

The Mark of a Solid Thought

By Ryan Beck

Imagine what life in the American South during the early 1800's might have been like; one passing through the countryside of a Southern state might feel insignificant upon viewing the vast fields of cash-crops and imposing mansions of those who held dominion over them. However, one would find that this façade of an idyllically beautiful rural community was crafted by those who labored under the horrors of enslavement. While an outsider could merely marvel at what slave labor had produced, one who lived in slavery would see the same things in a completely different perspective. The institution of slavery is an excellent real-life example of Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave." Plato's allegory serves to explain how truth is hidden from the masses; he states that what humans know is only the result of what a false reality has bestowed upon them. This is a fitting description of a slave's life; he is born into bondage and is told things that are fabricated as justification for why he must call one master. In Plato's story, however, one of these prisoners manages to escape from his chains, is dragged out of the cave, and finds truth. When he finds truth, he is at first dumbfounded by it but eventually comes to accept it. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* is a first-hand account of what one who escaped the confines of a fabricated reality might experience.

In his allegory, Plato stipulates that the majority of humans live life without knowing what truth is. As he describes the situation: "Human beings...are in it [the cave] 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... [and they] see along this wall [above them] human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall..." (Bloom 193). This image of people who can only see in front of them shadows of things carried by others raises the issue of whether or not what they can see is real. Frederick Douglass lived his early life in this manner; he was born into slavery and denied knowledge about the most basic of things such as his birth date and his parents' identities. In this manner, Douglass is comparable to the prisoners in the cave because he is born into bondage, shielded from the outside world, and forced to remain in a submissive role. Like a prisoner in Plato's allegory, Douglass eventually becomes exposed to the outside world. While Plato's prisoner is freed from his bonds in an unexplained manner, Douglass is granted a similar fortune; he is sent to Baltimore and given basic knowledge of reading and writing by a woman who has not yet been touched by slavery's corruptive touch. Reading and writing are to a slave what sunlight is to Plato's prisoner; they serve as a means for exposing truth. Plato's prisoner is exposed to truth once the sun casts its light on real objects and Douglass finds truth in things that he is able to read as a result of learning to read and write. One of Douglass's masters informs his mistress of what effect knowledge can have on a slave: "If you teach that nigger [Douglass] how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master" (Douglass 29). During his tenure as a house servant in Baltimore, Douglass has honed his reading and writing skills, but he is eventually sent back to a farm in Maryland's countryside. There, he attempts to show his fellow slaves that slavery is a brutally oppressive, immoral institution and that there exist outsiders that recognize its illegitimacy and hypocritical justification. By doing this, Douglass embarks on the process of sharing knowledge of what he has recently learned from being exposed to the world that exists outside the confines of slavery.

Plato proclaims that anyone who finds truth is obliged to return to the masses and teach them about it. Unfortunately, he also said that—at least at first—people would challenge the new ideas and reject them in favor of continuing to accept what they have always known as truth. This was an obstacle that Frederick Douglass faces upon his return to the countryside. Upon his return to the farm, he seeks to educate his fellow slaves and help them escape the confines of the horrid institution. Unfortunately, his plan does not quite work as well as he would have liked it to; an escape attempt is organized, but it is foiled on the eve of its execution by Douglass's overseer and master. However, because Douglass has knowledge of what the outside world is like—he gained a concept of what freedom was like from his experiences in Baltimore—he has a greater motivation to leave slavery forever. Within a year of this failed attempt, Douglass eventually does formulate a successful escape plan and gains the freedom that he so desires. His first few months of freedom are analogous to Plato's prisoner's reaction to real sunlight—it is a process of adaptation. Douglass faces many new problems as a freedman, but he also toils to promote a greater good and bring truth to his oppressed brethren.

Once he becomes a member of free society, Douglass notes that racism is still a part of life. He realizes that racism was still prevalent in the workplace, but he also realizes that there is a movement that was growing in opposition of racism and slavery—abolitionism. Prominent abolitionist leaders such as William Lloyd Garrison become aware of Douglass and his experience and seek to recruit him as a speaker for the cause. Accepting this offer is yet another commonality that he shares with Plato's prisoner; in doing so, he becomes an advocate of truth on a greater level. In order to bring down the institution of slavery, the arguments that support it have to be removed. One of the arguments lending support to slavery is analogous to a component of Plato's allegory; slaveholders that used Christianity to justify slavery were

comparable to the fire that projected shadows to the prisoners in the cave. Both are fallible explanations that attempt to justify the prisoners' (or slaves') conditions. Douglass's account of this is as follows: "I...hate the corrupt, slaveholding, woman-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land [the slaveholders' Christianity]...I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels" (Douglass 75). The slaveholders' interpretation of Christianity can be compared to one of the shadows projected on the walls of the cave—it served as something that justified the institution of slavery. It seems that the now famous allegory of the cave is as applicable to Douglass's liberation from slavery as it was to Plato's conception of what the educational system of Ancient Greece should have been like.

Plato's allegory of the cave is an excellent parallel to Frederick Douglass's escape from the institution of slavery. Aside from the actual events that took place, the experiences of both Douglass and Plato's freed prisoner are very similar in nature. Douglass escapes from a cave of sorts, learns of something outside of it, and then returns in an attempt to educate those who do not have the same privilege as him. In this respect, Douglass's experiences, as well as Plato's initial intent of using the allegory as a metaphor for education, can be used to draw parallels to how truth is dealt with in modern times. While slavery no longer exists in America, it still exists in other parts of the world. While slavery exists in other parts of the world, there will be those who will try to justify it; another "cave" will be created, so to speak—someone has to create something that will be presented to the slaves that will serve as justification for why they are enslaved. While still enslaved, this will be the only truth that these people will have been exposed to; think of it as another puppet-show in front of a fire. Only when one sees the sun—or, truth—can a challenge be made to the widely accepted ideas that govern the actions of those in

power. The only way that progress or reform can come about is through directly comparing differing ideas; eventually, one will gain strength and become the dominant idea. Due to the dynamic nature of politics, reform—or at the very least, minimal change—is inevitable. The fact that the allegory of the cave has withstood the test of time and proved relevant to a number of topics other than education—such as Frederick Douglass’s escape from slavery—is the mark of a truly solid philosophical thought. It is ideas like these that govern the ways in which Western thought is developed, advanced, and applied to society.