PRINCIPLES OF EARLY EDUCATION IN PLATO'S LAWS

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ABSTRACT

The precepts and principles of early education which Plato lays down in the Laws are not confined to a hypothetical ideal state. Collectively, so I argue, they constitute a template to which every positive system of education, ancient or modern, must conform, or at least aspire. This article examines these key principles. Special attention is given to Plato’s definition of true education, his warning about the dangers of innovation and change in established cultural forms, the need for the legislator to provide the necessary legal framework for a proper system of education, Plato’s use of Egypt as the model of a state in which true education can flourish, and the lessons for our own age in Plato’s system of early education.

There is today a dawning realization, backed by mounting evidence, that the seeds of success in education are sown in early childhood. The first three years of primary school, in particular, are increasingly viewed as being of prime importance. Thus governments and educators are belatedly turning their attention to the formative effect of early education.¹ This reinvention of

¹ The South African government, for example, has recently published an Early Childhood Development White Paper which seeks to ensure that by 2010 every child will receive at least one year of pre-school education before entering the first year of primary school (Eric Atmore, ‘Seeds of matric success sown in early childhood’, Business Day, 8 January 2007). Moreover, the South African Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, displays a firm belief that the almost exclusive emphasis on the final school-leaving examination (“Matric”) is misplaced and that it removes attention from primary school, especially the first three years (Sue Blaine, ‘A lesson for class act Pandor’, Business Day, 8 January 2007). Preschooling in South Africa is set to receive large cash injections. According to Pandor, the department has doubled planned funding for early childhood development since 2005, and more funding is in the pipeline (Sue Blaine, ‘Funds boosted to make preschool year universal’, Business Day, 25 April 2007). According to Pam Picken, director of Training and Resources in Early Education, extensive research shows that 80% of human brain development occurs in the first six years and depends on nutrition and proper stimulation. Absent these two elements, South Africa’s Matric pass rate will remain poor (Sue Blaine, ‘New rules “could leave poorest kids at risk”’, Business Day,
the wheel, by no means the first, is ironic, for it was in distant antiquity that
the philosophy of Plato first emphasized and explained the vital importance
of early education to the West. There is much that we can learn from Plato’s
system of early education, as set out mainly in his dialogues, the *Laws* and the
*Republic*.

My underlying premiss, which runs contrary to the thrust of contempo­
rary scholarly opinion, is that the educational (and other) principles formu­
lated by Plato in these dialogues need not be confined to a hypothetical ideal
state. These principles possess a universal validity which transcends context,
time and place. So, for example, the fact that Plato reserved his education for
carefully selected members of the guardian and auxiliary classes can have no
bearing on the validity and applicability of his principles in the present age.
Moreover, these principles collectively constitute a practical standard – albeit
a high one – to which every positive system of education, ancient or modern,
must at least aspire, if not indeed conform to. Special attention is given
below to Plato’s description of early training in the nursery, his notion of
true education, his warning about the dangers of innovation and change in
established cultural forms, the need for the legislator to provide the neces­
sary legal framework for a proper system of education, Plato’s use of ancient
Egypt as the model of a state in which true education was a living reality, and
the lessons for our own age in Plato’s system of early education. The method
adopted throughout this investigation is synthetic and expository, rather than
analytical. I shall first, by way of introduction, note certain Platonic principles
concerning the nature of education in general, and shall then consider what
Plato has to say about early education in particular.

Plato defines education as the constraining and directing of youth towards
that right reason which the law affirms, and which the experience of the
eldest and best affirms to be truly right. The function of constraining and
directing, the behaviour of the pupil is of the very essence of education, for
this function serves to refine his lower animal instincts. The violence and
brutality which surround us in the modern world are, in my view, the direct
result of a widespread failure to constrain and direct the behaviour of the

25 April 2007). See also *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 39:3, June 2007
(http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/ocp/epat/39/3?ai=3h9&ui=9f8es&af=1). This
special issue of the journal is devoted to philosophy of early childhood education.

2 *Laws* 659d. Unless otherwise stated, translations of Plato’s dialogues are those of B.

