

Research Article

Forum

Plato and Classical Civilisation A Level

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Abstract

The incorporation of Plato into the current OCR Classical Civilisation A Level syllabus, as part of the Love and Relationships topic (LR) presents a challenge for the classroom teacher. While the specification makes study of Plato mandatory the content description in practice effectively relegates the topic to the side-lines. Having described this problem the article goes on to suggest how Plato's ideas can be taught within the framework of the existing specification in a pupil-friendly manner which is true to the spirit of Plato's own philosophical practice.

Keywords: Plato, Classical Civilisation, A Level, examinations

The problem¹

When it comes to the history of thought it would be difficult to think of a more important figure from Greek antiquity than the philosopher Plato and it is only fitting that he should find a place in the syllabus of the new OCR Classical Civilisation A Level introduced in 2017. That said, Plato enthusiasts could be forgiven for feeling disappointment at the comparatively minor role he has been given. Incorporated within the Love and Relationships topic (LR) alongside Sappho, Seneca, and Ovid he seems to be in very strange company indeed.

Many Classics teachers will agree that the overall impact of the new Classical Civilisation A Level syllabus has been positive. It has proved a wonderful shot in the arm for those trying to encourage the study of Classics both in the sixth form and then at university. LR has played an important role here. I know from personal experience of several young people who have carried on studying Classics post-GCSE because they were attracted by the chance to improve their understanding of how loving relationships are regarded both in our own society and in the ancient world.

The LR unit itself is to be commended for putting into the hands of the classroom teacher materials out of which stimulating and thought-provoking lessons can be created. The poems of Sappho and Ovid and the ideas of Plato and Seneca are some of the greatest treasures from our Classical past and it is wholly admirable that they are made available to the present generation of school children. Any criticism I make of LR should therefore be regarded as an attempt to make a proven success even better.

The generic term for the group within which LR appears as a component is Beliefs and Ideas. One might have hoped that if the emphasis is to be on ideas Plato would occupy centre stage. But the central figures are clearly the prescribed texts, Sappho and Ovid.

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In the drama of Love Plato turns out to be more a Rosencrantz than a Hamlet.

Yet the wording of the Specification surely implies a much more substantial role for Plato. Just consider its very first paragraph:

All these components include the study of classical thought; from ideas about politics and correct governance to what is 'right' and 'wrong' (sic) when it comes to love and desire, to the nature of the gods and their relationship with mankind. The content of all components is equally split between classical thought and either literature or visual/material culture (OCR, 2022a, p. 32).

The reference to what is right and wrong when it comes to love and desire refers to the LR component specifically. The descriptions of Knowledge, Understanding and Skills, provided earlier in the specification, have made it clear that a learner will be required to 'understand, interpret, evaluate, and analyse a range of evidence' (OCR, 2022a, p. 7) and this strengthens the view that what is being taught here is an ability to analyse and evaluate philosophical positions. This is confirmed by the description of what learners should be able to do when studying classical thought, which begins its list with 'respond critically to the ideas and concepts studied' (OCR, 2022a, p 38).

There are no prescribed texts for either Plato or Seneca, his fellow key thinker in the LR topic. Reference is made to a requirement to make use of relevant secondary scholars and academics (OCR, 2022a, p. 32). Perhaps the expectation is that the thought of Seneca and Plato can be accessed at second hand rather than directly by reading these authors in an unmediated way. After all, the great volume of writing by either of these authors may well engender a sense of 'Where do I begin?'

In that sense the literature half of the LR component has effectively been given greater priority; where there is a time

constraint a teacher cannot afford not to cover in class the actual texts that are going to be the subject of comment questions in the examination. The Plato/Seneca half of the component may thus appear a secondary activity even though this is explicitly denied in the specification.

I do not have any evidence that teaching favours the literature over the philosophy content. Clearly conscientious teachers will encourage their students to divide their time between both. But the examiners' report on the LR examination in 2019 suggests that there might be a problem (OCR, 2019). Candidates who chose to answer a long essay question on the key thinkers were confronted with: 'Discuss how far Plato and Seneca agree about what sorts of relationships should be considered 'good' and 'bad'. You should justify your response with reference to the ideas of Plato and Seneca.'

