

Plato, The Poets, and The Philosophical Turn in the Relationship between Teaching, Learning, and Suffering

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ABSTRACT: Greek literature prior to Plato featured two conceptions of education. Learning takes place when people encounter “teacher-guides”—educators, mentors, and advisors. But education also occurs outside of a pedagogical relationship between learner and teacher-guide: people learn through painful experience. In composing his dramatic dialogues, Plato appropriated these two conceptions of education, refashioning and fusing them to present a new philosophical conception of learning: Plato’s Socrates is a teacher-guide who causes his interlocutors to learn through suffering. Socrates, however, is not presented straightforwardly as a pedagogical success story. Socrates’ failures are, paradoxically, part of what makes him an ideal literary model for a philosophical teacher-guide. Plato requires his readers to question why Socrates’ interlocutors fail to be converted to philosophers.

In recent decades, philosophers have increasingly studied Plato by considering the historical, literary, and cultural contexts of his dialogues. Gerald Press (2018) has called these approaches aspects of the “New Platonism.”¹ Scholars have focused on how Plato incorporated historical figures or events in his dialogues (e.g., Blondell 2002, Nails 2002 & 2015, Zuckert 2009), how Plato reckoned intertextually with epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, or forensic rhetoric (Nightingale 1995, McCoy 2007, Howland 2008, Hunter 2012), or how he adapted cultural ideas, for example, of religion in his philosophy (Nightingale 2021). In this paper, I undertake a similar project, though I am interested in the literary context of Plato’s treatment of teaching and learning.

While scholars have written about what Plato’s characters say about the poets and poetic education (e.g., Scolnicov 1988, pp. 112-119; Janaway 1998, pp. 80-105; Cannatella 2006; Kametkar 2008; Smith 2018), relatively little work has focused on Plato’s treatment of education as an engagement with Plato’s literary predecessors.² In this paper, I argue Plato’s treatment of education—the way he philosophized about education—adapts and appropriates the portrayal of education in the Greek literature that preceded him. First, I argue that the literature features two distinct conceptions of education: learning from a “teacher-guide” and learning from painful experience. Second, I show that Plato fuses these two conceptions of learning in his portrait of philosophical education.

¹ The New Platonism is not a unified movement but rather involves a general challenge to treating the dialogues as Plato’s attempt to convey settled doctrines (which can be sorted into different periods of writing). The New Platonism tends to view dramatic and literary elements as constitutive of Plato’s philosophy (2018, p.10).

² Zamir (1999) is an exception and undertakes a project similar to mine in that he considers Plato’s use of the learning through suffering proverb. Zamir, however, is primarily interested in how this informed Plato’s use of the dialogue form. In contrast, I focus on how that proverb, as well as the conception of “teacher-guide,” was appropriated and adapted into the conception of philosophical education in Plato’s corpus.

The Teacher-Guide in Greek Myth and Literature

The Greek poets revealed—or perhaps encouraged—a cultural appreciation for educators, or what I call “teacher-guides” in this essay. (“Teacher-guide” captures the wide array of educational figures in Greek poetry who guide, mentor, teach, or advise.³) In the earliest surviving Greek literature, the hero—despite innate gifts of brains, brawn or both—often cultivates his abilities through the education he received. In Homer’s *Iliad*, for example, Achilles is so fearsome, powerful, and skilled that he can single-handedly turn the course of the war. Achilles might thus seem like a Homeric vote for nature over nurture: he is a demigod, born to a goddess who made him nearly invincible. His heredity seems to determine his destiny. But the implication in Homer is clear. Heroes are not great because of their nature alone. Even heroes become who they are, at least in part, because of their education.

Achilles, Homer’s audience was made aware, was once a boy in need of rearing. In a pivotal scene in the *Iliad*, Achilles sulks by his ships. A group of men, led by Odysseus, visits Achilles, attempting to convince him to rejoin the Greeks in their war with the Trojans. Odysseus relates Agamemnon’s promise of gifts, a gesture from the leader of the Greek army who hopes to reconcile with Achilles after their feud. (Odysseus betrays no hint of Agamemnon’s demand that Achilles subordinate himself to the king as a condition of reconciliation.) Achilles remains unmoved so Phoenix, the man who helped raise Achilles, speaks. Phoenix reminds Achilles that he was entrusted to teach (*didaskō*) him to be “both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds” (*Iliad* 9.442-3). Then, in a strikingly tender moment set amidst the devastations of war, Phoenix recounts a scene from Achilles’ childhood. Phoenix contrasts the enraged warrior upon whom the fate of the war depends with the child in need of assistance. He describes holding Achilles on his knee in the dining hall. Phoenix served him meat and held the wine cup to his lips while Achilles sputtered the wine onto Phoenix’s tunic (9.486-491). Phoenix not only taught Achilles to be skilled in speech and actions, but he also helped him learn to take part in meals—to claim his place at the table, so to speak. Though he raised Achilles since he was a small child, he does not yet view his job as completed. He counsels Achilles to end the feud with Agamemnon. (Like Odysseus, Phoenix is ultimately unsuccessful.)

