

Lesson Plans 8: Hypotheticals and Socratic interrogation

The Civic Knowledge Project: Winning Words

Time: 1 hour

Abstract: Learn and discuss the inductive method used in the *Meno* and explained in the *Theaetetus*; discuss the concept of “testing” ideas for their truth-value.

Review of *hypothetical* (20 minutes)

Brainstorm as a class some abstract questions with which people are faced every day. Ethical questions, in particular, or questions about how to approach some specific event or set of circumstances, are useful (“How should teachers deal with classroom troublemakers?” or “How should parents talk to their kids about school?”) Divide students again into small groups (something to do more often as the final presentation approaches, particularly if the class is large and will need to be divided up for that task) and have each group construct a hypothetical situation that teaches some answer to one of the questions. Have students dramatize their solution in the form of a brief performance for the class, beginning with an introduction (“let’s just say...”) that assists the class in understanding the skit.

Review of the *Meno*, and the task of *induction* (25+ minutes)

Review with students Socrates’s unfulfilled goal of arriving at a proper definition of virtue. What was he trying to do by finding the one thing that all of Meno’s expressed virtues had in common? Write “midwifery” on the board, and ask students if they’ve heard this term before. Explain the term to students, and explain that Socrates referred to himself as a midwife. Have the class read an excerpt from the *Theaetetus*¹ in which Socrates explains his task. Explain to students that Socrates once had this exchange with a young man during a discussion about wisdom.

Theaetetus: I have often tried to think about this problem, when I have heard about the questions you ask people. But, I can never come to an answer that I find to be good. I can’t stop worrying about this.

Socrates: Yes! These are pains of childbirth, dear Theaetetus. It is not because you are unable to have children, but it is because you are pregnant, that you feel this way!

Theaetetus: I don’t know about that, Socrates!

Socrates: Did you know that I am the son of a midwife? Did you know that my mother’s job was midwifery?

Theaetetus: Oh yes, I’ve heard that before.

Socrates: And, have you ever heard that I am also a midwife, myself?

Theaetetus: No, I certainly have not! All you do is go around asking questions.

¹ Bernard Williams, trans., *Plato’s Theaetetus* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992). Adapted for young readers by Samuel Cohn.

Socrates: But I do, believe me! Only don't give me away to the rest of the world, okay? You see, my friend, it is a secret that I have this ability. That is not one of the things you hear people saying about me, because they don't know it. But they say I am a very odd sort of person, always causing people to get into difficult situations. Have you heard about that?

Theaetetus: Oh yes, I have.

S: Shall I tell you what the explanation of this is?

T: Oh yes. Please do, Socrates.

S: Well, think about what a midwife does, and you will see what I mean. You know, I suppose, that women never are midwives while they are still young enough to have babies. They only do it when they are too old to have babies of their own.

T: Oh yes, that seems right.

S: Midwives, because they work with women who are pregnant, are very good at telling when a woman is pregnant. This makes sense, right?

T: Oh yes.

S: Well, the work of a midwife is very important, but it is not as important as my own work. My own work is a little bit different. I work with men, and not women.² And, rather than watching over the labor of their bodies, I watch over their souls. The most important part of my job is to apply all possible tests to their babies, and determine whether they have given birth to an error, or to truth. However, one thing that I have in common with ordinary midwives is that I am unable to have babies of my own—I have no wisdom. The complaint that is always said about me is that I am always bothering other people with questions. But this is because the god says that I must. When I ask people questions, they often make lots of progress, and give birth to many great ideas. You see, I do not teach anything; I only help people give birth. However, these people often leave me too soon after giving birth. This is very harmful to them, because it means that they never get a chance to tell if their baby is the truth or a lie.

Discussion; word of the day: *induction*

Remind students of Socrates's questions in the *Meno*, and inquire as to what "baby" Socrates was trying to help Meno give birth to. Have them write "induction" in their notebooks, and explain that Socrates often liked to use this method as a tool in his midwifery. Explain that Socrates would attempt to use specific situations to come to general conclusions. Illustrate this with some examples, and refer to some student ideas from last week about virtue, urging students to use induction to

² I have preserved Socrates's sexism, as in last week's *Meno* in order to impart to students that, though insightful and worth reading about, Socrates was not a sage to be heeded unquestioningly. Hopefully, when students employ his method in their final performance, they will demonstrate that they have improved upon it in this and in other ways.

come to general conclusions about virtue. Can any students illustrate what might have occurred if Socrates had used his method to come to the same conclusion? Why would this make Socrates “not a teacher”? Attempt to lead students to understand that induction makes use of information that is already present in specifics to come to new general conclusions.

If there is time, ask students to explain the last part of this dialogue: what does Socrates mean when he says that somebody’s “baby” might be “a lie”? How long would someone have to stay with Socrates in order to test out all their ideas? Could they ever go home?

What is a lie? (10 minutes)

Ask students to assemble in pairs, discuss, and share.

Closing

Next class, students will be discussing “big ideas.” Think about what makes virtue or justice a “big idea,” and why some ideas are “bigger” or “smaller” than others.