

SOCRATIC INQUIRY FOR ALL AGES

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Abstract

In 1996, the author inaugurated philosophical inquiry groups called Socrates Café as one modest effort to counter in the United States what he perceived as rampant self-absorption and pervasive intolerance among its citizenry, and more positively, to create a type of ongoing dialogical inquiry group, more often than not in a public setting, that created bonds of empathy and understanding among participants. To make even modest inroads in achieving such a goal, however, it seemed incumbent to the author to have the exchanges driven by a method that would not so much force but inspire participants to challenge their own and one another's dogma, so that any desultory habits that allowed for complacency in thought would be supplanted by ones that inspired participants' critical acumen and imaginative vision. Over the last 16 years, the author has travelled extensively across the globe to engage with diverse others in Socratic inquiry – not just in places like cafés, libraries, senior centers, but in prisons, nursing homes, institutions for the mentally ill, universities, and in schools (elementary, middle and high schools, both public and private). These gatherings often bring together people of vastly disparate backgrounds and experiences and ages who nonetheless have a shared striving for impassioned yet thoughtful discourse. In this article, the author explores why he believes his approach to practicing philosophical inquiry merits the sobriquet 'Socratic,' and in doing so, relates the intellectual and processual underpinnings of his dialogical method. The overarching aim is to present a genealogy of one way of doing philosophical inquiry that can legitimately be called Socratic – a way that is open and accessible to people of all ages. This version of the Socratic method that is adumbrated is largely informed by Justus Buchler, though it is also influenced considerably by Walter Kaufmann (particularly the axiological and teleological strains), and Hannah Arendt (particularly the performative and doxological aspects). The author draws on supportive arguments from these preeminent Western intellectuals and humanist-scholars who themselves were irrevocably altered by the paradigmatic practices of the historical Socrates. At the same time, all had somewhat differing perceptions and interpretations of who this historical Socrates was, what his philosophical quest amounted to, and how he should be emulated in contemporary contexts. This informed their respective outlooks on contemporary usages of this eponymous method, and theirs in turn informed the author's.

Key words: Socratic method; philosophical inquiry; J. Buchler

Investigación socrática para todas las edades

Resumen

En 1996, el autor inauguró grupos de indagación filosófica llamados Sócrates Café como un esfuerzo modesto de contrarrestar en Estados Unidos lo que él percibía como un egocentrismo e intolerancia persistentes entre sus ciudadanos, y más positivamente, para crear un grupo dialógico de indagación que se reuniera con regularidad y en un espacio público, que a su vez creara vínculos de empatía y entendimiento entre sus participantes. Para lograr avances aunque fueran modestos, le pareció pertinente al autor, que estos intercambios fueran impulsados por un método

que no forzara sino inspirara a los participantes a retar sus propios dogmas y los de los demás para que así cualquier hábito poco metódico que diera lugar a la complacencia de pensamiento, fuera reemplazado por los que inspiraran la perspicacia crítica y visión imaginativa de los asistentes. En el transcurso de los últimos 16 años, el autor ha viajado extensivamente por el mundo para entablar diálogos de indagación socrática con una diversidad de individuos –no solo en lugares como cafeterías, bibliotecas, centros para personas de la tercera edad, sino también en prisiones, residencias de ancianos, instituciones para personas con enfermedades mentales, universidades y escuelas (primarias, secundarias y preparatorias tanto públicas como privadas). Estas reuniones con frecuencia reúnen a personas de edades, orígenes y experiencias enormemente diversas, que sin embargo tienen en común el empeño del discurso apasionado y a la vez respetuoso. En este artículo, el autor explora por qué considera que su acercamiento a la práctica de indagación filosófica, merece el mote ‘Socrático’, y al hacerlo, relata el sustento intelectual y procesual de su método dialógico. El objetivo general es presentar la genealogía de una forma de practicar indagación filosófica que puede legítimamente ser llamado Socrático –una forma que es abierta y accesible a personas de todas las edades. Esta versión del método Socrático aquí esbozada, está ampliamente informada por Justus Buchler, aunque también ha sido influida considerablemente por Walter Kauffman (particularmente las cualidades axiológicas y teológicas), y Hannah Arendt (particularmente en los aspectos performativos y doxológicos). El autor recurre a argumentos que lo respaldan de estos preeminentes intelectuales y estudiosos humanistas occidentales, quienes a su vez fueron irrevocablemente alterados por la práctica paradigmática del Sócrates histórico. Al mismo tiempo, todos tenían percepciones un tanto diferentes e interpretaciones de quién era este Sócrates histórico, cuál era su búsqueda filosófica, y cómo debería de ser emulado en contextos contemporáneos. Esto informó sus respectivos puntos de vista en cuanto al uso contemporáneos de éste método epónimo, y el de ellos en turno informó el del autor.

