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Why does socrates recommend the use of falsehood to teach virtue in his elementary education programme?: an argument and evaluation of permissible falsehoods in the search for truth

Smith, Julia Katherine

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ABSTRACT

The question of how to design an educational programme is a central and critical one in any society. A window of opportunity exists here—to start the educational process by looking closely at how dispositions and outlooks are formed. An inquiry into the *Republic* provides an opportunity to study virtue, and specifically for my project's purposes, Socrates' educational programme which centres on fostering virtue within the child. Virtue is understood as a quality that benefits both the child and the broader community.

The programme has two parts: first, education of children in music and stories which seeks to produce good habits of soul and body. These habits are a type of virtue required for the pursuit of more advanced studies. The ethically most promising children are then selected to become guardians of the *Kallipolis*. Socrates' advanced programme develops moral character further, with the ultimate goal of cultivating wisdom by means of mathematics and philosophy.

One of the striking features of Socrates' early programme is that falsehood—or perhaps lies—must be told to small children from their earliest years. This is, according to Socrates, required to prime and prepare the child's psyche for rational development in the advanced programme. In other words, he claims that falsehood should be used to develop a capacity for wisdom in children's souls (377a).

Socrates' claim seems at first glance to be a problematic position to take in a debate on the best possible way to advance moral character in the future guardians of the *Kallipolis*. Since falsehood is commonly understood as the opposite of truth, how could falsehood develop a capacity for truth and wisdom? Socrates' position is paradoxical, to be sure, but I think that there is something true about it, and in this thesis, I seek to understand and clarify its core

claims. Socrates is right to say that falsehood of a certain sort is necessary in early education, to set the child up for a philosophically led education in adulthood.

Let me explain how I develop my argument. It proceeds in two stages, where chapters one and two lay the foundations for three, and chapters three and four, in turn, the foundations for five. There is a gradual deepening in my account that corresponds with Socrates' own thinking. Ideas presented earlier are partial and superseded by later accounts.

In the first chapter, I discuss the contours of Socrates' psychological theory, specifically explaining his conception of the soul and how it develops and learns from infancy. Thereafter, in the second, I give an account of civic virtue, which, as I explain is the intermediate state of the soul which the early education programme seeks to cultivate using *mousike*. It is important for my project that civic virtue is not an intellectual state, but one of good habits of the soul.

Chapter 3 draws the first two chapters together as I give a preliminary account of why Socrates thinks that education should begin with false stories. In this chapter, I explain what fault Socrates finds with existing false stories, and what criterion he identifies in the *good* types of falsehoods that he insists must be told by poets and storytellers. The key ideas here are these: first, since children do not have a developed capacity for truth, they cannot recognise the truth for what it is. Thus, using true stories has no purpose. Secondly, since civic virtue is developed by imitation, historical truth is much less important than what I call 'ethical truth.' This is, in short, the provision of exemplary role models that children can identify with and emulate.

In chapter 4, I complicate my account of how a certain falsehood is required to develop truth. I do this by offering an account of Socrates' crucial distinction between true and verbal falsehoods. In this context, I argue that Socrates' distinction does not map onto our conception of a lie. A true falsehood is not a lie because it is a false belief, and a verbal falsehood is not

always a lie, because sometimes is not intended to deceive. For example, Socrates regards myths told about ancient events when the truth is not known as verbal falsehoods, though these are not lies. They are stories, designed to orient children to the history of their community and their world. I also provide an account of when verbal falsehoods must be used. The condition most relevant to my project is when the truth cannot be told to someone, for example, on account of deficient rationality. I further argue that permissible verbal falsehoods are designed to lead people to the truth.

In chapter 5, I complete my account by arguing that moral myths are verbal falsehoods. With the insights gained from chapter 4 I show that Socrates' preferred myths are, nonetheless, designed to lead to the truth. Crucially, I suggest that moral myths are destabilising. This is because their false, allegorical nature provides *temporary* structures of understanding in the psyche that collapse once the child matures and is able to comprehend the deeper meaning. This process of destabilisation is essential for moral advancement.

I hope thus to demonstrate that certain, psychologically disruptive falsehoods are effective pedagogical tools appropriate for an ethically led education. Through distinguishing categories of falsehood, and demonstrating how some are intended to be overcome, I hope to clarify Socrates's ultimate vision: the ability of future guardians to transcend their education.

This project is partly exegetical. It aims to consider Socrates' elementary education programme and its first principles. It endeavours to show how the programme provides a framework for children on which their experiences are layered. According to Socrates, falsehood is the means for cultivating a philosophically orientated position within a child's soul at the foundational level. Central to his theory is his conception of the soul and its development within a moral

culture. So, before I attend to falsehoods in education, I must contextualise Socrate's views on the phenomenology of the childhood psychological state, and its relationship with education.