

**Narrative Reflection in the Philosophy of Teaching:
Genealogy and Portraiture**

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in a polymorphic activity, but that all such teaching acts share a common aim – the intention to bring about learning (p. 168).

The legacy of this approach may be a greater clarity in our use of the concept of teaching. But these kinds of analyses suffers from a tendency to narrow down the subject, rather than enlarge it. They tells us more about what teaching is in terms of current usage. But when we read the great educational works of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Dewey, for example, we don't find much analysis of the verb to teach. What we do find are narratives of teaching and teachers – stories that provide very rich descriptions of the task of the teacher and conceptions of teaching that aim to offer new ways of thinking about teaching. It is this kind of narrative reflection on teaching that I plan to examine more fully in this paper. The stories I have in mind fall into two groups – genealogies and portraits.

A genealogy is a hypothetical construction – a story that offers a plausible account of how something originated. According to Bernard Williams (2002) it is a “helpful fiction...an imagined developmental story, which helps to explain a concept or value or institution by showing ways in which it could have come about” (21). Genealogies are widely deployed by philosophers. “State of nature arguments” such as those used by Rousseau in his second discourse, *On the Origins and Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind*, or Hume's discussion of the origins of justice and property present plausible accounts from which the nature of their respective concepts can be deduced. As Rousseau describes them, genealogies are “not to be taken for historical truths, but merely as hypothetical and conditional reasonings, fitter to illustrate the nature of things, than to show their true origins” (88). Plato uses myth to the same purpose (Guthrie). My aim in this paper is to show how myth and state of nature narratives have been used to support competing conceptions of the nature of teaching.

Portraits are another kind of helpful fiction that aim to present a picture of how teaching might be conceived, often in contrast to a dominant version that the portrait seeks to counter. Pedagogic portrait aim to teach by example. By constructing images of what might be call paradigmatic teachers, philosophers are able to project a

particular vision of the ideal teacher whose life exemplifies the proper conduct of the teacher and their purpose.

Plato's portrait of Socrates, particularly the Socrates of the middle dialogues, is perhaps the most celebrated example of this form of narrative portraiture. Indeed, I think that it's fair to say that his influence has been huge in the development of a tradition of pedagogic portraiture. Nietzsche's Zarathustra and the self portraits of Augustine of Hippo and Rousseau, which are presented in their respective *Confessions*, come to mind as portraits constructed on the familiar Platonic pattern. And although I will not argue the case in this paper, it is my claim that they constitute a particular philosophical *genre* in which the teacher is presented as a healer, and more precisely as a wounded or suffering healer.

The Origins of Teaching as a Technical Skill

A useful point of entry in discussing the idea of the origins of teaching is with Dewey's distinction between informal and formal education. Informal education is the kind of teaching and learning that takes place in the normal conduct of life. There is nothing planned or deliberate about it. "The very process of living together educates" (*Democracy and Education*, p. 6). We don't, at least initially, learn our mother tongue by going to school. Similarly, much of what we learn about values and social life is picked up, it seems, quite incidentally as we go about our the business of living our lives. Dewey calls this process one of "direct sharing" in social life.

The conditions of the modern world, however, demand that we also make special provisions for people to learn important skills and knowledge of things that are less likely to be conveyed through direct sharing. Many skills and subjects are too important to be left to merely informal arrangements. Complex societies need to adopt formal procedures and develop special institutions to ensure that education can be conducted in a planned way. Thus, says Dewey, "the task of teaching certain things is delegated to a special group of persons" (*Democracy and Education* p. 8).

In this version of the story, teaching has its roots in human social life. It is something

that we are all able to do, more or less. However, as a society becomes more complex, a greater degree of deliberation is required to continue this function. Thus formal arrangements become a necessary part of education. Lessons have to be planned and opportunities for learning created. We must exercise a degree of rational control over the subject matter; and we are compelled to make arrangements for instruction – to consider what is to be taught, when it is to be taught, how it is to be taught, and to whom it is to be taught. From this arises technical skill in teaching. The danger, of course, always being that formal teaching tends to become predictable and artificial rather than spontaneous and real – or “bookish and dull,” as Dewey puts it.

