Plato and the Computer

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On the Love of Wisdom in an Age of Information

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Philosophy?

Looking out at the faces in philosophy lecture hall, I often detect widespread bewilderment. Some look forlorn, others worried. Mostly I spot the grimace worn by those who have unwillingly entered some twilight zone of experience. It says: How in God's name did I get in here? It is often accompanied by an equally expressive look: How can I get out?

Far from being surprised or distressed, I am in many ways sympathetic. Philosophy, after all, has a bad reputation. Though it was once considered the core and crown of education, today its status is diminished, and it would not be too much to say that our age has a prejudice against it. Part of this is philosophy's own fault as many of its branches have, over time, been reduced to dry and twisted conceptual exercises. But does philosophy really merit our disdain?

Sometimes I try to remedy initial aversion by pointing out that the word "philosophy" comes from the Greek philos ("lover") plus sophia ("wisdom"). It doesn't seem to help. For though few have trouble thinking of
themselves as lovers, many wonder what "wisdom" is, suspecting it to be a fanciful rendition of a less stuffy word like "knowledge," and assuming, moreover, that it is acquired in the same way knowledge is thought to be acquired: by cramming one's head full of information. Now cramming is not an easy thing to love even when the prospective information is perceived to be useful, career-related and potentially lucrative. But when the student realizes that the information to be "crammed" in philosophy class is composed of the abstract ravings of ancient geezers, love is all but lost. Wisdom, it is decided, is not worth wooing.

But are wisdom and knowledge really the same thing? And is wisdom truly obtained in the way all other "knowledges" are thought to be obtained, that is, through the successful digestion of massive quantities of information?

Computers and the Age of Information

These questions are particularly apt right now because we happen to be in an age dominated by a single powerful tool—the computer. Computers seem to be everywhere and doing everything, on everyone's lips and at everyone's fingertips. A glance at my bookshelves reveals titles and subtitles with increasingly familiar rings: Western Culture in the Computer Age (Bolter, 1984), Computers and the Human Spirit (Turkle, 1984) and Computer Power and Human Reason (Weizenbaum, 1976). This is a mere hint of what one would find at the local bookstore, where entire sections are devoted to the theory and practice of the computer and to speculations on its cultural effects. And this is not to mention the spate of computer magazines occupying the shelves.

The computer has been touted as God's gift to primary education, as a new form of human intelligence, and as the key to civilization's progress. We will not assess these claims here. Perhaps it is enough to say that anything heralded as a panacea should arouse our skepticism. Instead let us ask more basic questions. What is all the hubbub about? What, after all, do computers do?

Computers are often described as information processing machines. A human being can put information—prodigious amounts of it—into a computer in the form of tiny electrical signals. This information can then be stored for later recall, or else combined, sorted, shifted, analyzed, played with, in short processed, in a multitude of ways and with remarkable speed. And process we do! From the labyrinthine corridors of government bureaucracy to businesses large and small, from workplace to home, from architect to accountant, from graphic artist to engineer, from oldster to youngster, we are locked in hotwire embrace with this latest and greatest technological tool. Combine the computer's omnipresence with its chief function and
you understand at once why chroniclers have unhesitatingly dubbed our era the Age of Information.

"Information" has thus become something of a buzzword. A local radio station advertises itself with an impressive male voice referring to its programs as "The Power of Information." The implication is that keeping tuned will fatten one's brain with information and thus increase one's intellectual girth. Similarly, I remember a program on public television some time ago, the first of a series on home computers. The host smiled out at his faceless audience and pointed to a you-know-what. "This," he said, "is a computer! Through it, a tremendous amount of information can become available to you!" Presumably audience reaction was to have been some mental equivalent of Pavlovian salivation, anticipating all the delicious information (and power!) that could be had by going out and getting one of these magnificent machines.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with information as such. As tots we cannot learn to tie our shoes until someone gives us information—by telling or showing—how it's done. When we need to know about the food we put in our bodies, good information is crucial to our survival and well-being. If we need to fix our plumbing, books can give us information that, when mastered, becomes invaluable. And so on for innumerable other aspects of life. Education does proceed largely on the conveyance of information. But to mistake this for the entire story is, I believe, a serious mistake. To think that the accumulation of information is all there is to education, or that the mastery of information is the ultimate function of human intelligence, is to sell ourselves tragically short.

