The Use of Reading Questions As a Pedagogical Tool: Fostering an Interrogative, Narrative Approach to Philosophy ((1

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine the text of the Symposium to illustrate two non-philosophical responses to Socrates' pedagogical provocation. While Apollodorus and Aristodemus, two Socratic disciples, demonstrate their erotic commitment to Socrates, they do not practice philosophy. They manifest their non-philosophical behavior in two ways. First, they idolize and imitate Socrates. Second, they constantly tell stories about Socrates. In the first section I analyze Aristodemus' and Apollodorus' emotional attachment to Socrates. While both disciples are genuinely protective of Socrates, their behavior often precludes the practice of philosophy. In the second section, I examine the nuances of the narrative frame of the Symposium. Apollodorus and Aristodemus both express their commitment to Socrates by telling stories about him. While their stories do preserve knowledge about Socrates, they are unpersuasive spokespersons for the philosophical life. They remain mired in their personal love for Socrates. In the third section, I interpret Plato's rhetorical use of anonymity as a strategy designed to .mitigate against the dangers of discipleship

I. Introduction

Teachers of first-time philosophy students face a number of difficulties in envisioning, structuring, and executing a class that introduces students to philosophy successfully. First, many of the students have chosen the class because it meets some general requirement. As a result, they often believe that the subject will hold little intrinsic interest for them. Furthermore, unlike English, math, history, most of them have had no previous experience with philosophy. Discomfort or anxiety about the unfamiliar is natural. Second, what students have heard about philosophy often makes them apprehensive, resentful, or skeptical. Some students associate philosophy with forms of life they have been told to "beware of," such as atheism and agnosticism.(2) Consequently, they view philosophy as subversive or dangerous. Others associate philosophy with abstract questions like "What is real?" or "What is Truth?" Still others think of esoteric questions such as "If a tree falls in the forest and no human hears it, does its

falling make a sound?" Or "How many angels can stand on the head of a pin?" Since these discussions are difficult for the uninitiated to follow and because they seem irrelevant to day-to-day concerns, students view philosophy as useless - a waste of time. Third, some students do not like to read. Even those who do read are poor readers; even the best readers are usually unprepared for approaching a complex philosophical text. Knowing that philosophy typically involves "a lot of reading" makes some students anxious. When reading does not produce immediate understanding, frustration grows in many students. Resentment may even emerge for some. Students who are anxious, skeptical or resentful about being in a philosophy class are less likely to benefit from philosophical inquiry. Therefore, the successful teacher must minimize these problems for the student. To further this pedagogical end, we propose a three-pronged strategy. First, we take an interrogative approach to designing and executing the course's objectives. Second, we place a narrative method at the center of our activities. In short, we approach the teaching of philosophy narratively and interrogatively. Third, we use carefully constructed reading questions to help the students participate in this narrative inquiry .that is philosophy. In this essay, we will describe and defend this tripartite strategy

II. The Deficiencies of A Problems Oriented Approach to Teaching "Introduction to Philosophy"

Over the course of our academic careers, we have approached the teaching of philosophy in two ways. The first is the typical, topical or problem-oriented approach. Using this method, the teacher will select four to eight topics or problems for the class to read about and to discuss during the semester. The advantages of a topical or problem-oriented framework are obvious. First, it is easy to organize. Given that so many texts are published with this approach in mind, creating a syllabus and collecting the course materials takes little effort.(3) Second, one can assume that at least one of the topics will spark the interest of every student. So, the course has some reasonable hope of getting students to understand and appreciate the value of philosophy. Third, it provides a disciplined way of presenting students to the canonical topics of philosophy. Fourth, it is likely to fit whatever preconceptions students have about philosophy. Fifth, the authors or editors of the text typically place the "most important questions" up-front in bold face print. Thus, the text itself makes "reading" easier on the student. In other words, the organization of the text compensates for the poor reading skills of the student. Therefore, teachers need not worry about improving the students' reading skills. Sixth, such courses typically de-emphasize the historical and social contexts of the texts. This quality, too, demands less of the student and the teacher. Students are not required to learn about the social context out of which philosophical inquiry emerges. The teachers need not worry about supplying the missing narrative for them. Finally, since the "real issue" is the

problem identified at the outset by the organization of the text, the student and teacher can ignore all those portions of the text not obviously connected with that topic.

