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A PLATONIC METHOD FOR MAKING IDEAS ENGAGING AND ACCESSIBLE

Charles More

In this essay, I introduce an imaginative method for transforming reasoned arguments of specialists into a form that is engaging and accessible to nonspecialists. I begin by reviewing a passage in Plato in which the method is used. I then develop an example of the method for a modern context. I conclude with reasons that philosophy ought to concern itself to engage the general public using imaginative methods of this kind.

1. Introduction

According to its editorial self-descriptions, *Think* aims to be 'Philosophy for everyone' and to reach 'the widest possible readership'. As part of this aim, 'the editor [of *Think*] would also like to encourage the use of imaginative and unusual ways of making ideas engaging and accessible'.

In response to this encouragement, suppose you have an idea that would seem dry or unapproachable to most nonspecialists. Suppose further that you want to make this idea 'engaging and accessible' to the 'widest possible' audience, ideally 'everyone'. What 'imaginative and unusual ways' would you use? How would you start? What method would you follow?

Despite the importance of imaginative ways of presenting or explaining ideas – e.g., in dramatic dialogue, thought experiments, etc. – you might be disappointed if you ask a philosopher for the best *methods* for doing so. Such methods are not typically taught in required courses in philosophy departments, nor are they a major topic of

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contemporary research. There is a vibrant philosophical literature on what thought experiments are and do, and whether specific examples of them succeed or fail to prove a point. But methods for generating them are largely left up to individuals to figure out for themselves.

In this essay, I summarize a method of creative thinking aimed at making ideas engaging and accessible. I have two aims.

First, I aim to present the method in a way that can be of immediate use to those working to transform theoretical ideas into something interesting and intelligible to nonspecialists. In principle, all you need to get started is the template in section 3 of this essay, which summarizes the method. Try it. See if it works for you with something you want to explain economically to intelligent generalists.

Second, I hope to encourage further discussion about methods for bringing philosophy to the general public successfully. This is an age-old aspiration of philosophy, and an important enterprise for human society as well. The more we share and improve our techniques for reaching nonspecialists, the more success we can have with this aspiration.

In section 2 I discuss the source that inspired this method – a memorable passage in Plato, one of the masters of making ideas engaging and accessible. In section 3 I summarize the method. In section 4 I develop an example of the method in a modern context. In section 5 I conclude by proposing that such methods have an important role to play in philosophy, and in society too.

2. The method at work in Plato

In the first part of the *Crito*, Socrates' friend Crito makes a 'cross-examination' of Socrates, in order to try to persuade Socrates not to accept the death sentence which the Athenian jury hung on him during his trial. As Socrates sits in his jail cell awaiting execution, Crito attempts to

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persuade him to sneak away to exile, rather than to stay in prison, awaiting death. In reconstructing the thought process in – and underlying – Socrates' response, I break things up into four distinct steps.

First Step: Subject Matter & Context. Socrates begins his response by asking Crito if he agrees to specific statements, which serve as the premises of an argument. Crito agrees with Premise 1 and 2, but then says that he does not understand Premise 3 (50a).

Premise 1. I should never do wrong. (49d)
Premise 2. If I break an agreement, I am doing wrong. (adapted from 49e)
Premise 3. If I break the law and escape into exile as recommended by Crito, I break an agreement. (50a)
Conclusion: Therefore, I should not break the law and escape into exile as recommended by Crito. (See 54d)

This argument provides the context for the ideas Plato transforms from inaccessible to accessible. Socrates' reasons in favor of Premise 3 are the subject matter to be transformed, so that Crito can understand and appreciate them, and the conclusion they lead to.

Second Step: Summary. The following four key points in favor of Premise 3 are stated or implied in the speech dramatized in the Third Step and Fourth Step. I am working backward from the dramatized speech to this reconstruction of a summary, in order to supply the kind of not-yet-dramatized thoughts Plato had – i.e., the raw material from which he made his dramatization.

Point #1. If a person has accepted the protection and support of the laws in the past, that person has an agreement to obey the laws in the present.

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Point #2. Socrates accepted the protection of the laws of Athens:

a. from birth to adulthood, because Socrates' parents, providers, and educators were bound by these laws in giving him benefits which he accepted.
b. from adulthood to age 70, because Socrates chose to stay in Athens rather than to to move to another city and live according to their laws.
c. during the trial, because according to the Athenian law that allows Socrates to propose an alternative punishment for himself, he could have proposed exile, but he proposed something else instead.

