IMPLICATIONS OF PLATO'S PEDAGOGY FOR MODERN EDUCATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

INTRODUCTION 1

Chapter

I. THE NECESSITY OF THE DIALECTIC 7

A. What is Thinking?
B. The Essence of the Dialectic

II. THE DIALECTICAL GROUNDWORK 16

A. The Arch-Enemy: the Conceit of Wisdom
B. The Mind's Best Weapon: The Dialectic
C. Injecting the Healthy Doubt
D. The Danger of the Diseased Doubt
E. The Problem of the Intellect's Declaration of Independence

III. THE DIALECTIC: THE CATALYST OF UNDERSTANDING 51

A. The Struggle to Transcend the Senses
B. Learning is Recollection
C. Words Bridge the Gap
D. The One, the Many, and the Whole

IV. THE TEACHER'S GUIDING STAR 88

A. Truth: First, Last, Always
B. Truth and Goodness are One

BIBLIOGRAPHY 100

INTRODUCTION

In educational circles today, it is the commonest thing to hear that we are sending our young people to schools and colleges to teach them how to think. That is the sacred shibboleth which is supposed to stir the blood of everyone interested or engaged in education. The trouble is, of course, that the shibboleth stops right there. It doesn't tell us what it means by "to think"; and even less does it tell us how to go about teaching it.

Perhaps I have already mis-stated the case. Modern educational literature does tell us what it means by "to think"; but its telling is so involved, complicated and weighted with technical (sometimes a synonym for meaningless) phrases that the poor ordinary pedestrian teacher is left not only as ignorant as he was at the beginning, but with an added sense of inferiority and unworthiness. He begins to suspect that he doesn't know what thinking means at all, nor how to teach it; and so he feels he is drawing a salary under false pretences, and the children under him are being deprived of their intellectual bread.

Educationists pile onto the modest teacher such a weight of inflexible teaching theory and practice that - like the shepherd boy David - the teacher knows if he ever goes into battle hampered and hindered by this ponderous

stuff, he will be made into mincemeat by the forty often small, but still mighty, Goliaths awaiting him in the class or lecture room. The pity is that many teachers haven't the courage to throw it all off as so much nonsense, and go back to the weapons they are familiar with and sure of: their personal experience of human nature, their own history of learning, their common sense informed by reading, reflection, and most of all by life itself.

Unintentionally this thesis has turned out to be a vote of confidence in the average, sincere teacher's knowledge of what he is about. When he feels the urge to speak out against the confusing mumbo jumbo about the learning process published in reams by so-called educational experts, he should not hesitate. He is not alone. There is someone on his side: and that someone is Plato.

Plato has had perhaps more influence on education than any other one man in history; and yet, often Plato's educational theories are so direct and down-to-earth that the ordinary teacher could almost (almost!) mistake them for his own because they perfectly echo what he has always been trying to say himself. Everyone knows that Plato is one of the world's profoundest philosophers; but how few know that even the profound can be simple - or rather, only the profound can be simple. Plato's teaching on education is much like Christ's teaching on religion and morality: the wisest man can never fully comprehend it,

but there is a wealth of wisdom in it that even a child can understand.

Plato's pedagogy can be put in a few words: cultivate the habit of wonder in the young; or, more specifically, — teach them how to ask and answer questions. It sounds all so simple that we who are the twisted products of a complicated age may scorn it as silly. But no one can scorn Plato with impunity, because for sure Plato is not the loser. Puzzled as we are by the complex problems of modern education, we owe it to ourselves to read and re-read Plato's dialogues. He is a prophet who instils what is needed most, confidence. He realizes and readily acknowledges that the difficulties in education are as plentiful and painful as thorns and thistles; but he insists that we must never underestimate the power and the pull of truth. The teacher's task is to move the student within the field of truth's magnetic influence because once the student is there truth can hold him and transform him by itself.

However, this is only to say badly what Plato himself says well. And in the thesis the spotlight is trained exclusively on him. No attempt has been made to quote the opinions of scholars on what Plato says about education; but an honest attempt has been made to let Plato speak for himself. No doubt it would have enriched the thesis and given it more authority to quote the great Platonic scholars; but in a short work, every quotation from them would have

meant one less quotation from Plato - and after all, his are the words of genius, his the words of wisdom. Nor must we think that the writings of present-day scholars are more valuable because they apply Plato's theories to the tantalizing and frustrating problems of education in our modern technological society. These contemporary problems are real; but they are not the most basic. The basic problem of education remains and will always remain the same. We are trying to teach human beings how to think. On this question Plato himself is as fresh as tomorrow's sunrise because among all the philosophers of history, Plato had a unique and unparalleled insight into what human nature is, what we mean by thinking, and just how we can teach others this art of arts.

The thesis, then, will endeavour to explain Plato's concept of the teacher's function in bringing about the act of understanding in the pupil. Obviously it will touch upon various vital areas in Plato's philosophy: his theory of knowledge, his theory of man, his ideal state, and his general system of education. Just as obviously, these questions cannot be discussed thoroughly in a work of this scope. Much will have to be supposed; and only that will be explained which has immediate bearing on the central investigation of the thesis. Simply put it is this: what did Plato think a teacher must do to help his pupils understand?

This investigation has a special importance for our day because of two prevalent pedagogical theories. First, there is the theory of indoctrination. This encourages the teacher to bombard the pupil's mind with the principles of a fixed philosophy. The aim is not to elicit a personal act of understanding; but rather to force the pupil by emotional pressure and brutal repetition to accept a rigid congeries of ideas and ideals. The most flagrant instance of this kind of teaching is Communist indoctrination; but there is in our schools an indoctrination in "democracy" which is more perverted and pernicious than we care to admit.

The second theory of teaching maintains that the teacher's function is merely to expose facts before students. This approach seems less insidious than indoctrination; but it is just as false, and so just as dangerous. First of all, it is valid only for the physical sciences; and even there the teacher's personal approach and influence must not, and cannot, be eliminated altogether. Secondly, man is not simply a thinking machine. Besides a mind, he has also a will. To pretend that there is no inter-play between these two faculties in man's quest for knowledge is plainly to deny the facts. Thirdly, man is a social being. He simply cannot do all his thinking by himself. The knowledge and experience of others are legitimate aids in his search for truth. Any man who rejects the philosophical,

scientific and cultural heritage of mankind and relies exclusively on his own experimental findings confines himself to a dark, narrow intellectual dungeon.

The truth about teaching is somewhere in between. The teacher is not an emotional rabble-rouser; nor is he a cold machine impersonally dissecting truths in the presence of his pupils. What, then, is a teacher? How must he help his pupils to learn? That is the question we are asking Plato.

CHAPTER I

THE NECESSITY OF THE DIALECTIC

There is one great danger when we consider the pedagogy of Plato. We don't take his dialectical method seriously. Some find it amusing; some find it annoying; but very few consider it practical or pertinent to modern educational problems. No one but a fool would brush Plato off as a philosopher; but even his admirers under-estimate him as a pedagogue. Perhaps this is because the students of education are so busy pondering and absorbing his teaching about the purpose and the principles of education that they haven't the time to weigh and consider his secondary - but still valuable - contribution to the question of teaching methods. But there is a second and more basic reason why we over-look Plato the pedagogue. We esteem his dialogues as triumphs in artistry, almost as unique examples of philosophical poetry; we are loth to lower them to the status of teacher handbooks. This is unfortunate. Plato surely would rather be praised and appreciated as a pedagogue than as a poet. He would be bitterly disappointed that the dialectical method which he works out so carefully and illustrates so lovingly should be considered a pretty embellishment rather than

as a vital part of his teaching on education.

For, to Plato the dialectic is not a luxury in education; it is a necessity. It is not merely one teaching method; it is the only teaching method. The philosopher and the dialectic are as inseparable as the singer and his song. Just as surely as Plato thought true knowledge the possession only of the philosopher, so he thought the dialectic the philosopher's only method of study and investigation. Dialectic was his art, his only art, and only his.

> Str. And the art of dialectic would be attributed by you only to the philosopher pure and true?
> Theaet. Who but he can be worthy?[1]

The dialectic, then is a tool that every sincere learner must use, and only sincere learners can use. For, the dialectic is not only an instrument that helps us attain knowledge; it is also an instrument that helps us test the validity of the knowledge attained. Consequently, it isn't something that can be used by sophist and philosopher alike. Indeed, it is the dialectic that distinguishes the genuine thinker from the fraud.

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[1] Sophist, 258. All quotations from Plato are taken from B. Jowett's translation, The Dialogues of Plato, 2 vols. (Random House: New York, 1937). In order that readers may have no difficulty in making reference to other editions of Plato's dialogues, the numbers given are those of the standard Stephanus pagination.

A. What is thinking?

This seems extravagant praise of the power and the importance of the dialectic until we consider Plato's explanation of the thinking process. It is simple, even naive. It is given by a philosopher happily ignorant of the torturous intricacies of the epistemological problem. And yet, it is the very simplicity of Plato's description of thinking that makes it so penetrating. Latter-day analyses of the thought-process are complicated and mechanical; consequently the light they shed is diffuse and superficial. Plato's light is well-focussed: it doesn't cover a wide area; but it reaches far. For, to him thinking is nothing but an interior dialectic. When we are groping for understanding, we are quizzing ourselves. We are picking and choosing, accepting and rejecting, fragments of previous experience until we can fit them into a new pattern. We are arguing with ourselves; we are literally talking the thing out; better, we are talking ourselves into a decision, and when we can honestly make the decision - either suddenly or laboriously - then we know.

> Soc. And do you mean by conceiving, the same which I mean?
> Theaet. What is that?
> Soc. I mean the conversation which the soul holds with herself in considering of anything. I speak of what I scarcely understand; but the soul when thinking appears to me to be just talking - asking questions of herself and answering them, affirming and denying. And when

> she has arrived at a decision, either gradually or by a sudden impulse, and has at last agreed, and does not doubt, this is called her opinion. I say, then, that to form an opinion is to speak, and opinion is a word spoken, - I mean to oneself and in silence, not aloud or to another. What think you?
> Theaet. I agree.[2]

If this is Plato's idea of thinking, it is logical that he should insist on the dialectic as the best, indeed the only, way of teaching. For, if thinking is nothing but a kind of silent discussion, then a dialectical discussion is nothing but thinking out loud. And for Plato, first, last and always, the only purpose of teaching is to get others to think.

B. The Essence of the Dialectic

Right here we must avoid a mistake about the dialectic of Plato. We mustn't think of it as a subtle mystique, esoteric, intricate, beyond the grasp of the average intelligence, and suited only to a genius like Plato. Every teacher who wants to develop the reasoning powers of his pupils can use it, and must. Plato admits that it can be used more or less skillfully; but he would maintain that it can be used effectively almost by all. For, essentially, the dialectic is nothing but the art of asking and answering questions: simply that and nothing more. And yet, it is the alpha and the omega of education; because - and this we can hardly repeat often enough - for Plato it means

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[2]Theaetetus, 189-190.

being able to reason, being able to think.

> And surely you would not have the children of your ideal State, whom you are nurturing and educating - if the ideal ever becomes a reality - you would not allow the future rulers to be like posts, having no reason in them, and yet be set in authority over the highest matters?
>
> Certainly not.
>
> Then you will make a law that they shall have an education as will enable them to attain the greatest skill in asking and answering questions?
>
> Yes, he said, you and I together will make it.
>
> Dialectic, then, as you will agree, is the coping-stone of the sciences, and is set over them, no other science can be placed higher - the nature of knowledge can go no further?
>
> I agree, he said.[3] (Italics mine)

We are in no danger of over-emphasizing the importance of the dialectic. The danger is all the other way. We arch our eyebrows a bit when Plato says boldly, "Dialectic . . . is the coping-stone of the sciences, . . . no other science can be placed higher;" and we wonder if he can possibly mean precisely what he says. As we shall see, he does. Obviously dialectic is an art; it cannot be done haphazardly; there is a right and a wrong way; it isn't magic. However, at this point, the thing to remember is simply that asking questions and giving answers is the corner-stone of Plato's pedagogical theory. Miss that, and his whole teaching structure tumbles down, and becomes a rubble of meaningless asides. If we asked Plato how to teach our students how to reason, how to come to genuine knowledge, he would give an answer both simple and profound.

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[3]Republic, 534.

Make them dialecticians; make them philosophers.

Soc. And this is he who knows how to ask questions?
Her. Yes.
Soc. And how to answer them?
Her. Yes.
Soc. And him who knows how to ask and answer you would call a dialectician?
Her. Yes; that would be his name.[4]

The unfortunate thing is that this answer is so simple we can't quite credit it; and so profound that few have the patience to ponder just what Plato means.

Before launching into the deeper implications of Plato's theory, we must fix a few fundamental facts in our minds. First of all, we should note that Plato doesn't say simply: teach students how to answer questions. Regrettably, today our schools pledged (perhaps unavoidably) to the examination system evaluate pupils almost exclusively on their ability at answering questions. For Plato the far most important thing was the asking. The student who can ask the right question about a subject, and more important the right series of questions, knows the subject better than the man who can fire back the answers once the questions have been given. For, what guides the process of learning is the questioning.

First of all, the questions must start from the known and move gently into the unknown. Plato's dialectics in the dialogues are skillful and striking illustrations of this process. Plato realized that new knowledge must grow out of

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[4]Cratylus, 390.

old, like new shoots growing out of the sturdy branch. If there is no organic connection between past and present knowledge, then what is new will be accepted from authority and not from reason. For, it is only when the teacher has united what the pupils knows with what he doesn't know that his is "in a condition to understand".[5] This, then, is the starting point of all questioning.

> I should reply . . . in the dialectician's vein; that is to say, I should not only speak the truth, but I should make use of premisses which the person interrogated would be willing to admit. And this is the way in which I shall endeavour to approach you.[6]

The opening questions in a discussion are vital. They distinguish the teacher from the indoctrinator. Using previously comprehended premisses, the teacher tries to bring the pupil to a new act of understanding; whereas the indoctrinator is satisfied with a blind assent and does not insist on an intelligent conviction.

The second basic characteristic of the dialectic is that it does not proceed aimlessly; it has a form, almost a format. There is a definite order, or pattern, to the dialectic, which is determined, as we shall see, by the order or pattern of reality. Not following this order is the cause of error. Instead of proceeding step by step, the learner often tries to jump to conclusions - and often he over-leaps or under-leaps the mark. The teacher's

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[5]Meno, 76.

