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## **A Satire on Education**

# **Plato, on the Renewal of American Education**

The gods seldom intercede in the mundane affairs of man. As Epicurus explains, the divine bliss cannot suffer such active interest. Perhaps the belabored and fruitless Trojan War cured them of becoming entangled in earthly combats. And the alleviation of human misery would seem to involve a Pandora's box of evaluation and comparison. Maybe the divinities gleaned a lesson from Pandora and accept the tribulation of some as brethren to the freedom of many. Be that as it may, this story heralds an episode of divine intervention.

### **I. The Mission**

"Plato! . . . Plato!" came the distant call, "Zeus summons you to his library!"

The bellow of Hermes rattled the calm of the Elysian Fields. It was, however, the content of the message, not the fervor of its delivery, which captured Plato's attention. Fondly, he recalled last visiting Mount Olympus during the Dark Ages. With knowledge in Europe then on the brink of disappearance, the gods had solicited and implemented his counsel; the Renaissance resulted. Plato dreamt for a moment of so enlivening the world again.

"Oh, please cast your work aside and hurry" – the divine messenger displayed characteristic impatience, thought Plato – "for Zeus is reassigning you to Earth."

"By the dog! I have long yearned to return to Athens and the Academy."

"You mistake the destination, Plato, the United States of America now needs your inspiration. What an opportunity this presents. The U.S.A., as the Americans call their country, has succeeded to the preeminence once enjoyed by ancient Greece. Among modern nations, it epitomizes freedom, prosperity, and progressiveness. In fact, my scholarly friend, for over a century, America has provided all citizens with a free public education."

"A remarkable development! To this extent, the society sounds quite advanced. Bless you, Hermes, for rousing my curiosity. Let us delay no more, for Zeus beckons."

The two travellers soon arrived at the Olympian library. The king of the gods awaited, pacing tensely across the marble floors. "Plato, the reluctance of the divinities to disturb your well-deserved leisure yields once more to need for your insight. Our experiment with American public education flounders. We have enlightened reformers to no avail. Not only do Americans cling stubbornly to an outmoded belief in rigorous education, but they misapprehend scholarship as a mere expedient."

The mighty voice of Zeus then cracked in quiet desperation. "The Americans are destroying the spirit of Learning. The decline rocks their civilization and has moved us to an extreme measure. Hermes has arranged for you to teach seventh grade at a typical school located in upstate New York. Pay particular attention to one Mark Treni, for this intelligent and apathetic youngster exemplifies the problem. Analyze the situation and prepare recommendations for divine action. Good luck."

"But Zeussss . . ."

Plato's journey to twentieth-century America, the year 1987 to be precise, had begun.

## II. The Greek Way

A bitter January wind brought in the first day of the second semester at the Valley Junior/Senior High School. Atop a snowy hill overlooking the city, the building stood contemporary, its design dominated by tan-colored bricks and glass windows. As activity mounted there in preparation for the arrival of the student body, Plato reappeared on an isolated sidewalk near the school.

Astonishingly, neither airplanes soaring above nor cars zipping below caused him bewilderment or surprise. And though the same in character and dress, he felt strangely acquainted with the rural community. Zeus had, realized Plato, miraculously attuned him to the modern environ-

ment. Comfortable with the situation, Plato determined to begin his assignment.

Buses had, by this time, inched up the winding road to the school's entrance. Plato followed their route and soon observed a tall, stout gentleman wearing a three-piece suit. "Be careful children," he barked, "we aren't at summer camp." His voice softened a bit: "It's wintry and ice covers the sidewalks. I don't want any injuries, or lawsuits."

"Excuse me sir, my name is Plato, the seventh-grade . . ."

"Where are your boots, man! Sandals on a snowy day." The gentleman shook his head in apparent disbelief and droned, "So you're the new teacher of the experimental class. I should have guessed. You know, of course, that the same twenty students will attend your class throughout the day. My name, by the way, is Howard Stearns, the principal here. I'll escort you to the classroom. Have you taught before?"

"Not in a public school setting."

