

The Information Cellar

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PHIL 205

September 10, 2022

Introduction

After recounting his famous allegory of the cave in the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates gives a brief excursus on the nature of education. When considered in the context of the allegory of the cave and that of our own present time this excursus sheds greater light upon both.

Socrates begins his explanation of education with the metaphor of the eyes, which, he says, "may be confused in two ways and from two causes: when they change from the light into the darkness, or from the darkness into the light."¹ The lesson to be learned from this metaphor, he explains, is that education consists not (as some would claim) in putting "knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes,"² but rather involves a process in which a soul whose eyes are fixed upon darkness is "turned around . . . to look at what is and at the brightest thing that is—the one we call the good."³ In other words, education is less about information and more about reorientation. Hence the allegorical prisoner was freed from the cave (i.e., the visible world) not by being merely informed of the existence of the surface (the intellectual world of forms) but by being entirely removed from the darkness of the cave so that he could finally gaze upon the sun (the good, the source of reality).

The Cellar

The issue facing the world today is that many people are trapped not in the darkness of the cave but deep in the artificial light of the cave's cellar. Unlike the prisoners in the cave whose fetters prevent them from looking away from the shadows that the fire casts upon the wall before them, the prisoners in the cellar need not be chained, for their eyes are covered by strange

¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 211.

² *Ibid.*, 212.

³ *Ibid.*

devices. There is no fire in the cellar, only the pale blue light which radiates from the strange devices' seductive screens and fills the prisoners' minds with fantastic yet insubstantial images. The prisoners pace to and fro within the cellar, going nowhere, although the devices tell their eyes they are daily traversing vast and beautiful lands, occasionally visiting a bustling metropolis to enjoy fair sights and sumptuous fare. The prisoners are free to communicate with one another but seldom choose to do so, preferring instead the company of the scantily clad and softspoken figures that their devices present to them each evening.

Many modern people are trapped in the cave's cellar—smartphones always in hand, televisions lighting every room, eyes constantly bombarded by the sensationalized information provided by social media and video streaming services. The ancient pagans were enthralled by the lower, visible world, a world admittedly dark in comparison to the higher, intellectual world of Plato's forms—but at least its was a natural darkness. It is difficult enough for the eyes of the soul to transition from natural darkness to intellectual light, but what of the man whose eyes are daily bleached by the blue light of artificial reality? Surely such eyes must first experience the reprieve which natural darkness grants before they can hope to bear the pure, ethereal light of the good.

Not only must the cellarites ascend first into the cave before having any hope of escaping to the surface, their predicament is further compounded by the fact that theirs is a self-imposed captivity. The cave-prisoners are bound in chains fastened by others, while those in the cellar are bound only by the fetters of their own disordered affections. They love their delusion. Indeed, they have chosen it; for, they have seen the cave and despised its lackluster shadow shows. To enter the cave appears as madness to one who knows not that its dimly lit corridors are the only path to the surface.

Conclusion

The word “education” comes from the Latin *educere*, “to bring out, lead forth.” But how can a prisoner be brought out of his captivity and led to the surface, if not by one who first descends into the cellar? This is why Socrates ends his excurses on education by claiming that true philosophers are those who not only strive “to see the good; to ascend that ascent,” but who after doing so choose to “go down again to the prisoners . . . and share their labors.”⁴ Yet as Socrates admits, this is no easy task: “And as for anyone who tried to free the prisoners and lead them upward, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn’t they kill him?”⁵

“They certainly would,”⁶ as Glaucon replied, and as Socrates would learn all too well when his own people had him put to death. Yet if such a one as Socrates lost his life in his attempt to free the cave-prisoners, who among us would dare descend into the cellar? The risk of death may seem remote, but can one be sure he will have the strength to resist the enticing light therein? Or will the temptation to escape the harshness of reality by adorning its devices be too great?

⁴ *Ibid*, 213.

⁵ *Ibid*, 210.

⁶ *Ibid*.

Bibliography

Plato. *Republic*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004.