

The Role of the Educator in the Just Society

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Sometime over the course of my recent trip to South Carolina, Tony Soprano either did, or did not, get what was coming to him. I did not see the final episode of *The Sopranos* but from what I have been able to gather the show itself left the question open. Some viewers, longing for moral clarity, or, at least, dramatic finality, were incensed at the ambiguity of the ending. I thought it was just as well. We are living in morally ambiguous times. The popularity of a show about a suburbanite man with generally suburbanite sensibilities, who makes his living lying, cheating, stealing, and killing is itself testimony to our moral unclarity. We don't know whether to despise Tony's moral turpitude or admire his power and success. A good part of the show's fascination was in the way it played with this disturbing ambiguity itself.

I was in South Carolina to give a presentation on Plato's ethics to a group of South Carolina public school teachers, as part of a program developed by Boston University's *Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character (CAEC)*. The program's aim is to promote sensitivity to issues of moral character development among primary school teachers, whose interactions with students in their formative years can make such a difference to their evolving views of life. The goal, to put it simply, is to promote a society with fewer Tony Sopranos. To succeed at this, however, we, as a society, will need to make some progress in resolving the moral ambiguity that Tony represents. How can we do so? That is a big question.

Plato knew all about moral ambiguity. Indeed, his entire philosophy, in one way or another, seems directed at the problems that it poses. He lived in a time with striking parallels to our own. The traditional values associated with the ancestral religions of ancient Greece were being called more and more into question. In their place a new set of values was emerging, promoted by a group calling themselves ‘sophists,’ or ‘wise men,’ emphasizing the pursuit of individual self-interest above all. “Justice,” says the cynical Thrasymachus in Plato’s *Republic*, “is the advantage of the stronger.” In every society, he explains, “each ruling group sets down laws for its own advantage . . . And they declare that what they have set down--their own advantage--is just.” Previously, justice had been supposed a transcendent value, administered by the gods for the good of all. But this view is now seen as itself but a ruse of the power elite, designed to keep the masses docile and pliable. Such traditional views may be fine for the masses, intones Thrasymachus, as the majority of men have neither the fortitude nor the wit to pursue their own self-interest without compromise, but the clever ones, the strong ones, the modern ones, have now seen through them.

What I found remarkable, and alarming, in my interaction with the school teachers attending my sessions, was how many were ready to echo Thrasymachus’ thought, even while disagreeing with it in spirit. It is not that they agreed that this is what justice *should be*, it is that they could not help but concede that this is what justice *is*, and in the face of the overwhelming testimony of *what is*, any appeal to what *should be* seemed to many of them wishful at best, if not altogether fanciful.

Where, after all, is what *should be*? Where can we go to look for it? How will we know it when we find it? How can we assess one person’s version of it against another’s? Even

for those of us inclined to affirm the reality of moral truths, these are difficult questions. More and more, in our public discourse, we seem to have lost the conceptual tools with which to address them. We seem caught between philosophies of moral relativism, tending toward nihilism, which deny the legitimacy of all moral judgments, and ideologies of moral absolutism, tending toward despotism, which refuse to submit their moral judgments to critical scrutiny. Both extremes testify to our failure to discover the locus of moral truth.

Plato believed that this locus is only discoverable through a process of vigorous, rational, self-examination. Values exist only in relation to one who values. The reality of what *should be*, then, is to be found only in the deepest recesses of the human soul. Superficially, we each, quite naturally, value our immediate concerns and desires. More profoundly, as Plato, Socrates, and all the great moral seers have affirmed, we are rooted in that which transcends these superficial bounds. The proof of this, however, is not to be found in the world of the senses. The senses report what we see, but moral reality pertains rather to *how* we see. Nor is it to be found in religious scripture. Religious scripture can at best alert us to a moral reality that it hasn't, in itself, the means to validate. If validation is to come it will come only from the one, and for the one, who is able and willing to undergo the difficult process of self-and-world-interrogation. The prerequisites for this process are scrupulous honesty and a capacity for sustained, disciplined, thought. To produce people who can satisfy these prerequisites should be, according to Plato, a primary goal of the educational process.

The stakes are high. As Plato well understood, the Thrasymachan view of justice must lead, inevitably, to a society in which those most adept at consolidating power for

themselves will succeed in subjugating those less able or willing to do so. The end of this road is a world in which the virtues of honesty, integrity, trust, fairness, compassion, and simple decency become material liabilities. Human beings divide into two camps: those who exploit and those who are exploited. When these are the only choices left, the human soul is forced to close in on itself for its own protection, and the world becomes a darker, meaner, and ever more desperate place.

We do not know what becomes of Tony Soprano in the final episode of the show. The last frame, I am told, simply goes black. There is considerably less mystery, however, as to what will become of a society of Tony Sopranos. If we wish to avert this a vigorous, morally attuned, education is necessary. What is the role of the educator in the just society, then? A primary one, certainly, must be to prepare students for an exploration of the meaning of justice itself.