

Teaching Socrates to First-year Philosophy Students in Iran, Based on Plato's *Euthyphro*

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Abstract

Is it possible to teach philosophy to first-year philosophy students in a way similar to the one Socrates used to teach his interlocutors in the early dialogues? Socrates conducted challenging discussions in the *agora* of Athens; he began with examining everyday routine concepts, subjected his interlocutors to scrutiny—ἐλεγχος—showed the contradictions in their thinking, and often finally arrived at both his and their ignorance. The starting point of this paper is whether it is possible to teach Socratic philosophy following the Socratic Method. Here, we defend this possibility based on our practical experience of teaching Plato's *Euthyphro* to first-year students. In particular, the first author taught three groups of first-year philosophy students, for three semesters—Autumn 2016, Spring and Autumn 2017—in the Department of Philosophy at ATU (Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran).

The paper is organised in three parts. The first part looks at the importance of this project for learning philosophy in general. The second part describes briefly the practical details of teaching and management of this class teaching. Finally the last part analyses precisely the outcomes of this project on the basis of our experience, both in regard to *Euthyphro* as a 'Socratic' dialogue on the one hand, and also as a dialogue on the subject-matter of 'piety', on the other hand.

Introduction

In order to highlight the importance of this project, we raise three questions: Why was this new plan introduced for first-year students in philosophy? Why did we choose 'Socratic philosophy' to introduce philosophy to first-year students? And why did we choose Plato's *Euthyphro* in order to do so?

In response to the first question, first-year students were chosen for this project because according to the set university curriculum, philosophy students in Iranian universities must pass a compulsory course on ancient Greek philosophy in the first two semesters. Therefore it was decided that the compulsory course would be complemented well by the *Euthyphro* course. This was the first time that Platonic philosophy was taught to first-year students through a Platonic text.

However, another, possibly more significant, reason was the similarity between the characters in Plato's Socratic dialogues and first-year students. Socrates' interlocutors are not philosophical characters, but are rather well-known in the social-political sphere and are generally keen on discussion. Although first-year students, unlike Socrates' interlocutors, are not specialists in any area, they similarly lack familiarity with philosophical

discussions, but they are generally keen to question received ideas.

As regards the second question, we chose a Socratic dialogue because of the importance of Plato's works as foundations of the western philosophical tradition which undoubtedly began with Socratic thought. Indeed, Socratic philosophy is the starting point of the history of philosophy, so we reasoned that students' familiarity with it could help them develop an accurate understanding of other western philosophies.

Thirdly, we chose *Euthyphro* among other Socratic dialogues because of its subject-matter, namely piety. This has a special relevance in Iranian society, where a religious atmosphere is dominant, while at the same time many Iranians grapple with challenging questions on such as divine law, religious ethics, the relation between religious injunctions and reason and many others. Therefore, it was anticipated that this dialogue would ensure students' engagement with the topic of piety and their active participation in discussions.

The conduct of the project

The first author, the MA student of philosophy at ATU, proposed this teaching plan to her supervisor, Dr. Ahmadali Heydari, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy at ATU in Spring 2016. Her

proposal was referred to the Department, which approved it for implementation in the autumn term 2016. Because it was the first time that such a project was carried out, the first author sought advice from the second author, who had previously taught Classical Greek to undergraduates at the University of Tehran and was also teaching Classical Greek to research fellows at the Encyclopaedia Islamica in Tehran.

Because of the importance of this project, it was decided that this project would form part of the compulsory first-year course 'Pre-Socratic philosophers and Plato' (History of Ancient Greek Philosophy I), usually offered in the first semester, rather than offering it as an extra-curricular course. The course 'Pre-Socratic philosophers and Plato' is a four-credit course, and the *Euthyphro* component was assigned 25% of the final grade.

The outcomes

This teaching project had a variety of useful outcomes, which are presented here in the form of points classified under two categories: **A.** the points under the first category relate to central problems of *Euthyphro* as a 'Socratic dialogue', like *aporia*, question-worthiness, *elenchus*, 'I know that I do not know' and so on. **B.** the points under the second category relate to *Euthyphro* as a Socratic dialogue 'on the subject matter of *piety*'.

