

"Bad Things Happen When Good People Stand By and do Nothing"

Paper By: Gningala Yarran-Clanton
Indigenous Barrister/Solicitor

5th April 2006
The Western Australian Club
Perth

I want to start by paying homage to my loved ones and ancestors and those that have gone before me. I want to say thank you to my Nyoongar people and Nyoongar Elders whose land we stand on here today. It is with great pleasure that I present to you here today as a Nyoongar/Gitja Wongi/Yamitji women.

I wanted to start by exploring the concept of Ethics. Some have argued that the basis of ethics is to be found in sentiment. In compassion - or pity - or love. Here, one might hold that there is no rational argument or ultimate foundation for ethics. Instead, being moral involves doing what we are naturally inclined to do (there being a natural goodness to or sympathy in humanity), or is a consequence of 'love'.

The basic moral categories would not be those of 'right' and 'wrong;' they would be, rather, 'what is fitting or appropriate' or 'what is inappropriate.' So, when confronted with a moral situation and when one asks oneself 'What ought I to do?'— 'What would be fitting or appropriate?

What one is asking is something like 'What does love, or compassion, or pity demand that I do here for my fellow human beings?' The word 'demand,'

though, does not reflect a logical necessity; it simply recognizes that I am called on to do something since I have love, compassion, or pity.

To paraphrase the British idealist philosopher, Bernard Bosanquet, the moral question here is “How am I to be equal to the situation?”¹

If we are to apply the philosophy of appropriateness versus inappropriateness, the question then is how appropriate has the treatment of Indigenous persons in this country been. One needs only to look at history to see that there is a huge disparity in what is “fair” and “just” and what has been metered out to the Indigenous peoples of this country.

- ❖ Australia incarcerates its Indigenous peoples at between 19 and 29 times the rate of the rest of the population
- ❖ Aboriginal people experience disproportionate levels of disadvantage, which are often reflected in health related problems. The life expectancy for Aboriginal people is also considerably lower than for non-Aboriginal people. For example, the life expectancy for Indigenous males born in 1999-2001 is 56.3 compared with 77.0 years for total males, and for Indigenous females it was 62.8 years compared with 82.4 years for total females.²

International studies show a link between poverty and the spread of HIV. Social inequalities in income and employment status are powerful predictors of HIV infection, with low income and high levels of unemployment linked to greater exposure to risky sexual experiences.³

¹ Sweet, Prof William, “The basis of Ethics”, Marquette University Press, 2001, p10
² Council of Australian Governments. *Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage:Key Indicators 2003*. 2003, Council of Australian Governments: Canberra.

³ Fassin D, Schneider H. The politics of AIDS in South Africa: beyond the controversies. *British Medical Journal* 2003; 326: 495-497.

People living in poverty also have diminished access to health information, absent or delayed diagnosis and treatment, and less concern about health and the future because of, difficulties in the present.

- ❖ In WA, young Aboriginal people aged 15 to 24 carry the highest disease burden for STIs. In 2004, Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 years were 13 times more likely to be notified with chlamydia and 118 times more likely to be notified with gonorrhoea than non-Aboriginal youth.⁴
- ❖ The multiplicity of social issues impacting on Aboriginal young people complicates considerably any attempt to prevent and control STIs. Issues of family violence and sexual abuse are compounded by other social determinants of ill health such as poor housing, inadequate education and lack of employment opportunities. The combination of all these factors reduces the capacity of health services alone to respond effectively to the sexual health issues that Aboriginal young people encounter.⁵
- ❖ The *Gordon Inquiry* (as it is now known) released its final report in July 2002. It found that violence in many Aboriginal communities is endemic, with child abuse and child sexual abuse being under-reported. The Inquiry has prompted discussion and action on sexual abuse in communities by both government and non-government agencies. Child sexual abuse has been directly linked to high-risk sexual and drug-taking behaviour, as manifested by early first use of intoxicants, early initiation into sexual activity and increased rates of partner change.⁶

⁴ Alcamo I, *Fundamentals of Microbiology*. Sixth ed. 2001, Sudbury, Massachusetts: Jones and Bartlett Publishers.

⁵ WA Aboriginal Sexual Health Strategy, 2005-2008, p19

⁶ Jarvis T, Copeland J, Walton L. Exploring the nature of the relationship between child sexual abuse and substance use among women. *Addiction* 1998; 93: 865-875.

