Learningguild Letter

2.2008

Dear members and friends of Learningguild,

Often, on entering university, students have heard from lecturers or others the remark "Now you're on your own." The intention has been to warn that there is a marked contrast between school, where to a large extent students have been told what to do next, required to do it, and given plenty of guidance, and university, where in general they are not. I shall argue here that this is a false and harmful antithesis, and that at every level of education, and in every educational institution (including Learningguild), those who can understand it should be invited to welcome and put into practice a more complex and balanced message, which can be summed up in these words: "You are an inheritor, and a member, of communities of enquiring and sharing. You need to go on learning how best to engage in those activities, drawing deeply on the experience of others in those communities and contributing to them. In that context, in which there are many sources of assistance and friendly encouragement, so much depends on **you**, on your readiness to do your utmost, if, with such help, you are to come anywhere near fulfilling your potential as a contributing member."

This letter, whose order and, I hope, balance is substantially the same as that of those three sentences, develops in relation to education the theme of responsive cooperation which I presented in *Learningguild Letter* 2.2005, and in Sec. 4 of its supplement. A genuine community is not a mere aggregation of people in a particular place and time, but a group of human beings, preferably diverse in age and of both genders, in which there is a commitment to recognize and foster common goods, as well as individual freedoms, and to support one another. The best kind of cooperation is responsive in that it displays sensitivity, appreciation, warmth, enthusiasm and encouragement: there is an alert readiness to notice or discover needs that are not yet met.

How far educational institutions often are from approximating to these ideals. The main question many a serious student needs to ask, and be helped to answer, is "What should I be **doing** in this or that course or area of study?" In fact the student is often left to make what he or she can of a series of lectures and/or books, and to undertake assignments (now often counting for n% of a final mark) with very little guidance on what to do and what not to do. How often an assignment is returned with comments saying or suggesting that the writer had not done what was wanted, and how discouraging and time-wasting that can be. Moreover, each set of students begins and continues in a course with little or no gain, apart from past exam papers, from the experience of their predecessors. In Learningguild we are providing much more: on our website now are the four exam papers for 2007-8 and detailed reports, written primarily for students, on each of those exams. In all, since 1987, there have been forty-three exam papers, all with the same structure, and on many of them there are reports. In *Learningguild Notes on English* there are explanations of some of the areas where students whose first language is not English often make errors. (When I write here of what Learningguild does, or of my own experience as student and teacher, it is not with complacency but rather with a desire to respond to the fair question "You say you have these ideals, but what have you actually done to put them into practice?")

There is seldom the right balance between three desirable components: teachers' expositions, discussions in pairs or groups, and individual exploration. One major weakness in most universities (Oxford and Cambridge have been the traditional exceptions) is that students become lecture-dependent: the syllabus is, *de facto*, what the lecturer or lecturers make it by what they talk about from week to week. Hence the anxious question "What have I missed?" and the gibe that university education is a matter of "Get it down, get it up, give it back". A fellow-student in Melbourne's Philosophy Department said to Margaret (my wife) in 1970 that she never read the books that lecturers recommended ("They only confuse you"), and that she liked the lectures of my colleague Father D'Arcy, giving as her reason that "He gives you good notes". (She did not mean printed notes.)

What can best be done to enable students to think for themselves? I have long emphasized the indispensability of becoming able to do well in tasks of the form "Present and discuss what author A says about subject S in place P", where P (for students) is normally a chapter or article, or a part of one; but I have now realized that a teacher needs to **show** students how to do that well, explaining the pitfalls. I have found it helpful, both as a university teacher and in leading Learningguild's philosophy seminar, to focus on **questions** and the student's need to understand them, distinguish different answers to them, and develop his or her own answers to some of them, trying to avoid oversimplification or exaggeration. In Philosophy I at Melbourne I used to hand out sheets headed "Some Questions for Investigation", and they provided much of the agenda for my lectures. In the last year (1974) in which I lectured in that subject at Melbourne, I divided the second of the two plenary sessions each week into halves, asking the students (in the Public Lecture Theatre) to discuss some questions I gave them in small groups, and to bring to me some further questions to which I would respond in the second half. I once arranged with a colleague, the late Don Gunner, that I would present, in one of his lecture-hours and after he had spoken, a more favourable view of Kant's ethics than his. Two law students came up to me afterwards, and one said "If you two can't agree, what are we students supposed to do?" The answer was, of course, to seek to understand the different views and to think for themselves. Kant's own motto for the Enlightenment was "*Sapere aude*", which could be translated as "Dare to think for yourself." (See *L'g L* 1.1997.) Later, as Professor at Cape Town, where students had been used to five sessions a week in each course, I abolished the Monday one, gave Thursday to tutorials, and offered members of staff other than the person who lectured on Tuesdays and Wednesdays the opportunity to contribute at a plenary session on Fridays.

If one disapproves of spoonfeeding students, one must not spoonfeed, while not giving to students either expositions or tasks which are too difficult for them, and should show students what good study on their part involves. I think of the subject called Logic in 1954, my second year as a student at Melbourne. Douglas Gasking was the lecturer, and certainly no spoonfeeder; yet he did not show us how to be somewhat independent of his lectures. He had set down as one of two prescribed books Strawson's excellent new one *Introduction to Logical Theory*. In fact he did not refer to it in lectures, and certainly did not require us to read any parts of it; so, given the conventions of the lecture-dominated form of university study, we did not. How valuable it would have been (not least for my own work in logic then and since) if he had said in writing at the outset, in a description of the scope of the course and the nature of the end-of-year exam (with previous papers and/or sample questions), that particular parts of that book should be studied closely, and that we should put in questions about them, which he would take up in some of the hours set down for lectures. In fact no system of education can be adjudged satisfactory that does not depend on the eliciting and encouragement of questions and comments from students, and some class discussion of them, as well as the provision of many by the teacher. In my own development it helped me greatly that at 11 in a London guild school, Haberdashers' Aske's Hampstead, I was encour-

aged to start and edit a handwritten class magazine ("The Kestrel"), and at 14 at Melbourne High School had an English teacher who encouraged discussion, especially of the poems in the excellent anthology *In Fealty to Apollo*.

