

## **Facebook: The Return of Plato's Allegory of the Cave**

**Muhammad WahidulAlam**

*Department of Philosophy, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh*

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**Abstract:** The author argues that the discrepancies between our offline and online lives created by Facebook use are like the return of the setting of Plato's allegory of the cave. To substantiate this claim, he draws an analogy between the allegory and the process of information gathering and knowledge formation through Facebook. He shows how this analogy bolsters the thesis of the paper by clarifying the fact that many of our Facebook activities are related to the dark side of Facebook use of which we are mostly ignorant.

**Key Words:** Allegory of the Cave; Depression; Ethics of Technology; Facebook; Friendship; Internet; Knowledge; Plato; Privacy; Social Media

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Facebook is the biggest and the most popular virtual platform in the world. Nowadays, the lifestyle and thinking pattern of many of us are highly motivated by Facebook customs. We live Facebook, dream Facebook, eat Facebook and drink Facebook. For many of us, the meaning of success is determined by the number of 'Like' we gain by posting or sharing content on Facebook. It has become the source of our mental happiness and depression at the same time. Different types of relationships are forming here with different dimensions. Now, we have two types of life: real or offline life, and virtual or online life. The influence of Facebook is also connected with our information gathering and knowledge formation. This paper aims at showing how the discrepancies between the two forms of life created by Facebook use are comparable to the return of Plato's allegory of the cave scenario.

To facilitate this purpose, the paper is divided into several sections. At first, I describe Plato's allegory of the cave. Then, I consider why we use Facebook and what we do on Facebook. In this section, I also relevantly discuss two dangers of Facebook use: violation of privacy and advent of depression. Then, an analogy between Plato's allegory of the cave and the process of information gathering and knowledge formation via Facebook is presented in the following section. There I also show how this analogy contributes to the thesis of the paper by clarifying the fact that many of our Facebook activities are related to the dark side of Facebook use of which we mostly remain ignorant.

### **II. METHODOLOGY**

This is basically a qualitative research. So, analytic methods are used here. Content analysis is the main zest of this research. Critical Comparison is made under the lenses of philosophical outlook. Secondary data are used here. Textbooks of Philosophy, recent research articles and Facebook newsfeed are analysed to make a critical comparison and synthesis between the actual life and virtual life. Theories of epistemology are given priority in forming the literature of the paper. Ethical theories are also considered in making comments on privacy and should-ought issues.

#### **Objectives**

The broad objective of this paper is to project the epistemic similarity between the Plato's cave dwellers and some Facebook users. For showing that similarity I make a comparison between our actual life and virtual life. Here I go through some specific objectives. These are like factors behind our Facebook use, the motivations for using Facebook. How this new engagement with virtual life changes the direction of Friendship and other relations? How Facebook becomes a social substitution? How it is breaching our privacy? How these changes become the cause of depression in many users? What are the epistemic loopholes of Facebook testimony? How these become dangerous for our actual life? These are the questions, which are answered in a way to reach the specific objectives of the paper.

### Plato's Allegory of the Cave

In the Republic<sup>1</sup>, Plato shows how the knowledge of perception can derail us. The allegory of the cave envisages the knowledge formation of cave prisoners. The prisoners are locked in the cave from the very beginning of their birth. They have no knowledge about the external world because they are not allowed to go outside, or they do not try to go beyond the cave. They do not have any chance to move their position, not even their eyesight. There is a huge fire behind them. Between the prisoners and the fire, there is a pathway where men, animals and different other objects appear one after another. The prisoners can see the shadows of those objects on the wall of the cave. The observation of those shadows is the only source of their knowledge. So, from this position, we can easily assume that their knowledge is incomplete and insignificant.

Suddenly, a prisoner manages to escape from the cave and comes outside to see the real world. Then, he finds the anomalies with his former knowledge. He discovers the real knowledge which is more vivid and valid than the knowledge of previous perceptions. He feels that it is necessary to inform this discovery to his cave-mates who are suffering from the imprisonment of ignorance. But the prisoners do not accept his view because they are already psychologically conditioned with the perception of visible shadow.

