
CUSTODY AND EPIPHANY IN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

A review article on my book, *The Custody and Courtship of Experience: Western education in Philosophical Perspective*, was contributed to the Autumn 1996 issue of *Studies* by Fr Des O'Grady, SJ. The book was published in the Maynooth Bicentenary Series - a series which aims to give a flavour of the kinds of studies being undertaken in a variety of Departments in Maynooth at the time of its bicentenary anniversary. Fr O'Grady welcomes the series but seems quite unhappy about my own contribution to it. In the opening paragraph of his article he refers to the tradition of education to which Maynooth belongs and writes: 'Surprisingly, Hogan repudiates rather than celebrates that tradition'. He also writes that I portray Plato, St Paul and St Augustine as 'the villains of the story'. I was greatly surprised to read these words, and I expect that most of my colleagues on the Maynooth campus will also be surprised to discover that they have had such a rascal in their midst.

The article reveals a sense of injury at my critique, in Part I of the book, of some of the major features of Christendom in education; the sense that an inheritance which successive generations have cherished as being of incomparable worth is here being subverted. In an earlier age the charge of repudiation would have called either for a recantation or an adversarial response on my part, perhaps before an Inquisition. Today the possibilities are thankfully more promising. It is necessary however, but also a bit embarrassing, to point out from the start that the tenor of the book is virtually the reverse of what Fr O'Grady's article has taken it to be. A reclamation guided by the overlooked concerns of practice in education, and not an effort at subversion in any sense, describes the book's main standpoint towards classical and religious tradition in Western education.

If the ideas put forward in *The Custody and Courtship of Experience* are to be a matter of practice rather than merely of avowal, then for this reason

also, retaliation is not the path to be pursued. What follows therefore is a summary attempt to explain the *educational* perspective of the book. In the course of this attempt I will seek to address the issues raised by Fr O'Grady's account of my arguments, and thus to ameliorate the conflicts of understanding occasioned by different starting points in our readings of Western philosophical tradition.

The Practical as a Philosophical Perspective

The Custody and Courtship of Experience embodies what might be called a lateral shift in philosophical thinking itself. In other words, reflection becomes and *remains* a reflection on practice, as indeed it had been with Socrates. Some might regard such a shift as unphilosophical. My own guiding intuition is that Socrates himself, more than a few others in the tradition, and virtually all thinking teachers would see it as a reclamation of what was truly philosophical in the first place. As distinct, moreover, from any restoration of an older order of things, such a reclamation is also informed by insights of recent philosophy and seeks to put these to work in ways which are fruitful for the practices that characterize education in our own day.

It is almost a truism to say that institutionalized religions often come to include practices and precepts which are at odds with what is most essential in the religion's origins. And here the distinction made in the book between Christendom and Christianity is a crucial one. For instance, the practice of burning at the stake those judged to be heretics is clearly identified as one of the more fearsome practices of Christendom during the medieval period. But it is a practice which seems to have no warrant in the teachings of Jesus Christ. It is possible to think of numerous less grim practices of a punitive or invidious character which attended Christendom during its long history (800 AD to 1800 AD - i.e. from the coronation of Charlemagne to the aftermath of the Revolutionary period in Europe and America). That some of these came to be associated with the essentials of the religion, rather than with its institutional embodiments, is a notable irony of history. But it is a regrettable and an abiding irony, as it has created some intractable difficulties when one approaches Christianity from an educational standpoint, or when one attempts to allow Christianity to speak in its educational voice.

The critique of Christendom in Part I of *The Custody and Courtship of Experience* is an attempt to identify some of the more decisive influences which wrought the transformation of Christianity into one of the most powerful and political of institutions in the history of the Western world. As the historical record shows, this transformation, or series of transformations, thrust to the foreground the authoritarian and doctrinal in matters philosophical, the penitential and pessimistic in matters religious, the custodial

and censorial in matters educational. This is not to say that the essentials of Christianity itself were extinguished. It is to suggest however that they became distorted, in greater or lesser measure, and that the distortions themselves became institutionalized. The legacies of figures like Plato, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas and some others, feature prominently in this series of transformations because they contributed something decisive to what were to become the prevailing cultural and educational patterns of Christendom. That some of the more severe, or more legalistic aspects of the works of these figures came to dominate the educational landscape does not, of course, detract from the more inspiring of their achievements. The unsurpassed incisiveness of Plato's imagery (as distinct from the authoritarian character of his provisions) is enough to remind us of this¹.

