

The Teacher as Mother or Midwife? A Comparison of Brahmanical and Socratic Methods of Education

KATE WHARTON

Socrates famously compares himself to a midwife in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Much less well known is the developed metaphor of pregnancy at the centre of the initiation ritual that begins Brahmanical education.¹ In this ritual, called *Upanayana*, the teacher is presented as becoming pregnant with the student. The *Arthavaveda* states:

The teacher leads the student towards himself, makes him an embryo within; he bears him in his belly three nights.²

¹ For the purposes of this chapter we will define Brahmanical education as purely concerning the memorisation of the sacred inherited verses – the Vedas – that were recited during the *śrauta* ritual. The term 'Brahmanical' refers to the experts (*brahmins*) who wrote the *Brāhmaṇas* and formalised and expanded the *śrauta* ritual. The definition of Brahmanical culture used here is not purely historical, but represents an over-arching cultural paradigm that extends from the composition of the *Brāhmaṇas* in 800–600 BCE to the era of the *Dharmaśāstras* 100 BCE–200 CE. We use the term 'Brahmanical ritual' rather than 'Vedic ritual' to draw a distinction between the early/middle Vedic culture and the late Vedic (Brahmanical) era. In the early/middle Vedic period the sacred hymns of the *Vedas* were composed by a large population of antagonistic tribes, and the sacrificial rite was a festal gathering not yet formalised, however, in the late Vedic (or Brahmanical) era, when the *Brāhmaṇas* were composed, the rite became a highly elaborate and controlled event. It is this later more developed ritual culture that is of interest to us here. This chapter does not intend to provide a historical outline of the full variety of educational methods in ancient India but to illustrate one predominant strand that can be seen as core to the educational system. For a more detailed discussion of the historical context of the strand that this chapter isolates refer to the introduction and first chapter of my thesis, *Philosophy as a Practice of Freedom in Ancient India and Ancient Greece* (SOAS, University of London, 2008).

² *Arthavaveda* (*Śaunaka Recension*) 11.5.3, Meiko Kajihara, *The Brahmacārīn in the Veda: The Evolution of the 'Vedic Student' and the Dynamics of Texts, Ritual and Society in Ancient India* (Harvard University Thesis, 2002), p. 136.

In this ritual action, the teacher becomes the mother of the pupil.

What is the difference between a mother and a midwife? The essential difference between these roles is that the mother gives birth and the midwife does not. In the *Upanayana*, the teacher becomes pregnant; in the Socratic analogy it is the student, not the teacher, who becomes pregnant: knowledge is presented as originating within him. Both these metaphors compare education to gestation, labour and birth, but the way they set out the teacher–pupil relationship is completely opposite. In the *Upanayana*, the mother directly generates and forms the student. The pregnant teacher is presented as the sole source of knowledge. In the Socratic analogy the midwife watches over the student and aids him as *he* gives birth.

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates argues that the educational process must be centred around the potential of the student, so that they initiate their own growth and give birth to their own truth. Socrates claims that knowledge cannot be passed down directly from teacher to pupil. He observes that growth in wisdom is only authentic if a pupil's 'progress is amazing both to other people and to themselves.' Socrates is adamant that this progress is never due to anything his students have learned from him: instead 'they discover within themselves a multitude of beautiful things, which they bring forth into the light.'³ In the Socratic model, the teacher stands to one side, like a doctor, and helps the student to critically examine his pregnancy to see whether it will come to full term.

In the *Upanayana* ritual there is absolutely no distance, no boundary, between teacher and pupil. The student bonds with his teacher as a child held in the womb. To understand the contrast between the pedagogical ideals of the teacher as a mother and the teacher as a midwife let us look in more detail at the *Upanayana* ritual and its function within ancient and medieval Indian education. The *Dharmaśāstras* (100 BCE–200 CE) state that *Upanayana* was mandatory, automatically undergone by all the higher castes in accordance with the laws of Manu. There was no choice involved: every male child of the higher castes would undergo *Upanayana* between the ages of five and eight. The Brahmin's whole childhood was dedicated to the imitation of his teacher as he recited Vedic mantra. When he is reborn in the *Upanayana* ritual the student is consecrated, like his teacher before him, to be a vessel for the Vedas, the sacred verses. The

³ *Theaetetus* 150e. John Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), p. 167.