A. The outcomes of teaching *Euthyphro* as a 'Socratic dialogue':

This part focuses on our experiences in connection with six central problems of any Socratic dialogue:

- I. Is *Euthyphro* a philosophical study or an open-ended story?
- II. The im/possibility of arriving at a certain answer to philosophical questions.
- III. The difficulty of coming to terms with 'All I know is that I know nothing'.
- IV. *Aporia*, logical impasse and frustration.
- V. Change of attitude.

We focus these points in more detail below.

I. Is *Euthyphro* a philosophical study or an open-ended story?

As we anticipated, the first feedback was rather negative. Plato's way of beginning the dialogue in terms of the scene of the dialogue (*agora*), (*Euthyphro*, 2a), the description of Meletus' appearances (2b), the narration of murder by Euthyphro's father (4d), Euthyphro's ability to foretell the future (3c), and so on, made students consider the beginning part of the dialogue an unimportant fictional introduction which they would rather rush through in order to arrive at the *philosophical* (according to them) parts. They understood the dialogue as an open-ended story. The Plato they encountered was completely different from the concept of 'philosopher' that they had had in mind previously.

However, as the reading progressed, students came to understand that in Plato's dialogues every detail is significant. After arriving at the *philosophical* (according to them) parts in the following pages, they observed the function of apparently superfluous descriptions for the illumination of the characters. They figured out that characters' philosophical ideas are not a catalogue of an inferior mind against Socrates' profound thought, but a series of philosophical problems in the dialogue with Socrates' thought.

Students declared that these apparently non-philosophical details render the understanding of *Euthyphro* more difficult. When they became familiar with the commentaries on Plato's philosophy, they figured out that the puzzle of the relationship between the philosophical and non-philosophical parts in Plato still remains a real question for any reader. Indeed, the question of how commentators should read Platonic dialogues if every incidental detail is potentially significant has always remained a challenge.

II. The im/possibility of arriving at a certain answer to philosophical questions

Before encountering the central question of the dialogue—what is *piety*?—we posed some problematic questions for students:

- Is it pious (or moral) for a son to prosecute his father? What is the criterion for a pious (or moral) action? If a person commits murder, should we take into account who the murderer and the victim are, and in which situation this murder was committed, or should a murderer be prosecuted in every situation irrespective of circumstances?

- Is there agreement among different religions on the criteria of piety and impiety? Could we identify any actions that are considered impious in *every* religion?

- What is the relation between piety and morality? Is every pious action moral and every impious action immoral?

- Why do we carry out religious practices? Is it to please God? Is it possible to please God?

In the discussion of these questions, students *really* tried to find a definitive answer. They strove to arrive at the 'one', 'right' and 'true' answer. As an instance, when we posed the question 'Is every pious action moral?' students expected to arrive at the 'one' direct answer 'Yes' or 'No'. They believed that 'affirmation' and 'rejection' are the only possible answers, and they felt compelled to resolve this problem to one side or the other of the dilemma. Even when they mistakenly believed to arrive at the definitive answer 'Yes' to the mentioned question, they attempted to continue the discussion in such a way that *every* exemplar of the pious actions is categorised under morality. Sometimes they faced counterexamples: they could not convince themselves to consider some pious actions, like 'prosecuting father' (according to the *Euthyphro*), as a moral action. However, they still tried to provide persuasive evidence for the rightness of their definitive answer 'Yes', showing that if a person commits murder, we should prosecute the murderer, without taking into account who the murderer is.

This approach was augmented by some aspects of the Iranian educational system: the most important measure of academic success is a final mark, and a numerical score reflecting the measure of students' achievement is obviously based on the number of 'right' answers. Indeed,

students' school experiences and the assessment/marking system have established and consolidated in their minds the underlying assumption that every question has one and only one right answer. Indeed, they believe that success is based on getting most answers right, whereas 'wrong' answers are penalised. On this basis, often after lengthy discussions on different problems in *Euthyphro*, they often asked: 'So what is the final, right conclusion?'

