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A Comparative View of Truth

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Abstract:

The ancient Greeks debated its significance, the enlightenment period doubted its existence, and twentieth-century political parties manipulated its definition; throughout the centuries the notion of 'truth' has remained consistent in its ability to interest intellectuals. Plato, René Descartes and Václav Havel at first glance may appear to have little in common, however, their interest in inner truth is a thread tying them together.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines truth as, “a judgement, proposition, or idea that is true or accepted as true.”¹ This will be the accepted definition for the remainder of this term paper. The ancient Greeks debated its significance, the enlightenment period doubted its existence, and twentieth-century political parties manipulated its definition; throughout the centuries the notion of ‘truth’ has remained consistent in its ability to interest intellectuals. Plato, Rene Descartes and Vaclav Havel at first glance may appear to have little in common, however, their interest in various aspects of ‘truth’ is the thread tying them together. By comparing the context of ‘truth’ in three seemingly different periods of history, we can grasp the complexity of the subject.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato wrote in “The Republic” that people contained higher intellect within themselves; however it was up to them to discover their own potential. In “The Allegory of the Cave” Plato proposes the idea that bound prisoners within the cave are not seeing reality, but only shadows of real objects. He presents an abstract scenario in which people have grown up prisoners deep inside a dark cave with their hands bound and their heads forced to look only straight ahead. Behind them, but in front of a fire are people who carry objects back and forth so that only the shadows of the objects are projected on the wall ahead of the prisoners. In this sense, what is reality for

¹ Definition of Truth. Marriam-Webster Online. 2005. URL: <http://www.m-w.com/>, accessed December 9 2005.

the prisoners has different properties than the reality of the people carrying the objects. Plato claims that the prisoners are unaware of their limited perspective of reality, which is an image of the ignorance of humanity.²

In *Allegory of the Cave*, Socrates states, “To them, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images.”³ If one of the prisoners was to break free from the chains and realize the source of the shadow images, she would become enlightened of her previous ignorance. Plato uses the example that she would be blinded by the brightness of the fire to represent the overwhelming discovery of alternate reality. If she continued upward out of the darkness of the cave, the sun as a representation of ‘truth’ would further blind her senses and conclusions about the reality she had previously known. The life she had always known would become a symbol of ignorance as if living within the shadows of truth. Her previous definition would collapse and she would have to relearn a new definition of ‘truth’ and re-understand reality. Given the amount of work involved, Plato claims that most people would prefer to live content within the shadows of their own ignorance. Those who do strive for ultimate ideas are the only persons worthy of ruling positions within society in Plato’s opinion.

Within their limited reality, it is assumed by Plato that the prisoners would name the shapely shadows the same names as those with a broader scope of reality. Thus, the prisoners would talk about the shadow of a chair, by using the word ‘chair’ to describe it, yet its function would remain unknown to them. Plato concludes that the concepts we grasp are not at the same level as the things we perceive with our senses.⁴ The world revealed to us through our senses is not the real world, just a poor copy of it.

In the early seventeenth century, Rene Descartes adopted a similar theory to Plato’s deception of the senses. Descartes also believed that ‘truth’ was the highest form of understanding and that the intellectual journey to discover it lay within oneself. Descartes refused to accept the obviousness of his own senses, understanding Plato’s belief that sensory reality is not the ultimate of ideas. Descartes looked to dreams to demonstrate sensory information that did not correspond with reality. In addition, since we cannot distinguish the validity of dreams from the validity of outside stimulus, we must not trust any conclusions of reality based on sensory information. He stated that doubt and certainty are inversely related; thinking is the only essence that could not be doubted and was therefore the only thing he believed with certainty. Using the analogy of building a house, he claimed that without removing the less solid parts of ground, the foundation will never be stable enough to support a house above it. Such was the method of his philosophies, and doubt undermined the [epistemologic](#) grounds.⁵

However, while Plato doubted the sensory information received by his senses, Descartes doubted anything that could be doubted. This process was termed

² Brians, Paul. *Reading About the World, Volume I*, Harcourt Brace Custom Publishing. 1998. URL: http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_1/plato.html, accessed December 2, 2005.

³ Kreis, Stephen. *The History Guide. Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History*. 2000. URL: <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/allegory.html>, accessed December 2, 2005.

⁴ Cohen, S.Marc. *Allegory of the Cave*. Philosophy 320, University of Washington. updated on 07/08/2002. URL: <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm>, accessed December 2, 2005.

⁵ Smith, Kurt. *Descartes’ Life and Works*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2003. URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-works/>, accessed December 3, 2005.

