



Socratic Method and Its Applications

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Socrates (470-399 BC) was a Greek philosopher who, despite being considered one of the greatest and most important philosophers who ever lived, left no writings at all. Most of what we know about his life and work comes from the writings of his disciples, Xenophon and Plato. He lived during a period of transition in the Greek empire, and after the Peloponnesian War, he was tried, convicted, and executed for corrupting the young. Socrates engaged in questioning of his students in an unending search for truth. He sought to get to the foundations of his students' and colleagues' views by asking continual questions until a contradiction was exposed, thus proving the fallacy of the initial assumption. This became known as the Socratic Method, and may be Socrates's most enduring contribution to philosophy.

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.

The Socratic method also can be known as Socratic debate, is a form of cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presumptions. It is a dialectical method, involving a discussion in which the defence of one point of view is questioned; one participant may lead another to contradict them in some way, thus weakening the defender's point. This method is named after the Classical Greek philosopher Socrates and is introduced by him in



Plato's Theaetetus as midwifery because it is employed to bring out definitions implicit in the interlocutors' beliefs, or to help them to further their understanding.

Elenchus is the central technique of the Socratic method. The Latin form elenchus is used in English as the technical philosophical term. The most common adjectival form in English is elenctic. In Plato's early dialogues, the elenchus is the technique Socrates uses to investigate, for example, the nature or definition of ethical concepts such as justice or virtue. According to Vlastos, it has the following steps:

- Socrates' interlocutor asserts a thesis, for example "Courage is endurance of the soul" which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.
- Socrates secures his interlocutor's agreement further to premises, for example "Courage is a fine thing" and "Ignorant endurance is not a fine thing."
- 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"
- Socrates then claims that he has shown that his interlocutor's thesis is false and that its negation is true.

One elenctic examination can lead to a new, more refined, examination of the concept being considered, in this case it invites an examination of the claim: "Courage is wise endurance of the soul" Most Socratic inquiries consist of a series of elenchi and typically end in puzzlement known as aporia. Frede points out that Vlastos' conclusion makes nonsense of the aporetic nature of the early dialogues. Having shown that a proposed thesis is false is insufficient to conclude that some other competing thesis must be true. Rather, the interlocutors have reached aporia, an improved state of still not knowing what to say about the subject under discussion.

Application of Method:

Socrates generally applied his method of examination to concepts that seem to lack any concrete definition; e.g., the key moral concepts at the time, the virtues of piety, wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice. Such an examination challenged the



implicit moral beliefs of the interlocutors, bringing out inadequacies and inconsistencies in their beliefs, and usually resulting in aporia. In view of such inadequacies, Socrates himself professed his ignorance, but others still claimed to have knowledge. Socrates believed that his awareness of his ignorance made him wiser than those who, though ignorant, still claimed knowledge.

A Socratic Circle or Socratic Seminar is a pedagogical approach based on the Socratic method and uses a dialogic approach to understand information in a text. Its systematic procedure is used to examine a text through questions and answers founded on the beliefs that all new knowledge is connected to prior knowledge, that all thinking comes from asking questions, and that asking one question should lead to asking further questions.

A Socratic Circle is not a debate. The goal of this activity is to have participants work together to construct meaning and arrive at an answer, not for one student or one group to “win the argument”. This approach is based on the belief that participants seek and gain deeper understanding of concepts in the text through thoughtful dialogue rather than memorizing information that has been provided for them.

While Socratic Circles can differ in structure, and even in name, they typically involve the following components: a passage of text that students must read beforehand and two concentric circles of students: an outer circle and an inner circle. The inner circle focuses on exploring and analysing the text through the act of questioning and answering. During this phase, the outer circle remains silent. Students in the outer circle are much like scientific observers watching and listening to the conversation of the inner circle. When the text has been fully discussed and the inner circle is finished talking, the outer circle provides feedback on the dialogue that took place. This process alternates with the inner circle students going to the outer circle for the next meeting and vice versa. The length of this process varies depending on the text used for the discussion. The teacher may decide to alternate groups within one meeting, or they may alternate at each separate meeting.



Reference

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