
THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE DESIRE FOR WISDOM

Tim Simpson

University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign

Socrates' knowledge of ignorance is identical with his perfect knowledge of erotics.... Are we lovers anymore? This is my way of putting the educational question of our times.

— Allan Bloom

The Closing of the American Mind

Recently, Plato's reputation has suffered in philosophy and philosophy of education. This has occurred for at least two reasons: First, he has overestimated the power of reason to discern the true, unchanging character of the world. Second, a Platonic educational program stresses rationality to the neglect of other modes of reflection—sensation, imagination, understanding—as well as other modes of human expression—emotion and desire to name a couple. Can it indeed be true that Plato is guilty as charged?

Generally, those who charge Plato with a hubristic conception of reason and narrow vision of education accept the orthodox interpretation of Plato. This interpretation holds that Plato's philosophy is a pursuit to *possess* knowledge of reality, namely through the possession of the Forms. However, to hold this interpretation and the claims that follow neglects a number of important aspects of Plato's dialogues—the dialogue form, myths, dreams, similes, and passages describing the relationship between the soul and Forms. I will argue that these aspects do not suggest a notion of possession but rather a cautionary message to attend to the *limits* of knowledge. Thus Plato has not overestimated the power of reason. In addition, these aspects of the Platonic dialogues suggest pedagogical methods not solely concerned with reason, as understood by strict logical reasoning. Rather, through recognition of the limits of knowledge Plato suggests a pedagogy of desire. It is through this paradoxical self-knowledge of our limit and limitlessness, a “learned ignorance,” that philosophy, for Plato, is not a possession of wisdom but is a *love* of wisdom.

My plan is as follows: First I will lay out the orthodox interpretation and then call it into question. Second, I will present the pedagogical problems that arise from a recognition of the limits to knowledge and Plato's attempt to overcome such problems. Finally, I will state a possible objection to a Platonic pedagogy of desire and a defense to that objection that rests on an understanding of self-knowledge.

ORTHODOX INTERPRETATION OF PLATO

The orthodox interpretation of Plato is focused on questions of epistemology and metaphysics, most notably the Forms. According to this interpretation, the Ideas are the principles of intelligibility and of the being of the things we experience, of phenomena. These eternal, changeless entities are the things we know when we say we “know” something about the world. Therefore, in so far as we know, say, justice, we can define it in all its instances and in so much as we have comprehensive knowledge of all the ideas, we are wise. Dialogues such as the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *The Republic* suggest that we have “forgot” but could “recollect” comprehensive knowledge. In short, one way or another, *comprehensive* knowledge of the world is possible for human beings. Philosophy, then, is the pursuit to possess such knowledge.

As for a Platonic education, it is the activity of sharpening reason to comprehend the Forms. The dialogues exhibit such an education through the pursuit of “What is X?” questions. Here a common sense term is taken into question through rigorous conceptual analysis—rooting out false premises and invalid conclusions. In the search for a single, precise definition of the term, the student exercises the mind in strict logical analysis. This education sets the student on the quest for certain, indubitable knowledge.

IS PLATO’S PHILOSOPHY AN ATTEMPT TO
POSSESS THE FORMS?

Despite the orthodox interpretation’s wide acceptance, there is evidence from the dialogue form, the language within the dialogue, and a general theme of human nature that discredits the orthodox interpretation. To this we now turn.

The Aporia of the Dialogues. A number of dialogues end in either *aporia* or are inconclusive and require more discussion. With the arguable exceptions of the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Laws*, the Platonic dialogues routinely exhibit the inability to arrive at certain knowledge of the Forms. This aporetic state is not only a feature of the so-called early dialogues, but also familiar to the *Meno*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*. If reason is capable of possessing the Forms and education sharpens reason for such a conquest, the dialogues, to the contrary, suggest that reason, as conceptual analysis is unable to define exhaustively the Form in each instance. Furthermore, the dialogue as a literary form allows for creative ways to face the non-possession of the Forms.

Non-Propositional Attempts to Access the Forms. When confronted with defining a Form or idea, Socrates often resorts to non-propositional efforts to access the issue in question. He attempts to bridge complex matters not with assertions of logical propositions but with non-discursive means. In the *Republic*, when asked to give an account of the highest intelligible object, the Form of the

Good, Socrates cannot proceed through ordinary assertion but offers a simile, namely the Sun. In the *Theaetetus*, after failing three previous attempts to define knowledge, Socrates recalls a dream. This dream initiates questions but fails to capture in hand the bird of knowledge. In the *Phaedrus*, when asked to give an account of the highest love Socrates tells a story about madness and the soul. Finally, in the *Meno* when confronted with an inability to capture the definition of virtue and Meno himself offers the learning paradox, Socrates recalls a myth of recollection. These conceptual but not propositional attempts to account for the idea in question exhibit, again, a cautious regard for possessing such objects. Yet, Plato understands the lack of possession and the fallible attempts to possess knowledge more deeply.

