Teaching in the Spirit of Socrates: Remembering Fergal O'Connor OP

Joseph Dunne

(The late Father Fergal O'Connor OP was born near Causeway, Co. Kerry, on 6 December 1926 and died in Dublin on 29 September 2005. Having studied at St. Mary's Tallaght, he was ordained a priest in 1951. He took the STD at the Angelicum in Rome in 1955 and then went on to take PPE at Oxford, staying at Blackfriars from 1956 to 1959. Having taught for a short time at the Dominican House at Cork, he was assigned to St. Saviour's Priory in Dublin in 1961, where he lived for the rest of his life. From 1962 he taught political philosophy at University College Dublin, continuing beyond retirement in 1991 to teach a course on Plato until 1997. A social critic and activist, he was for many years a provocative panelist on Ireland's foremost television programme, 'The Late Late Show', and wrote regularly for newspapers and periodicals; also he founded and for several decades directed Sherrard House, a hostel for homeless girls in Dublin, and ALLY, an organisation supporting single mothers. But it was as an extraordinarily inspiring teacher, primarily in the university but also in many other informal settings, that he was perhaps most deeply influential. The following is a slightly amended version of an article first published in Questioning Ireland, Debates in Political Philosophy and Public Policy *(eds, J. Dunne, A. Ingram and F.Litton, Dublin, IPA), a* Festschrift *for Father O'Connor written by former students and colleagues (including the theologian, Denys Turner, and the political philosopher, Philip Pettit) and published in 2000.)*

It was a matter of regret to Fergal O'Connor that in discussions in the media and elsewhere fascination with 'personalities' so often displaces critical analysis of issues. If this essay, then, focuses a fair bit on Fergal himself, I hope it will escape his strictures to the extent that in doing so it also addresses an issue that was of special concern to him – the nature of teaching. It is a better approach to human affairs, according to Aristotle, not to prescribe how things should be done on the basis of some antecedent principles but rather, having consulted our experience of best practice, to forge concepts that do justice to the exemplars of excellence with which we are already familiar. If we wish to understand practical wisdom, for example, we should attend less to a treatise on the subject than to a person who is practically wise — the most worthwhile treatise in any case will be the one that best captures the quality of such a person. I shall assume here that the case is similar with teaching — that if one is lucky

© The Author 2006. Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

enough to have had a good teacher then one is better placed to say what good teaching is. In Fergal O'Connor several generations of students were fortunate to have had a great teacher, the impact of whose lectures on many of us was life-changing and unforgettable. This reflection on teaching then arises out of memories of him in his element as a teacher of political philosophy in University College Dublin. As an avowed Platonist, of course, Fergal might be discomfited by thus being made grist to an Aristotelian mill. But philosophical justice may be served by the fact that his main company in the following pages will be that of Plato's Socrates. He and Socrates throw an interesting light on each other; and both together, as I hope to show, do much to enlarge and enliven our understanding of a teacher's calling.

Back to the Lecture Hall

In introducing us to the great figures of political philosophy, Fergal eschewed the conventional role of first presenting their views and then offering dispassionate assessment of their merits and weaknesses. When he lectured on Hobbes, he *was* Hobbes, unleashing the full power of the latter's thought and defending it against all-comers. The disconcerting effect was realised only later when, now that many of us had become convinced Hobbesians, Fergal metamorphosed before our eyes in the next set of lectures as Rousseau, the human world now being re-configured so that only Jean-Jacques truly divined its secrets. When, later again, Rousseau suffered the earlier fate of Hobbes, and newly enthusiastic Rousseauians were exposed to the unrelenting force of Hegel's' social vision, Fergal's sorcery was in full view and the question of what *he* thought had become acute. But if we were now gripped by a desire to know his mind — that many other teachers might have envied and been only too eager to gratify — Fergal was not about to provide ready answers. What really mattered — a hard learning, perhaps for the first time in our whole education — was what *we* thought.

Not that Fergal's inscrutability was in the service of a student-centred pedagogy for which 'thinking for oneself' could be a sufficient goal. He was indeed adept at eliciting our immediate prejudices and understandings, but only so that they could be tested by exposure to the master whose mask he had temporarily assumed; the whole point of being introduced to a succession of great thinkers, after all, was to have one's own thinking stretched or deepened, or sometimes overturned, by theirs. Fergal's exposition of the ideas of these thinkers was extraordinarily lucid, won by long hours of patient study (*un*blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil) but also fruit of a mind natively sinuous and uncluttered. 'Exposition', however, is not

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

quite the right word here. For Fergal's way of opening up classic texts enabled him at the same time to scrutinise current issues and prevailing assumptions in their light. Far from distracting from the texts, this scrutiny served only to confirm their continuing interpretative and critical power; to read these texts with Fergal was at the same time to be read *by* them.

