Gerard WEGEMER

Moreana XXVII, 101-102 (May 1990), 55-64

Thomas More's *Dialogue of Comfort* : A Platonic Treatment of Statesmanship *

The ideal of statesmanship recurs as a perennial theme of Western literature, and More's classical favorite, Plato, devotes several dialogues to the subject. [1] In this essay, I argue that Thomas More's *Dialogue of Comfort* freely imitates in both form and content Plato's treatment of statesmanship, just as More freely imitates Plato's treatment of the best regime in *Utopia*.

In Plato's *Statesman* and its companion dialogue, *The Sophist*, the statesman possesses two distinct attributes : he possesses true knowledge and virtue himself, and he has the ability to educate others to attain these same goods (see *Statesman* 309, for example). The sophist, in contrast, dissembles and uses the art of rhetoric to further himself as a hero of debate and a merchant of learned wares rather than one who implants the good seed of virtue and right opinion in the souls of his students (*Sophist* 231).

In *A Dialogue of Comfort*, Anthony shows his concern for the issues associated with Platonic statesmanship and sophistry. For example, in III.19 Anthony and Vincent engage in the most spirited exchange of the work. While discussing the nature of imprisonment, Anthony argues that imprisonment is just the same as not being in prison -- and actually, imprisonment is better. Vincent finds this opinion not only "strange" and hard to accept, but he calls it a "sophistical fantasy" (p. 269). [2] Although Anthony thanks Vincent for his frankness, he takes offense at this charge ; he refers to it at least seven times, and he argues until Vincent retracts his accusation and agrees that Anthony's opinion is a "very substantial truth" (273).

This distinction between truth and sophistry constitutes a central and recurring theme in *A Dialogue of Comfort*. Throughout the work, Anthony reveals Vincent's false imaginings, and he confirms Vincent in his true opinions. Repeatedly in these three Books, Vincent makes clear that the best comfort against tribulation is a mind and heart stabled in

truth. Given this emphasis on truth and virtue, Anthony resembles Plato's statesman who possesses both true knowledge and virtue and has the ability to educate others to attain them.

In the *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger explains how and why physicians of the soul [3] must use dialectic :

> They cross-examine a man's words, when he thinks he is saying something and is really saying nothing, and easily convict him of inconsistencies in his opinions ; these they then collect by the dialectical process, and placing them side by side, show that they contradict one another.... He, seeing this, is angry with himself, and grows gentle towards others, and thus is entirely delivered from great prejudices and harsh notions... [thus] produc[ing] the most lasting good effect on the person who is the subject of the operation. For as the physician considers that the body will receive no benefit from taking food until the internal obstacles have been removed, so the purifier of the soul is conscious that his patient will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge until he is refuted, and from refutation learns modesty ; he must be purged of his prejudices first and made to think that he knows only what he knows, and no more. (*Sophist,* 230)

Dialectic plays an essential role in the cure administered by such cunning physicians as Anthony, who gradually and dialectically removes the obstacles in Vincent's soul, thus enabling him to remember the ideas he will need for true opinion and for moral health.

Early in Book I, Anthony uses another common Platonic metaphor which explains the role of dialectic. He points out the importance of setting the seed of faith "in the garden of our soul, all weeds pulled out for the better feeding of our faith.... Then shall it grow, and so spread up...and bring forth virtue in the branches of our faith ; and then ... we shall be well able to command a great mountain of tribulation to void from the place where it stood in our heart" (I.2). This dialectical cultivation one sees in act throughout the *Dialogue* : Vincent begins with a small seed of faith surrounded by weeds of doubt which Anthony steadily removes. By the end of the *Dialogue*, Vincent has justified his name -- 'vanquisher'. Vincent has conquered his fear and has become strongly rooted in his beliefs. How does this change come about ? Anthony brings Vincent to a clear and deep perception of the true nature of suffering by subtly eliciting his doubts and disagreements, while calling him to remember true principles as opposed to illusory ones.

Upon close investigation, scholars have found that Anthony has a carefully planned rhetorical strategy throughout the *Dialogue.* [4] His treatment of tribulation is highly selective (II.2) ; he frequently cuts off or postpones lines of argument because they deviate from his controlling purpose. He also recalls and initiates lines of argument which seem digressions to Vincent, but Anthony eventually shows they are not. For example, in Chapter 16 of Book II, after Anthony has been speaking for several pages about the arrow of pride, he quite unexpectedly asks Vincent if they have not digressed from their main topic "since this kind of temptation of pride is no tribulation or pain." Vincent agrees, falling into the dialectical trap. Anthony immediately shows him a deeper level of perception whereby pride is a "greater tribulation" to good men than fear, thus putting Vincent on guard for the deeper function of other discussions which may at first appear digressions.

