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Friendship and Education

James S. Taylor

It is has been said, by Whitehead, I believe, that all of philosophy is a footnote to Plato; likewise, it can also be said that all of education is a footnote to his teacher, Socrates. If the essential quality of philosophy is exactly what the word means, the love of wisdom, then what is the essential quality of education, that is, of a school? In this regard, Plato's remembrance of his master, where we see the man Socrates, is more revealing of the essence of education than the theoretical details in the dialogues. For example, toward the beginning of *The Republic*, Socrates is playfully and affectionately restrained by his students from leaving the ceremonies so that he may stay with them and talk about justice. They are drawn to him, they seek him out, and surrendering in mock defeat, Socrates is heartened by their enthusiasm and is pleased to remain among his students. Then, in the Symposium, as the various speeches deal with some aspect of love and friendship, the subject rises to a crescendo with Socrates' recollection of Diotima's mystical encompassing counsel that the love of all earthly beauty ultimately leads to friendship with God.

In Wemer Jaeger's classic, *Paideia: 7he Ideals of Greek Culture*, commenting on the Symposium, he says that the nature of friendship and education is fundamental to Plato's whole philosophy.

> His teaching about friendship is the nucleus of a theory of politics which treats the state primarily as an educational force . . . When society is suffering from a great organic disorder or disease, its recovery can be initiated only by a small but basically healthy association of people who share the same ideas, and who can form the heart of a new organism . . . Therefore the problem covers a far wider field than any conception of friendship existing in our own highly individualized society.[1]

Since all of these comments about friendship by Jaeger are mentioned in the context of education, it is not straining my purpose here to translate a concrete application of the statement that, "a small but basically healthy association of people who share the same ideas", to be that entity that is the basis of a school: the faculty. Furthermore, all but the most naive or obstinately optimistic would deny that our present society "is suffering from a great disorder or disease". Notice too that Jaeger's observation for a recovery of such a condition in the manner of Platonic principles calls for an education that would "form the heart of a new "organism", instead of typical solutions that impose from the head down what seems to be an endless stream of new methods. This reference to the "heart" is no sentimental proposal, but is meant to be, as its Latin root implies, the core, the center, of education, as well as pointing to a real emotional engagement between teacher and student. Nor does this have anything to do with any mechanical model of education, as in some new system, but rather this is an "organism", the very living cell of true education. That is, a school in the legacy of Socrates would be first of all a faculty of friends, of those who love one another, love their students, and the beauty of truth in all things.

The current cant about diversity is wrong in this respect: we do not form friendships based on differences that would be essential, but on shared ideas, and more, on the love of those ideas. In fact, it is only this love of what is shared that can sustain and tolerate the inevitable differences between even the best of friends. There may be a heady fascination these days with bringing together diverse groups, but love only grows on the principle that like seeks out like, and the friendship that Socrates and his successors discovered to be true, was based on a mutual love of virtue (arete, excellence) and the good. Aristotle distills this insight by saying that only good people, that is, those who love and practice virtue, are capable of true friendship.[2] This legacy, sadly misunderstood or rejected in our day, has been replaced by "our own highly individualized society." In our work, education, and even in our play, we are often separated from our neighbor and are quite alone; thus, all the trendy gimmicks deployed to bring people together almost as if by force, like the joke among perceptive children at summer camps when they know it's time for mandatory fun.

Also, it is likely in our times of modernism that the complaint would be raised, as John Dewey voiced, that what might have been true for the Greeks was suitable for their times, but not necessarily for ours.[3] It is also easy to be overwhelmed by the entire apparatus of institutionalized progressive education that persuades us to believe it is impossible to seriously turn our attention back to ancient discoveries as the means of addressing current educational problems. But this is false, because there is an essential human nature that thrives on real friendship, and because there is such a thing as the tradition of Western civilization that continues to teach us that this is so. Western civilization is not just a topic for study, but it is a real and living thing no matter how vigorously we have tried to kill it. There is after all such a thing as discovery, and the Greeks did discover truths in astronomy, geometry, architecture, politics, economy, and literature which we have attempted to reject only at our great peril. The discovery of the wheel is final, and while the telescope enhances (and distorts) vision, the presence of the planets of earth's solar system, the observance of the yearly cycle of each with the moon, stars, sun, and earth, remains the same since their habits were discovered. In spite of the highest tech navigational equipment, one can still sail around the world using the stars as guides. All of geometry is divided by Euclid. And, Socrates said there were four basic forms of government, aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, and democracy—not five or three—and as it turns out, with obvious allowance for overlapping transitions between these forms, history has demonstrated that this is so. (Tyranny, which often emerged as the result of anarchy, was the perversion of government, and anarchy, as the name implies, is no government at all). It is only because we are intoxicated with the scientific-technological age that we do not extend such finality to other areas of art and science.

