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Can Excellence Be Taught?

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Can Excellence Be Taught?

By
Derek Turner

Tonight I would like to invite you to join me in thinking about a question that Plato raised in his dialogue, the *Meno*. Can excellence be taught? At the end of the *Meno*, Socrates says that if there were a person who could teach virtue, or excellence, such a teacher would be “a solid reality among shadows” (100a). What did he mean by that?

As you may know, Socrates was later brought to trial and sentenced to death for corrupting the youth of Athens. To corrupt another person is to make that person worse. A teacher of excellence, on the other hand, would be someone who improves other people. So Socrates is really saying that a person who improves the youth would be “a solid reality among shadows.”

When I first began thinking in a serious way about the question whether excellence can be taught, something seemed right about the idea that our job as teachers is to improve other people. Perhaps many of you students would agree that if you are not somehow improved during your time at the college, then you will not have gotten your money’s worth. But what does it mean to improve another person? If you ask that question, you are asking what makes a person better or worse, or what makes a person’s life go well or badly. You are asking the oldest and deepest philosophical question of all. How should we live? And what makes for a good life? Needless to say, people have lots of different and often conflicting views about how to answer this question.

As a teacher, I may try to improve other people, but if I do that, I can’t help presupposing certain views about what counts as improvement. The most I can do is to try to improve other people by my own lights. And how, in the face of disagreement, can I be sure that my views about what it means to live a good life are correct? Who among us really knows what it means to become a better person? Whose views about these things will survive rational criticism? Who has the wisdom? If anyone did, that person would be a solid reality among shadows.

Long ago, Plato appreciated this philosophical problem about teaching and used it to structure his dialogue, the *Meno*. Right at the beginning of that dialogue, Meno asks

Socrates whether excellence can be taught. Socrates's immediate response is that before we can even begin to address that question, we first have to figure out what excellence is. And Socrates admits that he has no idea. He and Meno discuss the nature of excellence for awhile, but as usual, the discussion goes round and round and does not produce any stable conclusions.

I have been thinking a lot lately about how to make this problem go away, and I would like to try an idea out on you. As much as I love and admire Plato, I think his own attempt to solve this problem is a mess. It involves supernatural forms, immortal souls, and things along those lines. As a science-oriented secular humanist, I can't accept that metaphysical stuff. Even worse, Plato's attempted solution also involves the mysterious idea that learning is nothing but remembering what you already know.

When Plato thinks about teaching, he thinks about it in terms of one person doing something to another person. Socrates gets accused of corrupting the youth. The accusation is that he has done something harmful to his young followers. Meno asks whether it is possible to improve the youth. That is a question about whether it is possible for one person to do something to benefit another. Plato is stuck in the cognitive rut of thinking that one person always has to be the agent, and one has to be the patient. What he doesn't get is that many of the most important things we do in life are not things we do *to* each other or *for* each other, nor even things that we do for ourselves, but rather things that we do together *with* each other. When Plato talks about excellence, it is always about one person making another more or less excellent. It never really occurs to him to think of becoming excellent as something that we do together, with each other.

There is not really any difference between the endeavor to become excellent, and the endeavor to figure out what excellence is. There is just one endeavor here that we can describe in two different ways. The idea that I want to try out on you is that this endeavor is and has to be a joint one. In a liberal arts classroom, we are trying to improve ourselves together, and trying to figure out together what excellence is. A liberal arts classroom is, or should be, a community of joint inquirers and improvers. Again, the inquiring and the improving are two aspects of the same thing. And when I talk about a joint endeavor here, I mean that in a strong sense. I don't just mean that I try to do something and you try to do the same thing. I mean that we together try to do

something together, where the togetherness is essential. Excellence is always spread out across personal relationships.

At his trial, Socrates insisted that he had “never been anyone’s teacher.” For Socrates, it was a point of pride that he had never accepted any money in exchange for teaching. He was trying to distance himself from the sophists. They were a group of traveling intellectuals who charged exorbitant fees in exchange for teaching privileged young people statecraft, rhetoric, and everything else they would need in order to be successful so that they could afford to hire sophists for their own kids in the future.

I have often worried that we liberal arts college professors are far more like the sophists than like Socrates. We take your money, or your parents’ money, and in exchange we purport to give you a good start in life. That’s exactly what the sophists did. I don’t know about your parents, but my father retired a few years ago from a long career as an accountant, and to this day he talks about my education and my brother’s as investments. Every time something good happens to us, he says, “It’s nice to see that the investment in you boys’ education paid off.” That is exactly how the parents in ancient Athens thought about the money they forked over to the sophists. The sophists stood for the idea that education is a business. They were just charging money for a service.

That is not what a liberal arts college should be about. We are not sophists. We don’t have to choose between Socrates and the sophists, because both made the mistake of thinking of improvement as something that one person does to another. Suppose for a moment that we give up on that idea and replace it with the idea that improvement and inquiry are things that we do together. Then your tuition is not like the money that parents in ancient Athens paid to the sophists. Instead, it is the price of admission to a community of joint improvers and inquirers.

This philosophy of liberal arts education might seem too egalitarian. What about the asymmetry of the relationship between professors and students? You students have to pay to belong to this community, but we professors get paid to belong to it. You write the papers and take the exams, and we give the grades. Why would these differences exist in a community of co-inquirers? Socrates was right in thinking that a teacher must have a certain sort of expertise. But he was wrong about the nature of that expertise. He thought that a teacher would have to be an expert on the nature of excellence. That sets

the bar impossibly high. In my view, a teacher's expertise has more to do with setting up the conditions in which a joint inquiry can take place. That is something we teachers can try to do well even without knowing, and without pretending to know the meaning of life.

This honors and awards ceremony is first and foremost a celebration of your individual academic and ethical excellence. We're here to recognize your talents, your conscience, and your hard work. I want to leave you with my warmest congratulations for your individual successes and my best wishes for the future. I also want to leave you with a new way of thinking about the significance of this Honors and Awards Ceremony. We might think of it as a way of acknowledging and celebrating your commitment to the shared project of inquiry and improvement. Your individual successes are the best evidence of that commitment.

I hope you all have a wonderful evening filled with good conversation with family, friends, and fellow improvers and inquirers. Congratulations.