3 Other translations, for example those of T. Saunders, *Plato: The Laws* (London
1970) and A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and his Work* (London 1960) suggest that this
function is less prescriptive and more persuasive than Jowett’s translation would
have one believe.
child along Platonic lines: with proper instruction and a fortunate nature, man becomes the most divine and most civilized of all animals; but absent proper education, he is the most savage of earthly creatures. It is the nature and extent of their education that locates individuals between the extremes of animal savagery and sublime spiritual perfection.

The constraining and directing function of education lasts only until the age at which reason awakens in the child. This is the age at which that function begins to operate from within the individual, instead of from outside. The result of constraining and directing the individual in childhood is reasonable, and therefore lawful conduct in later life, for reasonable conduct is lawful conduct. The link between education, reason and law will be explored below.

In his definition of education, Plato also provides a standard against which the pupil’s attainment of right reason may be measured. This standard is the experience of the wisest men in the state. The reverence for antiquity for long-standing tradition and custom, and for the wisdom of the eldest and best men in the state has become alien to us, but as we shall see, it is of central importance in Plato’s educational system.

The benefit of education in general is that it produces good men, and that good men act nobly. On this standard, the political leaders of the past century, who can be said to have been well educated in Platonic terms, can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

4 *Laws* 766a.

5 *Laws* 644e-645a.

6 Does Plato intend the lives of the wise to stand as models against which the attainment of right reason in an individual may be measured, or does he rather intend that the wisest men be appointed to judge such attainment? Jowett’s translation is unclear on this point, but Saunders’s translation clearly favours the latter view.

7 *Laws* 641b. Plato is speaking here of true education, a theme which he elaborates in *Laws* 643d–e (discussed below). It is interesting to compare Plato’s principles of education with some ideas on the role of the teacher drawn from the ancient Indian tradition: it is not enough for a teacher to possess academic qualifications and encyclopaedic knowledge; he must also have moral excellence of the highest order. He need not teach high moral principles, but he has to live them. Knowledge is useless which does not make the pupil perfect in both skills or abilities and character. In order to teach the love of knowledge, the teacher must love knowledge himself. A good teacher teaches by example, not by preaching. Knowledge without a broadening of the heart and a sharpening of moral awareness is a worthless burden. Clever but unscrupulous men and women are a burden to society. Education which produces such people is no education.
Plato holds that the beginning is the most important part of any work, especially in the case of the education of children, for that is the time at which the character is being formed. Young children can be allowed to hear only stories specially selected for their fineness and beauty; all others must be rejected. Only those ideas and beliefs which are in harmony with the foundational values of the state can be allowed to enter the soul at this age. It follows that stories written for young children must be subject to some form of screening, if Plato's goal of proper character-formation in early childhood is to be realized in practice. By the same token, mothers and nurses cannot be allowed a free hand in selecting the stories they recount to young children.8 We shall revisit the theme of cultural regulation, which is a vital element of Plato's educational scheme.

Artists, like writers, ought to be able to discern the true nature of the beautiful and the graceful, and to embody these qualities in their works. The beauty informing such works flows into the eye and ear of the child and imperceptibly draws the soul from earliest years into likeness and harmony with the beauty of reason.9 As with literature and art, so too with music. Plato, as we shall see, holds that earliest education is to be given through music in the form of dance and song. Musical training, for Plato, is a more potent instrument than any other, because graceful rhythms and harmony find their way into and fasten onto the inner depths of the soul, imparting grace to that soul. Conversely, the hallmark of poor or insufficient education is a soul which lacks grace.10 Given the prime importance of musical training in Plato's educational system, it follows that even training in gymnastic may not begin until music has first been introduced.11

In the Protagoras, Plato holds that education is a lifelong process which goes hand in hand with admonition. From the age at which the child is

8 Republic 377a-c. The censorship proposed here (in relation to stories) and in the Laws (in relation to music, dance and art) would find little favour in our age, which, in its ignorance, indiscriminately rejects almost every form of legislative regulation of literature, music, dance and art, on the ground that such regulation is authoritarian, repressive, fascist, unenlightened, or that it infringes on individual freedom. We pay a heavy price for the ignorance which these platitudes seek to mask: the fruits of un-restrained licence and self-indulgence are everywhere in evidence today.

