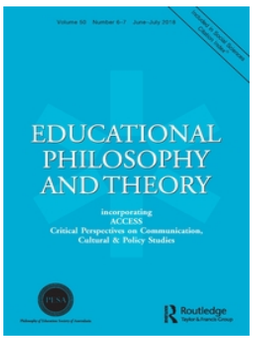

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Paideia, progress, puzzlement

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ABSTRACT

Platonic *paideia* is a mainstream concept in traditional philosophy and humanistic circles generally. It is closely connected with social progress brought about by the dynamics of enlightenment and self-fulfillment, symbolized by the allegory of the cave. The main contention of this paper is that the philosophical grammar of this simile is more precarious than is often recognized. Plato's apparently intuitive narrative blends together two features that do not easily mix, namely explicit, categorical dualisms (down/up, darkness/light), and temporal processes of development. The second feature is superimposed upon the first, more elementary, one, suggesting that a philosopher-teacher can be in charge of mankind's ascent towards illustrious goals. This line of thought conceals a basic rhetorical move built into Plato's *paideia*, namely its initial focus on enchained humans in need of liberation. It is from this bleak view of ordinary, 'commonsense' life that the narrative's drive is derived. How might a story about the human predicament without *paideia* look? Ludwig Wittgenstein, in some scattered remarks, provides a suggestion.

KEYWORDS

Allegory of the cave; Whiggish history; Jaques Ranciere; Ludwig Wittgenstein

The main tenets of Platonism have been controversial for a long time, but its notion of *paideia* has enjoyed a more favorable status. The call for papers for the Hvar conference, on which the contributions in the present volume are based, puts it well:

> Since the appearance of Socrates on the stage of human history, the task of philosophy has been inseparably bound to the task of education, for which it provides the foundation … (Zovko, 2013)

The first section of this paper will discuss the appeal of Marie-Élise Zovko's assessment and confront it with two skeptical voices (Klaus Heinrich and Jacques Rancière), linking *paideia* to more embattled Platonic concepts. The following main part will be an attempt to clarify the philosophical grammar of the most popular image guiding Plato's educational theory, namely the allegory of the cave. Particular emphasis will be put on what could be called 'the moment of truth', when cave-dwellers face the options of either sticking to their previous beliefs or else switch sides and embrace the Platonic outlook. In terms of customary pedagogical discourse their choice should, of course, be a foregone conclusion. Nobody willingly consents to continued slavery. Yet, as a discussion of some key provisions of the cave's philosophical grammar will show, matters are more complicated. There is, as the concluding part will argue, an alternative available for the addressees of Plato-style educational discourse.

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Paideia: Pro and contra

The most recent praise of *paideia* in a Middle- and Central European context is triggered by the comprehensive upheaval of the continental educational system commonly labeled the 'Bologna reform'. Its main aims, such as standardization of curricula, reducing drop-out rates and increasing the employability of graduates are directed against the more leisurely pace of traditional university teaching which was previously the norm in many parts of Europe. The reform's critics have been quick to invoke the Platonic heritage against those efforts of streamlining.

> Plato's idea of a comprehensive, self-determined *Bildung*, characterized by leisure, is the diametrical opposite to dominant tendencies in current educational policies that call for vocational training ['Ausbildung'] instead of *Bildung* … (Rehn & Schües, 2008, p. 8)

The distinction between a sophist's notion of personal development (for a price) and the genuinely philosophical quest for self-fulfillment is deeply ingrained in certain circles of the European intelligentsia and can, according to the authors, serve well to draw a vivid contrast between the real thing and an economically driven version 'fitting into our time that lacks time' (Rehn & Schües, 2008, p. 8). Plato's design, according to the opponents of what is perceived to be a technocratic, efficiency-oriented incursion into the humanistic project, is a most attractive counterweight to such misguided efforts.