### Why We Are on Facebook? What We Do Here?

Tosun (2012, p. 1510) mentions several reasons why people tend to use Facebook. She calls them purposive motives. Some of these motives are establishing and maintaining relationships that include friendships and romantic relationships, entertainment through different video- and photo-related activities, organizing social activities, and the like. A description of these motives along with related issues (e.g., privacy and depression) is presented below.

### Friendship and other relationships

In the world of Facebook, all members are treated as 'Friends' irrespective of their age, designation, caste, colour, race, culture and the like. Friendship here is one step away from clicking on 'Confirm' button of "Friend Request." We can divide the people of our friend list into two categories: those whom we know before being a Facebook friend, and those whom we know after being a friend on Facebook. Again, the second category can be divided into two subtypes: those with whom we meet in person, and those with whom we never meet.

Facebook friendship is different in nature from the real-life friendship. In the history of philosophy, we find Aristotle discusses friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics*<sup>2</sup>. But there are some significant differences between the Aristotelian idea of friendship and Facebook friendship about which Vallor (2012) points out,

Aristotle used the term 'friendship' in multiple ways, but it is widely acknowledged that his use is often at odds with the modern sense of this term. By our standards, Aristotelian friendship can seem uncomfortably elitist and conditional. Aristotle's communitarian outlook on friendship is also an uneasy fit with the individualistic bent of liberal democracies in which civic bonds are maintained primarily through duty and self-interest rather than a sense of mutual good will and common purpose. (p. 188)

Vallor (2012) also makes a demarcation line between these two categories under four crucial themes: reciprocity, empathy, self-knowledge and the shared life. In cases of reciprocity and empathy, Facebook is an easy way to accomplish. Say, for example, if someone's near one is died or fall in an accident, one can easily convey his feelings by sending a message, or by posting a 'Status,' which is very easy to do. But in real-world friendship, a friend cannot finish his duty just by expressing his sorrow feeling. He, for example, should at least give some time to his aggrieved friend. So, the requirement for reciprocity and empathy are lower in degree for Facebook friendship than the real-world friendship. Moreover, it is often seen that those who are real-life friends act differently on Facebook which could confuse one in knowledge formation about their friendship. For example, a real-life friend when meets his aggrieved friend who just lost his father may hug his friend or the like to show his sympathy. But this same friend may act shallow with respect to the same incident of his friend on Facebook by, for example, posting a mere Status.

Another important theme for being a good friend, according to Vallor (2012), is having self-knowledge. This knowledge is required for a good life and "complete friendship." The importance of self-knowledge, according to Vallor (2012, p. 193), is as follows,

Self-knowledge is not, for Aristotle, a matter of 'going inside' to observe some private, autonomous and unique inner core of the personality, as we often portray it in the modern West. Instead, self-knowledge in the Aristotelian sense is a matter of understanding properly where I fit in the world, what my proper role in it is, and the capacities I have (or lack) for actively flourishing in those roles.

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<sup>1</sup> I follow Reeve (2004) for the translation of the *Republic*.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Ross (2009) for the translation of *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Because I am a social being by nature . . . , I must come to understand myself as such; and the process of doing so is, at its core, a social process. This can help us to understand why Aristotle would claim that I can only genuinely attain self-knowledge through the mediation of another, specifically, a complete friend of virtue.

But this kind of self-knowledge is hard to find in Facebook friendship. So, the relationship may not be that much fruitful here. Aristotle demands friends as the second self, as the self which becomes the mirror of my own self. But this type of mirroring is somehow missing in Facebook friendship.

Another significant part of friendship, according to Vallor (2012), is the shared life. There is a sharp difference between the shared life of real-life friendship and that of Facebook friendship, which, according to Vallor (2012, p. 196), is as follows,

Initially, the possibilities for sharing lives online look relatively impoverished if we grasp the distinction between sharing lives and sharing about lives; the former involves performing together the activities that makeup a life, the latter involves communicating to one another information concerning our lives, without implying shared activity.