Finite Conception of Human Nature. The literary devices above are strengthened by Socrates' account of eros as human nature in the *Symposium*. There the revelers take turns divining the gifts of eros. According to Agathon, who follows the earlier method, eros lacks nothing and is our best guide to life. Socrates cannot agree. He asks, "Is love such as to be a love of something or nothing?" Agathon and Socrates agree that it is a love of something, primarily a present need. The priestess Diotima showed Socrates that love is not possessive but a desire for a need. Love, she says, is born from poverty (*penia*)—constant need or incompleteness—and plenty (*poros*)—resourcefulness, a way through difficulty. Born from poverty, the human condition is one of fundamental lacking. We can never completely escape our needs. Human nature, like eros, is a dynamic of limits and limitlessness. We are, as the priestess Diotima suggests, a spirit "in-between" complete wisdom and complete ignorance. Thus, we are lovers. As finite creatures it is of our essence to be desirous, questing but not completely possessing the objects of our search.

Finally, a characterization that expresses well Plato's rejection of a pursuit to possess wisdom is best articulated by Josef Pieper in *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. He states,

The quest for essence really implies a claim on comprehension. And comprehension is to know something in such a way as it is possible for it be known. ...but there is nothing that the human being can know in this way or comprehend in this strict sense... It is a property of philosophy that it reaches toward a wisdom that nevertheless remains unreachable by it; but this is not to say that there is no relationship at all between question and the answer. This wisdom is the object of philosophy but as something lovingly sought, not as something 'possessed'.... It therefore belongs to the nature of philosophy that it only 'has' its object in the manner of a loving search.¹

Contrary to the orthodox doctrine, the aporetic dialogues, the literary elements of the dialogue, and the discussion of eros as human nature, suggest that reason does not possess knowledge of the Forms. In addition, the claim that Platonic philosophy itself is a pursuit to possess wisdom should be in question as well.

IS THE PURPOSE OF PLATONIC EDUCATION TO SHARPEN REASON ALONE?

In the preceding section, I have suggested that Plato demonstrates a finite conception of reason and a recognition of the limits of knowledge and, so, tempered philosophy's so-called quest for certainty. Although this alternative reading seems to threaten the orthodox interpretation, it does not completely undermine their position. The orthodox interpretation could agree with the preceding section, that there is a *kind* of limit to knowledge, and continue to claim that the purpose of Plato's education is to sharpen reason for the *eventual* possession of knowledge.

For the orthodox interpretation, the limit to knowledge takes the form of a logical mistake. The important "What is X?" question provides a ripe opportunity for drawing conceptual puzzles that strain the mind's ability to solve logical problems, for example, "How can virtue be both a single entity while covering many instances?" On this account, Meno is caught in a logical paradox. *Aporia*, in this case, functions as a clearing of faulty reasoning so as to lay down a stronger foundation for inquiry. In this exercise, reason is sharpened so as to cut better the Forms to their correct dimension. A Platonic education, according to this view, might best be illustrated by the slave-boy episode in the *Meno*. The slave-boy, who is ignorant of the principles of geometry, is led by a series of questions to first acknowledge he does not know the answer to the question put to him. Once in this position, though, he is ready to learn. Through another series of questions, the slave-boy is led to obtain correctly the geometry answer.

However, the orthodox interpretation has not adequately understood the effect of *aporia* and so not adequately understood the purposes of Plato's education. *Aporia* is a recognition of a logical puzzle but more than that. *Aporia* is not only a logical confusion it both suspends reason and suspends our desire to go on. In *aporia*, one recognizes that not only is one wrong, but one cannot continue as one has been. All paths are both open and closed. In this state questions such as "Where do I begin?" and "Should I begin at all?" plague the mind. It is this affective dimension of *aporia* that the orthodox interpretation ignores and so sets askew Plato's education.

One purpose of Plato's education, then, is to cause an aporetic moment in the student. This is clearly the case in the so-called early dialogues. The purpose of *aporia* is not simply to clear the ground of faulty reasoning, as important as

that is. But, more importantly, it is to suspend comfortable conceit—pride—and elicit a more humble attitude for the search.

