



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Plato on Dialogue as a Method for Cultivating the Virtues

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 4th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 7th – Saturday 9th January 2016.
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Plato on Dialogue as a Method for Cultivating the Virtues

In two recent articles, Kristján Kristjánsson (2014a, 2014b) offers new perspectives on two aspects of Aristotle's theory of moral education that on first glance appear to work against the implementation of Aristotle's ideas in contemporary educational contexts. The first is Aristotle's supposed disinterest in dialogue as a pedagogical device for improving the moral development of students. Kristjánsson (2014a) correctly identifies a false dichotomy between Aristotle and Socrates in which Aristotle supposedly advocates mindless habituation through repetitive behaviors while Socrates advocates open-ended dialogue which develops genuine ethical knowledge in students. Kristjánsson argues that this is a misunderstanding of Aristotle's ethical and educational project and that in fact Aristotle is a proponent of dialogue, as evidenced by his analysis of friendship and how certain types of friendships are essential to ethical formation—and these friendships have dialogue at their core.

The second aspect that Kristjánsson (2014b) challenges is Aristotle's famous claim that individuals who are not properly brought up have no chance of ever developing full virtue. In places in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1179b11-31; 1105b11-12), Aristotle argues that individuals must have developed habits of performing virtuous actions from their youth, and that if they do not have those habits by the time they reach adulthood, there is no hope for them to develop them later in life. Good habits are necessary because (a) they teach individuals how to identify virtues, and (b) they inculcate a *desire* in individuals to perform them. Individuals who cannot identify virtuous actions and who do not have a desire to perform them are permanently unable, except in the rarest of circumstances, to live virtuous lives. Kristjánsson argues that this aspect of Aristotle's philosophy is unattractive to contemporary moral educators and he hopes to offer an "Aristotelian reconstruction" that, while not denying that Aristotle made these claims, points to places in Aristotle that seem more optimistic regarding the possibilities of virtue development for poorly brought-up individuals.

I find Kristjánsson's reinterpretation of Aristotle's ideas on dialogue and his reconstruction concerning Aristotle's views on bad upbringings persuasive, and I think he has done much to make Aristotle more relevant than ever, but the question is whether Aristotle gives us sufficient material to work with regarding *how* best to implement dialogue and overcome a bad upbringing in contemporary educational contexts. I argue that he does not and that contemporary moral educators would do well to supplement their study of Aristotle with a study of Aristotle's supposed philosophical rival, Plato.

Although the fact is often unacknowledged by contemporary philosophers of education and moral educators, Plato's theory of moral development is very similar to Aristotle's and even includes Aristotle's pessimism regarding the potential of individuals with bad upbringings to ever achieve full virtue. Plato argues that if one has been given an *improper* habituation in one's youth, he or she will have the wrong conception of virtue and the wrong tastes and therefore will be forever corrupted. "For no man under heaven who has cultivated such practices [vices] from his youth could possibly grow up to be wise—so miraculous a temper is against nature—or become temperate, or indeed acquire any other part of virtue" (*Seventh Letter*, 326c). Plato argues that for a person to develop full virtue they must have been properly habituated from their youth. Individuals who were so brought-up not only know how to identify virtuous acts, they also want to perform them—they have developed a taste for them and seek out opportunities to act accordingly (*Republic*, 395c-d, 518d; *Laws*, 635b, 792d-e). The same theory of moral development can be found in Aristotle, who points to Plato in his own formulation of the theory: "moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones. Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and be pained by the things that we ought" (NE, 1104b9-13).

Plato's emphasis on habituation and the difficulty of morally educating individuals who have been badly habituated is thoroughly Aristotelian, and at first glance it also appears to figure badly against the contemporary application of Plato's ideas. But hope is not entirely lost. It does not

take a reconstruction of Plato's ideas to rescue his contemporary relevance, like it does for Aristotle's ideas on bad upbringings. A close examination of Plato's ideas concerning dialogue reveals a theory of transformation for individuals who have a bad upbringing. But it is *not* the theory that is so often attributed to Plato—namely, the theory that dialogue allows individuals to *recollect true knowledge of the good* which will ensure that they act on the good (Kohlberg, 1981). In fact, Plato's theory of dialogue is much more modest. He believes that the role of dialogue is to temporarily open the eyes of individuals so as to inspire a *desire for re-habituation*. Plato suggests that while no poorly-raised individual can ever come to full virtue through teaching alone, he or she can be so impacted by a well-crafted dialogue that he or she can start the long process toward developing a different set of habits, habits that can eventually serve as a foundation for deeper philosophical reflection on the virtues, which can then, in turn, inspire further virtuous activity. Plato does not believe that dialogue alone can achieve complete moral transformation—at most it can “only half realize [the individuals] potentialities for virtue” (Laws, 647d)—but believes that it can *start a process* of moral transformation that has the potential to create lasting change so long as the individual develops new habits.