Point #3. Now in the present, immediately after the trial, Socrates has an agreement to obey the laws of Athens and not escape into exile, as a result of Point #1 and Point #2.

Point #4. Assumption: If Socrates goes into exile as Crito recommends, and breaks his agreement to obey the laws of Athens, this will be known to other cities. In other words, Socrates cannot escape to other cities with a 'clean record'. Other cities will know he broke the laws of Athens to get there.

Third Step: Personification & dramatization. Recognizing that Premise 3 has proven difficult for Crito to understand and accept, Socrates develops these ideas into a highly imaginative thought experiment. Socrates asks Crito to imagine the Laws of Athens personified (50a). The Laws of Athens are then dramatized as standing before them, interacting with them live.

The Laws make a cross-examination of Socrates that contests the cross-examination Crito just made, when he urged Socrates to break the law and escape into exile. Using simple and clear language, the Laws ask Socrates to

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acknowledge Point #2 a., b., and c., along the lines: 'Didn't we keep our agreement with you when you were born and educated, then during all your adult years, and even through the trial?' This puts pressure on Socrates to accept Point #3 as well.

A live courtroom scene is vividly recreated in the dialogue. Socrates consults with Crito about how to answer these points, drawing him into the thought experiment. Confronted face-to-face by the personified Laws, Crito overcomes his previous difficulty of understanding Premise 3, and assents to the conclusion that Socrates should not escape into exile.

This personification and dramatization transforms the Laws from impersonal codifications to live disputants with a personal stake in the argument. When the Laws have character and voice to speak on their own behalf, it is not so easy to ignore them and escape into exile. When the Laws can attest to their 70 year relationship with Socrates, it is not so easy to view the choice as an easy one, between Crito's lifelong friendship with Socrates, and unfriendly, undiscerning laws. Rather, the Laws have been with Socrates throughout life, just as Crito has. They have a right to be heard. Everyone can understand that. This returns the focus of the dialogue to the rational content of the premises and the argument, which favors the Laws of Athens over Crito, in the form Plato gives them.

Fourth Step: New Perspective. To make these ideas even more vivid, Plato adds another imaginative device to the personification and dramatization made in the Third Step. The Laws of Athens prompt Socrates to change his point of view, and imagine how things seem from their perspective, and from the perspective of the other families of laws which Socrates might soon meet, if he were to go into exile to another city. How does Socrates suppose the Laws would perceive Socrates if he chooses to break the law and escape, rather than obey the law and accept punishment?

Crito agrees that if Socrates chooses to escape, the Laws of Athens will view Socrates as someone trying to

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'destroy' them (52c9). From their point of view, after 70 years of keeping their agreement with Socrates, the Laws of Athens will be 'angry' at Socrates (54c6).

Making Point #4, the Laws of Athens then prompt Socrates to consider the matter from the point of view of other families of laws. When good families of Laws in nearby cities (e.g. Thebes or Megara) see Socrates coming in exile, they will 'look suspiciously' at Socrates (53b7), believing him to be a 'destroyer' of laws (53b7-8). When corrupt families of Laws in lawless cities (e.g. Thessaly) see Socrates coming in exile, they will take pleasure in the laughable way Socrates ran away from Athens, only to live with them as a slave who is forced to fawn on people to survive (53d-e). Either way, Crito comes to appreciate that breaking the law has consequences which he had not previously taken into consideration.

As a final imaginative flourish, we are reminded that there are laws in the afterlife too. Sooner or later, when the Laws of Hades see Socrates coming, they too will view him as someone who tried to destroy their siblings, the Laws of Athens (54c8). As a result, they will not be disposed to give him a warm welcome (54c7).

This Fourth Step is not as pronounced in the *Crito* as I make it in my version of the method. Plato does not specifically guide readers through the process of building of a point of view on the world from the perspective of the Laws of Athens, Thebes, Hades, etc. For my purposes, it is enough that readers are prompted to consider the personified Laws' point of view on this issue, as a complement to the imaginative dramatization of Step Three. In my view, even in this compact form, this move by Plato is a master stroke in the history of creative thinking.

3. Summary of the method

Following this Platonic model, ideas can be transformed through creative thinking that follows this four-step method. If you have difficult ideas you would like to make engaging

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and accessible, imagine what you might conjure up by working through these steps, presented here as a summary template to guide the process.

First Step: Subject Matter & Context. Determine the subject matter and its context. The subject matter is the difficult idea(s) which you aim to transform into something engaging and accessible. Its context may be an argument, theory, or story to which these ideas contribute.

