

Pragmatism Rescues Socrates

Robert R. Sherman
The University of Florida

Professor Götz has directed his attention to a great curiosity. For two and one-half millennia Socrates has been thought to be a great teacher, but we know almost nothing about his teaching method. (If he were in the university today, Socrates would have to make his method explicit, would have to publicize it, even beyond getting good results, else he would remain an associate professor.) We do know that Socrates taught through conversation, particularly by asking questions and using a dialectical approach.¹ And we also know that he had a superb publicist — Plato.² But, beyond that, what was his “method,” his procedure for reaching his aim or objective?

It is equally curious that ever since his time, humans have pursued Socrates’ (or are they Plato’s?) “essential” Truths — the Forms — but have overlooked what has been right in front of them all along. Richard Rorty got it right when he said that “conversation” is what is central to philosophy, and Socrates certainly demonstrates it. Rorty calls conversation the “ultimate context,” but it is method too. Rorty believes that giving up the notion of philosophy as a search for ultimates “would also be to drop the notion that there is something called ‘philosophical method’ or ‘philosophical technique’ or ‘the philosophical point of view.’”³ Following that lead, the pursuit of “Socratic method” might end right there.⁴

But that also would give up a chance to say some other things. To disavow philosophical method is not necessarily, I suppose, to argue against the utility of method in teaching. If Socrates was a great teacher, and we too have that aspiration, can his method secure for us the result? Professor Götz explains that Socrates’ method consists of three parts: (1) exposing error or untruth; (2) an acquaintance with the spiritual; and (3) “assent to the contemplation of and union with Truth, Beauty, and the Good.” And he wonders why “only the first part has been traditionally studied and its practice recommended to teachers.”

In explaining the first part of the method, Professor Götz reminds us that “Socrates operated in the moral realm.” His concern was not unlike, I suppose, what political conservatives worry about today. There once was a better time (at least it is imagined), whose standards (Truth) need to be recovered to put life on the right track today. Socrates perambulates Athens chiding and challenging those who claim to know the truth (or who Socrates says make this claim — a different matter). He appears to invite conversation, only asking questions, but even this part of his method is not without controversy. Socrates seems to be pretty sure of himself, though he denies it; he never asks open-ended questions; he seldom advances a view of his own for examination; and in examining others’ responses, he shifts issues and uses devices that today would be called “illogical.”⁵ If that be method, let the buyer beware.

Professor Götz’s presentation of Socratic method is informative and insightful, particularly when one considers that this is a subject that offers so little primary

material to work with. But there is, for me, a perplexity in his discussion of the first phase of Socratic method that extends throughout the other parts of the method and needs to be resolved. He says, "One may quibble [sic] forever about the meaning of truth, but when one speaks of the Socratic method, truth, and the art of finding it, are intimately connected." Of course he is correct that in Socratic method, truth and finding truth are strongly related.⁶ But the meaning of truth does seem to be worth "quibbling" about, for if one believed in a different conception of truth than did Socrates, would not that imply something about whether or not his method might be useful?

The second part of Socrates' method — "acquaintance with the spiritual" — refers to Socrates' belief that an "immortal soul" enables him to avoid error.⁷ Socrates' method thus involves more than just logical argumentation. It involves an "extra-logical element," admittedly "an element of mysticism," which though it might be called secularly a "sense of calling to the life of teacher," still is dependent on Socrates' conception of truth. So again, this idea seems to give the impression that one cannot be a successful teacher without agreeing with Socrates' idea of truth.

The third part of Socratic method is "ascent to the contemplation of and union with Truth, Beauty, and the Good." This part of method is pure abstraction and even more "mystical" than the second part. It is becoming clear, to me, why, as Professor Götz wonders, only the first part of Socrates' method ever has been emphasized or taught, why method "has remained so narrowly defined." I doubt that Socrates would credit method as successful if it did not lead to the kind of truth *he* had in mind.

In his later, general discussion and conclusion, Professor Götz wonders if "a narrowly conceived rational methodology can lead to meaningful and *certain* [my emphasis] knowledge. [There is the clue: *certain* knowledge.] Can one know purely rationally anything significant or must one first, in some sort of way, believe?" By now the questions are rhetorical. Socrates' answer would be, first, "no," and then, "yes," one must believe. But that puts Socrates in an awkward position. Must the teacher be converted before she can know? And would teacher applicants have to be tested for conformity with Socrates' belief before being allowed to teach? It will take more than Socratic "irony" to resolve those dilemmas.

Quite frankly, I do not see much difficulty in combining belief and method — as long as it is not Socratic belief! The parts of Socrates' method that include belief are unworkable, not because of the irrelevance of belief to method, but because of Socrates' conception of belief (Truth). Professor Götz thinks that "one of the reasons for the reductionist approach to the Socratic method is the unwillingness to admit an experiential, extra-logical dimension in philosophy." That may be true for some philosophers, but not all of them. William James, my preferred model more than Socrates, had no difficulty with this matter. It was a central concern in many of his essays.⁸ For James, belief is hypothetical and directs method, subject to the test of experience, whereas for Socrates, belief seems to be a certainty of knowledge and, ironically, a precondition for truthful experience.

I hope that my comments will not be interpreted as disagreeing with Professor Götz. I am sure he is correct about the elements of Socrates' method. He certainly

has opened my eyes about Socrates, though he may regret it. It is not because Socrates includes belief in methodology, but because of his conception of truth, along with other reasons, that I think his methodology is unworkable.⁹ At the same time, Professor Götz has caused me to think some more about pragmatism. If belief (or Truth) is prefigured in method, then it seems to me that the pragmatic test is all we have (other than force) to judge the results of method.¹⁰ Professor Götz quotes Nietzsche, who says (in part), “The only criticism of a philosophy which is possible, and which also proves something...[is] seeing if one can live by it.” That is pragmatism, though Nietzsche may not have intended it. Socrates surely lived by his philosophy but I wonder if it can be exported to anyone else without modification. What needs to be modified is not the relevance of belief to method, but the character of that belief. With this modification, pragmatism might even rescue Socrates.

1. A.E. Taylor, *Socrates* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), 156.

2. *Ibid.*, 129.

3. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 390-93.

4. See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1978).

5. See I.F. Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989). Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (New York: Oxford, 1994), would not agree.

6. Taylor, *Socrates*, chap. 4.

7. The use of the term “spiritual” (or “soul” or even “religious”) could create other difficulties if it was understood to mean “theological.”

8. For instance, William James's 1907 essays on *Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978) and his 1896 essay *The Will to Believe* (New York: Dover, 1956).

9. Another important reason is Socrates' anti-democratic tendencies; see Stone, *The Trial of Socrates*. Again, Brickhouse and Smith would disagree.

10. This is the premise of Feyerabend's *Against Method*.