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**Childhood is the embodied practice of adulthood.
The adult will know what the child experienced.**

Three essays on teaching our children to joyfully inquire and reason, draw upon the comfort of stories and tradition, and practice the principles of intellectual hospitality, so that one day they may create their own community for eudaimonia, or, human flourishing.

1. Conversation: Creating a Culture of Inquiry in the Classroom

Classical Education, the Liberal Arts, Plato, and Socrates

Learning is the act of moving from “I think I know” to realizing, “I don’t know,” then asking, “please help me know,” in order to finally arrive at, “with this new understanding, now I *do* know.” *Wisdom* is the recognition that you will continually repeat this process for a lifetime.

The first recorded example of how to teach the liberal arts is found in the writings of Plato. And so we begin our study of classic literature with Plato’s records of the words of his teacher, Socrates, because while Socrates never wrote, Plato never spoke. Instead, Plato used his pen to show us how to learn and think by presenting Socrates’ dialogues with one student (or, interlocutor) at a time. Plato uses Socrates both as a historical and literary figure—Socrates’ words were honed over time as Plato edited his writing to convey important concepts. We will read his essays both to learn how to think, as Socrates is teaching his interlocutor through a series of questions, but also, to learn how to teach, as Plato is showing us with Socrates as an example.

The thesis of this paper is that if students will need to be able to think and reason as adults then we should introduce the inquiry process, in an age-appropriate way, as a foundational schooling practice from the very beginning.

Part I - Socrates’ Method

In this essay I will analyze Plato’s dialogues, *Euthyphro* and *Meno*, as classic models for creating a culture of inquiry within a classroom. Sometimes students move through the learning process on their own through reading and observation. Often though, students need a skilled teacher to help them move through the stages of learning. Some, like *Euthyphro*, will resist learning when, upon approaching that moment of understanding, they see that this new knowledge will then require them to change their desired plan of action. Or, like *Meno*, they will look for the easy short-cut to power without an interest in deep learning. The skilled teacher will be aware of these very human responses and seek to create a culture that guides even reluctant students toward virtue and away from vice.

First, we start with Euthyphro, a young man who has just brought his own father before the court. His father allowed a known murder to die without trial so Euthyphro is prosecuting his father for impiety. Socrates meets Euthyphro outside the court while awaiting his own trial (he, also, is being prosecuted for impiety—he's accused of leading the young astray by ceaselessly "examining", or questioning, men to find the wisest one). Since both trials concern impiety, Socrates, who simply cannot stop examining others (even when about to go on trial for it!) strikes up a conversation with Euthyphro under the pretense that he, Socrates, needs to be taught what piety is by Euthyphro.

Socrates begins his questioning of Euthyphro's understanding of piety by testing Euthyphro's confidence in his own understanding. "Whereas, by Zeus, Euthyphro, you think that your knowledge of the divine, and of piety and impiety, is so accurate that, when those things happened as you say, you have no fear of having acted impiously in bringing your father to trial?" (4e). Euthyphro confidently assures Socrates that he has, "accurate knowledge of all such things" (5a). Socrates then begins his examination of Euthyphro by solidifying the nature of their roles, "It is indeed most important, my admirable Euthyphro, that I should become your pupil..." (5b). Thus, Socrates establishes that Euthyphro is solidly in the first stage of learning that I described at the outset as the "I think I know" stage. In fact, Euthyphro is so confident in his knowledge he views himself as a worthy teacher of Socrates knowing that Socrates is about to go on trial for impiety. In essence, Euthyphro is so confident in his own knowledge that *he will bet Socrates' life upon it*. Plato is establishing for us, the reader, that Euthyphro is without a doubt highly engaged in the conversation (and quite the cocky young man).

All of Plato's characters are rich but Euthyphro, in particular, may capture the interest of teachers with pupils they find difficult to teach. Euthyphro is bold, arrogantly confident in his own knowledge, and highly dismissive of anyone who would disagree with him. He says, "Whenever I speak of divine matters in the assembly and foretell the future, they laugh me down as if I were crazy; and yet I have foretold nothing that did not happen. Nevertheless, they envy all of us who do this. One need not worry about them, but meet them head-on" (3c). His first advice to Socrates is to simply plow on undeterred by any who would disagree with him!