A distinction must also be drawn between the educational censorship proposed here by Plato for very young children, and modern political censorship. Their respective aims are very different, and so too are the respective age groups at which they are directed. This distinction will be developed below.

9 Republic 401c-d.
10 Republic 401d-402a.
11 Republic 376e.
capable of understanding speech, mother and nurse, father and tutor teach him that this is just and that is unjust; this is honourable, that is dishonourable; this is holy, that is unholy; do this, and abstain from that. Nor does Plato shrink from corporal chastisement of the disobedient child. Elsewhere, however, he says that the best way for a teacher to train the young is not to admonish them, but to be always carrying out his own admonitions in practice.

I turn now to the central theme of this article, namely Plato's teaching on early education in the Laws. He begins by drawing the vital distinction between true education (defined below) and the inferior, but still important process of vocational training. Beginning with the latter, Plato remarks that anyone who would be good at anything must practise that thing from childhood onwards, both in his play and in earnest. He should learn in childhood the essential elementary skills he will need later in order to practise his profession. For example, he who is to be a builder should play at building toy houses; he who is to be a farmer, at tilling the ground; and the future warrior should learn riding. The teacher should in each case provide miniature tools that imitate the real thing. The teacher should try to use children's games to channel their pleasures and inclinations towards the activities in which they will have to engage when they are adults.

It comes as a shock to realize, already at this early stage of the enquiry, the extent to which modern education has deviated from the Platonic model. In modern practice, the choice of career is usually made on or after completion of secondary schooling, that is, at an age between 16 and 20 years. This, says Plato, is far too late, although perhaps not irremediably so, for he does add that education which has taken a wrong direction is capable of reformation. This work of reformation, however, is a lifelong undertaking. The true Platonic principle is that the child's ultimate vocation is established and fixed in the nursery. This is an aspect of the broader principle that the most important part of education is right training in the nursery. This principle, largely ignored until fairly recently by modern educational theory, is remarkable for its far-reaching implications. One of them is that the entire

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12 Protagoras 325c-e.
13 Laws 729b-c. Compare the analogous principle in ancient Indian education: note 7 above.
14 Laws 643c-644a.
15 Laws 643a.
16 Laws 643b-c.
17 Laws 644a.
18 Laws 643d.
19 See note 1 and text thereto above.
direction and outcome of an individual's life is determined at the nursery stage. Absent right training in the nursery, the remainder of the child's life consists at best of attempts to remedy the failure. Thus the importance of the formative influence of nursery training on the life of the individual can hardly be overstated.

But how is the child's vocational inclination to be determined in the nursery by those responsible for his growth and development, namely parents, nurses and teachers? Nowhere in the Laws does Plato address this intriguing practical question in any depth. His only pointer is that the teacher should provide for each child miniature tools that imitate the real thing. From this it has been inferred that the child, crawling among the toys scattered around the nursery, is naturally drawn towards those to which he feels attracted. Thus is his vocational inclination revealed to the teacher. Once the child's future vocation has been established beyond doubt in this manner, the die is cast: the remainder of his life then ineluctably follows the predetermined course. To the modern mindset, this process may appear to imprison the child in a straitjacket from which there is no escape. It is arguable, however, that the early determination of a citizen's later function in society must engender lifelong confidence, certainty and a clear sense of direction in the child. These are qualities vital for the conduct of life.

We shall misread Plato, however, if we take his primary educational focus to be vocational training. The latter, as we shall soon see, is of secondary importance. Thus Plato's key principle, namely that the most important part of education is right training in the nursery, will turn out to refer primarily to true education and not, as it has appeared until now, to vocational training, which Plato describes as 'education in the narrower sense'. In Plato's own words:

[L]et's not leave our description of education in the air. When we abuse or commend the upbringing of individual people and say that one of us is educated and the other uneducated, we sometimes use this latter term of men who have in fact had a thorough education — one directed towards petty trade or the merchant-shipping business or something like that. But I take it that for the purpose of the present discussion we are not going to treat this sort of thing as 'education'; what we have in mind is education from childhood in virtue, a training which produces a keen desire to

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20 Laws 644b.
21 Laws 643c.
22 Laws 643d.
23 Laws 643e.
24 Laws 643d-644a, transl. Saunders.
become a perfect citizen who knows how to rule and be ruled as justice demands. I suppose we should want to mark off this sort of training from others and reserve the title ‘education’ for it alone. A training directed to acquiring money or a robust physique, or even to some intellectual facility not guided by reason and justice, we should want to call coarse and illiberal and say that it had no claim whatever to be called education. (Plato’s emphasis.)

