

**David Carr**

University of Edinburgh

## The World is Too Much with Us: Apparent and Real Platonic Views of Intelligence and Knowledge for Education

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**Abstract:** From Plato onwards, notions of intelligence and ability – and of their implications for human flourishing – have had a chequered educational history. Following some attention to the influence of IQ theory on (arguably neo-Platonic) post-WW2 British selective state education, this paper proceeds to consider the more egalitarian educational reaction to such selection from the nineteen-sixties onwards. However, while appreciative of the individual and social benefits of such greater educational equality, the paper proceeds to ask whether the notions of individual growth, fulfilment and flourishing that they may seem to entail are entirely appropriate for the human world of tomorrow.

**Keywords:** intelligence, knowledge, Plato, selective vs egalitarian education

### Education and intelligence

The notion of intelligence has a prominent place and vexed history in modern western education and schooling. For much of the twentieth century, psychometry – the project of identifying and measuring intelligence – seems to have been a large preoccupation of academic psychologists and educationalists. However, the assumptions and purposes of psychometry were and are highly controversial (White 2006). This view

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largely held that human intelligence is innate or genetically determined and the prime purpose for which psychometric tests were employed was the sorting, grading and selection of human agents for various social, professional and educational purposes. Psychometry was therefore invariably linked to politically conservative ideology and sometimes to racism. Still, it was educationally influential throughout the twentieth century, not least on the British system of selective education that followed the post-WWII 1944 Education Act (Ministry of Education, 1944). One of the advisors to this 1944 legislation was the famous or notorious British psychometrician Sir Cyril Burt and it sanctioned a tiered system of secondary schooling based on selection – via something like IQ testing – at the age of eleven years. This provision was abandoned as inequitable and socially divisive in most of the United Kingdom in the nineteen-sixties and replaced by a common entry system of comprehensive schooling. The reputation of Professor Burt was also badly tarnished by the charge that he had faked his research on the innate and inherited nature of intelligence (see, for example: Ticker, 1994, 1997).

That said, this much-maligned system of early post-war selective education was far from ill-intentioned: on the contrary, it sought to promote wider educational access – guaranteed at least up to the minimum school-leaving age of fifteen years – to young people who had hitherto lacked such opportunity. However, it would also appear that the classical influence of Plato's *Republic* (1961) – which haunts much British educational theorising and policy making from the earliest nineteenth century reflections on popular education – looms large over the 1944 legislation. Although, as we shall shortly see, there is need for caution in interpreting Plato's *Republic*, the apparent theses of that work that society should be governed by the most intellectually able, that such ability is unequally distributed and that any system of public education or schooling ought therefore to be selectively organised or stratified in order to accommodate such intellectual difference, were fairly well reflected in the British 1944 Act.

In this regard, Plato's apparent proposals for the just ordering of the state could not be regarded – at least on the face of it – as egalitarian. For Plato, people should not be considered equal, precisely because they

are not equal. Of course, Plato held that it is not a bad or regrettable thing that people are not equal: on the contrary, the healthy functioning of human individual and social affairs and economy depends upon such inequality – more precisely on the division of labour necessary for a flourishing economy: Plato's idea of justice in individual soul or political state is that these are in good order insofar as their different constitutive parts are performing their proper functions. Thus, the sense in which Plato's view is less than egalitarian is that a complex (economic or other) functioning whole requires diverse properly operating constituents needing different and/or separate development. That said, such Platonic inequality was not inevitably a matter of unequal interpersonal or social regard, status or benefit: indeed, this is rather belied by Plato's insistence that his ruling guardians would not be those destined to enjoy the greatest material advantages or comforts.

Moreover, Plato would seem to have conceived the various qualities of intelligence or ability of different parts of the social whole more in terms of aptitude for different tasks. While post-WWII British selective schooling also aspired to something like this notion of differentiation by aptitude and ability, it was also regrettably infected by psychometric commitment to the measurement of such capacities by means of a common IQ-based test at the age of eleven years. Thus, fatally compromised by a psychometric ideology that generally correlated high and low IQ scores with greater and inferior human worth, the 1944 provision pre-determined the social, educational and vocational destinies of a generation of young people from an early age on the basis of a single simple assessment snapshot, making no allowances for differences of socio-cultural background, individual affective state on the test day and/or longer-term potential for late development.

