Plato's Anti-Kohlbergian Program for Moral Education

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Introduction

In “Education for Justice: A Modern Statement of the Socratic View,” Kohlberg (1981) attributes to Aristotle what he calls the “bag of virtues” approach to moral education. Kohlberg claims that Aristotle’s “bag of virtues” demands that students should be given a list of virtues that are supposedly constitutive of good character and then they “should be exhorted to practice these virtues, should be told that happiness, fortune, and good repute will follow in their wake; adults around them should be living examples of these virtues; and children should be given daily opportunities to practice them” (31). Kohlberg finds this approach to moral education both ineffective and morally suspect. As an alternative to this “Aristotelian” approach, Kohlberg recommends a “Socratic” or “Platonic” approach. According to Kohlberg, unlike the Aristotelian, the Platonic does not advocate a list of virtues, but one virtue: namely, justice. Additionally, the Platonic approach dispenses with the need to practice doing virtuous acts and instead focuses on helping students develop their “knowledge of the good,” which, when achieved, guarantees that they will “choose the good.” In order for them to know the good, Kohlberg claims that they need merely be asked questions about the good. “The teaching of virtue is the asking of questions and pointing the way, not the giving of answers” (30). Upon these foundations, Kohlberg built his field-transforming educational program in which students proceed through six sequential levels of moral development that represent the students’ increasingly sophisticated knowledge of justice. This is all achieved by the asking of questions and “exposing the students to moral conflict situations for which their principles have no ready solution” (47). In Kohlberg’s model, in order to become virtuous and act accordingly, students do not need to be habituated in virtue, but only need to develop the “knowledge” of it. Today, Kohlberg’s theory has lost much of its prestige. Nevertheless, with respect to his interpretation of Plato, Kohlberg’s influence seems as strong as ever. While Plato’s ideas concerning dialogue in education and the importance of Socratic questioning are still of considerable influence (Mintz, 2009; Rud, 1997; Pekarsky, 1994), his larger educational project, including his championing of eudaimonia and the cultivation of the virtues necessary to attain it, receives almost no attention in the philosophy of education literature. Kohlberg’s interpretation of Plato is not the only factor that contributes to the lack of interests in Plato’s moral theory among educational theorist, however. Over the last century or so, a standard view of Plato’s moral theory has emerged, which, in its emphasis on the cognitive priority of virtue, shares the strong “intellectualist” flavor expressed by Kohlberg. The intellectualist interpretation claims that Plato believes that knowledge of virtue is of paramount importance, and if one wants to become virtuous he or she should focus his or her attention on the cognitive apprehension of virtue, ignoring the more practical approaches to character development.

Both Sokrates and Plato (in many of his dialogues) commit the error of which the above is one particular manifestation—that of dwelling exclusively on the intellectual conditions of human conduct, and omitting to give proper attention to the emotional and volitional, as essentially cooperating or preponderating in the complex meaning of ethical attributes” (Grote, 1875, 399-400). The fact that Plato appears (on the intellectualist interpretation) to neglect the volitional and affective components of moral development, not to mention his supposed neglect of the training in the habits necessary to promote the volitional and affective, make his theory an unattractive candidate for moral education in contemporary schooling. If this is what Plato believes, it is not
surprising that he is largely neglected among educational theorists. But, in fact, this is not what he believes.

While Plato claims that knowledge is, at times, an extremely important handmaiden of moral education in the initial stages of an individual’s development, it is not sufficient to complete the education. Only imitation and habituation can do that work. One of the aims of this paper is to make Plato’s position on this clear, and in so doing make clearer the similarity between Plato and Aristotle. There is another aim to this paper, however. It is to show that the fact that Plato does emphasize the role of knowledge in the initial stages of the moral development of young adults makes his conception of moral education particularly useful to secondary educators. Indeed, in this respect Plato’s vision is superior to Aristotle’s insofar as it includes a process by which students who missed the proper imitation and habituation in their youth can develop it later in their lives. Aristotle says such people are not morally educable (NE, 1179b4-31; Burnyeat, 1980, p. 75; Sherman 1999, p. 237), whereas Plato believes that they are educable, and even provides insights into how to go about educating them.