Faced with Socratic questions and the answers he proposes, students came to understand that we should not expect to arrive at a certain answer, as we do in mathematics. The answer to the question 'what is the relation between piety and morality?', even if it has a certain answer, does not carry the same certainty as $2 + 2 = 4$. We attempted to demonstrate that questioning is valuable *per se*; what makes Socrates' philosophy what it is the power of the question, not the power of the proof.

Students suggested that their quests for certainty are also due to the Socrates' questioning style: he asks questions as though he himself knows the answer, and then raises readers' expectations for a definitive answer. However, after reading *Euthyphro* as their first philosophical experience, they realised that the Socratic aim is nothing more than leading the interlocutor, and, by extension, his readers through the millennia, to the awareness of 'all I know is that I know nothing'.

III. The difficulty of coming to terms with 'All I know is that I know nothing'

When we asked students about the oracle of Delphi, most students claimed that this was a boring, repetitive question and that everyone, even with the least familiarity with philosophy, knows the answer. They knew that Socrates was the wisest man in Athens. He had no wisdom to sell and no claim to teach. But because God does not lie, Socrates was keen to find out if anyone knew what made life worthwhile because anyone who knew the answer to this question would surely be considered wiser than him. He reluctantly took up some investigations and eventually he concluded that neither he nor anyone else was really wise and knew anything worthwhile, with the difference that others thought that they knew something,

whereas he knew that he did not, which made him wiser than the rest, and therefore the oracle had told the truth.

Despite going over this story in detail, one of the difficulties we faced during the semester was that students thought that they had true knowledge of piety. Even after their conflicting answers to the question 'what is piety?' they found it very difficult to accept their ignorance. They could not accept that after 18 years (the age of most first-year undergraduates) of living in a country where religion is present almost everywhere, they could not even define what piety is.

However, in the face of *elenchus* or refutation as Socrates' mode of philosophising, students gradually developed the ability to detect the paradoxes of their answers, and then found themselves closer to the awareness of 'all I know is that I know nothing'. They declared that this experience made them both open-minded and frustrated at the same time.

We highlighted this experience as a holy moment in getting to grips with philosophy and as a first, necessary, step in entering the realm of philosophy: we only have a 'desire' or a 'liking' (*philia*) to know, but in fact, do not, nor can we ever know. 'All I know is that I know nothing' is what makes Socrates who he is, while it was the sophists' 'we know' that got Socrates killed. We suggested that students would do well not to belittle this first step: it could shape all their future philosophical thinking.

IV. Aporia, logical impasse and frustration

Approaching the dialogue's final pages, students understood that even Socrates himself was not able to put forward an 'inclusive/exclusive' definition for piety, and that this open-ended dialogue leaves readers with a number of puzzling questions. At this moment, they experienced the *aporia* which they had heard of before. However, this worthwhile experience frustrated them, not only with the subject-matter of 'piety' and their religious beliefs, but also with philosophy in general. They complained that philosophy would be suffering and painful in this way, and wondered why they chose to study philosophy if it leads to nowhere, except to more and more puzzling questions.

They were frustrated with Socrates' method for approaching philosophical problems, according to which the solution of a philosophical problem leads itself to a new problem. Faced with the Socrates' question 'Why do we carry out religious practices?' as an example, when students considered it acceptable to answer 'because carrying out religious practices pleases God', they were faced with the more challenging question 'Is it possible to please God?'

Here, students experienced the nature of philosophy as the art of questioning, where the authenticity lies in its 'journey', not arriving at the 'finish-line'. Although sometimes they observed Socrates' attempts to find a '*euporia*' as a finish-line of a philosophical problem, they experienced philosophising as progress and a fluctuation between both *aporia* and *euporia*. Students came to understand that every philosopher's philosophising, even Plato's himself, is made by moving constantly between these two points.

V. Change of attitude

Gradually change took place. After going through these stages with all their difficulties and tensions, the students' attitude began to change. They acknowledged the change of their perspectives not only towards the concept of 'piety' and their 'religious' beliefs, but also towards many other concepts that they had used daily and many beliefs that they had accepted uncritically. They also mentioned a domain of 'doubt' which, as they said, expanded by the day.