The report commented favourably on those candidates who were able to refer to speeches in the *Symposium* and to make good use of the *Phaedrus*, two important works by Plato. But the mere fact of using a work by Plato does seem to be a very rudimentary achievement. The fact that those who did so were singled out for special commendation suggests a degree of low expectation on the part of the examiners in regard to the general run of candidates.

Candidates were criticised for failing to compare Plato and Seneca and this implies that had they done this their responses would have been better. But one is entitled to question whether comparison of the different views of different philosophers is in itself a task requiring any philosophical acumen above and beyond a mere exercise in memory recall. As the question specifically required a comparison between Plato and Seneca, the examiners' comment might rather suggest in fact that many candidates could not even read the question properly.

The key-thinkers part of LR does not therefore seem to have been well designed by the examining board or properly understood by the candidates. But that may be an unfair reading of the situation. I mention these points simply to show that even before we focus on the difficulties peculiar to Plato there is at the very least some muddle around the way that the ideas element of LR is understood, which may well encourage some schools to marginalise the key thinkers.

To understand the challenge that faces the teacher specifically when it comes to the Plato topic it is instructive to read Caroline Bristow's (2021) helpful account of how the current A Level specification arose. This article, written by someone involved at the heart of the A Level reform process in 2017, explains how the government at the time had to be convinced that Classical Civilisation A Level should exist at all given its apparent overlap with Ancient History. In order to justify its existence a definition had to be given of Classical Civilisation that kept it well clear of the historian's bailiwick. This left Classical Civilisation to be characterised as the study of literature, material culture, and thought, i.e. almost any significant aspect of the ancient world other than history.

The problem with a negative definition of Classical Civilisation ('anything but history') is that the scope of what the term covers is something of a rag bag, different subjects all worthwhile in themselves but united only by the fact that they are not history as such. There is no single educational goal. Literature, material culture, and thought are not obvious bedfellows. This makes it difficult to motivate teachers. Not every teacher of Classics is equally at home with all three of these areas. The teacher of the Greek Art component of the A Level who told me that she could not stand Plato is not perhaps unrepresentative². Such attitudes are quite understandable and might explain why a marginalisation of Plato within LR would occur.

It was not always so. Plato was an important part of Classical Civilisation A Level at its inception in the 1980s. I was asked to pioneer Classical Civilisation at the school where I taught and was happy to do so. I soon found myself teaching the whole of Plato's *Republic* to a class which included learners who had struggled to finish George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. And so I can well understand the temptation to water down or sidestep engagement with a Platonic text. This is felt particularly when teaching a class for whom the habit of reading English is not ingrained. Having to get them through the Ovid and Sappho prescriptions is quite daunting enough. It is therefore no surprise to read in Bristow's account that OCR dropped the requirement inherited from the AQA specification for the inclusion of texts by Plato and Aristotle as compulsory elements. This decision would have been broadly welcomed in schools throughout the country. But it does not solve the problem of how to teach Plato and might even exacerbate it. If Plato's texts are not central how then are Plato's ideas to be taught?

As already noted, the specification encourages the use of secondary sources. This means of course reading books or online material by other people explaining what Plato meant rather than actually reading Plato. The secondary source of choice for many teachers is an online article from an American university (Reeve, 2016). This may well be engaging with ideas in the manner envisaged, but whose ideas are they? To adapt a Platonic phrase, they are at best at one remove from reality. Furthermore regurgitating something imbibed online in this way is not exactly a rewarding educational experience.

It is of course a travesty to portray teachers generally as lazily pointing their classes in the direction of easily digestible secondary works. I am sure that on the contrary many teachers conscientiously encourage a direct engagement with short extracts of the *Symposium* and *Republic*. One should certainly not exaggerate the value of examiners' reports as evidence for classroom practice. Incorporating a direct quotation from Plato into one's argument in an effective way is a rhetorical skill that many of us struggle to attain, let alone those who are relative novices in essay technique. In what follows I simply offer some experience-based suggestions as a corrective against any temptation that might exist to succumb to the siren voices of the secondary sources.

A possible solution

The wording of the examination specification can easily be interpreted as claiming that Plato has ideas about love and relationships which students can assess alongside different ideas advanced by Seneca the younger. Such an interpretation is in my view a major part of the problem and should be junked as a matter of urgency. For it is based on a serious misconception about the nature of philosophy as developed by Plato himself. It can be no part of a serious examination at A Level to encourage a severely distorted view of the subject, especially when it is getting in the way of successful teaching.