Homer’s description of Achilles’ education is not atypical in Greek literature or, at least, it is only atypical in one sense: Homer says relatively little about the role of Cheiron, the centaur, in Achilles’ education while other sources connect the pair much more closely.⁴ Cheiron was celebrated as the teacher of many heroes, including Jason (e.g., Hesiod, *Theogony* 1000-1) and Asclepius (e.g., Homer, *Iliad*, 4.217-19.). Xenophon opens *On Hunting* with a long list, noting not only that Cheiron taught (*epaideusen*) Achilles, but also Cephalus, Asclepius, Meilanion, Nestor, Amphiaraus, Peleus, Telamon, Meleager, Theseus, Hippolytus, Palamedes, Odysseus,

³ Regardless of the word used to describe them, in the Greek literature preceding Plato, many individuals were recognized to have an important educational influence. My use of “teacher-guide” reflects that the concept was inchoate.

⁴ Homer mentions Cheiron as Achilles’ teacher only at *Iliad* 11.832. Vase paintings survive that depict Achilles and Cheiron together, and literary sources connecting them prior to Plato include, among others, Hesiod, *Catalogue of Women*, fr. 68, Pindar, *Pythian Ode* 6. 19 ff & *Nemean Ode* 3.43 ff. Plato mentions the connection (*Republic* 391c & *Hippias Minor* 371d) as does his contemporary Xenophon (*On Hunting*, 1.3-4). Later sources (around the first or second century CE) continued to emphasize the connection. See, for example, Apollodorus, *The Library*, III.13.6 and Statius’ unfinished *Achilleid*.

Menestheus, Diomedes, Castor, Polydeuces, Machaon, Podaleirius, Antilochus, and Aeneas (1.3-4).

Cheiron's many credits as the teacher-guide of heroes suggests that there was a long association between heroes and their teachers of Greek literature and myth. Herodotus, writing history in the Homeric mold in the fifth century BCE, includes many teacher-guides; advisors such as Croesus, Artabanos, and Artemisia are central to his narrative.⁵ *The Library*, attributed to Apollodorus and written perhaps in the second century CE though likely drawing on earlier sources lost to us, lists four teachers of Heracles: Amphitryon (who taught him to drive a chariot), Autolycus (to wrestle), Eurytus (to shoot a bow), and Linus (to play the lyre) (2.4.9).

Homer features several other examples of teacher-guides beyond Phoenix. Nestor's central role in the Achaean war effort in *The Iliad* is to offer guidance. Already past the age of fighting, he doles out advice to younger warriors (including his son, Antilochus). One of the dramatic storylines in the *Odyssey* is Telemachus' fate. Telemachus—who has been growing up without the benefit of his father's presence and, thus, guidance—is floundering on his own. But Athena arrives to serve as teacher-guide; in the guise of Mentor she, fittingly, mentors, advises, and guides his coming of age.

A teacher-guide helps boys—only rarely a girl—gain a share of wisdom or helps them cultivate their abilities.⁶ In the case of Cheiron, for example, heroes were taught medicine or archery among other skills. The process might involve some trials and tribulations; the student was called upon to exert considerable effort. Sometimes the lessons were not learned well. Heroes in epic poetry and tragedy fail their teacher-guides in many ways (just as Achilles' failed to heed Phoenix's advice) and the teacher-guides sometimes give bad advice (see, e.g., Gregory 2018, p. 244-245). However, learning that occurs under the tutelage of a teacher-guide is a straightforward process that typically proceeds smoothly (if not always effectively): someone with wisdom or knowledge of a skill attempts to transfer it. Education away from the teacher-guide is another matter; experience provides lessons, but those lessons are often sudden, destabilizing, and painful.

