Childhood, Philosophy, and the Polis: Exclusion and Resistance

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It is interesting to note how, beginning far back in the history of ideas, the devaluation of childhood has paralleled a devaluation of philosophy. The correlation probably begins with a passage in Plato’s *Gorgias*, where the devaluation of childhood is associated with a criticism of philosophy. Even more surprisingly, in that passage Plato himself offers a critique of his own master, Socrates—both of his understanding of philosophy and of the way he practiced it in the polis. Here we have Plato criticizing not only a denaturalization of dialectic argumentation but indirectly charging against his beloved master, Socrates himself? From a philosopher we can expect anything specially from a prominent philosophy as Plato when such serious things as the education of the young are at stake. In this paper, I’ll try to unfold this critique, justify the previous assessment and take some inferences in terms of some contemporary issues relating philosophy and the education of childhood. Or, as we might also say, about childhood and the education of philosophy.

*The critique of childhood and philosophy in the Gorgias*

Let’s go directly to the *dialogue*. Socrates has already made Polo and Gorgias abandon the conversation. Callicles has impulsively entered it complaining the way Socrates has treated his previous interlocutors. He asks Socrates to stop acting like a child and to distance himself from philosophy in order to dedicate himself to more important matters (*Gorgias 484c*). He says that philosophy corrupts men when they

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1 Thanks to my friend and colleague David Kennedy for correcting the English.
remain in it too long, and that it makes them unexperienced (apeiron) for public life in the polis. He claims that those who philosophize too much do not know the laws, do not know how to treat other people, and are not transparent, not well regarded and experienced (empeiron). In sum, they are ridiculous in public and private affairs (Gorgias 484c–d) in which they behave like children. This is what he attributes to Socrates: behaving himself like a child in the polis. The philosopher is as ridiculous and childish in public affairs as politicians are in philosophical conversations. Then, Callicles offers the following comparison:

*It is a fine thing to partake of philosophy just for the sake of education, and it is no disgrace for a lad to follow it: but when a man already advancing in years continues in its pursuit, the affair, Socrates, becomes ridiculous; and for my part I have much the same feeling towards students of philosophy as towards those who lisp or play tricks. For when I see a little child, to whom it is still natural to talk in that way, lipping or playing some trick, I enjoy it, and it strikes me as pretty and ingenuous and suitable to the infant’s age; whereas if I hear a small child talk distinctly, I find it a disagreeable thing, and it affends my ears and seems to me more befitting a slave. But when one hears a grown man lisp, or sees him play tricks, it strikes one as something ridiculous and unmanly, that deserves a whipping. Just the same, then, is my feeling towards the followers of philosophy. For when I see philosophy in a young lad I approve of it; I consider it suitable, and I regard him as a person of liberal mind: whereas one who does not follow it I account illiberal and never likely to expect of himself any fine or generous action. But when I see an elderly man still going on with philosophy and not getting rid of it, that is the gentleman, Socrates, whom I think in need of a whipping. For as I said just now, this person, however well endowed he may be, is bound to become unmanly through shunning the centers and marts of the city, in which, as the poet said, “men get them note and glory”; he must cower down and spend the rest of his days whispering in a corner with three or four lads, and never utter anything free or high or spirited.*

(485a–d, translated by B. Jowett)

Callicles states that it is beautiful to dedicate oneself to philosophy to the extent that it serves to education (paideia). Not that there is any appreciation for the two: they can be together only because they are both, by nature, unimportant, or, at best, a preparation for what really matters: the political life of adults. In Callicles’ view, education refers to a world prior to the real world, after entering political life. There is no politics in childhood, nor in education and philosophy; therefore philosophy can accompany human life during that stage of life as play (paizon) does, and it is even
appropriate and beautiful, but it cannot go through adulthood where play is not any more well seen and life has to take the form of a serious participation in the political institutions. One who dedicates to philosophy in adulthood becomes ungentle man (an opposite or negation of a man, anandroi), mainly because it does not occupy the public place (agora) and centre of the city, the places of realization of citizenship, and occupies the rest of his life whispering in the corners with some few young people.

It is extremely complex the relationship between Plato and the characters of his dialogues, beginning with Socrates and also others like Calicles. There is something that Plato, with little doubts, seems to be sharing with Calicles, the character: the idea that what really matter is the political life of adults in the polis, to describe which he has dedicated his two more extensive dialogues: The Republic and The Laws. Plato is also interested about the education of childhood, a theme which appears frequently in the dialogues. But he doesn´t seem to be interested in it because of childhood itself but because of the implications to social life carried by each way of educating childhood. In other words, education is so much important because it is the cause (aitia) of the justice or injustice of a polis (The Republic II 376c-d). This is why, unlike Calicles, Plato gives enormous importance to the education of the young and this is also why he will exclude eristic dialectic from it. In this respect he considers music and gymnastic to be the most appropriate studies at the beginning of the education of the young and he places philosophy only at the end of it. In spite of this difference, Plato might agree with Calicles that as practiced by Socrates philosophy could be useless or event dangerous and could not play its real service to political life.

