EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY

Educational Philosophy and Theory, 2011
doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2011.00773.x

Socratic Pedagogy: Perplexity, humiliation, shame and a broken egg

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Abstract

This article addresses and rebuts the claim that the purpose of the Socratic method is to humiliate, shame, and perplex participants. It clarifies pedagogical and exegetical confusions surrounding the Socratic method, what the Socratic method is, what its epistemological ambitions are, and how the historical Socrates likely viewed it. First, this article explains the Socratic method; second, it clarifies a misunderstanding regarding Socrates' role in intentionally perplexing his interlocutors; third, it discusses two different types of perplexity and relates these to philosophical inquiry and dialectical pedagogy; finally, it refutes the claim that those who use the Socratic method intentionally attempt to shame and humiliate students.

Keywords: Socratic method, Socratic pedagogy, perplexity, humiliation, shame, confusion

> Socrates has gone out of his way to engender a state of perplexity. (Higgins, 1994, ¶16)

> ... shame and not logic is the critical tool or weapon in Socrates' elenctic refutations of his interlocutors. (Tarnopolsky, 2001, p. 1)

Introduction

Do Socratic educators attempt to humiliate, shame, or perplex participants?

Daniel Pekarsky (1994), among others, has argued in 'Socratic Teaching: A critical assessment,' that the intent of the Socratic method is to cause participants to become perplexed and confused, and that Socratic teachers think that this is desirable. Pekarsky and others articulate a common misunderstanding of Socratic pedagogy that has unfortunately worked its way into the educational and philosophical literature (Higgins, 1994; Kahn, 1983; McKim, 1982, 1988; Rud, 1997; Tarnopolsky, 2001; Weisner & Westerhof-Shultz, 2004; White, 1983). Specifically, the misunderstanding centers on the idea that the purpose of the Socratic method is to cause participants to become humiliated, ashamed, and/or perplexed, often so that some greater understanding can result (Abbs, 1994).

This article attempts to correct these misunderstandings. By using concrete examples, I argue that the purpose of the Socratic method is not to humiliate, shame, or perplex

Published by Blackwell Publishing, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK and
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

students, but to help them have beliefs that accord with reality. To make this argument, first I explain what the Socratic method is; second, I explore humiliation and shame as they relate to Socratic pedagogy; and finally, I examine the idea of perplexity and what it means to be perplexed.

Correcting this misunderstanding matters not only because it clarifies a pedagogical and exegetical confusion, but for eminently practical reasons. This pervasive misconception of the purpose of the Socratic method has the very real potential to deter educators who wish to draw upon Socratic pedagogical elements. This is problematic because Socratic techniques have emancipating potential: they can help participants formulate arguments, improve their critical thinking and moral reasoning skills, learn to distinguish truth from falsity, and even reduce prison inmate's recidivism rates (Boghossian, 2005, 2006a and b, 2010).

What is The Socratic Method?

> The [Socratic] method is intrinsically as well as extrinsically valuable; life is worth living only so long as one is examining it. (Nails, 1998, sec. 2, ¶3)

The Socratic method refers to a type of pedagogy employed by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues. Socrates never explicitly states that he has 'a method,' or a way to explore questions and ideas. Rather, scholars have inferred the method from various dialogues. Socrates' pedagogical method, or way of engaging ideas through discourse, consists of five stages: 1) Wonder, 2) Hypothesis, 3) Elenchus (refutation and cross-examination), 4) Acceptance/rejection of the hypothesis, and, 5) Action (Dye, 1996). I will now briefly explain each stage.

The first stage, wonder, begins with a question. Questions usually take the form, 'What is X' (Robinson, 1953; Santas, 1979). Specific questions from the Platonic dialogues include, 'What is justice?' (*Republic*), 'What is temperance?' (*Charmides*), 'What is courage?' (*Laches*), 'What is worth dying for?' (*Apology, Crito*), 'What is piety?' (*Euthyphro*), and 'What is friendship' (*Lysis*). This stage of the Socratic method consists only of posing a question.

In the second stage, hypothesis, a possible or tentative answer to the question is offered. For example, if the question posed is, 'What is courage?' a possible response could be, 'Courage is doing what one thinks is right, even if that is difficult'. In this stage, an answer to the question is presented; there is no evaluation of that answer.