Moreover, even if Plato might be disassociated from the evils of modern psychometry, any attempt to build a system of education or schooling according to the blueprint of Plato's *Republic* could not nowadays be considered other than educationally, if not also socially, inequitable, unjust and ill-considered. The basic problem here – largely in line with Plato's own view that justice is best done when all citizens properly perform their

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diverse socio-economic functions – is that education is effectively conceived in instrumental or utilitarian terms. Indeed, the main mistake is that to which public educational policy-making has ever been prone: precisely of supposing that the sole purpose of education is to cultivate or promote the kinds of knowledge and skill that would fit citizens for this or that economically productive role. In line with this, the 1944 British legislation largely assumed that social and educational justice was best served when all citizens were enabled – on the basis of a simple aptitude test – to find their professional, vocational or other employment feet as doctors, lawyers, nurses, salespersons, accountants, electricians, typists, hairdressers, joiners, plumbers or builders.

While the so-called secondary (as opposed to ‘grammar’) schools to which eleven-plus failures were consigned did not entirely abandon the task of instruction of such pupils in elementary knowledge of English, mathematics, history, geography and natural science, such instruction was elementary, much tailored to such utilitarian ends as competent literacy and numeracy and inevitably lacked the depth and specialization available to those admitted to the academic grammar schools. One could not in secondary schools study classical languages (as required for entry to professions) or sciences to any serious level of professional practice and the mandatory school leaving age was fifteen (though later raised to sixteen) years. Hence, whereas the grammar school curriculum was often a prelude (following advanced sixth form studies) to university, or at least (for earlier leavers) to ‘white collar’ clerical work, exit from secondary schools inevitably meant transfer to unskilled labour, trade apprenticeships or further ‘blue collar’ vocational training. In sum, the 1944 Act effectively reduced the education of compulsory state schooling to *vocational training*.

### **Intelligence, reason and knowledge**

The prime concern of this paper is not with ideological controversies regarding the pros and cons of selective versus common schooling, or even with the issue of intelligence testing: rather, it lies with a more general

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issue of the relationship of human intelligence to such other human qualities as reason, knowledge and wisdom and with the moral, spiritual and educational implications of such qualities for any future world. In this light, while the psychometric intelligence of post-war British legislation was an unhelpful artifice, it evidently has a pre-theoretical analogue in ordinary Anglophone usage whereby we commonly describe some species or specimens as more intelligent than others. Thus, we speak of one animal species (dolphins) as being generally more intelligent than another (sardines), or of this specific sheepdog as more intelligent than that one. What we generally mean by this is that the creatures in question can learn or perform better than others in much the same circumstances. In more common usage, we speak of this dog, dolphin or child as being cleverer or 'brighter' than that one.

Still, such questions as 'how intelligent is A?' or 'Is A cleverer than B?' evidently cry out for greater specification via the further qualification: 'at, or with respect to, what?' – to which the apparent psychometric response of 'at passing intelligence tests' seems less than helpful. However, in the case of arachnids, one spider might be judged cleverer at spinning webs; in the case of sheepdogs, Rover might be smarter than Spot at herding sheep; in the case of plumbers, Jim might be handier than John at changing washers. Moreover, in the human case, matters are further complicated by the fact that being cleverer than another person at something usually involves reason, knowledge and/or rational skills, which opens the possibility of distinctions unavailable in the case of sub-rational brutes. Thus, we might say that while John has greater knowledge of plumbing than Jim, Jim is still cleverer at this (faster, tidier, more dexterous) than John; whereas it would make little sense to say that this spider has more knowledge of web-spinning, but that one is better at it. Such distinctions also allow us to say that whereas Jim is brighter or cleverer at the skills of plumbing than John, the latter is smarter than the former at evading VAT.

At all events, being cleverer or more intelligent is not at all the same – though it is not infrequently confused with – being more rational, reasonable or knowledgeable. Indeed, it might seem that this confusion

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is precisely that identified by the 'multiple intelligence' response to psychometry of Howard Gardner (2006) and others. But this is not obviously so: for while the psychometricians seem to have confused or subordinated reason, knowledge and other rational ability to more brute intelligence, the multiple intelligence movement no less unhelpfully reduces cleverness to reason, knowledge or other ability. But while human agents certainly have different rational or other abilities, we may yet need to compare or contrast individual competence in such abilities: hence, whereas A and B are both mathematically gifted (or have 'mathematical intelligence'), A is still cleverer at maths than B. To distinguish between different human abilities is not therefore to offer an alternative account of intelligence, but merely another way of confusing the two. Moreover, while we can hardly talk at all of non-human animals – intelligent or otherwise – in terms of reason, rationality or knowledge, we readily speak without contradiction of human agents as intelligent but not very rational; or as knowledgeable but not very clever; and so forth.

