
UNIT 2 SOCRATES

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

- To get to know in depth the Socratic Dialectical Method of thinking;
- To learn how the logical, epistemological, ethical, educational and political teachings of Socrates stand out as the beginnings of Western philosophy;
- To view the ideas of Socrates critically, with its merits and demerits; and
- To learn from personal application the fact that philosophy requires also ethical commitment to the advancement of wisdom and a life of commitment to the good of others – both of which will make the thinker more useful for the humanity than a professional thinker who gets paid.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.) is generally acclaimed as the father of Western philosophy, although, as we know, there have been many thinkers in the Greek world before him. This is mainly because he was the teacher of Plato, who was a very influential thinker, whose many works are extant, and who mentions Socrates' teachings in many of his works and compares his own with those of his teacher. Still another reason for his fame as father of Western philosophy may be that he exhibited the philosophical attitude of distanced and unaffected intellectual reflection, moral courage, spirit of an educationist, etc. His courage before death by drinking poison is the clearest proof.

Secondly, as he was a street thinker not interested in remuneration for his teaching (unlike the Sophists who taught for money), he was recognized by all as someone different. So he could identify the best of minds and the most committed of persons, and attract them to his group of students. Through his students we know that he developed a philosophy of clarity. It won the attention and respect of thinking men everywhere through his own teachings and the teachings of his immediate followers, especially Plato and Aristotle. This clarity attracted the

whole of the West through his followers. As the Arabic philosopher Avicenna translated the works of Aristotle into Latin in the middle ages, the Church took notice of the three great Socratic philosophers (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle). Again, these three were rediscovered during the Renaissance, and their rational, practical, and scientific ideas influenced the thinking and the governmental, religious, and educational institutions of the entire western world. From this historical point of view, Socrates remains even today the father of Western philosophy.

Thirdly, his Philosophy finds resonances even today. The whole trend of the Medieval and Modern thinkers, and of today's Analytical and Pragmatic philosophies, of seeking clarity in thought, language and morals, is prefigured in the Socratic rudiments. His penchant for logical arguments from experience gave rise to the inductive method. These add to his importance as the father of Western philosophy even today.

Life of Socrates

Almost nothing is known of the childhood or parentage of Socrates but it can be assumed from his later display of learning that he attended the schools of Athens. If so, he should have been from an aristocratic, or at least from a middle class, family. As a pupil of Archelaus during his youth, Socrates showed a great deal of interest in the scientific theories of Anaxagoras. But later he abandoned inquiries into the physical world for a dedicated investigation of the development of moral character.

- a. **Military Hero.** Until at the age of eighteen he entered military service, he must have continued studying in the schools. It can be gathered from various sources that he served Athens in the warfare with Sparta, and also participated in the battles of Petidaea, Delium, and Amphipolis. During the battle of Petidaea he is supposed to have saved the life of the Athenian General, Alcibiades. Socrates dabbled in the political turmoil that consumed Athens after the War, then retired from active life to work as a stonemason and to raise his children with his wife, Xanthippe.
- b. **Stonecutter.** Socrates worked from time to time as a stonecutter.
- c. **Sculptor.** He completed two works of sculpture, "Hermes," the god, and "The Three Graces."
- d. **Marriage.** Socrates married Xanthippe. She is said to have resented the fact that he charged no fees for his teaching. Later, in 415 B.C., Craco's Law authorized polygamy for the purpose of increasing the male population of the state. Socrates is believed to have taken a second wife at this time (Socrates 2010).
- e. **Philosophical Career.** After inheriting a modest fortune from his father, the sculptor Sophroniscus, Socrates used his marginal financial independence as an opportunity to give full-time attention to inventing the practice of philosophical dialogue.

Trial and Death: The parents of his some of his students were displeased with his influence on their offspring, and his earlier association with opponents of the democratic regime had already made him a controversial political figure. Although the amnesty of 405 forestalled direct prosecution for his political activities, an Athenian jury found other charges: corrupting the youth and interfering with the religion of the city. Upon these was Socrates sentenced to

death in 399 B.C.E. Accepting this outcome with remarkable grace, at the age of 70, he drank hemlock and died in the company of his friends and disciples. The trial and the last days and death of Socrates are described by Plato in his dialogues *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*.