His doctoral dissertation had been on Aquinas's understanding of the role of imagination as the crucial hinge between perception and feeling ('sense') on one side and concept and argument ('intellect') on the other. And the imaginativeness of his own teaching enabled the perceptions and feelings of students to become less blind (to echo another philosopher, Kant) in the act of his showing that the concepts and arguments of the philosophers were not empty. The young followers of Socrates had been both perplexed and captivated by his way of raising the deepest questions about human existence while still talking about 'pack asses, or blacksmiths, or cobblers, or tanners' (Plato, 1989, 221 E). And Fergal's thought retained a similar footing in the 'life-world': in his lectures, Plato's allegory of the cave or Rousseau's concept of *amour propre* or Hegel's analysis of the master-slave dialectic shared mental space with references to fashions in student clothing, a row in a political party, an ongoing strike by a group of workers, a pending piece of legislation, or a recent judgment in the courts. Such were these juxtapositions — or rather inter-penetrations — that it was hard to say which was more brilliantly illuminated: the universal reach of the present event or the very particular saliency of the classic text.

The 'lectures' in which all this went on were immensely lively, even theatrical. The drama of ideas in which students got caught up owed its momentum to the peculiar, and in some respects paradoxical, gifts of the teacher. Although politics is inevitably about power — who has it and for what — he seemed happy to give away whatever power lay in his position as lecturer (he frequently offered the lectern to anyone who would propose a counter-position) and to rely only on the power of the better argument. Though bound, as a Dominican friar, to the disciplines of a religious order, he seemed to have the freest, most unfettered mind in the university. He delighted in argument and was fearless in provoking it, goading and teasing his listeners — usually in direct proportion to their complacency and cock-sureness. Still, the sharpness of his dialectical rapier never took away from his gentleness; he had no need to hurt. And while irony pervaded a great deal of what he said, he never seemed cynical. To the contrary, his thinking was generous, not only in the sympathy it brought to his chosen authors but also in the imaginative vistas it opened up; the sting most often lay in the dawning sense of how much less we are than what we might be.

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

For all the personal gifts that made Fergal's style so attractive, there was a rigorous impersonality in his teaching. Irony served him as a mode of self-effacement, of directing attention to the texts and, beyond them, to the truth of the matter — ultimately the truth about us as humans — with which they were concerned. Winning us over to the point of view of his chosen authors, however, was not Fergal's purpose in expounding them. For, despite the clarity of his presentation and the flair of his defence of a specific text, his espousal of it could always be subverted by his subsequent partisanship on behalf of *another* text. Well before the word was in currency, then, 'deconstruction' — indirect and cumulative — was part of his pedagogical arsenal: apparently well-earned positions broke down and thinking became 'disseminated' in an ongoing movement of 'deferral'. Still, Fergal's teaching was different from what has come to be practised under the rubric of deconstruction. For the latter, the act of unmasking, or of showing every reading to be necessarily a misreading, is enough; since texts are mainly bound to other texts, the energy of endless deferral can be taken as its own end. This taboo on reference by texts to a reality beyond themselves, which they might be *about*, is also a disavowal of truth; texts no longer make truth-claims which constrain a reader's assent or challenge her to justify dissent. Deprived, then, of their own truth-claims, texts are also displaced as realities about which interpretations might, or might not, be true. Under the rule of 'intertextuality', and freed from the tyranny of truth, interpretations can succeed just by proving themselves interesting or inventive. Now Fergal's own interpretations were never less than interesting or inventive — the playfulness and mobility of his mind enabled him to conjure up and entertain hugely disparate ideas and perspectives. But playfulness was never a substitute for pursuing truth; it was, rather, a fruitful way of making this pursuit.

While Fergal's commitment to a truth to be pursued distinguished him from exponents of deconstruction, his playfulness distinguished him no less from zealous custodians of a truth already achieved. There was no trace of a hectoring tone in his teaching nor even of — what some might have regarded as a proper — earnestness. Instead, a lightness of touch and ease in banter bespoke something of that 'joyful kind of seriousness and that wisdom full of roguishness' that Nietzsche sees as the 'finest state of the human soul' (Nietzsche 1986, p.332). Indeed our responses to Fergal seemed to confirm another of Nietzsche's sayings (in oblique allusion to Socrates): that 'nothing better or happier can befall a person than to be in the proximity of one of those who, precisely because they have thought most deeply, must love what is most alive' (Nietzsche, 1984, p.136). His combination of neither appearing to have designs on what we *should* think nor of being threatened by what we *did* think dissipated resistance; with him, stereotyped reaction against authority-figures did not get its usual

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

purchase. Not that we didn't react strongly, sometimes fiercely, to what he said — given the frequent outrageousness of his baiting, how could we not have done so? But this reaction had none of the indifference or sullenness of withdrawal. It was, rather, an expression of engagement, evidence of being already 'hooked'. And here was no trivial gamesmanship on Fergal's part but rather something that he saw as indispensable to the teacher's role: the arousal (in Plato's words) of *eros* in a student's soul. This *eros* is a desire for understanding, which may eventually become that love of wisdom which is not only a prelude to but rather (as etymology attests) the very heart of philosophy itself.

