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'Wild' Critical Analysis

by James Dillon

There is an identifiable period of danger after students first learn an analytic method. Given what Plato witnessed in some of Socrates' students, he suggested not teaching the dialectic (Socratic Method) until they were at least thirty.[1] There is a tendency of younger students to misunderstand concepts and apply them improperly, making a mockery of the reputation of the school and the teacher. After their first taste of argument, Socrates says, young students "are always contradicting people just for the fun of it ... like puppies who love to pull and tear at anyone within reach."[2]

The immature application of analytical concepts is also accompanied by an intoxicating power, a sense in novices that they somehow stand above others. New students can become filled with indiscipline, "puffed up" with arrogated qualities they do not possess. Even more importantly, a puppy's zeal can do great damage to vital things. Present the dialectic too early, Plato warns, and students may use it to dismantle their guiding beliefs, leaving them awash in a nihilistic fog. Armed with the dialectic, they may run home and argue with their (lesser equipped) parents, contending they do not need to listen to them any longer, or like Euthyphro, haul them off to court. They may use their fresh "knowledge" to repudiate the laws and customs of the city for more ignoble pursuits.

Freud recognized a similar phenomenon teaching psychoanalysis in which new practitioners tended to understand analytic concepts simplistically and apply them inappropriately. In a little paper published in 1910, he calls this phenomenon "wild psycho-analysis."[3] In describing what makes an analysis wild, Freud highlights two types of errors which the novice is inclined to make: *scientific* and *technical*.

Scientific errors involve misunderstanding fundamental concepts. Freud provides the real-life example of a physician who used psychoanalytic theory to interpret his patient's intense anxiety as a result of her lack of sexual satisfaction. The physician told the patient she needed to go back to her husband, whom she recently divorced, take a lover, or masturbate. Each of these options was objectionable to her, which created a wrenching quandary. Freud notes that the wild analyst in this case employs a crude concept of sexuality which casts

it as genital intercourse, rather than the more encompassing "what we love." This conceptual confusion produces highly negative results. Freud says if the patient took this physician's advice, it is likely she would still be anxious, since the deeper issues relating to her desire remain unaddressed.

Like Plato before him, Freud laments that poor analysis by novices damages the reputation of the legitimate enterprise, not to mention the additional suffering and wasted time for the misdiagnosed patient.

Technical errors in wild psychoanalysis ignore the practical aspects of properly applying a concept and focus instead on abstract insights produced by the theory. Freud chides this same physician for simply telling the patient a truth revealed by analysis, "You are repressed and need sexual release," believing it will somehow be curative for her. The wild psychoanalyst did not appreciate the painstaking relational work which makes any analysis produce its salutary results. What causes pathology, Freud says, is not ignorance, but inner resistance to aspects of our life we know only too well. The task of the treatment lies in helping the patient experientially confront these resistances, rather than simply enlightening her with verbal truths.

In today's academy, where so many instructors are busy teaching young students the analytical tools from various "critical" theories, I have noticed a similar phenomenon of arrogance and dangerously clumsy conceptual application in novices. I call it "wild critical analysis."

For example, just this past year during an initial check-in before starting a seminar discussion on Plato, a student noted he did not do the reading because, to paraphrase, it was "written by white men, for white men." In a discussion about the individual soul, another student argued that such things were not worth considering because Spanish-speaking cultures like hers are "centered on the community" rather than the individual. In another class, we discussed the notion of work as a vocation. I encouraged students to articulate what their work life after college might look like from this point of view. One student (loudly) struggled with the task on the ground that forms of labor are constructions foisted upon us by the dominant class for the purpose of subjugation. I could go on. These examples would be quaint if they did not also carry such negative repercussions.

Echoing Plato, many of the adverse consequences of wild critical analysis stem from the immaturity of the student. Wild critical analysis appeals to the insecurity of the new learner, giving him a cocksurety which feeds the desire we all have to escape the logical contradictions of any theory we hold or analysis we perform. "Always remember," one of my teachers used to say, "that scholars, including this one, are used car salesmen." Escaping this truth is an attractive proposition. Conceptual simplicity, coupled with inner certainty, promises to satisfy our deep human

need for knowledge, but it never delivers. The student is left consuming thin gruel, too foolish to be able to recognize he is malnourished. This self-delusion also helps mask the wild critical analyst's own base interests, prejudices, and perpetuations of injustice, serving as a conscience salve, an excuse for inaction. "Don't look at me, I put up my lawn sign."