Everyone who lectures can normally adopt one helpful practice, namely to stay at the front until most of the students have left the hall or room and be ready to give at least a brief answer to a question or arrange an appointment. I well remember how disappointed I was, when I was on leave there in 1973-4, at a tendency in Oxford for the lecturer promptly to disappear through the door into the Senior Common Room, as though no more was appropriate than to give the lecture. But here we come to one of the crucial questions for universities: how much emphasis is to be put on teaching and the availability to students without which it can be or seem remote? Not long ago I heard a teacher of philosophy in a New Zealand university say that selection committees wanted testimony that a potential appointee was at least an acceptable teacher, but otherwise the emphasis was on research achievement and potential. That is generally judged now in terms of numbers of papers in refereed journals, the more prestigious the better. It is a policy that militates against the health of universities, for that health requires a readiness (on most weekdays, not necessarily all) both for arranged meetings between a staff member and one or more students and for spontaneous chats. How seldom, now, as I walk around my old university of Melbourne, do I catch sight of one of those chats, which used not to be uncommon. It is far from enough to say, as in Melbourne's Annual Report of 2007, "Here face-to-face teaching will be the norm". (What about saying rather 'discussion and general and individual guidance'?) At Boston in, I think, 2002 I was told by one member of the Arts Faculty that the common practice was to keep one's books at home and to work there except when one had to be in one's university room (let's not use the word 'office') for stated hours of availability (usually two or three in the week?). As a Philosophy staff member at Melbourne (1965-74), I usually had one weekday, and sometimes another half-day, entirely at home (or in my parents' home, when my mother typed for me), but otherwise I was mostly at the university, often available without appointment. The change I made at Cape Town, mentioned above, enabled every staff member to have Monday clear for research (or, if they wished, for a long weekend), but I wished us to be at the University and normally available to each other and to the students on other weekdays.

I believe that students will become more and more disillusioned with university life if more and more staff (younger and older) think that they will get little credit for excellence in lecturing and tutoring (including the materials they have found or devised), or for accessibility and helpfulness to students, when questions of tenure and promotion are decided. The present tendency, especially in the humanities, for young staff to concentrate in an overspecialized way on some area of research, to keep trying to publish in it, and to be obliged to continue for several years without reasonable assurance of tenure, even if not in a full-time position, has militated against their own health as balanced scholars and against effective teaching of students and discussion and friendship with them. Staff are often themselves disillusioned and can become cynical. I recognize that such ideals as I have presented here have become harder to put into practice in Australian universities now that government support covers so much less of their budgets than it did.

Even if universities or particular departments are healthy so far as guidance and availability go, there is a need to establish and foster communities including former members of such courses, and others interested, in which (not merely by the occasional open lecture) further enquiry is encouraged. Moreover, whether there are such communities in universities or not, there is also a need for an institution such as Learningguild to do what we are doing: arrange talks and discussion, encourage continuing enquiry and the sharing of it, and conduct an examination in the fundamental skills and sensitivities of reasoning and expression, not linked to a course and of a repeatable kind that universities do not offer.

There is a very valuable book by Richard J. Light of Harvard called *Making the Most of College*. (The word 'college' is used in the United States to cover the undergraduate stage of university education.) It was published by Harvard University Press in 2001. Light had long been a professor of education at Harvard, and his book is based on interviews with 1600 undergraduates: he himself interviewed 400 (p.6). The findings are admirably summarized on pp. 7-11, of which I'd gladly supply photocopies. Here are four extracts from those pages.

> When we asked students to think of a specific, critical incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, four-fifths of them chose a situation outside of the classroom.
>
> [Students value] getting quick feedback from the professor – ideally with an opportunity to revise and make changes before receiving a final grade.
>
> … students who get the most out of college, who grow the most academically, and who are happiest, organize their time to include activities with faculty members, or with several other students, focused around accomplishing substantive academic work.
>
> I would have guessed that [students] value good writing, but I didn't realize how deeply many of them care about it, or how strongly they hunger for specific suggestions about how to improve it.

Chapter 5 begins with these statements:

> Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience. Graduating seniors report that certain kinds of advising, often described as asking unexpected questions, were critical for their success.

It is worth noting how much students may need good personal advice even though they have hitherto been successful. Harvard students are of course in general among the highly successful. I should have benefited greatly (if I had been sensible enough to take such advice) if an Oxford tutor had said to me, in the first year of two when I was a Rhodes Scholar there, "You're an athlete, doing quite a lot of training: you must feel rather tired by about 9 p.m. Have you thought of getting up at, say, six, getting plenty of work done in the mornings especially, and going to bed, mostly, about ten or soon after?" and "Do you maintain sets of structural notes to which you can readily add, both for preparing essays and for frequent revision?" It has taken me many years to recognize and take seriously my need for each of those habits, and there is always room to learn more about what makes for fruitful study (and teaching).

There is of course an implicit question in both the questions in the previous paragraph: "How serious are you?" Here we move to "so much depends on you". I well remember a remark of Bob Priestley, in the sixties Assistant Dean of Arts at Melbourne, to the effect that it made such a difference when a student decided that he or she didn't need to go to a disco on a Friday night because he or she had become absorbed in and by study. Forty years later, when entertainment has become far too prominent an aspect of life, that point deserves a special emphasis. Two years ago, I realized that my attempt (at the request of his father) to help a university student, a native speaker, to learn English grammar and good writing was futile, because he was not revising and not eager to learn, and was employed for numerous hours a week, not, as I had supposed, to pay for accommodation, but to keep up his entertainments, for example, Saturday breakfast out with his friends.

