Amanda Zapata

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Dr. Mathes

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Does Enlightenment lead to the Truth?

To live in blissful ignorance or to understand the Truth? How are human beings ever capable of concluding the proper way to live? Despite the fact that people generalize Truth to be a universal, the history of the idea of the word proves to be subjective. More specifically, this paper argues that, because of increasing religious freedoms, Truth morphs into present-day self-discovery.

Commencing by examining the philosopher, Plato, known as an idealist and one of the most first known great thinkers. Plato’s discourse encompasses the idea of what an ideal world consists of. As an advocate for the importance of education, Plato begins explaining his idea in *Republic* (360 BCE) when conveying his message of his allegory of the cave. Inside of this fictitious cave of Plato’s, there are prisoners who inhibit the cave. These prisoners are chained up, unable to see the reality of the world behind them (Plato 64). In the manner that the prisoners are tied up by their legs and necks, they are incapable of turning their heads (Plato 64). Although the prisoners cannot do much, this reality happens to be all the prisoners have ever known (Plato 64). Images have been shown to the prisoners their entire life, they consider this as entertainment. At some point, they have been so accustomed to this, that the prisoners are able to predict what’s upcoming.

Little did the prisoners know, the images they were seeing were the shadows of people moving from the other side of the cave in front of a fire (Plato 64). One prisoner managed to escape and saw the world for what it was; he attempted to convince the others what the Truth was. Nobody believed the prisoner, because all they have known their entire life was the cave, and the figures on the wall (65). Plato’s message from this story was an analogy of society. The prisoners are human beings, and “the shadows on the wall” that they have been seeing are actually imitations of the platonic ideal of that concept from the divine realm.

Once that prisoner escaped and learned about the world around him, Plato stated that the prisoner would want to know more, the prisoner would want to share the Truth with everyone (65). When the Truth becomes available, it’s a life much more meaningful to move closer to the understanding of the Truth. The human mind craves more and more knowledge, when an individual spark an understanding of something, they must move to the next step of critical thinking. In the moment the individual “…distinguishe[s] between the two conditions and mode of existence, he’d congratulate anyone he found in the second state, and feel sorry for anyone in the first state (Plato 67).” As a strong proponent of deep philosophical thinking, it’s important to note that Plato was a grand believer of mimesis. His “allegory of the cave” shines the light on the idea of mimesis, which are the imitations of the people created by the fire. (Stevens 51). As an indubitably religious individual, Plato believed that the Truth was in the divine, and the world humans live in is the product of mimesis. With Plato’s ideology in mind, human beings will never acquire the real Truth while on Earth, due to it’s intangibility.

When an individual does not quite understand something, they might say “enlighten me”. What does it truly mean to be enlightened? Immanuel Kant introduces the term enlightenment in a more modern idealist approach in his essay “What is Enlightenment?” (1784), transforming older philosophical works of Truth to be accompanied with reason. According to Immanuel Kant, “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage (para. 1)” To be enlightened is to grow, to come to an understanding. Kant believes that coming to an understanding without the help of someone else, is what it means to be enlightened. People who are lazy and cowardly will never become enlightened, because they are allowing other people to do the work for them (para. 2).

Upon reaching enlightenment, an individual becomes able to contemplate difficult concepts which can either be very surface level about day to day tasks, or like these great thinkers, very deep intricate ideas on the basis of our existence. Once an individual reaches enlightenment, they will reach a point of self-discovery upon creating their own understandings of political opinions and religious Truth. Jumping back go 360 BCE, Plato’s allegory describes a prisoner who, in Kant’s terms, becomes “enlightened.” Astonishingly, the prisoner now had to abandon all his old understandings of the world. Although Plato and Kant were both idealist, change begins to become visible with Kant.

Kant swiftly establishes a clear distinction between the divine and reality. As an individual who believes in reason and critical thinking, Kant believed that enlightenment contains the entranceway to Truth. Plato’s personal Truth was a factor of noumena, “the larger ideal…can be perceived by the mind alone (Stevens 108),” which was pertaining to the divine realm, “…only philosophers can achieve the ideal through imagination and reason (Stevens 108).” On the other hand, phenomena pertain to objects that are tangible, they exist in a very real fashion. With the understanding of these terms, it’s safe to say that mimesis is not truth is not phenomena.

Alas, enlightenment brings exposure to the world and get a better understanding of it. Kant argues that reasoning “must be free at all times” as it “can bring enlightenment to mankind (p. 1). Freedom leads individuals to truth, and truth leads individuals to freedom. Since Truth is a manmade concept, it can be liberating to know that an individual can choose what they want to believe in. Kant believes that we are not living in an enlightenment age, but “in an age of enlightenment” (p. 3). Living in an age of enlightenment drives us closer to religious truth. Enlightenment proves to be absolutely necessary in a world for it to progress. People will not get anywhere in nonage politically, religiously, or truthfully. Enlightenment creates a distinction from the nonage, a follower who will drink the words of another individual without questioning anything for themselves. An individual who does this is simply a machine in Kant’s perspective (para. 9). Kant ignites the flame of what has become independent and critical thinking.

Both Plato and Kant delivered their messages on Truth in a religious aspect, contrasting to Friedrich Nietzsche who was a well-versed nihilist, philologist, and philosopher (Stevens 132). As a skeptic during the Enlightenment period, Nietzsche’s works certainly stood out and caught attention (Stevens 132). Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” (1873) introduces an even more contemporary approach on truth. Blasphemous to other philosophical works, Nietzsche was a strong proponent to the belief that nothing actually is real, and that life is full of illusions (Stevens 133). Truth shifts to Nietzsche from being Plato’s “…pale imitations of the ideal form (Stevens 133)” to humans understanding objects as phenomena, something scientific and tangible. According to Nietzsche, “all so-called ‘truths’ are only illusions and metaphors that humans use to make sense of the world (Stevens 133).” Plato certainly influenced Nietzsche, but in a manner that led to a completely opposing conclusion.

It’s very interesting to see the progression of the word truth from Plato’s days to our understanding of truth now. To gain an understanding of Truth, the individual must be enlightened. As the old-age phrase says, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, the same concept goes for truth. Truth is specific to an individual through their own philosophical endeavors and existential contemplation. Truth has proven to be subjective over time. “…truth is a useful illusion, one that serves a fundamental drive to survive (Norton 760).”

The most significant thing to do to get closer to the asymptote that is Truth, is to come to one’s own terms. The vitality to reason through exists, everyone can get to their own conceptions of Truth. Plato, Kant and Nietzsche formulated their own renditions of Truth, and many individuals proceeding them have also done so. Whether a personal Truth appears easily or not, it requires enlightenment to reach. Critical thinking of what existence and morality mean to an individual may lead to a personal Truth. Conceptions may be contradictory, but this doesn’t make one better than the other. If people did not have their own versions of Truth, there would not be different philosophical ideas, religions, political parties, and even interests.

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