Like wild psychoanalysis, wild critical analysis has a mistaken belief in the power of words and insight to produce change. As Freud notes, change cannot happen simply by sharing propositionally true knowledge with someone. In the same way, the wild critical analyst believes that exposing hypocrisy or injustice somehow changes things for the good.

Just to pick one example, I often hear students say, "Silence (about racial injustice) is violence." Let us assume for the moment that the substance of this statement is true. Does relaying this truth to the (silent) perpetrators do anything at all for them? Will it help anyone who tends to be unfair, or to take too much, to be more just in the future? Will it help any victims of injustice? As the Marxist cultural critic Fredrik deBoer notes, after all the post-George Floyd protests, university action statements, and beefed-up HR departments, the material circumstances of economically disenfranchised and marginalized people in the U.S. did not improve a single bit.[4] This is not to mention the failure to enact any effective reforms or major pieces of legislation. There is considerable evidence that "de-policing" and "de-prosecutorial" policies enacted in the wake of Floyd appear to have been injurious to those deemed most in need.[5] Sharing hard-hitting words has become the bright shiny object of the contemporary social justice movement.

Assuming we have a valid initial conception of justice, which is often sorely lacking in today's classrooms, questions which move us beyond these types of technical errors toward a deeper understanding are: How is justice effectively realized? How do we help individuals or groups recognize they have been unfair, cruel, or selfish, and to change? Answering these questions involves learning about the slow, painstaking confrontation with our weaknesses, limitations, and deepest fears, all under the pedagogical guidance of a loving other (or others). They involve not destroying, but assuming meaningful roles in life-giving institutions.

As I look to the future, it seems what is needed to combat the many scientific errors of wild critical analysis are instructors who know critical theory well. This is the bare minimum. I leave aside the thorny question of whether many university teachers are now simply doing a version of wild critical analysis in front of their students, which the novices then copy. Instructors must not only teach the correct content of the theory, but challenge the inevitable student misunderstandings and misapplications which result from wild critical analysis. They must be prepared to carefully practice strategies which are

designed to help students avoid the common pitfalls of early learning. This includes contesting rather than embracing the increasingly widespread misunderstanding and misuse of the theory by the general public.

To address the technical errors of wild critical analysis, students need help cultivating a greater awareness of the limitations of knowledge, and that "exposing hypocrisy" or "calling people out" with statements yielded by critical analysis is ineffective, if not counterproductive. Effective change involves students' learning to engage the actual institutions and human relationships which can produce genuine human transformation. I imagine something like the supervised practicum we have in psychology where students learn effective relational strategies, embedded in an institutional setting, under expert supervision. We do not send students away from our psychology classrooms armed only with newly acquired conceptual tools and ask them to do their work with no practice or institutional discipline. Why should it be any different for critical studies?

These imaginings of mine unfortunately sidestep Plato's larger questions about whether there are periods in life when young adults are simply not developmentally ready to learn certain things, and whether they need to learn other things first before taking them apart. Political discussions about whether elementary or middle school students are too young to be exposed to Critical Race Theory and related concepts often assume that college-aged students somehow are ready. If Plato thought a 29-year-old was too young to learn the dialectic, surely learning Foucault or Fanon at 18 is a serious problem. The current approach to university curriculum is developmentally incoherent and yields a host of negative outcomes as a result.

When students *are* developmentally ready to learn critical theory (or similar tools of suspicion like psychoanalysis, Eastern spirituality, or the Socratic Method), it should be something they are taught to do very carefully, almost with a spirit of fear and trembling. The current pedagogical model resembles handing a loaded weapon to a child and then walking away.

I am reminded in this context of George Will's admonition that we should not allow people to "commit sociology" in making sense of the 2012 mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado which killed 12 people. Will has in mind the notion that rushing too quickly to ever-larger levels of analysis blithely passes over smaller, potentially more appropriate planes, and is therefore like a crime against reality. It is lazy and simplistic, an error of wild critical analysis. When they do critical analysis, students should have a keen sense of exactly what being reckless and irresponsible with these ideas entails, particularly the various dangers described by Plato and Freud. They should feel like they are doing something they need a license to practice. And if students need something like a license to practice crit-

ical theory, we instructors surely need a license to teach it, or at the very least to display a greater sense of fear and trembling as we do so.

James Dillon *is Professor of Psychology at the University of West Georgia.*

1. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. D. Lee, (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1987), 289.
2. *Ibid*., 291-92.
3. Sigmund Freud, "Wild Psycho-Analysis," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. P. Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995).
4. Fredrik deBoer, *How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023).
5. Heather Mac Donald, "Disparate Impact Thinking Is Destroying Our Civilization," *Imprimis* 53, no. 2 (February 2024).