

Among All Socratics, Is there a Single Socrates? Irony, Aporia, and the Cultivation of Courage

Seamus Mulryan

Ursinus College

In “Competing Pretenses,” Karl Joyner invites us to reorient Jonathan Lear’s discussion of ironic disruption in order to consider how the productive effect of “contradictory prescriptions for action” might illuminate new pedagogical ends for students. More specifically, Joyner worries that the Socratic method as it is commonly practiced in classrooms (which Joyner notes, rightfully, isn’t always Socratic), can lead to a kind of educational apathy, whereby students give up on the possibility of knowing anything; and this result runs counter to the primary aims of an education where knowing something is important. Rather than endure a permanent paralysis from the Socratic sting ray, Joyner argues that students - and teachers - must understand these moments of *aporia* as opportunities to see their understandings not as wrong but rather as incomplete, to unify competing pretenses of a practical identity, and to reaffirm these commitments with new understandings.

While the Socratic method as Joyner describes it is used in classrooms as a means of directly teaching about subject-matter or about deconstructing wrong-headed socially received ideas, Joyner wishes to refocus the aim of Socratic questioning on the ironic experience of students that arise from challenges to the knowledge informing their everyday lives, such that they might recommit to a way of life with greater understanding. In doing so, Joyner redirects Lear’s analysis of the practical identity of a student *as* student to the practical identities a student has in his or her “everyday life,” for example, being a Christian. The identities that would seem to be at play in ironic experience with any student in relation to their everyday practical identities are identities that are at the core of what makes one’s self intelligible—of who one is as a person. Consider how Lear describes the ironic moment as that time at which “I can no longer

make sense of myself ... in terms of my practical identity.”¹ I would add to this relationship between self-intelligibility and practical identity that these identities are also inextricable from one’s vision of living a good life.

We maintain particular identities because they accord with our vision of a good life, and any challenge to what we value as composing a good life becomes a threat to the intelligibility of one’s self.² In the example of the practical identity of being Catholic, being a good Catholic is important not necessarily because being a good Catholic is meaningful in itself, but because such an identity fits into a larger constellation of practical activities that comprise what I see to be a good life. Charles Taylor says these commitments provide people:

the frame within which they can determine where they stand on what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value ... [W]ere they to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were ... It’s what we call an “identity crisis” ... They lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance ... ³

It is not surprising, then, that Lear says the moment where we lose sight of the *telos* of our practical activity, a moment he calls ironic disruption, is perfumed with a sense of uncanniness, and he likens it to an event where Socrates stands in one spot through the entire night “not because he is too busy thinking but because he *cannot walk*, not knowing where his next step should be.”⁴

I would venture the claim that this is not an experience one necessarily welcomes without practice, instruction, or prior valuing of the experience, and this is especially true considering the effect ironic disruption has on one’s self-intelligibility. In fact, considering Lear’s ironic experience requires ironic disruption, I would say that the capacity for ironic disruption must be part of the practical identity of the student as student, in a classroom where Joyner’s pedagogy of competing premises is central. I would also say that what Lear wants to call a capacity for ironic disruption I would call courage, that that what Socrates aims to do is to educate his interlocutors in what I’ve called the courage of dialogue, and that the success of this aim is indicated precisely by whether