"That figures." Stearns sounded unimpressed. "As your mentor, Plato, let me warn you: seventh graders have all the vigor of adults without the maturity. Their desire for independence causes rebellion against our authority and avowed contempt for our values. Strict discipline, that is the lone defense. Otherwise, these animals will run all over you."

Subsequent conversation unfolded further the gulf separating the beleaguered principal and the timeless philosopher. Yet the two parted with polite, genuine amenities in the noisy hallway outside the seventh-grade classroom. Within, the mirth of children bubbled, until the new teacher entered. Immediately, a sullen resign spread. The students took their seats. They mourned, again, for school had begun.

"Good day, citizens, I am Plato, your instructor for the spring semester." Giggling erupted. A petite, precocious-looking girl swung her arm wildly in the air. "Young lady, would you introduce yourself and tell me what you are doing?"

"My name is Diana Fitzgerald and I raised my hand for permission to speak. Everybody knows that rule. I have a question, sir, why do you wear sandals and that ugly robe?"

"I come from Greece, Diana, where such attire is not only appropriate, but considered quite attractive."

"What brings you to Valley?" asked a boy from the back row, window seat.

"Ah, Mark Treni, I believe." Plato's identification of Mark by name shocked the students. "Your dislike for education, a widespread feeling I am told, troubles the gods. They have sent me to study the causes underlying this intolerable state." Because the children looked intrigued as well as amazed, Plato explained further.

"In ancient Greece where I once taught, adults regarded learning as the most pleasant pursuit available. Given free time, typical Greeks studied and exchanged ideas. That is why the English word 'school' derives from the Greek word meaning 'leisure.' The Athenian devotion to learning led to a quality of culture and intellectual achievement which, historians agree, remains unparalleled to this day. And we attribute that success to an educational system our youths enjoyed . . . . What fails in the present system, Mark"?

"It's boring!" Asked why, Mark answered with the frank succinctness of youth: "We sit in classrooms for seven hours each day forced to memorize dull information."

To Plato's surprise, the other children nodded their approval. A lively discussion followed. Encouraged by Plato's curious, inquisitive manner and grandfatherly appearance, the twelve-year olds gathered around him to elucidate the particulars of modern education. They told of a structured and rigorous curriculum imposed routinely on all children between the ages of five and eighteen. Plato learned too of standard disciplinary rules which require kindergartner and senior alike to speak only if called upon and to obtain permission before moving from their assigned seat. Plato's obvious distaste for an institution the class considered unchangeable whetted the dialogue. Eventually, he asked what they enjoyed about school.

"Free-time!" "Lunch!" "Gym!" "Music!" were the emphatic responses.

Plato smiled: the vibrancy of youth indeed transcended the centuries. Off they went to the gymnasium. Plato there organized heated games, initiated the singing of jolly songs, and conversed generally with his students. Afterward, back in the classroom, the physically-spent youngsters acted calmly. Plato had readied them for leisure. A request came, "Please tell us about the schools in Greece."

Plato leaned against the broad desk in front of the room. The children too relaxed. "In Athens, the long school day for boys and girls centered around Gymnastic and Music. Gymnastic involved athletics and games. The exercise served to shape healthy bodies and active, yet disciplined, dispositions. Adults organized and participated in these activities

which, I believe, you would consider 'play.' Indeed, the palaestra, where Gymnastic was held, has been described as a 'gradual elaboration of the playground.'

"And Music . . . There, our history came alive – before our very eyes! – in dance and song, comedy and tragedy. Romantic tales too of gods subject to human frailties and ambitions stirred the imagination of young and old with gaiety. No nagging puritanical worries about death and sin chained Greek thought. To quote a renowned twentieth-century source, 'for the first time in the world the mind was free, free as it hardly is today.'

"The Greek school emphasized Gymnastic and Music for another reason, perhaps of more vital import: to daily release and exhaust the abounding energy of the youths in a wholesome manner. Then, during welcomed intervals of rest, we introduced Academic, what is commonly called 'reading, writing, and arithmetic.'