His Students: Some of the famous men who studied with Socrates were: 1) Plato, considered one of the greatest philosophers in the history of civilization. 2) Alcibiades, a military genius. 3) Aristippus, founder of the Cyrenaic school of hedonism. 4) Antisthenes, founder of the Cynic school of philosophy. 5) Xenophon, a military leader and historian. 6) Crito, one of the wealthiest men in Athens.

2.2 THE SOCRATIC DIALECTICAL METHOD

As self-styled teacher of the people in the streets and the inquisitive who came in search of him, Socrates devoted most of his adult life to the development of a philosophy to teach those followers who attached themselves to his dialogue discussion groups. Socrates was distinctive for:

Ethic of Knowledge: Linking Knowledge to Happiness (From Epistemology to Ethics). This was an attitude which influenced all later Greek philosophers. For Socrates, truthfulness is already based on truth as an ethical virtue. This was an improvement beyond the pre-Socratic thinkers. Socrates' core thesis was that humans do not knowingly act evil. We do what we believe is the best. Improper conduct is the product of ignorance. Lessen ignorance, improve society. He believed therefore that knowledge, or insight, was the foundation of virtue and happiness. In his use of critical reasoning, he showed his unwavering commitment to truth. Commitment to truth is the major virtue humans can have. This virtue, finally, tends us to happiness. The later insistence on morals as leading to happiness is based in Socratic thinking.

Contrast: An opposing view is that a better society must be maintained by punishments. This line of reasoning rests on the assumption that God gave us the free will to choose between good and evil. To restrain the evil; freedom has to be taken away from the guilty by incarceration or by the termination of life. To prevent the evil, freedom must be curtailed by pressures toward the moral rectitude by an elaborate system of rewards and punishments. The core postulates of this system are in the belief in God and in the belief of an afterlife. Thus, this system of rewards and punishments can include promises which fulfillment does not require tangible expenditures and cannot be verified, extended into eternity and intensified by fantasies of bliss in heaven and of suffering in hell. Within this cognitive framework, there is no escape, not even by suicide, which lands you in Hell. However, inflicting death upon others, earns you into paradise plus the seventy one maidens bonus.

Merit and Demerit: In comparison to this view offered for contrast, the Socratic ethic of knowledge has merits and demerits. The merit is that it is free of possible misconceptions in terms of tradition and theology. The demerit is that it has no theoretical foundations, except in the acceptance of dialogue as an effective methodology for eliciting knowledge from pupils.

Paradoxes: Many of the beliefs traditionally attributed to the historical Socrates have been characterized as "paradoxal" because they seem to conflict with common sense. The following are among the so-called Socratic Paradoxes: (1) No

one desires evil. (2) No one errs or does wrong willingly or knowingly. (3) Virtue is knowledge, and all virtue is knowledge. (4) Virtue is sufficient for happiness (Socrates Wiki 2011).

Development of the Inductive Method of Argument in Philosophy: Even today this is the method of scientific of reasoning. In Socrates we have the beginning of an epistemology of empirically based thinking in the Western world. He practiced this method insistently, which helped Plato and Aristotle to further develop it from the way he practiced it.

The Dialectical (*Elenchos*) Method - a Method of Interrogation: Free-wheeling interrogation of and discussion with the aristocratic young citizens of Athens, insistently questioning their unwarranted confidence in the truth of popular opinions, led Socrates into his founding the method of dialogue as a method of thinking. It is cross-examination (*elenchos*) with the purpose of refutation. Induction is the exact methodology applied in dialogues. In Greek, *dia* means “between”, and *legein* means “collect, read, speak, etc.” Thus, the dialectical method is an inter-subjective methodology of knowing. Plato turned this method into the universal method of his Academy, for philosophical training and disputation. Aristotle followed him, improved this methodology into “walking dialogues” and found it most useful to reach the premises of any deductive argument. Jaakko Hintikka, one of the most successful logicians of the 20th and 21st centuries, makes use of the method of dialogue and constructs a method of interrogation for epistemology and logic. In his *Socratic Epistemology: Explorations of Knowledge Seeking by Questioning* (p. 35), he comments on the dialectical method of Socrates:

