The Allegory of the Cave

Plato

Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once characterized the tradition of European philosophy as consisting of "a series of footnotes to Plato." While considered by most to be a slight exaggeration, it illuminates the importance of Plato's influence on all of philosophy and, certainly, on its inception.

After Plato's service with the army of Athens throughout the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) and Corinthian War (395–386), he went on to pursue a life of politics. His interest in politics was tainted, though, by numerous instances: one being an overtly corrupt and unjust coup that took over rule in Athens, and another, when Plato was 28, in which the government condemned to death his friend and teacher Socrates for supposed "corruption of the youth" and denigration of the gods (see other selection in this section). This prompted Plato and other students of Socrates to leave Athens and go to Megara, Greece.

It was at this time that Plato supposedly wrote most of his works, a majority of them in the form of dialogue. While he never referenced himself nor explicitly stated his position in these dialogues, he often used Socrates as a character. Many believe that Socrates represents Plato's views.

Plato returned to Athens and, at age 42, founded the Academy—the first Western university. It was at this university that many philosophical issues were studied for the first time. Plato taught many students at the Academy (including Aristotle, who arrived at the Academy at age 17) and remained until his death at age 80. The Academy remained until A.D. 529 when Christian rulers closed it due to its teachings that ran counter to the church's doctrine.

In this reading, Plato presents what has come to be one of the most well-known allegories throughout history. While he wrote it to put forth his metaphysical foundation for the existence of objects, this allegory also provides great motivation for our study of philosophy. For those without philosophical inclination, it is as though they are stuck in a cave of false reality, watching mere shadows on the wall. It is not until one pursues the "blindingly" difficult process of education that one can come to know reality, as illuminated by the sun.

In the conversation leading up to this discussion of the allegory, Plato defends himself as an "essentialist"—objects have essences or, in his terms, "Forms." These *Forms* allow us to know that one thing is a chair while another is not. We realize that no two chairs are exactly the same: They can have four legs, three legs, a back, no back, no legs (a bean-bag chair), are colored, wooden, plastic, etc. But, Plato argued, because each of these items shares in the Form of *chairness*, we call them all by the same name and know them as chairs. This Form of the chair exists objectively as the perfect chair—an ideal model of a chair—that maintains a greater sense of reality than the worldly examples (instantiations) of chairs that we see around us. (The term "Platonic Form" often refers to the perfect instantiation of something in our lives.)

When one emerged from the cave and became acclimated to the light, they could come to know these Forms. The Latin roots of the word "educate" are "to lead out." Plato held that the ideal leaders for the republic would be Philosopher Kings—those who had emerged from the cave and achieved this sort of knowledge.

Reading Questions

1. How does Socrates imagine the prisoner would feel once his eyes became accustomed to the sunlight? What point is he making here?
2. What would happen if the prisoner returned from the outside back into the cave?
3. What does Socrates say about the soul and how this knowledge should relate to education?

Compare the effect of education and of the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this: Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike 514
dwelling with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that b
along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets.

I'm imagining it.

Then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it—statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you'd expect, some of the carriers are c
talking, and some are silent. 515

It's a strange image you're describing, and strange prisoners.

They're like us. Do you suppose, first of all, that these prisoners see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them?

How could they, if they have to keep their heads motionless throughout life? b

What about the things being carried along the wall? Isn't the same true of them?

Of course.

And if they could talk to one another, don't you think they'd suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them?[1]

They'd have to.

And what if their prison also had an echo from the wall facing them? Don't you think they'd believe that the shadows passing in front of them were talking whenever one of the carriers passing along the wall was doing so?

I certainly do.

Then the prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other c
than the shadows of those artifacts.

They must surely believe that.

Consider, then, what being released from their bonds and cured of their ignorance would naturally be like if something like this came to pass. When one of

them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things
d whose shadows he'd seen before. What do you think he'd say, if we told him that what he'd seen before was inconsequential, but that now—because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are more—he sees more correctly? Or, to put it another way, if we pointed to each of the things passing by, asked him what each of them is, and compelled him to answer, don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown?

Much truer.

And if someone compelled him to look at the light itself, wouldn't his eyes
e hurt, and wouldn't he turn around and flee towards the things he's able to see, believing that they're really clearer than the ones he's being shown?

He would.

And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path, and didn't let him go until he had dragged him into the sunlight, wouldn't
516 he be pained and irritated at being treated that way? And when he came into the light, with the sun filling his eyes, wouldn't he be unable to see a single one of the things now said to be true?

He would be unable to see them, at least at first.

I suppose, then, that he'd need time to get adjusted before he could see things in the world above. At first, he'd see shadows most easily, then images of men and other things in water, then the things themselves. Of these, he'd be able to study the things in the sky and the sky itself more easily at night, looking at the light of the
b stars and the moon, than during the day, looking at the sun and the light of the sun.

Of course.

Finally, I suppose, he'd be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place, and be able to study it.

Necessarily so.

And at this point he would infer and conclude that the sun provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the
c cause of all the things that he used to see.

It's clear that would be his next step.

What about when he reminds himself of his first dwelling place, his fellow prisoners, and what passed for wisdom there? Don't you think that he'd count himself happy for the change and pity the others?

Certainly.

And if there had been any honors, praises, or prizes among them for the one who was sharpest at identifying the shadows as they passed by and who best
d remembered which usually came earlier, which later, and which simultaneously, and who could thus best divine the future, do you think that our man would desire these rewards or envy those among the prisoners who were honored and held power? Instead, wouldn't he feel, with Homer, that he'd much prefer to "work the earth as a serf to another, one without possessions,"[2] and go through any sufferings, rather than share their opinions and live as they do?