Palabras clave: método socrático; investigación filosófica; J. Buchler

Investigação socrática para todas as idades

Resumo

Em 1996, o autor inaugurou grupos de investigação filosófica chamados Sócrates Café como um esforço modesto de contrariar nos Estados Unidos o que ele percebia como um egocentrismo e uma intolerância persistente entre seus cidadãos, e mais positivamente, para criar um grupo dialógico de investigação que se reuniria com regularidade num espaço público, que por sua vez criaria vínculos de empatia e entendimento entre seus participantes. Para alcançar avanços, bem que sejam modestos, pareceu pertinente ao autor, que estes intercâmbios sejam impulsados por um método que não forçasse mas inspirasse os participantes a desafiar seus próprios dogmas e os dos outros para que assim qualquer hábito pouco metódico que desse lugar à complacência de pensamento, fosse substituído pelos que inspiraram a perspicácia crítica e a visão imaginativa dos assistentes. No transcurso dos últimos 16 anos, o autor viajou extensivamente pelo mundo para armazenar diálogos de investigação socrática com uma diversidade de indivíduos – não só em lugares como cafeterias, bibliotecas, centros para pessoas idosas, mas também em prisões, residências de anciões, instituições para pessoas com enfermidades mentais, universidades e



escolas (primárias, secundárias e preparatórias tanto públicas quanto privadas). Estas reuniões com frequência reúnem pessoas de idade, origens, e experiências enormemente diversas, que contudo têm em comum o empenho do discurso apaixonado e ao mesmo tempo respeitoso. Neste artigo, o autor explora por que considera que sua aproximação da prática da indagação filosófica merece o apelido de 'Socrático', e ao fazê-lo, relata a sustentação intelectual e processual de seu método dialógico. O objetivo geral é de apresentar a genealogia de uma forma de praticar a indagação que pode ser legitimamente chamada de Socrática – uma forma que é aberta e acessível a pessoas de todas as idades. Esta versão do método Socrático aqui esboçada, está amplamente informada por Justus Buchler, bem que tenha também sido consideravelmente influenciada por Walter Kauffman (particularmente as qualidades axiológicas e teológicas) e Hannah Arendt (particularmente os aspectos performativos e doxológicos). O autor recorre a argumentos que respaldam desses preeminentes intelectuais e estudiosos humanistas ocidentais, que por sua vez foram irrevogavelmente alterados pela prática paradigmática do Sócrates histórico. Ao mesmo tempo, todos tinham percepções um tanto diferentes e interpretações de quem era este Sócrates histórico, qual era sua busca filosófica, e como deveria ser emulado em contextos contemporâneos. Isto informou seus respectivos pontos de vista enquanto ao uso contemporâneo deste método epónimo, e o deles em retorno informou o do autor.

Palavras-chave: método socrático; investigação filosófica; J. Buchler

SOCRATIC INQUIRY FOR ALL AGES

In *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy* (2001) I relate how I decided in 1996 to inaugurate Socrates Café dialogue groups as one modest effort to combat in the United States “what I perceived as an extreme and pervasive self-absorption and intolerance among people, coupled with a lack of any sense that they were their brothers’ and sisters’ keeper” (p. 130). But my ends were in fact more positive, namely to create a type of dialogical inquiry group, more often than not in a public setting, that created bonds of empathy and understanding among participants. Ideally, this in turn would prompt contributors to become more committed to one another.

To make even modest inroads in achieving such a lofty goal, however, it seemed incumbent to have our dialogues driven by a method that would not so much force but inspire participants to challenge their own and one another’s dogma, so that any desultory habits that allowed for complacency in thought would be supplanted by ones that inspired both our critical acumen and imaginative vision.

In the last 16 years, I have travelled extensively to engage with diverse others in Socratic inquiry – not just in places like cafés, libraries, senior centers, but in prisons, nursing homes, institutions for the mentally ill, universities, and in schools (elementary, middle and high schools, both public and private). These Socrates Café gatherings often bring together people of vastly disparate backgrounds and experiences and ages who nonetheless have a shared striving for impassioned yet thoughtful discourse.

Why does my approach to practicing philosophical inquiry merit the sobriquet ‘Socratic’? What are its intellectual and processual underpinnings? In addressing these questions, the overarching aim here is to present a genealogy of one way of doing philosophical inquiry that can legitimately be called Socratic – a way that is open and accessible to people of all ages.