Each of Anthony's "digressions" and repetitions plays an integral role in Vincent's gradual cure. [5] More's *Dialogue* not only discusses comfort, it dramatizes the many stages and the subtle art of psychological comforting. Beneath wise Anthony's warm and humorous bantering lies a well-planned rhetoric which endeavors -- successfully -- to cure a troubled soul. This dialogue enacts a dynamic process in which form and content, *ergon* and *logos,* work together as an integral whole in bringing about Vincent's education. [6]

The dramatic action of the *Dialogue* mirrors its content. The *Dialogue* does not merely discuss comfort in an abstract manner, it actually dramatizes the act of a virtuous and learned man comforting a good but inexperienced youth. To appreciate the drama that unfolds, however, one must -- as in any Platonic dialogue -- know the characters of the interlocutors. Anthony, named after the long-suffering saint, proves himself virtuous, learned, and highly experienced in many forms of suffering. Twice captured by the Turks, he has witnessed and experienced many types of sufferings in his long life, and after a prolonged sickness, he himself readily faces death. He also has a deep knowledge of the theories and explanations set forth by classical and Christian writers about adversity. He possesses the well-formed conscience that Vincent desires as well as a calm, charity, and humor that Vincent admires.

Vincent, a young and rich noble, has come to the sick and dying Anthony for advice. With the expected invasion of the Turks, he fears for himself and for his friends. He fears not only for his physical safety ; more importantly, he fears that he will not stand by his conscience in the face of persecution and will not act as a true statesman

among his family, friends, and countrymen. Vincent has not thought through the implications of his beliefs, as one sees by the many questions which he himself calls foolish once Anthony has answered them. Not yet "deeply rooted," the weak beliefs of Vincent underlie his wavering character. His uncertainty also makes him both hesitant to speak in the early segment of the dialogue and anxious to hear Anthony's counsel. After Anthony's friendly prodding in the beginning of Book II, Vincent promises not to be so "shamefast" or bashful. However, Anthony will have to add humor to his rhetorical strategy before inducing Vincent's fuller participation.

These few facts about the interlocutors help one to appreciate the role of the supposed digressions and overly repetitive arguments in this dialogue. Vincent's underlying "disease" is a timorous mind, caused by intellectual doubts and passionate fears. How does Anthony seek to remove these fears and doubts from Vincent ? Primarily through the three-part dialectical process that conforms to the three-book and three-day structure of the dialogue as a whole.

Through the open and friendly dialectics of Book I, Anthony discovers not only the disease, but also several causes of Vincent's timorous mind : (1) Vincent does not understand the nature of tribulation ; (2) he has certain doubts about his faith, (such as the existence of purgatory and the possiblity of merit) ; and he is both (3) strongly attached to his own riches and (4) strongly repelled by the thought of suffering. Based on this diagnosis of character in Book I, Anthony can devise the rhetorical strategy needed for Vincent's cure in Books II and III. In the second stage, Anthony will reveal to Vincent the epistemological difficulties of his position, i.e., how false images and opinions co-exist with his true opinions, thus causing fear and preventing conviction.

Already in Book I, Vincent holds the opinion that all suffering is for the good of man, but he holds it reluctantly and accepts it more on the authority of the Bible and of Anthony than on its clarity to his own reason. He shows his reluctance by the many objections he raises throughout Books II and III and by his inability to answer the question most pressing to him : how can one be comforted when faced with fearful sufferings from the Turks ? This question Anthony deliberately puts off, and he answers it only in the final pages of Book III when Vincent is prepared for that revelation. In Book I, therefore, Anthony identifies the seed of faith amidst the weeds of doubt within Vincent. That seed contains the ideas which must be brought forth into the light of Vincent's consciousness through a dialectic that will recall the principles of Vincent's faith.