Imitation, Habituation and Reason in Plato’s Works

There are many occasions where Plato affirms the necessity of imitation and habituation. For example, we have a passage from the Laws where the Athenian claims that adults and children must perform the right actions and develop the correct habits if they are to become fully virtuous. “A man has to fight and conquer his feelings of cowardice before he can achieve perfect courage; if he has no experience and training in that kind of struggle, he will never more than half realize his potentialities for virtue” (647d). This passage clearly denies the standard view insofar as it explicitly claims that perfect virtue is not obtained through mere contemplation, as the intellectualist interpretation claims, but requires practice and habituation.

It is not only the Laws that emphasize habituation and practice; in the Republic we find similar passages. Take for instance, Book III, where Socrates describes the education of the guardians who while being the best and brightest and most naturally virtuous citizens of the kallipolis are still in need of premeditated educational strictures to help them to develop intellectually and ethically, strictures which are founded upon a regimen of imitation and habituation.

If they do imitate, they must imitate from childhood what is appropriate for them, namely, people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious, and free, and their actions. They mustn’t be clever at doing or imitating slavish or shameful actions, lest from enjoying the imitation, they come to enjoy the reality. Or haven’t you noticed that imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought? (Republic, 395c-d)

Later in the Republic Socrates returns to the education of the guardians and the need for imitation and habituation in Book VII after giving his most famous educational speech, the allegory of the cave. He reminds Glauccon of the role music plays in the guardians’ educations: “But that, if you remember, is just the counterpart to physical training. It educated the guardians through habits. Its harmonies gave them a certain harmoniousness, not knowledge; its rhythms gave them a certain rhythmical quality; and its stories, whether fictional or nearer the truth, cultivated other habits akin to these” (522a). A few pages earlier Socrates had said much the same thing about virtues beyond harmony, “Now, it looks as though the other so-called virtues of the soul are akin to those of the body, for they really aren’t there before hand but are added later by habit and practice” (518d). The virtues to which he is referring are the four cardinal virtues of antiquity:
wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice. These virtues can only come about through imitation and habit, and are contradistinguished from the one “virtue” of the soul that does not need imitation and habituation: the ability to apprehend the true, the good, and the beautiful.

But our present discussion...shows that the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning round the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely what we call the good. (518c)

What is important to note about this “virtue” is that even though the ability to see is present in all people and does not require imitation and habituation in order to be capable of seeing, the “turning around” and seeing clearly do in fact require habituation and imitation.

The centrality of habituation in being able to see clearly is evident in the allegory of the cave, where the recently released prisoner is “compelled” to turn around and face the light of the fire. He is then compelled to remain at the fire and is required to depict what he is seeing. Of course, because his eyes cannot see clearly (being blinded by the light) his vision must grow accustomed to the light. He must, in other words, habituate himself to the light so that he can actually “see” what he is naturally seeing. The same applies when he is reluctantly dragged up the steep slope. Here he has to habituate his legs to the ability to walk and must imitate what his liberator is doing—the freed captive must follow his liberator who acts as his guide. While this is not explicitly described as imitation and habituation, it functions as such. This becomes even more obvious when the liberated person reflects on his den mates and their habituation. He pities them and is returned to the cave where he is supposed to serve as a role model who can demonstrate the way of liberations to others. Thus, while Plato believes that the ability to “see” the good is a natural ability that exists in everyone, he also believes that perfecting the ability requires imitation and habituation. Socrates admits as much when he says immediately following the allegory that “Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn’t turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and tries to redirect it appropriately” (518c). Of course, as we see from the allegory, it is not just a matter of focusing it in the right direction through forced imitation, it is also insisting that the student habituate themselves by remaining focused in the right direction until their sight becomes clearer. Socrates argues that in order to compel the student to remain focused on the good and not retreat back to the merely pleasurable he must be “hammered at from childhood and freed from the bonds of kinship with becoming, which have been fastened to it by feasting, greed, and other such pleasures and which like leaden weights, pull its vision downward” (519a-b). This type of hammering is none other than imitation and habituation. As Lane (2001) argues:

