Critical Thinking, Education, and Postmodernity: Possibilities and Limitations for Moral Education

Duck-Joo Kwak

Konkuk University

Korea

The contemporary educational discourse on critical thinking, as one of the primary aims of education. has been divided into the spheres of modernist defense and post-modernist criticism. Critical of both positions, this paper attempts to find a new way of employing critical thinking, especially for the purposes of moral education, by drawing on Bernard William's concept of "ethical reflection." It will be shown that employing critical thinking for the fostering of ethical reflection in our young students can lead them into an "understanding" of ethical, rather than "ethical knowledge," which enables them to properly deal with moral relativism in a culturally pluralistic society. This paper then explores the educational possibilities presented by Socrates' teaching method as an example of this employment, though not without consideration of the attendant educational limitations and dangers.

Key words: critical thinking, moral education, moral relativism, ethical reflection, Socrates' teaching method

Introduction

Over the last few decades, there have been various lines of criticism from post-modern and feminist camps on the prevailing conception of critical thinking and it's justification as the primary aim of education. Even if it's status as one of the primary aims of education in our schools is not fully undermined, the concept and it's justification as the aim of education have been under serious pressure for substantial modification.[1] The contemporary attacks seem to be directed at one main target, that is, the Cartesian sense of rationality that the concept of critical thinking is based upon. The Cartesian sense of rationality is criticized for privileging rational and linear thought over intuition as well as for

Duck-Joo Kwak, College of Education, Konkuk University, Seoul, Korea.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Duck-Joo Kwak, Department of Teacher Education, College of Education, Konkuk University, 1 Hwayang-dong, Kwangjin-goo, Seoul, Korea (143-701). e-mail: djkwak@konkuk.ac.kr

neglecting emotions and lived experiences from concrete situations (Kohli, 1999, p. 83). It is considered to politically exclude historically marginalized or oppressed groups by posing the universal standard of rationality as the formal procedure of our thinking. In other words, this unfavorable attitude to critical thinking today derives mainly from a morally motivated aspiration for inclusion.

However, in a solidly sustained defense of critical thinking, modernist educators, such as Robert H. Ennis and Harvey Siegel, try to redefine the concept of critical thinking in a broader sense. Ennis defines critical thinking as "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe and do," whereas Siegel describes it as an ability to judge in such a way as to meet "relevant standards or criteria of acceptability" (Blake et al., 2003, p. 181). Although also opposing the exclusion of historically marginalized or oppressed groups, they are still concerned with epistemic criteria or standards that reason must meet in order to be rightly judged to be good reasons, namely, reasons that warrant beliefs, claims, and actions. Thus, they

counterattack their critics by asking them how they can coherently criticize the oppression or marginalization of particular groups without appealing to rational criteria that transcend cultural, social or gender-based boundaries. Their worry is that, if we do not have such criteria we would be easily led into relativism of rationality in public discourse, since different people have different ideas about what is rational.

To revisit critical thinking as one of the primary aims of education requires us to take seriously the respective concern of both sides as well as what is shared by them. The post-modern detractors of critical thinking seem to be interested in the question of how we can *coexist* or even *flourish with* differences and conflicts among those with different cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds, while the modernist advocates are concerned with the question of how the differences or conflicts can be *rationally resolved*. The former stresses our disposition to be open-minded, to bring into public discourse more voices from diverse groups, and the latter prioritizes the finding of a more objective knowledge on what to believe or act for the public arena. Despite this difference, however, both sides seem to share their *moral* concern, i.e., opposition to the injustice of excluding historically marginalized or oppressed groups. So I wonder if we can bring together the difference in their emphasis in regard to critical thinking for the purposes of moral education. If it can be shown how contributive to, or how limited for, our *moral* growth critical thinking actually is, we, as educators will be in a better position to situate critical thinking in education in general, and moral education in particular. Moreover, a crucial clue to begin this job can be seen in Bernard Williams' carefully thought-out ideas regarding the limitations of philosophical arguments for ethics.