The goal of this paper is to outline Plato's ideas on dialogue, habituation and the moral transformation of mature learners. Plato's ideas on these three issues have suffered an undeserved bad reputation. By clarifying his ideas I hope to make his work of greater relevance to contemporary moral educators, virtue ethicists, and philosophers of education.

Plato's Theory of Dialogue in the *Seventh Letter*

In the last thirty years, there has been a substantial number of philosophy of education articles and book chapters written on Socratic dialogue and the Socratic Method.¹ Broadly speaking these articles fall into three categories. The first category is composed of articles and book chapters that primarily trace the history of the *use* of the Socratic Method in educational contexts (Rud, 1997; Mintz 2005; Schneider, 2013); the second category is composed of articles and book chapters that primarily attempt to explain the Socratic Method through an analysis of a broad swath of Platonic texts, analyzing general characteristics of what Socrates does (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1987; Reich, 1998; Boghassian, 2012; Brickhouse and Smith, 2009, Pekarsky, 1994); the third category is composed of articles that primarily analyze one particular text and draw general conclusions from it (Hansen, 1988, Haroutunian-Gordon, 1986; 1987; 1988; 1990²; Jonas, 2015). Combined, these articles are very helpful in providing a well-rounded picture of the variety of ways Socrates conducts himself in his dialogues and the variety of ways contemporary “Socratic” teachers do or do not reflect this conduct. In these ways, the articles afford important insights into the “Socratic Method.” What I explore in this paper is a different issue that concerns Plato's explicit theory of dialogue rather than Socrates' conduct. In a sense, I am interested not so much in Socrates' “Method,” but Plato's “Method.” Specifically, I will outline the reasons Plato thinks that dialogue is the only adequate way of doing philosophy and examine what Plato hopes to achieve through dialogue. To establish Plato's theory of dialogue I will rely on his most direct and explicit discussion about it found in the *Seventh Letter*. In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato provides an account of the importance of dialogue for moral transformation.

Of the articles referenced above, not a single one examines Plato's discussion of dialogue in the *Seventh Letter*. Of course, there are many reasons that would explain this. The first is that the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* has never been conclusively established (Cooper, 1997). There are significant grounds for believing it is authentic, but there are also grounds for thinking it may not be. The jury is still out and will probably be out forever, unless archeologists uncover new

¹ Beyond articles and book chapters explicitly committed to philosophy of education, countless books, book chapters and scholarly articles have been written on the Socratic Method by philosophers, classicists, philologists, and philosophers of hermeneutics. A few examples include: Burnyeat (1992), Seeskin (1987), Gadamer (1980), Brickhouse and Smith (1994, 2000), Benson (2000, 2011) and Clay (2000).

² These four articles by Haroutunian-Gordon are explicitly meant to function as a whole and thus, in a sense, all of them put together would plausibly fit in my second category, where a broad swath of dialogues are canvassed.

archeological evidence. The second is that even if the *Seventh Letter* is authentic, it reflects *Plato's* thoughts on dialogue but does not mention Socrates or the *elenctic* method that Socrates employed. The third is that the letter is not a dialogue and therefore the figure of Socrates is not on display. Since all of the above articles were on Socrates and the Socratic Method, it makes sense that the letter would not be referenced. For the purposes of this paper, however, where we are trying to establish Plato's "Method" (as opposed to Socrates') the *Seventh Letter* is indispensable as it explicitly lays out Plato's theory of dialogue.

The *Seventh Letter* is one of Plato's latest works, written after his trips to Syracuse and Sicily. The majority of the *Seventh Letter* is not about dialogue but relates a story about Plato's travels to Syracuse and his (unsuccessful) attempts to convert the tyrant Dionysius II from a life of intemperance and unjust hedonism to the life of a moderate and virtuous philosopher. This truly fascinating narrative makes up the bulk of the letter and Plato's theory of dialogue represents only a brief "excursus." Plato's stated reason for writing the excursus is to repudiate Dionysius II's claims that he understood Plato's teaching on epistemology and dialogue and had elaborated those ideas in writing. Plato emphatically rejects Dionysius's claims by arguing that if Dionysius had really understood Plato's ideas he would never have written the ideas down because the ideas are not possible to be explained in writing. Plato claims that true understanding cannot be captured by words but can only be apprehended through dialogue. Plato argues that "there is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself" (SL, 341c). These pregnant words reveal much about the Platonic dialogues and the reason Plato only wrote dialogues. From them we learn that Plato did not believe that he could ever communicate in words the truths that he wanted to communicate to his readers, so he did the only thing he could do: he invited his readers to become interlocutors in conversations in which he hoped they would, "through long-continued intercourse", come to a recognition of the truth, the truth that would "flash forth" in the process of dialogue.³

After arguing for the necessity of dialogue for knowledge, Plato goes on to outline in very general terms what constitutes this knowledge. He claims that there are five levels of "knowledge" but only the fifth level constitutes *ultimate* knowledge. The first level is merely the *name* of the knowledge, like "courage" for example. The second level is the *definition* of the knowledge. The third is a visual representation of the knowledge, which in the case of courage would be a *description* of a particular courageous deed, which is a specific instantiation of the definition. The fourth is the ability to correctly identify—either by knowledge (*episteme*), reason (*nous*) or correct opinion—virtuous actions when one sees them. The fourth level is the closest to the fifth level and constitutes the level of understanding available to most human beings without the aid of dialogue. None of these however constitute the "flash" of true insight. Levels one through four constitutes some level of knowledge but not the highest and most important level (342a-3). Whereas levels one through four can be attained through direct instruction found in lectures and written works, the fifth level can never be achieved through these forms of direct instruction, or at least not for the vast majority of the human race.

Like Aristotle, Plato believes that the vast majority of the human race is incapable of attaining true knowledge of virtue on their own or even by being told what that knowledge is. Aristotle claims: "Now if arguments were in themselves enough to make men good, they would justly... have won very great rewards, and such rewards should have been provided; but as things are... [arguments] are not able to encourage the many to nobility and goodness" (NE 1179b1-3).

³ Plato's arguments made in the *Seventh Letter* substantiate recent analyses of the significance of Plato's use of dialogue to communicate his ideas, like, for example, Christopher Rowe's (2007) interpretation of the dialogues as exercises meant to change the reader. "Written dialogue (in Plato's case) is not the same thing as, and does not follow the rules of, ordinary philosophical dialectic... and his focus is—I suppose—on *our*, the readers' improvement, rather than that of Socrates' interlocutor" (22). The dialogical form invites, even demands, the reader to participate in the back and forth of the dialogue and as such implicates him or her in ways that seem to go beyond the communication of doctrine.

Plato argues similarly. He claims that if it were possible for teachers to make individuals good through argument alone, the teacher who could do so would be a great benefactor to humankind. But, as things stand, arguments are not powerful enough to transform the moral goodness of the average human being.

And this too I know: if these matters are to be expounded at all in books or lectures, they would best come from me. . . . If I thought they could be put into written words adequate for the multitude, what nobler work could I do in my life than to compose something of such great benefit to mankind and bring to light the nature of things for all to see? But I do not think that the “examination,” as it is called, of these questions would be of any benefit to men, except the few, i.e., to those who could with a little guidance discover the truth themselves. (SL, 341d-e)

There are two points in this passage that deserve attention. The first is that, as I indicated, Plato thinks that arguments for the fifth kind of knowledge will never help the average human being understand the true nature of things. The second is that Plato is explicitly concerned with the well-being of average human beings, and he believes that it would be noble to help them gain genuine knowledge. Obviously he thinks he cannot help them through writing treatises, because only the few would be benefitted. Of course, Plato stuck to this theory and never wrote treatises as far as we know. But he did write dialogues, which do have the power to help the masses attain knowledge by creating a “long-continued intercourse between teacher [Socrates] and pupil [reader].” As Hadot (1995) and others argue, Plato’s dialogues are not first and foremost direct transcriptions of doctrine, but spiritual exercises meant to engage the reader in dialogue.

