On Being a Professor: The Case of Socrates

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates provides a model of teaching that some believe is incompatible with being a professor. In what follows I will explore the source of this misconception by looking at Socrates’s teaching methods and by examining three myths: the myth of neutrality, the myth of expressionism, and the myth of denigration. I intend to think carefully about how to be an effective Socratic professor who motivates and frees students to think carefully for themselves.

What is it to be a Socratic professor? When I meet people, often the first question they pose is “What do you do for a living?”

I proudly answer, “I am a teacher.”

“Oh,” comes the reply. “Where do you teach?”

“I am a professor at a university,” I say, as the newly met person backs off. Professors are, well, strange. Professors profess. The term “professor” arose in medieval universities to denote a person licensed to teach or dispute publicly. We capture this derivation when we define "profess" as to "openly declare or publicly claim a belief, faith, or opinion."[[1]](#endnote-1) Professors not only *hold* informed and justified beliefs about important matters. They are *willing* to declare, defend, and recommend them publicly in the classroom or in writing.

Then comes the killer question. “What do you teach?” they ask. Alas, I am cornered. What am I to say? If I lie, in talking to me they will find out. And they do look like they want to know. “I teach… philosophy.” The truth is revealed, and there is a long pause filled with… fear and awe. Some admit that they had a philosophy course once, but did not understand it. Others say that they have heard about us. Pariah that I am, they move off to find someone with a less troubling occupation. After all, philosophers have a very bad reputation. They look for questions where there are no problems, and are never satisfied with the answers they get. They always ask another question – “Why?” – then another “Why?” and another.

Where did philosophers get this frightening reputation? I propose that it goes back to the first of the great Greek philosophers, Socrates.

The Case of Socrates

If there is any philosophical hero, any model for the philosophical life, any ideal teacher of philosophy, it is Socrates. Indeed, he approaches pagan sainthood as a man martyred for his persistent questioning. For attempting to get others to think, for corrupting the youth, for offending the powerful who claimed to know, Socrates was given the death sentence of drinking the poison hemlock. He believed that he had a calling to engage his fellow Athenians in philosophical dialogue and debate about things that really matter. Assisting them in the search for truth made life worth living. His long life exemplified his philosophical truism that *the unexamined life is not worth living*.

A Socratic professor is someone who emulates Socrates. But why do that? (There is that question “Why?” already.) Professors emulate Socrates *not* because he was a successful questioner who succeeded in arriving at the answers. Those whom he "taught" often left his “classroom” without a clear solution to the problem being discussed. Indeed, contemporary scholars identify the truly Socratic dialogues in part by Socrates' use of the *elenchus*: the adversarial refutation of other views. The opposing viewpoints refuted, discussion comes to an end but not a conclusion. The matter remains unresolved -- postponed to a future meeting that never occurs (*Protagoras* 361e; *Laches* 201e), or abandoned (*Lysis* 223a; *Euthyphro* 15e). It is as if for Socrates cutting a swath through the jungle of knowledge claims was more important than arriving at King Solomon's rich mines.

Neither do teachers follow Socrates because he was loved by all his students or debaters, for he was not. One might say that he received mixed student evaluations: loved by the youth who enjoyed seeing the powerful humbled; disliked by the self-affirming aristocrats when he revealed them to be ignorant. On his way to his own trial, Socrates encounters Euthyphro, who also is on his way to court, to prosecute his own father for impiety or lack of respect of the gods. It seems that his father caught one of his workers who had killed one of his slaves. His father tied the worker up and threw him in a ditch while he awaited word from the courts what to do with him. After a while his father forgot about the worker, who subsequently died of exposure. Socrates is shocked that Euthyphro would prosecute his father, since family bonds of loyalty should be reverenced and not be broken so easily. Socrates contends that Euthyphro is not justified in prosecuting his father until he understands the charge he is bringing against him. What is piety or respect of the gods, and what is it to lack respect? After a long debate, neither Euthyphro nor Socrates arrive at a definition of respect that would allow Euthyphro to prosecute his father, and Euthyphro heads off to an appointment. But before he leaves, Euthyphro expresses frustration over his perception that all Socrates did was to stir up arguments, setting them in motion so that they always seemed to run in circles and never settled to a conclusion. He pictured Socrates as the sculptor Daedalus, who created statues so real that they came to life and had to be tied down lest they wandered away (*Euthyphro* 11d).

Why, then, do we admire Socrates? In part because he attempted to assist politicians, poets, craftsmen, and others who thought they knew the answers to realize that they did not know. He tried to help them painfully scrub the scales of delusion from their eyes, to see more clearly their own ignorance. What is striking about Socrates is the way he taught. Socrates operated as the persistent questioner – the one who always asked “is it true?” and “why?”

