

The Soul of Philosophy in a Soulless Age

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Abstract: In its original Greek conception, philosophy was intended to promote both wisdom and virtue among society; in this sense, the teaching, or presenting, of philosophy is central to its essence. Socrates and Plato famously grappled with the question of how to impart wisdom and virtue to the learner, with mixed results. One of the standard methods—reading and writing—was argued to be misleading and even deceptive, because it deals with static, ‘dead’ words and ideas rather than with the “living discourse” of one person speaking directly to another. This general critique of certain ‘technologies’ of learning is even more relevant today, in our technological age, where the presenting of philosophy often involves computers, laptops, and the Internet. Such things come to function as addictive drugs—much like the *pharmakon* that Plato warned of. Philosophy would thus be better served by less use of mediating technologies and by a return to live, interactive, living dialogue between student and teacher.

Every academic discipline has an essence—something intrinsic that makes it unique and distinct from other fields of inquiry. This essence may be hard to define and hard to analyze, but it is there nonetheless. If nothing else, we have an intuitive grasp of such things, as illformed and fuzzy as they may be. This essence comprises the backdrop to all who practice a given discipline, unifying them into a semi-coherent community of like-minded thinkers.

Philosophy, too, has an essence, an essential nature, though—being good philosophers—we likely would all disagree on what exactly it is. On the one hand, philosophy is essentially about wisdom, of course; one can scarcely contemplate *philosophos* without the *sophos*. It is also about examining wisdom in a systematic, disciplined, rational manner—the logos of *sophos*, as it were.

If we hold true to its Greek origins, philosophy also has a pragmatic component. It is about a certain way to live: a good way, the *best* way. The Greeks placed highest value on excellence in life, in *this* life, and they understood that random, unplanned, unreflective modes of living were unlikely to produce such excellence. They furthermore understood that a good life, the best life, is that life which is most rooted in reality—in *real* reality, the real world, the world as it really is.¹ Hence the need for metaphysics: one must explore the nature of reality in order to live the best possible life.

I would further argue that philosophy, as originally practiced, is essentially about society, about one’s community of fellow individuals. For the Greeks, an excellent individual life could only be conducted within the confines of an excellent society. We see this in the reverence that Socrates and Plato held for the polis, and we see it in Aristotle’s extensive political and ethical writings. Thus it came to be that teaching, communicating, and expressing philosophy emerged as part of the essence of philosophy. And if teaching philosophy—that is, teaching wisdom, and teaching virtue—is part of the essence of philosophy, then we ought to examine the process by which philosophy is presented. Indeed, it can scarcely be avoided.

On the teaching of virtue

Plato famously examines the teaching or presenting of wisdom in *Meno*, where Socrates grapples with the apparent inability to teach virtue. Even the terms themselves are problematic; ‘wisdom’ (*sophos*), ‘virtue’ (*arete*), ‘knowledge’ (*episteme*), and ‘understanding’ (*phronesis*) are, at times, treated synonymously, and at other times distinguished from each other. Mid-dialogue, Socrates informs us that “virtue...must be a kind of wisdom” (88d), and again, “virtue then, as a whole or in part, is wisdom” (89a)— though later he will identify a crucial distinction between them.

But the key question is: Can these things be taught at all? No one disputes that there are such things, and that there are people with these qualities. But how did they come to be? How can one ‘present’ them to others, in order to instill them in the soul? Clearly people are not born with virtue or wisdom, otherwise we would see it in children (89b). Hence they must acquire it. But when, and how?

The obvious answer is by *teaching*: by a learned elder, himself wise and virtuous, who presents the nature of virtue to the eager student. But this option is fraught with difficulty— most notably, that we cannot, in fact, find actual teachers of virtue. The best men of Athens could not even teach their own sons, as Socrates shows by many examples. All we have are ‘fake teachers,’ the sophists, who teach rhetoric, not virtue (95b-c). Lacking effective teachers, we have no empirical reason to believe that virtue can actually be taught; the mode of presentation here seems irrelevant.

And indeed, the problem appears endemic to the subject matter. Knowledge or wisdom is, by definition, that which can be rationally justified; it can be “tied down” (97e), as Socrates says. Consequently, it can be taught. But virtue, as shown earlier, cannot be taught; therefore, it cannot be the same as knowledge or wisdom, which can be taught. Hence the teacher of philosophy should stick to things which are, in fact, teachable—namely, knowledge and wisdom—and leave aside the teaching of virtue. Yet, virtue is arguably the most important characteristic; and it is truly acquired, at least by some people. How? It seems almost miraculous. And indeed, astonishingly, Socrates makes this very claim, that it is something of a miracle, a divine blessing, by which some individuals become profoundly virtuous. “Virtue,” he says, “comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods (*theia moira*)” (99e); and again: “virtue appears to be present, in those of us who may possess it, as a gift from the gods” (100b). The lesson is clear: Philosophers should focus on knowledge and wisdom; leave virtue to the gods.