But there are dissidents. Probably the most influential one is Martin Heidegger whose revisionary interpretation of the allegory of the cave is a head-on attack on Plato's ascent to the highest principles of knowledge as an ultimate guarantee of a life well led (Heidegger, 1988). This is too big a topic to be discussed here (cf. Peterson, 2013); a brief look at two more recent authors will be offered instead. Klaus Heinrich, a German philosopher of religion, comes up with a startling assessment, given the lines drawn by the discussion of the Bologna reform. He talks about 'the greatest technologist of antiquity with the most important technological work in antique literature, namely Plato and his *Politeia*' (Heinrich, 1986, p. 168). Heinrich's argument is that Plato's approach towards the body of mythology permeating Greek civilization is essentially a technocratic one. He brushes aside local customs and competence in order to construct a more rational edifice of enhanced generality and higher standards of rationality. His proposals for educational reform, it has to be noted, exceed the strongest fears of the anti-Bologna fraction, and it is quite plausible to describe his notion of justice thus: 'Justice, as he conceives of it … consists in everything possessing and fulfilling the right function at its particular place' (Heinrich, 1986, p. 168).

While this is true, it could be objected, the cave analogy as presented in the fifth book of *Politeia*, does not have to be read in the light of the harsh regime proposed for the young in Plato's utopia. Jacques Rancière, however, detects an elitist pattern within the Socratic narrative itself. It is usually described as deconstructing unfounded knowledge claims and prompting Socrates' interlocutors to achieve a more adequate view of the issues discussed. A sort of hermeneutical liberalism is claimed for Socrates' insistence on preparing a path to an alternative realm. Yet, this is only half the story according to Rancière.

> Socrates does not only reveal the incapacity of the false experts, but also the incapacity of everyone who is not led along the right path by the master, who is not being subjected to the right relationship between intelligence to intelligence. (Rancière, n.d.)

Paideia, considered as an enterprise triggered by a self-ordained intellectual under whose guidance students are supposed to detect and use to enhance their most valuable capacities, is a deeply ambiguous procedure. It can be regarded as a liberating concept insofar as it prompts a critical review of everyone's status quo and offers an outlook that is, likewise, available to everyone concerned, regardless of social status. But this very prospect is constitutively determined by a mediator 'who knows better' and who keeps the educational process on the right track. It is not without reason that the Socratic paradigm is very popular in many accounts of how responsible, successful citizens are formed.

On the philosophical grammar of the cave

The simile we are considering is built upon some of the most suggestive opposites in the repertoire, namely the contrasts between down and up, darkness and light, chains and freedom. On first encounter,

those pairs appear to be mutually exclusive options, imposing a straight dualism upon the experiential field. (Similar distinctions are commonly made between cold and warm, left and right, positive and negative.) These 'digital' properties, however, work by partitioning a continuum: A vertical axis, the realm of the visible or the spectrum of human agency. In the case of the Platonic cave this continuum is *one*, albeit multiform, landscape. Some common ground must be assumed for transitions between opposites to be possible and the geological formation of a cave provides precisely this kind of setting. The visible surface of things as we experience them with our senses is described, according to the simile, as being perceived *down* in the *prison* of the cave, whereas the fire, *illuminating* natural darkness, stands in for the sun's power. The true, transcendent source of light only becomes recognizable once the *upward* move towards *freedom* has succeeded (cf. Plato *Politeia* 517b).

Two different strategies are mixed in Plato's simile. Its immediate effect, on the one hand, derives from its evocative contrasts which, on the other hand, can only play out their dialectical tension gradually, i.e. by bridging the gap between light and darkness, imprisonment and liberation. Plato does not start by describing an extendable field for human action but with categorical distinctions: People are kept in darkness by their attachment to physical perception; enlightenment is the other side of the coin, and must be attained through separation from sense experience. Still, for his parable to work this contrast has to be supplemented by a mechanism of transition, turning an initial black-and-white pattern into a story. Light is not just the opposite of darkness—it may be *approached* in leaving the cave. 'Up' is contradictory to down—and both categories have to be *combined* to describe ascent. Numerous pictures have been drawn to illustrate the Platonic thought experiment, many of them faithfully visualizing the details provided by his narration. Its essential feature can, however, be grasped by a much simpler image.

From a strictly dualistic point of view the image shows two distinct patches, much like a colored blot that might form on an uniform background. Except that a small black 'archipelago' stands out from this surface forming a complement to the contrasting blot. In terms of elementary contrasts this is just a slightly unusual border formation. But a more ambitious view, adding semiotic complexity, suggests itself almost immediately. Part of the 'coastline' is not just a segment of the line of contrast running through the photograph but carries additional meaning in a more elaborate context. It marks the shape of a human being almost completely separated from the core background. In picking out this particular

formation we draw on resources not comprehensible in the basic digital mode. Instinctively we grasp that a human being turns from darkness towards light.

