

On the Socratic Method

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Socrates, says Werner Jaeger, “is the greatest teacher in European history,” and yet we do not know what he really taught, nor whether he had a theory of teaching method.¹ He wrote nothing but a couple of poems, now lost. Certainly, he was not trained to teach, and even though he obviously followed some kind of method, it was practiced rather than discussed.²

He admitted that his questioning was, at times, annoying like a gadfly, and that through his questioning he brought forth ideas as a midwife brings out an infant from the mother’s womb.³ Yet, these are descriptions, not theory. He also claimed that he was guided by “a divine sign,” and, further, that there was a dialectical method or art for discovering truth in ecstatic abandon, though it required training and practice (*gymnasía*).⁴ Yet neither the role of inspiration nor the dialectic of discovery are generally mentioned as part of his method.

From the above, it would seem that Socrates’ method consisted of three parts or stages, a negative one of exposing error or untruth, a second one of acquaintance with the spiritual, and a third one of ascent to the contemplation of and union with Truth, Beauty, and the Good. This essay will present briefly the three parts of Socrates’ method, and it will attempt to explain why only the first part has been traditionally studied and its practice recommended to teachers.⁵

THE METHOD (1)

In a very general way, Socrates’ method took the form of a dialectic — that is, literally, a talking-through (*dia + lego*), aimed at clarification and, eventually, some generalization.⁶ It was, in a sense, a *reductio ad absurdum*, a sort of fallibilistic argument which often resulted in confusion (*aporía*), but with the intention of prompting the interlocutors to re-build on solid and examined grounds. This was achieved by adumbrating for them some kind of justified generalization or definition of what the discussion was all about.⁷

Generally, Socrates operated in the moral realm. The process moved from particulars to universals, from less perfect to more perfect, from confusion to clarity, which gives it the shape of what Aristotle will later call induction, which he credits Socrates with initiating.⁸

By general agreement, this first part of the method consists of two stages: (1) a collection of instances or *elenchos*, and (2) a cross-examination or discussion of the collected data to discover a common quality, *logos* or *ousía* — the essential (moral) truth.⁹

Gregory Vlastos says that “the method by which Socrates ‘examines himself and others,’ ... involves the form of argument which Aristotle was to call ‘peirastic’: a thesis is refuted when, and only when, its negation is derived ‘from the answerer’s own beliefs.’”¹⁰ The method, then, is generally negative, since it aims at showing

what a proposition is *not*. It does this because of the ostensible difficulty in establishing positive criteria of truth, or of “what is,” a difficulty Plato will tackle later through the theory of Ideas.

Beyond these generalizations, it is nearly impossible to come up with a more precise definition of this part of the method. There is no logical explication of it before Aristotle, and Socrates’ own comments in the *Apology* and elsewhere do not cast additional light on the matter. Further, the examples of the method come down to us through the writings of Plato and Xenophon, whose own methods may be inextricably entwined with the one of Socrates. Finally, it is difficult to tell in all cases whether or not Socrates thought he was in possession of the truth he was helping his friends discover, and whether his method amounted to anything if he did not.¹¹

Socrates’ objective seems to have been to help ordinary people clarify *their own* conceptions of morally good behavior, so that they might lead a better moral life, building their selves (*psyches*) to the fullest.¹² Hence he also called the method *maieutic* — that is, “mid-wifely” — since the method extracts from the interlocutors *their own* definitions.¹³

In a jocular passage in *Theaetetus*, Socrates comes as close as he ever came to describing this facet of his *modus operandi*. He asks Theaetetus: “Haven’t you heard, you fool, that I am the son of a midwife?”¹⁴

It is, of course, not at all certain that Phainarete, Socrates’ mother, was a midwife. He may have been punning on her name, “Revealer-of-virtue” (*phainô* + *aretê*), inspired, perhaps, by Aristophanes, who in one of his farces had made Strepsiades induce the miscarriage of a thought in one of Socrates’ students.¹⁵

The passage in *Theaetetus* is fairly straightforward, but I want to draw attention to a couple of points generally neglected in the literature. Socrates remarks that women become midwives only after they themselves have ceased bearing children, and barren women are not allowed to be midwives. The reason is that helping at a birth is a skill that is not developed without experience: “human nature,” he says, “cannot know the mystery of an art without experience.”¹⁶ The art is, of course, that of helping a woman give birth, or, in pedagogical terms, the art of letting others learn or conceive and bring forth knowledge.