### **Entertainment activities, and the paradox of privacy**

Facebook users share millions of news, views, photos, videos, etc. in every single moment. Video- and Photo-related activities give us some important clues about social life. People share multiple types of videos and photos on Facebook. Viewers give different types of reactions and comments on the basis of contents. There is no shortage of entertainment on Facebook. Here, we see people from different age groups, socio-economic demography, cultural tastes, and the like who share the same virtual platform. It makes a hazard in online life because everyone does not have the same taste of entertainment. But on Facebook, though we do not like to see too many videos and photos on some issues, we are forced to see them as they suddenly show up on our Facebook 'newsfeed.' In this way, we become a slave to it.

Though the Facebook authority repeatedly say that they respect our privacy, the question is, how far is it trustworthy? They would say that they take all the information upon our consent. But there is a loophole. To describe it, Drake (2016, p. 431) presents the following analogy,

I could close and lock the door to my office to gain privacy while working on this paper. But I do not have control over the janitorial staff who have a key to my office and could unlock the door and enter. I have privacy even without full control. If the janitor enters the room, I lose that privacy. And even then, if they entered only after knocking and I invite them in, they have not violated my privacy even if I have lost my privacy.

Similarly, Facebook is not the janitor who unlocks my room without my permission. Rather, Facebook is the janitor who takes permission and enters my room. Up to this point, I know that he has taken permission, so janitor is not morally blameworthy. But in the case of Facebook, the issue of moral obligation is not very straightforward. Whereas I know that the janitor is not going to make any harm by observing me and my surrounding situation in the room, I do not have any idea about what Facebook can do. That's why the self-management of privacy is not up to the mark. Hull (2015, p. 91) mentions three reasons why self-management cannot sufficiently protect one's privacy: "(1) users do not and can't know what they are consenting to; (2) privacy preferences are very difficult to effectuate; and declining to participate in privacy-harming websites is increasingly not a viable option for many."

Privacy is a social value. We have to maintain it for the betterment of society. We must have a private life, which should not be shared with all. But Facebook creates an atmosphere where people feel free to share that private stuff which they do not do in their offline life. For example, I cannot ask to see in person the honeymoon album from a person. More importantly, she may feel offended for such kind of demand. But the irony is that she shares her honeymoon album on Facebook. So, the privacy which we respect in actual life is somehow violated by us in virtual life. Again, though we are not allowed to take a picture of a Facebook friend in person with the help of our mobile camera without her permission, we can easily save a photo of her by visiting her Facebook account without her permission if she shares her images. So, Facebook brings a paradox of privacy. It is really an alarming trend initiated in our society which must get proper concern because "[a] society without privacy protection would be suffocating, and it might not be a place in which most would want to live (Solove, 2007, p. 762).

### **Organizing social activities, and advent of a new form of depression**

There are some social motives also. According to Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012, p. 245), there are basically two types of motives: the need for self-presentation, and the need to belong. Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012, p. 245) point out,

Humans are highly dependent on the social support of others ... and ostracism from the social group impacts negatively on a variety of health-related variables, including one's self-esteem and sense of belonging, emotional wellbeing, and sense of life meaning, purpose, self-efficacy and self-worth.<sup>3</sup>

One of the social purposes for Facebook use is the need for self-presentation. Facebook users are in a race to present themselves in the best look with the best surroundings. They try to promote their own selves by every single post on Facebook. It creates a narcissist atmosphere there: "The findings suggested that people with high level of narcissism and also people with low levels of self-esteem were more likely to spend more than [an] hour a day on [Facebook]. They were also more likely to post self-promotional photos enhanced by use of Photoshop" (Mehdizadeh (2010), as cited in Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012, p. 245). Actually, self-presentation becomes the demand of Facebook culture. Here, you have to be popular. Popularity is measured by the number of 'Likes,' 'Comments,' and 'Share.' These are working as currency on Facebook. As Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012, p. 245) claim, "[Facebook] creates an environment where information is shared proactively because of the site's influence on a user's need for popularity."

