

Warning: The Socratic Method Can Be Dangerous

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The Socratic method is inappropriate for children because it teaches them to question adult authority before they have the necessary experience.

Socrates was executed for practicing it. Plato advised that it not be taught until the student had mastered all of higher education and then not until the age of 30. Yet Mortimer Adler, TheodoreSizer, and others are said to advocate its introduction into the public schools.^{1,2}

I am referring, of course, to what Plato called "dialectics" and our contemporary advocates call "the Socratic method." Times change, we are told. Plato's rationale no longer holds, and what did Socrates in will be applauded today. I contend, however, that Plato's reasons are still good, that the Athenians knew what they were doing when they brought Socrates to trial, and that those who advocate the Socratic method may be leading American teachers to the choices given Socrates by his jury.

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Though exemplified in such early dialogues as *The Meno* and *The Euthyphro*, it is only in Book VII of *The Republic*³ that Plato presents a detailed discussion of the nature of the dialectical process. The discussion of dialectics follows Plato's discussion of the curriculum for the higher education of the ruling class or decision makers. This curriculum includes arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmony and is designed to accustom the learner to think abstractly, to discover the principles or essential properties of things, rather than to remain on the concrete level where individual cases are randomly encountered.

Socrates, who had always believed that "the unexamined life is not worth living" and that his special wisdom

derived from his recognition of his own ignorance, is now proposing that even these scientific and mathematical studies need to be examined and their limitations understood. The philosopher or dialectician "grasps the reason for the being of each thing" (534 b); he tries "to give an account" of things (531 e, 533 c), he "tries by discussion—by means of argument without the use of any of the senses—to attain to each thing itself that *is*; he doesn't give up before he grasps by intellection itself that which is good itself ..." (532 a).

Full understanding requires us to examine ideas or concepts internally and externally. An internal examination will *analyze* the idea so that we can formulate its essential meaning and reveal all assumptions or hypotheses that are entailed by it, until we can be secure in using the concept as the foundation for further knowledge. An external examination will relate ideas to each other or *synthesize* them into a

meaningful pattern. Plato recognizes the plight of the learner and recommends that "the various studies acquired without any particular order by ... children ... must be integrated into an overview which reveals the kinship of these studies to one another and with the nature of that which *is*" (537 c).



The Socratic method, by searching for hidden assumptions or hypotheses for any apparent *given*, tells us that things are not always what they seem to be, that the truth may not be in conventional wisdom, that matters of fact need to be transcended to discover the facts of the matter. But more

