



The Principles of Classical Pedagogy II: Mimetic and Socratic Teaching

with Andrew Kern of the Circe Institute

Lesson 5: Socratic Teaching

Outline:

Socratic Teaching

- **Proverbial Wisdom:** Socratic teaching patterns the wisdom literature and instruction in the Book of Proverbs. We learn via the use of **enigmas and riddles**; the wise man considers them and increases knowledge but will never stop learning. “What a pleasure to keep learning about something.”
- **Why Ask Questions:** The purpose of asking questions is to **find the truth**. A famous example of Socratic instruction is in Plato’s dialogue, the *Meno*, when Socrates questions a slave boy about geometry.
- **There is a pattern of Socratic questioning in the *Meno*:** He uses various kinds of questions, such as: Do you know correctly? Do you know this fact? “Try and see if you can tell me something else.” “I like to hear you say what you think.” Eventually, the student realizes he does not know, or does not know correctly. Is it better for the student to know that he is ignorant? Will such a student wish to remedy his ignorance?
- **Perplexity and Motivation:** A student will not likely try to learn or know something if he thinks he already knows it. Perplexity is better than thinking you know something when you don’t; riddles and enigmas are better than ignorance.
- **Desire and Wonder:** Socratic questioning can awaken in students wonder (at the unknown) and a desire to know. **Socratic teaching, therefore, seeks to teach children so that they want to know**. In the *Meno* Socrates teaches the slave boy geometry simply by asking the right questions that awaken a desire to know, and then the boy on his own begins to seek and find (discovering that doubling the diagonal of the square doubles the square’s size, *not* the doubling of the sides of the square). We become teachable when we say, “I don’t know.”
- **First Stage:** The first stage in Socratic teaching is the **Ironic Stage**, in which we ask students questions to examine what they think they know until we reveal to students what they don’t know. We don’t stop at this point. If we



- leave students in a place of mere ignorance, the student may think there are no answers and be led to despair and anger.
- **Teaching Posture:** Socrates knew where he was going with his questions; he did know some truth he wanted the boy to know. However, there is a sense in which every teacher still has more to learn about any truth he does know, a sense in which the teacher always does not know. There is always more to know.
 - **Second Stage:** The second stage of Socratic teaching is the **Maieutic Stage**. The maieutic stage is the “midwife stage” (*maia* = midwife) in which students, knowing they are ignorant, earnestly seek after truth and find it; this is often like the resolution of discord into harmony in the mind. Sometimes the truth reveals itself, and we trust that it will reveal itself. In Socratic teaching, the teacher does not merely ask questions; sometimes the teacher will pause and tell stories and engage in other kinds of instruction.
 - **Life and School:** Socratic teaching is not for school but for life—life will present us with many important, difficult, and challenging questions. We practice in school for the rest of life.
 - **Benefits:** The benefits of Socratic teaching are these: 1) The truth is always worth knowing and thus seeking, 2) The seeking after truth humbles us, 3) Students are introduced to a “living logic” that enables them to give names to things by thinking and paying attention to thought, always seeking to resolve discord into harmony, and 4) It facilitates better decision-making, because students must think carefully to make wise decisions.
 - **What is sought in Socratic dialogue?** Truth and understanding. Different kinds of truth: mathematical, moral, literary.
 - **Two reasons to teach a student using Socratic instruction:** 1) Help the student who understands incorrectly to see mistakes in thinking, recognize his ignorance, and then seek resolution, and 2) Help the student who does understand something correctly see that there is more and be moved to extend his knowledge.