Before we see why, let us be clear about what is at stake here: it is nothing less than our fundamental assumptions about human nature. For what we affirm about the end of human intelligence we shall also affirm about our deepest human identity. We need but glance at history to see the road we're on. At the outset of the Industrial Revolution, Western man made great strides in harnessing the power of nature by building ingenious machines like the steam engine. So compellingly intricate were these new machines, so impressive the way in which their many separate parts worked together as a total system, that it was but a step to see them as metaphors for human beings. A French philosopher named La Mettrie stated what many were already thinking. In a work called Man a Machine (L'homme machine, 1748), La Mettrie wrote:

The human body is a machine which winds its own springs... Since all the faculties of the soul depend to such a degree on the proper organization of the brain and of the whole body... the soul is clearly an enlightened machine... Let us conclude boldly that man is a machine... (Johnson, 1981: 47, 51, 53).
Other thinkers, as disdainful of what they felt to be the empty metaphysical speculations of earlier philosophers as they were impressed by the new technology, were eager to assert along with La Mettrie that the human being was a soulless, though exquisitely complex, machine.

With the arrival of the machine called the computer this line of thought has taken on juggernautical force. When it was seen that the electrochemical functioning of the human brain synapses was uncannily similar to the on-off electrical pulsing by which the computer circuit runs, it was tempting to conclude that the human being was nothing more (and nothing less) than a "biocomputer," a sophisticated information processing machine that takes in "input"—physical food as well as mental "food" or information—and processes it to the best of its ability toward the optimum of its survival.

The current debate over whether or not the full range of human intelligence might one day be manifested by a computer is one of the liveliest in philosophy today. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most complex. I won't enter it directly here, but instead will keep my promise to say why I believe it is wrong to equate mastery of information with that peculiar human excellence we call wisdom. In so doing, I will be nothing more than a diligent student of Plato. For though Plato and his heirs might well agree that human beings are to a great degree information processors, they would insist that our deepest humanity comes to birth only as we become wisdom-seekers. We are back again at our old question: What is wisdom?

Plato on Wisdom

A movie I once saw called the Seven Faces of Dr. Lao had a moment in which an old Chinese sage asks a little boy: "My son, what do you think wisdom is?"

Hesitantly, respectfully, the youngster replies: "I don't know, sir."

Smiling his approval the sage responds: "That is a wise answer!"

Plato's teacher, Socrates, would have liked that. In his own famous Apology (defense) before the citizens of Athens, Socrates says that his only claim to be wiser than other men rests on his awareness of how much he does not know. Intellectual humility is certainly one aspect of Platonic wisdom.

But the best path to Plato's notion of wisdom unfolds through an examination of wisdom's opposites: ignorance (amathia) and folly (aphro-sune). Nowhere does Plato express himself more forcefully on human ignorance than in a single vivid passage in his dialogue, Laws.¹ Twice in a short span of lines Plato himself emphasizes that he is speaking of the greatest ignorance or unwisdom to be found in the human condition:
Now what type of ignorance may fairly be called the greatest... I am on the point of describing... That of a man who hates, not loves, what his judgment pronounces to be noble or good, while he loves and enjoys what he judges vile and wicked. It is this dissonance that I call the worst ignorance and also the greatest, since it affects a large part of the soul... and in one individual man when fair discourse is present in the soul, but produces no effect, but rather the very contrary. These are the types of ignorance I would pronounce the gravest dissonances. (Laws, 689b; cf. Republic 352a and Phaedrus 577c.)

