

“And if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul must be immortal, and one must take courage and try to discover – that is, to recollect – what one doesn’t know, or, more correctly, remember, at the moment.”

Socrates, in Plato’s “Meno”

The Revolutionary Possibilities of Socratic Education

At a forum led by Institute member and Professor Phillip Greene, the aims and possibilities of Socratic education were explored. Although Socrates, through the voice of his star pupil Plato, paints a pessimistic portrait of the ignorance, corruption and mental laziness of his fellow Athenians, he does point to a path out of the psychological slavery depicted in the Allegory of the Cave. The critical tool for an upward ascent into the experience of Truth and insight into the harmonious order of nature is reason. Each must learn to apply reason to the great questions of life, particularly those with serious moral implications using a dialectical method of education. In an article on “Socratic Education” (in *Philosophies of Education*, Routledge, 1998) Professor Paul Woodruff has summarized the method of Socratic Education as follows:

Note: () indicates author’s annotations below.

1. Philosopher denies he is a teacher and takes the attitude of a learner
2. Lectures uttered by Philosopher are rare and when given are framed in such a way that Philosopher is not responsible for their content (i.e. some wiser source of wisdom guides the Philosopher)
3. Questions from Philosopher to potential student are the main form of interaction
4. Students are held responsible for any answers that emerge
5. Questions may aim at an answer that would be evidence to support student’s knowledge claim (that hopefully is truly his own and reflects prior knowledge and inner resources not some familiar social belief)
6. Philosopher introduces standards for knowledge, usually with student’s consent
7. Questions may elicit positive statements of assent from student to which Philosopher also subscribes. (In this way some shared understanding is reached).
8. Consistency requires that student therefore reject an earlier statement.

A willingness to admit that one’s thinking is caught in a contradiction is essential to learning. Otherwise the student stays stuck in some unexamined belief that blocks insight into reality and prevents the moral transformation that is a fundamental aim of Socratic Education. If some topics in Platonic dialogues

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seem metaphysically mysterious, they are to be bravely explored since according to Plato ethical reasoning is rooted in metaphysical presuppositions.

Ultimately Socratic education brings the student into wisdom and a vision of the Good, something of a mystical experience. But within the conventional circle of life in society, the aim of education is good citizenship based on the recognition of principles and a contribution to the education and well being of one's fellow citizens, including the younger generation. Portraits of an Ideal society can inspire hope and the enthusiasm for transforming social conditions. Such a vision of what is Ideal can be provided by virtuous and creative leadership and may include therapeutic myths offered for reasoned interpretation. This leadership by the "guardians" is made possible by specially designed education. Through their development of balanced and effective integration of virtues, such as temperance, courage and wisdom, the leaders can know justice and be exemplars of just men.

Is this not what the protestors filling the streets of the Middle East in recent weeks are asking for? Do we not all benefit from these dramatic exposures of corrupt and tyrannical leadership that has been silently accepted for years in the name of stability? The dynamics of street politics and messages sent by modern media may not match the method of dialogue that Socrates presented; street protests with thousands of participants hardly seem like Socratic dialogues. Yet on closer examination, one can see a dialectic at work in the public square that leads us all into questions about the basis of justice and the methods of good governance. The calls for freedom by protestors willing to risk their lives are in part a demand for opportunity to share in a dialogue about how a particular society can be transformed into a just one that provides conditions in which individuals can seek their ideals and participate as citizens as did Athenians in classical Greece. Interviews with protesters reveal a remarkable, philosophical understanding of the issues they depict with chants and posters. They know the value of human potential. So are not the lessons of Socrates embedded in contemporary, global dialogue and helping to unmask and topple tyrants? Thereby, a fresh cycle of the Great Transformation depicted by Karen Armstrong is inspiring human lives once again.

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