

Socratism as a Vocation

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Abstract This paper discusses the rhetorical problems teachers face in presenting Socratic activity to students, and it then argues that parallel problems arise in presenting liberal education to many academic colleagues. Given the nature of philosophy and the nature of expertise in today's academy, most academics will not understand, and perhaps be hostile to, philosophy, and philosophers may sometimes seem to them both arrogant and ignorant. The contemporary academy, dominated by assumptions Weber articulates in "Science as a Vocation," does not make room for philosophical activity and practitioners of philosophy in the classroom (in various departments) must adopt rhetorically appropriate postures in order to create safe spaces for Socratic activity.

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Liberal educators today face a problem both perennial and particular, and in this our patron Socrates provides a model for us. Socrates' rhetorical situation is impossible. He has landed in front of the jury because he has said things some important citizens find insulting. He also says things many members of the jury would naturally find insulting.

Some think Socrates wanted to be convicted, that he had gone out of his way to insult certain citizens and then did the same to the jury when faced with an avoidable death. Socrates

regularly conversed with citizens respected, especially by themselves, as knowers and doers in order to expose their failure to understand themselves as not understanding crucial things. Socrates claims some type of expertise in education, and he accuses members of the jury of being cowardly, unmanly, when faced with bodily or political dangers or when faced with the moral and intellectual danger of error.

Was Socrates right to say things people found insulting? There are two standards of correctness here: were the offending statements *true*, and was the saying of them *prudent*? That is (and we must remember this when we feel insulted), being offended is neither a valid objection to the truth of a claim nor a decisive objection to the prudence of an utterance. Some statements are insulting, true, and good to say. Let's move this issue to the backburner.

Another question is how we read Socrates' irony. The cynical attitude images Socrates as arrogant, believing he has answered the questions he raises with others. The generous attitude images Socrates as truthful in his denial that he knows the answers. Interlocutors and readers take on such attitudes. These interpretations get complicated by whether the interlocutor or reader thinks he himself already knows these answers adequately. For example, the hagiographic attitude is held by someone aware of the inadequacy of his own guesses and who imagines Socrates as really knowing the answers while denying he does.

Though I don't have the space to defend this view, I will plant my flag here: Socrates knows he doesn't adequately know the answers. Further, I know I don't either (though I know I often assume I do). So I would defend the non-cynical, non-hagiographic interpretation of Socrates, and I aspire to more honesty with myself about what I don't know.

To a person who imagines he knows these answers adequately, Socratic activity naturally appears offensive. Persistent questioning implies inadequacy of supplied answers.

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To a person who thinks no one can really answer in better or worse ways, Socratic dedicated wonderment appears foolish.

To those of us committed vocationally to drawing people into Socratic activity – and this happens not only in those (too few) philosophy classes worthy of the name, but also in many literature, politics, theology, and classic text classrooms – these facts about Socrates' rhetorical situation are pedagogically crucial. Many students simultaneously assume both that they already adequately answer Socrates' questions and also that no one can. That puts them at once in both categories of people disposed not to like Socrates.

As teachers inspired by Socrates, we aim to help students discuss and clarify questions that are simultaneously of both universal and personal significance and that force people into self-reflection by spotlighting the fundamental assumptions undergirding all other claims, goals, and activities. For example, what does a successful life look like? How can what we are told about ourselves from biology and religion cohere? How should a human being and citizen be educated? Every adult has opinions about such matters, but it is difficult for minds untouched by philosophical practice to engage such questions with balance—they haven't gained their sea-legs. Our vocation is to apprentice students in the activity of appreciating and discussing such questions so they are better able to see and respond to the world.

When we teach, we are colored by the attitudes that color Socrates. Some students imagine us as possessing the answers, yet we coyly refuse to hand our possession over. This may arouse student annoyance—or adulation. Or they may imagine us as not knowing the answers and thus to be running a course where no knowledge is taught, wasting their time and grading them unjustly.

To evade this appearance problem, we can sell our courses as a type of philodoxy: with irony (pretending philosophy is something less than it is), we may say we are teaching the variety of positions on such issues. Or we may justify our courses as intellectual history or cultural self-archeology. By doing so, the teacher risks hollowing out himself and philosophy, betraying his and its substance. One cannot defend philosophy in un-philosophical terms without presenting it as something it is not. With those students who need external incentives, whose philosophical *eros* isn't already heated up, one must buy time while luring the person into tasting the essential purpose. These strategies, appealing to incidental benefits of our courses, seem kosher, but only insofar they subserve, rather than supplant, the goal of apprenticing Socratic activity.

Without pretending to be more than we are, we must hold out the hope that our courses will help students better answer such questions. To pry open students' souls to Socratic activity, we must at once undermine the dogmatic *and* skeptical assumptions. This involves appealing to their imaginations without peddling false images: we want them to acquire the crucial habit of imagining themselves as wrong, while also stoking their imagination that something better might be found, knowledge-wise.

