

In Over Our Heads: Living and Learning in the Cave

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

Experts are in trouble. And our whole society is in trouble. We don't know what to believe and our experts often seem to have only a tenuous grasp on reality. As we have noted in this set of essays, these concerns are societal products of late 20th and early 21st Century thought. I would also note that there is a much earlier source: the voice of Socrates as heard through the writing of Plato. Socrates (Plato) offered a critique of ways in which we view reality—and how we should view the role of “experts”—through an allegory of the cave.

Plato's Cave

Let's briefly visit this cave. It is filled with people who have lived all of their lives chained to a wall in the cave. These people watch shadows projected on the wall in front of them. These shadows are being projected on the wall from things passing in front of a fire that remains lit behind them. The cave dwellers believe the shadows are reality.

Are we all living in a cave? Do we never gain a clear view of reality, but instead view only the shadows that are projected on the walls of our cave? We live with an image of reality (shadows on the wall of the cave) rather than with reality itself. Plato concluded that we have no basis for knowing whether we are seeing the shadow or seeing reality, given that we have always lived in the cave. Plato thus speaks to us from many centuries past about the potential fallacy to be found in a static objectivist perspective regarding the world—since we can never know whether we are living in the cave or living in the world of reality outside the cave.

Today, most of us live in a world that is becoming increasingly complex, unpredictable, turbulent—and contradictory. Turning back to Plato's allegory, we live with an expanded cast of characters in the cave. First, there is something or someone standing near the fire in the cave. Part of the fire's glow is blocked, thus limiting the shadow-images cast on the wall. The blocking feature can be a cultural or personal narrative that we absorb during our daily personal and collective lives.

Narratives and perspectives block out some of the light coming from the fire in the cave. Not only don't we actually see reality, there is something that determines which parts of objective reality get projected onto the wall. Those holding the partition that blocks out some of the fire's light have themselves grown up in the cave but may hold a quite different agenda from other cave dwellers.

There is yet another character in our contemporary cave. This is the interpreter, reporter or analyst—or the “expert”. We actually don't have enough time in our busy lives to look directly at the wall to see the shadows that are projected from the fire (which we assume is the “real” world). The cave has grown very large, and we often can't even see the walls of the cave and the shadows. We wait for the interpreter to tell us what is being projected on the wall and what the implications of these images are for us in our lives.

We are thus removed three steps from reality. We believe that the shadows on Plato's cave are "reality." We don't recognize that someone or something is standing between us and the fire and selectively determining which aspects of reality get projected onto the wall. Finally, someone else is situated inside the cave offering us a description and analysis.

Challenges of the Cave Increase

It gets even more challenging for many of us—as well as experts and the clients we are serving as professional coaches. First, there are now multiple fires burning in the cave and projecting multiple shadows on the wall. The so-called grand narrative (of Western European and American origins) which defined much of our reality during the 19th and 20th Century is now collapsing. We now have multiple, conflicting narratives that make it difficult for all but the most xenophobic people in the world to see only one set of shadows.

There is a second major change, with the advent of social media and reality television and with the purchase of goods and services directly from the source. We might now be moving back to a time when there are no "middle-men" or interpreters. The term disintermediation is being used to describe this potentially seismic change in our societal acquisition and framing of knowledge.

Regardless of the shifts now occurring in our world of knowledge, we seem to remain confused about what is "real" and often don't trust our direct experience. We are facing many contradictions—many of which I have described previously in this book. We move, with great reluctance (and considerable grieving), to a recognition that reality is being constructed for us and that we need to attend not only to the constructions, but also to the interests and motives of those who tend the fire and block images on the wall of the cave and those who offer us their interpretations.

An initial question might be posed given these changes: can professional coaches assist their clients in facing these challenges? Can coaches and consultants help their clients sort through the multiple narratives and deal with the disintermediation of images they are receiving? Can Plato's cave provide us with the opportunity to gain insights in a coaching session about the nature of the cave? What about the world that is projected onto the walls of the cave, and the nature and agenda of the "expert" interpreters? Can we help our clients critically reflect on the views be provided to us by the "experts" who are interpreting shadows on the walls of the cave?

Can we take one step further with our coaching clients? Can we help our clients consider whether or not to step outside the cave? More fundamentally, can we actually leave the cave? How does the coach assist their client in this challenging endeavor? Is it safer to remain inside the cave than to venture outside? Should we (and can we) face the profound challenge of unmediated experiences? Is a coach truly being helpful if she invites their client to leave the cave? Should a coach help their clients recognize ways in which they still carry the cave shadows and cave interpreters with them when stepping outside the cave? As we step outside the cave, are we likely to confront some objective reality through our experience, or is the experience itself constantly shifting depending on setting, context, interpersonal relationships and the nature of our own past experience? Are we just moving to another cave?

Imprisonment in the Cave: An Expanded Version

In addressing the challenge of expertise, we are pushed as professional coaches to an even more challenging perspective. The allegory offered by Socrates (through the voice of Plato) is actually much more extensive than the versions I just offered. Plato provides us with more detail about life inside the cave and about what might occur if one cave dweller is allowed to step outside the cave and then returns to the cave. Profound implications regarding coaching and expertise emerge from this expanded version--and further questions arise about the role to be played by a professional coach in addressing these implications regarding reality and expertise with their client.

Inside the cave, its inhabitants (as prisoners) are chained so that their legs and necks are fixed, forcing them to gaze at the wall in front of them and not look around the cave. Behind the prisoners is the fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway with a low wall. People walk behind the wall so that their bodies do not cast shadows for the prisoners to see, but the objects they carry do. Prisoners cannot see any of this behind them and are only able to see the shadows cast upon the cave wall in front of them. The sounds of the people talking echo off the shadowed wall, and the prisoners falsely believe these sounds come from the shadows. This is not a very pleasant setting in which to dwell. Some residents seek to leave the cave. There are dreams of liberation that occupy cave dwellers at night and that are to be found in narratives shared (often whispered) among these people.

