

"Plato: His Precursors, His Educational Philosophy, and His Legacy" (Robin Barrow)

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Review of

Plato: His Precursors, His Educational Philosophy, and His Legacy

by Robin Barrow, London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007

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Plato's Educational Legacy: Rationalism, Mysticism and the Arts in a Moral Context

Given that Robin Barrow is arguably one of the most influential philosophers of education in our time, it should not be surprising that he has written a definitive book on Plato's educational philosophy and its relation to rationalism, mysticism, and the arts in a moral context.

I shall first deal with the biographical section of this book. In the biographical section of the book, Barrow provides a useful framework for Plato's development in terms of five factors: friendship with Socrates; his reactions to the sophists, his personal relations with some of the leading figures of his time, the city state of Sparta, and, of course, those thinkers who preceded him, the Presocratics" (Barrow, 2007, p. 1).

Barrow's interest in Plato's friendship with Socrates lies in what he refers to as the unimportance of the debate about the overlap between Socrates' and Plato's conceptualization of the Theory of Forms or Ideas arguing that: "Given that there is clearly development of the theory in Plato's own writings, given the complexity of the theory, and given that the evidence all comes from Plato's treatment of the subject, trying to abstract the precise nature of Socrates' original view seems a far from urgent task" (p. 3).

Barrow also insists correctly that it is a myth to assume that there was a sophistic 'movement' as such in Plato's reaction to the sophists. As he points out, the sophists were far too different from one another in most intellectual, personal, teaching, and moral matters to constitute any semblance of homogeneity. There is no such thing as a proper 'movement' in this regard, except for the interesting fact that most of the sophists could be compared with our contemporary and contentious notions of self-help books and practical approaches to living as 'skill acquisitions' that purportedly lead to worldly success. For Plato, this mechanistic skill development vis-à-vis worldly success constituted a fraudulent approach, a heresy of distorting the truth, and an affront to education because it evaded the very ideal of the contemplative life of the good and was a detestable "manipulation of the truth and the subordination of knowledge to opinion, reality to appearance" (p. 31).

Plato's relationship with his politically active relatives begs the question of his actual position on democracy. Politically speaking, Barrow points out that although academics may argue endlessly over Plato's position on democracy, the fact remains that he coupled the contemplative life of the good with that of some sense of a practical advance but with a focus on theory rather than on practice.

The author finds that Plato's political and social views were influenced by Sparta, and that the Spartan ethos also shaped his educational views. It is the contrast between Spartan discipline and Athenian vice that appealed to Plato. For art and education, Barrow's observation that although "Plato is not as hostile to art and literature as some critics maintain, there is no doubt that he exhibits something of Spartan puritanism and distrust of sensation and emotion" (p. 13). In other words, the connection between puritanism and Spartan discipline was the reason for Plato's caution about the arts and the powerful and destructive emotions that can be evoked to the detriment of all concerned.

The Presocratic connection with Plato is a fascinating study in this book. Although that connection is, indeed, as he points out, highly fragmented, it is not to be discounted in terms of Plato's debt to the Presocratics. One significant strand that originates in Presocratic thinking and its influence on Plato is the argumentative insistence for and initiation of rational justification. The other strand is the concern of Parmenides and other Presocratics in their preoccupation with the nature of the world and its distinction between appearance and reality and the mystical orientation that things are not what they may seem especially as perceived by the senses. The key point here is that the ontological nature of the Presocratic writings pertaining to a scientific orientation reveals Plato's epistemology that, according to Barrow, is crucial to an understanding of Plato's educational thought.

It is the Presocratic preoccupation with mysticism, ethical concerns, and the Pythagorean orientation with art that is of special interest to this review. It is no accident that Democritus wrote about the training of the virtuous habits that he believed found their reflection in the divine inspiration of great poets. This would also be related to Pythagoras' music of the spheres (harmony in the universe) and cosmological matters that in turn influenced Plato's thinking about art (especially poetry and music) and moral education. All of these interests in turn influenced Plato's theory of Forms or Ideas and his major preoccupations with political, artistic, social, and moral questions. Pythagoras' belief in reincarnation and the soul was shared by Plato as well, even though the latter's thoughts were distinct from these. Pythagorean Greek values of limit, moderation, order, and immortality of the soul depending on right effort was certainly shared by Socrates in the *Republic*. "Similarly the Pythagorean view that the soul is the harmonious sum of its parts is surely a precursor of Plato's view that the soul is temperance ('sophrosune', which he glosses as a harmony), which involves the three parts—appetite, spirit and reason—working in harmony" (pp. 25-26). I agree with the author that it is more useful to think of the soul as the Greek word 'psyche.' "It is not necessarily wrong to translate 'psyche' as 'soul', since for many of us the term is free of many specific, particularly Christian, connotations" (p. 133).

