

Socrates, Cadmus, and the Case for Unphilosophical Parenting

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When my eldest son was in third grade, he started reporting that he was regularly eating doughnuts at school in the morning.¹ Neither my partner in these parenting decisions nor I hold any particular ill will towards doughnuts. They aren't exactly her sweet of choice—she comes from a family of chocolate worshippers and the quantity and quality of chocolate in doughnuts, even a chocolate doughnut with a chocolate glaze, just doesn't excite her. I, at least, can recognize their fatty and sweet appeal. But between her indifference and my range of food intolerances (curse you, my weak-stomached ancestors!), we fed our children doughnuts very rarely, making them almost exclusively a birthday treat (since our kids prefer them over birthday cake). But, of course, the main reason that the doughnut purchases were so rare was that we have been habituated in a parenting culture that induces feelings of guilt and shame when feeding children high-calorie, high-fat, high-sugar snacks.

In the part of red state America in which I lived, many of the parents at our children's school had no such hang-ups. Oddly, they seemed to think that pleasure was a sufficient reason to feed their children doughnuts. I envied those parents. Oh—what it must be like to let one's children eat inexpensive, convenient treats without suffering waves of existential angst about one's moral failure as a parent!

So, back to my son's school, where doughnuts, so he claimed, had seemingly become a staple of daily classroom life. Perhaps my doughnut-deprived son had an active imagination, compensating for

the scarcity of doughnuts in his home. Putting to use the detective skills I had cultivated from watching *Law and Order*, I made some subtle yet tactical inquiries. I learned that one generous parent was in the habit of dropping off doughnuts occasionally—though not each morning—for the teachers and my son’s class.

At least two options presented themselves to my delighted son’s parents. We could either do something—protest or resist—or do nothing and opt to let our son eat according to the parenting standards apparently prevalent at his school. Indeed, most tricky parenting dilemmas can be reduced to this simple choice of whether to agitate, going against the grain, or to embrace, or at least tolerate, the practices of one’s parenting culture.

For many parents who view doughnuts as a special treat rather than a daily dietary staple, the choice might be clear: firmly state to the teacher or an administrator that we don’t want our child eating a doughnut instead of the lunch we laboriously prepared (ensuring that all the food groups were duly represented, in precise proportions to whatever food pyramid or other nutritional advice was then in vogue). Just as I envy the parents who serve their children doughnuts without much thought, I envy those uninhibited parents who don’t hesitate to ruffle feathers and follow their principles of parenting wherever they might lead, whomever they might inconvenience, and regardless of the delectable treat they might snatch out of the mouth of every eight-year-old in their child’s class.

I was deeply ambivalent about the doughnut dilemma. I very much preferred that my son would not eat doughnuts regularly. And, yet, I wondered if a doughnut was really so bad. After all, the teachers and the school’s administration did not have concerns about these treats. My son—and presumably each of his classmates as well—had no problem at all with the situation. Was it better to go to the teacher and principal and try to convince them that there was something wrong with the situation,

and that they should change their school policies about these sorts of things as a result?

The field of philosophy of education has recently become quite interested in philosophical questions about parenting. The PES conference has featured general sessions on parenting each of the past two years, a book panel on *Philosophical Presentations of Raising Children* last year, and the field has produced a range of publications on the topic over the past 15 years.² I think that this work is of great value—it both illuminates the nature of parenting today by exploring and challenging tacit assumptions of the contemporary parenting ethos, and it offers frameworks for philosophically-inclined parents to make better parenting choices. In this paper, I hope to contribute to this area of work by broadly distinguishing two paradigms for parents' decision-making—one that is broadly philosophical and another which is less so. I then, counter to my personal disposition towards parenting and my professional training, defend the legitimacy of parenting unphilosophically.

SOCRATES AND CADMUS: TO FIGHT THE CURRENT OR RIDE THE TIDE?

As someone who has spent a career in the field of educational philosophy, part of me was and is inclined to agitate, to question, to make sure that a given school policy at my children's school is reasonable. After all, at the heart of philosophy is a contrariness, a challenge to the predominant cultural assumptions and practices; a concern for what we *ought* to do rather than an endorsement for what is currently being done. I call this philosophical paradigm for making parenting decisions “Socratic” because Socrates was the ultimate contrarian, an agitator so annoying that even his most admiring follower called him a “gadfly.”

