

# WHY THE GREEKS MATTER

## HOW TO THINK

### SOCRATIC DIALOGUE

What we remember most about Socrates (469 BC - 399 BC) is his quote "*I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance!*" Some regard Socrates as the greatest philosopher in history. His death reveals how difficult it is to fight "vested interests", ignorance and irrationality in an effective way single handedly.

A friend of Socrates, consulting the Oracle at Delphi, asked was any man wiser than Socrates? The Oracle replied that there were not! Upon being told of this answer Socrates maintained that this implied that he, alone, had this claim to wisdom -- that he fully recognized his own ignorance!

From that time he sought out people who had a reputation for wisdom and, in every case, was able to reveal that their reputations were not justified. Socrates regarded this behavior as a service to the gods (God?) and decided that he should continue to make efforts to improve people by persuading and reminding them of their own ignorance, (Socrates the gadfly.)

What we now call the "*Socratic method*" of philosophical inquiry involves questioning people on the positions they asserted and working them through further questions into seemingly inevitable contradictions, thus proving to them that their original assertion had fatal inconsistencies. Socrates refers to this "Socratic method" as *elenchus* (cross examining). The Socratic Method gave rise to dialectic (two sides to a position), the idea that truth needs to be approached by modifying one's position through questionings and exposures to contrary ideas.

Socratic questioning is a kind of questioning in which an original question is responded to as though it were an answer (by the teacher, say Socrates). This then forces the first questioner (say, the student) to reformulate a new question in light of the progress of the dialogue.

We will analyze Socratic dialogue using the following parts.

1. **Finding the thesis:** in this part, Socrates encourages the student to clearly state their position.
2. **Playing the skeptic:** in this part, Socrates is using questions to point out any inconsistencies in the thesis or the logic of the thesis.

3. **Framing the argument:** in this part, Socrates narrows down the argument so that a solution can be found because the idea being discussed is specific enough to be commented on.
4. **Logically reasoned position (Logos):** Here, Socrates drives home the argument and forces the student to agree that his original thesis is false and that a contrary position is true.

This process may be repeated several times in one dialogue.

People sometimes incorrectly believe this is a method by which Socrates and modern users of the method see the answer to a problem, or find knowledge or receive instruction. In fact the Socratic Method was intended to demonstrate someone's ignorance. Socrates did believe that knowledge was possible, but believed that the first step to knowledge was recognition of one's ignorance. The idea here is to convince someone that they, like Socrates, do not know something; that in fact they, unlike Socrates, only think that they do!

Socrates mostly applied his method of examination to concepts that seemed to lack any clear definition; for example the big moral concepts such as the virtues of piety, wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice. This examination challenged the moral beliefs of his students (or other victims), bringing out inadequacies and inconsistencies in their beliefs, and usually resulting in puzzlement known as *aporia*.

Your notes: