
Religion, Utopia, and the Concept of Perfection in Allegory of the Cave by Plato and A Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau

In today's world, religion is one of the most important things that influence the way a person lives their life. Whether it's waiting until marriage for sexual relations or deciding to not murder that coworker who always steals lunches, many people have their own religion that helps guide their actions and lifestyles. When examined on a global or universal scale, religion can be described as a set of ideals that aim for the follower's specific viewpoint of perfection. They attempt to live in such a way that would, if successful, eventually end in a Utopian society. Even though these people understand that they will never reach their goal, it is still their duty to try their best. This concept of perfection is present in Plato's Allegory of the Cave and Thoreau's A Civil Disobedience, but in slightly differing forms.

The entire point Plato was trying to make was that humankind should try to gain as much education as they can, even though it is obvious they will not ever have a perfect knowledge of everything in the world. He explains ignorance as a person being chained in a cave with no idea of what lies outside, or that outside even exists. But if that person were to be dragged into the sunlight, how much pain the brightness would cause them. "He will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see... that what he saw before was an illusion" (Plato 1236). This is what realizing how little a person actually knows is, and it is embarrassing and horrendously confusing. But after a bit of time, how great their joy would be at seeing the sunlight and everything else on the Earth. And even still that information is only the basic level of understanding, there is still so much they cannot even begin to comprehend, such as gravity or the rotation of the Earth. But now that they are out in the open, the possibilities are endless as to what they can learn and accomplish. And that doesn't even begin to cover what would happen if the entire population had this knowledge, and in reality everyone has access to it. So why does society take advantage of ignorance? The answer lies in the pain they must endure in realizing how little they actually know, and in being shoved into the blinding light of overwhelming knowledge. People are either completely ignorant of what is happening or they are too afraid of what they will have to go through in order to gain access to information, and the absurdity of that idea is made obvious in Plato's allegory. Thus, it is the duty of those who have already experienced the pain to bring the rest of humanity to light, however difficult that may be. Plato explains that teaching the ignorant is not a simple task because they "have become accustomed to the surrounding darkness" (Plato 1237). Society, if proved wrong, will kick and scream until they grow to see that the light brings so much more than dark, and only then will they begin to change.

This is the whole reason behind Thoreau's work, people simply need to be educated on the issues of slavery and the evils of government. Which leads to the main difference in the two pieces; no one can ever reach perfection in knowledge, but Thoreau believes humankind could one day reach a level of perfection in which they would no longer require a government. With Plato's concept of pain before gain, Thoreau stated that people would probably and should end up imprisoned before change for the better would occur, in both slavery and government. Thoreau is very extreme in his beliefs, and he states, "Under a government which imprisons

any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also prison” (Thoreau 1056). He is not going to sit back and wait for everyone to gradually realize there is an issue, and he urges his readers to do the same. If one honest man were to stand up and accept jail time over looking the other way, “it would be the abolition of slavery” (Thoreau 1053). Society as a whole is in the darkness of the cave when it comes to the corruption within the government, and though change is going to be painful, it will be well worth it in the end because of the freedom people will have. And the freedom from government is comparable to the freedom that education provides, in both cases the opportunities the people will have are limitless.

Even though Plato and Thoreau came from very different time periods, the motivation behind their pieces are strikingly similar. Neither was content with the way the government was running, and both realized that the issue behind that was a lack of knowledge within the general populous. They both pointed out the issues with their societies, and made it clear how corrupt the entire system was in the hope that the people would be inspired enough to fight for what was right. However, in both cases, each in their own way warned of the pain that must be endured in order to succeed, and in both cases it was because of a negligence of seeking a higher knowledge. Perfection is impossible, but the opportunities and chances at greater well-being far outweigh the pain of coming out of the cave. Society today can still learn from this wisdom, knowledge will never be outdated and unnecessary. In order for humanity to function, it must first become humble enough to realize it knows absolutely nothing.