If Anthony diagnoses Vincent's state of mind in the first day of the conversation, only on the second day does he begin the medicinal process whereby he shows Vincent the inadequacy and the inconsistency of his views on suffering. Why then does Anthony begin this second conversation with merry tales ? Because they serve to help Vincent relax in Anthony's company, and thereby help reveal the deeper fantasies and dark unknown which give rise to his fearful state of mind. As Book II opens, Anthony both insists that Vincent speak more, and constructs a strategy to enable this to take place. The rhetorical strategy to free Vincent from his fear of speech parallels the strategy Anthony will advise for the cure of potential suicides : telling fables in order to elicit the other's true thoughts artfully and pleasantly (II.16). This revelation of one's true thoughts comprises the very basis and the necessary ground for successful dialectic. Just as the counsellor must come to know the opinions or false fantasies that lie behind the potential suicide's fear of life, so Anthony must come to know the opinions or false fantasies that lie behind Vincent's fear of death.

Anthony perceptively explains that the timorous mind fails to see things as they are ; it sees, instead, fantasies and vain imaginings, which find their root in the "cowardice of one's own conceit" (II.13). To help Vincent reflect upon the cure for such states of mind, Anthony gives three examples of misperception based on fear : the stonehedge which was mistaken in the dark for an encamped army, Mother Maud's tale of the ass who confesses to the fox, and the person tempted to suicide.

Vincent reacts with laughter at the first two examples, but calls the third "marvellous" and "strange." He then offers the opinion that one in this suicidal frame of mind "can never full cast it off" (II.15). Anthony disagrees with Vincent's rash and fatalistic view, and proceeds to explore regions that have apparently never before occurred to Vincent. Inexperienced in the phenomena of suicide just as he has been inexperienced in persecution, Vincent calls upon Anthony to tell him what can be done. Anthony's reply sets forth in brief the theory behind the art of comforting the potential suicide, the same art he has been applying to Vincent's fear of persecution.

To cure a potential suicide, one must first know well the particular person and that person's situation -- something possible only if one succeeds in getting the person to speak his true mind. Then, having entered into dialectic, the "cunning physician" must give warnings of the danger in a "sweet and pleasant manner," and must gradually reveal to the suicide the difference between fantastic and true imaginings (II.16).

Having set forth these principles, Anthony then engages Vincent in a long discussion about how one can have sure knowledge of one's own mind. Such knowledge constitutes the most important element in curing the potential suicide as well as curing Vincent's own fears and false imaginings.

Anthony's "digression" about the strange fever delves more deeply into this epistemological question, revealing to Vincent the problems involved in knowing. Despite the evidence Anthony amasses, Vincent still admits that "save for the credence" of Anthony, he would not be able to believe such an unusual fever could exist. By showing the inadequacy of Vincent's knowledge in something as common as fever, Anthony prepares Vincent to accept difficult statements regarding other phenomena such as suffering. Anthony does indeed make claims about suffering that seem, on first view, incredible : that all suffering is good ; that suffering, in fact, is better than comfortable prosperity.

Anthony raises the epistemological question explicitly again in II.16 when he asks Vincent how he knows he is awake and not sleeping. Significantly, Socrates poses this same question in *Theaetetus* 158, the dialogue which forms part of Plato's trilogy on statesmanship. In both the *Dialogue of Comfort* and the *Theaetetus,* the Socratic spokesmen lead their interlocutors to reflect on the problems of discerning true from false perception. By the end of Book II of the *Dialogue*, Anthony succeeds in revealing to Vincent the difficulties involved in "sure knowledge" as opposed to imaginative fantasies, and in the beginning of Book III, he can embark upon the last stage of Vincent's education. [7]

Book III opens by dramatically enacting the theoretical fears Vincent introduced at the beginning of Book I : Vincent reports that the Turks are on their way. In trying to cope with this fear, Vincent wonders whether he should even think about his peril since he will fear twice as much, and probably in vain. Anthony strongly disagrees and argues that Vincent's main comfort and best medicine is "to perceive and weigh," to meditate upon, the true nature of terrors and fear.

In the first thirteen chapters of Book III, Vincent listens and raises no major objections to Anthony's counsel. In Chapter 13 he comments that no men could disagree with the theory that worldly comforts are fleeting and can be "deadly destructive unto the soul." However, he recognizes that some men through pride or fear of shame and suffering would be willing to sell out to the Turks. At this point, Anthony does what he encouraged the counsellor to do with the potential suicide (II.16) : to get the fearful soul to remove himself from his own situation by discussing a similar situation, but in someone else, a third party.