Socrates wasn't subtle about showing people the errors of their ways and their thinking. He was inclined to confront people publicly, "those who think they are wise, but are not," and he seems to have taken some pleasure from making people appear foolish. His students did too, he admits, because seeing such men exposed is "not unpleasant."³

With Socrates as the model philosopher, is it any wonder that I was reluctant to march into school and demand changes to their snack policy? After all, the Athenians had their revenge for Socrates' agitation, putting him on trial and condemning him to death. Even though capital punishment was an option where I lived, no one would have condemned me to death over doughnuts (at least not for getting doughnuts banned at school; my state's love affair with doughnuts may have led to state action if I applied my anti-doughnut crusade more broadly). But to advocate for a new policy, to try to create change, would have been a Socratic thing to do.

Socratic parents think that it's all too easy to be lulled into cultural assumptions about what we ought to teach our children to value, or how we ought to interact with our children. It is the Socratic parent's job to question society's priorities—the Socratic parent might very well consider doing so to be the most important aspect of parenting. Socratic parents take responsibility for their children's moral formation rather than letting other parents, teachers, or mass media have an outsized influence. The Socratic parent would say to me, "you've made a decision about whether your child should arbitrarily eat doughnuts in the morning. You decided that it ruins your kid's appetite and contains a lot of delicious but unnecessary calories. Grow a backbone! Tell the teachers that you don't want your kid eating those doughnuts. It matters not a whit if every child, every parent, and every teacher in that school hates you for calling for a ban of treats at school. It matters not if, instead of adopting a new policy for all children, the administration decides that everyone else can still eat doughnuts, but

that your son will opt out, and must then watch his friends eat while he sits in class and curses you. The Socratic parent does not fear the child's, his friends', other parents', or teachers' disapproval or wrath. Parenting isn't about ensuring that you fit in with the other parents or that your kids think you're hip, it's not a popularity contest. It's about making good choices for the benefit of your child and your family."

Essentially, Socratic parents take on an endless battle against their society, other parents, and sometimes against their own children. But that is the cost of being the kind of parent who examines cultural assumptions and strives to make autonomous decisions. The value of parenting in the Socratic paradigm probably needs no further justification for readers of this paper. The value of autonomous reasoning and contrariness is central to acting philosophically, and I expect most attendees at this conference would endorse it. But what of the unphilosophical alternative? Could one justifiably accept one's cultural ethos and make parenting decisions that adhere to a community's desires and expectations?

I will name this unphilosophical alternative Cadmatic, after the mythical founder of Thebes. To be fair to Cadmus, he wasn't merely a "roll with the punches" kind of Greek hero. He accomplished quite a lot. After a fruitless search for his sister, Europa, who had been abducted by Zeus, Cadmus could not return to his childhood kingdom. He set out to find a place to live. At last, with the help of a companionable realtor from Delphi, he found an ideal spot, with a lovely, flowing spring of fresh water nearby. Unfortunately, the realtor had failed to mention that that the spring was guarded by a dragon. To make matters worse, that dragon was favored by the cantankerous god of war, Ares. Yet the contract for the property had been signed and the funds had already been wired, so Cadmus headed over to the spring with the possibility of a particularly gruesome death looming. Cadmus, however, battled and eventually slayed

the dragon.

The goddess Athena popped by to congratulate him, and told him to plant the dragon's teeth in the ground. Those teeth quickly grew into human warriors, some of whom killed one another, but the five survivors became Cadmus' guard and Thebes went on to flourish. Cadmus married Harmonia, a daughter of Ares and Aphrodite, and he married his own daughter, Agavê, to one of the five "earth-born." (Ares, feeling generous, forgave Cadmus for killing the dragon after only a brief, eight-year sentence of servitude.)

It's the advice that Cadmus gives to Agavê's son, his grandson Pentheus, that makes him an exemplar of the "ride the tide" framework of parenting. In Euripides' play, *Bacchae*, we find Cadmus enjoying his retirement.⁴ Pentheus has ascended to the kingship. Pentheus is a law-and-order, no nonsense kind of king and everything seems to be going well in Thebes. His subjects respect authority, there is food aplenty, fresh water (since Cadmus had cleared up that nasty little dragon problem), and everyone dutifully worships the Olympian gods. Since everything is going swimmingly, Pentheus feels great about the job he's doing.

But one day a foreigner arrives in town. This foreigner has long blond locks, and he smells terrific. All the women swoon over him and, Pentheus hears, the foreigner tells the women that he'll initiate them into secret rituals. The women—even his own mother and aunt—follow the foreigner out to the forests to worship a new, foreign god, Dionysus. Pentheus cannot bear the thought of the women engaging in these Bacchic rites, which involve ecstatic, drunken dancing and, he assumes, sexual liberties (something that particularly angers and fascinates him).