Socrates did not claim that he knew anything. In the manner of a practitioner of my interrogative method, what he did was to ask questions. I suspect that it is only in Plato’s dialogues that he was looking for a definition of knowledge. And Plato put this question (and other questions of definition) into Socrates’s mouth because Plato shared the widespread Greek assumption that the definition of X gives us the “blueprint” that enables us to bring about X. (See Hintikka 1974, ch. 1–2.) This applies both to the generic search for knowledge and to the quest of particular items of knowledge. Thus, insofar as Plato contemplated knowledge-seeking (information-seeking) by questioning in our sense, he would have had to say that we must know what we are looking for there and that it is this knowledge alone that can guide our search. (No wonder he was worried about Meno’s problem.) By the same token, all search for knowledge would have had to be guided by our knowledge of what knowledge is. This shows the importance and applicability of the dialectical method even today.

Rationalism: Socrates believed that man was capable of arriving at truth through the use of reason. He criticized anyone who used rhetoric to convince people. This went against the politicians of the day. This insistence on reason was thus also a contribution to politics.

Notions in the Practice of the Dialectical Method

a. Interrogation: Athens became the classroom of Socrates. He went about asking questions of authorities and of the man in the street in order to arrive at political and ethical truths. He questioned groups of his students as a means of instruction, to compel them to think a problem through to a logical conclusion. His dialectic method, or method of investigating

problems through dialogue discussions, came to be known as the Socratic method. It involved:

- b. The Socratic Irony, the Method of Ignorance:** Socrates pretended that he knew no answers. He assumed that ignorance and willingness to learn from others were the background for adroit questioning to reveal the truth or expose the error of the answers he received. He is supposed to have said, I know only that I do not know anything!
- c. The Concept of Definition:** The initial question usually required the definition of the concept. This gives clarity to thinking. Whatever one thinks must be defined as best as one can. The others have always a place to play in the clarity thus achieved.
- d. Analysis:** Subsequent questions elicited an analysis of the definition in all its implications.
- e. Generalizations:** After examining all of the particular applications and consequences of the concept, Socrates reasoned, or persuaded his students to reason, from the particular to the general, or by the process of induction, to reach a general conclusion.

According to one general characterization by Vlastos, the practice of the dialectical method has the following steps (Vlastos 1991):

1. Socrates' interlocutor asserts a thesis, for example 'Courage is endurance of the soul', which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.
2. Socrates secures his interlocutor's agreement to further premises, for example 'Courage is a fine thing' and 'Ignorant endurance is not a fine thing'.
3. Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that these further premises imply the contrary of the original thesis, in this case it leads to: 'courage is not endurance of the soul'.
4. Socrates then claims that he has shown that his interlocutor's thesis is false and that its contrary is true.

As with any method, this method too has defects. But as the first full-fledged method of knowledge in the West, the Socratic dialectical method has always its importance.

2.3 SYSTEMATIC DIVISIONS OF SOCRATES' PHILOSOPHY

Since Socrates left no literary legacy of his own, we are dependent upon writers contemporary to him, like Aristophanes and Xenophon, upon the writings of historians and of his students, and especially upon the writings of Plato, for our information about his life and thought. Major ideas in the Socratic philosophy are:

- 1. Philosophical Anthropology:** The Proper Object of Study of Philosophy is Man. Socrates was not concerned with metaphysical questions as such. He believed that philosophy should achieve practical results in the form of greater well-being for man the individual and for mankind as a society. Hence, the proper study of philosophy is man. In pursuit of this study, Socrates' interests were centered in ethics and politics (Socrates 2011).

