

# Emancipation: Philosophical Conundrum or Objective Reality?

Written by Edmund Arghand

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Emancipation: Philosophical Conundrum or Objective Reality?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2009/05/26/emancipation-philosophical-conundrum-or-objective-reality/>

EDMUND ARGHAND, MAY 26 2009

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”[1] The entrapment and disillusionment of the self and of the collective has formed the central tenant of a large cannon of political and philosophical literature. Most importantly, questions of personal and social freedom informed and directed the work of Karl Marx as well as a subsequent school of thought, Critical Theory. The purpose – a purpose being fundamental to both theories – is to create or inform under what circumstances change is able to, or should occur. The change that is alluded to is not fickle but is both drastic and elemental. It is the emancipation of the self, freedom of the self from institutional domination that is described as the end goal for society. Only through consciousness and self-realisation can this be achieved. Marx believed this to be inextricably linked to the emancipation of society – from society. If “Consciousness is therefore from the very beginning a social product”[2] then a link between the freedom of the individual and the freedom of the collective can made.

The primary objective of this essay is not to discuss freedom and emancipation in their entirety. Knowledge, truth, consciousness, self-awareness, language, culture, conformity *et al*, all form part of what we can refer to when we talk about emancipation. To delve into a philosophical debate of what it means to be ‘free’ would risk opening Pandora’s box and suffer the consequences, although, it can still be postulated what may lay within it.

Instead, another discourse which may shed some light on a way of assessing whether or not a Critical approach to society leaves us with some kind of objective purpose that is so important to its function, will be pursued. This will be achieved by using a direct comparison of literature within Critical Theory and the Allegory of The Cave as set out by Plato within his work *The Republic*. A Critical approach to society is vast, varied and often confusing so it will be important to narrow down the analysis to that work which is relevant to the objective as set out. This may inevitably leave out notable omissions in the literature of Critical Theory – this however, shall be necessary. In conclusion, it will be discussed whether or not any of the ideas discussed are transferable to International Relations and the normative impact that may have if it is found to be true. Simultaneously, this will lead to a new conceptualisation of what The Cave could mean and how it could be used if we apply it in different ways.

The similarities linking the Allegory of the Cave and Critical Theory converge on both content and language. The Cave itself can become a *via media* between the thoughts of Plato, Rousseau, Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno and we may be better able to conceptualise their ideas through it. The central theme that envelopes these thinkers is the concept that we have to access freedom, that *it* in some way has to be *gained*. Freedom is not an *a priori* condition – life does not equate to freedom. It is in fact the opposite which is believed to be true. One of Rousseau’s most famous and quoted concepts is that “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains”[3]. This becomes the guiding principle which will allow for there to be a synthesis between Plato and Critical Theory via Marx. This simultaneously virtual and enforced entrapment[4] creates the subject and object which is analysed. The need to be freed from these chains and the way in which we may do so becomes the purpose. The point here is that man *should* be born free; it is his surroundings that bind him.

Although Plato’s work is highly philosophical and it can be argued that the normative value of it is fairly minimal, it will be important to defend his position as further analysis will show that Plato did believe in a practical application of his

# Emancipation: Philosophical Conundrum or Objective Reality?

Written by Edmund Arghand

allegory. Plato used his allegory to “illustrate the degrees in which our nature may be enlightened or unenlightened.”[5] The Cave symbolised the difference between perceived reality as truth and the ability to gain the knowledge of our true reality. For Plato the Cave symbolised our current state of being in which we had been “chained by the leg and also by the neck”[6] so that we are only able to see what is in front of us. The images that we see are simply shadows that pass the mouth of the cave and it is these shadows that we refer to as objects of our world. This is reaffirmed through language and discourse as we describe and prescribe action to these objects. It is because of this that we become socialised into believing that they represent the truth. Plato believed that within this context there is no totality to the description of the objects. Power and authority change as some people within the Cave may discover a better way of describing the patterns and nature of the objects and these people will be celebrated and others marginalised. In order to see truth one must free themselves from their shackles and travel out of the Cave and into the sunlight where the forms of the Good are present. Only there can truth be accessed.

Herein however, a problem with the analogy arises. It is difficult to discern whether or not the truth which Plato speaks of is what we may now term as scientific understanding. He later sets out a course of education which anyone (of good nature) can pursue in order to access the world of forms and truth. This includes learning, over a ten year period, mathematics, arithmetic, geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, harmonics and dialectic[7] in order to “draw the soul from the world of change to reality.”[8] This prepares the mind to be able to objectively analyse and realise what truths they are seeing. Despite the belief that science can know what is real through measurement and experiment, it may actually lead us back into unreason.