Socrates’ pedagogical style has become so influential that we call it the Socratic method. He operated as the persistent questioner, an intellectual midwife who assisted others to give birth to their own ideas and then tested these ideas for their truth. He believed that people had the resources of knowledge hidden inside of them. What they needed was someone – a teacher – to assist them to recall or bring out that knowledge from the mind’s hidden recesses.

Socrates denied that he taught in the way his contemporaries commonly understood teaching: selling knowledge at every opportunity. When brought to trial before his fellow-citizens, Socrates quickly refuted the charge that he was a Sophist, the public sellers of alleged knowledge who, at least in the eyes of both Socrates and his accusers, were hell-bent to make the weaker argument into the stronger. They wanted to gain clients whom they could train to copy their rhetorical methods. Truth didn’t matter to them; only success in persuasion.

Socrates distanced himself from the report that he was a teacher who conveyed knowledge from his own vast storehouse and poured it into students for profit or advantage. With characteristic irony, Socrates pointed to his very poverty to show he was no Sophist, for those who really knew, by virtue of this valuable possession, could charge a handsome fee for their services. Rather, he taught by making others aware of their own ignorance while enabling them to discover for themselves the truths deep inside them.

It is not that Socrates lacked wisdom. Rather, he professed a different wisdom, a limited wisdom that he took to be the beginning of all other wisdom. His wisdom concerned the nature of the knowing process. The first step of knowing, he argued, is being aware that one does not know.[[2]](#endnote-2) Socrates had an impetuous friend named Chaerephon, who allegedly traveled to the oracle at Delphi to ask whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. “No,” replied the oracle. When this was reported to him, Socrates was surprised. After all, he said, he did not know anything; how could he be wise? Yet the gods did not lie. Scholars debate the seriousness with which Socrates accepted the riddle of the enigmatic Delphic oracle, or even his professed claim to ignorance. But Socrates was serious about the task of confronting those in the Athenian community who claimed to know so much.

His teaching style critically examined the positions held by those he dialogued with. Socrates used his questioning to root out the errors of inadequate conceptions, wherever they were found. This refutation was not without merit, for to know that one didn’t know would improve a person's moral character – not only that of the person he questioned, but his own.~~[[3]](#endnote-3)~~

Where does this leave the Socratic professor, one who seeks to emulate Socrates as the model teacher? How can one who sees his or her role primarily as a barren classroom midwife, assisting students to give birth to ideas and then to adversarially test them for their "reality," profess anything if they do not express their view?

To profess is to advocate particular views as being true. Professors, being professors, whatever their personal views, cannot escape having beliefs. In fact, the Socratic professor who holds strong beliefs, as Socrates sometimes did (*Republic* 340d; 341a), might be accused of dishonesty in the classroom if they do not express these views (with the clarification that the view is theirs) and test them with their students. The professor’s educational task involves more than refuting. If professors only perpetually search for the truth and never possess or affirm it, then the gulf between belief and profession is as wide as imaginable.

I want to pose the question: is being a Socratic professor compatible with teaching? Can one be a Socratic professor, or is the term an oxymoron (self-contradiction)? To answer this question I want to look at and refute three myths about being a professor.

The Myth of Neutrality

It is believed, probably by many professors themselves (though often not by their students) that professors are completely neutral and objective. If professors are neutral and objective, is profession of their beliefs appropriate in the academic classroom? Does not a professor’s profession of particular beliefs and a general worldview conflict with the educational ideals of presuppositionless investigation, unbiased presentation of the material, and open dialogue?

At times Socrates overtly proclaimed neutrality in his investigations. The career of being a midwife begins when one can no longer conceive. "Midwives never attend other women in childbirth so long as they themselves can conceive and bear children, but only when the midwives are too old for that" (*Theaetetus* 149b). By parallel reasoning, one might argue that only when professors deny their own wisdom -- or become too old -- can they assist others to bear wisdom.

What are we to make of Socrates’ claim of not knowing? Although in the *Apology* Socrates claims not to have wisdom, his profession of not knowing is best understood as characteristic irony. It should not be taken simply at face value. His "profession of ignorance [is] intelligible only if understood to disclaim one sort of knowledge, while claiming another in the same breath."[[4]](#endnote-4) While he claims that he lacks superhuman wisdom, he does possess limited human wisdom (*Apology* 20d).