Negative Dialectics

Fergal took it from Aquinas that the intellect, being in harmony with reality, is naturally fitted for the pursuit of truth. But if this picture suggests an ultimately secure goal for the human mind it by no means indicates that its essential task can be immediately or easily accomplished. According to the early Greek philosopher, Heracleitus, 'nature loves to hide' — an idea which gave rise to the conception of truth as an unconcealment brought about only through a process of outwitting what otherwise escapes notice. In one form or another, this notion of truth, not as given to immediate apprehension but as the prize of an arduous quest, has been deeply embedded in western thought. It is reflected for instance in the notion of dialectic, as the process through which the mind is extended and tested in a back and forth movement towards knowledge, first elaborated by Plato. It still echoes in Aquinas's own mode of inquiry, which proceeds only through recurrently posing and then unpicking difficulties or 'objections' that arise at every turn, as well as in Hegel's account of the reconciliation between 'subject' and 'object' as achieved only through the cumulative overcoming of contradictions along the way. It is found also in thinkers who attend less to the explicit content of their writing than to the difficulty of any straightforward communication of this content to their readers. While these are less systematic thinkers, they are also more self-consciously pedagogical, even therapeutic. Their mode of address is complicated by their sense that if what they have to say is true then *ipso facto* their readers may not be well disposed to receive it. And so there are the strategies and ruses of Kierkegaard's mode of 'indirect communication': 'One can deceive a person for the truth's sake, and — to recall old Socrates — one can deceive a person into the truth. Indeed, it is only by this means, i.e. by deceiving him, that it is possible to bring to the truth one who is in illusion' (Kierkegaard, 1962, pp. 39–40). Or there is the unsettling angle of Wittgenstein's writing, as an exercise in conceptual therapy,

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

an attempt to break the 'bewitchment' of thought by language, or 'to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle' (Wittgenstein 1973, 309). And, unsurprisingly, these styles of writing find strong equivalents in oral practices: for example, the dialectical traps and ironic dissimulations through which Socrates is supposed to have led on his interlocutors or, in the psycho-analytic exchange, the tactical struggles of the analyst in attempting to outmanoeuvre the 'resistances' of the client.

If, in all these cases, Socrates is the original — and still exemplary — figure, this is because the kind of knowledge they involve is the one that he first canonised in the West: *self*-knowledge. Here the nature that 'loves to hide' is our own; and so gaining insight into it calls for a form of instruction and learning that is nothing less than a *psyches therapeia*, a practice of caring for the soul. This practice is characterised by a strong element of negativity, manifest in both method and content. In method, it appears in the oppositional nature of dialectic, in the fact that the path is neither linear nor smooth but advances only by confronting mistakes, problems, objections, tensions and conflicts — and by correcting, resolving or overcoming them. And it appears, too, in a pedagogical approach that values unlearning more than learning — or rather that sees precisely in unlearning the most important form of learning. What has to be unlearned is the 'knowledge' we suppose ourselves already to possess and that is all the more debilitating — and difficult to dislodge — just insofar as our possession of it (or rather its possession of us) hides from us our need to search for what better deserves to be called knowledge. Hence the intention of Socrates' pedagogy was not that students should acquire his knowledge but rather that they should come to recognise their own ignorance. It was not indeed clear that Socrates credited even himself with any knowledge higher than this clear-eyed acknowledgment of ignorance — an acknowledgment that was in any case valuable for his interlocutors precisely insofar as it freed them from the tyranny of false or half-baked ideas and gave them, instead of their mistaken sense of already possessing truth, a greater keenness in *searching for* it.

The negativity of this method resides not only in the paradoxical character of its outcome — a truthful state of ignorance rather than a deceived state of knowledge — but also in the pain that is inseparable from it as a process. Aeschylus had spoken of 'learning through suffering' as Shakespeare would speak of knowledge making 'a bloody entrance'. And while Socratic pedagogy, insulated as it was within a virtual arena of speech, fell short of the tragic exposures of lived experience, it was still people's live convictions — and not any merely academic opinions they might hold — that were put to the test when they were exposed to Socrates' questioning. The pressure to shed these convictions, and implicitly to admit the gullibility that had

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

allowed one to entertain them, could only be painful. It was not for nothing that Socrates had characterised himself as a gadfly constantly exciting an itch, nor was it surprising that the discomfort of this itch to his fellow countrymen should eventually have driven them to bring charges against him that were to cost him his life. For what one was being forced to relinquish, often enough, was not only particular views but a whole posture of mind that had made one vulnerable to these views in the first place. Rather than being easily detachable from oneself, such a posture can seem to constitute one's very self or, as we say, to confer one's identity.

It is perhaps evidence enough of Fergal's Socratic credentials that on at least one occasion a member of parliament publicly called for his dismissal from the university, just as a bishop attempted more discreetly to have him banished from the airwaves when memorable appearances on the 'Late Late Show' had extended the spirit of his seminars to the living-rooms of the nation. I mentioned above, though, a negativity not only of method but also of content; and I still need to say something about how the latter, too, was manifest in Fergal's teaching. Here it is not only a matter of the implicit negations of positions he had earlier seemed to support, which we have already seen to follow from his espousal — rather than simple exposition — of each consecutive figure who appeared on his syllabus. Nor is it only a matter of his systematic dissent from whatever views appeared at the time to be dominant — so that, while he might have been taken for a 'liberal' in his earlier years as a teacher, when liberal pieties ('freedom', 'rights', 'tolerance') themselves became orthodox, both in the academy and the media, they too became targets of his critique. This dissent was linked to what seemed an instinctive distrust of 'public opinion' (or the 'great beast' as Plato called it [Plato, 1979, 493]). But the distrust in turn was only a consequence of deeper intuitions about the kind of creatures we are, or what lies in 'human nature' itself.

