

WHAT IS THE SOCRATIC METHOD?

excerpted from *Socrates Café* by [Christopher Phillips](#)

The Socratic method is a way to seek truths by your own lights.

It is a system, a spirit, a method, a type of philosophical inquiry an intellectual technique, all rolled into one.

Socrates himself never spelled out a "method." However, the Socratic method is named after him because Socrates, more than any other before or since, models for us *philosophy practiced* - philosophy as deed, as way of living, as something that any of us can do. It is an *open system* of philosophical inquiry that allows one to interrogate from many vantage points.

Gregory Vlastos, a Socrates scholar and professor of philosophy at Princeton, described Socrates' method of inquiry as "among the greatest achievements of humanity." Why? Because, he says, it makes philosophical inquiry "a common human enterprise, open to every man." Instead of requiring allegiance to a specific philosophical viewpoint or analytic technique or specialized vocabulary, the Socratic method "calls for common sense and common speech." And this, he says, "is as it should be, for how man should live is every man's business."

I think, however, that the Socratic method goes beyond Vlastos' description. It does not merely call for common sense but examines what common sense *is*. The Socratic method asks: Does the common sense of our day offer us the greatest potential for self-understanding and human excellence? Or is the prevailing common sense in fact a roadblock to realizing this potential?

Vlastos goes on to say that Socratic inquiry is by no means simple, and "calls not only for the highest degree of mental alertness of which anyone is capable" but also for "moral qualities of a high order: sincerity, humility, courage." Such qualities "protect against the possibility" that Socratic dialogue, no matter how rigorous, "would merely grind out . . . wild conclusions with irresponsible premises." I agree, though I would replace the quality of sincerity with honesty, since one can hold a conviction sincerely without examining it, while honesty would require that one subject one's convictions to frequent scrutiny.

A Socratic dialogue reveals how different our outlooks can be on concepts we use every day. It reveals how different our philosophies are, and often how tenable - or untenable, as the case may be - a range of philosophies can be. Moreover, even the most universally recognized and used concept, when subjected to Socratic scrutiny, might reveal not only that there is *not* universal agreement, after all, on the meaning of any given concept, but that every single person has a somewhat different take on each and every concept under the sun.

What's more, there seems to be no such thing as a concept so abstract, or a question so off base, that it can't be fruitfully explored at Socrates Café. In the course of Socratizing, it often

turns out to be the case that some of the most so-called abstract concepts are intimately related to the most profoundly relevant human experiences. In fact, it's been my experience that virtually any question can be plumbed Socratically. Sometimes you don't know what question will have the most lasting and significant impact until you take a risk and delve into it for a while.

What distinguishes the Socratic method from mere nonsystematic inquiry is the sustained attempt to explore the ramifications of certain opinions and then offer compelling objections and alternatives. This scrupulous and exhaustive form of inquiry in many ways resembles the scientific method. But unlike Socratic inquiry, scientific inquiry would often lead us to believe that whatever is not measurable cannot be investigated. This "belief" fails to address such paramount human concerns as sorrow and joy and suffering and love.

Instead of focusing on the outer cosmos, Socrates focused primarily on human beings and their cosmos within, utilizing his method to open up new realms of self-knowledge while at the same time exposing a great deal of error, superstition, and dogmatic nonsense. The Spanish-born American philosopher and poet George Santayana said that Socrates knew that "the foreground of human life is necessarily moral and practical" and that "it is so even so for artists" - and even for scientists, try as some might to divorce their work from these dimensions of human existence.

Scholars call Socrates' method the *elenchus*, which is Hellenistic Greek for *inquiry* or *cross-examination*. But it is not just any type of inquiry or examination. It is a type that reveals people to themselves, that makes them see what their opinions really amount to. C. D. C. Reeve, professor of philosophy at Reed College, gives the standard explanation of an elenchus in saying that its aim "is not simply to reach adequate definitions" of such things as virtues; rather, it also has a "moral reformatory purpose, for Socrates believes that regular elenctic philosophizing makes people happier and more virtuous than anything else. . . . Indeed philosophizing is so important for human welfare, on his view, that he is willing to accept execution rather than give it up."

Socrates' method of examination can indeed be a vital part of existence, but I would not go so far as to say that it *should* be. And I do not think that Socrates felt that habitual use of this method "makes people happier." The fulfillment that comes from Socratizing comes only at a price - it could well make us *unhappier*, more uncertain, more troubled, as well as more fulfilled. It can leave us with a sense that we *don't* know the answers after all, that we are much further from knowing the answers than we'd ever realized before engaging in Socratic discourse. And this is fulfilling - and exhilarating and humbling and perplexing. We may leave a Socrates Café - in all likelihood we *will* leave a Socrates Café - with a heady sense that there are many more ways and truths and lights by which to examine any given concept than we had ever before imagined.

