

THE *Q*UESTION

*Teaching Your Child the
Essentials of Classical Education*

SAMPLE

LEIGH A. BORTINS

To Sarah Ellison, who asks many questions.

SAMPLE

THE QUESTION

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CHAPTER TWO

HOW THE DIALECTIC TEACHES FAMILIES TO WRESTLE

“Some things I have said of which I am not altogether confident. But that we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to enquire, than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know;—that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power.”

—Socrates, Plato’s *Meno*

Transforming your child’s education in terms of the classical model, the human soul, and the demands of the global economy may seem to be less of a priority when you come face-to-face with your twelve-year-old offspring. He is in the process of becoming an abstract thinker, but you might not know it by the kinds of exchanges that take place at the dinner table. At this age, youth excel at asking the kinds of questions designed specifically to aggravate and exasperate anyone in a position of authority. “Who says?”, “Why not?”, “Who cares?”, and “How should I know?” are just a few of the many possibilities. Then, too often, when it is time to talk about current events, math, or classic literature, the rapid-fire questions are replaced by a mumbled, “I dunno.” As a parent, it is easy to become frustrated, but if you can learn to channel your child’s

inquisitive and argumentative nature into constructive questions, you will be well on your way to finding delight in the dialectic stage of classical education.

A DEFINITION OF DIALECTIC

Definitions are an essential first step in any pursuit of understanding. Let's begin with a discussion of what is meant by the words "logic" and "dialectic," two words I will be using interchangeably. Travel back in time with me to the Middle Ages, when scholars in Europe made a concerted effort to revive the classical model of education. One of the most determined advocates for classical education was a bishop called John of Salisbury, whose professional career included serving under several archbishops of Canterbury and walking a delicate line between the Catholic Church and Henry II, a king of lax ethics. Talk about a man who needed to be able to speak with diplomacy and delicacy! For John, mastery of the dialectic was literally a matter of life or death. It is no wonder that John believed so staunchly in the importance of studying logic and argumentation. His treatise on the subject, *Metalogicon*, became a classic of educational philosophy.

John turned to theologian and philosopher Saint Augustine for a definition of logic. In his *De Dialectica*, Augustine called logic "the science of effective argumentation" that seeks "to investigate the truth and meaning of what is said" (*Metalogicon* 80–81). Whereas "grammar chiefly examines the *words* that express meanings, dialectic investigates the *meanings* expressed by words" (81, emphasis added). Okay, but what does *that* mean? Good question! In asking it, you are illustrating the point at hand. Augustine's definition is made up of words. A grammar student might simply memorize the definition of logic, but a dialectic student would want to understand what it means. By nature, children progress from wanting to absorb knowledge to wanting to question, challenge, and argue with the basic facts and parroted ideas they have learned during the grammar stage.

In writing this book, I have in mind the eleven- to fourteen-year-old age range, but every child reaches the dialectic stage at a different time, and all of us are grammarians as well as logicians any time we study a new subject. If your child has not yet mastered the basic grammar of a subject, or if he has not yet begun to see the tension between ideas, I recommend that you rest in the grammar stage until he is ready to move ahead. I suggest that you begin with my earlier book *The Core: Teaching Your Child the Foundations of Classical Education*. When your child begins to argue with the

most basic set of instructions and loses patience with your reserve weapon of choice—“Because I said so”—you will know that it is time to turn to the art of logic.

Dorothy Sayers says in “The Lost Tools of Learning” that the basic objective of the logic stage of education should be to prepare both teacher and student “to detect fallacy, slipshod reasoning, ambiguity, irrelevance, and redundancy, and to pounce upon them like rats.” Too often, classical educators limit the dialectic stage by simply adding formal logic to an existing curriculum and calling the project finished. Formal logic is an excellent way to train your brain to think in an organized fashion, and we will discuss it in more depth in the chapter on logic, but dialectic learning is so much more than a subject. When you begin to think dialectically, you begin to ask questions about all subject areas. You begin to define terms, compare ideas, and recognize patterns and rules. In science, men like Aristotle and Linnaeus recognized that our brains naturally group similar things together as a way of making sense of what we see. Out of that natural way of thinking, they used a series of questions to develop scientific systems of classification. In the sixteenth century, international merchants knew that they needed good translators to accompany them because they had to speak a common language in order to negotiate trades. Now, when students practice argumentation and debate, they begin by defining the terms of their topic so that both opponents and audience will know what the debaters mean by “policy” or “democracy” or “justice.”

