

PLATO AND THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION¹

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Abstract

In this essay I argue that we might benefit greatly, in contemplating both what is necessary in future for the acquisition of knowledge and for the stewardship of educational institutions, from attention to the approach Plato takes to these matters in his dialogues. I begin, reflecting on a passage from American phenomenologist Henry Bugbee's 'The Philosophical Significance of the Sublime,' by calling into question the central role of objectivity in modern epistemology. I then explore Platonic wonder as an alternate mode of encountering things to be learned and Platonic love as an alternate mode of knowing. My conclusion is that Plato recommends intimacy with things rather than objectivity as the goal of education and that, following that recommendation, we put ourselves in a better position to take care of both the world around us (i.e. the environment) and the institutions (government, school) central to the health of our communities.

Résumé

Dans cet essai, je soutiens que nous pourrions grandement bénéficier de l'approche adoptée par Platon dans ses dialogues pour réfléchir à ce dont nous aurons besoin dans le futur pour acquérir des connaissances et assurer l'intendance de nos établissements d'enseignement. Tout d'abord, réfléchissant sur un passage du phénoménologue américain Henry Bugbee tiré de son article « The Philosophical Significance of the Sublime », je remets en cause le rôle central de l'objectivité dans l'épistémologie moderne. J'explore ensuite l'émerveillement platonique comme alternative pour entrer en contact avec ce qui doit être appris ainsi que l'amour platonique comme alternative pour le connaître. Ma conclusion est que Platon recommande une connaissance intime plutôt qu'objective de ce qui doit être appris et, qu'en suivant cette recommandation, nous serons en meilleure position pour prendre soin du monde autour de nous (l'environnement) et des institutions (le gouvernement, les écoles) qui sont au cœur de nos communautés.

In the past 50 years or so especially, it seems to me that talk about the riches of our tradition has been too often shut up in university seminars and withdrawn from the community at large. That's not good for the tradition or the community. If the towering figures of Western intellectual history are to remain relevant, if they are to make a contribution to shaping our lives, they need to get out of the house. One such figure, undoubtedly, is the philosopher Plato. To the extent that we think of him at all these days, we tend to associate him either with a primitive metaphysical dualism now of purely historical interest or a kind of 'love' starved of sexual contact. If we can coax him out of the cloister of such academic clichés, though, we'll see that he has a great deal more to offer – not just to professional philosophers but to all those invested in the processes and institutions of education. In what follows, I take a few halting steps toward this end.

Plato lived in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C.E. As a young man he became a disciple of the philosopher Socrates who, by all accounts, engaged people in discussions of virtue and politics on the streets and in the public institutions of Athens. So impressed was Plato with Socrates that he immortalized him, dramatizing his teaching and learning in a series of dialogues. What we know about Socrates we know overwhelmingly on the basis of these written conversations. Serious students of Plato such as those in my seminars at Bishop's University tend to struggle early with the question of whether the Socrates they are coming to know is an historical figure or a creation of Plato's imagination. It seems important to them to distinguish real life from literature. I reached the conclusion long ago that it's virtually impossible to do this. I'll spare you my list of reasons. The funny thing – and the point I want to make – is that if you live with him for awhile, you'll almost surely come to regard the Socrates of the dialogues as real even though you know he is partly, perhaps even mostly, fictional. That's an extraordinary testament to Plato's genius as a writer – and the thing that sets him apart from everyone else in the philosophical canon. He doesn't just elaborate theoretical positions abstractly. He has Socrates and his interlocutors – sliding always somehow between history and literature – embody those positions and bring them to life. We never do Plato justice as a writer if we overlook that. What he has to tell us is lodged in the vitality of his literary creations and so must be sought there.

What exactly is that, though? What will we find in the conversations between Socrates and his interlocutors that pays back the not insignificant investment of studying them? Among other things in my view – broaching now explicitly the theme of this essay – some sage advice on the future of education. I wouldn't blame you if, initially,

you were surprised by that claim. We are talking here, after all, about documents that are roughly 2400 years old, produced by a culture long gone and, in some respects at least, politically primitive (Plato and his contemporaries condoned, if only by silence and/or lack of interest, both slavery and the subjection of women). The Greeks of the 5th and 4th century B.C.E. knew nothing of the scientific, technological, economic and environmental challenges we face. And so felt nothing of the urgency so palpable in schools and universities these days to make learning responsive to what is bearing down on us as a result of those challenges. However they may have pictured the future of teaching and learning, it will have looked nothing like our reality.