What happens when dreams are realized, and narratives are aligned with reality? What happens when one of these people is unchained and leaves the cave, discovering that the world is something more than the shadows they have always assumed were reality—that it is filled with many contradictory belief systems. This single prisoner (that we will call the protagonist) is freed, being forced to turn and see the fire and then forced (allowed) to leave the cave and confront the outside, ironic light directly. The light would hurt their eyes and make it hard for them to see the objects that are casting the shadows. They would not believe it if they were told that what they saw before was not real. Instead, the objects they are now struggling to see are real.

Our protagonist would be angry and in pain, and this would only worsen when the radiant light of the sun overwhelms their eyes and blinds them. The sunlight is representative of the new reality and knowledge that the freed prisoner is experiencing. Slowly, her eyes adjust to the light of the sun. Gradually, the former prisoner can see the reflections of people and things in water and then later see the people and things themselves. Plato continues, saying that the freed prisoner would think that the real world was superior to the world they experienced in the cave. Our protagonist would feel blessed for the change, pity the other prisoners, and want to bring their fellow cave dwellers out of the cave and into the sunlight

Beyond the Allegory: Leaving the Real-Life Cave

Briefly, I will leave Plato's Greece and return to the present 21st Century world. I propose that there are three levels at which we leave the cave in the real world. These three levels have been articulated by keen observers of human behavior—especially the formation of theories and attempts to solve

problems (the domains in which many experts reside). These observers include Daniel Kahneman, Chris Argyris, Donald Schon and Thomas Kuhn. I briefly visit each level.

Level One: Distinguishing between Biases and Noise.

In a recent book, Daniel Kahneman and his two colleagues, Olivier Sibony and Cass Sustein (2021) write about the distinction between bias and noise. They begin with a story about assessing the success of someone shooting arrows into a target. One desirable outcome would be for all the arrows to hit the target in the same area. When this occurs we can applaud the consistency of the archer. Another outcome would be for the arrows to arrive all over the target. Typically, we devalue this outcome. The archer has not been consistent in directing arrows toward the target.

Kahneman, Sibony and Sustein suggest that these assessments of success must be questioned. The first outcome indicates only that there is consistency—not that the arrows have arrived at or near the bullseye. The arrows could cluster at some point at quite a distance from the bullseye. This placement would reveal a BIAS. Conversely, arrows arriving at many places on the target reveal NOISE. Our authors suggest that these are quite different flaws in the performance of the archer—and that both Noise and Bias are to be found frequently in the judgements made by most of us. As behavioral economists and professors of strategy, Kahneman and his colleagues (Kahneman, Sibony and Sustein, 2021, pp. 5-6) propose that:

. . . noise is [sometimes] the more important problem. But in public conversations about human error and in organizations all over the world, noise is rarely recognized. Bias is the star of the show. Noise is a bit player, usually offstage. . . . In real world decisions, the amount of noise is often scandalously high.

I find that their observation about noise is valid in my own field of psychology. Typically, noise is considered to be statistical variance in the results obtained from a psychological experiment. The focus of most studies typically is on the mean (average) of the scores obtained. Variance is an unwanted visitor to the experiment and does nothing more than reduce the level of significance found in the comparison between experimental groups. As psychologists, we focus on the bullseye (mean) not the distribution of results.

I would suggest that the pattern of variation in results obtained are often much more interesting than the mean. I am in the minority, for those with a more behavioral bent (and an alliance with the scientific culture) tend to view “error variance” as nothing more than evidence of sloppy research, given that everything is determined by invariant external stimulus properties (situations/settings) and rewards rather by messy internal determinants such as personality or moment-to-moment chaotic judgements. These variances in human behavior (and the human psyche) are much more often a focus in the humanities—being portrayed in novels, portrait renderings and ballets.

I would further propose that any comprehensive view of a human experience or any attempt to engage in systemic thinking will produce noise. As Miller and Page (2007) note, complex systems contain many interconnected parts. They are not just made up of many parts, as are complicated systems. The interconnectivity produces noise and unpredictability (outcomes that traditional scientists hate). We

only get simplicity and consistency when we erect a silo—and in doing so we are vulnerable to the bias identified by Kahneman, Sibony and Sustain. I assume that Scott Page (2011) would suggest that we reduce bias with a diversity of perspectives—and this diversity inevitably produces noise. It is global diversity that has helped to challenge the biases inherent in the grand narrative offered by Western societies.

Experts must come to grips with the judgmental challenges of bias and noise. Where are they most vulnerable. They can offer consistent perspectives and advocate for consistent practices; however, in doing so they are open to profound biases, and they could do damage to those listening to their opinions and following their advice. Conversely, they could be open to new information and provide diverse perspectives and offer multiple bits of advice. As “noisy” experts they are likely to lose credibility and find few people willing to follow their suggestions. We find this challenge of inconsistency and diversity of opinion to be operating about those who offer “expert” advice regarding viruses, wars on poverty and drugs, and the preservation of democracy. Put simply, “noisy” experts are in trouble—even though they might have the best hold on contemporary reality. This is a very difficult condition embedded in the level one distinction to be drawn between BIAS and NOISE.

Level Two: Examining self-reinforcing and self-sealing assumptions.

A view of this second level comes from the work of two psychologists, Chris Argyris and Don Schon (1974). During more than twenty years of remarkable collaborative work, Argyris and Schon provided a detailed analysis of the way in which we, as leaders, members of a work group, or someone treating psychopathology, operate with two distinctive theories about human behavior and particularly about our own behavior. On the one hand, we have an *Espoused Theory*. This is the theory we offer to other people when asked why we do what we do:

“Why do I confront this person who works for me by offering examples of his misconduct? I do this because, he needs to know what he is doing in order to improve his performance.”

“As a leader, it is important for me to treat all of my employees in a fair and equitable manner. That is the modern way to be a leader.”

Our espoused theories often come from the books or articles we have read or the training session we attended last week (if we can still remember what was contained on the power points). At some level, we even believe that we operate in a manner that is aligned with this theory—though we are usually aware that there are “exceptions” – such as when my subordinate has ignored my previous feedback, or when the organization I lead is “in crisis.”