Platonic dialogues are model exercises. They are models, in that they are not transcriptions of real dialogues, but literary compositions which present an ideal dialogue. . . . For the point is not to set forth a doctrine, but rather to guide the [readers] towards a determinate mental attitude. It is combat, amicable but real. . . . To emerge victorious from this battle, it is not enough to disclose the truth. It is not even enough to demonstrate it. What is needed is *persuasion*, and for that one must psychagogy, the art of seducing souls. (91-92)

The correctness of Hadot’s thesis is made even clearer when we consider the fact that Plato never actually explains what the fifth level is, apart from the fact that it is a sort of perception that flashes across one’s mind. The reason Plato is unwilling to explain the fifth level of knowledge is not only that the masses could not understand the ideas, but something deeper—namely, that it is impossible to explain the fifth level of knowledge discursively without necessarily distorting that knowledge. He argues that because of the weakness of language a person can never express the actual “being” of a thing, but only its “particular properties.” As such, Plato claims that no sensible person would ever try to explain the true being of a thing. “On this account no sensible man will venture to express his deepest thoughts [which is where true knowledge lies] in words, especially in a form that is unchangeable, as is true of written outlines” (343a). As we have seen, Plato believes that the rarest individuals can, in spite of the distortion, come to understand the truth being expressed, but that is only because they have natures that are so “akin” to the truth already that they merely need a glimpse of it—even a distorted glimpse of it—to perceive the truth. It is the opposite with average individuals—they will be led by the distortion to think the explanation is literally true. He claims that they will be “filled with an ill-founded and quite unbecoming disdain, and some with an exaggerated and foolish elation, as if they had learned something grand.” (342a). In fact they will not have learned anything grand, but rather a distorted and fundamentally untrue description in words of what cannot, by definition, be described in words. Plato goes on to argue that for people like these, the only way to help them attain the flash of insight found in true knowledge is not to provide discursive explanations of truth but to engage them in sustained dialogue. “Only when all of these other things—names, definitions, and visual and other perceptions—have been rubbed against one another and tested, pupil and teacher asking and answering questions in good will and without envy—only then, when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort, can they illuminate the nature of any object” (344b). Surprisingly, Plato claims that having the fifth level of

knowledge does not guarantee that it cannot be refuted. On the contrary, the minute a person attempts to explain the fifth level of knowledge in words, those words can easily be turned around and twisted so as to undermine the truth that was apprehended (343d). This is why no sensible person would ever try to express their true knowledge in a discursive manner—rather, if he or she wants to communicate his or her ideas in writing, it is necessary to write dialogues. This does not mean that knowledge at levels one through four cannot be communicated through discursive text, but only the ultimate knowledge found in level five.

While the *Seventh Letter* is Plato's most explicit and direct explanation of his theory of dialogue, it is not the only place he references it. He echoes many of the same ideas in the *Phaedrus*, which, according to Kahn (1996), "is the only [place] in the dialogues in which Plato overtly comments on his own work as a writer." At the end of the *Phaedrus* Socrates argues that writing speeches is a foolish thing to do because it is impossible to communicate one's ideas adequately without knowing exactly who one's audience is. It is not the words that have transformative power, but the relationship between certain kinds of words and arrangement of words and the individual hearing those words. One person might be transformed by one way of giving a speech; another person by another way. Because one cannot have sufficient psychological knowledge of every kind of person hearing or reading a speech, there is no way of knowing whether they will understand what writer is trying to communicate (*Phaedrus*, 273d-e). Moreover, later he claims that if a writer tries to express his ideas in a "document which he believes to embody clear knowledge of lasting importance, then this writer deserves reproach (*Phaedrus*, 277d). Why does this writer deserve reproach? It is because he is unaware of the fact that true knowledge cannot be communicated in words. Individuals who believe that true knowledge can be communicated through words—individuals like Dionysius II—necessarily must not have true knowledge. Rather, they merely have a "dream-image" of knowledge. "For to be unaware of the difference between a dream-image [which can be communicated with words] and the reality of what is just and unjust, good and bad [which cannot be communicated with words], must truly be grounds for reproach even if the crowd praises it with one voice" (*Phaedrus*, 277e).