Learning and Suffering in Epic Poetry and Tragedy

There seems to have long been an association between learning and suffering in Greece. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod says that fools only learn after they have suffered (*Works and Days* 218). This association between learning and *pathos*, experience, (*pathos* can mean either a painful experience—suffering—or a neutral experience depending on the context) occurs at several points in Homer. In battle, Menelaus and Achilles taunt their Trojan enemies with an identical line: once a harm is suffered, “even a fool can understand” (*Iliad* 17.32 & 20.198). A similar situation occurs late in the *Iliad*. During the funeral games, Idomeneus says to Ajax, in the heat of an argument, that he will “learn by paying the price” (23.487). That is, Ajax will suffer the consequences of his action and only then attain understanding. More generally in the *Iliad*, learning late is a prominent theme. Agamemnon, for example, does not learn the tremendous cost of his feud with Achilles until he has suffered the consequences of his action, the changing tide of the war in Achilles' absence.

The idea of learning through suffering is critical in buttressing *xenia*, the rites and rituals of the guest-host relationship. The *xenos*—the foreigner, stranger, or guest—must be treated well because any guest or suppliant is protected by Zeus Xenios. One must treat the *xenos* well not only

⁵ On these advisors, see Shapiro (1994).

⁶ Justina Gregory (2018) argues that the teachers of Greek literature offer injunctions, general reflections, and exemplary tales.

because of Zeus requires it but also because the stranger might be a god in disguise, and one risks learning painfully of a guest's true identity if the guest is mistreated. A host must take care not to learn too late the identity of a mistreated guest. In *The Odyssey's* first book, Penelope's suitors, unwanted guests, lay waste to Telemachus and his mother's home and feast on their food. Yet when a stranger arrives—Athena in disguise as Mentor, as I mentioned above—Telemachus does not hesitate in welcoming the guest precisely as he ought, even though it would have been understandable if he did not want yet another stranger plundering his inheritance. Later Odysseus returns to Ithaca in disguise to test his wife's suitors' willingness to treat him well (in addition to surveying the precarious situation in his home). The suitors mistreat him and, as the Homeric characters of the *Iliad* might say, learn too late of their folly—Odysseus ultimately slaughters most of them.

Euripides describes Dionysus arriving in Thebes in disguise—a story I discuss below. Ovid would later record stories of gods disguised as *xenoi*, stories that likely were passed down from earlier sources that are now lost. Athena, disguised as an old woman, descends from Olympus to visit one of earth's greatest weavers, Arachne. Alas, Arachne is rude and boasts that her skills are superior to Athena's. The story does not end well for Arachne, as she only learns late the true identity of the guest, refuses to relent, and suffers a fitting punishment: she is condemned to weave nothing but webs after Athena turns her into a spider (*Metamorphoses* 6.1-148). Ovid also writes of a town of people unwelcoming to *xenoi*. Zeus and Hermes visited in disguise and were turned away by all except the humble Baucis and Philemon. For their exemplary treatment of their guests, Baucis and Philemon were not only spared from the destruction of the city, but they were also blessed with a long happy life (*Metamorphoses* 8.611-727).

The association of suffering and learning was proverbial: *pathein mathein*, to suffer is to learn. Herodotus has Croesus, after suffering a reversal of fortune, invoke the proverb in related rhyming form, *ta patheimta matheimata*, my sufferings have been my lessons (1.207.1). In Herodotus' famous account, Solon played the role of teacher-guide, trying to warn Croesus of how his wealth and power could be lost at any time. Croesus, however, paid little heed, only recognizing Solon's wisdom too late, when facing execution after losing his war with Persia (1.30-32 & 1.86.3-5). His learning proved fortuitous, however, and impressed Cyrus, Persia's King. Croesus was spared and appointed as Cyrus's advisor. Cyrus, we might infer, wanted to avoid Croesus' fate—he hoped to learn from a teacher-guide rather than from painful experience.

Aeschylus made painful learning central to Greek tragedy. As Werner Jaeger put it, "*Suffering brings knowledge*: that is a piece of very ancient folk wisdom. The epic did not use it as a leading poetic theme: it was Aeschylus who gave it a deeper meaning and made it his central motif" (Jaeger 1945, p. 257; emphasis in original). In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus invoked the *pathein mathein* proverb twice at lines 177 and 250. Leading up to line 177, the chorus appeals to Zeus to help them learn, "truly to cast away the vain burden of anxiety" (165-66). The chorus, though they identify omens which foretell misfortunes, look to Zeus for enlightenment. They recognize, however, that learning will come at a cost: it is "Zeus who set mortals on the road to understanding, who made 'learning by suffering' [*pathei mathos*] into an effective law" (176-178). Later the chorus picks up the *pathein mathein* theme again: "Justice looms, that they may suffer and learn [*pathousin mathein*]. The future one will hear about when it happens; till then, leave it be—but that's as much as to say, 'lament it in advance'—for it will all come clear together with the rays of dawn" (250-254).⁷ Clytemnestra also invokes the idea of late learning: "you will be taught, and