Insistent in Fergal's teaching, at any rate, was a note of deflation. To be sure, attendance at his lectures could be a heady experience and as students we were not mistaken to pick up, and often to be fired by, an emancipatory impetus in his words. But this impetus did not derive from any neo-Pelagian (or 'Californian') conviction about our irrefragable goodness. In his class, one could not forget that it was human beings — 'enlightened' human beings of last century — who were agents of the Holocaust and the Gulag. The extremity of these evils was not allowed to distract from the fact that we ourselves might be capable of them, as we were in any case caught up in the pettiness and foibles of the ordinary human scene. In disabusing us of any facile utopianism, Fergal was of course helped by the particular authors whose voices he so effortlessly assumed: Hobbes on the rapaciousness generated by an elemental fear, Rousseau on the

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

vanity — and potential for violence — implicit in the comparative basis of our self-esteem and, perhaps most of all, Plato (especially through the characters of Thrasymachus and Callicles in the *Republic* and the *Gorgias*) on the thinness of the veneer of 'morality' and the strength of unreformed egoism and will to power often lurking beneath it. But, as I have already intimated, Fergal's great force as a teacher lay in his ability not so much to expound these authors as to show the terrible plausibility of their respective accounts: their plausibility, that is to say, precisely as accounts of *ourselves* and of our many twisted ways of relating with each other.

Despite the darkness of these pictures it was often a comic note that prevailed in Fergal's classes. This created space for the intimacy of the pictures to strike home — for us to realise that they were really mirrors in which to catch our own image. The fact that our frequent laughter was not at the expense of others perhaps freed it from knowing superiority. But how, on the other hand — if it carried the smack of such chastening self-recognition — did it avoid being the expression of disillusionment or defeat? Corrosive cynics who know the value of nothing or no one — including students — are not unknown in universities, and how was Fergal not one of them? How was his *via negativa* not a path to nihilism?

The Search for the Good

As we have already seen, deconstruction — or to use his own term, criticism — did not amount, in Fergal's hands, to a denial of truth; rather, its intention was, in exposing counterfeits, to quicken a search for what is genuine. The distinction that holds here is the Platonic one between seeming or mere appearance and the real. It is our own propensity to be taken in by appearances — the fact that 'humankind cannot bear very much reality' — that imposes the rigours of dialectical search. This search, then, is undertaken in the service of truth and not as a demonstration of its unattainability. The affirmative stance that energised the negative movement of thought did not lie only in an inclination towards truth, however. I have spoken already of an *eros* in the soul that, when awakened, drives us in the pursuit of truth. But, in Fergal's Platonic perspective, truth is not the ultimate source of attraction nor does it, on its own, arouse this *eros*. What does? The answer is: the good — which itself cannot in the end be separated from the beautiful. The ultimate question for such beings as ourselves is not 'how or what can we know?' but rather 'how shall we live?' — which entails not only 'how should we act ?' but what 'kind of beings should we become and what kind of society should we strive to create?' It is the 'good' that presides over these questions,

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

drawing us on to search for answers to them. We are committed to truth insofar as we desire these answers to be adequate.

With regard to the good, two contrasting factors have to be held together: on the one hand, its power — magnified by the allure of a beauty that attends it — to draw us ever onwards, beyond where we are now; and, on the other hand, the fact that even where we are now — wherever that may be — we are *already* in the grip of the good. Let us get some grounding here by first looking at the latter of these two factors. What it reveals is the ordinariness, one might say the democracy, of the good — its non-confinement to an elite, intellectual or otherwise. All of us are well attuned to it, at least in some areas of our lives: we may like a good steak, enjoy a good 'pint', appreciate finely-cut clothes or a well-designed house, admire a brilliant footballer or a virtuoso fiddler. In these and similar cases — some firmly embedded in our lives, others more discretionary — we exercise choice or judgment: but only as drawn towards, or even compelled by, standards whose power of attracting or of binding does not derive from the mere fact that they accord with our taste. Rather, they enshrine the good, and the judgment we ourselves have — or are educated to acquire — is itself good just insofar as it accords with *them*. Many disparate domains, then, exhibit this structure of a 'good' and, correlatively, of a bad or indifferent. But beyond all these separate domains — or, rather, by and through our judgements, choices, and actions in and across all of them — we enact a whole life which is similarly exposed to evaluation with respect to the good. The shape and burden of our lives is such that, no matter how reflective or unreflective we may be, we cannot avoid an overall pattern of preference or aversion that betrays some notion of the human good. As human beings we must have *some* bearings in relation to this good. It is these bearings that orientate us in moral space, determining what matters to us or what we care about, as well as what we despise or find abhorrent. Just as, bodily, we would be radically disorientated without some sense of front and behind or above and below so, without these bearings, we would be no less disorientated as persons in moral — that is to say human — space.