Consider again the slave-boy and Meno. When the slave-boy enters the conversation he has no presumption of knowledge. When faced with the paradox he readily admits his ignorance and moves on with Socrates. Meno, however, begins the dialogue by peppering Socrates with questions in a haughty, presumptuous way. In fact, he asks a question in which he knows the answer and has lectured on it hundreds of times. The pridefulness that accompanies Meno's questioning obstructs real inquiry. In order to dissolve this obstruction Socrates leads Meno to *aporia* not only to show a logical problem, but also to temper Meno's self-judgment. In this case, *aporia* is meant to help Meno take a sober perspective, a humbling attitude, toward his own knowledge. Like the cave-dwellers in the *Republic*, Meno's pride is loosened by *aporia*.

Now, of course bringing a student or conversant into *aporia* does not necessarily mean he is now prepared for learning. *Aporia* is a neutral state. What is important in terms of education is not only that one gives up on a conceit of knowledge, but that one fosters the desire to go on learning. The slave-boy's response is uncommon in that he moves on without question. Most persons engaging with Socrates become defensive, such as Callicles and Anytus, or try to leave without being further questioned, such as Euthyphro, Thrasymachus, and Theodorus. I assume these are stubborn cases who are simply not willing to accept they could be wrong. However, there are others who are so shaken that they do not know how to go on. This is the case for Meno and the interlocutors of the *Phaedo*. If we look again at Meno's paradox we find that it is not simply a logical paradox, but a paradox of inquiry—how do I go on at all? Likewise, in the *Phaedo* the characters are distraught and overcome with grief since they have failed to arrive at a safe argument for the immortality of the soul while their greatest friend prepares to die.

Here we see that Plato's pedagogy takes on a second dimension—beyond *aporia* as a cognitive/affective suspension—from the orthodox interpretation. Namely, after the aporetic moment Socrates does not abandon the student to his own devices but helps the student to overcome the possible complacency of a student who lacks the courage to go on. Besides humility, Plato's pedagogy fosters courage for inquiry. Socrates encourages the conversant, such as Meno, to face uncertainty and rekindle the desire for knowledge. Again, the literary elements ignored by the orthodox interpretation play an important role in Plato's pedagogy. In the *Meno*, notice that Socrates does not respond to the paradox with a logical proposition or thesis from which to build. Rather, he offers a myth of recollection. After telling the story he says, "I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver, and less idle,

if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it” (86b-c). Likewise in the *Phaedo*, when Socrates’ interlocutors feared the worst he asked them to “sing a charm” (77e) to overcome such difficulties. Continuing later he said, “We should not allow into our minds the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it; much rather we should believe that it is we who are not yet sound and that we must take courage and be eager to attain soundness, you and the others for the sake of your whole life still to come, and I for the sake of death itself” (90e-91a).

The dialogue form, the literary devices within the dialogue, and passages describing the relationship between the soul and the Forms all contribute to this experience of loosening arrogance and overcoming complacency. Take, for instance, the dialogue form. While it contextualizes the conversation amongst particular interlocutors, a transcendent quality operates in the text. As Herman Sinaiko suggests, “Plato’s *Dialogues* hold out to the reader the promise of knowledge, of insight, of wisdom. The promise is never made openly, but it lurks just beneath the surface of the discussion, enticing the reader to look a little closer, to think a little harder.”² The paradoxes within the dialogue illuminate an impasse but also offer promise to move beyond.

Secondly, the literary devices that display an incompleteness are, at the same time, a way through such impasses. The simile of the Sun in the *Republic* provides an image of the object for contemplation, thus furthering the conversation. The dream in the *Theaetetus* offers the reader a final answer to question. While each of these devices expresses a limit it expresses possibility and thus manifests the overfullness of our nature. Plato illuminates paths for inquiry while reminding us of our finiteness. As one author suggests, each dialogue is an instance of *finite transcendence*.³

Finally, the very relationship between the soul and the Forms is not halting, but nourishing. Although we do not possess the Forms, this does not lead Plato to discredit the desire. Three examples from the *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, and the *Republic* may help to explain. The *Phaedrus* is the most obvious beginning because of its emphasis on eros (244-250). Recanting his first speech, Socrates offers a second speech on divine madness. After recounting three kinds of madness and describing the soul as self-motion, he produces a structure of the soul through the myth of the charioteer. By their nature the wings (eros) of the horses have the power to lift up the charioteer to see the “divine, which has beauty, wisdom, goodness, and everything of that sort.” As it views justice, self-control and knowledge, the soul makes itself most like a god. There is great eagerness to see the plain where truth stands because “this pasture has the grass that is the right food for the best part of the soul, and it is the nature of the wings that lift up the soul to be nourished by it.” In fact, the soul that has seen the most

will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty or who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love. The fourth kind of madness, the divine eros, is that which leads to the realm of Forms where the soul is nourished by its kin. For the *Phaedrus*, then, the relationship to the Forms is not possessive. Here eros does not lead to a having of the Forms, but rather a fertile plain that nourishes the soul so as to become a lover of wisdom, a philosopher.