The best way to approach the question of how to teach Plato in a modern school is to be guided by Plato himself. After all Plato, the founder of the Academy, stands at the fountainhead of education in the West. It is therefore worth taking his own views seriously.

Plato writes as follows:

But this much at any rate I can affirm about any present or future writers who pretend to knowledge of the matters with which I concern myself, whether they claim to have been taught by me or by a third party or to have discovered the truth for themselves; in my judgement it is impossible that

they should have any understanding of the subject. No treatise by me concerning it exists or ever will exist. It is not something that can be put into words like other branches of learning (Plato, *The Seventh Letter*, in Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII* translated by Walter Hamilton, 1973, p. 136).

This disclaimer by the man himself makes a lot of sense. Plato had a high reputation in the ancient world. Apart from the letters, his written work consisted entirely of dialogues, all of which have survived (Guthrie, 2008)³. In other words the Platonic corpus does not contain a single treatise or handbook of Platonic doctrine. Platonism as a distinctive body of ideas was created centuries after Plato's death.

In none of Plato's dialogues does Plato appear as a character. The ideas advanced in those dialogues are put in the mouths of characters created by Plato. You can no more argue that a view advanced by a character in a Platonic dialogue is Plato's view than you could argue that the view advanced by characters in a tragedy by Sophocles represents the actual views of the historical Sophocles.

There is also no shortage of ideas to be found in the pages of Plato, and indeed this is the problem. Nobody can say which of these views represent most closely Plato's own perspective. In fact the whole point of the Socratic dialogue as a genre is that it does not matter whether any views are Plato's own views. The ideas demand to be judged on their philosophical merits, not on the authority of any individual no matter how famous.

One important goal of philosophical activity, perhaps the only really valuable goal, is that the participants learn to think independently. Philosophy is widely perceived to have educational value because it encourages one to use one's own mental resources to the best of one's ability rather than simply accept uncritically ideas that are simply handed down *ex cathedra*. Just because an authoritative figure has vouched for an idea, this is no reason to treat the idea as worthy of belief. A lengthy process of reflection and debate is required and even the most plausible views may well not withstand scrutiny. The model for this examination of ideas is the behaviour of Socrates when he engages his interlocutors in argument in the Platonic dialogues. If we are to take Plato seriously it is this form of enquiry which should provide the model for classroom activity.

The textbook published to accompany the launch of the Classical Civilisation A Level does refer to Socratic enquiries:

After encouraging others to put forward their theories Socrates dismantles their ideas with a series of probing questions. It is tempting therefore to say that Plato expresses his own ideas through Socrates, but this is not certain (Barr, M. *et al.* 2017, p. 38).

I would go further and say far from being certain it is highly unlikely. It is difficult to believe that the Plato who devoted so much of his literary efforts to depicting and defending his own teacher Socrates would misrepresent him as a philosophical authority figure. Socrates never wrote a philosophical treatise and had no desire to present himself as an expert of any sort. This is where Plato himself got the idea from.

I would encourage teachers everywhere to think of Socrates as a heroic figure and a model for our profession. He was engaged in the business of educating his fellow Athenians by means of critical Socratic discussion, often with those on the threshold of adulthood, young people roughly the same age as modern A level students. When the state tried to stop him he was prepared to die rather than give this activity up.

Nor is it true that as the textbook claims he dismantled the ideas of others. Those he argued with may have changed their position but the ideas themselves are not necessarily discredited. This in fact goes to the heart of Socratic education: as he says in the *Theaetetus*:

God compels me to be a midwife, but has prevented me from giving birth. So I'm not at all wise myself and there hasn't been any discovery of that kind born to me as the offspring of my mind. But not so with those who associate with me. At first some of them seem quite incapable of learning; but as our association advances, all those to whom God grants it make progress to an extraordinary extent - so it seems not only to them but to everyone else as well. And it's clear that they do so, not because they have ever learnt anything from me, but because they have themselves discovered many admirable things in themselves, and given birth to them (Plato *Theaetetus*, translated by John McDowell, 1974, pp. 13-14).

A lesson in today's classroom that has as its goal the studying of an idea prominent within Plato's dialogues would do well to follow the model provided by Socrates in the dialogues Plato wrote. This does not mean that the whole process must be conducted without reference to any text. In the dialogue *Protagoras* philosophical debate arises from considering a myth of Protagoras and a poem of Simonides. The *Phaedrus*, a dialogue which examines the nature of loving relationships, takes as its starting point a speech of Lysias which Phaedrus has learnt by heart.

