

# **Educational Theory and Practice:**

## **Turning Points Part I**

**Richard A. Russell**

### **Plato (428-348 BC)**

Whitehead described the history of western thought as footnotes to Plato. Plato has done massive damage to Western civilization, including allegedly Christian periods of Western history. Most of the people who have been influenced by him have never heard of him, but his influence has poisoned Christian thinking on a wide range of subjects.

### **Greek Worldview:**

(a) The old nature religion which arose first (the religious vision of earlier tribal Greek society) was based on observation of the continual process of change, of birth, life, decay, death, in the world. It saw all of reality as a divine stream of life, a great process of coming into being and dying, of everything, including the gods (who merely lasted a bit longer), spirits, men, animals, plants, things, issuing from 'nature' and returning to it - everything was tied to nature and its patterns and processes. Characteristic of this is the god Dionysius (god of wine and ecstasy) and the philosopher Heraclitus ('all is flux', 'You can never step into the same river twice').

(b) The culture religion of the polis (the Greek city-state) arose as societal life grew more stable and structured. The landscape of Greece was very variegated and broken up, full of mountain ridges and small bays. In this context a lot of small city states (rather like fortified cities with land around them) developed, each in relative isolation and independence from the others, and with them a new worldview. Its new thought was that the gods (personified human virtues) were outside this system of flux (up on mount Olympus), above change and decay. These gods were, then, final reality - a new idea of what reality is about; all is not flux and relativity. The new religion was one of form, measure, harmony, order. The universe is given its shape and order by an unchanging cosmic law. Worship shifted from Dionysius

to Apollo (the legislator, god of the arts and of law and order) and then moved between the two - both aspects of life were real and you had to cope with both, and these two elements came to have a very fixed place in the Greek consciousness. The idea was formed that the empirical world of flux and motion (including personal feelings and anxieties) is ultimately illusory, reality lying beyond it, invisible but perceivable to the mind. The philosophers Pythagoras, Zeno and Parmenides developed this - reality is perceivable to the mind, not the senses, and change and motion are illusions. Thus there was a kind of split consciousness. Plato, grappling with the tension between these two ideas, gave priority to the new culture religion of form and the mind as representing reality, but also acknowledged a lower level of flux and change and matter and the senses. The higher level was that of the mind and of public life; the lower was that of matters of private emotion. We pass away, but the state goes on for ever; therefore public life is a higher order, the realm of real significance, private life a lower one. The old nature religion must be suppressed, marginalized, controlled. The empirical world is but a pale image of the real world.

**GREEK WORLDVIEW**

F O R M S	(b) culture religion of polis; form, measure harmony (law and order) Apollo (law, arts) - (the Anglicans!)	- PYTHAGORAS ZENO PARMENIDES (all is static, unchanging)	<u>PLATO</u> world of forms (eternal)
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M A T T E R	(a) old nature religion reality = a divine stream of life, issuing from nature and returning to it Dionysius (wine, ecstasy) - (the charisrnatics!)	- HERACLITUS (all is flux)	HIGHER  LOWER empirical world of change and decay, a pale reflection of the forms

**Athens:**

In Plato's day, there were over 80,000 slaves out of a population of 200,000, and about 20,000 who were traders - a bit better than slaves but not free men of the city. Some were private slaves, many worked in silver mines (>short life span). Slaves don't always want to stay slaves, and there was a sense of man having to keep a lid on the situation with half of the population in slavery - stability and luxury with a sense of insecurity (c.f. South Africa). The free had a lot of time for leisure and higher matters (philosophy) and a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

There was little education. The rich upper classes were given education by 'the SOPHISTS (*'Sophiste'* = wise man, hence sophistry). This education was mostly in rhetoric, the skills of persuasive speech for use in the law courts and assemblies - crucial for getting personal power and wealth in Athens. It was a private, elitist and very individualistic system of education and its aim was to enable students to get to the top, to gain personal power and riches. (c.f. education today!)

**Plato's 'Republic':**

Plato's writings constitute a whole vision of reality, worked out in systematic detail. His 'Republic' was the first systematic treatise on government and education in the western tradition, and has been profoundly influential. Many of the early church fathers were brought up on Plato before and after their conversion, including great people like Augustine; the Platonic academy kept going for 700 years, until the 4th century; medieval thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, Renaissance scholars, the Reformers, the Cambridge Platonists in 17th century Puritan England, the public school system - all studied Plato. The study of Plato in our society only began to die out when Greek and Latin began to disappear from schools. The study of Plato has continued for all of the last 2,400 years, and this profoundly influential pagan heritage has affected Christian (including evangelical and charismatic) theology.

(a) Salvation (soteriology). How, brother Plato, shall I be saved?