The classic mode of presentation

Regarding the teaching of knowledge and wisdom, Socrates and Plato have more to say, of course. The traditional mode, at least for the elite of society, was via reading and writing— techniques that had been in existence for over two millennia at that point. As simple technologies, such things were self-evidently essential to an educated class of people. But as always, things are not what they seem.

In *Phaedrus*, Socrates famously recounts the story of the mythical Thamus, King of Egypt. Thamus has a chance meeting with a leading divinity, Theuth (or Thoth), who was the god of mathematics, games, and writing. Of all of Theuth's gifts to humanity, writing was the purest; it was an unmixed blessing—or so he claimed. “O King, here is something that will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered an elixir (*pharmakon*) for memory and wisdom” (274e). It is fascinating in itself that Plato would describe reading and writing as *pharmakon*—literally, as a drug; but I leave that aside for the moment. As the story goes, the wise king pushes back against the god:

You describe [your invention's] effects as the *opposite* of what they really are. In fact, it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have discovered a potion not for *remembering*, but for *reminding*; you provide your students with the *appearance* of wisdom, not with its reality. [. . .] And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so. (275a; italics added)

Written words are little more than ideas ‘painted’ on paper, much like a bird is painted on a canvas. But no one mistakes the painted bird for a real bird; the painted bird is dead, fixed, lifeless. So why, asks Socrates, do we mistake ‘painted ideas’—written words—for real, living ideas? Who would accept dead, written thoughts in place of real, actual, living ones? Hence the surprising message from Socrates (and presumably Plato as well): reading and writing are not helpful tools in the teaching, the presenting, of philosophy. Even more: they are positively *deceptive*. They give only the appearance of knowledge and wisdom, not the real thing. Only a “naïve and truly ignorant person,” says Socrates, could believe that “writing can yield clear or certain results” (275c).

The only “legitimate” form of discourse, then, is “the living, breathing discourse” of an informed speaker, of one who knows, of one who can question and be questioned in turn. The living, dynamic, interpersonal dialogue is the only valid way to present

philosophy, and thus to impart knowledge and wisdom. The wise teacher first “chooses a proper soul”—that is, a receptive student—and then, like a good farmer, verbally plants the seed of wisdom within it. This seed of wisdom grows, produces new seeds, which in turn yield new forms of knowledge. In this way, and this way only, philosophical discourse is “forever immortal” (277a), rendering the fortunate recipient as happy and wise as is humanly possible.

It is easy to overlook how truly radical this conclusion is, especially in a modern era where reading and writing are taken as virtual human rights, and where they are seen as absolute essentials to an educated and enlightened life. Socrates and Plato beg to differ; even these simplest of ‘technologies,’ these elemental scribblings of ink on paper, are defective and deficient. They mislead. They tend to hubris. They take the place of real learning. Writing, they say, is little better than a game—a literal amusement, something to entertain, or at best to remind oneself of what one already knows. As *Phaedrus* concludes, Socrates adamantly reiterates his point: Anyone believing that a written document “embodies clear knowledge of lasting importance [ought to be] reproached” (277d). The wise man realizes that “a written discourse on any subject can only be a great amusement,” nothing more. Further, “no discourse worth serious attention has ever been written in verse or prose”—an astonishing statement, in truth. Thus we can understand why Socrates wrote nothing.¹

Presenting philosophy in the technological age

Let me jump, now, to the present day, bearing in mind these lessons of the past. Here I draw from my own extensive teaching experience, over some 30 years. As a passably effective instructor—judging from student feedback—I have some feel for what works, and what does not, in the presenting of philosophical ideas.

Philosophy, when taught in modern society, occurs almost exclusively at the college level. It consists of extensive reading and extensive writing. Fortunately, there are few other required technologies—no laboratories, no measurements, no experimentation, no prototypes. Yes, the students in class often use laptops as their recording devices rather than pen and paper, but this is not a requirement (and in fact it can often be detrimental, because typing requires less mental processing than writing, and thus is less retentive) (May, 2014). In most of my philosophy courses, however, students are prohibited from using cell phones, laptops, or tablets at all; I prefer their undivided attention, along with short, select handwriting of notes—parallel to my writing on the chalkboard—as the optimal pedagogical practice.

The central point is that my presentation of philosophy requires dynamic interaction between myself and at least some of the students. It requires a “living discourse.” Our illustrious experts in the textbook offer fixed, static views on the questions at hand; they cannot respond to our modern-day queries. In many cases I, as the instructor, will attempt to take their place, providing what I believe would be their replies to our various questions and comments. I am a poor substitute, but I can give at least a flavor of the discourse that they might wish to conduct with us, were they here themselves.