This moves us to the second type of theory identified by Argyris and Schon. This is the *Theory-In-Use*—a theory that guides the way in which we actually operate. This is the theory that would be identified by someone who is being objective and perhaps naïve (the proverbial “person from Mars”) when observing our behavior. Many years ago, I was conducting a summer program that involved learners of all ages. My two children were attending this program. One day, I asked one of my young children what she had observed. My child indicated that there seemed to be a lot of time spent sitting on uncomfortable chairs just talking about stuff. “Dad, why do people spend all of their time sitting on their butts? Don’t they

want to start doing something?” My child seems to have captured my pedagogical theory-in-use: people learn and somehow remain engaged when they are just sitting around and talking to one another.

For our thoughtful boss who is offering feedback to his subordinate, the theory-in-use might be: “I will provide the feedback, knowing that nothing will change; however, I can feel good about myself knowing that I provided the feedback and can use this as evidence that my subordinate will never change, even though I have offered him my candid feedback.” The caring leader may hold a more general theory-in-use that suggests: “the way in which to get people really working is to identify the current situation as a crisis and push hard for results. I am only being tough on people because of the crisis and will return to a more -kindly style of leadership once the crisis is over.”

Someone from the outside (the cave) could probably figure out the theories-in-use of our boss, our leader (or me as educator), after watching them in operation for several weeks (or maybe just a couple of hours). The outside observer would note that the employee receiving feedback from the boss seems to be quite anxious when confronted by the boss and is not really paying much attention (seeking instead to identify the reason for their behavior or reason to blame someone else for poor performance). It might be even easier to identify the leader’s (or my) theory-in-use, for it is displayed in a very public place: the leader’s organization seems to always be in crisis, at least in part because the leader is always acting in an erratic and dehumanizing manner. My students and I are sitting on our derrieres and just talking—no one complains.

It is remarkable for each of us to note how “blind” we are to our theory-in-use – or how reticent we are to acknowledge that this is the theory we are actually using most of the time in our relationship with other people. We are truly living in a cave and find the prospects of leaving the cave to be daunting. Argyris and Schon have offered us valuable insights about our own behavior—though we are often unwilling to act upon these insights. It is not just that these insights are uncomfortable for us to hear and act upon.

It goes much deeper than this. Our theories-in-use are often self-fulfilling (we get what we expect). Our employee doesn’t do anything different after we offer the feedback. Our organization can legitimately be considered “in crisis.” My students declare that they are “learning” even though not doing anything other than talking. This justifies our actions and reconfirms our theory-in-use. The condition in which we find ourselves and upon which we base our actions is “real” – but we are not being “realistic” (or honest) about our own complicity in bringing about these conditions.

There is yet another ingredient that contributes to our lack of theory-in-use awareness: no one is telling us what is really occurring. There is no “person from Mars”, or if there is this neutral observer, they don’t want to confront us with the “bad news”. They have their own theory-in-use about us:

“This person won’t listen to what I have said and will never change.”

“It is too dangerous to tell the truth!”

We end up looking a lot like the subordinate we identified earlier who never seems to change. Conversely, the theory-in-use of the neutral observer often concerns their own credibility or neutrality:

“I might not be seeing what is really happening” or

“I have too much at stake in viewing this situation to be in any way objective.” or

“I shouldn’t say anything at this point because I might be wrong” or

“I might be biased.”

The resulting decision takes place in the observer’s mind:

“I will remain quiet, even if asked what I have observed.”

Thus, any conversation about theories-in-use is avoided. Argyris and Schon identify this as the “self-sealing” nature of theories-in-use. These theories are non-discussable: we can’t talk about them or don’t see any reason to talk about that which is “obvious”. When you add together the “self-fulfilling” and “self-sealing” dynamics inherent in our theories-in-use, we see how powerful these theories can be and how resistant they are either to inspection or change. We continue to live comfortably with our espoused theories and close the door on our theories in use.

Level Three: Creating and Propagating Alternative Paradigms.

There is an even broader sense in which we have left a cave and are faced with the blinding light of the real world – or at least the shadows of a different cave. This third perspective is derived from the highly influential, historical framework offered by Thomas Kuhn (1962) in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Without going into details regarding Kuhn’s revolutionary analysis of revolutions, we can cut directly to the chase: Kuhn proposed that most scientific work (particularly in the physical sciences) is based on an underlying *paradigm*. This paradigm is very strong and reinforced by widespread institutional support (including finances and certifications). Plato would suggest that dominant paradigms constitute thick-walled caves.

Kuhn was one of the first to use the term “paradigm”. It has now become widely (and often inappropriately) used. Kuhn has himself been accused of using the word “paradigm” in multiple ways and has contributed to the confusion regarding this important word. Paradigm refers, in essence, to a community or cluster of ideas, practices, standards, criteria (who can sit at the table), institutional allegiances – and assumptions. This community and cluster reside inside a cave that is filled with all of the biases, limitations and levels of interpretation that I have already identified.

A revolution occurs when the dominant paradigm in a particular science is overturned—to be replaced by an alternative paradigm that does a better job of addressing what Kuhn calls *anomalies*. These anomalies are phenomena in a specific scientific domain that are not understood, explained or amendable to either prediction or control when the current paradigm is applied. Anomalies are first ignored and are often addressed only by those members of this specific scientific community who are marginalized because of gender, location, race, ethnicity or social-economic status. These marginalized players often lack the credentials or sufficient prestige to be taken seriously by the mainstream of a scientific community.

The successful attempts by these marginalized players to apply a new paradigm to the elusive anomaly can be effectively ignored – for a while. Very few people initially visit their cave. Eventually, however, the message gets out that something “interesting” or even “important” is occurring in this backwater location by this backwater researcher or theorist. Gradually, there is acceptance of the ideas and practices embedded in the new paradigm and successful work with the anomaly. Expansion of the marginalized approach and answers eventually leads to a revolution. The new approach and answers become the new dominant paradigm. The cave is now frequently visited, and many people move in. Many of the “old-timers” hang on to their precious but outmoded paradigm, but their time in the scientific spotlight has passed. They are now only acknowledged in the history of science textbooks.