The third stage, elenchus or refutation, rests at the core of Socratic practice (Gulley, 1968). In this stage a counterexample to the hypothesis is offered. The purpose of the counterexample is to call the hypothesis into question, that is, to show that the hypothesis is false, and thus undermine the interlocutor's claim to knowledge. Specifically, if the counterexample, or the example given, shows that the hypothesis cannot be true, then the participant cannot be said to know what it is that he is claiming to know.[1] Continuing with our example above, if the response to 'What is courage?' is 'Doing what one thinks is right, even if that's difficult,' a possible counterexample would be, 'What if one does something one knows is right, but it takes no effort to do so? For example, what if I know it's right to give my daughter a present for her birthday, and that's not difficult at all, is that courageous? Do I display courage by doing so?' This is a counterexample because it

prevents a viable challenge to the hypothesis, showing that it cannot be true. It shows, by offering a concrete example, that courage cannot be what the interlocutor thought that it was because one can do something that one thinks is right, and this is not always courageous. Finally, for the elenchus to achieve its epistemological ambitions, it must not merely point out contradictions in one's belief system, but also persuades one to change one's mind (Benson, 1990; Seeskin, 1987).

In the fourth stage, accept/reject the hypothesis, the participant can do just that, accept the counterexample, or not. If the counterexample is accepted then the participants go back to stage two and offer another hypothesis. If the counterexample is rejected, then both parties agree that it is neither necessary nor sufficient to undermine the hypothesis. In this example, did the counterexample of courage as 'doing what one thinks is right' call into question the knowledge claim presented in the hypothesis? If it does not, and the counterexample is rejected, then the hypothesis is tentatively accepted, or considered to be 'provisionally' true. If it does, or there are other counterexamples that show the hypothesis is flawed, then the discussion returns to step three, elenchus. After the process of examining counterexamples had been exhausted, then one enters the final stage of the Socratic method and *acts accordingly*, that is, ideally one would act on the findings of one's inquiry.[2]

Humiliation, Shame, and a Broken Egg

> The most common complaint against the Socratic method is that it is cruel and psychologically abusive. Socratic professors are quick to criticize imperfect student answers, subjecting students to public degradation, humiliation, ridicule, and dehumanization. This torture often scars students for life. (Kerr, 1999, p. 3)

There has been a spate of literature written on shame by philosophers (Baier, 1993, 1994; Dilman, 1999; Kekes, 1988; Klaassen, 2001; Williams, 1993), psychologists (Kaufman, 2002; Sabini & Silver, 1997; Tangney & Fischer, 1995), and educational theorists (Weijers, 2000; Wilson, 2001). There is a convergence of opinion regarding the role and consequence of shame as an educational or moral tool; shame 'appears to many thinkers to be altogether too blunt an instrument for motivating people to have morally good character … shame appears to be far too painful an instrument for its moral benefits, if in fact there are any (Metcalf, 2004).[3]

Putting aside the more conspicuous issues regarding using shame as a method to facilitate student learning, are the inculcation of shame and humiliation really what happens either as a result of Socratic inquiry, or during any of the stages of the Socratic method (McKim, 1988; Rud, 1997; Tarnopolsky, 2001)?[4] Do learners become ashamed and humiliated as a result of undergoing a Socratic dialectic? Simply: No.

Often as a consequence of sustained Socratic dialogue, one realizes that one did not know something that one thought one knew. Using the example of courage above, upon entering the dialogue one could have thought that courage meant one thing, but by the fourth stage of the method, when one's claims are subject to closer and more rigorous examination, one may realize that courage did not mean what one thought that it meant. This realization is a pivotal step in helping make one's ideas clear, and in distinguishing

truth from falsity, and yet it is hard to understand why one would believe that this discovery could be humiliating or shameful. For one who is simply curious about the world, correcting one's beliefs and coming closer to truth is not humiliating or shameful, but exciting and wondrous.