When you begin to think dialectically, you begin to ask questions about all subject areas. You begin to define terms, compare ideas, and recognize patterns and rules.

One of the criticisms modern educators raise against the classical model is that it focuses excessively on rote memorization (a pejorative term) at the risk of brainwashing the child rather than teaching him critical thinking (a desirable outcome). I would say to them that you cannot obtain critical thinking without memorization. Let me give you an example. Imagine that you want to learn more about rocks, but you do not have access to books or the Internet. How would you begin? Well, you would need to collect a variety of rocks. Then you could figure out what all of the rocks had in common. “What makes them rocks?” “What is their essence, or ‘rock-ness?’” You could compare them to other objects such as pieces of wood and empty turtle shells. You could compare them to one another. “How do they differ?” None of this would be possible if you had not first collected a pile of rocks.

In other words, we must collect knowledge before we seek understanding. In the same way, the grammar stage is not the end of education. A pile of rocks that sits in

your closet serves no purpose, but if you gather understanding about rocks, you might be able to use your knowledge to build a structure that can withstand earthquakes, or to identify an ancient artifact, or to carve a monument like Mount Rushmore. Understanding, honed in the logic or dialectic stage, is the necessary middle step between acquiring knowledge and practicing wisdom through rhetoric.

Ultimately, dialectical thinkers learn to integrate individual subjects into a comprehensive vision of the world. This is the true meaning of the term *critical thinking*. Unfortunately, the phrase has become a buzzword in education, on a level with “creative problem-solving” and “career readiness.” We are told that these are desirable traits, but no one is certain how best to foster them within the family, let alone on a national level. Our goal must be to reclaim the idea of critical thinking and give it fresh meaning. Socratic discussion, which I cover in detail in this chapter, will help your children ask insightful questions about every subject they study, in order to hone their thinking about that subject and pursue truth through it.

A WALK WITH SOCRATES

Historians don't know much about the actual life of the Greek philosopher and teacher named Socrates; most of what they do know comes from a series of dialogues written after his death by his student Plato, around the turn of the fourth century BC. In these dialogues, the most famous of which is *The Republic*, Socrates uses a series of leading questions to point his students toward knowledge and away from faulty thinking. The dialogues portray Socrates sitting down with students who demand that he answer difficult questions about ethics, politics, and society. The type of teaching he models in his responses is known as the Socratic method, but the Greeks were not the only ones to employ this technique. Similar approaches can be found in Hebrew schools. In Eastern Europe from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries onward, the Hebrew word *pilpul*, meaning “sharp analysis,” was used to describe the vigorous questioning and debate surrounding interpretation of the *Talmud*, the text that forms the basis of rabbinical law. American author Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen* gives a vivid contemporary example, telling the story of two Jewish boys who learn in this way.

The common factor between these historical methods is that a mentoring teacher uses questions to push his students toward greater knowledge and a better understanding of truth. As Tracy Lee Simmons explains in *Climbing Parnassus*, “The novice is thereby led through the bracken of his assumptions and biases to the clear light of

knowledge. The teacher holds him responsible for all words and ideas he utters, pressing him to define them with greater exactitude. Just what do we mean by Justice, Freedom, Courage, Virtue? Are they achievable in this life? Or are they beyond the grasp of even the most righteous? And this method remains a cardinal means of testing intellectual mettle” (52).

Let’s look at an example from *The Republic*. Don’t worry so much about understanding the argument at this point; focus on the kinds of questions that Socrates asks.

Excerpts from *The Republic*, Book I

SOCRATES And what is that which justice gives, and to whom?

POLEMARCHUS If, Socrates, we are to be guided at all by the analogy of the preceding instances, then justice is the art which gives good to friends and evil to enemies.