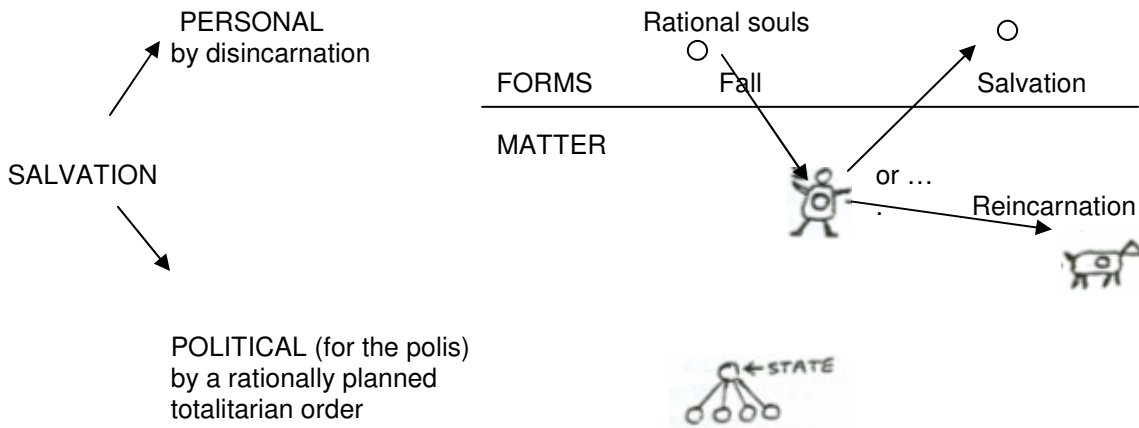
- (i) Personal salvation. Plato says that we were 'once rational souls, living in a higher realm of light and perfection, but something awful happened: we became incarnated into bodies. This incarnation is an imprisonment, a terrible state for a rational soul (c. f. Gen. 1, God looking at Adam and Eve -

Plato says 'bad', God says 'good'). We must get back out of the body and into the higher world of forms. Salvation means disassociating the soul from the body as much as possible. It's bad to be a manual worker, such can't be saved (eg. a carpenter?). It is good to get into the life of the mind, to think mathematical, rational, conceptual, abstract, non-sensible thoughts (nothing about flesh and blood, colour sound or the world around) and transcend the physical world of the senses. There is a profound other-worldliness; salvation means getting out of the world, which is a bad place full of suffering (c.f. Eastern religion - the trade routes in Alexander's empire which followed provided strong links with the East) and the way of salvation is to study philosophy. The soul is a little chip of the divine world which is going to rejoin divinity). If you disregard this way and enjoy the life of the senses in this world, you may be reincarnated as an animal. These ideas were very influential on much medieval theology, which adopted the idea that creation is intrinsically evil and the soul must escape it and get up to heaven (and evangelise other souls to join it). The final destination is seen as 'above' (c. f. the number of 'love/above' rhymes in *Hymns Ancient & Modern*); this world will not be renewed - it has no future. These ideas made possible Marx's accusation that Christianity is 'pie in the sky when you die'. They are not biblical. Also, Plato saw the soul as a little bit of divinity to be reabsorbed into the divine world - c.f. New Age teaching - Jesus woke up to his divinity and we must do the same.

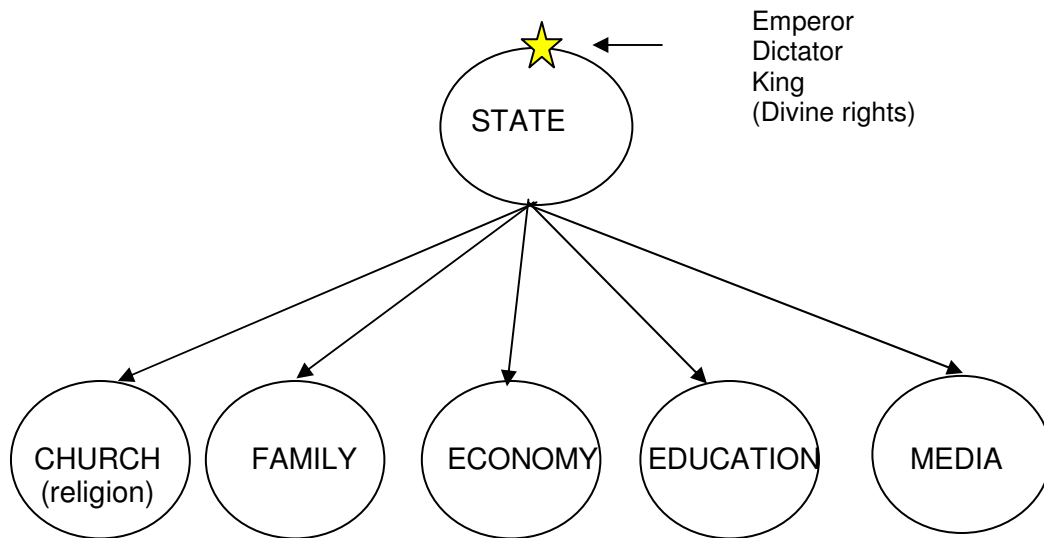
There is a theme of world despair - men have ambitions and plans, as individuals and societies, get so far and achieve so much, then gain time to reflect on what it is all for - age and death always take over (c. f. Ecclesiastes). So they seek escape into a timeless world. The conquest of death and decay and the renewal of creation are good news!

