

## Reviving Plato's Forms in Education to Fight Corruption

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**ABSTRACT** This paper aims at showing why Plato's educational philosophy constitutes a solid base for fighting corruption in the twenty-first century despite the fact that it was propounded more than two thousand years ago. The historical-educational research method was employed in this research which highlights the following key aspects of Plato's philosophy of education: the universality of forms or virtues, the simile of the cave and the Socratic method. A hypothetical example which explains the application of Plato's educational thought in classrooms is provided. The title of this paper provides a satirical wordplay since the forms have always been universally valid, and negating them has always had the potential to ignite undesirable results due to the corruptive nature of such action.

### INTRODUCTION

Linking Plato's philosophic thought to contemporary issues is not new. Its relevance has been shown, *inter alia*, in terms of psychological thought (Gill 1985), political sciences (Bradizza 2013), the use of popular music in studying and teaching international relations (Tierney (2007: iii-v), the training of nurses (Birkeland 2000), Didactics (Kanakis 1997) and a programme for congenital cardiac surgery (Mavroudis 2007). According to Herman (2014), Plato's emphasis on that which is universal and changeless has resulted in him remaining "the spokesman for the theologian, the mystic, the poet and the artist". The relevance of Plato's educational thought for fighting corruption, an area of research which this researcher wishes to pursue after having scrutinised the relevant primary sources, is also mentioned in literature. However, this consists of brief allusions such as those by Van Zyl (1999), who maintains that "[t]he world would [be] a happier place, void of atrocities such as genocide, apartheid and corruptions in government if Plato's thought [were] widely accepted", and O'Toole (1993), who advises that public servants should live "a pure and simple life" in accordance with Plato's views. This paper attempts to address this shortcoming by showing why Plato's educational philosophy can play a significant role in the current fight against corruption which manifests itself worldwide in guises such as asset misappropriation (Hosken 2014), collusion (Connor 2014; Holmes

2013), price fixing (Ashton 2013; Connor 2014) and irregular awarding of tenders (Corruption Watch 2014).

The main aim of this paper, namely showing the congruence between Plato's philosophy of education and fighting corruption more effectively, is geared towards promoting reflection on and application of Platonic based strategies at schools. This may seem idealistic. Yet, it is not unrealistic. Even though Plato's educational thought, which was expressed more than two thousand years ago, is theoretical and abstract, it will be shown that it lodges practical possibilities very worthwhile considering in education to fight corruption.

Corruption can be defined as the "impairment of integrity, virtue, or moral principle" (Merriam-Webster n.d.), "a departure from what is pure, simple, or correct" (English Dictionary 2014) and "[t]he action or effect of making someone or something morally depraved" (Oxford Dictionaries n.d). For the purposes of this research, these broad views of corruption will serve as point of reference. These definitions cover more specific and official definitions which appear in authoritative official documents.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, combating corruption is viewed in terms of adherence to universal ethical principles which would advance the fight against corruptive behaviour.

This study is considered necessary since the level of the societal problem of corruption is extensive (Gordon et al. 2012; Newman 2014; Patel 2013).<sup>2</sup> It is essential to exploit all avenues of

combating corruption since its “far reaching implications promotes and sustains a vicious cycle of poverty and leads to poor schooling environments” (Pitsoe 2013: 745).

A literature study of Plato’s educational philosophy prompted this researcher to address the following research question in this paper: Why can it be said that Plato’s educational philosophy is appropriate for combating corruption in the twenty-first century? To answer this question the historical-educational research method, also known as the problem-historical method, was employed. In essence it means that a contemporary problem is investigated in terms of relevant historical-educational facts obtained from authoritative sources to arrive at a valid answer. Emphasis was placed on the personalistic component of historic-educational research since the educational ideas of a specific person, Plato, as provided in primary sources, were scrutinised (Van Zyl 1985; Venter 1979, 1992; Venter and Van Heerden 1989). Readers will notice that an explication of Plato’s educational philosophy in terms of contemporary educational practice is at times placed within the South African context since this researcher is a South African citizen. It, nevertheless, has universal relevance.

