

Platonic education – “all learning is reminiscence”

“The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be enkindled.” - *On Listening*, Plutarch

In the famous story of the cave told by Socrates in the *Republic* our present condition and understanding of reality is likened to a strange cave in which prisoners sit chained on benches in such a way that their sight is restricted to a series of shadows playing on the cave wall: it is not until one of these prisoners escapes his chains and the cave that he is able to see the realities that exist in the bright light of the world above the cave and so to come to the realisation that the shadows below, which he had taken to be the only reality, were but distant copies of the things that adorn that upper world. Socrates discusses the inferences of the analogy: he says, “It is proper then, that we judge of [the implications] after such a manner as this, if those things be true - that education is not such a thing as some announce it to be; for they somehow say, that whilst there is no knowledge in the soul, they will insert it, as if they were inserting sight in blind eyes. . . . But our present reasoning now shows, that this power [that is, the possession of knowledge] being in the soul of every one, and the organ by which every one learns, and being in the same condition as the eye, if it were unable otherwise, than with the whole body, to turn from darkness to light, must, in like manner, with the whole soul, be turned from generation [that is, the material world], till it be able to endure the contemplation of being itself [or real ideas], and the most splendid of being; and this we call *The Good*.” (518b)

This view – that all learning is reminiscence – is the basis of Platonic philosophy: It says that the soul possesses within itself, in seed form, all true ideas; and that these seeds are grown and brought to life when our interaction with the external world prompts us to investigate the nature of immaterial reality; that given this prompt, and sufficient clear thought, we can bring into our fore-consciousness the light of those eternal ideas which underlie the manifested universe. As Socrates says in the *Meno* (81d), “For all things in nature being linked together in relationship, and the soul having heretofore known all things, nothing hinders but that any person, who has recalled to mind, or, according to the common phrase, who has learnt, one thing only, should of himself recover all his ancient knowledge, and find out again all the rest of things; if he has but courage, and faints not in the midst of his researches. For inquiry and learning is reminiscence all.”

What part does the panoply of teachers, texts, commentaries and academies play in this process of reminiscence-learning? Immediately after the *Republic* passage above, Socrates says, “This then, would appear to be the [teacher’s] art of his [the learner’s] conversion, in what manner he shall, with greatest ease and advantage, be turned. Not to implant in him the power of seeing, but considering him as possessed of it, only improperly situated, and not looking at what he ought, to contrive some method by which this may be accomplished.”

In our era learning is dominated by the written word; but in the ancient world philosophy was primarily an oral rather than a written tradition, and for Plato the key to education as reminiscence was very much a question of a soul to soul communication. In the *Phaedrus* Plato profoundly questions the place of written texts in the art of philosophic learning – he begins by telling a story about the invention of writing:

SOCRATES: I have heard then, that about Naucratis, in Egypt, there was one of their ancient Gods, to whom a bird was sacred, which they call Ibis; but the name of the daemon himself was Theuth. According to tradition, this God first discovered number and the art of reckoning, geometry and astronomy, the games of chess and hazard, and likewise letters. But Thamus was at that time king of all Egypt, and resided in that great city of the Upper Egypt which the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes; but the God himself they denominate Ammon.¹ Theuth, therefore, departing to Thamus, showed him his arts, and told him that he ought to distribute them amongst the other Egyptians. But Thamus asked him concerning the utility of each; and upon his informing him, he approved what appeared to him to be well said, but blamed that which had a contrary aspect. But Theuth is reported to have fully unfolded to Thamus many particulars respecting each art, which it would be too prolix to mention. But when they came to discourse upon letters, “This discipline, O king,” says Theuth, “will render the Egyptians wiser, and increase their powers of memory. For this invention is the medicine of memory and wisdom.” To this Thamus replied, “O most artful Theuth, one person is more adapted to artful operations, but another to judging what detriment or advantage will arise from the use of these productions of art: and now you who are the father of letters, through the benevolence of your disposition, have affirmed just the contrary of what letters are able to effect. For these, through the negligence of recollection, will produce forgetfulness in the soul of the learner; because, through trusting to the external and foreign marks of writing, they will not exercise the internal powers of recollection. So that you have not discovered the medicine of memory, but of admonition. You will likewise deliver to your disciples an opinion of wisdom, and not truth. For, in consequence of having many readers without the instruction of a master, the multitude will appear to be knowing in many things of which they are at the same time ignorant; and will become troublesome associates, in consequence of possessing an opinion of wisdom, instead of wisdom itself.”

PHAEDRUS: You with great facility, Socrates, compose Egyptian discourses and those of any other nation when you are so disposed.

SOCRATES: But, my friend, those who reside in the temple of Dodonean Zeus assert that the first prophetic discourses issued from the oak.² It was sufficient, therefore, for those ancients, as they were not so wise as you moderns, to listen to oaks and rocks, through their simplicity, if these inanimate things did but utter the truth. But you perhaps think it makes a difference who speaks, and to what country he belongs. For you do not alone consider, whether what is asserted is true or false.

PHAEDRUS: You have very properly reproved me; and I think the case with respect to letters is just as the Theban Thamus has stated it.