[6]Ibid., 75.

function is to guide the pupil not only in the right direction, but at the right pace. When Meno's slave-boy begins guessing and falls into error, Socrates sets things aright not by correcting him, but by questioning him properly, so that "he recalls the steps in regular order".[7] Even after one experience of the dialectic on one small question, the boy makes startling progress. Still Socrates points out to Meno that because he hasn't the habit of dialectic his notions are vague, and he answers "in a dream; but if he were frequently asked the same questions, in different forms, he would know as well as any one at last".[8] (Italics Mine)

Students, then, are to be taught so to ask questions that they enter into problems logically, progressively and penetratingly. Immediately, of course, the objection will be raised that the student who does not know what the answer to a particular problem will eventually be can hardly be expected to know what questions will lead up to the answer. But this is wrong. Indeed Socrates himself was often accused of insincerity because his listeners misunderstood this point. Socrates maintained stubbornly that he himself was only an enquirer and did not know the solution to the problems that so occupied and vexed his mind. And yet, he made a sharp distinction between not knowing the answer and not knowing the questions that would lead to it.

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[7] Ibid., 82.

[8] Ibid.

Socrates didn't know precisely where he was going and yet he did know the way to get there. That for Socrates was the magic of the dialectic. It wasn't like a particular map that showed the way through the maze of one intellectual puzzle; it was rather like a compass, always guiding and orientating the mind whenever it got lost in the tangled jungles of reality.

Here then we have the two typical, and essential, traits of every dialectical investigation. First it starts from where the pupil is; and second it points him in the right direction and steadies him there. Questions and answers are a necessary part of the process. At the beginning they tell the teacher just where the pupil is on any given intellectual investigation; and during the process, they are like the mechanical rabbit that eggs the hunting mind on and keeps it on the track. Always remembering these two main divisions in the dialectic, we can now proceed to investigate just what it entails in practise and in detail.

CHAPTER II

THE DIALECTICAL GROUNDWORK

One of the current educational platitudes is that we must educate the whole man. The trouble is that this is usually interpreted to mean that we must burden schools and colleges with giving physical training, social adjustment, emotional maturity and vocational guidance. We have so compartmentalized education that we may indeed be graduating men "of many parts"; but the parts are disjointed, disparate and conflicting. The young graduate is all too often a personality divided against itself. He sees himself and reality as a cluster of fragmentary truths; what he does not see is how the fragments fit together to form a whole. He is like a biology student who examines human eyes in one laboratory, human legs in another, human hearts in another, human brains in another; but he has never had the reassuring, staggering and inspiring vision of a living human body.

Now no one was ever more determined to educate the whole man than Plato. In his Republic and in the Laws, he works out his educational system down to the least details; but Plato never forgot that there was a hierarchy to it all. Everything in the whole scheme had to work to the same

purpose: to teach the pupils how to be human; and for Plato being human meant being able to think - not in the narrow, modern sense of being able to carry on logical, abstract speculations; but in that more vital, Platonic sense of so seeing the truth that we embrace it with our whole being and live it. Plato makes virtue and knowledge into heavenly twins; and he won't suffer them to be separated. He sets up a mutual causality between the two: without virtue, we cannot hope to know; and without knowledge, we cannot hope to be virtuous. Plato, who has been so often reproached for setting up an exaggerated duality between the body and the soul of man, insists nevertheless on a very tight unity within the soul itself.

In Plato's pedagogical thought, certainly, man is always considered as a whole. He is not a thinking machine; but a living personality - subject to the humiliating limitations of the senses, tugged at by the desires of pleasures, riches, power. The mind is not free to live its own life, go its own way unhampered and undisturbed. It must learn to cope with the forces and influences that would hinder its proper functioning. In order for a man to be able to think, the thinking power within him must subordinate all other powers to itself. Man's mind must either be the master that rules, or the slave that serves; what it can never hope to be - in this existence at least - is independent and isolated. This fact influences the whole learning process; for the

intellect does not operate alone, it is hindered or helped by everything else that a man is. And when we study Plato's pedagogical procedure, we see that he does not begin so much by exercising the mind in thinking, as by disentangling the mind from the chains and shackles that make it impossible for it to think at all.

The first, and in some ways the worst, chain is the desire for pleasure coupled with the fear of pain.

> Excessive pains and pleasures are justly to be regarded as the greatest diseases to which the soul is liable. For a man who is in great joy or pain, in his unseasonable eagerness to attain the one and to avoid the other, is not able to see or to hear anything rightly; but he is mad, and is at the time utterly incapable of any participation in reason.[1]

This enslavement to pleasure certainly makes thinking impossible; and yet, in a sense, it is not the most galling or the strongest of the chains imprisioning the mind. For, pleasure - passion - is a periodic thing. As Plato says, "at the time" of its sway, it drives out the reasoning power; but except in the hopelessly depraved, its sway is not complete or permanent. Another fact that diminishes the viciousness of pleasure in its attack upon thought is our awareness of its presence. In times of emotional upheaval, we realize how impossible it is to think straight; and so, we proceed with caution, we are on our guard against error. There is, however, a far more insidious enemy of the mind than pleasure, one far more dangerous because unknown, an imposter enjoying

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[1]Timaeus, 86.

the confidence of the mind and making it impossible for the mind to conquer truth because it has an enemy within.

A. The Arch-enemy: the Conceit of Wisdom

Many people know no more about Socrates, Plato's perfect teacher, than that he was killed because he had the obnoxious habit of asking awkward questions that showed up people's ignorance. This isn't much to know; and yet, it contains the most important ingredient in Plato's pedagogy. The first essential step in the search for knowledge is to distinguish truth from falsehood, wisdom from ignorance. The only person who cannot learn is the one who thinks he already knows. This observation produced the Socratic method, was the secret of his success and the cause of his tragedy.

> Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom. . . . When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and still wiser by himself; and thereupon I tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me.[2]

Not being a fool, Socrates realized from the beginning that this teaching approach would rouse enmity and resentment; but also, not being a fool, he knew that it was a price he had to pay if he was ever to be a genuine teacher and guide others to truth. For, Socrates had discovered that the first problem a teacher has to face is not the empty mind, but the

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[2]Apology, 21.

full mind. A vacant mind is open to the truth; it is the occupied mind that has no room for it. Lack of knowledge is no hinderance to learning; but the presence of falsehood is. This is the ignorance Socrates made war on because it possessed the mind and resisted truth.

> And is not ignorance the having a false opinion and being deceived about important matters?
> To this . . . they unanimously assented.[3]

This is the ignorance that is evil; for it destroys all love of wisdom. There is a world of difference between it and the simple lack of knowledge. The person who merely does not know may still love wisdom; but the person who thinks he knows has fallen in love with a lie, and his mind becomes evil. And those cannot

> be lovers of wisdom who are ignorant to the extent of being evil, for no evil or ignorant person is a lover of wisdom. There remain those who have the misfortune to be ignorant, but are not yet hardened in their ignorance, or void of understanding, and do not as yet fancy that they know what they do not know.[4] (Italics mine)

This kind of ignorance kills, along with love, any desire for wisdom; and when that dies all hope of learning dies with it. That is why fancied knowledge is so evil, and why it must first be removed if the pupil is ever going to be brought to the discovery of truth.

> Neither do the ignorant seek after wisdom. For herein is the evil or ignorance, that he who is neither good nor wise is nevertheless satisfied with himself: he

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[3]Protagoras, 358.

[4]Lysis, 218.

has no desire for that of which he feels no want.[5]

This ignorance that destroys desire becomes a bogus satisfaction of man's wants. It destroys his dynamism and his destiny, which is to become "like God, as far as possible: and to become like him, is to become holy, just, and wise".[6] Consequently, the man who fancies that he knows surrenders himself to a certain hypocrisy of the mind; he fawns on falsehood as if it were truth. He wraps himself up in a cocoon of seeming, of pretence in which he cannot - because he will not - see the truth.

> But, O my friend, you cannot easily convince mankind that they should pursue virtue and avoid vice, not merely in order that a man may seem to be good, which is the reason given by the world, and in my judgment is only a repetition of an old wives' fable. Whereas, the truth is that God is never in any way unrighteous - he is perfect righteousness; and he of us who is the most righteous is most like him. Herein is seen the true cleverness of a man, and also his nothingness and want of manhood. For to know this is true wisdom and virtue, and ignorance of this is manifest folly and vice. All other kinds of wisdom or cleverness, which seem only, such as the wisdom of politicians, or the wisdom of the arts, are coarse and vulgar. The unrighteous man, or the sayer and doer of unholy things, had far better not be encouraged in the illusion that his roguery is clever; for men glory in their shame - they fancy that they hear others saying of them, 'These are not mere good-for-nothing persons, mere burdens of the earth, but such as men should be who mean to dwell safely in a state'. Let us tell them that they are all the more truly what they do not think they are because they do not know it.[7] (Italics mine)

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[5]Symposium, 204.

[6]Theaetetus, 176.

[7]Ibid.

It is not that Socrates has no respect for the "wisdom of politicans, or the wisdom of the arts". The trouble is that politicians and artisans do not know the limitations of their knowledge. Because they know painting or poetry or politics, they fancy they know everything: and this false knowledge vitiates the value even of the knowledge they have.

> At last I went to the artisans, for I was conscious that I knew nothing at all, as I may say, and I was sure that they knew many fine things; and here I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets; - because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom.[8]

Socrates was incensed against this kind of ignorance precisely because it is so insidious. He lived in constant fear of it himself, knowing how it made enquiry impossible.

> You are falling into the old error, Socrates, he said, . . . trying to refute me, instead of pursuing the argument.
>
> And what if I am? How can you think that I have any other motive in refuting you but what I should have in examining into myself? Which motive would be just a fear of my unconsciously fancying that I knew something of which I was ignorant. And at this moment I pursue the argument chiefly for my own sake, and perhaps in some degree also for the sake of my other friends. For is not the discovery of things as they truly are, a good common to all mankind?[9] (Italics mine)

And just as this ignorance is dangerous not only intellectually, but also morally; so it is dangerous not

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[8]Apology, 22.

[9]Timaeus, 86.

only for the individual, but also for the state. All these things are intertwined inextricably in Plato. In the dialogue Charmides, he discusses the problem of this ignorance in all its varied ramifications. There he poses a question which is central and vital not only for his method of teaching, but also for its purpose.

> And this is wisdom and temperance and self-knowledge - for a man to know what he knows, and what he does not know. That is your meaning?
> Yes, he said.[10]

Tantalizingly, Plato never quite endorses this opinion himself. He leaves the relationship between wisdom and temperance vague and undecided; but he clearly shows how he longs for the identification of them by Critias to be true. For, he can visualize how simple life would be, how orderly the state if men only knew what they knew and what they did not know. He allows Socrates to dream.

> The dream is this: Let us suppose that wisdom is such as we are now defining, and that she has absolute sway over us; then each action will be done according to the arts or sciences, and no one professing to be a pilot when he is not, or any physician or general, or any one else pretending to know matters of which he is ignorant, will deceive or delude us. . . . Now, I quite agree that mankind, thus provided, would live and act according to knowledge, for wisdom would watch and prevent ignorance from intruding on us.[11] (Italics mine)

Plato maintains, then, that the first step in teaching is to reveal to the pupil his ignorance. This is the great roadblock on the way to knowledge. In the dialogue

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[10] Ibid., 167

[11] Ibid., 173.

Meno, he illustrates delightfully how this first step is executed.

> Soc. Do you see, Meno, what advances he has made in his power of recollection? He did not know at first, and he does not know now, what is the side of a figure of eight feet; but then he thought he knew, and answered confidently as if he knew, and had no difficulty; now he has a difficulty; and neither knows nor fancies that he knows.[12]

Strangely enough this intellectual humility is not only the beginning of wisdom, but the consummation also. It must be the habitual attitude of the mind. Not that we can never know, but even at best our knowledge is so limited and incomplete and impermanent. We can never rest on our laurels. The truth we have discovered and fully explored is like our earth, vast and varied and beautiful; but compared to the universe still to be explored, it is nothing but a speck of sand. The man who is satisfied, prides himself on what he knows not realizing how insignificant, how infinitesimal it is, only betrays in his conceit that in the last analysis he knows nothing at all. Quite different was the boast of Socrates, the genuinely wise.

> Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is - for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know.[13]

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[12]Meno, 84.

[13]Apology, 21.

B. The Mind's Best Weapon: The Dialectic

It is only when we realize that this ignorance possesses and controls the mind that we can appreciate Plato's obsession with its removal. In the minds of those who think they are wise, falsehood acts like a clever, calculating lawyer, who can twist and distort the wise words of a teacher until they sound like foolishness. Until this ignorance is removed, then, no teacher can help his pupils; for if he tries to warn them of the dangerous effects of their perverse stupidity, "when they hear this they in their superior cunning will seem to be listening to the talk of idiots."[14] (Italics mine)

It is in the Sophist that Plato explains why the dialectic is the most effective, and indeed the only, weapon capable of destroying this perverseness of mind. There he says that this ignorance is a vice in the soul, a deformity. "And is deformity anything but the want of measure, which is always unsightly?"[15] It causes the soul to be continually off balance, so that it misses its aim in action. It is in a sense involuntary, because no one consciously clings to ignorance just as no one would act evilly, if he were really aware of the evil.

He explains that any kind of ignorance is "the aberration of a mind bent on truth, and in which the process

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[14]Theaetetus, 176

[15]Sophist, 228.

of understanding is perverted".[16] Any kind of ignorance must be counter-acted by instruction, just as deformity in the body is counter-acted by gymnastic exercise. For most kinds of ignorance this is a simple process. The ignorance of technical skills, or of special branches of science, can be easily removed by instruction. As a matter of fact, it is on this point that Plato makes his distinction between instruction and education. Learning the arts and crafts, even music and mathematics, requires only instruction and can be entrusted to anyone who has this "mean and vulgar"[17] wisdom. It is perhaps to Plato's discredit and lack of vision that he was satisfied with the type of teacher of his day for all the preparatory subjects of his curriculum. It was otherwise for the summit subject of his curriculum, the dialectic. Here no mere instructor would do; what was needed was the true educator, the true teacher.

And the reason was because he would have to contend with ignorance of quite another sort, "one very large and bad sort of ignorance which is quite separate, and may be weighed in the scale against all other sorts of ignorance put together."[18] This, as we might suspect, is that ignorance by which "a person supposes that he knows what he does not know".[19] And for

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Symposium, 203.

[18] Sophist, 229.

[19] Ibid.

Plato, this is the "great source of all the errors of the intellect".[20]

The teacher may attack this kind of ignorance in one of two ways. He may try the method of admonition. For example, he may either roughly reprove his pupil; or he may gently advise him. However, against this ignorance, admonition - rough or gentle - is ineffectual because the pupil thinks he knows better. We can reprove or admonish as much as we like, "no one who thinks himself wise is willing to learn any of those things in which he is conscious of his own cleverness".[21]

In order, then, "to eradicate the spirit of conceit"[22] the teacher must use another method, the method of refutation, the dialectic. This works because by shrewd questioning the teacher gets the pupil to condemn himself out of his own mouth. Only when pupils have themselves repudiated what is false, will they willingly open their minds to what is true. And that is why teachers have to begin this way.

