

BOOK REVIEW

A Platonic Theory of Moral Education: Cultivating Virtue in Contemporary Democratic Classrooms

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A Platonic Theory of Moral Education: Cultivating Virtue in Contemporary Classrooms is an excellent book and should interest a wide range of readers, including teachers and students in foundations courses in education, scholars in the field of Plato studies, and researchers who want an adequate theory of education. Discussing Plato at length, Mark Jonas and Yoshiaki Nakazawa draw from him a theory of moral education that they argue is preferable to Lawrence Kohlberg's and a vital supplement to neo-Aristotelianism (*PT*, 139n4).¹ Along the way, they offer novel and provocative interpretations of Plato's dialogues, and they provide examples of what their Platonic theory looks like in practice.

As they note at the outset, Plato is not very popular among philosophers of education, at least in part since he can seem committed to intellectualism, anti-egalitarianism, and an otherworldly metaphysics characterized by the theory of Forms. Jonas and Nakazawa try to show that he is far different from how he is often pictured. They contend, for example, that the theory of Forms plays no part in his philosophy of education: Forms are not the object of the knowledge he wants us to have, since he thinks they are not humanly knowable (*PT*, 49–51, 57). To absolve him of anti-egalitarianism, the authors claim that the talk of philosopher-rulers in the *Republic* does not reflect his true political philosophy. And they say Plato rejects the theory that they call intellectualist, the theory that all it takes to improve someone's character is to argue them out of their false beliefs and into true ones — once you do this, like clockwork they become virtuous — since every human being has innate knowledge of virtue buried within them, and recollecting it, bringing it up to the surface, is relatively easy.

For Jonas and Nakazawa, Plato's theory is more nuanced than that. They hold that, although he does believe we have innate knowledge of virtue and that our task is to recollect it, he thinks our access to it is obstructed by vicious habits we inevitably form (chapter 2), and we cannot recollect this knowledge completely until our habits have changed (chapter 3). In fact, on Jonas and Nakazawa's

interpretation, the right dispositions, arising out of the right habits, are part of what complete human knowledge of virtue *consists of*; this is why Socrates considers virtue a craft (see especially *PT*, 12, 20–21, 31, 67). Like Aristotle, then, and unlike Kohlberg, Plato is realistic enough to recognize the importance of habit in shaping our characters and the inadequacy of simply forming true beliefs. And unlike Aristotle, he has an answer to the question of how we can reshape ourselves when we have been habituated improperly. Plato believes that, through dialogue with the right sort of teacher, the right sort of students can have an epiphany, meaning an experience in which they catch a “glimpse” of virtue (*passim*) that gives them partial knowledge of what it is, and they thereby become motivated to take on the hard work of rehabilitating themselves so as to act in accordance with what they have learned (see especially *PT*, 70, 73–74). Then, to carry out that work over a long period of time, they can imitate virtuous people, repeat the same right actions over and over, and continue their dialogue with the teacher. When the process is successful, students gain additional insight into the nature of virtue, and their feelings and inclinations align with their understanding of it such that they reach the fullest moral knowledge that is possible for human beings.

Jonas and Nakazawa commend this theory (or at least parts of it; they say they do not advocate “a complete revival of all of [Plato’s] ideas” [*PT*, 9]). They make their case for it in the conclusion and devote most of the book to defending their interpretation of Plato. The introduction, together with the appendix, helpfully addresses interpretive issues, such as what to make of the tensions among Plato’s dialogues and how much weight to place on the *Republic* in determining what Plato’s educational philosophy is. Chapter 1 contends that his so-called early dialogues are not intellectualist in the way they have been thought to be. Chapter 2 explains why the later dialogues, too, are free of intellectualism. Chapter 3 contains the authors’ main arguments for the claim that Plato puts habituation at the center of his educational theory. Chapter 4 is where the authors argue that Plato has a plan for *rehabilitation*. Chapter 5 provides examples of how Socrates carries out Plato’s plan in the dialogues, leading Alcibiades (in the *Alcibiades*), Glaucon (in the *Republic*), and Lysis (in the *Lysis*) to epiphanies. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss how teachers today might do the same sort of work with students. The book is admirably accessible, and it is insightful at many points. The authors are exceptional for the extent to which they emphasize the importance of habit in Plato’s philosophy, and they make a strong case in claiming that he takes it seriously. They also seem right about what Plato can add to Aristotle’s thoughts about habit. And at a time when virtue is in short supply in public discourse, they ascribe to Plato a promising and levelheaded account of how we might educate students for virtue.

