

The Allegory of the Cave's Implication on Modern Education

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Abstract: In "Allegory of The Cave" from Plato Aristocles' book *The Republic*, Plato presents a dialogue between Glaucon and Socrates, which discusses proper pedagogy through a cave metaphor. The cave metaphor is a scenario that involves the actions of few prisoners trapped in a cave; they "are very much like us humans" [1]. In the allegory, there are symbolic elements like shadows and sunlight. By interpreting these elements in the rest of the essay, it explores the implication of the cave metaphor to modern education: a gradual pedagogy should be preferred above sudden exposure to higher-level knowledge. I will first discuss symbolic meanings of significant concepts in this allegory then tie the cave metaphor back to education in society to see why a gradual pedagogy should be valued in the education realm.

1. Introduction

Education gives birth to enlightenment. In "Allegory of The Cave" from Plato Aristocles' book *The Republic*, Plato presents a dialogue between Glaucon and Socrates, which discusses proper pedagogy through a cave metaphor. The cave metaphor is a scenario that involves the actions of few prisoners trapped in a cave; they "are very much like us humans" [1]. In the allegory, there are symbolic elements like shadows and sunlight. By interpreting these elements in the rest of the essay, it explores the implication of the cave metaphor to modern education: a gradual pedagogy should be preferred above sudden exposure to higher-level knowledge. I will first discuss symbolic meanings of significant concepts in this allegory then tie the cave metaphor back to education in society to see why a gradual pedagogy should be valued in the education realm.

2. Interpretation of significant elements in this allegory

Several significant elements of these settings are key to the allegory, including darkness, fire burning, shadows, and a group of people under the cave. Exploring what these elements symbolize allows the readers to understand the implication of the allegory.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave depicts two contrasting worlds. One world is set within a dark cave where individuals can only see shadows cast by fire burning's minimal light like puppetry. Prisoners living in the world within the cave regard the shadows cast by fire sparks as the entirety of the world. The other world is outside the cave, including everything in nature: diverse creatures, people moving, and the sun. This world is a broader one where people's minds can perceive and learn about natural objects and where creatures are given energy by the strongest, original light source—the sun. The cave world is inferior. Readers can see Plato's disdain of the cave world for both its “ontological

lowness of artifacts” and “the aesthetic lowness” of the cave world’s puppetry in the cultural milieu of Athens” [2]. The cave metaphor takes place in the setting of these two different worlds.

Darkness represents ignorance. In the dark, people can hardly see. Because sight is a primary way of acquiring sensations and receiving information, darkness can be interpreted as symbolizing the prisoners' ignorance. Not only Plato points out that the prisoners are ignorant, but also he tells readers why they are ignorant. In the allegory, the prisoners are shackled and are unable to "turn their heads all the way around" [1]. Therefore, these prisoners are uninformed about how the outside world looks because they are shackled by the chains that forbid them from obtaining a comprehensive view. As prisoners are metaphors for humans in the real world, Plato implies that our souls reside in darkness, being uninformed because of the shackles in society which bind them. We can assume these shackles might be stereotypes in the society: gender stereotypes, racial stereotypes, nationality stereotypes. When society values one of the varieties and look down on others, the standard of goodness becomes singular, leading to people’s belief that there is only one thing they could do to become successful. These stereotypes hinder one’s self-development and therefore constrains one’s knowledge acquisition.

By contrast, light symbolizes enlightenment and illumination. The light in the real world is from the sun; however, the light of the cave world is from fire. Fire is similar to the sun in characteristics of warmth and illumination but incomparable in both scale and magnitude. The sun is “a symbol of (receiving) intellectual enlightenment” [3]. The sun brings enlightenment because it “makes possible clear vision, because it bathes the visible things in light and thereby gives to power of sight to the eye” [4].

Shadows represent partial truths. Shadows and natural objects look alike, but the shadows still lack natural objects' texture and color. The prisoners accept these fractions of truths as whole truths because, as Plato wrote, "they are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them" [1]. Their limited access to knowledge leads them to take partiality as an entirety. If they had the ability to look around the cave, they would discover much of what they have perceived as reality was actually the product of an elaborate ruse. There is nothing inherently correct or incorrect about the location that the cave-dwellers are forced to gaze upon, but because this gaze is fixed and limited, they are unable to apprehend even the most basic facts [5]. Prisoners are ignorant, but their ignorance is understandable. According to Critics Alan Bloom, if the shadows represent “the mental impressions of prisoners” and the creators of these shadows “the manipulators of thoughts”, then putting this allegory in a real-world context, “the mind of the mob thinking” is molded by “politicians” [6].

For example, politicians mold our understanding of “justice”. We are taught that, as direct and straightforward as it sounds, justice means punishing the ones who wrong others, following court procedures, and not convicting anybody of a crime without sufficient evidence. However, when evidence is lacking due to the negligence of the prosecution, even when it seems crystal clear who did wrong, that the person cannot be convicted. In such dilemmas, people who stick to fractions of truths will have trouble making decisions. Our soul—born in stereotypes, unreasonable social norms, and fractions of truths—cannot avoid being partial.

Ignorance seems unavoidable—unless pioneers make changes. As Socrates told Glaucon, people who have already seen the darkness and bright would feel privileged for their situation and, rather than despise the people in the dark, pity for those in the dark [1].

3. The cave metaphor's implications on modern education

The second section ties this allegory back to its implications on education, that is, promotion of a gradual education process. Plato's allegory suggests potential strategies to pursue and to avoid when enlightening others.

As a prisoner is dragged out of the cave and is forced to see the sun, it turns out miserable. He is "suddenly compelled to stand up" and "to turn his neck around" [1]. Since he has been fixed in one position in the cave for so long, he is "distressed and annoyed for being dragged" [1]. The prisoner shows a strong denial towards being informed, although the readers know this is beneficial for him. This painful process does not seem to reach the desired effect because the prisoner "has his eyes full of the beam and unable to see even one of the things true." Looking directly at the sun does not allow one to see the things in the world above or see the sun *as* that which illuminates and nourishes all things that appear. The more authentic nature of the sun can only manifest itself as compared to the cave world where there is no light at all and where shadows are replicas of actual objects. To comprehend the sun requires one to turn to look at things reflected by its beam. The prisoner's failure to be enlightened informs us that the ultimate truth, the good, cannot be apprehended directly but only through what it generates. Similarly, proper pedagogy should involve the step-by-step progression from accessible concepts to more abstract ones.

A gradual pedagogy accommodates students' learning process. When the prisoner is gradually released, he eventually gets used to the actual objects and the sunlight, demonstrating the intelligence inside each soul. Contrastingly, when such intelligence is abused, being exposed to knowledge that students cannot comprehend, students will intuitively reject this knowledge. Notice that gradual pedagogy does not impair teaching efficiency because fractions of truth contain hints of the truth that leads to eventual enlightenment. The shadows, for example, even as mere fractions, are the actual objects in the two-dimensional plane though without color. By learning shadows, prisoners see part of the truths, enabling them to accept the real world better when they gradually turn to face the outside world.

4. Conclusion

After discussing the symbolic meaning of elements and exploring how these concepts apply to education in the reality, this essay concludes that the education realm should promote a gradual education process that leads students step by step to the truths. We were born with shackles as there are all kinds of restraints on society, like bias, partial truths, misunderstanding. However, we were also born with inner intelligence that can recognize and comprehend the truth. If educators can untie our bonds and open up our horizon with gradual pedagogy that fits human intelligence capacity, we will step out of the dim cave and know more.

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