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image of pregnancy in the *Upanayana* is a metaphor for how knowledge is inherited, shared and passed between teacher and pupil: through and in the transmission of the Vedas, they identify with each other, becoming as if one body—and one mind.

The *Upanayana* ritual also dramatises the student's commitment to tradition. The womb from which the student is reborn is not the womb of any particular individual, but the womb of the Vedas themselves; the teacher gives the student over completely to the possession of the Vedas. The *Upanayana* dramatises the pupil's memorisation of his first sacred *mantra* and it ensures that the student relates to the truth of the Vedas as to his mother who created and bore him. The *Laws of Manu* refer to the *Upanayana* as 'birth from the Veda'.⁴ It says that the Vedic mantra is the 'mother' of the student.⁵ Laurie Patton has observed that in one Vedic hymn related to pregnancy, there is great anxiety over miscarriage, or the loss of an embryo, because it is seen as the loss not just of a child but 'more importantly [of] a Brahmin who knows verses.'⁶ According to Patton, this hymn suggests that each embryo has value only in that it is a 'storehouse for sacrificial knowledge.'⁷ In the *Upanayana* the student is consecrated to be such a storehouse; in imitation of his teacher he will memorise, preserve and pass down the entire corpus of verses.

The memorisation of the Vedas was an immense task. A student in a Ṛg Vedic school would have had to learn firstly, the *Ṛg Veda* (about 10580 verses), then the *pada*, *krama* and/or *jaṭā* texts (the same length), the *Aitreya Brāhmaṇa* and *Āraṇyaka*, and the six *Vedāṅgas* (which include the 4000 sūtras of Pāṇini's grammar).⁸ The amount of information to be memorised, and the amount of time required, meant that there was no space within the educational period for anything except replication.

⁴ *Manu Smṛti* 2.170; trans. Patrick Olivelle, *Laws of Manu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵ *Manu Smṛti* 2.171.

⁶ Laurie Patton, ed., *Jewels of Authority: Women and Text in the Hindu Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), p. 59.

⁷ Patton, *Jewels of Authority*, p. 53.

⁸ The *Gopatha Brāhmaṇa* states that the period of study for memorising one such Veda is twelve years (GB 2.5, CU 6.1.2.) Kane mentions various alternatives to this time found in the Law books, ranging from 3 to 18 years for each Veda, but twelve years seems to be the average. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1975), pp. 348, 352.

The essential educational method is demonstrated in the initiation itself. At the core of the *Upanayana* is the learning of the first mantra.⁹ The *Brāhmaṇas* describe this as follows:

As they sit facing each other west of the fire, the teacher, who is facing east, makes the student repeat the ‘resonating’ syllable OM, the ‘great utterances’ *bhūr*, *bhuvah*, *svah* and the *sāvitrī* verse.¹⁰

In one text, *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 11.5.4.13, this moment is seen as an act of impregnation. The text states that the *mantra* must be pronounced with the teacher and pupil sitting in correct position, face to face; otherwise ‘if someone were then to say “he begat him perversely,” it would be so.’¹¹ That the learning of the *mantra* is the basic reproductive technology of the womb of the teacher is stated explicitly in *ŚB* 11.5.4.17:

Twofold indeed are these progeny, divine and human. Those human progeny are born from the vagina. The divine progeny are the meters – [the teacher] generates them from the mouth, and from there he generates the (student).¹²

The student is more than human after he has been reborn through the memorisation of the Vedas. He is no longer human progeny; instead he is divine progeny, born of the scriptures themselves.

We have seen that one Vedic hymn suggests that the Brahmanical student’s life is valued only in so much as he is a vessel for the Vedas. We have seen that ritual rebirth is mandatory. This invites the question: Is the student freed or enslaved by his commitment to the Vedas? Born of the Vedas, born of the mouth of his teacher, does he become more than human, or is he rendered less than human, sub-human? Who is the rightful owner of his identity—the student himself or the tradition that has laboured over him and given him birth?

If we turn to more of the detail of the *Upanayana* ritual, we may be able to begin to answer these questions. The *Upanayana* begins with a series of gestures that represent joining, binding and enveloping. The student is wrapped in garments which are compared to

⁹ Timothy Lubin, *Consecration and Ascetical Regimen: A History of Hindu Vrata, Dikṣā, Upanayana and Brahmachārya* (Columbia University Thesis, 1994), p. 191.

¹⁰ Lubin, *Consecration and Ascetical Regimen*, p. 191.

