Allegory Of The Cave Essay, Research Paper

Allegory of the Cave

In Books II and III of The Republic, Socrates sets the stage for a

view of education for the warriors in the culture, asserting a need for the

study of different disciplines, including art and athletics. Though this

provides a sense of Plato’s perspective on education, his outlining of

educational premises in Book VII, including his view of rational though,

education, and the responsibilities of both the student and the teacher in

his “Allegory of the Cave” defines a call for a curriculum in education based

on the directives and significance of the student, and can be asserted as

the foundations of modern liberal arts educational philosophies.

In order to understand the different views on education provided by Plato,

it is first necessary to consider the messages provided in Book II, Book III

and Book VII. Plato initiates his discourse on education through the

dialogue of Glaucon, Adeimantus and Socrates and their perspective on

the appropriate education of the guardians of any polis. The warriors,

soldiers or guardians of a city are a separate class of people, and

distinguished by their knowledge and deduction to the central elements of

society. Because of their distinctions and their need to understand

wisdom and make appropriate and “educated” choices, the education of

the guardians is a necessary component in defining self-protection. It is

Socrates’ (and therefore Plato’s) assertion that there is a need to educate

the guardians in musical and physical areas, and to promote a correlation

between participation as a warrior and educational prowess. In other

words, it was Socrates’ contention that it was not enough to simply educate

a guardian in warfare, but instead, their role necessitates an understanding

of other premises, including history, song, art, philosophy and even

literature.

It is also Plato’s assertion in the last segment of Book II that one of

the failings of society is the fact that myths of valor and feats of strength

clearly impact the conduct of guardians, and that there is a need to

demonstrate that the warriors are not simply blood-thirsty war-mongers, but

instead have the capacity for rational thought and for the development of a

wide variety of personal characteristics. Book II of Plato’s Republic

begins with the assumption of the necessity for the education of the

guardians but takes this argument further by demonstrating the benefits of

physical and musical training. It is Plato’s assertion that these are

necessary in order to determine that the warriors, the guardians of

the city are actually true and virtuous. As a component of the arguments for

education in the guardian class, Plato also suggests that the man cannot

be assumed to be truly wise or to have the capacity for effective decision

making if he cannot comprehend basic aesthetic virtues like beauty as well

as more complex issues like morality. The guardians of any ideal city, then

would demonstrate their capacity for instilling virtue in others and directing

the course of their own actions to maintain this premise. In conjunction,

Plato asserts the need for a moral education of the guardians in order to

determine the capacity of guardians to instill morality in others.

In Book VI, Plato sets the premise for his argument for education in

his determinations regarding the soul, the search for truth and the pursuit of

intelligence.

The most substantive view of the correlation between Plato’s premises and

modern educational philosophies can be seen in Book VII, when Socrates

presents the “Allegory of the Cave”. This story, provides and outlines the

role of both the teacher and the student. Socrates’ message begins in the

idea that individuals can develop within surroundings that are so limited

that they have know way of experiencing truth outside of what they can

directly perceive, and this is the essential underpinning of ignorance. But if

an individual can learn to understand the possibilities outside of the

realm of singular understanding, and by exposure to different things,

determine new understanding, then Plato would assert that all men have

the potential to move from ignorance to knowledge.

The basis for the “Allegory of the Cave” is this: a prisoner is held in a cave

for his whole life (since birth), only able to see and experience that which is

placed before him. For example, the fire that is used to luminate the cave

becomes the center of the world much like our own sun is such a

compelling central component, and the prisoner experiences everything

that he sees and understands relative to the fire. In conjunction, the fire

become a means of visualizing other elements, including exposure to a

puppet and the shadows on the wall, and all of these factors make

up the specifics of what is known in the world of the prisoner. The divided

line is an imperative concept within the scope of this premise. In essence,

the teacher is the individual who directs the pursuit of knowledge past the

initial limitations that have been set. It is not the teachers responsibility to

simply say “here is the sun, here is the moon…now you know everything”

because the student would never understand the process necessary to

continue with the directive of self education. As a result, the process of

wisdom requires that individuals adapt and learn their own skills for

learning. Knowledge, then, is not simply sensory based (because the

prisoners in the cave, for example, believed they had the knowledge of the

fire, the shadows and the cave itself as if these were the only elements in

the world that needed to be known), but also extends past our senses into

the realm of logical reasoning, constructive reasoning, and a process

orientation to learning and developing wisdom. Rather than simply

producing information and addressing the learning process and the

students in order to bring them into complicity, it is Plato’s contention that

the learning process, the same process that occurs when the prisoner in

the cave is allowed to leave and experiences the sun, the moon, trees, and

all of life’s sciences and concepts, should be student directed. The teacher

is simply a means by which the student can come into connection with the

ways of attaining knowledge, but the process of learning itself must be

singular and directed by a personal learning focus. The teacher provides

the individual with the means to perceive themselves, to evaluate their

nature, and to consider the search for truth as a major aspect of the

educational process. It can be asserted that this kind of student focus

is the primary component of the modern liberal arts system, and

underscores the importance of the student in the learning process.

In addition, it is also Plato’s assertion in Book VII that the metaphor

of the cave, asserting man’s ignorance prior to learning, results in the need

for a teacher who can provide exposure to different subjects, different

perspectives and a range of educational subject areas. The Cave scenario

allows for the evaluation of the many different areas in which man should

pursue study, including the study of the actual, the factual, the scientific

and the conceptual. It is not enough to simply assert that by studying a

number of different subjects, the prisoner will gain enough knowledge to

determine their own route towards wisdom: there is greater support for the

view that the process orientation of learning, which includes the

assessment of the learning process and the determination of impacts for

wisdom underscores the benefits of this perspective in the development of

a modern curriculum.