Notice that Plato does not link ignorance with a lack of facts or absence of schooling but rather, and quite strikingly, with inner conflict. Ignorance here is linked to a lack of concord (diaphonia) between what one knows or feels to be true, noble and good, and what one actually winds up doing. It is not a deficiency of information in this or that category of life but an imbalanced condition of one’s whole being. When a person is at cross-purposes with himself he is, in Plato’s language, in a state of ignorance. Plato does not use this term derisively or disdainfully. He simply asserts that this unfortunate ignorance pervades the human condition. 2

If ignorance is inner conflict, we might deduce that for Plato wisdom lies in inner concord, in a harmony between our intuition of what is good and noble and our actual activities. And we would be right. Plato often speaks about wisdom as the overcoming of discord and contrariety in the soul. He describes wisdom as a state of being “in unison” within oneself (Phaedrus, 443e), and the wise one as possessed of harmony (harmonía), proportion of balance (metriotes), temperance (sophrosune), and friendliness (philía). (Cf. Republic, 443d, 490d; philebus, 64e-65d; and Laws, 628c, 693c.) Other virtues such as compassion (Republic, 516c) could be added to fill out the definition of wisdom. What is crucially important to see, however, is that for Plato “wisdom” is not solely cognitive. Platonic “wisdom” points to an overall condition of one’s being and the expression of that state of being in action. The “proof” of wisdom, in short, is all-around virtue, the sort of virtue that cannot be the result of occasional victories of will power over inclination but only a natural outflow of one’s inner balanced condition. The crucial chariot analogy of the Phaedrus, in which the soul is likened to a charioteer who must maintain a cooperative harmony between reason, on the one hand, and emotions, on the other, underscores Plato’s contention that a balance between logos and eros, and not some tyranny of reason, is the ideal.

I’m stressing this understanding of Platonic wisdom because an unwary reader of Plato might get the mistaken impression that he is all “head,” no “heart,” and despises the body to boot. It is true that Plato honors rational-
ity above all other human faculties and also true that the attempt to know Form, a discipline crucial to Platonic philosophy, appears at first to be an exclusively cognitive activity. Moreover, it is true that Plato and Socrates call philosophy the "practice of dying" because dying is understood as the separation of body and soul and that such a separation, in life, is precisely what philosophy attempts. The separation spoken of here, however, is not absolute, but relative, and for the purpose of finding a proper interrelationship between the various facets of human nature. A human being who somehow severed the relationship between the mind and the emotions would be a monstrosity in Plato's eyes. But the opposite extreme would be equally monstrous: those ruled by the demands of the body or whose ability to think clearly is regularly devastated by storms of emotion are clearly those who are likely to be destructive to themselves as well as to others. Socrates is Plato's hero not because he has smart brains but because he is an eminently balanced person from whom virtue naturally irradiates.

**Techne and Sophia**

We are now in a position to understand Plato's distinction between the pursuit of wisdom (sophia) and the cultivation of techne, Plato's general term for the art of making things. Briefly put, techne, from which we derive our word "technology," is the knowledge of how to do whereas sophia is the knowledge of how to be. Techne is transmitted through information, the learning and storing up of facts about the world and connection between these facts, whereas wisdom is not transmitted at all, but brought to birth in some other way. Just how we will see later on.

To Plato, techne without sophia is of dubious value. Technical knowledge is no guarantee against ignorance of the worst sort. We can check this against our own experience. Have we not known creative people who yet remain fools; brainy people with a marvelous capacity for mastering information who yet remain unable to balance their lives or engage in satisfying, nondestructive relationships; brilliant people who do not know their limits or how to deal with impulses, or who, despite their technical brilliance, seem confused about how properly to spend the limited life-energy that is at their disposal? Such people are often found regretting things they've done, haunted by a sense of waste.

Plato's rejection of the sufficiency of technical knowledge is evident when he notes in the Republic that the city is full of "many and manifold knowledges or sciences" (428c), none of which is effective in achieving political order, the sine qua non of human well-being. He mocks those who are information gluttons, always eager to "hear some new thing," and "farming out their ears to listen to every chorus in the land" (475d). In the Cave parable, too, Plato ridicules those who excel in techne while neglect-
ing the pursuit of sophia. They are Cave celebrities, “experts” who can authoritatively expound on the nature and function of the flickering shadows on the Cave’s walls. They win prizes for “seeing the passing things (i.e., things with no enduring reality) most sharply and remembering best which of them used to come before and which after and which together and from these were able to predict what was going to come” (Republic 516d).