The version of Socratic inquiry that is practiced at a Socrates Café is made up of the *maieutic* – of a type of midwifery that teases out from participants perspectives that they were were not aware (or fully aware) that they harbored; of *aporia* – the cultivation of a certain type of doubt, not to paralyze an inquirer, but to spur her to question and challenge her and other



participants' most firmly held views; and the *elenctic*, a Greek term that has no literal translation, but that means inquiry, cross-examination, and encounter all rolled into one. Blending these three elements, a Socrates Café features a type of individual and collective striving in which those taking part continually seek out compelling objections and alternatives (from others, but also, using one's imagination, from themselves) to any proffered view on any given philosophical question, and in which they sympathetically immerse themselves in all the perspectives that are broached, no matter how alien.

This entwined process of sympathetic immersion (of being extremely sensitive to the views of others, trying to put oneself in their figurative shoes) and of entertaining and plumbing an array of perspectives – via the blended use of the maieutic, aporetic and elenctic – prospectively enables participants further to refine not only their cognitive capacities, but their valuative and active capacities as well.

A New York *Times* feature article on a Socrates Café held at a unique venue touches on this potential:

Lauren Burger, a psychiatric social worker who attended the Montclair Socrates Café, invited Mr. Phillips [...] to inaugurate a group at East Jersey State Prison, a maximum security facility in Rahway[...] believes that in addition to increased self-awareness and tolerance for different points of view, the program benefits inmates by allowing them to better understand their defense mechanisms.

Imam Abdul Muhammad, the chaplain supervisor of the East Jersey program, said of the discussions: "I can even see a change in their attitude, the way they think, even the way they behave. There seems to be some improvement in their character."

Tariq Green, an inmate, has noticed a change. "I see more clear now. It gives me ideas of different people's thoughts," he said. "I might think one way, and this guy right here might say something that makes me change my whole way of thinking. I look at it in a different light". (2004)

Tariq Green's claim that it gives him "ideas of different people's thoughts" is indicative that he has engaged in sympathetic immersion, taking the time to consider seriously the merits of perspectives that differ from his own. However, this alteration in one's "whole way of thinking" is not just of a cognitive nature, I would argue, and so it does not just represent a potential sea

change in what one says and the thinking that goes into that what one says; rather, it has equally transformative implications when it comes to what one does and what one makes -- in one's active (or volitional) and exhibitiv (or valuative) modes of being, in other words.

This version of the Socratic method that I am adumbrating was largely informed by Justus Buchler, though it was also influenced considerably by Walter Kaufmann (particularly the axiological and teleological strains), and Hannah Arendt (particularly the performative and doxological aspects).

In what follows, I draw on supportive arguments from these preeminent Western intellectuals and humanist-scholars who themselves were irrevocably altered by the paradigmatic practices of the historical Socrates. At the same time, all had somewhat differing perceptions and interpretations of who this historical Socrates was, what his philosophical quest amounted to, and how he should be emulated in contemporary contexts. This informed their respective outlooks on contemporary usages of this eponymous method, and theirs in turned informed my own.

The Socratic Method a la Socrates Café

According to Justus Buchler, "Socrates was methodic but not systematic" (1961, p. 118), by which he meant that the historical Socrates is "not concerned with a schematic interrelation" of the results of his inquiries. (p. 119) A dictionary, for instance, as Buchler points out, systematically lists words in alphabetical order, but that is not tantamount to method, which would require a deliberate attempt to bring about an interrelation of the constituent parts as rubric for an overarching conceptual scheme. (p. 36) One may well disagree with Buchler that Socrates was not systematic. One may argue that Socrates engaged in methodic attempts at questioning that not only aimed to solve or shed light on specific problems, but to take on ones that were interrelated. If this is so, the strategies employed by Socrates might be considered both methodic and systematic attempts at developing an overarching (though by no



means exhaustive or 'closed') conceptual scheme on the nature of virtue.¹ The answers discovered might shed light on what Socrates is said by Plato to have considered one of the most important matters for any human being to investigate, namely how we should live.

Even so, Buchler's point – that not all systematic inquiry is methodic, and that lack of system does not necessarily diminish at all employment of method – remains valid. What is most vital to Buchler is that conditions are created in which a genuine inquiry can occur; this to him designates "probing in the widest possible sense, that is, probing which can be directed toward making or acting no less than toward stating" (p. 525). To be sure, the 'product' of such probing discourse need not be definitive, and hence "need not take the form of an assertive conclusion. It may be an enumeration of possible views, or a fuller definition of a problem, or a growth of appreciative awareness. It may be more of an envisioning or of an exhibiting than of an affirming." (p. 529). Each exchange will likely and necessarily take a different shape and in turn shape a different 'product.' This, to Buchler, requires dialogical or "discussion method" (p. 530). Further, Buchler suggests that those facilitating such discourse "have to be not only positive contributors but exemplars" of the methodological inquiry taking place (p. 53), and strive both to "implant the spirit and experience" of the discourse among all those taking part, so that it becomes ever more deeply ingrained. (p. 525)

