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Maybe Plato Was Right

Richard Ylvisaker

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into the face of such violence, take it upon ourselves, and even, if called upon to do so, bear up and suffer in some way because of it? As staff, administrators, and teachers on

college campuses related to the church, how might our tasks be affected, even altered, by a serious living out of the words.

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED: MAYBE PLATO WAS RIGHT

Richard Yivisaker

A popular view of Plato holds that his world view has had a great and largely detrimental influence while being transparently false. I have not been immune to this oddly dismissive attitude. It is with no little surprise, in fact, that I have gradually come to see that Plato may have been right. About everything? No. About some important things, however, clearly yes. I want to fix on one point in particular, a point which reverberates in a special way for those who inhabit the academic world. But first a brief consideration of some other points where Plato had an insight that merits preserving.

PRELIMINARY EXAMPLES

(1) Communities Are Not Necessarily Better Off By Becoming More Diverse.

We do not have to accept the vision of social differentiation and hierarchy idealized in the *Republic* to see the truth in Plato's view that a good society requires unity in diversity. Diversity may be necessary, but it is not sufficient. It contains the seeds of discord and disintegration along with the potential for enriched life, as homogeneity brings unity while threatening loss of vitality and decay. Everything depends on the wedding of diversity to some unity of purpose. We may accept Charles Taylor's notion that a "presumption" of value is owed to any deeply rooted culture, but this presumption has to be tested in an encounter of cultures whose outcome is uncertain.¹ This requires a commitment to such encounter on the part of the community, and this commitment is the unity of purpose which constitutes the community. If we were to turn our attention to the call for increased diversity at colleges of the church, creating the necessary unity in diversity would be a major task. It is not a matter of simple addition.

(2) If Politics Is To Be More Than A Struggle For

Richard Yivisaker is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Luther College.

Power By Competing Interests, It Has To Be Assumed That There Is A Moral Basis For Politics Which Transcends Special Interests.

Indeed, even the rightful pursuit of power on behalf of a particular interest assumes this. In our commitment to democratic politics we may reject some or all of the extreme measures to which Plato is led by this assumption. But the challenge of constructing a democratic process consistent with it is great. This may not mean, as it did for Plato, that the challenge is unmeetable. But the reduction of democracy to a naked or thinly disguised struggle for power parades itself daily.² Plato knew a difficult problem when he saw one.

(3) The Much-Derided Dualism of Body And Soul Contains A Measure Of Truth.

Even if we take the radical dualism in *Phaedo* at face value, there is more to be said for it than fashionable criticism allows. We want to say, of course, that the very idea of disembodied existence is both unappealing and barely conceivable (if conceivable at all). But this does not remove the problems of embodied life which rightly concerned Plato.

Of particular interest is his worry about the impact of embodiment on our cognitive life. For embodied creatures awareness of the world is mediated by organs which register and transmit sensory data. This leads to diverse points of view, depending on species nature, on individual physiology and psychology, on space-time location, and on cultural factors carried by language. The hope of liberating rational consciousness from such dependence may strike us as fanciful if not preposterous. As may the idea that we can aspire to a form of consciousness which is without any point of view and thus god-like. But bridging differences in point of view is a cognitive (and moral) imperative for us. So also, then, is discovering a process which in some way makes this possible. Plato saw all of this with great clarity. The point here is related to the earlier ones about morality

and politics and unity in diversity, and it brings us to the idea that I have come to see as Plato's deepest.

TOWARD A COMMUNITY OF DISCOURSE

Another surprise for me over the years has been discovering the strength of the penchant for doctrinaire pronouncement among academic people. Our fondness for mere opinion, in other words. Deconstructionists and Foucaultians will smile knowingly at my belated loss of innocence. But we needn't be deterred by their deflation of rational discourse as an illusion masking some will to power or fear of the free play of interpretation. Either they must defend their deflationary strategy incoherently (with an appeal to reasoned argument) or they offer us no reason to accept it. So we are free to reconsider Plato's commitment to the dynamics of reason.

The distinction between knowledge and opinion is central to the Republic. It was Plato's way of repudiating the reduction of knowledge to power or to groundless interpretation. Without this distinction the search for solid moral judgment is meaningless and the good life therefore impossible. Surely Plato was right about this. If personal or collective opinion is the last word, the true and the good are defined simply by our assent and thus become dispensable notions, except as tools of persuasion which work only until they are unmasked.

