# *From the Virtual to the Actual: The Painful Prospect of Liberal Education*[1] *(2000)*

"Education is the point at which
we decide whether we love
the world enough to assume
responsibility for it..."
**Arendt**[2]

"It would have been correct for such men
to make enlightenment their sole concern...
but it is only human nature to admire
good government and deplore injustice."
***The Tale of the Heike***[3]

"The trouble with people is
that they are too eager to
assume the role of teacher."
**Mencius**[4]

## I

Hello, I'm a real, living person.... I'm not some shadowy image on an electronic monitor. And I would like to do something today that is becoming increasingly unusual. I would like to speak to you **directly**.

Think about it. Life today is becoming increasingly 'virtual,'[5] as it is called. There is less interaction with other people, less immediacy between human beings. Let me give a few examples. Direct person to person communication is being replaced now by indirect, mediated modes of electronic 'access,' the telephone and e-mail; daily and friendly business is being replaced by catalogue shopping and impersonal internet e-commerce; the communal experience of the theatre has been superceded by the often times lonely experience of television, video and now DVD; and soon we will not even have to rub shoulders with one another while standing in line waiting to vote but will be able to do our civic duty by ourselves on-line. The logic of all these observations, some say, points to an eerie prospect: ultimately, we will have little direct contact with one another. Our reality will consist increasingly of a mediated, electronic or 'virtual reality.' **We will sit with our heads chained and our gaze fixed, looking forward at our own personal 'entertainment centers.'** Contradictory though this sounds, the shared realm is on its way to becoming less shared, and the community, 'de-communalized.' Some say this is our future.

Perhaps, though perhaps not in the way people think. Though this increasing privatization (cp. V 464cf.)—not to say isolation—may occur, we remain 'political animals.' Far from becoming private, isolated monads, we necessarily remain public, interdependent beings, even in such a 'virtual' realm. Here we are brought face-to-face with the old problem of our 'social or political natures,' if in an unaccustomed form.

The attractiveness of the cyber-world is in part due to our thinking that we will have access to new and greater sources of information and thus have more distinctive and sounder opinions. And for some, this even lends itself to an increased sense of 'originality' and thence 'individuality,' so much so that some even feel themselves more at home—more 'themselves'—in this impersonal realm.

Greater **information** will be disseminated, no doubt, but will greater **thoughtfulness** be the result? Opinion, after all, is still opinion. And opinions rooted in electronic, virtual images are not any less, nor more, penetrating than opinions garnered in the 'actual' world. The same mechanism of opinion, if you will, is at work in this new realm as has always been at work in our experience. Though, to be sure, the charm and excitement of the new electronic space may prove a blinding obstacle to our seeing this and thus to our having genuinely original opinions of our own. For what is overwhelmingly conspicuous is the irresistible attractiveness of these new opinion-makers. This is worth exploring further.

Indeed the Greek philosopher Plato has a word to say about this.... He saw early and with extraordinary clarity, that original opinions--genuinely original opinions--are only hard won and rare indeed. Such was his foresight that he compares **our everyday experience** to the electronic, virtual world...well, sort of. We need to explain this more fully.

## II

In the middle of the dialogue ***The Republic,*** Plato has the character Socrates ask his interlocutors, including us, but in particular a young man named Glaucon, to visualize a rather 'strange image' (VII 515a). Socrates bids us to "make **an image of our nature in its education and want of education**" (514a). He asks us to "see human beings as though they were in an **underground cave-like dwelling**...." The state of our education is somehow 'dark' and 'subterranean,' then.[6]

Ok, let us imagine ourselves in a large, cavernous room...oh, we are in a large, cavernous room...but let us imagine ourselves in such a room, though in one without windows, and only dimly lit. In addition there is a long passageway leading out "open to the light" that extends "the whole width of the cave." Exit is thus possible, indeed not narrowly restricted. But, it turns out, we are prevented from leaving. Our legs and necks are **bound**, Socrates says, "fixed, seeing only in front...." From childhood our vision has been unduly restricted, one-directional. The cave-dwellers are "**unable, because of the[se] bonds, to turn their heads all the way around**" (514b).