The choice that Pentheus faces is this: he put much effort into preserving a stable, orderly society—where the traditional Greek gods are worshipped, and where women act modestly and stay at home. Now,

some good-looking, sweet talking, exquisitely perfumed guy rolls into town, promoting a new god who wants everyone—particularly the women—to drink, dance, and let loose. Pentheus even doubts that Dionysus is a real god. Sure, he’s heard of him, and sure, people in far off lands worship him, but no right-minded Greek has ever done so. Why should Pentheus embrace Dionysus, especially when Dionysus’s P.R. guy has already inspired the women to act in uncustomary and worrisome ways?

What does Cadmus have to do with all this? I’m glad you asked. Cadmus, and the Theban seer, Tiresias, enter the stage early in the play and advise Pentheus to worship Dionysus and let the women go off to participate in the mysteries. Indeed, Tiresias and Cadmus not only think that the new god should be tolerated, they don Bacchic dress themselves—wearing animal skins, an ivy wreath, and carrying a thyrsus, a special staff unique to Dionysus and his followers. Once attired, they head off to the mountains to dance.

As a seer, Tiresias knows that Dionysus is actually a god. Cadmus faces a tougher decision. Cadmus advises Pentheus not to breach custom.⁵ This is an odd sort of thing to say. Why would it breach custom or law (the Greek word *nomos* can mean either) to worship a *new* deity? What Cadmus seems to be getting at is that Pentheus ought to recognize the limits of human knowledge. Pentheus puts much faith in reason, but with respect to the gods, he cannot hope to understand everything. Sometimes when your community embraces a new deity, and a new kind of religious practice, it’s best to go right along with them. Even if Cadmus might look ridiculous as an elderly man in a costume of animal pelts and ivy, he’ll be the first to lead others to the mountain to dance. Cadmus insists that stability comes not from adhering rigidly to principles, but by staying in tune with your culture’s ethos.

Rather than question, agitate, and resist like Socrates, Cadmatic

parents make parenting decisions with reference to the time and place in which they live. The Cadmatic parent makes decisions in line with cultural assumptions of what good parenting entails. If most people in your kids' school are fine with regular doughnut treats, the Cadmatic parent says, that's fine for your kid too. The Cadmatic parent might even drop off some doughnuts for the classroom.

Let's set aside doughnuts and consider another example with somewhat higher stakes, one that I know concerns many of my friends, and large segments of the population, at least given the extensive media coverage of the following cases. Parents in Florida, Maryland, and South Carolina have faced criminal charges of child neglect for permitting their children (ages ranging from six to ten) to roam and play unaccompanied by adults.⁶ Lenore Skenazy wrote an editorial about allowing her nine-year-old to ride the subway alone in New York and was promptly censured, labelled "World's Worst Mom."⁷ The parents in the Maryland case are particularly noteworthy. They ran afoul of authorities in December of 2014 for letting their ten and six-year-old children explore their neighborhood together, without supervision. And in April of 2015, the children were taken to Child Protective Services again for being unaccompanied. Now that's some Socratic parenting. Those parents made a decision (a) that independence was important for their children's development, and (b) that there was no reasonable threat to their children's safety in their neighborhood, so (c) there was no justifiable reason to keep them indoors when they could roam outside. Those parents recognized that other people in their community believed that children of ten and six always need to be supervised, but they persisted in following their principles. (Alas, after the second incident, they seemed to understand that the biggest threat to the children was Child Protective Services, which had frightened the children—and their parents—by keeping them isolated from each other, well into the night, and now feel that they couldn't put their children at

risk of being *taken by CPS* again.⁸)

This is perhaps a quintessential example of Socratic parenting—knowing that one’s belief about children’s independence is a cultural outlier but still parenting according to that belief. Cadmatic parents who want their children to cultivate independence, on the other hand, might opt for culturally uncontroversial activities like long periods of unsupervised play and exploring within the home, or in one’s yard. Though unsupervised play at home might not seem to go very far towards cultivating independence, in an era in which children are shuttled from one organized activity to another, the Cadmatic parent may very well be making a reasonable decision within the current cultural ethos.

THE BENEFITS OF CADMATIC PARENTING

With all due respect to Socratic parents, most of the decisions into which they invest their time, energy and sanity won’t make any difference in what kind of human being their child becomes. Say a studious Socratic parent wants to do a little research to aid them in their mission to recognize tacit, detrimental cultural assumptions. Perhaps they would be interested in the cultural assumptions in other countries. There is a slew of books on cross-cultural parenting that will give you insights into better parenting from the French, the Danes, the Dutch, indigenous peoples, the Finns, the Poles, South Koreans, and others.⁹ Reading about how French parents think about food, for example, might make us question why we seem to think it necessary to feed kids every few hours throughout the day (let alone the bonus third grade doughnuts).¹⁰ The fact that American children effectively snack all day and are thus never very hungry accounts, at least in part, for why American children are much more reluctant to try new foods, and much pickier eaters, compared to French children, so Socratic parents might learn from their reading.

