



Teaching Plato's Cave

Stephen Barnes

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In the summer of 1999, I had the opportunity to teach junior high and high school students an introductory philosophy course during the "Challenge to Excellence" enrichment program at Southern Illinois University. While our class ranged over a variety of topics, including the role of education in their lives, skepticism and belief, contemporary moral and political issues, and the nature of selfhood, one of the more provocative and enthusiastic discussions centered on Plato's Cave.

Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" is, as Plato puts it, "a parable to illustrate the degrees in which our nature may be enlightened or unenlightened." It's also an allegory for what Plato sees as the role that philosophy and philosophers play in helping the rest of us to become more enlightened.

The allegory describes the condition of people who have been living in an underground cavern all their lives. They are chained by the legs and by the neck so that they can only look straight ahead—at the back wall of the cave. Behind them, towards the mouth of the cave, is a fire burning and in front of the fire is a kind of puppet stage. People carry along on this stage various objects, including figures of men and animals, which project shadows on the cave wall for the prisoners to see.

As Plato points out, since the prisoners have never seen anything else in their lives, they take these shadows to be reality. Plato's point is that, as far as real knowledge is concerned, most people in the world are really no different than the prisoners in the cave. We are similarly unenlightened, and take our own perceptions to be real when, in fact, they are no better than the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave.

As the parable proceeds, one of the prisoners is released from his chains and brought up out of the cave into the light. At first, he is blinded by what he sees and can't accept the reality of three-dimensional objects in the world. Finally, though, as his eyes and mind become accustomed to things in the world outside the cave, he comes to see reality for what it really is. He feels sorry for his fellow prisoners in the cave who still live in a world of illusion.

But when he returns to the cave, he is unable to communicate with them. Having become accustomed to the light, he can no longer navigate the world of darkness. His fellow prisoners laugh at him and say his sight is ruined by his ascent. "If they could lay hands on the man who was trying to set them free and lead them up," says Plato (in an allusion to the fate of Socrates), "they would kill him."

The high school students and I began our conversation by talking about what they already knew about the history of ancient Greece, especially Athens. Many of the students talked about the wars between Athens and Sparta, and a few had heard of Socrates, including his career and death. This discussion provided a sort of background story against which to set Plato's concerns.

I used an overhead projector and a few cutout construction paper figures (a house, a tree, and an airplane) to illustrate the situation in the Cave. We turned out the lights, pointed the projector and all of their chairs in one direction, and I focused the images of the cutouts onto the wall. We agreed that one could use such images to tell stories (we even tried a few brief ones), and that if such images were all that one had ever seen, then those images would be assumed to be the most real (or only real) elements of the world.

The use of the cutouts and projector had the advantage of placing the students in a situation similar to the denizens of the Cave. Once we stepped outside the story, however, we were also able to talk about the relationship between the images on the wall and the construction paper cutouts in my hands. This led to a conversation about permanence and stability—that we tend to prioritize those things that are more durable and reliable. Furthermore, we were able to talk about how I could construct those things that they took to be most real (the images on the wall, and the story I told with them) so as to make them believe whatever I chose.

These further conversations moved our focus from the situation they had just been asked to approximate to concerns they had in their lives outside the classroom. Our discussions allowed them to consider how what they think and believe can be shaped by the actions of others, especially authority figures (which the high school students were especially eager to discuss). When I asked who had power over them to shape their ideas and beliefs, the answers ranged from "teachers" and "parents" to "people on television" and "politicians." One student offered her pastor as an example. The conversation about the role others play in shaping our beliefs was sophisticated enough that we were able to talk about why this is both helpful and potentially harmful. We discussed traditions binding groups of people together, and also considered propaganda and various forms of demagoguery. And we talked about asking questions, thinking critically, and considering points of view that are alternatives to those we are typically given.

Another student asked a few more questions about why Plato was so concerned with such matters. We talked about how Plato was skeptical of the sort of mob justice he believed Socrates to have received. I explained that Plato wanted to get behind what appeared to be going on to what was really real, to the truth of things. The student asked if this meant more reliance upon reason and careful study and consideration than upon emotional reactions and personal biases. (He was already performing as Socrates quite well.) I dutifully answered, "yes," to which the student replied, "then Plato is guilty too—he's just doing this because he's mad they killed his friend." Clearly, he already understood the intricacies and difficulties of working with Plato.



"Plato's Cave"

Grade 6 Student, Whitman Middle School, Seattle



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Essay on Superiority

Geoff Berkheimer

Geoff Berkheimer is a fourteen-year-old student in Libertyville, Illinois, who enjoys writing and hanging out with his buddies. He wrote this essay as part of the course "Introduction to Philosophy," taught by David White, Ph.D. at Northwestern University's Center for Talent Development.



A man comes to me with a question one day. He wishes to know if he can achieve superiority. A question riddled with questions, yes? I suppose an excellent person is one who is learned and has achieved everything that they have set out to do. But that has its problems. If a man's only goal in life is to live at home and feed off of his parents for all his life and he does so, then he would not be excellent, for he has done nothing. So a superior person must do something, and do it well, be it running a country or running a construction vehicle.

But an excellent person may not be a superior person for just that reason, as that only covers the work of a person. A superior person, also, must have little, if any, interest in filling his appetite. Profit must be treated as an appetite and, therefore, a superior man would buy only what he needed, and the contrary would buy whatever suited his fancy. A superior person would do his duties without being asked, and his counterpart would do his duties only upon being urged to do so or he would not do the job at all.

People, as a whole, generally associate with whoever they want to. This is what appears most logical to do and this is what a superior person must do, but those whom he chooses to associate with must have high morals and dignity. Therefore, he would not be weighed down by their wrong doings or corruptness.

Finally, it must be said that superiority cannot be learned, as the truly superior person would think of themselves as the common man because they are aware of their faults, even if their faults are few, and therefore would never believe it possible to be superior. It must also be said that perfection is not required for superiority, as perfection, as it is thought of today, is not possible.

I turned to the man, and said "No, you cannot be superior. No one can be superior, not a single person on the earth. People will be excellent and superior in some things but everyone has a fault or thirty, and other people may be superior at one thing and horrible at another. It is therefore, very simple that there cannot be such a thing as superiority. So no, you can't be superior. Nor can anyone. It is simply not possible, but the human race has the right to try and obtain it all the same. Good luck!"

Resources and Ideas for Discussions about Human Rights

Some Discussion Questions/Topics for Essays, Stories, Poems or Drawings



What is a right? Are human rights universal?

Which rights are most important?

What responsibilities do rights entail?

If you were to create a Bill of Human Rights, what rights would you include?

Suggestions for Reading Materials

Four good websites for resources and activities about human rights for K-12 students are:

http://press.coe.int/press2/press.asp?B=30,0,0,0,0&M=http://press.coe.int/Files/RelPub/FactSheetsDH/e_intro.htm

<http://tlc.ai.org/rights.htm>

<http://www.hrusa.org/educate/default.htm>

<http://erc.hrea.org/Library/>

Some of the following readings will be more appropriate for older students and some for younger students, depending on their levels of sophistication and reading abilities.

Elementary School:

Yertl the Turtle by Dr. Seuss

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: An Adaptation for Children by Ruth Rocha and Otavio Roth (United Nations Publications)

Videotape: Amnesty International Animated Version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Middle School and High School:

Chapter 5 from *Savage Inequalities*, by Jonathan Kozol

Long Walk to Freedom, by Nelson Mandela

"Afternoon in Linen," in *The Lottery*, by Shirley Jackson

"The Use of Force," in *The Farmer's Daughter*, by William Carlos Williams