By contrast, there is that "clerk of Oxenford", the Oxford scholar whom Chaucer, in about 1387, unforgettably described in the General Prologue to his *Canterbury Tales*, and who remains a model for any student, whether or not he or she is also a teacher:

> For him was levere have at his beddes heed| Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed,| Of Aristotle and his philosophye,| Than robes riche, or fithele, or gay sautrye.|
>
> ['For him was levere' = 'he would rather', 'fithele' and 'sautrye', fiddle (violin) and zither.]

The last six lines make a wonderful portrait of a man who spoke concisely, perceptively and with integrity, and loved both his studies and his teaching:

> Of studye took he moost cure and moost heede.| Noght oo word spak he moore than was neede,| And that was seid in forme and reverence,| And short, and quik, and full of heigh sentence.| Sowninge in moral vertu was his speche,| And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche.
>
> [We might say 'care' for 'cure', 'one' for 'oo', 'significance' for 'sentence', and 'imbued with' for 'sowninge in'. I am grateful to Jill Mann's Penguin Classics edition.]

Dorothy L. Sayers wrote that the Paris students clasped logic to their arms like a bride when Peter Abelard came to Paris. Melbourne's Professor of Physiology R.D. ("Panzee") Wright used to say that he looked for research students who had "fire in the belly". When B.F.Westcott, the nineteenth-century biblical scholar who was later a much-loved bishop, was a professor at Cambridge, he said "I would give a degree to a man who could ask twelve good questions." There is no substitute for the **eager seriousness** that is conveyed by the Latin noun '*studium*', verb '*studēre*' and adjective '*studiōsus*', and the Greek '*spoudē*' and its cognates.

The serious person combines ideals and practicalities, if he or she is not to become frustrated and do less work, and less fruitful work, than might have been achieved. So to do one's utmost, as the student should be invited to do, requires that one has aims for years, months, periods within a month, and days, and gets as much "deskwork" done as one can in successive stages of the day, especially but not only in the mornings, setting tasks and recording progress and time spent, and keeping bound and unbound sets of papers in good order and developing many of them; but also that one maintains the readiness and energy to think about one's work at odd times and often make notes. Tasks, for the student and the teacher, need normally to include both things one is required to do and things one sees to be desirable. For the student, the latter should certainly include the discovery and critical study of some books and articles that the teacher has not mentioned.

If in future I manage to write a book of guidance for students called *Gladly Learn*, my chapter-headings are likely to be verbs: Enquire, Share, Moderate, Aim, Order, Develop, Persevere, Love. 'Moderate', because one should not bite off more than one can chew or take on more than one can reasonably hope to achieve. ('Can reasonably hope' is different from both 'can possibly hope' and 'is likely'.) Perseverance is essential: Virgil wrote in his *Georgics* (1.145f) the famous words "*labor omnia vicit*| *Improbus*": "unrelenting work has overcome all", i.e., all obstacles. T.E.Page in his edition has at line 119 the comment on '*improbus*' (or '*inprobus*') that "it expresses an absence of all moderation". There is indeed a tension between moderation and perseverance, and one may need plenty of thought and some advice to get the balance right.

In the sentence at the end of my first paragraph which I have made a text for this letter, I ended with "if, with such help, you are to come anywhere near to fulfilling your potential as a contributing member". To get near fulfilling one's potential one must first appreciate something of what it is. Therefore eager attention needs to be given at all stages of education to enabling students to have the experience of success in giving a relevant answer, asking a pertinent question, finding something for themselves, helping someone else to understand. There is the lovely story of the boy who, on a visit to France, was invited by his teacher to ask in French for an ice cream, and returned saying "It works!" As the student (or the scholar, or the teacher) continues, there should be the experience of finding some things both difficult and satisfying, and of gladness that one is having to exert one's energies and stretch one's powers.

"I **am** a contributing member of my community!" Attention to the delight of and need for that discovery, and the continuing satisfaction and perspective it can bring, helps us to keep in balance an emphasis both upon the individuals striving to do their utmost (whether they are students or teachers) and the communities sustaining them to which they have so much to give.

Yours in Learningguild,

John Howes

State Aid not yet equitable

JACK GREGORY, *Emeritus Professor of History at La Trobe University, follows his article "State Aid: an historical survey" (*L'g L *2.2007) with one that springs from a talk he gave at our Friday-evening meeting on August 15th 2008.*

In my previous article I summarized the history of State Aid to non-government schools in Australia, concluding that it was "a depressing one, demonstrating how the things that divide us can triumph over the things that should unite us". Here I make some comments on the current working of the policy and offer some suggestions on ways it might be made more even-handed.

I am assuming that this policy of providing financial support from public funds to "independent" schools, most of which have a more or less close connection to a religious body, will continue to be a policy of governments in Australia, State and Federal, for the foreseeable future. Not everyone wants it to be that way. For example, Catherine Deveny, *The Age*'s lively pot-stirrer, recently gave it as her opinion that "[P]rivate schools should not receive any government funding. If people want to send their kids to a school that is a social, single-gender and/or religious ghetto in an attempt for them to meet the "right" people … they should pay for it themselves. Every single cent." She went on to suggest that more parents should, as she does, send their children to State schools, and save money on the fees private schools charge, some at the rate of around $20,000 a year. But whatever the validity of her view of the social influence of private schools, and the economic logic of her advice to parents, the reality is that the private school sector in our system of education will remain large (though the current financial crisis may cause it to shrink a little) and governments will continue to subsidise it. The essential question facing us now is how much State aid to private schools should be given, and on what terms.