Thus, teaching evolves like other activities which require a preparation in the application of approved technique and practices. We may all be able to scratch figures in the sand or daub a wall with paint but by means of the patient development and application of methods we learn to achieve certain predictable, and aesthetic, effects. Thus the development of technique is an essential component in the story of the growth of teaching from its original, natural state to its practice as a technical skill.

A similar account of the origins of teaching is given by Plato in his dialogue, *Protagoras*. The story, which is related in the form of a myth, does not, of course, represent the views of Plato on the origins of teaching, but those of Protagoras as represented by Plato (Taylor, 1969, p. 237).

The *Protagoras* takes place at the house of Callias. Socrates arrives with Hippocrates, a young man who is excited at the prospect of meeting the famous sophist and convinced that he will profit from becoming his pupil. Socrates casts doubt on this: What is it that Protagoras teaches? Protagoras claims that he teaches *areté* – excellence in conducting one’s own affairs and in being a good citizen. But Socrates objects that the people of Athens do not appeal to specialists in matters of virtue but treat all persons opinions as of equal value. Also, it is often the case that the most virtuous people are unable to pass along their knowledge to their children. It appears to Socrates that teaching virtue is not a skill that requires specialist knowledge and Protagoras has no special claim to expertise in this area.

In answer to these objections, Protagoras relates the familiar story of how Prometheus stole fire from Hephaestus and technical skill from Athena. Thus equipped, humans were able to use their technical skills to survive, but, unfortunately, this did not protect them from disputes with other humans, and they were soon in danger of wiping each other out. Zeus, who was rather taken by these creatures that prayed and sacrificed in his honor, instructed Hermes to give humans two new gifts – conscience (*aidōs*) and justice (*dikē*) – “to be the principles and organization of cities and the bonds of friendship” (322c). Hermes asked if they should be distributed unequally or equally among men, and Zeus agrees that they should be common property.

As Guthrie points out, the mythical elements of this tale can easily be stripped away and the rational elements defended, as Protagoras proceeds to do. His first point is that technical sagacity is innate – “it is bestowed by Prometheus at the moment when the first men see the light” (History of Greek Philosophy, Vol. IV, p. 65). But *aidōs* and *dikē* are not part of humanity’s original nature, but a gift conferred on all at a later date. This view is consistent with the belief that that civic virtues such as *aidōs* and *dikē* become widespread out of social necessity and by means, at first, of informal education. Thus, Protagoras agrees with Socrates that virtue is something that all people have a certain capacity to teach (informally), but that he has developed it into a formal, technical skill. Protagoras viewed the mind or soul on analogy with the body as something that could be shaped like a piece of sculpture (Jaeger, *Paideia* Vol I, p. 314) So the underlying view is that teaching is an art in which the teacher aims to shape the soul of the pupil.

Protagoras, like Dewey, offers a genealogical account of the origins of teaching locating it in our native human capacities – capacities that can be refined under more formal conditions to the point of becoming methodized. The gradual accumulation of technical skill in teaching could then be passed on from teacher to student. For Protagoras, like other sophists before and after him. The methods of his art were composed in a manual, now lost, but which outlined general methods in the art of rhetoric.

The Teacher as Lover: Plato's Re-enchantment of the Idea of Teaching.

Plato was implacably opposed to the sophists, among whom Protagoras was the leading theorist. He viewed their ideas as corrosive to traditional morality and as subversive and dangerous to the stability of the city state. The sophists “undermined the basis of morals by denying the existence of any absolute standards of conduct,” and “they attacked the immutable basis of law, which had hitherto been regarded as divine in origin” (Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods*, p. 340). Plato abhorred their atheistic outlook. Protagoras, in particular, was one of the main promoters of this materialist philosophy with his teaching that rejected the authority of the gods and made man the measure of all things. To Plato, “they represented in themselves a fundamentally misguided and harmful outlook on the world and human life” – an outlook that demanded a new philosophy that reconnected the world and human life with a conception of divine purpose (Guthrie, 1970, p. 341).

