

Part IA, Paper 5, Question 10

'Is the Socratic method as demonstrated in Plato's Meno a good way of teaching philosophy?'

In this essay, I will argue that the Socratic Method is a poor way to teach philosophy. First, I shall examine the nature of Socratic Method, identifying it the Elenchus. Second, I shall give the two main strengths of the Elenchus: it inquires into personal, important questions, and it inspires an intellectual humility that motivates students to enquire. However, the Socratic Method is also expensive, and could potentially alienate students rather than inspire them. Additionally, the Socratic Method lends itself to a conservatism which precludes fruitful enquiry. The Socratic Method also can't establish truth, only consistency. If we identify consistency with truth, this difficulty is avoided, but I give a moral use eg the so-called 'Preface Paradox' to falsify a coherentist theory of truth. In which case, the Socratic Method is a poor way of teaching philosophy.

Conceptual Clarification

For the purposes of this essay, I shall limit the scope of 'teaching philosophy' to those courses in formal educational institutions such as schools, universities and the like. The broader question to be asked is: 'how should we teach philosophy in such institutions?'. I am not an expert in education, so I shall not attempt to give a universal criteria for 'good teaching methods' which may be applied to all philosophy teaching. However, I can give a list of some of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching using the Socratic Method.

The exact nature of the Socratic Method is contested by academics, but there is general agreement over the following: the Socratic Method is only one type of philosophical enquiry that Plato examines and illustrates in his dialogues; it is not the only kind. It is primarily exemplified in the so-called 'early Socratic dialogues', such as the "Euthyphro" and the "Gorgias". The 'Meno' is unique as a so-called 'transitional' dialogue insofar as it exemplifies Plato's shift from purely using the Socratic Method to using the other methods of enquiry, such as the Method of Hypothesis. We see this insofar as the 'Meno' is split up into 3 distinct stages: First, Socrates and Meno's search for a definition of virtue, second, Socrates demonstrating to Meno how inquiry is possible even if one doesn't know what one is enquiring into, and third, Socrates and Meno using the Method of Hypothesis. It is only the first third that I take to be a genuine instantiation of the Socratic Method as employed in the Early Dialogues and by Socrates himself, so this is what I shall go on to define and assess as a teaching method. On a side-note, the Method of Hypothesis is a way of enquiring into X that first, lists conceptual constraints that any definition of X must fulfil, second, hypothesises a possible definition of X or quality of X, and then purports to falsify that hypothesis by showing how it logically entails some contradiction of the original conceptual constraints we laid down. For example, in the 'Meno' Socrates and Meno agree that:

1. X is teachable iff it is knowledge (conceptual constraint)
2. Virtue is knowledge (hypothesis)
3. Virtue isn't teachable (empirical data)
4. So \neg (X is teachable iff X is knowledge) (from 2. And 3.)
5. Contradiction between 1. and 4.
6. So reject hypothesis

That is the Method of Hypothesis.

The Socratic Method, however, is the elenchus. The elenchus is the active-question-and-answer process employed by Socrates against his interlocutors. More precisely, the Elenchus takes the following form

1. An interlocutor has a set of beliefs, including, say, P and Q
2. Socrates asks the interlocutor a series of questions, which explore that P entails \neg Q, and so the interlocutor is committed to both Q and \neg Q.
3. The interlocutor either stops believing Q, or P, to maintain consistency (or walks away in a huff like Callicles in the 'Gorgias', or seems to stop listening like Meno in the 'Meno').

The elenchus, then, tests for consistency (which I shall go on to define more precisely later when discussing the relationship between consistency and truth). For example, when employed against Meno's definition that 'virtue is one thing for a man, and another for a woman...' and so on, Socrates exposes that Meno also believes that virtue is one thing common to all subcategories and particular institutions of virtue, in which case, Meno has failed to give an account of the 'one thing common' to all cases, in his first definition, by just giving a taxonomy of different types of virtue. Given that Meno also believes, after Socrates questions him, that a definition should search for 'the one thing covering them all', Meno's purported definition fails to meet his own accepted criteria of a good definition, so he's forced into contradiction, so he gives up his first definition. (Although it is a matter of debate whether Meno really believes that a definition of virtue ought to capture 'the one thing covering them all'). I understand the above to be a paradigmatic example of the Elenchus, which is synonymous with the Socratic Method, which excludes other Platonic philosophical methodology such as the method of Hypothesis.

Reasons why the Socratic Method is a great teaching method

If the Socratic Method were to be instantiated in formal education systems, then a student's life would typically entail professing some belief to a Socratic-style professor, who would ask them questions that would expose an inconsistency, in which case, the student would abandon a belief, to maintain consistency. There are two reasons why this system would benefit students.