SOCRATES: Hence, he who thinks to commit an art to writing, or to receive it, when delivered by this mean, so that something clear and firm may result from the letters, is endued with great simplicity, and is truly ignorant of the prophecy of Ammon; since he is of opinion, that

¹ This was a legendary time when the Gods ruled the earth – Theuth (or Thoth) was identified by the Greeks as Hermes (their God of Learning), and the king, Thamus, who in his divine form was called Ammon (or Ammon-Ra) was identified by the Greeks as Zeus, the ruling God of the Olympic pantheon.

² In Dodona oracles were given – some say from interpreting the rustle of oak leaves, others from priestesses adorned with oak leaves.

something more is contained in the writing than what the things themselves contained in the letters admonish the knowledgeable reader.

PHAEDRUS: Most right.

SOCRATES: For that which is committed to writing contains something very weighty, and truly similar to a picture. For the offspring of a picture project as if they were alive; but, if you ask them any question, they are silent in a perfectly venerable manner. Just so with respect to written discourses, you would think that they spoke as if they possessed some portion of wisdom. But if, desirous to be instructed, you interrogate them about anything which they assert, they signify one thing only, and this always the same. And every discourse, when it is once written, is everywhere similarly rolled among its auditors, and even among those by whom it ought not to be heard; and is perfectly ignorant, to whom it is proper to address itself, and to whom not. But when it is faulty or unjustly reviled, it always requires the assistance of its father. For, as to itself, it can neither resist its adversary, nor defend itself.

PHAEDRUS: And this, also, you appear to have most rightly asserted.

SOCRATES: But what, shall we not consider another discourse, which is the genuine brother of this, how legitimate it is, and how much better and more powerful it is born than this?

PHAEDRUS: What is this? and how do you say it is produced?

SOCRATES: That which, in conjunction with science, is written in the soul of the learner, which is able to defend itself, and which knows to whom it ought to speak, and before whom it ought to be silent.

PHAEDRUS: You speak of the living and animated discourse of one endued with knowledge; of which written discourse may be justly called a certain image.

SOCRATES: Entirely so. But answer me with respect to this also: Will the farmer, who is endued with intellect, scatter such seeds as are most dear to him, and from which he wishes fruit should arise? Will he scatter them in summer in the gardens of Adonis,³ with the greatest diligence and attention, rejoicing to behold them in beautiful perfection within the space of eight days? Or rather, when he acts in this manner, will he not do so for the sake of some festive day, or sport? But, when seriously applying himself to the business of agriculture, will he not sow where it is proper, and be sufficiently pleased, if his sowing receives its consummation within the space of eight months?

PHAEDRUS: He would doubtless act in this manner, Socrates, at one time sowing seriously, and at another time for diversion.

SOCRATES: But shall we say that the man who possesses the science of things just, beautiful and good, is endued with less intellect than a husbandman, with respect to the seeds which he sows?

PHAEDRUS: By no means.

³ There was a festival in which the life and death of Adonis was celebrated: people would sow seeds in shallow pots which would then grow quickly but also die back quickly, all within the short period of the festival.

SOCRATES: He will not, therefore, with anxious and hasty diligence write them in black water, sowing them by this mean with his pen in conjunction with discourses; since it is thus impossible to assist them through speech, and impossible sufficiently to exhibit the truth.

PHAEDRUS: This, therefore, is not proper.

SOCRATES: Certainly not. He will, therefore, sow and write in the gardens which letters contain for the sake of sport, as it appears; and when he has written, having raised monuments as treasures to himself, with a view to the forgetfulness of old age, if he should arrive to it, and for the like benefit of others who tread in the same steps, he is delighted on beholding his delicate progeny of fruits; and while other men pursue other diversions, irrigating themselves with banquets, and other entertainments which are the sisters of these, he on the contrary passes his time in the delights which conversation produces.

PHAEDRUS: You speak, Socrates, of a most beautiful diversion, and not of a vile amusement, as the portion of him who is able to sport with discourse, and who can mythologize about justice, and other particulars which you speak of.

SOCRATES: For it is indeed so, my dear Phaedrus. But, in my opinion, a much more beautiful study will result from discourses, when someone employing the dialectic art, and receiving a soul properly adapted for his purpose, plants and sows in it discourses, in conjunction with knowledge; discourses which are sufficiently able to assist both themselves and their planter, and which are not barren, but abound with seed; from whence others springing up in different manners, are always sufficient to extend this immortal benefit, and to render their possessor blessed in as high a degree as is possible to man.

PHAEDRUS: This which you speak of is still far more beautiful.

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“... our looking into ourselves when we are endeavouring to discover any truth, evinces that we inwardly contain truth, though concealed in the darkness of oblivion. The delight too which attends our discovery of truth, sufficiently proves that this discovery is nothing more than a recognition of something most eminently allied to our nature, and which had been, as it were, lost in the middle space of time between our former knowledge of the truth and the recovery of that knowledge: for the perception of a thing perfectly unknown and unconnected with our nature, would produce terror instead of delight; and things are pleasing only in proportion as they possess something known and domestic to the natures by which they are known.” – Thomas Taylor, in his Introduction to his *Five Books of Plotinus*.