> They cross-examine a man's words, when he thinks that he is saying something and is really saying nothing, and easily convict him of inconsistencies in his opinions; these they then collect by the dialectical process, and placing them side by side, show that they contradict one another about the same things, in relation to the same things, and in the same respect. He, seeing this, is angry with himself, and grows gentle towards others,

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 230.

[22] Ibid.

> and thus is entirely delivered from great prejudices and harsh notions, in a way which is most amusing to the hearer, and produces the most lasting good effect on the person who is the subject of the operation.[23]

Finally, as so often, Plato puts his whole doctrine on this problem of ignorance as a mental block into a vivid simile.

> For as the physician considers that the body will receive no benefit from taking food until the internal obstacles have been removed, so the purifier of the soul is conscious that his patient will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge until he is refuted, and from refutation learns modesty; he must be purged of his prejudices first and made to think that he knows only what he knows, and no more. . . . For all these reasons, Theaetetus, we must admit that refutation is the greatest and chiefest of purifications, and he who has not been refuted, though he be the Great King himself, is in an awful state of impurity; he is uninstructed and deformed in those things in which he who would be truly blessed ought to be fairest and purest.[24]

We will have noticed, if we have read Plato's words carefully, that this ignorance is not something we can be indifferent to, because it is concerned not with the knowledge of things which we may or may not know according as our tastes and fancy guide us; but it is concerned with the knowledge of things which we ought to know. Indeed, this ignorance doesn't so much corrupt facts as it corrupts the mind itself. And we would make a disastrous mistake if we thought this kind of ignorance an uncommon thing. Of all kinds of ignorance, it is the commonest; and since it makes

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

learning impossible, it is the reason why of all kinds of men, the rarest is the wise.

> And yet surely by far the greatest number err about the goods of the mind; they imagine themselves to be much better than they are. . . . And of all the virtues, is not wisdom the one which the mass of mankind are always claiming, and which most arouses in them a spirit of contention and lying conceit of wisdom? . . . And may not all this be truly called an evil condition?[25]

Consequently, a teacher should be convinced that he has accomplished nothing if he has left his pupil in this ignorance, in this conceit of wisdom; and on the other hand, he has already done a great deal, if at the end of a discussion he has been able to show his pupil what he does not know. Indeed, Socrates thought that doing this alone was the highest accomplishment of the teaching art.

> But if, Theaetetus, you should ever conceive afresh, you will be all the better for the present investigation, and if not, you will be soberer and humbler and gentler to other men, and will be too modest to fancy that you know what you do not know. These are the limits of my art.[26]

C. Injecting the Healthy Doubt

However, we must not think that even the first part of the dialectic has only a negative result. It has really a double effect. It not only drives from the mind the pretence of knowledge; it also sets up in the mind a vacuum that requires filling. Plato conceives the mind as having a certain desire, a certain longing for truth. It is

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[25]Philebus, 49.

[26]Theaetetus, 210.

driven by an inner compulsion to know, just as the body is driven by an appetite for food. And that, of course, is the special evil of false knowledge: it takes away the mind's pangs of hunger without offering it any genuine nourishment. Quite definitely Plato would not be interested in bringing about this emptiness of mind unless he knew that the mind could not endure such emptiness. That is why he was always so insistent that those were blessed who realized their ignorance.

> Is he not better off in knowing his ignorance? . . . If we have made him doubt, and given him the 'torpedo's shock', have we done him any harm? . . . We have certainly, as would seem, assisted him in some degree to the discovery of the truth; and now he will wish to remedy his ignorance, but then he would have been ready to tell all the world again and again that the double space should have a double side. . . . But do you suppose that he would ever have enquired into or learned what he fancied that he knew, though he was really ignorant of it, until he had fallen into perplexity under the idea that he did not know, and had desire to know.[27]

This is a rather important point in the understanding of Plato's pedagogy. Plato does think the teacher should instil a doubt in his pupil's mind. Indeed, Socrates was best known for this; and because his purpose was misunderstood, he was accused and condemned of corrupting the youth.

> O Socrates, I used to be told, before I knew you, that you were always doubting yourself and making others doubt; and now you are casting your spells over me, and I am simply getting bewitched and enchanted, and am at my wits' end.[28]

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[27]Meno, 82.

[28]Ibid., 80.

By questioning then, Socrates aroused a certain doubt in the mind, a perplexity, a sense of confusion and uncertainty. This he conceived as the first, and necessary, re-action to be provoked in the pupil's mind. When he "cannot shake off a feeling of anxiety"[29] about his knowledge, when he is "full of perplexity",[30] then we know that the pangs of intellectual labour have begun and the student is in the process of bringing forth a new conception. It is this very power to perplex the mind that makes subjects worthy of serious study. For example, mathematics is an apt preparation for philosophy, for the dialectic, simply because it perplexes the mind, "thought begins to be aroused within us, and the soul perplexed and wanting to arrive at a decision asks 'What is absolute unity?'"[31] Once questioning begins, learning begins. Socrates, then, has a very positive purpose in arousing doubt. The very function of the teacher's "external" dialectic with the pupil is to set in motion the pupil's own "internal" dialectic by which he begins questioning himself - and that for Socrates is to begin thinking.

> I am ready to go on, Socrates; and yet I am unused to investigations of this sort. But the spirit of controversy has been aroused in me by what has been said; and I am really grieved at being thus unable to express my meaning. For I fancy that I do know the nature of courage; but, somehow or other, she has slipped away from me, and I

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[29] Theaetetus, 148.

[30] Ibid., 150.

[31] Republic, 524.

cannot get hold of her and tell her nature.[32]

For Socrates, then, doubt was the birth pangs of truth; and so, even though it was painful, it was the great hope of the mind. For the officials of Athens, however, doubt was rather the death blow to truth and a danger to the state; and so they killed Socrates for causing it.

D. The Danger of the Diseased Doubt

Among all the strange, bitter ironies of history must always be included the execution of Socrates. He was killed as a sophist; and yet he was among the very few who really understood the danger of sophism and dedicated his energy and his genius to destroying it. Socrates resembled the sophists very superficially - about as much as a sleeping man resembles a corpse. The difference between them was deep and fundamental. True, Socrates like the Sophists questioned established ideas, customs, opinions. Like them, he stirred up doubts in the minds of the young; but there the resemblance ceases. For Socrates never wanted his pupils to doubt that truth existed; he wanted them to doubt only their own grasp of the truth. It was quite otherwise for the Sophists. The doubt they injected was like a cancer in the mind which ate into the entrails of truth itself. They called into question the very existence of absolute truth. They turned it into something changeable, something ephemeral,

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[32]Laches, 194.

into something that was hardly more than a personal whim. Reality was what you made it. They carried on their verbal gyrations and their intellectual ballet for amusement rather than for learning. They were interested, not in discovering a truth which did not exist, but in winning arguments for praise and adulation - and for a fixed salary as Socrates so often sneeringly remarked. They attracted pupils by convincing them that the greatest instrument of power and influence in the state was a nimble wit. Socrates hated them and their doctrine with a deep and abiding hatred. To him truth was an absolute, beautiful reality; it was necessary, too, for the happiness of man and the perfection of the state. To doubt that truth existed was for Socrates sheer blasphemy. All the dialogues are hymns praising the unchangeableness, the loftiness of truth. It seems then, incredible that Socrates of all men should have been condemned to death, accused of attacking and destroying the thing he loved.

It is in the dialogue Theaetetus that Plato attacks the basic tenet of Sophism. They had adopted as their own the axiom of Protagoras: "Man is the measure of all things". Plato piles objection upon objection against this principle. His main attack, however, he launches against its impracticability. Destroy the absoluteness, the permanency of truth and you make rational action impossible. For, Plato's philosophy never lets us stray far from the practical

problem of living worthily and reasonably. What a man feels today, he does not feel tomorrow; his personal preferences cannot discover a unity or a pattern in things; his daily experiences cannot project the future because they cannot penetrate to the unchanging essences deep down in reality. In a true sense, Plato condemns this fundamental principle of the Sophists simply because it will not work. He himself cannot conceive a philosophy that does not work itself out in practise; and obviously no one but a fool would try to live Sophism to the hilt. He brings the principle into the arena of practical life and disproves it by showing that mankind lives the opposite.

> Soc. Suppose now, that we ask Protagoras, or one of his disciples a question: - O, Protagoras, we will say to him, Man is, as you declare, the measure of all things - white, heavy, light: of all such things he is the judge; for he has the criterion of them in himself, and when he thinks that things are such as he experiences them to be, he thinks what is and is true to himself. Is it not so?
> Theod. Yes.
> Soc. And do you extend your doctrine, Protagoras (as we shall further say), to the future as well as to the present; and has he the criterion not only of what in his opinion is but of what will be, and do things always happen to him as he expected? For example, take the case of heat: - When an ordinary man thinks that he is going to have a fever, and that this kind of heat is coming on, and another person, who is a physician, thinks the contrary, whose opinion is likely to prove right? Or are they both right? - he will have a heat and fever in his own judgment, and not have a fever in the physician's judgment?
> Theod. How ludicrous. . . . That is the best refutation of him, Socrates; although he is also caught when he ascribes truth to the opinions of others, who give the lie direct to his opinion.
> Soc. There are many ways, Theodorous, in which the doctrine that every opinion of every man is true may be refuted.[33]

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[33]Theaetetus, 178-179.

The whole purpose, then, of Plato's dialectic was not to cast doubt upon truth; but rather to unmask all fradulent, superficial opinions parading as truth. For truth was not something which we conjured up out of our mind, not something we fashioned to our own image and likeness; but something which existed apart, real, objective - and essential. "For is not the discovery of things as they truly are, a good common to all mankind?"[34]

And for Plato this good was not an abstract thing; it touched every facet of man's life, both as an individual and as a citizen. If truth was independent of man's mind, if it existed unchangeable and apart, then man's mind had to submit to it. And since reality would certainly not conform itself to man's mind, man had only one choice left: he had to conform to reality. And here Socrates agreed with those who condemned him. Any man who questioned the absoluteness of truth was also questioning the absoluteness of morality. He was truly worthy of death, because when the Sophist plied the dagger of doubt to stab truth, at the same time he stabbed the state. For if in the realm of truth every man was a law unto himself, so was he a law unto himself in the realm of morality; and no state can survive when every citizen is king. Here, then, was the choice: either both truth and morality were absolute, or they were both relative - and man's mind was meaningless, and so was life.

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[34]Charmides, 166.

Soc. But if . . . things are not relative to individuals, and all things do not equally belong to all at the same moment and always, they must be supposed to have their own proper and permanent essence; they are not in relation to us, or influenced by us, fluctuating according to our fancy, but they are independent, and maintain to their own essence the relation prescribed by nature.
Her. I think, Socrates, that you have said the truth.
Soc. Does what I am saying apply only to the things themselves, or equally to the actions which proceed from them? Are not actions also a class of being?
Her. Yes, the actions are real as well as the things.
Soc. Then the actions also are done according to their proper nature, and not according to our opinion of them?
Her. I should say that the natural way is the right way. . . .
Soc. And this holds good of all actions?
Her. Yes.[35]

It is interesting to note how this central conviction of Plato works itself out in all the particulars of his educational system. Nothing is arbitrary. Everything must conform to the one, perfect ideal. Each subject taught to youth then must pass this test. For subjects are true or false according as they measure up to their absolute form - and for Plato, it is good to remember, that true and false shade imperceptibly into good and evil. This explains why Plato seems so authoritative when determining the curriculum. Actually he is only being logical: he asserts that there is only one objective norm for all subjects. It would be sheer folly then to choose them haphazardly, to be satisfied with either this one or that as if they were all equally good.

Then, now as would appear, we are making the discovery that our newly-appointed choristers, whom we hereby invite and, although they are their own masters, compel to sing, must be educated to such an extent as to be able to follow

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[35]Cratylus, 386-387.

> the steps of the rhythm and the notes of the song, that they may know the harmonies and rhythms, and be able to select what are suitable for men of their age and character to sing; and may sing them, and have innocent pleasure from their own performance, and also lead younger men to welcome with dutiful delight good dispositions. Having such training, they will attain a more accurate knowledge than falls to the lot of common people, or even of the poets themselves. For the poet need not know the third point, viz., whether the imitation is good or not, though he can hardly help knowing the laws of melody and rhythm. But the aged chorus must know all the three, that they may choose the best, and that which is nearest to the best; for otherwise they will never be able to charm the souls of young men in the way of virtue.[36]

Plato, then, not only believed in the objectivity of truth, but as we can see from the passage above - a good sample of dozens of similar passages - he believed almost too vigorously in the mind's power of attaining this truth. Of course, when the Sophists threw absolute truth out the window, the power of the mind to attain that truth went with it. Little point in having a mind that can grasp truth, if there is no truth to grasp. Consequently for them enquiry had only a practical, day-to-day purpose, whereas for Plato it was the enduring purpose of life. Indeed, the ability of the mind to know truth was something worth even dying for.

> Sog. . . . Somethings I have said of which I am not altogether confident. But that we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to enquire, than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know; - that is a theme

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[36]Laws, 670.

> upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power.[37]

Plato is very vehement on this point. Indeed, when the question, Can the mind know? is put to him, he throws it out of court unexamined. Was this because of an exaggerated simplicity that could not understand the one question that has tortured most modern philosophers? Or can we detect in Plato's brusk, passionate answer a certain whistling in the dark? Was Plato so positive about the mind's power to know; or was he afraid even to raise the question, because he realized what a darkness of doubt it would plunge him into?

> Let us then in the first place, he said, be careful of allowing or admitting into our souls the notion that there is no health or soundness in any argument at all.[38]

Certainly Plato admitted the obscurity of truth, the difference in the intellectual powers of individuals, the difficulty of rising above our own darling illusions. He does not minimize the problem of the learner; but he does insist on a simplicity and sincerity in our approach to knowledge. He demands that we trust in our minds and enquire after truth with confidence.

> But I do not know that we are going beyond the truth. Doubtless, as he (Protagoras) is older, he may be expected to be wiser than we are. And if he could only just get his head out of the world below, he would have overthrown both us again and again, me for talking nonsense and you for assenting to me,

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[37] Meno, 85.

[38] Phaedo, 91.