What makes something 'methodic'? In *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (1966), Buchler characterizes "(m)ethodic activity" as one with "purposive ramification of judgment in any of its modes [...]. When methodic activity is informed by the interrogative spirit, by invention and probing, it constitutes *query*" (1966, p. 187). As Buchler points out in *The Concept of Method* (1961), "(m)ethod can be indifferent, and can serve any cause" for good or ill. However, when combined with query, Buchler sees it as having an implied "moral direction" (1961, p. 115). Such a methodic approach typically requires a

¹I do not believe it is possible to know whether he was attempting to achieve a systematic exploration in this sense, since the primary evidence we have is from Plato's dialogues, and to date there is not enough triangulating evidence to support or refute such a contention. However, it is less difficult to argue that Plato is himself engaged in a systematic and somewhat methodical exploration that attempts (imperfectly, as are all attempts, yet quite meaningfully) to construct foundational existential and ontological categories. This can be inferred from his dialogues: from the early set that supposedly features the historic Socrates, to his latter ones, in which Socrates typically is believed to be mostly a mouthpiece for Plato's own views.

hypothesis (or hypotheses) to be posited and then subjected continually to testing and experimentation; to confirmation or refutation by one's fellow inquirers, as one actively seeks out compelling objections and alternative.

In Buchler's estimation, the Socratic method, if practiced rightly, epitomizes love of inventive communication. But it also shows how inventive communication can be utilized to create a world made up of what one might term more loving reasoners, of people who engage in query to bring into realization a more civilized world, potentially leading to the discovery of new possibilities for human connectedness, with oneself, with others, and the universe itself. As Buchler points out, all methods are fallible; they may be dispensed with if they prove inutile or destructive, or they can lend themselves to further adaptation and evolution over time. It would seem to follow from Buchler's praise of the Socratic method that the Socratic approach has a unique or inherent adaptability and implicit inventiveness because, unlike 'indifferent methods,' the interrogative spirit pervades it, and so is of a nature that the query itself tends to make us more humane.

Socratic questioning, Buchler asserts, need not be systematic, though it of course should be imbued with method. As Buchler asserts, "The terms 'system' and 'systematic' are not [...] interchangeable with 'method' and 'methodic' but name specific traits that may be found within the general span of the methodic process" (1961, p. 118). To Buchler, "Socrates was methodic but not systematic" (1961, p. 118), by which he meant that the historical Socrates is "not concerned with a schematic interrelation" of the results of his inquiries (p. 119).

[...] system implies a concern with varied products or results of methodic activity - specifically, with the linkage of relatively self-contained results in a pattern designed for greater substantive fruition or deeper communication. But the pattern or scheme must be one that is both intended and accomplished, since any sum of results whatever will of itself necessarily fall into a pattern of some kind.

Socrates, in Buchler's estimation, does not meet this yardstick in his inquiries. This is not at all to say that Socratic inquiry cannot be both methodic and systematic, only that Buchler does not believe the historical Socrates was. One may well disagree with Buchler that Socrates was not systematic. One may



argue that Socrates engaged in methodic attempts at engaging in questioning that not only aimed to solve or shed light on specific problems, but to take on ones that were interrelated. If this is so, they might be considered both methodic and systematic attempts aimed at developing an overarching (though by no means exhaustive or 'closed') conceptual scheme on the nature of virtue. The answers discovered might shed light on what Socrates is said by Plato to have considered one of the most important matters for any human being to investigate, namely how we should live. Even so, Buchler's point – that not all systematic inquiry is methodic, and that lack of system does not necessarily diminish at all employment of method – remains valid

Buchler stresses that method (systematic or otherwise) in and of itself is no guarantor of human progress. Rather, if progress is prospectively to occur, means and ends are all-important. Richard Bernstein notes that to Buchler, method is "essentially purposive" (p. 39), but whether it is morally or immorally so is another matter: "There can be methods for suppressing knowledge as well as methods for achieving knowledge. Methods for destroying life as well as for saving it, methods for stifling creativity as well as methods for fostering it" (p. 39). To Buchler, method becomes inventive, civilizing, forward-looking; but only when it is 'part and parcel' with query. As he put it in *The Concept of Method*, "The primary effort of method is repeatedly to complete its instances" (1961, p. 114), to verify objectively the findings one used in employing a method to solve or resolve a problem, no matter the nature of the problem. But when method is attached to query, it is transformed: "Method informed by query is the essential expression of reason. Reason is query aiming to grow and flourish forever" (p. 114).