¹¹ Lubin, *Consecration and Ascetical Regimen*, p. 136.

¹² Lubin, *Consecration and Ascetical Regimen*, p. 136.

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womb-layers.¹³ Other ritual garments, such as the *mekhalā* belt,¹⁴ are tied round the student to represent his commitment to his teacher. The extent of the student's union with the teacher is seen in this statement, which the teacher makes in this case to a group of initiates:

We bend together your thoughts, your wills, your intentions; we make those of you there who are discordant bend (your wills) together.

I grasp (your) minds with (my) mind; follow my thought with your thoughts; I put your hearts in my powers; go and follow along my course.¹⁵

In another version of the ritual, the teacher touches the heart of one student and says: 'I place your heart under my rule. Let your thought follow my thought. Take delight in my word wholeheartedly. Let Bṛhaspati join you to me.'¹⁶ Bṛhaspati is the 'custodian of *brahman*' or revealed Vedic speech.¹⁷

The extent to which the student's mind and body is given over to the replication of the Vedas is revealed in Frits Staal's study of present day practices in Kerala, where the ancient tradition of Vedic memorisation is still active. Staal observes that the pupil's conditioning is rigorously controlled through a system of gesture, the student imitating not just his teacher's pitch and accent but also his head movements. Staal observes:

The head is kept straight when the phrase is medium pitch, is bent down when it is low pitched and for the high pitched it is bent to the right side... There are *mūdras* (hand gestures) which accompany the vowels and consonants of the RV recitation.¹⁸

And the students also count out the *vargas* with the fingers of their left hand and the half stanzas with the fingers of the right, again in imitation of their teacher.¹⁹

¹³ Kajihara, *The Brahmacārin in the Veda*, p. 21.

¹⁴ Lubin, *Consecration and Ascetical Regimen*, p. 183.

¹⁵ Lubin, *Consecration and Ascetical Regimen*, p. 189.

¹⁶ Lubin, *Consecration and Ascetical Regimen*, p. 189.

¹⁷ Lubin, *Consecration and Ascetical Regimen*, p. 182.

¹⁸ Frits Staal, *Nambudiri Veda Recitation* (S'Gravenhage: Mouton and Co, 1961), p. 41.

¹⁹ Frits Staal, *Agni: the Ritual of the Fire Altar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 359–379.

The historian Harmut Scharfe observes that this ‘motoric memory’ probably reinforced the retention of memorised sounds.²⁰

It might indeed be argued that the student is completely controlled, that he is dominated, by the discipline of memorisation. Strict rules that define the student regimen are set out at the end of the *Upanayana*. These ensure that the student has no autonomy. He must beg for food and eat what he is given—so he has no control over his diet. He must wake and sleep according to the teacher’s rhythm. He must be celibate and isolated from all social interaction. He must tend the fires daily and perform other servile tasks for his teacher such as washing, massaging and dressing. The student was brought up by his teacher with his every action directed by rule.

The combined effect of all these practices of self-denial, however, is to allow the student to become detached from any thoughts or inclinations that might distract him from the memorisation of the Vedas. The student regimen ensured that the student had no influence over any aspect of his daily routine—he never made a decision for himself or was allowed to pursue and gratify a desire. While he lived in his teacher’s house he was treated like an embryo in the womb; he was trained to be passive and to exercise no agency. This meant that the quality of the student’s attention was extremely pure—his focus was unwavering as he recited the Vedas. The student regimen removed the student far from all the variety of life, and his powers of concentration could develop to their utmost. The student was trained to be a perfect vessel for the Vedas: his ascetic regimen eradicated his inner life, so he became highly receptive, he could imitate and store the Vedas with perfect accuracy, and he was taught to live in a state of constant absorption, both absorbed in and absorbing the sacred verses.

The Law Books describe the ideal student as he listens to his teacher: ‘Focusing his eyes and mind on the teacher, the pupil should touch his vital organs with *durbha* grass [and] control his breath three times for fifteen more each.’ He must stand with joined palms looking at his teacher’s face with ‘his body, speech, organs of perception and mind under control.’ The ideal student ‘feels neither elation nor revulsion at hearing, touching, seeing, eating or smelling anything.’ He must be completely absorbed in the practice of memorisation itself.

The development of the student’s concentration—beginning remember, between the age of five and eight—can be seen in the

²⁰ Harmut Scharfe, *Education in Ancient India* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 241.