2. **Natural Ethics:** Socrates attempted to establish an ethical system based upon human reason rather than upon theological directives of the priests and rulers. He also insisted that knowledge is not for political power. Unlike the professional Sophists of the time, who acted everywhere as teachers, Socrates pointedly declined to accept payment for his work with students. Because of this lofty disdain for material success and the highest moral value of knowledge as virtue, many of his students were fanatically loyal to him. In the Socratic dialogues, his extended conversations with students, statesmen, and friends invariably aim at understanding and achieving virtue (Greek *aretê*) through the careful application of a dialectical method that employs critical inquiry to undermine the plausibility of widely-held doctrines.
3. **Knowledge, Self-knowledge and Wisdom:** Socrates asserted that the highest good for any human being is happiness. Whatever action a man chooses is motivated by his desire for happiness. Knowledge, virtue, and wisdom are all the same, since man chooses an action according to what he thinks will bring him the greatest happiness. Therefore the more a man knows, the greater his ability to reason out the correct choice and to choose those actions which truly bring happiness to him. The highest knowledge is possessed by that individual who truly knows himself. This knowledge constitutes ultimate wisdom. It enables man to act in a virtuous manner at all times, because he knows what will bring him true happiness (Socrates 2011).
4. **Political Philosophy:** Socrates did not approve of tyranny or of democracy. He believed that the best form of government was one ruled by an individual possessing the greatest ability, knowledge, and virtue.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Why is Socrates important for philosophy?

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- 2) Describe the dialectical method of Socrates.

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- 3) What is the importance of self-knowledge, according to Socrates?

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2.4 THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF SOCRATES

Socrates has tremendously influenced the education of the whole Western culture. The contributions of Socrates to education are as follows:

1. Qualities of the Socratic Teaching Method

The Socratic method offers the following advantages to teaching act:

- a. **Problem-centered:** The dialectic begins with a problem which must be analyzed, e.g. “What is your opinion about the nature of justice?”
- b. **Based on Student Experience:** The student or dialogue participant responds on the basis of his own knowledge and experience.
- c. **Based on Critical Thinking:** The student is held responsible for his statements. The teacher analyzes some of the possible consequences of the student’s remarks. The emphasis is upon the thinking processes of the student, who must think for himself and accept the consequences of his logic (Socrates 2011).
- d. **Teaching as a Drawing forth rather than a Telling:** In the Socratic method the teacher does not tell the student the proper answer. He draws from the student’s probable answer. Socrates brings in the following analogy. Knowledge / wisdom is the end result and aim of dialogue. It is the child. The nurse (Greek, *maia*) has a special function at the birth of a child. She helps the mother to bring the child out in a healthy manner. She pulls out the child. The student is the mother of the knowledge. The teacher acts as a *maia*. Hence the Socratic dialogical method of deriving knowledge is called the Maieutic Method. Thus Socrates, for the first time, gave great importance to the student and almost cast the teacher away from the central stage of knowing. A consequence of this is the following. If a teacher remains a student all through one’s life, the teacher has some importance in the process of attainment of knowledge / wisdom.
- e. **Learning Treated as Discovery:** The student learns when he discovers the true generalization through his reasoning processes. Socrates believed that (1) destroying the illusion that we already comprehend the world perfectly and (2) honestly accepting the fact of our own ignorance, vital steps toward our acquisition of genuine knowledge, by discovering universal definitions of the key concepts governing human life. Thus, discovery never ends (SGP 2011).

2. The Purpose of Education

The aims of education as derived from Socratic thought are:

- a. **Self-knowledge:** The educated man is wise when he knows himself.
- b. **Individual Moral Good:** The acquisition of knowledge is valuable for man because it makes him virtuous and happy. Socrates repudiated any ornamental theory of knowledge. In similar fashion Socrates deplors also the use of knowledge merely for material success in life. Knowledge is ethically and morally important for all men. Only someone who has been

earnest to achieve truth through continuous inquiry and dialogue is virtuous (Socrates 2011).

- c. Skill in Thinking: Each man must develop his skill in critically appraising propositions through the reasoning process.

