

The Teacher who Returns to the Cave: Education and Knowledge as Liberation in Plato's Alleged Allegation of the Cave

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Allegory of the Cave, presented in Book VII of The Republic, as a philosophical narrative about formation, knowledge, and teaching responsibility. It asks to what extent the teacher may be understood as the liberated prisoner who returns to the cave to support the liberation of those who remain chained. The study is a qualitative, bibliographic, and hermeneutic theoretical essay that brings Plato into dialogue with educational thinkers, especially Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Jacques Rancière, Henry Giroux, Hannah Arendt, John Dewey, and Gert Biesta. The article argues that the analogy is productive when the return to the cave signifies ethical commitment, pedagogical mediation, and the creation of conditions for students to question the shadows that shape their perception of the world. It becomes authoritarian, however, when the teacher is granted a monopoly over light and learners are reduced to passive beings. Knowledge is liberating not because it is transferred from one consciousness to another, but because it enables a turning of the gaze, critical inquiry, dialogue, and reflective action. The conclusion is that the teacher who returns to the cave does not replace old shadows with personal certainties; rather, the teacher shares intellectual tools so that each subject may take part in building a common and necessarily unfinished way out.

Keywords: Allegory of the Cave; Education; Teacher; Knowledge; Emancipation

Introduction

The so-called Myth of the Cave, more precisely the Allegory of the Cave, remains among the best-known philosophical images in the Western tradition because it condenses, in a single narrative, questions relating to truth, appearance, human formation, power, and the responsibility of those who know. At the beginning of Book VII of The Republic, Socrates proposes comparing the human condition, regarding education and the lack thereof, to the situation of people

kept since childhood in an underground dwelling. Chained, they see only shadows projected on the wall and mistake these images for the totality of reality. The initial reference to education allows us to understand that the cave is not only an abstract theory of knowledge: it is also a narrative about what it means to learn, to abandon habitual evidence, and to assume responsibility before others (Plato [1], 514a-521b). In everyday language, the character who leaves the cave is usually called a fugitive. The term is expressive, but requires precision. In Plato's account, he is freed from his chains and led to turn his

body, walk, and look at what he could not perceive before. His passage from darkness to light is not comfortable. The brightness causes him pain, real objects initially seem less clear than the shadows, and understanding requires time for adaptation. Knowledge, therefore, does not arise as a simple accumulation of information; it implies displacement, a rupture of perceptual habits, and a reconstruction of the criteria by which appearance and reality are distinguished.

After contemplating the outside world and understanding the Sun as the principle of intelligibility, the freed prisoner returns to the cave. This movement is crucial to the educational analogy developed in this article. The return reveals that knowledge cannot be thought of solely as a private achievement or individual privilege. He who has seen differently is called upon to share his experience, even if his words are met with distrust, laughter, or hostility. Upon returning, his eyes must readjust to the darkness; therefore, he may appear disoriented to his former companions, who interpret his difficulty as proof that leaving was useless or dangerous. The threat of violence against those who try to free them dramatizes the resistance that accompanies every break with established certainties (Plato [1], 516e-517a). This is where the problem of the study is formulated: to what extent can the teacher be understood as the liberated prisoner who returns to the cave to collaborate in the liberation of the others? The hypothesis defended is that the image illuminates the teaching function when the teacher is conceived as someone who has traveled certain paths of training and returns to make public the knowledge, research methods, and languages that allow students to broaden their relationship with the world. However, the same image can legitimize authoritarian practices if the teacher is presented as the sole possessor of truth, while the students are merely ignorant and awaiting salvation.