Plato countered the sophists by developing a philosophy and an eschatology that restored traditional Greek religious belief as the upholder of morality and the validity of knowledge. In order to accomplish this, he aimed to harness Orphic teachings to a new ethics and metaphysics, and a doctrine of the human soul as divine in origin.

With regard to their teaching practices, Plato saw the work of the sophists not only as immoral but as superficial (not a true *techné*, like medicine) – dealing not at all with what he considered to be virtue and knowledge, but with the mere belief and worldly success. Moreover, their techniques were plainly manipulative – aimed at getting a point across rather than with the processes of rational discovery. He opposed their idea of the teacher as someone who did something to someone in contrast someone who did something with someone. The sophists one-way, monological pedagogic techniques had little to do with knowledge. They treated their pupils more like customers.

Plato countered the sophists in two ways. First, by offering a new and very different account of the origins of teaching and, secondly, by presenting a very different portrait of the ideal teacher in the person of his own teacher, Socrates.

In Plato's view teaching is not something that arises out of our natural human capacities. It goes much deeper. It is a product of our divine natures. We should not, therefore, regard teaching as mere technical skill, as the sophists argued, but essentially as a sacred relationship arising in the immortal soul and inspired by *Eros*, god of love.

Essentially, Plato's idea of the divine origin of teaching is based on the traditional, aristocratic ideal of pederastic love – of the relationship of lover and beloved that the Greeks idealized as a relationship between an older man (the teacher) and a young boy (the pupil). But in Plato, the pederastic ideal is transformed so that the implied sexual passions are sublimated and transformed by the rational part of the soul.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato tells us that it is the form or ideal of Beauty that is most capable of rousing us from forgetfulness and turning our soul to the ideal: "it has the property of being especially visible and especially lovable" (250e). The sight of a beautiful person has a palpable effect on us – flooding our being with an invigorating rush of emotions that quickens the soul and causes it to soar towards the ideal of Beauty and to form a connection to that ideal world (251a–e). Thus, Plato suggests that what is fundamental to teaching is a sort of sacred relationship between teacher and pupil that provides the original impetus whereby the souls of teacher and pupil are turned towards the ideal. The process of education is a reciprocal one – it involves matchmaking, of finding one's soul mate. Thus, teacher and pupil become more aware, more perfectly educated in the image of the god to whom they are devoted: "they are trying to their utmost to get the boy completely and utterly to resemble themselves and the god to whom they are dedicated" (253c). This idea of finding a match is repeated in the *Theaetetus* when Socrates tells us that the midwife is also a kind of matchmaker: Skill in sowing is not to be separated from skill in harvesting (149e).

How is this accomplished? Teaching in Plato's view involves dialogic engagement with pupils. It is not a matter of doing something to someone – of putting something in that was not there before. Platonic teaching is a form of preventative care, of engaging pupils in such a way that the obscuring effects of the physical and sensual world are neutralized or removed so that the intellect and reason are allowed to operate

unhindered. It is a bit like brushing away the dust from a lens so that the eyes of the soul may see more clearly. Teaching is a talking cure aimed at loosening the grip of false belief (Freudian psychoanalysis comes to mind as a modern version of this process) or the removal of the errors that imprison our minds and hold us back from reaching the truth. Socratic method, the so-called *elenchus*, seeks to pick away at the obstructions that contaminate our reason rather as a physician might remove infected tissue from a wound in the process known as “debridement,” so that the healthy tissue is reinvigorated and the wound begins to heal.

The image of the teacher as healer, and particularly of the teacher as a suffering healer, is implicit in at least two influential Platonic images. I refer to the metaphor of the teacher as a midwife of the soul and the metaphor of the cave in which the teacher, once a prisoner in an illusory world, is released from bondage and struggles to the light. Essentially, both images embody the idea of the teacher as a wounded healer – images that suggest that a painful experience has been endured and learned from and that the overcoming of this experience forms the basis of a new teaching.

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates compares his skill in examining beliefs to that of the midwife, who, though barren herself, is able to help others give birth. Athenian midwives were required by law to have had children, so the idea is they were barren because they had passed the age of being able to conceive. Their experience of giving birth gave legitimacy to their maieutic skill (149c). “My art of the midwife is in general like theirs; the only difference is that my patients are men, not women, and my concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in travail of birth” (150a). Outside of the comforting security of modern medicine, giving birth is risky business for women.