SOC. That is his meaning then?

POL. I think so.

...

SOC. But see the consequence:—Many a man who is ignorant of human nature has friends who are bad friends, and in that case he ought to do harm to them; and he has good enemies whom he ought to benefit; but, if so, we shall be saying the very opposite of that which we affirmed to be the meaning of Simonides [who said justice is giving good to friends and evil to enemies].

POL. Very true, he said; and I think that we had better correct an error into which we seem to have fallen in the use of the words “friend” and “enemy.”

SOC. What was the error, Polemarchus? I asked.

POL. We assumed that he is a friend who seems to be or who is thought good.

SOC. And how is the error to be corrected?

POL. We should rather say that he is a friend who is, as well as seems, good; and that he who seems only, and is not good, only seems to be and is not a friend; and of an enemy the same may be said.

SOC. You would argue that the good are our friends and the bad our enemies?

POL. Yes.

SOC. And instead of saying simply as we did at first, that it is just to do good to our friends and harm to our enemies, we should further say: It is just to do good to our friends when they are good and harm to our enemies when they are evil?

- POL. Yes, that appears to me to be the truth.
- SOC. But ought the just to injure any one at all?
- POL. Undoubtedly he ought to injure those who are both wicked and his enemies.
- SOC. When horses are injured, are they improved or deteriorated?
- POL. The latter.
- SOC. Deteriorated, that is to say, in the good qualities of horses, not of dogs?
- POL. Yes, of horses.
- SOC. And dogs are deteriorated in the good qualities of dogs, and not of horses?
- POL. Of course.
- SOC. And will not men who are injured be deteriorated in that which is the proper virtue of man?
- POL. Certainly.
- SOC. And that human virtue is justice?
- POL. To be sure.
- SOC. Then men who are injured are of necessity made unjust?
- POL. That is the result.
- SOC. But can the musician by his art make men unmusical?
- POL. Certainly not.
- SOC. Or the horseman by his art make them bad horsemen?
- POL. Impossible.
- SOC. And can the just by justice make men unjust, or speaking generally, can the good by virtue make them bad?
- POL. Assuredly not.
- SOC. Any more than heat can produce cold?
- POL. It cannot.
- SOC. Or drought moisture?
- POL. Clearly not.
- SOC. Nor can the good harm any one?
- POL. Impossible.
- SOC. And the just is the good?
- POL. Certainly.
- SOC. Then to injure a friend or any one else is not the act of a just man, but of the opposite, who is the unjust?
- POL. I think that what you say is quite true, Socrates.

Soc. Then if a man says that justice consists in the repayment of debts, and that good is the debt which a just man owes to his friends, and evil the debt which he owes to his enemies,—to say this is not wise; for it is not true, if, as has been clearly shown, the injuring of another can be in no case just.

POL. I agree with you.

Notice a key point about this exchange: Socrates allows Polemarchus to do most of the work. Rather than lecturing or handing out a list of facts to be memorized (as might be done during the grammar stage), Socrates speaks almost exclusively in questions. He allows Polemarchus to make statements, and then he shows his pupil where those statements are flawed. How does Socrates do that? He shows Polemarchus what will happen if they agree to take Polemarchus's argument to its logical conclusion. Socrates gives multiple, seemingly simple examples, thus permitting Polemarchus to become confident in his faulty belief, and then he leads Polemarchus to a statement with which Polemarchus cannot agree.

Notably, Polemarchus is the one who identifies the error in thought and then explains how to correct it. Parents know that if they tell their young daughter not to look in the box under the bed in the guest room, her first instinct is to sprint for the guest room. Now take this principle to the level of ideas. What if your now-teenage daughter begins to ask questions about ideas with which you disagree? The topic might be evolution or a form of religion or a political position. If you tell her that the idea is just plain bad and that she should stay away from it, what is her first instinct? To sprint toward it at full speed. But what if you encourage her to study it with you? By asking good questions, you can help her to reach an informed conclusion about the subject. You can point her toward trustworthy authorities on the subject. You can help her to consider both sides as she forms her own opinion about it.