In that and other ways, the book offers powerful reasons for philosophers of education to engage Plato — to consider in depth how he can help us enhance contemporary education and to ask how to interpret him properly for that purpose. Like Avi Mintz’s most recent book,² this one not only adds immensely to the discussion of Plato but also shows that the discussion is important. So, strictly

for the sake of continuing the discussion, here is some pushback to the authors' interpretation of Plato.

Plato wants us to live well — to achieve *eudaimonia*, or flourish — and he thinks that integral to doing this is achieving virtue, which includes (but is not limited to) moral virtue. He also believes that for people to pursue virtue properly, a sort of conversion must be brought about in them. On those points — I think — Jonas and Nakazawa would agree with me. But I am not sure we would agree about what he wants to convert people *to*. In my view, central to it (for intellectualist reasons or others) is a certain sort of inquiry, as we can call it, meaning the process of seeking answers to your questions by trying to reason your way to them — or, to find adequate arguments for them. Maybe the authors would agree that inquiry *is* central to what Plato promotes; I don't know. But they can be read to mean that it is relatively unimportant to him — that for him, the point of dialogue, for example, is just to inspire us and give us enough guidance to carry out the process of rehabilitation.³

If that *is* what they mean, it can seem problematic. Socrates is a hero in Plato's dialogues, and he spends his life inquiring, as do, apparently, all the other lead characters in the dialogues. In fact, Socrates seems to define his very identity when he insists in the *Euthyphro* that “the lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him” (14c) and when he says in Plato's *Crito*, “At all times, I am the kind of man who listens to nothing within me but the argument that on reflection seems best to me” (46b).⁴ In Plato's *Theaetetus*, he describes himself as a barren midwife who helps other people give birth to philosophical insight through inquiry (especially 149a–151d, 210b–d). In the *Apology* and throughout the other dialogues, arguably, his test of whether someone has wisdom is whether they can give an adequate *logos* of what they know.⁵ And most important, he emphasizes at certain points that it is the love of truth and wisdom and the devotion to seeking them through inquiry that gives rise to genuine moral virtues (*Phaedo* 68c–69d, *Republic* 485a–487a). Jonas and Nakazawa could simply deny that Plato endorses statements such as these, but why think we should interpret Plato that way? And if the idea is, for example, that Socrates makes these statements only ironically, then why think he is in earnest in making the statements that undergird the authors' interpretation? There may be reasons, of course, but Jonas and Nakazawa do not name them. As I said, they argue compellingly that Plato thinks rehabilitation is important; however, he may value it not as a replacement for inquiry but as preparation for it. He may want us to rehabilitate ourselves just so we reason correctly, as the authors seem to acknowledge at one point (*PT*, 26).

Added to this is the fact that, when Jonas and Nakazawa say that dialogue can give us a glimpse of virtue that affords partial knowledge of it and motivates us to rehabilitate ourselves, there are certain things about that process that they do not explain. How, for Plato, can catching a glimpse of virtue motivate us enough despite our resistance to reformation? And what does he think is the mechanism whereby Socrates can give his interlocutors a glimpse of virtue and, in turn, partial knowledge of it? The authors beg off from answering the former question (*PT*, 74),

and the main point they make with respect to the latter is just that Socrates does not show what virtue is by proving it with arguments.

I realize it might seem inordinate to ask them to be more specific. On the one hand, they claim that the knowledge is partly ineffable (*PT*, 119–123), and the path to ineffable knowledge can be difficult to characterize. On the other hand, as for how the glimpse can motivate us, they indicate that it is not strictly rational and that part of how it can produce desires or inclinations is by involving one's emotions. Here, too, it may be difficult to provide details. It is relatively easy to understand rational persuasion, for example — persuasion in which you convince me of something simply by giving me an argument for it that I accept. It is somewhat trickier to pinpoint how you might successfully motivate me another way and how Socrates can motivate his interlocutors by other means. (It is easy enough to imagine tactics he uses. A harder question is which of them, in Plato's view, can be effective.)