A concern with the good, then, if only as what keeps us going in times of difficulty or despondency, is universal and inescapable. And yet, for Socrates, it is only too possible for people to be most exacting in their requirements regarding, for example, a horse or a saddle or, more personally, a dietary regime, and still to be careless with regard to the overall pattern of their lives. Not that this pattern could avoid revealing *some* conception of the human good; but this may be a distorted or false conception. We are prone then to be both mistaken about, and heedless of, our own true good. And so Socrates' understanding of his role as a teacher was to instruct people about, and to arouse in them a concern for, this good. His role was paradoxical,

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

however, in that he disavowed being a teacher or having any instruction to offer. The image of himself he offered instead, following his mother's profession, was that of a mid-wife. His function was only to help people — his friends, fellow-citizens or just anyone who cared to join in his conversations — to bring forth and nurture something that was already potentially alive in themselves: a susceptibility to, or weakness for, the good.

Here, then, we touch on the other aspect of the good — its reality less as an immediate presence than as a horizon of aspiration, an ever-receding vista that draws us on. To a great extent the world we inhabit is ruled by necessity and not by the good; and between these two poles there is an 'infinite distance' (Weil, 1976, p. 142; Plato, 1979, 293C). 'Necessity' here connotes not just the blind and impersonal forces through which, for example, diseases or natural disasters are visited on human beings. It also includes a kind of entropy in the human world itself, whether in horribly predictable regularities of oppression, suffered by whole groups, or in random afflictions that blight the lives of many scattered individuals. It comes to reside in the logic of social structures and institutions (for example, the market), dictating their survival in spite of casual cruelties they inflict or high social costs they exact. And it can become a form of rationalisation — a cover for expediency and violence — that presents itself as unblinking recognition of the workings of 'the real world'. Given the strong entrenchment of this necessity, then, the good becomes fragile, having to work against a constant gravitational pull. And yet, however fragile, the good maintains its own counter-attraction — which has perhaps never been more starkly expressed than in Socrates' proposition: 'it is better to suffer evil than to inflict it'.

Several points follow from this way of seeing the good. First, it involves an always problematic dialectic between an individual and his or her society. On the one hand, it is within individual souls that a sensitivity to the good must be awakened, a point all the time made by Socrates both in the highly individuated way in which he lived his own life and through the directly personal way in which he related to each of his interlocutors. On the other hand Socrates was first and last a citizen of Athens, a city to which he committed his life and at the hands of which he did not try to escape death. Both Plato and Aristotle take their cue from Socrates in seeing ethics as inseparable from politics, that is to say, in seeing the good life not as something to be achieved in isolation but as requiring a community held together by a shared ethos, which animates its laws and institutions. By following these Greek thinkers, Fergal found himself at odds with many contemporary 'liberals' who deem pursuit of the good to be only the private affair of individuals, while the polity must (as it were by 'necessity') resign itself to a lower-level neutrality, undisrupted by conflict between rival versions of the good. From a Platonic

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

perspective, the good cannot be thus confined; and liberal politics, just like any politics, will itself willy-nilly enshrine *its* version — an inadequate one, as it must seem to a Platonist. The inadequacy derives from the fact that as an individual one cannot realise the good on one's own, since community is not external to or imposed on one but rather already implicit in one's very reality as a person.

If Fergal was not a liberal, neither was he a 'communitarian' – at least not of the type that provides an easy target for liberal critics. For he did not believe that any society could be secure enough in its possession of the good to be entitled to define it pre-emptively for individual members. The ever-present threat of authoritarianism — no less than the danger that this 'good' would anyhow be distorted — distanced him from enthusiasts for established *Gemeinschaft*. Still, as I have just suggested, his love of liberty — his instinctive recoil from coercion in any matter really concerning the spirit — did not make him a 'liberal'. For privatising the good, in his view, was only too likely to remove it from the arena of rational discussion and thus to reduce it to the *fiat* of individual preference. And the beneficiaries, all too predictably, of this moral *laissez faire*, he believed, will be the strong and powerful at the expense of the weak and vulnerable. What distinguished him from *both* liberals and communitarians, then, was his commitment to the search for the good. Indeed for him this search was not just a path towards the good but was rather already at least partly constitutive of it: 'The good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life' (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 219). It was in the nature of this search, for Fergal as for Socrates, that it could best be conducted not on one's own but with others. And if one were to ask what education is for Fergal, I believe the precise answer would be: the conduct by teacher and students together of this search for the good.