(ii) More important for Plato is the means of *political/public salvation* (c.f. 'National Salvation Front' in Eastern Europe). There were strong signs of disintegration in the Greek city-states at the time. The Sophists were very relativistic; they were interested in the skills needed to get to the top, not in truth, which can get in the way. Plato saw the polis as a crucial institution

for human life. A 'barbarian' was one unformed because not formed and cultured by the polis, one barely human, more like an animal. He saw the polis as we see the body of Christ for the Christian - you have to be part of it to grow and develop properly and to be whole - and he had the same intense convictions about it. There was no salvation outside of the polis, and to be part of it is the only way to find your humanity. In the face of disintegration Plato feared chaos and looked to a strong order. The choice is presented as chaos or order - the only alternative to chaos is state-imposed order (c.f. South Africa) So Plato says that the whole of human life has to be controlled and ordered by the state.



**Totalitarianism (Statism)**



(b) Order in the ' Republic' . Plato's proposal for the city states was more or less total isolation in order to obtain almost total control.

Religion: The tool of the state; Plato saw religion as a problem. The gods and goddesses of the old Homeric stories were plotters, adulterers, murderers, rapists etc., and so were not fit examples *for* the populace and *for* children. Therefore the old Homeric myths would have to be suppressed/expurgated and a new responsible state religion introduced (c. f. "get 'Christianity, out of the schools or it will cause social disharmony, look at Northern Ireland, religion must be sorted out by the state") which will preserve order. Plato wants to purge religion and add the 'noble lie' (see below).

Family: - a dangerous alternative' loyalty and source of allegiance, which must be minimised - like in the U.S.S.R.: get the children into state nurseries as soon as possible to minimise its influence. In the upper classes the family would be abolished and replaced by a community of men and women in fluid cohabiting relationships, with overseers to check that these don't become too permanent, so that there is a single loyalty to the state. Plato says that we are rational with dogs and horses - we breed selectively for strength, speed etc., but with citizens people just fall in love and produce children with whomever they want. This is irrational - we are much more careful with animals. We must not be led by such feelings «old nature religion). Therefore there should be selective breeding through a lottery - you get your ticket and sleep with X for so many weeks until she's pregnant (and you must be sober and rational when you conceive children, not drunk!). The lottery is rigged by the state on the basis of what kind of citizen is needed in greater numbers. Infanticide is practised with physically weak-looking specimens. Comprehensive education makes further selection and weaker specimens are thrown out into the lower orders of society. A static city with a set number of citizens is required, so there will be penalties *for* producing unwanted citizens or *for* not producing wanted ones. (c.f. U.S.S.R., China).

Economics: Totally state controlled, kept at .a steady, static level. Unchanging

stasis is a fixed idea - contrast the Biblical one of historical unfolding and developing of creation from the garden to a city and then the whole panorama of Revelation, unfolding and developing gloriously forever.

Media: state-controlled.

(c) Education. Plato introduced the 'noble lie – a myth/religious teaching, not true, but useful and good for state order for people to believe and so passed off as part of ancient tradition (c.f. modern ideas of propaganda). This was that the gods made three sorts of people (because the state requires three sorts!):

