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introduction

doubting the light

There are times, many of which we keep secret, when we free-fall into darkness—long days of obscurity and shadow, hours of doubt that cloud the mind, depression so deep it seems impossible to see a way forward. All we want is a little light, a little clarity, a little sunshine. We long for the dawn of a new day. Even when we're feeling okay, we invoke the light often enough. We “see the light,” have a “lightbulb” moment, seek the “light at the end of the tunnel.” We're drawn to people who “glow” or have a “radiant” smile. At least in the United States—historically the land of bootstraps, optimism, and the power of positive thinking—we've been raised on a diet of light. We associate it with everything from safety to intelligence to peace to hope to purity to optimism to love to happiness to fun to frivolity. To everything good. Taken together, these little equations make up the Light Metaphor, which holds that bright is preferable to dim, sunshine happier than clouds, and light moods superior to dark moods.

This book is about the urge to pair light with good and dark with bad. We'll explore this pairing's underlying origins, its promises, and, ultimately, its harmful effects. It's understandable that we would want to avoid darkness, but we hurt

ourselves chasing the light. What we need going forward is to stop trying to shed light on darkness and instead learn to see in the dark.

Philosophers like me have been thinking about light and dark as metaphors for knowledge and ignorance, good and evil, for almost 2,500 years. Plato suggested this pairing in the *Republic* through the character of Socrates, who tells his friends a story about a group of prisoners forcibly kept in a cave unaware that the sun is just outside. Many philosophers inflict Plato's Allegory of the Cave on defenseless students semester after semester. I do it on the first day of Introduction to Philosophy.

As my students* and I read Plato's description of the cave together, I ask them to sketch it on paper. We will interpret its meaning later, I tell them, but since the scene itself is so hard to imagine, we need to get it down on paper first.

"What's in the cave?" I ask.

Prisoners, a wall, fire, some puppeteers, and an exit.

"Position the prisoners first," I say. They're human and we're human, and that seems important. A future philosophy major tells me that the prisoners are chained in three places: neck, wrists, ankles. They are stuck sitting down and cannot turn their heads, even to look around. They see only what's in front of them, but they can hear each other. All day every day the prisoners of Plato's imagination stare at a wall. Poor souls.

"Great. Draw the wall. What's on it?" Out of the corner of my eye I see a quiet freshman doodling, but I suspect she is not drawing the cave. She looks checked out, and she's not the only one.

"Shadows," someone in sweats mumbles.

* All student names have been changed because they represent composite characters.

“Of what?” I push.

“Animals, trees, people.” It’s common for students to answer this question laconically on the first day of class. They dare not deviate from the script they have been reading from since they were five. In time they will relax and take more risks thinking out loud.

“How’d the shadows get there?” I continue.

A dutiful student announces that puppets are responsible for the shadows on the wall.

“Huh? What puppets?” I ask.

“There’s a campfire burning in the cave,” someone responds, “and the puppeteers use that light to project shadows of their puppets onto the wall.”

“You mean like in a kid’s bedroom, where the light of a lamp is enough to throw shadow-puppets?” I clarify.

“Yup.”

“Why are people throwing shadows of puppets onto a cave wall?” I ask this question with the confusion of a first-time reader. I want to pique the students’ curiosity and make them question Plato’s sanity. What they can’t see yet is how quickly we will move from clarification-type questions to questions that will make them feel queasy.

No one can tell me why Plato’s puppeteers manipulate the minds of the cave prisoners. But they realize the prisoners are mistaking shadows for objects. Never having seen a real tree, they believe that tree-shadows are trees. The prisoners even have contests to determine rank: Who consistently spots the most trees? Who identifies the tallest one? In this cave, your worth is based on how expertly you traverse a world made entirely of shadows.

By this point, we can imagine the cave: it’s a dim place filled with sad sacks who spend their lives approximating reality. The

students understand why the prisoners don't rebel: they don't know their reality isn't real. Someone suggests that Plato is calling us prisoners. A second student thinks that we believe the media's lies. A third worries that we're living on autopilot. By now, though, we agree that Plato is telling us something. He thinks we're imprisoned together and have gotten something terribly wrong. But we don't know what it is, or how much of our lives we've spent believing it. Some students close their eyes. Others let out the air they have been holding. They are loosening up and looking around at each other in disbelief. They are perplexed.

