

The Educational Task of Teaching Ethically: Plato and the *Republic* and the Challenge of Education, Authority, and Moral Guidance in a Pluralistic Era

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Abstract: The paper re-examines Plato's *Republic* as a classical source of the ethical duty of teaching. Plato explained the idea of education as not the imparting of information but rather the turning of the soul away from opinion to the truth through the allegory of the cave. However, the philosophically trained person has to go back into the cave where truth meets convention, power, and resistance. The motion of ascent and descent reveals a persistent problem of modern teachers: what should be done to lead students to the good without taking over the monopoly on moral authority? Based on the theory of education by Plato, the Socratic method of teaching, the current teacher ethics, moral education, and value pluralism, the paper states that teaching is not a value-free technology or an authoritarian teaching of morals. It is instead an ethical and dialogic process that develops the ability of the students to perceive, ask questions, make judgments, and behave in responsible ways. Teachers ought not to assert any sovereign ownership of truth in a pluralistic era; however, they are unable to leave their students to relativism. Their challenge is to establish educational environments wherein students acquire the skills to evaluate appearances, arrange desires, face conflicting values, and build up responsive moral agency.

Keywords: Plato; *Republic*; Teacher ethics; Socratic pedagogy; Moral education; Value pluralism; Liberal education

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1. Introduction

The *Republic* by Plato can be considered as a book of political philosophy, however it is also a document on education. It is concerned with the just city as well as with the creation of the just soul. The question posed in the dialogue is how the human person can be brought out of appearance into truth, from disorder into inner peace, and from unchecked thought into reasoned thought. In this context, the educational project of Plato is still applicable to modern-day discussions on teacher ethics, moral education, and liberal education.

When Socrates begins the dialogue, he states that he has gone down to the Piraeus. The descent is not

merely a setting with a dramatic effect. It foreshadows the movement that will be subsequently developed in the allegory of the cave: the philosopher climbs up to the truth and also has to descend back into the world of regular people. Education is consequently ordered by a dual motion. It needs to have an ascent because the pupils need to be taken beyond the shadows of conventions and desires. It also needs to have a descent because the well-educated individual is accountable to re-enter the human society and interact with people using the means of education, conversation, and social practice.

The present paper discusses the educational philosophy of Plato in connection with contemporary teacher ethics. In particular, it raises three questions, namely: What are the kinds of education that turn the soul, as opposed to merely filling the mind? How can teachers be morally authoritative without becoming domineering? And what must teachers teach when they live in a pluralist society, and the values held can often be contradictory? My view is that teachers ought not to follow the pattern of Plato's philosopher-ruler by asserting sole ownership of justice or withdrawing back into value-free relativism. Teaching is an ethical form of guided freedom, i.e., it encourages the student to see things in a clearer perspective and still keeps them capable of making their own decisions.

2. Education as the turning of the soul

Plato employed the metaphor of the cave in the first lines of Book VII of the *Republic* to uncover the underlying idea of education. The prisoners are chained to their necks and legs since they were born and must stare at the cave walls and observe the shadows projected on them by the fire, believing that these shadows are real objects. When one of the prisoners gets freed from his bonds and has to get up and rotate his neck to move toward the light, he will be severely hurt: the fire will burn his eyes and he cannot perceive the objects that he previously saw as shadows. Should some other person pull him upwards up an ascent and rough mountain until he becomes pulled up and put outside the cave and in the sunlight, he would suffer even greater hardship, and might become blinded and incapable of recognizing anything real.

The given process can be called a metaphor of education. Plato, speaking by the lips of Socrates, stated: "Education is not in the way that certain men, who make it their business, pretend, that they may impart genuine knowledge to the souls which never had it before, as though they might convey sight to the eyes of the blind." The opposite of this is the core of education, or the turning of the soul (περιαγωγή τῆς ψυχῆς), i.e., the turning of the soul away towards the ever-changing visible world towards the unchanging and real world of ideas. Like the eye has its own vision, but the whole body must turn at once to move out of darkness to light, so also the soul has organs of recognition and learning, but the whole soul must turn to change the region of generation into the region of existence, rising slowly toward the concept of good.

Such a turn involves an extended period of training. Book VII of the *Republic* explains how the educational program works: beginning with physical education and music, moving on to mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics, finally ending with dialectics. Every branch of learning has the purpose of leading the soul toward a higher level: mathematics releases the soul out of the perceptible world and accustoms it to think about pure numbers; geometry leads the soul to the eternal life; astronomy prompts one to gaze upon the stars and think about the order of the universe; dialectical thought can discover the essence of every object without using any senses by the power of reason. It is an uphill challenge that cannot be accomplished by many.

Nevertheless, Plato constantly stated that the reversal of the soul involves personal exertion. Teachers are unable to fill the soul with information, but can assist it in utilizing its natural capacities to perceive. In the same way that the eye has to adjust to light, the soul must, over time, become accustomed to seeing the actual world ^[1]. The allegory, as Annas stated, dramatizes the difficulty of changing conventional belief to philosophical insight ^[2]. Education is thus not just informative but transformative. It alters what learners focus on, what they wish to have, and how they evaluate things.