It follows that the teacher who wishes to teach about Plato's ideas on love and relationships could certainly present students with short extracts from Platonic dialogues to get the discussion going. Students can then work out for themselves what the right and wrong answers are, if indeed there are any right and wrong answers. If the debate in the classroom proves inconclusive this is in some ways an ideal result as this is exactly how so many of Plato's dialogues end. Writing up the debate in essay form will then provide the participants with an opportunity to respond critically to the ideas they have encountered.

This approach has the advantage that students are not required to read large amounts of Plato. For example an important text is the speech in Plato's *Symposium* in which the comic poet Aristophanes explains the nature of love by telling the story of how humanity achieved its present situation. The story is a masterpiece of comic narrative. But it does not even need to be read by students since they can watch the cartoon version on *YouTube* (Szidon, 2007) and they can then decide for themselves what Aristophanes gets right and why.

This approach has the merit of avoiding excessive immersion in books and reading while at the same time it clearly lives up to the examination specification's statement that the study of classical thought and key thinkers focuses on the ideas themselves and that questions will expect learners to discuss the ideas and their context rather than show knowledge of specific sources.

This approach can be made even more appealing to the student by drawing out Plato's links with Sappho (Plato's high regard for Sappho is preserved in the tradition that he regarded her as the tenth Muse).

Sappho's poem *He is as blessed as a god* contains this description of the impact of the beloved on the person in love:

[...] your charming laughter, which for me honestly strikes terror into the heart in my breast when I see you, even for a moment, I can no longer speak (cited in OCR, 2022b, p. 10. My underlining).

Discussion of the poem presents a good opportunity to consider at the same time this highly poetic passage from Socrates' description of falling in love:

When their intimacy is established and the loved one has grown used to being near his friend and touching him in the gymnasium and elsewhere, the current of the stream which Zeus when he was in love with Ganymede called the stream of longing sets in full flood towards the lover. Part of it enters into him, but when his heart is full the rest brims over, and as a wind or an echo rebounds from a smooth and solid surface and is carried back to its point of origin, so the stream of beauty returns once more to its source in the beauty of the beloved. It enters in at his eyes, the natural channel of communication with the soul and reaching and arousing the soul it moistens the passages from which the feathers shoot and stimulates the growth of wings and in its turn the soul of the beloved is filled with love. So now the beloved is in love but with what he cannot tell (*Phaedrus* 255b6-d2, in Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, translated by Walter Hamilton, 1973, pp. 63–64. My underlining⁴).

These two descriptions of what the French call the *coup de foudre* provide an excellent opportunity for classroom debate, comparing and contrasting the two different conceptions of erotic desire (in Greek *himeros*) that are here juxtaposed: Sappho's 'charming laughter' (*gelaisas himeroen*) and Plato's 'stream of longing' (*'himeron'*) take the reader in different directions, but both the encounters are described in physiological detail which teenagers can relate to their own experiences⁵.

Philosophy as a subject may not be an easy sell. It lacks the immediate appeal of Greek pots or poems by Sappho. It must also be recognised that Plato is not necessarily a familiar subject either for teachers or for students. In this situation we cannot do better I think than imitate Plato and take our inspiration from Socrates.

The author has a Ph.D. in Philosophy from King's College, London and taught Classics and Philosophy for over 40 years in a variety of English schools. His translation of Alexander of Aphrodisias *On Aristotle On Sense Perception* was published in 2000.

Notes

- 1 Thanks are due to the anonymous reviewer for many helpful suggestions which I have incorporated into the text of this article.
- 2 The distinction between literature and philosophy is less noticeable. Plato's dialogues are in fact literary creations, but the specification is quite clear that it is Plato's ideas that are to be studied, not his literary output as such.
- 3 I count the *Apology* as a dialogue because of the dialogue element it contains.
- 4 This passage may well be a commentary on the Sappho poem, since Socrates has already mentioned 'beautiful Sappho' as the best writer on love at 235c3.
- 5 An equally strong link exists between Plato and Ovid. Socrates in the *Phaedrus* goes on to refer to his own skill in the science of love and as John Dillon (1994) has pointed out, this is the Greek original of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*.

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