The ironies just referred to touch on one of the book's major themes, in fact the opening one: what I call the eclipse of the Socratic heritage. A few points need emphasis here. The first is that the significance of Socrates for education lies not so much in a method, or a procedure, but in a singular kind of *conviction*. This is the conviction that certainty about truth is not available to humans: that if such certainty exists, it is the preserve of the Divine. The second point is that a Socratic acknowledgement of these human limitations reveals to us a family of educational virtues. These virtues are educational ones in a special way, in that their practice combines three main features:

(a) a well-informed regard for what our own upbringing and the traditions of our culture teach us about what is right and wrong, worthy and less worthy of our beliefs and actions etc.

(b) a critical interrogation of one's own tendencies to acquiesce too readily in these same customs and traditions ; leading in turn to

(c) a commitment to learning as a joint undertaking with others whose standpoints might sometimes challenge or contradict our own; an undertaking whose disciplined conduct might yet yield a deeper and more inclusive appreciation of truth, but also of its unattainability as something which can be finally secured by humans.

These virtues are identified in some detail in Chapter 7 of the book, where their non-partisan, yet substantive character is explored, and where their practice in the more difficult circumstances of contemporary classroom life - for example, the teaching of religion - is also investigated. So, far from something morally neutral, or merely procedural, or indeed individualist, the Socratic heritage in teaching and learning seeks to build up a special kind of learning community; one where the most important attributes of even the most advanced student are the dispositions that accompany an educated sense of one's own ignorance. With this goes the awareness that human emancipation

is to be conceived not as the lifting of all constraints on desire or will, but as a transformed understanding of our responsibilities and our capacities for action.

Contrasting Illuminations

But in what way does the book support its claim that this Socratic heritage has been overshadowed? And how does it substantiate its attempts to reclaim this heritage and to elaborate it in ways that are worthy of the commitments of teachers and students? The response to these questions must begin with a distinction that some philosophers are still reluctant to acknowledge. This is the problematic distinction between Socrates and Plato, or more precisely, between the self-critical convictions embodied in Socratic educational practice on the one hand, and on the other, the doctrinal and theoretical character of Plato's metaphysics. We have already touched briefly on the nature of the convictions that were essential to Socrates and Plato, or more precisely, between the self-critical convictions embodied in Socratic practice. We must also acknowledge wholeheartedly that it is to the earlier works of Plato that we owe most of what we know about this Socratic practice. These earlier Platonic works (including *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*) show the historical Socrates in action in a variety of settings. In Plato's later works however, the historical Socrates gives way to a 'Socrates' who is mainly a literary device for the eloquent voicing of Plato's own theories².

The features of Plato's later works which contrast most strongly with the Socratic convictions we have mentioned earlier are those which subsequently became influential as Platonism. They include the following: firstly, the hierarchical division of knowledge into a higher *intellectual-spiritual* world and a lower *sensual* world, each with its own sub-divisions; secondly, the claim that the higher of the two worlds was one of sublime, changeless truth while the lower was one where illusions and unworthy arts featured largely among the accepted cultural pursuit; thirdly, the claim that the higher truth whose source was the changeless *idea of the Good* was humanly attainable, but only by the properly tutored 'eye of the soul' and only among the intellectually gifted; fourthly, that such tutoring called for the most strict censorship of literary tradition and artistic imagination; fifthly, that only those who had been tutored to attain this truth should be allowed to become rulers and that educational effort must dedicate itself to such tutoring.

At one point in *The Republic*, where he makes 'Socrates' expound these doctrines, Plato checks himself with the declaration: 'That, at any rate, is my interpretation,... the truth of the matter is known only to God' (517b). The unassuming note in this declaration would suggest that doctrines of this kind should be regarded as matters of faith, as distinct from matters of secure knowledge. Yet in the later books of the *Republic* (533a), and in his later

works more generally, Plato approaches the point of claiming certainty for what can now be called metaphysical doctrines (i.e. doctrines about the ultimate questions of Being, which lie beyond the sphere of what can be proven or refuted). Where such doctrines later became fused with teachings of Christianity and became institutionalized in Europe's great centres of learning, dissenting standpoints were viewed not so much as contrasting interpretations but as punishable errors. We see here the tendency, characteristic of most of the history of metaphysics, to distinguish inadequately between matters of faith and matters of fact, and thus regard the metaphysical theology as the supreme *scientia* with which every other science must be in conformity. We also witness here a veritable eclipse of the kind of educational conviction which inspired the work of Socrates.

The Problematics of Enlightenment

The strong opposition the Enlightenment drew between reason on the one hand, and the 'prejudices' of tradition on the other, provoked the enticing but illusory hopes that if method in enquiry could become sufficiently rational, human understanding itself could henceforth become free from prejudice; free from the preconceptions which continually hinder human efforts to understand in an objective or unbiased way. Such hopes can be seen to animate the efforts of the Enlightenment spirit from Descartes in the 17th century onwards. During the late 19th century Nietzsche went to extravagant lengths to ridicule all hopes of this kind ('Facts there are not, only interpretations'), but the sweep of his declarations and the impetuosity of his style made it all too easy for the prevailing cultures of 'pure reason' to dismiss his insights in common with his eccentricities. Not until our own century were the more important of these insights retrieved and winnowed. In the meantime, contrasting conceptions of reason, or more particularly, an emergent host of rival rationalities, sought that place in the sun which an ecclesiastical rationality had occupied during the long era of Christendom.

