Douglass's Cave

By Benjamin Barnard

Frederick Douglass relates the story of his life as a slave in his *Narrative*, and when the events that formed his background are compared with Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in *The Republic*, it becomes quite clear that there is a universal ideal upheld in both stories. Plato discusses, in theoretical terms, what would happen if a man were kept without knowledge, and Frederick Douglass relates his own life story which is about what happened as he was kept away from knowledge. At its heart, Douglass’s story is a perfect illustration of not only Plato’s allegory, but also the warning that is given at the end of his telling of it, that it is the job of those who have seen the light to return to the cave and instruct and help those who cannot yet leave.

In *The Republic*, Plato is relating a hypothetical situation presented to him by his teacher, Socrates. It involves a group of men in a cave that have limited access to the knowledge of the real world. He describes the situation like this:

“... they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance ... They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds ... Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. ... also see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone ... some of the carriers utter sounds while others are silent ...” (Plato, p. 515)

Essentially, what is taking place here is that these men have never been allowed to see the outside world. They have no concept of the true nature of the ghostly shadows that are presented before them. As the firelight is behind and above them and the puppeteers move their objects just
above the barrier into the prisoners' line of sight, one can use a moderate amount of imagination to understand how deceptive such a sight would be, even for someone who has had education. As these people have never had education before, two different facts are almost certainly true. They almost certainly do not know what the real world is like, and they also almost certainly do not know that they do not have complete information on the world at large.

This is similar to Frederick Douglass's life story in and of the fact that he does not know, truly, what life outside of bondage is like, and he does not know that he is misinformed. Douglass was a slave in the early 19th century. A black man, he was rebellious and became educated. This education enabled him to garner his escape. For example, when Douglass first goes to Baltimore, the Auld family, who takes in charge from his owner, gives him an interesting experience. Mrs. Auld begins to teach him the alphabet. Her husband insists that she not do that. "Learning would spoil the best [slave] in the world" (Douglass, p. 29) is what he has to say on the subject. Mr. Auld is holding back Douglass the same way that the slave-owning, agrarian South attempted to do during the entire time that they held slaves. Education is the means that Douglass needs to escape. With it, he is able to understand notices, forge documents, and most importantly of all, he is able to use what he knows from all facets of life in order to escape. Without it, he would most certainly have remained a slave, and given his rebellious spirit and no way to use it for means of escape, he may have been executed. Furthermore, since he was educated, he was able to not only escape, but he went on to help others that were still in bondage. This is the clear connection between the Allegory of the Cave and Douglass's story.

In his story, one of Plato's prisoners becomes freed. He begins to leave the cave he has known as his world for the whole of his life. Plato writes, "... suppose he'd be at a loss and believe that what was seen before is truer than what is now shown" (Republic, p. 516). Once the
prisoner is freed, which is not without peril, he does not believe at first that what he is seeing is real. There is no reason for him to believe that it is. He has seen the world one way for his entire life. This is not at all dissimilar to Frederick Douglass’s exodus from bondage. When Douglass left slavery, he was shocked to find out that people who did not own slaves were not all poor, and that there were plenty of legal, job seeking people in the population. Once he sees this, he knows that he has perceived an untruth very similar to the shadows of the objects that are shown to the prisoners. The prisoner that is released observes things in the progression that Plato describes as, “... when he came to the light, wouldn’t he have his eyes full of its beam and be unable to see even one of the things now said to be true?” (Plato, p. 516). Douglass does tend to see things in a similar progression. First, he sees what it is like to go from being a field slave to a house slave, and then he becomes essentially a bound freeman. At each progression, he believes more and more that he can be free.

At this point, if one were to place Douglass in a proverbial “cave” of slavery, then he would be learning to see each different way of life just as the freed prisoner begins to see more and more of the real world for what it is. Douglass then makes some decisions which the text only briefly covers. First, he is exiled, then he buys his own freedom, and finally, he travels the country to help the fledgling abolitionist movement. This covers one of the most important parts of Plato’s work. Plato talks about the return of the freed prisoner to the cave in order to impart what he saw to his fellow former prisoners.

Separated by more than a thousand years, major cultural differences, and if nothing else, formal education, Douglass still managed to live out the ideal that Plato wrote about. He says after the Allegory,
“... then our job as founders... is to compel the best natures to go to the study which we were saying before is the greatest, to see the good and to go up that ascent; and... not to permit them... to remain there... and not be willing to go down again among those prisoners or share their labors and honors, whether they be slighter or more serious...” (Plato, p. 519)

Here, Plato refers to the larger work of the Republic, which contains this allegory, and how it is the job of these founders to design, build, and maintain the best living and working environment for their people as possible. The way that Plato suggests that this is done is by elevating those with the most talent, and then allowing them to help others that are not as gifted. Even though, as the person that Plato is relating this information to in the work points out, that may lend itself to the best and the brightest winding up with inferior lives. Plato answers that and completes the lesson by indicating that it is not the individual, or the few that must be in the ideal circumstances, but the population as a whole (Plato, p. 519).

Frederick Douglass does just that. Summoning the courage, intelligence, and ability from within himself, he finds his way out of his own cave and into relative freedom. This freedom is difficult to manage. He still must beware of runaway slave hunters that would seek to bring him back to justice in the South, and he must also find a way to work. His work as a tradesman is cut short when he is discovered as an abolitionist treasure. The first-hand knowledge that he relates in the Narrative as well as the lectures he would go on to give throughout the country are how he lives out the ideals that were set forth by Socrates and recorded by Plato.
Works Cited