As to how much, the generally agreed benchmark is the amount the State governments spend per child on their schools. Since there are six separate States (plus two Territories) in Australia, there is some variation, but it should not be difficult to strike a national average — currently about $7000 per primary student and $12000 per secondary. In a liberal democratic society such as ours, all children are entitled to receive equal educational support from the State, which, by law, compels their parents to send them to school. In addition Australia, as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, recognizes that "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (Article 26). These two requirements surely bind the State to support all children, and their parents, in at least basic education. However, whether the parents' "prior right" includes a right to receive State support, whatever the kind of education and type of school chosen, does appear arguable. It is here that difficulties arise, leading some like Deveny to deny any support to those schools they see as socially and/or religiously exclusive, which therefore embody in some way the things that divide rather than unite us.

It is not easy to strike a just balance between, on the one hand, the right of particular parents to have a choice about their child's education and, on the other, the responsibility of the State to promote our basic liberal democratic values of social justice, harmony, tolerance and equality of opportunity. If a private school is prepared to be co-operative towards State educational policies which endeavour to foster such values, then it seems to me that it is entitled to substantial, possibly even

full support (up to the benchmark above), from the State. We have to recognise the existence of certain convictions, especially religious ones, within our society and the insistence of many parents on their right to choose schools which reflect those convictions. That is the reality we face in this area of public policy ─ though I must add that many parents send their children to these schools, especially at the secondary level, for reasons of social aspiration rather than religious conviction, and so have less justification for claiming State subsidy for their choice. This is what gives force to the Deveny type of objection to any aid to such schools. But not all non-State schools can be labelled socially exclusive, especially the Catholic primary schools, which educate a social group very similar to the clientele of the State schools. There is no simple, clear-cut division between all State and all "private" schools, but rather a complex variety of conditions and characteristics within each kind. We need to avoid glib judgments, such as that of John Howard dismissing State schools as "value-free", ignoring the important value these schools have embodied from their very beginnings: our shared citizenship and the aim of working towards creating a just, egalitarian society, "for all of us" as Howard also liked to say.

How to ensure that all schools which receive public funding do not simply claim (as they will) to promote, but actually do promote, this basic value is a challenge for the policy-makers. The first principle I believe they should apply is that no school should be 100% exclusive in its enrolment choices, on religious or other grounds. All state-aided schools should be required to be prepared to admit some students (up to 10%?) who do not meet their normal criteria ─ Catholic, Jewish, Muslim or whatever, though gender might be an exception. Such enrolments may not actually occur in all schools, but the principle should be enforced that the school must be open to any parents who for any reason (say geographical convenience, or educational or multicultural convictions) may wish to enrol their child in them. Some Catholic schools, I know from a grandchild's school career, already do this, but all state-funded schools should in some measure reflect the multicultural, multi-faith and pluralist diversity of our society. I would add to this principle the right of any child (or parent) to opt out of formal religious classes and observances in the school, just as all students in State Schools may opt out of their (volunteer-taught) religious sessions. In my own schooldays, and later as a teacher in the State system, I observed many Catholic children do just that.

Another basic requirement is that all aided schools should follow any nationally agreed curricula, including sensitive areas such as science (where questions about "intelligent design" may be raised) and history ("black armband" or "white-wash"?). Federal governments of both the major parties have taken some initiatives in this area, so far mainly concerning numeracy and literacy, though they will no doubt disagree about desirable constituents for some discipline. Brendan Nelson, when Federal minister for education, seemed willing to have "intelligent design" taught as part of science courses, while also insisting that flying the national flag should be required of every school receiving Federal aid, thus accepting a strange mix of fundamentalism and nationalism.

A controversial area, where authorities will no doubt tread gingerly, if at all, is sex education. The *Guardian* reported recently that this will be made a compulsory part of the national curriculum, at both primary and secondary levels, in the U.K. The curriculum would ensure that children "learn about relationships and the option of abstinence along with the facts of life" ─ including contraception, abortion and homosexuality. "Ministers indicated that schools would not be allowed to opt out of the rules", the *Guardian* added, but "Faith schools will receive separate guidance on how to provide sex and relationship education." The problems of teenage pregnancy and STDs exist in Australia as well as the UK, but we are probably a long way from such a national curriculum, and it is a question what penalties could apply to any school which

resisted such a development. Some faith-based schools seem to inculcate values at odds with nationally agreed principles, such as gender equality, but here one can only trust that society at large, rather than the school, will determine the values that ultimately prevail "Exclusive Brethren" schools seem ready to inculcate attitudes quite opposed to mainstream values such as the civic responsibility to vote, gender equality, and encouragement of education beyond the middle level. One wonders why such schools should be supported at all by the State.

In the system of aid as it has development especially during the decade of Howard-led governments, the question of equity and accountability is a sensitive one. Federal aid to State school pupils was $648 in 1995-6, and $2166 to private school pupils. By 2007-8 the figures were $1438 and $5677 (as reported in *The Age*, 25/2/08). Spokespersons for the private schools justified this discrepancy as helping to redress the fact that State government expenditure is mainly to their own schools, and emphasised that the total of State aid received by non-government schools is still well short (about 70%?) of the benchmark figure. There is a good deal of force in this argument. But doubts arise about the justice of a system which subsidises heavily not just the Catholic primary school systems (and many other smaller faith-based schools) but also schools which charge large fees and are already well resourced, in some cases extremely well. *The Age* also reported (17/2/08) that "the audited figures of the top ten schools [in Victoria in 2006] revealed that they made a collective surplus of $54 million, with their coffers bolstered by $40 million in Federal grants ..." Grants on such a scale are probably least justifiable in Victoria, where private schools have long been predominant, especially at the secondary level. But the policies of the Howard-led Federal government, especially its intro-duction of the specious "socio-economic status" system in place of earlier resource- and needs-based criteria for determining what aid each school receives, has helped give Australia overall the most divisive, inequitable and expensive system of State aid to be found anywhere. The responsibility for this goes back to earlier governments, including the Labour one led by Whitlam, which failed to attempt to integrate the large, crisis-ridden Catholic system into a national, community-centred system of schools, and through that failure created a rising tide of State aid which many other faith- and class-based schools now surf very successfully.