Socrates himself professes, in his own dialectical way. The questions he asks often are rhetorical, which presupposes that he already knows the answer. That is the trick of a rhetorical question: it looks like a question, but is really an assertion of a belief. He inquires, Is quality of life better than quantity? Must one never willingly do wrong? It is right to injure another in retaliation? Ought one fulfill all one’s moral agreements? From these Socrates concludes that one ought not injure the state by breaking its laws (*Crito* 48b-50a). In his discussion with Meno about whether virtue can be taught, we get insight into Socrates’ own wisdom. Socrates poses the rhetorical questions: Is virtue something good? Is the good beneficial? Is not the benefit to be found in right use and harm in wrong use? Once Meno concedes these points, Socrates quickly draws the conclusion – professes – that virtue is knowledge, and that knowledge can be taught and makes one a morally better person. (*Meno* 87d-88d).

It might be responded that the conclusion he draws in the Meno remains tentative, for he goes on to wonder why there are not teachers of virtue if virtue is knowledge. But this, too, must be properly understood. On the one hand, Socrates often is not tentative. For example, when affirming that evildoers are unhappy, Socrates asks Polus whether he wants to refute such a claim. Polus notes that this "would be more difficult to refute than [Socrates'] first point", to which Socrates replies that it is "not difficult, but impossible, for the truth is never refuted" (Gorgias 473b).[[5]](#endnote-5)

At the same time, Socrates' tentativeness – his rejection of dogmatic certainty – provides an important model for the Socratic professor. It is the paradox of profession. The professor profoundly believes what he or she professes, yet the profession also lies open to question and investigation. The profession must be grounded in and testable by experience and reason. Socrates’ method never yields certainty. Every belief advanced is subject to scrutiny; its outcome remains tentative even if it survives Socratic questioning.[[6]](#endnote-6) At the same time, however, he does not leave us with agnosticism, which places all claims on equal footing.

Neither educators nor students come to the well of knowledge without a jug of a particular shape and texture, molded by past experiences and the hands of parents, peers, teachers, and others. Both within and outside the classroom, professors bring to their profession their own knowledge structure. They approach issues with presuppositions and biases, which run broad and deep. What is said and heard in the classroom, by professor and student alike, is viewed from the perspective of beliefs already entertained. Beliefs shape the way we pose questions and return answers, shape courses and construct exams. The hope is that what is unique about the perspectives of the professors is that they have conscientiously reflected on their beliefs and subjected them to scrutiny.

In short, professing is *perspectival*. We bring our presuppositions to our understanding and professing. Empty jugs can pour no water. In recognizing this, professors are freed from the unnecessary burden of trying to prove that they possess the illusory properties of neutrality and objectivity. They are also freed from the delusion that students can’t evaluate what is professed for themselves, without being overwhelmed by the power or position of the instructor.

At the outset of this section I suggested that Socrates' profession of ignorance might be ironic. He is persistent in his search for truth and belief that it can be found. In affirmatively pursuing truth he modeled this professorial attribute for his students. Students "need a teacher as a catalyst and guide, one who has struggled and is struggling with similar questions and knows some of the pertinent materials and procedures."[[7]](#endnote-7) Pure neutrality and objectivity in teaching is surely a myth.

The Myth of Expressionism

Socrates believed that learners unknowingly and forgetfully already possess knowledge and truth within themselves. Thus, education should provide the opportunity for these to be expressed and, if possible, integrated with the expressions of others. But if everyone already comes loaded with knowledge, it seems that there is little room for professing "experts." All we need are people skilled in the art of midwifery to bring out the hidden.

Some see this as supporting the popular educational view that there is no truth to be sought after, only feelings and opinions to be expressed. Everything we say or express is equally acceptable. Education, they say, provides a cathartic experience, best exemplified in “I *feel* it is so, therefore it is so.”

Contrary to the myth, Socrates’ belief is consistent with the professorial role of experts. First, Socrates seeks not merely to root out conceit of knowledge but also to advance the quest for truth by worming it out of those in whom it is hidden. He assumes that “his interlocutors always carry truth somewhere or other in their belief system,” truth that eventually they might recognize under his guidance.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Socrates did not allow just any expression to pass for knowledge. He strongly believed that there is truth that transcended individual possession, for which we are to seek. He argues, "I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects. But I would profess at all costs, both in word and deed, that we will be better people if we believe that we must search for the things we do not know, rather than if we believe that we cannot find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it" (*Meno* 86b-c).

Professors must agree with Socrates that it is essential that we search for the things we do not know *with the expectation that there is something to know*. This expectation is what many in our era of post-modern thought miss, but which the professor must profess. Unless there is something to know, unless there is truth, it hardly matters being a *professional*, let alone a professor. If there is no truth, any kind of professor will do. Education reduces to sensitivity, which paradoxically cannot have among its core beliefs that it is true that sensitivity matters.