The source that makes what we see visible is "...a **fire** burning far above and behind." But this source we do **not** see. The light that illuminates what is apparent to us in the cave is a **secondary** light. All we ever see, then, are the two-dimensional, **depthless shadows** cast by it onto the--monitor-like—cave wall. Socrates' conclusion is most disturbing. Sight--along with our other senses--is **not** the original source of insight that we might have first thought. It is, rather, superficial and unoriginal. The problem is that we do not recognize the shadows as shadows. Rather, we mistake them for the originals. As the image suggests, we are 'enthralled' in this perspective, not only enraptured, but also enchained. **We do not, in short, know what we see.**

What we do not recognize, Socrates now makes plain, is that **what we see is the work of others. [2x]** These others work behind our backs. Between the prisoners and the fire, Socrates would have us imagine 'image-bearers' walking in front of the fire, though unseen because a wall is interposed. 'The state of our nature in its education,' then, is to be compared, he suggests, to

children captivated by the wonders of a **puppet theatre,** absorbed totally in this world of someone else's making, with no suspicion of another, truer world.[7]

These human beings hidden behind the partition "...carry all sorts of **artifacts** that project above the wall...[including] statues of men and ...animals wrought from ...every kind of material" (515a). Not only do we only see shadows then, these in turn are only **shadows of artifacts**. Everything we think we see 'in the flesh' is thus derivative. Indeed appearances are somehow man-made. In this orientation, **our world is through and through preinterpreted for us by others.**[8] There is, then, nothing 'natural' or 'original' about our cave-experience.[9] But what does it mean to see only what **others** would have us see?

"It is a **strange image** and **strange prisoners** you're telling of," Glaucon remarks (515a). Indeed, Glaucon sees but does not see fully. He sees the image but does not yet see what the image is of. He sees this cave existence as proper to **others,** not fully recognizing Socrates' intention. But the phantasmagoria is **his—and our--world** too. He remains a cave-dweller.

Socrates thus has to make the connection for him. "They are **like us,**" he says. With this image, he hopes, Glaucon's familiar world will of a sudden appear **strange** to him (cp. 524 a-b). It is hoped that he will be moved to think about what he previously did not think required any thought at all. If still somewhat unself-aware, Glaucon is brought to grant that any true self-knowledge as well as other-knowledge[10] would be impossible in a world, as here, where people "...have been compelled to keep their heads **motionless throughout life**" (515b).[11] What characterizes the life of these prisoners is their remoteness from, and hence confusion about, the true nature and origin of things. "...**Such men,**" Socrates says, "**...hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things**" (515c). **[2x]**

The cave is our primary world. Recycled, predigested, and artificial opinions are the stuff of our lives too. The question arises whether we can live otherwise.

## III

Such then is "the state of our nature in its education." Are we forever enchained therein? And is there a world **outside,** as the image of a 'cave' tantalizingly suggests?[12] Socrates' exercise of our imagination continues.

He asks us to wonder further what would happen if one of the prisoners were to be suddenly compelled to stand up and look toward the source of light (even if artificial); he could only be **dazed.** And then should someone tell him that what he has regarded his whole life as 'true' weren't so, he could only be **at a loss** and seek desperately to return to what was all-too-familiar.[13] And should someone drag this prisoner away **'by force'** "...along the rough, steep, upward way..." dragging him into the light outside the cave, he could only be **blinded.** Release is thus possible. But accustomed as we are to seeing our world in a pre-fixed way, any move from the cave, with its dim, reflected light, to a world illuminated by a far brighter source would be **disorienting** and outright **painful.**[14]

But it is this last, in Socrates' view, that education must seek to accomplish. Despite the pain, the hope is that one would finally become accustomed to 'what is above,' first seeing indirectly **through the meditation of other things**—reflections, images, words--and then later seeing '**the things themselves,**' including the ultimate source of illumination that Socrates here compares to the sun (516a). He says: "Finally, I suppose, [the liberated prisoners] would be able

to make out the sun...he would be in a position to comprehend **for the first time** the source and steward of all things" (516c).

Education is this mediation, and there is a tradition that **liberal education** is the way out (enabling, after graduation from these intermediate studies, such original sightings). Such is the hope, not only that it will sever our ties to unexamined opinions—for that by itself would be merely negative, and possibly destructive—but also turn us around to the ultimate source of illumination in the light of which all things can be seen for what they truly are. This is accomplished, Socrates suggests, by 1) a carefully designed curriculum, and 2) the intervention of others ('educators').