The description just given makes it sound as if a person, *formerly* enclosed by darkness, had reached the threshold of a breakthrough, aspiring to a new destination and this certainly is part of the picture's message. But we should pay close attention to the story's temporal sequence. 'formerly' cuts across two methodologically distinct levels. There is no 'former' of an emerging human figure in black and white. The perception of an evolving process is *superimposed* upon this basic division from external experience. A segment of the dark side is thereby reinterpreted as destined to pursue its own, characteristic course. Light is not just the opposite of darkness, but also light at the end of the tunnel for figures that, in due course, turn out to be persons. To put this in more traditional terms: Matter and spirit might be the most basic components of the metaphysical order, but we have to *proceed* to enlightened matter, cave-dwellers on their way to true insight. Or, in more prosaic parlance, we have to bootstrap ourselves into an upward-bound movement starting from the minimal distinctions laid down in one initial, dialectical contrast.

So much for the general pattern, call it rhetorical or metaphysical, underlying the workings of the cave allegory. Its purpose as a literary construct is to highlight key points of the educational process. Summing up the preceding analysis we may say that it captures the following crucial trait: Pedagogic efforts are reassessments of given capacities. They provide a second look at what initially rested in itself. Like the shifting of gears they are a mechanism for implementing a distance (between a lower and a higher gear) *and* potentiating an incipient movement—ultimately towards 'the Good' in Plato's narrative.

This would be an external view of the phenomenon. A crucial feature of Plato's account, however, is that it tells the story from the point of view of the people involved. It is for this reason, and not because of a clever play with perspectives, that it has exerted its tremendous appeal. It offers the opportunity to identify with an 'upwardly mobile' protagonist. There is, however, one remarkable moment in the philosopher's narrative which corresponds to the less upbeat diagnosis referred to in the previous section. The ordinary focus is, of course, on the opportunity to gain insight into the essence of things (by being kicked upstairs). But what about the state of mind of someone faced with the choice between familiar certainties and the inevitable disturbance of those familiarities initiated by the breakout?

The question is not meant to probe the psychological conditions of an imagined avatar. Its purpose is rather to underline a structural feature of the simile that can now be recognized within the insider's story. We emphasized that there is *no* smooth transition between the dualistic pattern per se and an evolutionary outlook. The dynamics required for the latter results from the reassessment of a formerly static environment. This observation has a counterpart in the course of the parable. Down in the cave, accustomed to darkness, yet pushed towards a blinding light, a person will be thrown off the track.

> And if also one should point out to him each of the passing objects and constrain him by questions to say what it is, do you not think that he would be at a loss (ἀπορεῖν) and that he would regard what he formerly saw as more real than the things now pointed out to him? (Plato, *Politeia* 515d)

Given the thrust of Plato's story this is a weakness, to be interpreted as resistance against enlightenment. Small wonder, since our notions of enlightenment are more or less derived from turning towards the sun. But this amounts to judging the situation with 'superior' knowledge, i.e. from the viewpoint of an accomplished ascent. We first assume that liberation lies outside the cave and we consequently pronounce the remaining person's *aporia* as deficit. The pedagogical endeavor, however, understood from a modern point of view, consists in turning doubts into curiosity and curiosity into the quest for, and ultimate attainment of, superior knowledge.

The 'cultivation of excellence proper to our humanity' referred to in the call for papers for the *paideia* conference belongs to a long and venerable history of Whiggish readings of the allegory of the cave. Consider, however, an alternative view which does not take future progress for granted and is not prepared to summarily discard traditional competence. Assume this is *not* to be a 'conservative' backlash against the promises of freedom, reason and equality, but a more modest attitude, pointing out that at this particular juncture a leap of faith, based on external authority, is demanded from a confused

audience. The blueprint of the pedagogical process we are considering here presents, namely, an indissoluble mix, evoking hitherto hidden potentials, on the one hand, *and* asserting a teacher's authority, on the other. In other words, viewed in a more positive light, it represents the tension between personal development and professional guidance. The promise is that this tension will be resolved in the course of *paideia*, whose task it is to transform initial obstacles into stepping stones to eventual illumination. This, obviously, is a project imposed upon a hesitant audience from the vantage of humanistic experience. The point is not to criticize its sophistication or belittle its successes. It is, rather, to draw attention to its precarious status as a boot-up device.