Unfortunately, problem-oriented courses have some potentially serious shortcomings. We will briefly discuss three of them. One, far too many students these days are poor readers; even the best are untrained as critical readers of texts. Their inability to read the texts and absorb its contents quickly will initially be taken as faults of the text and of the teacher who has chosen them. Some teachers will work diligently to prod students to develop the critical skills they need to read and to discuss the texts intelligently. Often, they find themselves frustrated because they spend so much time "telling the students what the text says" that they never get to the "heart of a course in philosophy" - a class discussion with students advancing various arguments or considering diverse perspectives on some particular problem.

Two, most students view the problem or topic-oriented approach as a smorgasbord where they sample this and taste that without fully enjoying any entree before them. Much like a television program that they might watch during a commercial break on a competing network, each problem is presented on its own terms. All too frequently, students see little connection between the various problems. As a result, they do not seek the vital connections between themselves, text, context (social and historical), author, and authors. The question, "How does all this material fit together, if at all?" rarely arises. If it does, students have no framework and few skills with which to pose possible responses to the question. Consequently, even if some particular problem or text stimulates a student's curiosity, they rarely retain much beyond some sense of a quickened imagination. Too often, without a connection to a larger story, this burgeoning intellectual excitement creates confusion rather than intellectual commitment. Another way of putting this same problem is that the problems-oriented approach raises philosophical questions that the students themselves have not yet raised. Distinctions between epistemological and metaphysical issues are not relevant to the daily concerns of even the brightest students.

Three, the problems-oriented approach often generates skepticism or cynicism. Both can be detrimental to the intellectual life of the mind. To explain, students often read four essays each defending a different epistemological theory or a different justification of the moral life. As the teacher carefully leads the students to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of each competing view, students often conclude that no one view is any better (or worse) than any other. They erroneously assume that the issue reduces to individual choice or personal preference. Sometimes they have opinions about the subject (for example, abortion rights or euthanasia). Other times, they do not. From their perspective, having a deontological or

consequentialist approach to ethical reasoning does not matter. Given this lack of relevance, they naturally wonder why they should bother to read, discuss, or debate these issues at all. To be graded on their responses seems arbitrary at best, capricious at worst.

III. An Alternative: Teaching Philosophy Interrogatively and Narratively

What is the interrogative approach to philosophy? To interrogate is to ask questions of someone or something. To use an interrogative method in teaching philosophy is to make the "art of asking questions" central to how both students and teachers approach a text. Teaching philosophy interrogatively fits naturally with teaching philosophy narratively because both qualities are easily oriented to the fundamental question, "How are we to live our lives?" Our experience suggests that it is good to start the course by focusing students' attention on both the narrative framework and the interrogative method. So, the first day of class we begin by asking them questions such as "What is a narrative or story?" "What are the basic elements of a story?" "How would you apply the notion of a narrative or story to you?" We spend quite a bit of time talking about the story of our institution.(4) We ask older students to tell particular stories they find especially interesting, maddening, or perplexing. At the end of the class period, the students have competently practiced philosophy as a narrative activity.(5)

To familiarize students with the process of questioning, we use the beginning class period to discuss some very general questions about the nature of philosophy. Some examples include: What is philosophy? How do you do it? Why does one do it? What value is there in doing it? What are the benefits of doing it? What are the risks of doing it? Why are students troubled by doing it? Since these questions are usually swarming in their minds, by addressing these questions directly, you capitalize on their latent intellectual curiosity.(6) After this conversation, students see that their ideas about philosophy do not differ radically from the ideas of the other students and the professor. As a result, they gain an immediate level of confidence in the interrogative method. They become ready to participate in the narrative of philosophy.