We will say only a few words now about the former—Socrates has a lot more to say in *The Republic* itself (as you will see in the *Politics and Society* segment). The course of study he outlines is one that is designed "to draw the soul from becoming to being" (521d), to draw us away from the transient and insubstantial preoccupations of our subterranean existence to things that are more lasting, more worthy of our sustained attention, more nutritious for the soul. It is designed to lead to greater 'thoughtfulness' (*phronesis*) (521-527; cp. 539d). Such a course of study would "lead the soul powerfully upward and compel[] it **to discuss [the things] themselves**" (525e), he says, adding that such a curriculum should be **compulsory** (526e)... if only for some.

## IV

The circumstance of our cave-existence being what it is, **the most important function** that educators can serve then is **re-orientation**, dragging us to look elsewhere than in our overly familiar lives for that which is true and good. What within the cave is known as 'knowledge'--the organization of that which is fleeting and without foundation--has to be supplanted with another fuller, insight, one open to viewing experience in the light of the highest.

The guidance and redirection of the learner-prisoner is thus paramount. There is a profound difference, Plato wants us to see, between the '**educator**' and the '**professor.**' Socrates continues: "...**Education is not what the professions of certain men assert it to be.** They presumably assert that they put into the soul knowledge that isn't in it, as though they were putting sight into blind eyes" (518b-c). We are somewhat taken aback here, when Socrates offers what must appear at first to us a **disanalogy** between 'knowledge' and 'the activity of seeing.'

Traditional education presumes it is the **dispenser** of knowledge. Knowledge is thought to consist of discrete insights. Education is understood, then, to be the transference of this 'body of knowledge' from one vessel to another. Thus some think we can learn by being **lectured at.**[15] We have only 'to open our ears,' they think. But is fishing the same as the fish caught, or the developed capacity the same as its discrete outcomes?

For Socrates, by contrast, knowing is understood to be the culmination, rather, of the prior, broader and deeper **process of learning**. And the heart of the problem of learning is the actualization and orientation of the undirected and unformed capacities. The perfection of **this transition** should be **the fundamental locus** and distinguishing feature of education, then. "The present account," Socrates says, " indicates that this power is [already] in the soul of each and that the instrument with which each learns—just as an eye is not able to turn toward the light from the dark without the whole body—must be **turned around**...together with the whole soul until it is able to endure looking at that which is and the brightest part of that which is (518c-d). Knowledge as an activity must be directed to its proper object. Activities, after all, can be

misdirected. The redirection of the faculty in question, however, is not simple, but, as with the eyes, reorientation is possible only by means of the reorientation of the greater whole in question, and in the case of knowledge, that means the soul.[16] Socrates thus calls for a revolution, the most fundamental revolution of all, **the revolution of the soul**.

He says: "there would, therefore, be **an art of this turning around**, concerned with the way in which this power [in the soul] can most easily and efficiently be turned..., not an art of producing sight in it. Rather this art takes as given that sight is there, but not rightly turned nor looking at what it ought to..." (518d). The primary concern of a **genuine education** should not be that the learner might commit some methodological indiscretion—and thus be clear-sighted but quite possibly trivial—but that he or she be properly oriented to and preoccupied with what is most important. We can see. But this does not guarantee that we will see rightly or well. No methodology, no philosophical optometry, can make one see what one does not look at.

The art of questioning that Socrates calls '**dialectic**'—and that we at St. John's might call the tutorial art—is such a revolutionary mode of inquiry, directed at promoting precisely this, **the reorientation of one's interlocutor**. It is the question that prompts us to turn our head around, drawing our attention away from an accustomed attitude and to a new object and manner of consideration. It is the question, in short, that causes us to **see anew**. In this respect, a well-directed question is far more valuable pedagogically than a true but sightless and unresponsive answer.[17]

## V

But more, this distinction among orientations is **the basis**, Socrates now goes on to claim, **of any genuine human excellence or virtue (*arete*)**. Most virtues, he says, are the consequence of habits, whereas our capacity for '[prudential] thoughtfulness' (***phronesis***) is resident within us from the outset. "...But," he adds ominously, "according to the way it is turned, it becomes useful and helpful or, again, useless and **harmful**" (519e-520a). For him, far more is at state in education than two-dimensional 'cave-knowledge.'