It is important to recall that Kuhn focused primarily on the physical sciences. He believed that psychology (and most of the other social and behavioral sciences) are “pre-paradigmatic” —meaning that they are operating at the present time without a dominant paradigm or (to be a bit more generous) are operating with paradigms that are frequently overturned or significantly modified. Plato might say that Kuhn’s pre-paradigmatic state is one in which there are not any caves with sturdy walls. People are wandering around look for a cave in which to hide, learn, live . . . But none exist for them (at least at the present time). This is perhaps the essence of our present mid-21st Century state of knowledge—and what many social observers (including myself) identify as a postmodern condition of fragmentation and fiction (Bergquist, 1993).

The Three Level Crisis of Expertise

The three levels at which we can leave our cave relates directly to three levels at which experts can be in trouble. On the one hand, it is wonderful that an expert can provide perspectives and practices that are helpful at each of the three levels. An expert can help a leader differentiate between bias and noise—as Kahneman and his colleagues have done in their provocative book. An expert can also align with Argyris and Schon in assisting a leader in discerning what in their behavioral repertoire is theory-in-use rather than theory-in-mind. In this regard, the “expert” will often take on the role of coach or consultant when assisting their client. At the third level, the expert becomes a challenging presence in the life of their client, often providing an interdisciplinary and “cutting-edge” perspective that encourages their client to “think outside the box.” At the very least, the expert can be a reassuring presence and source of support and encouragement for a leader who is venturing outside the existing paradigm of their organization or society. While the expert might not be able to provide blinders when their client exits the cave or a guidebook to the new cave they are entering, they can at least let their client know that their fears are warranted—and that new learning is certainly on the horizon.

Before we begin to celebrate regarding the opportunities for valuable expertise when one is considering a venture outside the cave, we need to recognize that these opportunities are often offset by potential problems. First, we must remember that the expert is likely themselves to be living in the same cave as the leader they are serving. What makes us think (or the “expert” think) that they somehow can avoid the biases of the cave? Alternatively, if they reside outside the cave, then how do they fine the credibility to speak with insight and wisdom about living inside the cave. These outsiders might have found their own “bliss”, but this euphoric state might not be available inside their client’s cave.

Second, it is critical to note that the expert is confronted with a complex and often contradictory set of images inside their client's cave. There are images swirling all around the cave. Flames are flickering and the analyses that the expert can offer must always be tentative and contingent on events and processes that are often volatile and turbulent (Bergquist, 2021). Anxiety pervades the cave during uncertain times, and the expert's observations and recommendations can be easily misunderstood or mis-used by their anxious client (Bergquist, 2020).

Third, the expert is rarely the only voice in the cave to which their client is listening (or potentially listening). Expertise is a highly competitive enterprise – with high financial rewards and societal expertise often being at stake. With this being the case, an expert might be expected to spend considerable time on matters of marketing rather than matters directly related to updating and revising their own domain of expertise. They look themselves for expert advice – but now from those who purport to know how best to get one's voice heard in a quite cacophonous cave.

With these opportunities and challenges in mind, a cave-dweller might wish to obtain the services of a professional coach to help them sort through the many voices and images of expertise they are confronting in the cave. The professional coach can assist in helping their client identify the biases inherent in any advice being offered by experts (hopefully including the biases of the coach themselves). As I already noted, the coach can be of particular value in helping their client gain greater awareness of the distance between their theory-in-use and espoused-theory.

A professional coach can also assist their client in reducing levels of anxiety and finding a "container" for the anxiety that they do experience (Bergquist, 2020). Though the professional coach is not a therapist, they can provide support for their client in finding ways in which to relax in and with the expert perspectives and recommendations they are receiving, so that this expertise is not misunderstood or misused. Finally, the professional coach can become something of a consumer-guide for their client—helping them determine which source of expertise might be not only most credible but also most useful. The occupants of every cave should appoint at least one professional coach!

Returning to the Cave

I travel back to Plato's Greece and ask an important (and often troubling) question: can anyone come back to the cave and what would the "enlightened" person say to those still in the cave? How would the dwellers take in this radically different perspective? The cave dwellers don't know what to do with the returning unchained "revolutionary" who talks about a different reality. What happens when this person returns to the cave? Would this person be considered a "philosopher" (as Plato suggests) or would they be identified as a "fool" or as a person who is "mad"? The former prisoner's experiences terrify compatriots. Our protagonist realizes that they cannot remain in the cave. They would stagnate. Other cave dwellers will not change or move forward. They perceive our protagonist as dangerous.

The returning prisoner, whose eyes have become acclimated to the light of the sun, will be blind when she re-enters the cave, just as she was when first exposed to the sun. The cave dwellers, according to Plato, would infer from the returning prisoner's blindness that the journey out of the cave had harmed

her and that they should not undertake a similar journey. Plato concludes that the prisoners, if they were able, would therefore reach out and kill anyone who attempted to drag them out of the cave.

As professional coaches, can we help our clients navigate the return to the cave? Can we even help our clients determine whether or not they should consider returning to the cave? Why not remain outside the cave? Or is this yet another cave and another limiting version of reality?

Personal and Organizational Caves

There are several different ways in which to view the lives of cave dwellers. We can identify the cave as existing inside the occupant's head and heart. The cave mentality exists when people become trapped or caught in favorite ways of thinking and acting that confine individuals within socially constructed worlds and prevent the emergence of other worlds. Preconceived (and often contradictory) ideas become traps for people when they begin to hold onto their preconceived notions and biases that eventually become their reality. These traps often are first introduced by “experts” who enter the engagement with their own agenda and offer their own slanted interpretations.

The cave can also be viewed as a collective experience. An entire organization can be perceived as the cave and its members as those who dwell in the cave. Expanding on Plato's allegory of the cave, we can assume that people collectively develop unconscious mechanisms and construct realities in order to handle anxiety and desire. Organizations are created and sustained by conscious and unconscious processes. People can actually become imprisoned or confined by the images, ideas, thoughts, and actions to which these processes give rise. Organizations become stuck in their traditional manner of thinking. There are rigid (though often tacitly-held) rules about how things are done.

Organizational life is deemed as a mode of cave dwelling because those who work in it are set in their ways of thinking and refuse to change. Then a released prisoner (as a visionary leader) returns to the cave and describes a new, blinding reality. An organization is confronted with this new reality--one that requires a new way of thinking. Members of the organization must re-assess organizational norms. They must drop traditional modes of functioning. Individually and collectively these cave dwellers must develop a new identity and new ways of relating to one another and the organization's operations.