> and have been off and underground in a trice. But as he is not within call, we must make the best use of our own faculties, such as they are, and speak out what appears to us to be true. And one thing which no one will deny is, that there are great differences in the understandings of men.[39]

To summarize, then, we can see a marked distinction between the doubt praised and advocated in Plato's pedagogy and the doubt of the Sophists. Plato questions neither the existence of the truth, nor the mind's power to comprehend it; he questions only the individual's grasp of that truth. He makes it the beginning of his teaching process, because he is convinced that the mind cannot learn as long as it thinks it knows. His doubt, then, is functional: it gets the mind in motion; whereas the doubt instilled by Sophism paralyzes the mind and must therefore be shunned like a plague.

> And therefore we ought not to listen to this sophistical argument about the impossibility of enquiry: for it will make us idle, and is sweet only to the sluggard; but the other saying will make us active and inquisitive. In that confiding, I will gladly enquire with you into the nature of virtue.[40]

To Plato Socratic doubt is not at all the evil companion of scepticism; but the handmaid of wisdom and the servant of truth; for "the wise are doubtful, and I should not be singular if, like them, I too doubted".[41]

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[39]Theaetetus, 171.

[40]Meno, 81.

[41]Phaedrus, 229.

E. The Problem of the Intellect's Declaration of Independence

Even though Plato's intentions when arousing doubt in his pupils' minds were good, even though he felt this kind of doubt necessary for any learner; still he was shrewd and sincere enough to admit that this doubt was a dangerous pedagogical weapon. The dialectic was like a dynamite blast in the mind. If used skillfully, it could split the rocks of error, up-root the trees of prejudice, which obstruct any new extension of man's intellectual edifice. If used clumsily, it could destroy whatever structure of knowledge a man might have built up; and indeed it could undermine the foundations of the intellect itself. Either way the teacher must realize that the dialectic means a shock for the mind, an intellectual upheaval, and "great caution is required"[42] when introducing its use.

What happened to Plato's students when they began the dialectic thousands of years ago, happens almost universally to any college student today; that is, to any college student, who is not merely hunting a degree, but is trying sincerely to come to grips with truth, life and himself. One reason this happens is because the first serious intellectual discussion, which must necessarily be at least a shadow of Plato's dialectic, effects the student like champagne. It

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[42]Republic, 537.

goes right to his head. Suddenly he realizes that truth is exhilarating, that it is alive, that it effects him, has a profound influence on everything he will ever do or be. He suddenly realizes that knowledge doesn't consist in neatly packaged ideas in the chapters and paragraphs of text books; it is something vital, something growing, something extraordinarily personal: a rendez-vous between himself and all the realities of life. Consequently, learning is no longer merely passive, no longer a mere nodding of the head; but learning becomes intensely active, something in which he is really involved, something that matters, something in which he has a say.

> Any young man, when he first tastes these subtleties, is delighted, and fancies that he has found a treasure of wisdom; in the first enthusiasm of his joy he leaves no stone, or rather no thought unturned, now rolling up the many into the one, and kneading them together, now unfolding and dividing them; he puzzles himself first and above all, and then he proceeds to puzzle his neighbours, whether they are older or younger, or of his own age - that makes no difference; neither father nor mother does he spare; no human being who has ears is safe from him, hardly even his dog, and a barbarian would have no chance of escaping him, if an interpreter could only be found.[43]

> And when they have made many conquests and received defeats at the hands of many, they violently and speedily get into a way of not believing anything which they believed before, and hence, not only they, but philosophy and all that relates to it is apt to have a bad name with the rest of the world.[44]

Anyone who has spent some hours in a college smoker,

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[43]Philebus, 15.

[44]Republic, 539.

appreciates the truth and the accuracy of Plato's diagnosis. Discussion begins as an exhilarating novelty and ends up as a cynical sport with many college students. They become very deft at intellectual swordplay; but they do not realize how dangerous a game it is they are playing, and how deeply the sword's point can enter in to kill or maim their minds. For what is really happening? What takes place when a boy's mind begins to change into a man's mind, when someone begins to pass from intellectual childhood to intellectual maturity? What happens when a student ceases accepting the truth obediently, and begins discussing the truth curiously? This is the birth of the dialectic, the birth of real thinking; for the mind is re-acting: it is asking, why?

> Now, when a man is in this state, and the questioning spirit asks what is fair or honourable, and he answers as the legislator has taught him, and then arguments many and diverse refute his words, until he is driven into believing that nothing is honourable any more than dishonourable, or just and good any more than the reverse, and so of all the notions which he most values, do you think that he will still honour and obey them as before?[45]

The problem here is that the maturing student suddenly discovers that the truths which he has always accepted unquestioningly are being questioned. And - to his surprise and dismay - he has no answers. He has always admitted them on the authority of others; and now he discovers that the authority of others is little help in an argument - most of all in an argument with himself. Like

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[45] Ibid., 538.

a little child, he has been toddling along the intellectual byways with his fingers snugly anchored in his mother's hand; and then, of a sudden, he realizes that if he wants to get anywhere, he has to walk on his own. Naturally his first solitary steps lead to many a tumble, because in a real sense he has to learn how to walk all over again.

It is an impossible to avoid this problem as it is impossible to avoid the problem of growing up. Just as there is physical and emotional turmoil when the body matures, so there is intellectual turmoil when the mind matures. The problem in itself is difficult enough; but we must remember that it takes place not in a detached, isolated intellect, but in a complex personality. And the truths, accepted up to now on authority, are not vague abstractions that do not touch the student's daily living; they are the truths that motivate and guide his actions. Consequently, when truth is discredited, so is virtue; because they depend so completely on each other.

Even this would not be so dangerous and disastrous if man were influenced by nothing but the true and the good. However, as we all know, there is something else pulling at our personalities with great power and insistence, - pleasure, those "opposite maxims and habits of pleasure which flatter and attract the soul."[46] If the dialectic does nothing but silence the voice of authority, it leaves the soul of the

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[46] Ibid.

student at the mercy of the soft, sweet entreaties and enticements of pleasure. That is why the officials of Athens did have something to worry about when Socrates went around plying his dialectic. No doubt most of his listeners were confused and puzzled; no doubt some grew to condemn and despise the authoritative teaching of the state; no doubt some were really corrupted. Even Plato admits that the "students of the art (of dialectic) are filled with lawlessness".[47] However, this is one of the risks of living. Passing from babyhood to boyhood is dangerous too; but no one would be fool enough to try to stop it. The solution of the problem is not to stunt intellectual growth, but to encourage it - while guarding against and minimizing its dangers.

Plato gives us some sound practical hints. First of all - and most important of all - students must not be allowed to begin philosophizing too early. Plato puts off the day until the young man is thirty, because by then there should be a natural moderation which will help control the exaggerated enthusiasm of youth. By then, too, the careful previous training - outlined in Books II and III of his Republic - will have prepared the pupil for the difficult period of transition. For, although Plato delays the introduction of real education, he does not belittle the importance of early training. As a matter of fact Plato says that any child who has received improper training after the age of ten

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[47] Ibid., 537.

has been ruined irredeemably and could never be turned into a dialectician after that. The purpose of early training, then, is to develop the student's powers of observation and memory, help him acquire skills, accumulate facts, exercise the various mechanical abilities of mind and body. During this period, however, he thinks strictly "under the law", because as Plato insists he is not yet ready to think at all. Here we see how Plato solves his paradox that only the virtuous can learn and only the wise can be virtuous. The virtue that the young student begins his adult intellectual life with is the virtue of submission to the laws of the state. The wisdom he begins with is for him second hand, that is, the wisdom embodied in those laws. From this beachhead, at the right moment of maturity, he can begin his own attack on truth, confident that what up to now he has possessed in virtue of his citizenship in a just state, he will soon possess in virtue of his own personal conquest.

There is one other suggestion which Plato emphasizes in an effort to offset the evil effects of the dialectic. This point, indeed, reveals an inherent fallacy in our whole system of education and would probably have made Plato despair of it. It comes down to this. Once a student enters the door of philosophy, he has to go all the way. Nothing is more disastrous than partial answers; nothing more frustrating than to peek hastily through the keyhole of truth. There has to be a certain doggedness, a certain grim determination

to see the thing through to the bitter end. Plato has no patience with the student who is satisfied with "a fair measure of truth" simply because "a measure of such things which in any degree falls short of the whole truth is not fair measure at all".[48] The student, then, has to be ready for rugged intellectual toil. Plato compares the dialectic to physical wrestling, and admits that it entails "rough exercise"[49] for the mind. That is the reason why the dialectic must not begin too late: it requires too much energy and vigour for the old, "for the mind more often faints from the severity of study than from the severity of gymnastics".[50]

On this point, as on many, Plato shows that he violently disagrees with those who would suggest that all citizens should be given higher education. This is a fallacy that had gained a firm foothold in some modern educational circles. The reason is, of course, that some feel it is incompatible with democracy to give to few what you do not give to all. As a result, highschools and colleges are filled with students who have neither the desire nor the ability to pursue higher studies seriously. In his whole educational plan, Plato insists continually on what for him was an obvious fact: only those who have a natural bent for the dialectic should be encouraged to indulge in it.

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[48] Ibid., 504.

[49] Theaetetus, 164.

[50] Republic, 534.

It is as foolish to allow those intellectually poorly equipped to study philosophy as it is foolish to allow those physically poorly equipped to climb mountains. There are too many risks involved; and as Plato never tires of repeating, those maimed intellectually - like those with the conceit of wisdom - are a menace to the state. Plato's insistence on selection in education is hard to swallow for those who because of flabby thinking see it as a contradiction of the democratic ideal. But Plato is a good man to listen to. On this question, he may not be all right; but certainly he is not all wrong. Much harm is done in our high schools and colleges by filling them with students who have neither the ability nor the desire to learn. This policy can never do them any good, and it can do a lot of harm to those students who have a desire for a deeper, more universal knowledge.

> I dare say that you remember, and therefore I need not remind you, that a lover, if he is worthy of the name, ought to show his love, not to some one part of that which he loves, but to the whole. . . . And may we not say of the philosopher that he is a lover, not of a part of wisdom only, but of the whole? . . . And he who dislikes learning, especially in youth, when he has no power of judging what is good and what is not, such a one we maintain not to be a philosopher or a lover of knowledge, just as he who refuses his food is not hungry, and may be said to have a bad appetite and not a good one?
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> Very true, he said.
>
> Whereas he who has a taste for every sort of knowledge and who is curious to learn and is never satisfied, may be justly termed a philosopher? Am I not right?[51]

There is a second thing that Plato brings up when he talks about the inherent difficulties of the dialectic.

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[51] Ibid., 474.

Since by its nature it would be harmful to stop short of the whole truth, the dialectic requires time: it cannot be rushed. "Most people are not aware that this round-about progress through all things is the only way in which the mind can attain truth and wisdom."[52] And here we immediately think of the cruel dilemma that many teachers, and even University professors, must face because of the machinery of the modern educational system. They are almost forced to be timeservers, to work under pressure, with one eye on school supervisors, or on the prescribed curriculum, or on the coming examinations. Actually because of circumstances beyond their control, modern teachers fit Plato's description of the lawyers of Socrates' time, whom he so thoroughly despised. When teaching their students, they have their minds on a thousand things, except the one thing that matters: the truth.

> Soc. I mean to say, that those who have been trained in philosophy and liberal pursuits are as unlike those who from their youth upwards have been knocking about in the courts and such places, as a freeman is in breeding unlike a slave.
> Theod. In what is the difference seen?
> Soc. In the leisure spoken of by you, which a freeman can always command: he has his talk out in peace, and, like ourselves, he wanders at will from one subject to another, and from a second to a third, - if the fancy takes him, he begins again, as we are doing now, caring not whether his words are many or few; his only aim is to attain the truth. But the lawyer is always in a hurry; there is the water of the clepsydra driving him on, and not allowing him to expatiate at will; and there is his adversary standing over him, enforcing his rights. He is a servant, and is continually disputing about a fellow-servant before his master.[53]

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[52]Parmenides, 130.

[53]Theaetetus, 171.

According to this description of Socrates, today's teachers can hardly be considered free men. Of course in our present day educational setup, this all seems hopelessly impractical. We so often feel that the students must "get on with it". We do not make any distinctions - as Plato so definitely did - between learning skills or other branches of science and learning philosophy. Pressure training in remembering scientific facts can be beneficial; but it is disastrous when trying to assimilate metaphysics. The purpose of philosophy, and the dialectic, is that the pupil may come to understand - and understanding is a personal, slow and often painful process. And it is not really practical, but rather self-delusion and terrible waste if our students pass through the educational system today, get a degree, but never get an intelligent grasp of the truth. Certainly wise pedagogues down the ages have agreed with Plato that to rush students along is often to ruin them. Jacques Maritain, who has surely a respected voice in the forum of education and who is well aware of education's modern problems, insists even more vigorously than Plato that truth takes time and a student must have leisure to learn.

> Other great maxims could be recalled in this connection. The rule of Thomas Aquinas, in his own studies, was "never to leave behind him any difficulty unsolved". "Always make sure," he warned students, "that you actually understand what you read or listen to. . ." [54]

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[54]Jacques Maritain, Education at the Crossroads, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1943), p. 50.

> Before giving a youth the rules of good style, let us tell him first never to write anything which does not seem to him really beautiful, whatever the result may be. In the first approach to mathematics, physics, or philosophy, let us see to it that the student actually grasps each step of the simplest mathematical demonstration, however slow this may be - that he actually understands in the laboratory how logically the statement of the physicist emerges from the experiment - that he becomes intensely involved, through the very anxiety of the mind, in the first great philosophical problems, and after that, that he really sees the solution.[55]

And so, by a long and winding road indeed, we come ourselves to an understanding of why Plato thought the dialectic a necessary instrument of the teacher who wants to bring his student into the realm of true knowledge. First, it removes the main obstacle along the road: his fancied wisdom. Second, it instils a healthy doubt that eggs on the mind to further advance without sidetracking it into scepticism.

We have seen the preliminary work of the dialectic. It prepares the mind for the act of understanding; it makes it ready and free to grasp the truth. Now, we must study the dialectic's main function; we must try to see how the dialectical method helps the mind when it comes to the actual performance of its act of understanding.

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[55] Ibid., 44.

CHAPTER III

THE DIALECTIC: THE CATALYST OF UNDERSTANDING

We have seen that there are delights and dangers, advantages and disadvantages to the use of the dialectic in teaching the young; but as far as Plato is concerned the educator is not free to use it or not to use it. He has no choice, because only the dialectic will train the pupil how to think - and in Plato's opinion, skill in thinking is the only conceivable purpose of the whole educational process. In modern jargon, Plato is a confirmed faculty psychologist. When he applies his dialectical method to any subject, he is not primarily concerned with the subject under discussion itself; his first concern is with the development of the mind's power of reasoning.