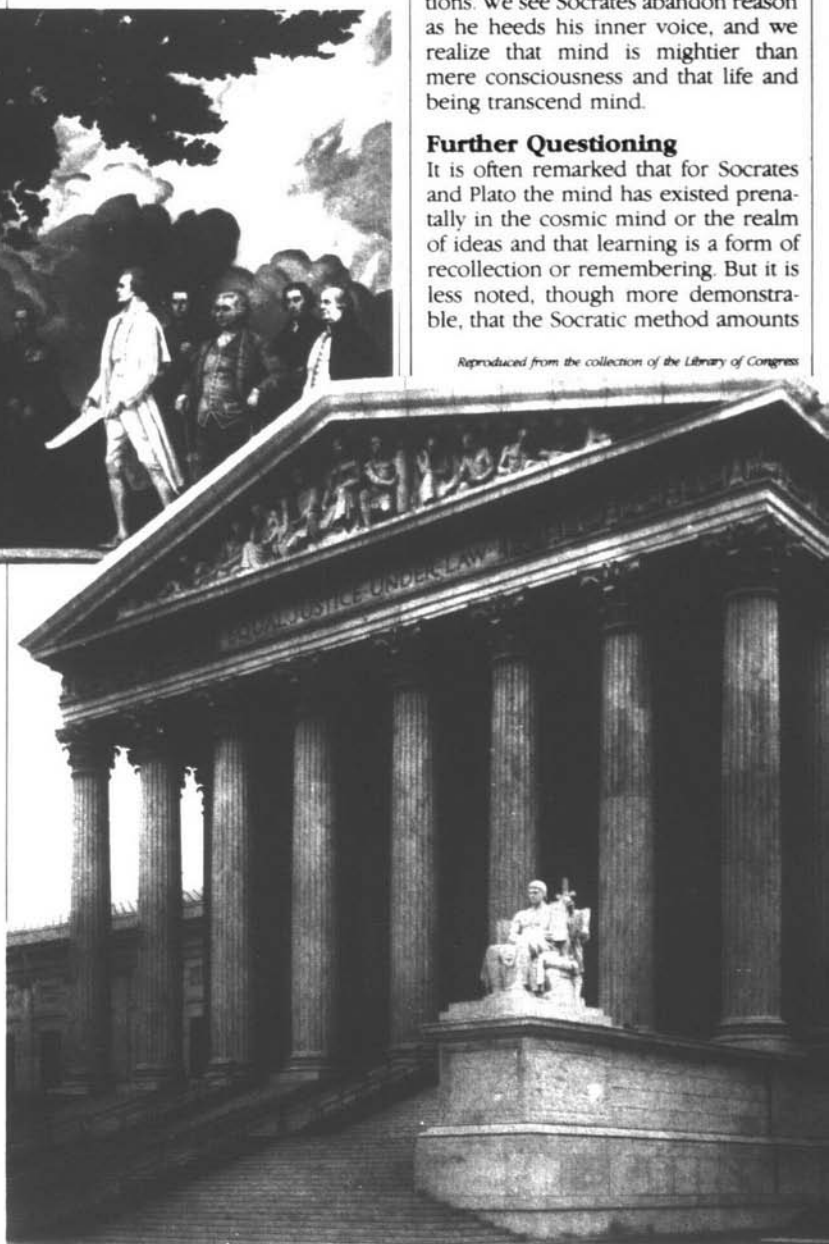
than that, recognizing that an illusion is an illusion gives us no assurance that its contrary will in turn be the ultimate truth. As Aristotle remarked, only one arrow can hit the center of the target, but an infinite number can miss it. Invalidating a thesis may suggest an antithesis that does not err in

the same way, but it too is likely to err in its own way. As each position may be successively discredited, our wisdom grows, but it is a negative wisdom. We learn what is *not* the way, and we become less arrogant, more open to new possibilities. Ultimately we may see reason turn upon itself and discover or intuit its own limitations. We see Socrates abandon reason as he heeds his inner voice, and we realize that mind is mightier than mere consciousness and that life and being transcend mind.

Further Questioning

It is often remarked that for Socrates and Plato the mind has existed prenatally in the cosmic mind or the realm of ideas and that learning is a form of recollection or remembering. But it is less noted, though more demonstrable, that the Socratic method amounts

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to a relearning and reorganization of what was previously known in this life—knowledge that has been gathered in a random pattern like colored pieces of a kaleidoscope. The Socratic method shakes things up, destroys the casual patterning, and looks for a better—more comprehensive and logically consistent—pattern. That pattern is again examined with the same criteria and may again be found wanting; the kaleidoscope is again shaken. Philosophy is a search for the ideal architectonics of “all time and existence.”

If anything is crystal clear, it is that Socratic questioning leads to further questioning. From this process we learn patience rather than The Answer. In the dialogues the relentless search for an ultimate truth is matched only by a ubiquitous dread of *hubris*, or idolatry, should we ever claim to have found it.

The Socratic method is nothing if it is not upsetting and unnerving. Dewey's remark about inquiry applies squarely: “If we once start thinking no one can guarantee where we shall come out, except that many objects, ends and institutions are doomed. Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril, and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place.”⁴ The inherent skepticism of the method can easily turn to nihilism; its openness to new visions and revisions may erode standards and disorient and alienate its disciples.

