Socratic *Aporia* in the Classroom and the Development of Resilience

Stephen Kekoa Miller

I'd like to talk about the value of unlearning, of undoing, of disruption. Especially in the early aporetic dialogues of Plato (those ending in perplexity), Socrates famously takes his interlocutors on a journey that at least initially appears to end in failure: at the dialogue's conclusion, there seems to be no answer to the questions that inspired the conversation. There has been a lot of recent debate about the so-called Socratic method and accusations that it may be deflating, resulting in less, rather than more original thought in students. In particular, the much-discussed work of Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, suggests that this method in fact masks a move of the teacher to subordinate rather than liberate the student. Adding to this the contemporary trends towards emphasis on content over critical reasoning in education and understandings of critical reasoning as consisting of categories to be memorized, and the use of questioning as an educational tool and as an end point can seem problematic indeed. How can one answer the question of what philosophy actually teaches? It is precisely because of its problematic, risky and disruptive nature that Socratic *aporia* works so well both in a particular class and over the course of a whole course.

While Rancier's critique only applies to some limited uses of questioning as a method, is it worth the risk? At the end of the day, does a dialectical method that leads us to see fatal flaws with both sides of important topics stand in danger of leading to nihilism, to a belief that we can't know and that it doesn't matter? In an interesting recent article in the *New York Times*, Justin McBrayer writes "What would you say if you found out that our public schools were teaching children that it is not true that it's wrong to kill people for fun or cheat on tests? Would you be surprised? I was. As a philosopher, I already knew that many college-aged students don't believe in moral facts. While there are no national surveys quantifying this phenomenon, philosophy professors with whom I have spoken suggest that the overwhelming majority of college freshmen in their classrooms view moral claims as mere opinions that are not true or are true only relative to a culture." (*NY Times*) The article discusses how the Common Core has introduced an understanding of the difference between fact and opinion as claiming facts are true and opinions are things people believe. Is this moral relativism caused by poor definitions, or has a Socratic method caused this too?

First, what is this method, and what's wrong with it? Rancière states that "good masters who follow this Socratic model use questions to discreetly guide the student's intelligence — discreetly enough to make it work, but not to the point of leaving [the student's intelligence] to itself" (p. 29).

On this view, Socratic teachers aim not at intellectual liberation, but instead, "interrogate because questions are a more effective means to intellectual subordination, to stultification, than lecturing." (Fullam, p. 55) If the goal is acquiescence and the acquisition of facts, this method sounds effective. At the end of a session, students ought to be subdued, beaten down and ready to bow to defeat, much like Thrasymachus at the end of *Republic* Book 1.

The problem with Rancière's analysis is that it describes a method rarely used in most high schools. According to Avi Mintz, "There is a distinction that can be made between the texts of Socratic teaching and those of the Socratic method. The Socratic method uses cases which simultaneously teach the law and provide an opportunity to engage in the kind of reasoning about these cases that is necessary for the practice of law (i.e. the case method can make students "think like a lawyer"). In contrast, Socratic teaching does not use texts as instruments of knowledge. Rather, Socratic teaching often uses rich, complex works which serve to enlarge the students' experiences, as well as to improve their thinking processes." (p. 490) In short, outside of law school, it's rare to find teachers using questions to batter students into accepting an answers they had in mind all along, contrary to Rancière.

If Socratic teaching isn't abusive in this way, doesn't it still risk leading to nihilism? I strongly remember the first time I taught a college ethics course. At the end of the term during the review session, I realized with horror that my course had inadvertently followed a pattern of exposing the students to an idea such as utilitarianism or Kantianism, explaining the idea and then exposing it to such criticism that the students couldn't have thought it still had value. Then the course moved to the next key concept to destroy. At the end of the term, the course had unintentionally suggested to the students a morally relative or nihilistic conclusion. I had to ask myself whether the students had in fact been harmed by the course…had I left them with less understanding of the topic than they started with? This is the more interesting and more disturbing possibility arrived at not only from Socratic method *per se* but from any academic course aiming for critical thinking and analysis rather than rote learning.