Education despite the University

It follows from all this that Fergal saw the university (or at least the *good* university) as a space in which each student could raise fundamental questions for herself or himself, with the great advantage of being able to do so *with* others, *and* in which the society to which they all belonged — and to which they owed some obligation just in virtue of being beneficiaries of a university education — could be subjected to thoroughgoing critique. Fergal went on pursuing this understanding of a university in his own practice even as it became increasingly clear that the university's *actual* role in society was becoming that of just another industry governed by the logic of 'the bottom line' — as, for individual students, enhancement of their prospects in a competitive economy was becoming the overwhelming purpose of their

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

education. As a place increasingly devoted to frantic dissemination of information within ever narrower and more fragmented specialisms, the university had become an inhospitable space for Fergal's kind of educative practice — all the more so when the radicalism of those in the Humanities most likely to be critics of this debasement had often succumbed to a post-modernist rhetoric that was itself more a symptom than a critique of 'late capitalism'. But what *was* this practice and how, against such odds, did he sustain it? The answer to the first of these questions makes the answer to the second one all the more remarkable. Or, rather, it shows that Fergal's practice has been even more deeply uncongenial to the reality of a contemporary university than I have thus far made apparent — so that it is something of a miracle that he has sustained it at all.

Fergal's teaching was of course about much more than transmitting information. He wanted students to acquire capacities to think rigorously — to follow out the implications of a position or to identify the assumptions lying behind it, to be alert to inconsistencies in argument, to understand the kind of evidential grounds required to justify claims and to recognise whether or not in particular cases they are available. He also wanted our minds to become more adventurous, being carried to unfamiliar places by a free play of ideas, undeterred by fear of novelty or the pressure of immediate 'reality-checking'. And he wanted us, too, to develop interpretative sensitivity, a feel for context, an ability to enter sympathetically into the shaping concerns of individual thinkers and to experience the force of their particular perspectives on the world. He wanted us to become intimate with these thinkers and to see that their ideas *mattered*. By exposing us in a year to several of them he wanted us to be challenged by the conflicts between them and thereby to learn the complexity and many-sidedness of the human condition. But he knew, too, that the result of such exposure can all too easily be the sceptical conclusion that these thinkers simply cancel each other out by their conflicts, leaving nothing to trump the received 'common-sense'; and he wanted us, beyond this, to come to some deep and tested convictions of our own. To be sure, these are very ambitious goals, which it might seem portentous to relate to undergraduate teaching. And yet — parochial and literal-minded though most of us were when we entered his class — they really did seem to inspire Fergal's teaching. And of course they were goals that required, intrinsically and not as a mere option, a particular style of pedagogy: one that constantly elicited the voices of students so that they came into play with Fergal's own voice and, through it (and often as indistinguishable from it), with the voices of his chosen philosophers. Following Socrates and Plato, he saw thinking as the 'dialogue of the soul with itself'; and like them, too, he saw actual dialogue, live and

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

unscripted with face-to-face others, as the very best medium in which thinking is learned.

But 'learning to think' could never in itself be the sufficient aim of Fergal's teaching. For there was a style of thinking which had beguiled the minds of Socrates' youthful followers and which Socrates himself, with Plato, saw as the lethal enemy of philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom. This was the sophistry — or, in its more combative forms, the eristic — which, transcending the specific densities of particular areas of knowledge, offered itself as a powerful tool for delivering success in *any* area. As masters of the arts of persuasion, sophists could deploy arguments with deadly cleverness and skill — but with success, not truth, as the defining norm of their advocacy. Here dialectic was a weapon to be used — with suitable manipulation of images and appeal to the emotions — to prove whatever case was required. The great sophists were intellectual mercenaries, hired guns who could assure victory in the law-courts, the assembly, or any relevant forum; and of course they are still with us among barristers, spin-doctors and assorted 'consultants'. How then are they to be combated, and how did Socrates as a teacher differ from those teachers of sophistic skills whose dazzling arrival on the scene brought 'enlightenment' to Greece in the fifth century BCE?

The answer here is not the one often attributed to Plato, or rather to the super-rationalist caricature who often goes by that name. It is not by resorting to the water-tight syllogisms of a cleanly unimpeded reason — and thus by renouncing as unworthy the realm of images and feelings — that one resists the lure of sophistry. Here we return once again to the *eros* that must come alive in the soul of the learner. 'Soul' has now an effete ring in English. But 'psyche', the Greek word it translates, is not an ethereal entity, the construct of some vapid 'spirituality'. To the contrary, it is rooted in the depths of a person's nature, in the drives and emotions that give energy to one's living and in the images and symbols (and stories) that influence the direction of this energy. For Plato, human beings are creatures of passion. But true passion for him does not lie in a bundle of drives inwardly propelled to already determined satisfactions. It lies, rather, in a capacity to be seized and moved by something outside and beyond ourselves. And for Plato there is something that is supremely worthy of being seized and moved by: what he called the beautiful and good (*to kalon kagathon*). To be sure, we may be deceived — perhaps disastrously — about what the beautiful and good consists of, or wherein it resides. But the task of education, as it is depicted in book 6 of the *Republic*, is precisely to turn around the 'eye of the soul' so that, undeceived, one is opened to it.