In order to gain a clear understanding of the validity of Plato’s educational philosophy for fighting corruption, an explication of the forms, or virtues, which constitute the essence of Plato’s educational thought, are presented in terms of their overall authority and the manner in which knowledge of them can be acquired. As regards gaining access to a better understanding of that which the virtues entail, Plato’s simile of the cave will be discussed. Possible obstacles which may be encountered when teaching according to the Socratic method, which Plato advocated to ensure an improved understanding of the forms, will also receive attention to further promote interest in the application of his educational theory in classrooms.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objective of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, as stated in the previous section, it is geared towards depicting the relevance of Plato’s educational thought for fighting corruption by means of intervention at schools. This is done by relating the key aspects of Plato’s educational philosophy, namely the nature of the forms

and the manner in which a deeper understanding of them can be gained, to modern-day teaching. Secondly, this paper provides recommendations aimed at promoting the application of Plato’s educational thought at school to fight corruption.

### **THE FORMS AS THE KEY COMPONENT OF PLATO’S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY**

The thrust of Plato’s educational thought is ethically charged since it revolves around gaining an understanding of the meaning of virtues. He often referred to them as forms in his dialogues and considered them to be more valuable than all the gold on or beneath the earth (Plato 1970: 190). Plato considered virtues, or forms, to be many in number, including, amongst others, wisdom, courage, justice, holiness, quickness of mind, nobility of character, valour, sobriety of spirit and righteousness (Plato 1971b, 1971c, 1971d). He, nevertheless, singled out the cardinal virtues of self-restraint, wisdom, justice, courage and piety (Antonites 1998). It is noteworthy that Plato considered the quest for understanding the forms as the pinnacle of the education of the future philosopher kings or legislators which constituted the highest class of his utopic state (Plato 1974).

In his *Republic*, Plato (1974: 209) states that “the elements and traits that belong to a state must also exist in the individuals that compose it”, thereby implying that certain traits would be characteristic of certain groups in the state. The philosopher kings would predominantly display wisdom based on their ability to gain an understanding of the forms by applying reasoning, the most advanced component of man’s tripartite soul. The other two classes, namely the soldiers and workers, would mainly entertain the “natural propensity [of people of their] positions according to the predominant nature of their tripartite human souls”, namely that of being spirited (courageous) and being appetitive (materialistically inclined), respectively (Van Zyl 1999: 91; Nettleship 1935). Since abstract cognition has a very important place in the formal education of learners today, especially at secondary schools, one can, having studied Plato’s educational thought on the forms and how an understanding of them can be attained, safely say that Plato’s educational theory has relevance for teaching at schools.

Plato's dialogues often focus on an interrogation of the true meaning of virtues since he considered the optimum obtainment of knowledge of the meaning of the forms as the most important aim of education. According to Boyum (2010: 543), such education would represent philosophical education which does not relate to the academic discipline of Philosophy, but to "a kind of reflection that every human being may sometimes, though perhaps not often, be engaged in". He, too, considers turning the attention of those who are being educated towards real knowledge, namely a comprehension of abstract universal forms.

Plato viewed proper education as that which enables learners to move from their condition of illusion (*eikasia*) and belief (*pistis*), a state based on a concrete observation, to a position of possessing reason (*dianoia*) at which pure thought (*epistēmē*) concerning the forms finds expression at an abstract level (Plato 1974). This researcher agrees with Plato that virtues are by nature abstract realities. This view is based on this researcher's conviction that the reality of universal abstract virtues can be explained in terms of the fact that refuting these abstracts, thereby acting in a corruptive manner, inevitably creates the possibility of dire consequences which, in extreme cases, could even include warfare. He therefore believes that a discussion of the outcomes of defying the forms should also be included when dealing with ethical issues to accentuate the importance of gaining an understanding of them as far as it is possible. Whilst Plato believed that an understanding of the forms was in itself the highest educational goal fit for the philosopher kings, this researcher holds the view that Plato's educational aim should be transformed to a societal educational aim for all which includes learners at school who are able to reason logically on an abstract level in order to fight corruption.