But suppose then that a Socratic parent recognizes that American assumptions about the need to stuff one's children ceaselessly, as though we were fattening them up for the witch in the gingerbread house, are absurd. The Socratic parent might identify those beliefs about snack-nutrition as ill-founded, unjustified, and not at all rationally compelling. What would happen to that American Socratic parent who tried to adopt French eating practices in America?

First, eliminating snacks from the life of the child of Socratic parents would be a Herculean task, unless the child is home-schooled. At virtually every institution in which the child finds herself, she will be prodded to eat. (Who came up with the idea that five-year-olds needed snacks at the half-time of their soccer games?) Second, even if the Socratic parent managed to eliminate snacking from his child's daily routine, that change (even if accompanied by others) would have little effect on his child's eating habits. It would be a proverbial drop in the American bucket of eating practices.

James Stigler and James Hiebert observed how some teachers, inspired by teaching practices in other countries, tried to adopt new practices in their classrooms. These changes often failed to achieve their desired effect because they were diluted and sometimes transformed in the American classroom ecosystem. Stigler and Hiebert give this particularly apt analogy: Albert Shanker was touring a housing project that hosted Jews from African and Arabic countries. As part of the resettlement program, the families were taught American customs and traditions. Many of these people had eaten on the ground in their home countries, so they were given tables so that they could become accustomed to eating in the American style. Shanker walked into the dwelling of a family from Yemen. They had indeed been successfully convinced to eat from the table, but that table was upside down, legs in the air, while the family

surrounded it on the ground.¹¹ So many of the decisions that Socratic parents make—hoping to impact their children’s beliefs, commitments, and practices—will be overwhelmed by the community in which they raise their children. The choice, to me, seems obvious: if you want your child to eat like the French, or to be happy like the Danes, you should probably move to France or Denmark and raise your children there.

This first argument in favor of Cadmatic parenting is therefore that, in most cases, parenting decisions matter very little. Despite the amount of time Socratic parents might invest in their counter-cultural attack on screen time, or on participation trophies, or on bottle-feeding, the effect on the child’s future is negligible. I call the Cadmatic view unphilosophical because there is a philosophical tradition in which every instance of a child’s life is filled with significance. From Plato worrying about the stories children are told, to Rousseau insisting that you can hand a child a toy the wrong way (“it is better to carry the child to the object than to bring the object to the child”), philosophers have argued that most events in a child’s life are far more impactful than people recognize.¹² To say that most decisions won’t make much of a difference might strike one as an abhorrent, craven, cowardly submission to accepting the world as it is, rather than how it ought to be. And yet, in defense of the Cadmatic parent, even if we want to change the world, our parenting decisions probably have a negligible impact on either our child or the world.

The second argument in favor of Cadmatic parenting is that Socratic parenting can be exhausting. Some people seem to be rejuvenated when confronting others, when advocating, when agitating. But some Socratic parents, feeling-duty bound to be in a constant state of vigilance, are forever on guard for damaging ideas and influences from which they must protect their children. Such a posture can be bad for the child—leading to a kind of intense surveillance of child’s life that

might be the philosophical equivalent of helicopter parenting. Third, in addition to Socratic vigilance possibly being bad for the child, it might also be bad for the parents. Spending too much time anxious about one's parenting can be damaging to one's psychological equilibrium. One study found that, at least for a certain subset of new mothers, reading parenting advice actually made them experience depressive symptoms, stress, and lower self-efficacy.¹³

But the Socratic parent might not be in a constant state of vigilance. Done well, Socratic parents might pick their battles, identifying only the most impactful for their children's character and well-being. The Socratic parent might recognize that most parenting decisions matter very little, but some matter very much. A parent who is never willing to articulate and defend important parenting decisions could very well be accused of shirking parental responsibility.

As I said at the outset of this paper, I am professionally and personally disposed to see Socratic parenting as the noble alternative. But I think that there's a case to be made for Cadmatic parenting. The parent who makes Cadmatic choices demonstrates humility. Cadmatic parents question their worthiness to be the arbiter of cultural assumptions about the good of children. Cadmatic parents have the humility to recognize that, while their decisions might have some effect, so much of the development of the child's character is not in their hands, and is instead in the hands of a society that might not be entirely irredeemable.