In terms of detail, this is of course incontestable. But the question, surely, is whether all things about education and its future – including the most essential things – are matters of such detail. And what I want to suggest to you, in the face, perhaps, of your surprise, is that they aren't. I want to suggest to you that a kind of fundamental conception of the world comes prior to all the details that worry us in programs and classrooms, that far too often in our rush to get on with learning and manage things around us this conception escapes our notice, and that the future of education – our education in the 21st century – depends largely on whether we keep nurturing that oblivion or try to turn ourselves around and make some attempt to assess it. I want to suggest all that – and then to wager that Plato's dialogues can be helpful, even decisive, precisely where our fundamental conception of the world hangs in the balance. Let me see if I can make my point a little more clearly and accessibly; because, really, everything turns on whether we regard our education and its future as a mass of details or the cultivation of a fundamental conception of the world.

Help from Henry Bugbee

When I was just starting out in university (at Mount Allison in New Brunswick), I had a teacher – Cyril Welch – who shook me up about philosophy. He was one of perhaps 3 or 4 flesh and blood people (as opposed to famous dead writers) who shaped profoundly my way of thinking. In the final year of undergraduate study, *his* teacher – an American by the name of Henry Bugbee – came to visit and talk with the Philosophy Department and its students. I don't know if you've had a teacher you've genuinely admired. (I hope you have – any kind of education would be radically incomplete without incurring such a debt.) If you have, you'll know that the idea of meeting your teacher's teacher has a kind of special *cachet* – as if you were meeting your intellectual grandfather, a more distant source of the world of ideas you live in. In my estimation at the time, Bugbee had a kind

of Olympian reserve that made me almost fearful. He didn't yak or quibble like other academics. And when he did say something it seemed both riddlesome and utterly decisive.

Years later in a funk over my own work one summer, he popped into my head as someone who might remind me of what philosophers are really supposed to do. So I trotted over to the library and borrowed his only book – *The Inward Morning* – really just a kind of journal of his thoughts over the course of about a year in the 1950s. That led me in turn to a number of other writings by and about him – all of which stoked the fire of my early middle age in more ways than I need to recount here. Almost everything Bugbee said was about our fundamental conception of the world. But he said it with a kind of candour and directness that cut through the paralyzing verbosity of the academy and so was infinitely more helpful. I would like to cite one brief remark that bears directly on what I'm interested in, then draw everything I have to say about Plato's dialogues from the store of its riches. In an essay entitled 'The Philosophic Significance of the Sublime,' Bugbee writes:

And the story seems something like this: as we take things so we have them; and if we take them in faith, we have them in earnest; if wishfully – then fantastically; if willfully, then stubbornly; if merely objectively, with the trimmings of subjectivity – then emptily; and if in faith, though it be in suffering, yet we have them in earnest, and it is really them that we have.²

'As we take things so we have them.' This is Bugbee's no nonsense way of saying that our fundamental conception of the world determines in advance the way things appear to us, the possibilities they hold out to us, and – returning to what I said above – the details that press on us. If that is so, however, then nothing could be more important to education and its future. The way 'we take things' is the foundation for everything else. Not only that. If, oblivious to that foundation, 'we take things' in some way that denies them the right to be what they are, then (almost paradoxically) we don't really 'have' them at all. We have a kind of 'effigy' of the world – to borrow a nice turn of phrase from David Toole.³ If we permit ourselves to harbour one hope for education, how could it be other than that by its grace we learn the difference between the world as it is and the world in effigy? The task of an education, surely, is to lead us the take things in such a way that 'it is really them that we have.'

In the passage I cited a moment ago, Bugbee recommends 'faith' as an appropriate name for that way. What he means by this familiar word is rather surprising. Here I will say only that it has nothing to do with signing on to the dogmas of an organized religion. What

interests me more, as a preface to talking about Plato's dialogues, are the attitudes he specifies that leave us, in one way or another, with effigies. Look again:

(A)s we take things, so we have them; and if we take them in faith, we have them in earnest; if wishfully – then fantastically; if willfully, then stubbornly, if merely objectively, with the trimmings of subjectivity – then emptily.

I want to draw your attention especially to the third and final option. If we take things 'merely objectively, with the trimmings of subjectivity,' then we have them 'emptily.' 'If,' Bugbee says – but frankly we've understood the world almost exclusively in terms of objects and subjects for the last 300 years – at least in the West. This is the attitude of modern mathematical and experimental science, the attitude of those sectors of the social sciences that, in the last 100 years especially, have set about trying to crack the codes and riddles of human nature by adapting the methods of hard science to the study of souls (psychology) and cultures (sociology), the attitude of economics, of the study of marketing and human resources (a particularly telling phrase in the story of taking everything objectively). For a long time things – even the kinds of things we are – have looked a lot like objects. And to learn – seriously and productively – has meant to cultivate the ability to see the world in objective terms.