Socrates thus asks us to consider whether something like the following has ever occurred to us: "...Have you not reflected," he asks his interlocutors, "about the men who are said to be **vicious but wise (*poneron men, sophon de*)—[2x]—how shrewdly** their petty soul [***psucharion***; Klein: 'shrunken'] sees and how **sharply** it distinguishes those things toward which it is turned, showing that it doesn't have poor vision, although it is compelled to serve vice; so the sharper it sees, the more evil it accomplishes" (519a; cp. VI 487d ff.).[18] A chilling observation.

Indeed intelligence is ambiguous (or as we say 'value-neutral'). As such it can be put to questionable ends. Even what we might nowadays call 'wisdom' (***sophos***)—erudition, learnedness, scholarliness, experience, and expertise of all sorts--can be ill used and misdirected. Here it is not a question of 'poorly sighted souls' but 'sharply sighted souls.' The danger comes precisely because of the ambiguous power of intelligence. A chilling thought, indeed.[19] In Socrates' view, most education is an education in this ambiguous sort of knowing, an education in something less than the highest and far from (prudential) thoughtfulness (X 603b).

Indeed we have today to live with this frightful truth. Conspicuous amidst all the incredible accomplishments of modern science is precisely the terrifying ambiguity of modern knowledge, the most prominent examples being our deep difficulties in dealing with the ethical and political dilemmas of atomic power and genetic engineering. What at one time was an expression of the profoundest hopefulness has today to be viewed quite differently. The founders

of the modern modes of knowledge sought, by means of new and powerful sciences, to make us "masters and possessors of nature"[20] in the hope that we would therewith solve the principal ills of human life. However it has proved to be far more difficult to fulfill our profoundest hopes, while at the same time new difficulties—awesome difficulties—have been introduced.

Socrates' concern shows itself here to be humanly fundamental. It becomes manifest above all what it would mean to fail to distinguish clearly **the ambiguity of the power of sight,** whether of the eyes or of the mind. Failure to distinguish between well directed thought and misdirected thought—both the 'natural' functioning of our faculties—only results in our having to live out the consequences of our human obtuseness and failure of self-knowledge.[21]

For this reason, Socrates says **education cannot be content with 'shadow-knowledge.'** We cannot just 'face forward' but must have our heads turned around that we might discover the source of intelligibility and goodness. In his words, we must 'ascend' to the knowable realm "until we see the last thing to be seen, and that with considerable effort, **the idea of the good,** that cause of all that is right and fair in everything..." (517b-c; cp. II 379b). Socrates adds, "The [person] who is going **to act prudently in private and in public must see it**" (517c).

## VI

"...Our job [then] as **founders** [that is, educators]," Socrates says, "is to **compel** the best nature[s] to go to the study which...is the greatest...and to go up that ascent..." (519c-d). Speaking at a time when physicians could prescribe what was good for the whole, Socrates proposes that we **compel** those of promise to take up this difficult course of study (indeed make it a 'law' [524c]).[22] Today, we can no longer compel, but we can invite.

Like many of us, Socrates' interlocutor Glaucon **wants** to hear that there is such a place beyond the world of shadows (517d-e[23]). He wants to hear that education is not mere acquaintanceship with what is transitory, not merely the accumulation of opinions, and nor simply concerned with projections of our own making. He wants to hear that he can be freed to find his way to what is immutable and everlasting. His is a deep yearning, one devoutly to be wished. Socrates' noble 'image of the cave' has sought to speak to and shape this desire.[24] Indeed, such a **formative, leading education** was once thought possible.

But Socrates must also caution us: "It's scarcely an ordinary thing, rather **it's hard, to trust that in these studies** a certain instrument of everyone's soul—one that is destroyed and blinded by other practices—is purified and rekindled, an instrument more important to save than ten thousand eyes. For with it alone is truth seen" (527d; cp. 520b-c). Glaucon has learned that the prospect that liberal education holds out for him is one that might well be painful, disorienting and possibly uprooting. Indeed it is hard to trust that such studies will succeed. For if what we do when we read is simply re-inculcate established opinions, then the cave image remains apt. If when we read we remain enslaved to our taken for granted presuppositions, then Glaucon's 'beautiful city' (527c) will be no 'more than a dream' (520c-d). Yet difficult though the way, the promise is worth the risk.[25]

Certain authors and books make a claim to having seen 'outside the cave'—we might call them 'great books.' **We ask you today** to learn from such books, ones that will loosen the bonds of your preconceptions, that will turn your heads, that will cause you to move beyond your preset opinions, that will lead you to a more sustaining view of what is... to move you, in short, from the 'virtual' to the 'actual' world.