and to what degree Socrates' interlocutors leave in a state of not-knowing.⁵ To make these claims is also first to make a distinction from any claim that Socrates is centrally teaching about *knowing* what courage is, as it ostensibly appears to be, for example, in Plato's *Laches*, and second to say that the fact a dialogue ends in a stalemate is not all that strange or problematic as an aim of education.⁶ In *Laches*, Nicias never seems to experience the uncanniness of ironic disruption. So, while they might not come to any conclusion about how, exactly, to define courage, this end does not appear to affect them in such a way that they *cannot fight courageously*, that they cannot act in a manner generally prescribed by the concept under consideration. This absence of uncanniness is why I disagree with Joyner that Nicias experiences Lear's irony—there appears to be no ironic disruption. A stronger example of Lear's ironic disruption might be found in *Meno*. Meno explicitly declares that he no longer knows what to say about a subject he has held forth on, *that* being precisely the center of his practical identity—to know what to say about that subject—and that being the activity in which he is engaged at that moment. This experience is so strong for Meno that he likens it to being stung by a sting ray—something quite painful.⁷ This is the end result, and a successful one, of what Socrates says of his engagement with others: that “I infect them with the perplexity I feel myself.”⁸ In the end, Socrates succeeds with Meno; he becomes more courageous.⁹ And while this education is risky for student and teacher alike, it is an education that is worthwhile, because a student properly educated to have this kind of courage might give up on knowing anything *dogmatically*, and the primary risk I see of Joyner's proposal is that it does not militate against dogmatic understandings or cause one to invite a deep questioning of one's ideological commitments.¹⁰

Perhaps the error of Socratic questioning as it is problematically used by teachers, then, is not that it risks ending up in educational apathy and nihilism as Joyner contends but that teachers misunderstand the aim and means of Socratic seminar or misuse Socratic questioning, rightfully understood. Take as a counter example of this problem the third pillar of education in Mortimer Adler's *Paideia Proposal*.¹¹ Here, Adler advocates *maientic* or Socratic questioning as the primary instructional means in the seminar classroom, in which books

are discussed that answer questions with no definitive answers.¹² In such a classroom, the aim *is* for a student to come to the realization that there is no definitive answer for the kind of question being asked, and, in fact, any answer offered by a student as the one-and-only answer will quickly and easily be found to be wrong—not necessarily that the student’s entire answer is wrong but that the assumed status of that answer as the *one* answer, i.e., its status as a dogmatic answer, is wrong. Ideally, this leads not to educational apathy but educational curiosity about all of the answers one might find for a whole host of questions, and it invites students into a greater understanding of those questions through an array of competing answers encountered.

Adler’s aim of Socratic questioning also does not lead a student to believe that what he or she brings into the pedagogical situation is of little value, saving it from one of Joyner’s concerns. Rather, the student might find that others have thought similar things before, in diverse and richer ways, but that such an answer is situated in an ongoing conversation comprised of different answers to the central question of the text or seminar. It would achieve the aim Joyner seeks, that “students ... learn the concepts and understandings they bring into the classroom are not wrong, but rather incomplete, ready to be flushed out by thinking through contradictions and complexities.” Maybe Joyner’s concern, then, is not so much that Socratic questioning itself needs a correction but rather that the problematic educational practices he points to do not necessarily take as their aim “becoming human” in the way Lear means it—the educational aim that we learn to inhabit practical identity *well* by developing a capacity for ironic experience, a capacity I would call a virtue, namely courage.¹³ On this view, maybe Joyner’s solution is to help the teacher sail clear of the rocky shores of educational hopelessness and nihilism by encouraging them to keep Lear’s idea of irony in view, not as a primary end of Socratic questioning but as a potential salve to heal an infected torpedo fish sting that cannot heal on its own, if we believe it should be healed at all.

1 Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 18.

2 Seamus Mulryan, “Confronting Death: Cultivating Courage for Cross-Cultural Understanding,” (PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois, 2011), 66-85.

3 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27-28.

4 Lear, *A Case for Irony*, 34, emphasis original.

5 Mulryan, “Confronting Death,” 139-51; see also, “The Courage of Dialogue,” in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2010).

6 Plato, “Laches,” in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

7 Plato, “Meno,” in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 80a-b.

8 Ibid., 80c.

9 Mulryan, “Confronting Death,” 144.

10 I take up a similar question, specifically on the prospect of liberation from ideological commitments, in “Towards Deep Liberation: A Gadamerian Correction to Critical Pedagogy,” in *Philosophy of Education 2016*, ed. Natasha Levinson (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2018).

11 Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Program: An Educational Syllabus* (New York: NY: Touchstone Books, 1984).

12 Ibid., 20.

13 Lear, *A Case for Irony*, 37.