Another social purpose is the need to belong. For many, Facebook takes that place of society. It is now the common meeting place of peers, where they share the happiness of life and get feedback. Even they modify their lifestyles on the basis of that feedback. When someone does something only for sharing on Facebook, it means his life is highly conditioned by Facebook. There are people who cannot imagine a single day without using Facebook; it becomes a nightmare for them. This would lead them to a new type of anxiety known as "Facebook Anxiety." This is a form of anxiety which develops when Facebook users become anxious because of their absence from this virtual platform. For them, Facebook is a social substitute because though they may be not that much social in real society, they may be found very active in that substitute society. Being a member of this substitute society is a matter of self-esteem for them. Any kind of exclusion or any kind of falling short makes them upset. If they cannot make a proper vibe on social media, they feel very low. In this connection, Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012, p. 245) say,

Self-worth and self-esteem are closely associated with the need to belong. It has been proposed that self-esteem may act as a sociometer – a monitor of one's acceptability to the group. A drop in self-esteem serves as a warning signal of potential social exclusion and motivates the individual to take steps to avoid rejection and improve one's standing in the social hierarchy.

In this way, Facebook has become a new contributor to the list of depression producing reasons. As mentioned, people nowadays live a twofold life: real and virtual. There are some similar things happening in both forms of life. Depression is one of them. One major cause of this depression is time management. Since now we have dual life, and since the total amount of time remains the same as it was before, we have to spend time on the virtual world snatched from the time of the real world. Hence, we give less time in real life than before. This new type of time investment hampers our daily activities of real life. The more we have friends on Facebook, the more diversified updates will come on our newsfeed, which demands more time than before. Thus, the journey of depression starts.

Blease (2015, p. 9) mentions the following as reasons for Facebook depression,

1. They have more online "friends";
2. The greater the time spent reading updates from this wide pool of friends;
3. The more frequently the user reads these updates; and
4. The content of the updates tends to a bragging nature.

These points show that the more we keep ourselves busy with Facebook, the more time it takes away from us, the more we give importance to this second life, the more we may lead to frustration and depression. After enjoying delicious food in a restaurant with our dear ones, we upload those photos of foods and moments on Facebook. Tension starts from here. We constantly check Facebook to see how many likes we get, and who comments what on it. But the more frequently we check Facebook 'Notification,' the more we expect from Facebook. When these expectations are fulfilled, we feel glorified. we feel depressed when expectations are not fulfilled. Thus, we find a shift of importance in our life. Before Facebook, our importance was on the events. Now, the importance changes to the reactions achieved on shared contents on Facebook. Nowadays, it seems that it does not matter how the food tastes. Rather, the matter is how many likes or comments on the shared image of the food we get on Facebook.

Thus, the shift of importance to virtual life from real life brings a new form of depression in our life. In this life, people judge and compare each other in light of 'Follower,' 'Like,' 'Comment,' and 'Share.' Hence, we often say, for example, "I will wear this dress on my brother's wedding because I got the highest number of 'Love' reaction to a photo wearing this dress," "I don't like him, because he gives 'HaHa' reaction to all my posts," and so on. Another type of depression relevant here is in spite of seeing our post or photo when someone does not give an expected reaction, we may feel low for it. That's why it is said that "Facebook is a medium of

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<sup>3</sup>See also Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Baumeister and Tice, 1990.

overweening image management" (Blease, 2015, p. 3). In this way, there remains the threat of mental shock in using Facebook.