‘methodological scepticism’ and criticized by some as being too extreme. However, for Descartes, it was the only sure way of discovering the ‘truth’. Further still, once Descartes determined that he did actually exist, he doubted the form in which he existed. He had previously known his body through his senses, which had proven to be misleading, therefore the only form in which he believed he existed without a doubt was in the mental form. For Descartes, thinking was the essence of existence. The separation of body and mind became known as ‘Cartesian Dualism,’ the separation between the material and immaterial. In Descartes philosophies, truth existed in the immaterial world and explained the existence of a higher power.

Although their philosophies emerged at different periods in western history, Plato and Descartes both sought to further comprehend the complexities of ‘truth’. Both philosophers asserted it was necessary to peel away the layers of beliefs and opinions that continually cloud the view of truth in order to attain higher levels of intellect. In the twentieth century, ‘truth’ became a political tool for politicians to wield their power over the masses. The term ‘ideology’ is defined by Vaclav Havel as an illusion of identity, dignity, and morality⁶. Under the Soviet occupation, the definition of ‘truth’ became a force in opposition with the ruling ideologies and therefore forbidden. In his essay “The Power of the Powerless” Vaclav Havel addresses the capability individuals have against the oppressive regime by simply acknowledging and living within ‘truth.’

Vaclav Havel, in his professional life, was a playwright who believed that peaceful change could occur through the gradual and subtle process of rejecting ‘living in a lie.’ Despite a strong censorship at the time, Havel had his essay illegally published in order to stimulate discussion amongst other dissidents. His paper presented the design of a powerful dictatorship hidden within an ideology; an ideology which explains what ‘truth’ to believe, demands acceptance of the ‘truth’ and has no tolerance for opposing notions of ‘truth’. With this concept Havel states, “Reality does not shape theory, but rather the reverse”⁷. In this sense, reality is a subjective state, which changes according to the ruling government.

Under soviet communism, people were told what to believe and accept as ‘truth’ without questioning. If we were to take Plato’s allegory of the cave analogy and apply it to soviet reality, it would follow that the bound prisoners would view the shadows and pretend to accept the shapes as truth, despite their inner conscious telling them otherwise. However, in order to live life under the radar of secret police and show trials, they go along with what is told to them. Their inner voice of reason cannot be ignored, and therefore agreement with the shadow reality is not openly declared, but instead assumed from lack of voiced opposition. Sitting silently is the only means of being promoted within the system. In Plato’s analogy, this would mean accession to behind the wall and moving the objects in front of the flames in order to cast shadows of ‘truth’ for others to silently disagree with. Havel states, “Should someone possess a more independent will, she must conceal it behind a ritually anonymous mask in order to have an opportunity to enter the power hierarchy at all”⁸. And so, they sit there, bound and uncomfortable, knowing that their version of truth differs from what authorities talk about in the

⁶ Havel, Vaclav. *Power of the Powerless*. October 1978, pg.133.

⁷ *ibid.*, pg 138.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pg 140.

shadows, yet silent because they know that trouble will arise if they were to state what is 'true'.

The powerlessness that people felt under Soviet government only served to perpetuate the system further. They lived in a world of 'appearances,' and if applying Descartes scepticism towards the fallibility of appearances by the senses, we can conclude that life under soviet ideologies lacks truth. By accepting, not questioning, 'reality' as proposed by the system of ideologies, the system continually feeds itself and the structure is built on a lie. As Descartes asserted, one must remove the shaky materials in order to build a solid foundation of knowledge to acquire 'truth'. Since the veil of ideology operates in opposition to the concepts of previously held truths, then the foundations of the system are threatened if even the smallest possibility of 'truth' should appear. Havel asserts that instead of confirming to the institutionalized lie, we should turn to truth as an attempt to regain control over one's personal responsibilities⁹. Havel encourages the cultivation of the sphere of truth within the individual to eventually become a changing force in society.

The phrase 'the whole is greater than the sum of the parts' is appropriately used to describe Havel's theories. Everyone working at an individual level made change possible at a national level. Rejecting the lie imposed by the soviet regime, people again freely embraced a common 'truth'. History tells us that 'truth' has changed with the introduction of religion and science. For Plato, Descartes and Havel the notions of truth were relative to the periods of their lives. However, what makes each of their theories timeless are the complexities of 'truth' that remain unchanged.

⁹ The World & I, Editorial review of *The Power of the Powerless*. 2004. URL: <http://www.worldandi.com/specialreport/1990/March/Sa17844.htm>, accessed December 2 2005.