

# Education Concepts of the Cave Allegory

## A Case Study of Plato's Metaphors inside the Cave

Yu Liu\* Tianlan Liu\*

Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College (UIC)  
jackliuyu@foxmail.com\* xtinaliu@foxmail.com\*

### ABSTRACT

Many institutions of higher education are now advocating the concepts of whole-person education, hoping that the personality, physique, and knowledge of the students who are receiving education on campus will be comprehensively improved to become a "whole-person" through four-year university training. The ultimate goal is for students to take the initiative to discover their own uniqueness. However, students are often confined to the teaching system and syllabus where they are even more restricted to the given topics in assignment writings, which their creativities are limited. Students spend far more time on homework and exams than others, such as club activities and physical exercises. When introducing Plato's cave allegory into the practice of the actual university life, the cave represents a state that students lack a specific ability of exploring ungiven knowledge proactively. The role of students is the self-ignorant prisoner in the cave. Therefore, students need a guide in cave to help them break the bondages of their souls and bodies, lighting their way out of the cave. Education plays a decisive role in guiding students towards self-knowledge, which echoes the Plato's idea of "turning the direction". It is a significant process which students transition from the world of self-blindness to the real knowable world.

**Keywords:** Whole-person Education, Plato, Cave Allegory, Metaphor.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Plato's view, both soul and body need to be exercised. The body needs to be healthy through physical sports. The soul must turn to achieve the stage of the "good" indeed. In fact, most students are restricted by various influences on campus, and it is difficult for them to independently generate their own ideas. The acquired study ability of individual needs external guidance. The educators play an important role in the whole-person education to guide students to realize their own real uniqueness. The education in schools has been transformed from individually teacher-led will to student-centred humanistic self-knowledge period. Thus, students will slowly walk out of the cave.

This article mainly analyses problems inside the cave and will be divided into three parts. The first part is to briefly explain the principle of Plato's cave and its connection with education. The second part is to discuss body and soul which are bound in the cave. The third is about the relationship between the light and shadow.

## 2. WHAT IS "CAVE"?

Plato uses the cave as a metaphor to illustrate a state that people have not yet master the ability of pursuing knowledge. The prisoners in the cave only have the first given nature, which only can be recognized and used when getting outside the cave. In short, the cave is a visible world in which people live in. Being in a cave must be aware of one's own nature at the same time, which is also a prerequisite for an individual to receive education. One part of description is extracted from *The Republic* (Plato and Blackburn, 2018)<sup>6</sup> here to express the structure of the cave more clearly:

"Make an image of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind. See human beings as though they were in an underground cave. Like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the

prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, but like the partition's puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets" (514a-515e)<sup>6</sup>.

This is the initial state of understanding of people living in cave. People are bound in body and soul, but they don't realize that they are in the cave, and people don't know the world outside the cave. For individuals who have lived in cave for a long time, it is difficult for them to get rid of the shackles. "A person is liberated from his shackles not through his own efforts, but by forcing him to turn to the bright teacher" (Yang, 2020, p.28)<sup>10</sup>. In such a process of getting out of the cave, the individual needs to be guided by education. In the process of being forced out, this kind of "forced" just shows that although being good is the nature of the human soul, the soul will be addicted to beliefs and imaginations (2020)<sup>10</sup>. To turn in the right direction, one must resort to a certain compulsory education.

### **3. THE BONDAGE OF BODY AND SOUL IN THE CAVE**

Physical bondage is the most primitive stage. Prisoners can only see shadows in a cave, which is the surface of things. According to Plato, "If they were able to discuss things with one another, don't you believe they would hold that they are naming these things going by before them that they see" (515b)<sup>6</sup>. People cannot see anything else, and would regard the shadow as a real thing. In other words, prisoners can only stay in the cave for their entire lives and cannot leave. This is the basic living condition of these primitive people. However, if you want to see the flame itself, you must break free from the bondage of your body. The liberation of soul is based on the physical freedom of the body.

