
III. PHILOSOPHICAL CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATION

Pedagogy/Diagnostics

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Abstract

This paper presents a pedagogy for student writing tasks for introductory philosophy discussions. The approach is based on the view that motivation for speculative thinking comes primarily from the perception of a problem, which I refer to as a pain, an intellectual pain that demands a solution. The solution is not necessarily a final cure but an “attempt”: the etymology of the term “essay”. The steps are: pain (awareness of a problem), nature of the pain, possible methods of analysis, and proposed solution.

Philosophy begins in pain

The idea that philosophy begins in wonder is attributed to Plato (*Theaetetus*, 155c), and we have it from Aristotle: “For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize” (*Metaphysics*, 982b). On closer inspection, it is difficult to imagine that philosophy begins this way. P.T. Raju observed that philosophical problems, like problems generally, are serious in a way that does not cause wonder: Confucius became a philosopher by contemplating the chaos of his times in China, the thinkers of the Upaniṣad were very much affected by the corruptions and defects of their epoch, and in Buddhism, philosophy begins with the idea of

suffering.* The consternation that the sophists caused Socrates is well known. We can see this pain-motivator occurring in others who were inspired to compose restorative works, such as Boethius and Dante. Contemporary philosophical and social movements are oriented towards particular pains (environmental, feminist, Other, bio- and business-ethics, philosophical counseling, etc). From pain comes motivation for critical action. The suggestion is not novel. We may here remark the turn to therapeutic applications in so many areas: there is puppet therapy, art therapy, music therapy, creative writing therapy, and so on. Book sales of the “how-to-be-happy” genre are enormous. All camps collect their resources to offer some kind of therapy. How much more important it is that philosophy should speak of knowing what does and does not require therapy.

An “intellectual pain” can be expressed as irritation, perplexity, enigma, inconsistency, contradiction, interruption, disappointment (as Simon Critchley says in a repackaged existentialism), and even that very unnatural modern human disorder: boredom. These are examples of unease and therefore dis-ease: things to be terminated. But we know them or sense them against a comfortable cognitive state or belief. In a similar way, pains are known against their opposites. St. Augustine was teaching this when he wrote “It is by their ideas that we judge of what things ought to be like”, and St. Bonaventura likewise wrote: “Since privations and defects may be known only through positive features, our intellect does not fully resolve the understanding of any one created thing unless it is assisted by an understanding of the purest...” Cognitive irritations arise when a proposition or text presents to a person the sense of defect. Such is the basis for a pedagogical task in critical-response writing: knowing why one was settled before a new unsettling question or perplexity came along.

Pain (awareness)

Not all students perceive the same pains. Sometimes they perceive a similar pain (e.g., the contradiction of technology’s simultaneous benefits and curses) in different ways (e.g., in terms of the environment, in terms of

* P.T. Raju, *Introduction to Comparative Philosophy*. University of Nebraska Press, 1962, 257.

displacing human crafts and livelihood, in terms of effects on family unity or a citizen's right to privacy). If this is true, then it is a corollary that not all perceive the same joys in the same respects. Those joys will come from finding some satisfaction in the essay's pursuit of a resolution to their pain as individually perceived - not necessarily a terminal resolution of the question itself. Thus, a measure of satisfaction is to be sought in how to deal with a problem without solving it once and for all time. The activity of resolving things is set to occur within the horizon of one's own curiosity.

My assumption is that a question for analysis that is framed as a personal pain is more of a motivation than one framed as a homework task to be completed for a grade. The most abstruse and opaque questions of continental and analytic philosophers can be made intelligible to young students by means of establishing the connection (relevance, etc) to some real, lived experience. On this point many philosophers are agreed: theory should lead to practical action, at least to help students to understand why they feel something to be painful.

What kind of pain is it? If we hold to the maxim "de gustibus non disputandum est", then the same should be true about pains: we cannot dispute about what is and is not painful to another. In this case, students select their own questions. However, even with a single question for a task, different people will perceive it to be painful in different ways. Here are possible reactions to a shared, group question:

– *How do I know that my senses are not deceiving me?*

Silvia: This question bothers me. The problem seems to be the reliability of memory, not the senses.

Toma: This question doesn't sound right. The problem seems to be that the question itself is not framed properly.