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practice exercises referred to as the *pada*, *krama* and *jaṭāpāṭha* versions of the Vedas.²¹ These texts grammatically alter or re-order the words of the original hymns as a kind of memory test, so that the student knows the Vedas both forwards and backwards. The easiest test is the *padapāṭha*, which removes the normal rules for combining the letters at the beginning and ending of words (*samdhī*), and also separates words that are normally in a compound.²² Another exercise, the *kramapāṭha*, offers a more complex challenge. It combines the original hymns with the *padapāṭha* in pairs of words that weave back and forth between the two forms: a-b, b-c, d-e, etc., with one word in *pada* form and the other in the original hymn (*samhita*) form. A further level of testing occurs in the *jaṭāpāṭha* form, when the original words of the hymn are completely rearranged. For instance if a *ṛg* verse ends with words a, b, c and d, it will be practiced as: a b, b a, a b c, c b a, a b c, b c, c b, b c d, d c b, b c d; etc.²³ These exercises suggest that what is being communicated in the transmission of the Vedic hymns is a method for developing concentration—the content of the hymns is not the object of study, but rather the whole effort of studying is aimed at a certain quality of absorption in the hymns.

Jan Gonda states that ‘the high goal, the mastery of the holy text called for the application of the whole person, of the whole life, of all energy.’²⁴ When the student was involved in mnemonic practices there was simply no energy left for alternative patterns of thought, for self-centred reflection or analysis. Scharfe observes that during the educational process questions were discouraged and must absolutely ‘not involve the meaning of the text.’²⁵ The student learnt a form, and the communication between teacher and pupil was always formatted: ‘There [were] no explanations... only precise repetition [was] demanded.’²⁶ In the Law Books it is stated that the teacher is to the pupil ‘the man who drills his ears with truth.’²⁷

²¹ www.vedchant.com presents recordings and accounts of a variety of mnemonic practice chants.

²² Harry Falk, ‘The Galits in the Rg Veda *Padapāṭha*: On the Origins of the *Samhitapāṭha* and the *Padapāṭha*,’ in Axel Micheals, ed., *The Pandit* (Delhi: Manohar, 2001), p. 181.

²³ Staal, *Nambudiri Veda Recitation*, p. 47.

²⁴ Jan Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), p. 295.

²⁵ Scharfe, *Education in Ancient India*, p. 244.

²⁶ Scharfe, *Education in Ancient India*, p. 244.

²⁷ *Vasiṣṭha Dharma Sūtra* 1.2.10, Patrick Olivelle, *Dharmasūtras* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

This all sounds highly mechanistic, but although the discipline of memorisation requires immense commitment it does not necessarily turn the student into an automaton. The development of unwavering concentration should rather be seen as a discipline of unwavering trust. The student relinquishes his will and identifies with the will of the tradition, but this need not mean that he is dehumanised; for human-ness should not be defined by free-will alone. The student's extreme commitment can be understood to be beneficial to him in very human terms. For the student of the Vedas perfect obedience inherently contains its own reward, because it leads to perfect confidence or *śraddhā*. *Śraddhā* is derived from *śrat* (a root noun which means 'heart') and the verb *dhā* (to place). It therefore means to place one's heart on something.²⁸ Vaman Apte defines the term as 'trust, faith, belief, confidence, sedateness, composure of mind, intimacy, familiarity, respect and reverence.'²⁹ In the materials relating to ritual performance, according to Minoru Hara, *śraddhā* is 'considered as the innate nature of a human being, his nature to trust something objective.'³⁰ The Vedas are seen as an objective authority, and in the womb of the teacher the student's innate capacity to trust is allowed to develop to its fullest potential, completely uninhibited. The student inherits limitless confidence from his teacher. Perfect trust can be seen as a profoundly human virtue, and strict obedience should not be always judged to be oppressive, as inculturation or conditioning. The educational discipline of the Brahmanical student should be seen, as in the etymology, as something on which the heart rests, as a foundation for emotional stability and constancy of heart.

The recitation of the Vedas is not merely therapeutic on an emotional level, however, for the human dimension of the benefits of learning the Vedic hymns is overshadowed by a greater cosmic dimension. As Paul Hacker observes, '*mantras* when spoken are capable of bringing about a reality not only at the psychological level but even in the material order of things.'³¹ The Vedic *mantra*

²⁸ Paul Hacker, 'śraddhā,' *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens*, Band III (1963), p. 151–189.

