

Longing for the Present; or, Teaching Without a Future

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Professor Blacker's talk provokes two anxieties in me, and I thank him for the provocation, since I think I deserve to be anxious about some of what I do as a teacher. Of course, Professor Blacker would not have made me anxious unless I found pretty convincing his description of how the longing for immortality is a motive in teaching. But he seems to find this longing a good thing, overall. I suppose I do too, but let me mention my two worries. My first anxiety is with the account of Platonic eros that defines one pathway to immortality. The second and more worrisome is with the conception of the value of philosophizing and of teaching that is presupposed by the connection with immortality.

My first anxiety concerns Professor Blacker's way of unifying the two pathways to immortality. He suggests that the Platonic and the Sophistic pathways suffer from different defects. The Platonist too easily loses human contact in an immersion in the timeless and the impersonal. The Sophist too easily succumbs to an egoistic delight in the mere influencing and manipulation of students. Professor Blacker's way out of these defects is to combine the two pathways, correcting the flaws of each with the strengths of the other. Thus the impersonal Platonist will see the human significance of his or her pursuits when supplemented by the Sophist's humane perspective, and the Sophist will temper his or her tendency to aim at influence as such by imbibing the Platonist's commitment to an independent truth that stands apart from any cult of personality.

I do not wish to deflect this discussion into a quarrel about Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, so let me just record here a disagreement with Professor Blacker and many other interpreters of Plato, including Gregory Vlastos and Martha Nussbaum. I believe Professor Blacker is misleading when he says that in Platonic eros, "the other may indeed share [our] end, but it is not to him or her that we look; Platonic teaching does not look *to* other human beings so much as it looks...*through* them." This interpretation claims that Plato directs us to love the good properties of an individual rather than that individual in himself. But the very vocabulary of the objection -- the substance/accident ontology behind the contrast between the individual *itself* and its mere *properties* -- betrays its Aristotelian presuppositions. No Platonist should accept the claim that I am one thing and my properties another. I *am*, for a Platonist, insofar as I imitate the forms; there is not some real me, the "me myself" that underlies this imitation. You may be an Aristotelian about what I am, but it is unfair to criticize Platonic love as *impersonal* simply because the Platonist offers a different account of what I am.

My second anxiety concerns equally Professor Blacker's Platonic pathway to immortality through contact with the timeless, and his Sophistic pathway through influence on succeeding generations. I wonder what philosophy and teaching have to be for this immortal longing to get any grip on us. Suppose all of music were live jazz improvisation: no composers to scribble things down, no microphones to record performances. Suppose in addition that the performers were so illiterate that they neither knew nor cared about what was spread abroad about them by those false poets, the critics. Being only performances and nothing else, such music and its making has no vehicle for immortality save its personal influence on the next generation, the apprentice performers who hang around and learn what they can from the masters. And perhaps the masters are happy enough to teach, or at least to set examples and give encouragement. Still, there is no need, when *this* master

gives affectionate support to *this* apprentice, that either has any further expectation of the apprentice then passing something down and down through the generations. It can be enough to love *this* young man or *this* young woman, to enjoy here and now seeing the youth blossom. We need not love the flower for the seeds it produces, after all.

Could this model of a life in music apply to that higher music that Socrates claimed to have always been practicing? Can we conceive of philosophizing as performance art, with the same evanescence as jazz or dance, rather than as a timeless or extra temporal activity? More generally, can we see our teaching as having its value in and during the particular fleeting engagement between teacher and student? Or must we find it in some product of that engagement, something more enduring than a flash of insight or a moment of connection? Suppose that we thought of our teaching as analogous to dancing with our students rather than as training them for something else, so that we were the recital and not just the practice. Oddly enough, this greater evanescence of value, this privileging of the moment makes me more anxious about what I do in the classroom, not less. There is less potential embarrassment, I suppose, in simply training students than in actually performing with them. But this conception, which locates the value of the teaching in the moment of performance, does not feed any longing for immortality. Even if Platonically we think we express some timeless standard in our dance with the students, or Sophistically think we influence them by the dancing, neither the timeless expression nor the continuing influence eclipses the primary value of the moment. I am not at all sure that dancing with my students would count as educating them, but I do not think it is easily reducible to *merely* entertaining them, either. Neither am I sure that I have either the interest or the talent that such aestheticizing of the classroom would require. But it would be a way to teach without indulging a longing for immortality.

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