

The Pretend Wall

I didn't see all the connections between Plato's *The Allegory of The Cave* and *The Phaedrus* and Hesse's *Siddhartha* until our class discussion. Both authors, it seems now, argue that disagreement is only an illusion. Even so, this illusion has terrible consequences on the way we speak and treat each other.

Siddhartha explains that his words are in obvious contrast to those of Gautama, however, this is "precisely why [he distrusts] words so much, for [he knows] this contradiction is an illusion" (Hesse, 115). Siddhartha chooses to acknowledge his oneness with the Buddha, his *actual* agreement, instead of becoming distracted by his *apparent* opposition. Similarly, Plato argues that once a person sees the light, the truth, he will not care about the shadows, the trifles men "fight with one another about" (*Rdr*: 54:58-60). Of course, there is disagreement in Plato's cave — so much that the cave dwellers wish to put dissidents to death — but this is only because the residents are manipulated by the shadows. Out of the cave, out in the sunshine, they would all see the same world. Deep within the cave, in the obscurity and shifting shadows, it is impossible for two to see the same object. There can be only one truth, but infinite filters to view it through.

Could there really be no such thing as disagreement but in our imagination? Most people have similar desires: to live happy lives and to be able to provide for themselves and their families, for example. We develop different values through the different environments we are raised in, but even these are not very opposing. The majority of people in the United States value freedom, for example; it is only a matter of different opinions about what it means and how it should be dealt with practically. Words can deceive us into thinking we vehemently disagree with others, when this is not the case. The real problem arises when we are taught not just different values and opinions, but different truths. It is like putting two groups of cave dwellers underground, chained so that they face opposite walls with very different shapes and textures. The same objects pass in front of the same fire, but soon the cave people begin to think the other group evil and demonic, based on their disturbed ideas, and to scream at each other.

With the Internet, it is so easy to see only one tiny little piece of a person — a comment on social media, for example — and base your entire judgment of that person on it. We imagine that agreement is absolute; "there are only 2 types of people, those who agree entirely with me, and those who disagree entirely with me." But this way of thinking ignores the complexity of each individual. I'm not so sure that there are two people on this planet who disagree or agree with each other absolutely. We just like to oversimplify because it is easy. We just like to ignore

the commonalities we have with our opponents so we can ignore their humanity and devalue their ideas.

As far as I can tell, in our class we all have very good relationships between each other. But are they very fragile? Do we dare not disagree, to preserve these good relationships, because we have been taught that disagreement is hatred? *Why* is there difficulty in leading class discussion, and furthermore, getting the discussion to develop spontaneously for more than a minute. In our society, we talk less and less, about the topics that really matter, because we assume that either the people around us already agree, so nothing needs to be said, or that they entirely disagree and therefore can never change their opinions anyway. In our discussion, if we asked a question, someone would eventually answer... but did they really want to talk, or were they only completing that chore to move on to the next thing, saying the “safe” answer, something minimal and undoubtedly agreeable?

Hesse and Plato seem to disagree about the path to enlightenment. Hesse promotes the idea of self-enlightenment, Plato says that people need to be liberated by the enlightened. But even this is an illusion; Siddhartha utilizes many unconventional teachers and lessons during his journey, and Plato never reveals to us how we can be certain of who is enlightened. Words should not trick us into thinking that our differences are irreconcilable. Our fear of words should not prevent us from discussing, learning from many others, and taking steps towards the truth.

Outline for Discussion

1. Small Group Discussion

- a. Project list of possible guiding questions, but leave discussion open to any topic/question that interests each group
 - i. What were your initial reactions to these pieces? Would it have been easier to understand Plato's ideas without the allegories or more difficult?
 - ii. Is learning the truth actually painful? Why or why not?
 - iii. Can one ever be sure if he knows the truth vs if all he sees is an illusion? When the person first sees the fire after only seeing shadows, he believes this is reality. Then, when he sees the sun, he believes this is. How does he ever know that he is right?
 - iv. How would Plato have us choose our leaders? Would his way have better results than ours? Would it be practical? Would it be moral to force people who do not want to lead to do so, for the greater good?
 - v. What is the significance of the Achilles quote in the context of the *Allegory*, "Better to serve a penniless master, and to endure anything, rather than to think as they do and to live after their manner?"
 - vi. What is the difference between *becoming* and *being* in lines 38-40 of the *Allegory*? Are there real examples that can illustrate the difference?
- b. Split up our group (presentors) to join the small groups and guide discussion, ask follow up questions, etc.

2. Large Group Discussion

- a. Meet back as a large group and again, leave discussion open to anything, but have the optional questions as starting places, and follow up questions prepared.
- b. See if the small groups discussed similar ideas and if they agree/disagree or talked about entirely different things altogether, and if groups can add on to what was discussed previously by the others.