Perhaps the finest image for this task was given to us, long before Plato, by early ancestors on this island: those who created an opening in the roof above the entrance at Newgrange, through which, for a

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

brief moment at the winter solstice, a ray of sunlight could penetrate to the inner chamber. Seeing in this building a powerful symbol for the construction of the 'new Europe', Vaclàv Havel is led to ask: 'are at least some of the thousands of designers and builders of this [political] edifice thinking of the opening that would connect it with the great beyond – that would infinitely transcend the project, and yet alone could give it true meaning?' (Havel, 1997, p.246). But perhaps we might see the feat of delicate alignment achieved by those ancient builders as an even more appropriate symbol for educators. The opening which corresponds to the 'eye of the soul' is rightly to be located in the intellect, which must break through illusion and orientate us to the good. But this opening has to work its way down into that patterning of imagination and emotion without which intellect itself (incapable of anything more than a specious cleverness), and will (as nothing more than a brittle agent of self-control), cannot allow the good to penetrate our lives.

From his reading of Plato, Fergal must always have been ruefully aware of just how much of this education of sensibility needs already to have occurred long before a student comes to university. But if his own role as a university teacher was (only!) to enable us to understand the good, he was acutely conscious of how much even this understanding depends on the generation of apt images and feelings. I raised the question earlier of what sustained Fergal in this role, especially at a time when the university milieu was becoming increasingly hostile to its fulfilment. Part of the answer lay in his practice every summer of bathing his mind, so to speak, in poetry and fiction — in texts that bore no necessary relation to the texts he would be teaching that autumn but which, by animating *him*, would also, he trusted, animate his teaching. Another, similarly oblique, but perhaps even more important, part of the answer lay in the practices he was engaged in outside the academy. Thirty years ago he founded a hostel for homeless girls in Dublin, which he has guided on an almost daily basis ever since. (For some of us, involved in various voluntary capacities, conversation with Fergal into the small hours around the fireside in the hostel seemed to be our *real* university.) For many years, too, he directed the activities of ALLY, an organisation which — again with enthusiastic co-workers — he founded to support single mothers, and which was able to make itself defunct a few years ago because a change in social attitudes and provisions and, not least, the abolition of 'illegitimacy' as a legal category, had lessened the need for its continued existence. Although in his lectures he seldom if ever spoke overtly about any of these extra-mural activities, they greatly nourished his teaching. For one thing, they freed him from the complacency, born of accustomed privilege, that could so easily become part of the academic persona. And they also provided him with the kind of rich staple of experience that he saw as essential

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

to his role as a theorist. For theory, in his understanding of it, is precisely reflection on experience; and it was the experience he acquired in these settings that gave such 'human truth' to his own theorising, that made it so devoid of pedantry or sentimentality, and that brought such luminous vitality to his reading of philosophical texts.

This kind of lived dialogue between theory and practical social engagement provides a counterpoint to what 'research', formal and published, is for many academics. As a consequence of Fergal's engagement in it, writing — apart from occasional pieces for newspapers or periodicals — never commanded his devotion. But this too can be taken as a sign of his fidelity to the Platonic spirit. *Written* words are weak, Plato tells us, because they cannot give 'instruction by question and answer'; 'if you ask them what they mean by anything they simply return the same answer over and over again' and so are 'only a kind of shadow' of the 'living and animate speech of the man with knowledge'. The words that really count are those 'spoken by way of instruction or, to use a truer phrase, *written on the soul* of the hearer to enable him to learn about the right, the beautiful and the good' (Plato, 1973, 275–78). If there is irony in our having these words from Plato's masterly pen, they are of course an entirely unironic allusion to Socrates, whose voice echoes down the centuries, though he himself has left us not a single written word.

The Example of a Good Man

As a great practitioner of the art of dialectical instruction, Fergal has surely written on many souls. But have we managed yet to disclose the sources that sustained him in this task? Fergal's own explanation for whatever gifts might be credited to him was always easy (and delivered with the customary twinkle): he's a Kerryman. But this answer may be good enough only for others fortunate enough to hail from 'the kingdom' (though it too might claim endorsement from Socrates, who was sensitive to the spirits of a place, being inspired for example on one of his rare departures from Athens to make his great speech on love by the river Ilissus!) One might speculate here on the influence of a father, grandfather and great-grandfather, all of whom were primary teachers, and on a local love of learning tracing back through the hedge-schools and beyond. Or one might look to the inspiration of Dominican teachers in a wider tradition stretching back to Albert and Aquinas. Or, remembering Socrates' attribution of his own education in the love of beauty to Diotima, a wise woman from Mantinea, one might think of the formative influence of women in Fergal's early life — the source, perhaps, of what has seemed his exceptional gift for quickening the

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

engagement of women students (something that is entirely absent, of course, from the Socratic dialogues).

In the end, though, the only answer here — whatever the obscure biographical sources – may lie simply in the fact of Fergal's own possession by the good. At the close of the *Symposium*, Alcibiades compares the effect of Socrates' conversation with the spell cast on his listeners by the flute-player, Marsyas: 'the only difference between you and Marsyas is that you need no instruments; you do exactly what he does, but with words alone' (Plato, 1989, 215C-D). And he then describes the exasperating discordance between his thoughts when he is in Socrates' company and his mundane sense of things when he is not. Since the only explanation he can find for Socrates' effect lies in Socrates himself, he goes on to evoke the man in the most vivid and impassioned portrait that we have of the great teacher. One of Socrates' qualities that he highlights is the composure and endurance that he himself had seen him display on the battlefields at Potidaea and at Delium. A similar courage, I believe, is revealed in Fergal's way of facing down such severe arthritis as he made his way in latter years to the lecture hall in Belfield. And I knew no one who could more justly appropriate Socrates' words at his trial:

> I care nothing for what most people care about: money-making, administration of property, generalships, success in public debates, magistracies, coalitions, and political factions . . . I did not choose that path, but rather the one by which I could do the greatest good to each of you in particular: by trying to persuade each of you to concern himself less about what he has than about what he is, so that he make himself as good and as reasonable as possible (Plato, 1983, 36B).

