

Philosophy in Schools

A Socratic Dialog

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Background

Over recent years there has been a growing movement pushing for the inclusion of Philosophy in schools.¹

As a subject, Philosophy is broad. It can be separated into many sub-disciplines such as Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Mind, Ethics, and Philosophy of Science, to name a few. These sub-disciplines reduce back to three broad pillars of Philosophy: Epistemology, Metaphysics, and Axiology.

Regardless of where one's philosophical interest sits, the essential skill set remains the same. This is the ability to reason. Philosophers produce rationally convincing arguments and critically assess the arguments of others.

In this fictional dialogue Socrates meets with Allison Fells, the Principal of Western Heights School, to discuss the inclusion of Philosophy in the school curriculum. Socrates has been running a successful Philosophy club at school and believes that students would benefit through the extension of the club into the regular school curriculum. Socrates argues that Philosophy equips students with the skillset needed to live *the good life*.

¹ For recent examples, see Whittle (2016); Humphreys (2016); Humphreys (2016b); Weller (2016).

Fells: Good morning Socrates. Please come in and take a seat.

Socrates: Thank you Ms. Fells. It is good of you to see me at such short notice.

Fells: I like to make time to talk to people when possible. I've been told that you would like to talk about the school curriculum.

Socrates: Yes, that's correct. Specifically, I would like to talk to you about the place of Philosophy in the curriculum. There are no Philosophy classes at Western Heights, and I would like to discuss the possibility of introducing the subject.

Fells: You're running a Philosophy club after school. From what I've been told, it is quite well attended. Why do you think we also need classes?

Socrates: The club only meets for one hour per week. The issues we discuss are deserving of more time. At most, an hour per week provides an introduction to Philosophy, but does not allow for any depth of discussion.

Fells: I understand what you're saying Socrates. But I'm sorry to say that we don't currently have the capacity to add a Philosophy class to our timetable.

Socrates: I admit that I do not understand the intricacies of timetable design, but it seems to me that it would be a relatively simple matter to add a subject. There are two empty classrooms. I could take one of them.

Fells: But where would you get the students from? They all have full timetables. The school curriculum is comprehensive and we need to cover a lot of material. We can't simply pull students out of other subjects to switch to Philosophy.

Socrates: Perhaps it could be optional.

Fells: My concern is that students might join your Philosophy class at the expense of something important that they really need, like English or Mathematics.

Socrates: English and Mathematics are indeed worthy subjects. Are you assuming that Philosophy is less important than English and Mathematics?

Fells: I wouldn't put it that way. What I mean is that English and Mathematics are *needed*, while Philosophy is interesting, but not essential.

Socrates: As a novice in the field of education I am eager to learn. What makes something *essential*?

Fells: Well, to put it bluntly, the essential subjects are the ones that prepare students to function well in society and get a job.

Socrates: Are you suggesting that the purpose of education is to prepare students to function well in society and get a job?

Fells: Yes.

Socrates: That seems rather a narrow purpose. Why does your school offer subjects such as music, art, and physical education? Are these taught so that students can function well in society and get a job?

Fells: Not directly. But they contribute to the overall student. They make the student a knowledgeable, interested member of society.

Socrates: So part of the purpose of education is to produce knowledgeable, interested members of society?

Fells: Yes, Socrates. And this contributes to their functioning well in society.

Socrates: It seems to me that if the purpose of education is to produce people who can function well in society, we need subjects that provide more than job readiness. This is why you include subjects such as music, art, and physical education. Would you consider these subjects essential?

Fells: I think these subjects are important.

Socrates: Allow me to pose another question. Would you think that education was serving its purpose if it was producing knowledgeable, interested, and well functioning members of society who get jobs, but who are unhappy and living in a state of despair?

Fells: I'd question why they are living in a state of despair, but I wouldn't necessarily blame education.

Socrates: I understand why you wouldn't want to blame education. However, do you agree that suitably educated people are able to assess their lives, make wise decisions, and thus avoid unhappiness and despair?