Socrates, however, is interested in a higher-quality conversation and so begins Euthyphro's education by asking a question, the key question that brings both men before the court: what is pious and what is impious? Euthyphro quickly responds by saying that piety is the very thing that he is doing. Brash Euthyphro presents himself as the very embodiment of piety!

I say that the pious is to do what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer, be it about murder or temple robbery or anything else, whether the wrongdoer is your father or your mother or anyone else; not to prosecute is impious. And observe, Socrates, that I can cite powerful evidence that the law is so. I have already said to others that such actions are right, not to favor the ungodly, whoever they are. These people themselves believe that Zeus is the best and most just of the gods, yet they agree that he bound his father because he unjustly swallowed his sons, and that he in turn castrated his father for similar reasons.

But they are angry with me because I am prosecuting my father for his wrongdoing. They contradict themselves in what they say about the gods and about me (5e).

I have recorded the rather lengthy quote here because in it Plato tells us so much about Euthyphro's understanding of the world and his motivations. First, Euthyphro reveals himself as a simple, black-and-white thinker: anyone who is wrong should be prosecuted, even your own parents. Second, the authoritative source he wishes to rely on solely is the law rather than his own reasoning, or cultural norms, or even a religious authority. Third, Euthyphro cleverly uses inconsistency in the actions of the gods—how can Zeus be just and yet do unjust things?—to cover for the inconsistency in his own actions. Euthyphro is aware that in his culture honoring your father is an act of filial piety, therefore prosecuting his father for a crime would be seen as impious. How can Euthyphro be pious while acting impiously toward his father? Euthyphro is saying, if Zeus can be inconsistent then so can I. This is a relativist view, characterized as, “it's true for me...” (Excerpts 20). In just one short speech by Euthyphro, Plato has shown us the type of student Socrates is working with.

Socrates gets to work. He says, “Bear in mind then that I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions but that form itself that makes all pious actions pious...” (6d). Socrates is dismissing Euthyphro's definition of piety (prosecuting the wrongdoer) as too narrow in scope since it is merely an example and not a complete definition. Socrates prompts Euthyphro to clarify his definition by asking for the form. He says, “Tell me then what this form itself is, so that I may look upon it, and using it as a model, say that any action of yours or another's that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not” (6e). Seeking the form of an idea is a key concept that Socrates will return to again and again. He will not accept an example as part of a definition but rather he is seeking an explanation of the very idea, or the essence, that defines a concept. Furthermore, by asking for the form he is asking both for the nature of the thing itself, and also, a way to classify the thing within, or among, other things.

The classical teacher of today may use Venn diagrams and outlined hierarchies to visually portray this kind of logical thinking to her class. Students should see identification and classification as integral components of the work of inquiry. The teacher will also want to help students understand the difference between using an example as the sole component of a definition versus creating a model to which all future examples can be compared. The difference may seem subtle at first to students but is, in fact, a very different type of thinking and important to learn. Working through this process of questioning the form of a thing, will help students move from the initial “I know” stage to the “oh wait, maybe I actually don't know” stage in their learning process.

Plato's story moves on as Euthyphro makes a second attempt at a new and improved definition. He says, “Well then, what is dear to the gods is pious, what is not is impious” (7a). Socrates' response is an important step in the inquiry process. He inserts some doubt by replying, “Whether your answer is true I do not know yet...” (7a). Plato is showing us that Socrates keeps

Euthyphro engaged in the conversation with the use of the qualifier, “yet”. This is a key component in successfully maintaining the atmosphere of open inquiry.

A classical school does not want to create a culture in which the teacher is the sole owner of knowledge while the students’ role is reduced to nothing more than attempts to get the right answer out of the teacher. In that scenario the students are passive while the teacher is active. Instead, to keep the students actively engaged, the teacher needs to validate each student’s attempt to answer questions. Just as Socrates replied, “I do not know *yet*” so teachers can respond to students by joining them in the act of inquiry. Responses such as, “Hmm, I wonder...” or “Let’s check ___ source to see if...” will be helpful in guiding the student’s path while simultaneously keeping him or her actively engaged in the search for knowledge.

Socrates’ next practice is to lead Euthyphro to consider the question of *some* versus *all*. Because Euthyphro’s second attempt at a definition still does not contain the form, or essence, of the thing, Socrates leads Euthyphro, with questions, to work on clarifying his definition. He begins with things that are easy to differentiate: e.g. larger vs. smaller or heavier vs. lighter (7c). Then, he moves on to examples of concepts that are more complex and therefore likely to be areas of disagreement, e.g. just vs. unjust, beautiful vs. ugly, and good vs. bad (7d). Analyzing differences between opposites is one method of getting the student to consider if the words they are using in their definition apply to some, or all, aspects of the concept.