While to Charles Sanders Peirce, inquiry is paramount in advancing human knowledge, and is purely cognitive in bent, Buchler, a Peirce scholar, contends that that inquiry is but one communicative mode, not at all primary, and so must be subordinated to what he terms query: "Query is the genus of which inquiry is a species" (1955, p. 7). As Steve Odin explains in *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism*, Buchler holds that while "inquiry ramifies judgments only in the assertive or cognitive mode, query instead signifies the

childhood & philosophy, rio de janeiro, v.8, n.15, jan./jun. 2012, pp. 131-151. issn 1984-5987 139

ramifications of judgments in *three* modes: the assertive (cognitive), active (volitional), and exhibitive (valuative)" (1996, p.149). This not only puts aesthetic and moral judgments on an equal plane with logically derived judgments, but indicates that the three forms of judgment are entwined.²

Buchler stresses that these modes of judgment "are also modes of communication. We communicate by acting and by making no less than by stating." (1955, p. 30). To Buchler, the purpose of query is to promote reason – not reason as a construct devoid or apart from human emotion and action, but as an integral and all-pervading ingredient to what he considers the most vital human dimension and capacity of all, love. As he puts it in *Towards a General Theory of Human Judgment*,

Reason is a form of love, as love (in an equally just perspective) is a form of reason. It is love of inventive communication. Nothing is more foundational for all value than query, and reason is devotion to query [...]. It is for reason to discover and appraise itself from time to time and [...] find that its work is good. Sometimes the progress of reason is more easily measured by the discernment of unreason and by the struggle that it is destined to undergo in order to prevent the fruitless death of its possibilities. (1951, pp. 68-169)

Query, according to Buchler, 'civilizes' us, and as such impels us to be more inventive, curious, empathic, forward-looking; civilization itself is the result of query (though, needless to say, the path of civilization has not by any stretch been a decidedly 'progressive' one – indicating in turn that query's own history has been sporadic at best). Those acts which, or which attempt to, bring down the curtain on civilization are the antithesis of query. Ultimately, in Buchler's system, query is a consummately rational and loving act, because it seeks to create rather than unravel. While query by no means assures that civilization (much less a humane civilization) will continue, leave alone evolve, the act of querying is necessary if civilization is to hold promise of advancing and evolving. In distinguishing query from inquiry, and placing it over and

² These three forms of judgment proffered by Buchler may well not be exhaustive; there may be other forms, including intuitive and non-volitional ones.



above inquiry, Buchler is proposing that inquiry is just one mode of query, and additionally that it is principally assertive in bent.

The question then becomes, what is the most fruitful or advantageous way to engage in query? In *Nature and Judgment* (1955), Buchler contends that no type of query is more advantageous for 'human elevating' ends than the Socratic method:

The Socratic method is indeed a method, the very antithesis of timorous caution. Its boldness of movement [...] renders its products not by simple affirmation but assertively, exhibitively, and actively, in subtle proportions. It is in a sense the paragon of query, being masterful in all the modes of judgment. (1955, p. 77)

Query, as conceptualized by Buchler, is inventive yet methodical exploration, discovery, and articulation. He considers the Socratic method the most 'masterful' way of employing query, which he asserts by its nature has morally elevating ends. As Richard Bernstein points out, Buchler posits that "man is a unitary rational being," and as such, can only fully "live a life of reason by cultivating query in all its modes," (1991, p. 39)

I further interpret Buchler's encomium to the Socratic method to mean that it is the method nonpareil for 'exploiting' these modes of judgment for the ends of human inventiveness; it reveals humans at their most creative, as works-in-progress capable, when harnessing the interrogative spirit, of giving entirely new and potentially redemptive present and future meaning, perspective and possibility to our words and deeds thus far. However, I would argue, Buchler's perspective on the Socratic method is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for bringing its practice to full fruition. One must possess in tandem a certain type of Socratic sensibility and empathic ethos to begin with.

The Socratic 'Type'

The social philosopher Walter Kaufmann advocates the blending of analytic preciosity with existential exploration via the 'Socratic type.' As Kaufmann posits in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (1975), this type has

been exemplified by those who “have tried to bring philosophy down to earth again like Socrates,” in taking up for interrogation “the passionate concern with questions that arise from life, the moral pathos, and the firm belief that, to be serious, philosophy has to be lived” (p. 51). To Kaufmann, the philosophical enterprise best flourishes whenever there is a great “tension between these two timeless tendencies, now inclining one way, now the other” (p. 51). But if there is no such tension, and each goes its separate way, then “the existentialist and the analytical philosopher are only half of Socrates” (p. 51). Kaufmann maintained that “if the feat of Socrates is really to be repeated and philosophy is to have a future outside the academies, there will have to be philosophers who think in the tension between analysis and existentialism” (p. 51). In my case, the challenge was to coalesce these traditions, to make a ‘Socratic whole,’ so to speak, via rigorous public inquiries in everyday modern America.

