

Education for Escaping the Cave: What Socrates Says About Teaching Children to be Just

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Last year I taught a graduate course in education and philosophy to secondary and elementary school teachers and administrators entitled «Teaching Ethics across the Curriculum». The purpose of the course was to aid teachers as they sought to teach ethics to children, years before the children would enter college level ethics courses. The centerpiece of the course was Plato's *Republic*, especially book VII, in which Socrates presents a model for the education of just citizens starting with the education of small children. Therein lies much thought that is helpful to teachers, parents and all who wish to teach children and themselves to live justly.

To give some background to the conversation, the *Republic* is an account of a dialogue that takes place between Socrates and a number of young men who have persuaded him to join them at a party. The party quickly turns into a conversation about the nature of justice, which Socrates controversially claims is an excellence of the soul and is always better than injustice. To prove his point, he constructs an allegorical just city. In book VI, Socrates describes how the leaders of this city, who must be philosophers, are to be educated so that they will love true justice and rule accordingly. As Socrates describes the education of the philosopher-kings and queens, the reader finds an outline of how all might be educated to live according to justice.



Book VII opens with the famous metaphor of the cave, in which Socrates asserts that most people live their lives imprisoned in a cave of shadows. His metaphorical prisoners are chained deep inside a cave, shackled so that they can only look forward towards the back wall of the cave. They cannot see their fellow prisoners or even their own bodies, except insofar as their bodies, lit from behind by a fire, cast a shadow onto the wall of the cave. Between the prisoners and the fire behind them is a wall upon which a puppet show of sorts is being played. The prisoners see the shadows of their own bodies and of the puppets dancing upon the wall they face. These shadows are the only reality they know.

To teach this metaphor and its meaning to children as young as 5 up to adult graduate students, I have re-enacted this cave scenario asking the students to imagine themselves chained to their chairs as I flash shadows upon the wall. Then, with the lights still out, we discuss this cave and the shadows. The children often enjoy the shadow puppets so much they say they would never want to leave. The adults see their point as well. The cave is safe, the shadows provide entertainment, the other prisoners give camaraderie. But then we discuss the world outside the cave, a world lit by a bright sun, a world full of objects that contain color beyond shades of gray, texture, taste, smell. We discuss the joy of knowing the real object not just its shadow and the freedom that comes from walking amongst a world that is brightly lit. But we also mention the danger, the pain, and the loneliness that one must face in order to leave the cave.

Socrates says that we all live in a cave. We believe the opinions we are taught by our parents, our friends, and our governments. The opinions tell us what and who is good and what and who is evil. The opinions define justice and injustice. These opinions make us feel safe and secure. Sharing these views with others lets us feel part of the group. We feel we understand each other. We laugh together at the same jokes. We enjoy the safety, entertainment and camaraderie of the cave.

But opinions are not truth, according to Socrates. While they make us feel safe, they actually imprison our minds. They keep us from the freedom and joy of knowing reality and living in the light of real truth. But seeking truth is difficult; the chains are tight. And the journey is dangerous for it is always possible that one only turns far enough to see a new set of shadows rather than real truth. Not only dangerous, the path is painful, isolating, and frightening. We fear that the other prisoners will become angry at us. The sun, at first, seems too bright. The freedom is dizzying. Yet, according to Socrates, truth is what we are made to seek. And wisdom alone, not opinion, can help us live truly good lives.

Socrates' points are controversial. First, he submits that the great majority live only according to opinion not knowing what true justice or goodness is but only what one culture teaches. Second, he proposes that there is something beyond opinion, some real truth. Third, he seems to have the hope that the truth can be understood, but that it is very very difficult to gain that understanding. Fourth, he defines truly good action as only that done out of understanding of truth. And Socrates asserts optimistically that knowing the good will lead to doing to the good, once we truly understand it.

If we accept these points, the next question is how we might help ourselves and others to get in touch with real truth so that we can freely follow good action. Socrates proposes the following manner of education, stressing the cross disciplinary nature of ethical training. First, ethical education can begin with the very young, with physical education. Movement, sport and game teach a child how to coordinate the body with harmony and grace. This is essential not only in itself but also to later learning how to coordinate the desires of the soul with harmony and grace. Children in the act of organized physical play learn moderation and grow in self-knowledge. They learn when to push themselves and when to rest. Such skills will serve them well as they learn how to moderate themselves in all areas of life. A modern day physical education instructor might add that children also learn the ability to cooperate with others, learn respect for rules and parameters in a game, and learn the benefits of honesty and fairness.

Young children should also begin the study of music, says Socrates. Music teaches children harmony of notes and the harmony of lyrics, beat and verse. This, like the harmony of the body learned in physical movement, points the child to a greater harmony. Furthermore, music accompanying dance teaches a child a knowledge of inner rhythm and internal harmony. In addition, music teaches children a sense of beauty. For Socrates, true beauty accompanies true goodness and true justice. Children who are taught to recognize beauty will also be able to recognize goodness. An orator might remind us that an ability to use rhythm and words to influence others will serve an adult well who wishes to attract people to justice and goodness.