The overall objective is to critically analyze the analogy between the prisoner's return and the teacher's work, considering knowledge as a possibility for liberation. Specifically, it seeks to interpret the main moments of the allegory as formative movements; to discuss the ethical and political responsibility of the teacher; to relate the exit from the cave to the notions of dialogue, autonomy, experience, and emancipation; and to delineate the risks of a paternalistic reading, in which teaching would be equivalent to passively leading the other to a pre-established truth. The relevance of this topic stems from a persistent tension in education. On the one hand, teaching implies that someone assumes responsibility for presenting knowledge that the student does not yet possess. On the other hand, no emancipatory learning takes place when the student is treated as an object of intervention. The pedagogical relationship therefore contains an asymmetry of experience and responsibility, but this asymmetry should not translate into inequality of humanity or intelligence. Dialogue with Freire, hooks, Rancière, Giroux, Arendt, Dewey, and Biesta allows us to explore this tension without abandoning either the importance of the teacher or the agency of the student.

Methodological Approach

This work is characterized as a theoretical essay with a qualitative approach, developed through bibliographic research and hermeneutic interpretation. The base text is Book VII of *The Republic*, especially the set of passages that describes the condition of the prisoners, their liberation, ascension, contemplation of the Sun, and return to the cave (Plato [1], 514a-521b). The choice of Stephanus's numbering, traditionally used in Platonic studies, allows for the location of passages independently of pagination differences between editions.

The reading of the allegory was placed in dialogue with works of educational theory that problematize emancipation, authority, dialogue, experience, and teaching. Paulo Freire and bell hooks offer foundations for understanding education as a practice of freedom; Jacques Rancière challenges the figure of the emancipatory teacher by defending the equality of intelligences; Henry Giroux interprets the teacher as a transformative intellectual; Hannah Arendt discusses the responsibility of presenting the world to younger generations; John Dewey relates learning, experience, and investigation; and Gert Biesta emphasizes the open and risky nature of the educational encounter. Studies that directly link the cave to education were also considered, especially Santos and Nogueira [2] and Silva [3].

The Cave as a Narrative of Formation

The first pedagogical strength of the allegory lies in showing that ignorance does not simply correspond to the absence of content in the mind. The prisoners possess an organized worldview: they recognize sequences, name shadows, and attribute prestige to whoever best anticipates what will appear on the wall. Their knowledge functions within the conditions given to them. The problem is not an absolute lack of intelligence, but the narrowing of the field of experience. Chains, body position, and repetition of images delimit what can be seen, thought, and considered true. In educational terms, this prevents the student from being identified with an empty consciousness. Every individual arrives at school with interpretations, memories, beliefs, and ways of naming reality; the formative task begins when this repertoire can be examined, expanded, and confronted with other ways of knowing. The second moment is that of liberation and the turning of the body. The prisoner needs to move to see the fire and the objects that produce the shadows. This bodily gesture symbolizes a change of orientation: learning is turning attention to what was previously outside the field of vision. Instead of imagining education as the introduction of sight into blind eyes, Plato relates it to the ability to guide an already existing faculty towards what deserves to be known. Education does not manufacture intelligence from nothing; it works on the direction of the gaze, on the habits that select the relevant, and on the willingness to remain in the face of something difficult (Plato [1], 518b-518d).

The pain caused by light prevents a romantic understanding of learning. New knowledge can disrupt identities, expose contradictions, and demand the abandonment of explanations that offered security. Discomfort is not, in itself, a guarantee of truth, but it indicates that learning involves more than receiving pleasant answers. At the same time, the prisoner's gradual adaptation teaches that no one instantly goes from shadows to contemplating the Sun. He first observes external shadows, then reflections, objects, stars, and only at the end, the Sun. There is a pedagogical temporality: mediations, exercises, language, memory, and revisiting allow the student to progressively inhabit a field of knowledge. Contemplating the Sun represents access to a principle that makes other things intelligible. In Platonic philosophy, the Sun refers to the Idea of the Good, the foundation of knowledge and a just life. In a contemporary educational reading, the teacher should not be identified with the Sun, nor should the curriculum be transformed into an indisputable doctrine. The relevant point is that knowledge seeks relationships, reasons, and criteria that go beyond immediate impression. Education leads from questioning what appears to investigating how it appears, why it appears, and what consequences result from accepting it as true. To know is to become capable of justifying, comparing, revising, and being accountable for one's own judgment.