"Like yourselves, Athenian youths found intensive study unappealing. Teachers respected their nonchalance and adapted instruction accordingly – until the students reached age twenty. That was not only the age of graduation from elementary schooling but the usual age of entrance to our universities. It was not anticipated that a youth would earlier possess the seriousness to pursue concentrated studies by choice."

Plato paused. He noticed Mark Treni leaning forward intently from the edge of his chair. With his back straight and chin set squarely on fist, Mark appeared ready to pounce into the discourse. Plato invited the boy's comment.

"The Greek style of education seems pleasant enough, sir, but impractical for our world. Most students would learn little under that system, and graduate only to unemployment."

"Your criticism has force, young man, given the distaste for learning now epidemic. However, no such attitude characterized the ancient Greeks. As a matter of fact, they are still revered for having had a 'passion for using their minds.' Why, you wonder? Because of a certain patience unfashionable among Americans: the willingness to let tender young minds develop naturally without scar until, at last, maturity makes love for the pursuit of knowledge irresistible.

"History attests to the fruits of this approach. In terms of skills, our youths emerged from Greek schooling physically fit, versed in our history and culture, and fairly grounded intellectually. Overall, we succeeded in raising happy, well-rounded citizens. I can envision for education no greater or more timeless goal."

A comfortable lull allowed the seventh graders a moment to digest their teacher's thoughts. Then, a child led the way, "Plato, the Greek approach would work in our schools."

### III. Renewal

Intelligence will glean the Right, professed Socrates, and grasp for Truth.

Whatever the sublime explanation, the prospect of revitalizing the school day allured the experimental class to curtail the noontime recess. The dialogue which followed disappointed no one. Not only did the youths perceive a purpose, they alone bore the challenge, for, as at the Academy, Plato made progress hang on their thought.

The class settled first in favor of the Greek premise that learning should provide the respite from exertion. In the process, an updated meaning attached to the terms Gymnastic and Academic. The former came to embrace sports, exercise, and other forms of recreation; the latter referred to math, science, English, and history. Integration of what the Greeks called Music proved slippery. It seemed subsumed into Academic, yet sadly missing. This problem led the youths to defer to Plato for implementation of the curriculum. The task thus devolved to him to enrich the day with Music.

Concern also arose regarding the ancient spontaneity in daily activities. The students urged that mass public education requires at least a general schedule. On this point, they persuaded the sage and, after intense negotiations, produced the following recommendation:

8 - 10	Gymnastic
10 - 11	Academic
11 - 12	Lunch
12 - 1	Academic
1 - 3	Gymnastic

Plato's hearty approval of the arrangement crowned the discussion. And, with this, the advent of dismissal time witnessed a calm unusual for the schoolhouse: the final bell triggered no explosion of pent energy. Instead, Mark Treni and his peers savored the fatigue of accomplishment.

Anticipations of ease under Plato's tutelage vanished early the next day. A brisk hike through the woods behind the school woke the students early and challenged them to keep step with their leader. During heated aerobic exercises, they at first worried for his health; within the hour, their attention focused inward.

In the seventh-grade classroom afterward, Plato shared his plan for Academic. To preserve a measure of continuity, the Monday through Wednesday lessons would concentrate on mathematics in the morning and letters (reading and writing) in the afternoon. On Thursdays and Fridays, the inquiry would shift to science and history. With respect to the bugaboo of most students – homework, Plato explained that extramural studies would be optional, but promoted for their intrinsic interest.

The ensuing week passed rapidly. Without being onerous, the bootcamp pace of the Gymnastic period vented the buoyancy of the teenagers. Conversation and camaraderie flowed freely; contemporary music even accompanied the indoor exercise. Plato himself set a merry tone. Moreover, the informality permitted him to extend individual attention to each youngster. In doing so, his quiet gregariousness was endearing, but overshadowed by his hardiness. That latter quality moved the students to twit their teacher about the unfairness of his divine advantage. Plato reproved them grinningly: "My physical state is unexceptional – for an Athenian!"