### The Overall Authority of the Forms

As shown, Plato's forms are universal in nature. According to Plato's views expressed in his *Timaeus*, the forms, or universal virtues, are divine in nature since their origin can be traced back to a benevolent Creator God whom Plato referred to as "the father and creator" (Plato 1971f: 1167): "He [God] was good, and the good can never have any jealousy or anything. And

being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as could be" (Plato 1971f: 1162). Yet, the Creator, who "desired that all things should be good and nothing bad as far as this was attainable" (Plato 1971f: 1162), ordained the elements of fire, earth, water and air to create "the world [as] a blessed god" although they were not considered to be "altogether immortal and indissoluble" (Plato 1971f: 1165). Their creations would include mortal humankind. They had to steer people away from evil except those who brought infliction upon themselves (Plato 1971f). It therefore seems that Plato considered amoral behaviour to bear undesirable consequences, a view which this researcher expressed in a previous section.

Plato's acceptance of the close relationship between morality and divinity prevented him from accepting the mythical and immoral behaviour of Greek gods in plays (Plato 1974) although, according to Kitto (1957: 109), "immoral plays about mythological personages [were written] to indicate the devastation of uncontrolled passion on individuals and societies at large should they succumb to it".

Plato's belief that virtues have a divine origin is alluded to by Boyum (2010:549) who considers them to be relevant in education "wherever its aim is ... insight into timeless essences or forms, concepts, ideas, or necessities; and wherever the education also consists in coming to live a philosophical life, contemplating the special philosophical truths (or Truths) ...". Mainstream faiths would support the view that virtues have a divine origin and reference to this aspect, without teaching any particular religion, would elicit interesting discussion when dealing with virtues in classrooms.

### Gaining Access to Understanding the Forms

As mentioned, Plato's educational thought on attaining an understanding of the meaning of virtues focuses on the education of the future legislators of his utopian republic since an interrogation of the virtues was only accessible to "the philosopher [who could] taste the pleasure of contemplating reality and truth" (Plato 1974: 406). Understandably, the appetitive and spirited components of the tripartite soul were viewed as being inferior to that of the reason (Plato 1974; Hsu 2007). To Plato (1971a 1974) education involves the humble quest for true

knowledge concerning the forms, as opposed to the “educational” practices of sophists who disseminated their views with much oratorical aplomb even though these were founded on opinion rather than deep reflection. The reasoning component of the soul would therefore play a significant role in gaining an understanding of the virtues (Plato 1974). As shall be shown, Plato’s simile of the cave, which relates to various stages of gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of the virtues, has relevance for teaching at schools.

Plato’s simile of the cave commences with a picture of chained prisoners in a cave who can only face a blank wall on which shadows of objects, representing the virtues or forms, are projected. The objects are carried behind their backs in front of a fire at the rear end of the cave. The prisoners consider the shadows to be the objects themselves, and only after having been freed to turn around to face the objects, do they realise that they have overlooked detail and failed to observe them properly. The prisoners are subsequently led out of the cave into the daylight where they become even more familiar with the true nature of the objects. Finally, once they have lifted their heads towards the sun, which represents the Divine Creator, do they see the objects, or forms, as they truly are since they now observe them in relation to the Creator’s all absorbing divinity (Plato 1974). Plato considered the virtues to be as real as the physically observable reality: “... the mind as a whole must be turned away from the world of change until its eye can bear to look straight at reality and at the brightest of all realities [God] which is what we call the good” (Plato 1974: 322). It is, nevertheless, doubtful whether Plato believed that the full meaning of the forms could ever be achieved. In his *Phaedo*, Socrates states that true wisdom will only be found in the next world once the soul is freed from the bodily senses (Plato 2013).