In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche said, "I admire the courage and wisdom of Socrates in all he did, said - and did not say." Nietzsche was a distinguished nineteenth-century classical philologist before he abandoned the academic fold and became known for championing

a type of heroic individual who would create a life - affirming "will to power" ethic. In the spirit of his writings on such individuals, whom he described as "supermen," Nietzsche lauded Socrates as a "genius of the heart. . . whose voice knows how to descend into the depths of every soul . . . who teaches one to listen, who smoothes rough souls and lets them taste a new yearning . . . who divines the hidden and forgotten treasure, the drop of goodness . . . from whose touch everyone goes away richer, not having found grace nor amazed, not as blessed and oppressed by the good of another, but richer in himself, opened . . . less sure perhaps... but full of hopes that as yet have no name." I only differ with Nietzsche when he characterizes Socrates as someone who descended into the depths of others' souls. To the contrary Socrates enabled those with whom he engaged in dialogues to descend into the depths of their own souls and create *their own* life - affirming ethic.

Santayana said that he would never hold views in philosophy which he did not believe in daily life, and that he would deem it dishonest and even spineless to advance or entertain views in discourse which were not those under which he habitually lived. But there is no neat divide between one's views of philosophy and of life. They are overlapping and kindred views. It is virtually impossible in many instances to *know* what we believe in daily life until we engage others in dialogue. Likewise, to discover our philosophical views, we must engage with ourselves, with the lives we already lead. Our views form, change, evolve, as we participate in this dialogue. It is the only way truly to discover what philosophical colors we sail under. Everyone at some point preaches to himself and others what he does not yet practice; everyone acts in or on the world in ways that are in some way contradictory or inconsistent with the views he or she confesses or professes to hold. For instance, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, the influential founder of existentialism, put Socratic principles to use in writing his dissertation on the concept of irony in Socrates, often using pseudonyms so he could argue his own positions with himself. In addition, the sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne, who was called "the French Socrates" and was known as the father of skepticism in modern Europe, would write and add conflicting and even contradictory passages in the same work. And like Socrates, he believed the search for truth was worth dying for.

The Socratic method forces people "to confront their own dogmatism," according to Leonard Nelson, a German philosopher who wrote on such subjects as ethics and theory of knowledge until he was forced by the rise of Nazism to quit. By doing so, participants in Socratic dialogue are, in effect, "*forcing* themselves to be free," Nelson maintains. But they're not just confronted with their own dogmatism. In the course of a Socrates Café, they may be confronted with an array of hypotheses, convictions, conjectures and theories offered by the other participants, and themselves - all of which subscribe to some sort of dogma. The Socratic method requires that - honestly and openly, rationally and imaginatively - they confront the dogma by asking such questions as: What does this mean? What speaks for and against it? Are there alternative ways of considering it that are even more plausible and tenable?

At certain junctures of a Socratic dialogue, the "forcing" that this confrontation entails - the insistence that each participant carefully articulate her singular philosophical perspective - can be upsetting. But that is all to the good. If it never touches any nerves, if it doesn't upset, if it

doesn't mentally and spiritually challenge and perplex, in a wonderful and exhilarating way, it is not Socratic dialogue. This "forcing" opens us up to the varieties of experiences of others - whether through direct dialogue, or through other means, like drama or books, or through a work of art or a dance. It compels us to explore alternative perspectives, asking what might be said for or against each.

Keep this ethos in mind if you ever, for instance, feel tempted to ask a question like this one once posed at a Socrates Café: How can we overcome alienation? Challenge the premise of the question at the outset. You may need to ask: Is alienation something we always want to overcome? For instance, Shakespeare and Goethe may have written their timeless works because they embraced their sense of alienation rather than attempting to escape it. If this was so, then you might want to ask: Are there many different types, and degrees, of alienation? Depending on the context, are there some types that you want to overcome and other types that you do not at all want to overcome but rather want to incorporate into yourself? And to answer effectively such questions, you first need to ask and answer such questions as: What is alienation? What does it mean to overcome alienation? Why would we ever want to overcome alienation? What are some of the many different types of alienation? What are the criteria or traits that link each of these types? Is it possible to be completely alienated? And many more questions besides.

Those who become smitten with the Socratic method of philosophical inquiry thrive on the question. They never run out of questions, or out of new ways to question. Some of Socrates Café's most avid philosophizers are, for me, the question personified.

from *Socrates Café*, page 18 - 24.

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