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Plato's Allegory of the Cave: An Understanding

With all the Philosophers and their ideas, their theories and teachings; there is only one Philosopher with such a captivating allegory that it should be brought to the attention of everyone, everywhere. Aristocles was a Greek Philosopher who built his own Academy and wrote the book: The Republic. In Book VII, he introduces the Allegory of the Cave. The allegory is set up with prisoners chained and bonded sitting in a dark cave since childhood. Behind the prisoners is a burning fire. Between the fire and the prisoners are puppeteers; these puppeteers walk to and fro casting shadows on the wall for the prisoners to see. The bonds which confine the prisoners prevent them from turning their heads as to restrict them to only the shadows on the wall and not the masquerade behind them.

Plato uses this allegory to describe our psyche and the predicament philosophers face when they attempt to educate the public of the truth. Our own ignorance results from ourselves being the chained prisoners only receptive to

the shadows we've known since childhood. The puppeteers that feed the ignorance of the prisoners can be described as the astonishing amount of organizations and groups that attempt to discredit facts, science and discoveries. They instead convince the public that what they've always known prior is fact, and can never be changed or altered. The masses of these groups vary based on the principle they are trying to preserve and the relevance in their community.

To better understand this, we first need to know the full allegory in detail. We already know that the prisoners in the cave are unable to move at all including even turning their head. The puppeteers walking back and forth, and the fire casting the shadows. What we don't know yet is what exactly the prisoners see and hear, the objects being used to cast the shadows and what would happen if we were to set some of the prisoners free.

Even though the prisoners are forced to only stare at the wall, they are still aware of the other prisoners around them. They cannot see each other, but they are able to converse with each other and collaborate on the naming of the different shadows they are presented with. The objects the puppeteers project in front of the fire are common representations of real world objects such as: trees, buildings, animals, etc.

Now we'll look at what happens when one of the prisoners is released from his bonds. When the prisoner is first liberated, he remains stationary. He must be compelled to stand up which becomes very painful to him. Even after this, his liberator forces him to turn around and face the fire that was at his back which becomes even more painful to him. The liberator shows the freed prisoner the objects that were used to cast the shadows on the wall and tries to explain to him that the shadows he was used to seeing his entire life were not the actual objects, but instead vague representations of the real thing. The prisoner begins to argue with his liberator that he is wrong, and the objects being presented to him are completely different than the shadows he's seen. The liberator then forces the prisoner outside of the cave and into the sunlight which again, is extremely painful to the freed prisoner.

After some time, the freed prisoner's eyes adjust and he starts seeing things for how they really are. Eventually he looks up at the sun and is suddenly edified because he now knows the source of all things. He is now considered wise because he has accepted the truth for how it's plainly seen. Unfortunately, his liberation is only temporary and is forced to return to the cave.

He sits with the other prisoners who are still naming the different shadows. He tries to explain to the other prisoners that what they see isn't what it appears to be. He urges them to come out of the cave with him so that they

can see with their own eyes; but they refuse, and they inform him that if someone else were to try and free them, they would gang up on the liberator and kill him. The liberated prisoner urges with them again that what they're used to is a lie. The prisoners then compromised with a game of wits. They told the liberated prisoner if he truly has been enlightened, then he should know the names of the shadows more than the prisoners; and if he wins, they will follow him out of the cave.

The liberated prisoner becomes horrible at this game because all he's seeing is shadows. The rest of the prisoners find the perceived lack of knowledge they assume the liberated prisoner has not only humorous, but also threatening. They figure out that this guy who was once one of us, is now telling us that everything we've always known since we were born is a lie. He's disrupting the natural order of things and our way of life. They decide that if anyone else tries to do this same thing to any other one of us, or even tries to convince us of this again, we'll kill them so that we can maintain our content way of living. This marks the end of the allegory.

Now that we know the allegory in detail, we must analyze it to understand the different analogies taking place. We already know that the prisoners represent all of us and we also already know that liberated prisoner describes philosophers. The Sun represents the truth, knowledge or enlightenment. The puppeteers can be described as anyone, or any group with any level of power and reason to keep a group of people in the dark. Some examples may be

leaders, politicians, teachers, parents, police men, religions, the media, etc. The liberator who freed the prisoner are considered to be mentors. The cave itself can be described as ignorance, however, Plato describes the cave as the physical world and the outside of the cave as the intelligence world.

This allegory explains multiple different struggles that happen in life. One of which is Philosophers themselves in teaching others about the wisdom they have. At the very end of this allegory, Plato makes a very clear reference to Socrates. Socrates was a profound Philosopher in Athens, however, his teachings were not conventional and he became a threat to the Athenian Government. Being afraid that Socrates would uphold the Athenian Government and disrupt the natural order of things, they charged him and sent him to trial. They found him guilty and had him executed.

Another struggle is our way of learning. Our current way of learning is that students pay money to a school, and then teachers give us knowledge. Plato says that this is the incorrect way of learning. This way of learning is the exact model of the allegory. The teacher is the puppeteer, his teachings are the projections on the wall and we of course, are the prisoners. The correct way of teaching should be encouraging us to physically turn ourselves around so that we can walk into the intellectual world and look at the sun. Plato said that

education is turning the whole soul around. You must convert your mind, your body, your spirit, your desires, etc. in order to be educated.

This kind of learning is considered as active learning. Where your desires, passion and physical self is completely tuned to what is being taught. Education cannot be plainly given to someone. The individual must go out and grab it. This type of learning is considered painful because you have to shift your mindset and completely alter your passion to what is being taught in order to learn anything.

The analogy above could be considered the top most analogy if all the other analogies referencing to the allegory if they were to fall under a hierarchical system. Meaning that the phrase: “don’t believe everything you read on the internet is true” could be considered its own analogy referencing the allegory but ultimately falling back on the above analogy of making ourselves physically shift ourselves around to discovering it for ourselves. What we find on the internet is just one of many relevant references to Plato’s Cave.

Another popular reference is an explanation of individuals begin to listen to groups or organizations that disprove already proven scientific discoveries or facts. An example would be group who is currently trying the convince everyone that our world as we know it is actually flat. This kind of arrogance is astonishing

because we've proven the Earth is round hundreds of years ago and today, with all the advancements in technology and science, some individuals shifted themselves back to primitive knowledge because it's easier for them to comprehend.

One final reference which is probably the most relevant reference today is business. This can reference any sort of entity that has power and uses its power for monetary gain. The top three of these entities is politics, media, and corporations. These top three are also tied for first because any one of those three could potential have power over the other two. This goes along with the saying: whoever controls the media, controls everything. However, corporations could control the media and politicians can make laws that give them power over the other two. All three of these entities use Plato's Cave Allegory as tactics for keeping them in power.

All three of these however, must use the media in order to display their shadows to the public. This is also where the media can obtain control by choosing what and how they present information to the public. A great example of this is the controversy of "fake news" or the controversy of whether the primary source is presenting accurate or inaccurate information or if the media is presenting accurate or inaccurate information.

David Hume, who was a Scottish Philosopher, talked about verifying information. He said that all statements must be either: true, false, or irrelevant. This kind of thinking goes along with Plato's Cave in that we should verify that what we're being taught or what is presented to us is not shadows, but instead the truth.

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