In fact, this critique to philosophy put in Callicles mouth by Plato must be well known and common after the death of Socrates. In the Republic, Adeimantus offers a parallel argument: those who do not abandon philosophy after embracing it as part of
their education when they are children (*neoi*), become adults who are strange (*allokotuous*) or evil people (*the Republic VI 487c–d*). Again, philosophy can be practiced while one is a child, but politics is the world of the mature, where philosophy is out of place. Nevertheless, if that is the case, what the meaning could be of affirming that the evils of the city would not cease before philosophers govern it if philosophers are so meaningless for political life of the polis, questions Adeimantus. (*487e*)

Plato responds through an image given by Socrates known as the allegory of the ship. Succinctly, the argument proposes to consider a ship controlled not by the one who has learned the art of sailing but by those who take it by force. In such a ship one who has learned the art of sailing would be considered useless or dangerous as the philosopher is in the polis. But such a ship is not a true ship as a polis where those who govern haven’t learned the art of governing is not a true polis.

This image of the philosophers related to their ruling or governing the polis is presented more thoroughly later in *the Republic* from the Allegory of the Cave on. It is far away from the position traced by Socrates of himself in the *Apology* and other early *dialogues*, not only in terms of their political function but also in their relationship to knowledge and to education. While in *The Republic VII* there is a whole set of subjects (geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and dialectics) the philosopher needs to learn, in the *Apology* if the philosopher is the wisest man in Athens it is because he is precisely the only who does not know and does not believe he knows. More, in the *Apology* the philosopher is a master (*didáskalos*) of no one, differently from *The Republic* where he must educate all the others. Finally, in the *Apology* Socrates affirms that if he had entered political life, if he had brought philosophy to politics, he would have died much earlier (*Apology 31d*). So that, it seems, the relationship to knowledge, to education and to politics are mostly opposite in the *Apology* and in *The Republic*. While in the former,
Socrates, the philosopher is a *paradeigma* both because he does not presumes to know or to teach and he has maintained isolated from the political life of Athens, from the Council and the Assembly, in the latter there is a deep curriculum the philosopher needs to know in order to be the true ruler and educator of the polis. Socrates himself who seems so happy practicing philosophy outside Athens’ political institutional life to question his fellow citizens about their way of life, would be forced by the designers of the polis of the *Republic* to enter the institutions and take them out from the cave to put into practice the educational and political dimension of philosophy.

*Childhood and philosophy in the Apology*

Let’s go back to the *Apology*. At the beginning, Socrates, the philosopher child presents himself in his prosecution in court as completely foreigner to the lexicon of the place (*atechnos oun xenos echo tes enthade lexeos*, 17e). As such, he tells the judges that he will speak using the same words as he is used to doing in the present moment, in the public space of the *agora*. He therefore requests to be allowed to speak in the voice (*phone*) with which he was raised, as if he truly were a foreigner. Socrates would speak in a philosopher’s voice— the voice of childhood. The democratic Athenian judges will not listen to a foreigner, a child and a philosopher. There is no common language between Socrates and the judges. There is no dialogue between childhood and the polis, no dialogue between Socrates philosophy and Athens’ politics. Socrates speaks the true word of childhood; his judges, the false word of rhetoric. The *polis* is insensitive to the childlike language of the philosopher. It cannot seriously listen to childhood. Socrates looks ridiculous in court, like a child playing.

The issue is crucial for Plato’s battle on the education of childhood. Socrates’ childlike position as traced in the *Apology* in relation to knowledge is politically
dangerous or inutile. What for Socrates is the truest relationship to knowledge – not knowing but that one does not know – is childish, playful, not serious enough for the political challenges of the polis, in order to build a fair, beauty and good order. Socrates image of a philosopher as described in the *Apology* is impotent in Plato’s perspective for philosophers who need to change the *polis*. Socrates is too close to childhood, too open to play, to not knowing, to questioning, to not teaching… in his philosophical life for the political projection that Plato puts in philosophy. That’s why, in Plato’s *Republic*, when philosophy is included at an older age in the curriculum of politicians aspiring to govern the *polis*, it is completely different, so certain of what needs to be know and in the educational projection of this knowledge. This is also why Plato considers that children need to be excluded from dialectics, because they take it as playing with contradictions and not as a path to inquiry the truth (*The Republic* VII, 539a-c).