²⁹ V. Apte, *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959). M. Hara defines it as a 'permanent dormant or innate instinct' in 'Note on Two Sanskrit Religious Terms: bhakti and śraddhā,' *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 7 (1964), pp. 124–145; p. 143.

³⁰ Hara, 'Note on Two Sanskrit Terms: bhakti and śraddhā', p. 143.

³¹ Harold Coward, *Mantra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 14.

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are not seen as humanly authored hymns, but as pre-eternal sounds that are coextensive with the forces or laws governing the universe. All cosmic events are controlled by and mirror the Vedas. The truth that is passed down from teacher to pupil is greater than human wisdom; it was not invented or discovered by humans. Thus it was believed that the truth of the Vedas is an articulation that articulated itself, that the verses are elemental, and, like the laws of physics, that they reflect the self-expression of the cosmos.

Harold Coward observes that *mantras* express truth 'not just because they capture the truth of some cosmological occurrence but because they themselves have participated and continue to participate in the same cosmological events;³² not a sentence about an event, but are the event itself. This is most evident in the equivalence of the sound OM and the moment of creation.

Because a *mantra* has no human author it is perfect and completely incorrupt; unlike any human expression there is nothing that can be misunderstood, questioned or doubted in the Vedic hymns. In Brahmanical education a clear division is maintained between divine wisdom, the *mantra*, and human wisdom, which develops through the practice of judgement and decision-making. In the twelve years that the student lives with his teacher he focuses completely on inheriting divine wisdom, and he does not develop any critical faculty. Scharfe observes that it was often the case that 'the average reciter had little or no understanding of what he had learnt.'³³ This is not to denigrate this system of education, because the curative power of memorisation practice is not increased by questioning or analysing the linguistic meaning of what is learned.

Memorisation and the Socratic Elenchus

What would Socrates have said to a Vedic student absorbed in mantric recitation? Would he have reacted as he did to Ion, a professional performer of Homeric verse, when he criticised him for becoming hypnotised by his own performance? In his seminal study *Preface to Plato*, Eric Havelock interpreted many of Socrates' arguments in the *Republic* as a critique of educational practices based on memorisation. Havelock claims that Socrates' method of refutation (the *elenchus*) was designed to free his students from the 'state of emotional involvement and of emotional identification,'

³² Coward, *Mantra*, p. 14.

³³ Scharfe, *Education in Ancient India*, p. 238.

described by Socrates as a kind of trance, that was a result of addiction to the recitation of Homeric verse. Havelock states that Socrates asks for a critical turn

against centuries of habituation in rhythmic memorised experience. He asks of men that instead they should examine this experience and rearrange it, that they should think about what they say instead of just saying it. And that they should separate themselves from it instead of identifying with it; they themselves should become the 'subject' who stands apart from the 'object' and reconsiders it and analyses it and evaluates it, instead of just 'imitating' it.³⁴

The 'subject' who stands apart from the 'object' is like the doctor that stands apart from the disease. Socrates argues that it is psychologically more beneficial to listen to a speech and analyse the inconsistencies within it, to diagnose and cure its internal problems, rather than to commit an inherited text to memory.

Following his medical model, as we have seen, Socrates developed a new metaphor for the teacher-pupil relationship, that of midwifery. When Theaetetus, his finest student, says that he can not stop worrying about the inadequacy of his ideas, Socrates replies 'Yes, those are the pains of labour, dear Theaetetus, it is because you are not barren but pregnant.' In the midwife metaphor Socrates teaches his pupils to give birth to their own truth by exercising their freedom to question, examine and diagnose or judge for themselves. Socrates charges each of his pupils to 'bring your own belief forth into the light.'³⁵ In this process, the student is not only giving birth to hypotheses and arguments, he is also giving birth to himself. The midwife watches over the student as he defines and styles his own identity. Full maturity is seen as the out-growing of all dependency. To inherit truth, to trust your teacher, to accept as the highest knowledge memorised text is judged by Socrates to impede progress towards full development. The true birth of the student occurs when all aspects of his soul have been thoroughly tested and chosen precisely because they are judged the best. As Hegel said of Socrates, 'such are not made but have formed themselves into what they are; they have become what they have wished to be, and are true to this.'³⁶

³⁴ Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 47.

³⁵ *Theaetetus* 157d. Cooper, *Plato*, p. 175.

³⁶ G. W. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), Section 1.393.