Whether the present government led by Rudd can, if it lasts long enough, channel Federal grants a little more in the direction of social justice and equality remains to be seen. It certainly will not be able to turn things around decisively, for it cannot afford to alienate the many middle-class parents who feel their children's prospects are better served in State-aided private schools than in State schools. If in such areas as I have outlined ─ enrolment, curricula, finances ─ the Rudd government can move the administration of that aid more strongly in the direction of community needs rather than narrower religious, class and individual interests, that is about as much as we can hope for. The educationist Harry Brighouse summarised the issue thus: "Social justice in education allows a good deal of scope for having parents choose among schools for their children …(but) … some choice schemes should of course be opposed: in particular schemes that have the government pay for private schooling without regulating the curriculum and without prohibiting top-up [fees] can be expected to undermine rather than further social justice in education" (*Social Choice and Social Justice*, pp. 206, 208). Australia under Howard embraced just such a scheme, and his heirs would be likely to retain it. State aid, I fear, is likely to continue to foster the things that divide rather than unite us.

We should particularly welcome any comments on this article. Attention might be given, for example, to forms of co-operation between State and independent schools in the sharing of resources and in sport and other activities. JH

An Australian researcher in Germany

HILARY HOWES *here combines a report on her recent work in German universities and libraries with vivid description of places to which she travelled. Hilary is the daughter of Michael and Dorothy and the sister of Janet and Elizabeth, whose articles were in our last* Letter.

My doctoral research, which I am undertaking in the Division of Pacific and Asian History at the Australian National University, focuses on two late nineteenth-century German naturalists, Adolf Bernhard Meyer (1840-1911) and Otto Finsch (1839-1917). I am interested in their travels in the Pacific (particularly New Guinea), their encounters with indigenous peoples, and the impact of these experiences on their understandings of human differences and "race". As part of this research I spent five months of 2008 in Germany locating primary sources – travel journals, personal and professional letters and museum correspondence – and published books and articles not available in Australia. This trip, as well as being crucial to my thesis, gave me the opportunity to travel, meet old friends and make new ones, and improve my grasp of German.

The adventure began in Berlin, at the *Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences). Here I spent my first weeks in a small reading room opposite the *Gendarmenmarkt*, a large open square flanked by two stately churches whose bells chimed a different tune every hour. Some were well-known hymn tunes, others recognizably traditional folk songs ("*Alle Vöglein sind schon da"* was one I always listened for). Sitting down to the first file, I was immediately confronted with the difficulties of hundred-year-old handwritten documents: fragile paper, faded ink, barely legible handwriting. Finsch's letters were particularly challenging, as they were written not in standard cursive but in Old German script, in which some letters (s, f and h, n and e) are virtually indistinguishable and others, particularly the capitals, almost unrecognisable. Despite having a printed guide to the script beside me, I remember taking over an hour to decipher the first four lines and thinking "I'll never be able to do this!" Practice, however, coupled with a bit of intelligent guessing, worked wonders, and the contents, once deciphered, were fascinating. Large files of correspondence addressed to Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), first President of the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory and a leading figure in German medical and scientific circles, proved particularly valuable, containing many of the travellers' first impressions of the indigenous New Guineans they encountered. One could clearly sense their astonishment at finding many of their expectations challenged or completely overturned: "These Papuans throw all our beautiful theories out of the window!" exclaimed Finsch in one memorable passage. In several letters there were beautifully executed sketches of individual New Guineans, of which I was able to obtain copies.

After six weeks in Berlin, including several weeks in the extensive archives of the State Library, where it was sobering to observe the number of pre-1945 publications listed in the online catalogue as *Kriegsverlust* (lost during the war), I headed to Dresden, where Meyer had worked as Director of the Dresden Museum for Zoology, Ethnology and Anthropology for some thirty years. Lengthy microfilmed files of museum correspondence, including everything from Meyer's insistent requests for more glass display cabinets to his instructions for travelling anthropologists wishing to making plaster casts of human faces, absorbed most of my three weeks here, but I did take six days off to look around the city, prompted by an

Australian friend who got us through more sightseeing in a day than I would otherwise have managed in a week! The highlights of these wanderings were undoubtedly Dresden's beautiful churches: the newly restored *Frauenkirche*, looking like nothing so much as an elaborately iced wedding cake; the soaring vault of the *Kreuzkirche*, its walls, soberly coated in dove-grey stucco, reverberating to the tones of the great organ; the *Dreikönigskirche* with its wonderful early sixteenth-century stone frieze of the *Totentanz* (Dance of Death), a long line of individually sculpted figures, from popes and princes to merchants, abbesses and paupers, kicking up their heels to the accompaniment of cheery skeletons brandishing scythes and drumming with bone drumsticks. To this we added a superlative performance of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at the *Semperoper* and a visit to the recently re-opened treasure chambers of the *Grünes Gewölbe* (Green Vault), where gold, silver, ivory, ebony, amber, coral, tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl, rhinoceros horn, and gemstones of every variety jostled for place in a series of increasingly bizarre *objets d'art*, from a single cherry-pip carved with 185 individual faces to a magnificent ivory frigate with paper-thin sails and hordes of miniscule ivory sailors climbing the rigging.

