

## Confusion about the Socratic Method: Socratic Paradoxes and Contemporary Invocations of Socrates

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Ask the average person, “Who was Socrates and what did he do?” and you are likely to get the following response: Socrates was a old philosopher who bothered people with questions and was ultimately put to death. Almost twenty-five hundred years after placidly drinking the hemlock, what we remember Socrates for is his habitual questioning, his demand to live an examined life.<sup>1</sup> The figure of Socrates is in ordinary discourse synonymous with his method — the Socratic method.

Contemporary scholars echo this commonplace opinion. Gregory Vlastos, who devoted his entire life to Socratic scholarship, reflects that the Socratic method is Socrates’ “greatest contribution” and moreover, one which ranks “among the greatest achievements of humanity.”<sup>2</sup> The results of Socrates’ life, the conclusions he drew about how we ought to live, Vlastos argues, are less important than the manner in which he conducted his life, the style of inquiry he originated and bequeathed to future generations. Indeed, aside from philosophers, few today could identify what specific beliefs Socrates held. In contrast to most other great thinkers, Socrates’ primary legacy is not a contribution to humanity’s storehouse of knowledge, but a pedagogy; not substance but process. To overstate only slightly, for Socrates, and for our understanding of him, method is all.

Yet despite the general acknowledgment of Socrates’ achievement, it is not at all clear what exactly the Socratic method *is*, and more specifically, what the Socratic method *does*, either in the dialogues or in contemporary invocations. This essay investigates the Socratic method by connecting an examination of the actual Socrates in the Platonic dialogues with the relevance of the Socratic method today. I examine two puzzles central to any understanding of the Socratic method: (1) Does Socrates possess knowledge, or are his claims of ignorance sincere? and (2) Does the Socratic method lead to truth?<sup>3</sup> I then turn to contemporary views of Socrates and the Socratic method, showing how the textual puzzles illuminate current confusion over Socratic method. Finally, I advocate a particular version of the Socratic method myself, sketching in very brief detail the outlines of an updated Socratic method that takes truth as a regulative goal and is most appropriate for civic education.

Part of the confusion over the Socratic method relates to its very definition. Some scholars argue that Socrates has in fact no discernible method, and that we should not speak of “the” Socratic method.<sup>4</sup> Socrates has a grab-bag of pedagogical styles, it is said, that cannot be unified under a single label. Other scholars view Socrates as deploying a consistent pedagogical approach.<sup>5</sup> I will avoid taking a side in this particular debate, though for matters of simplicity I will continue to refer to Socrates’ method. For purposes of this essay, in which I am equally concerned with contemporary images of Socrates as well as the actual Socrates in the dialogues, it is necessary only to identify two particular Socratic strategies — the *elenchus* and inspiring *aporia*.

Socrates' questioning technique had a purpose — to refute or cross-examine people — and this refutation or cross-examination the Greeks called *the elenchus*. The *elenchus* lays at the heart of the Socratic method, for it was through refuting or cross-examining people that Socrates aimed to shame them into a recognition that their beliefs were false and in need of revision. Application of the *elenchus* thereby drew Socrates' interlocutors into common inquiry; it cleansed them of the cobwebs of false belief that clutter reason. *Elenctic* questioning breaks down in order to build up.

The mechanism of the *elenchus* is straightforward. It works by probing each response of an interlocutor, examining whether the entire set of beliefs held by a person is mutually consistent.<sup>6</sup> Socrates almost always succeeds in eliciting from a person some belief that entails the opposite of a belief proffered earlier, and thereby leads the respondent into contradiction. Thus, in the *Gorgias* for example, Callicles says first that pleasure is different from happiness, and after questioning from Socrates, that pleasure is identical with happiness. Socrates responds, "Then you ruin your earlier statement, Callicles, and you can no longer properly investigate the truth with me, if you speak contrary to your opinions."<sup>7</sup> While Socrates is being particularly direct with an obstinate Callicles, such remarks are common throughout the dialogues.