The *Phaedo* and *Republic* passages confirm the *Phaedrus*' notion of a nurturing relationship between the soul and Forms. In the *Phaedo* (84b-c), "The soul of the philosopher achieves a calm from such emotions [pleasure and pain of the body]; it follows reason and ever stays with it contemplating the true, the divine, which is not the object of opinion. Nurtured by this, it believes that one should live in this manner as long as one is alive." Again, when the soul comes into contact with the Forms it does not merely possess the Forms but is nurtured in their presence. Philosophy, then, is a way of life, not merely a state of possession.

Finally, consider the following passage from *Republic* Book VI in defense of the philosopher:

Then, won't it be reasonable for us to plead in his defense that it is the nature of the real lover of learning to struggle toward what is, not to remain with any of the many things that are believed to be, that, as he moves on, he neither loses nor lessens his erotic love until he grasps the being of each nature itself with the part of his soul that is fitted to grasp it, because of its kinship with it, and that, once getting near what really is and having intercourse with it and having begotten understanding and truth, he knows, truly lives, is nourished, and—at that point, but not before—is relieved from the pains of giving birth? (490a-b)

Again, erotic love leads the soul to grasp the object not for simple possession. Rather, erotic love leads to the soul's nourishment and the philosophic life. What is more, the philosophic life does not mean the possession of certainty but the quest for wisdom.

Plato's education is more than sharpening reason alone. Given the premise that we do not possess wisdom but are in search of wisdom, education must habituate humility and courage. Cultivating the desire to question with the desire to question one's own desires is the precondition for any future inquiry. Plato trusts that such a quest will make one better.

REJOINDER TO PLATO: HOPELESS DESIRE

The nature of *aporia*, the literary elements, and the account of human nature all suggest a recognition of the limits of knowledge. What is important,

then, is the desire to continue the quest in the face of uncertainty. But is this desire justified? Is it a hopeless desire? Or a mere coping strategy for a hopeless quest?

It could be argued that Plato has replaced a dogmatic assumption of reason for a dogmatic assumption of desire. On one account of postmodern thought, the postmodern perspective would claim that any desire for foundational knowledge is ultimately misguided because there is no foundation outside of the construction of human communities. It could be argued that the idea that a transcendental movement in the direction of comprehending reality is not only constitutive for human existence, but also that it expresses the humanity of man. For human existence is unlivable without the aspirational striving toward sense, even though this aspiration in its totality is fundamentally unachievable. Our striving, on this account, is a mere regulative ideal: the inspired unity is not a given, but rather a necessary though insoluble task of man. The desire for comprehension is a coping strategy and nothing more. It expressed a kind of aesthetic sensibility of the whole.⁴

The claims above ultimately reject Plato's use of desire because foundational knowledge is not possible and so any desire for such is futile. However, I believe these counter-arguments fail for two reasons. First, Plato has not suggested that he believes a foundational knowledge, a certain and indubitable basis is possible ala Descartes. The evidence in this essay has tried to suggest that he does not hold out a desire for a foundation. Thus, the critique is of a position Plato does not hold. Second, Plato does ground his desire but it is not in a theoretical foundation. Nor is it as a coping strategy. The criticisms ignore the fact that the desire to overcome the limit of knowledge is grounded in a kind of self-knowledge. The desire to overcome the limits of oneself is born from knowledge of ignorance. This desire will remain constrained and so finite by the nature of the self as a finite creature. Socrates' knowledge of his ignorance is his knowledge of erotics.

A FINAL DEFENSE OF PLATO

Recalling Plato's *Apology* will help illuminate the conception of philosophy I am attributing to Plato as first articulated and exhibited by the Platonic Socrates. It will also help acknowledge both the limits of knowledge and the desire for wisdom. I will summarize the position.