Midwives, adds Socrates, merely help in the delivery. Surely, it is part of their art to know when a woman is pregnant, when the pregnancy is advanced and the time of birth is at hand, and how to guide the foetus out into the world; and all this is difficult and requires experiential knowledge. But his own art, says Socrates, is more complicated. It is not just a matter of helping someone learn, for there are all kinds of knowledge, truthful and fallacious. His maieutic art, therefore, requires that he also to discriminate between truth and falsehood, and the success of the performance consists in making sure that the thought being brought forth is not a phantom but a real thing imbued with life and truth.¹⁷

The maieutic method, therefore, is not neutral, a much craved state in the modern world. Neither is the method characterized simply by the production of

ideas. What renders it distinctive, according to Socrates, is its power of discrimination — the ability of the teacher to let the young mind learn only the truth. One may quibble forever about the meaning of truth, but when one speaks of the Socratic method, truth, and the art of finding it, are intimately connected.

One could argue that intellectual midwifery, unlike the medical one, is not tolerant. Herbert Marcuse has drawn our attention to this meaning of tolerance.¹⁸ Tolerance does not mean the acceptance of absolutely every color and shade of opinion. The goal (*telos*) of tolerance is truth, and as truth begins to emerge, however weakly, tolerance ceases and commitment begins. Hence the need for a well-developed art of discernment, for sensitivity toward the truth that is constantly being uncovered in the world and in human affairs.

Socrates also specifies as a characteristic of the maieutic art the ability to recognize the best midwife for each soul.¹⁹ Not every teacher can teach every child, and part of being a sensitive, discriminating, and generous teacher is to place each soul in the care of the midwife best suited to help the young mind bring to term its own thoughts. We do this as a matter of course when it comes to taking care of our bodies: we look for the right physician, and to do this we ask the opinion of friends, of other doctors, and so forth, in an effort to place our bodies in the care of the best doctor; but we neglect to do this for our souls.²⁰

THE METHOD (2)

Søren Kierkegaard was one of the first writers to point out the importance of the Socratic *daimonion* as well as the difficulties surrounding interpretations of it.²¹ Though the function of the *daimonion* is described differently by Xenophon and Plato, Kierkegaard finds it closer to the truth that the *daimonion* only warned Socrates but did not specifically reveal answers to him. This is still the general interpretation of the *daimonion*'s role. If this is the case, then the *daimonion* acted toward Socrates as Socrates himself acted toward his interlocutors: it warned him that the truth he was seeking through a particular reasoning or course of action was not to be found there.

But the introduction of the *daimonion* adds a whole new dimension to the Socratic method, for it can no longer be claimed that Socrates pursued the truth solely through logical argumentation, since a non-logical element was very much a part of it, namely, the warnings of the *daimonion*. Furthermore, the *daimonion* warns him about his hearers, thus becoming an intimate part of the method.²² This is understandable, since we are dealing with the all-important matter of *paideia*.²³ Finally, it would seem that, if Socrates is in possession of some truth, albeit negative, the *reductio ad absurdum* of the first part of the method is merely propaedeutic, the equivalent, *mutatis mutandis*, of the methodical doubting of Descartes.

The *daimonion* does not seem to have been a peripheral and occasional factor in Socrates' life. On the contrary, it was conspicuous to the point that his friends and acquaintances took it for granted that if he was late — for instance, at the symposium at Agathon's — it was because he had fallen into a trance.²⁴

The introduction of this extra-logical element suggests that, perhaps, one should place the Socratic method in the context of Socrates' mission or calling.²⁵ The

daimonion's promptings would seem to indicate that he felt he was not permitted inwardly to acquiesce in falsehood or to deny the truth.²⁶ This means that the maieutic art is not something one can just learn through so-called "education" courses. It is not one more method one can add to one's repertory. Rather, it is a practice that flows out of one's calling to the life of a teacher, which therefore engages one's total being in a kind of familiarity with the *daimonion*.

It is hard to know when Socrates began to look at his questioning as a mission. It may have had something to do with the answer of the Delphic oracle — that there was no one wiser than he — and his own "ironic" interpretation of this to mean that his wisdom consisted in not claiming wisdom.²⁷ This realization may have added a moral dimension to the quest for knowledge he had taken up in his youth: he may have felt morally compelled, or "called," as he says, to help others come to a similar realization. Moreover, as he says in *Apology* 22-23, he worried that poets, politicians, and artisans alike knew many things, but were ignorant of the most important one, the care of their souls. He wanted to remedy this malady; he wanted to cure ignorance but without substituting his own knowledge for it. He wanted to help the individuals regenerate themselves, and he felt a moral calling to achieve this.

