and changing them, or altering conditions of observation.⁴ As William James (1842–1910) put it, “Truth happens to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true.”⁵ Along similar lines, John Dewey (1859–1952) pointed to art as truth revealing. Poetry is an archetypal example. The word “poetry” has ancient Greek roots that connote “making,” “doing,” “creating,” and “handiwork.” Poets are makers in the obvious sense of being creative wordsmiths. They are also revealers, bending language to help us see things that we missed, almost as black light divulges what was previously hidden. Dewey accordingly remarked that poetry “radiates the light that never was on land and sea but that is henceforth an abiding illumination of objects.”⁶ Summarizing roughly the same idea in squarely mythic terms, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) discussed *aletheia*, a Greek word for “truth.”⁷ The term combines the prefix *a-* with the word *lethe*. The prefix means “without,” and *lethe* means concealment. (In Greek mythology, Lethe was the name of an underworld river that would obscure a person’s memory when they drank from it.) Heidegger accordingly maintained that truth brings things out of hiding; it lifts the veil and reveals.

These newer notions accordingly build on old Greek traditions, and we also see a merging of old and new in *Crusade*. The movie starts with Indigenous singing and percussion, suggesting pre-Columbian times, then flashes to Indy’s youth in the American desert where the plunderers have just discovered the crucifix: an Old-World relic in the New World. Newer and older concepts of truth—which are not utterly divergent—are specifically personified by Indy and his father. The elder and younger Joneses exemplify Old- and New-World customs respectively, and are appropriately played by a Scotsman and an American. Their first interaction highlights the contrast. Having just seized the cross from the plunderers, Indy rushes up a pathway that cuts through an unkept yard, leading to a rundown house. Clamoring in, he passes the dog from which he adopted his nickname, “Indiana,” and bursts into his father’s study, which has a cluttered cave-like appearance, with sunlight streaming through the windows. His father wears professorial garb, including a bowtie that will be his signature up until almost the movie’s end. Henry Sr. pores over a medieval manuscript depicting a knight and Christian iconography. Annoyed by Indy’s intrusion, he

stalls the action by instructing his son to count to 20 in Greek. This early scene effectively depicts a contrast between an older man, who excavates preserved truths through quiet contemplation, and his younger son, who seizes them through energetic action that often entails testing their world-changing mysteries.

The two Joneses nonetheless share a lot, to the point of shadowing one another. Indy hates snakes, his father rats. Indy becomes highly educated like his father, and already shows a command of ancient languages when a teenager. History fascinates both men, who dwell in silhouettes of the past. They are both named Henry, which is why Indy's father calls him Junior. Yet they also have different personas. Henry Sr. relishes academic life, and for much of the film is comically out of place in action-packed scenarios. Although Indy adopts a professorial career too, he seems reluctant. At one point he flees students, absconding into his office that doubles as a boiler room. It is appointed with rustic furniture and wood shelves cradling stone and clay artifacts, giving it a cave-like appearance. Once again sunlight seeps through a window, the one Indy uses to escape his irate students.

As the movie progresses, Henry Sr. gradually comes to shadow Indy's active ways. Shocked when his son kills a group of Nazis, he exclaims "Look what you did!" But the elder Jones soon finds himself manning the turret in a biplane, albeit incompetently. To his credit, Henry Sr. adjusts. After crash landing, and with a German fighter bearing down, he startles a flock of birds with his umbrella; the flock takes flight into the plane, causing it to crash. Here, he fuses his son's active tendencies with his contemplative ones. In a fictitious quote invented for the movie, he chuckles that "I suddenly remembered my Charlemagne: 'Let my armies be the rocks and the trees and the birds in the sky'."

Such patterns repeat. Later, Henry Sr. is captive in the belly of a World War I-style tank, once again with sunlight pouring through viewports and an open hatch, recalling the prisoners in Plato's cave. At one point, he fights a soldier for a pistol, while his endearingly helpless friend Marcus sits idly by. As his enemy gets control over the firearm, Henry Sr. squirts ink from his fountain pen into his attacker's eyes. Although a cartoonish act, it expresses the idea that pens can defeat guns when wielded by those steeped in the art of writing. That said, Henry Sr. decides guns can work too, pulling the trigger on a side cannon, demolishing an approaching truckload of soldiers. Marcus incredulously says, "Look what you did!", shadowing the earlier remark of Indy's father. Even Marcus, who, in fact, pointed out the power of the pen to Indy's father in his soft-spoken way, determines that big sticks can get the job done when he clubs an assailant with a metal pipe.