Williams puts forward two (post-modern) assumptions about the nature of ethics. One is that ethical knowledge on what is right or wrong, if there is such a thing, is not *necessarily* the best *ethical state*.[2] The other is that "in the process of losing ethical knowledge (which we have already acquired), we may gain knowledge of other kinds, about human nature, history, what the world actually is like" (1985, p. 168). The first assumption indicates that the attainment of ethical knowledge, i.e., a moral belief that is rationally justifiable, may not be sufficient for moral education; so this assumption will help us take a critical stance from which we

can see the limitation of the modernist advocacy for critical thinking, which is obsessed with epistemic criteria to achieve rationally justifiable moral knowledge. On the other hand, the second assumption implies that ethical knowledge is still educationally valuable since a process of losing it will bring to us other kinds of knowledge. Williams later describes these other kinds of knowledge as the *understanding* of the ethical, as opposed to ethical knowledge. Thus, the second assumption will be useful in alleviating the post-modern and feminist attacks on critical thinking and redirecting these attacks in a more fruitful way.

Taking Williams' two assumptions as guiding principles, this paper aims at showing a fruitful way of situating critical thinking in moral education. To do so, I will first critically examine two earlier views on critical thinking, Sigel's as modern and Burbules' as post-modern, as a way of arguing for a new approach to critical thinking in moral education. Then, I will take up an analysis of Socrates' teaching method demonstrated in *the Meno* to exemplify this new approach, which is now supposed to serve as a new educational purpose in moral education. This will reveal the educational possibilities and limitations of critical thinking in moral education.

A Critical Review of Two Earlier Approaches to Critical Thinking, Modern and Postmodern

What is critical thinking? The modernist theorists conceive of critical thinking in terms of *both* the ability and disposition to critically evaluate beliefs, their underlying assumptions, and the world views in which the beliefs are embedded. Siegel (1988, p. 23) emphasizes not only the critical thinker's mastery of "epistemic criteria" that reasons must meet in order to be rightly judged to be good reasons that warrant beliefs, claims, and actions, but also their tendency to be "appropriately moved by reasons," i.e., a tendency to be open-minded, fair-minded, and respectful of others in deliberation. However, it is important to note that, even if equally emphasizing these two components of critical thinking, Siegel also makes it clear that these two are conceptually distinct and have different priorities in constituting the concept of critical thinking. Contrasting epistemic criteria with epistemic virtues, Siegel (1997, p. 107, 172) argues that only the former can determine whether

a belief is justified, so inherent to the meaning of rationality, whereas the latter merely increases the likelihood that an inquiry leads to a rational outcome.

Here we can see that Siegel takes the role of epistemic virtues in critical thinking as limited and secondary. He does so in the sense of thinking that how much open-mindedness or willingness to listen to others is to be allowed should be determined by epistemic criteria as "relevant standards or criteria of acceptability" that transcend particular social circumstances. However, what if we disagree over what constitutes "relevant" criteria in assessing a given case? Isn't that the moment when we should be even more *critical* of the given notion of relevant standards or criteria? Moreover, what would allow us this far reaching openness to the new challenge? In the face of this challenge, we may need a different level of open-mindedness, or willingness to listen to others, from that which Siegel conceives. This is all the more the case with moral matters. To clarify my point, I quote Socrates' dialogue in *the Euthyphro* as a relevant instance:

> Socrates: What are the subjects of difference that cause hatred and anger? Let us look at it this way. If you and I were to differ about numbers as to which is the greater, would this difference make us enemies and angry with each other, or would we proceed to count and soon resolve our difference about this?
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> Euthyphro: We would certainly do so.
>
> Socrates: Again, if we differed about the larger and the smaller, we would turn to measurement and soon cease to differ.
>
> Euthyphro: That is so.
>
> Socrates: And about the heavier and the lighter, we would resort to weighing and the reconciled.
>
> Euthyphro: Of course.
>
> Socrates: what subject of difference would make us angry and hostile to each other if we were unable to come to a decision? Perhaps you do not have an answer ready, but examine as I tell you whether these subjects are the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad. Are these not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision, you

and I and other men become hostile to each other whenever we do? (Plato, 1981, p. 11)

The above dialogues seem to tell us two things about the nature of moral arguments. One is that it is natural that we end up with disputes and disagreements when attempting to make moral arguments. The other is that this is because moral arguments in their nature differ from arguments in science and mathematics; unlike the latter, the former is usually incapable of rational settlement. However, I think modernist educators like Siegel would be likely to reject both points by assuming that *the rationality* of moral argument depends upon its leading from premises all parties accept, in steps all can follow, to an agreement upon a conclusion which all must accept. For them, the goal of moral argument is agreement upon a conclusion concerning what ought to be done. Thus, they would take "ending up with a quarrel" in itself as the evidence of incompetence in critical thinking on the part of the engaged, incompetence which is susceptible to moral relativism.

