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Correspondence should be addressed to Jeanne Connell, Educational Policy Studies, College of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 375 Education Building, 1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820. Email: jmconnel@uiuc.edu

The Use of Socrates: Earl Shorris and the Quest for Political Emancipation Through the Humanities

JAMES SCOTT JOHNSTON
Queens University

TIMOTHY L. SIMPSON
Morehead State University

In this article, we examine the invocation of Socrates as the exemplar for Earl Shorris' Clemente Course in the Humanities program. Our aim is to temper Shorris' claim that the Socratic method and the humanities are tools for political liberation. Though they may have this consequence, they are not exhausted by this consequence. Rather, this method and the humanities are an invitation to a quest of fundamental human questions that need no justification outside of themselves. In this essay, we undertake four related tasks: (a) We probe the arguments that Shorris makes for the inclusion of Socrates as the philosophical

figurehead for the program. (b) We challenge Shorris' taking up of Socrates in this manner. We argue that, contrary to Shorris' belief that Socrates's method was open-ended, it had a point and a purpose, and that this was a search for the truth. (c) We explore the fate of the humanities as a free and open method, as suggested by Shorris. We argue that as a free and open method the humanities hold no elevated position beyond any other sets of readings, and that this has implications for the political life that Shorris wants to cultivate. (d) Finally, we challenge Shorris' very notion of philosophy, and by implication, the humanities. We argue that philosophy, as understood by Shorris, is nothing other than sophistry, the supposed enemy of Socrates/Plato. We conclude by suggesting a tentative definition of Socratic/Platonic philosophy, and thus a reconstructed notion of the humanities that may better serve Shorris' goal of promoting the political life.

Earl Shorris has written a work of compelling interest, a work that, while flawed in certain respects, has about it a profound insight: that the humanities have an abiding role to play in the education of the poor (1997). The Clemente Course in the humanities, which is the outgrowth of this insight, aims to provide a humanities education to the historically and traditionally disenfranchised. With several campuses (including two international ones) in addition to the prototype at Bard College, New York, the Clemente Course has managed to offer several thousand students an education in philosophy, history, art and art history, literature, as well as more local subjects, such as Cherokee and Maya culture.

Central to the workings of the Clemente Course is a theory of poverty. For Shorris, force is the dominant mechanism in and through which the poor are kept disenfranchised. Force is a many-headed Hydra. It is active and concrete, passing from the heightened position of observer free from its effects, down to the poor, who contend with its oppressive manifestations. Frequently, it is in the best interest of those unaffected by the force of poverty and its surround to misunderstand or deny the role of force in the lives of the poor. This is so because they are complicit in the making of inequality that leads to poverty. Force is not negotiable, nor can it be bargained or reasoned with—one simply succumbs to its power. Force cannot be withdrawn, nor can it occupy a “middle ground.” One might say that it cuts to the bone. Force and violence, force and power, are often coterminous.

Shorris likens the effects of force on the poor to that of a surround. This he derives from the practice of the surround tactic of Native Americans in their capture of buffalo and deer. “Isolated, with no place to turn, they panicked, and then the killing began” (1997, 48). Surrounded by direct (hunger, crime, racism, isolation, prison, drugs), and indirect (public housing, media, police, government forces) forces, they succumb, helpless, and the cycle of poverty continues (1997, 48). But Shorris does not think that the cycle is a vicious one. Specifically, Shorris saw a mechanism for the dissolution of the surround. Political enfranchisement, in

the guise of critical and democratic thought, through the means of instruction in, and discussion of, the humanities, is Shorris' solution. Shorris stresses the dialogic potential of the humanities; the sense of a community formed around the great questions that are tackled within the greatest books and debates of the history of humanity. Shorris finds such a community in fifth century Athens and its greatest supporter in the historical figure of Socrates.

Shorris is surely correct in that politics is dialogic and that therefore it does not happen in isolation. This suggests that if there is a "truth" to be had about politics, it cannot exist separate from the persons who discover its nature or decide on it. This is agreeable. But it does not address what follows when the one or the many discover or decide on, the truth. Does this end the debate? Or does the debate continue? If so, what justifies the debate remaining? And if not, what justifies the end of the debate? Put another way, what does Shorris' advocating of Socrates as a supporter of a democratic and open-ended method have to say about the situation in which truth is discovered? We argue that it says nothing. It cannot because it has no means to address this question. And it has no means to address this question because it ignores the historical and philosophical fact that Socrates, in his supposed use of a democratic and open-ended method, searched for the truth, and this search, though participated in by many interlocutors, did not rest for its justification on their voices, rather on the strength of argument. What ultimately ended the debate was a discovery of the truth (or its *reductio ad absurdum*, the discovery of the nontruth).