This stage encompasses Chapters 14-15 of Book III, where Anthony asks Vincent to play the part of a prosperous man who will defend his possessions by denying just a small part of his faith. In this dialogue-within-a-dialogue, Anthony has Vincent defend a way of life based on false or sophistic opinions. Vincent defends this view valiantly for several pages but must give up since he recognizes the inconsistencies. Although this exercise further clarifies Vincent's thinking, Vincent's cure is still not achieved. As the next few chapters reveal, rational consistency is not the greatest problem for clear thinking ; fear and shame pose much greater difficulties. Such emotions give rise to fantastic images that can displace even knowledge once held as true. When Vincent finally perceives this important fact, his cure is nearly complete and he shows confidence that he can maintain his comfort in tribulation -- if only he can "remember" the considerations which he and Anthony have discussed. Throughout the *Dialogue*, Anthony directs Vincent to recollect the full vision of his faith as contained in Scripture and Tradition. Vincent repeatedly complains of his poor memory and of the many obstacles caused by obscurity, fear, and imagination that prevent him from seeing and living this vision as an integral whole.

This difficulty of remembering brings us back to the original motive for the *Dialogue* as a whole. After the very first exchange of the *Dialogue*, Vincent says to Anthony :

> O my good uncle, even these same self words...make me now feel and perceive what a miss [= loss] of much comfort we shall have when ye be gone. For albeit, good uncle, that while ye do tell me this I cannot but grant it for true, yet if I now had not heard it of you, I had not remembered it, nor it had not fallen in my mind. And over that, like as our tribulations shall in weight and number increase, so shall we need not only one such good word or twain, but a great heap thereof, to stable and strength[en] the walls of our hearts against the great surges of the tempestuous sea. (I.Pref)

In response to this plea, Anthony promises a "store of comfort" by "call[ing] to mind with you such things as I before have read, heard, or thought upon, that may conveniently serve...this purpose" (I.Pref).

This "store of comfort" Anthony provides is a modified form of Platonic recollection. Uncle Anthony constantly encourages his young nephew to "remember" and to "recall" by pondering, weighing and contemplating the collective memory of Christendom : the Bible and Church

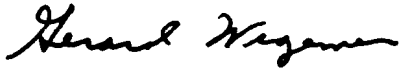
tradition -- what Anthony and Vincent refer to as their faith. In fact, Anthony claims to help Vincent see the whole of this memory and to root himself strongly in the moral implications of its sight.

Anthony warns Vincent no less than thirty-five times that vain imaginings can and will overtake the mind unless one meditates habitually upon the truths of the Christian's collective memory, a memory incarnated in the supreme *exemplum* of the suffering Christ. As Alistair Fox has rightly noted, "All the different structural patterns of the *Dialogue* converge upon the same point : More's demonstration that Christ's passion archetypally embodies the purpose of all human experience." [8]

Remembering this *exemplum*, and thus the whole of the faith, will bring sure comfort despite any suffering -- so argues Anthony again and again. Anthony's own life gives proof that this advice can indeed bring comfort. Having gone through two persecutions himself and now in physical pain, he maintains a comforting humor and calm that Vincent admires and wants to imitate. He suffers physically, but without regret or fear. Indeed, he considers suffering his greatest treasure since it prepares him for a world more permanent and more important than this present world of fleeting pleasures.

Thomas More's own life gives proof that Anthony's advice can bring comfort regardless of the suffering. Like Anthony, he showed a consistency in word and deed : during his months in the Tower, he meditated upon the nature of suffering, thereby strengthening his own store of comfort, nourishing the good seed of virtue and knowledge. He, like Anthony, was able to maintain a humor and calm that offered comfort to those around him and that many admire still today. In so acting, More and Anthony act as Platonic statesmen, possessing and leading others to possess moral virtue and true opinion.

English Department
University of Dallas
Irving, TX 75062, USA



★ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Sixteenth-Century Studies Conference, October 25, 1985.

1. More states his preference for Plato quite explicitly. In one place he says : "However much I esteem both the writers you mention [Vergil and Homer], they will never prevail on my judgment to such an extent that I will concede as much authority on this point to both put together as I concede Plato alone..." *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More,* Volume 3, Part 2 *: "Latin Poems"*, ed. Clarence Miller et al., (Yale U.P., 1984), p. 643.

2. Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation,* ed. Frank Manley, New Haven : Yale U.P., 1977, p. 269. All subsequent references to this modernized version, from the *Selected Works of St. Thomas More,* will be noted within parentheses in the text.