However, if two cultures or two moral outlooks differ from each another, someone who has certain dispositions and expectations as a member of one culture will often be unwilling to see or do what is done in the other culture, when confronted with an alternative moral outlook. It is part of what makes his or her response an *ethical* response that he or she is deeply internalized enough for this reaction of not merely unwillingness, in some cases, rejection. For this unwillingness or rejection has to do with a common phenomenon that the ethical thought of any given culture tends to stretch beyond the boundary of its own culture and claims its universality. In other words, the fact that we easily end up with quarrels over moral issues derives from the nature of the ethical thought. However, as Williams (1985, p. 159) points out, this nature of the ethical thought may not be about the objectivity of the ethical thought in question, but about its content or aspiration. This means that, even if there is no way in which divergent ethical beliefs can be brought to converge with each other by rational argument or independent inquiry, each moral outlook may still make claims that it intends to apply to the whole world, not just to that part of it which is its own world. That is to say, the fact of no rational settlement of moral arguments, or non-objectivity of moral beliefs, does not necessarily imply any relativistic attitude for the moral agent, or lead him or her

into the state of relativism, as Siegel worries.

On the other hand, it seems that, once we are *conscious* of this non-objectivity of our moral knowledge, it should affect the way in which we see the application of our moral outlook. However, how should *this consciousness* affect our ethical thinking? According to Williams (1985, p. 159), there are two mistaken, yet common, responses to this consciousness. One is that we think that this consciousness should just switch off our ethical reactions when we are confronted with an alternative outlook, believing that this consciousness of the non-objectivity of moral knowledge demands us to take a relativistic view which requires us to be equally well disposed to everyone else's moral belief. However, I think this is a seriously confused response because it takes the non-objectivity of moral beliefs to "issue in a non-relativistic morality of universal tolerance." It mistakenly takes up a universal morality, i.e., universal tolerance, at the same time that it denies such a thing actually exists. The other is that, despite the consciousness of the non-objectivity of moral beliefs, we can go on, simply saying that we are right and everyone else is wrong; we affirm our values and reject theirs on the non-objectivist view." Either way, the consciousness would just leave everything where it was and not affect our ethical thought, which is certainly an inadequate response.

Thus, my dissatisfaction with Siegel's theory of critical thinking is twofold. One is with his excessive concern with relativism. I have shown that the fact of no rational settlement in moral arguments does not necessarily lead us as moral agents into relativism since our ethical thinking still *in its nature* aspires to its universal application, if not to its objectivity. The other is with his ill-placed emphasis on the mastery of epistemic criteria in ethical thinking. The mastery of epistemic criteria in itself does not seem to prepare us to adequately respond to our consciousness of non-objectivity; for the latter points to the limitation of applying the given epistemic criteria to the question like "How should *this consciousness* affect our ethical thinking?" Critical thinking, as defined by Siegel, cannot play a proper role in responding to this kind of question because our answer to the question does not rely on epistemic criteria but rather problematizes them as a whole by demanding us to reflect upon our ethical thinking that conforms to the epistemic criteria. In other words, to take seriously the question of "How should the consciousness of the non-objectivity affect our ethical

thinking?" demands from us a different form of ethical thinking access to which may be possible only by being open-minded enough to doubt our tendency to conform to the given epistemic criteria.