In the image of the cave, the prisoner discovers that his world of shadows is illusory after his struggle into the light. If he were to return to the cave in an effort to persuade the others of their errors, they would probably kill him. You cannot put knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, nor sight into a blind eye. However, “the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth and the organ to see it with...so the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world” to a contemplation of the

Beautiful and Good. Plato conceives of an art whose aim is “to ensure that, instead of looking in the wrong direction, the soul is turned the way it ought to be” (Book VII, 518). The teacher who was a prisoner it appears will find no converts by means of mere persuasion, but must become a practitioner of the art of turning the soul towards the ideal. This art of teaching as turing the soul is a reciprocal affair that is based on an appropriate relationship and less on the deployment of a technique. The portrait of Socrates that embodies this Platonic vision of the ideal teacher is one of great originality and power. It offers a new vision or model of teaching that is based on the sanctity of the relationship between teacher and pupil as a form of reciprocal healing.

This idea of the teacher as a kind of healer was not entirely new to the Greeks. Behind the vivid portrait of Socrates lies a more archaic and shadowy figure who represented the ideal teacher to the Ancient Greeks, a figure whose mythical origins resonate in the character and appearance of Socrates. I speak here of Chiron, the centaur.

Chiron may be viewed as a sort of antecedent to Socrates – an archetypal portrait of the ideal teacher that precedes the Platonic *persona* of Socrates and shares some important qualities with him. Two powerful symbols converge in Chiron. The first in his reputation as a healer, the teacher of Asclepius and Achilles. The second is manifested in his biform appearance, the peculiar union of man and horse that signifies a dynamic interplay between two realms of being – animal and human existence. The first world represents knowledge of the world of nature; the second, the world of ideas and rational control. We are reminded of the image of the human soul in Plato’s *Phaedrus* – “a soul is like an organic whole made up of a charioteer and his team of horses.” The charioteer, like the human half of the centaur, represents human reasons and strives for control over the dark horse while giving rein to the light one. The centaur would seem to unite these twin aspects of being in one creature – like the Dionysian and Apollonian drives that Nietzsche identified as a vigorous fusion of impulses that contributed in large part to the genius and creative spirit of the Greeks.

Chiron symbolizes both forces in dynamic interplay – a union in which the human, rational, and civilizing power tames but does not emasculate the animal drives.

One is struck by the similarities between Chiron and Socrates, both physically and spiritually. Take, for example, their strangeness. In both portraits, outer deformity belies an inner beauty. Chiron is a “good centaur,” a creature who is atypical of the savage race of centaurs. Socrates is portrayed in similar terms as a kind of living contradiction. In the *Symposium*, for example, Alcibiades compares him to the satyr, Marsyas, and later to Silenusⁱ:

He loves to appear utterly uninformed and ignorant – Isn't that like Silenus? Of course it is. Don't you see that it's just his outer casing, like those little figures [figurines of sileni] I was telling you about? But believe me friends and fellow drunks, you've only got to open him up and you'll find him so full of temperance and sobriety that you'll hardly believe your eyes.

Wounded by Hercules' poisoned arrow and a pain that he cannot cure, Chiron chooses death over immortality. There are parallels, here, in spite of the contradictions – Socrates seeks the release of his immortal soul in death, while Chiron trades his immortality for a death that will cease the pain that he is suffered to endure everlastingly. Each sees death as a cure, and the cure is a form of escape from the disease of life. It appears that Socrates may be paying a veiled tribute to Chiron in asking Crito, in his dying last words, to sacrifice a cock to Asclepius, who was regarded by the Greeks as Chiron's pupil.

Two metaphors of teaching

These two foundational accounts of teaching – teaching as method and teaching as a relationship – based as they are on two quite different accounts of the origins of teaching, are difficult to reconcile. They imply two very different approaches. In the sophistic tradition, teaching is skill in shaping minds, in putting understanding in where it was not. It is a rational art of rhetorical composition, of constructing lessons,

aimed at informing an audience. The Platonic conception of teaching, on the other hand, views teaching as a form of reciprocal soul-healing, which arises in a relationship of great intimacy between teacher and pupil.

