CHAPTER 5

SOCRATIC TEACHING AND THE SEARCH FOR COHERENCE

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This paper is an attempt to engage in 'applied philosophy'.¹ My primary conclusion is that as teachers we would do well to imitate Socrates. On the way to this conclusion I will point to insights that can be gained through a look at two areas of philosophy. First, I will argue that an important debate in contemporary epistemology can help clarify one of our central goals as teachers, arguing that contemporary foundationalists and coherentists converge on the conclusion that a person with real understanding is characterized by a coherent set of beliefs. If this is so, as teachers we should seek to help our students examine their beliefs for coherence and prod them toward a more coherent system of beliefs. Second, I will argue that a look at the ancient philosopher Socrates provides a challenging model for how to lead our students toward this goal.

I. COHERENT BELIEFS: A CRUCIAL EDUCATIONAL GOAL

There is, in contemporary epistemology, an ongoing discussion between ‘foundationalists’ and ‘coherentists’ concerning how justified beliefs are structured and supported. I am convinced that an important insight for teaching can be drawn from this discussion. But before we look at the details, let me clarify two assumptions upon which my argument is based. First, I am assuming that the goal of our teaching is what I will call ‘knowledge with understanding’. Although there may be a kind of knowledge that involves little or no reflective awareness on the part of the knower, there is also a level of knowledge in which the knower has an understanding of the implications and applications of what she knows and an awareness of, or at least an ability to become aware of, her reasons for believing what she does.² Good teachers seek to do more than implant bits of information in the minds of their students. They also strive to impart understanding of these bits of information. Secondly, I assume that knowledge with understanding involves what epistemologists call justification. Although ‘justification’ is itself a word over which contemporary epistemologists differ, I will be using it to refer to the state of having proper grounds or reasons for one’s beliefs. My assumption, then, is that knowledge with understanding includes, among other things, having good reasons or grounds for one’s beliefs, or in other words, it involves holding justified beliefs. If our goal is knowledge with understanding, and knowledge with understanding entails being justified in one’s beliefs, then as teachers one of our goals is to produce

¹ K. Lehrer et al. (eds.), Knowledge, Teaching and Wisdom, 71–81.
students with justified beliefs. Assuming these points, it is reasonable to ask if we can learn from what philosophers have to say about justification. I think we can.

We turn now to a look at two leading theories of the structure of justification. On the one hand, some epistemologists, called foundationalists, have emphasized the role of ‘foundational’ or ‘basic’ beliefs, arguing that beliefs are only justified if they are appropriately based upon properly foundational beliefs. In contrast, other epistemologists, called ‘coherentists’, argue that there are no beliefs which serve as ‘foundations’. Instead, the coherentists argue, beliefs are justified when they ‘hang together’ in a coherent, systematic way. While foundationalists contend that justification is transmitted from some special category of beliefs, coherentists claim that justification is produced by appropriate coherence-producing relationships between beliefs.

Before we look at foundationalism and coherentism as they are represented in the contemporary discussion, it should be pointed out that there is a form of foundationalism, which we can call Naive Foundationalism, that no good philosopher would hold. Naive foundationalists believe that there are some obvious truths of which we can be certain and on the basis of which all other things we know can be proven. Usually, the ‘obvious’ truths are assumptions which the naive foundationalist has never really questioned, and perhaps thinks should not be questioned. As teachers, I suggest, we encounter naive foundationalists all the time. They come in a large variety. Some believe that everything they read in newspapers, magazines or textbooks is unquestionably true and base other beliefs on this uncritical assumption. Others believe that unquestionable truth comes from the mouths and writings of scientists, or from the mouths of religious authorities, or from some other unquestioned source. In each case these foundations are accepted without critical evaluation and taken as unquestionable bases for proving everything else. Obviously, these are not developed philosophies or complete perspectives. The point is simply this, many people accept some beliefs uncritically as starting points for their reasoning to other beliefs and actions. In the mind of the naive foundationalist justification is a matter of building one’s beliefs on unquestioned foundations.

Philosophers throughout the history of philosophy have questioned naive foundationalism. One such philosopher was Rene Descartes in the seventeenth century. He lived in a time when the prevailing scientific theories which he had learned in school were crumbling. In an attempt to find a better basis for scientific knowledge, Descartes sought foundations which could not crumble. Unlike naive foundationalists, Descartes believed that we should evaluate our beliefs and build our knowledge only on those which pass the test of rational criticism. To do this he tried to doubt everything that was possible to doubt, and build the structure of his beliefs upon only those beliefs of which he could be certain. His goal was to build an unshakable structure of knowledge. Unfortunately, one of the few things about which today’s epistemologists agree is that the Descartes’ project failed. First, even