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Socratic Pedagogy, Race, and Power: From People to Propositions

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Abstract

Rud (1997) wrote in this journal: " Leaving aside the blatant (to my eyes at least) problems of power and dominance of an elderly Greek citizen teaching a slave boy, this example [the Meno] of teaching has always left me cold." Garlikov (1998) addressed Rud's criticism of the Socratic dialogue. The present article addresses and extends Garlikov's response to cover general notions of power, and shows how these may affect Socratic discourse. Socratic pedagogy is not merely an illusory exercise where participants acquiesce to notions of truth because of power differentials. But power relations play a role in all communicative contexts. However, in Socratic pedagogy the adverse effects of power are greatly reduced and the focus is shifted from people to propositions.

Introduction

The Meno has long been considered the paradigmatic example of the Socratic method. Here, solely by asking questions, Socrates teaches a young slave boy that the area of a large square is twice the area of a smaller one. Some scholars, however, find both the Socratic method generally, and this example specifically, to be problematic because of notions of power and the influence this may have on the participants' responses. Garlikov engaged part of the criticism that relates to the idea of respondents being logically led to given conclusions (Garlikov, 1998; Rud, 1997). However, the gap in the literature that now needs to be addressed deals with the power differential between participants and whether or not this could influence the interlocutor's responses in a Socratic discourse. Is it possible that Rud's criticism (even though he offers it as just an aside) of Socratic pedagogy is misguided, and assent to propositions are the consequence of power dynamics rather than students being led to certain conclusions (Rud, 1997)? This essay will focus on these ideas, specifically exploring the nature of power in discourse as it relates to Socratic questioning, and show that while the criticisms definitely have merit, they are not strong enough to undermine the Socratic project.

There are two ways that power relations could impact a Socratic discourse, one obvious and one less obvious, if: 1) the participants respond in a certain way because they seek something other than the truth, such as approval or a good grade, and 2) the race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., of either the Socratic practitioner or of her interlocutors play a role in the discourse, i.e., if arguments and counterexamples offered do not stand or fall on their own merit, but because of an intrinsic quality of the utterer. Let us now examine these and see what role, if any, they play in the successful practice of the Socratic pedagogy.

The relationship between knowledge and power in discourse has been extensively examined (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1997; Boileau, 2000). Often these criticisms focus on the more obvious abuses of power in discourse, such as individuals not being allowed into the discourse, or individuals who go into a discourse with certain assumptions about what someone can know based upon their sex or race.(Note 1) These are issues in any discourse, and the first point, while admittedly important, is structural and somewhat less interesting, and consequently will not be addressed here (i.e., in a classroom environment issues of self-selection of participants, or who physically gets to be in the classroom, is not immediately relevant to the ideas being examined here). The second issue does indeed impact Socratic discourse, and surprisingly little to no research has explained how power dynamics impact Socratic practitioners and their students (Boghossian, 2001). If it is the case that truth seeking educational communities cannot be established because of power disparities between students and teachers, then not just Socratic pedagogy, but the genuineness and authenticity of all dialogical pedagogies are called into question. If the problems posed by the Socratic teacher are met with responses that have some other intent rather than to get at the truth, then Socratic pedagogy cannot be said to be genuinely truth oriented because the participants did not yield to propositions on the basis of reason.

Race, class and gender

One of the presuppositions of the method is that what is at issue is the force of argument, not exogenous factors such as the race, gender or social class of the person who

But what is more likely, that an argument will be subconsciously discounted because of the race of the person who makes it, or that an argument, regardless of the race of the person who makes it, succeeds or fails *because of* the elenctic process? That is, in genuine Socratic practice arguments cannot be *de facto* rejected; they must be rejected because of a counterexample or by sheer force of argument. (Of course anyone can intentionally disregard statements by people of a certain race, and these more obvious and even more egregious instances are not at issue here because this has nothing to do with Socratic pedagogy and everything to do with blatant racism. What is at issue are people's voices being heard and their claims being answered, or not, because of who they are). Subconsciously or otherwise, of course the Socratic teacher could overlook, or give less attention to, someone's claims because of their race. One could, for example, disregard a devastating counterexample as irrelevant because they had the prejudice going into the discourse that people who are a particular race, gender or sexual orientation could never say anything substantive. But this would not be Socratic; this would be a form of abuse that masquerades as Socratic and as such could be found in any pedagogical model. The claim here is that this is more and not less likely to be exposed in Socratic pedagogy due to the ability of rational participants to assent to true propositions; and this, in turn, is because of a rational process that removes much of the ambiguity and confusion from adjudicating claims.