Again we must remind ourselves that Plato is not condemning techne as inherently worthless. On the contrary, it is good to gain skills, know facts, know how to make a good speech, use a hammer and add numbers. Studying the arts and sciences can provide a good basis for the pursuit of wisdom, but it does not address what is most essential in human beings. Without wisdom a human being is half-finished. Technical competence and financial success can swell the head to such proportions that that illusory fullness causes one to reject wisdom as a useless pursuit without even knowing what it is. This is the “double ignorance” that Socrates decries in the Apology (29b).

The Path to Wisdom: Remembering

“How fine it would be,” says Plato, “if wisdom were the sort of thing that could flow out of the one of us who is fuller into him who is emptier, by our mere contact with each other, as water will flow through wool from the fuller cup into the emptier” (Symposium, 175d). Alas, it cannot be transmitted in this way. Nor can it be taught in the way a teacher normally teaches a student. In the Republic, Plato insists again that wisdom cannot be put into heads like water into an empty jar (518c). And since what goes by the names of “teaching” and “learning” is a process whereby someone who has information or skill conveys it to someone who does not, Plato claims that, so far as wisdom is concerned, there are neither teachers nor learners! How then does one “get” wisdom?

Let us look more closely at what we might call the “empty jar” model of the mind. We may indeed be empty of the various informations and knowledges of life such as how to fix a carburetor, make a pie crust or determine the circumference of a circle. But wisdom—and here is Plato’s bedrock assertion—is already a part of our nature, knitted into the very fabric of our humanity. It is our natural birthright, something of which we all have a “store” within. Thus, Plato describes his own special notion of education in the following way:

... not an art of producing vision in [the soul] but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should, an art of bringing this about. (Republic, 518d; emphasis mine).
The reason we are not wise is not because we are empty of it but because we have neglected to tap the well of wisdom that is ours. The pressures of growing from infants into socialized adults have shifted our attention too lopsidedly toward the external world, and as a result, our pipeline to the well of wisdom within us has gotten clogged from disuse. We have in some sense forgotten what we already have.

Therefore, we must REMEMBER. “True seeking and learning,” says Socrates in the *Meno*, “are in fact nothing but recollection” (81d). The path to wisdom, it turns out, is through remembering—remembering what is forgotten, re-collecting what has been scattered and dispersed. This is a most unusual doctrine! Can Plato mean what he says? Not only does he mean it, but we must realize that far from being some minor footnote to his philosophy, it is, rather, one of the keys to his entire teaching enunciated again and again in his most important dialogues. (Cf. *Meno*, 81d, 85c; *Phaedo*, 72e, 73b-c, 75e, 76a; *Republic*, 504c, 586e; *Phaedrus*, 248b, 249c; *Theaetetus*, 198d-e; *Lysis*, 222a; *Timaeus*, 90c.)

Nor has this idea died with Plato. The widely respected philosopher and educator, Jacob Needleman, has written as recently as 1982 that “[T]he function of philosophy in human life is to help man remember. *It has no other task*” (Needleman, 1982:4. Emphasis his).

Remember what? To ask this question is to reach down toward the very root of this teaching and to find there an assumption shared by Plato and Needleman and many others who came between. It goes something like this: When we are born we come out of our mother’s womb. But in a deeper sense, we arise out of the womb of the universe. We are thus deeply akin to it. Just as our mother is profoundly present in us (through genetic inheritance) so too is the structure of timeless Universal Being present in us. Its truths are “known” to us, written into us and closer to us than our jugular vein. The *times* we are born into will be quite new and unknown to us. But deep within us resides the knowledge of abiding realities, the essential truths of Being.

For most of us, these natural belongings of the soul remain hidden and unreclaimed. Recollection is the key to that reclaiming. No one can tell us about the truths of Being, at least not effectively. Each of us must remember those truths for him or herself. Only when one personally experiences their resonance within can they be effective. Secondhand reports will not do.