Indy similarly undergoes a transformation that brings him closer to his father's Old-World thoughtfulness, while simultaneously accentuating his New-World brashness, particularly when he encounters trials that demand elevated contemplation and daring at the same time. This is especially so in the three tests to gain entry to the cavern chamber with the Grail. Each comes with a clue. The first proclaims: "The penitent man is humble before God." Indy figures out that a humble man kneels, taking this position, narrowly avoiding decapitating blades. The second clue declares: "Only in the footsteps of God will he proceed," a statement implying action while referencing the opening of the Gospel of John, with its Platonic overtones. This puzzle is easier because Indy confronts a walkway with rough tiles, each with a letter. Yet passing through requires more knowledge since the word for God is inscribed in Latin. Getting through, of course, demands action, with missteps causing death. As Nietzsche observes, a healthy life is one of *overcoming*. Fittingly, Indy surmounts obstacles through a *growing* appreciation of the wisdom of old books.⁸

The third challenge is the most interesting and connects squarely with concepts of truth as revelation. It presents the following puzzle: "Only in the leap from the lion's head will he prove his worth." Indy here encounters a sculpted lion's head overlooking a chasm, maybe 50 meters across. Indy is hesitant, but the voice of Marcus echoes through the cavern, urging him to get the Grail to resuscitate his wounded father. He steps into the void, only to find sure footing on a walkway perfectly camouflaged with the surrounding rock so as to be invisible. This exactly captures a sentiment that William James expressed when he said that belief is measured by willingness to act; actions can generate, and hence reveal, realities that were initially taken on faith.⁹ But insofar as the leap depends on faith in something superseding mere material existence, it also signifies a return to Plato.

Myth and Family in Plato's Cave

Parent-child conflicts are part of the human condition, and central in the history of myth, whether with ancient gods overthrowing their parents, or with children disobeying their heavenly father in Abrahamic traditions, or again with tragic figures such as Agamemnon, Electra, and Medea. Parent-child issues are also prominent in the *Indiana Jones* movies. *Temple* and *Crystal Skull* respectively have Indy as the surrogate and absentee father. *Crusade*, in its turn, has Indy struggling with an emotionally distant father.

Without suggesting sexual hang-ups, father–son conflicts in *Crusade* approach the Oedipal myth at times, with Henry Sr. and Indy romantically involved with the same woman. Partly crafted by renowned playwright Tom Stoppard, the film shows a love scene with Indy and Elsa, but soon after the audience learns about Henry Sr.’s relationship when he explains that her Nazi allegiance was obvious because she talks in her sleep. The two men are next restrained back-to-back in a Nazi lair. Elsa comments to Indy that she “can’t forget how wonderful it was.” Henry Sr. is facing away from her, so assumes this is directed at him, remarking, “Thank you, it was rather wonderful.” Indy later chastises Henry Sr., indicating he’s old enough to be her grandfather. The indication is—again, along Oedipal lines—that she’s young enough to be Indy’s daughter. This is fitting because she is a darker shadow of himself—of what he could have become had he solely fixated on fortune and glory.

The relationship between the Jones men is generally tense. Early on, Henry Sr. mistakes Indy for a Nazi, breaking a vase over his head, showing more concern for the smashed artifact—which turns out to be a forgery—than for his possibly concussed son. A little later, he declares the Grail even more important than his friend Marcus. Indy complains that neither he nor his mother ever understood his father’s Grail obsession. Henry Sr. laments that his wife understood only too well, keeping the distraction of an illness from him until all he could do was mourn her death. Aboard a Zeppelin leaving Germany, the two share a drink. Indy remarks that he had a milkshake the last time they had a moment like this, indicating it was decades ago. His father—more interested in his Grail journal—distractedly asks what they discussed. Indy replies: “We never talked.” Henry Sr. interjects that he was a great father: he didn’t tell Indy what to do and taught him self-reliance. His son rebukes: “What you taught me was that I was less important to you than people who had been dead for 500 years.”

Henry Sr. evolves, however, and by the end of *Crusade* Indy has become more important than the Grail. This is, in fact, the elder Jones’s path out of Plato’s cave. We see this change when Indy is reaching for the Grail, as his father clings to one of his hands to prevent him from tumbling into an abyss, sunlight once again dappling the cavern entrance. Almost exactly echoing what his darker shadow, Elsa, said before she fell to her death trying to grasp the Grail, Indy blurts: “I can almost reach it, Dad.” Henry Sr. gets his son’s attention by finally calling him by his preferred name, Indiana. His father has relinquished his lifelong quest for the artifact, and calmly urges his son to do the same.