This criticism builds to a larger point. The point and purpose of the dialogic method impacts the manner of the use of the Great Books and other texts central to the Clemente Course. A central question becomes, what does the use of the Great Books and other texts look like when the point and purpose is open-ended dialogue for political enfranchisement as opposed to the avowedly Platonic reading of the search for and settlement on, truth/nontruth? How does each of these ends alter the way in which the texts get read? And, can the political enfranchisement that the Great Books and other texts read in the context of the Clemente Course provide the sorts of critical operations that Shorris thinks they can without a search for and settlement on, the truth? We think not.

In this article, we examine the invocation of Socrates as the exemplar for the Clemente Course in the Humanities program. Our aim is to temper Shorris' claim that the Socratic method and the humanities are tools for political liberation. Though they may have this consequence, they are not exhausted by this consequence. Rather, this method and the humanities are an invitation to a quest of fundamental human questions that need no justification outside of themselves. In this article, we undertake four related tasks: (a) We probe the arguments that Shorris makes for the inclusion of Socrates as the philosophical figurehead for the program. We find that Shorris, and many others, equates what is important about Socrates and his utility for the program with Socrates's supposed open, dialogic

method, as specified in the early dialogues of Plato. This method is to lead to a manifestly political life; a necessity for further democratic freedom. (b) We challenge Shorris' taking up of Socrates in this manner. We argue that, contrary to Shorris' belief that Socrates's method was open-ended, it had a point and a purpose, and that this was a search for the truth. We then argue that in one of Socrates's early dialogues, the *Euthyphro*, an early argument for the forms is made, which places Shorris' convictions in contention. We argue that the Truth was a necessary condition to envisioning the sort of political life that Shorris demands for the poor. (c) We explore the fate of the humanities as a free and open method, as suggested by Shorris. We argue that as a free and open method the humanities hold no elevated position beyond any other sets of readings, and that this has implications for the political life that Shorris wants to cultivate. Specifically, if the humanities are a tool amongst many in the toolbox, with no inherent value in themselves, then the poor are merely wielding one force within a surround of force. Thus, they fight force with force rather than transcend the fight itself. (d) Finally, we challenge Shorris' very notion of philosophy, and by implication, the humanities. We argue that philosophy, as understood by Shorris, is nothing other than sophistry, the supposed enemy of Socrates/Plato. We conclude by suggesting a tentative definition of Socratic/Platonic philosophy, and through this a reconstructed notion of the humanities that may better serve Shorris' goal of promoting the political life.

The Good Socrates and the Bad Plato

Socrates is the philosophical figurehead of Earl Shorris' Clemente Course in the Humanities. Socrates is not an odd choice at all; in fact, several notable scholars have made reference to the thinker as inspiration for their respective programs. Mortimer Adler's most recent championing of the Socratic method as a part of the Paideia Proposal, comes to mind (1982). Another is the Great Books program at St. John's College in Maryland that uses the Socratic method as in motion in the 1930s by Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr (<http://www.sjca.edu/main.html>). Martha Nussbaum's text, *Cultivating Humanity* also waxes nostalgic over the "Socratic" purpose of higher education (1997). Invariably, it is Socrates the dialogician, Socrates the gadfly, Socrates the democrat, who comes to the fore in these invocations. And while there is nothing at all wrong with emphasizing these aspects of Socrates, often what we consider an equally important side of Socrates (we would argue even more important) gets left aside. And this is Socrates the Truth-seeker.

Shorris makes much of Socrates as developing the political life. As Shorris states, "he was above all a political man, a humanist, one who held human beings responsible for human thoughts and action, which as we know may have been part of the reason or rationalization for his death sentence" (2000, 5). Shorris furthers his estimation of Socrates's political acumen in the following arguments.

In selecting his [Socrates's] method for the Clemente course rather than the French model... [we begin the political life of the student], for in his decision not to write Socrates exemplified the political life; he melded thought and action, the marriage of which politics is born. The political life and the life of the mind followed a similar course and used a similar method: politics is always dialogue; it cannot ever be done alone. Like dialogue, politics does not happen within a person, but in the free space between person, the political space. There cannot ever be a private life of politics, since politics takes place between persons, in a public way, not public in the sense of broadcast or crowds but as the opposite of private. (2000, 29)

Socrates, the dialectician, believed in “the living connection between men, using what he called ‘maieutic dialogue,’ ‘the midwifery of the mind,’ the philosopher led his opponents through the maze of arguments to the brilliant aporia, the point at which there could be no escape from truth” (2000, 18).

