

On Teaching, Sailing, and Swimming

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...whether one falls into a little swimming pool or into the middle of the biggest sea, one nevertheless swims all the same. – Plato, *Republic* 453d

Throughout Plato's *Republic*, Socrates provides us with an opportunity to think about images, figures, and metaphors associated with teaching. We are encouraged, for instance, to consider the extent to which the pedagogical task of the philosopher is analogous to that of a pilot of a ship. The notion of the philosopher-teacher as pilot would seem to lend itself to a whole series of somewhat over-obvious metaphors: the teacher tries to steer the class-as-ship, and navigate through the sometimes tumultuous waters of inquiry, while maintaining order, keeping an eye on the well-being of his or her students, and trying to bring them safely to the shore of their collective and individual destinations.

In what sense is the pilot of a ship also to be regarded as being, despite his or her role as leader or in addition to it, just another person on board, trying to stay afloat along with everybody else? What happens to our image of the teacher as the pilot of a ship if we complicate it by also thinking of the teacher as someone immersed in the very element with which he or she is contending?

Socrates goes so far as to present teaching as a task in which one risks the intellectual equivalent of drowning. Strikingly, he does so in the midst of teaching, while engaged in conversation with his students, who, with Socrates, are trying to pursue a whole range of questions about justice. Why is justice better than injustice? What does justice do to the character of the person who practices it? Of what would a just community consist? Socrates philosophizes about these questions *through* teaching: there is no division here between the relatively solitary

experience of researching, theorizing, and writing, on the one hand, and the social experience of teaching and conversing, on the other. Rather than distributing, via lectures, ready-made lessons about justice to his students, Socrates attempts to see justice and injustice “coming into being” (Book 2: 369a; Allan Bloom translation) with them, and to argue about what it is that is coming to sight as the discussion proceeds.

Such habits are likely to make the Socratic understanding of teaching seem rather odd to us. Certainly, we may assume that our lives as theorists or scientists are bound up with our lives as teachers, but we may not conceive of the activities associated with each as occurring simultaneously. Nor, I think, would many of us be inclined to deem it a good idea to let students know, as does Socrates, that in presenting a given argument to his students, he runs the risk of “slipping from the truth where one least ought to slip” (Book 5: 451a) or to observe, disarmingly that, “to present arguments at a time when one is in doubt and seeking – which is just what I’m doing – is a thing both frightening and slippery” (450d-451a). Socrates presents the task of teaching under such conditions as one comparable to “swimming,” while “hoping that some dolphin might take us on his back or for some other unusual rescue” (453d).

Given the relative rarity of unusual rescues by dolphinesque figures, it is not hard to see why we might find this pedagogical strategy unattractive and, indeed, not much of a strategy at all. Ironic or sincere self-deprecation is one thing; hoping that students will pardon one’s lack of expertise because one has freely confessed to it is another. Openness to alternative answers with respect to a given question is not equivalent to lack of clarity concerning the question itself. Needless to say, discerning the former from the latter is a vital necessity in this context.

Beyond that, what does swimming (apart from the need for an ample supply of the figurative equivalents of life jackets and the like) have to do with steering an imaginary ship?

In this context, I think it is important to keep in mind that while very few of us outside of the department of philosophy think of ourselves as being philosophers in a formal sense, within the context of graduate education in the Arts and Sciences, we all become doctors of *philosophy*. As doctors or would-be doctors of the love of wisdom we try, among other things, to let students see what it might mean to be in love with a scholarly question, and what it would feel like to take risks in following it wherever that question takes us, whether it leads to the conceptual equivalent of a backyard swimming pool or to what the poet Matthew Arnold once called “the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea.”