What is more, she will be able to claim the opinion she reaches as her own because she walked toward it step by step; she will know the route you traveled to get there, not just the destination. In a very real way, you are teaching your child to be the driver, no longer just a passenger. Like those early driving lessons, it is a little scary. Sometimes you may need to scream, "Brake! Brake!" Sometimes you may have to grab the wheel. But your goal is to relinquish more and more control as your child learns how to navigate safely. You can only do that by respecting her questions and encouraging her to ask them without fear.

One of the hardest things about being a parent or teacher is believing (to the point of acting on your belief) that truth will stand up to scrutiny. Too often, we associate critical thinking with criticism or even cynicism, something that always tears down, never builds up. That's not true logic. The same fear drives modern educators to prescribe textbooks. *The information is all there. Don't question it; receive it blindly. Never move out of the grammar stage.* If we want to make a difference in our children's lives, if we want them to become free adults, we have to be radically different educators. That means we should move further and further away from this textbook approach. We should seek out original documents and let our children do the work of dissecting ideas, questioning them, evaluating them, and then either affirming or negating them. In the example from *The Republic*, note that Socrates never once reaches for an answer key or tells Polemarchus to correct his work using a textbook about justice.

One of the characteristics of the dialectic stage of education that parents find frustrating is that the answer key becomes less and less important. In math, instead of focusing solely on the correct answer, you should be asking your child to show you how he arrived at his answer. In literature, instead of asking only questions such as how many siblings Laura Ingalls Wilder had, you should begin to ask your child to evaluate Pa's decision to move the family west. In science, instead of fixating on whether or not your child achieved the anticipated result in an experiment, you should be asking her why the experiment failed. The focus, then, is not on chalking up another correct answer but on asking the kind of questions that will consistently lead a student to greater understanding.

When you are new to dialectic studies, your primary goal should be to learn how to ask good questions. Down the road, as you become comfortable with the types of questions that lead to orderly thought, you can begin to encourage your student to develop his own questions and to ask them without your prompting. When he can do that successfully, he will be ready to approach the rhetoric stage. (I will talk more about rhetoric at the end of the chapter.) Remember, the art of asking questions takes time, and you should expect to face resistance until your child learns that finding answers to his many questions will take time and patience but is nonetheless possible. If we believe that there is truth to be known and that there are ways to know it, one failed experiment or one as-yet-unanswered question should hold no fear for us. I say "should" because

the Socratic method forces both the teacher and the student to grapple with a certain amount of tension. Getting past the first “I dunno” answer requires you to push your child. You have to circle around the first question by asking more questions until your child realizes one of two things: 1) he actually does know the answer, or 2) he doesn’t know as much as he thought he did and maybe he should study more.

While both parents and children should learn how to argue effectively, they must also learn how to do so gently and considerately. Here’s where it gets a little more difficult. Ms. Sayers refers to the dialectic as the “Pert” stage of learning, which is “characterized by contradicting, answering back, liking to ‘catch people out’ (especially one’s elders); and by the propounding of conundrums. Its nuisance-value is extremely high” (“The Lost Tools of Learning”). If you have ever heard a middle schooler triumphantly correct the teacher who said without thinking, “Thomas went on the field trip with Miss Marshall and I,” instead of “with Miss Marshall and me,” you might agree with this assessment of the young dialectician! Mutual frustration is common during the teenage years. Children in this age group are prone to become frustrated for one of two reasons: either they think they already know all the answers and there are no more questions worth asking, or they think that the answers to their deepest questions cannot be known. Parents in any age group are prone to become frustrated by the sense that they don’t know what kinds of questions to ask, so they cannot possibly model the dialectic for their children.

In order to successfully master the dialectic, parents and children must work to set aside defensive attitudes. As teacher and student, they must first build a relationship based on trust and respect. If they do not, one or both will be tempted to give up and flee the conversation in defeat. My encouragement is that you have already won half the battle by admitting that you do not have all the answers. To paraphrase Socrates in Plato’s *Meno*, “You are better and braver and less helpless when you realize you ought to ask questions than you were when you had indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what you did not know.” Your task is not to have all the answers; rather, it is to engage your children in dialogue, honestly confronting their questions, and at the same time learn how to model the type of questions you want them to be able to ask on their own.

