

Review of

## *Plato: Images, Aims, and Practices of Education*

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Plato is a towering figure in the history of philosophy, both for his ideas themselves and for the legacy of influence that he has had on the tradition. Werner Jaeger goes as far as to claim that, “To this day, the character of any philosophy is determined by the relation it bears to Plato” (p. 2:77). One of the central themes throughout the Platonic corpus is education. While some have recognized the centrality of education in Plato’s thought and the importance of his contributions to philosophy of education (Rousseau, for example, describes the *Republic* as “the finest treatise on education ever written” (p. 8)), many have not. In his book *Plato: Images, Aims, and Practices of Education*, Avi Mintz correctly recognizes this fact, noting that, “While most scholars working in classics or philosophy would not deny that Plato addressed education in his works . . . too often scholars omit education when exploring the topics that Plato discusses” (p. 15). Mintz’s book, part of Springer’s *Briefs in Education* series, is an attempt to respond to that unfortunate reality. It is a compelling, albeit concise, apologetic for the truths that “Plato’s engagement with education was central to his life,” that “Among the most important reasons that people continue to read him is that Plato addressed the most pressing, perennial educational questions,” and that Plato’s ideas about education “have reverberated through millennia of educational theory and practice” (p. v).

Mintz makes his case in three stages. He begins in Chapters 1 and 2 by providing historical background about Plato’s life and the ancient Greek approach to education. In Chapters 3 and 4, Mintz then turns to Plato’s engagement with educational ideas, examining both what the interactions between characters in the dialogues demonstrate about education as well as a series of images and metaphors that Plato uses to explain various aspects of his educational philosophy. Finally, in Chapters 5 and 6, Mintz examines Plato’s legacy in the history of education by addressing the Socratic method as a pedagogical technique and the parallels between Plato’s educational vision and contemporary institutions of higher education.

In his overview of Plato’s life and historical context, Mintz is intentional about making explicit connections between important biographical details and their relevance to Plato’s educational thought. After examining Plato’s relationship with Socrates and providing an overview of Socrates’ trial and death, for example, Mintz notes: “It is not unreasonable to infer that the charge that Socrates corrupted the youth was the impetus for Plato returning so often to questions about the nature of teaching and learning, the purpose of education, and the role of education in society” (p. 2-3). A similar link is drawn between the political upheavals Plato experienced in 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>-Century Athens and his view that the only

remedy for badly governed states is for political power to be held by lovers of wisdom, i.e., philosophers.

Mintz introduces education in classical Greece by describing the curriculum that students would have encountered in formal schooling: *gymnastikē* (gymnastics), *mousikē* (music, broadly understood), and *grammata* (reading and writing). He makes the important point, however, that this formal schooling was only one aspect of a Greek child's education and that in Greek thought, "The most important educative forces were not thought to be the school at all" (p. 7). Mintz then examines the educational influences that were exercised by the city and its laws; by fathers and other citizens; by poets; and by sophists, orators, and philosophers.

In his examination of the final group (sophists, orators, and philosophers), Mintz differentiates between them primarily based on the content and method of the education they offered. The distinction drawn between sophists and orators, for example, is that, while both were paid instructors who taught the art of persuasion, the latter group "focused exclusively on oratory" (p. 11). Sophists used debate and didactic exhortations to teach and hence are described as a "new kind of teacher who developed novel teaching methods" (p. 11). By contrast, Mintz explains, Socrates in Plato's works distinguishes himself from the sophists by the fact that he is not a paid teacher. Sophists are depicted as "panderers, arrogant, unserious" (p. 12), while for Plato, "Central to the task of philosophizing seems to be intellectual humility" (p. 17).