These same assumptions that make difficult the teaching of philosophy conspire to make difficult any defense of it to people who, like Socrates' craftsmen, know quite a lot about other noble things but without practice in Socratic self-examination in search of wisdom. That includes most academics.

Those who found Socrates' activity insulting were proud of their knowledge and accomplishments; they disdained him for lacking what they hung their pride on; this disdain became indignation when Socrates claimed a good they did not possess. Such a situation must turn dangerous when goods like honor, power, or curricular requirements are at stake. Students have less disdain for and feel less threatened by (and are thus less threatening to) philosophy's questioning, because they are less sure of their own wisdom than are most academics.

To many, Socrates' professed ignorance appeared and appears still ironic, a tricky boastfulness. Even, or especially, when denying their own wisdom, philosophy teachers often seem arrogant to their colleagues. Are they?

Let's think about the phenomenon of arrogance for a moment. It is easier to appear arrogant in your comportment to an arrogant person than to someone lacking self-esteem. This appearance results only partly from your attitude to him; it results also from his prior images of you and himself. Arrogance results from the belief one possesses an excellence one does not. The arrogant person is arrogant toward those he disdains for lacking the goods grounding his pride. Naturally, persons with proper self-esteem will often appear arrogant to an arrogant person. The arrogant person who grows vulnerable, glimpsing his possible failure to possess the good grounding his pride, will easily feel offended when a disdained person occasions this glimpse of himself. Perhaps philosophy teachers are typically—maybe essentially—arrogant. But maybe this appearance arises from a prior disdain some others have for us and our activity.

So one hypothesis, to explain the common accusation of arrogance against philosophy teachers by other academics, is that it is the accusers' arrogance that causes a false appearance. Another hypothesis: philosophy teachers appear arrogant because philosophy's task is impossibly ambitious for human beings, and to take it up suggests one esteems oneself capable of it.

Two facts of academic life magnify this appearance of arrogance: first, today's academy assumes disciplinary and professional equality (flattering this fiction is called collegiality); second, most academics are—both in reality and in their self-images, and no less than 'professional philosophers'—not only credentialed and accomplished, but serious persons, dedicated professionals, and really very smart.

A defense of Socratic activity in the academy founders on the assumption of equality. Those academics who require a defense of philosophy are usually not inwardly familiar with it, so descriptions might be called for. But they aren't going to like the descriptions offered. We may say philosophy asks the most fundamental questions; reflects on the deepest

assumptions; is the meta-discipline interested in the whole and not defined by a narrow subject matter; clarifies concepts (e.g., those used in other disciplines); seeks to ground knowledge (e.g., that of other disciplines); reflects on the whole of human experience. All of this offends, given the assumption of disciplinary equality. And if we call that assumption into question, philosophy will appear unequal—that is, it will appear *inferior*—to the other disciplines.

This is because a description of philosophy gives credentialed knowers reason to doubt philosophy teachers know anything at all. What is its methodology? Philosophy admits it doesn't have one the way the disciplines do: it just strives to take nothing for granted and to think really hard about how things must be. (More insults!) What is its subject matter? Philosophy doesn't limit itself to a specific domain of the world. Because it implies that the disciplines are not self-sufficient in their methodologies or isolated in their subject matters, it hardly helps to add that all disciplines lead into Socratic activity. In our academy, philosophy must appear as another discipline, yet philosophy defies the way disciplines are defined, and—unless philosophy teachers cave, as most do, to identifying themselves by their sub-sub-subfields (for me: “Husserlian social ontology”)—they seem to be experts in nothing in particular.

As should be obvious, I have no discipline.

Witness the scandal of philosophy, the failure to agree on anything. And then philosophy teachers might add the Socratic disclaimer that they cannot answer the questions they raise with others; they lack the type of answer that would eliminate the need to re-ask the question again soon. From their defense speeches, philosophy teachers will likely appear both as arrogant and as having nothing to teach.

A defense of philosophy in the academy founders also on the fact that most academics are serious persons, dedicated professionals, and very smart. Describing philosophy requires offering examples of our questions, e.g., What is truth?, What is human success?, What's the good of knowledge?. . . Many will at first think neither they nor their disciplines need help with such questions. This is natural, because all disciplines do lend light on them. But by definition no partial discipline can sufficiently address them. So if this is the response, the examples of philosophical questions will have failed to jolt the interlocutor into the Socratic attitude. *Successfully* raising these questions with people who have dedicated their lives to *other* questions reminds them that they have not dedicated much time to *these* questions. There is always something *ad hominem* in philosophy, because we are always at issue: its questions touch upon who we are, our place in the whole, what we think we know, and what we think is important. So philosophy is always a little personally unsettling. Thus success here may be worse than failure. Questions chosen strategically to illustrate the need for philosophy, *if successful*, remind other academics that they lack something that touches directly on them as professionals, as

expert knowers, and as persons. The more important the question, the more cutting the lack. The more the defense succeeds in principle, the more we fail personally.

