

# Escaping the Modern Caves

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## Abstract

Let's escape our caves and, quite literally, spend more time philosophizing in the great outdoors.

Now, if he recalled the cell where he'd originally lived and what passed for knowledge there, and if he recalled his former fellow prisoners, don't you think he'd feel happy about his own altered circumstances, and sorry for them?

Plato, *Republic*, 516c

Plato's allegory of the cave, a founding moment in Western philosophy, asks one to imagine a scenario. You are tied up in a cave, only able to face one wall. Behind you is a fire, and between the fire and you are people walking past carrying ornaments. You, and your fellow prisoners, are only able to see the shadows that these people and ornaments cast upon the wall you are facing. Naturally, since this is the only experience you have known, you might well believe these shadows are all there is to reality. Now, imagine you are freed. You can turn round and see the fire, and see the ornaments and people, and discern that the reality you believed until now is but a dim reflection of the true workings of the universe. Moreover, you can leave the cave, bask in the sunlight, and enjoy the wonders of your natural surroundings. Upon being freed you feel intense pity for the poor souls still imprisoned in the cave, experiencing but a modicum –

a shadow – of reality and believing it to be the comprehensive truth. Plato uses this allegory to convey the liberatory power of philosophy, and how reflection and inquiry can free us from the shackles of an incomplete understanding of the universe.

Environmentalists are often accused of wanting 'us all to go back to living in caves'. It is a simple insult that portrays 'greens' as backward and anti-progress. Following the pandemic where we all spent large swathes of our time holed up in our caves, we can assure you, dear reader, this is the last thing we want (although, as we shall see, we would also claim that certain aspects of what gets called 'progress' are chronically overrated).

Indeed, part of what the pandemic helped us to revalue was: nature itself. Access to *the outdoors*. We got to hear the birds sing. We got to appreciate so much our once-a-day opportunity to go out and use our bodies.

We believe that leaving one's cave and spending far more time in the great outdoors could benefit both individuals and societies much more than is commonly thought, and that this is currently an almost untapped source of joy and peace. Take schools for example; most lessons (ones that don't require specialized equipment) can in principle be moved outdoors. Imagine how good it could be for kids in so



many diverse ways, if this were to happen. (The growing popularity of ‘Forest Schools’ is a clear straw in the wind here.)

We understand you may worry about the effect the notoriously unpredictable British climate could have on such a teaching method, but as someone who has co-taught classical philosophy at the University of East Anglia (UEA) for several years now, I (Rupert) can confidently say such worries are often overblown. Like the philosophers of old who peripatetically made classrooms out of the acropolis grounds, education could once again be moved outside to the great benefit of the pupils and teachers. Indeed, thinking of the pandemic (and there will be more coming, so badly have we disturbed nature), many lives could have been saved if education (one of the biggest ‘spreaders’ of the virus) was moved outside where infecting others was less likely.

During the pandemic, many of my peers at the university where I (Rupert) work only taught online. My ancient-philosophy specialist colleague Catherine Rowett and I both recognized

the potential of teaching outside, and so moved our education beyond the ‘cave’ of the lecture theatre or the digital darkrooms of the endless Zoom calls and into the outdoor facilities that UEA were forward-thinking enough to instal. I would then periodically make references to our natural surroundings to enrich and illustrate the philosophical points I was making, and I found that outdoor teaching was a benefit to my students as well. I am not alone in thinking this; preliminary work on the benefits of outdoor teaching shows that it improves the engagement, confidence and attitude of students.<sup>1</sup>

Not just teaching; the outdoors is too important to be restricted to that. Let me share a couple of anecdotes from my university life. The first is from two decades ago. I was in a meeting with a number of excellent colleagues, seeking to co-create a new School for the Humanities at the University of East Anglia, when outside, through large panes of class, we could see a thunderstorm brew and then break out. And not just any thunderstorm. One of the most spectacular

I have ever witnessed. Shattering bolts of lightning, teeming rain. I wanted to revel in it. I wanted to turn to my colleagues and say: ‘Let’s turn our heads and *look* at this.’ But no-one else seemed even to have noticed. We were all focused inward. On humanity; on what we were planning. On words and thoughts.