Education, then, involves more than eliciting expressions. Unreflective experience provides a beginning source for discussion. We begin with the assertions of what we believe to be true. We also connect what we hear with what we already believe. But a task remains for the professor, a task that goes beyond mere questioning that elicits opinions from students. A philosopher once told me that the business of philosophy was garbage disposal. He was only partly correct; professors engage in more than trash-sorting and the disposal business; they must be committed to helping to restock the food shelves. They are obliged to provide elements whereby others can make new or replacement truth claims. Professors present claims, not to be asserted dogmatically or taken uncritically, but truth claims nonetheless, truth claims both subject to investigation and recommendations to be accepted and acted upon.

The Myth of Denigration

The final myth I want to address is that profession demeans the listener. Some think that professing demeans in that it allegedly attempts to coerce or compel students to the professor’s position, rather than allowing students to think for themselves. Students should be respected, the argument goes. They should be given the tools to construct their own worldview and belief system, not persuaded or cajoled into that advocated by the professor.

However, the problem is not with professing, but with the *misuse* of professing. Professors often use professing as a tool of proselytizing—of making disciples of students – rather than of educating them to think for themselves. Education is not equivalent to mere persuasion. If it were, professors would be justified in using any rhetorically persuasive device, so long as it was successful. Rather, education should assist students to discern the truth for themselves. And education should do this by reasoned presentations of the perceived facts and their justification. The goal is that students come to hold justified true beliefs *for themselves*.

How might profession be properly employed? I note four points. First, educational integrity. Profession is not an exercise in power.Professors should put the issues squarely on the table and stake out their thesis regarding the issue. They might do this boldly and assertively; they might do it tentatively and hesitantly. The degree of certitude professed will depend on the perceived strength of the evidence and the willingness of the believer to commit to that position. Profession also should provide students with reasons and evidence for thinking that what is professed is true or probably true. This will assist students to distinguish profession from propaganda.

How does this work in practice? Let me give one example. Professors might think about how they evaluate their students. Is the point of the evaluation to get students merely to repeat what the professor or the book said? Is it to show that our students are really disciples of us or our discipline? Or does it show that students can use what they have learned to think and profess for themselves in light of what the professor professed?

Second, professors need to respect alternative voices, that is those who think differently. They should neither construct straw persons to be easily vanquished nor demean or belittle opposing views or the persons holding them. Those with different views should be welcomed and taken seriously. The opposing views should be developed with the appropriate nuances, provided with their soundest and strongest reasons, and evaluated fairly. Opposing views, whether of scholars or of the students, should be stated with the same clarity and treated with the same respect as the views one professes. There is a role for professional “devil’s advocates.” Socrates is the very model of doing this. When he discusses knowledge with Theaetetus, Socrates introduces the voice of Protagoras. Protagoras held radically different views than Socrates. He believed that “man is the measure of all things,” that there is no absolute truth. Although Protagoras was dead, his ideas were still heard in Athens. Socrates made sure that Protagoras’s voice is heard and treated fairly (although still critically) in the discussion.

How might this be done in the classroom? In Socrates’ debates, the debaters or students talk almost as much as Socrates. Unfortunately, in many of our classrooms the professors do all the professing. The lecture mode remains easiest for the professor and student alike, but it creates passive learners. Eric Mazur humorously notes that lectures are one way of transferring professors’ notes to students’ notebooks without passing through the brains of either.[[9]](#endnote-9) Encouraging student voice, activity, and sometimes contrary views moves material from their short term to longer term memory.

Professing should be done from humility brought on by the recognition of our extreme finitude. It is an old saying that the more one knows, the more one realizes how much there is to know and what little one knows. Socrates was correct: to recognize one's limits is the beginning of wisdom.

Third, proper profession creates tension. If truly Socratic, professors will challenge students with their profession. Nicias says of Socrates, "Anyone who is close to Socrates and enters into conversation with him is liable to be drawn into an argument. He finds that once entangled, Socrates will not let him go until he has completely and thoroughly sifted him" (*Laches* 187e). Creative tension should characterize the classroom, occasioned by profession that at times will make others uncomfortable but that also will provoke and accept creative responses.

Socrates likens his professing task to the stinging fly that goads the lazy horse into action. There is little doubt that some of his questioners – and our students -- need to be stung out of their lethargy. But once they start kicking, we need to encourage them to get up and run. Classrooms should be exploding with ideas and controversy, rather than locations where student fall asleep to the rhythmic clicking of notetaking on computer keyboards.