Nevertheless, human intelligence is still apt to be revealed in this or that specifiable ability or activity – and, as such, is not well captured by psychometric tests purporting to measure some innate all-purpose form of this endowment. Indeed, while psychometricians may correctly suppose that the intelligence needed for success in some distinctively human activities (such as mathematics, music or chess) is innate or genetically inherited, experience shows that the musical progress of even unmusical pupils may (if not actually hearing impaired) be improved by coaching or training, and it is notorious that performance on the IQ-related tests of eleven-plus examination was often much enhanced by private tuition. More significantly, it does not follow that because children are not conspicuously gifted or able at mathematics or music, they should be *denied access* to such skills or activities: to suppose this would be to miss the entire point of human education which is precisely to equip agents with valuable knowledge, capacities or skills that they did not previously possess. As one latter-day British philosopher of education shrewdly put the point: the abilities that education serves to promote are 'not a given thing but a goal' (White, 1971: 275).

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### **Liberalism, equal opportunity and liberal education**

More in tune with such insights, a rather different educational perspective from that of the 1944 legislation virtually transformed British education around the sixth decade of the twentieth century. To be sure, the nineteen-sixties are now remembered as a landmark of cultural revolution, not least in the spheres of popular music and other arts – though such novelties were more than likely particular spin-offs or side-effects of a general shift of western sensibility in an era of new post-war prosperity and affluence, as well as of some reaction to inherited social divisions and hierarchies. But the more optimistic, egalitarian and opportunistic mood of nineteen-sixties Britain was also undoubtedly reflected in significant changes and reforms to elementary and higher education. Thus, whereas the major development at the level of higher education involved wider extension of college and university access to students who had not formerly enjoyed this, the major change to (most UK) elementary schooling was the abolition of eleven-plus examination in favour of common entry to a comprehensive system of secondary schooling.

However, the new comprehensive system of schooling required a new common programme of study to replace the divided curricular fare of the old selective system. In this regard, curriculum policy-makers and planners drew much inspiration from significant modern revival of a broadly liberal conception of education owing much to such nineteenth century philosophers and theorists as Matthew Arnold and John Henry Newman. In this spirit, the new British liberal educationalists distinguished vocational training more clearly from education as concerned with the development of human reason and rational agency through the acquisition of intrinsically worthwhile human knowledge and understanding (see mainly, for this perspective: Peters, 1966; Hirst and Peters, 1970). On this view, some broader understanding of the world through such traditional school studies as history, geography, science (in its diverse forms), mathematics, art and literature were to be considered of real human significance as crucially formative of mind and agency. In the words of the nineteenth century spokesman for liberal education, Matthew Arnold,

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education should be conceived as initiation into human culture conceived as 'the best that has been said and thought in the world' (Arnold, 1967: 150). In a new British climate of comprehensive schooling, it was argued that such liberal education should be available to all. On this view, it should not be assumed that because Sean was destined for a career as an auto-mechanic he could not be interested in ancient history, or because Sharon was later to be a hairdresser, she could not enjoy poetry.

Still, while the new curriculum initiatives of late twentieth and early twenty-first century British educational policy-making did reflect the more egalitarian drift of such liberal educational thinking, these were (as ever) devised by politicians and civil servants and not by educational philosophers and theorists. In consequence, even in locations where the influence of academic educational philosophy on curriculum policy was more apparent (notably in Scotland), the key liberal idea of education for its own sake was hard to discern in UK national curricular policies and the content of school syllabuses remained more evidently utilitarian. Hence, while educational opportunities were undoubtedly extended by comprehensive schooling, the prime educational concern lay much as before with the overall enhancement of local economic interests rather than with development for its own intrinsic worth of the minds or souls of individual citizens. In this light, better or more knowledgeable school or college graduates might be expected to contribute more effectively to national economic growth. Sean might not be a better auto-mechanic for any interest in ancient history, but he might be so for more theoretical instruction in science.