There is an element of mysticism involved in all this. It is known that Socrates had been initiated into the Orphic mysteries early in his life. He may have even participated in Corybantic rituals.²⁸ Orphism was one of the common cults, but by the time Socrates was an adult, it had degenerated, and Socrates may have moved away from its rites. But his mystical inclination does not seem to have suffered; in fact, as mentioned above, there is evidence that he continued to practice a kind of ecstatic contemplation, perhaps secularized, which was acknowledged by others to be the source of much of his superior knowledge as well as of his "strangeness."²⁹

By the time he inquired after Charmides' soul, his mission seems to have been set. This was immediately after the battle of Potidaea (430), when he was in his late thirties, and after a long trance lasting some twenty-four hours, during which he stood quietly, under the careful watch of other soldiers in the camp.³⁰ Such experiences may have instilled in him a sense of calling to be a questioner, a perambulating teacher in a society that was not yet fully schooled. It appears, therefore, that a major part of his method had to do with a kind of connaturality with the *daimonion* that preserved him from error and guided his questioning.

THE METHOD (3)

Diotima, says Socrates in *Symposium* 201, taught him everything he knows about the art of love — by which he does *not* mean sex! The speech he delivers at Agathon's is purportedly a report of her teachings, received from her when he was younger. There is no question here of his appropriating to himself a woman's teachings, of substituting his words for hers, as has so often been done: throughout his speech he makes it very clear that he is reporting *her words*.

Diotima is identified as a priestess from Mantinea, a city in Arcadia destroyed in 418 by the Spartans during the Peloponnesian War. She may have been a Pythagorean seer, much as the Pythia was Apollo's votary at Delphi, and Socrates

may have come to know her through his involvement in Orphism: there were mutual influences and borrowings between these two mystical traditions. Many commentators consider her an invention of Plato's, and the speech a kind of *mythos*, though the reference to her having delayed the advent of plague for some ten years situates her historically and makes her existence difficult to deny.

I find it significant that the source of one of the most exalted utterances in the Western tradition — Socrates' discourse on love — should come from a woman, a woman who knows from experience what she is conveying, and who has intellectualized her experience to the point of being able to describe a method for the progressive initiation into the mysteries of love.³¹ She also understands the need for a guide and the role this guide is to play — indeed, she models this role for Socrates by leading him, at least in conversation, through the various steps up to the vision of wondrous, absolute, and everlasting beauty.³² In Socrates' own words, she is his teacher, and if, according to Jaeger, Socrates is “the greatest teacher in European history,” what does this recognition make of her?

At the source of the pedagogical tradition of the West, when human concerns become more decidedly humanistic, there stands not just a man, but a woman, Diotima. She is the one who teaches Socrates the method of dialectical ascent. For the *daimonion* is first a voice that warns and inhibits, but then, in the guise of Eros (who is himself a *daimon*), it “lifts us from earth to kinship in heaven.”³³

The goal is “a new type of cognition, which cannot be learned from anyone else, but if the thought in the soul of the inquirer is led on in the right way, arises of itself.”³⁴ The ascent takes place under the impulse of Eros in oneself yearning to attain one's true nature, and therefore it is a “moulding of oneself.”³⁵

The processes are described by Plato in *Republic* VI.490A-B and 500B-C. Richard Nettleship summarizes them:

Beginning with the instinctive attraction to what is familiar, passing on into the ready receptivity for all that is admirable in nature and art, with the unconscious grace and refinement which accompany it, it has now become the consuming passion for what is true and real, at once the most human and the most divine attribute of the soul, the crowning gift and complete embodiment of perfect manhood.³⁶

The affective and even religious elements are found, not in the *Republic*, but in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. Several of the speeches in the latter — for instance, Alcibiades' — indicate some of the ascetical practices required to begin the march toward the mystical heights sketched later by Diotima.³⁷ Detachment from individual and physical beauty is followed by learning to value moral beauty and to contemplate the unity and kinship of all that is noble and honorable. There follows the relish of abstract relationships, culminating in a divinizing union with Beauty itself, as in the Mysteries. Thus the individual, “transformed totally into totality, becomes truly total himself.”³⁸

One should note, however, that these mystical heights are not a refuge or resort, but the mainspring for “giving birth in beauty;” therefore, the ascent and the vision are clearly part of the method, the method of a teacher inspired by love.³⁹