⁷ That *justice* leads to learning through suffering was also central to Hesiod's treatment of the idea in *Works and Days* (218, mentioned above).

learn, good sense—though rather late in the day” (1425; see also 1617-1625). Consider how Aeschylus describes learning here. Understanding will come late, and it will be painful. Pain is the teacher (1621-23). Since learning is painful, one ought to be in no rush to “lament it in advance.”⁸

One could interpret the creation of the “effective law” of “learning by suffering” in one of three ways. First, perhaps before the rise of Zeus, people learned without suffering. If that was the case, mortals lived in an idyllic state that was only worsened by Zeus. The second possibility is that, prior to Zeus’ reign, people did not suffer but neither did they learn; they lived in a comfortable, though animalistic, state of ignorance. The third option is that, prior to Zeus, there was much suffering. Zeus redeemed suffering, allowing humans, at least on occasion, to learn from it.⁹ If one accepts this third option, Aeschylus elevated learning to a divine gift. As Aeschylus points out elsewhere in *Agamemnon*, no human is free from suffering (553-4 and 1327-9). But, at least, learning is possible amidst the misery. We may learn, but only when the time is right, only when it has been divinely ordained. As Gregory points out (2018, p. 24), Aeschylus concludes the *Oresteia* by having Athena congratulate the Athenians for becoming “wise in due season” (*Eumenides* 1000); that is, they learn without suffering. Nevertheless, in tragedy, characters often learn—attaining meaningful or important knowledge, at any rate—through painful experience. They learn only too late.

Many of the surviving fifth century BCE tragedies feature both teacher-guides and the idea that to suffer is to learn. Indeed, failing to take the advice of a teacher-guide heightens the drama as the audience watched a protagonist head towards disaster. Sophocles often has characters echo the idea that to suffer is to learn, *pathein mathein*, and typically features teacher-guides who offer (unheeded) advice. In *Antigone*, Haemon, demonstrating sound judgement, tells his father Creon that it is “good to learn from those who give good counsel” and advises him to allow Antigone to perform burial rites for her brother whom Creon deemed a traitor to Thebes (723; see also 710-11, 1030-32, 1098). Creon, however, stubbornly refuses to heed the advice of either Haemon or the prophet Tiresias. He enforces a harsh penalty on Antigone. By the time Creon decides to relent, he has caused not only Antigone’s death, but Haemon’s and his own wife’s as well. He did not see the wisdom in the advice he received and only through experience suffered into the knowledge that Haemon and Tiresias were right. Sophocles’ *Antigone* ends with a fitting line related to *pathein mathein*: as people grow old, the pain they suffered from great blows teaches them wisdom (1352-53).

In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus is repeatedly warned to abandon his quest to discover the king’s murderer. Tiresias says that the knowledge he seeks will only lead to suffering (315 ff.). Jocasta, his queen, also warns him to cease his search (e.g., 976-79). But Oedipus ignores the advice and persists until the terrible climax when he comes to recognize that he murdered his father, the king, and married his mother. He suffers under the weight of the knowledge and recognizes that the advice he failed to heed was correct. He was eager to understand but that

⁸ As K. J. Dover’s put it, “Zeus has so constructed the universe (denying man prescience as he once denied him fire) that we *cannot* understand whether we are taking the right course of action *until* we have experienced the consequences of that course” (1973, p. 63; emphasis in original).

⁹ H.D.F. Kitto opts for this third option and says of Zeus’s new law: “How was this new? We cannot imagine that under his predecessors men learned without suffering; Aeschylus did not believe in a past Golden Age. The only interpretation is that under the earlier gods man suffered but did not learn; nothing came of hard experience. This is what the poet commemorates here; under the reign of Zeus, learning, progress, become possible” (1939/2011, p. 60).

understanding came late. Experience in *Oedipus Tyrannus* provides the painful lesson; despite their efforts, the play's teacher-guides could not spare Oedipus from it.

One finds similar depictions of teacher-guides and learning through suffering in Euripides. *Bacchae* features a confident ruler like Oedipus. Pentheus has been entrusted with the kingdom and he is eager to maintain order in Thebes. A handsome stranger, a *xenos*, shows up and proposes that Thebans embrace a foreign religion based on worship of Dionysus. The women of Thebes accept the new religion but Pentheus is alarmed as they act in uncustomary ways. Pentheus reacts severely, imprisoning the visitor (and thereby failing to treat the *xenos* appropriately, as in the examples discussed above). Pentheus, like Oedipus, ignores the teacher-guides—Tiresias and his grandfather, Cadmus—who advise him to accept the new god, Dionysus. But Pentheus persists, refusing to recognize him. After Pentheus' grizzly death, Dionysus tells Cadmus and Pentheus' mother Agavē: "Late is your knowledge of me: you did not have it when you needed it" (1345).¹⁰