Plato likens the cave to our real life. People are bound in this real situation, but most people cannot realize that all they have is imagination. Prisoners live in this world and have formed a set of common moral concepts. They are all dominated by it and lack the ability to think independently. Prisoners cannot recognize their own circumstances, and cannot examine the world in which they live. This is what Plato says is the bondage of the soul in the cave. People cannot know anything except passively seeing the shadows cast by man-made objects. Living in the cave, the human soul is bound by the solidified traditions. Because people have been in the cave for a long time, the liberation of this bound soul will be very difficult. In the way of human existence, people are also accustomed to life in bondage. There is no external pressure, and people will not easily get out of habit (Yang 2020, p.33)<sup>10</sup>. In Plato's view, as the existence of "ignorance", people cannot see the truth. Therefore, if the people who are bound in the cave want to break through this habit, they need the help of external forces. This external force is education and guidance,

which affect in both the body and the soul. Their bodies cannot rotate and their souls are bound by traditional customs. Individuals are trapped in perceivable caves which is in a state of ignorance and unconsciousness.

Plato states, "Just as an eye cannot be turned around from darkness to light except by turning the whole body" (518c)<sup>6</sup>. The prisoners in the cave cannot turn his body, only see these shadowy things in front. All the people in the cave understand about the world which comes from the shadow in the cave. Shadow is also the starting point for understanding the world. Based on this shadow, individuals have the possibility of seeing firelight and man-made objects.

The people in the cave are based on seeing with their eyes, whether it is shadow or light. This kind of observation can only stay in the visible world. What the prisoner is watching is the appearance but not necessarily true. To truly see the essence of the world is transcending the physical part, that is, to use soul understanding. Plato believes that the people in the cave themselves have inner eyes on the soul, through which they can actively recognize the current situation. However, as people who are physically restrained, they cannot turn their bodies. "This means that the soul itself has eyesight but cannot grasp the right direction. This kind of correct steering is very important for people. This is individual acceptance, the process of turning the soul through education" (Yang, 2020, p.35)<sup>10</sup>.

What the prisoner can see in the cave is only some vague phantoms, but cannot really see clearly and understand the true face of things. What they have is some given uncertain experience. They do not have their own independent thinking ability and will only passively accept information and opinions from the outside. It is precisely because they will never be able to recognize the knowable world.

Today, the minority of people can really recognize own life situation. What the individual sees is only an illusory appearance, and they can only stay in the cave without being able to realize the turning of the soul and walk out of the cave.

### **4. HOW TO "LIGHT" THE PRISONERS?**

In a cave, the prisoners can only see shadows and everything else through the light. Plato's metaphor indicates that the light in the cave is same as the sun outside. "It shows a necessary part of our existence, the bearing of undesirable, yet unchangeable, components of reality and our status within it" (Segev, 2019, p.40)<sup>9</sup>. It is a necessary element for people in caves to see things clearly. The presence of the light in the cave is not an accidental metaphor. It has a special meaning with the ancient Greeks. Fire is the symbol of the existence of the living, the medium through which man affirms his world,

and the source of the light seen in the cave (Yang, 2020, p.34)<sup>10</sup>.

Light is very important for the people in the cave because it is the first step to enlightenment. “The author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason” (Segev, 2019, p.47)<sup>9</sup>. Because of the fire, there is the shadow of the wall, which is the caveman's first understanding of the world. Among the common secular concept, people usually describe the educators as the light on the students' learning path, who guide them to success.

In the same way, when the cave concept is introduced into this habitual thinking, the educators are the ferrymen of fire and light in the cave, and the students are the prisoners trapped in the cave. However, this needs to be viewed dialectically as to whether educators are true “light” for their students. “Anyone a person encounters can act as a puppet handler, who passes on unfounded or unexamined information or opinions, or who does not understand the nature of the responsibility one person has for another” (Michelle Renee, 2002, p.32)<sup>8</sup>. Educators' thinking dimensions, attitudes towards students, and grading standards have different effects on students. For example, educators cannot guide students to unleash their limitless creativity in such writing tasks within a limited scope, which is not an interaction that leads students out of the cave. If educators only impart past knowledge without updating knowledge sources and innovations in time, as prisoners in the cave, students may have fear and anxiety about the reality and the future, and finally retreat to the edge of the cave step by step, further away from the exit of the cave.

