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## On the Silence of Socrates in Plato's *Cleitophon*

The original title of this talk was: "Socratic Wisdom and the Liberal Arts." This might imply that the subject would be the employment of Socratic method or the importance of Socratic ignorance for a Liberal Arts education, or something to that effect. However, I'm actually interested in a *disparity* in the aims of Socratic education and liberal education. In the following, I will try to draw out what I take to be a *tension* between the Liberal Arts and Socratic philosophy.

A common complaint about Socrates is that conversations with him rarely, if ever, yield any sort of definitive, positive knowledge but often end in utter confusion.<sup>1</sup> Even at his trial, he claims that he cannot be a teacher and corrupter of the youth precisely because he himself lacks wisdom. We have all heard the slogan: "All that I know is that I know nothing."<sup>2</sup> But there is at least one positive claim which Socrates derives from the recognition of his ignorance, namely that, "The unexamined life is not worth living."<sup>3</sup> It is the awareness of our ignorance that both motivates and justifies the life devoted to inquiry, and this way of life constitutes the Socratic education.

The word "art" in Liberal Arts suggests the possibility of teaching, or at least learning, and possessing some positive knowledge. Yet this need not imply indoctrination or dogmatism in any way. These "arts" are purported to be "liberating" arts which further implies that they are in some way tools or techniques for the attainment and practice of freedom and liberty. Of course, the Socratic education promises a kind of freedom as well, but of a different sort. Socratic education offers

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. especially Euthyphro. One often suspects Socrates knows something that he is not telling us (*Cleitophon* 10c6-7; cf. Cratylus 304a on irony).

<sup>22</sup> Common paraphrase of Apology 21d and 23a-b: "I do not think I know that which I do not know;" "[H]uman wisdom is worth little or nothing [compared to divine wisdom]; and "The man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless."

<sup>3</sup> *Apology of Socrates* 38a.

liberation *from* the invisible bonds of opinions which we all inherit involuntarily. But here we must pose a question to Socrates: “Is this sufficient?” And indeed Cleitophon will do this for us.

Education in the Liberal Arts, on the other hand, offers the possibility of a “freedom *to*,” a freedom *to act* rightly in the world, or at least better than we would otherwise. This would be a freedom to speak, to choose, and to properly exercise our liberty in the society in which we participate. But we must pose the question to ourselves: “Is this possible? Can good judgment be taught, or can it even be learned through a course of study?”

In Plato’s *Cleitophon* we find an argument for both the necessity and insufficiency of the Socratic education from someone concerned with the improvement of public life. Cleitophon had hoped that philosophizing with Socrates might help make this possible. But our interlocutor has been disappointed and believes he can show Socrates quite clearly the limits of the Socratic education. Cleitophon lodges such a devastating critique of Socrates that at the end of the dialogue he can make the incredible claim that Socrates is *not only* a stumbling block to the achievement of virtue but ultimately an impediment to the realization of human happiness. That is, the Socratic education could ultimately be harmful to human beings, at least according to Cleitophon.

What is extraordinary about the *Cleitophon* as a dialogue is how abruptly it ends. Socrates apparently has nothing to say after hearing Cleitophon’s severe criticism that while Socrates can exhort us to care for virtue, he cannot at all show us how to go about this. Plato writes no response on behalf of Socrates. But should we interpret this as silence? It is possible that in reading the dialogue it is not really silence that we experience, but rather a suspension between speeches, one in which our anticipation demands that we respond.

Some reasons why Socrates does not respond might include:

1. The possibility that Cleitophon is not worthy of a response. Cleitophon just won't "get it," so it would be a waste of time to try to correct him. This happens to be the opinion of most of my colleagues who have committed themselves to the study of philosophy. I don't think that they realize Cleitophon is actually on their side, at least those who happen to be professional educators.

2. It could be that Cleitophon's critique is legitimate and cannot be defeated. This is not necessarily to say that he is simply right; there are such things as undecidable propositions and irreconcilable differences. Socrates does offer viable defenses elsewhere, but perhaps none are definitive or even adequate.

3. Perhaps Socrates would not want to defend himself in this particular case. Socrates may have no interest in encouraging someone like Cleitophon to turn to philosophy as a way of life. Cleitophon is someone who has spent a good deal of time with Socrates, who is competent in dialectic, who is sympathetic, and who despite being disparaging sees the value of Socrates. Cleitophon could act as a sort of public advocate of philosophy, a representative who participates actively in civic life and who may be critical of Socrates but is not hostile.