Yet, I can certainly sympathize with Plato: the text itself, the written word, can indeed feel like a drug at times. We cannot live without our texts. Our memories alone seem too meager, our minds are too stretched and distracted by other issues, other classes, other pressing matters. The very format of a modern university course—meeting two or three times per week, for an hour or two—demands that much reading and writing be conducted out of class. Try as we might, living discourse alone does not meet the requirements of the modern university.

And, in recent years, it is yet worse than this. Much of reading, and all of writing, are now conducted on technological media. E-books, online articles, videos, Wikipedia, and SparkNotes all compete for students’ attention. Technology provides vast access but it also offers vast temptations and shortcuts. The motivated few will take advantage of the access, and the less-than-motivated majority will take the shortcuts. In the pre-

Internet days—say, before 1995—students were more or less compelled to attend class, to pay attention, and to take decent notes; there were few alternatives, and plowing through a primary reading on your own was not fun. Now, however, with the many available shortcuts, including many options for plagiarism, undisciplined students find many easy ways out. Class attendance seems less necessary than ever, and even a sleepy attendance will often suffice.

The net effect is that the living discourse is irreparably harmed. Students are increasingly reliant on static technological media rather than a living dialogue with an actual professor. A vibrant, productive dialogue can only occur where each party perceives, and responds to, subtle verbal and bodily clues—a raised eyebrow, a slight smile, a wave of the hand, or a tonal inflection can all convey important insights into a person's thinking process. Such things require live, in-person, face-to-face interaction between like-minded investigators. Overreliance on texts, videos, or online sources are all pale substitutes, at best, for a true, living dialogue.

Life in times of Covid

And then along comes an evil god, Pandemic. An already-depleted learning environment becomes even more dysfunctional, in an instant. Governments and universities lurch into crisis mode, doing something, *anything*, to at least appear to respond. The now-familiar devices are quickly rolled out: masks, distancing, plexiglass shields, reduced hours, cancelled events, and most disconcerting of all—*remote learning*. In-person classrooms are now viewed as a health risk, given that students are generally untrustworthy when it comes to stringent health measures that reign during a pandemic. Teaching must go on—after all, vast tuition dollars are at stake—and therefore the only option is to use yet more technology, and to further cripple the living discourse, in order to carry on the mission of the university.

Several ironies present themselves in such a situation. First, few seem to acknowledge that a pandemic itself is, almost by definition, a technological crisis. Pandemics can only occur in large populations, living in relatively dense conditions, and rapidly moving about. That Covid-19 should have emerged, apparently, in one of the world's most populous nations, China, is somehow appropriate. Large populations and population centers have only existed in the past few hundred years, thanks in large part to the Industrial Revolution; new agricultural technologies, new energy technologies, and new medical technologies allowed human numbers to explode. Total world population in 1600 was about 600 million; currently it is pressing against 8 billion. Today, transportation technologies allow thousands of people to move around the planet in a flash, spreading any pathogens far and wide, before anyone can even identify them. In the past, dangerous germs were localized and confined to a small tribe or village; today, they fly around the world at 500 miles per hour.

The standard solution to this technological problem is, of course, more technology: disinfectants, respirators, and ultimately, new, high-tech vaccines. Transportation and personal interaction were inhibited, but since the flow of commerce, information, and capital must proceed, many modes of interaction shifted to advanced technology—hence the ubiquitous Zoom call. Weeks and months of “lockdown” and virtual home confinement meant countless hours of digital gaming and Netflix binging. In-person shopping was problematic, and so a massive shift to high-tech, on-line shopping. Amazon, and Big Tech generally, surely cried few tears over the pandemic.

The net result of a technology-driven pandemic was, then, a technology boom. Strange how the culprit is the very one to benefit. And we all nod in compliance; after all, *we have no choice*. Education must continue and business must continue, therefore technology must be advanced, and its reach must penetrate even further into

the hearts and minds of human beings. Students from college level down to preschool must spend hours a day in online learning, which only adds to the existing hours of gaming, web-surfing, and video-watching. The technology-pandemic has surely intensified our mass addiction to the technology *pharmakon*.

If Plato was the first to see the simplest of instructional technologies—reading and writing—as drugs, as *pharmakon*, then he wasn’t the last. Writing in 1750, Rousseau recognized this very point, in principle if not literally. The arts and sciences, he said, are functionally addictive:

So long as government and law provide for the security and well-being of men in their common life, the arts, literature, and the sciences, less despotic though perhaps more powerful, fling garlands of flowers over the chains which weigh them down. They stifle in men’s breasts that sense of original liberty, for which they seem to have been born; cause them to love their own slavery, and so make of them what is called a civilized people (Rousseau, 1750, p. 147).