'Writing on the soul' must not be taken to imply, of course, that the soul is passive, as paper is in receiving marks inscribed on it. No one was less in thrall to the transmission (or, in contemporary jargon, the 'delivery') model of learning than Socrates: 'My dear Agathon . . . if only wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full vessel into an empty one' (Plato, 1989, 175D) — an early statement of the 'jug and mug' theory of education. The very discrepancy between the student-in-construction-with-the-teacher and the student then left to his own devices, that was so painful to Alcibiades, is evidence enough that the teacher's efficacy is not as straightforward as that of the pen. I have already mentioned the kind of gravity exerted in the human world by the force of 'necessity'. And Plato's depiction of the soul in Socrates' great second speech in the *Phaedrus* accords with that image. The soul nourished by beauty, goodness and wisdom grows wings which 'have the power to lift up heavy things and raise them aloft where the gods all dwell' (Plato, 1973, 246D). When one reflects on the experience of many students who experienced a kind of intellectual lift-off in Fergal's classes

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

which they, like Alcibiades, then found it difficult to articulate or 'retain' in other settings, it does not seem too fanciful to think of Fergal's 'wings' as creating a kind of anti-gravity in which others too could take flight. In this different field of force, the perspectives one entertains, the goals that come into view, and the very questions one finds oneself asking, are freer and more expansive. And this soaring effect of his words was all the more remarkable, of course, in one who remained so firmly rooted in the ordinary. (How many evenings spent with people in various kinds of distress, how many Saturdays in the hostel fixing door locks, radiators or cisterns with his friend Frank — in whom he found not only the philosopher but the engineer that he himself, had he chosen another path, would have liked to become?)

I promised at the outset to address the 'issue' of teaching. In concluding, I am conscious of not having abstracted any rules or formulae that might define the essence of this practice. But perhaps we already have enough attempts to do just that, to work out 'strategies' for inculcating 'skills' or 'models' for specifying 'outcomes' — all the better to secure standardisation and, thereby, as we suppose, success. I make no claim for Fergal or even for Socrates as paradigms of the teaching art — not, in any case, if that means they must be *imitated* by others who wish to become good teachers. If they are exemplary, as surely they both are, it is because they realised possibilities proper both to teaching and to themselves. For those of us who are teachers, then, the challenge of their example is to discover *our* possibilities as teachers. 'Perhaps he shares some of his specific accomplishments with others', Alcibiades says of Socrates, towards the end of his famous encomium. 'But, as a whole', he goes on, 'he is unique; he is like no one else in the past and no one in the present — this is by far the most amazing thing about him' (Plato, 1989, 221C). What is claimed here for Socrates I have wanted to claim also for Fergal. But perhaps education is the space where we must claim that, at least potentially, this 'most amazing thing' holds true for *everyone*. Great teachers surely enter deeply into the minds and hearts of their students; for many of us it is an effect of having been taught by Fergal that, even decades later, there are issues we cannot reflect on without at the same time contending with a Fergal-within — his is still one of the voices in the internal dialogues in which our thinking consists. Still, it was not so that we might become like himself that Fergal taught us so unstintingly and with such élan. It was, rather, so that we might ourselves be lured into that search which for him was a profession only because it was also an unfeigned reality in his life. Like Socrates, perhaps he did not entertain too many illusions about how inclined most of us are to engage in this search. But by embodying it so powerfully in his own practice — at a time when computers and other machines could be touted for their

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

manifold superiority to mere teachers – he gave us every reason to be grateful for what he showed us about the call of teaching.

References

Havel, Vaclàv. 1997. The Art of the Impossible. New York: Knopf.
Kierkegaard, Søren. 1962. The Point of View for My Work as an Author, trans. W. Lowrie. New York: Scribners.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1986. Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1984. 'Schopenhauer as Educator', in Untimely Meditations, trans. R.J. Hollingdale and J.P. Stern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1984. After Virtue. London: Duckworth.
Plato. 1983, Apology. In H. Tredennick, trans. The Last Days of Socrates, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Plato. 1973. Phaedrus, trans. W. Hamilton. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Plato. 1979. The Republic, trans. D. Lee. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Plato. 1989. Symposium, trans. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett.
Weil, Simone. 1976. Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks, trans. Elizabeth Chase Geissbuhler. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 1973. Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.

Joseph Dunne
Department of Education
St Patrick's College
Dublin City University
Drumcondra, Dublin 9

© The Author 2006
Journal compilation © The Dominican Council/Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2006

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0028-4289.2006.00141.x Published online by Cambridge University Press