In this light, whether the more egalitarian or inclusive policies of recent educational legislation have served to promote the classic liberal educational ideal of appreciation of knowledge and understanding for its own sake among British comprehensive school pupils may be doubted. All the same, it may be that some comprehensive school Sharons of hairdressing destiny have been placed in a position to appreciate poetry as would not have been open to the eleven-plus failing Sharons of former secondary schools. Indeed, it may also be that some comprehensive Sharons have gone on to be English literature graduates or even best-selling novelists



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as their mothers could hardly have dreamed of doing. All the same, we might ask whether these more inclusive, enabling or liberating latter-day educational developments have engendered a society of better citizens for a better world than the more socially divided or less equal British society that preceded it. Well, insofar as it has been more enabling for many than ever before, it would be churlish to deny that this as a social gain and good. By the same token, such enablement seems also to have engendered – as its advocates had indeed hoped – a more ambitious, enterprising and affluent society. Is this, then, not also to the good?

### **Problems with liberalism and competitive intelligence**

In response to this question, one might first note that the political liberalism (as typified by Rawls, 2005), with which ideas of liberal democracy and liberal education are closely associated, has often been castigated – particularly by recent communitarian philosophers (for example, MacIntyre, 1981; Taylor, 1992; Sandel, 1998) – as the source of a peculiarly modern malaise of self-focused and divisive individualism: on this view, liberalism encourages us to assert our own rights above those of others and to look after number one at others' expense. However, this might not seem a very well-aimed criticism. Of course, if it means that individual agents are at liberty to make their own moral and other choices and decisions in the light of personal conscience, then that seems true enough. But liberalism also insists that individual choices should be morally principled and neither of the two ethical theories with which it is closely associated is in the least individualistic: utilitarianism is a highly demanding ethics of other-regard in which individual agents are at all times required to put the interests and welfare of others before their own; and (Kantian or other) deontology explicitly emphasises the primacy of other-regarding duties over rights and insists (in the spirit of the Christian 'golden rule') that we cannot require of others anything that they might not require of us in return. Both deontology and utilitarianism are ethics of strong social conscience and other-regard. Moreover, the associated idea of liberal

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education advocates some distance from personal concerns in favour of rational commitment to objective knowledge and truth as well as principled moral regard for others.

That said, to whatever extent the communitarian critique of liberalism misfires at the level of ethical theory, there may be more to it in actual practice. While a broadly liberal outlook has yielded clear benefits in terms of greater social justice, equality and opportunities for many previously denied these, it has also fostered other more morally ambivalent human ideals, attitudes and expectations. In practice, liberalism does endorse personal ambition of an overtly competitive and accumulative kind: indeed, at least since its first clear seventeenth century formulation, it has been linked to a free enterprise economy that encourages individual acquisition often at the expense of others, and the worst excesses of free market capitalism have long been the target of Marxist and other radical social and economic critiques. On the other hand, insofar as latter-day liberal theorising has appreciated and sought to safeguard against the worst effects of such enterprise, one may also hesitate to reject the undoubted moral, social and economic benefits of liberal democracy and economy as such.

Still, it seems much the same qualities of competitive and opportunist liberal initiative and enterprise, encouraged among the young in our homes and schools – albeit not necessarily expressed in incentives to what the poet calls ‘getting and spending’ (Wordsworth in Nichol-Smith, 1921: 146 – that fuel more excessive and ruthless forms of adult competition. In the apparently laudable spirit of the Gospel parable of the talents, caring parents encourage their children to develop this or that academic, technical, artistic or sporting ability or potential with a view not only to becoming good at this or that, but to outshining or distinguishing themselves as better than others. In this manner, the more widely enabling liberal or egalitarian climate of latter-day schooling differs little from its more exclusive and selective predecessor – apart from the fact that more young people than ever are driven by such competitive goals: ambition and competition have been democratised. But what is wrong with such desire for achievement or with good parental incentive

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towards success? Do we not rightly regard people as good parents insofar as they work to assist their offspring to worthwhile and personally fulfilling goals with a view to the rewards of personally successful life? Can there really be any case for thinking that parents should *not* encourage their offspring to succeed or do well?