The elenchus does not necessarily bring one's racial and gender assumptions to the surface, but it does force the participants to focus on the arguments and not the people who make the arguments. If there is ever a dispute, the *claim* is at issue and not the person. Because of this it is more likely that issues of race and gender will not play a role in the discourse, as opposed to other models where there is no process for the adjudication of claims. Therefore, while race and gender play a part in all dialogical contexts, they play less of a role in a Socratic discourse. As such racial and gender issues do not compromise the integrity of the Socratic method.

Power dynamics

The Socratic method centers on the notion that attaining the truth is possible through discourse (Vlastos, 1994). The idea behind this is that through argument, example and counterexample, rational participants will assent to true propositions. However, this is bundled with a number of presuppositions, such as the presupposition that participants enter into the discourse freely (as opposed to being forced to take a required class where the teacher's pedagogical model is Socratic), and that responses are being given because they are believed to be true (as opposed to being assented to because of convenience or because respondents will “get something” from their interlocutor). (Note 3) If it is indeed the case respondents will receive some tangible benefit, or at least perceive that they will, it stands to reason that they will provide answers that they believe the Socratic practitioner wants to hear. If they provide responses for any reason other than the belief that what they say is true, then the elenchus cannot achieve its epistemological ambitions. If this is the case then it is not a trick of inference, or a “twisting” of logic, but that the respondents want to give certain answers because of something *other than logic*, like approbation or even fear of looking stupid.

An important question then becomes whether it is the case that because of one's position as a teacher and the authority and power that come with that role, students in a Socratic classroom environment will assent to certain propositions that they would not otherwise

agree to if they were just with their peers? It is certainly possible, because of the student/teacher power dynamic, students would too easily permit the teacher to influence and even guide their responses. This has the obvious impact of subverting genuine educational discourse because differences in power between and among those engaged in conversation prohibit an honest exchange of ideas—and an honest exchange of ideas rests at the heart of the elenchus. For the elenchus to work, students need to agree or disagree with certain propositions because of their belief in their truth or falsity. So if it is the case that a proposition is offered not because it is viewed as being true, but for some other reason, then genuine discourse would seem to be inhibited. If students and teachers cannot have an authentic truth-seeking classroom, or even have a genuine discourse, then one of the principal goals of Socratic pedagogy—truth seeking—is seriously compromised.

Thus successful Socratic pedagogy will disabuse participants of more rigid notions of relations of power that are structurally embedded in traditional communicative contexts. Traditional power relations, specifically in a classroom setting, center on both the teacher's "power position" and her privileged access to the truth (Etzioni, 1975, p. 5). But paradoxically Socratic pedagogy confuses, and to an extent even inverts, traditional power relations. The Socratic practitioner is not claiming to have all the answers. She is, in a very real sense, deriving power from the declarations of her interlocutors (if there are no claims made the Socratic questioner has nothing to proceed from). When students participate in a Socratic discourse it is not immediately clear where the lines of power are. Truth is no longer the exclusive province of the teacher. Truth switches from people to propositions. In traditional discourses perceptions of truth are at least partially constructed by position, race, social and economic class, and even by aspects of appearance, like age or disability status. This reorientation of the power dynamic can be socially, intellectually, and even educationally disorienting.

Of course this does not negate the fact that participants in a Socratic classroom setting will respond in certain ways not because of the truth but because of a perceived benefit from a given response. It is not philosophical naïveté to claim that no matter what the reason is for one's responses, perceptions of reward may make students more easily led by the teacher, but it will not change either the truth of the matter or the defensibility of their claim. Perhaps this is best seen with a specific example from Garlikov's article:

An example of the latter case was in a discussion of homosexuality in an "Ethics and Society" course where many students said that homosexuality was wrong because (the idea of) it was so disgusting. I asked them whether they thought that such disgust was a sufficient characteristic to make an action be immoral. They said it was. I asked them then to close their eyes and think about ... their parents having sex with each other. They all let out an even bigger groan of disgust, and said they found that idea really disgusting. So I asked whether they would have to conclude then that it was immoral for their parents ever to have (or to have had) sex with each other. They agreed it was not. Of course they then asked whether that meant I thought homosexuality was moral. My response was that whether it is or is not is simply unrelated to whether it is personally disgusting or not to anyone. I was not trying to argue in this particular case for or against the morality of homosexuality, but was merely trying to get them to see that finding an action disgusting did not justify their thinking it must be immoral

just because of that (Garlikov, 1998).