We now see why philosophy a la Plato is so different from other fields of study whose *modus operandi* is the transmission of new information. For recollection, the heart of philosophy, proceeds not by accumulating information but by asking questions, by engaging in conversations about the deepest matters, and by having the patience to honor the questions as questions, resisting the grab for easy answers. Plato called this aspect of the
pursuit of wisdom *dialectic*, a give and take between “teacher” and “pupil,” an endless conversation about Being. Plato felt that it was such conversation, a continuous *dwelling with* the question (i.e., with no impatience to answer it) that catalyzes recollection, that stirs up that layer of ourselves where wisdom sleeps so that it can awaken and arise. This also helps us to see why Socrates resisted the designation “teacher,” often preferring to be thought of as a midwife. For in his own estimation, Socrates was not providing anything new but rather bringing to birth what was already there.

I am aware that I have just been speaking about wisdom as occurring through the “recollection of the truths of being” which probably sounds like a purely mental process of discovering certain ultimate pieces of information, whereas before I spoke of wisdom as inner concord. If this is confusing, two notes may help.

First, the process of recollection is itself partly dependent on inner concord. They work together in a deepening spiral: at some point, *some* inner concord motivates one to seek more deeply. Seeking more deeply (in dialectic) effects “remembering,” which then strengthens inner concord, which causes one to seek more deeply and so on.

Second, the “truths of being” which are remembered are not such truths as “water freezes below 32 degrees F.” or “Los Angeles is south of San Francisco,” or other truths which can be stated in propositional form. They are rather intuitions of the deepest dynamics of Reality, intuited by one’s whole being and expressed in *patterns of activity or modes of being* and not, at least not very effectively, in words. This brings us to our final note on Plato’s path to wisdom.

*The Beginning and End of Wisdom: Being Good*

Plato reserves a single, beautiful term for the deepest and highest Reality, for the Source of all Being, for the Pattern behind all patterns and for the fundamental Order of the Universe. He calls it *the Good*. Because each of us is a miniature Cosmos, mirroring the structure of the great Cosmos, the Good also dwells at our own deepest level, at our most fundamental being. Though it is within us, we do not know it, for, as ancient lore would have it, “like can only be known by like.” If we want to know the Good (which is our deepest nature) we must start by being good. Like a guitar string which when plucked will set another guitar string tuned precisely to the same pitch humming in resonance, so too must we be good if we are to be in vibrational alignment with the Good. To push the musical metaphor a step further: if the Good is the fundamental chord of universal Being, our lives must be in harmony with that chord if we wish to remember the Whole Music of Being. Only when our lives are morally tuned can the intellectual part of us hear—recollect—the deepest truths of Being.
Thus, Plato's path to wisdom has a profoundly ethical cast to it. The most precious lesson Plato learns from Socrates is that the pursuit of wisdom necessitates an *amendment of life, a transformation of character, an all-round moral effort*. Without such effort, the intellectual work involved in philosophy is about as effective as trying to ride off on a horse that is securely tied to a fence post. No amount of mental muscle, no quantity of information, can open the clogged pipeline to the Truth as much as goodness can. If we are to attain that wisdom in which we find our completeness, our inner life must have the same qualitative excellence as the object it seeks to know. Will I do Plato's profundity an injustice by encapsulating it?: In order to progress in wisdom, one must be good. The "gooder" one gets, the more one understands about Reality and the wiser one becomes. The wiser one becomes, the less effort it takes to be good. It's a package deal.  

*Epilogue: Re-Collecting Ourselves*

Hisotrians and journalists tell us that we live in an Age of Information. If they were asked to come up with a second-best label, might it not be "The Age of Stress"? Can you think of a complaint that falls from contemporary lips more frequently than feeling "stressed out" or "scattered"? We need not rely on supposition here. Not long ago TIME reported that "two-thirds of the office visits to U.S. family doctors are prompted by stress-related symptoms" (June 6, 1983; emphasis mine). Can there possibly be some connection between the avalanche of information the Computer Age sends roaring down upon us and the tension we feel? It would be tempting to offer philosophy as a cure for stress, but I will resist the temptation. The market is already oversaturated. Instead I will simply offer a bit of wordplay and a closing observation.