While it can hardly be denied that good parents should encourage their children to have ambition and to succeed in life, there is also success and success and ambition and ambition. More precisely, though it is all to the good that young people direct their talents and energies to personally life-fulfilling and enhancing enterprises and goals, it seems that such personal ambitions are nowadays beset by hazards and temptations that are less obviously conducive to complete moral and spiritual well-being. While some of these dangers and temptations have been ever with us, it has become more recently evident that we now inhabit a culture – particularly in the affluent west, but increasingly globally – that is increasingly conducive to self-regard of an unprecedentedly narcissistic character. Moreover, as contemporary communitarians have suspected, the moral, political and economic ground for widespread modern celebration of such individual self-aggrandisement – particularly in the affluent west – has doubtless been assisted by the exaggerated liberties and material affluence that liberal-democratic association and free enterprise have enabled.

Moreover, one significant by-product of modern liberal economics that has greatly reinforced contemporary deification of the individual and celebration of celebrity for its own sake is a technological revolution that has virtually transformed human communications, association and sense of identity over less than a century. In the first half of this period, the invention of and popular access to cinema, radio and television encouraged widespread celebration of some agents as ‘stars’ of a media world beyond the sphere of common humanity – a status much reinforced by the machinery of mass advertising also fostered by such technology. In early and prescient critical appraisal of this development, Marshall McLuhan declared that the medium had become the message (McLuhan, 2005; McLuhan and Fiore, 2016), that style had now triumphed over substance

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and form over content in a brave new world in which show, conceit and vanity were virtually ends in themselves. In the closing decades of the twentieth century to the present, however, citizens of McLuhan's 'global village' have witnessed the bewildering explosion and dissemination of personalised technologies of computing, internet communication, mobile telephony, electronic mail and social media that have served only to tighten the hold of media message and extend such self-absorption to the masses.

The vice-like grip of this revolution is by now universal, it is oblivious to traditional human barriers of class, gender, race and geographical distance and only the technically incompetent aged (like the present author) have any hope of avoiding its influence. If one travels nowadays by public transport one can hardly fail to notice that most other travellers are glued to their mobile phones or tablets. Moreover, while the enormous human benefits of this modern gadgetry should not be denied, the downside of all this – especially for up-coming generations who are habituated or addicted to its use – is by now also well-documented. Notwithstanding that the communication enabled by such technology is unhindered by traditional divisions of class, race, gender, culture and distance, the social media of preponderant youthful use has greatly increased the power of peer pressure, so that on-line persecution, ridicule and bullying – with sometimes fatal consequences – has become one common side-effect of its employment. Indeed, social media encourages a level of virtually (often enough actual) pornographic self-exposure apparently immune to the inhibitions and censure of traditional shame. What seems to have effectively replaced such shame is the threat of embarrassment over loss of face or popularity among one's peers or those one is virtually compelled to try to impress.

The significantly negative effects on human identity, consciousness and interpersonal association of the addictive use of internet and social media have been imaginatively explored by media itself in the impressive popular American TV series, *Black Mirror*, and in a number of fine feature films (such as *Disconnect* and *Her*). The movie *God Bless America* also presents a savagely satirical picture of a society, not too far removed from

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the present, shaped by reality and talent show television wherein genuine artistic or intellectual merit has been largely replaced by trivial exhibitionist and populist entertainment and in which a performer attempts suicide, not because he has been subjected to ridicule and humiliation, but because he has been denied further TV appearance. Much the same reaction might well be expected from present-day teenagers from whom parents might try to confiscate their mobile phones, and it is clear that the most devastating form of damage to self-identity that a modern young person can experience is social media ostracism via face-book account deletion. Reinforced by intense school pressures to succeed in a competitive economy wherein employment prospects are also often bleak, such anxieties only serve to compound the personal insecurities of young people. Indeed, dog-eat-dog anxiety to distinguish oneself by any means is probably the contemporary name of the game and even in the cloistered groves of academe the urge to make one's mark at all costs is all too often manifest in preference for questionable novelty over reason and truth.