The cave dwellers are offered an opportunity to be liberated from the cave by the prisoner who escapes and discovers the "real" world -- or at least a different world. These are a different (and often more challenging) type of “expert.” Cave dwellers are given the opportunity to discover that the world beyond the shadows of the cave is richer, more complex and perhaps more rewarding. The prisoner has escaped TO freedom and invites their colleagues to also escape to freedom. However, does the escaped prisoner (and the other cave dwellers) soon wish to escape FROM this new freedom? (Fromm, 1941; Fromm, 1955; Bergquist and Weiss,1994; Bergquist, 2021)

Do they long for a world (inside the cave) that seems simpler, more clearly defined and ultimately less challenging? Do they blame the escaped and returning prisoner for their new-found anxiety? Does the visionary expert suddenly become an uninvited outsider who wants to cause pain, confusion and uncertainty? How does a coach help the challenged leader to work with the visionary expert—and with those (like himself or herself) who still dwell in the cave?

In Over Our Heads

Keeping the metaphor (and challenges) of Plato's cave in mind, let's once again bring the cave into our 21st Century world and consider how we address challenges associated with our coaching client's encounter with experts that reside both inside the cave and outside the client's personal and organizational cave.

It is first important for a professional coach to help their clients recognize that the world inside their cave (both personal and organization) is complex and confusing. We must assist our clients (and recognize in our own life and work) identify cave-related issues that exist at several different levels.

At one level, we are dealing with multiple senses of self. During the 1990s, Ken Gergen wrote a quite prophetic book (that was updated in 2001: Gergen, 2001): *The Saturated Self*. Gergen identified challenges we face in defining who we really are. Traditionally, our personal identity was defined by the family of birth and the community in which we were raised. As Tevye notes in the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, it is all about tradition! Our place in the world is pre-assigned and we live within the boundaries of a specific place and time. The struggle for Tevye concerns the desire of his daughters to break out of these boundaries—particularly in their choice of husbands. Gergen is suggesting that not only are there fewer pre-assigned identities (at least in most Western societies), there also are a massive number of alternative identities from which to choose.

Given the inundation of advertisements via many different media—and the many experts who are available to “assist” us by offering us their own interpretations of reality, we don't know which identity to choose. Are we going to be the most interesting man in the world or the glamorous but troubled teen-age star? At a more mundane level, are we going to be the corporate accountant or independent store owner? What about the trade-off between a life devoted to family and a life devoted to career—we certainly see appeals to both priorities on our TV and computer screens. Experts tell us to “follow our bliss” What does this “bliss” look like and how do we find it? We are saturated with alternative identities and must try repeatedly to discern which of these identities is authentic or at least aligned with our decisions and actions. We live in a world of competing and often contradictory identities—a world of irony.

I will take Gergen's analysis a little bit further and return once more to Plato's insightful allegory about the cave. I will further explore what it is like to live in this cave and will then redesign the cave to make it (from my perspective) more closely aligned with our 21st Century world—and frankly with the life most of us are now leading and, in particular, the lives being led by the men and women we coach.

Observing the Shadows

Plato's Cave provides us with one of the earliest and still most poignant allegories concerning the relationship between reality and fantasy. Would Plato be particularly inclined to reinforce his allegory of the cave if he time traveled to the 21st Century? He probably would be disturbed regarding what he sees and witnessed and would, in my opinion, describe it as a cave (once he began to understand what is happening around him in this much different world of the 21st Century). I believe that Plato would

conclude that our contemporary 21st Century world is even more complicated and ironic than he had suggested regarding reality and fantasy.

Part of the opening to the cave is selectively blocked out. As a result, the shadow is only part of what could appear on the wall. Our sense of reality is selective, both because we don't want to see it all (or are unable to see it all in terms of our cognitive and affective capacity) and because other members of our society (who also live in the cave) have the capacity or authority to select what does and does not enter the cave from outside. For example, CNN news in the United States is quite different from the CNN news that appears elsewhere in the world. Al-Jazerra is disconcerting for many Americans in large part because information conveyed over this news station is quite different (and quite a bit more extensive) than what is presented on most American networks--particularly regarding international news.

As professional coaches, are we ever to play the role of de-selector? Do we ever encourage alternative perspectives? Do we ever share information with our client that they usually do not receive (such as feedback from their co-workers)? Do we link our clients with alternative sources of insight and "expertise" regarding the world (cave) in which we all live? Many years ago, the Nobel Prize winning scientist, Michael Polanyi (1969), wrote about the important of focusing on that From Which we attend rather than that *To Which* we attend. On the one hand, he was referring to our own internal state: we tend to be highly influenced as we take in information from the outside world by our own internal state. Recent studies in neurobiology tend to confirm Polanyi's perspective. This shift in attention, however, also refers to our analysis of the outside information itself: we should look not just at the content of the messages we receive from the outside world, but also at the sources of this content. Who is selecting what images are allowed to enter the cave and be projected on the wall? Why are some images selected while others are blocked? As interventionists, are we in the business of assisting our clients with Polanyi's shift in attention?

Listening to "Expert" Interpretations of the Shadows

Once again, I will push Plato's allegory of the cave even further. As citizens of the 21st Century, we are not actually observing the shadow on the cave wall. Rather we are listening to or watching someone else comment on the shadow and its meaning. They are identified as "experts." Or we see a replay of specific shadow images and then hear or read the expert interpretation. It seems that most of us tend to prefer listening to the expert comments and observing replay of the shadow (or parts of the shadow) rather than observing the actual shadow (let alone leave the cave and observe the real world in operation).

For example, most of us living in the United States do not have sufficient time available to watch the full congressional sessions and hearings of the US Senate or House of Representatives. Or, quite frankly, we probably are not sufficiently interested to set aside this time. Only the "news junkies" are inclined to observe the full shadow of congressional proceedings that are broadcasted in most instances on CSPAN. We no longer even read an evening newspaper (which in most cases is now out of business). Our news comes in brief sound and video bites on a cable news station that is highly politicized (either left or right wing) or our news comes from the bits of information contained on the Internet (these bits often being

just as biased as those offered on the cable channels). While the news has always been biased in most countries in the world, we now find that there is very little news. Rather, there is an abundance of interpretation and a minimization of information.

