

Plato's Allegory of the Cave and Taking Your Thoughts and Life Out of the Shadows

By *Harrison Barnes*

One of the greatest challenges to [finding a job](#), changing direction in our lives and becoming the people we are capable of becoming, is learning to see the world in different ways. Several years ago I was on a jet with one of the wealthiest men in the country. This guy had recently purchased a jet that I estimate was probably worth at least \$25,000,000 at the time. He used the jet to hop around the United States for leisure purposes. He really did not do any business at that point anymore, and had been retired for a few years.

I had been brought along as a passenger with him at the last minute because we were both traveling to a wedding together. I want to be clear with you at the outset that this is not the sort of society I normally travel in. However, on this day I had the opportunity to spend a few hours with one of the richest men in the United States, and someone who by the time he was in his mid-40s was worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

What I am about to tell you right now is not about how this guy got so rich. What is most interesting about this particular guy is how he thought about the world and the opportunities in it. I spoke with him during the flight that day and then I spoke with him for several hours once we arrived at the wedding. This was some time ago and I was just starting out in some respects, and was very eager to learn the secrets of someone who was so successful. In fact, I thought this person had a tremendous amount to teach and the more I spoke with him and asked him questions, the more I realized that he had a way of looking at the world that was much different from mine.

A few weeks before traveling with this mogul, I had been to a party at one of his friend's houses. His friend was an electrician. The two of them had gone to high school together and stayed best friends ever since then. His friend was uneducated and had not gone to college, but was someone who worked very hard. The house I visited for the party was the most unbelievable house I ever saw. The guy had done so well as an electrician that he had actually had gold laid between the cracks in marble on his floor. The home must have been at least 20,000 square feet. I had never seen anything like it. On the airplane that day the guy started telling me about how his friend had gotten so rich.

"When I made all this money I started getting disappointed that all my friends were uncomfortable around me. If I ordered a \$300 bottle of wine at dinner, they would be worried they would have to contribute to the bill and then would not order entrees. It was very uncomfortable. People did not want to travel places with me because they were uncomfortable with me paying for their hotel rooms. So at some point I decided that my best friends needed to be ridiculously well off as well, and I made sure they were."

"What did you do?" I asked him.

I was expecting him to tell me that he gave them the money they needed. Instead, he really opened my mind about how some of the wealthiest people out there think.

He explained that his friend who was an electrician had spent 20 years with a little ad in the Yellow Pages driving around doing electrical work in the [blue collar](#) area of Los Angeles he worked in. The guy had one helper and they worked Monday through Friday traveling around doing some work, giving estimates and so forth. When the electrician's friend got really rich he sat him down because he realized they could not be friends if they were not both obnoxiously wealthy.

"How much do you make a day?" he asked him.

He explained how he billed out at \$65 an hour, his helper at \$32.50 an hour, and how the two of them spent about half an average day giving estimates and the other half actually doing work and making money. When the tycoon listened to this, he thought the solution to the problem sounded really easy.

"All you need to do is get 200+ guys like you billing \$65 an hour, seven days a week and not have to give any estimates and you're going to be fabulously wealthy!"

"That's impossible!" the electrician said.

"Absolutely not. We'll figure it out."

A few days later the tycoon took the electrician to Beverly Hills, got him a haircut and bought him a \$1,500 suit. He paid someone \$500 to put together a little write up about the electrician's company on expensive stationery. Without being dishonest, he made sure the write up sounded like the electrician had one of the largest electrician outfits in the country. A week later the electrician was sitting in a conference room at a major cell phone company in his new suit, after having been coached by the tycoon.

"Our company is one of the most established electricians in California. We can service and do all the electrical maintenance on all of your cell phone towers in California, Arizona and Nevada ..." was something along the lines of what the electrician told this company.

"You need to look the part to [get the job!](#)" I remember the tycoon telling me about why he bought his friend such a nice suit.

"You need to go for the moon. Show up ready to do the most outrageous and [highest paying](#) thing imaginable, and deliver. That's all you need to do."

Within a few weeks of his friend sitting him down, the electrician had landed a contract to maintain and do all the electrical maintenance for all of the cell phone towers in several states for a major cell phone company. Within a year his company had gone from two people to several hundred, and the electrician was making more than a million dollars a month. Aside from some coaching from a tycoon, he did this all on his own. Now he travels around with his friend to vacations on private islands and so forth, and pays his own way.