Kaufmann further limns, in *The Future of the Humanities: Teaching Art, Religion, Philosophy, Literature* (1995), his notion of the Socratic type as someone who makes a lifelong commitment “to the rigorous examination of the faith and morals of the time,” scrutinizing particularly “those convictions which are widely shared and rarely questioned” (p. 28). Kaufmann presents in *Discovering the Mind: Freud, Adler and Jung* (1990) a concise rendering of the kind of critical inquiry which in his estimation may be constructed as the essence of the Socratic method:

What is needed [...] is enough imagination to bring up hypotheses, objections, and alternatives, as well as a highly developed critical faculty that persists in evaluating them. [...] One asks oneself: What objections and alternatives might an intelligent person present at this point? One willingly considers many views, not only one’s own. That requires [...] imagination as well as critical acumen. (1990, p. 448)

Kaufmann asserted that Socrates’ primary aim in all his inquiries was, “Know thyself!” (p. 473). I take this to mean that proper use of his interrogative method should necessarily lead to greater self-understanding, and ultimately precipitate self-transcendence, the ability to see oneself through more objective lenses, to discover one’s blind-spots, and to overcome those aspects of one’s personality that inhibit greater self-actualization.



To Kaufmann, Socratic inquiry can serve as a means for inquirers to be 'mirrors into one another's selves,'³ in ways that gently but honestly help us reveal both the consistencies and the contradictions, the virtues and vices, in our respective ways of looking at the world and being in the world, then this might be a primary mechanism for transformation of the self. (By extension, the transformation of the self is also the transformation of society, if one believes, as I do, that the two are inherently interwoven.) Perhaps inquirers might then go on in some cases, based on such discovery, to sculpt or shape themselves in ways that are specifically aimed, in part, at making greater contributions to human enfranchisement.

In positing that such revelations should be undertaken 'gently but honestly,' one might argue that Kaufmann is going against *the* 'Socratic type,' since the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* (1988), for instance, seemed to derive pleasure from mordantly skewering certain of his fellow Athenians. But I do not believe that one must be 'like Socrates' the historical persona in order best to wield the Socratic method for contemporary ends that can enhance or evolve our rational-empathic acumen, much less develop a democracy. This perspective of mine surely says a great deal about me, and perhaps also about my affinity with Kaufmann's iconoclastic approach to understanding self and others, which represents a breach with the traditional academic approach – namely, that rather than separate the personalities of intellectuals from their philosophies or theories, one might at certain junctures of one's analyses take the time to examine the two in conjunction. Given that there are nearly as many perspectives of who the 'real Socrates' was in ancient Athens as there are people who posit the perspectives – and further given (as will be examined in upcoming sections) that there are widely varying approaches to contemporary usages of the Socrates method, even when such usages are not allied to any specific notions of the historical Socrates – it seems clear that this wide disparity must be due at least in part to the personalities of those positing them.

³ Cf. Plato, *Alcibiades*.

The Socratic Persona

While there have been untold attempts by scholarly and lay thinkers to portray the historical Socrates in equally untold ways, Hannah Arendt's attempted portrayal is singularly intriguing; made more so because of how she relates her understanding of Socrates to what would seem indisputably to be one of the most central concerns facing modernity. Indeed, whether there is a future beyond modernity may lie with the insights gained from the issue she unflinchingly explores. In her essay "Thinking and Moral Consideration: A Lecture," (2003) Arendt examined "the inner connection between the ability or inability to think and the problem of evil" (2003, pp. 159-189). She wrote this essay after her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), left her with lingering questions. Her book dealt with the trial of the former Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann –for crimes against Jews, crimes of humanity, crimes of war. Eichmann stood trial in Israel after his capture in Argentina, was found guilty, and hanged.

Arendt, who attended the trial, recounts in *The Life of the Mind* (1978) that she was amazed to find Eichmann "quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous" (1981, p. 4). What she discerned, in witnessing his testimony, was that he possessed "not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think" (2003, p.159). Arendt concluded that his utter incapacity to think – shared, in her view, by virtually all those tried at the Nuremberg trials – enabled him to perpetrate the greatest evil without the least twinge or stir of conscience, much less moral compunction to do otherwise. To her, he was the epitome of thoughtlessness, a veritable non-thinker. "The trouble with Eichmann," she came to conclude, "was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal" (p. 253).

(T) his normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied [...] that this new type of criminal [...] commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong. (1963, p 253)



Finding that Eichmann was so plebeian led her to assert that “such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together” (1963, p. 288).