From this point onwards the trip seemed to speed up; subsequent archival collections were smaller and I rarely spent more than a week in one place. My anthropologists had wandered widely, and I followed in their footsteps. While this strategy had its disadvantages – constant unpacking and repacking, hours spent in cramped cafes trawling the internet for cheap accommodation, train travel in quantities wearisome to all but the most devoted enthusiast – they were far outweighed by the delights of experiencing the astonishing range and regional variation of German landscapes, architecture and culture. My wanderings took me to Bremen, where the dampness of the North Sea fog shines on red brick and verdigris; Munich, dozing in the southern sun, its wide streets crammed with milling tourists; little Braunschweig (whence the name 'Brunswick'), once mighty under Duke Heinrich *der Löwe* ('the Lion'), its cobblestones painted here and there with a scarlet jester's cap to remind passers-by of Till Eulenspiegel, the town's famous trickster; Göttingen, the Oxford of Germany, whose university walls and immense wood-panelled library formerly housed such august personages as Wilhelm von Humboldt, Albrecht von Haller and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. I also returned for a week to Dresden, where an obliging member of staff at the Ethnological Museum cranked open the storeroom compactus to reveal Meyer's prized collection of 135 human skulls, each one carefully wrapped in clear plastic. Subjects of science, or its slaves? Their empty gaze was a powerful reminder of the altered priorities of a bygone era.

The results of my research were both fascinating and frustrating. I did not find as much material as I had hoped to, nor could I access all the material I thought I had found. Some promising trails – notably the Finsch collection at the Vienna Museum for Ethnography, currently the subject of a large-scale project and consequently closed for the foreseeable future – turned out to be blocked; others led nowhere. One letter from Meyer, written shortly before his death, was particularly tantalising. Apparently responding to a request to bequeath his personal papers to the Royal Library in Berlin, he listed in detail the numerous prominent anthropologists – German, French, British, Italian, Dutch – with whom he had corresponded, but added that he was "not so willing to deposit anything" into the Royal Library, which he compared to a "giant stomach" where "manuscripts are buried and accessible only with difficulty, or not at all … as the cataloguing does not keep pace with the acquisitions". If these papers still exist (though they may well be *Kriegsverlust*), I have been unable to trace them. On the other hand, some of the best material I found was entirely unexpected: I think especially of a small pamphlet written by Finsch in tribute to Tapinowanne Torondoluan, a young indigenous boy from the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain who

accompanied Finsch to Germany after his first Pacific voyage, and remained there for almost three years before returning home. Finsch became genuinely attached to "Tapino" and was much impressed by his behaviour, declaring that "in conduct, politeness, courtesy, orderliness [and] obedience … this black boy could truly serve as an example to many a white one". These sentiments, a far cry indeed from Finsch's pre-voyage condemnation of New Guinea's indigenous inhabitants as "lazy" and "insolent", indicate the extent to which his perceptions were altered by his travel experiences. His 16-page tribute to Tapino may well be the first biography of an indigenous New Guinean.

For research, then, my trip was amply justified. For the opportunities it afforded to meet old friends, make new acquaintances and broaden my mind through travel, it was invaluable. Despite time constraints, I was able to reconnect with a former schoolfriend in Munich and an ex-flatmate in Ferrara, Italy; I also celebrated the combined fiftieth birthday of family friends amongst fields of sunflowers in western France, travelled with London-based friends to Hadrian's Wall, and spent ten days on a whirlwind tour of southern Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland and France with my brother John, whose ability to hit the ground running simultaneously amazed and appalled me. Finally, while still recovering from this mad dash, I had the opportunity to present a paper (in German) at the annual meeting of the German Society for Ethnology's Oceania Research Group in Göttingen, a feat which I would hardly have dared to attempt only five months before.

Now that I'm back in Canberra, the experience has begun to seem almost dreamlike, but I still have a folder full of photos and a head full of memories as reminders of its real existence, to say nothing of a thesis clamouring to be written! Anything I can write will, I fear, fall short of capturing adequately the richness and complexity of these past lives. Nevertheless, I feel very fortunate to have made their acquaintance.

WHAT'S A GOOD INTRODUCTION TO … *PLATO'S ETHICS?*

Learningguild's philosophy seminar began in 1995. Our theme for 2009, the fifteenth year, is "Good, better, best", and Plato our main author. Here **JOHN HOWES***, who leads the seminar, identifies as still a good introduction to Plato's ethics a long essay written nearly 130 years ago, called "****Plato's Conception of Goodness and the Good****".*

Plato is extremely difficult to summarize, and not only because it is often hard to find for his Greek words an adequate counterpart word or phrase in our modern languages. He did not want to be summarized, but rather to confront those who heard or read his dialogues with questions, and with characters whose inadequate responses (even Socrates' own, though much better than others') would show how much the questions needed more careful thought and preferably (or even necessarily) discussion. As with the study of any serious dramatist, we may best proceed by attending mainly to a few carefully selected works, and often by excerpting an especially revealing passage, making sure that we understand the context in which it occurs.

In about 1881 or '82 R.L. (Lewis) Nettleship of Balliol College, Oxford, then only about 35, wrote a survey of Plato's ethics, intending it to be one of five chapters of a book about him. Most chapters of such books run to something between six thousand words (which can be read at a moder-

ate pace in a fifty-minute paper) and nine thousand: Nettleship wrote about forty-five thousand! The publisher would not accept the idea of a fuller scale, and the author worked on reduction. A major task, however, in the next six years was his long (and excellent) memoir of his teacher and friend T.H.Green, who had died at 45 in 1882. Nettleship himself was to die at the same age, mountaineering in the Alps, in 1892.

When A.C.Bradley prepared a collection called, in its second edition (Macmillan, London 1901), *Philosophical Remains of Richard Lewis Nettleship*, he included (after short papers, extracts from letters and reconstructions of some lectures on logic) the full version of that "chapter" or essay on Plato's ethics, and, with a short explanation, it runs from p.239 to the end of the book (p.396), with the title "Plato's Conception of Goodness and the Good". Another whole volume was published containing reconstructions of Nettleship's lectures on Plato's *Republic*. In 1879 he had written an essay called "The Theory of Education in the *Republic* of Plato", published in a joint volume called *Hellenica* (edited by Evelyn Abbott). It later appeared as a separate book, which deserves renewed attention.