Socrates, for Shorris, is the philosophic exemplar of a politically attuned democrat. Further, Shorris’ Socratic method is dialogic and open; it is public and accountable to a public that it is itself of a piece with the dialogue that informs. Now Shorris also tells us that the purpose of Socrates’s dialogue is to lead to the truth. But what this truth is, and what priority it is given in the dialogue is nowhere to be found in Shorris’ argument as to what, beyond the development of the political life, constitutes his reasoning for invoking Socrates as the exemplar of the Clemente course.

In contrast to Socrates, who receives much credit, stands Plato. Plato is the philosophical progenitor of such fundamentalists as Allan Bloom and Leo Strauss, of whom Shorris quite characteristically finds abominable. In Chapter XII entitled, “Radical Humanism,” Shorris claims that Bloom believes there is a Truth, that this Truth is found in the Western Canon and that this canon is reserved for the elite. Shorris, of course, believes that the humanities are for everyone because everyone needs to be able to think about things. Bloom and Strauss are said to prefer an aristocracy to a democracy; a self-fashioned civitas that is responsive only to preordained truths, and not dialogue amongst citizens. One manifestation of this is found in the relegation of literary form. In the Republic, Plato is taken to task for banishing the poets in the Republic (1997, Book 10). Shorris sees this as a species of fundamentalism. He calls Plato “an arch-conservative,” and the state of the Republic as “an immutable organization prescribed by nature, and ruled by a philosopher-king” (2000, 111). He believes that Plato was hostile to the poor and sees his program in contrast to Plato’s Republic. “The radicalism of the humanities in America is the denial of this essential distinction between rich and poor: the birthright of power. Once this happens, freedom is possible in the minds of the poor, and Plato’s republic falls before the onslaught of the poets, the parents of politics” (2000, 116). Plato’s supposed fatalism is said to be aligned against freedom. Ac-

ording to Shorris, “It is not merely the reaction to slavery, but the struggle against fate that gives rise to the idea of freedom. The essence of tragedy comes of man’s will to be free, independent of his fate, whether it is determined by gods or government. That is the great lesson of the humanities and the reason why Plato found the humanities intolerable” (2000, 111). To Shorris, Plato seems rigid and absolutistic, in contrast to Socrates, who seems open-ended and democratic. It will be our task in this next section to demonstrate that this binary cannot hold.

The Socratic Quest for Truth

Though Shorris does not say so, his view of Socrates as having an open-ended method and leading his interlocutors to the truth through the dialogic, “maieutic” method, is of a piece with the conventional wisdom that it is Socrates’s voice that comes through most notably in the early dialogues, and not Plato’s.¹ Further, the early dialogues supposedly emphasize a much more democratic and dialogic method, in contrast to the middle and later dialogues, which emphasize much more Socrates in a position of authority on philosophical matters, and thereby, a mouthpiece for Plato. It is therefore not surprising that the early dialogues receive the greatest focus (in addition to the “cave” passages from the *Republic*) at the Bard College Clemente Course in the study of the discipline of philosophy.

But we assert that the emphasis on Socrates’s early dialogues as open-ended is misleading, particularly if one was to further that argument as Shorris does by suggesting that the results of the dialogues were up for grabs. These dialogues did not end in a settled state of affairs or a conclusion satisfactory to Socrates. But neither did they end in a pronouncement of ethical relativism, or skepticism, or for that matter, in a democratic consensus. They ended, in fact, in pursuit of Truth. It will be our task now to examine one of the dialogues, the *Euthyphro*, to demonstrate that it was in fact the Truth, in the guise of the Forms that Socrates was after. This will set the stage for us to argue further that Shorris’ Socratic, open-ended method has its limitations, and that the quest for the political life, if it is to be successful, must combine successfully with the Truth.

The *Euthyphro* is an early dialogue in which Plato and Euthyphro discuss the topic of piety (Plato, 1997). Euthyphro has recently deposed murder charges against his father for the killing of a servant. Socrates, too, is concerned about murder, as he is to shortly stand trial for supposedly corrupting the youth of Athens. In this famous exchange, no ostensible solution is reached as to the question of what piety is, or what constitutes its nature, and we, the readers, are left with Socrates pondering the question as Euthyphro announces in mid-dialogue that he must leave.

In support of our thesis, consider the arguments of R. E. Allen. Allen, in a famous paper on Plato’s early theory of Forms, argues that the *Euthyphro* serves two essential functions (1971). The first is to specify a body of rules concerning dialectic

tic; that is, the method for arriving at the theory of the Forms. These rules stipulate that questions of something's nature, such as "what is piety?" cannot be answered by turning to examples or by looking for some distinguishing mark amongst things that are nonpious. Rather, it must be answered by an investigation of the virtue in its essence. In the second place, the *Euthyphro* posits that the Forms are standards, and not mere examples or distinguishing features of standards (1971, 328).