To get at this, let's think about the Socratic dialogue *Lysis*. In this dialogue, Socrates ends up discussing the notion of friendship with two young boys, Lysis and Menexenus. Throughout the dialogue, the three explore how friendship, affinity and goodness relate. Throughout also, Socrates leads the boys, who, importantly, consider themselves friends, to a point where they think the question has been answered. However, each time, Socrates, like Peter Faulk in a *Columbo* movie says "One more thing," and introduces a problem. The dialogue ends with the words "And as yet we have not been able to discover what is a friend!" (*Lysis*, 75) While no one seems able to define friendship here, the boys remain friends. Everyone simultaneously seems to both know and not know what friendship is. Controversially, even the major later dialogues not commonly thought of as *aporetic* like *The Republic*, end with a real sense that we don't know if the whole thing is a kind of a joke…does Socrates really believe the things he's said? He couldn't be serious, and yet, Book X ends with a suggestion that the text is to be taken so, "an illustration of Socratic education that is systematic and complete, albeit one that is rife with complexity and raises more questions than it answers about the

usefulness of Socratic education for contemporary classrooms since Socrates seems to intentionally lead his interlocutors to intellectual disorientation in which they not only realize the inadequacy of their previous answers to questions, but also experience extreme doubt about their ability to find answers that are more adequate." (Mark, p. 41)

Given that these books have been read and taught for 2400 years, what are high school and college teachers aiming for in presenting these texts, but even more fundamentally and broadly, in designing courses that follow the pattern of the books by arriving at the end of the term without giving definitive answers.

A modern academic course carries with it a similar structure. From Ethics to Philosophy of Mind, Science or Religion, a well-designed course would optimally investigate a few core questions and then query what possible answers would look like. Each position would then be critiqued.

Even in Intellectual History courses, it's hard to imagine a modern professor presenting a narrative of triumphant progress to the present moment where we have come to know which position is right. The best courses I took as a student, and those I have tried to model my practice after as a teacher, never reached the end of the semester with a final answer to the central motivating questions. Aristotle's concept of *endoxa*, of looking at the range of opinion on a particular topic to generally find that most views contain part of the truth varies from this in one big way – the modern teacher often won't even say what is true in each position.

As a teacher, I have noticed that at the end of a course like my high school Existentialism class, the students often describe the course as their favorite, but have a hard time saying what it was about, what they learned and what conclusions they have drawn. This leads to the fundamental, Socratic question about teaching...what can a philosophy class teach? At the end of the day, do Lysis and Menexenus know less than they had before? When students beg to know a teacher's view on a particular question, are they better served with sly Socratic evasion or direct if coercive answers? Despite this, Plato himself warns us in the *Republic* that the right spirit is needed to do this type of work, "I don't suppose that it has escaped your notice that, when young people get their first taste of arguments, they misuse it by treating it as a kind of game of contradiction. They imitate those who've refuted them by refuting others themselves, and, like puppies, they enjoy dragging and tearing those around them with their arguments. (*Republic* VII 539ab)

It's always useful to allow students a chance to speak for themselves. I asked a former student, Jake Cardillo, now a florist, about this. Here is his exact response:

> Also, I gave a little more thought to your question about philosophy and dialectic being a pursuit which doesn't yield answers, and I wanted to give a more considered answer, which is this: especially today, we are confronted with too many answers, but we simply aren't taught the ability to sort through them and decide which ones make sense and which ones are nonsense. That was what Socrates literally spent his days doing: telling people who assumed they had all the answers that maybe those answers don't make any sense at all. If philosophers

just asked questions that they expected to provide answers to, they'd be scientists; instead, they are questioning the answers themselves, and pointing out that when confronted with several answers to the same question--e.g. in economics, 'what caused the recession?', to which there are competing answers and theories--there is no obvious method for deciding among them, and perhaps the best approach is to critically evaluate each of them and end up rejecting them as thoroughly as possible, exposing the inadequacies of 'experts' in precisely the areas they claim to know everything about. Socrates' brilliance is precisely in insisting on impracticality, in other words on the interruption of everyday life for a time to realize that all the answers that everybody throws at you, and which are indispensable for just living life practically, are not particularly well-founded. Perhaps all that is obvious, but I just wanted to give a more thorough response. (April 12, 2015)