So what is the nature of Cleitophon's complaint? He says he has always marveled at the arguments Socrates makes against his fellow Athenians saying,

Don't you see you haven't the slightest clue what you're doing? You, whose entire concern is to make money; You don't seem to care whether your sons who will inherit your riches will know how to use their wealth justly. You don't even bother trying to find out if there are teachers of justice for them or even for yourselves. (407b2-6)<sup>4</sup>

Cleitophon recognizes something important about the true value of education. He sees that an education concerned solely with making a living is inadequate. It is more important to know *what* to use money *for* than to know how to get it.

This problem lies at the core of the current crisis in liberal education. Faced with the complaint that degrees in the Liberal Arts aren't practical, we have two main arguments to make our case: We can argue that Liberal Arts students fare just as well

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<sup>4</sup> Line numbers refer to Slings' text of the *Cleitophon* (Cambridge 1999).

financially as students with vocational degrees. Or, we can try to show that liberal education can offer something priceless, the betterment of one's soul. Cleitophon is convinced of the latter and for this he thanks Socrates. Socrates has persuaded him that happiness consists in the exercise of soul in virtue both for oneself and for the sake of others, and that material goods should be placed in the service of these ends.

Cleitophon believes that Socrates thinks one can learn an art of self-mastery: mastery over one's belongings, one's body, and ultimately one's soul. In addition, those who learn the art of self-mastery can benefit those who can't or don't by directing them in their actions and in the disposal of their goods. Such people should, "hand over the rudder of their thought, as if on a ship, to another who has learned the art of piloting human beings" (408b1-3). That is, those who are capable of self-mastery are also competent leaders. Cleitophon here reminds Socrates that this is what he often calls "statesmanship" (*politike*) which is "the very same art as that of judging and justice [*dikastiken te kai dikaiosunen*]" (408b4-5). There is an art of good judgment that, like any skill, can be taught or at least learned by means of some sort of instruction. This effectively makes Cleitophon a proponent of the Liberal Arts; for is this not a presupposition of liberal education?: namely, that one can develop good judgment by means of a certain course of study.

So, Socrates' exhortation to virtue has succeeded. Great.. Can Socrates do more for us or are we left only to exhort others? We should ask with Cleitophon: "What next? How do we even begin the study of justice?" (408e1-3).

Cleitophon knows that he won't get a straight answer from Socrates himself, so he goes to his young associates—knowing not to call them students—asking them, "What is the art having to do with the virtue of the soul?" to which the most reputed among them replies "nothing other than justice" (409a2-6). Cleitophon inquires further asking what the "work" (in Greek, the *ergon*) of justice might be suggesting an analogy with the arts. Just like the art of medicine produces two things: 1) more doctors, and 2) health; and carpentry produces two things: 1) more carpenters, and 2) houses; and as it is the power of all crafts to produce some artifact in addition to more artisans, so, likewise, what does the art of justice produce? Cleitophon providing a partial answer asks: What

does the art of justice produce besides just men? But is the just man merely another artisan who can teach the art or is he the artifact?

We should wonder here whether the just man is merely another teacher of justice who can teach others to be teachers, or if the just man is a product like health and houses. Cleitophon takes it that the art of justice produces teachers of justice and some artifact besides. His question then remains as to what this product could possibly be. But are the artist and the artifact necessarily separate?

We need to consider Cleitophon's understanding of the craft analogy itself. When he first suggests the analogy he mentions not only medicine but the art of gymnastic training. He then drops the art of gymnastic to focus on medicine and carpentry. These become the models for the art pertaining to the virtue of the soul. But perhaps the art of gymnastic is more suitable.

If we unpack the analogy, we see that medicine is comparable to gymnastic and to carpentry in different ways. Like gymnastic training, medicine is concerned with the health of the body; like carpentry, the product (health in the body of *another*) is independent of the artist. In the unique case where the doctor practices medicine on himself, he does not treat himself *qua* doctor but rather *qua* patient. As Aristotle might put it, one acts on oneself as other (*Metaphysics* IX.1). On the other hand, someone practicing the gymnastic art practices on himself *qua* self. The body acts on the body *qua* body. Physical training is a self-sufficient activity, unlike either medicine or carpentry the products of which are always external.

Here we can see an ambiguity in the Greek word *ergon* which Cleitophon overlooks. *Ergon* can mean the work of art as well as the work of the artist. The latter is the exercise of the art itself. Cleitophon is focused on the *ergon* as a product independent of the activity rather than the activity itself. For Cleitophon, the activity of the artist is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

This is also reflected in his understanding of philosophy. He does not seem to be interested in the intrinsic value of inquiry or self-knowledge as such but more with how

philosophizing might serve as a means to an end; and a noble end at that, namely, an understanding of justice for the sake of the achievement of virtue.