The natural outcome of the *elenchus* is *aporia*, or confusion. Upon being refuted, the interlocutors can no longer maintain what they originally believed and are left, typically, in a state of utter perplexity. The classic statement of such confusion comes from Meno after being questioned by Socrates about virtue:

Socrates, even before I met you they told me that in plain truth you are a perplexed man yourself and reduce others to perplexity. At this moment I feel you are exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell until I am just a mass of helplessness....My mind and lips are numb and I have nothing to reply to you. Yet I have spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of large audiences, and very well too, or so I thought. Now I can't even say what it is (*Meno*, 80a-b).

In applying the *elenchus* to his interlocutors, Socrates gets them to admit their ignorance, thereby saving them from false belief. For knowing that one is ignorant is a far better state of affairs for Socrates than possessing beliefs that are untrue. But more importantly, *aporia* arouses curiosity. Shorn of the certainty of their previous beliefs, Socrates' interlocutors recognize that they must begin searching anew. Once a state of *aporia* has been inspired, the destructive component of the Socratic method is complete and Socrates and his fellow inquirers stand on common ground, not pretending to knowledge or truth, but ready to engage in a collective search for it through further dialogue. The brutal cross-examination of the *elenchus* and attendant *aporia* that follows are, thus, not corrosive but, in the end, wholly therapeutic.

#### FIRST SOCRATIC PARADOX: QUESTIONS OF *DOCTA IGNORANTIA*

Given this extremely general picture of the Socratic method, I want now to describe two paradoxes that complicate our understanding of it. We can label the first paradox the question of *docta ignorantia* — is Socrates a "doctrinaire ignoramus?" Socrates repeats over and over again that he himself has no knowledge, possesses no truth, wherein lies his wisdom. But he acts as if, and occasionally says,

that he does in fact possess knowledge and is a confident purveyor of truth. Both claims cannot be true at the same time.

On the one hand, Socrates insists repeatedly that his reputation for wisdom lies in his recognition that “in respect of wisdom [I am] really worthless” (*Apology*, 23b). Socrates says that his conversations with others reveal that “neither of us has any knowledge to boast of” (*Apology*, 21d). When he befuddles his interlocutors through the *elenchus* and they then ask him to say how things truly are, Socrates typically responds in astonishment, as he responds to Critias, for example: “Critias, you come to me as though I professed to know about the questions which I ask, as though I could, if I only would, agree with you. Whereas the fact is that I am inquiring with you into the truth of that which is advanced from time to time, just because I do not know” (*Charmides*, 165b). Such an attitude is repeated throughout the dialogues (*Apology*, 21b; *Euthyphro*, 5a-c; *Gorgias*, 508e; and *Republic* I, 337e).

On the other hand, at the same time and often in the same dialogue, Socrates speaks as if his knowledge is secure and certain. In defending himself against his accusers, Socrates observes that for those who know him, “it becomes obvious that I have not the slightest skill as a speaker — unless, of course, by skillful speaker they mean one who speaks the truth” (*Apology*, 17b). Similarly, he notes that while he is ignorant of what shall come to pass after death, “I do know that to do wrong and disobey my superior, whether God or man, is wicked and dishonorable” (*Apology*, 29b). Here Socrates makes plain his clear possession of a moral truth: He shall not do wrong. On this he is unwavering to the utmost degree; his obstinacy brings him the death penalty.

But the most curious passage with regard to the paradox occurs in the *Gorgias*, in which Socrates proclaims his utter certainty and utter ignorance in the very same breath. Socrates argues with Callicles that it is better to suffer harm than to inflict it, and after a particularly heated exchange, Socrates asserts,

These facts, which were shown to be as I state them some time earlier in our previous discussion, are buckled fast and clamped together — to put it somewhat crudely — by arguments of steel and adamant....And unless you or one still more enterprising than yourself can undo them, it is impossible to speak aright except as I am now speaking. For what I say is always the same — that I do not know the truth in these affairs (*Gorgias*, 508e-509a).

Socrates spares no pains to demonstrate the truth of his claims and the inconsistencies and fallacies of Callicles. As Vlastos comments, “No moral philosopher has ever avowed more positive conviction of the truth of a risky thesis than does Socrates [in the *Gorgias*].”<sup>8</sup> Yet, then he disavows knowledge himself. How is it possible to have an argument clamped “by steel and adamant” but still assert ignorance about the truth of the matter? How can we explain this paradox?