No one was more keenly aware of these dangers than Plato himself. He had seen the dangers inherent in the Socratic method become real, had seen it turn against Socrates himself. So he has Socrates ask the question, “Don't you notice how great is the harm coming from the practice of dialectic these days? . . . Its students are filled with lawlessness” (537 e). He goes on to describe how we become socialized, saying that “we have from childhood convictions about what's just and fair by which we are brought up as parents, obeying them as rulers and honoring them” (538 c). But then “lads get their first taste (of argu-

ments), they misuse them as though they were play, always using them to contradict and . . . refute others” (539 b). They will question what the law says is just and fair, and they will refute arguments about its validity until they come to “neither honor nor obey them any longer in the same way” (538 e). Generalized, it can be imagined that all the customs, mores, standards, values, and conventional wisdom of the society will be examined and refuted by these immature dialecticians who are “like puppies enjoying pulling and tearing with argument at those who happen to be near” (539 b).

Of course, it is the older generation, the fathers and authority figures, who uphold the traditional views; indeed, their claims to legitimate authority rest upon these views. And their sons, armed with the Socratic method, come pulling and tearing at them as Oedipus attacked Laius. Small wonder that Socrates was accused of attacking traditional religion and of corrupting the young. So Plato, chastened and saddened decades later, has Socrates ironically warn us that only older men, over the age of 30, who have orderly and stable natures—only these should engage in philosophy or the Socratic method (539 d).

The Nature and Value of Culture

As Dewey observed, inquiry leads to change; and in a dynamic and democratic society such as ours or fifth century Athens, inquiry should be welcomed. Without change a society will stagnate; and the energies of its citizens may turn inward, destructively. But every society also needs stability and continuity, and the absence of these will generate anarchy. The two are part of an organic unity, and a healthy society needs to find a middle way. Continuity ensures structure, without which nothing can function, grow, or develop.

It was Socrates' failure to recognize the claims of a convention-based stability because of his intoxicated, monomaniacal thirst for inquiry that led finally and inevitably to his trial and

death. The wisest man of his time was blind to the human requirement of habit and tradition, of having a past. He failed to heed the traditional wisdom of his culture to avoid excess—“nothing too much”—and he was cut down. R. Freeman Butts comes to a similar conclusion: “It may ultimately be decided that the greatest weakness of Socrates was his failure to stress a positive education for citizenship that would develop the basic loyalties to the common values of democracy at the same time that it developed the ability to criticize, which was Socrates' chief glory.”⁵

A proper education of the young must begin with a firm grounding in the nature and values of our culture. Without teaching the rules of the game and the lay of the land, we handicap the young and threaten the continuity of the society. Teaching the essential knowledge, skills, and values of our culture presents a challenge and a paradox and requires some epistemological tightrope walking. On the one hand they *are* essential. They are non-negotiable. It is tempting to portray them as absolute and eternal and invest them with divine authority. But they are also relative to our culture. They have been created by peoples; and they will inevitably be changed, just as they vary in other lands and at other times. We do impose our culture and its standards on the young; to do otherwise would be irresponsible and injurious to them. But we must try to give good reasons for these standards; and we need to be open to discussion, lest we be accused of indoctrination. On the other hand, in these early years we should not take the initiative to demonstrate inconsistencies and other inadequacies in the belief systems we are helping to inculcate. As R. S. Peters has written, “To take a hatchet to a pupil's contribution before he has much equipment to defend it, is not only likely to arrest or warp his growth in this form of thought; it is also to be insensitive to him as a person.”⁶ We have seen thus far that as desirable as the Socratic method may be, great difficulties have emerged. The com-

prehensive overview, or *synthetic* aspect, first requires that children have considerable experience. That experience may then be scrutinized, analyzed, and reconstituted. In fact, that process may continue indefinitely with each synthetic overview reanalyzed and ultimately reconstituted. But even the first comprehensive vision requires a level of experience young children prior to high school age will not usually attain.

The *analytic* aspect encounters more severe problems. If we assume children are capable of this manner of thinking, despite Piaget, Socratic methodology may prove damaging to the vulnerable young child, as Peters indicated, and may rob him or her of a needed sense of security. It may lead to a growing recognition that there is no truth and that reason is a poor tool. Cynicism and despair may follow. In older students who are insufficiently mature it can become a weapon in the conflict between generations, with the young attempting to discredit the values and conventional wisdom of the older generations. Hannah Arendt remarked that Socratic "thinking as such does society little good . . . it does not create values . . . but, rather dissolves accepted rules of conduct." Socrates was perceived as the instigator of the activity that undermined Athenian society; and he was ordered to desist, or to leave Athens, or to take hemlock and die.

For the most part *our* citizens as well want the schools to transmit our cultural traditions, not change them. When teachers emphasize change and inquiry to the detriment of continuity, their communities may censor the activity, suggest that the teacher relocate, or force the teacher out of teaching. Thus, the Socratic method may be as perilous to the teacher as it is to the student. The case against introducing the Socratic method in the public schools is strong indeed.

An Idea-Centered Curriculum

And yet, in a larger sense, we have no choice. In the deepest sense dialectics or the Socratic method is simply *think-*

ing, nothing less, nothing more. "Socrates is a metaphor of an activity of mind," writes Joseph Needelman.⁸ For humans it is inevitable that there will be thinking; the question is merely one of degrees, the extent and the depth we will go. By calling the thinking process "dialectics" or "the Socratic method," however, we have opened the door to a new insight. Thinking is the mind talking to itself, dialoguing, answering its own questions. The dialogue, the Socratic method, is really the *externalization* of thinking; more accurately, thinking is the *internalization* of a social process, a dialogue, an interaction between two people. But the duality involved is essentially of two *ideas* as presented by the people and not the people themselves. Human beings have a duality insofar as we think. We are "both the one who asks and the one who answers," says Arendt.⁹ Our two selves strive to be consistent with each other. Indeed, insofar as they are, there is no thinking. Only when we encounter contradictions or *otherness* do we become perplexed and wonder. This encounter is the origin of thought. There is no difference between Socrates encountering a Sophist or Dewey's "problematic situation"¹⁰ because these are the external or social occasions for the self to undertake thinking or problem solving.

Once we have grasped the notion that thinking is not only something that goes on subjectively in one's head but also has an objective correlative in what goes on between two people (who embody ideas), we can take one further step. The teaching of thinking or the stimulation of the mind is not done by somehow tinkering with mental processes or developing techniques or skills. Rather, since thinking has the external or social aspect to it, our attention should focus on institutionalizing the Socratic method.

One way of doing this is to adopt a curriculum that is more *idea centered* than *skill centered*. Skills are not experienced as contrary to one another and will not generate thought. Ideas, on the other hand, are the means through

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which we process the world and the very stuff of our thinking.

For political reasons an idea-centered curriculum cannot be too closely associated with the individual teacher or with contemporary factions. It must take account of our deeply conservative nature (which includes a distrust of thinking) and appear safe from radical departures from our tradition. The curriculum I would advocate is, nevertheless, the curriculum that is most likely to develop critical thinking, most likely to produce divergent or radical thinkers. It is the traditional *liberal arts* curriculum. From that tradition came the *philosophes* of the French Revolution, Jefferson and his cohorts in America, Karl Marx and John Dewey, and among our contemporaries, Paul Goodman and Ivan Il-

lich. These critical thinkers were not educated in schools that taught *problem-solving techniques* or *critical thinking* or *creativity*. Indeed, one raises the heretical question, "Is the paucity of independent, critical thinkers among today's 'me' and the 'post-me' generation a result, not of *lack* of attempts to engineer critical thinking, but of their very presence?"

The liberal arts curriculum can be recommended because it is both politically safe and educationally sound. It is richest in ideas, perhaps in strange, divergent ideas that are more *other* than the fashionable and contemporary; and hence it is most capable of operating "Socratically" or of stimulating thinking.