I suppose he would rather suffer anything than live like that.
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Consider this too. If this man went down into the cave again and sat down in his same seat, wouldn't his eyes—coming suddenly out of the sun like that—be filled with darkness?

They certainly would.

And before his eyes had recovered—and the adjustment would not be quick—while his vision was still dim, if he had to compete again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows, wouldn't he invite ridicule? Wouldn't it 517
be said of him that he'd returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and that it isn't worthwhile even to try to travel upward? And, as for anyone who tried to free them and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?

They certainly would.

This whole image, Glaucon, must be fitted together with what we said before.
b The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey, since that is what you wanted to hear about. Whether it's true or not, only the god knows. But this is how I see it: In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the
c cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.

I have the same thought, at least as far as I'm able.

Come, then, share with me this thought also: It isn't surprising that the ones who get to this point are unwilling to occupy themselves with human affairs and that their souls are always pressing upwards, eager to spend their time above, for, after all, this
d is surely what we'd expect, if indeed things fit the image I described before.

It is.

What about what happens when someone turns from divine study to the evils of human life? Do you think it's surprising, since his sight is still dim, and he hasn't yet become accustomed to the darkness around him, that he behaves awkwardly and appears completely ridiculous if he's compelled, either in the courts or elsewhere, to contend about the shadows of justice or the statues of which they are the shadows and to dispute about the way these things are understood by people who have never seen justice itself?
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That's not surprising at all.

No, it isn't. But anyone with any understanding would remember that the 518
eyes may be confused in two ways and from two causes, namely, when they've come from the light into the darkness *and* when they've come from the darkness into the light. Realizing that the same applies to the soul, when someone sees a soul disturbed and unable to see something, he won't laugh mindlessly, but he'll take into consideration whether it has come from a brighter life and is dimmed

through not having yet become accustomed to the dark or whether it has come from greater ignorance into greater light and is dazzled by the increased brilliance. Then he'll declare the first soul happy in its experience and life, and he'll
b pity the latter—but even if he chose to make fun of it, at least he'd be less ridiculous than if he laughed at a soul that has come from the light above.

What you say is very reasonable.

If that's true, then here's what we must think about these matters: Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that
c lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes.

They do say that.

But our present discussion, on the other hand, shows that the power to learn is present in everyone's soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is
d and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good. Isn't that right?

Yes.

Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.

So it seems.

Discussion Questions

1. How could you know if you were living in a "false reality"? Imagine a tiger born in a zoo—a cave-like reality. Would he know that he is missing out on the jungle, or would he likely think that the zoo habitat just *is* the one true reality? Is it possible that humans live in such a false reality? What would that mean?
2. In the movie *The Truman Show*, the main character is born into a false reality—a huge television set that serves as the ultimate "reality show." Everyone on the set is an actor (including his wife, friends, and boss), and viewers at home watch Truman grow up. Even though everything is taken care of for Truman—the weather, his job, relationships, etc.—do you somehow feel that he has missed out on something important? Explain.
3. Where do you put yourself on the spectrum of ignorant-and-blissful on one end and knowledgeable-and-miserable on the other? Do you think that ignorance is bliss? In what ways is being knowledgeable *unblissful*? Do you agree with these dichotomies?
4. How much truth is there to the phrase "What you don't know can't hurt you"?
5. In what ways is it selfish and even harmful to adhere to the phrase "Ignorance is bliss"?
6. In what ways does your education involve putting information "into your soul," as Socrates suggests? In what ways does it involve drawing it out of you? Is one better than the other? Which do you value more?

The Value of Philosophy

Bertrand Russell

Bertrand Russell began his education in mathematics at Trinity College in Cambridge and there, three years after he arrived, he began his study of philosophy. He went on to teach at Cambridge and refine his theories of mathematics (he later published a highly renowned book in 1910 with Alfred North Whitehead called *Principia Mathematica*). Russell was outspoken and this caused much strife in his life: His public atheism prevented him from holding positions in Parliament; his outward opposition to World War I (though a pacifist) caused his teaching position at Cambridge to be terminated and eventually led to his six-month imprisonment in 1918 (and again in 1961 for one week for civil disobedience); and his liberal views on sex prevented him from acquiring a teaching assignment at New York City College.

In 1936 he went to the United States to teach and in 1950 won the Nobel Prize for literature for his book, *A History of Western Philosophy*. He returned to Cambridge and focused on the dangers and pitfalls of the war.

The following selection is the final chapter of his book, *The Problems of Philosophy*. In it he provides a brief overview of what philosophy is—and is not. More importantly, he lays out the virtues of philosophical pursuit and how in can help prevent us from being stuck in a "Plato's Cave" situation—ignorant and cut off from the world.

Reading Questions

1. To whom does Russell refer as the "'practical' man"? How are they "wrongly" called this? What does it have to do with the value of philosophy?
2. According to Russell, what are the two reasons that philosophy has no "body of truths"?
3. What value does Russell suggest can be found in locating our *un*certainty?
4. How does philosophic contemplation help escape the potential narrow-mindedness of our own surroundings? How does it aid in the "enlargement of the Self"?

It will be well to consider . . . what is the value of philosophy and why it ought to be studied. It is the more necessary to consider this question, in view of the fact that many men, under the influence of science or of practical affairs, are inclined to doubt whether philosophy is anything better than innocent but useless trifling, hair-splitting distinctions, and controversies on matters concerning which knowledge is impossible.

This view of philosophy appears to result, partly from a wrong conception of the ends of life, partly from a wrong conception of the kind of goods which philosophy strives to achieve. Physical science, through the medium of inventions, is useful to innumerable people who are wholly ignorant of it; thus the study of

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