

# Cave Speak: The Cacophony About Gender

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In that (rightly) most famous story about education in the history of humanity, Plato's cave, we can discern four sorts of speech; imagination, opinion, reasoning, and understanding. Each level uses words and intends to communicate with other word-users through them; whether they also purr, scream, shout, or even lie is unimportant. Let us examine the first three, treating them as three different sorts of people in an effort to make their usages clear, though most speakers/writers use language in all three ways without making any clear distinction. Not making any such distinction is why it is necessary to call the result of such speaking a cacophony.

This cacophony can begin to be understood when we see that each sort of person says he "knows," though what each means by "know" can only be sorted by seeing the differences in that which is the object of their knowledge as well as the concomitant "how" each comes to know that object. The first sort of speakers, at the bottom of the cave, see the shadows. Each says what he "knows" it is. In their discussions, common phrases like "that's my truth," "that's how I see it," "that's your opinion," "everybody sees that differently" would be widely used and are the absolute truth of the place. This is in keeping with the University of Nebraska System policies drawn up by some university apparatchik that there is "one's internal knowledge of one's own gender" and "students, faculty, and staff are free to determine the gender identity they want to be known by in University information systems."<sup>1</sup> Plato makes clear that none of these speakers knows anything about the real cause of what is appearing. This is the level of imagination.

The fire lighting the cave is the fire of desire—it flickers and dances—as do the desires of all the talkers. So, part of the reason each sees whatever appears

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<sup>1</sup> Executive memorandum #40. Policy on Chosen Name and Gender Identity. Available at <https://nebraska.edu/offices-policies/policies/no-40-policy-on-chosen-name-and-gender-identity>.

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in the way each does is necessarily because of their desires, and all their talk about “things” comes forth in that light. The thing they “know” is only their own perception or feeling. The second level of the cave is still only lit by the fire of desire, and we see people are walking along a road carrying things on their heads, like hats or hairstyles. The road is the road of life, for this is what the lives of those on the second level amount to. They call what they are carrying knowledge, though how they came to it can only have been by much repetition, helped by others to keep it on their heads over long periods. They no longer believe that whatever each imagines is whatever it is to them, is “their own truth”; there are, rather, true things that “we all know” and carry.

This seems an advance on the solipsism the first group, but in reality this is still only the echoing world of opinion. These are their truths, but not just each his own. They have come to accept these repetitions; they are a shared “truth.” Early in *Republic*, we have the examples of the definitions of justice carried by Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus, which each takes as simply being the truth about justice; these truths are obviously shared by many. Thrasymachus can point to places where they say these things: Thebes calls tyranny justice; Athens, democracy; Sparta, aristocracy. Social constructions differ: Justice is the will of the strong. Power determines truth. When in Rome . . . .

So, these are people like presidents of universities, or maybe even presidents of countries, or at least secretaries of Health and Human Services, and (considering Thrasymachus) we should include Attorneys General. They put out their statements on gender as “we know.” We could call them “influencers” and their influencing (just as presently) keeps them warm and comfortable in the cave of opinion; for the carriers are closer to the fire of desire than the prisoners below.

So, too, with the question at issue—we also have gender authorities; they went to college, some went to Harvard or Oxford or perhaps Berkeley.

These also figure a certain kind of teacher, one who was very successful at remembering what his own teachers said, passing on the arcana of conglomerated opinions. Thrasymachus suggested that he pour his speech into Socrates’ ear so he could get the point. Plato’s picture shows us this is merely a form of cave speech, not an exit to something other than opinion. Socrates demurred from Thrasymachus’ willing helpfulness and suggested the “discipline of

questioning and inquiry.”<sup>2</sup> This is the only way out of the cave. But leaving causes problems.

First, we are used to the cave and its speech—“we have been here from childhood” in whatever culture cave we grew up in; in all of them some things are said and some things one learns not to say for fear of ridicule (a cultural universal, applied in every cave), ostracism (in Athens they voted on this), cancellation from Twitter, removal of your major (as happened to Philosophy at the University of Nebraska, Kearney), or whatever other forms of coldness your particular cave has at the ready. We are used to this place, we (usually) feel comfortable in it; we can keep warm and fed—and the screen changes in front of us entertainingly. As Socrates says, these prisoners are fettered here by feasting and other pleasures. So, the first problem is getting up to move yourself, which means exercising your own mind, though exercise, as all couch potatoes know, is a real drag.