Thus, we ask you today to make this a place where the 'revolutionary art of education' is at work in us. We ask you, while at the college, not to be content with 'shadow talk' but to seek to free yourselves from the undue influence of the 'wall-walkers' by yourselves engaging, through your own efforts of fundamental inquiry, 'the things themselves.' For only then is a genuine and full 'individuality' possible.

Lastly, leaving this cavernous space today, you will notice as you turn around that the door is open.

**Thank You**

## Endnotes

1 A convocation address given on June 18, 2000 to open the 34th summer session of the Graduate Institute in Liberal Education, St. John's College, Santa Fe. Our discussion of 'the image of the cave' in ***The Republic*** VII is undertaken cognizant that it runs the risk of fundamental misunderstanding because it is 'out of context.' Socrates is 'leaving out a throng of things' (509c). Nor is this image necessarily part of 'the longer way' (504a). And, as he has stressed often, 'nothing incomplete is the measure of anything' (504e). All quotations are from ***The Republic of Plato***, translated by Bloom, New York, 1968. (Cp. Rousseau, ***Emile or On Education***, translated by Bloom, New York, 1979, p. 40.)

2 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis of Education," ***Between Past and Future***, New York, 1965, p. 196.

3 ***The Tale of the Heike***, translated by McCullough, Stanford, 1988, p. 173; cp. I 328c.

4 **Mencius IV. A. 23** (translated by Lau, London, 1970, p. 126).

5 'Virtual' is used here in its current usage—'applied to the apparent ...image resulting from the effect of refraction'—not in its original meaning—'effective in respect of inherent natural qualities or powers' (S.O.E.D., p. 2361). One might want to say, given the original meaning, that the aim of education is to bring us from the virtual in the current sense back to the virtual in its original signification. We will say more simply that education should bring us from the 'virtual world' as it is currently understood to the 'actual world' in all its essential fullness.

6 Eva Brann's characterization: 'the dark drama of human nature' ('The Music of the Republic,' ***Four Essays on Plato's Republic***, **The St. John's Review**, XXXIX, 1989-90, p. 72).

7 Glaucon says, "I see." This is a wondrous kind of seeing he exercises. He sees not with his eyes but with his intellect. But is he able, not only to put the pieces of this image together and thus see it as a whole, but also to see the original of which this is an image 'our education and want of education'? And can he judge the aptness of this likeness?

8 In modern philosophy, paradoxically, these 'other men' also include us.

9 Sight, then, is no simple activity. We do not see with our eyes alone. Rather, it is claimed here, we see through (***dia***) **the focusing and interpreting lenses of others' opinions** as well. There is never simple, unmediated or naïve access to reality, as some would have it. Cognitive psychology abstracts from this. The present representation provides a model of liberation: by means of the verbal lens or image given to us by Socrates we are brought to consider what the image is of and thereby to move beyond it.

10 In contrast to certain modern philosophies and subjective psychologies, there is no privileged access to ourselves, any more than to the world at large.

11 The problem here is not so much 'subjective relativism'—though the images are in part relative to the image-makers (a problem Plato understands well; cp. ***Protagoras, Theaetetus)***—as situational, social, cultural, historical, political or **'doxastic' relativism.**

12 The 'cave image and the world outside' seeks to articulate the structure of our experience of initial unsuspecting obtuseness and the consequent wonder that the truth of things is somehow more than we first thought (not only because our first take fails to achieve complete clarity, but that our predispositions, prejudgments, our inherited and pregiven opinions all prevent us from seeing things in their full dimensionality). In addition, the tantalizing suggestion that there are 'originals' to these first two-dimensional 'images' supports this. It presents the rich prospect that our everyday experience is imbued with and reflections of higher things, thus that it is possible to get beyond first impressions and subjective

limitations. Hence, what at first might seem discouraging (the flat unrevealing character of our cave-existence) becomes a project, a quest, an expedition, a life.