This explanation of the differences between these groups is, I think, a missed opportunity. It certainly is true that there are differences between them in terms of their pedagogical practices and the curriculum that they taught. A more important distinction, though, which Mintz does not emphasize, is their differing understandings of the *telos* (purpose or goal) of education. In contrast to traditional Athenian education, which sought to cultivate students into people who are both beautiful and good (*kalos kagathos*), the educational goals of the sophists and orators were unabashedly pragmatic and utilitarian. The socio-political landscape of Athens was changing in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, and within the new context one's ability to speak eloquently and sway public opinion were essential for political success. The sophists and orators recognized that "in political life absolute theoretical truth is irrelevant; it is success that counts" (Scolnicov, p. 4-5), and thus they "were not concerned with teaching knowledge of the truth but with teaching the ability to win arguments and convince an audience of any proposition whatsoever" (Diener, p. 19). This is the key distinction that separated these groups of teachers. It is because of their differing educational goals that the sophists and orators "attended more to devising persuasive techniques than to finding true arguments, and this amorality exacerbated the disintegration of the ethical tradition and led to their condemnation by Plato" (Kimball, p. 17). While Mintz does note that Plato "returns often to the contrast between Socratic philosophy and education and that of the sophists' and orators' teaching" (p. 12), the foundational difference between them regarding their understanding of the *telos* of education is largely overlooked.

With an overview of Plato's life and Greek education in place, Mintz turns to education as it is found throughout Plato's works. He begins with an analysis of various types of educators that appear as characters throughout the dialogues. The goal here is not to exegete Plato's explicit statements about the nature and purpose of education *per se*, but rather to glean educational insights from the ways that Plato uses Socrates, the sophists, and orators in the capacity of teachers throughout his writings. Mintz then walks through the dialogues that explicitly address educational themes and also makes the broader claim that, because every dialogue involves characters who are learning something, "One could

justifiably argue that every dialogue could be read as an educational encounter or interaction” (p. 21). Even without an explicit treatment of Plato’s statements about education, this presentation of the pervasiveness of educational themes is compelling evidence for Mintz’s overarching claim that Plato’s thoughts on education are central to his philosophical project.

Finally, almost halfway through the book, Mintz turns to Plato’s explicitly articulated educational views. Instead of presenting Plato’s views as a systematic philosophy of education, Mintz examines a long series of images and metaphors that appear throughout Plato’s work, each of which provides a unique window into Plato’s understanding of education. Anyone familiar with Platonic philosophy will recognize many of these images and their educational implications: the gadfly, torpedo fish, midwife, theory of recollection, aviary, cave, etc. Mintz also expounds on some images that receive relatively less attention in the literature, such as playing games, gardening, sparking fires, and statues that run.

For the most part, Mintz’s presentation of these images and metaphors, along with his explanations of their educational implications, are informative and fairly straightforward. At a couple of points, however, he seems to veer off into less central matters. There is an extended argument, for example, against accepting that Plato actually believed in the transmigration of souls as presented in his theory of recollection. Unfortunately, it is not made clear to the reader what import this question bears on our interpretation of Plato’s educational views or why, in a chapter explicitly devoted to a series of images and metaphors, the theory of recollection is singled out for this kind of analysis. Similarly, in a section addressing how Plato accounts for false beliefs, Mintz veers into a historical account of the Athenian Alcibiades and the problems he posed for Socrates. While the history of Alcibiades certainly may be relevant for explaining the background of Plato’s thought, it is not clear how, in this section, it helps to explain or demonstrate the educational import of the images under discussion. Mintz follows his treatment of these images and metaphors with a helpful summary of Plato’s presentation of education in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, focusing in particular on how in these works education is directed toward the cultivation of virtue.

The final section of the book examines Plato’s educational legacy, focusing in particular on the Socratic method and the contemporary university. Mintz offers an extended and insightful analysis of the various ways that the so-called “Socratic method” has been used as a pedagogical technique throughout the history of education. He correctly notes that in contemporary education, “Educators have deemed a vast array of practices as Socratic, some of which outright oppose each other” (p. 41). Mintz also demonstrates the problematic nature of trying to define what should count as “authentic Socratic teaching” and questions the helpfulness of judging contemporary educational practice by its fidelity to ancient descriptions of Socrates’ method. His conclusion, in short, is “that there is no uniform contemporary ‘Socratic method’ to critique, no clear ‘Socratic method’ can be found in the Socratic dialogues of ancient Greece, and that the relation of contemporary Socratic teaching to our ancient sources matters not at all in terms of contemporary educational practice” (p. 46).