Why are Indigenous peoples now being compared to Afghans? Why are Indigenous peoples plight so desperate? I have a philosophical view of how we arrived here, bearing in mind that there is hard core evidence of a bloody history that has left a culture in tatters.

I might refer to the great philosopher Plato and his Allegory of the Cave.

The Allegory of the Cave

Suppose that there is a group of human beings who have lived their entire lives trapped in a subterranean chamber lit by a large fire behind them. Chained in place, these cave-dwellers can see nothing but shadows (of their own bodies and of other things) projected on a flat wall in front of them. Some of these people will be content to do no more than notice the play of light and shadow, while the more clever among them will become highly skilled observers of the patterns that most regularly occur. In both cases, however, they cannot truly comprehend what they see, since they are prevented from grasping its true source and nature

Now suppose that one of these human beings manages to break the chains, climb through the torturous passage to the surface, and escape the cave. With eyes accustomed only to the dim light of the former habitation, this individual will at first be blinded by the brightness of the surface world, able to look only upon the shadows and reflections of the real world. But after some time and effort, the former cave-dweller will become able to appreciate the full variety of the newly-discovered world, looking at trees, mountains, and (eventually) the sun itself.

Finally, suppose that this escapee returns to the cave, trying to persuade its inhabitants that there is another, better, more real world than the one in which they have so long been content to dwell. They are unlikely to be impressed by the pleas of this extraordinary individual, Plato noted, especially

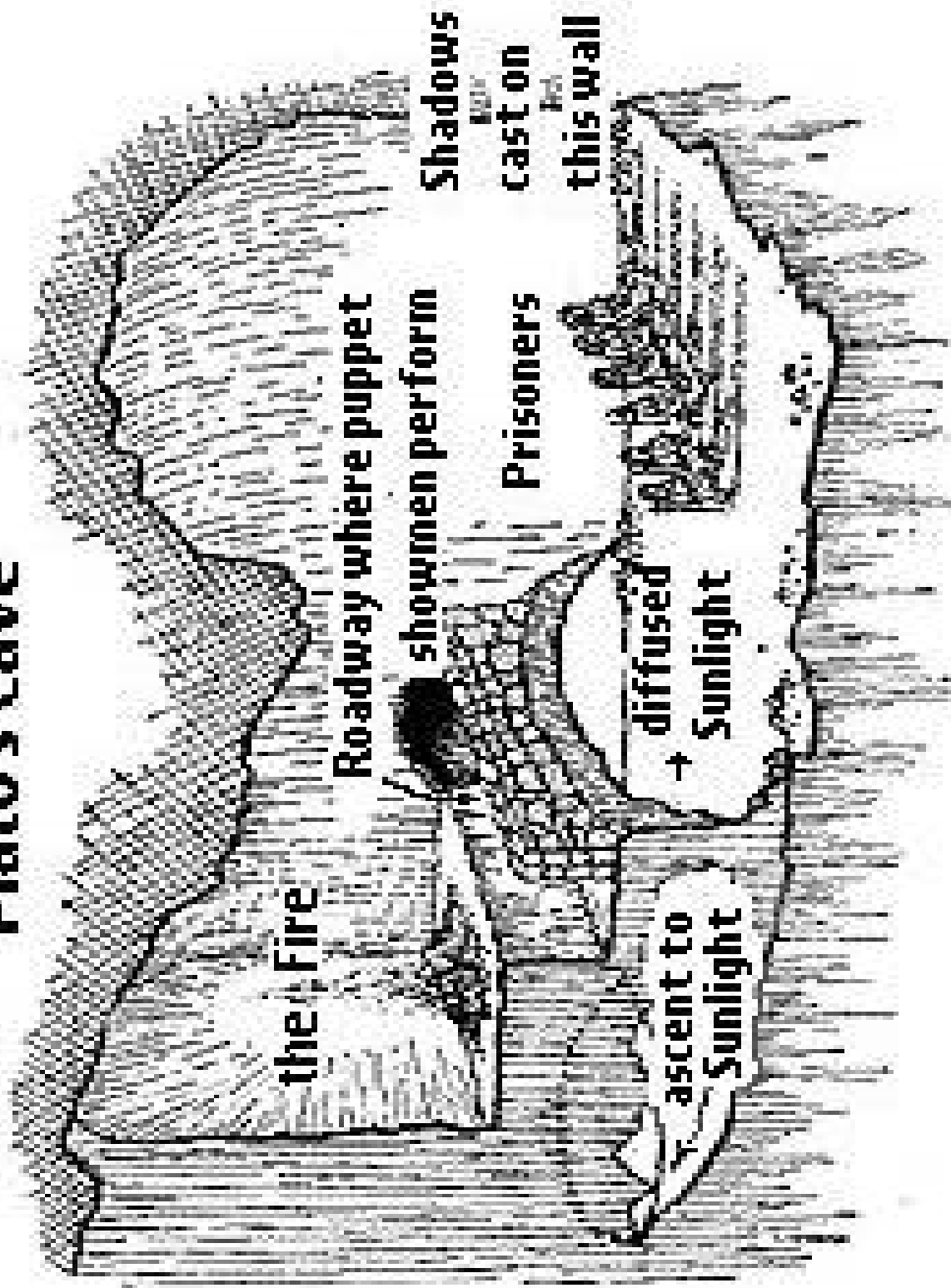
since their former companion, having travelled to the bright surface world, is now inept and clumsy in the dim realm of the cave. Nevertheless, it would have been in the best interest of these residents of the cave to entrust their lives to the one enlightened member of their company, whose acquaintance with other things is a unique qualification for genuine knowledge.