There are several passages that echo Allen's reading. Most important are the passages at 5D, 6D–E, and 11B. It will do to look at these passages more closely. At 5D, We have Socrates exclaim:

So tell me now, by Zeus, what you just now maintained you clearly knew: what kind of thing do you say that godliness and ungodliness are, both as regards murder and other things; or is the pious not the same and alike in every action, and the impious the opposite of all that is pious and like itself, and everything that is to be impious presents us with *one form* or appearance insofar as it is impious. (1997, italics added)

In this passage, two important issues arise. The first is that Socrates reaches for an early version of an argument in *kinds*, suggesting an early metaphysics of genus/species that becomes more prevalent in the later dialogues, and presages the argument of Forms as standards. The second is that thing/opposite and same/alike arguments are invoked, suggesting an early version of the dialectical method so gracefully employed in later works.

In passage 6D–E, we have the following dialogue:

Socrates: Bear in mind then that I did not bid you tell me one or two of the many pious actions but that *form itself* that makes all pious actions pious, for you agreed that all impious actions are impious and all pious actions pious through one form or don't you remember?

Euthyphro: I do.

Socrates: Tell me then what this *form itself* is, so that I may look upon it, and using it as a *model*, say that any action of yours or another's that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not.

Euthyphro: If that is how you want it, Socrates, that is how I will tell you.

Socrates: That is what I want. (1997, italics added)

Now in these passages, Socrates is clearly pressing Euthyphro to define piety not by example or by action, but rather form of piety itself, and, having found it, to

use it as a model and then compare various actions with it to then determine whether or not they are pious or impious. Thus we have Socrates asking Euthyphro for the essence of piety so that it can be held as a standard for all pious or impious actions.

The final passage is 11B. Here, Socrates reiterates his major concern with Euthyphro's argument: that of not using quality or characteristic to define a thing's essence.

Socrates: I'm afraid, Euthyphro, that when you were asked what piety is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me, but you told me an affect or quality of it, that the pious has the quality of being loved by all the gods, but you have not yet told me what the *pious is*. (1997, italics added)

The importance of defining the nature of the virtue (in this case, piety) in question cannot be lost on us. Socrates is pressing Euthyphro to first find the essence of the virtue before determining whether or not something in its appearance is or is not virtuous. Socrates is pressing Euthyphro, in short, for an account of the truth of piety. And the truth of something, as Allen rightly points out, can only be gained by an awareness of its reality (1971, 334). This is the first order of business, if you will, before going on to settle what counts as pious or impious action. It will not do, as Socrates maintains, to discuss a subject in a fruitful way without recourse to the truth of that subject. And this holds for all subjects in question. One must find out the truth about what one is discussing before one can discuss it reasonably, or with recourse to its traits, distinguishing features, or its application.

How does this apply to Shorris' lauded goal of developing the political life of the poor? Truth seeking seems lost on Shorris. For Shorris, it is enough to teach the poor how to question, period. But question for what purpose? If it is to find solidarity with other poor people, this is an important step toward political enfranchisement, but it is not coeval with the Socratic method. If the questions lead to actions against the surround (e.g., against the landlord, neighbor, social worker, police) can Shorris provide a reason not to avenge through physical punishment the pain of the surround? Shorris does give us an example of a student who walks away from a possible physical altercation, but can he ground the action with a reason? Further, are these reasons anything other than cultural habit, custom, or dogma? If not, is Shorris providing reasons or rhetoric? If Shorris is only providing reasonable persuasion, then is he teaching the poor to meet force with force, if even in words? This is surely not the goal of the Socratic method. What Plato brings to Socrates's supposed open-ended method is precisely an account of the truth; an account of the reasons for actions against injustice. And this is why Shorris must return to Plato to complete his account of Socrates if he is to remain the philosophical progenitor of the Clemente program.

Humanities as a Free, Open Method

Before we can address the fate of the humanities as a free, open method, we must first understand the end of the humanities for Shorris. The end of the humanities course is to cultivate the “philosopher-citizen” (Shorris 2000, 6). Based on the citizen of ancient Athens, the philosopher-citizen is “the person who thought reflectively about the management of the internal and external affairs of the city” (Shorris 2000, 6). This type of citizen debates with his community the most basic political issues of the day. For Shorris, Socrates is the exemplar philosopher-citizen because of his constant criticism of conventional opinion. Emulating Socrates, Shorris believes, the poor obtain a means to escape from poverty.

According to Shorris, without the political acumen of Socrates, the poor merely survive, they react but do not reflect on the surround of force [for example, illness, media, family violence, drugs, government, to name a few (2000, 40)] that keeps them poor. The humanities offer access to the political skill of reflection. Reflection, for Shorris, means to “consider more than one alternative” (2000, 114). Through reflection, the poor learn to question the surround of force and, by doing so, they enter the public realm as real citizens.