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If I had that meeting again, I hope that I would have the courage to say: ‘Let’s stop, and look. This is how nature enters the conversation.’

The second anecdote is more recent. I arranged a meeting of our ecology research group, but a meeting with a difference. A sort of field trip, if you will. We went to have our meeting: at the extraordinary north Norfolk coast. We met and talked in sight of the sea, after hiking through marshes together to get there. It was a meeting so much more ... real than so many others I can remember.

What other elements of everyday life could benefit from more outdoor activity? We have already looked at schools and universities, but what of businesses? Could they not sometimes hold their meetings outside the ‘cave’ of a board room? Or for that matter, government? What signal improvements in thinking, in vision, in connection, might follow from such bold undertakings? Imagine our elites and our ‘leaders’ becoming less alienated from the world of life in which we exist. This could be epochal in its effects.

There are of course many documented benefits of spending more time outdoors. Some are obvious, like the increased vital Vitamin D intake, but others have taken more research to crack. Tillman et al.’s 2018 systematic review on the effect that spending more time outdoors has on children and teenagers found that most studies report a positive relationship between time spent outdoors and improved emotional well-being, higher self-esteem, lower levels of depression, and better attention and concentration levels.<sup>2</sup> Are these not all effects we would like to see – in every facet of our lives?

So what we are saying is this. We can literalize Plato’s analogy. We can, quite simply, leave our physical ‘caves’ to which we have become accustomed and revel in the light of the natural world which is becoming more and more ‘othered’ in our comfort-obsessed society. The distinction between the human and the natural is a false boundary which our way of life has clung to ever more tightly. It’s time to let to (it) go, and to reintroduce yourself to the wonders of nature that surround you. Here is the literal teaching we can take from Plato’s great thought experiment.

But there is a second, more analogous, teaching we can take from Plato’s work, beyond the benefits that being outside has on our mental and physical health, and the benefits springing from the escape from an artificial environment. The modern ‘cave’ is not just a shorthand for being inside, but a construction that changes our perception. Plato’s analogy of the cave fundamentally argues that our perception of reality is a filtered glimpse of the true workings of the universe. At the centre is a distinction between belief and knowledge. What the prisoners see is a filtered reflection of reality, yet they believe it to be all there is to life. In the age of the internet and social media, and the endless barrage of swipes and scrolls, flames and trolls, it becomes all too easy to succumb to the ‘digital cave’ (obviously also usually manifesting in a physical one like a house/room; but the digital cave can also capture us even when we are outside ...). According to recent data, the average UK citizen spends 110 minutes every day on social media and based on these statistics will spend

over five entire years on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat during the course of their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> A meta-analysis of the related literature reveals that time spent on social media has detrimental effects on mental health, most commonly manifesting as anxiety or depression.<sup>4</sup> Returning to Plato's cave, it's not hard to see why. A quick scroll on any platform and you'll be greeted with endlessly smiling faces, exotic holiday pictures, fancy designer clothes, the latest accomplishment of a peer, or any other 'highlight' of life, all collated in one place, one after another, to make you question why your experience isn't as rich, happy, or successful as those on the other side of the screen.<sup>5</sup> But this is an illusion. Social media is the twenty-first-century shadows flickering on the cave walls. The flames there are echoed in our flame-wars now... We must be astute to recognize that the fake reality presented to us by social media could constitute the only reality people in this situation would recognize (515c). Indeed, Plato posits that in the cave the prisoners may assign prestige and credit to one another based on their proficiency at recognizing the false reality of the shadows on the wall (516d). Is this not where we are in the 'digital cave'? Do the participants of the digital cave not reward those who can most appealingly (but in fact appallingly) display a warped picture of their reality? Plato argues that the free ex-prisoner would not care for such rewards and prestige, based as they are on a false reality.