Plato seriously intended this allegory as a representation of the state of ordinary human existence. We, like the people raised in a cave, are trapped in a world of impermanence and partiality, the realm of sensible objects. Entranced by the particular and immediate experiences these things provide, we are unlikely to appreciate the declarations of philosophers, the few among us who, like the escapee, have made the effort to achieve eternal knowledge of the permanent forms. But, like them, it would serve us best if we were to follow this guidance, discipline our own minds, and seek an accurate understanding of the highest objects of human contemplation.⁷

⁷

Plato: The Republic, www.philosophypages.com/hy/2h.htm

Plato's Cave



My interpretation of Plato's Cave is that the fire is representative of colonisation. The view apparent during the period of colonisation was that the colonists would bring "civilisation" to the native in order that he may reap the rewards that flow from a "civilised" world.

The roadway is where the puppeteers (missionaries, politicians, government departments) have presented us with an image (eg: assimilation will benefit the Indigenous race) and the prisoners are the Indigenous race who are only seeing the shadows cast by past policies, oppression, racism, poverty. The sense of hopelessness makes them prisoners in their own thinking, so they act out their hopelessness.

When the enlightened persons do make the journey to ascend to the sunlight and seek to bring back the new ways of being in the world, they are met with resistance because the conditioning is so strong.

When you are told you are no good, your language should not be spoken because its of the devil, your skin colour is something to be ashamed of, your culture offers no tangible benefit to society, your parents do not know how to parent and that your spirituality is likened to black magic, is it any wonder that people choose the path of least resistance.

Fortunately for our culture there are more and more Indigenous Australians who have chosen to step out of the cave and redefine who they are and where they fit into the fabric of Australian society.

Real power and real freedom will only come with supportive constructs within government, within departments rather than a reconstructive model. There is an old saying that says;

"... feed a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime".

When you help a child to learn to ride a bike, you can't just tell them how. They have to try it for themselves - you can't hold them up the whole time either. There comes a point when you have to let them go. If they fall, they fall, but if you hang on, they never learn.⁸

Spinoza was of the view that freedom is

self-determination, so when I acquire adequate knowledge of the emotions and desires that are the internal causes of all my actions, when I understand why I do what I do, then I am truly free. Although I can neither change the way things are nor hope that I will be rewarded, I must continue to live and act with the calm confidence that I am a necessary component of an infinitely greater and more important whole.

This way of life may not be easy, Spinoza declared, "But all noble things are as difficult as they are rare."⁹

I have no desire to be assimilated - or mainstreamed or whatever it is that you have in mind for me in the future what I do want is to be able to determine for myself, my own destiny. Where Spinoza has the view that,

'I can neither change the way things are nor hope that I will be rewarded'

I have the view that I can change the way things are and my reward will be that my children will be the beneficiaries of that action.

Thank you for listening to me today.

⁸ Boeree, Dr C. George, "Carl Rogers 1902-1987, Personality Theories", p6

⁹ Spinoza, G "God, Nature and Freedom", www.philosophypages.com/hy/4h.htm