And so it is with the principles of education discovered by Socrates—they are still true, and the disastrous neglect of their application today only proves how true they are. One of the reasons they are true is because they are not a body of theo-

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retical principles imposed from the top down, but instead are based first on the keen understanding and sympathy of what the human being is at the various stages of development. And at all stages in all things, Socratic teaching took place in an atmosphere of friendship—it was not a theory, it was a living thing that shone forth from the interior life of the teacher, and like the spiritual flame Plato spoke of his *Seventh Letter*, leaped from the life of the teacher to the heart of the student. Without this species of love, the discovery of the love of the truth of anything is impossible. In this regard, recall that the reigning mode of instruction in Socrates' time was that carried out by the Sophists—brilliant teachers who taught for gain, clever rhetoricians who, because of their lack of love of the truth, used true things to manipulate arguments to coincide with such specious arguments as the relativist position that whatever is right is what those in power declare. One of their prize pupils was Thrasymachus who makes his appearance at the beginning of *The Republic*, venting his personal attack on Socrates. It is not that such students are unintelligent, it is that, lacking a love of the good, they are incorrigible and cannot be taught. It is only when Socrates patiently reveals the bad will of this student, the famous moment when Thrasymachus blushed, that there is any hope that he may indeed be able to learn.

Therefore, issues such as which curriculum to follow are at first beside the point. High ACT scores and admittance to national honor societies, all the efforts to catch up with the Japanese, piling on homework and attempts at year-round schools, are even less relevant. Education at the elementary and even at the secondary level is not to advance knowledge—it is to first see what is already there that is true—and it certainly is not intended to produce "bookish" students with over-stimulated minds. It is not an education for parents to be able to say: My kid is smarter than your kid. Certainly at the first twelve years of education, if there is to be a recovery of education within our tradition, there will be no quarrel concerning the books to be read. They will be the good and great books of Western culture, from *Mother Goose* to the *Odyssey*, and the classics of history and science taught proportionately to the student's ages. But even here, these books must be in the hands of teachers who love them and love their students, so that they become occasions of something more important than what is now considered education. And this is why.

The philosophers spoken of here recognize such distinctions by speaking of causes or ends; that is, in addition to reading the books for enjoyment, an immediate experience, the student, under the teacher's imaginative guidance, is able to consider imitating the good therein, as well as knowing something of the dangerous and forbidden in a vicarious way. Furthermore, with as much direct experience with nature as possible observing things as they are and the nature of things running in tandem with the "book-learning", students discover that language lives, moves, and has a being, and as a result become better readers and writers in this quite simple way, not by methods of attacking the discrete topics of a language arts programs. Enjoyment of hearing stories, learning to read and write, are examples of the ends called immediate and proximate causes.

But there are also *remote* and *ultimate ends*. It is these last two that describe the experience of real education. The reward teachers and students know when they abandon all the cumbersome paraphernalia of scientific education and confront one another and the truths of the subject at hand directly and simply, is friendship. This is as true with the direct study of natural science as it is reading an adventure story. They have loved the same thing, together. These last ends of education are more difficult to define because they point to the mysterious bond between teacher and student who have been brought together by something other than themselves, something they both love, something that begins to encompass them both. Perhaps these four causes can be better understood by using the example of a dinner party where the immediate occasion for gathering is to eat and drink, to be nourished; the proximate cause is to visit and to behave as social beings, as the term *proximus* implies, to be neighborly. But the remote end of feasting is to arrange the pleasant occasion for real friendship, which, in turn, may led to the ultimate and more mysterious end: a participation in a transcendent feast and friendship, to be caught up in the way of love as understood in this tradition.

Given the state of modem education—and by modem, I begin counting from the Cartesian revolution down to the pragmatism of Dewey and his over-zealous followers—with all the textbooks and workshops, methods and techniques, as the means to overcome what nearly everyone recognizes as an institution dreadfully disordered in some way—why not introduce ever so gently the suggestion that it is all in pieces and therefore let us return to the original master and integrator of education and see where we might begin again? As school teachers and those interested in education, why don't we begin with ourselves? No curriculum studies just yet, no book list to quarrel over, no buildings, not even any students. Just ourselves. We know it is true that we cannot give what we do not have, so we must know our subject. But do we love our subject, and do we love it because there is something true about it? Or have we found a way of hiding in our subject, using the truths of science, history, literature, and philosophy, perversely, to distance ourselves from the very ones who need our love to be overflowing? There are many teachers and religious leaders who know their subjects, but judging by their actions and results, do not love what they know to be true. The ancient and classical tradition of the teacher was also analogous to a musician,[4] where we tuned the soul for a more significant life, and in this regard, we should ask ourselves, do we play the notes, or do we play the music?

The greater, more disturbing question is, do we love our students? For if we truly love the truth of what we teach, like the good, it will be diffusive, we will want to pass that love on to. others. It is in this way that we best love our students. This is not to say we try to recapture this departure from the ancient tradition by becoming "buddies" with our students. Aristotle, the inheritor of the tradition of education from Socrates and Plato, is careful to distinguish that friendship has its definite arrangements based on that great Greek discovery of all harmony, proportion.[5] That is, we do not love our students as we do our parents (though something of the familial relationship should exist in a school), nor do we love them as we would our adult colleagues who we call friends, and most dangerous of all, we do not love them as we would our spouses. This last example calls to mind again that the truly good friend is always a person of virtue, one who desires the good of the other above their mere usefulness or ability to please. In fact, I would say the proper love between teacher and student occupies a class by itself, like all the others in some respects, including the teacher's admiration for their students' physical and emotional beauty, but closer to what Plato sought to explain all his life, the Form of Love.

