

Teaching the Liberal Arts: Philosophy Department

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In the first session of my PHI 101: *Introduction to Philosophy* I usually discuss the central argument in Plato's dialogue *Crito*, to the effect that Socrates (who has been unjustly sentenced to death) is better off staying in prison than escaping. In his opening move, Crito (a friend who visits Socrates in prison) argues that since the majority of the Athenians believe that the sentence is unjust, Socrates is entitled to escape. Socrates responds that what is just, and what is unjust, is not determined by the majority but rather by those 'who understand justice and injustice', hence that Crito's opening move fails. After having clarified Socrates' point, I ask the students to reflect on their own for a few minutes on contemporary issues where, according to them, drawing the distinction between what is just, and what they take, or what the majority takes, to be just, is proper. (I emphasize to the students that Socrates does not hold the elitist view that the majority is always wrong in moral matters, but only that regarding justice and injustice there is always a further issue beyond the question what the majority holds: Is the majority right?) Usually, the students come up with a host of interesting examples: death penalty, abortion rights, social security, gay marriage, stem cell research, etc. After a discussion of how Socrates' point applies to these examples, I drive home my main lesson: that by the students' own standards, what they themselves may unreflectively feel about the death penalty, abortion rights, etc. is not, for them, the ultimate arbiter regarding these issues. The crucial further question is always: Is the feeling right? And the response to this further question has to be found out through reflection based on the best information available – i.e. it has to be found out through 'understanding of justice and injustice', or 'examination'. (The 'essential lesson for life': by the students' own standards, moral relativism and moral non-cognitivism – so fashionable amongst US college students at the beginning of the 21st century – are wrong with respect to problematic issues such as death penalty, abortion rights, social security, gay marriage, stem cell research, etc.)