In accord with ancient design, the rigor of Gymnastic made the succor of Academic more and more welcome. The relief itself was illusory, as the mind toiled while the body rested. But learning now inspired the class. Plato's facility with the famed Socratic method accounted for the renewal. By relying on the students to follow, ponder, and debate chains of interrelated questions, he captured and held their attention.

The zip and chatter which characterized the Gymnastic period during the first week of the semester mellowed throughout the second week. Afternoon calisthenics on the following Monday were particularly lackluster. Plato seized the moment, "Is there an overemphasis on Gymnastics?" The students answered affirmatively. "Shall we reduce the time in half?" Only for the afternoon, they agreed. "Shall I lengthen the afternoon Academic lesson to fill the void?" That brought the predicted reply. "Then what shall we do?" Silence.

Plato was prepared, and spoke intently. "As you know, Music was the lifeblood of ancient education. Its modern equivalent had, until last evening, thoroughly escaped me. What, I wondered, could today so harbor vitality with knowledge? How, at the same time, could imagination and emotion wax free – the one to stir discovery, the other to instill meaning? The potential lies not in any modern religion: they seem to me too steeped in orthodoxy and solemnity.

"Unfortunately, my friends, I have no profound answer, only a modest suggestion. An innovation popular among your colleges and universities entails the offering to students of a variety of seminar courses

from which to choose their schedules. The seminar itself stresses independent thought and study. The motivation is two-fold: first, the student's selection of the course indicates an interest in the subject matter; second, the student has the freedom to fashion his or her own inquiry.

"In the same vein, I propose that we reserve the middle hour of each afternoon, the time from 1 – 2 p.m., for seminars. We can schedule a different seminar for each day of the week, but, being human, I can only direct one at a time. To maximize the appeal of the seminars, majority opinion of the class will determine the various topics, with each seminar lasting only so long as your interest in the particular topic continues. Allowance will be made for anyone who desires to forego participation in a seminar. Those individuals may pursue other projects or read in the classroom or library. Bear in mind, however, the caveat of the old Athenian schoolmaster: 'Inactivity is intolerable.' "

The idea behooved no formal adoption for at once the seventh graders started reeling off potential seminar topics. All the youths desired to begin and end the week with an airy seminar; contemporary music on Monday and game playing on Friday filled the bill. Nor did anyone dissent from holding a Wednesday seminar about the use of computers. The individuality and salesmanship of the children surfaced in the debate over the seminars suitable for the remaining two days. Eventually, the production of a newspaper on Tuesday and a comedy videotape show on Thursday gained majority support.

These seminars succeeded in refreshing the school day. At the same time, they enabled Plato to subtly excite learning. The music seminar moved apace from listening to contemporary songs, to transcribing lyrics, to changing the lyrics, to writing music, and finally to composing. The Friday games rewarded thought and scholarship. Jeopardy, chess, and trivial pursuit provided such wholesome recreation. A classroom version of Wheel of Fortune served to focus attention on famous quotations. Preparation of a newspaper and videotape involved the students in organized, constructive endeavors; moreover, Plato used the seminars as the vehicles for field trips and career exploration.

One bitter evening in mid-March, Plato warmed himself with thought of the progress achieved by the experimental class. Mark Treni and his friends had grown attached to their weekly school routine. Some seminars had disappeared quickly, others still thrived, like music, games, and computers. When the gods recalled him, planned Plato, his general prescription for renewing American education would be straightforward: employ the theory of the ancient Greeks.



#### IV. The Rebuke

Early the next morning, Plato was taking the daily roll when a prim, stiff woman marched unannounced into the classroom. "Mister Plato" – she held out a bulky manila envelope – "this letter constitutes official notice from the Board of Education ordering you to appear tonight at our special inquest into your conduct of the experimental seventh grade. We do look forward to seeing you." Before Plato had the chance to respond, the messenger performed an about-face and exited. As so often happens, a storm had spoiled the halcyon calm.

"I knew it was too good to continue," grumbled Mark Treni. "I am surprised you lasted this long, Plato. We shall miss you."