Yet there are commentators who have offered sketches. For many of them, for example, Socrates is right to rely on flattery and shame the way he does. For others, he does well to present appealing myths. And on one recent interpretation, part of how he can motivate his interlocutors to invest themselves in inquiry is by introducing them to the pleasures of it, pleasures that are profound enough to “reconfigure [their] beliefs about the good.”⁶ The authors could say something similar about the glimpse of virtue. In line with certain comments in the *Republic* about beholding the Form of the Good (for example, 519c, 580d–588a), they could say the glimpse is so intoxicating that it can overwhelm one's tendencies toward vice.

There also are accounts of how we can get ineffable knowledge through Socratic discussion, Plato's dialogues, and a variety of other writings, including even Descartes's *Meditations* and Shakespeare's plays. On one interpretation, for example, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can teach us about love insofar as Romeo is blind in a certain respect: as the play makes clear, he ignores the reason to doubt that his would-be love for Juliet is anything more than infatuation, lust, or simply being in love with love.⁷ Blindness of this sort is basic to love: when you love someone, you are so overtaken by their beauty that you are only selectively aware. Yet philosophical discourse cannot show us this fact about love, since seeing it requires *experiencing* blindness in the right way, and philosophical discourse cannot generate that experience. *Romeo and Juliet* can, though. It can do so since *its* beauty overtakes *us*, the audience, to the point that we overlook the inauthenticity of Romeo's passion. That is the mechanism by which the play can illuminate an integral feature of love.

On one interpretation of Plato, the knowledge he wants us to gain is not an awareness of the truth of certain views but an ability to use the right methods of philosophical inquiry in the right way. This, very roughly, is Wolfgang Wieland's reading.⁸ It is especially notable here because of Jonas and Nakazawa's emphasis on habit, practice, and Socrates' craft analogy. To get a sense of what Wieland has in mind, think of the following, for example. When we are evaluating a philosophical

theory, we should ask, of course, whether there are contradictions in it, since certain contradictions will give us reason to reject it. But beginning students in philosophy are sometimes overzealous, seeking out contradictions when other tasks are more important and fixating on contradictions that are inconsequential since they can be smoothed out easily enough just by reformulating the relevant arguments. One mark of philosophical maturity is the ability to tell when a contradiction is significant and when it is not. On Wieland's reading (or an interpretation that is easily associated with it), having a range of abilities of that sort is what it is to excel at inquiry and is what Socrates hopes to cultivate in his interlocutors and Plato in his readers — fittingly, since one develops this philosophical know-how mainly through having the kinds of conversations Plato depicts.

On another interpretation, that of Francisco Gonzalez, Socrates can lead his interlocutors to knowledge, and Plato can lead his readers to it, insofar as Socrates *exhibits* the virtues in the dialogues in which he discusses them.⁹ In most or all of the dialogues, Socrates and his interlocutors cannot say or prove through argument what the virtues are; no human being can. But although Socrates and everyone else are in that sense ignorant of virtue, Socrates displays virtue by the way he inquires and dedicates his life to inquiry — more specifically, to inquiry into what virtue is. For example, he displays courage, since he neither claims to have knowledge, as someone who is foolhardy does, nor gives up on making progress in inquiry, as someone who is scared by it does; and it is easy to be scared by Socrates' sort of inquiry since, at every moment when you engage in it, the integrity and legitimacy of your whole way of life are on the line and your ignorance is repeatedly exposed. Similarly, Socrates displays temperance inasmuch as he has the "knowledge of knowledge" discussed in Plato's *Charmides*: both in that dialogue and in all the others, his devotion to inquiry reveals that Socrates has knowledge of what he knows and does not know. He displays all the other important virtues, too, in inquiring. And in fact, for Plato, Socrates' life of searching for virtue, a life devoted to inquiry of his sort, *is* the life of virtue — not surprisingly, since Socrates says in the *Apology* that engaging in that sort of inquiry is "the greatest good" (μέγιστον ἄγαθόν, 38a) for human beings. Neither Plato nor Socrates can prove by argument that the life of Socratic inquiry is best, since, as Gonzalez puts it, "the benefit of such a life is not some product separable from it and therefore can be experienced and understood only by someone who lives it."¹⁰ But Plato and Socrates *show* it to us by what Socrates does, and by that device they can lead us to a life of Socratic inquiry and, in turn, to the sort of knowledge that Socrates has: knowledge of his ignorance of virtue and of his need, accordingly, to seek knowledge of what virtue is.

