

## **Application of “The Cave” in Macroscopic and Microscopic Situations**

By Don Bickley

The Cave is a myth that deals primarily with the issue of human ignorance and our contentment with that ignorance. The myth illustrates Plato’s belief that we can never know true reality, but through Socrates’ use of metaphor, we can come close to knowing what Plato believed we had known in a previous state. This is illustrated by the fact that the two characters in “The Cave” are debating even though, as Socrates continues with his argument, they essentially agree.

With this in mind, I will reflect on the duality Plato believed constructed the universe by referring to Wendy Doniger’s opening chapter of The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth: “Turning from the myths themselves to scholarly approaches to them, we can choose to focus a microscope on any of an infinite number of levels of magnification within any text and see something very different if we do so, from submolecular structures to the large patterns that are also visible to the naked eye” (Doniger 9).

The microscopic represents the interpersonal application of a myth’s meaning while the telescopic represents the social application of the myth as a universal human truth. In this sense, it is interesting that Plato’s myth, “The Cave,” illustrates both sides of the metaphorical focus lens both when being read literally, and when looking at it metaphorically.

In the microscopic sense, the individualistic understanding of what “The Cave” means, the cavern itself is an illustration of how far removed we are from true reality. Plato believed reality was constructed as an intelligible form, so how far removed these prisoners—directly being compared to us, the generalized human race—are to not only exist as physical beings in a physical world, but to be shackled in a world under the earth, under all of the insurmountable tons of crushing matter above our heads.

Two societal aspects are called into question in this dark cave: that of what the prisoner’s see as a “two-dimensional shadow play cast by hidden puppets” (Partenie 52) being reality, and

the beliefs their imagination help to form based on this interpretation of reality. The shadows themselves represent the realm of forms while the thoughts, based on imagination which forms our belief of what it is we think we perceive, is a negative duality in Plato's model of the Psyche and Society, which is dualistic in itself (between society and cognition).

The microscopic delusion is that of how the individual mind perceives the shadow play as what is real, but this personal falsity lends itself to a macroscopic delusion reinforced by the greater social group, all of the prisoners, believing in the same thing: that the shadows on the wall represent what is real. This group-based acceptance solidifies the beliefs of the individual; those who may disagree would be inclined to stay silent, knowing all too well that their dissent would yield unwanted attention.

So far, this puts all of the emphasis on the prisoners themselves, or us if alluding to Doniger's phrase that "often when we think we are studying an other we are really studying ourselves through the narrative of the other" (Doniger 11). When Socrates states that prisoners are "no different from us," he is bridging the gap between the other and ourselves, so that while describing the narrative of the other, we know from the beginning that we should approach this narrative as that which is relevant to our own lives.

But what of the guards who keep the prisoners in the cave? According to Wikipedia in a heading about symbolism, the guards "are people in power who want to stay there; they want the prisoners to remain exactly how they are" (Allegory). If this were really the case, why would a single prisoner be chosen to leave the cave and experience the outside world?

I believe such a theme, the prisoner being forcibly removed, is to be expected given the philosophical mindset of the period. In the opening comments of "The Cave," it is stated that Socrates believed that men can only experience true knowledge in an ideal state, a Polis, which could only come into being if a king were a philosopher or philosopher's king (Partenie 51-52). It is important to note that Socrates says a *king* and not a *representative* (Athens, after all, was a

republic at the time). This totalitarian view of enlightenment illustrates the amount of pessimism Plato felt toward society as a whole.

Could knowledge be achieved on a microscopic scale, through the individual? As the myth says, for one prisoner it certainly can. But can knowledge be achieved on a macroscopic scale? Plato seems to say no. As the myth goes: if the prisoner would be taken back, he would not want to live in his previous state of ignorance, and he would also know that his earlier companions would ridicule him and think him a fool if he tried to explain the outside world. Perhaps if the myth were to be extended into a novel written by Plato, eventually another prisoner would be released and another, until enough individuals had experienced true reality that they would become the whole of society—a motivation for Plato starting his own school.

The darkness is a frame that focuses our minds on a false picture. True reality, “the Good” as Plato calls it, would be a light with no frame of reference, thus overwhelming.

Through the process of education, the painful adjustment of our eyes from dark to light, we would first look at the ground and see its colors and shapes and wonder what they are. This process would be thinking according to Platonic Model of Cognition with states of mind.

From there, we would come to know what those three-dimensional shapes (or, since we live in a three-dimensional world, higher dimensional shapes such as a seventeenth-dimensional mathematical fractal) are, the process of knowledge. By understanding that there are then objects outside our previous understanding, this engages our mind to inquire about what else might be false, a process that lead to the highest mental faculty: reasoning. But this is an ideal situation where the prisoner simply accepts the nature of reality on its own terms, but I must point out again that the prisoner was initially forced.

What were to happen if the prisoner simply walked out of the cave on their own terms? As cult behavior throughout the ages seems to show, especially the notorious Heaven’s Gate cult whose members locked themselves in a cave-like dark house in preparation for their suicide toward enlightenment, the path to understanding true reality can be a dangerous one, and in some

situations maybe it would be best for the prisoner to remain in the cave (UFO Religion). It is ironic that in our country and age, the age of technology and science, the age of reason, it is in these situations where such UFO cults are created and flourish.

No doubt frustrated with the herd-like qualities of his peers, it's understandable why Plato would believe only totalitarian actions could bring about mass change—that perhaps the individual was incapable of leaving the cave on their own. But did not Socrates come to philosophy of his own free will? Perhaps Socrates' failure in achieving Polis was in his belief that Polis had to be totalitarian. I believe there is far greater strength, for better or worse, when the individual comes to understanding through their own volition. Perhaps the fire will go out some day, and the prisoners will retreat from their cave in fear and experience the outside world. And perhaps some will find firewood and retreat back to their cave.

To constantly deride the populace about their ignorance, though, is a dangerous passage to walk; as constructs of this physical reality, who are we to know that we are not in essence fooling ourselves, independent of how logical we make our judgments appear? Plato would argue that we are not who is to know or can know, but by alluding to images that we can relate to, and constructing them in a rational way, we can come closer to understanding, or at least opening ourselves up to the possibility, of Plato's ultimate, intelligible world.

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