

Remarks on the 2013 Fortin Award

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Thank you all very much. This has been a surprising and touching honor, and I appreciate it. Above all I'd like to thank Mike Fortin for establishing an award that does two fine things. First, it's the perfect tribute to his father, Roger Fortin—a true historian, a true teacher, and a true leader who has been a dedicated friend of Xavier in all three areas. Secondly, the Fortin Award is an excellent way to encourage the humanities at Xavier. There is no lack of deserving professors in our humanities departments, and I'm looking forward to seeing many of my accomplished colleagues receive this honor in coming years.

As I tried to prepare a few remarks on my own teaching and scholarship, I kept returning to what I don't do and can't do. Maybe this is inevitable for someone who regularly teaches Plato. Plato, of course, was one of the greatest teachers and writers in history, but his dialogues are full of hints about the limitations of teaching and writing. Plato never forgot Socrates, his inspiration, who denied that he taught anyone anything, and never published a word.

The education professionals of Socrates' day were known as wisdom mongers—or in Greek, “sophists.” The sophists claimed that they could impart wisdom on many topics—especially, the art of persuasive communication and the art of being excellent. There were plenty of takers for these educational products, and the most successful sophists got very rich. Protagoras, for instance, had no fixed fee, but asked his students to judge his teaching by its results. If they liked the outcome, they could deposit as much money as they thought his teaching was worth in a temple where he kept his bank account, as we'd call it. From these purely voluntary contributions, Protagoras accumulated a great sum of gold.

Against all this, Socrates said that he had no knowledge and no wisdom, except for knowing that he knew nothing. Socrates *desired* wisdom (or in Greek, he was a “philo-sopher”). He denied that he had anything to teach—some people simply found it pleasant to spend time in his company, and occasionally they seemed to improve themselves. Sometimes he even went farther, and denied that anyone teaches anything, because knowledge doesn't come from teacher to student; it's already within the learner. Before this life, our soul knew everything, but we forgot it when we entered our current body. Our experiences and encounters can sometimes jog our memory. At best, a so-called teacher is a memory coach.

We call this “the Platonic theory of recollection,” and we smile at its mythology. But it's not a theory—it's a mythical way to represent an essential truth about philosophy, and about any studies that can't be reduced to mere information transfer: the insights that the learner achieves are never just the absorption of new facts, but are acts of *recognition*. To achieve this recognition, you first have to learn to be surprised by the familiar—to see it as if it were new. Then you may come to see deeper dimensions of it that were always there, but were so familiar that you never noticed them explicitly before. This is what can happen when we ask questions such as “What is justice?” “What is knowledge?” or “What is being?”

The teacher's role in this—if there are any teachers—is to jog the learner's memory, to ask questions, to provide occasions for recognition. Or as Socrates puts it in Plato's *Republic*, education is not the transfer of insight from teacher to student, as if one were putting the power of sight into blind eyes. Instead, we assume that the power of sight is already within the learner, but the learner isn't looking in the right direction. Education in the fullest sense, then, would be the art of turning the whole soul around to look in the direction of what truly is.

That's a great art—and I don't have it. I doubt that any of us professors do, because we don't have power over the students' whole souls—we can appeal to their intellect during the few hours we spend with them, and to some extent to their imagination and emotions, but at best we provide a few opportunities and provocations—a very finite time and space in which, if the students take the initiative and have an inner drive, they can get a taste of reorientation and recognition.

If we do manage to retrieve knowledge, what kind of knowledge will be most important? Surely it would be knowledge of the good—and if we had it, we might become good people. We might become virtuous. The sophists promised that they could teach virtue—that they could make their students excellent human beings. But Socrates said that he didn't know what the good was, or what virtue was, and he doubted that virtue, whatever it was, could be taught. (If it can be taught, then why don't good parents always turn out good children?) Now, surely we professors have less influence than parents. So if we promise to make our students virtuous, I'm afraid we're sophists. All we can do is encourage students to ask what is good, give them opportunities to wonder at the concepts of goodness that they've long taken for granted, and present them with some food for thought. Then it's up to them: their dedication, their habits, their thought and action. We hope we have aided them in some project of becoming good that they themselves have undertaken.

So the Ethics/Religion & Society courses will never make our students ethical, religious, or socially responsible. All they can do is encourage our students to pay attention to the issues, to consider some possibilities, and to adopt a free position of their own. We can't make them good, and if we pretend to do so the students will either see right through us or adopt a semblance of goodness, an appearance with no firm inner source. Our goal should not be to make them good, but to set them free—inasmuch as we can do so, because we also have to remember that *making* someone free is an oxymoron.

As for writing, Socrates makes some powerful arguments against it in Plato's *Phaedrus*. A book may seem to be a source of wisdom and memory, but in fact it can be a distraction from the quest to cultivate wisdom and recollection within oneself. A book can't speak to individuals; it addresses everyone in the same way. It can't defend itself or explain itself. It just sits there, repeating the same thing forever.

Of course, Plato *wrote down* these criticisms of writing. Unlike Socrates, he didn't avoid publication altogether, but published texts that, while they cannot eliminate the disabilities of writing, find ways to work within them, to compensate for them as much as possible. (One compensation is to take himself out of his dialogues, and to make many of them inconclusive, in order to discourage us from assuming that they contain his beliefs, or truths, or "information." Of course, most readers, even today, continue to ignore these hints.)

If Plato, the founder of the first Academy, was so modest about the power of his writings, what hope is there for a 21st-century academic, publishing secondary literature that will be read for a few years by a handful of fellow specialists? What is the point? If my ambition were to say something that no one has said before, or to reach absolute truth, or to change the world, I would be one frustrated and bitter writer. But I don't hope for any of that. I actually don't expect anyone to read anything I publish; I'm always pleasantly surprised, and a little embarrassed, when I hear that someone has actually looked at my work.

Why do I do it, then? Simply because it makes me think. For me, the pressure of a deadline and the idea of a hypothetical critical reader help me work through certain kinds of problems more responsibly. I learn by publishing.

Not everyone needs those stimuli. Not everyone learns by writing, much less by publishing. So I would suggest that although number of publications is a convenient way to recognize that a professor is an active scholar, we should also remember that there are other ways to demonstrate knowledge, thought, and learning. What's most important is that we continue to serve as inspirations to our students: not models of professional information producers with marketable skills, but models of learners, who keep trying to be surprised by the familiar, to recollect the essential, and to reflect on the good. If we do our job well, our graduates will look back on their years at Xavier and say: that's when I learned to learn.