On the other hand, Plato's use of this distinction is problematic. Taking it as a given epistemically, he makes it call for a parallel and equally sharp distinction between the objects of knowledge and opinion: they cannot be distinct purchases on reality unless they are about different realities. Epistemology thus entails metaphysics: In this way the original distinction produces a fundamental divide between stable, mind-transcending models or exemplars (the Forms) and the space-time particulars which are their images.

We are rightly suspicious of the claim that knowledge and opinion cannot be about the same objects, even if we agree that epistemically there is a qualitative difference between them. But Plato's mistake is not the blatant one it is often taken to be. Crucial marks of knowledge cannot be detached from metaphysical considerations. For example, legitimate claims to know must be supported by good reasons, by "reasoned discourse" or "a reasoned account of reality" which can "survive all refutations," as Socrates puts it in Republic VII. If we grant this, we cannot avoid the question: About what sort of reality is it possible to have "reasoned discourse"? Which puts us firmly on the path of

metaphysics. So Plato's attempt to harvest metaphysical hay from the field of common-sense epistemology has something to be said for it.

More important, however, is the way questions about the links between knowledge, reasoned discourse, and reality are embedded for Plato in questions about the good community. Epistemology and metaphysics are inseparable from ethics. Even if we are skeptical about his metaphysical enterprise and suspicious of the social and ontological hierarchies to which it leads, we do well to ponder his insistence on the link between reasoned discourse and community. For the larger society his vision of a community built on reasoned discourse may be utopian; for an academic community it should not be. It matters - especially in such a community - how the views we hold are supported and defended. Being right is not enough: better to be wrong with good reason than right with bad (or no) reasons. So I have slowly learned. This may seem obvious, too obvious to have to be learned. But in my experience tough-mindedness about the pedigree of your own beliefs, especially the ones you hold dear, is not easy to come by.³

TWO CASES

Possible examples of the difficulty are legion. I choose two which are of particular interest to me. In each case the choice reflects my confidence both about an important truth and about the negligence of a particular defense of it.

(1) **The Death Penalty Is Wrong And Should Be Abolished.**

I have little doubt about the truth of this, though the tide in our country is running the other way. However, I have even less doubt about bad defenses of this truth. I pick one such defense, though a variety is ready to hand; and I pick it because it is close to home.

The E.L.C.A. is in the practice of issuing social statements on major public issues. These statements become the basis for continued discussion in the church and for public policy advocacy. A minimal requirement is that the positions they adopt be defended carefully and honestly, that no shortcuts be taken to make them appear self-evident. An egregious failure to meet this requirement is provided by the church's 1991 statement on the death penalty.⁴ Anyone who has really thought about this issue knows that the strongest case for retaining the death penalty is based on the demand for just retribution. It presses such questions as these: What

penalty "fits" or is "deserved by" the uniquely heinous crime of first degree murder? What punishment adequately upholds the community's consensus about the depth of the wrong committed by a brutal taking of innocent life? This case for the death penalty needs to be taken seriously by any convincing case against it: Can the demand for just retribution be met without recourse to the death penalty? If so, how? Is that demand itself misguided? If so, why?

There is more than one way of minimizing this challenge. A common one is to equate just retribution with vengeance. For the E.L.C.A.'s social statement, however, the challenge hardly exists. Though it repeatedly cites justice as a goal of the church's social action, the statement shows scant understanding of distinctions which are crucial to understanding this goal. In the brief section on "Doing Justice,"⁵ we find the following:

Violent crime is, in part, a reminder of human failure to ensure justice for all members of society. People often respond to violent crime as though it were exclusively a matter of the criminal's individual failure. The death penalty exacts and symbolizes the ultimate personal retribution.

Yet, capital punishment makes no provable impact on the breeding grounds of violent crime. Executions harm society by mirroring and reinforcing existing injustice. The death penalty distracts us from our work toward a just society. . . . It perpetuates cycles of violence.