However, the unfortunate economic and environmental consequences of such ego-reinforcing technologies should also not go unremarked. There can be little doubt that the global drive to national economic competitiveness and prosperity, in which the main imperative (in especially western developed nations) is to consume and out-consume, is recapitulated at the individual level whereby the imperative is not just to keep up with the Jones's, but to out-do them as conspicuously as possible. This inevitably means larger living spaces, more impressive (private) transportation, (often obscenely) large bank accounts. more expensive holidays entailing more (polluting) international air and other transport, more (increasingly inessential) durable or disposable personal commodities and accessories, and so forth. While human insatiability and aspiration to such conspicuous consumption has always been with us, the effects of such avarice were doubtless formerly much less environmentally damaging than they are nowadays and its agents less well-placed – as people are today – to appreciate its hazards. All of this is exponentially reinforced by the propaganda of commerce and entertainment that encourage ordinary citizens to think that they have as much right to

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wanton consumption as the most self-indulgent media celebrities. One might also consider the insidious effects of endless popular action movies featuring further large-scale frivolous waste of the natural resources already exploited by extravagant modern technological production (such as, for example, the reckless and frivolous car pile-ups in the popular comedy film *Blues Brothers*).

### **Intelligence, reason and wisdom for tomorrow's world**

Thus, as indicated to date, while more recent educational policies and practices in Britain and elsewhere have indeed widened opportunities and done much to reduce the pernicious social inequality and elitism of former days of selective schooling, they have done little to curtail human competition or the ambition to outdo others in the game of life as such. On the contrary, latter-day schooling and parenting have increased pressures on pupils and offspring towards relentless competition with their peers. As also noted, such competition and ambition have been exacerbated by global development of a modern technologically-driven culture of mass media and advertising which reinforces dubious forms of narcissistic self-absorption and fear of failure or loss of face, now widespread among today's young. All this widespread pressure, not just to succeed but be seen to succeed – via any notice or notoriety – is also operating in an increasingly overpopulated world in which the price of personal aggrandisement is all too often the globally unprecedented consumption of ever-diminishing natural resources.

Moreover, such self-promoting competition, ambition and appetite is – and has always probably been – widely regarded as human virtue. Does not the Christian Gospel parable of the talents enjoin us to develop our God-given abilities and, as previously noted, do we not naturally regard it as the duty of good parents to assist their offspring to develop themselves to the full in this or that personally fulfilling endeavour? How, indeed, might human life and progress be otherwise conceived? It could also be said that whatever is at issue here – if, indeed, there is just one

issue rather than several – might be helped by distinguishing between (morally) good and bad forms of self-assertion, competition and ambition. In the current climate of Aristotelian virtue ethics, we might therefore be urged to distinguish more or less acceptable ‘means’ of such mindsets from their unacceptable or damaging extremes. In the first place, however, this advice may seem less than illuminating, since it is far from clear how – or by what criteria – more acceptable forms of self-assertion, competition and ambition might clearly be distinguished from those less so. (Of course, some latter-day virtue ethicists are also inclined to jettison the doctrine of the mean: but it then it may be less clear what is especially helpful about the Aristotelian practical wisdom of *phronesis*.) Indeed, it is far from evident that such qualities are precisely ‘morally’ objectionable on any conventional understanding of this term. It is not that self-assertive, competitive or ambitious agents are necessarily amoral, immoral or wrongdoers in any very significant sense: on the contrary, as good liberal-democrats they could also be acceptably pro-social, caring and considerate of others. What then is the root objection, if any, to such qualities?

The title of this paper contains a quote from the English poet William Wordsworth (Nichol Smith, 1921: 146) which captures a central theme of eighteenth and nineteenth century romantic literature: precisely, that of modern post-industrial concern with material human goals of ‘getting and spending’ and consequent human failure to perceive and appreciate the world (especially of nature) and its natural wonders for what they really are. However, this paper then proceeded to a critique of post-war British selective education – with its emphasis on intelligence as a measure of human success and worth – which it traced to the influence of both modern psychometry and Plato. Still, despite any and all contrary appearances, there is strong intellectual connection between Plato and the modern romanticism of a Wordsworth. First, modern literary romanticism owes much to the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1977) who traced the root cause of human injustice to a kind of socially conditioned ‘false consciousness’ (to use a term of Marx no less appropriate to the thought of Rousseau) that deludes agents about their true (natural) importance and status relative to others. But this key theme of Rousseau

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was itself influenced by his own acknowledged reading of Plato, precisely by Plato's own image of the false consciousness fostered by human imprisonment in the cave of misleading sense experience. To be sure, this idea has been liable to different precise interpretation along the way: whereas Plato appeals to non-empirical reason to free us from the delusion of sense experience and Rousseau appeals to reason to free us from social prejudices, the romantic poets appeal to sentiment and emotion to help us appreciate sense experience more keenly. But a common theme of the need for human liberation via wise liberation from ignorance and delusion runs nevertheless throughout here.