I have attempted only to argue that there might be something to be said in defense of Cadmatic parenting. Because most of the philosophy of education literature is aimed at making parents approach their parenting decisions philosophically, I thought that a defence of unphilosophical parenting is warranted. As for me, I hope that I have the courage to parent Socratically when the situation calls for it. But, for the record,

we never did end up advocating for a new snack policy. My son joyfully continued to eat doughnuts, alongside his friends.

1 I have made some changes to this story to protect the privacy of the well-meaning, dessert-loving, doughnut-supplying individuals in my child's life.

2 Stephanie Mackler, "Raising a Human: An Arendtian Inquiry into Child-rearing in a Technological Era," *Philosophy of Education Society 2017*, ed. Ann Chinnery; Amy Shuffleton, "The Monstrosity of Parental Involvement: Formation through Reading in Shelley and Rousseau," *Philosophy of Education Society 2018*, ed. Megan Laverty; Naomi Hodgson and Stefan Ramaekers, *Philosophical Presentations of Raising Children: The Grammar of Upbringing* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019). Judith Suissa has done more work in the area than anyone else. See, e.g. Judith Suissa, "Tough Love and Character Education. Reflections on Some Contemporary Notions of Good Parenting," *Pedagogical Culture* 1, no. 1 (2017): 115-131; Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa, *The Claims of Parenting: Reasons, Responsibility, and Society* (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London, New York: Springer Science & Business Media, 2011); Judith Suissa, "Constructions of Parents and Languages of Parenting," *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2010): 117-125; Judith Suissa, "Untangling the Mother Knot: Some Thoughts on Parents, Children and Philosophers of Education," *Ethics and Education* 1, no. 1 (2006): 65-77. See also, e.g., Lynne S. Wolbert, Doret J. de Ruyter, and Anders Schinkel, "What Attitude Should Parents have Towards Their Children's Future Flourishing?," *Theory and Research in Education* 16, no. 1 (2018): 82-97.

3 Plato, "Apology," trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, eds. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, Hackett: 1997), 33c.

4 Euripides, *Bacchae*, trans. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, Hackett: 1998).

5 *Ibid.*, lines 330-331.

6 Caitlin Schmidt, "Florida Mom Arrested After Letting 7-Year-Old Walk to the Park Alone," *CNN.com*, August 1, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/07/31/living/florida-mom-arrested-son-park/index.html>; Kelly Wallace, "Mom Arrested for Leaving 9-Year-Old Alone at Park," *CNN.com*, July 21, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/07/21/living/mom-arrested-left-girl-park-parents/index.html>; Andrea McCarren, "Parents in Trouble Again for Letting Kids Walk Alone," *USA Today*, April 13, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/13/parents-investigated-letting-children-walk-alone/25700823/>.

7 But, kudos to her, she turned the ordeal into a book deal. Lenore Skenazy, *Free-Range Kids: How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts with Worry)* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

8 Andrea McCarren, "Parents in Trouble Again for Letting Kids Walk Alone," *USA Today*, April 13, 2015.

9 Pamela Druckerman, *Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* (Penguin, 2014); J.J.; Alexander and I. Sandahl, *The Danish Way of*

Parenting: What the Happiest People in the World Know about Raising Confident, Capable Kids (London: Penguin, 2016); R.M. Acosta and M. Hutchison, *The Happiest Kids in the World: Bringing Up Children the Dutch Way* (New York: Random House, 2017); David F. Lancy, *Raising Children: Surprising Insights from Other Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Amanda Ripley, *The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013); Christine Gross-Loh, *Parenting Without Borders: Surprising Lessons Parents Around the World Can Teach Us* (New York: Penguin, 2014); Robert LeVine and Sarah LeVine, *Do Parents Matter? Why Japanese Babies Sleep Soundly, Mexican Siblings Don't Fight, and American Families Should Just Relax* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016).

10 Karen Le Billon, *French Kids Eat Everything: How Our Family Moved to France, Cured Picky Eating, Banned Snacking, and Discovered 10 Simple Rules for Raising Happy, Healthy Eaters* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2012).

11 James W. Stigler and James Hiebert, *The Teaching Gap: Best Ideas from the World's Teachers for Improving Education in the Classroom* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 107.

12 Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, eds. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), books II, III, and X; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1979), 66.

13 Victoria Harries and Amy Brown, "The Association Between Use of Infant Parenting Books that Promote Strict Routines, and Maternal Depression, Self-Efficacy, and Parenting Confidence," *Early Child Development and Care* (2017): 1-12.