Kosta: This question is troublesome. It doesn't fit with what is revealed in holy Scripture.

Stefan: This question is not about the senses; there is ambiguity in the term "deceive".

Ana: This question bothers me because it has already been answered by Berkeley.

Dictating to Ana that the problem is what Silvia says could reduce Ana's motivation. In smaller groups, the approaches can be shared and this would further increase awareness about the scope and pursuit of philosophy.

Nature of the pain

Each of the reactions above can be treated in a solid philosophical paradigm using various methods of analysis. Professors need not be concerned with the student's choice; the point is for the students to identify how it is painful to them and then to proceed by identifying the sort of pain it is.

If the question assigned contradicts known physical or logical laws, then the irritation is an aporia. If it could be interpreted as a psychological reaction or psychologism, then an analysis of the source of the question might be in order. It could evoke an enigma or symbolic significance. It does not matter as long as the pursuit of analysis is grounded in a personally motivating impetus. If at the beginning the first accomplishment is showing why a student's reaction is unjustified or even absurd ("This question bothers me because my uncle used to ask these kinds of things all the time") or the result of some misunderstanding ("This question bothers me because I didn't think it was possible to analyze it"), then much has been achieved. Whether the solution to an irritation is based in contingency and circumstance, or is objectively the same for everyone and can be demonstrated as true or false is an important learning distinction. So we proceed:

– *What is the nature of this pain?*

Silvia: The nature of the pain is epistemological.

Toma: The nature of the pain is logical.

Kosta: The nature of the pain is theological.

Stefan: The nature of the pain is semantic.

Ana: The nature of the pain is that it conflicts with my present convictions.

Possible methods of analysis

These responses and the philosophical literature relevant to them will require guidance by the instructor, who fills the role of a socratic midwife, drawing out the method and its appropriate sources. Based on the key terms

in the question and the student's reaction to it, the method can be designed.

Analysis in the etymological sense of the word (*ana-lusein*) is "to loosen" or "to break up"; and this is what Aristotle surely meant when he wrote that analysis is like untying a knot. The possibility of obtaining a solution comes only after one knows what kind of knot one is holding. The term "diagnostics" expresses our project well: *diagignoskein*, to discern, distinguish, to know thoroughly. A problem is identified, its nature understood, and analyzed.

– *How can you go about fixing the pain?*

Silvia: I might be able to relieve it by analyzing the purpose of memory - "what it does" instead of "what it is" - how it can be said to be reliable, and see if there is anything that can be relied on if it breaks down.

Toma: A possible method of analysis is to examine how the key terms of this proposition "know", "senses", and "deceive" can and cannot be used together.

Kosta: My hypothesis is that a solution can be obtained by surveying the relevant passages of Scripture and relevant commentaries of Church Fathers and theologians. Then I might compare these to opposing views.

Stefan: It seems that the resolution can be found by examining all the possible meanings of "deceive" in the language and listing their implications regarding the statement in question.

Ana: I will have to explain Berkeley's position fully and reconsider existing challenges to it as well as newer ones to see if his position still stands.

Proposed solution

The chosen method of analysis (the pursuit) should take one to a new viewpoint. Silvia proposed that the question is a leading question and that it makes unwarranted either-or assumptions about the corporeal senses; she also gave an argument in favor of the primacy of memory as the *sine qua non* of perception. Toma's solution made several suggestions for reformulating the question and discarded the original one as meaningless. Kosta found

satisfaction from a closer and more attentive reading of biblical and theological teachings and new significance in them after a comparison with several opposing philosophical and psychological views. Stefan's discovery was that satisfaction for him is had by simply knowing how linguists and philosophers of language and metaphor approach the question; he concluded that the purpose of such a question is not to be answered at all but to stimulate "an aesthetics of questioning". And Ana found that she is still confident that there is no matter, only ideas, and recast a new argument in her paper that Berkeley's "esse est percipi" stands in spite of new challenges in the literature presented by the course instructor. She even concluded with a rather novel proposal about how to apply Berkeley to developing self-awareness.

To each his own (pain)

Students are typically certain about what is and is not a pain, what is and is not a "worthwhile question", and so it seems that questions for critical analysis might be more productive when they are formulated as something personal. That little personal issue with a question is often enough to motivate one's entire attention. Such is the Old English proverb: The pain of the little finger is felt by the entire body.