Nietzsche wrote that “...Copernicus convinced us to believe, contrary to all our senses, that the earth does *not* stand still...it was the greatest triumph over the senses that the world had ever known.”[9] Even for Nietzsche who celebrated science as the dethroner of religion still asked “why knowledge at all?”[10] That this science would diminish the *will* and lead us to acceptance. Although we can measure some things with certainty through science, it can never measure truth. For Horkheimer and Adorno, Nietzsche was too quick to praise science without judging its repercussions. The replacement of the search for truth with the absoluteness of science would lead us into regression – “on the road to science, men renounce any claim to meaning.”[11]

It is of course problematic to discern exactly what Plato was referring to when he spoke of an objective understanding of *things*. If he were alive during the Enlightenment period he may well have thought that science was just another way of better describing the shadows rather than explaining the truth. This attempt of separation and objectivity is what Horkheimer and Adorno saw as our attempt to dominate and explain nature, something that we are fundamentally afraid of. The authority given to science, as Joan Alway has noted, returns us to unreason and barbarism that “It’s very success...” she writes “...resulted in a privileging of science as the only road to truth” she continues, that “the movement that aimed to conquer nature and emancipate reason from the shackles of mythology turns into its opposite: reason returns to mythology.”[12] This has become the disillusionment of humanity, as science replaces religion we fool ourselves to the salvation that it promises – that it may change our nature! John Gray, believed that “By revering scientists and partaking of their gifts of technology...we can stupefy our reason and fortify our faith in humanity.”[13] All that this achieves is the institutionalisation of disillusionment which will bereft humanity of the possibility for emancipation.

Despite this, emancipation does not solely revolve around a philosophical debate on truth and knowledge or the discrepancies between the two. As stated at the beginning of this essay the purpose of critical theory is to *change* the current state of repression. The question that we must ask is; If Plato’s scientific method is seen as a contradiction to the goals of emancipation, is there anything else that we can derive from his allegory that may allow us to have some form of method for emancipation?

The link between the normative value of Marxism and that of Plato has been previously noted by Erica Sherover-Marcuse, Herbert Marcuse’s second wife. She likened the Philosopher King in Plato’s cave to that of the proletariat in Marxism stating that; “Marx’s poor and Plato’s philosopher kings resemble each other both ontologically and socially.”[14] Sherover-Marcuse judges that because both the philosopher kings and the proletariat do not own property (their social status) that they therefore, share the same ontological foundation of being free from commodity fetishism. However, this proposed analogy fails on two grounds. Firstly, Sherover-Marcuse overlooked a fundamental

## Emancipation: Philosophical Conundrum or Objective Reality?

Written by Edmund Arghand

factor that differentiates the philosopher king from the proletariat, that is, the philosopher king gives up his possessions through choice. The proletariat's position is one of domination from the bourgeoisie and the division of labour. This crucially changes the whole perspective of what it is to be part of the under-class as opposed to a choice to forgo one's possessions. The class consciousness that is supposed to prevail from what it means to be subordinate and the "superior insight and perspective"[15] that is associated with it, is non-transferable to a body which does not share in its struggle; for if it did it would certainly lose its nature.

In her analogy Sherover-Marcuse was strictly referring to a classical Marxist paradigm, she may have created a more successful comparison if she had considered movements away from this position and towards Western Marxism[16]. This development in Marxist thought was popularised by such writers as Georg Lukacs who proposed that the revolutionary potential of the proletariat could only be fully realised under the control of a leading party. He believed that "Organisation is the form of mediation between theory and practice." [17] While this may not initially seem a particularly Platonic concept, Plato was very aware of the need to form leadership and organisation in the form of governmentality in order to ensure the enlightenment of the community *writ large*. Plato stated that; "the law is not concerned to make any one class especially happy, but to ensure the welfare of the commonwealth as a whole." [18] He later continues that this can only be achieved by forcing philosopher kings into the position of leadership as politicians were untrustworthy and only seek power – "whom else can you compel to undertake the guardianship of the commonwealth; if not those who...look for rewards of a different kind?" [19]

This raises an interesting question about the nature of those who may become enlightened. From a normative perspective we could create a real life comparison between a false idol and one who really has achieved emancipation (obviously, not in totality) of a community or society. For instance, the Ayatollah Khomeini was seen to be a pure and wise leader who could bring his fellow country men and women out of the darkness of repression and into the light of truth. However, his own will bent his potential to create change for the better, instead, creating a new false truth which would only worsen the situation of subordination. Plato stated that even those who are wise and enlightened can still lead society astray if they wish to seek power through change that "its [wisdom's] use for good or harm depends on the direction towards which it is turned." [20] In comparison to the Iranian leader, we could suggest that figures such as Ghandi or Martin Luther King became true beacons of emancipation, seeking not political power but the justification of what they believed through action.