The light is a real source of knowledge, a way to confirm really living in a cave. The light is “the medium of existence in this world” (Yang, 2020, p.35)<sup>10</sup>. If educators actively dialectically look at the difference between the past and the present, and constantly update their knowledge, then under their leadership, the prisoners in the cave can learn the method of critical thinking in the process of stepping out of the cave. In the end, the prisoners will choose to come out of the cave. For the prisoners, the first step is to unshackle the chains, which bind physically, and then they can turn to the light to study the true cause of the light in the cave, and to see and recognize the reality of life in the cave. Individual learning is the first knowledge of their own situation from the bondage of ignorance to free. The school or teacher directs the individual's body towards the light. The truth is that the light is not the outside sun which does not tell the individual about the outside world, but the firelight can lead the prisoners out of the cave eventually. The prisoners themselves are the main subjects to go out and know themselves.

## 5. CONCLUSION

For people who live in caves, this is the reality of their existence. Such a metaphor can be applied to the world today. The individuals always have to live in the cave, and the spiritual growth of man also has to be completed in the cave. As an individual, man cannot live apart from the social community (2020, p.36)<sup>10</sup>. Plato pointed out that the cave is our fundamental living condition. Thus, realizing our soul is most primitive state while the man inside the cave is in a state of ignorance. But inside the cave there is a light to illuminate, which is an important medium for the prisoners to learn about the world. It is only by living in the cave of real existence that the individual has the possibility of becoming a whole person.

Although there is a sun outside the cave, which is the symbol of the supreme good, the people inside the cave are not able to recognize. In short, for the individual, the cave is the real-life world, and the only way for the body and soul to break through the bondages is through the education in the cave. There may be a few surprised accidents that make people out of the cave to see the outside world, but very few of these people would return. At the same time, those who do choose to come back and guide the people out of the cave can still only describe the outside world using the light and shadow inside the cave. This cycle argues that the elements of the cave are the only means to civilize the prisoners.

Going back to the beginning question, the only solution is to make better use of resources within the school and redistribute the time for academics, personal education, and physical exercise so that in the limited four years of college, the development is more balanced to achieve the goal of the whole-person education.

This article only discusses the relationship between prisoners, lights, and shadows in the cave. Plato mentions some exceptional cases of prisoners who come out of the cave by accident. People who see the real world outside can be described as educators. Future research should shift from the role of education to the methods of education. The role of educators in returning to the cave should be detailed, and how they make prisoners believe in the real world as educators see. The educators encourage prisoners to think and distinguish between shadow and the outside knowable world.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I take a deep breath and sit in front of the computer, I feel incredibly powerful. I know I will finish this article, no matter how much tedious material I must read. Thanks for the little pretty inspiration that came to me when I was not expecting it. Thanks for the air conditioning in the library for keeping my head cool on a hot summer day. All in all, thanks for the great thoughts of Plato.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Egan, K. (1997). *The educated mind: how cognitive tools shape our understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [2] Holowchak, M. A. (2012;2013;). The paradox of public service jefferson, education, and the problem of Plato's cave. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 32(1), 73-86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-012-9322-7>
- [3] ISSITT, J. (2007). Evidence and metacognition in the new regime of truth: Figures of the autonomous learner on the walls of Plato's cave: Evidence and metacognition in the new regime of truth. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 41(3), 381-393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00580.x>
- [4] Katsnelson, R. (2007). cave maintenance and plato's paradox: On the readmission of poetry into general education in the republic. *Eudaimonia*, 4(1), 23.
- [5] KURZWEIL, E. (2000). *Fraternities to world-class education "in plato's cave" by alvin kernan (book review)*. PR Inc.
- [6] Plato, and Blackburn, S. (2018). *The Republic*. Clydesdale Press.
- [7] Propson, D. (2016). *The sophist in the cave: Education through names in plato's "republic"*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- [8] Pierczynski-Ward, M. R. (2002). *Plato's allegory of the cave: A guiding metaphor in teacher education*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- [9] Segev, A. (2019). Rationale for moral education: A reading in Plato's republic. *Interchange (Toronto. 1984)*, 50(1),39-56, from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-019-09347-3>
- [10] Yang, SHUYAO. (2020). *Individual learning and holistic adults* [Ge ti xue xi yu zheng quan cheng ren]. Hunan Normal University, MA thesis. <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFD202101&filename=1020322501.nh>