

BRINGING PHILOSOPHY TO LIFE

BPTL #25: Release from the Cave

The previous episode in this series ended with an excerpt from the Allegory of the Cave presented in Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*. The characters Socrates and Glaucon are discussing the nature of education, and Socrates has suggested that human ignorance can be compared with the plight of prisoners in a cave whose heads are chained so that all they can see is shadows moving on the wall in front of them. These prisoners are "like us" because what we experience with our senses is only part of the process of coming to know the world. In this episode, we pick up the allegory where Socrates explains the process of moving from this realm of shadows to an understanding of how they are produced and where they fit into reality.

Socrates: Imagine that one man is set free and forced to turn around and walk toward the light. Looking at the light will be painful; the glare will be dazzling and make it impossible to see the objects that previously appeared as shadows. Then imagine someone telling him that what he previously saw was an illusion, but as he approaches, what is real and true will become visible. How would the prisoner respond? What if someone points to the objects as they pass and asks their names? Won't he experience great difficulty, considering the familiar shadows to be more real than the objects he sees now?

Glaucon: Much more real.

Socrates: And if the prisoner is forced to look at the light, won't the pain to his eyes cause him to take refuge in the shadows, which are easier to recognize than what is now shown to him?

Glaucon: That's true.

Socrates: Next imagine that he is dragged up the rough, steep path to the mouth of the cave and not released until he is in the presence of the sun itself. Don't you think that he would be pained and outraged at being treated this way? And when he is in full sunlight, won't he again be blinded and unable to see any of the things that we would now say are real?

Glaucon: He wouldn't be able to see them right away.

Socrates: He would have to get used to seeing the world outside the cave. First, he will recognize the shadows, then the reflections of people and other objects in the water, and finally he could see the objects themselves. Then he will gaze at the night sky, still better able to see the light of the moon and the stars than the sunlight or the sun.

Glaucon: That's probably how it would be.

Socrates: But at last he would be able to see the sun in its proper place, rather than its reflection in the water or somewhere else. Then he will be able to consider its true nature.

Glaucon: Yes.

Socrates: He would infer that the sun produces the seasons and the years, that it rules over everything visible and is, in some way, the cause of everything that he and his fellow prisoners used to see.

(Plato's Republic, translated by Benjamin Jowett; revised by Albert A. Anderson, Agora Publications, 2001, Kindle Edition, Greek pages 515-516. The entire allegory is available free of charge on the Agora Publication website in the "Documents Archives" which can be found at: (<https://www.agorapublications.com/allegory-of-the-cave.html>)).

Plato's allegory, like all symbolic language, requires interpretation. In an ongoing effort to bring philosophy to life, my goal in this episode is to explore the meaning of this poetic creation as it relates to the current crises in education that is discussed in Episode #24, "The End of Education." To get beyond a literal account

of what Socrates says, let's begin with two questions: Who is the man who was set free? Who released him? Because this is poetry, not history, the best way to deal with such questions is to look closely at the symbols themselves and form a credible interpretation of what they mean and how they fit together. Historians know little about Plato's life, but it is generally believed that as a young man he aspired to being a poet. His dialogues are filled with references to Homer and Hesiod as well as the tragic and comic poets who performed throughout Greece and competed for prizes. Plato, like many other young men in Athens, was attracted to the Agora where the historical Socrates was often found questioning prominent citizens, including political leaders, poets, craftspeople, generals, religious leaders, and teachers of rhetoric. It is easy to understand why Plato and the others delighted in watching Socrates question those self-confident experts and showing that they really do not know what they pretend to know. In this way, Socrates demonstrated how the young men might question authority and learn how to think on their own about the most important topics. By observing Socrates in the Agora, Plato learned how to acquire and practice the art of dialectic, not by recording what Socrates said but by creating a character who interacts with other characters in a form of poetry that Aristotle, in *The Poetics*, identified as "Socratic dialogue." This approach shifts the responsibility for education from external authorities to a process that takes place in our own soul. Socrates puts it this way: "Those people are wrong who claim that they can educate

by putting knowledge into an empty mind, like putting vision into a blind eye”

(*Plato's Republic*, Greek page 518). He continues:

Socrates: According to our account, the power to know is already in every soul. But just as the eye cannot turn from darkness to light without turning the whole body, when the mind's eye is turned around, the whole soul must turn from becoming to being and must be able to endure seeing its brightest form, which we call the good.

Glaucon: That is our account, and I think it's true.

Socrates: There must be an art that expedites this change as easily and completely as possible, not by implanting vision, which the eyes already have, but by turning them in the right direction, which they lack.

Glaucon: Yes, there must be such an art (*Plato's Republic*, Greek page 518.)

That art is “dialectic” as it is manifested in Plato's dialogues.

After telling the allegory, Socrates says: “Glaucon, my friend, you may now connect this allegory with what we were saying before” (517). He is referring to the end of Book 6 of *The Republic* where he and Glaucon imagined the process of thinking by using a metaphor that placed various forms of awareness on a line beginning with images and sense experiences and culminating in dialectical reasoning about forms or universals that we can use to guide our lives. Socrates says:

Socrates: There are many beautiful things and many good things, each one existing by itself and designated by a specific word.

Glaucon: Yes, we have agreed about that.