How, then, do we escape the modern cave(s)? Liberation from the caves that bind us is not easy. As Plato recounts, the first encounter with the real sun is blinding for the escaped prisoner, but adjustment to the light comes quickly. Indeed, our modern relationship with the indoors and all the comforts that come with it may be a hard habit to shake initially, but with increased dedication to the wonders of the outdoors, and the motivation to not be trapped in the cave, positive adjustments will follow. We're saying, in other words, that a big part of escape from the digital cave is to be found in, surprise, surprise,

simply going out into the light. Spending time outside. Turning your devices off, and meeting nature. Just trying it, is the start.

As I (Rupert) write elsewhere, I believe that the civilization we currently partake in will without doubt end within the next century, and will probably be replaced – whether through transformation or collapse – by one that is far more attuned to the natural world.<sup>6</sup> We need to start moving towards this end, to reacquaint ourselves with the wonders of the universe; and that can only be done by leaving the physical *and* the digital 'cave'. To make a concerted effort to spend time outdoors is to walk with the muse of Baudelaire, Wordsworth and Blake, of Vivaldi and Debussy, of Monet and van Gogh. The true splendour of the Earth is a hard one to capture (and probably 'capture' is actually the wrong word ...), but it is impossible to do so from within the cave.

And of course – and here we come full circle – it is even possible to enter into the true splendour of our planet also quite literally via *caves* ... this is the purport of Robert MacFarlane's fascinating recent book, which we recommend, *Underland*, which literally and literarily explores the world not infrequently beneath our feet: the beautiful world of actual caves. I (Rupert) felt this fascination for myself earlier this year: entering the caves at Lascaux in France, and coming face to face with ancient cave paintings, I found myself moved to tears. It was nothing less than a spiritual experience.

Applying the idea we have been developing in this piece to the great issue of our time, the ecological/climate crisis, time in nature could manifest itself in local food production and stewardship of the natural world, which requires little input from the energy grid. Modern 'caves' have Wi-Fi, TV, computers, AC, all of which take massive amounts of energy and materials to run, which incurs an emissions and an ecological cost. A walk in the woods costs the living planet no carbon and no extinction. Increased time in nature could thus massively reduce our energy consumption, helping us to get back within planetary boundaries. Time outdoors can help save the natural world.

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So, in short, time away from nature is detrimental for our physical and mental health, while increased time spent outdoors correlates to improvements in these areas, as well as better levels of concentration and focus, and potential improvements for the natural world itself. The echo-chambers of the internet that most of us are immersed in can seem so alluring, but they are a dim reflection of reality. (When you’re ‘surfing’ the internet, you’re not *surfing*. You’re sat on your bum.) It takes time and dedication to free oneself, but this can be done via exiting that ‘digital cave’ (or at least seriously attempting to limit one’s time in it ... we both made a start recently by taking the Facebook app off our phones). What, then, could possibly be a good enough reason for us to stay in our caves when there’s so much to see, and seeing it has been proven to be better for us? When it is good for us, and good for the planet to shake them off, the shackles of the cave really seem foolish. So join us, dear reader, in freeing ourselves from the caves and dedicating more time to the great outdoors. After all, we have nothing to lose but our chains, and we have the very world to win. In fact: to save.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sam J. Cooley, et al., ‘The Role of Outdoor Adventure Education in Facilitating Groupwork in Higher Education’, *Higher Education* 69.4 (2015), 567–82.
- <sup>2</sup> Suzanne Tillman et al., ‘Mental Health Benefits of Interactions with Nature in Children and Teenagers: A Systematic Review’, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 72.10 (2018), 958–66. <<https://cybercrew.uk/blog/social-media-statistics-uk/>>.
- <sup>3</sup> <<https://cybercrew.uk/blog/social-media-statistics-uk/>>.
- <sup>4</sup> Fazida Karim et al., ‘Social Media and its Connection to Mental Health: A Systematic Review’, *National Library of Medicine* 12.6 (2020).
- <sup>5</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJQGHibqBeA>>. Not to mention those flame wars and trolls, which can really ruin one’s day.
- <sup>6</sup> Rupert Read and Samuel Alexander, *This Civilisation is Finished* (Melbourne: Simplicity Institute, 2019), <<https://249897.e-junkie.com/product/1619231/This-Civilisati>>.

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