Jake's insistence on philosophy as being a form of impracticality and interruption is apt. The other key piece of the Socratic approach involves his famous use of irony. Socratic irony is of a special sort; Gregory Vlastos demonstrates this by showing how different Greek irony is from our usage today, as it intentionally uses deception, but deception not meant to be believed (p. 66). Jonathan Lear describes this as "pretense" (*Irony*, p. 9). No one in the dialogues really believes Socrates' claims to not know anything, and no one reads him as trying to deceive them, however at the same time, Socrates does "put [himself] forward in one way or another, we tend to do so in terms of established social understandings and practices." (*Irony*, p. 16) Lear's book *A Case for Irony* makes the intriguing leap of applying this standard to all real teaching – "So, for instance, one way of being a teacher would be to be a professor. In the United States and Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century there is a fairly well-established range of teaching styles—in seminar, tutorial, and lecture course—and a fairly well- established range of evaluative techniques, such as grades. There is even a range of dress you can expect a professor to wear, a way of being in front of a lectern and delivering a paper. And there are socially acceptable ways of demurring from the role: special ways of not wearing the right clothes, not giving a standard talk. That, too, can be part of the social pretense. But in this variety of socially recognized ways, I put myself forward as a professor. In this way a whole range of activity—including dress, mannerisms, a sense of pride and shame—can all count as pretense in that they are all ways of putting oneself forward as a professor... The possibility of irony arises when a gap opens between pretense as it is made available in a social practice and an aspiration or ideal which, on the one hand, is embedded in the pretense" (p. 11)

Within a class, teachers frequently play the Socrates, feigning uncertainty about an answer or leading students into a dead end with a put-on confidence. Again, from Lear, he shows this discomfort to apply to the teachers as well: "But then things get out of hand. I am struck by teaching in a way that disrupts my normal self-understanding of what it is to teach (which includes normal reflection on teaching). This is not a continuation of my practical reasoning; it is a disruption of it... (p. 21) When irony succeeds, the target has an uncanny experience that the demands of an ideal, value, or identity he takes himself to be already committed can dramatically transcend received social understandings. Finally, then, both teacher and student become "an infinite end" (p. 27), open to the world and towards change out of untruth. This form of irony demands of teacher and student alike

the unsettled feeling of uncertainty. In the *Meno* this is made clear: "The truth is rather that I infect them also with the perplexity I feel myself. So with virtue now. I don't know what it is . . . Nevertheless I am ready to carry out, together with you, a joint investigation and inquiry into what it is." (*Meno* 80c–d). We don't know where we're going or when we'll get there. In the end, however, it is just this discomfort, disruptive *aporia* that is the point. This view lines up interestingly with recent work on cognitive and academic development.