In sum, on top of the human disposition to imagine oneself as already answering philosophy's questions, academics will likely think that their disciplines, toward which they feel a professional patriotism, already address them. On top of the modern disposition to think that these questions cannot be answered in better or worse ways, academics have sophisticated standards for research methods and results, next to which Socratic searching clearly falls short. And then there is the fact that many philosophy teachers, with their heads in the clouds, don't know or care to know what many others take as obvious and important. Thus Socrates presents the stereotype in the *Theaetetus*: “the philosopher is the object of general derision, partly for what men take to be his superior manner, and partly for his constant ignorance and lack of resources in dealing with the obvious.”

Given all this, not only will the jurymen probably think, “I already address these questions,” and, “no one can really answer these questions”; they likely will also think, “philosophers sure don't answer them.” And about this last, of course, they are right.

If philosophy teachers often appear arrogant to their colleagues, it is an open question whether they or their colleagues are more responsible for this appearance. Certainly blame varies case-by-case. But this appearance seems sometimes inevitable if we present our job not ironically but as what it is. That is because—and this only sounds arrogant—philosophical questions are more fundamental and ultimate than the questions driving other disciplines. That is also because—and this only sounds humble—we are arrogant, as are all human beings, by imagining ourselves as understanding things we do not. How can we be faithful to Socrates and deny this?

Inherent to philosophy are two features at war with each other: first, the attempt at omniscience, knowing the whole; and, second, the need never to forget the inquirer, to know oneself as human, possessing only human wisdom. Here is Robert Sokolowski on the paradoxical *human* attempt at knowing the *whole*:

The philosopher is omniscient only formally and only in principle, that is, only potentially. People sometimes complain that a philosopher pretends to be a know-it-all, and that he tries to tell everybody else what they are doing. But the complaint is unjustified. It is true, that if someone presents himself as a philosopher, he will not be able to recuse himself from any philosophical question. He is called, in his profession, to address the whole of things. . . . [But] The potential omniscience of the philosopher is chastening, because, like Socrates, he is always aware that he does not know but is obliged to know.

This human/super-human tension is built into our activity: thus when Lady Philosophy appears in Boethius's cell, her

eyes have “a more than human keenness,” and though she seems sometimes of averagely human height, at other times, she seems to “pierce the very heavens and baffle the eyes that look upon her.” Likewise, Husserl insists that “we must distinguish between philosophy as a historical fact at a given time and philosophy as idea, as infinite task” to which we are called. This is an idea we cannot let go of, yet one we know as impossibly beyond us. This is Thomas Prufer’s version:

Philosophy, perhaps more than any other human endeavor, is shadowed by the temptation to give itself up, and this is because the gap between its intention and achievement is so great. The infinite and accurate statement of being is never actual; hence the temptation to unarm the philosophical eros... The philosophical life is the erotic life par excellence, and eros neither achieves plenty nor is it satisfied in poverty. From the point of view of ordinary life and of the arts and sciences, a point of view from which more can be achieved because less is intended, philosophy often seems presumptuous nonsense. And philosophy’s preoccupation with reflection on its own act usually leads to oscillation between confessing its failures and renewing its pretensions.

The particular danger today, the way philosophy is now tempted to “give itself up” to escape from this oscillation between (in Hume’s words) “philosophical melancholy and delirium,” is by making itself just another one of the disciplines, another branch of partial, expert knowledge – rather than a reflection on the whole of being in its human engagement. This is now our temptation and danger, because it is also our disguise.

In the *Crito*, the Laws of Athens gently mock Socrates: in order to escape he would need to disguise himself. In the *Sophist*, Plato suggests that the philosopher naturally misappears as a sophist, a madman, or a statesman. If we must misappear, perhaps of these three we should aim for the statesman. We are not inventing a disguise, yet being cloaked in one seems inevitable. We should use whichever one is given us that permits us to do our work well. Today’s academy robes us with a fourth possible misappearance: the researcher, the expert *partial* knower. We must take on this costume even within professional philosophy departments, and many philosophy teachers have taken cover as experts in literature, political science, or theology.

A colleague explained once to me that he wants his students to understand how their professors ended up as they are. This was his image: as a student, each one of us got fascinated by some particular thing and start digging, only to discover himself years later at the bottom of a hole needing to remind himself what he was after in the first place. Whatever it is I do, I appeared to my friend as like himself – having followed, self-forgetfully, chance inclinations to the bottom of a hole.