The process is only complete with the return. Individual ascension does not conclude the formation of the philosopher, for he who has achieved a broader vision must return to ordinary life and participate in its conflicts. Silva [3] emphasizes that the allegory articulates knowledge, courage, and pedagogical responsibility. The return transforms knowledge into commitment: he who learns becomes responsible for the social use of what he has learned. In this sense, education is not liberating only because it allows the individual to escape personal limitations, but because it calls upon him to collaborate in building conditions in which others can also look, ask, and act.

The Teacher as the Returning Prisoner

The analogy proposed in this article identifies the teacher with the returning prisoner, not simply with the one who has left. The verb "to return" defines the public dimension of teaching. Before teaching, the teacher has traveled paths of study, confronted specialized languages, appropriated methods, and learned to recognize problems that were not evident in their initial experience. Their training does not definitively remove them from the cave; it enables them to return to the common space and make accessible cultural goods that should not remain restricted. Teacher knowledge acquires meaning when it is transformed into presence, explanation, questioning, listening, demonstration, and the organization of learning situations. This return should not be understood as a gesture of moral superiority. The teacher does not return because the others are inferior, but because he assumes a specific responsibility towards them. Arendt [4] understands education as the field in which adults are responsible for the world and present it to newcomers. This responsibility does not

mean demanding blind adherence to the existing world; it means not abandoning students to their own devices nor pretending that all interpretations have equal consistency. The teacher is responsible for the selection and presentation of knowledge, while at the same time opening space for the new generation to judge it, renew it, and produce something unforeseen.

The authority implied in this responsibility differs from authoritarianism. Pedagogical authority stems from commitment to the subject matter, preparation, coherence, and a willingness to be accountable for the choices made. Authoritarianism, on the other hand, transforms the teaching position into immunity to questioning. The teacher who returns to the cave needs to explain why certain content matters, what evidence supports it, what controversies surround it, and what limits remain. Their word carries weight, but it cannot be presented as the final word. The light they discovered is not private property; it is a field of investigation to which students should have access. Giroux [5] offers a formulation compatible with this reading by defending the teacher as a transformative intellectual. Teaching is not reduced to the technical execution of materials defined by others. The teacher interprets the curriculum, relates knowledge to social conflicts, chooses forms of participation, and creates conditions for knowledge to become an instrument for understanding the world. Just as a returning prisoner needs to relearn to see in the dark, the teacher needs to translate without impoverishing, to connect without trivializing, and to recognize the codes of the group with which they work. Teaching requires navigating between worlds of different languages.

Returning to the cave also carries risk. The prisoners may reject the account because it threatens the criteria by which they have built recognition, security, and belonging. In school, resistance to knowledge is not explained solely by laziness or lack of interest. Content may contradict family beliefs, expose inequalities, displace identities, or seem disconnected from concrete life. There are also previous school experiences marked by humiliation, failure, or silencing. The teacher needs to interpret these resistances without romanticizing them and without converting them into moral condemnation of the student. The challenge is to build enough trust so that doubt is not experienced exclusively as an attack.

Knowledge as Liberation: Dialogue, Experience and Praxis

Freire's [6] critique of banking education is crucial at this point. When the teacher imagines himself to be the owner of the light and deposits content into students conceived as receptacles, he reproduces the structure of chains: he keeps the subjects immobile, now facing the shadows authorized by the school. The problem-posing alternative does not eliminate teaching or the teacher's role. It reorganizes the pedagogical relationship so that knowledge is presented in dialogue with real questions, confronted with experience, and converted into instruments for reading and transforming the world. The

teacher teaches, but also investigates with the students the meanings and effects of what he teaches. In **Pedagogy of Autonomy**, Freire [7] associates teaching practice with methodological rigor, research, respect for students' knowledge, critical thinking, and awareness of incompleteness. These principles allow for a reinterpretation of Plato's ascent without reducing it to unilateral guidance. The student needs to find reasons to move forward, test what they see, and build relationships between concepts and reality. Respecting their initial knowledge does not mean keeping them confined to what is already known; it means treating it as a legitimate starting point for a process of expansion. The teacher's authority is manifested in the quality of the mediations and in the commitment not to abandon the student when the light causes confusion. bell hooks [8] expands this perspective by conceiving education as a practice of freedom and the classroom as a space where participation, voice, and concrete experience can challenge forms of domination.