In this outstanding example of the Socratic method, if students thought that their teacher did not like homosexuality, then they could easily have lied and given false statements. For example, anticipating where he was going, they could have responded that envisioning their parents having sex was not disgusting, but that it made them uncomfortable. This would still have left room for defending their claim that all things that are disgusting are immoral. But then Garlikov could have made further inquiries about other things that are disgusting, such as eating a plate of live insects, and shown that disgust is neither necessary nor sufficient to judge a thing as immoral. *In either case, no matter what their responses were, through successful elenctic inquiry a truth of the matter would have emerged.* Their claims would have withstood the elenchus, or not. The relationship between being disgusting and being immoral would have been established, or not.

So the question then becomes, how much, if at all, a student's giving a response that she think the teacher wants to hear is going to adversely affect the truth seeking conditions of the dialectic?(Note 4) My claim is that if the elenchus is successfully applied, power relations will still impact Socratic discourse, but not to such an extent as to make it an ineffective pedagogy. Not only is truth seeking not compromised, but also other virtues such as getting students to think critically and engage ideas remain unscathed. In our present example, to even think so far ahead in a discourse as to be able to anticipate where it is going requires a fairly high degree of cognitive ability.(Note 5) And if students are not capable of this, then the issue that they would give a response because of a teacher's sentiment, or because they want to “get something,” are dulled. The idea of giving a response because of something presupposes that students know what that response is that they are supposed to give. Not only is it often unclear what response the teacher wants, but that does not guarantee that particular conclusions could be reached.

So then the issue becomes, what if students give responses not based upon the teacher's sentiment, but because they think that is the smartest response to give, and giving the smartest response means that they will get the best grade. (That is, the smartest response may not be one that a student believes accords with the truth, but the one that makes them look the most intelligent; so one's motivation would not be for the truth but to look intelligent.) Well, this still would not adversely impact the discourse to such an extent that its practice would be jeopardized. Giving the best response, or at least attempting to, would relegate the truth seeking status of the method to secondary or even tertiary significance, conveying primacy on the critical thinking aspect of the method. Depending upon the teacher's desires, this could actually be beneficial.(Note 6) But this would only adversely affect (perhaps more by slowing down the discourse by taking more time to arrive at conclusions), and not endanger, the method's truth seeking orientation.

Conclusion

Garlikov addressed the first part of Rud's criticism about Socratic dialogue being leading. This work has addressed and extended his response to cover general notions of power, and shown how these could impact a Socratic discourse. Because of the proposition oriented nature of the elenchus, Socratic pedagogy is not merely an illusory exercise where participants acquiesce to notions of truth due to power differentials. But

power relations certainly do play a role in all communicative contexts, and Socratic dialogue is no exception. What is an exception, however, is that the adverse effects of power are minimized, and the focus is shifted from people to propositions.

Notes

¹ For example, in the Symposium Socrates asks the women and the slaves to leave the room. Or more recently, feminist epistemology claims that the sex of the knower at least partially determines what is known, what can be known, and how it becomes known.

² The best way, if at all, these could be controlled for would be through blindly graded exams, probably utilizing a banking pedagogy where there are very specific right and wrong answers that need to be memorized and regurgitated (Friere, 1970).

³ Foucault would argue that one always gets something from being correct in every discourse, not just restricted academic discourses. Perhaps due to the limited context, it is more obvious what a student “gets” when he answers a question correctly. Where he stands in the power web becomes more visible. He gets a special relationship to the teacher. The teacher knows best and now he knows second best—and everyone knows that he know second best.

⁴ What often happens in the classroom is that a good Socratic teacher is able to prevent students from correctly guessing what she wants to hear. This is because the Socratic teacher is inquiring into the reasoning behind a position—she examining whether or not it will stand up to scrutiny. Challenging a student's reasoning tends to make the student think that his conclusion is being challenged. Students very quickly learn that it is difficult to figure out the teacher's position, particularly when she challenges conclusions that are contradictory to each other, one of which is supposedly what the teacher believes. But if Socratic teachers are looking for sound arguments, and if the student is able to come up with a good argument, reason (and therefore the best method we have to search for truth by using evidence to make inferences and deductions) is served even if it also pleases the teacher. But the enterprise is so difficult in most complex situations that it is hard to imagine a student's coming up with a chain of reasoning that will withstand the teacher's scrutiny just because that student is trying to impress her or get her to like him by guessing. Guesses are not likely to do the job.

⁵ In a personal correspondence Garlikov wrote, “even in the Socratic dialogues, as in classrooms, interlocutors give wrong answers that they try to support, which shows, I think, they are not just giving psychologically prompted answers, but answers that show they really think about the material—logically and conceptually.”

⁶ Though in my personal opinion, this would be a heartbreaking consequence of privileging intellectual qualities over a search for and love of the truth.

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