The story has a happy ending: One prisoner gets his chains ripped off before being forcibly dragged out of the cave. His body is thrust into the light of day, where he immediately buries his eyes in his elbow. For weeks, he's unable to recognize anything in the light except what looks familiar, like shadows on the ground and reflections on the lake. He is blind until the sun sets, at which time the trees on the riverbank come into focus.

After a long time, our hero starts acclimating to the light. As his eyes adjust, he can make out real trees. In time, he will accept what my students are considering for the first time: even our bedrock beliefs can be wrong.

A typical interpretation of Plato's cave is the one my students land on: the sun saves. My religious students think the sun is God; the atheists prefer to call it Truth. We can at least agree that it's the sun that allows the freed prisoner to truly see the world. Someone compares acclimating to the sun to education. It's a process of crawling out of ignorance and into truth, out of darkness and into light. However painful the sun may be at first, the students admit, it ultimately saves the prisoner. We can all relate. We too have been taught to walk in the light.

By the time I turned eighteen, I'd already collected a fair share of love and light. I'd spent my summers on a hot towel on

Rockaway Beach in New York City. So by the time I was in college learning the Light Metaphor's philosophical origin, I was ready. I graduated clutching one certainty, the same one my students lunge at with both hands so as to stop spinning: light is necessary to know the truth.

The problem with this setup is that I have always felt emotionally dark. I'm an angry person genetically, and I feel sad most of the time. I think the world is overwhelmingly tragic, with just a few rays of sunshine poking through every now and then. Like Winnie-the-Pooh's pessimistic donkey friend, I have always been an Eeyore at heart.

If you're like me, you know it's not easy to be an Eeyore in a world that prefers Tiggers, to be a rain cloud who gets told sunshine is best.* It's hard for those of us with a darker disposition to avoid being pelted by positivity, one perky pebble at a time. TV, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, podcasts, self-help books, T-shirts, pillows, bumper stickers, coffee mugs, and billboards all want us to live our best life. In the 1980s it was Bobby McFerrin's song "Don't Worry, Be Happy" and Walmart's big yellow smiley face. Today it's "Let Your Light Shine." Dark moods struggle for sympathy in a world that would like to see them corrected, cured, or converted.

To fit into this sun-drenched world, some of us try to fake it till we make it. We remember that some people have it worse than us (which usually makes us feel guilty on top of achy). We call "First World Problems" on ourselves (and take

*How and why Tigger became the symbol of bright-sidedness is a mystery if you read him as a nervous wreck who bounces to self-soothe.

on a bonus feeling: shame). And we read books on how to be happier. Book sales suggest that I am not the only one who has exhausted herself chasing the light.

Rachel Hollis's 2018 best-seller *Girl, Wash Your Face* sold over two million copies because that many of us wanted to believe that we can control our happiness with our attitude. Twelve years earlier, *The Secret* and *The Law of Attraction* became best-sellers for the same reason: we wanted to up our return on investment in positive thinking. These are just modern iterations of the 1952 classic *The Power of Positive Thinking*. When Norman Vincent Peale made his debut, Americans made him a best-selling author. In so doing, we agreed to become the Light Metaphor's foot soldiers, repeating the mantras that declare light to be smarter than dark, happiness hipper than sadness, tranquility trendier than anger, and optimism holier than pessimism. We smiled in the face of adversity, attended workshops on anger management, taught our kids that crying is weak, and tried to chemically erase our anxiety, fear, and sadness. We obeyed the Light Metaphor's three commandments: silence, stifle, and swallow your dark moods.

It worked. We beat the darkness. We successfully wrestled our negative feelings way down deep into the oubliettes of our souls, where they got perfectly lost until they disappeared forever. After vanquishing our darkest moods and screwing on happy faces, we lived happily ever after on cloud nine with nary a worry line in sight.*

Or maybe not.