What this argument boils down to does not become a question of truth or knowledge, emancipation or domination. It is about the nature of the human species. Horkheimer and Adorno saw the neglect of our nature as the reason for social domination. In attempting to control nature and to change our own, we negated our freedom. As Alway noted; "The self-control that made civilisation possible and that is the hallmark of bourgeois subjectivity is achieved only at the expense of the free play of spontaneity, sensuality, and imagination." [21] Marx replaced moral freedom – the freedom of the soul – with economic freedom. While Marx is right to note that the proletariat is "*in* but not *of* civil society" [22] it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy to believe that the proletariat themselves are not free. To believe that you are constrained by your material possessions creates the limitations which frame your life. Self-pity, misfortune and jealousy act to fog the mind of the faculties required to release oneself from the shackles of ignorance. Only through self-realisation of the nature of our being, that is, the actual limitations which *do* constrain us by way of our nature, can we accept the fate that we may never be released from the cave of shadows.

This is what Jurgen Habermas realised when he said; "What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: *language*." [23] If we can never know the truth of what is outside the cave then working within our limits can still lead us towards a freer and better world. If we realise that we too, like all animals, are organic beings of Eros and Gaia then we may stop dreaming of being masters of the universe and attempt to simply better the world as best as we can with what we *do* know.

The application of all of this to International Relations may seem tenuous at best, but it can in fact be applied normatively. In order to make this leap of faith we may first change the nature of the cave. We may for instance imagine that the walls of the cave are not made of mud and rocks but are instead fashioned out of glass. In reality there is not only one cave but many, and they touch and collide at different points giving rise to interaction between different caves and different people. As we have grown in isolation the language that we form and the meanings that

# Emancipation: Philosophical Conundrum or Objective Reality?

Written by Edmund Arghand

we prescribe to the shadow's seems radically different and we think of the 'others' as barbaric. We wage wars by moving our walls into the territory of these other people and we slay them for being different. Over time, we realise that our wars are meaningless as we are simply describing the same shapes only in a different tongue, not only that, but we soon realise that the walls that separate us are not even solid – we may walk through them if we so dare. Horkheimer and Adorno, unlike Marx, believed that the driving force of humanity is not self-preservation but fear. The reason for creating a new meaning to the cave is thus – if the driving force of humanity is fear and fear creates domination, we should be able to curb this illusion of difference by the action of language described by Habermas. Through learning and development and mutual benefits we could assume that something like the European Union is not an exception to the rule but is instead the first step on the road to the emancipation from fear. This will allow for the mutual understanding between states and an acceptance of 'sameness' while maintaining "social solidarity and the necessary division of humanity into separate political association"[24] that is vital to our need for some form of community.

## Bibliography

Adorno, T and Horkheimer, M. (1944) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.

Alway, J. (1995) *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities*. London: Greenwood Press.

Gray, J. (2002) *Straw Dogs*. London: Granta Books.

Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Boston: Beacon.

Linklater, A. (1998) *The Transformation of Political Communities*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Lukacs, G. (1971). *History and Class Consciousness*. London: Merlin Press.

Marx, K. (1973) *On Society and Social Change*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Marx, K. (1998) These on Feuerbach. In Marx, K *The German Ideology*. New York: Prometheus Book.

Nietzsche, F. (2002) *Beyond Good and Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Plato. (1941) *The Republic of Plato*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rousseau, J.J. (1973) *The Social Contract and Discourses*. London: Everyman.

Sherover-Marcuse, E. (1986) *Emancipation & Consciousness*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

[1] Marx, K. (1998) These on Feuerbach. In Marx, K *The German Ideology*. New York: Prometheus Book. p571

[2] Marx, K. (1973) *On Society and Social Change*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. p10

[3] Rousseau, J.J. (1973) *The Social Contract and Discourses*. London: Everyman. p181

[4] For Marx this occurred through the division of labour and the domination of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. For Horkheimer & Adorno it was effect of culture and conformity and for Plato it was a product of being unenlightened.

[5] Plato. (1941) *The Republic of Plato*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p227

[6] Ibid.

# Emancipation: Philosophical Conundrum or Objective Reality?

Written by Edmund Arghand

[7] Ibid. pp235-255

[8] Ibid. p237

[9] Nietzsche, F. (2002) *Beyond Good and Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p14

[10] Ibid. p123

[11] Adorno, T and Horkheimer, M. (1944) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso. p5

[12] Alway, J. (1995) *Critical Theory and Political Possibilities*. London: Greenwood Press. p35

[13] Gray, J. (2002) *Straw Dogs*. London: Granta Books. pp29-30

[14] Sherover-Marcuse, E. (1986) *Emancipation & Consciousness*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. pp32-33

[15] Ibid

[16] Op. cit. Alway, J. (1995).

[17] Lukacs, G. (1971). *History and Class Consciousness*. London: Merlin Press. p299

[18] Op. cit. Plato (1941). p234

[19] Ibid. p235

[20] Ibid. p233

[21] Op. cit. Always (1995). p34

[22] Ibid. p13

[23] Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Boston: Beacon. p314

[24] Linklater, A. (1998) *The Transformation of Political Communities*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press. p53

—

Written by: Edmund Arghand  
Written at: London School of Economics  
Written for: Dr George Lawson  
Date written: 2009