

SITUATING LEARNING

Bringing the messiness of life into the classroom with confidence



Introduction

OUTLINE

The Problem

Ethical Theory

Socratic Method

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When in Newgarth

“In Newgarth people eat with their hands rather than utensils such as a fork or spoon. They even eat rice with their hands.

A friend of yours calls from Newgarth. She reports that Newgarthians get upset when she pulls a fork and spoon out of her purse to eat. When she eats in the home of a Newgarthian family, their displeasure is quite apparent – they seem to be insulted by her refusal to eat with her hands. She tells you that she eats with a fork or spoon because her mother taught her that it is wrong to eat with your hands.”

Q: What should you tell her?

Q: Why?

Smith, K. (2015, June). *The Socratic Method: Engaging students in meaningful discussions*. Presentation given at the Clemson Thinks2 Faculty Institute, Clemson, SC, Clemson University.

When in Newgarth?

“Suppose that, desperate for hard currency the government of Newgarth, developed a novel way to attract foreign tourists. In an effort to outdo the Bangkok sex trade, Newgarth developed a federal sex service. Boys and girls age 8-15 are required to register for a sex draft. Drafters are selected by means of a lottery; those selected are required by law to provide one year of national service in the sex trade. These sex workers are regularly screened for sexually transmitted diseases and provided with effective treatment when necessary. Newgarth is thus in a position to provide a wide array of sexual services at a very competitive price. This system has been in place for many years.

A friend of yours moved to Newgarth several years ago. Her oldest daughter just turned eight. She has just received notice from the government that her daughter must register for the draft. She calls to ask advice.”

Q: What should you tell her? Why?

Q: How can you justify a different answer here than you had before?

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Possible responses

Ethical Frameworks:

- **Utilitarianism:** Most good for the most people, Everyone has same value
- **Libertarian:** Human dignity, respect for individual rights and choice
- **Character/Virtue:** Who do I want to be, what virtues (respect, safety, tradition) do I extol?

Common challenges:

- **Religious justification:** Well that's just my religious belief, Morally wrong
- **Legality:** If its legal, its ethical
- **Relativism:** Opinion, Who's to say what's right and wrong?

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Objectives

- Understand why/how conversations about ethics can **promote thinking**
- Understand why/how to facilitate ethical discussions via **Socratic Method**

What is the problem?

Emerging adults have been **poorly educated** in how to think about **moral issues** well...[and] provided with **few useful intellectual tools** for working on **moral questions**

- Christian Smith

Smith, C., Christoffersen, K., Davidson, H., & Herzog, P. S. (2011). *Lost in transition: The dark side of emerging adulthood*. Oxford University Press. (p. 69).

Link to critical thinking

The task of the liberal arts teacher, as I envisage it, is **NOT** to tell students **what to think**; it is to teach them **to think** ...**carefully, critically, and for themselves.**

- Robert P. George

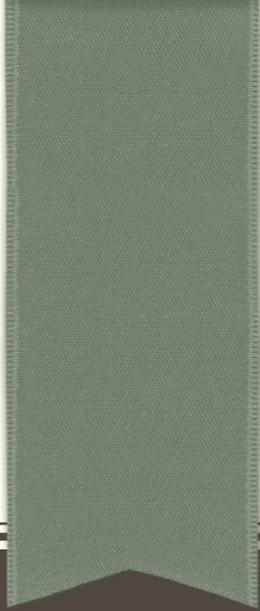
George, R.P. (2008, October). *Self-Mastery, Education, and the Liberal Arts*. Wheatley Institution, Provo, UT, Brigham Young University.

Ethical theory lite

- Ethical Commitments
- Ethical Sensitivity
- **Ethical Reasoning**

The **process** by which we attempt to find “the right answer” to ethical questions.

Smith, K. C. (2014). Ethics is not rocket science: how to have ethical discussions in your science class. *Journal of microbiology & biology education*, 15(2), 202.