The advantages of taking things this way are significant. Thinking objectively has brought us all the aid and comfort of modern industry, the saving power of modern medicine, and the data collecting, storing and information sharing capacities of the computer technology. But Bugbee is also right. To take things objectively is to have them emptily. This is especially evident now with respect to our natural environment. The effects of human intervention on climate and biodiversity that currently worry us are predicated largely on the reduction of nature to resource and raw material, on the fundamental conception of the world as a playground of sorts for human willing and doing. For a long time now, we've refused to grant the things of nature any kind of genuine independent reality and dignity. Instead, we've regarded them as bundles of atoms, or sources of energy, or simply casualties incurred as part of the cost of doing business. In each of these cases, the thing as such is an empty construct. And its very emptiness sanctions its unmaking and/or remaking.

The corollary of this view, in the assessment of human relations and culture, is the thesis that personalities and societies are constructed and that understanding them is a matter of articulating and demythologizing the powers that put them together. I think this is what

Bugbee has in mind when he qualifies his description of the objective attitude toward things with the phrase ‘the trimmings of subjectivity.’

Constructivism of one kind or another has been the basic currency of intellectual criticism for at least the last 70 years. And, like the attitude of objectivity that nourishes it, it has delivered important benefits – the transformation of our understanding of gender roles, to take perhaps the most obvious example. But – the notion that all social phenomena – even our identities as social beings – are mere constructions leaves us with a human world every bit as empty as a nature reduced to raw material. The price of this emptiness is especially evident in the prevailing cynicism toward institutions – governments, churches, and universities, for example. Under the aegis of constructivism we are all constrained to ask, sooner or later, why we should dedicate service, why we should even respect structures that simply manifest the interests of the power elite.

‘As we take things, so we have them.’ But if for centuries now, we have taken them ‘objectively, with the trimmings of subjectivity,’ and so had them ‘emptily’ – to the point where it is difficult to see the very environment that sustains us as anything more than raw material, to the point where it is difficult to imagine service to political and spiritual institutions as anything more than complicity with power – how do we avoid the conclusion that we have them in ‘effigy?’ And if that conclusion is unavoidable, how do we imagine a future for education – responsive precisely to the kinds of environmental and cultural concerns that press us so urgently – that wouldn’t include reframing the objective conception of the world, going behind and beneath it, establishing in our quest for knowledge the kind of foundation that would make it at least possible to have things ‘in earnest?’ For me these are rhetorical questions. As educators, we have the responsibility to revisit our fundamental conception of the world. We have the responsibility to ask how we might ‘take things’ – if not exclusively ‘objectively, with the trimmings of subjectivity?’ How we might ‘have’ them in the end, if not ‘emptily?’

Plato’s First Lesson – Take Things in Wonder

Let’s turn now explicitly to Plato’s dialogues. For, as it turns out, he’s enduringly helpful precisely on the question how we might reframe our fundamental conception of the world. Or to say the same thing in a slightly different but possibly more useful way: on the question of how an education ought to begin and how it ought to end. In fact, the early dialogues – texts many readers associate more closely with the historical Socrates – are arguably always about how we might properly begin to know things. If we were to read 6 or 7 of them in

quick succession we'd notice a number of common features. Socrates is almost always talking to young men – people of high school or university age just coming into possession of their adult faculties but not well established with reputations to defend. The talk is almost always about what we might call virtues – things like temperance or moderation, courage, holiness, friendship and justice. Socrates' interlocutors almost always claim to know what these things are, and are, after a little prodding, prepared to offer definitions. The definitions they offer almost always come from what we might call the store of conventional or cultural wisdom available to 4th century Athenians. (The first book of the *Republic* is a perfect case in point.⁴ Socrates engages three guests at a gathering on the subject of justice. The first defines it as paying your debts and keeping your promises, the second as helping your friends and harming your enemies, the third as the prerogative of the powerful. Each proposal might have garnered wide support from the Greek poetry and literature that formed and informed the citizens of Plato's day. Each reported what we might call a consensus of opinion). As the conversation with Socrates proceeds, the definitions come apart. Under his persistent questions, commonly held opinions turn out to be either self-contradictory or anti-rational. For the speaker channeling his culture who thinks he knows what he's talking about, this is an uncomfortable process. His way of taking things unravels before his very eyes – as a result of his own best answers to Socrates' questions. In the end, he stands before the original matter of conversation disarmed, stripped of his apparent mastery.