Skeptical, not dismissive, of Siegel's concept of critical thinking, the *moderate* post-modern thinker Burbules comes up with a modified concept of rationality, namely, "reasonableness." In contrast to Siegel's concept of rationality as the formal and universal criteria of thought to which everyone is expected to conform, Burbules' reasonableness refers to the dispositions and capacities of a certain kind of person, "a person who is related in specific contexts to other persons, not to the following of formal rules and procedures of thought" (1995, pp. 85-86). What should be noted here is that Burbules means "the dispositions and capacities of a certain kind of person" to be *more* than the mere combination of both the skills of logical reasoning and the disposition to be moved by reason. While describing reasonableness as a more complex set of features of any reflective thought in relation to others, he attributes it to the character of a person who is capable of applying the skills of logical reasoning in specific context of practice. In other words, Burbules characterizes reasonableness as "virtues," which are related to one's sense of the self or integrity as flexible aspects of character. Thus, Burbules' reasonableness can be taken as a complex set of *epistemic virtues*, epistemic in the sense that it is a complex set of features of any reflective thought, and virtues in the sense that they are social aspects of one's character.

Thus, if we formulate the concept of critical thinking in terms of Burbules' reasonableness, it would have two distinctive features. First, the concept would be closely related to the ethical formation of one's selfhood; the primary concern for the education of critical thinking would be the examination of one's own beliefs and actions in relation to others', rather than vice versa. Secondly, the practice of critical thinking would be considered practical and social endeavors. In fact, Burbules claims that the criteria for the adequacy of reasoning processes lie in the practical efficacy and social acceptability of the conclusion the processes derive; they are contextual, interactive and communicative. I find the first feature appropriate to consider, but the second feature trivial, at best, and empty, at worst, in suggesting a role for critical thinking in moral education. Let me be more specific about my point in terms

of the second feature.

Burbules' pragmatic account of reasonableness presupposes the postmodern proposition that the concept of rationality in itself is a socially constructed human invention. For Burbules, what prevents us from falling *entirely* into relativism is our reliance upon communicative and social interactions through which we judge the practical efficacy and social acceptability of our thoughts and actions. What is distinctive about this pragmatic response to moral difference is that the point of reasonable disagreement with others is *pragmatically* determined, pragmatic in the sense of driving the process of intellectual, moral and political development.

Thus, according to Burbules, critical thinking as reasonableness can be best fostered when we are confronted by alternative moral outlooks, the interaction with which tends to cause us aporia, namely conceptual puzzlement. Through this aporia, we experience our limitations as knowing subjects, and yet this experience of aporia would, in turn, lead us into the process of learning, whether intellectual or moral. Now, moral differences are celebrated in moral education for the sake of learning. However, in emphasizing learning experience in itself in dealing with moral differences, Burbules'account does not tell us how exactly aporia would lead us into learning experience, rather than confusion or self-enclosedness, and, more importantly, in what sense this educational experience through social interaction with others prevents us from falling into the danger of collective moral relativism.

I think that to admit *objectively* that the concept of rationality is socially constructed is one thing, and to be committed *personally* to a particular concept of rationality as *my* or *our value* is another thing. Especially when rationality is understood in the broad sense of a *moral* term like "reasonableness", this seems to be all the more the case. This means that, even if we are aware that the concept of rationality is historically contingent, this awareness does not make us immediately stop being committed to it by forcing us to take a relativistic attitude; we still remain committed to it. Yet, it should not leave everything where it was either. As we put it earlier in a slightly different way, we should raise the question to ourselves, "How *should* this awareness affect our ethical thinking?" Although Burbules' pragmatic answer can be one response to this question, I find it quite unsatisfactory since it seems to replace 'the ethical' with 'the pragmatic.' What matters now is not whether there is a way

for us to avoid relativism altogether, which is not possible. It is rather how much room we can *coherently* find for thinking in a relativistic way.

Williams (1985, p. 160) holds, as shown earlier, that both the relativist, who thinks that the judgments of one group apply just to that group, and the other party, who thinks that any group's judgment must apply to everyone, are both wrong. According to him, if we are going to accommodate the relativists' concerns, we must *not* simply draw a line between ourselves and others. Rather we should recognize that others are at varying distances from us, and we must also see that our reactions and relations to other groups are themselves part of our ethical life. I agree with this inclusive view as a realistic as well as ethical response to cultural pluralism. Yet, we feel that some disagreements and divergences are more important than others because we concern the question of what life we are going to live as a group or as an individual. I think this is the very moment when we feel forced to justify our moral outlook against others'. However, what matters in this justification is not just to know how to accept the possibility of legitimate disagreement with others in moral arguments, but to know *in what spirit* to disagree rationally.