And we must also be prepared to have our share of the children of Thrasymachus, more so perhaps in our day of deep antagonisms between people in general, between nations, between races, parents and children, husbands and wives, teachers and students. In the presence of such unrequited love, if you are a teacher who holds a religious belief, you will pray for them, even as they may be lost from your presence; if you are agnostic or otherwise, wish them well at least and hope that someday something of the example of what was loved will rise from their memory when age and experience has had their way with them.

Let me say this again another way and return to the essential aspect of the school, the faculty: no change of the curriculum or of the books taught will necessarily produce higher interest from students. Nor will the addition of experts on the faculty produce that light and exuberance we know should be a part of education. What is needed to bond the school again will not happen until they first see that we have fallen in love with our subjects and that we have a species of love, friendship, for our fellow faculty members, loving the same things. That is what draws students to teachers, and even in our day, there always seems to be the one elementary or high school teacher, the handful of college professors, whose love of what they do draws the students to them and changes their lives forever.

When we compare the ends of modem education, be they in the public schools and universities, or the majority of private and religious academies, with the ends of education as conceived by the much longer and vibrant tradition traced here, we see that there can be very little friendship between students and teachers and between the students themselves, at least in this traditional context. First, the faculties of most schools have been brought together to instruct students in certain subjects according to a planned system of coordinated textbooks and tests, so that they master certain skills. Students are present because by law they have to be, and by the "law" of economics, so they are told, they must use an education to get a job. Now, faculty members within this setting, as well as students, may indeed become friends, but it will not ordinarily be because of a remote or ultimate cause of education, but because of the nature of human beings who tend to form friendships of some kind in social settings. Furthermore, since the pervasive influence of Dewey and his overzealous disciples have firmly implanted the idea throughout the training of teachers that there really are no universal transcendent truths to be seen and experienced outside their utility in solving economic, social or political problems, then there is nothing left for teacher and student to gaze upon beyond immediate and proximate ends, nothing for them to love as good in itself This situation is further revealed to be destructive of friendship because of the confusion, or ignorance of, the distinctions of the kinds of good and the friendships based on them that existed if not always in fact at least in ideal from the time of Socrates.

Aristotle set these down in an orderly manner, which had already been observed in common experience for as long as anyone could reflect on such things,[6] that there are some friendships based on utility, the *bonum utile*, where what love there is, is not based on the good of the other, but upon what each can get from the other. For example, the teacher has information, the student takes this from the teacher for a grade. It is for the good of ourselves that we befriend another person in this case. Then, there is the occasion of friendship based on pleasure, the *bonum delectabile*, similar to the *bonum utile* in that the love of the person is still based, not on the good of the other, but upon what pleasantness we derive for ourselves from that person. Here, the teacher might try to mainly entertain and be well-liked. Aristotle says such friendships are incidental and are easily dissolved because if one person ceases to be useful or pleasant then there is no reason to love them. Of course, Aristotle also points out that true friendships contain a measure of usefulness and pleasantness, for, after all, these are goods of a kind, and the truly good do desire to be useful and pleasant to their friend. It is just that the useful and the pleasant between real friends must be of a higher order and not subject to change and whim. But perfect friendship, says Aristotle, can only take place between those that are good and are alike in virtue, and interestingly, not normally between old people whose youth and main time for forming friendships have passed; and not possible at all, for obvious reasons, with those who are severe. This *bonum honestum*, is reserved for those who love the good, where we desire, above all, the good of the other. When the teacher, by the fact of his life of love of the good, true, and beautiful, becomes the flame by which the student is warmed by the wonder and goodness of things, then the school of the faculty makes the great inclusive move to the school of the student.

So, it is not difficult to see that the immediate and proximate ends of things are closer to the utilitarian and pleasant goods; whereas, the remote and ultimate ends can rise to the *bonum honestum*, that is, to the honorable good, which, beginning with at least Socrates to present-day Christianity, is recognized as true friendship that when practiced, we humbly participate in the bonum summum, the sum, the whole, of all good, philosophically speaking; and, from the point of view of religion, we share in the life of God Himself.

Now it is clear from all experience that youth do not really form the higher degrees of friendship—their's is mainly at the level of what is useful and pleasing. But given the presence of teachers who are friends and who love their students in the highest order, desiring their good, and understanding and patient of their exuberant age, these fortunate pupils will have the model in their memory, the form of love in their minds, especially in a time where as a nation, as a world, we either destroy our youth in unjust wars, or by over-indulgence, or by neglect and deprivation.

So let us take a deep breath, and take a time out, and reflect on the possibility of such a school, with just a few teachers and few students, for a few years based first on a faculty of friends in love with the simple truth of things. Who knows how far the spark may leap? With all the experiments in education, with all the concern about diversity, it would seem there would be room somewhere for this one small experiment in the recovery of education.

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