While I think these conclusions are all true, Mintz is perhaps too cavalier in his rejection of attempts to nail down a definition of the Socratic method. The “Socratic method” certainly does not represent a single pedagogical technique, either in Plato’s dialogues or in contemporary practice. Nonetheless it does represent a cluster of pedagogical principles that can be usefully distinguished from other practices which clearly are *not* Socratic. The moniker “Socratic method,” for example, certainly cannot be used to describe pedagogies that conceive of teaching primarily as didactic knowledge transfer from teacher to student. Similarly, while the type and use of questions varies among pedagogies

described as “Socratic,” it would be difficult to predicate the “Socratic method” of a pedagogy that does not afford questions a central role in the process of teaching and learning at all.

After examining the interpretive questions of whether Socrates himself is a teacher in the dialogues, and whether Socratic teaching is open-ended, Mintz concludes the book with an analysis of the correlations that exist between ancient education and contemporary universities. He contrasts Plato’s Academy with Isocrates’ School, noting that their competing models have “an equal claim to influence in today’s modern university” (p. 58). While the contrasts Mintz draws are insightful, this closing chapter is primarily focused on the history of these two Greek schools and spends relatively less space explicating the legacy of effect they have had on the university today. Also, the few lines of effect that are drawn jump directly from ancient Greece to modern universities, completely skipping over Plato’s legacy throughout the Middle Ages and his influence on the development of the early medieval universities. Thus, Mintz’s presentation of Plato’s legacy shortchanges the pervasive effects that Plato’s life and thought have had on the theory and practice of education across the centuries. The reader is left with the impression that Plato’s chief educational impacts are merely a loose cluster of pedagogical practices that can’t really be called “Socratic” anyway, and an influence he shares with Isocrates on the basic idea of the modern university. Certainly, those alone would be a remarkable legacy, but in fact Plato’s towering influence goes well beyond these strands of influence.

In summary, I would like to offer a minor criticism as well as an emphatic commendation. First, Plato’s views on the *telos* of education are one of the central defining aspects of his philosophy of education. Throughout the book Mintz does address Plato’s views on the goals of education, but never in a centralized or systematic way. In various places Mintz recognizes that, for Plato, education is directed toward the formation of students’ souls (p. 34, 37), and he also acknowledges at multiple points that the goal of education for Plato involves cultivating virtue and moral character in students (p. 22-23, 35-36, 39, 51-53). Unless the reader is looking for these scattered instances, however, it will not be clear how they relate to each other or that in fact Plato’s understanding of education’s goal as soul formation and the cultivation of virtue is one of the most salient and important aspects of his educational philosophy. In an introductory book about Plato’s educational thought, this central theme seems like something that should have been highlighted in a more focused and systematic way.

In praise of Mintz, on the other hand, one of the overarching themes woven throughout the book is that, for Plato, philosophy itself is intrinsically educational in nature. Mintz notes, for example, that the act of philosophizing for Plato “principally involved studying alongside others, articulating a vision of the kind of life worth living, and then holding oneself accountable to the pursuit of that vision” (p. 4). Throughout the dialogues Plato not only discusses education, but also sometimes “explicitly has his characters describe philosophers as learners, and philosophy as education” (19). Mintz goes on to argue that because, etymologically, a philosopher is a lover of wisdom, “Plato’s philosopher is therefore already in an educational position: a person who loves wisdom, but does not possess it. . . Learning is not merely tolerated as something to be overcome en route to knowledge; the philosopher must love learning itself” (p. 21). It follows that, according to Plato, one cannot be a philosopher of any sort without actively participating in education: “To commit oneself to philosophy is to commit oneself to one’s education; to philosophize is to learn” (p. 23). Throughout the book Mintz thus not only shows that educational themes happen to be pervasive in Plato’s philosophy but also demonstrates the stronger claim that, for Plato, philosophy is itself pervasively educational in nature.

Mintz therefore fulfills his goal of demonstrating that one cannot (or at least should not) overlook the educational aspects of Plato's thought. He admits that he has "oversimplified matters" (p. 62), but no treatment of a thinker as monumental as Plato could do otherwise. By examining Plato's background, ideas, and legacy, Mintz offers a clear, well-researched, and informative introduction to many of Plato's key educational insights. In doing so he makes a compelling case that education did in fact occupy a central and important role in Plato's philosophical thought.

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