The discussion of the practical application of the allegory of the cave in a hypothetical classroom situation, which is presented below, will only incorporate the first three stages of obtaining knowledge in terms of the simile of the cave (observing the shadows in the cave, observing the objects in the cave, and seeing the objects in daylight). The reason for omitting the final stage, namely that of observing “the good” (the Divine Creator), is that the researcher considers this to be an impossibility.

The reader will notice that the explication of the application of the simile of the cave which follows focuses on a series of questions and answers which could assist learners to move closer to an understanding of a virtue. This method, advocated by Plato, is the method used by his deceased mentor, Socrates. In Plato’s dialogues, Socrates often features as an interlocutor who constantly poses questions to allow his listeners to move closer to the true meaning of the virtues as they realise that the answers that they provide are insufficient.

Concerning the first stage of obtaining knowledge of the virtues, which can be related to the observation of the reflections of the objects on the screen by the chained prisoners, a teacher may ask learners about their perceptions concerning the meaning of a particular virtue. For example, concerning the virtue of righteousness the following initial question could be posed: “What is righteousness?” This question would elicit answers that, in all probability, would show that a deep reflection on the meaning of the virtue is wanting. Answers could, for example, include the view that righteousness means that one would refrain from stealing another person’s belongings.

Having listened to answers reflecting learners’ perceptions of righteousness, questions relating to the second phase of gaining knowledge in terms of Plato’s simile of the cave, the stage when the prisoners could view the actual objects in the dim light of the cave, should be posed. These should be geared towards eliciting answers that show that the answers provided thus far are deficient. They should allow for the identification of commonalities or categories derived from the answers provided by learners during the first phase. Example: “If righteousness means that one would disapprove of stealing, refrain from using notes during examinations, hand back change to a cashier if too much was given, do all in one’s power to protect people and their property, etc., can one say that righteousness as such is each of these aspects by themselves? Is not righteousness a virtue which includes all of these aspects?” Bearing learners’ answers in mind, probing questions could be asked to arrive at a more acceptable answer which could, for example, indicate that righteousness means that one would protect the human rights of oneself and others as provided in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Af-*

*rica*, Act 108 of 1996 (RSA 1996, sections 7-39). These include, amongst others, the right to: equality; respect of human dignity; life; freedom and security of the person; freedom from slavery, servitude and forced labour; privacy; freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion; freedom of expression; peaceful and unarmed assembly, demonstration picket and petition; freedom of association; and freedom to make political choices.

During the third stage of gaining knowledge, which relates to the freed prisoners watching the objects in daylight, emphasis could be placed on more intricate matters to accentuate the fact that any conclusions made during the discussion would always be subject to further investigation since attempting to gain an understanding of the virtues is a complex matter. Questions and answers relating to this stage could, for example, relate to the fact that the virtue of righteousness would not under all circumstances mean that the human rights of oneself and others, as mentioned in the South African Constitution, have to be protected since it may also sometimes be appropriate to disregard a right. The right to privacy, for example, cannot be sustained if criminal activity is suspected. In this regard the discussion could focus on the fact that perceived rights would not under all circumstances support the welfare of all. Satisfying sexual desires when they are experienced, for example, cannot be considered as a basic right for all people because it would have immeasurable disastrous effects on the lives of sexually assaulted people. During this stage discussion could also include the interconnectedness of the virtues. It could also be pointed out that views expressed may need to be revisited to gain further clarity.

Socrates did not consider himself as a teacher whose task it was to impart knowledge but rather as a facilitator or "midwife" which had to assist his students in birthing ideas which would increasingly become more congruent with the reality of the forms (Plato n.d.). The Socratic method does not imply approaching a student with a fixed schedule of questions, but it requires asking questions which are based on answers provided by students. As shown in the above explanation, initial questions are posed to allow students to realise that their interpretations of a virtue do not correspond with its true meaning. More questions are required in order to move

evermore closer to a more acceptable interpretation of the meaning of a virtue (Maxwell 2013).

