

Question:

1. Which method does Heidegger use in his reading of Plato's allegory of the cave?
2. Do you consider this to be a legitimate method? And why (not)?

Please consider in your answers also the way Heidegger translates Plato. Note that this latter aspect — how does a translation affect our reading or interpretation of a text? — may also be relevant for your own reading of the English translation of a text which is originally in German. For those of you who read German, it might be worthwhile comparing the German original with the English translation.

Method

In his reading of Plato's Cave, Heidegger practices a precursor of **deconstructionism** as a method. Derrida, who invented deconstructionism, created "déconstruction" from Heidegger to translate two Heideggerian terms: "Destruktion", which means not destruction but a destructuring that dismantles the structural layers in a system; and "Abbau", which means to take apart an edifice to see how it is constituted or reconstituted (Borchert, 2006).

The definition of deconstructionism is much debated (Royle, 2000). Here I will use a generalised definition which also fits Heidegger's method: to deconstruct is to take a text apart along the structural "fault lines" created by the ambiguities inherent in one or more of its key concepts or themes to reveal the equivocations or contradictions (Holland, 2012).

Heidegger's project

Heidegger's views changed significantly between 1927 and 1937. He went from "being compelled to understand the Greeks better than they have understood themselves" to "a good interpretation will never understand a text better than its author, but in another way". For Heidegger, this 'otherness', was not restricted to Plato: his ambition was to establish another view, not just of Plato's Cave but of the whole history of Western Metaphysics (Mincă, 2017).

Heidegger first presented his reading of Plato's Cave during a 1930/1931 lecture, in the middle of the transition period. He sets out to uncover the "unsaid" in Plato's text, but it remains hazy whether he is:

- explaining what Plato meant, possibly what would have been obvious to the audience in Plato's time;
- formulating what Plato might have agreed with but failed to say, perhaps even was not aware of;
- improving on Plato by uncovering what Plato's next step should have been;
- correcting Plato;
- deducing the correct interpretation of Plato's work as opposed to the received Western view;
- all or some of these.

For the moment, let us assume that Heidegger is right in thinking there is more to the "doctrine" of a thinker than is written in the text, that his deconstruction will yield some insight whatever his ultimate purpose.

Translation of keywords

Heidegger's reading is centred around the concepts of ἀλήθεια (truth) and παιδεία (education)¹. These concepts do not signify fixed states but are more like verbs, reminiscent of how we may say today that 'marriage' is a verb. He starts by quoting Plato: the Cave allegory illustrates παιδεία or lack thereof. Παιδεία is untranslatable but best approximated by the German word "Bildung": it is not "merely pouring knowledge into the unprepared soul". Rather "real education lays hold of the soul itself and transforms it in its entirety by first of all leading us to the place of our essential being and accustoming us to it". Next, Heidegger discusses ἀλήθεια. Its etymological meaning derives from "un-hiddenness", that which is revealed to us. He points out that all scenes of the Cave allegory have things which are hidden and unhidden. The allegory is about uncovering hiddenness. It is a struggle towards the light. Hence παιδεία becomes a "turning around of the whole human being" towards ἀλήθεια, toward unconcealment: the essence of "education" is grounded in the essence of "truth".

Saying the unsaid

The allegory of Plato's Cave serves as the theatrical setting for four scenes: imprisonment in the cave, liberation within the cave, liberation from the cave into the outside world and finally the return of the liberated prisoner to the cave. Heidegger claims that during the transition of scenes, there is an "unsaid" change in the concept of truth, replacing the original meaning of ἀλήθεια. The sun is essential to this final uncovering of the truth, by bestowing "unhiddenness". Heidegger concludes that the sun is the "image" for "the idea of all ideas". This ἰδέα του ἀγαθοῦ (the idea of good), the sun, becomes superior to ἀλήθεια. As Heidegger puts it: "Truth becomes ὀρθότης: the correctness of apprehending and asserting". This change transforms truth from "a fundamental trait of being" to "a characteristic of the knowing of beings". Heidegger claims that it is at this point where Western philosophy got off the rails, because "taking the essence of truth as the correction of representation" inevitably leads to evaluating all reality according to "values".

Conclusion

Heidegger's lack of clarity about his project is unfortunate. It makes it difficult to judge if deconstruction is an effective or a legitimate method. His insight into the intertwining of truth and education depends entirely on the correctness of his translation and interpretation of context. He may be right in his historical analysis about how the Western philosophy got the wrong idea about truth. None of these points can be verified within the space of this assignment. The superior role Heidegger assigns to the sun seems far-fetched, in particular his conclusion that the sun **supplants** ἀλήθεια as the ultimate source of truth. It does not seem sensible to stretch the metaphor of the Cave – or indeed any other metaphor – to harvest significant meaning at its very edges.

Bibliography

- Borchert, D. M. (2006). *Encyclopedia of philosophy*. Thomson Gale/Macmillan Reference USA.
- Holland, N. (2012). Deconstruction. In J. Feiser & B. Dowden (Eds.), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Mincă, B. (2017). Heidegger's Return to the Cave. *Heidegger Studies*, 33, 93–110.
<https://doi.org/DOI: 10.5840/heideggerstud2017334>
- Royle, N. (2000). What is Deconstruction? In N. Royle (Ed.), *Deconstructions: A User's Guide* (pp. 1–13). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-06095-2_1

¹ A wordcount reveals that Heidegger seemed preoccupied with the notion of "essence" – he uses it 86 times and in different ways, much more often than "idea" (52) and "truth" (58). What "essence" signifies, Heidegger does not discuss in this text.