When people are shown certain mathematical or physically counterintuitive demonstrations, for instance, they are not humiliated or ashamed, but excited and delightfully surprised. For example, in my critical thinking classes I ask students what would happen if I dropped an egg out of a third- or fourth-story window onto a lawn. After a curious look, they respond that the egg will break. When I actually do drop an egg out of a the window, however, the egg will normally *not* break as long as it hits grass and not a bare spot or a stone.[5] As many times as I've done this, this counterintuitive 'egg phenomena' is still astonishing to behold. (Buckminster Fuller designed geodesic domes, e.g. the Astrodome, based on the strength of the eggshell due to the way it distributes forces.) When students learn that their intuitions in such matter are mistaken, in this case that the egg will not break, they do not feel humiliated or ashamed. Rather, virtually everyone thinks it's 'cool'.

Realizing that one does not know some particular fact has nothing to do with humiliation, shame or perplexity. It simply has to do with knowledge. For example, if you are about to jump start a car with another car and battery cables, I want to make sure you know that you do not attach the negative to the negative, but that you attach the negative of the 'live' car to the ground (frame) of the dead car. So I might say, 'You know you're not supposed to hook up the negative to the negative, right?' in order to get your attention and make sure you are focused on a potential hazard. That is not a Socratic question, but it has the kind of point that many Socratic questions in stage three of the method have, and that some lecture points have as well—to help people see that they have some mistaken or incomplete beliefs so that they can then try to make sure that their beliefs accord to reality. Asking these types of questions is not about *causing* humiliation, shame or perplexity, but about helping people to realize mistakes or errors in reasoning so they can correct them (Garlikov, 2000).

Similarly, that one would not seek truth when one mistakenly thinks one has it is not because one is smug, or because one suffers from a moral deficiency, but because one has no reason to find out something one believes one already knows.[6] To use the example from above, when I ask students in my critical thinking class what happens when an egg is thrown onto the lawn from a third-story window, they immediately answer that it will break. My response to them is 'That is not true,' not 'You just think you are so smart, don't you?' They do not think that they are particularly smart, they just think that is the right answer. They do not consider knowing that eggs break when thrown out of a third-story window as something that requires great intelligence. There is no reason for them to think otherwise unless someone points out their mistaken belief, or just drops the egg and shows them that it does not break. If one witnesses the dropping an egg out of a third-story window, the point is to demonstrate that it does not break, not to make students feel humiliated or ashamed for not knowing it would not break. The point is not to humiliate people, though seeing the egg's not breaking is confusing, but to facilitate thinking about how this counterintuitive phenomenon works—which most people would have had no reason to think about, not because of smugness or arrogance.

A Socratic teacher, going through each stage of the Socratic method, may help students see that they have inconsistent beliefs, and/or that what they have assumed was true was really not. This process may be confusing, and it is possible that some students might infer incorrectly that the teacher then thinks that they are stupid. However, embarrassment or even shame is the result of psychological factors that the student brings with her into the discourse, and unrelated to pedagogy, Socratic or otherwise.

This does not negate the fact there may be some educators who use the Socratic method for the sole purpose of humiliating students.[7] They, perhaps, mistakenly believe that shame is somehow good for learners, or because they think that intentionally creating confusion in learners gives the learner a sense of accomplishment. But this is an issue of teachers who abuse their power and who happen to choose the Socratic method as a vehicle to discharge their abuse (Boghossian, 2002b). Something intrinsic to the educator's psychological makeup and their power relationship with students acts as the conditions for the possibility of abuse.[8] As we have seen, shame is not the right tool for motivating people or the right tool for discharging one's educational objectives.

Roots of Misunderstanding: the *Meno*, the Slave Boy, the Stingray, and Socrates' Intentions

> The account offered of Socratic teaching highlights the teacher's effort to guide the student from complacently held but not yet adequately examined opinion to a state of ... perplexity. (Pekarsky, 1994, p. 1)

Pekarsky (1994) and others use Plato's oft-cited example of the numbing effect of the stingray to explain what it feels like to be perplexed:

> Socrates, even before I met you they told me that in plain truth you are a perplexed man yourself and reduce others to perplexity. At this moment I feel you are exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell until I am just a mass of helplessness. If I may be flippant, I think that not only in outward appearances but in other respects as well you are exactly like the flat stingray that one meets in the sea. Whenever anyone comes into contact with it, it numbs him, and that is the sort of thing that you seem to be doing to me now. My mind and my lips are literally numb, and I have nothing to reply to you. Yet I have spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of large audiences, and very well too, or so I thought. Now I can't even say what it is. (*Meno*, 80a–b)