Implicit in all these views is the final element in the aspirational Plato, one which is perhaps the least well known, but potentially the most significant for defending Platonism against the [standard view]. This is the idea that moral goodness requires serious, protracted, and sometimes painful effort. Although goodness is objective, becoming good or virtuous requires a lot of hard work with no guarantee….The notion of ‘imitation’ is deeply Platonic; it characterizes the education recommended in the Republic on all levels, from the imitation of benevolent gods and courageous heroes by children, to the imitation of the Form of Goodness in their souls by the initiate-philosophers.
In summary, in the *Republic* we see a clear and explicit call for imitation and habituation in education, both with respect to the development of the cardinal virtues and the development of the ability to clearly apprehend the true, the good and the beautiful.

It might be argued however that Plato does not mean the above passages to apply to average individuals since the passages are largely focused on the education of the guardians. The standard view is that it is only the philosopher-kings who are truly capable of the vision of the good and that the average individuals in the *kallipolis* cannot apprehend the good and cannot become fully virtuous; rather, the best they can do is to be told what virtue is and then to be compelled to behave accordingly by the auxiliaries who force the average individuals to obey virtuous laws. The problem with this line of thinking is that it ignores the fact that the *kallipolis* is an allegory; in the same way that the allegory of the cave is meant to approximate how coming to see the good comes about, the *kallipolis* is meant to approximate the workings of a human soul.

To recall, the goal of creating the *kallipolis* was to “show what effect [justice and injustice] has because of itself on the person who has it—the one for the good the other for the bad” (367e). Glauccon and Adeimantus ask Socrates to illuminate the nature of justice not because they are interested in forming a political community based on it, but because they want to know whether it is in the individual’s best interest to live a just life. There is no indication that Socrates’ or Plato’s primary goal in creating the *kallipolis* was to espouse a political theory. Indeed, not only does Socrates embark on the creation of the just city as an attempt to answer questions about the human soul, but the *Republic* ends not with an emphasis on the justice of the *kallipolis*, but with an exclusive emphasis on the justice of the soul. If one were to read the beginning and the end of the *Republic* alone, it would seem implausible to claim that the text is primarily a political document, since the emphasis is entirely on justice in the individual.

Framing her analysis in ethical terms Julia Annas (1999) argues that the goal of the *kallipolis* is to “grasp the ideal of virtue, which is presented via the picture of the ideal state. The message, however, is not the simple-minded one that he should wait for some philosopher-kings to come along, or try to become one himself. Rather, he should internalize the ideal of virtue as a ‘city of himself’ (592A7)—that is he should internalize in his soul the structure pictured in the ideal city” (81). Although framed in pedagogical terms Jonas, Nakazawa, and Braun (2012) argue similarly, claiming that

The *Kallipolis* serves an important purpose, but its purpose seems less political than pedagogical: it is primarily to help Glauccon see what justice is, and so too the superiority of the just life to the unjust life. The *Kallipolis* is a city that has been purged in order to become just, and thereby is instrumental in educating Socrates’ interlocutors. The Kallipolis is not the true and healthy city, but one that has become a heavenly city in the course of a dialogue that has helped Glauccon find justice in his soul. (357) The ethical and pedagogical interpretations of the *kallipolis*, properly underscore the allegorical nature of the philosopher-kings and their seemingly unique ability to develop into fully virtuous beings. The philosopher-kings are not meant to represent actual beings; rather they are meant to represent the ability of the human soul to apprehend the true, the good and the beautiful. As Socrates claims after outlining the allegory of the cave, “the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul and that the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be

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1 For an extended analysis of the arguments *against* interpreting the *Republic* primarily as a political document, see Annas (1999, 72-83).
turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be
turned around...without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the
brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good” (518c). Because the *kallipolis* is meant
to approximate the individual soul, then the philosopher kings represent the faculty of reason and
the ability to see, which is “present in everyone’s soul.”