Before describing our narrative approach to philosophy, we must first define narrative. We associate a "narrative" with a spoken or written account of something. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg offer a simple definition; "for writing to be a narrative no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required."(7) A narrative is a "story" and to narrate is to tell a story. Narratives or stories have familiar elements: a plot, characters, a setting, and a theme. To take a narrative approach to the teaching of philosophy in an introductory course is to structure the course guided by the notion of philosophy as a coherent narrative.(8) The story has a setting (the intellectual conversation produced by philosophical texts), characters (Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), plot (the search for

wisdom), and a theme (what is wisdom and, for example, whether belief in God is wise).(9) We then tell the students that the assigned readings constitute episodes or moments in the philosophical plot.

For example, in Introduction to Philosophy, we might chose "How ought I to live?" as a unifying theme. Then, we select texts based on how they contribute to the narrative unfolding possible answers to that question. For example, we might select the Apology, in which Socrates poses this seminal question. We might then choose sections of Aristotle's Ethics or Politics in which he suggests that one must live in a vibrant and full human community. We might then turn to Augustine's Confessions. There, he narrates his journey from sin to salvation. We ask the students how Augustine's spiritual quest relates to our original question. Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love further expounds on the theme that right relation to the divine is essential to living well, but places Aristotle's vision of the content of eudaimonia in question. Descartes' Meditations on First Philosophy initiates a method of inquiry that elevates the autonomy of a human being beyond the Christ-centered context of Augustine and Julian. John Locke's discussion of "reason" and "faith" in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding poses similar challenges which Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion develops in some depth and detail. This text holds possibly devastating consequences for traditional religion and morality. Nietzsche's Twilight of the Idols presents an even darker moment in the story. The traditional heroes, Socrates, Paul, and Jesus, among others, suddenly become villains. The narrative approach extends to contemporary thinkers as well. For example, Roberta Bondi's Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life tells us how destructive a patriarchal understanding of theology can be. Jean Bethke Elshtain's Democracy on Trial tells of the dark side of the quest for egalitarian liberty, especially when articulated and pursued through competing and conflicting versions of moral, social, and political liberalism.

We have decided upon this narrative approach for two reasons. First, as Alasdair MacIntyre maintains "human beings are story-telling animals, a teller of stories that aspire toward the truth."(10) Philosophy has always concerned itself with self-knowledge or self-understanding. Genuine self-understanding, we contend, comes grappling with these sorts of questions — of what stories am I a part? What stories have shaped my own? Second, like Plato and MacIntyre we recognize that the power of narrative is enormously seductive.(11) Peter Brooks explains the mechanism of this seduction. He believes that "plotting, the dynamic aspect of narrative makes us read forward."(12) Furthermore, the appeal of narrative lies in the belief that one will come to have the knowledge contained in the narrative. A narrative promises us this knowledge. According to Aristotle, this promise of knowledge seduces us because "to be

learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of humanity, however small their capacity for it."(13) The seductive power of narrative lies in (this enjoyment.(14

IV. The Mechanics: Working with Reading Questions

This section describes four types of reading questions that we regularly use to foster this interrogative, narrative method. First, we construct a general set of questions that apply to any text. We see these questions as modeling the inquiries that an informed critical reader of texts would have in mind when approaching a new work. We explain to the students that they should always start with these questions as they begin a new text. Eventually, students should learn to ask themselves these kinds of questions as they begin to read any text, regardless of discipline. To construct these questions, think about the numerous inquiries you automatically make as you approach a text. Some examples include: When was it written? By whom? In what historical context? What is the intended audience and how does/may that audience differ from a contemporary audience? What do you hope to learn from reading this text? Why have you chosen it? As highly educated academics, we often make these inquiries automatically. Often, we assume that the students have similar assumptions and goals as they approach a text. Generally, they do not. The disparity between our assumptions about their reading habits and the real way in which they read can create frustration for both professor and student. By providing the students with a model, they can more easily understand what the process of reading means to a professor.