Once one undergoes a Socratic dialectic, the result is that one often does become perplexed, 'numb' or even 'helpless' (Spyridakis, 2009, p. 18) as if one has been stung by a stingray. This claim is often true. What is untrue, however, is Socrates' 'active role in bringing about this state of perplexity' (Higgins, 1994). Did Socrates really desire to 'demolish intellectual smugness' and 'induce perplexity' (Pekarsky, 1994; Rud, 1997)? Was this really the objective the Socratic method?

Pekarsky (1994) repeatedly questions 'the wisdom of leading the student from unexamined opinion to perplexity', as if this is the intent and the purpose of the Socratic method.[9] He believes that educators employing Socratic pedagogy think that inducing

perplexity is justified because of 'the critical role they are believed to play in the pursuit of truth, which itself seems to be valued primarily as a means to improving the human condition' (p. 9). Pekarsky claims that Socrates believes that 'perplexity and intellectual humility have value not in themselves' (p. 9), but that perplexity has a purely instrumental value (Matthews, 1999) because it 'may give rise to knowledge, and knowledge [is good] because it will improve our li[ves]' (Pekarsky, 1994, p. 10). While there is scant textual evidence offered for this assertion, those who argue against the Socratic method almost universally refer to the above famous passage from the *Meno* to support their position. Perhaps this rests at the heart of the misunderstanding.

The way Pekarsky and others use the *Meno* generally, and the passage quoted above specifically, is a misappropriation of the context of the dialogue. Socrates is trying to show that knowledge is recollection, that is, that knowledge is a remembrance from a previous life, and that even uneducated people like a slave boy have knowledge that they do not realize. Socrates demonstrates that even the slave boy can figure out a complex mathematical principle simply by being asked the right questions. During points in the dialogue, the slave boy incorrectly intuits some particular propositions. Socrates wants to him to identify his own errors both so that he can more readily see the correct answer and so that he can achieve a deeper understanding of the issue. But Socrates' point is not to cause perplexity for its own sake, but to do a number of things, one of which is to arouse curiosity about what is true.[10]

This passage characterizes the way in which those whom Socrates questioned saw what he was doing. But it is a charge that is leveled against Socrates, and not a description of how Socrates intended the method to be used or understood. Socrates' interlocutors may have seen it this way because they were resistant to thinking or to following a line of reasoning no matter where it led, and they thus saw Socrates as trying to use verbal and logical trickery to confuse them. Ironically, they thought that Socrates was a Sophist. But this quotation cannot stand as a description of the method as Socrates saw it, any more than the charge of 'corrupting the youth of Athens' is how Socrates viewed what he was doing.

Coming Out of the Cave: Perplexity and Engaging Difficult Ideas

> It is not a blanket destruction of all of his beliefs that Socrates wants, but dialectic, meaningful discussion of the most serious matters. Any teacher who would seek only to destroy a pupil's beliefs is missing the point. (Fulkerson, 1998, p. 11)

There are two types of perplexity.[11] One type of perplexity results from trying to figure out a lecture, explanation, description, phenomenon, etc., that is confusing or unclear (Moore, 2008). The other type of perplexity occurs as a consequence of engaging difficult, novel or unusual ideas or phenomena in which one crosses the boundary between intuition and reasoning. I'll now address both types of perplexity as they relate to the Socratic method.

The main problem with claiming that Socratic pedagogy instills perplexity is that it confuses an occasional result of the method with its purpose. The fact that some people may become perplexed and uncomfortably confused during a Socratic discourse,

particularly if a difficult subject, challenging concept, complex line of reasoning, or heterodox idea is examined, does not mean that it is the pedagogy that caused learners to become perplexed. Using our egg example, it is not the tossing of the egg out of the window that caused students to become confused, it is the egg's not breaking. It is not the process of the method but the consequence of the truths discovered.