This egalitarian reading is confirmed when we look beyond the *Republic* to Plato’s
elaborate description of each individual’s potential to apprehend the good in the *Phaedo*. In
*Phaedo* Plato extends the image given in the allegory of the cave by offering a robust theory of
recollection that includes the immortality of the soul. In that discussion he very clearly states that
every individual’s soul is immortal and has the potential to recollect all knowledge (75d-77e).
However, he equally clearly states that the passions and desires of the body have a corrosive
effect on the soul’s ability to apprehend the good (81b). ² Here there is no distinction made
between those individuals who have the ability to attain the knowledge of the good and those
who cannot. All individuals’ souls have equal potential to recollect the good, but the degree to
which individuals can achieve recollection depends on the degree to which their souls have been
habituated in line with the virtues of justice, temperance, courage and wisdom. As we saw in the
*Republic*, the soul cannot find lightness in the dark without being “hammered at from childhood
and freed from the bonds of kinship with becoming, which have been fastened to it by feasting,
greed, and other such pleasures and which like leaden weights, pull its vision downward” (519a-
b). Plato is clear that this hammering does not take place in the realm of abstract reflection on the
good, which is what Kohlberg and certain other orthodox interpreters suggest, “but are added
later by habit and practice” (518d). Thus, while Socrates’ discussion with Phaedo may appear to
advocate a kind of retreat and escape from the body in abstract ethical reflection in order to
achieve recollection, Plato believes the opposite—one begins to attain a clear-eyed vision of the
good only when one first practices the virtues which are developed through imitation and
habituation.

At this point, Plato’s position begins to look surprisingly Aristotelian. Aristotle also
believes that all free individuals are born with the *capacity* to develop the virtues, but that *having*
the virtues does not arise naturally in human beings: “Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to
time do the excellences [virtues] arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them,
and are made perfect by habit” (1103a23-25). Furthermore, Aristotle similarly believes that
knowledge of the good only comes about when individuals are habituated in virtues early in their
life and the degree to which an individual will be able to apprehend the good is dependent on
their prior habituation. It is only after individuals have been trained to recognize *that* something
is virtuous and to desire to act accordingly, that they be capable of understanding *why* something
is virtuous. This *why* represents the knowledge of virtue that cannot be articulated in a general
set of principles, but can be “seen” nevertheless. In a passage from the *Laws* that is remarkably
reminiscent of Aristotle, Plato offers an image of moral development that emphasizes the *that*
and the *why*.

I maintain that the earliest sensations that a child feels in infancy are of pleasure and pain,
and this is the route by which virtue and vice first enter the soul....I call “education” the
initial acquisition of virtue by the child, when the feelings of pleasure and affection, pain
and hatred, that well up in his soul are channeled in the right courses before he can

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² This is echoed in a post-*kallipolis* section in Book X of the *Republic* when Socrates claims that
the immortal soul is “altered” by the choices it makes in collaboration with the body. (618b).
understand the reason why. Then when he does understand, his reason and emotions agree in telling him that he has been properly trained by inculcation of appropriate habits.

Virtue is the general concord of reason and emotion. (655a-b).

While the above analysis raises significant doubts about the intellectualist interpretation, there is still the issue of Plato’s strong sense of knowledge and its connection with the Forms. Unlike Aristotle, who rejects a strong, codifiable conception of knowledge, Plato, or so it seems, believes in just such a strong, codifiable conception of knowledge: the Forms. The question however is how we are to interpret the Forms. In particular, are the Forms a doctrine that is meant to be taken literally, expressing a metaphysical realm that certain individuals can somehow access, providing them with direct, absolute knowledge of the true, the good and the beautiful? Or are the forms a mythological construct that functions as regulative ideal to which individuals are supposed to strive? The standard view is that they represent a metaphysical reality, but there have been significant challenges to the standard view. Iris Murdoch argues, for example, that while truth is objective for Plato it is not objective in the strong metaphysical sense that the Forms seem to suggest.