In this change of attitude, they figured out that 'doubt' is the prerequisite for clarity, and clarity is the prerequisite for the improvement of understanding, which is nothing more than a restatement of what they already believed to begin with. They realised that philosophy's starting point lies where ordinary issues are accepted unquestioningly by common people. A philosopher is not an extraordinary person removed from everyday human experiences; s/he is an ordinary person living an everyday life, but the difference between a philosopher and an ordinary person lies in the former's transcending attitude towards the world.

B: The outcomes of teaching Euthyphro as a Socratic dialogue 'on the subject-matter of piety':

Although Socrates' philosophy in itself could be an educational goal of a curriculum, we decided to present Socratic philosophy through *Euthyphro* which discusses the concept of 'piety'. The reason has already been explained: we chose it among other Socratic dialogues because of the religious atmosphere in Iran. In fact, we decided to create, for students, the experience of *aporia* through the examination of a challenging subject-matter which they think that they know, but they do not. Indeed, if we had chosen 'courageousness' (as the subject-matter of *Laches*), 'temperance' (as the subject-matter of *Charmides*) and so on, they might have admitted their ignorance more readily. However, when faced with the subject-matter of 'piety', we anticipated that they would not admit their ignorance easily.

Our discussions focused on various parts of the dialogue, although the number 10 (a-e), the well-known Socratic question in the dialogue, was the most challenging part: Is a pious act pious because the gods love it, or do the gods love it because it is pious? Indeed, in this part, they tried very hard to provide an answer for this Socratic question, and it was exactly this problematic part that helped them experience a 'change of attitude'.

In order to make this question more concrete, we asked them to change it to the form 'Is telling lies bad (or impious) because it is goes against the gods' divine command and the gods hate it, or do the gods hate it and forbid it because it is bad?', or 'Is telling the truth good (or pious) because the gods love it or do the gods love it because it is good?'

Students opposed not only this new structure, but also Socrates' own question and declared that as Homer and Hesiod show, the Greek gods commit sins themselves; therefore, how can they determine the criteria for goodness and badness? In addition, as Socrates mentions, the Greek gods are at odds with each other on the matters of piety/ impiety, goodness/badness, justice/ injustice. We explained that the gods (or God) that Socrates had in mind are not the Greek mythological gods: after all, one of the reasons for which Socrates was

sentenced to death was that he had no truck with the authority of the traditional, mythological Greek gods and divination.

However, in order to delve deeper into the problem, we asked them to substitute the name of the God they believe in, *Allab*, as He is known in Islam and then again contemplate the question. At this point, it would be helpful to describe the students' notion of God and then look at the formulation of the problem which yielded the following results. First, we present a brief summary of this notion and four of the attributes of *Allab* relating to this discussion.

The first two are common in the notion of God in other religions: God is omniscient and omnipotent. However, He is not a despotic ruler, nor a tyrant in the Greek sense: He has allowed humans 'free will'. This third attribute, relating to free will, is specific to the Shia's denomination, one of the two major denominations in Islam, and is also represented in *Mu'tazila*, a well-known movement in Islamic theology. Putting aside challenges between 'determinism' and 'free will', witnesses for determinism, and to what extent this will is free, free will played an important role in students' comments since most Iranians are Shi'a.

Finally, this God is the same God of both Judaism and Christianity, with the difference that in Islam, He speaks directly to His creatures, and explains His principles and Himself completely, and so Muslims consider Islam as the last revealed religion. Because of this, Muslims consider God's divine commands perfect and infallible, even if we do not intellectually understand them as perfect.

On the basis on the above, we formulated the problem in this way:

A: If God forbids telling lies because lying is bad in itself, it means that there is a criterion beyond God, based on which He has determined his divine commands, and consequently even if He is 'aware' of this criterion and then remains omniscient, He could not be considered omnipotent because He Himself has not constituted this criterion. As a result, it leads to inconsistency with students' religious beliefs.

B: On the other hand, if telling lies is bad because it is a God's divine command, there is no answer to the question 'Why has He forbidden it?', except that 'Because He is the omnipotent God'.

Even if this omnipotent God is omniscient, as students believed, and His commands are perfect, we would not be questioning them. This syllogism then depicts a tyrannical picture of God and consequently leads to the negation of free will which itself leads to the inconsistency with students' religious beliefs. Moreover, it leads to the negation of 'question-worthiness' as a Socrates' philosophical study, without which the experience of 'change of attitude' would prove impossible too.

