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Out of the Shadows and Into the Light: Liberation through Education

Jeff P. Godowski

The “Allegory of the Cave,” Book VII of Plato’s Republic, has been a staple in Western philosophical and political thought for millennia. Following a brief summary of Plato’s story told by Socrates, this article makes a case for using the allegory as a framework for discussing the systems of oppression created by colonialism and hegemonic control. The second part of this article discusses the ways in which Plato’s vision has been used in educational philosophy and psychology to symbolize the gradual processes of education as a means of liberation. This discussion takes the form of an analysis of Platonic developmental processes of cognition and reasoning in comparison to self-authorship and self-evolution theories of Baxter Magolda (2001, as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), and Egan (1983). Additionally, this article offers a connection between Platonic philosophy and Heidegger’s theories of ontological education to inform student affairs practice. Finally, Plato’s pedagogy and the work of Paulo Freire (1998) present critical education as a method of liberation.

Warning: Reflections in this mirror may be distorted by socially constructed ideas of beauty.

-Center for Health and Wellbeing, The University of Vermont

This article uses Plato’s allegory of the cave as a framework for discussing the systems of oppression created by colonialism and hegemonic control. Colonialism is a system that denies human rights to human beings, subdued by violence and forced into a state of misery (Memmi, 2013). Hegemony, as described by Leistyna, Woodrum, and Sherblom (1999), can be defined as the imposition of ideologies and forms of authority through which dominant members of society maintain control. This article describes education as a means to liberate oneself from these systems of control and provides implications for using the allegory of the cave as a way to deconstruct Western hegemonic thought. This article

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also presents the case that Platonic philosophy still has relevance in contemporary American higher education, a system founded on the belief that studying the classics aided students in raising core human questions and in understanding the human condition (Cohen & Kisker, 2010).

Plato was born in Athens, Greece in 428 or 427 B.C.E. (Egan, 1983). From early childhood, he was exposed to the political life of Athens. Through the influence of the great teacher Socrates, Plato took up a life of philosophy rather than politics. Socrates plays a major role in Plato's works and acts as the main character in Plato's *Republic*. Book VII of *The Republic* focuses on a conversation between Socrates and the character Glaucon concerning the allegory of the cave. According to Mills (1990), this story analyzes inherent problems of the human condition in the epistemology of the world.

This allegory begins with Socrates' description of the cave, during which he describes prisoners dwelling in a dark subterranean cavern (Plato, trans. 1969). These people have been imprisoned since childhood, with legs and necks chained, facing forward at one spot without freedom to move. The prisoners can only see the wall in front of them, illuminated by a fire from behind. Between the prisoners and the fire, there is a road with a low wall, from which puppeteers cast shadows on the wall. The prisoners see nothing but shadows, not even each other, and hear nothing but echoes reverberating from the walls of the cave.

Next, Socrates discusses the ascent out of the cave. Once freed, the individual would see the light and the objects directly, but feel pain from the brightness of the fire. Socrates ponders the denial that the prisoners would face if made to discern what was real from what was shadow; and if dragged out of the cave into the painful sunlight, they would run back into the cave for the security of its familiarity. If the process were more gradual, the prisoner might begin to adjust to their new surroundings slowly—beginning by discerning shadows, then reflections in the water, then the objects themselves, then the objects in the sky (more easily seen at night), and finally the sun itself and its true nature. The remainder of this article follows the order described above, beginning with the events that take place within the cave, followed by the events that are associated with freedom from the cave.

The Cave: Colonialism and the Hegemony

The Puppeteers

As Gocer (1999) described, analysis of the puppeteers [*thaumatopoiōi*] has generally failed to grip the attention of scholars, since many interpretations of the cave focus on the ascent out of the cave. One interpretation places the puppeteers as the “manipulators of thoughts” in society (p. 120). Wilberding (2004) described

a similar situation in which these puppet masters are one of the following: legislators, politicians, poets, painters, musicians, sophists, and orators. In a comparison of the cave to society, the puppeteers are those who are in control, the masters of the hegemony, the colonizers.