Before you can ask questions successfully, you will have to get comfortable with tension, which is not something that comes naturally to most of us. Let me give you an example. A conference presenter is speaking in front of an audience of twenty-five people. Three or four of the attendees are doodling in the margins of their notebooks,

one is staring out the window, several are checking their iPhones, and another is actively snoring. To regain her listeners' attention, the speaker throws out an easy question: "Can you see any problems with this argument?" No one answers. One minute passes, and then another. Throats are cleared. Armpits begin to sweat. Restless feet tap on the floor. A dozen pairs of eyes are now studiously examining the furniture. Everyone in the room is silently pleading for the speaker to give up and move on. That's how most of us feel about unanswered questions. We don't handle tension very well, but we need to learn how to sit in it together.

For this reason, the Socratic method is inherently relational in nature. Most of the Socratic dialogues feature Socrates sitting down with his pupils at one of their homes. One of Plato's students, Aristotle, founded an influential school of philosophy derived from Socrates' teachings. The school was called the Peripatetic School, not only because Aristotle's followers taught under the covered walkways (Gk. *peripatoi*) of the Lyceum in Athens, but also—according to legend—because they taught while walking (Gk. *peripatetikos*) with their students.

When was the last time you went for a walk with one of your children? In this age of virtual interaction and long days spent in front of a screen, the idea of taking a walk outdoors might seem alien. Treadmills allow us to catch up on television re-runs while we exercise, after all! Who needs a walking companion? We have headphones! Yet, when someone you know is going through a particularly difficult time—a family member has died, a teenager is slipping out of the house at three a.m., a marriage is floundering—one of the metaphors you might use to indicate support is your desire to *walk with* that person through their struggles. Why is that?

When was the last time you went for a walk with one of your children?

When you walk with someone, you embark on a journey together. The prologue of Geoffrey Chaucer's famous fourteenth-century poem *The Canterbury Tales* is narrated by a man who sets out on a pilgrimage to a shrine at the Canterbury Cathedral in England. Because the road is long and "truly there's no mirth nor comfort, none, riding the roads as dumb as is a stone" (24), he and his fellow travelers agree to tell each other stories to pass the time. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, when Miss Bingley and Elizabeth Bennet want to have a private chat, what do they do? They "take a turn about the room" (38).

Walking is a useful technique in literature for the same reason that we like to imagine Greek philosophers strolling under vine-covered walkways while contemplating the

human soul: this is one area in which teaching through technology remains insufficient. To have this kind of meaningful interaction, you need the one sense that technology cannot recreate: touch. A hand on a shoulder or a hug can go a long way to defuse tension between two people. Even if a conversation creates frustration between you as you walk, you are physically together and moving in the same direction. You may be silent or you may talk, but you remain physically close. When you are a mile away from home, you can't give up after the first response of "I don't know." You have to keep asking questions to fill the space. You have to wrestle with the tension and test different ways of reaching resolution. After all, that's what contradiction does: it forces us to reconcile ideas, and that is precisely what the dialectic is all about.

ARISTOTLE'S TOPICS

I'm sorry. My responses are limited. You must ask the right questions.

—Hologram of Dr. Alfred Lanning, *I, Robot* (2004)

In order to reconcile ideas, we have to be able to think and argue clearly. In order to enable clear thinking and arguing, we need tools to help us ask the right questions. Classical rhetoricians such as Aristotle and Cicero developed a systematic approach to argumentation that was based on the way the human mind functions. They called these rhetorical techniques *topoi* (topics). The five common topics are *definition*, *comparison*, *relationship*, *circumstance*, and *testimony*. The topics can help you lead your students to good questions, but don't think about them as defining the limits of your questioning; instead, use them as tools to generate more and more questions as you circle around your subject.

Because every child learns at a different speed, and because dialectical thinking takes time to master, your students may not be able to ask questions related to all five common topics right away. At first, they might just ask questions of definition. Later, as they become more comfortable with definition, they might focus on comparison. Even after they master all five topics, they may not apply all of them to every situation, and they may not ask the questions in the same order.