Plato pictures objects of thought at different levels of insight as possessing different degrees of reality. The contrast between states of illusion (selfish habits or egoistic fantasy) and honest clarified truthful serious thinking suggests a moral picture of the mind as in a continuous engagement with an independent reality….The intensity of Plato’s vision of this connection forces him (if one may put it thus) to separate an idea of goodness…from the imperfect hurly-burly of the human struggle….Good is unique, it is ‘above being,’ it fosters our sense of reality as the sun fosters life on earth. The virtues, the other moral Forms, are aspects of this central idea….It must be kept in mind that Plato is talking in metaphysical metaphors, myths, images; there is no Platonic ‘elsewhere’, similar to the Christian ‘elsewhere.’ (398-399)

Does Murdoch have any exegetical ground to stand on? As it turns out she does. Not only, as we have seen, is the discussion of the philosopher-kings and their ability to escape their bodies and contemplate the Realm of the Forms explicitly offered as an allegory of the soul, so too is the separation of the body and soul in the soul’s ability to contemplate the Realm of the Forms in the Phaedo.

In the Republic, the function of the kallipolis is not to offer a blueprint for an actual society, but to help Glaucon develop a conception of justice in the soul and to inspire him to pattern his life upon that conception. Similarly, in the Phaedo, Socrates offers an allegorical conception of the soul and its relationship to the Realm of the Forms that is intended to inspire Phaedo and the others to want to pattern their lives after it. His goal, in other words, is not to communicate absolute, indubitable metaphysical knowledge, as the standard view suggests, but to inspire others to pattern their lives after the metaphysical allegory that is offered. He explicitly says as much at the very end of the dialogue when he urges his interlocutors to follow his advice regarding the way they live their lives, even if “no sensible man would insist that these things are the way I have described them”. While it would be impossible to know precisely what Socrates means by “these things,” it is entirely possible, even plausible, that he means them to refer to his doctrine of the Forms. But that is not to say that the myth of the Forms is therefore not true; the Forms are true but not in the “strict way” that Socrates describes them. Like the myths of the cave and the kallipolis, they are meant to describe reality truly, albeit in a metaphorical way.

But though Plato’s Forms are a myth, they are not a consolation, a mere avoidance of vertigo; vision of them is portrayed as too difficult an attainment for that to be so….The
point of the metaphor is the colossal difficulty of attaining a capacity to cope clear-
sightedly with the ethical reality which is part of our world. Unlike other philosophical
responses to uncodifiability, this one may actually work towards moral improvement;
negatively, by inducing humility, and positively, by inspiring effect akin to that of a
religious conversion. (McDowell, 1979, 347)
McDowell’s claim seems on the mark especially when we consider that Socrates himself
advocates the use of the myths as methods of “incantation.” He argues that “it is fitting for a man
to risk the belief [in his explanation about the soul and the afterlife]…that this, or something like
this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and
a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an incantation, which is why I have been
prolonging my tale” (114d). Interestingly, the life that Socrates recommends is the same that he
recommended in the Republic, namely that the eternal destination of all human souls “will
conform to the way in which they have behaved….The happiest of these, who will also have the
best destination, are those who practiced popular and social virtue, which they call moderation
and justice and which was developed by habit and practice” (Phaedo, 82b). The emphasis on
habit and practice is stark, especially in contrast to the received wisdom that focuses exclusively
on knowledge. It is true that immediately following this passage Socrates goes on to affirm the
need of “philosophy” and the “love of learning” to consummate the process of purification that
habit and practice began, but nowhere does he indicate that philosophy is alone sufficient for this
purification.3 Indeed, as we saw in the Laws, mere knowledge can only “half realize [a person’s]
potentialities for virtue” (647d).
So far then we have seen that the intellectualist interpretation of Plato is doubtful. To be
sure, Plato does place a premium on knowledge—a fact to which we will return—but it is
equally clear that he places a premium on imitation, habituation and practice. Becoming virtuous
is not merely an intellectual matter solved by an intellectual apprehension of the knowledge of
the good, but is a premeditated, rigorous practical activity that requires habituation and training
for all individuals if they are to have any prospect of becoming good.