This is not to say that all writing is pointless, however. Socrates concludes his condemnation of discursive rhetoric with a pregnant, if enigmatic, acknowledgement that philosophical writing has some merit, so long as the philosopher doing the writing truly has a vision of the good and yet, paradoxically, knows that his or her vision cannot be communicated in a serious discourse. Socrates claims that individuals who write in this manner must "make the argument that [their] writing is of little worth" (*Phaedrus*, 278c) and that they should recognize that only "what is truly written in the soul concerning what is just, noble, and good can be clear, perfect, and worth serious attention" (*Phaedrus*, 278a). What he seems to mean by this is that since the writing itself cannot contain the truth, it is of little worth as writing; it is merely so much ink on paper. However, from the context, it is clear that for Socrates the knowledge that motivates this writing is of great worth and that the pursuit of such knowledge must be the goal of human beings. Writing is therefore at best only an indirect means of helping others achieve a vision of the good that cannot, itself, be expressed in the writings. To try to express it is to guarantee failure. It is better to see one's writings as merely expressing a dream-image that, under ideal circumstances, and with a little good luck, can produce a vision of the fifth level of knowledge that is hinted at in the writing but never directly stated.

Plato's Theory of Dialogue in Action

Plato's discussion of the fifth kind of knowledge is tantalizing but (purposely) vague. It would be helpful to know more about this true knowledge and how it is arrived at, but Plato cannot offer the reader of the *Seventh Letter* a more filled-out account because doing so would necessarily falsify the account. However, now that we understand what Plato is trying to accomplish with his dialogues, we are able to examine the dialogues for *images* of the fifth kind of knowledge in action. Of course, because the dialogues themselves are communicated through words and images, the best understanding we can hope for is knowledge of the first four levels, but at least this will illuminate *how* true knowledge comes about, even if it never tells us what that true knowledge is.

A dialogue that is particularly helpful in providing such an image is the *Lysis*. As Jonas (2015) argues, at the end of the dialogue, Lysis clearly comes to some sort of internal realization that is manifested in his physical comportment. Jonas calls the realization an “epiphany” which goes beyond words and cannot be explained by words. The evidence that Lysis has such an epiphany is seen in the way he falls silent at certain points of the dialogue (222a, 222b) and how during these silences other members of the dialogue recognize that he is having an “epiphany.” Remaining true to his theory of knowledge in the *Seventh Letter*, Plato does not explain the content of the epiphany; he merely gives the reader an image of the outward manifestation of the epiphany. Plato also remains true to his theory by highlighting the way the dialogue itself leads to an epiphany. As many commentators point out, the dialogue is full of fallacious reasoning on Socrates’ part. Interestingly, the specious arguments of Socrates help to create a number of *aporias* in Lysis’s mind. Lysis becomes confused partially because Socrates says things that just do not make sense; but because Lysis trusts and defers to Socrates he goes along with Socrates’ arguments such that he is reduced to complete confusion on several occasions. Jonas argues that the *aporias* are essential to the creation of the epiphany in the *Lysis* because they bring Lysis to the end of his normal understanding. This is consistent with Plato’s theory in the *Seventh Letter* insofar as Plato claims that individuals must be brought to a place “when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort” (344b) for the fifth level of knowledge to occur. When Lysis reaches those extremities he becomes open to understanding things in a new way. Quoting Tindale (1984, 107), Jonas claims:

“To describe in words alone what friendship is would be to falsify it in some way, to prevent the necessary moment of encounter in the discovery of the idea....What have been seen as defective arguments within a perplexing context emphasizes the inadequacy of definition without an underlying experience”. As such, in order for any person to genuinely understand what a friend is, they must cease relying on linguistic, rationalist conceptualization of friendship. They must simply *see* what a friend is—and this requires a kind of epiphany.”

As far as the general precepts go, this passage could be taken straight out of the *Seventh Letter*. It contains the ideas that (1) words falsify true knowledge, that (2) true knowledge is best described as a type of seeing, and (3) that true knowledge comes from a moment of encounter in a dialogue.