Second, we also write specific questions geared toward each reading assignment. For example, in Introduction to Philosophy,(15) we regularly assign the Euthyphro. To construct these questions, we go through the text and mark all points that one will refer to in lecture and class discussion. We create questions that will orient students toward becoming aware of these particular points. Some examples include: Where does the dialogue takes place? Why are Socrates and Euthyphro at the King Archon's porch? We ask them to describe the personalities of Socrates and Euthyphro. Then, we ask them to find specific places in the text that reveal their respective personalities. These questions are useful because they provide the student with an awareness of the detailed reading that philosophy demands. Unfortunately, students normally read at a superficial level. They read a text much like they might watch a basketball game between teams who will not make the playoffs. Hence, they often have no awareness that they are not reading in the manner in which you assume that they will.

Third, we create some questions with the idea that the students should prepare formally written answers to them. Five times during the semester, usually the class period before an

exam, we dedicate entirely to small group work. We break the students into groups of three to five depending on the size of the class. (More than eight groups becomes unwieldy for a single professor to oversee effectively.) Each group discusses the written answers to the questions. Initially, reticent students may feel more comfortable reading their answers aloud. However, they are often drawn into active conversation as their peers comment on their work. We tell the students that these questions will take the entire period to discuss fully. We encourage them to ask each other to defend their answers and explain why they wrote the answers that they did. Since the students prepare written answers to the questions, they think about the important issues before discussing them in class. As a result, the quality of discussion radically improves.(16) Furthermore, students will be able to participate in a genuine intellectual exchange because everyone has prepared something. Students also benefit from comparing their answers to the questions with those of their peers.

Fourth, we also use this interrogative method to investigate an issue raised by a classical text but with an effort to relate it to "contemporary" concerns. We also create questions with an eye toward the narratives that frame a student's cultural perspective. These questions may confront racism, sexism, or explore the perplexities generated by religious or political beliefs and practices. For example, we discuss our changing cultural views of appropriate roles for men and women. Some possible questions include: Would you vote for a woman for President? For Governor? For Student Body President? What role should women play in the military? In this context, it becomes clear that Plato's claim that women should be educated along with men is not simply an ancient Athenian concern. We often use these questions at the beginning of a class discussion. Therefore, the discussion starts at a personal level, where students feel confident and comfortable. The enthusiasm for the topic then carries over into a discussion of the nuances of the philosophical text that raised these provocative issues. In this way, the reading questions show students that philosophical texts are relevant to their daily concerns.

V. Conclusion

These descriptions reflect an idealization and consolidation of our classroom practices.(17) Obviously, teaching narratively and interrogatively may not work for all teachers in all contexts. Some professors feel uncomfortable veering away from strict lecture. Others find the small group work that we feel is central to the success of the interrogative method to be cumbersome. Other professors may feel that a coherent theme can be over done and students may tire of the narrative and interrogative perspective. One colleague suggests that he speculates that the better students flourish in such a context, but the weaker students are left

floundering. Nonetheless, we think the method is sound and have found it enormously useful. We do want to stress that this method has evolved over several years of practice. It may take some time for a professor who is new to the method to adapt it to his or her particular .pedagogical context

Notes

(1) We would like to thank the X University Philosophy department colloquia members for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this essay. We would also like to thank the faculty for creating a collegial environment that encourages and values excellence in teaching. Three graduate students, Randy Colton, Chris Blakley, and Tom McCasland, were enormously helpful as well.