> Str. And now that this discussion is completed, let us go on to consider another question, which concerns not this argument only but the conduct of such arguments in general.
> Y.Soc. What is this new question.
> Str. Take the case of a child who is engaged in learning his letters: when he is asked what letters make up a word, should we say that the question is intended to improve his grammatical knowledge of that particular word, or of all words?
> Y.Soc. Clearly, in order that he may have a better knowledge of all words.
> Str. And is our enquiry about the Statesman intended only to improve our knowledge of politics, or our power of reasoning generally.
> Y.Soc. Clearly, as in the former example, the purpose is general.[1]

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[1]Statesman, 285

Through the dialectic, then, the teacher is out "to sharpen the wits of the auditors",[2] to make them "better dialecticians",[3] better thinkers.

And here we must get one point perfectly clear. Plato gives the dialectic a unique value: it is absolutely necessary in the process of education. Nothing can replace it. Even mathematics, highly honoured by Plato and often praised, cannot teach a student how to reason, cannot launch him into the orbit of pure knowledge, above and beyond the pull and the limitations and the confusion of the senses. Students of all other subjects are hindered and hampered by the atmosphere around them, changing things; only the student of the dialectic experiences the glorious freedom of the outer space of knowledge, the realm of unlimited and everlasting truth.

> Do you not know that all this is but the prelude to the actual strain which we have to learn? For you surely would not regard the skilled mathematician as a dialectician?
>
> Assuredly not, he said; I have hardly ever known a mathematician who was capable of reasoning.
>
> But do you imagine that men who are unable to give and take a reason will have the knowledge which we require of them?
>
> Neither can this be supposed.
>
> And so Glaucon, I said, we have at last arrived at the hymn of dialectic. This is that strain which is of the intellect only, but which the faculty of sight will nevertheless be found to imitate; for sight, as you remember, was imagined by us after a while to behold the real animals and stars, and last of all the sun himself. And so with dialectic; when a person starts on the discovery of the absolute by the light of reason only, and without any assistance of sense, and perseveres until by pure intelligence he arrives at the perception of the absolute good, he at last finds himself at the end of the intellectual world, as in the case of sight at the

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[2] Ibid., 286. [3] Ibid., 287.

end of the visible.
Exactly, he said.
Then this is the progress which you call dialectic?
True.[4] (Italics mine)

A. The Struggle to Transcend the Senses

We touch now upon a central problem both in Plato's theory of knowledge and in his pedagogy. The question may be posed this way: in education are we trying to teach students to seek out facts or to think about the truth; are we training them to observe things or to reason out principles? There is a wide, perhaps unbridgeable, chasm between Plato and progressive education. Progressivists say, put the student in touch with the size, shape, weight, energy and physical properties of things and you are putting him in touch with reality. They aim at turning students into fact-finders, men seeking new discoveries, new inventions that will build a cozier, more fascinating world. Plato, on the other hand, ambitions students who will hunt down the unchanging, deeper principles of reality - the truth that will rescue man from the transient pleasures of time and transfer him to the paradise of fixed Ideas and the unchangeable good. This difference of purpose filters down to different pedagogical precepts. Progressivists say: trust what you can touch; Plato, trust what you can think. Progressivists say: concentrate on what's in the test-tube; Plato, concentrate on what's in your mind.

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[4]Republic, 531.

> And were we not saying long ago that the soul when using the body as an instrument of perception, that is to say, when using the sense of sight or hearing or some other sense (for the meaning of perceiving through the body is perceiving through the senses) were we not saying that the soul too is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard, when she touches change?
>
> Very true.
>
> But when returning into herself she reflects, then she passes into the other world, the region of purity, and eternity, and immortality, and unchangeableness, which are her kindred, and with them she ever lives, when she is by herself and is not let or hindered; then she ceases from her erring ways, and being in communion with the unchanging is unchanging. And this state of the soul is called wisdom?
>
> That is well and truly said, Socrates, he replied.[5]

The antagonism set up here by Plato between the senses and the intellect must sound like gibberish to modern pedagogues, who follow the teachings of men like Rousseau and John Dewey. When Plato in the Phaedo poses the question: "What shall we say of the actual acquirement of knowledge? - is the body, if invited to share in the enquiry, a hinderer or a helper?"[6], they would answer: a helper, of course. Plato says, just as definitely, a hinderer. Of course, perhaps, they could agree that for certain accidental reasons, external to the actual learning process, the body can be a hindrance.

> For the body is a source of endless trouble to us by reason of the mere requirement of food; and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the search after true being: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and

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[5]Phaedo, 79.

[6]Ibid., 65.

> endless foolery, and in fact, as men say, takes away from us the power of thinking at all.[7]

But Plato doesn't want to stop at anything accidental. To him the body is an essential hindrance to true knowledge and we must be rid of it, if we ever want to reach the truth. It is good, perhaps, for us to see Plato's extreme position and the reasons why he posits it, before we examine the reasons why in practise he must modify it.

> Last and worst of all, even if we are at leisure and betake ourselves to some speculation, the body is always breaking in upon us, causing turmoil and confusion in our enquiries, and so amazing us that we are prevented from seeing the truth. It has been proved to us by experience that if we would have pure knowledge of anything we must be quit of the body: and then we shall attain the wisdom which we desire.[8]

Plato's dilemma can be put in a few words: truth is unchangeable but sensible things change. He failed to see how we could possible derive the permanent essences of reality from the fluctuating world around us. He was unwilling to admit that anything as uncertain, indistinct, and transitory as sense perceptions could produce pure, unerring, eternal ideas. He put the object of the senses and the object of reason at opposite poles and denied any possibility of inter-communication.

> First, then, in my judgment, we must make a distinction and ask, What is that which always is and has no becoming; and what is that which is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is

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[7] Ibid., 66.

[8] Ibid., (In the original "Last" occurs within a sentence and therefore is not capitalized.)

> always in the same state; but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason, is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is.[9]

For Plato, then, education that stops short at turning out scientists is not really education at all. It isn't that Plato was fool enough to deny the usefulness and the profitableness of technical discoveries and advances in science; it is just that he was convinced that there was something more essential to man's peace and fulfillment than getting to the moon. He would smile indulgently at the idea that modern scientific research-centers are the source of our latest knowledge, because to him true knowledge is neither late nor early, but everlasting; and the one place you could never find it would be in a laboratory. In the Philebus Plato gives a perfect pen portrait of today's science student and he says quite bluntly that no matter how hard he studies he will always miss the truth that really matters to man.

> Soc. Even he who supposes himself to be occupied with nature is really occupied with the things of this world, how created, how acting or acted upon. Is not this the sort of enquiry in which his life is spent?
> Pro. True.
> Soc. He is labouring, not after eternal being, but about things which are becoming, or which will or have become.
> Pro. Very true.
> Soc. And can we say that any of these things which neither are nor have been nor will be unchangeable, when judged by the strict rule of truth, ever become certain?
> Pro. Impossible.
> Soc. How can anything fixed be concerned with that which has no fixedness?
> Pro. How indeed?

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[9]Timaeus, 27-28.

> Soc. Then mind and science when employed about such changing things do not attain the highest truth?
> Pro. I should imagine not.[10]

Clearly, then, Plato considered the final goal of education quite distinct from that accepted by many educationists today. We must train students to leap beyond sensible perceptions into the area of pure thought - something somehow unconnected and independent of the senses. Until the intellect acts alone, it does not really act at all. This is his conclusion in the famous passage of the Republic on the various divisions of reality.

> And when I speak of the other division of the intelligible, you will understand me to speak of that other sort of knowledge which reason herself attains by the power of dialectic, using the hypotheses not as first principles, but only as hypotheses - that is to say, as steps and points of departure into a world which is above hypotheses, in order that she may soar beyond them to the first principle of the whole; and clinging to this and then to that which depends on this, by successive steps she descends again without the aid of any sensible object, from ideas, through ideas, and in ideas she ends.[11] (Italics mine)

This passage makes several points clear. First, the end product of education has to be an intellect trained to deal in unchanging ideas. Second, the thing that bridges the gap between hypotheses based on sense perceptions and true knowledge is the dialectic. The third - and not insignificant - point states that although perceptions can never be organically connected with true knowledge, although they can never cause it,

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[10] Philebus, 59.

[11] Republic, 511.

because they can never cause the trait most characteristic of it, that is, changelessness; still there is some sort of connection: the senses do somehow provide points of departure.

In order to make Plato's pedagogy more platable to the modern mind, we must dwell on this third point. Very few philosophers today would agree with Plato that there exists apart and objectively another world of Pure Forms, Essences, Ideas, which we must contemplate if we are to grasp truth. Very few, too, would concede that the senses must be repudiated before we can truly advance in understanding. Consequently, they feel themselves so opposed to Plato's position that they cannot believe he has anything helpful to offer them either with regards the purpose of education or teaching methods. They have failed to notice the difference between Plato the schematic philosopher, building up a closely connected, unified system of knowledge, and Plato the practical pedagogue. Plato the philosopher ran into one impasse: he could not conceive how changing, sensible data could yield unchanging ideas. Therefore - in theory - with a kind of grim-lipped loyalty to the logic of his system of knowledge, he refuses to allow the senses any internal function in the acquisition of knowledge. However - in practise - out of sheer honesty and fidelity to experience, he acts 'as if' pure knowledge did somehow depend on sense perception. He is never quite comfortable on this point: he hedges, he squirms; but for every passage that proves the absolute, complete independence

of pure knowledge, we can find a phrase admitting the need and the concurrence of sense perception in the acquisition of this knowledge. These small phrases act on Plato's elaboratedly developed theory of knowledge like pin pricks on a balloon: they are tiny by comparison, but eventually they let all the air out! They also show us that although we may reject Plato's theory of the Forms, we would be rash to reject along with it everything he says about the way students actually achieve understanding. Plato's conclusions about knowledge may have gone a little awry and missed the mark; but his observations about the learning process remain shrewd and invaluable.

But first a few quotations to show that in practice Plato did admit that sense data does enter very intimately into our achievement of intellectual knowledge. In the Phaedo just after saying that if the soul does "consider anything in company with the body she is obviously deceived"[12], he goes on:

> And do we know the nature of the absolute essence?
> To be sure, he said.
> And when did we obtain our knowledge? Did we not see equalities of material things, such as pieces of wood and stones, and gather from them the idea of an equality which is different from them? . . .
> Then these (so-called) equals are not the same with the idea of equality?
> I should say, clearly not, Socrates.
> And yet from these equals, although differing from the idea of equality, you conceived and attained that idea?

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[12]Phaedo, 65.

Very true, he said.[13] (Italics mine)

The significant, and surprising, thing in this passage is the fact that Plato is not discussing any mongrel knowledge; but that pure-bred knowledge, which alone is knowledge, the knowledge of essences. If we take the words "gather from them the idea" and read into them the slightest bit, we can easily see hints of the Aristotelian theory of abstraction to come. This, however, is to be a prophet after the event. What is clear is that Plato wrestled valiantly in his efforts to reconcile common sense experience of the role of our senses in our knowing and his intellectual conviction that passing sensations could not produce the permanent truth of our ideas. He admits a relationship between sense experience and intellectual knowledge; but he does not see how this relationship can be in any sense causal. The point we are trying to establish here is that Plato was not blind to the important function of the senses, even though this forced him into an awkward dilemma.

A little further on in the Phaedo, he reaffirms even more strongly that the senses do play a vital role in all learning - even of the highest truths.

> And we recognise also that this absolute equality has only been known, and can only be known, through the medium of sight or touch, or of some other of the senses, which are all alike in this respect?[14] (Italics mine)

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[13] Ibid., 74.

[14] Ibid.

Again in the Republic, when discussing the study of military tactics (than which we could hardly find a more practical study!), he praises it because it "draws the soul towards being".[15] This brings up the interesting, and enlightening, distinction and explanation of the different kinds of sense objects.

> I mean to say that objects of sense are of two kinds; some of them do not invite thought because the sense is an adequate judge of them; while in the case of other objects sense is so untrustworthy that further enquiry is imperatively demanded.[16]

Certain sense perceptions coax the mind on to thought. Plato uses provocative phrases like "invites or excites intelligence", or the intelligence is "compelled to ask", or "these intimations which the soul receives are very curious and require to be explained."[17]

It is in the Theaetetus, however, that Plato manifests the ambivalence of his thinking on the relationship between sense perception and true knowledge. The question on the block is precisely: is perception knowledge? In the process of answering this, Plato describes the inner mechanism of the knower and this sheds light on his problem of reconciling theory with practice. There is, he says, a single perceiving-knowing subject using the mind, which in turn uses the senses to perceive the object.

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[15] Republic, 523.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 523-524.

> For no one can suppose that in each of us, as in a sort of Trojan horse, there are perched a number of unconnected senses, which do not all meet in some one nature, the mind, or whatever we please to call it, of which they are the instruments, and with which (i.e. the mind) through them (i.e. the senses) we perceive objects of sense. (In the original "For" becomes within a sentence and therefore is not capitalized.)[18]

Later in this dialogue, Plato urges a comparison which helps him defend the position that senses are senses and mind is mind and "never the twain shall meet". He notes the clear-cut distinction between the objects of the faculties of sight and hearing. The eye cannot see sounds; the ear cannot hear colours. Each sense does what it alone can do; and so it is for the mind. It alone can know the universal. This operation is as much beyond the senses as tasting salt is beyond the eye.

> Soc. . . . Now tell me what is the power which discerns, not only in sensible objects, but in all things, universal notions, such as those which are called being and non-being, and those others about which we were just asking - what organs will you assign for the perception of these notions? . . .
> Theaet. Indeed, Socrates, I cannot answer; my only notion is, that these, unlike objects of sense, have no separate organ, but that the mind, by a power of her own, contemplates the universals in all things.
> Soc. You are a beauty, Theaetetus, . . . if you are clear that the soul views some things by herself and others through the bodily organs.[19]

Now the startling thing in this passage is not that Plato gives the mind a separate power by which it contemplates the universal in things independently of the bodily organs;

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[18]Theaetetus, 184.

[19]Ibid., 188.

but that Plato should admit that "universal notions" lurk somehow in "sensible objects" is quite a blow to his complete repudiation of things in the search for truth. However, perhaps once again we have been lured into an Aristotelian interpretation of Plato's words. Here, we have to look carefully not at what Plato actually says (since words can bear various interpretations); but at what Plato means to say. And it seems clear from so many passages throughout the dialogues that Plato means to say always that whatever be the connection between sensation and intellection it is not a connection of dependence. He clings to this conviction even if he has to force a few square pegs into round holes.

For example, there follows in the Theaetetus a long and careful dialectic in which Plato tries to sew his experience of the learning process (which demands a function for the senses) onto his theory of knowledge (which demands that truth be absolutely independent of all sense perception). He stitches very expertly; but we can all detect the patchwork: the two pieces of cloth just don't match.