Second Step: Summary. Respond to this prompt: 'If given a limited number of words, what would be the most important points for explaining this subject matter to non-specialists?' In response to this prompt, make a brief summary of the points which you would want a general audience to understand about the subject matter – as if the key points needed by the public to make an informed vote in a democratic election or jury trial. This summary should be intelligible, self-contained, and brief enough to be expressed in about 200 words or so.

Third Step: Personification & Dramatization. Respond to this prompt: 'If the entities in this summary could speak for themselves to a general audience, and tell their own story in nonspecialist terms, what they would say?' In making your response, personify the entities or actions in the summary, and dramatize their interrelations, as if composing a short one-act stage play. Give character and voice to the points in the summary. Let them say or do something that introduces them to a general audience, by using terms analogous to the experiences familiar to most human beings. Stay close to the subject matter when it concerns the main line of thinking, but let your imagination roam when it does not. The result is a brief story anyone can understand, and thereby also understand a line of thinking analogous to the difficult ideas of the subject matter. This process of creative thinking requires trial and error, imagination, and an open-mind – just as the rest of philosophy does.

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Fourth Step: New Perspective. Respond to this prompt: 'If you could recreate the world from a point of view within this drama, what salient features would you want to emphasize?' In making your response, imagine how things seem from the perspective of one or more of the characters of the drama made in the Third Step. Think of this imaginative work as a drama instructor helping actors to 'get in character'. This involves describing facts about how the world seems from the point of view of the character. It involves building a mental picture containing the relevant cognitive details of this point of view. The result is what we might call 'twice removed empathy'. Usually empathy requires you to 'stand in the shoes' of a real being, thus one remove from reality. The Fourth Step requires you to 'stand in the shoes' of a hypothetical being, thus two removes. Despite this additional remove from reality, this kind of empathy nevertheless also aims to understand reality more deeply, just as empathy for a real being does.

A final point. The aim of this four-step method is not a polished piece of writing. Rather, the aim is engaging and accessible ideas. It is helpful to write up these ideas as a transcript of the creative thinking process. But preparing the ideas in the transcript for publication or formal presentation requires a separate, subsequent step. It requires separate literary techniques to transform the ideas from the transcript in to language appropriate to a specific occasion, audience, genre, and scope. Although accessible ideas and accessible language often go hand in hand, it is useful to keep them separate, so that the method is not expected to do work beyond its range. Writing and polishing are separate from generating the basic ideas in the four-step process just described.

4. A modern example of the method

Now let's consider how this method might work in a modern context. A good candidate would be an idea that is

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scientifically well-documented but not yet understood or accepted by the general public, or specific segments of it. One such example is bullying others. Bullying another person persists in the minds of many as not necessarily nice, but not itself harmful to the person who bullies another.

First Step: Subject Matter & Context.

Bullying others is in fact statistically correlated with negative consequences which, other things being equal, any reasonable person would choose to avoid. Consider the following argument that appeals to this research, beginning with the premise shared with the *Crito* that one should never do wrong – including wrong to oneself, in this case.

Premise 1. I should never do wrong.
Premise 2. If I do something that, other things being equal, substantially increases my risk for depression and suicidal thinking/behavior, I am doing wrong.
Premise 3. If I bully others, it substantially increases my risk for depression and suicidal thinking/behavior, other things being equal – as demonstrated in scientific studies, such as Klomek et al. 2007.
Conclusion: I should never bully others.

This argument provides our context. For the present purposes, let's assume that our audience of intelligent nonspecialists accepts Premises 1 and 2, but does not understand Premise 3 - the same predicament as Crito. Our evidence in favor of Premise 3 is the subject matter to be transformed.

Anat Klomek and her collaborators have provided well-documented scientific evidence for Premise 3 in 'Bullying, Depression, and Suicidality in Adolescents' in the January 2007 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, (40–49).

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Let's bring the data and ideas in this scientific paper to life.

Second Step: Summary.

- Klomek et al. studied 2,341 students in six New York high schools (page 41), for a correlation between bullying and the risk for depression and suicidal thinking/attempts.
- According to the study, bullying is when a fellow student(s) 'says or does nasty and unpleasant things' to another student, including 'when a pupil is teased repeatedly in a way he or she doesn't like.' (42)
- About 25% of the students in the study report bullying others while at school. (42)
- According to the findings, other things being equal, if one bullies others, one substantially increases one's risk for depression and suicidal thinking/attempts, compared to those who do not bully.