Prometheus Bound, attributed to Aeschylus, contains the same idea about late learning. Prometheus says, "time, as it grows old, teaches everything" (981). When Prometheus encounters Io, who like him is suffering endlessly (she is tormented by Hera, he is tormented by Zeus), she asks him to tell her when her suffering will end. Prometheus, who has the gift of foresight and can answer her question, does not want to do so. The knowledge, which Prometheus says will upset her, is of no use: "It is better for you not to learn that than to learn it" (624). Prometheus himself serves as a teacher-guide for Io, and he hesitates to increase her suffering by answering questions about her fate. Prometheus does not view the teacher-guide as one who should cause suffering through learning. The situation in other plays of the period is similar. Painful knowledge arises from experience, not from the teacher-guides.

Plato's Socrates as Teacher-Guide

Thus far, I have argued Greek literature preceding Plato features two prominent conceptions of learning. One might learn from teacher-guides or from experience. Learning from experience, in contrast to learning from a teacher-guide, is painful. The knowledge attained in these situations comes late; it catches one unaware. Whereas the teacher-guide strives to help his pupil navigate life's challenges, learning through experience involves painful recognition of one's peril or mistakes. In his dramatic presentation of philosophical education, Plato fuses these two conceptions of education. In this section, I focus on Socrates as teacher-guide.¹¹

Despite the fact that he was executed for corrupting the youth, Plato's Socrates is, in many ways, a role model. He is a valiant soldier (*Symposium* 220d-221c; *Laches* 181b; *Charmides* 153a-d) and fearless in the face of his own death (*Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*). He has gained the benefit

¹⁰ Dionysus' chastisement Cadmus and Agavē might strike the audience as unfair because, unlike Pentheus, they both welcomed Dionysus and joined the religious rituals that honor him. It seems, however, that they are stand-ins for the general contempt that the city had showed Dionysus' mother (a Theban) when she claimed that she bore Zeus' child.

¹¹ Plato treated the definition of "teacher" as a philosophical question requiring investigation (especially through Socrates' denial of teaching in *Apology* and the discussion of what it means to teach and learn in *Meno*). Plato's Clitophon recognizes the challenge of describing Socrates' students. He says they are "contemporaries [*hēlikiotōn*] and fellow-desirers [*sunepithumētōn*] or pupils [*hetairōn*], or whatever their relationship to him is to be called" (*Clitophon*, 408c, in Slings, 1999). I discuss the historical context for Socrates' denial in Mintz (2014).

of years of experience and study.¹² Though Plato's Socrates denies possessing wisdom (e.g., *Theaetetus* 150c-d), he is wise insofar as he recognizes the knowledge he lacks (*Apology* 21d ff.). He roams around Athens, eager to speak to young men and visiting places like wrestling-schools where he would find them (e.g., *Charmides* 153d ff.; *Alcibiades I* 103a-104b; *Theaetetus* 143e). As Socrates reports at his trial, he exhorts and persuades them to care for their souls, to care for virtue (*Apology* 30a-b & 31b). Plato has Phaedo say that Socrates "was of all those we have known the best, and also the wisest and the most upright" (*Phaedo* 118a).¹³

Plato includes other educators in the dialogues who provide an instructive contrast to Socrates: the sophists, professional teachers who promise to make their students wiser and better able to manage their households and their city's affairs. The sophists advertised a straightforward path to improvement. As Protagoras says to Hippocrates, a potential student, "this is what you will get if you study with me: The very day you start, you will go home a better man, and the same thing will happen the day after. Every day, day after day, you will get better and better" (*Protagoras* 318a-b). Plato's sophists and teachers of oratory market themselves as venerable wise men who are available on demand. Yet Plato presents them more sinisterly; the philosopher from Elea defines the sophist as a "hunter of rich young men" (*Sophist* 231d).¹⁴ They may make a claim to be teacher-guides, but they are deficient compared to Socrates.¹⁵

The sophist is available to anyone who wishes to partake in his lessons. (Anyone, at least, who can pay the fee.) While the sophists hunt for students, Socrates refuses to take on students formally (e.g. *Apology* 19d) and often resists even informal associations (*Laches* 200c-d; *Theages* 127c-128c). If the sophists are hunters, Socrates strives to become hunted—and to have philosophy become the object of desire—a role reversal featured dramatically in *Alcibiades I*. In that dialogue, Socrates approaches a handsome, arrogant young Alcibiades. (Alcibiades is accustomed to people fawning over him and paid Socrates little attention.) However, by the end of the dialogue, Socrates has undermined Alcibiades' inflated sense of his abilities and accomplishments, and Alcibiades pleads to study philosophy with Socrates.