Using Memmi (2013) as a framework to describe colonizers, the puppeteers could be considered as *colonizers who refuse* or *colonizers who accept*. The argument for classifying them as colonizers who refuse is weak, since the puppeteers neither withdraw physically from colonialism nor remain to fight and change the system. For this reason, the argument for the puppet masters as colonizers who accept is stronger. They are called to manage the affairs of the city (read:cave), placing them in control of the cultural hegemony, and their privilege comes from degrading the colonized. Lears (1985) described their position in the hegemony of the cave as controllers of social life. Their prisoners must then accept the images shown by the puppeteers and only listen to the echo of their voices. The puppet masters are the institution that controls the distribution of knowledge and the “values, norms, perceptions, beliefs, sentiments, and prejudices that support and define [it]” (Lears, 1985, p. 569).

The Prisoners

If the puppeteers are the colonizers, then the prisoners must be the colonized. According to Socrates, the prisoners are *homoious hēmin* or “like to us” (Plato, trans. 1969, 515a). Hall (1980) referred to them as *homoious* of our condition as human beings, condemned to the shadows of the cave. This condition of the prisoners is caused by their position in the cave world, representing an “apparatus of political control through which men are manipulated... the whole cave-system represents a corrupt political community” (Hall, 1980, p. 75). Wilberding (2004) argued that prisoners represent contenders in a game, in which they identify the shadows, with the winner gaining power in society. This game shows how prisoners inherit beliefs from others, who do not fully understand these shadows either (e.g. other prisoners, who are also guessing). In some ways, this inheritance of beliefs seems compatible with the idea of social reproduction when thinking of the cave in relation to the hegemony.

The prisoners are those who have been colonized into thinking that the system of the hegemony is the only one in existence. Much like Memmi’s (2013) description of the colonized, the prisoners are degraded for holding low educational status, and the prisoners are only referred to as a group, rather than as individuals, being denied liberty. According to Memmi, one reason the colonized might not revolt is because of the hope that their masters will reward them. This situation can be related to the guessing game described above, analogous to contemporary gambling or lottery games and the hegemony that enforces a belief in false hope. This system

also relates to the symbolic universe described by Lears (1985) in that the subordinated groups may be active participants in maintaining this symbolic universe (the cave and the games), even though it serves to legitimize their subordination.

The Shadows and the Cave System

The shadows are cast by artifacts, likenesses of animals and people (Plato, trans. 1969). The shadows are twice removed from what is real and true. In the cave system as a whole, the shadows “arise from the unnatural divorce of philosophy and political authority” (Hall, 1980, pp. 75). In this interpretation, the cave symbolizes either the perverse character of a political condition or an innate intellectual capacity to contrast the understanding of the philosopher.

In a comparison to a colonized society as described above, the cave would represent the hegemonic systems that control the citizens, and the shadows would be the social constructions reflected in that system created by colonizers and the hegemony (puppeteers). This analysis can then be used to describe the power and oppression associated with certain social identities. One example using race might place White people as the puppeteers and People of Color as the prisoners, all existing in a cave of systematic racism. The shadows in the cave would represent race as a social construction. Another example would be if one uses sex or gender as an example, men and those in control of the patriarchy would be the puppeteers, women and other subordinated gender and sexual identities would be the prisoners living in a cave of sexism, with gender as a social construction, being the shadows. In a society represented in this way, surely there must be a means of liberation, since there is a way to liberate oneself from the cave.

Out of the Cave: Education and Liberation

Plato and Student Development

Egan (1983) formulated a developmental theory based on Plato’s system of education. This model neatly ties in with Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship (Evans et al., 2010). Egan’s (1983) four stages are described with subject-object relationships in mind. The first stage, *eikasia*, connects images and likenesses, with the person focusing solely on the superficial aspects of things, similar to Baxter Magolda’s first phase of *following formulas* (Egan, 1983; Evans et al., 2010). Egan’s second stage, *pistis*, describes the acceptance of the conventional dominant definitions of things. In this stage, the person moves from seeing only surface issues of matters, to making them more concrete, similar to Baxter Magolda’s *crossroads* phase. The third stage, *dianoia*, literally means “thinking.” In this stage, the person views models as more than two-dimensional images and sees them as abstract representations. This stage, like Baxter Magolda’s *becoming*

the author of one's life, is a mix of viewing matters as both concrete and abstract. The final stage, *noesis*, describes intelligence as the highest stage in which a person is no longer confused by ambiguities. The person becomes focused on the Idea or Form as the abstract concept that embodies the reality of the matter at hand. This final stage is similar to Baxter Magolda's *internal foundation* phase. In these ways, this Platonic theory aligns with self-authorship in a movement from following authority, to becoming an author of one's own values.