But are these two versions of the nature and role of the teacher really that hard to reconcile? Can the art of turning the soul be made to fit with the art of shaping it? Surely the teacher healers must apply method in the practice of their art, just as teacher artists must entertain purposes in developing and employing their pedagogic methods? Plato suggests as much when he addresses the question of philosophic method in the final section of the *Phaedrus*; while Protagoras claims that his teaching aims at a kind of healing, of producing better people. However, we have inherited from Plato a conception of teaching that is placed starkly in opposition to the one entertained by the sophists and rhetoricians. Indeed, it seems to me that this division in our thinking between practicing teaching as a skill and practicing it as a form of mutual inquiry, is very much evident in contemporary educational thought. Thus, a history of the idea of teaching would necessarily involve tracing the ways in which these two divergent approaches to teaching – teaching as method and teaching as reciprocal healing – have evolved.

A Short Account of Teaching Methods

The history of methods of instruction begins with the sophists and the deployment of rhetorical strategies in achieving instructional aims. John Dewey credits Johann Friedrich Herbart as the first thinker to formulate general methods of instruction, but Herbart is no innovator in this regard. He is the inheritor of a tradition of thought that reaches back to the practices of the ancient rhetoricians.

Dewey tells us that “Herbart’s great service lay in taking the work of teaching out of the sphere of routine and accident” (*Democracy and Education*, p.71). Herbart is undoubtedly an important figure in the history of the development of teaching methods, but he is hardly the originator of conscious methods of instruction. The method that Dewey is referring to is the so-called “method of recitation,” a series of five

distinct steps that teachers were to follow in teaching a lesson, and abstracted from Herbart's writings by his followers – preparation, presentation, comparison, generalization, and application. The method is well entrenched in pedagogic practice, but its prevalence as a methods may just as well be attributed to Gorgias, Cicero, or any of the sophists, most of whom would have little difficulty in recognizing the rhetorical strategies embedded in each of the five steps.ⁱⁱ

Herbart should be credited with advancing a much more important idea in the history of teaching methods – that of *anschauung*. This is a concept that derives from Herbart's great predecessor in the chair of philosophy at Königsburg, Immanuel Kant. In Kant, *Anschauung* refers to intuition or perception. However, it is Pestalozzi who first gave currency to the term in its educational sense, *Anschauung* conveys the idea of a direct apprehension of the world, unmediated by language, and this is the sense that Dewey gives to his concept of appreciation. The principle is summed up in Rousseau's view that "man's first reason is a reason of the senses; this sensual reason serves as the basis of intellectual reason. Our first masters of philosophy are our feet, our hands, our eyes. To substitute books for all that is not to teach us to reason." It is this idea that justifies such pedagogic innovations as field trips, project-based learning, and student inquiry projects. Dewey contrasts appreciation or direct apprehension of things with what he calls "representational experience" or experience mediated by language. The first phase in teaching is not in verbal lessons but in activities that allow pupils to use things.

Thus, the important step in the history of teaching as method is the recognition that the soul or mind is not passive. In effect, the soul undergoes its own internal dynamic of growth and change through interaction with the world. We should not see soul shaping, as the sophists did, as the result simply of the external actions of the teacher. There is more to method than pedagogic techniques of direct instruction. For example, Dewey identifies method with inquiry – method is identical to the processes of reflective thought as they unfold in the activity of solving problems. Dewey is not just shifting the locus of method and thought away from the teacher and on to the students.

His originality, I think, lies in the fact that he locates method in the activity of learning and this is just as much the province of the teacher as it is for the learner. Teaching is about getting students to engage problems with intelligence – that is, with method. Method is part of the activity of teaching in so far as the teacher is also a learner and a participant who shares the work of the students: “In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher – and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better” (*Democracy and Education*, p. 160).