Fells: Possibly. But that does not lead me to think that the purpose of education is to help people avoid unhappiness and despair.

Socrates: We have agreed that the purpose of education is to prepare students to function well in society, have we not?

Fells: Yes we have, Socrates.

Socrates: Do you think people can function well in society if they are unhappy and in a state of despair?

Fells: I suppose it depends on the extent of their unhappiness, but probably not. I imagine their depression would cause problems. Some people might end up with drug addictions or the inability to commit to a job.

Socrates: So when I asked about knowledgeable, interested, well functioning members of society, who get jobs, but who are unhappy and in despair, I was imagining the impossible, correct? We can't have well functioning members of society who are unhappy and in a state of despair. They wouldn't function well.

Fells: It seems not.

Socrates: To function well in society, people must be happy, do you agree?

Fells: Based on our discussion so far, yes, I agree.

Socrates: Shall we describe people who are happy, knowledgeable, interested, and functioning well in society as living the *good life*?

Fells: That sounds like a reasonable description of living a good life.

Socrates: Okay. Let's talk a little more about *happiness* and the good life. We have agreed that happiness is a component of the good life.

Fells: Yes, we have.

Socrates: So, it would seem that to live the good life, one must seek happiness.

Fells: That follows.

Socrates: Tell me, if you had never seen a bird, would you be able to seek one out?

Fells: I suppose not. I may stumble upon one by accident, but if I didn't know what it was, I'd be likely to ignore it.

Socrates: So if a person needs to seek *happiness* in order to live the good life, it follows that he or she would need to know what happiness is. I think we should talk more about this. We have not yet developed a working definition of *happiness*.

Fells: It seems straightforward to me, Socrates. We all know what happiness is.

Socrates: I am not so sure. Tell me, Ms. Fells, if a person functions well in their society, but is entirely selfish, would you think they are living the *good life*?

Fells: Sure. Why not? They might be perfectly happy with the way they live their life. We have said that the good life is lived by those who are happy, knowledgeable, and functioning well in society.

Socrates: What do you think is the better life: one in which a person is knowledgeable, interested, functions well in society, but is selfish, avoids paying tax, and focuses on gaining material wealth; or one in which a person is knowledgeable, interested, functions well in society, helps others, pays his tax, and focuses not on material wealth, but on ensuring the health of his *humanity*?

Fells: What do you mean by "humanity"?

Socrates: In the past I would have used the term "soul". Really what I mean

is the state of the person as a just, benevolent, and humane being.

Fells: Okay. When you present it as a dichotomy in this way, I would be foolish not to agree that the second option is preferred. But in both cases, the person could be happy.

Socrates: Let us see if this is true. Is it your opinion that a person can achieve happiness by focusing on gaining material wealth?

Fells: I would say so, Socrates. They gain happiness from the things they buy.

Socrates: But if a person equates happiness with material gain, he needs to constantly acquire more possessions in order to be happy. How, then, could he ever achieve happiness? There is always something else to buy. Wouldn't such a person simply have moments of pleasure, but always be wanting more, thus never being fulfilled and never achieving true happiness?

Fells: I can agree to this point Socrates. However, suppose that a person has gained as much material wealth as he wants. He doesn't want anything else. Surely then he would be happy.

Socrates: Are you suggesting that the mere possession of this material wealth is sufficient to make this person happy?

Fells: Yes. He might be completely happy with what he has.

Socrates: Here you seem to be saying that his material wealth makes him happy because he is happy with his material wealth. Isn't this circular? It doesn't seem to provide us with an answer to what happiness *is*, does it?

Fells: You philosophers are annoying.

Socrates: You see that this is an important issue to settle, do you not? If people want to live the good life, and if happiness is a necessary component of the good life, then people need to know what happiness is. Now, you are suggesting that happiness is achieved through wealth and material possessions, but I am not sure this is enough.

Let's continue. Do you agree that material wealth, in itself, is neither good nor bad?