Plato’s notion of true education is thus very specific: at the heart of it lies instruction in virtue with a clear socio-political aim, namely to enable the child, once he becomes an adult, to participate fully in the affairs of the state. The aim of training in virtue, in other words, is social and ethical rather than spiritual; it aims at producing perfect conduct in the citizen rather than at the pursuit of truth for its own sake.

Several features of this notion of true education call for comment. First, by placing virtue at the heart of it, Plato insists on value-based education from the very outset. In so doing, he provides a moral and ethical impetus which is almost entirely absent from today’s secular systems of education. The general absence of Platonic virtue from modern early education goes a long way towards explaining the ills that increasingly beset our societies: crime, dishonesty, callousness and corruption. Secondly, by the term ‘virtue’ in this formulation of true education, Plato means the aggregate of the four cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, wisdom and courage.25 Thirdly, Plato understands, as we today do not, that the whole, that is, the state, matters more than the individual, that the individual forms part of the fabric of the collective and exists to serve the whole. We today, in contrast, have placed the individual on a pedestal, and the price we pay is the cult of selfishness and the destructive divisions that characterize our societies.26 Plato’s educational aim is to produce the perfect citizen, capable of obedience and command alike, for the two are inseparable: only he who has learnt to obey can

25 Laws 965c-d. Plato describes these virtues in detail in the Republic passim.
26 While Plato confined himself to the traditional opposition between an atomistic (individualistic) and holistic (universalistic) view of society, it is important to note that an alternative paradigm has developed since the beginning of the 17th century. At that time, the Dutch political theorist, Althusius, realized that the traditional whole-parts dichotomy fails to take account of the fact that not every societal entity is a part of the state (my emphasis). Thus provinces and municipalities are true parts of the state, but non-political societal institutions such as families and churches, are not. See C.J. Friedrich (transl.), Politica methodice digesta of Johannes Althusius (New York 1979). I am indebted to Professor Danie Strauss for drawing my attention to Althusius and his thought.
lead, command and rightly rule. Examples of such citizens in the world today are not easily found.

It is clear by now that the bulk of what we call education today is, in Platonic terms, little more than vocational training. It follows that the majority of highly skilled professionals (for example doctors, engineers, nuclear scientists and economists), who have not received intensive early instruction in virtue, must be regarded as uneducated in Platonic terms. Conversely, a street-sweeper or labourer who has received early instruction in civic and moral values, would be considered to be educated in the true, Platonic sense.

Plato, as we have seen, does offer some consolation to those who have not received this indispensable early training in virtue: the defect can be cured by lifelong remedial training. He adds: ‘As to wisdom and true and fixed opinions, happy is the man who acquires them, even when declining in years; and we may say that he who possesses them, and the blessings which are contained in them, is a perfect man.’

Education, we have seen, is first given through music, in the forms of dance and song. The one who is well educated is not he who merely sings and dances well, but he who knows what is good in song and dance, delights in what is good and rejects what is bad. Base dances and songs must invariably harm their devotees, while those who prefer fine musical forms will inevitably derive good from them. It is in earliest childhood that the seeds of judgement and discrimination must be sown, so that the decision to prefer the fine to the coarse in dance and song (and by extension in art) may later be made as a matter of course and without fail.

Plato recognizes, however, that the implementation of such a system of value-based musical education cannot be left to the whim of teachers, nurses and parents. What agency, then, is available to ensure that only the finest in music and dance reaches the eyes and ears of children from their earliest years onwards? It is the laws of the state which must provide the indispensable foundation for true education. On the legislator, therefore, rests the great responsibility of ensuring that preprimary and later education comply with Platonic principle. Not surprisingly, therefore, Plato lays emphasis in what follows on the role of the legislator in the field of education, and on the nature of the legal regime or mechanism necessary to implement a system of true education in the field of music, literature and art. The mechanism.

