

A Discussion of Various Interpretations of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"

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CCSU 490C: 1960s American Cinema

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March 19, 2023

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Plato's allegory of the cave is one of the most recognized allegories in the history of Western philosophy. Many interpretations of the allegory of the cave have emerged. These interpretations have led us to think about and ask important questions about topics like government and education, among other things. Interpretations of Plato's allegory of the cave include that the public is too ignorant to govern itself, we suffer from a state of education that is comparable to that of the prisoners, and it is a metaphor for the theory of forms.

One interpretation of Plato's allegory of the cave is that the public is too ignorant to govern itself. In the allegory of the cave, when the freed prisoner came back to the cave to tell his findings to the other prisoners, he experienced blindness due to passing from light into darkness (Plato, 2012). The cave prisoners laughed at and pitied him and opposed being freed (Plato, 2012). Dale Hall's article in "Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science" pointed out how this instance contrasted the enlightenment of a philosopher with the belief of ordinary men (Hall, 1980). After all, in the allegory of the cave, ordinary men (the chained prisoners) were not just complacent in their ignorance but antagonistic against those who challenged it. The ordinary men (chained prisoners) were completely oblivious to the world outside the cave and believed the philosopher (freed prisoner) to be the foolish one; they crossly rejected his knowledge (Plato, 2012). Because Plato believed the public to be too ignorant to govern itself such as the example in his cave allegory, in "Republic", Plato condemned democracy and advocated for government by "philosopher-kings" (Plato, 2012). Furthermore, Dale Hall stated

that the “awful” chained prisoners who reveled in their ignorance and repudiated knowledge in the allegory of the cave showcased our predicament when we are deprived of philosophic rule (Hall, 1980). Dale Hall argued that when we are deprived from philosophic rule, an “awful perversion of nature” occurs due to “our remoteness from the ideal and natural condition”; ordinary men are, after all, “insufficiently rational” to understand and appreciate knowledge and truth (Hall, 1980). So, the chained prisoners in the allegory of the cave represent the ignorance of society at large; the allegory of the cave communicates that like the prisoners of the cave, all men are born unfamiliar with ultimate reality. The allegory of the cave demonstrates that men are oblivious to their ignorance unless shown otherwise. After all, the chained prisoners had no idea they were incognizant of ultimate reality and a massive outside world; only by being freed did the freed prisoner realize what he didn’t know. To make matters worse, because the chained prisoners are unaware of their own ignorance, they resist being educated about ultimate reality. So, because common men in the allegory of the cave are too ignorant to rule themselves, they require someone who is enlightened like the freed prisoner to make decisions on their behalf. Because Plato argues against democracy and for rule by philosopher-kings throughout “Republic”, it makes sense that he’s using the allegory of the cave to advance the idea that men are too ignorant to govern themselves. And so, in that way, one interpretation of Plato’s allegory of the cave is that the public is too ignorant to govern itself.

Another interpretation of Plato’s allegory of the cave is that we suffer from a state of education that is comparable to that of the prisoners. According to Nicholas Smith’s article in “Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science”, Plato’s allegory of the cave

is “explicitly a parable about education” (Smith, 1999). That is, in the allegory of the cave, Smith believes that Plato is communicating that we suffer from a state of education that is comparable to that of the prisoners (Smith, 1999). So, because our education system is formulated by common men like the chained prisoners in the cave and not by philosophers, we are being withheld from a proper education because we are not being taught about the true nature of reality. Plato’s “Republic”, according to Smith, is an instrument designed to free us from “the shackles of our cave” (Smith, 1999). In “Republic”, Plato shared a great deal about what an ideal education should resemble (Smith, 1999). In Books II and III of “Republic”, Socrates illustrated what “a proper curricula” for future guardians of the state entails: a first education phase with music and physical training to instill in future guardians “the right opinions and the right habits of character” (Smith, 1999). And in Book VI of “Republic”, curricula for the “higher education” of guardians was laid out: first, guardians were instructed in “explicitly mathematical studies” and then the “highest study of all”, dialectics. Finally, future guardians would undergo a fifteen-year apprenticeship, during which they would pass their final tests of judgment and character (Smith, 1999). Without undergoing this rigorous educational system, Plato did not believe it was possible for one to realize their “highest intellectual ability” (Smith, 1999). Because the common men (chained prisoners) in the allegory of the cave lack knowledge of ultimate reality, they communicate false and incomplete knowledge to one another. And to make matters worse, they did not allow the freed/enlightened prisoner to impart his knowledge with them. The only way to learn ultimate reality in the allegory of the cave was to seek beyond the conventional education provided by common men and travel outside the

cave. In “Republic”, Plato was critical of the current conventional education system delivered by common men and promoted a rigorous curriculum that instills insight regarding ultimate reality and the world around us. To further his argument for this new education system, Plato shared his allegory of the cave to communicate that the education system of his time was woefully insufficient because common men are too ignorant to teach themselves. Hence, in such a manner, one interpretation of Plato’s allegory of the cave is that we suffer from a state of education that is comparable to that of the prisoners.

A further interpretation of Plato’s allegory of the cave is that it is a metaphor for Plato’s theory of forms. In Robert Fogelin’s article in “The Philosophical Review”, he argued that Plato illustrates the theory of forms in his allegory of the cave (Fogelin, 1971). In a nutshell, Plato’s theory of forms argues that forms, as opposed to the physical world, are in possession of ultimate reality (Fogelin, 1971). In other words, the “world of appearance” is merely a semblance of the “intelligible world” (Fogelin, 1971). Fogelin expanded further upon Plato’s theory of forms by stating that forms stand to their representations in the physical world as their representations are to images of visual objects (Fogelin, 1971). So, the bottom line is that what we see with our eyes does not tell the entire story. This principle is evidenced in Plato’s allegory of the cave in “Republic”. After all, all the chained prisoners could see were the shadows on the wall, so they were oblivious to the true nature of reality. The chained prisoners were only aware of things in the material physical world as opposed to forms. What Plato attempted to communicate via the allegory of the cave is that in contrast to the ultimate reality of forms, things in the physical world are just as false and misleading as the shadows in the cave. The

freed/enlightened prisoner was acquainted with the world of forms, but the chained prisoners were only aware of the physical world, which didn't tell them the whole story. So, in such wise, one interpretation of Plato's allegory of the cave is that it is a metaphor for Plato's theory of forms.

Thus, interpretations of Plato's allegory of the cave include that the public is too ignorant to govern itself, we suffer from a state of education that is comparable to that of the prisoners, and it is a metaphor for the theory of forms. I believe that all three of these interpretations of the allegory of the cave are valid. The interpretation that seemed most pronounced and on-target to me was that men are too ignorant to rule themselves. This is a common interpretation that one will likely come across many times while researching the allegory of the cave. It is evident in the allegory of the cave that men can't rule themselves because the common man, like the prisoners of the cave, is ignorant to world's reality and opposed to learning the truth. Plato's "Republic" is arguably the most notable work of philosophy and political theory of all time. All subsequent political and philosophical works are said to be based at least in part by "Republic". Because "Republic" has such a massive influence, it is crucial to understand what Plato is trying to communicate in his allegories, particularly in the allegory of the cave, which is Plato's most well-known allegory. Plato's allegory of the cave can lead us to ponder about and ask important questions regarding our government structure, education system, and knowledge sources, among other things. Plato's "Republic" and allegory of the cave will continue to dominate secondary and higher education classrooms around the world, so reading further into them will open many doors.

References

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