In part 2 of this book, I will apply the five common topics to individual subjects as a way to organize more detailed conversations about math, science, literature, and more. First, however, I will examine the topics one by one to reach a basic understanding of the type of questions each topic produces. As a model, I will use Plato's discourse

Meno, in which Socrates leads his friend Meno through a series of questions leading to a definition of virtue.

Common Topic #1: Definition

SOCRATES The next question is, whether virtue is knowledge or of another species [division]?

MENO Yes, that appears to be the question which comes next in order.

Earlier, I mentioned that Linnaeus's system of scientific classification was derived from one that Aristotle pioneered. Aristotle did not limit his system to natural science, because he understood, at least in part, that our brains naturally seek to classify objects based on what they are and what they are not. Through definition, we seek to understand the basic essence or nature of a thing. Aristotle breaks definition down further into *genus*—broad classes of things—and *division*, or *species*—narrower subsets of things differentiated from other members of their class. (Today, we more often use those terms in a scientific sense to name living things, as in the classification of man as *Homo sapiens*: *Homo* [genus] + *sapiens* [species].) The following are questions you might ask in order to understand definition:

- What is _____ (history / truth / slavery / literature / writing)?
- What is _____ (science / art / beauty / justice) not?
- Is this _____ (rectangle / fish) a _____ (square / shark)?
- How can _____ (a story plot / a volcano) be broken down into parts?
- What are the essential qualities of _____ (a sedimentary rock / a symphony)?
- What are the characteristics of _____ (a Latin adjective / an epic poem)?
- What are the stages of _____ (a war / a scientific experiment)?

Common Topic #2: Comparison

SOC. Then right opinion is not less useful than knowledge?

MEN. The difference, Socrates, is only that he who has knowledge will always be right; but he who has right opinion will sometimes be right, and sometimes not.

Once we know what something is, we naturally begin to compare it to other things. Why do you think world maps show so many countries and cities and states with the word “new” in their names? Here is an example: In 1664, when England added another colony to its North American holdings, Sir George Carteret was made one of the proprietors. Sir George had formerly been the governor of the Isle of Jersey

in the English Channel. So, the only logical name the English royals could find for the new colony was “New Jersey.” Do you see how it works? Our brains make sense of new information by comparing it to familiar information. Take another example: When Columbus first reached the Caribbean, he did not recognize that he had reached an entirely new geographic region; he expected to reach the Indies. He incorporated his new experience into his old paradigm, and as a result, he called the region the “West Indies” and the inhabitants “Indians.” Later explorers compared Columbus’s thesis to newer information about the Americas—again, practicing dialectic—and this time, they realized that Columbus was wrong and modified the familiar information (however, the names stuck).

Rhetoricians divide the topic of comparison into three parts: *similarity*, *difference*, and *degree*. They ask, “How are things alike?” “How are they different?” “To what degree are they alike or different?” The following are questions you might ask a student in order to help him understand comparison:

- How is _____ (music / a lion / a gerund) similar to/different from _____ (dance / a tiger / an infinitive)?
- To what degree is _____ (Mozart / Shakespeare) similar to/different from _____ (Bach / Dickens)?
- How are _____ (a research paper / the Korean War) and _____ (a persuasive essay / the Vietnam War) both similar to/different from _____ (a poem / the Cold War)?
- Is _____ (honesty / pacifism / capitalism) better/worse than _____ (tactfulness / self-defense / communism)?
- Is a _____ (tornado / question) more or less _____ (damaging / persuasive) than _____ a (hurricane / statistic)?

Common Topic #3: Relationship

SOC. And does any one desire to be miserable and ill-fated?

MEN. I should say not, Socrates.

SOC. But if there is no one who desires to be miserable, there is no one, Meno, who desires evil; for what is misery but the desire and possession of evil?

MEN. That appears to be the truth, Socrates, and I admit that nobody desires evil.

SOC. And yet, were you not saying just now that virtue is the desire and

power of attaining good?

MEN. Yes, I did say so.