I mention all this since it invites the following questions. Like most readings of Plato, Wieland's and Gonzalez's, for example, put inquiry at the center of Plato's thought and practice. And Wieland's and Gonzalez's interpretations are compatible with all the passages that the authors cite as evidence for theirs. So why accept Jonas and Nakazawa's interpretation instead of Wieland's or Gonzalez's, supposing still that it conflicts with theirs? More pointedly, why not prefer Wieland's or

Gonzalez's interpretation to Jonas and Nakazawa's? By providing more details than Jonas and Nakazawa's does, Wieland's and Gonzalez's interpretations give us more direction on how to educate students. No less important, they make themselves more vulnerable to refutation than they otherwise would be. If, for example, inquiry turns out not to be a central activity in Plato's dialogues, or some of them, then Wieland faces a problem; and if we find reason to think that Socrates displays vice in the dialogues or fails to exhibit virtue, then Gonzalez has trouble. The flip side of this is that the more the dialogues *accord* with Wieland's and Gonzalez's interpretations, the more evidence there will be in favor of them. Alasdair MacIntyre makes a point about philosophical systems that is applicable here:

What makes it possible for the adherents of a philosophical system to claim that it has been rationally vindicated is just that about it in respect of which it is also open to the possibility of rational defeat. Hence, it is one of the essential virtues for a major philosophical system that it will be stated in a way that renders it maximally vulnerable to refutation from its own point of view.¹¹

The same goes for interpretations of Plato. Jonas and Nakazawa protect their interpretation remarkably well from the worry that it clashes with the text. The danger is that, as a trade-off, there will be too little reason to prefer their reading to its competitors, since many of them, too, may cohere with the text.

This is only a quibble, though. Again, the book is first-rate. I hope it finds a wide audience and brings attention to Plato in philosophy of education.

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1. *A Platonic Theory of Moral Education: Cultivating Virtue in Contemporary Classrooms* will be cited in the text as *PT*.

2. See Avi I. Mintz, *Plato: Images, Aims, and Practices of Education* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018).

3. On Jonas and Nakazawa's account, for example, Plato holds that complete human knowledge of virtue "is obtained from practicing the virtues over and over again" (*PT*, 50); Plato "believes that *the* role of dialogue is to temporarily open the eyes of individuals so as to inspire a *desire for rehabilitation*" (*PT*, 70, emphasis added); and Plato thinks "habituation is *the* key to virtue" (*PT*, 94, emphasis added). See too pp. 13, 21, 31, 81, though also pp. 26, 94, and the rest of the passage on p. 70.

4. I use the translations in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997).

5. See *Apology* 22b–c; *Gorgias* 465a, 500e–501a; *Meno* 98a; *Phaedo* 76b–c; *Phaedrus* 278c; *Republic* 531e, 534b–d; *Theaetetus* 187b–210b; and *Timaeus* 51e.

6. Jacob Stump, "On Socrates' Project of Philosophical Conversion," *Philosophers' Imprint* 20, no. 32 (2020): 1–19, at 2. For a fuller account, see Jacob Stump, "Socratic Method and Moral Motivation" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2017).

7. See Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

8. See Wolfgang Wieland, *Platon und die Formen des Wissens* [Plato and the Forms of Knowledge] (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1982). Worth noting in connection with Wieland is Catherine Rowett's recent reply to the now-common attempt to reduce all apparently nonpropositional senses of "knowledge" to the propositional sense, or to analyze them in terms of it, in *Knowledge and Truth in Plato: Stepping Past the Shadow of Socrates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). See also Stephen Hetherington, "Knowledge as Potential for Action," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (2017). In this paragraph, I mostly paraphrase Wolfgang-Rainer Mann, "Plato in Tübingen: A Discussion of Konrad Gaiser, *Gesammelte Schriften*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 31 (2006): 349–400, at 360–361.

9. See Francisco J. Gonzalez, "The Socratic Elenchus as Constructive Protreptic," in *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. Gary Alan Scott (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002): 161–182, especially 175–182, and the citations therein of Gonzalez's other relevant work.

10. Francisco J. Gonzalez, "Is There an Art of Living?" *Salmagundi* 126/127 (2000): 253–75, at 264.

11. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Are Philosophical Problems Insoluble? The Relevance of System and History," in *Philosophical Imagination and Cultural Memory: Appropriating Historical Traditions*, ed. Patricia Cook (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 65–82, at 77–78.