  - depression risk: double for infrequent bullying, triple for frequent bullying (42)
  - serious suicidal ideation risk: double for infrequent, more for frequent (43)
  - suicide attempts risk: double for infrequent, more for frequent (43)

- The findings of this study are consistent with seven other recent studies (47). There were no recent respected studies that oppose this correlation. These findings, then, can be taken to reflect current scientific consensus.
- Assumption: Most if not all bullies do not understand this correlation. Otherwise they would not bully.

Third Step: Personification and dramatization.

The following example of a dramatization is not intended to dazzle anyone by its literary or rhetorical qualities. Rather, it is a simple dramatization which anyone could have made on their own. Again, the aim of the method is to generate personified ideas, easy to understand by

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intelligent nonspecialists. In the writing process following the four step method, the right words can be found to reach – and dazzle – the specific audience.

Imagine a large auditorium, filled with 2,341 students in American high school, from six area schools. About a quarter of the students sit on the left side, and wear a red shirt. The other three quarters sit in the center and right side, and wear a green shirt. The only other visible difference is that some in both groups wear florescent yellow hats.

The occasion for the gathering is to discuss this question: 'What are the disadvantages of bullying another person?' The group on the left are those who bully others. The group on the right are those who do not. The florescent hats are worn by those with depression and/or suicidal thoughts/attempts. Each of the two groups has a spokesperson, who comes to the front to express the point of view of the whole group – honestly and directly, without fear of punishment or retribution.

Statement by the left side: 'Disadvantages of bullying? We do not see any. When you bully someone else, it is bad for them, not for you. You feel powerful, they feel disempowered. Some may think you are cruel, which could count as a disadvantage. But who cares if a few people disapprove?'

Statement by the right side: 'Look for yourself at the audience, which reveals disadvantages you overlooked. The vast majority here do not bully others, as you can see from looking at the ratio of shirts. That is because most of us find better ways of feeling powerful. Further, look at the ratio of florescent hats to people in each group. It is much higher on the left side. Even if you bully infrequently you are twice as likely to have depression and suicidal thoughts/attempts. And if you bully frequently, the likelihood can triple. So if you bully, you are making a trade: feeling powerful for a moment, but taking on substantially higher risk that *you* are in fact disempowered. That is a bad trade.'

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Fourth Step: New Perspective.

Imagine the world from the perspective of the student speaking for the bullies. You are standing on the stage. It registers, for the first time in your life, that there is a connection between doing nasty things to others and your own risk of depression and suicidal thoughts/attempts. You cannot ignore the connection. The hats and shirts speak for themselves. Your statement, and your view of bullying, was wrong. Bullies suffer. You are stunned.

You look over at the group of non-bullies. You now think about them in a new way. You feel sorry for them. You think they are doing something right over there. You imagine your group looking like theirs, with half or two thirds fewer people experiencing depression or suicidal thoughts/attempts. You imagine how things would be if all that energy were instead spent on learning, playing sports, practicing theater, playing music, or any of the other activities you love to do. It would look better.

You then look over at those who bully. You also think in a new way about them. You feel sorry for them. You think they are like people who eat food with a toxin without realizing it. Once they make the connection, they will no longer eat the toxic food. Seen in this way, the problem is a matter of information. If others can see the facts come alive the way you have, they wont bully. And if no one bullied, the world would be a different, better place. We would spend all that time on the activities we love to do, and skip an activity that disempowers us all.

5. Concluding statement

The main strength of this method lies in its combination of two powerful modes of the human imagination – personification and empathy. This combination has extraordinary potential for transforming ideas in a way that makes them interesting and intelligible to a wide audience.

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I now invite you to pick up where Plato left off. I invite you to help me and everyone working to make philosophy relevant and useful, by giving the general public something from philosophy that can compete with the soundbites promoting consumerism, political antagonism, or religious fanaticism. What if the energy spent on these activities were instead spent on Socratic dialogues that help ordinary people to adopt more nuanced and reasonable positions on social and political questions in their lives? In my view, it would be an impressive result for philosophy, and an undeniable improvement in the society that harbors it.

There is an old and vexed question about what counts as progress in philosophy. Perhaps my invitation offers a new place to look for part of the answer. Rather than looking exclusively *within* philosophical debates for a view that philosophers seem to form a consensus about, perhaps we should also look *outside* specialized debates, to the views that get uptake by the rest of society. If philosophy were able to communicate, on the terms of nonspecialists, and in a way that makes society as a whole more reflective, it might result in progress of a kind which, sadly, many philosophers seem not yet to have even imagined.[1]

Charles More (charles-more.com) is an independent philosopher.

Note

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