I am not Plato ... but Plato's not here right now

By Andrea Monteath

Biography

Andrea Monteath is a writing specialist. Director of The Life Writing Project, Andrea conducts leisure courses in autobiographical writing and book production, and offers a variety of writing development courses for both adults and secondary students. As a PhD student, she redeveloped and taught The Literature of Adolescence *at Edith Cowan University, and is the author of* Something to Prove: philosophy, community of inquiry and creative thinking. *Andrea is a keen advocate of philosophy in schools and, when she is not pinning unsuspecting passers-by to the wall on this subject, loves science fiction, British period dramas, and feeding her boys in her tree house by the sea. She holds a PhD in Writing, and a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) with a major in Writing and a minor in Philosophy and Religion.*

I flatter myself but, as a middle-aged woman, I like to think that I have a few things in common with Plato. Specifically, we share a love of loose clothing, open-toed sandals, and the desire to nudge socio-political ideologies in the direction that we think is best. You see, Plato tinkered with the idea that, just because we *have* a system that works well enough, doesn't mean we should stop striving towards a model that works even better. Around 350BCE, he wrote *The Republic*, a sort of essay tucked inside a story, about his idea of the perfect society. To me, it resembles a modern, sci-phi dystopia — bleak and unforgiving. Essentially, his

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model implies that, as a citizen, you should, 'Stay in your designated lane, and do your job'. Plato's vision left little wiggle-room for artists or — more personally disturbing — for writers. Left-leaning centrists need not apply. I'm certain I would sink straight to the bottom of a society like that and, yet, I sense a need for change. Perhaps not Plato's kind, but definitely *some* kind. So, like every personal crusade I imagine from the safety of my study, I begin by taking stock of what we have. I go for a walk and observe the world. I read a little, watch a few videos, Google a bit, and this is what I see. It's my snapshot of the challenges ahead. Not all of them, of course (I'm not *that* conscientious), but a few of the bigger ones. I label these findings 'challenges' — these heroically elephantine tasks our children, and grandchildren, will have to conquer — because I'm an optimist.

At the moment, our world has a population of 7.3 billion people, or something close to it. One per cent of that number owns almost half of the world's wealth (including money, land, capital, and the means of production), and 70 per cent of us live in countries where the gap between rich and poor has increased over the last 30 years. Our collective boot-print on the planet's ecology has become impossible to ignore. What we *want* makes ever-increasing claims on the natural world,

consuming minerals, plant life, animals and habitats. What we *don't want*, fouls our water systems, denudes our land, and messes with our air. Our appetites and habits are changing the climate. Automation, through advances in computer science and robotics, is steadily chipping away at our traditional employment structures, replacing industry with software. These emerging systems are designed to be everything we want them to be — fast, accurate and tireless. The bots won't take sick days or need a holiday and, whether we find that exciting or disturbing, the answer to our obsolescence won't be found in retraining. When motor vehicles replaced horse-drawn carriages we only needed to be smarter than cars to find new jobs. When computers replace cars, we'll probably need to be smarter than computers to find work. It's likely that, one day, the services of most people will no longer be required, leaving just a handful to keep the power on for our clever algorithms. As one MIT researcher concluded, 'From here on in, it's really, really, really going to change and it's going to change faster than we can handle'.

Did I mention that I am an optimist? Well, that's still true. While the foundations of our social structures pitch and yaw like an elephant on roller skates, I still think that the

future of humanity gleams with innovation and possibility. So, here's a thought. Ignoring the declining birth rate in the Western world, and the generally 'later launch' of young adults from the family home, a child born in 2016 will probably be a parent by the year 2050. That's 34 years from now. Around 34 years *ago*, IBM launched the first personal computer. That's a fun bit of symmetry ... right up until the moment you consider the

What will we do when the planet can't sustain us anymore?

How can we be productive now that there is abundance for all?

What should we do now that the capitalist system has finally reached its use-by date?

If money no longer matters, how do we measure our personal contribution to the world?

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mind-blowing rate of change since then. But let's not look backwards. Let's think about the future instead. The 30-something of 2050 will inhabit a world we can barely imagine, much less anticipate. There is an excellent chance that he or she will be thinking about questions like:

What should we do with our days now that we can live for centuries?

And, while it seems unlikely that *all* of these realities will be imminent in 2050, a few of them might. The rest will be winking visibly in the distance.

So, what can we do to prepare our children for a future we can only imagine? How do we help them to navigate that strange landscape? I think we should turn to Plato. Well, not the man himself (because I think

we can agree that he's not here right now), but to his legacy of philosophical inquiry. Inspired by Socrates, and followed by centuries of philosophers willing to put their beliefs about the world under scrutiny, Plato's approach to knowledge, and knowing, is more relevant than ever. Philosophers examine the things we think we know about the world and then ask, 'How do we know that for certain?' They test that knowledge questions, concepts and issues in a forum of tolerance and respect' but, as a writer, that definition makes me want to poke my eyes out. It doesn't capture the spirit of an activity (and it *is* an activity) that forces participants to slow down, engage, and untangle the world. A COI has a structure. It has rules. There are strategies. Done right, it can evoke passion, wonder, understanding, and a sense of mutuality that comes with knowing

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for coherence. They ask questions like, 'Is that logical? Is there evidence? Is there a system?' This rigorous cross-examination of knowledge not only applies to things we can demonstrate scientifically, but also includes trickier stuff, like, 'Is this right? Is it moral? What should we do next?' In a complex world where we are so often required to specialise, philosophy asks us to take a wider view. It encourages us to take a step back from the facts and figures we've gathered, and question *what and how* we know something — anything — for certain. It teaches us to conduct our lives with both imagination and reason, and it gives us the means and the courage to poke at our most fundamental belief systems.

If it is the job of philosophers to understand the big picture, then the *philosophical community of inquiry* (COI) is their 'big-picture toolbox'. To describe a COI fully you might define it as, 'A group dialogue employing critical and creative methods to explore

that, because we listened and reasoned together, we are all part of the solutions or revelations we uncovered. We were silent and we waited. When the quiet boy was ready and had formed his words, he shared his idea. Gathered up by the confident girl, the boy's idea was polished and held up for everyone to see. Someone spun a story around it. Another explained. Slowly, the shy girl imagined, found some words, and everyone leaned in to hear. Yes, it's an old-fashioned concept (and completely low-tech), but COI conjures fellowship. Applied to any question, including questions we cannot conceive of today, and to the circumstances of a future we can't begin to imagine, it might be the perfect skill-set for the future. So, one day, when our great-grandchildren *can* use technology to combine Plato's long-lost genetic material with a chocolate Labrador, I'd like to think that a robust philosophical COI will help them to decide *not* to. Plato would be pleased, and I am still optimistic.