Scholars are divided.<sup>9</sup> Some see Socrates’ *docta ignorantia* as a pedagogical ruse.<sup>10</sup> On this interpretation, Socrates’ professed ignorance is a feint designed to draw others into dialogue and to provide ample opportunity for the application of the *elenchus*. Others believe Socrates is sincere.<sup>11</sup> On this interpretation, Socrates’ positive statements about knowledge are always tempered by some uncertainty or the potential for revisability. Still others make divisions among the different kinds

of knowledge one may possess, attempting to distinguish the kind of knowledge Socrates does hold from the kind he does not.<sup>12</sup> Finally, others assert that Socrates possesses ordinary knowledge but not wisdom.<sup>13</sup>

#### SECOND SOCRATIC PARADOX: QUESTION OF METHODOLOGICAL GOALS

The second paradox is closely connected to the first, though clearly distinct from it. We can label this paradox “the question of methodological goals.” What is the outcome of Socratic method? How can Socrates claim, as he often does, that his method of inquiry will lead to truth when he himself, the busiest practitioner of the method, disavows any claims of knowledge or truth? If the heart of the Socratic method is the *elenchus*, then the method cannot result in truth but only in establishing the inconsistency of various claims made by an interlocutor. Socratic method appears to test for logical coherence, not justifiable truth claims.

Socrates often promotes the efficacy of his method for striving toward truth. Contrasting his method with that of the judicial system, which relies upon numerous witnesses to establish the truth of a matter, Socrates says, “if you can contrive no better refutation than this, then leave it to me in my turn...for I know how to produce one witness to the truth of what I say, the man with whom I am debating” (*Gorgias*, 474a). Or shortly thereafter, Socrates asks Polus, “And has it not been proved that it is true?” to which Polus replies, “Clearly” (*Gorgias*, 479e). Some scholars agree. Thus, Laszlo Versenyi comments that, as compared to the Sophists, “[Socrates] not only insisted on truth but showed a way of getting at it.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, George MacDonald Ross writes, “Socrates believed that [his] method was sound, provided that all participants cooperated in having the truth as their objective — winning the argument would then be the same as arriving at the truth.”<sup>15</sup> On this latter reading, Socrates’ method made no ironclad guarantees that the truth would be revealed as a result of the inquiry, but should consensus form among the participants, such consensus would constitute the truth.

Yet it seems impossible to square Socrates’ statements about the veridical results of Socratic inquiry with his oft-proclaimed ignorance. If anyone should have reaped a harvest of veracities from the Socratic method, surely that person is Socrates himself. But again and again, Socrates avers in the midst of dialogue, “I do not speak with any pretense to knowledge, but am searching along with you” (*Gorgias*, 506a). If he advertises his method as leading to truth, why has he none?

Just as problematic is the actual mechanism of the *elenchus*. The *elenchus* is a tool of refutation and establishes the inconsistency of the current claim of an interlocutor with an earlier claim. It points to the contradictions among various beliefs of respondents. But how then, based on refutation alone, can the *elenchus* yield truth? Or put conversely, how can the *elenchus* prove falsity? This paradox is well explored by Vlastos and Richard Robinson. Vlastos queries, “How is it that Socrates claims to have proved the thesis false when, in point of logic, all he has proved is that the thesis is inconsistent with the conjunction of the agreed-upon premises for which no reason has been given in the argument. Could he be blind to the fact that logic does not warrant that claim?”<sup>16</sup> It seems that an interlocutor could simply retract an earlier statement or adjust the current thesis in order to make

consistent his entire set of beliefs. When Callicles holds first that pleasure is identical with the good and later that pleasure is different from the good, could he not revise his later premises in order to retain his first thesis? Nothing prevents him from doing so. Thus the *elenchus*, a test for consistency and coherence, seems unable to justify the theses of interlocutors as true. It is for this reason that Robinson concludes, "The aim of the *elenchus* is not to switch a man from an opinion that happens to be false to an opinion that happens to be true.... The aim of the *elenchus* is to wake men out of their dogmatic slumbers into genuine curiosity."<sup>17</sup> Socratic method, as Robinson puts it, tells a person *that* he is wrong, but not *why*. Similarly, Irwin notes that the *elenchus* assesses the stability of beliefs and that "Socrates' beliefs are stable, but are not knowledge; they survive the *elenchus*, but he cannot show that they survive because they are true."<sup>18</sup> Thus, Irwin accepts Socrates' professed ignorance as sincere.