The youths explained to Plato that the School Board undertook such action only in cases of extreme teacher misconduct. For a moment, dread filled the sage. "By the dog!" he burst forth suddenly, "I have committed no wrong here. My young friends, tonight's meeting provides a perfect occasion for me to exchange ideas on educational policy with the administrators of your schools. This will allow me to measure the receptiveness of your society to the reforms I advocate."

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"Please be seated everybody." With those words, a bearded gentleman wearing a sports coat convened the Board meeting. He spoke confidently, yet softly: "Tonight's large turnout – at least 100 people – requires your utmost cooperation and orderliness. We have already delayed ten minutes.

"This meeting focuses on the concerns of parents and teachers about Mister Plato's manner of instructing the experimental class. More rumors than truths, I fear, have clouded the facts. On behalf of the Board, I now invite Mister Plato to tell us about his methodology."

Plato obliged enthusiastically and thoroughly. His rhetoric captivated the audience, but was unconvincing. "Do you mean to tell us, sir," challenged the messenger, "that you disapprove of forcing students to learn?"

"Precisely!" replied the sage. "Admittedly, my undemanding approach sacrifices an immediate tapping of the full intellectual potential of the youths. That end, however, requires children to perform hard mental labor throughout their formative years, years of impressionability when lifelong inclinations develop. The laws of mental association remain true today . . . as in antiquity . . . as in the nineteenth century when the educator Herbert Spenser observed:

. . . while men dislike the things and places that suggest painful recollections, and delight in those which call to mind bygone pleasures, . . . the men to whom in boyhood information came in dreary tasks along with threats of punishment, and who were never led into habits of independent inquiry, are unlikely to be students in after years. (Spenser, 1860, p. 160)

I assure you that learning will again flourish when school stops taxing young minds."

"What about college?" shouted a young mother. "My seven-year old Johnny is going to be a nuclear physicist. Harvard will never take him after an education like that you propose."

"Madam, if Johnny decides he wants to attend Harvard, he will choose to pursue the necessary studies and devote his energy accordingly. Until then, Johnny should be permitted to enjoy his childhood, while at the same time developing a basic literacy and logic. . . . Isn't happiness what you really desire for your son?"

Plato attributed the obduracy of his listeners to a fear of the unorthodox. To shock them into objectivity, he changed strategy. "Good people, long ago my dearest friend told me that the unexamined life is hardly worth living. Tonight, I implore you to reexamine the present philosophy of education. No longer does the raising of happy, healthy citizens hold first priority. That noblest of ends stands eclipsed by a societal desire to produce ideal children.

"Today production begins at the primary school level because nature then predisposes children to ready comprehension. To take full advantage of that stage, educators thrust knowledge upon them. They learn, save with reluctance, which translates into restlessness. To maintain order, teachers institute strict behavioral rules. These encourage the 'proper' attitude: one which is quiet, attentive, studious. It is widely believed that this approach serves to give youths the knowledge and discipline necessary to succeed in a hard world.

"Be that as it may, in practice such an education harnesses a child's spirit, driving it toward adulthood. Unfortunately, the burdens of being adult carry none of the common rewards. No wages compensate the youngsters for a day of lost play. Nor does autonomy over person or possessions accompany conformance to the expected behavioral standards. And children suffer more stringent standards than adults; surely, none of you need permission to speak, stand, or visit the bathroom. In short, children are forced to think and act as adults, yet are coddled like infants.

"I dare say we have all heard their cries of inequity and unfairness. Rebellion follows inevitably – only its form varies. Oftentimes, youths assert their independence through supposed 'adult' activities like drinking alcohol, using drugs, smoking cigarettes, hurling vulgarities, and being sexually promiscuous.

"Worst of all, however, is the oppression this pedantic method visits on the minds of its victims. In the classroom, the rules of strict conduct and the rigors of concentrated study clash against the carefree joy of youth at its peak. The strong-willed admit disinterest and battle the restrictions; they are labelled 'troublemakers.' The passive submit and rebel subtly; to paraphrase Mr. Spenser, their painful lessons make knowledge repulsive. Regardless, they share a common scar: an ingrained aversion to learning.