To make this point clearer, let me cite Stanley Cavell's words:

> But in the moral cases *what* is "enough" is itself part of the content of the argument. What is enough to counter my claim to be right or justified in taking " a certain" action is up to me, up to me to determine………I can *refuse to accept* a "ground for doubt" (raised by others) without impugning it as false, and without supplying a new basis, and yet not automatically be dismissed as irrational or morally incompetent. What I *cannot* do, and yet maintain my position as morally competent, is to deny the *relevance* of your doubts,…….., to fail to see that they require a determination by me. But in epistemological contexts, the relevance of the doubt is itself enough to impugn the basis as it stands, and therewith the claim to knowledge (1979, p. 267).

Cavell suggests to us one way of understanding what it means for us to disagree rationally in moral arguments by describing the subtle characteristics of our moral agency in rationally disagreeing with others. Cavell seems to claim that

what matters in moral arguments may not be necessarily to find out whether the position we take is rationally justified or not (or more or less reasonable), but to *come to know* where I stand in relation to the position I claim to take or how much I can take a responsibility for the position I claim to take. Of course, I could assess, when confronted by others' questioning, the position I take is flawed and decide to withdraw myself from the original position. However, this can be said to be part of the process through which I come to find out what position I really take and whether it is the one I can respect. Moreover, in Cavell's view, in coming to know what my position is and how much I am willing to be committed to it, which can be brought about by serious discussion with others, the grounds for doubt about my own position becomes less important to me.

For Cavell, what is at stake in moral arguments is *not* exactly *a matter of knowing*, i.e., whether the others know our world, *but a matter of living*, i.e., to what extent we care to *live in* the same moral universe. Thus, Cavell concludes that "what is at stake……is not validity of morality as a whole but the nature or quality of our relationship to one another" (1979, p. 268). While refusing to accept the ground for epistemological doubt, since my commitment to my value means so much to who I am, I do not need to take it as epistemologically false since I cannot deny that it may be relevant to the epistemological status of my moral outlook. The extent of room in which we can think in a relativistic way may be then determined by the degree to which we care to live in the same moral universe. In this sense, for Cavell, our rational disagreement in moral argument, that is, thinking in a relativistic way, can be justified only for moral reasons.

Thus, this view can be said to imply that moral argument in moral education is not to be directed to moral knowledge (or rationally justifiable positions), but to the *reflection* upon one's own moral position and one's relation to the position. This reflection in its character seems to have deeply to do with our being in the *ethical state*, which Williams assumes as the aim of moral education. For this reflection is viewed as allowing us to *live in* the same moral universe with others. Hence we may now conclude that the purpose of critical thinking or moral argument in moral education is to cultivate this ethical state in our students. In the next section, I will introduce Socrates' teaching method as an example of showing a way in which critical thinking is

employed in such a way as to accommodate this new educational aim for moral education.

Socrates' Teaching Method: Using Critical Thinking as a Way to Ethical Reflection

In moral education, the fostering of critical thinking is usually expected to lead students to struggle against the uncritical acceptance of the moral habits and opinions that have formed their character from early on in their childhood. Critical thinking is to question their moral knowledge of what is right to believe or do, the knowledge which they have relied on to find their way around the social world. However, what purpose exactly is critical thinking supposed to serve in moral education? The purpose it may serve is to initiate reflection, so as for the students to imagine the possibilities beyond their current set of commitments or moral beliefs. As a result, as shown above with Cavell's view, this reflection will allow them the possibility of autonomy in the sense that it enables them to *will* for themselves a commitment to ideas and beliefs, even those handed down from their parents or teachers. However, would it be sufficient for moral education to facilitate students' *ownership* of those moral ideas and beliefs?