Comparing two things naturally leads us to ask how they relate to each other. Aristotle gives us four categories of relationships to use as a starting point: *cause / effect*, *antecedent / consequence*, *contraries*, and *contradictions*. As an example of the first, you might notice that your neighbor has just brought home a new dog, and the new dog barks all the time. A week later, your cat comes home with a torn ear. Before you storm over to the neighbors and demand that they pay for your vet bill, you need to ask a few questions. Even though the new dog arrived before your cat was injured, the dog did not necessarily *cause* the cat's injuries. A second type of relationship asks you to consider the *consequences* of choices or actions. If my son breaks his curfew, he may be grounded. My son's lateness does not cause me to ground him, but being grounded is a consequence of his action. Teenagers need to understand that there are consequences if they wreck a car, get a speeding ticket, or break an expensive electronic device. Ideally, they should have a good understanding of this principle *before* they are placed in situations where their actions can produce irreparable consequences.

The remaining two types of relationships can be confusing. (Chapter 8 on formal logic may help you to understand these concepts.) Two things are *contrary* if they belong to the same basic category and cannot both be true. When we see a photograph of Uncle George, we may say that his shirt is all red, or we may say that his shirt is all blue. These two statements cannot both be valid, but they can both be invalid. Just because we prove that statement A was false does not mean that we have proved statement B to be true. The shirt could very well be green. On the other hand, two statements are *contradictory* if one of them must be valid and the other must be invalid. That cup of coffee is either entirely hot or partially not-hot (logic-speak for the exact opposite of hot). The point of contradictory statements is that there are only two options. If the cup of coffee is not entirely hot, at least part of it must be not-hot.

The following are questions you might ask in order to understand relationship:

- Did _____ (slavery / pollution) cause _____ (the Civil War / global warming)?
- What will happen if _____ (you heat water to a certain temperature / Hamlet kills his uncle / you change the length of one of a triangle's sides)?
- If _____ (evolution / Christianity) is true, what cannot be true?

- Are _____ (the death penalty / American culture) and _____ (Pro-Life movements / Native American culture) mutually exclusive, or can they coexist?

Common Topic #4: Circumstance

SOC. If virtue was wisdom (or knowledge), then, as we thought, it was taught?

MEN. Yes.

SOC. And if there were teachers, it might be taught; and if there were no teachers, not?

MEN. True.

As much as we would like to tackle all the questions in the universe, there are some tests that we cannot do—whether for ethical or practical reasons—and there are some laws, like the law of gravity, that we cannot break in everyday life. Part of the dialectic is learning to recognize our limitations. The topic of circumstance deals with basic limitations on what is possible as well as what is and is not probable. The two types of circumstance, according to Aristotle, are *possible / impossible* and *past fact / future fact*. For families, this conversation can blend nicely with a discussion about the consequences of actions and the importance of discipline and family rules. *Past fact / future fact* deals with probability. Do we know that something happened in the past, or are we just guessing? Can we be sure that something will happen in the future, or does the answer depend on our actions now? A child will ask these questions a great deal when he studies history.

The following are questions you might ask in order to understand circumstance:

- Is it possible or impossible to _____ (end world hunger / compare two works of art / solve a math equation)?
- What might prevent us from _____ (winning a soccer game / buying a dog / jumping across the Grand Canyon)?
- Do we know for sure that _____ (the Aztecs killed Montezuma / Latin was pronounced a certain way)?
- If we _____ (raise taxes / read books), can we be certain that _____ (national debt will decrease / our vocabulary will improve)?
- What else was going on when _____ (Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* / World War II began / the thirteenth amendment was ratified)?

Common Topic #5: Testimony

SOC. I think not.

MEN. Why not?

SOC. I will tell you why: I have heard from certain wise men and women who spoke of things divine that—

MEN. What did they say?

SOC. They spoke of a glorious truth, as I conceive.

MEN. What was it? and who were they?