Institutional Diversity

Now, I doubt that we can educate teachers to use the Socratic method; and as I have already shown, we probably shouldn't even if we could. Few philosophy professors, including those who are lifelong scholars of Socrates himself, have successfully used the Socratic method in any meaningful or profound way. Of course, we all ask students, "What do you mean by so-and-so?" Plenty of articles and manuals are available on techniques of questioning, for classroom teachers through Rogerian therapists. But the relentless and incisive questioning of Socrates himself has never been closely approached. It requires not only a vast experience, but a genuine *openness* to new experience, a lack of dogmatism, and a playful and experimental personality that is extremely rare in this world. And it requires a talent for *listening* and for hearing any particular utterance in the total context of the communication. This seldom occurs between parents and children or between husbands and wives. To expect it to occur in classrooms of 30 students is folly.

Yet, if we look at the matter from an institutional perspective, it is not necessary for each teacher to be capable of entertaining and examining alternative beliefs by having an open personality. The faculty as a whole may reflect a wide spectrum of beliefs, with each member holding his or her beliefs with the utmost dogmatism; and we could still achieve the objective of stimulating or generating thinking.

This objective would not necessarily be achieved *within* each classroom, in the formal setting, but could be achieved by internal, informal dialogue that would be set in motion within the individual student. Such an arrangement would also generate a terrific amount of informal discussion between the students of the school—again, not in the formal classroom setting.

This model needs to be considered with the utmost seriousness. The laboratory of history seems to confirm its success; and it requires neither a revolution in teacher education nor innovative programs, techniques, and materials for teaching critical thinking. It requires care only in the selection of teachers, and I shall soon return to this important issue.

On the other hand, this model strikes at the heart of many contemporary approaches. While it embraces formal and even compulsory schooling as a means, it implies that the *culmination* of the educational effort—thinking—may occur within the everyday life of the student in an informal setting. Nothing is remarkable about this, except that it is not the way modern schooling operates. If the goal of schooling is achieved outside the formal setting, then measurement and evaluation lose their importance, if not their very being. Teachers lose their accountability. Students are no longer viewed as material to be manipulated or managed, and the conclusions of their thinking cannot be monitored. Outcomes of student thinking may be unpredictable and may never even be known to the teacher or school, as behavioral objectives for students are transcended. But isn't that what happens when there is true inquiry, when we follow the argument where it leads? Surely, if the argument is worthwhile, it will lead out of the classroom and into the life of the student!

What creates an invigorating school climate, then, is *not* a faculty of moderate, even-headed, undogmatic, friendly, tolerant, pluralistically oriented teachers who are compatible at faculty meetings and are mutually supportive of each other's decisions and views. A school climate that will generate critical thinking requires a faculty of strong individuals who differ widely in their ideas, values, and teaching styles.

A faculty that because of its differences is in perpetual discussion among its members is also a faculty that shows students by example that ideas and thinking do matter and must enter into the way we conduct our lives, that critical thinking is not a performance within a classroom setting but is an essential component of full, successful living.

The institutionalization of diversity, by creating faculties composed of strong individuals, is easier said than done. Some colleges and universities—usually the superior ones—have succeeded, but our public school faculties are characterized by an increasing *homogeneity*. This may ultimately be the most serious problem facing the future of our schools, as it may be the most limiting factor in developing critical thinking. The level of compensation of teachers and their social class origins, preservice education, program design, hiring standards and personnel directors, current administrative philosophy, school board controls, and other factors have contributed to this growing homogeneity. How to reverse this trend, however, is not within the scope of this paper. "Perhaps," as Socrates might say, "we shall return to this someday. For now, however, my wife is expecting me home, and we must end the discussion." □

¹Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal*. New York: Macmillan, 1982.

²Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1984.

³All quotations are from Allan Bloom's translation of *The Republic of Plato*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1968.

⁴Joseph Ratner, *Intelligence in the Modern World of John Dewey's Philosophy* (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), p. v.

⁵R. Freeman Butts, *The Education of the West* (McGraw-Hill, N.Y., 1973), p. 92.

⁶R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1966), p. 59.

⁷Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), p. 192.

⁸Joseph Needleman, *The Heart of Philosophy* (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 25.

⁹Arendt, p. 185.

¹⁰Emanuel Shargel, "Dewey's Dialectic" *Philosophy of Education 1981* (Philosophy of Education Society, Normal, Ill., 1982) pp. 162-171.

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