In posing the question, "How should our consciousness of the non-objectivity (of our own moral beliefs) affect our ethical thinking?" Williams seems to suggest that ethical reflection can or should go further than enabling students to have the ownership of their moral ideas and beliefs. He says about ethical cases that before we reflect we could genuinely find our way around the social world by using our ethical knowledge on what is right to believe or do. However, once we reflect upon it, we feel that we should be doing something else. That is, ethical reflection on what we thought is right or wrong becomes part of the practice it considers and inherently modifies the ethical practice, even with our reassured commitment to it. In this sense, ethical reflection may destroy our ethical knowledge. According to Williams (1985, p. 168), however, "In the process of losing ethical knowledge we may gain knowledge of other kinds, about human nature, history, or what the world is actually like"; in other words, "we can gain knowledge about, or around, the ethical." Thus, Williams claims that "inside the ethical, by the same process, we may gain *understanding*"

(1985).[3]

Despite the ambiguity of what Williams means by "understanding," I now conclude that the aim of moral education is to gain an understanding of the ethical. How then, can we characterize "understanding" as a form of knowledge? Moreover, how can we educators employ critical thinking in moral education in such a way as to lead our students into an understanding of the ethical? Let us examine Socrates' teaching method exhibited in *the Meno* as a way of answering both questions.

While reading *the Meno*, a famous dialogue of Plato's, we are often puzzled or even offended by Socrates as a teacher because his intention in leading the dialogue with Meno, a promising young man who is intellectually curious and confident, appears so opaque to us. His brilliant questionings and rigid arguments look suspicious, as if they masked an ulterior motive. In questioning Meno about *what he knows* about what virtue is, Socrates does not mean to seek a theory on the nature of virtue, although his unrelenting interest in the definition of virtue makes us think he does. What Socrates really does is to *critically examine* what Meno knows about what virtue is (Bruell, 1999, p. 169). Interestingly enough, however, Socrates' questioning does not seem to be geared to helping Meno to find out the right answer, or to persuade him to agree with himself, or to encourage him to seek his own view on it. Socrates' persistent cross-examination seems to be rather skillfully designed to frustrate Meno, only to make him realize that he did not know what he thought he knew.

As indicated by Meno's long confession on his frustration about Socrates' teaching, with its description of Socrates as a torpedo fish that "makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb"(1981, p. 68-69), Socrates deliberately perplexes Meno by questioning and exhausting his answers as all mistaken. Socrates suggests the reason in the later part of the dialogue, referring to the case of the slave boy: "Do you think that before he (the slave boy) would have tried to find out that which he thought he knew though he did not, before he fell into perplexity he realized he did not know and longed to know?" (1981, p. 73) That is, Socrates intentionally leads Meno into the state of aporia, only to make him *long to know* since we do not seriously desire to know before we realize our self-ignorance.

However, the difficulty with Socrates' teaching method as critical questioning is that it can fail to produce in us

longing to know even if we are led into aporia; this is exactly the case with Meno. The textual evidences of Meno's failure even after his confession of aporia are scattered throughout the dialogue.[4] This failure, however, does not make the intellectually curious and eager Meno stop seeking the answer to his initial question of whether virtue can be taught[5]; he continues to bring up this question and tries to engage Socrates into the question in the end. Meno's single-minded concern with theory-oriented knowledge persists despite his failure to long to know. This shows that the kind of knowledge involved in "longing to know" must be distinctive from theory-oriented knowledge in its nature.

What then prevented Meno from longing to know even after going through aporia? I think it was because Meno failed fully to acknowledge his ignorance. Aporia, a Greek word for "a state of perplexity" (Audi, 1995, p. 29), seems to be primarily *epistemological* perplexity where discussions come to no real conclusion, hitting a frustrating dead end. Meno finds himself incapable of answering what virtue is since all the knowledge he knew about it is exhausted by Socrates' dispute. However, for Meno this state of aporia is accompanied by *psychological* discomfort; his warning tone of voice in confessing his state of aporia reveals his somewhat antagonistic feeling toward Socrates. Thus, we can conjecture that intellectually confident and eager Meno, who could not hear the kind of answer he pursued from Socrates, but only left with frustration and confusion, may have had a good reason to find the situation disconcerting and even unjust, far from noticing Socrates' deep educational intention. I think this psychological factor played a role in Meno's inability to fully acknowledge his ignorance.

What then did Meno miss by failing fully to acknowledge his self-ignorance? Or what is the educational function of the acknowledgment of self-ignorance? In describing reasonableness in terms of the acceptance of being fallible, Burbules (1995, p. 93) claims that fallibilism requires us to reflect not only on the fact that "we have *made* a mistake," but also on the question of "why it happened and how we can change to avoid repeating it in the future." If we apply the same requirements to the acknowledgement of self-ignorance, we can say the following as to Meno's failure. First, Meno failed to reflect that he made a mistake about a particular fact, i.e., that he did not know what virtue is; this concerns his awareness of a particular fact to be corrected.