Pedagogical transgression is not empty disorder; it is the refusal of boundaries that silence certain subjects and naturalize singular versions of the world. Applied to the cave, this conception demands asking who controls the fire, who carries the objects, whose voices define the names of the shadows, and which experiences have been excluded from the curriculum. Liberating knowledge makes visible not only that there are projections, but also the social processes by which some projections become official. Deweyan research adds a practical dimension. For Dewey [9], learning involves confronting problematic situations, observing conditions, formulating hypotheses, and examining consequences. The school can organize experiences in which students not only receive conclusions but also follow the path by which a statement becomes justifiable. In a science class, this means relating concepts to observations and evidence; in history, comparing sources and perspectives; in language, analyzing how discursive choices produce meaning; in mathematics, understanding relationships and arguments, and not just repeating procedures. The method of knowledge becomes part of the content. The convergence of these contributions leads to several didactic implications. The first is to begin with the shadows without ending there: everyday representations, news, images, memories, and spontaneous explanations can initiate the work, provided they are questioned.

The second is to make explicit the mechanisms of knowledge production: sources, criteria, concepts, methods, and controversies need to appear, because school truth should not depend solely on trust in authority. The third is to guarantee time for elaboration, recognizing that adaptation to the light is gradual. The fourth is to create opportunities for expression and reasoned confrontation, so that the student learns to support and revise positions. The fifth is to relate understanding and action, allowing knowledge to produce participation in everyday life. In this context, dialogue is not equivalent to a conversation where all answers are equally valid. It requires listening and reciprocity, but also criteria. An education committed to freedom cannot abandon evidence, coherence, and responsibility in

the name of a false horizontality. The teacher needs to correct errors, present distinctions, and show consequences, without transforming correction into humiliation. To dialogue is to recognize the other as a subject capable of understanding reasons. Equality lies in dignity and the power to think; difference lies in the paths, repertoires, and responsibilities assumed in the educational situation.

Limits of Analogy: The Teacher is Neither the Sun nor the Savior

The image of the teacher as a liberated prisoner has power, but also a danger: it can fuel a salvationist narrative. In this narrative, the teacher would appear as a fully enlightened subject, tasked with rescuing a mass of people incapable of thinking for themselves from ignorance. Besides being ethically problematic, this interpretation contradicts the very experience of education. No one can see for another, and no explanation guarantees that the student will achieve the expected intellectual progress. The teacher can open paths, offer support, demand attention, and demonstrate procedures; however, the appropriation of knowledge involves the irreplaceable activity of the learner. Rancière [10] radicalizes this warning by upholding the equality of intelligences and denouncing the cycle in which endless explanation produces dependence on the explainer. His critique does not demand abolishing teachers, content, or requirements. It compels us to ask whether teacher intervention increases the student's potential or continually confirms their supposed incapacity. The emancipatory teacher is not the one who leads the student to repeat their own intelligence, but the one who demands that they use their own, verify, seek relationships, and account for the path taken. From this perspective, liberation is not carrying someone out of the cave; it is rejecting the belief that they were born destined for chains. Biesta [11] contributes by defining education as an undertaking permeated by risk. Educating subjects is not about producing objects according to specifications.

