

Essay

EYES ARE LIGHT SENSITIVE

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Plato tells the story of a people who lived in a cave. All day long these people sit, backs to the door, staring at reflections on the wall. These reflections — dancing shadow and light — the people take to be real, the real world, the facts.

Ever so often one of these people stares at the wall for too long. He grows hypnotized: the wall disappears, his orientation dissolves; he is left lost, lost and confused.

Usually, the strange one returns to his normal state of staring in time. Nobody notices. Nobody gets embarrassed.

In our day, he will pop a pill or buy something new or go on a trip or start a new project, or any one of literally, millions of possible diversions from this, quite natural confusion.

For staring does have its consequences: the laws of our vision require movement to keep the interest of the eye. Staring too long at anything stops the flow. So either we stop staring, or we go within it, creating movement within ourselves: this is called fantasy, dreaming.

To stop staring at any particular thing, we adults divert ourselves: we stare at something else instead — a new fact, or object, or project. We reserve dreaming for children. We want our children to fulfill our dreams for us.

Childhood is the time of play, yes. A good time. The time of our lives. But now we are grown-ups, we know the facts — those shadows, reflections, those black and white judgments; our divergent but “enlightened” self-interests, and so, with the competition engendered by that, inevitably, our wars among men.

We are born at one with ourselves, and in our growing we learn to split ourselves in two. We go to war with ourselves; we forget who we are.

We come into this world, says Plato, trailing clouds of glory, knowing all and everything. Yet, we leave it knowing only “the facts,” mere shadows. Why. How does this happen.

Thus the story of the cave.

If the strange one in the cave allows himself to become confused by his hypnotic staring, if he allows himself a confusion that is total, complete — then slowly, and of its own accord, his body begins to move, and so to turn, to turn 180 degrees. He faces the door. He receives his first glimpse of relativity: the cave is not the world, the cave is only one world, one of the many possible worlds.

This stuns him, makes him wonder if he is dreaming, merely dreaming . . .

He looks at himself, he sees he is alone in his dreams . . .

He grows fearful, he wants to belong again . . .

He seeks advice, from a parent, a teacher, a guru . . .

But those who give him advice are seldom prepared to do so. They have not grown confused, as he has. They have made sure they remain clear. Clear as to the facts. Clear as to how to help this poor lost soul. They give him clear-cut directions. Go pop a pill or sleep it off or come to my office next Wednesday my church on Sunday . . .

This is the first of many temptations along the way. Each of them appears during a time when our seeker fears his own aloneness, and so needs to return to the fold. Each time he does this, he turns himself around to line up with all the others. He adopts the pose of his guru, and becomes righteous; he identifies with this or that religion or science or political party or psychoanalytic or spiritual cult or you name it. There are, again, literally millions of ways we can distract ourselves from our own body's calling, once it has felt the heat of the sun, once it has turned, of its own accord, from the shadows to face the door.

Any seeker who ignores the advice of his fellows and sets out alone on that other path — that road that knows no name, and for which there are no maps, no landmarks anywhere — is flying into the face of danger. His fellows are right. It is embarrassing to feel so confused. It is lonely to feel so alone in one's dreaming or is it dreaming.

And if the path from the shadows to the door is full of pitfalls, then the path ahead is infinitely steeper, longer: the distance from earth to the sun.

Our seeker has turned, his body now faces the door. Slowly, surely, and of its own accord, that body moves through the door and into the light.

A living body seeks to warm itself. This is only natural. But eyes were not made to turn to the sun. Eyes are light-sensitive; too much sun can blind.

These blind ones are our burnt-out cases.

In order to turn to the sun, and not go blind, our seeker must look obliquely, as if only in passing. There is no direct path to the truth. This seeker is mortal. Mortals have bodies. Human bodies have eyes. Eyes are light-sensitive.

Our seeker has seen the light. And the light has made him changed. And he is full of light now, compassionate.

He returns to his homeland, the cave.

But his fellows do not recognize him. They stare as he walks by.

And he looks at them, and sees their stares, and feels strange. He is a stranger, and this a strange land, his homeland, a land he no longer feels at home in.

He lives in the world now, as before; but he is no longer of it.

He lives with his fellows now, as before; but he no longer belongs.

He lives in the world as a child now, and this makes him childlike, vulnerable, exposed.

Plato's story ends here. Plato does not tell us what happens to the seeker, unless his story of the death of Socrates is some indication.

Post-Script. This is the column that was not printed in the Times News during Nov-Dec 1977. Eight others were. They raised quite a ruckus.

I wrote this one last, after I heard about the ruckus, and stuck it in my drawer. There it sat, until now, 2.5 years later, as I clean out my desk preparing to leave.

I want to thank this community for its acceptance of this seed, OS, into its ground.

*The roof of Plato's cave, I now realize, has holes in it: white holes, open to the sun,
open to the wind, open to space.*