3. Returning to the cave: The ethical risk of teaching

Seeing the sun, the philosopher should go back to the cave. His eyes, which are accustomed to the sunlight after a sufficiently long period of exposure, suddenly fall into the darkness, causing him to temporarily lose the ability to perceive the world around him. If before he has been able to adjust to the darkness, and starts to argue with the people in the cave regarding the validity of the images, he will be made a laughing stock. They will claim that he has damaged his vision by going outside and that he thinks the notion of looking up is an absolute joke. This descent shows the age-old conflict between philosophy and politics: the existing political system and the ancient rules of the cave are antithetical to the philosophy that is constantly trying to discover what the real good life is.

Once this questioning is brought into the political sphere, the prisoners of the cave, who are used to the darkness and the illusory pictures, will have already considered the pattern of the shadows lit by the torches as the truth itself. And those who held the torches have been ruling over all the inhabitants of the cave, and would never let an alien endanger the already well-established life in the cave in the name of the truth? In case the confusion of the prisoner masses and the tyranny of power combine, the philosopher needs to decide between sacrificing his own self in the name of truth, or obeying the political law and silencing truth, and listening to the opinions.

This pressure is at the heart of teaching. The teachers are supposed to assist their students in questioning the inherited beliefs but they operate in institutions that are driven by the social expectations, assessment systems, parental demands, and political pressures. Similar to the returning philosopher of Plato, the teacher has to oscillate between seeking truth and fulfilling his social obligations.

Socrates death is what makes this risk actuality. Instead of teaching by doctrine, Socrates taught by asking questions, but his questioning was seen as an attack on the state. The death of Socrates demonstrates that education may upset existing orders. To Vlastos, Socrates philosophical practice could not be separated from the moral self-examination ^[3]; to Brickhouse and Smith, Socrates interaction with the people was a form of ethical provocation ^[4]. The teaching in this sense of Socrates is not impartial. It breaks complacency.

Yet, Socratic teaching ought not to be equated with the fact that the teacher has ultimate knowledge. It is based on the ability to engage in dialogue, irony, and refutation. Mintz pointed out that the Socrates of Plato undermines any simplistic representation of education as a transmission of doctrine ^[5]. Socratic teacher is not merely providing answers; he reveals contradictions and challenges students to consider their own positions. This difference is important to contemporary teacher ethics. Educators can lead, but they need to allow space for questioning, contradiction, and student autonomy.

4. The soul, desire, and moral formation

The ethical role of education is explained in more detail by Plato in his theory of the tripartite soul. The soul in Book VII of the *Republic* has three components: reason, spirit, and desire. Truth is something that reason seeks, pleasure and satisfaction are what desire desires, and spirit can support reason or desire. Justice is the balanced state of all these elements: reason leads, spirit helps, and desire submits to reasonable limits.

The contemporary democratic education does not allow accepting the hierarchical system of politics as proposed by Plato and, in particular, his stratification of humans into the predetermined classes using the so-called noble lie. Nonetheless, his psychological understanding is still valuable. The education should be directed to the entire individual. It is possible that schools can develop intelligence and neglect desire and emotion, and thus students may be technically competent and morally lost.

The issue is particularly significant in consumer societies. Advertising, digital media, and algorithms are used to continually activate desire. Students are motivated to consume, show off, compete, and find instant pleasure. But schools frequently shy away from discussing desire, character, and a good life. The schools instruct students on how to be successful but not necessarily how to live.

Plato can be put into the context of modern-day moral education. According to Noddings, care should form the basis of moral education instead of rules alone ^[6]. The same is also noted by MacIntyre: moral life requires practices, virtues, and reasoning traditions about the good ^[7]. The education system should then develop such rational capacity alongside the cultivation of the habit of attention, restraint, care, and responsibility.

5. Teacher authority and its limits

Another of the most contentious aspects of the *Republic* is Plato's criticism of poetry. Plato argues against poetry on the basis that it is a copy of appearance, it makes people emotional, and it provides morally unsafe pictures of gods and heroes. The critique is not just aesthetic but also an educational authority. Poets in ancient Greece had the role of educating society. To question poetry was to question the question of who has rights over shaping the moral imagination of the youth.

This very question is as urgent today as ever. Competitors, textbooks, digital media, families, peer groups, and political institutions vie with each other to mold student values. The teacher is not the only source of authority in the classroom but teaching is also related to power. Teachers select texts, formulate questions, encourage certain kinds of speech, and determine what behavior is appropriate. To use the words of Campbell, teaching is necessarily ethical as teachers always impact the moral existences of their students ^[8].

The issue, however, is not in what extent teachers have authority, but under what conditions this authority should be legitimized and restricted. Teaching is described by Hansen as an ethical activity that is based on attentiveness, responsibility, and availability to students. Sockett also contends that the moral foundation of teacher professionalism ^[9]. These viewpoints imply that teacher authority ought not to be charismatic domination or bureaucratic control. It must be dialogical, accountable, and focused on the development of students.

