

PLATO'S ADVICE ABOUT HOW TO AVOID BECOMING A PHILOSOPHICAL BASTARD: MOVING THE PROBLEM OF THE ONE AND THE MANY TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

Peter A. Redpath, Ph.D.

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For this reason, Socrates continued by saying that when the soul's eye, the human intellect, is buried deep in a kind of primeval mud,

dialectic gently draws it forth and leads it up, employing as helpers and co-operators in this conversion the studies and sciences which we enumerated, which we called sciences often

from habit, though they really need some other designation, connoting more clearness than opinion and more obscurity than science. “Understanding,” I believe, was the term, we employed. But I presume we shall not dispute about the name when things of such moment lie before us for consideration.

Clearly, this passage indicates Plato thought that, while he called studies like geometry and its subalternate disciplines of astronomy and music “sciences,” or “philosophy,” he was predicating the terms “science” and “philosophy” analogously, and chiefly of the assumption-less, non-hypothetical, theoretical science of metaphysics. Toward the end of the *Republic* Book Six, Socrates had described to Glaucon a divided line of learning, ascending from the lowest form of human learning to the highest. He now revisited what he had said about the divided line toward the end of Book Six to express his thinking more precisely.

He recalled how he had given a simile of a straight line, cut in two, with each half, similarly subdivided. The result was a fourfold division of two major sections, one representing higher learning, the other lower. The two subdivisions of higher learning he had designated “knowledge”; the lower two he had called “opinion.” The higher division he had subdivided into (1) science and (2) understanding. The lower division he had subdivided into (3) belief and (4) imagination. Socrates stated that knowing relates to being, and opinion relates to becoming. Expressing this in a proportion, he said that as being is to becoming so science is to belief and understanding to imagination.

Socrates then stated they would give the name “dialectician” to the person who can give an account of the being, or essence, of each thing to himself and others. But they would deny this designation to the person unable to do this because this person does not “possess full reason and intelligence about the matter.”

He added that, in the same way, denial of this designation applies to the person who cannot “define in his discourse and distinguish and abstract from all other things the aspect or idea of the good.” *Socrates thought that truly (that is, precisely) to know something is to know it philosophically or scientifically. And this means to know it abstractly. This involves being able to explain something in terms of its first principles and causes, to be able to state the reasons why something is the way it is in terms of principles we have abstracted from our experience of the being of things.*

He described someone incapable of doing this to be like someone going through life half-awake, dreaming his way through. He said we would say of such a man that he “does not really know the good itself or any particular good, but if he apprehends any adum-

bration of it, his contact with it is by opinion, not by knowledge, and dreaming and dozing through his present life, before he awakens here he will arrive at the House of Hades and fall asleep forever.”

Especially in an ideal city, where philosophers will be rulers, Socrates maintained we cannot neglect having children learn that discipline whereby they will be able “to ask and answer questions in the most scientific manner.” For this reason, Socrates said he had put this study of dialectic higher than all others, like “a coping-stone,” so no higher learning could be put above it and to make their discussion of studies complete.²⁵

Having thus completed their investigation into the nature, division, and methods of the sciences, Socrates stated that what remained for them was to determine to whom to assign studies and how. In the *Republic*, Book Six, Socrates had already stated that traits of a philosophical nature included: quickness at learning, memory, courage, and magnificence.²⁶ Toward the end of Book Seven, he reiterated many of these traits, and recalled something else he had said in Books Six and Seven, “Our present mistake . . . and the disesteem that has in consequence fallen upon philosophy are, as I said before, caused by the unfitness of her associates and wooers. They should not have been bastards, but true scions.”

So as not to be a philosophical bastard, Socrates maintained we have to be industrious, not half-hearted. A true philosopher loves learning and hard work. We must also hate mistakes in ourselves and others, as much as we hate lies in both. No true philosopher “cheerfully accepts involuntary falsehood,” is undisturbed when convicted of ignorance, or “wallows in the mud of ignorance as insensitively as a pig.” True philosophers are also temperate, courageous, and great-souled.

Socrates maintained that, since philosophers will be rulers or their advisors, we have to be careful that philosophical natures possess, and can recognize in others, temperance, courage, and greatness of soul. Otherwise, we will undermine, not preserve, our city, and “we shall pour a still greater ridicule upon philosophy.”