The student's response may be unexpected, the question may shift the planning, and knowledge may be used in ways that the teacher does not control. This risk does not represent a defect to be eliminated, but a condition of freedom. A pedagogy that guaranteed all results in advance would need to negate the subjectivity of the participants. The return to the cave, therefore, does not ensure the liberation of others; it inaugurates an encounter whose effects depend on singular responses and collective conditions. There is still a political limit. The cave is not formed solely by individual beliefs; its chains can include material inequalities, racism, sexism, ableism, precarious employment, censorship, and lack of access to cultural goods. The teacher alone cannot dismantle structures that extend beyond the classroom. The recognition of their responsibility cannot serve to transfer to them the entire burden of social and institutional problems. Educational liberation requires public policies, working conditions, libraries, accessible technologies, social protection, and communities capable of sustaining the right to learn. The analogy becomes more

fitting when the teacher is described as a responsible companion on the journey. They know parts of the path, anticipate difficulties, and are responsible for organizing the experience, but they also listen, learn, and recognize that there are paths they hadn't imagined. They are not the Sun, because no single individual embodies goodness or truth. They are not a savior, because freedom cannot be given as an object. Their role is to keep open the possibility of change: to draw attention, offer tools, protect the right to question, and bear witness that the world can be seen from more than one perspective.

The Contemporary Cave and Education for Critical Reading

The relevance of the allegory today does not stem from a simple equivalence between the cave wall and digital screens. Technologies broaden access, expression, cooperation, and learning; they are not, by nature, new trends. The comparison becomes pertinent when one observes that much of contemporary experience arrives through selected, cut-up, and ordered representations before reaching the user. The abundance of images and messages can produce the impression of direct contact with reality, although what is seen results from framing, interests, circulation routines, and barely visible technical mechanisms. Silva [3] already related information, cyberspace, and consciousness to the Platonic problem of the passage between appearance and understanding. In this context, the task of the returning teacher is not to demonize media outlets or replace one source with another considered infallible. It is to teach critical reading procedures: identifying authorship and context; distinguishing between testimony, opinion, advertising, and research; locating evidence for a claim; comparing versions; recognizing manipulations of language and image; verifying dates; understanding uncertainties; and revising conclusions when better data emerges.

The fundamental pedagogical gesture consists of shifting the question from "what am I seeing?" to "how was this produced, by whom, with what criteria, and with what effects?" Critical reading must include self-criticism. One of the most dangerous appropriations of the cave is imagining that only others live in shadows. Groups, institutions, and disciplines can build their own walls by selecting convenient evidence and ignoring divergent experiences. Liberating education teaches one to be suspicious of appearances without turning suspicion into cynicism, and to seek truth without confusing it with personal certainty. The teacher offers an example when they make their sources explicit, acknowledge what they don't know, and publicly correct an error. Thus, they demonstrate that leaving the cave is a permanent exercise in intellectual responsibility.

Final Considerations

The analysis allowed us to conclude that the teacher can be understood as the liberated prisoner who returns to the cave, provided the metaphor is interpreted critically. The return represents the decision to transform knowledge into public responsibility. The teacher travels paths of study, appropriates languages and methods, and re-

turns to the common space to create conditions for access, investigation, and participation. Their role is not only to inform that shadows exist, but to help examine how they are produced, what interests sustain their authority, and what experiences allow them to be overcome. Knowledge proves liberating when it produces a shift in perspective, broadens experience, fosters the ability to justify judgments, and encourages action in the shared world. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to the transmission of ready-made answers. Freire and hooks highlight the centrality of dialogue, voice, and praxis; Dewey shows that understanding presupposes investigating and reconstructing experiences; Giroux and Arendt reinforce the public responsibility of the teacher; Rancière prevents this responsibility from becoming mere tutelage; and Biesta reminds us that education remains open to the unpredictable responses of free individuals. The teacher who returns to the cave does not come back to take the place of the Sun, nor to replace old shadows with projections of his own authority. He returns to support questions, share instruments of verification, present still unknown worlds, and accompany the difficult process of adapting to the light. His greatest contribution is not to lead everyone to an identical exit, but to make the construction of common exits thinkable and practical. From this perspective, educating is participating in a liberation that never ends: each discovery expands the visible world and, at the same time, reveals new regions that still need to be explored.

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