In contemplating the connection between thinking and evil in “Thinking and Moral Consideration,” Arendt (2003) does not say that if we can become adept at thinking, we will then necessarily avoid doing evil or avert others from doing so; rather, she is saying that only with an ingrained thinking capacity can we then make a conscientious judgment about whether to do good or evil. In the case of Eichmann, and all those ‘like him’ whom she found to be devoid of such a capacity for thinking and hence for judgment, it was no great leap, in her estimation, for them to fall prey to fanaticism, to become perpetrators of the greatest acts of evil.

Consequently, Arendt pondered how ordinary or quotidian people might develop those thinking capacities that can imbue them with the ability to judge whether they should or should not go along with attempts at committing such evils. How, she asked, can everyday people learn to think for themselves? Since thinking is, in her estimation, one of the primary conditions that enables us to make judgments, how can this capacity be developed on a pervasive scale? From her initial explorations – namely into key questions such as, “Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, [...] dependent upon our faculty of thought? Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide?” (2003, p. 160) – Arendt says another “question posed itself: Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it ‘conditions’ men against evil-doing?” (2003, p. 160).

Arendt’s own answer is that it can, if we strive to become exemplars of the type of persona modeled by Socrates. Arendt believes, as she states in *The Life of the Mind*, that the historical Socrates represented the emblematic

example of a thinker who was not a professional, who in his person unified apparently two contradictory passions, for thinking and action – not in the sense of being eager to apply his thoughts or to establish
childhood & philosophy, rio de janeiro, v.8, n.15, jan./jun. 2012, pp. 131-151. issn 1984-5987 145

theoretical standards for action but in the more relevant sense of being equally at home in both spheres and able to move from one sphere to the other with the greatest apparent ease, very much as we ourselves constantly move back and forth between experiences in the world of appearances and the need for reflecting on them [...] [Socrates was] a man who counted himself neither among the many nor among the few [...], who had no aspiration to be a ruler of men, no claim even to be particularly well fitted by his superior wisdom to act in an advisory capacity to those in power, but not a man who submitted meekly to being ruled either; in brief, a thinker who always remained a man among men, who did not shun the marketplace, who was a citizen among citizens, doing nothing, claiming nothing except what in his opinion every citizen should be and have a right to. (1981, p. 167)

Socrates was, to her, the ideal 'every person,' a paragon of thinking of which everyone is capable. This is not to say we will automatically, as a result of becoming 'like Socrates,' fend off evil, much less not commit evil ourselves; rather, it is to say that only when we have such a thinking capacity can we make a choice. Thinking like Socrates, then, is no safeguard in itself, with its "undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements for good and evil, in short on those customs and rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics" (2003, p. 176). But it is from this undermining effect that one can then choose to construct an autonomously positive, humanizing ethic.

One might debate *ad nauseum* whether Arendt's estimation of Socrates is accurate. Yet one might find compelling this particular 'Socratic characterization' as one principal underpinning for the cultivation of a type of persona (regardless of whether Socrates himself authentically meshed with this type) best equipped to see through the machinations of 'evil doers' and then decide whether to 'go along and get along' or to do what one can to thwart such machinations - in other words, to make considered judgments.

In Arendt's essay "Philosophy and Politics" (2004) she lauds Socrates' autonomy, his capacity for inculcating a type of moral individualism that at the same time was not self-centered or self-aggrandizing, but that enabled him to develop the qualities that made him, as the political theorist Dana Villa puts it in *Socratic Citizenship*, laudatory "not simply as a great *thinker* but as a great *citizen*" (2001, p. 265). Arendt believes this singular ability he mastered to engage in internal dialogue and thus judge each situation as it presented itself,



is a critical ingredient for developing the type of autonomous persona imbued with a social conscience necessary to be a good democratic citizen: “only someone who has had the experience of talking with himself is capable of being a friend, of acquiring another self” (2004), of forging the type of *philia* that constantly expands outward one’s circle of friends, and of making conscientious judgments within the context of (what is happening in) society at large, and doing so based on whether they are ‘democratic enablers.’

This “enlarged mentality” is what enables one to think from the “standpoint of somebody else” – to develop prospectively a type of empathic connectedness that springs from what Arendt believes to be the primary (but what I would assert is the concomitant or complementary) striving to think for and with oneself, and so more foundationally to know oneself. Arendt’s philosophy of thinking is that it “involves a type of internal dialogue”. According to Bernstein (1996), this is “what Arendt calls a ‘two-in-one’ – in which there is a dialogue between me and myself” (pp. 171-2). As a consequence, an individual can develop her own conscience as her primary guide for responding to concrete situations that call for an ethical response. Socrates, in Arendt’s view, was exemplary in this.

Margaret Betz Hull, in *The Hidden Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (2002), notes that Arendt identifies in her rendering of the historical Socrates what “she believes to be a unique respect for *doxa*, to each individual’s own opening to the world” (Hull, 2002, p. 107).

