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Box 09, Folder 30 - "Philosophical Principles of Learning" "Socratic or Natural Method of Teaching" (Ed.-437 folder) (E.M.S.)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING

It must be kept in mind that in natural things, a thing may preexist potentially in a twofold manner: in one way in active, complete potentiality, that is, when the intrinsic principle is sufficiently able to bring it to perfect actuality, as is evident in healing, for through the efficacy of nature in the sick person, he is brought to health. In another way a thing can preexist in passive potentiality as when the intrinsic principle is not sufficient to educe it to actuality, as is evident when fire is made from air for this cannot be done through any power existing in the air. When, therefore, something exists in active, complete potentiality, the extrinsic agent acts only by helping the intrinsic agent and by ministering to it those things by means of which it comes forth into actuality, just as a doctor in healing is a minister to nature which does the principal work- ministering by abetting nature and by applying the medicines which nature uses as instruments for healing. But when something preexists in passive potentiality only, then the extrinsic agent is that which does the principal work in bringing it from potency to act, just as fire makes from air fire in act what is fire in potentiality. Knowledge, therefore, preexists in the learner, not in the purely passive potentiality, but in active potentiality. Otherwise man could not by himself acquire knowledge.

Just as a person may be cured in a twofold manner, through the operation of nature alone or through nature with the aid of medicine, so there is a twofold manner of acquiring knowledge, the one when the natural reason of itself comes to a knowledge of the unnatural reason, which is called instruction. Now, in those things which are done by nature and art, art works in the same way and by the same means that nature does, for just as nature in one suffering from cold induces health by warming him, so does the doctor. Hence, art is said to imitate nature. Similarly, it happens in the acquisition of knowledge that the one teaching leads another to the knowledge of the unknown in the same way as he (learner) would lead himself to cognition of an unknown in discovery. Now, the process of reason in one who arrives at a cognition of an unknown in discovery is the application of general, self-evident principles to definite matters, and by proceeding from them to particular conclusions and from these to others. Hence, one man is said to teach another because the teacher proposes to another by means of symbols the discursive process which he himself goes through by natural reason, and thus the natural reason of the pupil comes to a cognition of the unknown through the aid of what was proposed to him as with aid of instruments.

As, then a doctor is said to cause health in a sick person through the operation of nature, so man is said to cause knowledge in another through the operation of the learner's natural reason - and this is to teach. Hence, one man is said to teach another and to be his master. And, according to this the Philosopher says (IPost, com.5), that a demonstration is a syllogism that causes knowledge. But if someone proposes to another those things which are not included in self-evident principles or though included are not self-evident he does not cause knowledge in him but perhaps opinion or belief. However, even belief is caused from innate principles, because from self-evident principles themselves, a man considers that those things which necessarily follow from these things must be held as certain, and that those which are contrary, to them must be rejected entirely; but that to other consequents he may either assent or not. But this kind of light of reason by which principles of this kind are known to us is implanted in us by God, being, as it were, a likeness of uncreated truth reflected in us. Hence, since no human teaching can have efficacy except by virtue of this light, it is evident that God alone is He who teaches interiorly and principally, just as nature heals itself interiorly and even principally. Nevertheless, man is properly said to cure and to teach in the aforesaid manner.

--from Mayer, Mary Helen, "Philosophy of Teaching of St. Thomas." pp.48-54

THE SOCRATIC OR NATURAL METHOD TEACHING

The Socratic method of teaching is the very core of liberal education. Its place in education may be illustrated by an analogy with medicine; there is a close relation between the art of healing and the art of teaching.

The analogy stems from a distinction made by Hippocrates some twenty-two hundred years ago. Hippocrates classified all the means of healing the sick into three sections. First, he said, you can take the patient and control his regime - his hours of sleeping and rising, his climate, how he works, what he eats. Second, you can give the patient medicine. Third, you can do surgery. These three, he said, are desirable in that order. The best way to cure disease is by controlling the patient's regime. If that doesn't work you may resort to medicine. Finally, as a last resort, you may do surgery - but only as a last resort, for surgery does violence to nature, whereas the art of the physician is to work with nature and help it.

That insight of Hippocrates can be applied not only to medicine but to any art which cooperates with nature. Teaching is such an art, for the mind is intended by nature to grow and to develop. Just as a good physician is one who helps the body heal itself, the good teacher is the person who helps the mind learn by itself.

The techniques of teaching can be put in much the same terms as Hippocrates put the techniques of healing. Reversing Hippocrates' order, there is, first, indoctrination, which consists in forcing acceptance of belief without understanding. Second, there is the imparting of knowledge and information through lectures and textbooks; this can be done without forcing, but it involves the student's accepting material without fully testing its significance. Third, there is the Socratic Method of questioning and discussing to encourage the mind to work as it is naturally disposed. Of these three, indoctrination, like surgery, is worst in its violence, for just as surgery takes something out by force, indoctrination puts something in by force. Lectures and textbooks are not so drastic, but they are still, like medicine, artificial devices. But questioning and discussion do nothing but make the mind act in its own way. "Enlargement of Mind" Newman

It may be objected that, if the mind develops naturally, there is no need for a teacher. Strictly speaking, this is true. There is nothing anybody can be taught that he cannot, given time, learn for himself. The only reason for teachers is that they assist the learning process. The only distinction between discovery and good instruction is that good instruction is aided discovery. Learning by good instruction is discovering the thing by yourself with someone else guiding and facilitating the process; and teaching, when done rightly, is a process not of imparting something but of aiding the learner to discover. It was this conception of teaching that Socrates had when he described himself as a midwife attending at the birth of ideas. It is the student who is the mother of the ideas, who has the labor pains and who finally produces the brain-child, the idea. The midwife is not the mother...of the knowledge in a student's mind. Sum

The instruments of intellectual midwifery are questions. The process in which the instruments are used is discussion, in which questions are asked and answered (in related sequence), leading to more questions and to opposite answers, ultimately reaching a statement of all issues and perhaps some agreement or some understanding of the truth. The modification of the Socratic Method is necessary because not all teachers are, in fact, Socrates. By themselves they do not have all the qualifications of intellectual midwifery. Socrates was a very wise man who had an understanding not only of the process of the birth of ideas, but of the nature of ideas themselves. A teacher, in order to use the pristine Socratic method, needs to be wiser than his pupil.

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