Some notes on the educational relationship between childhood and philosophy

If we are interested in this debate it is not because of itself or for historical reasons but because of the way it might help us to think our present. The battle between Plato and Socrates is a battle not only between two notions of philosophy but also between two politics of educating childhood in the name of philosophy. Two different conceptions of philosophy are on stage: philosophy as a questioning life and philosophy as an intellectual task related to a positive knowledge or truth. The latter promises the conversion of childhood into adulthood through the educational projection of philosophy. This path takes childhood as an object of education, in order to transform what it is in what it ought to be, the children we have in the adults we need in the future
for the political utopia as drawn by the adults of the present, the philosopher, the legislator, Plato himself.

The former takes childhood as subject of its own education, as a true voice that educates and whose educating power has philosophy as one of its names. In this form, childhood is not educated but educates. This is Socrates position at the Apology, questioned in many of the following dialogues. At the Apology, both childhood and philosophy present themselves in a disruptive, irreverent and uncontrolled form of exercising the power to speak, to think and live a different life from the institutionalized one in the public space of the agora. Therefore, two conflicting ways of practicing the political power of philosophy are opposed. It is not philosophy outside the agora against the inner politics practiced in the institutions. It is the politics of a childlike philosopher against the politics of the adult citizens in the same space of the agora.

In its Socratic, childlike and foreign ways of expressing itself in a community, philosophy shows the value of searching for an unknown knowledge above all other things, of questioning and unlearning what we know and affirming the value of not knowing, of attempting to respond, with all of its forces, to those questions which cannot be answered. This practice of philosophy is not knowledge but a relationship to knowledge. It does not promises the paths to knowledge but a way of feeding the value of not knowing. It also does not teach but provokes learning. It does not take life as an object of reflection, it is a way of living.

Understood in this way, philosophy is useless for constructing a predefined political-pedagogical project. In Plato's view, it is not only useless but dangerous. Because of this, it must be purged from the polis, because it leaves no good place for a curriculum, for a development of learning, which can make the polis more beautiful, good and fair, as Plato claims it ought to be. Ironically and symbolically Plato might not
disagree so much as he personally did in the ways the judges reacted against his beloved master. This is the paradox of Socrates, of his pharmakon (drug, medicine, poison) creation: in order to live, his followers also need to kill his master; in order to grow, philosophy might need to charge against the image by which it was born. Socrates giving birth to philosophy born his own pharmakon.

Contemporary creator of philosophy for children, Matthew Lipman remembers the passage where Callicles critizes Socrates in the foreseen scene of the Gorgias (Philosophy Goes to School, 1988, p. 3). He does so to reivindicate Callicles against subsequent commentaries on Plato who showed that Callicles was wrong, and that philosophy is for adults only. Lipman puts himself in Callicles side to show how philosophy could be practiced in childhood. He also reivindicates for philosophy for children a Socratic inspiration as something that is done and not learn or applied, as shown in his conversations with the young (ibid., p. 11-2). So that, we could say that in his conception of philosophy, Lipman is much more close to Socrates than to Plato: philosophy is something practiced, a form of life and not a path to true knowledge. As Lipman argues it convincingly, Socrates stress in philosophical inquiry as following the reasoning wherever it leads should not be confused with the mere technique of dialectical argumentation that Plato urges to be excluded from the young in The Republic VII in the sake of the reputation of philosophy.

Lipman concludes that to inhibit children to the realm of philosophy from Plato´s critique in The Republic is a mistake: what Plato bans from children is not philosophy itself but its reduction to eristic argumentation (Lipman, op. cit., p. 15). Socrates inspires Lipman´s model of a philosophical community of inquiry in which he wants to convert every classroom. Concerning the political dimension of the practice is philosophy my perception is that Lipman takes sides with Plato against Socrates:
Lipman has already an utopia: a reasonable, democratic world that the practice of philosophy by children will help to build and the introduction of philosophy in schools is a path towards transforming children in the reasonable and democratic citizens that such a world calls for. And this is partly because Lipman has introduced as structure of the practice of philosophy the community of philosophical inquiry which has in itself a democratic agenda as a framework.

When Socrates begins his speech at the *Apology* he argues that, even though his prosecutors haven’t said anything true, they spoke so convincingly that he almost forgot of himself. Maybe all those of us lovers of philosophy and childhood might give some attention to this childlike voice. Maybe we might consider once again what kind of space, position and forces we affirm in relation to childhood while educating children through philosophy. Maybe we might consider how sensitive to a politics of childhood our philosophy is.