

## **ON EDUCATION**

### **A Socratic Dialog by BRENT SILBY**

#### **Background**

Socrates has been invited to run a philosophy discussion group at Western Heights school. The discussion group is part of a social sciences class, and a student has interrupted the discussion to question its importance, given that it does not contribute to course assessment.

**Student:** Is this going to be on the test?

**Socrates:** What do you mean?

**Student:** I just want to know if this discussion is important. If it's not being assessed, then I think we should move on.

**Socrates:** Why do you say that?

**Student:** I don't think we should be wasting our time on unimportant discussions.

**Socrates:** But you are here to learn, are you not?

**Student:** Yes, but only the important things.

**Socrates:** What do you deem important?

**Student:** Knowledge and skills that will be assessed so that I can pass the course.

**Socrates:** Do you think assessment the goal of the course?

**Student:** Yes, that's why I'm here. Passing the test is the goal of the course.

**Socrates:** Is the purpose of education to pass courses?

**Student:** Yes.

**Socrates:** Why do you think that?

**Student:** Because I need to get qualified and to gain a qualification I need to pass my courses. Why else would I be coming to school if not to get my qualification so that I can move forward in life?

**Socrates:** That's an interesting question. Why indeed would you come to school if not to gain a qualification? In asking that question seem to be suggesting that the purpose of education is to gain qualification. Is that your view?

**Student:** Yes, that's right.

**Socrates:** Why do you want this qualification?

**Student:** So I can go to university. You can't get into university without completing highschool with good results.

**Socrates:** So you are suggesting that the purpose of education is to get a qualification so that you can gain more education. Why do you want more education?

**Student:** So that I can get a good job.

**Socrates:** Ah, so perhaps you are arguing that the purpose of education is to get a good job.

**Student:** I suppose so.

**Socrates:** Why do you want a good job? Why is that important?

**Student:** So I can buy the things I need. People can't live on thin air. I want to be able to afford a nice house, good food, and a decent car.

**Socrates:** Why do you need those things?

**Student:** So that I can live a good life.

**Socrates:** It seems to me that living a good life is your end goal. So can we state that the purpose of education is to enable you to live a good life?

**Student:** Yes. I think that is a fair statement of my position, Socrates.

**Socrates:** Tell me, is it possible to earn great sums of money and yet not live a good life?

**Student:** I don't know what you mean.

**Socrates:** Imagine, for the sake of argument, that a wealthy businessman drinks too much, eats bad food, and smokes. Would you say he is living a good life?

**Student:** He might think he is. He might be having fun.

**Socrates:** But is it a good life? What if his lifestyle causes health problems. We might also imagine that he treats his work colleagues badly. Earning large amounts of money does not guarantee that one is nice to other people. Let's imagine that this hypothetical man is highly disagreeable and people grow to dislike him. Would it be fair to say that he is not living a good life?

**Student:** In this case he would not be living a good life.

**Socrates:** But he has a highly paid job. Do you agree, then, that having a highly paid job is not sufficient for living a good life?

**Student:** I suppose so. You need to know how to spend your money wisely and treat people well.

**Socrates:** How do you get to know these things?

**Student:** We learn them.

**Socrates:** Is it fair to say that you learn these things at school through discussions and lessons.

**Student:** Yes.

**Socrates:** So, if the purpose of education is to learn how to live a good life, would you agree that gaining qualification is not sufficient to meet that end?

**Student:** I don't understand.

**Socrates:** The qualification allows you to get higher qualifications in order to get a highly paid job. But we have agreed that a highly paid job is insufficient for living a good life. You need more, right?

**Student:** Yes.

**Socrates:** But we agree that the purpose of education is to lead a good life.

**Student:** Yes we did, Socrates

**Socrates:** Does it not follow that if a qualification is insufficient to living a good life, but the purpose of education is to live a good life, there must be more to education than gaining a qualification?

**Student:** When you put it this way, I must agree.

**Socrates:** Would it therefore be fair to suggest there are many important things to discuss in class that might not be on the test? This conversation might count as one of those things.

**Student:** I suppose you are right.

**Socrates:** Let us therefore make the most of the education opportunity that lies before us. Certainly, do your best to pass the course test. But let's not limit your education to what is on the test. Life is complex, but if you can learn how to examine it, you will come to understand how to live it well.

**Student:** Thank you Socrates.