27 See text to note 15.
28 Laws 644b.
29 Laws 653a.
30 See text to note 9.
31 Laws 654a-656d passim; 802d-e.
32 Republic 401b-402a.
favoured by Plato is akin to censorship. This is a term upon which we today, in our unrelenting pursuit of licence without limit, bestow a pejorative connotation.

We fail also to appreciate the clear distinction between, on the one hand, Platonic regulation in the field of education and, on the other hand, modern censorship which is almost invariably associated with authoritarian governments. These seek to restrict their citizens’ access to literature, art and music primarily for political ends. The character of censorship of this kind is almost entirely negative. In contrast, Platonic regulation of the arts serves cultural and educational aims; it plays a pivotal part in character formation, and in seeking to ensure that only the finest music, literature and art reach the child, is predominantly positive in outlook. Such regulation of early education, if widely practised today, would, without more, arrest and reverse the downward slide of our societies into ever-deepening darkness and ignorance. It is thus the task of the legislator to provide this vital regulation in the field of the arts. To perform that task properly, the legislator will certainly need to possess in ample measure the Platonic virtues of courage, temperance, wisdom and justice.33

The relationship between music and law runs deep, for there exists, as Plato points out, an etymological identity between them: the name for the laws (nomoi) is also the name which was anciently given to certain lyric songs.34 We thus have striking confirmation, at the most fundamental level of language, of the validity of the Platonic principle, discussed below, that when musical modes change, the laws of the state must ineluctably change to the same extent, no more and no less.35 Plato, as we shall see, deduces this principle, not from etymology, but from his own study and empirical observation of the Egyptian civilization.

In the Republic,36 Plato explains the causal relationship, largely forgotten today, between good education and the well-being of the state. The state, he says, once started well, moves with accumulating force like a wheel. Good nurture and education of the young, if properly sustained, implant good constitutions. These, taking root in sound education, constantly improve, to the benefit of both the individual and the polity. In order to attain to this outcome, it is essential that music and gymnastic, the foundation of early education, be preserved in their original forms, and no innovation made. The rulers must do their utmost to maintain these forms intact: any musical

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33 Republic 402b-c.
34 Laws 800a.
35 Republic 424c.
36 Republic 424a-425a.
innovation is to be shunned, as likely to endanger the whole state. When modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state always change with them. The guardians must, therefore, lay the foundations of their fortress in music. Failure to do so allows lawlessness to steal imperceptibly into the state, in the form of amusement, and as though it were harmless. Harmless it is not, for little by little, this spirit of licence, finding a home, imperceptibly penetrates into manners, customs and fashions, then invades contracts. From those, it goes on recklessly to invade laws and constitutions. The end result is an overthrow of all rights, both private and public. Examples of this process of disintegration at work in the present age are not far to seek.

Thus, if the amusements of children become lawless, they will produce lawless children, who can never grow up into law-abiding citizens. The effect of allowing innovation in childhood games is the erosion of reverence for long-established customs, traditions and laws, which alone ensure continuity and stability in the state. Unbridled innovation of this kind must eventually corrode the very fabric of the state, ensuring its disintegration. Conversely, when children make a good beginning in play and absorb lawfulness from music and poetry, this habit later accompanies them in all their actions and fosters their growth, correcting anything in the state which may have gone wrong before. This latter picture stands in direct opposition to the former.

I have paraphrased this passage in its entirety, for it paints an uncannily and disturbingly accurate picture of our contemporary societies. In these societies, innovation in musical, artistic, cinematic and literary forms is not only allowed but indeed encouraged as a manifestation of an enlightened, free-thinking mindset. Those who devise something new and unusual in forms, colours, sounds and the like are held in special esteem, whereas Plato would regard them as a harbinger of the greatest evil. Our worship of novelty seems to know no bounds. It is important to note at this point that the kind of innovation which Plato condemns in express terms is not scientific, technological or medical, but specifically cultural. Can it then be denied that there exists a causal link between, on the one hand, the

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37 Consider the current proliferation of electronic toys and games, most of which remain in fashion for a year or two before being discarded and superseded by new ones.
38 In *Laws* 797a-c and 798b-d, Plato reiterates those principles, laying emphasis again on the deadly socio-political dangers of allowing innovations to be made to musical, artistic and literary forms.
39 *Laws* 797b.
degeneration of modern cultural forms and, on the other hand, the political turmoil, lawlessness, public and private dishonesty, corruption, social fragmentation and cynicism which are such ubiquitous features of modern life? There are those who will rightly demand empirical proof of the causal relationship asserted by Plato. Such proof would call for a close comparison between political, economic and social conditions in states which allow cultural innovation, and those in a state which does not. Plato, as we shall see shortly, cites Egypt as a living example of a state in which musical and artistic norms remained unchanged for millennia.