As coaches, do we collude in the emphasis on interpretation? Are we often helping our clients make some sense of their world (images on the wall of the cave) by offering our own “expert” analysis? Are we sufficiently arrogant to believe that our clients need not experience the real world in its raw form (outside the cave) or even experience the shadow on the wall without our interpretative intervention? What is it that our clients are asking for in the coaching or consulting relationship? Interpretation and analysis--or do our client want us to encourage direct experience? Are we to offer support as our clients experience the real world and receive unvarnished and full-spectrum feedback from their environment?

Learning About Learning and Living with Relativity

Ultimately, I believe that it is our role as professional coaches to not be experts – but to be thoughtful and patient educators. We are experts – but the expertise concerns helping our clients chose and learn about ways in which they can live and work inside and outside the cave. I am particularly guided in my own coaching work by the “expert” analysis offered by William Perry in his description of four different perspectives on reality. Studying the way in which young men at Harvard University reflect on their own learning, William Perry (1970) proposes that most of us move through several stages of cognitive development and sophistication as we mature (and as we learn about living in our cave). While Harvard is not much of an average place in which to explore learning and Harvard students are not your run-of-the-mill learners, Perry has captured something of importance in his identification and description of the cognitive (and ethical) development. His work seems to be applicable to all of us – including our clients_ - as we confront diverse sources of expert advice.

Dualism

As young men and women we tend to view our world in a dualistic fashion: there is a reality that can be discerned and there is one right answer to the complex questions we are asked. Those in authority can be trusted to reveal the truth. There are also those people who are inherently evil or stupid, and they are not to be trusted. There are indeed people with white hats and black hats. Our job is to determine which color hat they are wearing.

While many people spend most, if not all, their life viewing the world from this dualistic perspective, there are often events or people who disrupt this simplistic frame. We discover that there are multiple sources of credible information and multiple sources of potentially valid interpretation of this information. It is not clear what is true or what is real. According to Perry, the initial response to this disconfirmation is often a sense of betrayal. We were told by people we trust and respect that the world is to be seen in one way. Suddenly we see that this might not be the case.

Multiplicity

Given that there is no one right answer, then any answer will do. This is what Perry identifies as the multiplistic perspective. In many ways, it is simply another form of dualism: if there is no one truth or reality than there must be no truths and no realities! Certainly, the challenge of living in an Ironic cave

suggests that the multiplistic perspective is justifiable. If there are multiple openings that are always shifting, if we can't even see the shadows on the wall but must rely on interpretations and replays, and if these interpretations often contradict one another, then why should we ever trust anything that we experience in this cave. The world is composed of nothing but expedient story-telling and fake versions of the real world: those with the power are allowed to define what is real and important.

Perry proposes that this multiplistic stage is common among young adults who are first exposed to a world that is expanding in size and complexity – they are seeing the multiple images on the wall of their cave. This sense of betrayal is likely to remain if the young adult is provided with minimal support and finds very little that is to be trusted in the world. We certainly see an abundance of multiplicity in our current world – along with the dualistic perspective. Perry is optimistic, however, about the capacity and willingness of many adults to move beyond multiplicity, especially if they are fortunate enough to live in a supportive and trusting environment.

Relativism

Perry suggests that this transition is to a relativistic perspective. We now see that within a specific community there are certain accepted standards regarding truth and reality. We can appreciate the fact that other communities adhere to different standards than our own. While adhering to a relativistic perspective, we are likely to avoid making any value judgments regarding competing versions of the truth. We live in the cave and sit back to witness (perhaps even savor) the multiple images on the wall and multiple interpretations of these images.

Commitment in Relativism

Unfortunately, we can't live forever in this suspended state of relativism. We must somehow engage—and even provide leadership—in this world of multiple and often contradictory perspectives. As mature and responsible adults we must make decisions and take actions. Perry identifies this fourth perspective as commitment-in-relativism. We recognize that there are alternative standards operating in various communities, but also recognize the need to pick a specific standard and base our life around this standard. We might change our standard over time and might be able to live in a different community and embrace their standard while living there but come back to our base of commitment.

Ken and Mary Gergen (2004, p. 93) offer a similar perspective in their exposition of social constructivism:

If we abandon the view that some particular arrangement of words [social construction] is uniquely tailored to the world as it is [an objectivist frame], then we are freed . . .
[C]onstructivism doesn't mean giving up something called truth; rather we are simply invited to see truth claims of all kinds as born out of relationship in particular cultural and historical conditions.

Perry notes that this fourth perspective will look very much like dualism to other people (who are themselves dualists or multiplists). After all, if one is making commitments, then isn't this deciding that there is a right and wrong answer and a truth that is stable and confirmable? The Gergens (Gergen and Gergen, 2004, p. 96) similar note that the critics of constructivism "often mistake this meta-level account as the constructionist attempt to tell the real truth about the world." The ongoing challenge of those with a commitment in relativism perspective is to recognize that this misunderstanding will often

occur and that a clearly articulated rationale must be offered to other people for the decisions being made and actions taken.

William Perry offers yet another insight that is particularly poignant for those who are coaching clients moving from one of these perspectives to another one. Perry suggests that this movement inevitably involves a grieving process. One is, in essence, moving from one sense of self and one sense of the world in which we live, to another self and another sense of the world. In moving from dualism to multiplicity we are losing some of our innocence, while the movement from multiplicity to relativism requires the abandonment of irresponsibility.

We must now seek to understand and appreciate other communities and recognize that there are standards regarding truth and reality—even if there is not one absolute standard. Finally, in the movement from relativism to commitment in relativism we are grieving the loss of freedom. We must now make hard decisions, knowing that there are several (perhaps many) good choices that could be made. We must take action in an Ironic world that does not yield easy answer or offer us assurance that we are doing the right thing for the right reason. We are truly living in a state of Hard Irony.