So some say, including on occasion Socrates himself, that Socratic method leads to truth and knowledge. Others say that Socrates has no knowledge and that his method can never attain such lofty epistemological certainty; it can only test for consistency. The paradoxes of Socrates lead to polar opposite interpretations of his life and his method. There is good textual justification and scholarly argument to believe that Socrates possesses knowledge *and* that he is ignorant; there is good textual justification and scholarly argument to believe that the Socratic method produces truth and knowledge *and* that it can only test for consistency. Typically, as is obvious, those who believe Socrates is sincere about the *docta ignorantia* also find that the Socratic method has more limited epistemological results than those who believe him to be a fount of knowledge. If Socrates knows the truth, then his method teaches it; if Socrates is ignorant, then his method cannot yield the truth.

#### SOCRATIC PARADOXES AND CONTEMPORARY INVOCATIONS OF SOCRATES

Who, then, is the real Socrates? Which Socrates do we invoke today when we laud him and celebrate his method? The textual paradoxes illuminate contemporary references to Socrates, for they provide us with a way to understand how his image is used in widely divergent ways, and why he is praised by people of very different philosophical and political stripes.

One remarkable aspect of contemporary invocations of Socrates is the almost unanimous praise for him. The following is surely not an exhaustive list, but it represents well the great range of people who point to Socrates for inspiration and guidance. In educational circles, the appropriate mode of instruction in Mortimer Adler's *paideia* proposal "must be the Socratic mode of teaching, a mode of teaching called maieutic because it helps the student bring ideas to birth."<sup>19</sup> Neil Postman lauds the Socratic method as the ideal form of "crap detection."<sup>20</sup> TheodoreSizer promotes Socratic teaching in his high school reform movement called the Coalition of Essential Schools.<sup>21</sup> And Gareth Mathews engages young children in Socratic dialogues, teaching them in the process the activity of philosophizing.<sup>22</sup> In psychological circles, Sigmund Freud praises Socrates and adopts much from the Socratic method in constructing a theory of psychoanalysis around dialogue.<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg's groundbreaking work on the moral development of children hails the

“way out from the Scylla of indoctrination and the Charybdis of ‘laid-back’ relativism or values clarification — Socratic dialogue to stimulate stage development.”<sup>24</sup> In political circles, to name just two figures, John Stuart Mill takes Socrates as a heroic figure, while Allan Bloom, on a much different end of the political spectrum, also sees Socrates as a hero.<sup>25</sup> Finally, in philosophical circles, Socrates is invoked by thinkers as diverse as neo-Kantian Leonard Nelson, who bemoans the loss of Socratic method in philosophy and looks to mathematicians and scientists to rejuvenate the Socratic search for truth; Hans-Georg Gadamer, who sees Socratic inquiry at the heart of hermeneutical encounters; and Richard Rorty, who praises Socrates’ epistemological humility and his value as a symbol of continual curiosity and openness.<sup>26</sup> In short, the image of Socrates and the Socratic method find contemporary proponents across many disciplines and across very different philosophical and political views.

How is it that Socrates can be praised alike by people who otherwise vehemently disagree with one another? How can Rorty and Bloom, philosophers with almost nothing in common, agree about Socrates? or Nelson and Gadamer, a Kantian and a hermeneuticist, unite around Socrates? The answer, I submit, depends on how each sees the paradoxes outlined above. The disjuncture in scholarly opinion about Socrates and his method is mirrored in more popular appraisals of Socrates. Whether one views Socrates as purveyor of truth or as sincere ignoramus will largely determine the reasons for invoking his name and method. Thus, the Nelsons and Blooms of the world praise Socrates for his unassailable quest for truth while the Gadammers and Rortys idolize him for precisely the opposite reason, because Socrates understands that he cannot attain truth and instead leads a life of perpetual openness to dialogue and questioning. Those realists and epistemologists who believe in truth appropriate the confidently knowledgeable version of Socrates; those postmodernists and historicists who believe truth to be contingent appropriate the sincerely ignorant version of Socrates. Given the paradoxes, the image of Socrates has something to offer anyone who takes a position on truth and knowledge.