She [Arendt] explains that ‘the world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it’ but that there is a ‘sameness of the world, its commonness’ which ‘resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and despite all differences between men and their positions in the world – and consequently their *doxai* (opinions) – ‘both you and I are human.’ [...]

Arendt argues that Socrates’ voluntary involvement with the *doxai* of others reveals an interdependence to the formation of opinions: ‘...just as nobody can know beforehand the other’s *doxa*, so nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion’ [...] Present here is also a taste of Arendt’s notion that the formation of the self is not possible in isolation; others are needed, as in

this case, for the expression and development of my unique *doxa*. (2002, p. 108)

I also subscribe to the belief that I can only further, and prospectively better, sculpt myself with the dedicated help of others. This requires that I continually seek forms of encounter with others in which I can come to a more acute understanding of what my words and deeds and ideals, and the value system on which they are based, amount to. I deemed it essential regularly to hold philosophically-grounded inquiries featuring a modernized version of the Socratic method.

In my estimation, the ultimate end of Socratic inquiry is to engage in a type of discursive, methodically-based deliberative dialogue that contributes to democratic renewal and even upheaval. This view is based on a notion of self in which the individual and society are not at opposite ends of a continuum, but are interlaced, requiring a dual nurturing of both if greater individual autonomy is to be coupled with a developing social conscience for the realization of democratic ends. It also is based on the notion that the individual self is itself a 'democratic one,' replete with many and often contradictory dimensions and impulses and perspectives which can be teased out to some degree in the course of a Socrates Café-type inquiry. Additionally, in my view, if one divorces Socratic ideals and their integral political dimension from the ideal Socratic setting – namely, the public marketplace, what the Greeks called the *agora* – one diminishes the capacity of Socratic inquiry to advance deliberative democracy. I hence feel that a democratic citizenry needs continually to cultivate what Villa (2001) describes as a critical-skeptical bent, in order to practice constructive dissidence, with the end of cultivating forms of individual, communal and societal excellence in which citizens develop a successively greater commitment to achieving *arête*. Villa characterizes the ideal form of democratic citizenship as necessarily Socratic in its essence; to him, this is tantamount to placing value on the form of "conscientious, moderately alienated citizenship" that he argues is modeled by the historical Socrates. This kind of citizenship is one that is "critical in orientation and dissident in practice," and is "cause-based, group-related, and service-oriented" (p. 2). I am



not sure that such conscientious citizenship is always one in which we are moderately alienated – depending on the time and clime, one might not feel alienated at all, while at others, one might feel extremely so.

Like Villa, I tended to agree, when I began in 1996 developing and disseminating my own version of the Socratic method, via Socrates Café philosophical discourse groups, that such inquiry is not “a *directly* political exercise,” though it “does have political implications” (2001, p. 4); among other reasons because the insights gained from such inquiry can be one principal determinant of our political positions and dispositions, and hence impact our civic involvement or lack thereof. However, it may be a more direct political exercise than it appears at first glance. Charles Taylor maintains in essays such as “The Politics of Recognition” (1994) that contemporary open societies must go to great lengths to enfranchise members of all the cultures of which it is comprised. This is not to say that people’s opinions are equally or intrinsically of the same worth; rather, that such worth can only be gauged as its members take part together, on an equal footing, in the type of deliberative process the ‘Socrates Café method’ of inquiry espouses and models. Walter Kaufmann puts it this way in *Future of the Humanities*:

Socrates' heirs reject relativism no less than dogmatism; they aim to show how most views are untenable. But they are not committed to refuting all views or to finding all they reject equally bad. Some solutions of a problem are more confused and inconsistent than others; some are only slightly flawed; and one, or perhaps two or three, may be acceptable. It is worth remembering that Socrates had standards for which he was quite willing to die, and he was far from supposing that any norm or argument or book is every bit as good as any other. (1995, p. 33)

Villa, in *Politics, Philosophy and Terror* (1999), following Arendt in particular but also Kaufmann, limns Socrates as “the enemy of all forms of self-righteousness, but especially of those that congeal around groups. He exposes the manifold corruptions of solidarity. His lesson for democrats is [...] that the consistent avoidance of injustice demands sustained moral energy, coupled with a ruthless intellectual honesty” (pp. 4-5). It is not, though, his ‘ruthless’ or

'relentless' intellectual honesty that might best speak to someone across the span of centuries, but what one might take to be his endless and infectious passion and curiosity, rooted in such honesty. One might say Socrates is like a child, always asking 'Why?,' never satisfied with facile or even finite answers to any given question.

Again, whether Socrates was precisely this way or not, what inspired me (and what I hoped might serve to inspire others) as much as this method he practiced was the idea of such a persona, the notion of striving in one's own way, in one's own times, to emulate this sensibility, and perhaps to inspire others by example to do the same.

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