Man's generally torpid condition is, according to Plato, responsible for our failure to observe and diagnose the causal relationship under consideration. Thus he says that in states generally 'no one has observed that the plays of childhood have a great deal to do with the permanence or lack of permanence in legislation.' This acute observation holds good today even more than it did in Plato's time. It is not easy for us today to accept that the plays and music which constitute earliest education exert a direct and profound influence on the key institutions of the state, in particular the laws: to the extent that the plays of childhood remain unchanged, says Plato, those institutions will be preserved intact.

Plato traces the steps in the process by which changes in children's games distort the polity and the laws of the state. When, instead of deterring them, teachers and parents accede to the desire of children for innovation in games, these children will grow up to be men who are different from the previous generation. Being different, they desire a different sort of life. Driven by that desire, they want different institutions and laws. There follows then what Plato describes as the greatest of evils to states.

Consider, for example, the change in musical taste from swing, to rock ’n roll, to heavy metal rock, to rap and to kwaito over the last seventy years or so. Similar changes can be observed in the fields of modern art, literature and dance. Plato would hold these changes primarily responsible for the current worldwide increase in lawlessness, dishonesty, and political instability.

In contrast, South Africa could serve as a prime example of a state in which official indifference to cultural innovation, coupled with minimal enforcement of the laws, has produced a society in which primary and secondary state education is dysfunctional, lawlessness is rampant, and political corruption is rife.

In Plato's own words (Law 797b-d, transl Saunders): 'If you control the way children play, and the same children always play the same games under the same rules and in the same conditions, and get pleasure from the same toys, you will find that the conventions of adult life too are left in peace without alteration. ... Change, we shall find, except in something evil, is extremely dangerous.'
Questions arise. Is there any state today with the political will to enforce a regime of Platonic education through legislation? Even where the political will does exist, is it possible in practice to maintain childhood plays and musical fashions unchanged in an age of globalization, in which the craving for novelty knows no bounds? The Internet and other means of electronic communication ensure that new games and musical fashions easily cross political boundaries. It would seem that only a paradigm shift, a change of mindset on a global scale will suffice to stem the tide of innovation in children’s games and toys. Yet, these and other difficulties notwithstanding, can we continue to ignore the uncomfortable scenario which Plato lays before us, a scenario whose validity is amply confirmed by the reality of our own age? Can we afford to continue to dismiss the idea of fixed, unalterable values in literature and the arts with such tired and meaningless labels as ‘reactionary’, ‘conservative’, ‘authoritarian’, ‘prescriptive’, ‘repressive’, and ‘idealistic’? In our present circumstances, would we not do better at least to put the Platonic principles to the test? The paradigm shift involved here would require us to re-evaluate what we have lost in this age, namely a reverence for stability, tradition and custom. We need to rediscover that these are vitally important for the spiritual, moral, political and social well-being of mankind. In the face of our insatiable craving for novelty, we need to rediscover a reverence for the eternal unchanging which underlies and supports the flux of human activity. It would take a fearless legislator, willing to swim against the current, to initiate a paradigm shift of this nature.

Plato repeatedly makes the point that true education rests ultimately on the force of law. Thus, for example, the true legislator will persuade, and, if he cannot persuade, will compel the poet to express as he ought, by fair and noble words in his rhythms, figures and melodies, the music of temperate, brave and in every way good men.45 Elsewhere, Plato proposes a standard by which poetic composition may be judged: the poet shall compose nothing contrary to the ideas of the lawful, or just, or beautiful, or good which are allowed in the state. Judges and guardians of the law, appointed for the purpose, will monitor the poet’s compliance with this standard,46 which presupposes a shared value system in the state, a degree of unanimity which is almost incomprehensible to our modern mindset, founded on ideas of cultural diversity and freedom of the individual.