3. Plato favors the comparison of the statesman with the physician. See *Statesman* 298.

4. See especially Louis Martz, "The Design of More's *Dialogue of Comfort,*" *Moreana,* 15-16 (1967), 331-346, and Frank Manley's "Introduction" to *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1977), xi-xxviii. I agree with their assessment regarding the *Dialogue*'s unity, but I argue that the order is psychological and dialectical as well as theological.

5. While recent critics recognize an overall plan, they tend to demean More's rhetorical design as "duplicitous" (Lee Cullen Khanna, "Truth and Fiction in *A Dialogue of Comfort,*" *Moreana* 65-66 [1980], 62), or marked by "the progress of misdirection" (J. Stephen Russell, "More's *Dialogue* and the Dynamics of Comfort," *Moreana* 65-66 [1980], 41). The best recent study is Nancy Yee's perceptive analysis of Book I, "Thomas More : In Defense of Tribulation" (*Moreana* 74 [1982], 13-26).

6. A subtle integration of dramatic characterization with the dialectical search for truth characterizes the Platonic dialogue. Elizabeth Merrill, in her study of *The Dialogue in English Literature* (New York : Henry Holt and Co, 1947), explains :

> With Plato the dialogue is a true literary FORM, since his purpose and its means of fulfillment are made one : his purpose, the discovery of living truth as shaped and conditioned in the minds of men, and his means, the conversation which leads to that discovery of truth (p. 11).

Plato stressed the importance of such "organic unity" in both his letters and dialogue (see especially the *Phaedrus*), and More, in the letter he appends to the 1518 edition of the *Utopia*, refers to the "sharpsightedness" which is exercised and developed through such organic writing (*CW*4, p. 249).

7. Stephen Greenblatt gives a quite different interpretation of this passage on knowing. See *Renaissance Self-Fashioning : More to Shakespeare* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 24-25.

8. Alistair Fox, *Thomas More : History and Providence* (New Haven : Yale U.P., 1983), p. 232-233.

Précis

This paper argues that More's *Dialogue of Comfort* imitates in both form and content Plato's treatment of the statesman. Plato's trilogy on statesmanship holds that the statesman must possess true knowledge and virtue himself and be able to bring others to attain them as well. More presents and dramatizes just such a statesman in Anthony. This article shows how Anthony uses the same dialectical and rhetorical approach as Plato's Socrates, and how Anthony also aims at leading his interlocutor to virtue and knowledge through a doctrine of recollection similar to Plato's.

Résumé

Cet article affirme que le *Dialogue du Réconfort* imite, et dans sa forme et dans son contenu, la façon dont Platon traite l'homme d'Etat. Dans sa trilogie sur l'art de gouverner, Platon soutient que l'homme d'Etat doit lui-même posséder la science et la vertu, et savoir en même temps amener les autres à les atteindre aussi. C'est un tel homme d'Etat que More présente et dramatise dans le personnage d'Anthony. Cet article montre comment Anthony s'y prend de la même façon dialectique et juridique que le Socrate de Platon, et comment Anthony vise aussi à amener son interlocuteur à la vertu et la science à travers une doctrine de recueillement qui ressemble à celle de Platon.

★ ★
★

• December 1988

Thomas More in *FOCUS*

Walking from the Catholic Chapel at URI (which has Thomas More for its patron) to the Faculty Club, I found in the wet grass a copy of Ronald J. Wilson's *Focus on Faith in Jesus,* fallen from a teen-ager's school satchel. Almost predictably in an English-speaking country, More has a little niche in the book, in the section (p. 88f) on « The Canonized Saints of the Catholic Church ». Next after the Mother of God, we find the apostles and martyrs, with this useful reminder : « The word *martyr* comes from the Greek word meaning *witness.* » Then comes a list of seven models in the 'question' column : Joseph, Elizabeth Seton, Thomas More, Joan of Arc, Isaac Jogues, Rose of Lima, Martin de Porres. Can we see a pattern ? St Joseph, husband of the Blessed Virgin, is of course honored throughout the world. The American hemisphere looms large as it should : Elizabeth was born in N.Y. City, and Jogues martyred in N.Y. State (before it was a State) ; Rose was a pure shoot of white colonial presence, and Martin a poor mulatto with no known father. In the 'cloud of witnesses' dating back to the « ages of faith », Joan the French peasant and soldier, and More the sophisticated lawyer apparently stand out by a universal significance and appeal.

G.M.