Secondly, he failed to reflect that what was to be blamed for this mistake was his own habit of mind since it made him make the mistake; this concerns his awareness of himself as the source of error.

However, the acceptance of fallibilism does not play the same role as the acknowledgement of self-ignorance does in producing knowledge. The former may lead us to change our mind to have a better opinion, if we are eager to learn, as Burbules describes. With the acceptance of fallibilism, we are led to realize ourselves as the source of error, but only so as to correct ourselves or not to make the same mistake in the future. On the other hand, with the acknowledgment of self-ignorance, we are led to see ourselves not just as the source of error but as self-ignorant, only to have a more *objective* understanding of ourselves *as* a species. This understanding tells us that we are the kind of creatures who know that we are self-ignorant. This self-knowledge in turn comes to be the very source of our longing to know. For this self-knowledge as a philosophical understanding of ourselves is exactly what enables us to see the real possibility of knowing ourselves within.

Thus, the kind of knowledge involved in longing to know is not of theory-oriented knowledge that concerns the certainty or betterness of knowledge, but of knowledge in which we are always *present* as knowing subjects, aware of self-limitation as well as self-possibility. This is exactly what opens to us the horizon to see the possibility of living in the same universe with others who have different moral outlooks. Thus, this characteristics is essential to what Williams calls "understanding" (of the ethical) or "being inside the ethical," which can be gained only through the experience of "losing ethical knowledge." In addition, I also think that critical thinking in the form of critical questioning of our ethical knowledge can play an educationally important role in bringing to students the experience of "losing ethical knowledge."

Of course, this experience of losing ethical knowledge could be educationally useless or even destructive rather than constructive as in Meno. Hence, we as teachers may need to be cautious in employing critical thinking in the form of critical questioning. There seemed to be two main obstacles that may prevent students like Meno from achieving "understanding." One is their blind-minded tendency towards theory-oriented knowledge. The other is their vanity of not acknowledging their self-ignorance. These are obstacles that even an unconventional teacher like Socrates could not help them overcome. This may imply something about the limited role of critical thinking in moral education. Critical thinking by it's nature cannot lead us to "understanding." Teachers can challenge students with their critical questionings, but it is the students' own agency that enables them to overcome the obstacles and to take the crucial step into the realm of "understanding."

On the other hand, apart from the obstacles that can be attributed to students, we educators may also need to carefully ask ourselves whether teachers could take a position different from Socrates' in critically questioning their students in order to minimize their theory-oriented students' resistance to "understanding." In fact, this should be the central task for the teachers who are serious about applying Socrates' teaching and William's insight for the purposes of moral education.

Note

[1] See the three essays on rationality and reason in *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education* (1995), edited by Wendy Kohli

[2] Here I use the terms "moral" and "ethical" interchangeably, taking them in a broad sense that includes obligations and duties as well as virtues.

[3] According to Williams, Socrates made two assumptions that Williams himself does not accept. One is that Socrates thought it impossible that reflection should destroy knowledge since nothing unreflective could be knowledge in the first place. The other is that Socrates believed that reflection led to knowledge and that knowledge was what matters. Williams rejects both of these assumptions for the following reasons. In the case of moral knowledge, knowledge without reflection is better in enabling us to go about the social world. On the other hand, ethical knowledge, though there is such a thing, is not necessarily the best ethical state. In morality, moral action should be considered prior to moral knowledge (1985, p. 168).

[4] See the text at 82a (1981, p. 70) and 86d (*Ibid*., p. 76).

[5] According to Bruell (1999, p. 167), Meno was a student of the famous sophist-rhetorician Gorgias. Meno's belief that he knows what virtue is was bolstered by Gorgias' authority. Unlike other sophists who claim that they are able to teach human and political virtue, Gorgia thinks one ought merely to make the

pupils clever at speaking. While Meno admires in Gorgia more than anything else his refraining from the sophist claim, he is not certain his teacher is correct. Thus, his approach to Socrates with the question of whether virtue can be taught at the beginning of the dialogue was said to be motivated by his intellectual curiosity to resolve this uncertainty of his.

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