First, the philosophical teaching would answer questions of personal concern. In other words, the teaching would answer questions that matter to the student. Presumably the student would only profess beliefs that are important to them, such as 'My friends tell me to become a vegan but I think they're wrong', or 'I shouldn't be at Cambridge because I went to a private school, so my being here is inherently unfair'. In this way, the students would benefit as they would inquire into that which was most important to them. In this way, they would mirror the whole tradition of Hellenistic Philosophy, wherein Socrates is the most prominent figure as featured in the dialogues of Plato, since the foremost question in the Hellenistic Philosophy of the Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics and so forth, was the question 'How should I live?'. So installing the Socratic Method would be a beneficial teaching method because it would render practical questions at the centre of the learning experience.

This is particularly relevant to the 'analytic' school of Philosophy practiced in modern Cambridge. 'Analytic' Philosophy is a sort of derogatory term used by opponents of the philosophical norm, and doesn't really refer to any particular ideology or thinkers other than the philosophy of Russell, Wittgenstein and Moore which emphasized the importance of carefully examining the meaning of words and sentences. (The first time the continental/analytic labels were used was by a non-philosopher, Coleridge: there is no clear definition of the term). However, it is true that there is a widespread assumption that Philosophy has a tendency to be extremely esoteric and irrelevant

(one need only look up 'Monty Python Philosophers' sketch on Youtube for empirical evidence of this claim), especially the kind of philosophy that does hardcore analysis of language. Whether such a reputation is accurate or not is irrelevant: what matters is that the social perception pushes people away from a beautiful subject that wouldn't have such a reputation for irrelevance and being esoteric, if it placed the Hellenistic questions of practical importance at the forefront of the teaching/learning experience. So the Socratic Method would be a good way of teaching philosophy because it would keep philosophy relevant. This is not to say that we couldn't study Russell's unpacking of the word 'the', so long as we kept tying the content of Russell's article on definite descriptors back to matters of personal importance. (I shall not attempt to do so here, I am only claiming that the Socratic Method doesn't preclude an investigation of very technical, apparently esoteric areas, so long as we keep the Hellenistic questions at the fore front of our minds).

The second reason that the Socratic Method would be a beneficial teaching method is that it gives students motivation to search for the truth. Socrates performs this same operation on his interlocutors; in the Meno, during his interchange with the Slave-boy, he shows how exposing the ignorance of an interlocutor is a good because it motivates a search for the truth. The elenchus motivates a search for truth as follows: Many students and interlocutors of Socrates enter the Elenchus with prior beliefs; they already think they have knowledge. For example, Meno has a pre-prepared definition of virtue in his conversation with Socrates ('virtue is one thing for a man, another for a woman...' and so on). So before the elenchus, we are prone to believe that we already know the truth. But, as remarked in Plato's Symposium, a necessary condition for a desire for X is a belief that we don't have X; this was the first institution in the long tradition of Hellenistic philosophy that identified a desire with a lack, at some level. So, prior to the elenchus, we don't believe that we lack the truth. So we don't have a desire which motivates us to search for the truth. The elenchus solves this problem by highlighting inconsistencies within students, and thus shows them that they don't know, what they thought they knew. So it fills students with a belief that they lack truth. In which case, the students will be filled with a desire for truth, and so will be motivated to study. In other words, the Socratic Method exposes inconsistencies, which gives the students intellectual humility, which motivates them to seek truth.

So the Socratic Method is a good teaching tool in two ways. First, it prioritizes questions of practical importance. Second, it motivates students to study by purging them of academic arrogance, or the belief that they already know the truth.

Weaknesses of the Socratic Method as a way of teaching Philosophy

First, I shall give two sort of trivial problems with the Socratic Method as a teaching method, and then I shall expose much deeper problems of it.

Firstly, it is conceivable that a continual humiliation of the student by a professor who explores inconsistencies in the student will not motivate the student to study harder, but rather will educate them to loathe a subject at which they seem to be so poor at. Plato was clearly aware of this weakness, as many of Socrates interlocutors such as 'Meno' and Callicles and Protagorus went on to live vicious and fundamentally non-philosophical lives, and Meno himself gets very frustrated and upset after Socrates rejects his third attempt at defining virtue. However, it is a psychological, not a philosophical point, so I am unqualified to flag it up as anything other than a potential wrong.

Secondly, the immensely personal, one-to-one teaching method of the Socratic Elenchus would be very costly in terms of professors' time and attention. It is much less efficient than, say, a lecturer lecturing to 50 students at once.

