

SUTD 2019 02.001 HASS Mid-term Dialogue Assignment

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A first-person perspective of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, with a twist.

"Ah! My eyes!", I exclaimed. I somehow felt pain in my eyes for the very first time because of this... blinding shiny figure. I could not see anything but white light. "You are free now. Never go back, or face the consequences," my former captor announced. He went back into the cave, seemingly in a hurry to attend to other matters. After a few hours, my vision starts to become clearer and I could start to see moving shadows. After a few more hours, I could barely figure out that the moving shadows are people. I asked around curiously and they told me that the light source is called the Sun. Interesting name, I thought to myself. I pointed around to other unfamiliar so-called objects and they patiently explained to me. The deep blue body of water is called a lake, while the green tall figures are called trees. Birds were chirping and flowers were blooming. "What a fascinating and beautiful world!" I thought to myself. All this time, I was only familiar with the concept of shadows. The shadows of people and animals who walked behind me in the cave were the only ideas I was intimate with. It turns out that the shadows that I sensed with my eyes every day were not real. It was not part of the highest and most fundamental part of reality. When I was just given this opportunity to explore what was outside the cave, I was terrified of the burning light. However, now I realized that what I had been given was freedom, not torture. I understood that my eyes were finally open.

However, even in this freedom, I felt some form of guilt. I felt compelled to invite my fellow prisoner friends to enjoy and taste the true beauty of this world. I was once lost but now I had found the way, the truth and the light. I should at least give it a shot to try to free them as well, so that they could experience this wonder of knowledge and freedom. But this was a risky move. I did not want to be caught by the cave guards and forced to face that dreadful wall of death again. I went to sit by a peaceful corner nearby a tree to enjoy some food from the lunch pack that the guard has provided me while reflecting and carefully formulating a comprehensive plan to stealthily infiltrate the cave compound. I barely remembered the pathway towards the prison, but the guards' patrol schedule was etched into my mind after all those decades in prison.

Time to execute my plan at night. Patrol was not that heavy since most guards were sleeping but I was not able to easily recognize the way in since it was quite dark. A few stone oil lamps were lit here and there, but it was not enough to fully enlighten the pathway back into the cave. When I finally reached my two fellow prisoners, they were fast asleep. I sneaked around a corridor and called their names softly, prompting them to wake up.

"Hello guys, I'm back," I softly whispered.

"Why are you back here? Are you here because it is too scary outside?"

"I heard from the guards that there are no more familiar shadows in the outside world," replied the other prisoner.

"No no, I'm actually here to free you guys. When I went outside, I saw the true reality that we lived in. I saw beyond more than just these shadows. My eyes were opened!"

"Are you mad!? We heard you screaming on the way out, so there's no need to bluff us. It sounded more like torture than freedom. If you would like to take your former place, then we welcome you. Otherwise, get lost."

"But guys, what I told you is really the truth. There's just so much more outside there that I want to show you. If you guys give me the chance to free you, I will show you the real knowledge of this world beyond these shadows."

"Alrighty then," retorted the Austronesian female prisoner. "Convince me that you are sane, and I will leave with you."

"Now, let me ask you about something. How does someone learn about things?" I asked.

"One would learn from others about that, correct? For example, we know that a rope is a rope because the guards told us about it," replied the male prisoner.

"One could not possibly be taught on how to recognize things by others, right? One was only taught on how to describe such things by giving them names, for example."

"Hmm... In that case, I suppose the term 'rope' is only the name that we give to things that can be described as a rope," he answered.

"Yes correct! When we were told by the guards that ropes are ropes, we associate the essence of rope-ness to the physical things that were called as ropes and we will

remember it for life. Thus, human beings actually know that things are things and that they already have the knowledge of things from the beginning,” I patiently explained.

I heard the footsteps of a guard walking towards our area and I went to hide behind the bushes. I stayed almost perfectly still until the guard went far into the long corridor. When I emerged to explain further, the female prisoner raised a question.

“But how sure are you that human beings have this idea of things before they were even conceived? Won’t they be just a blank sheet of paper? Through his exposure in life, he learns about things through his observations.”

“Ah yes, but you have one dangerous premise there, my friend. For one to be able to know that he or she knows something, one should know what he or she does not know and, hence, will be aware when one knows that thing.”

I continued, “Try explaining to me how you know about the things that passed behind you just through the shadows on this wall.” I pointed at the wall of death – the wall that we are always told to stare at.

“Well... these shadows are the only things that we know since we were very young. When the guards described to us the names of these things, we accept them as part of reality.”

“Ah yes, but I have witnessed of something called the Sun outside that provide these objects with the shadows that we have seen since we were young. These shadows are just a mere lesser representation of the objects and I have seen the greater forms of these things outside! I do acknowledge that I was screaming in terror when I was on the way outside, but after basking in the glory of reality outside, I received enlightenment.”

"Hmm... Following your argument that what we usually perceive is just a lesser representation of the true forms of things, it is very likely that what you have perceived outside, even this so-called Sun, is also not the true representation of those things, correct?" inquired the female prisoner.

"Unfortunately, yes. I admit that we would never be able to witness the true forms of objects and matter in this fugacious physical world. However, I believe that our eternal souls inside of us have known these forms in the heavens since time immemorial.¹ Wouldn't it be better that before we leave this world, we get a glimpse of the grandiose view, and yet only a partial representation, of the things which we usually saw as mere shadows? Therefore, I hereby invite you to witness these greater forms together with me."

"Hmm... I guess it wouldn't hurt to give it a try. Besides, your contention seems valid and I don't think you are insane if you are able to make such well-reasoned arguments," she replied. I am glad that she was at least conceding to me.

Apparently, we argued until a tinge of the morning sunlight broke through the cave's fragile ceilings. At least now they were slightly convinced that what I saw was part of the greater reality. It's a miracle that no guards noticed me during our conversation. In fact, it felt too good to be true. But I cast my worry aside first, since there were more urgent things at hand.

"So now, if you guys permit, I will free your tied hands. Sounds good?"

¹ Plato, & Gallop, D. (1988). *Phaedo*, 78d-79a. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

"Sounds good."

"I will start with you," I conveyed to the male prisoner.

As I went for his hand, my hand phased through his hand. I was surprised.

"Huh... Are you a shadow as well, brother?" I inquired nervously.

In a flash, the two prisoners who were with me disintegrated into what looked like bluish-green cubes, along with the rest of the cave. *Voxels*, I suddenly thought. But what are *voxels*? Sounds so familiar and yet I cannot quite put my finger on what it means. Who implanted this idea of *voxels* into me? I tried to climb up the stairs again, but nothing is present outside the now-disintegrated cave. No people, no lake, no Sun. Just pure blackness, as if my eyes were fully closed. After a moment, a booming voice echoed throughout the empty space that I found myself in.

"Virtual diagnosis complete. Subject is deemed to possess enough level of intelligence and empathy. Subject is human enough to be released to the new planet."

"Initiating simulation system shutdown."

And then, my eyes were truly open.



References

Plato, & Gallop, D. (1988). *Phaedo*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.