As a child grows older, she should begin to learn mathematics, first counting, then arithmetic, then plane geometry and finally solid geometry. Mathematical skill is essential, says Socrates. A person can hardly run a business or a country if one cannot tell the difference between a large number of people, money or resources and a small number. Furthermore a strong leader must be able to balance a checkbook, plan the dimensions of a battlefield, and organize an army. But even more interesting and essential, Socrates adds, is that the study of math teaches that there are eternal truths that we find reflected in matter but exist in our minds beyond matter. In other words, math teaches that there are ideas beyond opinion. For example the number three, which a child sees embodied in 3 fingers or 3 apples or 3 years of age. The child learns to recognize the threeness that participates in all of these but transcends all of these in its existence.

And the child learns that $1+3=4$ is an eternal truth - whether it is fingers or apples or years that are added together. The equation is something she knows, not opines, something that transcends the cultural. With mathematics, the child is pointed towards something beyond the cave's shadows.

Finally the child is introduced to science, especially physics and astronomy.

Socrates explains that science, like math, is necessary for the everyday tasks of running a country. Being able to navigate ships or predict the weather has practical applications, as does the practical sciences of engineering and medicine. But more importantly, in science the student sees that the eternal truths of mathematics are embodied in the world around us. Science teaches children about the beauty of the world. Socrates is not a Gnostic; he believed that there is great beauty in the world that reflects the true beauty and justice that is known by the mind. Furthermore, ethics is about living in this world, not beyond it. Thus children must not only learn to see the justice that transcends opinion, but learn to apply justice in their lives. Socrates suggests that as the astronomy student witnesses the beauty of the stars obeying their orbits, he learns much about how human action is beautiful when in accord with true justice.

Thus are the necessarily disciplines for building a foundation of ethics, according to Socrates. What he claims is that it is false to think that children only learn ethics in a specific course, or only at their parent's knee, or only at church. Indeed, all the disciplines taught at school are instrumental in teaching children how to understand themselves, beauty, harmony, transcendence, and the immanence of transcendence. A combination of disciplines is essential to learning the good and how to enact it. From Socrates, we learn we must respect the gym teacher as much as the chemistry teacher, the music

teacher as much as the algebra teacher. School officials, parents, and politicians must realize that these are essential courses - not just for the skills they impart but for their role in teaching children how to be free, joyful, and just human beings.

But, of course, this is not the end of education. Socrates says that these alone will not let us understand what true goodness is. After the first essential disciplines are mastered, children, now adults must begin the challenging work of dialectic, the discussion and debate of philosophy. Socrates does not believe that ethics can be taught by a teacher lecturing to a student memorizing. To use an example, a math teacher cannot simply tell a child about the number 3. She must show the child many images, three fingers, three oranges, three dogs, until the child is able to make the leap to understand the concept beyond the image. How much more difficult it is to help a student make the leap to understand the concept of justice. Dialectic requires students to discuss different opinions, different images of justice. Socrates assumes that these opined shadows do reflect justice, however dimly. But it takes conversation about many different opinions to begin to see the common concept of justice more fully and deeply. Perhaps the student would begin by arguing the view of his father against the view of his teacher, then against the view of his country and against the view of his enemy. The apt student will see that these views are not equal. Socrates is not a relativist. But through conversation of the differences, what is the same, what is really justice, will begin to emerge.

Dialectic is difficult. And even when a student begins to see a transcendent truth, she cannot embody it completely in an uncontested sentence. Justice is beyond any sentence about justice, just as threeness is beyond any grouping of three apples. And the leap the mind must make to see true justice is much more difficult than seeing any mathematical concept. Socrates is clear that it is possible that the student may never see real truth. But he believes that learning that one does not know real truth yet is already a step forward. It is a step forward to more discussion, as the student strives to know more completely what justice is. Although the aim is lofty, Socrates is convinced that the need for knowledge is not gratuitous. Just as the child must learn arithmetic in order to function in business, so too the student must strive to understand truth in order to act well in society.

Thus, educators of children and all those who seek to live justly learn much from Socrates. He teaches that children learn to escape the confines of unquestioned opinion by learning from a variety of disciplines and continuing their education with dialectic. He insists that the foundation of sport, music, math, and science not be forgotten, for they pave the way to self knowledge and transcendent understanding. But, Socrates adds that the great leap beyond opinion requires much conversation with others with differing opinions. This is not to say that all opinions are equal, but to claim that point and counterpoint done well can lead to a fuller understanding of the true concept. With such understanding enacted in daily life, justice can be embodied in our lives and in our cities even as beauty is embodied in the stars. Such is life lived joyfully and freely beyond the cave.

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