Interestingly, in at least two of its components, (1) and (2), it could also be taken straight out of Aristotle. Aristotle similarly argues that words can never adequately explain what the virtues are and therefore the one who truly understands virtue will not be able to explain that understanding but will merely appeal to the fact that he or she just “sees” it. Summarizing chapters 11 and 12 of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, McDowell (2001) claims “the content of the conception of a virtuous person acts out cannot be formulated in such a way that its application can be expressed in the “rule”-“case” form....In the absence of such an argument, it comes naturally to say ‘you have to see it’, with the perceptual concept marking a point at which discursive justifications have run out” (p. 29-30).⁴ Aristotle asserts that students so trained will be able to understand or see what virtue is or requires, but he does not say they will be able to *explain* it in general terms. If we were to ask a virtuous person what virtue is, they would be able to point to various instances of virtue, and they would be able to describe to some degree the internal motivations of their virtuous acts, but if we were to ask them to *define* it by generalizing from the particular act of virtue to virtue itself, they would not be able to do so; or if they did so, they would necessarily offer an incomplete or distorted account. According to Aristotle, this does not mean they do not know what virtue is; they know virtue when they see it, and they know and can express what the virtuous thing to do is in a given case, and they know *why* they should act virtuously in the given case, but they cannot articulate that knowledge in general terms. Of course, it is true that Aristotle offers a general explanation of virtuous behavior—hitting the mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency—but not only

⁴ While being correct on this point, McDowell (1998) problematically connects it with his belief that Aristotle does not believe in “universal ethical truth” (p. 28). Aristotle’s refusal to allow that virtuous acts can be codified does not necessarily mean that he does not believe that there are universal ethical truths. One can believe that true virtue has a universal character and still be unable to express exactly what that character is. For a discussion of McDowell’s “anti-foundationalist reading of Aristotle, see Kristjánsson (2006, pp. 110-112).

is this definition almost entirely negative, it is also almost entirely formal. It does not really afford even a shadow of the perceptual complexity of the internal comprehension of virtue found within the virtuous individual.

In the case of (1) and (2), Plato and Aristotle share perspectives, but it is (3) that makes them different. Although Kristjánsson has accurately shown that there is an element of dialogue to be found in Aristotle's ethics, it is only Plato who makes it front and center. But it is front and center in a very specific way. All of Plato's dialogues engage interlocutors who are post adolescent (at the youngest) and many who are adults. This is not unintended by Plato. In fact, he believes that the central importance of dialogue is to provide individuals who were not properly raised to have a chance at developing virtue later in their lives.⁵ Unlike Aristotle who believes that the perceptual capacity to "see" the virtues can only be achieved by habituation early in youth, Plato believes that the perceptual capacity can be attained later in life through dialogue—although, to be clear, the dialogue has to be very carefully constructed to achieve the proper perception. Merely talking about the virtues is not sufficient for the task.

But now a serious issue arises—namely, that as we saw in the introduction, Plato argues that an individual will never achieve *full* virtue if he or she merely *knows* what virtue is. For an individual to become fully virtuous they must also consistently practice the virtues. But therein lies the problem: Plato claims that if individuals do not develop virtuous habits in their youth they will not have a taste for them when they are adults.

If they do imitate, they must imitate from childhood what is appropriate for them, namely, people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious, and free, and their actions. They mustn't be clever at doing or imitating slavish or shameful actions, lest from enjoying the imitation, they come to enjoy the reality. Or haven't you noticed that imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought? (*Republic*, 395c-d)

The problem is that even if poorly brought-up individuals achieve the fifth level of knowledge through epiphanies created by dialogue, they will still have to overcome the bad habits that they developed in their youth—habits that work against that knowledge. Their ingrained and habituated tastes are against them. They may desire to live in light of their newfound knowledge, but their habituated tendencies desire something else. This is, of course, a common experience for those of us who seek to reform some habitual aspect of our lives; like a New Year's resolution, they are easy to make in good faith, but they are hard to carry out for the very reason that old habits are hard to break, and new habits are hard to make. Plato is insistent on this point: the only way to live a fully virtuous life is to develop virtuous habits. Having knowledge of virtue is not enough; one has to overcome any habitual tendencies that are in opposition to virtue. "A man has to fight and conquer his feelings of cowardice before he can achieve perfect courage; if he has no experience and training in that kind of struggle, he will never more than half realize his potentialities for virtue" (*Laws*, 647d). Plato argues that courage does not come about simply through the knowledge of courage. Individuals must have learned to overcome countervailing desires to act cowardly. Only when individuals have been habituated to face their fears and overcome the temptation to act cowardly will their knowledge guide their actions infallibly. For Plato, true virtue comes only when one's habituated emotions are in line with reason.