However, if the humanities course, as a free, open method accountable to the public, leads to reflection, and reflection is asking questions and considering more than one alternative, then how do the humanities differ from engagement with everyday experience? Why are the humanities so important for political enfranchisement and political reflection? The humanities are not the only means to political enfranchisement. Shorris believed that immigration, labor unions, tenant unions, and especially churches and families, can lead to political action (2000, 104–105). So, why the humanities? The humanities do teach us to *think about things* but so do our everyday lives.² Each day we are confronted with alternatives through our interaction with other persons. Further, the newspaper, television, or the comics asks us to reflect on multiple worldviews. And, of course, if poor need the skill to reflect why not offer multiple cultural perspectives that are themselves taken to be alternative worldviews? Why, then, do the humanities, especially Western notions of the humanities, hold an elevated status above these other alternatives to reflection? Finally, even if the poor are reacting rather than reflecting, these reactions change given that the environment itself changes, and so some reflection must take place amongst them. If mere reflection is the goal of the humanities, then not only are the poor reflecting now but also there are a number of alternative prompts available to teach reflection. What *kind* of reflection, then, did Shorris have in mind?

Shorris might respond by claiming that the humanities offer more than mere reflection, but rather a strategy, skill, or tool. As the rich, according to Shorris, have used the humanities as an *instrument* for oppression, the poor will use the humanities as an “instrument for justice” (2000, 111). Here Protagoras, a famous Sophist of Greece, enters as a “teacher of the humanities” for Shorris: For

Protagoras, like Socrates, valued “critique as an avenue to the consideration of ethical questions” (2000, 109). Like a good democrat, says Shorris, Protagoras is subversive in his critique of conventional opinion (2000, 110). Moreover, Protagoras claimed that for a small fee he could impart his political skill. This political skill, he claimed, could make one better.³ The zealous young politicians convinced that traditional wisdom could not help them rise within the restoration of Athenian democracy soon sought Protagoras out as a political teacher. Like Protagoras, Shorris believes that the humanities offer a certain skill. He says the humanities are a foundation for “getting along in the world” (1997, 53). As rich people know how to use the humanities; the poor will also know how to “negotiate instead of using force.” The poor need the means to live a “more effective method” in this society. If the poor are taught the political strategy of society’s game, then they themselves can change the rules of the game for the betterment of themselves. To keen ears, the humanities of Shorris promise the same political shrewdness of the Sophists, namely to teach the political virtue of eloquence (or, negotiation or oratory or “winning the argument”).⁴

What are the political implications of conceiving of the humanities as a strategy for eloquence or negotiation? First, the self begins a process of de-isolation and makes a public connection. For example, the Clemente program has formed a small like-minded community. Second, the humanities provide access to alternatives other than physical aggression in the combat with the surround of force. Third, the poor may be able for the first time to articulate what is and who is the force. For example, in *As a Weapon in the Hands of the Restless Poor*, Shorris recounts that a discussion on the American Revolution led to a difficult question, “If the founders loved the humanities so much, how come they treated the natives so badly?” Shorris himself was stumped. A student, though, responded, “That’s what Aristotle means by incontinence, when you know what’s morally right but you don’t do it, because you’re overwhelmed by your passions” (1997, 58). The other students nodded in agreement. This classroom moment epitomizes what we think Shorris hoped the humanities can do. These students are beginning to better understand the forces they live in and may begin to escape from them. We share the same hope as Shorris.

However, we have two concerns with Shorris’ use of the humanities as a skill for political enfranchisement. First, we do not believe the humanities should be reduced to an instrument for political enfranchisement. Shorris runs the risk of turning liberal education into vocational education. A liberal education, one that necessarily involves the humanities, is an education which has its justification in itself, a vocational education is an education that has a purpose outside itself, a purpose which consists in a useful effect that can be realized through practice or training. Only a liberal education is an education for freedom. Second, we do not believe Shorris has justified or grounded his goals for the humanities instruction, namely the democratic ideals of fairness, freedom, and equality. Are these cultural dogmas or can they be

grounded in something transcultural or in nature? Shorris was right to ground his ideals in the tradition of this nation. However, the ground of our nation's tradition has undergone a vigorous debate. Is our tradition a bold conviction and passion or does it have a theoretical basis? Shorris imparts to the poor an instrument he accuses the wealthy of wielding for injustice, but does not educate the poor on the idea of justice nor on the right use of this instrument for justice. Are we willing to supply anyone with a tool that can be used for justice or injustice without instructing them in the right use of it?⁵ When will the poor know they have achieved justice other than personal advantage? For Shorris, the humanities are "dangerous," indeed (1997, 59).