2.5 LEARNING ABOUT SOCRATES FROM HIS FOLLOWERS

Interacting with an arrogantly confident young man in Euthyphro, for example, Socrates systematically refutes the superficial notion of piety (moral rectitude) as doing whatever is pleasing to the gods. He argued, efforts to define morality by reference to any external authority is inevitably founded in a logical dilemma about the origin of the good (SGP 2011).

Plato's *Apology* is an account of Socrates's (unsuccessful) speech in his own defense before the Athenian jury before his death; it includes a detailed description of the motives of philosophical activity as he practiced it, together with a passionate declaration of its value for life. The *Crito* reports that during Socrates's imprisonment he responded to friendly efforts to secure his escape by seriously debating whether or not it would be right for him to do so. He used even this opportunity to exercise the Maieutic Method. He concludes that an individual citizen, even when the victim of unjust treatment, can never be justified in refusing to obey the laws of the state.

The Socrates in the *Meno* tries to determine whether or not virtue can be taught, and this naturally leads to a careful investigation of the nature of virtue itself. Although his direct answer is that virtue is unteachable, Socrates does propose the doctrine of recollection to explain why we nevertheless are in possession of significant knowledge about such matters. Probably this doctrine is originally from Socrates, or Plato's own, put in the mouth of Socrates, or, ideally, both. Most remarkably, Socrates argues here that knowledge and virtue are so closely related that no human agent ever knowingly does evil. We all invariably do what we believe to be best. Improper conduct, then, can only be a product of our ignorance rather than a symptom of weakness of the will (Greek, *akrasia*). The same view is also defended in the *Protagoras*, along with the belief that all of the virtues must be cultivated together.

2.6 A CRITIQUE OF THE SOCRATIC DIALECTICAL METHOD

According to Jaakko Hintikka (2007 p. 74), the following may be considered to be some of the drawbacks of the dialectical method in general. (Quoting directly, we number the paragraphs.)

It is not clear in general what answers to more complex questions will look like logically, nor is it clear what their presuppositions might be. And even if answers to these questions were available, there apparently are no rules of logical inference that could parallel the relevant complex question–answer steps. This might seem to jeopardize the entire strategic analogy deduction and interrogative inquiry.

Other limitations are likewise conspicuous. Perhaps the most important shortcoming of first-generation epistemic logic confronts us when we begin to emulate Socrates and Aristotle and model all inquiry as a questioning process. Such a model is straightforward to implement as long as the inquirer is given a fixed conclusion that it be established through an interrogative process starting from given initial premises. This may be enough to answer *why*-questions through a questioning process. However, there does not seem to be any way of analyzing similarly the all-important method of answering questions—that is, initial “big” or principal questions, by means of a number of “small” or operative questions. This would be a serious limitation to any application of the logic of questions and answers to epistemology. In view of such applicational shortcomings of first-generation epistemic logic, it might in fact look as if the philosophical community could be excused when it has so far turned a deaf ear to the interesting and important philosophical vistas suggested by the observations so far described.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) What are the qualities of Socrates’s teaching method?

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2) Give your criticism of Socratic dialectic method.

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have studied the importance of Socrates to Western Philosophy. Then we have seen his life and his philosophical method. This was followed by an analysis of his philosophy and finally a critique of his method. The application of the Socratic dialectical method is to be found most famously in the class room, in legal courts and in psychotherapy. As an epistemology, it is the first of its kind in the history of Western philosophy. This is also the first philosophically formulated ethics in the West. His political and educational ideas had great influence during and after his life. The Socratic method has been made famous by the schools and works of Plato and Aristotle. Thus, Socrates remains the father of philosophy in the serious and life-involving meaning of the word.

2.8 KEY WORDS

- Arête** : (Greek, the goodness or excellence of a thing) The goodness or virtue of a person. In the thought of Plato and Aristotle virtue is connected with goodness.
- Dialectical Method** : It is the Socratic method (also known as method of elenchus, Socratic irony, or Socratic debate), named after the classical Greek philosopher Socrates, is a form of inquiry and debate between individuals with opposing viewpoints based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to illuminate ideas.
- Paradox** : A statement or proposition that, despite sound (or apparently sound) reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems senseless, logically unacceptable, or self-contradictory.
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