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Called to Teach: Brief Essays on the Meaning of Teaching



Out of the Cave and Into the Light

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In the middle of Plato's grand thought experiment, *The Republic*, Socrates describes the relationship between the soul and the good to a group of eager listeners. He explains, "Every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake. It divines that the good is something, but it is perplexed. It cannot adequately grasp what it is or acquire the sort of stable beliefs about the good that it has about other things. As a result, the soul misses the benefit that the good may provide" (*Republic* 505e).¹ Socrates' main interlocutor, Glaucon, is excited by this evocation of the good. He urges Socrates on, imploring him not to "desert us now with the end almost in sight" (*Republic* 506d). He assures Socrates that they will be "satisfied if he discusses the good as he discussed justice, moderation, and the rest of the virtues" (*Republic* 506d). Socrates replies, "that, my friend, would satisfy me too, but I'm afraid that I won't be up to it and that I'll disgrace myself and look ridiculous by trying. So let's abandon the quest for what the good itself is for the time being, for even to arrive at my own view about it is too big a topic for the discussion we are now having" (*Republic* 506d-e).

What is this? Socrates, relentless seeker of truth, stops here, just on the threshold of leading his fellow travelers to the good itself. Does he, the paradigmatic philosopher, simply give up, refusing to go along the rough, steep upward way of thought? Of course not. But perhaps recognizing the limitations of human reason, and certainly acknowledging the conceptual limitations of his interlocutors, Socrates offers an alternative method of inquiry. After presenting Glaucon with the

images of the Sun and the Divided Line to consider, Socrates next proffers the Cave, which describes our soul in its lack of education (*Republic* 514a).

Plato's Allegory of the Cave presents us with one of the most enduring images in the philosophical canon. Like Augustine's dramatic recollections of the pear-stealing episode and Descartes' thoughtful ruminations over the ball of wax, Plato's skillful use of descriptive language concisely evokes themes of startling intellectual complexity along with their nearly universal applicability. Here is a brief summary of the story that Socrates tells about "the soul in its uneducated state" (*Republic* 514a):

Imagine human beings living in an underground, cave-like dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their necks and legs fettered, able to see only in front of them. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. Also behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path . . . Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets . . . then also imagine that there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artifacts that project above it, statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. (*Republic* 514b)

Glaucon's initial response to this perplexing image no doubt mirrors our own response as contemporary readers: "It's a strange image you're describing and strange prisoners" (*Republic* 515a). But Socrates rightly tells him, "They're like us" (*Republic* 515a). Glaucon's response is quite typical and instructive for the education process. For example, one student of mine recently said, "Well, this is a nice little story that Plato wrote, but, you know, there really isn't any cave. At least, I know I'm not in one." This response is telling. Most students find it difficult to believe they are in any sort of cave, lacking access to truth. Able to retrieve whatever information (or misinformation) they need from the Internet, students often have difficulty believing that truth, not to mention "alternate facts," may not be immediately available to them.

As Socrates continues the story, we learn that the chains have been loosened on one of the prisoners. We are not told why. We are told that "one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his neck around, walk, and look up toward the light" (*Republic* 515c). We also learn that, "someone drags him out of the cave, by force, up the rough steep path, and doesn't let him go until he has dragged him into the light of the sun, the offspring of the good itself" (*Republic* 515e). It is important to note that the journey is strenuous. It takes a toll on the philosophical traveler. As the journey begins, the traveler "is in pain;" he is "dazzled [and] unable to see clearly" (*Republic* 515d). As he continues looking at the sunlight, which leads to the Good, "his eyes hurt," and he must be dragged "along the rough steep upward way" (*Republic* 515e). After experiencing these difficulties, the traveler becomes "distressed and annoyed" (*Republic* 516a). We may be uncomfortable with some of the language Plato uses to describe the educational process, particularly the metaphors of

force and violence. We are more comfortable seeing education as a means of motivation, as a process of facilitation, as the practice of freedom. We promote the active dimensions of learning and the enjoyment and empowerment that students feel.

Nonetheless, all educators surely resonate with at least some aspects of this stark description of the educator's role. Some days it definitely feels as though our students are kicking and screaming with all their might against our valiant attempts to provide them with information and insight. But we continue on, leaping higher, leading them out of the cave like Gatsby looking toward that green light at the end of the pier. In these endeavors, we would do well to remember that for Plato genuine freedom entails making the difficult journey to the good and that a measure of compulsion is necessary to begin the journey and also to motivate the return to the cave after making the ascent.

I see my role in the classroom as a calling. I aim at creating an intellectual space where students' chains will be loosened, where they will be compelled to leave the cave, where they will be guided to a point where they can recognize the limitations of their previous worldview and come to an understanding of a deeper sense of reality outside the cave. For Nietzsche and for many of his postmodern progeny, there is no reality outside the cave to discover; we are entirely defined by the social and historical circumstance of our being-in-the-world. However, it is important to emphasize that for Plato, there is a reality outside the cave. Once we see the light outside the cave, our perspective on the world changes. Indeed, in Plato's view, our souls change. For Plato, the soul is the immortal part of us that desires the Good but is distracted by the things of the physical world. When we are educated properly and exposed to the right conditions, the soul is "turned around toward the true things" (*Republic* 519b). The soul now contemplates reality itself rather than imaginary shadows of reality.

This conversion to the philosophical or intellectual life is the purpose of both Platonic and Socratic pedagogy, and it should also be a primary goal of Christian education. Christian educators should resonate with this image—regardless of their particular discipline—for we are all engaged in the Socratic task of soul leading. We seek to lead students out of ignorance and into a greater understanding of the world. But why? Why do we engage in this task of soul leading? The soul of the teacher is one that has itself been liberated, and this soul has pity for those who remain behind (*Republic* 516c). As a result, it also has an obligation to help others grow in their understanding of truth as well. It is an act of compassion: After all, Plato tells us that once the prisoner gets used to the light of the sun, the existence outside the cave is quite pleasant. The former prisoner looks around and sees the real beauty of the world—the stars, the sun, the trees, lakes and rivers—rather than the dark images that flash across the cave. The former prisoner is, in fact, quite content to cultivate a new existence here in the light. Simply put, the soul longs to be free, to find its real home and abide

there forever (*Republic* 516b-e). We educators can hope not only to lead our students to their real home but to inspire them to liberate others as well.

¹ All *Republic* quotes are taken from Alan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (Basic Books, 1991).