Tales of fiction, like poetry, must be regulated by law, which will approve fine or beautiful stories and reject those which are not. Nurses and mothers must be persuaded to tell children only the authorized stories; they are to

45 Laws 660a.
46 Laws 801c-d.
shape the mind with such tales, even more fondly than they mould the body
with their hands.47

And how is the divinity to be represented in such tales? God, says Plato, is
immutable, remains absolutely and for ever in his own form, is perfectly
simple and true, and does not deceive mankind in word or deed. He must be
represented as such.48 This is a precept of timeless validity, yet one which is
largely forgotten, if not actively opposed, in our secular age. The damage
occasioned to our moral and social fabric by such ignorant denial is
immense.49

Plato is only too well aware that his scheme of early education will be
difficult to realize. In almost every state of the ancient world known to Plato
(as of our modern world) education in music and dance was allowed to
proceed without reference to virtue and vice.50 Must we conclude, then, that
value-driven education of the Platonic kind was, is, and always will be a
utopian ideal, incapable of practical attainment? Not quite, for there is,
according to Plato, one exceptional case which takes his educational scheme
out of the realm of the ideal and into that of the possible and the practical.
By his treatment of this vital and unique exception, Plato means to show us
that his educational principles, though difficult to implement, are indeed
capable of realization. This solitary exception is ancient Egypt.51 Plato is said
to have spent considerable time in Egypt. His first-hand knowledge of that
country would then at least partially explain his choosing it to exemplify the
practical implementation of his educational scheme.

In the Laws, Cleinias asks ‘And what are the laws about music and dancing
in Egypt?’ The Athenian stranger replies ‘You will wonder when I tell you.’52
With these words, the scene is set: the Athenian proceeds to explain that the
principle at the heart of Platonic education – that young citizens must be
habituated to forms and strains of virtue – was a living reality in Egypt.
These forms and strains were fixed, and models or patterns of them were put
on public display in the Egyptian temples. No painter or artist was allowed to
innovate upon these forms, or to leave the traditional forms and invent new
ones. In Plato’s time, Egyptian works of art were painted or moulded in the

47 Republic 377b-c.
48 Republic 381c-383a passim.
49 A number of books which deny the existence of God have recently appeared.
Chief among these is perhaps Richard Dawkins’s The God Delusion.
50 Laws 656d.
51 According to Saunders, Laws 506, we have little more than the word of the
Athenian stranger in the Laws for the following account of the regulation of cultural
norms in Egypt. See also G.R Morrow, Plate’s Cretan City (Princeton 1960) 355.
52 Laws 656d.
same forms which they had had literally 10,000 years earlier: there was no difference in quality. This was the supreme achievement, not so much of Egyptian artists, as of Egyptian legislators and statesmen. Plato is not suggesting that Egypt was a model of perfection: his aim is to show that it is possible in practice to choose music which embodies a natural truth and correctness, and put it on a firm footing by means of legislation.\textsuperscript{53}

To make this selection is no easy task. To uphold and sustain the true musical forms over a period of 10,000 years requires an ongoing act of political will perhaps unparalleled in human history. Why did it happen in Egypt rather than elsewhere? It seems that in that country, the love of novelty which arises out of pleasure in the new and weariness of the old, did not have sufficient strength to corrupt the consecrated song and dance.\textsuperscript{54} How different is our modern world, blighted as it is by our insatiable craving for novelty, which is carefully and constantly nurtured by advertising and the media.

Plato's treatment of the relationship between music and legislation in ancient Egypt contains in my view the key to the prolonged survival and well-being of a state, ancient or modern.\textsuperscript{55} We continue to ignore his strictures at our peril. Failing the maintenance of cultural forms by force of law, a state must inevitably slide into licence and disorder, with consequent disintegration of the social fabric. This process is clearly discernible (and is in some cases far advanced) in many contemporary states. It is surely only a matter of time before conditions in such states become ripe for the emergence of a tyranny or a dictatorship, which in Platonic terms is the worst form of government.