Plato tries to teach us that the aim of philosophy is to re-member what has been dis-membered, to re-collect what has been lost. Reality is such stuff as human beings are made of, and the more we re-collect the abiding realities of Being, the more we re-member the scattered pieces of ourselves. What all the king's horses and all the king's men could not do for Humpty-Dumpty, we can do for ourselves. The entire re-membering process must be complemented by an effort at virtue, and this effort is in its own way a putting-back-together of head and heart, of bringing con-cord (with heart) where there was dis-cord (without heart). Thus does philosophy earn its name as the love of wisdom, the love of inner unison.

Finally we might ask if there is anyone who can claim to be wise or who has completed the path to wisdom. Plato is quite clear on this point. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says: "To call [someone] wise . . . would I think be going too far; the epithet is proper only to a god. A name that would
fit . . . better, and have more seemliness would be ‘lover of wisdom’ . . . ’ (278d). The great Plato scholar, R. E. Cushman, underscores the point:

The philosopher must content himself with the status which his name implies, a lover of wisdom. He will cherish every intimation of the truth which he is privileged to receive; but his peculiar excellence or virtue will be found, not in the possession of wisdom, but in the earnest and undeterred pursuit of it. (Cushman, 1958:56)

For Plato the goal is not to get to the end of the Path, for it may have no end. The goal, rather, is simply to be on the Path. To love wisdom, to pursue it intently and earnestly—this is enough.
Notes

1 This is Plato's last dialogue, written at an advanced age. It is the only one in which Socrates neither speaks nor is referred to, thus suggesting unalloyed Plato. All quotations from Plato are taken from Hamilton and Cairns, 1961.

2 There are two other references to ignorance in the dialogues that are worthy of note. First, in the Apology (29b), Socrates describes ignorance as the state of those who, not having wisdom, nevertheless presume to know what it is, scorn it, and judge it not worth the pursuit. Second, in the Gorgias, a conversation between Socrates and Polus makes clear that, for all his frankness, Polus is misconstruing to himself his real and true convictions (474b). This fairly common human trait, lying to oneself, Plato would also call ignorance. Ignorance is thus to be identified with either a) inner discord or fragmentation, b) presumption, or c) self-deception. Here we shall focus almost exclusively on the first.

3 According to Protagoras in the Platonic dialogue of the same name (Protagoras, 321cj), techne was given to mankind by the mythic hero Prometheus. This seems to be a logical extension of the Prometheus myth which portrays the hero as having stolen fire from the gods. For nothing gave man more power to shape his environment, to bend raw materials to his needs, than mastery of the burning energy of fire. Of course, the gods punished Prometheus for his deed, chaining him to a high rock and allowing wild birds to feed eternally on his intestines. Fire, and by extension techne, the myth seems to say, are purchased at a heavy price; the ceaseless gnawing of human guts by the hunger for power and control.

4 Cf. Meno. The focus of this dialogue is the question: “Can arete (virtue) be taught?” The answer is no. It cannot be taught and it cannot be learned. Since wisdom are virtue are, for Plato, almost interchangeable (we will say more about this below) the same may be said of wisdom: it is unteachable and unlearnable in any ordinary sense.

5 J. Needleman has noticed that “[O]ur society has no place where the ultimate questions are honored as questions. Every institution and social form we have is devoted either to solving problems or providing pleasure” (Needleman, 1982: 75). If Needleman is right, it is little wonder why the psychologist C.G. Jung once said that modern man is in search of a soul.

6 Whence comes the strength to rise above deeply ingrained, unfulfilling habits and the will to remain steadfast in the good? For Plato and Aristotle it was the human will itself which had to rise above its own dispersion, with a little help perhaps from plain old luck. For Asian traditions it is the same, though luck in this case is called beneficial past karma. For Christians, however, the human will was thought too infirm to take on this project.
While not denying some role to the will, the Christian emphasis is preeminently upon divine grace. (Book VIII of Augustine's *Confessions* provides a textbook illustration of this.) The stress on the role of divine grace marks a major parting of the ways between Christianity and other spiritual paths regarding this perennial human problem.

Our interpretation of Plato's path to wisdom as a co-operation between the process of questioning/recollecting and the practice of moral excellence is given support in the person of Socrates, to whom we know Plato owed the inspiration for his life's work. For Socrates excels in two things: in "taking care for the soul's goodness" (i.e., living virtuously) and in questioning.
References