I shall make two criticisms of the essay on Plato's ethics (they will also serve to illustrate the contentions in my opening paragraph), and then provide four reasons for valuing it highly and recommending it. Finally I shall contrast it with the recent entries on Socrates and on Plato by T.H. Irwin in *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (ed. L. and C. Becker, 2nd ed., Routledge, New York and London 2001). Anyone who would like to read the essay but has difficulty in locating a copy of the book is welcome to contact me. So too for the three-volume *Encyclopedia*.

Nettleship proposes 'goodness' as a far less misleading rendering of the noun '*aretē*' than 'virtue'. He goes on to write of '*aretē*' as "the Greek term for excellence of character in general" (p. 242). However, none of the terms 'virtue', 'goodness' and 'excellence of character' will do the job of rendering '*aretē*' when Callicles, in the *Gorgias*, says at 492c what Nettleship represents on p.294 by "The truth is … that luxury, licence, and freedom are virtue and happiness". 'Excellence', without the addition of 'of character', is the best option. Nor is Callicles saying that luxury, licence and freedom will bring a person happiness in the now normal sense of that word: '*eudaimonia*' is the noun commonly applied in congratulatory fashion to the state of a person judged to be living well, and again, as with '*aretē*', Greeks had conflicting criteria for applying that noun. It would have helped if Nettleship had focused on these key terms of Plato, their very wide range of application, the full difficulty of translating them, and Plato's concern with what he regarded as their misapplication.

A very good place to start, and come back to, is the brief exchange between Polus and Socrates at 470e in the *Gorgias* concerning the Great King (of Persia). Polus is amazed that Socrates will not immediately recognize the king as a paradigm case of *eudaimonia*, and that he actually considers, on the contrary, that for both men and women it consists in *paideia* and *dikaiosunē*: as we might say, in mental development and justice or fairness. It is a mark of the richness of the *Gorgias*, as well as of the difficulty of justly summarizing Plato, that Nettleship does not have room for that exchange. (I discussed it in Chapter Seven of my Melbourne doctoral thesis: the first half of that thesis concerns the adjectives '*eudaimōn*' and 'happy' and cognate and otherwise related words.)

Aretē and the question of its teachability is the subject of the short dialogue *Meno*, which I translated in 1970 and lectured on at Melbourne and Cape Town, finding it a good beginning to a Philosophy I course. Nettleship returns for this dialogue, unwisely, to 'virtue' as his rendering, which does not fit the young man Meno's conception of it as, for people such as himself, "to desire the things that are fine and have the power to get them for oneself", where fine things are agreed to be good things, and turn out to be, in Meno's view, "the acquiring both of gold and of silver and of positions of honour and control in one's city" (77b-78c), though he accepts (on Socrates' prompting) that one needs to add

'justly and righteously'. Here only 'excellence', rather than either 'virtue' or 'goodness', has the contestability of meaning that is required.

Nettleship has a second fault here, one that again illustrates the problem of summarizing Plato's ethics. Dealing with a dialogue where the Stephanus numbers used in references go from 70 to 100, he goes straight from 71 to 86. Hence (apart from an earlier reference on p.245) he does not describe the characteristic process whereby Socrates reduces the initially complacent Meno to *aporia*, the state in which, as he confesses, his supply of ideas has dried up and he is numbed by a perplexity induced by Socrates, whom he likens to a crampfish. Whereupon Socrates says that he is like the crampfish if and only if it is itself numb as well as making others numb: "**I**'m perplexed and thus I engender perplexity in others. At this moment **I** don't know what excellence is" (80cd). Thus from Nettleship we learn little about Meno's inconsistent conceptions of human excellence or how Socrates not only shows their inadequacy but also guides him firmly out of the complacency that stands in the way of serious enquiry.

Nettleship's brilliant opening paragraph must be quoted in full and constitutes my first and perhaps supreme reason for valuing his essay as highly as I do.

> Any critical enquiry into the nature of moral qualities or principles must be primarily an enquiry into the meaning of certain words and phrases. Every civilized society has a current phraseology, in which its feelings about right and wrong, about what it admires and what it dislikes, are embodied. Under the apparent fixity of this current language is concealed an indefinite variety and inconsistency of meaning, according to the character, education, and circumstances of those who employ it. Such a fluid mass of opinion, solidified at the surface into words, was the material with which Plato started in his ethical enquiries; and the questions with which at various points he probed the mind of Greek society were practically two: What do you really mean by this or that expression? and, What do you think you ought to mean by it?

It should be noted how much the third and fourth sentences need to affect our interpretation of the first and second, and that it would be more consistent to use the expression 'the divergent values of his contemporaries' than to be content with 'the mind of Greek society'. It is clear from the examples in the four critical paragraphs I have written above how well Plato's work in ethics is characterized by this introduction to it by Nettleship, which is also valuable for anyone wanting to appreciate the emphasis put on language by many Oxford philosophers. That emphasis did not begin with Ryle in the nineteen-thirties: it is at least as early as Green (see his lecture in *Works*, Vol. II, on senses of 'freedom'), and A.C. Bradley says in a note that begins on p.li "Green suggested to [Nettleship] in early days that he might approach philosophy from the side of language".

I drew this opening paragraph to the attention of Richard Hare, to whom I went for tutorials in 1958 at Balliol and who became my mentor and friend, and was glad to find that, in a relatively late work of his, the article "Moral Terms" in the *Encyclopedia of Ethics* mentioned above, he responded to the question how moral judgments are to be distinguished from other evaluative ones by saying "There is probably no uniquely right way of doing this, simply because the word 'moral' is used in so many different ways" (p.1182). He goes on to illustrate that. In earlier years he would have been more likely to write of "the moral concepts" as though they were constant and required the one right way of delineating them.

The second reason for recommending Nettleship's essay is another brilliant paragraph, this time a summary of the three-part plot of the *Gorgias*, each part dealing with a defective but different view of how we should live. The opening enables the student to see the wood, and invites him to study the detail of the trees in relation to it.