It is certainly the case that in Socratic discourse participants can become confused and perplexed—particularly in stages two and three of the Socratic method—but that is usually because a deeper examination of one's beliefs is inherently challenging and difficult, like, for example, introduction to calculus. Garlikov (personal communication, January 4, 2002) related the following about one of his ex-students who wrote to him and asked for help with a calculus problem. She wrote:

> Def: lim f(x)'Lx->a means for all epsilon greater than zero there exists a delta greater than zero such that if the absolute value of x minus a is less than delta, the absolute value of f(x) minus L is less than epsilon. Yes, this is in a high school AP Calculus class Y our teacher says that it is the basis of all calc, and I am so lost my head is spinning. This example is not part of the Socratic method and has nothing to do with it; it is about calculus. Does this mean that calculus is only meant to perplex students and to make them feel humiliated? Of course not.

In this example the meaning of the word 'limit' in calculus was confusing to the student, especially since the definition her book provided meant absolutely nothing to her. It is not the case that the author of the book used a definition *intended* to 'make [her] head spin'. Rather, it was a combination of her examination of a difficult concept and an unclear explanation that made her 'head spin'. The Socratic method does not cause either type of perplexity; examining and engaging difficult concepts, *or* trying to figure out something that is conveyed in an unclear way, does. These are crucial distinctions.

In any pedagogical context, if one were neither confused nor perplexed when initially examining a difficult concept or subject, then it is questionable that one's subject matter was as difficult as one thought, or one's examination as probing.[12] In this sense, being confused and perplexed is a natural consequence of dealing with difficult concepts (Matthews, 1999) and unrelated to pedagogy.

Of course there are bad educators (e.g. teachers who do not listen well, who cannot articulate clearly, who become frustrated and impatient easily, who move too quickly through a topic) who choose to employ Socratic pedagogy. However, there are good and bad teachers who use a range of pedagogies, and using the Socratic method does not mystically or formulaically make one a good teacher, just as using a lecture-based delivery mechanism does not make one a good or a bad teacher. If one is a poor educator then any pedagogy, content delivery method, or approach to teaching may not work well, and would thus be more likely to cause confusion and perplexity than teaching methods used by a good teacher.[13]

To confuse or perplex students is not the goal of inquiry, but a possible result, or byproduct, of engaging ideas. Trying to shame or humiliate students has nothing to do with Socratic pedagogy, and everything to do with bad teaching.

Notes

1. The reason that this undermines knowledge is that until very recently (Gettier, 1963), knowledge has been viewed as justified true belief. To make a claim to knowledge one must have sufficient justification, or sufficient reason to believe, what it is that one is claiming to know. If one does not have sufficient justification to warrant belief in a given proposition, then one cannot be said to know what one thinks one knows.
2. Bandura (1990, 1999, 2002) and others (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996) have argued for what is termed 'moral disengagement'. Moral disengagement means that just because someone knows something is right, such as what particular course of action one ought to take, that does not mean one will take it. People often become disengaged from right and wrong, and knowing what is right does not translate into doing what is right. While Bandura does not apply this to Socratic practice *per se*, the implications for Socratic pedagogy as a tool for behavioral change could be devastating. For example, in Socratic interventions with prison inmates (Boghossian, 2006a, 2010), if the problem suffered by felons is not that they do not know right from wrong, but that they intellectually, emotionally, or morally disengage themselves from doing right action, then this has the potential to undermine the Socratic enterprise. Socratic pedagogy, like Plato's ethics, presupposes that the main reason for poor action is a lack of knowledge. If people only had the 'full picture' then they would act accordingly, and choose the best course of action.
3. As Metcalf (2004) correctly points out, turning to Locke (1693, in Metcalf, 2004, p. 8) for thoughts on the role of education, and Kekes (Kekes, 1988, in Metcalf, 2004, p. 11) for the role of shame in the Platonic dialogues, can be extremely helpful when thinking through the role and purpose of shame.
4. McKim (1988), Kahn (1983), and Tarnopolsky (2001) focus their criticisms on the *Gorgias*. However, their critiques can be generalized to other dialogues. Shame [*aidōs*] also plays a role in the *Theaetetus*, the *Symposium*, the *Republic* and the *Laws*.
5. I also use the following example in my critical thinking classes: if one was to tie a ribbon around the earth at the equator (assuming the earth was a smooth, round ball) and then splice in one extra yard, and smooth out the slack, so the little loop of the splice was everywhere taken up by the ribbon in a new circle, the ribbon would end up being just slightly less than six inches above the ground all around the equator. Adding X amount of circumference to any circle, no matter how large or how small, will add X/6.28 to its radius.
6. I am reminded of a Socratic adage: 'A man doesn't want what he doesn't think that he doesn't lack'. If one does not think that one is in need of something then it is not clear that one would desire it.
7. It has, however, been argued elsewhere 'that the elenchus acts as a dialectical safeguard to adjudicate competing claims' (Boghossian, 2006b), meaning that the elenchus has an intrinsic mechanism within it that allows for the truth of a proposition to emerge. It is possible, then, that in a Socratic environment these sorts of abuses would be less likely. An imperfect example would be that the Socratic method is like a sieve for propositions, allowing only the true propositions to get through. If this crude example holds, then the focus shifts from people to propositions, and this could possibly diffuse defensive reactions by learners who might otherwise feel 'stupid' or feel threatened (Boghossian, 2002b).
8. It has been argued elsewhere that teachers who wish to take advantage of their students are *less* likely to be successful in a Socratic learning environment than in other types of learning situations (Boghossian, 2002a).
9. There are several compelling reasons why one would think that the historical Socrates would not wish to induce a state of perplexity in his interlocutors. In *An Apologia of the Socratic Method*, Fulkerson (1998) has addressed the notion that the purpose of Socratic teaching is to induce perplexity and confusion by an exegetical analysis of the Platonic dialogues. Writing from an historical perspective, he correctly argues that, 'Pekarsky's objections rely on a misunderstanding of the Socratic elenchus and how it is to be used' (Fulkerson, 1998, p. 13).