> Soc. And does she (the soul) not perceive the hardness of that which is hard by the touch, and the softness of that which is soft equally by the touch?
> Theaet. Yes.
> Soc. But their essence and what they are, and their opposition to one another, and the essential nature of this opposition, the soul herself endeavors to decide for us by the review and comparison of them?
> Theaet. Certainly.
> Soc. The simple sensations which reach the soul through the body are given at birth to men and animals by nature, but their reflections on the being and the use of them

are slowly and hardly gained, if they are ever gained, by education and long experience. . . .

And can a man attain truth who fails of attaining being? . . .

And can he who misses the truth of anything, have a knowledge of that thing? . . .

Then knowledge does not consist in impressions of sense, but in reasoning about them; in that only, and not in the mere impression, truth and being can be attained? . . .

And would you call the two processes by the same name, when there is so great a difference between them? . . .

And what name would you give to seeing, hearing, smelling, being cold and being hot? . . .

Perception would be the collective name of them? . . .

Which, as we say, has no part in the attainment of truth any more than of being? . . .

And therefore not in science or knowledge? . . .

Then perception, Theaetetus, can never be the same as knowledge or science?

Theaet. Clearly not, Socrates; and knowledge has now been most distinctly proved to be different from perception.[20] (Italics mine)

In order to understand Plato's pedagogy, then, we must see two points clearly: first, sense perception and knowledge, as end products, are as different as day and night. Therefore any education that concentrates on collecting and collating sense data - as much of our science education does - is like a body without a head: the most important part is missing. Second, when discussing the process of learning, Plato sometimes in loyalty to his theory of knowledge, kicks the senses out into the cold: perception "has no part in the attainment of truth"; sometimes, in loyalty to common sense, he allows the senses to crouch precariously by the door of truth: "knowledge does not consist in impressions of sense, but in reasoning about

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[20] Ibid., 186.

them." And what is most important for our purpose to remember is that either way, Plato insists that the only way to pass from the senses to the intellect is by means of the dialectic. In other words we would be wise to consider the dialectic on its own merits without summarily rejecting it because we disagree with Plato's theory of knowledge.

B. Learning is Recollection

This is a sane and profitable approach, too, when we consider one of the corollaries of the theory of knowledge, namely, Plato's contention that all learning is recollection. Once again we should investigate the reasons why Plato arrived at this conclusion. We should remember that it not only offered a rather satisfying explanation of his experience of how people actually learn; but it also fitted into his theory of absolute Forms by showing that we have our ideas of them, which alone contain truth, from a previous existence and not from present sense perceptions. This pleases Plato. It gives him a resting place between the two horns of the dilemma. It explains daily experience: after all, our ideas do somehow come from sensations; it protects his dear dogma that the changing sensible cannot produce the unchanging intelligible. Plato will allow sense perceptions to arouse, evoke, awake ideas; but he will not permit them in any way to cause ideas. It solves a great many problems for Plato if he accepts that the soul is immortal, always had knowledge, and now needs only that

this knowledge be stirred into actuality.

> The soul, then, as being immortal, and having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all; and it is no wonder that she should be able to call to remembrance all that she ever knew about virtue, and about everything; for as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is no difficulty in her eliciting or as men say learning, out of a single recollection all the rest, if a man is strenuous and does not faint; for all enquiry and all learning is but recollection.[21]

But we must not do Plato the injustice of saying that he adopted this theory simply because it fitted into his philosophy of knowledge neatly. It also explained the facts.

> If you put a question to a person in a right way, he will give a true answer of himself, but how could he do this unless there were knowledge and right reason already in him?[22]

Certainly he makes a good case for his theory when he illustrates it by questioning the slave boy of Meno about the geometrical figures. This passage shows the teacher Socrates at his best; and that best rests upon the conviction that the teacher is not putting something into the head of the student, but drawing it out. A teacher's work is not to explain things to pupils; but to get them to explain things to themselves.

> Attend now to the questions which I ask him, and observe whether he learns of me or only remembers. . . . Do you observe, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but only asking him questions. . . Mark now the farther development. I shall only ask him, and not teach him, and he shall share the enquiry with me: and do you watch

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[21]Meno, 81.

[22]Phaedo, 72.

> and see if you find me telling or explaining anything to him, instead of eliciting his opinion. . . . What do you say of him, Meno? Were not all these answers given out of his own head? . . . And yet, as we were just now saying, he did not know? . . . But still he had in him those notions of his - had he not? . . . Then he who does not know may still have true notions of that which he does not know? . . . And at present those notions have just been stirred up in him, as in a dream; but if he were frequently asked the same questions, in different forms, he would know as well as any one at last? . . . Without anyone teaching him he will recover his knowledge for himself, if he is only asked questions? . . . And this spontaneous recovery of knowledge in him is recollection.[23]

One other small point has to be noted before we can appreciate the bearing Plato's theory of recollection has upon the necessity of the dialectic in bringing about the act of understanding in a pupil. We have seen that this theory allows at least some sort of connection between our sense perceptions and intellectual knowledge.

> So much is clear - that when we perceive something, either by the help of sight, or hearing, or some other sense, from that perception we are able to obtain a notion of some other thing like or unlike which is associated with it but has been forgotten.[24]

This connection Plato explains as an association, and he emphasizes the fact that it works even when there is a wide chasm between the two things associated, even when the two things are unlike. This point is essential, because he insists that the impression of equality that we get from sensible things is a far, far cry from the idea of absolute equality in the mind. That is why when he gives an illustration

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[23]Meno, 83.

[24]Phaedo, 75.

of this power of association, he picks two things that are not in any way intrinsically connected; and yet one is very effective in conjuring up the other.

> I mean what I may illustrate by the following instance: - the knowledge of a lyre is not the same as the knowledge of a man?
>
> True.
>
> And yet what is the feeling of lovers when they recognise a lyre, or a garment, or anything else which the beloved has been in the habit of using? Do not they, from knowing the lyre, form in the mind's eye an image of the youth to whom the lyre belongs?[25]

In this quotation at last we have come to a point where we can all join hands with Plato, no matter what we may think of the two aspects of his theory of knowledge which we have briefly discussed, namely, that truth can only be found by contemplating ideas in themselves, and secondly that all learning is consequently only recollection. Whether we agree on these points or not, we do agree that the teacher's main problem is how to help pupils so re-act to what they see, or hear, or touch, that they can "form in the mind's eye an image", an idea. For this is the step that transforms students into beings that do not merely sense, but also think; that do not deal exclusively with particular, changing things, but also and especially with universal, unchanging truths.

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[25] Phaedo, 72.

C. Words Bridge the Gap

Practically speaking, Plato says in his pedagogy if you want to bring your student out of the jungle of the senses, make him talk! That is the purpose and the function of the dialectic: it gets a pupil talking mentally; this he has to do, if he is ever to get at the truth. All this sounds naive; but it is amazing how often Plato in his dialogues links truth and the power to express it. You cannot have one without the other. All his discussions with the young have one same purpose: to make them "better dialecticians, and more capable of expressing the truth of things."[26] In educating the guardians of the state, guardians that is of truth and justice in the state, the final test that they have the knowledge necessary to govern is their ability to express their knowledge. "But do you imagine that men who are unable to give and take a reason will have the knowledge which we require of them? Neither can this be supposed."[27]

It is obvious, then, why Plato in his teaching theory insists on the activity of the pupil. He must express himself, or else he won't be thinking; and what better way to make a pupil express himself than through an interchange of questions and answers? This exercise is not a luxury of

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[26]Statesman, 286.

[27]Republic, 531.

learning, to be used periodically as a change and as an amusement; it is an integral and necessary part of the process of reasoning. Plato is brutally blunt about it all: those who cannot explain themselves, simply cannot think!

> And every one who is not born deaf or dumb is able sooner or later to manifest what he thinks of anything; and if so, all those who have a right opinion about anything will also have right explanation; nor will right opinion be anywhere found to exist apart from knowledge.[28]
>
> Soc. And that which we know we must surely be able to tell?
> Lac. Certainly.[29]

Looking then first at the acquisition of knowledge, we see that Plato considers it cannot be done except words are used as a sort of catalyst which works at once on sense perceptions and our previously acquired unconscious knowledge and the result is: actual, expressible knowledge. The test whether we possess knowledge is simply: can we express it?

> And you also agree, I said, in describing the dialectican as one who attains a conception of the essence of each thing? And he who does not possess and is therefore unable to impart this conception, in whatever degree he fails, may in that degree also be said to fail in intelligence? Will you admit so much?
> Yes, he said; how can I deny it?[30]

But there is a second point. Not only is expression important

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[28]Theaetetus, 206.

[29]Laches, 190.

[30]Republic, 533.

in the acquisition of knowledge, it is equally important in testing the validity of the knowledge acquired. We see how Plato does this in the dialogue Theaetetus. First, they come to a point where they have a clear idea of what they are talking about; and second, they must put this idea through another dialectic to check its validity. We shall see a little later why this must be done; it is enough now to note that there is this double process and in both, expression is essential, and consequently so is the dialectic.

> And you would say the same of the conception of the good? Until the person is able to abstract and define rationally the idea of good, and unless he can run the gauntlet of all objections, and is ready to disprove them, not by appeals to opinion, but to absolute truth, never faltering at any step of the argument - unless he can do all this, you would say that he knows neither the idea of good nor any other good; he apprehends only a shadow, if anything at all, which is given by opinion and not by sciences; - dreaming and slumbering in this life, before he is well awake here, he arrives at the world below, and has his final quietus.
>
> In all that I should most certainly agree with you.[31]

The power of expression is vital in Plato's pedagogy. Questioning and answering help not only to formulate an idea; but also to prove it. We should note here, perhaps, that the criterion of truth which Plato offers us is both social and practical - and this throws much light on his whole outlook on the purpose of education and indeed the function of truth. Ultimately knowledge must issue forth into virtuous action; and virtue is not something personal, subjective; but rather a social, civic requirement. Consequently, just

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[31] Ibid.

as knowledge would be sterile if it did not lead to action; so knowledge would be sterile if it could not be expressed. The philosopher must be king not only because he knows the truth which the state needs to act justly, but also because he can express what he knows. He would simply not be a philosopher if he lacked either requirement, either knowledge or the ability to express it.

> And ought not the interpreters, the teachers, the lawgivers, the guardians of the other citizens, to excel the rest of mankind, and perfectly to show him who desires to learn and know or whose evil actions require to be punished and reproved, what is the nature of virtue and vice? . . . And can we wonder that when the guardians are not adequate in speech or action, and have no adequate knowledge of virtue, the city being unguarded should experience the common fate of cities in our day?
> Clo. Wonder! no.
> Ath. Well, then, must we do as we said? Or can we give our guardians a more precise knowledge of virtue in speech and action than the many have?[32] (Italics mine)

> And may not the same be said of all good things - that the true guardians of the law ought to know the truth about them, and to be able to interpret them in words, and carry them out in action, judging of what is and of what is not well, according to nature?[33]

Just as the individual cannot think if he cannot express the truth of things to himself, so the state cannot think, cannot act rationally and virtuously, unless through its guardians it can express the truth of things to its citizens. This is how Plato's perfect state will be ruled by reason and not by force; for, its citizens will obey not out of cringing servitude, but out of conviction. Indeed,

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[32]Laws, 964.

[33]Ibid., 966.

there is a certain delightful naivte in the above passage, when Plato implies that those to be punished will realize what a blessing punishment really is if the legislator convinces them of the terribleness of vice. All this flows from the fact that truth is a social good, not only is it expressible, but it must be expressed. The philosopher could no more silence the truth within him than the sun could bottle up its light.

> Perhaps what I am saying may seem paradoxical, and at variance with the usual language of age. But when any one has any good and true notion which is for the advantage of the state and in every way acceptable to God, he cannot abstain from expressing it.[34]

There is, then, an intimate inter-dependence of thought upon expression: it is not an accidental aspect of learning, but an essential part both of the process and of the product. This is not surprising if we remember that for Plato words and names are the instruments of definition. In and through them, we get at the nature of things.

> Soc. Very good: then a name is an instrument?
> Her. Certainly.
> Soc. . . . Regarding the name as an instrument, what do we do when we name?
> Her. I cannot say.
> Soc. Do we not give information to one another, and distinguish things according to their natures? . . . Then a name is an instrument of teaching and of distinguishing natures, as the shuttle is of distinguishing the threads of the web. . . . And the shuttle is the instrument of the weaver? . . . Then the weaver will use the shuttle well - and well means like a weaver? and the teacher will use the name well - and well means like a teacher?[35]

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[34] Ibid., 821.

[35] Cratylus, 387.

In a long and close dialectic Socrates shows that names are not arbitrary. They must reflect the "form" of things, the true essences. This is not a matter of sounds or syllables, for obviously these differ in each language, as houses of wood, of stone and of clay differ; but the form remains the same; and the individual house or name will be true in as much as it conforms to its ideal.

> Soc. Then, as to names: ought not our legislator also to know how to put the true natural name of each thing into sounds and syllables, and to make and give all names with a view to the ideal name, if he is to be namer in any true sense?[36]

Of course, not every legislator will be qualified to do this important task; and therefore he must be prepared to get the advice of experts on the nature and the use of names. That expert, of course, is the dialectician.

> Soc. And who will be best able to direct the legislator in his work, and who will know whether the work is well done, in this or any other country? Will not the user be the man? . . . And this is he who knows how to ask questions? . . . And how to answer them? . . . And him who knows how to ask and answer you would call a dialectician?
> Her. Yes, that would be his name.[37]

We can see better now why Plato puts so much emphasis on discussion in the acquisition of knowledge; and why knowledge must be expressible if it is to be true. Names are not just tags for Plato: they are carriers of truth.

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[36] Ibid., 389.

[37] Ibid., 390.

Soc. . . . Was I not telling you just now (but you have forgotten), that I knew nothing, and proposing to share the enquiry with you? But now that you and I have talked over the matter, a step has been gained; for we have discovered that names have by nature a truth.[38]

D. The One, The Many, and The Whole

The emphasis Plato puts on words and names is a hint to the general movement of the dialectic, and so of the acquisition of true knowledge. Names lead us to definitions; but for definitions we need distinctions, classifications. But classification demands showing the relations between things - and so we approach what for Plato is required for true knowledge, a general synthesis. Our task now is to investigate the connection between this synthesis and the dialectic, and to show why Plato thought the dialectic the only way we could achieve it.

Since this is a focal point of Plato's pedagogy, we shall trace the development of it in Plato's mind by handling the dialogues in the generally accepted chronological order. We shall not attempt to explain the full implications of Plato's doctrine on the synthesis of knowledge; we shall only be showing its relationship to the dialectic. A full exposition of the necessity of synthesis to arrive at truth would require a thesis in itself.

