November 7, 2023

Dear John,

The received wisdom is that Plato's writing changed as he aged. The earlier dialogues presented Socrates as he was—a gadfly quizzing Athens and leaving aporia in his wake. The middle dialogues used Socrates as a mouthpiece for Plato's own views, emphasizing Plato's theory of forms and the benefits of dialectic, that is, talking things through. In the later dialogues, like his Laws, Plato left Socrates behind entirely.

But what if the story is better than that? Catherine Zuckert argues that Plato's corpus is seamless. Instead of chopping it up by tendentious standards of early or late, we should arrange the works in their dramatic order. This, for instance, makes Laws not a late work but the earliest. Socrates is missing because he's still an inconsequential youth. Once we see the dialogues in dramatic order, we see that they tell one story and one philosophy. Plato wasn't developing his thoughts as he aged. He had the grand vision all at once and only slowly unfurled it. Socrates only appears to change dialogue to dialogue, but does not in reality, because Plato used him to illustrate the subtle art of persuasion: You must meet your interlocutors where they are. Different arguments, different analogies, different degrees of flattery and mockery work on different people and different audiences.

I don't know if Zuckert is right. It's a romantic hypothesis. Without a time machine we'll never know for sure. Indirect evidence, though, would be if we see similar things in the world's other great thinkers. Have there been other thinkers who had such a vision all at once and then spent decades unfurling it?

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Nestor in Homer's Iliad is a master of delay. Having aged out of fighting, his role is to advise the younger, tempestuous heroes around him. He does not merely exhort. Often, he tells digressive stories. In the Iliad's first book he tries to stop the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon caused by Agamemnon taking Achilles' war booty. With his honey-sweet voice, Nestor tells how he as a young man fought centaurs in the mountains with "better men than you." His prowess was great and the two should therefore listen to him. Plus, he understands how power works: Achilles is the stronger, but Agamemnon is more kingly and therefore has more allies. Achilles, stay your wrath! Of course, Nestor is ignored by the simple-minded warriors around him (the plot would have ground to halt otherwise). But what if they had listened? So many Greek warriors would have lived.

I say all this not to compare you to Nestor in long-windedness (heaven forbid). Instead, it reminds me of a trip we took into darkness one night. (It happened to be a trip to the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.) It was you, me, and Tess in a van driving to the middle of the California desert. Endless and bleak, the trip evokes Odysseus's visit to the underworld. Hades is neither heaven nor hell as Christians conceive it. Instead, it's a land of mindless shades flitting about. Among the shades are the specters of Achilles and Agamemnon and others besides.

If only the shades of previous generations had listened. The hours of pointless statistical rigamarole to make sure "affect" wasn't the real culprit. The Herculean labors to prise "self-esteem" apart from phantoms like "self-efficacy." The careers squandered in the belief that we do things to "feel good about ourselves" and to "find meaning," with no larger evolutionary

rationale. Sadly, the Μοῖραι saw fit that the wise watched as the unlistening dashed their time and minds against pre-Darwinian theories of psychology. Thankfully your labors have not been Sisyphean; Darwinism continues to take over psychology.

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I found evolutionary psychology by accident. I already knew Doug Kenrick, but only from his social psychology class. At the time, I worked at a library. Often a title would catch my eye and I'd dip in for a few pages. Sometimes the book went home with me. One of those was Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works*. What could be more obvious than that the mind is a computer created by natural selection? I had never considered it before, but it was clearly true. (In fact, it was so obvious that I was astounded later when I learned that both the computation and evolution sides were widely criticized.)

It was clear from the book that these Tooby and Cosmides people were a big deal. I moved onto reading "Psychological Foundations." Skipping forward a bit, I knew who I wanted to get my PhD with. It was the only application for graduate school I ever submitted. And I was accepted.

Yet I worried. Tooby and Cosmides were brilliant. But in their writing, they took no prisoners. What would they be like in person? Difficult and aloof? Worse? I shouldn't have worried. Few people are kinder than you and Leda. Our first conversation during my recruitment visit was a rundown of the other masters of evolutionary psychology. You didn't want me to miss out on a better fit, so you talked up your favorite colleagues. (Or maybe you just wanted to pawn me off on Buss or Daly and Wilson.) Your tender heart was matched by a tenderized stomach. At recruitment dinner, I saw that a young Nike's favorite game was to punch her father in the gut, a beating you took with equanimity.

Like children, graduate students don't quite realize what quality advisors do for us. I've advised only a handful of grad students. When I arrived at UCSB, I believe you and Leda had eight or nine students. No wonder papers were delayed! Grad students have no clue what they are doing, least of all when it comes to writing. It takes me hours to work through my students' first drafts. Multiply that by nine students, each with many papers and each with dissertations and theses—how, I ask, did you survive?

My strongest memories of Santa Barbara are the time, the sheer time you invested. Three-hour meetings every week to hone students' projects. Hours of individual time designing studies. Time alone revising papers. You said once that each of us amounted to a book you didn't write. You weren't exaggerating. And we can't thank you enough.

I find I've inherited a lot of your traits. The best arguments start from the big bang. Every talk is a job talk (until you get tenure). The most common phrase my students hear from me is, "Let's step back a bit." It means we've gotten ahead of ourselves and haven't considered the first principles that should guide what comes next.

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I'm reading Voyage of the Beagle right now. As I follow with Darwin through his interpretations of flora, fauna, weather, and stratigraphy, it reminds me of listening to you. Darwin could hold the biggest of pictures in mind—seeing the grand sweep of rivers turning plains into valleys, of life evolving bit by bit. And he had time for the smallest details—the life

of barnacles, the ways of worms. (He even showed up the physicists. Darwin's theory required immense spans of time. Lord Kelvin calculated, however, that the sun could not possibly have been around long enough and therefore Darwin was wrong—oops.) You created our own modern synthesis and still gave thought to details like meta-representations and recalibrated mental variables.

Darwin spent his life unfurling a single great idea. Could the same be true of Plato? I think so. The legacy of his genius far outshines the martial κλέος that Homer's heroes fought and died for. Would it shine so bright if it was a grab-bag of fun but disjointed dialogues? Hardly.

I can say this with confidence because I know John Tooby and I know how he and Leda Cosmides devised evolutionary psychology in a short span and are still waiting for the world to fully catch up. I can say this with confidence because I spent a decade learning next to my own Plato, my own Darwin.

Love,
Andy