I call 'education' the initial acquisition of virtue by the child, when the feelings of pleasure and affection, pain and hatred, that well up in his soul are channeled in the right courses before he can understand the reason why. Then when he does understand, his reason and his emotions agree in telling him that he has been properly trained by inculcation of appropriate habits. Virtue is the general accord of reason and emotion (*Laws*, 635b).

⁵ Plato's attempt to convert Dionysius II in the *Seventh Letter* is evidence of this fact, as is the fact that all of Socrates' interlocutors are in their late adolescence or adulthood. Moreover, it is safe to assume that Plato's readers are also at least in their late adolescence. Clearly, on several counts, it is obvious that Plato believes in the *potential* of dialogue to help transform adults—even if it is, as we shall see, a *slim* potential.

In this passage, which is a description of a *properly* brought-up individual, we see that knowledge of virtue comes later in life, *after* virtuous habits are developed. In this case, a person first learns to desire doing virtuous acts, and it is only later that they discover what it is about those acts that makes them virtuous. Until they have both consistent desires to do virtuous acts *and* the knowledge of what makes those acts virtuous, they will never be fully virtuous. The same two components are necessary for individuals who had bad upbringings. In their cases, however, the order of the two components is reversed: they must first receive knowledge of what constitutes virtues and must later develop the habitual desires act in light of that knowledge. Both of these components must be in place for them to become fully virtuous. A person is not fully virtuous until they have the proper emotional responses to performing virtuous actions (which makes them want to perform them). If individuals do not have the proper emotional response to doing the virtues—like poorly raised individuals who have developed bad habits—then they are at best only half virtuous.

What impact does the need for habituation have on the present analysis? The answer is that Plato does not believe that merely inducing an epiphany leading to the fifth level of knowledge is enough to make adult learners virtuous. If they are going to become virtuous then they must go beyond their knowledge by developing new habits, habits that support rather than oppose their knowledge. This means that they must start a re-habituation process in their later years. The need for re-habituation qualifies the use of the *Lysis* as the exemplary dialogue in which to understand Plato's theory of the development of the virtues. While the *Lysis* is an excellent dialogue in which to see an epiphany happen, it offers very little explanation of what *Lysis*' next steps must be if he is to live into the epiphany he has achieved.

A better example of the next steps an interlocutor must go through to become fully virtuous is found in *Alcibiades I* (although even here we are only given a glimpse). The dialogue depicts the initial transformation of Alcibiades from a power-hungry hedonist to a seeker of virtue who decides to devote himself to justice: "I'll start to cultivate justice in myself right now" (*Alcibiades I*, 135e). (In a sense, this conversion reflects what Plato hoped to achieve with Dionysius II in the *Seventh Letter*.) The fact that Alcibiades claims that he will "start" the cultivation of justice is important. Alcibiades has come to see his former desires and his former way of life as incompatible with virtue, but he also recognizes that this knowledge alone does not make him virtuous; it prepares him for virtue but does not fully accomplish the fact. He must start the process of cultivating a virtue which does not yet exist in him. Plato makes this abundantly clear through the lines that preceded the above quote. After Alcibiades epiphany, Socrates asks Alcibiades recognizes that he is currently in a condition which make living virtuously difficult

Socrates: Can you see the condition you're now in? Is it appropriate for a free man or not?

Alcibiades: I think I see only too clearly.

Socrates: Then do you know how to escape from your present state?

Alcibiades: I do

Socrates: How?

...

Alcibiades: Yes that's right. I'll start to cultivate justice in myself right now

Socrates: I should like to believe you that you'll persevere, but I am afraid—not because I distrust your nature, but because I know how powerful the city is—I'm afraid it might get the better of both me and you. (135c-d)

This passage outlines the dangers to the poorly brought-up individual who has had an epiphany about virtue. Alcibiades *knows* that he is not living the way he should be living; he also *wants* to stop living that way. But Socrates indicates that merely having the knowledge and the desire to live virtuously does not guarantee that one will do so. Socrates claims that Alcibiades must "escape" from his present state. Yet, Alcibiades has already has his epiphany. Clearly then having the knowledge and desire found in the epiphany does not free a person. The escape from the habits created by years of living his former lifestyle is still an issue—and a daunting issue at that.