Finally, professing frees and empowers students to profess for themselves. Professors should leave it open to the students to develop and make their own professions. This will allow for openness, for breathing room, for a space where the students can, for themselves and in their own time and way, carefully think through the issues before them.

The obligation to profess is not the obligation to convert. Success in profession of beliefs should never be equated with the agreement of listeners. Should we do so, truth becomes a matter of who and how many believe it. Truth is never discerned through democratic voting.

Education is incompatible with compulsion, or with getting people to believe on the basis of mere authority or the professor’s power. If students are to become life-long learners, they must be provided the intellectual tools to be able to distinguish true from false claims, to distinguish good from bad reasoning, to distinguish fact from wishful thinking, to distinguish evidence from pseudo-evidence or emotional appeal. Professors should encourage and develop critical thinkers.

Socrates’ mission was to help his listeners solve their own questions. By dialectic – question and answer – he wanted them to posit solutions to the problems It was not solutions he gave them, but solutions that they themselves had developed. These he tested for their adequacy, and when they failed, he had the student resume the search – with no penalty. In effect, he wanted not only to help them become life-long learners, but life-long professors.

Profession properly employed does not demean learners. Rather, professors enable listeners to come to an open-minded, fair, reasoned and judicious, carefully qualified position of their own. In this, students are respected, indeed, most highly respected, for in professing, professors share what is of great importance from their own worldview. Here is my metaphor: the classroom should be a marketplace of ideas. Professors put their own beliefs out into that marketplace, to be tested for their worth. They do not cast their ideas as pearls before swine, but pearls before jewel buyers, who must themselves decide the value of the wares. The most liberated, bravest student I ever had was one who found one of my published articles and, contrary to the mores of his culture that did not allow students to critique their professors to their face, wrote his term paper critiquing the ideas and arguments he found in my article.

Professing and Piping

Alcibiades likens Socrates to the piper Marsyas, who merely by playing could bewitch his listeners. "Now the only difference, Socrates, between you and Marsyas is that you can get just the same effect without any musical instrument at all -- with nothing but a few simple words... When we listen to you, ... we're absolutely staggered and bewitched" (*Symposium* 215c-d).

The Socratic professor pipes. Successful profession requires empathy between the professor and the pupil. Socrates at times terms it a divine voice, which warns him when the pupil is incapable of conceiving ideas (*Theaetetus* 151a). But however one describes it, profession occurs most effectively when there is a personal connection between professor and listener that attracts, motivates, and stimulates the search for truth. Professing truly occurs when the student really matters.

Profession must not be the piping of proselytizing, which turns students into disciples. It is the piping of *liberation*. Whereas proselytizing makes for followers who primarily emulate the leader, education creates students who reflectively go beyond the professor. The piper of education plays the passionate song that frees listeners from the bondage of ignorance, to pursue the truth of the tunes. The piper models profession, playing the tunes that enable others to play their own tunes.

The Socratic professor pipes no contradictory tune. Once the faulty myths of neutrality, expressionism, and denigration are disposed of, the alleged objections to Socratic profession are less weighty. Indeed, Socrates can still function as a model once it is seen that the Socratic method involves more than mere questioning, when profession advances the truth no matter how tentatively. We need not have an excuse to profess socratically nor see it as an unwelcome side of the educational task. Rather, proper professing stands at the heart of the educational enterprise.

NOTES

1. “Professor,” *Oxford English Dictionary* VIII, p. 1429. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Vlastos notes that Socrates is not guilty of self-contradiction, for Socrates does not claim that he *knows* that he does not know; he *merely* affirms that he is not aware of such knowledge. Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 82, n4. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It might be objected that Socrates was less concerned with teaching others than finding the truth for himself. In *Charmides* (166c-d) he notes that he "examines the argument chiefly for my own sake, though no doubt also for the sake of my friends." Since our concern is with the latter element, we will pass over this (not unimportant) feature of Socrates as educator. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Vlastos, p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. "These facts ... are buckled fast and clamped together -- to put it somewhat crudely -- by arguments of steel and adamant -- at least so it would appear as matters stand. And unless you or one still more enterprising than yourself can undo them, it is impossible to speak aright except as I am not speaking. For what I say is always the same -- that I know not the truth in these affairs... And so once more I hold these things to be so" (Gorgias 509a). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Vlastos, p. 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Arthur Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), p. 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Vlastos, p. 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Craig Lambert, “Twilight of the Lecture,” *Harvard Magazine* (March-April, 2012), https://harvardmagazine.com/2012/03/twilight-of-the-lecture [↑](#endnote-ref-9)