Fells: I agree to this

Socrates: Very good. I think we are making progress. Tell me now, Ms. Fells, do you agree that wisdom is good and ignorance is bad?

Fells: I think so. I certainly think wisdom is better than ignorance.

Socrates: Okay. Now, is it plausible that a wise person will put material wealth to good use and achieve happiness, while an ignorant person may be wasteful and end up in a worse position, and thus achieve the opposite of happiness?

Fells: How so?

Socrates: Consider a famous performer who has amassed a vast fortune. This fortune itself does not produce happiness, so the performer decides to seek happiness in rich food. His health suffers, and happiness is elusive. The performer then attempts to gain happiness by throwing parties and drinking large quantities of alcohol. But this does not work. Eventually the performer turns to stronger drugs in order to satisfy his desire for happiness. The drugs are addictive and lead to a cycle of behavior that causes relationship problems and the loss of much of his fortune. Do you understand this

example?

Fells: Okay Socrates. You make a fair point. Material wealth does not necessarily bring happiness. If bad decisions are made, material wealth can prevent happiness.

Socrates: Indeed. So the key to attaining happiness is not material wealth itself because material wealth is neither good nor bad. However, ignorant action can be bad and wise action good, so what's important is knowledge of how to put material wealth to good use. And if we put the issue of material wealth aside, we see that this applies to life decisions in general. If people make poor decisions about their life, happiness will remain out of reach. Many years ago I suggested that *the unexamined life is not worth living*.² This is precisely what I meant. It seems to me, then, that wisdom is the route to happiness.

Fells: Can you tell me more?

Socrates: I am pleased to elaborate. We have agreed that happiness is not to be found in material wealth. Instead, happiness is found in the decisions one makes about one's own life. Everyone has the ability to choose their life direction. The ignorant person may choose a direction that is focused on *merely* satisfying his or her desires. But the wise person can recognize which desires are worth satisfying and which ones prevent a sense of overall purpose and the ability to function well. The wise person understands human nature and how to bring out the best of their own humanity.³ Achieving this is happiness.

² Plato. Apology. Translated by Benjamin Jowett.
Retrieved December 4, 2016, from <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/apology.html>

³ For a summary of Socrates' thoughts on happiness, see <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/socrates/>

Fells: This is much more complex than I had ever realized.

Socrates: Perhaps we should pause to summarize our discussion thus far.

Fells: Yes, please. That would be useful.

Socrates: It will be useful for us both. Please correct me if I am wrong. We have agreed that to be happy, one needs to know how to live a life in which the focus is not on the accumulation of material wealth, but is instead focused on one's own *humanity*. We have also agreed that the purpose of education is to prepare students to be knowledgeable, interested, happy, well functioning members of society. We have called this the *good life*. So, it follows from what we have said that the purpose of education is to prepare students to live the *good life*.

Fells: Based on what we have discussed, I agree that the purpose of education can be summarized as preparing students to live the good life.

Socrates: Then I think we have our first premise in an argument for including Philosophy as a subject at Western Heights School:

Premise 1: The purpose of school is to prepare students to live the good life.

Shall we proceed?

Fells: You have captured my interest, Socrates. Yes, let's continue.

Socrates: Excellent. Now, consider this proposition: The purpose of an Internet provider is to provide Internet access to its customers. Am I correct?

Fells: Yes, you are correct, Socrates.

Socrates: Would you agree that if the purpose of an Internet provider is to provide Internet access to its customers, then procedures and equipment specialized in providing Internet access to customers should be available within the company?

Fells: Yes, of course.

Socrates: If we apply this analogy to the field of education, we have the second premise in our argument:

Premise 2: If the purpose of school is to prepare students to live the good life, then subjects that specialize in equipping students with the tools necessary to live the good life should be offered in schools.

Fells: I understand your point, Socrates. But before you go on to suggest that we don't have suitable subjects on offer, I need to remind you that we have a robust curriculum here at Western Heights. I believe our curriculum is sufficient to meet the stated purpose of education. Many subjects can prepare students to live the good life.