Perry would probably suggest that professional coaches are in the business, at least partially, of assisting their clients through this grieving process and helping their clients recognize the value inherent in one of the more mature perspectives. This valuing of relativism and particularly commitment in relativism may be particularly important for those clients who are operating in a leadership position—and for those who are seeking guidance and advice from an “expert”.

Finally, we find a related analysis offered by Robert Kegan (1994, p. 185) who suggests that the relativistic perspective, when engaged to make decisions and take action, is indeed quite challenging:

When we look into this collection of expectations for success at work, we discover that each actually demands something more than particular behavior or skill. Each is a claim on our minds for a way of knowing. Each amounts to a slightly different way of demanding or expecting a single capacity for psychological authority. This capacity . . . represents a qualitatively more complex system for organizing experience than the mental operations that create values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalty, and intrapersonal states of mind.

It is qualitatively more complex because it takes all of these as objects or elements of its system, rather than as the system itself; it does not identify with them but views them as parts of a new whole. This new whole is an ideology, an internal identity, a self-authorship that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states. It is no longer authored by the, it authors them and thereby achieves a personal authority. Despite the surface differences between the various work expectations, they require a common underlying capacity, a common order of consciousness.

How Does Commitment in Relativism Feel?

While Perry was primarily concerned with the cognitive aspects of development among the young Harvard undergrads he was studying, he certainly ventured into the domain of emotions and affect when writing about the grieving process that attends any movement to a more mature and nuanced state of development. I would suggest that the role played by affect and emotions is particularly

important (and often elusive) when one is engaged from a relativistic perspective in making a commitment and taking action in the world.

There is inevitably a mixture of emotions when we enter into a domain of commitment in relativity. I suspect that it is a bit like Adam and Eve leaving Eden with full knowledge of one another and the world. As Perry insightfully noted, we will grieve the loss of some innocence that comes with any movement to a higher cognitive level. We leave the sanctuary of relativism (without action) with inevitable regret and fear, just as we leave the simplicity of Dualism (and Multiplicity) with a heavy heart. There is also the elation associated with new birth—for we find new horizons that afford us new competencies and new opportunities. If we have a companion (as Adam and Eve) did, then the move might not always be so frightening. Other forms of support also make a big difference (Bergquist, 2011).

We certainly see this interplay of head and heart taking place in Gergen's description of "being over our head" and Kegan's reflections on higher states of reasoning. An even more detailed and neuro-biologically based assessment is offered in Antonio Damasio's new book, *Feeling and Knowing: Making Minds Conscious*. Basically, in seeking to gain some understanding and traction with the elusive phenomenon called "consciousness", Damasio is providing us with useful insights regarding what Perry has called "commitment in relativism."

Being, Feeling and Knowing

First, Damasio (2021, p. 25) introduces us to three fundamental evolutionary stages: (1) a sense of *being*, (2) the experience of *feelings*, and (3) engagement in the process of *knowing*. While recognizing that we are alive (being) is critical, it is also important that we frequently access our relative success in being alive—this is where feelings enter the picture. Images are created that bring together feelings and knowing. These images are neuro-biologically-based spatially mapped patterns that represent objects and actions. (Damasio, 2021, pp. 35-36) We operate in the world through "the construction and storing of imagetive patterns by the organism and inside the organism." (Damasio, 2021, p. 38) Damasio's next step concerns relating and combining images in our mind and transforming them within our creative imaginations. New images are produced: "that signify ideas, concrete as well as abstract; we produce symbols; and we commit to memory a good part of all the imagetive produce. As we do so, we enlarge the archive from which we will draw plenty of future mental contents." (Damasio, 2021, p. 47)

This very condensed summary of the way in which Damasio proposes that we operate in the world sets the stage for Damasio's venture into the realm of consciousness. Before entering this realm, I wish to extract several important insights from this initial summary description. First, Damasio is describing a constructive process that requires extensive reworking and re-assembling of sensory information coming in from outside ourselves. I realize that Damasio would like us to focus on the cave that resides within ourselves, as we seeking to establish our own identity (being) and a way of making sense of and acting in our world (feelings and knowing). However, I imagine that he would tip his hat to Plato and recognize the many ways in which the cave that exists outside ourselves influences our internal cave--the shadows (images) and interpretations (imagetive patterns and combinations) that we create internally.

Damasio clearly believes that our feelings play a major role in the constructive process and in the determination of actions we take as a function of this construction. Reinforced by our powerful somatic substratum (the ongoing signally of our body to our mind), feelings inform our mind "of the state of life

within the organism to which that mind belongs.” (Damasio, 2021, p. 96) Moreover, according to Damasio, “feelings give that mind an incentive to act according to the positive or negative signal of their messages.” (Damasio, 2021, p. 96) An important point is being made by Damasio that relates directly to the nature of effective expertise: “feelings help us introduce not only quantitative measures (numbers) but also qualitative measures into our assessments. These multi-source measures tell us how we are doing and what the implications are of the entities out in the world that we encounter.” (Damasio, 2021, p.53).

The Feeling of Commitment

It is especially the case that feelings play a major role in not only determining the actions to be taken in our world, but also in assessing the outcomes of these actions. This is where commitment in the midst of relativism enters the picture. I expect that Damasio would suggest our movement to commitment from the more thought-based stance of relativism is laced with feelings. I would also expect that Damasio would urge experts to assemble both qualitative and quantitative information in the domain of their expertise and communicate their own findings (assembled images) and proposed actions (linking of feelings and knowing) in a manner that touches on both the head and heart.

Damasio offers a quite detailed and often nuanced presentation regarding consciousness. Much of what he offers is not directly related to the substance of the current essay. However, there are several major points related to the nature of consciousness that do further our exploration of ways in which we live and learn in the cave—and specifically ways in which we feel about making a commitment in the midst of relativism. First, it is important to note that Damasio’s consciousness has to do with Ownership. In the midst of being conscious we become fully aware of our being (Damasio’s first evolutionary stage) and our “owner-mind.” (Damasio, 2021, p. 137) Damasio asks a question that has eluded many philosopher and psychologist: “what does it mean to say “I am conscious”? He (Damasio, 2021, p. 128) offers the following answer:

At the simplest level imaginable, it means to say that my mind, at the particular moment in which I describe myself as conscious, is in possession of knowledge that spontaneously identifies me as its proprietor. Foundationally, the knowledge concerns myself in varied ways: (a) my body, about which I am continuously informed in greater or lesser detail via feeling, (b) along with facts that I recall from memory and that may pertain (or not) to the perceptual moment and are also part and parcel of myself.