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The Socratic maxim that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’ is one of the most familiar fragments of the philosophical tradition. Socrates would argue that the *Upanayana* ritual depicts rebirth into a life that is not worth living. Enclosure in the womb of the teacher would be for Socrates a form of imprisonment or entombment. He would argue that because the entire responsibility for the formation of the student’s identity is held by the tradition, the student is never allowed to live his own life, that he never attains to full development or maturity because he is never allowed to take responsibility for himself.

In the midwife metaphor the student’s progress rests on his own strength. He has to rely on his own inner resources in order to generate ideas that might, when tested, lead to what Socrates calls a ‘discovery worth the name of wisdom’. Socrates states that one’s philosophical nature is ‘self-made (*to autophues*) and owes its upbringing to no-one.’³⁷ In order to ensure that his pupils do not expect him to give birth for them, Socrates himself claims to be barren; he states:

I myself am barren of wisdom. The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough. ... I am not in any sense a wise man; I cannot claim as the child of my soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom.³⁸

Throughout the Platonic Dialogues, there is no scene in which Plato dramatises the ‘birth of wisdom’; instead he continually returns to the Oracle’s pronouncement that Socrates is the wisest among men. However, Socrates always claims to be barren. In response to the Oracle, Socrates states that his wisdom amounts to this: ‘I do not think I know what I do not know’. Socrates claims that his wisdom is merely ‘human wisdom.’³⁹ He claims that the greatest possible human wisdom is to honestly admit that you know nothing. As a doctor or midwife, Socrates’ main therapeutic technique is to remind people of their human limitation and at the same time to teach them how to be fully human. He aims to diagnose and cure the faults of the soul that result in people believing they have greater than human wisdom – these faults often include over-credulity, a weakness for flattery or lust for power. When Socrates finds

³⁷ *Republic* 520a. Cooper, Plato, p. 1137.

³⁸ *Theaetetus* 150c-d. Cooper, Plato, p. 167.

³⁹ *Apology* 20e. Cooper, Plato, p. 21.

these illnesses in the soul he attempts to correct them by means of arguments, reminding those who have delusions of grandeur of their human dimensions, using argument and questioning to humble and even humiliate them.

The Socratic dialogue usually begins by a simple question: What is friendship? What is virtue? What is temperance? The student will answer this question as if it were obvious, then Socrates will ask more questions, getting the student to develop his definition, and during this process an essential contradiction inherent in the original answer will be exposed. The dialogue normally ends with both teacher and pupil agreeing they have returned to the beginning. The student's labour has been in vain. All his efforts have culminated in *aporia*. In ancient Greek, *poros* means path so *aporos* means lacking a path, a passage, a way. When a discussion ends in *aporia* it means that it has lost its bearings. The clear direction it seemed to be progressing in has revealed itself to be a dead end or impasse. In the dialogue named after him, Meno describes *aporia* as a state of pain and disorientation, and he compares Socrates to a stingray that numbs and paralyzes its prey. Instead of passing down divine wisdom to his pupils, Socrates questions them relentlessly until they abandon all their preconceptions. One of Socrates' main responsibilities as a midwife is to diagnose false pregnancy. The midwife has a duty to abort students' ideas that are malformed. As an abortionist, the teacher's main responsibility is critical. Socrates teaches his students to examine their own ideas and be merciless in abandoning them if they are unfit.

Socrates claims to free his students from the form of life he most pities, the unexamined life. Here, however, it is vital to ask: Who, out of all Socrates' students, actually manages to give birth to a 'life worth living'? Which student is truly fertile, what conception is examined, tested by Socrates, and survives? The light-hearted way in which Socrates identifies himself with the happy image of the midwife disguises the real implications of the metaphor. Throughout the Socratic dialogues no student's pregnancy is brought to full birth' and all ideas are refuted and revealed to be what Socrates refers to as phantoms or false offspring. The only healthy birth that Socrates oversees is the birth of barrenness: the midwife's work is complete when the student realises that it is humanly impossible to give birth to truth. This is the way that Socrates teaches his students to be free; he frees them from any illusion of power or knowledge. There is no truth that has any power over the student, and the student has no special access to the truth that gives him power over others. The students are like Socrates,

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completely free from any authority that is greater than their own ignorance. But what does this really amount to in human terms? What is it like to live completely in the negative, holding on only to the central Socratic principle: 'I do not think I know what I do not know'? The barrenness of the student reflects his identification with *aporia*, understood as a pure state of not-knowing. In the midwife analogy Socrates promises his students that they are giving birth to their true selves, but the experience of *aporia* is one of loss of self.