Rorty attempts to explain the dichotomy of the two Socrates by identifying a “Platonic Socrates” and a “Deweyan Socrates.” Plato suggests, according to Rorty, that philosophy gives us answers and knowledge about the world through the Socratic method as depicted in the dialogues. Dewey suggests that we look to history and anthropology for comparisons in order to understand the world, much like Socrates forever sought out partners in dialogue. Rorty writes,

For Plato, the life of Socrates did not make sense unless there was something like the Idea of the Good at the end of the dialectical road. For Dewey, the life of Socrates made sense as a symbol of a life of openness and curiosity.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, the Platonic and Deweyan Socrates correspond with the two sides of the paradoxes; the Platonic Socrates possesses truth; the Deweyan Socrates is happily ignorant about it.

I think, however, that Rorty’s labels are faulty, for the Platonic Socrates embraces *both* versions. The Platonic Socrates, as we have seen, is paradoxical; it is difficult to determine from Plato’s dialogues whether the *docta ignorantia* is sincere and what the methodological goals of the Socratic method are. A better

appellation and division, I suggest, might be the “moral Socrates” and the “metaphysical Socrates.”<sup>28</sup> The moral Socrates refers to the Socrates of the earliest Platonic dialogues.<sup>29</sup> In these dialogues, Socrates is primarily concerned with interrogating his interlocutors about how best to live, carrying out his divine command to demonstrate to the avowedly wise that they really possess less knowledge than they think (especially *Apology*, *Phaedo*, *Charmides*). Notably, these conversations are much more likely to end in confusion than later dialogues. The metaphysical Socrates refers to the Socrates of middle and later dialogues. In these dialogues, Socrates is more forceful in his interrogation, taking a stand more often, more prone to lecturing, and proffering the doctrine of recollection, an idea wholly absent in the early dialogues. Moreover, in the later dialogues, the *elenchus* disappears almost completely. Robinson comments that the *elenchus* “gradually ceases to be actually depicted in the dialogues and refutation takes less of the total space.”<sup>30</sup> Socrates appears more concerned with matters of truth and his disavowals of knowledge become less and less frequent. Irwin’s master list of Socrates’ proclamations of ignorance lists eleven citations up through *Gorgias*, and only four subsequently.<sup>31</sup> Brickhouse and Smith’s master list notes sixteen citations up through *Gorgias*, and only three thereafter.<sup>32</sup>

Those who admire Socrates as the paradigm of open inquiry and curiosity about the world accept the moral Socrates; but those who admire Socrates as the paradigm of truth-seeking and knowledge accept the metaphysical Socrates. Both Socrates can be found in the dialogues. What appears to happen, Vlastos and Robinson suggest, is that the figure of Socrates slowly metamorphosizes into the mouthpiece of Plato throughout the dialogues. Robinson notes in the middle dialogues a “distinct change in character.”<sup>33</sup> Vlastos writes that the doctrine of recollection is “about as far as it could be from anything we associate with the Socrates of the elenctic dialogues....[and that] when Plato puts the doctrine into the mouth of Socrates we know that the protagonist of the elenctic dialogues has achieved euthanasia in a genius greater than his own — Plato’s.”<sup>34</sup> On this argument, the early dialogues depict the historical Socrates and the middle and later dialogues are much more the creation and ideas of Plato.<sup>35</sup>

#### THE SOCRATIC METHOD TODAY

In this final section, I want to offer, in very brief and sketchy form, my own appropriation of Socrates. I conclude with my own plea for Socratic education, and the Socratic method, in a particular form.

If the large number of invocations of Socrates across disciplinary and political lines is remarkable, it is perhaps more astonishing that, given the praise and attention the Socratic method has received, it is still so little used, and where used, so perversely misunderstood. As has been documented time and again, in all levels of schooling in America, classrooms are almost always teacher-centered.<sup>36</sup> Teachers serve as lecturer or dispenser of information; students passively receive the information, memorizing it in order to pass the test on it. The Socratic method has had many champions, but it has yet to become even remotely a part of any child’s typical experience in school.