With a sophist, one simply pays for a course and follows the curriculum. In contrast, Socrates developed no curriculum for students to follow. He did not formally agree to take on students and he does not even promise any positive results. The one thing that that Socrates' interlocutors can expect, however, is that learning with him will be painful.

Suffering and Learning in Plato

Education at the hands of Socrates is not a straightforward or pleasurable process. One does not delight in advice packaged in stories of the past, as one might hear from Nestor, a man

¹² In only one dialogue, *Parmenides*, where Socrates is about twenty, could he be described as young. The next dialogue in the dramatic chronology is *Protagoras*, which occurs about seventeen years later. On the dramatic dating of the dialogues, see Nails (2002) and Zuckert (2009).

¹³ In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato writes that Socrates' fate was one that, "he, of all men, least deserved" (7.325c). Whether Plato authored the *Seventh Letter*—and *Alcibiades I*, which I also discuss in this essay—has been the subject of scholarly debate, though I tend to be persuaded by the arguments in favor of authenticity. Translations to works of Plato are from Plato 1997 unless noted otherwise.

¹⁴ Elsewhere, Socrates tells Crito that he is interested in studying with the sophists Euthydemus and Dionysodorus, but that they would not be eager to take old men as pupils. So, Socrates proposes to Crito that they should take his "sons as bait to catch them... their desire to get the boys will make them give us lessons too" (*Euthydemus* 272d).

¹⁵ The nature of the difference between Socrates and the sophists in the Platonic corpus is a much thornier problem than many commentators have recognized. See McCoy (2007), Mintz (2011), and Corey (2015).

from “whose tongue speech flowed sweeter than honey” (*Iliad* 1.249). One does not get to practice mixing herbs or shooting the bow under Cheiron’s encouraging watch.¹⁶ Socrates may flatter his interlocutors, but he also challenges them, testing whether they have the character and intellect to study philosophy.¹⁷ Socrates’ questions are closer to the often unwelcome advice offered in Greek tragedy. But whereas the characters in tragedy simply ignore the advice they hear, Socrates persists, like a lioness sinking her teeth and claws into her prey.

Plato was undoubtedly aware of the *pathein mathein* proverb. He has Thrasymachus and Socrates discuss the proverb in the *Republic* (337d).¹⁸ He also has Alcibiades invoke the proverb about fools learning through suffering: “don’t wait, like the fool in the proverb, to learn your lesson from your own misfortune” (*Symposium* 222b). But, more generally, Socrates causes suffering. Examples in Plato’s corpus abound—many characters are humiliated, angered, frustrated, perplexed or otherwise distressed as a result of their conversations with Socrates. Socrates is the kind of teacher-guide who does not hesitate to tell arguably the one figure in Plato’s corpus about whom he cares most, Alcibiades, that “not only are you ignorant about the most important things, but you also think you know what you don’t know... You are wedded to stupidity, my good fellow, stupidity in the highest degree” (*Alcibiades I* 118b).

Plato offered several metaphors to describe what one suffers in conversations with Socrates.¹⁹ Alcibiades says that one of Socrates’ “proudest accomplishments” was causing him pain; it was as if he was bitten by a snake directly in the heart or soul when he was “struck and bitten by philosophical discourse” (*Symposium* 218a).²⁰ Elsewhere, Plato describes being subjected to Socrates’ questions as the sting of a gadfly or a torpedo fish (*Apology* 30e and *Meno* 80a-b). The midwife metaphor, which suggests that Socrates helps deliver ideas from young men as a midwife helps deliver a baby, might at first appear to be much gentler and nurturing. But even there Socrates emphasizes the suffering involved when answering his questions. Socrates says that midwives can initiate a woman’s labor; they “have the power to bring on the pains, and also, if they think fit, to relieve them” (*Theaetetus* 149d). Socrates says that spending time with him is worse; the men “suffer the pains of labor, and are filled day and night with distress; indeed they

¹⁶ Education under Cheiron was not depicted as pleasant by Statius in his unfinished *Achilleid*. However, he was writing much later (the first century CE) and probably reflects education in his own era which was routinely portrayed as harsh. Additionally, he may have cast Achilles’ education in such a way to celebrate how he overcame great hardships and challenges (2.96 ff.).

¹⁷ Plato describes testing Syracuse’s tyrant, Dionysius, similarly: “You must picture to such men the extent of the undertaking, describing what sort of inquiry it is, with how many difficulties it is beset, and how much labor it involves” (*Letter* 7.340b-c).