Here is the moment a genuine education might begin. In the *Apology*, Socrates claims that the only advantage he has over other men is that he knows he does not know the things they claim to know. In the *Crito*, the *Charmides*, the *Laches*, the *Lysis*, the *Menexenus*, the *Euthyphro* and other early dialogues, Plato portrays him consistently bringing his interlocutors to the same state of conscious ignorance. But what is this moment like, really? Let me talk briefly through three of its aspects.

First, notwithstanding the fact that it constitutes the beginning of our genuine education, it comes late. The interlocutors in Plato's dialogues think they have *already* made sense of the world in which they find themselves. They have taken this sense for granted, as a kind of inheritance. They do this not out of stupidity or carelessness but as a result of something pretty close to necessity. To have grasped the intelligibility of the world is a condition for the possibility of being an adult human being. But there is something of crucial importance here: if Plato's dialogues portray accurately the business of learning, then revisiting our fundamental conceptions is not simply a responsibility

imposed on us, say, in coming to terms with the limits of objectivity, it is the enduring substance of education itself. To learn is always to revisit the sense we have already made of things and to find that sense inadequate.

My students have never had a problem with this aspect of the moment I'm describing. Their own culture has made them radical constructivists. They're more than willing to grant that the conventional wisdom of 4th century Greeks – or indeed 21st century North Americans – is worthless and full of contradiction. In this respect, they're happy to cheer on Socrates's adventures. Indeed, some of them find him disingenuous, afraid to draw what they regard as the natural conclusion of his own method – which is that no knowledge, ultimately, stands up; that the kind of thing he is concerned with in particular – virtue – is simply a subjective 'trimming.' But here – and this would be the second point – we need to be careful. If we look closely at the way Plato portrays the coming to consciousness of ignorance, it never culminates in the reduction of the matter in question to opinion or human construction. At the end of the dialogue that bears his name, Charmides recognizes that he cannot say what temperance is, but that makes his determination to learn its nature even more pressing.⁵ At the end of the *Laches* the failure to define courage leads the two generals involved with Socrates to pledge their return to school.⁶ Plato always couples the failure of conventional wisdom with acknowledgment of the enduring actuality of the things themselves. In this, I think, he is true to experience. Who among us could rise successfully right now to the challenge of defining temperance or courage? Not me, certainly. But neither you nor I *live* as though such things are illusions. On the contrary, their reality presses on us every day in the evaluation of our actions and the actions of others, in the assessment of the performance of our governments and institutions, in the articulation of our individual and collective aspirations for the future. And all the more so when discussions and events make it clear to us that prevailing conceptions of them are inadequate. In the state of conscious ignorance, properly represented, temperance, courage – whatever the provocative matter is – stands before us, as if for the first time, at once meaningful and mysterious.

Plato's own name for this state is wonder. In the *Theaetetus* (a later dialogue on the subject of knowledge), he tags it explicitly as the origin of philosophy.⁷ A *propos* of our responsibility as educators to ask how we might 'take things' if not exclusively 'objectively,' the thrust of his advice in the portrait of his own teacher throughout the dialogues seems to be: take things in wonder! This isn't merely fanciful or poetic advice in contrast to the hard-headed practicality of science. To take

things in wonder is precisely to take them 'in earnest,' to acknowledge both the urgency of knowing them as they are – i.e. as they weigh on us in experience – and the failure of conventional wisdom to respond to this urgency. If I were charged personally by some authority in the government or the university with imagining the future of education, I would begin by thinking about the nature of wonder. I'm not far down that road at present. But reflecting on my own attempts to learn over the years, I see a third aspect. The very experience of wonder – the confrontation of a matter that is at once meaningful and mysterious, incontestably real yet beyond our capacities for definition – *invites* us to know. Such an invitation not only supports the pursuit of knowledge, it draws us to it as an indispensable labour of human life. Aristotle gathers it up with his usual succinctness at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*: 'All men by nature desire understanding.'⁸

Plato's Second Lesson – Have Things in Love

If Plato's prescription for the future of education is that it begin in wonder, what will he recommend as an end? In what does/ought our learning to culminate? Or again: What is the proper response to the world's invitation to know? The answer appears most explicitly in two masterworks of his maturity – the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. There he makes the case that if we 'take things' in wonder we 'have them' in love. I have always thought that this idea has intuitive appeal. It is most evident in what we might call erotic life. What is more important, more real, in youth, than the body and soul of someone we love? It is as if they become for us the very beacon of humanity. How many stories in literature and history attest – one way or another – the intensity of a lover's reality? Romeo and Juliet die for it! Dante's Beatrice guides him through the hyper-reality of the highest heavens! Of course the story we tell ourselves on the sidelines of the game of *eros* is that such people are bewitched and deluded, that the way the world is (if it is any way at all) is best apprehended when emotional turmoil subsides.