Sarah Kofman observes that originally *poros* referred not to a land path but to a sea path. She states that a *poros* was a sea route, a passage opened up across a chaotic expanse. When there is no *poros* then the student is at sea. Kofman compares this aporetic sea to Hesiod's Tartarus, calling it 'a realm of wild, swirling squalls where there are no fixed directions, where one can find no landmarks, no bearings to travel by'.⁴⁰ Socrates claims to free his students to discover the truth for themselves, but he really teaches them to inherit a truth that is beyond questioning. This truth is the idea that the greatest possible experience of freedom is found in *aporia*, in a state where all ideas, beliefs, arguments and principles are equally negated, equally in free-fall. In the aporetic dialogues, Socrates' students experience the collapse of all their ideas into anxiety and grief, and fear the complete dissolution of their identity. Socrates himself experiences *aporia* as unlimited freedom and abandons himself to it. He allows every aporetic crisis to reduce him *afresh* to emptiness — this is the Socratic ritual of rebirth, which reoccurs continually.

In the *Phaedo* (112–114), Tartarus is depicted as a great ocean at the centre of the earth. Socrates states that 'into this chasm all rivers flow together' along with terrible winds. After death, condemned souls are thrown into this chasm and wracked about by great storms. By suspending his students' judgement in a constant state of *aporia*, Socrates trains them to endure Tartarus; he does not found their identity on perfect confidence in divine wisdom, but instead teaches them to cultivate perfect humility, to acknowledge the forces of chaos in the world and to develop courage in the face of the unknown.

In contrast, the educational paradigm of the womb of the teacher, which we have seen set out in the *Upanayana* ritual, works to seal the student away from the world. The student's perfect confidence is not merely based on an exchange of information, or words, or arguments,

⁴⁰ Sarah Kofman, 'Beyond Aporia,' in Andrew Benjamin, ed., *Post-Structuralist Classics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 7.

but on the shaping of a sealed educational environment that forms a perfect whole around the student. We have seen that in the *Upanayana* ritual garments are given to the student that envelop him like womb-layers. In the womb of the teacher the student is taught to believe he is encompassed by completeness. He is never taught that there is anything missing, or that he should look for what is not right, nor to search for a mistake or an inconsistency. He has been given perfect confidence in his proximity to truth. It is a great virtue of this educational system that the student does not find himself left alone to search for a truth that might not even exist. Instead, he is brought up to believe that he is already in proximity to truth. Truth is so close it does not require explanation or analysis. The student does not struggle to give birth to ideas that approximate truth, instead he just has to listen, absorb and trust.

Martha Nussbaum states that:

Philosophy heals human diseases, diseases produced by false beliefs. Its arguments are to the soul as the doctor's remedies are to the body. They can heal and they are to be evaluated in terms of their power to heal.⁴¹

In the Brahmanical *Upanayana*, argument is not seen as curative. Instead argument is seen as the disease, or at least a symptom of the disease.⁴² The soul is healed not through argument, but by being held securely and surrounded completely by a sealed system of truth that is always already perfect; this is how the soul is healed in the womb of the teacher. The cure for human insufficiency and illness is to construct an nourishing environment of truth for every individual, a womb of truth consistent in all its parts. Every detail of the *Upanayana* and the student regimen combine to ensure that the student's memorisation of the Vedas frees him from any sense of deficiency. The recitation of *mantra* encapsulates the way that the student relates to his being, once he has been transformed by education. The *mantra* is the sound of perfect confidence in one's self and one's world. In his constant practice of questioning and refutation, the Socratic pupil learns humility and develops fortitude and courage in the face of the unknown. In his constant practice of Vedic recitation, the Brahmanical pupil rests in complete trust that

⁴¹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 14.

⁴² See also Logi Gunnarsson, this volume, on the idea of 'philosophical maladies.'

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he has inherited perfect knowledge and can never be separated from the truth.

In this chapter, I have argued that practices of education that rest on complete trust should be affirmed because they allow the student to see themselves not as an *aporia*, a problem that can never be solved, but as encompassed by truth. To borrow from another spiritual tradition, the essential message of the *Upanayana* ritual could be said to be: 'Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly father is perfect.'⁴³

⁴³ Matthew 5:48.