"Parents, for the sake of your children, I pray you will reexamine the pillars of American education and dare to change them. If this sounds extreme, hearken to the words of Albert Einstein:

It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry, for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty." (Quoted in Graubard, 1972, p. 208)

The brisk evening air uplifted Plato as he walked home from the meeting. The clear, star-filled heavens reminded him of the gods. Had they observed the Board meeting? The unanimous vote? His discharge for insubordination? Zeus had perceived the situation accurately: the policy of rigorous study stood entrenched.

Plato spent the remainder of the evening planning his next move. Sleep eventually overtook him . . . and Somnus carried him back to Olympus.

## V. Epilogue

"Crisis in the classrooms of America!"

The early morning announcement rang through the halls of Mount Olympus. "Emergency session in the Great Hall!"

The deities assembled. Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, opened the meeting: "My fellow Immortals, as you may be aware, our experiment with American schooling has gone awry."

"Excuse me, Athena." Pluto, the God of the Dead, looked startled. "Do you refer to the noble idea we instilled in that fellow . . . Mann . . . regarding education of the masses? I must confess, the population explosion and world wars have swelled the numbers entering Hades and this has monopolized my attention. However, I remember a report by the Muses that nineteenth-century America provided the perfect setting for the introduction of public schools."

"Exactly their conclusion," interjected Neptune. "The country was then wealthy, yet still early in its formative stage. 'Ripe for change' that is what the Muses said. They noted, too, the unusual social consciousness of the Americans. No one doubted the long-overdue reform would work." Neptune's tone suddenly bellowed, "And now a crisis? I demand an explanation!"

Scholastica rose before the august body and, unruffled, addressed it as follows. "Mighty God of the Sea, and other revered Gods and Goddesses, as the one who inspires Learning, it shames me particularly to acknowledge the degraded state of education in America. A century ago its civilization truly appeared capable of rising to the pinnacle of thought once reached by the ancient Athenians. We predicted that material prosperity would contribute to such development by freeing the people for intellectual pursuits. Instead, wealth has induced a societal preoccupation with achievement. Be the ends sought noble or ignoble, the Americans now place a premium on reaping immediate results.

"Their impatience carries over to education. The rush to complete all formal schooling at the earliest possible age belies concern for the children's happy development. The tragic consequences are succinctly and profoundly portrayed in the following quotation from an astute American educator, Erik Erikson:

It is not possible to spend any prolonged period visiting public school classrooms without being appalled by the mutilation [of spirit] visible everywhere — mutilation of spontaneity, of joy in learning, of pleasure in creating, of sense of self." (Quoted in Silberman, 1970, p.15)

"This is intolerable!" shouted Apollo. "We must intervene." His ever-imperious pitch softened, "Plato, you have instructed these mortals with some success. What remedy do you suggest?"

"May it please the Divinities, though my foray into the modern schoolroom ended inauspiciously with my discharge," – gasps from the gods – "I posit still that the promise of refreshing American education lies in the pedagogy of Socrates and the Academy. The existing institutions should readily accommodate this reform. I foresee a revamping of the curriculum as the pivotal task. From K through 12, the guiding principle should be the ancient respect for childhood, the recognition that as youths mature, their attraction to play evolves to gradually embrace the intellectual. Academic instruction will perforce resign to a supporting rather than a leading role. Recreational exercise and opportunities for youths to pursue constructive interests will round the school day.

"As to the actual progression of students through the grade levels, advancement now depends properly on intellectual growth. It is the standards expected of youths which need alleviation. In accord with the priorities of Athenian education, competence in reading, writing, and arithmetic should alone determine whether or not a child 'passes'. Once the Americans accept these revisions, there remains only the matter of execution.

"To be candid, parents and administrators alike shun my ideas. Fear of the unknown deafens them to the voice of reason. Perhaps a contemporary proof of the continued vitality of the Athenian approach to education will convince them. That seems the only hope – a private school modeled after the ancient."

The immortals approved. And Plato returned to America on his second mission. But that is another story.

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