Moreover, despite the previously noted impact of Plato's *Republic* on later political and educational theorising, it is arguable that much of this influence rests on a mistake, insofar as the account of the ideal political constitution presented in that work is meant primarily (as the dialogue itself makes clear) as an allegory or metaphor for the moral constitution, structure and health of the soul. Further, in the present view, while his *Republic* makes significant contributions to Plato's moral psychology and epistemology – especially via the images of the cave and the divided line – his dialogue *Gorgias* provides much better entry into Plato's ethics and educational thought, insofar as this work directly confronts the key educational and existential question of how one should live one's life. As in his *Republic* and *Philebus*, Plato's *Gorgias* is concerned to resist the view, defended primarily by the ancient Greek sophists, that a good, worthwhile or successful human life is to be measured in terms of the achievement at any price of all one's primarily self-serving ambitions and desires. On the sophists' view, even the wicked tyrant who successfully subjugates others by violent means was to be regarded as the happiest or most fortunate of men.

Against this view, Plato's Socrates argues that far from the happiest of men, the tyrant is the most wretched and miserable. Still, for present purposes, the main Platonic point is not the more obvious one that that since wickedness is morally bad and harmful it is not therefore to be envied or admired – though this clearly true and a significant implication of Socrates' argument. However, the main Platonic point clearly cuts more



deeply and concerns the state of soul of all those who are unduly overtaken or consumed by the vain and vaulting ambitions to which humans are inevitably inclined in the cave of false sensible and sensual experience. From this viewpoint, the wealthy philanthropist may be in no less difficulty than the wicked tyrant. Indeed, this may be the main moral of the story of the rich but virtuous and God-fearing young man in St Luke's Gospel who approaches Jesus to know what he should do to gain eternal life: when he is urged to sell all that he has and give it to the poor, he turns sorrowfully away. The key point here is not so much that the rich are necessarily without generosity, but that they are too much – like the rest of us in our more modest way – in thrall to the attractions of this world, such as possessions, prestige and reputation.

The deeper point of the *Gorgias* therefore warns against the attachment of all human souls – the good, no less than the bad or ugly – to the false idols and priorities of sensual pleasure, riches, reputation, ambition, celebrity and downright egotism: these are the distractions of the cave that impede that knowledge of the good which is a matter of unclouded and impartial vision of what is truly worthwhile. As Plato also makes clear in the *Symposium* such worldly distractions are essentially forms of ignorance to which humans are all too fatally attached by that egoism identified in his *Laws* as defining the human self or personality in the cave of sensual experience. If this was a serious moral and spiritual hazard in the time of Socrates and Plato, it can only be yet more so in our modern age of self-focus, narcissism and celebrity wherein it is the ambition of every human ego to be famous for a day (there are actually internet websites that advise people how to achieve this) or much longer if possible.

This is clearly not just what the world and modern media preaches, but what schools, universities and educational institutions also teach in their own ways. In the cave of the world, the cultivation or exercise of human intelligence seems primarily directed towards exploiting one's abilities, looks, personality or natural assertiveness so that one may be noticed or stand out from the crowd come hell or high water. But what alternative might there be in a world in which success is so measured? As already noted, is not the successful expression of such talent or intelligence

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something that all parents – indeed, those we describe as good rather than bad parents – precisely desire for their offspring? It is this, however, that Socrates and Plato would regard not as intelligence – and certainly not wisdom – but as a kind of delusion from which the soul needs to be liberated. The more one sees of TV and internet, the more one may be persuaded that there is a serious point here. To be sure, human agents need to succeed in the life that we are given to live and to serve that life – as Socrates and Plato would have wished – as best we can. But their point was that we may not serve it well if the world is too much with us. In this light, and for the sake of tomorrow’s world, it may be one urgent task of contemporary and future education to reflect better on how we might encourage the young to serve it in a more Platonically self-effacing and wiser way.

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**Information about the author:**

**David Carr** is Emeritus Professor at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK and was until recently Professor of Ethics and Education in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues of the University of Birmingham (UK). He has written much on the significance of art and literature for educating moral character and on the virtue of gratitude.