¹⁸ After he has entered the conversation about justice, Thrasymachus says to Socrates that he can present a better definition of justice than anyone has offered. Thrasymachus then asks, “what would you deserve then [*ti axiois pathein*]?” *Pathein* means “deserve” in the legal sense of suffering or incurring a penalty. Socrates responds, “What else than the appropriate penalty [*paschein*] for one who doesn’t know, namely to learn [*mathein*] from the one who does know? Therefore, that’s what I deserve.” Thrasymachus responds, “You amuse me, but in addition to learning [*mathein*], you must pay a fine [*apoteison argurion*].” James Adam notes that Socrates’ play on the *pathein mathein* association in this specific judicial sense of *mathein* is the reason that Thrasymachus says that he’s “amused” by Socrates. See James Adam (1902).

¹⁹ I discuss Plato’s educational images at greater length in Mintz (2018).

²⁰ In this quote, I translated *philosophia logōn* as “philosophical discourse” rather than “by philosophy.”

suffer far more than women. And this pain my art is able to bring on, and also to allay” (151a). Socrates is an expert in pain.²¹ He knows when to inflict it and when to relieve it.

Plato also depicts philosophical education as painful in his cave allegory. The philosopher’s ascent from the cave is marked by pain as he is “pained and dazzled” as he adjusts to the light (*Republic* 515c). If a prisoner were forced to ascend—like the unwilling participants in Socrates’ conversations, we might assume—he’d be “pained and irritated to be treated that way” (*Republic* 515e).²² Socrates notes in the context of learning that “fine things are difficult” (*Cratylus* 384a-b; *Republic* 435c & 497d; *Hippias Major* 304e; see Mintz 2010). Socrates says that philosophy resists a person’s predilections while oratory gratifies them (*Gorgias* 513d & 521d-e). Based on this understanding of philosophy, it is no wonder that most conversations in the Platonic corpus lead to suffering as characters confront their ignorance and ineptitude. They are like the fools in the proverbs of Homer and Hesiod who have learned through experience. But unlike late learning through painful experience in the Greek literature that precedes him, Plato’s dialogues do not feature general experience—surprising encounters with new and upsetting knowledge—as the cause of suffering and learning. The cause of the painful learning is Socrates and Socrates creates the situation with calculated intention. He is the midwife who brings on the pains or, sometimes, allays them. Aeschylus wrote of a Zeus who made learning possible through suffering. Plato grants Socrates the same ability. If Plato does not elevate Socrates to a god, then he brings learning from suffering down from Olympus into the human realm. Mortals do not have to wait for Zeus to bless them with wisdom. If they are willing to deal with the pain, they can attain it on their own schedule. Yet they cannot do so alone; pursuing philosophy is not a solitary affair. They should, Plato suggests, search for a partner, a philosophical teacher-guide, their own Socrates.

Historically, the sophists and orators may very well have suggested to future students—much like Plato suggested through his dialogues to his own readers—that they would need to work hard in the course of their studies. Indeed, such an exhortation is central to Prodicus’ *Choice of Heracles*, where the audience is encouraged to embrace the much more difficult path to a life of Virtue, like Heracles, rather than be enticed by the alluring route to Vice (in Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.21-33). But Plato’s sophists do not present such a vision of education. In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates is the one who exhorts students to embrace the more difficult path. Socrates is the figure who offers something like the *Choice of Heracles* in the closing myths of *Gorgias* and *Republic*, where his audience is exhorted to embrace the virtue and philosophy. Socrates is the one who exhorts people to devote themselves to inquiry or to improving the state of their souls (e.g., *Phaedo* 114d–115e, *Meno* 81b, 81d; see also 86b–c).

In the Platonic corpus, there is a prominent example of sophists causing students to suffer in the way that resembles Socrates’ interrogations. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus question and outwit their targets, causing them distress, frustration and humiliation. But Plato shows those sophists to lack seriousness. Not only do they lack a worthy goal like Socrates’ desire to have his interlocutors embrace philosophy and care for their souls, they are not particularly skilled at

²¹ Since Plato describes the distress Socrates causes his interlocutors as painful and analogous to women’s pains of labor, I use “pain” and “suffering” to describe the range of adverse emotional experiences that Socrates’ interlocutors undergo in conversation with him. I make the case elsewhere (Mintz 2017) that educational theorists have too often failed to recognize a broad array of students’ unpleasant experiences as painful and that such dismissal can be detrimental to students.