Why not?

Because Plato was wrong. Or at least readers of Plato have been wrong to conclude from his allegory that truth can only

*Cloud nine used to be cloud seven. Even our imaginary goalpost for happiness keeps moving.

be found in the light. We were wrong to believe that the sun alone will save us. Worst of all, we failed to consider the intellectual, physical, and emotional cost of putting the sun so high in the sky.

After Plato, the Light Metaphor really took off. Jesus called himself the light of the world. Copernicus declared that the Earth (and everything else) revolves around the sun. Light became our savior and darkness sank under the weight of its homely attributes. Darkness was denigrated (literally, “blackened”) and vilified, taking its place in philosophy, religion, and history as scary, ugly, ignorant, and sinful. “My life feels really dark.” “I’m in the dark on this one.” “I don’t want to go back to that dark place.” The Light Metaphor relentlessly insists that darkness is ugly, negative, miserable.

Not surprisingly, the Enlightenment philosophies that emerged long after Plato did not go so well for dark-skinned people, who were “scientifically” proven to be less human and less intelligent than light-skinned people. Within their biased framework, whites could scarcely conceive of Black knowledge or wisdom. After the emancipation of enslaved people in the United States, Black men were portrayed as monstrous rapists who terrorized innocent white women. Black women were cast as their sexually insatiable, sinful counterparts. These stereotypes have been immeasurably damaging, and we are not past them yet. Fair and Lovely skin-lightening cream is still used by dark-skinned women who have been convinced that light is luscious and darkness is deficient. Fawning over a newborn’s light skin or blue eyes is customary in Latinx communities like mine; not so for dark skin and brown eyes. And although *Night Vision* is not focused on societal prejudice against dark skin as much as on dark moods, the two ideas grew up together. We

will never conquer colorism as long as we equate darkness with deformity and deficiency.

In a world that worships light, darkness is made to carry the weight of a hundred ills, including ignorance, ugliness, unpleasantness, gloominess, painfulness, heaviness, monstrousness, and all-around unhealthiness. Forget dark moods—they never stood a chance.

After reading Plato's cave story, my students have a hard time believing they might have been brought up on shadows. Likewise, in writing this book I've had a hell of a time doubting the unequivocal goodness of light. Who wants to argue against cultivating optimism or a cheerful attitude? What American dares to doubt that we make our own happiness or that a sunny disposition leads to financial gain? Who would not want to bask in the light of an \$11 billion self-help industry?

Those of us who have been burned by the Light Metaphor, that's who. Anyone who has been told to look on the bright side would be right to think the person saying that sees our anger, sadness, grief, depression, and anxiety as self-indulgent. Few people who offer this advice want to hear about the dark place we are in, or how we think things will not work out this time. People who swear we "make our own sunshine" tend to be short on empathy. They will most likely assume that we're not trying hard enough.

This is the Brokenness Story, and it plays bad cop to the Light Metaphor's good cop. If the Light Metaphor sings, "Happiness is a choice!" the Brokenness Story barks: "What are you sniveling about now?" We hear the Brokenness Story every time we fail to live in the light, when we just cannot make ourselves feel brighter. It's the voice that calls us weak, ungrateful, self-pitying, and self-indulgent. In the name of strength, it shames those of us who do not smile through our pain (or at least grit our teeth and bear it).

Could it be that all this time we've been trying *too* hard? That we've been trying to bleach something that was never meant to be bright? Maybe darkness is the human condition, and maybe not even Tigger can "be like a proton: always positive." In this case, what gets left in the wake of the self-help authors and positivity gurus who rip us in two with their bare hands and a smile are a bunch of divided souls who feel dark but wish we didn't. Instead of feeling human, the angry among us, the hurt, the grieving, the depressed or anxious, have every reason to feel broken.