Portraits of the Teacher as a Healer

Philosophical portraits of ideal teachers tend to be variations on the Platonic theme that draws on the Chironic image of the teacher as a wounded healer. The basic idea, as I mentioned earlier, is that the teacher is able to draw on lessons learned from some present or past experience of suffering in order to inform their own teaching. It is closely related to the idea of philosophy as a therapeutic discipline. The Stoics, and Epicureans clearly saw it that way (Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*). Epictetus, for example, saw schools as hospitals and teachers as physicians and the role of the philosophy as a cure or, at least, as a palliative for the tribulations of life.

Examples of the genre abound in other fields, especially in representations of religious figures like Dionysus, Jesus, an assortment of saints, and, to give a recent example, Mary Baker Eddy. The model of the teacher as a wounded healer is also a familiar one in novels, films, and other media. The popular series *House*, for example, depicts a Sherlock Holmes-like physician whose insight into the illnesses of his patients appear to mysteriously emanate from his own ill health and addiction to painkillers, not unlike the archetypal detective.

In addition to Socrates, Augustine, Rousseau, and Nietzsche’s Zarathustra seem to fit the wounded teacher/healer pattern quite closely, as do Spinoza and Wittgenstein. Each of these examples represents a kind of evolution of the original Platonic version –

changing the terms in which we understand the nature of the teacher-student relationship and the notion of the particular malady that teaching aims to cure.

Rousseau, as Jean Starobinski points out, presents his life in his writings as a suffering healer: "For all his weakness he was the one who proclaimed the punishment of a guilty society and the 'healing of ills' " (367). He clearly took himself as a model of someone who has been personally afflicted by the wounds of a corrupt society and who has learned how to overcome them by suppressing his own *amour propre*.

Where could the painter and apologist of nature, so disfigured and calumniated now, have found his model save from his own heart? He described it as he himself felt...In short, a man had to portray himself to show us primitive man like this. (Dialogues, p. 214).

All teaching, in addition to being an act of teaching something to someone, is a demonstration of teaching; and the idea of representing a teacher/healer in the form of a portrait takes advantage of this power of example to instruct readers on the nature of teaching.

In Plato's portrait of Socrates, two important aspects of teaching are stressed – the special relationship between teacher and pupil as lover to beloved and the specific form that teaching must take in order to effect a cure (clearing away the obstructions that lead to error to effect a turning of the soul towards the light). Rousseau also stresses similar aspects of relationship and teaching form. In *Emile*, teacher and pupil end up as friends and Rousseau tells us that this has been his object all along. Even though it did not describe the earlier relationship of Jean-Jacques and Emile, it was never out of his mind as the object of instruction. The highest friendship is one that is based on a mutual esteem for virtue. And such friendships are "the most sacred of all contracts" (*Emile*, 233n).

Conclusion

In this paper I have aimed to show how our modern conception of teaching is informed by two traditions of thought – one that emphasizes the role of method in

teaching and conceives of teaching in terms of artistry; the other that gives priority to the special relationship between the teacher and pupil and views teaching as a special form of healing – one in which the example of the teacher as a sufferer provides legitimation for their pedagogy. Each conception of teaching arises in different narratives of the origins of teaching. In addition, the Platonic version gives rise to a further tradition of portraiture in which the teacher is portrayed as a suffering healer.

In the Western tradition of thought, these competing ideas emerge very early with the Greeks, and particularly in the work of Plato, where they are viewed as wholly distinct versions of the nature of teaching. One is viewed as originating as a response to the changing conditions of human affairs, and it views the relationship of teacher to pupil as asymmetrical – the teacher as a person who is in possession a method for bringing about effects in the learner. The other conception of teaching, deriving from Plato, views teaching and learning as interconnected, as arising in a productive relationship, a form of intimate association in which teacher and pupil are bound together in a mutual effort to bring about their own improvement.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Sileni were satyrs usually depicted as half goat, half human, but sometimes as half horse-half human. They had a reputation of drunkenness like the similarly disposed centaurs.

ⁱⁱ A useful survey of the history of rhetorical method from its ancient roots to the Nineteenth Century can be found in Corbett, E.P.J and R.J. Connors, (1999). *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 4th Edition. Oxford: OUP, pp. 489-543.