### **Facebook as Plato's Cave**

How is Facebook creating Plato's cave for us? How is it creating new challenges for our information gathering and knowledge formation? It is up to us whether we will accept Facebook as a source of new information or not, but it is true that we say like: "Wow! You are passing the amazing time. I saw you visiting Disney on Facebook." Or, "What happens to Mr. X? He is posting frustrating Statuses nowadays." These are very common sayings in our daily life nowadays. Intentionally or unintentionally, we use Facebook newsfeed as a source from where we can get a lot of information. This way of knowledge formation has a huge impact on the human brain. One may say that we use Facebook just for fun, but we do not take Facebook newsfeed seriously. To a certain extent, perhaps, he is right. But the question is, if I am engaged with something for most of the time of the day, how can I say that it is not influencing my thinking? A serious drug addict also knows that drugs are highly injurious to the health, still, he takes them. The same thing happens with many Facebook users. It seems that it brings hardly any value to our life and it takes a huge amount of time from our life, still, we use it heavily. Thus, we forget ourselves and get busy with others' lives.

Another problem is seen in considering Facebook as a means of attaining knowledge. There is a significant difference between traditional understanding of perception and the testimony based on the Facebook newsfeed. In the case of traditional perception, the observer can observe the whole picture as it is visible before his eye. But in the case of newsfeed testimony, it is totally selective. People are projecting that part of the story which he wants to show and hides the other side. So, the testimony of Facebook users is the representation of the partial or distorted picture of reality. This sort of distorted knowledge involves epistemic risks which, in turn, is resulted from the way knowledge is shared on Facebook.

In the modern world, Facebook is the largest platform for spreading information and knowledge through different contents shared by its users. In this platform, information and knowledge sharing has a different style. In the case of academic knowledge, we have to follow some processes. For example, we have to study with rapt attention for understanding the depth of message given by any academic books or articles. At the same time, sometimes we must have some background knowledge of or prior attachment to the subject. So, this type of knowledge gathering is a bit toilsome task. We have to give some dedicated effort for having knowledge. But in the case of knowledge sharing on Facebook, it is not that much difficult because, on Facebook, those information and knowledge are more circulated which can produce more pleasure or give more thriller. As a result, topics of these sorts get more coverage to mass people for being easy-going and catchy. But if the contents are about some speculative texts, then most of the Facebook users scroll down their newsfeed quickly so that they vanish away from their eyesight since they cannot produce instant gratification. If something is spicy, abnormal, or weird, it gets a response from common people. They also like to share this with their fellow friends on Facebook. This is very much similar to pop-culture. Knowledge is spreading in a popular way on Facebook which is similar to the spreading of various lifestyles, fashions, and trends by films and movies.

Here come the visible surface and dark surface issues. By "visible surface," I refer to those things that we apparently see on Facebook. By "dark surface," I mean those things on Facebook about which we remain ignorant. In Plato's allegory of the cave, the cave-mates only see the shadow of the things on the wall. This is their visible surface. But they do not know what is the colour, sex, and so on of the things they see as the shadow. This is their dark surface. On Facebook, we get knowledge only from the visible surface. We have no clue about how large or how significant the dark surface can be. Common people may become the victim of dark surface. For example, we find different Facebook 'Pages' or 'Groups' where they share contents like "Ten Ways to Reduce Your Fat," "How to Make Your Skin Glossy," "Best Goals of Lionel Messi," etc. These are common attractions for which people give their attention to and start following these Pages or Groups. But they do not know about who the 'Admins' of those Pages or Groups are? What is their purpose? What is their ideology? What is their intention? There is no security protocol system to scrutinize these Pages nor even verify the group of people who are working behind these activities. Recently, in the USA, it is found that a group named "Movie Lovers" used to post reviews about popular movies which attracted young followers. Later, it was found that the group was organizing young people for extremist activities (Schou&Farkas, 2016, p. 37).

Now, let me relate this case to Plato's allegory of the cave. It seems that to many people, the Facebook newsfeed is just like what the shadows on the cave wall to many cave inhabitants in Plato's allegory. We do not know the dark surface of the Facebook newsfeed, which may be totally different from what we observe. So, it is really a burning need to make scholarly research on different sources and users of Facebook Pages and Groups. These researchers can be considered as the prisoner who managed to escape from the cave and discovered the actual knowledge. The researchers must disclose the secrets to Facebook users like the escaped prisoner

returned to the cave to inform his discovery to his fellow cave-mates. This research will help us to be not conditioned by Facebook knowledge.