Moreover, we cannot take Solon’s advice that, as we get older, we will be able to learn many things. We must train the young for philosophy through liberal education. Or, as Socrates stated:

Now all this study of reckoning and geometry and all the preliminary studies that are indispensable preparation for dialectic must be presented to them while still young, not in the form of compulsory education. . . . Because . . . a free soul ought not to pursue any study slavishly, for while bodily labors performed

under constraint do not harm the body, nothing that is learned under compulsion stays with the mind. . . . Do not . . . keep children in their studies by compulsion but by play.

After a period of primary education in the liberal arts, at about age twenty, Socrates said, those who will be given preference to higher learning in philosophy would have to demonstrate their ability to unify “the studies which they disconnectedly pursued as children in their former education into a comprehensive survey of their affinities with one another and with the nature of things.” That is, they would have to be able to show how all their *many* former studies are *one* with each other and the world.

“That,” Socrates maintained, “is the only instruction that abides with those who receive it.” This is the only kind of learning that lasts. “And,” he added, “it is also . . . the chief test of the dialectic nature and its opposite. For he who can view things in their connection is a dialectician; he who cannot is not.” That is, the person who can intellectually comprehend how many things are one, the person who can reason abstractly and metaphysically, is the philosopher. The person who cannot do this is not.

Socrates warned, however, about the dangers of premature study of dialectic. He did so, among other reasons, because Plato tended to conflate philosophy, which he called here “dialectic,” with first philosophy, or metaphysics. Socrates thought that premature study of metaphysics is dangerous, because metaphysical study requires that a person be able “to disregard the eyes and other senses and go on to being itself in company with truth.” Because most young people are not prepared to embark upon such a rigorous journey in abstract reasoning about most general first principles and causes (first principles and causes that all arts and science take for granted, or assume), he noted how great is the harm cause by the way the Greeks were treating dialectic in his time: “Its practitioners are infected with lawlessness.”²⁷

Sad that Descartes’s Jesuit instructors at La Flèche did not take this warning to heart. Premature study of metaphysical subtleties by precocious youth under the influence of sophists often winds up producing sophists (like Descartes), and eventually, in their wake, corrupt lawyers, judges, politicians, bankers, and intellectuals, much as sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias had done in Socrates’ and Plato’s time and, as Adler, Maritain, and Gilson recognized, subjective idealists and other “philosophical bastards” have done in modernity’s early and late phases.

Socrates maintained that the situation of such prematurely metaphysically-exposed youth is similar to that of an intelligent, spoiled

rich kid, doted over all his life by family flatterers, and raised by others like an orphan, almost as if by adopted parents. When he reaches physical adulthood he perceives that he has no parents, and does not know how to find his natural ones. A young person in that sort of situation would likely start to have a higher opinion of his flatterers and those who raised him, would be more inclined to listen to them and live by their rule and less inclined to disobey them in great matters, than he would his natural parents.

From childhood rearing, Socrates said, we have received specific convictions about higher things, great, important, matters, such as about the nature of truth and the honorable. We have been raised from childhood under obedience to these convictions. At the same time, practices opposite to what we have learned exist “that have pleasures attached to them and that flatter and solicit our souls.” Such practices do not corrupt decent people because they continue to honor and obey what they have been taught.

But what are such people to do when they run into questions about the highest and most important things, questions we commonly call “metaphysical” and “moral,” when they find their traditionally-held beliefs about what they hold to be true about everything refuted by subtle arguments they cannot adequately answer? What is the honorable person to do, Socrates asked, “when he has had the same experience about the just and the good and everything that he chiefly held in esteem”? How will he conduct himself thereafter regarding respect and obedience to his former beliefs?

Glaucon’s answer was that, inevitably, this person will disrespect and disobey the former beliefs.

And, then, Socrates wanted to know, what will happen to him? He will now be in a situation where he ceases to honor his former metaphysical and moral principles, will think they are no longer binding on him, and he will be unable to discover true ones. Such a person will be like putty in the hands of any flatterer or dictator who comes along, and will adopt the life the flatterer or dictator desires. In so doing, like American youth of the pre-World War II generation, and many Western youth of today, such a person will become rationally ungovernable, a rebel against traditional law and morality.

Plato gave us a similar warning in his classic work the *Gorgias*, in which we find Socrates critiquing the famous sophist Gorgias for making the same absurd and grandiose claim, which Descartes would later make: that he possessed one art, or *the* specific method, to know everything, and “without learning any other arts . . . to prove in no way inferior to the specialists.” The discussion continued:

SOCRATES: Therefore when the rhetorician is more convincing than the doctor, the ignorant is more convincing among the ignorant than the expert. Is that our conclusion, or is it something else?

GORGIAS: That is the conclusion in this instance.