The closeness of the Jones men in this climactic scene is symbolized by the fact Henry Sr. has lost his tweed jacket, and his signature bow tie is undone, along with the top buttons on his now-filthy shirt. This all gives him a rough-and-tumble appearance approaching that of his

son. Simultaneously, he retains his high-minded, Platonic thinking. When Indy queries what he got out of the quest, his father answers simply: "Illumination." The Grail as a physical artifact has lost sway over him, but he cherishes the wisdom he has gained. Given that Henry Sr. has moved to the ideal, it's fitting that this exchange occurs outside the cave in full sunlight. Yet the scene crashes down from the ethereal when Henry Sr. asks his son what he gained, unfortunately reverting to the habit of calling him Junior, which annoys Indy, reintroducing a petty conflict and preventing an answer. The return to earth is accentuated by the soft umbers of the desert and the fact that the men—Henry Sr., Indy, Marcus, and Sallah—return to action, riding horses into the sunset.

Truth, Acts, and Shadow Facts

Crusade highlights the risks of overly contemplative life: Henry Sr.'s mode of existence not only damages his relationship with his son, but limits his capacity to discover the Grail. At the same time, the movie depicts the dangers of fervent action without adequate contemplation. As Nazi collaborator Walter Donovan says, his allies "want to write themselves into the Grail legend and take on the world." Marcus warns Donovan that "you're meddling with powers you cannot possibly comprehend," and the latter is indeed killed by mystical forces he does not understand. Henry Sr. similarly laments that "Elsa never really believed in the Grail. She thought she'd found a prize," and she died seeking it.

Additionally, *Crusade* shows that newer, active notions of truth are not diametrically opposed to older, more static ones. Even if it turns out that older notions are false, they retain a role by providing solid ground for truth-revealing action. Indy's development calls to mind ideas advanced by Nietzsche. Simultaneously criticizing and appreciating Greek philosophy, Nietzsche rejected the unchanging "true" ideas of Plato as false yet potentially life-enhancing fictions that can bring out and thus reveal new ways of being.¹⁰ So, for example, the golden cross at the beginning of the film is nothing more than that; it's an empty fiction of sorts, not worth risking one's life over as Indy later does on the ship at sea. Yet the initial fight over the cross generates Indy's self-identity—everything from his hat, chin scar, bullwhip fetish, and fear of snakes to his maverick attitude. Moreover, we must overcome static concepts; tired and conventional thinking traps us. We learn this from Plato's allegory where the shadows might be understood as commonplace that people unquestionably take to be true.

Crusade offers a cartoonish, colorful, and sentimental spectacle. But it nonetheless deals in sophisticated ways with ideas percolating in the collective culture that Campbell described, including ideas that captivated Plato. The film also flips Plato to reveal other archetypes. Indy prefers action, and says he's interested in facts, not truth. Facts are occurrences, and the Latin root of "facts" means "do" or "make" or "act." In ancient contexts "pure act" is total achievement of ideal form, where the completely *actualized* thing has full truth and being. To the extent that Indy and his father become more truly who they are, the transitions are in keeping with the general thrust of the allegory of the cave, while simultaneously exemplifying pragmatic, transcendental, and existential trajectories.

Notes

- 1 See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Bollingen Foundation, 1949) and *The Masks of God*, vols. 1–4 (New York: Viking, 1969).
- 2 Friedrich Nietzsche highlights this in *Twilight of the Idols* [1888], trans. Walter Kaufman, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin, 1954), 473–486. Plato appeared sensitive to this, indeed defining truth-seeking inquiry as a practice of death. Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, 64–68, available at <http://cscs.res.in/dataarchive/textfiles/textfile.2010-09-15.2713280635/file>.
- 3 See Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: PIMS, 1949), ch. 1.
- 4 See John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1929), ch. 4; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (Boston: Munroe and Co., 1836), esp. ch. 8.
- 5 William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longman Green and Co., 1907), 77–78.
- 6 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court, 1925), 360.
- 7 See Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 56–86.
- 8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1892], trans. Walter Kaufman, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin, 1954), 225–228.
- 9 For example, William James, "Rationality, Activity and Faith," *Princeton Review* vol. 2 (1882): 58–86.
- 10 For example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science* [1887], trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §110; Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 473–479.