Sophistry or Philosophy?

A question emerges: How has Shorris arrived at this position? This article hypothesizes that Shorris has mistaken sophistry for philosophy. In our estimation, the difference between sophistry and philosophy is that the former is not searching for Truth, rather it is the art of verbal persuasion. The latter, however, is the search for Truth. In our attempt to distinguish sophistry from philosophy, we follow two useful sources: W. K. C. Guthrie's, *The Sophists* (1971) and Harry S. Broudy and John R. Palmer's, *Exemplars of Teaching Method* (1965). Guthrie's is a masterful work on the culture of Fifth century Greece and the place of sophists and sophistry within it. Certainly sophists are a varied bunch but Guthrie describes them as: "masters of the art of verbal persuasion," (1971, 15) and teachers of "conduct" in political, practical affairs (1971, 30). This was based on an epistemological insight most, but not all, sophists shared, namely "a scepticism according to which knowledge could only be relative to the perceiving subject" (1971, 50). This claim characterizes Protagoras' famous phrase, championed by Shorris, "man is the measure of all things." We believe, contrary to Shorris, that neither the Socratic method nor the humanities teach this relativistic position. Broudy and Palmer describe what the sophists teach as, "the ability to speak effectively," "the power to sway an audience" that can be "turned into political power," (1965,15) finally, "to guide and control public deliberation" (1965, 6). For Broudy and Palmer, the sophists were not interested in Truth, but only in persuading the right public for personal ambition. Their interest lay in taking fees from rich, ambitious youth not helping the poor assume political enfranchisement.

Shorris argued for a close relationship, almost an equation, between Protagoras and the early Socrates. He claimed that both Socrates and Protagoras affirmed "the life giving character of the changing world" (2000, 111). For both Socrates and Protagoras, the political life is dialogue in the world (2000, 71). As the Platonic dialogue named *Protagoras* (1997, 314c–d) suggests, however, it is difficult to distinguish between a sophist and philosopher.⁶ As Socrates and Hippocrates are discussing the merits of good teaching, they pause at the door of Callias's house, where Protagoras is staying, and finish their discussion; the doorman obviously

overhears them; so when they knock, he opens and says, “Ha! More sophists! He’s busy,” and slams the door in their faces. We should not assume, as Shorris does, that a lively discussion alone that promotes reflection is philosophy. In this essay, we believe that Socrates’ commitment to the search for the Truth, as evidenced in the *Euthyphro*, is a strong candidate for distinguishing philosophy from sophistry.

Shorris’ confusion stemmed from equating the aim of Protagoras with the aim of Socrates. He says that they both use “critique as an avenue to the consideration of ethical problems” (2000, 109). At first glance, this is true enough. The Sophists rose to prominence in fifth-century Athens as teachers of rhetoric for the political sphere. They taught the art of politics. If the dialogue *Protagoras*, however, is a fair depiction of Protagoras himself, then we should consider what he claims to teach. First, he claims that “the very day you start [your study], you will go home a better man, and the same thing will happen” every day (1997, 318a–b). But better in what sense? If you went to a painter, you would learn how to paint. If you went to a musician, you would learn how to make music. What do you learn if you go to Protagoras? In what do you become better? Protagoras responds, “What I teach is sound deliberation both in domestic matters—how best to manage one’s household; and in public affairs—how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action” (1997, 318e–319a). In other words, Protagoras claims to teach the art of citizenship—no doubt a reason why Shorris elevates Protagoras as a model for the humanities. However, a good citizen is relative to its regime. A good citizen in a democracy is different from a good citizen in an oligarchy or tyranny. Protagoras is willing to sell his intellectual wares to anyone in any regime. He has abandoned the idea that there may be a good apart from the conventions of each city, which he should use as a guide in the making of a good citizen. A good citizen relative to a regime is not necessarily a good man. Here is the decisive difference between the aim of Protagoras’s teaching and the aim of Socratic teaching. The aim for Socratic teaching is a good man that is good in all regimes and only a good citizen in the best regime.

The point here is that Shorris fails to see the aim of Socrates’s method.⁷ The aim is nothing other than Socrates’s mission in the *Apology*, “to go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul” (1997, 30a–b). This explains why Socrates cautions Hippocrates in the *Protagoras* to the danger of placing his soul in the care of a sophist he does not know. To care for the soul is to exercise one’s soul in the search for the truth. Plato suggests that participating in the Forms is the proper nourishment of the soul, as Socrates explained in the *Phaedrus* (1997, 244–250): “this pasture [that of the Forms] has the grass that is the right food for the best part of the soul, and it is the nature of the wings that lift up the soul to be nourished by it” It is not surprising, then, that in the *Protagoras* Socrates distinguished himself from Protagoras by his desire to question rather than give speeches about what virtue is in itself. Likewise, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates searched for a true measure of piety for making elegant and

correct judgments. Socrates exercised with his interlocutors in the search for Truth because in the search they become better human beings.