In fact, the philosophical trajectory is outward, so a different hole might make a better image – the kind with a ‘w’ in it. Having started with a desire fully to understand some particular thing, we take a step back for more context, only to find ourselves years later in space.

Socratic activity just doesn’t fit into the university as a collection of specializations. That isn’t because there isn’t some kind of expertise in philosophy (there is). Rather, our model assumes that all expertise is radically partial. This is Weber’s description in “Science as a Vocation.” After dismissing interdisciplinary work as superficial prelude to science, he says, “A really definitive and good accomplishment is today always a specialized accomplishment. And whoever lacks the capacity to *put on blinders*” in risking “the fate of his soul” on a narrow question “may as well stay away from science.” A new sub-specialization is discovered every few months, so Weber’s house has many rooms, but none has been prepared for us. The Weberian divide-and-conquer directive leaves no playful open spaces for our attempt at the whole and the human place in it.

The regime of specialized sciences promises to master each part, but toward the whole, Weber suggests, we can have only subjectively chosen worldviews. All philosophy can do is discuss consistency within worldviews, which are like arbitrarily adopted personal religions providing people with a sense of ultimate meaning. This model of science is, for Weber, part of the modern rationalization of the world, a project of disenchantment: “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.” But the “all things” here that we are trying to master piece by piece is not the same as the whole. Can we master “the all,” rather than merely “all things,” by this method? Though philosophy faces the whole, it makes no sense to do so in the way a specialized science seeks to master its region. The ultimate worldview Weber adopts is of a multiplicity of worldviews warring like polytheism’s gods. That is where the process of disenchantment must stop short for him. As a specialist, the philosopher is here a scientist of warring worldviews, or, worse, a spinner of one, which seems to me not an academic project.

It’s easy to be cranky about the new problems threatening the academy: the reductive shortsightedness of ‘assessment’ with its positivistic assumptions, the proliferation of legalistic administrative oversight, and the transformation of campuses into country clubs, complete with jugglers, comedians, and shuffleboard tournaments designed to distract our students not only from distraction but also from taking books too seriously. Without indulging these work-a-day laments, note that they seem a natural result of our Weberian self-image. The academy is one among “all things.” So the process of rationalization demands a disenchantment of the academy, which must be mastered by an expertise, administration.

And part of living in a world of warring worldviews—ultimate and arbitrary, individually chosen values, which our sciences themselves say are not open to reasonable adjudication—is that we must cater to those values chosen by our customers. If committed to this model, academics cannot say to administrators that there is something about education that cannot be mastered by another specialization: why would our specializations be valid and not theirs? And if committed to this model, we cannot say to our students that education serves true goods that may not already be in their value-set: Why would our arbitrary, value-drenched worldviews be worth *their* money?

To challenge these forces of administration and consumerism, we should emphasize that the academy—in addition to selling “content and skills”—is where citizens apprentice approaching the whole of life intellectually and remaining open to meanings and goods in the world beyond their current views. Our public culture doesn’t know it needs this, but a Socratic classroom is a wildlife sanctuary for the free human intellect, a nature preserve for natures capable of liberty and truth. In place of skepticism and dogmatism, we foster Socrates’ erotic humility and courage. It may look like wasted, untilled land to others, but it protects the person and leavens our culture. If we abandon this vocation, invite the hall-monitors of ‘outcomes assessment’ into our classrooms, and to student life, bring in the clowns.

So, here we are in the academy, at the bottom of various holes we dug ourselves. I didn’t challenge my friend’s image of me, or himself. After all, mustn’t Socratic teachers misappear this way to other academics? And shouldn’t we sometimes use this misappearance? We must sometimes play the ‘credentialed

partial knower’ card, even though philosophy is really something that cannot be merely ‘left to the experts.’

Defending philosophical activity is impossible as the crow flies. This fact must inform our pedagogy as well as our self-presentation to colleagues. We lose if we lay our cards on the table without strategy (it’s high-stakes poker with friends forgetful of which hands trump others). To state the situation directly seems mean and is counterproductive, for it will not be understood. It is folly to defend Socrates in the academy without irony. On the other hand, some things, insulting or not, must be heard sometimes—for example, when others’ ignorance or disdain for us threatens student access to Socratic courses. But unless we till the ground ahead of time, asserting Socrates’ centrality to academics is usually imprudent. It will appear comically boastful. Must we not try gently, with circumspection and some irony, to engage others in the activity we love, seducing the *eros* for philosophy that subterranously animates their specialized academic quests and even their personal lives?

Philosophy teachers need the disguise of a discipline to survive in today’s academy. Still they should not confuse this shadow for themselves. In the long run, it is impossible to defend Socratic activity in the academy without trying to make the academy and ourselves more Socratic. And though this task may be impossibly ambitious for human beings, isn’t endeavoring it part of our vocation—or does prudence suggest sharing this activity only with the youth and each other?

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