The statement then calls for "an assault on the root causes of violent crime" and asserts without argument that problems of fairness in the administration of the death penalty are insurmountable. Finally, we are told that

The practice of the death penalty undermines any possible moral message we might want to 'send.' It is not fair and fails to make society better or safer. The message conveyed by an execution . . . is one of brutality and violence.⁶

In a few lines the demand for just retribution is first slighted, then confused with different concerns, and finally obliterated. It is hard to imagine less regard for reasoned discourse. The presupposition of the argument, if there is an argument, is that the primary agent of crime is society, the alleged criminal being more a victim than a perpetrator of injustice. This presupposition is not self-evident; it needs to be argued. And it needs to be argued case by case-unless we

fall back on a social determinism which removes all responsibility and with it any role for the notions of justice and injustice. This, too, would need to be argued.

(2) We Must Extend The Boundaries Of Moral Concern Beyond Humanity To Encompass All Of The Natural World.

I find this imperative as compelling as the one about the death penalty. It certainly is unproblematic within a theocentric ethic: "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof." But how make it compelling to resistant non-theists?

Consider a recent attempt in this direction: Larry Rasmussen's Earth Community Earth Ethics.⁷ Though there is much to admire in Rasmussen's book, it provides another example of the failure to offer compelling reasons for a strongly held position. We may agree with Rasmussen's judgment that a way of life tied to a consumption-driven, globally expanding market economy is unsustainable and that its threat to ecological well-being is growing exponentially, and agree as well that the urgency of the situation calls for a paradigm shift in our moral thinking. But how are we to ground the necessary shift? Showing its utility is one thing; grounding it is something else. Rasmussen attempts to ground it in two ways. One is by expanding the realm of sentient life, life capable of experiencing pain; the other, as his title suggests, is by enlarging our view of community. Each fails even moderately stringent tests of rationality. The unintended result is to turn Rasmussen's brief for a non-homocentric ethic on its head.

There is no phrase more often repeated in his book than "earth's distress." The less dramatic variants include "creation's pain," "the cry of the earth," "nature's suffering." Sometimes God is the one who is said to suffer as a result of nature's degradation. More typically, however, "earth," "nature," or "creation" itself is viewed as the subject of suffering. This way of speaking serves to make all of creation the focus of moral regard and to awaken compassion for it. But what is the basis for adopting such language? Rasmussen offers only constant use of the language, intimating that refusal to adopt it is a sign of homocentric arrogance. Emphatic reassertion, in other words, rather than argument. It would indeed be arrogance to deny suffering to nature where observable behavior displays it. But where there is no such behavior, the attribution of suffering becomes moralizing sentimentality.

Rasmussen's other attempt to ground a radical revision of our moral framework fails similarly: the natural world is characterized in a way which encourages the revision, but little rationale is offered for it beyond the characterization itself. This time the language is that of "cosmic community," "earth community," "the community of life," "creation as a genuine community," "nature as both the aboriginal and comprehensive community." Such phrases are used again and again as the basis for a "comprehensive communitarian ethic."⁸

The thinness of Rasmussen's argument is revealed as soon as we ask how "community" is to be understood. The difficulty he faces is that this concept must have moral import and yet be comprehensively applicable. The latter requirement is satisfied by explicating "community" in broad relational terms. We hear about the "internal relatedness and interdependence of creation," the "interconnectedness . . . among all things," and the "intricate togetherness of things." Talking this way is convincing as long as we understand it in causal terms. It is no accident that Rasmussen appeals to the discoveries of natural science to ground his communitarian view of nature. But causal interdependence, simply as such, lacks moral import. Rasmussen unwittingly exposes the crucial non-sequitur: "The goodness of life together and the reciprocity learned in genuine community create moral agency and responsibility."⁹ A community in which reciprocity is learned is indeed a moral community; but the interdependence which holds it together is more than causal, a kind of interdependence we have been given no reason to apply to the cosmos.

Aldo Leopold fell into the same error in his classic expression of this communitarian vision.

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate . . . The land ethic simply enlarges the boundary of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.¹⁰

Ethics requires the context of community and community requires an interdependence of cooperating members. But the land (in Leopold's sense) is not such a community. The mutuality essential to cooperation and hence to moral community is absent.

Rasmussen and Leopold take a concept whose moral pregnancy derives from a human context and extend it beyond that context without supporting evidence. Equivocating on the word "community," they end up attacking a homocentric bias in ethics with a conceptual move which is itself deeply homocentric. Ironically, reconceiving the natural world in our image has become the basis for reconceiving ourselves in nature's image.¹¹ The result is an expanded moral vision supported by no good reason. Little more than mere opinion, Plato would have said. And he would have been right.

THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES

Why should we care about having good reasons for our beliefs?¹² Well, the likelihood of having true beliefs is enhanced by good reasons. That is, good reasons make it more likely that my beliefs reflect the way things really are and not merely the way I want them to be. Suppose, however, that we reject the very idea of "the way things really are"; or we say that what matters about a view of the cosmos is not whether it is objectively true but whether it supports a preferred moral vision, or that moral visions do not need grounding in the way things really are.

Plato, of course, would demur on all of these suppositions. But assume that there is something to be said for them. Even then Plato would continue to defend the demand for good reasons since reason is linked to the possibility of a community of discourse. Disdain good reasons and you risk losing this possibility.¹³ Reason fosters such a community because it is by nature dialectical. Provoking us to discover incoherence in our beliefs, it leads us to uncover the assumptions on which they rest and to subject these assumptions to critical scrutiny. In this way it pulls us toward the vision of a ground which can compel the assent of all who reach it and thus bind us together. But this movement has to be governed by the mutuality it seeks; hidden contradictions and underlying assumptions do not yield readily to a solitary mind. The dialectic of reason is of necessity dialogical.

Here, then, is the fundamental insight: Offering reasons to support our beliefs and caring about the best possible reasons is a way of exposing ourselves to others and reaching out to them in the name of a community of discourse, a way of inviting them to join us in building this community. Refusing to provide reasons or to care about them is a rejection of community, an attempt to get others to accept our word as the last word. It is the will to power

at work.

Each of the ideas for which I earlier claimed Platonic ancestry points to this final one. For me its essential rightness has taken a long time to sink in. Teaching for many years is what made it possible. Largely by happenstance, I stumbled into a way of teaching which involved taking positions in class - real positions, positions to which I was seriously if provisionally committed - and urging students to come at them with their probing criticism. My initial motivation was to get them thinking by making myself vulnerable in this way. But what I discovered was a dialectic in which, on the good days, we pushed each other into thinking in new ways and doing this together for the sake of deeper understanding. I rediscovered Plato.

How can there be academic community without something like this as the controlling ethos, in the conversations not only of faculty with students but among students themselves and even - the biggest challenge - within the faculty? How (even more) can it fail to be the controlling ethos at a college of the church, with its confession of faith in the creative Word and trust in a Holy Spirit moving among us? Here, at least, Athens and Jerusalem should meet.

NOTES

¹ Charles Taylor et. al., Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) 63-73.

² Jesse Helms' use of the power of his chairmanship of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to prevent both committee and floor debate on William Weld's nomination to be Ambassador to Mexico is a recent example of a naked exercise of power at the expense of the democratic process. The fate of the McCain-Feingold bill on campaign finance reform is another, though in that case the power struggle was at least thinly disguised.

³ A likely rejoinder here would say, "Surely there are views which can only be held with little or no reason." Perhaps. But we ought to be suspicious of any particular claim to this effect if it is made with no investigation of possible reasons. That there are no possible reasons is itself a claim

which needs argument and thus reasons.

⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "A Social Statement on: The Death Penalty" (September 1991).

⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁶ Ibid, 4. Emphasis added.

⁷ Larry L. Rasmussen, Earth Community Earth Ethics (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

⁸ This theme appears throughout the book, but it is especially prominent in the concluding part, "Earth Action," 319 ff.

⁹ Ibid, 313. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1949), 203-204.

¹¹ It may be that homocentrism is inescapable here, that we need to find a way through it to a recognition of worth in the natural world which is independent of our interests. Rasmussen occasionally suggests a possibility of this sort without pursuing it: recognition of the ways in which we are implicated in nature's web of causal interdependence has the power to awaken gratitude for the gifts we receive from it. Gratitude, of course, is homocentric: it is gratitude for a benefit to us. But gratitude seems also to acknowledge the intrinsic worth of the source of the benefit: we can hardly be grateful if we view the source as having merely instrumental value relative to our interests. Whether gratitude must always be felt toward a person is a further question. An intriguing one which bears on the possibility of having an environmental ethic which can be non-theocentric as well as theocentric.

¹² Perhaps there are beliefs which are matters of "faith" and not of reason (i.e. of any conceivable kind of reason). But beliefs designed to provide a non-theocentric foundation for expanding the boundaries of moral regard are not promising candidates.

¹³ Whether Plato would say further, following Rousseau in The Social Contract, that without a community of discourse no reason is possible, is unclear to me.