It is in the Meno, an early dialogue, that we get the first hint of Plato's conviction that knowledge isn't

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[38]Cratylus, 391.

knowledge until it is contained in an all embracing synthesis. In order for knowledge to be viable at all it must be a body of knowledge, since the reality it reflects is ultimately and intimately one.

> The soul . . . having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all; and it is no wonder that she should be able to call to remembrance all that she ever knew about virtue, and about everything; for as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is no difficulty in her eliciting or as men say learning, out of a single recollection all the rest, if a man is strenuous and does not faint.[39] (Italics mine)

It is in the Republic that Plato shows the relationship between the other branches of study and the dialectic in this search for a synthesis. The dialectic is the crown of all studies: "calculation and geometry and all the other elements of instruction . . . are a preparation for dialectic."[40] This is because in it "all these studies reach the point of inter-communion and connection with one another, and come to be considered in their mutual affinities".[41] Plato does not disparage the study of other sciences. Indeed, the dialectic can only be used and understood by those trained in the other branches of knowledge simply because no one can order and synthesize facts until they have facts to order and synthesize.

> But I must also remind you, that the power of dialectic alone can reveal this, and only to one who is a disciple of the previous sciences.[42]

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[39] Meno, 81.

[40] Republic, 536.

[41] Ibid., 531.

[42] Ibid., 533.

The dialectic is really the soul of knowledge, with mathematics and music and gymnastics and the rest the different members of the body. It is the most important because it unites and vivifies and puts into motion all the limbs of learning.

Plato then goes on to look at the question from a slightly different point of view; and here again he proves both the necessity of the dialectic as the culmination of intellectual development, and also its dependence for effectiveness upon the other sciences. All other sciences are limited in their scope, but the dialectic is limitless: it questions the last underlying principles of things. Not only that; it also supplies the orderly process by which we can pass from these principles to broader, more practical conclusions. Without this, knowledge would be merely automatic habits of the mind, devoid of inner meaning and vital force. Actually it would be nothing but make-believe.

> For when a man knows not his own first principle, and when the conclusion and intermediate steps are also constructed out of he knows not what, how can he imagine that such a fabric of convention can ever become a science?[43]

In the search for the reality deep down things, then, the dialectic is the only way: it alone can do the job, but it does not do the job alone. Throughout his dialogues Plato insists so frequently - and almost ferociously - on getting above things in order to contemplate Ideas, which give meaning to things, that he is often accused of being an ivory-tower

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[43] Ibid.

philosopher. Not seldom he is scorned for being too idealistic, as if his system of philosophy was out of contatt with the realities of life. This is perhaps nothing more than another sign of the central tension in all of Plato's thought. He knew that for true science you must have permanency of truth, and he saw all around him the vast majority of men chasing after the phantoms of changing impressions and experiances. His reaction to this was too violent to be balanced. Men's minds were so immersed in changing things that - in theory - Plato urged them to get out of things altogether; but - in practice - he knew that although we must not stop our search for truth in sensible things, still we must start there.

That is why in one sense Plato is the most practical of philosophers. He has no patience with those who would philosophize without knowledge of facts, or habits of observation, or "keeness and ready powers of acquisition",[44] or contact with concrete objects. In other words, though Plato teaches that genuine education must carry students above and beyond these things, he denies emphatically that it can bypass them. The dialectician needs the other sciences. He is not a spider who can spin a synthetic web of truth out of his own tail.

> Then dialectic, and dialectic alone, goes directly to the first principle and is the only science which does away with hypotheses in order to make her ground secure;

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[44] Ibid., 537.

> the eye of the soul, which is literally buried in an outlandish slough, is by her gentle aid lifted upwards; and she uses as handmaids and helpers in the work of conversion, the sciences which we have been discussing.[45]

It is on this point surely that Plato would throw down the gauntlet before modern education and challenge its right to be called education at all. We make so much of this or that branch of science that we make it into the be-all and the end-all of education. Secretly, perhaps even unconsciously, we have accepted the fact-filled, skilled scientist as the truly educated man. We gave ourselves away when we panicked so pitifully and castigated our educational system so bitterly when Russia put a man in orbit and proved that they had better technicians than the West. Perhaps, today, in education we need most of all another courageous prophet like Socrates to preach the uselessness of gathering, and even of controlling, facts unless we can also comprehend them. Mankind now more than ever needs what Plato promises in the dialectic, the ability to "grasp truth as a whole . . . and in the right way".[46] In other words, Plato would warn us that our education tends to turn out terrifying Frankinstein monsters: with over-grown, powerful, skilled bodies of science but with small, stunted minds of philosophy. Such monsters may very well crush reality, because they cannot comprehend it. And that is why there is desperate need of the dialectic;

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 491.

and why time spent in acquiring physical and mental skills is useless and meaningless unless time is also given to developing the powers of comprehension, the powers to rise above the particular problems of here and now to the absolute values of truth and goodness. Technical secrets rapped

> After that time those who are selected from the class of twenty years old will be promoted to higher honour, and the sciences which they have learned without any order in their early education will now be brought together, and they will be able to see the natural relationship of them to one another and to true being.
>
> Yes, he said, that is the only kind of knowledge which takes lasting root.
>
> Yes, I said; and the capacity for such knowledge is the great criterion of dialectical talent: the comprehensive mind is always the dialectical.
>
> I agree with you, he said.
>
> These, I said, are the points which you must consider; and those who have most of this comprehension, and who are more steadfast in their learning, and in their military and other appointed duties, when they have arrived at the age of thirty will have to be chosen by you out of the select class, and elevated to higher honour; and you will have to prove them by the help of dialectic, in order to learn which of them is able to give up the use of sight and sound and the other senses, and in company with truth to attain absolute being.[47]

In the Parmenides Plato returns to his conviction that without the dialectic, the student simply cannot arrive at truth.

> The impulse that carries you towards philosophy is assuredly noble and divine; but there is an art which is called by the vulgar idle talking, and which is often imagined to be useless; in that you must train and exercise yourself, now that you are young, or truth will elude your grasp.[48]

The reason he gives later is familiar to us. The dialectical

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[47] Ibid., 537.

[48] Parmenides, 135.

process urges and directs the mind to fit the fragments of truth under consideration into the general structure of reality. The dialectic is the dynamism by which the mind is impelled towards that synthesis which alone gives meaning to isolated truths. The insistent, insatiable questions of the dialectic make the mind see a truth not merely in itself, but in its relations and connections with all other truths.

> In a word, when you suppose anything to be or not to be, or to be in any way affected, you must look at the consequences in relation to the thing itself, and to any other things which you choose, to each of them singly, to more than one, and to all; and so of other things, you must look at them in relation to themselves and to anything else which you suppose either to be or not to be, if you would train yourself perfectly and see the real truth.[49]

It is in the Sophist that Plato becomes more specific about just how this necessary synthesis is to be achieved. It is done through classification. The mind must show the order in things, the hierarchy of reality. Once again, Plato is giving the reason why the dialectic is the queen of all the sciences, the highest and the best. The other branches of knowledge only supply disparate raw materials; it takes the dialectic, with its power of arranging, uniting, dividing, to build up the orderly structure of thought.

> Str. And as classes are admitted by us in like manner to be some of them capable and others incapable of intermixture, must not he who would rightly show what kinds will unite and what will not proceed by the help of science in the path of argument? And will he not

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[49] Ibid., 136.

ask if the connecting links are universal, and so capable of intermixture with all things; and again, in divisions, whether there are not other universal classes, which make them possible?
Theaet. To be sure he will require science, and, if I am not mistaken, the very greatest of all sciences.
Str. How are we to call it? By Zeus, have we not lighted unwittingly upon our free and noble science, and in looking for the Sophist have we not entertained the philosopher unawares?
Theaet. What do you mean?
Str. Should we not say that the division according to classes which neither makes the same other, nor makes other the same, is the business of the dialectical science?
Theaet. That is what we should say.[50] (Italics mine)

We notice now, however, that Plato conceives the dialectic as proceeding by a three-step process. It is as if the mind was spiralling up to a higher and higher degree of unity. The first step is to see the oneness in the multitudinous things around us. The second step is to recognize the many distinct forms in this confused multitude; for the treachery of the senses is precisely in this: they present things in chaos and confusion. For example, a finger is seen as both large and small "whereas the thinking mind, intending to light up the chaos, was compelled to reverse the process, and look at small and great as separate and not confused. . . . And was not this the beginning of the enquiry 'What is great?' and 'What is small?' . . . And thus the distinction of the visible and the intelligible."[51] After this second step of separating out the many in the

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[50]Sophist, 253.

[51]Republic, 524.

confused mass, the mind proceeds to the third step which is to perceive the wholeness of reality, so that even apparently separate and isolated things are seen as parts, for one form knits everything into a single whole.

> Str. Then, surely, he who can divide rightly is able to see clearly one form pervading a scattered multitude, and many different forms contained under one higher form; and again, one form knit together into a single whole and pervading many such wholes, and many forms, existing only in separation and isolation. This is the knowledge of classes which determines where they can have communion with one another and where not.
> Theaet. Quite true.
> Str. And the art of dialectic would be attributed by you only to the philosopher pure and true?
> Theaet. Who but he can be worthy?[52]

Of course, the ultimate reason why the dialectician is able to grasp the wholeness of reality and bring order out of chaos is because he is "always holding converse through reason with the idea of being".[53] (Italics mine).

In the Statesman, Plato returns to the same problem; but stresses there the importance of the right procedure in investigating reality. It isn't enough to follow "the great method of division",[54] and yet, distinguish things at random. Any Sophist can make distinctions according to arbitrary whims; but the dialectian distinguishes things in accordance with their real forms, and in the three steps that keep him from making them in the wrong way.

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[52] Sophist, 253.

[53] Ibid., 254.

[54] Statesman, 286.

> Whereas the right way is, if a man has first seen the unity of things, to go on with the enquiry and not desist until he has found all the differences contained in it which form distinct classes; nor again should he be able to rest contented with the manifold diversities which are seen in a multitude of things until he has comprehended all of them that have any affinity within the bounds of one similarity and embraced them within the reality of a single kind.[55]

It is in the Philebus, that we see how Plato in evolving this theory of synthetic knowledge is groping for an answer to a difficulty that plagued him all his life. The problem of the one and the many moves in and out of his dialogues like a ghost which simply will not be laid to rest. It is at the root of his quarrel with the senses and with sensible things. It explains Plato's tendency to contradict his theory when he gets down to practise on the question of knowledge and learning. In the Philebus he seems to settle for a compromise and admits that one and many, though seeming contradictions, are still both essential properties of knowledge. They are the inseparable components of every thought and of every word.

> We say that the one and many become identified by thought, and that now, as in time past, they run about together, in and out of every word which is uttered, and that this union of them will never cease, and is not now beginning, but is, as I believe, an everlasting quality of thought itself, which never grows old.[56]

When Protarchus asks Socrates the way of enquiring into the deeper realities, Socrates speaks, of course, of the

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[55] Ibid., 285.

[56] Philebus, 15.

dialectic, "the parent of all the discoveries in the arts".[57] It is only through its method that the problem of the one and the many can be resolved; and once again, he emphasizes the three-step procedure. However, in this dialogue, Plato - under the influence of mathematics, which more and more engaged his thought - demands a numerical preciseness. First, we must see the unity in everything. But in the second step, in determining the many, we must not be cavalier about it and come to some generous round number. The enquirer must determine the definite number of divisions within the object of his enquiry. Only then can he move to the third step, the knowledge of the whole, of that infinity of beings that makes up the comprehensive structure of reality. This is the outline of philosophical enquiry - obviously a long, torturesome process, and made possible only by the genuine dialectic, the gift of the gods.

> A gift of heaven, which, as I conceive, the gods tossed among men by the hands of a new Prometheus, and therewith a blaze of light; and the ancients, who were our betters and nearer the gods than we are handed down the tradition, that whatever things are said to be are composed of one and many, and have the finite and infinite implanted in them: seeing, then, that such is the order of the world, we too ought in every enquiry to begin by laying down one idea of that which is the subject of enquiry; this unity we shall find in everything. Having found it, we may next proceed to look for two, if there be two, or, if not, then for three or some other number, subdividing each of these units, until at last the unity with which we began is seen not only to be one and many and infinite, but also a definite number; the infinite must not be suffered to approach the many until the entire number of the species intermediate between unity and

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[57] Ibid.

> infinity has been discovered, - then, and not till then, we may rest from division, and without further troubling ourselves about the endless individuals may allow them to drop into infinity. This, as I was saying, is the way of considering and learning and teaching one another, which the gods have handed down to us. But the wise men of our time are either too quick or too slow in conceiving plurality in unity. Having no method, they make their one and many anyhow, and from unity pass at once to infinity; the intermediate steps never occur to them. And this, I repeat, is what makes the difference between the mere art of disputation and true dialectic.[58]

As we have pointed out often already, in Plato's thought truth must always overflow into act. This factor enters, too, into this question of the proper method of enquiry. In the Laws, Plato says that the ultimate reason why the dialectic's methodical procedure is essential is because only the man who has a grasp both of the unity and diversity within reality can ever hope to bring about that synthesis of thought which will result in order of action. Practical living, the problem of constituting and operating a just state loom large on the horizon of Plato's philosophy. He is never concerned only with constructing a system of thought; he tries always to delineate the order required for rational living. For him knowledge and virtue are not separate, independent things; but two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other; and you can have neither without the dialectic.

> Ath. Did we not say that the workman or guardian, if he be perfect in every respect, ought not only to be able to see the many aims, but he should press onward

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[58] Ibid.

to the one? this he should know, and knowing, order all things with a view to it.
Cle. True.
Ath. And can any one have a more exact way of considering or contemplating anything, then the being able to look at one idea gathered from many different things?
Cle. Perhaps not.
Ath. Not 'Perhaps not', but 'Certainly not', my good sir, is the right answer. There never has been a truer method than this discovered by any man.[59]

This should be sufficient to show why it is that Plato throughout all his philosophical teaching insists that truth is not something we stumble upon, but something we will conquer only if we both know what we are fighting for and the strategy that will end in victory. It is the dialectic that provides the strategy. In the first two chapters we saw that it alone removes the obstacles to learning; and in this third chapter, we have seen that it alone can impel and guide the mind to that synthesis of truth, without which the mind would be like a rudderless ship tossed on the treacherous, shifting sea of change and confusion. The dialectic, then, is not for Plato one of many ways of teaching. It is the only way to transform a student's knowledge from a superficial, confused conglomeration of facts into a unified body of truth. It alone can bring order, not only into a man's mind, but also into his life - and into the life of the state.

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[59]Laws, 964.