The influence of Socrates on Plato's educational thought is, as Barrow points out, an incontrovertible one in that "Socrates, by the example of his life and death alone, profoundly influenced Plato. In addition ... the ideas, the arguments, the questions that he raised and expounded represented a part of what one might call Plato's formal education" (p. 28). Of particular note is the fact that Plato resisted sophistry and emphasized the idea that truth is valuable for its own sake. Protagoras' view that moral truth is relative to social constructs is one that Plato argued against most of his life, as evidenced in *Protagoras*. Barrow argues that it is not necessary to establish whether Plato was reacting specifically to Protagoras; it is enough that the idea of moral relativity already existed in Plato's time.

Barrow's concluding statement to the first part of his book: "In terms of articulate and penetrating thought about education and much else besides, in terms of rationality, in terms of the Western tradition, he [Plato] is the practical beginning, the 'fons et origo,' of it all" (p. 39).

In the second part of his book, Barrow provides a critical exposition of Plato's educational thought and reveals that which is most important. Barrow zeros in on a serious prejudice of certain writers such as Crossman (1971), Popper (1966), Russell (1946, 1950), arguing they do Plato an injustice by claiming he felt we are born to certain roles. He points out that Plato's concern with sociocultural and environmental setting, as well as his educational emphasis belie such claims. Instead, Barrow argues that although Plato believed in innate qualities and talents, he also believed in the interplay between our innate nature and the power of the environment.

The author succinctly summarizes some of the most difficult issues in a very few words without distorting the original picture. I was particularly pleased with Barrow's clarification of 'mousikos' (musical man). He emphasizes the notion that a musical person was cultured in all ways and that the concept of music was inexorably intertwined with all the arts including dance, poetry, sculpture and playing various instruments such as the lyre and aulos (flute). Of particular interest to this reviewer is the important clarification of the popular misconception that the notion of music affecting moral character had initiated with Plato. I was especially pleased with other references in this regard to the musicologist Damon, to Aristophanes and his comedies and to Aristotle's broad acceptance of this thesis. These references are very important because too often they are not drawn on in relation to this significant idea.

What a far cry is the Athenian notion of music and educative demands from the current shortsighted and vapid educational programs our poor and unfortunate students receive at the hands of too many faculties of music throughout the land! We have the lack of moral and aesthetic breadth of all the arts in current curricula in many of the so-called best schools, departments and faculties of music in Canada and the United States. But I hasten to add that many a fine music educator is also trapped in this overly skills-based educative environment. The point here is that "it seems safe to say that Plato's main concern is to provide a curriculum that develops the ability to think in rational and abstract terms about the fundamental moral and humanistic questions, culminating in a sound grasp of the Ideas themselves" (p. 56). All of this is scrupulously balanced against Barrow's astute warning that *The Republic* is about political and individual justice and ultimately not about education as such. As for beauty in all the arts, we are reminded that Plato in the *Laws* (667b) suggests "that a work of art has three aspects: its charm or tendency to give pleasure, its technical merit, and its propensity for producing good or bad effects" (p. 119).

Moving on to the significant theory of Ideas, Barrow observes that Plato's theory was not exclusively located in the domain of the *Republic* but one of an ongoing development during his long life. Barrow emphasizes the critical importance of the *Phaedo* in which he identifies the crucial notion

... that there are Ideas, such as that of the Good or the Beautiful, which are real and true but cannot be apprehended by the senses, only by 'Nous' (mind) after a process of reasoning. Our souls or minds ... are familiar with them from an existence prior to the current one in our bodies, and objects of our senses, phenomena, or everyday instances can prompt us to recall them; but the business of truly grasping them depends upon the intellect. (p. 62)

Barrow does not worry about that which remains imponderable in his theory of Ideas—Plato's own doubts and minor modifications—and successfully defends the theory against its detractors and broadly argues for its plausibility, correctness, and crucial importance. However, he does not duck the problematic features of the theory and goes on to discuss the implications of these difficulties under the following headings: i) Language ii) Are there Ideas of everything? iii) Is there a hierarchy of Forms? iv) The Third Man v) A Transcendental World? (which Barrow defends with the provocative statement that "nobody who understands the theory of Ideas would fail to see through the empty rhetoric and tedious misapplied point-scoring of 'postmodernism'" (p. 76).