Plato, of course, takes an opposing view. Not because he prefers fiery emotions to cool calculation, but because he sees in the transport of erotic love an intimation of the structure of knowledge at the very highest levels – the kind of knowledge that might culminate in a completely different relation to the natural environment and/or the institutions of politics, spirit and learning that seem, late in our modern age, to be faltering. In a moment, wrapping things up, I want to say something about the character of that knowledge. As a prelude to that, go back one more time to the problem of emptiness given us in Bugbee's characterization of objectivity.

The context there, roughly, was elaboration of a theory of knowledge. But a kind of objectifying emptiness also threatens in the arena of *eros*. We call it lust – the origin of pornography and other reductions of the truth of sexual experience to physical bodies and power. Plato warns against this deformation repeatedly. In the *Phaedrus* he has Socrates construct a detailed account of the wolfish lover – the man who seeks only his own selfish pleasure in the women and boys he takes to bed.⁹ The actions of such a lover aim uniformly at possession. By them, the beloved is reduced to a piece of property. Lust *is* a delusion. It founders on the paradox that what it esteems and values (*viz.* the beloved) it simultaneously degrades.

In the *Symposium*, the point is subtler but for our purposes ultimately more useful. There Socrates asks his audience to ponder the nature of the longing lovers feel. It seems, at first, to consist in the desire to possess what we lack. No one pines for someone or something he already has. But on closer examination, it turns out that genuine *erotic* longing has nothing to do with possession. It is, instead, the desire to ‘bring forth upon the beautiful, both in body and in soul.’¹⁰ That is to say, in love we strive to be generative, to bring into the world – precisely in recognition and supplement of its own beauty – something beyond ourselves.

In nature, this *eros* culminates in reproduction. But, to return to the point I brushed by above, making babies is a kind of trope, a model for the aspiration to generate that crowns every stage of human accomplishment. On Plato’s view, lovers of souls seek out conversations because they long to give birth to ideas. Lovers of education set their feet down in schools and colleges and universities because they want to give birth to homes for learning. Lovers of public service offer themselves for office in the civil or diplomatic corps, or in the legislature, because they want to give birth to vibrant communities. It is of course true that conversations can be rote repetitions of well-worn opinions or sterile debates that lead nowhere. It is true that schools and colleges and universities can misdirect the invitation to know the world addresses to virtually every child as a birth right. It is true that the institutions of government can be a refuge for the selfish or merely ambitious. But not, Plato would say, where things are taken in love. The aspiration to generate culminates in a knowing so inherently appealing, so essentially satisfying, that the temptation to subvert our role in it evaporates. Who, having experienced such intimacy with others, with things, with the environment, with the world, would choose its opposite? ‘As we take things, so we have them’ Henry Bugbee says. And Plato responds: ‘then take them in wonder, and have them in love.’

ENDNOTES

- 1 This essay is an adaptation of a talk delivered originally in January of 2010 at Stanstead College to an audience of students and members of the local Stanstead and Derby Line communities. It was part of the Vermont Humanities Council Lecture Series.
- 2 Bugbee, Henry, 'The Philosophic Significance of the Sublime,' in *Philosophy Today*, 11:1 (1967: Spring) p. 59.
- 3 Cf. Toole, David, 'As We Take Things, So We Have Them: Reflections on the Fragility of Nature,' in *Wilderness and the Heart: Henry Bugbee's Philosophy of Place, Presence and Memory*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), p. 167.
- 4 Cf. Plato, *Republic*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Paul Shorey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 576–605.
- 5 Plato, *Charmides*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, p. 122.
- 6 Plato, *Laches*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, p. 144.
- 7 Plato, *Theaetetus*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. F.M. Cornford, p. 860.
- 8 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinell: The Peripatetic Press, 1979), p. 12.
- 9 Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. R. Hackforth, pp. 484–88.
- 10 Plato, *Symposium*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Michael Joyce, p. 558.

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