13 Cp. Homer, *Odyssey*, III 103-4.

14 "One must not only get used to the light; one must also get used to the dark" (Hans-Georg Gadamer, ***The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy,*** New Haven, 1986, p. 75).

15 **'Knowledge without learning'** is an illusion in Socrates' view. Thus 'lecturing' leads to a problematic outcome by disengaging the outcome from the process. It dissociates the learner from what is learned (such that our 'knowledge' accompanied by an attendant tentativeness). It reduces the fullness of thought to 'information' and an item of exchange. Hence it rarely becomes **'our own'** and formative.

16 The analytic approach simplifies the matter, and therewith epistemology as a whole. It is not a matter of a preestablished focus on a given discrete object. Even with a methodologically refined faculty, the most important object may not ever come into view without the redirection of the soul. We will not see what is there to be seen unless our visual field and focal range include it. No matter how finely ground our lenses, one will not see what is above, unless one raises one's head. We must first 'face the truth.'

17 "The world has many dark corners. Questions...are like flashlights, the beam of which we direct towards those dark corners. The beam is our language." "We do...experience a kind of question which... tends to smash the bounds that limit us. We do occasionally stop altogether and face the familiar as if it were for the first time.... The overwhelming impression on such occasions is the strangeness of the thing we contemplate. This state of mind requires detachment.... We suddenly do not feel at home in this world of ours. We take a deep look at things, at people, at words, with eyes blind to the familiar. We re-flect. Plato has a word for it: ***metastrophe*** or ***periagoge,*** a turnabout or conversion...we convert the known in the unknown. We wonder.... [This kind of questioning] calls myself in question [as well].... It compels me to detach myself from myself, to transcend the limits of my horizon; that is, it educates me. It give me the freedom to go to the roots of all my questioning" (Jacob Klein, "The Idea of Liberal Education," ***Lectures and Essays,*** Annapolis, 1985, pp. 161, 162).

18 Kritias was such a living example for Plato, cp. ***Charmides.***

19 But an ambiguity that we might be inclined to grant, confirming our suspicion that an academic degree does not guarantee that the person will put it to good use, nor that it will lead to a life well lived

20 Rene Descartes, 'The Discourse on Method VI,' ***Philosophical Works of Descartes,*** translated by Haldane and Ross, New York, 1955, p. 119.

21 This also recalls Thracymachus' early definition (I 336b-354c). Its problem was its failure to distinguish among kinds of advantage. The formulation was wrong, not because it failed to articulate in some general way what justice is, but because it was misdirected. It was blind to any notion of the good except that which satisfied its indiscriminate longings for superiority. Formulated in an overly general and hence ambiguous way, it failed to allow for a philosophical justice, and gave expression only to the self-serving 'justice' implicit in all of our tyrannical desires. Contrast Aristotle ***Nicomachean Ethics*** I 1097a.

22 Let us not forget the very great irony here (VI 487e and ***The Apology of Socrates).*** Socrates is recommending that those very persons—philosophers—who were thought to be such a serious threat to the city now be **compelled** to study, for their occupation, thought inimical to the very being of the city, is the only thing that will prevent it from remaining a cave-existence.

23 "You'll not mistake my expectation, since you desire to hear it" (VII 520 d-e; cp. II 358d, 367b, 368c).

24 Ancient as well as modern thinkers have wondered whether there is anything beyond the cave. The cave-image would seem to require the rejection of those views that there is no 'outside' of the cave, only

other caves, joined one to another perhaps, but no one any less subterranean, none any less closed off from an original source of light. All speech and thought would thus be 'shadow-talk.' All we ever do is spelunk from one place of dim illumination to another. One can never be confident that what one sees has any greater ontological standing. The problem is if this were true, one could never take responsibility for the world (see note 2 above).

[25] "It is only when we dedicate ourselves to the radical, ***metastrophic*** questioning, when we free ourselves from the ever-present concern that the burden of life imposes upon us, that formal education becomes ***liberal education,*** that the formal disciplines become liberal disciplines or liberal arts. Obviously this is a precarious and even perilous kind of business. But I do not know of anything worthwhile that is not precarious and perilous" (Klein, ***Essays and Lectures,*** pp. 164-5).