On the basis of these explanations and formulation, here we classify our experiences, and in particular the outcomes of teaching *Euthyphro* as a Socratic dialogue 'on the subject-matter of piety' into three classes according to students' answers:

I. One of the most interesting answers was an attempt to maintain both human free will and God's omnipotence. Some students declared that because of God's omnipotence, God has determined the criteria of goodness and badness. Indeed, telling lies is bad only because God has forbidden it, and telling the truth is good only because God has commanded it. God has formulated His divine commands based on the criteria of goodness and badness which He has determined Himself, and then He has expressed the best commands (the case **B**).

But the point is that according to human free will, students declared, it is our choice whether we conform to these commands or not. Even though we will receive divine retribution if we do not follow divine commands, we still have the right and the ability not to conform to them. Students tried to explain what they had had in mind since they developed awareness of the concept of God: although God has determined the unchangeable criteria of goodness and badness, He has not determined what we do in our lives. They also went further and claimed that we 'cannot' choose not to have free will and the power of choice, although it is our choice to do this or that. As a result, they concluded that telling lies is bad because God has forbidden it (God's omnipotence), but it is our choice whether to tell lies or not (humans' free will).

We found this answer interesting and creative; if *Euthyphro* had provided this answer, perhaps Socrates would have led the discussion in a different way. But as it was, it focused on free will and then

transcended the two poles of the Socratic question—God or an independent criterion as the determiner of goodness and badness. Interestingly, Euthyphro never mentioned free will, which could have been in the dialogue with ‘freedom’ in other Plato’s dialogues such as *The Republic*, or even with Socrates’ image of the gods in *Apology*.

However, in the same way that Socrates always asked his interlocutors, we asked students to reflect on their declarations and discuss whether and how they related to the main subject matter of the dialogue: what is piety, and who is pious? Indeed, by concentrating on free will, they merely attempted to do away with the tyrannical image of God, while they diverted the discussion from the main topic. Whether a person could *choose* to tell lies or not does not explain who a pious person is. The question is not whether a pious person has free will or not, but rather what is it that characterises a person as pious.

Here, students themselves recognised such an unconscious diversion from the main topic and even they themselves called it a sophistic technique. In addition, they came to understand that the final result they arrived at, whether we have free will or not, is that telling lies is bad because God commands it, not because it is bad in itself. They realised that even though they were able to minimise the emphasis on a tyrannical image of God, they did not succeed in eliminating it completely.

II. Another impressive answer could be explained in this following way: as students believed, God explains His principles in the most complete way in Islam, and then His commands are more complete compared to those in other religions. Regarding this belief, students declared that it would be reasonable to trust and not question these commands. Indeed, telling lies is bad and telling the truth is good only because God has commanded as such. These are axioms, so we do not ask ‘why’ this axiom is bad or what that one is good (the case **B**). But when we put forward the idea that this belief contradicts with question-worthiness as a Socratic study, they proposed the following reconciliation of the two contradictory positions.

The students suggested that alongside this kind of clear commands as principles or axioms, there would also be

challengeable commands which we could discuss. In the case of lying, for example, we do not challenge why lying in general is bad because it is an axiom. But we could ask around why it might be considered *not*-bad ‘in a certain situation’, ‘to a certain person’, ‘at a certain time’, or ‘about this subject’ and so on. Indeed, around an axiom, there are some secondary questions which we could consider. The students claimed that we *could*, and even *should* discuss these commands, in the same way that, we *could not*, and also *should not*, challenge principles. The domain of principles is not the domain of reason, rather of the trust which could be gained only by a leap of faith. However, question-worthiness would not be lost here; it could be maintained, but only in the domain of secondary questions.

We explained that every question is a question *of* something, and what makes a question worthy, is the subject of a question, i.e. what a question is about. Philosophical questions are nothing except the questions of principles and basic axioms. If philosophy, according to Aristotle, is the most perfect knowledge, it is only because philosophy is the knowledge of the first principles (*Metaphysics*, 982b).