As mentioned, the Socratic method would be relevant for teaching learners who show the capacity for logical reasoning the meaning of the virtues. One would expect teachers to carefully prompt learners to encourage them to express their views and kindly point out deficiencies in their answers. The Socratic method implies interaction between teacher and learners, the sharpening of learners' concentration and the validation of learners' answers as being important in coming to a clearer understanding of the virtues.

It is not the intention of this paper to provide a detailed manner of dealing with the teaching of virtues, but to advocate the application of the essentials of Plato's educational thought to facilitate arriving at a clearer understanding of the true meaning of virtues. It is the belief of this researcher that an interrogation of the meaning of virtues would promote an awareness of their relevance and importance in everyday life and that it would therefore contribute towards fighting corruption, especially if, as pointed out, the consequences of negating the virtues are discussed.

The above brief and hypothetical application of the Socratic method in classrooms takes cognisance of the fact that Plato foresaw that virtues, despite their universality, should be viewed in terms of particular contexts. His views, expressed in his *Statesman*, show that the virtue of moderation, although being greatly admired because it is associated with peace, could, if not tempered by the virtue of courage, result in being trampled upon by a "chance aggressor", and that unbridled courage, too, is not always desirable (Plato 1971e: 1079-1080). The simplified explanation of the Socratic method provided in this paper should not give the impression that its application does not require vigorous argumentation based on penetrating thinking which may require much time. In the *Statesman*, Plato (1971e: 1054) expresses the view that argumentation concerning the virtues requires little or much time for participants to "find real forms" and to "divide according to real forms".

The application of the Socratic method depends on critical thought and clear communication. The following nine types of questions, according to Paul and Elder (2006), are applicable to the Socratic method and would be helpful in

ensuring that the speaker and listener attach the same meaning to information: questions that probe the purpose of what is being said; questions geared towards ascertaining the assumptions on which information is based; questions requiring information, reasons, evidence and causes relating to thoughts raised; questions aimed at reaching consensus on viewpoints and perspectives; questions that focus on implications and consequences of views expressed; questions that focus on the validity of questions that are posed; questions that relate to concepts; and questions that probe inferences and interpretations. Applying the Socratic method would strengthen learners' intellectual ability which is applicable to all academic endeavours since it would develop the following competencies: intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual empathy, intellectual autonomy, intellectual integrity, intellectual perseverance, confidence in reasoning, and fair-mindedness (Paul 1993, 1999; Elder and Paul 2013).

#### **Obstacles Relating to the Application of the Socratic Method in Teaching Ethical Issues**

Applying the Socratic Method presupposes a commendable knowledge of content. It implies extensive reading and intensive reflection on appropriate ethical issues before engaging with learners. This, as such, however, need not constitute a big challenge. What could be problematic to some teachers is the planning of lessons since answers to questions cannot be foreseen, as well as the asking of appropriate follow-up questions which are necessary to ensure a logical flow of ideas and active learner participation.

The application of this method requires mental alertness. Pointing out contradictions in discussions and clarifying meanings of concepts play a vital role. Teachers should therefore refine their cognitive skills, even while partaking in and listening to everyday informal conversations, by identifying ambiguities, illogicalities, changes in points of reference, and biased opinions. Teachers should not consider an authoritarian teaching style, but should rather opt for a democratic approach which allows for discovery and learner participation which, in turn, would promote an awareness of and interest in virtues. Taking ownership of content concerning virtues would deter corruptive thought and action, also later in life, due to its transferability.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In this section the reasons for considering Plato's educational philosophy being appropriate for combating corruption are provided in order to answer the research question posed in the introduction of this paper.