Euthyphro’s third attempt at a definition of piety shows he is beginning to use some/all language. More importantly, it shows that Socrates and Euthyphro are in a groove now. Their entire exchange shows that Socrates is already leading Euthyphro to embrace the art of examining a statement for truth.

Euthyphro: I would certainly say that the pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious.

Socrates: Then let us again examine whether that is a sound statement, or do we let it pass, and if one of us, or someone else, merely says that something is so, do we accept that it is so? Or should we examine what the speaker means?

Euthyphro: We must examine it, but I certainly think that this is now a fine statement.
(9e)

Of course Euthyphro, being who he is, thinks three attempts is certainly enough to have arrived at a conclusive definition, but at least he is still in the conversation and willing to examine his latest definition.

Continuing his education in using reason and logic to understand concepts, Socrates next leads Euthyphro to use *cause* and *effect* to improve his third definition by analyzing the statement that, “the pious is what all the gods love”. Socrates’ examination leads Euthyphro to consider if loving something causes it to be pious, or rather, if it is pious because it is loved. For example, if a god loves a harmful thing, e.g. to murder, then is it logical to say murder is pious since it is a god, after all, who loves it? No, that is not logical. Instead, a better definition flips the cause and effect to something is pious first and then, because it is pious, then the effect upon

us is that it is loved by us. Of course this still does not define piety, but it does reveal the role of cause and effect when thinking logically to define a term.

Socrates: What then do we say about the pious, Euthyphro? Surely that it is being loved by all the gods, according to what you say?

Euthyphro: Yes.

Socrates: Is it being loved because it is pious, or for some other reason?

Euthyphro: For no other reason.

Socrates: It is being loved then because it is pious, but it is not pious because it is being loved?

Euthyphro: Apparently. (10d)

Euthyphro's less than enthusiastic, "apparently" reveals he is wearying of the exchange. In fact, after this there is an interlude in which he complains that he cannot nail down a definition because as soon as he does Socrates causes it to move just out of his grasp. (The elementary teacher would recognize that her student needed a brain break right about now.) Socrates, however, pushes on, though this time moving the examination forward by offering a definition of his own to prop up Euthyphro's lagging enthusiasm.

Now that Socrates has covered why an example cannot be used in a definition (Euthyphro's first attempt), and introduced some/all language (second attempt) as well as cause/effect language (third attempt) he is ready to introduce the verbal equivalent of a Venn diagram.

Socrates: ...See whether you think all that is pious is of necessity just.

Euthyphro: I think so.

Socrates: And is then all that is just pious? Or is all that is pious just, but not all that is just pious, but some of it is and some is not?

Euthyphro: I do not follow what you are saying, Socrates.

Socrates is saying that there's a large category, what is just, and within that there is then a smaller subset of actions that are pious. For example, a judge could make a ruling in court that was certainly just but that was not necessarily concerned with piety. So, justice is a larger category than piety. But, because piety will, of necessity, always be just, piety should be placed *within* the category of justice. In essence, piety cannot be unjust so it must be seen as existing within the category of that which is just.

Now that we understand what Socrates is saying, let's look at how Euthyphro is faring. His, "I do not follow" statement shows us that he appears to have moved firmly into the, "oh wait, actually I don't know" stage of learning. A little later in the text, after some examples to clarify his point, Socrates restates their working definition and then asks Euthyphro, "Shall we say that, or do you think otherwise?" Euthyphro responds, "No, but like that, for what you say appears to be right" (12d). This statement shows that Euthyphro has entered the third stage of learning: "please help me to know".

Socrates is more than happy to oblige in helping Euthyphro to know. Euthyphro's fourth attempt at a definition keeps what they have but attempts to elaborate by adding the concept of care. He says, "...the godly and pious is the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods..." (12e). Socrates, still portraying his role as pupil and Euthyphro's role as teacher, responds that he needs, "a bit of information" (12e) and asks Euthyphro to explain, then handily leads Euthyphro in further dialogue to arrive at the idea that he didn't really mean 'care of' but rather 'service to' (13d).