Socratic Questioning, Epiphany and Self-Habituation

As indicated above, the fact that Plato emphasizes imitation, practice, and habituation
does not mean that he considers knowledge unimportant. He considers the intellectual
apprehension of the good to be of profound importance, especially for the education of young
adults who were not properly habituated in their childhood. For these young adults the
apprehension of the good is meant to initiate a re-habituation process. To explain this it will be
helpful to revisit Aristotle.

As was mentioned, Aristotle believes that poorly raised young adults have no hope of
attaining virtue. He claims that arguments have little effect on the formation of virtue in
individuals who were habituated to desire what is vicious.

What argument would remold such people? It is hard, if not impossible, to remove by
argument the traits that have long since been incorporated in the character….For he who

3 This combination of habituation and philosophy is echoed in the final lines of the Republic
when Socrates argues that to be happy in life and in the afterlife, he and Glaucon must “always
hold to the upward path, practicing justice with reason in every way” (621c). As will be
discussed shortly, mere practice does not lead to virtuous actions. Ultimately, for a person to be
virtuous (and thereby happy) they must combine practice and knowledge.
lives as passion directs will not hear argument that dissuades him, nor understand it if he does; and how can we persuade in such a state to change his ways? And in general passion seems to yield not to argument but to force. (1179b1-15)

As a consequence, Aristotle recommends the use of laws to protect the majority from their passions. He does not hope to make them virtuous by the laws but at least to prevent them from obeying those passions that would have socially destructive tendencies if acted upon.

From the foregoing analysis, it would seem that Plato shares Aristotle’s skepticism regarding the potential of reforming the vicious since he also believes that only those souls who have the proper habituation have the chance of being good. To recall, he claims that the soul must be “hammered” upon from childhood with the proper habits and practice. Be that as it may, Plato does offer the pedagogical hope found in the use of Socratic dialogue. Like Aristotle he does not believe that arguments alone can reform the vicious; but he does believe that an individual can be so transformed through careful, premeditated dialogues in which they achieve a moment of insight that functions as a transformative catalyst that initiates a desire in the interlocutor to pursue self-habituation.

The most obvious example of Socrates’ faith in the ability for dialogue to initiate a desire for self-habituation is seen in the Alcibiades, where he leads Alcibiades to the recognition that he must begin a process of “self-cultivation” if Alcibiades is to become virtuous. After leading Alcibiades to this realization, he follows by explaining that Alcibiades must have a mentor who can guide him in his pursuit after virtue; Alcibiades must “be ruled by somebody superior” (135b) until he has acquired virtue himself. Alcibiades recognizes the need for this and suggests that Socrates become his mentor.

The example of Alcibiades is a remarkably clear one but it leaves something to be desired insofar as the content of Alcibiades vision of the good is largely formal. While he has had a vision of the good, the vision is merely that he is not virtuous and does not even know what virtue is. A more filled out picture is provided in the Republic, where Glaucon not only recognizes his need for re-habituation but also has a glimpse of what constitutes the virtues that will result from that re-habituation.