Modern technologies weigh us down, confine us, restrict us—and yet we “love” them, and cannot do without them; so powerful is their addiction that we surrender, in no small part, our very liberty. A century later, Samuel Butler made a similar observation. He could see, even then, that the evolution of machinery was on a track to make humanity the inferior being on this planet. How, he asked, would humans ever allow such an obviously deleterious situation to come about?

This question is easily answered. For firstly, man is committed hopelessly to the machines. He cannot stop. If he would continue to marry as early as he does, and bring up his children with a fair prospect of their thriving, he must go on improving the machines; these objects are far dearer to him than the remote subjugation of his race. It will not be in our time, and ten thousand years hence may be left to take care of itself (Butler, 1865/2020, p. 152).

Sadly, the “ten thousand years hence” is about to dawn upon us, sooner than we like.

The connection between machinery—technology—and addiction was made explicit in 1937 by George Orwell, in his brilliant but little-known nonfiction work *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The entirety of Chapter 12 is a prescient and entertaining critique of the modern machine-society and its homogenizing, over-socializing effects. Thinking people hate the machine, he says, but they realize that we have little choice:

The sensitive person’s hostility to the machine is in one sense unrealistic, because of the obvious fact that the machine has come to stay. But as an attitude of mind, there is a great deal to be said for it. The machine has got to be accepted, but it is probably better to accept it rather as one accepts a drug—that is, grudgingly and suspiciously. Like a drug, the machine is useful, dangerous, and habit-forming. The oftener one surrenders to it, the tighter its grip becomes. You have only to look about you at this moment to realize with what sinister speed the machine is getting us into its power (Orwell, 1937, p. 140).

We can only imagine Orwell’s thoughts about the present day.¹

Now, well into the 21st century, we must deal with literal *pharmakon*—literal technological addiction. Even that “learning tool” called television has long been known to promote compulsive viewing. Researchers in *Scientific American* argued that “television addiction is no mere metaphor,” citing a number of parallel behaviors with drug addiction (Kubey & Czikszentmihalyi, 2002). A few years later, Elias Aboujaoude conducted the first large-scale random sample survey of adult Internet usage, finding that roughly 12% exhibited at least one sign of problematic use. Warning signs included “relationships suffered” (5.9%), “concealed use from other” (8.7%), “used longer than intended” (12.4), and “hard to stay away” (13.7%) (Aboujaoude et al., 2006). By 2007, some in the business community were worried that employees addicted to smart phones supplied by their employer could have grounds for lawsuits.

Meanwhile, recognition has been growing globally that Internet Addiction (IA) is a major social problem, especially for students and youth. A 2009 study of 2,293 Taiwanese middle schoolers found that nearly 11% had developed an addiction, and that this was linked to greater occurrence of ADHD, hostility, depression, and social phobia (Ko et al., 2009). The following year it was reported that roughly 30% of Korean adults were addicted to Internet gaming.

Other scientists sought physiological effects of IA. Some found decreased grey matter and microstructure brain abnormalities in addicted adolescents (eg. Zhou et al., 2011). By this time, other researchers began dedicating entire chapters and even complete anthologies to IA (eg. Young, 2011). The phenomenon began to spread—one British doctor warned that children as young as age four were being treated for IA (Keating, 2013). Overall prevalence in the US and Europe is estimated to range between 1.5% and 8.2%, with certain subpopulations as high as 38% (Cash et al., 2012).

In the past few years, it has emerged that tech companies have been deliberately designing their products to be maximally addictive.² Online games like Fortnite have been shown to be particularly problematic.³ Meanwhile it has been demonstrated that screen time can literally change the brain structure of preschoolers, leading to lower cognitive development (Hutton et al., 2020).⁴ The technological *pharmakon* is a cruel master.

Presenting philosophy: An outlook

All this bodes ill for the presentation of all academic fields, not least philosophy. As the nominal study of wisdom, philosophy has a special obligation to critically examine threats to rational thinking, and none appear greater than the increasingly technological mode of learning that students of all ages must confront today. It is an urgent and pressing problem, one that worsens by the day.

Perhaps this calls for a profound re-conception and re-envisioning of the very process of education. Perhaps our many sophisticated tools, as clever as they are, interfere with and even undermine the process of learning. Perhaps in the realm of so-called educational technology, less is more. Perhaps, as Socrates said, a simple and elemental “living dialogue” is our best guide for imparting wisdom. And then, perhaps, the gods will find favor with us, and bestow upon us that rarest of qualities: true virtue.

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