DISCUSSION

The intellectual life of al-*Ghazâlî* (1058-1111) may offer an apt illustration of the full tripartite method described above. After having been appointed professor of Islamic law at Nizâmiya College in Baghdad in 1091, al-*Ghazâlî* underwent an intellectual crisis that prompted him to enumerate, following a kind of *elenchos*, all the various kinds of knowledge he possessed regardless of their source. Next, and five hundred twenty-seven years before Descartes, he submitted them all to methodical doubt and found them wanting. In this he was guided, he says, by “a light which God most high cast into my breast.”⁴⁰ Bathed in its brilliance he concluded that “whoever thinks that the understanding of things Divine rests upon strict proof has in his thought narrowed down the wideness of God’s mercy.”⁴¹ To establish this claim, he resigned his teaching post and embarked on a ten-year pilgrimage. He read, reflected, experienced, meditated, often high up on a minaret of the Damascus mosque where he lived for many years. In this fashion he came to the conclusion that certainty in knowledge “was not to be attained by oral instruction and study but only by immediate experience and by walking in the mystic’s way.”⁴² The remaining years of his life were spent in the company of *sûfî* adepts. From methodical doubt and the clarity of evidence he moved on to a protracted ascent to truth.

Therefore, the question posed here is whether a narrowly conceived rational methodology can lead to meaningful and certain knowledge. Can one know purely rationally anything significant or must one first, in some sort of way, believe? The Socratic method holistically considered asserts, as Anselm will centuries later, that the knowledge one can attain to through pure reason is only negative, the *neti! neti!* of earlier Upanishadic sages. To proceed to substantive knowledge an extra-logical element is needed. In the case of Socrates, it is the *daimonion* that warns him about error. In the case of Plato it is a light that flares up in the soul and sustains itself thereafter.⁴³ In the case of Augustine it is, again, a light that teaches from within.⁴⁴ In the case of al-*Ghazâlî* it is a light from God. In the case of Descartes, it was the illumination of a series of dreams on the night of November 10, 1619, which caused in him “a strong inclination of the will” to believe.⁴⁵

Guided by this light (or forewarned by a *daimonion*), the seeker then moves on to an experiential path in which guidance of some kind is, at least initially, needed. Socrates had Diotima; Plato, the Pythagoreans he met at Krotona; Augustine had Ambrose; al-*Ghazâlî*, the *sûfîs* who led him up the mystical path; and Descartes, while fighting to explain himself, submitted to the guidance of his faith. Again, in their cases, the three dimensions of the full method were actualized.

CONCLUSION

Considering the complexity of this tripartite method and the far-reaching consequences of its use, it is a matter for wonder why only the first part has been discussed; or, to ask the question differently, why the Socratic method has remained so narrowly defined. One could answer that the elenctic method is just *one* method employed by Socrates, and that he uses others depending on his goal; but this answer would only serve to raise the question at a different level.

Russell claims that Socrates’ method of dialectical discussion is unsuitable to scientific inquiry and to questions of fact, but is quite adequate to a strictly logical

class of cases, or to those matters in which, as he puts it, “we have already enough knowledge to come to a right conclusion, but have failed, through confusion of thought or lack of analysis, to make the best logical use of what we know.”⁴⁶ One could argue, then, that the method is not suitable to matters of vision, especially mystical, and that therefore those parts of the method that dealt with the extra-logical were accordingly excluded.

There is something to be said for this view, but there were other historical circumstances that give a better explanation of the exclusion. Early Jewish and Christian authors saw the Greek and Roman religions as competing faiths, but philosophy, which was secular in nature, did not hold a serious threat and could therefore be approached and studied with a certain impunity. The first part of the method of Socrates fell in this latter category, while the second and third seemed closely allied to mystical neo-Platonism and even gnosticism, and were therefore perceived as a threat — and overlooked.

In fact, the philosophical Socrates, accused precisely of subverting Athenian religion in the name of reason, became a Christian before Christ — as Justin Martyr (*ca.*100-165) dubbed him — because all rational beings were believed to share reason with the Logos who is Christ.⁴⁷ The mystical Socrates was ignored, though the mystical Plato, especially after Plotinus, became increasingly appealing. The second and third parts of the method became linked to him rather than to Socrates.

Finally, it seems to me 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. In an early work, Nietzsche wrote: “The only criticism of a philosophy which is possible, and which also proves something — that of seeing if one can live by it — has never been taught at the universities.”⁴⁸ The failure to include the third part of the Socratic method in current accounts seems to me to be rooted, at least partly, in the neglect of the experiential in our approaches to knowing.

In a modern episode, what Dewey called the religious quality of experience, which he thought was the culmination and fulfillment of it, shared the fate of the second and third parts of the Socratic method. In a century obsessed with the scientific, it was overlooked in favor of what was obviously secular, the cognitive, and aesthetic qualities of experience.

It is one of the quirks of history that the Enlightenment, despite its exaggerated rationalism, did not succumb, as the scientism and post-modernism of our century have, to the reductionist abandonment of the mystical and the metaphysical. The acceptance today of a broader philosophic method in general, and of the full Socratic method in particular, may help us regain some of the perspectives of past times and to improve on them.

1. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943), 27.

2. *Ibid.*, 62 ff. On the requirements of a method, see Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5-7.

3. *Apology* 30B; *Theaetetus* 149A and 210B-C.
4. *Apology* 40B; *Parmenides* 135C-D.
5. See Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, 3.
6. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 127.
7. See, for example, *Euthyphro* 62D and *Theaetetus* 146E.
8. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XIII, 4 1078b 28 and I, 6 987b 2, though he grants that the syllogistic form of induction was not well-developed in Socrates' time. Jaeger, in *Paideia*, vol. 2, 164, strongly disagrees with Aristotle's interpretation blaming it for subsequent misunderstandings of the method down to our own days. Stenzel, *Plato's Method and Dialectic* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), also disagrees, for he thinks that neither Socrates nor Plato were interested in setting up a theory of logical method.
9. See, for example, *Euthyphro* 62D and *Theaetetus* 146E. Brickhouse and Smith maintain that *elenchos* was used to disprove or destroy, to interpret, and finally to exhort, which earned Socrates the reputation of being a "gadfly" (*Plato's Socrates*, 16-27 and 11, note 16). On the history of the use of *elenchos* see Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* I, 27-58.
10. *Apology* 28E. Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, 4; *Soph. Elench.* 165b 3-5, in Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 111. Vlastos defines 'peirastic' as "making trial of one another in the give and take of argument" (94 note 53), as in *Protagoras* 348A, and refuting from the discussants' beliefs rather than one's own.
11. Eduard Zeller, *Socrates and the Socratic Schools* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 129.
12. *Ibid.*, 121.
13. William K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 432.
14. *Theaetetus* 149A.
15. *Clouds* 137-139.
16. *Theaetetus* 149C.
17. *Theaetetus* 150C. It is not just knowledge that is brought forth but a new self-knowing being who has ritually died and been reborn. On the implications of midwifery for *self-knowledge*, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 197-201.
18. Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in Robert Paul Wolff et al., *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
19. *Theaetetus* 151B.
20. *Protagoras* 313A-C.
21. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony* (Bloomington: Collins Sons, 1965), 185 and Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, 189-95.
22. *Theaetetus* 150D and, with caution, *Theages* 129E.
23. Paul Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 35.
24. *Symposium* 175.
25. *Theaetetus* 150C. Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*, vol. I, 36.
26. *Theaetetus* 151D.
27. *Apology* 21 and Vlastos, *Socrates*, 3 ff., 82 ff., 236-39, 288-89.
28. *Euthydem.* 277D. See E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 79; Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, 195 ff.
29. Vlastos 79-80; *Symposium* 175C-D; "atopia": *Symposium* 221D.
30. *Symposium* 220.
31. *Symposium* 209D.
32. *Symposium* 210D. St. Augustine narrates a parallel conversation between himself and his mother, Monica, leading to ecstasy (*Confessions* IX.23-4).

33. *Timaeus* 90A. Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*, vol. 1, 44.
34. Jaeger, *Paideia*, vol. 2, 171. *Meno* 85D.; and *Epist.VII*. 341C-D.
35. *Republic* 500D.
36. Richard Lewis Nettleship, *The Theory of Education in the Republic of Plato* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968), 23; Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction* vol. I, 51-3.
37. Eduard Zeller, *Plato and the Older Academy* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), 193 ff. *Republic* 515E speaks of a “steep and rugged ascent.”
38. *Phaedrus* 249C. On the implication of *teloumenos* see Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially chap. 3 and notes and Marvin W. Meyer, ed., *The Ancient Mysteries* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987). Also, briefly, Ignacio L. Götz, “A Note on Myth, the Mysteries, and Teaching in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Alexandria* 3 (1995): 271-75.
39. *Symposium* 206. Friedländer, *Plato: An Introduction*, vol. 1, 54.
40. *Al-Munqidh min al-dalâl* II.76.
41. *Al-Munqidh* II.76.
42. *Al-Munqidh* III.126.
43. *Epistula VII* 341C.
44. *De Magistro* XIV.
45. “Objections,” 3d series, 13 and *Oeuvres des Descartes*, vol. 10, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Ministère de l’instruction publique, 1897-1913), 149.
46. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 93. Confucius had already remarked, “If I have shown a student three sides and he cannot add the fourth, I desist from teaching him” (*Analects* vii, 8).
47. Or in the name of his own version of religion: see Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato’s Socrates*, 173-78; Justin, *Apology* I, 46. See Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 16-17.
48. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), VIII, 99.