Socrates: And we give a single name to the beautiful itself and the good itself and all the others we called many, recognizing each as a single form that indicates what it is.

Glaucon: We do.

Socrates: And is it fair to say that the many discrete things can be seen but not thought, whereas the forms can be thought but not seen?

Glaucon: Exactly (*Plato's Republic*, 507).

The first step in developing the art of dialectic is to use Socratic questioning to refute false opinions, many of which are taken for granted by most people. Sometimes, as in *Euthyphro* and *Laches*, Plato leaves us in ignorance, making it clear that we must think again. In other dialogues such as *The Phaedo*, Plato includes a constructive aspect that takes us beyond mere refutation. Socrates tells of his life-long quest for the proper method of inquiry:

Socrates: As I continued my search, I thought that I should be careful not to blind my mind's eye the way some people ruin their bodily eyes by looking directly at the sun during an eclipse, rather than looking at an image of the sun reflected in water or a similar material. I was afraid that my soul might be blinded if I looked at things with my eyes or tried to grasp them with any of my other senses alone. I thought it would be necessary to appeal to reasoning when seeking reality and truth. But perhaps that comparison is not quite right, since I would not say that people who contemplate reality by reasoning are merely working with images. At any rate, this is how I proceed in every inquiry. First, I select the account of the matter that seems to be the strongest, and then I consider whatever agrees with it to be true — whether it concerns causality or anything else. Whatever disagrees with that account I assume to

be false. Maybe I should explain what I mean more clearly, because I'm not sure you understand what I am saying.

Cebes: No, Socrates, I definitely do not understand.

Socrates: What I am about to say is not new. It is what I was saying earlier in this conversation and what I say always and everywhere. In trying to explain the nature of causality, I will return to those familiar ideas and begin there. First, I assume the existence of beauty itself, goodness itself, greatness itself, and other such forms. If you will grant that, then I hope to show you the nature of causality and that soul is immortal.

Cebes: I do grant that, so please go ahead.

Socrates: Then consider my next step and see whether you think it is a good one. I think that if anything is beautiful other than beauty itself, then it can only be beautiful because it takes part in beauty itself. And I would say the same of everything else. Do you agree with this idea of causality?

Cebes: I do agree.

(Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Agora Publications, 2005, translated by Benjamin Jowett; revised by Albert A. Anderson, Greek pages 99-100).

The ultimate causes that cast the shadows on the wall of the Cave are forms or universals. These forms or universals are best conceived as aims or goals, not as ideas we already know fully. Justice itself, beauty itself, or goodness itself are real and are the cause of all manifestations of those ideas in human life and in nature. We must leave the Cave to seek their true causes and use them to guide our actions.

In this light, I will conclude by returning to the contemporary world. I propose we use the Allegory of the Cave to consider what we know and do not know about

the war currently being waged in Palestine and Israel. We began with shadows in the form of news reports about the events of October 7 when Hamas attacked Israel, killing, maiming, and kidnapping more than 1,500 people. Even when journalists do the best they can to report what happened, many points of view emerge, and conflicting perspectives increase the shadows. Not all observers seek the truth but try to deceive by adding points of view that represent contradictory ideologies, opposing historical accounts, and telling blatant lies designed to promote their agenda and to cast doubt on other opinions. To seek the real events and true causes, we must leave the darkness of the Cave and follow the dialectical process as we seek to replace opinion with knowledge.

When such events are considered on college and university campuses, such as those of Harvard and Penn, the shadows are everywhere. For this reason, the first responsibility of both the faculty and the students is to do everything possible to find and articulate the real events and the true causes. Eventually, such inquiry may justify protests, boycotts, and other forms of activism, but the primary role of the educational process (whether in institutions or anywhere else) is to seek knowledge rather than opinion. In Plato's *Apology*, the character Socrates claims that when the oracle at Delphi called him wise, it is because he does not pretend to know what he does not know. That alone makes him wiser than those to claim to know but do not. Even if we never achieve full wisdom through that quest, we can at least distinguish

between the shadows and what produces them. The purpose of education is first to identify what is false and then to progress as far as possible in seeking what is true and real before we act.

Thinking is not opposed to acting, but it is prior both in time and in importance, especially if there is a way to unify and integrate perspectives that at first seem to be irreconcilable. Both Palestine and Israel have been in bitter conflict since 1948, and both sides seek to indoctrinate their citizens concerning the evils of the other. It would help considerably if protestors and activists were to study both the history of Israel and of Palestine. That is precisely the kind of work educational institutions are designed to do. The complexity and confusion about that history becomes obvious even if one only reads the recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* called “The Long Shadow of 1948” (February 4, 2024). A better understanding of what has taken place since 1948 and a sincere attempt to understand and implement solutions that benefit both communities might lead to activism that unites rather than polarizes. For example, that kind of education might open the way for people to promote action that provides full citizenship for Palestinians and, at the same time, to acknowledge the prevalence and the evil of anti-Semitism and to seek educational rules and civic laws that discourage and eliminate hate speech and similar forms of destructive rhetoric, especially in educational institutions. Rather than being a battleground where cultural wars are waged, our educational institutions

should return to their primary mission of contributing to the common good through dialectic, the form of reason that promotes the art of life.