> The problem of the *Gorgias* is developed in three stages, in which the antithesis, implicit from the first, becomes gradually more explicit, and the rival solutions more radical.

Then we are given the three stages:

> Gorgias, the famous master of rhetoric, with whom in the first part of the dialogue Socrates is confronted, is represented as a man of honesty and principle, but quite unaware of the inconsistency which is latent in the theory of his art. He is treated by Socrates with elaborate but unyielding courtesy, and retires from his untenable position to make room for Polus, the wild 'colt' of his school, who prances into the field to the defence of his master. Polus sees that the inconsistency proved against Gorgias arose from his making a certain concession to public opinion, and boldly proclaims his own emancipation from moral prejudices; but, as he still retains the feeling that there is something 'disgraceful' in doing injustice, he is gradually reduced to a dilemma from which the only escape is by denying any but a 'conventional' validity to all moral distinctions, and asserting as the 'law of nature' the right of everyone to do as he pleases as far as he has the power. This final step is taken by Callicles, the brilliant and cultivated politician and man of the world, who sticks at nothing, believes in nothing, and fears nothing. The tone of Socrates, who has managed the sprawling impetuosity of Polus with high-handed but playful contempt, changes, as the struggle deepens in the third part, into that of set resolve and incisive earnestness, as of a man certain of death but certain also of victory.

Not, if we are to represent Callicles accurately, 'the right of everyone to do as he pleases as far as he has the power', but 'the right of any superior being, a "lion" among lesser beings, to do as he pleases because he has the strength'. (See *Gorgias* 483c-4c, Dodds's commentary there, and his appendix comparing Callicles with Nietzsche.)

Thirdly, Nettleship manages to encapsulate in about fifty pages the main ethical themes of the *Republic*. He does justice, as many do not, to the challenge put by Plato's half-brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus at 357-67 (pp. 346-50); he summarizes much of the *Republic*'s ethics and political theory by saying "A society or an individual is perfect in proportion as the lower ends are pursued in proportion to the higher; imperfect, in proportion as they are substituted for the higher" (p.377); he vividly presents the main lines of the degeneration in an individual as Plato describes it (pp. 377-385); he brings out one Platonic theme by saying "The perfect life would be the life of complete community, the life in which a man fully realized the truth that he is what he is by participation in a larger being" (p.376); and he sees that according to Plato it is *philosophia*, properly understood as an enduring passion for wisdom, and so for truth, and for an understanding of "ideal goodness and the ideal good" (p.386), that can give the human being the best perspective of all, one that issues in moral as well as intellectual goodness (pp. 362-7, 371-5, 386-390).

> Supposing, then, that the 'philosophic' element in all its forms were allowed full sway, that the capacity for communion were fully tended and developed, that every man up to his measure realized his place in the whole of which he is a part, human life would reach its highest point, and those who had most of the 'philosophic' nature, that is, who realized the truth most profoundly, would be the utmost which it is given to man to be.
>
> (p.364)

But Plato knew that to call oneself or be called a philosopher is no guarantee at all that one is thus oriented.

From p.252 the essay proceeds from dialogue to dialogue, covering eight in all, divided into two groups. Nettleship takes as his first group *Protagoras*, *Meno*, *Laches*, *Charmides* and *Euthydemus*, as concerned with what can be said about the nature of *aretē* or some particular *aretē* (courage or moderation), and as his second *Gorgias*, *Philebus* and *Republic*, which he links as concerned with "an ultimate good" (p.277). I have said enough to show how valuable are Nettleship's summaries, even when something precious is omitted from them. A fourth reason for valuing the essay highly is that it contains an instructive, even inspiring, attempt to describe Plato's ethics in a mode that draws on Nettleship's own aspirations and experience. Here are two sentences from the section on the *Philebus*, of which the second is quoted by Bradley as "very characteristic of [Nettleship's] own feeling" (p. xlvi). He is writing of "a contrast between Plato and the modern mind" in which the latter is preoccupied

with process and a supposed need for change.

> And if it be asked, What is the thing most worth having in the world? we can only answer in terns which give the priority, not to mere pleasurable feeling of process, but to that which we come to be in the process. If the end of our being is to be, to be the utmost we are capable of being, then the higher the constant level at which we can live, the less the energy which we have to spend in escaping the pain of depression, the more each moment contains in itself, and the less it borrows from felt contrast with a lower past or a higher future, the more nearly do we approach the full measure, the full beauty, the full truth, in which, according to the *Philebus*, the principle of good is manifested.
>
> (p.313f)

Turning to T.H.Irwin's articles on Socrates and Plato, we find little attention given to the development of any particular dialogue. On p.1322 is the clause "When the interlocutors in [*Republic*] Books i-ii doubted whether justice is good for the just person"; in fact Thrasymachus denies that it is, and Glaucon and Adeimantus explicitly ask, and expect, Socrates to show that it is an intrinsic good, and distance themselves from those whose claims (especially that it is important to seem just rather than to be so) they present. It is misleading to use (p.1319) the phrase 'the Socratic position', because Socrates is engaged in a cooperative and critical search, not without insight and suggestion, rather than stating a position. Irwin says on that page "Since Plato rejects the Socratic conceptions of virtue and happiness, the defense of justice offered in the *Republic* differs on some central points from the one offered in the *Gorgias*." It is misleading to use the words 'virtue' and 'happiness' here without immediate explanation, and to say that Plato rejects Socrates' "conceptions" (better to say that he amplifies them). We are not told in either article what defence of justice is offered in the *Gorgias*, which is not so much a defence of justice as a revealing of the inadequacy of the views of rhetoric, justice, *aretē* and *eudaimonia* held by Gorgias, Polus and Callicles, and many others then and since. Nettleship's summaries are no substitute for Plato's dialogues, but a better aid in their study than Irwin's articles, in which there is a desiccation from which the essay by Nettleship is free.

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