SOCRATIC METHOD

A 3,000 year old solution

To qualify:

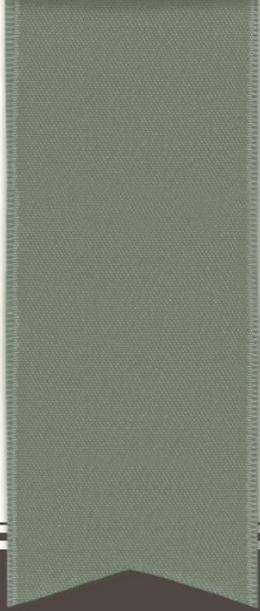
1. Address a particular question
2. Have a critical component
3. Arrive at consensus/ convergence of some sort (even if consensus about our ignorance)

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Steps for Socratic Dialogue

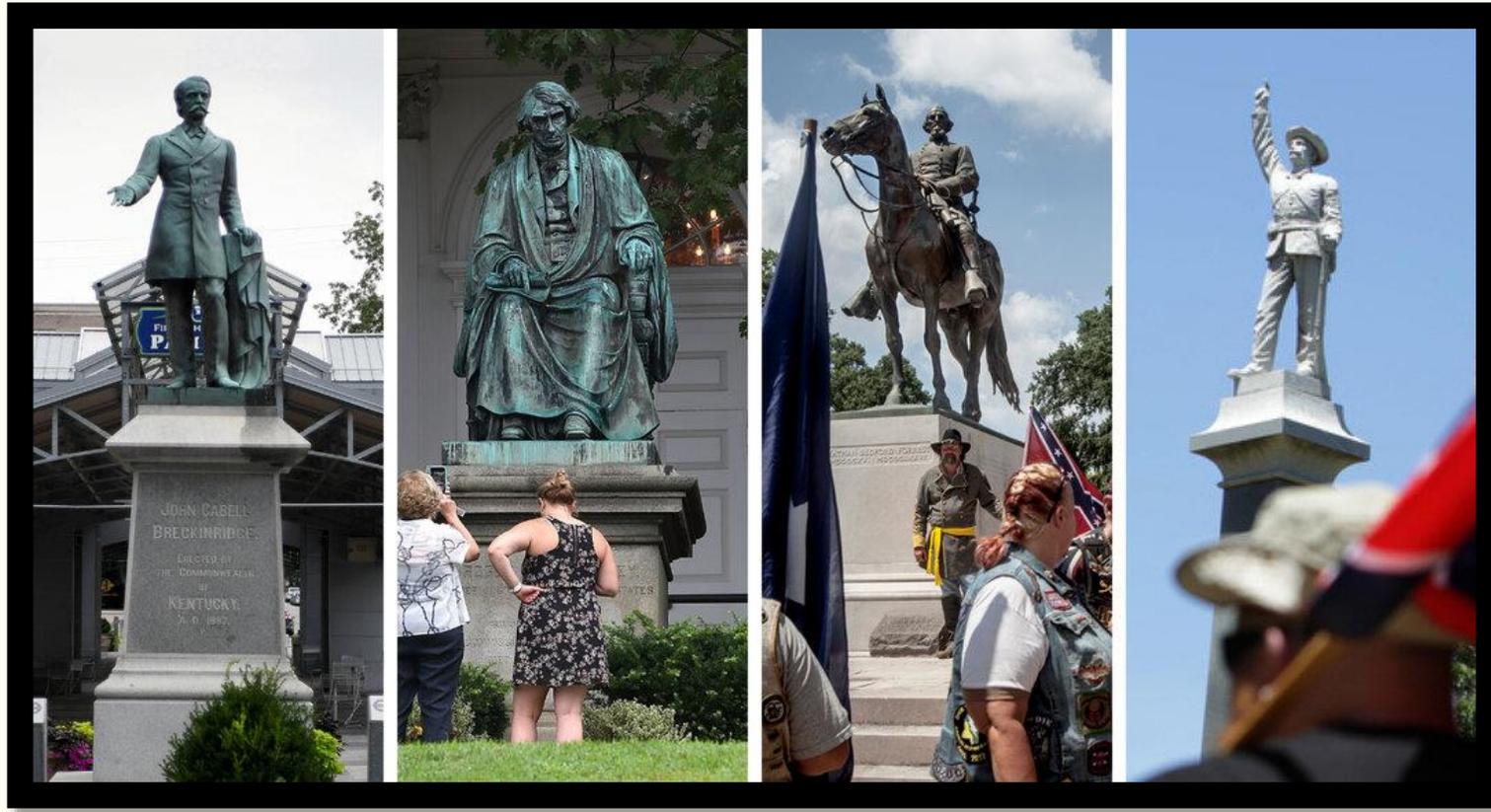
1. Formulate a question
2. Clarification/ Probing Questions
3. Critically examine the answer
4. Prove the answer inadequate
5. Loop back to step 3 until answers are exhausted
6. Summarize what we have learned (often in negative terms: [concept] is NOT any of these 4 things)