Therefore, teachers must not dominate the process of interpreting justice. When the classroom is a place where the opinion of the teacher about what is good cannot be challenged, education turns into yet another cave. However, when teachers are unwilling to provide any form of value orientation, they leave their learners exposed to bewilderment or to more potent external influences. Ethical pedagogy needs an

intermediate course of action: teachers ought to reveal reasons, challenge them, and assist the students in the development of their own capacity to judge.

6. Teaching in a pluralistic age

The present-day teachers operate under the principle of value pluralism. It is asserted by Berlin that there are many human goods that cannot always be compared^[10]. Freedom, equality, loyalty, truthfulness, care, excellence, and autonomy are all possible goods that may collide. Galston^[11] also demonstrates that liberal societies should have to bargain with diversity and not turn into moral disinterest.

This pluralistic situation adds to the problem faced by the teacher. On the one hand, the teachers must not enforce any specific general doctrine. On the other side, pluralism does not imply that all values are equivalent nor that teachers are supposed to be quiet on moral issues. The students require assistance in order to comprehend the reasons behind the conflict between values, learn how to reason in the context of moral disagreement, and behave in a responsible manner without being sure.

One solution is liberal education. Nussbaum said that education must develop humanity by being able to critically self-examine oneself, be citizens of the world, and imagine narratives^[12]. Gutmann also focused on the idea of democratic education as a form of preparation for common civic decision-making^[13]. Such viewpoints may sustain a concept of teaching as the development of reflective agency over ideological conformity.

According to Biesta, modern education tends to be too focused on the lack of purpose in an era of measurement^[14]. There is no place to ask about human formation when the quality of education is measured primarily by test results, rankings, or other performance indicators. Although the language of the soul used by Plato might be remote to the context of the modern school, it captures exactly what measurement frequently neglects: education is concerned with the type of persons students are turning into.

In a pluralistic era, it is impossible to have a sole authority providing final solutions to all moral and existential dilemmas. People should keep questioning themselves about their beliefs, recognize their prejudices, be aware of their shortcomings, and think in the absence of certainty. It is almost similar to the Kantian essence of enlightenment, which is to have the courage to use one's own reason. Reflective abilities can be taught by teachers. There is no way to ensure that students will always make the right decisions or that teachers will live the lives of students on their behalf. They could assist the students to cultivate the practice of self-reflection; i.e., inquire why they believe what they believe, realize how social pressures influence their wishes, and be willing to revise their thinking. This may be one of the most significant educational flames that a teacher can impart. It does not represent a set of doctrines or an impenetrable ethical system, but the bravery to pose questions and the ability to think clearly.

7. Seeing, dialogue, and reflective agency

And so, what must teachers impart? Not an enclosed creed, but a method of change. Plato, in his cave, implied that education starts with learning how to see. Seeing is more than just perceiving visual information; it is seeing the distinction between appearance and reality, shadow and object, desire and truth. This ability is developed by teachers as they assist the students in slowing down, focusing attentively, and questioning what is hidden behind common assumptions.

Third, teachers must establish areas of dialogue. The banking model of education, which sees teachers putting information into passive students, is criticized by Freire ^[15]. Socratic and dialogical education are opposed to such a model. It is not about the idea that teachers and students have similar knowledge. It is the concept that education is a common quest where reason plays a greater role than authority.

Next, teachers ought to nurture reflective agency. The students are required to learn how to analyze their own beliefs, identify bias, challenge the conflicting goods, and take responsibility in judgment. It is similar to the concept of enlightenment in Kant, which is defined as the courage to think using your own mind. Moral philosophy by Kant also opposes the elitism of Plato: moral dignity is not the sole prerogative of philosophical rulers but of all rational persons.

To put it in this perspective, the teacher is not a philosopher-king or passive facilitator. The teacher acts as a guide who directs beyond shadows and does not take over the visualization of the student. Ethical teaching is the combination of conviction and humility. It provides guidance without being domineering; it allows an ascent, but also equips the students to go back to the world responsibly.

8. Conclusion

Plato's *Republic* still has value in educational theory as it views education as a change in the soul. The allegory of the cave will remind us that students can exist in shadows and that education can be achieved through painful turning. However, Plato also showed the danger posed by the ethical authority in education. The teacher who is said to have the light may turn out to be a new form of domination.

In contemporary teaching, the task is to direct without dominating. Pluralistic societies do not allow teachers to impose one vision of the good; however, teachers cannot claim to be value-neutral technicians either. Teaching is a form of ethics that determines the way in which students perceive, desire, think, and behave. It does not aim at creating obedient adherents but reflective individuals able to make ethical decisions.

The aim of education is to assist human beings in their movement out of unexamined opinion into responsible freedom, as it has been since Plato in his cave to Kant with his moral law. Teachers do not impart final certainty to their students, but rather the courage and discipline of inquiry: the ability to perceive things more clearly, ask questions more honestly, and behave more fairly in a world where shadows compete and light is incomplete.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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