In the few places where the Socratic method is self-avowedly practiced — some law schools, for example — it has been morphed beyond recognition. The law professor, seated at a lectern with a seating chart, “cold-calls” on students, eliciting factual information and analytical comments on demand. The infamous Professor Kingston of *The Paperchase* fame has become the stereotypical image of the Socratic law school professor. This is the image of the Socratic method that Lani Guinier rails against as excessively competitive and ultimately gender-biased in her recent book *Becoming Gentlemen*.<sup>37</sup> But, of course, this is a woefully impoverished understanding of the Socratic method, for cold-calling bears no resemblance to Socrates’ pedagogical activities in the dialogues.

So, if not cold-calling, what form of the Socratic method might be appropriate for a twenty-five hundred-year-old pedagogy? I suggest that a Socratic method that *detaches* truth as the desired goal or outcome serves contemporary students best. I choose the “moral Socrates,” the Socrates who is eternally skeptical of any claim to possessing absolute and eternal truths. The Socrates and Socratic method I invoke are characterized by a deep epistemic uncertainty; it is a Socrates doubtful that knowledge can ever be infallible.

Why disengage truth as the desirable goal of Socratic inquiry? Two reasons: First, I agree that the *elenchus* serves only to test consistency and is incapable of justifying truth claims; Second, and more importantly, it is not that we should give up on the notion of truth, but rather that it should serve as a *regulative ideal*. If the Socratic method cannot ascertain the truth of any claim, we need not abjure the very idea of truth. It ought to be our ideal, and we ought to pursue it. We must recognize, however, that all knowledge is fallible and stands open to future revision. We may have well-justified and widely shared beliefs that we call “true,” yet we should still recognize, as Vlastos argues Socrates did, that truth claims can never be “finally decided; everyone of them is open to review in the present argument, where the very same kind of process which led to the original conclusion *could* unsettle what an earlier argument may have settled prematurely, on incomplete survey of relevant premises, or by faulty deductions.”<sup>38</sup>

Obviously, there is an enormous amount of philosophical literature on truth. Due to space constraints, I cannot argue here for why I accept the notion of truth as a regulative ideal over truth as an attainable ideal. But I can suggest one other good reason for detaching truth as the desired and realizable goal of the Socratic method. The reason is the fact of pluralism. In a multicultural society, there are widely varying accounts of the good life, no one of which can be asserted definitively and conclusively as the best. Surely there are better and worse visions of the good, but nonetheless, the diversity of society precludes us from identifying any one as the pinnacle of what it means to be human.

Thus, in my appropriation, the Socratic method is important less for its drive at *moral education* than for its capacity to further *civic education*. Whereas Socrates, and to an even greater degree Plato, held up one conception of the good life, how every person ought to live, modern liberals no longer have such a luxury. The fact of pluralism precludes it. So what the Socratic method can do, and do powerfully,



is help students learn the critical thinking skills and habits necessary for political participation in a pluralist democracy. Moreover, it can instruct them in ways to assess and choose among various conceptions of the good. Accepting the fact of pluralism does not imply that we become relativists and that any moral end is acceptable. On the contrary, many are not, and students need the analytical capacity to render such judgments for themselves. In a pluralist democracy that prizes individual autonomy and revisability of ends, the Socratic method becomes a powerful tool of civic education.<sup>39</sup>

Two recently published books by eminent scholars buttress the notion that the Socratic method is a necessary staple in the educational diet of democratic citizens. J. Peter Euben wants to get Socrates out of the academy and into the streets as the heart of a project in civic education.<sup>40</sup> Martha Nussbaum believes the continuity of a liberal democratic society depends on the ability of students and adults to reason Socratically. She writes, “In order to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good, we must produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs.”<sup>41</sup>

The Socrates I admire can be best described as curious and confidently humble. The figure of Socrates symbolizes most powerfully the ideal of constant openness and eagerness to enter into dialogue with others. At the same time, the expectations from such dialogue are not that a final truth will be established, a truth common to all, even for those not participating in the conversation. As such, the Socratic image is attractive for the purposes of modeling common inquiry and forwarding, in a sense, civic participation and engagement. Similarly, I admire the legacy of the Socratic method for its pedagogical potency to develop analytical skills and a philosophical habit that should prove invaluable in a modern democracy. If for Socrates the unexamined life was not worth living, and the Socratic method provided a means to living the examined life, then for citizens of a liberal democracy, the unexamined life deforms our autonomy and diminishes our freedom. The Socratic method becomes a way to cope with diversity and flourish amidst it.