Ignoring for a moment the question whether virtue can be taught, what are the political implications for the poor if they follow sophistry or philosophy? If the poor follow sophistry, then they do learn the art of negotiation and form a community. These are important goals for the political liberation of the poor. But if Protagoras is right that “man is the measure of all things,” then Thrasymachus in Plato’s *Republic* is right as well. That is, justice is the advantage of the stronger and so might makes right⁸ (1997, 338c). Thus, when Shorris provided the poor with new tools and a new community, he provided them with a new power to wield against force. But this power is merely another force; it is an art of verbal persuasion. The game is played differently by the poor—the poor may play it exceedingly well according to some—but the root injustice, the game of force itself, has not changed. In addition, the poor do not possess the means to grasp a standard of justice from which they can change the game itself. If the poor follow Plato’s philosophy, they learn the means to search for justice itself. They learn to question on principle rather than by self-interest. Their standard is not mere consensus or power, but the power of the argument and Truth. In this quest, the poor not only emerge as model citizens; they emerge as model lives. This life, we believe, is like Socrates not Protagoras.

How are we to reconcile the humanities with Socrates the truth seeker? We suggest nothing new. That is, the humanities have traditionally been interpreted as exposure to the fundamental human questions and exercises in truth seeking. The humanities are those texts and disciplines that best exemplify the human condition, both its greatness and its failures. They need not be strictly associated with the Western tradition, but they should remind one of what it means to be human. For through the humanities we are reminded of our humanness. The beauty of the humanities is that authors contradict one another about the human. So we are asked to both listen to the conversation of the greatest minds but also question the greatest minds as well. This, of course, is no small task. Rather, it is the “training in the highest form of modesty, not to say of humility. It is at the same time training in boldness: it demands from us the complete break with the noise, rush, the thoughtlessness, the cheapness of the Vanity Fair of the intellectuals as well as their enemies. It demands from us the boldness implied in the resolve to regard the accepted views as mere opinions, or to regard the average opinions as extreme opinions, which are at least as likely to be wrong as the most strange or the least popular opinions”⁹ (Strauss 1988). For the humanities only serve us through our questioning of those very texts and our searching for the Truth of those texts.

Conclusion

Like Shorris, we believe that the humanities can serve a critical role in helping the poor escape poverty. However, until Shorris is able to reconcile his distancing of the open-ended Socrates with a truth-seeking Plato, his understanding of the hu-

manities has a serious limitation. Elevating Socrates as the exemplar of the humanities and viewing the humanities as exercises in truth seeking does not preclude the poor from learning to question and from entering the political realm. Rather, the Socratic method and the humanities can invigorate a commitment to principled justifications for a better way of life for the poor and call on society to meet its own democratic commitments.

Notes

1. Consider the following sources: “Most of what we know about Plato’s philosophy is based on the many dialogues he wrote in which the character of faithfully reported Socrates’ original views. But as Plato grew older and his own theories began to develop, the character Socrates increasingly became the mouthpiece for Plato’s own views” (Vasquez 1991, 101). “The stylistic changes [changes in dialogue form and content] reflect a shift away from the personal urgency of Socratic enquiry: from the middle dialogues on, we are in no doubt that Plato does have views of his own which the figure of Socrates serves merely to present” (Annas 1993, 233). “Plato, so this view [Socrates as separate from Plato] continues, went beyond Socrates in developing a view about how such knowledge might be gained.” Then, in a footnote the author states, the “bulk of the tradition follows this view expect John Burnet and A.E. Taylor” (White 1976, 3, 23).

2. According to Jon Fennell (1999, 18) Bloom cannot provide an educational aim beyond merely *thinking about things*. Paraphrasing Bloom he writes, “[The students] are to recognize alternatives and become acquainted with profound possibilities. This leads to an awareness of a full range of perspectives.” This is nothing other than Shorris’ goal as well. However, Fennell believes that Bloom wanted his to students “to take risks and enjoy the consequences of a serious life [a life that believed in something]” but since he (Bloom) assumed a world bereft of value (nihilism) was possible and must be taken seriously his “critique of nihilism is incomplete and unsatisfactory to the degree that Bloom is unable to commit himself to the existence and possession of truth as opposed to the mere search for it.” Again, if Shorris is accepting Socrates but rejecting Plato on account of Plato’s belief in Truth and Socrates questing for it, then both Shorris and Bloom end up in the same position. Namely, both Shorris and Bloom do not or cannot give an account of education with a faith in Truth, but justify education as a mere pursuit. We hope to show, like Fennell, that there are problems with this approach to the humanities.