Is this story incredible? Yes. But this is the sort of thing that happens all the time. There are countless people out there who live in obscurity because they cannot see the opportunities that are right there in front of them. How many electricians out there are taking advantage of the opportunities that are out there like this guy?

Are you taking advantage of the opportunities that are in front of you? I refer to ideas like what we see with the electrician as "people discovering the truth." There is "truth" out there, and this truth is that you can be whatever you want to be and become. But you need to see the truth first. So many peoples' lives are held back forever by their complete inability to see the truth. The truth is that most of the obstacles out there are in our own mind and this is something that holds us back. Most of us are in the dark figuratively, and cannot see everything that we are capable of becoming.

In Plato's, *The Republic*, he writes:

See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their head all the way around ...

This passage is well known both for its simplicity and the profoundness of the message that it contains. This particular passage of *The Republic* is written as a dialogue between Socrates and his students.

Men trapped in a cave sit with their backs to a fire and are not allowed to turn around to see what is behind them. They are chained in the cave their entire lives and all they can see is a blank wall. The only thing they can see is the shadows of objects that are held up behind them. When objects are held up to the fire, they project shadows and the men identify these shadows. But the men can only identify objects by the shadows, and they cannot see the objects themselves. The shadows are as close as the people ever get to seeing reality.

Between the fire and the prisoners there is a walkway that is raised. Along this walkway various animals, plants, puppets and other things are moved. The prisoners see these shadows. There are also echoes that come off of the wall from the sounds on the walkway, so the prisoners are not even hearing reality. Socrates implies that it would be reasonable that the prisoners would see the shadows as real things and the echoes as real things as well. Hence, the prisoners would see the sounds and sights not just as "reflections" of reality, but as reality itself. The entire group of men and their society would become dependent upon the shadows on the wall. Thus, the men would praise the men who were able to guess the next shadow and these would be seen as among the most intelligent prisoners and as people who understood the true nature of the world.

Socrates then introduces another idea to the scene and the cave. For example, what if a prisoner is allowed to stand up and someone showed him the things which cast the shadows. The prisoner would not be able to recognize the objects because all he understands are shadows. He would believe the shadows on the wall to be more real than what he is actually seeing.

Socrates also asks about what would happen if a man were forced to look at the fire. He would likely turn away and look back at the shadows, because this is what he perceives to be real. If the man were dragged out of the cave, would the man be angry for this being done to him? He would be at first pained by the Sun and confused by the objects around him. However, when he eventually came to understand what the world really is, he would be sorry for the men whose lives were spent in the shadows. When the man tries to describe the truth to the men in the cave, they resist learning the truth and think their friend is crazy for doing so.

In the cave allegory, the men who are in the cave represent most of the world. They do not see truth and only see representations of objects and things. They are the majority. The man who escapes the cave and sees the true nature of things is in the minority.

What the cave represents to me is that there are few people out there who really see the true nature of things in the world. Instead, they are interpreting the world through reflections, shadows and echoes. For example, why did the electrician in the story I told you take out a little advertisement in the Yellow Pages and travel around from house to house giving estimates and doing small jobs throughout his career until advised otherwise by the tycoon? Probably because this is how he believed the work should be done. Everyone else did things this way and he saw this and followed the crowd.

What does all of this mean to you, your job search and your life? I would submit to you that if you are like 99% of all people, you are operating by interpreting shadows and sounds. You are not seeing reality and what opportunities lie before you. You are not seeing what you are truly capable of, and what you can do. You do not realize the incredible number of opportunities there are.

When you are operating in the shadows you are not seeing the true nature of things. There are powerful and penetrating insights into the world and the nature of things that are available when you start to think very carefully and closely about things. These insights are what are separating the people who are going to really get the results they want, from those who will not.

I have heard numerous stories about people over the years who achieve incredible success in their careers and lives. In every case, these were people who stepped out of the shadows to see some new way of doing things. They opened their mind by challenging an assumption or something along those lines about the way they have done something in the past. The rewards for stepping out of the shadows are huge. When you see the truth out there, you can accomplish far more than when you are simply in the shadows.

The idea that Plato is attempting to make clear is that people who are trapped in a cave can only see the shadows of objects projected on the wall.

THE LESSON

You must learn to see the world differently in order to find a job, change your life's direction, and become the person that you want to be. Take advantage of the opportunities that are in front of you. The people who have achieved incredible success over the years where those who stepped out of their comfort zones and discovered new ways of doing things. The potential rewards for stepping out of your comfort zone are huge.