Moving towards a better understanding of the virtues through vigorous intellectual interrogation in accordance with Plato's educational theory would raise an awareness of their importance which, in itself, would advance the fight against corruption. Realising that universal virtues, despite their abstract nature, are very influential realities since negating them creates possibilities of undesirable outcomes, would further fortify learners' desire for responsible, non-corruptive behaviour. Because the teaching of virtues in terms of Plato's educational theory imply dealing with virtues in a broad sense, it would also relate to combatting a myriad of social ills including drug use, pornography, reckless driving, absenteeism from work and school, as well as being insensitive towards poverty, to name but a few.

The application of Plato's educational theory which focuses on universal abstractions would be particularly meaningful in multicultural countries like South Africa where it would advance the cohesion of various sectors of the population regardless of religious and cultural variance, thereby uniting people in their stand against corruption based on moral conviction.

An examination of virtues which commences at a concrete level and proceeds to a universal and abstract plane, as illustrated in Plato's simile of the cave, have many prospects of application at schools, depending on the cognitive level of learners. It relates to many subjects, including Life Orientation and History, as well as Biology in terms of, inter alia, ecological and genetical issues. Since the Constitution of South Africa bears close relation to Plato's virtues because it accentuates universally valid principles, it could serve as a relevant frame of reference when applying the Socratic method at South African schools.

Since the teaching of virtues in Platonic terms emphasises critical and analytical reflection and rejects unreasoned and invalid opinion being considered as truth, it would not only promote an anti-corruption attitude, but would also be of value to any field of study.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Bearing the above conclusion in mind, the recommendations that follow are made to fight corruption by means of intervention at school level.

It is recommended that education authorities at national level, for example, the South African Department of Basic Education, develop a strategy to sensitise teachers in becoming aware of linkages between the syllabi that they teach and the exploration of ethical issues in classrooms.

In developing a strategy to fight corruption by means of education at schools, national education authorities should seriously consider promoting the application of the Socratic method in teaching syllabi that deal directly with ethical matters since it would advance interrogative interaction between teachers and learners which would be conducive to an understanding of the importance of adherence to universal virtues. In this regard, workshops aimed at familiarising teachers with the application of the Socratic method could be planned and implemented. Since the application of the Socratic method develops intellectual qualities which are appropriate for any field of study and because ethical issues can be related to so many fields of study, attendance of such workshops should be extended to as many teachers as possible.

### NOTES

- 1 An example of an officially authorized definition of a legal definition for the offence of corruption is provided, inter alia, in South Africa's *Prevention and Combating of Corrupt Activities Act* (12 of 2004\_ (RSA 2004, sec 3):
  - Any person who, directly or indirectly –
    - (a) accepts or agrees or offers to accept any gratification from any other person, whether for the benefit of himself or herself or for the benefit of another person; or
    - (b) gives or agrees or offers to give to any person any gratification, whether for the benefit of that other person or for the benefit of another person, in order to act, personally or by influencing another person so as to act, in a manner –
      - (i) that amounts to the –
        - (aa) illegal, dishonest, unauthorised, incomplete, or biased; or
        - (bb) misuse or selling of information or material acquired in the course of the, exercise, carrying out or performance of any powers, duties or functions arising out of a constitutional, statutory, contractual or any other legal obligation;

- (ii) that amounts to –
  - (aa) the abuse of a position of authority;
  - (bb) a breach of trust; or
  - (cc) the violation of a legal duty or a set of rules;
  - (iii) designed to achieve an unjustified result; or
  - (iv) that amounts to any other unauthorised or improper inducement to do or not to do anything; is guilty of the offence of corruption.
- 2 South Africa, whence this researcher hails, was ranked 72nd out of 177 countries with a score of 42 (on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean)) in terms of public sector corruption according to the Corruption Perception Index which the organization Corruption Watch interpreted as pointing towards “a stable but disturbing trend in South Africa” (News24 2013).

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