Although modern educators often exalt expert testimony above all other forms of knowledge, it does have an important place in dialectic learning. We need to teach our children how to recognize valid forms of testimony as well as how to challenge and expose invalid forms of testimony. Aristotle divides this topic into six categories: *authority*, *testimonial*, *statistics*, *maxims*, *laws*, and *precedents*. An *authority* is someone who is thought to offer expert opinion on a subject. In a murder trial, a lawyer for the defense might bring in an “expert witness” to provide evidence about the cause of death. A *testimonial* is similar, but it is given by someone who, while she may not be an expert, witnessed or experienced an event firsthand.

Authorities and testimonials provide qualitative evidence, but other types of testimony, such as *statistics*, are quantitative. Although statistics may be useful, numbers and percentages can be manipulated into pointing to just about anything. When your child encounters statistics as part of an assignment or while doing research, he should learn to ask how the statistician gathered and evaluated his data.

Some types of testimony, such as *laws*, are encoded in writing and are thought to be binding. In human society, laws include contracts, official documents, testaments, statutes, and constitutions. In science, laws refer to statements that have been proved multiple times by experiments. In math, a law is a rule that is always true for that number system.

On the other side of the spectrum are *maxims*, another word for common knowledge. Everyone knows the proverb, “He who laughs last, laughs longest.” When you talk about testimony, you should teach your child to evaluate whether or not a maxim is based in truth.

The final type of testimony, *precedent*, also changes over time. Precedent could easily be called the evidence of examples. If you have run through a puddle six times, each time splashing mud up on your jeans, you can reasonably assume that the same thing will happen a seventh time. Likewise, history (France under the Germans in the twentieth century, America under the British in the eighteenth century) tends to

support the argument that people fight back against occupation by foreign rulers. When you base an argument on examples, however, you should always be on the lookout for counter-examples that make the opposite point.

All of these forms of testimony may be useful, but keep in mind that every human is biased in one way or another. Even journalists, who strive to report in an even-handed way, are influenced by their personal beliefs, perspectives, and past experiences. It is up to the dialectician to identify bias and decide if it invalidates a form of testimony.

The following are questions you might ask in order to understand testimony:

- On what type of testimony does this argument rely?
- Should a _____ (work of literature / think tank / historian / politician) be considered an authority?
- What are this authority's biases? Do they invalidate his testimony?
- What does this testimony assume about the world? Is the assumption valid?
- How were these statistics gathered? Who gathered them?
- How recent are these statistics? How many cases were included?
- Should we trust a majority opinion about _____ (history / proper grammar / truth / human rights)?
- Do we know for sure that _____ (chicken soup cures the common cold / cheaters never prosper)?
- Is this example universally true, or are there counter-examples?

TURN TOWARD RHETORIC

So, where are we left at the end of all the questions? In “The Lost Tools of Learning,” Dorothy Sayers says, “Towards the close of this stage, the pupils will probably be beginning to discover for themselves that their knowledge and experience are insufficient, and that their trained intelligences need a great deal more material to chew upon.” You might be cheering at the idea that your child will be humbled suddenly by how little he knows. No more arguments, no more crowing, no more challenging your authority. Well... maybe not entirely. Another probable consequence of the dialectic is that you will realize how little *you* know. But that's not the end of the story for either you or your children. Sayers goes on to say this:

The imagination—usually dormant during the Pert age—will reawaken, and prompt them to suspect the limitations of logic and reason. This means that they are passing into the Poetic age and are ready to embark on the study of

Rhetoric. The doors of the storehouse of knowledge should now be thrown open for them to browse about as they will. The things once learned by rote will be seen in new contexts; the things once coldly analyzed can now be brought together to form a new synthesis; here and there a sudden insight will bring about that most exciting of all discoveries: the realization that truism is true. (“The Lost Tools of Learning”)

Imagine the doors of a storehouse of knowledge being thrown open and a wealth of knowledge being available at your child’s ready disposal because you taught him how to ask the essential questions and that it was productive to ask them. Remember, we ask questions not because we are cynics who believe that nothing is true and nothing can be known but because we believe that truth exists and can be known, at least imperfectly. Our questions are designed to weed out falsehood and cultivate right thinking so that we can share its fruits with those around us. This is the promise that hovers at the beginning of the rhetoric stage. The journey to reach that point is long and by no means easy, but the reward at the end is far better than we can even imagine.