However, because Fulkerson attempts to ground his argument in the details of Plato's early dialogues, he neither goes far enough in explaining the fallacies in Pekarsky's argument, nor does he make these misunderstandings accessible to those who are most likely to use Socratic pedagogy—educators who are not professional philosophers. Grounding a response in the Platonic dialogues explains why these notions are not rooted in the historical Socrates' practice. However, it does little to help contemporary educators understand the reasons why these claims are misdirected.

10. Arousing students' curiosity often helps students focus on relevant features of a phenomenon in order to form a better understanding of it (Boghossian, 2005). For example, in the *Meno* when Socrates helps the slave boy to see some of his mistakes, he is not only showing him his errors but how he made them. In the same passage discussed here (Plato as cited in Pekarsky, 1994, p. 8), when Socrates talks about numbing the student like a stingray, he is only using the metaphor that *Meno* used. Socrates is mocking the metaphor, or more specifically, using it sarcastically. The substance of what he is saying fits what he says in the *Apology*, where he explains that he discovered what the oracle meant when it called him the wisest man in Greece—that he was the only one who realized what he did not know, and that made him wiser than the others who held false beliefs without knowing it. Pekarsky (1994), Higgins (1994), Rud (1997) and others make it sound as though the purpose of the Socratic method is to engender perplexity and confusion, and that there is something wrong with helping people to realize that they have false or inconsistent beliefs that can be corrected (Boghossian, 2005).
11. The Oxford English Dictionary defines perplexity as follows, '1. a. Inability to decide what to think or how to act owing to the involved, intricate, or complicated condition of circumstances or of the matters to be dealt with, generally also involving mental perturbation or anxiety ...' (OED, 2010).
12. It has been argued that perplexity is inseparable from philosophical practice (Muguerza, 2004). This does not mean, again, that the *purpose* of philosophical inquiry is to become perplexed.
13. The resulting confusion is not something intrinsic to the Socratic method, rather, it is something intrinsic to bad teaching. Of course there are also abuses of the Socratic method, and teachers who wish to exert their will to power over students may find fertile ground in the elenchus (Boghossian, 2002a; Boghossian, 2002b). It is certainly possible that teachers who wish, for whatever reason, to intentionally cause confusion or perplexity could use the Socratic method, but they could also just as easily lecture, or use constructivist or behaviorist classroom practices (Boghossian, 2006b).

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