Through such effective permutations, Barrow is able to piece together Plato's views on education into a coherent and meaningful whole. Plato's *Republic*, in spite of its paternalism is, as Barrow argues, not hostile to the masses but truthfully—in the sense that Plato was not lying—caters to their best interests and well-being. This would include a highly intellectually cognitive education (which as Barrow suggests he must have valued as the highest form of education), and a more technical/vocational curriculum as being equally important in its own right. But Barrow is not blind to Plato's possible shortcomings regarding contemporary concerns and points out that in spite of

the desirability and legitimacy of the sort of distinction made in what is usually called ‘setting’...he [Plato] was wrong in so far as what he was advocating was actually ‘streaming’, meaning an overall classification such as academic/nonacademic, or ‘A’/‘B’ student, as distinct from a more specific judgment such as ‘poor at mathematics.’ (p. 91)

The author recognizes the crucial issues that arise from the complexity of differing capabilities of citizenry, and the implications of determining them for education and equal opportunity as we understand it in our time. Although Plato does not offer a modern curriculum of particulars that relate to any modern ‘subjects’ of study he does articulate the need for understanding and the necessity of appropriate curriculum:

...the development of the mind, by which is meant the acquisition of understanding of abstract ideas and modes of thought. This is the original and among the most notable accounts of education in terms of intellect...A developed mind is one that has the most valuable understanding. The most valuable understanding is understanding of the Ideas, particularly the Idea of good.” (pp. 85-87)

In light of the dialogue *Meno* and the art of teaching dialogically, it is worth highlighting [Plato’s] belief in the immortality of the soul” (p. 95). The point here is that the soul forgets or loses its knowledge of what it knew after its transmigration and rebirth to a new body. The author is not denying that learning is not the acquisition of entirely new knowledge but of coming to see that was always there; however, he stresses that these passages show that the student *can*, through judicious questioning, be brought to new understanding. Thus the emphasis and the art of teaching is the teaching of the good and is not on ‘leading’ but on “... some instruction, some directed activity, some undirected activity, some unstructured learning situations, some structured, some questioning, some telling, and so on and so forth” (p. 95). Barrow argues that the teacher plays a crucial role in creating the appropriate environment. I agree with him that in all likelihood this environment is indeed one “that values knowledge, encourages learning and allows the child to pay attention to the input (part of the environment or ‘right soil’ [of the *Republic*] of the teacher” (p. 98) rather than the contemporary environment in which children are protected and given a wide range of choices in a free and pleasant classroom which excludes any extraneous influence.

The teaching of humanities, and, as a representation of the arts, the literature of the time—as opposed to the empirical sciences—is an important consideration of Plato’s curriculum both directly and indirectly in his educational philosophy. Barrow’s interpretation of the banishment of the poets is striking. His analysis in *The Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and the poets’ mild treatment in the *Apology* reveals “that Plato is not hostile to literature as such” (p. 117). As I have also interpreted these sources in the same way, I had no problem accepting his thesis. Plato was more worried about the conceit, ignorance and arrogance of poets and tragedians and the notion that written texts in themselves do not offer definitive answers. Nevertheless, it is a shame that the prevailing view of Plato’s assumed hostility to poets remains in light of other reasonable interpretations that deny this position.

Plato, as Barrow points out, prefers dialogue between individuals as a better way of seeking knowledge. In my opinion this is akin to the great religious traditions that were suspicious about the written word. For this reason, there are many religious figures such as Jesus, Buddha, St. Francis, etc. who have not written a single word of their philosophy. And, along with this tradition, we have Socrates himself. This is a crucial part of Barrow’s book and obviously a highly controversial position about Plato’s supposed hostility to the poets and their literature and, presumably, to other artists as well.