SOCRATES: Is not the position of the rhetorician and of rhetoric the same with respect to the other arts also? It has no need to know the truth about things but merely to discover a technique of persuasion so as to appear among the ignorant to have more knowledge than the expert.

GORGIAS: But is this not a great comfort, Socrates, to be able without learning any other arts but this one to prove in no way inferior to the specialists?²⁸

Socrates did not think so. For this reason, in the same work, in his discussion with the corrupt politician Callicles, Socrates told Callicles (who, like Gorgias' student, Polus had admired the despot Archelaus as the happiest of men) that men like Archelaus are the most miserable of men and fools. Callicles' problem was that *confounding sophistry with wisdom eventually tends to turn a person into a dictator or a panderer to dictators.*²⁹

Rightly considered, Socrates thought the practice of dialectic, or the generic practice of philosophically-abstract reasoning common to all the specific sciences, is ordered toward enabling us to become metaphysicians, to help us to understand the first principles and causes about everything, especially about the highest, or most important things for us to know as human beings. When it is not rightly ordered, the knowledge that had been philosophy, science, tends to degenerate into sophistry, ideology, and argument for the sake of victory (propaganda), not truth; tends, in short, to produce philosophical, scientific, bastards.

No wonder, then, so many contemporary descendants of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel glory in thinking that their philosophical work is chiefly to get students "to question their belief systems."

Such thinking is not philosophical. It is a secularized understanding of St. Augustine's reduction of philosophy to theology in which philosophy becomes reduced to "faith seeking understanding."


As a result of the perennial dangers of mistaking sophistry for philosophy, we have to be careful not to introduce students too early to philosophical argumentation involving metaphysical issues. When this happens, when young people "first get a taste of disputation,"

Plato thought they “misuse it as a form of sport, always employing it contentiously, and, imitating confuters, they themselves confute others. They delight like puppies pulling about and tearing with words all who approach them.”³⁰

Plato maintained that the person who “makes a jest and sport of mere contradiction” is a sophist, not a true philosopher or dialectician. When young people run into such sophists, mistaking them for philosophers, and start to imitate them, he thinks “they quickly fall into a violent distrust of all that they formerly held true, and the outcome is that they themselves and the whole business of philosophy are discredited with other men.”³¹ As Mortimer Adler recognized, they become like contemporary students have become under the influence of modern subjective idealists and their subjective critique: moral and metaphysical relativists.

Socrates and Plato did not object to questioning traditional beliefs. Socrates was put to death for refusing to stop questioning the poor educational practices of his time fostered by poets and sophists. Both philosophers objected to confounding philosophy with sophistry and sophistry with metaphysics. Hence, Plato had the character Socrates maintain that his requirement would be that “those permitted to take part in such discussions must have orderly and stable natures, instead of the present practice of submitting it to any chance and unsuitable applicant.”³²

Because Plato also tended to conflate philosophy, science, as a generic habit with the specific scientific habit of first philosophy, or metaphysics, he ended Book Seven of the *Republic* by recommending, in striking similarity with his student Aristotle, that the study of metaphysics, or dialectics, start about age fifty. At this time, he said of those who would have passed all prior tests and would have been approved to become philosophers:

We shall require them to turn upward the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light on all, and when they have thus beheld the good itself they shall use it as a pattern for the right ordering of the state and the citizens and themselves throughout the remainder of their lives, each in his turn, devoting the greater part of their time to the study of philosophy, but when the turn comes for each, toiling in the service of the state and holding office for the city’s sake, regarding the task not as a fine thing but a necessity. And so, when each generation has educated others like themselves to take their place as guardians in the state, they shall depart to the Islands of the Blessed and there dwell. And the state shall establish public memorials and sacrifices for them as to divinities if the Pythian oracle approves or, if not, as to divine and godlike men.³³ 

NOTES

25. See, for example, Plato, *Parmenides*, 142A–144E; *Sophist*, 256E–259E; *Republic*, Bk. 6, 509B; *Timaeus*, 87D; see, also, Étienne Gilson’s lucid exposition of the problem of reality and being in Plato in *Being and Some Philosophers* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), pp. 1–18.

26. Id., Bk. 6, 503C.

27. Id., Bk. 7, 535C–538A.

28. Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W. D. Woodhead, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues Including the Letters* (New York: Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series 71, 1966), 459B–D.

29. Id., 482C–527E.

30. Plato, *Republic*, Bk. 7, 539B–C.

31. Id., 539C.

32. Id., 539D.

33. Id., 534E–540C.

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