(2) Many students take Paul's remarks in Colossians 2:8 to heart. He warns his audience; "Beware lest someone take you captive with philosophy and empty deception." (Colossians 2:8)

(3) Two examples suffice to illustrate our point. David Stewart and H. Gene Blocker divide their introductory text of readings into general topics that map primarily onto modern conventions about the branches of philosophy. So, readings are devoted to the following sorts of topics: logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, esthetics, and social and political philosophy. See, their Fundamentals of Philosophy, 4th ed. (Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1996) p. iii-vi. In contrast, Joel Feinberg organizes his introductory textbook of readings around the conviction that the college student is best introduced "to philosophy by means of a few representative problems examined in great detail," Reason and Responsibility, 9th ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996) p. xi. Among the problems most frequently anthologized are the problem of faith and reason, the mind-body problem, the problem of free-will and determinism, the problem of science and religion, the problems of morality: theoretical and practical; personal, social, and political.

(4) One colleague successfully uses David Hoekema's Campus Rules and Moral Community to begin discussion around these issues. David Hoekema, Campus Rules and Moral Community (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).

(5) Take, for example, a recent campus-wide discussion about whether church affiliated institutions like our own should expel a student for posing in Playboy. They come to see this incident as an episode in a larger story about an ongoing institutional commitment to traditional Christian morality. They see its possible place in a plot whose central theme might be that religious universities are or are not legitimate institutions of higher education in a democratic culture.

(6) Hopefully, through this process of questioning, the following ideas about the nature of philosophy will emerge. 1. Philosophy is an activity. 2. Philosophy is inquiry, stimulated by wonder, curiosity, or perplexity. 3. Philosophy uses the interrogative method. Socrates remarks, "The unexamined life is not worth living." 4. Philosophy also involves reading and conversation. We read about other philosophers philosophizing, become engaged by their conversations, and thereby learn how to philosophize. 5. Philosophy uses "story-telling" or narratives. 6. Philosophy happens in community. We are shaped by the company we keep. See Wayne Booth, The Company We Keep. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Martha Nussbaum's belief in the moral efficacy of reading novels upholds a similar understanding of educating people into an ethical community. See Martha Nussbaum, Love's Knowledge. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

(7) Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg. The Nature of Narrative. (London: Oxford University Press, 1976) p. 4.

(8) We do not mean to marginalize those who would deny that there is such an overarching metanarrative to philosophical discourse (Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, etc.). However, we feel a postmodern approach to philosophical inquiry demands a thorough understanding of the intellectual tradition out of which it arose. The average introductory student is in no way equipped to understand the nuances of such learned discussions.

(9) Obviously, these parenthetical examples are just that, oversimplified examples. Any instructor should redefine the elements of narrative to suit their own particular interests and the particular needs of their students.

(10) Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) p. 216.

(11) Eric S. Rabkin explains that narrative is seductive because it depends on subliminal knowledge. He asserts, "It is the subliminal-suspense that engages us with the fictional world, and it is subliminal-suspense to which we most immediately react" Eric S. Rabkin. Narrative Suspense "When Slim Turned Sideways." (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973) p. 69.

(12) Peter Brooks. Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) p. viii.

(13) Aristotle. Poetics. 1448b13-15.

(14) See Richard Rorty, "Hermeneutics, General Studies and Teaching." Synergos 2 (1982) p. 1-15. Rorty claims that it is the job of the educator to seduce the student into learning. He remarks, "Unless the teachers as well as the books or the laboratory apparatus are potential

romantic objects, they might as well not be there" p. 12. He claims that "Teaching general studies (the last years of high school or the first year of college – the stage of Romance) is erotic or nothing. Either the student is moved to think of himself as a potential member of a community which includes both his teacher and the author of the book being read, or nothing happens at all" p. 13. We believe that teaching philosophy in the manner that we have outlined fulfills many of these pedagogical goals without placing the individual educator so centrally into the student's classroom experience.

(15) Our introductory philosophy course is called "Living Issues in Philosophy."

(16) We have experimented with letting students divide themselves into groups, dividing students randomly, dividing students according to sex, dividing students according to ability, and distributing different levels of students into each group. In many contexts, we have found that the single sex discussion groups are extremely effective but we recommend using all these methods over the course of a to ensure that each student is exposed to as many different points of view as possible.

.(17) Examples of reading questions are available upon request