Whatever one’s view of Plato’s proposals in the *Republic*, they should be seen as political proposals; his censorship plans have nothing to do with literary or aesthetic quality. At no stage does Plato suggest that the poets and tragedians produce poor literature. On the contrary, his

argument is based on the opposite assumption that he is dealing with good literature. Good literature he sees as the product of divine inspiration, and Plato's worry is that such literature is, by virtue of its inspired quality, appealing and hence influential in forming opinions and attitudes. At no stage of his 'attack' does Plato's literary sensibility desert him. (pp. 118-119)

But what must and is correctly emphasized by Barrow is that Plato's time had a communal sense and understanding of their music and the emotional representation of the arts in general, and they knew what they meant by such enigmatic terms as harmony and moral influence that could be derived and identified from their various art forms. We do the same with our art in our own times. We too have a communal understanding of our local culture vis-à-vis our art. Barrow recognizes the futility of seeking an understanding of ancient Greek culture (especially music in ancient Greek aesthetic terms) in our own terms and does not fall into the trap of seeking answers that could not possibly be justified in *this* way. This is a remarkably complex topic and can all too easily be misapplied. Put differently, too much time has elapsed since the Athenian era and we have strayed from *their* tonal ideal too many centuries ago (see Senyshyn, 2003, p. 119).

In terms of literature we are in much better situation to understand the implications of Plato's literary contemporaries. Whereas the concept of 'harmony' has changed over the centuries, the notion of understanding literature has not changed greatly. Barrow can rightfully argue that

Plato's objection to the artist, and literature *in particular*, [my emphasis] is one of his least convincing claims. Good literature might even be defined (ironically, in a Platonic manner) as that which convincingly and pleasingly illuminates correctly some aspect of the human condition... Moral maturity ... demands sensitivity to others as well as intellectual ability, and it might well contribute to developing one's awareness of others and of the infinite variety of human individuals" (p. 130).

A critical exposition of Plato's thought would be incomplete without clarifying what Plato meant by 'dialectic.' Barrow explains that such a task is beyond textual exegesis and must rely on positing a possible theory based on the little that is explicitly said by Plato and that which is generally known about his thought. The author thinks that Plato was not confused, as "many contemporary educational theorists appear to be, between thinking that he is introducing a distinctive method(s) and thinking that he is introducing a distinctive concept..." (pp. 146-147). Barrow argues that for Plato the dialectic is what we refer to as philosophy and the study of the Forms that essentially amounts to a study of conceptual analysis not tied to any particular method—or to the common misconception that it reveals or demonstrates some kind of absolute or ultimate truth. Barrow points out that knowing the Forms directly is not attributed to a fanciful, infallible intuition on our part but by the notion that the Forms themselves are completely intelligible.

We can in principle grasp the concept of love (or a concept of love, if you prefer); we cannot in principle or practice gain a complete understanding of the act or fact of love. Plato was less interested in proof than in acquiring proper understanding, and the talk of dialectic's unmediated view of reality or truth implies accurate perception rather than demonstration...the vision or perception of the Form of the Good is not like a prize; it is rather (to use Crombie's analogy) akin to the pianist who having learned to play a piece comes to recognize it as music: the dialectician comes to see the Good for what it is, having mastered and engaged in dialectics. (pp. 148-149)

Barrow agrees with Christina Nehring (2001) (as would Socrates and Plato) that much of sexual harassment legislation actually disempowers women and has done damage for pedagogy in the university. He makes three important distinct and clear points with regard to Plato (in *Symposium*, *Lysis*, and *Phaedrus*) and *eros* (love) in the postsecondary learning environment, arguing that love may be

valuable in facilitating learning, that love of an object may motivate learning, and that teaching should “involve the attempt to cultivate passion for knowledge and truth” (pp. 159-160). Barrow’s qualifies that Plato did not advocate a sexual element in teaching; rather, “... attraction and rapport between student and teacher, and passion for knowledge and truth” (p. 155). Thus, not being a ‘rational’ love, is the one way we can rise above our rationalist conditioning; indeed, eros was about searching as well as desiring and loving that which is lacking.

Are we left with a viable educational theory that can be extracted from Plato’s educational thought? As Barrow points out, a theory of education, as any other theory of science or history, is necessary. Barrow argues that Plato indeed has been the first to contribute a known theory of education and his starting point is that humans are unique in that they possess the divine spark of rationality and thus the capacity for reason, along with a tripartite soul or psyche with an unlimited potentiality. As well, Plato clearly emphasized another undeniable fact: that people have desires, wills, determinations, and that conflict can reign in the soul; in the face of this “The aim of education may therefore be said to be to develop understanding and virtue in the individual” (p. 167).

Plato would presumably insist, writes Barrow, “that the human mind clearly amounts to a great deal more than the sum of those parts or aspects” (p. 166). And, as he astutely observes, so-called psychological ‘advances’ “certainly don’t involve repudiation or rejection of Plato’s basic insight” (p. 166).