These researchers will examine what epistemic problem arises in believing a Facebook friend's post whom we do not know very well. As a result, we will become aware of the dangers of such epistemic risks as falsehood, propaganda, rumour, and so on.

Actually, on Facebook, we share our lives that involves some risk factors. Suppose that Mark has 500 friends on Facebook. It seems that all 500 friends are not equally close to him. But any shared post of Mark on Facebook is easily accessible to all his friends unless he imposes some restrictions, such as using 'Custom' option while sharing. Even those 500 friends can 'Share' that post from their own accounts (if the privacy setup is not customized to restrict share). Then it would be accessible to thousands of friends of those friends who shared Mark's post. Now, consider that shared post of Mark bears an extremist ideology that may mislead people. This is one kind of potential risks that involves sharing contents on Facebook. Hence, Facebook friendship may involve the sort of danger which is worse than the ignorance suffered by cave-mates in Plato's allegory of the cave.

Besides, a popular proverb says, "Birds of same feather flocks together." This is not always true about Facebook friendship because "Mutual Friends" on Facebook is not as significant as they are in real life. For example, I may like and respect one of my friends very much because he is really a nice person. Imagine that I have got a Facebook friend request with whom this nice friend is a mutual friend. Now, I may be convinced by it, and am willing to accept that person as my friend on Facebook. But this mutual friendship does not ensure me that my new friend has good character. So, I cannot be as sure about the character of my new friend as I am sure about the character of my real-life friend who is a mutual friend to my new Facebook friend.

Another significant loophole is judging a new friend by his posts on Facebook about his achievements. We may find a new friend on Facebook who posts bold Statuses but may find him as a coward in real life. We may find someone as cultured on Facebook, but maybe in real life, he is uncultured. So, if we judge someone through his Facebook posts, we may come up with a distorted or partial picture of reality.

Moreover, we sometimes become satisfied with the sort of reactions and comments by our Facebook friends for a particular video or photo. But it does not represent a complete picture of our knowledge because we only know the views of those who give reactions and comments (even though many of them may fake), but remain ignorant about views of those who see the photos or videos but offer no reactions or comments. These people are passive observers on Facebook because they remain quiet, but they always know very much about the contents shared by others.

We also often see one's taste of entertainment hurts sensitivity of another people or another group of people. In fact, one of the reasons for the advent of the new form of depression caused by Facebook is what I already mentioned as the dark side of our virtual life. We do not know much about what it implies when someone likes our photo. We remain ignorant about whether it is really a sign of liking, or whether it is merely offered to get a similar response to her shared photo on Facebook. Because of too many friends and too many updates, we often miss important updates of our really near ones. Ignorance of this sort also leads us to more depression.

As mentioned, the privacy issue on Facebook is also problematic. This problem is connected with the dark side of Facebook because we know something about Facebook, but do not know lots of other things. Here, invisible things or the things of which we are kept ignorant are far more significant than the visible things on our Facebook newsfeed. That's why Hull (2015, p. 93) says,

Users do not and can't plausibly be expected to know enough – neither about the uses to which their information might be put, nor about the specific benefits and harms that might result from those uses, nor about the likelihood that such harms might result – for consent to be meaningful, especially if one makes the assumption that those users are following a risk/benefit model of economic rationality.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

In fine, I argue that the discrepancies between our real life and virtual life created by our Facebook use are analogous to the setting of Plato's allegory of the cave. To support my claim, I draw an analogy between the allegory and the process of information gathering and knowledge formation via Facebook. I argue that this analogical connection supports the thesis of the paper. I contend that this connection clarifies the fact that many of our Facebook activities are related to the dark side of Facebook use of which we do not have much knowledge.

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