We noted in the previous section that Plato has been considered a technologist by some commentators. If we bracket the specific philosophical implications of his blueprint and draw upon our analysis of its two-step dynamics we can make out a plausible cause for this claim. Think of a doctor recommending some treatment against a condition he considered harmful but her patient has not yet worried about. Or, for a more poignant example, of a life-saving intervention that might very well leave the patient worse off than before (Griesecke, 2014, pp. 149–194). On many occasions, following the doctor's advice will be the standard way to proceed. However, there will be cases typical of technocracy, confronting, for example, a 'layperson' with an 'expert' who 'knows better' on account of technical means at her disposal and the presumption of professional competence. Again, this might well be beneficial to the patient, but it does not qualify as an educational process, unless she is given full authority to decide over her course of therapy, including the option to reject her doctor's advice, by which she refuses to enter the course of action recommended by a representative of science, progress and so-called 'good practice'. It is this affinity to technological procedures built into the Platonic blueprint which prompts the question whether philosophy is well-advised to continue along these lines.

Paideia: The endgame

A fairly standard philosophical reply to such considerations runs like this: 'Good practice', as a guiding principle for social pursuits, is only a derivative of the quest for a good life. This, in turn, is not covered by any partial set of rules since it concerns human existence in its entirety, irrespective of special interests or skills. Plato's parable, it is pointed out, is concerned with human well-being in the most general sense, i.e. with 'the task of education, for which it provides the foundation: The quest for knowledge and understanding of ourselves and of nature … ' to quote the conference call previously referred to Zovko (2013). Self-awareness, along with insight into the nature of things, is the ultimate goal of the ascent being promoted here. Powerful arguments have been developed to bolster this claim and to demonstrate its plausibility and fruitfulness. This is not the place to rehearse them, but all of them share the structural feature discussed above. They operate on a presumption of superior insight designed to enlighten addressees supposed to be the beneficiaries of this encounter. Jacques Rancière has put the problem in highly suggestive terms (Chambers, 2013). Inequality, according to him, 'is not hidden behind equality. In a certain way it asserts itself as equal to it. This equality of equality and inequality has a proper name. It is called progress' (Rancière, 2004).

There is no doubt, then, that Plato's blueprint of *paideia* enables progress. The problem is that progress has perhaps been over-rated as constitutive trait of humanity, given the pattern it superimposes upon the relationship of man towards nature and towards himself. Isn't it strange that one pictures ordinary persons as being enchained slaves (as Bruno Latour remarks), in order to set the stage for their release and ascension (Latour, 2004, p. 16). There is one twentieth-century philosopher whose approach towards the transition between the ordinary and the exceptional can further expound the issue. Ludwig Wittgenstein began his philosophical career as a resolute Platonist. Logical form, according to his *Tractatus* doctrine, was the ultimate determinant of the meaning of language, to be arrived at by discarding widespread misconceptions of its proper functioning and the ensuing muddles. Wittgenstein even speaks of prototypes ('Urbilder') serving as a normative matrix for an appropriate account of the world (Wittgenstein, 2003, p. 3.315). The categorical framework of down and up, confusion and enlightenment, is clearly prominent at this stage of his writing. Moreover, he does not hesitate to assume a

magisterial role in urging his readers to cut through the thicket of language to achieve a top-down, atemporal view. His Platonism, however, comes with a twist. The established doctrine, as we have seen, is built upon an interchange between the cave and open air. One continuous world is containing those opposite formations. The corresponding theoretical term is *methexis*, participation between earthly and celestial determinant pieces. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, ends up by blocking this exchange.

One reading of the famous concluding sentences of the *Tractatus* is as a dissolution of the *paideia* paradigm. 'My propositions are elucidatory in this way: He who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them' (Wittgenstein, 2003, p. 6.54). Wittgenstein, who had taken up the poise of a teacher instructing his readers on how to attain ultimate insight into the essence of the world, is not just, preemptively, releasing his readers from an unheeded dependence on his teachings. He holds his very elucidations to be simultaneously unavoidable and inappropriate, in the style of a Zen master who could be asked by his pupil: 'How do I achieve enlightenment?' and who could answer 'I will tell you, if you agree to immediately forget my advice'. In Wittgenstein's words: 'He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it' (Wittgenstein, 2003, p. 6.54). There is more to this than education transformed to autonomy, and Wittgenstein, returning to this trope several years later, does not just throw away the ladder, he does not even want to touch it from the start (Gakis, 2010).