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1. A quick glance at the *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* entry for Socrates corroborates our intuitive understanding of Socrates: “Greek philosopher who initiated a question-and-answer method of teaching as a means of achieving self-knowledge”; (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 1711.

2. Gregory Vlastos, ed., *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 19-20.

3. It is unclear exactly what Socrates means by “truth” in the Platonic dialogues, in part because of the confusion resulting from the paradoxes. On some readings, Socrates might be held to a constructivist theory of truth — the idea that the outcome of a Socratic inquiry will be the collective establishment of true claims. On other readings, Socrates might be held to a coherence theory of truth — the idea that the Socratic method will test for the coherence of a set of beliefs that the participants can then call “true.” The most common reading of Socrates’ definition of truth, however, is that truth is *discovered*, or more accurately, *re-discovered*, as something that inheres within our soul but needs only to be recollected. This latter notion is connected to the doctrine of recollection, which, as I discuss in this essay, may be more a later invention of Plato than anything that appears in the early dialogues.

4. Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), v; David Hansen, "Was Socrates a 'Socratic Teacher?'" *Educational Theory*, 38, no. 2 (1988): 213-24; and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), x-xi.
5. Kenneth Seeskin, *Dialogue and Discovery: A Study in Socratic Method* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986); Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
6. For further elucidation, see especially Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, 11 and Richard Robinson, "Elenchus," in Vlastos, *Philosophy of Socrates*.
7. *Gorgias*, 495b, Socrates, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Huntington Cairns and Edith Hamilton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961). All of Plato's dialogues are from this edition and will be cited by name in the text for all subsequent references.
8. Vlastos, *Socrates*, 5.
9. Already in 1926, German scholar Leonard Nelson notes that "opinion on Socrates is more uncertain and more divided than ever"; Leonard Nelson, *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 4. Things have only become more discordant since then.
10. See, among others, Laszlo Versenyi, *Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 121.
11. See, among others, Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 39-40 and Robinson, "Elenchus," 79.
12. See Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, 55-56. He distinguishes "knowledge<sub>c</sub>" — epistemically certain knowledge, of which Socrates is ignorant — from "knowledge<sub>e</sub>" — elenctically justifiable knowledge, which Socrates possesses in abundance.
13. Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, v-vi.
14. Versenyi, *Socrates*, 74.
15. George MacDonald Ross, "Socrates versus Plato: The Origins and Development of Socratic Thinking," in *Socratic Education*, ed. Peter Abbs (Hull, U.K.: University of Hull Press, 1993), 11.
16. Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, 21.
17. Robinson, "Elenchus," 90-91.
18. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, 62.
19. Mortimer Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: MacMillan, 1982), 29.
20. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1969), chaps. 1 and 3.
21. Theodore Sizer, *Horace's School* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
22. Gareth Mathews, *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) and Gareth Mathews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).
23. See Tullio Maranhao, *Therapeutic Discourse and Socratic Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), chap. 11.
24. Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 3.
25. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), see esp. pt. 3.
26. "Philosophy cannot now assume the role, originally hers, of guardian of the intellectual values whose fate is bound up with that of the Socratic method. Having disowned her stepchild, and thus deprived herself of its vitalizing and rejuvenating influence, philosophy has become so infirm that she must now beg of her sister asylum and aid for her castoff daughter"; Nelson, *Socratic Method*, 40; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1989); and Richard Rorty, "That Old-Time Philosophy," *The New Republic* (4 April 1988), 28-33.
27. *Ibid.*, 31.
28. I elaborate and extend here some suggestions by Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, 37.
29. By earliest dialogues, I refer to those up to the *Meno*.

30. Robinson, "Elenchus," 92.
31. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, 39.
32. Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, 30, fn 2.
33. Robinson, "Elenchus," 93.
34. Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, 79.
35. Given the lack of space I cannot substantiate the claims of Robinson and Vlastos. I record them as helpful suggestions in coming to terms with the paradoxes.
36. For excellent documentation, see Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890-1980*, 2d ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).
37. Lani Guinier, Michelle Fine, and Jane Balin, *Becoming Gentlemen: Women, Law School, and Institutional Change* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
38. Vlastos, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, 11.
39. For more on such a conception of modern liberalism, see especially John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1971) and *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
40. J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
41. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 19.