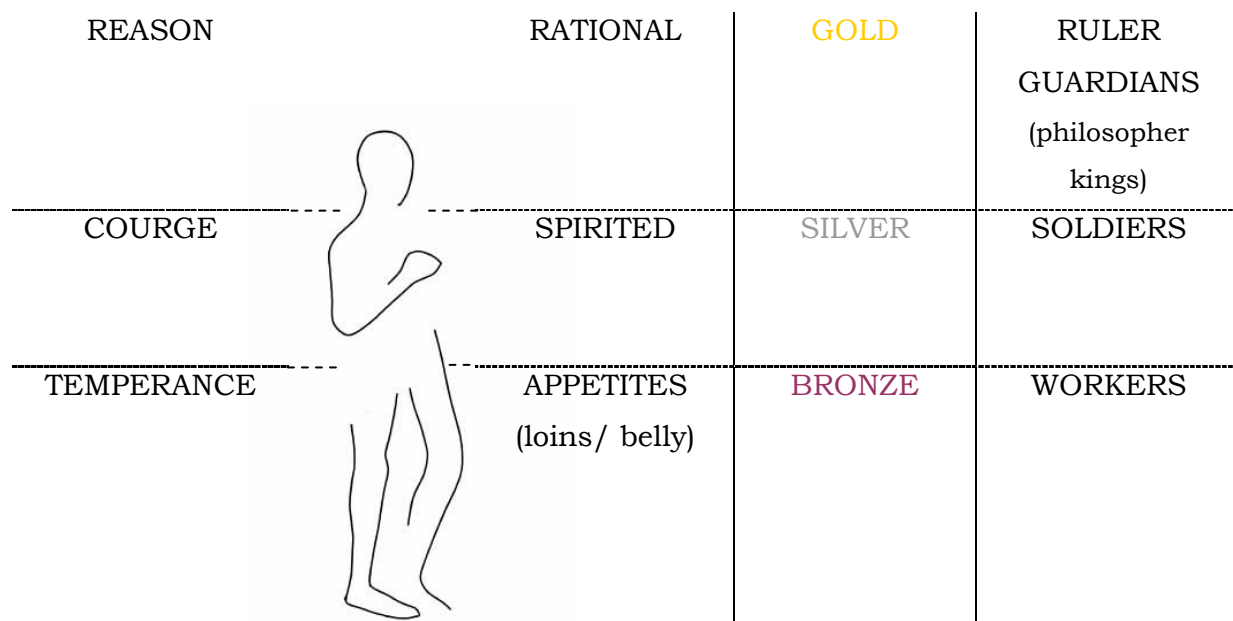
‘And now we will have to devise one of those useful lies of which we spoke, and if possible get the rulers themselves to believe it, and in any case have it accepted by the rest of the citizens.’ What kind of story would that be?’ asked Glaucon. ‘Oh, nothing very new,’ I said: ‘just a Phoenician story told by the poets, and located in many places. It has not happened in our time, and I am not sure that it could. It will certainly take a considerable amount of persuasion to put it over,’ said Glaucon. ‘Can you not just go ahead with it?’ ‘Very well, then,’ I said. ‘Here goes!

I will inform the rulers and their assistants, and then the rest of the citizens, that the training and instruction they had seemed to get had all been a dream: that in reality they had been fashioned in the depths of the earth, and on being completed had been sent up to the light of day by their Earth Mother . For that reason they must protect the land which had been nurse and mother to them from its enemies, and regard the other citizens as earth brothers. "All of you who dwell in the city," we will tell them, "are brothers, but the god who made you mixed gold in the composition of those among you who are fit to rule. Silver entered into the composition of their assistants, and brass and iron went to the making of the farmers and other craftsmen. Your children will usually be like yourselves, but since you are all akin it is possible that a silver child may sometimes be born to a gold parent, and the other way about. Similarly with the rest of you. The first and most imperative charge laid by God on the city's rulers is that they

keep close watch on the children born among you and discern the metals that have gone to their making. If one of their own progeny has iron or brass in its composition they must have no scruple about putting the child among the farmers and workers whose nature it shares. If on the other hand, a child born in the lower class proves to have gold or silver in him, he must be made a warden or an assistant, as the case may be."

'Can you suggest any way of getting this story accepted?' I asked. 'No,' said Glaucon. 'I do not think there is any chance of the citizens to whom it is first told believing it, but possibly their children and the generations that follow may come to do so.'"

PLATO, *The Republic*, III, 414-15.



There is a virtue and a dominant characteristic for each class. Education is the production and selection of citizens to meet the needs of the state (incl. infanticide and selective breeding). The city would incur divine judgement (nemesis) if the wrong kind of person got into the wrong job - if a soldier ruled, for example. The pattern was a period of education, then a test; a predetermined number are selected out and become workers; another period, then a test; soldiers selected out; then gymnastics, music, literature and 10 years of maths (abstract and therefore



related to the real world) before becoming a philosopher/ruler in one's 40s. (Compare our education system - O-level/A-level/University, + 1944 education. act: Grammar school/secondary technical/secondary modern) Women were to be included. The curriculum was Gymnastics, Music, Literature, Maths, Dialectics (philosophy). Dionysian ('pop') music was out, martial music was in; the whole curriculum was geared towards producing obedient citizens for the state. Although Plato's model of a republic was never implemented, the idea of exclusive state control of education has been around ever since.

Later, Alexander's Greek world empire reflected this strong doctrine of salvation and messianic view of Greek culture, leading to conflicts in Paul's day - where was salvation to be found - in Greek culture or in the people of God?