Does it help or hurt that most of our dark moods are classified as mental illnesses? The light of Western medicine has not been kind to our darkness. Medical terminology for depression, anxiety, grief, sadness, and anger has made us more, not less, biased against darkness. On top of "scary," "ugly," "ignorant," and "sinful," doctors have painted our darker moods as illnesses, diseases, disorders, pathologies, infirmities, ailments, and maladies. These medical terms make a science of our brokenness, of our definitive departure from wholeness. Under the fluorescent lights of psychiatry, it's as difficult to recognize dignity in our dark moods as it was for the newly freed prisoner to recognize a real tree in the middle of the day. No one I know thinks that crying yourself to sleep on the bathroom floor is dignified. But it is very often diagnosable.

Good psychologists will readily admit that there's no agreed-upon definition of disorder, mental illness, or disease. They don't even agree on whether the five moods discussed in this book—anger, sadness, grief, depression, and anxiety—are best categorized as mental illnesses or if they should be called something else. But despite psychology's stab at humility, it is impossible to miss the anxiety "epidemic" among teens, or the millions of people in the United States who are "afflicted" with

depression. The terms we use to name our existential conditions are often hostile or scary, not to mention degrading. We are said to be “battling” mental illness or “succumbing” to it by suicide.

Words matter: they pit us against ourselves or put us on our own side. “Brain disease” does not exactly inspire a person to honor their depression; “diagnosis” doesn’t rhyme with “dignity.” “We’re all mentally ill” is not nearly as edifying as “anxiety makes you a full-blooded human being.” Judging dark moods by how they look in the light yields a vocabulary that makes dignity hard to spot. Learning to see our painful moods in the dark will involve adopting new words for old woes.

By now the research is clear that pretending to be brighter—turning our frowns upside down—hurts us. We have heard that we can make ourselves sick—literally, emotionally, mentally—by suppressing or avoiding negative feelings. With help from authors like Kate Bowler, Brené Brown, Austin Channing Brown, Tarana Burke, Susan David, Glennon Doyle, and Julie K. Norem, and propelled by movements like Me Too and Black Lives Matter, some of us are experimenting with not drying our eyes or washing our faces. Some of us have begun leaning into the dark side of our emotional spectrum.

To some extent, it’s working. Some of us experienced a rush of recognition the first time we heard the term “toxic positivity,” because although we had felt the oppressive phenomenon for years, we did not know we could name it. Talking about depression and grief seems more okay since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. We have plenty of evidence that we are not alone, and it’s nice to see people letting their dark hair down. When billboards tell us that depression is

not laziness, that anxiety is not weakness, and that anger, sadness, and grief are dark moods that everyone struggles with, it becomes easier to believe that there are more out there like us. Mental health campaigns like makeitok.org tell us, “You’re not alone.”

Still, it’s hard not to finish that sentence with, “. . . because we’re *all* broken.” “You need not be ashamed of your anxiety because 30 percent of Americans are in the same boat” may be closer to the truth than “anxiety is a sin,” but it’s not as true as “anxiety means you’re paying attention.”¹ Shining a spotlight on anxiety and depression can show us the size of the boat we share. But it cannot offer us dignity.

Self-help books be damned: you can’t build a positive self-concept on brokenness. You can’t draw encouraging conclusions about dark moods by looking at them in the light.

Even the fiercest defender of dark moods—someone who believes that darkness is more than failed light—still feels pressure to lighten up. The same person who knows that #staypositive burns them will let slip words like “pity-party” or “wallow” to describe their darker moments.

For example, I might defend a woman’s right to anger by day but experience shame in the dead of night if that angry woman turns out to be me. When we are alone, we may wonder whether those manifestation folks are right in claiming that we attract what we put into the world. We might even worry that the all-the-feels movement will fail us. Vulnerability might just leave us exposed. Chasing emotional balance has left many of us ambivalent: we agree in principle to stop denying our dark moods but still feel shame when they overcome us. Even as we gain emotional intelligence, the Light Metaphor reminds us that, come midnight, we’ll be praying for daylight just as surely as

our neighbor's kitchen reads: "Stay Positive: Better Days Are on Their Way."

