

Truth and Illusion

The Allegory of the Digital Cave

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In March of 2017 the cover of TIME magazine asked “Is Truth Dead?” If Socrates and Plato were alive now what would they think about the state of truth and reality in this modern digital age? With the vast number of means for finding and gaining information today from social media, news stations and websites, it is no wonder that many consider us to be living in a golden age for learning and knowledge. But is this really the case? Has technology and our pursuit of making “truth” and “knowledge” more accessible made it easier for people to analyze situations less acutely and blindly accept any given “truth”? Perhaps because humans are creatures of habit, after a given time, we often take what we hear from society or from figures of authority to be true without fully contemplating all angles of a situation. If we question nothing we do not expand our horizons and are no better off than the trapped prisoners within Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, constrained by the limitations of what is presented to us and our own blissful ignorance.

One of the main premises of Plato’s Allegory is that humans only see and understand the environment or situation they are exposed to because it is the only reality and source of knowledge they have and believe. The prisoners’ reality is confined to the shadows of objects and their sounds. When one prisoner is unchained and journeys out of the cave he is slow to understand his new reality and appreciation for the truth. The discovery that everything he knows to be true is a deception causes him immense pain. Perhaps he would be better off never knowing about this reality at all, to be back safe chained alongside his fellow prisoners. But once you know truth can you ever go back? He decides to return to free those who remained behind but, when he attempts to free his fellow peers from their binding chains, they refuse to allow it due to their fear. They choose to remain ignorant to the “outside” world.

Over the last thirty years the development of technology which allows us to have access to information and each

other has grown in leaps and bounds. We have access to limitless sources of potential truth and knowledge, yet people still appear to face a fundamental wall preventing them from exploring information that could lead them to such reality and truth. Students in school literally have a world of information at their fingertips, but if they ask a teacher a question and the response is, “Let’s look it up,” the student rolls his eyes and says, “Can’t you just tell me the answer?” The next time this student has a question they will not ask it so they can avoid this routine. Rather than fueling a desire to learn, it seems at times that technology has made us complacent because we know that it is easy to find the answer. But, just because the information is easily accessible, once we find it do we know what to do with it? Is the information correct? Is it fact? Is it opinion? Is the source valid? Are there multiple perspectives? Do I hold any bias that would lead me to see the information for something more than it is? These nuanced changes can very easily misguide many from truly exiting the “cave.” To truly be able to exit Plato’s binding cave, we must be wary of these issues first in order to overcome them. Socrates spent hours every day in the agora questioning those around him to help them ascertain truth and to see the flaws in their reasoning. This is why philosophy education is so important and necessary in schools today. If we help children ascend from the cave from the time they first step foot in a classroom it will, hopefully, set them on a path to enlightenment. Children question everything when they are young but we often fail to realize that we need to continue that questioning spirit into adulthood. Technology can certainly help us do this but we need to understand its limitations. We need to question our sources and to look at multiple perspectives, etc. in order to come to a well-reasoned conclusion. This means that we might have to invest some time but isn’t knowing truth worth the effort? Is truth dead? No. We just have to work harder to discover it.

YOUR TURN: How is the computer like Plato’s Cave?