We know that it is daunting because Socrates expresses his doubt that Alcibiades will actually be able to escape. Socrates does not doubt the epiphany that Alcibiades has received nor his genuine desire to escape his vicious condition, but he knows full well that the power of a vicious culture can make changing one's vicious habits difficult. Socrates last comments foreshadow both Alcibiades' moral demise in Athens and Socrates' physical demise. In the case of Alcibiades, Athens' vicious culture was partially responsible for Alcibiades' vicious upbringing and thus Socrates knew that it would not support Alcibiades in the changing of his habits, but rather bring him back to his bad habits again and again.

Amidst Socrates' pessimism, Plato hints at the only possible hope for Alcibiades. Alcibiades must find a virtuous role-model who can guide Alcibiades in the development of new habits. Alcibiades recognizes this and asks Socrates to be such a guide. He claims he is going to devote himself to Socrates and be guided by him. For Plato the only hope for the person who seeks a process of re-habituating is to find a guide or guides who can instruct him or her in the practice of virtue. He indicates this throughout his corpus, like in the *Gorgias*, for example:

Should a man professionally engaged in physical training pay attention to the praise and blame and opinion of any man, or to those of one man only, namely a doctor or trainer?... He must then act and exercise, eat and drink in the way the one, the trainer and the one who knows, thinks right, not all the others?...

So with other matters, not to enumerate them all, and certainly with actions just and unjust, shameful and beautiful, good and bad, about which we are now deliberating, should we follow the opinion of the many and fear it, or that of the one, if there is one who has knowledge of these things and before whom we feel fear and shame more than before the others. If we do not follow his directions, we shall harm and corrupt that part of ourselves that is improved by just actions and destroyed by unjust actions. (47c-d)

Socrates directly states that like an athlete who wants to perform at his or her highest potential must find a trainer to direct him or her in a regimen of practice, a person who wants to live virtuously must find virtuous role-models who can direct him or her in a regimen of practice. Of course, Socrates seems somewhat pessimistic about whether, in Athens at least, such role-models exist, but whether or not they exist, they are needed. It is clear that to become good, adults and young adults must find virtuous guides, which is why Socrates encourages his interlocutors in the *Laches* to find teachers if they want to "become as good as possible." "Well, it would be a terrible thing, Lysimachus, to be unwilling to join in assisting any man to become as good as possible... what I say we ought to do my friends... is to join in searching for the best possible teacher, first for ourselves—we really need one—and then for the young men, sparing neither money nor anything else" (200e-201a). But even finding a good teacher (as Alcibiades does in Socrates) is no guarantee that one will become virtuous. Even with a teacher, practicing the virtues requires tremendous effort and self-motivation. Sometimes we imagine that for Plato, or for our own students, all teachers need to do is help students see what virtue is or requires and the students will act accordingly but this is not Plato's position and should not be ours.

As Melissa Lane (2001) argues:

Implicit in all these views is the final element in the aspirational Plato, one which is perhaps the least well known... This is the idea that moral goodness requires serious, protracted, and sometimes painful effort. Although goodness is objective, becoming good or virtuous requires a lot of hard work with no guarantee... The Forms must be internalized for them to achieve moral sway over our minds. And to do this requires a painful course of education as self-cultivation. (94-95).

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that Plato offers, in a way that Aristotle does not, guidance to contemporary moral educators regarding how best to encourage the cultivation of the virtues in students who were brought up within ethically adverse circumstances. His guidance consists of demonstrating the ways dialogue, and dialogue alone, can create moment of insights or

epiphanies regarding ethical truths. The problem is that dialogues and the insights they inspire are not sufficient to produce consistent virtuous action. At best, these dialogues afford knowledge and cause a *desire* to act virtuously. This is an important first step, but next comes the hard work of overcoming the habits built by years of non-virtuous living. In order for these habits to be overcome, Plato believes that a re-habitation process under the guidance of virtuous role-models must ensue. Only when individuals reenter childhood, as it were, and let themselves be guided in practice by moral mentors, will the hope of lasting change be realized. Contemporary educators need to be aware of the need for re-habitation and be on guard against the complacency that can come when we successfully lead our students to moral insights that we imagine are strong enough to overcome their previous habituation. Perhaps, after leading students to these insights we should follow up by helping them find virtuous role-models who can lead them further along the path.

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