> I might say, if the place I want to reach could only be climbed up to by a ladder, I would give up trying to get there. For the place to which I really have to go is one that I must actually be at already. Anything that can be reached by a ladder does not interest me. (Wright, 1998; 64e; Wittgenstein, 2000, Ms 109, p. 207)

Wittgenstein therewith abandons the Platonic mindset that leads people to aim for higher realms (or to dig deeper), compared to what they find themselves surrounded by. This attitude is in line with his discomfort with modern times that he declares in a sketch to a foreword to his *Philosophical Investigations*:

> The spirit of this civilization the expression of which is the industry, architecture, music of present day fascism and socialism, is a spirit that is alien and uncongenial to the author. (Wright, 1998, 8e; Wittgenstein, 2000, Ms 109, p. 205)

Wittgenstein has been called a traditionalist because of such considerations, but one should rather take him to be rejecting the *paideia* model as the guide to human fulfillment. The ladder is not just thrown away, it is not even introduced into the picture. The problem is, however, thereby not yet resolved. In renouncing the help a ladder might provide Wittgenstein is using two telltale phrases.

Talking about a place 'to which I *really* have to go' indicates that there is still a claim for extra-ordinary aims; and the claim it is a place 'I must actually be at already' introduces a measure of authenticity over and above merely finding oneself in one location. The above abandonment of the metaphysics of enlightenment still contains an echo of its main motive. The question then becomes how to distinguish a situation one *happens* to be part of and a situation one *really* wants to attain—without, as it were, the basic vocabulary of human self-improvement. It is by close inspection of Wittgenstein's anti-Platonism that we can learn how thoroughly pervasive the *paideia* blueprint turns out to be. Like the concept of progress, it is a background condition of thought not even those avoiding the mainstream can easily escape. Yet Wittgenstein, in a precious vignette, tells what appears to me to be a *paideia*-free story of self-fulfillment.

Wittgenstein offers, namely, an intriguing narrative of homecoming (Hrachovec, 1990) which does, it has to be noted, start with a motive fairly similar to *paideia*: 'It is as if I had been lost and asked someone for the way back home' (Wittgenstein, 2000, Ms 180A, p. 33r) According to the narrative, a person is lost and needs guidance to find her way to where she belongs. Someone offers himself as a guide; but then a strange thing happens: 'He says that he will guide me and leads me a beautiful, even path which suddenly stops' (Wittgenstein, 2000, Ms 180A, p. 33r). Returning home is in no way demanding, in fact it is quite the opposite of a mountaineering effort. And, even more surprising, it does not lead anywhere. Has the guide been cheating? The answer is 'no', and here is Wittgenstein's explanation: 'And now my friend says: "All you have to do now is to find the way home from here"' (Wittgenstein, 2000, Ms 180A, p. 33r). Has one thereby progressed towards her destination? Wittgenstein seems to think so, but one has no way of telling, lacking a clear direction home, just like before. There is no down and up, no darkness and light, just a state of perplexity and its hoped-for solution. The in-between guide might have helped, but then again who knows?

A more prosaic version of this argument runs like this:

> The difficulty—I might say—is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it … (Wittgenstein, 1981, p. 314)

This account is not suitable to serve as a backbone to the advancement of human civilization, as it mercilessly highlights the gaps glossed over by the Platonic parable. Wittgenstein is not disputing that there might have been some advancement; but this does not accomplish homecoming in the sense of providential closure. Let me pinpoint the problem by quoting the prominent concluding lines of J.W. V. Goethe's magnificent drama of *Faust*, the very model of a truth-seeking bourgeois scholar and statesman. As he nears his end, and as the heavens open to receive him, an angels' choir welcomes him home: 'Whoever strives, in his endeavor/We can rescue from the devil' (Goethe, J.W. Faust 11936 f.). Now, this seems good news: An offer of salvation if we keep trying hard enough. A happy end, no harm done? Don't count on it.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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