Unfortunately, the last dialogue appears to have exhausted Euthyphro. Instead of growing excited by the prospect of deeper understanding, as teachers observe in pupils who love to learn, Euthyphro is growing testy. He says, "I told you a short while ago, Socrates, that it is a considerable task to acquire any precise knowledge of these things..." (14b). Socrates presses on and, with a bit more conversation, suggests this definition for Euthyphro to consider, "The pious is then, Euthyphro, pleasing to the gods, but not beneficial or dear to them?" (15b). Alas, Euthyphro will not continue to pursue the conversation. After receiving a final lecture from Socrates that demonstrates that Euthyphro's actions in prosecuting his father, within the cultural concept of filial piety, cannot be pious because it would not be pleasing to the gods, Euthyphro abandons the conversation by saying, "Some other time, Socrates, for I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to go" (15e). At the final moment of comprehension, when Euthyphro saw that his new understanding would require him to change his course of action, he turned away from that understanding.

There is much that could be said here about people who turn away from knowledge and choose ignorance to continue toward choices they suspect may be wrong but cravenly desire anyway. The lesson for the early elementary teacher is that helping students recognize vice and virtue, and how to apply logic and reasoning, and to see the benefit of working for deeper understanding of complicated issues, all must be done early in life. If we miss the tender age of formation and let our children grow into brash, arrogant, wilfully ignorant Euthyphros, all of society will suffer.

Part II - Socrates on Teaching

Education is an important theme in Plato's record of Socrates' conversation with Meno, an ambitious young man heading toward a political and military career that would be fiery, but short (p 870). Plato's story joins Meno and Socrates mid-conversation. We are not told the setting or circumstances but start right at the point where Meno is asking Socrates if virtue can be taught. Specifically, Meno wants to know if virtue is, "something teachable, or is a natural gift" (86d).

After confounding Meno into numbness by rejecting Meno's first attempts at defining virtue, Socrates begins teaching. He demonstrates that all knowledge is already within us by leading Meno's servant, who had not been formally educated, through a geometry lesson on finding the area of a square. Then, he offers his opinion to explain how the servant could do such a thing. He says, "the truth about reality is always in our soul," meaning that we already possess

knowledge and need simply to recognize it, that is, *come to see it*, by searching for it through the act of inquiry (86b). Socrates then gives his opinion about the pursuit of knowledge in a short speech that may be considered the heart of the passage:

I do not insist that all my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it (86c).

By offering an opinion Socrates departs from his usual questioning-only method and ventures into instruction. I would surmise that this one topic—searching for what one does not know—is deeply important to him. Indeed, he returns to this theme near the end of his life, in the *Apology* when he says, “for the unexamined life is not worth living for me” (38a).

Observing Socrates and Meno wrestling with the question of whether virtue can be taught is helpful for understanding Plato’s position on education. After Socrates asks, “Since the good are not good by nature, does learning make them so?” and Meno responds that according to this hypothesis, “...if virtue is knowledge, it can be taught” Socrates immediately backs away from his own theory (89c). He surmises that since there are no teachers of virtue, virtue cannot be taught (89e). This refusal to admit that virtue can be taught is confusing after Socrates has just spent a good amount of effort moving toward this conclusion.

One possible interpretation of Socrates' insistence that virtue cannot be taught because there are no teachers of virtue, is that Plato is making a commentary on the nature of learning. Perhaps he is using Socrates' hesitance in order to make the same cause-or-effect argument he made with love and piety in the dialogue with Euthyphro. In that attempt to define piety Socrates asked, is something pious because it is loved, or is something loved because it is pious? He was asking, which is ‘cause’ and which is ‘effect’? Similarly, perhaps Plato is pointing out that learning happens within a person and, no matter how good the teacher is, no one can force a person to learn. Perhaps the key point of this exchange is: is something learned because it is taught, or is it taught because it is learned? That is, if a teacher teaches to unresponsive students, is it really teaching or merely talking? Similarly, does learning *always* require teaching? Can not a student learn by observation of others and without a teacher at all?

I think Plato is issuing a warning to heed in our analysis of how to teach. Learning only happens within a student, and occurs irrespective of the teacher’s best efforts. Furthermore, your students are always watching you and may be learning more from what you *do* than what you *say*.

Summary

Reasoning is good. We should do it more. Plato, through Socrates, shows us how to use questions and conversations to lead students to develop their own understanding of difficult concepts.

It’s fun! Don’t be a Euthyphro. Or a Meno.

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