Central to Socrates' defense of himself and philosophy in the *Apology* is his effort to overcome the contention that he, like the sophists, considers himself to be wise. Quite to the contrary, Socrates almost exaggerates the force of which he is aware of his lack of wisdom (19). He knows, above all, that he is not wise. Nevertheless, he continues, the problem is more complex, for the oracle at Delphi, speaking in the name of the god and therefore necessarily speaking the truth,

has said that no one is wiser than Socrates. Socrates is faced with a riddle; how can it be that no one is wiser than he is, if he knows that he is not wise? Socrates proceeds to relate the tale of how he, in an effort to resolve this riddle, went to a series of reputed wise people—sophists, statesman, poets—to question them in the hope of discovering their wisdom and thereby “refuting” the oracle’s claim that he is the wisest of men. Quite to the contrary, what he discovers upon questioning these people is that although they certainly claimed to be wise and thought that they were wise they really were not. Socrates concludes that in a curious way, the oracle was right. He is wiser than other people, but just on this point, that he, not being wise, does not think that he is wise, whereas most other people, and certainly the reputed wise people whom he questioned, thought that they were wise, although in fact they were not (23). Socrates’ wisdom, it is important to note, is thus *self-knowledge* in this sense: knowing that he knows and what he does not know.

Immediately we can note that there is something altogether extraordinary about Socrates’ wisdom and self-knowledge.⁵ His wisdom is not the possession of knowledge expressed by assertion. His self-knowledge is also not a possession of truths about himself. He neither asserts what justice is or that he knows that he knows what justice is. Socrates’ wisdom is not a massive body of knowledge that he can dispense, but his recognition of his lack of wisdom. How does this wisdom get exhibited? He exhibits his wisdom through his questioning. This is important in relation to the orthodox interpretation. The Platonic Doctrine would hold that the Socrates is an important figure because he exhibits wisdom through defining important concepts such as justice or acknowledging the a priori propositions for building a foundation for a structure of knowledge. A question, on this account, is the acknowledgement not of wisdom but merely a lack of knowledge. Only assertive knowledge or only the Doctrine that can be lifted from the arguments of the Platonic dialogue is important. On the account offered in this essay, Socrates shows us that questioning, or at least certain modes of questioning, is founded upon and an exhibition of knowledge. What knowledge? Self-knowledge understood again, as knowing what I know and what I do not know. In regards to the critique, it is important to note that Socrates does not rest content with his own knowledge, thus identifying himself with his beliefs. This conceit of wisdom obstructs inquiry. Rather, he takes the stance of questioning. The willingness and ability to continue to hold one’s views and oneself open to question tempers the hubris that may result from identifying oneself with one’s beliefs. The unexamined life, Socrates says, is not worth living.

Understanding philosophy as the recognition of our ignorance and the desire to question ourselves that arises from such ignorance is merely to recall the literal meaning of philosophy. “*Philo-sophia*” means, literally, the “love of wisdom.” As Socrates made clear in the *Symposium*, to love wisdom signifies

that one lacks wisdom, acknowledges that lack, and strives to overcome it. This is our erotic condition. We are both limited and limitless; knowledge of this dynamic is “learned ignorance.” “For a man—even one very well versed in learning—will attain unto nothing more perfect than to be found to be most learned in the ignorance which is distinctively his. The more he knows that he is unknowing, the more learned he will be.”⁶ Unto this end, I believe, Plato had undertaken the task of writing his dialogues.

CONCLUSION

Is philosophy in the Platonic dialogues a pursuit to possess wisdom? Is Plato’s education solely concerned with sharpening reason? I have sought to remind us that Plato shares a deep mistrust of claims to possess comprehensive knowledge. These claims obstruct inquiry rather than animate a search. His dialogue form, his use of literary devices, as well as his account of the relationship of soul and Forms, guides us to self-knowledge. Through knowledge of our ignorance we exhibit our desire in the question. Philosophy, and likewise the question itself, are forever the love and not the possession of wisdom.

NOTES

1. Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1948), 112–3.
 2. Herman Siniako, *Reclaiming the Canon: Essays on Philosophy, Poetry, and History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 324.
 3. Drew Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).
 4. It is interesting to note the possibility that typically Plato would share postmodern claims, such as a finite reason and limits to knowledge. One book in particular has helped me to see this connection, Jos De Mul, *Romantic Desire in (Post)modern Art and Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999). Dr. Pradeep Dhillon from the University of Illinois recommended this book to me.
 5. Drew Hyland, *The Question of Play* (New York: University Press of America), 146–7; David Roochnik, *The Tragedy of Reason: Toward a Platonic Conception of Logos* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 200.
 6. Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance* (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur B. Manning Press, 1996), 51.
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