Socrates: I wonder to what extent your subjects do, in fact, equip students to live the good life. We have agreed that all subjects contribute to the development of a well functioning person, but not all subjects *specialize* in preparing students to live the good life.

Consider this scenario: suppose that the purpose of education is to prepare students to be excellent musicians. I can imagine some subjects incidentally covering elements of music training. However, I also know that music teachers *specialize* in running classes that offer musical training. On balance, what do you think provides the best guarantee that students will leave school as an excellent musician: having music covered in classes such as English

and Mathematics, or having it taught as a specialized subject?

Fells: You are leading me to agree that it would need to be taught as a specialized subject. I'd be foolish to disagree when you word it this way.

Socrates: We agree, then, that it is better to offer a specialized subject rather than leaving it to chance. So, if Philosophy is the subject that specializes in providing the tools for living the good life, you must agree that we should offer Philosophy classes at Western Heights. What do you think?

Fells: I agree that if the goal of education is to prepare students to live the good life, then if Philosophy specializes in this goal, then we would be best to offer it as a class at Western Heights.

Socrates: Very good. This brings us to our third premise:

Premise 3: Philosophy specializes in equipping students with the tools necessary to live the good life

Tell me, how much do you know about Philosophy?

Fells: Not much to be honest. I haven't had much time to explore it. I know it involves asking unusual questions and talking about religion.

Socrates: We do indeed ask questions in Philosophy. And some of those questions are related to religion, but many are not. Why do you think we like to ask questions in Philosophy?

Fells: I suppose questions provide a context for discussion and debate.

Socrates: Certainly, yes. But the end goal of Philosophy is not discussion and debate. The word "Philosophy" means "love of wisdom". We ask questions to

better understand what it is to be human. We also seek to understand our place in this vast universe. Sometimes our questions are unanswered, but our exploration of philosophical questions moves us closer to gaining clarity and knowledge.

Now, we have agreed that in order to be happy and live the good life, one needs to know how to live a life in which the focus is not on the accumulation of material wealth but is instead focused on one's own *humanity*. Am I correct?

Fells: Yes, we did come to this agreement.

Socrates: How did we come to this agreement?

Fells: We talked through the issues and reached a conclusion.

Socrates: That's right. We carefully worked through the issue. We *reasoned*. We have reasoned about what constitutes the good life. This is what we do in Philosophy. Philosophy is the subject that specializes in providing the tools with which to reason and gain wisdom, and we have agreed that wisdom is required for people to know how to live the good life.

I believe we have completed the construction of the argument. May I summarize?

Fells: Please, go ahead.

Socrates: We have done well today, Ms. Fells. From our discussion we have built three premises that lead to the conclusion that Philosophy should be offered in schools.

Premise 1: The purpose of school is to prepare students to live the good

life.

Premise 2: If the purpose of school is to prepare students to live the good life, then subjects that specialize in equipping students with the tools necessary to live the good life should be offered in schools.

Premise 3: Philosophy specializes in equipping students with the tools necessary to live the good life.

Therefore, Philosophy should be offered in schools

From here, I suggest that since Western Heights is a school, Philosophy should be offered at Western Heights.

Fells: Your reasoning is impeccable Socrates. I admit that although I find your approach rather annoying – you just don't take "no" for an answer – I have enjoyed our discussion. Is this how you plan to run your Philosophy classes?

Socrates: My aim is to develop these skills in students so that they too can construct convincing arguments and assess the arguments of others.

Fells: The process is good, and you have convinced me that Philosophy is a worthy subject. Yes, it should be offered in schools. I cannot promise that we will include it, but I will certainly give it some careful thought and will consult with our school board of trustees. I hope you understand that I can't commit right now.

Socrates: I am happy that you are willing to consider it. Shall I come back next week?

Fells: It may take longer than a week for me to work through this.

Socrates: I shall see you next week.

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