When I fall into the hands of the Brokenness Story and begin to wonder if God does sometimes make junk, I take refuge in philosophy. Two millennia after Plato came the Existentialists. This is a group—half of whom reject the term "Existentialist"—who believe that life is really, really hard. They see humans as the ones who hold your hair while you vomit and hold your hand while you die. They believe that we have an intense capacity for sadness, along with unsounded depths of rage and anxiety, grief, and depression. For them it's no mystery: we walk barefoot on this craggy earth and watch our loved ones grow cancer. Existentialists understand why we spend so much time devising ways to avoid thinking dark thoughts. They write about how we lie to ourselves and each other, how we say we're fine when we're not and find excuses not to talk to our kids about death. Existentialists write things like, "Hell is other people," and, "To love is to suffer."² For me, it was love at first sight. Existentialists have been helping me see dignity in darkness for over twenty years.

Before medical health professionals and superstar bloggers took over the job of narrating our psychic lives, philosophers were the primary storytellers of the soul (or the *doctors*, if you asked the ancients). The philosophers whose stories I share in this book spent significant time exploring their caves and recounting what they saw there. None of them will object if you wear black and listen to Morrissey—nor will they require it. They will let us think about death and decay without calling us "morbid" or "dramatic." When we need shelter from the light, we can turn to these six Existential philosophers who were intimates of darkness: Audre Lorde, María Lugones, Miguel de

Unamuno, C. S. Lewis, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Søren Kierkegaard.³ They can provide shade for us when the sun starts to burn. The words they used and the positions they took on anger, sadness, grief, depression, and anxiety help me hold my head high. I'm hoping they will help you too.

The central questions of this book are: What if truth, goodness, and beauty reside not only in light but also in darkness? What if believing otherwise has been a huge mistake? All this time we have been taught to be biased against darkness when there was a far more tangible source of danger living in Plato's cave: the puppeteers. It was their job to fool the prisoners into thinking that shadows were real objects. What saved Plato's imaginary prisoner 2,500 years ago was not the sun. It was getting away from the puppeteers. Nevertheless, my college-aged self, my students, and Western history have mistakenly gleaned from Plato's story a fear of, and concomitant hatred for, darkness.

The problem is not the cave. The solution is not the light. Shadows exist in broad daylight too, and anyone who offers you the light of truth without the truth of darkness is selling you noontime pride and midnight shame.

Night Vision is not a bright-sided philosophy* about our dark moods. It won't ask you to be grateful for your grief or to love your anxiety. It's a social critique launched by six philosophers in defense of those moods. In the light, our dark moods make us look broken. In the dark, though, we look fully human. Each mood is a new set of eyes through which we can see a world that others

*Barbara Ehrenreich called out America's tendency to bully us into staying on the sunny side of life in *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (2009). Her book was shortly followed by Oliver Burkeman's *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking* (2013).

can't—or won't. Each philosopher in this book offers new words for our dark moods. And while you won't find any of them calling your depression a superpower, they do better than “You're lovable *despite* your disease.” They understand that each of us is a unique ratio of dark to light, and that each combination is respectable, dignified, fully human. They can show us how to see in the dark.

Plato's successors taught us to evaluate dark moods by the light of science, psychology, and religion. I invite you to doubt your intellectual inheritance and consider the possibility that to find dignity in darker moods, you'll need to step *out* of the light and back into the cave. I take my cue from the novelist, environmentalist, and poet Wendell Berry, who wrote:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.⁴

If Berry is right that dark moods are best known in the dark, let's stop shedding light on them.

We have all experienced dark moods. Some of us are living through one at this moment, and some are on the edge of one. Resisting the throng of best-selling puppeteers peddling their gratitude journals, let us head into the cave for the length of this book to learn what we can know in the dark. *Night Vision* is a way of seeing in the sense that it's a way of knowing. It includes feeling, imagining, judging, embodying, and thinking of all kinds. From now on, we will turn down the lights and stop smiling. We will suspend the idea that darkness is to be feared, minimized, or escaped. We will ignore the voices that say learning happens only in the light of day. There are no puppeteers here—only philosophers who have known anger, sadness, grief, depression, and anxiety.

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