3. If Plato’s *Protagoras* is any indication of Protagoras’s real teaching, then we should pay special attention to his claims in this account. At 318a–b Protagoras says, “The very day you start, you will go home a better man, and the same thing will happen the day after. Every day, day by day, you will get better and better.” This is certainly a strong selling point. At 318e Protagoras continues, “What I teach is sound deliberation, both in domestic matters—how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs—how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action” (see also Jaeger 1979). Interestingly, Michael Frede (1992) in the “Introduction” to a translation of the *Protagoras* notes that Protagoras is not a democrat in the way Shorris assumes, but rather is a threat to democracy. He says, “Democracy rests on the assumption that the affairs of the city are not the subject of some special expertise, but that every citizen is competent to judge them. To claim that a special expertise or art is needed for these matters comes dangerously close to claiming that the people are not fit to rule, for they do not have this expertise” (xii–xiii). That is to say, if democracy rests on the everyday citizen, but Protagoras has a special art (an essential art?) to sell to the everyday citizen, then he is undermining the very idea of democracy.

4. If equating Shorris’ promise with the Sophists is disconcerting, Shorris seems to agree. While praising Protagoras he asks the reader to separate “sophistry” from the “sophists” because sophistry is problematic. (2000, 108–109) However, what is a sophist but a purported “wise guy (man)” who offers tactical oration for political advancement? So, while he wants

to distance himself from sophistry he accepts the sophist Protagoras and his method and so, in my estimation, never completely distances himself from advancing the merits of sophistry. This inability to distance himself from sophistry becomes more problematic as we proceed.

5. To suggest a “right” way should unsettle the reader. The next section will brave this unsettling feature.

6. There is some question as to whether or not Plato is a reliable source for Protagoras’ and other Sophist’s views. Guthrie (1971, 262–269) provides a summary of the views regarding Plato as a source for the Sophist’s teaching and views.

7. Interestingly, Dr. Martin Kempner, the professor of philosophy for the Clemente course, recognizes this end differently from Shorris. In a sample syllabus of the philosophy course provided by Shorris in *Riches for the Poor*, Kempner emphasizes Socrates’ quest for wisdom and that Socrates’s mission was to seek the truth. For whatever reason, Shorris does not find this significant for his own understanding of Socrates.

8. Consider also chapter 15 of *The Prince* by Machiavelli (1999), when he stated, “And because I know that many have written of this, I fear that in writing of it again, I may be held presumptuous, especially since in disputing this matter I depart from the orders of others. But since my intent is to write something useful to whomever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good.” Once one abandons the quest for the best city “one must lower the standards in order to make probable, if not certain, the actualization of the right or desirable social order or in order to conquer chance.”

9. Also, note that Dewey, for example, would agree with the premise but not the conclusion. He would argue that it does not follow that, because the only laws we have are our own, therefore a “will to power” prevails. Rather we work together to solve common human concerns.

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Correspondence should be addressed to James Scott Johnston, Faculty of Education, A318 Duncan McArthur Hall, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Ca, K7L–3N6.
E-mail: johnstos@educ.queensu.ca

Antipoverty Policy Perspectives: A Historical Examination of the Transference of Social Scientific Thought and a Situated Critique of the Clemente Course

JENNIFER NG
University of Kansas

Poor people have been described in a range of ways. This article begins by tracing the term "underclass" in its social and political context from the 1960s to present, examining its transference from academia to lay usage through analysis of widely accessible periodicals of the time. Next, it engages the work of Earl Shorris, a writer who devised a course in the humanities to be taught to poor people as a remedy for poverty. Shorris' Clemente Course is examined in both ideological design and policy-related intent, and it is concluded that although Shorris offers a new vocabulary for theorizing about poverty, his project reflects much of the traditional antipoverty discourse that is behaviorally based, is dehumanizing, and minimizes the reality of poverty's structural effects. By incorporating the work of Paulo Freire, I argue that any effective remedy to poverty must go beyond simply attributing the cause of poverty to the poor; rather, the role of affluent individuals and the interconnectedness of their privilege to those who are poor must be made explicit.

Poor people have been described in a range of ways, from exacting profiles such as high school dropouts, prime-age males not regularly attached to the labor force, welfare recipients, female heads of families (Ricketts and Sawhill 1988); to broader characteristics referring to early sexual initiation, need for authority, inability to defer gratification (Lewis 1968); to loosely defined labels suggestive of their problematic status as pathological (Moynihan 1965), underclass (Myrdal