However, a much more interesting problem with the Socratic Method as a teaching method is that it is extremely conservative. By 'conservative', I mean, perpetuates old practices and concerns; inhibits creative thinking and innovation. As Benson points out, a weakness of the Socratic Method is that it can only examine claims which people profess to a Socratic figure. In other words, it cannot examine claims which nobody believes; it is limited to claims which people already believe. As such, it cannot examine the strength of unprofessed answers, eg creative, innovative answers to philosophical questions which nobody has yet considered. This kind of conservatism is exemplified in Rawls 'Theory of Justice'. Like Socrates in *The Republic*, one of Rawls' ambitions is to give an account of Justice. In doing so, Rawls gives an account of Equality of Opportunity, or more precisely 'Fair Equality of Opportunity' (FEO) which states that a society has FEO is two people with equal ability, effort and ambition are equally likely to get a particular job. However, Rawls makes no mention anywhere at all in 'A theory of Justice' of race, which, at the time at which he was writing in the United States was a huge issue, in terms of the discrimination against black people. While Rawls may not have been using the Socratic Method, I think this does show that Philosophical enquiry has a tendency for conservatism, which inhibits productive philosophical enquiry, because we don't get to examine the really creative and original ideas. The Socratic Method, as I've shown, only serves to perpetuate such conservatism insofar as it questions people's poor beliefs, so it is not an excellent teaching method.

The Big Problem

So far, I have listed some strengths and weaknesses of the Socratic Method as a way of teaching philosophy. However, the strengths I have listed (it answers important questions, it motivates students) won't apply at all if the Socratic Method fails as a method of inquiry, insofar as it cannot establish the truth. And this is arguably the case. That is to say, even if the Socratic Method motivates students and asks important questions, we still shouldn't use it as a teaching method because it doesn't enable students to answer their questions which are important and they're motivated to ask, because it cannot establish the truth.

There is critical and textual evidence for this. The critical evidence is that

1. The Elenchus can only highlight inconsistency
2. Making our beliefs inconsistent is not sufficient for our beliefs to be true.
3. So the Elenchus can't make our beliefs true

For example, if Socrates took two of my beliefs, P and Q, he could show that P entails $\neg Q$, and so show that I believe P, or Q. (Presuming that the contested principle that $((S \text{ believes } P \wedge P \rightarrow \neg Q) \rightarrow S \text{ believes } \neg Q)$ is true). This doesn't show me which belief is true or false, it only shows that I cannot hold them simultaneously. So the elenchus doesn't actually show which of my beliefs are true, it just highlights inconsistencies.

The textual evidence for this is that in so many of the Socratic Dialogues, the interlocutor asks a question, the Elenchus is performed, and the result is that, still, neither Socrates nor the interlocutor appear to reach a good answer. For example, in the 'Euthyphro', the interlocutor Euthyphro asks 'What is pretty?' and this question is never answered. Also, in the 'Theaetetus', the interlocutor asks 'What is knowledge' and this is never answered. Indeed, the perplexing thing about the 'Meno' is that

Socrates and Meno do reach a positive claim about what virtue is: they claim that virtue is true belief. However, this is a result of the application of the Method of Hypothesis, not the Elenchus. So there are textual reasons to believe that Plato, too, thought that the elenchus couldn't establish truth.

Vlastos, in response to these worries, has argued that the elenchus can give a weak reason to think that a given belief is true. He calls a belief 'elenchially justified' if it withstands the elenchus, that is, if the elenchus fails to show that a given belief leads to a contradiction with the rest of one's beliefs. We can then assume such beliefs to be true. So in this way, the elenchus is a good teaching method because it can establish claims to truth.

However, as Nehamas notes, Vlastos' notion of elenctic justification is very weak, insofar as it doesn't give us much confidence because, while a given claim may have resisted one elenchus, it would still easily fail the next elenchus. So we can never have strong reason to believe an 'elenchially justified belief' is true. So the elenchus fails to establish the truth in an enquiry.

Comments

This essay gives a clear answer to the set question. It defines important terms, e.g. 'Socratic method', and uses its terminology consistently. The structure is simple but more than adequate. It shows a better-than-average grasp of Plato's Meno, offering some quite elegant summaries of difficult passages while showing a strong grasp of the structure of the whole dialogue.

It shows good knowledge of the scholarly literature on the 'elenchus', but does not mechanically regurgitate the well-known claims of this literature; rather, it creatively applies the traditional defences or criticisms of the elenchus (e.g. its conservatism) to the specific question asked about pedagogy. The essay imaginatively brings together historical scholarship with work in contemporary epistemology. It says several intelligent and plausible things about teaching that seem to be derived from careful reflection on experience rather than anything in the official syllabus. These are all things that the General Paper is designed to encourage students to do.

The essay is evidently incomplete, the introduction promising a general critique of coherentism in epistemology that is never delivered on. This turns out to be for the best, as the brief discussion of the elenchus's inability to go much beyond delivering a consistent set of beliefs is all the argument really needs. A charitable reader can work out what the final step of the argument would have been. Given the clarity, imaginativeness and the breadth of knowledge it shows, this essay merits a mark in the 70–72 range.