Throughout the Republic Glaucon is led through dialogue, by almost imperceptible degrees, not only to a cognitive understanding of the virtue of justice but a commitment to pattern his life after it. Plato highlights the centrality and power of properly structured dialogue to seduce Glaucon’s soul into transformation. Prior to this transformation, Glaucon was a paradigm of the type of the hedonist that Aristotle describes above who “living by passion they pursue their own pleasures and the means to them, and avoid the opposite pains, and have not even a conception of what is noble and truly pleasant, since they have never tasted it.” This nearly perfectly describes Glaucon at the beginning of the Republic when he objects to the life of moderation and justice that Socrates describes in his famous city fit for pigs in Book II. Glaucon cannot imagine living a fulfilled happy life in that city because it does not offer the luxuries and conveniences to which he has grown accustomed. What is remarkable is that by the end of the book, Glaucon’s desires have been completely transformed. He has been converted in the space of several hours of conversation from being a hedonist who could not imagine being happy without the ability to fulfill his bodily passions to proponent of moderation who cannot imagine being happy without practicing justice and the rest of virtue. How has this transformation taken place? It is not through arguments but through dialogue—and not through dialogue itself but through a certain type of dialogue. When Socrates recognizes that Glaucon cannot be converted through direct arguments like the kind found in Socrates claims that the “city for pigs” was the
“true” and “healthy” city (372e), he resorted to a more roundabout approach in which he slowly seduced Glaucon to a vision of the good. He uses the myth of the *kallipolis* to prepare and condition Glaucon’s soul and in so doing provides a kind of verbal habituation process. He does not subject him to the *elenchus* but involves Glaucon in the constructing a metaphorical image of the soul that, because it is only a metaphor, does not threaten Glaucon or demand that he immediately give up what he holds most precious: his bodily desires. Rather, at the beginning, the image the *kallipolis* is so incomplete that Glaucon does not suspect the trap he is falling into. He is taken off his guard and unsuspectingly walks into cathedral so ornate and awe inspiring that his vision is dominated and his appetites are overcome. To quote McDowell again, Socrates has, through the dialogue inspired “an effect akin to a religious conversion.” It is through the dramatic myth of the *kallipolis* that Glaucon is given an image of the good—an image which becomes temporarily stamped upon Glaucon’s soul.

As impressive as this conversion has been, it is incomplete. Socrates does not believe that since Glaucon has attained a vision of the good that he will automatically become virtuous, as the orthodox view would maintain. In fact the opposite is true. Socrates in the *Republic* (as well as Plato throughout the dialogues) makes it clear that having a vision of the good is only half the battle. Having come to *see* what virtue is, Glaucon must now continually *act* in ways consistent with that virtue, so that he has a prospect of living a life consistent with his recently acquired vision of the good.

When Aristotle claims that arguments are not sufficient to overcome the bodily desires of the vicious, he was correct. Plato agrees. But what Aristotle does not sufficiently account for (in his *Ethics* at least) is the power of dialogical myth and its ability to temporary transform the desires of the vicious. When myths are powerful enough, and especially when students are invited to participate in their construction, something can happen to a soul. It is true that these myths are not enough to permanently overcome the continually nagging desires of the body—only imitation, habituation and practice can overcome those—but they inspire a *desire* to begin a process of re-habituation. After an epiphany of the good has been obtained, the student has, if provided with direction and with a virtuous guide, a chance to reenter childhood as it were and choose for themselves to be habituated under the guidance of their mentor(s).

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of this essay, it was suggested that Plato offers an account of moral development that improves on Aristotle’s in important ways. Whereas Aristotle holds little hope for the ethical development of students who missed the proper habituation in their youth, Plato, by contrast, offers hope by emphasizing the profound role epiphanies can have as a motivation for moral growth. Both Plato and Aristotle focus on the importance of imitation and habituation, but only Plato believes that an individual can be so transformed by a vision of the good (incomplete as it may be) that he or she will actively seek out exemplars, teachers, or guides, who can provide direction for the newly motivated novitiate. The novitiate seeks out his or her exemplar not so that he or she can learn propositional facts about virtue, but so that he or she can be guided in right action. The exemplar or guide is supposed to function like a spiritual director, as it were, not like an intellectual tutor. In this context, the novitiate can receive a process of habituation that he or she missed in their youth.

Contemporary secondary educators who seek to improve their students’ ethical selves are given hope in Plato that they might not have found in Aristotle. Even the most recalcitrant and poorly habituated students have the potential to change the moral direction of their lives. What is
required is for the teacher to successfully lead these students through dialogue to an epiphany of the good. Once these epiphanies are achieved they can help their students to find guides who might be able to carry on the habituation process. Of course, all of this is easier said than done—and for that reason we ought to keep reading the Platonic dialogues for insights into how best to lead our students to these transformative epiphanies.
Reference List