So, how does this analogy help us understand justice? Cleitophon may have almost answered his own question before he asked it. Earlier he had said that justice is the art of self-mastery. But perhaps the art of self-mastery is like gymnastic where the exercise of the art itself is the end; self-mastery would be the exercise of the soul *qua* soul on itself and for itself. As to the product or artifact of self-mastery, this may be secondary or even accidental. It may even be that the care of the self is *not a matter of art at all* but of the soul's nature (cf. 410d). As it is the nature of the body to care for itself through exercise, so may it be the nature of the soul to care for itself *qua* soul through the exercise of self-mastery. But Cleitophon had identified and even stressed the by-product of an art of self-mastery, namely the mastery over others. The work of self-mastery amounted to the art of piloting other human beings.

Perhaps here we find one key difference between Socrates and Cleitophon, and so between Socratic Education and the Liberal Arts. For Socrates self-mastery as care of the soul arguably consists in inquiry itself, regardless of whatever inquiry might produce. In the *Apology*, Socrates exhorts us *to discuss* virtue everyday *not act* virtuously, unless of course these are the same. Cleitophon is interested in discussing virtue precisely for the sake of acting virtuously. Can we really blame him for this?

Returning to the original question, Socrates' young associates respond that the artifact of justice is the useful (*sumpheron*), the fitting (*deon*), the beneficial (*ophelimon*), or the profitable (*lusiteloun*) (409c1-3). None of these satisfy Cleitophon because they are so vague as to apply to any art. All arts and actions intend some good, so none of these get at the particular good which justice produces.

Someone soon speaks up suggesting that justice produces "friendship in the city" (409d5). Friendship is always good and is some kind of like-mindedness. The question is raised as to whether this sameness of mind is the sharing of opinion or of knowledge. Since common opinion is often wrong and can result in great harm, the product of the art of justice must be friendship among the like-minded in the city who share in knowledge (409d6-e10).

Cleitophon is prepared to leave this answer intact, but unfortunately others jump in pointing out that like-mindedness is also common to all the arts. All doctors share the same knowledge insofar as they possess the art of medicine. All carpenters share the same knowledge insofar as they possess the art of wood working. So, the argument comes full circle: though we know that the art of justice is a knowledge shared among just citizens, we don't yet know what external good in particular such persons produce (409e10-410a6).

I would like to argue that Cleitophon's interest in friendship suggests that he is one of the good guys. It is always tempting in Plato to be suspicious of anyone who has political ambitions, especially someone who hangs out with rhetoricians and sophists. Cleitophon does in fact spend time with one of the nastiest among them, namely, Thrasymachus whom we know as Socrates' hostile interlocutor in the *Republic* and who argues the position that "might makes right," or that justice is the law of the stronger. But even though he says he will go to Thrasymachus and whomever else if he gives up on Socrates, we have no indication that Cleitophon is a follower of Thrasymachus or anyone else for that matter. I can easily imagine him arguing with Thrasymachus as we see him doing here with the best of Socrates' associates.

I noted earlier that Cleitophon knows not to call these so-called associates Socrates' students. He doesn't know what exactly to call them: "peers (*helikioton*), co-enthusiasts (*sunepithumeton*), comrades (*hetairon*), or whatever!" (408c6).<sup>5</sup> He recognizes that Socrates is not a teacher in any normal sense. But one term that he is also careful not to apply to Socrates or his associates is "friends" (*philoï*), the very sort of relationship that he is interested in engendering between citizens. (There is an unfortunate issue with the translation I handed out where our translator has translated both the *hetairon* and *philoï* indiscriminately as "friends." It is important for my argument that *both* Plato and Cleitophon make a distinction between *philoï* and *hetairon*, the latter of which I would translate as companions or comrades.)

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps "cohorts" since they share the activity of exhortation?

But Cleitophon doesn't even identify himself as one of Socrates' associates or even as his friend. I think the care with which he speaks is evidence of some significant understanding of Socrates.

In his concern for the city, Cleitophon had praised Socrates' criticism of his fellow Athenians for setting "brother against brother, and city against city" in the pursuit of material gain. Socrates motivates them to concern themselves with virtue. But Cleitophon's complaint stands; all he sees Socrates do is turn people toward a *concern* for virtue and at best teach them how to turn others. But apart from exhortation, when asked how to learn the art of justice and put it into practice, Socrates seems to have little to offer.

If education in the Liberal Arts only produced teachers (or God forbid only produced philosophers) there would be a real problem. Socratic education is not enough if it can only direct us toward the life devoted to inquiry. At some point there must be students who are not teachers so that there can be considerate and educated citizens who are competent to deliberate about real world issues and who can make choices that result in action. If there really is an art of good judgment, perhaps justice and freedom can be developed through a course of study.

Most institutions of higher learning do offer the means to make a good living. I think we are all here because we are of same mind in thinking that there should be more concern for living the good life.