Damasio (2021, p. 128) offers a guest list to this event of consciousness:

The scale of the knowledge fest that renders minds conscious varies depending on how many honorable guests attend, but certain guests are not only honored but obligatory. Let me identify them: first; some knowledge about the current operations of my body; second, some knowledge as retrieved · from memory, about who I am at the moment and about who I have been, recently and in the long ago past.

In keeping with Damasio’s metaphor, I suggest that the party is at one level a quite lonely affair. We must acknowledge that when we take action midst relativism, the decision is ours alone. Our decision is not an “unconscious” conformity to social norms or an uncritical embrace of a widely held social construction. We are stepping outside the cave—even if it is just for a moment—and can’t help but feel

a bit lonely in taking this action. At another level, our party is being held with several invited guests. So we are not alone in our commitment to action. We bring along the wisdom of our body (the neurobiological substratum), our memories, and our intense awareness of where we are situated right now (even if outside the cave). These guests of consciousness not only provide us with guidance, they also (in their own integration through feelings) provide us with a bridge between mind and body: “The classic void that has separated physical bodies from mental phenomena is naturally bridged thanks to feelings.” (Damasio, 2021, p.122) We are thus not only challenged in the commitments we make in the midst of relativism, but also rewarded by being provided with a feeling-based bridge that the engagement of both thought (relativism) and action (commitment) uniquely provide.

There is a second important point to be derived from Damasio’s exploration of consciousness. He (Damasio, 2021, 136) describes the state of “enrichment” that comes with consciousness:

In my proposal consciousness is an enriched state of mind. The enrichment consists in inserting additional elements of mind within the ongoing mind process. These additional mind elements are largely cut from the same cloth as the rest of the mind—they are imagetic—but thanks to their contents they announce firmly that all the mental contents to which I currently have access belong to me, are my thing, are actually unfolding within my organism. The addition is revelatory.

Thus, in my commitment, I am at once alone and surrounded by imagetic guests from my own mind. I suggest that under such conditions, I am a source of valuable wisdom—and expertise—within the cave where I dwell with other members of my society. Now, can I find a way to make this wisdom and expertise welcomed by others who live with me in our cave?

Conclusions

I return one last time to the Platonic Cave. Can it get even more challenging in the cave? Can we add more complexity to Plato’s allegory? Living in the mid-21st Century, perhaps we are actually living in a cave that has multiple openings which offer many contradictory images. There may be multiple shadows on the wall of the cave, each shadow being a partial image of the outside world (with the image being selectively blocked at each opening).

Furthermore, there may be multiple and even contradictory interpretations of each partial shadow being projected on the wall in front of us (and to our side and even behind us). We face not just multiple and contradictory messages embedded in the shadows but also contradictory interpretations of what these messages mean. This is a truly ironic world! What a remarkable cave this would be – a bit like traveling down one of the major boulevards in Las Vegas surrounded by glittering casinos, with each one encouraging us to enter their own unique fantastic reality.

It would seem that the openings in this 21st Century cave may even be coming and going. One closes down while another one opens up. This venture into Plato’s cave and our redesign of this cave provokes many coaching and consulting questions. These questions inevitably surface organizational and leadership challenges and deeply personal concerns regarding integrity, trust and honesty. I have addressed many of these challenges. However, it would be short-sighted of us not to also recognize the opportunities that this redesigned cave offers us.

A host of cognitive and affective opportunities and challenge awaits all men and women who seek to lead the complex and ironic organizations of the 21st Century—especially when these leaders must rely in part on a highly diverse set of expert perspectives and practices. They can best address these opportunities and challenges when they seek out professional coaching assistance. We are often “in over our heads” as leaders and could use some help from a competent professional coach when exploring the validity and usefulness of expert advice. Life-long learning is critical to successful leadership in our contemporary world and a professional coach can be of great value in helping to support and even guide this learning process. This is particularly the case when a coach helps their client discern the best way in which to engage the important insights that legitimate experts can provide on behalf of the leader’s ongoing learning inside and outside the cave.

References

- Argyris, C. and D. Schön (1974) *Theory in Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Bergquist, W. (1993) *The Postmodern Organization*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bergquist W. (2011) *Managing Life Transitions: A Coaching Tool*. Library of Professional Coaching. Link: [Managing Life Transitions: A Coaching Tool | Library of Professional Coaching](#)
- Bergquist, W. (2020) “Leadership and Anxiety: Containment and Metabolism I: Anxiety in a VUCA Plus Environment.” *Library of Professional Psychology*. Link: <https://psychology.edu/library/leadership-and-anxiety-containment-and-metabolism-i-anxiety-in-a-vuca-plus-environment/>
- Bergquist, W. (2021) *Authoritarianism, Cave Dwelling and the Contemporary Escape from Freedom*. Link: <https://library.psychology.edu/authoritarianism-cave-dwelling-and-the-contemporary-escape-from-freedom/>
- Bergquist, William and Berne Weiss (1994) *Freedom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Damasio, Antonio (2021) *Feelings & Knowing*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Fromm, E. (1941) *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Rinehart.
- Fromm, E. (1955) *The Sane Society*. New York: Fawcett.
- Gergen, K. (2000). *The Saturated Self*. New York: Basic Books, (rev ed).
- Gergen, K. and M. Gergen (2004) *Social Construction: Entering the Dialogue*. Chagrin Falls, Ohio: Taos Institute Publications.
- Kahneman, Daniel, Oliver Sibony and Cass R. Sunstein (2021) *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kuhn, Thomas (2012) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions [4th Ed.]* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, J. and S. Page (2007) *Complex Adaptive Systems*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Page, S. (2011) *Diversity and Complexity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Perry, W. (1970) *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. Troy, MO: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Polanyi, M. (1969) *Knowing and Being*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.