CHAPTER IV

THE TEACHER'S GUIDING STAR

A. Truth: first, last, always.

In one sense, we can conclude that Plato begins and ends his theory of pedagogy with the same refrain. The teacher must be a dialectician teaching others to be dialecticians. In blunt terms, too, he defines the dialectician, who is his perfect philosopher, as "one who knows how to ask and answer questions." This is certainly plain enough, and if every professor in our colleges adopted Plato's system of teaching, we would undoubtedly see a transformation in our graduates. Perhaps our democratic system of education makes this conversion to the dialectic a pipe dream, because it is highly doubtful whether the dialectic can be adapted to the mass production, assembly line, technique. Still even a partial conversion, or adaptation to the dialectic would bring about a marvellous change - a change from passivity to activity, from repeating answers supplied in texts to thinking out answers supplied by their own personal contact with truth.

And yet, to leave Plato's pedagogy stand on this explanation of the method and the goal of the dialectic is to leave it standing on air. There is something much more

fundamental in Plato's pedagogical teaching, which serves as a basis for Plato's method, and without which the dialectic would become nothing but verbal fireworks, clever and amusing perhaps, but also dangerous and disastrous because leading not to philosophy but to sophism. It is true that the philosopher can be and is defined by Plato as one who knows how to ask and answer questions; but there is another and a more important definition.

> Who then are the true philosophers?
> Those, I said, who are lovers of the vision of truth.[1]

This thought so permeates the writings of Plato that to try to exemplify it by excerpts is like trying to describe the beauty of a symphony by extracting a few random notes from the score. Love of truth conditions and controls and inspires and directs everything Plato writes in his dialogues. Neither Plato nor Socrates make any sense unless we understand this about them: their strange, uncompromising passion for the truth. But this, of course, is the very secret of their pedagogy. To explain the dialectic and to omit any discussion - however brief, however incomplete - of their attitude towards truth is like explaining a doctor's vocation without any reference to health. The dialectic is the means: truth is the end. Everything a teacher does, every method he adopts must have one sole purpose: to bring his student to the truth. And if, as a teacher, he is going to follow

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[1]Republic, 475.

the path pointed out by Plato, then for him truth must become the passionate love of his life.

We choose out - almost at random - a few passages that adumbrate the all-pervasive influence that this love of truth must have on any genuine teacher. We can do no better than start with Socrates, Plato's living ideal. At the very opening of his defence for his life, Socrates riveted the minds of his judges on one thing only:

> never mind the manner (of my speech), which may or may not be good; but think only of the truth of my words, and give heed to that.[2]

Truth was to be the one weapon of his defence, as it had been the one object of his search in life. Not only that; for Socrates - as it should be for all teachers - truth was to be the only means he had to influence his hearers. He laughed at his enemies' accusation that he charmed his listeners with eloquence, "unless by the force of eloquence they mean the force of truth; for if such is their meaning, I admit that I am eloquent."[3]

The search for truth was the motive force behind Socrates' questioning and teaching. It was in him an incessant and insistent urge that could not be denied without loss of integrity. And again, as always in Plato, this responsibility to track down truth was not and could not be a personal, private duty. If it touched him as a man, it

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[2]Apology, 18.

[3]Ibid., 17.

touched him as a citizen; if it was wrong for him to allow his own soul to be shrouded in the poisonnous mists of ignorance, it was just as wrong not to try to dispel these mists from the minds of his fellow-men. For, ignorance is like the bubonic plague: one infected individual infects others and soon the whole state is sick. Socrates the teacher and the man had pledged his fealty to truth, even if the pledge should cost his life.

> And therefore if you let me go now, . . . if you say to me, Socrates, this time . . . you shall be let off, but upon one condition, that you are not to enquire and speculate in this way any more, and that if you are caught doing so again you shall die; - if this was the condition on which you let me go, I should reply: Men of Athens, I honour and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting any one whom I meet and saying to him after my manner: You, my friend - a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens, - are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? And if the person with whom I am arguing, says: Yes, but I do care; then I do not leave him or let him go at once; but I proceed to interrogate and examine and cross-examine him, and if I think that he has no virtue in him, but only says that he has, I reproach him with undervaluing the greater, and overvaluing the less.[4]

It should be noted (because it is important) that Plato didn't regard this search for truth as a mere passing amusement of the present existence. It goes much deeper than that. It is the very purpose of the life of the soul; and the after-life is always depicted as more glorious and more

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[4]Ibid., 29.

satisfying because then the seeker will be unrestricted and unencumbered by the body in his search. Knowledge, truth is an end in itself: it is the fulfillment of our innermost being, it is the fulness of life. Here, too, it is enlightening to notice how this teaching, but with an infinitely deeper meaning, is found in the Gospel of St. John: "This is eternal life: to know Thee the only True God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent."[5] Man's existence, both here and hereafter, is essentially linked with truth. Plato explains this in what is surely one of the most winsome and childlike pictures of man's future life.

> But if death is the journey to another place, and there, as men say, all the dead abide, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? . . . Above all, I shall then be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in the next; and I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not. What would not a man give, O judges, to be able to examine the leader of the great Trojan expedition; or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or numberless others, men and women too! What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions! In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions; assuredly not.[6]

The reason why this love of truth was so essential to Socrates, as it is essential to every dialectician, every philosopher, every teacher, is because so many other things are bidding for man's loyalty. If he gives himself to the pleasures, the riches, the power possible in this life, then he is incapable of true knowledge, for he is in love with

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[5]John: 17, 3.

[6]Apology, 41.

things in themselves.

> But those who love the truth in each thing are to be called lovers of wisdom and not lovers of opinion.[7] (Italics mine)

This love demands a certain ascetecism. Teachers who struggle for status, who demand higher salaries are put in an awkward position. Socrates, who despised the Sophists for taking money for their work, would judge them perhaps too harshly. No doubt, among the honoured people in a state should stand its teachers and professors; no doubt plumbers and carpenters should not be earning in an hour what many teachers earn only in half a day; but still teachers should be so enamoured of truth and of the duty of teaching it to others that they are willing for sacrifice. So says Plato.

> Renouncing the honours at which the world aims, I desire only to know the truth, and to live as well as I can, and, when I die, to die as well as I can. And, to the utmost of my power, I exhort all other men to do the same.[8]

This willingness to suffer for the truth is something which Plato preaches ceaselessly. The example of Socrates' life had burned deep into his consciousness; and even in his own, Plato learned that truth could be hard and exacting. And so, he reminds his readers often that they have to so love truth that they will follow it anywhere and endure whatever it demands.

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[7]Republic, 480.

[8]Gorgias, 526.

> Answer, Polus, and fear not; for you will come to no harm if you nobly resign yourself into the healing hand of the argument as to a physician without shrinking, and either say 'Yes' or 'No' to me.[9]
>
> Soc. I will not tell you until I have endeavoured to consider the matter from every point of view. . . . On the other hand, if we utterly fail, I suppose that we must be humble, and allow the argument to trample us under foot, as the sea-sick passenger is trampled upon by the sailor, and to do anything to us.[10]

In particular the teacher and the student must have the courage to accept refutation. This was obviously something Socrates had experienced again and again: listeners unwilling to admit their own error. It is interesting both how often Plato brings up this point, and also how often he insists on this humble attitude before truth not only in the student, but also in the teacher. One of the great problems in college lecture rooms is the closed mind of the professor. He gives the impression to his students that he is exposing a perfect, complete answer to whatever problem he is dealing with. This immediately puts the lecture in a false light: it is not the beginning of thought, but the end of it. The students are not there to think, but rather to accept what has been thought out for them. This attitude would be vehmently damned by Plato as killing knowledge right in the womb. In his opinion, the cause for such a killing could not be excused by the fact that the professor might very well have the answer. The point of teaching - as he insists so

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[9] Ibid., 475.

[10] Theaetetus, 131.

often - is not that the professor display his own packaged principles, but that he help the students manufacture their own. Besides, Plato, and justifiably, would maintain that professors adopt this know-it-all attitude because deep down they are afraid of the truth.

> Soc. Then, hear me, Gorgias, for I am quite sure that if there ever was a man who entered on the discussion of a matter from a pure love of knowing the truth, I am a one, and I should say the same of you.
> Gor. What is coming, Socrates?
> Soc. I will tell you: I am very well aware that I do not know what, according to you, is the exact nature, or what are the topics of that persuasion of which you speak, and which is given by rhetoric; although I have a suspicion about both the one and the other. And I am going to ask - what is this power of persuasion which is given by rhetoric, and about what? But why, if I have a suspicion, do I ask instead of telling you? Not for your sake, but in order that the argument may proceed in such a manner as is most likely to set forth the truth.[11]

Again:

> Then, I said, be cheerful, sweet sir, and give your opinion in answer to the question which I asked, never minding whether Critas or Socrates is the person refuted; attend only to the argument and see what will come of the refutation.[12]

And again:

> Pol. You are hard of refutation, Socrates, but might not a child refute that statement?
> Soc. Then I shall be very greatful to the child, and equally grateful to you if you will refute me and deliver me from my foolishness. And I hope that refute me you will, and not weary of doing good to a friend.[13]

What a salutary attitude of mind this would be both among our students and professors today! How often the

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[11] Gorgias, 453.

[12] Charmides, 166.

[13] Gorgias, 470.

atmosphere of hostility is set up because the teacher wraps himself in a pretentious cloak of omniscience, and the student in a cloak of stubbornness, unwilling to accept what is said, true or false. Both should remember that they are not enemies of each other; but united in their search for truth, which is more important than their personal feelings, and bringing as much good to one as to the other.

> Soc. And let us have no concealment, Protarchus, of the differences between my good and yours; . . . for surely we are not now simply contending in order that my views or that yours may prevail, but I presume that we ought both of us to be fighting for the truth.[14]

Any accusation that Socrates was superhuman and did not have the same struggles as others is proven false by dozens of passages in the dialogues. Plato never forgot the human frailty of the learner. He does not hold himself aloof from this natural tension between truth and pleasure, this tug-of-war between what we see is and what we wish could be. In the Phaedo he shows his great ideal, Socrates, wrestling with the temptation to make truth say what pleased and comforted him. This is one of the most moving passages in all of Plato. How much error, how much tragedy would have been saved mankind, if all men recognized and acknowledged as Socrates did that inner struggle between truth and themselves; and yet, still had the courage to champion the truth.

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[14]Philebus, 14.

> Let us then, in the first place, he said, be careful of allowing or of admitting into our souls the notion that there is no health or soundness in any arguments at all. Rather say that we have not yet attained to soundness in ourselves, and that we must struggle manfully and do our best to gain health of mind - you and all other men having regard to the whole of your future life, and I myself in the prospect of death. For at this moment I am sensible that I have not the temper of a philosopher; like the vulgar, I am only a partisan. Now the partisan, when he is engaged in a dispute, cares nothing about the rights of the question, but is anxious only to convince his hearers of his own assertions. And the difference between him and me at the present moment is merely this - that whereas he seeks to convince his hearers that what he says is true, I am rather seeking to convince myself; to convince my hearers is a secondary matter with me. And do but see how much I gain by the argument. For if what I say is true, then I do well to be persuaded of the truth; but if there be nothing after death, still, during the short time that remains, I shall not distress my firends with lamentations, and my ignorance will not last, but will die with me, and therefore no harm will be done. This is the state of mind, Simmias and Cebes, in which I approach the argument. And I would ask you to be thinking of the truth and not of Socrates: agree with me, if I seem to you to be speaking the truth; or if not, withstand me might and main, that I may not deceive you as well as myself in my enthusiasm, and like the bee, leave my sting in you before I die.[15]

B. The Oneness of Truth and Goodness

Just as it is essential to realize the driving impulse of truth in Plato's pedagogy, so it is essential to understand the special nature of this truth. There is little doubt that Plato clearly distinguishes the cognitive power and the appetitive power in man. However, unlike many who let the distinction get out of hand so that it separates and divides up the knower even as a functioning agent, Plato

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[15]Phaedo, 91.

always thought of the oneness of the knowing being first, and then only of his various faculties. In his passion for oneness Plato could not easily accept a double end for man. He could not separate the truth which attracts the intellect from the good which attracts the will. He identifies them. The truth is man's good: it enters into him as he enters into it; it transforms him; it allows him no rest until truth and the soul are one.

> And have we not a right to say in his (the philosopher's) defence, that the true lover of knowledge is always striving after being - that is his nature; he will not rest in the multiplicity of individuals which is an appearance only, but will go on - the keen edge will not be blunted, nor the force of his desire abate until he have attained the knowledge of the true nature of every essence by a sympathetic and kindred power in the soul, and by that power drawing near and mingling and becoming incorporate with very being, having begotten mind and truth, he will have knowledge and will live and grow truly, and then, and not till then, will he cease from his travail.[16]

But this supreme truth is not only the consummation of all learning; it is also the inspiration of all learning. For Plato, the good hovers over the mind of man like a guiding star: it draws hom on, it directs him, it is at once hope and satisfaction. Without it, there is no knowing; for, without it, truth has neither value nor function nor meaning.

> What is this highest knowledge?
> Nay, I said, ask if you will; but I am certain that you have heard the answer many times, and now you either do not understand me, or, as I rather think, you are disposed to be troublesome; for you have often been told that the

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[16]Republic, 490.

> idea of good is the highest knowledge, and that all other things become useful and advantageous only by their use of this. You can hardly be ignorant that of this I was about to speak, concerning which, as you have often heard me say, we know so little; and, without which, any other knowledge or possession of any kind will profit us nothing. Do you think that the possession of all other things is of any value if we do not possess the good? or the knowledge of all other things if we have no knowledge of beauty and goodness?[17]

Throughout Plato virtue is linked with knowledge because goodness is linked with truth. Only the good can know; and out of knowledge comes the power to make the knower good. This is the purpose of education as it is the purpose of life: to give truth and goodness their full scope in man. It is something that is never done, but carries on into the adult life of man until he is made perfect in truth. Then his life has a double dedication, which again is really one: he pursues the truth, he loves the state. When a man has reached this single-minded devotedness, then his education is over; and the teacher who has played so prominent a part in his formation can praise and honour the perfection of his work.

> And when they have reached fifty years of age, then let those who still survive and have distinguished themselves in every action of their lives and in every branch of knowledge come at last to their consummation; the time has now arrived at which they must raise the eye of the soul to the universal light which lightens all things, and behold the absolute good; for that is the pattern according to which they are to order the State and the lives of individuals, and the remainder of their own lives also; making philosophy their chief pursuit, but,

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[17] Ibid., 504.

when their turn comes toiling also at politicis and ruling for the public good, not as though they were performing some heroic action, but simply as a matter of duty; and when they have brought up in each generation others like themselves and left them in their place to be governors of the State, then they will depart to the Islands of the Blest and dwell there; and the city will give them public memorials and sacrifices and honour them.[18]

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[18] Ibid., 539.

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