²² Zamir writes: “For the souls of future humans, pain is, therefore, always around: it initially motivates the ascent, is continuously felt during the climb, and is only momentarily relieved during the soul’s encounter with knowledge” (1999, p. 84).

dialectical sparring. By the end of *Euthydemus*—and amidst Ctessipus’ first conversation with the sophists—the young man has figured out sophists’ technique. Socrates ironically praises the sophists for the fact that their “technique [can be] picked up rapidly” (*Euthydemus* 303e), but the implication is clear: they are no philosophical midwives in full possession of the skill of causing or allaying pain.

The Successes and Failures of Plato’s Teacher-Guide

Plato positions Socrates as new type of teacher-guide, adapting the model of epic poetry and tragedy. Socrates causes learning through suffering rather than merely offering wisdom or teaching skills. Plato also refashions the literary precedent of the teacher-guide in two fascinating ways. Socrates cannot be ignored like Tiresias and other teacher guides of tragedy, nor is he measurably successful like Cheiron, whose lists of students includes some of the greatest heroes of Greek myth. Plato could very well have made his corpus a celebration of Socrates’ noble influence on his students. Even if Plato, out of modesty, did not want to claim himself as Socrates’ greatest pedagogical accomplishment, he could have chosen from a list of devotees. *Phaedo* and *Crito*—dialogues in which Socrates speaks to people committed to him and to philosophy—could have been the rule instead of the exception. Plato instead typically portrayed Socrates in conversation with people who not only failed to embrace philosophy and virtue, but they were notorious for their misdeeds.²³ Plato chose Meno as Socrates’ conversational partner about the nature of virtue and whether it can be taught. Plato’s readers in antiquity would have been well aware that the conversation failed to improve Meno. Xenophon describes Meno as thoroughly despicable, a man so awful that when he was captured, he was not simply beheaded like other generals but tortured to death over the course of a year. Phaedrus fled Athens after being accused of sacrilege in profaning the Eleusinian mysteries. Critias and Alcibiades were the names most commonly associated with the charge the Socrates corrupted the youth. As Xenophon put it, Socrates’ accuser said, “after they became Socrates’ associates, Critias and Alcibiades harmed the city the most. For Critias was the most thievish, violent, and murderous of all in the oligarchy, and Alcibiades the most incontinent, insolent, and violent of all in the democracy” (*Memorabilia* I.2.12]. Plato also puts Socrates into conversation with Charmides and Glaucon. Both were associated with the Thirty, the group led by Critias who inflicted a devastating reign of terror on Athens.²⁴ The list could go on. Rather than marginalizing or ignoring those relationships, Plato makes them prominent (especially if one considers both *Alcibiades I* and *II* as authentic). Why would Plato put Socrates into conversations about temperance, justice, and virtue with characters who his readers would have instantly recognized as intemperate, unjust, and vicious?

One answer to this question might be that, like the philosophers he exalts who are committed to truth rather than persuasion, Plato felt duty-bound to disclose the best counter-arguments to the assessment in *Phaedo* (quoted above) that Socrates “was of all those we have known the best, and also the wisest and the most upright” (*Phaedo* 118a). If the dialogues can be read as presenting Socrates as an ideal teacher-guide, Plato also wanted readers to contend with the ways that Socrates failed in his role.

Perhaps instead, or in addition, the answer to this question lies in the necessity of challenge that Plato believed is central to philosophical education. If every dialogue depicted Socrates successfully converting his interlocutors to philosophers, readers might be inspired to embrace philosophy. However, they would not additionally be drawn into philosophical education, required

²³ See Nails (2002) for an overview of these characters and related sources.

²⁴ On Glaucon’s likely association with the Thirty, see Howland (2018).

to exert intellectual effort in their encounter with the dialogues. Plato embraced a literary form that involves the reader's education analogous to Socrates' interlocutors' struggles within the dialogues. Readers may not be stung or bitten like the characters in the dialogues, but they are forced to reckon with Socrates. Why does Socrates fail to persuade people? Is it Socrates' fault or his interlocutors? Where have Socrates' interlocutors erred in their conversations? Where has Socrates? Plato could not pain his readers in the way Plato's Socrates pained his interlocutors. But he wrote dialogues that, at the very least, caused them intellectual distress. In a literary tradition of nuanced characters, Plato created a philosopher who is as fittingly complex as the phenomena he is devoted to studying. That is among the reasons why Plato was not only recognized in antiquity as a great philosopher but as kin to Homer, Hesiod and the other paragons of Greek literature.²⁵

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²⁵ I gratefully acknowledge the reports of the anonymous reviewers of this paper, one of whom offered several pages of both substantive and minor challenges. Addressing those challenges helped me improve this paper immensely.

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