Resilience, grit and hard work in the face of failure have increasingly been shown to correlate with both higher levels of success and subjectively reported levels of happiness. The trait of resilience is trainable and it is now seen as pretty definitive that the secondary school years are some of the most important for this development, as the prefrontal cortex is most actively reorganizing itself during the teenage years. Laurence Steinberg in *Independent School Magazine* writes "It is also the brain region most important for self-control, which is the foundation for critical "non-cognitive skills," such as perseverance, determination, and the delay of gratification - a combination that some experts refer to as "grit." (*New Foundations of Adolescent Learning*) The key finding here is that "... the changes that take place in the brain during adolescence are not so much about *growth* as they are about *reorganization*." (Steinberg) Steinberg goes on to claim that "First, because prefrontal development is stimulated by novelty and challenge, it is essential to expose students to demanding courses that push them intellectually. Many American high school students report that school is boring and unchallenging." In this case, the term "challenging" can best be understood literally. Rather than just giving students difficult problems with a pre-arranged answer, philosophy courses really can challenge them. It leads to exactly this kind of reorganization by unsettling everything, forcing a rethinking of not only a particular belief, but the whole web it sits in. Just as the first learning as an infant involves pruning back of neural connections, one of the most powerful forms of learning is unlearning. Also in *Independent School Magazine*, Ann Klotz points out that "To be resilient means a child has endured something horrific or, to a lesser degree, difficult. But there are opportunities that do not require suffering or loss or exquisite pain, and practicing the habit of resilience helps children learn to weather the storms that are an inevitable part of growing up." Having one's fundamental, strongly held beliefs cast into doubt serves this purpose well. Furthermore, "Seligman's research on 'learned optimism' and Carol Dweck's research on 'mindset'... indicate that a significant barrier to happiness and fulfillment is the belief that there are conditions in your life that cannot be changed." (Morris, p. 26). Realizing that not only one's core beliefs but fundamental perception can be taken apart may be scary but it's also empowering.

Pavlos Michaelides, describes this unlearning powerfully: "For the sage of antiquity divine ignorance and unknowing enables and enhances inspiration, bringing into the pedagogical context *aporia*, creativity, resourcefulness, and contemplative silence. Surely, the negativity arising from the realization of ignorance is at first deflating as it initiates the negative existential state of *aporia*, impasse, or lack of resource that throws the whole person into uncertainty, confusion, doubt, exasperation, despair, anxiety, resentment, and puzzlement. But most positively it purges the conceit of holding onto contradictory beliefs and false knowledge. *Aporia* induces shame and apotropë toward one's old stance, at best generating change in orientation directed toward the ethical life but

concurrently, and ultimately, whether one is aware of it or not, it initiates a change in life-posture" (*Socratic Ignorance: Lifelong Teaching and Philosophical Education,* p. 252). Of course, it is precisely this sort of movement that is so hard to measure or to track.

Let's go back to Justin McBrayer's question of "Why Our Children Don't Think There Are Moral Facts". He asks, "So what's wrong with this distinction and how does it undermine the view that there are objective moral facts? We can do better. Our children deserve a consistent intellectual foundation. Facts are things that are true. Opinions are things we believe. Some of our beliefs are true. Others are not. Some of our beliefs are backed by evidence. Others are not. Value claims are like any other claims: either true or false, evidenced or not. The hard work lies not in recognizing that at least some moral claims are true but in carefully thinking through our evidence for which of the many competing moral claims is correct. That's a hard thing to do. But we can't sidestep the responsibilities that come with being human just because it's hard. That would be wrong." (*NY Times*)

Of course, importantly, this isn't *all* that a philosophy course does – it is also part psychology, part history, part logic and part science, but at its heart the Socratic, *aporetic* understanding of teaching of philosophy is countercultural. It violates the spirit of the Common Core and undermines most of the answers given by universities when faced with the current *Crisis of the Humanities*. By measuring the success of a course through a test or, as many universities are now doing, by defensively justifying Humanities courses in general by claiming they help students do well at business or law later on, these institutions make a comforting but ultimately dishonest claim about the nature and value of this discipline. In the end, it calls for us not to ask what should I believe, but what life I should live. As Pavlos Michaelides reminds us, "Socrates' earnestness of ignorance "bestows upon the human renewal and transformation unto its highest humanity" (p. 251). This transformation has come to be called resilience or "growth mindset" lately, but both terms point to improvement through challenge rather than content mastery. Philosophy, when understood properly, should make us unlearn much of what we believe, should make us uncomfortable, should make us uncertain and should ultimately, then, make us stronger and better.

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Address Correspondence to:
    Stephen Kekoa Miller
    Oakwood Friends School & Marist College
    22 Spackenkill Road
    Poughkeepsie, NY 12603
    smiller@oakwoodfriends.org