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PRACTICE

What are the ethical issues facing our field?



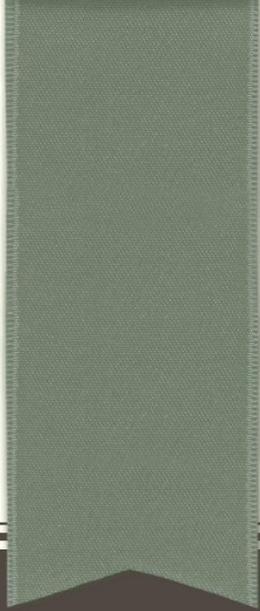
Confederate Statues

“Although the American Civil War ended over 150 years ago, the legacy of this time in history remains immortalized throughout much of the country. Monuments, parks, and statues named after prominent members of the Confederate States are scattered across the South and Confederate flags fly in public; and while many people feel that these are important reminders of history and an ode to Southern heritage, they are increasingly viewed by others as a glorification of white supremacy and slavery. As such, cities have begun to remove many of these memorials in an effort to make the public space feel more welcoming to citizens of all demographics. However this action has been met with significant opposition. ***With the stakes escalating around this highly contentious issue, the questions remains: which side is right?***”

Kailo (2018). *Should the US remove confederate memorials, flags, and monuments from public spaces?*
Retrieved from: <https://www.kialo.com/should-the-us-remove-confederate-memorials-flags-and-monuments-from-public-spaces-2408/2408.0=2408.1/=2408.1>

Group Challenge – Preparing for an ethical dilemma

- **What are responses you might anticipate from students?**
 - Utilitarian response?
 - Libertarian response?
 - Virtue/Character response?
 - Religious response?
 - Legal response?
 - Relativistic response?
- **What question(s) would you use to clarify/probe?**
- **How might you respectfully critique responses?**
- **How would you assess a student's contribution in an ethical discussion of this kind?**



DO'S AND DON'TS

Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- Explicitly and continuously talk about reasoning. What it is, why it matters, how to do it properly.
- Get them to speak and to do so honestly/authentically
- Involve them in the process:
 - Have them formulate the rules of good argument to structure discussions
 - Allow them a role in enforcing these rules (even with you)

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Do's and Don'ts

Do:

- To do SM well you need to be able to **anticipate** what your students are likely to say so you can respond
- You must **confront** head on their misunderstandings – you can not fill a cup which is already full.
- Act to **prevent premature consensus**
- Be ready to **play devil's advocate** by asking questions which will force them
- Ask Why? A lot! (just vary it up so you don't sound like a toddler)

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Do's and Don'ts

Don't:

- Do things that terminate discussion prematurely:
 - Never let students know your personal views until the discussion is over
 - Don't allow students to assert things in ways that don't allow discussion (EX: "Well, that's just my religious view")
- Allow discussions to get too far off track
 - Don't get bogged down in unnecessary details
 - Ask students how their question(s)/comment(s) are relevant to the original question or point

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Do's and Don'ts

Don't:

- Try not to use SM about situations which are pretty clear
- It's more about **the reasoning process** than the answer

Warning: Ethical Dilemmas are Messy!!!

**It's crucial that we engage in discussions about ethical issues
with **dignity, humility, and respect.****