What the Platonic model, founded on the Egyptian wisdom, envisages is not the emerging modern trend towards 'nanny' or 'big brother' states, which exercise centralized, bureaucratic supervision over the life of the individual. What Plato offers us is nothing less than the key to the establishment of a

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Laws} 656d-657a. The literature that I have consulted provides scant independent historical evidence to show that ancient Egypt, over centuries and millennia, prohibited cultural innovation in the way Plato describes. The credibility of Plato's account, however, is supported by the fact that he almost certainly visited Egypt, spent considerable time there, and acquired his knowledge of that country at first hand. Plato's account, as that of a reliable eye-witness, is therefore to be preferred to the views of modern Egyptologists.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Laws} 657b.

\textsuperscript{55} See R. Barrow, \textit{Greek and Roman Education} (London 1976) 42.
long-enduring civilization, one that later ages will look back upon in wonder and admiration.\textsuperscript{56}

In the Platonic educational regime, the key central figure responsible for ensuring that no deviation occurs from the prescribed and hallowed forms is the legislator. Legal regulation alone is, of course, insufficient to ensure the onward transmission of the original cultural forms, as standards of eternal, unchanging virtue. The enshrinement of these forms in a fixed, unalterable law can be realized only after they have first been identified and adopted by a person or body of persons of elevated wisdom.

What was the means adopted by the Egyptians to exclude innovation in, or deviation from established modes of dance and song? Their method involved a religious consecration of the approved dances or melodies. Any deviation from the consecrated forms was punished by the priests and priestesses, acting in concert with the guardians of the law. The transgressor was punished by expulsion, presumably a kind of exile. In addition, he rendered himself open to a charge of impiety.\textsuperscript{57} This powerful combination of a religious with a legal sanction would lie beyond the reach of modern secular states, even those which possess the political will to prohibit innovation in cultural forms. Joint enforcement of the sanction by the religious and secular authorities in the state is probably indispensable to the maintenance of cultural forms envisaged by Plato. It would therefore be difficult to implement the Egyptian model in an age or in a state in which a division has been effected between the divine and the secular.

Plato insists on compulsory schooling for both males and females. Pupils are regarded as belonging to the state rather than to their parents.\textsuperscript{58} There are modern thinkers who favour the abolition of compulsory schooling laws of the kind enshrined in the South African constitution.\textsuperscript{59} This idea is an understandable result of the alarming poverty of education offered by most state schools. In Plato's system, by contrast, children in the nursery and in state schools receive an education in virtue, an education based on the finest standards of art and music. These standards are absorbed by and diffused uniformly throughout society.

There can be little doubt at this stage that Plato regards education of the young as a matter of supreme importance. Not surprisingly, then, he holds that only the finest of the citizens is eligible for election to the post of

\textsuperscript{56} Witness the intense contemporary interest in the ancient Egyptian civilization, as shown by the recent proliferation of popular literature on the subject.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Laws} 789e-799b, 800a-b.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Laws} 804d.

\textsuperscript{59} See, for example, E. Davie, \textit{Unchain the Child: Abolish Compulsory Schooling Laws} (Johannesburg 2005).
Minister of Education, a portfolio which he considers to be the most important in the state. The procedure for this election requires the involvement of the highest office-bearers in the state.\textsuperscript{60}

Taken collectively, Plato's principles of education of young children are accurately described by the Greek term \textit{paideia}. This term is defined by Werner Jaeger as follows:\textsuperscript{61}

\textit{Paideia} ... is a difficult thing to define; ... it refuses to be confined within an abstract formula ... It is impossible to avoid bringing in modern expressions like civilization, culture, tradition, literature or education. But none of them really covers what the Greeks mean by \textit{paideia}. Each of them is confined to one aspect of it: they cannot take in the same field as the Greek concept unless we employ them all together. Yet the very essence of scholarship and scholarly activity is based on the original unity of all these aspects - the unity which is expressed in the Greek word, not the diversity emphasized and completed by modern developments. The ancients were persuaded that education and culture are not a formal art or an abstract theory, distinct from the objective historical structure of a nation's spiritual life. They held them to be embodied in literature, which is the real expression of all higher culture.

It is \textit{paideia} in this sense that is so sorely needed in our age and in our systems of education. Plato can provide it, but only if we are open to his wise teaching.

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\textsuperscript{60} Laws 765d-766c.

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