What would it mean to go further than being a carrier of social constructions? Is it even possible? What would be better than being an influencer and making boatloads of money? A rumor of something beyond the fire would require you to walk through it to find out what, if anything, is on the other side, and this means that a person would have to walk over his desires, step on them, treat them as naught—or worse, temptations. Temptations to turn back to cave comforts. Why think there is anything beyond what people say, beyond the social constructions parading through life? If the good of life is pleasure, this whole venture promises nothing but pain. Isn’t pleasure, including the pleasure of acceptance by others, the good of life?

Now we are at the turning point. Was this a real question, or not? Is pleasure the good life or not? Do you care if the answer to that question is pleasant or not? If your answer to this question is “yes, I do care if the answer is pleasant,” then the first question wasn’t a real question for you. But if your answer to the second question is “no, it does not matter whether the answer to the first question is pleasant or not” then you have already stepped on your desires and treated them as naught; you are on your way; you have confessed an interest in knowing the truth about life—in this case, whether pleasure is the good of life or not. Be forewarned: this aim is very dangerous to pleasure, and will be

2 Thus, at least, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1999): 491. Gadamer adds that this is the “discipline that guarantees truth.” The two earlier stations also use the word truth, Gadamer seems to be implying they don’t have any. That is also Plato’s implication, and mine.

dangerous to you too; people are kicked off Twitter, ostracized, and given hemlock tea for things like that. Particularly when it causes pain to others who do not share an interest in truth over pleasure. Which means, in cave speak, they do not share your truth. Your choice and speech are offensive; it is hurtful (and pain is *the* moral evil). This will always happen; nowadays such people are called “haters.” So they say.

Socrates explained, just before telling of the cave, how we come to the truth about things. We start with a hypothesis; from there we develop a chain of connections which lead to a conclusion that follows from the hypothesis. Now we are reasoning. Let’s attempt this with regard to gender.

To exit the cave of opinions, certified and uncertified, we need a hypothesis about “what is” gender beyond mere words. This means there is something other than what individuals feel or imagine, or beyond the social constructions that are being carried around. If whatever I think gender is is what gender is for me (the first level of the cave), or whatever I and my fellow influencers say gender is is what it is (the second level), then there is no truth about gender—only what I or we say. So let us begin with exactly what such an opinion hypothesizes: “There is no truth about gender.”

But, if there is no such thing as gender, then there can be no such thing as gender dysphoria, misgendering, cis-gendering, non-cis-gendering, gender prejudice or gender rights. What are the rights about? Nothing. Something I call myself, or something we made up in our church. New Age Creationism, Gamma Ray Marigolds. But you can’t expect me to be responsible to your pretenses—even if you believe them; nor can I expect it of you regarding mine. To do so would be unjust; does it not seem so to you as well?

So let’s try the opposite hypothesis: there is such a thing as gender. What shall we hypothesize it is? Gender is a thing in many languages: it belongs to all nouns and determines how adjectives are to be related to each gender. Gender fluidity or gender dysphoria among these substantives would soon make any paragraph in any of these languages into nonsense, as Sam Clemens, in his humorous story “The Awful German Language,” once proved. It is impossible that this is the problem at issue. It would be impossible to speak of it.

A second hypothesis about gender: gender is biological. Among animals, say more particularly mammals, we find one half of a species to be capable “for the most part” of bearing the young; the other half, “for the most part” is capable of engendering—an interesting word, for the sperm cell does determine gender.

The first are called female, the second male. They have been doing it for millions of years without any help from psychologists, physicians, or even metaphysicians. The phrase “for the most part” is borrowed from Aristotle, who like every other natural scientist knew that nature is stochastic. Biology’s necessities have not the certainty of geometry. Many species of worms, for example, are hermaphroditic. The chances of this happening among human beings, or any other mammal, is well outside of two standard deviations from the mean. For the regular earthworm, the chances of it not happening are just as far outside those two standard deviations. So far, this biological hypothesis plays out. I know it is true. You can see it is too. Go look.

So, gender is whatever biology says one’s gender is, identifying that sort of reproductive function to which each belongs by that which each “for the most part” can fulfill and looks at first biological glance as though they can. *Wanting* to bear or engender, *liking* to bear or engender, *aiming* to bear or engender, *feeling one wants to* bear or engender, or even *actually* doing so have nothing to do with the identifications of this science. This does not deny anyone’s feelings in this matter, but they are not at issue in the realm outside the cave where there is knowledge of things. There is no conclusion among those which follow from the hypothesis that gender is biological which is determinately false. Therefore, this hypothesis holds the field. You are, of course, always free to return to the cave—it is more comfortable, as you might imagine or even believe.