In short, far from embodying a vision of emancipation that combined an acknowledgement of the claims of tradition with a judicious tolerance of difference, the educational legacy of the Enlightenment in the nineteenth century was itself largely custodial, though in a new way. In a pattern which became evident in many countries, it recast the conduct of formal learning as a battle for the minds and hearts of the young. The battleground became thronged with an increasing plurality of 'isms' in a struggle for the control of schooling as a *strategic instrument* of the strongest interests in society.

The consequences of such conflicts are still deeply embedded in modern educational systems; and to such an extent that they render almost quixotic

any attempt to restore an educational order of things inspired by a pre-pluralist era. But wouldn't the Socratic conception of education that I am keen to advance be something of this quixotic kind? In fact quite the contrary. Within metaphysics in the traditional sense, the claim to an all-inclusive overview remains dominant. With this goes the view that anything short of certainty is a deficiency. With it also go conceptions of social and political life which are not hospitable to critique, to self-criticism, or to new claims for the recognition and expression of differences. An educational practice inspired by convictions of a Socratic kind embodies the reversal of features such as these.

But it would be a great mistake to see the Enlightenment as just so much bad news. Where the critical inheritance of Enlightenment thinking has combined with an openness to more traditional forms of learning, as it has in our own century in the works of figures like Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor, it has made possible a more original understanding of human understanding itself; one which is more modest and yet more inclusive than its metaphysical predecessors; one which invites criticism of itself, but one which proves remarkably robust in the face of efforts to refute it. This more original understanding not only opens the way to reclaiming a Socratic conception of learning; it also situates it clearly in a contemporary context and gives it a new philosophical significance. One could describe such reclamation in academic terms as an advance achieved by the 'hermeneutic' researchers of recent philosophy. One could describe it in more practical terms as the disclosure of a cluster of insights which illuminate the experience of teaching and learning from the inside, as it were, and especially those daily dimensions which have remained *terra incognita* in most of the philosophical and psychological discourse on education.

Conclusion

These insights, and what I have called the more original understanding of human understanding itself, are explored in some detail in the book and they are what enable me to describe and defend teaching and learning more as a form of courtship than as a form of custody, though the distinction should not be thought of as a dichotomy. In conclusion I will try to indicate, if only very briefly, what some of the main themes in this exploration are. (a) Because our human efforts to understand are inescapably constrained by perspective, each of us will always understand incompletely, and in some degree differently. (b) In each case then, our understanding is constituted by a partiality, in both senses of the word (bias and incompleteness); a partiality which cannot finally be overcome during our lifetimes. (c) But we need not be simply at the mercy of this partiality. Our understanding can, through disciplined co-operative and sustained efforts in any field of study, become *more* complete even if it can

never become absolute. (d) On the other hand, the partiality inherent in understanding can quickly become more divisive and intractable (for instance through overt or unnoticed conceit, partisanship, narcissism, etc.) depending on how our efforts to understand become engaged, sustained and schooled during our lives. (e) To realize the best in ourselves as humans is therefore to become aware that we *are* a dialogue, whose possibilities can be taken up ever anew, or declined, or even smothered. (f) To act on this awareness in judicious ways which enable pupils and students to discover through their studies the strengths and the limitations that are unique to each of them is to treat the issue of personal identity more as a matter of epiphany than of imposition, of disclosure than of conformity.

And epiphanies, as writers from James Joyce to Charles Taylor remind us, can occur in the often unremarked experiences of each day, just as they can in the more dramatic events of life. In a more formal variant of this everyday sense, they lie at the heart of what teaching and learning, at their best, seek to achieve.

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¹ Yet it can scarcely be denied that the conduct of European learning inherited from the pre-Christian Plato more an authoritarian Platonist than a fully inclusive Platonic legacy, much as a constricting scholasticism was to become the main educational legacy (though not the only one) of Aquinas' work for many generations. Indeed the modesty (and probably the vision) of Aquinas's critical estimation of his own life's work, had it been taken up and pursued, might have advanced a remarkable insight; might even have enabled scholasticism itself to become transformed, as an educational pattern more to be admired than to be criticized in subsequent centuries.

² One of the most carefully researched studies of the distinction between Socrates and Plato is Gregory Vlastos' *Socrates - Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