Students themselves declared that if philosophy were limited to the secondary questions, there would be no difference between philosophy and other sciences, and then they would not prefer philosophy. As students of philosophy, they knew that ‘What is piety?’ is among the primary philosophical questions and Socrates’ attempt in *Euthyphro* to provide the ‘definition’ of piety is among Platonic (or Socratic) *euporia*(s), and thus it is not fair to divert this crucial attempt to define the *essence* of piety to some secondary questions *around* piety.

III. Despite the two previous answers leading to the side **B**, this time students attempted to approximate, but not completely defend, another side, **A**: God has forbidden lying because it is bad in itself, and has commanded telling the truth because it is good in itself. They declared that there is an independent criterion of God for badness and goodness. But God’s commands are in conformity with this criterion, which should not be taken to mean that He has determined His commands *in accordance* with this criterion. Indeed, the two independent criteria for badness and

goodness are in conformity with each other.

They continued that if we are religious and act in the way that God has commanded us, then we would also act in accordance with that independent criterion for badness and goodness because they conform to each other. However, in the case of non-religious people, the outcome is also the same; God creates all humans in such a way that if they think rationally, they will act in accordance with that independent criterion which conforms to God’s commands.

Students attempted to make their claim more precise, and well-organised. Here, we tried to help them recognise the vagueness of their formulation: If a criterion for badness and goodness existed, and this criterion was independent of God, but in conformity with His commands, how did this conformity come about? Is there a purpose behind it, or did it happen by accident? If the former, whose purpose is it? And if the latter, this would be a bizarre accident indeed. In addition, we helped them to clarify what they mean by ‘thinking rationally’. In response to their reply—acting according to morality—we raised a Socratic question: ‘What is morality?’

Moreover, we stressed that every philosophical discussion involves some indisputable presuppositions, which every claim must be consistent with. Here, students acknowledged that they had considered their religious beliefs as the presuppositions of the discussion, but their declaration was not consistent with them: the existence of an independent criterion for badness and goodness, consistent with divine laws, would inevitably negate God’s omnipotence, even if it is assumed that God is aware of this criterion, so He is still omniscient. Indeed, the existence of this independent criterion points to the existence of something beyond God’s domain even if His commands are in conformity with it. Moreover, the existence of this independent criterion could deny God’s unity, and this would then imply that this independent criterion would perhaps also be worthy of worship.

After all these discussions and challenges, we raised the final fundamental question for students: What does Socrates mean by the concept of ‘gods’? In

Euthyphro, although Socrates keeps open the question of the existence of an independent criterion of gods for goodness and badness, he asks the audience to think about at least its *possibility*. Here, students related this possibility to the accusation against Socrates in the *Apology*: 'there is a man called Socrates, a wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger... those who study these things do not even believe in the gods' (*Apology*, 18c). They were curious to know whether or not both gods and the independent criterion of goodness and badness refer to the same thing, namely Forms in the context of Platonic thought.

Conclusion

To return to the main question of this paper: is it possible to teach philosophy to first-year philosophy students in a way similar to the one Socrates used to teach

his interlocutors in the early dialogues? The outcomes of the three courses run point towards a positive answer. Indeed, the Socratic Method is so strong that it can still work even after 2500 years, after a multitude of historical, social and cultural changes.

As we mentioned, because of the importance of this project, it was decided that this project would form part of the compulsory first-year course 'Pre-Socratic philosophers and Plato' which is a four-credit course. The *Euthyphro* component was assigned 25% of the final grade. In addition, we set weekly homework to help students engage closer with the philosophical problems and consolidate what they were learning. At times we held class quizzes to measure student learning; these class quizzes not only helped us identify interested and talented students, but also helped students reform their expectations of assessment and getting to the 'right' (according to them) answer. Although they had expressed doubts, in the beginning, about

the functionality of learning Socrates and Plato through the *Euthyphro*, most of them reacted positively to this experience at the end of the semester and expressed interest in reading Plato's other dialogues.

When we reported the course outcomes to the Department of Philosophy, we were asked to repeat this project for the following semesters, Spring and Autumn 2017. We reported that as students' interests, talents and efforts differed, the outcomes varied somewhat, even though most outcomes were the same in all three cases.

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