Plato and Ontological Development: Theory to Practice

As related by Thomson (2001), Heidegger connected the process of leaving the cave to ontological education. In this way, the process of *paideia*, or education, is associated with discovering a sense of being. Heidegger described this process of education as laying “hold of the soul itself and transform[ing] it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it” (Thomson, 2001, p. 252). In this reflective form of self-discovery, “genuine education leads us back to ourselves, to the place we are, teaches us to dwell there, and transforms us in the process” (p. 254).

Heidegger, as described by Thomson (2001), connected four parts of the allegory of the cave to an educational pedagogy of ontological freedom. These four parts include (1) the prisoner being in captivity, (2) the discovery of the fire and the objects responsible for the shadows, (3) the ascent from the cave into the light and a coming of understanding, and (4) the return to the cave to liberate other prisoners. In the beginning, education is only a means to an end. Then, students see things differently for the first time, but the tools learned hold little value. The third part represents a positive freedom, in which the students can interpret and use their tools to make meaning. Finally, students become the teachers themselves.

Powell (2011) used Heidegger's framework described above to relate psychotherapy to liberation. For the connection of student affairs theory to practice, I have replaced “therapist” with “student affairs practitioner” and “patient” with “student.” Powell argued that the liberator (prisoner that returns to the cave) can manifest either in the practitioner or in the student. The process of liberation is slow, and the practitioner cannot drag their student out of the cave, rather they must help them “adapt to the light” (Powell, 2011, p. 43). The practitioner is able to aid this process because they too were once in the cave. The ascent out of the cave can relate to a variety of practitioner/student relationships, e.g. guiding students through difficult transitions, working through periods of crisis, processing exploration of identity, etc. This process of viewing the ascent as a series of steps functions as a conceptualization for “meeting students where they are at,” a theme commonly associated with student affairs practice in relation to student development.

Platonic Pedagogy and Liberation

Losin (1996) related education to the two scenarios described by Socrates, one being education as a gradual process of obtaining knowledge, and the other being an abrupt and painful experience. The educator's role in this process is to help the student (prisoner of the cave) to reorient their perspective, rather than to give them any new information. Shim (2007) echoed this notion of the educator being the person to lead prisoners out of the cave as a facilitator, who guides the person to see things differently.

Shim (2007) synthesized this pedagogy with that of Paulo Freire, who described the idea of a “dialogical co-investigation” as educators learning with rather than teaching a lesson to the learner (p. 528). In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire (1998) described this critical educational practice as a human experience that dismantles a reproduction of dominant ideology through its interrogation. This form of praxis is rooted in fundamental teachings of critical pedagogy. Both Plato and Freire demonstrate that the teacher and learner discover matters collaboratively. Plato refers to the inverse of this method as *narrative teaching*; Freire referred to this method as banking education, one in which the students are only receptacles of knowledge rather than creators of knowledge. Elias (2005) also compared Plato's pedagogy to Freire's liberation framework—a concept of praxis in which teachers and learners come together to analyze and denounce dehumanizing realities in the name of liberation. This analysis reemphasizes the idea that the role of the educator is to facilitate learning by guiding students in dialogue about injustice.

Conclusion

The framework represented above makes a case that connects the various levels of analysis in Plato's allegory of the cave to the systems of colonization, hegemony, and oppression. It also provides an educational pedagogy as a means to escape systems of oppression through liberation and decolonization. One caveat to using Platonic philosophy as a framework to discussing liberation is its position at the center of Western thought, which has led to the creation of colonization and systems of oppression throughout the world. This analysis calls upon an essay title by Audre Lorde, a radical feminist and civil rights activist, which says that “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” (Lorde, 1984, p. 110). In this quote, there is a worry that while the tools may be temporary solutions to combat oppression, they can never create genuine change, because oppression is so imbedded in our lives. By looking at Plato and the roots of Western civilization through a critical lens, there may be some hope to achieve liberation. In the spirit of Freire and liberation theology, it may be possible to use the master's tools (Platonic philosophy) in conjunction with alternative or indigenous educational pedagogies to create a collaborative approach to achieve freedom and to dismantle

the master's house. This collaborative method would focus on finding a path of solidarity, in which human beings can liberate themselves from oppression through critical educational practices.

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