

Lesson Plan 4: Socrates, justice, and a dialogue

The Civic Knowledge Project: Winning Words

Time: 1 hour

Abstract: Review *dialogue* and *rhetoric* before reading and discussing an adapted Socratic dialogue from the *Republic* of Plato; draw some of Socrates's characteristics out of the dialogue, and attempt to determine the nature of his task therein.

Recapitulation of *rhetoric* and *dialogue* (5-10 minutes)

Return to these ideas briefly and ensure that all students are up to speed.

Not knowing (10 minutes)

Inform students that they will now be reading a dialogue that takes place in ancient Athens, a city in Greece. This dialogue is a conversation recorded by a man named Plato, and involves a man named Socrates, who was Plato's teacher. Many people in Athens agreed that Socrates was a strange man with strange ideas. Ask students to pay close attention during the dialogue, and try to discern an answer to the question: what kind of person does Socrates seem to be? Inform them that, before they begin, you will share a few words uttered by Socrates that might help them understand his attitude in the dialogue. Ask students to record the quote "*The only thing that I know is that I know nothing at all.*" Allow students to ponder this quote briefly, reminding them that when doing philosophy, patience is required to understand complicated ideas.

Reading the dialogue (from *Republic* Bk. I)¹ (20 minutes)

Before reading, ask a few students to recapitulate the class rules for discussion, and remind them to be polite and respectful during the reading. Assigning roles might be necessary for the dialogue if the class is small, but in large classes, popcorn reading is advised. Using this method, students must all follow along as the arbitrarily-chosen reader speaks a line aloud. If the student stumbles, encounters trouble, or is embarrassed or shy, thank him or her and move to another speaker. Inform all students that it is important that they each understand every line. If a student does not understand a line, he or she should raise his or her hand and say "repeat!" and the line will be repeated. Ask students to refrain from questions or comments until the dialogue has been read twice by the class, and everyone has some idea of what it is about.

Socrates: Dear friend, Cephalus! What do you consider to be the greatest blessing that you have from all of your money?

Cephalus: Well, Socrates, when a man is old, he thinks about the life he has lived and what he has done to other people. It is important to return what you have borrowed, not to lie to anyone, to have treated everyone with justice – to have lived a good life.

Socrates: But what is justice? Does it mean that you should never tell lies and always pay back what you have borrowed? That seems to be what you said. Or, is justice something more than that? Are there any exceptions to justice? For example, suppose that a friend lends me

¹ Modified by Samuel Cohn for very young readers. Do not feel restricted to this simplified version if your students can handle more complex text.

his weapons. A few days later, this friend becomes very upset and very angry about something, and he asks me to return his weapons to him because he needs to use them. Now, I know that it is very dangerous to use a weapon when upset or angry. Also, if he wants weapons because he is upset or angry, then he probably wants to use them to hurt someone. But the weapons belong to him, so according to your definition of justice, I should give them back to him. But what if I know that if I give them back he'll use them to hurt someone or to hurt himself? Should I still give them back to him in order to be just?

Cephalus: Good point, Socrates. You are quite right – you shouldn't give the weapons back to him.

Socrates: So then, speaking the truth and paying back what you owe is not the correct definition of justice.

Polemarchus: No, wait, Socrates – that *is* the correct definition of justice.

Socrates: Polemarchus! So now you are stepping in to this discussion! What do you think the correct definition of justice is?

Polemarchus: That giving back what you have borrowed is justice, just as my father said. Cephalus was right!

Socrates: I don't quite understand. So I should return the weapons to their owner when he asks for them, no matter what?

Polemarchus: Yes!

Socrates: But don't you agree that it is dangerous for a person to use weapons when he is angry, and so I should not give my friend back his weapons if he wants to use them while he is angry?

Polemarchus: Certainly not! Even though they are his weapons, and you owe them to him, it would be too dangerous

Socrates: So when your father, Cephalus, said that giving back to a friend what belongs to him is justice, he didn't think of this exception to his rule?

Polemarchus: My father thinks that a friend should always do good things for his friend no matter what. And letting your friend have his weapons when he is angry would be bad for him.

Socrates: So it seems we have a different idea now of what justice is. At first, we thought that justice is giving to each what belongs to him, and what we owe to him. But now you say that justice is doing good to your friends. You seem to think that what we owe to our friends is to do what is good for them, even if that means that sometimes, in order to do good to them, we do not give back what belongs to them.

Polemarchus: Yes.

Socrates: What do we owe to our enemies, then? If justice means that we owe good things to our friends, and enemies are the opposite of friends, does justice mean that we should give our enemies harm? Is it just to harm our enemies – since it is just to do good to our friends?

Polemarchus: That seems right, I think.

Socrates: But is it ever just to harm anyone?

Polemarchus: No, of course not. Doing justice to others means not harming them, even if they are our enemies!

Socrates: So we have a problem again. This is much more complicated than it was when we started, and no definition of justice seems to be good so far.

Discussion (20 minutes)

Discussion will of course vary class to class. Start off by asking students if they can identify what the main question of the dialogue is. Younger students in particular will likely see the dialogue as a story about two people disagreeing. It is important to first bring all students around to understanding that the three are interested in the question of justice, and that Socrates's questions are in pursuit of the definition. During discussion, be sure that students always reference their reason for thinking what they express. Even at the risk of being boring, keep discussion exegetical and focused on understanding the positions of the three characters, and in particular the style of Socrates. Push the students to identify his goal, to understand that he does not seem to have any opinion himself on the matter.

Raise again the quote about knowing nothing. Does Socrates's behavior in the discussion help us understand why he would say "the only thing I know is that I know nothing"?

Word of the day: Socrates (10 minutes)

Socrates. So far as the students know, Socrates is a man who has a very strange style of arguing. He has opinions about the matter of justice, but only expresses them by telling other people that they are wrong, and identifying the matter as a complex one. Inform students that Socrates is considered to be a philosopher, and a lover of wisdom, who thinks that he "knows nothing."

Closing

Ask students to review their notebooks at home, contemplate the character of Socrates, and share some facts about his personality with their parents. Next week, they will encounter him again, and try to discern more about his personality and way of life.