Barrow recognizes that here is a question of educational balance between a given environment and its power in relation to conflicts in the soul (innate characteristics) of the learning individual. Plato calls for a suitable environment that allows a child to be habituated by the good and the true by controlling judiciously any social influences that could undermine the aspiration to knowledge or understanding. The Theory of Forms ultimately provides this aspiration by encouraging “an understanding of concepts or abstract and ideal general notions and a synoptic view of knowledge as a whole...we can say that his [Plato’s] explicit point is that education should be concerned with theoretical understanding of all kinds – with grasping the reason why of things and appreciating connections and distinctions between different areas of understanding” (p. 168). These are not to be achieved so much by praise and blame but rather through the modeling of our requirements pertaining to values and standards. Thus, one would move from the study of relatively abstract particulars vis-à-vis organized disciplines such as mathematics to a philosophical study.

The author emphasizes the need to understand Plato’s view as one that transcends the mere role of well-delineated prescriptions for teaching. Thus Plato does not provide any recipes for teacher assessment or any pseudoscience that purportedly establishes pedagogy or curriculum evaluation. According to Barrow, Plato would see through the insignificance and sham of such pretensions; it is far more important to establish aims, content, organization: “Only when we have a clear idea of what we are doing, only when we have grasped the Idea or Form of education can we begin to judge the efficacy of various methods; by the same token, no way of evaluating can itself be evaluated except in the light of the *Idea* [emphasis added] of education” (p. 170).

Barrow disarms us by admitting to a logically obvious though paradoxical conclusion regarding the present-day influence of Plato on educational thinking. He points out that although our *admiration* of Plato’s philosophical and educational thought has been prodigious, his *influence* has remained relatively insignificant. He admits to a somewhat rueful but consistently honest answer to the question of Plato’s influence on educational thought today by acknowledging that it is “not much and its influence on practice, though slightly greater, has been largely indirect.... Plato’s educational arguments and views may not be much studied in a sustained and critical way, but they certainly ought to be” (p. 201). I particularly agree with Barrow’s summation that Plato’s influence educational practice has been largely indirect.

As a scholar of Kierkegaard and an admirer of his important *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Kierkegaard, 1992), I would suggest that for the very reason that Plato’s influence is indirect, it is therefore, a good deal more considerable than Barrow is perhaps willing to admit to. Kierkegaard

argued that an indirect influence, as it were, acts as a form of communication because it is related to the metaphorical mode of maieutic art, and thus, for our purposes, to the Socratic dialogue. This influence, in turn, takes the form of the subjective and would thus constitute a personal communication. Kierkegaard felt that subjective communication, say in a classroom where a Socratic dialogue is taking place, is therefore indirect and personal in its approach and for that very reason cannot be taught directly. The teacher must teach in the metaphorical mode of maieutic art because there are no 'methods' for producing creativity. There are no formulas (Kierkegaard, 1846/1992).

Thus, teachers would have to rely on their informed intuition and empathize with the feelings of their students as individuals and yet not be afraid to disagree with them in the spirit of empathy and knowledge based on their experience. In this way, teachers would become meaningful mentors to their students and preserve their creative, responsible, individuality through a subjective reflection which would not evade the actual content of their existence.

Given this context it is fitting that Barrow writes on the last page of his book that the main goal in educational study, research, and practice is to develop a clear concept of education "and then of all the subsidiary related concepts such as knowledge, humanity, integrity, courage, interest, need, etc." (p. 231). The question is not "is Plato still relevant to educational theory?" but 'has there ever been a thinker who contributed more to establishing the ideal Form of Educational Theory?' I think the answer is probably 'no.'" (p. 231)

In conclusion, Barrow has written a masterful study and defense of Plato. In doing so he has revealed both the continuity of his thought, such as his seminal notions of 'skill' and 'curriculum' (see Barrow, 1990, 1984) and a deepening sensibility to the human condition well beyond the utilitarian Plato (Barrow, 1975). He has also revealed a deep respect and understanding of the arts. Unlike Roger Scruton (1999) who wrote the misinformed *The Aesthetics of Music*, Barrow, like Wittgenstein, knows through an understanding of the *what* and the Kierkegaardian *how* (Kierkegaard 1992) of the impossibility of the *The* in Scruton's book. No doubt Barrow will lead us next to a more existential perspective on an aesthetic philosophy, because he too has grasped that which Plato knew very well two and half thousand years ago: that "aesthetics and ethics are one and the same" (Wittgenstein 1974, p. 71).

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